



Your life should have meaning on the day you die

*In Pat's Tavern on St. Patrick's Day, a cast of 16 players wonders if
a town like Tacoma can help a person figure things out*

A short story by Richard Wiley '67

Pat's Tavern, on 21st Street, not far from the old LaPore's Market, had been the best college drinking establishment in Tacoma, Washington, a decade earlier, but when I worked there it had started its coast into oblivion, with Vivian Flanagan running it and finding people like me to tend bar. Her husband, Pat Flanagan, managed the tavern during its heyday, hiring College of Puget Sound athletes and tough guys like himself, but not many years after the College of Puget Sound became the University of Puget Sound, Pat's Tavern lost its cool and even on weekends it wasn't full. Still, a schooner of beer cost a quarter and I and my fellow bartender, Marsha, often gave beer away to friends on a one-and-a-half-to-one kind of deal. By that I mean we would sometimes lift their schooners from in front of them, top them off under the tap, and put them back down. Marsha wore Coke-bottle glasses with unruly hair falling all over the place, while I kept a copy of *Siddhartha* in the pocket of the army jacket I had taken from my father's closet. It was the spring before the Summer of Love, St. Patrick's Day, and Pat himself was in the corner booth with two other Irishmen, pointing out the photos on the walls.

“That’s Harold Berg above you, Fatty,” Pat said. “He still comes in occasionally. Played semipro after college.”

Fatty was actually thin, with the face of James Cagney. “Harold Berg,” Fatty said. “H-a-r-o-l-d B-e-r-g.”

Earlier they had been playing Irish Spelling Bee, a drinking game they’d invented, and Fatty was too drunk now to know that the game had ended.

“Stop fookin’ spelling everything,” said Paddy, the third man in the booth. So they were Pat, Fatty, and Paddy, three men in their 60s in a bar owned by Pat and otherwise frequented by kids on the verge of hippiedom, who got their beers topped off by Marsha and me.

“Harold Berg was in last night,” I said, bringing the pitcher Pat had ordered for them. Pat himself didn’t drink. Vivian told me that he had once, terrifically, but quit because drinking made the fighting man come out in him.

“Did you give Harold Berg the news about your grandmother?” Fatty asked me, and all three men howled. A few months earlier I had used the excuse of my grandmother’s death to get the weekend off to go to Westport, but my brother came in when I was gone and when Vivian consoled him over our loss he said she’d been dead for a decade. Vivian fired me the following Monday, but soon enough hired me back.

I didn’t mention my grandmother but asked instead, “Aren’t you Harold Berg? H-a-r-o-l-d B-e-r-g?”

That sent Pat and Paddy into roars of drunken laughter, though Pat, of course, was sober. “Look behind you, Dick,” he said. “Viv will fire you again if you don’t start pouring beer.”

“For Christ’s holy sake, is his name really Dick?” asked Paddy. “You’ve hired a boy named after his penis, Pat. No wonder your tavern’s gone downhill.”

Vivian was short and dough-faced and disliked nearly everyone who came into the bar. Raja and Mahmoud, two exchange students from Saudi Arabia, were at the top of the list of those she disliked, but they were regular customers, sitting and drinking the way some Muslims do when they get to America. “Look at them,” Viv said. “Bold as you like and on St. Patrick’s Day, too, just waiting for me to serve them...”

Vivian kept a milkshake container filled with Mogen David wine at the back of the bar by the cash register, and she turned and sipped from it

now. “My own bar,” she said. “I guess I can serve who I want.”

Raja and Mahmoud sat in a booth with some friends of mine: Roy, who’d gone to Westport with me; Cheryl, Roy’s girlfriend; John, recently back in town after graduating from Pomona College in California; and Becky Welles, the daughter of Orson Welles and Rita Hayworth. Becky had a calm and knowing look, more her father’s than her mother’s, and enjoyed coming to Pat’s because we liked her for who she was, and not for her famous parents.

