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A Message from the Past

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Through the blank impersonality of cyberspace whizzed an e-mail to the "Mairie" (City Hall) of Jersey City, New Jersey, a town that sprawls on the Hudson River almost within hailing distance of the Statue of Liberty and New York's shimmering skyline.

> My name is Gil Malmasson. I'm a 31 year old Frenchman who lives in a suburb of Paris. I work as a professional photographer but one of my favorite hobbies is metal detecting. A few years ago I was searching near a small American monument in memory of WWI American soldiers who fought in the Argonne Forest. Suddenly I found a gold ring with an onyx stone. Inside was engraved: "FROM MAYOR FRANK HAGUE TO SHERIFF TEDDY FLEMING 1945." I went to the U.S. Embassy in Paris and to U.S. Army headquarters to ask their help in finding the owner. They were unable to assist me. Finally, on the internet I found the page you wrote about Frank Hague and the many years he served as mayor of your city. Can you help me find Sheriff Fleming or his children?

Gene Scanlon, Jersey City's director of communications, forwarded a copy of this e-mail to me in my New York apartment. Gene had graduated a year ahead of me from the local Jesuit high school, St. Peter's Prep. Without him, Gil Malmasson's message might have gone unanswered. No one else in City Hall would have been likely to connect me with the days when Mayor Frank Hague and Sheriff Teddy Fleming strode the corridors of power.

I sat there, staring at the message, not quite able to believe what I was reading. Thirty years had passed since this ring had vanished into loose dirt on a hillside in that blood-soaked French forest. I had gone there to write an article for *American Heritage* magazine on the fiftieth anniversary of the climactic battle of World War I. The ring had slipped off my finger on a cold March day and vanished into loose shale. Now it had come back to me in this extraordinary way. What did it mean?

I was not sure. For the moment I was only certain of one thing. I handed a printout of the e-mail to my wife, Alice, and said, "I want to go back to the Argonne and have him put the ring on my finger exactly where I lost it."

Maybe then I would understand what it meant. But I somehow doubted it. Already I sensed it would take more than a journey to France to understand the many meanings of the man who had accepted that ring and the mayor who gave it to him. They represented something large and imponderable that I had tried to deal with in a half dozen novels. But I had never confronted them as history. Was it time to do that? Inwardly, I flinched from the task that I half knew was being imposed on me. All writing was a mixture of pain and pleasure. In this venture I feared pain would predominate.

Alice and I flew to Paris on Monday, November 25, 1998. A smiling Gil Malmasson met us at Charles de Gaulle Airport. With him were his father, François, a well-known architect, and his brother Marc, a gifted musician. Also on hand were a reporter and photographer from Agence France-Presse, the French news agency, who interviewed us briefly and took pictures. Gil had told the story of the ring to several friends in the media.

The next day, François Malmasson drove Gil and Alice and me to the Argonne. During the 170-mile ride, we talked about how Gil had found the ring. He had begun exploring historic sites with his metal detector when he was a teenager and now had a collection of Roman-Celtic artifacts and other discoveries that was moderately famous among fellow hobbyists.

I asked Gil why had he had gone to so much trouble to locate me. "As a Frenchman I wanted to express my gratitude to the Americans for the help they had given us twice in this century," Gil said. "Without you, France would not be a free country today."

When we reached Varennes, the Argonne's principal town, we discovered that Gil and I were on the front page of *L'Est Républicain*, the regional newspaper published in Verdun. The headline read: LA BAGUE D'ARGONNE. It told the story of the loss and recovery of "the Argonne ring."

Within an hour, a television crew arrived to interview us. I told them how much the restoration of the ring meant to me personally. It had renewed my sense of closeness with my father. As an historian, I was also ready to discuss the French perception of the ring's wider meaning. I talked about my recent book, *Liberty! The American Revolution*, which stressed how much France had helped the infant United States win its independence. I praised the Marquis de Lafayette, the fervent young idealist who had spent his personal fortune to support the Americans in their fight for freedom.

My father's ring recalled how the Americans had repaid that debt by coming to France to fight the Germans in 1917. On July 4 of that war-torn year, General John J. Pershing, the commander of the American Expeditionary Force, had led an honor guard to the grave of the Marquis de Lafayette in Paris. A staff colonel who was fluent in French declared, "Lafayette! We are here!"

While the TV cameras whirred, Gil placed the ring on my finger. For a moment I was almost undone. I remembered the shock of losing it. For a week I had roamed the Argonne Forest and the twenty-mile-wide valley beside it, where over a million Americans had fought the Germans for almost two months, taking appalling casualties from massed machine guns and artillery. Never had I felt so close to my father, so full of admiration for him. Then came the desolating moment when I realized that the ring was gone.

