

The Reillys

by
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The Reillys lived across the street from us but down just one house. I suppose it would be more accurate to say that Mr. Reilly lived across the street from us because it was years before I ever saw Mrs. Reilly. My mother told me that she was "in Norristown", the euphemism for people resident at the state mental hospital. There had been a son who died in the war. The Reillys had one of those little red, white, and blue banners with a gold star in their front window. That meant Mrs. Reilly was a gold star mother. I wondered if she even knew that.

I liked Mr. Reilly. He had very, very black hair and it smelled of brilliantine. He always bought anything I was selling or contributed to any cause for which I might be collecting. When a Catholic neighbour died, my mother sent me around for money for Mass cards; when it was a Protestant neighbour, I collected for a floral tribute.

Long before the days when schools had chocolate bar campaigns to raise money, we sold subscriptions to the *Sacred Heart Messenger* and to the *Catholic Digest*, and in some moments of ecumenical fervour, *Readers' Digest*. The shades on the Reilly house were always down, even during the day. There were blackouts at night, of course, during the war, but rarely did any of us pull down shades during the day. When I would knock on Mr. Reilly's door he would open it and then stand between the front door and the storm door and willingly contribute to whatever it was that I was doing. He had a sweet, sad smile. My mother said he was some kind of salesman, although she didn't know what he sold, and maybe he was so generous with me because he knew how hard it was to make a sale sometimes.

Every Saturday morning, rain or shine, Mr. Reilly would leave his house very early, with a shopping bag in each hand. He would come back again late at night, again with a shopping bag in each hand. He did the same thing every Sunday but left a little later, and returned a little earlier, because of the change in train schedules. On holidays, he followed his Sunday schedule. When I asked my mother about this she said he took the train to Norristown on those days. They were the visiting days for Mrs. Reilly and he never missed one. Sometimes on a Sunday when we took the train to visit my father's mother for dinner or when she came to visit us, we would see Mr. Reilly at the railroad waiting for a train. And there would be others with him. I used to feel so sorry for all of them. They had friends or family in the hospital, too, I gathered. I knew some of them from my parish church and some from streets near my own. Sometimes I was so surprised at who they were because they seemed to bear their pain so well.

One day, Mr. Reilly came and knocked on our door. I was really surprised. He asked for my mother and when she came and invited him in, he told us in an excited voice that the doctors had decided that Mrs. Reilly was well enough to come home for a weekend visit. She could do this once a month to start with, and then twice a month, and then finally every weekend, and the doctors were hoping that eventually she would be able to come home for good. He was very, very happy. He told my mother that he did pretty well on his own but he wondered if she would come and clean up for him just a bit – he'd pay her, of course – and be sure that everything was just as perfect as could be for Mrs. Reilly's first weekend home. My mother said she would and she did. She seemed happy, too.

The next Saturday Mr. Reilly left as usual, but he was back much earlier. On his arm was a frail woman, who looked very old to me. Her clothes were old-fashioned, and she had on a hat, but you could see the black hair just like Mr. Reilly's under the hat. She hung onto him, clung to him, and they went into the house, and closed the door. I watched all of this with my playmates. One of them said something about the "nut case" coming home and I said that she was coming home because she wasn't a nut case any more, and that they should shut up. On Sunday afternoon, the Reillys emerged and went back to Norristown. He came home again later that night. When I saw him the next day, I asked him how the visit had gone and he said, "Very well, very well indeed."

And so the pattern was established. On all these visits home, the Reillys never left the house. I asked about that and my mother said they probably didn't have any place to go. I wondered if we could invite them for Thanksgiving or Christmas Dinner or the Fourth of July, but she thought it best not to. She told me the Reillys were lapsed Catholics, and we were to be kind to them but it was better not to associate with them. It took me a while to realize that lapsed Catholics meant they weren't practicing being Catholic any more but the sisters told us there was no such thing as not being a Catholic at all. You were either a good Catholic or a bad Catholic because you had this indelible mark put on your soul at Baptism and everybody in hell would know that you had been a bad Catholic. The Reillys didn't strike me as bad "anythings" but I guess the sisters knew what they were

talking about or they wouldn't have been sisters, so I decided that having the Reillys to a meal probably would have put us into an occasion of sin, or at least put us in the company of bad companions, which we had to avoid at all costs.

