

AND THERE HE SAT, up front, all alone in the first pew. For those who asked, the ushers confirmed it with a reluctant nod. Yep, that's him. For those who cared but said nothing, they gave themselves away by staring sideways and pretending to be impressed by the nearby stained glass, as if devotees of Cornelius the Centurion or Godfrey of Bouillon instead of a seventy-nine-year-old writer with gout. Rumor had it he might show. His oldest and dearest friend, Charles Henry Topping, was dead. Funeral on Tuesday at St. James on 71st and Madison. Be respectful. Dress appropriately. See you there. Some of the faithful brought books in hopes of getting them signed, a long shot but who could resist, and by a quarter of eleven the church was almost full. I myself remember watching friends of my father as they walked down that aisle. While they glimpsed the Slocums and the Coopers and over there the Englehardts—hello by way of regretful grin—a number of these fellow mourners baffled them. Were those sneakers? Was that a necklace or a tattoo; a hairdo or a hat? It seemed death had an unfortunate bride's side. Once seated, all and sundry leafed through the program—good paper, nicely engraved—and gauged the running time in their head, which mercifully lacked a communion. There was a universal thrill for the eulogist since the man up front was notoriously private, bordering on reclusive. Excitement spread via church-wide mutter. Thumbs composed emails, texts, status updates, tweets. This New York funeral suddenly constituted a chance cultural event, one of those I-was-there moments, so prized in this city, even if you had known the writer from way back, knew him before he was famous and won all those awards, knew him as a strong ocean

swimmer and an epic climber of trees, knew his mother and his father, his stepfather, knew his childhood friends, all of whom knew him as Andy or Andrew rather than the more unknowable A. N. Dyer.

All this happened in mid-March, twelve years ago. I recall it being the first warm day of the year, a small relief after months of near-impossible cold. Just a week earlier, the temperature sulked in the teens, the windchill dragging the brat into newborn territory. Windows rattled in their sashes, and the sky resembled a headfirst plunge onto cement. After a long winter of dying, my father was finally dead. I remember standing up and covering his face, like they do in the movies, his bright blue socks poking free from the bottom of the comforter. He always wore socks with his pajamas and never bothered to sleep under the sheets. It was as if his dreams had no right to unmake a bed. I went over and opened both windows, no longer cursing the draft but hoping the cold might shelter his body for a bit. But on the day of his funeral, the city seemed near sweltering, even if the thermostat within St. James maintained its autumnal chill, the Episcopalian constant of scotch and tweed.

Churches are glorified attics, A. N. Dyer once wrote, but now he resembled a worshipper deep in prayer—head lowered, hands crammed against stomach. His posture reminded me of a comma, its intent not yet determined. People assumed he was upset. Of course he was upset. He and my father were the oldest of friends, born just eleven days apart in the same Manhattan hospital. Growing up, this minor divide seemed important, with Andrew teasing the older Charlie that he was destined to die first—it was just basic actuarial math—and Andrew would bury his friend and live his remaining numbered days in a glorious Topping-free state. “The worms and creepy-crawlies will eat you while I swig champagne.” This joke carried on until the punch line became infused with intimacy and what once made young Charlie cry now made him smile, even toward the end. “You really are milking this,” Andrew muttered during his final visit. “I’ve had the bubbly on ice for a month now.” He sat by the bed, like a benched player witnessing an awful defeat. My father was no longer speaking. That bully with the scythe straddled his chest and dared him to breathe, c’mon, breathe. So Andrew decided to give his friend the last word by leaning closer and

