

THE CREMATION OF JOE VENTURI

By Benjamin A. Horwitz

“And indeed there will be time
To wonder, “Do I dare?” and “Do I dare?”
Time to turn back and descend the stair,
With a bald spot in the middle of my hair –”

They said Joe died of natural causes. But that wasn't the case. The apartment manager found him in a chair in front of the television - the television blaring away. He said he hadn't seen Joe for several days and when he walked by Joe's apartment that afternoon and heard the TV he knocked on the door. After several repeated attempts to get Joe's attention, he opened the door and found Joe sitting in his favorite leather chair, eyes closed as if he just dozed-off while watching the Tonight Show - a half-empty bottle of Jack Daniel's and an ashtray filled with a couple dozen half-smoked cigarette butts sitting on the coffee table next to the chair.

Joe Venturi was an alcoholic, but hadn't had a drink for over ten years. He also had a bad heart, and both he and his wife Lynn stopped smoking several years ago - Joe on doctor's orders, Lynn, just to be sure there was no temptation. Lynn loved Joe very much. The irony here is that Lynn's death, occurring just eighteen months before Joe's, may have been caused precisely by her quitting. After more than fifty years of nicotine addiction, Lynn quit cold-turkey, just to be sure Joe wouldn't be tempted to start-up again. Six months after quitting, Lynn had an acute asthma attack. Somehow, she developed asthma *after* she stopped smoking. Go figure. Then, just a year after that first attack, while in the bathroom at Cleveland State University, where she worked as the department secretary for the Psychology Department, she had a massive asthma attack, which, according to doctors,

probably caused her fatal heart attack. And then, just eighteen months after Lynn's unexpected death, Joe Venturi "wraps the drapery of his [leather recliner] about him, and lies down to pleasant dreams." (I'm sure Joe would appreciate the literary reference.) Joe could have just as well stuck a 38-caliber revolver in his mouth, but I guess that wasn't Joe's style.

You'd think, that after working closely with a guy for 25 years, socializing on many occasions with him and his wife, and watching his five children grow up – well, you'd think you would have known the guy. But if ever there was an enigma, it surely must have been Joe Venturi. Because it turns out I didn't know Joe at all. And that's what's so unsettling now – that after 30 years, Joe Venturi turns out to be a complete stranger. Was I that stupid, or just oblivious to all the obvious signs?

Joe and I met almost 30 years ago in a meeting with Dupont engineers. It was Joe's first week with H.K.Ferguson, the engineering contractor we were both working for. I had only been there several months myself. We were both working on a Chlorine plant our company was designing for Dupont. Joe was in his early fifties and had just come from Pittsburgh where he was working for Westinghouse in their nuclear division. After the war, the Second World War, Joe went to school on the GI bill and graduated as a chemical engineer from Pratt Institute of Technology. He began his career in the nuclear industry working for Union Carbide at their Paduka, Kentucky facility, separating isotopes of Uranium. Eventually he wound up at Westinghouse designing the nuclear power plants for Rickover's navy. Joe worked with a very exclusive team at Westinghouse. Exclusive in the sense that this Westinghouse team directly worked with a select group of engineers from the navy. Rickover had direct authority over both teams, and hand picked the members of each team. This should pretty much tell you all you

need to know about Joe Ventury's brains and intellect. I, on the other hand, arrived at the H.K. Ferguson Company by a less prestigious route. That route isn't relevant. In any event, Joe and I both happened to be in that meeting with Dupont personnel. I didn't know Joe then, hadn't even met him, even though we were both working on the same project. There were more than a hundred people working on the Dupont Chlorine project so it wouldn't be unusual not to know several of the other engineers. The meeting was called because of the project schedule. Dupont wasn't happy with some of the equipment delays as it was beginning to impact construction schedule in a big way. The Dupont project manager was lecturing the H.K.Ferguson personnel about the importance of this project to Dupont's overall financial position. Somehow he referenced our awareness of this fact to a patient just recovering from an anesthetic - at which point I hear this guy next to me quote under his breath:

“Let us go then you and I
when the evening is spread out against the sky,
like a patient etherized upon a table.”

