

You Were Forever

By Kathleen Donohoe

Eileen took off her cap as she walked into Glory Devlins and inhaled the scent of fresh cigarette smoke and stale beer. She found it familiar, and good. The owner was a buff and an amateur photographer so the walls were crowded with shots he'd taken at fires and around firehouses, a lot of different ones, but always Brooklyn.

As Eileen made her way to the bar, a few firefighters turned, startled, probably thinking that she was some kind of nine-eleven groupie whack job who'd swiped a Class A uniform. From an officer, no less, because she had a white cap. But then she gave and returned greetings to guys she knew. One waved her over but she pointed to the bar. She needed a beer.

"Hey, Lieu," a voice called from the corner.

She nodded in that direction and caught a couple of frowns. Old school. Maybe realizing who she was—Sean O'Reilly's sister--or otherwise just guessing from her age and rank that she was one of the first. As for the young guys, they knew it had taken a lawsuit to let women on the job the way they knew about the American Revolution. It happened.

Eileen tossed her cap onto the bar and leaned in, clasping her hands as she waited for Matty's attention. She tried to think of his last name. It was ironic, this not remembering, in the middle of all the Never Forget proclamations whipping through the air. She had to concentrate to come up with where she and Henry met, how to spell her married name, which she never used herself, that her sons were huge teenagers and not little boys. Their names. A few times, she'd been standing on the pile and she had to stop and think. Emmett. Leo. Both dark-haired like Henry but with her blue eyes. She did not tell Henry. But then she did not tell Henry much these

days. He kept asking her to escort him around the site, beyond the perimeter. After all, he was a history teacher and this was their Pearl Harbor. She understood, really she did, and yet she couldn't stand the thought of her own husband as a Ground Zero tourist like a goddamned movie star.

Matty greeted her and pulled the Six Point tap without her having to ask. Good man. Glory Devlins was surprisingly crowded. Nobody had been lingering much after the funeral slash memorials. But of today's other services, one was upstate and the other two were way the hell out on Long Island. Getting from Brooklyn to any of them on time was impossible. And it was the end of October now. Long gone were the days when it was possible to believe the myth of voids, small cities beneath the city where whole tribes of the lost were tucked up beside food courts, waiting.

This morning, Eileen walked over to the church in Carroll Gardens, ignoring the people who turned and stared as she passed by. Like herself, Capadora stayed in the neighborhood where he'd grown up. They hadn't worked together since their promotions to lieutenant off the same test four years ago, but his wife asked Eileen to say a few words at the mass. She told Eileen they couldn't wait anymore. She and the girls needed to have a service before the holidays were on top of them. We're looking, Eileen said. Me too, Bernadette answered.

Eileen accepted her Six Point and pushed a \$10 across the bar in spite of Matty waving her off.

"Eileen? I thought that was you."

"Hey, Danny," Eileen offered a half-smile for the firefighter who stood beside her.

She hadn't thought to check the list for his name, but she probably would have heard if any of the Kiernans were missing or dead. Danny and her niece dated their whole senior year of high school, until Maggie broke it off the summer after graduation. She was going to college in Boston. Danny was set for Marist College in Poughkeepsie and the first possible chance to take the test for the fire department. Maggie said crisply that it was better to end it before the separation did.

"What are you drinking?" Danny asked.

"A pint."

"Yeah? I used to stick to Guinness but now I can't wait for it to settle."

Danny asked for a Jameson neat and they were silent until Matty brought the beer.

He asked where she was working. She told him and saw him register the number. *Eight*.

"You?" she asked and when he told her, she thought for a minute. *Six*. The entire engine.

"Hey, I liked what you said today," Danny said.

Eileen winced and drank from her beer. This morning in the packed church, the altar behind her filled with some kind of bitter fall flower, she spoke about the Steven Capadora she'd worked with--company chauffer, hands down the best chef, linebacker for Pudgy Walsh and absolute fucking lunatic. She talked about the time he stretched across an aeryway and let a woman cross his body like a bridge from the building that was on fire to the one that wasn't. Once he leapt down half a flight of burning stairs and crashed into her at the bottom. Later, at the hospital when she was waiting to get her wrist X-rayed—he was fine--she said, "You know, the banister wasn't on fire" and he said she should of got out of his way.

But truthfully, Eileen had cheated. To really tell the story of her and Capadora would have meant going into how it was when she first came on the job in 1982. As a probationary firefighter, rotating from firehouse to firehouse, she got the silent treatment from just about every guy in every company she went to. All probies were hazed but this wasn't that. More than once, the guys refused to set a place for her at the kitchen table. This was worse than 'bitch' in black marker across her locker, eggs in her boots or the sneering suggestion to sit with the wives at the company picnic. (She did. They were lovely. The ones who weren't teachers were nurses and they rolled their eyes behind their husbands' backs. 'They'll get over it,' they told her.)

