

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/4

Walter F. Giersbach
Time's Up

PATRICK SEAMUS O'NEILL STARED AT THE SHIP MOVING at three knots into the sunset toward Kearny and the New Jersey shore. He nudged his son and said, "That's the most beautiful sight in the world," and wasn't disappointed hearing the middle-aged man snort. Younger people were so impatient.

"You have to understand," he said without taking his watery blue eyes off the stern of the carrier and the little tugs guiding it. "I didn't serve on the *Intrepid*, but I might have. I was assigned to the *Bonhomme Richard*. We called it the *Bonnie Dick*, and it was one of the most valiant ships in the fleet."

"I know, Dad, you told me." The younger man turned to look back at the Lincoln town car idling on Manhattan's West Street, then glanced at his watch.

"You still don't understand what I'm telling you, son. It wasn't just the war. It wasn't just my buddies — the ones I see at reunions and the ones I'll never see again."

Frank wanted to roll his eyes, but kept his head lowered out of filial respect. He'd heard it all before.

"This is going to sound sappy, but I wish things were like they were when your mom and I were growing up. I wish sometimes I could go back. We had stable lives. A guy could afford to let his wife just be a homemaker like your mom was. Life was slower." He smiled. "You don't remember, but when I was in school two yellow pencils cost a nickel. Now... I don't know."

"Slower isn't possible anymore," the younger man said. "It's never going to be simple again. Look at this city, look what's changed in just two decades." He waved his hand over the skyline behind him, but his father couldn't tear his eyes off the ship being towed to another port until its Hudson River pier could be refurbished.

"We had community." Patrick wiped a hand over his thinning hair. "We knew our neighbors. Our friends were shopkeepers and people who lived in the apartment building. Simple people. What's the word your generation uses? Authentic people. We had authenticity."

One neighbor in particular, a classmate at PS 11 who lived a few blocks north. He'd wait on Ninth Avenue until he saw her strolling to school and then step out and say, "Hey, Alice, goin' my way?" In fact, his routine then was to do a little jig like that guy, Eddie Cantor, shuffle his feet and make like he was tipping his hat to her.

And she'd giggle. "You're such a card, Patrick O'Neill! Stop making me laugh."

He never knew quite how to collect the words that would express what he wanted to say. Something like, *I thought of you before falling asleep. I looked into your blue eyes and wanted so much to run my fingers over your cheek.*

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/4

Instead, he made jokes. Sometimes gently elbowing her shoulder for effect when he hit the punch line.

“Dad, c’mon, we have to go. The ship’s almost out of sight and it’ll be dark.”

“Just a few minutes more. Humor an old man and his memories.” A wry smile crossed his lips. He didn’t care that Frank was being impatient. This moment would never come again, an instant when he could go back six decades, to a time when he was truly alive and knew his every action as a sailor was an authentic choice that might result in life or death.

An idea totally unrelated to mortality suddenly struck him. “Sometime it might be fun to get your sister and the kids and have a picnic in Central Park,” he said. “Your mother — God rest her — and I used to take you on picnics on the Great Lawn and watch you toddle around picking dandelions.”

The river was slate gray, except for an occasional sparkle where a sunbeam ricocheted off a ripple. It had once been called the North River until somebody later decided to hang the name of an Englishman employed by the Dutch on the broad expanse of water demarcating civilization from the wilderness.

“That deli near our apartment in Hell’s Kitchen used to make great roast beef sandwiches on long loaves, and they cost less than a buck. Remember? That was our picnic. One dollar! The subway was fifteen cents. What do they cost now?”

But it wasn’t about price. Life was anchored in value.

On the way home from school, he’d leave Alice and pop into the deli, coming back with two giant dill pickles he’d bought for a nickel. One for her while the other went into his mouth like Groucho Marx smoking a cigar. “You should be in show business, Patrick,” she’d say. “I’d pay to see your act.”

Frank wagged a finger at the car and the driver pulled up to the parking area. Patrick stood on the edge of the pier, silhouetted against the sunset.

