

CAROUSEL

The twirling horses floated on silver rods with a mechanical jingle, and Jude made another lap around the grounds of the Mount Carmel festival in Brooklyn's old Italian neighborhood. He was explaining to his daughter Amelia, heavy-hearted and heavy in his arms, the reason why couldn't let her take the shot at the bottle toss. Then someone caught his wrist and slipped something between his arm and his body. It was that garish, red-lipped woman again, "No, I'm still not interested, thanks! Parlor tricks and thievery, all of it, Amelia, I'm telling you." Before he could hand the brown paper box back, Madame Magdalena had disappeared into the crowd or some other dimension entirely.

Jude opened it on the walk back after getting Amelia a soft serve and relating his childhood memories of the old ice cream truck that used to tempt him every day. As he ripped open the first fold of the box, "That song would get stuck in my mind. Maybe that's why I'm so neurotic. One reason."

"What's new-rock-tick?"

"Neurotic? It's like, mental illness that's not so bad and all your own fault."

The box was empty, save for the feeling it gave him—instant nausea and a weakness that grew with every step. He and Amelia said goodnight to their neighbor smoking a cigarette out the first-floor window. By the time they reached the third floor, sweat soaked his brow. He put Amelia to bed with a short bedtime story and felt like passing out. He knew he couldn't. He readied Amelia's breakfast, lunch, and dinner and put them on the lowest shelf of the refrigerator. He left a vague message with her mother that she might have to pick her up tomorrow, reminding her of Amelia's ballet class and how she liked her Sunday spaghetti. Finally, he drew up one of Amelia's whiteboards with all the letters of the alphabet, a small mirror, and his cellphone, charged with the lock screen turned off and the dial pad open. He crawled into bed and fell asleep.

Jude woke up under the overpass on a moving blanket and a stack of soggy Clive Cussler books. His first thought: all that prep-work for nothing, or most of it at least. Jude took stock of himself. Furry paws, shaggy brown coat, everything in black and white. Ok, he thought. He knew he had no time to investigate the existential questions, such as how did his consciousness map itself on this old mutt? His findings would mean nothing if he didn't find a way back into his body. More importantly, he couldn't have his daughter grow up thinking he abandoned her.

He took a lap around the block to get the hang of his new gait. Once he could work up to a gallop, he ran to the place where he could find his salvation.

The lights that had raced in green, blue, red, yellow circles with the speed of a firing synapsis now rested in pieces on the blacktop, which Jude paced through. He wound around the mounds of trash, petrified into a dried paste by the rain alongside the curly-cue-strawed cups sold the night before, chewed skewers, ripped tickets, claimed and dropped prizes, condoms, used. Everything done with—and then, there on his right, the booth which promised the future. The night before, below this all-seeing eye in a triangle, Jude had said, "No thanks, I'm good," to the free urgent palm reading. Even if she had information he needed from the beyond, Jude did not believe in the mystic, for one, and secondly, he was much too afraid of it. He felt unnaturally sensitive to the potential ghosts floating around him, of them possessing him, of him giving them attention on accident and inciting their rage. He'd just go over and over the possibilities in his mind. And now, as a canine, when he needed to speak with her, she was gone. He jumped up and pawed at the closed awning.

“Hey, Bingo,” came a brash scold. “Knock it off.”

There she was, sitting in a doorway, smoking a cigarillo on a long, silver holder and tossing around the hem of her skirt folded around her. He tried speaking, but it came out as a bark, yelp, yelp, bark, whine. She understood and said, “Yes, I placed a curse on you—”

Yeah, I got that, Jude barked. One of those body transformations. Or is it a switch? Is my body still somewhere? Is a deranged dog running the controls?

“—If you ever want your humanity back, you must—”

Yeah, yeah, I’m familiar with the genre. Learn an important lesson.

“—Your ways.”

Please, give me a hint. Is it because I was short with you? My daughter will be waking up soon. You got to come up with some other curse for divorced dads.

She gathered her skirt, opened the door, and left him alone outside.

He made it back in time to witness his personal catastrophe—his ex-wife showing up in a fit of rage and anxiety, rushing up the steps, explaining as best she could to the downstairs neighbor, and getting him to open the door. A few minutes later, she came down with Amelia, who was more confused than upset. She clutched a plush puppy and cried, “Where’s Daddy?”

Jude ran up to them and whined, looking into her eyes and trying to paw at the puppy. *It’s me, it’s me!* His ex pushed him off with a forceful knee and vowed to call the pound. Still, he thought about jumping in the car as she buckled Amelia in. That’d get him put down—or worse, shipped off and adopted, locked in. As the door closed and the van peeled out, he realized he was a professional street dog now. He raced after them, barking—not saying anything at all.

