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Isaac Rehert

Cleaning Woman Continues On Her Way

Having finished my business, I was walking through the corridor on the upper story of a tall office building just at closing time when I passed a cleaning woman. She was middle-aged and nicely groomed, and she smiled politely in my direction. I smiled back without a thought (who thinks about the cleaning woman?) and passed on, down the quiet, empty hallway, in the direction of the elevator. The cleaning woman, too, continued on her way.

Just about everyone had left by then, and there was an air of unaccustomed silence and loneliness in the hall—it had been busy when I first came in—and now my footsteps clacked noisily as I walked. The cleaning woman was pushing a canvas trash bin on smooth-running casters, and I surmised that she was just coming on duty. (From experience I knew that the cleaning of office buildings takes place during the night, after all the regular personnel is gone.)

I pushed the button for the elevator, looked up at the guide-arrow to see that it was still running and waited. And while I waited, my imagination alighted on that cleaning woman and began asking questions.

Frankly, I've never actually talked to a real cleaning woman. I mean a professional cleaning woman, not just housewife's helper or a housewife, who's only semi-professional, even if she does spend a lot more hours at it than most of the pros.

Romantic Visions

The thoughts that flitted through my imagination must have had their origin in the short stories of O. Henry and Maupassant, or in soap operas; certainly they sounded like such fiction. For I conjured up some rather romantic visions of what that cleaning lady's life must be like.

I saw her, for example, working her fingers to the bone—this was undoubtedly her second job, moonlighting—so that she could pay the tuition to send her only talented son through medical school.

Or maybe she was superlatively honest, and was toiling through the silence of the night to pay for a priceless pearl necklace she had once borrowed and lost.

Or maybe now her children were all grown and she had decided to go back to college and read the Great Books and dabble in literature and art. Maybe while sweeping and dusting with her hands, she was keeping her brain immersed in great and ponderous thoughts.

Imagination is interesting, but realism, I think, can be even more so. As a private individual walled up in his own affairs, I might never have had the audacity to go back and speak to that woman; but as a member of the Fourth Estate, reinforced with a press card and a deadline, I did turn back and interview her.

She told me her name, but I won't give it here (I'll just call her Mrs. D.) because I'm told you mustn't be too specific these hazardous days in giving out information about defenseless people who are forced to be out on the streets at night.

Keeps Busy

I didn't ask her age, but she revealed that she was a widow with six grown children and three grandchildren. She had been through eight grades of school, was raised a Catholic though now she rarely goes to church. "You can pray just as well at home," she said.

She works at this—her only—job five days a week, from 5 P.M. to 10 P.M., for which she earns $50, which is enough money to take care of her needs. She lives alone.

The work, she says, is not hard, though it keeps her busy, which she likes. The building supervisor came up to inspect a few times when she first began her job, "but he just said that everything is fine and I've hardly ever seen him since. I don't like a boss breathing down my back."

Mrs. D. lives in southwest Baltimore. She rides the bus to work and back. After returning home, she takes a bath and watches a little television, and then she goes to bed. By then it is usually midnight.

During the day, before coming to work, she cleans her own house, reads the newspaper, watches TV, visits friends in their homes or to go bowling, or goes shopping. Once in a while she goes to a movie. She likes westerns and she is eager to see Love Story.

She sees her children occasionally. One son drives a transit bus; another is a State trooper. She doesn't have to contribute to the support of any of them. During the summer one son sometimes takes her to the beach.

I asked her how she likes her work.

"Just fine."

"It's terribly quiet. Doesn't that bother you? You probably don't hear a single sound from 5 to 10."

"Oh, no. I like it that way. I used to work in a nursing home and that's really nerve-wracking. People crying all day long to go to the bathroom, or to beg for a drink of water. This is a pleasure after that.

"Then I worked in a rag company. We were outside all the time. In the winter it was too cold and damp. You had to wear boots all the time. They paid the same as here, but here they pay insurance and Blue Cross too.

"Once I worked in the shipyard. I was a sheet-metal helper."

"How'd you like that?"

"Oh, it was all right. But this is nicer. Sometimes, alone on a job like this, I feel like singing. And I do. You can do that when you work all alone. Nobody is around to think you're crazy."

