

## Excerpt from “From sanctuary, to the Teachers”

*In this excerpt, Paul Zindel writes a tribute to his teacher, Miss Stillwell, as he recalls his days as a student on Staten Island during World War II.*

It was a duration when there were nightly air raid drills with shrieking sirens, when my sister Betty and I would extinguish every speck of light and go down to our cellar. There we hid under mattresses and held our gas masks ready. There were books of stamps for rationed food. Our policeman father had left us, and our mother worked days as a welder in a Mariner’s Harbor shipyard and evenings as a hat check girl at the Tavern-on-the-Green in New Dorp.

I remember being very frightened. Often. There were reports of German U-boats spotted in the narrows between our Island and Brooklyn, and in the waters off Bayonne. We could no longer go to West Brighton and the Richter’s restaurant on “the hill” for pot roast. The family was said to be all Hitler’s spies and often seen at their windows using binoculars. At school we learned where to stand if the bombing began, and how to evacuate the building if it should begin to burn or collapse.

And in the middle of this waiting battlefield, five days a week I could count on Miss Stillwell being there in her classroom. She had a highpitched, emotional voice. She was animated and ardent and bouncy and game. I believed she was in her fifties, and sometimes I would be fascinated by the wrinkles on her neck. I thought how good she looked in her shiny, flower-covered dresses and the cobalt blue ceramic earrings she’d made in her kiln. She let us thread several dozen unclassified cocoons and hang them on the classroom windows. One night they all hatched and, when we arrived back in the classroom in the morning, it was dark with the windows covered by thousands of newborn praying mantises.

I remember we often asked Miss Stillwell if she were afraid, too, and she’d say yes, and we’d talk about all of our fears for awhile. Not very long. Soon Miss Stillwell would be pulling out a book and reading us snippets of *Gulliver’s Travels* or *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* or a jungle tale about Frank Buck bringin’ ’em back alive. I remember her letting me be part of the team that drew Mt. Vernon on an entire blackboard in lush, pastel chalks. In my memory, she was always vital to everyone of us, praising, showing us, hovering, delighting in us. We were intoxicated by her fragrance, a mixture of delicate gardenia and faint, fresh apple. She was a safe harbor at a time of chaos.