

An Excerpt from David Orsini's book • *Bitterness / Seven Stories*

Memorials

In September, exactly a year after Neal had died during the Meuse-Argonne offensive within the forests east of Verdun, Deirdre agreed to join her sister Moira and her husband as well as their parents on an afternoon's sail across Newport waters. They were (she saw because of their carefully modulated smiles) very pleased that she was for the first time in more than a week consenting to enter a day's colorful progress. That she had on more than one occasion excused herself from their amiable excursions seemed almost a natural thing. For she was adjusting slowly to her husband's having died in the war and to this vacant afterward which was unmitigated by those flickering moments when she believed him to be in the sun-touched shadows of the parlor or the library or her bedroom, here in her parents' summer home on Ocean Drive.

After the early months of Neal's being dead, she had discouraged any conversation that would too prosaically define her feelings about him or about the long, sleepless nights she had taught herself to endure or about the loneliness that frightened her and would not leave her. Nor would she express to these four relatives whom she respected and loved—or, for that matter, to the friends who had been very close to her and her husband—her uneasy memory of the two years when she and Neal were alive together and happily married.

So often in this year of her grieving, she had seen Neal standing ruggedly before her or heard his husky voice in a room nearby. She remembered accurately, as if they were speaking to each other right now, the private dialogues which had made their union both idiosyncratic and enjoyable. She remembered, too, all the specific places and occasions which had been the colorful excuses for their being together. On those days, they had appeared (her mother used to tell her) both compatible and ideal. With her titian-hair and light-skinned willowy frame and his tall, sun-bronzed muscularity, they belonged to no one but each other. Was it any wonder that her memory of the happiness she had shared with Neal had at first drawn from her both solacing and grateful tears? So, too, had his having consented to her and not only having consented to, but having needed her supremely and vigorously and absolutely. Nothing (she told herself in the first months after his death) could steal those years from her. Their reality became insistent and vivid whenever her memory gave her husband back to her. But gradually, even against her will, her days with Neal began to seem dreamlike and mysterious. Into death he had vanished and vanished too was the palpable reality of their being together.

Grown weary at last of looking back at all that was finished and fearful that she might soon run mad because of her constant grieving, she began to accompany her mother and her sister on the frequent Samaritan visits they paid to the sick or poor as well as to the aged or injured in the working class suburbs which stood, unobtrusive and ordinary, beyond the visible rims of Newport. That her mother's father had been a minister who had devoted his life to the needy encouraged her to believe that she, too, could be more than the impulsive and self-absorbed young woman her privileged background had sometimes influenced her to be. In this second half of the first year of Neal's death, she discovered within herself a profound sympathy for the anguished and afflicted and abandoned. There grew in her a genuine desire to do all that she could to

help them.

During this period, she encouraged new hope and optimism in a young, alcoholic widower who lost his wife shortly after she gave birth to their still-born son. After winning his trust, she persuaded him to join a counseling group for alcoholics. Having freed themselves from their own addictions, the men in that group were now guiding him toward a similar recovery. In a later month she was moved by the plight of a rugged middle-aged carpenter who had fallen from the second-floor scaffolding of a house he was repairing. A team of conservative doctors thought it unlikely that he would regain the use of his fractured legs. Resisting their pessimism, she turned to a renowned surgeon from Johns Hopkins. Because of his pioneer work, the carpenter was going to walk again. Once more, after months of rehabilitation, he would be for his wife and his three children both self-reliant and enterprising. While he progressed through his convalescence, she secured for him, from among her family's friends, important commissions that promised him a substantial future. To him and to others like him, she offered with her mother and her sister the sustenance of food and clothing and accelerated the efforts of state agencies to send money for fuel and rent.

Charitable work, church-centered meetings, and quiet afternoon teas with friends of long standing had provided her with the social interaction toward which her family had urged her. But it was not their counseling alone which had drawn her away from brooding days and solitary rooms. More than any other influence upon her, a realistic awareness that she must get on with things had slowly brought her away from her months of isolated grieving into the world again. But rarely would she enter any occasion which carried with it a light-hearted scenario and which, even in well-intentioned ways, subverted her loyalty to Neal's memory.

Today, though, when her parents as well as Moira and Derek had invited her to a sail on the first anniversary of Neal's having been killed in the war, she accepted without hesitation. For she wanted to commemorate his passing by making a journey they two had often made together. When she asked Derek if they might sail in the yawl which had belonged to Neal, he readily agreed, even if (she felt) he would have preferred to captain his own formidable boat. They would be traveling across Narragansett Bay to the Rose Island lighthouse. There, they would visit the venerable keeper Henrik Terborck and bring to that accurate workman a picnic luncheon which they planned to share with him. They were also bringing all manner of cured hams and cheeses, preserves and other provisions which would supply him with healthy meals throughout the winter.

