

Three Unpublished Narratives and a Short Story

Charles Reis Felix

Introduction

These three narratives and one short story by Charles Reis Felix are published here for the first time.¹ “Eels,” “Rare Coins” and “Milk Bottles” are part of the unpublished novel *Gently, Brother*, although they can all be read independently of the novel. They constitute self-contained Great Depression-themed narratives. In the narratives featured here these three main themes are 1) getting around the scarcity of food, 2) experiencing dashed economic hopes; 3) and shoring up traditional values in the face of economic calamity.

“On Being Drafted” was written as a short story.

During his years of activity as a writer, which extend from 1947 to roughly 2000, Charles Reis Felix (1923-2017) published two memoirs and two novels: *Crossing the Sauer: A Memoir of World War II* (2002) and *Through a Portagee Gate* (2004); *Da Gama, Cary Grant, and the Election of 1934* (2005), and *Tony: A New England Boyhood* (2008). Although the first two works are memoirs, they focus on very distinct subjects. The first dwells on Charles’ experiences in the U.S. Army (1943-1945), including one year as a radio operator in Europe. *Portagee Gate*, perhaps Felix’s masterpiece, is both a biography of Charles’s father, Joe Felix, an immigrant cobbler from Setúbal residing in New Bedford with his wife and two children, and an autobiography of young Charley’s trajectory as the son of immigrants striving and surviving in the New Bedford of the Great Depression, capturing the storied history of city and its multiple ethnic groups, attending high school in the Northside, and eventually departing the city to study at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. Charley interrupts his studies at UM to spend a couple of years in the Army. After returning to Ann Arbor, Charley met his future wife Barbara Fox, with whom he would have two children. The young couple settled in California where Charles finished his B.A. in History at Stanford, became an elementary school teacher, and, finally, a full-time writer.

Felix also left us five unpublished novels, including the first work he penned between 1947-1948 entitled *Gently, Brother*, followed by another two novels both entitled *The Bluebird of Los Tramos*, one of them having as protagonist a mature teacher, Seraphin, the other having Mrs. Branscomb, an older teacher, as protagonist. “*Vice President Nixon, Welcome to Our School!*” focuses on two teachers who want to leave their profession, and *Mothballs and His Friends: Barracks Life by the Golden Gate, 1943-1944* are Charles Felix’s two other novels. All these unpublished works are to be found at the Ferreira-Mendes Portuguese-American Archives at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth.

In addition to memoirs and novels, Charles Felix left us a few short stories. “On Being Drafted” shows that had Charles Felix dedicated more time to the short story he could have made a mark in that genre.

Except for his memoir of the Great War, all of Charles Felix’s published works are set, totally or in part, in his native city of New Bedford during and after the Great Depression of 1929-1939. The

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action in the short story published here occurs right after the United States joined the War effort. It is not known when Charles Reis Felix wrote this story.

In his *Interviews 2005 and 2006*, from which the narratives featured here are extracted, Charles Reis Felix explains why he repeatedly cannibalized the unpublished novel *Gently, Brother*. In this excerpt of the Interviews, Felix is speaking with his daughter, Mona Felix Biskup:

[...] *Gently, Brother*, I spent two years at it; but never finished it. However, it still proved very, very valuable, because, when I wrote *Through a Portagee Gate* I had written a lot of stuff about Pa, and I was able to cannibalize and use it, and it was so important because I was writing *Gently Brother* in 1947, and I was writing about 1937, it was just ten years later, it was very immediate in my mind. When I wrote *Portagee Gate* it was 50 years or so later, I had lost that sharpness of detail, the little things. So it helped me a great deal. It wouldn't be half as good, *Portagee Gate*, [that is,] if I didn't have that book to refer to. And so, you could say that I wasted that time, but I don't think I did, because I was able to use it.²

Francisco Cota Fagundes

² Charles Reis Felix, *Interviews 2005 and 2006*. Organization and Introduction by Francisco Cota Fagundes, Transcription by Mona Felix Biskup and Francisco Cota Fagundes, Editing of Transcripts by Charles Reis Felix. http://works.bepress.com/francisco_fagundes/32/: 18.

