

The ride from the morgue to Happy Valley, as the Alfred area is sometimes called, seemed to last forever. As their smoking car passed through Friendship, questions about those who were supposed to be her son's friends plagued Eileen. Don King had said Chuck died at a drinking party. Didn't he have a single friend there to watch out for him? Couldn't someone have taken him to the health center?

Aware that she would need her strength for what lay ahead, Eileen managed to keep her composure during the drive. Chuck was dead, but at least, she consoled herself, she would soon know why. She wondered if Greg Belanger, Chuck's Sayville friend, would be at the dormitory. She hoped eyewitnesses would be able to tell her what her son might have been thinking at the end. Tears streaked her mascara, but she refused to crack.

Her mind was at war. Fixed in Eileen's memory was the sight of her strapping son in that cold, sterile room. She recalled the softness of the sheet covering the gouges an autopsy required. She could see only his hands and face; the rest was hidden under the white cloth. The aides had seen to it that he looked like he was sleeping. His color had not changed, but that would happen, she knew. The lips were not as cold as she had expected. But they were cold. The room had smelled faintly of disinfectant.

Questions assailed her. Can he see me now? Is he aware of my suffering? What does he think about what happened last night?

Her family had been her life. Now a void existed. How could she ever have imagined that she knew pain and sorrow? What petty problem had she been wringing her hands over only the day before? Bitterness welled inside her. In her mind she yet again questioned Chuck.

What happened last night?

Why did you drink so much?

What were you trying to prove?

The winter scenery in the foothills outside Alfred blurred past the window. Something in this sparsely populated country had stirred Chuck. He had spoken of the friendly, down-to-earth people he had met and the beauty of the outdoors, teeming with pheasant, black bear, whitetail deer, redtail hawks, and mallards. She glanced at the snow-laden hardwood ridges in the distance and at the occasional stands of pines lining the highway. Allegany County was beautiful, but she had no desire for pretty landscapes now. Chuck had looked forward to coming back here. Yet he

had called to let them know that his arrival was tainted by sadness. He missed his family.

The family missed him.

Alfred was Chuck's second college. While he was in high school, a recruiter from Doane College in southeastern Nebraska sold him on that school. Doane was his first choice partly because he thought he might have a chance to make a smaller college's basketball team. But even there the talent proved too much for him. He worked out with the team when he arrived and learned that his hustle couldn't keep him from being over-matched by more skilled players.

Nothing worked for Chuck at Doane. His shirts were flannel, which, he joked in a letter, did him a lot of good. September temperatures were in the nineties, and it stayed sunny and warm into November. The boy from the Great South Bay of Long Island did not belong in the flat fields of Nebraska. Pizzas at El Toro in the college town of Crete couldn't satisfy a kid whose taste buds craved New York-style food. He referred to himself as "your stranded son" and felt pinned to the campus without a vehicle.

The subtle beauties of the Midwest simply didn't touch Chuck's soul. The hills, trees, and duck ponds on the Doane campus failed to excite him. His outdoor spirit craved an ocean or woods. He had brought only his clothing and a pillow. "The room seems so black with nothing in it," he said. He tacked up a photograph of his little sister to remind him of home.

Eileen badgered Chuck to write to all his relatives. She also spiced her letters with multiple questions. Chuck teased her for being nosey and called her a nag. She was undaunted in a return letter, baiting him by stringing a chain of questions together. "Have you heard from anyone yet?" she wrote. "Could you take more classes if you wanted? Have you thought about your major yet? Hey, what's this about a kid from Levittown? Maybe you can come home together? What do you do after classes? Do you have a lot of free time? Do you need money? How much did the books cost? (Only five more questions)."

In a letter he confessed that he really didn't mind his mother's Spanish Inquisition routine, adding an evaluation of her character that one day would haunt the Alfred University administration. "You wouldn't be the same if you didn't ask all those questions," he said.

Homesickness assaulted him, relieved only by a visit from Jimmy Arnoux and Mike Shivers in late September. He missed his friends. Worse, his classes were hard, and he struggled to keep a C- average.

