

AFTER THE SERVICE

Funny. As a kid I never noticed the azaleas running riot across the back yards of St. Bart's Way. But after the service for Uncle Pete, my father's younger brother, I stare at the flowers outside the kitchen windows — anything to avoid my mother's eyes jitterbugging around the kitchen.

"Where is he?" She looks first to me, then my wife, then my sister Gail. In the center hall, the guests are arriving: the librarian who lived downstairs from Uncle Pete; my mother's sister and her husband; neighbors and friends. My mother wants to welcome them — her hostess turn always has been flawless and she needs my father to serve drinks at the makeshift bar. But as soon as he had turned into the driveway, my father and his old newspaper buddy headed to the garage with Pete's veteran friends.

"Where is he?"

"They went to the garage," says Gail.

"The garage? What's he doing there?" My mother's eyes oscillate with exhaustion — when I had come down for coffee at dawn I found her cutting radishes into roses into radishes. I had wanted to take her blood pressure, but she laughed me away. Doctor or not, I was still her little boy.

"Maybe he just needs to recoup. Who knows?" Gail says.

"Put a butter knife with the mustard and use that small Lenox bowl."

"I'll see what I can do," I say, grabbing a bag of chips and looking at my wife. A Midwesterner, Kara has never witnessed Baltimore's riotous spring. The flowers masking the stone foundations have renewed some essential calm robbed by my uncle's funeral. Once again I offer a prayer for having found this long-legged woman from the land of practical people. In the back yard, our young sons have wilted into the weathered chaise. The constraint of the funeral has blanched the color from their faces.

I reach for the knob of the side garage door: Drew, our oldest, sliding his six-year-old hand under mine; Frank, three, following.

Even as a child, the door to our garage was the door to mystery: cartons of motor parts, paints, shovels — my father always complained that he never could find a shovel with the right heft — mowers, rakes, fertilizers, and, of course, newspapers. Back then, I would run my fingers over them, hoping their secrets would transform my hands into those of a man. The light from the window silhouettes a circle of men. My father stands near the workbench along the back wall. Above it hang tools — the screwdrivers graduated according to size — hammers, saws, pliers, clippers, an ax; each hung with some good intention.

Charley Anson, my father's buddy, and three men from Uncle Pete's Vietnam veterans group are with my father who has found an intricate fishing reel; its tissue, only a step from dust. A compact man whose eyes are the blue of the Irish Sea, my father seems desperate to put his hands on something finely honed, something well-balanced and running smoothly.

"You know, they're cleaning up the Inner Harbor," he says. "They say we'll be catching rockfish down there soon." Forty years in Baltimore and his voice still has the burr of Boston. "Thought I might go down there mornings. On the other hand, I may just drop some chicken necks in a crab pot and see what I get. What do you think?"

"I caught a perch the other morning off Thames Street," answers a vet in a bolo tie.

My father rummages through some cartons. He pulls out a Volkswagen horn, a can of flea spray, a broken faucet, a basketball pump, and, finally, a bottle of Maryland rye. The liquor lights to amber as he holds it to the appreciative eyes of the waiting men.

“Darn,” he says, “I knew I’d like fishing.”

“Seems like you’ve got a knack for it,” says Charlie Anson.

My father takes a white handkerchief and wipes a plastic lid from an aerosol can, taking special care with the tiny plastic ridges at the rim. Then does the same with others so everyone can drink.

I wonder if the precision he invests in the simplest task has its roots in his training in Latin — the precise conjugation of ancient verbs. His schooling by the Jesuits has given him a courtliness that served him well in a town where Southern probity rules. Too, my father has a hypnotic way with a story: a respect for the enduring power of words — qualities that once won him entry into Baltimore’s inner chambers, those usually closed to a boy from Boston College.

“I think I’ll have a Coke,” says Lenny, the vet in the bolo tie, his voice croaking with longing and resolve.

“Coke sounds fine with me, too,” says Charlie Anson, a vet himself.

My father sends Drew into the house for Cokes and the men fold round the bottle, their eyes searching for an object so as to hide their anticipation.

“You’ve got some fine poles,” says Lenny, noticing old rods across the rafters.

“You want a fishing pole?” Charlie Anson asks Frank.