I remembered wondering if Teddy Fleming was wryly informing me that I was not as close to him as I had imagined. Was he suggesting I would never really understand him? Our pasts were too different. What did I know about the humiliations of poverty, the embittering sense of being treated as a member of an inferior race? Had I ever talked back to a sneering WASP or gotten out a ninety percent straight ticket vote?

Forty years of reading and writing American history steadied me. I now knew a great deal more about the complicated reality in that much-misunderstood term *Irish-American*. That enabled me to understand a lot more about the tough, angry man who had worn the Argonne ring. I managed to conceal these old but by no means quiescent feelings from the camera's staring eye.

That night at seven o'clock, Gil and I saw ourselves on French national television at our Verdun hotel. The story opened with my father's picture in his World War I lieutenant's uniform, with his broad Sam Browne belt across his burly chest. A French commentator translated my remarks. Gil added a moving statement about his belief that finding such mementos as the ring on a battlefield was a way of defying death's seeming omnipotence.

Back in Paris, Senator Paul Loridant, who represented Gil Malmasson's district, invited us to the Luxembourg Palace. At a reception in the Victor Hugo room, Senator Loridant presented me with the medal of the French Senate. "Your coming here to retrieve your father's ring reminds us of what fathers mean to sons and what sons mean to fathers," the senator said. "It also reminds France and America of the sacrifices brave men have made for their democratic freedoms."

The splendid rugs and gilded ceilings of the Luxembourg Palace were a long way from the mud and blood of the Argonne in 1918. They were equally far from the shabby industrial city of my Depression-era boyhood. They were light-years from the waterless, unheated downtown tenement in which my father had been born. The ring indubitably linked us with the poilus and doughboys of their distant decade. The connection to these vanished Jersey City worlds was equally strong—and growing more intense by the hour. Deeply as I appreciated Gil Malmasson's generosity, I began to think the loss and rediscovery in the Argonne were only the surface meaning of the ring's return.

Back in the United States, the ring's reappearance attracted newspaper, magazine, and television attention. The *New York Times* devoted almost a full page of its Metro section to its discovery and my trip to France. *People* magazine ran an article on it. The Pax TV network devoted a half hour to the story. All these reports remained on the surface of the event. Hardly surprising—there was plenty of surface to write about.

Then came a telephone call from Jersey City. Mayor Brett Schundler wanted to give me a reception in City Hall. This was good for a private laugh. Until recently, my status in Jersey City was somewhat anomalous. In 1969, a decade after my father's death, I had written "I Am the Law," a long profile of Mayor Frank Hague in *American Heritage* magazine, coolly analyzing his ruthlessness, his corruption, and the near perfection of his version of machine politics. Hague loyalists found it lacking in sympathy for the mayor. I came close to being called a turncoat—an experience I have recently replicated by writing equally dispassionate books about Franklin D. Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson.

In another magazine article, "City in the Shadow," I chastised Frank Hague's successors for continuing a tradition of corruption that had already landed several of them in the penitentiary. The followers of these discredited pols liked this commentary even less. Once, when I ventured across the Hudson to speak in my hometown, people knocked knives on coffee cups and interrupted my observations with catcalls and insults.

As a writer, I had moved beyond my birthplace as a subject. I had written a dozen history books and novels about the American Revolution. Next came a history of West Point, followed by novels set in World War II and Vietnam, as well as in pre–Civil War Washington, D.C., and post–Civil War New York. On the surface at least, neither my father nor Jersey City were topics that had occupied my imagination for decades. But by this time I knew I was not dealing with surfaces. I was aware that on a deeper level Teddy Fleming and his wife, Katherine Dolan Fleming, and the Irish-American political and religious world of Jersey City had been with me every year of my literary life.

I accepted Mayor Schundler's invitation. My wife, Alice, and I journeyed from our New York City apartment via the subway and then a PATH train that whizzed beneath the Hudson River to Jersey City. In my youth, PATH had been an independent railroad called the

Hudson and Manhattan Tubes. The cars had been dirty, groaning relics from the era of World War I. My uncle Al Gallagher had been the night superintendent and often regaled us with predictions of catastrophe when (not if) the wheels fell off or the brakes failed. Now the trains were run by the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey and were clean and relatively noiseless.

In a half hour we were sauntering down Grove Street toward City Hall. For a moment I recalled meeting my father here after staying late at my nearby high school, St. Peter's Prep, rehearsing a play. In the twilight, the massive granite and marble "Hall" loomed like some huge mythological creature with a hundred staring eyes. At the curb, a row of gleaming seven-passenger Cadillacs waited for the ward leaders to finish their conference with Mayor Frank Hague and his fellow commissioners. Power, I thought. Irish-American power. The cars, the building, had emanated it. Gone now, gone beyond recall.

