



By Margaret Evans, Editor

It ain't easy writing a column from a high-rise condo in Myrtle Beach while attending a family reunion. This festive get-together has been happening every summer for as long as I can remember, and with almost 30 people in attendance – ranging in age from 8 months to 75 years – it's not particularly conducive to contemplation. Or concentration.

I brought a notebook along, hoping to jot down some random thoughts while lounging on the beach or by the pool. Sometimes, you jot down enough random thoughts, string them together artfully, throw in a few choice adjectives and adverbs – but not too many, because they say that's unwriterly – and you'll find yourself with something resembling a publishable essay. But, as it turns out, it's difficult to conjure up decent thoughts when everybody around you is laughing and gossiping, eating and drinking, dancing and singing and throwing what amounts to a continuous five-day party. Eventually, you will find yourself holed up in your little room, away from all the fun, sitting on your bed with your laptop, feeling both sorry for yourself and slightly relieved.

Politics is always the topic to avoid during our family reunion, though we never quite manage to. Inevitably, my husband and Uncle Bob will find themselves going head to head on the hottest issues of the day – though, to their mutual credit, they always end up shaking hands like gentlemen and hoisting another beer. This year, the news was all about the "historic defeat" of Eric Cantor, and the usual suspects on TV were weighing in with their analyses. One answer to the question "why?" seemed to have cross-partisan support: the theory that Cantor was more interested in his own personal ambitions – his lust for higher office – than in serving his constituents and earning their votes. The old "pride goeth before a fall" scenario. Having seen that scenario play out over and over in my lifetime – on stages both large and small – it's a maxim I hold unimpeachable. I can't say for sure it applies in this instance, since I don't know Eric Cantor at all.

But I did know Peter.*

We got the call about Peter on the first night of our family reunion. According to my sister's friend on the phone, he had been found dead in a room at the Red Roof Inn that morning. Peter was fifty-five.

I can write about Peter with a fairly stiff upper lip, but only because I hadn't seen him in years. And, even then, we weren't exactly what you'd call "friends." I'd moved away from home long before he entered the lives of my family, first as a social acquaintance, then later as my sister's boss. When home for the holidays, I'd often find myself gravitating toward Peter at this party or that one. He was one of those people who made any occasion more fun just by showing up – bringing a sparkling wit, impeccable taste, and a thousand stories. My party persona adored his party persona, and vice versa – I think? – but the man himself remained a virtual stranger to me.

Not so, my little sister. She went to work for Peter in the '90s when he was a dazzling young architect about town, a rising star in north Alabama's booming housing industry. Peter asked my sister to leave a job she liked to come run his architecture firm. Based on the sheer force of his personality and her belief in his gifts, she went for it – diving in with all the style, smarts and extreme competence my sister brings to every task she undertakes.

And for a while, things were good. People were building houses left and right, and everybody wanted to bask in Peter's glow. He was the proverbial toast of the town. A rare talent and genuine visionary, Peter could look at the bare banks of a lake in rural Alabama and see the dappled glory of Italy's Amalfi Coast. And he could convince people to dredge canals and build ascending plateaus and erect elaborate, custom-designed houses there . . .

Until people ran out of money, and he couldn't.

But I'm getting ahead of the story. As I said, Peter had impeccable taste . . . and it was expensive. He traveled abroad extensively, always staying in the best hotels . . . dining in the finest restaurants... flying first class. According to a friend who knew him well, Peter would have it no other way. He and his partner, an interior designer, bought a historic home they couldn't really afford and set about restoring it to stunning effect. They threw fabulous parties there with all the right sort of people in attendance. I'm told Peter was very much concerned about the right sort of people – both knowing them and being perceived as one of them. A not particularly

religious man who was raised Baptist, he even joined the Episcopal Church in that pursuit.

At some point, Peter's life began sliding downhill – like a grand Italian villa built on the muddy, shifting shores of an Alabama lake. Always a heavy social drinker, his "drinking lunches" led to "office happy hours," which started earlier and earlier as time went by. Chronic back pain later led to a prescription pill addiction. Meanwhile, the housing market was drying up – people were building smaller houses, then no houses. But Peter's impeccable taste remained unwaveringly impeccable. He began spending other people's money – the bank's, contractors', etc. – to send himself and his partner on the extravagant vacations to which they'd grown accustomed, leaving my sister back at the office to juggle bills and answer irate phone calls. Those close to him were never quite sure whether Peter really loved to travel – or just loved to tell people he'd traveled. With Peter, appearance and reality were almost impossible to separate. I'm fairly certain he never made the distinction. In his defense, I believe he was a classic aesthete, so surrounding himself with beautiful art, architecture, scenery and people may have felt as necessary to his survival as the very blood in his veins.

Well, I don't have to tell you that he lost everything. After many emotional come-to-Jesus meetings, and at her wit's end, my sister – who genuinely loved the man – finally quit after 12 years and moved on to a job at the local hospital. Everybody else at the firm eventually left, too. The bank took Peter's wonderful, tenderly-restored home and his long-suffering partner of 25 years left him, like a desperate man fleeing a sinking ship. Nobody blamed him.

We all lost touch with Peter for several years.

Then, a few weeks ago, he called my sister out of the blue. Said he had an opportunity to work in Dubai and was feeling hopeful for the first time in ages. She was happy for him, but had her doubts. Rumor had it he'd been living in a homeless shelter. How would he make such an expensive trip? She worried about the lack of contrition in his voice, too. It sounded all too familiar. According to Peter, everything that had happened to him – the drinking, the pills, the shady dealings, the loss of his business – was somebody else's fault. He was misunderstood and underappreciated. As usual. And he was still drinking, too. He'd tried rehab, but couldn't abide AA meetings. He didn't like the people there; thought they seemed "uneducated."

After losing everything – and after all this time – he still hadn't taken a good, hard look in the mirror.

And now he's gone. The brief newspaper item referred to our brilliant, dashing Peter as "a body found in a room at the Red Roof Inn." Friends believe he died of complications related to alcoholism, but even that is unclear at this point. We were told his priest had put him up in the motel room where he was found. In the end, joining the Episcopal Church may have been the best decision Peter ever made, whatever his reason.

Why was I telling you all this, again? Oh, yes... we were talking about pride. Lord knows I'm familiar with the affliction. Even now, I fear you won't like my little story... that you'll judge it – judge *me* – lacking in direction and purpose. You'll wonder why I had you waste your time on this page. To be honest, I'm not really sure.

As we sat watching the moonlit ocean that first Myrtle Beach night, remembering Peter, my mom shared a story he'd told her years ago that I'd never heard before. As children, Peter and his little brother had been fighting in the back of the family station wagon when the door suddenly swung open; Peter's brother fell out, was hit by the car behind them, and killed. Can you imagine the anguish? The guilt? What would it be like to grow up with that moment forever seared on your heart? What might you do – how far might you go – to surround yourself with beauty and festivity, finery and pleasure, all manner of lavish distraction? How far might you run to escape yourself . . . to avoid looking too closely in the mirror? Sometimes, it's hard to tell self-regard from self-loathing. Maybe they're not that different.

Goodbye, Peter. You were the closest thing we'd ever seen to a real-life Gatsby. Rest in peace, old sport. Or better yet, enjoy the party.

** Peter is not his real name.*

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