“I need one for Drew. He’s my brother,” Frank chirps. My father’s eyes contract at the stab of “brother.” He starts as if he feels some hand reaching on a dark tenement stairway.

Raised alone by my grandmother Nora, my father and Pete had only each other. For of all the mysteries, commandments, sacraments, and deadly sins Nora knew, she learned best the six-word admonition, “Spare the rod, spoil the child.” That faith she practiced to perfection.

Drew runs across the lawn with the Cokes and my father pours them to the men nursing their sobriety and pours the rye for the others with a ceremonial flair. He hands the drinks to the circle of men and boys, and, with his plastic cup, salutes.

The circle returns the gesture.

“To men who jump to the sky,” says my father.

“To paratroopers.”

“To Pete.”

“To Pete.”

“To Pete.”

My parents rarely mentioned Pete after I was ten, but before that my uncle was very much the subject of conversation. “Should I ask your brother?” my mother would ask whenever a holiday or birthday neared.

She came from a large family whose manner of regarding each other as friends as well as relatives was profoundly genuine. At those innumerable gatherings, those birthdays, holidays, baptisms some current affirmed their essential decency.

My mother considered the meagerness of my father’s family a pity and saw her attempts to encircle his brother in hers as something that could only be enriching, for my uncle’s life careened between a veteran’s hospital and a second floor apartment on Lanvale Street.

If Pete were on Lanvale Street, my parents — and I can still remember them sitting at the kitchen table — would discuss who was coming, and who was not, since my uncle could not tolerate surprises. Not even loud noises.

Whatever the occasion, he always came early and ensconced himself in the blue wingback chair to the right of the fireplace. I believe those times, while my mother fussed and padded about in her slippers before putting on her dress shoes were the richest domestic scenes Pete ever witnessed.

When the others came, Pete was unfailingly polite, even engaging, always remembering everyone's name, where they worked. He shared my father's intelligence and knack for surprising metaphors. He too had a gift for the long tale and an Irishman's wry, self-deprecating humor.

And my mother's family, treasuring civility as they did, chose to overlook the restless way Pete's eyes moved, his reflexive habit of smoothing his hair and clearing his throat. They were good-hearted people, who had honed graciousness to an art, so they regarded putting Pete at ease as evidence of their own virtue.

Pete, however, would never leave the blue wingback chair. Not even to shake a hand. Only an abrupt rending of the social hubbub — the sudden shattering of a glass, a too-loud laugh— could propel him from that blue cocoon. Then he would rise suddenly, his eyes scanning the crowd for his brother.

I remember the New Year's Day my father was talking with my Uncle Warren about trickle-down economics; they were at the dining room table where a ham sat like a doomed potentate. Never missing a beat, my father turned toward his brother who was just rising from the blue chair: "Ready to go, Pete?"

"Ready as I'll ever be."

And the sound of the party almost drowned out the Volkswagen backing down the drive.

In the garage my father refills the glasses of the solemn circle, but I cover my plastic cap with my palm and step into the yard. The noontime sun has ratcheted up the gaudiness of the flowers, and I understand why Pete once called them "Jell-O mold flowers" — middle class and proud of it.

I go into the kitchen where my mother's older sister, my Aunt Louise, is filling tiny sandwiches with shrimp salad. She makes three, slips a spatula beneath, and slides them — one, two, three — onto a silver tray, her smile spreading all the while: "These should lure those men in from that garage." I suppress the temptation to mention the latest article on cholesterol in *Lancet*: "Your famous shrimp salad, Aunt Louise?"

"Well, it is the least I could do. What with you mother having a houseful and all. Besides, I was really very fond of your uncle."

"Is that a fact?"

"Why, yes. Of course." I calculate quickly; it is over fifteen years since Louise and Pete had been in my parents' home together.

"Where's Mom?"

"The last I saw, she was in the living room, talking to that librarian."

I wander into the dining room where Kara is talking about ceiling molding with my uncle Warren, Louise's husband. When she lifts her arm in a sudden balletic motion, my wife's thrall sifts over my uncle as surely as a net.