But to be shut out of the firehouse kitchen--if you were wandering around inside the human body, it was like being banned from a necessary organ, not the appendix or the spleen. If she was sentimental, she'd say the heart but Eileen was not sentimental, so, the liver. Both kidneys. She made bologna and cheese sandwiches and ate them alone in front of her locker. Often, she sobbed all the way home. But never on the way into work because if she'd walked into the firehouse with swollen eyes, that'd be it. She'd have to go back to bartending and mulling over a paralegal course. She never told Sean how bad it was. He was too pissed at her to care. The guys were not such terrible chauvinists. Not all of them. Most truly thought women couldn't handle the job. Eileen believed this because she knew her brother.

She and Henry were married seven months after she got her first permanent assignment. On her first day back after her honeymoon, she was tossing her stuff in her locker, trying to get her head in the right place, when Capadora came up behind her.

"Hey, you cost me forty bucks," he said.

She turned around warily. "Yeah?"

“Me and Tierney had a bet. I said you were a dyke. He said you probably weren’t.”

“Oh, I am a dyke,” she said. “But I knew about the bet.”

The next tour, he gave her a cookbook for a wedding gift. Mama Rose’s Italian Specialties. “You know why the Irish all starved to death way back when?” he said. “Nobody could fucking cook.”

“Not funny,” she said. But it was.

That night, Capadora personally called her in for the meal.

“O’Reilly! C’mere. Take a seat,” he said.

She went to chair he was pointing at. There was a phone book on it. Uncalled for. She was almost 5’7”, not too much shorter than a lot of the guys.

Capadora sat down next to her. During the meal, she dropped her fork and when she bent to pick it up, she took out her lighter—she still smoked then—and set the cuff of his pants on fire.

“Redheads are crazy,” he said after he put it out with a glass of milk. “My wife’s a redhead.”

Life got better after that. Word was out. Don’t fuck with the girl. Unless she fucks up on the job. Then you can of course fuck with her the way you would fuck with anybody.

To dredge it all up at a funeral would have been considered whining, bitching, give-me-a-break territory and rightfully so. Still, Eileen wished she could have told that story, to make it understood that simply by choosing to be her friend, Capadora was extraordinary, and brave.

“Yeah,” Eileen said now to Danny, signaling for a refill. “I don’t know. Hard to know what the hell to say.” She’d ended with a line from a poem. Capadora probably would have

hated the sentimentality but Eileen needed a way out. The Lament for Art O'Leary. "My friend! You were forever."

"No, I'm serious. It's now in my top ten favorite 9/11 eulogies."

Eileen smiled a little. "Well, thanks."

"How's Maggie?" Danny asked, not looking at her.

Eileen glanced at his hands. He was Maggie's age, twenty-nine. He wore a Claddagh ring on his right hand, heart in. A girlfriend but not a wife?

"She's good," Eileen said. "She's got her degree in Irish studies. Actually, she was in Dublin this summer, teaching."

"Teaching the Irish how to be Irish?" Danny said. "Yeah, that sounds like Maggie."

Eileen laughed. "It was some kind of summer literature seminar."

"She's back now?"

"She got back the week before." Eileen knew she hardly had to specify what week, before what.

"I've never been to Ireland," Danny said wistfully. "Maybe with all this, somebody'll offer a free trip."

"Put the word out," Eileen said, but Danny waved a hand to show he was kidding.

"Excuse me, ma'am?"

Eileen and Danny turned. The man behind them was young, in his early twenties.

"I'm with the Neary Sentinel." He was dressed in a suit and tie. He looked more like an apprentice undertaker than a reporter.

“We’re—I guess you could say--a pretty small town upstate. I was wondering if I could talk to you for a minute?”

“To me? What are you kidding?” Eileen said, surprised.

“No one’s written you up yet?” Danny said, grinning a little.

There were twenty-five women on the job. None had been killed in the attacks.

“No way in hell,” Eileen said. “We’re not the story. You big, brave men are the story.”

Danny frowned and looked away. She’d pissed him off.

“Uh, someone over there told me you lost a brother who was a fireman,” the reporter said. “Is that accurate?”

Eileen nodded curtly.

“Is that his jacket?”

“No,” she said.

“Oh. Are you a paramedic?” He squinted at the badge on her arm.

“She’s FDNY. This is Lieutenant Eileen O’Reilly,” Danny said. He left off, *you fucking dick*, but he might as well have said it.

The reporter glanced down at his notebook and then back up at Eileen. He tried again.

“I asked if anybody here lost anyone, like from their actual family, that’s the story I’m supposed to be writing, and they said you did.”

Eileen gave in. “Yeah,” she said but didn’t elaborate. Let him figure it out.