Now I don't appreciate stereotypes. While there may be some kernel of truth to some of them, they are often exaggerated to the point of absurdity not to mention cruelty. As an engineer, I was especially offended by the usual stereotypes associated with my profession. And I suppose what I am about to reveal may even reinforce some of those traits associated with engineers. But to be truthful, the last thing I expected was some engineer sitting next to me quoting T.S. Eliot, and my favorite poem. We went out for the first of many lunches that afternoon.

So a 25-year relationship began because of a mutual affection for T.S. Eliot's poem, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock". Joe was 25 years

older than me, but the relationship was never a father-son thing. Joe was certainly a mentor to me, but not because of his engineering experience. In fact, Joe's chemical engineering expertise was quite weak, in a general sense. He spent almost his entire career in the nuclear power field, which has very little relevance to general chemical manufacturing. His narrow focus on nuclear power was almost a disadvantage for his present work with Dupont. But remember, Joe Venturi was hand picked by Hyman Rickover to work on projects for the navy. And as I implied before, no one who had worked directly for Rickover was ever accused of being dumb, or even more important, incapable of adapting to new and unusual situations. Rickover's interviewing process was legendary, not to mention his mercurial behavior. So Joe's narrowly focused chemical engineering experience was quickly and easily bridged. Within six months, Joe was considered by all of the other engineers in his area of Chlorine recovery, to be the "go to" guy. Look, plain and simple, Joe Venturi was smart – real smart. Was he an intellectual? Probably. But how would I know? Joe Venturi would be more accurately described as a renaissance man. He could intelligently speak on almost any subject: Art, music, science, literature. Not in a pretentious way, but in very disarming manner, in a very low-keyed manner. Nothing braggadocios or pompous about Joe Venturi - just the opposite, in fact. Joe's knowledge of Eliot or Gershwin or Bach or Fermi or any of the subjects on which Joe Venturi could wax so intelligently and eloquently, would become part of the conversation very casually, very matter-of-factly, and more often than not, very reluctantly. Joe Venturi was basically shy and introverted. And then, suddenly, Joe Venturi disappeared for three weeks.

He just didn't show up to work for three weeks. I asked his boss where he was, and the reply I got was "Joe's on special assignment." - no more of

an explanation than that. And I didn't pursue it. Then one Monday morning Joe appeared back at his desk and we started talking as though he had just come back from lunch. No explanation. No discussion. I probably should have recognized this as part of the enigma that would eventually envelop Joe Venturi. But I was young and didn't want to intrude and figured if Joe wanted to discuss his "special assignment" he would. He never did. That evening, we made plans to see Maynard Ferguson and his band, which was performing at the Smiling Dog Saloon on Cleveland's Near West Side. Joe was a jazz and big band aficionado – 1930's and 40's vintage. After the Ferguson concert, our eardrums in desperate need of repair from sitting in the front row, I took Joe back to his residence. This turned out to be a bit of a surprise. Joe was living in the inner-city in an old rather run-down Victorian style mansion. Something the Rockefellers or the Mathers or one of the old Cleveland families living on Millionaires Row may have once resided in. Joe's family hadn't yet moved to Cleveland from Pittsburgh, but this looked like a rather odd temporary residence for a "renaissance-man" to be living in. Years later I found out the old run-down mansion was a half-way house, and Joe's mysterious three week absence was the result of another alcohol binge and a drying-out at the Cleveland Clinic. Later that year, Joe and his wife and five children moved to a large brick Tudor style home on Fernway road in Shaker Heights.

During the next five years, Joe and I would work on several more projects together. When we were working on different projects we would manage to meet for lunch several times during the week, or shoot the bull in the mornings for 10 or 15 minutes. We played tennis three or four times a month. I usually beat Joe, having that 25-year age advantage, but it was usually close. Sometimes we would play doubles – Joe and Lynn, me and

my girlfriend of the month. Lynn had me over for dinner many times, especially when she made beef stroganoff, her specialty. Lynn Venturi was a terrific cook.

