

# Coney Island

by Professor Solomon

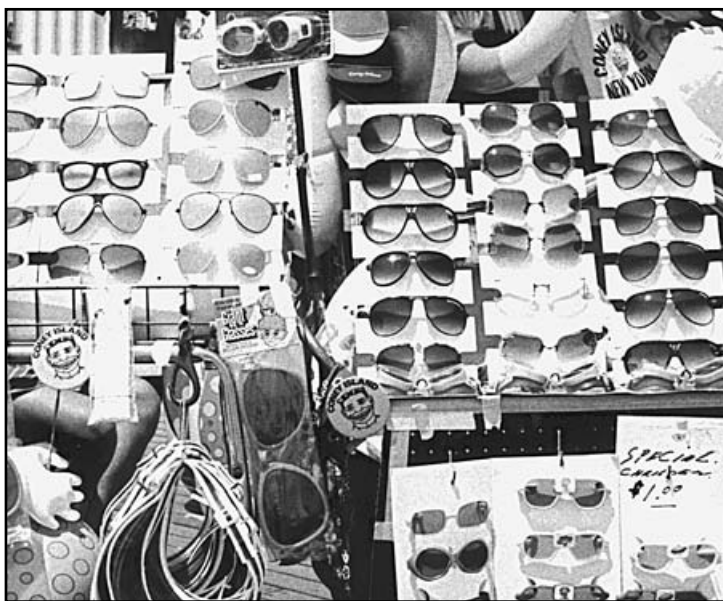


## Coney Island—Past and Present

Professor Solomon begins by delving into the history of Coney Island, the seaside resort that was once America's most celebrated amusement center.

Then he goes there—to see what remains of the place. Wandering about, he looks for antiques...talks with old-timers...explores the Boardwalk and surviving amusements.

Join the Professor in his excursion to this legendary funspot.



**PROFESSOR SOLOMON** (who describes himself as an “amateur professor”) is the author of *How to Find Lost Objects*, *Japan in a Nutshell*, and *How to Make the Most of a Flying Saucer Experience*. He resides in Baltimore, and frequents the public library.

<http://www.professorsolomon.com>

# **Coney Island**

by Professor Solomon



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I. Personal Note

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My first visit to Coney Island was a disappointment. For we had arrived to find most of the rides, booths, and stands closed.

I was thirteen at the time, and a tourist in New York City. The trip was a bar mitzvah gift from my grandmother, who was accompanying me (along with my brother, whom I had managed to squeeze in on the gift). Before leaving home, I had determined which sights I wanted to see; and heading my list had been Times Square, the subway, and Coney Island. Times Square I intended to film (at night, for the neon signs) with a movie camera borrowed from my father. The subway I wanted simply to ride. As for Coney Island, was it not the most renowned of amusement parks? And were not such parks the crowning achievement of Western Civilization—the proper end of technological progress? The place had to be checked out.

An overnight train had taken us to New York; and for three days my grandmother had led her charges about town. We had (according to a travel diary I kept) taken “a cab to Grenish Village, seeing paintings”; shopped at Gim-bels; climbed the Statue of Liberty; dined at an automat; sailed around Manhattan on the Circle Line; viewed Times Square; toured the United Nations building; attended a showing of *Cinerama Holiday*...and gone out to Coney Island. But it had been a Monday, the day off for many who worked at the beach. The three of us had strolled a Boardwalk that was nearly deserted, lamenting (my brother and I, at least) the immobile rides and shuttered booths.

Yet the experience was satisfying in its way. For one had been to Coney Island. One had walked along the fabled



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shore; found the Dodgem open and scrambled into a car; played Skee-Ball; and eaten a foot-long hot dog. Moreover, one had journeyed there by subway. With its screeching wheels, exotic straps, and press of humanity, the train had provided a ride as exciting as any roller coaster.

Still, some disappointment lingered.

More than twenty years later, I arrived for my second visit. I was staying with friends in Manhattan; and someone had mentioned Coney Island. Recalling that boyhood excursion, I had decided to go out and take another look around.

This time the rides and booths had all been open. (All of them, that is, that still existed. For in the intervening years much of Coney Island had been torn down.) I watched a carousel go round, and rode a couple of spook rides (the cars rattled through dark tunnels, and that was it—virtually nothing along the way was functioning). I loitered on a fishing pier; conversed with a family of Gypsies at their fortunetelling booth; ate onion rings and frozen custard; and marveled that this old-fashioned, seaside resort was still in existence (though I noted the abundance of rubble-filled lots). But the high point of my visit came at a fun house called the Magic Carpet.

Following its winding corridors, I had felt cheated. For the surprises of the fun house, like those of the spook rides, were mostly duds: either out of order or missing altogether.



(The result of vandalism, I later learned.) But the Magic Carpet was redeemed by its final surprise—a feature that was not only operative, but worth the price of admission.

I had entered a small, windowless room. The floorboards had creaked beneath my (no longer wary) step. Muffled voices could be heard from elsewhere in the fun house. In the center of the room was a bench, with a sign on it:

SIT HERE

Like Alice finding the Drink Me bottle, I had hastened to comply. And no sooner had I lowered myself onto the bench, than several things began to happen at once.

With a loud click and a whirring sound, the bench began to descend. Simultaneously, the floor in front of me opened up—to reveal a conveyor belt that was moving.

The bench tilted forward and flung me onto the belt. I thought to myself, with the odd detachment that can accompany disaster: *Is this really happening?*

Light flooded the room—from a gate that had opened in the wall. Sprawled on the conveyor belt, I was borne through the gate. I felt like an animal that had fallen into a trap. I was dumbfounded, outraged!

The belt carried me downward. I squinted at sky and realized I was outside. The midway tumbled about me.

I was dumped on the ground, and became aware of legs, laughter, and mirthful looks. They belonged to the spectators who had been waiting outside the Magic Carpet for its next victim to emerge. I picked myself up, grinned like a good sport, and staggered off.

A diabolical device had ejected me from the fun house.

On the train back to Manhattan, I congratulated myself on having experienced Coney Island again—this time with the sensibilities of an adult, and on a day when everything had been open. I had spent an afternoon partaking of Coney Island's amenities—its antique rides, fun house, fortunetellers, seaside snacks, salt air. Much of the amusement area was gone, but what remained was boisterously alive. The disappointment of my boyhood visit had been more than compensated.

The following week I was chatting with a student at the Boston high school where I worked as a substitute teacher. When I mentioned my trip to Coney Island, a look of astonishment crept across her face. Finally, she whispered (as if the name were too highly charged to pronounce aloud): “Coney Island? You went there?” I assured her I had. And she said: “There’s still a Coney Island?”

The girl had assumed the legendary funspot was defunct. How come you never saw it on television? she wanted to know. Why didn’t they advertise it, like Disneyland or King’s Dominion? Then, with a fervent look in her eye, she murmured: “I gotta go there.”

At that point I had to convey the bad news. Yes, I told her, Coney Island was still around; but it had declined. Although the beach itself was still popular, the amusement area had fallen on hard times. Much of it had been torn down; and the rest was in a shabby state. I felt obliged to tell her, too, that the neighborhood had deteriorated, and that Coney Island had acquired a reputation as unsafe. Unruly and criminal elements were said to frequent it; and while the reports were exaggerated, the place had to be approached with caution.

But nothing I had to say could dampen her desire to go there. Coney Island held a mystical office in this girl’s mind (as it had for me at thirteen). The mere mention of its name evoked the sounds of a carnival; and my revelation that it still existed had stirred her imagination. Someday, she said, she was going to go there. *In loco parentis*, I urged her to be careful if she did.

I suspect, though, that she soon forgot about it—as I did, my curiosity having been satisfied.

Six years went by.

Then, one summer afternoon, I was reading a magazine article about Brooklyn; and it mentioned Coney Island. The amusement area, I learned, had “shrunk to a few blocks.”

I was surprised that even a few had survived. The rides I had gone on—and everything else in sight—had seemed to be in their final days. Moreover, I was aware that urban amusement parks were a vanishing species. Fate had not

been kind of late to our older parks (particularly to those located on a beach, their site now prime real estate). Many had been closed or allowed to deteriorate; and when the wrecker's ball or fire finally leveled them, the event was little more than a *coup de grâce*. A nostalgic obituary would appear in the newspaper; people who had grown up with the park would sigh a lament; and that was that. It was a sad litany. Pacific Ocean Park (in Santa Monica) had been demolished to make way for an apartment complex. Euclid Beach (in Cleveland) had met a similar end. Riverview (in Chicago) was long gone. Revere Beach (near Boston) had undergone a progressive decimation, until only a handful of amusements remained—and then it, too, had yielded to high-rises.

It was as if, at the beck of wizards, those apartment towers were on a march to the sea. There they were devouring old amusement parks and taking root in the sand: bleak memorials to an institution that had had its day. Inexpensive seaside resorts? Rides, penny arcades, bandstands, just a trolley ride from the city? Old hat, we were told. Such places were obsolete. They attracted a bad element. They were eyesores. (More to the point, of course, they were less profitable than the “seaside residential environments” that were replacing them. Not wizards, but dollar-eyed developers were behind the march of the towers.)

One by one, the trolley parks were vanishing; and an era was coming to a close. These urban playgrounds had arisen around the turn of the century, enjoyed a heyday, and declined. Now they were in their final hour. To the roar of bulldozers, a venerable institution was being consigned to oblivion.

Rereading that mention of Coney Island in the magazine article, I recalled the deterioration I had seen. And I pondered the obituaries for amusement parks that I had been noting in newspapers. Suddenly it struck me that something was passing from the scene.

And my antiquarian instincts were roused. Here was a cultural artifact—the traditional amusement park—on the verge of extinction. Was anyone documenting its demise? Or seeking to preserve a sense of it? And here was Coney

Island, the most celebrated of those parks, in its apparent death throes. Surely there was lore to be gathered—photographs to be taken—oral histories to be set down—before a landmark was reduced to rubble.

Interested now in Coney Island, I headed for the library. And I returned home with two detailed histories of the place.\*

Reading through them, I was astonished at the richness of Coney Island's past. One revelation was that no amusement park called Coney Island had ever existed. Rather, three separate parks—in competition with one another—had flourished at that locale. I learned too that these three had inspired all the rest—that Coney Island had been the birthplace of the amusement park. Yet parks were only a part of its story.

It was not long before I had decided to pay a third visit to Coney Island—this time with notebook and camera. For a writer with an antiquarian bent, it seemed a natural subject: the original amusement center, moribund but still in operation. Old-timers to interview, lore to ferret out, ruins to photograph—how could I pass it up? I had to return there.

And soon, I was convinced—before the apartment towers arrived. Most of the amusements, apparently, were already gone; and a developer was no doubt waiting in the wings. A report on Coney Island? It was now or never, I told myself. In any case, a heat wave was in progress in the city where I resided—just the time for an excursion to the sea. I began to prepare.

Friends to whom I mentioned my plans were dubious, even apprehensive. They warned me that Coney Island was located in a high-crime area. One of them was surprised to learn it still existed at all. An ex-New Yorker who had frequented the amusement area as a youth, he thought it had been torn down in the sixties. I told him he was thinking

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\* *Sodom by the Sea: An Affectionate History of Coney Island* by Oliver Pilat and Jo Ransom (Doubleday, Doran and Company, Garden City, 1941), and *Good Old Coney Island* by Eno McCullough (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1957).

perhaps of Palisades Park, whose Hudson River site was blighted now with high-rises. No, Coney Island was still there—at least, according to the magazine article. Just how much of it, in what condition, and for how much longer, I would let him know.

In late July I traveled to New York. The idea was to go out to Coney Island; see what was to be seen; talk with people; take notes and photos—and produce an antiquarian report.

And I soon found myself standing on a subway platform, clutching my satchel. In it were notebook, camera, and various survival items. I was waiting for a B-, D-, or F-train, any of which (according to the transit map) would take me to the shore.

What I would find there would be at once engaging and sad. Engaging, because Coney Island is still a lively destination. Sad, because so much of it is gone—has been burnt, bulldozed, or simply hauled away.

Accompany me there. Together we shall stroll the Boardwalk, contemplate ruins, chat with old-timers. The pleasures of an outing will be shared; while the actual legwork, sunburn, and food poisoning will be mine.

It may be some time, though, before our train arrives. (They have been breaking down frequently this summer.) While we wait, let me tell you the story of the Island for which we are bound. Let me chronicle the rise of a resort—conjure up its fantastical skyline, looney rides, beer gardens, bathhouses, wax museums, disaster shows, Pavilion of Fun, flea circus, game booths, thieves' dens, milling crowds, and a few of its characters.

Then, braving the perils of the New York subway system, we shall go there...to see what is left of the place.



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II. History



A tribe called the Canarsie dwelt in the forest that the urban wilds of Brooklyn have replaced. That forest has utterly vanished; and so, too, those for whom it was home and hunting ground. Few residents of present-day Brooklyn could even tell you the tribe's name. Indeed, scholars themselves know little about the Canarsie, whose demise antedated the rise of ethnology, and who have left behind only a handful of artifacts. But for centuries these Algonquin-speaking villagers thrived here. They roamed the aisles of the vast market that was the forest, filling their baskets with nuts, berries, mushrooms, herbs. They tracked deer amid the tall trees; grew corn in clearings; adorned their huts; fought wars and traded. They chanted and smoked pipes to the Sky. And (like many modern Brooklynites) they were wont to head out to a certain beach in the vicinity—especially a group of them known as the Konoï,\* or Bear Band.

Unlike their successors, however, the Indians had no interest in swimming, frolicking, or basking in the sun. Rather, they hiked out to the long, treeless island called Narrioch—the Place Without Shade—solely to gather shells. For the Canarsie, like other tribes along the shore, were the prospectors of their day. The gold they sought was the shells of clams and periwinkles. (Strung together, these

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\* This would seem to be the origin of the Island's name, although another theory derives it from *Konijn Eylandt* (Dutch for "Rabbit Island"). It is tempting, of course, to seek a connection with *coney-catcher* (a petty swindler). But Coney Island had acquired its name long before the arrival of the three-card monte men and other con artists.

constituted the seawant, or wampum, that was legal tender among the eastern tribes. The rarer the shell, the more it was worth—just as with the precious metals that once served us as money.) While beachcombing, they probably



ate some clams; and if first they fried them, the Canarsie may be said to have originated the snack that would one day be popular on this beach.

The Bear Band did not dwell on Narrioch. They came to the island only to gather shells (and, in time of war, to hide their womenfolk and children). The four-mile stretch of sand and scrub was neither home nor playground for them—simply a useful place. Yet the Canarsie cannot have been immune to its charms. They cannot have been oblivious to the waves that surged along the shore; the roll of the dunes; the drone of crickets; the mist at sunrise; the lazy glide of the gulls. Nor could they have failed to note the special light of the Place Without Shade. Intense yet serene, it seemed infused with a living presence—radiant with some resident deity. So bright were the sands that the Konoï must have squinted as they gathered shells.

But one day a shadow came to the Place Without Shade. And soon not a single Canarsie was leaving his footprints



in the sand. Only the remains of their campsites—charred logs, pieces of pottery—and a mention in the annals of those who replaced them, would serve as evidence that the tribe had ever been here.

That shadow, of course, was you and I, in the form of our rude ancestors.\*

It first manifest itself as a vessel (monstrous to the native eye) that sailed into the bay one morning. The year (by the reckoning of the newcomers who were scanning the shore) was 1609. The ship was the *Half Moon*, captained by Henry Hudson on behalf of the Dutch East Indies Company. Some Canarsie hopped into a canoe and paddled out to investigate. Trinkets and tobacco were soon being exchanged; and there were the usual unfortunate incidents. Then Hudson sailed off, venturing up the broad river that would come to bear his name.

At the mouth of the river the colony of New Amsterdam was established. Included in its grant was Narrioch. But no Dutch ever settled there; and the island continued to be frequented by Canarsie. They gathered shells, roasted corn, smoked their pipes and chanted. The moon waxed and waned. Season gave way to season. The waves came rolling in.

Then one day Lady Moody arrived in the colony. “Here comes trouble,” the Bear Band may have murmured, and they would have been right. Wealthy, cultured, and dissenting, this strong-willed woman had run afoul of Charles I and emigrated to the Massachusetts Bay Colony—only to be booted for her views on infant baptism. Now, with a group of like-minded settlers, she had purchased a parcel of land from both the Dutch and the Canarsie (handing over blankets, guns, and shells to a member of the tribe named Guttaquoh in exchange for his mark on a deed). The patent was for a sizeable tract along the shore, including “Conyne Island.”

The immigrants built a fortified village, naming it

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\* Actually, my own rude ancestors (from Eastern Europe) would not arrive until the present century. And for any Indians reading this, the ancestors are those upon whom the shadow fell.

Gravesend (after a town in England). And the land was divided among the forty heads of family—all of it except a marsh and that long, sandy island, which were considered worthless. The men came out to hunt snipe and rabbits; but that was the extent of their interest in the beach. The seashore as a recreational site is a modern notion. It would not have occurred to the settlers to prance about in the waves or cavort on the sand. In any case, these were sober, industrious folk, with little time or inclination for leisure. There were trees to be felled, crops to be planted, houses to be built, families to be raised. And hymns to be sung, to the God who was watching over them in this new and (that screech—an owl or an Indian?) sometimes frightening land.

For the next two centuries their descendants would farm the same land, sing the same hymns, and go on ignoring the beach. The sands were rarely trod, the gulls fished alone. Cows grazed in the vicinity; and during the eighteenth century, a Thomas Stillwell and his family made their home on the island.

A few Canarsie persisted on small farms nearby. But no longer did they come out to gather shells.

And the dunes seemed to be brooding...as if vaguely aware of the approaching deluge.



The first sign of change came in 1829. That was the year some townfolk embarked on a commercial venture. They laid a road out to the marsh, and built a bridge over Coney Island Creek (which divided the island from the mainland). And on those useless dunes—on that lonely island—they raised an inn.\*

Called Coney Island House, this inn marked the beginnings of the shore as a resort. Its clientele was well-heeled; for to get here from the city, one had to own a carriage or be able to afford the stagecoach. Thus, the *hoi polloi* stayed home, while New York's *beau monde* drove out for summer holidays. Lounging on the veranda with its splendid view of the bay, they gossiped, told jokes, drank beer, slurped clam chowder, and watched the ships sail by. As their numbers grew, other inns were built nearby.

Now the citizens of Gravesend—though no longer following the strict Puritanism of their forebears—had remained pious. So they were not particularly happy about all this (those of them, that is, with no financial interest in the inns). The noise of carriages, the drinking, the general merriment were seen as desecrating the Sabbath. The matter was hotly debated at town meetings.

But the rush was on and there was no stopping it. Almost overnight, saloons, clam shacks, and bathhouses sprouted from the sands. A pier was built at the west end of the island; and day-trippers began to arrive by steamboat. Among them were devotees of that recent import from

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\* Much of the Creek was eventually filled in; and only by dint of its cultural insularity has Coney Island qualified since as an island.

France, the pic-nic. The farmers of Gravesend came out to view the city folk at play, shook their heads, and trudged back to their honest plows.

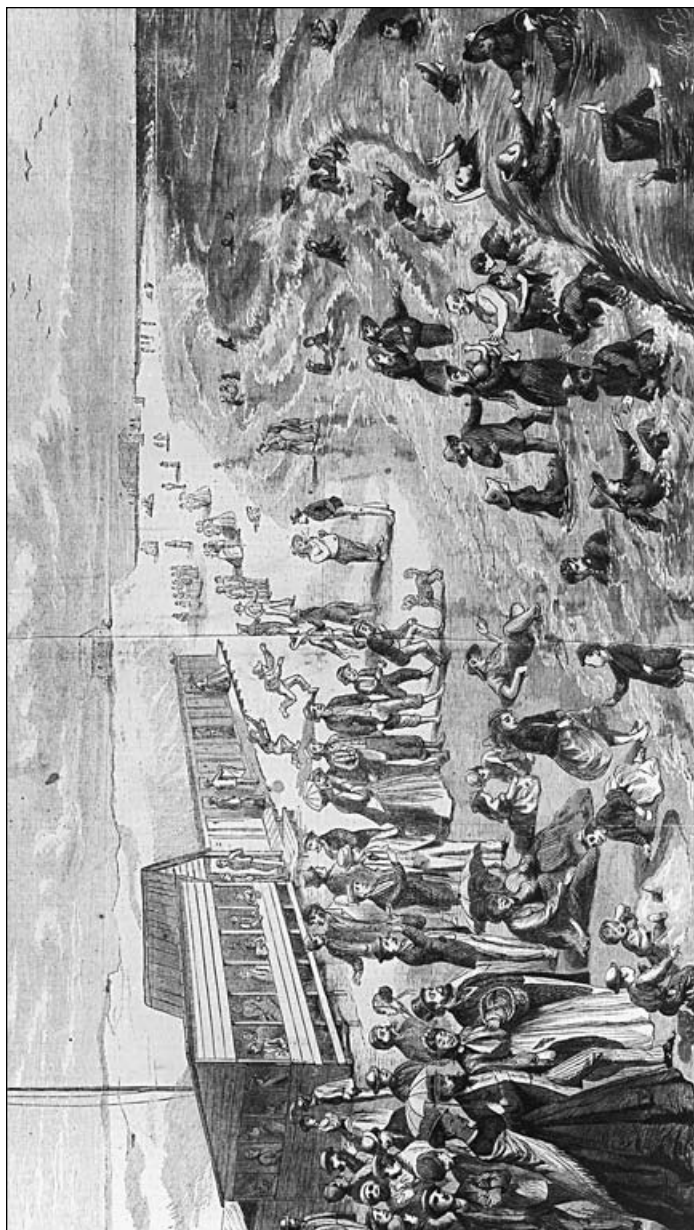
The register of Coney Island House has been preserved; and in it, inscribed with the florid penmanship of the day, are names we recognize. Washington Irving showed up one summer with his nieces, to savor the ocean air. Herman Melville (for whom “meditation and water are wedded forever”) checked in now and again. P. T. Barnum escorted Jenny Lind to the shore. Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, and John Calhoun came out to wet their whistles. And Brooklyn’s own Walt Whitman would repair to Coney Island, when the song of the city reverberated too loudly at his door. Whitman has written of his affection for “the long, bare, unfrequented shore, which I had all to myself, and where I liked, after bathing, to race up and down the hard sand and declaim Homer and Shakespeare to the surf and sea gulls by the hour.” But the number of visitors was growing; and Whitman was soon forced to go elsewhere for his exultations.

The Civil War brought a temporary halt to development along the beach. But in 1865 a railroad (the Brooklyn, Bath, and Coney Island Line) was built. Near its terminus sprang up more hotels, including “Cap” MacPherson’s, the lobby of which was fitted out as a ship’s cabin. (“Cap” was noted for his custom of accepting IOUs written on clam shells.) And it was around this time that Peter Tilyou came out and built his Surf House. By boat, train, carriage, and horsecar, the crowds began to arrive in earnest, seeking relief from the heat and from a nerve-jangling metropolis. The beer flowed in abundance. 10,000 clams were consumed on a single Sunday. Middle-class New Yorkers had found their weekend retreat, and the boom was on.

Meanwhile, near that pier at the west end of the island—or Coney Island Point, as it was then known—a different sort of crowd had gathered. Thieves, gamblers, prostitutes, and other marginal types hobnobbed in crude saloons.\*

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\* A visitor to one of these saloons described it as a barnlike structure, with boards athwart barrels serving as tables. Stools, spittoons, and a burly bartender in a soiled apron no doubt completed the ambiance.



COLLECTION OF THE NEW-YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Practitioners of three-card monte were planting their tables in the sand. Rowdies roamed about, looking for trouble. This pack of mischief-makers had spilled over from New York, where Boss Tweed was promoting an atmosphere of license and chicanery. Thus, while inns such as Coney Island House still catered to a respectable clientele, less particular establishments had opened up at the Point. Middle-class visitors were scandalized by the goings-on there—the gambling and indecent revels that often lasted till dawn. Scandalized, too, were the residents of Gravesend. Their dismay was tempered, though, by the rentals coming in from the beachfront lots.

By the mid 70s, Coney Island Point had acquired an unsavory reputation. A rough, anarchic place, it had become the site of round after round of boozing and brawling. To maintain a semblance of order, a kingpin was called for, and duly acquired. His name was Thunderbolt Norton. Thunderbolt (so dubbed for his ability to floor an antagonist with a single blow) was a New York politician who had come out to the shore, built a hotel, and surrounded himself with a loyal band of thugs and ne'er-do-wells. Pugnacious and domineering, he ruled his corner of the Island (now called Norton's Point) as he saw fit. The town of Gravesend, under whose jurisdiction the Point fell, was unable to halt this influx of undesirables. Nor could the town interfere with Norton: tied in with the Tweed ring, he had remained a power in New York and its environs.\*

But the rule of Norton yielded in time to that of another iron-fisted character. Which brings us to the era of the Island's greatest notoriety, and to the man, John Y. McKane, who presided over it.

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\* When Tweed made his famous escape from legal custody, he headed straight for Norton's Point. There he hid out in a shack before fleeing to Spain. New York City continues to produce colorful and dashing politicians, yet none so literally dashing as Boss Tweed that afternoon when, on furlough from prison, he scampered out a back window of his mansion.



Following the Civil War, development had begun in earnest along the shore. An elaborate resort was rising, to the din of saws and hammers. Once alone on the dunes, Coney Island House was surrounded now by establishments catering to tourists. The spurt in building had provided jobs for many of the locals. And it had promoted a land rush.

