



THE HAWKES WINE CLUB

September 13, 2019

A LETTER TO THE SHAREHOLDERS

My uncle, Leonard, called me from the hospital and asked me to pick him up. I was lying in bed with my wife. I got up and went out in the kitchen before I answered. She's a light sleeper, my wife. She weighs a hundred and twenty pounds and has more shoes than Imelda Marcos, but she sleeps with a pump gun under her pillow and treats me like a convict.

"Hello?" I said. "Who is this?"

"It's your uncle."

"Which one?" I said.

"Leonard."

"I thought you were dead," I said.

"I just had a little heart surgery," he said.

"When?" I said.

"Thursday," he said.

It was Saturday. I had not seen Leonard in thirty years. Back then, he was still married to my Aunt Susan. She was a sometime unitarian minister, school teacher, rabbit farmer. They lived in a little place in Olympia, Washington. That whole part of the state smelled like raw stumps and fish guts – things being torn apart and consumed to satisfy the bottomless appetite of progress. I don't know what Leonard was doing for work. Various things. Even when he lived at home, he would be gone for nights on end, then come walking out of the woods with his shirt hanging off in rags and his eyes all red and blue and muddy.

"He has the soul of a dog," my aunt said. She sat on the porch, smoking, looking at the woods, waiting on Leonard. I can't stand a view like that – a view of nothing – a few hundred feet of yard and then a wall of green. As the sun went down, it felt like those trees were reaching up, over you, ready to swallow the house while you slept. I had dreams about drowning. I'd rush out on the porch in the morning, gasping for air. And there Susan was, lighting another Pall Mall. She could have been three hundred years old, how would you know?

But, it was true what she said about Leonard. He rambled. One time we went over there for a visit and ended up taking Leonard with us. This was when my father still looked like a lumberjack and travelled everywhere with a hundred-pound Rhodesian Ridgeback named Burt. I loved that dog. He was mean as a snake. Doors swung open for us wherever we went.

We were pulling out of Susan's, my dad driving, Burt riding shotgun, me in the back seat, when the door opened and Leonard climbed in. Looks were exchanged and away we went. My father didn't need an explanation. He knew Susan. He grew up with her, for Christ's sake. The trees streamed by in an endless crowd standing at the edge of the highway, watching us desert them. They're nice, evergreens, but there's a sameness to them that reminds me of people.

We stopped for gas in the shadow of Mount Shasta. It looks like Fuji, I've always thought. When we pulled away, Leonard was no longer in the car. I didn't hear from him again until he called me from the hospital. But I thought about him, often. I rolled the memory of our conversations over on the tongue of my mind for years:

"A career is like a disease," Leonard once said to me. "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

"I see the logic in that," I said.

"I learned how to box in prison," Leonard once told me.

"Were you a southpaw?" I said. "What is a southpaw?"

"I learned how to rodeo when I was a boy in Colorado," he said.

"Mesas," I said. "Did you ever get to ride a horse on a mesa?"

"My father worked for the railroad out there," he said. "Busting heads."

"Ouch," I said. "I think hobos are cool. I root for them in the movies."

"I worked on this boat up in Alaska," Leonard said.



THE HAWKES WINE CLUB

A LETTER TO THE SHAREHOLDERS

“We were supposed to be catching salmon, but we just chopped up whatever got caught in the net and put it in a can. Squid, livestock, cars. We once hauled in a Sitka spruce that had been marinating in the Bering Sea since the time of Christ. It had his initials right there in the bark. We sold it for three cents a pound to a cannery in Anchorage. It went in with the albacore.”

What is more lonely than a hospital at night? Leonard stood at the curb in his gown, holding a shoebox. I might say something dramatic, like, “at first I didn’t recognize him,” but that would be untrue, Leonard looked exactly like himself. I wouldn’t even say he looked appreciably older than he had thirty years before. There was a plastic tube hanging out the armhole of his robe, and he arranged it on his lap before closing the door.

“You need a place to stay?” I said.

“You can drop me down on the Avenue,” he said.

When people in Sonoma County, say “the Avenue,” they mean Santa Rosa Avenue. It’s the only place left around here that feels the way it did when I was a kid. As you’re probably aware, most of Sonoma has been overrun by yuppy winemakers and their customers. If I see grilled sardines with Meyer lemon aioli on another menu, I’m burning the goddamned restaurant to the ground. What the hell happened to the American West? People like you and me, that’s what.