From *Gently, Brother*

*For in the Market-place, one Dusk of Day,
I watch'd the Potter thumping his wet Clay:
And with its all obliterated Tongue
It murmur'd — "Gently, Brother, gently, pray!"*
from *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*

Eels

Senhor Augustinho walked by in his high boots, with his oars over his right shoulder. *Senhor* Augustinho was the hard-working Portuguese man who lived two houses down on Bullock Street. He was a weaver at the Fawcett Mill and he was also a fisherman of sorts, parting the Okecola River from some of its prize eels.

"Hey, Davey, do you want to go fishing?" *Senhor* Augustinho hailed.

"Sure!"

"Well, run upstairs and ask your mother if it's all right."

Dave got the required permission and then walked proudly by *Senhor* Augustinho's side down to the bottom of Bullock Street to the oily waters of the Okecola River. *Senhor* Augustinho waded out to where his row boat was anchored, and rowed back in to pick up Dave.

Dave lounged back, silent, and enjoyed the motionless river and the soft breezes as Augustinho rowed rapidly with powerful strokes to the first pot. He grabbed the floating cork and pulled in the line. The cylindrical wire pot came up out of the sea crammed with the valued prize—long, black, slimy eels. Augustinho dumped them on the floor of the boat where they squirmed like fat, over-fed snakes. This was the end of the cycle. First the pot had been filled with stale, hardened pieces of Portuguese bread and laid close to shore in low water. A good collection of tiny, wiggling mumpers had resulted. The pot had then been cleaned of bread remains, placed in deeper water, and the attraction of the eels for the mumpers did the rest. The eels entered the swinging wire door that opened only one way—in.

Senhor Augustinho opened up a conversation as he rowed for the second pot. "Well, Davey," he said, "pretty soon school starts and you have to go back again, huh?"

"Yes, that's right," Dave nodded regretfully.

"What grade are you in now?"

"The sixth."

"I am going to tell you something, Davey," *Senhor* Augustinho said ponderously. "Stay in school as long as you can. Yes sir, stay in school. Then when you come out, maybe you can get a good job and don't have to spend the rest of your days sweating in the damn mill."

Dave nodded his head in understanding agreement with the sage shaking of *Senhor* Augustinho's.

"I had a boy once too, you know," *Senhor* Augustinho reflected. "If he didn't die, he would be as old as you are today."

"What did he die of?"

"Pneumonia. I carried him around the room in my arms, but he got sicker and sicker, and then when the doctor came, too late, he was dying."

Dave was silent.

That was all the conversation they had, for Augustinho was a quiet, thoughtful man and Dave felt it would be presumptuous of him to start a conversation first.

Dave slumped in the back of the boat, his hand trailing on the surface of the murky water. As they got further and further away from shore, the terrible stink of pungent mill refuse decreased. There were many mills lining the banks of the river and they all dumped their refuse into the water. A compounded odor resulted that wrinkled up your face, and you never got used to it, no matter how long or how often you smelled it.

The Drysdale Street kids were swimming bareass. He could see them wading out in the slimy, viscous mud, occasionally pushing some floating debris away, and then diving in the dirty water.

The moon was out, and its reflection danced on the water. By the shore, outlined against the sky, could be seen the impressive silhouettes of various cotton mills, set close by one another. Those few that were operating nights seemed to be on fire, so brightly lit up were they. Dave listened to the throbbing hum of the machinery and watched the ant-like forms of the workers move about by the windows.

Dave watched Augustinho rowing so smoothly and with no lost motion. They cut through the water noiselessly. Now that they were further out, the water didn't look as muddy as it had by shore.