He lifted his notebook and readied his pen. “What was his name?”

“Sean O’Reilly,” Eileen resisted the urge to add his middle and confirmation names.

Sean Michael James O’Reilly.

“Have they found him?” he asked.

By the time Eileen arrived at Lenny's Art Supplies, the smoke was white, the runoff from the hoses had frozen in the street, and Sean had been out of air for almost fifteen minutes. Still, the guys were digging out the basement as though there might be hope. She tried to go in but the Chief stopped her. "We'll get him," he said, not unkindly but firmly.

Eileen held his stare for a moment. "I'll give you this," she said not because it was an order, but because she figured Sean *would* have wanted his brothers to bring him out. A half-hour later, Eileen and the rest of the assembled firefighters took off their helmets as Sean was carried to the quiet ambulance. Then she left with the chaplain and the Chief to go tell her mother.

"They found him in '83," Eileen said now.

"They found him on the eighty-third floor?" the reporter asked.

Danny snorted. "Yeah," he said. "If you're ever at the site, go on up and take a look."

"*Nineteen* eighty-three," Eileen said.

"Wait—what? You're saying he died in 1983?"

"That is what I'm saying."

"At a fire?" he asked.

"No," Eileen said, "he was run over by a garbage truck."

Danny laughed outright this time. The reporter glared at him. Danny returned it and he took a step back.

"Look, I'm sorry, I--they told me you lost a brother." He capped his pen. "I assumed—I thought he was there."

Eileen smiled a little. "I was there."

He thanked her and after an uneasy glance at Danny, he retreated.

They drank in silence for a few minutes.

“I’m tired,” Eileen said, without meaning to speak aloud.

“Yeah? Are you eating okay? Are you talking to each other about the men you lost?”

Danny asked, his tone a perfect parody of the counselors who were assigned to the firehouses.

Eileen laughed. “They must have a manual.”

Thiers introduced herself as Dr. Lisa Alexander. “But please call me Lisa.” She wore her hair in a bun like a librarian and she couldn’t have been thirty. She chewed her lip like it was Juicy Fruit.

A couple of years ago, the firehouse had a mouse problem and they put down some glue traps. Eileen went into the kitchen one morning and found a mouse stuck to the trap, trying so hard to get free, the trap was sliding across the floor. After a few visits to the firehouse, call-me-Lisa had eyes like that mouse, darting and desperate.

She cornered Eileen on the apparatus floor and said, “You have to get the men to talk to me. I just don’t know what’ll happen to them if they don’t.”

If she’d appealed to Eileen as their lieutenant, Eileen might not have been pissed. But call-me-Lisa lay a hand on her arm like they were girlfriends and added,

“You’re probably better equipped than most fire officers to reach out to them.”

Assuming that Eileen’s shoulders were for crying on—that was pure, unacceptable bullshit. “I’m not their mother or a wife,” Eileen told her. “I send them into fires.” She thought,

I sent them in to that fire. And then I lost them in the dark.

Eileen could’ve told call-me-Lisa—but didn’t—that she had no chance of getting the guys to talk unless she had the balls to start with the one question that every New York City firefighter now had to answer forever, “What saved you?”

Eileen picked up Danny's routine. "Are you drinking more than normal? Are you sleeping?"

"Do you have feelings of guilt?" Danny said. "Are you having nightmares?" He signaled Matty for a refill.

Eileen shook her head. She wasn't having nightmares about September 11th but she dreamed again and again about September 10th.

The day is quiet as the whole summer has been quiet. O'Mara says, as he has a hundred times since August, something big's coming. I can feel it in my bones. Something big and Bonafedes growls, Say that one more time Billy-boy and I will choke you to death with one hand. They catch a couple easy jobs, nothing much, nothing to write home about.

Late in the afternoon, they go to Key Food. Kowolski brings the dog on the rig. She's a terrier-sewer-rat hybrid who'd turned up at the firehouse a few months ago. Eileen and Jimenez the probie and Killian and Ayres move through the supermarket's aisles at peace. Nobody sees them and begins to cry. Nobody comes up and says, you're saints, you're heroes, God bless you and thank you, thank you, thank you. An old lady at the checkout clutching a can of Pledge and \$5 bill leans away from them, wrinkling her nose, because, yeah, they do stink, but not of corpses and gray dust, only the way they are supposed to, of black smoke from a good fire and garlic and something else, something like salt, like the sea.

And they jump back on the rig with pork chops for the meal and the dog lunges for the shopping bag and Rowley says, I'm going to kill that fucking thing, and Smithick gives her an M&M, laughing, and they are all laughing and it is a good day.

Eileen wakes from the dream to find a blue and yellow morning, the most beautiful day in the history of New York City, a Tuesday. Always a Tuesday.