At the bar sat Ralph, an English teacher; Mona, whose husband was doing time at McNeil Island Federal Penitentiary—a much more exotic presence than the daughter of Orson Welles; Bob-the-lawyer, whose wife had left him and who kept trying to get Mona to take him home; and Duke, a philosophy professor. So Pat, Fatty, Paddy, Vivian, Marsha, Raja, Mahmoud, Cheryl and Roy, John-from-Pomona, Becky Welles, Ralph, Mona, Bob-the-lawyer, Duke, and me. Sixteen characters in search of a play, *St. Patrick’s Day*, 1967. I haven’t mentioned yet that I’d dyed my hair green for the occasion, but must mention it now, in light of what Mona said next.

You look good with green hair, Dick.”
Mona came to Pat’s nearly nightly and often took men home. She enjoyed saying *McNeil Island Federal Penitentiary* in a low and husky voice, to those she wanted to take. I thanked her but was too busy to stop and chat. I’d been trying to avoid Mona anyway, since she’d said *McNeil Island Federal Penitentiary* to me about five nights in a row. I hurried off with beer for Raja and Mahmoud and Roy and Cheryl and John and Becky.

“I’d like two burgers when you get a minute, please, Dick,” said Mahmoud. “In fact bring two burgers for everyone at the table.”

Mahmoud was fatter than Fatty and had a lot more money than everyone.

“Cooking’s out tonight,” I told him. “St. Patrick’s Day and all.”

The beer I had brought them was as green as my hair. John-from-Pomona said he’d go get the burgers at Frisko Freeze and bring them back. John had a motorcycle and one night a couple of weekends earlier he and I took it out along South Tacoma Way, stopping at every tavern, and now we were friends for life. As he headed for the door on the hamburger run, I worked my way back past Duke-the-philosophy-professor, who said, “I know you’ve read *On the Road*, Dick, but have you reread it?”

When Marsha heard Duke’s voice she came over fast, though people were demanding beer. “I reread the damned thing,” she said. “And rereading makes it ordinary. About like you are, Duke.”

Marsha and Duke had had a fling a couple of weeks earlier and Duke had said he was moving on. He glared at her like Gertrude probably glared at Ernest, never mind the gender reversal.

Marsha never did much work when Duke was in the bar, and Vivian never did anything but cook and drink Mogen David, so I was busy for the next hour, with both taps open and green beer flowing, and with Bob-the-lawyer trying to offer me his services by writing me a free will. He offered the same thing to Mona, but she was looking the other way. Bob offered someone a free will every night, so it, along with Mona saying *McNeil Island Federal Penitentiary* and Duke extolling the virtues of rereading, were staples at Pat’s, even when it wasn’t St. Patrick’s Day.

Irish music came from a record player Pat had brought in, and Fatty and Paddy kept trying to make people stop talking while they listened to it. “Shut fookin’ up,” was how Paddy put it, standing in their booth so he could be seen.

“Do you mind if John works for a while?” I asked Vivian. “We need someone washing schooners or we won’t have glasses to pour this stuff into in about 10 minutes.”

I’d forgotten that John was out buying two burgers each for everyone at his table, but Viv didn’t know who John was anyway, and when she said she’d pay him 10 bucks at night’s end, I asked Ralph-the-English-teacher if he could be John until John got back. Ralph hated Duke, though, and wouldn’t wash schooners if Duke was going to sit there criticizing him, so Becky came behind the bar and tied an apron over her overalls.

“Never mind rereading,” said Duke when he saw Becky. “How about re-watching, Rebecca? Everyone’s re-watched *Citizen Kane*, but did you ever re-watch *The Third Man*? If you haven’t I’ve got two words for you, *Joseph* and *Cotten*.”

“J-o-s-e-p-h C-o-t-t-o-n!” shouted Fatty. “He was a bloody Irishman!”

“It’s spelt with an ‘e’ not an ‘o,’ ya drunken twit,” said Paddy, and when Duke said, “He was not an Irishman,” Marsha said, “Duke, you kill me.”

“I’ve met Joseph Cotten,” said Becky. “And

you're right, he wasn't Irish, Duke. He was a working-class guy from Virginia. Had a great big crush on my mom."

Becky so rarely mentioned her parents that Pat turned the Irish music down.

"He mightn't have been Irish but he had an Irish heart," said Fatty.

