

ED BRESLIN

JAKE BERTHOT
AND
THE PRIMACY OF ART



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*This book is for Lynn Dreese Breslin
for inspiring it*

*And in celebration of Betty Cuningham
for all she's done her lifelong for artists*

*And in gratitude to Warren Gold, Jack Lichtenstein,
and Ahouva Rubinstein
for being the most supportive friends
any writer ever had*

*And in memory of Gerard Wagner,
Gene Labocetta, and Tommy Mitchell
for keeping me this side of the grass
and productive for countless years*



“Time present and time future are an unexpected bonus.”
— Henri Matisse

“Art is not the application of a canon of beauty but what the instinct and the brain can conceive beyond any canon.”
— Pablo Picasso

“Words of the world are the life of the world.”
— Wallace Stevens

“Time is the least thing we have of.”
— Ernest Hemingway

“For those who enjoy theory, it’s fine. Those serious minds who *need* theory —why not give it to them? But let’s keep focused on what really matters—on the thing itself. Let’s try to get into it, not walk around it with calipers and quiz glasses.”
— Orson Welles

“Every good painter paints what he is.”
— Jackson Pollock

“Aesthetics is for me like what ornithology must be like for the birds.”
— Barnett Newman

“For example ‘theories of drama’ and that kind of thing I find quite unreadable.”
— Harold Pinter

“As far as critics are concerned, I don’t read them any more. I just keep going straight ahead. If someone doesn’t like what I’m doing, so be it.”
— Anthony Hopkins

“You don’t have to understand art. If you are open it will speak to you anyway. It doesn’t matter if you like it or don’t like it. Just see what that particular artist is doing. That in itself can be interesting. Sometimes people are afraid of art because they think they should know something they don’t know. Actually, we all know, like a kid who picks up a crayon. So all you have to do is look. And the act of you looking is a gift, a gift of energy which bounces back to the artist.”
— Henrietta Mantooth



JAKE BERTHOT AND THE PRIMACY OF ART

PROLOGUE

October 18, 2013

Dear Jake,

It's been seven hours since I saw your show and it has left me rocked and shaken in the most beautiful way. It was devastating, uplifting, and eerily impactful in a way I haven't experienced from art in a long while. Your confrontation with the twin terrors of thanatophobia and thanatophilia was the most moving visual and intellectual encounter I witnessed and internalized in years, maybe decades. What I loved about the work was the resolution it achieved and the paradox it embodied. The surface serenity floating above the profound chaos animating the receding background was wildly effective in replicating the very ambivalence and tension of life, of the state of physical existence, of the experience of being suspended between birth and death. My admiration for what you did in this series of paintings is infinite.

As I looked I kept thinking how apt my favorite line from Leonardo da Vinci was to what you had created: "Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication." Circuiting the individual paintings I felt again the consoling acceptance of life and death everyone hopes to attain and few do. I hadn't been that simultaneously disturbed and soothed—even anesthetized, free of all pain—since Lynn and I visited Matisse's Rosary Chapel in the late summer and early fall of 1981. That was the emotional effect of your work. The intellectual effect was different, but every bit as emphatic. In an odd way your work affected me as had the Arena Chapel when Lynn and I visited it in early October 1991. My thoughts were streaming by in my head the way my thoughts had done while stepping from panel to panel in the interior of that masterwork of a chapel.

Then there was the aesthetic effect of witnessing an artist at the

apex of his control of his medium: unselfconscious, direct, natural, and devil-may-care what any detractors may think or say. Yes, there was theory, but it was pressed into the service of profound mental feeling, a preternatural cognitive equilibrium—no vacuous intellectual posturing or pandering allowed. The work personified the total self-possession and emotional balance every artist wishes he or she could access and only a few get to render permanently in a fixed expression of enduring sensibility. There was none of the melodrama of Rothko, none of his useless despair. Yes, the work was broody, but not in the service of blankness. It chose light over darkness. The work was illuminated by a love of life while imbued with an accommodation with death, a species of self-negotiated peacefulness and a testament to confirmation of one's being.

The skull and the tree, the one stated in the foreground, the other shadowed in the background, articulated the perfect simple dichotomy at the heart of each painting, of each mute yet eloquent allegory in color, in line, in object, and in perspective.

Each painting had the urgency of acute expressiveness fully delivered and the immediacy of a lifetime of sweat equity fully paid off.

If I had the swag, Jake, I'd buy them all and install them exactly as Betty displayed them tonight, two rooms and one alcove of pure mastery, one big everlasting installation. Your ontology is boldly and irrevocably stated for all time, ineradicably confirmed in immortal work. You've created a thanatopsis for the ages.

I want to go back midafternoon one midweek day and have the rooms, if I'm lucky, empty; and the artwork, if I'm luckier still, all to myself.

Congrats and thanks a million for making your art.

*Yours,
Ed*



CHAPTER ONE

In the fall of 2013 I went to see a show by Jake Berthot at the Betty Cuninghame Gallery. Jake and I had friends in common and we'd once shared a marvelous Thanksgiving a few years ago at the house of two of them, the painters John Lees and Ruth Leonard. I noticed that day that Jake's right hand was wrapped in a black brace from a fall he'd taken while reaching out on a ladder to prune a tree. He complained about it not at all but pointed out that it made painting more challenging by limiting his dexterity. Jake paints with his right hand. Over the years I saw him with John and Ruth and other mutual friends, usually at openings, at the dinners afterward, or at the holidays. When I saw him in the summer of 2012 at a Ruth Leonard opening he had lost weight and color. He was battling a particularly virulent form of leukemia. Again, not a peep of complaint.

His show that fall of 2013 overpowered me. It was the best show I'd seen in four decades of going to openings. It so moved me that seven hours later I got out of bed and wrote him a letter. I told him he'd achieved complete command as a painter and had produced a thanatopsis for the ages, a fancy Greek word for a meditation on death. In that show, composed of about twenty paintings and drawings, Jake had stared the Grim Reaper down and put him in his place. He had reconciled life and death and embodied and projected their proper, totally natural relation to each other.

He had pulled this off by painting free of doubt, strain, or self-consciousness. At the same time he had battled death to a standstill. He had merged artist with artwork and attained an aesthetic stasis in the finished work that transfixed the viewer and suffused him or her with a tranquil ecstasy. It was magical, it was mesmerizing, it was mystical.

Jake wrote back and asked that I come visit him in his studio in the

woods. Then the snowy winter intervened, the roads were difficult, and Jake went up and down the scale of vitality depending on the effects of chemo. Spring came. Dates were set, dates were canceled. For long stretches the cancer prevailed. Then Jake called and said he felt good. I drove down on July 3 and he gave me the greatest artistic gift I've ever received. After two hours of tea, conversation, and perky visits from his gorgeous Russian Blue cat, named She-Gray, he put me in his studio in front of a track-lit single painting on an off-white wall. Called *Night, Wood, and Rock*, the painting apprehended me, not I it. It pinned me to the tall director's chair Jake had put me in. I studied the painting for twenty minutes.

Jake returned and sat in a matching tall director's chair in silence for another ten minutes. Then I told him he had taken the spirit imbuing the paintings in the show the previous fall another step: he had simplified further. That's when my negative capability as someone hideously literal kicked in. I recounted what the painting imparted to me allegorically, a quality that the paintings in the show had radiated effortlessly, subtly, magisterially. Suddenly Jake said, "Don't tell me any more."

He put up another painting called *Coming Morning*. As with *Night, Wood, and Rock*, this one had a severely limited color range: muted blacks and shaded grays with a silver slash of light entering from the upper left corner and penetrating to the center before trailing off toward the lower right corner. After fifteen minutes of staring in silence, I said, "Jake, this one achieves total static equilibrium. You've refined the creator out of a separate existence from the creation. The sensibility of the artist is one with the artwork. You've disappeared into your work. There's no allegory either, just this sensation of detached engagement and icy benevolence."

He said, "There's a narrative but it's in the service of nature, not me." We went back to the house and had more tea and conversation and more perky antics from She-Gray before going out to dinner.

We drove to Stone Ridge and ate at Momiji, a restaurant featuring

Japanese and fusion cuisine. Jake ordered his favorite dish, called a Kamikaze. It consisted of tuna and yellowtail sushi topped with avocado and a spicy green sauce. I had one too. The sushi soothed your palate and the sauce cleared your head. Green tea ice cream and piquant tea provided a great finish.

Two weeks later Jake called and invited me back. When I got there we repeated the previous pattern of tea and conversation, though She-Gray was out in the yard and refused to come in. Then Jake put me in the studio again. Out came *Night, Wood, and Rock*. I studied it alone for twenty minutes before Jake joined me. I told him he had transformed and refined it. Like *Coming Morning*, it was now pure essence, stripped of all inessentials. Studying it my heartbeat had nearly disappeared. The painting's effect was total relaxation, like acupuncture. The masterwork on the wall banished anxiety and infused me with a serene acceptance of life's glory, suspended always above death, no matter death's imminence, or seeming finality.

I said, "Don't touch this, Jake."

He said, "I won't. The dialogue with this painting is complete."

I witnessed a second masterwork when Jake again put up *Coming Morning*. Mortality had died as a possibility for Jake in the eternal genius he'd invested in these two masterworks. He had told me of his admiration for poet William Packard's remark that "art had to fill you up." I was filled up with a sensation of acceptance, a serene wisdom about life and death and the high calling of art when purged of ego and fully vested in spirit, which means in Latin the ability to breathe.

These two paintings were going to breathe for all eternity. On my first visit two weeks earlier Jake had remarked that modern art had "taken the air out of painting." I took this to mean that modern painting had too often abandoned its spiritual essence for sterile theory, had sacrificed its soul for sales. Jake had bemoaned the tendency of

modern art to be viewed as “commodity,” by its creators and its collectors, its connoisseurs and its consumers. Even, in fact, by its critics and its so-called aesthetes.

That day I wished everyone could see Jake’s latest two paintings as I had seen them: off-white wall, track lighting, two tall director’s chairs, one in front of each painting, with as much time to view them as one wished to invest. I wished the Kleinert Center in Woodstock or the Dorsky Gallery in New Paltz would mount a two-painting showcase before the paintings were shipped permanently to the Phillips Collection in Washington. Though, as it turned out, Jake later changed his mind and only *Night, Wood, and Rock* went to the Phillips.

As I left the studio I looked high up on the wall and saw, in Jake’s handwriting, these words from Chuang-Tzu, the Taoist: “In the state of pure experience, we have no intellectual knowledge of any kind.”

CHAPTER TWO

These first two visits set a pattern for the rest of the summer. Jake would call and say he had something he wanted to show me. That meant a painting had been reworked or completed. I would arrange to come down and we would sit on the porch and discuss various things, mostly about art and painting, movies and books, and Jake would ask me how my writing was going. He had liked my memoir about drinking and my dog's role in curing me of this debilitating addiction. He had also liked my memoir of shadowing the Yale men's basketball team for a whole season as a faux coach back in the fall of 2011 and the winter and spring of 2012. When he asked to see a coffee table book on American railroad stations I had written the text for with my friend Hugh Van Dusen, to complement Roger Straus III's photos, I gladly brought him one. We discussed all three books and Jake was so perceptive it never failed to astonish me. After all, he wasn't a writer but a painter, yet he keyed into writing as deeply and as insightfully as did our mutual friend John Lees.

Painters and sculptors are amazing people; the serious ones, that is. They take a monstrous dare and gamble their whole lives on the proposition that what they make will warrant the worth of their existence. They focus first on what they make; and second, to use a phrase I dislike, on what they will amount to. This absolute commitment to a single goal in life invests them with a spiritual aura hard to resist. This accounts, I believe, for their enthusiasm for poets and jazz musicians, fellow existential daredevils with a maniacal commitment to one thing in life, a thing the rest of the universe often disregards or even ignores outright. I've learned this firsthand. My wife is a serious, talented, and committed painter who has taught me endless lessons in artistic commitment and determination and has brought me, to my great benefit, into contact with hundreds of painters and sculptors

just like her. Along with my wife, these artists have schooled me in the art of brave commitment to an elusive goal in a way I can never repay.

That's what Jake represented to me as strongly as did my wife and my painter friends John Lees and Ruth Leonard. His commitment to his art was total, all consuming: the thing he did that obsessed and defined him. He gave allegiance and pledged time and energy only reluctantly to anything else, other than vital relationships and collateral artistic efforts by others in film, music, photography, architecture, or literature. He had some interest in baseball and some in basketball, but these interests were not deranging or obsessive or born of a desperation to instill passion in his life, as was true for so many sports fanatics living otherwise empty and sterile lives. These sporting interests for Jake were diversions, respites, helpful interludes of pure relaxation, not providers of life-and-death moments of primal fury and aerobic fantasy.

The minute I saw Jake's October 2013 show I knew his work was full of deep thought—effortless and natural and uncontaminated by any grinding philosophy. All theory was subservient to mind, eye, hand, and brush. Sensibility, not cogitation, ruled Jake's process. Any and all systems of dictatorial thought or degrading theory shattered against the energy of Jake's aesthetic passion. He belonged to no "schools," conformed to the shibboleths of no "groups," cast his fate with the dictates of no "movements." He was a painter alone with his ideation, and his ideation was instinctual, innate, and as individualized as his DNA; what's more, it was governed solely by his sensibility, free of all outside influences, schemes, and fashions. His work disdained any tricks or gimmicks or affectations. Because of leukemia he had stage four cancer: yet the cancer was overmatched against stage four artistic command earned through six decades of sweat equity expended in an effort to master one thing: the art of painting that revealed one's mind, encapsulated one's soul, and exulted in one's sensibility in order to produce a quality Jake quoted to me four days before Thanksgiving 2014: Kant's observation that "the beautiful is that which pleases universally without...a concept."

CHAPTER THREE

Jake asking me to his studio to give aesthetic feedback on his artwork is one of the most flattering things ever to happen to me. It was also loads of fun. The conversation and the kidding, aside from the discussions of the specific artworks, would go on for hours, and every minute was as exhilarating as the one before. Jake would delve into some piece of art criticism he had recently read and dissect it quickly to reveal what he now considered its irrelevance. His opinions ranged widely. When I told him there was a recent front-page article in the *Times* about an Orson Welles film that had long been tied up in litigation but that now might be released, he flared from this development to a discussion of his unbridled admiration for Welles. He loved the big three: *Citizen*, *Ambersons*, and *Touch*. He then catapulted into an aria in praise of Welles and his unshakable commitment to excellence through the protection of his unimpeachable vision, with his unflinching sensibility vested in every detail. Next Jake mentioned several foreign films he had seen as a young man and had never got over for having this same personal stamp you always got in a Welles film. The films Jake mentioned were French or Italian, by Renoir or Truffaut, De Sica or Fellini.

On recent American cinema he was rough, lamenting the fall from grace marked by the vacuous ascension of Spielberg and Lucas on the flimsy wings of outsized sensation and asphyxiating sentiment. On Woody Allen he startled me by sharing my low opinion, saying, correctly, “the thing on Gertrude Stein, Fitzgerald, and Hemingway in Paris was an intellectual embarrassment to America.” I remarked that although Allen was a triumphant TV gag writer and standup comedian, he made, as a filmmaker, what amounted to pretentious home movies for the Manhattan in-crowd, the pseudo intellectuals and the

faux sophisticates. His movies' self-congratulatory smugness was off-putting; their tone of having nailed a joking reference to Kierkegaard's existential duality or for using the Bloomsday date for the bank heist in *Take the Money and Run* was sophomoric, an autodidact's pirouetting in the parlor for the applause of his parents and grandparents. We agreed that Allen's takes on sex and death and relationships were adolescent. We laughed over our shared disdain for the slick, shallow, and ultimately trumped-up knowingness of *Annie Hall*.

During my visits Jake would often zip into discussions of writing that would mesmerize me. As with paintings and movies, he had strong likes and stronger dislikes. He would talk with enthusiasm about poets whose work kept him company in the single-digit hours of his insomniac nights, when he wrestled with his dwindling vitality and his encroaching death. His love for Wallace Stevens matched my own. He was busily reading Stevens' *Collected Poems*, a book he kept on the end table next to his reading chair, just as I kept my copy in the country and in the city next to my reading chairs. When I told him I was addictively devoted to *Anecdote of the Jar*, he feverishly insisted we find and read it right away. Of course I knew right where it was and found the page and handed him the book. Silently he read the poem, then conned it slowly with his eyes a second time before he read it aloud with the aplomb of a classically trained actor. He keyed the sentiment, the intellectual import, and the charged emotion and enthusiasm underlying every word. He then immediately put me to the test. "What's so special about it?"

"I love its profound simplicity and its effortless precision and its total effectiveness without an ounce of strain."

He smiled, then chuckled. I told him how Marty Kellman, a gifted teacher, had taught me this powerful poem in college. I had never forgotten Marty's explanation of how Stevens had organized the whole terrain and, by extension, the whole universe around this one simple object: a jar in a field in Tennessee. Marty also taught me how James Joyce had done pretty much the same thing. Joyce organized the

whole cosmos around Stephen Dedalus as a schoolboy in Clongowes Wood College, the famous Irish prep school run by the Jesuits. While seated at his student desk there, Dedalus wrote down in a copybook where he was situated in the universe by listing an ever-widening arc of addresses, starting with Clongowes Wood College and culminating simply with “The Universe.” I told Jake I liked that practice very much as long as you could keep in mind while executing this egocentric placement in the universe that you were an infinitesimally small grain of sand and not the beach, not the center of the universe, as Joyce too often mistook himself to be.

These conversational exchanges happened on my second visit in July, on the eighteenth, a Friday. I had sat on the screened porch with Jake upon arrival, had visited the studio to see the latest updates on his two recent masterworks and on several pieces he had completed between the previous fall’s show and the present, and had then gone out with him for another good Japanese dinner at Momiji in Stone Ridge. When, after dinner, we returned to his house—a cabin, really—we sat and chatted while sipping more of his delicious red tea, from India, for accompaniment. That’s when Jake had directed the conversation to poets and hauled out the Stevens collection for the reading of *Anecdote of the Jar*. I never caught on until much later that Jake himself wrote poetry. I knew only that he liked to read poetry into the evening and through the night. Later, after listening to him many times on my visits, I would come to appreciate more and more how truly well he read poetry aloud. He had a deep voice that he could modulate with the range and sonorousness of a large church organ.

That night as I looked around the living space of the cabin its simplicity and spareness reminded me of Thoreau. What Jake actually had in his cabin in the woods was a rural loft, a transplanted living space like the one he had lived in on the Bowery in New York for many years before he and his then wife Kristin purchased the upstate cabin in the early nineties. The purchase had been Kristin’s idea and when the marriage came undone a few years later Jake had been left

to live in it, the loft in town having been sold as part of the divorce settlement. With his usual resilience Jake had made the most of it. The cabin was about a thousand square feet. Before Jake had converted it to a living space it had been the woodworking shop of the previous owner. The studio, a separate structure Jake had hired a contractor to build off to the side of the cabin, was about the same size as the cabin but designed as an open working space. Set off to one side near the entrance was the only exception to the open plan, a guest bedroom. Then came the large working studio and, behind it, toward the back of the studio and off to one side, a storage space holding paint racks.

The cabin itself had a small front deck, three steps up from the front yard. When visitors came, the front yard doubled as a parking lot. Just inside the cabin's front door was a small mudroom. Then came the vestibule. Off the vestibule was Jake's bedroom, filled with a large bed covered by a multicolored patchwork quilt, a set of bookshelves, and a favorite painting Jake had done years earlier. Up a few steps from the vestibule, straight ahead, were the living space, the kitchen, a small bathroom, and a door leading to the screened porch just off the kitchen. From this porch you could see the studio and the land out back that Jake had landscaped beautifully, rendering the back yard a very rustic garden, planted with shrubs and wildflowers around a small pond. From a door between the kitchen and the living space you could walk out onto a large deck that spanned the back of the cabin and wrapped around to the side opposite the screened porch.

The place was altogether cozy, comfortable, and, in a roughhewn way, *gemutlich*, even though everything was on the open plan, like a loft. Jake had decorated the living space with an eclectic hodgepodge of furniture, including a futon couch and a leather Eames reading chair, a chaise, the kind, I noted, the shrinks often have. He had placed a throw rug in front of the Eames chair and end tables on either side of it. A big cast iron stove separated the living space from the kitchen. The stove, a Quadra-Fire, fascinated Jake. One night he went into an explanation of its innovative design, in detail, and praised its cleverness and beauty.

There were four chambers, two for intake, two for exhaust, and Jake appreciated the fluidity and evenness this arrangement facilitated for the flow of warm air. As a master craftsman, he appreciated master craftsmanship, no matter where it manifested itself. In that regard he was like Leger, whose observation that a bolt was as beautiful as a rose I always liked. There were also bookcases everywhere, chockfull and spilling over with books and, on one low bookcase against the back wall, a DVD player and a stack of DVDs.

Everywhere you looked, everything said art. The walls were covered with drawings Jake had done or with drawings from artist friends or with artworks Jake had purchased, several of them primitive pieces he had picked up at county fairs and rural antique or junk shops. There was also a large drawing table formed by two short black file cabinets underpinning a white Formica tabletop big enough for a dining room. This was against the inside wall between the living space and the vestibule. Over the next few months I would come to know this space well and to become inordinately fond of it. There would be interesting stories behind almost all of these artworks, and Jake would recount them to me with gusto and humor. I knew this setting was going to furnish a lot of good talk from him, and I also knew that by putting me alone in his studio he had recreated the fascinated ecstasy I had enjoyed as a schoolboy visiting alone the Philadelphia Museum of Art, a five-minute walk from my front door when I was growing up and a place I stopped into about two times a week for four years on my walks to and from Drexel University. It was invigorating to be in direct touch with Jake's art this intimately, and to be so near the source of the creation of art that would last and endure. Driving the nearly sixty miles home that night in the high-summer dark, redolent with the fragrance of grass, flowers, fully bloomed trees, and maturing crops, I felt highly privileged and almost unbelievably blessed.