"Being downtown this way, do you ever feel any of the fascination of being near the heart of a big city? I mean, looking out at night from way up here, you see all the lights—the night spots, the moving headlights of cars and buses taking people to the theater; I guess you can even see ship lights in the harbor. Do you get a charge out of any of that?"

Mrs. D. smiled and spoke with her customary softness. "I never have time for that. Too busy."

"How about being out on the street at night? Are you afraid—like when you wait for your bus."

"Oh no. I just try to stand under a bright light. If no bus comes, or if it's raining, I sometimes take a cab."

"Would you show me the offices that you clean."

Silent Halls

Mrs. D. led me down the silent hall. Most of the doors were locked and she didn't use her keys to open them. There were offices of lawyers, one personnel company, a real estate appraiser, a salvage company, an insurance company and the like.

I asked Mrs. D. if she ever had exciting adventures, like finding valuable documents that had been lost or replaced, or large sums of money that someone had failed to deposit in the bank.

"No. Nothing like that."

Did it ever turn her on to wonder what the companies she cleaned for were doing? Was she ever curious to read documents or papers that might be lying around on desks?

"No. I just clean and dust. I'm really too busy for anything else."

"Do you like this kind of work? Suppose suddenly you became rich and you didn't have to work, what would you do?"

"I wouldn't know. I do like to clean. If you have to raise six children yourself, it'd be pretty awful if you didn't. I even used to clean my son's house, during my spare time."

That's the story as Mrs. D. told it. I'm sure she wasn't revealing all. The human soul is a bottomless well of memories and feelings, and nobody who has lived to middle age, buried a husband and raised a family just goes to work and goes back home and that's all.

But whatever love or excitement or values there are that keep Mrs. D. alive and functioning, they don't seem to be closely related to cleaning offices.

William Gailes Contee (left) and Edward Wilson Parago, Sr.

Contee-Parago Park

Bolton Hill Area Named For Neighbors

BY JANE HOWARD

A wrought-iron plaque hung in the dining room of William Gailes Contee's home on Dolphin lane carries the well-known line by Sam Walter Foss: "Let me live in a house by the side of the road, and be a friend of man."

Evidently, Mr. Contee's neighbors on Dolphin lane believe that he lives up to the motto, for they have honored Mr. Contee and Edward Wilson Parago, Sr., his next-door neighbor, by naming a small park in Bolton Hill after the two men. A "park fete," scheduled for Saturday, will dedicate the area and provide day-long entertainment.

Mr. Contee and Mr. Parago, both in their seventies, are considered two of the oldest living homeowners in the Bolton Hill area. They have watched this section of the city change in character and in appearance over the years, and have watched people move in and move out and buildings rise and fall.

For vacant lots and tall, new buildings have taken the place of many houses on Linden avenue and on Dolphin street, causing the old family neighborhood atmosphere to diminish greatly.

Younger people who have moved in—sometimes Maryland Institute students—often do not settle themselves as the older generation did. They come and go, and are nice, according to Mr. Parago, but "they just keep on going."

Other Improvements

For this reason, the 1200 Block Bolton Street Improvement Association has been working toward "trying to bring the neighborhood back," as Mr. Contee explained it. Remodeling of the old buildings has been encouraged, as well as other improvements, of which the park is an important one.

"It will be good for people to come and sit in after work," Mr. Contee continued, speaking of the park. "It is one of the best things they could have done."

Both of the gentlemen felt they had been greatly honored by their neighbors. Mr. Parago was surprised. "They said they were naming the park after someone, but I had no idea it would be me." Mr. Contee modestly suggested that they were honored for being "the oldest property-owners here," adding, "They wanted to confer the honor and I accepted. I like the people and they like me. They give me work. I was able to buy my house and educate my children."

Mr. Contee owns an upholstery shop in the front of his home on Dolphin lane, where he has lived since 1930. His residence in Bolton Hill, however, dates back to 1915. He was born in Montrose, Va., and his early days were spent as a valet and companion to a judge, who died in 1922, leaving Mr. Contee money with which to go into business for himself.

