MY FATHER'S TRACTOR

BY RICHARD GILBERT

It was a bittersweet experience for me as a boy when Mom would take us to visit our old Georgia hometown, because I felt I should have been growing up there. By the time I was a teenager, the differences between me and my Georgia peers had become too stark for me to enjoy the experience at all.

I had imprinted on the landscape, however, on the vast fields relieved by dark islands of pine and bordered by creeks which were overhung by oaks and magnolias and haunted by alligators that moved unseen through the black water. And my earliest memories cluster there: screams and running as a bat flies down our house's chimney and beats against the high ceiling; a long rattlesnake hanging dead from a tree limb for all to see; the dust rising behind a red tractor as my father disks-my sister and I are at the edge of the field, trying to bash open the shell of a turtle to get at the secret inside, and Dad appears above me as I lift the rock and silently takes away the bleeding creature.

As a college student, feeling uncomfortably rootless, I drove to Leesburg myself. We had been gone fifteen years. In the town's only grocery, I told the proprietor that we had lived on the Stage Road Ranch. The man thought for a moment. Then he said that my father's ability to estimate the weight of a pen of market steers was the most remarkable he'd ever seen. I was proud that Dad's competence was honored, even if for a rarified skill. I suspected that he was remembered less fondly by my mother's close circle of friends there.

I had sworn never to return, because of the emotions the place stirred up, but I visited again in middle age, when a car trip took me through southwestern Georgia. I was several years into my own farming apprenticeship by then. Still ahead of me were larger farms, more powerful tractors, and a big flock of sheep. If I hadn't yet grasped fully what drove me, I was starting to better understand my father and his clashing dreams of flight and rootedness.

I found myself talking about him in Leesburg with a local couple. The woman was the daughter of the mechanic who had serviced Dad's tractors. Her husband was heir to a peanut and cotton plantation by then managed primarily for quail hunting. They demanded of me, in an indirect southern way, to explain my father. They looked at me across the dinner table of their hunting lodge, waiting. Who knows what they had heard from their parents-they were my age-but undoubtedly it boiled down to his being an unfriendly Yankee. He certainly hadn't socialized in the local way, telling funny stories about foolish behavior, his own and that of others. I'm sure he hadn't tried to fit in, had seemed aloof and humorless, strangely driven by work.

My mother had tried and had been accepted there, even loved. Taking in an outsider was an historic event in a place where people born north of Americus, only twenty miles away, were viewed with suspicion. But she wasn't the question on the table. I searched for an adjective that would help them place my father, that would define his solitary nature without implying that it had anything to do with them, because, of course, it didn't. I felt the usual pang of guilt for discussing him at all, never mind critically, with anyone outside the family. He needed interpreting, but doing so felt like a betrayal.

Explaining my father without diminishing him would take hours, days-a lifetime. Yet the couple waited politely for an answer.

"Dad's got a neat tractor for the farm," my younger brother Pete reported over the telephone. I asked him for more details, but Pete was a policeman and sportsman, not a farmer, and had grown up in a Florida beach town. The excitement in his voice told me, however, that Dad had gotten some sort of real tractor.

It was 1978, and our father had retired as vice president of the aerospace division of Pan American World Airways, in Cocoa Beach. Upon buying a five-acre rectangle about ten miles inland from the Atlantic Ocean, he went shopping for a tractor. He wanted to start some sort of farm business on his new homestead, to return to his first passion.

He bought a gleaming orange and blue Kubota tractor, the product of a Japanese company so old it made John Deere look like a sprout. On my next trip home, I made my acquaintance with the import from Osaka. Although it was small-tiny compared to even Ford's classic 1940s model 9N tractor-this was clearly a serious piece of machinery and no overgrown riding lawnmower. The Kubota B-6100E was poised foursquare atop tires that gave it more than a foot of ground clearance. Weighing in at just under 1,000 pounds, the tractor gained additional ballast from the water filling its rear lug tires. A tidy compartment on the side carried this notice: "Tool Kit. Pull forcefully, and it will open." Simple, rugged, and small, the Kubota exuded the charm of a bantam rooster.

