

# Bittersweet Brooklyn: Coney Island

*In this chapter, Thelma and her future husband Philip go on their first date. He doesn't yet know that her brother is a criminal, and Phil has his own secrets.*

*1923*

The following summer, Thelma and Phil visited Coney Island on their first date away from Pitkin Avenue. It was one of those sunny Sundays that appeared endless, a gateway to a better, happier adulthood. Phil offered to pick her up on Montauk Avenue. He lived a mile away in a fine two-story brick row house with double windows overlooking tree-lined Wyona Street, having by then revealed that he was the middle son of a successful Rumanian immigrant who owned apartment buildings, which accounted for the fancy gloves.

Thelma declined Phil's offer. She didn't trust Annie with strangers, particularly those of whom she was fond and wanted to impress. Her sister the shamer would interrogate him about his intentions for her skinny little sister, mock his hat, or probe into his father's finances. Entering Montauk Avenue represented hostile territory where the women's low opinion held Thelma hostage. As she'd leaped out the front door, her sister had squawked, "Cover those toothpick legs."

Ignoring her, Thelma skipped down the street and rode the new subway to the sea for a nickel. At the final stop, Phil awaited her by the turnstiles. His dismayed face cracked a grin when he saw her, as if he'd been as nervous as she was about being ditched, as if this adventure

represented as much to him as it did to her. It meant everything, even if she tried to quash her enthusiasm and expect the inevitable disappointment for which Annie had prepared her.

Phil was on time and well dressed in the middle of the day, pleats in his pants and a handkerchief in his breast pocket. Annie had never dated a man so fine. Thelma let herself gloat that this looker under the Panama hat had been waiting just for her, even if that brief bliss made her fear he would immediately withdraw. Don't give yourself a *keyn eynhore*, she thought, the evil eye that spoiled everything one treasured.

*Don't want him or he won't be yours.* It was such a twisted way of thinking she'd inherited—this mistrust of joy. It had no apparent impact on Abie. If there'd been an evil eye, he'd once bragged, he would have spit in it. He had no time for old-world superstitions in Brooklyn. But she was different. And yet she didn't want to hex this date; she was putting her best self forward, lively enough but not so excited that she'd scare Philip away. When she pushed open the gate, he lit up a matinee-idol smile that sent sparks shining into his dark eyes.

They joined the hordes pouring down the street from the end of the subway line, crushing toward the shore. Most other visitors carried food baskets, beach balls, and umbrellas, herding brats and the elderly, heading to the sand, their swimming costumes puckering their street clothes because they couldn't afford the price of a changing room. Unburdened, Philip grabbed her hand. It felt awkward at first. She was so hyperaware of their connection, her left palm in his right, that she almost didn't feel the press of any other bodies for the touch of his.

As the crowd carried them along, Thelma's purse tucked under her free arm, full of coins nicked from Annie's secret jar, he said, "The beach is for suckers." They agreed: she was no Miss Coney Island sunbathing on the sand, *shvitsing*, being pecked by pigeons and prodded by other people's kids.

In the past, when she'd come to the beach with Annie and Mama, her bare body in a bathing costume had shamed her: the spindly legs, angular hips, tiny breast buds she'd waited impatiently to grow. They hadn't. She'd felt uncomfortable on the hot sand, wanting to hide beneath her towel. Vulnerability had been a dangerous condition around Annie and Mama as they carped on the physiques of the people strolling past, laughing at this one's little pecker visible in swim trunks too small, that one's jiggling fat rolls as she lunged for a rogue rubber ball. *Meeskait*, they'd pronounce, *little ugly one*. *What a tuchus*, they'd say and point at someone with a seat that could fill a subway car. And yet, the pair hadn't been bathing beauties, either: the walrus and the sea lion. Mama covered in a floral muumuu and Annie squeezed like a sausage into a swimsuit one size too small, revealing back fat that she didn't notice from the front, impressed by her own cleavage.

Oblivious to their own looks, Annie and Mama had judged Thelma—scrawny, knobby kneed, titless. Their voices had permeated her thoughts so that she'd been constantly comparing and contrasting herself to the parade of bodies, filling her alternately with envy and disgust. That self-consciousness had scraped away the joy of sun and sand. And waves, of which she'd been justifiably terrified. Like her kin, she'd never learned to swim. Who would have taught her? It had been hard enough for her mother to learn English; the ocean itself had been a foreign language.

