A Place of Refuge

Betty Fouch
Western Michigan University

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Each Saturday is like a pie—a pie fashioned from the finest ingredients and made to look appetizing by a clever pastry chef. I cut from this exciting dish a wedge all for myself: two hours alone to do with as I please. I back our functional Ford out of the driveway. And even as I wave goodbye I forget that calling it functional is a family joke to excuse its shabbiness. I pretend that I am motoring into the City in my Continental and I fancy myself having an extravagant shopping tour when I reach Jacobson's glass doors.

My pumpkin coach is parked in the city parking lot. I stroll down the Burdick Mall with two dollars cash in my French purse. Half the city strolls with me because the sun is shining and because spring fashions—a la hothouse—have bloomed in the store windows. I stare at the diminutive mannikins and regret that I am not diminutive. I criticize accessories and, deeming them unsuitable, am glad that I do not have to buy them. I muse philosophically before a window of dancing, gay red shoes . . . shoes which no mother with four children who have eight feet can afford to buy on impulse.

I take my beer-pocketbook into F. W. Woolworth's—thoroughly effervesced by the champagne of an hour's window-shopping. I reach for the 59 cent size tube of Red Commotion (a lipstick which should rightfully be called Same Old Red), when I abruptly find myself looking straight into the eyes of Temple Drake. She sits—her slender legs crossed—on the fourth shelf from the floor. In those sheath dresses you just don't dare to cross your legs. She has her legs crossed.

Dammit. She doesn't look one day older than when I first met her in 1940.

* * *

Malodors herald the seasons in any industrial area. Twenty-five miles southeast of Chicago's Loop sprawls Hammond, Indiana, in the dirt. Slashed by railroads, butted by factories, like mankind it prevails. There the smells of the soap factory mean summer. A waft from the Amazo plant connotes spring. The oil refineries fog the chilled air of autumn with the stench of their waste gasses. Winter becomes a welcome, relatively odorless, bas-relief of soot.

It was through the winter soot that I made my way to the F. W. Woolworth Co. in Hammond in the cold season of 1939-40. There, as an eighteen year old high school graduate, I was qualified to earn 25 cents an hour. Dressed in an anonymous-looking cotton uniform, I served white patrons of the soda fountain. I learned to carry (simultaneously) main dish, roll, butter, beverage, water, check. I learned to completely ignore negroes. (Company policy.) I worked Monday through Saturday, ten till two. Twenty-five cents a day automatically deducted from my pay whether or not I ate lunch at the soda fountain. (Company policy.) I quickly learned to savor Today's Special.

On slow days the soda fountain manager (she hated her own sex) would thrust a stack of handbills into my unwilling hands. These bits of paper, if anybody cared, announced soda fountain specials. At the entrance of the store I stood, a nobody in a white nothing, hawking handbills to handless Hammondites. This humble experience shaped me into the thoughtful, considerate person I am today. I have been seen (in the rain) graciously accepting handbills from syphilitic lepers.

One dreary Saturday afternoon I was shifting from left foot to right bestowing ravishing looks upon indifferent Poles, Slavs, Mexicans, when Joe Farrell came by. I had seen him the week before at the public library and he had helped me find "Northwest Passage" in a stack of newly-returned books. Joe reached for one of my STRAWBERRY SUNDAE WITH WHIPPED CREAM 15 CENT SPECIAL handbills. I fell in love. I nodded my way through his halting invitation to go to a movie Saturday night.

My widowed father lived with his only child on the northside of Hammond in a Cape Cod cottage. The neighborhood was chiefly Polish. Houses and yards were humble but well-kept. These people were the first to be laid off when a factory shut down. But if they were unskilled workers at the bench, their vegetable gardens flourished under green thumbs. There was enough, though not always plenty.

In our small living room there was an old-fashioned library

table near the door. Above it was a rectangular mirror, gilt edged. When Joe Farrell came on foot to escort me to the Parthenon Theater, he placed the first of many books on that table. It was Thomas Wolfe's "Look Homeward, Angel." Joe also introduced me to Hemingway, Steinbeck, Dos Passos, Whitman.

