

The Anniversary Man

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For a long time John Costello tried to forget what happened.

Perhaps pretended that it had not.

The Devil came in the form of a man, around him the smell of dogs.

He wore an expression as if a stranger had handed him a fifty-dollar bill on the street. Surprise. A sort of self-satisfied wonder.

John Costello remembered the panic of wings as pigeons rushed away from the scene.

As if they knew.

He remembered how darkness approached in a hurry, delayed somewhere and now anxious to meet its schedule.

It was as if the Devil possessed the face of an actor – an unremembered actor, his name forgotten yet his face dimly recognized.

'I know him . . . that's . . . that's . . . honey, this guy here? What the hell is his name?'

Many names.

All of them meant the same thing.

The Devil owned the world, but he remembered his roots. He remembered he was once an angel, cast down to Gehenna for treason and mutiny, and he withheld himself as best he could. But sometimes he could not.

It was ironic, like sex in cheap motels with unattractive hookers. Sharing something so intense, so close, and yet never speaking your given name. Believing yourself guilty of nothing significant, and thus innocent.

John Costello was nearly seventeen. His father owned a restaurant where everybody came to eat.

After it happened, John was never the same.

After it happened . . . hell, none of them were.

Jersey City, out near Grove Street Station, always the smell of the Hudson; place looked like a fistfight, even on a Sunday morning when most of the Irishers and Italians were dressed up for church.

John Costello's father, Erskine, standing out front of The Connemara diner – named after the mountains where his ancestors fished in Lough Mask and Lough Corrib, and hauled their catch home after dusklight, and lit fires, and told tales, and sang songs that sounded like history before the first verse was done.

Erskine was a quiet tree of a man – bold eyes, his hair black like soot; spend enough time with him and you'd wind up answering your own questions out of loneliness.

The Connemara sat beneath the shadow of the El train platform with its wrought-iron steps and gantries like walkways to some other world – a world beyond all of this, beyond this universe, beyond the dreams of sex and death and the denial of hope for all that this strange and shadowed quarter of the city had to offer.

John was an only child, and he was sixteen years old in January of '84.

It was an important year.

The year *she* came to stay.

Her name was Nadia, which was Russian for *hope*.

He met her on a Sunday at The Connemara. She came on an errand for her father. She came for soda bread.

Always there was music from the radios, the rumble of laughter, the slap of dominoes. The Connemara was a hub for the Irish, the Italians, the Jews, and the drunks – the ebullient, the aggressive, the angry – all of them silenced by the food Erskine Costello made.

Nadia was seventeen, five months older than John Costello, but she had a world in her eyes that belied her age.

'You work here?' she asked.

First question. First of many.

A great moment can never be taken away.

John Costello was a shy boy, a quiet boy. He'd lost his mother some years before. Anna Costello, née Bredaweg. John remembered his mother well. She forever wore an

expression of slight dismay, as if she'd entered a familiar room and found the furniture moved, perhaps a seated stranger when no visit had been scheduled. She started sentences but left them incomplete, perhaps because she knew she'd be understood. Anna Costello conveyed multitudes with a single look. She angled herself between the world and her son. Mom the buffer. Mom the shock absorber. She challenged the world, dared it to pull a trick, a fast one, some sleight of hand. Other mothers lost children. Anna Costello had only one, and this one she would never lose. She never thought to consider that he could lose her.

And she spoke with some kind of instinctive maternal wisdom.

'They call me names at school.'

'Kind of names?'

'Whatever . . . I don't know. Just names.'

'Names are just sounds, John.'

'Eh?'

'Think of them as sounds. Just make believe they're throwing sounds at you.'

'And what good would that do?'

Smiled, almost laughed. 'Why . . . in your mind you just catch them and throw them back.'

And John Costello wondered later – much later – if his mother would have seen the Devil coming and protected them both.

He smiled at the girl. 'I work here, yes.'

'You own the place?'

'My father does.'

She nodded understandingly. 'I came for soda bread. You have soda bread?'

'We have soda bread.'

'How much?'

'Dollar and a quarter.'

'Only have a dollar.' She held out the note as if to prove she wasn't lying.

John Costello wrapped a loaf of soda bread in paper. Brown-bagged it. Passed it over the counter. 'You can owe me.'

