

A Paper in Three Acts

Act I

Let Us Now Praise Honorable Men

To borrow the title of Fred McGavran's anniversary dinner paper, the voices in my head now remind me to. A. Maintain my resolve to be forthright because B. A person only gets one debut.

During the last two years, I regularly, and most thankfully, found myself in the midst an American rarity: quietly captivated in a genteel mosh pit of wide-ranging experiences and opinions, delivered and received by a company of honorable men. It quickly became apparent that, thankfully, since this wasn't an army induction, nor a board meeting, nor a political rally, therefore absent are the bully-pulpit and oratory which often emanates at such functions with – to put it kindly – a more pointed, less generous, and woefully ill-informed, train of thought. The word train should be underlined, for if the innocent strays unwarily in the switching yard, the heat of the steam engine will singe his skin. Heaven forbid if he's tied to the metaphoric tracks of some "authority's" ideology.

I treasure the experience of coming through the red door and hearing from our constituency about history, courage, and relevance. It's better even than college – no tests and drinks at the start. Once today's date was circled on my dance card as the time to tango, all the papers preceding tonight were doubly smart and witty and, therefore, intimidating. As this paper was drafted, time and again I wanted to reference an insight gleaned from a fellow member as I gratefully listened, way back there. Many authors force themselves to stop reading their favorite authors while working on a novel as a means of guarding against the voice on the page morphing into the voice in their head. My situation paralleled their dilemma as with every passing week, another idea sprouted up in the midst of this paper, like flowers brightening up my vegetable garden. It was while reviewing, i.e., pruning, that I realized the greatest value of this weekly buffet, or in our terms, a budget of ideas, viewpoints and fellowship.

The adage that we stand on the shoulders of others could not be more true than here at the Club. Visually, my appreciation takes on the form of the food pyramid. I suspect the many physicians here tonight could remind us why this beloved icon has been pitched, but to replace it with what looks like a cross between a TV tray and a pie plate seems like a major Freudian slip to me. Anyway, I will utilize that classic triangle –FDA and dieticians be damned – for my thanks.

At the top, I'd like to first single out my two sponsors, Dick Wendel and Tony Covatta. The next layer of thanks is for the officers of the Literary Club who kindly provided support when life showed its more fearsome side in the last year. The third layer is the membership at large – august, avuncular, and delightful in a dignified way. And last, a sincere thanks across the centuries to the group that John Diehl tips his hat to annually, our founders; for without their vision, wherewithal and moxie 162 years ago, we'd be roaming the streets with a paper in hand, in search of literate companionship.

Act II

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men

The curtain rises with Jerry Kathman's wonderful paper on Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger still ringing in our ears. In support of his thesis as to the enduring legacy of these musicians lobbying for social change through their songs, this story referenced their literary counterparts, James Agee and Walker Evans, who collaborated on the landmark "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men" a book which also aimed to change the world.

A few years after the dire conditions of the Depression settled into America and savaged the landless poor, but still well before the popular press reported on their struggles, Agee and Walker traveled with America's tired, poor and downtrodden. Chronicling their desperate lives in words and pictures, their collaborative work shook the public with its gravity, in the same way that the off-beat structure of the text unsettled readers.

Fifty years later, my hometown's greatest writer graduated high school, or more accurately, narrowly escaped eternal detention. I spent many hours in Dale Maharidge's company, either swearing as we played nickel ante poker and feared that our whole paycheck of \$40 could be lost in a hostile hand of cards or diving out of the way of an overturned bottle, for Dale's nickname was Dr. Spill. For a bunch of underage hooligans, which we were, there was nothing worse than going home broke and smelling of beer.

Dale followed the path of other writers, which means he often wandered, seemingly without direction. He tried the nearby community college for a spell, but both he and the institution quickly tired of one another. He then did what countless newspaper reporters did, which was wear out a couple pairs of shoes trying to chase down a story or two, and then wear out a couple dictionaries and typewriters trying to write those stories up in such a way that pleased editors, readers, and himself...in that order.

He moved up the newsprint food chain, from the local rag covering city council, PTAs, farm reports, and the police blotter, on to freelance features for the Cleveland Plain Dealer. Not surprisingly when one grows up in the perpetual winter of northern Ohio, he longed for a life in California, he wanted to follow the road west, just like Steinbeck and Kerouac. He signed on with one of the legendary liberal papers of our time, the Sacramento Bee, forged a bond with a kindred spirit, a young photographer named Michael Williamson, and together they profiled the next generation of hoboes, destitute, and unfortunate.