Now the key to a land rush, obviously, is land (or in this case, sand). And to anyone who gave the matter any thought, it was clear that the dunes had become prime real estate. The original settlers had so disdained this portion of their grant that they had not bothered to divide it up, save for one central strip. Owned now by their scattered descendants, the titles to those properties were in a state of confusion; while the rest of the beach, classified as “common lands,” belonged to the town. Thus, the stage was set for some swift, shady, and highly lucrative deals.

Enter John Y. McKane, successor to Thunderbolt Norton and soon to be known simply as “the Chief.” To many he would become the Island’s chief villain; to others, its hard-nosed hero. McKane winks at us, checks the time on a gold pocket watch, and slinks off on some shadowy errand.

Raised in the Sheepshead Bay section of Gravesend, John McKane could boast of humble beginnings. His immigrant father had scraped by with a farm and small store. John had started out as a “Coney catcher”—one of a barefoot brotherhood that dug for clams along the shore. (The clams were sold to schooners that would rush them to the Fulton Fish Market.) Children of the better class of excursionist were no

doubt told to stay away from these scroungers in the mud, with their rough ways and language.

As he filled his baskets, McKane was not oblivious to all the building going on. Finally, he abandoned clamming and set himself up in the construction business. With tourist facilities mushrooming, work was plentiful for an ambitious, able-bodied man such as McKane. He also wrangled an appointment as one of the part-time constables employed by Gravesend to patrol the town and beach. A large, barrel-chested man who welcomed a round of fisticuffs, Constable McKane was not one to be trifled with.

Nosing about Town Hall, he learned that Gravesend had been receiving, for the land on which the resort was going up, only \$700 a year in rentals. Deeming this an absurd figure, McKane got himself appointed Commissioner of the Common Lands and set out to adjust it. Within a year the revenues had doubled, and would continue to grow. None of this money went into his own pocket (although McKane would eventually steal large sums from the town). But during the course of his dealings with lessees, he landed a number of construction contracts. Moreover, the future Chief had begun to acquire a circle of friends and associates.

By the late 70s, the Island had become divided into four districts. Each was patronized by a different class of visitor.



The most exclusive was Manhattan Beach, where posh hotels pampered the well-to-do. Next door was Brighton Beach, which served the middle class. Then came West Brighton, the busiest section of the beach. A sprawl of saloons, inns, eateries, and catchpenny amusements, it



resembled—with its shacks of driftwood and canvas—a mining camp. And over in the West End (as Norton's Point had been rechristened, in a public-relations move), Thunderbolt and his gang still carried on. Coming out from New York now were several railroads, built by developers to bring tourists directly to their hotels. And the tourists were arriving, in increasing numbers. One Sunday, an estimated 60,000 souls converged on the long sandbar that had become the site of a bustling resort. Coney Island was a boom town, with loads of money to be made—if the right property came your way. And that was where John McKane came in.

As the official in charge of the common lands, McKane had maneuvered himself into a position of power. Not only did he determine who got to lease the beachfront properties; he had attained a monopoly on any new construction. Thus had McKane come to figure prominently in the seaside bonanza. Who exactly was he? Photographs show a handsome (in a rough way), powerfully-built man, with a Vandyke beard and penetrating stare. He seems to have exercised a rude charm upon those he met. (Toward the end of the Chief's reign, a reporter would admit: "There are many people who do not like John Y. McKane's style of running things, but there are not many who know the man himself who do not like him.") He had married young and fathered four children. A devoted family man, he taught Sunday school at the Methodist church and abstained from alcohol and tobacco. Despite the license and corruption for which his fiefdom became known, in private life John Y. McKane adhered to a rigid code of conduct. He was a man with but a single vice: a passion for power.

In 1876 McKane was elected mayor. The 35-year-old ex-clam-digger had accomplished this through the support of the new element that had come to reside in Gravesend. One of his first acts was to create a beach patrol. Appointing himself its chief and acquiring a diamond-studded badge, he set up headquarters in a shack on the dunes. Thus began two decades of corrupt, autocratic, and colorful rule at Coney Island.

If the old-time residents of Gravesend had yet to com-



prehend the changes being wrought in their community, their eyes were opened at a special town meeting. McKane had arranged to sell some choice town lands to a developer named Corbin, at a ridiculously low price. (He had been promised the construction contracts.) Outraged by this maneuver, the old guard had called a meeting, in order to vote the proposal down. But McKane packed the hall with his supporters, some of whom arrived carrying clubs. Presiding over the meeting was a justice of the peace elected on the McKane ticket. Using a bludgeon as a gavel, he sought to steer the proceedings in the Chief's favor. Angry words were exchanged. Fist fights broke out. When the lawyer for the old guard rose to denounce McKane's tactics, he was bodily removed from the hall. Finally, a vote was taken. With a chorus of "Aye!"s, the developer had his prize.

It must have been a horror story for the simple folk of Gravesend. The sharks had come up from the beach and

installed themselves in Town Hall.

The rascals were in all right, and in to stay. McKane consolidated his power, and was soon ruling the town—with its treasure chest of a beach—like a pirate-king. From his shack on the dunes he commanded a police force that would grow to fifty men. Nothing of consequence could be initiated without his approval. Suddenly, a license was required for a wide range of commercial activities, from selling beer to operating a bathhouse. To obtain this license, no character references were required—only the payment of a fee, along with certain gratuities. Bribery, secret deals, favoritism—all centered on that shack with its official flag—became standard practices. Gravesend had come under the sway of one man, who served simultaneously as Mayor, Police Chief, Commissioner of Common Lands, and Board of Health. He enforced the law (often personally), and dictated any new ordinances deemed necessary. John McKane had become the law on Coney Island.

As a consequence, the shore became a lawless locale. Not only did the Chief tolerate the miscreants already active in his bailiwick; he had no objection to new blood coming out to join in the fun. And come they did, as word spread of the permissive enclave at the doorstep of New York City. Gambling houses were allowed to flourish. Racetracks opened up, with betting carried on in defiance of state law. Boxing matches (considered scandalous at the time) were regular events. Prostitution was conducted openly. All this under the indulgent eye of its mayor and police chief—that former scrounger in the mud, now Sunday-school teacher and substantial citizen—John Y. McKane.

The Chief also became a political figure of note, creating a local Democratic machine of which he was the kingpin. The John Y. McKane Association of political stalwarts was formed—a seaside Boss Tweed and his ring. In state and national elections he could deliver virtually the entire vote of Gravesend. This feat was accomplished in a devious fashion. On Election Day the Chief would sit behind the ballot box in Town Hall, casting a dark eye on potential free-thinkers. Nor was he adverse to sweetening the results with repeaters, or to doctoring the tallies. Cheering him on in

this mischief were the developers, restaurateurs, barkeeps, and petty crooks who had formed a clique about him. Those who did not approve of the Chief (and they existed) feared his power and kept silent. But the majority of those earning a living at the beach supported him, for he championed—with energy, style, and results—their commercial interests.

That style included the use of a steel rod—a thin, supple scepter of office that he always carried, and that he might apply to anyone who displeased him. Outsiders operating a scam without his permission, or troublesome drunks, were often beaten senseless by the Chief. A cruel streak existed in McKane; and the one-man rule that had come into being at the shore allowed its full and unquestioned expression. As generous as he was to his stalwarts, the pirate-king could be equally vicious to those who defied him.

Under John McKane, Coney Island became a sanctuary of forbidden pleasures, just beyond the Brooklyn city line. Almost anything was permitted, so long as the Chief had given it his nod and had a piece of it. The once-idyllic shore—crowded now with hotels, saloons, brothels, music halls, and throngs of funseekers—had become synonymous with license and licentiousness. Clergymen were calling it Sodom by the Sea. And if any of its residents found this state of affairs an affront to decency, they dared not publicize their views. No one raised a peep against the unscrupulous ways of McKane and his associates.

No one, that is, except young George Tilyou.



His father was Peter Tilyou, the proprietor of Surf House. One of the first bathing pavilions on the Island, Surf House provided the essentials for a day at the beach. For 25¢ you were rented a “fancy flannel bathing suit”; given a place to change into it; and served a bowl of chowder. Tilyou catered to a family trade—a respectable clientele that managed to include a number of New York politicians.\*

It was at Surf House that George spent his summers, working alongside his father. In his free time he roamed the dunes. He also conducted a commercial venture of his own, selling homemade souvenirs: boxes of genuine Coney Island sand, bottles of actual sea water. His souvenir stand prospered. Parlaying the profits into a horse, and building a



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\* These politicians were known to Tilyou from his days as a city recorder, before the family had moved to the shore for George’s health—a doctor having prescribed sea air for the ailing three-year-old.

coach out of driftwood, he went on to operate a shuttle between the pier and the hotels.

The shuttle proved profitable—so much so that the Chief decided it would have to be licensed. George refused to pay, and wound up having to move on to something new. He tried real estate—leasing and then subleasing plots from the town—and was soon taking in a tidy sum. And at the age of twenty, he helped his father build Tilyou's Surf Theater, a vaudeville house.

Now the Tilyous, father and son, had made no secret of their opinion of the Island's most powerful figure. They detested McKane, abhorring the corruption he both represented and promoted. Their objections were practical as well as moral: Coney Island's notoriety was detrimental to family-oriented businesses such as their own. (And despite its reputation as a Sodom, the Island was still, by and large, a legitimate resort.) They inveighed openly against McKane and the prevailing state of affairs. And when George published a newsletter one summer, he did not fail to denounce certain real-estate practices of which he was aware. Although no names were named, John Y. McKane was not amused.

Nor was he pleased when, at the instigation of a growing reform party, the New York State Assembly appointed a committee to investigate his seaside domain. The flagrancy of the vice there had roused a public outcry. Tactless remarks by McKane to reporters (such as "Houses of prostitution are a necessity on Coney Island") had not helped. He was subpoenaed and questioned by the chairman of the committee, a Colonel Bacon. Among the matters looked into were McKane's alleged soliciting of bribes; his tolerance, as police chief, of gambling and prostitution; and the land deals in which he was involved. The Chief insisted he was innocent of any malfeasance, and was doing his best to enforce the law on the Island—"not an easy job, by the way," he confided.

The committee had been able to find only one person willing to testify against the Chief. That was George Tilyou. Taking the stand, George described the wrong-doing of which he had personal knowledge—and spelled out Mc-

Kane's part in it. When he had finished, an angry McKane jumped up and demanded an opportunity to take the stand again, to refute the charges. The request was granted; and in his emotional state, the Chief succeeded only in further incriminating and perjuring himself.

The hearings were given prominent coverage in the *Times* and the *Brooklyn Eagle*; and the reformers—for whom Coney Island had become the object of a crusade—were convinced that McKane was about to get his due. The days seemed numbered for the nest of naughtiness that had flourished under the gaze of a blushing Statue of Liberty.

When the last testimony was in, the committee issued a report. It condemned the lawlessness at Coney Island; described the police chief there as “an enemy...of justice”; and demanded McKane's indictment on numerous counts. The end seemed near for the misrule that had cast a moral pall over the Place Without Shade.

McKane ousted? You wouldn't have wanted to bet on it. As a well-connected politician, he had a favor coming from Hugh McLaughlin, the Democratic boss of Brooklyn. The report made headlines for a few days...then was discreetly shelved, no action whatsoever being taken on its recommendations. Sodom by the Sea had eluded the wrathful hand of reform.

That summer a victory celebration and tribute to McKane was held at Bauer's Casino. You may be sure the Tilyous were not invited. Indeed, they were fortunate to suffer no worse fate than they did. McKane's revenge was swift. Some strings were pulled; and Peter Tilyou wound up losing Surf House and most of his money. He also received word that it would be wise to leave the Island. George lost his leases on town properties, and was likewise warned to make himself scarce. For their treachery to its tyrant, the pair were banished from Gravesend. (Mrs. Tilyou was able to hang on at the beach, running a bathing pavilion called the Mikado.)

And the Chief's reign continued. It would last seven more years, during which the Island persisted in its ways. The Gay Nineties were gay indeed just across the line from Brooklyn. But the reformers and newspapers had not given

up. They were still calling for an end to the license at the shore.\*

Finally, the legislature in Albany decided to remedy the rigged elections that were the basis of McKane's power. An election-reform bill was enacted, aimed specifically at Gravesend. It required that the town be divided into six polling districts. The idea was to allow people to cast their ballots away from the watchful eye of the Chief.

McKane rolled out the map and redistricted as directed—but in a novel fashion. (How he must have chuckled as he worked it out!) In each district he included a narrow strip that led to Town Hall. McKane then had six doorways added to the building: one for each strip. At a point inside Town Hall the strips converged—and there the ballot box was installed. On Election Day he would sit behind it as usual, making sure the townsfolk voted as they were supposed to.

When word of the scheme got out, the reformers were outraged. But they were determined to prevail. A team of prominent citizens was appointed to monitor the voting.

On the eve of the election, these poll watchers departed Brooklyn in three carriages. Armed with a protective injunction, they were bound for Gravesend and its Town Hall of many doors.

McKane was waiting for them, along with his police

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\* The gaiety at Coney Island was often alcohol-induced. A journalist who came out in 1893 to investigate illicit prizefighting, reported:

"I found myself standing in an amazing street. It was a long street—reaching as far as the eye could see—of incongruous wooden buildings, and every building was a drinking place. From hundreds of signboards that jostled and overlapped each other, came an almost audible cry of invitation to those who hesitated to get drunk.

"They fairly tumbled and sprawled over each other, these misshapen and shabby buildings, in this mad desire to allay the thirst, apparently, of the universe.

"In every direction, look where I might, a sign leered at me or winked at me... a sign that always adjured me to disregard all the other signs and go in and drink."



force and a mob of supporters. Many in the mob were drunk and carrying clubs.\*

It was a cool night in November. The first carriage to arrive halted in front of Town Hall; and out climbed the poll watchers. At their head was the same Colonel Bacon who, seven years before, had sought to have McKane indicted. Murmuring its displeasure, the crowd closed in. The Chief stood tall in a black suit and broad-brimmed hat. His badge flashed in the moonlight.

“We were looking for you,” he said to Bacon. “You get out.”

“Mr. McKane,” said Bacon, “we are here under the authority of the law, and moreover, we have papers from the Supreme Court to serve on you. These papers protect us fully. Moreover, the law requires you to protect us as officers of the election.” He held out the injunction.

The ex-clam-digger glared at these prominent citizens. His lip quivered. And holding his hands behind him to prevent service, he pronounced the words that would appear in headlines the next day; be picked up by the wire services; and bring him national notoriety.

“*Injunctions don't go here,*” said John Y. McKane. “I won't take any papers.”

“You will,” said Bacon. “You've got to take them, whether you want to or not.” He thrust the document forward, slapping McKane with it.

The Chief had not cared for any of what was happening, and on his own turf yet. Nor did he much care for Colonel Bacon (the official who had sought to have him indicted, and whom he no doubt viewed as a self-righteous prig with an upper-class accent). But especially did he not like to be slapped.

McKane spun around and shouted an order to his beach patrol. The Colonel and his party were to be arrested.

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\* Contrary to state election law, the saloons had remained open. Most reporters were intercepted at the train station and kept from entering town; but one would provide this description: “At the bar, standing five deep, disreputable characters whose votes had been brought in to complete the bargain of the chief. The streets swarmed with disreputable characters....”

“They’re all drunk. Lock ’em up.” And he indicated they were not merely to be arrested.

“This is Judge Barnard’s signature!” cried Bacon as the night sticks flew. He and the poll watchers with him were beaten to the ground, then dragged into a police van. Mean-



while, the other carriages were arriving. The mob set upon them; and more poll watchers were beaten. A clergyman in the group was chased out of town.

When the polls opened in the morning, McKane and his cronies were to be seen crowding into a bar. There, with loud laughter and round after round of drinks, they celebrated their victory over the reformers.

But for once, the Chief had gone too far. The next day’s *Times* proclaimed:

CONEY ISLAND’S BRUTAL BOSS  
AMERICAN CITIZENS BEATEN BY M’KANE’S RUFFIANS.  
CROWNING OUTRAGE AT GRAVESEND.  
Mr. Gaynor’s Watchers Shamefully Attacked and the  
Supreme Court Defied.  
“INJUNCTIONS DON’T GO HERE.”

And the *Eagle* had issued a midday extra, with the headline INJUNCTIONS DON’T GO HERE and an account of the reception given to the poll watchers. The story may have

swayed voters to the reform ticket, which scored a decisive win in the election.

One of its first acts was to call for the head of John Y. McKane.

A special district attorney was appointed; a grand jury was convened. And in December of 1893, the Chief was indicted on eleven counts of election fraud. A month later he went on trial in Brooklyn. The courtroom was packed—with reporters; McKane's cheering, joke-cracking stalwarts; and citizens eager to see a politician get his comeuppance.

On February 15, McKane (to his surprise, for he had made a generous offer to at least one juror) was found guilty and sentenced to six years at hard labor in Sing Sing. A crowd was waiting outside the courthouse to see him taken away. "Bundle him into the Maria!" someone shouted as he was led out. "Give him a dose of his own medicine!" McKane scowled, became red in the face, and turned his eyes to the ground.

As the Chief was driven off to prison, a white-haired figure stood waiting near the Brooklyn Bridge. It was the banished Peter Tilyou, who shook his fist at the passing carriage and cried out: "This is my revenge. John McKane is on his way to Sing Sing and Peter Tilyou is a poor but free man. Don't you bet he'd change places with me now?"\*

That same year the town of Gravesend—including Coney Island—was annexed to Brooklyn. Many (though by no means all) of the gamblers, crooks, and prostitutes fled, as a freewheeling era came to a close. Its pirate-king gone and independence crushed, the resort was going to have to mend its ways.

McKane's mother (in a gesture out of a gangster film) kept a light burning in the window of his old room, every

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\* There were those, of course, who defended McKane. A resident of Gravesend had this to say: "I was in the railway station at Coney Island one day when a boy entered, leading an elderly blind woman. McKane was also in the waiting room. 'Grandma, there's Mr. McKane,' I heard the boy say. 'I can't see him,' the old woman replied, 'but God bless him for his goodness to me.' Now you needn't tell me that a man who is known like that is a bad man."

night during the period of his imprisonment. He wound up serving only four years, assigned the easiest jobs and allowed a well-stocked icebox. Nonetheless, it was a bleak and lonely end for the man who had been fawned upon by the regulars of the John Y. McKane Association—who claimed to have provided the decisive votes in a Presidential election—who had ruled one of the liveliest enclaves in America. He is said to have remained aloof from the other prisoners, and to have forbidden his family ever to come visit—that they might not see him in stripes.

Finally, he was paroled and sent home, with a prison pal-  
lor and broken spirit. Those of his old supporters who were still around, welcomed him back in an emotional scene. But the respect had turned to something more like pity. For the next year McKane sold insurance (mainly to keep busy, for he still had plenty of money). And then he died, largely forgotten on the Island. The Chief was superfluous to the new order that had come to the shore...a beached whale from its wildest years.



Those years had seen the rise of many amusements along the shore. (No amusement *park*, however, was to be found there; the idea of such a place had yet to enter the mind of man.) Visitors could have subjected themselves, for example, to the Switchback Railway—a gravity-powered ride that was the first roller coaster.\* The more daring could have ascended with Professor King in his balloon. The curious could have slipped into a tent advertising “The Original



MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK

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\* Its inventor, LaMarchus Thompson, had gotten the idea while watching carts being joyridden into an abandoned mine.

Turkish Harem.” The hungry could have patronized any of the restaurants along Surf Avenue, or stands offering such snacks as fried clams and corn-on-the-cob. The thirsty could have chosen one of a multitude of saloons. And available at game booths was a time-honored privilege: one could be fleeced of a trifling sum, in exchange for a good time. The beach had become the site of a summerlong fair—a commercial festival with the population of New York City from which to draw its crowds.

What had it been like, the Coney Island of the McKane years, for a typical visitor? (That is, for the majority who came out for its honest entertainments, rather than for the vice.) What sort of experience would have awaited him? What had been the tone and temper of the place?

To find out, let us imagine it is a Sunday afternoon, a century ago. A middle-class resident of New York—the Head of Family, we’ll call him—has made a promise. He has agreed to take the Wife and Boy out to Coney Island. The day has arrived; and the three of them (having attended church) are about to journey there, via steamer. To add a nautical touch to the occasion, the Boy has been outfitted in a little sailor’s suit. This sartorial outrage has left him looking glum. But his mood should brighten once the Pegasus sets sail. And there’s the whistle now.

“We’re off! We’re off!” cries the Boy, jumping up and down. Boisterous behavior, but his father does not restrain him. This is an outing, after all, a Sunday excursion; and the Head of Family is feeling excited himself. Holding onto his hat, he leans on the rail and watches as Manhattan—that vast hive of brick, studded with steeples—recedes. What a capital view, he says to himself. And what an excellent tonic is this breeze and spray!

Clutching a picnic basket and an open parasol, the Wife is wearing her Sunday best. The wind bends the ostrich plume in her hat; ripples her ankle-length dress; threatens to blow away the parasol. The Head of Family—a stout, extravagantly-mustached fellow in a checkered suit—is still holding onto his hat; for the wind would like nothing better than to deposit it on the waves. Indeed, that passenger over there just lost his. What a collection of hats Neptune

must have by now, muses the Head of Family—everything from Phrygian caps to the latest straws. He breathes deeply and murmurs pleasurably. The salt air, the gulls, the pennants flapping on the lines. What a capital idea this was!

As they sail across the bay, he points out to his son the Statue of Liberty and the Brooklyn Bridge. But not until the Pegasus is nearing its destination does the city's most distinctive monument, to his mind, become visible along the shore: the Elephant Hotel. A hotel shaped like an elephant! For ships entering the harbor, it is an unmistakable landmark (even at night, when the glass eyes glimmer in the moonlight). Recalling that the hotel has been dubbed the Colossus of Architecture, the Head of Family remarks: "The Greeks at Rhodes had the Colossus, welcoming ships to their harbor. We New Yorkers have the Elephant."

The Boy is unmoved by the comparison. But he is intrigued by the structure and stares at it as if hypnotized. This is the same Elephant, explains the Head of Family, that inspired the recent hit tune. (He does not mention that it has also come to figure in a naughty saying. "I'm off to see the Elephant," a young man may whisper with a wink, to signify an amorous rendezvous.)

The Iron Pier looms larger. Finally, with a blast of its whistle and a thud, the Pegasus arrives. At Coney Island!

The passengers flow down the gangway and along the pier. In their midst is our family, eagerly anticipating an afternoon at the shore. On the beach, with its plank walkways, the new arrivals merge with the crowd already there.



Everyone is well-dressed and well-behaved—at least, in this portion of the beach. (The family will avoid the western end of the Island and other disreputable areas.) Over the hubbub can be heard a brass band. How cheerful and at ease everyone seems. And why not? The sea, the food, the amusements—what a unique destination! The three have been out before; but each visit seems like their first. Where should they begin?

The Boy begs to go immediately into the water. So they head for a bathing pavilion called Stauch's. Father and son are soon trotting out onto the sand in their rented suits. And here comes the Wife. "Oh my!" calls out the Head of Family, at the sight of her in striped pantaloons and blouse. "And I thought I looked silly!"

With a roar of delight, he follows the Boy into the water. Not too far, though. The Head of Family is content to stand in a few inches of water and savor the salt air. The sea laps at his feet. And he declares: "The embrace of the deep! How it soothes the soul—banishes time and care alike, as effectively as any philosophy. I wouldn't mind standing here for the rest of the day, if somebody'd fetch me food and drink. Oh, hello dear."

The Wife has joined him. Keeping an eye on the Boy—who is splashing about—they stand there like a pair of flamingos and watch the ships sail by. The foam tickles their toes.

When they have had enough of bathing, the family rents an umbrella. They set it up in front of Stauch's, in the midst of scores of other umbrellas. (The mania for sunbathing has yet to afflict beachgoers.) They eat their picnic lunch. Afterwards, the Head of Family dozes off. The Boy digs in the sand with a pail and shovel he has brought along.

Then they redon their clothes and take a walk. A fair has arisen along the beach; and they follow walkways through a hodgepodge of booths and tents—food vendors, games of skill, pitchmen, performers who pass the hat. The Boy, of course, wants to sample everything; and even the Wife seems to have lost her usual good sense. But the Head of Family is firm. True, he says, we're here to have a good time—but not to be taken in by these rascals with a glib



patter. Over their objections, he keeps his dependents moving past one "flimflam" after another. The Wife, for instance, wants to stop and have her fortune told by a Gypsy. "Consult a fortuneteller?" he says. "I should say not!"



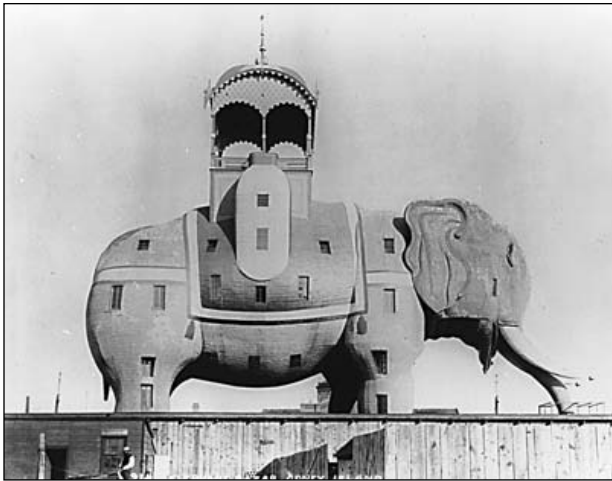
The Boy becomes fascinated by a three-card monte man, and begs his father to place a bet. He is shooed onward. Finally, they do patronize a photographic tent; ride the Switchback Railway; and watch a young man who bills himself as "Houdini the Magician" perform some tricks.

