

The Boatyard

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As an actor in New York City in the early 80's, I got lucky and lived rent free for over a year in an old, disused boatyard in Jersey City. It was on a small land spit jutting out into New York Harbor and measuring about 40 by 110 yards. The yard faced Manhattan's Battery Park, across the harbor at about eleven o'clock. To the right was the Statue of Liberty, way out there at about two o'clock, welcoming her huddled masses. Most of the ground in the boatyard was covered with small, rubber tire chips. Up at the street end, the yard bordered the bottom of Dudley and Essex Streets, and was three blocks from the Path Subway train (and a stone's throw from Paulus Hook, site of a Revolutionary War battle). The Path train runs under the Harbor over to the World Trade Center in Manhattan, then up to 33rd Street in midtown. Perfect for me to reach auditions.

Two canals bordered the boatyard, both emptying into the Harbor. The canal on the right side, with an old, inoperative freighter moored there, was about 70 feet wide and bordered Liberty Park, a recreation area. Besides several small abandoned boathouses, there was a small blue trailer, a small white frame house and about six or seven wooden shacks scattered around in the middle of the yard. My rent was in exchange for one day's work a month on an old 48-foot wooden cargo boat anchored in the Morris Canal on the left

side of the yard. This canal is a 40-foot-wide 18th-century stone-walled creation with some small local boats moored there; it begins up at the street end and flows down to the Harbor.

Boris, my Brooklyn roommate, discovered the yard while sailing his 37-foot “Jersey Seabright,” the *Tuamoto*, a modified, two-lunger (two cylinders) fishing boat. At the time, he was driving a cab and teaching film processing at Pratt Institute over in Brooklyn and had a mooring slip nearby. Boris had worked on the seven seas as an Oiler on big tankers, and his other love was writing; he was hard at work on a novel about pirates in the South China Sea, which are more common today than they were a hundred years ago. They usually hit the big oil tankers because they only have about seven or eight sailors awake at a time on shift duty. (They come at night in small boats and use grappling hooks to board quietly, and with machine guns.) Boris said the big tankers have an unwritten agreement with pirates. They keep a few thousand dollars in cash which, by the agreement, settles it, and the pirates take it and leave.

One afternoon Boris burst into our Dean Street apartment totally hyped. “Oh Man—you’ve got to see this boatyard over in Jersey City—it’s stuck in the 40’s—and pure John Steinbeck!” (Later we discovered that John Dos Passos had written about the place in one of his *U. S. A.* novels.)

So, over we went from Brooklyn on the *Tuamoto*, passing the Battery and Staten Island to starboard, the Statue of Liberty to port, and finally squeezing by an old rusting tugboat at the boatyard entrance and tying up at what was to become my boathouse dock. When I saw the boatyard, it was love at first sight. We found the boathouse owner, Bill Stelling, through Danny O’Brien (a double amputee), who lived in the small blue trailer. He contacted the owner, Bill Stelling, for us, and we waited for him on the dock.

(Ownership of this piece of land had been disputed and tied up in courts for well over one hundred years, and no organization, local or state, had the legal authority to throw us out. I have a 1980's *New York Times* article that dates many legal arguments going back to the early 19th Century. This land spit was prime, potential real estate, but it was a political hot potato. State and local factions hated us; essentially, we were squatters.)

If you called Bill Stelling a fat man you'd be off your mark. Not so fat as large. As if on cue he appeared, on a tiny bicycle with ridiculously small wheels, his rear end eclipsing the seat. He was a ringer for an old film noir actor—Sidney Greenstreet on a midget bike, white suit and shoes, a wide-brimmed Panama hat flapping in the blazing sun and riding past run-down shacks on a rubber-chip road, ready to make a deal. He was anxious to have work done on his boat, and both delighted, we sealed the deal with a handshake right there on the dock. My work on Bill's boat would consist mainly of caulking her porous, dried out hull on only one day a month. Best rent deal ever!

So, I lived in a boathouse on the Morris canal, below the abandoned warehouse, the "Hercules Marine Supplies" sitting on the Harbor's edge. Con Ed supplied us all with electricity, even the shacks, but years ago, when the yard officially closed, Jersey City had cut off the water supply. Soon enough though, someone discreetly tapped a common garden hose into a fire hydrant up at street level and ran it down the Morris canal side, supplying the Farrell brothers' wood frame house, Danny O'Brien's tiny trailer and ending in my boathouse. In winter, I was obliged to keep a trickle running to prevent freezing up the line.

