

1955

The Finishing Stroke

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Recommended Citation

Falch, Sally (1955) "The Finishing Stroke," *Exile*: Vol. 1 : No. 1 , Article 13.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile/vol1/iss1/13>

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Sally Falch, a junior from Brecksville, Ohio, holds a realistic mirror to our generation in . . .

THE FINISHING STROKE

BY SALLY FALCH

New Jersey highways are the worst. Puny farms and punier towns, that all add up to just one thing: nothing. At least this was the verdict expressed by the three of us sardined into the front seat of PJ's coupe. PJ, Vern MacCaffery and I were enroute from Philly to a blast. You know, a sort of coupe de grace to a wretched summer, spent roof shingling, if you can imagine a more plebian occupation. Anyway the last roof was roofed and it was Labor Day and well, is there better reason for an uninhibited party or two? So, when PJ said, "How about taking off for the shore?" Vern and I yessed with much gusto. Decided we'd look up old Annie, a pretty good girl we all dated back at school who was playing waitress for the summer. But the best laid plans of mice and men etcetera—anyway, this billboard by billboard existence ceases to be too diverting after a while and with each ad, our fond vision of old Annie faded.

As we passed one particularly bilious creation letting us know we were entering the town Wildwood-by-the-Sea, PJ growled, "This place better be something! At this point your pilot could do with a little wildness."

"It looks promising, it looks promising," Vern decided as we passed the town's first building—a bar. That's right, the first building was a bar and so were the next three. We were laying odds on number four when PJ floored the brakes and made arm motions at this roadsign. "Do I know the mark of fate when I see it?" and made a left to follow an orange arrow with "Boardwalk" printed above it.

Believe me, this town was really living up to its name. Wild, it was. There were the pink-shirted, pegged-panted humans all over the area. And the babes! Well, I live in a big town and see eager lasses now and then, but this sea town even widened my eyes.

The boardwalk was swarming. We could just tell by eyeballing that these were easy dates.

"It's been a long chaste summer," PJ sighed.

"And a long hard ride," Vern finished.

"The cocktail hour is upon us, am I right?" PJ demanded.

Well, there were two things on our minds when we succumbed to about the twentieth bar we had passed—women and booze. The bar had just the right touch. Small, dark—well, actually that described most dens, I guess—but this was a shore town, remember? So it was the rotting fish nets and the dehydrated fish carcasses hanging all over the walls. The place was neatly divided into three parts, bar in the center, long party tables on one side and little intimate dealies on the other.

PJ headed right for the middle, perched himself on a stool and ordered, "Three beers for the group."

This whole action hit me wrong. Partly, I guess, because he sat on the seat so casually. Me, I've been practicing for years and I still climb on a barstool like a kid who just grew out of his high-chair. And partly because he ordered beer. Once PJ starts drinking beer you can kiss the next six hours good-bye. The guy's a fanatic over the stuff. Besides I didn't even want any. I don't know why but I just can't hack beer. I'm strictly a Seven-Seven man myself.

When the bartender set the beer down, PJ turned around and saw Vern and me just sort of standing there. Now if there's anything PJ hates, it's people who don't look like they know what they're doing. With him the word is finesse. "Hey, Gentlemen," he yelled, "Get over here, I want you to meet a friend of mine. Say hello to Pete, world's greatest healer of parched throats."

I don't know how he does it, here we are in this place for about three minutes and already old PJ is joking around with the bartender and calling him by name. It beats me. I go to a place for a year and still have to say "Hey You."

Well, Vern and I hiked ourselves over to the bar and the three of us downed our beer. No one said anything, we were looking around too much I guess. The same kind of clan was in here that we had seen out on the boardwalk, spiffed-up guys and willing women. Never in my long history of barhopping have I seen so many women alone, one or two habitués maybe, but not this mass attendance. I was just getting myself used to this phenomenon

when PJ said, "Well gentlemen—" We're always gentlemen to PJ, who thinks any other term is for the peasants.

"Well, gentlemen," he said, "We've got the booze, now how about number two? Some female companionship? What do you say we make our move?"