These genteel exchanges mingled with the harmonics of silver, china, and crystal and remind me of the cordiality some of my most seriously ill patients assume — the extra effort they make to ask about my sons or how I'm coping with winter in Minneapolis. Civility served in the face of sorrow always has struck me as somehow both fitting and brave.

My mother, her smile brittle with earnestness, pauses in telling Mary Gleason, the only black person in the room, how she "adores" Alice Walker. Her eye catches mine, but I ignore the question her glance holds; she wants to know if my father has come in from the garage.

I introduce myself to Mary and we chat about the difficulty of flying to Baltimore with two small children. She still has the slender elegance I recall from the times my father and I visited Pete on Lanvale Street. Her closely cropped hair has turned grey and enhances the symmetry of her head and her long neck. She is wearing dramatic, oversized glasses and a grey shawl draped over a simple black dress. The rye is with me and I want to be near Mary's center point of utter calm. All about her might be chaos, but in Mary there are only symmetry and balance. An arresting woman, this Mary Gleason.

"Well, the trip wasn't too bad. We flew. We've flown quite a bit because my wife's parents live in Duluth."

“Yours are thoroughly modern children, are they?”

“Very modern. Sometimes, I think too modern.” And then, unable to hold it back any longer, “I just want you to know I have a book that you gave Pete a long time ago.”

“Oh, Pete — he was a great reader. And very eclectic. I loved that about him. He wasn’t stuffy at all. Some people look down on the newer writers; they think no one can live up to the great classics. But not Pete. He was open to anything.”

“Oh I’m afraid this is one of those older ones. It’s *Anna Karenina*.”

“Ah, his favorite. One of his many favorites, I should say. One of mine too.”

“I just wanted you to know, I’ve kept it over fifteen years.” “And you’ve actually read it?” she said smiling.

“Once. Once was enough,” I laugh. “When I was fifteen.” That summer my father took me to the veterans’ hospital. I think he wanted to show me that just when the horizon seems endless, time slips away from you, and you become an onlooker to the only life you’ll ever have; at fifteen I was as rootless as the dandelion puffs my sons chase.

The hospital was on a split of land stretching into the upper Chesapeake. Perhaps it was hoped the undulating shoreline grasses could coax peace into splintered souls. Men with stubbled chins and pastel robes lined the corridors. I remember thinking, “These are baby colors: pink, pale green. Why do these men wear these colors? They were soldiers. Why dress them like babies?” Their harrowed eyes studied the bay’s shimmering surface as if it were a Ouija board.

At the end of the corridor Uncle Pete was alone in a room lit by windows reaching almost from floor to ceiling. He had fashioned a chaise by pulling up a chair to face the one he sat in and stretched out his long legs.

“Christ all mighty and all the saints, will ya look at what the cat’s dragged in!”

“Don’t get up. We only just drove sixty miles,” my father said.

“I won’t. Why? You don’t want a chair, do you? After a drive like that, it’ll do you good to stand for an hour or so. Strengthens the legs. That’s why they don’t have pews in the great cathedrals of Europe. Stand through a year of High Masses and you’re ready for anything. All the best crusaders had legs like iron. It’s a fact.”

“You’re full of it.”

“That may be, but I’m not the one with tired legs, am I?” Pete stretched out further.

“What are you reading?”

“Something better than that tref you publish, unless you want to put Tolstoy up there with some wacko columnist.”

“You still trying to read *Ann Karenina*? Christ, Pete, you’ve been tryin to read that since you were sixteen.”

“Actually it’s Kitty, Jack, she turns me on. Kitty and those high heels of hers. But listen to me talkin about bein ‘turned on’ in front of a wee tiny innocent such as we have here. How old are you now? Nine? Ten?”

“Fifteen.” I knew he was kidding, but still, it felt raw.

“You wouldn’t be lyin to me now?”

“No, Uncle Pete. Honest. I’m fifteen.”

“Ah, that’s okay. It’s only a wee bit of a fib. Go to confession. Don’t worry about it.”

“Really. I’m fifteen”

“Then you must have the stunted growth curse that runs through our family. You’ve told him about the stunted-growth relatives in Ireland, haven’t you, Jack?”

“Actually, I’m five-ten.”