It appeared that the diesel tractor was another of Florida's introduced exotic species, although not yet as newsworthy as walking catfish, smothering kudzu vines, or a newly escaped aquarium plant called hydrilla that was choking the state's freshwater rivers. Kubota's was the only compact diesel tractor brand being sold in the U.S. in the late 1970s. The company had met the need for compact, durable tractors for part-time farmers, homesteaders, and horse owners. In another decade, such machines would lead all tractor sales.

My father, who stood six-foot-two, had a big man's fondness for small, elegant tools. He would perch on the Kubota, wearing a floppy white hat, and drive around the property on various missions. The scene brought to mind a photograph I had seen of him as a young man in California, driving a midget racecar around a crowded racetrack. He beeped the tractor's horn to summon my mother from the house when he needed help. After a lifetime of lower-back problems, he needed both the tractor and my mother to supply the muscle he no longer possessed. Only five-foot-four, but with a strong back, Mom could lift fifty-pound sacks of fertilizer.

She called the tractor his new toy and noted its growing arsenal of implements, including a mower, a disk harrow, a fertilizer spreader, and a grader blade to smooth their unpaved driveway. The Kubota, however, may have been the first farm machine he ever bought that was scaled realistically for the size and income of his enterprise. In 1952, on his first ranch, in California, he had bought a new bulldozer to clear sagebrush, too impatient to hire an operator; and later, in Georgia, at the ranch embedded in my earliest memories, he had equipped the struggling startup business with tractors, silage choppers, and even a huge, dirt-moving pan that he used to build a pond rather than hiring it done.

Now his retirement dream was to turn a slice of sand, thin grass, and live oak trees into a garden farm, and to raise a cash crop of some kind. Still thinking like a cattleman, he first built a pole barn and a corral, and he even bought a head-squeeze before deciding that he physically wasn't up to running steers and didn't have the acreage for such an operation anyway. He explored raising pygmy goats for the pet market-his increasingly esoteric reading included Aids to Goatkeeping-and his children enjoyed the image of Dad leading a herd of knee-high pot-bellied goats.

While his research into farm enterprises continued, he seeded buckwheat and then, dragging his petite disk behind the Kubota, chopped the plants into the thin soil to add organic matter. He built a trellis and planted muscadines, the big southern slip-skin grapes, testing them as a potential market crop. In winter, he sowed annual ryegrass into all the fields, turning the farm into an emerald swatch in the khaki landscape. He got the mania for soil improvement out of his system with the realization that he didn't need fertile earth for the enterprise he had settled on. He had decided to go into the nursery business and would raise trees in plastic pots on top of the ground. He devoured horticulture manuals, took classes at the local two-year college, and visited growers. He installed an elaborate irrigation system, and Coral Tree Farm was in business.

Immediately his plants began dying. He had his well tested and learned that the water was almost as salty as seawater. We all thought this meant the end of his latest dream. He simply switched to native

plants, mostly live oak trees and wax myrtle shrubs, which had evolved to tolerate salinity. Dad thereby stumbled into Florida's native plant movement. State officials and many gardeners and ecologists were disgusted with imports from Australia, Africa, and Brazil that had escaped suburbia and were displacing native species. Developers wanted plants that needed less coddling. Homeowners wanted a lower-maintenance, more natural landscape. Business at Coral Tree Farm was good. Dad's vest-pocket farm actually made money, a rarity in agriculture and a first for him.

On my frequent visits, I saw oaks growing from acorns he had collected from trees that shaded the property. Wax myrtles sprawled to catch the sun with their thick, dull green leaves. He grew thousands of the bushes by picking their gray seeds, roughly rolling them to soften their tough shells, then sowing them in the shade. Dad nurtured his plants and got amazing growth rates. When he wasn't tending his nursery, he sipped iced tea in the house, looking out the window for customers-who headed for the “Ring Bell for Service” sign but who seldom had a chance to ring before he was at their sides.

As his nursery prospered for six years, Dad's health declined. The business was too small for him to afford help and too large for him to operate by himself. His heart was weakening and limiting him physically. He decided to close another chapter. Not only would he go out of business, he would sell the place they had created--their cedar house, the duck pond, the poultry barn, Mom's flowers.