Vern mumbled something but whatever it was was drowned by the beer in his mouth. Probably affirmative, though. When it comes to the question of women Vern's one guy that's always ready and willing. As for my thoughts on the subject, if they had both forgotten old Annie still some thirty miles away, I certainly wasn't going to be the one to bring it up. And well, I'm never one to keep what promises to be a good party flat because of a lack of women, so I said to PJ, "OK, great, but what are we supposed to do, prance up to one of these dollies and say may I have this beer with you or something?"

"Nothing so crude my boy," PJ drawled. "Just pick your women and leave it to your Old Dad."

We finally decided on three fairly decent numbers down at the end. They were drinking beer so PJ figured our finances would last longer. He called Pete the bartender over and said, "See those three dames down there?" Pete did. "Good, how about asking them if they'd let three infatuated gentlemen buy them a round or two?"

We waited and watched, nonchalantly of course, while Pete performed his mission. There was much giggling and what they call "sidelong glances" from the babes and Pete came back and said, "The three ladies you indicated will be only too delighted."

From the looks of them, though, I decided that none of our conquests would even know what a three syllable word like "delighted" meant. "Marvelous," I said, "This'll be cozy as heck, won't it? We sit here and they sit fifty feet away drinking up our money. Good work Old Dad." I said this as sardonic as I could, the only one who heard though was Vern. Old PJ was already half-way over to where the girls were sitting.

I got over there just in time to hear him saying, "Well, fine then. How about that big table right over there." The girls looked at him as if he'd just suggested a trip to Bermuda and then it was the mass movement to the table. I really had to hand it to PJ. The situation was made—to use an expression I personally dislike.

The girls sat every other chair. These gals were nobody's fools. I moved in next to this blonde with one of those blue backless

jobbies on. "Well, it's about time we got acquainted," I slurred, "the minute you walked into this dump, I said to myself, now there's a woman I've got to know." Now I may not be as suave as PJ, but believe me I know how to get a conversation started right.

"Name's Dave," I said, "Let's see, I bet your's is Bluebell so you wear blue all the time."

"Oh, but you're wrong, Doll," she giggled, "My name's Colleen."

Maybe it was because she had this action of flicking her tongue out when she talked, but for a minute I didn't know whether she had said Colic or Colleen. I decided Colic would be more like it. Now, I don't know about you, but whenever I hear the name Colleen I think of some demure and pretty little Irish thing. Believe me, this was no Colleen by my standards. Neither were her two friends, for that matter.

Old PJ wasn't even talking to his babe, he was giving her the PJ shoulder. This shoulder act of PJ's is taking on the proportions of a psychological experiment anymore. Tonight's doll had the babbling response, which of course had no effect on PJ who was too busy studying one of those fish carcasses tacked on the wall. The guy must have an extra sense or something, because if there's one thing about PJ, he always knows when someone's looking at him. He turned on me with the same look in his eye that he had been giving the fish and yelled, "Tell me where the fishes come from."

Now I know PJ well enough to be fairly sure he didn't expect me to give a spiel on spawning, so I just sat there.

"I knew it," he shouted. "The poor sinner doesn't know. What's wrong with people anymore?" This last was directed at Vern and the babes who took my line of action, sitting with stupid looks on their faces.

"What's the matter," he repeated, "Don't you read your Bible? It's all there—right under Creation. The fishes along with all the other animals."

"Man," he said, looking at me, "If you all don't know that, then Brother, you sure do gotta be saved. I's gonna put some of that Old Time Religion in your soul. It's Revival Meeting time!"

Well, now, I've known PJ for years and believe me he can always be counted on to liven up a party. He just comes up with one of his idea storms. That's how he does it—just announces Revival Hour or some idiotic thing and you'd think he was Napoleon or someone the way everybody hops to it.

"Brother Dave, you sinner you," he hollers at me, "you is about to see de light. Hallelujah!"

I'll be darned if everyone doesn't holler "Hallelujah" right along with him. We were off.

"We'se got to do this here thing up rightly now, Brothers," PJ drawls. "The propa procedure in these here Revivin' Meetin's is to start things off nice and peppy like with one of them spirituals you all learned at yo' dear old Mammy's knee. Brother Vern how's about leadin' us in a lil' 'ol thing called 'Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory.' How 'bout it Brother Vern, is yo' with us?"