Lynn and Joe were both from Queens. Their families were friendly and they lived and grew-up in the same Queen's neighborhood. Joe was about five years older than Lynn, so as Joe liked to say, he never noticed her till he got out of the Army Air Corps after the War. They married after Joe graduated from Pratt. Lynn was an extremely attractive woman. Strikingly Irish, tall, short back hair and dark brown eyes. She had a pretty good temper on her and didn't suffer fools gladly. Joe was also very handsome, tall, but wore this horrendous toupee. I never really understood the toupee, not that a toupee requires any understanding. It was just so uncharacteristic. I had seen pictures of Lynn and Joe at their home when Joe was just out of the army – full head of hair and quite striking in his Army Air Corps dress uniform. But this toupee was simply awful. I never saw Joe without his toupee. Even after his first heart attack, when we were rushing him off the tennis court and into my car, all he wanted to know was if his hairpiece was still on. (Jesus, Joe! What was with that goddamn toupee?)

I remember those first five years of our friendship for many special reasons, the most important being Joe's encouragement that I should try my hand at writing. I had written some technical articles that were published in Chemical Engineering Journals, but nothing "philosophical" in nature. The university education of an engineer allows few courses that aren't highly technical in substance and fewer that allow any artistic expression in prose. It is quite difficult to wax philosophically about a distillation column; although Primo Levi did a pretty good job in "The Periodic Table". In any event, I was taken aback when Joe suggested I try my hand at writing. Why

he thought I might have any talent along those lines is a mystery to me. But he constantly urged me to give it a try. Finally, in response to an Op-Ed piece in the Plain Dealer complaining about science and technology's irresponsibility and harm to society, I wrote an article defending all the good science and technology had accomplished – which far out-weighed the bad. I showed it to Joe, and he encouraged me to send it to the “Letter's to the Editor” which I did. I then left for a nine-month assignment in Minnesota to start up a sugar beet plant. After being there a week, I got a message to call Bill Treon, an editor at the Plain Dealer, who wanted to publish my article as an Op Ed piece, and pay me twenty-five bucks to boot. Thus began a series of articles that Joe and I wrote which appeared on the Op Ed pages of the Plain Dealer. Sometimes we'd share the by-line, sometimes either Joe's or my name would appear by itself. Joe was a prolific writer; poetry, short stories, essays. This is something I didn't know until we began writing these C.P.Snow-like articles about science and society. It wasn't until much later in our relationship that he began to show me some of his writings, one of which was an amazing and startling short story titled. “The Burial of Arthur” - a piece which turned out to be more non-fiction than fiction. But who knew what was to come. And who knew Joe Venturi? Certainly not me. And then, after five years, I left the employ of H.K.Ferguson and the daily companionship of Joseph L. Venturi.

I took a job across town at another engineering contractor called Arthur G. McKee. Joe and I kept in contact, and still played tennis, and I still got invitations to the Venturi's for dinner - especially when Lynn decided to make her specialty. But we lost that daily comradery and personal contact that comes with working together or working at the same location. We lost that ability to chitchat whenever we felt like it - dropping into the other's

office and just begin talking about whatever comes to mind. But more important, we couldn't lunch together. The distances between offices wouldn't permit it. And then, after I had been at McKee for about a month, I called Joe one day and was told that Joe Venturi didn't work at H.K. Ferguson anymore.

After the initial shock, a mutual friend, Joe's boss, told me the following story: Joe was in Philadelphia about to give a talk to the Chlorine Institute at their annual meeting. There were over 1000 people attending, and it was considered quite an honor to be invited to speak at the annual meeting. H.K. Ferguson had a preeminent reputation in the Chlorine industry, and the good sense to let Joseph L. Venturi present the talk. Joe was a captivating speaker. He could take even a technical subject, like the manufacture of Chlorine, bring to bear all his worldly-experiences in a clever and relevant manner, tell some humorous anecdotes about Rickover and it was spellbinding. I know what you're thinking. How the hell could a talk on the manufacture of Chlorine be "spellbinding". But by the time Joe got going, you weren't even thinking about Chlorine. It's why I missed our lunches so much. They were actually entertaining. Joe never got to make that spellbinding speech. Evidently, when the Ferguson entourage, including the Vice President of Marketing, met for breakfast that morning, Joe showed up completely inebriated. Unable to barely walk, let alone talk. He was fired on the spot. I also found out at this time that this wasn't Joe's first fall off the wagon. It happened several times in the last five years, and he had been warned on at least two separate occasions, the first when he mysteriously disappeared those three weeks when I had first met him.