Somewhere in the midst of their adventures, they hit upon the idea of undertaking a follow-up to Agee and Evans. They journeyed back to the same Southern towns, and found, sadly, that the sons and grandsons of those portrayed in "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men," were living in the same dire conditions, and in some cases, the same houses. Their work was entitled "And Their Children After Them" and it won the Pulitzer Prize back in 1990.

Here's the part that few other people know. Dale was working at the obituary desk the day the call came in that informed him of the selection. He said thanks, but there was enough of a trace of disappointment in his voice that the caller asked if there was a problem.

Dale, being Dale, replied that what they were really hoping for was the Robert F. Kennedy Award for Excellence in Journalism given by the RFK Center for Justice and Human Rights.

After calling his folks, he called me. I was working for Houghton Mifflin in Boston at the time, which coincidentally, was the house that published Agee and Evan's work half a century beforehand. Dale asked if when he and Michael flew to New York to accept the award if they could fly first to Boston and visit. I offered them a place to stay the night before, but he said they were coming in on the red-eye so they wouldn't miss a day of work.

On the appointed day, Dale and Michael showed up in the lobby of 2 Park Street looking no worse for the wear, or no worse than remembered. We went up into my office, an odd space that had two doors, letting me daily live out the phrase of never knowing whether I was coming or going – and a enormous set of windows that looked over the Boston Common, leaked cold air all winter, and in the summer, welcomed in the trance-inducing chants of the Krishnas. I showed the boys two famed works on the walls, each with a photo of former US Presidents whose books Houghton had also published. I pointed out to Dale and Michael that the letters under the photos, in both cases, were inquiries as to possible monies owed on their respective royalties.

We laughed and caught up. I told Michael about Dale's monicker of Dr. Spill. Michael showed me the spot on his pants where Dale's Diet Coke had landed during their flight. I asked Dale what he was going to do with the award money. He said maybe a new used car – his current beater, as he called it, sat unlocked outside the Sacramento Bee offices, often with the windows down all day because it wasn't worth the cost of repairs when the thieves would bust the locks or the glass to get at a radio which was long gone. The night he left work after midnight only to find a prostitute turning a trick in the backseat was the last straw – he tossed the keys in the front seat and walked away.

He said he'd let me read his acceptance speech except that was bad luck, so he promised to send a copy afterwards. We had whiled away a little too much time, so they had to quickly gather up their things. I gave them directions to the Blue Line of the T, which by far was the fastest way to Logan Airport. We shook hands, said goodbye, and off they sped.

Ten minutes later, the phone on my desk rang – Dale asked if perhaps his glasses had been left in my office. Glancing around the mess, I saw them on the bookshelf. I told him not to board until the last possible minute, sprinted to the T, squeezed through the doors of a departing train, and thankfully with no security measures in 1990, made it to his gate with five minutes to spare.

Since then, that barely-made-it-out-of-high-school hack (as he called himself) has been a visiting professor of journalism at Columbia University and Stanford, and was a Nieman Fellow at Harvard University. The foreword to his upcoming book was written by Mr. Bruce Springsteen. His devotion to writing the stories of the underclass would make Agee, Evans, Seeger and Guthrie proud. As are all us knuckeheads who knew him way back when...and read him still. Our world needs the muckrakers and fiery, unflinching viewpoints they share. Thank you, Jerry, for reminding me of that, and thanks, Dale, for uncovering the stories of those almost left behind, those who by the accident of birth, need a hand to hold and help lift them up, not the back of a hand that marks their plight.

Act III

Let Us Now Praise All Men and Women

And so we arrive at the central part of this paper, a work of fiction, otherwise entitled:

The Eulogist

Even though the congregation sat hushed, Cheever cleared his throat, lightly tapped the microphone, and nodded solemnly at the hundred people gathered there, all dressed in mourning black and navy blue. In the stillness of the church, Cheever waited. A casket rested in the center of the aisle. His hands gripped the side of the pulpit to steady his legs, which quavered and felt as if they might buckle. Odd.

For over five decades, James Cheever Snell Jr. had been speaking on behalf of the dearly departed. A person might rightly think after such tenure that he'd feel no nervousness whatsoever. But this time was different and his unsettled condition betrayed him. His heart seemed to miss every fourth beat, so his internal metronome waltzed instead of marched, his thoughts off balance. His breathing was shallow and rough, like the rapids at Mill Creek. He could feel his pulse at his temples and along his collar. The tips of his ears felt hot.