Pete grinned at me from his makeshift chaise. “Tell him, Jack. The poor souls with the stunted growth curse, most of them do just fine. People generally have more sense than to confuse them with leprechauns. And if they do, they’ll pay for it because the leprechauns take great offense. You’ll hit your growth any time now.”

“Really, I’m five-ten, Uncle Pete. And that was three months ago. I might have grown even more since then.”

“Yeah. Yeah. By whose yardstick? That apostate school you play basketball for? I read about it in that rag of a paper of your father’s. St. Paul’s is it? What can you expect? A school with English leanings if ever there was one. It’s a fact they use them foreshortened yardsticks. Goes with their peckers. Still, I guess St. Paul’s is okay for someone with your unfortunate genes. Don’t you think?” I shrugged.

“You better get him a specialist, Jack. He could be having a seizure of some sort. Fine young man like this — doesn’t look you in the eye. Twitches instead of sayin’ ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’ It’s a damn shame. Could be the stunted growth. A damn shame. A fine boy like this, just about to hit his growth.”

I tell Mary how relieved I had been when my father finally set down a bag of books she had sent. And I remember how happy Pete was as he read each title: *Washington Square*; *I, Claudius*; *Emma*, and, last, *Anna Karenina*. Pete gave it to me and I accepted it, just so I wouldn’t hear any more about stunted growth.

And I tell her how, when I saw Pete and my father out on the seawall, they reminded me of the halves of a seed, but I never tell her how, when we got home, the phone rang just as my mother asked about Pete. Before my father could reply, my mother answered it and spent the rest of the evening chatting with Aunt Louise.

Mary and I talk about other books Pete loved and just when I’m about to tell her I plan to reread *Anna Karenina*, Frank’s howl of anger and pain pierces the white noise of sociability. Kara is down the steps and across the lawn before I am through the kitchen door.

“Drew threw a brick at me,” Frank wails.

“I did not. You put your hand in the way, you little stupido.”

“That’s enough.” Kara holds Frank close, but the threeyear-old is too angry to let her see his hand.

“We would have had him if you hadn’t put your hand in the way, you little stupido.”

“That’s enough I say.” Kara tries to cuddle Frank’s head to her shoulder. I examine his hand. The bones are so flexible, they’re not so much bones at all as the promise of bones. But the skin is abraded. Kara carries him into the house, and I turn to Drew.

“He put his hand in the way. I told him.”

“Told him what?”

“To move.”

“What were you doing?”

“Looking for a snake.”

“Where?”

“There.” A pile of bricks along the garage has been pulled apart. “We wanted to get him and bring him home.”

“How were you going to do that?”

“We were going to ask Grandma for a jar.”

“Is everything okay over there?” my father calls from the driveway.

“Fine,” I answer just as Uncle Warren steps onto the porch and lifts a silver tray with tiny sandwiches over his head like a winning athlete. He heads toward the brotherhood of the garage.

“Why don’t you go get a sandwich?” And as Drew trots across the yard, I go to check on his brother. As I pass through the kitchen, my mother repeats her lament, “Isn’t he ever going to come in? There are people here.”

“He knows that, Mom. There are people out there too.”

“Well, you know what I mean. It’s just that he should come in.”

“He’s just tired, Mom.”

“And will you look at that?”

“What?”

“Your Uncle Warren. He’s just laid that tray right on the drive. Nothing under it. Your Uncle Warren just laid the silver tray smack on the driveway,” she says to Gail — a sort of pop quiz that I’ve noticed mothers spring on daughters.

“The one from Grandma?” Gail asks on cue.

“For our anniversary,” my mother finishes. I go upstairs to check Frank’s hand.

Kara is sitting on the rim of the tub, rocking him; her eyes tell me all is well. Out the window, on the driveway, I hear the men, their conversation a current of repartee.

“This party could use some pickles,” my uncle Warren says. “So happens I’ve got some in the car.” A car trunk slams and then Warren asks, “Did I say ‘pickles’? Damn, I meant ‘pickled.’ Amazing what a difference one letter can make. Age will do that to ya.” I don’t have to look out the window to know he’s unearthed another bottle. Charley Anson says he could use another Coke and asks Lenny if he wants one too. My father sends Drew for paper cups.