Ambling over to Feltman's Ocean Pavilion, they take an outdoor table, order lemonades, and listen to the 6th Regiment Band play a rousing air. When they are refreshed, the Head of Family whispers to the Wife: "Say, why don't we go on over and"—he winks—"take a look at the Elephant?"

"Yes!" she squeals.

The Elephant is a destination that is difficult to miss; and they are soon staring up at this architectural curiosity. The howdah is provided with telescopes; and the Boy begs for a look through one. So they enter the hotel and climb to the howdah. A striking vista greets them—a panorama of rooftops, beachgoers, and the sea. Gulls glide through the air. Flags flap in the breeze.

Located in one of the Elephant's legs is a cigar store. As they leave, the Head of Family buys a cigar. Outside he lights up; and the Wife begins to cough and grumble.



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“Look here,” he says, “I’m going to smoke this thing. We’re out here to have a good time!”

Just then a tall, barrel-chested man, with a Vandyke beard and intense look, brushes by them and passes into the cigar store.

“Did you see that fellow?” whispers the Head of Family. “Do you know who that was?”

“No, who?”

“John Y. McKane, that’s who! In the flesh. Those hearings that were held? That was him, the big gun out here.”

The Wife wants to take a look at the fancy hotels along the Esplanade. But the Head of Family shakes his head. Manhattan Beach is too long a walk, he says; and it’s getting late. Time to go home.

They head for the pier. But as they pass his booth, a weight-guesser accosts the Head of Family. The man lays down a challenge. He will guess the Head of Family’s weight—within one pound—or else hand over a prize.

“One pound? I doubt it,” says the Head of Family. Eyeing the display of prizes—dolls, vases, hats—he is enticed. “All right, I’m game.”

With nimble hands the weight-guesser gives him a once-over (as if frisking for concealed poundage), then makes a guess. The Wife titters as her spouse steps up on the scale.

“Not even close!” says the Head of Family, looking

pleased with himself. When handed his prize, though, he frowns. It is a cardboard puzzle, worth a small percentage of what it cost him to have his weight guessed. Still, he is proud of having bested this fellow. A fit conclusion to a fine outing.

But one last experience awaits our family at Coney Island. Standing in line to buy tickets for the ferry, the Head of Family discovers his wallet is gone.

And only now do they learn that a virtual corps of pick-pockets has been working the beach. Robbed! The Head of Family stands there groaning. The Wife, meanwhile, searches her purse and comes up with a handful of money. To their relief, it is just enough for the tickets. They pay and clamber aboard.

The whistle blows. And the Pegasus, crowded with day-trippers, steams back to Manhattan.



The majority of visitors to the Island came for the innocent diversions to be found there. They wanted simply to picnic on the sand, prance in the waves, check out the amusements—and escape the city for a day. For New York’s middle classes, with their growing appetite for outdoor recreation, the seashore was the perfect destination. Mixed bathing had only recently become socially acceptable. The fashion had originated with the rich at Newport, and spread to Coney Island (and other such beaches); so that now anyone able to afford the train and bathhouse, might frolic in the sea. The posh hotels provided a tone that spilled over to the bathing pavilions and beer gardens. Even if you could not manage a room at the Oriental, you shared a beach with the high-society and sporting types who could.



You splashed in the same ocean, drank the same beer, consumed the same clams—and could proudly tell your friends you had been to Coney Island. Thus, by the turn of the century, a public playground had arisen on the outskirts of New York, to which all but the most proletarian might repair for a holiday by the sea.

Now on that same stretch of sand flourished another Coney Island—one to which the middle-class day-trippers might have shut their eyes. (Or, like latter-day visitors to Las Vegas, did they experience a titillation at rubbing shoulders with hoods and harlots?) It comprised the morally and legally ambiguous activities that had proliferated under John McKane, and that had earned the Island its appellation of Sodom by the Sea.

The worst of these activities were to be found in a shantytown known as the Gut.\* An unruly tribe of thieves, card-sharps, stable hands, touts, pimps, prostitutes, bruisers and brawlers had assembled here. Some had migrated from Norton's Point; others, from the city. All were in search of congenial company and the lowest sort of gratification. "I don't suppose there was a wickeder place in the globe than the Gut in its palmy days," John McKane told a reporter. He was referring to the years of near-total license (complete with sex shows as depraved as those of Paris) that had characterized the district, prior to his rise to power. Whereupon, the Gut had been reduced to a more manageable, if yet lawless, lifestyle. (Unlucky visitors to its saloons and dance halls might still be robbed, beaten, administered knock-out drops, or even murdered on occasion; but McKane had brought a semblance of discretion to these carryings-on.)

As the Island had prospered, its underworld had spilled beyond the borders of the Gut...until all along the shore (if one knew where to look) were to be found shadowy resorts of indulgence. Bordellos such as Mother Weyman's, the Albatross, Mrs. Moore's Franklin House. Girly shows. Gambling houses. And actual thieves' dens! These last were

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\* The name derives from the Dutch word for gate. This "gate" was a depression in the sand in which, half-hidden from view, the shantytown had arisen.

dimly-lit taverns and inns, where crooks gathered to plot, count their spoils, and laugh at the law. The most notorious were the Hermitage and the Red Light.

The Hermitage was a waterfront dive straight out of a Nick Carter novel. Overlooking the Creek, it was accessible only by boat, or via a walkway of planks that zigzagged across the marsh. Host Joe Gorman was an ex-pickpocket who had become a scoutmaster for thieves. (He would eventually “reform” so far as to join McKane’s police force.) Joe and wife Molly extended their hospitality and dim light to such local characters as Cock-eyed Leo (a well-known fence) and Diamond Maggie (years before a much-sought-after courtesan, now a pitiful drunk). Meanwhile, over at the Red Light hung out Shang Draper and his gang. According to the police commissioner of New York, Shang and his pals were responsible for 80% of the bank robberies committed in the U.S. between 1860 and 1884! Apparently, Coney Island was where they came to lie low—a tolerant beach community where even a bank robber could walk the streets without being hassled.

But more typical of the Island’s watering holes were its cafes, cabarets, and concert saloons. These catered to the unrefined (but not strictly-speaking criminal) tastes of the general public. Many were located along a pedestrian lane called the Bowery.\* There was, for example, a popular nightclub called the Glass Pavilion; Connor’s Imperial Music Hall; and Silver Dollar Smith’s saloon, with its gleaming dollars embedded in the floor. For New Yorkers in search of fun, nightspots such as these had it all: decor, song and dance, beer by the pitcher, a jovial loosening of restraints. Urban rubes and slumming sophisticates alike made their way to the Island, to drink, dine, take in the latest acts—and to gamble. Is not Coney Island starting to sound like a precursor of Las Vegas? A Caesar’s Palace would seem to be a direct descendant of the old beer gardens—chief of which was Charlie Feltman’s, where thousands crowded together to be served expensive food and be serene.

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\* Laid out originally by George Tilyou, the Bowery was a populist version of the Esplanade. It led to the entrance of Tilyou’s Surf Theater.

naded by bands and orchestras.\*

Many came out solely for the horse races. (Three tracks, complete with illegal betting, had been allowed to operate within the city limits of Gravesend.) And when boxing matches began to be held, sports fanciers flocked in even greater numbers to the sea. At their heels (if not already in their pockets) were more crooks and prostitutes, eager to join those already working the tourist traps, or running some racket in a booth.†

Certainly, then, the Coney Island of the McKane years was a modern-day Sodom. Less Biblically, it was an enclave of naughtiness, in an era no stranger to either public merriment or private turpitude. The Gay Nineties had a flair for genteel abandon, and for depravity, too. Coney Island knew them both. When denounced by reformers such as Anthony Comstock, McKane could only shrug. "After all," he once said, "this ain't no Sunday school."

Yet for all its notoriety, the Island was basically a legitimate resort. The typical visitor was looking for nothing more than an outing by the sea; the typical businessman, an honest living. It should also be noted that, among those earning their living at the beach, a close-knit community had formed, much in the manner of a circus or carnival troupe. Coney Island had become a small town, independent of Gravesend. As in any community of its size, the residents knew one another (if only by sight), and cared about (or at least took a malicious interest in the affairs of) one another. Like any self-respecting small town, the Island even had its longtime pharmacist: Doc Chambers, whose

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\* Feltman had America's largest ballroom, accommodating 3000 persons. He is also credited with having invented the hot dog, the first of which is said to have been served at his restaurant in 1889 (and which is still called a Coney Island at some lunch counters).

† One such racket was the art of "tapping." Unscrupulous weight-guessers would pat a challenger up and down—ostensibly to get a sense of his size, but actually to determine the location of his wallet. This information would be signaled to a confederate; and the mark—whatever his weight upon mounting the scale—would return home a few ounces lighter.

drugstore on Surf Avenue was a popular hangout (and the site of the Island's first telephone). And like many small towns, or big-city neighborhoods, it had a political figure who was highly visible and accessible. Not everyone liked John McKane or the values he represented. Yet most agreed that his leadership, corrupt as it was, had furthered their interests. Coney Island had boomed, and McKane had promoted that boom.

But then the Chief fell. The lord of license was taken away to a narrow cell, his only solace a private icebox. And even as he brooded on the bitter ends to which the mighty are subject, the New Coney Island (as it was being called) began to take shape. Helping to sweep away the old were two fires, in 1893 and '96. (Had our Sodom provoked at last the Divine Wrath?)

The New Coney Island would be dominated by something new under the summer sun: amusement parks. And the individual who would do the most to usher in this era was McKane's arch-antagonist, George Tilyou.





Let us leave the Island for a moment and journey to Chicago.

In his book *Amusing the Million* (Hill & Wang, 1978), historian John F. Kasson submits that amusement parks represented a revolt. Around the turn of the century, he says, a new mass culture had been struggling to be born. The battle had been waged against the over-refined, repressive ways of what we now, with a shudder, call Victorianism.

American popular culture of the nineteenth century, explains Kasson, had been established by genteel reformers. Middle-class Protestants from the Northeast, they had seen it as their duty to discipline and uplift the lower orders. One's leisure time should be spent, they believed, not in idleness or frivolity, but in edifying pursuits. Thus, self-improvement became the order of the day; and the rudiments of Culture were purveyed to the general public—via magazines, cheap books, lectures, and lithographs. The forces of uplifting were everywhere, as clerks, mechanics, shop attendants, and factory workers were urged to rise above the base instincts that were their natural bent.

But the reformers would fail. Both the urban working class and rising middle class resisted these efforts to save them from themselves. The fact was, they didn't really want to be uplifted. Chautauqua lectures? Poetry? Reproductions of great paintings? The populace had given it a try, but were now muttering: "Enough!"

What they craved, of course, was not self-improvement at all...but *amusement*.

Meanwhile, a popular culture that was truly popular had

been thriving on the sly—in street fairs, circuses, medicine shows. These vulgar (but vigorous) entertainments had been biding their time...waiting to emerge and upstage the high-minded stuff. The crisis may be said to have been reached in Chicago, at the Columbian Exposition of 1893.

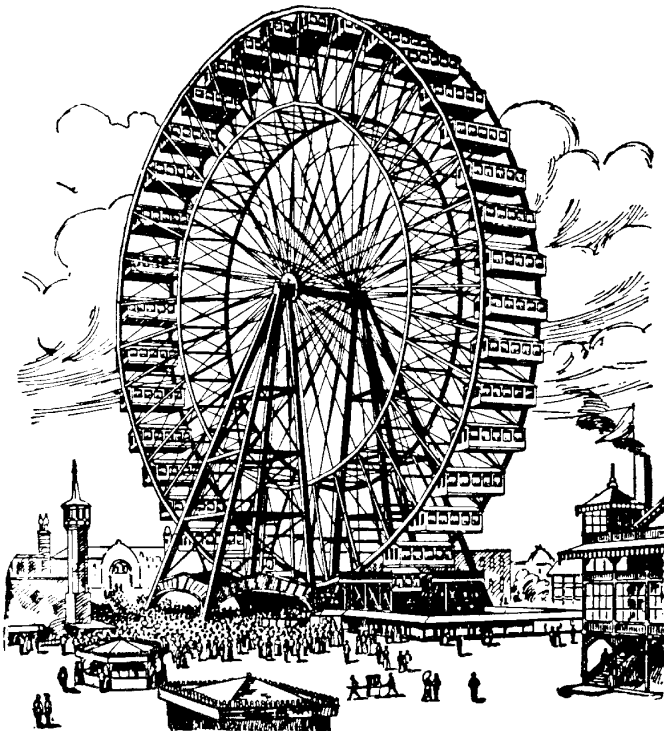
A vast assemblage of industrial and fine-arts exhibits, this World's Fair was an impressive event. It featured a course of buildings known as the White City. Neo-classical in style, the White City was a monument to order, progress, and civic dignity. Its domes, columns, fountains, and sculptures embodied the loftiest ideals of the Victorian era; while its industrial exhibits—locomotives, dynamos, printing presses, the world's largest cannon—represented the boon (or at least the *boom!*) to mankind of modern technology. Millions attended the Exposition, converging on it by rail from around the country. They milled about the White City with solemn expressions, intimidated by the Beaux-Arts architecture and edifying exhibits. If they were enjoying themselves, it might have been in the manner of a common type of visitor to museums: dutifully reverent, yet itching to be elsewhere.

But just beyond the White City was a concession to the less exalted tastes of the public. This was a mile-long strip of exotic pavilions and re-creations, known as the Midway Plaisance. Among its attractions were the Street of Cairo, the Japanese Bazaar, the Irish Village, castles, theaters, restaurants, and shops selling goods from around the world. The Midway was intended to entertain as well as edify. Privately-sponsored, its exhibits were also intended to turn a profit. And just beyond the Midway a Wild West show had set up (with no official sanction), along with a collection of magicians, jugglers, fortunetellers, pitchmen—the sort of gypsies who had been showing up at fairs since the Middle Ages. What the Midway and its environs amounted to was an elaborate sideshow.

And wouldn't you know it? After making their obeisances at the White City to the idols of Progress and High-mindedness—the industrial wonders, the fine art, the organ recitals—people were making a beeline to the Midway. There they were lining up, and paying, to see the African

drummers, Arab swordsmen, World's Congress of Beauty ("40 ladies from 40 nations, ladies and gentlemen!"), strongman ("Sandow, the Strongest Man in the World!"), Castle of Donegal, Electric Scenic Theater, ostrich farm, Eskimo Village, Zoopraxographical Hall, cycloramas, panoramas, silver bed of a sultan, and (outside of which the longest lines of all were forming) Persian Palace of Eros. The main attraction at the Persian Palace was a belly dancer. (She and her imitators became known as Little Egypt; the dance, as the Hoochie-Coochie.) Clergymen denounced the undulating and scantily-clad performer; but a steady stream of male visitors emerged from the Palace newly appreciative of the traditional dance arts of the East.

The centerpiece of the White City was a statue—a towering maiden called *Republic*. Yet fairgoers seemed more impressed with an even higher (if less high-minded) structure over at the Midway. This was a mechanical wheel, specially built for the Exposition by an engineer named Ferris. 250-



feet-high and made of steel, it was intended to rival the Eiffel Tower (which, four years before, had dominated the Paris Exposition). Each of its cars was the size of a streetcar, and held up to sixty people. The Ferris wheel drew many over from the White City—fairgoers who would then check out the acrobats or Little Egypt, and often spend the rest of their day at the Midway. On learning that their paean to Progress was being upstaged by a carnival, the cultural arbiters must have known they were in trouble. Ostriches, belly dancers, the bed of a sultan: ill omens indeed for the priests of self-improvement.

Had they known what the Midway Plaisance was going to spawn, they might have shut it down. For it was the prototype of the amusement park, an institution that would help bring to an end their efforts to uplift.

Or at least they might have banned from the grounds a young man from New York: our own George Tilyou. Tilyou was one of the nearly two million people who ascended on the Ferris wheel, and gazed out over the tenements, train yards, and factories of Chicago. He had come to the Exposition on his honeymoon. He would leave it with a bulky souvenir, having purchased a Ferris wheel. (It was a smaller version of the one Ferris had built for the Fair. That fact notwithstanding, Tilyou would bill it as “the world’s largest.”) With his Ferris wheel and other rides, George Tilyou would soon be offering to the public a new concept in entertainment. His amusement park at Coney Island would defy the lofty ideals of the age, make him a small fortune, and be widely copied.

The champions of Culture would be dismayed by the proliferation of such parks. Americans would be flocking, not to the museums and lyceums so generously (and paternalistically) provided them, but to boisterous funspots on the outskirts of cities. Pouring out of trolley cars, they would throw their money away on rides, rigged games, and kinoscopes. They would cavort on the sand, eat frozen custard, loll about, laugh and flirt. And forget all about improving themselves! Says Kasson:

Coney Island in effect declared a moral holiday for all who

entered its gates. Against the values of thrift, sobriety, industry, and ambition, it encouraged extravagance, gaiety, abandon, revelry. Coney Island signaled the rise of a new mass culture no longer deferential to genteel tastes and values....

An era was drawing to a close. That young couple (in derby and fruit-basket of a hat) who only yesterday were attending lyceums, would soon be seen disappearing into a Tunnel of Love.

And this would all start at a beach in Brooklyn...to which we now return.



For testifying against McKane, young George had been hounded from the Island. Seven years later, the Chief was in prison; and his former fiefdom was undergoing a change in character. The reformers had prevailed. And while much of the vice that had offended them was still available, it had become less visible. A new tone was about to assert itself. The realization had been made that there was more money to be had from rambunctious but legitimate forms of amusement than from vice.

Where had Tilyou been keeping himself during the final years of McKane's rule? Apparently, he had quietly returned to the shore and been working alongside his mother at the Mikado bathing pavilion. He had also been building a ride called the Aerial Racing Slide. For Tilyou had ambitious plans. He wanted to operate a number of such rides at the beach.

In 1893 Tilyou acquired his Ferris wheel. The following year McKane was imprisoned; and the way was clear to set up the ride. Tilyou also brought out the Aerial Racing Slide, and the Double Dip Chute, another of his inventions. It must be stressed, however, that he installed these rides at scattered sites along the beach. The idea of an amusement park had yet to occur to Tilyou or anyone else.

But at last somebody figured it out.

In the summer of 1895, Sea Lion Park opened its gate at Coney Island. A collection of rides and exhibitions surrounded by a wall, Sea Lion is considered to have been the first amusement park. Its creator was Captain Paul Boyton, a former Navy officer and Atlantic City lifeguard, and a bizarre celebrity. It is a sobering comment on the nature of

fame that Captain Boyton—once honored by heads of state and lauded in headlines—is virtually unknown today. That neglect seems to me undeserved; and I would like to pause for an account of Boyton's aquatic career.

A Pittsburgh inventor had come up with a new type of life preserver; and Boyton, a strong swimmer, had been engaged to demonstrate it to the press. Essentially, it was an inflatable rubber suit. Anyone wearing this outlandish outfit was virtually unsinkable. The press gathered on a New Jersey beach. Boyton suited up and (resembling the Creature from the Black Lagoon) waddled into the sea. Oblivious to the guffaws and jocularities, he dived into the water and floated offshore. Then, lying on his back and using a double-bladed paddle, Captain Boyton propelled himself a mile out—a human kayak.

Having proven the suit worked, Boyton was ready now to put it to a real test. He announced his intention to hop off a ship *in the middle of the Atlantic* (actually, just 200 miles out), and paddle his way home. And he wasn't kidding. Stowing away on a passenger liner (none would sell him a ticket), he was restrained only at the last minute by the crew. But as the ship neared Ireland, Boyton persuaded the captain to let him drop over the side—despite heavy seas—and seek out the coast on his own. Passengers and crew watched in disbelief as the black-suited figure plunged into the ocean, waved, and paddled off.

Hours later, exhausted and festooned with seaweed, Boyton staggered ashore before a group of fishermen, who stared at him in astonishment. But when this man-fish introduced himself as an American of Irish descent, he was greeted with cheers. And a hero was soon being conveyed to Dublin.

Stopping only to catch his breath, Boyton continued on to England—self-propelled, across the Irish Sea. His subsequent passage down the Thames was featured in the press, as was the ceremony in which Queen Victoria presented him with a pocket watch. The Captain lingered in London to enjoy his sudden fame, then climbed back into the suit and paddled on. He crossed the Channel, smoking cigars and eating sandwiches as he went. (Boyton was now

tugging at his stern a small boat filled with provisions.)

An eleven-gun salute welcomed him to France; and he began a tour of the great rivers of Europe—the Seine, the Rhine, the Danube. When he returned finally to New York (on a ship), Boyton received an enthusiastic welcome. In years to come, his double-bladed paddle would flash on a succession of American rivers.

But the years catch up with all of us. What we did yesterday we cannot do today. Our bodies mutiny, our limbs will not heave to. The day came when Boyton decided to hang up his paddle and look around for a less strenuous line of work. And what better place for a showman of the waves than Coney Island?

He purchased a plot of land near the Elephant Hotel, and began to build Sea Lion Park. It would feature Shoot-the-Chutes (an aquatic toboggan ride); performing sea lions; and, of course, Captain Boyton himself, giving exhibitions of the inflatable suit. A ten-foot wall surrounded everything; an admission fee was collected at the gate. The park opened with great fanfare and was an immediate hit.

George Tilyou, with his scattered rides, watched this development with interest. The advantages of an enclosed park were obvious. Its drawing power surpassed that of any single attraction; people who entered for a particular ride wound up going on others as well; and a gate, along with uniformed attendants, provided a degree of control over troublemakers. Tilyou went to his drawing board, and then to his banker.

Two years later he opened his own walled park. Far more elaborate than Boyton's, it was called Steeplechase.





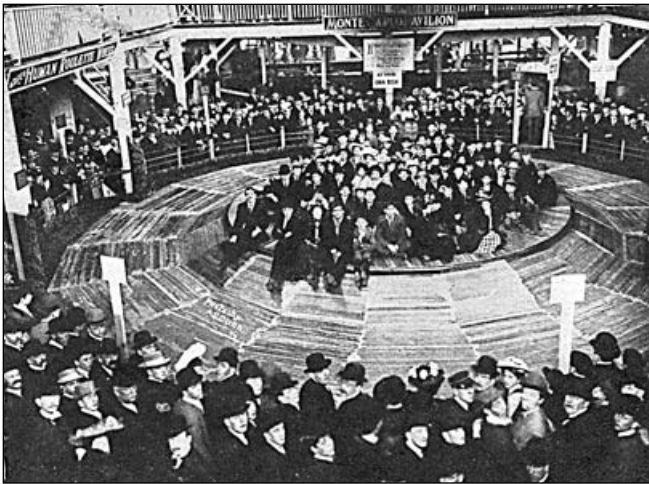
The name came from the Steeplechase Horses, a gravity ride built along the outside of the wall. A long line usually formed at the Horses; but for the impatient, much more lay ahead. The gates themselves were an event. Suspended over one of them was the park's emblem: a demented doorman called Funny Face. To enter the park, you passed through either a revolving cylinder known as the Barrel of Fun, or a gaping red mouth. Once inside, you were beset with choices. You could experience the Dew Drop (a spiral



slide), or the Whichaway (a multidirectional swing)—both Tilyou inventions. You could cruise the Grand Canal in a naphtha-powered boat; ride the Ferris wheel, with its bird's-eye view of the beach (strung with light bulbs, at night the Ferris wheel was a sight in itself); brave the Earth-

quake Stairway; laugh at yourself in the magic mirrors; patronize the penny arcades, game booths, and refreshment stands; or just wander about.

As the park prospered (and, after a devastating fire, was rebuilt), it would expand to fill fifteen acres, adding such features as a ballroom and a huge swimming pool. Its main attraction was the Pavilion of Fun. A joke on the Island was that the church-going Tilyous prayed for rain: business might be ruined elsewhere, but people would flock to their roofed Pavilion. Among the amusements to be found in this hangarlike building were the Human Roulette Wheel (a spinning disc one sought to cling to); the Wedding Ring (a suspended hoop on which up to seventy persons could be swung); and a booth that rented clown suits.

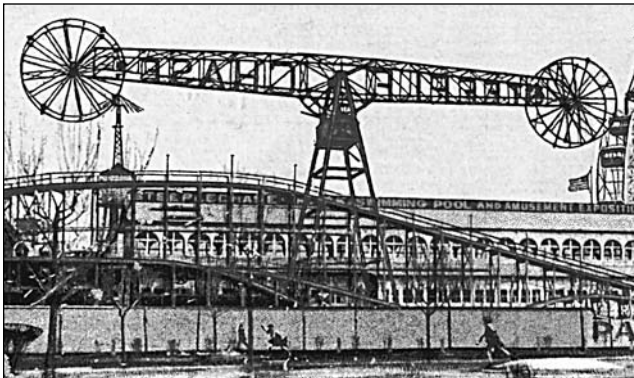


Tilyou himself had designed many of the rides at Steeplechase; and certainly the overall conception was his. A theater called the Insanitarium may serve to elucidate the spirit of the park. On its stage was a doghouse. Persons exiting the Steeplechase Horses were routed, via passageways, into this doghouse. Laughing nervously, they would emerge from it on their hands and knees—to be greeted by a dwarf. The dwarf would assail them with wisecracks, and chase after them with a paddle or electric prod. There were particular corners of the stage to which he liked to chase people. In one, a stack of barrels began to totter, then

changed its mind and straightened back up. In another, a devil popped out of a box. The dwarf's favorite trick, of course, was to position you over one of the blow-holes in the floor. A blast of air then sent either your hat or (as he preferred) your skirt flying upward. Meanwhile, an audience was roaring with laughter. It was Kafka American-style: tribulations that were rude and ridiculous, with everyone (victims included) having a good time.

