


Two Stories of Irish New York

Ed. Note: Terence Winch, the author of these stories, is well known among New Yorkers. The award-winning writer, composer, and musician grew up in the Bronx, the son of Irish immigrants. In the 1970s he moved to Washington, D.C. In addition to publishing poems and short stories, he has released three albums with the traditional Irish music band, Celtic Thunder. The following reminiscences tell of his parents and others he knew a few decades ago in New York. Both selections are from his latest book, *That Special Place: New World Irish Stories* (New York: Hanging Loose Press, 2004).

Lost Hearts by Terence Winch



y father was born in 1905, my mother a year later. As far as I know, of all those from my parents' circle of friends, only Jerry Campion survives. I saw him last at a gig in Connecticut in 1995, when he was ninety. We played a song I wrote called "When New York Was Irish," and dedicated it to him. By the time we finished the song, my brother and I could see from the stage that he was crying. When we talked to him later, he seemed frail, fragile as a worn teacup, his skin almost translucent. But his spirit was still strong, and he spoke of my parents and their mutual friends in a quiet, affectionate way. For me, it was like having someone dial up my parents' world on a Ouija board. He was the Ancient Mariner, the sole survivor of an amazing and lost time, one that I recall—more and more fleetingly as time passes—from the days of my childhood.

Jerry worked for years at a little grocery store in the Bronx, around Fordham Road and Jerome Avenue. It was a Reeves store, one of the last to hold the name of what had been one of the big grocery chains in New York in years gone by. My father had worked for Reeves during the Depression, and always said he felt grateful to have had any kind of job during those hard times. Jerry Campion is one of those guys who loves work. After he retired as a supermarket manager—he used to run the Safeway in my old neighbor-

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hood until getting fired for refusing to remove a Holy Name Society pin—he began a second career as a free-lance caterer and grocery store manager.

One day, in the mid 1970s, the fiddler Brendan Mulvihill was visiting his family in the Bronx, after having only recently migrated to Washington to play music. My brother and I were among the new friends he had made in D.C. We were also the only people in the capital known to Jerry. Sure enough, didn't Brendan wander into Reeves this one day to buy some tea and sausage and other supplies.

"Where are you from, young man?" inquired Jerry, always a sociable and outgoing person.

"I'm living in Washington," Brendan, who had never before met Jerry Campion, responded, while Jerry rang up his purchases on the cash register.

"Washington, D.C.," says Jerry, running through his mental address book. "Do you know the Winch boys by any chance?" he asks.

"Oh, I do," replies Brendan.

It has always amazed me that they connected so easily, instantly discovering that they knew people in common. But in some ways the world of the New York Irish was a universe unto itself, one in which, during its heyday, there were probably only two degrees of separation between any two people. Jerry Campion comes out of that mythic Irish past, so maybe his brief linking up with Brendan was simply a momentary rip in time. Brendan remembers Jerry pulling a pencil from behind his ear and writing up the purchase right on the brown bag. "He winked at me when he handed me the bag, and I didn't know what that meant. When I got home, my mother checked over the transaction and said Jerry undercharged me by about ten dollars."

Jerry was the brother of Peggy McCarthy, one of my mother's close friends. Like Peggy and my mother, Jerry's wife Mae died long ago. Mae was a sweet and likable woman, and she and Jerry were, by all appearances, happily married. Men like Jerry, who have uprooted themselves from their origins to never return home, who have worked hard all their lives without complaint, whose appetite for life always calls for seconds, have a contract to go the distance no matter what. Men like Jerry remarry. P.J. Conway, self-taught box-player and my father's best friend, was the same way. When his wife Nora died in her fifties, P.J. went on to two more marriages before he was done.