He wondered if he'd be able to make it through Sam's eulogy. Sam had been his best friend since elementary school almost 70 years ago. They'd grown up and grown old together. Cheever had married Margaret two days after high school ended. Sam had married her sister, Ann. Sam and Ann had a long and happy life together, celebrating their golden anniversary just two days before Ann died in a car crash. Margaret passed a decade later...to the day. In the same way that Ann's death had rendered Sam without purpose, Margaret's passing had ripped a hole in Cheever's existence.

Before that day at Sam's service, his most recent eulogy had been for Margaret, six months and four days ago. So, so much had changed in that half year. There was no going back, Cheever knew this, but there was, as he learned, no going forward either.

If asked, he might be tempted to say that he couldn't rightly recall the first time he stood behind the pulpit, but that's not because his memory was failing. Instead, the eulogy had been so unflaggingly awful that he preferred not to remember. He stammered, he lost his place, he didn't pause for effect or significance, he didn't know what to do with his hands, his eyes were unfocused, and his feet felt rooted. He used the phrase "words cannot describe" and then tried to do just that. Yet somehow, everyone who came up to his afterwards remarked on his composition and his composure.

Compounding his misgivings was the fact that the first eulogy had been for his father, delivered on September 19, 1964. Pre-cumidin, pre-pacemaker, pre-back-up-and-at-'em recovery regiment, his father's first heart attack was followed by two weeks of bed rest. On the fifteenth day, James Cheever Snell Senior stood...and fell straightaway, his feet swept out from under him by the second scythe swing of myocardial infarction. This time, his soul followed his body down. Down, down, down, onto the bedroom floor, out the

front door, feet first, and on to eternal rest. And it fell to him, James Snell's youngest son, to herald his days above ground.

Looking back, he had many theories about what made it possible to stand at the front of the church and recite the virtues, but not the vices, of his father...even though the latter outnumbered the former three to one. Maybe that's why Joe and John, his older brothers, deferred when asked to speak, for their recollections would have been more pained as they too often bore the brunt of his temper. Instead, they sat in the front row and looked up at him. For the first time in his life, his brothers looked up **to** him.

During the few passages where emotion had snuck up on him, he flashed back to the damage done to his father by the bottle. Cheever soldiered through, describing the man as he'd been before alcoholism grabbed him by the throat. Cheever pushed beyond the falter, claimed his space on the altar, and took control of the tremble. Cheever held steady.

In the end, he managed not only to eulogize his father, he flat-out lionized him. He found the five most complimentary moments in his father's life and moved them front and center. He embellished the truth, but just enough. Last, he found a couple metaphoric apples in the overgrown orchard of his father's time on this earth and polished them up until they shone like the flashing lights at the railroad crossing that ran through the middle of town. He buried the bad, along with his dad, and everyone was as grateful for his omissions as they were for his commissions.

Afterwards, his brothers, relatives and neighbors embraced him, patted him on the back, blessed him. He remembered thinking it was crazy, he wasn't the man of the hour, that was his father. But it was his father's finest hour...and he had helped make it so.

Eulogy number two was for his Uncle Jerry. As he spoke the first few lines, he winced when felt a flourish swirl up inside him, just as the mid-winter snow swirled outside the window in the gray twilight. At that very moment, he believed he found his real calling. It was a post he'd never applied for, likewise, one that probably never actually existed: eulogist. Cheever became the designated hitter for the home team. He was the man whom the town of Harris, Indiana, trusted to say the right things.

There was nothing in his background that would make anyone think he had a talent for praising the dead. He was a simple farmer, turning the earth on the same 200 acres that his grandfather had bought after coming back after World War I, land that his father tended thereafter.

Cheever would be the first to say that he had no predisposition to public speaking or turning a phrase. More precisely, what he did seem to have a knack for was knowing which phrase not to turn. Cliches held no quarter in his fond farewells. Sympathy card sentiments never made their way into his text.

Silver-tongued, they claimed, but only he knew that it wasn't his tongue, it was his ears, and it was Margaret. The two of them would spend two or three days sitting with family and extended kin, listening for the telling detail – a flower still worn in the lapel, a kleenex tucked into the sleeve of a sweater, the first car, the first date, the first child.

Margaret would ride along with him in the car to these meetings, then silently sit at the kitchen table, or on a chair in the corner of the room. Cheever would sit on the couch, often between members the grieving family, extending an arm around their shoulders when emotion overtook them. Margaret took notes almost surreptitiously, allowing Cheever to ask a question every now and then without distraction. A few days later, in the formal ceremony of final goodbyes, he'd repeat what they shared in an emotionally controlled and eminently constrained way. It wasn't magic – it was simple, small-town kindness and consideration.