The talk turns to the condition of the driveway that runs between my parents’ yard and their neighbors’ the Cottmans. Lenny tells my father that he’s worked on a road crew, and laying a good driveway isn’t as easy as it looks; there are all sorts of things to consider: drainage, roots, shade, sun, sewer lines. All sorts of things. My father starts asking him easy questions and then focuses on drainage when it’s clear Lenny knows what he’s talking about.

“You want to minimize any slant toward your basement. If it has to go anywhere, let it go towards your neighbors. Of course, you don’t want no lawsuit neither. The important thing is the slant and how deep for a well-laid drive.”

“If he’s talkin’ about deep and well-laid, ya know he’s lyin’,” says another vet. “He don’t know nothin’ about deep and well-laid.”

“Better to lie about deep and well-laid than tell the truth about short and sorry like you, you miserable old peckerwood,” Lenny says.

Kara looks out the bathroom window. “Why don’t they come in? What are they all doing out there?”

Drew’s voice drifts upwards: “Where are the pickles?” The men laugh and Frank stirs at the sound of his brother’s voice. “I’m all right, now.”

“Maybe you should leave the snake alone for now,” Kara suggests. But he’s already gone to join his brother.

Kara and I go across the hall to the spare bedroom. The architectural details stand out: the well-proportioned dormer, the solid brass doorknobs, the eight-over-eight mullioned windows offering a unique perspective on St. Bart’s Way. Kara runs her hand over the wide, common sill. “This millwork,” she murmurs, “it’s beautiful. So difficult to duplicate.” Her fingers, like her legs, are long. Everything about my wife is straight and true.

I remember the Easter I had stood at that same window and watched my Uncle Pete walk away from the house on St. Bart’s Way where he would never be welcome again.

“So what’s going on? Why aren’t they coming in?” Kara says. “Your mother, she must be having a fit. It’s not like your father. What’s going on?”

“I think it’s because of Pete.”

“What about Pete?” “It’s complicated.”

“Yeah?”

“I think my father ... I think he may be protesting.”

“Protesting what?”

“Against Vietnam.” And so I tell her that I thought my father was not coming in as a protest against hospitality served to honor a brother who wasn’t welcome.

I tell her about the surprisingly warm, rainy Easter when my father was late at the paper and my mother’s preparations were especially elaborate — she had just inherited a set of fine china and she wanted to show it off.

Pete was in the blue chair; he had brought Gail a gray plush, lop-eared rabbit, and we were considering scurrilous names like Mr. Snotgot and Sir T. Tail Wigglesmore. Suddenly a noise loud enough to make the lilies on the dining room table tremble rolled through our house.

“What was that?” Pete’s chest heaved.

“It’s thunder, Uncle Pete.” Gail’s face puckered in bewilderment.

“That’s not thunder,” his voice hoarse.

“Yes, it is so.” And then another clap.

“My god.” He was out of the chair and clutching Gail to his chest. She started to cry; she had dropped the bunny. “My god, we’ve got to get out of here.” Pete was trying to get my arm.

“It’s just thunder, Uncle Pete.”

My mother, in from the kitchen. “What’s wrong? What is it?”

“We have to get out of here.” Still holding Gail, steering me into my mother, pushing me to her, her face ashen. Another clap. Pete thrusting me to my mother, making her stumble against the table.

“Move! Move! For Christ’s sake. We’ll be hit!” My mother still uncomprehending. Frozen.

“Move!”

Still frozen. And, then, my mother, stumbling, grabbing the table cloth, and china — her very good china — cascading to the floor, all crash and clatter and shards.

“No! No, Pete!”

And another clap. “Christ, they’re close. We’ve got to get out.” Pete’s face red with rage at my mother’s stupidity, trying to grab her.

“For God sakes, Pete. Put her down!” Gail screaming now. My mother trying to wrest her away. Me stumbling against her. Lightning so bright the silver caught it. Another clap.

And my uncle grabbing a knife. “Do as I say! We’ve got to get out. Christ, they’re close. We’ve got to get out.”

“My God, Pete! My God. Put her down! Stop! For the love of God! Stop! ”

And suddenly rain sheeting against the window, my uncle pressing his palm against the pane, and then turning to my mother, grief contorting his body. And then sinking to the carpet. And burying his face in the corner of the linen tablecloth. And Pete sobbing.