When he took the dollar their fingers touched. Like touching electric.

'What's your name?' she asked.

'John . . . John Costello.'

'My name is Nadia. That's Russian for hope.'

'Are you Russian?'

'Sometimes,' she said. And then she smiled like a sunset and walked away.

Everything changed afterwards, after the winter of '84.

John Costello realized he would become someone else, but he could not have predicted how.

Now he finds safety in routines. In counting. In making lists.

He does not wear latex gloves.

He is not afraid to drink milk from the carton.

He does not take plastic cutlery to restaurants.

He does not collect psychotic episodes to share with some shallow pervert mind-voyeur on a five thousand-dollar couch.

He is not afraid of the dark, for he carries all the darkness he needs inside him.

He does not collect clipped fingernails or locks of shorn hair for fear that hoodoo will be performed and he will die suddenly, unexpectedly, in Bloomingdale's, his heart bursting in the elevator, blood from his ears while people scream hysterically. As if screaming could serve some purpose.

He would not go gently into that sweet goodnight.

And sometimes, when New York was bleeding the heat of its summer from every brick and every stone, when the heat of a thousand earlier summers seemed collected in everything he touched, he had been known to buy bottled root beer from the chilled counter, and press the bottle against his face, even touch it to his lips, with no fear of what fatal disease or virulent germ might be there upon the glass.

See him in the street and he would look like a million others.

Talk to him and he would appear to be just like you.

But he was not. And never would be.

Because he saw the Devil in the winter of '84, and once you see the Devil you don't forget his face.

*

She came again the following day.

She brought the quarter, and paid her debt.

'How old are you, John Costello?' she asked.

She had on a skirt, a tee-shirt. Her breasts were small and perfect. Her teeth were matchless. She smelled like cigarettes and Juicy Fruit.

'Sixteen,' he said.

'When are you seventeen?'

'January.'

'You got a girlfriend?'

He shook his head.

'Okay,' she said, then turned and walked away.

He opened his mouth to speak but there was silence inside.

The door closed behind her. He watched her reach the corner, and then he watched her disappear.

The Connemara was never empty. It always held atmosphere, if nothing else. But the people who came were real people with real lives. They all carried stories. More than the stories themselves, it was the words they used to build them; no-one talked like that anymore. The detractions and minor anecdotes they employed to fill the gaps, like mortar between bricks. It was the way those words sounded – the timbre, the pitch, the cadence – as they followed one another out of their mouths and into the world. Words the world had waited for.

Old men who selected pieces of their varicolored lives for sharing – different hues for different days – and unfolded them carefully, as if they were delicate gifts, fashioned to survive just one telling, and then they were gone. Gossamer stories, perhaps cobwebs or shadows. They told stories to be heard, so their lives would not go unnoticed by the world when their work was done. Some of these men had known one another twenty, thirty years, but knew nothing of occupations. They spoke of externals – baseball, automobiles, sometimes girls, all things outside, all things definable with phrases from newspapers and TV, some of which they used with no real understanding. Often their conversations were not conversations in the real sense of the word. Ask a question and then they'd tell you what *you*

thought about it. Everything was a matter of opinion: their own. But they didn't see it. They saw a discussion, a two-way thing, structured and balanced, a meeting of minds. But it was not.

These old men, the ones who haunted The Connemara, perhaps they also saw their end when the Devil came. Perhaps they looked back at the gaping yaw of the past and they saw a world that would never return. Their time had been and gone. Their time had run out.

They heard of what happened to Costello's boy, to the girl who was with him, and they closed their eyes.

A deep breath. A silent prayer. A wonder as to what had become of everything, and how it all would end.

And then said nothing to one another, for there was nothing more to say.

Erskine Costello told his son that Man was the Devil in human form.

'A man went for cigarettes and never came home,' he said. 'You will hear that. It has become a thing all its own. Means something other than the words used. Like most things. Italians. Irish sometimes. He went out for cigarettes, he went to buy a pack of Luckies. Sure he went out for cigarettes, but whatever cigarettes he bought they were his last, you know? He'll be in the bottom of the Sound without his fingers and toes.'

Later – dental recognition, other scientific advances – they used to break the teeth.

