

Today Is Eddie's Birthday

Eddie and his brother are sitting in the maintenance shop.

"This," Joe says proudly, holding up a drill, "is the newest model."

Joe is wearing a checkered sport coat and black-and-white saddle shoes. Eddie thinks his brother looks too fancy—and fancy means phony—but Joe is a salesman for a hardware company now and Eddie has been wearing the same outfit for years, so what does he know?

"Yes, sir," Joe says, "and get this. It runs on that battery."

Eddie holds the battery between his fingers, a small thing called nickel cadmium. Hard to believe.

"Start it up," Joe says, handing the drill over.

Eddie squeezes the trigger. It explodes in noise.

"Nice, huh?" Joe yells.

That morning, Joe had told Eddie his new salary. It was three times what Eddie made. Then Joe had congratulated Eddie on his promotion: head of maintenance for Ruby Pier, his father's old position. Eddie had wanted to answer, "If it's so great, why don't you take it, and I'll take your job?" But he didn't. Eddie never said anything he felt that deeply.

"Helloo? Anybody in here?"

Marguerite is at the door, holding a reel of orange tickets. Eddie's eyes go, as always, to her face, her olive skin, her dark coffee

eyes. She has taken a job in the ticket booths this summer and she wears the official Ruby Pier uniform: a white shirt, a red vest, black stirrup pants, a red beret, and her name on a pin below her collarbone. The sight of it makes Eddie angry—especially in front of his hotshot brother.

“Show her the drill,” Joe says. He turns to Marguerite. “It’s battery operated.”

Eddie squeezes. Marguerite grabs her ears.

“It’s louder than your snoring,” she says.

“Whoa-ho!” Joe yells, laughing. “Whoa-ho! She got you!”

Eddie looks down sheepishly, then sees his wife smiling.

“Can you come outside?” she says.

Eddie waves the drill. “I’m working here.”

“Just for a minute, OK?”

Eddie stands up slowly, then follows her out the door. The sun hits his face.

“HAP-PY BIRTH-DAY, MR. ED-DIE!” a group of children scream in unison.

“Well, I’ll be,” Eddie says.

Marguerite yells, “OK, kids, put the candles on the cake!”

The children race to a vanilla sheet cake sitting on a nearby folding table. Marguerite leans toward Eddie and whispers, “I promised them you’d blow out all thirty-eight at once.”

Eddie snorts. He watches his wife organize the group. As always with Marguerite and children, his mood is lifted by her easy connection to them and dampened by her inability to bear them. One doctor said she was too nervous. Another said she had waited too long,

she should have had them by age 25. In time, they ran out of money for doctors. It was what it was.

For nearly a year now, she has been talking about adoption. She went to the library. She brought home papers. Eddie said they were too old. She said, "What's too old to a child?"

Eddie said he'd think about it.

"All right," she yells now from the sheet cake. "Come on, Mr. Eddie! Blow them out. Oh, wait, wait . . ." She fishes in a bag and pulls out a camera, a complicated contraption with rods and tabs and a round flashbulb.

"Charlene let me use it. It's a Polaroid."

Marguerite lines up the picture, Eddie over the cake, the children squeezing in around him, admiring the 38 little flames. One kid pokes Eddie and says, "Blow them all out, OK?"

Eddie looks down. The frosting is a mess, full of countless little handprints.

"I will," Eddie says, but he is looking at his wife.



☺ EDDIE STARED AT the young Marguerite.

“It’s not you,” he said.

She lowered her almond basket. She smiled sadly. The tarantella was dancing behind them and the sun was fading behind a ribbon of white clouds.

“It’s not you,” Eddie said again.

The dancers yelled, “*Hooheyy!*” They banged tambourines.

She offered her hand. Eddie reached for it quickly, instinctively, as if grabbing for a falling object. Their fingers met and he had never felt such a sensation, as if flesh were forming over his own flesh, soft and warm and almost ticklish. She knelt down beside him.

“It’s not you,” he said.

“It is me,” she whispered.

Hooheyy!

“It’s not you, it’s not you, it’s not you,” Eddie mumbled, as he dropped his head onto her shoulder and, for the first time since his death, began to cry.

☺ THEIR OWN WEDDING took place Christmas Eve on the second floor of a dimly lit Chinese restaurant called Sammy

Hong's. The owner, Sammy, agreed to rent it for that night, figuring he'd have little other business. Eddie took what cash he had left from the army and spent it on the reception—roast chicken and Chinese vegetables and port wine and a man with an accordion. The chairs for the ceremony were needed for the dinner, so once the vows were taken, the waiters asked the guests to rise, then carried the chairs downstairs to the tables. The accordion man sat on a stool. Years later, Marguerite would joke that the only thing missing from their wedding “were the bingo cards.”

When the meal was finished and some small gifts were given, a final toast was offered and the accordion man packed his case. Eddie and Marguerite left through the front door. It was raining lightly, a chilly rain, but the bride and groom walked home together, seeing as it was only a few blocks. Marguerite wore her wedding dress beneath a thick pink sweater. Eddie wore his white suit coat, the shirt pinching his neck. They held hands. They moved through pools of lamplight. Everything around them seemed buttoned up tight.

☽PEOPLE SAY THEY “find” love, as if it were an object hidden by a rock. But love takes many forms, and it is never the same for any man and woman. What people find then is a *certain* love. And Eddie found a certain love with Marguerite,

a grateful love, a deep but quiet love, one that he knew, above all else, was irreplaceable. Once she'd gone, he'd let the days go stale. He put his heart to sleep.

Now, here she was again, as young as the day they were wed.

"Walk with me," she said.

Eddie tried to stand, but his bad knee buckled. She lifted him effortlessly.

"Your leg," she said, regarding the faded scar with a tender familiarity. Then she looked up and touched the tufts of hair above his ears.

