

Gint Aras

Baptism Party

I am driving to pick up my sixteen month-old daughter from the house of an alcoholic.

It's my father, closing out his fifth decade of alcoholism. Of course, he isn't babysitting—it must be twenty years since anyone has left him alone with a child. About sixty people have gathered at my parents' house in the Chicago suburbs to celebrate the baptism of my sister's twins. I attended the church ceremony earlier this afternoon, then left to perform at a reading hosted by Criminal Class Press, publishers of a literary magazine. My wife, a violinist, is playing a gig in Kalamazoo. With virtually all our social capital gathered at the Baptism Party, we charged a trusted aunt to care for our daughter. I'd arrive before the party's late and dangerous hours.

Yet I'm unsettled while driving. Cruising down I-55, I admit a fact: tonight I knowingly left my daughter in the house of an alcoholic—one whose habits I know too well—in order to read a bawdy short story (about an idiot with a hangover) to about five dozen people, most of them art students. How would a jury of average Americans respond? Another question: Was I pleased, at least partially, that this reading's date fell on the same day as the Baptism Party, an acceptable reason for *me* to avoid the old man's house?

I know these parties. My family celebrates sacraments and Super Bowls with only minor differences, and all our parties begin the same way. Mother greets guests at our back porch. If appropriate, people leave gifts on a table, then drop their coats on one of the beds. Aunts and fiancées of cousins will help arrange food onto serving trays while thirsty men casually saunter down to my father's basement bar, a pleasant space of hardwood panels, several black card tables, a faux-fireplace, the bar itself mahogany. Poached since morning, my father will be pulling a pint from the keg he keeps tapped at all times. With his patchy beard, broad nose and yellow-gray skin, he resembles an aging despot curled over a favorite treasure.

Family and friends continue to trickle in. As this occasion celebrates the cleansing and forgiveness of two infants, the invite list is rather long. In



time the house and back yard are packed with guests, people almost exclusively Lithuanian-American. Those non-Lithuanians who befriended or married one of us—examples include an actual Dubliner and a sprightly Mid-

west girl — are relieved to smell carrot and ginger soup, a signal that traditional fare, items like pickled herring and black bread, will appear only on the side. Others, particularly my father's drinking buddies, are drunk before my aunts can help blend a salad dressing.

The buddies sit with my father at the bar. He barely needs to warm up before he starts one of his rants: *I'll let you now what it is. It's all because of these Government Niggers. And I can't tell you how sick and tired I am of turning on the TV and seeing one of these Hollywood Jews.* Even if a buddy ends up taking rare exception, there won't be any argument, at least not this early. These men will sit while the booze keeps flowing, and my father will continue pouring if even one person remains seated, always proud when a bottle has been finished—he can now procure another from his expensive stash, a collection strategically prepared to be greater than his visitors' thirst. Wander past the bar at random, perhaps to grab a napkin or cracker, and he'll immediately offer you a drink. Refuse and he'll question your masculinity or, if you are a woman, your spirit: *No shot of cranberry? Now, are you sure? What a shame...I used to think you were vivacious.* It's fascinating how many people will be bullied to drink when they'd rather be watching baseball or photographing the infant girls. More fascinating: the buddies nod their heads when my father begins ripping someone who has just left the bar: *That guy really needs to go on a diet or My god, is that woman a bore!* His buddies seem to believe he only ever rips the others.

Ask these guys in private and they'll say my father's a good man. Probe deeper—*Why?* It's rare to meet someone who keeps his word, a generous person. My father lets people use his Michigan fishing trailer, total access to the booze closets. "The man's like a magnet," says a recently emigrated Lithuanian nationalist, "A great personality and patriot. All three of his children speak Lithuanian." The outdoorsman in the group appreciates my father's hunting and fishing skills, the amount of game he gives away each season, his wall of stuffed fish. A soccer fan believes my father is civilized because he knows soccer is the beautiful game. Two members of an amateur opera choir (my father used to belong as well) find him cultured: he loves and supports the opera. Strangely—or perhaps not—they don't mind his party soundtrack of ABBA, Village People and Baha Men.

My mother is serving dinner buffet-style, and the buddies take their plates to the bar. The men discuss hunting and fishing, the English Premiership, then some of the opera company's old productions, *I Lituani* and *Otello*. The old man pulls pint after pint of Berghof and pours shots of Finlandia from bottles frozen into cylinders of ice. Good and hammered after the meal, the men sit smug and cocksure, certain of some looming victory, not unlike Iago when handed Desdemona's handkerchief. Even so, their conversation topics soon run aground—for talk to continue, someone would have to leave

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the bar. The men share an uncertain silence until my father begins a drinking song.

The typical Lithuanian is, by nature, shy and reserved, often aloof and cold. One must invade his nation and threaten him with extinction (or, at minimum, defeat on the basketball court) before he's inspired to passionate courage. While he dreams of the perfect world he'd create when, finding himself coronated, he could plant a forest of impaled enemies, he tends toward cowardice. This helps me explain his fascination with mediocre, even atrocious singers. Talent is almost beside the point; Lithuanians covet guts, and a ballsy singer seduces just as he ignites a kiln of jealousy in the Lithuanian heart. The drunken men gathered around my father join him in song, but they also watch him, his talent similar to the kind available on Lithuanian television. Yet unlike some entertainer, my father doesn't sing to please or unify the group. A booming tenor, his voice overpowers most, crushing the weakest; it reminds the men that while they wish they could sing at the tops of their lungs (to annoy the people who only want conversation), they'd never find the guts without him. Even after three songs, the singers already wishing to sit someplace else—perhaps outside, the midsummer night aglow with fireflies—they will not leave the bar. It would be an admission: the old man's voice has won, pushed the others aside. Leave for a cigarette and he'll accost you later: *What? You're **back**? I thought it was more pleasant outside where you could smoke.* He knows you've been struggling to quit, yet brings it up each time he sees you. To spare yourself this sack of shit, you exchange it for another: a fifth song, then a sixth. The songs will continue until my father grows tired of this favorite amusement, being the centerpiece in a huddle of cowards—one I know intimately.

I'm still a few miles from the party when my iPod shuffles to Charles Mingus' *II B.S.* It strikes me that not even the blare of horns can drown out the Lithuanian traditionals heaving-ho in my head. They quiet only when I imagine my father looking past his troupe to realize the basement has totally emptied. He fidgets, sucking down the rest of his beer. *Now, gentlemen. We'll give the voices a rest, shall we? Just lemme go use the john.* The singers stumble into different corners, some to pick through the meal's leftovers, others to the yard. Smokers gather near the grill. The guy with the weakest voice—not a regular drinking buddy, but a man who had first been bullied to drink, then could not escape the songs—searches for his wife.

The woman has taken only one glass of red wine with her dinner, no more. She finds excessive drink offensive, just as she loathes sport, yet she's been unable to escape a conversation about the Blackhawks for over an hour, one hockey fan unable to understand how she has never been to a single match, another flipping through memories of old Chicago Stadium, the days



when you could piss in the sinks. While she's relieved to see her husband, she's immediately shocked; the tiny man has not been this pale-faced and stumbling drunk since...well...the last time my father bullied him. The woman and man congratulate my sister and thank my mother for the wonderful dinner—really, the meal was truly delicious, and she should be proud to have such beautiful granddaughters. They make their way out to their Japanese coupe and enter the tiny car. The couple exhales, staring straight