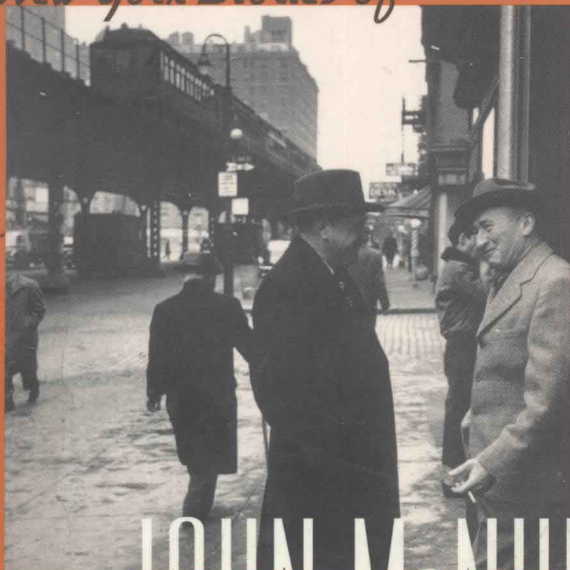


THIS PLACE ON THIRD AVENUE

The New York Stories of



JOHN McNULTY

U N T E R P O I N T

THIRD AVENUE

The New York Stories of

JOHN McNULTY

Memoir by Faith McNulty

Photographs by Morris Engel

COUNTERPOINT WASHINGTON, D.C.

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THIS PLACE ON THIRD AVENUE

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ALSO BY JOHN McNULTY

Third Avenue, New York

A Man Gets Around

My Son Johnny

The World of John McNulty

THIS PLACE ON



John as he was

I met John McNulty on Valentine's Day 1941, in the City Room of the New York *Daily News*, where John was a rewrite man. It was the first day of my first job. John later told me that when he saw me he walked over to one of his friends and made a small joke. "That girl," he said, "will someday be known as McNulty's folly." Four years later we were married, and we were together until he died in 1956. After John died I didn't reread his work. I'd lived with the writing of it and knew it by heart. Now, after all these years and a whole other life, I have just read it again and once again and, as I did throughout the years we were married, find myself trying to find words to define this complicated, elusive, sometimes heartbreaking man.

I can still see the enormous City Room filled with desks, typewriters, telephones, and men in shirtsleeves. Next to the horseshoe-shaped City Desk were the desks of the rewrite men who turned raw facts, telephoned in by reporters working on the street, into stories that appeared in the paper. Rewrite men were the class act of the City Room, and John was one of the best. Taking a story, headphones

clamped over his ears, he made a few notes, then wrote the story without any apparent pause for thought. Rewrite men have to get it right the first time—no fiddling with leads or leaving awkward sentences to be fixed later. As he finished a page he'd call "boy" and a copy boy, or girl, would hurry to take the page to the City Desk. I was a copy girl and found it thrilling to carry newly minted words from desk to desk.

One day, during a lull in my errands, John called me over and handed me something else, a proof of a story that had just been accepted by *The New Yorker*. It was a vignette, entitled "Atheist Hit by Truck," in which he captured a small event in big-city life. Although I didn't quite understand the story, which was in a form that was new to me, I was filled with awe at being so close to that illustrious magazine. I was also taken by surprise that he wanted me to read it. Looking back I can now see that this story was the beginning of a new phase in John's life. He had found his form and within a year was writing regularly for *The New Yorker*, joining the elite group of writers whose talent, skill, and grace made the magazine of the 1940's a thing of beauty and elegance from cover to closing period.

I would like to describe John as he was when I met him in the City Room of the *Daily News*, but he is hard to get on paper. What was most distinctive, almost startling about him was his eyes. They were of a blazing blue, with a wide-

open, direct gaze. His hair was true black, his features rough and masculine with a nose that had taken a beating in barroom fights. He was not handsome in any conventional way, but he was magnetic. When he walked through a room, strangers noticed him. His voice was a beautiful, deep baritone with a lot of music in it.

The “place on Third Avenue” where McNulty found many of the stories in this collection was a saloon on the corner of Forty-fourth Street in New York presided over by Tim Costello and his brother Joe. It was an old-fashioned place even in 1942 when I first saw it: definitely a saloon, not a bar or restaurant, and with the standard saloon features—a long mahogany bar with mirrors on the wall behind it, shelves loaded with polished glasses, and tiles on the floor. The most visible evidence that it was different from other saloons was a mural—a series of large-scale cartoons of men, women, and dogs—with which James Thurber had decorated the long stretch of wall opposite the bar. Beneath the mural was a row of booths, maybe six or eight, for dining. John took me to Costello’s for dinner the first time we met away from the City Room. A bit later on, Tim was the first of his friends that John introduced me to. It was early in the day, a quiet time, and Tim was sitting on a bar stool with a cup of tea and a newspaper. Without warning me, John pulled me over to Tim and said, “Look at her, Tim! I’m crazy in love with this girl!” Tim’s eyes opened in sur-

prise. He smiled and mumbled some sort of blessing. I realized later on that John would not have said something so intimate to anyone but Tim.

