

## **Zen and the Art of Route 1**

Thoughts on moving back to Milltown

**Rt. 1 in front of Roosevelt Park, Wednesday Evening:** I am almost grateful for the rain and traffic because without it I feel that I would drift off into a trance, falling prey to the neon lights and the orange glow of the brake lights, sliding into that comfortable zone somewhere between memory and expectation. WFAN drones on in the background, grey noise that wraps the Saturn in a cocoon. There are so many things that I could be thinking about, but it is easy to lose myself in the talk about the Giants. I don't think that I want them to fire Fassel. I'm not sure why I like him. Maybe it is something about his son that he gave up for adoption, but that is no way to run a football team. From nowhere, like the sudden and unexpected appearance of a comet, it occurs to me that she asked me to leave more than 10 months ago and I have done little about it.

**Rt. 1 North-Crossing the Raritan, Morning:** The sun is lost in an early fog and I know how it feels. I am moving back to Milltown and I am not sure what to think about that. The marriage ended after two years, almost entirely my fault and now I am going back to the place where I grew up. Dionne Warwick's "Anyone Who Had a Heart" comes on the radio and I come to the startling revelation that I am the bad guy in everyone of her songs. When did I stop being me and become a song villain? But even so, I can't help singing along with her. I am all over the background vocals, punctuated by the *so* and *to* throughout the song. It is almost like confession. The woman in the car next to me is not getting the whole Dionne thing and I can tell by the look on her face

she thinks something may be medically wrong with me. I roll down my window and say, “It is OK. I’m a song villain.”

**Rt. 1- Dunkin Donuts, Edison, Later that Morning:** It’s decaf. I can tell. I didn’t want decaf. I wanted the full bottle-rocket blast of caffeine, but the coffee roll is solid and that brings some pleasure to the commute. I immediately go into the juggling routine of cigarette, coffee, and coffee roll. All I need is for the phone to ring and I’d turn into a circus act. With the impending move, I’ve been thinking a lot about Milltown lately and random thoughts pop into my head, surprising and meteor-like. This morning while shaving I thought about the Little League field. I played right field for the Milltown Fire Department Tigers. I liked to stand out there and kick the tops off the dandelions, spreading seeds all over the field—I seminanted a whole generation of weeds. Despite me being in right field, the Tigers made it to the championship series against the Rescue Squad Cardinals. In the final game I was in my customary kingdom watching the light shift and play off the tops of the trees with the coming of evening. The Cardinals rallied and in the bottom of the last inning put the winning base runner on. The next batter hit a ball into right field. I momentarily woke from my dream world only to have the ball roll through my legs to the fence. They scored the winning run and took the championship. I jogged in slowly, kicking every dandelion. The memory touches me somehow like a life defining grad school short story. I could almost listen to Springsteen now, but that would be too funny. I opt for punk instead and slide the Bouncing Souls into the CD player and begin my little car dance. I light another cigarette and the juggling act continues. I wonder how long I’m not going to think about my real problems.

**Rt. 1 South-Sitting in Traffic in front of the Ford Plant:** I know that by moving back to Milltown, I am challenging the “Can’t Go Home Again” theory. Things have

changed there, that is unavoidable-the 4<sup>th</sup> of July beer trucks are gone, farmer's fields and woods have disappeared under developer's plans and I am no longer the twelve year old running away from Uga Booga on Mischief Night. The night before Halloween divided us into two schools of thought: those who stayed at home "guarding" the house by sitting on the front porch with a garden hose and those who went out armed with shaving cream, toilet paper, eggs and dried corn to throw at people's metal doors. The gathering of corn was adventure to itself, sneaking through the fields at Rutgers under the eyes of the guards and almost always involved being seen and running away through the dried corn stalks. Those who went out on Mischief Night ran the risk of Uga Booga whose description varied but usually fell somewhere between Boo Radley and Charles Manson. One night we were gathered in front of my cousin's house assembling the toilet paper and shaving cream when a cry came from the side of the house, "UGA, UGA!" Kids scattered in all directions, corn spilled out of the five gallon buckets onto Harrison Avenue and my cousin Jim and I stood frozen. He grabbed my arm and pulled me to the ground where we crawled under his parents' Granada. Uga came into the empty street and screamed, "I am Uga Booga and this is my night!" All we saw were his work boots, but they told us nothing about his identity because everyone in Milltown wore work boots. We stayed under the car for what seemed like hours until the night grew silent punctuated only by our breathing. When we finally climbed out, I decided that I would go home, turn on the garden hose and guard the house. I was a different person then, but I am still entrapped by the same fears: the fear of the unknown which is where I have placed myself, the fear of being caught and the chilled hard feeling that Uga will come for me in the middle of the night.