“Some people just retire,” I told him. “They enjoy doing things around a place.” He said nothing but shook his head, looked away, saying it all: that wasn't for him. He would never putter, do nothing but relax-all of that a living death to him. He engaged with the outside world exclusively through work. He would expand his work as a consultant for Pan American. Still, I would like to think my parents might have stayed on the farm, entering a new phase of my father's form of retirement, if a developer hadn't bought the pinewoods beside them and constructed a twenty-four-hour truck terminal.

Wax myrtle, oaks, and slash pines couldn't shield the farm from the glare of floodlights or from the noise of trucks grinding gears at three o'clock in the morning. The farm's fate seemed peculiarly Floridian and particularly cruel. My father got the owner to erect a six-foot fence, but the chain link that replaced a woven-wire cattle fence only emphasized how much had changed. Finally, Dad sold Coral Tree Farm to the developer, and my parents prepared to move away.
Mom suggested I take the Kubota. She knew I needed a tractor for the nine acres my wife and I had purchased that winter in Indiana. At first Dad was puzzled by the idea, which involved my flying to Florida and hauling the little tractor eight hundred miles north. “You're welcome to it,” he said, “but don't take it for sentimental reasons.”

He had no desire to see a tool enshrined as a memento of something that was gone. To him, the tractor was simply a machine that had served its purpose well and should be sold with the farm. While his suspicion was correct-we were all sentimental about the Kubota, or at least the image of him upon it, busy with tasks-I needed it. Mom was more practical than either of us, knowing that my father would lack the patience to recoup the tractor's resale value and knowing that I couldn't afford to buy machinery for what it would cost me to tow Dad's to Indiana. By the time I arrived in Florida, one might have thought giving me the tractor had been his idea by the pleasure he took in handing it over.

“How many years do you think the Kubota is good for?” I asked.

“It should last as long as you do,” he said.

The Kubota's paint, once tangerine, had faded to a salmon, and there were rust bubbles on the hood. But its engine ran as confidently as ever. A diesel is good for at least five thousand hours before a major overhaul. Dad showed me how to operate the tractor and how to attach the mower that it pulled. We loaded the equipment in a U-Haul truck, and I drove the tractor onto a trailer. Early the next morning I headed north.

The next time I saw my parents, the story of Chuck and Rosie had taken an unexpected twist. They were living apart, Mom in an apartment in Orlando and Dad in a one-bedroom condominium near the beach in Cape Canaveral. Rosie had helped him find the condo after telling him, upon the sale of the nursery, that she was leaving him. He was dumbfounded. Rosie had left him before, and had divorced him three times, it was true, but it had been decades since the last divorce.

“I want to be the captain of my ship for once,” she said.

“I can't believe you're doing this at sixty-eight years old,” he said.

“You just watch me. Have I ever said I was going to do something I didn't do?”

Mom had no trouble recalling this conversation for her children, but she didn't explain to me her need to break away. My older sister, acknowledging that Dad hadn't consulted Mom about the farm's sale, told her that her response was nevertheless out of scale. But it seemed that she had to separate from what she had always said was hard to take, Chuck's darkness.

“If I don't get out I will die,” she said to my sister. “I have to save myself.”

She visited him at his condo, but she never stayed there. “He's nervous as a cat when I'm there,” she told me. I imagine this was because he feared criticism of his domestic skills. The place was spotless, though. He didn't cook, and ate all his meals out-“He can't boil water,” Mom said-and he had a housekeeper.

My father had a quality of exile. A visitor from another world who had been stranded when his world had flickered, dimmed, and died, he was apart from other people. We didn't have a sense of his moving through life with us. We respected his separateness, however. Once in Georgia, when I was about five, Mom had ordered Dad to punish me for pulling all their books out of the bookshelves. She was pregnant and didn't feel up to whipping me herself. He spanked me, went into their bedroom, sat down on the bed, and cried. “I've proved I can beat up a five-year-old,” he said. She didn't ask him to discipline me again for years. He would have been a nice balance to her hot temper, but he was an infrequent visitor to the domestic sphere, in a relationship with Rosie but relating to his children almost exclusively through her.

