

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

RJB-20
Vicky and Harry Wrigley

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Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York, 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

It was a hot muggy July night, the kind which makes a cotton dress cling to the body, when Vicky Walent met Harry Wrigley. "They used to have open air dancing," Vicky says, "and all the girls used to like to go together because no one wanted to dance with the same boy all night."

"Harry was at the dance, but I didn't want to go out with him. One of the girls told me 'Every time you see him, he's with a different girl.' So when Harry came over and asked me, 'Would you like a ride home?' I told him 'No thanks, I'm going home with my friend Ginger.' He didn't say anything, he just walked away.

"Well, about a quarter of twelve I started looking for Ginger to go home but I couldn't find her. So my friend over here (Harry) came over and innocently asked, 'Are you looking for somebody?' I told him I was looking for Ginger.

"Just as innocently he told me she couldn't wait for me, and had gone home. He offered me a ride again. I didn't know then that he had schemed with Ginger, and told her she didn't need to stay, because he was going to take me home. Anyway, I was stuck at the dance and scared to death to go home with Harry."

"I took you right home, didn't I?" said Harry.

"Yes," Vicky laughs, "you did."

"I didn't even make a passer nothing."

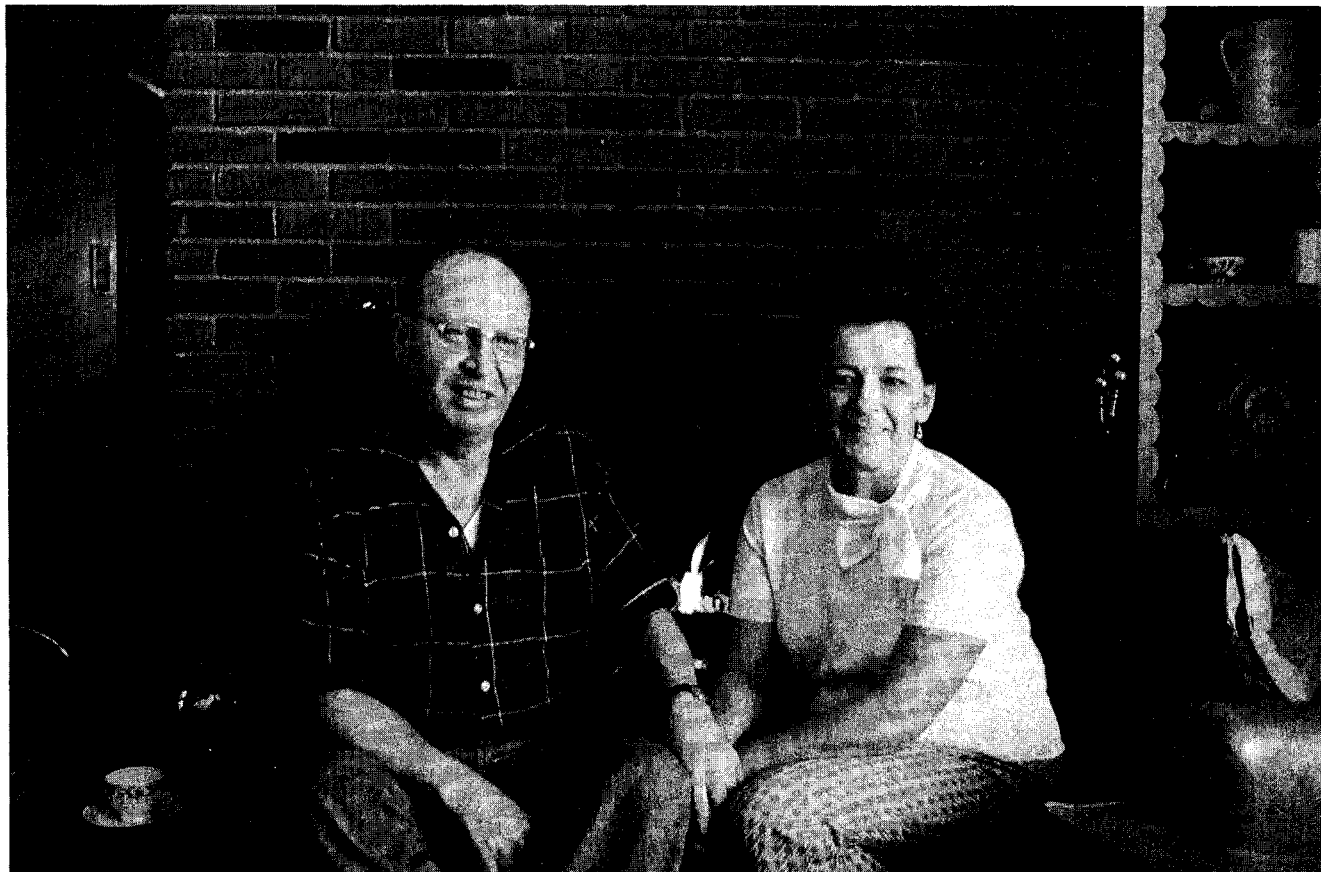
"No, but the next night you came banging on my door asking would I like to go swimming. I told him no but he said some of my friends were in the car and that I could trust him.