As Joe put the book down, I saw reflected within the framework of the gilt edged mirror a blue-eyed Irish boy. Of medium height, slim, smooth-skinned, pleasing to my eye, he smiled at me and I saw endearing smileliness at either corner of his mouth. He wore dark brown woolen slacks, a white dress shirt with tie, a hip-length jacket of suede cloth in a shade then called British Tan. I later learned that this outfit, plus a sleeveless knitted vest of beige, comprised his entire wardrobe. He was immaculate, as those who have nothing better to do with learn to be.

My father eyed Joe Farrell over his evening paper, then said goodnight. We walked the mile or more to the picture show. A half-dollar from Joe's pocket admitted both of us to "The Grapes of Wrath." By the time we emerged two hours later, we were holding hands.

Joe worked at the public library where he earned ten dollars a week. Seven of these he gave to his mother, as this sensible Slavish woman had taught her eight sons and daughters to do. Joe, at nineteen, listened respectfully to the matriarch. But he had inherited some of his Irish father's carefree ways. After the movie he squandered money on sodas for us at the Greek's. Then he dropped two dimes into the coin-box of the Number Two bus and we rode home in style. The two men seated immediately in front of us had WPA necks. Digging ditches and leaning on shovels produced what I called a Depression Neck: deep black furrows on rough red skin—an ugly sight to stare at while holding hands. I put my head against Joe's British Tan shoulder and closed my eyes.

By the time the Amazo plant sent a cornstarched signal of spring toward Hammond, I had finished reading about Eugene Gant. Joe came with "Of Time and the River," leaving it on the library table as usual.

From "Leaves of Grass" Joe read aloud:

> When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd
> And the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the night,
> I mourned, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.

The timbre of his Irish voice transformed these mournful lines into a love song.

The drab industrial town cloaked itself in a light green wrap. The factory smells were suddenly heavenly. We had no money, no car. Through the town we walked pointing at buds and waving at birds. And when we came to the other side, the open-hearth of the steel mill glowed for us in the spring night. And there we kissed.

We bicycled to the golf course, fell laughing onto the grass, and watched the golfers. Ever-returning spring, trinity sure to me you bring. Walt Whitman. Joe Farrell. Walt Whitman, Joe Farrell. When Joe stopped reading, I was always near.

When Dad let me take his car, we sometimes drove into the country south of Hammond. We watched the moon and the fireflies. Or we'd drive to Miller Beach, build a fire, climb the dunes, and race into Lake Michigan in the dark. We occasionally drove into Chicago to a concert at the Grant Park Bandshell. Once we stood in line for the longest time at the World Playhouse to see a foreign movie about the life of Tchaikovsky. As we waited in the lobby, the lovely strains of music drifted from the screen to the spot where Joe and I stood happy.

On the 4th of July we rented a rowboat and spent the day on Wolf Lake. In the soap factory's haze, we took turns with the oars, sang loudly to the cattails, and trailed our feet in the cool water. The fishermen stared as we waved to them.

By autumn Joe was making more money at the library. He enrolled at a university extension class. American Literature. I met him after class and we munched taffy apples and walked along kicking leaves. I now had a good job at Illinois Bell. As a long-distance operator I earned 35 cents an hour and was assured of a 40-hour week. Joe met me after work and we would plan our evening together. Now, with the fog pouring down from the oil refineries, the fourth season, winter, was at hand. I began to practice writing: Mrs. Joe Farrell, Mrs. Joseph A. Farrell, Mrs. Betty Farrell.

In November we listened to the radio a good deal: Fred Allen or Jack Benny or Fibber McGee and Molly. What more romantic setting than cokes, popcorn, and Dick Jergens' orchestra playing, "Daydreams Come True at Night"? Joe sent me brief, humorous notes when he couldn't see me. He brought me books when he could.

One night in late November Joe arrived covered with snow. He put down a snowy book on the library table and I helped him out of his jacket. From his jacket pocket he took a small volume containing Emerson's essay on Self-Reliance. He read to me and thus we together studied his Literature assignment.

We sat close on the over-stuffed divan and for all I knew he might have been reading from "Song of Songs" instead of Emerson. His voice was that thrilling. As I contemplated immediate surrender, my father stirred in his sleep in the next room. So instead, because it was getting late, I walked Joe to the door and we spent ten minutes saying goodnight. A very simple wedding in June I said to myself. Then I fell asleep.