He didn't respond to life the way other people did. Consequently everything he did and said seemed significant to his children. We monitored his activities. The area of the garage where he polished his shoes was sacrosanct and fascinating. Other fathers talked with their families, but not our father. Other families took vacations together, I noticed. I envied their togetherness but knew that was not his way. He cut short our only family trip, to the Callaway Gardens resort in Georgia. He was supposed to be recuperating there from his first heart attack, which almost killed him in 1967, on the thirty-fifth anniversary of his father's death.

What my father carried inside, what reverberates to this day but which I hope ends with my generation, was a shotgun blast in a Michigan farmhouse. He was fourteen on the Thanksgiving morning he found his father's bloody corpse on the bathroom floor. His submerged sadness formed the emotional subcurrent of our family life. My mother, in whom Dad confided what little he told anyone, tried to soften its effects. Once, telling me of another of his losses, the death of his first love when she was nineteen, Mom said his life was the saddest story she had ever heard. Or, as my sister told me once when I said something critical of him, “If you crawled inside his head, you couldn't stand the pain.”

He needed to exist in a parallel universe he controlled. He seemed to recognize the comforts of our world, but these were unavailable to him in his exile. When he moved into his condominium, he started over as he always had, with a clean slate, retaining nothing from Coral Tree Farm. Not a photograph. Not a screwdriver. He even gave away the dog that had been my parents' nursery companion. His pared-down life was epitomized by the purchase of an electric weed-whacker for cutting a strip of grass in front of his condo. He worried that swatch of grass with his string trimmer. It seemed a ridiculous tool to me, though, as the Kubota had been, it was exactly what he needed and signified a new phase of his existence. On the day I visited, he buzzed the grass, a two-minute job. A neighbor, an unshaven young man, ambled past and hailed Dad warmly: “Hi, Charlie!”

I was appalled and must have looked astonished. Charlie? This idiot thought my father was like anyone else-an ordinary human, undignified . . . mortal.

In Indiana, the Kubota's home was a concrete-block storage unit on the edge of our town. After the sun was up on weekend mornings, I would drive from our house to the facility, get on the tractor and accelerate to its top speed-eight and a half miles an hour-and head down the blacktop road a mile to our new land. We planned to build a house there and, in the meantime, I was preparing the site. Actually I was beginning a long-delayed apprenticeship in farming, though I didn't know it at the time.

Arriving at our land, I was always intimidated by how tiny the tractor seemed out there in the field. Its

lawn mower, perfect for Dad's level, tamed plot, bogged down in my heavy grass and struggled to slash through thistles, Johnson grass, ironweed, and giant ragweed that reached eight feet tall in spots and towered above me on the tractor. Often I felt exhilaration at the rough wildness of my meadows, but my groundskeeping experience had been suburban, and just as often I felt awed by the power of plants and a slave to chlorophyll. Dad had told me not to baby the tractor, but the jungle I faced made me fear a breakdown. The tractor was really too small for my hilly acreage. I lay in bed at night and studied the owner's manual, which was written in quaint, formally awkward prose translated from Japanese.

“How long does it take you to mow the place?” a friend asked, thinking in terms of hours or days. “Months,” I said of my endless cycle. “All summer.”

I look back on that time in amazement at my energy, in pride at what I accomplished, and in regret at the time I stole from my wife and two small children. Something had been released in me, and the strength of it alarmed my wife. I worked as if possessed, every spare moment devoted to our land: I sowed pastures and planted thousands of trees, shrubs, and perennial flowers; I grew a big garden and raised and sold broiler chickens. On Sundays, exhausted, I would take our children fishing in our pond.

It took me years to realize how much my dreams sprang from my father's farming efforts and from internalizing his loss of our Georgia farm when I was a boy. It took me another decade to understand that my father's farming was entwined with his own boyhood experiences of family pain and loss. He hadn't encouraged me to take up his passion for agriculture. But some families keep trying to express their wish for a farmer, and early experiences and family stories turn the genetic key in some children. I've noticed that to produce a successful farmer, it takes a family about three generations of throwing offspring at the dream.

