

“The Secret Life of Charles Kuralt”  
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On his sickbed in New York, Charles Kuralt thought of Montana, a place he had loved for a great many years for its unfurled splendor and natural wonders, far away from his life in New York. He enjoyed standing knee-deep in a trout stream with no deadlines or pressures, with only his thoughts and a well-made fly rod.

Down by a riverside, he built a log cabin. It reminded him of his native North Carolina, but most of all it gave him a place to disappear. Wherever the news took him, wherever CBS sent him, whatever corner of the country he explored for his “On the Road” series, Kuralt always returned to his little cabin on the Big Hole River.

In the hospital, having surrendered to doctors and tests, Kuralt, shaky and anxious and only sixty-two, took up a pen and wrote a letter: “Dear Pat, Something is terribly wrong with me.... I'll have the lawyers visit the hospital to be sure you inherit the rest of the place in MT. If it comes to that...” It was his last letter in many years of letters to Patricia Shannon.

Kuralt could not have foreseen its impact, for the letter revealed a life he had hidden for nearly thirty years – from his family, from the nation – and one that led to a confrontation between two women he hoped would never meet. Petie Kuralt, his wife, and Patricia Shannon, his longtime companion, both wanted the Montana land Charles Kuralt left behind. Pat Shannon contested Kuralt's will in a court case that added a surprising and uncharacteristically contentious footnote to a life story everyone thought ended July 8, 1997, when Charles Kuralt journeyed home one last time, to a shaded grave in Chapel Hill.

In the Madison County courthouse in Virginia City, Mont., case file DP-29-97-3609 overflowed with glimpses of a Charles Kuralt that America did not know. For twenty-nine years he moved between two worlds: one with a wife and career on the East Coast, another with a woman clear across the country. He shared Montana with Pat Shannon, and that is not all. They vacationed together, celebrated Christmases together, camped, hiked and picnicked together. Charles put her oldest daughter through law school and helped put her son through college. He bought Pat a cottage in Ireland and a term of design school in London. Over the years, he sent her enough money that she didn't have to work; the checks came monthly, \$5,000 here, \$8,000 there, well over half a million dollars. Even as he and Pat drifted apart (he refused to leave his wife), he continued sending money and notes of affection.

A few months before he died, Charles deeded Pat the Montana cabin and twenty acres, and with his final letter intended to give her the surrounding land. It was for the courts of Montana to decide whether the letter legally constituted a will. At stake were 90 acres and a historic schoolhouse Charles and Pat renovated as a library on a bluff overlooking the cabin, \$600,000 worth of property.

The Kuralt family declined to discuss the matter, and so did Pat Shannon and all their attorneys. Though the court records told a great deal of Pat's side of the story, Petie Kuralt, before she too died, chose not to step forward and tell hers. The only known details about the marriage were in Charles Kuralt's own words.

The lawyers wanted so much to protect both women they asked the court to close the case to the public, something District Judge Frank Davis would not do even if he could. “(Charles Kuralt) has, for all practical purposes, disclosed his double life,” Judge Davis said in court. “And we can’t permit the deceased to dictate from the grave these concepts of privacy, I don’t care how delicate they may be.”

And so the court file grew with personal letters and mementos and photographs and cards, Pat Shannon’s evidence of Kuralt’s generous devotion to her and her three children, who came to think of him as a father. “Mr. Kuralt and I lived a life, and perhaps it was not a life you approve of,” she testified. “But it was a life together.”

Kuralt took great care never to cross that life with his other, or to “mix the families,” as Pat’s daughter, Kathleen, put it. Perhaps only Kuralt himself can say why.

During his forty years with CBS News, Charles Kuralt achieved an enormous and loyal following, especially in his hometown of Charlotte, and all over North Carolina. He traveled the world and to the ends of the nation but never forgot where he came from, which so pleased the people back home they considered him not just a local-boy-made-good but an ambassador, even a hero.

Kuralt had fans everywhere and he did not let them down. He reliably returned to their evening news and Sunday mornings with tales of the ordinary and offbeat, of worm grubbers, horse traders, mushroom hunters, sculptors, lobstermen, graveyards, veterans, brick makers, parades, hippies, migrant workers, wildflowers... Throughout the 1970s and on into the '90s, he sought out and celebrated the poetry of everyday life, a simple, powerful series known as “On the Road.” With his resonant drawl and folksy eloquence, Kuralt introduced America to itself. People loved him for it, and for the basic reason that, famous or not, he seemed as ordinary as anyone: easygoing, rumped, as pudgy and balding as a favorite uncle.