Tilyou had definite ideas as to how visitors to "the Funny Place" (as he billed his park) were to be amused. He wanted as much physical participation as possible, and a communal feel, like that of a fair or festival. Furthermore, a mild mortification was to be part of the proceedings. Being made a fool of could be great fun, he had discovered—as long as you got to watch the next person suffer the same insults, blast of air, or collapsing stairway.\*

As for the tone of Steeplechase, a certain decorum prevailed. (These were, after all, our Edwardian forebears.) At the same time—as female legs flashed in the Barrel of Fun, and skirts were blasted into the air—there was a note of the mischievous and the risqué. It is illuminating to contrast the park's emblem—the leering Funny Face—with that of Disneyland: the simpering Mickey Mouse. Like Disney, Tilyou intended his park to be family-oriented. Yet he also sought to lend it an edge of ribaldry—a dash of the indecorous. The tonic he was dispensing was wholesome enough, yet had a hint of ginger to it. Tilyou seems to have been a



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\* That fun house bench, I realized, had been a Tilyou legacy.

straitlaced fellow (employees caught using profane language were dismissed), who nonetheless enjoyed a practical joke, even if it was slightly suggestive. His park was respectable and orderly; yet it encouraged pagan high spirits.

Steeplechase has been compared to the Feast of Fools, a medieval holiday given over to buffoonery and riotous behavior. In each case the proprieties were grossly violated; social strictures were suspended. Yet the mischief was only a momentary aberration, and served in the end to reaffirm those strictures. The atmosphere at Steeplechase was similar to that of Old World carnivals and festivals. It was characterized by an infectious conviviality, with strangers speaking easily to one another. The spirit of fun was such that many unable to afford the amusements, came in anyway (there was no admission fee), simply to walk about and mingle. You could share in the merriment through mere proximity to those doing the actual whirling, shrieking, and wearing of clown suits. As at a festival, too, personal restraints were loosened. You could laugh uproariously, hug your companion, allow yourself to be tumbled about. There was even a dish-breaking booth: for a dime you got to throw baseballs at cheap china! Finally, the park was gaily be-decked—with flags, pennants, and bunting—as if for a holiday.

A century of dignified behavior, proper posture, and constricting clothing was about to give way to something less rigorous. And Steeplechase Park, with its rampant zaniness, helped to set the new tone. Such was George Tilyou's contribution to our emerging modernity. It would not be long before informality and "self-expression" ceased to constitute a revolt, and had become the order of the day.

In return for the jollity he provided us, a small fortune in dimes and nickels came Tilyou's way. So successful was he, in fact, that he soon attracted imitators. In 1903 a rival to Steeplechase arose, just down the street. It was called Luna Park.



Luna was the brainchild of Frederick Thompson, an architect, and one Elmer Dundy. The pair were not new to show business. Two years before, at the Buffalo Exposition, they had built and operated a cyclorama. Called *A Trip to the Moon*, it had featured a Jules Verne–style spaceship. Ticket-holders had been led into a darkened hall and seated inside this spaceship. With a shudder it had “taken off”; and our astronauts, holding onto their derbies and parasols, had lurched through space. Through the portholes they had watched celestial bodies (projected onto the walls of the hall) float by. They had listened to strange, interplanetary sounds. After a bone-shaking landing, everyone had left the ship and entered a lunar grotto. There they had been greeted by the Man in the Moon, who sat on a throne surrounded by moonmen and dancing girls. One of the girls had crooned “My Sweetheart the Man in the Moon.” On exiting, each visitor had been handed a piece of green cheese as a souvenir.

Scouting out new attractions for his park, George Tilyou had attended the Exposition. He had been impressed by *A Trip to the Moon*, and by the *Giant See-Saw*, another Thompson-Dundy creation. The following year both were in operation at Steeplechase, the proceeds being split with Tilyou. But Thompson and Dundy soon tired of this arrangement. They decided to strike out on their own—and to do so in a spectacular manner.

They borrowed a million dollars, bought Sea Lion Park from Captain Boyton, and demolished it (except for the lagoon and Shoot-the-Chutes). And they began to build Luna Park. A din of construction joined that of the rides

and merry-makers over at Steeplechase.

By May enough of it was ready that Luna was able to open for the season. Eager to see what new diversions had been fashioned in their behalf, the public poured through the mammoth gate. They were not to be disappointed. According to the *Times*, visitors that first day had rubbed their eyes and pinched themselves.

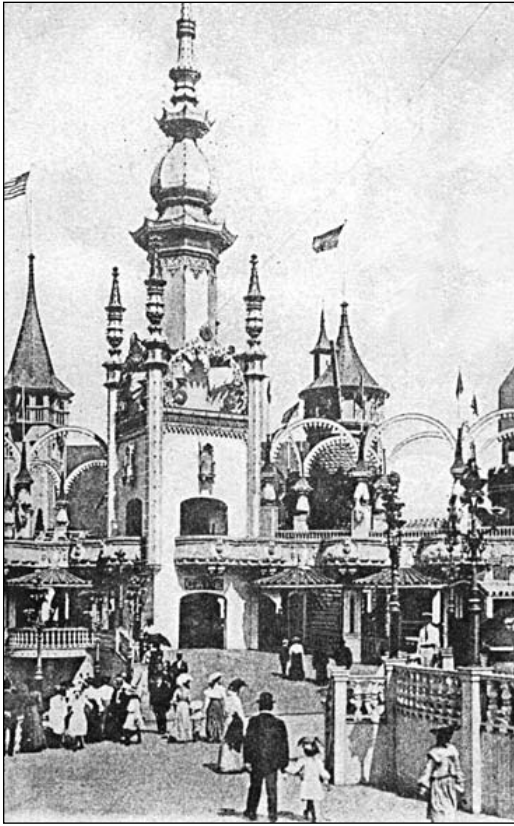


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Taking cues from both the White City (with its monumental airs) and the Midway Plaisance (best remembered for the Persian Palace of Eros), Thompson had designed a baroque tour de force. With the lagoon as centerpiece, an Oriental fantasy greeted the crowds. The park was a shameless fairyland—a gaudy vision of the Arabian Nights. Minarets, domes, and dragons rose to dazzle the eye. Flags and pennants flew from spires and along the walkways. The facades of buildings were gaily colored and embellished with scrollwork. Curves and curlicues were everywhere, Thompson insisting that “straight lines are necessarily severe and dead.” He had been inspired in this lavishness by the current style of theater design (a look that would culminate in the pseudo-Moorish movie palaces—the Alhambras and Egyptians). But nothing on such a scale had been conceived since Nebuchadnezzar had snapped his fingers, and his viziers had scrambled to create the Hanging Gardens. The most blasé visitor was impressed by the boldness of the plan and its skillful execution; the most sober,

taken with the playful fantasy. Even the materials—plaster and lath (a flimsy stock of wood)—contributed to the dreamlike atmosphere: buildings so insubstantial could scarcely be meant for any practical purpose on this earth.

Yet not only Luna's architecture set it apart from Steeplechase; its ethos was different, too. No air blasts, collapsing stairways, or revolving barrels waited to render one a pub-



lic spectacle. Designed as much to amaze as to amuse, the park itself was the spectacle. For the 10¢ admission fee one could roam the bannered promenades of another world.

Let us take a look at what Thompson and Dundy had in store for us beyond that gate.

There was, for a start, *A Trip to the Moon*, housed now in a permanent structure. An *Eskimo Village* glinted in the summer sun. And a disaster show called *Fighting the Flames*

was presented on an outdoor set. One bought a ticket, sat in the grandstand, and watched flames engulf an apartment building. Actors dressed as firemen rushed to the scene; other actors leapt into their nets. Daily the building caught fire.\*

There were rides—Bump the Bumps, the Tickler, the Tunnel of Love—and slides. There were acrobats and trained bears. Oriental processions. Roving brass bands. Cafes and a Japanese tea garden. And elephants wandered



about, in elaborate costumes. (It was as if the spirit of the Elephant Hotel—destroyed in the last fire and its site absorbed by Luna—were haunting the park.)

And everywhere flags flapped in the wind.

Four million paying customers visited Luna during its second year. Many came expressly at night, to see the park at its most spectacular. For when the lights came on (a quarter-million of them, it was claimed), this Baghdad in Brooklyn seemed to leave the earth entirely.† Less than two months after opening, Thompson and Dundy had been able to pay back their bank loan from the receipts. That

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\* The show was changed eventually to *The Eruption of Mt. Pelée* (with the same extras fleeing from simulated lava), and then to *The Johnstown Flood*.

† A friend tells me his grandfather used the expression “lit up like Luna Park,” to refer to an intoxicated person.



insubstantial fantasy of plaster and lath was producing hard currency.

But what about Steeplechase? Was “the Funny Place” suffering from such formidable competition? Not at all. Thompson and Dundy had brought new crowds out to the beach; and everyone was benefiting, from Tilyou down to the lowliest pedlar.

Indeed, so fertile had the sands become that there sprouted from them—barely a year after the opening of Luna—a third amusement park. It was as if, in the heat of the summer, a trio of mirages had flickered into being. The last to arrive was the most extravagant of them all. It was called Dreamland.



I have reached these lands but newly  
From an ultimate dim Thule—  
From a wild weird clime that lieth, sublime  
Out of SPACE—out of TIME.

—POE, “Dreamland”

Dreamland was built by a group of New York businessmen and politicians who had sniffed profit in the salt air. They had acquired from the city (by the usual dubious means) a parcel of land, ideally located between Surf Avenue and the beach; and on it they raised an amusement park. While more lavish than Luna, their creation was in many respects a shameless copy. The same Orientalisms—the faerie domes and spires—were etched against the sky. (They were painted white, though, in contrast to Luna’s gay colors.) A gate as high as its neighbor’s promised passage



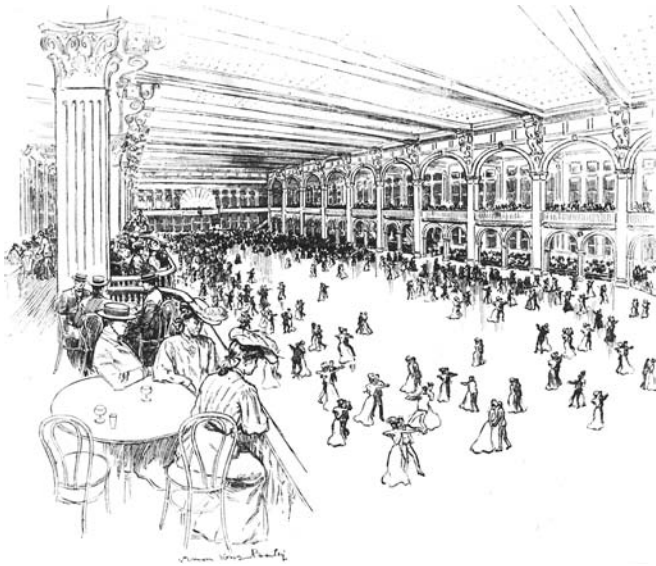
into as spectacular a realm. (Outside the gate was a further enticement to enter: a colossal sculpture of an undraped female. Titled *Creation*, it was Little Egypt thinly disguised as Art.) Within the walls of Dreamland were imitations of attractions at Luna: a burning building; a Shoot-the-Chutes; a Mt. Vesuvius that would seek to outspew Mt. Pelée down the street. More insidious yet, many concessionaires had been lured away from Luna. The new venture was similarly festooned with light bulbs—a million of them, it was alleged—so that by night Dreamland, too, hovered at the water's edge like an electric revelation. Two versions of the same fantasy had materialized on the beach—each with a seductive gate, through which (for a small fee) one might pass beyond the cares of this world.

But much that was original was also to be found at Dreamland. A chief attraction was the village of Lilliputia, in which everything—houses, furniture, vehicles—had been scaled to meet the needs of the scores of midgets hired to inhabit it. Chariot races were held. The Alpine Scenic Railway offered rides through a stage set of Switzerland. The Haunted Swing swung dizzily from one end of a room to the other. (That was the illusion. In fact, the swing remained stationary, as the entire room was pivoted!) Dreamland's centerpiece was the Beacon Tower, whose searchlight threw red and white beams at night onto the fantasy below (until the Lighthouse Commission had it turned off, citing confusion to ships). And the park's owners had acquired the Iron Pier and constructed a ballroom on it. Full-skirted Nereids danced now over the waves, as the music drifted out to sea.\*

The entertainment was as lively as anything over at Luna. It included Bonavita the lion tamer; Professor Wormwood and his performing monkeys; a "bona fide" Wild Man of Borneo (actually an Alsatian from the Bronx, his face darkened with burnt cork), who grunted savagely as part of the ballyhoo outside the animal tent; and Omar Sami, the celebrated barker, looking exotic in his turban and red

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\* That music might have been the first sound of America to be heard by immigrants arriving in the harbor.



bloomers. (Omar was from Vermont.) And for a real thrill, the aeronaut Santos-Dumont was in attendance, offering dirigible rides out over the ocean.

Three amusement parks, then, within blocks of one another and in spirited competition, provided New Yorkers with an abundance of diversions. Not since Kublai Khan had erected his pleasure dome had there been anything to rival it; and not until Mr. Disney would raise his, would Coney Island be eclipsed in the public eye. The Brooklyn resort was the Disneyland of its day. Yet for all their similarities—the fantasy, the skilled showmanship, the catering to a family trade—how different the tone and spirit of the two places. Consider their emblems. Miles apart are the grotesque Funny Face and the bland Mickey Mouse. Disneyland has a pleasant, genial air. The three parks in Brooklyn—staffed by carnie types and replete with hoaxes such as the Wild Man of Borneo—had a raffish edge to them. Disney's park aims at children. Coney Island included children, but did not condescend to them. How different even the textures of their surfaces. Steeplechase, Luna, and Dreamland had been fashioned from honest wood, and from plaster suggestive of a sculptor's studio. Disneyland's space-age synthetics—the simulated wood, fake brick, and

sleek polyvinyls—for all the millions of dollars involved, look cheap. There is a different feel to their amusements, too. Dreamland's catchpenny origins were still discernible (most notably, in its sideshows); whereas Disneyland, with its insistent cuteness, harkens back to nothing naughtier than a church bazaar. There is no wild side to the Disney domain, no vulgar exuberance.\*

Finally, despite the firm hand with which the Brooklyn parks were run, employees were not required to suppress their personalities. Moreover, just outside the walls were independent enterprises. The Disney operations, in contrast, are monoliths of control and calculation. Steeplechase, Luna, and Dreamland employed former circus and carnival hands—rough-edged characters who might growl at you, or worse. Disneyland is staffed by clean-cut young people, who are not permitted to chew gum on the job. The parks at Coney Island were guided by individual rather than corporate dictates, with both Tilyou and Thompson residing on the premises. And this last difference: If you were low on cash, you could still come out to Coney Island, just to mill about or linger by the sea. The admission fees at Disneyland can set Dad back a week's salary.

These differences notwithstanding, the New Coney Island was the Disneyland of its day. Despite some lingering mischief, a new respectability had come to Sodom; and it drew millions. "It is a question," declared one visitor, "if Coney Island is not more crowded than any city in the world (except possibly Cairo) during the heated season." Middle-class New Yorkers, and out-of-towners too, were making frequent pilgrimages to the shore. Even foreigners were showing up for a look at what had acquired an international reputation. Freud, on his way to Massachusetts to deliver a series of lectures, came out and is said to have enjoyed himself. The Russian writer Maxim Gorki, moved by the sight from his ship of the illuminated parks, gushed:

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\* When Disney first told his wife of his intention to build an amusement park, she is said to have been puzzled. "But Walt, why would you want to do that? Amusement parks are nasty, dirty places." "Exactly," replied Disney, a mad glint in his eye. "Mine won't be."

“With the advent of night a fantastic city all of fire suddenly rises from the ocean into the sky....Fabulous beyond conceiving, ineffably beautiful, is this fiery scintillation.” And the newspapers that had once denounced the resort with prophetic fervor, had only praise for it now. A reporter from *Scientific American*, sent out to do a piece on the latest ride technology, urged his readers to pay a visit. He suggested they arrive by ferry:

Coney Island, that marvelous city of lath and burlap, should always be approached by sea, as then, and then only, can the beauty of this ephemeral Venice be appreciated. Landward, the trains run through squalid neighborhoods, and past the back of everything. Its best foot is put forward to the sea.

And Albert Bigelow Paine, writing in the *Century*, had this to say on the new moral climate:

We had learned to regard Coney Island as the natural home of those engaged in the trade of petty “graft” and as the resort of their willing victims....Now we found that the lemonade was real lemonade in reasonably clean, large



glasses, the restaurants were wholesomely kept, while the concert halls supplied decent even if not the highest order of dramatic entertainment, and were patronized by thoroughly respectable men and women....Kinetoscope shows of a gay but harmless variety seemed to prevail, where once painted and bedizened creatures attracted half-besotted audiences with vulgarity and display.

His views were seconded by a writer from *Munsey's Magazine*, who described the visitors as "well-mannered...and even cultured—a crowd as handsome and charming to gaze upon as any to be found at Newport or...along the boardwalk at Atlantic City."

Yet it should not be imagined that the shore was given over now entirely to model citizens. The grifters, gamblers, and prostitutes of the McKane era had furled their flags; but by no means had they all moved on. For anyone who came looking for it, the low and sordid was still to be found on the Island. Heading the police force during these years was an officer named Dooley, apparently an honest, diligent man. But despite his efforts to enforce the law, vice continued to flourish. The State of New York, under pressure from reform groups, would show its muscle from time to time. In 1910 the more flagrant of the cabarets were forced to curtail their activities; and a year later, the betting at racetracks was halted. If that wasn't enough to put a damper on the fun, Carrie Nation showed up at Steeplechase one summer, to give a series of temperance lectures.\* When a law was passed limiting the serving of alcoholic beverages to hotels, the saloons had simply acquired rooms overhead and registered as inns. (Nor had they failed to find a use for the rooms.) By World War I most of the old cafes and cabarets would be gone; but they persisted in their hijinks—and occasional rough stuff—right to the end. Reminisced Jimmy Durante (who, like fellow show-business luminaries Irving Berlin and Eddie Cantor, had put in

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\* Popcorn, beer, and rude epithets were tossed at her. Finally, she was hauled off to jail when, after denouncing the owner of a cigar store for promoting tobacco addiction, she began to wreck his shop.

time on the Island as a singing waiter): “You couldn’t build a Sunday school out of those nightspots. People knew they were tough joints, and if they gave ’em a play, had nobody but themselves to kick if they lost their shirts.” The War saw the demise, too, of most of the surviving bordellos, as the military brought pressure to bear to have them closed.\*

The face of the resort kept changing, a process hastened periodically by fire. In 1903 the Bowery burned, destroying a score of disreputable haunts left over from the McKane era. Almost immediately, a new Bowery rose from the ashes—a phoenix of fun—and was soon as busy as ever. But, as any old-timer could have told you, it was tame in comparison.†

Four years later, a fire that began in the Cave of the Winds swept through Steeplechase, destroying most of it. A blackened Funny Face grinned from a heap of rubble. Squarely facing misfortune, George Tilyou was there the next day to supervise the cleanup, and to post a sign:

ADMISSION TO THE BURNING RUINS—10¢

He speedily rebuilt, enlarging the Pavilion of Fun and improving the rides. The Steeplechase Pier was lengthened, making it accessible to the steamers from Manhattan. They could now disgorge passengers directly at his doorstep. It was not long before Tilyou was prospering once again.

And in 1911 came another fire, the most dramatic yet. Its spires becoming pillars of flame—its Mt. Vesuvius collapsing in the inferno—one of its lions escaping into the streets—Dreamland burned down one night. It was never rebuilt. For a few short years the dream had dazzled the crowds. Then, like the world of Shakespeare’s players, everything had “melted into air, into thin air”—dissolved

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\* The government also banned the serving of liquor to men in uniform. But sly servicemen got around the rule by patronizing saloons in their bathing suits.

† The Bowery at Coney Island is not to be confused with the Bowery in lower Manhattan. The latter was New York’s original theater district; then, for many years, its skid row.



like an insubstantial pageant. Gone were the cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces, the solemn temples. "We are such stuff as dreams are made on," wrote Shakespeare; and surely the example of a costly venture called Dreamland lasting less than a decade, would have stirred his imagination. Had he stood among those who had watched it burn that night, he might have murmured:

Weeds of fire do swiftly overgrow  
The tinsel towers where bloomed a thousand flags;  
And wither the brief and insubstantial spires  
Where Joy was wont to perch, that now takes wing  
As conflagration, like a dragon's breath,  
Shrinks and blackens all that once was gay.  
O woe, look at it go. Alackaday!  
So too the ends of kings, methinks: mere spectacles  
For Sunday mobs to flock to, coins in hand  
To view the smoking ruins and shake their heads.  
O rude mortality! We are but born to burn.  
Most smolder all their lives, then flicker out;  
A few rare souls do like a nova go.  
O most rare Dreamland, thy ramparts and thy rides  
Do mount to heaven from a worthy pyre;  
Whilst we who in thy ivory precincts roamed  
(Cagèd creatures now, that may not stroll  
Thy faerie paths and celestial promenades)  
Shall miss thee like a prisoner doth the sun  
And languish in drab tents and nickel booths  
And glimpse thee hence but through the crack of sleep.  
O look how fire doth eat what we have loved.  
A hose, a hose! Our tears will douse these flames!  
But 'tis too late. The bold Arabian towers  
That once did crowd the sky in rich array  
Do fill it now but as a sulphurous fume  
As all dissolves, abruptly as a dream.  
Farewell, proud park. I'll follow thee anon.  
(For what's the soul, if not a sentient smoke  
That riseth heavenward, the day we croak?)  
Yet again thy wonders shall I see.  
Till then I'll prattle, of grim mortali—Yeee!

*(Exit, pursued by a lion)*



It was a bleak day as, once more, the crowds came out to view the ruins. During the fire their employees had scrambled to hose down the two other parks; and the destruction had been confined to Dreamland and a portion of Surf Avenue. But the Avenue began to rebuild immediately; while many who had been left jobless by the park's demise, found berths at Luna or Steeplechase. One of them, Dr. Martin Couney, had rushed to transfer his exhibit during the first hours of the fire. Couney was a French physician and well-known figure on the Island. He ran an unusual show—one that may seem to have been exploitative and tasteless. In fact, it was a noble enterprise.

Dr. Couney had invented an incubator for premature babies. To publicize his device (and thereby induce hospitals to adopt it), he had been making the rounds of World's Fairs. After the Pan-American Exposition, he had looked about for another such event; and his eye had fallen on Dreamland. In 1904 the Premature Baby Incubators had opened its doors to a curious public. For the next forty years (initially at Dreamland, then at Luna), the exhibit was a Coney Island fixture. Couney charged a quarter for a look at the "preemies" in their glass cabinets. In short, he ran a sideshow—more or less a freak show.

Appalling? Not if Couney's motives are considered, and his accomplishments. Unable to interest a single hospital in his invention, and lacking financial support, he needed somewhere from which the incubator could be publicized. Coney Island was the sole place that would have him. The admission fees covered his expenses for nurses, oxygen, and rent, as he displayed his invention. At the same time,

Couney was able to save the lives of most of the babies brought in. Only gradually did he win over his medical colleagues, and the incubator become standard equipment in hospitals. In the meantime he labored alone—often maligned—at his sideshow by the sea. When incubators became generally available, he continued to take in babies—from mothers unable to afford the hospital. He is said to have preserved the lives of more than 7000 infants. Several of them grew up to find work on the Island and to spend their lives there: carnie folk from the earliest age imaginable. Is it going too far to view Couney (who seems to have been revered locally) as a sideshow Albert Schweitzer? Why, after all, did he maintain his exhibit once the incubator had been adopted and no longer needed publicity? Among the poor in Brooklyn, the doctor had found his *Labaréné*. And the wanderer had found a home. There is a saying still current at Coney Island: “You get sand in your shoes and can’t get it out.” Not even a humanitarian physician had proven immune to the blandishments of a carnival camp, or to the charm of the shore.

A longtime resident such as Couney would see many alterations over the years, as both the attractions and the tone of the resort kept changing. The first faces to press against the glass of his incubators had belonged to properly dressed and postured individuals, in derbies and wax-fruit extravaganzas. By 1943 (the year he retired) those peering in at the “preemies” were casually attired and looser of limb—resembled you or me. Can we pinpoint when it was that this change—reflective of both new standards of comportment and a new class of visitor to the beach—came about?

If a single event may be said to have inaugurated this latest era at Coney Island, it was the arrival in 1920 of the subway. The proletarian masses suddenly discovered that they were not only welcome at the shore, but able to get there easily and cheaply. They came in droves, pouring out of the BMT and IND cars just as many of them had recently crowded down the gangways of steamships. Meanwhile, the well-to-do were going elsewhere. (High society, ever fickle, had found new watering holes; while the sporting

crowd, ever since the closing of the tracks, had shunned the Island.) As a result, the posh hotels were shutting down. The grandiose restaurants also were closing, as hot-dog stands became the preferred venue for dining. And dreamy couples no longer waltzed over the waves: the ballroom on the pier echoed now with more contemporary sounds. That distinctive style of seaside elegance had vanished, never to be seen again. In its place arose what has been called the Nickel Empire—according to your point of view, a democratization or a cheapening of the resort. It was during this period that the city took over the beach, widened it, and built the Boardwalk.