Now, while riding over September waters with her parents and with Derek and Moira, she knew the dappled textures of the warm, evolving day. Configurations of inlet and bay were hurrying past her now, and hurrying too in the flicker of receding distance were serried groves and burnished greenscapes. On the crest of sun-glanced fertile hills, at the margins of enshadowed woods, a gray-blue immensity of larches swayed in alliance with the pastel sky. Theirs was a gentle wavering of contours left as if floating in the lift and flare of her turning glance toward zinc-white cliffs and glint of farm field and boats like shimmering amber glass vanishing within the rippled light upon Newport waters. Much nearer than that, in the spume-fed wake of their own kinetic vessel, she noticed the splash of a larger mackerel, its silver-viridian body a mottled gleam upon her fleet apprehension. She knew as well the rankled caw of a herring gull that was curving the dark glare of its wings while alighting upon the uneasy lip of a wave.

“How wonderful to be a part of all of this,” her mother said. As patrician as she was direct (and meticulous in the simplicity of her fashion and her upright carriage), she was offering her words as a strategy for affirming the day and affirming too that each of them was uniquely in it.

“The summer is still here,” Derek (busy at the tiller) said. With affable ease he directed his gaze upon her. For in league with her parents and with her sister, he meant (she knew) to bring her back to a comfortable belief in the future. “There will be days and days like this.”

(A murmur of the heart had kept him out of the war. Neal alone had left their successful law practice to join the American Expeditionary Force. For a year now, she kept noticing in Derek a kind of awe before the fact of Neal’s sacrifice, and for that she liked him immensely.)

“We are going to enjoy every one of these days,” her father promised. Tall, silver-haired and portly, he brought to his remark his well-honed, lawyerly assurance. Like the three others there, he was determined—without even once mentioning Neal—to rescue her from her prolonged and muted sorrow.

“It will be good to see Henrik again,” Moira told her.

Her sister remembered that, even before they were married, she and Neal had enjoyed visiting the aged mariner who was the keeper of the lighthouse.

“Yes,” she found herself saying. “I always learn something new when I see him.”

The four of them smiled, and she was pleased that she had made the moment appear lighthearted and casual. Now, while the imagery of Indian summer wheeled around them, they spoke of many things, including her parents’ travel to British Columbia the following month and, a few days before that departure, Moira and Derek’s return to their New York brownstone.

Then it was that she and the four others saw in the loom of sun-threaded distance, on an island requiring no more than sixteen acres, the gleaming white emphasis of the lighthouse. Its wood-frame solidity dominated both rock and soil. Rising thirty foot and more through the mansard roof of the keeper’s dwelling, its square tower stood, resolute and precise, over Narragansett waters. When, a quarter of an hour afterward, they’d arrived to see that imposing structure as an even larger reality, its redoubtable presence evoked—in her eyes, at least—the artful rigor of Second French Empire and Victorian influences. Perhaps at the same time, all of them sighted the weathered virility of Henrik Terbork. He was waving to them from the slate-gray dock where they intended to anchor their vessel.

“That is a man whom God has sorely tested,” her father said.

With compassion as genuine as his, she and the others also observed the mariner and waved back to him. Shortly thereafter, Derek smoothly navigated their craft into the anchoring place.

Her own struggle with loss and disappointment roused her special notice of the old fisher. Two or three years earlier, Neal had told her about the sorrows which afflicted Henrik’s life. It was that, perhaps, or her empathy with all human beings strong enough to withstand even the bleakest experiences which drew her pensive attention to Henrik. In this year just passed, she had developed a careful respect for the sterner capacities that enable people to endure so many little deaths and larger ones, too. But she had no time to ponder at this moment what Neal had told her about this man or about its implications for

her own life. Derek, with his dark-haired and muscular bearing, was offering his hand to guide her—as he had guided the others—safely onto the dock. After that, with her parents and with Moira and Derek, she hurried to greet face-to-face the venerable mariner.

“You have come at a good time,” Henrik said. His sturdy Dutch inflections defined the warm greeting he was exchanging with them. “I have some free hours to make your visit an enjoyable one.”

