

## Harry, Mark and John

*(I was born on Lou Reed's 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. I was born in London at four thirty in the morning, so maybe it wasn't quite his birthday yet, in New York. Maybe he was just getting ready to celebrate. Maybe he was watching television. Maybe there were fireworks.)*

Three men stand at the edge of the water. Behind them are a bank of sky rockets, a dozen, maybe more, carefully placed in the sand, facing up and out over the water. It is November, cold here, way out at Montauk, past the lovely houses and the lovely people, out to the end of the road, end of this road, where there is a big cliff edge fading to dunes fading to sea. Too far to go home tonight, they'll go back to the city in the morning. They are waiting for night first, waiting for the sky to fully darken. Not long now. The men are staying in a motel just behind the dunes, have taken three units. Each one with a double bed, a small old-fashioned television, and a fridge to hum through the night. This time of the year, so far off-season, they were lucky to get anything. They tried four places before they found one open. This was the least salubrious, with an unwelcoming landlady and units that smell of damp and the ocean and loss. Which is kind of right.

Number One :

Caroline doesn't even bother sneaking out. The apartment in Spring Street is too messy for her, she says. Too dirty. Too tired, she says. Caroline walks out leaving The Man behind her, his arms raised, screaming why at her departing back as she heads down the stairs and out to the subway, their neighbour across the landing has heard this argument before, will hear it again. Caroline walks away, carefully keeping her pace moderate, not hurrying from the shouting of The Man behind her, not hurrying to her destination either. Caroline takes care in her walking, neither speeds nor slows her journey. Only these in-between times are measured, everything else is all pace.

She leaves the building and the street is a warm greeting, body warmth and concrete warmth and the warmth of the subway below, spilling up into the city. Caroline reminds herself that she must pay attention, she is hopeless at this, the number of express trains she has taken, even after all this time, eight or nine months now, the times she has found herself way up in Harlem, exit, past the Apollo, along the street, back downtown again. She is only going to the Upper West, upper not upmost – must remember to choose the local, take the train that lets her off. She does.

West 72<sup>nd</sup>. Walking away from the park, heading for the river, past the cute boutiques and the pancake place and the big fat bars for skinny little girls. Harry lives between the park and the river. Harry has a wife and three teenaged children and they are all very nice and their apartment is lovely with a wealthy

view, large and bright on this warm and sunny afternoon and Harry's family are not home and Caroline is in his home and Harry is at home, with Caroline. They go to bed and she cries and he smiles and then she laughs and then, because there is a Cuban-Chinese restaurant downstairs, on the corner of this block, because they can, because they will be hungry soon and his family will be home soon, they do it again. Then she changes the sheets while he washes. She does not need to wash. Well, she could, but actually, part of the reason for coming up here, for coming all this way, is so she can go back to the Spring Street apartment where The Man is waiting for her, return to him with another man's breath on her skin. There is time to order a small plate of fried chillies, noodles, a beer for her, water for him. She leaves, Harry walks slowly back upstairs, five flights of stairs instead of the elevator in a WASP-ish penance, now he will be Good Dad, make a second meal for them all, the nice wife and the nice kids and how kind of him to come home early, change the sheets, do the laundry, knowing her busy schedule today. He is nice actually. Everyone says Harry is a nice man. They are right.

The Cuban-Chinese closes down a year later. Some problem with a health inspector.

#### Number Two :

The city is a funny place. Caroline and Mark meet in the church close to his work. That church down on State Street. Dedicated to a woman, a saint, it's quiet, the tourists don't come here, don't notice its simple exterior, just a house really,

dwarfed by the insanity roaring up behind it, don't see that it would welcome them into a soft, pale interior. There is a gallery, this is where they agree to meet, at Caroline's suggestion. In the place of women, where once only women stood, only women were allowed, this is where Caroline and Mark come together today. He said he wanted to talk, needed to talk, she thought it might be safer here.

There is no sex in the church, he could not do it in the place of Christians, she has ghosts of her own to lay elsewhere, not here, this church has not offended her, she will not offend it.

They sit instead – instead of kissing, instead of screwing, instead of loving – in two years this is the first time they have sat together, so quietly, so still, so long without touching. Their usual behaviour is anything but still. There is a quiet place between them, morning light, faint and faded street noises filter through and are lost in slowly falling dust motes. Mark has come to say goodbye. He and his boyfriend are moving away, to California where even the earliest morning light speaks of spring all year round. He is sorry, Caroline is sorrier. She might have left The Man for Mark, did not expect to be left by Mark, is left anyway. It is a quiet farewell and when Mark has gone she lights a candle. She is not sure if the candle burns for herself or for Mark or for The Man. And then Caroline goes home, always goes home, to The Man. She brings Thai food with her, from that place on the corner. The Man likes it when she does that, surprises him with a feast she will buy, but not prepare – Caroline does not cook. He knows she brings this food as an offering, a payment, an apology – almost. Caroline does not apologise either.

### Number Three

John is young, younger even than Caroline, who is younger than Mark and Harry who are both younger than The Man. Or maybe Caroline just seems younger, Harry doesn't actually know her age, Mark is sure she is younger than him, more sure now that they write to each other, all the way cross country, her round young-girl's handwriting and the funny little non-sequiters she scribbles on the back of old picture postcards that make her seem younger still. John though, is definitely young, it says so on his identity card. All of twenty and hungry for the city and for love and for fame and fortune and a new start and an old bed with Caroline in it. Caroline is in it, lying in it, beside him in it, in it with him. John wants to be a writer, a musician, a singer, an actor, an artist, a designer – he wants to make his name, make his fortune, sing his song, paint his wagon, hitch his star to hers. John wants to be everything. He will be something, eventually. Right now, he is making love to Caroline (though she is not being made love to) and for John, that is a beginning and an end in itself. Caroline is alpha and omega for now, for this time.