CHAPTER FOUR

After my first visit with Jake my mind was alive with the power of having seen his latest work in the privacy of his studio, alone and in silent contemplation. The experience was even more mystical than my drop-in visits to the Philadelphia Museum of Art had been on the walks to and from Drexel University in the late sixties. On those walks I would enter the museum at the back, just above the Fairmount Water Works, and Mrs. McCleary, a neighbor and the cashier, would always wink and wave me through. As a small boy on my first visit to the museum with my father, my brother Jimmy and my sister Margie, on a cold gray January day, I had been paralyzed by Rubens's *Prometheus* on the second floor, where the windows looked out across the East River Drive and Pennsylvania Avenue to the red-tiled steeple of our parish church, St. Francis Xavier. The Reubens painting had so disturbed me that I had nightmares. Unaware of the mythology behind the painting, my father could explain only that the angry eagle was pulling the man's liver from his wounded side, but not any of the classical reasons behind this action: the punishment of Prometheus for having brought the fire of intellect to humankind.

By the time I attended Drexel, I had moved beyond staring bug-eyed and terrified at *Prometheus* and would study hard, in total serenity, depending on my mood, the modern collection on the first floor or the riveting Eakins paintings on the second floor, especially his rowers and boxers. On the first floor, the soft focus but inclusive and discerning vision of Cezanne could hold me for thirty minutes studying a single painting. I had learned to study a single painting this closely from reading *A Moveable Feast* shortly after its publication a few years earlier, and the habit has stayed with me ever since. I find it emblematic of the twentieth century, and especially of its

massive discontents and abominable crimes against humanity, that Hitler trotted through the entire Louvre in forty minutes on his one visit to occupied Paris while the black Daimler idled at the curb outside, surrounded by his motorcycle escort of SS paladins clad in black leather. My intense college-days sessions studying a single painting were of the utmost value to me: Before psychotherapy saved me, studying art kept me sane.

The first visit to Jake and his studio did the same. It so galvanized me that I resolved to write about it. It so happened that a week earlier my friend Paul Smart and I had arranged to attend the Tri-City Valley Cats game against the Lowell Spinners up in Troy at the Joe Bruno Stadium on Sunday, July 5, only two days after my first visit to Jake. The game was a sellout and Paul and his son Milo and I had standing-room-only tickets. So we retreated during the early innings to the refreshment pavilion above the stands and sat on tall wooden stools arranged around giant empty beer barrels. From there we heard, more than saw, the game. That's when I told Paul about the transformative experience of visiting Jake's studio. Paul edits several local newspapers and said if I wrote a thousand words on the visit he'd try to publish it. I did, he did, and the article appeared in the *Shawangunk Journal* at the end of July while I was lounging on a Rhode Island beach and scrambling in the rough surf to avoid a broken spine, since we were beyond the giant breakwater known as Long Island. That article basically forms the first chapter of this book.

When I got back from Rhode Island to the Hudson Valley, I hustled to the post office to send hard copy of the article to Jake. I hadn't realized Paul had already published it. Two days later I called Jake to apologize for not telling him about the article and to make sure he had received the hard copy I'd sent. He had already read the article in the newspaper and was amused that I was so out of it. More than that he was delighted with the article and got a special thrill because the other big article on the front page featured his good buddy Roswell Rudd, a neighbor and a jazz legend then appearing at the Shadowland Theatre

in Ellenville. All I felt was relief. Before he hung up, Jake said he had something to show me in the studio and arranged a visit.

When I got there about a week later Jake was zooming. The great thing about my visits all summer was that Jake's health was holding out. The leukemia, though not officially in remission, was at bay and manageable. Jake had grown tired of the exhaustion involved in sustained chemotherapy and so had aborted the regime. Instead, he was trying some natural remedy and, so far, it was working. After our usual warm-up chat on the screened porch, with the red tea from India, Jake was eager to get me out to the studio: "I started and finished a new one, a small one," he said, "and I can't wait for you to see it."

The session in the studio expanded. Jake brought out a number of paintings done over the winter and I spotted immediately how transitional they were to the two paintings I had written about. These transitional paintings formed a natural bridge from the work in the fall 2013 show to his latest two paintings. All of this intermediate work had the force and impact of the drawings and paintings from the 2013 show but, more than that, they also had been whittled to bare essentials only just shy of the completely purged and pure-essence-only state of *Coming Morning* and *Night, Wood, and Rock*. In the transitional works traces of the artist and his artistry still lingered. In *Coming Morning* and *Night, Wood, and Rock* such maker's marks were indiscernible: The artist had completely disappeared because the works themselves subsumed the separate existence of the artist.

At the end of my previous studio visit, when we were sitting side by side in the tall director's chairs studying the two paintings, *Coming Morning* and *Night, Wood, and Rock* that hung on the white wall in front of us, I mentioned that all allegorical elements had been effaced in these two works. I remarked that there was no narrative. That's when Jake made the trenchant comment: "The narrative is in the service of nature, not in the service of me." I then remarked that the shadowy hints of German romanticism scarcely detectable in the fall 2013 works had receded here completely. I mentioned that any sense

of dread was gone. Jake said: “There is a void, but not an abyss.” As usual, he had clarified things precisely.

We sat awhile without talking. Finally I told him that the transitional works had also achieved a type of stasis. They had tension and radiated energy, but they ginned no anxiety and induced no stress. I told him how affected I was by the way his palette moved toward the plain as his brush gravitated toward the mystical. He had reduced his range of colors but invested those left with disconcerting subtlety, the muted tones almost invidiously intrusive. These paintings invaded the viewer, they took you over. At first they upset you, but in the end they left you whole—more than that, they left you enhanced. They were like aesthetic muggers who never moved a muscle yet left you enriched by the psychic tossing they inflicted on you. I told Jake I thought his work had crested, that all the sweat and effort of a lifetime of exploration, experiment, and learning had coalesced for him. That was something every artist sought and few attained. I told him how impressed and happy I was for him.

He shucked this commentary off with a grin, then said: “I haven’t even shown you the one I brought you out here to see.” He hopped down from the tall director’s chair and retreated to a small storage area and worktable to the left. He rumbled a few canvases and drawings on cardboard and extracted a small canvas about a foot square. Holding it against his body with its back to me, he concealed it completely until he reached the wall, took down both transitional paintings still hanging there, and then installed the small square canvas all on its own, spot-lit and showcased. He stepped back, smiled, and hop-stepped to his perch beside me.

The painting on the wall was every bit the match for *Coming Morning* and *Night, Wood, and Rock*. In muted browns and tans and eggshell shades of white, it featured only a skull staring—sightless—straight ahead into time and space and all eternity. Startling in its simplicity, disturbing in its starkness, serene in its finality and aggressive in its self-possession, it was a refined and rarified talisman to the fate

that awaits everyone. As unsettling as it was, it yet breathed inspiration into you. It almost enunciated this dictum: *Though I never figured out life I lived it well and so can you. Do the one thing you want to do and do it all the way.* This small and simple skull painting was as silently articulate as the Great Sphinx. It spoke volumes about living your life to the fullest while in scorching pursuit of your passion.

After staring at this forceful and eloquent painting for twenty minutes I hopped down from the chair and went up and stood staring at it from inches away, moving from side to side before stationing myself in front. After another few minutes I turned and said, “This is magnificent...a virtual skull sonnet.”

“That’s it,” Jake said. “That’s the title: *Skull Sonnet.*”



Skull (Sonnet), 2014, oil on linen on panel, 10 5/8 x 8 1/2 inches
The Phillips Collection, Washington D.C.

CHAPTER FIVE

Like me Jake was subject to enthusiasms. He liked the title *Skull Sonnet* so much that he became animated and playful. He had this jaunty side that was as charming and effective as swagger in a great athlete or vanity in a great actor. He knew just how and when to apply it. He never took it too far or applied it at the wrong time. He usually combined it with a mischievous and impish delight in making people happy through his generosity. Like our mutual friend John Lees he had the makings of a fine actor: the voice, the range of expression, and the adaptability. So, with a rapid and weird collage of facial expressions—a winning grin, a hasty sneer, and a quick frown—he told me I had an assignment before we could go out to dinner. I knew he was channeling his teaching style; he had taught college courses for years at the School of Visual Arts, at Cooper Union, and at the Studio School, all in Manhattan; and, for a decade, at Yale University's renowned School of Art up in New Haven.

"You have to pick out a drawing," he said.

"Jake, that's not necessary. Your stuff's worth too much money."

"I want you to have it and that's it."

I made one more demurrer and then I saw the formidable side of this mostly gentle and dedicated artist. With a will as strong as tempered steel he insisted I had to pick out a drawing and that was it. There was an unspoken "or else" quality to his insistence and, even battling leukemia, he had remnants of the physically formidable man he had been. He still had a physicality and a fierceness about him that when he was younger must have been intimidating, radiating energy as he always did, even now. Farm work as a boy had strengthened him and during his lean years as a struggling artist in Manhattan with a wife and child to support he had done heavy construction work,

mostly installing drywall. He had recently stopped the chemo regime and his strength was surging. He had simply decided to try alternative medicine and he wasn't enervated by chemo poisoning his body and attacking all his cells, both healthy and carcinogenic. By being back in his studio and producing art he felt strong again and exhilarated. He knew his mind and did not like to be balked, as I would find out again a few months later when the leukemia waxed and his strength waned: weakened then, he was nevertheless formidable.

"Come with me," he said. He walked away from the far end of the studio and went to a large, roughhewn workbench just within the entrance, opposite the guest bedroom he had installed off to one side. He reached under the workbench to a series of vertical storage shelves and extracted a large black portfolio. This he placed on the workbench and opened to reveal a large stack of drawings. He stood them on edge and shuffled them the way you straighten playing cards, only these were much larger, about two by three feet. Then he gave me a stern look and said, "Now we go through these slowly and you pick one, and I'm not going to answer questions or help you in any way. *You* have to decide."

I looked at him and started to say something, but he cut me off with "Got it?" It wasn't a question. It was an assertion.

I nodded.

As he turned the drawings for my inspection, panic hit me. They were all superb and I didn't know what to do. He saw this in my face and said, "Remember, *you* gotta decide, not *me*."

"I wish you'd just pick one and give it to me. They're all stunning and I'd be happy with any of them."

"That's not the way it's going to be. Now take your time. Narrow it down. Then we'll go through the pile of possibilities."

"Did you do all these here in the studio?"

"No questions, no answers. But just this one time: I did them in here or out in the woods near here." Saying this he pointed out the big picture windows on the outside wall of the studio, showing the woods

lining the property and the moss-encrusted stone wall defining the boundary. Beyond lay thick woods.

Almost every drawing featured trees or mountains. They were all in one way or another related to the monumental works he had done for the 2013 fall show, or they were clear outgrowths of that show, just like the two paintings he had shown me on my first two visits. They were also like the devastatingly exquisite *Skull Sonnet* we had just spent about forty minutes discussing after I had studied it alone for a good twenty minutes. Great art accelerates your metabolism but, paradoxically, leaves your mind preternaturally calm, all stillness and reflection, and unable to think quickly or clearly. Jake had told me on my second visit that “music takes place over time but alters space; painting takes place in space but alters time.” On first hearing this I didn’t get it. But reviewing powerful drawing after powerful drawing, I did get it. At the center of my swirling panic of indecision, time expanded; it had elasticity and expanded the more I panicked at my indecision. I had known that art had transcendent powers since my first visit to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, shepherded by my father and accompanied by my siblings, on that cold January day in the mid-fifties. And I had relearned it every time since when I had seen great art, whether in museums or galleries or in my wife’s studio out back behind our house.

I knew Jake was testing me and I didn’t want to flop. I whittled the choices down to five drawings out of what must have been forty-odd. Two were mountainscapes and three were treescapes. Just like the ones I’d eliminated, the five finalists were all excellent. Any one would do, as any of the forty-odd would have. I asked to see the candidates again, with Jake turning the five finalists slowly and telling me to take my time. I sweated and fretted and couldn’t decide. I am usually decisive nearly to a fault, so I was growing angry with myself for waffling. Like most artists Jake had great antennae. When I let the silence linger too long, he stepped in.

“Let’s go get dinner and you think about it,” he said. “I gotta show you this burger joint.”

On my first visit we had sat on the screened porch for quite a while talking about writing and painting. He had read my memoir about my drinking and our dog, and how the dog had helped cure this malady; an affliction, really. He had liked the boozing memoir and this triggered a discussion of my sports memoir about following the Yale men's basketball team as a kind of virtual coach. He had asked to see a copy and I sent him one. He read it quickly and now on this third visit he was excited that I had sampled the hamburgers at Louis' Lunch, the legendary little *boite* on the edge of the Yale campus where the hamburger was invented in the late nineteenth century. In the book I described how Louis' hamburgers were cooked like toast in these ancient iron gas ovens, the meat patties suspended vertically between heated filaments on either side. Jake then said that, like me, he was a hamburger freak and, while teaching at Yale, had sampled Louis' burgers and loved them. That's why we had to go out this evening and get these fabulous burgers at a country place he loved only a short drive away.

So off we drove in his Toyota Yaris with him at the wheel. I was always confused in driving back off the main roads to his place. It was deep in the bosky woods and there were cuts and intersections, driveways, forks in the road, offshoots, and narrow, rutted dirt lanes branching off haphazardly in all directions. Getting lost was easy, and I had done it several times, especially at night, but also, a few times, during the day. The roads formed a maze. When we got to the end of the driveway that evening, he went in the opposite direction to the approach I knew to his house and studio. He whipped around curves and talked all the while, and it was all high-summer beautiful, that great fullness of greenery you get before what the Romans called *Estival*, their fifth season, the one between high summer and early fall that occurs from the middle of August to the beginning of October. I told Jake about the five seasons the Romans had and, as I knew he would, he got it right away, and we talked about it, as attuned to nature as he was. In *Estival* the trees turn a heavy, darker green and the sunlight

begins to have that early autumn crystalline clearness as colder air moves down from Canada and the humidity haze from the south lifts. Besides turning a darker green, many leaves develop a tan outline at their tips, not yet turning fully brown, and the sunlight starts to slant down at a raked angle rather than beat straight down from overhead. Stout breezes also riffle the leaves and make the swaying trees sough.

While we nattered away about this natural phenomenon, suddenly disaster struck when Jake whipped the car into a large gravel parking lot off the main road we had taken since we cleared the woods. On a slight rise above the parking lot stood an old-fashioned clapboard country inn painted a light taupe. On the near side, it featured a big glassed-in porch for dining. Immediately Jake snapped, "Damn. It's closed." With the parking lot empty it was a conclusion I should have drawn too. But in my excitement I hadn't. I didn't want it to be true. I very much wanted to try the burgers. We sat there immersed in deep disappointment and crestfallen silence.

Finally, Jake sighed and said, "Well, what should we do?"

"Is there any other place to get a good hamburger?" I asked.

"Not like this place. Not that I can think of."

"Then I think we should just go back to Stone Ridge and dive into the sushi joint."

"Okay, but I really wanted you to taste the burgers here."

"Believe me, Jake, I'm disappointed too."

He turned the wheels and out of the parking lot we zoomed. When we got to the sushi restaurant we had our usual Kamikazes and the usual conversation, about painting and poetry and books recently read, all punctuated with lots of humor. Then Jake looked at me and said, "Did you make up your mind about the drawings yet?"

"Not really."

"Well, don't worry about it. I know what one you're going to take. I've always known."

I believed him. He was so sensitive it was palpable. His sensitivity tipped into being psychic. That can make you uncomfortable. It's eerie.

As soon as we got back we went straight into his studio. He stopped at the big workbench with the portfolio of drawings. “Let’s look at them one more time,” he said. He was enjoying himself. He extracted pleasure from little things. I liked that about him and was trying to learn to do that very thing myself. As he turned the five final drawings I knew I wanted the sketch of the single mountain, as much as I liked the three treescapes and the single drawing of a crescent of mountains surrounding a valley. I simply liked the single mountain more. Jake looked at me with a huge grin that said it all: He *had* known all along which one I’d take. I didn’t even go into it, I just grinned back at him.

“How am I going to get it home without bending it?” was all I could think to say.

“I’m going to wrap it, idiot.”

He stepped away and went into a storage area and came out with two big pieces of sturdy white cardboard. After putting them down on the workbench, he grabbed a pair of big scissors, more like shears, and went to work rapidly and dexterously. I love to watch artists work with their hands. They are so adept and sure-handed and smooth. My wife has this quality. I marvel at it all the time, klutz that I am. Even with his right wrist in the black brace, Jake had flawless dexterity in abundance. Within minutes, using thick white packing tape, he had made a strong but makeshift portfolio. He even made protective corner triangles for the drawing with heavy paper so it wouldn’t be crimped or bent in transit. He taped and sealed the whole thing and we put it carefully in the trunk of my car before going back into the house for a tea for him and a coffee for me. We sat in the living area and he asked about other books I’d written. When I told him about this goofy parody of *Spy* magazine I’d done years ago, titled *Sty*, he said he’d like a copy of that too. I told him I’d dig one out of the attic and mail it to him. Not the least of Jake’s charming qualities was his ability to focus on other people’s attempts to make art. I’m sure it accounted for his enormous popularity among his former students. That’s why a good number of them had visited him lately.

When it grew late I left, giddy that I had got to know him so well in so short a time. I was overjoyed that he was back on form and working in his studio. It was the one thing he wanted to do, the only thing, as he had told me several times the previous month when he spoke of how the chemo had drained his energy and sapped his will all through the winter and into late spring. I was delighted to see him get his wish to work with renewed energy and forcefulness in his studio, his sanctuary. He was again a dedicated artist of talent and drive back in his element producing first-rate work. To witness it imparted a strength and determination to me that I started to think should be widely shared. That was all I thought about on the long ride home, the back of my mind working full bore, but obliquely.

CHAPTER SIX

Things went along well for Jake for the next six weeks or so. I visited him in late August, right before Labor Day, and then again about two weeks later. Each time at his suggestion I picked up food and brought it to the house. We would talk for an hour or a little more and then visit the studio. Jake was pleased that he was again able to work in his studio, even though he had down days when his energy flagged and he spent most of the day reading or napping, in his reading chair or sprawled in bed. Always when I got there he showed me the paintings he had worked on since my last visit. Like Cezanne, whose biography by Alex Danchev he was reading, Jake was an artist who revisited his work constantly, reshaping and refining it to perfection. Cezanne was notorious for this too. He would even visit the houses of collectors who had bought his work and retouch a painting as it hung on the wall. When the collectors returned home they would know he had been there by the smell of wet paint. Jake refined his work with the same compulsion to finish it completely, to add the final touch, that little brushstroke that rendered all elements of the work integral, complete, fully consummated, that final dab that said, “There. That’s it. You got it.” Acoustical engineers call this state of affairs—every sound in perfect balance, all music in perfect harmony—“hitting the center of the doughnut,” and that’s what Jake wanted his paintings and drawings to achieve, that same state of serene completeness and total integration.

Of the many things I envy painters, that kind of freedom and control is major among them: They don’t have people interfering with or changing their work, a fate writers almost always suffer. I never told Jake this but Yeats was compulsive too. He refined his poetry over and over, getting it exactly as he wanted it in its final iteration. Like

Cezanne retouching his paintings hanging on collectors' walls, Yeats continued to refine his poems even after they had appeared initially in print. He would polish them for later, updated publications. Of course this compulsion could be dangerous. Marianne Moore had ruined her work when this very same compulsion turned pathological. She had the equivalent of literary OCD and mangled her poems with such sweeping cuts that virtually nothing was left. The final iterations were skeletal, mutilated wrecks of the splendid poems they had been. Happily, one can still enjoy the beautiful versions as originally published. This impulse to destroy one's work is a form of insecurity and self-loathing, a form of fatal dissatisfaction that most artists and writers feel; yet to act on these negative emotions to the point of destroying one's work is pathological.

At any rate, on this visit after Labor Day, I went to the studio with Jake and he showed me his latest touchups and re-dos on his recent work. I noticed that he had refined even the two masterworks I had written about in the newspaper article, even though he had pronounced the dialogue complete with at least one of them, the smaller *Night, Wood, and Rock*. I liked that Jake was an endless tinkerer. Tinkering confirmed the inventive side of any artist. It served as proof against complacency. It affirmed that the quest while one was alive was endless and without resolution. But thank the stars that Jake didn't take it to the catastrophic point Marianne Moore did.

When we returned from the studio we yammered a bit more and then he reheated the food I'd brought and we chowed down. We ate in the kitchen at a roughhewn oak table that was as unpretentious as a two-by-four. There were many stories and anecdotes Jake had told me from our very first meeting and I got him to revisit them. I wanted every nuance. I didn't yet know why I was pumping for details but within weeks I would know. Probably because I had expressed my unqualified admiration for Matisse's Rosary Chapel in my original letter to him after his triumphant fall 2013 show, Jake, provocative like all great teachers, told me now over dinner, for the second time, that

“Picasso drank the wine to get drunk. Matisse drank it for the vintage.” Obviously he preferred Picasso’s protean approach to making art—his freewheeling reinventions of himself, his style ever altering, his passion never diminished, his ambition never fulfilled—to the fully rendered and perfected consistency and precision of Matisse. Picasso was chaotic and mercurial, Matisse calm and contained. One was combustible, the other constant.

On this issue I never made up my mind. My wife favors Matisse and she’s no fool. Yet I see no reason to choose between them, liking the work of each as much as I do. On my part this duality is predictable. When pressed, I identify my two favorite American painters as Jackson Pollock and Edward Hopper. Contradictory it may seem, but it’s not. When I told this once to my friend Paul Oppenheimer, who has written a distinguished biography of Rubens among many other estimable books, both fiction and nonfiction, he said, without missing a beat, “Pollock for the inner chaos and psychic pain, Hopper for the outward serenity masking the inner loneliness and alienation.” As the British say, Paul “got it in one.” I also like Thomas Eakins and Franz Kline, both for disciplined precision, Eakins in the service of visual phenomena and Kline in the service of psychic noumena. So you can see why I don’t feel compelled on the Picasso/Matisse divide to jump to either side. Jake, though, was a Picasso guy.

