

# One bled out, the other bled in

It's been a bloody January in France. I suppose most months are bloody there, as here, but not in a way I notice. Not in a way, with nicknames, Charb, and relationships, son of the chief rabbi of Tunisia, that leaves me visualizing the victims.

My father died in January, 44 years ago. I was 18. When I reached the age he was when he died, I scheduled a cardiac scan. I don't know what I expected to find. My father's heart broke in ways that cannot be measured.

I'm thinking about the bloodshed in Paris and I'm thinking about my father, because, I believe, it was another war — same continent, different century, other young men with guns — that unraveled his life and led to another January death.

My father had one brother. I never met him, but his shadow hung over my life. My uncle was, by all accounts, kinder and more responsible than my father. My grandmother says he would come home after a date and sit with her on the porch, telling her all about it. I doubt anyone was still awake when my father came rolling in.

My uncle went to college. My father ran bootleg whiskey along the farm-to-market roads of the Texas panhandle. My uncle enlisted during World War II and went into the army as a junior officer. My father, as a farmer, had a deferment, but after his brother went off to war, my father enlisted, too. He joined the Navy, went to training and promptly sent a one-line telegraph to my mother. It read, "Betty, come get me."

My uncle was part of the Allied invasion of Italy. He died during the Po Valley campaign. The soldiers who made the long journey to my grandparents' house in Tulia, Texas, told them this story: My uncle and his men were in a foxhole. An Axis soldier threw in a grenade, which exploded, wounding my uncle and many of his men. My uncle, the survivors said, wouldn't let the medics tend to him or evacuate him until all the other wounded had been seen to. By the time his turn came, my uncle had bled to death.



MELISSA  
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—Dreamstime

He died on April 17, 1945. Hitler would die less than two weeks later. The war in Europe would end on May 8, 1945. Three weeks and my uncle might have gone home, back to the farm and Musick Produce and Farm Supply, with the Purina checkerboard sign out front.

My parents always said he died "one day after the war in Europe ended." It's as if they could not help but heap absurdity upon their grief. He not only died young and far from home in a country to which he had no ties of history or kinship, but, in their telling, he died as a casualty in a war that wasn't.

My father was on a ship in the San Francisco harbor when his brother died. He was waiting to be shipped out for the invasion of mainland Japan. Instead, he was sent home as the sole surviving son of parents who had lost one in combat.

My father never fired a gun in

battle. He never, to my knowledge, killed a man. He just killed himself. I can attest to that, because I watched it happen. It was a slow death, a 25-year-long re-enactment of his brother's bleeding out.

My father bled in.

My grandparents kept all the letters their dead son had written home from Italy. They kept the letters his friends and fellow soldiers had sent after his death. As long as they lived, a color snapshot of my uncle hung, enlarged and framed on the living room wall. The colors in the pictures faded over time, the sky bleached and his green dress uniform melting into a green-tinged tan. The picture was taken as he left home for the last time.

My grandparents tended his grave, planting climbing roses on both sides of the headstone, hauling water in buckets in the back of the pickup to

water the plants. But they never spoke of heroics or noble sacrifice. They were farmers, whose whole lives had been spent coaxing abundance from hard, dry soil. They had watered the land with their sweat. It seemed to them a waste that he watered a land not his own with his blood.

My father came home and had more children and built a house and took a job and began the serious work of his adult life: drinking himself to death. He drank to forget. He drank to feel. Then he drank to stop feeling. At some point in the long dying, my father added amphetamines in the morning to wake up and barbiturates at night to go to sleep. The drugs were provided by one of his childhood friends, a pharmacist who, *pro re nata*, conveniently ignored the dates and amounts on prescription pads. "As needed," it turns out, was several times daily.

My oldest sibling is 13 years my senior. She and her friends remember my father before his brother died. They tell stories of a man I never knew. My sister's friend says, "I adored your dad. He was smart and funny and generous and kind." But I was only 5 when she left for college and then marriage and a life far away from the death that my father bore and at which he labored.

The worst years were before us.

My father believed that some cosmic mistake had left the wrong brother alive, and he would work the magic backwards. His heart was strong, so it would take all of my childhood, but my father finally managed to dig his own foxhole, to crawl in and never come back out.

I think about the murdered, and their murderers. I think of them in France and in all the places I can now name — Chechnya and South Waziristan — without knowing more than a name. I think of the dead in places, like Fallujah, that haunted us once and now haunt us again. I think of the dead in a river valley in Italy, a place as remote to my grandparents as the moon. And I think about the way shed blood seeps and stains. Because I know how the stain spreads, even to those still unborn.