Bill Stelling was the son of a German ship captain who had sailed liners across the Atlantic Ocean years earlier. Retired, and now close to 80, Bill had spent many years

working on the trans-Atlantic run for the Cunard Line, singing popular romantic songs—Irving Berlin, Cole Porter, etc., and arias from operettas and operas, along with his specialty, German lieder. He had bought this old, wooden, 48-foot cargo boat after retirement with the Impossible Dream of sailing it one day. Impossible because one, he had very little income, high blood pressure, an ailing wife with a couple of serious medical problems, and two, no sailing experience. He was too old and broke to do anything much more than dream. “Humor him,” Boris said. “He’s a dreamer, a nice guy who probably knows he’s not going anywhere but enjoys the dream.” Hope. Not a bad thing to have at Bill’s age. Danny O’Brien explained, “He’s upright enough to deal with, but keep your eye on him anyway.” Pure Danny—always an eye out for the unexpected. I moved in the next day. During my time there, Boris would often cross the Harbor from Brooklyn and tie up at my dock for the night, we’d cook supper, and Boris would sleep on his boat. It was the only small boat I’d been on that smelled almost sweet—not like other boats. It had no bilge or fuel odors. Boris loved that boat. He was an authentic Romantic.

Outsiders rarely ventured into the yard. It was a closed community with a fiercely maintained “No Trespassing” reputation in Jersey City. About 25 yards across from the Morris canal to the left sat the three-story brick Colgate Palmolive Company, producing its usual soap, toothpaste, etc. It had been there for years, was still a working plant, and had the World’s Largest Neon Clock (a beautiful, violent red) on its roof, a well-known landmark, easily visible from Manhattan’s West Side. The Morris canal was later made a state historical landmark, as was the clock. The plant was later demolished, but you can still see the clock by googling a video tour of the Jersey City waterfront. (The revered clock still

sits on the original site, now atop a fancy brick structure on the ground. Look quick or you'll miss her.)

In the canal on the right was moored a 100-foot sea-going freighter, its once red paint faded to a soft rose. Its owner was a sculptor who, weather permitting, would open the Main Hatch and let the sun flood down onto the ballast gravel on the bottom and his tools—his studio. He bought the old tub at auction for three hundred dollars and had it towed to the canal, because the engine room had been destroyed by a fire set by a money-hungry insurance company up in New England. The company intended for it to sink because of the fire and then they would collect the insurance, but the damn thing wouldn't sink, so the artist bought it for a song. He, his wife, and small daughter lived up in the oak-lined Captain's quarters—with a kitchen yet. His mooring fee was thirty dollars a month. Such a deal.

The wooden shacks, each one topped with a TV antenna, were all occupied by Ukrainian immigrants, men who all worked at Colgate. They had electricity but had to use portable boat toilets and haul in their water supply. They spoke a smattering of English and were very low-key. Friendly and quiet. We figured that their green cards, if they ever had them, were expired, and this was a great hideout—a and right near work. A few owned dogs—also friendly and quiet. On the Morris canal stood the Farrell brothers' white house, which was near Danny's blue trailer. At night, the only sounds in the yard were the faint murmurings of the shacks' TV's. A pleasant and safe place to live.

Across from my boathouse stood an old cinder block garage which housed a chop shop. A chop shop is an illegal operation that disassembles stolen cars, files the ID number off the engine, then sells the parts on the black market. It was owned by Tommy Dady, an

ex-Marine Vet and a WWII buddy of Danny's. Lastly, we had a silent tenant, a retired seaman who lived on the old, rusting tugboat anchored in the mouth of the Harbor, about forty feet from my small dock. He waved occasionally. Our resident hermit crab.

The boat I worked on was a copy of an early 18th-century cargo carrier (about 70 feet long) nicknamed the "Coastal Bumper." These smaller wooden ships sailed in the early 19th century, their sides bulging like pregnant white whales, delivering cargo to ports up and down the east coast, and also up into the Erie Canal, until steamboats eventually replaced them. My Bumper was built in the 1940's for the amusement of some millionaire who soon tired of it and sold it unfinished. Bill Stelling bought her for peanuts at auction and she'd been sitting there, her hull drying out, for God knows how long.