"It's white," she said, smiling.

Eddie couldn't get his tongue to move. He couldn't do much but stare. She was exactly as he remembered—more beautiful, really, for his final memories of her had been as an older, suffering woman. He stood beside her, silent, until her dark eyes narrowed and her lips crept up mischievously.

"Eddie." She almost giggled. "Have you forgotten so fast how I used to look?"

Eddie swallowed. "I never forgot that."

She touched his face lightly and the warmth spread through his body. She motioned to the village and the dancing guests.

"All weddings," she said, happily. "That was my choice. A world of weddings, behind every door. Oh, Eddie, it never changes, when the groom lifts the veil, when the bride accepts the ring, the possibilities you see in their

eyes, it's the same around the world. They truly believe their love and their marriage is going to break all the records."

She smiled. "Do you think we had that?"

Eddie didn't know how to answer.

"We had an accordion player," he said.

☉THEY WALKED FROM the reception and up a gravel path. The music faded to a background noise. Eddie wanted to tell her everything he had seen, everything that had happened. He wanted to ask her about every little thing and every big thing, too. He felt a churning inside him, a stop-start anxiety. He had no idea where to begin.

"You did this, too?" he finally said. "You met five people?"

She nodded.

"A different five people," he said.

She nodded again.

"And they explained everything? And it made a difference?"

She smiled. "All the difference." She touched his chin. "And then I waited for you."

He studied her eyes. Her smile. He wondered if her waiting had felt like his.

"How much do you know . . . about me? I mean, how much do you know since . . ."

He still had trouble saying it.

"Since you died."

She removed the straw hat and pushed the thick, young locks away from her forehead. "Well, I know everything that happened when we were together . . ."

She pursed her lips.

"And now I know *why* it happened. . . ."

She put her hands on her chest.

"And I also know . . . that you loved me dearly."

She took his other hand then. He felt the melting warmth.

"I don't know how *you* died," she said.

Eddie thought for a moment.

"I'm not sure, either," he said. "There was a girl, a little girl, she wandered into this ride, and she was in trouble. . . ."

Marguerite's gaze widened. She looked so young. This was harder than Eddie figured, telling his wife about the day he was killed.

"They have these rides, see, these new rides, nothing like what we used to have—everyone has to go a thousand miles an hour now. Anyhow, this one ride, it drops these carts, and the hydraulics are supposed to stop it, bring it down slowly, but something sliced the cable, the cart snapped loose, I still can't figure it, but the cart dropped because I told them to release it—I mean, I told Dom, he's this kid who works with me now—it wasn't his fault—but I told him and then I tried to stop it, but he couldn't hear me, and this little girl was just

sitting there, and I tried to reach her. I tried to save her. I felt her little hands, but then I . . .”

He stopped. She tilted her head, urging him to go on. He exhaled deeply.

“I ain’t talked this much since I got here,” he said.

She nodded and smiled, a gentle smile, and at the sight of it, his eyes began to moisten and a wave of sadness washed over him and suddenly, just like that, none of this mattered, nothing about his death or the park or the crowd he had yelled at to “Get back!” Why was he talking about this? What was he doing? Was he really with *her*? Like a hidden grieving that rises to grab the heart, his soul was ambushed with old emotions, and his lips began to tremble and he was swept into the current of all that he had lost. He was looking at his wife, his dead wife, his young wife, his missing wife, his only wife, and he didn’t want to look anymore.

“Oh God, Marguerite,” he whispered. “I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry. I can’t say. I can’t say. I can’t say.”

He dropped his head into his hands and he said it anyhow, he said what everyone says.

“I missed you so much.”

Today Is Eddie's Birthday

The racetrack is crowded with summer customers. The women wear straw sunhats and the men smoke cigars. Eddie and Noel leave work early to play Eddie's birthday number, 39, in the Daily Double. They sit on slatted fold-down seats. At their feet are paper cups of beer, amidst a carpet of discarded tickets.

Earlier, Eddie won the first race of the day. He'd put half of those winnings on the second race and won that as well, the first time such a thing had ever happened to him. That gave him \$209. After losing twice in smaller bets, he put it all on a horse to win in the sixth, because, as he and Noel agreed, in exuberant logic, he'd arrived with next to nothing, so what harm done if he went home the same way?

"Just think, if you win," Noel says now, "you'll have all that dough for the kid."

The bell rings. The horses are off. They bunch together on the far straightaway, their colorful silks blurring with their bumpy movement. Eddie has No. 8, a horse named Jersey Finch, which isn't a bad gamble, not at four to one, but what Noel has just said about "the kid"—the one Eddie and Marguerite are planning to adopt—flushes him with guilt. They could have used that money. Why did he do things like this?

The crowd rises. The horses come down the stretch. Jersey Finch moves outside and lengthens into full stride. The cheering

mixes with the thundering hooves. Noel hollers. Eddie squeezes his ticket. He is more nervous than he wants to be. His skin goes bumpy. One horse pulls ahead of the pack.

Jersey Finch!

Now Eddie has nearly \$800.

"I gotta call home," he says.

"You'll ruin it," Noel says.

"What are you talking about?"

"You tell somebody, you ruin your luck."

"You're nuts."

"Don't do it."

"I'm calling her. It'll make her happy."

"It won't make her happy."

He limps to a pay phone and drops in a nickel. Marguerite answers. Eddie tells her the news. Noel is right. She is not happy. She tells him to come home. He tells her to stop telling him what to do.

"We have a baby coming," she scolds. "You can't keep behaving like this."

Eddie hangs up the phone with a heat behind his ears. He goes back to Noel, who is eating peanuts at the railing.

"Let me guess," Noel says.

