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# THE UNTOLD HISTORY OF THE BIDEN FAMILY

*Relatively little has been known about the President's father,  
whose story reveals a family's fraught relationship with  
money, class, and alcohol.*

**By Adam Entous**

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*Joe Biden, Sr., revealed little about his tumultuous personal and business dealings with his cousin Bill Sheene, Jr. Photograph by Jamie Chung for The New Yorker / Source photograph courtesy Sheene family*

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In 2019, I wrote a piece for this magazine about Hunter Biden, the younger son of the current President, Joseph Robinette Biden, Jr. Hunter, describing his childhood in Wilmington, Delaware, told me that after church his father would sometimes drive him and his brother, Beau, through wealthy neighborhoods, where they would sneak onto empty estates that were either abandoned or on the market. If the front door was locked, the boys' father would hoist them through a second-floor window, and they would run downstairs and let him in. If a real-estate agent arrived when they were there, Biden, who at this point was a senator, would charm the agent into giving them a tour.

Hunter insisted that he grew up middle class, but his family lived on an estate of their own—a ten-thousand-square-foot mansion with a ballroom. (His father, on a tight budget, would close off large sections with drywall to save on heating costs.) “Even as a kid in high school I’d been seduced by real estate,” Biden wrote in his 2007 memoir, “Promises to Keep.” The fixation seemed anomalous, almost self-defeating, for someone who wanted to be known as Middle-Class Joe.

One of Biden’s skills as a politician is his ability to connect with working-class and middle-class Americans. In speeches, he often emphasizes his modest upbringing. “I grew up in a family where, if the price of food went up, you felt it,” he said in his 2022 State of the Union address. “I remember when my dad had to leave our home in Scranton, Pennsylvania, to find work.” And yet the anecdotes I heard about Biden’s father, Joseph Robinette Biden, Sr., told a different story. He was working at a car dealership when his son was elected to the Senate, in 1972, but according to Jimmy Biden, one of the President’s younger brothers, his

father's idea of casual attire was a sport coat and an ascot. Biden, in his memoir, wrote about opening a closet and finding his father's polo mallet, equestrian boots, riding breeches, and hunting pinks—items that suggested a past life of privilege. At one point, Biden, Sr., had a lot of money, but he lost it all, for reasons that went mostly unexplained. “I never asked him much about his life, and he didn't offer,” Biden wrote.

On top of the family's fraught relationship with class is a tragic history with alcohol. Hunter has had issues with drinking and substance abuse, which, along with his controversial business dealings, have been weaponized by his father's political opponents. If Republicans take over the House of Representatives in November, they plan to hold more hearings focussed on Hunter.

The President considers alcoholism a kind of family curse. After growing up around hard-drinking relatives, he chose to abstain from alcohol. He also urged his siblings, and, later, his children, not to drink, although all of them eventually did—some in moderation, others to the point of addiction.

Relatively little has been written about the life of Biden, Sr., or about the Biden family's history. The earliest and most detailed study is in Richard Ben Cramer's 1992 book, “What It Takes,” a lengthy, character-driven account of the 1988 Presidential campaign. But Biden, Sr., wouldn't speak with Cramer, and the journalist relied mostly on interviews with Jimmy Biden—who shared family stories he'd heard—and with Jean Biden, the President's mother. When Joe Biden published “Promises to Keep,” he repeated many of the stories from Cramer's book, some of them almost verbatim, with similar gaps.

Biden's parents are no longer alive, and the President declined to speak with me for this article. I talked with his siblings, but they didn't have much to share about the family's past beyond what had already been published. “Dad wasn't a big talker,” the President's sister, Valerie, told me. When I asked Jimmy why their father hadn't been more forthcoming, he said, “I think it's akin to somebody who

served in World War Two or Korea, and then came back and saw the atrocities. He was embarrassed.”

Cramer and Biden wrote that Biden, Sr., was close to a cousin—a man on his mother’s side of the family—who is identified in both books as Bill Sheen, Jr. The cousins were the best men at each other’s weddings, and they were in business together during the Second World War. I tried to track down the Sheens but was unsuccessful. I finally understood why after I visited Loudon Park Funeral Home and Cemetery, in Baltimore, to see the graves of the President’s grandparents Joseph Harry and Mary Elizabeth Biden. At the family plot, I noticed a grave marker: “William E. Sheene, Jr., 1914-1969.” Cramer and Biden had both misspelled the Sheene family’s last name, and subsequent authors had repeated the mistake. Using the correct spelling, I was able to find Bill Sheene III, Sheene, Jr.’s son, who was living at an R.V. park in Fort Myers, Florida. He told me that I was the first reporter to contact him about the Bidens.

“I can visualize everything,” he said in the fall of 2020, describing his father’s Long Island mansion, where Biden’s parents were a constant presence. He provided details that helped me piece together a more complete story of the Bidens’ financial rise and collapse. He said that his parents had hinted at business improprieties—his mother would make references to the family’s wartime “blood money,” and his father was paranoid about being followed by the I.R.S. He also talked about his father and grandfather’s mobbed-up business partner, Arthur Briscoe, who worked closely with Biden, Sr.

With the help of genealogists, I found more information in documents stored at various institutions, including state and federal archives, courthouses, universities, and a mental hospital. Ultimately, I discovered that the story the Bidens had told the public was woefully incomplete, possibly because Biden, Sr., had never shared the full version with his children. “They just want to forget everything,” Sheene III told me. “New chapter.”

Joseph Robinette Biden, Sr., was born in Baltimore in 1915. As a child, he contracted Sydenham's chorea, a neurological disorder that causes muscle spasms, which kept him out of school for many months. His father, Joseph Harry Biden, unwilling to leave his son at home, began taking him to work every day, and the two became very close. Joseph Harry worked at the American Oil Company, which later became known as Amoco. He was one of the first three employees hired by Amoco's founder, Louis Blaustein. In its early days, the company delivered kerosene, transporting it in a steel tank that was mounted on a horse-drawn wagon. Joseph Harry was photographed next to the wagon, and Amoco used the image in its advertisements. Internally, employees would reference the "Joe Biden tank wagon," and Joseph Harry became Amoco's poster child. After starting out as a low-paid plant clerk, he moved to a sales job, and in the nineteen-twenties he was tapped to manage a new branch in Wilmington. Amoco's in-house magazine touted him as a model employee: "Mr. Biden's record of seventeen years offers a perfect example of a man who has grown with his company."