[Melissa Musick Nussbaum's online column for NCR is at [NCRonline.org/blogs/my-table-spread](http://NCRonline.org/blogs/my-table-spread). More of her work is at [thecatholiccatalogue.com](http://thecatholiccatalogue.com).]

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# Lessons of age as I fall into being my mother

“Pride goeth before a fall” (Proverbs 16:18) is one of the Bible verses I learned before I could understand it. I now not only understand it, I can add to it. “Pride goeth before, and sometimes after, a fall.”

For those of you who read our sister publication, *Celebration*, and so are keeping score at home, you may remember that I fell hiking in the mountains with my grandchildren on the Fourth of July. Bombs bursting, as it turned out, not so much in air as in my shoulder and my back.

The first problem showed up in a right rotator cuff tear. The second problem, a displaced spinal vertebrae and impinged nerves, showed up soon after. I’m now a regular at the physical therapists’ office, where they are valiantly working to stretch, exercise and massage me back to health.

Another verse comes to mind: “The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matthew 26:41). This, I now understand, is a simple declarative statement about the way muscles and tendons and nerves (oh, my!) work and do not work, regardless of the intentions of the body in which they dwell, and is devoid of any hint of what we currently call “spirituality.”

When my husband and I prepared to leave on a late summer vacation, my physical therapist — and the only person I know who both refers to the pelvis as a “soup bowl” and can demonstrate how to hold said pelvis so as not to “spill the soup” — urged me to travel with a cane. I could see the sense of that.

What I could not quite believe is that I did not have a single cane in my possession.

My mother, who lived with us for years before she died, was something of a cane diva. She had canes with floral patterns, and canes with fancy handle grips, and carved wooden canes, and the sturdy, three-tipped canes for days when she was less interested in looking good (and those days were rare) than in strong and certain support.

Before she moved to a walker and then to a wheelchair, her canes were both mobility aids and fashion statements. Admiring cane users often stopped us to find out where my mother had picked up an especially fetching number.

So why was I on my way to the medical supply store to pick out a cane for me?

Because, when my mother died in December 2011, I gave them all away. It was partly a goodwill gesture to the facility where she spent her last months, a place where canes were always needed. But it was mostly my own pride and arrogance and a sense that I would have no need of her canes. Canes were for the elderly and I was a staunch middlely.

Then came the fall, and, if not The Fall, it was my fall, and my body wasn’t the only thing bent out of shape. I took the cane on vacation, and spent a good bit of time in airports and on our boat explaining my problems in such a way as to make them sound a) temporary and b) the result of the kind of vigorous, outdoorsy, youthful activity that makes one “the fun grandma.”

I should have worn a sign: “My regular mode of transportation is a pair of sturdy — slightly used, lightly varicose, but very handy — legs.”

When I returned home, I went for my regular biweekly appointment at the body shop and picked up a Jolly Rancher candy (I know, I know) from the bowl beside the check-in desk. I popped it in my mouth and began chewing. I stopped chewing as soon as I realized that, in addition to the chunk of hard sugar, I was chewing on something distinctly metallic.

I pulled out of my mouth a piece of candy with a dental crown firmly embedded. One of the questions after the pride and the fall is, “Where does one stow a piece of crowned (literally) Jolly Rancher during a physical therapy appointment?”

Answer: A tissue. Held gingerly, so as to keep the crown intact and replaceable. (Do not put the tissue in your pocket. Because you will forget it



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and sit on it and bend it. Do not ask me how I know this.) And just like that — or, at least, after everyone stops laughing — all pride is gone.

Or maybe not, because then I began falling, just falling. In public, on a quaint street in a quaint town in Maine, in a movie theater with my 12-year-old grandson. No harm done, because I have learned to take support where it

take back the cow, please) into the spinal nooks and crannies.

A friend, who is also a nurse and who helped care for my mother in her last years, took me to the appointment. She sat with me as the IV was inserted in my hand. She waited until I was returned to the curtained cubicle where I broke my pre-procedure fast with cold water and saltines.

The nurse came in and made me stand and walk. Nothing, at least, made worse. And that simple relief, my friends, is now also a source of joy. I could go home.

They removed the IV and wrapped my hand in the brown, stretchy bandage I remember so well from mother’s late-life illnesses and accidents.

We got in the car and I fastened my seatbelt. My glance fell on my hand, the fingers thickening at the knuckles, the digits curving in slight arcs, as if my fingers were preparing to take flight. It was, right down to the bright red fingernail polish, my mother’s hand.

“Oh, Yvonne,” I said, “look. It’s my mother’s hand.” I waved it in the air.

She looked and smiled and said, “Yes, yes, it is.”



may be found.