While Chuck chafed in Nebraska, letters from Greg Belanger told him what terrific fun Alfred was. Belanger's classes were fantastic. The view from his dormitory room was idyllic. He had made the friends of a lifetime. Oh, he had broken his leg in a touch football game, but, hey, three girls from his dormitory were fetching his food and washing his clothes. There was a beer party somewhere every night. Without trying, Belanger sold Chuck on Alfred.

Chuck asked his buddy to send him an application and catalog for Alfred. “[Greg] doesn’t care if he goes home or not over the holidays,” a shocked Chuck wrote his mother. He’d had enough of a state without an ocean. “I don’t want to go here again. I like it, but I’d much rather be in New York somewhere. Greg’s school sounds nice,” he went on.

Chuck wrote another letter home in November. He planned to leave in nine days to enjoy Thanksgiving with his family. His heart was set on Alfred, but he knew it was too expensive. He was resigned to attending a state college.

Despite his loneliness, Chuck made close friends at Doane, a liberal arts school affiliated with the United Church of Christ, with a student body of only about seven hundred. He dated a pretty freshman named Sue Cantwell. She says that Chuck wanted to have a good time but drew the line at smoking marijuana. “I don’t know if he even drank,” she says. “He didn’t participate much on that level at all. He was not a drinker, and he was not a smoker of pot.”

Chuck would talk for hours about the Great South Bay and his boat back home. “He was homesick—he was real homesick,” says Cantwell. “He really missed his family and friends a lot. Those people born on the East Coast have a real umbilical cord to the ocean.”

Shortly before Thanksgiving Chuck and his parents had a heart-to-heart phone conversation. The upshot was that he would leave Doane at the end of the semester and enroll at Belanger’s beloved Alfred in September—if he still liked the school after checking it out. Eileen and Roy agreed they would scrimp and help him all they could, and Chuck said that he would come home and work for a year to help defray costs.

Chuck visited Alfred and loved the campus. In the spring of 1977 he enrolled there, first majoring in economics. The letters from his family continued to flow, but Chuck began to phone more often than write. Peer pressure to drink occasionally caught up with him, according to Jimmy Arnoux and Joe Bachman, Chuck’s roommate that spring. Chuck went with Arnoux to a Klan party, where the two of them “were blitzed on grain alcohol.” Arnoux, who lived in Openhym Hall a few rooms from Chuck, says that they knew drinking and crazy antics went on at Klan, but not the severity of it. “I do not have the foggiest idea of what went on in his mind that night [of his death],” says Arnoux. “From the bottom of my heart I do not know. It had to be a spur-of-the-moment thing.” Bachman says Chuck was trying to prove “he could drink with the big boys—the baddest dudes around—Klan Alpine.”

Despite the nighttime antics, Chuck loved his classes at Alfred, and his grades were better. He raved about several, including his American literature class. In the months after his death, Eileen studied Chuck’s class notes, trying to stay in touch with her son’s mind. He took extensive notes on Thoreau’s *Walden*, underlining references that struck a particular chord: “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.”

The references would haunt Eileen. The literature of nineteenth-century America is preoccupied with death, wickedness, and the moral failures of mankind. She couldn't help wondering if his reading had anything to do with his decision to join men who had declared themselves brothers. "The unpardonable sin," Chuck wrote, "was isolating yourself from man." She chastized herself for lionizing Chuck in her diary and journals, noting after his death that his real appeal was that he was "an ordinary kid."

His notebook also showed that, however content he was at Alfred, he still missed the beautiful bay. The pages were covered with doodles of his clamboat and the boatyard on the Great South Bay.

The smoking car entered the tiny village of Alfred. Eileen took no notice until her escorts pointed out the school. The drive to the dormitory from the campus entrance took less than a minute. The first thing Eileen saw was Chuck's pickup truck, the only one among the cars, a bold, blue reminder that he was gone. She sobbed. Roy's arm tightened around her. Chuck had loved that vehicle. It had been repainted only a few months earlier. He was always washing it, fixing it, driving it. It had been his recreation and his favorite status symbol. He had poured his money into it.