*“Your less-hungry-than-thou thing is very annoying.”*



Cartoon by Carolita Johnson

In 1930, when Biden, Sr., was fourteen, his father was at the peak of his career. After receiving another promotion, Joseph Harry bought a duplex, the Biden family's first house. But he soon fell into debt: in 1934, after he failed to keep up with tax payments, the house was sold at a public auction. That same year, he was demoted and sent to a branch in Scranton.

“My father used to have an expression,” Joe Biden said at an event earlier this year. “He’d say, ‘Joey, a job is a lot more than a paycheck. It’s about your dignity. It’s about your place in your community.’” In Scranton, the President’s grandfather went from being Amoco’s poster child to feeling like he was unwanted at the company. According to Amoco’s internal memos, one of Joseph Harry’s bosses told him that the Scranton branch “would never amount to anything,” and another complained that he was overpaid. According to a colleague, Joseph Harry felt like “his check is always handed to him in a way that makes [him] feel he is stealing it.” He was in “constant worry” of being relocated again or getting fired altogether.

In the thirties, Amoco’s magazine published a photograph of Joseph Harry. He is wearing a straw-brimmed hat, which casts a shadow over his eyes, and his face is gaunt, his lips narrow. He looks a lot like his great-grandson Hunter, when Hunter was in the throes of his addictions. (I showed the photograph to Hunter, who had never seen a picture of Joseph Harry, and he was taken aback by the resemblance.) According to Jimmy, who recounted stories that he’d heard from Biden, Sr., Joseph Harry began drinking heavily after his career took a turn for the worse. When Biden, Sr., was a teen-ager, his mother, Mary, would send him to the local gin mill to retrieve his intoxicated father. I couldn’t find concrete

evidence of Joseph Harry having a drinking problem, but divorce records describe his father, George T. Biden, drunkenly abusing Joseph Harry's mother and sister before walking out on them, in 1912.

When Biden, Sr., got to Scranton, he met Catherine Eugenia (Jean) Finnegan, his future wife. He graduated from high school and took a job at Amoco, despite his father's troubles there. In 1937, Louis Blaustein died. After that, Joseph Harry said, there was "no warmth in the organization." He later went with Biden, Sr., to the office of Louis's son, Jacob, who had co-founded Amoco with his father. Jacob was away, but his secretary recorded a memorandum of what the Bidens said. Joseph Harry, she wrote, had "gotten to a point where he cannot stand it any longer." He wanted to leave his job in Scranton and go into business with his sons—Biden, Sr., and Frank—selling Amoco products on commission. The Bidens would still be tied to the company, but they would be their own bosses. "By having the boys with him, he can train them in the work and leave them a heritage," the secretary wrote. Joseph Harry wanted Jacob Blaustein's blessing. He pleaded with the secretary to find time on her boss's schedule—"just for fifteen minutes to talk it over." But she was noncommittal, explaining that Jacob was "busier than ever these days."

Joseph Harry never went into business with his sons. He was still working at Amoco in 1941, when he had a cerebral hemorrhage and died, at the age of forty-eight. Amoco, in recognition of his long career and the company's use of his image "in all sorts of advertising," decided to pay his widow a year's worth of his salary—about four thousand dollars—in monthly installments, spaced out over three years. (The payments stopped after Mary died, in 1943.) It was clearer than ever that there was no future for the Bidens at Amoco. Biden, Sr., needed to find a new job. Frank had joined the Army, and, with him away and Joseph Harry dead, there was only one person in the family Biden, Sr., could turn to.

ne of the most influential figures in Biden, Sr.'s life was Bill Sheene, Sr., his uncle and godfather, who was married to Mary's sister, Alice. The Sheenes lived **O**in Baltimore, and they had a son, Bill Sheene, Jr., who was about a year older than Biden, Sr. The cousins were inseparable, and Sheene, Sr., treated his nephew like another son. Sheene, Sr., was intelligent and ambitious. He was also stubborn and sensitive to slights. At fifteen, he sued a music hall that kicked him out of a vaudeville performance for showing up underdressed. He sought a thousand dollars in damages, citing the "public indignity, insult, and humiliation" that he'd endured, but the music hall was ordered to pay him just twenty-six cents: the price of the original twenty-five-cent ticket, plus a penny for his trouble.

Over the years, Sheene, Sr., became a successful businessman. When the United States entered the First World War, he was working in roofing, and he won war contracts—as one newspaper put it, a "\$1,000,000 job from Uncle Sam." He got two big contracts to lay asphalt roofs on Army supply warehouses in Norfolk, Virginia. The Army wanted the roofs finished quickly, to expedite the delivery of critical supplies to American troops in Europe. But Sheene, Sr., resisted pressure from Army officers to "do everything that he possibly could to hurry his work," knowing that he would make less money on the contracts if he expended more resources to fulfill them. The job wasn't completed until the summer of 1919—more than six months after the signing of the Armistice. Later, at a hearing with a contract review board, Sheene, Sr., was unapologetic. "In executing a roofing contract, the incentive for doing it, in the first place, is to make a profit," he said. The board slammed him for "looking at what was more profitable than what was proper."

Not long after the war, Sheene, Sr.'s mother died. He came up with a business idea after attending her funeral. Instead of building waterproof roofs, as he'd done in the past, he would build waterproof grave vaults, using a mixture of asphalt and materials such as sand and limestone dust. One day, when travelling on a steamboat between Baltimore and Norfolk, he met a purser named Arthur

Briscoe. According to interviews that Briscoe gave years later, the two men got to talking, and Sheene, Sr., described his business idea. Unbeknownst to Sheene, Sr., Briscoe was a bootlegger who bought cases of whiskey in “wet” Maryland and sold them for double the price in “dry” Virginia. Briscoe also came from an old-money family with a history of alcoholism and mental illness. When Briscoe was a teen-ager, his father was temporarily committed to the Springfield State Hospital for the Insane, in Maryland. Briscoe himself would later spend time there, receiving a diagnosis of “psychopathic personality.”

A few days after the conversation on the ship, Briscoe said, he showed up at the Sheenes’ home in Baltimore with thousands of dollars in cash. “Where the hell did you get this kind of money?” Sheene, Sr., asked.

“Don’t ask questions,” Briscoe replied. “Now, when do we go into business?”