But, driving down Santa Rosa Avenue is like driving backwards through time. At the corner of Corby Avenue, it’s about 1980 and by the time you get down to Hearn, to where my uncle asked me to stop at a little motel called The Dew Drop Inn, you’re in the time before I was born.

“You wanna have a drink?” Leonard said.

We were sitting in the car, in the motel parking lot. There was a pushcart in front of us with a generator running a string of electric lights over some metal tables and chairs. An old lady was cutting up a roasted pig and making tacos out of it.

Leonard opened up the shoebox on his lap. There was a bottle of Gordons gin in there. It fit like a coffin. Leonard took it out and unscrewed the cap and took a drink and passed it to me. I took a drink. Things were better, it occurred to me, when electricity was more expensive. Lighting was less thorough.

Short people in sandals, the women with those impossibly long braids, the men in big straw hats, came walking out of the darkness and ate the tacos. We drank the gin and watched them. It was like a painting that moved. Watching it, I knew that its beauty was to be a secret I would carry with me for years – like the sleeping faces of my children, like a 747 dropping fire retardant on the hills east of Geyserville – there is no explaining the way you feel when you witness certain things.

“You’re probably married,” Leonard said.

“I am,” I said.

“That’s good,” Leonard said.

“Is it,” I said. “I remember you once told me your life could fit in a matchbox and that was the way you liked it.”

“I said that?” Leonard said.

“On the porch in Olympia. It was part of what I call your ‘The Curse of Stuff’ speech.”

“That’s BS,” Leonard said. “A family is the most beautiful thing in the world. I wish I was a lawyer.”

“Really?” I said.

I looked over at Leonard. I wanted him to look over at me, to reach out his skeletal hand and touch me on the cheek and say, “You did good, kid,” but he didn’t do that. He put the bottle of gin back in the shoebox and closed the lid and climbed out of the car and walked off. I sat there and watched him knock on the door of the motel lobby. I guess I wanted to make sure he was alright, whatever that means. After a short while, a woman came to the door and unlocked it and let Leonard in. I watched her lock the door behind him, then stand there hugging



THE HAWKES WINE CLUB

A LETTER TO THE SHAREHOLDERS

him in the antique yellow light of the threadbare lobby. I bet her name was Gloria or Wanda or something. For a moment, I wondered who she was, what her relationship to my uncle was, then I pushed that out of my mind and turned on the car and drove home. On the way, this is what happened in my thoughts:

First, I felt better about my life. I had always wanted to be a loser and a felon and had ended up being a family man instead. I had been embarrassed by my success, especially around men like Leonard. Now, I felt vindicated. The idols of my youth regretted their indiscretions and wished they had dental insurance. I had lived the right life, after all. Ha!

Then, I realized that Leonard didn't mean what he said about a family 'being the most beautiful thing in the world.' He didn't want to be a lawyer. I was such a fool. What a failure I was, what a waste of air.

The sun was coming up by the time I pulled into my driveway. Sitting there, looking at my house, the same thought occupied my mind that always does when I arrive home: I could leave here and never look back, get a job on an oil rig, eat plenty of shrimp, sleep in a pickup truck.

There were a couple of chickens asleep on the front stoop, and I had to step over them to get inside. The house was still asleep. I decided to make waffles. Who doesn't love a waffle? I fired up the grill or press or whatever you call that thing. I threw some sausage in a pan, rustled up some eggs.

"What's all this?" my wife said when she came out.

"You need to borrow money again?"

"Just feeling glad to be here," I said.

I leaned in for a kiss. She turned away.

"You could build a garage on that breath," she said.

The 2015 vintage of Cabernet continues to surprise me with how good it is. The three years that precede it – '12, '13, '14 – are destined to be classics. They all coincided with a historic drought that produced intense, brooding wines that will take years to be at their best. I knew I loved them right away.

2015 was different. It was a very early spring and hot summer that led to an early harvest. At the time of harvest, I remember worrying about the unevenness of the fruit – some seemed perfectly ripe, some still a touch green-tasting. We harvested all our Cabernet in September, something I cannot remember having done since 2004.