"I went swimming and we were married a little more than a year later, and that was nearly 35 years ago."

"That's a long time ago" Vicky says, "but the time has passed pretty quickly. When I think about it, I've been working at Western Electric for nearly eighteen years. When I started I thought I'd only work a couple of years. But every time I thought about quitting we always seemed to need something else, so I kept on working.

Richard Balzer is an Institute Fellow exploring the effects of social and economic change on lower-middle-class America.

"Once, several years ago, I had thought about quitting, but Harry was unhappy at his job as an insurance salesman. I told him if he didn't like the work he should quit while I was working and do something he liked. He did quit and he started selling automobiles, and he's been selling cars ever since.



"Thinking back like this makes me think about when the children were small, and how we used to play leap frog with them on the carpet." The children and their lives still take up a large portion of their parents' time. Rusty, their son and the older of the two children, is a teacher at a local secondary school. He wanted to be a teacher for many years, and now he wants to be an administrator. He has his master's degree. Vicky says, "We really don't help him out financially anymore. Sure, I might give him a little something to help him out with his books, and I can't help but spoil my grandchild a little, but Rusty takes care of things."

Harry says, "He's the kind of kid that a mother likes. He's dependable and solid. Rusty's the typical guy that mothers like. They go to school, get a job, get married and have children. Now Rusty could have gone completely the other way and become a gypsy, but he didn't."

"That's right," says Vicky, "he married his high school sweetheart. But he always had sense. They waited until they each graduated from college before they got married."

"See," says Harry, "That's just what I mean. He and Terry loved each other, but they waited to get married until after college. You know, just what mothers want. Nice wedding, big reception."

"Someone will ask me," Vicky says, " 'What does your son do?' I'll say, 'Oh, he's a teacher and he has his Masters.' Then they'll ask 'What does your daughter do?' I'll start, 'She's...' and then I slur a little. I mean that's how things are. Joannie's a good kid. I can't say anything against her. Whatever she does, she does on her own and she enjoys what she's doing.

"When she comes home, she loves to be home. She's my daughter and I enjoy her. I'd love for her to be living here, get up, go to work, do her job, come home, but that's another thing. That isn't her way."

"Do you think that Rusty going to school locally and Joannie going to school in Colorado made a big difference?" I ask.

"No," says Harry, "they've just got different personalities. Rusty is a home body. He wants to lay down the rules, and make plans. First it's I'm going to finish school, then get married, and then pay for a house and have children. Joannie could decide tomorrow she wants to go to Alaska and she'd just pack up and go. Rusty, if he was going to Alaska, it would take a year's planning to do it. Joannie could hop in the car with a dollar in her pocket and say 'I'm going to Alaska' and she'd go. I envy Joannie for that."

"Joannie's never had a real plan of what she'd like to do," Vicky says. "Joannie went to a junior college around here for a year, but she didn't like it. At the end of the year she told me she wanted to take a year off. Well, I wanted her to get an education. I never had the chance to get one, and I always regretted it. When I was young I thought about becoming a nurse but I knew going to college was out of the question so I never told my parents. We didn't have the money, and besides girls didn't go on to college in those days. The closest I ever came to college was taking some clerical courses when I worked in Andover. I never used them, but I was glad I had the courses. I wanted my children to go to college, if they had the chance, and we could help them out. Harry and I have always tried to help them out if we could.

"But Joannie didn't like school and wanted to work, so she got herself a job in a local factory. I remember I warned her that she might not like it very much. We didn't argue about it. She just told me she could handle it.

"After only one day at the rubber plant she came home exhausted. She came in the front door, all tired out, and started laughing, 'It's just like you said it would be, Mom. I never thought it would be like that.'

"When I woke her up the next morning for work, she told me she didn't feel too good and maybe she'd stay home. I told her, 'Look, dear, you're working now. If you only have a cold you should go to work.' She lay there for a while and I told her 'All right, young lady, get out of that bed and get going.'

"I had to tell her the same thing the third morning, and when on the fourth morning she told me she didn't feel well, I let her stay home. She quit the job that Friday.

"I'll say this for her, she didn't lay around that summer. The next week she went looking for a job, and started working for an insurance company in Andover. I think that little taste of what work was like convinced her that going to school was a better idea. She enrolled the next year at The University of Northern Colorado in Greeley and she just graduated last June.

