

# Caitlin in the Y2K Museum

by Tobias Carroll

Two months after Peter moved out, it opened on the eastern-leaning boulevard, a stone's throw from the water. Caitlin heard about it from a friend at a bar three weeks after that, found that the concept wouldn't quietly settle in her mind, and made plans to go. The city had stepped through autumn's door and was moving cautiously into the new season, sloughing off degrees as it went. It was always like that, had always been for as long as she could remember, those slipstream spaces that eased you into something familiar. The waterfront, she knew, would be ten degrees colder than her inland home. It always was, and while she remembered it in the moment, she knew that she would have forgotten by the time she set out for it.

She'd listen to pop songs in that season, pop songs so full they'd seep into her and move through her with a fragile majesty, pop songs that made her heart and lungs clench as though the feeling they imparted was the last and best she'd ever know. She'd pause -- waiting for the bus, on her way out of work, at an airport terminal scanning the crowd for a friend -- she'd pause and she'd let the song put tears at the brink of her eyes. She would stay there, fixed to that point, until the song reached its end.

On a northbound bus once, a chubby boy half her age stared at her as her gaze arced into space. "What're you lookin' at?" he asked with a sneer. "You look crazy." The intrusion felt like a slap, and she moved instinctively to return it. One lean arm swung up and tore the headphones from her ears. Her upper lip curled, showing bared teeth. The kid saw her eyes and held a tentative hand above his breastbone. "Jesus," he said. "Jesus, I didn't mean—" Caitlin released her breath and turned. She pushed through the doors at the next stop, knowing she wouldn't be able to listen to that song for weeks.

At twenty-three grey had crept into Caitlin's hair, and by now it had driven anything with a hint of polychrome away. She'd dyed it

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twice in the ensuing years, once black and once a deep red, but neither had seemed to fit. She had met Peter on the day she chose to leave red behind, and Costel first came to know her with dark hair. He hadn't realized its color wasn't natural, and when it began to fade, he approached her assuming the worst. "It's got to be something," he said. "It's got to be something awful that has you this worried."

At the party where she learned of the opening, Caitlin's friend Marie gave her her first news of Costel in almost a year. "He sent me a postcard," she said, and then had to shout it again over the sound of the stereo. Caitlin pulled her into the kitchen, where they found a corner to speak away from the drunks lurching to dwindle the apartment's supply of beer. "Did you say you'd heard from Costel?" Caitlin asked.

"He sent me a postcard," said Marie. "He's in Montana now. Tending bar four hours from anywhere." In the room behind them another album stepped into rotation and made itself heard, drumbeats ricocheting off the blue-painted apartment walls.

"Did he leave an address?" asked Caitlin. "Is he all right?"

"He says it's the best thing he's ever done." And Marie smiled. "But he said that about the magazine job, too. You remember. The magazine job and the trip to Memphis. But that was..." Caitlin understood. For most of the time that she had known him, Costel's evaluations of his own life had meant one thing, and had passed without much significance, a tidal ebb and flow that could be easily ignored. And then one day, she'd found that the beach itself was missing.

Marie indicated the thin layer of beer at the bottom of her bottle. "Another one?" Behind her came sounds of distortion, a wailing vocal channeled through speakers, a dozen overlapping conversations.

"Yeah, okay," Caitlin said. When Marie returned Caitlin got the promise of Costel's address; she segued onto the roof and stared at the street four stories below, drunken revelers walking into cars and

reaching up to grasp the heavens and making out up against streetlights. And she heard a few people behind her -- Richard and Kim and Matty from Seattle -- all talking about a museum; curiosity overtook her, she turned to them with an Excuse me and joined in, and the trio became a quartet. Kim and Matty left the roof and the party as one forty minutes later, and Caitlin and Richard drifted back downstairs to find the party eviscerated, empty bottles adorning the room, the CD changer spent, and the host passed out beside the staircase. Richard dragged him onto the couch and Caitlin turned off a few of the lights and powered down the stereo and they both made for the street. He indicated his northbound path and she began her vigil for a cab, the barren 4 AM wind drawing her attention to loose strands of hair. She cursed something invisible, intangible, and caught sight of an active-duty taxi.