Dave wished he was as good with his hands as Manny. Then maybe Augustinho would let him row like he did Manny. Augustinho would like him better for it, too. He felt with secret hurt pride that though he was smart in school, Augustinho wasn't half as impressed with that as he was with Manny's skill with his hands.

He admired Augustinho. All the things he knew! He was a weaver, and a fisherman, and a farmer, too. He had a big plot of land just beyond Howland Road on which he grew potatoes and lettuce and things like that.

Augustinho rowed them under the Locust Street Bridge and Dave looked up at the people on the bridge who were staring down at them. At the kids who were envying his good fortune and wishing that they too could be out on the water, he looked with condescension. At the lovers who were so close together they looked like one, he looked with envy.

They passed the dreaded Rayon Mill, where it was said no man could work for over five years without going to the hospital with lung trouble. But the Rayon Mill paid five cents an hour more to start with than the cotton mills, so they always had workers. It was not as brightly lit up as the other mills. The smell of the chemicals used in the rayon process carried out to them, sharp and disagreeable.

Augustinho had dumped out four pots so there were many eels in the boat. Dave looked at their ugly, squirming, shiny black bodies with revulsion. He was glad he wasn't in Augustinho's family. They were always eating eels, they had to, Augustinho made them. And like poor Eva, his daughter, said—"I'll be glad when my father stops going fishing. Oh, I'm *so* sick of eating eels."

Every now and then Augustinho gave Ma one, and she cut it up into little pieces and fried them. But he could never eat any of it, he disliked the taste and the visual image interfered.

They had had a free show the last time Augustinho gave Ma an eel. Ma tried to cut its head off on a board while he and Manny held it, but it was too slippery and wiggled out of their hands onto the floor, and then the next time it shot out of their hands onto the table, and they just had a helluva time trying to hold it.

Senhor Augustinho stopped rowing and bent over for a bobbing cork. He pulled the pot up out of the water—empty. There was nothing in it, not even a single minnow. It strongly implied an alien hand. *Senhor* Augustinho came purposely out at dusk to make it difficult for anyone on shore watching his movements to see where he placed the pots. He had lost many fine catches in just this way, and sometimes they even took the pot home with them.

Senhor Augustinho looked at the empty pot vengefully. He stood up in the boat and shook his fist at the shore in impotent fury.

"Somnabitch! Basta!" he cried. "*Filhos da puta! Ladrões!*"

“Some night, Davey, I am going to hide in those woods over there with a gun, and the first man who touches a pot of mine I will kill!”

Dave nodded, while Augustinho returned to rowing and muttering fierce curses under his breath.

Rare Coins

It was *Senhora* Maria who was responsible for a very eventful day in Dave's life—a day full of excitement and hope. He was delivering a pair of shoes to her this one time, a Saturday morning, when she asked him if he wanted something. Last summer she had been digging in the ground at a farm when she found two big copper pennies in the dirt. She had saved them. But if he wanted them, he could have them. He looked at the dates. They were 1843 and 1837. He said he wanted them and thanked her warmly. He cunningly tried to keep the excitement out of his voice, tried to keep calm, so that she wouldn't get suspicious and think they were worth something and keep them. But when he had them safely out of her house, he went crazy with excitement, and wanted to run straight downtown to an office he knew where they bought old coins, or at least that's what it said on the window. But it was almost noon, time to eat, so he had to go home.

Immediately after finishing his meal, he bolted out of the house, not telling Ma a thing. He wanted the money he would get to be a surprise. And he was wise enough to know that there was a possibility of failure, in which case it wouldn't be smart to tell Ma his high hopes because afterwards she would only laugh at him and tell the whole family about it and they would kid him for the next two years.

How much would he get? Certainly for a couple of coins as old as these he ought to get plenty. Why, look how hard it was to get a penny dated before 1900, and these were almost a hundred years old. He had never seen any coins so old in all his life. Why, Manny had an Indian head penny of 1882 that he was saving, thinking it was rare—hah!