With the opening of the subway (and we're still waiting, by the way, for that train of ours), New Yorkers of modest means began to come out in growing numbers. While the middle class continued to patronize the resort, they were no longer its principal clientele. Taking their place were a hoard of immigrants, for whom Coney Island was a welcome sequel to Ellis, and a relief from the tenements into which they had been crammed. We may imagine a decorous family of "old American stock" watching with mounting dismay as more and more of these "new people," noisy and excitable, showed up... until one summer that family decided simply to go elsewhere.\*

Some of the old crowd were upset, too, by the sartorial changes that had come to the Island. With the shift in morals and manners that characterized the twenties, day-trippers were abandoning the formalistic dress once de rigueur for any public event. These liberated souls were dressing as they pleased. And the bathing suits they had adopted! In a move toward comfort and self-display that would have been scandalous before the War, the women were streamlining those pantaloons-and-blouse outfits; while the men were beginning to shed their swim shirts (and occasionally getting arrested for indecency).

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\* Half a century later, the descendants of those noisy and excitable Greeks, Jews, and Italians would enact the same scenario. They would constitute the "uneasy whites" who fled the beach (and the city) before the latest wave of immigrants: noisy and excitable blacks and Hispanics.

Another mark of the changing tone was the proliferation of sideshows. Wax museums, freak shows, and peep shows (with short films such as “After the Bath” and “Iceman’s Delight”) rose to a new prominence. Also rising was the noise level, as barkers at these shows vied with game-booth attendants. (Electric amplifiers were common now; and the Bowery had become a gauntlet of ear-splitting spiels.) Alas, the current crowd preferred this type of entertainment to the old ballrooms and atmospheric restaurants. The new level of taste may be gauged by the sensationalistic wax museums that had opened up. One of them, called Underground Chinatown, featured the re-creation of an opium den. Another, the Eden Musée, amused the public with its wax celebrities—and with its French Nudist exhibit. In a wall of the Musée were openings, covered with canvas flaps. Through them, announced a sign, could be viewed wax sculptures of a family of French nudists. French nudists? Shall we take a look?

The holes are large enough for our heads to fit through. We peer in—and receive a rude surprise. On display are a group of wax figures. As promised, they are nude. But unexpectedly, their faces are familiar.

For thanks to a clever arrangement of mirrors, the faces are none other than our own.

Mr. Disney would not have approved.

But certainly the most glaring, and disturbing, feature of the midway was its freak shows. Freak shows were not new to Coney Island: one had been operating as early as the 1880s (and had included an ostrich). But it was at Dreamland that they had first achieved any prominence, as if no dream were complete without a note of the grotesque. The Congress of Living Curiosities had become a major attraction at the park. Samuel Gumpertz (the showman who managed Dreamland for its absentee owners) had roamed the globe in search of human oddities for the Congress. One of his earliest coups had been to bring over from the Philippines a tribe of alleged headhunters. Surrounded by the faerie spires and clattering rides, they had dwelt in replicas of their jungle huts. The mild-mannered Bantocs would return home with strange tales to tell. If anyone was

impressed by Dreamland (though puzzled as to its purpose), it was they. Perhaps the Wild Man of Borneo had dropped by Headhunter Village for some pointers, only to be disappointed by its grinning, joking inhabitants.

By the mid twenties a small company of freaks were living and displaying themselves at Coney Island. They included Jolly Irene the Fat Woman; Zip the Pinhead; the Tattooed Wonder; Captain Fred Walters, known as the Blue Man (he ingested silver nitrate to turn his skin blue); Baron Paucci, a midget; Cliko the Dancing Bushman (far, far from his home in the Kalahari was poor Cliko); and Jackie Donahue, the Human Auto Tire. Any fascination with these human anomalies must be tempered with a compassion for their plight. For some, joining a freak show was the only means available of earning a living. It might also have provided their sole chance for companionship—and for community, with the carnival troupe for whom the Island was home. Sadly, there was an occupational hazard to self-display. A glassy-eyed stare was often the lot of a human exhibit, as he retreated into a shell before the imperinencies of those who had paid to view him. An apt emblem for life in a freak show was an apparent Englishman known as Sober Sir Edward, perhaps the most curious of all the Living Curiosities. Sober Sir Edward, it was claimed, did not laugh. A prize of \$100 was offered to anyone in the audience who could make him laugh. It was never collected. Year in, year out, Sober Sir Edward sat there on the stage, staring out mournfully as jokes and absurdities were shouted at him. This lugubrious frame of mind seems to have been no act, but the real Sir Edward: when his fiancée died, he is said to have married her ashes. What exactly his problem was—whether a species of catatonia, a profound melancholy, or simply an excessive dose of English reserve—is not known.



But if a visitor to the midway had any compunction about viewing freaks (and few did), other sideshows beckoned. A gauntlet of barkers were urging him to step up and buy a ticket—to see the sword-swallower, the fire-eater, the magician, the electric lady. These performers were depicted on canvas signs, and brought out for brief previews (known as ballyhoos). A strongman might emerge from his tent, strut about, and tear a phone book in two. His barker would then exhort you to come in and see more. (Charles Atlas began his career in a Bowery sideshow.) A mentalist might stare at you from beneath his turban, and dare you to attend his performance. And there was a flea circus! Yes, flea circuses actually existed at one time; they are no cartoonist's gag. One had arrived at Luna Park shortly after World War I, and become a popular attraction. These tabletop extravaganzas had originated at the court of a German prince, spreading from there to fairs and carnivals. Far from being hoaxes, they were a subtle and demanding form of theater. The ringmaster-impresario would start with a bottleful of fleas, selecting out the highest jumpers. These were his stars. He would then harness them to tiny chariots, merry-go-rounds, and trapezes—a meticulous process that required patience and a special grade of wire. (Legend has it that there existed only one spool of this ultra-fine wire, somewhere in Germany. The impresarios shared it; and when the supply was exhausted, the shows died out.) As the fleas sought to leap about, they would pull, turn, or swing the miniature props. And lo, a flea circus. Whether on account of an empty spool of wire or the vicissitudes of public taste, the last of these eye-straining spectacles played

during the forties, at Huburt's Museum and Flea Circus in Times Square. They then became extinct.\*

The subway crowd wanted cheap entertainment—and cheap food, too. By now, hot dogs had overtaken fried clams as the most popular seaside snack. Their leading purveyor was Nathan Handwerker. Nathan had been an employee of Charlie Feltman, the hot dog's inventor. In 1916 he had opened his own stand, at a fortuitous location: directly between the beach and the future site of the subway station. Nathan charged only a nickel, as opposed to his mentor's dime. In an attempt to improve the image of hot dogs (they had acquired a reputation for unwholesome ingredients), he once hired college students to dress up as doctors and patronize his stand. His sign urged one and all to "Follow the Crowd to Nathan's." Millions did and still do.

Where they were going in decreasing numbers was to the old, grandiose restaurants. Only two remained now: Feltman's (with its 8000-seat complex of dining rooms) and Stauch's. Louis Stauch was an interesting case. He was known as one of the most generous men on the Island, and as one of the most eccentric. Uncle Louis (who was occasionally to be seen collecting cigar butts on the beach) had the instincts of a hermit. He not only refused to set foot off the Island (where he had arrived as a young man), but rarely left the premises of his restaurant. For twenty-five years he ate and slept there; had his hair cut by a visiting barber; and (having gotten married in his own ballroom) raised a family. Uncle Louis was also the chief financial support for the annual Mardi Gras festival, the proceeds of which went to the Coney Island Rescue Home for wayward girls.†

And certainly, you could still come out to the shore to wet your whistle, despite Prohibition. A number of "Irish

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\* Some enterprising reader may consider reviving the flea circus. Ultra-fine wire is no doubt available today; and one's troupe of daredevils could be recruited at no greater distance than the nearest dog.

† Compare Stauch's ways with those of the absentee landlords who would come to dominate the beach.



inns” were popular, and cabarets where a singing waiter might do a little jig as he plopped your drink down in front of you. During the dry years the Island had its share of mobsters, with one Frankie Yale presiding for a while as big boss.

Steeplechase, run now by Tilyou’s sons, was still thriving. And the crowds were as big as ever over at Luna, whose Arabian Nights skyline had weathered from the salt air, but was still exotic. Both parks sought to keep up with the latest fads, such as beauty contests. And both kept adding new and zippier rides, including the Caterpillar and Tilt-a-Whirl.\*

New rides were also appearing outside the walls of the parks. During the twenties the Wonder Wheel was built, and the Cyclone and the Thunderbolt. These last were the *dernier cri* (on several deadly occasions, literally so) in roller coasters. The Cyclone in particular acquired a reputation for thrills. Charles Lindbergh used it to prime himself for his trans-Atlantic flight; and stutterers would ride it in hope of a cure. A mute named Emilio Franco is alleged to have regained his speech after a ride on the Cyclone. The story goes that, during one of the plunges, he achieved a shriek. Then, staggering from the car, Franco murmured, “I feel sick.”

And another tower went up, which should be mentioned: that of Our Lady of Solace Church. It contained a bell that had once hung in the Chimes Tower at Steeplechase, and that was now inscribed:

We live for those who love us  
For those whose hearts are true  
For the God that reigns above us  
And for the good that we may do.

The congregation (which had met previously in an old dance hall) consisted largely of persons associated with

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\* Many of these rides were designed and built in his nearby shop by William Mangels, known as the Edison of carnival rides. They were tried out locally, and, if successful, marketed to the amusement parks that—inspired by the two in Brooklyn—were springing up around the country.

Luna or Steeplechase. A special Mass was held early Sunday morning, after the parks had closed and Luna's quarter-million lights been turned off. Ride operators and vendors, strongmen and freaks found a sanctuary here, after a week spent amid the hurly-burly of an amusement park.

The Coney Island of the twenties, then, was a lively, prosperous place, enjoying its new identity as the proletarian resort. Each summer the crowds milled—barkers touted their shows—Dodgem cars crashed—band organs played—the Wheel of Fortune spun. And the beach was packed with bathers, a large proportion of whom were immigrants. Chattering in many tongues, they were an emblem of the diverse society that had welcomed them to its shores (and that had just passed the Immigration Act, to stem the tide).

And the gulls shrieked, the ships went sailing by.



During the thirties and forties, little new was added to either park; and while still busy, they had begun to show their age. Gone were the verve and the sparkle. Buildings and sets needed a paint job. Rides were getting creaky, and ride operators too. Even the freak shows had declined: fakes were not uncommon; and a college student willing to shave his head and grunt, might spend the summer working as a pinhead. But the barkers were as loud as ever (except for Dr. Couney's "lecturer," who continued to address the public in sober tones). And some old-fashioned attractions had taken on a new life as curiosities. Cycloramas, for instance, were still being shown (the latest being *The Battle of the Marne*). And a phrenologist, like the last of a race of dodos, still hung his shingle out over the Bowery.

Old-timers complained that Luna was a shadow of its former self. The entertainment was second-rate, they insisted; the sense of spectacle gone. And they were right, although the new owners were trying to liven up the proceedings. There were publicity stunts, such as Hot Dog Day (with Milton Berle on hand to knight the lowly snack) and kissing marathons. Novelties were brought in: baby elephants that danced the Charleston, a glass tank in which a man grappled with sharks. But the glamour was no longer there. And though sizeable crowds were still passing through its gate, Luna's finances were rumored to be shaky. (The park would change ownership repeatedly during this period.) Down the street Feltman's restaurant had declined—beachgoers were no longer interested in leisurely dining or seaside elegance—and would soon shut down.

The beach itself was still crowded: the jobless and the

struggling were not about to overlook a source of free fun. The waters had become polluted, but who cared? Bathers would arrive with their suits already on, or change under a blanket; and they would ride home in wet suits (as what the trainmen called “drippers”). As a result, many of the bathing pavilions had closed. Worse yet (as far as the tone of the beach was concerned), a growing number of males were shedding their swim shirts; and it would not be long before you were odd if you wore one.

In 1940 Coney Island received both the ride that would become its symbol, and the man who would seek to destroy its amusements. The ride was the Parachute Jump, acquired from the New York World’s Fair. The man was Robert Moses, the newly appointed Parks Commissioner. His upper-middle-class tastes offended by the honky-tonk at-



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mosphere, Moses saw it as his duty to upgrade the beach. His proposal to that end was startling in its simplicity: the greater part of the amusement area was to be torn down and replaced with a “seaside park.” Attila the Beautifier! Moses

was vehemently opposed, of course, by everyone with a concession or ride, and was forced to abandon his plan. He did manage, though, to have the volume lowered on loudspeakers, and to outlaw ballyhoos. His major accomplishment was the installation of more trash barrels. Scandalized by the single “bad boy” under his jurisdiction, the Parks Commissioner—unable to level the place—did what he could to clean it up and tone it down.

Where Moses failed, however, fire took a hand. During this period a series of blazes destroyed Luna Park. Thompson and Dundy’s elaborate fantasy followed Dreamland to a fiery grave. The site would become a parking lot, then a housing development. Other landmarks were also vanishing. Louis Stauch’s restaurant, once the most popular on the shore, had shut down (although his bathing pavilion remained open). And over on the Bowery—

But my crystal ball into the past suddenly went dark. The books from which I had gleaned this mass of information came to a close with the fifties. Coney Island was still going strong then. To be sure, television had cut into its business (as had movies and radio in previous years). Americans were preferring to be amused in the privacy of their living rooms, where they need not stir from the hypnagogic slouch that had become the national posture. But in 1957, 40 bathing pavilions were still in operation, three roller coasters, two freak shows, 32 frozen-custard stands, three fun houses, and a dozen carousels. Now and again, something new would even appear at the water’s edge. (Most notably, the city had just built an aquarium on the site of Dreamland.) And Steeplechase still offered its distinctive brand of fun, as a new generation crawled out of the doghouse and sought to escape the dwarf. The park’s original Ferris wheel still turned, having survived both fire and fashion. The Steeplechase Horses continued to race, on rickety tracks. And several rides were still manned by longtime employees, who had grown gray and bent on the job.

I could find little, however, that had been written about the Island since the fifties. A recent guide to amusement parks listed it simply (and ominously) as “Not recommended.” Even fiction-writers appeared to have forsaken the

locale. Beyond the nostalgia of its name, Coney Island had ceased to play a role in the collective imagination. I would learn that the reformers had taken a last stab at the dying giant: the Commissioner of Consumer Affairs had been trying to force game booths to post their rules and prizes. And a magazine writer had visited the roller coaster built over a house, in which its owner lived. Otherwise, no one seemed interested in the old resort. Coney Island had sunk into oblivion.

What was it like out there now? I wondered. True, I had paid a visit six years before—but with a tourist’s eye, not a reporter’s. All that I could really recall were those spook rides and the fun house. Moreover, six years is a long time in the life-cycle of a resort. Radical changes could have come to the shore. Perhaps the city planners had finally prevailed, with their vision of a sanitized park. Or the developers, with their greedy schemes. Or fire, that grim reaper of amusement parks.

I would go and find out. With notebook and camera I would visit the once-celebrated beach. “Not recommended” though it was, Coney Island beckoned. I could hear the rattle of its dilapidated rides, the wail of the wind on the Boardwalk...and it was as if a ghost were rattling its chains and moaning. Not to be avenged—just remembered.

Thus did I come to be standing on that subway platform.



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III. Excursion

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Half a dozen subway lines (the B, F, D, M, Q, and N) go out to Coney Island, where they end. It is as if New Yorkers were impelled periodically—by some elemental urge—to seek out the sea, and this transit system were designed to take them there. They need only hop aboard any of these trains and will soon be at the beach. Their afternoon may be spent lying on a blanket, checking out the amusements, downing snacks, or strolling the Boardwalk. They then climb back on a train, and—having satisfied that mysterious need to be near a body of water—are sped homeward (with a tan, perhaps, or a tummy-ache).

I had been waiting about twenty minutes when a D-train roared into the station. Its cars were covered with graffiti—had been transformed, by midnight Picassos, into a mural on wheels.\* The doors clanged open. I got on and took a seat beside a trio of Hispanic-looking girls.

Discreetly, I eyed them. Two of the girls were in their mid teens; the other was about twelve. Their attire and gear proclaimed them to be under the influence of that very urge—to be bound for the beach. They had a stroller with them, in which was cradled a child—along with towels, lotions, cookies, orange juice. The girls already had on their swimsuits, under flannel pullovers. A plot of sand would be their bathhouse; and they would return home as “drippers” (although they probably had no intention of going into the water).

The train sped through the gloom of the tunnel. Then, with a burst of light, we emerged onto a bridge. My fellow

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\* Since my visit, this crazed art form has been eliminated from the subway system.



riders ignored a spectacular view of the East River: the broad expanse of water, the neighboring Brooklyn Bridge. Behind us rose the glass towers of Manhattan. Ahead, the brick contours of Brooklyn rolled to the horizon. My subway fare had entitled me to both a ride and a scenic view. For some reason the train was creeping along; and our passage over the river was a prolonged, though agreeable, affair.\*

Finally, we were underground again—in Brooklyn now—and picking up speed. The train passed beneath neighborhood after neighborhood. At Flatbush Avenue a group of teenage girls scampered aboard, taking seats across the aisle from me. Their gear revealed that they too were bound for the beach. The girls were a mixed group: black, white, and Asian. They seemed to have stepped out of one of those subway ads that show young people of different backgrounds, smiling and learning new skills together. (Such ads have a contrived, unreal air. People getting along? Yet here was a living testimonial—not for the Job Corps, but for the camaraderie an outing can inspire.) A chorus line of legs arranged itself opposite me. The sight was a welcome antidote to the litter and graffiti that filled the car. The girls began to chatter. Each carried a stylish sack, crammed with beach paraphernalia. My own bag (a thriftshop find) seemed drab and heavy beside those in the laps of this holiday crew. Seemed heavy? It was! Let me enumerate the contents of this bag—the items I had deemed essential for a trek to the shore. Remember, I was out for facts, not frolic. To that end, I had to be no less prepared than the sunworshippers across the aisle.

Included in my bag (assuming nothing had fallen out its torn corner) were:

notebook  
pens  
camera

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\* The trainmen, I later found out, were engaged in a work slowdown. Their bosses had criticized them for taking turns at excessive speeds, and called them “cowboys.” In response, they were going by the book at several points along the line.

film  
long-sleeved shirt (for protection against either sun or air conditioning)  
handkerchief (for mopping brow)  
bottle of water  
wallet (containing sum of cash just large enough to mollify muggers)  
the morning's *Times*  
book  
cigars  
matches  
Swiss Army knife  
stamps  
New York City transit map  
emergency kit (a packet containing such potential lifesavers as shoelaces, rubber bands, compass, bandages, and a coin for the phone)

With the above I hoped to survive whatever rigors awaited me in Brooklyn, and to pass the day in sufficient comfort to insure my alertness as a reporter. The bag contained not a superfluous item, yet was heavy enough to have already become a nuisance to lug about. During the two successive days I would spend at the beach, this bag would serve as both lifeline and albatross.

The car never got crowded. (The morning rush was over, and in any case had been headed in the opposite direction.) But by the time we emerged from the tunnel, more teenagers in shorts and swimsuits had come aboard. There could be no doubt about it: this train was bound for Coney Island.\*

I watched Brooklyn go by—row houses, tenements, trim single dwellings, business blocks. In contrast to Manhattan, trees flourished along many of the streets and in backyards. As the train rumbled along elevated tracks, a rooftop world revealed itself: chimneys, antennas, ducts. Neighborhoods were flashing by—look away for a moment, and

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\* I had chosen a weekday for my visit: out of a dread of crowds, and a hope that the concessionaires would not be too busy to talk with me.

you had missed one. The architecture changed constantly and dramatically, as (I knew) did the ethnic identity of the inhabitants. Below was that teeming mass of peoples, the biggest and blackest of our melting pots. Crowded together in Brooklyn were more nationalities than were represented in the United Nations building across the river. It was a volatile mix of tribes, largely unaware of one another, but occasionally at odds. What they shared was a nominal link to the mainstream of America; a physical link to the mainland; and a long white beach.

It was around ten o'clock when I arrived—though not at my destination. On weekdays, I discovered, the D-train did not go as far as Coney Island station: it terminated two stops earlier at Brighton Beach. I got off with everyone else, descended a metal stairway, and emerged onto a commercial avenue that ran beneath the tracks.

No sooner had I reached the sidewalk than I became aware of a distinctive smell. Of salt air? No, of fruits and vegetables. In recent years Brighton Beach had become a thriving immigrant neighborhood—an enclave of Russian Jews; and the newcomers had established a lively street life, of which produce stands were a salient feature. I was tempted to pause here...but my day's work lay ahead. Following the overhead tracks, I walked on.

I passed an apartment complex and a city park. Just beyond the park, I detected a hint of ocean in the air. Music could be heard now; and rides were visible over the rooftops.

Turning onto Surf Avenue, I encountered the narrow stalls of a flea market. They were just opening up for the day. I sauntered by, watching their proprietors arrange on the sidewalk a colorful array of junk.

I came to a barnlike building—the B&B Carousell, according to its sign. The B&B, I recalled, was the genuine article: wooden horses, and a band organ that pumped out the hit tunes of a century ago. But the carousel had yet to open; and only raucous disco music—from a ride up the street—served to greet an early visitor to the beach. I moved on.

At the corner of Surf and Stillwell Avenues was the sub-

way terminal—a huge, dingy building with elevated tracks and platforms. I halted outside its portal. Across the street were the beginnings of the amusement area. I had arrived, at the main crossroads of the Island.

Standing there, I found myself caught up in a rush of noise, color, and motion. No sooner do visitors emerge from the station, than the sights, sounds, and smells of Coney Island assail their senses and begin to work upon their will. Pedestrians and cars streamed by me. I flinched at the screech of a security gate being raised. Surf Avenue was just starting its day, yet already a hustle and bustle filled the air. Garish signs—for beer, bumper cars, cotton candy—made clear that ahead lay all one was looking for, and more. The disco music blared, like an unseemly anthem of the place. One had arrived, announced the signs, music, and smells, at a kingdom of the senses. Thrills unavailable elsewhere were to be found here. Welcome, honored rubes.

The flood of sensations was overwhelming. Feeling about to be swallowed up, I leaned on a post and sought to preserve my equanimity. Somehow I had to orient myself before proceeding along this gauntlet.

Already I had become aware of the most common smell at the beach: that of fried foods. Not far from where I had halted was a stand that specialized in them. I eyed the golden, greasy fare. Displayed under warming lights were french fries, onion rings, knishes, exotic Hispanic snacks. Resisting the impulse to sample one of these (I had a long day ahead of me, which would be ill-served by dyspepsia), I turned my attention instead to the pedestrians passing by.

They were still a light flow at this hour. An elderly couple shuffled along, murmuring in Yiddish and holding onto one another. The pair seemed bewildered by the babel of Surf Avenue. A Gypsy woman (in traditional costume) hurried by, grave and preoccupied. A Jehovah's Witness stood in the middle of the sidewalk, holding up Spanish-language pamphlets; and the pedestrians flowed around him. And a lunatic was seated on the pavement outside the terminal. He had spread a towel beneath him, staking out his turf like a professional beggar.

Few of the pedestrians seemed to be beachgoers; at this

early hour the locals still predominated. Coney Island was more than a funspot, I realized. It was also a neighborhood, with a New York-style mix of types and nationalities. The locals did appear, though, to have assimilated a beachgoing mode of dress—casual, comfortable, slightly eccentric. The beach (like the Laundromat or the garden) is one of those destinations for which one dresses down. Indeed, in my baseball cap, blue cotton workshirt, jeans, and Hush Puppies, I would come to feel almost overdressed as the day went on. Whimsical hats, sunglasses, pullovers, illustrated T-shirts, swimsuits, shorts, sandals: these lend the Island a distinctive stamp. Coming here, one could fail to spot (outside the wax museum) a single male in a suit and tie.\*

Where to begin?

I had an address—found in the course of my reading—for the Coney Island Chamber of Commerce. It had occurred to me that I might stop by the Chamber, to solicit their views on the current state of the Island, and to get the names of some talkative old-timers. (For it was there—at the feet of the grizzled methuselahs of the place—that I hoped to elicit lore, anecdotes, and cantankerous opinion.) Accordingly, I set out for this address—on Surf Avenue and at a number only a block away.

The building I found there was boarded up (as was the huge Shore Theater next door). Had I miscopied the address? Had the Chamber of Commerce given up and closed? Whatever the case, not a propitious start. Blankly, I resumed my walk along the Avenue. Where else might one go, to get one's bearings on this foreign shore?

I had not gone far, when a sign on a door—CONEY ISLAND CHAMBER OF COMMERCE—caught my eye. They had moved to new quarters, since the publication of whatever book or article had furnished me with that address. (The perils of antiquarianism.)

I rang the bell, noting as I waited that the Chamber

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\* In the afternoon I did come upon two young men in suits and ties: a pair of missionaries, working the Boardwalk. With their business attire, erect posture, and broad smiles, they stood out from the crowd like a couple of Martians.

could not have moved much further up the Avenue. Ahead seemed to be mainly parking lots.

A male figure appeared in the glass, assessed me, opened the door. I explained my need, and was told to return in an hour. Matt Kennedy, the person I wanted to see, wasn't in yet.

Looking up and down the Avenue, I pondered my next move. Someone else whom I had considered seeking out was the local priest. Conceivably, he could direct me to those talkative old-timers, or provide other useful information. The church was only a few blocks away—I could see its tower. Why not? In any case, the walk over would provide me with a glimpse of the neighborhood.