Two days later, eleven AM. Caitlin sat at her desk, sunlight wasted on files and a paperweight that she'd had since grade school. Across her screen, a message came from Marie with Costel's address. Caitlin jotted it down on her pad, bought a fine-tipped pen on her way home from work, was halfway through her first beer before she began the letter. And an hour later she finished, addressed the envelope, sealed the letter inside, and applied a stamp. She would mail it on a Tuesday; he'd receive it Friday or Saturday, she decided. She read Apartment 3 on the address and idly wondered which floor it was, second or third, what the buildings in Montana were like. She'd come to the city from a childhood in the Chicago suburbs; they'd never made it further west than Minneapolis in the vacations of her youth.

Costel. They'd always found common ground, the same places in the city holy to each of them, seeking similar qualities in the same books, the same music. She had seen him in conversations where he'd done nothing but listen for hours at a stretch. And yet when he wanted to, he could be the center of any conversation, steering it into new and uncharted regions.

Costel had made the decision to leave the city abruptly, had been blessed in this endeavor by a monthly lease, had sold most of what he owned and rented a car and bid them all farewell one October morning. Seven AM, a last breakfast, six of them together. He'd said.

He'd said, *I'm going out somewhere. I don't know where yet. I'll know it when I see it.* They'd all thought him crazy. Stuart had actually said it, had stormed out of Costel's apartment one night. Called it bullshit, and most of them had agreed that he had a point. *This is utter bullshit, Costel. No one's saying that you aren't entitled to look for something new, but...it's bullshit.*

Costel's place had always been walking distance from hers, and Caitlin spent days there, browsing his LPs, talking football, thinking on something. His reply to her letter came two days before she visited the museum.

*Oh Christ, it began. Oh Christ;* she gazed down at the page and saw it full of black marks, words excised, letters obscured. Costel's handwriting had always been both neat and imprecise, as though two studious pupils jockeyed for control over his hands, and his time in Montana had changed nothing. She looked away and got up to pour a glass of water before looking back at the letter. And then she looked away from it again and stood back up. Her white-walled kitchen felt empty, the darkening sky staring in, and she walked over to pull a CD from her shelf before beginning. Galaxie 500 or Boards of Canada: something that produced its own space, that conjured an expanse.

*Oh Christ, Cait. You knew me then.*

*How'd you do it? How did you bear me? I've been out here, living this life, and I've been thinking on it daily. Daily, if not more. Hourly, some days, or by the minute. I live in a second-floor apartment above a cigar store, and on the days I'm not working at the bar (they like me there) I watch the street from my own vantage point. Cars pass, and the occasional bicycle. It's nothing like the city and yet it's exactly like the city.*

*I think about everything and everyone there. Christ. I was insufferable. Cait. Jesus, Cait. I'm sorry for it, for everything.*

The stroke of the pen changed slightly here. The ink's shade shifted and the angle of the letters grew less canted.

*I almost crossed that part out. I'm still making revisions out here.*

*Anyway. I'm working these days: afternoon bartender four days a week, and odd jobs the rest. I do all right. My rent's far less than the city, as you might have guessed, and so... I go to the movies every week or so. I've got a library card, and I'm making the most of that. I don't do much socially. Chat with a few people. Flirt with a lady when I'm behind the bar ever so often. That's the extent of it. It's quiet. I can manage.*

Below the word manage was the beginning of a line, straight, pointed down, and ultimately crossed out. Below that, he'd signed his name. She remembered his signature elsewhere -- a check that he'd given her for some money she'd lent him, a petition passed his way near the waterfront, a postcard from Florence -- and found this one different. She folded the letter and put it out of her sight and silenced the lights and made her way out, out to a bar, somewhere to drink. She thought *Call Marie?* No. This was her shred of Costel; Marie knew him from other angles, had views she could call her own.

