Promoted to Glory

by Paul Illidge (July 2024)

Pressing the Grapes, Florentine Wine Cellar (John Singer Sargent, 1882)

“We’ll fly,” my brother John said on the phone when I relayed what had sounded like my mother’s last request in a desperate phone call twenty minutes earlier.

Billy Bishop Airport on Toronto Island was home base for the half dozen Cessna T182s that John’s company Aviation Holdings owned, however he’d recently moved the planes to the Collingwood Airport, two-hours north west of Toronto, where they’d be hidden from Gerry Gurdler, his bankruptcy trustee, and other creditors who were working overtime trying to discover the whereabouts of the $100 million that had recently gone missing from Rampart Securities, John’s investment company on the Toronto and New York stock exchanges: a massive financial fraud that both police and securities officials had been looking into but with no luck, due to the fact John had cleverly *squirreled* his millions into a dozen or more numbered holding companies.

“We’ll meet at Beinn Tighe on Saturday morning,” John continued. “Leave after lunch, the flight only takes about fifty minutes from Collingwood flying over Lake Ontario. I’ll have taxis waiting when we land in Port Dalhousie for the drive from Niagara Regional Airport to St. Catharines, maybe twenty minutes, then they’ll return us to the airport after dinner. We’ll be home by ten o’clock at the latest.”

Beinn Tighe, Welsh for “House on the Hill”, was John’s 750-acre farm in the pastoral rolling hills south of the town of Collingwood overlooking Georgian Bay in eastern Lake Huron. Forty-head of beef cattle, a farmer named Peter managing the herd, doing the grounds-keeping, a woman named Holly tending the three large gardens on the property, a spring-fed pond where people could swim.

Our younger brother Peter drove from Beinn Tighe, where we’d all spent the night, to the Collingwood airport with my three

children, aged 7, 10 and 12 (their mother and I were separated) and me, while our kid sister Judith, who lived in Collingwood, met us there.

We waited while John went to pick up his pilot Graham at the motel outside Collingwood where he was staying for the weekend, flying two clients home to Toronto Sunday morning, happy to kill time Saturday with a flight to St. Catharines and back.

I'd never met Graham before, but I knew his history and how John came to hire him when he started his air service. Graham had been a celebrated and revered music teacher and band conductor for twenty-five years at Oakwood Collegiate in Toronto. In April 2005 shocking news broke: Graham was arrested and charged with twenty-seven sexual abuse and abuse-related offences. The following week, more kids came forward. The number of victims shot up to forty. Charges went back sixteen years, and they involved male students. He flew boys who played in the school band to his cottage on Georgian Bay for special "rehearsals," served them alcohol then molested them once they were drunk and passed out.

He was convicted on all counts, sentenced to three years in prison.

A registered sex offender, the only job he could find upon release was as a charter pilot and flight instructor at Toronto Island Airport. John one of Graham's first students, after getting his pilot's licence, decided to build a fleet of Cessnas and start a premier charter company with Graham as his chief pilot whisking Hollywood movie stars and celebrities from Toronto's Pearson International airport to their northern cottage retreats in the Muskoka Lakes region so as to avoid the three- to four-hour or longer drive in heavy holiday traffic.

John knew Graham's story. His arrest and trial had been in all

the media. But as far as John was concerned, the man had done the crime, served his time and was trying to put his life back together. He deserved a chance. Besides, he was a superb pilot, the kind you needed working for you when you're flying rich, heavily-insured clients and celebrities around.

John and Graham soon arrived. After introductions and some talk about seating arrangements for load purposes, Judith, Nicky and Hannah boarded Graham's plane, while Peter, Carson and I hopped in John's. He'd had his pilot's license since he'd acquired the first of his six *Cessnas*.

We took off into a cloudless blue sky, levelled out at six-thousand feet heading south-east, sun warming the cabin, the engine droning bearably loud, not a hint of turbulence. Carson and I gazed out our windows at the landscape passing below while Peter, the technical wizard, peppered John in his usual way with mechanical questions about the plane, wondering about specs and details which John knew nothing about. "I don't build them, Pete! I just fly them," he said to end the interrogation. Peter laughed, unpacked his camera, made some adjustments to the lens then started taking pictures for an autumn-themed photography show he was preparing.

We flew over the town of Creemore, New Tecumseh, Mansfield Hills, the Hockley Valley, Caledon, over Etobicoke in south-west Toronto where, thirty minutes into the flight, we started across Lake Ontario. I felt a sudden anxiety at being high over water in a small, single-engine prop plane, and I guess it showed. John picked up on it, telling me with a straight face that we had nothing to worry about: there were lifejackets in the back of the plane if the crash didn't kill us." Strangely enough I found the droll humour reassuring, and enjoyed the rest of the ride.

