

WHEEL MAN

While my father attacks his corned beef dinner, Aunt Marie frowns at her ham and poached eggs and says, "I don't believe it." She picks up the slice of ham with her fork and calls the waitress, who pushes a wisp of hair aside and pads over in scuffed white shoes.

"What do you call this?" Marie asks "Is this a ham steak or a slice of ham for a sandwich?"

Before the woman can answer Marie puts down the ham and cuts through one of the eggs with the edge of her fork.

"And what's this? What kind of eggs are these, poached or hard boiled? Or poached until they're hard boiled."

Hank moves to pick up the plate, saying, "She'll take it back," but Marie pushes his hand away and gives him a burst of Italian which she doesn't think I understand.

"It's not worth the trouble. These people don't know any better." To emphasize the point she holds up her thumb and index finger in a pistol shape and swivels her hand. Forget it, there's nothing there.

Outside, Queens Boulevard looks like a timed exposure, cars, trucks, and lights all melted into luminous bands. I'm trying to appear more interested in a turkey club and french fries than the conversation. I pick up more that way. Marie speaks Italian because it feeds into the conspiracy mentality prevalent in the Marino family - herself, my father, Aunt Gina – she's been dead for a year now - and Uncle Vito, dead for two days and lying in a casket a few doors down the street.

Now we eat our sorrows and angers away, Hank packing in the corned beef with potatoes and apple sauce while I drench the fries in catsup. Aunt Marie switches to chocolate cream pie after swearing the waitress to its quality as though we're in a court of law.

The first night of a funeral is always the worst and this is no exception. Tonight my father saw his older brother dead at fifty-two years. He took one look at Vito and walked back out of the chapel, leaning against the wall and sobbing in the hallway. It was the second time I'd seen him cry. The first was years ago when he drank so much he couldn't walk and sat next to my maternal grandmother and cried on her shoulders, and in great heaving sobs told her what a rotten guy he was but never explaining why, even though most of us knew what he was talking about.

This is a hard first night even without the crying, with just the fact that Vito was the family Achilles, strong as a horse, tall, handsome, any woman's dream, the uncle who stood in for my father and took me party-boat fishing and to a Yankee game where I saw Joe DiMaggio make an over the shoulder catch like it was nothing. Vito even died a hero's death - hit in the head with a garbage pail thrown from a tenement roof while he was selling ice cream from his truck, a shot as lucky as the arrow of Paris.

"And he didn't need that job," Marie says, pointing her fork at my father as if she's about to stab him. "But you know Vito. He wasn't afraid of anything. He went into the worst neighborhoods."

"He sold more ice cream there," my father says, not looking up. He'd sawed off a piece of corned beef and was covering it with potato and apple sauce as a prelude to lifting it off the plate. He knew it was useless to argue with Marie - who was always right - useless to tell her what we all knew, that Uncle Vito needed that job because he was an addicted gambler and his fire department salary couldn't support his family and his habit.

Except for women, my father has no such vices, not drinking, not gambling. He'd been a fireman for a few years, then he quit and went into the bar business. Hank's the smart Marino. Always work for yourself. He'd like to take that motto back right now because I'm a half year out of college and unemployed, working at his place and living at home.

But we're not only drowning our sorrows because of Vito's death. There's a complication. After my father and Marie calm down from the initial shock of seeing their brother laid out like a slab of oak, the funeral director reveals that the burial arrangements are a problem. Even though the Marino family has two plots in Calvary Cemetery - spitting distance from the diner - Uncle Vito can't be buried there because he wasn't a practicing Catholic.

Now, is it possible for Vito Marino - an Italian-American and New York City fireman - to not be a practicing Catholic? The funeral director can only repeat what he's been told by the Cardinal's office. By virtue of a separation from his first wife, and a common law marriage to a second - with whom he had a child - Uncle Vito had fallen afoul of church law and could not be buried in a restricted cemetery. And in a city with millions of such sinners,

how was my uncle discovered? By a family member who'd placed a call to the New York Archdiocese, and who then admitted what he'd done.

"That's how stupid he is," Marie says, referring to my older cousin, Lennie, who married a Seventh Day Adventist and converted.

"He's an idealist." My father works on his rice pudding, shaving off slices of whipped cream with his spoon to make it last.

"But the wife egged him on," Marie says, lapsing into English because it's alright for me to know this. "She's more of a screwball than he is."

"The question is why."

"I'll tell you why. Because he'd like nothing better than to rub the Pope's face in the dirt. If Gina was alive she'd slap some sense into him." Marie raises her hand, fingers together, and makes a well understood chopping motion. "She was too easy on that kid."

The mention of Gina silences the table. Gina was the older sister, the surrogate mother for Vito, Marie, and Hank. When Grandpa Marino's wife died he was running a grocery store in Brooklyn and worked long hours while the children were left to the care of Gina, the family ugly duckling as Marie was its beauty. Gina was the female Vito, a brick, tough as nails, fast with her hands, a terror with a wooden spoon or any weapon within reach, including a home made device Lennie once showed me, a cut off broom handle with a heavy leather strap attached to one end with friction tape. Corporal punishment was a Marino tradition.