On the days Colgate made toothpaste or soap, the air was a perfumed delight, and a white powder residue would drift around and settle almost everywhere within two blocks—including the barstools in the nearby bars (which still sold ten-cent beers!). But every rose has a thorn, and on Thursdays they rendered fat, with a stench strong enough to drive away everyone with the power of locomotion. I escaped to Manhattan on Thursdays.

My boathouse was on the canal and about 60 feet from the Harbor. It was cavernous; about 25 by 60 feet, with a 15-foot ceiling. Several masts and old sails were stashed up on the rafters and a huge, old, white Cunard Line flag with a gold star hung on the wall. I had an old, wood-burning stove for heat, a sink, an electric stove, a refrigerator, and an interior "outhouse" that drained into the harbor—an actual "convenience." Boris gave me a boat shower—a large plastic bag with a long hose with a shower nozzle on the end. I put the bag on the roof to be heated by the sun and ran the hose down into the outhouse. I built a duckboard floor, painted it bright yellow, then painted large red lips

around the toilet hole. A masterpiece. When you gotta go, Matey, go in style. The place had no insulation, so, for heat, I used a chain saw and cut up fuel from some of the many timbers lying around outside. And since the place also leaked heat like crazy, I built a wooden loft for my bed, TV, and books, about eight feet above the floor. Heat rises.

Warm, rent-free, and only 15 minutes from Manhattan for only 35 cents on the Path train—40 cents cheaper than Manhattan subways—a bargain that any actor would kill for. For auditions I took the train under the Harbor over to the World Trade Center and then on up to 33rd Street.

Money was always crucial, so if I needed a fast infusion of cash I could walk along the shoreline, cut down some tall swamp reeds with my handy machete, bundle them up, take the Path train over to midtown, walk over to the flower district on 28th Street and pick a florist at random. I would walk in, plop the bundle on the floor, and simply point and smile. There was never a haggle—I was reasonable and florists die for this stuff. They spray-paint these babies silver or gold for use in large vases. Presto—groceries for a week.

When acting and carpentry jobs were slow, another (occasional) source of income was street-vending. My good friend and fellow actor Mark taught me how to buy popular goods wholesale and sell them cheap. Never had a problem selling the stuff. Boris would often ferry me across to Manhattan, drop me and my goods or carpentry tools at the Battery, then sail over to work and put in near Pratt, while I took a subway uptown for work. If I was vending, I'd usually go up to Canal Street and set up in front of the post office. A good, busy spot and no one could throw vendors off public sidewalks—only the cops could—which they did to me a couple of times.

My friend Mark, an actor and designer, was living in Greenwich Village. When he came over and first laid eyes on the primitive look of the place, he was shocked. (“Oh, my God!”) So, I cooked us dinner, and afterwards cranked up some Puccini on my stereo, then we took a joint and a couple of beers up onto the roof and settled in on lawn chairs overlooking the harbor. Operatic arias, night sky, stars up there and on the water, as we watched the moon sail over the World Trade Center Towers. Mark changed his mind (“Oh my God—Wow!”).

About a week after I moved in, my wife, Ursula, came up from Virginia where we lived, and the Stellings invited us to lunch. We walked up to their brownstone on Dudley Street, met Mrs. Stelling, and Bill cooked a German stew of sweetbreads. “This will increase your strength and potency for a week,” he bragged. It meant eating animal organs I had never dreamed of eating, organs that only crusty Prussians with spiked helmets ate. It had a smell and taste that almost finished me. My wife (who is Bavarian) had no trouble with it, but I barely got it down and, ala the old Moose Shit Pie joke, I complimented the meal.¹ Afterwards, Bill’s tiny sparrow of a wife pumped out a couple of German lieder on an old upright piano while Bill sang. He still had it—an impressive baritone with old-fashioned styling. Our deal was sealed further by the meal and he was happy as hell. (By the way, his claim about increased potency was true.)