"I took ten days of my three week summer vacation to go out to Colorado to pick Jeannie up. She wanted me to meet her friends and then we were going to drive around. She was going to show me Utah, the Great Tetonians (sic), parts of the country I've never seen. But Jeannie's car had problems, one of the valves had a pretty low compression reading, so we came home as quickly as possible.

"The trip gave us a chance to talk. Jeannie had all sorts of ideas about going to South America or India. I told her after the last tuition check she would have to start assuming responsibility for things. We would help her out, but she would have to find a job, and begin supporting herself.

"I promised her a trip as a graduation present. Well, she asked me for the money, saying she might use it to go down to Latin America. I wanted to give her a nice comfortable trip as a present and I thought if what she wanted to do was to go to Latin America she should do it by putting her feet down on solid ground first.

"She said if I'm going to give the money why should I care how she spends it? I guess she's right, but I do worry about her. I think we're very close, but in some ways we're very different. Last time Jeannie was home I drove her to the Motor Vehicle Bureau to have her picture taken for a new license. Her hair wasn't fixed up, and I said, 'You know, you look like a washerwoman, aren't you going to make your hair up?' Jeannie just looked at me and said, 'No, what's the difference?' I told her the picture had to last four years. 'So what?' was her answer, 'it doesn't matter, it's not important to me. It's just a picture of me.' I told her if it was me I would have been sure to fix my hair up.

"I know with a lot of these things that sometimes I hold on too much. It's hard to let go. I know she's 24 and can make her own decisions, but still, it's hard to let go. I've been that way for a long time, so the kids know that when I said no they should ask Harry.

"I remember when Jeannie was 18 and she wanted to go to Canada with a couple of friends. I wasn't too anxious for her to go, but Harry told me, 'Look, she's a good driver, let her go!' Finally I said OK.

"She called up from Montreal the next day and said she'd been in an accident. I was so excited when she said that that she asked to speak to her father. She told him about the accident and that she had already called the insurance agent, and had had the car repaired. You know what Harry told her, 'Now I want you to find the nicest restaurant you can, have the best meal, and then find a nice motel and stay there.' Well, she felt just like aces. Harry didn't criticize her; he was proud that she had taken care of things.

"A few years later she wanted to go with her girlfriends to Alaska. I was hesitant again but Harry said, 'Look, she's 21 now, it's time we give her our blessings and tell her to do the things that she wants to do. We can't stop her anymore!'

"So Harry is more lenient with the kids. I think some of it is because of what it was like when I was a kid. I grew up in a small town in Maine--Mexico, Maine. My mother was always saying no; she'd say no before you'd ask. It seemed as though I could never make plans and say 'Oh yes, my mother will let me go.' I could never have that freedom--never.

"When I was in high school I was involved in lots of things. I was the head cheerleader, and I was on the debating team. If you were on the debating team it meant you had to do research in the library. I'd say to my mother, 'I'd like to go to the library tonight.' She'd say 'No, you're not going to the library tonight.' Or I'd want to go to a game or practice for a game, and she'd say no and she'd never explain the reason.

"After my Mom would say no, I'd ask my father, because I knew he'd usually say yes. Usually he'd say something like 'OK, but come right back when it's over so your Mom won't be too mad at either of us.'

"My Dad died thirty years ago and that left my mother, and bless her soul, I love her, but she's not always that easy to live with. She doesn't like to let go. I'm almost embarrassed to say I still wonder before I do something whether or not my mother would let me do it. Imagine that, me, at my age, and I still want my mother to say ok. It's only been the past couple of years that I've really started to do the things I want. I think it started with our trip to Hawaii. My sister and I planned a trip and I told my mother, 'We're going to Hawaii.'

"She said, 'I don't know why..there's plenty to see around here.'

"It bothered me a lot, but we finally went.

"So even though I say I won't hold on like my mother, I know I hold on, a little more than I'd like.

"Jeannie's a big girl now, and I still worry about her. I'd like her to be a little more financially secure. She's happy, I know she's happy, but I still worry about her. She's living up in New Hampshire now and a boy she was going with in Colorado has moved to New Hampshire.

"I don't ask about certain parts of her life; I try not to put my nose into certain parts of her life."

"It's the old ostrich syndrome", Harry says. "Put your head in the sand and you don't know what's going on. Times have changed, and things are different. When we went to visit your parents before we were married, we did our thing, necking, in the automobile."

"We never kissed in their house", Vicky says. "We would never even sit next to each other. I wouldn't dare to kiss you in front of my parents. Kids today are more free. We aren't puritans, but everything has its proper place.