The home of the gentle, easy-going man is filled with pictures of his 5 children, 11 grandchildren and 12 great grandchildren, as well as many books and mementos from their foreign travels.

One son has a doctorate in history and teaches at Columbia University, New York. Two other sons who live in Baltimore are with the probation department and the post office.

"One daughter lives in North Carolina, where she is growing tobacco and corn and won't come back," Mr. Contee added, smiling. Another works with the Welfare Department in Baltimore.

Mr. Contee remembers when Bolton street was lined with houses, all the way down to Biddle street; when Bolton Hill was "midcity" instead of "uptown"; when Enon Baptist Church was torn down to build first townhouses, and then Sutton Place and when the B & O train used to run through the Mount Royal Station, which now houses the Maryland Institute.

"You could hear the horses go thump, thump . . . down the cobblestone streets," he recalled. "Now office buildings have moved in. Soon there will be more."

"People were more sympathetic to colored people then," Mr. Contee added, his eyes squinting slightly as if to conjure up a picture of the past. "Those people died and left. But people are still nice; it depends on yourself, your own personality—the way you carry yourself and treat other people. Everyone treats me nice. I wouldn't want to live in another neighborhood."

Four generations of Mr. Parago's family have lived in his home on Dolphin lane. He was born on Rutter street, but moved with his family to the house in which he now lives, in 1908. He now lives with his daughter and grandson. Mr. Parago also has two sons, eight grandchildren and one great-grandchild.

"I worked in the post office during World War I," Mr. Parago recalled, "but was pushed out when the veterans came back after the war. I then worked in the Customs House until 1948, and I retired when my health began failing."

He feels that he knows more people since he retired but admitted that people there are different now. He explained, "Many were up and doing things, and some had hired help—some old ones still do—but they've died out."

Mr. Parago, standing in his small backyard, pointed to a large building which once was the home of former Gov. Edwin Warfield, and is now an apartment building. In the rear a smaller building once stabled the governor's horses and carriages.

"Horses were once used to deliver milk door to door," Mr. Parago added. "But you carried a container and dipped it in the milk. Then the Health Department came in and said they would have to use bottles."

Vacant Lot

The Western Maryland Dairy began building around 1914, according to Mr. Parago. As it expanded its facilities, houses were torn down to make room. A vacant lot now reminds long-time Bolton Hill residents where the dairy once stood.

The trackless trolley, which ran on rubber tires via overhead wires, was a vivid memory of Mr. Parago's. "That was 12 to 15 years ago," he said. "It cost 10 or 15 cents, and you could transfer free."

The tall, slim and serious man also remembers the Baltimore fire of 1904 and the reconstruction of the Maryland Institute of Art in 1905.

"The only trouble we have here," he said, speaking of his neighborhood," is migrators going through. They broke windows in the house next door." The house, badly in need of repair and new windows, is now vacant. "The real estate people didn't put any conveniences in it," he explained. "Urban renewal came through and then it was sold so that the owners wouldn't have to fix it up.

The new owner is trying to get money to have it renovated, as others have done in this section of the Bolton Hill area. And the new Contee-Parago Park, located at the foot of the 1200 block Bolton street, may mirror a trend in increased concern of city dwellers for their neighborhood . . . and their neighbors.

The park will be dedicated at 2 P.M. Saturday. A storyland for children, a cakewalk, movies produced and directed by two Maryland Institute graduates, fortune tellers, body painting, prints, art work, batiks, weaving, lemon peppermint sticks, a health food stand, flea market and open gardens will be available as well as neighborhood information booths, ceramics, jewelry, and refreshments. The rain date for the park fete is May 22.

Marin Show At National Collection Of Fine Arts

By LINCOLN F. JOHNSON

In commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the birth of John Marin in 1870, the Los Angeles County Museum organized a retrospective survey of his work which has been touring the country and is now at its last stop in the National Collection of Fine Arts in Washington.

It is a large show. In fact, on first entering the galleries one may well think it is too large—there are 157 pieces—and a quick walk through only seems to confirm such a judgment. But while a one-man show on this scale may serve only to expose the poverty of invention in some artists, in Marin's case it reveals a continuously fertile imagination, active and original right down to 1953, the year of his death.

