URBANTASM

a novel

BOOK TWO:
THE EMPTY ROOM

Connor Coyne

EXCERPT:
The True Story of the Michigan Coney Island

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In the perfect past, in the flushest years at Ellis Island, as overladen ships waked the gray waves and passed into New York Harbor, small groups of Greeks clustered at the prows and pointed at the broad banks of twinkling lights in the distance.

"Είναι ότι η New York?" they'd ask a deckhand or whoever happened to be standing nearby.

"Ya," he'd reply. "That's Coney Island."

"Coney Island," the emigrants repeated in awe, leaning out over the churning ocean to get a better look at their new home. It was sparkling bright, shimmering, these ethereal, auroral sparks in the morning twilight, murmured invitations from the Cyclone, the Wonder Wheel, to taste the delights of the Boardwalk, of Luna Park, Steeplechase, Dreamland, and rapture on off of the Parachute Drop. The lights preceded the long queues, the dirty work, the discrimination against these Orthodox Christians with their swinging censers and their woolly bearded priests. In the hard years to come, the emigrants always held that first vision of Coney Island in their memories, because it was their first, unsullied glimpse of the Americas, and it had seemed to confirm the promise of a better life here. That's why, days, or weeks, or years later, having saved up scraps from their factory jobs, or having snuck small fortunes overseas, sewn into their threadbare jackets, when they opened hot dog stands in the industrial cities of Southeast Michigan, they called them "Coney Islands."

That's the story I was told growing up. Like so many of our New World origin stories, it's pretty much bullshit. The immigrants called their wieners "coney islands" because they bought them at Coney Island, and the local Chamber of Commerce banned the words "hot dog" because they figured the stupid immigrants might think their wieners were made from actual dogs.

But when the supposedly stupid immigrants arrived in Michigan and started selling their own coney islands in the nineteen teens, they decided to improve their product. Thus began a long process of prayer and experimentation, roots plucked from tiny backyard gardens, cattle slaughtered at the altar, with providential navigation toward the apotheosis of the hot dog.

The core of this creation was the wiener itself, and from 1914 these were produced under arcane secrecy by the Richard Goerlich Bavarian Encased Meats Company, later known simply as "Goerlich's." Perhaps as a nod to the melting pot that threw the German Lutherans in with the Balkanites, a Goerlich was made out of many animals. A puree of pork and beef with secret spices all pressed together in a lambskin casing, tied off and smoked over a hardwood grill. The pork content meant that these Viennas could be grilled for longer than other wieners without burning and shrinking. The spices were sweet and sour: traces of mustard, sugar, vinegar, and salt. When you bit into a Goerlich, you felt the skin snap before your teeth sank into its soft inner flesh.

A Goerlich alone, however, was not enough to make the superior coney. To turn a Goerlich into a coney, you had to top it with coney sauce, mustard, and onions, on a fresh bun, on a hot plate with a hot cup of coffee on the side. To do it right, everything must be fresh. Even the mustard, the simplest ingredient, must taste as sharp as a paring knife and shine as bright as the sun. The Balkanites didn't just chop their onions into large, trapezoidal chunks. Onions were precision-cubed by calloused hands at half the speed of sound before being swept into oak barrels and sealed and chilled and called into use. Akawe Ashkenazi bakeries supplied the buns, which the Balkanites steamed before setting them onto waxed paper gracing elliptical china plates. The thick plates kept your food from burning your fingers. The thick cups kept your coffee

from cooling off.

I haven't described the sauce. I've saved the best for last. Finely ground beef heart and beef kidney, mixed with beef suet and more ground up Goerlich's, browned minced onions, and sanguined spices. Which spices? Cumin and chili powder and something else. Something magical. Nobody knows what but the coney chefs, and if they told then they would not be gods.

The truth is, they may not have realized at first the specialness of what they had created. These Greeks, these Macedonians, these Albanians, these Rumanians had arrived in factory burgs to take up jobs in the factories and to serve the factory workers. The immigrants hemmed trousers, cobbled clogs, thatched nobs. They sold their coneys on the side, to earn a little extra, but soon they noticed that the coneys brought in more ducats than their other trades.

This was filling food; as heavy as it was delicious. The X Automobilians, whether sweating in the foundries, grinding through midnight shifts at the metal center, or straining over dies and tools in bright light for hours, could fill up in five minutes with a coney and coffee. The perfect food for an assembly line town, as demonstrated by the ordering shorthand that sprang into life like a new language: “One up” meant a coney with everything; a milestone of verbal economy and the inverse relationship of calories to syllables. So coney stands became Coney Island Restaurants. They bloomed fruitful and fecund, increased in number. Multiplied across the earth and increased upon it.

By the mid-twenties some three-dozen Coney Islands in Akawe served up tens of thousands of coneys a day built by hundreds of restaurant employees. Balkan assembly line workers bent over their stations for hours: one man grilled the Goerlich's, another steered it to its bun and plate, where the next station assembled the dressing, nothing written down, everything achieved with hands and voice, as demanding of

speed and rigor as riveting.

I'm not exaggerating when I tell you that there were so many Coney Islands that they were served over the river; two restaurants opened on the midst of the East Street Bridge and stayed there for decades. I'm not exaggerating when I tell you that the Coney Islands were open 24-7-365. Once, during a flood, a Coney had to hire a security guard to watch the door because the owners had lost the keys years earlier.

The Coney Islands thrived along the factory zones. They pulsed along the Akawe's main arteries. They anchored each neighborhood and kept their street corners noisy all night long, from the wail of the evening whistle to the chiming of the church bells.

When the factories started to wither, the Coney Islands did too.

They held out longer than the factory jobs but, one by one, the great restaurants closed their doors. Midnight Oil Coney Island, Akawe Old Fashioned Coney Island, Delicious Coneys, Joe's Original Coney Island, and most of the others dried up through the 80s. By 1993, there were less than a dozen left.