Marie and Peter had been coworkers in those days; and so the method by which she had met Peter was traceable, ultimately, back to Costel. Marie and Costel's relationship had faded into an amicable friendship, while Caitlin had only seen Peter twice since he moved out. These had come in social situations, and she tried her hardest to maintain the maximum distance from him. She stood there, in crowded rooms and in less crowded rooms, using friends and acquaintances as unwitting blockers, snapping the possible lines of sight.

(She found herself curating the stereo at some of these. She chose her preferred style of pop songs, beatific yet brimmed full, bursting with emotion, and would periodically slide over to the

sound system and coax the volume higher. At once, she knew that he would see her if she did this. It was a risk she was willing to take.)

Peter had chosen to disembark on the day that Caitlin had concluded that things would be better if Peter no longer shared her space. This was a month or so after Costel and Marie had officially ceased to be a couple. Marie, that night, had left the party with Richard, and Costel hadn't seemed to care. Caitlin bade her friends good night and walked into the main space of the apartment and heard Costel and Peter in a contest of rhetoric. Thinking back on it now, she couldn't recall whose apartment it had been, or what Peter and Costel had been debating; only the sparseness of the night's remaining guests and the tone of the volleyed sentences. Costel spoke soberly, outlining a character with his words and then swinging out with a mind to demolish it. Peter was more noticeably drunk, tying together disparate strands from arguments he'd had at his last four social outings, recycling and thinking on the fly and praying that he'd reach a suitable conclusion. And it was the drink in him -- it must have been, Caitlin later concluded -- that led to the final point. Costel swung low with a grim, possibly condescending observation that stung even Caitlin, standing on the fringes of the conversation. Peter inhaled grimly, took a long drag of whiskey, and then pointed, his finger inches from Costel's chest. "You weren't always like this. I think I liked you better before." And he turned away and walked to Caitlin. "I'm going. I'll see you at home." She knew these moods, Peter a wrong look away from challenging everyone in the room.

She heard him on the stairs, the sound of his shoes on the wooden steps catching in her throat. She walked over to Costel, who was by now sitting, sipping from a glass of water. "He didn't mean it, you know. That last part. I don't know about the rest."

Costel shrugged. "I don't care if he did. He might be right. Genuinely, I don't care."

As she walked towards the museum, she felt a phrase come to her lips. *Fuck you, Costel.* No sooner had she thought it than she

wished it away, averting her eyes. She recalled another conversation with him, a year before that one with Costel and Marie at a bar, Peter out of state at a convention of some kind. Built to Spill and Elliott Smith on the jukebox. Marie had stepped outside to make a call to a far-off friend, and Caitlin looked at Costel. "I need to talk to someone about this. I'm sorry to lay this on you, but I think you're the only one who'll understand." *What is it?* he'd said. "Peter." she had replied. "I think Peter's losing his charm." And she'd enumerated his flaws, their points of contention, the sore points in the seven months for which they had been living together. Costel listened attentively, one eye towards the door for signs of Marie. When Caitlin was done, her face red, Costel nodded and slowly wove a defense of Peter, a qualification for many of the flaws she had enumerated, shifting certain grating qualities into the realm of the understandable, subtly changing the light around Peter, reframing his character, rebuilding him in Caitlin's eyes. She was smiling by the time Marie rejoined them.

Costel's life, of all of theirs, was the lowest-impact. By and large, he did some sort of unspecified freelance work, conducted largely from his apartment. He stayed disciplined, remaining true to a standard work schedule no matter how offbeat the nature of his work was. He jogged most every morning and took up amateur photography and spoke periodically about a stageplay he was writing. And one day, Caitlin received a call from Marie that Costel had been stricken, that he was in the hospital, that they didn't quite know what it was that had knocked him from his feet, had broken the ease with which he moved through life.

An aneurysm, they later learned. One that left him alive but, for a few months, withdrawn. It had punched a hole in him, violating him like a jetliner's ruptured cabin, not culling but ravaging.

Caitlin moved closer to the museum. She could see its façade, gleaming in the autumn's afternoon light, clearly.

