

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/3

Tom Sheehan
Comes Moving Day

IT WAS JULY OF 1936, sticky hot, perhaps ice cream someplace I hoped, but I was acutely aware that ice cream might not happen this day. The steel bars of the old Mystic Bridge in my hands were hard and warm, as the sun had hours of penetration and I had one hour to spare within my dramatic playground out over the Mystic River we called "The Oily" with observant regard for its rainbowed surface. Having slipped inside the girder work of a cage-like support angled at 45 degrees, my eyes went directly down on a boat about to pass under the bridge loaded with iron junk, old cold steel, surely lots of brass and copper from junk yards and junk wagons all over Boston. Long lengths of copper and brass, gleaming in the mess, looked like sandwich parts between dark iron crusts. The bridge sat between Boston's Charlestown borough, proud as the Bunker Hill Monument, off across the borough and uphill from me, and Chelsea, a city as small in area as one can imagine, but lined with petrol tanks and ship piers, ships that traveled the high seas from countries around the globe.

I wondered where this ship was going, why junk was the cargo, all that clap-trap debris of the deserted, from wayside conglomerations and ruins and cast-offs that old men in thick white whiskers and beards picked up in horse-drawn wagons and now and then a small red truck with high red sideboards, a step up from the horse vehicle, for delivery and sale at junkyards in the area. The answers came later, in one fell swoop of destiny. There was a singular difference in the cargo of outgoing ships and the junk wagons; the ships only carried metal while the junk wagons also carried scrap paper and cardboard baled tight with rope or wire or old neckties whose patterns still showed off their styles, and bales of old rags in new patterns.

It was July of 1936 and I was on vacation from Miss Finn's first grade class at the Kent School, not far from Hobie's Beanery, in a garage of all places, Abie's Market on one strategic corner of the Loop-the-Loop, and the Bond Bread factory. All of them memorable for one or more reasons, and I still have the note Miss Finn sent home to my parents: "Please don't move away until I have taught all the Sheehans." Miss Finn thought my sister Patricia and I were her bright stars; we were readers at this early age, taken in hand by a paternal grandmother and a paternal grandfather for the grasp of one of "the three Rs."

And yet here I was adventuring within the structure of a monster bridge, a structure that continually enticed me with solid come-ons. Once, a few months earlier, I had traversed over the river's water as the bridge opened to let a ship pass under its span. That one-time terror became, for a free lancer kid, a constant challenge to do it again, to out-do my first fear, to be, as my father used to say, "One of the survivors of the times that flag about us." I knew what he was referring to ... always hungry for the thin meals that came from nowhere into my mother's hands in our third level kitchen on Bunker Hill Avenue; some of those Depression-era meals so immemorial they are most memorable the longer I hold onto them (Let's say about 80 years now, stretching on, keeping cover.) An instance

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would be a Sunday meal purchase for a dollar after church: at Hobie's Beanery a quart of baked beans and a loaf of brown bread and the balance spent in Abie's Market, closed on Sunday but entered via the back door for all the lamb kidneys I could get from Abie. Abie favored us too, for my sister once told him, "You grow the best lamb kidneys of all, but they still stink up the house when they're getting cooked." He loved her honesty and winked his appreciation for me, and I couldn't wait to tell my parents; good news was always in order.

It was July of 1936 and if my father knew I was in that cage-like support, he'd whale the tar out of me; my mother would cast a stern look, shake her head, begin to cry at the possibilities. But ... and a big imaginative BUT, my grandmother, likely on that same day, put on her pert little black hat, grabbed her black shiny pocketbook and took the first bus that came by her corner of Highland Avenue and Trull Lane in Somerville, a few miles away, the tall, elegant lady of manners, most correct speech, possibly the softest hands I've ever known, and words that often said, "We are born to read." More than three-quarters of her life were spent binding books at Ginn & Company in Cambridge, with hundreds of rejects landing on our shelves from her shiny black pocketbook, those very books calling out, making demands, crying for attention to favored paragraphs beginning the longest lingering that bunches of words ever had. (The High Lama saying in *Lost Horizon*, "For when that day comes, the world must begin to look for a new life. And it is our hope that they may find it here. For here, we shall be with their books and their music, and a way of life based on one simple rule: Be Kind! When that day comes, it is our hope that the brotherly love of Shangri-La will spread throughout the world. Yes, my son; When the strong have devoured each other, the Christian ethic may at last be fulfilled and the meek shall inherit the earth.")