I remember at that time I was reading a memoir by Philip Guston’s daughter, Musa Mayer, titled *Night Studio*. I mentioned this to Jake and told him that for years my wife had urged me to read it if for no other reason than Guston’s often quoted advice in the book to banish the critic from the studio in order to do the work one was born to do. This incomparable advice applies to all creative work, whether in the plastic arts, in literature, in music, in the theatre, or in movies. When a mental chorus of discordant and hypercritical voices is prattling away in your head, it is hard to concentrate your mind, heart, soul, and sensibility on what you are trying to “make.” Creating is very different from, and much more difficult than, commenting upon and

categorizing that which has been created. Creating is a vital and visceral function, an internal battle with one's own potential, an always humbling and usually painful struggle. Criticizing and commenting is a passive and solely cerebral process that serves as a consolation prize for would-be creative people who have suffered paralysis or collapse when faced with the artist's eternal challenge, that existential dare that, if flubbed, can lead to another species of paralysis: clinical depression, the spirit's version of maximum entropy.

Guston understood that artistic challenge—the arresting dare—and commented on it emphatically and, to his own peril, also commented on the pusillanimous response of critics to it. By that point in his career, a whole raft of critics had already pummeled him for abandoning abstract expressionism because he found its strictures too limiting for his artistic needs and his aesthetic vision when the late sixties rolled around. Even fellow artists got into this ritualistic and sadistic beat-down, many of them longtime friends of his. They jumped on the critical juggernaut with caustic appraisals, dismissing Guston's later works. This is a big mistake. The later work is glorious: playfully profound, painfully disturbing, and insouciantly jaunty. No one looking at the three Nazis in the jalopy can fail to see the huge merit in Guston's later work, especially against the draconian American political atmosphere of the late sixties and early seventies, with the Southeast Asian debacle raging and first LBJ, and then Milhouse Nixon—in company with their henchmen and accomplices—rolling around Washington like a latter-day Reich elite. Guston's friend Philip Roth had a great go at these political brigands and madmen in his cutting and hilarious send up, *Our Gang*.

Jake had known Guston and his daughter slightly. He had also read her book and, as I talked about its impact on me, he agreed, saying he loved Guston for being a maverick and for doing what he wanted to do, whether in accord with current art fashion and theory or not. He liked all of Guston's work, both the early abstract expressionist work and the later representational work. I spoke of how I empathized with

Guston's insomnia and his need for solitude and isolation to do his work. Hence, his night crawler existence. It was a lot like my own when my insomnia got out of hand. And I too, when I had good flow, liked to write deep into the night and often right on into the morning. Jake said he was much the same. He talked of how he would read the night away late when he couldn't sleep, despite exhaustion, over the course of his battle with leukemia and especially in the enervating but anxiety-prompting aftermath of the chemo treatments; he added that he had always liked to work late into the night on his artwork, especially when much younger and in good health, when he would paint the night through in his studio, alone and energized, his nerves keyed to unlock his creative powers, to drive them to a peak. He then told me again another thing Guston had said, a favorite of Jake's: that if a Rembrandt masterpiece sat on the edge of a cliff and hordes of people rushed by and hurled themselves over the cliff to their death, the Rembrandt wouldn't care. He had told me this quote before and each time, as now, I visualized first the Pied Piper and the rats going over the cliff and then Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis as Thelma and Louise nose-diving into the Grand Canyon in their turquoise Thunderbird convertible; and finally, as a third follow-up, I visualized a series of cartoon characters, like the Roadrunner, having miscalculated the remaining terrain in front of them, going off a cliff and air-running in pure space preparatory to the big and painful plunge back to earth. Such is the power of popular myth, movie culture, and cartoon comedy. I loved this Guston quote's visual triggers, its pictorial vigor. Like Jake, I also knew Guston was right yet again. I too find the arctic indifference of great art a reassuring earnest of its permanence.

I love stories of museum and gallery hopping, and when we had finished dinner, after Jake supervised the washing and putting away of dirty pots and dishes, we moved over to the living area and I got him to tell me again a true beauty of an anecdote in this vein to ensure that I had the nuances right. Years ago, before MOMA's renovation and expansion, Jake visited and climbed to the second floor to the abstract

expressionist room. He wanted to study Ad Reinhardt's black monochromatic masterpiece. For a while he stood gazing at the painting, letting it work on him. As he did this, out of the corner of his eye he noticed a woman staring at him in what appeared to be consternation. Ignoring her, Jake continued to concentrate on the painting. He had been doing this for about ten more silent minutes when suddenly he noticed the woman standing beside him. When he turned to her, she snapped, accusatorily, outrage in every syllable, "What *are* you doing?"

"I'm studying this painting."

"*How?* What does it mean?"

"I don't know what it means."

"Then why are you staring at it so long? *What* are you studying?"

"I'm enjoying it."

Fuming, she frowned, turned heel, sighed, and left.

When I asked Jake what her problem was, he said she couldn't "surrender control" to the painting.

"How do you mean that?"

"She couldn't say, as with the painting of an apple, 'My son could paint a better apple than that.' She didn't get the painting at all. She didn't let it in. She didn't let it take her over."

Jake laughed at this memory and I did too. He saw endless humor in this anecdote, and every time I think back on it, even now, I do too.

For about another hour or a little more, he talked about various books he was reading and how sustaining he found them, especially the poetry of Wallace Stevens. He said he couldn't stop reading it late into the night. I said that was because Stevens was so obsessed with rendering accurate states of being and consciousness in his poems. Jake said all he knew was that he found great comfort and solace in reading them. I mentioned that's why Stevens in his letters expressed such admiration for Hemingway's uncanny facility in this regard, especially in the early stories, where states of being and consciousness are so sharply etched.

Then, when She-Gray came closer and flopped on the floor in front of Jake, we talked, as she slept at his feet, about our mutual love of cats. This prompted him to tell me about a book on cats he'd recently read by John Bradshaw called *Cat Sense*. I told him funny stories of things Cleo, our rescue cat, routinely did to me, especially late at night, like walking back and forth across my keyboard till I gave her a twenty-minute rubdown and a kibble treat before she repaired to her favorite corner and curled up asleep. I said she was a nine-pound dominatrix with a will of steel and we laughed at how quirky and determined female cats could be.

When Jake paused, I told him, faced with the long drive home, that I had to get going. He held up his index finger, said, "Wait a minute," and went to a tall bookcase. After a brief search, he plucked a book from a high shelf. He came back, handed it to me and said, "You'll really enjoy this." It was *Cat Sense*.

As I left, I felt buoyant, the way Jake always left me feeling. But I also felt an ominous undercurrent of discomfort—not quite dread, not quite yet—because I feared that Jake's energy and strength were being challenged by his corrupted blood cells in a way they hadn't been for the last two and a half months of our lively and, because of him, endlessly entertaining and instructive visits.

CHAPTER SEVEN

My premonition was right. Not only did Jake have health issues over the next four weeks but so did I. I came down with a bad cold I couldn't shake and my business commitments also picked up. As a result I couldn't visit him for a good stretch. Finally we talked on the phone the night of September 21 and it wasn't good. He was in the dumps because his energy had flagged and I was in the throes of the cold, sneezing and snuffling and afflicted with all the other unpleasant side effects of the flu, despite having got my flu shot and my pneumonia shot, something I have to be vigilant about as a diabetic. But this flu kept recurring. Just when I thought I had it licked, it would rebound and lay me low again. I had been expected to visit Jake that day at about six o'clock and to bring dinner. It had all been arranged days ago. But sick in bed again, I had overslept. So I called as soon as I got up at six-thirty—a full hour and a half after I should have been there. I apologized and explained that I still had a bad cold, that it had bounced back on me. Jake said he could hear it in my voice and not to worry about it. He said let's just talk a bit.

I told him I was rolling around in my mind the emblematic story he had told me about the teacher in high school who called on him to comment on a poem read aloud in class. Jake had made an arcane but on-the-nose comment about the meaning and significance of the poem, and the class had laughed. The teacher told them to stop laughing and said flatly, "Jake is a poet." Jake himself—a teen at the time—was knocked back by this comment but didn't realize its prophetic accuracy. *Poet* in Greek means *maker* and for all his life Jake was essentially that, a maker. That was one of the major things about him that had riveted me for the past three months. He was the quintessential working artist, a pure maker of things.

Before I could tell him any of this he said, “Things are bad here. I have no energy. I don’t want this life. I can’t even go into my studio. My life has no purpose.”

Without being a Pollyanna I disagreed. “You don’t know, Jake, your strength will probably wax and wane. You’ll have to wait it out when it wanes. I told you about my two friends fighting back against cancer and more than holding their own. Their strength goes up and down too.” This was true. Both these women friends faced steep odds yet battled back as hard as courageous human beings possibly could. Neither would accept that her disease had to be fatal. One was in her late seventies, the other in her early twenties. This didn’t matter. Each had suffered through multiple treatments. Each was willing to try anything to effect a permanent cure and not just induce a state of remission. Each wanted to prolong her life as long as possible. They stayed with experimental chemo trials and kept making it, holding the fort gallantly.

Jake countered my pep talk by saying something he’d already told me: that he had stopped chemo and changed to a natural cure because chemo wiped him out entirely for long, long stretches. He added that he wasn’t having any more of that.

He paused and I said nothing. Then he added: “At least this way I get to go into my studio once in a while. But even when I do I’m so tired I can’t last more than an hour.”

I said, “Jake, remember the first day out on the porch back in July when I told you I passed through Rockefeller Center and they had that damn flowered puppy monstrosity by Jeff Koons on display above the ice rink.”

He laughed and said, “Yeah.”

“Remember how I told you I wouldn’t trade that glorious tiny pencil sketch by Picasso for that giant kitschy canine.” In 1983 I had seen in the Picasso Museum in Barcelona, right off the Ramblas, a tiny self-portrait done by Picasso at age sixteen in simple pencil that I had never forgotten. I had stood before it transfixed, studying it,

marveling at its simplicity and its reverberative beauty, its delicate profundity, wondering all the while how anybody could do something that gorgeous at only age sixteen.

“So what’s the point?” Jake asked.

“The point is to work small. If you can’t go to the studio, sit quietly and draw in your reading chair. I know your feelings on Matisse and his drinking only for the vintage, but he also kept working even up in years when his brushes had to be taped to his hands. You can do it.”

“Yeah, right.”

“How about when we talked about how much I liked John Lees’ little sketches in those home-made sketchbooks of his?”

“So?”

“So when we talked about John’s sketchbooks and I asked if you had any, you pulled out those wonderful little sketchbooks of yours. They were terrific. Remember how I told you the erotic drawings in them reminded me of the erotic drawings by Picasso in that museum in Antibes?”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“You’re the one who told me ‘scale’ is so large now because art is hyped as ‘commodity,’ correct?”

“That’s the truth.”

“So work small. It’s the act of creation that counts, not the size of the so-called ‘product.’”

“But I’m so tired.”

“You’re having a down day.”

“I’m having a lot of them.”

“Your whole life is about creation. No sense in changing the habit of a lifetime now, no?”

“Why are you so involved with this?”

“Because I know who you are. At least I know who you are to me. And I’ve made a decision about it.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m going to write a short book about you.”

“Based on what?”

“Based on the way you dedicated your whole life to one thing: the creation of your artwork. The way you stuck to it. The way it was everything and the only thing to you.”

“Get out of here.”

“You represent for me the supremacy of ‘doing’ over ‘talking.’ You and I have discussed the emptiness of theory for three months now. You personify that great statement by Pollock: ‘Put up or shut up.’ I love that statement and John Lees loves it too.”

“So do I.”

“Okay, so that’s what I’m going to do, write about you.”

There was a long pause. Then he said, “Today I didn’t even have the energy to get out of bed.”

I said nothing.

“Things here are just getting bad,” he muttered. He then added that he had to put the phone down to check on his dinner, which he said was heating on the stove. This made me feel guilty that I was sick and hadn’t been able to drive down the nearly sixty miles and pick up a good dinner at the Davenport Farm market in Stone Ridge about six miles from his house. I had picked up our dinner the last few times I’d visited, and we had eaten healthily and well because Jake knew all the best places to get really good food, almost always organic. The Davenport Farm market was at the top of the list. I came to rely on it when Jake was no longer mobile enough to drive to a restaurant.

When he came back on the line, I told him I hated to miss our visit and I was sorry I hadn’t brought us dinner.

“Forget it. I wasn’t up for a visit anyway.”

We signed off and I felt another stab of chagrin over being down with a cold when I should have been visiting him. Jake’s great friend Verna Gillis, who lived with partner Roswell Rudd, had volunteered to organize Jake’s schedule of visitors, who were many and enthusiastic, so I didn’t know when I could next get a time to visit. I fretted that it would take weeks to reschedule me. I also regretted that I hadn’t

kept more notes on our earlier conversations; but, then again, I hadn't thought of doing a book on Jake until that week. On top of all this useless mental torment, I felt the anxiety one always feels after declaring the intention to write a book. Jake had summed this angst up using a painter's terms on my first visit on July 3 when he said, "Starting a painting to me is like being told you have to cut the lawn with a pair of cuticle scissors."

I had cracked up laughing at this line and told him that in my unpublished novel titled "Worry Later" I had written that starting a book was like being assigned to paint Churchill Downs with a mascara brush. My friend, the Scottish novelist and memoirist Campbell Armstrong, had liked that line so much he promised to steal it. As it turned out, Campbell died before he could. I miss him every day, his bouncy humor and especially his irrepressible fighting spirit when it came to writing, no matter the discouragements coming his way, like bad reviews and scathing and consistent rejections. Mentioning my unpublished novel reminded me that in telling Jake about seeing Koons's silly flowered puppy in Rockefeller Center I had told him about my disappointment the previous year in failing to place for publication in book form my seventy-fifth anniversary tribute to Rockefeller Center. This setback conjured the prospect of next failing to get my projected homage to Jake himself published. Then, suddenly, thinking of Jake's energy and courage, I decided down with this line of thought. I needed to take some of my own medicine and press onward. As a guy who wanted to write a book to set Jake's example of undaunted creative courage before the world of aspiring artists and writers, I needed to start by following it myself.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Five days later I did an extremely dumb thing: not an unusual occurrence for me, unfortunately. The back wall of our house in Coxsackie faces west and suffers exposure to the sun and wind much more than the other three sides. The wind zooms down from the Catskill mountains about fifteen miles away and rattles our back windows and can turn the toilet paper roll in the upstairs bathroom into a flimsy pennant, the loose end stretching out and flapping in the breeze. This back wall takes a battering and has to be painted more frequently than the other three. As proof against further deterioration from winter weather, I had decided simply to spot-patch it, and tackle the onerous job of sanding, caulking, priming and repainting the whole wall in the spring. But that Friday of September 26 when I started scraping the bad spots the whole wall morphed into one big bad spot and flaked away in cascades, covering the spruce-blue deck below with light yellow, English Ivory paint chips. By nightfall that day about half the wall was bare wood.

The next morning I worked about two hours and then called it a day. I went up to the refurbished and expanded UAlbany stadium to watch the Great Danes do battle on the gridiron with the visiting Lions of Columbia. I sat through the whole game wondering in the back of my mind why I hadn't listened to my wife and put the entire paint job off till late spring. I knew it was now going to interfere with my ability to see Jake but, then again, Verna Gillis had a long lineup of visitors to schedule and I might not have been able to see him that much anyway. At least this is how I consoled myself for my stupidity as I watched Albany thump Columbia, a sight I didn't enjoy. The Lions are the home team for all Upper West Siders like me. Then again, I loved UAlbany too, as my upstate home team. So it was, emotionally, a push.

As it turned out, with visiting Jake I got lucky. When I had to cancel our

intended meeting on the previous Sunday, September 21, I had asked Verna to give me the next date that opened up, especially if anyone had to cancel. When she emailed me out of the blue and said that Jake was open for a visit on the upcoming Wednesday, October 1, I leaped at the opportunity, especially since I had worked again on the back wall on Sunday and Monday and would again on Tuesday. That was about the maximum intensity I could endure these days when it came to painting clapboard. The short notice was a blessing, not a burden. Wednesday visiting Jake would offer a welcome respite from drudgery, I thought, and as it turned out, I was dead right. It was the best six-hour tutorial I ever took, wrenching, taxing, and relentlessly intense though it was.

“Hey, Jake, it’s Ed. How are you?”

“I’m dying. But you already know that. So why ask?”

“I obviously meant how are you besides dying?”

He laughed.

I said, “Are you up for a visit today? Verna scheduled me and I’d love to see you.”

“Then get down here about four. And bring us dinner.”

“Okay. See you in four hours.”

“Don’t fall off any ladders between now and then.”

“I won’t. I’m taking the day off.”

“Get good food.”

“I will.”

He hung up. Jake loved it that I had foolishly started the paint job on the back of the house and now regretted it. He had a grudging admiration for hard work since he had done so much hard work himself to make his house and studio so simple yet so spiffy, even beautiful when it came to the landscaping and the man-made garden out back that had a Japanese neatness and symmetry—if a bit askew, contradictory as that sounds.

Had I worked on painting our house that day for two hours there's a good chance I would have toppled from a ladder. Whenever I went to see Jake now that his health had declined again, I grew tense and anxious. I would have to steel myself for a visit, much as I wanted to see him, because it was hard to watch him fading away, a condition he always described in these words: "I'm not a human being, I'm just a human." When scheduled to visit him now, I seemed always to tighten up, and often arrived as much as a half hour late from dawdling. No matter what time I arrived in Stone Ridge I always pulled into the Mobil station on Main Street and kidded with the Indian fellows who ran it. Unfailingly polite and friendly, they would smile when I bought my Diet Pepsi and a doughnut or a bar of candy, not a good move for a diabetic but a tranquilizer nonetheless—if only, in reality, a comfort-food placebo. Either snack would soothe my nerves and settle my spirit until Jake could work his massive charm and render me oblivious to his deteriorating condition.

For the past several months, whenever I drove out route 202 toward Stone Ridge, I would pass a weathered white clapboard church on the right, spotted with bare gray patches where the paint had peeled, but sporting a rustic wooden sign out front that held this message: "Life is fragile. Handle with prayer." This healthful recommendation I was unable to follow; I simply didn't have the faith to embrace it, though I had been subject to a creeping spiritualism for the past decade.

At Jake's that day the visit started inauspiciously. Ten days earlier when I came down with a cold and called him that Sunday night to apologize for being a no-show, having spent the day under the covers in bed, he told me in detail how discouraged he was and how he saw no point to his life anymore. He also told me not to sweat missing our visit that day because "Today I didn't even have the energy to get out of bed. Things here are just getting bad." He had then put the phone down to check on his dinner, heating on the stove, and I had felt lousy all over again that I hadn't been there to pick up a good dinner for us. I pictured him throwing together the odd soup and some leftovers,

and I didn't like that lonely image at all. When he came back on the line I apologized again for our lost visit, and he said that his dinner was ready and not to worry about our busted plans because he "wasn't up to a visit today."

Being too cheerful and positive around the seriously ill and possibly dying is a despicable practice I can never bring myself to indulge. You couldn't do it around Jake anyway. He would call you out and spotlight your asininity by playing your hollow homilies back at you. Then, channeling the Socratic method—the teacher in him rushing to the fore—he would ask you what purpose your positive but palliative words could possibly serve. You'd feel an inch high.

Except for this: I had told him about that remarkable friend of mine, a tough and beautiful little Israeli woman bursting with the life force and the wisdom so many Jewish people admirably demonstrate. Given only six months to live after she came down with double myeloma seven years ago, she had battled back with inexhaustible energy and impregnable positive thinking, even as she lost many productive days to the crippling aftereffects of experimental chemo trials. I had also told him about that other gallant friend of mine, a sort of honorary niece who had fought back against refractive Hodgkin's lymphoma for six years. Diagnosed while still only a sophomore in college, she had endured radiation treatments and experimental chemo trials and their devastating side effects and aftereffects, including gastrointestinal misery on a major scale. Yet she always battled back and had graduated college with her original class. These days she holds down a prestigious job with a high-tech company in midtown Manhattan. Being around both these stouthearted women had changed my mind on the futility of fighting back against deadly strains of cancer, and I hoped their stories would have the same positive impact on Jake.

Sometimes, hearing about them, he perked up; other times he didn't. Mentioning them was an iffy gambit. This day he wouldn't have it, I felt sure, so I bit back my impulse to cheerlead against the Distinguished Visitor, as Henry James referred to impending death, and

instead to simply let Jake vent for a while longer. That's how our visit started so slowly, with him being relentlessly negative and struggling mentally in a painful way I found hard to watch and listen to. His lack of energy and its ability to prevent him from going to his studio and making art was his personal purgatory right here on earth. Whenever he stated how excruciating this state of affairs was, I knew he was the greatest teacher I'd ever been around: For him art made life possible; without art he saw no point in living. It was as simple as that. Making art for him was as existentially basic and life enabling as breathing. It was the baseline that his entire being was built on. Life without engaging in the always heroic act of trying to make art was for Jake merely flat-lining, a form of being brain- and soul-dead with only the pointless pulsing of your heart to furnish the backbeat to your despair. When he repeated again and again that day that he didn't want to live "this life," I knew what a fool I was to waste any of my precious writing time on doubt and depression—or, for that matter, to waste any precious non-writing time in any way other than in play and recreation with those you loved.

After Jake muttered this negative mantra again I decided to divert him. I reviewed stories he had told me to make certain I had them right. Like many writers I detest tape recorders and consider making notes while talking to someone a form of rudeness only slightly less annoying than talking over someone or aborting a good conversation to take cell phone calls. I also wanted to actualize Jake somehow, to prime his motor before I hit the ignition and fired his storytelling engine. With patience I knew I could get him going, despite his pain and despair. So we reviewed the story of the woman irritated with him in MOMA in front of the all-black Ad Reinhardt painting. Then he recapped the Philip Guston remark about the indifference a Rembrandt masterpiece sitting on a cliff would display to people hurling themselves over the cliff to their death. Next I struck gold when I asked him to retell the story of the teacher who upbraided the class when Jake raised his hand, while still only a schoolboy, and explained

what a poem meant. Offbeat and bizarre, the explanation caused the class to break out into mocking laughter. That's when the teacher intervened, rebuked Jake's classmates, and informed them that he was "a poet." Even hearing this story for a third time I broke into a smile, and, seeing this, so did Jake.