And sobbing still as I took Gail by the hand up the stairs to the room with its unique perspective on Bart’s Way. And maybe sobbing still as I watched him slowly walk away. And maybe still when my father’s Volkswagen turned the corner, made a U-turn, and Pete got in. And all the while hearing those other sobs, the ones of my mother as she and Aunt Louise picked up shards of china. And my mother groaning, “He had a knife, Lou, a knife.”

When I finish, Kara’s eyes resolve that nothing like that will ever happen to her sons. I enfold her and think how frail we are when measured against the times we are born to. And when she pulls away, the flash of an ankle bracelet shows in the swirl of my wife’s skirts.

By the time I come downstairs, the men have wound their way down the drive to the front of the house. My father and Lenny are talking about roofs, Lenny saying that replacing a roof does no good at all unless your gutters are good. He knows; his brother was a roofer and most roofing problems start with gutter and downspout problems. He has a slight man’s agility and leaps onto the porch’s broad railing. Holding on to the gutter, he inches his way along, commenting about water damage, rotting shingles and rust, and just when he is across from the front door, my mother, followed by Mary Gleason, opens it.

“Lenny, here, is giving me some roofing tips. His brother’s a roofer,” says my father. I search his face for conciliation, but his eyes yield nothing. Such is his victory.

“Mary has to leave,” my mother says, only her mouth smiling.

“Here, Mary, let me drive you,” my father says, taking out his keys before my mother can object.

Charlie Anson is on a cell phone talking to the paper. He wants to use the corporate skybox for that night’s ball game. “Yeah, yeah, a coupla vets here. Heroes, for Christ sake. Christ, you should see the decorations they have. I never seen such scrambled eggs. Golden bough clusters and everything.” When he cinches the skybox, he turns to my father. “You comin, Jack?”

“Maybe we’ll join you later. What do you say, Ned? We could take the boys.” So the three of us get into the back of his car, Mary in front. My father is deferential, even tender towards her, holding the door and making certain her seatbelt is comfortable.

“The azaleas are especially vivid this year,” she remarks, as he pulls away.

“Maybe the cool and rainy spring,” he says. The streets gradually became wider, emptying their traffic onto a thoroughfare, a rib of commerce leading to a grand convergence at the harbor’s edge. Only when the car has entered into a perfect syncopation of lights and speed do my father and Mary feel a dispensation to say “Pete.”

“It was a lovely service.”

“I think Pete would have liked it,” says my father. “I think so. Especially the piper.”

“I had a devil of a time finding one. I can tell you.”

“It was worth it.”

“I was wondering, Mary, do you want the flag?”

“The flag? Oh, I don’t know. I don’t know what I’d do with it. Don’t you want it, Jack?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what I’d do with it, either. It’s in the trunk for crying’ out loud. Heck of place for it, but I just didn’t know where to put it.”

“Well, let me think about it. I wonder what people do with those flags. Put them on the mantle? In a drawer somewhere?”

“Might be an interesting story. I bet some people burn them.”

“I bet they do. Oh, I bet they do.”

When my father turns onto Lanvale Street, the house where Pete lived above and Mary lived below is dark. She turns to my father, “Well, I guess this is it. I guess it will be what it will be. Either a beginning. Or an end. But the truth is that I really only like endings in books. Other than that, I’m sort of a middle person.”

“I know, Mary. So am I.”

She waits as my father opens the car door for her and as he puts her key in her lock, ceding to him his need for chivalry, his need to act. And when he opens the door, the entry is as dark as the farthest reaches of memory.

Then my father drives down Lanvale Street, neither turning north, towards St. Bart’s Way, nor south, towards the game. He can, I realize, see into the distance only as far as the next streetlight leads him. His hands on the wheel are brownflecked with something surfacing. Something ineluctable and final. Something stronger than bone that one day will leave my father alive only in Gail and in me. And, then, only in my boys. At the corner, he slows and looks over his shoulder at them asleep in the rear. There, they rest. Boy limb over boy limb. Palms turned toward the gathering night. Brothers in repose.