stage-whispering in his ear, “This is where you tell me to go look in the mirror, with all my pills a day and my ruined joints and unsalvageable lower midsection; this is where you point and say with the awful knowledge of those who go first, ‘You’re next.’” Andrew was rather pleased with this comeback. He wondered how far back his dying friend could reach, if apologizing was worth all the dragging up, but really he decided the important thing was that he was here, A. N. Dyer in the flesh, today’s visit no small feat considering the state of his big toe. It had been a two-Vicodin morning. Charlie for his troubles sported a morphine drip. “Just look at us,” Andrew started to say when Charlie’s right hand took unexpected flight and flopped like a dead bird onto Andrew’s knee. His fingernails were thick and yellow, and Andrew recalled from his more macabre youth the keratin that keeps growing after death, which raised his eyes to that weedy Topping hair and how in the coffin Charlie would miss his monthly trim and turn bohemian, like Beethoven conducting his own decay. Unnerved, Andrew gave his friend a gentle pat. His own hand seemed hardly any better. Then Charlie tried to speak, he tried and tried—clearly he had something to say—but all meaning remained locked up in his throat and what rattled free sounded like one of those cheap Hollywood scarefests where the living transform into the contagious undead and you had best run. To his credit, Andrew refused to look away. While he was obviously upset, he also seemed embarrassed, perhaps more embarrassed than upset, as if dying involved a humiliating confession. Please let me go, he probably begged to himself. Release me. After a minute of listening to this hopeless rasp he interrupted by saying, “I’m sorry, pal,” and he placed his hand on Charlie’s chest and kissed him softly on the head. That was good enough, right?

Charles Henry Topping earned a respectable if pictureless two-hundred-word obit in *The New York Times*—lawyer, philanthropist, trustee, world-class decoy collector, and lifelong friend of the novelist A. N. Dyer, who often wrote about the blue-blooded world of the Toppings and the Dyers. Wrote? I’m sure Andrew marveled at that particular choice of tense. It likely surprised him that my father even warranted a mention in the *Times*. How little a life required nowadays.

The church organist played the last of the Mendelssohn prelude.

Andrew curled farther forward in his pew, as if pressed by the world behind him. If only Isabel were here. She would have known what to say. “Enough thinking about your miserable self.” She could cut through him like no other. All day yesterday Andrew had sat over his IBM Selectric and found little to recall about his friend except that he liked bacon, liked bacon tremendously. Charlie could eat a whole slab of it. BLTs. Bacon burgers. Bacon and mayonnaise sandwiches. Liver wrapped in bacon. Disgusting. Of course there was more to say (after all, the *Times* managed two hundred words) but it seemed that so much of the Dyer-Topping friendship was based on those early years when action trumped language and bacon was as profound as anything. Since birth their relationship was as fixed as the stars. That was a large part of its charm. Like many men who keep friends in orbits of various length, a month, six months, a year might pass without talking and yet they could pick right up again, unfazed. The two of them were close without question so why bother searching for answers. Talk centered on the trivial, past and present, on summers and schoolmates, those earnest memories of youth, while the stickier issues, like disease and divorce, death and depression, occurred on the subatomic level: they had their fundamental effect, their important interactions, but they had no identifiable consequence when having a pleasant meal together, a meal likely pushed upon them by their ever-attentive wives.

Charlie sure loved his bacon.

Andrew removed the eulogy from his suit jacket.

How can I read this crap in public? he wondered. How will I even manage to climb the lectern without my gout igniting a thousand crystal-cracking explosions? My bedrock is nothing but chalkstone. From his pocket he retrieved then popped his just-in-case Vicodin, the lint-covered backup to his post-breakfast Vicodin. Just swallowing the pill seemed to hurt, as if ground-up glass were part of its pharmacology. The organist approached her tonal amen. Behind the altar loomed that massive golden screen with its carved miniatures of important church figures, once memorized by Andrew and Charlie during their Sunday school days, with that cow Miss Kepplinger insisting on a metronomic recital of names—*St. Polycarp, St. Gregory of Nazianzus*—

a pause and no snack for you—*St. Michael, St. Uriel*—and while Andrew had a strong memory—*St. Raphael, St. Gabriel*—if old Miss Moo were tapping her clubfoot today—the fifth archangel up top, um, the patron saint of all who forgive, um, the angel who stopped Abraham’s Issac-slaying hand, um—he would have gone graham crackerless. But there was no tapping. Not today. Mendelssohn was done and Charlie was dead and Andrew was a few minutes away from mortifying his more famous self in front of all these people.