Kuralt did his job so well, people not only felt they knew his story subjects; they felt they knew him, forgetting there is more to a man, to any human being, than a television camera can beam into a family’s den.

But for all his fascination with the simple things in life, Charles Kuralt was a complicated man.

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*On the morning of Tuesday, March 3, 1998, a petite woman in a black suit took the witness stand in a nearly empty courtroom in Virginia City, Montana, a rugged gold-rush town in the Tobacco Root Mountains. Pat Shannon was sixty-four years old, silver haired and shy. She did not seem to want to be there.*

*“Ms. Shannon,” asked the attorney, “would you explain how you met Mr. Kuralt?”*

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It was the spring of 1968, and Martin Luther King Jr. had just been assassinated. At her home in Reno, Nevada, Pat Baker sat up into the night wondering what she, a young, divorced mother of three, could do. Each day on her way to work at the power

company, she passed a vacant lot in a desolate neighborhood. Somebody should turn that into a park, she thought. Then she decided the somebody was her.

She called on city leaders, contractors, landscapers, cement companies, and in three months had what she needed, plus volunteers to do the work. To raise excitement, they decided to build the park in a weekend. What they needed was publicity.

Pat heard CBS had a guy who had just started roaming the country doing feature stories for Walter Cronkite to put on the evening news. She called CBS in New York. Cronkite's secretary switched her to Charles Kuralt.

Kuralt was thirty-three years old but already a CBS veteran. Eleven years earlier, the network had hired him away from The Charlotte News because he wrote so well. He started as a copywriter for news anchor Douglas Edwards but went quickly into the field as a correspondent, covering the secretary of state's visit to Thailand, a steel strike in Pennsylvania, U.N. Ambassador Adlai Stevenson's tour of South America. . . . Breaking news kept him on the go. "I woke up those mornings staring at hotel room ceilings and trying to remember whether I was in Bangkok, Bethlehem or Bogota," he wrote. "Wherever I was, it wasn't Brooklyn, where I was supposed to live." He had a wife, after all, his high school sweetheart, Sory Guthery, and their two baby girls, Lisa and Susan.

"I was drunk with travel, dizzy with the import of it all, and indifferent to thoughts of home and family," he wrote. "Pretty soon I no longer had a home or family."

Charles and Sory divorced. The marriage had lasted five years.

"I found I was lonely," Kuralt wrote. "I needed somebody to have a drink with once in a while, and tell my troubles to. On rare trips back to New York, I always had a drink with Petie Baird, the beautiful secretary who used to run along the Grand Central catwalk with me, arranging Doug Edwards' scripts. She was a reader of books, all books, Thurber, Steinbeck, Faulkner, Bruce Catton, Rex Stout, Alexander Pope. She was always able to tell me things I didn't know. One night, she overcooked a pork chop for me at her walk-up apartment in Greenwich Village."

"You are a terrible cook," Charles told her. "I don't suppose you'd like to marry me?"

"Maybe, someday."

When she finally accepted, Charles warned her.

"I'll be traveling all the time."

"I'm used to being alone."

"I'm not kidding. I'll never have a nine-to-five job."

"I couldn't stand having somebody always around the house."

On June 1, 1962, Charles Kuralt and Petie Baird married in a one-minute ceremony at City Hall in New York.

"I suppose we haven't spent more than a week at a time together from that day to this," Charles would write many years later. "Petie has not minded this much. People ask, And what does your wife do while you're away? I say, She reads and when I come home, she tells me things I don't know."

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The park in Reno sounded like a good story for "On the Road." Charles and his camera crew headed west. By now it was July in the blood-hot summer of '68. Bobby

Kennedy was dead, too. If the black and white people of Reno could work together to build a park, that would be something to see. And it was.

Kuralt's camera rolled as 700 volunteers worked the weekend away.

“Almost lost in this crowd is a slight, pretty woman named Pat Baker,” he told his viewers. “The whole crazy idea of building a park in two days was hers. . . . Her idea became everybody's idea, and Pat Baker is watching her dream happen out here in the sun.”

That night, Charles invited Pat to dinner. He arrived at her house with three dozen red roses. She introduced him to her children: Kathleen, thirteen; J.R., eleven; and Shannon, nine. He met Pat's mother, too. After dinner, Charles and Pat sat in the lobby of Charles' hotel and talked all night about their lives. She was thirty-four, he thirty-three. She was born in San Diego, he in Wilmington, North Carolina. Both graduated from college in 1955, she from the University of Nevada, he from UNC Chapel Hill. She was the daughter of an auto body worker, he the son of a schoolteacher and a social worker. She worked in public relations; he had never wanted to be anything but a journalist, and a traveler. She had been divorced for five years, and he had been remarried for six.