Coins this old, he was sure they were worth from one to two thousand dollars apiece. He should get the maximum amount for them too, because they were in such good condition. They weren't worn smooth like so many coins you saw today. It was surprising that the print on them was so sharp when they were so old, but he guessed that was because they had been lost early and never handled much.

A question of ethics rose in his mind. How much should he give *Senhora* Maria? He would have to give her something. Half? No, that was too much. He would give her a hundred dollars. She was poor, that would be plenty for her. Yes, a hundred dollars was plenty. After all, they were his coins now, he didn't have to give her anything. She was darn lucky to have given them to him, somebody who knew about these things. She could have given them to some dope who wouldn't have known their value and just left them hanging around the house. But suppose he got under a thousand dollars for the two of them? Well, then he'd give her fifty dollars. That was it—fifty for a thousand and a hundred for two thousand.

Two thousand dollars! Wow! He felt jubilant. And wouldn't Pa be surprised! Two thousand dollars—why, it took Pa years to make that much.

He half-ran, half-walked it downtown. He did what he heard the Boy Scouts did when they wanted to get someplace fast, run fifty paces, walk fifty paces, only it was too much trouble to count paces, so he ran two blocks and walked two blocks. All the way downtown he did it.

He arrived at the Chandler Building breathlessly. He walked down the long dim corridor in trepidation. He stared at all the glass doors. Insurance, Law Office, Realty, Law Office, Law Office—ah, here it was.

Philip W. Vandercook, Philatelist
Old Coins Bought and Sold

He tried to look through the glass window, but it was opaque and he couldn't see anything. He tried to control himself and quiet his pounding heart as he put his hand on the doorknob. Then he suddenly remembered he had tied the two pennies in a knot in his handkerchief so's he wouldn't lose them. It would be embarrassing to have the man find out he had done something only little kids do. He took his hand off the doorknob and untied the knot.

He walked in. It was a small office and there were all kinds of rare stamps in glass cases up against the wall. A fat man in a business suit was behind the big desk. Dave guessed he must be the philatelist. He walked up to him. He reached in his pocket and brought out the two coins. He handed them somewhat reluctantly to the philatelist, suddenly afraid that the philatelist was a crook and would swipe them and say he hadn't given them to him.

"How much are these worth?" he asked in a subdued voice that he tried to make casual. He watched the man's face closely to see it light up with wonder and excitement, just like it happened in that movie he had seen where a girl buys a ring for ten cents in the Five and Ten and brings it to a jeweler who tells her it is a rare diamond worth two hundred thousand dollars.

But the man's eyes did not pop out. He looked at the coins indifferently for a few seconds and then shrugged his shoulders. He gave Dave a little smile. "They're not worth much, son," he said. "I couldn't give you anymore than twenty cents for 'em."

"For both of them?" he asked, startled.

"That's right! Ten cents apiece."

He eyed the man suspiciously. "Gee, I was sure they were worth more than that," he said.

He walked out of the office with a dull, sickening sensation in the pit of his stomach. He'd be damned if he'd sell them for that much. He walked down the corridor and out into the street with the slow dragging steps of an old man.

Maybe the guy was trying to cheat him out of it. He had heard of cases like that where a sharp guy had bought some very valuable stamps off a poor unsuspecting sap for just a few pennies. Or maybe the guy just didn't know his business.

Those possibilities buoyed him up for a while, but not for long. He felt licked. If he only knew some other guy in the city who bought old coins he'd go to him. Well, he'd hang on to them for good-luck pieces anyway. He'd be damned if he'd ever sell them for ten cents apiece. Boy, he was glad now he hadn't said anything about this to Ma.

He walked home forlornly, not running every other two blocks like he had when he came down here.

* * *

Dave kept the two pennies around the house for a whole week. Then he started to get tired of handling them and examining them. He had the funny feeling that they weren't doing him any good this way. He had them for lucky charms, but what would happen? He would lose them someday. They just weren't doing him any good. Money was meant to be used. Why not have another kind of lucky charm, like a flat white stone, or maybe something else—anything as long as it wasn't worth money. That would be smarter.