Just leave right now, shouted in his head.

Pull the old fire alarm and bolt.

He blamed the whole mess on the second Mrs. Topping, my stepmother. Lucy had the unique ability to corner a person on the phone. “He did love you,” she told him the day after my father died.

“Yes,” Andrew said.

“So so much.”

“Yes.”

“So proud to have you as a friend. So proud. Just plain proud of you.”

“And I he,” Andrew said, wondering if he was speaking English or Mandarin.

“And the boys, and Grace, they love you too, like a second father really.”

“Their father was a good man.”

“You have such a way with words. As a matter of fact . . .”

It was ridiculous, her flattery, or perhaps mockery since her lips often pursed the thinnest of smiles, passed down from a particular brand of suburban housewife who could appear both dense and all too wise, like any service industry veteran. Yet somehow by the end of the conversation the divorcée from Oyster Bay had nabbed her prized eulogist. A goddamn eulogy? What could be worse? Maybe a graduation speech. A wedding toast. Andrew had said yes despite the clearest of professional and private intentions, had said yes despite the fact that his last novel, *The Spared Man*, was published ten years ago and most of that was cribbed from something he had abandoned twenty years before—since then nothing new from the celebrated author of *Amper-sand* and *Here Live Angry Dogs and Brutal Men* and a dozen other books,

not even a letter of decent length. Sometimes it seemed a vital piece had gone loose in his brain and he could feel the bit rattling around, a temporal gear that had slipped its carriage and no longer stamped thoughts into proper words and sentences. He was, in effect, broken. Often he wanted to jam a screwdriver into his ear. Like last night, in his study: he was sitting at his desk distracted by the recent reissue of his books, with that stupid business on their spines (if arranged chronologically they revealed a red line that traced the peaks and valleys of a cardiogram), which, while clever enough, did not take into consideration the random heart conditions after midnight, the arrhythmias and shortnesses of breath and implied flatlines, the irrational fear of sleep, the old friend recently dead and only a few hours to sum up his life. Four-thirty in the morning and chest-deep in his own grave, Andrew reached for that most loathsome and inguinal of writing instruments, the laptop computer. He lowered himself into the underworld of the Internet. Almost as a lark he did a Google search (was he the only one who noticed in its logo a babyish connotation, a sort of infantile infinite?) for *eulogy* and *help* and *please*. Within an hour he found his Eurydice:

My dear friend,

I am here to offer you my very deepest sympathies for the loss you have recently suffered. In this time of grieving it can seem overwhelming to deliver an eulogy in front of an audience of friends and family and clergy and strangers let alone writing said eulogy with all the care it so obviously deserves and all in a matter of a few fraught days. What can you give but tears? Believe me I know what you are going through. I myself was beyond bereft and scared when my brother-in-law asked me to give the eulogy for my much loved but tragically deceased sister and while I was afraid I might not do the lovely part of her life justice I preserved and there were such good feeling and warmth for my words that since then I have written and delivered eulogies for my father, my cousin, my uncle, two of my aunts, my grandmother, countless dear friends, even poor newborns abandoned I have remembered. If you want to skyrocket your confidence and

save precious time and rest assured in delivering a memorable tribute to someone who once meant so much to you, then www.eulogiesfromtheheart.com is the most important website you will visit today. My Instant Eulogy Package will give you everything you need to stand tall with appropriate and meaningful sorrow. Let me help bring forth the loss that is struggling within you.

