

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/3

Tom Sheehan **The House No One Lived In**

They considered themselves midnight adventurers, coming off the hill they so lovingly called Henshit Mountain, to cross the pond in the dead of winter with sleds to "borrow" lumber from Artie Donolan who had "borrowed" it from Breakheart Reservation, a state park. The park, at its deepest end, bordered on land that the Donolans had worked for years, including timber they ripped out of the state park as long as a few eyes stayed closed. To the boys from Henshit Mountain, the Donolan rape was not unknown, not to these teenagers, who were only enacting their own form of justice, borrowing enough lumber to build themselves a clubhouse at the thickly-treed section of the mountain. With various spurts of energy, even in summer when they floated rafts of lumber across the same pond from the same lumberyard, rooms were added to the clubhouse. The building rose majestically, they all agreed, they who had to a man become proficient carpenters and finish men.

Over a number of years, as they grew toward a global war surfacing on both oceans, meetings were held, elections concluded, designs and improvements of all genres initiated, trysts enamored, hope burst continually from that domicile in which no one lived, not as a home site.

When the town, through the office of the chief of police, demanded taxes be paid on the property, thus quickly abandoned by the clubmen to the town, to the weather, to the times. They relocated their activities to another phantom house they'd build on land without a road, deeper in the tall pines, stray apple trees feeding off the ground since the Civil War days, and tyrant oaks that held their territory.

The membership included Frank Parkinson, Eddie Olijay, Bud Petitteau, Homer Barnard, Allie Devine, Clete Weaverling, Asa Parnell, Poker Symonds, Nial O'Hara, Chuck Grabowski, and others, by adoption or temporary association, whose names will only resurface as the story progresses. Some girls, of course, toward that quick run at war building in Europe, had honorary admission at all hours of day or night after a code of secrecy had been imposed. Not one of those girls, from what I have heard over the long years, ever broke that code.

Even as the members pillaged materials in small doses from ready sources on Route One, begged and borrowed in addition to the stealing, the noises on the far side of two oceans began to sift into their meetings.

"Hey, guys," Poker Symonds said one night as the moon sifted down through the trees, "I just heard today Buzz Marchowski joined the Canadian Air Force and is already in Moncton or Shédiac or St. Something somewhere. Eddie Smiledge down The Rathole told me. Says Buzz's all pissed off about the Germans screwing up Poland where his grandparents are living on the family farm."

Symonds, his name changed from hard-to-pronounce beginnings like *Sczy* and whatever, kept shaking his head as if he wondered why his name had been hidden behind soft edges. As it turned out, he was the first to leave the clubhouse one night, never to come back. Under the moon that night and light of kerosene lamps, others knew what was cooking in him; his eyes told the deep unrest so recently kicked free.

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Each knew his turn was coming, that he was bound elsewhere on the globe's face. If it touched Saugus in any manner at all, all swore an oath they'd be in the first line of recruits.

Germany was making too much noise, stepping on too many toes, bustling and bragging of their great inroads on small nations guarded by token armies, and Japan, like a lecher, was stretching its imperial hands across the rich skin and into too many orifices of the tasty Orient. In a matter of a week the balled fist of war came at them; one classmate, flying for the RCAF, was shot down over the English Channel; another enlistee, a neighbor of Parkinson's, was missing from an RAF flight over France; an uncle of Clete Weaver was stomped to death on the China coast as he tried to sneak out to sea to board a submarine after secret service on the mainland, and Oljay's distant cousin was shot in front of a firing squad at the edge of a ghetto in Poland.

War, in its demand for enlistment, called them, young and exuberant in their outlook and it was in the next week they gathered in the clubhouse, the house nobody lived in, and made their plans to help save the world.

Frank Parkinson said, "We don't go as a group. We don't get in one line to any branch of the service, and end up in one squad or one flight or one patrol, go down with one bang. We each go our own way. If we come back, or those who do come back, we'll meet here. No Trafalgar Square for us or even under the clock at The Ritz. We will celebrate here someday. We ought to go down to see the Chief and tell him our plans. He might understand. If not, we'll tell him not to tell us."

"Why can't we go as a group, the whole club of us?" Oljay said, seeing the whole group as a squad of its own, firepower from the start, Robin Hoods or Lone Rangers waging battle.

Parkie said, "No matter if we walked in and got consecutive numbers, they'd split us up. They do things like that so we don't clique it up. Makes sense to me, so we should each go our way. I'm going in the army. When I heard about Big Red in Burma, it said I'd join the army."

In a day's time, it was all decided, for each of them, and all services were involved.

The war to end all wars bruised them all, each one, each in different ways, some with dread permanence. Clete Weaver was blown off the deck of a Navy supply vessel in the Pacific, never to be seen again. A year later an envelope ended up at the Legion Hall, from Clete, simply addressed to *The Boys of Henshit Mountain, Saugus, Massachusetts*. The Post Office, having no proper or known address, delivered it to the Legion Post, #210, to hold for any survivors of the war who might have been The Boys of Henshit Mountain. As it was, one old WW I vet said he knew of them and would deliver it to the first one who came home. The Legion held the letter for almost two years.

Then it was delivered to Bud Petitteau one evening at the Meadowglen Club as Bud had come home from two years in the far Pacific and hospital time, one hand gone from a nasty grenade. The old Legionnaire had heard Bud was home, spending time at The Meadowglen with some guys who had come home, and made a trip to deliver the letter, which was simple enough in its message:

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"Miss you guys like hell, but some good guys here. I just wanted to see if this gets through to the clubhouse or to any of you. We have heard stories about miraculous deliveries of real short addresses. If I don't get to see you on the mountain, I am sure that we will catch up to each other sometime, someplace. Your clubhouse pal, Clete

PS: Say hi to Mildred Derning for me. I got her last letter about a year ago and never did answer it for one reason or another. She's a real cute kid I've thought about a few times.