So on the next Saturday he got to thinking about how nice it would be to have twenty cents. That was three weeks allowance for him. With twenty cents he could see a movie this afternoon, buy a nickel's worth of candy to eat at the show, and still have a nickel left over, which with the nickel he would get from Pa tomorrow would make a dime, enough to go to the show with next Saturday.

So he went downtown to the philatelist with the two coins. He had a moment's panic, suddenly afraid that the man would not want them now for any price. He was afraid that by delaying and not taking him up on his offer right away, he had lost everything. But no, the man came through.

"You told me you'd give me twenty cents for these two pennies a few days ago," he told the man in quavering, fearful tones.

The man looked at them, then took out a dime, nickel, and five pennies from his cash drawer, and pushed this money across the desk at him.

Hmph, couldn't even give him two dimes, had to give him pennies. He didn't even say thank you either, even though he had said it. Oh well, he had his twenty cents, to hell with him.

Milk Bottles

Dave was lying on his back on his bed playing a game of baseball with himself. He was the pitcher. He had a black taped baseball in his right hand that he threw up in the air, almost hitting the ceiling. When it came down, he caught it with the first baseman's mitt on his left hand. If it came down right smack on his chest, it was a strike. If it came down anywhere else, it was a ball. Four balls and the man walked. Three strikes and he was out.

He was playing thusly in quiet contentment when he heard Ma call him from out in the kitchen. He felt the apprehension that always accompanied an interruption. He pretended he didn't hear her.

Then she stood in his doorway.

"Davey, I need you to go to the store," she said.

"What do you want me to get?"

"We need a quart of milk for supper."

"For cryin' out loud, why can't you order enough from the milkman to last you?"

"Because I don't have ice in the house, and it would spoil. That's why."

The grocery store was on the corner, a short distance away. So it wouldn't take a long time. But he hated to go to the store, and he especially hated buying milk. It was because of the bottles. The store carried milk from the Golden Sun dairy. But Ma bought her milk from the Portuguese dairy, Freitas. The bottles were different; they were not interchangeable. A quart of milk from the store cost fifteen cents, thirteen cents for the milk and two cents for a deposit on the bottle. But Ma didn't want to pay the deposit on the bottle. So Dave had to take along an empty Freitas bottle and have the milk poured from the Golden Sun bottle into the Freitas bottle. The boss, Mr. Prefontaine, didn't want to bother pouring milk so he always had the young guy, Marcel, wait on Dave who could tell that Marcel didn't like pouring it either but he had no choice.

Dave had the solution all figured out and he tried to explain it to Ma. If she bought just one bottle of Golden Sun milk and paid the two-cent deposit on the bottle, she would never have to pay the deposit again, because then they would own one Golden Sun bottle and he could bring the empty Golden Sun bottle and trade it in for a Golden Sun bottle with milk. They wouldn't have to pay the deposit again and there would be no more pouring of milk from one bottle into another and everybody would be happier.

But Ma would have none of it.

"No," she said.

"Why not?"

"Because I don't want to do it. That's why not."

Ma handed Dave a clean Freitas bottle and a fifty-cent piece.

"And get ten cents worth of pressed ham," she said.

"Okay," he said, and off he went.

He was hoping that Marcel would be in the store. He didn't want Mr. Prefontaine waiting on him. Sometimes Marcel was out delivering an order. A few people on the street had a telephone and they would phone in an order. Marcel had a bicycle with a basket in the front and he would make the delivery. Marcel was just seventeen years old, but he worked at the store full time, six days a week. He was French, like Mr. Prefontaine.

Dave was in luck. Marcel was in the store.

"I'd like a quart of milk please," Dave said to him.

