

A couple is silhouetted against a bright light source, likely a street lamp or a building entrance, in a city at night. The background is dark with blurred lights, suggesting a busy urban environment. The couple is standing close together, facing away from the camera.

# BEFORE WE WERE STRANGERS

A ~~LOVE HATE~~ LOVE STORY

RENÉE  
CARLINO

ADVANCE UNCORRECTED PROOFS—NOT FOR SALE

## Simon & Schuster eGalley Disclaimer

---

Do not quote for publication until verified with the finished book. This advance, uncorrected reader's proof is the property of Simon & Schuster. It is being made available for promotional purposes and review by the recipient and may not be used for any other purpose or transferred to any third party. Simon & Schuster reserves the right to terminate availability of the proof at any time. Any duplication, sale or distribution to the public is a violation of the law. This file will no longer be accessible upon publication of this book.

COMPLIMENTS OF  
THE PUBLISHER

From the *USA TODAY* bestselling author of *Sweet Thing* and *Nowhere But Here* comes a love story about a Craigslist “missed connection” post that gives two people a second chance at love fifteen years after they were separated in New York City.

To the Green-eyed Lovebird:

We met fifteen years ago, almost to the day, when I moved my stuff into the NYU dorm room next to yours at Senior House.

You called us fast friends. I like to think it was more.

We lived on nothing but the excitement of finding ourselves through music (you were obsessed with Jeff Buckley), photography (I couldn't stop taking pictures of you), hanging out in Washington Square Park, and all the weird things we did to make money. I learned more about myself that year than any other.

Yet, somehow, it all fell apart. We lost touch the summer after graduation when I went to South America to work for National Geographic. When I came back, you were gone. A part of me still wonders if I pushed you too hard after the wedding...

I didn't see you again until a month ago. It was a Wednesday. You were rocking back on your heels, balancing on that thick yellow line that runs along the subway platform, waiting for the F train. I didn't know it was you until it was too late, and then you were gone. Again. You said my name; I saw it on your lips. I tried to will the train to stop, just so I could say hello.

After seeing you, all of the youthful feelings and memories came flooding back to me, and now I've spent the better part of a month wondering what your life is like. I might be totally out of my mind, but would you like to get a drink with me and catch up on the last decade and a half?

## M

- Included in the 2015 Atria Indie eSampler
- Feature on [AtriaIndieAuthors.com](http://AtriaIndieAuthors.com), [Facebook.com/AtriaIndieAuthors](https://Facebook.com/AtriaIndieAuthors), and [@AtriaIndies](https://twitter.com/AtriaIndies)
- Promotional assets, including bookmarks
- Cross promotion with [ReneeCarlino.com](http://ReneeCarlino.com), [Facebook.com/AuthorReneeCarlino](https://Facebook.com/AuthorReneeCarlino), and [@Renayz](https://twitter.com/Renayz)

Renée Carlino lives in Southern California with her husband, two sons, and their sweet dog, June. When she's not at the beach with her boys or working on her next book, she likes to spend her time reading, going to concerts, and eating dark chocolate. To learn more, visit [ReneeCarlino.com](http://ReneeCarlino.com).

ALSO BY RENÉE CARLINO

Sweet Thing

Nowhere but Here

After the Rain

**BEFORE  
WE WERE  
STRANGERS**

*A Love Story*

RENÉE CARLINO

**ATRIA** PAPERBACK

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi



**ATRIA PAPERBACK**

An Imprint of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

1230 Avenue of the Americas

New York, NY 10020

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and events are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2015 by Renée Carlino

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever. For information address Atria Books Subsidiary Rights Department, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020.

First Atria Paperback edition August 2015

**ATRIA PAPERBACK** and colophon are trademarks of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Simon & Schuster Special Sales at 1-866-506-1949 or [business@simonandschuster.com](mailto:business@simonandschuster.com).

The Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau can bring authors to your live event. For more information or to book an event contact the Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau at 1-866-248-3049 or visit our website at [www.simonspeakers.com](http://www.simonspeakers.com).

Interior design by Esther Paradelo

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Carlino, Renée

Before we were strangers : a love story / by Renée Carlino. — First Atria paperback edition.

pages ; cm (trade pbk. : alk. paper)

I. Title.

PS3603.A75255B44 2015

813'.6—dc23 2015017238

ISBN 978-1-5011-0577-7

ISBN 978-1-5011-0578-4 (ebook)

For Sam and Tony, whom I'm blessed and lucky to know



Life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.