Up to this point in our relationship, Joe had never talked about his alcohol problem, and I never suspected he had one. When we went out for dinner or

lunch, he never had a drink - not even a beer or a glass of wine. Lynn never had a drink either, so I just assumed they weren't consumers of alcoholic beverages. Not so unusual. I never really gave it any thought. Joe's firing in Philly happened about a week before my call. I thought it odd that Joe didn't try to get a hold of me, and I waited another week before I called him at home.

I half-expected Joe might give me a call, but he didn't. Perhaps he was too embarrassed. When I called him the following week there was no mention of the drinking problem. I didn't let on that I had spoken with his boss, and he just mumbled something about, "It was time to leave, anyhow". And we left it at that. We set up a date for lunch later in the week. He said he only had one car that was working, and Lynn took it to work, so I would have to pick him up at his home in Shaker. Now the relationship gets a bit strained. When I picked him up about 11:30 in the morning, he had already been drinking. You could smell the alcohol as soon as he got in the car. His speech was slurred and his movements were erratic and jerky. I was shocked. I had never seen Joe Venturi in this condition and it bothered me a great deal. I didn't really know exactly how to handle it. So I just pretended everything was normal and we proceeded to the restaurant. He told me how he was going to be a consultant and work out of his home. He said he always threatened to work for himself, and now the opportunity presented itself. He still never mentioned anything about a drinking problem. When we got out of the car and walked towards the restaurant, Joe lost his balance and stumbled. I grabbed for his arm and caught him before he fell on the ground. He immediately yanked his arm out from my grasp, and gave me a rather menacing gaze. The conversation during lunch was rather strained. No humor, no talk about Oppenheimer or Eliot. No talk or discussion about

the real reason for leaving H.K.Ferguson. His demeanor was rather belligerent and resentful. I chalked it up to the alcohol, but I was very uncomfortable. A side of Joseph L. Venturi I had never seen and didn't appreciate.

Later that evening I wanted to call Lynn and offer any assistance I could, but I didn't know if she would be offended or embarrassed. I had never been in a situation like this before, and frankly, I didn't know what to do or how to behave. I decided not to call Lynn. Maybe things would just return to equilibrium, naturally. We chemical engineers are strong believers in the three laws of thermodynamics. "Systems tend towards equilibrium" is a paraphrase of one of the laws. It was almost nine months before I got a call from Joe inviting me over for dinner. Lynn was preparing – you guessed it - beef stroganoff. Joe sounded like equilibrium had returned and I quickly accepted the invitation - my confidence in thermodynamics reaffirmed.

Joe was his old self again and Lynn seemed both happy and relieved. His consulting business took off rather unexpectedly with some work from Sherwin Williams. Their corporate offices were in Cleveland, and a well-timed sales call proved to be successful. I Left McKee and took a position back with H.K. Ferguson. After about a year I was promoted to manager of the Chemicals Department. If Joe had stayed with Ferguson, I would have been his boss. That would have certainly presented some obvious problems. So things seemed to have worked out for the best. Joe and I had lunch maybe once or twice a month. His consulting business was booming and he was out of town quite a bit. We still played tennis frequently, but now the 25-year difference in our ages wasn't helping me as much as it used to. I know I was getting older, but so was Joe. It must have been the tennis lessons he and Lynn were taking once a week. Eventually he started

whipping my butt, but it didn't really bother me that much. I was just happy to see Joe doing so well. Joe was a splendid sight on the tennis court. Always properly attired in white shorts, white socks and a white tennis shirt. He looked like Jay Gatsby. If there was a slight chill in the air, like in early Spring or late Fall, Joe had on his perfectly knit white v-neck with those alternating purple and blue stripes outlining the "v". So what if he was beating someone 25 years his junior – besides, I was starting to take up golf. Joe wasn't a golfer.