Since this is a sign of worsening nerve impingement, I was sent for an MRI and flexion (if that is, indeed, a word) X-ray study.

That led me to a pain specialist who suggested the next plan of attack. Which is how I found myself face down and bottom up on a gurney, as the doctor threaded a catheter into my spine and pumped some combination of steroids and magic beans (I’ll just

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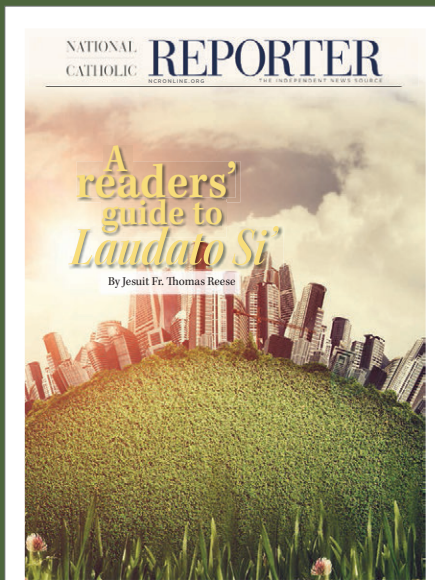


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—Newscom/Reuters/Charles Platiau

A French flag is seen among candles, flowers and messages in tribute to victims at the Place de la Republique in Paris Nov. 26.

## A message on mortality from an American in Paris

### *SOUL SEEING*

By PATRICK JEPHSON

Usually I'm a prompt unpacker. But for some reason, I let the Paris suitcase I brought back home sit unopened for almost a week before, with a strange reluctance, I made myself unzip the lid and look inside. The familiar contents were a little creased and rumpled but otherwise unchanged since I had happily stowed them in the Samsonite 10 days ago, anticipating the prospect of the flight to France and the conference at which I was guest speaker.

Why the reluctance? Because now all that belonged to another world — the one that ended on Friday, Nov. 13, 2015. Neither the suitcase nor I stopped a terrorist bullet; the hotel room we shared hadn't been rocked by exploding suicide vests or the street spattered with blood and worse. But we were there in Paris on that night, and the corner of my brain that has time to think about eternity is asking why.

Back in suburban Washington, D.C., I watched the TV news like everybody else as the Islamic State attacks and their gory aftermath were reported and repeatedly picked over, as if sheer volume of airtime could explain immeasurables like good and evil. And as I eventually started unpacking, unconsciously labelling each item as worn Before Friday or After Friday, part of me was gnawing at questions of chance and free will that CNN couldn't be expected to answer.

**Only one thing remained: a French flag, made of thick shiny paper and mounted on a plastic stick**

The suitcase — faithful companion on scores of journeys to wilder spots than France — held no answers. That is, until only one thing remained: a French flag, made of thick shiny paper and mounted on a plastic stick. The stick was now bent and the paper crumpled but as I held the flimsy, red, white and blue scrap, a pattern slowly formed in my mind.

I had arrived in Paris Nov. 11, and took the bus to the Champs-Élysées, where a thin line of spectators was standing on the pavement, looking downhill toward the Place de la Concorde. I had forgotten it

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## A true tale of love (and laundry) lost (and found)

I'm Catholic, but my oldest sister, well, she's an Edist. She believed, and believes, in Ed, her late husband.

When Ed died two years ago, she had his body cremated and kept the ashes. Some of them she scattered on a pond in Rocky Mountain National Park. Some of them she scattered in the Pacific Ocean along the Southern California coast. Some of them she had made into a necklace. My sister wears her husband everywhere. His ashes are in a clear, silver-rimmed orb that hangs from a silver chain around her neck.

After my sister had a heart attack, she went into the ICU. The bag containing clothes, shoes, reading glasses, Kindle and wristwatch, all the hopeful markers of her life, had to be taken home. No quick stent and out for my sister. She was intubated and sedated, and I flew out to California to be with her.



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The day came when they started talking about taking out the breathing tube and the feeding tube. They would begin lightening the sedation, all in the hope that my sister would wake up and know us and know herself.

Part of knowing herself is remembering Ed. She keeps a bottle of his cologne on her dressing table. If we go through a car wash, she reminds me that Ed thought car washes were a waste of time and money. Most of her reflections on food, kinfolk, movies, books, politics or weather include some comment on what Ed thought, thinks, about that.

Ed was not my sister's first husband. She was 20 when she married a good-looking disc jockey from Cactus, Texas. "Good looking" turned out to be the best thing she could say about him. He got a job as the program director at KIXZ in Amarillo. They had two children. He got a better job at KEZY in Los Angeles. They moved to Anaheim and he left her for a girl-group singer.