Once or twice early on, he felt put off by a family, as if they might be clamoring for special sanction, in the way that a bride might covet a certain caterer. He later saw through his misperception though, realizing it was simply the family's grief morphing into clumsy conversations while trying to make arrangements. This, he knew, he could help them with this part, so he'd set their minds at ease with multiple reassurances and a parting gift that sang like the choir.

The third eulogy was for Aunt Rose, and by then, he almost felt as if he knew which buttons to push, and when. A dramatic pause after a semi-bashful admission or a wistful romantic recollection of a nephew to his fetching, favorite aunt.

When he sat back down, his heart sounded a steady thump-thump in his chest, counterpoint to the missing beat from the casket. What struck him though was that he didn't feel the shortness of breath or the racing pulse that betrayed nerves from speaking in front of others. He'd found his sweet spot.

He spoke at all five churches in town: Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Baptist and the innocuous vanilla catch-all of Harris Christian. Curiously, he never attended any of these churches on Sunday, preferring to drive Margaret over to the next county so they could pray without the mantle of piety or the specter of a recent passing, be it imagined or real.

Cheever once told his brother Joe that what he came to like most was making his way through the back entrance of each house of worship; Margaret never accompanied him there, choosing to stay in the car until the service began. Cheever later told her that he believed that regardless of how much gold leaf and or how many colorful tapestries might adorn the sanctuary, the soul of the church was borne up by how well the hallways and side rooms were maintained, spaces habitated only by clergy and select few others from the community. If the walls that were hidden from the masses were painted regularly, if the floors were swept and the glass globes of the light fixtures were cleaned of flightless moths...all was indeed good there. But if plaster patches lingered or chairs were stacked but not tucked out of the way – Cheever thought of one church in particular this way, although he'd never say so in public – he'd make certain that the grieving family would only enter and depart through the front doors.

Eulogy #4 – Uncle Lee. Cheever remembers opening his closet and not finding a presentable suit for the service. A farmer is never a dandy or a clothes horse, but Uncle Lee had been the mayor of Somers, the town that shared the western border of Harris. Cheever felt he had to be respectful to the office as well as his uncle. Cousin Bill, Lee's son, owned the men's wear shop on the square, so when Cheever and Margaret came by to interview

him for his recollections, he decided to buy a new suit. They spent hour after hour talking, back by the mirrors and the fitting rooms. A tape measure hung around Bill's neck like a scarf. Both Cheever and Bill were pleased that off-the-rack black fit him perfectly, Cheever due to his frugality, Bill because he knew he couldn't get anything tailored in time. Margaret waited.

Still and all, Cheever was a pragmatist, so he bought another suit while there: a grey one, both the same cut, both the same label. Bill had written in a discount when totaling it up, but never mentioned it – Cheever only noticed when the handwritten receipt surfaced months later in his overcoat pocket.

For subsequent funeral services, Cheever appreciated the formality that the material itself seemed to possess and project; it propped him with the tang and twill of sorrow and sobriety. So different from his normal appearance in coveralls and flannel shirts. Later, maybe the second or third decade, he felt sad when lifting the selected hanger off the pole, for it meant another death had come to Harris, a limestone quarry town that was quietly expiring as well. During the last few years, his remorse had evolved to resolve to extend deserved respect to the proceedings, the jacket and matching slacks were now his uniform, like a military honor guard.

Almost ironically, but certainly heartbreakingly, his mother had never been eulogized. He knew, if he could go back in time, that what he would have delivered that day would simply have been a love letter spoken aloud. He would have rendered his angel real in words and appreciations, as he had also done for his Margaret 80 years later.

His mother had died in childbirth, delivering him. It wasn't so uncommon back then, in the 1930s. But what had made it tragically unexpected is that she had birthed two healthy boys prior. His father was grief-stricken, didn't speak to anyone for days, couldn't even raise his eyes to the congregation as he stood silently at the pulpit. After an eternity of five silent minutes (Cheever had been told this only years and years later), James Snell Sr., almost cracked in half as a cry rattled out his throat.

So began the near-isolation the Cheever and his brothers grew up in, a self-imposed almost-exile that effectively cut off the family from the rest of Harris and allowed his father's drinking to go undetected for over two decades.

