

Eulogy

Pete Fromm

"He's never sicced lawyers on us before," Kagan said, opening the long envelope his wife had handed to him. He unfolded the stiffly creased letter and took a sip of his drink. He could feel his wife watching as he read and he lowered his face so she could not see his eyes.

He folded the paper again and took a drink. "He's dead, Beth."

She started to get out of her chair but Kagan waved her back down. "My brothers will be ecstatic."

"Kagan!"

"He was the meanest man alive, Beth. Now he's probably the meanest one dead. I suppose I should call my brothers."

"I'm sure they know."

Kagan shook his head. "I just got a letter saying my father's dead, Beth. A letter. Not a phone call. He's already buried. This," Kagan waved the letter, "is about his will. He put it in his will not to let any of us know of his demise until all arrangements were taken care of. To the bitter end, Beth, that's how he was."

Kagan looked at his wife for the first time since he opened the letter. "You know what he left us? Me, I should say. Patrick and Tom got nothing. His moldy, old wooden canoe and his fishing rods. I suppose that's my punishment for sending him the annual guilt letters."

"Those were probably the only things he had left that meant anything to him."

"Well, they don't mean anything to me."

Kagan stood abruptly and paced to the end of the room. He turned and held out his empty glass. "Do you want another?"

Beth shook her head. "How are you going to get the canoe?"

"I wouldn't take it if it was delivered."

"It will be the only thing you'll have from him. The only thing our kids will have from their Grandpa."

"They never even met him!"

"I never met him. In eight years. That's pathetic."

"Count yourself lucky. He'd have hated you too."

"Kagan!"

"See? You take it personally too. It's hard not to, isn't it? But don't. He hated everybody."

"Stop it!"

Beth stood up. "Kagan, I read last year's 'guilt' letter. You left it on the computer."

"You had no right."

"You don't hate him, Kagan. You never could, no matter how much you tried. Why is that something you need to hide?"

"He never answered a single one of those letters, Beth. Never. Not one single one."

"But you wrote them."

Beth smiled at him and held out her glass. "Mix another while I pack for you. You can visit Tom when you go through Minneapolis."

Kagan took her glass and stared into it. She turned down the hall for the bedroom. "You had no right to read that letter," he called after her.

Two days of solid driving from Seattle to Eau Claire. One thousand miles a day. The night layover in Glendive, Montana. It was how he had always made the trip home when he was in college, when his mom was alive. And once the year after.

He remembered how his father used to meet him out front, charging across the lawn as soon as he saw the car pull in. His mother always stood just outside the door and called for them to come inside where it was warm. And, no matter how tired he was, they would always stay up talking late into the night.

He did not plan to stop in Minneapolis. Tom hadn't lived there when he used to make the drive. But he jerked the car onto his exit at the last possible second.

He had just stepped out of the car when Tom rushed out of the house. "Bout time. Beth said you'd be in by noon."

Kagan wished she hadn't called. "Not as young as I used to be on the highways," he said.

Tom's family was collecting around them on the lawn. Kagan shook his brother's hand and said, "Dad's dead, Tom."

"I didn't even know he was sick."

Kagan smiled. It was an old joke about their mother, a famous funeral attender. She would go on about a relative they had never

heard of before, fretting about how she would get to the funeral. Their father would lower whatever he was reading and say, 'So and so? I didn't even know they were sick.' He'd said it so often she'd stopped scolding him for it. It always made the boys laugh. But the joke was the only pleasant allusion to their father they made that evening.

As he had known they would, Tom and his wife refused to let Kagan leave before morning. Tom's wife had shooed the children away when Tom continued to tease Kagan about coming for the canoe. And, when the talk turned ugly, she left too.

"I think we could have tried harder, Tom."

"You don't know a thing about it, Kagan. You were already off at school. We still had to live with him. So don't give me that tired old line."

Kagan bowed his head and nodded. "I know. But I can't forget how he was before."

"That only makes it that much worse. Can't you see that?"

Kagan shook his head, not because he didn't agree, but out of helplessness. "He snapped when Mom died, Tom. He was out of his head."

"Please, Kagan. Don't try to guilt me into anything. You hated him just as much as the rest of us, when it was all said and done."

"I know."

Kagan snuck out of the guest room long before dawn. He left a note he didn't mean, saying he'd stay longer on the return trip.

When he reached Eau Claire he did not follow the familiar route to his home but drove directly to the lawyer's office. There was more handshaking, and when Kagan asked the lawyer about the canoe he answered apologetically. "The canoe is in my garage. We had to move it out of the house for the new occupants."

There were more surprises like that. The lawyer wasn't allowed to say who owned the house or where the money for it had gone. If Kagan hadn't known his father he would have suspected a swindle. But he had not been taken unawares by the limitless bitterness for years. He kept shaking his head though, as he followed the lawyer to his garage.