¹ In the past two centuries, more or less, railroad roustabouts working far from home slept in caboose cars, and often had to take turns cooking for everyone else—a job everyone hated. The story goes that they drew straws for the job, but they had to agree to eat everything the loser cooked without complaining, otherwise the complainer became the new cook. One day a cook had had it, scooped up some moose manure from trackside, baked it into a pie and served it. One disgusted roustabout finally broke down and said, “Say, this pie tastes like moose shit—but good!! But good!!”

Danny O'Brien was a sweet but tough man. A product of Manhattan's lower East Side where, when he was a kid, he had a shoeshine business with clients of all stripes, besides local residents: cops, brokers, lawyers, bar customers, and occasionally, a whore or two with leather shoes. Danny had lost both legs in the Marines during WWII on Okinawa Island as a result of machine gun fire. The doctors there wanted to amputate immediately, but Danny said no, and fought unconsciousness, saving the legs for years of use. ("Doctors," he would sneer). He jogged for years, then used braces until the circulation failed, until he finally lost them in 1968. He worked on car engines and transmissions for the chop shop, usually out in the yard, and also repaired TV sets in his trailer for local customers. He was a contented man. I spoke once by phone with his daughter, who lived in the family house up in Bronxville. "Oh, I wish you could talk Daddy into staying up here with us," she complained. "He owns a good sheet metal and machine shop up here, and I don't know what he sees in that boatyard, but he loves it!" I think Danny simply loved the independence and adventure of the whole thing.

The only blemish to the totally serene environment there was the chop shop owner, Tommy Dady, Danny's war-damaged pal and a heavy drinker. He was quick-tempered, often irrational. Danny kept him on a tight leash and protected him from occasional rash moves. Tommy's gray eyes had a scary look—a touch of madness; he probably drank to blot out war memories—you think? I kept my distance, waved, but never went into his chop shop. But many cars did. ("They check in, but they never check out!").

I didn't know how long Danny had been living in the boatyard, but I think the Farrell brothers were the oldest residents and lived in the only real "house" there. They had jobs somewhere, maybe at Colgate—I never found out. They didn't socialize much and kept all

of us at arm's length. Cautiously friendly. There were at least three of them, maybe four; I never got a clean count. They mostly just hung out on their porch evenings, drinking beer and waving at everybody, but that was it. Danny told me a story about them. Years earlier, before the Civil Rights movement swung into high gear, a black guy was living in the yard. When some local rednecks got loaded and came down in a crowd with their clubs and tattoos to fuck with him, the brothers were standing in a row facing the entrance, shotguns in their hands. (Hello, Clint Eastwood.) The crowd vanished. Nobody messed with the Farrells, just like no one messed with Jersey City much, either.

When he worked, Danny would ditch his wheelchair and wear heavy canvas gloves to propel himself efficiently around the yard and under cars. The rubber road chips blackened his clothes and face, so he showered every day. On many nights, a cop car or two would park next to his trailer. It was their timeout place. They often drank a beer and chatted with Danny, for whom they showed unusual respect. His Marine Corps experience, his stint as a bank robber, and his prison career were legend in Jersey City. (Many years earlier, after the war, Danny and his friend "Frankie the Jap" pulled some bank jobs together but were never caught). The cops sat in their cars at night reading a newspaper or racing form, or maybe eating a midnight sandwich. Danny introduced me as the resident actor, and the cops gave me a nickname: "Dave the Rave." Go figure. And they totally ignored Tommy Dady's hot cars gliding by them in the dark to disappear forever. Danny said, "The cops and crooks here are mostly all Jersey City Boys anyway. Same high schools, same neighborhoods, just different uniforms," he laughed.

Most of us seemed not to consciously register Danny's diminished height; he had once been over six feet tall, handsome and broad shouldered, and he still carried himself

that way. It was quite an illusion. The day Ursula met him, he rolled out from under a car and introduced himself. She was taken by his “Peter O’Toole eyes,” she said later, as those sparkling blue eyes shone through his sooty face. They took to each other on the spot.