After Uncle Lee's funeral, Cheever traced the branches of his family tree in his mind's eye, acknowledging that he'd better be ready, like a doctor on call, as his hardy, hard-working aunts and uncles and neighbors were falling and failing fast, virtually in a flock, succumbing to the final indignities of age and illness. A broken hip leading to a nursing home. The flu leading to hospitalization. It seemed that as soon as they had been whisked away from their homes, the four horsemen of modern era would descend upon them: pneumonia, Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, and cancer. And no one ever seemed to transition back to home care, so a month or two or three later, Cheever would get the call, a cousin asking if he'd be able to say a few words for the parent who had just passed on.

As the very youngest of all the kin, his older cousins began to falter and fall as well. They had lived the good life in comparison to their parent's generation, but they were fast on

their heels toward their respective holes in the hillside. But it was the excess of modern living that chased them: diabetes, obesity, drinking and drugs. Same outcome, though. His second cousin Roger, eulogy #14, had all four...and a super-sized coffin to go with it. Cheever was shocked by the sheer width of the cabinetry – it almost seemed square, instead of rectangular, but getting 300 pounds to fit right took some custom carpentry. Standing alongside in his grey suit, white shirt, a dark blue tie, Cheever felt a bit like a maître de at Harris' one fancy restaurant, perched out by the interstate, where clearly Cousin Roger had deposited too many paychecks.

Paradoxically, as the public speaking became easier, the preparation proved more difficult. He found that having a couple drinks did indeed loosen the flow of words and memories, as he'd spend hours talking through with Margaret and detailing the who and when and where. But then he could tell the next day if he'd had one or two too many – the dateline would elude him, the special moments shared by kin seemed thin in his description, so Margaret would pull out her notes and together they'd stitch together the quilt of memories. Mindful not to slip into his father's and Faulkner's shared pitfall -- if a glass is good, a Mason jar is better – he pulled himself out of this spiral before he crashed.

Sam's funeral came on an early spring day. The minister left church doors open at end of aisle to welcome in the promise of a rebirth of seasons. As Cheever stood there, his eyes raised above the heads of the congregation, he struggled to place precisely where he was. There were three funeral homes in town: one that catered to the Presbyterians, one for the Baptists, and one for everyone else. There were the five churches, but not a single temple, mosque, or cathedral. On a few occasions, the memorial service would be held at the funeral home, or at the individual's home if that was their stated wishes. Here too Cheever was made welcome for he was regarded as the third player in the earthly trinity of mortician, funeral home director, and eulogist. So while he knew he was welcome, where was he? Where was Margaret? Where was Sam?

After Margaret passed, Cheever would find himself often driving without a destination. As he traced the roads of Harris, Indiana and throughout Brown County, his mind would riffle through the names and faces. He remembered the service, the chapel that accompanied each one's final firmament. If it fell to lawyers recite the last will and testament, cloistered in a dark-paneled office, divvying up the meager or mighty assets between the family, his role was the opposite: a public, but always cheering, effusion of emotions and cherished memories, shared with one and all, freely, spoken and shared during the light of day, often with the sun sparkling through cut glass window, colors dancing.

Before Margaret's, there'd been three funerals that marked him irrevocably, two that shook him terribly, and one that mystified him still. The first began without a sound.

Mort, as he was known by everyone in Harris, never awoke one morning in June. As the town's postmaster, he knew everything about everyone, ranging from who sent whom a Christmas card, to who was getting letters from collection agencies, to judging the cuteness of the ever-diminishing next generation via birth announcements.

The whole "neither rain, nor snow, nor gloom of night" fit Mort like his trim jacket which snapped at the waist and the wrists. No one knew the last time when the mail didn't

come. But no one *knew* Mort: he was a fixture with his mail jeep, delivery bag and boots, but the statue downtown possessed a stronger personality that did Mort himself.

No one in that small town knew who Mort was or what he did when he wasn't delivering mail. Except fishing, they knew that, seeing his pole angled in the back of the mail jeep. He may have been the only government employee so brazen about his avocation, then again, he was the only federal employee in Harris.

So in that second week of June, 1998, three amazing things happened in very short order. First, Mort failed to show up for work on Monday. By noon, a call had been placed to the main USPS 800 number and some higher-up was alerted that Mort, the mail carrier was missing.

Turns out, Mort lived, and died, two counties over. When Larry Jones, the Harris police chief and Rob Thomas, the local police chief of Saxton, Indiana, turned the unlocked knob on Mort's front door, they found him peacefully, yet stiffly, stretched out on his couch in the living room. Second, while searching his house, no next of kin turned up. No photos, no personal phone book, no credit cards in his wallet, no notations on the calendar hanging in the kitchen, no cell phone with last numbers called. Zero, nothing, zilch.