Ten years passed and Joe Venturi seemed to have conquered the demons that drove him to drink. His consulting business kept him quite busy and frequently out of town. As my golf improved, my tennis suffered. Joe and Lynn continued with their weekly tennis lessons and soon I was no challenge for Joe on the court. We'd manage to get together a couple times a month for lunch. Whenever Joe would come downtown for a meeting with Sherwin Williams we'd usually meet for lunch. Eventually we just stopped playing tennis altogether. I found golf more exciting, and Joe belonged to a traveling tennis league set up by several of the tennis clubs in the city. After Joe's last kid got married and flew the coup, Joe and Lynn were all alone in that big Tudor house, so they moved to a spacious three bedroom apartment on Van Aken, near the rapid stop. We'd still get together socially, sometimes for dinner, sometimes for bridge. Then my life changed rather suddenly. First, I decided to quit my job at H.K.Ferguson and try my hand at consulting, like Joe. The decision was not a well thought out one, but rather provoked by some politics at work that eventually created a situation that manifested itself in large doses of Zantac. So I gave the Vice President of Engineering two weeks notice and then quit. It has since turned out to be the right decision, but at the time it may have been a bit rash. Three months

went by and not a single company desired my services. The bimonthly checks from Ferguson that had paid my mortgage and made my car payments for 25 years – were no longer there. Joe and I would have lunch whenever he was in town, so that was the good part of becoming an unemployed consultant. I didn't realize how much I missed those lunches until we started them up again on a regular basis. My first actual paying consulting job came from Joe. I suspected he felt sorry for me, but he insisted it was an assignment he needed done quickly and I was the right person for the job. I will admit, it certainly felt good to get that first check with my name on it, even though I remained suspicious there was some charity connected to that payment. Soon after that I started to get some of my own consulting jobs. And by the time Christmas came around that year, I was pretty busy. And then I got engaged. No one was happier for me than Joe and Lynn, and immediately had us over for dinner –that's right, beef stroganoff. I guess one would be called a late bloomer – getting engaged for the first time in your late forty's.

Bonnie, my fiancée, was in her early forty's, and had been married previously – no kids. She worked for a nation-wide financial company as their Vice President of Marketing, but her real love was poetry – both reading and writing. She was really quite gifted as a poet. Some of her poetry was published in several university publications. I used to tell her she was really a poet masquerading as a bank vice president. I think she liked when I referred to her in that manner. She and Joe, of course, got along famously. For the next several months, the four of us “double dated” – the symphony, local jazz clubs, the art museum. It was fun being with Jay Gatsby. Bonnie was given a promotion but would have to go to San Francisco where her company's corporate offices were located. We

discussed the promotion and decided she couldn't turn down the opportunity, besides, I could operate as a consultant from any location. Later that summer we took that glorious drive across the country out to California where Bonnie got situated in the Marina district and then I flew back to Cleveland. We commuted between Cleveland and San Francisco for several months. Bonnie came back for Christmas. We spent Christmas Eve with the Venturi's dining on – no, not beef stroganoff, but duck. Later that evening we went to Midnight Mass at St. Dominic's. It was my first Midnight Mass. Lynn was a Mass-every-day strict Catholic. Joe was a bit more cavalier with his Catholicism. And Bonnie had long ago separated from her Catholic roots. She even commented at the irony of a Jew leading her back to the church after so many years away. After the New Year, Bonnie went back to San Francisco. Eventually the commuting distances became too great, both literally and figuratively and the engagement just sort of faded away. No arguments. No harsh words. Nothing formally spoken. I guess we just both knew it wasn't going to work. For some inexplicable reason, my consulting business began to take off. Keeping busy helped ease the breakup with Bonnie. And of course, Joe and Lynn were helpful and comforting. And then, six months later, Lynn Venturi was dead.

I was in El Dorado, Arkansas working on a distillation tower problem for Great Lakes Chemical when I got the call late one evening in my motel room. Joe's daughter called informing me of Lynn's sudden and unexpected death. Joe was too distraught to call, she said, and wanted to know if I could make the funeral. I left that evening and drove to Little Rock, catching the early morning flight back to Cleveland via Cincinnati. The funeral was held the next day, around noon, at St. Dominic's.