Soon the Asphalt Grave Vault Company was born. An advertisement from 1924 claimed that the company’s vaults remained “absolutely waterproof, air-tight and moisture-proof for hundreds of years.” Sheene, Sr., and Briscoe later said that they sold more than eighteen thousand grave vaults in Baltimore and Washington, D.C. Two of those vaults, they said, were used to inter Presidents William Howard Taft and Warren G. Harding. The company brought in as much as a hundred thousand dollars a year, the equivalent of nearly two million dollars today.

The Sheenes began to live lavishly, and Biden, Sr., benefitted from their newfound wealth. After his family left Baltimore, he returned during the summer months to stay with the Sheenes. He began leading something of a double life: in Wilmington and, later, in Scranton, he lived modestly—the purse strings drawn tight by his bitter, cash-strapped father—but in Baltimore he lived large, bankrolled by his spendthrift uncle. Every few years, Biden wrote, Sheene, Sr., bought new Cadillacs for himself and his son, and for Biden, Sr., he bought a Buick roadster. There were also horses, airplanes, and yachts. According to

Sheene III, Biden, Sr., and Sheene, Jr., were allowed to participate in fox hunts in Maryland's countryside because of their lineage. (The Robinettes traced their roots from England to the Pennsylvania Colony.) "We were aristocrats," Sheene III told me.

Biden, Sr.'s country-squire tastes caused tension with his soon-to-be in-laws, the Finnegans, a well-educated family of modest means. Jean's father had a "bit of a chip on his Irish shoulder about the Scranton elite," Biden wrote. Jean's brothers ridiculed Biden, Sr., who, Cramer wrote, "talked about golf, shooting skeet, jumping horses, and racing cars that no one had ever seen." One brother, Biden wrote, would tell him that the "Bidens have money," but the "Finnegans have education." Despite her family's reservations, Jean married Biden, Sr., in 1941, a few months before Joseph Harry died.

Joseph Harry's drinking problems were only whispered about within the family, but there was nothing subtle or private about Sheene, Sr.'s erratic behavior, which was the subject of court hearings and newspaper headlines. He was a philanderer, a gambler, and an alcoholic whose binges could last for two or three weeks. In alimony proceedings, his wife alleged that when he was drunk he would treat her "with great harshness and brutality," and that on one occasion he beat her "severely." And his grave-vault business wasn't what it seemed. By early 1941, the Federal Trade Commission had accused him of deceiving customers with false claims: the vaults were, in fact, neither "waterproof" nor "air-tight." Some of them didn't even contain asphalt.

By the end of that year, Sheene, Sr., had his sights set on his next big project. America's entry into the Second World War was fast approaching, and he had plans to get back into the war-contracting business, this time with Briscoe and Sheene, Jr., as his partners. Biden, Sr., would be their No. 1 employee.

This next big project was "plastic armor." During the war, steel was in short supply, and the Navy began protecting its cargo ships with an asphalt-like

substance. (When hot, the substance was pliable, like plastic—hence the name.) The Navy needed contractors to make plastic armor, and Sheene, Sr., and Briscoe jumped at the opportunity. “We have the largest Asphalt Plant for this kind of work in this part of the country and are qualified to handle any size contracts,” Briscoe wrote, in a letter to the Navy Department’s Bureau of Ships, in March of 1942.

But the guidelines for how to make plastic armor were classified, and contractors had to undergo a background check. The Office of Naval Intelligence launched an investigation into Sheene, Sr.’s company, looking for “any additional information” that would help it determine “the advisability of turning over classified specifications to this firm.” There was plenty of disqualifying information to be found: Army records and hearing transcripts related to Sheene, Sr.’s First World War contracts; the Asphalt Grave Vault Company’s settlement with the F.T.C.; and evidence of Sheene, Sr.’s and Briscoe’s volatility, including an arrest report from 1935, after Sheene, Sr., assaulted two police officers, and patient records from Briscoe’s time at the mental hospital. But there was a war on, and the Navy told its investigators to complete their research “as soon as practicable.” Shortly afterward, the Sheenes received permission to manufacture plastic armor.

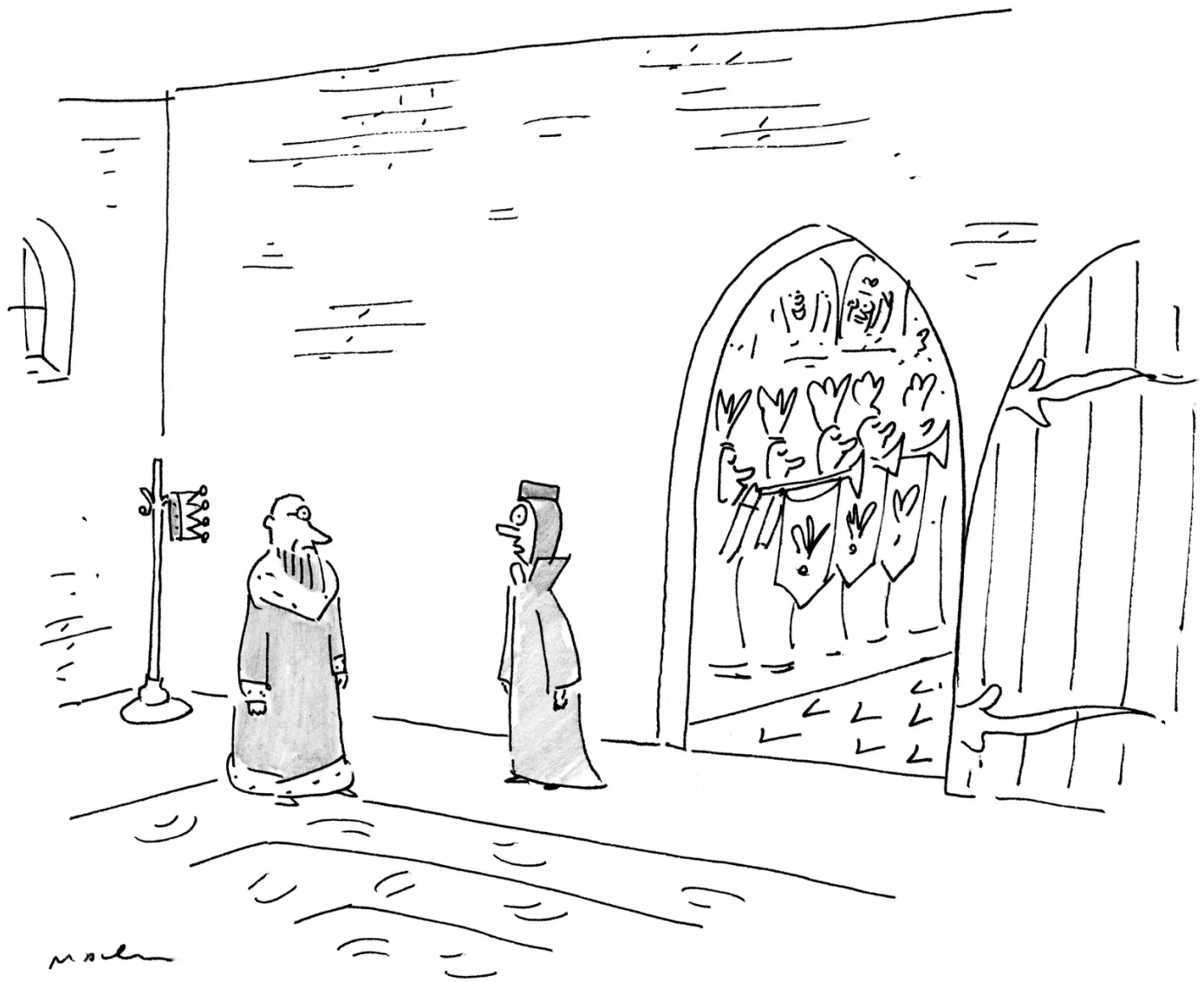
The business operated out of Baltimore and Brooklyn. Sheene, Sr., stayed in Baltimore to run a factory that manufactured plastic armor and shipped the slabs to Brooklyn. Briscoe and Sheene, Jr., set up shop in a warehouse near the Brooklyn Army base, where they oversaw a crew of men who attached the armor to ships. There were initially only four employees, including Biden, Sr. At least two of the men he worked with had attended Alcoholics Anonymous meetings with Briscoe in Baltimore. In June of 1942, Biden, Sr., helped equip three vessels with plastic armor. The work was time-consuming, difficult, and sometimes dangerous, in part because the armor needed to be applied at an extremely hot temperature. By August, Biden, Sr.’s salary was a hundred dollars a week. At