My father ignores Marie's remarks about Gina being too easy on Lennie. If anything it had been the opposite, but none of this talk addresses the problem of how to bury Uncle Vito in the family plot.

"Tomorrow," he says, "we go downtown."

"For what?"

"To visit the Cardinal."

The next morning I take the wheel of my father's Oldsmobile Starfire. He sits beside me dressed in a dark suit. He's shaved so close he must have gone over his face three times. Aunt Marie is wearing a gold crucifix and so much black lace she looks like the Spanish Inquisition. We take Queens Boulevard past Calvary Cemetery with its giant statue of Christ, then we cross the 59th Street bridge. My father keeps his back to the passenger door so he can give me directions and talk to Marie, who sits with both arms resting on the seat back.

We head over the river into Manhattan, the U.N. Building a blazing wall of sun, the skyline as clear in the morning light as an architect's model. Traffic on the bridge is stop and go, and during the stops I take up a Times and half read, half listen to my father and Marie speaking Italian in their conspiratorial voices. He's asking about her husband, Steve. They've been separated for several years, and Steve wants her back.

Marie takes one last puff on a cigarette, then opens the window and throws it onto the roadway.

"The trouble isn't Steve," she says. "It's his mother."

"And what does she have against you?"

"My life."

My father removes the cigar from his mouth and examines the wet part. Marie eloped with Steve because Grandpa Marino refused to recognize her as his daughter. Steve's mother knew this. The story of Marie's banishment was never spoken about, but I got it from

Lennie's younger brother, Anthony, who had it from Aunt Gina: Grandpa Marino ruled his children with an iron fist, and Marie wouldn't submit. She stole his money, ran away with a gangster, had a child and gave it up for adoption, and finally, while she was working in the garment district, she met Steve at a dance and bowled him over.

"The mother called me a whore. When we told her we were getting married she wanted to look at the sheets from our honeymoon night. Can you believe that?"

"Was Steve supposed to bring her to the hotel the next morning?"

"Oh no! He was supposed to mail the sheets! This woman gave him the sheets from her own marriage for us to use in the hotel! Now does this make sense? Am I supposed to carry a can of beef blood around? Here you have Steve, educated, a gentleman, a mild mannered man if there ever was one, and his mother's a sack of ignorance. I've said it all along, Steve may be educated, but his people come from the mountains."

I listen all through the ride, back and forth about Uncle Steve. Everybody likes him. He's a college grad, a civil engineer, a naval officer, a trout fisherman, a tall, deep voiced man with a well trimmed moustache and formal manners. He plays poker with my father and uncles just to be sociable and he's so unlucky at the game that one night he drew four aces, except that it was the first hand of the night and betting was almost nil.

At the Archdiocese on First Avenue I wait in the car while my father and Marie get their audience with the Cardinal. I read the sports section, then the news, then the op-ed page. I lean back in the seat and close my eyes, listening to the cyclic whir of traffic and the footfalls of passers by. I'm used to waiting alone in the car for my father. Long before I learned to drive a car my father would take me over the 59th Street bridge and into the city. It was his way of being with me and seeing his girlfriends at the same time. We'd head down

the East Side drive, and he would ask me to repeat the names of all the bridges into Manhattan that he'd taught me: Queensboro, Delancey Street, Manhattan, and Brooklyn. Then we'd turn into the city's cavernous streets and park seemingly at random.

He would say, 'Lock the door and wait here,' and then disappear. I never saw him enter a store or building. He just walked down the street and disappeared. When he came back to the car the conversation was always the same.

"Where did you go?" I would ask.

"I had to see somebody."

"About what?"

"Business."

"What kind of business?"

"Just some business."

So now I wait once more, this time while he and Aunt Marie meet with the Cardinal, or more likely one of his assistants. I can hear Marie bullshitting the priest with her gold crucifix and black lace, talking about St. Raphael's parish on the west side, about Vito's First Holy Communion, his Confirmation, how he never missed his Easter Duty; how his first wife couldn't conceive, and how his common law wife gave him children duly baptized in the Roman Catholic church. Then Hank moves in for the kill, taking out the envelope and saying, "Father, this is for the church. This is from our family."

And I think about mild-mannered Uncle Steve and how the beautiful, black haired Marie had probably wrapped him around her little finger with her worldliness and that very slight Italian accent, and how this little incident with the Cardinal only plays into the Marino view of the world as nasty and corruptible. I feel the whole weight of my family, aunts,

uncles, cousins, grandparents, all their stories and struggles and habits. The food and the beatings, the snails and clams and lambs heads and salt cod and cannoli, the grapes my grandfather crushed every year, the voices, the card games, pinochle, poker, and briscola, the meatballs and rigatoni drowning in sauce, the dialects and arguments exploding like cannon - those cannon that Lennie told me the Pope had blessed in World War II. Sometimes the burden of images makes me want to be like Uncle Steve, quiet, gentle, and a loser at poker.