Had we stayed in Georgia, Dad might have driven me away as many farmers do, overworking and over-bossing their offspring. As it was, our exodus to a Florida boom town when I was six colored my boyhood darkly. I was shy and overly sensitive. I suffered from nosebleeds and nightmares. I mourned the loss of the Georgia farm, as I assumed he was doing, unaware that I had inherited a more enormous loss, my father's boyhood trauma, of which he also didn't speak.

He was stoic, as remote as a mountain. Sometimes, however, a startling current of warmth flowed from him that was almost physically palpable, the way the Gulf Stream off our beach coursed in a warm vein through the Atlantic's murky coastal chop. When I was an angry teenager, he suggested I read the newspaper comics page. And once he volunteered, “I'm not an unhappy man.” Did two negatives make a positive? I wasn't buying it. We had lost something large and important and were toughing it out, like broken characters in a Hemingway novel. I fantasized about returning to Georgia and buying our old ranch.

When I was seventeen I discovered, in a mall bookstore, paperback reprints of Louis Bromfield's Pleasant Valley and Malabar Farm, postwar bestsellers that were two of the most romantic farming books ever published. When I showed them to my father, he pointed to the originals in his library. The hardback versions were elegantly bound in black cloth and embossed with a Harper & Brothers logo showing a torch being passed from one hand to another.

After almost two years apart, Rosie and Chuck reconciled. Rosie moved out of her inland apartment and Chuck sold his beach condo, and they met in the middle, settling into a stucco house with a swimming pool in a new subdivision called Suntree, which was just a couple of miles from their former nursery.

They seemed happy. Chuck worked as a consultant for Pan American's aerospace division and maintained the lawn and cars. He talked of eventually working with mentally disabled adults and of learning to play the piano. I couldn't picture him in either activity and, as always, I didn't know what to think when he spoke like a regular person. This was partly because after the original statement, issued like a bulletin from an alien shore, he wasn't open for discussion and sank back into silence.

He did feel the need for closure. He desperately wanted to talk with his surviving older sister, Mary, about their parents. He'd never spoken to his children about them or his early life, except once saying to me out of the blue about his father, his face a mask of pain, “I hated him for years.”

His father, originally from Massachusetts, was a wholesale food supplier, stock market investor, and owner of a chain of restaurants in Detroit. The family's city house was a mansion purchased from Henry Ford. His mother, the daughter of a Minnesota lumberman, was considered beautiful, her

family's Irish features sharpened by an infusion of American Indian. Her husband had forbidden her to talk about the fact that her grandmother was an Indian, but she told my father in confidence during an ocean passage.

In 1922, when my father was four years old, he and his mother were in a train that wrecked on its way to Daytona Beach. The accident disfigured her face and severed one ear. Doctors fashioned a replacement ear, but it didn't appear normal, more like a flap of flesh. Over the years she underwent thirty-seven operations on her face. “You aren't beautiful anymore,” her husband told her, and moved out of her bedroom.

Every evening after dinner, Chuck's parents went into separate rooms. It was a nightly loyalty test-which one to follow? Eventually he was sent away to an elegant boarding school to be reared by strangers. School records show that he was involved in student council, various sports, and the charity and dance committees. The school was near the family's farm, but Chuck was able to go home even less than students who lived far away. His father deteriorated after the stock market crash of 1929, and shot himself on the holiday morning he had promised to take his son rabbit hunting.

When Mary and her husband, Bob, had come once to visit at Coral Tree Farm, Dad had been more nervous than I'd ever seen him. I had never perceived that my father was an anxious man, desperate in situations he couldn't control. I arrived as he was showing them the pond, where Mom's geese and his wild ducks swam, and he introduced them to me as “Uncle Mary and Aunt Bob.” He and Mary had battled for decades. She had tried to stop his cashing of his inheritance, intended to be held in a trust, but which he needed to bankroll the California ranch.

“She is evil incarnate,” Chuck said once to Rosie. But he may have imagined himself through her eyes-the little brother who had squandered his share of their father's money in ranching, who lived in tacky Florida in a crackerbox house with the Other Woman. Mary had liked Chuck's first wife, another heiress, and was patronizing toward Rosie, who responded with a poor girl's defensive pride.