She was new to the city when she first met him: four months out of college, not awestruck as so many of her peers were, but

adjusting nonetheless. She had been in a bookstore late on a Thursday night; an afterwork dinner had wrapped up twenty minutes earlier and she was there to kill time. There was a boy she had plans to meet, but not until later, a nearby bar, close to midnight. At that hour, there were few places to watch time pass, but this shop seemed appropriate. She'd been using it to shortcut through idle half-hours for the last two months, and knew that she could expect to be left alone there, could walk the stacks under precision-focused lights at her leisure. She chose the monographs for no particular reason, and was looking through a display copy when a motion caught her attention. Thirty feet away stood a thin man, tall with short and curly hair, smiling and waving. She paused and looked back at him, trying to place his face.

She couldn't, she realized. She closed the book and walked closer and observed his face, the light in his eyes, his closed mouth barely holding back the words that he was on the brink of saying. Still, his appearance brought no recognition in Caitlin, and as she drew closer, she could see that light broken, the words caught in his throat, the smile faltering. "I'm sorry," he said. "I thought you were someone else. Hence..."

"I expect you come here often," she said, and felt a sudden trust in this man. "Waving at women, drawing them in..." Her tone was stern, a grim reprimand, but she didn't mean a word of it.

"You're the first who hasn't fallen for it," he replied.

It was present from the beginning: that ease between them, a natural rapport that they fell into. They spoke for ten minutes before introducing themselves, and for ten more afterwards before Caitlin remembered the boy waiting at a bar a few blocks away. "I have to go," she said. "I need to meet someone." He nodded, handed her his card; she said that she'd be in touch. And so she was, the following day. The boy at the bar merited one call four days later, abrupt, conciliatory, but nevertheless final. She saw him at the occasional party for the next few years, a hazy figure on the other side of the room issuing his own furtive glances towards her.

Marie later told Caitlin of how she and Costel had first met, how



easily the two of them had fallen into conversation, of their shared decision to run with things right then and there. That quiet synchronization that progressed into something even-handed and graceful, which one day found itself reduced again to amicable soloists in adjoining rooms. In the meantime, Caitlin had met Peter and found him agreeable, and so things went: a happy stability, gradually losing momentum, and shattering.

Costel seemed the same after his stay in the hospital. Two weeks after that, he was at a party: eight to ten close friends and thirty or more casual acquaintances. He sat on a couch, arms spread wide across the back, a glass of water on the table before him. Standing in front of him, leaning over slightly, was this party's official bad drunk, a guy named Ed who had once played in a band with Marie. Caitlin was on her way into the room to see how Costel was when she heard Ed say about the worst thing possible: "I thought those killed you." Costel had been looking away from Ed, giving him the minimum amount of attention one could give without seeming rude, but at this he met Ed's eyes directly.

"Not always," he said. Ed looked back at him and stepped away. Even from across the room, Caitlin could hear the edge in Costel's voice; his words were a slap across the face of the drunk who called him a dead man, and who could argue with his decision, his tone? "Jesus," Ed was saying as he passed Caitlin. She sat next to Costel on the couch and he drew his arms down to his side.

"I'm sorry about that," she said.

He shook his head, the sort of motion her father made when criticizing her in her teenage years. "Happens when you're out around drunks, I guess," he said. She wanted to say something positive, to extol the good qualities of those at the party, but words fell short, the immediacy of Ed's remark and Costel's return volley still stinging. And so she sat next to him in silence, breathing in and out, watching him watch her and wait for a reply. "I'm sorry," she said again after a while. "I'm sorry."

"I should go," he said. "This isn't working, tonight." He got to his

feet and she followed, motioning to give him a hug, which he accepted after a pause. "We need to talk soon," he said, and she nodded.

"We do," she said.

A few weeks after that came the news that Marie and Costel had split up; a few months after that, she and Peter found themselves past the point of reconciliation.

The front of the museum was made from silver and glass. THE Y2K MUSEUM was etched into the metal above the door and embossed on flags suspended from the building's facade. Open 12 to 6, Tuesday through Sunday. She reached for the handle, a lighter shade of silver, and stepped through the door. Admission, at least for the moment, was free.

