

## An American Dream.

The bagel shop felt warm and welcoming as I sat sipping creamy-hot Chai tea and gradually recovered from the chill wind that blows so cruelly in the northeast. I had only lived in Massachusetts for a few months and was already missing my old life in England, the fresh greenness year-round and the overt friendliness of the people.

Glancing up from the newspaper's help wanted section, I caught sight of a man and a woman shuffle in, she in front wearing shoes trodden down at the heel and he in an ill-fitting jacket and pants that were from another's life, perhaps via a thrift store. Her clothes matched his, not in style, but in their dirty drabness and patches of heavy wear. She ordered one bagel and a coffee and paid for them with copper and silver colored coins, carefully counted out into a shop assistant's patient outstretched hand. The assistant, a young girl with bright eyes and a gentle smile exchanged none of the usual comments with them, or they with her.

The woman approached the table next to me without acknowledging my presence, and eased herself into the inadequate gap between bench and table. With a quiet groan, she took the weight off her feet and settled in. Looking up, she gestured to the man to sit opposite her. He stood motionless a few feet from the chair, head bowed, indecisive and looking uncomfortable. He waited, as if not knowing how to complete the next three steps, or what mechanism to employ to make them happen.

The pair might have seen only fifty winters, but it seemed as if life, unfair as it was, had in that time dealt them seventy. Their cheeks, sallow despite the cold outside, grey eyes colorless and unkempt hair, made me wonder about the life they led in what I still believed was the land of opportunity.

I glanced back to her, trying not to stare, hiding in the anonymity of my newspaper, with one eye snapping a new frame every few seconds. She smiled vacantly and stirred her coffee with reverence, as if it was the elixir of life. She held the paper cup as a priest holds a holy vessel at communion. I saw her head move as it lowered towards the cup, taking in the fresh aroma and feeling its steamy warmth on her face and then her attention returned to the man. A smile gently parted her thin lips and she looked at the man as mother regards her sick child.

"Come on Billy. Sit down. Here, next to me," she coaxed, lowering her head again towards the source of her comfort and adding, "Coffee's getting cold. Come and have some bagel."

I saw that she had carefully split it in two and placed the larger piece on a paper napkin in front of the empty chair.

The man stood with one foot firmly planted, the other heel rose as if to move forward. Nothing happened; his stare remained unfocused on her. She had turned her body, ready to lift her heavy frame from the comfort of the solid bench. Her mouth still smiled, but a different smile, questioning, her head angled towards one side, and her eyes, like melting snow, glistened. When she spoke, her weak voice sounded as if years of suffering were distilled into that single moment.

"Oh, Bill'eeee, don't be mean. Come and sit down. Oh please, Bill'eeee don't be mean to me."

She continued to search his face, waiting for a response and when it came, she sank back onto her seat. The man, little by little, completed his journey and sat on the wooden chair opposite her.

Her expression once again became benign, but was now devoid of the earlier happiness. She pushed the cup towards him. He picked it up, raising it purposely to his lips, and put it down again without tasting the contents. The man opened his mouth, his lips and tongue forming words that at first had no sound as he struggled to make them whole.

“G...g...gunna g...gho.” He squeezed out the words from his throat and with them threw down a challenge that caused her face to magnify the hurt she must have felt deep inside her heart.

“Bill’eee, please stay, Bill’eee. Please stay with me.”

The man said nothing, sitting passively, his face betraying no feeling.

“Bill’eee don’t go... please. Don’t be mean, Bill’ee. Please stay, just for coffee. I won’t speak. Won’t say anything, just stay and drink some coffee.”

Then more slowly, her eyes filling, she said, “Please, don’t be so mean Bill’eee.”

The man put both hands on the table, gripping its rounded edge, using it to push his chair back and, beginning to stand, he leaned forward until his face was level with hers.

“G...going out s...side.”

She reached out and touched his hand. He snatched it away as if remembering the stab of a hypodermic needle.

“Please Bill’eee. Oh Bill’eee. Please stay.”

The woman struggled to control her emotions, not in the way I would to avoid a scene in a crowded eatery, but as if in an attempt to deny the power of his words over her. She was unaware that her pleading told only of the frailty of her own existence.

He rose, leaving the coffee, the bagel that she had split in two and the woman crying quietly into a coarse brown paper napkin, which must have felt as hard and unyielding as the man in her life.

“Oh Billy,” she mouthed as she watched him standing outside, huddled against the cold as he waited for her to finish her coffee.

I lowered my eyes to the newspaper, unable to see any words through the unwelcome mist that had invaded them and thought of my home now so far away and of the people I cared for and that I had abandoned for my American dream.