My father's situation was different. My mother's death, when she was fifty-five and he fifty-six, hit my father in a way that caused permanent damage. He had a girlfriend for a while, but they were a real mismatch and the romance, if it can be called that, went nowhere. She was much younger than my father and, I think now as I remember back, probably gay. He gave her one of his tenor banjos, a beauty that had once belonged to a Tipperary musician named Happy O'Brien, who had been a friend of my father. After my father died, I visited her and asked her if she would give back the banjo, but she said no. It made me very angry at the time. In a logical way, I figured that since I actually played the banjo and it had belonged to my father, she had no right to it. But perhaps it meant a lot to her. Maybe in her own way, she loved him. In any case, my father had a pronounced tendency to give things away. All you had to do was admire something of his, and it was yours.



I'm not exaggerating. He gave away record collections, prized family heirlooms, you name it. We had a beautiful blackwood walking stick, intricately carved with delicate shamrocks, that he gave to old Jack Sullivan, the retired bus driver who was his part-time helper at St. Thomas Aquinas School, where my father was the custodian. Jack noticed it nestled in a nook in my parents' bedroom wall and said something about what a fine stick it was. He instantly became owner of the stick, a longtime family favorite. My father had this wonderful nonattachment to the things of this world. While we loved him for his non-materialism, we also wished he wouldn't always be giving our stuff away. Certain kinds of material things can transcend their nature and evoke memory and spirit. Those you don't want to lose.


The woman who might have saved his life was Theresa McNally. She was my mother's best friend and fellow Galwegian. Theresa's husband John had died a while before my mother. We all hoped that Theresa would take up with my father, but she wasn't interested, I guess.

Not that my father didn't try. He and Theresa went out a few times, and my father may have even popped the question. The details are all distant and hazy at this stage of things. But I remember feeling very sad for my father. We knew how devastated he was by my mother's death, and how great the possibility that Theresa McNally was the cure for his profound sorrow. Theresa was everyone's favorite—one of those charismatic personalities, forever light-hearted, full of twinkle and humor, that people are always drawn to. It's quite possible that my father's heavy burden of grief was more than Theresa thought she could take on, particularly since his pain centered on my mother, her departed best friend. Maybe she felt they needed more to build on than mutual loss and mourning. Maybe she was afraid that if he became her spouse he'd give away all their possessions.

Whatever her reasons for turning my father down, no such impediments blocked Theresa's responsiveness to Jerry Campion's attentions. For all I know, Jerry and my father may have been only two of many bereft widowers drawn to the lovely consolation promised by the girlish laugh and demeanor of that enticing Galway widow. Now that I have reached the approximate age these people were in those days, I see, of course, how a woman in her mid-fifties could be very sexy and desirable. As a teenager, I just assumed, with the ignorance of youth, that love and lust could not possibly reside in the hearts of any of these ancient immigrants.

So Jerry Campion married Theresa McNally, and they had a good many years together before Theresa, everyone's darling, passed away. After Theresa decided against him in favor of Jerry, that was it for my father. I believe that he lost heart completely after he lost her. I think Theresa McNally represented, in his mind, his only hope of overcoming the loss of my mother, Bridie Flynn.

My father and his circle of friends had their own secret codes and private jokes, often clustered around music, it seemed to me. Mona Geelan, puffing her L&M, would pinch her nostrils shut, and squeak, "Please play 'The Lakes of Sligo,'" to my father and P.J. Conway, who often played for parish dances and parties, as well as for get-togethers in our apartment. This always got a knowing, insider's laugh from everyone gathered in the living room, sipping high-balls and