To Eileen, Openhym Hall didn't look special, but the hilly campus was pretty. Alfred University occupies 232 acres of land. Some of its older buildings are eye-catching. Alumni Hall, a white, churchlike structure with an ornate steeple topped by a twelve-foot quill pen, is lovely. The Steinhelm Museum, an intriguing gothic building originally constructed as a house in 1875, looks as if the stone tower ought to harbor a madwoman or a hunchback.

Someone had gotten word to the men of Openhym that Chuck's parents would be coming by. Eileen walked into the building. What plans had Chuck had when he first passed through these doors? The boy with the laughing eyes and the mane of hair had a serious side, too. He was worried about the environment. He worshipped wildlife and worried about endangered species. Eileen believed Chuck would have been successful at whatever he tried. He would have been a superior history teacher. No one was better with kids.

Something was very wrong, Eileen thought as she walked to room 221, Chuck's room. Her son drinking himself to death? He couldn't have done that, could he? He was too conservative to be a risk-taker. He wasn't the type to accept dares. He was his own person, his own man, sure of himself. He had wanted to come to Alfred even when he didn't qualify for financial aid. He had earned a significant portion of his tuition, too, as he had promised. Her thoughts were driven from her head as young men walked toward her and Roy. They shook Roy's hand, comforted her. A couple offered hugs. Many were crying.

Inside room 221 there were two beds. Chuck's was made; the roommate's, rumpled. The room looked as if Chuck had merely stepped out for a moment. On the wall was a picture of Jonathan Livingston Seagull—a

present from Suzanne—and a U-Haul poster that Mike Shivers had given him. On the desk were a letter to Eileen he had just begun and an unopened letter from her that must have come that day. A few weeks previously, she had sent him a schmaltzy Valentine's Day card, thinking at the time that it sounded too gushy, but he had displayed it. A snapshot of his boat on the Great South Bay was in view, along with a sketch of a house by his grandmother, Doreen Stenzel, and a picture of Suzanne. A wire spool from the Long Island Lighting Company that Roy had corked served as a table. A new history textbook was on his desk, and nearby was a pile of books by his three favorite writers: Jacques Cousteau, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Kurt Vonnegut.

Eileen tried to touch all his things. Before leaving, she fingered Chuck's blue down jacket, the only coat other than his yellow slicker that he owned.

"Roy, why is his coat here?"

"I don't know."

"This doesn't make any sense. Why would he go to a party in the middle of winter without taking his coat?"

A few days later a recollection of this detail came back to Eileen, leading her to deduce, rightly or wrongly, that Chuck had been surprised and taken—coatless—from the room by Klan Alpine.

Greg Belanger sat in Alex's bar, a pitcher of beer in front of him, eyes fixed on the light in the Alfred administration building across the street. Ever since six A.M. when a friend told him ever so bluntly that Chuck was dead, Belanger had been rambling all over Alfred in a borrowed yellow Volkswagen. He had stopped by the quaint country house of Paul Kohler, a professor of languages who was battling the university for his academic life due to Rose's faculty cutbacks. Kohler had been in Europe during World War Two and had witnessed Nazi atrocities firsthand. "Young men do stupid things," was all he could say when Belanger asked him to make sense of his friend's death.

Chuck had been a part of Belanger's life from the time the Stevens family moved into his neighborhood just before both boys entered third grade. Belanger lived in a development on the backside of a tract of woodlands. He felt a strong bond with the new kid on the other side of the woods. Chuck lived on Marion Street, a dead end, which made it a fine place to throw a ball back and forth without traffic interruptions. Bronzed and golden in summer, the pair chased one another all over the woods, following the old wagon ruts that cut a swath through the trees.