They tied the heavy wooden canoe to the racks Kagan had bought in Seattle. The lawyer found the rod cases and Kagan put them in the trunk without opening them. The lawyer came from the garage one more time with the paddles and a canvas Duluth pack that looked one hundred years old. "These were not specified, but

this is all full of fishing and camping paraphernalia. I couldn't see what good one would be without the other. You don't have to take them."

Kagan threw the pack in with the rod cases and took the paddles. "I don't have to take any of it," he said, slamming his door shut.

"Thanks," he said through the open window, wishing the door hadn't closed quite so hard. "Thanks for everything." He put the car in gear and, just before driving away, asked, "Is he buried with Mom, or is that a secret too?"

"He was cremated, Kagan. He didn't say whether I should tell you that or not."

"Oh, for Christsakes. Well, where the hell are the ashes?"

"I'm sorry, Kagan. That I can't tell you."

Kagan's tires squealed as he shot out of the lawyer's driveway. "You son of a bitch," he shouted, beating his fist against the steering wheel. If his dad was still alive, Kagan could just about kill him.

He drove around Eau Claire aimlessly. It was too soon to get back on the road, but he had nothing else to do. He hadn't been here in ten years. He drifted through the town, finally turning away from the street he grew up on. He turned north accidentally, but held the course until Eau Claire was behind him. For the longest time he would not admit where he might be going.

Kagan was surprised to find that the dirt track was still there. His father was even stubborn enough to fight off the trees' relentless siege. He followed the long, slow curve through the hardwoods and stopped at the tiny strip of white sand at the edge of the lake. He surveyed the lake from that strip of sand and then struggled singlehandedly with the canoe the way his father must have done until he died, at sixty-five.

Before pushing off Kagan dropped the rods into the bottom of the canoe. The cases rolled back and forth on the dark, glossy wood of the ribs. Finally, Kagan struck straight through the tangle of bushes at the edge of the lake and stooped. He came up with the raspberries he'd known would be there, and he picked until he had handfuls of them wrapped in his handkerchief. He dropped the handkerchief into the Duluth pack, which smelled as mildewy as ever, then pushed out into the lake.

"Like riding a bike," he said out loud after putting the canoe through its paces. He laughed, for the first time since leaving Seattle. His father's last bitter trick had backfired. He was going to enjoy this.

He pointed the bow straight across the lake and put his back into the paddling. He didn't care if he would have to pay for that later.

When Kagan entered the left hand bay on the far shore he craned his neck, searching. He looped the canoe around for another pass, but still could not find what he was looking for. He paddled, much more slowly now, into shore.

He nudged the bow of his father's canoe against the sand and listened to the waves hiss away along the small stretch of beach. He did not move for a moment, then stepped carefully over the side, taking the Duluth pack with him. He pulled the canoe up and lay beside it, using the pack as a pillow.

Clouds drifted up from the south, reflected against the far end of the lake. Kagan reached above his head and fumbled in the pack. He found the raspberries and set them on his chest. Still gazing into the clouds on the water, he sucked the first one into his mouth. He rolled it on his tongue then bit down, closing his eyes to hold the taste.

With the sun red-black against his eyelids, and the old taste in his mouth, Kagan let the warmth of the sand work through his shirt and the fall breeze eddy across his chest and legs. Over the small, grassy knoll behind him, just before the dark pines took over, was where the abandoned lodge had been. The one he had looked for from out in the bay. Kagan thought of its long, forbidding logs and boarded windows. They had all been very young when his father first showed the lodge to Kagan and his brothers.

Kagan ate another raspberry but it didn't taste as good as the first one. He flattened a lump in the sand with his shoulder. Years and years had piled up since he'd last been here. Or since he'd last seen his father.

The lodge was visible from the left bay, about a mile off, but it melted back into the trees if you didn't find the right spot. Thompson's Lodge, home and hideaway for Chicago's gangsters — as boys, that'd been all they needed.

When the canoe had eased onto the sand that day, and the towheaded boys had splashed and struggled until their father pulled the boat ashore, they'd been off to inspect the building. Kagan had found the one window with the faulty boarding. Their father came up the hill with the enormous Duluth pack and smiled at them, all lined up, Tom pointing up the hill, not daring to speak. He knew what they had found. "Maybe we should see if they left any of the loot?" he suggested.

The decision to sleep in the lodge had come later, out of necessity. Rain had spattered across the lake with the dusk and they'd moved

through the window following their father's flashlight. He swept the mouse droppings aside with his poncho and guided the spreading of the sleeping bags.

They'd set up near the base of the stairs. The dim, flickering light of the two candles took over for the usual camp fire. The dampness of their smokey clothes and the musty, rodent smell of the lodge mingled. Soft scurrings and sharper taps and gnawings encircled them.

