

ANALYSIS

“Over the River and through the Wood” (1934)



John O'Hara

(1905-1970)

The title is from an old song about going to Grandmother's house for Thanksgiving, evoking traditional family values. The theme is loss of traditional values in the modern world as illustrated by the disrespect of the younger generation for older people, a trend since the 1920s epitomized by the counterculture of the 1960s. The representative older person is named *Win*-field, ironically, since he ends a loser.

Mr. Winfield is to accompany his granddaughter Sheila to her parents' house for the holiday. When she arrives in an open car to pick him up, Sheila is accompanied by two unannounced girlfriends. Had she been respectful enough to inform her grandfather beforehand, he would have had time to make other arrangements. As it is, "he was going to have to sit on the strapontin [little side seat], or else sit outside with Robert" the chauffeur. He had no raccoon coat like Robert, which would subordinate him to the black chauffeur. "So it was sit outside and freeze or sit on the little seat inside." Sitting on the little seat reduces him to the status of a child. "Apparently it made no difference to Sheila."

Sheila is preoccupied being in a hurry. Despite her insensitivity, Mr. Winfield admires her for her social and navigational skills, multi-tasking their way "out of the city in no time." In the modern City, he does not see his family anymore except once a year on Thanksgiving. The City divides families and polarizes genders and generations. They travel into the Countryside toward the pastoral values of home and family. Mr. Winfield also admires Sheila's friend Miss Farnsworth, even though she is into herself and he wonders whether she really likes anyone. Needing warmth, he admires her ability to be cold: "You could get away with it, too, if you were as attractive as Miss Farnsworth." The weather gets colder and so do the girls toward Mr. Winfield. They pull over in a town and Sheila embarrasses him in front of the girls by asking him if he doesn't need a rest stop. "He understood then that his daughter had told Sheila to stop here: obediently and with no dignity he got out."

When he returns to the car Miss Farnsworth stares at him "almost as though she were making a point of not helping him." At the same time he wants no help because he does not want to feel old, though he is only 65, the retirement age. Most people who survived to that age were not as fit as most people of that age today and they did not live as long. The girls smoke and then open windows, causing a "terrible draught" on Mr. Winfield. Finally asked to close a window, he tries but "his hands were so cold there was no

strength in them.” He feels even more ashamed when upon their arrival at the house in Lenox, he gets out of the car, his knees buckle and he falls to the ground. The girls are afraid his daughter, Sheila’s mother, will blame them for his fall, but “If they only knew....” Mr. Winfield knows that, on the contrary, his daughter would be most likely to blame him, just as she blames him for a moral fall in relation to her mother. The season is Fall and Mr. Winfield has one fall after another.

When he startles Ula the maid she exclaims “Ugh”--much the way his family feels about him. His daughter is named Mary Day, ironically, since she does not make it a merry day for him. They “went through the travesty of a kiss that both knew so well.” She is vexed with him rather than sympathetic: “Father! You’re freezing!” In another sense she is the cold one, condescending when she offers him a non-alcoholic drink: “You’re on the wagon, aren’t you?” She tells him he will have to share a bathroom with one of the girls, setting up another mortifying fall.

Up in his old room he becomes nostalgic, recalling when he owned this house, until Mary’s husband bought it from him 15 years ago. He had lost a lot of money, fell behind in taxes and, having fallen from her graces, was excluded by his wife from her will. Mary’s husband explained to him that “she thinks you weren’t very nice to Mrs. Winfield” so that now, Mary would not invite him to live with them. Mr. Winfield felt compelled to sell them his house. Now he has lost everything except a tattered shred of dignity. His thoughts reveal that he had fallen in love with a woman named Enid Walter, who gave up on him and moved back to London “because he didn’t have the guts to divorce his wife, and the reason he wouldn’t divorce his wife was that he wanted to ‘protect’ Mary, and Mary’s standing, and Mary’s husband’s standing, and Mary’s little daughter’s standing; and now he was ‘protecting’ them all over again, by selling his house so that he would not become a family charge—protecting the very same people from the embarrassment of a poor relation.” He had sacrificed his own happiness.

Ula the maid brings *two* cups with hot cocoa on a tray, forgetting that Mr. Winfield is occupying the room alone. Through the doorway he sees Sheila assigning Miss Farnsworth to the room next to his and telling her, “Remember what I told you, Farnie.” He can only wonder what she might have said about him, influenced by her mother’s image of him as an adulterer. After drinking a cup of hot cocoa he feels better. He is warmed and surrenders again: “Mary was right; it was better than a drink.” Yielding to her on that subject is consistent with his lifelong pattern of giving up what he wants and accommodating others. In this instance also Mary is probably right. He is beginning to worry about the effects of aging. This state of mind prepares for the impact upon him of Miss Farnsworth’s outburst.

Generously, he decides to offer a cup of cocoa to Miss Farnsworth. “He admired that girl. She had spunk.... That girl would make up her mind about a man or a fortune or a career, and by God she would attain whatever it was...which in a hard girl like this one would take nothing from her charm.” Winfield finds her interesting and admires her for the spunk he has always lacked himself. Besides, “it would be just plain nice of him, as a former master of this house, to invite her to have a cup of cocoa with him.” Finally, for the first time in the story, he is going to assert himself.

Rather than knocking on her door in the hall where he might be seen and misunderstood, ironically, he goes into the shared bathroom and taps on the door to her room. The innocence of his intent is connoted by the cocoa he is bringing instead of a drink. The reply of Miss Farnsworth to his tapping is unclear through the door, perhaps because he does not hear as well as he used to. Trying to be polite, to avoid making a bad impression by requiring her to repeat herself--he opens the door.

Miss Farnsworth is “standing there all but nude.” Giving him no chance to explain, she assumes the worst. “There was cold murder in the girl’s eyes, and loathing and contempt.” She kills what remains of his will to live by reducing him to an ugly stereotype: “Get out of here, you dirty old man.” She flatters herself. He is more shocked than Miss Farnsworth. Her opposite, always generous and accommodating, the old man accepts her view of him and sits alone in shame, ready to die.

Michael Hollister (2013)