What made Costello's different from other Irish saloons stemmed from Tim himself, whose presence had somehow made the place into a salon as well as a saloon. He often worked behind the bar, with a white apron tied with strings about his middle. He was a big upright man from Ireland with shrewd blue eyes and a mouth that tended to be slightly pursed. It was the expression of a man who sees everything, but withholds comment. When he was amused his smile went wide, his eyes sparkled under bushy eyebrows, and he would polish the glass he was drying even more vigorously. He was a man of dignity and pride who disliked anything phony, especially phony Irishmen. John told me how Tim had disposed of one such St. Patrick's Day patriot who stood at the bar, flushed with drink and wearing kilts. Tim gave him a withering glance and said, "Pull up your socks, Hiawatha!"

A good saloon, John once wrote, should be a retreat from, and a miracle drug to alleviate, loneliness. "There is 'Parkinson's disease,' and 'Bright's disease,' and so on," he wrote, "but loneliness is 'Everybody's disease' . . . the simple, everyday loneliness, which makes it so nobody especially wants to have lunch alone."

Tim understood that, and his saloon was a place where a

man could always find someone to talk to without appointment, or could stand at the bar exchanging news and comments with Tim as he moved up and down it pouring drinks. Tim himself was not an easy-going man, but he believed that a saloon should be a low-key place, a neutral zone of relief from the pressures of the outside world. He succeeded in keeping Costello's that way until, ironically, John's writing about it, Thurber's murals, and the patronage of other *New Yorker* writers made the place famous. By the early 1950's Madison Avenue ad men were crowding in and changing the tone. John recorded the change in a line in a story: "Nobody goes there any more. It's too crowded."

I was twenty-three when I met John. He was forty-six. He had grown up in Lawrence, Massachusetts, in a neighborhood of Irish immigrants. His father was a bricklayer, born in County Clare, his mother a seamstress, from County Mayo; they met when she made him a suit. John was born in 1895, and his brother, William, two years later. Soon after, there was a sudden disaster. John's father fell from a factory chimney he was building and was killed. The widow's brothers came to her aid. They took up a collection and bought her a candy store. She and the boys lived in the back rooms, and the store's small proceeds supported them well enough.

John remembered the candy store lovingly—the liveli-

ness of people coming and going, the greetings, bits of news and pleasantries, and never a moment of loneliness, at least in his recollection. All his life he was happiest with people around on just that level—not too long or too intimately.

It was John's mother who gave John the brilliant eyes and the talent. She was quick and witty, a wicked mimic who would "take off" the mannerisms of her customers after the door closed behind them. (John was an actor, too. He could charm a roomful of people by acting out stories and anecdotes.) Having grown up almost entirely among Irish people he had strong and conflicting feelings about them. He believed that they are separate and different from any other people. As he once wrote:

The Irish are a dreadful race to be a member of
When it's spring and your life you're in the
September of.

There was much in his Irish background that he wanted to escape and much he knew he never could. When we were setting off for a visit to Ireland, he was full of apprehension about how he, an Irish-American, would be received. He feared mockery. "They can be terrible," he said, meaning that there can be bitter wit hidden beneath Irish charm.

John got through school without giving it much thought, and began to work for the local paper, with a night job playing the piano in Boehm's Café. He took to the saloon—the

fellowship, the merriment, the showing off at the piano. He tasted whiskey and loved that, too. He went on to college at Holy Cross, and then Colby, in Maine, but the excitement of war overcame him and he left to enlist in the Army. By May 1918 he was in France. His regiment, the Thirty-ninth Infantry, was in heavy fighting immediately. He was made a sergeant on the battlefield because, he said, all the real sergeants had been killed. He lived through Château-Thierry in July, but in August, at Vesle, he was badly shot up in the legs. Years later he wrote a story, "Two People He Never Saw," about the soldier who picked him up on the pitch-black battlefield and carried him to an aid station. John never saw his face and always wondered about the man who had saved his life. The other person in the story was a woman on the far side of the wall of John's dreary furnished room at a low point in his life. When *The New Yorker* published the story in 1944, the editor, Harold Ross, sent him one of his commending notes: "Your Christmas story was wonderful and as good a Christmas story as any magazine could possibly deserve."

Back in the States John spent a year in the hospital. There were deep scars on his legs that made him ashamed ever after to wear bathing trunks. He had a slight limp. Once, in the City Room, someone innocently referred to it and John flew into a rage. His vanity and pride of person were intense.