She was, on that day or one just like it, bent on travel and transportation and relocation... of our family, "Find some grass and trees for the boy, friends for the girls, room to breathe, throw arms and yells into the sky, climb the hills, fish the ponds, let them be." A hundred times I had heard her say to my father, "Let them be, James. Let them be," That **BE** was stretched as far as she could send it. Too much too soon she had seen more than once; in our own doorway the drunk of early morning advertising his hard, harsh night, half alive, meaning half dead, sprawled in his helplessness, his loss, extravagance afoot gone prone, a disastrous sight for an elegant grandmother, bookbinder, dreamer, mover of families. There was a better place. Perhaps she had paused as I had on that same elocution of the High Lama, where each of us had seen Hugh Conway nod his head in universal agreement, in solitude's assessment. Some grandmothers are like that; lucky us.

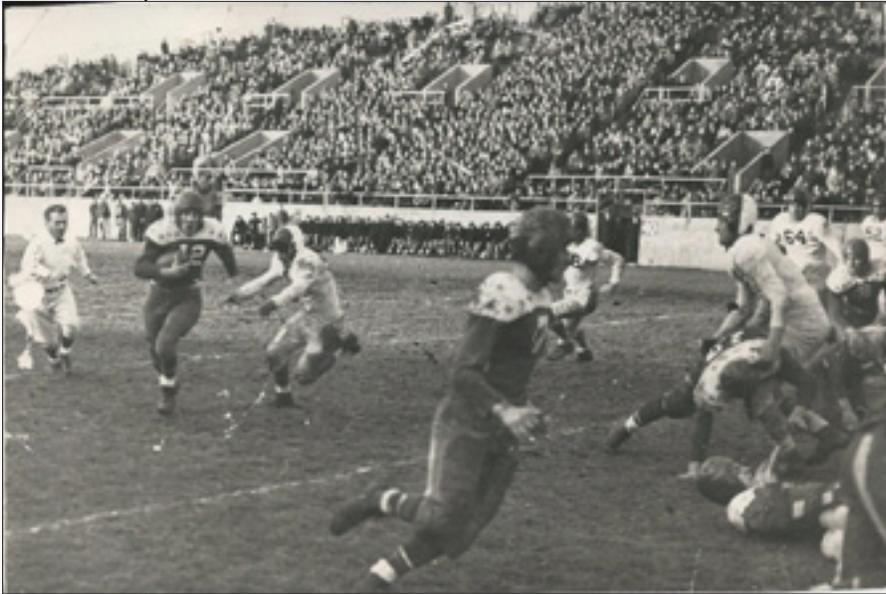
That grand day of decision, she went via Somerville/Everett Station/Malden Square to find a big silver Hart Lines bus that said "Saugus" on its destination sign. She found a third floor apartment in Cliftondale Square beside Hanson's Garage, near Joe Laura's Barbershop and Louie Gordon's Tailor Shop, and gave directions to my father.

He took me for my first ride to Saugus. We crossed "my bridge" on the way. Eventually we went along the river and a small fleet of lobster boats (I mentioned that I'd never had lobster and my father said, "Don't worry

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anymore," as he tousled my hair), cruised through the awed parts of town full of green grass in exorbitant spreads, lusty farms teeming with crops taller than me, rode the Turnpike that headed all the way to Newburyport ... and beyond? I heard the hum of traffic in prolonged sprints rather than the in-town screeches of a daring rider performing a Loop-the-Loop, tire cries as high-pitched as police whistles. Then we circled around until we had seen the three ice houses along the banks of Lily Pond and huge fish, which were carp, roiling in wide circles on the surface and kids jumping off a rocky place into the pond. A few older folks, on the far side, were almost in the darkness of trees as thick as parade crowds, swinging their fishing lines out over the pond where the leaning sun leaped westward back across the Turnpike. And one canoeist, motionless, most distant but ever since a part of this history, dazzled in the sun's rays, such a far cry from the drunk in the doorway who startled and started my grandmother on her own crusade, her own trek here, her trip for preservation.

I was locked into Saugus already, the images flying through me from the river and the pond and a small, decrepit building with high black letters on its gray side spelling out "Shadowland."



Tom Sheehan carries the ball in 1946

"It was a ball-room," my father said, qualifying my curiosity. "Looks like it's gone into the Nevernever land."

But I could tell he was up to something, something special, something to fit, "Find some grass and trees for the boy." It was the male connection. It would not be a place where he'd say to the girls, "This is where you'll play with your dolls, or practice early make-up treats, wear dresses and gowns and high

heels that are too many years bigger than you."

We spun a quick left hand turn and the broad field swept out in front of me. A gridiron, then and still now, longer than I could run ahead of others, a baseball diamond in one corner backstopped by a huge tree looking like it could swallow foul balls.

In the air was a hush. It was minutes long. He waited while the images came and went, then simply added, "This'll be for your brother and you. The girls will find their own places. They always will.