(A note here: It was not revealed until 1950 that Mildred Derning had an eight-year old son she had named John Cletus Derning. She never married as far as I know and died in 1981. John Cletus Derning took down his physicians shingle in 2002. I don't know if he ever knew anything about his father, but I hope he did. If this tells him, it's about all I can do.)

Homer Barnard didn't come home from the 2th Infantry Division in the Pacific, and the 31st Infantry Regiment of the 7th Infantry Division in Korea, until 1954 and after he had served in a POW camp in North Korea for two years. One of his letters, addressed to *The Clubhouse on Henshit Mt, Saugus, Mass.*, was hung up in a dead letter box and a postal center under construction until it fell from between the cracks of time in 1963. It was delivered back to Homer by a personal friend, an employee of the USPS and an army comrade from basic days, who had intercepted it finally en route to Saugus and recognized the sender's name. He drove from New York one day in the fall to deliver it and spent a week in Saugus. He even visited the original clubhouse, which by then had been jacked up and a cellar placed under it, three rooms added, and a porch wrapped half way and more around the house from where a huge section of Rumney Marsh was visible as well as a great chunk of the Atlantic Ocean on a good day. The two men sat on the porch a good part of one afternoon with the owner, in Italy with the 10th Mountain Division with a few other Saugus boys, and the beer was free. They even went to see the Patriots play the Kansas City Chiefs at Fenway Park, which ended up in a tie game.

Parkie, who admittedly only wrote one letter to the guys, which has not yet surfaced, but about whom much has been written by me, ended up on the hot sands of the Sahara and could have been dead a few times. Of him it has been said, him being *The Municipal Subterranean* in a poem: *He comes up, goggled, out of a manhole in the middle of a street in my peaceful town, sun the sole brazier, like an old Saharan veteran, Rommel-pointing his tank across the four-year stretch of sand, shell holes filling up quick as death. I think of Frank Parkinson, Tanker, Tiger of Tobruk, now in his grass roots, the acetylene smile on his oil-dirty face, the goggles still high on his high forehead, his forever knowing Egypt's two dark eyes.*

Frank told me his story one evening as we drank beer by old Lily Pond. It came around as "Parkie, Tanker, Tiger of Tobruk," and many people have read it elsewhere.

Asa Parnell, it has been said, wrote dozens of letters to the guys but sent his via Harry Clemson at The Pythian Alleys (The Rathole Poolroom its other half), who held them until one of the guys picked them up in 1945, after the big boom went down. Parnell had 25 missions as a waist gunner of a B-17 over Europe, went to school on the GI Bill, ended up with his PhD, taught at two Maine colleges for more than 30 years before he

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drowned in a kayak ride on the Allagash River when he was over 70 years old. He only came to Saugus at the Founders Day festivities, out front of the Town Hall in September of the year when, at times, 10-15 thousand people might pass through the center of town during the celebration, the accompanying mini-marathon race, and the high school football game every other year. One year I heard that he found two other guys and they sat for four hours on the steps of the library hashing over the old days, and then he went north again, for his last ride a few years later.

Every so often, as if I'm being summoned by a voice, a face, the edge of a shared incident, I leave the vets section of the cemetery and visit Henshit Mountain, trying to find any remnant of a clubhouse, cellar in place, second floor added, perhaps a porch and a garage, a garden for summer attendance. Once an old fishing buddy, who had lived on the mountain for many years, pointed out two or three places that had strange beginnings. "There are no shortcuts in those places. They were built well by guys who knew their business. They had OJT before there was OJT. Go down alongside old Lily Pond and more than half the houses down there were summer camps before the big war, and when the boys came back home and were looking for cheap quarters, they bought a camp erected on cement blocks and after a while jacked it up, put in a stone or poured foundation, got central heating, raised a family, added rooms, sold it, bought or built a new place, all part of the economy. Some of the original camps are now so sprawling over the landscape you'd have to get a pre-war aerial map to find the beginning forms of them.

Parkie carried on for 20 some torturous years before he hugged the earth for the last time, but not on Henshit Mountain, home away from home for a long time in his short life. Every Memorial Day I re-flag his grave along with a host of people, and have done so for more than 25 years.

All of them are gone now, some here, some elsewhere. Four of the membership share the same plot with Parkie. None of them ever climbed to the back end of Henshit Mountain after the war. The house that no one lived in really had passed on in their growth, even its nostalgia, for they had rushed onto the real estate of the whole globe.

Now and then, usually close to Memorial Day and again at Veterans Day, I drive up the hill, for that's what it really is, a rise of about 500 feet above sea level, on a series of paved roads. From the road I can see two houses, now lived in for more than half a century, where no one lived when they were built. I can visualize the membership crossing the pond in winter on sleds loaded with purloined lumber and supplies, or on rafts tied together in the dead of summer nights. I know where they kept their beer in underground coolers, where it stayed cool and was hidden from the temptation of potential thieves. I know some of the girls, still here with us, grandmothers time and again, and great-grandmothers, who swore to the secrecy code and will carry it away with them.

It's on a rare occasion when I come face to face with one of those ladies in the aisle of a mall store, or at the library with a chosen book, or in the cemetery on a special day, and get a wink acknowledging the deep and mostly hidden years. We understand the past, the pact, the passions. We understand what loyalty means, and where things have gone in this short passage.