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*“Now did you, after that evening, continue a personal relationship with Mr. Kuralt?” asked the attorney.*

*“Yes. He began calling me frequently and he sent me a book. It's called The Gentle Wilderness. It's on the Sierra Nevada, and in it he put a note and said, Pick a place and we'll go there. And he came back in September and we went hiking in the Sierra.”*

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Every few weeks, Charles visited Pat in Reno. Sometimes they went to San Francisco but usually they stayed with Pat's children and parents. They played the piano together, dyed Easter eggs, went to J.R.'s Pop Warner football games. Pat's family adored him.

In the fall of 1970, when Pat and the kids decided to move to San Francisco, Charles not only helped them move, he paid the rent. The house on Eucalyptus was a nice place in a nice neighborhood, something a single mother with three children couldn't have afforded alone on a \$13,000 salary. She worked in public relations for the U.S. Department of Labor but soon found the job got in the way of time with Charles. So she quit and started her own women's rights consulting firm, Pat Shannon Baker & Associates.

The business wasn't enough to live on. Charles supported Pat and the kids.

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*“Did you talk about that with Charles Kuralt, the support, or was it kind of an unstated proposition?” the attorney asked.*

*“Well, when we talked about my quitting my job, we knew I didn't have any money. . . . Charles always said, his refrain through all of his life - Don't worry, we're rich, he would say. He was the breadwinner of the family.”*

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Pat never went on the road with Charles but they traveled together in his off time. In 1975, they found an ad in a fishing magazine: field house for rent at a ranch on the Big Hole River. They headed there, to southwestern Montana, known for its abundant streams and the trout that live in them. The Big Hole meets the Jefferson and the Beaverhead near Twin Bridges, an old farming town of 400, an hour's drive south of Butte. Charles and Pat found the field house on a rough little road 10 miles outside town, on a stretch of river quiet as a whisper.

"I fell in love with Montana at first sight," Charles wrote. "I was young and all the world was beautiful to me, but Montana was a great splendor."

He loved the history of pioneers and farmers and miners and thieves, and knowing Lewis and Clark camped there in 1805 on their way to the Pacific. He loved the wild, endless parade of elk, moose, pheasants and deer, and respected the privilege of living almost at one with them. Everywhere, there were mountains, surrounding the valleys like the white points of a crown. Magnificent as they were, Charles preferred the lowlands: endless fences and alfalfa fields and gentle herds of cattle and sheep, lambs clopping after their mothers. He came to love Montana most in September, on the crisp, russet edge of winter when the mayflies flit above the surface of the creeks, and the ranchers put up hay, and the cows came home. The sun dropped earlier behind the velvet folds of the foothills and the night creatures sang in the silence. It was a lovely place to grow old.

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*"Now, did there come a time when there was discussion about purchasing property in Montana?" the attorney said.*

*"Yes."*

*"And who initiated that?"*

*"Well, Charles had always wanted a piece of land on the river. . . ."*

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It was autumn 1981. Charles and Pat had vacationed almost every autumn at the same ranch on the Big Hole River. There, they wanted to stay. The rancher sold Charles 20 acres a few miles away from the field house, near a thicket of wild roses. Charles found a company in Kalispell that made square, rough-hewn logs the color of honey. He had a cabin built, a small but handsome cabin with porches front and back and a fireplace of fieldstone, right there on the river's edge.

This was a busy time for Kuralt. He had just had another book published, "On the Road with Charles Kuralt." He delivered the graduation speech at UNC-Chapel Hill. And he took Pat to Ireland.

"Let's just drive around and look at real estate, see what's for sale," Charles said one day when they were there. Pat had been desperately unhappy. A friend of Kathleen's had committed suicide. Charles had gone with them on the boat to scatter the boy's ashes beneath the Golden Gate Bridge.

The cottage he chose was in the town of Derrynavglau, near the Glencoaghan River, on a meadow that sloped to a bog and filled with wildflowers in summer.

Charles bought it for Pat, a gift.

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*“OK,” the attorney continued. “One question that should be directly asked is that you knew that Mr. Kuralt was married during this period? And by this period, I’ll define it as throughout the 1970s and 1980s.”*

*“Yes.”*

*“Were there specific discussions about . . . him being married?”*

*“No. There were - I went through bouts of despair, and there were arguments, but we never directly talked about, about his life in New York. I knew it existed. Charles - I read in some of this material that’s coming out of Washington today how there’s a tendency for men of power and, and fame, to sometimes compartmentalize their lives. And I think that’s what Charles did. He had a life in New York. I did not inquire into it. And he did not discuss it with me.”*

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In 1987, Charles decided to buy more land on the Big Hole River, thirty-nine acres on one side of the cabin and a fifty-acre bluff on the other. Driving around Madison County, Charles and Pat often passed the Pageville schoolhouse, a derelict old thing given over to wayward cows. In the steepled ruin, Charles and Pat envisioned a library where Charles could write after he retired from CBS.