twenty-six, after working for the Sheenes for barely two months, he was earning more than his father had after twenty-nine years at Amoco.

In the company's first seven months of operation, it netted more than five hundred and sixty thousand dollars (more than nine million dollars today). But in early 1943, when Briscoe surveyed the ships that still needed plastic armor, he realized that "there was very little work on them to be done," and that it might be time to find a new revenue stream. The men started another venture, which would offer welding and repair services at shipyards, using many of their plastic-armor employees. They also opened a division in Boston and put Biden, Sr., in charge of it.

Biden, Sr., was someone the partners could rely on to deal with thorny legal and labor problems. (In at least one lawsuit, the Sheenes and Briscoe gave him power of attorney.) He worked closely with Briscoe, who helped manage the operations of both the plastic-armor and the welding-and-repair outfits. Biden, Sr., had known Briscoe since childhood—Briscoe and his uncle were close, and his uncle had been the best man at Briscoe's first wedding—but working under Briscoe couldn't have been easy. Briscoe's relatives said that he was charismatic; Sheene III said, "He was a scary guy." Briscoe's first wife divorced him for impotence, and he later married a woman in Baltimore named Alpha. He then began a relationship with an actress in New York named Marie Gaffney, who had connections to the Mob. During Briscoe's tryst with Gaffney, Alpha was scalded to death in a bathtub. There was no autopsy, and the death was declared an accident. ("They couldn't pin anything on him," Sheene III said.) Three months later, Briscoe married Gaffney.

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*"You should wear the crown. They expect it."*



Cartoon by Michael Maslin

The new venture, called the Maritime Welding & Repair Company, grew to hundreds of employees, and Briscoe and Biden, Sr., faced frequent pressure from the maritime unions, which wanted to organize their workforce. Early on, Biden, Sr., had represented management in a unionization vote, which failed. But the efforts didn't stop there. In interviews, Briscoe said he'd learned that Albert Anastasia, one of the notorious racketeers of Murder, Inc., had attempted to unionize Maritime's workers. Briscoe, on Gaffney's recommendation, contacted

Frank Costello, the so-called Prime Minister of the Underworld, after employees started picketing. “Frank, what’ll it take to break this strike?” Briscoe recalled asking Costello. According to Briscoe, Costello replied, “Well, we might have to break a few heads.” Briscoe later said that he paid Costello to keep the unions in line, and that, to keep his men happy, he paid them “more than the union help was making.” Within a few days, the picket lines were gone, although the company’s troubles were only beginning.

Financially, the businesses were thriving. Sheene III said his father told him that the partners kept between three hundred thousand and four hundred thousand dollars of petty cash in the Brooklyn safe alone. Briscoe and the Sheenes used their profits to buy estates and to hire chauffeurs to drive them around in Cadillac and Rolls-Royce limousines. Biden, Sr., didn’t have nearly as much money as the Sheenes or Briscoe did. But, as Valerie Biden wrote in her recent memoir, the family “had more money than ever before.” In Newton, Massachusetts, a suburb of Boston, they bought a Dutch Colonial house—the grandest home they’d ever own. They also splurged on fur coats and fine china. Biden, Sr.’s status as a war contractor gave him clout with the nation’s airlines, and, according to Cramer, “that meant he could bump a general, if Jean fancied a weekend in Scranton”—assuming the Bidens were flying commercial. Biden wrote in his memoir about the joyrides that his father and Sheene, Jr., would take in the Sheenes’ planes, piloting them “up and down the eastern seaboard” and then “over to the Adirondacks to hunt elk.”

Documents link Biden, Sr., to an excursion on his cousin’s thirty-nine-foot yacht, which later became the subject of an insurance-fraud case. During his deposition, Sheene, Jr., was asked to confirm that Biden, Sr., and two unmarried women were with him on the boat, and his lawyer advised him not to answer. Sheene, Jr., said the yacht had caught fire soon after he took it out. “I tried to put it out,” he said. “I saw other boats, and tried to hail them for help, but they wouldn’t come near.”

He turned toward Jones Beach and abandoned ship. “The only thing I could do was stand on the shore and watch it burn up,” he said.

The Sheenes and Briscoe were initially in good standing with the government, which, in February of 1943, had deemed the company’s billing rates for the plastic-armor operation “equitable” and its financial condition “satisfactory.” Then the partners opened Maritime. President Roosevelt had capped prices and wages during the war, in order to prevent inflation. But Maritime padded its welders’ pay by factoring in extra hours. As a result, the company’s welders made roughly twenty per cent more per hour than welders at competing contractors did.

