

A work of magical realism in which Lennon returns to New York City to exorcise his demons and begin a road trip to once again give peace a chance.

John Lennon and the Mercy Street Cafe

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William Hammett

Prologue

He stepped onto the platform, merging into a stream of passengers feeding countless other streams that formed a river of impatient strides moving toward the stairs. He recalled being in the lower levels before, the time he'd taken a shuttle down to Washington to stand in a boxing ring without ropes and . . . well, that was a lifetime ago.

Wearing a dark sweater and distressed leather jacket with a fur collar, he climbed the stairs, passing an old friend descending to one of the two lower levels of tracks. His friend's hair was shorter than he remembered, and he wanted to turn and call out his former co-worker's name, but it was too late. His friend was already in the bowels of the great terminal that swallowed millions of travelers every week. He was sure he knew his friend's destination.

"Too late," he said to himself, pausing by a newsstand.

Too late. The words seemed to have a special significance, though he didn't know what it might be.

He continued up the stairs and walked onto the Main Concourse, a cavernous space with a polished marble floor, balconies, and balustrades. He stopped and stared at the huge four-faced clock above the information booth, a meeting place for friends, business associates, and tourists. He also looked at the ticket booths and the arched dormer windows, bright light broken into long lines across the floor by bars protecting the enormous panels of glass.

He stood in the middle of the organized chaos, reflecting on how good it felt to stand in a crowd without being hassled, and then moved to the front doors leading to Lexington Avenue.

Opening the door on the far right, he stepped onto the sidewalk and disappeared.

Part One

The Mercy Street Café

Chapter One

November: shadows slide across the streets of Manhattan, painting every alley and avenue a deep shade of melancholy blue. The air is chilly and damp, pedestrians leaning forward and looking down at the pavement to avoid contemplating the despair curled up in the marrow of their bones. November. That's when I met him.

I was walking home from the Barrington-Karp Agency, thinking about the mind-numbing hours I'd spent that day attempting to put together a campaign to convince Jane Q. Public that a client's bra—the Miracle Cup—was as effective as cosmetic surgery in lifting her breasts proudly and firmly with lighter-than-air fabric not unlike material used in the manufacture of parachutes. My boss, Kellie Karp, encouraged me to think of skydivers perilously falling to earth before they pulled the ripcord. "You've got to approach the Miracle Cup as somehow defying gravity. The Miracle Cup is like an open chute, a silky something to keep mammary glands airborne. We don't want skydiving breasts rushing toward the ground." Kellie Karp most definitely did not have a way with words, and her agency's success rested in large part on the fact that her employees usually ignored her rambling vowels and consonants.

"Vanity, vanity, all is vanity," I mumbled, huddled in my coat against the growing darkness as I walked through the West Village. I thought the author of Ecclesiastes had known a thing or two about life. There was indeed nothing new under the sun. Women had tried to save their sagging breasts from gravity for thousands of years, and I didn't need Kellie Karp's metaphors to understand the concept.

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Nothing new under the sun, nothing new under the blouse.

The East River seemed darkly appealing. Its eddies and currents would close over me, with only seagulls, riding updrafts, as witness to my demise, and they weren't likely to call the cops and spoil the insurance payoff to my parents. My OCD boyfriend, Thad Nash from New Orleans, would grieve for exactly three months as prescribed by the DSM-IV, the bible of psychiatry, and then systematically find a woman to satisfy e-Harmony's twenty-nine areas of compatibility. I wouldn't be missed for very long. As for my parents, they had regarded me as a lost cause after I declared a major in English with an emphasis on creative writing, and though they would grieve outwardly, inwardly they would be happy as clams that my education had finally paid off. And maybe they'd been right all along. My degree had earned me the right to brainstorm about D cups being pulled skyward on a magic current of sensuous Ultra Spandex KD-X, patent pending.

"I'm a loser," I said aloud.

A middle-aged woman, tucked into a raincoat and wearing cat-eye glasses, turned and looked at me as she hurried through the evening gloom, though I don't know why. New York has enough mumbling lunatics to keep head-turns to a minimum.

I was on Hudson Street. Charles Street was the cross-street up ahead, and after that was Perry Street, where I would take a left, walk a block and a half, and find the brownstone where Thad would be calculating my ETA so he'd know when to decant the wine. As I walked, I heard an acoustic guitar launching chords into the evening, melodic ambassadors to the darkness as night began to throw its weight around more seriously.

Nothing new, really. After all these years, folkies and their Martin guitars still haunted the Village, musical progeny of Dylan, Seeger, Havens, Yarrow, Stookey, Travers, Sebastian, Paxton, and many more.

A yellow neon sign at the end of the short block flickered, died, sputtered again, and finally stayed on, braving the night. It said MERCY STREET CAFÉ. Across the intersection was Village Dry Cleaners.

"Mercy Street?" I said aloud. "I'm on the corner of Charles and

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Hudson.”

There was a Mercer Street in the Village, but no thoroughfare named Mercy.

I had no recollection of ever seeing the Mercy Street Café, but clubs came and went—vanity, vanity, all is vanity—and all I wanted was to have a drink and slide into bed, pretending that the blue silk sheets I’d recently bought were waves spreading out from a tugboat plowing through the mysterious East River as it reflected the jeweled lights of Metropolis.

Blissful sleep. Dreams. No Kellie Karp. No Miracle Cup.

Death should always take a backseat when a mattress is available. Besides, I figured evolution had spent a lot of time to produce me—Amy Parisi—and I didn’t want to waste millions of years of artistic effort even if my immediate future dealt with ways to support mammary glands.

I stopped at the corner and glanced to my right.

He was sitting on a high stool, playing “Watching the Wheels” on an Ovation guitar. And he was chewing gum, his jaw moving ever so slightly the way it had in video footage from the *White Album* on. He had always looked so nonchalant, so cool. The café, brick walls on all sides, was dimly lit, with two track-lights aimed at a small stage at the rear of the building. There were no doorways—only three arches granting access from the sidewalk.

The café was empty. John Lennon, gunned down in 1980 in front of the Dakota, was playing to an empty house on . . .

I glanced up at the blue street sign. It read Mercy Street.

“There *isn’t* any Mercy Street,” I said. “This is Charles, for crying out loud.”

And then I came to my senses. John Lennon was inside, not more than ten yards away. What the hell was I doing standing on the sidewalk?

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