**Rt. 1- The morning commute, Rutgers:** The weather has turned decidedly colder and panzer gray clouds heavy with rain move in from the west. The morning light

is muted and falls like a lace tablecloth on the fields and cows outside of Cook College. I can tell that it will be a day that my feelings will be dictated by light and weather and that feeling moving through with the storm front is guilt. My therapist-if I was still seeing him-would tell me that this is normal, part of the grieving process, the end of things. It will pass. He leaves one thing out of the equation. I grew up Catholic and wear guilt like a tattoo. I went to Our Lady of Lourdes grammar school and I still hum songs from the May Crowning. My aunt made the May crowns from the flowering cherry tree in her backyard. As an altar boy I once served 37 funerals in a row, almost all of them at 9 am-the same time as math class. I still have problems figuring out percent and fractions, but I can recite the Latin Rite of the Dead. I was obsessed with the lives of saints, drawn to martyrs: Catherine on the wheel, Laurence turning slowly on the spit and my favorite, the arrow-filled Sebastian-people of conviction and certainty of purpose. And I can barely decide whether to leave the car in fourth gear or to shift up to fifth.

**Evening-Merging on to RT 1 south from the Parkway:** I have an eye infection and the ointment from the doctor blurs my vision. The comedy is not lost on me: man who had problem seeing his path in life is afflicted with an eye disease-funny like the story of Job is funny or like *Moby Dick* and peg-legged Ahab. I slowly merge into the steady line of cars with NY plates, shoppers shuttling between the two malls. I took my eye ointment prescription to Milltown Pharmacy instead of one of the large chain stores. And as I handed over my prescription, I realized that these people have no idea about my connection to this place, the boxes of Stover's Chocolates, the packs of Charms' Candy and the slight menthol smell of cough drops lingering in the aisles. The pharmacy was originally owned by my father's uncle Lou, a man who would turn his hearing aid off when he had too much of a conversation. My father would take me down

to the pharmacy to buy a pack of Lucky Strikes and stand smoking around the drug counter with Uncle Lou, Cousin Al and Dick while I wandered through the aisles. When he was younger, he worked the soda fountain and I try to picture him putting together a banana spilt and what the counter used to look like when the pharmacist sticks his head out from the back. "I have a Jimmy Lukach on file here. Is that you?" Jimmy? Yeah, that's me. It's been a long time since I've been here.

**Exiting Rt. 1, Turning into Milltown:** It is one of those rare afternoons when I have silence in the car-no radio, no music, only my thoughts bouncing around the car like a hard rubber ball. Dave had a party on Saturday and everyone I grew up with was there: Bob, Mitch, Steve, my cousin Jim and Jacqui. I have tested their limits of friendship with the way I handled the disintegration of my marriage. But there is too much history and biography between us for me to let it all slip away. There was something about standing around in Dave's basement that conjured up the old days, a sweet mixture of memory and feeling. Images slid in and out of my mind, postcards from the past, binding me to all those people in the basement: jello wrestling, funerals, Fourth of July, and road trips. I will make it up to them. They are Milltown. They are the reason for the way I feel about this place, the sense of connection and the feeling of home. I end my self-imposed silence with a punk compilation and I start to bounce in my seat, trying to catch up with my thoughts and as I pass into Milltown there is a sign that says, *Welcome to Milltown. A Friendly Community.*