On at least two occasions, Briscoe was approached by managers at the shipyards, who asked him to lower his workers’ salaries in order to keep the peace. But he refused—possibly because his higher pay rates were slowing down unionization efforts. The pay disparity became a major source of tension, and the Navy got wind of it. “A critical situation has developed in the shipyards,” a representative from the National War Labor Board wrote in the summer of 1943, ordering an investigation. Briscoe refused to hand over Maritime’s payroll records, but investigators determined that the company had paid at least four hundred thousand dollars in illegal salaries (more than seven million dollars today). The partners, faced with devastating fines, reached a settlement with the board. They agreed to pay a much smaller penalty fee in exchange for abiding by the wage rules moving forward and lobbying other welding contractors to do the same. But the board, which wanted to make an example of Maritime, still issued a damning press release, stating that Maritime’s “tardy cooperation could not completely offset the evils which the Company’s past wage practices created.” The partners emerged with their fortunes mostly intact but their reputations in shambles.

The stage was set for another investigation. War contractors were expected to limit their profits, and in the middle of the war the average profit on a naval contract was about eight per cent. The Maritime Commission began looking into

whether the Sheenes and Briscoe might have taken a larger cut, and it found that, on average, the men's businesses made a twenty-three-per-cent profit. In the case of the Asphalt Grave Vault Company, which was part of the plastic-armor outfit, the pretax profit was an egregious forty-eight per cent.

Briscoe argued that the partners were entitled to the profits—on top of their salaries—because they had stopped selling grave vaults in order to manufacture plastic armor in the country's time of need. Back when the men were selling vaults, they'd taken a forty-per-cent profit. But the commission was unmoved. The partners were asked to return two-thirds of their profits to the government—about half a million dollars, the equivalent of some eight million dollars today.

Biden, Sr., had been the second-highest-paid employee at the plastic-armor outfit, and he was a division manager at Maritime, but he wasn't a partner in either business. The documents I found didn't indicate that the government tried to rescind his earnings, although some of the records from this period were impossible to obtain, including a lawsuit with depositions, which was destroyed in a courthouse fire.

Still, after the war, Biden's parents "lost everything they had built," as the President later put it. Biden, Sr., told his children that he'd tried to go into business with a friend in Boston, but the friend ran off with the money and Biden, Sr., declined to press charges. I couldn't find records of any such partnership, however, and it's unclear whether the story is simply family lore.

In November, 1945, shortly before the birth of Valerie, their second child, Biden, Sr., and Jean sold the house in Newton. The family ended up in Old Westbury, Long Island, where Sheene, Jr., owned a mansion that, according to a 1945 item in the *Times*, had twenty rooms, a garage with chauffeur's quarters, stables, a squash court, and a tennis court. Sheene III said that his father continued to live like Jay Gatsby, even as billing notices from the government arrived. If he wasn't out drinking on his new yacht, then he was hosting boozy gatherings at home,

where he would play the piano or the banjo for his guests. “The Bidens were the life of the party,” Sheene III recalled. “Everybody liked Joe,” he added, referring to Biden, Sr. “He was always smiling, laughing, a jokester.” In the morning, while the adults were sleeping off their hangovers, the children would go downstairs and taste the leftover alcohol. “We’d go around draining the glasses,” Sheene III told me. “I was just a baby, four or five.”

At one party, Sheene III was introduced to a stunt pilot named Ken Tyler, who was good friends with both Sheene, Jr., and Biden, Sr. “He was a character,” Sheene III recalled. Tyler, a Canadian Royal Air Force instructor during the Second World War, had been court-martialled for reckless flying. He ran a crop-dusting service that operated out of Fitzmaurice Field, an airstrip on Long Island, and Sheene, Jr., and Biden, Sr., went into business with him. (According to Cramer, they received some financial help from Sheene, Sr., who, like his son, was dodging bills from the government.) In newspaper articles, Biden, Sr., is described alternately as Tyler Flight Service’s general manager and as its vice-president; an airport directory lists him as the manager of Fitzmaurice Field. At the New York Aviation Show, Biden, Sr., announced that Tyler Flight Service handled more contracts for mosquito control than any other aviation company in the country did.

In the fall of 1946, the Biden family moved to a two-story house in Garden City, close to Old Westbury. Jean began to sour on the family’s life in Long Island. According to Cramer, she had been opposed to the crop-dusting business, and she resented Sheene, Jr., for “drinking the company dry” while Biden, Sr., “humped all over the Island, drumming the farmers for jobs.” Jimmy said that his mother was worried about the influence that Sheene, Jr., had on his father: “She thought that the Sheenes would draw out every negative impulse that Dad had.” For many years, Sheene, Jr., had been cheating on his wife, Marie, a close friend of Jean’s. Marie finally left him, taking the kids with her, and in the summer of

1947 Sheene, Jr., sold the Old Westbury estate. Then he temporarily moved in with his cousin.

One evening, as a drunken prank, Sheene, Jr., set off a fire alarm near the Bidens' home, causing a commotion. *Newsday* published an article about the incident, which described Sheene, Jr., as "the owner of an airplane or two, a yacht and sundry other playthings," and gave the Bidens' address as his residence. Later, Sheene, Jr., told his son that Biden, Sr., had been part of the prank. "When they were together, they were drinking all the time," Sheene III said. "Jean was probably worried that her husband would end up in jail." (According to Cramer, Jean went to live with her family in Scranton during this period.)

The crop-dusting business was short-lived. There are varying accounts of what led to its demise: Sheene III said that his father bought an airport in Buffalo, where planes were grounded in a snowstorm, preventing the company from fulfilling its contracts; Sheene III's stepsister said she'd heard that a drought killed all the crops. Regardless, the Bidens were left with nothing. They sold the house in Garden City, and had no option but to move in with Jean's family. "By the time I was ready to start school," Biden wrote in his memoir, "we were back in Scranton—and broke."

It was a humiliating arrangement for Biden, Sr. "The Finnegan boys used to be pretty hard on him when he was making money, but they didn't let up when he'd lost it," Biden wrote. And yet there may have been another reason that Biden, Sr., was so uncomfortable in the Finnegans' home. In May, 1944, the month that the National War Labor Board went after the Sheenes, Jean's brother Ambrose Finnegan, Jr., a second lieutenant in the Army Air Force, died in a plane crash in the Bismarck Sea, en route to a village that the Allies had seized from Japan. As the Finnegan side of the family made the ultimate sacrifice, the Biden side was making money from a business that was later called "an unstabilizing influence in one of our country's most vital war industries."