Looking up at City Hall, I realized something else had vanished: the bravura brass cupolas on the corners and the soaring central tower that had given the building a touch of grandeur. As my old friend Gene Scanlon soon explained to me, the chemicals in the city's once omnipresent smog had not been kind to metals. A recent mayor had chosen the less expensive part of valor and amputated these architectural grace notes. But the imposing gray façade, with its array of windows flanking the porticoed entrance, still managed a semblance of dignity.

In the mix of private and public memory through which I was moving, another group of buildings were at least as important as City Hall. A mix of brick and wooden two- and three-story structures, many with businesses on the first and second floors, they were on the opposite side of Grove Street and lacked even a hint of grandeur. In 1906 or 1907, when my father was in his late teens, one of the second floors had been a dentist's office. One winter day, Teddy Fleming sat down in the dentist's chair, pointed to his teeth, and said, "Pull'm out."

"All of them?" the startled dentist said.

"All of'm," my father said.

It took the dentist two hours and cost my father almost every cent he possessed. I don't know whether the dentist used novocaine or gas to stifle the pain. Probably the latter, since novocaine had only begun its career as an anesthetic in 1905. Teddy Fleming went home to his family's flat on Communipaw Avenue in the Sixth Ward and dulled the ache with whiskey until he went to sleep.

A few days later Teddy returned to the dentist's office and the dentist inserted a set of upper and lower false teeth that transformed his appearance. His natural teeth had been a protruding, twisted mess, which would have forever condemned him to inferiority with women and even with most men. In 1908, everyone admired the strong-jawed Anglo-Saxon Protestant types that dominated the stages of Broadway and the advertisements in newspapers and magazines.

Whenever I walked past City Hall during my adolescent years, I looked across the street at the site of the dentist's office, which was long gone. My mouth hurt. I felt my father's pain. I admired his guts. I wondered if I could do something so amazing. Teddy Fleming had done nothing less than change himself from an ugly lower-class Irish-American—a mick—to a man with the good looks of the WASP elite. The price he paid in pain and money was unquestionably worth it.

There was something profoundly American about this transaction. An aura of wonder, even myth, surrounded this vision of my father. Its many meanings still throbbed in my chest in 1998, almost a hundred years after it happened. It was an ineluctable part of my private memories of Teddy Fleming.

Inside City Hall, Mayor Schundler's reception was held in the council chamber where Frank Hague once presided over meetings of the city's commissioners. Maybe it was my recent exposure to the Luxembourg Palace, but the room looked unutterably dingy. It had not seen a paintbrush in several decades. In Hague's day the place had gleamed.

In the audience was a delegation of smiling teachers and students from St. Peter's Prep and a scattering of old-time Jersey Cityans who remembered Teddy Fleming and pumped my hand. Reporters from the *Newark Star-Ledger* and the city's local paper, the *Jersey Journal*, interviewed me and Mayor Schundler.

The atmosphere was incredibly good-natured. No one had a negative word to say about Mayor Frank Hague or the bare-knuckled political organization he had created and Sheriff Teddy Fleming had helped him run. On the contrary, everyone, including Mayor Schundler, the first Republican mayor in almost a century, seemed ready to hail the Democratic chieftain and my father as men who had given Jersey City an aura of national power. At times they seemed to be using my modest literary celebrity to say the bad old days were not so awful as a lot of people once claimed.

This was so contrary to the experience of my youth, when "Hagueism" was an epithet in newspapers, magazines, and books, that I felt almost disoriented. But I managed to play my part in the ceremony, expressing my genuine gratitude for this expression of affection from my hometown. I coated my remarks on the old days in a glaze of sentimental glory.

Back in New York, as my wife and I walked from the subway down East Sixty-ninth Street toward our apartment, another memory stirred. On the south side of the street was a huge modern apartment house. On the north side was a row of nineteenth-century carriage houses—now garages with apartments above them. One night early in 1920 Teddy Fleming and Katherine Dolan, known to her friends as Kitty, were visiting a couple who lived in one of these carriage houses. Teddy and Kitty were not yet married but both had marriage on their minds.

The host, Eddie Shanaphy, was my mother's cousin. He was a chauffeur for the Wall Street millionaire James Cox Brady. The gray Rolls-Royce that Eddie drove was in the garage below them. His wife, Mae, enjoyed living in the aura of the very rich. She was always talking about "the Madam"—Mrs. Brady—what she wore, what she said, where she traveled. It gave her—and my mother—a vicarious thrill to imagine people with unlimited cash at their disposal.

It was a snowy night. On Third Avenue, the El loomed in the streetlights. Trains rumbled past, rattling the windows. In 1920 my father had just returned from France, where he had won a lieutenant's commission for his performance on the battlefield at St. Mihiel and in the Argonne. Friends were telling him—and my mother—that he had a future as a politician.

