

Please Come to Boston? (Memoir)

by Rick Rofihe

I've been invited to speak at Emerson College in Boston—it will be the summer of 2013, and I'll be speaking on running an online literary magazine; in this case, my own, Anderbo.com.

I lived in Boston on-and-off during 1976-77-78; three memories:

1. When I got my own apartment there, I asked the woman I had been staying with [see note below] what she would suggest I do next, and she said I should shop for dishes, and for tableware—forks, knives and spoons.
2. I went to downtown Boston. While shopping somewhere there I encountered a woman who saw me helplessly trying to make choices; it turned out that her husband was the chef at a very good hotel restaurant, the Ritz-something, so I took her suggestions: functional-but-distinctive stainless-steel forks, knives and spoons, and some plain, mostly off-white, dinnerware, Cordon Rouge (Red Ribbon—second prize?).
3. Before buying the dishes and all, I'd wandered into an FAO Schwarz toy store on Newbury Street where a young boy was playing something on a toy piano while another boy his age looked on. Nearby was a woman I took to be the piano-player's mother. The song being played was somewhat familiar to me, and I asked the boy just what it was, and he said he wasn't exactly sure; his friend wasn't quite certain either. Then the mother of the young pianist spoke from the next aisle: "It's the theme from 'The Young and the Restless.'"

* * *

[note] The woman I'd been staying with in Boston would sometimes (though not frequently) break into song. That gave me an idea in 1976 to write a short story, my first, which I finished in 1982 and sold to The New Yorker in 1988. Here it is:

Boys Who Do the Bop
by Rick Rofihe

Learning to type? Not easy, right?

It is work which gives flavor to life.
It is work which gives flavor to life.
It is work which gives flavor to life.

It can't be easy, with the letters presented to you shuffled up the way they are. Few typing instructors will concede that there's any disarray, but at least half the instruction books I've seen feature practice sentences that try to play up the learner's sense of purpose and foster a feeling of order where there's apparently none.

Enid is in her room putting on makeup. Why do anything to those delicate features? "Because it takes up time," she would say if asked.

Enid closes her bedroom door when she changes her clothes but leaves it ajar when she's doing her face; is she hoping some small talk might reach her dainty ears? If that's so, and if I am to oblige, I have to keep one eye on the keyboard, one eye on that door. Have I been much too quiet already? It must be so, for she's starting to sing.

*I've been across this country clear
from Bangor, Maine, to Frisco, where
I turned around,
feet on the ground,
and headed back on home somehow*

That's a good song; why would I want to interrupt it? Besides, typing requires concentrated practice.

Do the thing and you have still the power; but they
who do not the thing have not the power.

Soon she says, "Oh you want more floor show?"

*When Lady Luck would treat me right,
I'd hit some town on a Saturday night,
and rule of thumb
where I come from
is party time is now. I'm—*

She stops making up in her oval dresser mirror and comes out to look in the full-length one.

"These pants are too . . . what is the word, Noonie? Or cats got tongue?"

I like Enid, and I like just about anything Enid says to me, and I'd just as soon hang around here with her and her cats as just about anything, maybe anything. Now, to talk or to type?

If you would not be forgotten, as soon as you are
dead and rotten, either write things worth reading or

"Unable to wear THESE pants at THIS time," she says, and walks back into her room and closes the door.

This is the longest I've stayed at Enid's, six weeks now. The sofa here is certainly comfortable; I prefer it to the bed in the spare room, to my bed back home, maybe any bed anywhere. Now the door is ajar again.

*I'm a girl who digs a chance
to get out on that floor and dance*

Her room, if you enter, is just a neat, compartmentalized, one-windowed box with sections for books, for yard goods, for notebooks, for keepsakes— but the first thing you notice is the background odor, which is of perfume mixed with stale cigarette

smoke. That doesn't sound inviting, but you might not turn and run.

*I've danced in the east,
I've danced in the west,
and the thing that I like best is*

Enid once told me she was going to be a singer—that was when one of her husband's friends, who instead became a doctor, was going to be a songwriter. Do I think Enid might get married again? Any such new husband would certainly want the sofa cleared, or perhaps a new, less comfortable sofa, and, simultaneously, the cats declawed. That would all be too bad, but what do I have to do with it outside of being a worrier about Enid? Now the bedroom door is opening wide.

*BOYS who do the BOP,
MAN, they never STOP.
Give 'em cut time
and, man, they're flying,
those BOYS who do the BOP*

Enid, wearing different pants, walks from her room toward the bathroom.

*those BOYS—Boys! Boys! Boys!
who DO—do do do do do do
the BOP—Boys who bop!*

I'm no help, either. On Tuesday, after I came back and told her about a girl I met over at the Peabody, Enid stopped wearing a bra. She set up the ironing board right in front of where I was typing and started ironing with her shirt mostly open, so what did I do but ask how come she usually wears a bra. She said something about gravity and time, then left the room, and when she came back she'd buttoned her shirt nearly up to her neck.