Becky was washing schooners fast, running them into the soapy water and the rinsing tub and placing them on the drying rack. Orson Welles had come to Tacoma once and she'd brought him into Pat's, but that was the week-end of my grandmother's ersatz death and I'd missed him.

"Well, he's what makes *The Third Man*," said Duke.

"What makes *The Third Man* is the story and screenplay, both by Graham Greene," said Ralph. "Becky's dad didn't direct it, so why be such a sycophant, Duke?"

"He did direct it! *Citizen Kane*, *The Third Man*, and *The Magnificent Ambersons*. What a legacy! And you're the sicko-phat, Ralph."

You're right on two, but Carol Reed directed *The Third Man*, Duke," said Becky.

"Wouldn't you know it. A woman!" said Paddy. "Women direct the whole fookin' world."

"Carol Reed is Donna Reed's sister," said Fatty. "And if anyone says Donna Reed isn't Irish, I'll meet them outside right now."

"Sorry to say, Carol Reed is a man, Fatty," Ralph said.

All three Irishmen doffed invisible hats in honor of Carol Reed's Irishness, or Donna Reed's, maybe; then Pat asked Marsha to bring them more beer.

"Thanks a lot for helping," I told Becky. "And thanks for the story. I'm still sorry I missed your dad."

"It was you I brought him in here to meet, Dick," she said.

Vivian *had* been there the afternoon Becky brought her father in, and so had my brother, and when Viv gave him her condolences over the death of our grandmother, Orson Welles did, too. It was my brother's greatest thrill since seeing Louis Armstrong at the field house in 1957. "Orson Welles in Pat's Tavern," said Viv now. "Can you believe it, Pat? We're the watering hole for famous men. Maybe when the two Omars get famous we can put their photos on our wall, too."

The two Omars—Raja and Mahmoud—raised their glasses to Viv, who'd been calling them the two Omars since she saw *Doctor*

Zhivago at the Rialto Theater downtown. For a while Mahmoud corrected her, saying, "It's Mahmoud, Mrs. Flanagan," though Raja understood both the joke and its insult from the start. Now, though, drink fired up the fiery side in Bob-the-lawyer, who swiveled on his stool to point at the men in the corner. "How would you like it if people started calling you the three Conans?"

"The man is talking to you, Pat," said Paddy. "Perhaps he thinks you need a will. And if three Irishmen are sitting in a bar and you call out 'Conan,' you're likely to get one of them. Conan, as it happens, is my given name."

"He's Conan O'Connor from Cork," said Duke, who made silly rhymes when the subject of rereading wore out.

The door kept opening and closing. A group of four cleared some bar stools just as John came back with his sacks full of burgers. Mahmoud got up to pay him for them, and Vivian started calling him Wimpy instead of Omar. Roy and Cheryl got up, too, to dance around in the one clear space.

"I'll Conan-from-Cork you," Paddy told Duke. "Pat, I don't know how you allow the likes of him in here. No wonder Harold Berg stopped coming."

When he said that, Vivian looked at Harold Berg's photo on the wall. "Why I didn't take Orson Welles' picture when he was here, I'll never know," she said, while Pat went over to Roy and Cheryl, put a hand on each of them, led them back to the booth, then got some plates, took the bag of burgers from John and laid them out, only one burger each instead of two like Mahmoud had ordered. He carried the burgers to Raja and Mahmoud and Roy and Cheryl, gave one to John, who now sat at the bar, then got five more plates for the five remaining burgers, delivering them to Duke and Mona, Ralph, and the two Irishmen in the corner. Viv and Marsha, Becky, Bob-the-lawyer, Pat himself, and I got no burgers at all.

"Now cook up some fries, Viv," Pat said. "These burgers are on Omar and the fries are on us."

Pat truly believed that Mahmoud's name was Omar, and Mahmoud tipped an invisible hat at him. Ten burgers delivered, then, and four men tipping invisible hats, and the story's not nearly to its end.