Then my sister met Ed, who always counted the day they met as his luckiest one. They got married and blended their families.

Ed retired from advertising, though he kept the black-and-white, Mad-Men-era agency photos of himself, suited and smoking, martini at his side. He acted, in commercials, mostly, and in a cameo for a movie.

Mostly he ran the house while my sister traveled, meeting with fabric suppliers and T-shirt designers,

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## SOUL SEEING: BEFORE AND AFTER FRIDAY

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was Armistice Day and the time was nearing 11 a.m., the moment of most solemn remembrance.

I could hear the drums of an approaching military band and soon the cavalry of the *Garde républicaine* came gloriously into view, rank after rank of snorting chargers and their splendidly uniformed riders, faces implacable under plumed helmets, sabers drawn. Suddenly, you could guess how it must have felt to be one of Wellington's infantry at Waterloo.

From the Arc de Triomphe came the notes of a bugle. A hush descended on the crowds as we remembered the fallen of Verdun and Normandy, of Vietnam and Algeria. After a long two minutes, the world came back to life and I dragged the suitcase the final hundred yards over the cobbles to my hotel.

I was still holding the paper flag a cadet had given me to wave at the cavalry. I was about to throw it in a convenient trash bin but instead stuffed it into my luggage, a sentimental souvenir that would surely find its way to the kitchen bin when I got home.

Now, as I finished unpacking, here it was in my hand. It certainly belonged in the Before Friday category, yet After Friday it had become the worldwide symbol of defiance in the face of terror. It deserved better than the recycling bin, so I stood it in the shell case

that decorates my desk, alongside the Stars and Stripes that had been a gift at my U.S. citizenship ceremony.

There they stand as I write, a powerful symbol of unity, one the politicians on TV would eagerly seize upon to illustrate their brave words of patriotism, and even braver threats of bloody retribution. But as an explanation for the tragedy of Paris and the conflict that grows around us, this fails a less worldly curiosity.

So I thought back to the night of the attack, retracing my footsteps — all 6.56 miles of them, according to my iPhone. Before the killing started, in the still coolness of a perfect Paris autumn evening, I made a small personal pilgrimage to the underpass at the Pont d'Alma. There was the approach road, down which 18 years ago the world's favorite, most beautiful and vivacious princess had sped, a long and hopefully happier life stretching ahead of her.

Then I slowly made my way to the opposite parapet, its granite sanctified by the scribble of a thousand poignant felt-tip tributes. I stared down at the exit ramp, up which Diana had been carried, her dwindling life now to be measured in minutes.

Across the Seine, the illuminated Eiffel Tower soared into the dark sky, the searchlight at the top sweeping a long cold beam over the city, shining briefly on streets where unseen gunmen were readying their Kalashnikovs.



—Newscom/Sipa/Houpline-Renard

The Eiffel Tower is illuminated in the colors of the French flag Nov. 16 in Paris.

Oblivious, my mind was still filled with memories of visits to Paris with Diana, of her laughter as the paparazzi motorbikes swooped around our car like bandits round a Wild West stagecoach. I like to think she was still laughing as the Mercedes smashed into the 13th pillar of the underpass.

With that picture occupying my mind, I wandered toward the nearest bus stop. I had my usual plan for a night alone in a friendly foreign city:

trees around the bed.

I didn't want to interrupt the day nurse for a necklace. Still, I didn't know what would bring my sister back to us. It might be the necklace she wore every day. It might be Ed, who had brought her back to life once before.

The nurse looked annoyed. Losing a necklace is not what they most fear losing in this place.

I told her, fumbling for the words, not sure how to explain or describe a necklace-urn. "She has her late husband's ashes in it," I said, wondering only later why I had felt the need to add the qualifier "late" to "husband's ashes."

I said, "Have you changed my sister's gown?"

She looked stricken. She had changed her gown, several times. Central lines and tubes and catheters and needles and anticoagulants combine to cause leaks and seeps, the skin violated, its defenses breached.

I went in the room and began going through the laundry hamper. There wasn't much in it. I went back in the hall and told the nurse.

"I think they've taken the laundry," she said. "I'll call down and ask." She was on this task, searching now for a different sort of medication, an alternate therapy.

The laundry, I learned, is sent to an off-site facility. It was gone, but the nurse would call the facility and describe the necklace as I described it to her. She told me they would look.

I called my niece. I called my husband. I panicked, as I had when we lost the bunny or the bear or the blankie or the cotton ball, the totems our children had needed to be soothed into sleep. What if this was the totem my sister needed to be soothed into wakefulness?