When Belanger moved to an older section of Sayville, he and Chuck stayed tight. At St. Lawrence the Martyr Elementary School, Belanger and Chuck and Jimmy Arnoux made a single shadow. Strangers often assumed that Chuck and Belanger were twins. With platinum hair and a striking look, Belanger was a stockier version of Chuck.

When Belanger, Arnoux, and Chuck were hardly more than fingerlings, they gave their hearts to the bay on Long Island's south shore. They

rolled in the warm sand like colts, and their spare time revolved around seawater adventures. By the ninth grade each owned a boat. Belanger's was a quixotic symbol for his romantic spirit. Chuck's and Arnoux's vessels satisfied more practical needs. Pragmatic Arnoux saw an opportunity to make a buck from his beloved sea. As a clammer, he became the captain of his life, rejoicing every day that he could make money without being entombed in a factory.

Chuck had a little of Belanger and a little of Arnoux in him. He had the imagination to get a near-mystic thrill from the sea, but he wanted to be paid for his hard work. His biological father, grandfather, and great-grandfather had been clammers and fishermen at one time or another. His father had courted Eileen by taking her for rides on the sound aboard his clamboat. Because Chuck hailed from a family of modest means—although hardly poor—he also saw clamming as a cash industry. If you pushed and had the will to learn that Arnoux and Chuck had, you could earn much more than you could flipping burgers. The three boys told one another that someday each would buy a monster pickup, the steed of choice among Sayville's working-class men. Boomer Esiason, the rugged quarterback for the Cincinnati Bengals, grew up on Long Island, and he, too, clammed for spending money. "That was my summer job," says Esiason. "You talk about hard work! Kids don't know what it means to spend six hours out in the boat digging for clams. That's unbelievable."

As Chuck, Belanger, and Arnoux aged, they graduated to bigger and bigger boats. The trio expanded into an unnamed fraternal society of clammers that at one time also included Billy Vollmer, Mike Shivers, Scott Doty, and Jim Schildt. The bond between these seven was strongest when they bought a ruined houseboat and worked as if they had hot coals in their pockets to restore it to its former grandeur. They furnished it with whatever used (and sometimes new) items they could borrow or steal from their various homes. Roy once pulled into the garage to find a rug missing that he had intended to put in the family's playroom. He rushed down to the boat to repossess it—a good thing too since the boat eventually sank, taking several mothers' silverware, dinner plates, easy chairs, and tables down with it.

Before it sank, however, the boys lived on that boat, and the regular crowd on Fire Island got to recognize it when the gang of seven docked to get Cokes and cheese sandwiches at a local cafe. Many local high-school girls pranced aboard its deck, prompting some jealous, luckless, boatless guys to dub the houseboat a "floating whorehouse."

No matter how much fun the gang of seven had, they respected the water as well as loved it. They knew enough to take care on days that were less than calm or shrouded in fog. Every so often on a howling day, a clammer gets lost on the bay. Usually, but not always, it's someone with an ill-equipped boat who has ignored small-craft warnings or overloaded the deck with men, clams, and equipment. Chuck and his friends never overdramatized the danger, yet they knew it was there. Chuck's great-

grandfather, after all, had perished in a storm at sea. Jimmy Arnoux's dad also died on a boat.

Year by year, the boys proved themselves seaworthy. Belanger held his own, but he was not the clammer that Chuck and Arnoux were. From Roy and Arnoux, Chuck learned a strong work ethic. From Billy Vollmer's father, he learned self-reliance: "You want water, you get water," Mr. Vollmer had taught him. "You want a fire, you build one." From Eileen he inherited a stubborn streak that wouldn't let him give up when his hands were raw and chapped in winter, or even when the clamboat sank, as it occasionally did, and required costly parts. Arnoux was equally self-reliant and stubborn, plus—as Belanger likes to say—"he had more integrity than anyone I knew." If Arnoux told Chuck and Belanger to meet him at the dock at six-thirty A.M., the two wouldn't have to wait one minute. The others always teased Belanger, who liked to sleep late.