No one wanted Vivian to make the french fries since she used old oil and left them in too long, so I got the fries

from the freezer and began to cook them myself. The tensions in the bar, between Duke and everyone, between Vivian and the two Omars, and between the Irishmen and Bob-the-lawyer, seemed to dissipate by general consensus since St. Patrick's Day was for the exhibition of good cheer. As I cooked, sweating green sweat out of my hair, I heard Becky tell John that Vivian had offered to pay him 10 dollars and also saw that every schooner was clean again and Becky had taken off her apron. But instead of returning to the booth she took a stool next to Duke, available because no one else wanted to sit with him. John put the apron on and stood behind the bar with Marsha, while Marsha pretended an interest in Bob, since Bob had written her will the night before.

"I think I'll stay in Tacoma after I graduate," said Becky. "There's nothing more for me in L.A., and there's something about this place. Tacoma, Washington—who'd have thought it?"

She was talking to me, although I was facing the fry basket. Bob was on her left now, with Mona on the other side of him, and when Ralph got up to go to the men's room Paddy took his place. Becky would graduate in June, when the Summer of Love got started.

"There's something about every place, not just Tacoma, Becky," Duke told her. "And there's really something about great books, if people ever bothered to reread them."

I could feel warmth coming toward me from two directions, from the crazily cooking fries and from Becky.

"What do you suppose it is about Tacoma that would keep Becky here?" asked Mona. She was asking Duke, but Bob was ready with an answer. "Becky's not in probate in Tacoma," he said. "Orson's not the judge, and Rita's not the jury."

I thought that was a terrific answer, but Paddy said, "A person can't be in probate. What law school did you go to, ya twit?"

"He went to the *will* law school," said Fatty from behind him. "Whenever he looks at Mona he thinks, 'I will if you will,' but she won't have anything to do with him!"

He fell into Pat, roaring at his own joke, while Pat pressed the tips of his fingers together like a spider doing push-ups on a mirror.

"Drunkenness will get you nowhere, Bob," he said. "Take it from me, the sooner you get over her the better."

No one but Becky seemed to notice Pat's mid-sentence shift from his own past drunkenness to Bob's continued heartache over his wife.

Becky put her arm on Bob's shoulder and leaned over to kiss him on the ear.

"She was a lousy wife anyway," Bob said. "As bad a wife as Mona's husband was a husband."

"I was asking why Duke thought Becky was drawn to Tacoma," said Mona. "I am drawn to it because he is in *McNeil Island Federal Penitentiary*, bad husband or not."

Duke's ears perked up. "Maybe Tacoma sets Becky free," he said.

"Exactly," said Roy and Cheryl in unison. They were out of the booth again, heading over to Roy's place, and were leaning against each other, wanting to say their goodbyes in unison, as well.

When the fries were ready the burgers were gone, so Marsha collected the plates, wiped bits of meat and bread off of them, and loaded them up with fries. Vivian, meanwhile, retreated to the storeroom to refill her Mogen David milkshake cup, angry with Pat for his comment about wives and angry with me for taking over as fry cook.

When Ralph came out of the men's room he sat with Raja and Mahmoud, who were alone in their booth after Roy and Cheryl's departure and had been quietly speaking Arabic. Ralph hadn't finished his burger but Marsha had thrown it out anyway, so to make up for it she gave him extra fries then sat at the booth with him.

"Becky's mother was known as 'The Love Goddess' back in the '40s," said Duke. His eyes were on Marsha in the mirror.

Dick, when my dad came in and met your brother that day I got jealous," said Becky. She had pushed her plate of fries across the bar so I could share them. Duke, by then, having heard the notorious *McNeil Island* line, had gone to stand behind Mona.

"Nothing to be jealous of, Becky," I said.

I wanted a beer, would have poured myself one had Pat not been watching me, his music turned down so low that no one could hear it but him. Pat had rheumy eyes, a wife in the storeroom, his life mostly behind him.

"Here's the thing about Tacoma," said Becky. "It comes out to meet me, it goes half way... Does it make sense to you, Dick, that a place could feel so welcoming to me?"

Mona stood off her stool, took a quick look at Bob, then went out into the evening with Duke. Bob sat there nodding as I topped off his beer. Pat's eyes were on me but he was gazing somewhere else.

