



CAROLYN VAN DUYN

## Crock of Ages 2: 1964

*I didn't mention the Old School memories classes, in which the old and pre-old might learn how to tell their stories, just like in the Hiker. No tale is too tiny not to have a nugget of interest in it. So, as an example, here is one of mine, full of sound and no fury — and a touch of meaning? But allow me to tell it just for the heck of it. — RS*

I was just settling into my first drink, a (real) dry martini, at Costello's in Manhattan, when I remembered I needed to see a television set for a stupendously overwrought spectacle, the arrival of performers for Ed Sullivan's show.

I wasn't hot about it, though earlier in the day I'd seen this train of stretch cars roll up in the middle of thousands of howling children outside police lines and barricades on the West Side. It could have been a place as ordinary as the Americana, something like that, but I can't quite remember. When the limousines discharged their loads, the chief screams seemed to be for these long-bouncy-haired boys who ran toward a hotel entrance. I screamed and split the scene. The screamees were the ones I needed to catch on the Sullivan show.

So, I was in Costello's. No TV in this saloon. The backbar was laced with blackthorn canes and shillelaghs and other relics of the Irish saloon's history, all frosted with soft dust and other fine-spun detritus. The headwaiter — and

most of the time the only one — Emil, was an old Irish lad with a pleasant brogue (of Germanic origin). He was dressed in classic black evening garb and was a bit bossy about his territory.

Editors and writers from the *Post*, *Daily News*, the *Herald-Trib*, and publishing houses drank and ate there sometimes, and a few came from as far away as the *Times*, though Bleek's seemed to be their choice for inner lustrations. Costello's had been the favorite bar<sup>4</sup> of *New Yorker* writers and editors, and one of them, John McNulty, put his version of it in the magazine. I often ate at the exclusive Horn & Hardart automat a half block down the Third Avenue.

When I got there late in the liquidly literary life of Costello's, those Thurber caricatures on cheap wallboard panels, patinated with smoke, were still lighting up this dark, dingy, sad sa-

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4. You could actually eat there.

loon. James Thurber wrote some of *The New Yorker's* best and funniest stuff and drew cartoons that were just as funny and famous and never wavered close to *Art*. He had one of those smartly devious minds that is always pinching you with surprises. The only figure I remember in Thurber's drawings was Asheville's Tom Wolfe. Strange. Or maybe not.

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*One of the few pleasures of getting on is having your mind suddenly changed by something eerily opposite. The Beatles were good.*

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Not all the old crowd had deserted Costello's. One night, I bumped into A.J. Liebling and his wife, Jean Stafford, who had once been married to poet Robert Lowell. Liebling was a great reporter, writer, and critic, especially of *The New York Times*, and he

knew how to cook bouillabaisse, without, necessarily, the classic ingredients. Stafford, a poet and critic, was as good as her husband, literarily, and both were warm and funny this night, filled with lively spirits — any way you looked at it

I also broke up a meeting Harvey Kurtzman — definitely not of the *New Yorker* persuasion — was holding in Costello's with the artists of his "Little Annie Fanny"<sup>5</sup> stable. Kurtzman started *Mad* magazine and kept it madly funny for a while, and he was mighty tolerable of his drunken friends.

I had hoped I might get up with one of Liebling's buddies, Joe Mitchell, another champion writer, from Robeson County. He dropped in occasionally, I heard, but my timing was never right. In Brendan Gill's *New Yorker* book, Tim Costello says, "Joe Mitchell has been workin' hard at bein' an old man since he was in short pants. It's as good an ambition as any." I drink to you, Joe Mitchell.

Remember, this was before most writers, and kin, were celebrities, and they didn't go uptown and hold their noses falling into

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5. A *Playboy* cartoon feature.



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a festering sump run by a nasty dame, called Elaine's. Costello's had soul, even in its mortal throes.

Anyway, I needed to see this *Ed Sullivan Show*. I remembered a service bar right across Avenue had a TV set. Am I nutty thinking it was color? I finished my (real) martini, crossed over, and got a scotch and a splash, standing at the bar to watch the overhead television. I was not anticipating any epiphany. I sort of liked the cadaverous Sullivan leaning around with his grease-rippled hair and talking to these bright, rather epicene children with pageboy bobs and English accents. Caw!

They are in tight black cut-away coats (like hacking jackets) with microscopic lapels, pistol-legged breeches, and glossy winklepickers — cherub dandies — bantering, in Fauntleroy accents, with this old cat who finally turns them loose to play, three guitars and a drum. I am not ready for this.

Good Lord, they are rocking and singing falsetto. What are they, castrati sopranos, or something? No. What they *are* is sensational.

My jawbone drops. I fight it, but their performance destroys every skeptical (cynical?) defense I have. This semi-helpless state might have been enhanced by a couple of (real) martinis and a scotch with ice, but one of the few pleasures of getting on is having your mind suddenly changed by something eerily opposite. The Beatles were clean, refreshing, and *good*. The world needed them.

One of the last times I was up in the Big, I looked for Costello's and found a skyscraper. Someone said the bar had moved nearby on a crosstown street and even had a couple of the Thurber panels on the walls. True. A year later I went again. Gone. Like Ebetts Field the time I went over to Brooklyn to see it when I first moved to New York, many a year ago. Sic transit. •