—KHALIL GIBRAN

**FIRST MOVEMENT:**  
**RECENTLY**

## 1. Do You Still Think of Me?

### MATT

Life was passing me by at high speed as I sat back with my feet up, rejecting change, ignoring the world, shrugging off anything that threatened to have meaning or relevance. I categorically disagreed with all things current. I despised the use of emojis, the word meta, and people who talked on their phones in line. Don't even get me started on gentrification. There were twenty-one Starbucks within a three-block radius of the building I worked in. Recording studios, film labs, and record stores were dying, if not already vacant corpses turned cupcake shops or blow-dry bars. They had stopped playing music videos on MTV and had banned smoking in bars. I didn't recognize New York anymore.

These are the things I pondered while sitting in my four-by-four cubicle at National Geographic. It hadn't felt National or Geographic since I had taken a desk job there a few years before. I had come out of the field, where I had seen everything, and I went into a hole, where I saw nothing. I was in the middle of the city I loved, back in her arms again, but we were strangers. I was still hanging on to the past and I didn't know why.

Scott smacked me square on the back. "Hey buddy. Brooklyn for lunch?"

"Why so far?" I was sitting at my desk, fidgeting with the battery in my phone.

"There's a pizza place I want you to try, Ciccio's. You heard of it?"

"We can get good pizza on Fifth."

"No, you have to try this place, Matt. It's phenomenal."

"What's phenomenal, the pizza or the staff?" Since my divorce a few years ago,

Scott—boss, friend, and eternal bachelor—had high hopes that I'd become his permanent wingman. It was impossible to talk him out of

anything, especially when it involved women and food.

“You got me. You have to see this girl. We’ll call it a work meeting. I’ll put it on the company card.” Scott was the type who talked about women a lot and about porn even more. He was severely out of touch with reality.

“I’m sure this qualifies as sexual harassment somewhere.”

He leaned against the top of the cubicle partition. He had a nice-looking face and was always smiling, but if you didn’t see him for a week, you’d forget what he looked like.

“We’ll take the subway.”

“Hey guys.” My ex-wife walked by, sipping a cup of coffee.

I ignored her. “Hey Liz,” Scott said and then stared at her ass as she walked away. He turned to me. “Is it weird to work with her and Brad?”

“I’ve always worked with her and Brad.”

“Yeah, but she was your wife and now she’s Brad’s wife.”

“I honestly don’t care anymore.” I stood up and grabbed my jacket.

“That’s a good sign. I believe you. That’s how I know you’re ready for some strange.” I often ignored these types of comments from Scott.

“I need to stop by Verizon first and get a new battery,” I said, waving my phone.

“What is that?”

“A cell phone. Pretty sure you’ve seen one before.”

“First of all, no one says ‘cell phone’ anymore. Second, that’s not a phone; that’s an artifact. We should ship it to the Smithsonian and get you an iPhone.”

On the way out, we passed Kitty, the coffee cart girl. “Hello, gentlemen.”

I smiled. “Kitty.” She blushed.

Scott said nothing until we got into the elevator. “You should tap that. She totally wants you.”

“She’s a child.”

“She’s a college graduate. I hired her.”

“Not my type. Her name is Kitty.”

“All right, now you’re just being mean.” He seemed minimally offended on Kitty’s behalf.

“I’m fine. Why is it everyone’s mission in life to set me up? I’m fine.”

“Clock’s a-tickin’.”

“Guys don’t have clocks.”

“You’re thirty-six.”

“That’s young.”

“Not compared to Kitty.”

The elevator doors opened and we stepped into the lobby. A giant print of one of my photos ran the length of a wall.

“See that, Matt? That gets women wet.”

“It’s a picture of an Iraqi child holding an automatic weapon.”

“The Pulitzer you got for it, genius, not the picture.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “That was a good year for you.”

“Yeah, it was. Professionally, anyway.”

“I’m telling you, you have to use that to your advantage. You have a moderate amount of celebrity because of that photo. It’s worked in my favor.”

“How did it work for you, exactly?”

“I might’ve borrowed your name for a night. Once or twice.”

I laughed. “That’s disgraceful, man.”

“Kitty’s into you. You should give that little hottie what she wants. You know there’re rumors about her.”

“Even more reason to stay away.”

“No, good rumors. Like she’s crazy. A little animal.”

“And that’s good how?”

We made our way outside and headed for the subway station on West 57th to catch the F train. Midtown is always congested at that hour but we were nearing the end of winter. The sun beating down between the buildings drew even more people out onto the street. I weaved in and out of the masses while Scott trailed me.

Right before we reached the station entrance he spoke loudly from behind.

“She’d probably be into anal.”

I stopped and faced him at the top of the steps going down. “Scott, this conversation is wrong in so many ways. Let’s just end it here, okay?”

“I’m your boss.”

“Exactly.” I trotted down the steps toward the turnstiles.