Axes, hawsers, machetes, butchers' knives, hammers – ball-peen and flathead.

Burned a man's face off with a blowtorch. Smelled bad. Smelled so bad they never did it again.

'These things happen,' Erskine said. 'You go looking for the Devil, you'll find all the Devil you could ever want right there in a man.' He smiled. 'You know what they say about the Irish and the Italians? First son to the church, second to the police, third to jail, fourth to the Devil.' He laughed like a smoky train in a dark tunnel. Ruffled John's hair.

And John Costello listened. He was a little kid without a mother. His father was everything to him, and he could never lie.

And later – afterwards – John realized that his father had not

lied. You could not lie about something you did not understand. Ignorance influenced his understanding, gave him a slanted view.

John saw the Devil, and thus he knew whereof he spoke.

She came three times in the following week.

Nadia. Russian for *hope*.

'I am studying art,' she said.

'Art.' A statement, not a question.

'You know what art is.'

John Costello smiled with certainty.

'So I am studying art, and one day I'll go to New York, the Metropolitan perhaps, and I will—'

Costello's mind drifted, away to the sidewalk, the street beyond. It was raining.

'Do you have an umbrella?' he asked, a question out of left field with a curve in its tail.

She stopped mid-sentence, looked at him as if the only acceptable response was a headlock. 'An umbrella?'

He glanced toward the window. 'Rain,' he said matter-of-factly.

She turned and looked. 'Rain,' she echoed. 'No, I don't have an umbrella.'

'I do.'

'Well that's good for you then, isn't it?'

'I'll get it. You can bring it back whenever you like.'

She smiled. Warmth. A real sense of something. 'Thank you,' she said, and for a moment looked embarrassed. 'That's very thoughtful of you, John.'

'Thoughtful,' he said. 'Yes, I s'pose it is.'

He crossed from the counter to the window after she'd left the diner. He watched her hopscotch between puddles toward the corner. A sudden gust caught the umbrella, her skirt, her hair. Looked as if she'd blow away.

And then she was gone.

Now he lives in New York.

He writes everything down. Prints in blocks. He used to write down sentences, but these days he abbreviates.

He still keeps a diary, more a ledger, a journal if you like. He has

filled many of them. If he has no event to describe he conveys the feeling of the day in single words.

Exigent.

Palpable.

Manipulation.

Something he likes, he learns all about it. Often he learns things by heart.

Subway stations: Eastern, Franklin, Nostrand, Kingston, Utica, Sutter, Saratoga, Rockaway, Junius. The stations on the 7th Avenue Express, all the way through Gun Hill Road to Flatbush.

Why? No reason. He just finds comfort in it.

Mondays he eats Italian, Tuesdays French, Wednesdays he has hot dogs with ketchup and German mustard, Thursdays he leaves open to chance. Fridays he eats Persian – gheimh and ghormeh and barg. A small restaurant on the corner near Penn Plaza in the Garment District where he lives. It is called Persepolis. Weekends he eats Chinese or Thai, and if inspired he makes tuna casserole.

Lunch he takes in the same place every day, a block and a half from the newspaper where he works.

Routines. Always routines.

And he counts things. Stop signs. Traffic lights. Stores with awnings. Stores without. Blue cars. Red cars. Station wagons. Disabled people.

Safety in numbers.

He invents names for people: Sugarface, PaleSocrates, Perfect-silentchild, Deepfearhopeless, Drugmadfrightened.

Made-up names. Names that suit them. Suit the way they appear to be.

He is not crazy. He knows this for a fact. He just has a way of dealing with things, that's all.

Doesn't harm anyone, and no-one would know.

Because, on the face of it, he looks just like everyone else.

Same as the Devil.

John Costello and Nadia McGowan ate lunch together for the first time on Saturday, October 6th, 1984.

They ate corned beef on rye with mustard, and green pickles, and they shared a tomato the size of a fist. Scarlet, a blood-red thing, sweet and juicy.

They ate together and she told him something that made him laugh.

The following day he took her to the movies. *Places In The Heart*. John Malkovich. Sally Field. Won two Oscars, best actress and screenplay. John Costello did not kiss Nadia McGowan, nor did he try, though he did hold her hand for the last half hour.

He was nearly seventeen, and wanted so much to see her perfect breasts, the way her hair would fall across her naked shoulders.