They go to the window and pick another horse. Eddie takes the money from his pocket. Half of him doesn't want it anymore and half of him wants twice as much, so he can throw it on the bed when he gets home and tell his wife, "Here, buy whatever you want, OK?"

Noel watches him push the bills through the opening. He raises his eyebrows.

"I know, I know," Eddie says.

What he does not know is that Marguerite, unable to call him back, has chosen to drive to the track and find him. She feels badly about yelling, this being his birthday, and she wants to apologize; she also wants him to stop. She knows from evenings past that Noel will insist they stay until closing—Noel is like that. And since the track is only ten minutes away, she grabs her handbag and drives their secondhand Nash Rambler down Ocean Parkway. She turns right on Lester Street. The sun is gone and the sky is in flux. Most of the cars are coming from the other direction. She approaches the Lester Street overpass, which used to be how customers reached the track, up the stairs, over the street and back down the stairs again, until the track owners paid the city for a traffic light, which left the overpass, for the most part, deserted.

But on this night, it is not deserted. It holds two teenagers who do not want to be found, two 17-year-olds who, hours earlier, had been chased from a liquor store after stealing five cartons of cigarettes and three pints of Old Harper's whiskey. Now, having finished the alcohol and smoked many of the cigarettes, they are bored with the evening, and they dangle their empty bottles over the lip of the rusted railing.

"Dare me?" one says.

"Dare ya," says the other.

The first one lets the bottle drop and they duck behind the metal grate to watch. It just misses a car and shatters onto the pavement.

"Whoooo," the second one yells. "Did you see that!"

"Drop yours now, chicken."

The second one stands, holds out his bottle, and chooses the sparse traffic of the right-hand lane. He wiggles the bottle back and forth, trying to time the drop to land between vehicles, as if this was some sort of art and he was some sort of artist.

His fingers release. He almost smiles.

Forty feet below, Marguerite never thinks to look up, never thinks that anything might be happening on that overpass, never thinks about anything besides getting Eddie out of that racetrack while he still has some money left. She is wondering what section of the grandstand to look in, even as the Old Harper's whiskey bottle smashes her windshield into a spray of flying glass. Her car veers into the concrete divider. Her body is tossed like a doll, slamming against the door and the dashboard and the steering wheel, lacerating her liver and breaking her arm and thumping her head so hard she loses touch with the sounds of the evening. She does not hear the screeching of cars. She does not hear the honking of horns. She does not hear the retreat of rubber-soled sneakers, running down the Lester Street overpass and off into the night.



∞LOVE, LIKE RAIN, can nourish from above, drenching couples with a soaking joy. But sometimes, under the angry heat of life, love dries on the surface and must nourish from below, tending to its roots, keeping itself alive.

The accident on Lester Street sent Marguerite to the hospital. She was confined to bed rest for nearly six months. Her injured liver recovered eventually, but the expense and the delay cost them the adoption. The child they were expecting went to someone else. The unspoken blame for this never found a resting place—it simply moved like a shadow from husband to wife. Marguerite went quiet for a long time. Eddie lost himself in work. The shadow took a place at their table and they ate in its presence, amid the lonely clanking of forks and plates. When they spoke, they spoke of small things. The water of their love was hidden beneath the roots. Eddie never bet the horses again. His visits with Noel came to a gradual end, each of them unable to discuss much over breakfast that didn't feel like an effort.

An amusement park in California introduced the first tubular steel tracks—they twisted at severe angles unachievable with wood—and suddenly, roller coasters, which had faded to near oblivion, were back in fashion. Mr. Bullock, the park owner, had ordered a steel-track model for Ruby

Pier, and Eddie oversaw the construction. He barked at the installers, checking their every move. He didn't trust anything this fast. Sixty-degree angles? He was sure someone would get hurt. Anyhow, it gave him a distraction.

The Stardust Band Shell was torn down. So was the Zipper ride. And the Tunnel of Love, which kids found too corny now. A few years later, a new boat ride called a log flume was constructed, and, to Eddie's surprise, it was hugely popular. The riders floated through troughs of water and dropped, at the end, into a large splash pool. Eddie couldn't figure why people so loved getting wet, when the ocean was 300 yards away. But he maintained it just the same, working shoeless in the water, ensuring that the boats never loosened from the tracks.

In time, husband and wife began talking again, and one night, Eddie even spoke about adopting. Marguerite rubbed her forehead and said, "We're too old now."

Eddie said, "What's too old to a child?"

The years passed. And while a child never came, their wound slowly healed, and their companionship rose to fill the space they were saving for another. In the mornings, she made him toast and coffee, and he dropped her at her cleaning job then drove back to the pier. Sometimes, in the afternoons, she got off early and walked the boardwalk with him, following his rounds, riding carousel horses or yellow-painted clamshells as Eddie explained the rotors and cables and listened for the engines' hum.

One July evening, they found themselves walking by the ocean, eating grape popsicles, their bare feet sinking in the wet sand. They looked around and realized they were the oldest people on the beach.

Marguerite said something about the bikini bathing suits the young girls were wearing and how she would never have the nerve to wear such a thing. Eddie said the girls were lucky, because if she did the men would not look at anyone else. And even though by this point Marguerite was in her mid-40s and her hips had thickened and a web of small lines had formed around her eyes, she thanked Eddie gratefully and looked at his crooked nose and wide jaw. The waters of their love fell again from above and soaked them as surely as the sea that gathered at their feet.

☺THREE YEARS LATER, she was breading chicken cutlets in the kitchen of their apartment, the one they had kept all this time, long after Eddie's mother had died, because Marguerite said it reminded her of when they were kids, and she liked to see the old carousel out the window. Suddenly, without warning, the fingers of her right hand stretched open uncontrollably. They moved backward. They would not close. The cutlet slid from her palm. It fell into the sink. Her arm throbbed. Her breathing quickened. She stared for a moment at this hand with the locked fingers that appeared to belong to someone else, someone gripping a large, invisible jar.