At seventeen Chuck and Arnoux looked like weatherbeaten seamen in a Winslow Homer painting. They belonged to the sea. On the water they had the confidence of racecar drivers who have logged hundreds of wins. Belanger admired their efficiency and effectiveness. He himself never became an accomplished clammer. He was like the baseball player who thinks while swinging and thus watches every pitch whiz into the catcher's glove. Arnoux and Chuck were like batters who simply put good wood on the ball. Arnoux, silent by nature, and Chuck formed a lasting bond through clamming. They needed no secret handshake, no ritual to cement their brotherhood.

As they were preparing to leave Openhym Hall, Roy asked one of the women who had driven them to phone Don King. Eileen feels that their having to track King down is another sign of his insensitivity to their situation. King says he left his afternoon free to meet with Eileen whenever she finished at the morgue and dormitory. He too was exhausted after staying up all night, and Roy had spoken to him briefly from the hospital to let him know that they had arrived.

Before closing the door to Chuck's room, Eileen asked the students if anyone had seen his roommate. No one had. Nor had anyone seen Greg Belanger. She had no idea how she would get Chuck's truck and belongings back to Sayville. But one young man promised to see to it that the truck and everything else made it safely. Students wept in the hall as the Stevenses departed.

Eileen and Roy went from the dorm to King's office in Carnegie Hall, a boxy building with an attractive red roof. Only the dean's quarters were lighted; the rest of the building was dark. Only King was at work this cold Saturday afternoon, facing his grim duty.

King tried to be both cordial and professional, but Eileen sensed his trepidation and anxiety. A lean man, a daily jogger well before the national craze, King has the handsome features of a small canine. At this initial meeting, he kept directing himself to silent Roy even though Eileen posed nearly all the questions. Perhaps King knew instinctively that he had a

better chance to understand this tall, uncomplicated man—obviously a jock like himself—than he did his wife. He chose his words carefully. At the time Eileen thought he did so because he feared she would break down. Later she decided that he spoke with caution to avoid having to eat his words in court someday.

King had to walk a tightrope that afternoon. He wanted to convey his personal feelings about the death. But as someone who not only loved but represented Alfred University, he had no divided loyalties. If Eileen's charge that King was evasive is valid, such conduct would not be atypical. The dean tends to "stonewall in crisis situations," according to a tenured faculty member.

Eileen could not have known at the time that Richard Rose, Alfred's president, had consulted with one or more school attorneys at some point on Saturday morning and was advised to clamp a lid on the Stenzel death. The lawyers instructed him to give minimal information to the family and the press, advice King had also given him at the Klan Alpine house in the middle of chaos. King says, "I conferred with him and told him what I thought we should do—he agreed." King denies that there was any stonewalling. "The institution wasn't trying to whitewash what had taken place," he says. Rose also insisted that all statements by university officials be "cleared" with him personally.

King is a few years younger than Eileen; he was two months shy of his thirty-fifth birthday at their first meeting. He came to Alfred in 1969 after working for two years at the State University College of New York at Brockport. His job at Alfred encompasses many responsibilities: he oversees residence halls, student activities, counseling services, financial aid, health services, intercollegiate athletics, and recreation. Although he met with fraternities and sororities to lay ground rules for rushing and other events, he did not require the Greeks to have faculty advisors. Alfred University had no formal policy to delineate the duties of advisors. "You have to realize that these [fraternity houses] are all off-campus places, and the advisors, in some ways, were in name only," King says.

The versions of what transpired during King's hour-long meeting with the Stevenses, as well as during a ninety-minute visit as he drove them to the airport in a university car, vary dramatically. Eileen learned that there was drinking, "lots of drinking." She learned that Chuck died at a Klan Alpine function and that two other pledges had been hospitalized. She says King reassured her that both the police and the university would investigate and keep her informed.