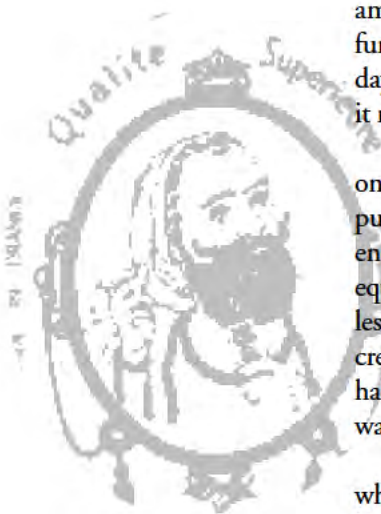


trading stories. What the joke might be, what obscure incident it referred back to, was not for the likes of me to know. "The Stack of Barley" was also regarded as a piece of powerful music—a half-humorous mating dance. Not to mention "Shoe the Donkey," with its alternate title, "Cock Your Leg Up." Music brought out the latent uproariousness of life. Or, just as commonly, the heart-slashing pain of loss and exile. So, one minute it would be "Miss Fogarty's Christmas Cake" and "Paddy McGinty's Goat," in which absurdity and foolishness defined reality, and the next we would be all weepy because "A Mother's Love Is a Blessing" and the mothers are all dying or because "Galway Bay" was so far away and so beautiful and we'd never see it again.

Alcohol and prolonged mourning combined to wreck my father's health, and made it impossible for him to live on his own in the last few years of his life. He moved in for a while with my brother Kevin in Brooklyn, then with my sister Eileen in Atlanta, before settling in permanently with my sister Pat and her family in Lake Luzerne in the Adirondacks. But before that odyssey began, he continued to play music for local events in the city. My brother Jimmy (now known as Jesse) or I would often join him and P.J. for these gigs. But by the late '60s, Jesse and I and our friends had our own private language and world of secrets, as the counterculture caught up even working-class ethnic kids in its irresistible mix of drugs, music, and politics.


I remember my father showing up unexpectedly one afternoon at our apartment on Daly Avenue—or "Dear Old Dirty Daly Avenue," as P.J. (who lived on Fairmount Place a few blocks away when he wasn't crashing with us to avoid his crazy second wife) called it. My father was supposed to be working, but instead surprised us by walking into the kitchen where Jesse, John McCarthy, Willie Farrell, and I were exuberantly smoking pot. The room was filled with dope smoke as we quickly snuffed out the joints and hid them out of sight under our cigarette packs. Everyone except Jesse also smoked cigarettes, which we figured would provide our cover.

"How are you, boys?" my father asked, going to the sink for a glass of water. And we burst into insane laughter, spitting out our uncontrollable amusement at his question in a spray of hilarity. "Didn't know I was that funny," he said, prompting a further hurricane of mirth. This was in the early days of dope, when it made everything so funny in a brand-new way. Later, it made me paranoid and obsessed with thoughts of dying, but not then.



Eventually, my father figured out what was going on. He took me aside one day and asked if I was smoking marijuana. I was impressed that he had put it all together. We just figured that the older generation lived in a different world in which their ability to deduce what we were up to was about equal to their ability to understand Egyptian hieroglyphics. I was a motherless, 18-year-old student, working the summer as a laborer on a construction crew, and, frankly, I didn't care if he knew. But I didn't want to hurt him. I had already left the Church, which had been difficult for him to accept. He was a wounded man, and I had no desire to inflict any more injury.

I started to defend myself. "It's not really that bad, Dad. It's not like what you read in the paper. I don't think it's any worse than having a few beers." My father listened to me. One of my father's most admirable qualities



was his trust in his children. Faced with the choice, I knew he would be more inclined to believe me than *The Daily News*.

This discussion took place probably around 1966. My father was a 61-year-old Irish Catholic immigrant. But what he did next defied the time and his designated role in it: he said he'd like to try it himself. So, the next time I had some pot, my father and I smoked it. He had quit tobacco years earlier, so lighting up and smoking was an unfamiliar activity for him. If you don't want to get high, you won't. I tried LSD only once, in the early '70s. I was desperately afraid of acid, like many a lapsed Catholic, and shut down my receptivity to it. I think my father did the same thing with dope that time. He said, after the joint was done, that he didn't feel anything, didn't see what all the fuss was about. But not long afterwards, he grew a mustache and sideburns, something none of his peers would ever dream of doing.