Biden, Sr., struggled to find work in Scranton. His brother suggested that he look for a job in Wilmington, a place that they knew well. Biden, Sr., took his advice, and got work cleaning boilers for a heating-and-cooling company. To make extra money, he worked at a weekend farmers' market selling pennants and other knickknacks. This was hard for him to stomach—a few years earlier, he had been running an entire division of a war-contracting company, with many employees answering to him. But, even though it was a meagre living, the Bidens no longer had to depend on the Sheenes. In a story that Biden later recounted, one day Jean visited the farmers' market and told her husband, "I've never been more proud of you."

Not that her husband had disavowed the Sheenes. Even though Jean clearly detested Sheene, Jr., in November of 1953, she and Biden, Sr., named their fourth child in part after him. "I didn't know Uncle Bill very well, but they gave me his name for my middle name—I'm Francis William Biden," Frank said. "That's how close my father was to Bill Sheene."

Biden, Sr., eventually got a job at a car dealership, and the family moved to Mayfield, a suburb of Wilmington. "I always had a sense my dad didn't quite fit in Mayfield," Biden wrote in his memoir. At the dealership, Biden, Sr., was the only employee who wore a suit, a silk tie, and a pocket square—folded to four crisp points. Slowly, his children learned more about his past. "We each had our individual journey to understanding our father," Frank said.

Of the four siblings, Jimmy knew the most about his father; he asked more questions than the others. One day, he said, when he was a boy, his father drove him to a small airport near Wilmington, pointed to a Piper Cub airplane on the tarmac, and told his son to climb into the passenger seat. To Jimmy's surprise, his father took the controls, and soon they were airborne. After circling the family's house in Mayfield, Biden, Sr., landed the plane. "This is between me and you," Jimmy recalled his father saying. "Never tell anyone about this."

Frank said that his epiphany about his father's "background as a patrician" came later. For years, a picture of a horse had hung behind Biden, Sr.'s recliner. One day, Frank asked about it, and his father replied, "That's Obe." Biden, Sr., proceeded to tell him about the horse—a jumper named Obadiah—which he had kept in the stables of his cousin's estate in Old Westbury.



Cartoon by Roz Chast

Sometimes Biden, Sr., would take his family on drives through wealthier neighborhoods, and he seemed to admire the estates they passed. “He felt that we should have been in there, and that what he was doing was something less than he wanted to do for us,” Jimmy said. “We never felt poor,” Jimmy went on. “We never felt like we were deprived.” And yet their father seemed ashamed of their comfortable middle-class existence. Later, when Biden became a senator, his father insisted on leaving the car dealership. “This is an embarrassment,” Jimmy recalled Biden, Sr., saying. “I can’t be in the car business.” He became a real-estate broker.

As Biden, Sr., tried to adjust to a middle-class life style, the Sheenes spent the late nineteen-forties and early fifties trying to restore their fortune. After the war, Briscoe, on the other hand, still had his estate, a chauffeur, and a housekeeper. (Years later, he would brag about how he had outsmarted the I.R.S. by buying his estate in his mother’s name.) The Sheenes sued Briscoe, alleging that he had siphoned money off their partnership. “He is the only one who made out like a bandit,” Sheene III told me. But Briscoe and his wife, Marie Gaffney, failed to show up in court. The local sheriff visited their estate and found Briscoe lying down, “inebriated.” A bedroom was locked from the inside, and when the sheriff forced it open he found Gaffney, who had been dead for about a week. According to the medical examiner, her body was “so decomposed that it was impossible to determine an anatomical cause of death.” Afterward, Briscoe filed a motion to dismiss the Sheenes’ lawsuit, claiming that it was “impossible to produce material witnesses because of death.” The suit went nowhere.

In 1950, Sheene, Jr.’s mother, Alice, took Sheene, Sr., to court. The two had long been separated, and Alice accused Sheene, Sr., of failing to provide her with financial support. On the day of his deposition, Sheene, Sr., was unemployed and living with his sister. He claimed to have only two dollars to his name. Over the years, he’d given his son a hundred and fifty thousand dollars (roughly two million

dollars today), for numerous ventures. Asked in court if he expected to be paid back, Sheene, Sr., said, “You can’t get blood out of a turnip. He hasn’t got a dime.”

“How do you expect your wife to live?” Alice’s lawyer asked. There was a long silence. “Did you hear the question?”

“I am trying to think of an answer,” Sheene, Sr., said. “I don’t know.”

After the deposition, the I.R.S. went after Sheene, Sr., Sheene, Jr., and Briscoe for back taxes. (Together, they owed the modern equivalent of some three million dollars.) Unable to rely on her ex-husband or her son, Alice moved close to Biden, Sr., her nephew and godson. She rented a room in a house a couple of miles away. Jean put up with the arrangement, knowing that Alice was like a second mother to Biden, Sr. “My mother would pick her up every morning and take her to our house, where she sat on the left-hand side of the couch all day,” Valerie recalled. “Then, after dinner, my mom brought her home.” Eventually, Alice began helping Jean with household chores, ironing the white shirts that the Biden children wore to school. Joe Biden and his siblings called her Aunt Al.

For several months, Sheene, Jr., lived at the Bidens’ house in Mayfield, Valerie said. This was harder for Jean to accept. (“I wasn’t crazy about him either,” Valerie said, of Sheene, Jr.) His drinking had got worse—as Sheene III said, “He couldn’t get up in the morning and go to work without a shot.” After he moved out, he regularly returned to Mayfield to go out drinking with Biden, Sr., and, on occasion, to attend Biden family gatherings.

Toward the end of Sheene, Jr.’s life, Biden, Sr., would visit him in Maryland. “My father would basically go down and minister to him, to let him know that he’s not alone in the world,” Frank said. In the spring of 1969, Biden, Sr., Sheene, Jr., and Sheene III spent the day fishing on the Chesapeake. Sheene III said that his father told him that Biden would be joining them. But Biden—

whose wife, Neilia, had recently given birth to their first son—didn't show up, Sheene III said, so the men set off without him.

Sheene, Jr.,'s doctor had told him that if he didn't cut back on his drinking he would die. But the warning didn't stop him that day. Sheene III remembered his father polishing off two or three bottles of wine by himself. When they ran out of wine, they switched to beer, and when they were done fishing Sheene, Jr., took them to a bar in Annapolis, where the men drank whiskey deep into the night. "Joe kept saying to him, 'Slow down, Bill, slow down,' " Sheene III recalled. It was the last time that Sheene III saw his father alive. That April, at the age of fifty-four, Sheene, Jr., died, of cirrhosis of the liver. He was buried in Loudon Park Cemetery, a few feet from Joseph Harry and Mary Biden.