High ceilings; lost in the rafters twenty feet up were miniature white stars, coating everything on the floor level with a crisp and even light. The room was almost square, and seemed larger than the estimates she had formed in her mind before entering. Exhibits and display cases rose out of the walls and drifted in and out of the natural pedestrian paths. Caitlin walked slowly among them and caught sight of a few others doing the same. She was the only one there alone: a group of three people her own age stood on the opposite side of the room, and a couple in their sixties had almost completed a circuit.

It seemed frozen somehow, on the cusp of the crescendo that would usher in the climax of that larger-than-life pop song. Caitlin passed the first wall's exhibits, which focused on the technological fears and emergency preparations of the moment. Newspaper clippings, flatscreen displays with headphones: she stood in silence and stared at reports about security concerns, doomsday scenarios, projections of shuttered cities, wracked technology, and speculation as to what exactly would fall silent in the first seconds after midnight.

She made her way to the other wall after twenty minutes, and found its subject to be the cultural representation of Y2K. Television

shows referencing it; songs written on the subject; novels. On one screen played a commercial: a man running cheerfully through the morning as the world fell apart around him. She passed through this area more slowly, lingering on every beat of the songs, watching each frame of the videos, her hand half an inch from the screen. Some of what she saw triggered reminiscences of where she was when she first encountered it. In other cases, she was experiencing what she saw or heard for the first time, and she wondered how that would have colored her experiences, if it might have changed anything, then or in the ensuing years; given her touchstones, things to cite in conversation with friends, references to make, anecdotes to unveil.

Caitlin looked at the last exhibit and exhaled and wandered into the middle of the room. She saw a Plexiglas repository for donations and slipped in a few dollars. She realized then that the main room did contain a handful of antechambers. The bathrooms were obvious; less so was the gift shop, which she would not have expected. Still, she made her way in and found its offerings sparse. A few of the albums and books on display, one DVD, and a number of placeholders assuring the shopper that a collection of relevant materials, curated by this very museum, would be available in a manner of weeks and could be pre-ordered today. She took note of the stock and walked out, striding back through the museum and into the open air.

As she leaves the Y2K Museum behind, she thinks of the letter she'll write to Costel. As she does so, she begins to understand just how much his letter to her has left her wounded, rendered her brittle in places she had always considered impassable. Planned sentences reveal fresh scars, drying wounds running throughout her. As she charts words carefully selected for the greatest impact, she finds tears gathering, ducts waiting to burst. She names him bastard: it does no justice to the fullness of her anger, but she will not allow herself to again become vulgar. Four, six, eight blocks from the museum she crafts these words, and when she's nearing

the bus stop she pauses and considers Costel's reaction. She looks into the distance for the bus and stops to think and-

She pictures him sitting atop some weatherbeaten couch in a small apartment somewhere, his hair longer and less kempt, opening it with anticipation-

And here it stops. A breeze moves past her, some pedestrians walk by, their fortunes shared, oblivious to her. She realizes then that she can no longer anticipate his reaction: last year, she could foresee his reactions to words before she spoke them. (She often joked with him about this -- her "portable Costel", she called it.) She can no longer say whether he will greet her words with a relieved smile, with anger, sorrow, or no emotion at all -- the flat face of a man fully detached from his former life.

The Costel she knew was gone. He had transformed, emerged from his ordeal more radically different from the previous month's version than the estranged siblings he sometimes spoke of. Her words, calculated to dig into him deeply and leave him reeling, would find nothing on which to catch.

This new Costel, she realizes, could hardly have understood how much his words left her bruised. He had evaluated his life and found it unimportant, and withdrew from it as quickly as he could, abandoning all that they had loved about him. All she had loved.

She turns away from the bus stop, begins the slow walk home. She can make it in an hour. Forty-five minutes if she hurries, but she's in no rush.

Put Costel back there, too, she thinks. Find a case for him, preserve those last moments of his faded signal, of the lost soul she once cared the world for. *Pin down the parts that matter, and let this new iteration run free.* And let that recording slowly decay, along with the rest of them on the walls, colors saturating after years and years, audio finding gaps, Costel growing indistinct. In the late afternoon light, she walks towards home, nothing in her path.