Many summers back, when Thelma had still played with buckets of water at the ocean's edge, the littlest Rosenzweig boy had drowned. One minute he'd been digging with his toes for sand crabs and the next he'd disappeared, last seen by a stranger with his curly head bobbing far into the tide before anyone raised the alarm with the lifeguards. The young cousin who'd been left to watch the smaller child melted into tears, carrying two drippy ice cream bars until all he

had was two sticks and an eternity of guilt. The doomed lad had been marked for life: the one who killed his cousin, a child who'd never cried a night in his life, an angel, destined one day to be a banker, a lawyer, a *macher*. Those who'd died young were angels; the devils grew up. Husbands that couldn't be trusted around other women became saints to their widows when they entered an early grave, escaping the nagging of existence.

As long as Thelma avoided the sand, she loved Coney Island. Beside Phil, she smelled fat frying at Nathan's, kosher dogs, knishes. She'd felt less self-conscious about her body because fashion had caught up with her figure: clothes suited her slim frame, especially the drop-waist dotted swiss she'd sewn over the last three nights and worn that day. It revealed her calves and shapely ankles above cutaway T-straps she'd dyed canary yellow when they could no longer pass as white. Phil wore a three-piece khaki summer suit—she didn't know another man who had pants so light, so vulnerable to dirt. She could hear Annie's voice in her own head: *What if he spills something?* Phil breezily angled his Panama hat low over his right eye, not quite cocky but not just another man in the crowd.

They paused to watch a bowler-hatted barker hawk his freak show—the bearded lady, the world's thinnest man, a human corkscrew, whatever that was. But Phil led them on, past the man hammering five-inch nails into his *schnoz* for free on the stage before the canvas tent. She couldn't help peeking at the performer's bald head out of the corner of her eye.

For all the noise and distraction, what she felt most intensely was Phil's large hand in hers, dry and cool despite the late June heat, casual. He had this day covered. He knew where they were going. She only needed to follow—and have faith in him. Even if they weren't meant to last forever, even if he never asked her out again, she surrendered to that single Sunday, to being connected to a beautiful if mysterious man. She wasn't alone. The excitement of all those people,

those children, to have a free afternoon under the sun, eating buttery corn straight off the cob burned from the grill and drinking fizzy soda, talking loud and laughing louder, jumping the waves, playing catch. Shabbos had been behind them, and the workweek, the unemployment line, would never arrive. In a world driven by yesterday and tomorrow, the distant *shtetl* across the ocean and the successful future just out of reach, there were these golden hours. The sky didn't disappoint. A sweet westerly breeze blew them a kiss.

Phil slipped through the throng, leading Thelma through the amusement park, past the haunted house's obscene devil's tongue to the no-name bar fronting the new boardwalk. When they procured a metal table out front, she sipped root beer beneath an umbrella's shade, feeling nearly attractive in his reflective glow. He ordered limeade in a thick-bottomed glass and, because it was Prohibition and alcohol sales were forbidden, he topped the drink off with vodka from a silver flask. She looked away to keep from staring: his narrow, clean-shaven face that ended in a square chin, dark eyes deep beneath thick, expressive brows, his shiny black hair slicked back like Valentino's when he removed his hat.

She might have already loved him then, just the surface beauty and the lazy self-possessed way he poked fun at all the people who soldiered past, sandy and dripping out of their ill-fitting swimsuits, naming the animals they resembled, strange beasts like okapis and marmosets. He called himself the albino because he was so pale, and she argued that he shouldn't knock himself because he was so handsome. At least she hadn't said "dreamy," but she still blushed because she'd given herself away. He didn't seem to notice, looking out to the Atlantic beyond that mass of bodies crawling over themselves like drones without a queen.

He drank through the afternoon and only got more charming. Her cheeks hurt from laughing; she must have given him a bruise from how frequently she punched his arm. She hardly noticed

his narrow hands shaking as he evaded any questions about his family on Wyona Street. He stuck to current affairs and politics, passionately denouncing the self-interest of bankers, an issue that couldn't have been further from her mind. She knew no one who worked in a bank, although she knew the unemployed men who gathered in front of the Brooklyn Savings & Loan Association arguing socialism versus communism, hoping to be hired as day laborers. She knew newspaper salesmen and jewelers and thieves, not apartment building owners like his father.

Beneath the table, she kept her T-straps near his tan bucks. But she never made the first move. She didn't want to scare him away. As dusk fell, he helped her up and they strolled, arm in arm. She admired the fun land's jewel-toned fairy lights, the enchanted Wonder Wheel, filled with little human ants smooching or spitting on the chumps below. As they walked together, lazily, leaning on each other, they seemed to change from two separate people into a couple without words to barter the arrangement. All she could see was him in the twilight, the gentleman in the well-cut khaki suit. Everything else was lights and whistles, whirling blurs. He changed her entire balance, ripped her from the not-good-enough noise in her head.