It must have been eighteen months later when my mother told me that Mrs. Reilly was coming home for good. The doctors had decided that she had made enough progress to do that and my mother would appreciate it if my curious friends and I would be very kind to her. That didn't take much. We never saw her! The shades stayed drawn. We never saw her sitting on the front steps the way most of our parents did at night. We never caught glimpses of her in her back yard as we walked through the narrow alley behind the house to school or the grocery store or the after school club we went to. It was as if she weren't there. Mr. Reilly still did all the shopping, and we'd see him hanging out the wash, and every evening as he usually did when she wasn't at home, go out for a beer to the local tap room.

My father wasn't a drinker but he understood that some of the men on the street liked to go have a beer after their supper and enjoy each other's company. Actually, so did some of the women, but neither my mother nor my father thought much of that. My father preferred to read the paper and listen to the radio. Mr. Reilly usually went to the beer parlour for just a bit once Mrs. Reilly came home. He'd return from the tap room sometimes more smiling than usual, but nobody could ever call him drunk.

Sometimes we'd see Mrs. Reilly at the door when Mr. Reilly went to the tap room. She'd stand between the front door and the storm door, and would look out in a very frightened way. If she saw anyone of us looking at her too long or too hard, she'd go inside immediately. But one night she stood at the door looking out almost continually. It was a lovely summer evening and most of our parents were sitting outside on the front steps and we were playing games waiting for the inevitable 9:00 p.m. call to go to bed no matter how bright the day still was. And then just before nine, we saw the police car come. It came very, very slowly as if looking for a house number. It stopped in front of the Reillys. The policemen walked up the steps and into the house and closed the door behind them. Eventually one of them hopped the iron fence between the Reillys and the Garners, their next door neighbours, and soon we saw Mrs. Garner head into the Reillys while Mr. Garner came across the street to tell us all quietly that Mr. Reilly had dropped dead of a heart attack at the local tap room. They were going to go with Mrs. Reilly and the police to the morgue to identify his body.

Five days later, Mr. Reilly was waked at the local funeral director's and buried from our parish church. My mother was surprised at that. She felt the parish priest had probably done that for Mrs. Reilly's sake. She had lost her son and now her husband and that was enough pain for anyone to have without being refused a church burial, even though no one could remember the last time the Reillys had been at Mass. Plus he could always have asked God for forgiveness at the last minute, with the last breath he took, I informed my mother, and that counted. The sisters always told us that we could sin at the very last minute but we could also repent. That was why we had to be eternally vigilant about our moral lives.

I went to the wake. Previously, I had collected money for Masses for him from the neighbours and in some special gesture had taken two dollars from my very own savings and asked the pastor to have a mass said for him by me personally. I wished that I could have spared five dollars because then he could have had a sung high mass within a month especially for him but two dollars was all I could manage. I asked my mother if we could use the money I collected for at least one high mass but she thought given the circumstances it would be better to get a lot of two dollar ones.

Mr. Reilly didn't look like himself at all, just a waxy replica. And there was no smell of brilliantine, just a funny odour of some kind of chemical. I knelt at the coffin and prayed for the repose of Mr. Reilly's soul and then went to Mrs. Reilly and offered her my condolences. We were supposed to tell people, the sisters said, that their peace was in God's will and that the death was God's will. The words stuck in my throat. Mrs. Reilly seemed to be drifting and didn't say anything to anyone. There were no other relatives there, just a few neighbours, so different from the funerals in my own family where hordes of relatives, many from out of town, and all kinds of friends and friendly associates came in huge numbers. Our wakes were held in the home of the deceased and there was always some kind of good food and drink in the kitchen for all who came. Who would sit up with Mr. Reilly's body overnight and pray?

The next morning I sang at his funeral mass. The school girls' choir always did that. Boys weren't allowed into it because their voices changed, the sisters said, so they served on the altar and we did the singing. It was so sad. Mrs. Reilly was there with her two Protestant neighbours on either side of her.