In February 1979 King gave this official version of what transpired in a media release:

During the course of our discussion, we talked about everything I had learned up to that time concerning Charles's being invited to pledge Klan Alpine: the trip from his dorm to the fraternity house in the



trunk and at a party in the fraternity house after he got out of the trunk, his passing out and being put to bed and checked on by others from time to time, and finally the discovery of his rapidly deteriorating condition.

At this point, Mr. and Mrs. Stevens knew as much as I did about the incident.

In her journals Eileen criticized that release, and she still feels strongly about it. She says that King did not tell her and Roy about Chuck's being placed in the trunk of a car. She acknowledges that the passing of time and her distraught condition might have caused her to confuse minor details, but she believes she has complete recall of the gist of what King told her that afternoon. Roy Stevens concurs, saying he learned about the trunk of the car at Chuck's wake from his brother, a Long Island policeman who had been told the story by a colleague.

King admits that he isn't certain he told the Stevenses about the trunk. Asked if it might be possible that he discussed it on the drive to the airport, King says, "No, because I didn't even know [about the trunk] at that time—not when we were driving back to the airport. I went to meet the next day with students who were at the hospital to try to learn from them what had transpired."

Thus, part of the university's official statement, designed to destroy Eileen's credibility, is by King's own admission either inadvertently incorrect or an intentional falsehood. Eileen doesn't gloat over King's altered story. She believes it may show that the dean has changed, grown, in the time since Chuck's death.

At some point during the interview with King, Eileen asked to see Rose. She says that King told her that the president was unavailable—that he had planned to attend a basketball game that day.

King denies saying that Rose was at a basketball game. But a Rochester *Times-Union* story from 1978 sheds light on this point of contention. The paper's first story on the Stenzel incident included this fact: "Dr. M. Richard Rose, university president, was not available for comment and was reported at a basketball game."

Whether Rose was at that basketball game—a match pitting the Alfred Saxons against the Rochester Institute of Technology, whose presidency Rose would assume in a few months—is irrelevant except that Eileen was angered by what she perceived as his lack of sensitivity. The *Times-Union* article indicates a potentially greater relevance, however—that the basketball game may have been used as an excuse to keep the press and Eileen away from Rose. Was the basketball game a fabrication? If so, on whose part?

President Rose's first public response to Chuck's death was not printed until the Monday after he died. He said, "Drinking is a serious problem at college campuses in the United States, and Alfred University

obviously is not immune," a position that deemphasizes the fraternity's role in the tragedy. His reasons for that approach puzzled Eileen for twelve years. Why would Alfred University try to make it look as though some dumb kid drank himself to death at a party—instead of as part of a fraternity initiation? Could the university's action have been designed to prevent the fraternity angle from instantly putting Chuck's death on the wires as a national news story?

The answers to these questions may lie in the fact that Alfred had a special visitor in its backyard all weekend. When Rose went to Klan Alpine on the night of Chuck's death, he was returning from a meeting in nearby Hornell. Rose says he cannot recollect precisely where he was that evening, but a newspaper account states that the annual dinner meeting of the Hornell Area Chamber of Commerce was held that night. The guest speaker that Friday evening—as part of "his weekend tour of the Southern Tier"—was New York Secretary of State Mario Cuomo.

Cuomo, an ally of Governor Hugh Carey, was one of the state's most powerful political figures, destined to become lieutenant governor in 1978, and eventually governor. The university was ultimately unsuccessful in downplaying the fraternity initiation angle in Chuck's death. Newspapers in Buffalo, Rochester, and Long Island, for example, put the story on page one Sunday morning. But one plausible reason for Rose's having ducked Eileen Stevens is that he wanted to avoid a possibly messy confrontation that might hit the papers. Similarly, he may have ducked newspaper reporters that Saturday so that Cuomo would be safely out of the Happy Valley area before his statement appeared in print on Monday.

Cuomo's presence at a function Rose attended on that February 24 made it an especially sensitive time for a messy frat death to hit Alfred. But if the institution thought it could clap a lid on this particular can of worms, it was mistaken. The can was filled with gunpowder. When it finally exploded, Alfred University suffered burns that still haven't healed.