After discharge from the Army John went to New York,

where he studied journalism at Columbia but spent more of his time drinking with friends. He described it as a wild, wonderful, irresponsible time. Wounded soldiers could get away with a lot. He sold his Army-issue clothes for drinking money and went back to the Army store for more free clothes. He remembered fondly a rich old lady who bought these young heroes hot chocolate at Rumpelmayer's. He was young and strong enough to drink and do a day's work too. He found newspaper jobs easily and became known in the trade for speed and excellence, but there is little tolerance in city rooms (writers, like actors, have to perform on schedule) and he was repeatedly fired for drinking and bad behavior. Finally his friends decided it was time he left town. When he lost his job at yet another paper, somebody wired the editor of the *Ohio State Journal* in Columbus informing him that they were sending out a first-class rewrite man who should be met at the train station. They put John aboard with nothing in his pocket except a pack of Sweet Caporal cigarettes. He always remembered the misery of sobering up on the train and realizing his situation. He arrived humbled and ready to go to work.

In Columbus John was sufficiently sober and industrious to become a star, but he found the Middle West joyless and never lost his sense of exile from New York. To his good fortune and delight he found a comrade in James Thurber, who was a reporter on the rival paper, the *Dispatch*. They

understood each other's jokes, which were often of a sort then unknown in Columbus. "Jimmy looked up to me," John told me, "because I was a writer from the big city of New York. He thought I must be worldly. He didn't stop to wonder why, if I was so sophisticated, I was there in Columbus, Ohio." Years later Thurber wrote about John: "He was not merely an amusing companion; he was one of the funniest of men. When he told a tale of people or places, it had a color and vitality that faded in the retelling by anyone else." John and Thurber saw each other almost every day. "He was invariably excited about something, the cabin lights of the *Shenandoah* [a dirigible], which he had seen twinkling in the sky the night before, a girl at the James Theater who sang 'Roses Are Shining in Picardy,' Donn Byrne's novel *The Changeling*, which he demanded that I begin reading right away, there on that crowded corner, or a song called 'Last Night on the Back Porch,' which he insisted on playing for me, then and almost there. Actually, he took me around the corner to a music store and began beating out the song on the first piano he came to."

Thurber also recalled that, when he and John had a falling out over some minor matter, John "was capable of a fine anger . . . sometimes as unreasonable as it was quick." They developed a manner of making up afterward, a running gag, during which the cause of the trouble was never mentioned. "Spotting him in a bar, I would present myself,

politely, as a man just in from Columbus, Ohio, with a letter to him from Sully [a boxer they both admired]. ‘Let me see the letter,’ he would say, and there ensued a search through all my pockets, in which he helped. ‘Let me have another go at your coat,’ he would say grimly, but the letter was never there. ‘Well, when you find it,’ he would say, ‘bring it around. If I’m not here, I’ll probably be somewhere else. Meanwhile, let’s have a drink to old Sully.’”

Thurber introduced John to a young woman named Donia Williamson and they were married in 1924. John moved from the *Journal* to the *Columbus Citizen*, where he was editor of the drama page and his name became well known. In those days whiskey was an integral part of newspaper life. The moment a day’s work was done a newspaperman headed for the bar. For some of them, John included, this evolved into a drink in the morning to get going and a pint wrapped in brown paper in the desk drawer during the day. At last, John’s drinking caught up with him and took over his life. There was one job disaster after another. He was forced into exile in Cleveland and finally in Pittsburgh, Pa., which is the newspaper equivalent of Siberia. Once when he was fired for drinking, he presented himself at the editor’s desk the next day, sober, and with straight-faced formality said, “I understand there is a vacancy on the staff. I would like to apply for the position.”

John was forgiven, but finally forgiveness ran out, even

from Donia, who divorced him. There was a period of living in furnished rooms. For the rest of his life furnished rooms epitomized for John the desolation and terror of true loneliness.

Meanwhile Thurber had gone to New York and was working for *The New Yorker*, a young magazine then, founded in 1925. He urged John to join him in the city and John did so, in 1935. It must have been then that he discovered Costello's and became friends with Tim. It was in Tim's that John made the decision to quit drinking forever. He told me about the moment when, standing at the bar, he saw himself in the mirror behind the rows of whiskey bottles and knew suddenly that if he didn't quit liquor he would become a drunk, a cadger, a permanent resident of furnished rooms. He raised his glass to his image and drank a last drink. After that, sobriety was his most precious possession. When we met he told me with pride that he had not had a drink in seven years.

Thurber introduced John to *The New Yorker*, and Ross hired him, but John's first stint there was brief. He wrote a few pieces, but the looseness of everything made him uneasy. He was used to newspaper discipline and the authoritative presence of an editor, someone to report to in the morning and to send him home when his work was done. At *The New Yorker* there were no hours, no requirements, no allotted tasks. Ross didn't give assignments; writ-