

Chuck Lyons

THE LEFT HAND OF GOD

John was in his suit in his coffin with a red and white pin in his left lapel. I couldn't remember ever seeing John in a suit before. The pin was his membership button from the Polish-American Club. Our relatives, John's and mine, fluttered around the coffin, alighting to talk and moving on like house sparrows.

I was sure John hadn't joined the Polish-American Club out of pride in his Polish roots or a love of the culture; he joined because it was walking distance from where he lived and he could drink there without having to worry about the Blacks and Hispanics who had taken over the neighborhood. They weren't allowed in.

John was only half Polish anyway. On his mother's side. The other half was Belgian like me. Our parents were brother and sister, two of the five children of Belgian immigrants who had landed in New York a century ago and moved upstate to Rochester.

It was snowing when I drove to the funeral home along Hudson Avenue, that street that had once been so important to us all, the main street of our childhood, and was now only the fastest way through a rough part of the city. Snow had been blowing across the road, pelting the dark figures huddled in the plastic bus shelters and teenagers in bulky coats and sneakers.

The Polish-American Club was next door to where Wojacski's Bakery had been. Now it was the Church of Jesus Christ the Living Savior. The funeral home was next to that. St. Stanislaus Church, the Polish church, was a block away and still functioning. It had become some kind of Catholic tourist attraction now and drew more people to Sunday Mass than it had when we were kids. John had stayed in the old neighborhood, living across the street from the house he grew up in, the only one of us who had not fled the city.

I'd been in the Polish-American Club when John held a bachelor party there for his son, the only time I remember ever meeting his son. He had been standing inside the door of the funeral home by the coat closets when I arrived, and he greeted me by name. I couldn't remember his.

We had also gone to the Polish-American Club when I was a kid. There were several Polish clubs in that part of the city then, and I went to all of them at one time or another. John's father, my mother's brother, had

seven kids and a Polish wife. We went to a lot of weddings at the Polish-American Club. Long tables with white paper taped to them, cluttered with beer bottles and paper plates with broken potato chips and cigarette butts. Polkas and accordions. A group of men clustered together in the bar laughing.

My mother would get drunk there.

“Ruthie, why do you always have to ruin everything,” John’s father said to her one time.

I stood at the coffin amid the circling relatives, and I looked at John’s made-up face and at the suit and the pin from the Club.

The Belgians drank as much as the Polish. They always had a glass of Genesee beer in front of them—all of them. Not yet tonight. But they would later; when the funeral parlor closed they would go to someone’s house in the neighborhood, Polish and Belgians alike. Maybe John’s. They would sit around the kitchen table, eat potato chips, drink beer, and talk about their departed brother, cousin, or nephew. I was raised with that.

That’s what John would have done too if it were someone else’s funeral.

John and I grew up together. He lived ten blocks away from us, and I didn’t see him everyday. Not even every week. But we were about the same age (he was a year younger than me). I saw him many weekends and we played together and told stories and lied to each other. Then he went in the Army and to Vietnam, and I went to college. When he came home we smoked marijuana together in the house I had inherited from my mother.

The family didn’t know what happened in that house.

When my father died at age 48, we were alone there, my mother and I.

They told me in the morning. It was a Saturday, and when I came out of my bedroom my mother was sitting on the couch with a neighbor woman. I stood there on the rug in my pajamas and she told me. That’s all. She just told me. I went into my bedroom, got dressed, went outside, and shoveled the snow that had fallen while I was sleeping and my father was dying.

The following Christmas I got more presents from the family than I had ever gotten before, but none of them seemed to know what to say.

My mother couldn’t bear the loss. At night I would lie in bed in the front of that house, listening to her talk to my dead father, and watching the rectangles of light race around the walls when a car passed in the street.

There were pictures pinned on a display board next to John’s coffin, speckles of life, frozen moments. There was John in black and white with a mischievous grin as if he had just pulled a joke. He was wearing a work shirt with his name in an oval on the right front and a pocket with a small

metal ruler on the left. Taken in one of the machine shops he worked in. He was a machinist and was always able to get a job. He said he was in demand. And he used that, quitting jobs and switching shops pretty much as the mood struck. Never staying very long at any one place and never becoming any more than a machinist.

There was another black-and-white photo of John holding the waist of a woman I suppose was his wife. That marriage lasted long enough to produce two children and not much longer. I don't know if I ever met John's wife. After that he seemed to have nothing to do with women. I never knew him to talk about a girlfriend. There were two older women he did talk about. They went places, he said, drove around and talked dirty. They were his traveling companions, he said. There was a picture of John with his brothers, the three with their arms around each other. With his brothers and his two sisters. With his parents. There was the high-school graduation picture and one of him in his Army uniform. One of him standing outside the Polish-American Club.

"Ruthie, why do you always have to ruin everything," my uncle had said.

She drank more in that house. She had gone through the Bible in her grief and found no comfort, gone to the priest and found nothing. The beer worked best for her. And as she drank to deal she grieved more and slipped into dementia. "Where's my tin box?" she asked, looking for the box that held her bills and receipts. Pacing the floor, wringing her hands, looking frightened, smelling like spoiled meat, with wide hazel eyes that never blinked. "Where's my tin box? Where's my tin box?" I'd take her into the bedroom and show her the box was where it always was in the bottom of her dresser.

I'd close the dresser and she would ask, "Where's my tin box?"

I was fifteen then.

I never saw John much after college and Vietnam. It was only in the few years before he died that we came into contact again. We talked sometimes. He told me about the reunions of his branch of the family "out at Lou's place."

"We shoot skeet," he said, "and there's a pool."

But he didn't seem very enthusiastic. He told me about his jobs and about how valuable he was in his trade, how in demand he was.

He came to my own son's wedding.

He spent his nights at the Polish-American Club and some of the smaller bars just north of the city, spent his days working in the machine shops, went places with his “old ladies,” and died. That was that.

“Ruthie, why do you do that?” her brother had said.

She began lighting her hair on fire and sticking her head in the oven. I slapped out the flames in her thin graying hair and turned off the gas. If I came home from school and she was gone, I would search the house expecting to find that she had hanged herself in a closet or some corner of the cellar.

I never did.

I did come home from school one afternoon and found them there—two of her brothers. They were sitting in the living room on the couch with her, talking seriously. Then she went away. They took her to the psychiatric hospital, and I was alone in the house.

I was seventeen then.

They never talked to me about her. I barely saw any of them again until her funeral, when I was supposed to have them all over to the house to drink beer and eat sandwiches, but I refused.

Before she died I visited her every Sunday at the hospital, and listened to her worry aloud about her tin box and beg me to get her out of “this place.” Then I got married myself, moved my wife into that little house, and had a child. Went to school, got a job, and grew older.

John had done the same—gotten married, gotten a job, had children. Now John was in his suit in his coffin with a red and white pin in his left lapel.

I left the funeral home, went outside into the snow that was blowing horizontally across Hudson Avenue and the small parking lot of the funeral home, hitting against the side of the building that had been Wojacski’s Bakery and against the front of the Polish-American Club.

And I went home. ☞