The meeting is a success. "And why not?" Marie exclaims when they get back in the car. "For enough money you can buy a ticket to heaven."

She reunited with Uncle Steve just after that, but he died within a year of cancer, something she knew about but kept to herself to avoid the accusation -- made anyway -- that she'd only gone back to him for his pension. The burial is in New Jersey, and once again I find myself driving, this time a new Thunderbird -- my father's business was good -- taking him and Aunt Marie to another funeral.

My cousin Lennie is there and he reads from his Bible at the graveside. It's a cold, March day, and the cemetery is near a chemical plant, the wind wafting a nostril-biting smell like battery acid. Lennie wears a dark raincoat buttoned up to the collar and he holds the Bible open, page corners flapping in the wind. Then he extends one hand toward us, waffling his palm.

"The place where Uncle Steve is going is nothing like what you see here, nothing like this world of poison and materialism."

Lennie then reads a passage, some men in uniform show up and fire off a two-gun salute, and when the ceremony is over we drive to Steve's mother's house where the table is crammed with fancy Italian cheeses and cold cuts and baskets of the chewiest, crustiest bread

I've ever eaten. Steve's mother is a short, silver haired woman with gold stud earrings who sits in a corner with a small plate of food and a tumbler of wine on the sideboard. Her little black eyes dart here and there and when I call her Signora in my best accent and say I'm sorry about Uncle Steve she's completely charmed. She calls over Steve's sister, Camille, who tells me how Uncle Steve had especially liked me because we had our education in common. She knew that I liked to fish so she leads me through a bookcase lined living room and down into the basement. There she offers me all of Uncle Steve's fly fishing equipment, bamboo rod, automatic reel, boxes of wet and dry flies, a fishing vest that fit, and a tackle box full of extra gear.

When the reception is over we get into the T-Bird and take the Jersey Turnpike north. Like a good wheel man I keep to the middle lane, enjoying the knowledge that this big, new car has all the power I want.

It's a quiet ride, the T-Bird taking the potholes with a muffled bobble, the three of us studying the hazy expanse of highway, factory, and refinery, the old brick buildings with broken windows, the smoking refineries and monstrous cranes, all the ugliness that Lennie had cited. I was sad for Uncle Steve but also thinking of the haul I'd made - the rod and reel, the boxes of expensive flies, and how every time I wade into a trout stream and cast a fly I can think of what a gentleman Uncle Steve was, and that would bring me luck.

After paying the toll at the George Washington Bridge Marie says, "That's that!" and we ride over the Hudson in silence, all of us smoking, Aunt Marie and myself with Pall Malls, Hank with an Antonio y Cleopatra, and thus we zip into the city with the car windows open wide enough to flush our smoke with clean New York air.

Finally my father says, "Steve's mother wasn't very friendly back there."

In the rear view mirror I see Aunt Marie react with a very Italian gesture, a movement of her head and a slight "Eh!" as if to say that the obvious had been spoken.

Then in Italian, she says, "She wouldn't be happy if he married the Virgin Mary."

Marie died several years later. She was buried in New Jersey with Uncle Steve, maybe as close as they'd ever been. She didn't have much and left everything to my father, some jewelry kept in the freezer, an old Ford Crown Victoria, and a small piece of land bought long ago as an investment. My father and I went through her papers, and I found a packet of letters from some man who wasn't Uncle Steve. Each letter professed his love, each had a poem with all the dramatic specificity of opera lyrics: your eyes, your hair, your beauty, your delicate touch.

She'd met him on cruise to Italy that she took with Aunt Gina, then a widow. Among her effects was a souvenir LP from the cruise, the album cover showing the ocean liner, the Cristoforo Colombo. Tucked inside was a photograph of the dining room and dance floor and pictures of Gina and Marie among the tourists, with corsages on their dresses, oversized hoop earrings and bouffant hairdos. I play the album when I get back home, all Italian tunes, the first cut called Quando, Quando, Quando: Tell me, when will you come/when, when, when. Playing that song I imagine my two aunts on board the cruise ship, first class, the height of their lives, both on the prow. And while my father was putting in sixteen hour days in his restaurant, Gina and Marie were enthroned in the dining room with their armpit pads and girdles laced up tight, downing Manhattans, and later wine and veal and manicotti and pastries, cannoli and sfogliatelle and Napoleons - better than home - stuffing themselves until their girdle laces stretched to the breaking point. There were surely several dances with that writer of poetry or with bald or silver haired men also traveling to Naples or Palermo,

some married, some widowed, all of them lonely and on the make and with that sad look in their eyes to fuel their poetry, all of them, men and women, looking for a new start.

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