Well, Brother Vern was most obviously with us. And to prove it, he felt obligated to stand up and invite every character in the whole bar to join in. The idea caught on like a parade. You'd think the song was number one on the Hit Parade the way this Wildwood crowd hit those Hallelujahs. Believe me, the whole place really started jumping. One poor sucker got so carried away he ordered a round of beer for every "sinner in the bar," as he called us. And, well I guess, old Pete, the bartender, was having the time of his life bellowing out, "Brother have another beer 'cause it sure is good fo' yo' soul!"

Maybe I'm funny or something, but I was having a little trouble feeling any brotherly attitude toward these greasy characters in the pink shirts who kept panhandling my cigarettes. If that's brotherly love you can keep it.

Nothing was bothering old PJ though. The boy was really having a ball. Some of those spirituals weren't good enough anymore, I guess, so Parson PJ as everyone started calling him, was busy making-up his own versions. Right in the middle of one particularly lewd rendition of "Jacob's Ladder," this female voice cried out, "Brother, the Lord will thank you!"

For a guy who never misses a cue, old PJ was pretty quiet all of a sudden. Then he started laughing. I thought he was going to fall off the table, he was laughing so hard. Now, PJ isn't the kind of guy who gets carried away too easily. With him it's always saying something to make the other guy laugh, if you know what I mean. But there he was—I've never seen anything like it—hopping up and down and pointing his finger.

Well, this was too much. First he gets hysterical on us and then pulls this rude gesture of pointing his finger. For as long as

I've known him, PJ has never been so crass. Such action goes right along with thumbing the nose, if you know what I mean—two things a gentleman of PJ's stature just doesn't do.

Well, the boy had his audience right along with him. The whole thing reminded me of a play I saw once where this character on the stage pointed his finger out at the audience and the twenty other people on the stage pointed right along with him, mentally, I mean. Anyway, that's what we must have looked like. All of us mentally pointing our fingers right along with PJ at this motley crew of dames bearing down on us.

There were three of them. It was the outfits you noticed first. They looked like something out of the nineteenth century. Completely black except for these grey Grandma Moses shawls they were clutching around their shoulders. Then you saw their faces and everything else was like it wasn't even there. They were really weird. I don't think they had any make-up on. It just wouldn't go with the rest of their get-up if you know what I mean. But never have I seen any face without powder look so white. They were unearthly, I tell you. And their eyes—well, I guess the word is "piercing." But they pierced and burned and everything else. It was really gripping.

You could see that the number one dame was big chief. She was easily six feet and was walking through the bar like she was the Queen Mother or someone. The other two just sort of padded along behind. The big one was banging on a little drum and kept shouting in this hoarse voice, "You'll get your reward in Heaven, Brother. The Lord'll be good to you." Her two cronies just kept filling in with "Hallelujahs" and jingling these buckets they had. Forward they came. Three bonneted creatures among eighty peroxide blondes and greasy duck-cuts. What a procession!

By this time they'd gotten to PJ who was up there making these flourishing bows and scrapings to the big one.

"Get up there, boy," he said to me. "Didn't yo' mammy learn yo' to behave likes a gentleman does when there is a real lady present?"

"What are you going to do, Brother Parson," I said as I got up, "Offer her a beer and have her sit down and join the party?"

PJ ignored me and said to the woman. "Here, ma'am, you all jes' pretend like this chair here is a step up to the Lord. Jes' you all come up here and help me show these depraved wretches the true way and the only way."

This last he screamed at the top of his lungs at the fish nets on the ceiling. What a ham!

The woman sailed right by me, smelling like she'd found her clothes in someone's attic. All the time she was staring at PJ like she had found some Saint Michael and kept on shouting how he'd be saved and all.

"Brother," she said, when she had gone up one step nearer the Lord, "we who have heard the Word must unite. Together we can show these poor helpless sinners the way of the Lord. When he calls we must throw away our pride and enter the Dens of Iniquity. Together we must save Mankind."