He paid \$15,000 for the schoolhouse, had it moved to the river bluff and hired a contractor to restore it, easily a \$180,000 project. They laid in walls of Honduran mahogany, floors of black walnut, bathroom tile from Portugal. They built a chimney of stones from the banks of the Big Hole River and hung oak doors salvaged from a New York brownstone. Pat oversaw a lot of the restoration from San Francisco, where she was getting increasingly restless. With Charles' help she had started a small business that made and sold frozen cooking stocks, but the company had failed. The children were grown. And despite the plans she and Charles had made, they were having trouble.

They had been together twenty years now and still Charles refused to divorce his wife. Pat decided to move to London to study landscape architecture at the Inchbald School of Design. Charles paid for it, and visited her there that autumn. One day, they strolled hand in hand through the antique district of London and found the centerpiece for the schoolhouse back in Montana: a Victorian partners' desk, named for its facing knee wells. He could write on one side, she could design gardens on the other. Charles paid \$13,000 for the desk and had it shipped to the States.

When Pat returned home in the spring, she and Charles went camping.

He wrote her son, J.R., a letter: “We are enjoying camp. We saw a pheasant but not a skunk. We had a pillowfight . . . We listen to music . . . We cook our own meals and only take a bath when we want to. . . . It is hard to write a book and design a garden, so we have not tried yet, but this is supposed to be next. . . Well, I must close for now. I love you. Oh, our faucet drips. xxxxx, Charles. P.S. I love you.”

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*Pat Shannon's son briefly took the stand. J.R. Baker was forty years old and had come from his home in Washington state.*

*"At what point in your relationship with Mr. Kuralt did you find out about his family in New York, or did you ever find it out?" Judge Davis asked.*

*"I was aware that he was married to Mrs. Kuralt, and I probably found that out late teens, early twenties, I would say."*

*"Did that bother you in any way, especially after you found out about the marriage?"*

*"No . . . I judged them and their relationship based on their love for one another and their love for me."*

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From the start, Charles Kuralt impressed the Baker children as a kind man who was genuinely interested in their lives and future. He gave J.R. his first baseball glove, taught him how to sail. When J.R. had trouble getting into college, Charles sent him to a preparatory school in Arizona, where one of Cronkite's children had gone. When he thought J.R. should see a bit of the world he took him on the road with his camera crew, and once got him an internship at CBS.

He paid for Kathleen to go to law school at the University of San Francisco; when she graduated, Charles was there. He helped send J.R. to grad school; when he graduated, Charles was there. He gave them job references and advice and very often, a little walking-around money, even when they didn't ask for it. He never failed to send birthday cards and Valentines. He wrote letters a good father would write: Don't rush into a job you hate . . . Let's catch some fish this summer . . . I'm proud of you . . . I love you.

He began signing his letters, "Pop."

They sent him cards on Father's Day.

He said he would always be there for them, no matter what happened between him and their mother.

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*"Now Ms. Shannon," the attorney continued, "was there a time during this period that you attempted to break off and pursue an independent life?"*

*"Well, we - our lives became increasingly scattered, I guess you would say. Charles was no longer on the road. He was living with Mrs. Kuralt in New York City. . . . Charles had not gotten a divorce and I was becoming more and more unhappy about it and had decided to spend more and more time in Ireland. . . . Charles said he thought we had too much invested to just toss it aside and was eager, as I generally was, too, to have reconciliations."*

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In 1990, Charles Kuralt's newest book came out, his memoir, "A Life on the Road." He wrote, "There is no contentment on the road, and little enough fulfillment. I know that now. I am acquainted with people who live settled lives and find deep gratification in family and home. I know what I have missed, the birthdays and anniversaries, the generations together at the table, the pleasures of kinship, the rituals of the hearth. And still I wander. . . ."

They were in their mid-fifties now, Charles and Pat, and had behind them the trips, the gifts, the Septembers in Montana, all the years of letters and poems he sent, like this one at Christmas:

*What I Will Give You . . .*

*A string of pearls*

*A suit and sweater*

*A Rubens print*

*A holly tree*

*And me.*

*A mixing bowl*

*A sofa and chair*

*A set of china*

*A butcher knife*

*My life.*

A year earlier, Charles had written Pat into his will. "In the event of my death I bequeath to Patricia Elizabeth Shannon all my interest in land, buildings, furnishings and personal belongings on Burma Road, Twin Bridges, Montana."