Danny’s life in the yard was a busy one. After school, a half-dozen younger Puerto Rican teenagers would brave the scowls of the Farrell brothers, venture inside the yard and hang around Danny’s trailer, fetching tools, watching him work, and delivering TV sets back to their owners. He would pay them a few bucks for their trouble—if they brought back the right amount of cash. In return, he taught them things about his job, and, by example, how a man is respected for hard work and honesty. If they played hooky, he would read them the riot act, deny them work that day and send them home. But for the most part they listened to him. He had charisma, integrity and charm that won people to him; he was a fierce, no-bullshit straight shooter.

He would occasionally talk about his past. Sitting in his trailer one afternoon, drinking beer and watching him work on wiring inside a TV set I said, “You’re pretty good at that small, intricate stuff.” He paused, squinting over at me, and held up five splayed fingers. “Number Five!” “What do you mean?” I asked. “Number Five on the FBI’s ‘Most Wanted’ List for safecracking,” he said, taking a slug from a can of Pabst beer. “Long time ago—and they never caught me,” he grinned. “Oh, I did some of time later, but not for that. I was good at it back then, but today’s safes? Forget it. Too complicated—I never kept up. Opened a metal shop up in Yonkers and went straight.” He leaned against the wall. “Y’see, after we mustered out of the Marines me and my old buddy Frankie the Jap busted a few banks. We didn’t have much training for anything else, but we had learned a lot about guns and explosives. And they trained us how to kill. I was a big guy from Jersey City—a kinda

tough, you know? So, after Basic they sent me down to Panama to their 'Jungle School.' It was their first kind of school for that stuff. Taught us a lot more: guns and hand-to-hand combat with knives and Jujitsu. How to stand still in stinking swamp water for hours up to my bottom lip waiting to surprise an enemy and strangle him with piano wire. Very intense. Probably where the Navy Seals and Green Berets came from afterwards. And then there was regular combat on the islands—if you can call combat regular. Hell, the swamps were safer—it was the “regular” fighting that was really dangerous—like the machine gun fire that fucked up my legs, Dave.” A loud snort. “Regular combat, Shit!” He sipped at his beer.

“But you play the cards you’re dealt, right? Well, after we got out, I did a lot of therapy and kept my legs for a few more years. But me and Frankie couldn’t find any decent work back then, so we started busting banks. Hell, our war training fit right in. But no guns! Our rule was, ‘Never hurt anybody,’ so we worked at night after the banks closed.” He told me about one bank that bragged to the newspapers about a new, “impenetrable” walk-in bank vault they had just installed. Danny and Frankie cased the bank—a one-story cement-block building. On the off chance that the vault had no steel rear wall, just one made of cement blocks, they borrowed a wrecker, attached a railroad tie to the front bumper and waited until midnight. Then they crashed through the back wall of the bank and right smack into the vault—they were right. And they were surrounded by money. They loaded up a lot of cash and drove away. He laughed. “Sometimes it *doesn't* pay to advertise!”

I often commuted down to Virginia to my family. One Thanksgiving I caught the flu and stayed there longer than usual. While I was gone, a van full of movie location scouts drove over from Manhattan to see the “picturesque” boatyard they had heard of. They were

scouting locations for Sergio Leone's film *Once Upon a Time in America*. Danny told them, "Hey—we got Dave here—he's a professional actor!" Well, where was he...? By the time I got back it was too late. They didn't use the boatyard in the film, but Danny was cast in a small, non-speaking role. Before shooting, Sergio Leone had heard about Danny from the owner of McSorley's Tavern and arranged a meeting there. McSorley's is the oldest Irish Tavern in New York (Abraham Lincoln drank there—and the Tavern is still open). Leone wanted information about crime in Manhattan during the 20's and 30's—especially about criminal mobs. The Tavern is in the neighborhood where Danny grew up and Leone pumped him for stories of those early days. I heard about their meeting much later, on another movie set from a crew member who had worked with Leone. He said McSorley's owner's Dad had told Leone about the "Old Guys" from the area, especially Danny, so Leone sent a car for him. Danny entered McSorley's on crutches, hopped up onto a bar stool next to Leone and started talking. The crew guy says, "They drank while Danny talked about his past—Jewish, Irish and Italian mobs included. Just sat there and shot the bull; two wonderful old characters."