By then an hour had passed and I was hungry. But I knew Jake wasn't yet focused on food. So, even though I could smell the food sitting on the oak table in the kitchen area, I asked him how his son's visit had been the past weekend. You could always light Jake up by inquiring how his son was, especially because son John is a really talented photographer. This time was no different. There was a big bonus as well. John had borrowed a friend's vintage Mercedes and driven up from the city. Like my wife Lynn, Jake could startle me with what he noticed visually. Painters are amazing this way. Jake then told me how much fun he'd had while John visited for three days. He launched from there into a tiny aria about how beautiful the vintage Mercedes had been. He was especially delighted that the car had featured the old upright emblem on the hood, the three-pronged star encased in a circle and supported by a thin steel column. This particular car had been built in Germany the last year before the automaker opened its U.S. plant. Since then, according to Jake, the hood ornament on the cars built here has been embedded horizontally rather than mounted vertically, the way he preferred it. As always, he had noticed a tiny visual detail.

The very same thing had happened on my second visit back in July. I had worn an old black polo shirt with a big magenta bleach stain on the shoulder. Jake spotted it immediately and asked me how it got there. I explained that I had bleached the deck at our house because we had a barbecue planned and the deck had been stained with mildew. I used a bucket of bleach and a scrubbing brush with a long handle to remove the mildew. When I took a break from scrubbing I absentmindedly touched the brush and then scratched my shoulder. That's when the bleach on my hand dyed the shirt. Jake didn't care for

these details. He thought only that the magenta was beautiful. He said I had improved the shirt. We were sitting on the screened porch at the time and he said that at first he thought the stain was a sunspot. He loved it that this happy aesthetic accident had occurred instead. The point is, he missed nothing visually.

He was just as keen mentally, and I knew I had to continue to tread carefully in trying to jolly him out of his funk. You couldn't manipulate him, not that I wanted to: he was always several jumps ahead of you, even if the black cloud of depression hung over him. But right then my hunger was getting the better of me, and I was relieved when he suggested we heat up our food. We went over to the kitchen area and soon he had our roast chicken parts and broccoli—both in reheatable round aluminum tins—shoved into the oven and filling the room with a hunger-stimulating aroma.

We went back to the sitting area and I asked what the electric keyboard and a set of snare drums were doing sitting behind the futon couch. This ignited him all the way. He was out of the dark mental woods and zooming at the prospect of regaling me with every detail of a visit he'd had a few nights earlier with Roswell Rudd and Verna Gillis, his great friends. At the mention of Verna, I said guiltily that I had brought along some good chocolate but had been unable to find fruit-flavored sodas, per Verna's instructions. Verna's touching concern for Jake reinforced his exhilaration, but he said not to worry: he didn't care a hoot about the fruit-flavored drinks. What he desperately wanted to tell me about was the enormous thrill he'd had playing his old snare drums with a musician as accomplished and legendary as jazz wizard Roswell.

Things now were really looking up. But I had no idea how great the rest of this visit would turn out to be. My stomach was doing somersaults from hunger, so I was delighted when Jake pulled the chicken parts and broccoli from the oven, got us both a cold glass of ice water, then added some rice, wrapped in tin foil, he had heated in the oven as well. As per his instructions, on the way to his house I had

stopped at the Davenport Farm market and picked up the exact food he wanted. As always it was plain, tasty, freshly prepared, and totally restorative. And, of course, organic.

As I tucked into my grub, he started to regale me with stories. He was off the snide and back on his game, lost in joy because he had jammed with Roswell, noodling and woodshedding, as jazz musicians refer to experimenting and practicing on their instruments. He told me playing music had triggered memories from years ago, when in high school and as a young painter struggling in New York he had relaxed by playing music with friends, all of them, like him, only amateur musicians but professional enthusiasts when it came to this hobby. He was spinning now, into the glory of art and energy and the ecstasy of life when fully lived. I was relieved and happy and just as into his enthusiasm as he was, maybe because someone once told me that the word *enthusiasm* derived from the Greek word for God.

CHAPTER NINE

As we ate dinner Jake reveled in his musicianship and his great thrill at playing the drums with a professional at Roswell's lofty level, filling me in on every detail of their recent jam session. The whole time I listened curiosity niggled at the back of my mind because I focused on John Lees and his gag gift for Jake. No two friends have had a more salutary effect on my life than have John Lees and his wife Ruth Leonard. Their unwavering, quiet, and unegotistical commitment to making art has inspired me for years. It has also lifted me out of not a few crippling bouts of depression and helped me to hold despair at bay until I could rally my mind and heart to work again, to write despite the gargoyle of doubt perched on my shoulder and whispering discouraging words into my ear, mostly negative self-assessments reinforced by heaps of rejection letters piling up in my study. Anyway, for about the last two weeks John and I had tried to work our schedules so I could pick up a gag gift he had for Jake and hand-deliver it. But we had failed to mesh our schedules and John had mailed the gift instead. Whenever I asked John what the gift was he chuckled and said, "You'll see." This was now the source of the curiosity niggling away at the back of my mind, wondering what this crazy gift was.

I had promised John that as soon as I got to Jake's I'd ask if the gift had arrived. I did and Jake grinned and said he'd show it to me later. So now as Jake eased down from the natural high of talking about jamming with Roswell, I asked again what the gift was. He jumped up and said he'd get it. He went over to his long work table on the far wall, with all the great drawings taped above it, and came back to the kitchen table and plopped down a brick with a wire sticking out, about the length and girth of a wire hanger cut in half. Looking at it I wondered whether it was some kind of insider Duchamp thing, a

sophisticated backhanded joke about a found object as a work of art. My thinking ran all in the wrong vein. John had made this brick as a memento of a trip he and Jake had taken to Assisi to see the Giotto's back when they had taught at Nick Carone's International School of Art in Montecastello, Italy, about seventeen years earlier.

When the two hatched their plan to drive to Assisi, one of their favorite students, a talented young woman named Lucy MacGillis, said, "You two are driving to Assisi...*by yourselves?*" She was utterly incredulous.

"Yes."

"I'll pray for you," she told them.

Such were John's and Jake's reputations for eccentricity and practical incompetence. As it turned out, Lucy MacGillis knew something. They drove to Assisi without incident and spent hours looking at the great Giotto murals. They even had a good lunch and a pleasant stroll around that picturesque hilltop town with the central square overlooking the rolling valley with the Umbrian hills in the distance. But disaster struck when they decided to retrieve their rental car and head back to Montecastello. They could not remember how to get back to the narrow alleyway that led down a steep hill to the parking lot on the outskirts of town where they had left the car. As a result, for about an hour they wandered all over town. Then Jake's visual genius saved them: he really did miss nothing visually. Spotting a brick with a protruding wire a few steps down an alleyway as they passed the entrance, he hollered, "That's the brick we passed when we walked up from the parking lot." He was right. They walked down the alleyway to the bottom of the hill, where, in the distance, they spied the parking lot with their rental car. They made it back to the art school that night, somewhat later than they had planned, but intact.

When Jake filled me in on all the comic details of this escapade, I found myself every bit as amused as he was while picturing them wasting time searching for a car, like two vagabonds instead of two talented artists. Jake then told me how much he loved John and Ruth

and how good he thought they were as serious painters. Years earlier he had helped Ruth get in a show at the Samuel Dorsky Gallery in New Paltz, and for years John and Jake had both showed at Betty Cuninghams's fabulous gallery on East Twenty-fifth Street near the Meat Packing District. They still showed at Betty's smart new gallery and annex on Rivington Street on the Lower East Side. They'd been friends for decades.

Eccentric himself, Jake found John's eccentricity refreshing. When one of John's foibles got him embroiled in a contretemps at the International School, Jake had helped to smooth things over and settle matters down. Jake was amused by John's foibles, not annoyed by them. I'm the same way. Charm was coined to describe a man as polished and beguiling as John Lees. Jake also praised John for his disdain for over-elaborated art theory and criticism, especially as a guide to one's own work, an opinion they shared, as do I. Typically, in this very sense, Jake had wryly characterized the International School of Art as "a way for rich American art students to have wine at lunch."

One lasting memory I have from that summer when they both taught in Italy is John returning Stateside and describing the Italian men in an Umbrian trattoria watching Mike Tyson losing on television to Evander Holyfield in a championship boxing match when abruptly the frustrated Tyson bit Holyfield's ear to stop the fight on a disqualification. One of the men at the bar immediately turned away from the wall-mounted TV and announced to the room in general a single descriptive word: "*Animale!*" Even today, all these years later, when John and I see something horrible in public, we turn to each other and say, "*Animale.*" John, of course, the superior thespian, gives the better, the more inflected and animated, impression.

As we finished eating I took heart in Jake's lightened mood when he told me how dull he was finding the middle sections of Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*. On a previous visit I had spotted an old paperback edition of the book on Jake's reading table and we had discussed it briefly, Jake mentioning that it was not holding up well for

him. I said that the beginning was a 600-word masterpiece of compressed writing in the service of foreboding and the creation of mood rendered perfectly, but that the novel tailed off badly and sharply and became a juvenile and not very interesting romantic fantasy. Jake roared with laughter when I told him that years back a British book had appeared listing novels the authors could do without and *A Farewell to Arms* had been near the top of their list. I asked if Jake had read the dreadful rowing-to-freedom scene on Lake Como and he said he had. I remarked that it held some of the worst dialogue ever written. Then I told him I could never read it without thinking of the scene in *The Rocky and Bullwinkle Show* where Boris and Natasha are in a rowboat and Natasha, as usual, is stuck doing all the work, rowing madly while Boris sits idly in the back. When Natasha asks when Boris is going to row his share, since they had agreed beforehand to split the rowing chore down the middle, clever Boris replies, "Soon, but your half is bigger than mine."

I remarked to Jake that I liked to point out to beginning writers the hot messes made even by geniuses of Hemingway's stature. Even though he was a giant of American literature, Hemingway wrote some really bad books, misshapen and vapid. Then again, Bruce Chatwin's comment was also true that even when Hemingway missed he was worth reading anyway, just for the flashes of brilliant prose. I felt the same way about Martin Scorsese, the artist I most admire in my generation. It's wonderfully encouraging to see a genius of his towering stature produce a miss as off-target as his *The Last Temptation of Christ* or, for that matter, *New York, New York*; *Gangs of New York*; and *The Departed*. Such misses are incompatible with immortal works like *Who's That Knocking at My Door*, *Mean Streets*, *Raging Bull*, *Goodfellas*, and the documentary, *Italianamerican*. When as a beginner you see titans like these two artists miss, you are reminded how hard it is to do well what you too aspire to do. That is, everybody misses sometimes. Even Shakespeare is insipid and silly at times. So: You can't be too hard on yourself, especially at the beginning of your quest to

make art and, especially—even later after some successes—when you too mess one up. Jake said that when teaching he always told his students things along this line to encourage them and make them daring instead of daunted.

For dessert he pulled out three delicious oatmeal cookies and we shared them while I did the dishes quickly—as usual, under his close supervision. Jake had definite places where he wanted washed dishes strained and dry dishes stored in the cabinets. I liked that he stayed on top of his everyday chores, even if by proxy, and that he kept his place in good shape even though housecleaning wasn't at the forefront of his mind these days. As I washed the dishes he told me more about what it was like to teach art in Umbria and how he and John had become better friends by being thrown together there.

Then, when I finished the dishes, we moved back to the sitting area and, spying a little mannequin of a ballerina sitting on the windowsill at the far side of the room, I asked Jake again about the days when he traveled an hour and a half from Brooklyn to nearly the top of the Bronx to work at Macy's branch store as a window dresser. This was in the days when Jake struggled to do his art while holding down a job that would sustain him and his first wife, Ginny MacKenzie, and their toddler son, John. Jake had grown fascinated with this ballerina mannequin and, with the help of coworkers, sneaked it out the back door and brought it home to his studio. For all these years he'd kept it and whenever I asked about it, which I did then for the second time, he told me how he'd heisted it. He loved the memory of how clever and stealthy he'd been. I asked if he'd liked the mannequin as a possible still-life model to draw, but he just shucked this off with a giggle and said the tiny ballerina had simply fascinated him. It even had a little crinoline skirt and tiny black ballet slippers. Jumping to the wrong conclusions as usual, the first time I spotted it I had been thinking Degas—literal cretin that I often am, but I had kept the thought to myself. When I mentioned Degas this time, Jake frowned.

So I changed the subject and remarked how much I liked his country lifestyle. I told him I found it just like Thoreau's in the cabin at Walden Pond, but with the feel of a downtown New York loft instead. I liked that Jake had no cable and used his TV only as a closed circuit medium to watch old movies on DVDs, and that he had no cell phone and no computer. He was not digitally wired in, and I said how much I liked the solitude his lifestyle gave him. Solitude, I knew, was essential to getting your work done. On one of our very early visits I joked that I had considered starting Left-Out as a countervailing service to Linked-In. Left-Out would be for people who wanted undisturbed time to do their creative work. The trouble now was that the mention of the word *loft* brought a forlorn look to Jake's face.

"Yeah, I know what you're saying, but I miss my New York loft. These days I wish I was back on the Bowery, especially late at night. It gets too lonely here."

"I've always found the country lonelier than the city," I added. "Then again, I'm a city guy. Anyway, how'd you get your loft on the Bowery?"

"Through a crazy character named Jack Klein. There ought to be a statue of him. He helped so many artists in the early days."

"When Soho was still called Hell's Hundred Acres?" On an early visit Jake had told me that was the original name for Soho when artists first colonized the abandoned factory district in the late sixties.

"Yeah, he was fabulous before downtown became fashionable. When artists still lived illegally in their lofts and pulled the curtains at night. Before it all went to hell in a hand basket and turned into high-end boutiques."

"So he got you the place on the Bowery?"

"Me and hundreds of other artists. He was in charge of real estate for the Lions Club. He was a total character, a guy who could really move around, wheeling and dealing. But the thing was, as good as he was at real estate, Jack was better at taking care of artists. He would get you a space—a really good space—but you always had to understand

that you might have to move out on really short notice. Of course, when that happened, he lined up another space for you, but it was always the same deal: You had to be ready to haul ass if he suddenly needed your space. The thing was, he was so big-hearted and generous to artists, yet crafty as hell as a businessman.”

“Was he in the Lions?”

“No. He just managed their real estate. They’re a charitable and philanthropic organization and they’ve been helping out down on the Bowery for years and years. They’re known for it.”

He paused and stared straight ahead wistfully, then said: “He was the best. My loft was the best. I wish I could be there now. My friends used to drop in all the time. We had great visits, great late-night sessions. Talk, talk, talk. Fun, fun, fun. Art twenty-four-seven, art all the time.”

“You’ve got friends visiting all the time here. These days I’ve got to make an appointment to see you.”

“It’s not the same as the city.”

“Nothing’s the same as the city. You know that Tony Bennett remark: ‘When you leave New York, you’re outta town.’”

“It gets lonely here at night, reading away in silence.”

“But you love literature.”

“I *loved* that loft.”

“Why’d you give it up?”

“I *didn’t*. I lost it in the divorce to Kristin, my second wife.”

“Tell me about it. Tell me about those days, and about the really early days too. Romance equals finance, again, huh, with the loft?”

He frowned. Way back on my second visit he told me he had to watch his shekels carefully. He added that his last show, the one I loved and wrote him about, hadn’t sold as well as he’d hoped. Money was tight everywhere, so it was no surprise that Jake too had to be careful with a buck these days. Ever since the economic collapse of 2008 we were in a depression, but the Orwellian governmental euphemism was, at first, a recession, now recently elevated, after seven years

of misery, to the Great Recession. All the arts were hurting badly, but as the old Italians in Philly always said, with total resignation, when I was growing up, about any situation where things went wrong and you were powerless, “Whattaya gonna do?”

Jake said, “You can read all about the early days in my first wife’s novel, *Living With Gypsies*. Ginny wrote all about it, but I can’t read it. I just don’t want to. I’m told I don’t come off too well in it.”

Ginny was Jake’s talented first wife who had reinforced and fortified his interests in poetry and literature. She was responsible for his fondness for the words of her former mentor, William Packard, a New York City legend as poet, teacher, and commentator on the arts, especially poetry. Since Jake had first mentioned Packard on my initial visit, I had Googled him. Besides his other accomplishments, Packard had founded and edited, for over thirty years, until his death in 2002, the most influential poetry magazine of its time, *The New York Quarterly*. He also wrote plays, screenplays, and a celebrated novel, *Saturday Night at San Marcos*, a send up, bless his heart, of the literary scene. Through Ginny, Packard had passed along to Jake the saying he liked so much: “art had to fill you up.”

Back in the summer when I looked up Packard and found good stuff on him, Jake had asked to see it. To my everlasting chagrin, I forgot to print it out and bring it to him. This thoughtless oversight didn’t occur to me until just now writing this passage, and it causes me pain, and will for a long time to come. Yet my dialogue with Jake over this whole extended period of visits is the conversational equivalent of such a rich, delicious, variegated and unforgettable bouillabaisse that there is nothing fishy about my forgetting yet another ingredient that could have spiced it even more. But what makes this oversight worse on my part is that I was at Harper & Row when we published Packard’s book, *The Poet’s Dictionary*, which I read and enjoyed and have here in my bookcase in the country next to my reading chair. So goes it with memory gaps, I suppose, as I grow older and more distracted and less attentive to outside developments the

more my inner life intensifies. At any rate the minute Jake mentioned Ginny's novel I made a mental note to track down a copy and read it.

"She must be an interesting woman, Ginny. She must have had a great influence on you."

"She did. She was terrific."

"How did you meet?"

"She was my high school sweetheart."

For a minute Jake got a sad and wistful look on his face. Then he suddenly lit up and told me how Ginny was writing poetry even back in those high school days in Clearfield, in central Pennsylvania, and how she knew about cultural events they could attend. Then he told me with a big smile how they had driven one time to State College, not too far from Clearfield, to see an exhibit at the Penn State campus art gallery. That gallery hosted traveling shows that Jake and Ginny often attended. But one time they did this was monumentally influential. It was for a show of abstract expressionists full of all the New York art stars of the fifties. He remembered seeing Rothkos, Klines, and, especially, Pollocks. He and Ginny were so filled up with art, as poet Packard would have said, that they drove home and went into Jake's grandparents' barn and found a large piece of cardboard. They grabbed some paint and some of Jake's brushes—since he had already started painting and drawing as far back as a toddler—and walked out into a field and created together, with Ginny in the lead role, their own "action painting," an imitation of, and homage to, Jackson Pollock, painted right there in a Pennsylvania cow pasture by two kids in love with each other and with the arts. While retelling this story the reminiscential excitement in Jake's voice was palpable. His smile flashed and his eyes lit up. Mine did too, and he loved that I loved it. "What an image," I said, and we both started to laugh at the frantic image of them doing this. I told him it was one of the best autobiographical vignettes I'd ever heard: immensely significant—seminal even—as well as comical and inspirational, all at the same time.

I next asked Jake about his grandparents and what it was like

growing up in Clearfield. He went over again to his worktable against the wall and came back with a handful of snap shots from the forties and fifties. They had scalloped edges and that high glossy finish that fifties cameras gave you, imparting a murky, shadowy quality to the shots. Time had faded them as well, increasing their lack of clarity. Probably they were taken with a Kodak of some kind, a household camera. There was a great shot of the farmhouse and the fields sprawling away behind it with mountains in the distance. There were shots of his grandmother and grandfather, strong, stout Pennsylvanians of Scots-Irish descent, his grandfather burly and well muscled, wearing big workman's suspenders on his blocky dungarees, and his grandmother substantial, a bit plump in her print dress, both in their mid-fifties or thereabouts. Then there was a shot of Jake at about age three sitting on a horse with his mother standing in front and holding the reins while facing the camera. She is what they called in those days "a nice looking tomato." Her face is gorgeous and her body all Betty Grable provocative and erotic, a handsomely built woman, what they also called in those long-gone World War II days, "whistle bait." I mentioned to Jake that she was a real beauty and asked about her.

He told me she was away all the time, doing war work in a factory down near Harrisburg, in Lancaster or York maybe, I think he said. His father was away doing service in the war. He said his grandparents really raised him. His memories of them were vivid, based on deep fondness. He then told me another five-star anecdote. When he was really young he liked to draw with a pencil. He would do this on scraps of brown wrapping paper and on flattened brown paper bags and sometimes on hunks of cardboard. His grandmother would always encourage him. One day he showed her a drawing and she said, "You can do better than that. Make it fuller. Put in some shadows and some shading." He took the drawing back and did exactly that. The improvement was remarkable and his grandmother praised the drawing and asked him a question. "Johnny," she said, "what's the worst sin anyone can commit in life?"

“I don’t know.”

His grandmother then asked and answered a series of rhetorical questions, supplying the answers like Socrates.

She said, “Is it lying?”

(Pause) “No, it isn’t lying.”

“Is it stealing?”

(Pause) “No, it isn’t stealing.”

“Is it murder?”

(Pause) “No, it isn’t murder.”

His grandmother looked at him in silence.

“I just don’t know,” he admitted again.

“Well,” his grandmother said, “I’m going to tell you. The worst sin you can commit in life is to waste the talent God gave you. So you have to keep trying to get better at your drawing. You have a real talent. So don’t waste it.”

This admonition he never forgot. In fact it spurred him on his entire life. As for his grandmother’s advice on shadows and shading, he said it was “the best art lesson I ever got.”

CHAPTER TEN

“Goddamnit, you *are* a real writer.”

Jake was irritated with me. But it didn't matter. His words will sustain and encourage me the rest of my life. As he snapped this welcome assessment, his voice started to quaver. He leaned forward in his reading chair and stared at me hard. I think in retrospect he was debating whether to answer my question about his father or just clam up. Finally he said: “I never really knew my father.” Then he stopped. He continued to lean forward toward me and glared for what seemed like minutes but was likely, in reality, only twenty seconds or so. As I mentioned, he was formidable and his glare could unnerve you.

Without further prompting, he told me his father was away in the war and when he returned Stateside he and Jake's mother couldn't get along. There was strife and his dad couldn't stop drinking. Listening, I thought: Another combat veteran of World War II who had delayed traumatic stress disease that went completely unacknowledged and therefore undiagnosed and untreated in those benighted days. My own father, a real hero with a silver star, a purple heart, and a projected, but canceled, parade and bond tour with Martha Raye to show for it, suffered from the same disease.