When I taste the 2015's now, I find them incredibly fresh and full of life. The aromatics are explosive – high-toned and floral, with a purity of fruit I had almost forgotten to hope for in Cabernet. Looking back, I credit the early harvest with the freshness that is the characteristic through-line of 2015. It was an accidental discovery, but it was one I took to heart. I hope you'll notice an increased freshness in the wines that follow the 2015. It's something that's been in my mind ever since.

With that, I'll make a few comments on the two 2015 Cabernets in this shipment: the 2015 Alexander Valley Estate Cabernet, and the 2015 Pyramid Vineyard Cabernet.

Everyone who has received this letter hopefully has at least one bottle of our **2015 Alexander Valley Estate Cabernet** to look forward to. This wine is always a blend of fruit from all three of our vineyards: Red Winery, Pyramid, and Stone. It is always 100 percent varietal, but the blend depends on a handful of different factors. The most obvious of these is vintage – which vineyard produces the most grapes and the best grapes each year. Then, there is how the finished wines play together: wine A, B, and C are all good. Wine A likes B but not C, etc., etc. I guess that's called blending.

These days, though, there's another complicating factor: age. Red Winery and Stone were planted more than forty years ago, Pyramid more than 20 years ago. Like us, they're all old, some more than others. Little by little,



THE HAWKES WINE CLUB

A LETTER TO THE SHAREHOLDERS

we're tearing out old blocks and replanting them. We still sell nearly 80 percent of what we grow so, until all the new vineyards are up to speed, it's a bit of a juggling act to keep our clients happy and our wines rad.

This redevelopment project is one of the reasons our recent Alexander Valley Estate Cabernet has featured plenty of Pyramid fruit. This vineyard is younger than the other two and it has proportionally more producing Cabernet vines right now. More importantly, every grape we harvest from Pyramid is excellent. The best wines from Red Winery and Stone may be as good or better than the best wine from Pyramid in a given year, but neither of them make grapes that are as universally excellent.

So, the 2015 Alexander Valley Estate Cabernet is composed of 55 percent Pyramid, 30 percent Red Winery, and 15 percent Stone. The influence of the Pyramid is pronounced here, the 2015 is laced with its signature dark fruit – blackberry, black cherry, currant. But there are other brighter, more nuanced aspects, too, especially in the aroma – crushed bramble from Stone and baking spice from Red Winery. That brightness and the slightly herbaceous character give this wine a freshness and nuance that make it not just delicious but immediately and repeatedly pleasurable. It's not ponderous, it's racy. Drink now through 2030.

The **2015 Pyramid Vineyard Cabernet** is a selection of the best lots from one of the most dramatic Cabernet vineyards in the county, a steep and exposed series of hills in the mountains between Chalk Hill and Knights Valley. It comes from two blocks with slopes of up to 45 percent, where the soil is broken volcanic material mixed with round rock from old riverbeds carried up through the hills by thousands of years of systemic activity. It's a dense, purple, monster of a wine with aromatics of fresh plum, baking chocolate, coffee and a touch of that same wild, bramble I get in the 2015 Alexander Valley Cabernet. We originally wanted to bottle this wine young to capture all its vibrancy, but it was simply too tannic. It ended up spending about twenty months in French oak, mostly neutral. Drink now through 2035.

The **2016 Alexander Valley Merlot** comes from our Red Winery Vineyard, the same vineyard we have made it from in every vintage since 2002, a three-acre block in the foothills of the Mayacamas Mountains planted by my dad in 1973. It's a vineyard that typically produces a bright, floral style of Merlot, but the 2016 is dark all the way through – black cherry, plum, and bittersweet chocolate. This wine drinks very well now, but I love the way it ages. Get a few extra bottles, lose track of them, and find them again around 2025 to discover the strange fascinating tertiary aromas hiding beneath the fruit – tobacco, all spice, leather. It's delicious now, but it will only get more complex for the next five or ten years.

The **2017 Home Chardonnay** is from Stone Vineyard, our family ranch on Chalk Hill Road, the place I grew up, and where my parents both still live. It's the coldest vineyard in Alexander Valley and, every year we make wine from it and I walk into the winery and smell the amazing aromas coming from the fermenting juice, I remember what a blessing it is to have these grapes to work with. The 2017 is particularly lean. It shows green apple and honeydew and wet slate. It was aged on the lees in old French oak barrels for six months, a process that has a tempering, broadening effect on the otherwise crisp and racy texture.

Somebody give me an oyster, stat.

Thank you for your support and happy drinking.

- Jake