Marcel knew what to do. Without a word, he went to the refrigerator and came back with a Golden Sun bottle. He took the empty Freitas bottle from Dave and started pouring. Dave marveled at his skill. He held the bottles so steady he was able to transfer the milk without spilling a drop.

"And I'd like ten cents worth of pressed ham," Dave said.

When he got home, he put the milk and the ham and the change on the table. He no sooner got in his bedroom that he heard Ma calling him.

“Davey, come here!”

He went back into the kitchen.

On Ma’s face was a serious, stern expression.

“You have to go back,” she said.

“Why?” he asked

“Explain this to me. The milk is thirteen cents and the meat is ten cents. That’s twenty-three cents. I gave you fifty cents. That’s twenty-seven cents change. How come you brought home so much money?” She opened her hand and showed him. “You have here three dimes, a nickel, and two pennies. How come?”

He hadn’t even noticed what the change was when Marcel handed it to him.

“Marcel made a mistake, that’s all. He gave me thirty-seven cents change instead of twenty-seven. He got an extra dime in there, that’s all.”

“You have to take it back.”

He was shocked.

“Why?” he demanded

“It doesn’t belong to me.”

“Why can’t we just keep it?”

“No. I pay the right price. I don’t want to get cheated, but I don’t want to cheat anybody either.”

“Ma, listen. Marcel is the young guy. If I take the dime back, I’ll get him in trouble with the boss. He could get fired. Don’t make me go back.”

“You have to go back. It doesn’t belong to me. Go now, boy.”

“What about Marcel?”

“Next time let him be more careful and give people the right change.”

Dave set off for the store and he was thinking, “Why not just keep the dime but tell Ma he had returned it?” But he knew he didn’t dare do that. One look at his face and she would know he was lying.

He tried to enter the store unobtrusively but he noticed that Mr. Prefontaine had his eye on him. He walked up to the counter where Marcel was standing. He held the dime out to him.

“You gave me too much change,” he said.

Marcel flushed. He had a stricken look on his face that said, “Why are you doing this to me? Why are you betraying me?”

Dave glanced over at Mr. Prefontaine. He was glaring at Marcel. Yes, and probably he was thinking, “How many other people have you given extra money to?”

Dave turned and left. He felt real bad.

On Being Drafted: A Short Story

It was May, 1943. I went up to Boston on the train for my physical. I was weighed and measured, thumped and listened to. I coughed sideways. I gagged when what looked like a wooden ice cream spoon was stuck down my throat. I covered my right eye and then my left and studied the chart on the wall. A small hammer with a gleaming white chromium handle and a hard rubber head was bounced against my knees. As someone who had had little experience with doctors and examinations, I looked upon the physical with great interest. My general feeling was—What next? What came next was the order to skin it back and milk it down, a maneuver I had no trouble performing. Then came the command, “Bend over and spread your cheeks.” For someone who regarded his private areas as very private, this last was somewhat humiliating.

While I was in line at the next station, a soldier came up to us and asked, “Does anybody here speak Portuguese?”

I raised my hand halfway up. “I do.”

“Come on with me,” he said.

I accompanied him, feeling kind of strange as he was dressed and I was stark naked.

“We’ve got a guy here—he’s Portuguese—and he doesn’t know any English,” the soldier explained. “So, I want you to talk to him in Portuguese.”

“What do you want me to say to him?”

“Just have a friendly conversation with him. Ask him his name, where he lives, stuff like that.”

We came to a little room. Inside was the Portuguese. He was sitting in a chair. He was about my age, young, and I noticed—fully dressed.

I stood in front of him.

He took one quick look at me and then dropped his eyes. He didn’t look at me again. His features were immobile, frozen.

“Hey, *compadre*, how are you?” I said to him in Portuguese.

He didn’t answer and his expression didn’t change. It was like he hadn’t heard me. Except for one thing. For a millisecond something flicked across his eyes—panic. He had counted on not speaking English. He hadn’t counted on speaking Portuguese. But the son of a bitch understood me all right.

“What is your name?” I asked him.