There is a large, very crowded outdoor market scene early in *Coming to America* where you can spot Danny from behind, back to the camera, sitting on the ground, his goods on a blanket and wearing a blue shawl and seaman's cap, vending to a crowd. (To be exact: his scene is 42:35 into the film—about eight seconds long—be quick). Typical of Danny, he never bothered to see the movie.

One afternoon, he told me his prison story. Years ago, he did over eight years in Sing-Sing for shooting a mobster (in self-defense) up in Albany, New York. Frankie the Jap had a friend who wanted to open a restaurant and bar in a Polish neighborhood. Frankie

knew people downtown and he helped get the liquor license while Danny dealt with the interior design. Now, the location was definitely *not* in what the local Italian Mob considered their territory. For a while everything went okay, until the Mob got wind of the deal and decided that they should have a piece of the restaurant, especially because “these two guys” were out-of-towners. The Mob began sniffing around. There was a gas station across the street from the restaurant run by two Italian brothers who were friends of the restaurant owner, who was Polish. A couple of Mob members questioned them about Danny and Frankie. They wouldn’t say anything so the two Guidos (Danny’s words), tied one of them to the car lift, and started raising it slowly to the ceiling. They talked—said that the “two guys” were coming to eat there Friday night, and Danny got wind of it. Trouble. Angry as hell, he and Frankie got weapons and arrived at the restaurant a couple of hours earlier. Frankie went inside armed with a .45 automatic and waited at the bar. As backup, Danny sat in his car around the corner, covering the back door with a shotgun. He took off his leg braces to get some relief, loaded the shotgun, rolled down the driver’s side window and waited. Sure enough, two hit men came through the front door. Guns were pulled, shots fired. Frankie the Jap wasn’t hit, but he nailed one of them and the guy ran out of the front door. The second guy panicked and ran to the back of the place and out the back door, carrying a .45. Once outside, on the top of the steps, he spotted Danny and aimed, but Danny was faster and killed him.

Pure self-defense, but the law didn’t like it and tracked Danny down, and he went to trial. The only witness was walking his dog several yards away and saw the shooting under a not-so-bright light over the back door. The “not-so-bright” light defense didn’t work.

Danny lost, and spent almost nine years in Sing-Sing prison in upstate New York. Frankie got away.

Because of his experience with sheet metal Danny became head of the metal shop in Sing-Sing. The cons liked him because he argued with the Warden for better working conditions. But both were stubborn men. Finally, after days of arguing about something and Danny wouldn't back down, the Warden threw him into solitary confinement for a month. He served the time, returned to the shop, and then smuggled letters to the outside complaining about the unfair and actual unlawful prison working conditions. The Warden put him back in solitary, this time for over two months, definitely more time than was legal. He was left naked in a bare cell with only a bucket for a toilet. The metal shop went on strike. The Warden finally relented and returned Danny to the general population but barred him from the shop, so again the workers went out on strike. This began to draw unwanted public attention to the Warden, and, in the end, he gave in and Danny got his job back.

“Then I thought—to hell with this shit—right? So, I started putting a lotta time into the prison library's law books. Pretty soon I had to requisition more books. Pissed off the Warden, but he must have figured if that's what it took to keep me away from trouble then he'd do it. This was easier for him, and when he was filling out the requisition, I swear the little bastard had half a grin on his mug. Okey-dokey with me, I thought.”

So, he put in a lot of time learning the law and studied one convict's case so intently it soon became obvious that the guy had been railroaded at trial. Danny advised him that he had a good chance for a new trial, and to hire a lawyer. And bingo—it worked! The guy's conviction was overturned, and he walked. The story of the successful defense (Danny's

sleuthing) made the papers. So, Danny read some more and got a retrial for himself by challenging the (only) eyewitness's ability to identify him "under very poor lighting." "At the second trial the witness had second thoughts," Danny explained. "During cross-examination he caved, said that he wasn't so positive anymore. Dave, this guy was a middle-class Bonomo. I had fired from inside a dark car and he was no less than 30 damn feet away, smoking his pipe while his dog took a leak. So, eight years later he has second thoughts. I think my ugly mug in court scared him," he grinned. "So, waddayaknow, they sprung me!" He leaned in. "...and y'know, Dave, I never had any trouble with my conscience—that guy coulda run for it, but, bad choice, he aimed right at me. Went out of his way to kill me. Also, the Mob was out of its territory, bucking its own rules, so screw them too! That's bad morality, Dave," he chuckled. "Anyway, I was free."