Sheene, Jr., left behind a few possessions, including a collection of old polo mallets, which Sheene III and Biden, Sr., divided between the two of them. One treasured item—an Omega watch, bearing Sheene, Jr.,'s initials, which he had received as a gift from Alice—went to Sheene III, but Biden, Sr., said that he wanted it. "I had never gotten anything from the man my whole life, so I told Joe, No. I was going to keep the watch," Sheene III said. "I don't know if he was offended by that. If he was, tough."

Alice lived for another three years, remaining close to the Bidens until her death. The last family Thanksgiving she attended was at Biden's house outside Wilmington. "We have a new baby up here; just a little over 2 weeks old; Neilia's + Joey's little girl, now they have two boys and this angel," she wrote in a letter to her granddaughter Mary Jane, in 1971. The following July, she died, at the age of eighty-five.

Sheene III told me that Alice had a large, distinctive Bible with a big inlaid cross on it. When I showed him photographs of the Bible that Biden has used at all his swearing-in ceremonies—from when he first became a senator, in 1973, four

months after Alice's death, to his Presidential Inauguration, in 2021—Sheene III said, “Yeah. That’s it.”

On September 2, 2002, Biden, Sr., died, at the age of eighty-six. Later that day, his four children gathered at Biden's house in Delaware, and Biden, being the eldest, was chosen to deliver the eulogy. But what would he say? There was still so much he didn't know about his father. “It is beyond my power to sum up such a man, even when I have known him all of my life,” Biden said in the eulogy. He spoke about his father's “magic smile” and “special touch,” describing him as “quintessentially Dad.” There were cryptic references to “polo ponies” and a “beautiful home,” and to Biden, Sr., returning, “penniless,” to Wilmington, where he lived a life “overcoming pain with grace, dignity, pride, and style—always style!”

All children are shaped by their parents. Joe Biden draws much of his public persona—his emphasis on his Irish roots and his middle-class background, his interest in politics and in public service—from the Finnegans. In “Promises to Keep,” Biden wrote that he partly modelled himself after his late uncle Ambrose Finnegan, Jr.: “I had a picture in my head of the sort of man I wanted to become, a picture filled in by my mom and dad, by the teachings of the Catholic schools I attended, by stories I heard about our family hero, Uncle Bosie, a pilot who was shot down in World War II.”

In other ways, Biden has been shaped by his father—a man he described, in his eulogy, as “a dreamer burdened with reality.” By the time Biden was twenty-eight, he was juggling three mortgages and a loan from his father-in-law. He eventually bought a former du Pont mansion—much like the ones that Biden, Sr., had coveted. Jimmy went even further, purchasing a sprawling Jacobean-style home, to which he later added an indoor basketball court, that gave the Sheene mansion in Old Westbury a run for its money. “Even if it was a stretch, they were going to do it,” Frank told me, of his brothers' real-estate purchases. “It's personal. It's not

a matter of show. It's not how people on the outside look at me. It's how I look at me."

Hunter and Beau grew up conflicted about wealth—the old Biden-Finnegan divide. Beau dated Lilly Phipps, an heir to the Phipps family fortune. (Biden, Sr., who was still alive at the time, would sometimes ask about her great uncle, a polo champion with whom he had once played.) Meanwhile, Hunter dated Sissy Dent, a du Pont heir. But the boys were never comfortable with the idea of marrying rich—like their father, they took pride in being able to say that they were middle class—and the relationships didn't last. Hunter later married Kathleen Buhle, who came from a working-class background. In a recent memoir, Buhle wrote about first seeing where Hunter lived. "A kid from a middle-class family does not have a ballroom," she recalled telling him. (Hunter and Buhle divorced in 2017.)

If Biden got his love of mansions from his father, then it might have been his encounters with Sheene, Jr., and stories he heard about him, and about other alcoholic relatives, that turned him off alcohol. Even though Biden, Sr., and Jean watched alcoholism destroy the lives of the Sheenes, Arthur Briscoe, Joseph Harry, and one of Jean's brothers, they didn't discuss the dangers of drinking with their children. The only member of the family who talked about alcoholism was Biden. He told his siblings that he would give them each a hundred dollars if they didn't drink before they turned twenty-one. "Joe, I believe, saw the ravages of alcoholism and what it had done in the extended family, and he didn't want any of that visited upon us," Frank told me. "Alcoholism is a genetic disease, but what has to happen is you have to trigger it, you have to light the kindling, you've got to fuel the flame to get that gene activated. I think Joe understood that."

Valerie didn't drink socially until after her twenty-first birthday: "I thought, Who needs this stuff? We weren't righteous. I just didn't want to deal with it." Jimmy had his first drink when he was twenty-two. Years later, he noticed something: one day, he might have ten drinks and nothing would happen. Another day, he might have two sips and get drunk. Eventually, his mother noticed that he looked

jaundiced. He went to the hospital, where he was given an I.V. to clear the alcohol out of his system. He said a doctor told him that he was allergic to alcohol, and that drinking could kill him. He hasn't had a drink since.

Frank started drinking when he was in high school. Jean would call Jimmy at 2 A.M. and tell him to find his younger brother and bring him home. By the time Frank was in law school, he had become an alcoholic. For the next decade, he fought what he called a “horrific battle” to stay sober. He would relapse, go to rehab to dry out, and then the cycle would begin anew. At one point, he suffered delirium tremens, the most severe form of alcohol withdrawal. “I have lived and died my recovery,” he told me. “I mean, I have suffered the vagaries of fucking hell and come out the other side.”



*“Can I have some water, and maybe a tuna salad on rye, light on the mayo, and a pickle on the side?”*



Cartoon by Barbara Smaller

In 1972, Biden's first wife, Neilia, was driving with their three children when she got into an accident with a tractor trailer. Both Neilia and her infant daughter, Naomi, were killed. In the wake of the tragedy, Biden seized on rumors that the other driver was drunk, saying that he'd supposedly "drank his lunch" that day instead of eating it. But investigators determined that the tractor-trailer driver was sober, and years later Biden apologized to one of the driver's daughters for repeating the false story.