"Maybe it's only Pat's Tavern that gives you

that feeling, Becky?" said Marsha, holding onto Ralph now.

"Maybe," said Becky. "But I wonder if a town could actually replace people. Do any of you think that a specific geography can act as a hedge against the unabated loneliness of a human heart, whether mine or anyone else's?"

Those were the days when a person could say "the unabated loneliness of a human heart" aloud in a bar.

Becky was asking Marsha and me, but it was Raja and Mahmoud who stopped speaking Arabic, stood out of their booth, and took her question to heart.

"You are talking about Mecca," said Raja. "Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem, one-two-three!" He still had his beer in his hands and was swaying back and forth.

"Listen to what the two Omars are telling you, Becky, dear," said Mahmoud. "Your life should have meaning on the day you die! It is *place* one must put one's trust in. *Place* is life's key!"

Mahmoud had tears in his voice but his eyes were dry. Tears were in Pat's eyes, though, as he stood to find his wallet so he could give John the 10 bucks Vivian had promised him. Pat didn't miss much of anything.

Marsha said she would stay and close the bar, since I had done most of the work. Raja and Mahmoud pretended they were going to their apartment, though in fact they were heading somewhere else, in pursuit of the women who would no longer be available to them once they went back to Saudi Arabia. Bob stayed on his stool until Pat asked him to help carry Paddy and Fatty to Pat's car.

That left Becky, John, Marsha, and me, with Vivian in the storeroom, no doubt fast asleep.

Whose story was this, then? It wasn't John's, who went to law school the following fall, and it wasn't Marsha's or Duke's, who drifted away in the days and weeks that followed. I thought at the time that it was my story, of course, but my life took turns after that, that I could not have imagined during my year of working at Pat's. Escape from the war in Vietnam, searching, writing, marriage and children, failure and success...

Was it Becky's story, then, told by someone who knew her well but briefly, and remembered the adage of the two Omars when recently reading her obituary?

Rebecca Welles Manning, 59, passed away peacefully October 17, 2004, at home in Tacoma, Wash. Rebecca is survived by her loving husband,

Guy; son Marc; stepchildren Kristine, Michael, Brandi; sisters Yasmin, Christopher, Beatrice; eight grandchildren; and many other family and longtime friends.

Sixteen people, the very number of those who played in Pat's Tavern on that cold St. Patrick's night. Sixteen lives branched out back then, and 16 more coming into my consciousness now, all these years later in Becky's obituary.

Or maybe this was Tacoma's story. Maybe Becky knew that place was the secret of not feeling terrorized by everything. ■

Editor's postscript: Pat's is still a tavern, still in the same spot on 21st Street, but it's called Magoo's now. One evening Assistant Editor Cathy Tollefson and I decided to punch out a little early and head over to Magoo's to get some ideas for illustrating Richard Wiley's wonderful story, the one you just read. I'd never set foot in Magoo's; Cath remembers hanging out there as a student in the '80s and was interested to see what had changed. The answer was, not much. It still had a nice pub feel. The walls were still painted green. It still had a lot of UPS-related photos on the wall. The booths along the wall were gone, replaced by pub-style tables and stools. We sat down at one of the tables and ordered a pitcher of a locally brewed IPA. No sooner had we clinked our glasses than a dapper little man dressed in a greenish serge suit and string tie walked in off the street, caught my eye, and made a beeline for our table. He reached into his vest pocket, smiling all the while, and pulled out a paper bar coaster that was stamped on the back, in green, with the word "Leprechaun." He placed it on the table and tapped it with one finger. "That's me," he said. "I'm a professional leprechaun."

Cathy and I looked at each other. We didn't say anything, but she must have been thinking, as I was, "OK, so we're here to get ideas for a story that takes place in this bar on a St. Patrick's Day, and a guy we've never met comes in and walks right up to us and introduces himself as a leprechaun."

I looked around the room. At that moment by my count there were 16 people in there, counting us. The leprechaun—Bill, his name was—told us he'd attended Puget Sound for a while in the late '40s and early '50s, and later had helped install the first computers used for payroll at the college. Then he shook our hands simultaneously, bowed a shallow bow, and took his leave.

— Chuck Luce