Sincerely and again with deepest condolences,
Emma Norbert

Yes, Andrew thought, Emma Norbert understood. Her photo was front and center, her face soft with the sweetest kind of intelligence, even if the eyes were punctuated with too much makeup, like unnecessary quotation marks. But you could tell she was an honest if dyslexic mourner. Emma had the real words while all Andrew had was artifice. Drunk with scotch and swirled with Vicodin, he considered the fourteen books that would stand as his testament, a handful of older critics giving their kind words, a handful of younger critics challenging such weary opinions. Oh Emma, Andrew thought, what would you say about me for \$29.99? He plugged in his information, his credit card number, then pushed `ENTER`. In five minutes he had his choice of fill-in-the-blank eulogies.

They say that at the end of our time on this earth if you can count a few good friends you are a fortunate person. I know that I am fortunate because I could always count on [insert name] to be the truest friend I ever did know, and today I am sick with despair, doubly sick because [insert name] is not here to repair me with his/her kind words and loving heart . . .

Andrew clapped his hands, maybe even cackled. The idea that he or Charlie could repair anything was laughable. Their mothers, and then their wives, did all the repair work, often literally, while their sons, and later their husbands, bungled even the easiest of household chores and came to depend on a general air of domestic incompetence for a sense

of well-being. They were hopeless without their women. Andrew rolled a sheet of paper into the Selectric, always a satisfying action, like adding memory to an empty head. As he copied the words he allowed himself a brief fantasy with Ms. Norbert, Emma in leather and high heels, pushing his face down and riding him like a run-on sentence. Nothing rose from her whip but there was some solace in the harsh slap of keys.

I just hope I was half the friend that [insert name] was to me, and in the end, when my time is up, God willing I will once again find myself with him/her and we can (a favorite shared activity) again. The sun might set, but there is always the promise of a new day, always the promise, always.

But in the gloom of this day Emma floated like stone. Andrew slipped the eulogy back into his suit jacket and bunkered himself farther into the pew, hoping perhaps that old Miss Moo would forget to call on him. He wondered about Andy—he had escaped outside for a quick smoke but that was four or five cigarettes ago. Then again, what did twenty minutes mean to a seventeen-year-old? Or an hour? Even a year? All that future ahead was a bright light shining under the door, the present just a narrow peephole. Still, Andrew wished he could reach over and touch the boy's knee and maybe settle himself with a self-confirming glance. Andy was the answer to that late-night question: Am I alone? No. You have him. But where was he? Andrew thought about turning around and looking but the idea of wading through the collected crowd, the various social connections, the past that grew thin but never snapped, if anything grew more elastic, exhausted him. It was a history he couldn't deny. Like an Appalachian boy who done good, the entire Upper East Side had embraced his early success, even if his novels tended toward the Upper West, with friends of his mother and stepfather praising the reviews and magazine articles and asking about sales and potential awards and if Darryl Zanuck had come calling yet, these same hands congratulating him decades later when he ripped them apart in the Henry Doubleday diptych (*American*

Ligature and *The Gorgon USA*), but by then there was no cause for outrage. A. N. Dyer was famous. Andrew cleared the ever-prolific phlegm from his throat, a thirty-second job nowadays. Yes, the pews behind him carried the junk DNA of his life, useless perhaps but within their folds he might glimpse his mother, long a ghost, making her giddy rounds and he might overhear a kind word said about his father, who died the day after Christmas when Andrew was just eight. But rather than turn he continued to peer ahead, disoriented, like somebody mistaking a mirror for a way out.

The organist roused into the first chord of the processional hymn, “Thine Be the Glory.” The congregation stood and angled toward the back, though A. N. Dyer remained seated, seemingly too distraught to move. First came the boys choir, followed by the clergy, the coffin, and finally we Toppings, led by the Widow Lucy. No doubt her black ensemble with fur trim and fat satin buttons caused a stir among a few of the ladies who expected no less from Mrs. Oyster Bay. The original Mrs. Topping, aka Eleanor, my mother, would have been understated to the point of high style, a woman, like so many of her generation, who took her cues from Jacqueline Kennedy, to the point where you could imagine all these women the survivors of some public assassination. But in Lucy’s defense, she had drawn the short straw, having been tied to my father for all the difficulties—the first bout of esophageal cancer, the mental confusion, the heart failure in conjunction with the second bout of cancer—and she had made his last years as comfortable, as happy, as possible, even if she droned on about thwarted trips to India, to Cambodia, to Xanadu, I swear. Only the cruel would have criticized that ridiculous Halston knockoff hat. She deserved this big wedding of a funeral, in full choir.