Beau and Hunter were both hospitalized after the crash, though they made full recoveries. Later, their father encouraged them to abstain from drinking, and Beau took these warnings to heart. When he was young, his nickname was the Sheriff, because he followed the rules and was always in control. He didn't touch alcohol until he turned twenty-one. He joined a fraternity at the University of Pennsylvania, but told his frat brothers that he wouldn't drink. (He told at least one of them that he avoided drinking because his mother and sister had been killed by a drunk driver.) When he was in law school, he began to drink in moderation, but only in secret, because he didn't want his father to know.

Beau drank more heavily in the winter of 2001, when he was based in Pristina, Kosovo, for the Justice Department. He was a regular at the Boom Boom Room, where the d.j.s mainly played American pop songs, and he would drink Jack Daniels with Coke. He developed an inflammatory disease known as ankylosing spondylitis when he was abroad, which made it difficult for him to walk, and after he left Pristina he cut back on his drinking.

Hunter was more rebellious than Beau, and he started drinking as a teen-ager, although he never drank in front of his father, either. His drinking worsened in 2002, when he was commuting between Wilmington and Washington for a lobbying job. He'd spend most afternoons at the Bombay Club, across the street

from his office, where the bartender knew his name and had his favorite drink and a cigarette at the ready. He went to rehab for the first time in 2003, and when he got out Beau picked him up at the airport and took him to his first A.A. meeting. Over the years, he has had frequent relapses. In 2015, Beau died, and Hunter says that the following year he developed an addiction to crack cocaine. He has been sober since 2019.

After Biden was elected to the Senate, in 1972, Sheene III's ex-wife, Trudy, and their daughter, Amy, would occasionally run into him in the Wilmington area. "I'd say, 'Joe, it's Trudy,'" she recalled. "He'd say, 'Yeah, I know who you are.' And that would sort of be it. There was no warmth at all." She added, "The Bidens disowned the Sheenes."

Like the Bidens, the Sheenes struggled with alcoholism through the generations. Mary Jane, Sheene, Jr.'s daughter—and Biden, Sr.'s goddaughter—drank herself to death. Sheene III also had a drinking problem for a time, though he cut back after getting into a drunken brawl at a family wedding. At one point, Sheene III had a modestly successful construction business. When a legal dispute with a larger company threatened to bankrupt him, he called Biden's office and left a message with a staffer, asking his cousin to call him back. Sheene III wanted help, but Biden never returned the call. "I had a lot of respect for Joe," he told me. "I didn't hate him." Although, he added, "I didn't care for his politics, because I thought he was a wimp, and I still do."

When "Promises to Keep," was published, Amy Sheene photocopied the sections about the Sheenes and sent them to her father, Sheene III. "Some of that stuff isn't even true," he told her, after reading the passages. One of the more significant inaccuracies involved Sheene, Sr., whom Biden believed had died either during the Second World War or shortly afterward. When the crop-dusting business went bust, "Dad had nowhere to turn," Biden wrote. "His own father and mother had both died. His uncle Bill Sheen was dead also." When

Alice died, her obituary noted that her husband had died in 1952. In fact, Sheene, Sr., lived for nearly two more decades. After the war, his drinking worsened, and he was committed to the Springfield State Hospital—the same institution that the Briscoes had been sent to decades earlier. According to Sheene, Sr.,’s confidential case file, when he arrived “he was confused, angry, delusional, and quickly lost his temper.” After being discharged and then recommitted, he died there in 1967. There was no funeral.

Biden probably didn’t know the details of Sheene, Sr.,’s death. Family stories get passed down from one generation to the next, like a game of telephone. Over time, the narrative is refined: heroes are made, shameful details are edited out, fables become facts. Biden, in his memoir, wrote that his uncle Bosie had been “shot down.” (The same phrasing was used in Valerie’s memoir.) But, according to another man, who was in the airplane at the time—the sole survivor of the accident—the plane got lost, ran out of fuel, and then crashed into the sea. The President’s uncle died in a tragic accident, not in combat.

Other people have been cut out of the story entirely. Arthur Briscoe didn’t make it into “Promises to Keep,” but Biden likely knew who he was; in 1978, Briscoe showed up at one of the senator’s events, and Biden signed a photograph for him, writing, “To Dad’s old friend Arthur. With best wishes.” There was also the misspelling of the Sheenes’ last name, a mistake that the Sheenes assumed had been made in bad faith. “That really pissed me off,” Sheene III told me. I asked him and Amy whether it was possible that the President didn’t know the correct spelling. “No,” Sheene III said, noting that Alice had practically lived with the Bidens for seventeen years. Amy agreed. “It has to be intentional,” she said. “For the families to be so close like that, how can you not know how to spell the name?”

Last fall, Sheene III stopped answering his phone. I flew to Florida and knocked on the door of his R.V., but he was too weak to let me in. I called 911, and an ambulance took him to a hospital, where doctors found a tumor on his pancreas.

He declined treatment and instead went back home, where he waited for his life to end. Sheene III had told me, “I used to stop and think a lot, What in the world ever happened to all the money? And there was never anybody to explain it to me.” Our last conversation was on January 12, 2022. “I have found out more through you than anybody else,” he said. Five days later, he died. Trudy told me, “I’m so glad that Bill died of pancreatic cancer and not alcoholism. I feel like the chain was broken.”

Sheene III expected to be buried in the Robinette family plot at Loudon Park Cemetery. But when Amy discovered that it would cost more than thirty-five hundred dollars to inter his ashes there, she decided to make less costly arrangements. On June 6th, Amy and Trudy drove to the cemetery, where, in the back of Amy’s black S.U.V., Trudy used a measuring cup to transfer some of Sheene III’s ashes into a ziplock bag. The women carried the bag over to the Robinette plot. The grave of Joseph Harry and Mary Biden was in decent shape, but there was a deep hole under Sheene, Jr.’s grave marker, which appeared to have been dug by a rodent.

“Do you think there are cameras around here?” Amy asked, wondering whether the impromptu ceremony might violate the cemetery’s rules.

“Well, that’s what you get for charging thirty-five hundred dollars,” Trudy replied.

“I’m just going to put it down the hole,” Amy said.

“Oh, God, if that thing comes running out,” Trudy said.

Amy began pouring out the ashes. “Be with your dad, Dad,” she said. Afterward, Trudy read a short poem, and then the women headed back to the car. Trudy wondered aloud whether the Bidens knew that Sheene III had died.

Amy shrugged. “They ended up in the White House,” she said. “We ended up in the trailer park.” ♦

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