"Hullo, anybody home?" Enid, now through with bedroom and bathroom, says to me, then turns her attention to one of the cats. "What, not enough litter for a cute thing to scratch? We call Cat Litter King, o.k.?" She picks up the cat and brings its face to hers as she sits by the phone and dials the King's message machine. "Greetings! Enid and cats on Comm Ave. wouldn't mind a royal visit.

We want a case of cat food that says 'Cat Food.' Not without labels, not cat-and-dog food, and not labeled 'Dog Food' that you say is cat food. One hundred pounds of litter in ten-pound bags, not two fifties—what do you think we are? We're home late tonight and all tomorrow night. *Sois prudent*, Your Highness." What an entertainer! Enid is no snob!

Enid puts down the phone and the cat, and is lost to me for a few minutes. I think she is thinking about the past, which is something I've pretty well cultivated out of myself, thinking about the past. As I turn off the typewriter, Enid looks over at me and says, "Let's go here, let's go there! That's the thing to do, right?"

There was nothing like the Cat Litter King where I came from; there were also things in Boston I couldn't get used to. Just before I first visited Enid, her small white cat, the one she told me would sleep on her neck, got stolen from out front by the junkies down the block. "Let's go get it back?" a friend of hers had mocked my suggestion. "Noonie, you don't go confronting addicts!" So as I went up and down Commonwealth Avenue putting up Lost Cat signs I had to fill my mind with other things, like memorizing the alphabetically ordered cross streets—Arlington, Exeter, Fairfax or Fairfield, Gloucester; that's all I remember now, and Exeter Street's easy, because that's where the Exeter Street Theatre was.

It was only a couple of days later that Enid started talking about my getting some kind of job, though following right up with how after she moved to Boston she'd go through the Help Wanted's, circle all the interesting ones, fold the newspaper neatly on top of her recycling pile, and then go out to a museum or two. Once Enid did get me something part time at Faneuil Hall Marketplace. She was working near there then, so a lot of times we got to have lunch together, and I even started thinking maybe that's why she got me the job. If it was a nice day and I got off early, I would go back to her place and sleep on the sofa in the sun with the cats. On days I wasn't working, I would walk and walk—one day I did the whole Freedom

Trail—or just turn to my Old List, which was some basic things that had looked at first to me impossible to do but that just about everybody seemed able to do, like skipping rope, riding a bike, driving a car (or, as I updated the list, if you learned on an automatic, then driving a standard), swimming, and, of course, typing. (I don't have a New List but do keep an Auxiliary one, which is for not-impossible-looking things, like certain dances.)

Enid and I set out walking and, by the Charles River, Enid lights up a cigarette and tells me how her mother, who smokes, too, waits until everybody at their house has gone to bed and then goes outside on the patio and breathes out, all the way, emptying her lungs—push push push—completely, then breathes in a full load of fresh air, and then forces every bit out again, convinced that she's cleaning that day's smoking out of her lungs. I laugh at that, really laugh, and after a two-second delay Enid laughs, too.

I've never actually met Enid's mother, but I talked to her on the phone once when she called and Enid was out. She knew who I was and kept calling me by my first name, again and again, with the most luxurious voice. Enid has every right to sound like that but doesn't. Enid's mother wanted, I think, to ask me how Enid *really* was, and I wasn't so sure of myself that I said anything that would make her worry, but I didn't try to make her not worry, either.

Here, there; and from the Cambridge side of the Charles, up by MIT, Enid points out the narrow eastern face of the new Hancock building and tells me that it reflects the sunrise in a long vertical line, and that the western end does the same at sunset. (You've got to admire the Hancock, though it's tall and modern, and modern with problems. Try looking at it from the south when you're way down on Tremont, or from the north, from beside the old Hancock, going right up close.) “I liked it in plywood and I like it now—windows and all, as long as nobody gets hurt,” Enid says, while reaching one hand over her head, tracing a halo's shape with her finger, around and around.

It isn't late when we get back to her place, but Enid's tired, and does have to get up early to move her car for Friday street-cleaning before going to work, so right away she puts on that white cotton nightdress of hers and gets into bed. I feel bad that we've developed any sort of routine at all, Enid and I, because soon I'm probably going to be someplace else, and, to take just one example, who's going to read from her book, that scrapbook of stories about sleep she's put together in her more-than thirty-one years? Every evening I've been reading something from it to her after she gets into bed. It's a great book—so good that I've had all three hundred and sixty-six oversize pages photocopied to take with me when I go. Tonight's story was taken from the autobiography of Benjamin Franklin:

. . . I had walked again up the street, which by this time had many clean-dressed people in it, who were all walking the same way. I joined them, and thereby was led into the great meeting-house of the Quakers near the market. I sat down among them, and, after looking round awhile and hearing nothing said, being very drowsy thro' labor and want of rest the preceding night, I fell fast asleep, and continued so till the meeting broke up, when one was kind enough to rouse me. This was, therefore, the first house I was in, or slept in, in Philadelphia.

