

a bagel in the storm

ANDREA HANSELL



MY ADULT SON AND I CALLED one another often during the long months when the pandemic prevented in-person visits. As we complained of canceled trips, delayed family events, and our pervasive fear of catching the coronavirus, one of us would invariably ask, “But did you find a bagel to be happy about?” The other would then recall a small moment of joy from the previous week.

image info

The bagel aphorism originated many years ago on a long drive back to Maryland. It was the first holiday season after my husband’s death, and we had tried to make it festive by visiting old friends in Michigan. Our spirits had lightened briefly in the communal glow of Hanukkah candles and Christmas lights, but as we drove through the flatness of Ohio under low clouds, we felt the approaching darkness of the long, lonely winter nights at home. My usually talkative son spoke little. Even the Christmas music on the radio seemed flat, the once cheery songs sputtering down toward New Year’s Day when they would be mothballed until next winter.

A few spatters of drizzle hit the windshield. Then without warning a stiff wind blew heavy sheets of water horizontally across the highway. I squinted through the rain and the gathering dusk, trying to make out the lines on the road. At first the pavement was just wet, rivulets of water running off into the winter-plowed fields, but soon our headlights caught the sheen of ice. I gripped the steering wheel hard.

A car slid off the road in front of us, then another. Wheels spun, and fathers climbed out of cars to push their families over the crests of what in good travel conditions would be barely perceptible midwestern inclines. I wondered how we’d manage the upcoming Pennsylvania Turnpike with its twisting ascents through the Allegheny Mountains.

“Maybe we should stop for a while,” my son suggested.

We inched along, peering into the gloom for a service plaza sign. And there it was: Gas, Bagels, Pizza, Coffee!

Everyone on the Ohio Turnpike had the same idea. Ice-encrusted cars, blinkers flashing, lined up in the right lane to exit. We had to park far from the entrance, and we hung onto each other to keep from falling as we slid our way across the parking lot.

It was a relief to reach the noisy warmth of the main building, still decorated for Christmas with red bows and colored lights. But we saw lines everywhere—outside the restrooms and at all the food counters. Every table was occupied. People sat eating on windowsills and even the floor,

their faces dark and anxious, their agitated voices shouting into cell phones. The place felt like an evacuation center.

“We should eat dinner while we’re here,” I said. I joined a line at the bagel place and sent my son on a scouting mission for a spot at a table. My line snaked and crawled. It took half an hour to reach the front and place my order. “I’ll have two tuna sandwiches, please,” I said. “One onion bagel, one sesame. And two coffees.”

“No tuna left, just roast beef. And only plain bagels,” said the lone woman working the counter. “Coffee’s brewing. You’ll have to wait for it.”

“I’ll take two plain roast beef bagels and wait for the coffee,” I said.

Finally, roast beef sandwiches and steaming coffee in hand, I located my son. He had squeezed in around a table with another family—a young couple and a wispy-haired little girl in a pink parka. I pictured my husband and me, all the times we had sat at rest stop tables with our children and not paused to be grateful that we were alive, healthy, and together.

The mother of the family next to us looked down at her bagel sandwich as though it might be poisoned. “This has been the worst Christmas ever,” she said to her husband. “Your mother was beastly to me. And now this ice storm. There’s nothing about this whole week to be happy about.”

The husband kept chewing. The little girl looked up. “Mama?” she said. “I’m happy about my bagel.”

The mother’s face softened. “Well, good,” she said. “I’m glad.”

My son smiled at me across the table, his first real, full, crinkle-eyed smile in months.

The rain finally lightened and turned to snow flurries, and we saw the flashing lights of salt trucks out on the highway. The family with the little girl who was happy about her bagel left for wherever they were going, and we ventured out too.

The winter storm on the highway had just gifted us a bit of wisdom from a child that would become our future language of gratitude. As my son and I drove on toward Maryland, I pictured our cozy kitchen, how the cats would rub against our legs when we walked in. 🐾