There was an old woman playing a violin at the bottom of the steps. Her clothes were dingy and hair was a gray, matted mess. The strings on her bow were hanging off, like floating foxtails but she was playing Brahms flawlessly. When I threw five bucks in her case, she smiled. Scott shook his head and pulled me along.

“I’m trying to keep you happy and productive, Matt.”

I swiped my Metro card. “Give me a raise. That will keep me happy and productive.”

The station was crowded. A train was pulling up, but we were stuck behind a huge group of people who were pushing toward the front like they had somewhere important to be. Scott was content to hang back and stare at a woman who had her back toward us. She stood near the edge of the platform, rocking from heel to toe, balancing on the thick yellow line. There was something striking about her.

Scott elbowed me and then waggled his eyebrows and mouthed “nice ass.” I wanted to punch him in the neck.

The more I looked at the woman, the more I felt drawn to her. She had one thick blonde braid running down her back. Her hands were shoved into the pockets of her black coat and it occurred to me that, like a child, she was teetering joyously to the rhythm of the violin echoing against the station walls.

When the train finally pulled up, she let people rush past her and then stepped in at the last second. Scott and I stood on the yellow line, waiting for the next, less-crowded train. Just as the train doors closed, she turned around. Our eyes locked.

I blinked. Holy shit.

“Grace?”

She pressed her hand to the glass and mouthed, “Matt?” but the train was pulling away.

Without thinking about it, I ran. I ran like a crazy person to the end of the platform, my hand outstretched, willing the train to stop, my eyes

never leaving hers. And when I ran out of platform, I watched the train fly into the darkness until she was gone.

When Scott caught up to me, he looked at me cautiously. “Whoa, man. What was that about? You look like you saw a ghost.”

“Not a ghost. Grace.”

“Who’s Grace?”

I was stunned, staring into the void that had swallowed her. “A girl I used to know.”

“What, like the one who got away?” Scott asked.

“Something like that.”

“I had one of those. Janie Bowers, first girl to give me a blowie. I beat it to that image until I was, like, thirty.”

I ignored him. All I could think about was Grace.

Scott went on. “She was a cheerleader. Hung around my high school lacrosse team. They all called her the Therapist. I didn’t know why. I thought she was gonna be my girlfriend after that blowie.”

“No, not like that,” I said. “Grace and I dated in college, right before I met Elizabeth.”

“Oh, like that. Well, she looked good. Maybe you should try to get in touch with her.”

“Yeah, maybe,” I said, but thought there’s no way she’d still be single.

I LET BRODY, the seventeen year-old salesperson at Verizon, talk me into the newest iPhone. It actually costs eight dollars less a month to have a newer phone. Nothing in this world made sense to me anymore. I was distracted while signing the documents because the image of Grace, on the train, floating off into the darkness, had been running on a constant loop in my mind since we had left the station.

Over pizza, Scott showed me how to play Angry Birds. I thought that was a big step toward overcoming my technology phobia. The girl Scott was hoping to see wasn’t working so we ate our pizza and headed back to the office.

Once I was back at my cubicle, I Googled Grace's name in every possible variation—first, middle, and last names; first and last names; middle and last names—with no luck. How was this possible? What kind of life was she leading that kept her completely off the internet?

I thought about what had happened to us. I thought about the way she looked on the subway—still beautiful, like I remembered, but different. No one would ever describe Grace as cute. Even though she was petite, she was too striking to be cute, with her big green eyes and massive mane of blonde hair. Her eyes had seemed hollow, her face a bit harder than when I last saw her. It had only taken one glance for me to know she wasn't the effervescent, free spirit I'd known years ago. It made me crazy wondering what her life was like now.

Cheers erupted from the break room down the hall. I wandered over to witness the tail end of my ex-wife announcing her pregnancy to our co-workers. It wasn't long after my divorce that I became acutely aware of everyone around me carrying on, living life. I was static, standing on the platform, watching train after train go by, wishing I knew which one to be on. Elizabeth was already at the next stop, starting a family while I was slinking back to my shitty cubicle, hoping not to be seen. I was indifferent toward her and her pregnancy news. I was numb . . . but I shot her an email anyway out of some residual obligation still lingering from our failed marriage.

Elizabeth,

Congratulations. I'm happy for you. I know how badly you wanted a child.

Best, Matt

Two minutes later, my email pinged.

Best? Really? You can't say "love" after spending over a decade of your life with me?

I didn't respond. I was in a hurry. I needed to get back on the subway.



## 2. Five Days After I Saw You

### MATT

I took the damn F train, an hour-long ride to Brooklyn from Midtown and back every day, at lunch, hoping I would run into Grace again, but I never did.

