

Requiem for a Dreamland

by Gabriel Cohen

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When I first saw the Freak, he was looking spry and cheerful, which was surprising, considering that his boss was exhorting passersby to shoot him. "Step right up!" the man growled in a fierce Brooklyn accent. "Shoot a Live Human Target!" Customers peered over the edge of the sun-broiled Coney Island boardwalk, down into a vacant lot between two small brick buildings. There the teenaged Freak dodged and darted, ducking occasionally behind a rusted old water heater to escape the line of fire. (Actually, the bullets were just paintballs, but they still hit with a loud *smack!*)

There was clearly something raffish and disreputable about this "amusement," but such traits have long constituted part of the appeal of the most legendary playground on earth. For nearly a century the residents of New York City have been able to ride a subway train to the end of the line and emerge in a seaside zone populated by carnies and freaks and wild women, a place where they can be temporarily freed from mundane responsibilities. With Times Square now stripped of its peep shows and made safe for tourists in Bermuda shorts, for the past few years Coney Island has enjoyed a freedom from competition—it's the city's great unrestrained *id*.

The legendary Cyclone rollercoaster still writhes and rattles like a twisted snake, and sideshow barkers coax passersby to gawk at Insectavora and Ula the Painproof Rubber Girl, but this summer has marked a crucial turning point in the resort's history: it risks being tamed like its Manhattan cousin. A stone's throw from the boardwalk, a long blue plywood wall conceals a newly vacant lot, former site of a good chunk of amusement property. *For Rent* signs mark the facades of souvenir emporiums on nearby Surf Avenue. Thor Equities, a prominent New York development company, has already acquired \$120 million of land beneath the current entertainments and is doing its best to buy up what's left. Fans of legendary Coney turn a wary eye on the company's touted vision of a safe, gleaming, and grit-free new resort.

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Speaking of visions, if I could have witnessed only one moment in Coney Island's history, I would have stood on the boardwalk at eight in the evening on May 16, 1903, when two hundred and fifty thousand incandescent bulbs in magical strings suddenly winked on over the boardwalk, outlining the minarets and pleasure domes of an enchanted Moorish village, a new attraction called Luna Park. Coney Island was about to enter its Golden Age.

By the late 1800s, resort hotels and a few primitive amusement parks had begun springing up on a sandy peninsula at the southern tip of Brooklyn, nine miles from Manhattan. It faced the Atlantic Ocean, and was named after the wild rabbits, or *coney*s, which used to proliferate there. Crime and vice also soon ran rampant, earning it the sobriquet of "Sodom by the Sea."

One notable attraction was a hotel in the shape of a giant elephant, with rooms distributed throughout its body, but the fantastical apparitions that would make Coney Island world famous did not reach their peak until the first two decades of the next century, when three major parks, created by rival impresarios, competed for huge crowds. First came Steeplechase Park, famous for an attraction that let delighted customers jockey mechanical horses along an undulating metal track, and for its Trip to the Moon, which simulated a voyage to a green-cheese planet populated by midgets. Then came Luna Park, which featured a chute-ride down into a magnificent lagoon, as well as a Great Naval Spectatorium, in which American ships fought simulated battles against the rest of the world. And finally there was Dreamland, a classical extravaganza in white, which offered Venetian canals, a train ride up the Swiss Alps, an erupting Mount Vesuvius, a wild animal pavilion, real tribespeople from all over the world, 600 veterans of the Boer War recreating their most famous battles, and—its most popular attraction—an Infant Incubator, which publically displayed premature live babies. Here's another surreal scene I'd love to have witnessed: Sigmund Freud, in 1909, strolling beneath the dazzling arches of Dreamland.

At night, the parks were so brightly lit that Coney Island gave off a glow that could be seen thirty miles out to sea, earning it the title City of Fire. Unfortunately, it was also the city of fires: one after another, the great parks, built of lath and cheap plywood, succumbed to cataclysmic infernos. (The morning after the devastation of the original Steeplechase Park in 1907, its adaptable creator George C. Tilyou posted the following sign: *To inquiring friends: I have troubles today that I did not have yesterday. I had troubles yesterday that I have not today. On this site will be erected shortly a better, bigger, greater Steeplechase Park. Admission to the burning ruins: ten cents.*)

The Golden Age did not last long, and fires were not the only reason. The booming technology of the new century soon gave city residents new means of diversion. They didn't have to leave their own neighborhoods in order to be transported by television or by air-conditioned movie theaters. And they didn't have to flock to Coney to be treated to mock exotic locales; they could travel by automobile and airplane and discover the real deal for themselves. Still, the resort continued to draw citizens eager to escape the city heat, and to visit the great rollercoasters, the Cyclone and the Thunderbolt and the Tornado; to take a spin high above the beach on the mighty 150-foot-tall Wonder Wheel; to scream in glee as they plummeted from the even-taller Parachute Jump, which resembled the skeleton of a giant mushroom and was fondly known as Brooklyn's Eiffel tower. The crowds reached record capacity on July 4, 1947, when 1,300,000 sweating New Yorkers blanketed the beach. The visitors liked to smooch it up too, inspiring the hit song "Under the Boardwalk," as well as winking references to "Coney Island whitefish" (floating condoms).