Moreover, Mary knew something of agriculture: she had been named a Michigan Farmer of the Year for running the dairy at their father's 200-acre showplace-complete with ornate, brick Victorian barns surrounded by white board fences-while the men were occupied in World War II. She had remained in Bloomfield Hills, tended by servants, cultivating her wealth. She joined her inheritance to a fortune of robber baron proportions in marrying Bob, owner of the ink company that supplied most of America's newspapers.

When I met her for the first time that evening at Coral Tree Farm, she dispensed with me quickly and turned back to studying Chuck's pond, a mere puddle but something she might inform him how to improve. In profile, in the fading light, she looked Native American, their mother's secret Cherokee blood at the surface.

Mom's report that Dad was hosting Mary again surprised me that October. He had summoned her to Florida. His urgent question was whether his parents had been happy together before his mother was disfigured. Mary's story wasn't pleasant: their father had collected their mother as another beautiful possession. The marriage was sterile, their father unable to love.

Rosie left the brother and sister talking for hours on the patio. Chuck didn't seem upset afterward. He had loved his mother and no longer hated his father, and if Mary's assessment fell short of his hopes for them, at least he no longer took it personally. Anyway, he was happy-Rosie heard him tell Mary that. He said he finally knew what was important. He said the past year at Suntree had been the happiest of his life.

Two months later, we all gathered at Mom and Dad's house, which inside was golden and red with her Christmas decorations and comforting to us with the smells of her cooking and the familiar dark Mediterranean furniture of our childhood. There were grandchildren everywhere. Pete's daughter swam with mine; the girls, both two years old, wary of a crab image on the pool's bottom, fearing its ceramic claws would grab their skinny legs and pull them into the depths.

I told Dad of my plans for our Indiana homestead and showed him photographs. We planned to build a house overlooking our pond. The only structure on the property was a tractor shed. I had installed it after two mowing seasons in order to end the scary experience of driving the Kubota on public roads. Dad asked how his tractor was holding up, and by then I felt confident in reporting that he was right: the tractor, turtle-like, would chug forever.

Then Mom and my sister Meg gathered the boys-me, David, and Pete-and told us that Dad's heart was working at only eight percent capacity. He didn't know it was that bad, they said-the doctor had told him twenty percent, bad enough. To get through airports during his consulting trips, he repeatedly popped nitroglycerin pills. He wanted to talk to us now, too.

Dad reclined in his armchair in the living room, his feet up on an ottoman. He said his heart was failing but tried to reassure us. “I'm not in pain,” he said. “I'm not suffering like I would be with cancer.” I fell on him, kissed his rough cheek, tried to hug him. He submitted quietly, without flinching or moving, his face slightly turned, still. He'd never touched his sons beyond a handshake, never embraced.

On a Saturday night almost exactly a year later, Meg called to say that Dad had passed out while she and Dad and Mom were at dinner. By that time, his heart must have barely been pumping blood to his brain. He had revived, and they wanted to put him on the phone. In my denial, it didn't sink in that surely I was about to talk with my father for the last time. We had always had terse phone conversations-me frustrated, needing more than he could give. This time I was overwhelmed by our house construction and distracted by the coming week.

“You really gave everyone a scare,” I said. He replied, in a phrase that epitomized his stoicism and the unselfconscious machismo of his generation, “It goes with the territory.”

I was under water when my father died. That's how I got the news, while submerged. It was early the next Monday morning and, getting ready for work, I had immersed myself in the bathtub to wash my hair. There wasn't a shower in the rental house where we were living while building our home. My wife's hand reached through the water and jabbed at my shoulder and clutched at my arm. I surfaced, looked at her.
“Your mother just called,” she said. “Your father has collapsed and they can't revive him.” She had just told me that Dad was dead, but that's not what I heard. This was just another medical emergency. He'd collapsed before. Mom had gone with Dad to the hospital, where they would be able to take care of whatever was wrong.
But he'd died already, on the kitchen floor. She had heard him make a sound, as if he had taken a blow. Rosie rushed to Chuck's side.

“I'm okay,” he said. “Just let me lie here.” She ran for the phone to call an ambulance. “No, honey, don't,” he said. He had a horror of being hooked to life support devices or becoming disabled and dependent.