Things were bad at work. I had submitted a request to go into the field three months ago but had been denied. Now I had to watch Elizabeth and Brad walk around in bliss as people congratulated them on the baby and Brad's promotion, which came right after the announcement.

Meanwhile, I was still rejecting any forward motion in my life. I was a stagnant puddle of shit. I had volunteered to go back on location to South America with a National Geographic film crew. New York just wasn't the same anymore. It held no magic for me. The Amazonian jungle, with all of its wonderful and exotic diseases, seemed more appealing than taking orders from my ex-wife and her smug husband. But my request hadn't been approved or denied. It just sat in a pile of other requests on Scott's desk.

I pondered the current state of my life while I stared at a blank wall in the office break room. Standing next to the water cooler, holding a half-empty paper cone, I tallied the insubstantial years I had spent with Elizabeth and wondered why. How had things gone so terribly wrong?

"What are you doin', man?" Scott's voice came from the doorway.

I turned and smiled. "Just thinking."

"You seem a little brighter."

"Actually, I was thinking about how I ended up thirty-six, divorced, and trapped in cubicle hell."

He walked to the coffee pot and poured a mug full then leaned against the counter. "You were a workaholic?" he offered.

"That's not why Elizabeth was unfaithful. She fell right into Brad's skinny arms, and he works more than I do. Hell, Elizabeth works more

than I do.”

“Why are you dwelling on the past? Look at you. You’re tall. You have hair. And it looks like” —he waved his hand around at my stomach— “you might have abs?”

“You checking me out?”

“I’d kill for a head of hair like that.”

Scott was the kind of guy who was bald by twenty-two. He’s been shaving it Mr. Clean-style since then.

“What do women call that thing?” He pointed to the back of my head.

“A bun?”

“No, there’s, like, a sexier name for it. The ladies love that shit.”

“They call it a man-bun.”

He studied me. “Jesus, you’re a free man, Matt. Why aren’t you prowling the savannahs for new game? I can’t watch you mope around like this. I thought you were over Elizabeth?”

I shut the break-room door. “I am. I was over Elizabeth a long time ago. It’s hard for me to even remember being into her. I got caught up in the fantasy of it, traveling with her, taking photos. Something was always missing, though. Maybe I did work too much. I mean, that’s all we talked about, that’s all we had in common. Now look where I am.”

“What about subway girl?”

“What about her?”

“I don’t know. I thought you were gonna try to get in touch with her?”

“Yeah. Maybe. Easier said than done.”

“You just have to put yourself out there. Get on social media.”

Will I find Grace there? I went back and forth between wanting to do everything I could to find her and feeling like it was totally pointless. She’d be with someone. She’d be someone’s wife. Someone better than me. I wanted to get away from everything reminding me that I still had nothing.

“If you care so much, why haven’t you approved my request?” I asked.

He scowled. I noticed how deep the line was between his eyebrows and it occurred to me that Scott and I were the same age . . . and he was

getting old. “I don’t mean the actual savannahs, man. Running away isn’t going to solve your problems.”

“Now you’re my shrink?”

“No, I’m your friend. Remember when you asked for that desk job?”

I walked toward the door. “Just consider it. Please, Scott.”

Right before I left the room he said, “You’re chasing the wrong thing. It’s not gonna make you happy.”

He was right, and I could admit that to myself, but not out loud. I thought if I could win an award again, get some recognition for my work, it would fill the black hole eating away at me. But deep down, I knew that wasn’t the solution.

After work, I sat on a bus bench just outside the National Geographic building. I watched hordes of people trying to get home, racing down the crowded sidewalks of Midtown. I wondered if I could judge how lonely a person was based on how much of a hurry he or she was in. No one who has someone waiting for him at home would sit on a bus bench after a ten-hour workday and people-watch. I always carried an old Pentax camera from my college days in my messenger bag, but I hadn’t used it in years.

I removed it from the case and started clicking away as people flooded in and out of the subways, as they waited for busses, as they hailed cabs. I hoped that through the lens I would see her again, like I had years before. Her vibrant spirit; the way she could color a black-and-white photo with her magnetism alone. I had thought about Grace often over the years. Something as simple as a smell, like sugared pancakes at night, or the sound of a cello in Grand Central or Washington Square Park on a warm day, could transport me right back to that year in college. The year I spent falling in love with her.

It was hard for me to see the beauty in New York anymore. Granted, much of the ruffraff and grit was gone, at least in the East Village; it was cleaner and greener now, but that palpable energy I had felt in college was gone, too. For me, anyway.

Time passes, life goes on, places change, people change. And still, I couldn’t get Grace off my mind after seeing her in the subway. Fifteen

years is too long to be holding on to a few heart-pounding moments from college.