I headed for the church. Turning onto a run-down commercial street, I felt my pace quicken. Was this that “high-crime area”? Most of the people I passed were Hispanic (although an Italian bakery suggested a recent shift in population). Young men loitered on corners. I wondered how welcome I was in the neighborhood.

Our Lady of Solace was a modest-sized brick building, with a high tower. I found my way to the office, where a secretary told me Father Gillespie was the person I wanted to see. He was out, however, and wouldn't be available until the following day. I made an appointment to meet with him then.

Back outside, I reflected that I was getting nowhere. Clearly, the thing to do was to skip the official encounters—those could come later—and simply plunge right in.

Bag in hand, I headed for the beach.



Between Surf Avenue and the Boardwalk stretched an empty lot of many acres. Surrounded by a fence, it was being used for parking. I peered through the fence—at an expanse of weeds and rubble. The bulldozers had been here. At the far end of the lot were the remains of a ride: the Parachute Jump.

More desolation came into view, as I skirted the lot and followed a side street toward the Boardwalk. The street was



bordered with more empty lots. Everywhere were weeds and debris. A row of burnt-out booths festered in the sun. It was as if this portion of the beach were reverting to its original state—open, windswept, lonely. I seemed to be the

only person about.

A few hundred feet from the Boardwalk, the street I was following intersected with a pedestrian lane. This end of the lane had been devastated—was lined with naked earth and rubble. But to the east were rides, buildings, and signs of life. Turning onto the lane, I walked in that direction.

The first intact structure I came to was the Thunderbolt—a roller coaster that undulated to the Boardwalk and back. I approached its ticket booth. In the window was posted the price of a ticket. The booth was empty. Seated nearby, however, were three men.

The three were black, slouched, and scruffily dressed. One had on a torn straw hat (left behind perhaps by a beachgoer). They were sitting on milk crates in the middle of the lane. They seemed at ease—yet oddly restless too. For periodically, one or another of them would get up and walk about. Then, as if unable to recall why he had left it, he would return to his crate. A conversation was in progress. A bottle was being passed around.

I had come upon, apparently, a trio of winos—three stalwarts of a lowly stratum of society. It is interesting to note that an informal socialism exists among such men. They often share with one another (however grudgingly) any alcohol they have managed to scrounge. They may even be said to have a credo: “To each according to the length of his swig. From each whatever he’s hiding there.” Like the socialists, they have a material god—the Bottle. And like the most communal of souls, they are often without possessions. These particular winos, however, still clung to a bourgeois notion of property—as far as their milk crates were concerned.

One of the crates was plastic; the others were metal. All looked comfortable. But the fellow sitting on the plastic crate coveted one of the sturdier metal crates. So whenever a companion wandered off, he would exchange crates. Upon returning, the companion would detect the substitution and protest loudly. Whereupon, the crates were reexchanged. Several times as I stood there watching, this scene was enacted. It was a bizarre version of musical chairs.

Finally, I turned my attention to the roller coaster,



although still keeping an eye on the three men. They seemed harmless enough. But I wasn't sure; and except for the four of us, the area was deserted. Might they be wondering if I had anything of value in my bag? No, I decided as I eavesdropped on their banter. These winos were good-natured and (more or less) law-abiding. A bottle was the sole thing they craved; and they had one.

But when I began to photograph the Thunderbolt, their interest was aroused; and they turned on their crates to watch. Their comments and guffaws drifted over. Not twenty feet from me, these spectators could hardly be ignored.

"What time do they open here?" I asked, more as a conversational gambit than out of any expectation of information.

"Ain't gonna open," said one.\*

A lull in the conversation followed, as the bottle made another round. And then the winos were giving me the low-down on the Thunderbolt.

Evidently, they had been hired to cut weeds at the ride, and were waiting for their employer to arrive. The Thunderbolt, I learned, had not opened this summer—for the first time in fifty years. It had failed to pass a safety inspection; and the owner could not afford the repairs. "Needs \$18,000 fixin'," said one wino. "\$50,000," corrected the slouched figure beside him.

As they debated the matter, the last of my fears dissolved. Surely these men were as harmless as the pigeons that were fluttering about the roller coaster. When I pumped them for more information, one of the three got up and nudged me over to the fence. "See over there?" he said, pointing toward the ride. "See that house, man?" The woman who owned the roller coaster lived in there. I should talk with her, he told me, not with them. I should go knock on her door.

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\* A word on quotes. I worked without a tape recorder, scrawling notes as I spoke with people (or, in situations like this one, scrawling them as soon as I was alone). So I did not capture every word—only the essentials. Any quotes, therefore, were reconstructed later, and may deviate slightly from the precise wording of what was said.

Putting my nose to the fence, I discerned a dwelling. So this was it—that roller coaster built over a house. My informant returned to his crate; and I considered his suggestion. The interview was an obvious one to seek out; and the gate was open. But I had qualms. Its unique location notwithstanding, this was somebody's home. Simply to show up at her door seemed an invasion of the woman's privacy. And what was I to tell her—that the winos had sent me? I would have to think about it. Maybe later.

“She gonna open up again, if she can.”

I had a suspicion, though, that she would not. Already weeds were growing in profusion about the ride, and even sprouting up through the tracks at one point. At the base of the lift-chain a pool of water had collected. And while the Thunderbolt looked operational, it was fifty-years old and



evidently in need of more than a paint job. Its air of dilapidation was a pleasure for any eye (such as mine) that enjoyed the faded, forgotten things of this world. But the inspector had seen only a safety hazard, and had closed the ride down.

I asked the men if I might photograph them. They had no objection, but began to murmur something about “a fee.” Petty extortion, but the shot—three derelicts in front of a derelict ride—seemed too good to miss. So I agreed to remunerate them for their pains. When I had taken their picture and distributed a handful of change, I could not

resist a jibe. What were they going to do with the money, I asked, go on a ride? Oh no, replied one with a wave of dismissal, they never went on any rides—although he had visited the wax museum once, and urged me to check it out. That place was *weird*, said the wino. (I'll bet it was.) No, they were about to launch the most seaworthy among them in the direction of Nathan's, and hope he'd find his way back with some food. I wished them well and continued along the lane.

Ahead I could see rides and booths that were open. But that mention of Nathan's had roused my appetite; and spotting a sign for the restaurant, I decided it was lunchtime for me too.



Nathan's is the most celebrated snack bar in New York. It still does business at its original location, and is still owned by the Handwerker family. The stand is always busy (a madhouse on summer weekends), and should not be missed by any aficionado of the seaside snack. I cannot speak personally of the hot dogs, fried clams, or knishes; but all looked tasty, and their individual partisans seemed to be enjoying themselves. I chose the corn-on-the-cob. Served steaming hot and dripping with margarine, corn-on-the-cob is widely available at Coney Island. How it came to be a local speciality I was unable to determine; but I have a theory. It is the legacy, I would suggest, of the Canarsie, who must have roasted the Indian staple over their campfires on the beach. Conceivably, some lingering member of the tribe peddled corn to the first day-trippers; and stands such as Nathan's have kept the tradition alive.\*

If so, I am grateful to the original inhabitants of the shore for having bequeathed to us so fine a snack. Arriving at Nathan's thirsty, I was no less grateful for the Coca-Cola (that paleface staple) with which I accompanied the corn. A frozen custard completed my lunch. I downed these items while seated on a stoop, in the alley between Nathan's and some booths. (Almost everyone else ate standing up, but that has always seemed to me a barbarous practice.) Handkerchief in lap to intercept dripping margarine, I had dug

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\* Europeans, by the way, rarely eat corn, using it exclusively as livestock feed. On visiting the U.S., they are taken aback to see humans chomping away at it; and this may contribute to their low opinion of us.

in—to a memorable meal. My hunger, the uniqueness of the occasion, and the above comestibles provided a chemistry that the most skilled chef in Europe (who would have viewed my main course as animal fodder) could not have duplicated. Indeed, so intense was my dining pleasure that I was not immediately aware of having become an object of scrutiny.

A column of children had come to a halt in the alley, like a stalled train. They were day campers, sportily garbed in T-shirts, shorts, and sneakers. Their counselors were telling them to stay in line and to keep holding hands. As they waited, the campers nearest my stoop were staring at me, with the unabashed curiosity that is the hallmark of a four-year-old. I stared back and went on eating. My defiant meeting of their eyes was meant to communicate: *See here, you parade of preschoolers. You human centipede, with your little feet in little sneakers. You are the spectacle, not me.* These children (most of whom were Chinese) had been brought out, no doubt, to visit the Aquarium and to see the sights. But why were they staring at me like this? I was no creature of the sea, no local landmark. Could it be they had never before seen an ear of corn? Were they surprised to see an adult eating on a stoop? Or had they yet to be fed, and were shamelessly coveting my lunch? The answer is probably that they were staring, half-stunned, at everything they passed. Coney Island had overwhelmed them. The amusement area is an assault on anyone's senses; and these children were getting a full dose of it, through eyes and ears that had not yet learned to filter and suppress. I had the impression they were only partly enjoying themselves—that they were as much intimidated as impressed by the phantasmagoria through which they were being led.

I finished my frozen custard, and decided to try the Chamber of Commerce again.



I was directed to Matt Kennedy, who motioned me into a chair beside his desk.

And it soon became apparent that I was fortunate not to have missed him—not so much for any practical information he would provide, as for the living history represented by the man himself. For Kennedy—a slim, silver-haired octogenarian—was one of those grizzled methuselahs I had hoped to ferret out. Later in the afternoon, the operator of the Wonder Wheel would claim: “Matt and me, we’re the last of the old-timers around here.” And indeed, Kennedy was one of the venerable graybeards of the Island. (I should point out that he was neither bearded nor grizzled—clean-shaven, rather, and mildly cherubic.) He answered my questions, initially, in a frank yet businesslike manner. But as he warmed to the subject matter, Kennedy became less formal. He lit a cigar, leaned back, and (with obvious pleasure in the summoning up of memories) told me about the old days.

His mother had been born in the lighthouse at Norton’s Point. His father had been a Coney Island policeman—the very desk sergeant who had answered the phone to learn that Dreamland was on fire. Kennedy had been born and raised on the Island, and still lived nearby. This was his neighborhood, he said proudly, though much changed now, having become black and Hispanic. Back then, you went to work for either an amusement park or the gas company: these had been the equivalent of the local mill. “Kids all got jobs,” he said. “They had no time for shenanigans.” His own first job had been at the Mile Sky Chaser, “the largest roller coaster of its day.” After that he had worked various

concessions, including a long stint at the Brighton Beach Baths. He remembered Coney Island when it was still a small town: self-sufficient, close-knit, clannish. “You had all the nationalities and they all got along. Out here you weren’t Irish or Italian. You were Coney Island.... We ate off the beach. Frostfish—that’s whiting—that you could pick up with nets. My grandfather ate dulse—that’s a seaweed—that washed up along here. Everybody had woodburning stoves, fueled ’em with driftwood.... We were nothing but family out here. You had three or four churches, each helped the other. Catholics helped build the *shul*, and vice versa.” The local stores had been of the Mom and Pop variety; the proprietors had known your parents and kept tabs on you. People took care of one another’s children, he said with a wave of the cigar; and in bad times they shared food. “It came over the back fence. Your neighbors helped you, not some social worker.” There had been block parties; a Mardi Gras parade; a Maypole festival.

I asked what it was like now, and Kennedy groaned. People didn’t share anymore, he lamented. It was dog eat dog. Selfishness. (He seemed to be speaking at once of Coney Island and of everywhere.) Kennedy shook his head sadly. I sought to get a journalistic handle on what he was telling me. Was it that people used to...care? He nodded. “You said exactly the right thing. That was it, they cared about each other.” He granted that neighborhood organizations were seeking to re-create the old solidarity, but decried the “militancy” often associated with such efforts. Bemused, he puffed on his cigar and said: “Makes me laugh sometimes to see ’em trying to get it back today. Don’t know where we lost it.”

We talked about the beach. Kennedy (who was, after all, the Chamber of Commerce) praised Astroland; handed me its brochures; and described the twenty-year-old park as the Island’s salvation. On the other hand, he was frank about the devastation I would see—the rubble and empty buildings. He was equally frank about its cause: absentee landlords. In former times all of the rides, restaurants, and bath-houses had been owned by those who had operated them, and who had therefore cared about the future and appear-

ance of their property. Not anymore. When you had a landlord living a thousand miles away, his only concern was that monthly rent check. The ultimate result of this state of affairs, said Kennedy, I would see for myself. He shook his head and murmured, as if unable to credit the base ways of his fellows.

I asked if the beach was safe—I had heard it wasn't. Kennedy assured me it was: adequately policed, but unfairly treated in the media. As public places went in the city, Coney Island was safe.\*

Finally, I asked if any portion of Steeplechase had survived; and if so, was the Tilyou family still involved with it? No, he sighed, Steeplechase was long gone, torn down by the city. And the family no longer owned anything locally. George's grandson, though, still worked at one of the kiddie parks—old John Tilyou.†

I had arrived at the Chamber expecting a glib boosterism. I left satisfied with an honest assessment of the Island's state, and charmed by my informant. I had my bearings now, and could resume my tour of the beach.

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\* By the end of my visit, I would agree with his assessment (as far as the daylight hours were concerned). The fact remains, though, that the adjoining neighborhood is no place for a stranger to venture into; that there *are* incidents; and that one would, of course, be safer at Disneyland. The ills of Coney Island are the ills of New York City.

† During a subsequent visit I would seek out Tilyou's grandson, and learn that he was off in Canada somewhere, operating a portable ride.





I am tempted to insert here, for the reader's convenience, a map. But there is something about a map antithetical to the spirit of an amusement park. Nobody arrives with one at Coney Island; and none are provided. Like any fair, Brooklyn's is meant to be wandered, haphazardly and serendipitously. It is best approached in a state of mild, euphoric confusion, like that of a drunk roaming the aisles of a supermarket. If there's a particular ride you're interested in, sooner or later you'll happen upon it. And as lost as you may become in this maze of amusements, its littered paths will lead you out—when it is time to go.

Yet I should offer some sense of the general layout (especially since I myself arrived with a map—an antiquated plan of the Island copied from one of the histories). What is today called Coney Island is a section of Brooklyn four blocks wide and two miles long (corresponding roughly to the old West Brighton district). It is traversed by three avenues: Surf, Mermaid, and Neptune. The neighborhood is fringed with high-rises—low- and middle-income towers that rise anonymously over run-down streets. It is a neighborhood that happens to have a beach, and a summerlong carnival.

If you've come out for the carnival, then Astroland will be your ultimate destination. And if that's the case, you will need no map: the Astrotower soars into the sky, like a reply to the grim housing towers. Moreover, the park is so noisy one could find it blindfolded.

Not far from Astroland is what has survived of the older amusements. If these few blocks are your destination, again you will need no map: the Wonder Wheel is your landmark

here.

And should you venture westward, still you will need no map. For little has been left standing in that direction. Yet even those acres of desolation (to which one may be drawn, as to a haunted place) have their landmark: the ruins of the Parachute Jump.

I returned to the pedestrian lane I had been following. And consulting my map (which I had forgotten about), I learned now the identity of that vast, rubble-strewn lot. It was the site of Steeplechase Park. The Funny Place had been leveled. I made a mental note to return there later and examine its remains.

I proceeded eastward. And coming to a street sign, I learned that the lane was none other than the Bowery. Here was that popular promenade that had led to the gate of Steeplechase—that had been lined with saloons, restaurants, and penny arcades—that had been thronged with funseekers. The crowds were gone now (on this Tuesday afternoon, at least); and two-thirds of the Bowery had been razed. Behind me (except for the Thunderbolt and a collection of kiddie rides) were vacant lots, filled with weeds and debris.\*

I am happy to report, however, that ahead the Bowery was alive and well. Lined with game booths, food stands, and rides, and loud with amplified pitches, it showed no signs of decline. As I neared a shooting gallery, a tape-recorded voice urged me to “Shoot out the stars! *Disparanda a la estrella!*” Over the entrance to the Dragon’s Cave a reptilian head swung back and forth, emitting shrill laughter. (“No Refunds” warned a notice on the ticket booth—plain English for *caveat emptor*.) I came to the Jumbo Jet, an abbreviated version of a roller coaster. Noting the words “Steeplechase Park” on its sign, I decided an inquiry was in order.

I approached the Jumbo Jet and introduced myself to its

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\* It would be explained to me how the desolation had spread from the ruins of Steeplechase. Concessions bordering the rubble-strewn lot had done poorly, gone out of business, and become ruins themselves—a progressive decay that had worked its way along the Bowery.

operator. His name was Norman Kaufman, I learned, and he owned the ride. We talked about Coney Island. Kaufman was in his fifties, had been around for years, had seen



many changes. Business was slow on this weekday and he did not mind answering my questions. We spoke through the window of the ticket booth. Meanwhile, he sold an occasional ticket, stopped or started the ride. I sought to listen intently (although flinching whenever a balloon popped at a dart game across the way).

The Jumbo Jet had originally been part of Steeplechase. Kaufman had purchased it when the park had closed. I asked why Steeplechase had been torn down. “Tax purposes,” he answered tersely. How was Coney Island doing? He shrugged. “Okay. It’ll grow again.” Was there still a sense of camaraderie among the concessionaires? He grinned. “Sure, though nothing like what it used to be.” How was business? “Not bad. The crowds are still coming out. Fifty years ago it was the Jews and Italians. Now, Haitians and Orientals.... Knock on wood, the place’ll be around for some time yet—if it doesn’t go up in smoke.... You won’t be seeing any new rides. Too expensive nowadays.”

He mentioned the bungalows once available for rental along the shore (“People took their vacations in Brooklyn, can you imagine?”); and he passed on a few opinions. Then

our conversation ended—to my surprise, with a handshake. Surprise, because we were separated by the glass of the window. Kaufman had slipped his hand through the cash slot!

“Welcome to Coney Island,” he said in a tone at once ironic and sentimental.

As I continued along the Bowery, challenges were flung at me—to throw balls into milk cans, or into the mouths of Smurfs. Stopping at a penny arcade, I was disappointed to find only video games. The arcade at Euclid Beach (the amusement park I had frequented as a youth) had been something of a museum. I could still recall its antique but functioning machines. The Iron Claw (a mechanical claw that descended into a mass of trinkets)...the Love Meter (“Lukewarm, Red-hot, Call the Fire Department!”)... Mutoscopes (movies via flipped photographs)...machines that dispensed humorous licenses or photos of forgotten movie stars. I had assumed that machines like these were still to be found in penny arcades. But the antique dealers had carried them off, to make room for Pac-Man and his ilk.

I paused outside a booth offering “Portraits by Computer.” The artist was a robotlike affair, tended by a teenager. No samples of its work were visible. But the artist itself—

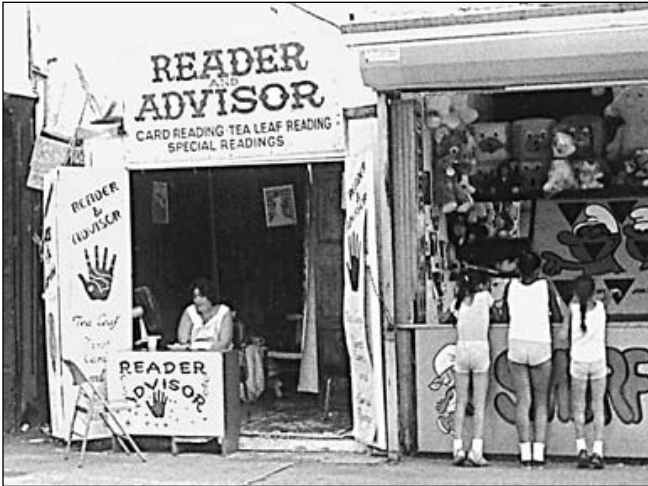


all glass and chrome, like a jukebox—was a sight. It was startling to see this machine sitting in a booth. The thing

had the air of a robot that was down on its luck—that had once been featured in science-fiction films, but was now eking out a living at carnivals. When I lifted my camera, the attendant preened.

I had less luck with the nearby “Reader-Advisor.” When I asked permission to take a close-up of her booth, she shooed me away.

But a friendlier reception awaited me at the Wonder Wheel.\*



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\* A brief word on the Gypsy fortunetellers, several of whom have set up shop at Coney Island. First of all, it should be made clear that they do not tell fortunes. Fortunetelling is illegal in New York State, except for clergymen and economists. (The statute exempts these two professions. Your pastor may thunder of impending doom; while your financial advisor may present his charts of trends and tendencies.) Thus, a fortuneteller will consult the stars in your behalf, read your palm, or analyze tea-leaves—as a means of offering advice. But she will not, if she wants to stay in business, reveal your future. So don't even ask. It is true that these storefront sibyls have been known to flout local laws. They have been accused of operating scams, of taking advantage of the gullible and the superstitious. Be that as it may, they should be applauded for their plain speech and theatrical flair. I would sooner be counselled by a reader-advisor (who will speak to me at least in ordinary English), than by a jargon-tongued

economist. And our clergymen could pick up a few pointers, in the panache department, from these dramatic, exotic-looking women. Let us not, therefore, malign the fortunetellers in their catchpenny booths—even if one of them, with a surly gesture, should send us on our way.



The Wonder Wheel is located along a shabby alley, across from a shooting gallery and a Skee-Ball parlor. What exactly is a Wonder Wheel? The signs at the entrance let you know in no uncertain terms:

Go Up! And Get A Real Thrill!  
World's Largest Wheel  
A Masterpiece of Modern Engineering

Highest! Biggest! Longest! Ride in Coney Island  
CONEY'S COLOSSUS  
Height 150 feet! Weight 200 tons! Capacity 128 persons

That “modern” refers to the early twenties, when the Wonder Wheel (along with its sheds, ticket booths, and quaintly-lettered signs) had been raised. The ride had served then as the local Colossus, and still did. I gazed up at an abstract idol that bestrode the sands. Soaring over the surrounding honky-tonk, it looked capable of providing that “real thrill.” As I stood there, the Wheel began to turn, slowly and soundlessly. Its cars began to swing and slide.

I was watching the Wonder Wheel revolve, when something at its base caught my eye. A collection of penny-arcade machines. *Antique* machines. Somehow they had managed to survive here. With a murmur of pleasure, I sidled up to them.

The most intriguing was Grandma's Prediction. Grandma was a mechanical mannequin in a glass cabinet. Her features had an eerie yet kindly look. Arranged in front of her were a few playing cards and a candle. She was waiting for

customers.

My quarter brought her to life. Her head turned from side to side, her chest heaved. A hand moved over the cards as the candle flashed. Then down the chute (in violation of that statute) came a card bearing my fortune. "Drop another coin in slot," it concluded, "and I will tell more."

If the Wheel was an idol, here was its oracle!

Keeping Grandma company were a Relaxalator ("Tired? No pep? Feet hurt? Step on the Relaxalator"); a scale; a photo-booth; and a machine that sold postcards. The last was a welcome find: I had been looking for views of the beach to mail to friends. I deposited a coin and—slowly as directed—pulled the lever. Nothing happened. Had I pulled too fast? I put in another quarter; still nothing. The machine offered a choice of cards. I tried the other slot, only to lose a third quarter.

It was the Coney Island they warned you about—of broken-down equipment, cons and rip-offs. I was lamenting my loss, when a gravelly voice sounded from behind me.

"Y'put money in there?"

I turned around. From his post at the turnstile, the operator of the Wonder Wheel had called to me. I replied that yes, I had put money in there.

He beckoned me over and handed me a couple of cards. (Apparently, it was easier to pass them out than to repair the machine.) That was how I came to meet Herman Garms, Jr., the 73-year-old co-owner of the Wheel. I was soon introducing myself as a writer, and making known my interest in local lore. Garms (like other old-timers I encountered) did not have to be prodded into reminiscing. With a sly grin, he began to speak of the ride that loomed over us.

The Wonder Wheel had been built in 1920 by his father, this impish figure in a red hat, rumpled shirt, and jeans told me. (While we spoke, he continued to sell tickets, operate the Wheel, and shout an occasional instruction to the gray-haired woman who was helping people out of the cars.) "The oldest ride at the beach," he boasted, then corrected himself: the oldest ride still on its original site. "And look here, get this straight right off. It's *not* a Ferris wheel, okay?"



Everybody makes that mistake. It's not a Ferris wheel. Right?"

"Right."

"Get that down, 'cause otherwise you'd be making a great error."

"What exactly is it?"

"A steel-structure mechanical wheel."

His father and a small crew had built the Wheel, from materials trucked into the site. And they had worked from



an unusual blueprint. For the Wonder Wheel had been conceived originally, Garms told me, not as a ride but as a perpetual-motion machine.

My pen halted mid-scrawl. Was he putting me on?

"A perpetual-motion machine?"

He nodded. His father had bought the plans and a "working" model from the inventor, then added a motor and built it instead as a ride.

I asked how it was supposed to have worked.

Garms explained. The cars were attached to the superstructure in such a way as to be capable of sliding along—of moving forward in relation to the rim. They also swung from side to side. These movements of its cars were to have caused the Wheel to rotate. And that rotation, in turn, was to have kept the cars sliding and swinging! A mutuality of motion. You move me, I'll move you. In a more perfect

world than our own—some Platonic realm without air, friction, or the first law of thermodynamics—I suppose it might have worked. As things have turned out, the Wheel’s motion is hardly perpetual. It moves only during the summer, and then with a discreet boost from Con Edison.

“Hey, get away from those guns!” shouted Garms, to some teenagers at the shooting gallery. Unnoticed by the attendant, they had been handling the rifles.

