

More Stories!

Forum

Number 17

October 2007

Widows

By Robert J. O'Connell

I just returned from a tour of Arlington National Cemetery. Its 200 lush acres holds the graves of 300,000 dead. So many neat rows of dead soldiers makes a tremendous impact in these troubled days. At the time of WW2, I was too young to realize how the war changed families. Happily, no one that I knew directly was killed (a small benefit of belonging to a family of 4F Hemophiliacs). But I can now see the broader picture. After the war, when my father lost his job making trigger guards for 45 caliber automatic pistols, we moved to welfare and a public housing project, Pioneer Homes in Syracuse. At the time, this was a very good place to live. We were located between a Jewish ghetto on the west side and a Black Ghetto on the east. To say that we were multi cultural is an understatement. Although it was deemed a "rough" neighborhood by the local police, it was actually quite peaceful and orderly, due in large measure to the efforts of the local heroin dealer, "Snake" Taylor. If anyone got out of line, there would be a discrete visit from Snake and he would show you his sawed off shotgun slung under his cashmere overcoat and mention what would happen to you if your activity attracted the police to the neighborhood. You could recognize those who failed to heed his advice because of their limping or their absence.

Each of the brick buildings where we lived on Stewart Court held eight attached two story town houses. Only two of these in our building had a resident father, Mr. O'Connell and Jones. The remainder were all families headed by widows. They included, Mrs. LaRosa, Derby, Karsh, Vulcano, Rena, and Fitzgibbons Their husbands had all been killed in the war. The sad part of this, I now realize, was that it seemed quite normal to me. Although I knew what a gold star hanging in a window meant, it aroused no more interest in me than the other sign in the window telling the ice man how many pounds of ice to deliver for the icebox.

Although several of the widows could be seen moving about the neighborhood, others were invisible. I was especially fond of Mrs. LaRosa and her two equally beautiful daughters, Rose and Mary. Unfortunately, they were competitive with each other so it was not possible to date them both at the same time, although there was a brief moment when I foolishly thought I would not have to choose between them. But after they talked with each other and discovered my duplicity, further choices were not allowed. My friend Roger had a widowed mother. She would call him from the kitchen window to come in from the Court and eat, but she never came out of the house. So she remained an apparition behind the kitchen curtain. I could not tell you what she looked like. This seclusion I now imagine to be part of the grieving process.

Arlington is still burying our war dead and their families. They average 25-30 burials per day. I can't help but wonder how many more invisible woman are made each week.

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The Windswept Press
Saugerties, NY

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