Joe was wearing sunglasses, the ones he cherished from his days of flight training in the Army Air Corps. They couldn't really hide the swelling and redness around his eyes. We embraced and cried in each other's arms. There were well over one hundred people at the service, many of them students or former students in the Psychology Department at Cleveland State. Lynn, being the department secretary for 20 years guided, mothered and nurtured many of the students through the labyrinth of courses and other requirements for a degree. Many of their eyes were swollen and reddened. Little did I know that in eighteen months I would be back attending Joe's funeral, which in stark contrast to Lynn's, would have a total of fifteen people in attendance - his five children, their spouses, his grandchildren, and me.

Later that evening I was invited back to the apartment for dinner. Joe's daughters prepared the meal and must have been very attentive in the kitchen when growing up. Joe's eldest daughter, Christy, cornered me and asked me to keep in touch with Joe for the next several months. We were all thinking the same thing - Joe was especially vulnerable to his former demons - and of course I said I would. I would get to see Joseph L. Venturi Jr. only once before he died, eighteen months later.

A week after the funeral I gave Joe a call to see how he was getting on. He seemed fine on the phone, but still a little melancholy and said he wasn't quite ready for lunch just yet. I called him again the following week, still detecting some sadness in his voice, and again he put me off for lunch. He was busy with his consulting work, which was good, so we left it that when the spirit moved Joe to have lunch he would call me. He appreciated my attention, but let me know it wasn't necessary to call him every week. It was a polite rebuff. A month went by and no word from Joe. His daughter

Christy called me and said she hadn't been able to get in touch with Joe all week, and wondered if I had spoken with him. We both thought the worst, so I called Joe that evening. He seemed fine, almost like the old Joe Venturi. He told me he had been to a poetry reading group that met in Lakewood and met a terrific women (his words). I was a bit shocked that Joe was already hitting the social scene so soon after Lynn's death, and a bit uncomfortable that he shared that information with me. But I let it pass. Joe gave me the opportunity to respond, but my momentary silence on the matter prompted him to suggest we might double date that weekend. I lied and said that would be a great idea, but I had some commitments that weekend and suggested we could do it some other time. He knew I was lying, but continued on with the game we were now playing and this time suggested I contact him when we might all get together. I didn't see or speak with Joe for six months. After returning late one night from a trip to Kingstree, South Carolina, I found a six page fax from Joe on my fax machine titled:

To Elyn:

I Only Want to Say I Love You

By Joseph L.Venturi Jr.

I was going to read the fax in the morning, but curiosity prompted me to read the first paragraph. I finished reading in tears. Under the guise of fiction, Joe wrote an apology to his wife and children. It was quite remarkable and also quite poignant. I read it twice more before I went to sleep that night. I would have called Joe, but it was late and decided to wait till the next day.

It was, of course, vintage Venturi. And I was as troubled with the content as I was impressed with the style and sheer force of his prose. I can pick it up this many years later and still tear-up by the time I finish it. Joe was a fan of both “*Redbook*” and “*The New Yorker*”. He had subscriptions to both for nearly 50 years. “I Only Want to Say I Love You” was in the style of both magazines – with the waspy pretentious names and the waspy pretentious spellings (“Elyn” –C’mon Venturi!) The first time I read it through, I read it somewhat detached – like if I had read it in *The New Yorker*. The second time through, however, I read it as a piece of non-fiction – surprised at the many bouts of alcoholism and drug-addictions and hospitalizations Joe had. The estrangement with his children he never even hinted at, and the difficulties he had expressing his feelings for Lynn. I was shocked at the references to his many infidelities and casual one-night flings. As a piece of fiction, “I Only Want to Say I Love You” was gripping. From the very first paragraph it grabbed at your heart – strings, whether you knew Joe Venturi or not. As a piece of non-fiction, it was very disturbing. Who the hell was this guy Joe Venturi that I had known for 25 years? In some ways I put Joe on a pedestal, you might even say I idolized him. But the revelations in his recent short story – if you could call it that, perhaps confessional would be a more appropriate description – proved I didn’t have a clue to who this guy really was. And perhaps that’s what was most upsetting to me. I called him early the next morning.