He described how he and his brother had begun working at the Wheel the year it was built. He had been ten-years old. And I learned that the woman loading and unloading riders was his wife. Garms called to her and she waved. He recalled that in the early days of the Wheel, this section of the beach had been open land.

Garms had a minor run-in with another beachgoer, then let me in on the big news. He and his brother had just sold the Wonder Wheel, and were retiring to Florida. I asked who had bought it. “That guy!” he chuckled, and bid me turn around for a look at the new owner. “There’s a man who’s got himself a ride.”

A silver-haired man in sunglasses had come up behind us. He and Garms bantered briefly (or rather, Garms bantered, as the newcomer sought to put to him a pressing question). Then I was introduced to Deno Vourderis, who brushed aside the formality of a surname. “Just Deno,” he said in a thick accent. Garms told him I was a reporter, come out to do an article on the Wonder Wheel.

“A reporter?” said Deno.

“Well, a writer.”

“Come on upstairs.”



Wondering where “upstairs” could be (no buildings higher than a single story were in sight), and who this man was, I followed after him. He walked rapidly, as if too busy ever to saunter; wordlessly, as if rapt in thought; and hunched over, as if his legs could barely keep up with the determined brow. A ringful of keys jangled on his belt. My bag kept bumping into people as I sought to keep pace. We climbed a ramp, passed through a gate, and entered Deno’s domain: an assemblage of small-scale rides known as Kiddie Park.

He led me to a snack bar called Deno’s that adjoined the Boardwalk. On its patio Deno sat me at an umbrella-shaded table with a view of the sea and brought me a beer. Then, installing himself on the edge of a chair, he began to out-



line for me his career. At one point he mentioned having been interviewed recently by a reporter from the *Times*; and I realized he had mistaken me for someone of comparable importance. I corrected the misimpression. But it made no

difference to Deno, who welcomed the opportunity to describe his accomplishments—even to so dubious a source of publicity.

Deno Vourderis was a short, energetic man: similar in size and build to Herman Garms, but a different sort of character. In Garms I had encountered a unique blend of gruffness and affability. One minute he would be barking at someone who had broken the rules; the next, talking to me again, with winks and grins. The bite was real, but muzzled by an essential good nature. Even as he had huffed and puffed, the funny red hat had given the show away. Garms had struck me as a vociferous scamp—a brash, cheerful soul who thrived on the ambiguities of carnival life.

His successor was of another breed. The rags-to-riches tale I was listening to was that of a Greek immigrant, serious-minded and hard-working. Arriving in New York virtually penniless, Deno had gone on to acquire a snack bar at Coney Island, and to put in long hours behind its counter. Like an alchemist, he had transmuted the base nickels and dimes into a decent living. And now (would they not be impressed back in his village?), here was a writer taking notes on Deno's life story—paying attention to his every word, and even to the minutiae of his dress. He had on a souvenir hat; mirrored sunglasses; a yellow T-shirt with a Pepsi slogan; slacks; and sturdy black shoes splattered with paint. His hair was silver but still youthfully full; and there was a boyish quality to the pride and enthusiasm with which he described his career. One expected to find, operating carnival rides, a rogue, hustler, or showman. Deno was none of these.

We had spoken for only a short time (during which I had had trouble getting Deno's story straight, due to both his accent and his earnestness), when suddenly he rose and said to follow him. Apparently, there was a ride he wanted to show me. I reached for my bag. But a young woman, who had joined us at the table, said: "That's okay, I'll watch it."

Indecision seized me. Leave my bag behind? But this was Coney Island, this was New York City! That bag, containing my wallet, camera, exposed film, Swiss Army knife—I might never see it again. I looked at her in confusion, as

Deno bounded off.

Leave my bag behind? But who was this woman, with the sleek black hair and lively eyes? She seemed to have some connection with Deno, though I wasn't sure. She looked honest, whoever she was. Yet the value of the contents of my bag would be unknown to her. Assuming it to contain mere beach gear, how carefully would she watch it? And surely thieves were on the prowl, in Kiddie Park as elsewhere, looking for ill-tended bags.

It is not easy to abandon the paranoia so habitual (and realistic) nowadays in public places. But with a silent prayer that my bag be safe, I followed after Deno.

When we returned, it was still there. And I learned now the identity of the woman who had watched it. She was Deno's daughter, Risa. Like her father, she wore a Pepsi T-shirt (which served as a uniform in the park). Deno resumed his story. As he spoke, his daughter acted as a chorus: affirming this, expanding on that, laughing and sighing. Then all at once he excused himself—an employee was calling—and trotted off.

Risa took up the tale. And only now did it begin to assume a coherent shape for me. She told it chronologically, and in an accent (Brooklyn rather than Greek) that was not a problem. But she gave it more than shape. As Risa spoke of her father and his fortunes, a passionate tremor entered her voice. She leaned toward me, as if we were exchanging confidences. Her eyes flashed with a narrative fervor. She would underscore phrases with dramatic gestures; and a flicked finger served as an exclamation mark. I became oblivious to the people milling about—to the music from the merry-go-round—to the pops from the shooting gallery below. Deno's daughter had riveted my attention, with the family saga (and with the lowdown on Coney Island). We were joined at the table by her husband, a local fireman, who nodded and made sympathetic sounds as she spoke.

The story began some twenty years before, with Deno's arrival at the beach...behind a pushcart. The umbrella over our table dissolved to the one that had shaded his cart. Under it he had peddled hot dogs, ice cream, sodas. Squir-

reling away the profits, he had graduated to the ownership of a snack bar. As a girl Risa had worked there, alongside the rest of the family. And Deno had prospered, purveying snacks to the hungry crowds.

Then one night the snack bar had caught fire and burned to the ground. Rushing to the scene, the Vourderises had stared in disbelief at smoldering debris that represented years of effort. An acrid stench hung in the salt air.

The Fates had just zapped another uninsured mortal.

Deno had been prepared to return to his pushcart and start over. But his daughter had decided otherwise. Just married, Risa had thrust her wedding money upon him. It would go toward the rebuilding of the snack bar, instead of a honeymoon and home. "I made him take it," she said. But the old location was no longer available; and they could not find another. The future looked dim.

And I was told of the night her mother had wandered in a storm. (As she painted the scene, Risa put particular feeling into the words; and her gestures took on an added sharpness.) Seeking a new site for the snack bar, Mrs. Vourderis had roamed the beach in a blasting rain. How the sea had boiled that night, how the heavens had howled! Drenched and exhausted, she had made the rounds of everyone she knew. Finally, a local landlord had spotted her, called her in out of the rain, and offered the family an empty lot he owned.

With the dowry money, Deno had leased this plot of sand and bought a trailer. "He started again from *zero*," said Risa. "That was ten years ago." Gradually, the reborn snack bar had grown. Deno had built the additions with his own hands—although everyone, including his new son-in-law, had pitched in. And the current Deno's (which resembled—with its outdoor tables, umbrellas, and view of the sea—a Mediterranean cafe) had taken shape.

Meanwhile, Deno had had his eye on the dilapidated kiddieland next door. Eventually he had acquired it; and again the family had joined in, to upgrade his new venture. "We worked like slaves," said Risa. "We cared to make this place something and we did." New timers, wheels, and straps had been installed on the rides. Mechanisms had

been inspected, unavailable parts improvised. And everything had been repainted. "It's the salt air," she sighed. "You're always painting out here."

She stressed the determination and hard work of her father, and of the rest of the family. "He had the entire family behind him. Otherwise, impossible." And she praised their present landlord (the son of the man who had called Mrs. Vourderis in from the rain): "A real sweetheart...one of the few decent landlords around." She mentioned the vandalism, petty theft, and other discouragements they had to put up with. Pointing out a new security fence, Risa told me they also had guard dogs now—measures resorted to after losing thousands of dollars' worth of colored bulbs to thieves.

"Basically, though, we're doing all right. Look at him." She nodded in the direction of her father, who was roving about like a sedulous scoutmaster—tending to this, checking on that. Risa smiled like an indulgent parent. "He's happy as a kid with these rides. And now he's got the Wonder Wheel, which he's been wanting for a long time. Take a look up there."

She pointed to a sign with "Wonder Wheel" in large letters. Attached to the top of it was a second sign:

#### DENO'S

I asked why so much of Coney Island had disappeared, or was deteriorating. I had touched a sensitive nerve. Risa slapped the table and let out a moan of exasperation. "It's the landlords!" she cried, and described her frustrations with them. At Chamber of Commerce meetings she could not get them interested in a concerted effort at improvement. "Most of 'em, they couldn't care less about the future of the beach. You do what you can by yourself. We try, what more can we do?"

I nodded sympathetically.

Her gaze darkened. "And do you want to know who it was that ruined this place? I'll tell you who ruined this place. Because there's no doubt about it. *Mayor Lindsay, that's who,*" she hissed, flicking a finger through the air like

a whip. “*Mayor Lindsay!*”

Back in the sixties, said Risa, the Mayor had failed to provide any money or extra police for the ailing beach. As she denounced him, a specter rose before me—of old Peter Tilyou, shaking a fist at the prisonbound McKane. This advocate for a revitalized beach likewise had her villain; and she railed away at Lindsay.

Risa described for me the demise of Steeplechase. The park had declined sharply during the fifties and early sixties.\* Finally, Tilyou’s sons had sold it—lock, stock, and Barrel of Fun—to a developer. Most of the rides had been sold or put into storage. But then the developer had been forced to abandon his plans for an apartment complex. As part of a tax settlement, Steeplechase (or what was left of it, after looting by local youths) had passed to the city. And the city had decided to raze it. “Lindsay,” spat Risa. “Lindsay bulldozed Steeplechase.”†

Adding to the desolation on the Island were frequent fires. And not all of them, I learned, were considered to be of accidental origin. The Fates can be blamed for only so much. Risa spoke of the problem with gestures of helplessness and a rising tone of anger. Her fireman husband (who had helped fight many of the blazes) shook his head sadly.

And that was the story I heard at Kiddie Park. Within its walls kiddies and their escorts were enjoying the innocent amusements—unaware of the politics and family dramas connected with them. I closed my notebook and finished the beer. Risa offered me a ride on the Wonder Wheel; but I had to decline, confessing to a dread of heights. Clucking at my faintheartedness, she wished me luck on the book.

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\* A factor in this decline, according to people I spoke with later, had been racial tension.

† The developer, too, had had a hand in the razing. At a ceremonial event (in which toasts had been drunk to “the glory that was Steeplechase”), he had posed for photos in a bulldozer that was about to help demolish the Pavilion of Fun.





I did return, though, to the Wonder Wheel. For I wanted to take a picture of Herman Garms, and to put a question to him. Where, I wanted to know, was that fun house—the one with the insidious bench? In all my wandering about, I had yet to come upon it.

Garms blushed at the prospect of being photographed. And he had disappointing news for me: the fun house was gone. I groaned aloud. How I had looked forward to arriving at that bench; lowering myself onto it, as if unaware of what was about to happen; and being ejected on the conveyor belt! But the fun house, according to Garms, was a “portable,” and had been dismantled and taken elsewhere.\*

It was time to visit Astroland. I cut through Kiddie Park, waving to Deno. He was standing there like a traffic cop, hands on hips, surveying his realm with an eagle eye. I exited onto the Boardwalk.

Astroland was just next-door. A din of music, bells, and rattling wheels rose from within its walls. Dreading the noise, I entered the gate.

Built in the sixties (on the site of Feltman’s restaurant, where the hot dog was invented), Astroland is a full-fledged amusement park. You can purchase a wristband that admits you to any of the rides; buy tickets as you go; or just walk about, taking in the sights and sounds. The rides—with names such as Music Express, Water Flume, Dante’s Inferno—are new, fast, and flashy. And the park

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\* Someone else I spoke with insisted the Magic Carpet had been demolished. Perhaps Garms was referring to some other fun house. In any case, the Magic Carpet is no longer around.

can boast a superattraction, having recently annexed the Cyclone.\*

Astroland bills itself as “a family amusement park,” and it is that. At the same time, it does not suffer from that surfeit of cuteness and wholesomeness that is the bane of Disneyland and other contemporary parks. It has game booths as raffish as those along the Bowery. Nor are its employees clean-cut teenagers in uniform, who have been given a Code of Conduct, and been programmed to remind “guests” staggering off rides to have a nice day. (“Dad, was that one of the robots?” “No, the robots are up ahead....I don’t *think* that was one of the robots.”) Rather, the personnel here are unmistakably human: gum-chewing, capable of gruffness, unstandardized in either appearance or behavior. Not that you are likely to be ill-used at Astroland. But there is at least a hint of risk and rascality in the air—the *sine qua non*, I would submit, of a true carnival. With its clattering wheels, music, sound effects, and occasional spiel, Astroland is also a cacophonous place—again, like any self-respecting carnival. It even had litter!†

The park seemed to be doing a fair amount of business, for a weekday. As I walked about, I could almost forget that Coney Island had declined. I did not stay long (the noise was too much for me). It was reassuring, though, to come upon a full-fledged amusement park, still in operation at the shore.\*\*

Fleeing the din, I emerged onto the Boardwalk.

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\* Roller-coaster buffs come from around the country to ride the Cyclone. It is considered to be the most thrilling roller coaster anywhere.

† Disneyland is litter-free. Drop a candy wrapper (if you dare), and it will be picked up within five minutes and consigned to AVAC: a network of underground tubes that speed such refuse—at 60 miles an hour—to a central disposal point.

\*\* Since my visit, Deno has further expanded and enhanced his domain—dubbing it Deno’s Wonder Wheel Park. So once again, there are a pair of amusement parks at Coney Island.



The illimitable ocean, mingling with the sky,  
to remind me of eternity...

—HAWTHORNE

Hovering over the beach is a walkway. Its piles are planted deep in the sand. Its boards simmer in the sun. It stretches in either direction for as far as one can see. The Boardwalk!

There are other boardwalks on the East Coast. But can any of them rival Brooklyn's? Monumental in conception, it is two miles long and situated on a spectacular beach. It charms the eye with the herringbone pattern of its boards. And it is plain and functional—with the unpainted look of driftwood—yet alive with color: the beach garb of those who stroll along it.

I sat down on a bench and watched the parade go by. Most of the marchers were black or Hispanic. Families, couples, oldsters, teenagers, and an occasional bum or lunatic trod the boards in a leisurely slow-motion—twelve feet above the sand.

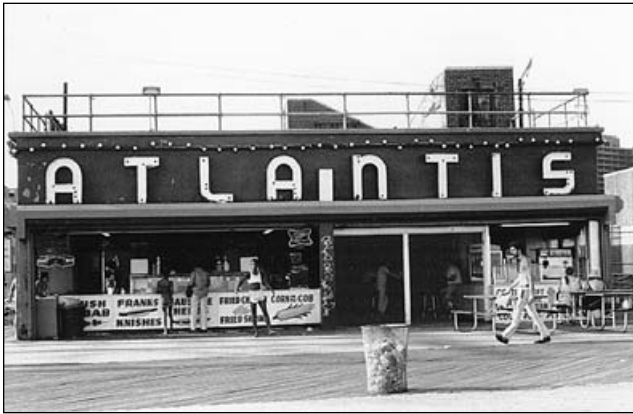
I looked down at the beach. Despite the warm weather, only a scattering of sunbathers were sprawled on the sand; and scarcely anyone was in the water. The sand gleamed. Waves flashed. Gulls glided about. The Place Without Shade!

Thinking about nothing in particular, I sat there for a while. Then I got up and fell in step with the parade.

It was late in the afternoon. Exactly how late, I did not know; for I wore no watch. Nor are there any public clocks on the Island. Serving to mark the passage of time are only

the sun, tides, and rumbling of stomachs for more french fries or frozen custard. We travel to the beach to escape the city's heat and claustrophobia—and its clocks. In the presence of a large body of water, time seems to dissolve; and with it, cares and confusion. There is, as our grandfathers believed, something salubrious about salt air. Certainly, it was having its effect on these strollers. Never had I seen New Yorkers so relaxed in public. The amusement area might further decline—might even disappear; but this walkway would remain, with its balm for the soul.

I came to a restaurant-bar called the Atlantis and peeked in. It had a spacious interior, most of which was going



unused. Could the Atlantis be a relic from livelier times? Then, on the side of the building, I spotted an old neon sign: DANCING. So, a former dance hall.

The din from Astroland receded as I continued westward. And soon the only sounds were the tread of feet on the boards, the breaking of waves, the murmur of the wind.

I came to more empty lots. Whatever had adjoined the Boardwalk here had been replaced with weeds and debris. Nearby was the rear portion of the Thunderbolt. In plain view now was the owner's house: a flat-roofed structure with peeling paint. A metal chimney jutted from the roof. Queen Anne's lace grew unchecked in the yard. A roller coaster loomed overhead! How could I pass it up? Surely I had to go knock on the door and beg an interview. But again I hesitated. I was weary of interviewing. Maybe

tomorrow. I walked on.

Suddenly I came to a halt. I was hearing something that puzzled me. Voices from nowhere. A disembodied conversation, like the murmuring of ghosts.

Where were these sounds coming from? Had they traveled along the Boardwalk from some distant point—an acoustical phenomenon, like the whisper effect of domes? Then I understood. The voices were drifting up from beneath me. There were people under the Boardwalk, talking.

Ambling on, I arrived at the Parachute Jump.

The ruined palaces of kings can be a sobering sight. But this ruin was less sobering than sad. Here was the favorite toy that a child, moving on to new fancies, had tossed aside. Once a prime attraction—indeed, the emblem of Coney Island—the ride had been reduced to a shell. Gone were its signs, lights, parachutes, ramps. Only the superstructure



and dangling wires remained. Rust had lent a melancholy veneer to this skeleton. Graffiti covered its base. Pigeons roosted on its girders. And a dark thought occurred to me. Perhaps the Parachute Jump was *still* the emblem of Coney

Island—reflecting, in its degraded state, the changes that had been wrought here.

The abandoned ride rose from the lot that had been Steeplechase. Nothing else in the park had survived. After the removal of anything saleable, the Funny Place had been razed. Like some walled city that had offended Nebuchadnezzar, it had been reduced to an empty, windswept expanse. What little remained of Tilyou's park—broken bricks, twisted wires, a section of walkway (and perhaps



some shards of china from the Break-a-Dish booth)—was of interest only to some future archeologist. Steeplechase razed! An infamous deed.\*

I was taking pictures when a figure entered my viewfinder. A woman, hefty and middle-aged, was walking about in the lot. Now and then she would stop, pick up a piece of debris, and examine it. A ruin fancier like me? That very archeologist? I watched as she approached a Dumpster bin that had been left behind.

And then this woman did something that left me gaping in disbelief. *She climbed the Dumpster bin.* With an unexpected agility, she hoisted herself up and peered into its depths. What in the world was going on here?

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\* A number of its rides do live on, in far-flung locations. The El Dorado, for example—a unique, three-tiered carousel—is featured in an amusement park in Tokyo.

But then I guessed who she had to be: an antique dealer. She had come to Coney Island in search of relics; and the prospect of booty had roused in her both a lust to acquire and a sudden strength. That was no Dumpster bin she had climbed in her frenzy—rather, a treasure chest.

Spotting nothing of interest, she hopped down and went on inspecting the lot.

I detoured over to Surf Avenue to take some photos. Then I returned to the Boardwalk and kept on walking until I reached the pier. Only fishermen and dedicated strollers came down this far. I sat on a bench, lit up a cigar, and wrote postcards.

Then I walked out on the pier. The wind grew stronger, and I had to hold onto my cap. Fishermen lined the pier, leaning on the rail or sitting in folding chairs. Many had their families with them. People were sipping beers, eating



out of bags, gabbing in Spanish. A radio, turned up loud, provided Latin-style music for all. The ocean lapped at the piling—foamed about this ship that was going nowhere, this budget cruise! I had come upon a gathering of immigrants, no doubt a daily event. Loitering in their midst, I wondered if I might be the only “Anglo” present.\*

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\* Eventually I did spot some non-Hispanics: a pair of characters fishing together. One was tall, lean, and craggy-faced; unlike anyone else around, he wore an apron as he cleaned his fish. The other was squat, beer-bellied, and unshaven, and had a bicycle. The

Reaching the end of the pier, I looked out over the water. The wind was tugging at my cap and buffeting my bag. But a calm came over me. Brooklyn seemed to fall away, leaving only the pier and the churning sea. As far as the horizon, the Atlantic heaved like a living thing.

After a while I returned to the Boardwalk and pondered my next move. I wanted to wander about more. But the sun was going down behind the housing projects; the lights on the Wonder Wheel had come on. The beach would soon be shifting to its nighttime persona. Enough for one day—my tour would resume in the morning. I headed for the terminal.

On Surf Avenue I stopped at a mailbox. No collection times were given; and I hesitated before depositing my postcards. Burnt-out booths, the ruins of the Parachute Jump, a boarded-up theater across the street. Might not this mailbox, too, be abandoned?

How tenuous, in any case, seemed the link between island and mainland!

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two conducted themselves with an air of authority. Their grave demeanor seemed to say that the pier had long been their turf, and that—while willing to share it with these newcomers—they would brook no nonsense. The pair had to be a local institution. (They were members, too, of a national fraternity. What public pier is without at least one such regular, grizzled and eccentric, tending his line?)





The next day I was back on the subway—a B-train this time—bound for the shore.

I knew we were nearly there when three towers—the Parachute Jump, Astrotower, Our Lady of Solace Church—and a wheel became visible over the rooftops. We crossed a waterway that was dark with industrial waste, and on which was moored a rotting barge. A junkyard lined one of its banks.\*

The train wound along a curve, entered the terminal, and was there. No fanfare or announcement greeted us—just the clanging open of doors. The passengers left the cars and, in a leisurely procession, made their way down a ramp. I followed the flow.

The ramp led into a musty, cavernous space. I passed through a turnstile—and paused before an antique fare booth.

A style of architecture once flourished at seaside resorts. Its hallmark had been a playfulness or breeziness. Its emblems (such as undulating scrollwork, suggestive of waves) had been marine. Its prime material had been wood. The booth I was contemplating had survived from that era. It was big and solid, yet somehow fanciful. It was painted blue—evocative of the sea. And it was octagonal, with eight token windows—an octopus of a booth, to speed you home from the sea. Alas, this antiquity was no longer in use. Nearby was its replacement: a steel cage with bulletproof glass. The token-seller was answering questions via a loud-

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\* This River Styx, I later determined, was a surviving portion of Coney Island Creek.

speaker—grudgingly, like some troll beneath a bridge.

My fellow pilgrims had left me behind, in a vast, dim terminal that was nearly empty. A light at the end of a passageway seemed to be the way out. I headed towards it.

My second day at the beach began with a lunch stop at Nathan's. Then I walked over to Our Lady of Solace, for my appointment with Father Gillespie.

I had expected an older man—some longtime resident of the Island, with a rich store of anecdotes and information. But the priest into whose office I was shown was in his late twenties. Father Gillespie was stocky and bearded, with a soft-spoken but straightforward manner. To my surprise (the times had left me behind), he was wearing a sport shirt and jeans, rather than clerical garb; and had not a photo of a church dignitary hung on the office wall, it might have slipped my mind that I was speaking with a priest.

I told him why I had come to the Island; and we chatted. Father Gillespie made clear to me that his parish was Coney Island the neighborhood, not the recreational site. Nonetheless, he took an active interest in the beach. He belonged to the Chamber of Commerce (the only nonbusiness member), and knew most of the people with whom I had spoken the day before. When I mentioned Herman Garms, Father Gillespie told me about his brother. Freddie Garms, it seems, was also a character. After sixty years with the Wonder Wheel, he knew it so intimately that the slightest variation in sound told him something. During the summer Freddie slept at the ride—to guard it—and was still climbing it to make repairs. One night Father Gillespie had taken tickets at the Wonder Wheel, to get a sense of a ride operator's job. He had found the experience memorable.

“Every sort of person in the world came by.”

Father Gillespie knew the Island's history, and appreciated its identity as an amusement center. But his real interest was in its run-down streets and the people who inhabited them—that ethnic enclave that had become a ghetto. The “old family stuff” was gone, he told me; and community organizations—such as the planning board, to which he belonged—were the sole communal force nowadays. These

groups were seeking to revive the neighborhood. It was an uphill struggle; but he did think the Island capable of a comeback. Indeed, Coney Island was a perfect candidate, said Father Gillespie, for gentrification. (And it was clear from his tone that he knew what gentrification usually meant for the poor.)

Besides his involvement with civic groups and his pastoral duties, Father Gillespie spent time with the boys from the church school. He talked about what it was like living in Coney Island. Its residents were obviously deprived; yet they did have the beach. It functioned, he said, as a safety valve. Coney Islanders didn't feel closed in, the way the poor did in other parts of the city.

A constricting poverty, a wealth of space.

Father Gillespie copied for me a newspaper article about the neighborhood. I thanked him for his time and headed back to the beach. The street I followed was lined with boarded-up buildings and vacant lots.



I wandered about, taking photos and scrawling notes. On Jones Walk I passed a ride called Spookarama. Outside it were statues of Laurel and Hardy that must have dated back to the thirties—when Steeplechase and Luna Park were still standing. As I wandered, I had to keep reminding myself that what I was seeing was only a surviving remnant. Most of Coney Island’s amusements were gone.

Looming over what had survived was the Wonder Wheel. I found myself loitering at its base. The arcade machines had been discovered by two teenage girls. One of them was vibrating on the Relaxalator, while the other laughed at the sight. I decided to weigh myself—bag in hand, to find out how many pounds I was lugging about. As I mounted the scale, one of the girls warned me that it was only partially working. You got your horoscope, she said, but not your weight.