Two taxis were parked on the tarmac when we landed. John gave one driver my mother's address, Judith and the kids heading off. Peter and I waited with the other driver while John and

Graham discussed something: Graham's plane had developed a mechanical issue during the flight. He thought he knew what it was, but needed a mechanic with whom to discuss repairs. Whether the issue would be resolved by the time we were done visiting my mother was hard to say.

We arrived at my mother's building, Loyalist Lodge on King Street in downtown St. Catharines, just after four. My mother picked Loyalist not because it was the newest of the seniors' residences in town, but because it had been built on the site of the Bell Telephone building where my engineer father had worked for many years.

As the first dinner sitting wasn't until five, my mother gave us a tour of the residence: for the benefit of the kids, she said, who had seen the place before of course, but showed polite interest in what Grandma was saying as she proceeded a few steps in front of us: the beginnings of a stoop, downcast eyes, wringing her hands, chewing her lips—along with dry voice and throat-clearing, the side effects of the medication she was on. She was certainly pent up about something, enough to have convened this *emergency* family conclave: all four of her children together with her at the same time, something that, as I thought about it, hadn't happened for various reasons since my father's funeral several years earlier. Yet there we were on what would have been his seventy-eighth birthday, one not always happy family . . .

Dinner was roast beef, Yorkshire pudding, peas, carrots and Parisienne potatoes, with lemon meringue pie or strawberry shortcake for dessert. Conversation consisted mostly of my mother's reminiscences about John, Peter, Judith and I when we were growing up, stories the kids had heard before in one form or another, delivered now in a voice that was little more than a murmur, so faint at times we couldn't figure out if she was talking to herself or to us, not that it would have made much difference.

Then, just like that, she segued into questions for the kids about how they were doing, what school was like, what they and their friends were up to. Their answers given, there seemed to be nothing else to say. Even when we turned the conversation to Canadian politics, she gave one- and two-word responses to questions that not so long ago she would happily have taken fifteen fierce minutes to answer.

I recognized the agitated look storming her face. It came my way, reminding me of what I was expected to do before broaching the source of the panic that had drawn us all here: she didn't want to talk in front of the kids.

On the one hand I was determined not to capitulate *just like that*, telling them to snap to it and get down to the recreation lounge for some ping pong so the adults could talk. I'd discussed mental illness with my children enough that they understood their Grandma suffered from one. As they saw it, that's why her behaviour was sometimes so *eccentric*. It was really no big deal to them. They didn't mind having a slightly off-the-wall grandmother. They had told me it made family events more interesting and sometimes dramatic, and helped them better understand that family relationships can be more complicated than we think. There might not be many more opportunities to see their "interesting" grandma. They were part of our rescue delegation; it seemed to me they deserved to hear what all the fuss was about.

At the same time, I couldn't expect her to understand that discussing something like mental illness in front of your grandchildren was considered a healthy thing to do nowadays, that people were trying to stop treating it as something dangerous, a stigma to be feared and kept secret as she and my father had always done with my brothers and sister and I, never acknowledging, even in adulthood, the impact my mother's illness had taken on *our* mental health over the years, and was continuing to take: proof of which surely lay in the fact that we had again reacted to one of my mother's distress phone-

calls in the usual Pavlovian fashion by immediately dropping everything and rushing straight over to St. Catharines, only to listen to her recount yet another fraught tale of near-death experience, this one, ludicrously enough, at the hands of a hotdog.

Nevertheless, I made her wait before giving in, five minutes of silence that was uncomfortable for us all. Her brooding becoming more fretful by the minute, I caught John's eye and told the kids they could go play ping pong if they wanted to. Off they went.

"So Mom," John said on cue, "what's up?"

She came to life instantly. Bright with sudden energy, she sat up in her chair, leaned forward, hands folded in front of her, no longer wringing them and, after clearing her throat a few times, explained about the hotdog.