Marin was one of the best known and widely respected painters of the American vanguard in the first half of the century, and his mind and eye were so full that he managed in some ways to be in the vanguard even at the end of his career.

At the beginning he had worked at architecture a while, which may have something to do with his interest in buildings as a theme, his interest in line and his development of a symbolic vocabulary of forms.

After attending the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and the Art Students' League, in 1905 he went to Paris and knocked around Europe until 1911, returning for a time in 1909, when Alfred Stieglitz organized a show of his work at 291 Park avenue.

He was in Europe, thus, during the period when the foundations of Twentieth Century art were being laid by a variety of expressionists, cubists, futurists and abstractionists and he was in association with a man who was introducing Americans to "non-photographic vision" well before the famous Armory Show of 1913.

In the works of this period and for that matter even later, there are innumerable parallels to the work of other artists from Sargent to Seberini; but Marin's individuality is so strong that it is almost pointless to think of specific external influences except for the stimulus provided by the cubists and futurists.

And though at a little distance his "Portrait of John, Jr." of 1915 might almost be taken for a sketch by the futurist Severini, in general he seems to have accepted the cubist fragmentation of space and the futurist tracings of paths of energy primarily as justification for pursuing methods already indicated in his earlier work.

There is abundant evidence of his originality in the famous Weehawken sequence. Though there is some question about whether the date is 1903-1904 or 1910, the implications of these bold, spontaneously brushed little oils are such that either date is surprising; for already Marin seems to be painting very like the abstract expressionists and the abstract impressionists of the Fifties.

In fact one of the series, "Weehawken Sequence No. 56" bears more than a little resemblance to a de Kooning landscape of the Sixties. Apparent in the early works also is not only the penchant for line but the characteristic desire to give his forms breathing room by leaving some white space around them.

The energy that erupts in these early works animates his pictures down to the end. It is embodied not only in the forms but also in the patently improvisational method, which, if it occasionally leads to easy solutions, also leads to the written works of the late Forties and Fifties, which so clearly parallel Jackson Pollock's drip paintings.

Marin's art is generally associated with land, sea and city, whose dynamics he absorbed and distilled and transferred quite unchecked to the paper and canvas.

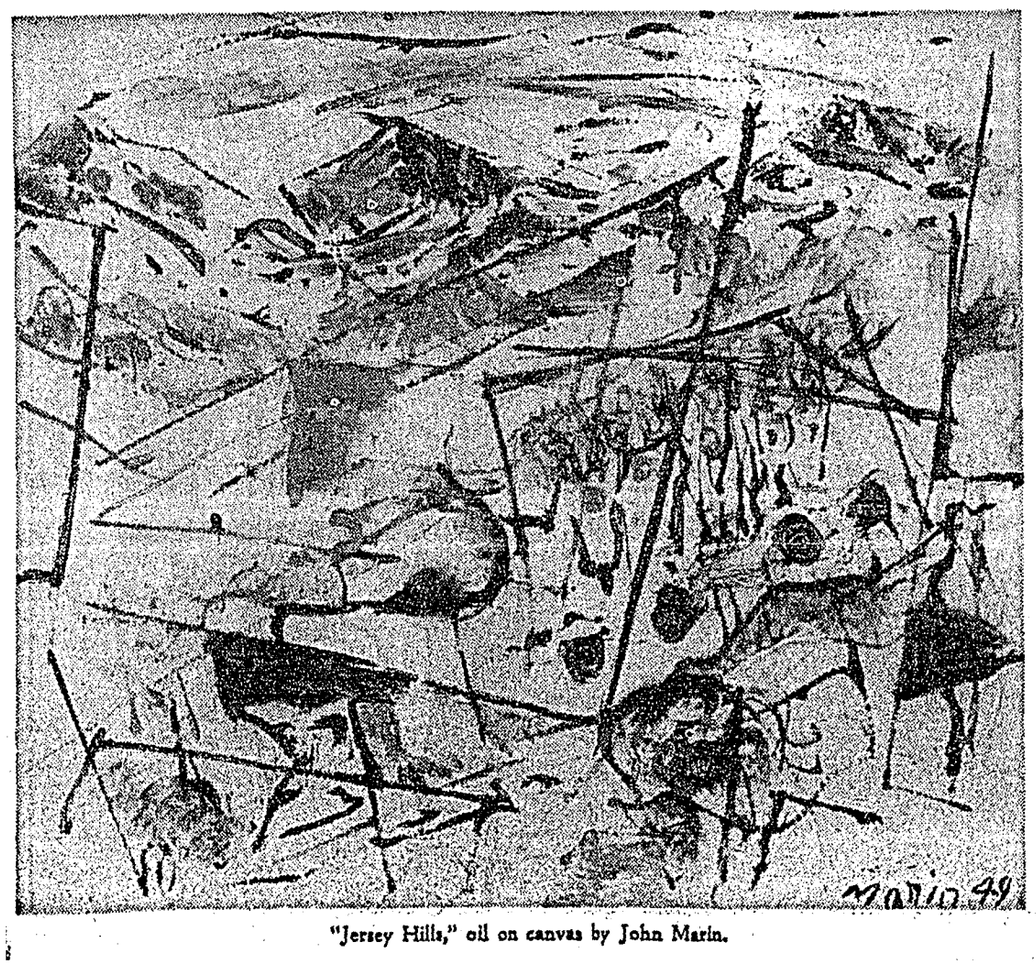
There are in the show, however, a good many less familiar pictures from Thirties and Forties containing human figures, which Marin seems to have been less willing to take liberties with than he was with other subjects. Or was he? Is it my vision or Marin's that finds a woman formed like Aphrodite from the form of "Wave or Rock," 1937, and Gorky-like hints of anatomy in other pictures of the period?

