

The loss of a thing you never had

By Terence Cannon

Recorded by Terence Cannon and his wife, actress Robin Bartlett

(*Inside Llewelyn Davis, American Horror Story: Coven*)

Every light at the Bay Bridge Toll Plaza turned red except at the far right. Cathy slid across ten lanes. There were no other cars.

She felt for change, found none, pulled a dollar bill from the bottom of her purse, handed it to the attendant, a person of indefinite age and sex.

If you want to give God a good laugh, said the attendant, tell Her your plans.

My change please.

The right lane curled beside marsh weeds, trash, jetsam of the bay. Where it started its upward curve preparatory to lifting off the flats onto the bridge proper a woman stood, thumb out.

The body doesn't speculate, no matter what the mind may do. The body flees from danger or runs to aid, lets the mind figure things out later.

Cathy's body braked the car, which swerved over a truck-tire peel, gravelled to a stop while her mind said *run*. One has to stop.

When it's your Mom.

Her mother ran through the brake-light glow, Cathy watching in the rearview mirror. Her mother rapped on the passenger window.

"Mom?" said Cathy, leaned over, unlocked the door. Her mother got in, pulled the door closed.

It was not her mother.

"Oy," said the woman, "this is a bridge you shouldn't walk."

The *oy* was comforting; the basket in the woman's lap, however, was the size of a human head.

Cathy's mind took charge, decided she was safer on a bridge in a moving car than stalled in a lane by a wasteland verge.

"You going to San Francisco?" she asked, which was stupid since from there the Bay Bridge went only to San Francisco, so she added, "You live around here?" Equally stupid. The bridgeway lifted beneath the car.

The woman pointed outside the window and down.

"You live under the bridge?"

"Where else?"

Indeed.

"This is a bridge what shouldn't be here," the woman said. "These goyim with their steel and chutzpa and big ideas. 'We're in a hurry to go from here to there, we can't wait: build a bridge.' Do they ask permission? No!"

"Permission from ... who?"

"The water. The Bay. The earth with its San Andreas Fault like a tickle up its nose. Who else? What is their gontser megilla bridge on top of that? A bug, a flea... Potch! Gone."

Ok, she's not going to kill me.

"You know what I think? I tell you what I think. The steel changed them. In the old days, they made bridges of stone, wood. You take stone from the mountain, cut trees from the forest, takes time. First, you consult with the material. The river, the stream, it says back to you, 'You want to go across me, good. You want your commerce, your vacation travel. You want to feel safe. Mazel! So what do I get?'"

"And?" To demonstrate attention.

"Well. We got gold, silver, goats, sheep,' says the builder. The river has got

gold already, the earth has silver, goats, sheep. Bubkis! We, the natural forces, want what you got what is most precious to you. You think a bridge what don't fall down comes cheap? Are you some kind of schnorrer? What we want is children."

"Children?"

"Only two. One under each end of what it is holds up the bridge. Then we know you are sincere.' So they do. Two, three, a lot of thousand years."

"Pagans?"

"Schmagens, Christians, anybody what builds bridge. London Bridge already. Then comes along steel and what thinks the momzer? No more deals. We put one end here, the other there, who cares?"

"The water..." said Cathy, dutiful student.

"We care. The trolls. That's our habitat."

"You're a," said Cathy, "*yiddische* troll?"

"I'm not your mother. Your mother, I should add, is not so reliable she should show up when you need her."

And true, Cathy's mind had not said, It's the middle of the night on the approach to the Bay Bridge, therefore that woman on the side of the road cannot be my mother. And she did need her mother, she didn't know why. They neared Yerba Buena Island.

"On the other hand," said the woman, "You know what is under this part the bridge? The biggest military prison in the Bay Area. So who says nobody sacrifices the kinder to improve their sense of security? Anyway. Enough with the troll-business. Why did you pick me up?"

You picked *me* up, lady. Cathy compressed her lips, bit them, stared at the swooshing-past green Naval Station sign, gnawed her lips, sighed, adjusted her position, changed hands at the wheel to brush back some loose hair, checked the rearview mirror, scratched her nose, was emblazoned by tunnel-light as they drilled through Yerba Buena, looked at her passenger.

“The toll lights,” she said. “You looked—” Never mind. “I have no idea.”

“Now you are making sense. What is it you have no idea from? What it is you have no idea from that’s the thing that is the problem. Now we are progressing.”

Oy, thought Cathy, a Freudian yiddische troll. Already.

“Schmoidian,” said the troll. “You look like a woman who is making a decision about something she does not know, maybe not even the topic.”

“You’re saying I don’t know what I want.”

“NO. NoNoNo. What you want you know. You want a good night’s sleep. You want to get laid. You want a bagel with lox.”

Which was true. Wow! These psychics are fantastic.

“‘I want a something’ you say, and you always know what is it. You don’t say, ‘I want, uh, the whatever it is I have a want for.’ What you got is a need. Needs are what you find out later you had to have.”

“Because they’re unconscious.”

“Did Schmoid remove your brain? Unconscious is when they operate on your gall bladder. Wake up. We only got to the end of the bridge.”

Chastened, listened.

“You got shpilkus, ants in the pants, you don’t know what is this feeling. Then one day, you do something you don’t understand, something you didn’t plan. God gets no good laugh. Maybe what you do looks like a want. You think, I want a car. A Mercedes, just kidding, a car you can afford. But you are not buying a car to get a car. What does it turn out why you got that car? You needed to drive. Maybe away from something. Or somebody.

“And no one is surprised as you. A want is no surprise. But a need? They pop up like trolls at a toll booth.”

The City phosphoresced before them.

“You want example? I give you. 1963. You want a dress. You take the IND downtown to Macy’s mit your best friend what’ser...”

“Carol.”

“Right. You find the dress, a beautiful dress. Back home, out of the bag, its color is shmutz. All a sudden, the Bronx looks like shmutz, a good place to run away from, nu? You’re 19. Am I right? You want you want you want you want. To end racial discrimination. You want to help Negroes in the South. You got this feeling, this funny feeling, you have lost something you never had. Never in your life did you have this thing and you lost it already. How can that be? But it’s true. Not like virginity. Virginity you had, you lost it, that was a want. Remember?”

She did, and San Francisco seemed no closer.

“The loss of a thing you never had, that’s a different horse. You go to Mississippi to help Negroes. Did you help Negroes?”

“Little bit”.

“Little bit. A want. Which was right. On the other hand, did you find, did you discover in finding it, something you lost what you didn’t know you needed, what you never had?”

Yes. *Myself*.

“So we aren’t what we want, nu? We are what we find out later we needed. Turn off at Bryant.”

The billboard said Dean Martin would soon appear at the Sands in Vegas. They were on Bryant Street, the passenger door opened.

“Wait,” said Cathy.

“Advice I am not offering. Don’t get greedy.”