From about the mid '60s to the early '80s, drugs were central to the counterculture, for want of a better word. Pot was everywhere back then; people bought it by the dresser-drawer full. Coke was less common, because it was so expensive. People like me indulged in it rarely, and mostly when it was provided by someone else. When it seemed to trigger weird heartbeats, I began avoiding it completely. Booze never went away. I'm one of those people who have a built-in incapacity for drugs of any kind. A tiny bit does the trick for me. When I start to overdo it, I get dizzy or paranoid or nauseous, and stop.

My mother died in January of 1962, before people like us had things like tape recorders. As far as I know, her voice was never recorded. I long now to hear what she sounded like. Did she have much of a brogue? Did she sound smart, funny? I can't remember at all what her voice was like. Three or four years later, P.J. and my father, with some participation from me, made a little audio anthology of Irish music to send to my brother Jesse, then serving in the Peace Corps in Niger, in West Africa, where Irish music was scarce. P.J. had a reel-to-reel Webcor tape recorder, big as a suitcase—a magnificent, cutting-edge contraption. On the tape, P.J. and my father play the box and banjo, and talk between numbers. My father's few comments from that session are all I have of his voice, and I treasure the sound of him.

I also have his favorite tenor banjo (not the one that wound up with his girlfriend), which I used to play quite a bit years ago, until deciding to concentrate solely on the accordion, an instrument I took up at age eight. Somebody told me recently that his banjo is now worth thousands of dollars, which would have amazed and amused my father.

I'm glad it wound up with me before he had a chance to give it away. I will pass it along to my own son Michael, who is learning the fiddle. He's got real talent, too. "The family's been waiting generations for a fiddler," I tell him, only half kidding.

In my many years of playing Irish music, my one notable success was "When New York Was Irish," the song that made Jerry Campion cry back in '95. I wrote it as a tribute to my parents and their friends, out of my deep regard for the hardships and homesickness they endured as poor immigrants to America in the early twentieth century. Some people seem to think it's too arrogant or jingoistic. I tell them: write your own version.

A Row and a Ruction

by Terence Winch




I saw the punch coming. A big slo-mo roundhouse, like some choreographed shot from *Rocky*, that started at the floor and ended at my jaw. But I froze. Part out of fear, part out of disbelief. I was paralyzed. I stood there and let the guy knock me out. Maybe at that point I wanted oblivion. Some of the women in the bar dragged me to a back room, where I came to a few minutes later.

Just before I got hit, I had been watching a menacing drunk tug at my brother Jesse's hair and repeat a question familiar in those days: "Why don't you get a haircut?" The three of us, ridiculously outnumbered, wanted to avoid a brawl. I was leaning with my back to the bar watching the exchange between my brother, who was trying to be diplomatic, and the drunk, when the punch landed. McCarthy, the third member of our besieged group, was still behind the bar.

We had been playing at the Leaside in Kingsbridge for about a month. We used to wander into Irish bars in the Bronx in search of free beer and a little fun. I'd bring my box, Jesse would haul the guitar. McCarthy would sing, and play the spoons. We'd plant ourselves at the bar, and after a beer, one of us would ask the bartender if he'd like to hear a few tunes. Bartenders always said yes. After a few numbers, the beers would start sliding down the bar in our direction. People would cluster around us, patting us on the back, glad for the facsimile of live entertainment.

Martin, the Leaside's manager, loved us at first sight, and hired us on the spot. He claimed to be a friend of Brendan Behan's, as did half the Irish pop-



ulation of New York back then. I too loved Behan, and read everything he wrote. “The principal thing to do in this world,” Behan once remarked, “is to get something to eat and something to drink and somebody to love you.” Unlike poor Behan, Martin was a solid man, radiating authority. He booked us for three hours on Friday and Saturday nights, \$15 each for every performance plus all we could drink (no small amount then). It was the kind of job we dreamed of: money, freebies, good companionship, short hours, and lots of laughs.