Then everything went dizzy.

“Eddie?” she called, but by the time he arrived, she had passed out on the floor.

☉IT WAS, THEY would determine, a tumor on the brain, and her decline would be like many others, treatments that made the disease seem mild, hair falling out in patches, mornings spent with noisy radiation machines and evenings spent vomiting in a hospital toilet.

In the final days, when cancer was ruled the victor, the doctors said only, “Rest. Take it easy.” When she asked questions, they nodded sympathetically, as if their nods were medicine doled out with a dropper. She realized this was protocol, their way of being nice while being helpless, and when one of them suggested “getting your affairs in order,” she asked to be released from the hospital. She told more than asked.

Eddie helped her up the stairs and hung her coat as she looked around the apartment. She wanted to cook but he made her sit, and he heated some water for tea. He had purchased lamb chops the day before, and that night he bumbled through a dinner with several invited friends and coworkers, most of whom greeted Marguerite and her sallow complexion with sentences like, “Well, look who’s back!” as if this were a homecoming and not a farewell party.

They ate mashed potatoes from a CorningWare dish and had butterscotch brownies for dessert, and when Marguerite finished a second glass of wine, Eddie took the bottle and poured her a third.

Two days later, she awoke with a scream. He drove her to the hospital in the predawn silence. They spoke in short sentences, what doctor might be on, who Eddie should call. And even though she was sitting in the seat next to him, Eddie felt her in everything, in the steering wheel, in the gas pedal, in the blinking of his eye, in the clearing of his throat. Every move he made was about hanging on to her.

She was 47.

"You have the card?" she asked him.

"The card . . ." he said blankly.

She drew a deep breath and closed her eyes, and her voice was thinner when she resumed speaking, as if that breath had cost her dearly.

"Insurance," she croaked.

"Yeah, yeah," he said quickly. "I got the card."

They parked in the lot and Eddie shut the engine. It was suddenly too still and too quiet. He heard every tiny sound, the squeak of his body on the leather seat, the *ca-cunk* of the door handle, the rush of outside air, his feet on the pavement, the jangle of his keys.

He opened her door and helped her get out. Her shoulders were scrunched up near her jaws, like a freezing child. Her hair blew across her face. She sniffed and lifted her eyes to the horizon. She motioned to Eddie and nodded toward the distant top of a big, white amusement ride, with red carts dangling like tree ornaments.

"You can see it from here," she said.

"The Ferris wheel?" he said.

She looked away. "Home."

☉BECAUSE HE HAD not slept in heaven, it was Eddie's perception that he had not spent more than a few hours with any of the people he'd met. Then again, without night or day, without sleeping or waking, without sunsets or high tides or meals or schedules, how did he know?

With Marguerite, he wanted only time—more and more time—and he was granted it, nighttimes and daytimes and nighttimes again. They walked through the doors of the assorted weddings and spoke of everything he wished to speak about. At a Swedish ceremony, Eddie told her about his brother, Joe, who had died 10 years earlier from a heart attack, just a month after purchasing a new condominium in Florida. At a Russian ceremony, she asked if he had kept the old apartment, and he said that he had, and she said she was glad. At an outdoor ceremony in a Lebanese village, he spoke about what had happened to him here in heaven, and she seemed to listen and know at the same time. He spoke of the Blue Man and his story, why some die when others live, and he spoke about the Captain and his tale of sacrifice. When he spoke about his father, Marguerite recalled the many nights he had spent enraged at the man, confounded by his silence. Eddie told her he had made things

square, and her eyebrows lifted and her lips spread and Eddie felt an old, warm feeling he had missed for years, the simple act of making his wife happy.

☺ ONE NIGHT, EDDIE spoke about the changes at Ruby Pier, how the old rides had been torn down, how the pennywhistle music at the arcade was now blaring rock 'n' roll, how the roller coasters now had corkscrew twists and carts that hung *down* from the tracks, how the "dark" rides, which once meant cowboy cutouts in glow paint, were full of video screens now, like watching television all the time.

He told her the new names. No more Dippers or Tumble Bugs. Everything was the Blizzard, the Mindbender, Top Gun, the Vortex.

"Sounds strange, don't it?" Eddie said.

"It sounds," she said, wistfully, "like someone else's summer."

Eddie realized that was precisely what he'd been feeling for years.

"I should have worked somewhere else," he told her. "I'm sorry I never got us out of there. My dad. My leg. I always felt like such a bum after the war."

He saw a sadness pass over her face.

"What happened?" she asked. "During that war?"

He had never quite told her. It was all understood. Soldiers, in his day, did what they had to do and didn't speak of it once they came home. He thought about the men he'd

killed. He thought about the guards. He thought about the blood on his hands. He wondered if he'd ever be forgiven.

"I lost myself," he said.

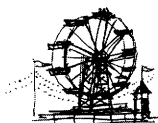
"No," his wife said.

"Yes," he whispered, and she said nothing else.

☺ AT TIMES, THERE in heaven, the two of them would lie down together. But they did not sleep. On earth, Marguerite said, when you fell asleep, you sometimes dreamed your heaven and those dreams helped to form it. But there was no reason for such dreams now.

Instead, Eddie held her shoulders and nuzzled in her hair and took long, deep breaths. At one point, he asked his wife if God knew he was here. She smiled and said, "Of course," even when Eddie admitted that some of his life he'd spent hiding from God, and the rest of the time he thought he went unnoticed.

The Fourth Lesson



*F*INALLY, AFTER MANY TALKS, Marguerite walked Eddie through another door. They were back inside the small, round room. She sat on the stool and placed her fingers together. She turned to the mirror, and Eddie noticed her reflection. Hers, but not his.