Hence the third remarkable event, uncovered when Chief Larry Jones and the postal supervisor showed up at the Harris post office. As the anteroom was never locked so that folks with PO Boxes could pick up their mail any time, there was a slot that connected to the back room for sorting mail and storing supplies. The townspeople of Harris, fearing that there was no insurance policy to bury Mort, had paid their respects rather literally by slipping one dollar bills, five dollar bills, twenty dollar bills, and even two fifty dollar bills, through the brass slot marked Outgoing Mail.

A mound of green bills with the occasional wink of a silver greeted the two visitors. The supervisor nudged the pile with his foot. Chief Jones, as he later described the scene to Cheever, waited and wondered what the other fellow was going to do. Larry said he would have bet that the post office supervisor wouldn't have reported anything about the money if "the law" hadn't been there with him.

"What's all this?"

"Guess that's Harris' way of taking care of their own. We're paying his expenses."

"Don't need it. The postal carriers union and his pension fund will cover everything. That's the post office's way of taking care of their own," the supervisor said with a tiny sneer. Nonetheless, he added, there was no reason for anything beyond a standard casket, nor any need for flowers or catered food.

"Did he have any kids? A wife?" Larry just shook his head to all his questions. At the same time, Larry was incredulous – didn't this guy who'd been Mort's boss for the last few years have any clue as to next of kin! Wasn't there a file and paperwork with Mort's name on it somewhere?

It was decided, by whom no one knew for sure, that Mort's funeral instead would simply be a memorial service that weekend, as things had gone on long enough and the last thing anyone wanted, at that point, was to uncover anything messy. The money was donated to the town's park fund, marked specifically for keeping Memorial Lake stocked with fish.

Mort's fishing pole spanned the podium, and his mail bag was draped from left to right. Unlike most other services, there were no shorter remembrances offered by others, so Cheever rose from his seat in the back of the room after Minister Dean finished his prayer.

No surprise, the preparation of this eulogy had posed a problem for Cheever: no family members nor extended relatives to consult with meant no favorite stories. Cheever was tempted to use platitudes and spin something out of whole cloth, but that somehow seemed grievously unprofessional to the unofficial fraternity of eulogists.

So he flipped it, explaining to those gathered that the redeeming part of the mystery of no history meant there were no black marks on his record, that he had performed his duties admirably and consistently, that he'd provided devoted service to everyone without begrudging his tasks or belittling the job. He always smiled, quiet yet friendly.

Cheever privately reflected that he, like Mort, was destined to be taking many secrets to the grave. So many things he knew, but never shared. His job was to let everyone gathered know that this life now lost meant something positive, that it counted more than just an obituary. As the Buddhists would say, just being there was enough.

Recollecting Mort brought a wry smile to Cheever's face, whereas the two tragedies twisted his features and set his face hard like stone.

Tom Tellingham killed himself at the age of 17. His mother, who was Cheever's second cousin on his father's side, found the boy's body in his bedroom, an empty bottle of pills at his side. The family, the school, the town was a wreck. People couldn't speak to each another without breaking down, collapsing into an embrace that propped them up as much as it comforted them.

Sniffling and shaky hands clutching the paper programs were the only sounds that day. Cheever knew that it was extremely thin ice and that if he touched any raw nerve, the barely contained emotion in the room would flood the service, so he kept his remarks short.

"The universal challenge is to leave this world a better place. The past few years have forged in me the unquestioned devotion to the three things that sustain me: family, service to friends, and life's calling.

"Two days ago, young Tom ended his life, a tragedy that has marked everyone who knew him. Tom was the child of my oldest cousin. He was loved by one and all. We wish we had more answers, instead all we have our memories.

"But in his relatively short time on this earth, I do believe he left it as a better place. He was a sweet kid, and it seemed like his future was limitless. We all miss him and anticipate that the family will find a way to keep his light shining. Thank you for your

understanding and support, as always. We'll find our way back to balance, and hopefully understanding, one day, one step at a time.”

No note had ever been found. No whispered circumstances had ever come to light. No one in Harris ever got any closer to understanding why Tim took his own life.

But the worst, if that's possible, was the death of Sam's son, Chuck. Blasted by a 13-year-old Vietcong. Blazing away with a gun that was longer than he was tall and a box of ammo half his weight. It was preposterous to have a 13-year-old and an 18-year-old shooting at one another in those killing fields. Rice paddies seemed so tranquil in photos, tender shafts of green, thin yet strong like the dragonflies that zipped about.