I didn't know the names yet of coming teammates, but I knew right

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then, beforehand, the robust images of Doug and Bruce Waybright, Art Spinney, Frank Pyszko, Bob Kane, Ernie Anganis, John and Fred Quinlan, Soupy Campbell, Gene Decareau, George Miles, Andy and Frank Forti, Sardie and Richie Nicolo, Cushy Harris, Saugus 14-Lynn Classical 12, Saugus 13-undefeated Melrose 0 (twice- 1941 & 1944), Saugus 21-undefeated Revere 0, the sharing, the warmth of friendship, hard work two-a-day practices starting in 1943, walking off to Korea with four years' worth of opponents, sharing the Main Supply Route in a single file walk with Lynn Classical's Jimmy Varzakis as we swapped positions in the Iron Triangle of 1951 under the leadership of Young-Oak Kim, Korean-American, for whom I carried a 300 command radio as he directed the whole Iron Triangle attack. Once a highly decorated officer in WW II Europe in the Nisei 442nd Battalion, a lieutenant when I first saw him and a Lt. Colonel when we parted. That day of parting he stood at the tail end of a six-by truck of home-bound soldiers having earned "rotation status," and said, "Is Sgt. Sheehan aboard?" I wanted to duck. I wanted to get home. I wanted to write. I had things to say, and I thought he wanted to keep me for another tour.

All of this history is traceable to an elegant lady with a shiny black pocketbook, soft hands, a thirst for the good word of the language, who bound books for more than half a century, who dreamed of a place of green fields and thick trees, never knowing at the outset it was Saugus, where Indians danced, where Captain Kidd might have come up the river, where young Scots were indentured at the First Iron Works in America, where a Yankee carpenter or builder left a talisman coin on a sill of my house built in 1742, but my father called it "*anting-anting*" from his Philippine days.

The junk collectors never knew they were selling parts for Tokyo's battleships, aircraft carriers, Zeros in quick flight. Neither did I. In other forms that load of junk hit me for years on end. Images, couplets, lines came and were gathered, remain like pieces of this wall of me ... but a long time before things fell into place, as in my father's advice; Crow a little bit when you're in good luck; Own up, pay up, and shut up when you lose. Fishing is the great solace in sports. It's for the mind, not the hook. It's the time when you measure wins and losses in the truest angle of all, a slant of unbearably beautiful sunlight through morning's alder leaves, water's whisper of confidence on rocks you think you can hear later in the night, the pointed miracle of a trout beating you at his game, letting you know the wins and losses do come and do pass by, even standing still. It's like the game of golf or the game of pool, the green is highly coincident. And early in sports, at the edge of my first failure, marked by the touch of his hand on my shoulder: "You come into this life with two gifts, love and energy, and words and sports are going to take both of them for all you've got." I think his heart remembered a loss, his knees their pain. When they took his leg off, the pain did not leave him.

But the reminders stick like old gum under theater seats on late Saturday evenings ... I who lost a brother and nearly lost another remember the headlines, newsreels, songs of bond-selling, gas-griping, and movies too true to hate, the whole shooting match of them. The entire Earth bent inwards, imploding bombs, bullets, blood, shrieking a terrible bird cry in my ears only sleep could lose. Near sleep I could only remember the nifty

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bellbottom blues he wore in the picture my mother cleaned and cleaned and cleaned on the altar of her bureau as if he were the Christ or the Buddha, a new tall, skinny statue in my mind, but he was out there in the sun and the sand and the rain of shells and sounds I came to know years later moving up from Pusan, breaking out of the perimeter, bound north. I never really knew about him until he came home and I saw his sea bag, as he stepped off the train in Saugus Center, decorated with his wife's picture drawn by his hand, and a map and the names Saipan, Iwo Jima, Kwajalein, the war.

The memories stand still at times, forced into place, hardening me, stiffening the joists I rest upon, bearing recall, the fast moment being retrieved, lost, found again, fireworks on the Fourth, a May Monday of silence, a friendly-forces face from Bethlehem or McKees Rocks or the Windy City, a last moment caught again in surprise, elegant, heroic, so sassy, talking back to me on a Saturday afternoon as I drink a beer, as it comes again without prejudice, in a new millennium: I know the weight of an M-1 rifle on a web strap hanging on my shoulder, the awed knowledge of a ponderous steel helmet atop my head, press of a tight lace on one boot, wrap of a leather watch band on my wrist, and who stood beside me who stand no more.

The old Mystic River Bridge is gone, replaced by new a new structure with automatic toll collection; so are some cities I have visited in khaki, those blasted to smithereens saving a million lives here, losing unknown thousands there, still know about Young-Oak Kim, now celebrated by the name of a school, talk now and then to Pete Leone in McKees Rocks and Frank Mitman in Bethlehem and Bob Breda in North Riverside, Illinois, and wonder about him, and know most of all those who have moved with eternal motivation ... who stand beside me no more.

Nor does that elegant lady with the huge, shiny black pocketbook, bookbinder, director of traffic, mover of families, steadfast reader, enforcer of the trade.