“The bride waits here,” she said, running her hands along her hair, taking in her image but seeming to drift away. “This is the moment you think about what you’re doing. Who you’re choosing. Who you will love. If it’s right, Eddie, this can be such a wonderful moment.”

She turned to him.

“You had to live without love for many years, didn’t you?”

Eddie said nothing.

"You felt that it was snatched away, that I left you too soon."

He lowered himself slowly. Her lavender dress was spread before him.

"You *did* leave too soon," he said.

"You were angry with me."

"No."

Her eyes flashed.

"OK. Yes."

"There was a reason to it all," she said.

"What reason?" he said. "How could there be a reason? You died. You were forty-seven. You were the best person any of us knew, and you died and you lost everything. And I lost everything. I lost the only woman I ever loved."

She took his hands. "No, you didn't. I was right here. And you loved me anyway.

"Lost love is still love, Eddie. It takes a different form, that's all. You can't see their smile or bring them food or tousle their hair or move them around a dance floor. But when those senses weaken, another heightens. Memory. Memory becomes your partner. You nurture it. You hold it. You dance with it.

"Life has to end," she said. "Love doesn't."

Eddie thought about the years after he buried his wife. It was like looking over a fence. He was aware of another kind of life out there, even as he knew he would never be a part of it.

"I never wanted anyone else," he said quietly.

"I know," she said.

"I was still in love with you."

"I know." She nodded. "I felt it."

"Here?" he asked.

"Even here," she said, smiling. "That's how strong lost love can be."

She stood and opened a door, and Eddie blinked as he entered behind her. It was a dimly lit room, with foldable chairs, and an accordion player sitting in the corner.

"I was saving this one," she said.

She held out her arms. And for the first time in heaven, he initiated his contact, he came to her, ignoring the leg, ignoring all the ugly associations he had made about dance and music and weddings, realizing now that they were really about loneliness.

"All that's missing," Marguerite whispered, taking his shoulder, "is the bingo cards."

He grinned and put a hand behind her waist.

"Can I ask you something?" he said.

"Yes."

"How come you look the way you looked the day I married you?"

"I thought you'd like it that way."

He thought for a moment. "Can you change it?"

"Change it?" She looked amused. "To what?"

"To the end."

She lowered her arms. "I wasn't so pretty at the end."

Eddie shook his head, as if to say not true.

"Could you?"

She took a moment, then came again into his arms. The accordion man played the familiar notes. She hummed in his ear and they began to move together, slowly, in a remembered rhythm that a husband shares only with his wife.

You made me love you

I didn't want to do it

I didn't want to do it. . . .

You made me love you

and all the time you knew it

and all the time you knew it. . . .

When he moved his head back, she was 47 again, the web of lines beside her eyes, the thinner hair, the looser skin beneath her chin. She smiled and he smiled, and she was, to him, as beautiful as ever, and he closed his eyes and said for the first time what he'd been feeling from the moment he saw her again: "I don't want to go on. I want to stay here."

When he opened his eyes, his arms still held her shape, but she was gone, and so was everything else.

FRIDAY, 3:15 P.M.

Dominguez pressed the elevator button and the door rumbled closed. An inner porthole lined up with an exterior porthole. The car jerked upward, and through the meshed glass he watched the lobby disappear.

“I can’t believe this elevator still works,” Dominguez said. “It must be, like, from the last century.”

The man beside him, an estate attorney, nodded slightly, feigning interest. He took off his hat—it was stuffy, and he was sweating—and watched the numbers light up on the brass panel. This was his third appointment of the day. One more, and he could go home to dinner.

“Eddie didn’t have much,” Dominguez said.

“Um-hmm,” the man said, wiping his forehead with a handkerchief. “Then it shouldn’t take long.”

The elevator bounced to a stop and the door rumbled open and they turned toward 6B. The hallway still had the black-and-white checkered tile of the 1960s, and it smelled of someone’s cooking—garlic and fried potatoes. The superintendent had given them the key—along with a deadline. Next Wednesday. Have the place cleared out for a new tenant.

“Wow . . .” Dominguez said, upon opening the door and entering the kitchen. “Pretty tidy for an old guy.” The sink was clean. The counters were wiped. Lord knows, he thought, *his* place was never this neat.

“Financial papers?” the man asked. “Bank statements? Jewelry?”

Dominguez thought of Eddie wearing jewelry and he almost laughed. He realized how much he missed the old man, how strange it was not having him at the pier, barking orders, watching everything like a mother hawk. They hadn't even cleared out his locker. No one had the heart. They just left his stuff at the shop, where it was, as if he were coming back tomorrow.

"I dunno. You check in that bedroom thing?"

"The bureau?"

"Yeah. You know, I only been here once myself. I really only knew Eddie through work."

Dominguez leaned over the table and glanced out the kitchen window. He saw the old carousel. He looked at his watch. *Speaking of work*, he thought to himself.

The attorney opened the top drawer of the bedroom bureau. He pushed aside the pairs of socks, neatly rolled, one inside the other, and the underwear, white boxer shorts, stacked by the waistbands. Tucked beneath them was an old leather-bound box, a serious-looking thing. He flipped it open in hopes of a quick find. He frowned. Nothing important. No bank statements. No insurance policies. Just a black bow tie, a Chinese restaurant menu, an old deck of cards, a letter with an army medal, and a faded Polaroid of a man by a birthday cake, surrounded by children.

"Hey," Dominguez called from the other room, "is this what you need?"

He emerged with a stack of envelopes taken from a kitchen drawer, some from a local bank, some from the Veterans Administration. The attorney fingered through them and, without looking up, said, "That'll do." He pulled out one bank statement and made a mental note of the balance. Then, as often happened with these visits, he silently congratulated himself on his own portfolio of stocks, bonds, and a vested retirement plan. It sure beat ending up like this poor slob, with little to show but a tidy kitchen.