“I only remember this one incident,” Jake said. “I was in the house with my grandmother and I saw my father walk up the road toward our house. Before I knew it my grandfather came out of the barn and stopped him. He cut him off and shoved him. They had words and started to fight. I saw my grandfather beat him up and throw him on a pile of junk, a burn pile. Then my grandfather walked away. As I watched, my father just sprawled there on the pile. Then after a few minutes he got up and walked away, stumbling, lurching forward and clutching his arm. My grandfather had broken my father's arm in

the tussle. My grandfather didn't like him for laying his hands on my mother, his adored daughter, in anger." Jake's voice had broken and he said, choking out the words, fighting back tears, "So there. Now you know all I know about my father."

"I'm sorry your dad had such a rough time, and that it spilled over and impacted you so hard."

"Yeah."

"A lot of WWII vets were messed up, but nobody paid any attention back then. It's not like now when psychological help is more available and guys are less reluctant to avail themselves of help."

There was a silence, a long one. Then I asked: "Was the horse in the picture with your mom a farm horse, a plow horse?"

His mood spun one-eighty. He smiled and said the horse was named Nellie and she was a favorite of his. She did work all the time on the farm, doing everything, working year-round and nearly always six days a week. He extolled her virtues and said she would always give him rides when one of the adults put him on her back and walked around the yard with him imagining himself a cowboy. "Did you ever read that poem by Donald Hall about horses? I love it. I love his poetry. Would you like to hear it?"

"Yes." I would have listened to Jake read the want ads in a newspaper.

He rapidly sorted through the books on the end table next to his reading chair and pulled out a copy of *Selected Poems of Donald Hall*. He flipped through the book but couldn't find the poem, so he went back to the front, found the page number, and rifled the pages until he came to it. "It's called *Names of Horses*," he said. In his excitement he didn't even pause to scan the poem to prepare himself and refresh his memory. He jumped straight into the reading and, before he finished about ten lines, his voice started to tremble; after about ten more lines, the tremble morphed into a quaver. I was mesmerized. Jake pressed on, stumbling on a few words. Then, as he got to the last few stanzas, where Hall listed the names of the horses he'd known on his family

farm in New Hampshire as a boy, Jake started to cry at the mention of “Nellie,” the exact same name his horse had on his grandparents’ farm in central Pennsylvania. He struggled gallantly and got the whole poem out, though his face was streaked with tears by the finish, and his voice had cracked several times over the last few lines describing the euthanization of the horse and its burial.

I didn’t say a word as Jake collected himself. I just looked straight ahead.

Finally, he looked up and said, “I loved that horse. I *lived* this poem. When I was still small enough to sit on my grandmother’s lap we heard the shotgun blast in the barn when Nellie had to be put down. I can still remember every detail of it, the silence of a country Sunday, and then the blast ringing out. I watched them drag her across the yard and take her for burial in the fields. I loved that horse so much I never got over it. And never will.”

I asked a few clarifying questions and Jake snapped, “I’m not going to answer these questions. You should’ve listened harder. Pay more attention.”

He was pissed at me. Neither of us said a word. We just sat there. I had just heard the most dramatic, disconcerting, and unforgettable reading of a poem I will likely ever be privileged to hear. I wanted to hear him read the poem again, but my compassion canceled my selfish eagerness. Reading it once had taken everything Jake had. I couldn’t put him through that again.

After a few minutes, I finally said, “If there’s one thing I can understand, it’s the trauma of having to put down an animal you love. That was a big part of writing about losing our dog. And at the time I was fifty-nine years old, not a toddler, the way you were when you lost Nellie. You never get over it, losing an animal you’re crazy about.”

Just as he had with Wallace Stevens, Jake talked then about how much he loved to read Donald Hall late at night. At a glance I could see that this was true. His copy of the selected poems was well thumbed and the dust jacket heavily scuffed. I told him I admired Hall a great

deal and that he had been a wonderful influence in college, when in the yearlong poetry class I took we had used Hall's anthology called *Poetry in English*, compiled with co-author Warren Taylor. I used to read from it to my future wife when we started dating as undergraduates and I still have it on my bookshelf next to my reading chair in the country. When I can't get started writing and all else fails I often reach for this book. It too is well thumbed and the cover is heavily worn, though as a textbook it has no dust jacket. Sometimes reading just *Westron Winde*, *When Will Thou Blow* can get me back on track and on the keyboard. I told Jake this and also mentioned a great little anthology of modern American poetry Hall had done that I had a paperback copy of; it too was terrific. I told Jake the reason I found Hall so good was that he was a writer first and a critic second, the same way Randall Jarrell and Edmund Wilson were. They wrote about the work of others with firsthand experience of the craft of writing and its difficulties. That's why their evaluations are so accurate and their appreciations so articulate.

I blurted all this to Jake, staccato fashion, and he said, "That's why I agree with you about Rackstraw Downes. His criticism is based on experience too. He's a good painter who writes really well." On one of our earlier visits I had mentioned that I was reading Downes's book, *Nature and Art Are Physical*. I liked that Downes hated groups and schools and movements that homogenized artists and bullied and browbeat them into conformity with heavy-handed theory. That was exactly the way Guston had been bullied and browbeaten by the bruising evangelists of abstract expressionism once he switched his style to an often jocular, but sometimes devastatingly satirical, objective realism. Guston had ventured even further, into outright caricature. A similar thing had happened to Jake when he switched from the purely abstract expressionist idiom to his later work with broody landscapes and faint but discernible objects.

Jake said, "Let's read some more poetry." He read several Donald Hall poems and then took up Stevens' *Collected Poems* and read about

eight of them, for about half an hour. The reading was piquant yet soothing. But, in truth, after the reading of *Names of Horses*, I had a hard time concentrating on these other poems, despite their Olympian excellence. My mind kept drifting back to Jake's childhood traumas witnessing his grandfather pummeling and manhandling his dad, and then having to live through, if only aurally, the shotgun euthanization of his beloved Nellie. Certainly these two incidents explained his dotting love for his son John, and his wish always to be a good father to him. Also, it explained why Jake was so touchingly attached to She-Gray, who was still sound asleep at his feet, encased as they were in large woolen hunting socks and fluffy, dark blue slippers.

It was growing really late, but Jake seemed too stirred up to let go. I knew all about insomnia and I feared Jake had let himself in for a rough night by reliving these wrenching childhood experiences. So when he talked about how much he liked to read Montaigne's essays, I just listened. To my shame I hadn't read these essays since my college days. I remembered how skillful and brilliant they were, how intelligent and reflective, and I marveled again at the serious literature many painters read, the way Jake and John Lees did. John's love for the poems of Ezra Pound and his obsession with Pound's *The ABC's of Reading* had led me to reread and discuss them with him. This had been over twenty years ago and I still remember how much I enjoyed it.

Although I didn't want to, I told Jake I had to leave. It was past eleven thirty and I had an eyelash under sixty miles to drive. I'm a night owl and that's no problem, but my night vision is not what it used to be, and I didn't like to compound late-night driving with tiredness. My eyes seemed to fade late at night and my ophthalmologist had told me that I had "the beginnings of cataracts." So, much as I sensed Jake's desire to keep talking, I needed to be realistic and hit the road. As it was I got home at one o'clock.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

When I finally pulled into the driveway that night I just sat there, collecting myself. The whole ride home had been surreal, my preoccupation behind the wheel nearly dangerous. I knew what this feeling was: catharsis, the emotional and psychological state of being completely purged that drama is supposed to give you. I remembered the first time I'd had it after watching a matinee of Harold Pinter's play *The Homecoming* at the Forrest Theatre in Philadelphia on Saturday afternoon, November 11, 1967. That's a big day in my life because I took my wife on our first date that night to the Society Hill Playhouse to watch a production of *Marat/Sade*. At the time I was taking an Introduction to Drama course at Drexel taught by Joel Balsham, a talented teacher. He encouraged us to attend as many plays while taking the course as we could afford. So I saw two that day. I also fell in love with my wife. That made for a pretty big day.

After seeing *The Homecoming* I walked home up the Parkway and felt so strange I couldn't fully accommodate the stunned and drained feeling I had. In high school we'd been taught about catharsis but I thought it was pretentious baloney served up by the elite. Never again did I think that. Watching Vivien Merchant and Robert Shaw on stage had just changed all that. We had already read Pinter's *The Caretaker* for class discussion, monitored by Joel Balsham, and I'd been fascinated, but it had not prepared me for what happened that damp and drizzly afternoon watching *The Homecoming*. When the play ended I simply sat motionless in my cheap balcony seat. I couldn't bring myself to move. I was so lightheaded I had a vague feeling that if I stood up my legs would buckle. Sitting now in the dark car in our driveway I felt the same enervation and eeriness, the same drained emptiness. I knew again that catharsis was real, not just a phonied-up, elitist concept.

I couldn't stop thinking about my several hours spent with Jake. Clearly it had been healthy for him to unburden himself of childhood traumas, but listening to him had been salutary for me too. He had gone so far beyond small talk or empty chatter—or, for that matter, beyond normal meaningful conversation—that I was going to need hours to get right. When I finally climbed out of the car and went into the house Lynn was in bed, of course, but our dog Henry and our cat Cleo greeted me with the usual animated and affectionate rituals they displayed any time I showed up after being away for a while. Lynn had rescued them both and she referred to them as “our family.” Distracted as I was, I managed to take Henry for a quick leak in the yard before treating him and Cleo to a late-night snack of kibble. Then I went upstairs to my study, still stunned. Cleo hurried up the stairs with me, a late-night habit she has, looking for a rubdown and another treat. First, to calm and distract myself from my obsessive thought patterns, I tried to catch up on the day's sports news on ESPN, a favorite ritual of mine, but I turned off the TV after a short time because I couldn't concentrate. Instead I started to scrawl notes about the day's visit and the subjects covered in our conversations, along with snatches of dialogue.

Doing this I had an inspiration. I Googled Donald Hall's poetry and read *Names of Horses* obsessively, many times out loud. Unlike Jake's highly inflected baritone, my voice is squeaky and high and, though I don't like to inflict it on others, I tolerate it well when reading aloud to myself, which I do all the time with poetry I love and with my own writing when I'm trying to gauge its readability: its cadence, rhythm, and flow. Reading the Hall poem over and over gave me a feel for it I don't believe I'll ever lose. It also prompted flashbacks to Jake and I was able to write some more notes about our charged visit that day. Then, after testing my glucose reading, I went downstairs and got some ice cream, though I shouldn't have, and took it upstairs along with Henry, shushing him to be quiet all the way up the staircase. I then ate more ice cream than I should have

while sitting in my reading chair with Cleo and Henry perched at my feet, cadging little dollops of vanilla ice cream. I told myself again I was committing suicide by sugar, but I needed to calm down and the ice cream would knock me out after a while and I might be able to sleep.

After about an hour of kibitzing with various books of poetry, I did get drowsy from the ice cream. Yet, when I tucked myself into bed, my mind went viral, looping the whole panoply of today's visit. I had terrible premonitions of Jake's health giving out, and I was haunted by a statement he had repeated at least twice: "Why is it I meet a friend like you, who understands me and my work so well, just when I have to die?" This had brought me up short. I doubted the part about my understanding him and his work so well. Then again, I always doubt any compliment. What I knew was: I shared his melancholy over making an everlasting friend you would shortly lose. I tossed and turned pondering death and loss like a medieval monk berserk with negativity, sleeping in his own coffin in his monastery cell as a warm-up for his own demise, testing his resting place for all eternity, getting a feel for the big dirt nap. Obsessed with such thoughts I stared at the ceiling, wide-awake. Mercifully, when the weak autumn pre-dawn light showed in the east-facing bedroom windows, a deep gray giving way to an ashy silver, I finally slipped into sleep.

CHAPTER TWELVE

A long interlude set in that lasted nearly four weeks and consisted of a medley of missed connections and unfortunate contretemps. Jake's health declined further, and my business picked up just as I struggled to finish painting the back wall of our house. On top of this there were rainy days when I couldn't paint. I hated monitoring the weather channel as closely as a Midwestern farmer or a New England sea captain. I ended up juggling my time in the country with my obligations in the city, including nipping down to a Tribeca loft for a memorial service for a close friend of nearly four decades, an old buddy in the book publishing business I had worked with both at Harcourt, Brace and at Warner Books. The memorial service took place on a sunny but chilly and windy late October Sunday. Ironically it was a perfect day for outdoor painting and there wouldn't be many more this late in autumn. That fact, plus having to spend the next few days in the city on business, put me up against the clock with the paint job.

During this interlude in our visits Jake and I had talked a few times on the phone. He was understandably down in the dumps about not being able to get into his studio on too many days. He said his energy just wasn't there. I hated hearing the pain in his voice over having the one great and defining activity of his life taken from him, resulting in a kind of living death. That's how important for him making art was. He told me again there was "no point in living this life" and that some days he was so exhausted he just stayed in bed reading, getting up only to make soup or to relieve himself. Every time he told me this I admonished myself, yet again, not to squander time on trivial pursuits and to ward off depression with an overarching commitment to what I was writing.

Still, I had to see Jake. He would ask me to visit with such urgency

that I had to go, I needed to go, I wanted to go—even if the back wall of the house had only white primer on it through the winter. I could finish the job next spring or summer, I figured. So through the ever-so-caring, ever-so-loving Verna Gillis, I made an appointment to see Jake on Friday, October 24 at five o'clock. The day turned out sunny and bright and I worked about three hours on the back wall of the house before getting ready to drive to Accord.

When I got to Stone Ridge I hurried into the Davenport Farms market and bought us another healthy dinner. Then I went to Jake's and found him slightly down but happy about several recent visits, especially one from a former student and another from an interviewer from Florida who had previously written about him and his work and wanted to again. We talked about some practical things like who he could get to bring in his firewood that winter and other seemingly trivial but actually important things like that. Because he was partially disabled now by his illness, small things such as this took on major importance. Like a lot of people battling cancer he was cold most of the time and so dressed warmly, even indoors. He also had the wood stove going most of the time. I also remember the big, heavy gray socks he always wore though they were designed for hunting outdoors in frigid weather, not for sitting around in a warm cabin. The socks this time had a thick red stripe around the top and were, as always, encased in his huge fluffy slippers, dark blue like mine and no doubt manufactured in China and purchased for pennies, probably from Target or Wal-Mart. When I arrived around five-thirty he again didn't show any interest in the food right away, but I had anticipated this and snacked at the Mobile station in Stone Ridge on a Snickers bar, so I could wait patiently this time.

The conversation wasn't heating up right away, as usual, and I noticed a copy of William Nolan's bestseller from years back, *How We Die*, sitting atop the usual stack of books on his end table. So I wasn't surprised when he fixed me with his facing-down-the-devil stare and said, "I wonder if I'm doing this thing right? Dying, I mean. I have no way of knowing since I never died before, but I don't want to make a mess of it."

This was said with resignation, not self-pity, and not in jest or in irony. For him it was the natural product of his high IQ, his bottomless sensitivity, and his dedication to craftsmanship and the importance of doing a good job in anything and everything he undertook. A stickler for detail and perfection, he really didn't want to get it wrong, the dying business, his final activity on earth. He let a silence hang.

Finally I said, "I'm sure there's no right way to die. And so far as I know you've been exemplary about it. Really admirable."

"Bullshit, I'm complaining all the time."

"You complain about your inability to get to the studio and create art. You don't piss and moan about your lousy disease or your nasty fate in getting it. You don't maunder on about, 'Why me?'"

He pondered this for a while. Then I said: "Did you get into the studio at all recently, even for an hour?"

"A few days I got an hour or less. I did a tiny bit of touch-up, but I always got too tired and came back and read in bed or on the futon, hoping to fall asleep."

"Tell me about the student who came?"

"She was a great kid I taught at SVA a couple years ago."

"Lynn used to teach there too," I added, perhaps inanely.

"I liked teaching at SVA a lot. It was hands-on, relaxed, and informal. And the kids were mostly modest, with their heads on straight."

"The School of Visual Arts had a hands-on and practical orientation right from the start. That's what its founder intended and that's why Lynn thought so much of the place too."

He fell silent. So I asked, "How did it compare to Yale?"

"Yale was good too but more formal, a little up-tight even. But I liked it a whole lot too. I got a lot out of my years there."

"Why'd you leave?"

"It wasn't voluntary. I had a two-year sabbatical and when it ended, they didn't want me back."

I shifted the subject. "Teachers are funny. I went to college before teacher evaluations and grade inflation came in. Back then teachers

were either the greatest or the worst people you ever met. Teachers today can't get away with tyranny and arbitrary treatment. I had some real bastards, especially in graduate school."

"Teachers are sadistic," Jake snapped.

"Yeah, that's what I mean. But today they can't be as imperious and vindictive, and overly personal, the way they could be in those days."

"I always tried to help, to really teach my students something."

"The teachers I had like that are unforgettable."

"Yeah. Teaching's wonderful but it can burn you out. I only liked it when I could still get enough time in my studio. If your teaching schedule gets heavy, it's hell."

"Teachers permanently disappointed in themselves are dangerous. They're given to hero worship in place of their own effort to create. Being chockfull of admiration is a form of paralysis. Naturally this distressing condition prompts them to lash out and ridicule the efforts of others. Students are easy targets, especially when they're starting out trying to learn to make art or music or literature. Teachers then can be scarring monsters."

"I liked what you said about great artists, like Hemingway and Scorsese, also producing great duds. I used to tell my students to jump in, they had nothing to lose but their fondest dreams, their life's ambition, their most ardent passion. In time you see the serious ones plowing on, no matter the criticism, no matter the rejections. But I really believe teachers in the arts need time for their own work. I know I had to have it."

"I only know I wasted too much time thinking you could learn to write by reading when the only way to learn to write is to write. And if a teacher isn't encouraging, that teacher is useless. And, worse, potentially injurious."

"I always told my students to get into their own work and let the work of the greats alone for now. Learn from it, but don't worship it."

We talked more about teaching before Jake surprised me by saying, "Let's eat." We went into the kitchen and he popped the lids of

the aluminum containers holding the food and shoved the topless containers into the oven. We then discussed the visitor from Florida who had interviewed him recently. Jake was pleased by this interview especially because he liked the guy. I was grateful that Jake was getting this kind of critical appreciation at a time when he really needed it to bolster his spirits.

Over dinner he talked more about teaching, then wanted to know about John Lees and Ruth Leonard. I told him they were both well and going along productively with their work, and that John was back teaching one day a week at the Studio School on Eighth Street in the Village. He asked about other mutual friends too. I then mentioned that Lynn and I had gone to the Whitney and seen the Jeff Koons show. I told him how boring, derivative, calculated, plastic and lifeless I had found the work, most of which was oversized, vulgar, ugly, and aimed at people like the brain-dead arrivistes who, half a step less sophisticated, bought things like life-sized stuffed and mounted Kodiak bears in galleries in places like Aspen and Jackson Hole. I also said that what I had read of Koons's artist statements—displayed on the walls, in the vitrines, and on one credenza—was laughably old-hat, pretentious, self-serving, superficial, egotistical and uninteresting, especially the mini-essay titled “The Banality of Evil.” I added that a few days after I saw the show, at a party, I talked to my friend, the sculptor and painter Jerry Orter, who in this early years had been an assistant to Sol Lewitt and was now having his own shows. Jerry had seen the Koons show and had the same reaction I did. He remembered “The Banality of Evil” essay too and said the essay, as well as the whole show, should have been called “The Evil of Banality.” Jake found Jerry's remark highly witty and laughed hard, as I had when Jerry first quipped it to me.

Jake insisted he needed a fuller report on the show. I told him the thing I disliked intensely about Koons's work was its pediatric foundation, with its emphasis on toys and childhood, so sacred to American culture, and so often disfiguring and banal. Artworks as deliberately

cute as Hummel figurines left me cold. To top off all this pediatric rubbish and set it totally in opposition, Koons, a major narcissist, had included some hardcore and totally inane porn. One room, restricted to adult viewing, featured a huge blowup of a super-realistic photograph of a naked Koons with his naked wife, a former porn film star, showing Koons grinning back toward the camera as his glans enters her vagina. Hardcore porn publishers like Bob Guccione and Larry Flynt, as louche as massage parlor proprietors, did this kind of thing infinitely better, so what, I asked Jake, was the point? In answer he laughed. I then mused aloud whether Koons thought he was making social commentary in defense of ignored but important found, commercial or pop art. Jake only chuckled and shook his head again, grinning the whole time. "Bottom line," I said, "Koons's stuff is silly dreck, and I heard it cost nearly \$800,000 in rigging fees to install it. Art these days really is viewed and handled as commodity, no doubt about it. Koons is about marketeering manipulation of consumers, not about aesthetic achievement for art appreciators." Jake just laughed again; he loved when I went off on riffs like this, and was inclined to incite them and then urge me on.

For dessert we each had a Davenport Farms oatmeal cookie with tea. Then I cleaned up, under Jake's supervision, and listened to him reminisce about his early days in New York, especially about Soho when it was still called Hell's Hundred Acres. He told me what a tremendous help to him Ivan Karp had been when his O.K. Harris gallery was booming in the eighties. I remembered the thrill it had been when Lynn's work was included in a group show there around that same time and Karp praised her drawings and said he wished she had enough for an individual show. I told this to Jake and he said it was "typical of Ivan, a generous, big-hearted guy."

Then Jake launched into an anecdote with a Dickensian touch. He had mentioned to Karp one lean year that Christmas was going to be a bit grim and that he wished he could get something terrific for his son, and not just homemade presents. Karp asked what the boy liked. Jake said he was crazy about trains. At the time Jake was showing

with Karp but selling only moderately for low prices in comparison to what his work commanded years later. The next thing Jake knew Karp showed up at his loft a few days before Christmas with a big box from F.A.O. Schwartz. Inside was a complete electric train set. When Jake asked what he could do to repay him, Karp just puffed on his cigar, smiled, and left, wishing him and his family happy holidays.

