

*Iván Brave*

### Knowing When to Quit

AS SOON AS HE LETS IT GO, Ilya regrets dumping his bag of coke into the public trashcan.

“Shit.”

The scene of this victimless crime, the Coney Island Boardwalk. Above, the sun blazes at five thousand degrees Kelvin, a tireless watcher. All around, the sounds of rollercoaster rides, amusement park jingles, and a horde of Brooklynites and tourists from around the world, cheering, dancing.

But Ilya, a club DJ, isn't dancing, isn't cheering. He is ten mins away from his first date with a news reporter twice his age, named Julia. No, it isn't a mystery why Ilya threw his baggie. He remembered that his date doesn't like drugs. So, just like that, he tossed it, thinking, it was free anyway, since his dealer lady gave it to him as a gift.

If only the trashcan were an open barrel. If only there weren't so many people watching him, Ilya could fish it out.

Metallic saliva fills his mouth, as he bends over. And reaches in, shoulder deep.

“What'd you lose, son?”

The DJ's heart sends a rush of panic, like when you stare off the edge of a cliff.

It was the garbageman. “Let me open that for you.”

“No!” shouts Ilya, drawing out a sopping wet hand covered in ketchup and something else, maybe peanut butter. “No, no.”

The garbageman finds the right key. “Is it your ID or something?”

Ilya dashes to the beach. There, at the edge, where the sand meets the foam of a crashing wave, the DJ washes his arm. Eight minutes till his date. But he decides to show up late, so he can score some more coke.



Knowing this place his whole life, for twenty-two years, comes in handy at a time like this. Within half an hour, Ilya is sitting under a big pier, in the shadows, away from the crowd, the noise, the judgement, and anything else. What about his date? Maybe she is late too, no text from her yet.

The new baggie feels sticky. Looks cheap. But better than nothing. In his victory, Ilya crunches the grains between his thumb and index finger, as if attempting to grind them even smaller.

Above him, on the pier, multiple generations of fishermen cast their lines out into the ocean. It smells of raw, bloodied worms, and canned alcohol in paper bags. Luckily the sea air wisps by, clears the smell, before it drips again between the wooden plank.

The DJ uses the calloused yolks of his fingertips to open the plastic. But

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where to put the powder in? Ilya finds a seashell. A small purple and orange one, with parallel vertical ridges, and a basin worthy of a miniature, strawberry-blonde Venus.

Just then Ilya's real strawberry-blonde Venus texts him. He ignores it, continues pouring powder into his thumbnail-sized seashell. Another text enters. But again, he ignores it, as Ilya draws the dish to his nose. Another, third text comes in. So Ilya lowers the drugs for a second, to open up his phone.

"I'm here," she's saying. "Got us a table. What do you think?"

It is one of those pictures with a woman's legs jutting outward, a mimosa on her lap wetting her thigh, before a view of the crowded boardwalk.

What pickle. On the one hand, literally, is the seashell full of coke. On the other hand, just as literally, is Julia. The goddess who told him she thinks drugs are for losers.

His leg jitters. His shoulder muscles throb. His eyes ache like someone rubbed mud in them. Meanwhile the seashell is so close to his nose that he can sense the grains of cocaine sparkle like glitter. When a looming shadow creeps over him.

"What d'you got there?"

Ilya does not breathe, before he can turn around.

"Pretty seashell," says a young girl of about five. "Can I see it?"

Behind her is a group of girls, all about her age, bathing in the sunlight, and playing in the sand. Ilya dumps the shell's contents, saying, in a princely tone: "What do you need it for, may I ask?"

"We are building a sandcastle!" she says, snatching Ilya's empty seashell from his hands.

As the young girl inspects it, running her fingernails through the ridges, Ilya snags another, even larger, even prettier seashell from besides his flipflops.

"Listen," he says. "I need that small one. Can I give you this big one instead?"

"Woah!" says the girl, her eyes widening. Snatching it, she runs off. Ilya gets up. And he walks back to the boardwalk. The rest of the baggie's junk spilled and buried in the sands of famous Coney Island.



The restaurant Julia has her legs on display at isn't that far. Just down the busy boardwalk, past many, many trashcans, the Wonder Wheel, hotdog shops, the traffic, the noise, and everything else. Down, down Ilya goes, to the Russian-side of the island, Brighton Beach. Popped blood vessels forming bags under his eyes. Those bags cooled by the evening air. As his breath dwindles to a low hum, like a ship's haul. And Ilya thinks, "This is the real me." He presses his hands into fists, to pop his knuckles.

Where is she?

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Ilya steps up to the exact table Julia texted him from. There's even her half-drunk mimosa there. But not her. She must have left.

Ilya asks the waiter in his broken Russian if the lady, who was sitting here . . .

The waiter shrugs. Walks off. What an idiot. Let this be a lesson, thinks Ilya, wiping the wet ring of water on the table Julia had been on.

And then, softly, slowly, off in the distance, where white sand meets the crashing waves of the ocean, there comes a warm voice floating:

"Ilya!"

The DJ turns.

"Ilya!!"

It's Julia, in a bikini, kicking seafoam and splashing herself, as she runs out of the water. Waving the young man in.