Chuck Smith was only 18. Boys sent to fight the wars for old men, he'd heard that before...and it was true. So no, not preposterous, but hideous. And heartless. And wrong.

The bullets not only tore a hole through Chuck, they also ripped open Sam's soul forever. Chuck had been a short-timer, due to ship out less than two weeks later. A 20-year-old scared-shitless Ivy-League ROTC green lieutenant decided his new unit needed to take action, be bold, and he led them...no, he ordered them to advance into the too-quiet village where no one was seen and nothing moved.

Afterwards, the other soldiers in the platoon, upon seeing Chuck fall, pulled out their M-72 and erased the Vietnam village from the planet, that was the only word for it. Erased the three huts on the edge of the jungle, wiped it gone. The only reason that they knew Chuck's mortal enemy was so young was by the medic's review that the gunman still had some of his baby teeth.

Most of this wasn't in the eulogy nor did he tell the gruesome parts to Sam. Cheever had done more research, talking with another Marine from Indianapolis. He said there were three casualties that day, Chuck, the Vietcong, and the lieutenant who after Chuck has been killed was told to stand behind when they retaliated; the backfire from the anti-tank guns turned wiped clean his senses and he spent the remaining 30 year wasting away, never leaving his ward in a VA hospital. Dead, no, gone, yes.

Would a eulogist deliver such news? No.

Flashing forward from the testament he delivered from Sam's son valor, he focused on how wrong the sequence felt – fathers are supposed to die before sons, not the other way around. Chuck had been the red bulls-eye in Sam's and Ann's lives, but their concentric circles protect him as the seven red circles in his chest proved

Cheever looked up. A sea of faces...every one of them at least a decade younger, most two decades, half again only half his age. In a few years, if he lasted that long, he'd be the same age as the first line of the Gettysburg Address: fourscore and seven. His grandfather and Sam's grandfathers were both born in the twilight years of the 1800's. Numerically and historically, that was still hard to grasp, going from a time of horses and railroads to wood-burning stoves an era of private jets, mobile phones, and microwaves.

He picked up his papers, folded and unfolded them. He wobbled a touch. Later that day, there were some in the congregation who would tell one another that at that moment, they thought he was going to faint. Or perhaps even more unthinkable, that he'd return to his seat without saying a word.

Cheever slid his hands along the side of the podium, gripping it solidly. He gazed toward the very back of the church – the dark brown doors were now closed. He knew the ushers had released the doors so that those folks seated in the back could hear. At the same time, he knew the sun was shining outside and he wanted to see it. He wished he could ask the ushers to open those doors and let the fresh air in again.

His lips drawn tight, he pushed his glasses up to rest on the top of his head. His shoulders turned as if to suggest that he was going to leave that spot without saying a word. But then the shoulders squared back to the congregation, he bowed his head, looked up and smiled. "Sam Smith was my best friend. I will miss him deeply.

"For everyone here, I can only hope that each of you someday, with someone, can enjoy a friendship like Sam and I. I can see now, I truly loved him.

I also loved his wife, Ann." He knew if he paused too long on that line, an eyebrow or two would be raised and a rumor would rustle, so he quickly added: "As I loved Chuck, their son."

Waiting a beat: "And I really loved Ann's sister, my Margaret." At this revelation, the crowd relaxed some and smiled knowingly. Cheever was back in gear, he was going to get through this.

"Soon, I follow him along the path to heaven knows where. Sam, and Ann, and Margaret, and the entire previous generation of Harris will meet me there. All of them. All of us.

"Let me share with you some of the many things he taught me, told me, showed me, and thereby, some of the things he gave to me." Cheever saw two men in the second row glance at their wristwatches, then pass a knowing look between them, a go sign as clear as the green flag at the Indy 500.

His hands now squeezed the side of the pulpit so tight he could feel the wood grain that had been worn almost-smooth over the years – hold on, he told himself. Hold on for Sam. For the next twenty minutes, never checking his notes, never turning the page, Cheever reminisced about the life and times of one Sam Smith. He shared stories of them as boys camping out on the banks of Mill Creek. He told the tale of Sam driving to Washington D.C. to "wring the necks of the gutless brass at the Pentagon who handed down his boy's death sentence."