The Fifth Person Eddie Meets in Heaven



*W*HITE. THERE WAS ONLY WHITE NOW. NO earth, no sky, no horizon between the two. Only a pure and silent white, as noiseless as the deepest snowfall at the quietest sunrise.

White was all Eddie saw. All he heard was his own labored breathing, followed by an echo of that breathing. He inhaled and heard a louder inhale. He exhaled, and it exhaled, too.

Eddie squeezed his eyes shut. Silence is worse when you know it won't be broken, and Eddie knew. His wife was gone. He wanted her desperately, one more minute, half a minute, five more seconds, but there was no way to reach or call or wave or even look at her picture. He felt as if he'd tumbled down steps and was crumpled at the bottom. His soul was vacant. He had no impulse. He hung

limp and lifeless in the void, as if on a hook, as if all the fluids had been gored out of him. He might have hung there a day or a month. It might have been a century.

Only at the arrival of a small but haunting noise did he stir, his eyelids lifting heavily. He had already been to four pockets of heaven, met four people, and while each had been mystifying upon arrival, he sensed that this was something altogether different.

The tremor of noise came again, louder now, and Eddie, in a lifelong defense instinct, clenched his fists, only to find his right hand squeezing a cane. His forearms were pocked with liver spots. His fingernails were small and yellowish. His bare legs carried the reddish rash—shingles—that had come during his final weeks on earth. He looked away from his hastening decay. In human accounting, his body was near its end.

Now came the sound again, a high-pitched rolling of irregular shrieks and lulls. In life, Eddie had heard this sound in his nightmares, and he shuddered with the memory: the village, the fire, Smitty and this noise, this squealing cackle that, in the end, emerged from his own throat when he tried to speak.

He clenched his teeth, as if that might make it stop, but it continued on, like an unheeded alarm, until Eddie yelled into the choking whiteness: "What is it? *What do you want?*"

With that, the high-pitched noise moved to the back-

ground, layered atop a second noise, a loose, relentless rumble—the sound of a running river—and the whiteness shrank to a sun spot reflecting off shimmering waters. Ground appeared beneath Eddie's feet. His cane touched something solid. He was high up on an embankment, where a breeze blew across his face and a mist brought his skin to a moist glaze. He looked down and saw, in the river, the source of those haunting screeches, and he was flushed with the relief of a man who finds, while gripping the baseball bat, that there is no intruder in his house. The sound, this screaming, whistling, thrumming scream, was merely the cacophony of children's voices, thousands of them at play, splashing in the river and shrieking with innocent laughter.

Was this what I'd been dreaming? he thought. *All this time? Why?* He studied the small bodies, some jumping, some wading, some carrying buckets while others rolled in the high grass. He noticed a certain calmness to it all, no roughhousing, which you usually saw with kids. He noticed something else. There were no adults. Not even teenagers. These were all small children, with skin the color of dark wood, seemingly monitoring themselves.

And then Eddie's eyes were drawn to a white boulder. A slender young girl stood upon it, apart from the others, facing his direction. She motioned with both her hands, waving him in. He hesitated. She smiled. She waved again and nodded, as if to say, *Yes, you.*

Eddie lowered his cane to navigate the downward slope. He slipped, his bad knee buckling, his legs giving way. But before he hit the earth, he felt a sudden blast of wind at his back and he was whipped forward and straightened on his feet, and there he was, standing before the little girl as if he'd been there all the time.

Today Is Eddie's Birthday

He is 51. A Saturday. It is his first birthday without Marguerite. He makes Sanka in a paper cup, and eats two pieces of toast with margarine. In the years after his wife's accident, Eddie shooed away any birthday celebrations, saying, "Why do I gotta be reminded of that day for?" It was Marguerite who insisted. She made the cake. She invited friends. She always purchased one bag of taffy and tied it with a ribbon. "You can't give away your birthday," she would say.

Now that she's gone, Eddie tries. At work, he straps himself on a roller coaster curve, high and alone, like a mountain climber. At night, he watches television in the apartment. He goes to bed early. No cake. No guests. It is never hard to act ordinary if you feel ordinary, and the paleness of surrender becomes the color of Eddie's days.

He is 60, a Wednesday. He gets to the shop early. He opens a brown-bag lunch and rips a piece of bologna off a sandwich. He attaches it to a hook, then drops the twine down the fishing hole. He watches it float. Eventually, it disappears, swallowed by the sea.

He is 68, a Saturday. He spreads his pills on the counter. The telephone rings. Joe, his brother, is calling from Florida. Joe wishes

him happy birthday. Joe talks about his grandson. Joe talks about a condominium. Eddie says "uh-huh" at least 50 times.

He is 75, a Monday. He puts on his glasses and checks the maintenance reports. He notices someone missed a shift the night before and the Squiggly Wiggly Worm Adventure has not been brake-tested. He sighs and takes a placard from the wall—RIDE CLOSED TEMPORARILY FOR MAINTENANCE—then carries it across the boardwalk to the Wiggly Worm entrance, where he checks the brake panel himself.

He is 82, a Tuesday. A taxi arrives at the park entrance. He slides inside the front seat, pulling his cane in behind him.

"Most people like the back," the driver says.

"You mind?" Eddie asks.

The driver shrugs. "Nah. I don't mind." Eddie looks straight ahead. He doesn't say that it feels more like driving this way, and he hasn't driven since they refused him a license two years ago.

The taxi takes him to the cemetery. He visits his mother's grave and his brother's grave and he stands by his father's grave for only a few moments. As usual, he saves his wife's for last. He leans on the cane and he looks at the headstone and he thinks about many things. Taffy. He thinks about taffy. He thinks it would take his teeth out now, but he would eat it anyhow, if it meant eating it with her.