Philadelphia? I only have to hear a city's name and I start to get ideas. Actually, I'd kind of made up my mind to try New York.

"Enid?"

"What, Noo?"

"Are there any more words to the song?"

"There's more I can't remember right now. I think I'm asleep."

Before I leave this time I'm going to get those Bop lyrics on paper; otherwise I'll have to write to wherever she is, and what if she has a new last name?

"Is it o.k. if I stay up and type?"

"S'all right. I like a little background noise when I dream."

(Enid really doesn't mind it when I stay up late and type.)

CURB SERVICE

In the small cities of South America one does not have to send to the store for a container of milk.

The milkman walks through the streets with his supply, stopping at each door or window, where the customer may see for herself that it is fresh. And how can she doubt it when his supply is kept fresh in the cow that accompanies him?

It was only ten-thirty and I still wasn't sleepy, so I started looking through the cupboards for something to eat. Next to three boxes of Wheatena and behind the saltines was an open bag of Pepperidge Farm Tahiti cookies. There were only two cookies in the bag, and since I hate to eat the last of anything when there's someone else who might come snacking, I took just one cookie. Then, maybe because I was alone and it seemed so quiet, I got out a pen and wrote in ink on the bag, "Contains One Only—No Good if You're Hungry." I put the bag back on the shelf, went and stretched out on the sofa, and thought some more about Benjamin Franklin, and then Thomas Jefferson, and then John Hancock, and then whether or not I'd kissed Enid good night. I had, but it was the kind of kiss you can't expect to go far, a kiss without plans.

So all that was a Thursday night. Then Friday, then Saturday, then Sunday; then Monday I left for New York, and I haven't seen Enid since. I did leave her my P.O. box address from back home, because I wasn't sure where I'd end up, and my cousin who works at the post office is good about forwarding things. Using that system, I've received three communications from Enid, three in five years:

1. In a puffy envelope mailed not long after I left Boston was the empty Pepperidge Farm cookie bag, with an “N” added to my note; i.e., “Contains NOne Only—No Good if You're Hungry.”

2. Several months after that I received a postcard showing the lobby of a hotel in a place like Tahiti, and there, among other words, was “honeymoon”—not as in “Hoyle Up-to-Date,” not honeymoon bridge. (Enid once told me that her mother used to tell her, “You might as well be nice.” Even with that I couldn't decide whether or not to send a wedding present, which is to say I didn't.)

3. Then nothing for over four years until this menu, here in my hand, reached me earlier today. No message, but each dish and price printed in Enid's hand, along with the restaurant's name, and its address, three thousand miles away. I looked at the menu for a long time, and did think of writing something on it like “Menu Only—No Good if You're Hungry” and sending it back, but then thought better of it. (Another thing I'd been cultivating was thinking better of things.)

As for what went the other way, once in a while I'd sent her funny newspaper clippings and stuff, but every time I wrote a real letter I knew it was a mistake the minute I dropped it into the big blue box. And telephones? You can't get them to work right.

That's still a great song, that Bop one. It's a good thing I wrote down the words before leaving, but just getting lyrics on paper is not really how such things should be done. The way to make a song yours is by singing it—right? Some how-to-do book must say that. I gave my typing one away, because learning was so hard for me I began to feel that if I ever got good at it it would be while getting less good at something else.

Doing all right in New York, with all my books in one place for the first time in fourteen years, including two big identical old Random House dictionaries. I keep one at each end of my apartment so there's no lugging around. I turn to them often. “Menu” comes from the French for “detailed list,” “detailed” as in “small and

detailed," while "snob" has no accepted etymological origin—though I've heard of Latin teachers who like to say it's short for "Sine NOBilitate", "without nobility." But Enid was no snob!

Enid's sofa was comfortable, yes, but on that Thursday night there was some noise from the street, a car radio playing loud, I think, so I moved my blankets into the spare room in back, which shared a wall with Enid's and was its mirror image. Unfortunately, the bed there was much too soft, and I still couldn't sleep. I started wondering if there was any part of a moon out that night, and if the long narrow ends of the Hancock ever reflect moonlight in a line—if not when the moon is large but pale on the rise, then maybe when it's small and bright in the sky. A little while later I heard Enid get up, use the bathroom, and, I thought, go back to bed.

A few more minutes passed and then, from outside the spare-room window, came a sound that should have made me think of death, or birth, but even before I got up to look I knew what it was: Enid, expelling a day's intake from her almost thirty-two-year-old lungs, cleansing them well with the damp, night-morning air.