"I know my thinking is affected by the way I was brought up," Vicky says. "Just like in certain ways I still have a problem spending money. I was a kid right after the Depression. My mother needed every bit of money my father made just to clothe us four kids, to feed us and keep us warm. There were two things I wanted as a child and never could have. I never had a bicycle to ride; I never had a doll carriage. The only way I had a doll was when you bought bread. There were coupons; save so many coupons and get a doll. That was the only doll I remember having. We kids would have to entertain each other. Our big fun was that somehow my father would take us for a ride. My father bought a car just before the Depression. Somehow he kept up the payments and he would have a little money, maybe \$1.00, to put some gas in the car and go for a drive. He'd always have a couple of nickels in his pocket so the kids could have candy.

"My other great joy was picking fruit. There were some farms nearby and for 50¢ you could pick a huge barrel of apples or plums. My mother would can the fruit and put it away for the winter. You know, there's still a farm nearby where you can pick blueberries. My husband doesn't like to do it, but I do. Instead of canning, I just put them in the freezer and use the blueberries for pies.

"I still have trouble spending money and my mother never wants us to spend money. Just last summer I thought of renting a place near the beach for my vacation where I could take my mother. I told her about it and she asked me, 'Still got the mortgage, don't you?' I told her yes and she said, 'Well, put the money away toward the mortgage.' Now my mother knows I've never missed a payment on the mortgage and I never will. Yet she doesn't want me to spend money.

"For my mother some of the nicest Christmases were when she had enough money to pay off some bill she owed at local stores. So she doesn't like me to have any outstanding bills. But things have changed, Harry and I have been able to work and make a good life. For years things were tight. We moved into our first house thirty-one years ago. Just when we had nearly paid off the mortgage, Harry decided to buy the land where our house is now sitting. He came in one day and said, 'Phil's decided to sell us that piece of land.' I was worried about it, but Harry thought we had almost paid off the last house and it was time to move. Harry helped build the house we wanted; he helped design it, and build it; within a year we moved in. Just when we were getting out from under we had another big mortgage. Then we've had the children's educations. That was something we wanted to do, but it was a major expense. It's only recently, within the last five years, that we could afford certain things we wanted.

"You know, I only got an automatic washer about five years ago and I still have the old washer in the basement. I know I should give it away, but who wants it? Nobody wants to use a hand washer anymore. Even people on welfare want an automatic washer. It's just like a black and white TV.

People on welfare don't want a black and white TV; they want a color TV. We got a color TV three years ago. I told Harry, 'Look, let's treat ourselves well; let's get a color TV.' He said naw, anything he wanted to watch he could watch on black and white as well as color and I coaxed him into it. Wouldn't you know it, we got it and Harry wants to watch all his shows in color and I end up watching the black and white when I'm downstairs ironing.

"The trouble is we still have a hard time spending money. I guess it still makes me a little uncomfortable."

Harry agreed, "We were brought up to watch a dollar. We have a few dollars now but still we can't throw it away without feeling guilty. If we were to spend \$100 today it wouldn't hurt us, we wouldn't miss it, but we'd think twice. We could spend alot more money and not go without, but you just don't do it because you have it. I think that's the times we were brought up in."

Vicky says, "I'm satisfied that I have helped our two children. They wanted to go to school and we were able to help them. This gives me some inner peace. Now Harry and I should spend some on ourselves, but it's difficult."



Vicky gets up to go into the kitchen and says, "I'm going to put a couple of baked potatoes in. Please stay for dinner; we're having roast pork." "Oh", she says, "that's right--you're Jewish and I'm asking you if you want pork. You don't follow that do you? If you want, I'll put a steak on for you."

"No, that's fine," I say. "I eat pork at home."

"Really Dick," she says, "if you don't like it, I'll give you anything you want."

"Thanks Vicky. It will be fine."

A little later Vicky yells from the kitchen, "Come to the table, dinner's ready."

We dig into the meal, the fire still crackling in the background. Harry and I each take a new beer as Vicky says, "Harry's been here all his life, but I was brought up in Maine. I didn't come down here till I graduated from high school."

"There wasn't much work in Maine so I came down to Andover, where my sister was working. I worked in the comptroller's household at Andover Academy. I did cooking and taking care of laundry. It makes me laugh when I think how hard I worked the two years I was there. I worked incredibly hard, and I can't say I liked it, but it was a paying job."

"I enjoyed my next job more; I worked for a very wealthy woman who had a home in New York and a five story summer home in this area. I worked hard, but the woman, who was very wealthy, treated me very well, almost like a daughter. I used to be friendly with her daughter."

"I remember once after I stopped working the girl invited me to visit her in New York. I didn't go, because I thought I'd have to have all kinds of fancy clothes, or I'd be embarrassed. I didn't keep up with her. I think now I would have acted differently and kept up with her. Now I can see how silly I was. I know if my Joannie was in a similar situation, she would act differently. That's a generation difference. When I was young, if you were out of your group you couldn't be satisfied as to who you were. Even though this girl was willing to accept me, I would have wanted to have more. I don't think Joannie thinks that way. She wants people to accept her for who she is, and not what she has."