As an aside, and also as a reflection of Sam's character, he repeated the conversation they had when he traded in Chuck's Mustang which had set in the side yard, waiting three years to be driven again. Sam told the car salesman, "Sure, I've thought about a new car, but that's about it, just thought about it. Maybe if I was a young man, I'd get a fast car. By

there's something so conservative in the very core of my being that reminds me that having some souped-up sports car, while it's great out on some big open highway with no traffic, here in Harris, pulling in and out of the driveway, stop sign after stop sign, that'd be pointless. That's like going out with Sophia Loren and taking her to grocery store. If you're with Sophia Loren, you go to the Riviera. If you have a fast car, you go to a race track. My car and my life is just fine for Harris. I want a safe car, a used car." The car he bought that day lasted twenty more years, until it sat idling at an intersection, not going anywhere but still in harm's way when Ann was hit head-on by a drunk driver. He didn't tell those gathered in the church that part.

"The deal was, whichever one of us went first, Sam or me, the other would say the eulogy. But knowing that, he also gave me his final words to tell you all. He wanted me to say, "I'm done. This time on earth has made me look forward to rest. For everyone here, I have two words to give you. Go. Live."

Cheever folded the four pages back along the crease and slipped it into the inside pocket of his suit coat, patting it as it slid over his heart. Now it was Cheever speaking to the crowd. "I'm done too. Sam's is the last eulogy I will deliver. I hope I have served well those who passed before me. Feels like I've outlived everyone, well, except for you all." A laugh, limned with uncertainty as to whether laughing was ok, bubbled up from the congregation.

"Here's what I told Sam when he asked me what my final wishes were. My one request -- have a program of music only. No words. Let's start a new tradition." Then Cheever, for the last time from his vantage point behind the podium, repeated Sam's benediction: Go. Live.

And so it seemed that everything had been settled. Harris and its townspeople would continue on. The secrets that had been protected by Cheever's safeguarding would be taken with him to the grave with no one ever the wiser.

It's just there was one more secret, which no living being in Harris had any clue. James Cheever Snell Jr. could barely read or write, and some days not at all.

Nowadays, he'd be diagnosed as dyslexic, but back then, the label was slow. Up through junior high, his brothers Joe and John had shielded him, writing out his essays. Once he ever finagled his way out of a year-end test by wrapping his right hand in an Ace bandage, telling the teacher he'd gotten it hacked up by the tractor, and took the final as an oral test and aced it. Cheever got his drivers license before there was a written test and always made sure to renew it on time. Took all the important paper to the lawyers, a bit of a show that made them snicker, believing that Cheever felt his farm was so doggone important that the lawyers had to be consulted for every little thing. He bought seed by feel and smell. He listened to the weather reports on the radio, later on the TV. Margaret did all the family and farm correspondence, as did a number of the wives in Harris, nothing out of the ordinary there. But for Christmas cards and bank checks, he added his own signature, which he had learned by copying it a hundred times over.

When it came to the eulogies, it was Margaret taking notes in the corner who was his safety net. And although she did notice when the family member would lean forward toward Cheever and whisper some recollection, those were the words he never passed on, and she never asked.

Later, she'd listen to him, hour after hour, as he crafted and practiced the final words for the friends and neighbors. Then when he did his run-through the day prior, she'd take it all down in shorthand, and type it up so it was written there on the papers kept in his jacket pocket when he did the monologue.

But without Margaret, this time the pages in his jacket pocket were blank. His safety net was gone. If the eulogy hadn't been for Sam, he'd be adrift. Unmoored. Lost. Untethered. Sam knew too. He had helped Cheever go through the mail after Margaret was in the ground, sorting through the flyers, tossing out the junk mail, avoiding his best friend's glance of surrender. Never said anything, though.

Now Margaret, Sam, John and Joe were all gone. His confederates, his co-conspirators, his inner circle. The group that propped him up when it came to the written word. He knew as someone eighty-five years old that no one would be surprised if his memory got a little dodgy, his eyesight got worse, or if he claimed to not remember something because he wrote it down somewhere but couldn't find the note he had made.

But the clock was ticking – he knew that soon he'd have to move from the farmhouse where he'd spent his whole life. There'd be something he'd miss in the mail, and he was far too old to seek out another “reader.” So he prepared for the inevitable...the move to the nursing home where others would take care of the paperwork.

Maybe, he thought, he could take on the role of the oral historian for Harris, Indiana. That too was a post that no one ever applied for, likewise one that probably had never existed before Cheever thought of it. That'd be a good job for him. More service to the community. Better choosing which songs he wanted to be sung at his funeral. It was time for him to go. There were still reasons for him to live.

- The Eulogist is dedicated to the memory of my father, my cousin Bob, and my friend John. Thank you.

Presented by Richard Hunt, 13 February 2012