"Yesterday was hotdogs for lunch. Sometimes I have trouble swallowing hotdogs. A bite became lodged in my throat and I started choking. The aides couldn't dislodge it. I was turning blue, I couldn't feel myself breathing. I continued choking. Things went dark and I lost consciousness. That's all I remember until I woke up in bed in my apartment. They'd revived me despite the *Do Not Resuscitate* order on my medical record. I didn't *want* to be revived. I wanted to *go*. They ignored the DNR. What's the point of having one if they're not going to respect it? When I asked the director why, she said choking was a medical emergency, and they had no choice but to resuscitate in medical emergencies, it was part of their job. My point was that if you're dying, and it doesn't matter how, that's a medical emergency, isn't it?" She looked at each of us in turn. "What ways of dying are there that *aren't* medical emergencies? There's really no situation where you can *use* your DNR, because it's always a medical emergency, and they'll always revive you. Do Not Resuscitate means *Do Not Save*. At this point in my life," she said growing evangelical, "I don't

want to be saved! I'm not *worth* saving!"

"Don't say that, Mom," said Judith.

"Have you told Reverend McKinley that?"

She made a face. "Reverend McKinley." The minister at her Anglican church, with whom she often tangled in dogma disputes brought on by my mother's belief that Michael McKinley was actually a Roman Catholic trying to convert his congregation. "*I want to go*," she said firmly, like it was a proclamation. "I want to be *promoted to glory* like the Salvation Army says."

"Death as a promotion," said Peter. "It's kind of a nice concept."

As morbid as conversation like this at the family dinner table would seem to most people, it needs to be understood that my brothers and sister and I were used to such talk from my mother on the subject of Death, her own, of others, the general principle. She'd been obsessed with the topic on and off for much of her life, and it was something about which she talked with no compunction as if views on death, on heaven and hell, the afterlife were things that all families discussed as a matter of course.

I don't know if she ever expressed it to my siblings, but my mother had told me on numerous occasions throughout my life that she didn't fear death. She had faith. She believed in God, the resurrection, the life everlasting—that she looked forward to the day when she'd be *At Rest*, the words she wanted inscribed on her gravestone, the same ones she'd had put on my father's. *At rest*, she would say when musing about it, *is something I've always wanted to be*.

"—Maybe you could avoid choking by taking smaller bites, Mom," said Peter.

"Chew them more," John suggested.

“Drink a glass of water while you’re eating.”

“Just stop having hot dogs, Mom,” said Judith. “They’ll bring you something else.”

“I like hotdogs.”

“Why don’t we forget about the hotdogs,” I said. “What is it you want us to do, Mom, now that we’ve rushed over to see you thinking there was a crisis.”

“What I *want* you to do is check and see if the DNR is still in my records. If it’s not, tell them I want it to be, if it is, tell them to follow through on it next time.”

“To let you die… ”

“What about the aides whose arms you die in? How are they going to feel? It’s not fair to them. Have you thought of that?”

“It’s human instinct to want to help someone in distress.”

“Why did you want a DNR in the first place?

“I get lonely.”

“Who doesn’t?”

“Nobody comes to see me… ”

This our cue to let her carry on with the *Guilting Story*, the perennial rant that she let loose with at some point on these to-the-rescue missions: why we didn’t visit more often, why we never called, how we’d abandoned her to live cooped up in an *old folks’ home* without a car—

John’s phone rang. He took the call.

He turned to my mother when it was done. “We have to be on our way, Mom.”

“Is everything all right?”

“Everything’s fine. We want to get in the air while it’s still light.”

Residents were lining up for the second dinner sitting. After we finished our coffee I went to the recreation lounge and rounded up the kids. We walked my mother back to her apartment, chatted for a minute outside her door, reminding her it was only five weeks until Christmas, when we’d see her again. She watched us go down the hall to the elevator, waved when it came, the kids calling *Bye Grandma!* as they hopped on.

Things weren’t fine at the airport. Graham was still waiting for the mechanic he’d called to show up. The repair could take a few hours, maybe longer.

John made a phone call. Fifteen minutes later a black stretch limousine appeared. A uniformed chauffeur stepped out. John explained to the kids that Graham’s plane had to be fixed, nothing serious, but the mechanic would be a few hours working on it. They could drive back to the farm in the limo with Judith. Peter and I would go with him in his plane and we’d *reconvene* at Beinn Tighe in a few hours. He peeled two hundred-dollar bills off his wad, handing them to Judith for pizza and snacks on the way. “*Ándale, Ándale!*” he joked, hustling everybody into the limo.

A late night Saturday, the kids stopping for snacks twice on the way, the limo driver getting lost on the dark country roads, it was close to midnight when the limo finally pulled up at Beinn Tighe. We slept late on Sunday, had brunch and drove home in the early afternoon. The mechanical issue dealt with, John stayed at the farm so he could talk to his pilot Graham when he returned from St. Catharines about what had gone wrong with the plane.