The Last Lesson



*T*HE LITTLE GIRL APPEARED TO BE ASIAN, maybe five or six years old, with a beautiful cinnamon complexion, hair the color of a dark plum, a small flat nose, full lips that spread joyfully over her gapped teeth, and the most arresting eyes, as black as a seal's hide, with a pinhead of white serving as a pupil. She smiled and flapped her hands excitedly until Eddie edged one step closer, whereupon she presented herself.

"Tala," she said, offering her name, her palms on her chest.

"Tala," Eddie repeated.

She smiled as if a game had begun. She pointed to her embroidered blouse, loosely slung over her shoulders and wet with the river water.

“*Baro*,” she said.

“*Baro*.”

She touched the woven red fabric that wrapped around her torso and legs.

“*Saya*.”

“*Saya*.”

Then came her cloglike shoes—“*bakya*”—then the iridescent seashells by her feet—“*capiz*”—then a woven bamboo mat—“*banig*”—that was laid out before her. She motioned for Eddie to sit on the mat and she sat, too, her legs curled underneath her.

None of the other children seemed to notice him. They splashed and rolled and collected stones from the river’s floor. Eddie watched one boy rub a stone over the body of another, down his back, under his arms.

“*Washing*,” the girl said. “Like our *inas* used to do.”

“*Inas*?” Eddie said.

She studied Eddie’s face.

“*Mommies*,” she said.

Eddie had heard many children in his life, but in this one’s voice, he detected none of the normal hesitation toward adults. He wondered if she and the other children had chosen this riverbank heaven, or if, given their short memories, such a serene landscape had been chosen for them.

She pointed to Eddie’s shirt pocket. He looked down. Pipe cleaners.

"These?" he said. He pulled them out and twisted them together, as he had done in his days at the pier. She rose to her knees to examine the process. His hands shook. "You see? It's a . . ." he finished the last twist ". . . dog."

She took it and smiled—a smile Eddie had seen a thousand times.

"You like that?" he said.

"You burn me," she said.

☉ EDDIE FELT HIS jaw tighten.

"What did you say?"

"You burn me. You make me fire."

Her voice was flat, like a child reciting a lesson.

"My ina say to wait inside the *nipa*. My ina say to hide."

Eddie lowered his voice, his words slow and deliberate.

"What . . . were you hiding *from*, little girl?"

She fingered the pipe-cleaner dog, then dipped it in the water.

"*Sundalong*," she said.

"*Sundalong*?"

She looked up.

"Soldier."

Eddie felt the word like a knife in his tongue. Images flashed through his head. Soldiers. Explosions. Morton. Smitty. The Captain. The flamethrowers.

"Tala . . ." he whispered.

"Tala," she said, smiling at her own name.

"Why are you here, in heaven?"

She lowered the animal.

"You burn me. You make me fire."

Eddie felt a pounding behind his eyes. His head began to rush. His breathing quickened.

"You were in the Philippines . . . the shadow . . . in that hut . . ."

"The *nipa*. Ina say be safe there. Wait for her. Be safe. Then big noise. Big fire. You burn me." She shrugged her narrow shoulders. "Not safe."

Eddie swallowed. His hands trembled. He looked into her deep, black eyes and he tried to smile, as if it were a medicine the little girl needed. She smiled back, but this only made him fall apart. His face collapsed, and he buried it in his palms. His shoulders and lungs gave way. The darkness that had shadowed him all those years was revealing itself at last, it was real, flesh and blood, this child, this lovely child, he had killed her, burned her to death, the bad dreams he'd suffered, he'd deserved every one. He *had* seen something! That shadow in the flame! Death by his hand! *By his own fiery hand!* A flood of tears soaked through his fingers and his soul seemed to plummet.

He wailed then, and a howl rose within him in a voice he had never heard before, a howl from the very belly of his being, a howl that rumbled the river water and shook the

misty air of heaven. His body convulsed, and his head jerked wildly, until the howling gave way to prayerlike utterances, every word expelled in the breathless surge of confession: "I killed you, I KILLED YOU," then a whispered "forgive me," then, "FORGIVE ME, OH, GOD . . ." and finally, "What have I done . . . *WHAT HAVE I DONE? . . .*"

He wept and he wept, until the weeping drained him to a shiver. Then he shook silently, swaying back and forth. He was kneeling on a mat before the little dark-haired girl, who played with her pipe-cleaner animal along the bank of the flowing river.

☉ AT SOME POINT, when his anguish had quieted, Eddie felt a tapping on his shoulder. He looked up to see Tala holding out a stone.

"You wash me," she said. She stepped into the water and turned her back to Eddie. Then she pulled the embroidered baro over her head.

He recoiled. Her skin was horribly burned. Her torso and narrow shoulders were black and charred and blistered. When she turned around, the beautiful, innocent face was covered in grotesque scars. Her lips drooped. Only one eye was open. Her hair was gone in patches of burned scalp, covered now by hard, mottled scabs.

"You wash me," she said again, holding out the stone.

Eddie dragged himself into the river. He took the stone. His fingers trembled.

"I don't know how. . . ." he mumbled, barely audible. "I never had children. . . ."

She raised her charred hand and Eddie gripped it gently and slowly rubbed the stone along her forearm, until the scars began to loosen. He rubbed harder; they peeled away. He quickened his efforts until the singed flesh fell and the healthy flesh was visible. Then he turned the stone over and rubbed her bony back and tiny shoulders and the nape of her neck and finally her cheeks and her forehead and the skin behind her ears.

She leaned backward into him, resting her head on his collarbone, shutting her eyes as if falling into a nap. He traced gently around the lids. He did the same with her drooped lips, and the scabbed patches on her head, until the plum-colored hair emerged from the roots and the face that he had seen at first was before him again.