Same response. That is to say, no response.

“You don’t understand me?”

It was like I wasn’t even there.

“Where do you live?”

This was going to be his way out.

The soldier, who had been standing there, watching us closely, drew me aside.

“What do you think? Is he faking it?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. It’s hard to turn in on one of your own countrymen. “My Portuguese isn’t perfect. And he might be from one of those islands in the Azores. They speak different dialects there. Maybe he just didn’t understand me.” This was pure bullshit. My parents were not from the Azores, but I had yet to meet an Azorean who didn’t understand me.

The soldier nodded but he looked skeptical. I think he understood my position. He then sent me back to the line I had been in and I continued my physical.

Of all the tests I took that day, the only one that bothered me was the hearing one. I did not feel that it was scientific. I sat down in a chair in a large shadowy closet and a soldier stood by the door.

“Thirty-nine,” he whispered.

“Thirty-nine,” I answered back.

He then whispered other numbers and I repeated them aloud.

He's human, I thought. He's not a machine. How can he maintain the same degree of audibility all day long? Won't some of his whispers be softer than others and therefore handicap the testee?

But finally the physical was over. I had passed. I dressed and went in a large room and sat in one of the chairs and waited. When all the chairs were filled up—there were about thirty of them—an Army officer, a dignified older man with beautiful wavy white hair, came in and spoke briefly to us on the responsibilities and opportunities ahead of us. We listened attentively.

Then he said, "Stand and raise your right hand."

We did.

"Repeat after me."

We did.

We were now sworn in. I was in the Army.

* * *

By the time I got home, the sun was going down. My mother was waiting for me. She was sitting in her favorite chair in the corner behind the black cast-iron stove. She was sitting quietly in the shadows. She hadn't turned the lights on. The moment I opened the door, she bounded out of her chair and rushed at me. Her face was twisted; her eyes were wild.

"They didn't take you, did they?"

It was a ringing accusation more than a question and she did not wait for an answer.

"I told you they wouldn't take you!" she cried triumphantly. "You're so skinny and weak, what do they want you for?"

Her eyes wanted to believe it, but they were afraid.

"I passed, Ma."

"You passed?" She was horrified.

"Yes, I passed."

"No! You're playing with me! This is one of your jokes! Tell me the truth!"

"I passed."

"How could you pass?" she demanded, exasperated. "You look like you got tuberculosis! A fart would blow you away!"

"Well, I passed anyway," I said with some irritation.

She believed it then. She became very subdued and said hardly a word the rest of the night. She put out our supper and we ate in a strange, unaccustomed silence. I had no idea she would take it so hard.

She looked at me grimly.

"How long before you go?"

"Two weeks."

* * *

The Army gave us two weeks to tidy up our affairs. In my case I had no affairs of any sort to tidy up.

On the appointed day we gathered inside the Hook Street fire station at nine o'clock in the morning. There were quite a few of us. We filled the fire station. Some lucky guys found benches to sit on, me among them, but a lot of guys were left standing.

I brought a small zippered bag with me. It held my toilet articles—soap, soap dish, toothbrush, toothpaste, razor, razor blades, shaving brush, shaving cream, comb.

Mr. Poisson was there. He was the head of the Draft Board. He was French so his name was not pronounced Mr. Poison. It was pronounced Mr. Pwah-sahn. Mr. Poisson was in his mid-forties so he was safe from the draft.

Mr. Poisson jumped up on a table and started delivering a patriotic speech. But it takes a special person to deliver a patriotic speech. Not everyone can do it. It has to be somebody important-looking, like, say, General MacArthur. But Mr. Poisson was small and seedy-looking. Also, it was early in the morning, not the best time for a patriotic speech.

But Mr. Poisson knew the circumstances called for this kind of talk, so he was doing his best. But he was very ill-at-ease. There was a furtive air about him. He couldn't look us in the eye. His eyes kept darting around. It was like he was afraid we might suddenly rise up and turn into a bloodthirsty mob eager to rush him outside where he would be tarred and feathered and ridden out of town on a rail, as they used to do in the old days.