“Careful, Dad. Don’t lose your step and fall in,” Frank said. “I can’t swim worth a damn.”

“D’you know, when I was growing up I used to light a match with one hand. I’d open the matchbook, like this” — he mimicked the motion — “bend the match over and scratch it against the charcoal striker. Then they put the striker on the back of the matchbook. Guess too many people were burning their thumbs.” His laugh was a short dog-like bark.

“Was that a useful thing to know?” Frank asked. He adjusted his necktie.

“Now the doctor tells me I can’t smoke a cigar. Even without inhaling. They call it dying from second-hand smoke.”

He realized he was thinking of natural selection, about survival of the fittest. Perhaps he had even been a grim Darwinian reaper on board the *Bonnie Dick*, killing some people so the superior, morally fit could

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/4

survive. As he ended his eighth decade the question now was, who still deserved to be saved? Was it an ethical question or simply an economic conundrum? In the end, he wondered, aren't fallen mortals just damaged goods already corroded by any of those sins identified by the holy Mother Church?

Frank switched his weight on the asphalt. Time was almost up. "Why would you want to die prematurely? Smoking, I mean. Science isn't on your side, Dad. We love you. We don't want you to die."

"In Chicago, while I was in the Navy," Patrick replied, "I learned to light a match against the wind, by cupping it inside my hand. They can't prohibit that. Couldn't outlaw the wind any more than they could prevent chapped lips from kissing girls on Michigan Avenue."

The soft susurrations of homeward-bound traffic on the West Side Drive lent a whisper of comfort and warmth to the evening.

"What've we lost?" the old man said softly. "Where's our community? Who're our friends? What do we stand for as a country?"

"Dad, I really insist you cut the crap. Time's up." Frank reached for his father's elbow, gently but persuasively. "There'll be other places to play back your old-timey memories. Right now we have to go. There's a meeting in forty minutes and you have to get ready."

"There's always a meeting, isn't there?" Patrick asked.

"Dad, *for Christ's sake*, you're a billionaire. You own half of the city. The Finance Committee's waiting and you need to make a 20-million-dollar decision about acquiring the Fischel property. It's getting dark. Damn it to hell!"

Patrick smiled, his reverie broken. "Thanks, Frank. That was fun. Get our law firm and call Mancuso at Prudential. And have someone see if we can get a table tonight at Le Cirque."

Then he squinted down the asphalt lane reserved for joggers and bike riders. A girl who might be 11 or 12 years old was staring at him. He gave her a half wave and a smile of cordiality while she stared solemnly with her hands folded. Odd child, he thought, as she walked toward him. The hem of her blue dress fell below her knees and she was wearing shiny black shoes. Patent-leather things girls used to call Mary Janes.

"Hello, Patrick," she said softly.

He squinted against the setting sun as if this would bring the girl into focus. She looked familiar. "What's your name, little girl?" he asked.

"I'm Alice. Don't you remember?" She took off the wool hat and shook loose a tumble of yellow curls.

"Alice?" Yes, Alice, from a time when they had been in fifth or sixth grade at PS 11 on West 21st Street. There had been an evening like this when he and Alice had strolled over to the Hudson. He had kissed her, impulsively and with no right to claim her affection. She had returned a beatific smile and told him, "We're not alone anymore, are we? Say 'Forever and ever.' Say it."

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/4

On Monday, when he returned to school, he heard playground rumors that Alice had polio. She was absent from school for several days before the teacher — he remembered it was Mrs. Goff — told the class that Alice had died.

He stood up and shouted “You lie!” at Mrs. Goff and she sent him to the principal who paddled him. Still, every morning for the next week, he stood on their corner of Ninth Avenue. Waiting. Alice hadn’t just left him. She had betrayed his love by dying, left him alone to claw his way up and out of the neighborhood.

“Will you come with me now?” Alice asked in an even voice. “It’s time to go.”

“No,” he said with fear. “No! I can’t. I have too much to do. Not yet.”

She smiled wistfully. “Then soon,” she said. She cocked her head to one side and said directly to him, “I’ll be back. When that big ship returns. You won’t be alone then.”