When she opened her eyes, their whites flashed out like beacons. "I am five," she whispered.

Eddie lowered the stone and shuddered in short, gasping breaths. "Five . . . uh-huh . . . Five years old? . . ."

She shook her head no. She held up five fingers. Then she pushed them against Eddie's chest, as if to say *your five. Your fifth person.*

A warm breeze blew. A tear rolled down Eddie's face. Tala studied it the way a child studies a bug in the grass. Then she spoke to the space between them.

"Why sad?" she said.

“Why am I sad?” he whispered. “Here?”

She pointed down. “There.”

Eddie sobbed, a final vacant sob, as if his chest were empty. He had surrendered all barriers; there was no grown-up-to-child talk anymore. He said what he always said, to Marguerite, to Ruby, to the Captain, to the Blue Man, and, more than anyone, to himself.

“I was sad because I didn’t do anything with my life. I was nothing. I accomplished nothing. I was lost. I felt like I wasn’t supposed to be there.”

Tala plucked the pipe-cleaner dog from the water.

“Supposed to be there,” she said.

“Where? At Ruby Pier?”

She nodded.

“Fixing rides? That was my existence?” He blew a deep breath. “Why?”

She tilted her head, as if it were obvious.

“Children,” she said. “You keep them safe. You make good for me.”

She wiggled the dog against his shirt.

“Is where you were supposed to be,” she said, and then she touched his shirt patch with a small laugh and added two words, “Eddie Main-ten-ance.”

∞ EDDIE SLUMPED IN the rushing water. The stones of his stories were all around him now, beneath the surface, one touching another. He could feel his form melting, dissolv-

ing, and he sensed that he did not have long, that whatever came after the five people you meet in heaven, it was upon him now.

"Tala?" he whispered.

She looked up.

"The little girl at the pier? Do you know about her?"

Tala stared at her fingertips. She nodded yes.

"Did I save her? Did I pull her out of the way?"

Tala shook her head. "No pull."

Eddie shivered. His head dropped. So there it was. The end of his story.

"Push," Tala said.

He looked up. "Push?"

"Push her legs. No pull. You push. Big thing fall. You keep her safe."

Eddie shut his eyes in denial. "But I felt her hands," he said. "It's the only thing I remember. I *couldn't* have pushed her. I felt her *hands*."

Tala smiled and scooped up river water, then placed her small wet fingers in Eddie's adult grip. He knew right away they had been there before.

"Not *her* hands," she said. "*My* hands. I bring you to heaven. Keep you safe."

∞ WITH THAT, THE river rose quickly, engulfing Eddie's waist and chest and shoulders. Before he could take another breath, the noise of the children disappeared above him, and

he was submerged in a strong but silent current. His grip was still entwined with Tala's, but he felt his body being washed from his soul, meat from the bone, and with it went all the pain and weariness he ever held inside him, every scar, every wound, every bad memory.

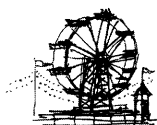
He was nothing now, a leaf in the water, and she pulled him gently, through shadow and light, through shades of blue and ivory and lemon and black, and he realized all these colors, all along, were the emotions of his life. She drew him up through the breaking waves of a great gray ocean and he emerged in brilliant light above an almost unimaginable scene:

There was a pier filled with thousands of people, men and women, fathers and mothers and children—so many children—children from the past and the present, children who had not yet been born, side by side, hand in hand, in caps, in short pants, filling the boardwalk and the rides and the wooden platforms, sitting on each other's shoulders, sitting in each other's laps. They were there, or would be there, because of the simple, mundane things Eddie had done in his life, the accidents he had prevented, the rides he had kept safe, the unnoticed turns he had affected every day. And while their lips did not move, Eddie heard their voices, more voices than he could have imagined, and a peace came upon him that he had never known before. He was free of Tala's grasp now, and he floated up above the sand and above the boardwalk, above the tent tops and spires

of the midway, toward the peak of the big, white Ferris wheel, where a cart, gently swaying, held a woman in a yellow dress—his wife, Marguerite, waiting with her arms extended. He reached for her and he saw her smile and the voices melded into a single word from God:

Home.

Epilogue



*T*HE PARK AT RUBY PIER REOPENED THREE days after the accident. The story of Eddie's death was in the newspapers for a week, and then other stories about other deaths took its place.

The ride called Freddy's Free Fall was closed for the season, but the next year it reopened with a new name, Daredevil Drop. Teenagers saw it as a badge of courage, and it drew many customers, and the owners were pleased.

Eddie's apartment, the one he had grown up in, was rented to someone new, who put leaded glass in the kitchen window, obscuring the view of the old carousel. Dominguez, who had agreed to take over Eddie's job, put Eddie's few possessions in a trunk at the maintenance shop, alongside

memorabilia from Ruby Pier, including photos of the original entrance.

Nicky, the young man whose key had cut the cable, made a new key when he got home, then sold his car four months later. He returned often to Ruby Pier, where he bragged to his friends that his great-grandmother was the woman for whom it was named.

Seasons came and seasons went. And when school let out and the days grew long, the crowds returned to the amusement park by the great gray ocean—not as large as those at the theme parks, but large enough. Come the summer, the spirit turns, and the seashore beckons with a song of the waves, and people gather for carousels and Ferris wheels and sweet iced drinks and cotton candy.

Lines formed at Ruby Pier—just as a line formed someplace else: five people, waiting, in five chosen memories, for a little girl named Amy or Annie to grow and to love and to age and to die, and to finally have her questions answered—why she lived and what she lived for. And in that line now was a whiskered old man, with a linen cap and a crooked nose, who waited in a place called the Stardust Band Shell to share his part of the secret of heaven: that each affects the other and the other affects the next, and the world is full of stories, but the stories are all one.

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