They appreciated his straightforward manner and his earnest regard of them as well, unconstrained as that manner and regard were by the rough slurring of his words and by the urbane ambiance which, despite their unpretentious composure, they may have represented to his steady blue eyes. With his tonsured mien and aquiline nose and with his long white beard and gaunt, ascetic lineaments, he existed (she mused) as nobody except himself. He was the honest ruin of the brave and humble workman he had for so many years been and now, nearing seventy, continued to be.

“You are a most effective sentry,” her father remarked as he grasped the old man’s hand in a solid gesture of friendship. “Only an alert keeper would have noticed our boat at so far a distance.”

“Why are we here, if not to see?” Henrik asked.

“Ah, but to see well, as you do,” her father said. “That is a gift.”

Old Terbork (so the strong friends who with him had survived a sea-bruising life now called him) bent his wrinkled head slightly as if to salute a kind advocate. Or, perhaps (she guessed), he wanted to modify an inherent reserve or an ingrained tendency toward a merely frugal show of emotion. Whatever the case, he smiled adequately. The rightness of his intuition persuaded him to guide his guests without any other words into the waiting lighthouse.

It was at this time, as they were walking toward the lighthouse, that Neal’s words about what this man had lost came swiftly back to her.

That her father regarded Henrik Terbork as an exemplary man did not surprise her, for she knew the kind of human being whom he found admirable. Aware of Henrik’s story, as they all were, she recognized the judiciousness of this favorable appraisal.

Long ago, when he was not yet twenty, Henrik had with his bride made the arduous voyage to Newport from the Spartan environment of Scheveningen. It was a fishing village near the Hague which, in the years when he was growing into a vigorous youth, he had learned to love well, as had his parents before him and his three older brothers. Each of them accepted it as the place of their ancestors, who had rendered it meaningful by the boldness of their skill on the sea and by their ability to find amidst its austere obligations lives that were useful and bracing. After he and his equally strong-willed Ingrid had followed their desire to be Americans, he would speak with heartfelt recollection of this early part of himself, formed as he had been by a judicious upbringing and by experiences that had taught him the merit of hard work and self-sustaining honesty.

To her father and to Neal and Derek, as well as to those close friends who belonged to his daily life, he would from time to time recall a moment or an episode deriving from his years in Holland. He might have, only an hour before meeting them, looked upon the spectral gleam of a pond frozen in winter behind the white clapboard symmetry of his Newport house. Or he might be put in mind of his homeland while on a

solacing April afternoon he observed the grace of a fragile tree. One time, he remembered Scheveningen after noticing Neal and her mooring their summer boat to a convenient buoy. Neal had turned the sturdy craft into the wind while Derek and her father brought down the mainsail and with limber skill hurried the mooring line aboard to loop it 'round the bow cleat effectively.

It was then that he would tell them of seeing, as a rugged yet taciturn boy from a fishing village where there was no harbor, incoming boats roped to teams of docile and efficient horses from the Belgian Ardennais. Their red-roan bodies were as startling as their large, expressive eyes and pricked ears and wide-open nostrils. Their strong shoulders and deep chest and muscular limbs represented so much massive power pulling the reluctant vessels onto the beach at Scheveningen.

He would also tell them of his older brother, Hans, skate-sailing with him in the west Netherlands. They moved as if they were their own ships gliding magically across a frozen river. Both of them had built masts made of hickory rods whose bottoms rested in straps fastened to their left legs. By placing one arm around the mast and with the other hand holding onto the top spar, each brother supported a sail of the strongest cotton sheeting.

More recently, just before Neal had gone into the war, he would also tell them of one time not like any other time except the moment it supremely inhabited. Years earlier, on a morning in early spring during the very week that they had married, he and his fair, raven-haired Ingrid awoke to see, from the window of a cottage in the countryside just outside Amsterdam where they were staying, the pink shimmer of almond trees blossoming above an unexpected blanket of snow. The day itself was rising easily, incandescent and natural, and the welling sheen of its sun was like sulfur touching everything.

Yes, he remembered favorably his days in the Netherlands. That imagery remained for him comforting and pure, untouched by the sorrows that came into his life years afterward. But when he was young and blissfully married, the geography of his destiny located itself elsewhere, or so he believed. Therefore, with his agreeable bride he left behind all the places which had known him and all the good people.

Then, finding his way to a compatible life with Ingrid in Newport, he knew again the fervor of life on the sea. In the early years of his arriving on Atlantic shores, he worked in unison with a team of mariners to fish effectively in New England waters. Later, honed by earned confidence and aspiration, he led a savvy crew of fishers in a prosperous business of his own making. By this time he had secured contracts with the best markets in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New York, as well as in Rhode Island. But, though as a mariner he thrived and as a loving husband he enjoyed nearly all the rewards that a man may build through his bond with a faithful wife, he also knew the unspoken sorrow which, even while held silently taut within the most secret recesses of the heart, afflicts a man when he and the woman he passionately loves cannot have children.