Later, after everything, he would remember that evening. He walked her home, to a house on the corner of Machin and Wintergreen. Her father waited for her on the doorstep, and he shook John Costello's hand and said, *I know your father. From the soda bread*. And he looked at John closely, as if to ascertain intentions from appearance alone.

Nadia McGowan watched John Costello from her bedroom window as she took off her sweater. *John Costello, she thought, is quiet and sensitive, but beneath that he is strong, intelligent, and he listens, and there is something about him that I can love.*

I hope he asks me out again.

He did. The following day. A date fixed for the subsequent Saturday. They saw the same movie, but this time they paid attention to one another and not to the screen.

She was the first girl he kissed. Proper kisses. Lips parted, the feeling of a tongue other than your own. Later, in the darkened hallway of her house, there behind the front door, her parents out for the evening, she removed her bra and let him touch her perfect breasts.

And then later: the second day of November.

'Tonight,' she said. They sat together on a narrow wooden bench at the end of Carlisle Street near the park.

He looked at her, his head to one side as if bearing a weight on his shoulder.

'Did you ever . . .' she said. 'You know . . . did you ever have sex before?'

'In my mind,' he whispered. 'With you. A thousand times. Yes.'

She laughed. 'Seriously. For real, John, for real.'

He shook his head. 'No. You?'

She reached out and touched his face. 'Tonight,' she whispered. 'The first time for both of us.'

They fell into a rhythm, as if this was somehow familiar territory. It was not, but it didn't matter, for discovery was as much a part of the journey as the destination. Perhaps more than half.

She stood ahead of him and she held out her arms to close around him, but he smiled and moved to the right, and he stood beside her so she could rest her head against his shoulder.

'You smell great,' he said, and she laughed, and said, 'Good. I wouldn't want to smell bad.'

'You are—'

Ssshhh, she mouthed, and pressed her finger to his lips, and she kissed him, and he could feel her hand on the flat of his stomach, and he pulled her in closer.

They made love for the first time.

She said it did not hurt, but the sound she made when he pushed himself inside her told him something different.

And then they found the rhythm, and though it seemed to last no time at all it didn't matter.

They did it again later, and it lasted so much longer, and then they slept while her parents stayed overnight in Long Island City and were none the wiser.

John Costello woke in the early hours of the morning. He woke Nadia McGowan just so they could talk. Just so they could appreciate the time they had together.

She told him she wanted to sleep, and he let her.

Had she known she would be dead before the month was out . . . if she had known, she perhaps would have stayed awake.

He remembers so many things, which – he is sure – is the only reason he keeps his job.

He is an index.

He is an encyclopedia.

He is a dictionary.

He is a map of the human heart and what can be done to punish it.

He was sixteen when she died. She was his first love. The only one he really, really loved. He convinced himself of that. It didn't take much effort.

He has been through everything a thousand times and he knows it was not his fault.

It happened on the same bench, the one at the end of Carlisle Street near the park.

He could go right back there now, in his mind or in person, and he could feel something, or he could feel nothing at all.

It changed him. Of course it did. It made him curious about the nature of things, about why things happened. Why people love and hate and kill and lie and hurt and bleed, and why they betray one another, and why they steal one another's husbands and wives and children.

The world had changed.

When he was a kid it was like this: A child's trike on the corner of the street. Mom must have called the kid for supper. A passer-by would pick it up, set it to the edge of the sidewalk for later collection, so as no-one would fall over it and hurt themselves. A simple, nostalgic smile. A memory of their own childhood perhaps. Never a second thought.

And now, the first thought would be abduction. The child snatched inside a single heartbeat, bundled wholesale into the back of a car. The trike was all that would remain of them. The child would be found in three weeks' time – beaten, abused, strangled.

The neighborhood had changed. The world had changed.

John Costello believed that they were the ones who'd changed it.

After the death of Nadia McGowan the community fell apart. Her death seemed to mark the end of all they held important. People no longer brought their children to The Connemara. They stayed home.

His father watched it come to pieces, and though he tried to reach John it didn't really work. Perhaps his mother would have found him, hiding within whatever world he had created for himself.

But she was gone.

Gone for good.

Like Nadia, which was Russian for hope.