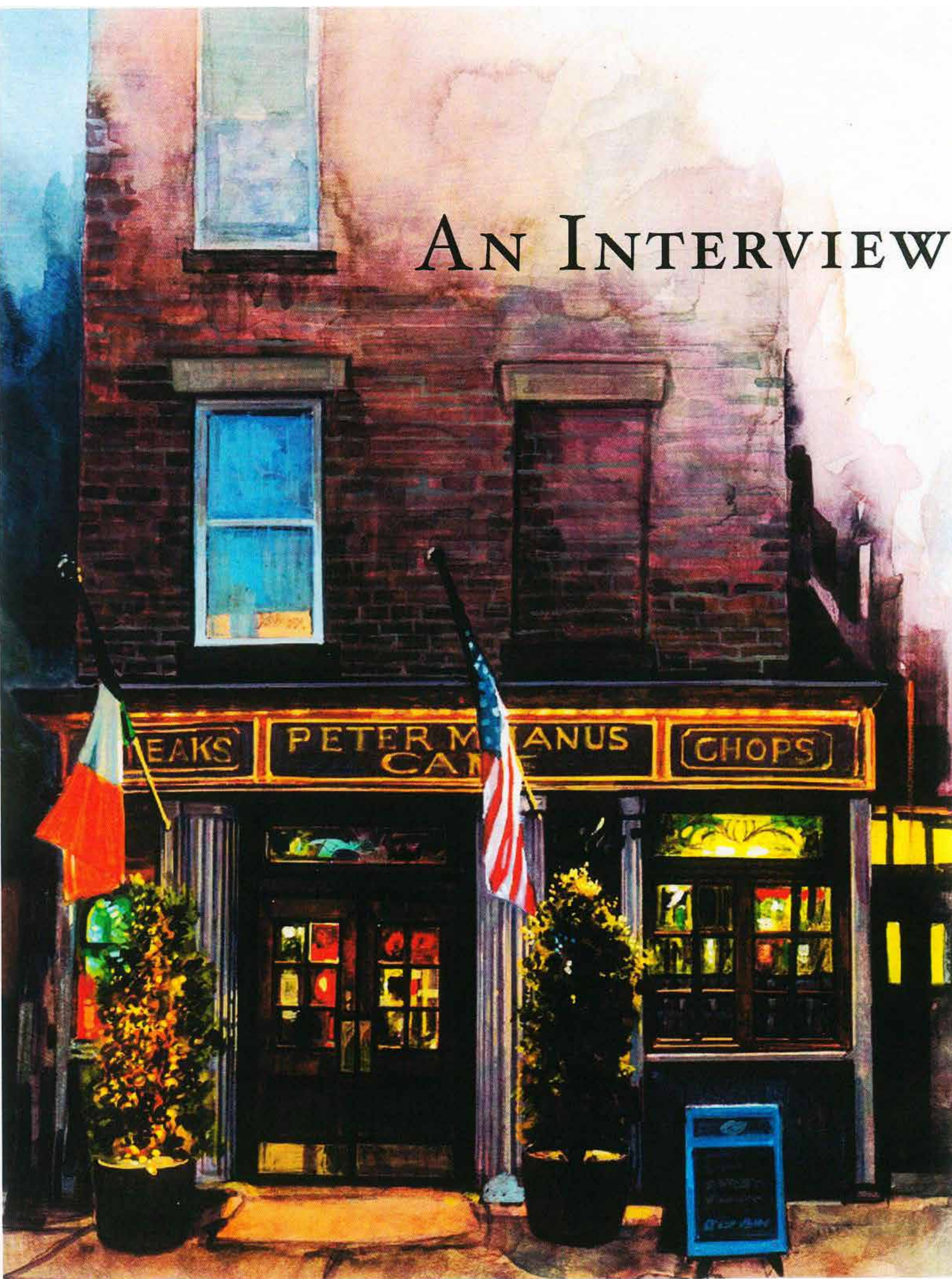


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AN INTERVIEW WITH STEPHEN GARDNER

BY ELLA RUE

ILLUSTRATIONS BY STEPHEN GARDNER

ILLUSTRATION OF STEPHEN GARDNER BY DENNIS DITTRICH

STEPHEN GARDNER IS THE John Cleese of the New York illustration community. I have known Stephen for a couple of years, after meeting him at the Society of Illustrators, but recently had the unparalleled privilege of spending an entire afternoon talking and laughing with him in his Brooklyn apartment. He had me doubled over with laughter as he made me feel completely at home in his impeccably decorated home, as he cooked an amazing lunch of spinach, Irish bacon, and tomato sprinkled with black pepper on rye toast.