* * *

When I wasn't grieving at the silence, I was raging at how abruptly I had been dropped by Joe. For after that snowy November night Joe didn't appear, didn't phone, didn't write. When I phoned his house, his sisters said he wasn't home. When I wrote, no reply. I wept. I anguished. I waited. Then, because I was young and healthy, I recovered. That all-girl symphony of telephone company life helped a lot. Phil Spitalny should have known as many girls as I knew during that winter of 1940!

By mid-summer I was dating an engineering student. We wrote to each other daily after he returned to the campus in September. On December 7, 1940, we were having dinner together at the University of Illinois student center when President Roosevelt announced that Pearl Harbor had been attacked. If our world was coming to an end, we decided, we wanted to be married first. We made plans to elope on New Year's Eve. Roger and I agreed to keep our marriage a secret until the end of the school year. He then returned to the U. of I. campus and I returned to the Bell Telephone switchboard.

Two weeks later a telephone supervisor handed me a note which had been delivered to the chief operator's desk. It was a note from Joe. He asked me to meet him at the Greek's. At the sight of his handwriting my heart resumed its old ache. I had to see him once more.

The Greek's was the same old stale-smelling, marble-tabled ice cream parlor, really rather-dismal place. Nothing had changed. Joe still looked like William Holden. Irish, Immaculate. We stared at each other over the tall sodas the Greek put in front of us.

Joe said, "Thank you for coming."

I said, "Thank you for rising from the dead."

"I've thought of calling you lots of times."

"Why didn't you?" I said. "I was just one index finger away."

"You don't know?"

"Oh yes, I know. I know that you kissed me goodnight fourteen months ago and I know that you've avoided me ever since. Tell me, do you cross the street when you think you see me coming?"

"Obviously your father never told you . . ."

"What does my father have to do with it?"

"Betty, the last night we were together I left a book on the table by the front door."

"I remember."

"Did you read it?"

"Yes, I read it. What about it?"

"Well, what did you **think?"**

"I thought that I had never heard of William Faulkner. I thought that I had never heard of a book called 'Sanctuary.' I thought that Temple Drake was a damn fool to hang around that still and those moonshiners when she could have made a break for it. Then I forgot all about the book. What did you think I'd think?"

"Betty, William Faulkner is a genius. I wanted you to know his brilliant style of writing. At the library 'Sanctuary' is kept locked in a bookcase in the Head Librarian's office. You have to ask for it at the desk as though it were Havelock Ellis. I picked up that worn-out copy just as they were about to haul it away."

"Well, to tell you the truth," I said, "I didn't understand much about what was going on in the story. Anyway what does 'Sanctuary' have to do with your disappearing from my life?"

"When I left you that night I was so much in love with you that I couldn't get to sleep when I got home. So I put the sheet over my head, turned on my flashlight, and I wrote you a big, fat, passionate letter—the first one I've ever written. I threw on my clothes and went out and mailed it. The next thing I knew your father was at my front door shouting to the whole neighborhood that I was a filthy-minded piece of scum."

"Joe! He **opened** my mail from you? I had no idea . . ."

"My letter arrived at your house just as he was getting ready to blow his stack about the book. Evidently he was just reading about Popeye raping Temple in the barn with a corncob. And then when he read on and came to the Memphis brothel— So he tore open my letter and then he was really mad. In front of my mother, my father, and a streetful of nosy neighbors, your father shrieked that if I ever came near you again he'd take my letter to the postal authorities and have me sent to prison."

"Oh no! Poor Joe!"

"I was petrified, Betty. He scared the hell out of me—**plus** the fact that I had to do a lot of explaining to my folks. I steered clear of you alright."

"Dad never has said one word of this to me. I'm so sorry that

it happened. And certainly I never dreamed that that book had anything to do with your silence. Joe—"

"Yes?"

"Why are you here now—after so long? Why did you write to me and ask me to meet you?"

"Because," replied Joe, ever so sweetly, "I'm a year older, a year braver, a year lonelier, I suppose . . . and maybe because of ever-returning spring."

* * *

Well, Temple, old girl, you've done your dirty work. And there you perch—on the cover of a paperback in the five and ten. Any twelve-year old child can reach for you today, take you home, find out all about you. More than likely Daddy wouldn't even notice.

I wonder what Today's Special is at the soda fountain.

Medium: Photograph

Artist: *LARRY MERCURE* Size: 7″ x 9½″