Only ever daytimes though, when The Man thinks she is at work, imagines she is not, when John is supposed to be studying or in class, when John definitely is not, that is when Caroline is with the youthful and ever-hungry John. When she should not be. The should not is part of what excites her, much of what excites John. It is also, though Caroline does not know this for sure, though she only

suspects (it's not the kind of thing they talk about), it is also part of what is exciting for The Man.

Caroline gives her daytimes to John, afternoons to Mark, early evenings to Harry. (She does not work, though none of them know this. She already has money, someone else's money, from another place, another time.) The late evening, the night, Friday through Monday, she gives to The Man. The Man she leaves behind when she heads uptown for Harry, The Man she would have left for Mark, The Man she tries to forget and fails to forget while she lies in the big old bed on the big old mattress with John. And because she knows The Man will wait, because she knows he will always be there, she goes away and then she comes back. Caroline is a tide that comes back because The Man is waiting, goes away because he is waiting. She thinks he might grow tired of waiting, keeps testing him, pushing him, pushing him away and pulling him back. He is going nowhere. Caroline is though.

Caroline dies young. It's kind of inevitable and kind of awful and, The Man thinks, crying, sobbing, breaking his heart on a lung full of tears, kind of ordinary too. He is used to Caroline not being around, not all the time anyway. Now she will not be around – all the time.

Harry assumed Caroline had left him. She just didn't turn up at the apartment one day. It was Monday, Caroline's day, and she wasn't there. Thursday, Caroline's

day again, again she wasn't there. Two weeks passed, three, four, and Harry finally realised she wasn't coming back. Harry had no address for her, no phone number. Remembering her problems catching the local rather than the express, he hung out for a while up on 125<sup>th</sup>. He didn't see her and he didn't forget her. But he did stop taking those late afternoons off work and his wife, who had grown accustomed to coming home to their bedroom all clean and tidy, the laundry done, dinner almost on the table, realised the affair must have come to an end and was grateful for her old friend's advice, the one friend who had told her to wait it out, it would pass – as opposed to all those other friends, divorcées to a woman, who thought Harry a lying cheating bastard. Harry's wife quite likes the ring on her finger, is glad she kept it there, and she quite likes Harry, lying cheating bastard or not.

Mark used to send letters and Caroline answered him, several times with postcards, often not new, often an old postcard with a new stamp and her kisses scribbled across someone else's wish-you-were-here, she sent used subway tickets, market receipts, once there was a note from the zoo – the ticket pushed into an envelope and a four-line love letter written across its date and time. The envelopes with their surprise contents stopped coming after a while and Mark gave in to California and he came out properly to his family who said they'd always known anyway and eventually he stopped thinking about Caroline more than once or twice a year and there was almost always sunshine and his boyfriend loved him and it was good.

John wrote a novel about Caroline, changing her name and her age, but leaving himself the same – it didn't sell. He wrote a song about Caroline, but no-one else wanted to sing it. He painted her several times, always reclining on that big old bed. It was only years later, when he was directing the drama class he now taught at a small, upstate college, that he finally found a use for his Caroline memories, transferring them to a piece the class were working on. The girl working the puppet that was sort-of-Caroline developed a crush on John in the course of their work. A year later, when she had graduated, they became lovers. John would not compromise his teaching position for her and, marvellously, she agreed to wait. They have two children and very nice house in the suburbs and now John supplements the routine of his teaching life with an occasional spark of theatre design or directing, and it is more or less enough. He has a beard now and sometimes his old ankle injury flares up and he has to limp into work and yet he thinks Caroline might still recognise him, even now, just about. The same young man in an older man's body.

Many years later, now, The Man also died. He was ill for almost three years before his death and had a long time to become accustomed to his own passing, to make his plans, to find contact details for the others. In his will, he left a parcel for Harry, Mark and John. The three men did not know each other and it took a while for the executors to get them all together. Eventually the parcel was passed over at a café on Hudson. Harry, Mark and John read The Man's accompanying letter before opening the box. He said Caroline had left strict instructions for her



ashes when she died, Harry, Mark and John nodded at that, it was exactly the kind of thing Caroline would have said, talked about, even in her early twenties she was always planning her own death. The Man went on to say that he had never been able to do as she asked, he hadn't wanted to let her go, even though all their time together had been a letting go of sorts, a letting go and a coming home, until that last time, when she didn't come home again, couldn't come home again. The Man thought Harry, Mark and John all owed him, and that now they might do as he asked, as she had asked.

Harry, Mark and John stand looking out to the horizon, sky rockets lined up behind them, holding the mingled ashes of Caroline and The Man. One by one the rockets are lit and fuses burn down, powder ignites, and a dozen missiles roar off into the deep Atlantic sky. Satellites of love painting blue and silver trails, white stars exploding into the dark, arc out over the ocean and slowly fall back down to the cold water. The three strangers drink a little whiskey from a shared flask, indulge in a memory or two, carefully, not sure how much to tell, how much to admit. John offers a hug, Mark shakes hands, Harry is quiet. They sleep in their separate units and leave in the morning, rocket debris floating far out to sea.