On the first floor of the carriage house, my father had seen several sets of skis on the wall. "Let's try those toboggan shoes out in Central Park," he said.

In spite of the newly passed Eighteenth Amendment, which theoretically banned alcohol from America, everyone had downed enough rye whiskey to put them in the mood for some fun. They were young and they wanted to pretend they were rich. In those days, skiing was mostly a rich man's sport. You had to travel to Switzerland or Colorado to try it. They bundled into their winter coats and trudged four blocks to Central Park with two sets of skis on Teddy's muscular shoulders.

It was well after midnight. The park was dreamlike, blanketed in gleaming snow, random lamps glowing with a fiery light. The skis did not require boots. There were clamps on them, like old-fashioned roller skates, and binders that wound around the ankles to give the skier control. For two hours they slithered and floundered and flopped in the snow, laughing at each other's crashes.

I suddenly saw Teddy Fleming in the middle of this snowy stillness, surrounded by the towering apartments of the rich, helping beautiful dark-haired Kitty Dolan to her feet, brushing her off, urging her to try again. He careens downhill himself, crouched low for balance. Everyone yells their admiration. He smiles. Why not pretend to be rich for a night? He had survived thousands of German bullets and shells in France. He had helped beat the kaiser. Maybe the world was his oyster.

My mother thought it was. She saw vast potential in my father. She thought she could polish him for a march to big things by cleaning up his grammar and lower-class Irish accent. She succeeded in both departments. But he never rose beyond the wards and precincts of Jersey City.

Back in our apartment, I gazed at the picture of my father in his U.S. Army lieutenant's uniform on the dresser in my bedroom. Not for the first time, I admired the toughness in those blue eyes. Beside the lieutenant was a smiling picture of Katherine Dolan Fleming on her wedding day in 1923. Her smile concealed many sorrows.

I suddenly thought of the worst day of my life.

"I can't stand it, I can't stand it any longer," Kitty Fleming screamed. She ran out to the kitchen and pounded on the red Formica tabletop with her fists. "I'm going to kill myself!" she cried.

I raced out to the kitchen and found my mother on her knees in front of the open oven. "I'm going to do it," she sobbed. "I'll show everyone what a monster he is. I'll tell the whole world he doesn't love anyone or anything."

I retreated to the study at the rear of my New York apartment, where I wrote my books, and pondered a large framed picture of my father as I remembered him when he was sheriff of Hudson County and leader of Jersey City's turbulent Sixth Ward. The face was fleshier than the lieutenant's but it had the same tough eyes. The mouth was tauter, more knowing—almost sad. There were sorrows here too. But Teddy Fleming had accepted them with the fatalism of a man without illusions. You win some and you lose some.

What was he saying to me? Something like: You've written a lot of history about a lot of guys. How come you've left out the mayor and me and the rest of our crowd? We made a little history too. We got a few things done, even if some people didn't like the way we did them.

What if I tell the whole thing? The inside and the outside? You and Mother? The day in the car when what you said changed everything? The poem I found in your dresser drawer? What you said when you lost your leg?

You're the writer. It's your call. But if you want my advice: tell it straight.

On the opposite wall was a picture of Mayor Frank Hague, glaring defiantly into the camera. He looked ready to take on the whole Republican Party single-handed. I remembered the first time I met him, when I was seven years old.

We were in the parking lot outside Roosevelt Stadium, Jersey City's baseball park. My father steered me around a big puddle and caught up to Hague as he was getting into his gleaming black Cadillac limousine. "Mayor, I'd like you to meet my son," Teddy Fleming said.

I held out my small hand. His Honor glared at me as if he had just caught me scalping box-seat tickets and crushed my fingers into a throbbing pulp. Simultaneously he growled, "Your old man is a hell of a guy."

Maybe it was time to tell the whole story. The public triumphs and the private tragedy, the gritty laughter and the bitter regrets, the courage that transformed public defeat into a private victory. Maybe, in the words of my favorite Irish poet, I should live it all once more:

Endure that toil of growing up,
The ignominy of boyhood, the distress
Of boyhood changing into man.

Maybe I could finally explain to myself and others how fear of Teddy Fleming turned to forgiveness and dislike to admiration. Maybe I could track the way love won a subterranean battle against historic wounds and silent reproaches. Maybe I could face—and understand, and forgive—Katherine Dolan Fleming's embittered attempts to make me a fellow antagonist of the man she publicly admired and privately disdained.

Maybe I could unite the tragic history of a people and the tragic history of a family. I had long since decided that the Irish who emigrated to the United States had become radically different from the Irish who had stayed behind and suffered under England's brutal heel. Maybe the Flemings and the Dolans summed up a lot of that history-charged term *Irish-American*.

Yes, I thought, *yes. I'll try it—even if it involves lying down one more time in the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.*