Jake said he had been lucky his whole career because all his gallery owners had been supportive and generous, just the way Karp had been. He praised Betty Cuninghame for giving him his start in the late sixties when she had her first gallery above Fanelli's, the old Italian bar and restaurant on Prince Street in Soho that was just then becoming famous as an artist hangout in the tradition of Max's Kansas City and the Cedar Bar. After Betty, Karp had been terrific, then David McKee was the same way. Jake was amused that he had come full circle and was now back with Betty. I told him that John Lees liked David McKee and Betty enormously too.

Because I had been browsing *Night Studio* again—the memoir by Musa Mayer about her father, Philip Guston—it clicked in my brain that Philip Guston had shown with David McKee also. So I asked Jake if he and Guston had shown with McKee around the same time.

“Yes,” he said. “And one night I got a really good feeling when Harvey Quaytman and I were invited to dinner by David after an opening for Guston. It was in a restaurant, I think, on the Upper East Side. After dinner Guston wandered over as we were leaving and thanked us for making money for McKee so he could help Guston out financially. This was during the period when Guston was struggling and the critics were kicking his teeth in for abandoning abstract expressionism. A lot of the abstract expressionists were kicking his ass too. So his work wasn't really selling then. Harvey and I were glad to help, though we didn't know we were doing it till he thanked us. Guston was a class act.”

With the dishes and pots done and put away properly, just where Jake wanted them, we moved back over to the sitting area. He told me

that he was reading madly, since, when he couldn't go to the studio, it was the only thing that gave him any sense of accomplishment and also relief from his painful awareness of time slipping away without being able to do anything constructive with it. Then he picked up an old and battered hardcover copy of a book and asked, "Did you ever read *Little Caesar*?"

I said I hadn't but I'd always heard good things about it.

"It's written so clearly and it goes along so easy and fast that it's just wonderful."

"That's because the author was in advertising, right?"

"How do I know?"

"I'm pretty sure he was a big deal in advertising. Those guys usually write plain, strong, and well. Lean, too. And he was writing back when Hammett and Chandler were turning out hardboiled detective novels because Hemingway's influence was really starting to be felt. And a guy Hemingway keyed on as a mentor was Sherwood Anderson, who'd been writing advertising copy in Chicago too, when Hemingway briefly lived there. Anderson also wrote plainly, using short sentences. All of this probably influenced the *Little Caesar* guy. What's his name?"

"Here," Jake said, tossing me the book. "Look at that book. The typeface is so clear, so beautiful. The whole book is beautiful."

I looked and saw that the author was W.R. Burnett, whose name I knew but couldn't bring to mind. And—my years in book publishing showing—I said, "I believe this is an old book club edition." The paper and the binding were not first class, but the typeface was clear and readable, the leading deep and the kerning wide; that is, the space between the lines and the space between the letters made it very easy on the eyes. The battered book had no dust jacket and there was no inside author bio at the back. So I couldn't confirm whether Burnett had been in advertising. I couldn't look it up either; there was no Wi-Fi and Jake had neither a cell phone nor a computer. My own cell phone wouldn't work either without Wi-Fi: we were too far into the woods

without a transmittal tower nearby. In looking at the book I noticed the epigraph and read it twice, then said, "What do you make of this quote from Machiavelli at the front: 'The first law of every being is to preserve itself and live. You sow hemlock, and expect to see ears of corn ripen.'"

Having suffered a brain cramp, I was puzzled by this.

Jake said, "It means what you sow is what you reap. If you do poisonously wrong things you can't expect to be nourished by them. Self-destructive actions end in self-destruction."

"I see," I said, though, still brain cramping, I didn't. I was still off-form from hearing Jake's laments that he couldn't get studio time. So I replayed in my brain his explanation of the book's epigraph. Then I said, "So it's a fancy way of saying that crime doesn't pay."

"That's how I read it."

Feeling like a cretin, I managed to say "Thanks," still not knowing why I was so slow-witted, though a short while later, driving home in the dark, I did know: it was caused by Jake's deteriorating condition and the distraction and pain it was causing me internally. His failing strength and vigor compounded my distress with a brain-jamming rush of negative thoughts and emotions, all intensified by the fear of losing him. Dread just hung over me like a black thunderhead preceding the storm to come. All of this malaise was being signaled to my central nervous system as clearly as ozone signals an imminent and violent thunderstorm. Wanting to escape all these short-circuiting thoughts and emotions, internally I ranted at myself to come off it. Suffering a detachment verging on an out-of-body experience, and trying to fight it off, I heard myself ask, "Did you ever finish Hemingway's *Farewell To Arms*?"

"I lost interest." Then, after a pause, he added: "Maybe I'll go back to it."

I told him to read the early short stories instead, about which Bruce Chatwin had been ecstatic, the way I have been since first reading them in my teens and still am. That got us onto Chatwin. I said that I had

liked enormously Chatwin's collection of essays, mostly old magazine pieces, collected in book form and called *What Am I Doing Here*. Jake said, "Get me a copy. I really need good books to read." I said I would and that I'd also get him a copy of Wolcott Gibbs' *Backward Ran Sentences*, which I had recently read and enjoyed, especially the parody of Hemingway titled *Death in the Rumble Seat*. Of course, the greater the writer, the easier the parody, a form of backhanded praise when done as gently and wittily as Gibbs did it, unlike the envious E.B. White (as seen in his letters), with his barbed and condescending *Across the Street and Into the Grill*. Jake and I agreed that being parodied is always an achievement accorded only major writers. So, if not always a homage, provided the joshing writer is any good, parody is almost always a sign of arrival, achievement, and stature for the writer parodied.

"I've got somebody I want you to read," Jake said. He got up and went to the tall bookcase again. There he searched frantically, and finally came back with a novel by Thomas Bernhard, the highly acclaimed German writer. He ordered me to read it and I said I would. This I haven't yet done, though I hope to eventually, when my sense of loss subsides. Bernhard's novel is called, no kidding, *Extinction*.

When Jake asked for more good books, I told him again how much I had liked *My Lunches with Orson*. He ordered me to send him a copy in his stentorian, a-general-surveying-the-battlefield-through-binoculars way, a mannerism he had that endeared him to me. In the early summer Chris Jacobson at the Strand Bookstore kiosk on the southeast corner of Central Park had tipped me to this book on Welles. Based on interviews by filmmaker Henry Jaglom, and edited and introduced by Peter Biskind, the book was an unputdownable, behind-the-scenes, no-holds-barred look into the mind, heart, and soul of Welles, an endlessly fascinating artist, despite his outsized flaws. After reading the book I had given away about five copies to friends, so adding Jake to that group would be a pleasure.

Jake said: "What else have you read and liked? I need books. I *really, really* need good books to read."

“I’m reading Lydia Davis’s collected stories and they’re indescribably good.”

“Lydia’s a friend of mine. I have first editions she’s given me.”

“You’re kidding. How do you know her?”

“Her husband’s a painter who used to teach at Bard. We’re friends. Come with me.”

He got up from the chair and I followed him into his bedroom. There on a low bookcase he showed me about three or four first editions of Lydia Davis’s books, all signed. I told him they were valuable and he just smiled. I said, “She’s so good it’s ridiculous. I just bought her latest collection. It just came out. You want a copy?”

“Hell yes.”

Above the bookcase hung a large painting that immediately arrested my eye. I said, “Whose painting is that? Yours?”

“Yeah, it’s a favorite. I’ve always kept it.”

“Keep doing that. Don’t sell it.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t. It’s not for sale.”

A broody work, the painting was a medley of mixed colors, all somber, mostly, as I recall, inky black and dark gray with hints of deep green and a splash of silver at its center, representing Jake’s signature, but often faint, source of light. It was mounted on a wooden backing that gave it a rugged feel. I would later learn from Betty Cuninghame that this wooden backing is called a stretcher bar. She also told me the painting was titled *Lovella’s Thing* and had been done in 1969. It adumbrates Jake’s late work with recognizable objects, like skulls and trees and mountains, even though it’s clearly executed more in an abstract expressionist and color field mode. It pleased me when Betty also informed me that it was destined to rest permanently in the Phillips Collection, just like *Night, Wood, and Rock*, and *Skull Sonnet*. For all of them *Lovella’s Thing* serves as a transitional precursor, providing what Jake called a painter’s “hand” or “touch” that proved all his work was integral and related, and that the classification divide between his abstract expressionist and later subtly representational work, the

objective realism, was overstated. For a fact: his entire oeuvre is of a piece.

Jake put the Davis first editions back in the bookcase and we went back out into the living room. He seemed to know everyone upstate who was in the arts. On my first visit he had surprised me by knowing Charley Rosen, whose books on basketball I loved, especially the one about coaching the semi-pro Savannah team and the one about coaching the Division III college team for Bard.

Jake and I spoke desultorily for a few minutes. Then I glanced at my watch. It was nine thirty. "Jake," I said, "I'm sorry to break off the visit, but I gotta get down to Kingston to meet Lynn's bus. It's due in at 10:10."

"Make sure you send me those books and try to come back soon. When I don't see you I miss talking to you."

"Same here."

I had just voiced one of the great understatements of my life.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Come in, come in,” I heard Jake yelling. So I opened the door and went into the living area. He was lying on the futon couch with his feet elevated. This was a sign I hated to see. It meant his feet and ankles were swelling and he was having circulatory problems and, no doubt, overtaxing his heart. I had seen this before, most recently with my mother right before she died in December 2008.

“Sorry I couldn’t come to the door,” he said. “I’ve been feeling really weak all week. The doctor had to rush over here a few days ago. He just can’t believe I’m still alive. I hate staying in bed all day so I’m out here on this couch taking it easy. How was the show?”

“I’ll tell you in a minute. Guess what I saw cross the road about a mile back?”

“A black bear.”

He was ahead of me as usual.

“But when I saw it, I thought it was a large standard poodle at first. Then it loped instead of walked or ran. It crossed the road and crashed into the woods. I drove up to the spot where it dived into the woods and stopped, but I couldn’t see it.”

“They’re faster than you think.”

“But I’d never seen one before except in zoos.” As I talked I became as excited as I had been at seeing it. “It might have been young. It wasn’t fat, not even hefty. Just like a big black standard poodle, but a little bigger.”

Jake laughed and I did too, adding quickly, “It reminded me of the story of you and the bear that kept invading the birdfeeder on the back deck.”

“I hated that greedy bastard. He was eating all the feed the birds needed. I thought I’d never get rid of him.”

“I’m just glad he didn’t go after She-Gray.”

“Me too. So what about the show? How was it?”

“Provocative, disturbing and beautiful,” I said. We had talked on the phone at noon to confirm that he was up for a visit. I had told him I was going to stop off first in Woodstock and see a show by Henrietta Mantooth at the Kleinert Center. It was the last day the show would be up and I very much wanted to see it. I now described the show to him. The theme was America’s brutal treatment of its vast prison population, most of whom were black men subjected to cruel and unusual punishment that was statutorily unconstitutional. Henrietta had poetized and dramatized this theme using caged birds as symbols for the prisoners. Moody and contemplative, the artwork had an unsettling forcefulness to it, almost assaultive in its impact, because all systematized and societally sanctioned forms of abuse, when exposed, invariably are. Staring at Henrietta’s installation for half an hour brought to mind a mesmerizing lunch hour I had spent in MOMA back in the early eighties studying *Guernica* before the museum shipped it permanently to Spain, its rightful place. Anyone who says socially prompted art isn’t valid is a fool. Picasso proved that and so this late fall day did Henrietta Mantooth.

“After the show,” I said, “I skipped across the street to the Golden Notebook and bought Henrietta a copy of Willa Cather’s letters. Her ninetieth birthday is two weeks off.” I had discussed with Jake on one of our earlier visits how helpful Henrietta, a former journalist in her youth, had been with my writing, and how she had told me that Cather, an avid reader, when she finally realized she had to try writing for herself, had remarked, “I decided to stop admiring and start remembering.” It was great advice for all aspiring writers beset with doubt and paralyzed with admiration for their writing heroes, and, as a result, simultaneously setting the bar too high and berating their beginning efforts; eventually, this neurosis leads to a total shutdown. Cather’s remark is a kissing cousin to Guston’s advice to painters to get the critics out of the studio.

Jake said, “There’s nothing like positive reinforcement. I learned that from teaching. Some students at first I thought were hopeless, but I encouraged them anyway. Turns out a lot of them were the best students I ever had.”

“I think everybody deserves a fighting chance in the arts. That’s what Warhol meant with his famous fifteen minutes of fame remark. I also think that’s what the great Gertrude Stein meant when she wrote *Everybody’s Autobiography*. It may even be what Joyce was hinting about when in *Finnegans Wake* he nicknamed his character Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker as a stand-in for Here Comes Everybody.”

“When I taught, I knew everyone sought self-expression, especially in the arts. Even executives seek self-expression, but in business, in accumulating money, toys, power, and prestige. In the arts though, you really see it in its most admirable manifestation. That’s why a teacher’s job is to motivate, not denigrate.”

“What books did you read that I sent you?” I asked.

“I really liked the Welles interviews. He said a lot of things about making art that are good advice whatever you’re trying to do. And the man was funny.”

“John Lees loved it and so did I.”

“That’s easy to understand. It’s full of great stuff.”

“Did you read the Hemingway parody in the Wolcott Gibbs?”

“Yeah, it made me laugh out loud.”

“How about the Lydia Davis?” I had sent a first edition of *Can’t and Won’t*.

“The writing is striking but a lot of times there wasn’t enough on the line.”

“When Henrietta Mantooth stayed overnight with us last month she asked for something to read. I gave her Davis’s *Collected Stories* and she went nuts for them. I got a paperback copy for her birthday too, along with the Cather letters. Henrietta writes short stories when she isn’t doing her painting.”

“So she paints and writes too.”

“That leaves the Bruce Chatwin,” I said. “What’s the verdict?”

“I gotta tell you. The selections were okay but the name-dropping and who-you-know was overdone. It put me off.”

“But a lot of the pieces were magazine assignments to visit and interview and describe the lives of famous artists. So that’s inevitable to some extent. Did you read the article about the visit with Akhmatova and the one about the boat ride to visit Stalingrad?”

“Yeah, but somehow the book irritated me.”

I loved Chatwin’s books, so I changed the subject. Besides, as Dick Cavett has pointed out more than once when accused of name-dropping, if you’ve been in the entertainment business most of your life, especially as an interviewer, how are you going to avoid it.

I felt the need to put in a plug for Davis. “I don’t think Davis’s stories are sterile word games. There’s a deep psychological component and a highly honed female sensibility behind them. Her stories are as layered and textured as a palimpsest. In any collection of short stories a few will almost always turn out flatter than the really good ones. And her style is cut so precisely they’re like prose poems, a pleasure to read just for the writing.”

“I’ll read some more of them. What have you been doing these past weeks, besides finishing the paint job?”

“I finished only because I hired those two terrific young women who painted the lower boards and the windows while I climbed the ladder and finished up top. Thank God I had the sense to do that.”

At this he laughed, picturing me scrambling to finish the job with these two young women working rapidly to make that possible, but I was consciously trying not to get him laughing. Several times during previous visits, when he was feeling much stronger, we had zoomed each other to the point where Jake had lost his breath and held up a hand for me to stop. I didn’t want to risk a repeat of that now, when he was fragile and exhausted and didn’t need to struggle for breath. Not joking would make the visit solemn but it couldn’t be helped. Despite

realizing this, I hated to miss another of our raucous good times. This was selfish on my part but that's how I felt.

With the book talk over, for several minutes Jake explained about seeing the doctor who had rushed over that week. The reason Jake called the doctor was that he started having trouble breathing. This rang another alarm bell for me, just as the swollen feet and ankles had, and their need to be elevated. But it did put a kind of imprimatur on my decision not to joke and fool. I realized also that Jake needed me there right now mainly just to listen. This I did until he surprised me by saying, "Let's get some dinner. I have hardly eaten anything today. What'd you bring?"

"Good organic food from Sunfrost Farms in Woodstock."

"Let's reheat it."

"I'll reheat it. You stay there."

Surprising me again, he said, emphatically, "No. I'll do it," as he leveraged himself upright and off the futon couch. He may have been weakened, but he was still Jake, still in charge, and I liked him for it.

Over dinner he was animated and excited after he started to talk again about teaching at Yale. In those years he was madly reading Theodor Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*. In one of his letters over the past winter he had informed me that Adorno was his "spiritual hero." After about fifteen minutes of regaling me with how much Adorno had meant to him back then at Yale, he popped up, went to the small bookcase beside his worktable, and came back with a battered and marked-up paperback copy of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*. Rifling the pages, he began to read long sections aloud. I always liked when he got like this, so full of life.

Yet he was reading theory. This somewhat dented his disavowal of all theory. Then again, only fools never contradict themselves. So I asked him about it. "I was overboard on this guy, I admit it," he said. "I remember I had one Yale student who said to a classmate—inadvertently, within my hearing—"Watch out for this guy, he'll really louse you up with Adorno this, Adorno that." We both burst out laughing,

though I really didn't want to encourage any laughing with Jake's breathing so tentative. Then he said for me to browse the book while he did the dishes. I told him instead to just put the dishes in the sink and I would get them in a few minutes while he stretched out on the futon. For once I prevailed and he went to the sitting area and flopped into his reading chair instead of stretching out on the couch.

For a few minutes I read sections of the book, especially Jake's underlined sections, but the writing was hard going, as thick as triple canopy jungle, and I put the book down with a sense of relief. When it came to Adorno I agreed with the disgruntled Yale student who had protested Jake's infatuation with this high-octane, hyper-intellectual mishmash. Cynic and philistine I am, I suppose, but I still think Henry Fielding was right when he said, "Affectation is the true source of the ridiculous," just as Gertrude Stein was right when she said, "Affectations kill." Heraclitus claimed that "character is fate," so I'm stuck with my jaundiced view of pure intellectual ego spinning. In the Frick I can spend an hour in front of Goya's *The Forge* and never miss an instant of joy, but give me Sartre or Heidegger to read, both of whose work I endured as a silly and grinding undergraduate, and I won't last more than thirty-eight and a half seconds.

She-Gray appeared and entwined herself in Jake's feet once again, walking figure eights between and around them as he sat in his reading chair. Animals are so sensitive they never fail to astonish me. She knew her owner was in trouble and struggling. On my very first two visits Jake kept exclaiming when She-Gray performed this figure-eights ritual between my legs and feet. He exclaimed also when she let me reach down and stroke her back. He said she came to no one, but that she was obviously "claiming" me, to use an expression he'd learned in reading about cat psychology. All I knew was that I had let her make all the first moves before I cooed and petted her gently. She was indescribably beautiful as Russian Blues so effortlessly are.

Sitting across from Jake in the rocking chair I felt a deep sense of finality, the same thing, I imagine, that She-Gray felt. I listened as he

recounted various anecdotes from his life, especially highlights with Ginny, son John, and second wife Kristin. Wistful but cheered by his memories, Jake suddenly changed tack and sailed into a discussion of how much he had loved Werner Herzog's movie, *Cobra Verde*, based on Bruce Chatwin's book *The Viceroy of Ouidah*. On an early visit, when we fell into discussing movies, triggered by my mention of the rediscovered Orson Welles film, Jake had raved about how much he enjoyed the DVD of *Cobra Verde*. He said he had watched the DVD several times, enthralled by Herzog's skillful conversion of Chatwin's book to film. He had made me promise to get a copy and watch it. Writing this now I know it is yet another thing I have failed to do: I'm still too raw from his loss to do it, but I will, one day. Sensitive as ever Jake had seen my disappointment at his disapproving rejection of Chatwin's essays, profiles, and travel pieces in the book I'd sent him, *What Am I Doing Here*. Probably I'm overboard, but I love that book.

Negativity and fears of more loss were threatening to shut me down entirely. I couldn't tell Jake that one of my closest friends from high school and college had died by his own hand in the early morning hours of November 5. It had thrown me into a tailspin, especially since his wife, now his widow, was a stupendously wonderful and beautiful woman, as was his daughter, a talented singer, and his handsome son, a successful rock musician and heartthrob. My friend had lost his battle to clinical depression, an affliction I knew only too well, having been tortured and shut down by it several times myself. For the last eighteen days I had found myself staring into space over his loss and ranting at him in my head for doing himself in when we had a pact that he would call me, no matter the hour of day or night, whenever he got so low that the urge to end it all attacked and overwhelmed him. Of course I knew this thinking was odious self-centeredness on my part, but I couldn't absorb his loss and kept telling myself a gentle exchange of words would have put him on redirect and he'd still be here to break my chops, which he loved to do and had done with great flair for fifty-three years. I loved him and I'd always

miss him, and I worried about his wife and kids and any collateral damage they would now suffer.

Jake broke this useless reverie when he said, “You know, I keep thinking how much I’d like to see that Cubist show at the Met.”

“Why don’t we go,” I snapped.

“It’s not that easy and it’s gonna close soon.”

Dumb as a brick, I said, “So we’ll do it fast.”

“I need a wheelchair.”

Dumber still, I blurted, “So I’ll go and arrange it.”

After a pause, I added, “I’ll drive us down and we’ll make a day of it. I’ll get you back that night after we see the show together.” I was having visions of Jake talking me through the show. I so wanted to hear his comments on the works on display. There was silence and I should have twigged to Jake’s realistic concerns, but my Katzenjammer Kids and Hardy Boys enthusiasm for art obliterated my judgment. I said, “You have work in the Met collection, correct?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll research what’s involved in getting us there as soon as I get back into town.” Obtuse as ever I thought I could cheer him up with something to really look forward to.

“What are you working on?” he asked.

As a non sequitur I answered, “I wish I still kept a daily journal. I told you how reading that suggestion in a Cheever interview had helped me so much years ago.”

“You didn’t answer the question.”

“Oh, I’m working on the book about you. That’s why I wish I still kept a journal. I’m going entirely on memory for the early visits.”

“Well, not because of this book on me, but for general practice, I want you to promise you’ll go back to keeping a journal. I did the equivalent thing for years—with sketchbooks and notebooks—and it helped. So get back to it.”

“I will. It’s fun to keep a journal anyway.”