“Hang on,” she told him, again beside him, holding his hand and looking into his face, thinking, Something is wrong with his eyes, they aren't the right color, they've lost their color.

When I arrived at their house from the airport, Mom and I hugged, weeping. “It's big,” she said, shaking her head.

She said Pete was going to take David and me to see Dad. It wasn't allowed, she said, but Pete, as a cop, could get us into that area of the hospital. After years of hearing her criticize funerals as being barbaric, of the horror of open caskets, I couldn't believe she was sending us to see Dad's body in a morgue. “I think it's important that you go,” she said. “For closure.” His wish was for there to be no ceremony, to be cremated, to vanish.

After the hospital, frightened by the wildness of my grief, I wrote his obituary for the local newspaper. I stayed up all night. I wrote that he had been an aviator who made his first solo flight in Detroit as a teenager, attended flight school in California, and served as a bomber pilot in the war. I mentioned the utopian book he wrote in 1948, Success Without Soil, about growing plants in nutrient solutions inside greenhouses, a completely artificial system in which to nurture life but one in which all variables could be controlled. I wrote of his leadership of thousands of workers at the Kennedy Space Center. I didn't write about his sense of humor, rarely expressed but surprisingly silly; or his humility, or the way, without trying, he commanded respect. I didn't say that he was just passing through, a pilot who had never really landed.

We gathered the next morning in the living room, Rosie and all of his children, her four and his first wife Jean's two, Ann and Chuck-Charles C. Gilbert III. Ann, who had insisted on some kind of observance, read from the Episcopal Service for the Dead. Aunt Mary was there, having come from

Michigan. Mary, fourteen years older than Dad and their parents' last surviving child, looked stricken. Some of us said a few things, Ann acting as mistress of ceremonies. Meg's husband, also a pilot, mentioned Dad's membership in a secretive fraternal order which Dad's hero Charles Lindbergh had helped establish. The room resonated with Chuck's life, with us, looking at each other, but especially with the wild years in California with Jean and Rosie. There I was, named after his best friend, who had been William Randolph Hearst's favorite pilot; and David, named after another friend, a frequent weekend guest at Dad's desert ranch, his former psychiatrist.

When I think of my father, I never picture him at the house where he died. In my mind's eye I see him walking into his nursery under the Florida sun, throwing his damaged right leg forward from the hip, the leg withered from chronic spinal problems; his blue eyes focused on the day's work, his scarred heart barely beating.

On New Year's Day, all the visitors gone, they parked and walked down the curving dirt lane at Coral Tree Farm. Chuck had told Rosie, one day when they were living there, that he wanted his remains scattered under the oak tree beside the farm's well. The new owner, the developer, had given permission. He was living there and operating the nursery, which was weedy.

Pete carried a square cardboard box. How does one go about spreading ashes? he wondered. It didn't seem appropriate to dump them in a heap. Rosie reached into the box. It's not like ashes at all, she thought, sinking her fingers into the grainy material that was like coarse fertilizer. She grabbed a handful, surprised by the many white chips of bone, and opened her fist under the tree. Then Pete walked around the trunk in a circle dispersing the residue. His emotions felt like they were in a blender, and he tried to keep them from rising and pushing out. He couldn't speak in front of his mother without risking sobs.

Soon the developer bulldozed Coral Tree Farm. He flattened the cedar house, the barn, the mossy trees. There, on the raw earth adjacent to his truck terminal, he erected an office park and paved the farm with concrete.

However, he spared our father's oak. He had liked Chuck and had admired the way Chuck had fought an impossible rear-guard action against him, extracting concessions before the zoning board. He was forced to build that fence between their properties, and he had ended up buying trees and shrubs from Chuck to buffer the nursery from the glaring lights of the industrial zone. Surely he knew that, regardless, he'd ruined the old man's little Eden. Yet he noticed that Chuck never complained but, instead, played the cards he had been dealt.

Pete visits Dad's oak when he's traveling through that part of the county. There's a picnic table beneath the tree where the office workers take breaks. Nothing looks the same, of course, but he walks around and thinks about Dad and the farm, remembering the place in surprising detail. In his mind's eye he can see everything beneath the surface, everything that was obliterated.

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