He took her out of his will in 1994, one of the most pivotal years of his life.

Professionally and personally, Charles Kuralt's relationships were changing, if not ending. He retired from CBS, and letters of sadness poured in from all over the country, more than one thousand a day. He answered his fans by writing another book, his last. For "Charles Kuralt's America" he would spend one month in the twelve places he loved best, at the time of year he loved best. New Orleans in January, Grandfather Mountain in May, Twin Bridges in September, New York City in December. . . . He gave February to Key West, Florida, and called Pat to join him. She still hoped Charles would leave Petie, so she took him up on his first-class ticket and went. In Key West, she realized again nothing ever would change.

When Charles invited her to Charleston a month later, Pat said no. When he asked her to meet him at the cabin, again she said no.

Charles, busy and tired, returned a letter to a man who had approached him about selling the place in Montana. "This might be the best solution eventually. The property naturally should be one ranch, but I crave at least one or two more seasons there, and haven't made up my mind." After all, he had ended "A Life on the Road" this way: "There is a cabin in a grove of cottonwoods beside a western river. . . . I love this place. When I am here, I think I would be happy never to leave it. Every trip has to end." He called the chapter, "A Place to Come Home To."

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That September, he turned sixty in Montana.

"I thought of my father, back home in North Carolina," he wrote. "I'd be going to see him in a few days. He was seriously ill but still in good spirits, and he was eighty-six years old. I'd settle for that, I thought. . . . Eighty-six would be all right for me, too. Eighty-six, if I could make it, would give me twenty-six more Septembers in Montana."

Charles had never taken good care of his health. He enjoyed rich food and liquor and too many cigarettes. In October 1995, just before he went in for heart bypass surgery, he wrote to J.R. and enclosed a check for \$50,000. "If I should die (highly unlikely, they

tell me) cash it immediately,” he wrote. “Don’t fail!” The surgery didn't kill Charles but it forced him to consider the reality that something eventually would.

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*“Now, Ms. Shannon, I want to move up to 1997,” said the attorney.  
“I’m handing you what is marked as Exhibit 10, and ask you what that is.”  
“This is a warranty deed for the 20 acres and the cabin. . . .”  
“And when was that property conveyed to you?”  
“April 9, 1997.”  
“And what were the circumstances leading up to that?”  
“Charles’ health had been getting steadily worse. . . .”*

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Pat now owned the cabin and twenty acres and the view of the river Charles loved so well. Charles wanted to deed over the rest of the land, but Pat says she urged him to wait. They were to meet at the cabin in September and once again try to repair their relationship. She wrote to him before leaving to spend the summer in Ireland. The meadow was mowed, the new disposal installed. . . . “God willing,” she wrote, “I’ll see you in the fall.”

Charles had not been feeling well. His doctors in New York ran tests to figure out why he stayed so tired all the time. On June 18, he wrote to Pat from the hospital: “Something is terribly wrong with me. . . .” He enclosed two checks, one for \$9,000 and one for \$8,000. Days later, when she received the letter in Ireland, Pat frantically called J.R., who called the hospital, which would tell him nothing, not even that Charles was a patient. J.R. called Charles’ apartment in New York as he often did, and as he left a message on the answering machine, Petie Kuralt picked up the phone. For all she knew, J.R. thought, this was just another friend calling to check on Charles, just another friend from the road.

His heart was the trouble, and lupus. But he seemed to be getting better, Petie said. J.R. called his mother and told her not to come to New York. A few days later, on July 2, Charles wrote to his old friend Bill Friday, a former president of the University of North Carolina system. “I know you have better things to worry about, but I thought I would ask if you have any way of finding out if there are a couple of burial plots in Chapel Hill?”

On July 3, J.R. called Charles. Pat was anxious to speak to him, he said.

No, said Charles; he would be home soon and would call her then.

The next day, he died.

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*“You went to his funeral, didn’t you?” the attorney asked Pat.  
“Yes.”  
“What documents did you have with you at his funeral?”  
“I had the June 18th document.”  
“The June 18 letter?”  
“Yes.”*

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They buried him between a crape myrtle and a dogwood tree in Old Chapel Hill cemetery, his mahogany casket covered in red roses. More than 1,600 people came to the memorial service to say goodbye, the famous and the unknown, among them Patricia Shannon. At some point that day, she showed Charles' letter to someone at the funeral, and the secret began to unravel.

—May 24, 1998