My friend Frankie Zowic was sitting next to me. He murmured in my ear, "You know Stasia Dombrowski. . . ."

"Yeah," I said. Not to talk to, but I had seen her walking around plenty of times. I knew her brother Walter real good.

"She married Old Man Poisson," Frankie said, indicating Mr. Poisson with his head.

"You're kidding!"

"No. It's the truth. I was walking by St. Casimir's two Saturdays ago. Stasia was in her wedding dress and he had on a tux and they came out hanging onto each other and everybody was throwing rice on them."

"I can't believe it," I said. And I was telling the truth. I couldn't believe it. Stasia was nineteen years old, a blonde, slender, beautiful. And Mr. Poisson was getting fat around the middle and had a receding hair line. Why would she want to marry an ugly old man like that? How could she have done it? I was devastated. I felt a moral wrong had been committed here, some kind of indecency. It was like "Beauty and the Beast." Beautiful Stasia, lost to me forever.

"I know that wherever you boys go, you will make this city proud of you," Mr. Poisson was saying. "I know that you will bring honor to this city."

"Do you think he'd change places with me?" Frankie said. "He can go off and bring honor to this city, and I'll stay home and fuck Stasia."

A gangly guy got up at Mr. Poisson's request and stood there grinning with embarrassment while Mr. Poisson lauded him. It seemed that the guy had gone to Boston some time back for his physical and was turned down because of his bad teeth. So he went to a dentist for many visits and had his teeth all fixed up and then he had gone back to Boston and this time passed his physical.

"He spent one hundred and forty dollars of his *own* money!" Mr. Poisson informed us. "That's how badly he wanted to serve his country!"

Spending your own money—surely there is no higher test of patriotism. For some reason I thought of Johnny Caldeira, who lived on my street. Johnny had rotting black icicles for teeth. I guessed he wouldn't be drafted.

Streetcars were lined up outside the station waiting for us. We piled in. Everybody had a seat, no standing. And then away we went, the conductors letting everyone know we were coming, clanging their bells all the way. It was like a wedding party, cars with their horns honking. People on the street stopped and stared. Some waved.

"First time I ever rode for free." Frankie said.

We went past all the familiar stops. It was a nonstop trip to Channing Street, where we got out and walked the one block down to the depot. A special train was waiting for us.

We got on and after a few minutes we were on our way. Everybody was talking softly and looking out the windows as we went by the tenement houses. Then we were past the tenements.

We heard a faint sound in the distance. As we slowly chugged along, it got louder. It was coming from somewhere on the right side of the train. All the guys sitting on the left side, and that included me, jumped up and rushed over to look out the windows on the right. It was the strangest sound. And then we identified its source. It was coming from the Grindell Mill, which ran alongside the railroad tracks. The Grindell was not a tall building, only three stories high, but it was very long. Every floor of the Grindell had an unbroken line of windows and every window was open and crowded with girls and women leaning out and waving white handkerchiefs and crying out to us. It was a sea of whiteness in motion. The sound we had been hearing was their wailing and it made the hair stand up on the back of your neck. And when we passed the mill, the wailing didn't stop but gradually faded away. We returned to our seats and sat there in stunned silence.

In a few minutes we would be coming up on the Chace Mill. Then we heard this wail. Again, we all looked out. Every window in the Chace was open. The workers were leaning out, waving white handkerchiefs, calling to us. And then the mill was behind us. We were out of town, going by some woods. No more mills.

There was no talking. Everybody was deep in thought.

From both mills, the same outpouring. A fluttering of blinding white, a purity of feeling. And a wail, an animal cry of anguish. And then it struck me. We were their sons, brothers, husbands. They knew about these things better than we did. They weren't crying for all of us. They were crying for those of us who would not be coming back. It was their way of saying good-bye.