“Horoscope only?” I said, and stepped off. “That’s of no use to me. I just wanted to see what this bag weighs.”

Our conversation went no further, as the girls edged away from one of those Coney Island characters they had been warned about.

Herman Garms was taking tickets at the turnstile. He spotted someone changing clothes in the photo-booth. “Hey, get outa there!” he shouted. “That ain’t no bath-house!”

I returned to the Boardwalk, plopped onto a bench, and gazed down at the sunbathers. Sprawled on the sand, they resembled the listless denizens of a zoo. (They even had their keepers: unlicensed hucksters who passed among them, selling sodas out of coolers.)

And I watched the parade on the Boardwalk. A column of day campers—in “Surfside Kollege” T-shirts—marched by. Teenagers on bicycles zipped along the boards. Families, lovers, and lunatics promenaded together, like Parisians on a boulevard.

After a while I got up and joined them. But I had not gone far when an arresting sight brought me to a halt.

A pedlar had set up directly on the Boardwalk. He was seated on a milk crate; his wares were displayed on and about a table. The man knew the needs of those who came to the beach. Rubber rafts, beach balls, sunglasses—the sun glinted on these and other baubles, as on an array of riches. Balloons swayed on their tethers. They were the new Mylar type: mirrored on one side, shaped like a heart or dolphin. As the breeze moved them about, the balloons brushed against one another and flashed like signal lights—a *ballet aéronautique*. They reminded me of the delicate instruments of a weather station. I became transfixed by the movement of the balloons...and by a display of pinwheels.

The pinwheels had been stuck into a block of Styrofoam. These were no ordinary pinwheels. Mounted on each stick were eight small wheels of different colors. The scores of wheels would wait for a gust of wind, then go into a mad spin together. With the precision of a dance troupe, they started and stopped at the same instant. (Some spun clockwise, others counterclockwise—depending on the angle of the pinwheel to the wind.)

I watched the pinwheels whirl and flash. Here was a scientific wonder, in the guise of a simple toy. Each wheel took the essences of wind and sun, and transmuted them—into motion, color, and a fragile gaiety.

Wind, spin. No wind, stop.  
To be as mindless as this tinsel top!

I had come upon a patch of local flora: plastic flowers as indigenous to the honky-tonk as the wild roses and bayberries had been to the dunes.

As I stood there, a little girl in a bathing suit ran up, oohed and ahed, and blew on the stalled wheels. With the

aid of a gust, she had them spinning again. The pinwheels flashed, the balloons swayed on their tethers. And she gazed at it all as if upon a miracle.\*

Watching these toys move in the wind, I realized what was missing at Coney Island. The flags were gone. In old photos you saw them everywhere—atop the faerie spires, the hotels, the bathing pavilions. The sky had been alive with the Stars and Stripes, the Flags of All Nations, pennants and streamers: a host of banners that had signaled gaiety and welcome. Today, (except for a few at Astroland) they are gone. All this wind, yet scarcely a flag in sight.

At the nation's door, we have lowered the flags that—whether in patriotic fervor or quivering self-delight—once preened themselves in the breeze.

What moves in the wind today? The dangling wires of the Parachute Jump. The litter in the empty lots.

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\* Parents wishing to tutor the eye of their children—to promote an appreciation of form, color, and light—should consider a visit to a catchpenny display like this one. An art museum may bore them; an array of trinkets, never.



At the Atlantis I decided to photograph that DANCING sign. A ramp led down to Stillwell Avenue; and the place to stand for the shot I wanted was at its base. I got out my camera and walked down the ramp.

I found a cozy little nook down there, beside the ramp. It was carpeted with sand, wallpapered with graffiti. And it was occupied. Slumped in a folding chair was an old man. Comfortably garbed in golf cap, sport shirt, and slacks, he was dozing.

At least, I thought he was dozing. But as I focused the lens, the old man spoke.

“Hey,” he said in a Brooklyn accent, “what are you taking a picture of that joint for?”

Just what I needed as I sought to steady the camera. A heckler.

“The sign,” I replied. “I like the sign.”

There is a locution I have encountered in Victorian novels, but didn’t believe—until this moment—anyone actually said.

“Pshaw,” he growled, “don’t waste your film. You want a picture? Take a look over there, fella. Over there.” He pointed to a large building, the forward portion of which had been ravaged by fire. A scorched sign identified it as Stauch’s Bath. “Look at that detail, that ornamentation. A hundred years old. Now there’s a picture for you. See up there? That’s Neptune. Take a shot of Neptune, why don’t you?”

And Neptune it was. The head of the sea-god, with crown and seaweedlike beard, had been sculpted on the side of the building. I took a picture.

Grateful for the tip, I was wary still of the tipster. So I turned away to photograph the DANCING sign. And I was about to move on, when the old man began to talk. Spontaneously, he began to reminisce—about an era that had survived only in archives, architecture, and the memories of old men.

And it soon became apparent that, in my rudeness, I had been about to walk away from a gold mine. I had stumbled upon—and come close to missing—a rich lode of lore. His name was Morty, and he



went further back even than Matt Kennedy. So far back that he would mention a childhood visit to Dreamland.

I wound up kneeling beside his chair: listening, asking questions, taking notes. Morty spoke in a low drone, as if from the borders of consciousness. This lassitude was not, however, the result of infirmity (he appeared to be in good health); rather, of drowsiness: I had interrupted a siesta. The voice was that of an octogenarian whose faculties were as sharp as ever, but who would be neither rushed nor ruffled. From time to time, he glanced over to make sure I was still listening, or to note my reaction to a joke. For the most part, though, his eyelids drooped as he droned on. I had identified myself as a writer and Morty knew just what I wanted to hear. Like a fisherman casting his line into the depths of memory, he brought up one choice item after another. My notebook was his net.

“The Indy 500 started at Coney Island. At Sheepshead Bay Race Track. Did you know that?”

“No, I didn’t.”

Almost imperceptibly, he nodded. “Sure. Started here. Then they moved it....You used to be able to get here by boat. And from the pier you could take a trolley right to the gate of Steeplechase. Of course, this was years ago....Salt-



water taffy originated out here, did you know that?”

“No.”

“Well, now you do. We called it Turkish taffy. Guy named Bonomo brought it over. Bonomo, Turkish Jew. He started popcorn balls, too. Had a stand over on West Eighth. This was sixty, seventy years ago.... The Velodrome,



ever hear of that? Over on Twelfth. All the biggest fighters. Dempsey fought George Carpentier there....Feltman's, largest beer garden anywhere. Right here.”

I asked him about himself.

“Me?” Morty paused and ruminated. Then, at the same unhurried pace, he continued to reminisce. “I started out here as a kid selling newspapers, and I've been around ever since. My parents came to this country in 1893, from Austria-Hungary. My father had a stand. He introduced to this country the waffle sandwich with ice cream in it. Powdered sugar on the outside. One cent each. Delicious. One cent and delicious, make a note of that. Me, I did all kinds of

stuff, but mostly I been with the bathhouses. See that? That burnt place over there? That was the last of 'em."

Morty had opened his eyes, and was pointing at the building with the sculpted head of Neptune. Before the fire, he told me, he had run a concession in there. Stauch's had been the sole survivor of the bathing pavilions. "That's what we called 'em," he droned, "bathing pavilions."

There had been, I knew, hundreds of these pavilions. Until its takeover by the city, the beach had been divided into individual plots. Each plot was fenced off as far as the low-tide mark, and maintained by a pavilion. A bather could use only that portion of beach in front of the pavilion he was patronizing. But over the years, the hundreds had shrunk to a handful, then to only one—Stauch's. Now there were none. Over the winter, fire had claimed that lone survivor.

I asked what exactly a bathing pavilion was.

"Well, you changed there," Morty explained patiently. "You took a shower, sat around in the steam bath, used the health facilities. You sunbathed on the roof. Naked. And you socialized." Stauch's had offered all of this, right up to the end. Now it, too, was a memory.

When I remarked that its demise was sad, he shrugged and said: "That's the way. Things come, they go. What're you going to do?"

Morty appeared undisturbed by the loss of his concession, or by the passing of an institution that had figured so prominently in his life. The fire had thrust him into retirement; yet he was not bitter. That imperturbable drone of his seemed to be saying that there was still the beach, the salt air, the sway of Neptune.

He began once more to come up with tidbits of information for me, like a sedulous computer searching its memory banks for what it knew I wanted.

"The first human cannonball. At Dreamland. Incredible. They shot this guy into the air. Got that? First human cannonball."

"You were there?"

He nodded a millimeter. "I was there. I was a kid. This was, maybe, seventy years ago."

“Amazing.”

“Perry’s Cabaret, lots of famous entertainers started there. Long gone, of course....Jackie Gleason was a barker at Coney Island, did you know that? No? You do now ....Ravenhall’s Bathhouse, oh that was a bathhouse. Dempsey used to hang out there....Henessey’s Theater. The best vaudeville used to come to Henessey’s....Nathan’s, you been to Nathan’s yet?”

“Oh yes.”

“Did you have a hot dog?”

“Corn-on-the-cob.”

“Well, Nathan became a multimillionaire on hot dogs—on dimes and nickels.” The drone took on a wistful note as he repeated, “Dimes and nickels....Hey, this’ll knock you off your feet. Cary Grant was a stilt-walker out here. For Rosen and Wagner’s freak show. I’m not putting you on. Write that down.”

“Got it.”

“This was *the* place, if you know what I mean. People came here from around the world. Not any more. All slums now. But once. Hard to believe, hey? Years ago, one dollar was all you needed for a good time at the beach. You took the train out, played the machines, had a hot dog, rode the roller coaster, and went home with ten cents in your pocket. This you could do on a dollar. Can you imagine?” He sighed softly, his thoughts a million miles away.

How peaceable was the temple of memory. How gracious its gray-headed acolytes. Sitting at Morty’s feet, I felt as if I had come upon some forgotten Keeper of the Records—some neglected archivist. In the shadow of the Boardwalk he was fading away; and his archives were fading with him.

Or it was as if some local spirit—the genius of the beach, the ancient god whose name had died with the Canarsie—were speaking through the somnambulant figure beside me. In Morty the Island had its oracle; and his office, in this ravaged place, was to murmur of the past.

He had fallen silent, and I wondered if Morty had crossed over into sleep. His lethargy did not arise from feebleness, I was sure, but from sheer animal pleasure in lounging on a beach. Only twice during our talk had he stirred

appreciably. One time was to get up and move his chair back into the shade, which had crept away from us. The other was to acknowledge a woman as advanced in years as he. On her way to Nathan's, she had stopped to ask if he wanted coffee brought back. They had chatted briefly, exchanging news of So-and-So's illness and So-and-So's financial woes. Apparently, Morty belonged to a circle of oldsters who hung out at the Boardwalk. They were spending their final years here, snoozing, shmoozing, and sipping coffee. Gray-headed beach bums!

A policeman came swaggering down the ramp. He was heavyset, with a mustache the size of a pocket comb. He knew Morty and stopped to say hello. I was introduced.

"Philip, this guy's a writer. Says he's doing a book on Coney Island."

The policeman raised his eyebrows. "Oh yeah? Let me tell you, you should call your book 'The Last Days of Coney Island.'"

Ominous words. If anyone should know, it was the officer on the beat. Was it true then? Was the Island in its closing days, as the acres of devastation had suggested? If so, how would it go? Would (as one rumor had it) the hotels and casinos arrive, to gobble up what was left? Would fire triumph at last? Or would a storm blow it all away one night—Neptune's revenge for the burning of his shrine?

I remarked that Morty had been regaling me with local history. The policeman nodded. "You've got a wealth of information in this man," he said.

We talked about Stauch's. Morty drew my attention to the empty lot behind the building. Uncle Louis's restaurant, I learned, had been located there. I asked where people changed nowadays, if there were no more bathhouses. Morty chuckled. "Under the Boardwalk Hotel. That's what we call it, right, Philip?"

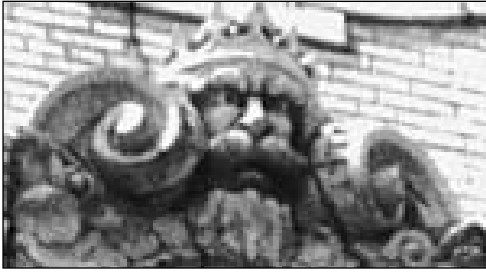
"Oh yeah," chortled the policeman. "I'll tell you, some of 'em do more than change down there. Whew!" With a wave he moved on.

It was time for me, too, to be going. Rising from the sand, I shook hands with Morty, told him my name, and thanked him for having dipped into that "wealth of infor-

mation” for me.

He repeated my name and asked: “A Jewish boy?” I said I was and Morty let out a murmur of approval. Apparently, Jewish boys didn’t frequent the beach much anymore; and he was surprised to have encountered one.

His eyes fell shut and he resumed his reverie.





Among the few businesses remaining along the Boardwalk was a souvenir shop. Somehow I had overlooked it the previous day. But now I came to a halt. Displayed outside the shop were a sampling of its wares: sunglasses, hats, inflated animals, postcards. It was the cards, with views of Coney Island in the fifties, that had caught my eye.

I was looking through them, when a figure appeared behind the table; and a voice—high-pitched but not unpleasant—asked if I was interested in postcards. I confessed I was; and he informed me there were more inside—including the truly old ones.

I followed the man into his shop. Deep and narrow, it had a stamped-tin ceiling, and a wooden floor into which a trail had been worn. Leading me to the rear, he told me proudly that the shop was only six-and-a-half-feet wide, from shelf to shelf. The shelves were packed with merchandise—visors, T-shirts, sandals, squirt guns, plastic swords, piggy banks, ashtrays, pennants, rings, backscratchers, pail-and-shovel sets, plaques with comic mottos (“The Lord Giveth, the Government Taketh Away”), and a few practical items such as film and sun-tan lotion. It was a cornucopia of toys and souvenirs, of which only a small portion—that outdoor display—had spilled out onto the Boardwalk.

Presiding over this trove of trinkets was a short, bespectacled man in his sixties. He had swept-back gray hair, a toothy grin, a paunch. He was wearing a white T-shirt and beige Bermuda shorts. His name was Alex Silverman (though he was also known—as he would reveal to me with a self-deprecating smile—as Mr. Coney Island).

He handed me a stack of plastic folders that were filled

with old postcards. And I found myself looking at photographs of beer gardens, rambling hotels, crowds in Edwardian dress. Of attractions at Dreamland, Luna Park, and Steeplechase.

As I inspected the cards, Silverman kept shuttling between me and his outdoor display. I could hear him joking with passersby, making sales, hailing people he knew. Rejoining me in the rear of the shop, he would talk about Coney Island. For I had mentioned that I was a writer, in search of lore.

His wife ran the store with him; and their conversations drifted back to where I was standing. The Silvermans seemed to be enjoying themselves as they worked. They hobnobbed with customers and with friends who stopped by. Some of the friends sat down and lingered, at a picnic table belonging to the bar next door. And indeed, there was something of a picnic atmosphere to the shop. I was reminded of a neighborhood luncheonette, where the talk is as hearty as the fare. The origin of this atmosphere was the Silvermans—in particular Alex Silverman. Cheerful and gregarious, he cracked jokes, ogled girls in bathing suits, energetically bounced about.

Intermittently we talked. And it soon became apparent that Silverman was closely in touch with the life of the beach. He was acquainted with most of the people I had talked to, and filled me in on facts they had missed. He knew which rides were doing well and which were not. He was aware of the different crowds that milled about together, or that came out at different times of the day. And not only did he know the Island's history; he appreciated its cultural significance. (He bragged, for instance, that the carousel was a classic, built by Parker.)

He told me, too, about himself. His father had been Jack Silverman, "the last of the old carnival men." Silverman *père* had started out at Blackpool, the resort in England, and moved to Coney Island in 1904. "I'll tell you, though," said son Alex, who had kept alive his father's souvenir shop, at changing locations about the beach. "I wouldn't advise my son to go into this business. The future is not here, sad to say."

Though hardly a scholar, Silverman was familiar with the books that had been written about Coney Island, and had several of them for sale. (He confided to me the sum he had received recently for one such book.) He was also a dealer in relics: I was shown a sign for Steeplechase and a boxful of ride tickets. Here was the man you came to for Coney Island memorabilia, the postcards being his specialty. Silverman said he had more cards at home—thousands of them—which he would be glad to show me. “I sell ———, I sell ———,” he boasted, naming two celebrities who collected postcards (and using an odd syntax, which may have been carnie lingo or a Yiddishism). He gave me a list of libraries that had Coney Island material. He described the rolling chairs that people used to rent on the Boardwalk. He told me how the Island got its name (the rabbit theory), and where I could get the best knish (Sam’s at Brighton Beach). He recommended persons to interview, and seemed aware of everything that was going on. When that magazine writer had come out, she had been referred to Alex Silverman, the local maven.

But what struck me most about Silverman was the interest he took in the parade outside his shop. His chief pleasure seemed to lie in chatting with those who stopped to inspect his wares. At one point he joked with his wife about moving to Florida. But clearly it was here—at “the Riviera of the poor,” as he referred to the beach—where he wanted to be each summer, peddling and palavering.

In short, he had assumed the role of Mr. Coney Island. “That’s what they call me. Mr. Coney Island. You’re speaking with him.”

And he was. Alex Silverman was the local greeter, gossip, historian, philosopher, purveyor of relics—all rolled into one affable proprietor of a souvenir shop. He was a public figure and a character. With his knowledge of—and feeling for—the beach, he was just the man for a visiting writer to talk with. Mr. Coney Island!

I was a potential customer, but his friendliness was unfeigned. He brought me a glass of water, wanted to know where I was from and what I did. He was as interested in me as I was in his postcards. And why not? As the Silver-



mans went about their work—inflating balloons, bagging T-shirts, cracking jokes, bickering mildly, conversing with customers, exchanging sly observations—I sensed a genuine affection for what they did to make a living. Doing business on a boardwalk is a sociable undertaking; and they seemed to thrive on it.

Finally, I bought some postcards, told the Silvermans I'd be back next summer, and ambled on.



I stopped to look again at that house under the Thunderbolt. The woman who lived in it, I had learned, would not mind being visited. But I decided not to seek out an



interview. Let her sip tea undisturbed in her parlor beneath the shut-down ride. Let her enjoy the silence.

Yet how haunted the house must seem now, the shrieks gone and windows no longer rattling.

I walked out on the pier again, watching the fishermen tend their lines and the waves roll in. And I took a final walk along the Bowery. Then, deciding it was time to go, I headed for the terminal.

On the way I stopped at the carousel. The horses were not moving (there were no customers); but the band organ was playing. It boomed forth the Marine Hymn, accompanying itself with castanets, drum, and triangle. Finally some children climbed aboard; and the ride started up.

I was watching it go round, when an old black man came

up and stood beside me. He too watched the carousel go round, then said in a bemused tone: “When I was a boy, you could ride on that thing for a nickel. But we didn’t even have a nickel.”

So much for nostalgia.

As I walked on, the Gay Nineties music of the band organ gave way to the disco beat from the bumper cars. I entered the terminal, passed through a turnstile, climbed the ramp.

I took a seat on a waiting train. Opposite me a family was settling in, with its beach chairs and cooler. The doors slammed shut; and the hour-long ride back to Manhattan began.

The cars rolled along the elevated tracks. I stared out the window at the rooftops of Brooklyn. We rumbled over neighborhood after neighborhood.

Then the train entered the tunnel, and the window became a mirror. Reflected in it were a weary author, that family with chairs, and the crazed graffiti.



A year later I returned to Coney Island.

Still there were the game booths, Nathan's, the rubble-filled lots. Still there, too, was Morty (I spotted him sitting on a bench with some cronies). And still there were the Silvermans, who welcomed me back.

In the rear of their shop I examined a new batch of postcards. Then I went outside and sat at the picnic table. Silverman was bustling about, as he conducted business and chatted. Tending the display was an elderly man—Silver-



man's father-in-law, to whom I was introduced. "Pop" was a former Fuller Brush man, Silverman told me, and at the age of 89, still an able salesman.

I spent an afternoon hanging out at the souvenir shop. Music blared from the bar next door; beeps and sirens sounded from a video arcade that had opened up since the

previous summer. Yet the noise did not bother me: it was a part of the place. I was content to sit and do nothing—to savor the breeze and watch the parade go by. What better place to dawdle than a boardwalk? I could have sat there till nightfall, eyeing passersby and gazing out at the sea. But I soon found myself taking notes again. Silverman was in top form—bantering with customers, spouting local history, dispensing philosophy—and I could hardly allow it to go by unrecorded.

“It was gorgeous,” he said, referring to the Coney Island of the forties and fifties, “just gorgeous....I got a disease, I got sand in my shoes—I love this place....If you offered me a hundred dollars for that book, I wouldn’t take it. What would you give me for it?....I love to joke. If I can’t joke, I can’t work....What the hell is money? People talk to me about money. How’s your health, that’s all I want to know. You got your health, you’re a millionaire.”

Silverman spoke of the antique shows he worked during the winter; his adventures tracking down memorabilia; his son who didn’t want to get married. He explained why his shop was so narrow. (It was the former entranceway to a bathing pavilion, the rest of which had been torn down.) He lamented that the annual fireworks had been discontinued.

He recalled the afternoon a whirlwind had scattered his display onto the beach. And though she had failed him on that occasion, Silverman relied, he said, on his wife’s skill at predicting weather. She could sense approaching rain from such signs as the iridescence and low flight of gulls, or from changes on a souvenir barometer. Business and weather, I learned, were intimately interrelated out here. Strong winds and whitecaps meant a slow day. It was like talking to a farmer about the subtle influences on his crops.

Silverman kept moving between the shop’s interior and his outdoor display. Virtually every customer he engaged in conversation. His most common question was “Where are you from?” The flow of customers and friends was continuous, and included the following:

*A middle-aged woman, with her husband and daughter.* She was disappointed and angry. “They’ve destroyed it,”

she growled. A Coney Island native, she had moved away after high school. This was her first visit since then, and she couldn't believe the changes. How could it have happened? How? Silverman shrugged.

*A Jamaican couple who wandered in with their toddler.* Silverman bantered with them, making a joke about the poverty in Jamaica.

*A suburban woman with her granddaughter.* Fondly remembering the beach from her youth, she had brought the girl to see it. Silverman chatted with them. When the woman asked what to do with her cigarette ashes, he told her to drop them on the floor. He'd sweep them up; and besides, he didn't want a clean-looking store—clean stores didn't look busy. Silverman quoted to her the last of the old carnival men: "Never sweep dirt out, my father used to say, 'sweep it in. You'll sweep your luck out.'" The grandmother bought a T-shirt for the girl.

*A photographer from Montreal.* He marveled that so picturesque a place as Coney Island had survived. Silverman sold him postcards.

*A friend with news.* The police, we learned, had just hustled a topless woman off the Boardwalk. Silverman turned to me and said: "Anything is possible at Coney Island."

"Unbelievable," said Mrs. Silverman, rolling her eyes.

*An English family on holiday.* Silverman held an animated conversation with them. He mentioned his father having been at Blackpool, and they nodded genially. The talk turned to the shortcomings of various nationalities; and everyone had a good laugh. Silverman dispensed some philosophy. The grave, he observed, was indifferent to the religious affiliation of its occupant.

After the English family had gone, he said to me: "In this store you get the best education in the world. I see the world."

Silverman led me to the bar next-door and introduced me to its owner: a short, muscular man named Ruby. Ruby told me he had owned a successful camera store in Manhattan, but had sold it and bought this bar. He gestured at the Boardwalk. "It's the life out here. The liveliness, you know? The air."

The bar was decorated with old photos of the Island. On its stools sat a bunch of codgers and local *bons vivants*. They exchanged barroom chatter as they drank. Sea breezes mingled with cigarette smoke. Here was the closest thing at the shore to the old Coney Island House. The likes of Daniel Webster and Washington Irving had been replaced by a less genteel but no less bibulous crew.

I lingered at the souvenir shop until late in the afternoon. When I rose to leave, rain was threatening. The Silvermans began to dismantle their display. Dark clouds were coming in from the sea. The gulls were flying low. There were whitecaps on the waves.

And the parade along the Boardwalk melted away, as everyone scurried for cover or the subway.



So yes, there's still a Coney Island. Although much diminished, and located in a deteriorated section of Brooklyn, the resort has persevered. How much longer it will be around, no one can predict—not even Grandma in her glass cabinet.

If you are visiting New York, you may want to check it out. The beach is easy to reach by subway. Wear a hat (for the Place Without Shade). Keep your wallet tucked away. And spend the afternoon exploring the amusement area; lounging on the beach; or just strolling the Boardwalk, as if without a care in the world.

And be sure to stop at Nathan's for a hot dog. Or better yet, for a corn-on-the-cob: smothered in margarine and salted by the very air, this legacy of the Canarsie is worth the trip out.

And buy yourself a souvenir: an ashtray, or pennant, or T-shirt. Something to remind you—when the last of the old-time parks is gone—that the Disneylands were preceded by something more rambunctious. And that it all started at a beach in Brooklyn.

A beach to which the weary came by the trainload—to be soothed by a breeze, engulfed by a wave, served by a singing waiter, chased by a dwarf, advised by a fortune-teller, growled at by the Wild Man of Borneo, entertained by fleas, embraced in the Tunnel of Love, cheated at the Wheel of Fortune, sunburnt, poisoned, and pickpocketed.

And to satisfy that ancient urge to idle by the sea.





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