One night he showed me an old photo of himself and Frankie taken just after the War at the most famous nightclub in New York City—the Copacabana. Over six feet tall, dark hair and in a beautiful suit, Danny was a dead ringer for the actor Errol Flynn. (Robin Hood in 40's films.) But by the time I met him his hair had turned white, and with the white beard he was now a ringer for Hemingway. And what about Frankie's name but with conflicting blond hair, I asked him—any Japanese heritage? Danny thought not, but he never asked him. Danny figured it was a nickname from Frankie's old neighborhood.

Soon, 80's politics proved fatal to the boatyard and ultimately we were all forced out for good. Certain state government departments (maybe the Park Service?) and drooling real estate moguls couldn't wait any longer for the courts to settle, and shortly before my second summer there, while I was away, the Hercules Maritime building burned to the ground. Oops. Then again, during another absence of mine, my boathouse was

hollowed out by fire. Oops again. “Accidents.” All the residents soon got the message and the place emptied out. The End.

A couple of years later, my daughter Karla entered Sarah Lawrence College up in Yonkers. A short time later I was in Manhattan to visit my dentist, and I took her downtown to meet Danny. (A day earlier, on 44th Street outside Grand Central Station, I had spotted him.) It was Christmastime, and he was sitting near the Station entrance in his wheelchair with an empty coffee cup in his hand. He held it casually, not straight out, and if anyone dropped money in it, fine, but he never acknowledged it. With his white beard and hair and his black fishing cap, who wouldn't tip Hemingway? I knew he had plenty of money stashed away from his machine shop and veteran's allowance, so I asked why he was down there. He said he needed a little extra cash to close a deal on a new house trailer he was buying for his retirement down in Tom's River, New Jersey. He had already made over a grand sitting there in just one week. I didn't doubt it. I asked him where he was sleeping nights, and he said that he was using an “outside nook.” “Boy, Danny, that's kind of dicey, isn't it?” Smiling, he lifted the blanket lying across his lap. There it was. A razor-sharp filleting knife with a nine-inch blade. He replaced the blanket. “Don't worry my Man—I'm a hellava lot scarier than they are.”

My daughter and Danny hit it off. “You have any kind of trouble, Karla,” he said, handing her his phone number, “call me, okay?” I left the city feeling a little more reassured about her safety. That was the last time I saw Danny O'Brien.

About twenty years later I took one of the new ferries near the World Trade Center over to Jersey City and near where the boatyard had been, then walked down to where the ends of Dudley and Sussex Streets used to be. Many new apartment buildings. That section

of the old Jersey City was slowly disappearing, including Bill Stelling's brownstone: his whole block was gone. The Colgate plant had been demolished, but the big clock was still lit up there. Just where the end of Dudley Street had been was a huge, seven-story complex of condominiums overlooking what had been the boatyard. Everything was gone except the canals. And I noticed that the Morris canal, however, finally got a plaque commemorating its historical significance. But Danny, the kids, the Farrell brothers, the Stellings, the Ukrainians and their dogs, crazy Tommy and his chop shop, the cops at night, the rubber chip road, the rusty tugboat, the old red freighter, all history. What a time that was.

Now, the boatyard was gone. But the famous red neon clock was there, resting on ground level atop a brick wall on the edge of the harbor, still brightly lit. You can see it by taking a video tour of Jersey City on the internet.

In the boatyard's stead was a long, bright green lawn down to the harbor's edge and fronting a large condominium. A beautiful, red-haired young woman was out there, the ocean breeze sculpting her silk blouse to her body as she sailed a Frisbee over the head of an Irish Setter as beautiful as she. Lovely. I walked over the lawn to the former site of my boathouse, stepped down to the water's edge on the Morris canal and retrieved a couple of items from among the rocks there. They are in front of me as I write this. A small wooden tackle block and a turnbuckle green with age—vestiges from voyages long forgotten. In the fall sunlight on the return ferry, with lower Manhattan and the World Trade Center Towers over the bow, no one knew that beautiful picture would soon be brutally smeared.

It was late August, 2001.