He didn’t come home to my house that night, or if he did it was after I’d gone to bed. I missed him Monday morning, was

working in my office transcribing an interview that I'd done for a book I was working on, when Judith called to say there'd been a break-in at the farm during the night. The police were investigating, trying to get in touch with John. Apparently a neighbour driving by early in the morning reported a Yamaha 500 motorcycle lying in the middle of the road about thirty yards from the foot of the Beinn Tighe driveway, a helmet by the side of the road, key in the ignition, switched to ON, no sign of a driver, no damage to the bike.

The police traced the registration, found John's name and the Beinn Tighe address on the ownership. They went to the farm, the front door wide open, saw there'd been a break-in. They found Judith's name and Collingwood phone number on a *Post It* note beside the wall phone in the kitchen. They asked her what her connection to John James Illidge was. She told them, and they asked if she had a telephone number where they could reach him. Judith gave them the five she had in her book, no idea which ones were still in use or not. Some were, but the police said their voicemail message boxes were all full.

Judith met them at the farm. The first thing they pointed out was a set of men's boot prints in the light snow under one of the living-room windows, the sash closed but, as one of the officers demonstrated, unlocked: this was how the thieves must have got in.

The place hadn't been trashed. Far from it. Several lamps had been knocked over, two tables and some chairs had been overturned, books taken from bookcases and tossed on the floor, broken dishes on the kitchen floor, some artwork pulled from the walls, several sculptures tipped over—more mischief than vandalism, so the police said. A $69.95 WalMart ghetto blaster that John kept on the night-table beside his bed and a naval telescope that our great-grandfather had used in 1916 at the Battle of Jutland seemed to be the only things missing. According to Judith you wouldn't have known the place had even been broken into—until she remembered the wine-fridge.

The glass door closed, the key was in the lock but there was no need for it: the red wines were still there, but the shelves of the other compartment—where John kept his prized whites—were empty. Judith pointed this out to the officers, who joked that they were dealing with a very selective thief.

She led them around the side of the house into the woods: the chains that locked them to the trees had been broken with a bolt-cutter: the two Honda ATVs were gone, as well as the Yamaha motorcycle chained to a nearby tree. The officers couldn't figure that one out. The thieves knew where in the house to find the key and a helmet, drove the motorcycle down to the road and left them lying there? Judith said the officers didn't appear to clue in, but it seemed to her almost like it had been done on purpose, like the thieves wanted the break-in to be discovered.

Judith and one of the police officers walked down to the road. The officer took pictures of the motorcycle, as did Judith. They lifted it up. Judith checked the gas tank, almost full. She hopped on, turned the key and the bike started with no problem. The officer climbed on behind, they drove up the hill to the house. The other officer said he'd reached John and told him what had happened. He was in Toronto but leaving for the farm immediately.

Over the next two weeks the police carried out an investigation, the roofers, who had finished up in late October the number one suspects.

The insurance adjuster told John it happens with local contractors sometimes if they haven't been paid. John assured him these guys had been paid generously and in full.

A friend of Judith's whose cousin worked for the roofers said they were livid at being considered suspects. They'd only finished the job three weeks ago. How stupid would they have to be to rob the place, knowing they'd be number one on the

suspect list? They were an old family company. They all had alibis. There was no way they could have robbed Beinn Tighe. Besides, the owner of the company told the cops, they hated white wine.

With the wine, it baffled the adjuster that only John's whites had been stolen. The man claimed to have sommelier qualifications. While he realized John didn't have many bottles, being more of a white wine aficionado by the looks of it, among his dozen or so reds he had noticed some very impressive and expensive labels.

In the end, the police report advised the insurance company that the investigation of their only suspects, the roofers, proved inconclusive. There would be no charges. The case was to be considered closed.

The adjuster proposed a settlement of $82,000. John countered with $92,000, they split the difference and settled on $87,000 more than five times what the roofers had *soaked him for* on the shingle repair.

John crowed when he received the insurance check. Everything had worked out just fine.

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Paul Illidge's most recent book is the true crime financial thriller *RSKY BZNS* (New English Review Press, 2022), a "fascinating story" (Frank Abagnale, Jr., author of *Catch Me if You Can*), a "gripping and intricate read" (Conrad Black). His book *THE BLEAKS* (ECW Press), was a *Globe & Mail* Best Book of 2014. Books in his *Shakespeare Novels* series *Hamlet, King Lear, Othello, Twelfth Night, Midsummer Night's Dream, Macbeth, Romeo and Juliet*, are all available internationally

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