She seemed so lost, so very, very lost. She had on the old-fashioned coat and hat and I remember that the funeral director knelt in the pew along with them so they would know when to sit and when to stand. I remember the pastor telling us in his sermon to "judge not lest ye be judged". He had decided to give Mr. Reilly this Catholic burial and that was that, I thought he was saying. Most people thought he was a hard man but I wasn't sure about that.

My mother went to the cemetery. I wasn't allowed to because I had to go back to school. She told me afterwards it was terrible. There was no meal to go back to afterwards. Mrs. Reilly just went home with her two neighbours and that was that.

My mother knocked on her door a few times after the funeral but there was no answer. The Garners were doing her shopping and being of what help they could they told my mother, but they were both in their 80's. Mrs. Reilly never answered the door when I went on my collecting and selling rounds.

About six months after Mr. Reilly died, an ambulance quietly pulled up in front of the Reilly house. A doctor and nurse and the Garners went into it and soon after, Mrs. Reilly came out wearing the same hat and coat she did when she came home for the very first time after all those years away. She had a shopping bag in each of her hands and the doctor and nurse also carried one in each of their hands. They all got quietly into the ambulance, the nurse and Mrs. Reilly in the back and drove away as quietly as they had come. Mrs. Garner was crying and both she and Mr. Garner looked very, very sad.

The next day a FOR SALE sign went on the house. My mother said that the Garners had finally called Mrs. Reilly's doctor and he decided it would be best if she went back to Norristown. She had nowhere else to go. She would go into a different ward than the one she had come from he assured the Garners and Mrs. Reilly, because she was still much better than she had been. There was a place there where older women without any family or with families who didn't want them could stay, in return for taking care of women who couldn't take physical care of themselves. The doctor thought Mrs. Reilly would be good at that, and she would be comfortable there with other women like herself. The sale of the house would pay off their debts and give Mrs. Reilly a little bit of a nest egg for treats for herself now and then. They had a tuck shop at the hospital and she'd have some money to use to buy things at it now and then.

The house sold quickly. The war had just ended and the boys were coming home and wanted places of their own. The Salvation Army came to collect whatever furniture the new owners didn't buy or want. The gold star banner came down from the front window. The shades went up and stayed up for the remainder of my time on that street. The house had a new life. Mrs. Reilly had her old one.

Sometimes when we went to the train station on a Sunday to go to my grandmother's, or to go to centre city Philadelphia for a Sunday afternoon movie, I asked my mother if just once in a while we could please take the train in the other direction, and go to see Mrs. Reilly. My mother told me that children my age couldn't go there. I'd have to be at least sixteen to get in and what was more, Sunday was my father's only real day off, and they ought to use it for something else other than going to the mental hospital. By the time I was sixteen, and could have gotten to the hospital on my own, Mrs. Reilly was dead.

A woman from our church, who had a daughter in Norristown, and who had traveled to and from there with Mr. Reilly for years, told us that Mrs. Reilly had died in her sleep. It was as if one night she just turned her head to the wall and died. Mrs. Reilly had been very kind to her daughter, caring for her when she was unable to care for herself, exerting on her a very calming influence her mother said, so much so that the doctors were saying her daughter could soon begin a monthly visit home.

I remember as if it were yesterday the first time I saw the woman and her daughter at church. She was much taller than Mrs. Reilly but I could have sworn it was Mrs. Reilly's coat and hat that she was wearing. Her mother, a widow, was beaming, despite her daughter's rather vacant stare. Eventually, the daughter came home to live. I lost track of them when we moved from that neighbourhood.

To this day I cannot think of the Reillys without a lump in my throat. Could we have done more? Should we have done more? Should I have thrown a temper tantrum, something which good Catholic girls did not do, and refused to go to my grandmother's or to a movie downtown, if we did not go once in a while to see Mrs. Reilly? My mother always sent a Christmas card but that was so little. Was my mother fearful of her own depressive personality and afraid that she would see in Norristown her own possible future? She did have to be hospitalized later in her life and received shock treatments for severe depression. Were we all victims of "the right thing to do"?

I will never forget Mr. Reilly's smiling self, opening his door to me once again, the smell of brilliantine in the air, peeling off money from the clipped bills he carried in his pocket, graced with a dedication and wisdom and good humour which perhaps one day I will come close to matching in my own life, no matter what pain it might inflict on me.