He spent the summer days making friends with vendors, and once he had a hot dog or some halal meat in his belly, he could think straight about his lesson. No one could say he was not a caring, attentive parent. Even now, he risked the persnickety residents of Brooklyn Heights just to watch Amelia walk to school, suffering the usual daily anxiety when she disappeared behind the doors. The rest of the day, he looked for opportunities to brighten the days of people around him. Maybe he’d been too solipsistic, too focused on his career to be good to them. And given it was his exchange with Madame Magdalena that started all of this, he focused on those in service and entertainment. He kept the man who sold limoncello in McCarren Park company. He licked the calloused hands of the lonesome, blind guitarist at the foot of an above-ground subway stop. And stayed long past the scraps thrown to him to entertain the line cooks on their smoke breaks. But there were no signs he was making any progress, none of the spiritual sensations he used to feel as a human at the thought of something spiritual. When he watched Amelia’s sixth birthday from a safe distance around a charcoal grill at the park, he decided to change course. Maybe, he thought, it was a deeper error.

That night, he hid under the shadows of an overpass and identified his greatest flaw: passivity. Being assertive as a dog seemed a great challenge. He started taking risks. In the fall, he bussed uneaten brunch from outdoor tables to his neighbors without homes and dragged blankets and heavy canvas to them in the winter. He barked and snarled at cat-callers, earning a kick to the ribs on more than one occasion. And he ventured to collect the abandoned toys from playgrounds and left them on the steps of buildings where children lived, including Amelia’s. Jude hoped the parents would take a chance, clean it, and give it a second life.

The concept felt meaningful and global—maybe this was the lesson, not some trivial personal flaw. But when the anniversary of his transformation came along and he’d single-handedly recycled the loose materials on the streets, distributed lost goods, and thought long and hard about the beauty of redemption, he was still a dog. He howled, feeling like the crucified

Jesus on the Mount Carmel tower until the brass band stomped in and scattered him and the pigeons off. Neither the Madame nor the booth were there this year, just a psychic who darted a cigarette at him. In a panic, he switched back to his original theory and delighted the carnival workers as best he could.

The next morning, he strolled through stacks of books at a flea market and wondered if he'd made any progress on any of his theories, sniffing at the philosophy, literary, psychology, and self-help titles he'd read and had allegedly (when he talked about them) made a significant impact in his human life. He thought of an old girlfriend who repotted her plants what felt like every week, checking for growth and disease, rotating them in the sun, adding lime, adding lava rocks, repotting, repotting.

Amelia and her mother moved to Manhattan the next fall and Jude experienced the loneliest cruelest winter. Hunger was lodged in his stomach like the song of the ice cream truck. Survival was a choice he made. One night, he passed out under a merry-go-round because he was too weak, tired, and bitter to find a single pizza crust. He awoke with a ratty coat on top of him.

The next morning, he gave up on his theories and search for lessons. From then on, all he decided was where he wanted to roam. He'd check on the cooks and do tricks for them if they called him over. Or saddle up to the subway artist when his especially soulful notes serenaded no one at all. One day, he slipped on the subway at 2:30 a.m., rode it to Coney Island to sleep in the warm sand, swim, and walk the promenade. He admired the murals composed of glass, tile, sand, and concrete arranged into a great big whale or dolphin. He looked through the fence at the men slapping the ball, grunting, and circling, reorienting themselves to each other and the wall. He wanted to play, and he remembered he'd thought that the last time he came here as a human. He thought of himself as a repotted plant.

Maybe it was the dog brain taking over but often his long, ambitious or anxious internal dialogues had been replaced with images. Somedays he felt doll missing eye, other days, red bicycles. Somedays he was the re-potter; others, repotted plant. Animal control, chip bag, ice cream truck, painted wooden horse, sand, water, wind. Once, while scratching himself with his hind legs in the dusty corner of a park, he had an unusually long thought: all my thinking, all this language was an extrapolation or justification of these images. Most days now, following the sun and his mood, he just felt like brown dog.

Several years later, he was lounging by his old building, where he could usually count on a loaf or sausage from his old neighbor, when a brown-haired 12-year-old walked up the street. Looks like Amelia would look, he thought. He jumped to his feet. He ran up to her and circled her, peering into her face and wagging his tail.

“Chien-chien!” she cried.

His heart sank and the rest of the family came around the corner. He lingered, drawn to the grandmother, a 6-foot-tall woman with long, silver hair, gold, opal, and amethyst rings adorning her fingers, and a strong aura of sage. He sneezed his dog sneeze. And even after that, his whole body was racing blue, red, yellow, green. He felt wall ball, his mind to hers. Whiteboard. Brown paper box—closed, now open.

“You know I can hear you,” she said, “Why don't you say anything?”

“I was listening.”