True, his beloved Ingrid had, in the first five years of their marriage, twice conceived a child and successfully carried it through several months of what appeared to be a healthy pregnancy. But she lost the son she had been nurturing inside her body and, two years later, the daughter. Their little hearts (the physician explained) suddenly stopped because of a blood deficiency which assailed their mother's otherwise splendid

frame. Because her very life during this second miscarriage had been grievously threatened and because she and Henrik regarded their losses as brooding signs that Heaven was not favorably disposed toward their desire to be parents, they taught themselves gradually to accept this sparser life without children. Even in their young time they were wise enough to acknowledge, ardent and grateful still, the tremendous blessing of their having found perfect love with each other.

Now, while Henrik brought an even greater enterprise to his seafaring business, Ingrid—in league with a guiding minister and his wife and a group of equally altruistic women—devoted her energies to maintaining a retirement home for old and often indigent men of the sea. There, in a refurbished Victorian house owned by their church, she and the others, without salary or fanfare, cooked and sewed and washed for these tough-hearted men who, though loyal and hardworking during their useful time, had entered their final cycle without wives or families or friendly cohorts even. Remembering how well they'd always acquitted themselves during the harsh disciplines of their maritime years, the sympathetic inhabitants of Newport privately called them orphaned men. Most of them had never married, and the few who had done so had outlived both wives and offspring. With rigid calm, they had acceded at the last to their Spartan aloneness.

It was through her unobtrusive charity toward them that Ingrid discovered how necessary she was to her community. Her being a woman who could not give her husband a child suddenly became an incidental note in the public's affirming definition of her. Thus it was that she and Henrik, though childless, continued to bring joy to one another. All the hours that made them separate and individual—he through his rugged vocation on the sea and she by her service to others—enhanced and deepened the meaning of who they, as husband and wife, were together.

But in the eighteenth year of her marriage, when she was nearly forty, Ingrid—with Henrik—once again conceived a child. After meticulous attention from a mid-wife and a prudent confinement to her bed during the latter months of her pregnancy, she presented to her husband a bright and healthy son. They named him Vincent, and he lived—athletic and insightful and proficient—for sixteen years. By that time, he was a husky youth of medium build and brown-eyed intelligence and hair a handsome tawny red. Always, he embraced the splendid adventure that is the world. For he had learned from his warmhearted mother a congenial manner and from his strong-willed father and other manly tutors the disciplines of mind and body that enabled him to excel in sailing and swimming and fishing...in baseball and soccer...in chemistry, botany, and physics...and in geometry and calculus, too.

“He will serve the world well,” his teachers as with one mind agreed. They never imagined that he would soon die on the soccer field from sudden heart failure. The secret malady betrayed the natural rhythms of his breathing and pulse and honed-sharp awareness and with unexpected swiftness killed him.

When he died, the bright colors of the earth, to Henrik's and Ingrid's eyes, instantly faded. Then, a mere six months later, Ingrid—racked by debilitating grief and the onset of severe arthritis—also died. A massive stroke overwhelmed her uneasy frailty.

Condemned to live after these two essential beings without whom there could for him no longer be joy or hope or heartening sustenance, Henrik confronted his bleak life with quiet, ingrained patience. Alone as he was and reluctant at first even in his early

sixties to leave his life as a mariner, he consented finally to be the keeper of the Rose Island lighthouse. The careful members of a committee appointed him to that post because they respected his knowledge of the sea and his unfailing diligence and because they were aware that he had recently lost his wife and his son. Compassionate and realistic, these men and women well understood that the solitary nature of the lighthouse keeper's position might invite a forlorn man's brooding. Yet they believed nonetheless that a new and demanding assignment would very likely prevent Henrik from dwelling bitterly upon his hard sorrow. Besides (they said), it seemed appropriate that he should be the keeper of a lighthouse that stood as a memorial honoring all those Coast Guardsmen and other brave seafarers who had died in the line of duty.

And so, a decade later, austere and methodical in his guardian capacity, the strong-minded mariner continued to endure.

Now, at the margin of this September afternoon when she intended to commemorate the death of her husband, Deirdre and the four others followed Henrik into the lighthouse. At first she found within the lower floors a vaporous gloom or inwoven darkness that surprised her senses as it drew her into its strangeness. Even Derek and Moira appeared to enter the rooms as if they had never before been here.