We decided not to tell my sister what had happened. The staff wanted her quiet. We stood by her bed as she slept, talking softly about soup recipes, keep-

ride a bus to anywhere, get off where the restaurants and cafés looked most inviting — then take a long after-dinner stroll back to the hotel.

So I got onto the first bus that came along, destination anywhere. It took me to the delights of St. Germain and oysters at Brasserie Lipp. But had I not been lost in memories and had walked a little faster, the first bus to arrive would have taken me toward the Gare de Lyon, to restaurants where diners were about to be machine-gunned at their tables.

By such margins do we live or die. As I lay awake that night, listening to the sirens and helicopters and hoping the mayhem wasn't about to come in my direction, it was easy to take refuge in prayer. Some Scripture played on a loop in my head, connecting Verdun and Vietnam with the Alma tunnel and the carnage at the Bataclan and the Boulevard Voltaire: "Thou fool: this night thy soul shall be required of thee" (Luke 12:20).

Not required on the night of Friday, Nov. 13, of this fool anyway.

But tonight? Lord, forgive our foolish ways.

[Patrick Jephson served eight years as equerry and the first and only private secretary (chief of staff) to the Princess of Wales. Appointed lieutenant of the Royal Victorian Order for personal service to the sovereign, Jephson became an American citizen in 2014. He is founding partner of the Washington communications, reputation and protocol consultancy JephsonBeaman LLC.]

## NUSSBAUM: LOST IN THE LAUDRY

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negotiating deals with Disney and Wal-Mart and Hallmark. They lived happily, if not ever after.

Ed got sick. My sister remembers climbing into his hospital bed, curling herself around the tubes and him, holding tight. He told her, "I just want a little more time." He meant "with you."

She says, "We weren't quite done." She means "with each other."

So, when the doctors started talking about bringing her out of the chemical sleep, we agreed that she would need Ed where he'd been all those years, right beside her. I went back to her house and found the necklace.

The sparkling pink glitter in the orb looks nothing like charred bone or incinerated flesh. The necklace is like a Victorian hairwork mourning wreath; you wouldn't guess that the flowers were fashioned from a dead person's curls.

I brought Ed to the hospital and gave him to my niece for safekeeping. Once my sister began to wake up, my niece tucked the necklace in the pocket of her mother's hospital gown. My sister was groggy, but she heard, and she smiled.

My niece went to work and my nephew and I took her place near my sister's bed. When my nephew got up to leave, he reminded us all about Ed, and reached into the gown pocket to reassure his mother, "Look, he's right here."

The pocket was empty.

We searched the bed, careful not to kink or yank the tubes. We searched the table, where cards for my sister and snacks for the watchers had accumulated. We looked under the bed and in the chair where we had taken turns spending the night. We looked in the closet, feeling among the stiff, folded sheets and sheet-like blankets.



The necklace with Ed's ashes

Every two patients in this ICU has one nurse, who has a desk in the hall between two side-by-side rooms, where the nurse can chart and call the doctors or therapists, all the while keeping watch through large windows. The ratio sounds luxurious, but it means the nurse is constantly moving between the patients.

The nurses are always working, and not all of the work is medical. The alarms sound, the monitors beep, the man with the broken neck demands his bass guitar and his black bag. It is forever time to move the patient, empty the catheter, check for bedsores, suction the breathing tube, change the beds, call a code, holler for help, pour more liquid down the nasogastric tube, take temperatures, figure out what system (human or mechanical) is failing, hang medications from the IV poles standing like bare winter

ing the tone light and amiable. No one dies in soup; nothing is lost.

But my sister did hear us talking. She took my hand. I leaned down to listen. She said, "Don't worry about the necklace. I don't want you to worry. Ed already did his job." She closed her eyes.

We asked my sister if she had more ashes, as if she had Ed stockpiled somewhere against the days of famine.

She nodded. "Yes."

I said, "We'll have another necklace made."

My sister slept. Ed had already done his job.

The next day I was alone in the room with my sister. Two women came in and introduced themselves: the laundry supervisor and her assistant. They apologized for the loss of the necklace, though, of course, they'd had nothing to do with its loss.

Everyone, they told us, had been looking for the necklace. Someone, they told us, had found a necklace, maybe the necklace. The supervisor pulled out her cellphone and brought up a picture. She turned the phone to me so I could see the screen.

"It's the necklace," I cried. "Look, it's your necklace."

Now that she knew she had located Ed, the supervisor turned the phone so that my sister could see the screen. She looked at it and smiled.

The women said they would have the necklace back to my sister by late afternoon.

I kissed my sister and told her I needed to go downstairs and catch a cab to the airport. I was leaving, but Ed would be right back.

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