After dinner Kagan asked his father if he was done percolating. Their father's smile was lost in the darkness of his shadowed face. His quietness was traditionally broken around the camp fire. The stories were 'percolated' with his after dinner pipe and poured out to them once it was dark enough to be scary.

He cleared his throat and said that he couldn't talk without a fire. Kagan and his brothers whined and pleaded until he agreed that the candles could count this once.

Kagan's father's eyes roved about the room, settling on the stairs behind his sons. Taking a deep breath, he began, and the story wove its way through the flickering light in the rough bass that Kagan had vainly hoped would come to him when he grew.

The boys followed the echoing voice along the walls of the lodge into the dismal void beyond the candles' reach. Each log's shadow leapt and quavered as the candles guttered.

But it was the stairs the story revolved around. And, when the madman entered the story, living on the second floor with whispered hints of daggers and axes, the stairs pressed down on the boys until they all leaned toward the candles.

His father's quiet, deep voice rumbled on. He sat back and his face became completely hidden in shadow. Soon he had the grizzled, wild man, dripping wet from the storm outside, easing his way toward the stairs. The collapsing, rotten stairway, leading up the black hole of the lunatic's abode, crushed down upon the boys. Suddenly they knew he was coming down those stairs for them.

Their father made it impossible for them not to hear each footfall of that descent, and the low, unearthly cackle, and the swish of the final blow through the dead, stale air.

Finally they had all glanced back to the stairs at the same time. Their father had been waiting for that moment. A bellowing, insane laugh filled the lodge and the room was turned into something worse than black as the candles were doused. Without a chance to move, Kagan had been knocked sideways, engulfed in impossibly strong, hard arms, the breath squeezed from him in a gasp.

Kagan opened his eyes and squinted against the brightness of the beach. He sat up and brushed the sand from his back. He remembered his father relighting the candles and soothing Tom, the youngest of them. The attack had been in fun, he'd explained. He hadn't meant to scare them that badly. It was just a ghost story.

Kagan started to laugh. He'd have to go home through Minneapolis now, just to thank Tom for crying at that awful moment. It had stopped their father's attack and Kagan, who had been too old to cry, had been saved the embarrassment.

The short laugh died out on the quiet beach. Kagan plunked a stone into the water, breaking apart the reflection of the clouds. He knew the spot from the left bay as well as his father had. The lodge was no longer there. Kagan knew he should go up the hill and find out what had happened, if it had burned, or been moved or whatever.

Kagan ate another raspberry but it was dry and seedy in his mouth. He picked himself up from the beach, not bothering to brush away the sand. He was stiff already, from that little bit of paddling, and the trudge up the hill was longer than he remembered.

He came to the great open square in the trees. He could still make out the foundation lines and he pictured how tightly the branches must have closed around the lodge. There were still bits of blackened metal about, and sodden lumps of grey ash. Some of the trees bore blackened scars along the lodge side of their trunks. It all looked fairly recent, but he felt certain his father had known.

Kagan kicked at an ash pile and tried to remember that quiet rumbling of his father's voice caught up in a story, but the other came back—the cutting edge of that beautiful bass, sharper than any knife. And Kagan remembered how, starting even before their mother's funeral, he had slashed and slashed until his isolation was inviolate even to Kagan.

He realized, as he had at the time, that it wasn't them that his father had struck at, but at himself. He had cut himself off from everything that reminded him of her. Her children included.

But knowing that hadn't helped. Kagan turned away from the empty hole where the lodge had been and walked back toward the beach. He settled the pack into the canoe and pushed it away from the shore. He looked once more at the grassy slope that just hid the lodge from view, then walked across the clean sand and through the water to the canoe which was now his. The small wave ridges on the bottom held his weight without giving away, stinging his numbed bare feet.

Kagan backed off shore and spun the long canoe toward the

fleecy clouds that continued to drift up from the south. The rod cases rolled slightly on the canoe's ribs. He paddled away from shore, keeping his back to the lodge's beach.

Kagan put his paddle down suddenly and picked up one of the cases. Even as he fumbled with the threaded lid, Kagan pictured the glossy layer of yellowy varnish on the bamboo splits, knowing that his father would never have let these slip away from him. And when the rod slid out and he peeled away the felt wrapping, that's exactly how they were.

He found the reel case in the Duluth pack and though his hands were shaking now, he threaded the line through the guides and made his first cast in ten years, short and awkward, and he could see his father smiling at that.

The canoe drifted in the spot where it had once been possible to see the lodge and Kagan made another cast and watched the flyless leader as if something could still come up to it. Now Kagan could see the lodge and he could see his father standing by it. He knew where his ashes were and he knew the canoe and the rods were not one last cruel joke. He gripped the cork butt of the rod more tightly, feeling the rough spot where his father had stuck the flies, and he made one more cast, toward his father and his lodge, and he smiled. ♪