A word about the National Collection of Fine Arts, which ought to be a good deal better known than it seems to be. Along with the National Portrait Gallery it occupies one of the most attractive buildings in Washington, the old Patent Office Building, which can be entered on Ninth street between F and G.

It houses a large and comprehensive survey to three centuries of American art and is the only place in the Baltimore-Washington, area where a large sampling of recent art by major figures is continuously on display. There is also a children's gallery.

The museum's calendar between now and January is packed with important exhibitions and interesting activities well worth keeping track of.

In addition to the Marin exhibition in the National Collection, which closes on June 6, there is in the National Portrait Gallery a show of the little known American portrait painter Henry Benbridge, 1743-1812.



"Jersey Hills," oil on canvas by John Marin.

A Week Of Festivals

By EARL ARNETT

Although the Greater Baltimore Arts Festival, which begins today and continues through Sunday, is the longest and most elaborate segment of "Preakness Week," a variety of other events are also scheduled during the next four days.

"Jazz at the Point" will brighten the Fells Point area for three hours tomorrow night, beginning at 7 P.M. at the foot of Broadway. Gene Franklin and his Pier 5 Jazz Band, a local Dixieland group, will provide the musical entertainment.

The group features Mr. Franklin on clarinet; Al Straub, coronet; Bernie Wiessner, trombone; Walton Marquardt, piano; Tildon Streett, drums; and John Spicer, tuba and string base. The Baltimore Musicians Union is sponsoring the admission-free event.

A Navy destroyer is also scheduled to dock at Recreation Pier before the concert and will be available for public inspection throughout the weekend as part of the area celebration of Armed Forces Day.

And of course, the famed Preakness horse race, for which this week has been named, will run at 1 P.M. Saturday at Pimlico.

Sunday will feature the Second Annual Ice Cream Stick Sail Regatta from 11 A.M. to 3.30 P.M. in the city's Inner Harbor and two neighborhood tours: "A Spring Walk in Charles Village" from 1 P.M. to 5 P.M. and the annual "Federal Hill Celebration" from 1 P.M. to 6 P.M. The latter event will also include exhibits, refreshments and demonstrations built around the theme, "The Peninsula —Port of Call."

The classical musical arts will also be represented with a Baltimore Symphony concert tonight at 8.30 P.M. at the Lyric; a Bach Society Cantata Program tomorrow aat 8.30 P.M. at Goucher College and Bach Society performances Saturday by Joseph Stephens at 11 A.M. and of the B Minor Mass at 2.30 P.M. at the college. The metropolitan area's galleries, gardens and theaters will be open to add to the festivities.