The other two looked completely lost after their chief had mounted her pulpit. They just sort of grouped themselves around her feet and kept muttering those idiotic "Hallelujahs." You could tell they were afraid the Lord wouldn't like it if they said anything else.

One wise guy looked at the littlest one and yelled, "Hey, lady, what have you got in that little bucket, Easter eggs?"

She looked like she didn't know whether "Hallelujah" would be the right answer to this one or not, but said it anyway. Of course that was a complete howl. By this time the little woman was really snowed. She didn't see the joke and neither did I. I don't know why, but I felt kind of sorry for her. For some reason she reminded me of my little aunt who used to send me cakes and stuff down at school. Now don't get me wrong, my aunt doesn't wear a bonnet or anything, but she gets that same "I don't understand you but I'd like to" look about her every once in a while.

Mrs. Lord, herself, was now putting on a better act than even PJ had been doing. Everyone got so busy listening to her they forgot about the other two. They must have figured the Lord was on their side again and their "Hallelujahs" got a little stronger.

For a while PJ was enjoying the show with the rest of us. But our Parson wasn't going to stay out of the limelight long. Every time the old dame paused he would insert a solemn "Hallelujah." The poor woman got so moved that she didn't even notice that PJ had to have a laughing fit in between every "Hallelujah." Everyone else did though. And pretty soon the whole bar was bedlam. PJ was right behind her making all these mimicking motions. And as a caricature he was the greatest.

The old gal was playing a perfect straight man to PJ's hamming. He'd never expected any outside help but he sure was

playing it up now that he had it. The worst part of it was, the old girl thought PJ was leveling.

The louder and louder everyone kept laughing the louder the woman would praise the Lord. As I said it was bedlam—that's the only word I can think of—just plain bedlam.

After one completely hysterical outburst from her audience, she turned to PJ for some help in saving these sinners, I guess. But PJ was in the middle of one of his laughing fits and didn't see her soon enough.

Well, I guess I'll never forget the look on her face when she saw PJ laughing. She just stared—I don't know, but I bet Jesus must of looked something like that when He was on the cross. PJ just kept laughing—right in her face. Then she turned away, picked up her skirts and stepped down. It was the most beautiful move I've ever seen. She nodded to the other two and the three of them began to trudge silently toward the door.

Now I've never prided myself of being overly religious or anything, but I had to do something. I couldn't just let them walk out of the place like that. I had to at least talk to them and try to tell them that they had just lucked into a bad place or something. Make them see that it wasn't their fault. Oh, I don't know what I wanted to say, but I had to say something. I just couldn't stand the expressions on those white faces.

PJ saw me jump up and yelled, "Aw let the biddy go, Dave, for Chrissakes. We've got enough entertainment right here. Isn't that right Baby?" and he put his arm around that little witch he had picked up. Then he looked at me again. "What's the matter Kid," he said, "you getting a mushy cardiac or something?"

Colleen, or whatever her name was, grabbed my hand and said, "Davey, Honey, where ya goin'. You gonna give up your Colleen baby for that old crazy woman?"

Everyone started laughing again. This group—they'd laugh at anything. I grabbed away my hand and Colleen started yelling, "Why you no good. . . ." I must of knocked over a chair or something, anyway some other babe started screaming. But I just had to get over to those women. Tables, chairs, people, hands, beer—everything was in my road and their black backs were almost gone. I got to the big one just as she was at the door. "Ma'am," I said, Please wait a minute, please, I want to talk to you." I put out my hand and grabbed her arm. At my touch she whirled around. She

was almost on top of me yet she didn't even see me. Her eyes were fastened on the chaos of the bar.

"Ma'am," I said again. Then she turned and looked at me. We must have stood a minute that way, just staring at each other. I hit a black spot. I couldn't say anything. It was those eyes of hers. Then I felt her whole body tighten and I removed my hand. She turned like she was escaping from something and was gone out of the bar—leaving the door swinging in my face.

I wanted to move but I just stood there. There was only the whine of the door as it quivered back and forth. I guess I must have been in a trance or something—but when I looked up I saw PJ leering and I knew I was alone.