By the mid-Seventies, though, Coney had reached a sad low tide. The great amusement parks had all closed down, New York City suffered a major financial crash, and the boardwalk plunged into a severe decline, marked by roving gangs (as seen in the film "The Warriors") and drugs ("Requiem for a Dream").

In the 1980s, as so often happens in New York, boisterous and energetic artists spearheaded a revival of the crumbling neighborhood. They mounted shows and painted murals, staged concerts and wacky events, reinvigorated the

art of the sideshow, and drew a whole new generation to the area. In 2001, a new minor league baseball stadium opened (featuring the Brooklyn Cyclones), which gave the quarter another much-needed boost.

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Today, the amusement area is relatively humble, comprising just a few square blocks. Though the Wonder Wheel still spins, only one rollercoaster remains, and the other limited, rather shabby attractions—two small parks crammed with kiddie rides, video arcades, and modest games of skill—can't begin to rival those of the resort's glory years. Even so, Coney Island still throbs with life. Families pack the boardwalk, and children cram the rides. The boater hats and bowties of the early years have been replaced with basketball shorts and baseball caps, but—as always—New Yorkers come out in search of an ocean breeze and a few cheap thrills.

When I was an adolescent, on a family vacation, I was delighted to see a pretty woman casually shed her top on the beach at England's Brighton Pier, and I'm reminded of that sexual highlight every June when the Mermaid Parade passes along Coney Island's Surf Avenue. The friendly bacchanal features throngs of hip young women in skimpy sea-themed costumes, with bewitching mermaid tails and clamshell bras. (Near-naked *mermen* provide eye candy for the ladies in the crowd.) For another Not-Safe-For-Work kick, I could visit the burlesque shows at Sideshows by the Seashore, or watch Diamond Donny V, a.k.a. The Human Blockhead, hammer a long nail up his nose.

Last Sunday, though, I just went out to roam the boardwalk, to merge with the great river of humanity that still promenades there, squinting into the sun. Coney Island is the ideal place to witness New York's staggeringly international makeup. I wandered among Indian women in bright saris, cute Japanese girls sporting *Hello Kitty* T-shirts, and barrel-chested Russians, who had strolled over from neighboring Brighton Beach, which has become known as Little Odessa for its large community of emigrés. Near the defunct but still towering Parachute Jump, a group of Puerto Ricans had circled together—as they do every weekend—for an impromptu salsa jam session. Suave white-haired couples spun each other around to the beat of congas and cowbells. Coney on a weekend is a crazy-quilt of sounds that would overwhelm a blind visitor: seagulls caw into the breeze, rides buzz and whir and clang, kids scream, and bumper car rides blare the latest R 'n' B hits.

Feeling hungry, I considered buying a hot dog, a mass-market treat pioneered here by Charles Feltman way back in 1867 (he called them Coney Island Red Hots). This summer, thirty thousand people showed up to witness the 92nd annual Nathan's hot dog eating competition, a world-renowned event which adds gluttony to Coney's other low-rent vices. Winner Joey Chestnut managed to cram sixty-six dogs (and buns) into his maw in just twelve minutes. The thought did little for my appetite, and I opted instead for a little sidewalk taco stand presided over by several stocky Mexican women endowed with the regal faces of their Mayan ancestors. I capped my meal at a gruff open-fronted boardwalk bar called Cha-Cha's, where a wall bore a cast photo from "The Sopranos"; I enjoyed an ice-cold can of cheap beer alongside some paunchy, grizzled regulars who could easily have passed for cast members. We gazed out across the boardwalk

to the sunstruck beach, packed with New Yorkers gyrating to boomboxes, playing volleyball, or just lying on the sand like small beached whales as a week's worth of workaday tension seeped away into the sand.

Whatever happens to Coney in the next few years, the beach will remain popular, the Cyclone will still awe riders, and the landmarked Wonder Wheel and Parachute Jump will stand, but change is transforming the rest. Bulldozers are at work; they have already demolished a go-cart track, a miniature golf course, and some baseball batting cages, and the rest of the existing rides and games are soon to disappear. Some local business owners have been happy to sell out—it has not been easy for them to eke out a living from properties that only produce revenues during the warm summer months, one amusement ticket at a time. The new developer promises to create a world-class, year-round theme park, but the future might also bring hotels, shops, high-rise apartment buildings, and franchise restaurants. These might be an economic boon for a depressed area, but local historical preservationists, concerned that the national treasure may be turned into a glorified shopping mall, have joined with members of the city administration to try to conserve some elements of what makes the area unique. They seem to be having some success, but it's tough to imagine that the new resort will have room or patience for gritty bars, salsa jam sessions, or raucous amusements such as Shoot the Freak. It's easy to make a case for Coney Island's importance as a bastion of urban accessibility, democracy, and brotherly love, but harder to explain how a little raw and seedy charm can prove a valuable tonic for the soul.

Before I leave, I stand on the boardwalk and watch a bunch of seagulls poised in mid-air over the boardwalk, beating against a strong sea breeze. Like them, I feel suspended, waiting to see what the winds of change may bring to the Coney Island I love.