He thought I would have called sooner. I told him I got in very late - too late to call. He asked, of course, what I thought of the piece. I told him it was the best thing he ever wrote. He admitted it was mostly autobiographical, but that really wasn’t necessary. I told him he should send each of his children a copy. They would certainly appreciate his true

feelings for their mother. I'm sure they wouldn't be as surprised as I was by all of Joe's admissions of frailty. I'm sure they knew the score all too well. I'm sure it would have comforted them to know, that according to Joe, he and Lynn were again beginning to find the intimacy and love they once shared. But Joe said he wasn't going to send his children the story. When I persisted, he said that after he was dead, if I wanted to, I could give it to them. There was no threat or warning in his voice when he said it. He said it very casually, something like "after I'm dead and gone". I didn't think anything of it. Nor did I know what was to happen in the next 12 months, nor have the slightest clue, but I should have. We decided to meet for lunch that afternoon at our favorite Chinese restaurant on Chagrin, near the Interstate. Joe seemed in good spirits. It had been a little over six months since Lynn had passed away. It turned out to be the last time I would see Joe Venturi.

Over the next several months I began to receive some very bizarre telephone calls from Joe. The first came just a couple of weeks after our lunch at the Chinese restaurant. Joe was calling from a bar in Philadelphia. You could hear the sounds of a Jazz trio in the background playing some Gershwin tune. At first I thought Joe was back on the booze, but he sounded perfectly sober and proceeded to introduce me to his new Vice President of Marketing. A woman with a distinct southern accent gets on the phone and starts talking to me like she's known me for years. Joe must have filled her in with some relevant details of our 25 - year association, and then Joe got back on the line himself. Said he couldn't wait for all of us to get together in Cleveland and quoted a line from our favorite poem and poet.

“ I grow old, I grow old
Shall I wear the bottom of my trousers rolled?”

The entire conversation lasted maybe all of five minutes. Two weeks later I get a call from Tampa. Again Joe’s calling from some piano bar. Still sounding sober and quite content. Seems his Vice President of Marketing was getting some plastic surgery done in Tampa. Then phone calls from London, England, Paris, Rome and Asheville, North Carolina, where apparently the Vice President of Marketing lived. After about another month, Joe called me from his apartment in Shaker and suggested we get together for lunch. I made some feeble excuse why I couldn’t make it after I heard the Southern Bell’s patter in the background. It wasn’t difficult to figure out what was going on. But just to make sure I had all the details, a taxi driver Joe and I both used for transportation to and from the airport for our consulting work, gave me all the information I needed. On one of my trips to El Dorado, Arkansas, Sandy, our mutual taxi driver, told me about this very attractive women Joe was frequently squiring around town. Sandy had both driven them to and from the airport on their trips about the world and to various night-spots in Cleveland. For some reason Joe didn’t want to use his car when she was in town, and went everywhere by taxi. Of course I asked Sandy what she was like, and Sandy said she was a “real looker” (his words). About forty, extremely attractive and well built. Joe was 72 years old, so Sandy knew what was going on here. It wasn’t the age difference so much as it was Joe’s behavior around her. Sandy even mentioned that Joe was really “throwing money at her”. So it was what I suspected all along; Joe Venturi was in the grasp of a con artist, or I guess what they would call today, a grifter. Did he know what was going on? They say even the brightest men in their senior years can be fooled. What about that Texas

billionaire who took off with some 25 year-old Playboy model. But sorry, not Joe Venturi. Not the chemical engineer hand picked by Hyman Rickover. No way. And I certainly wasn't going to inject myself into this mess. I avoided Joe and his con-artist Vice President of Marketing with every excuse imaginable. After a while Joe just gave up. He knew, I knew what was going on and probably wanted to avoid a confrontation as much as I did -because he knew and I knew that I would say something if we ever got together. So we talked on the phone whenever he was in town, but the conversation became very stilted. I never really knew the extent to which Joe was taken by this southern grifter until I talked with his oldest son after the funeral.