But this was 1968, that *annus mirabilis* in American history. Jesse, McCarthy, and I were indistinguishable from other hippies and freaks. We had long hair and beards, and wore patched-up blue jeans and headbands. We were good working-class first-generation Irish-Americans, but part of the left-wing, free-love, antiwar cultural revolution as well. Friends of ours, guys from our schools and neighborhoods, were getting killed and wounded in Vietnam. The cops and construction workers who were beating up the antiwar protesters were people from our streets and parishes. The middle-class college kids who spat at the troops returning from Vietnam infuriated me. Sometimes it was tough to sort it all out.

But at the Leaside, all those divisions were set aside. It was as though the ecumenical spirit of Vatican II had seeped into the atmosphere, providing an air of tolerance. We’d crank out “The Dying Rebel,” “Sean South of Garryowen,” “The Irish Rover,” and throw in a few jigs and polkas, and you’d think the Clancy Brothers themselves were in the house. Basking in the adulation of the crowd, celebrities in our little corner of the cosmos, who could fault us for never detecting the slow simmer of resentment cooking amongst a clique of disgruntled Irishmen who saw us as alien intruders from the outer fringes of the known and acceptable universe?

What happened was that Martin, our protector, got very drunk the night of the fight. Sober and upright, the only way we knew him, he ruled the Leaside like an Afghan warlord. Now, slipping off a barstool, pint in hand, he summoned McCarthy to get behind the bar and take his place. Martin always assigned himself and an additional barman the task of accommodating the long counter’s weekend mob, and now he called upon McCarthy to help serve the thirsty masses.

McCarthy in charge of the booze? This was an insane proposition. Back then, you’d no more want John McCarthy minding the liquor than you’d want William Burroughs sitting in for the regular pharmacist.

McCarthy quickly obliged. John is a man who loves an audience. In his prodigious capacity for drink, his comic’s sense of timing, and his legendary storytelling ability, McCarthy could rival Behan himself. Before he gave up drinking, Mac was most at home within a saloon’s rectangle of glass, wood, smoke, and mirrors.

The entire congregation of drink-seeking Celts quickly shifted down to McCarthy’s half of the bar, to better hear him josh and joke with the customers: “Gin and tonic for you? Get outa here. You’re gettin’ a beer.” He would sing an aria of people’s drink requests back to them. He’d do instant, dead-on imitations of voices, laughs, attitudes.



But if John was in heaven at that point, his co-bartender, one of the secret resenters, was roasting in a personal hell of anger and envy. He felt like an idiot. One or two luses, too drunk to even know where they were, sat at his half of the bar. The rest of the patrons elbowed and wedged themselves as close to the McCarthy Show as they could get.

The other barman could finally bear it no longer. He marched down the bar into John's spotlight, and asked him the same question one of his cohorts was soon to taunt Jesse with: "Why don't you get a haircut? You look like a girl with that hair."

It was like someone had switched off the sound track. Laughter stopped, talking hushed, glasses ceased their clinking. Everybody stayed on the inhale, waiting to see what would happen, though everyone knew what it would be.

Knocked out cold, I missed the great spectacle of John and Jesse bolting out the front door with a drunk gaggle of Leesiders in hot pursuit, for when the chips were down, our erstwhile fans took the side of the resenters. Turf loyalties will always win out in these affairs. It now seems comical to me: my brother and McCarthy sprinting along Broadway under the El, innocent monsters running for their lives from the schnockered townsfolk of some Irish takeoff on *Frankenstein*.

At a peace conference the following week, Paddy, the schmuck who decked me, offered to help pay my dental bill. My swollen cheek looked like a spaldeen was stuffed in it. If I had known that the half a tooth I lost would wind up costing me thousands over the ensuing decades, I would have taken him up on the offer. Martin wanted us to come back, but I think he knew, as we did, that our day at the Leaside had passed. You do see stars when you get knocked out.

***Author's Note:** My good friend John McCarthy passed away on November 14, 2003. He was an amazing man who is greatly missed by his family and numerous friends.*