For a good while Jake reminisced about his work and told me how

much he wanted another chance—preferably lots of chances—back in his studio. Some of his intentions were exciting to listen to, except for the stabs of dread that would rip through me at the thought that he might be cut down at any minute and all his plans would come to nothing. He switched subjects and told me, with a grin of resignation tinged with satisfaction, that he had everything in order. “I’m glad you encouraged me to set my will straight and all that stuff back in July. I hated to acknowledge that I needed to do it, but it’s best that I did.” He had made a car trip into town about two and a half months earlier when he was feeling stronger. He paid a local kid who drove him into the city, waited for him at his lawyer’s office, and brought him back that same evening. This accounted for my wishful thinking that I could drive us into town for the Cubist show. I asked him if everything was all set for the transfer of many of his paintings and drawings to the Phillips Collection and he said it was all wrapped up legally. I remembered that in August Betty Cuninghame and the noted curator from the Phillips, Eliza Rathbone, had cheered him up immensely with a long visit to his studio.

This visit was now becoming too solemn. So I loved it when Jake blurted that he had another couple of poems he wanted to read me. He almost bounded out of his chair and over to the large bookcase behind the couch. He scanned the books, running his right hand over their spines. After a while, frustrated that he couldn’t find the book he wanted, he went across the room to the little bookcase next to his worktable. Still, he had no luck. Growing angry and muttering, he said he’d check the bedroom. After five minutes, he emerged frustrated, resigned to the annoyance that he couldn’t locate the book. Every book lover knows this sensation: it can drive you batty. He sat down and started muttering, saying, over and over, “I know it’s here.” I told him not to worry; he could read it on my next visit. He said, “Damn it. I know it’s here,” and jumped up and went back to the tall bookcase and searched the shelves again. Finally he gave up, having spent some fifteen minutes on this frustrating search.

I started to rack my mind for an appropriate segue to another, brighter topic. But, tired, I couldn't find one. It was also growing late, slightly past ten, and I needed to hit the road. But I sat rooted to the rocking chair directly across the room from Jake, facing him in his Eames lounge chair. I always sat in this rocking chair and seemingly couldn't move now, even though I'd been visiting for over six hours.

Then Jake suddenly said, "What was that thing you told me about money worries and Henny Youngman?"

"Youngman said, 'I'm not worried. I have enough money to last me the rest of my life...so long as I die by four o'clock this afternoon.'"

Jake liked this joke more than I did, which was nearly impossible, since it had sustained my whole life as a free-lancer for the past twenty years plus. He laughed, and I laughed, and I knew it was a great ending to our visit. I told him I had to go and not to get up, but he insisted and followed me out to the front porch, where he stood back-lighted by a night light on the front wall as I wondered if this was the last time I'd ever see him—in silhouette, no less. Then I climbed in the car, waved, backed out of the front yard and bounced up the dirt driveway and away into the night.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

In town I went to work on getting the details of how Jake and I could visit the Cubist show. The people at the Met were fantastically helpful. They have a whole apparatus in place for visitors who are not ambulatory and need a wheelchair. The helpful woman on the phone left a brochure for me at the front desk. When I picked it up on my next trip across town I learned from reading it at home that it covered everything. It even specified how to access underground parking for the handicapped. Doing a belt and suspenders job, not wanting any confusion or slipups, I stopped and spoke to the parking attendant a day or two later so I had the whole drill down pat. Satisfied on all fronts, I walked back across the park that sunny day, admiring the view of midtown looking south across the Great Lawn, and thinking how insightful it would be to take in the Cubist masterpieces while getting Jake's take on them.

Avoidance is unavoidable and fantasy sustains us all. When I called Jake with this exciting news he bit my head off. My obtuse enthusiasm backfired. He ripped me up one side and down the other. He asked what was I thinking. He said he felt sick and weak, too weak to get out of bed or to do anything else but lie with his feet and legs elevated on the futon couch. I went silent while I asked myself what was I thinking. Meanwhile Jake blew off more steam at me. I listened and said nothing. When he finished giving me hell there was a long silence.

He finally broke it beautifully. Ignoring everything that had gone before, he said simply, "Here's how we're going to do it." He paused and then revised all the plans I had laid out. "You're not going to come here early in the morning and drive us down and back in one day." I had detailed the day using the plan the kid who drove him to his lawyer's office had used; that is, down and back in one day. "What

you'll do is come here and use the bedroom in the studio and spend the night. Then we'll get up in the morning, take our time, have breakfast, and get on the road at a civilized hour. We'll get down there, have lunch at the Met, see the show while taking our time, no rush, have dinner somewhere, then drive back up here and you'll spend the night again and drive home the next day."

Jake was back on his game, as charming and smooth and suave as Lord Chesterfield. It made me happy to hear him and to relish our planned day in Manhattan even though I knew it would never happen, having—finally—assessed the situation properly, realistically. We stayed on the phone for a while, chatting away, and then I told him how sorry I was that he was having a rough time again but not to conclude that he wouldn't rally and find himself back sketching in his reading chair or maybe even back in his studio getting some larger work done.

This conversation took place on Monday, December 6, and when he asked when I was coming to see him I told him I would be in town for the next two weekends, the first weekend to attend Henrietta Mantooh's birthday party and the following weekend to see his work in Betty Cuninghams' "It's Magic" group show, where he had two pieces. He signed off by telling me that when we talk we really talk, and it was something he needed to do, especially now when he wasn't feeling good. He added firmly that I was to call Verna Gillis and set up a visit at the holidays. That's how I came to have the visit set up for Boxing Day, the one I was too sick to keep.

"Hey, Jake, guess where I am?"

"Guess who I'm talking to?" he countered.

I ignored this and said, "I'm standing in the very front of Betty's gallery staring at *Bone*. It's on the opposite wall and it's magnificent. I've been staring at it for twenty minutes, paralyzed with admiration."

"I'm sitting here with Riley Brewster and I just mentioned you."

"Stop boring him."

"He's been visiting for a while."

"Good for him, and good for you. Tell him I hope to meet him one of these days."

"How's the turnout?"

"Really good. The gallery's packed, but the food and the drinks are downstairs, so, naturally, that's where the crowd is. I'm upstairs with the whole gallery to myself. *Bone* is upstairs too, the first thing you see when you walk in the door. Across from *Bone* is a terrific cityscape by Rackstraw Downes. It shows in minute detail the ratty underpass beneath the ramps leading on and off the GW Bridge. It's so vivid you feel you can smell all the trash and the gas fumes. "

"That's great. Give everyone my best and get over here for a visit."

"I also like that moody mountainscape of yours, the smaller painting. It's disturbing and powerful. Betty's hung it prominently downstairs."

"*Janlori Loop*."

"That's the one. I couldn't think of the title. Great stuff."

"Thanks."

"Get back to Riley. See you soon."

Riley's visit was obviously a major tonic for Jake. It had turned around his mood in twenty-four hours. I noted this because I had called the day before to confirm that he'd received two books I'd sent. He had received them and that made me happy. Listening to his ebullient voice and his bullish attitude just now, I knew Riley had rallied him. Like all people seriously ill, Jake was having caustic outbursts lately, like the one he'd had over the planned trip to see the Cubist show. There had also been a devastating outburst when I called on Thanksgiving Eve. In a really foul mood he had accused me of being a "fantasist" about writing a book on him when he was only a "third-rate artist in a sixth-rate art world." I had conveyed this quote to Betty an hour earlier and we had roared with laughter at the absurd mis-

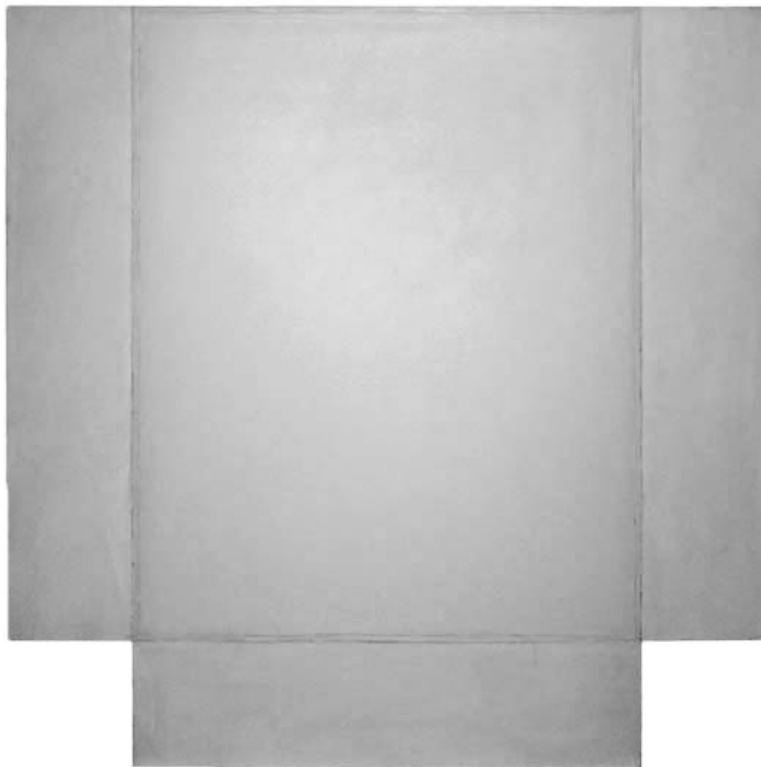
characterization of it; of both Jake, who was nothing if not a first-rate painter, and of the art world, which, despite the usual drawbacks, and in the face of a wicked economic downturn, continued to thrive. The demon doubt never gives you a hall pass, no matter your accomplishments, as Jake's bitter quote attests.

But with Jake these caustic moods never lasted long, usually only a minute or two, like a sun shower, and then his sunny self would return and take over again. That's what Riley had done for him with his visit just now. Never having met Riley, I didn't know that he lived in New Haven. When I later found this out I wondered if he'd driven six-hours roundtrip in one day to visit Jake. It was magnanimous on Riley's part, and a testament to Jake's unbeatable charm and magnetism.

All these thoughts flashed through my mind as I stood in Betty's gallery alone, studying *Bone*. It was the highlight of the opening for me. I stared at it awhile longer. It had a rectangle at the center, about five feet high and four wide, with long vertical panels on either side, about a foot wide and the same height as the central rectangle. Below the central rectangle a horizontal panel, the same width as the vertical panels but stretching only the four-foot width of the central rectangle, served as a kind of pedestal for the entire painting. The central rectangle was a light greenish gray, a kind of pastel, while the two framing vertical panels and the pedestal panel were a richer and darker green. Almost cruciform, the entire painting looked like a two-toned Russian Orthodox religious icon; and, simultaneously, viewed flatly and neutrally, while reading nothing into it, it evoked and resembled Russian Constructivist paintings. The colors, perfectly shaded and blended, complemented each other to a T.

The whole painting was serenely deft, but I couldn't stop reading the cross imagery into it. Had I told this to Jake I'm certain he would have countered that it was simply an abstract expressionist painting with a nod to color field theory. This difference of opinion didn't matter. Studying *Bone* for the better part of an hour, in two sessions, made

my holidays. I wished I'd had the ninety-fiveGs to buy it. I also sometimes wondered what the irate woman in MOMA who rebuked Jake for studying Ad Reinhardt's all-black painting would have thought about *Bone*.



Bone, 1973, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 72 inches

“I hope you accept this preacher getting, well, metaphysical for a moment. We can do that here in the center of this town—Woodstock being a rather metaphysical community.”

Lynn and I were seated side by side in a pew near the front in the Woodstock Reformed Church on the town square listening to Reverend Joshua Bode deliver his Christmas Eve oration. As a preacher he was pretty hard to beat. He never strained for theological or philosophical profundity just as he never stooped to homiletic banalities. He spoke straight and plain from a good heart filtered through a first-rate mind. His theme tonight was reconciliation: “Big reconciliation. Reconciliation with a capital ‘R.’ Reconciliation as the ultimate purpose of the universe.” He elaborated on this theme and concluded by saying that the divine word is “Yes.” That single and most powerful of all words reiterated and summed up an earlier assertion: “Yes, you exist for a purpose, for a goal, for an end.”

Sitting and listening I thought of Jake. He had certainly said “Yes” to life, producing a magnificent body of work, fathering a terrific and talented son, and garnering a raft of lifelong friends. Struggling hard I could not reconcile myself to his impending loss. We had talked frequently on the phone over the last month, most recently the day before. He was his great and usual self, but he told me he had almost died the day before, Monday of Christmas week. He said, “The doctor had to come rushing over again because my lungs were so congested that my breathing was difficult.” This news scared me witless when I put the phone down. Of course Jake had told me several times over the last three months “my doctor doesn’t know how I’m still alive. He’s amazed.” Every time he said this I flinched if I was on the phone and he couldn’t see me, but, when I was visiting him and talking face to face, I said nothing, and tried to show nothing on my face. In our latest phone conversation he also told me he’d miraculously managed “to finish a painting I really want you to see and I found the volume of poetry I couldn’t find the last time you were here.”

“Where was it?”

“Right in the big bookcase I kept saying it was in.”

This cracked us up.

Now in church I was chagrined that I had been forced to spend so much time in the city in the intervening weeks since I'd visited the Sunday before Thanksgiving. But the holidays were always tough in the sense of crowded social obligations on top of year-end business obligations. I had been divided within myself, wanting to drop everything and visit Jake, but not being able to do this without breaking commitments to friends and neglecting professional responsibilities.

Even the candlelit singing of *Silent Night* could not distract me from painful thoughts of losing Jake and of the two close friends I'd lost over the past six months, my longstanding friend from publishing days and my really close friend from high school through college. “Reverend Josh,” as his congregation calls him, accompanies the singing of *Silent Night* with a chorus of timed bell ringers all wearing white gloves, among whom he is one. The performance is very beautiful and I look forward to it each year. Then I thought of my dead parents. Morbid thoughts were ganging up on me. In fact I had to dab my eyes and cheeks because tears formed and rolled down my face. I was genuinely annoyed with myself for being a sentimental wimp. To make things worse, I was sneezing and had a throbbing headache, a scratchy throat, and an itchy nose. I had signed off my phone conversation with Jake the day before by telling him I couldn't wait to see him in two days.

The whole next day, Christmas, I spent sick in bed. The night before, before going to church to hear Reverend Josh and the candlelit singing of *Silent Night* accompanied by the bell chorus, Lynn and I had dined at the Bear Café after catching a glimpse of the Woodstock Christmas parade, with Santa Claus perched on a shiny red fire truck driving

slowly though town while the spectators lined the streets and cheered, especially the children, whose faces were so ecstatic it was uplifting. Peter Cantine, a co-owner of the Bear Café, kindly gave us a table in our favorite room, the fireplace room in the back. The large fieldstone fireplace accommodates a real bonfire and it made for a cheery and memorable Christmas dinner, so I wasn't totally deprived the next day when I sent Lynn alone to Christmas dinner at a friend's house. Though, truth to tell, I did feel, that miserable Christmas Day—to use one of my mother's old expressions—like death warmed over. Mercifully, I managed to sleep all day and all evening and then, still sick, went straight back to bed early that night after Lynn got home at about nine o'clock, only to sleep straight through on Boxing Day till six-thirty, an hour and a half after I was supposed to be pulling into Jake's driveway. Angry with myself for oversleeping, but barking with a persistent cough and running freely at the nose, while wheezing and sneezing like an old horse on its last legs, I called Jake right away and apologized for being sick and unable to make it down to see him.

That's when we had the conversation I described earlier when I apologized and told him I'd only endanger his life by coming, and he thanked me for being considerate and said he felt lousy anyway and not up for a visit, so I should "forget it." But he wanted to talk for a few minutes and he mentioned how much he'd liked both books I'd sent, the ones that arrived the week of Betty's "It's Magic" opening. He said, answering my query: "I liked Roth's *What I Saw* a whole lot, and I liked the Donald Hall too...but it was a little too close to the bone." Then he laughed his inimitable laugh, relieving me of yet another bout with lifelong guilt. I had sent Joseph Roth's short essays on Berlin in the twenties and Donald Hall's latest book, *Essays After Eighty*, which I had spotted while browsing my favorite Manhattan bookstore, Book Culture, up on 112th Street near Columbia's campus. I had bought it and sent it unread, though a few days later I got another copy for myself and read it.

I said, "Roth's collection of little essays is a favorite of mine, and the

Hall thrilled me as a brilliant and humorous summation of a life successfully dedicated to only one thing: the relentless pursuit of his art.”

No sooner had I said this than I realized I shouldn’t have. It triggered Jake to lament his inability to get to his studio. Hearing this again was heartbreaking, as it always had been. Then he said, “When will I see you?”

“I gotta go down Sunday to close out the year-end stuff on the business. I’ll be up Wednesday for New Year’s Eve and I’ll call Thursday around noon and come over. Or Friday, whenever you’re open and up for it.”

“Great.”

“That emphasis by Hall on cross-pollinating with other art forms sounded familiar, no? So did his obsession with writing poetry. And with reading other poets and writers. And with seeing all the good painting and sculpture and architecture he could manage. Also, listening to great music. And trying all the time to be a good and inspiring teacher. Remind you of anyone you know?”

He chuckled and instructed me to perform an impossible act with myself.

By saying what I said I didn’t feel as dumb as a beer ad for sending the book in the first place, which, though close to the bone for Jake, was so good I’ve since reread it.

Like Jake, Hall is a major man, a dedicated teacher, and a gifted artist. His writing is always a pleasure to read. Sending his book to Jake unread was maybe a blockhead’s move, but in hindsight I was glad I’d done it. I have no doubt Jake connected with it, even loved it, as I did.

After a long pause all I heard was Jake’s labored breathing and then: “Get over here soon. I gotta go. My food’s gonna burn.”

Then the phone went dead.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The flu had let up enough by Friday night that I tinkered in my pajamas with some polishing work on the first three chapters of this book while still sneezing and coughing, but not in pain with fever. Again on Saturday, recovered a bit more, I “worked late again and started and finished chapter four.” I’m quoting from my journal, which, under Jake’s edict, I was scribbling in madly, much as I used to before I got too busy. I think he was right to insist that I go back to keeping a journal. To any writer it’s an enormous help, and, as he said, it’s a help to painters also. He knew this from his own experience.

By Sunday I felt well enough to take the bus down to the city. I had called a bright and able young college student, the daughter of a close friend, and arranged for her to help me knock out the end-of-year paperwork—especially the tax information—over the next two days. When my helper showed up on Monday I was able to direct her briefly before my energy flagged. The previous night I had been agitated and my sleep had been fitful; according to my journal notes, I “was unable to sleep, and alert and agitated about I don’t know what.” Earlier that afternoon, under doctor’s orders, I went to see a nutritionist. The office was on Fifty-Seventh Street a few doors down from the Art Students’ League; passing the building’s ornate facade, I thought, as always, of Jackson Pollock and all the budding abstract expressionists painting away in there in their youth, and of my friend Henrietta Mantooth, years later, doing the same thing in there with her talented female colleagues, most of whom I had the pleasure of meeting and also of seeing their work. Because the autumn had stressed me out and my glucose readings were too high, my endocrinologist had remanded me to the nutritionist. She was attractive and able, but I was

glad to escape her office, so preoccupied with Jake's health and disrespectful of my own was I.

By the time I got back to the apartment my diligent helper had accomplished wonders, and, embarrassed and enervated, after asking if she had any urgent questions and learning that she didn't, I told her, with much reluctance, that I had to lie down for a quick nap. I slunk off to the bedroom sheepishly, but I really was—from lack of sleep the previous night—lightheaded and slightly dizzy. I stretched out on the bed and nodded off intermittently for short snoozes but always woke a few minutes later bug-eyed with anxiety. I ascribed this condition to my usual worries that I'd go awry with the tax accounting and end up in orange coveralls playing ping-pong in the federal pen at Allenwood with crooked pols caught with their hand in the sugar bowl. My ability to project imminent catastrophes is exceeded only by my ever-present, and always acute, angst and paranoia. I am unnecessarily silly about tax problems because I have an accountant who's a combined CPA and tax lawyer with the moral probity, ethical rectitude, and mental agility of Moses and Maimonides wrapped into one. He's also as kind, generous, and wise as anyone I've ever met. Still, whenever an IRS requirement rears its ugly head, I fret and fuss all day and toss and turn in bed half the night.

That's what would happen that very night, but I didn't know that yet. When I got up an hour later from my fitful, post-nutritionist nap, I paid my helper, and saw her off. After she left I reviewed her work and then followed her instructions on what needed to be done as follow-up. Next I worked an hour or so organizing what needed to be done by her the next day. Still not feeling right, I called my nephew Charlie, nicknamed by me Bonnie Prince Charlie, and wished him a happy birthday. My nieces and nephews are an endless source of joy for me, and Charlie always comes through by making me laugh, as does his older brother Billy, dubbed by me William the Conquer. They've loved my silly joshing since they were toddlers, and now on the cusps of being teenagers, they liked it more, knowing their uncle is a bit crackers in general.

After I put the phone down with Charlie I felt the urge to call Jake, but I didn't because it was well past ten o'clock and his sleeping pattern was so erratic I feared waking him, especially if he had managed to fall into a much-needed, sound sleep. Instead I sat quietly for half an hour and then went out to get some groceries and horse around with my Mexican buddies at the Korean deli around the corner and then work my way along Eighty-sixth Street talking to the doormen, all buddies of mine as well. At home I ate a snack and watched a little of ESPN, a great way to wrap up a day. After ESPN finished and looped itself I read for an hour before collapsing in bed.

My energy level was not right and I still didn't feel a hundred percent, but I attributed this to the aftermath of my nasty bout with the flu. I needed a good sound night of sleep to cure this fatigue, I figured, but I figured wrong. In bed my mind did its imitation of a motorcycle in a barrel; this often happens, no matter how tired I am, no matter if I've been asleep in a chair for twenty minutes in the living room: as soon as I'm horizontal in the bedroom my mind kicks in and is off to the races, manufacturing things to obsess and worry about. It's a curse. Again, after about an hour, too tired to get back out of bed, I nodded off only to come wide-awake an hour or so later. I passed the whole night this way, craving rest but unable to achieve sustained sleep. When the windows turned dull gray with the weak winter dawn light of December I slipped asleep for three straight hours.