They made a handsome couple in a way she'd never experienced alone. She with her bobbed hair and kohl-rimmed green eyes, long lashes, pale skin, red lips; he, tall and lanky, broad shouldered, with that Transylvanian pallor. His lips were red for a man's, in that long face now darkened by bristles. They matched. It was as if they, just the pair, not their parents, grandparents, sisters and brothers, had been family—just Phil and Thelma. That was enough.

Entering Nathan's to buy nickel frankfurters, they joined a line fifteen deep as the mob stopped on their way home, fulfilling the day's final promise. Across Surf Avenue, the carousel produced the saddest jolly music in the world. Thelma felt a hollow in her stomach like a hunger that couldn't be satisfied with frankfurters. Her loneliness returned, the low after the high, a

wave of doubts washing over her. Phil had grown quiet. His eyes seemed pensive and distant, his lashes wet. His hand remained on her shoulder to protect her from the crush, but the gesture seemed absentminded, as if he'd been here before with other girls.

Across the street, the merry-go-round slowed between rides. The organ music became lethargic: *the end is near, the end is near*. In line at Nathan's, a tough guy with a fight-flattened nose pivoted from the front counter. He clumsily sluiced pickle juice on her new dress. She'd raised her right fist and opened her mouth to give the fella hell. The bruiser braced for a fight despite holding a semiwrapped pickle in one hand and three dogs in paper sleeves in the other.

Phil interceded. "It's only a shift, even if it's a very pretty one. No one ever died from a little dill on a dress."

Cowed by Phil's manners, the bruiser apologized by sharing two of his three franks. Philip accepted graciously. He held the treats aloft as the pair slithered out to the stand-and-eat counters that rimmed the stand. Surrounded by the buzzy crowd, they chewed their mustard-drenched dogs in silence.

"Don't say I never gave you anything," Phil teased, wiping mustard from her mouth.

"You never gave me anything," she said. And then her words tumbled, unfiltered—"except the best day ever. Spray me with ketchup and I wouldn't care."

"Tempting as that offer is, I'll pass."

"I don't want to leave yet, Phil."

"We can't: What's Coney Island without riding the carousel?"

"That's kid stuff," she said with a tough-girl growl, shaking her head dismissively. She lied. How could she confess how much it meant? She'd never ridden a carousel. Annie's voice: *A*

*waste of money. It's over in a minute.* She wanted that ride so much she feared making a fool of herself.

“You’re never too old,” he said. She gathered their trash and tossed it gingerly in a barrel swarmed by yellow jackets, fearing their stingers. They started toward the subway, past the sword swallower and the fire breather. She took his hand, abandoning all pretense, and said, “Can we go for one ride, please?”

“Anything you want, sweet cheeks,” he said. They spun around, jaywalked across Surf Avenue, and joined a serpentine line. To their left, the gilt-and-mirror-trimmed carousel circled, casting mad reflections of the riders’ gleeful grins. When their turn finally arrived, they surrendered blue paper tickets, but others had claimed all the prized prancing ponies that moved up and down. She panicked and began to run around like the loser in musical chairs. But Phil found her an available perch. He boosted her onto a stationary rooster, which was not quite the steed of her dreams. Then he stood beside her, his hand on the fowl’s painted saddle.

When the ride began to lurch forward, she held tightly to the pole. That was when he kissed the ringlet at her nape. She felt his lips’ softness, the damp tickle. But the gesture didn’t make her woozy with affection. She flinched, thinking: that was it. The sun set, the moon rose, and the moves began. Annie’s voice squawked, *He’s like every other punter making a play.*

Sure, Phil was slower and slicker, but maybe she wasn’t worth the rush. With her bobbed hair and short skirt, her kohl-rimmed eyes, perhaps he’d considered her a dime-store vamp from the very first hello at Gertz’s.

After kissing her, he rested his hand where his lips had been, rubbing her neck softly. She twisted to look at him, feeling foolish astride that big chicken. She stared straight into his eyes,

where she'd recognized a vulnerability that matched her own. She read a plea for mutual understanding and an escape from loneliness. It didn't seem cynical or carnal.

"I'm not who you think I am," he said softly as the ride slowed, the words nearly drowned by the crush of children rushing to exit. She ignored the warning. He grasped her by the waist and lifted her off the seat. When her T-straps touched the floor, it felt like the ride was still moving. Her knees buckled, but that wasn't why she laughed. Because she wasn't the shopgirl he thought she was, either. She was Little Yiddle's little sister.