Evidently Joe had changed the terms in his will so that he was cremated. Just part of Joe's overall plan. There's no way Lynn would have cremated Joe, regardless of his desire in his will, if Joe had died before Lynn. Joe couldn't pay for his funeral. His eldest son Paul told me Joe had gone through every penny in his estate, including Lynn's state teacher's pension and life insurance policy - which amounted to almost two hundred thousand dollars. In addition, he had his American Express card maxed out to seventy-five thousand dollars. American Express immediately had a lien against his estate. And whatever he had in his checking or bank accounts was cleaned out, not to mention his stocks and securities, all of which were cashed in months ago according to Paul. It was really unbelievable the amount of money Joe went through in about one year. His five kids pitched in for the cremation and funeral. Joe was absolutely broke.

I debated whether I should bring Joe's piece about his wife to the funeral. But I thought his kids would want to read it, and unless I brought it, I doubt they would have found it in Joe's apartment. I gave it to Christy, his oldest

daughter just before I left the funeral. I told her I had something Joe wanted me to give to her after he died. Joe must have mentioned it to his kids because Christy told me she hoped I would bring it to the funeral. For some reason I found that bizarre. I handed her the folder with Joe's last epistle: "I only want To Say I Love You" and she put her arms around me and began to cry.

The funeral itself was a very uncomfortable situation. The only attendees were Joe's five children, their spouses, the grandchildren and me. The setting wasn't St Dominic's for obvious reasons, but a small sanctuary at the funeral home. There was, of course, no casket. And the service was conducted by a born - again minister. One of Joe's daughters, Barbara, married a born - again Christian. So Barbara's minister came up from southern Ohio and presided at the service. All I could think of when the minister began to speak, was, thank God Joe Venturi was dead. Joe was not a fan of the born-again movement.

The funeral service, if you could call it that, took place at the Brown-Forward funeral home. Here is where the crème de la crème of Cleveland society came to be finally laid to rest. The location of the funeral home was no more than ¼ mile from Joe's apartment, which may be why his kids chose Brown-Forward. Regardless, Joe's obsession with everything that smacked of that waspy, Episcopalian way of life (or death) would have given him great satisfaction to have known his final chapter was played out at the Brown - Forward funeral home. Who knows, he may have even had some grand scheme.

I really wasn't that surprised when I found the empty plastic vial with Joe's prescription for sleeping pills (Seconal, if you're interested.) It was rather ironic how I found it. After the funeral, Joe's youngest son Mark

called me and said that all the kids insisted I take Joe's leather recliner. They even delivered it to my condo before they all scattered around the country back to their respective homes. It was only about a week later, while I was watching Jay Leno and the Tonight Show when I found the vial. I positioned the recliner as far back as it would go, and as I did, some change fell out of my pocket in between the cushions. When I put my hand down there to retrieve the change it fell down further into the recliner mechanism and then I heard it fall to the floor. When I moved the recliner to get the money, that's when I saw the empty vial of sleeping pills. I suspected all along that there was nothing natural about Joe Venturi's death. You can't purposely kill yourself with a half bottle of Jack Daniel's and a couple dozen half-smoked cigarettes. No, Joe planned this one right down to the empty bank accounts.

It's been almost four years since Joe died. I'm still bothered by the circumstances and why I didn't see any of this coming. Maybe that's why I'm writing about it now. In some strange way I think Joe knew I would write about it. Maybe that was part of his plan, too. It's funny, I think I learned more about Joe in his death, then when he was alive. I still don't completely understand this. Sometimes I think Joe Venturi lived his life as though he were a character right out of some famous piece of literature. From some play or some poem or some novel. Or maybe he lived his life as some frustrated writer – he sure ended it like one. Was he Jay Gatsby or F. Scott Fitzgerald? Was he Edward Arlington Robinson, or Miniver Cheevy? I guess, tragically, he wound up like Richard Corey. So who the hell was Joe Venturi? I don't know. I'm still working on it.

“We have lingered in the chambers by the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.”