*Thine be the glory, risen, conqu’ring Son;
Endless is the vict’ry, Thou o’er death hast won*

Andrew, still sitting, thought, or sensed, sort of breathed in the air and comprehended the years within the particulates of this church, where nothing changed, not even the smell, which was similar to his

father's closet, and how as a boy he could stay huddled on top of sharp-heeled shoes, not quite hiding but not quite not hiding, almost wanting to be found though he'd instantly feel foolish—yes, winged within this constancy were numerous past weddings and christenings and funerals, God knows how many times sitting in this church and Andrew hardly believed in God.

*Make us more than conq'rors, through Thy deathless love:
Bring us safe through Jordan to Thy home above.*

Boys like pocket-size men passed by in their red and white frocks. This slow-moving, high-pitched train startled Andrew, and he realized, Oh crap, I should be on my feet, the service has begun. He grabbed the pew and eased himself up, hobbled only by a memory of pain, thanks to the Vicodin. Some of us gave him a weary grin as we entered our reserved pews. Lucy and Kaye Snow, her daughter from her first marriage, slipped in beside Andrew. Kaye was an unmarried breeder of Wheaton terriers, though seeing her you might have guessed Pomeranians. But her true profession was aggrieved yet devoted daughter, a career she had thrived in for nearly forty-seven years and from which she would never retire. Kaye smiled at Andrew. She must be very talented with dogs, he thought.

Lucy reached over and touched his forearm. "How are you feeling?"

"What's that?"

"You look peaked."

"No, I haven't," he misunderstood. "Have you seen Andy?"

"No. Is everything all right?"

Andrew assumed she was asking about the eulogy. "Oh, it'll be fine."

"It's hard, isn't it?"

"What?"

"All of this," she said, her hands spreading as if the human condition were roughly the size and weight of a melon, then she fixed his collar and brushed a bit of dandruff from his shoulders. "I wish I had a comb."

Daughter Kaye grimaced, a sentiment that seemed tattooed on her lips.

“Anyway”—Lucy waved to a friend—“thank you for agreeing to do this.”

The hymn concluded and Rev. Thomas Francis Rushton stood before the congregation and spoke those familiar words “I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord . . .” though there was nothing particularly immortal about his delivery, just the words themselves in intimate soliloquy “. . . and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die . . .” the Reverend reminding Andrew of an Astroff from a production of *Uncle Vanya* he had seen many years ago, when he hated the theater a little less “. . . I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth . . .” Andrew trying to remember what Sonya said during that last scene, something about the futility of life and how we must play the hand of our remaining days “. . . and though this body be destroyed, yet shall I see God . . .” where in Christ’s name was Andy and how many cigarettes did the boy need “. . . and no man dieth to himself . . .” Andrew himself a pack-a-day smoker until he was fifty and still he yearned for the morning smoke “. . . whether we live, therefore, or die, we are the Lord’s . . .” seventeen years old and smoking, just like his old man “. . . Blessed are the dead . . .” Andrew breathed in and imagined his lungs in harmony with the boy’s “. . . for they rest from their labors . . .” and that’s when he shuddered, terrified by what his next breath might bring.

Reverend Rushton declared, “The Lord be with you.”

“And also with you,” replied those in the know.

“Let us pray.”

In the pause before the Our Father began Andrew whispered, “What have I done?” loud enough for some of us to hear.