One especially amusing story that he shared was about a time that he had stepped out, just for a moment, to drop his recycling into the recycling chute. The bin is situated just outside of his apartment. He had it all bagged up and tied shut and stepped outside to drop it down the shoot. Just after stepping into the hall he heard what appeared to be a very loud

“click” as his door latched and locked behind him! His plan was to go unnoticed, and quickly dispose of his recyclables, as he was wearing nothing but his underpants. Unfortunately fate had other plans, as he was now locked out of his apartment; no keys, no cell phone, and precious little clothing covering his body, with his wife at work. Hearing that “click,” he froze in panic. After first trying the superintendent’s apartment (to no avail), he knocked on door after door, in the hopes that a kind neighbor might take pity on him, and hopefully not report him to the police. Eventually a kind elderly woman, who was otherwise deeply engaged in her soap opera “stories,” allowed him respite and let him sit on her couch until the super returned and gave him access to his apartment again. He told me it was easily a good three weeks before he could look that woman in the eye again, at which point he had flowers delivered to her to express his undying gratitude.





Everything comes with a story with Stephen. Prior to illustration, Stephen was a stand-up comedian. He did this seriously, or shall I say comically, for a good five years before committing his time and talents full time to illustration. He even had a brief stint as a cast member on *Race Rabbit* TV show on Nickelodeon.

Stephen is originally from Wisbech, England. Last spring he came to our university to present on "The Immigrant Experience." When first invited to speak about the immigrant experience, he laughed and said "Why yes, I've got that!" in his thick British accent. I asked him about his ultimate migration to the states and what had prompted it. He told me New York City was (and is) the epicenter for illustration and he wanted to be closest to where the action was. I asked him what his parents' thoughts were about him moving state side.

He laughed and said his mother could not understand his desire to live here with all of these "Ugly Americans walking their pet rocks around everywhere." Thankfully, she has since come to appreciate the beauty of America, and Americans.

As they say, you can take the boy out of Britain but not the British out of the boy. If you've spent any time in England you are keenly aware that the British enjoy not only their pints and quarts but also their pubs. Stephen is no different. He has found a new home in Brooklyn. And he has found success illustrating countless book covers, baseball cards, and collector plates, as well as high-end jewelry design, but his latest passion has brought back a little slice of home for him as he works on a personal project of an illustrated coffee table book of Manhattan's finest pubs. As Steven states: "This book is the result of the combining of two



passions, my love of painting and my love of bars.

"Being English I have grown up in a drinking culture and view pubs as an extension to my living space, the term "Pub" after all, comes from the term "Public House," a house to which all are invited to drink and socialize with their fellow man. When I walk into a good bar with the right atmosphere, I know I'm home.

"When I arrived from England to New York I was delighted to find bars and taverns that exhibited all the qualities that one I have come to cherish, places in which I immediately felt at home. I'm talking about real "Old School" bars with a sense of tradition, I started to build a collection of such places and started to fall in love with the history of these wonderful old bars, most of which survived prohibition."



A selection from a Stephen's interview with Pepe, the bartender at McSorley's, the oldest Irish tavern in New York City:

"McSorley's is a truly unique and timeless experience and made even more by the staff that run and maintain the place with a deep affection and appreciation."

Pepe is the personification of a New York bartender, a man whose charm and spirit blends perfectly with the experience of the bar. A native New Yorker born of Ukrainian Immigrants who, themselves, came to the US in December of 1950. "I still have the trunk they brought all their worldly belongings in a room above the bar." Pepe, born in 1955, has worked at McSorley's since he was 18 years old.

"I grew up on 6th Street, and as kids we played on the street outside. When I was 18 we'd come in for drinks, that was the legal drinking

age back then. John Smith was the bartender at the time and offered me a job and I just never left." Pepe would work during the day and attend college at night; he graduated with a marketing degree but enjoyed the bar too much to leave. "On any given day I can say hello to over a thousand people." Pepe's twin brother, who is now retired from a career in banking, joins him for coffee at the bar every morning at 10:00.

I asked Pepe what was his favorite memory of the bar. "Every Christmas," he says, "all my nieces and nephews come in with their respective friends and have themselves a great time, some from Philly, some from New Jersey and others from East Long Island. They're all in their thirties now but we've been doing it since they were 18. It's cost me a fortune each year but I love it."

Pepe has become a de facto historian and was able to put me right about the legendary wishbones that hang

from the old gas lamp above the bar. "John McSorley treated soldiers to a free turkey dinner before they went off to fight in WWI. The soldiers left their wishbones hanging from the light and claimed them upon their return. The ones that remain are from the soldiers who didn't come back."

This same John McSorley banned women from the bar, citing "It is impossible for men to drink with tranquility in the presence of women." As of August 10, 1970, women have been allowed to drink at the bar, although they didn't get round to installing bathrooms for the women until 1986. Pepe recalls one of his first jobs at the bar monitoring the bathrooms when they had to be co-ed."

During his spare time, between teaching, and illustrating and jewelry design, Stephen can be found in any number of the local pubs, some known, and some unknown, some historical, and some fairly new. He will

bring his camera, his sketchbook, and his Pantone Color Swatch book and settle into the area with the best lighting and 'drink and draw.' His goal is to have his book near completion by this fall to coincide with the completion of his Master of Fine Arts thesis show from the Fashion Institute of Technology.