At ten I woke and got out of bed and prepared for my helper's arrival. She came, we started to work, and we worked well for four hours, until I sent her out briefly with money to buy herself a nice lunch. I mentioned, again sheepishly, that I needed to take a quick nap because, suddenly, I was yawning and woozy again. But I had a great feeling about the paperwork and the tax prep documents; they were under control and nearly done. We were in fine shape and I jumped to the conclusion that this would mean a good, deep, restorative nap. For once I was right: It did, and when my helper returned from lunch and let herself in, she got right to work in the living room and let me

sleep in the bedroom. Which I did till nearly four o'clock. We worked together then for two hours and had the job done, all but for tiny follow-up tasks by me. I paid her, thanked her profusely, wished her happy holidays and a good final term at college, and she left at six o'clock, leaving me relieved and quite happy. After she left I worked another hour and a half before a bruising headache erupted and made me tired and achy all over. I ascribed this, yet again, to the aftermath of my bout with the flu, like the aftershock following an earthquake.

So I jumped back into bed and enjoyed a nice nap and, having set the alarm, got up, dressed quickly, and caught the crosstown 86 bus to the East Side. While riding through the Central Park transverse I remembered to check my cell phone. There were several messages and I spotted one from an 845 area code. Fear invaded me. I recognized Verna Gillis's number and feared she was calling with news I didn't want to hear. I put the phone back in my jacket pocket until we cleared the park. On East Eighty-fourth Street, when the bus stopped just east of Fifth Avenue and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, I stared, as I always did, at No. 3, the art deco apartment building designed by Raymond Hood, the architect of Rockefeller Center, the Daily News Building, the old green McGraw-Hill Building on west Forty-second Street, and that great old building facing Bryant Park on west Fortieth Street, now the Bryant Hotel, the one with the dazzling gold and black terracotta façade. When the bus pulled out, turned next onto Madison, then onto East Eighty-sixth Street, I stopped stalling and took out my cell and called Verna's 845-area-code number.

"Hello, it's Ed calling."

"Hello Ed." It was Verna. She hesitated ever so slightly, then said, "I hate to tell you but Jake died this afternoon."

"Oh, no," was all I managed to say.

"I know, Ed. It's a terrible loss for all of us."

"That it is. Thanks for calling and telling me, Verna. I really appreciate it." I paused, then had the brains to add: "I'm sorry you and Roswell lost such a great friend."

“You did too.”

I couldn't respond to this. Instead, I blurted, “I'll tell Lynn and John Lees and Ruth Leonard.”

“The funeral is private, but there'll be a memorial service. I'll let you know when and where.”

“Thanks again, Verna. You and Roswell were terrific to him.”

“So were you. Take care of yourself.”

She broke the connection and I held the dead phone, staring straight ahead as the bus now bounced over the construction plates and skirted the pilings for the Second Avenue subway, a seemingly endless construction challenge for Manhattan. Stunned, I managed to call Lynn and leave a voice message. Next I called John and Ruth and did the same.

I got off the bus at First Avenue. Then, walking down the avenue, I had a panicky moment. I feared that I would let Jake down if I did not take action immediately. So I hit the redial button on Verna's number and, when she answered, told her Jake planned to show me his last painting hanging in the studio. I also told her he had found a volume of poetry he wanted to read to me from. I asked her to ask someone with access to Jake's house and studio, maybe ex-wife Kristen or Jake's son John, if they would photograph the painting on the studio work wall and look on Jake's end table next to his reading chair for the volume of poetry. I said the poetry volume would be in addition to the Wallace Stevens collection and the Donald Hall volume, which were always there, but that it would be another, third volume recently added. I asked if someone could write down the title of the book and the name of the poet's work it held. Verna said she would try to help, and did, but it never worked out. I never saw the painting or learned what the volume of poetry was.

In our last phone conversation on Boxing Day, Jake, playful as ever, had teasingly refused to tell me anything about the poetry book he originally couldn't find on my last visit. He laughed and said I had to come and find out what it was for myself, firsthand. It suddenly

reminded me of his stern playfulness when he told me the story of losing his horse Nellie when he was a toddler sitting on his grandmother's lap and I asked him to repeat the details, trying to memorize them, and he snapped, "No. You were busy writing in your head. Pay attention the first time." Of course he knew exactly what I was doing, writing the anecdote in my head to commit it to memory. He always seemed to know what I was doing, and thinking, so when Verna signed off, and again I held the dead phone in my hand, right there on First Avenue—wide, concretey, ugly, and as bland and dangerous as an L.A. freeway—so shaken my spine practically quivered from nervous exhaustion—in spite of all I started to grin, picturing him in my mind's eye. There he was, right up to the end, up against his work wall creating beautiful artwork, consistent from nearly birth to burial in doing the one thing he most wanted to do, despite any and all impediments. I will hold fast to that exhilarating and inspiring image for the rest of my life.

My grin was short-lived and ceased the moment I met with my friends. I stayed awhile, long enough to be polite, but I was too distracted to stay longer and left after an hour. I walked home and called Lynn along the way. Of course she hadn't retrieved her phone messages. I told her that Jake had died and that I had called John and Ruth. But I told her to double-check in the morning that they'd got the message. When I got off the cell I went to the FedEx office on Lex off Seventy-ninth and bought business envelopes to send out the end-of-year tax info in the morning. Then I walked over to Madison and up to Crawford Doyle booksellers and stared in the shop window at the floodlit first editions. Unless I'm in a real hurry, I never pass this splendid old-fashioned bookstore without doing this very thing. It's one of Manhattan's unsung pleasures.

After scanning the first editions I walked up Madison and turned in at Eighty-second and walked the length of the block. When the trees are bare in winter and stand like stark sculpture against the lamplit night sky, this stretch of street perfectly frames the floodlit

night façade of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's original building. The view grows more dramatic as you approach Fifth Avenue. The limestone façade is stunning because Richard Morris Hunt converted the original brick facade into the arresting and dramatic American Beaux Arts style in the waning years of the nineteenth century, before McKim, Mead, and White added the matching limestone wings in the early years of the twentieth. When you reach Fifth Avenue the whole façade is on view, the original building and the two wings on either side. This is one of the best nighttime views Manhattan offers, and it offers many. For me only the floodlit nighttime view looking down the Promenade from Fifth Avenue at 30 Rock trumps this one.

While walking toward the Met down Eighty-second Street the pain of losing Jake had hit me full force and I whispered to him aloud, "You're in there, Jake, and that's nothing to sneeze at." This thought triggered a recall of Jake mentioning on my last visit that he had a drawing of a goat's skull in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. This made me happy on two scores, because that museum meant so much to me as a kid and as a young man, and because I liked knowing Jake had work in it, another major achievement among his many, and this placement of his artwork only three blocks from the house I'd grown up in.

Next thing I knew I remembered my uncle Tom making a home-made movie of us kids on the rock-strewn escarpments leading up to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The movie was a western, a short, and I recalled that my gun-toting cousin Tommy headed up the sheriff's posse that rounded up Tommy's younger brothers, Jimmy and Frank, and me, the escaped bandits wearing red or blue paisley kerchiefs over our mouths and brandishing six-shooters in holsters on our hips. Under movie director uncle Tom's instructions, we bandits had gathered mica rocks as false gold and absconded with them in a school bag, an ersatz stand-in for a saddlebag. But sheriff Tommy and his posse put paid to our extremely short life of crime. After a brief shootout, they rounded us up in no time. The whole sixteen-millimeter movie was

shot with us climbing among the rocks surrounding the north-side base of the knoll on which the museum had been built in the early years of the twentieth century, on the site of the filled-in original Philadelphia reservoir. That reservoir had been part of the Philadelphia Waterworks built in the early nineteenth century, right after colonial times, to combat the city's primitive water supply infested with mosquitoes carrying yellow fever. Philly, built on a swamp like Washington, D.C., had famous early problems with mosquito-borne yellow fever epidemics.

Thinking all this on the rest of my walk across the Eighty-sixth Street transverse I reminded myself to stay steady and not to crack up again. I knew I was "tobacco-auctioneering," as I call it, with many voices carrying on in my head as a form of mental protection and emotional avoidance. I had even distracted myself from thoughts of Jake's death by visualizing Saint-Gaudens's wonderful gilded copper statue of the huntress Diana that topped the grand staircase in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. This statue had excited me as a small boy because she was tall and slender and nude and built wonderfully and about to fire an arrow. I knew there was something about her that could really rock a guy's boat but I didn't know exactly what that was, though I was determined to find out. This majestic statue had originally stood atop the second Madison Square Garden, the one built down on Madison Square by McKim, Mead, and White, the one with the rooftop garden restaurant where Stanford White met his untimely end for his dalliance with actress Evelyn Nesbit, the ravishing beauty whose husband Harry Thaw took a dim view of White's philandering and drilled him fatally with a pistol. So in my whirling thought pattern designed to blockade the pain of losing Jake I came full circle, from New York to Philly and back. But the minute I got into my apartment this diversionary ruse failed me.

Torturous agitation set in. I am not good at handling this. I tried to write the tax letters to mail the next day, but I couldn't concentrate, even though these letters are a snap to write. I decided to knock

them out in the morning and to do instead what I did years ago when kicking alcohol and then tobacco. I took myself for a long walk, a wide loop down Central Park West to Columbus Circle and back via Broadway. At the circle I saw the Warner Center and remembered a great Manhattan moment in there when an exuberant black teen had mimed cunnilingus on the squat female nude of Eve by Botero at the top of the up escalator opposite her male twin at the top of the down escalator, Adam, he of the tiny penis rubbed shiny by tourists, both statues executed in bright and gleaming bronze. I have chuckled over this for years.

The magic of a late-night walk on the West Side worked, I'm sorry to say, only briefly. When I got back to the apartment things were not good. No longer able to blot out my consciousness with booze, I now overate instead and, while doing so, I also drank too much caffeine-free diet cola in a harebrained attempt to cure a crisis of nerves. All of this I did unconsciously, not thinking, just being infantile and oral. While I did this I watched ESPN without absorbing a thing. I gorged on cottage cheese next, then on raw carrots and dip, and finally on watermelon chunks I found in the fridge. I gobbled all of this. Foolishly, at the end of my stroll, I had bought a bag of gummy green spearmint leaves at CVS, looking for a sugar high's inevitable drop to knock me out and put me sound asleep in bed. For this reason I had slammed down the spearmint leaves too, all washed down with can after can of caffeine-free diet cola.

I tried for half an hour to read, but couldn't concentrate, so I went in and flopped on the bed fully dressed. I closed my eyes and rested, but soon—surprise! surprise!—I found my stomach in an uproar. I started gagging and got up and ran to the bathroom. There I upchucked time after time, forgetting to kneel down as everyone knows to do when this kind of mess strikes. When I stopped vomiting violently into the toilet I couldn't breathe well because I had stood up the whole time and simply bent over through the entire disgusting and self-induced ordeal, clogging my nasal passages with tiny bits of carrot, pieces of

watermelon, and chunks of gumdrop spearmint leaves. It was gross. I'm aware you can die by choking on your own vomit, so as soon as the convulsions subsided I sat on the side of the tub and just rested there until two more seizures, much less intense, erupted and cleared up my nasal passages. I could again breathe through my nose as well as through my mouth.

Half an hour later I cleaned up the mess I'd made. Then I filled our deep, old-fashioned tub to the spillover line, stripped and gingerly lowered myself into the scalding water. I soaked for what must have been half an hour before emerging as red as a boiled lobster. I toweled off and put on clean pajamas and went out and sat in the dark in the living room for a long time, head back, eyes closed, alone with my thoughts, mostly centered on recollections of visiting Jake. I never cried as a normal person would have instead of acting like a berserk glutton. Then I went back into the bathroom, brushed my teeth for the third time since the storm of projectile vomiting subsided, then staggered into the bedroom in the dark and crawled into bed. I don't remember falling asleep. But I did, rather quickly for me, and didn't wake until nine that morning, a Wednesday, and New Year's Eve.

After dawdling over coffee slightly longer than I should have, I called a friend who'd landed back in the hospital with yet another attack of Guillain-Barre syndrome, battling paralysis that began in his feet and lower legs and ascended from there. Untreated, this killer disease will invade the viscera and paralyze the heart, inducing death. As ever, my friend, now stabilized, was cheerful and forbearing, a stout-hearted Midwesterner. Next I called my Israeli friend who's fought double myeloma to a standstill for seven years and wished her a happy birthday. I did the same with my friend Bob Bohan, who had also been born on the year's last day, falling only hours short of being a New Year's baby.

Then I went hard at the end-of-year tax letters, printed them out, put them in envelopes, stamped them and strolled to the post office, where I nearly missed getting them out because the post office closed

for the holiday at noon, not at six, as usual. With that done and dusted, I called Lynn, told her I'd catch the two o'clock bus, hustled to the Port Authority Bus Terminal and arrived upstate in time to spend New Year's Eve with John Lees and Ruth Leonard and Lynn, just the four of us at their house. Ruth, a talented cook, had prepared a delicious shrimp dinner. Afterward we watched the ball fall in Times Square, shared about a hundred laughs, and called it a night. For me New Year's Eve couldn't have been better.

Later, when I got in bed at home, after reading for a quiet hour, I thought how this new year would be lived without Jake. But that sad thought faded quickly in the face of the overwhelming gratitude I felt for having had the privilege of sharing so much vital time with him over the last half year.

EPILOGUE

When I awoke on January 24, 2015 it was snowing. It was also the day scheduled for the first of two memorials honoring Jake. Today's memorial would be held in the Marbletown Community Center in Stone Ridge, across the road from the Mobile station operated by the friendly Indian fellows I always stopped and chatted with on my way to and from visiting Jake, whose house was only a few miles farther west in the woods of Accord. This meant that Lynn and I had to drive just under fifty-five miles to get there, and the way the snow was falling at nine a.m. this was not a welcome prospect. Driving in snow in the Catskills is tricky and can quickly turn treacherous, especially when the temperature fluctuates rapidly and black ice forms a coating on the roads, or even when old snow, now turned to ice, lingers ominously on the roads under a new snowfall. As I sat in our living room watching the snow whirl down through the four bay windows while sipping my morning coffee, I feared Lynn and I would have to miss the memorial if the snow didn't let up. As ever, Lynn tamped down my dismal anxiety by saying, measured as ever, "Let's wait and see. Maybe it'll taper off, or let up completely."

Just as the previous winter had been nearly Siberian in its snowiness and frigid intensity, which had prevented me from visiting Jake until the warm weather came in, this winter was threatening to set itself up as an identical twin. This it eventually did, proving the threat was not idle. The cold and snowy madness beyond the windows reminded me, as I sat sipping coffee, of the power art has always held for me. In the midst of the severe weather in the winter of February 2014, when Jake wanted me to visit, conditions were so bad even in snowbound Manhattan that I was rescued from cabin fever, art depriv-

vation, and lunacy by walking a mile up West End Avenue and seeing a show at David and Annette Benda Fox's gallery.

The show featured the work of my friend Jim Holl, a talented painter, designer, and teacher, and of one of his teaching colleagues, Hallie Cohen, at Marymount College on the Upper East Side, where Jim heads up the Art Department. Jim's works on paper in this show were so deft and delicate, yet formidable and vaguely disturbing, that I marveled at them for long spells. Then I stared, ironically enough, at Hallie Cohen's icescapes, dazzling and enchanting despite the mounds of dirty snow supporting SUVs and cars outside along West End Avenue in all the dug-out curbside parking spaces, with bumpers from cars knocked off by snowcrete topping some of the piles of frozen and filthy snow ornamenting the sidewalks here and there amid a glittering array of lost hubcaps. New York was battling back gallantly against a Muscovite winter, but casualties were high and alternate side of the street parking rules were in endless suspension.

After seeing this show and chatting about it with Annette and David, I walked the mile home with my mood elevated and my outlook sunny, instead of dark and Dostoyevskian. David and Annette, in their enthusiasm for promoting artists and their work, are like two possessed aesthetic Samaritans, as emblematic of Manhattan's many cultural allures as any couple you're likely to meet.

The memorial for Jake was scheduled for three and the snow stopped about noon, to my great relief. An hour later Lynn and I climbed into our all-wheel-drive Subaru and, allowing two hours, drove carefully to Stone Ridge and arrived with thirty minutes to spare. The room was fairly large and about a hundred oaken folding chairs had been set up in front of a makeshift stage with a large free-standing microphone at its center and a set of musical instruments arranged off to one side. Lynn and I took seats and watched the room fill. We were elated when John Lees and Ruth Leonard came in with Betty Cuningham. This was especially welcome since we didn't know too many people there.

Jake had talked so often and warmly about his family and friends that I was eager to see them in person. I spotted his son John instantly, so closely did he resemble Jake: he had matinee idol looks to match his father's. I also guessed right when I noticed Kristin Flynn, Jake's second wife, standing off to the side but keeping an eye on the proceedings, obviously making sure things went off right. She was as strikingly attractive as Jake had described her, saying, more than once, "She looks like a model." I was also elated, watching the musicians gather around their instruments, to spot Roswell Rudd, whose photograph I had seen back in July when the article about him shared the front page of the *Shawangunk Journal* with the article I had written about my first visit to Jake's studio.

The scary thing was that I felt my mind zoning out and my attention numbing up. The reality of Jake's loss was boring in and threatening to shut me down. An antidote for this appeared when John and Ruth, sitting across the narrow aisle, started to chat with Lynn and me. Both are enchanting and together they're a doubled-down delight. I also stole glances at Roswell unpacking his trombone and warming up near the musical stand up front. I noticed that Betty knew many of the other artists present and stood in a cluster near the back talking to them. When John and Ruth joined Betty's group, Lynn fell into conversation with the two women who had sat down beside her. Meanwhile, in silence I studied the handsomely produced program listing the agenda for the memorial. It featured photos of Jake on the front and back, both taken by son John. The photos were professional level and beyond the standards of headshots used by professional actors and models. Both shots were of Jake in his prime, years before I'd ever met him, and the one on the back showed him seated in a tall director's chair in what I took to be his beloved loft on the Bowery, the one Jack Klein had found for him as he had found so many for other struggling artists in the days when Soho was still called Hell's Hundred Acres, before the ballistic gentrification and commercialization swept in. That was the reason Jake wanted a statue of Klein erected down there.

A few minutes after three o'clock, when the room had filled to overflowing, with those unable to find seats lining the sides and back, Kristin Flynn stepped to the microphone and said a few words about her life with Jake. I laughed when she said that at their first meeting, while crossing a small bridge in upper Vermont from opposite sides, Jake had said, when they met in the middle, that she reminded him of a "grasshopper." It was so playful, so Jake, and so apt: Kristin did have the sprightliness, animation, and winged liveliness of a grasshopper.

The remark was a keynote for everything that followed. My best memory is that Roswell Rudd played his solo composition titled *Memories of Jake*. His trombone enveloped the entire room and cast over everyone a soothing cascade of rhythmic and cadenced—and perfectly phrased—sound. The music had no funereal or melodramatic flourishes, but was lively and moving start to finish, never mordant, always vibrantly affective, no schmaltz allowed. Without a smidgeon of strain Roswell's artistry perked me up.

There followed a succession of speakers who had known Jake for years. Most spoke of his salutary effect on them and of his endless encouragement for their artistic efforts and ambitions. Quite a few were poets who read samples of their work. I especially remember Janlori Goldman reading her poems, which were sophisticated, polished, plain and strong. She is the woman Jake named his painting *Janlori Loop* after; this was the painting that accompanied Jake's magnificent *Bone* in Betty's "It's Magic" show that opened back on December 13. A few of the poets spoke of Jake's own poetry. I felt dumber than reality TV for not having suspected and glommed onto Jake's writing his own poetry sooner, given his endlessly demonstrated passion for poetry.

But the horrible truth right then was that I was numbing up again, contracting into myself. I listened but didn't manage to absorb much from a series of speakers who emerged from the audience to say a few words. A brief period of silent meditation followed, highly welcomed by me. Then, as a windup, Roswell and his four fellow musicians, who

billed themselves as the group OmU, played a handful of numbers for about thirty minutes before refreshments were served. Then everyone milled around, eating homemade cookies and brownies and sipping coffee, sparkling water or soda. I introduced myself to Kristin and to Jake's son John, talked briefly with Betty Cuningham, John Lees, and Ruth Leonard, then wandered over and complimented Roswell on his excellent performance and on his dashing, blousy woolen trousers with wide horizontal stripes. When I asked if he'd had them handmade in Scotland, he smiled and said he couldn't remember where he'd picked them up. When his partner Verna Gillis wandered over I introduced myself and thanked her for all the help she'd been in arranging my visits. Then I drifted into the next room, where several large family albums were displayed on a large table off to one side. The photos fascinated me.

As I spent time going over them slowly, Lynn wandered into the room and joined me. She told me she had looked over the albums earlier but wanted to take her time with them now. We both studied them for a long time. They spanned Jake's whole life, from his early days on his grandparents' farm right through his teen years and on to his early days in New York, when he studied at the New School for Social Research and at the Pratt Institute of Art in downtown Brooklyn. It was fun to see old Brownie and Kodak pictures from the forties and fifties with scalloped edges, and to see from the sixties and seventies glossy and slightly bleary Polaroid shots taken at family gatherings, especially during the holidays and at weddings and funerals. There were shots of Jake's two weddings and shots of old gatherings after gallery openings, with Jake surrounded by his painter friends. What fascinated me the most were the shots of Jake on the farm sitting atop his horse Nellie, and the shots of the barn with the fields flowing away toward the mountains that loomed in the distance and cupped the valley the farm nestled in. Jake's painful memory of losing Nellie recurred to me and his peerless reading of Donald Hall's poem, *Names of Horses*, resounded again in my ears. I also pictured Jake and Ginny as teens

in high school rushing into the barn after returning from seeing the abstract expressionist show at Penn State and gathering paint cans, brushes, and cardboard before retreating into the field where they painted their impromptu drip-painting homage to Jackson Pollock. These pictures had a galvanic effect and spurred my determination to write this book. By then, despite interruptions, I had five chapters in first draft and nearly eight thousand words. I silently told myself to push on, despite any interruptions, and to follow Jake's command to keep a journal and a notebook in order not to lose contact with what I was doing on days when I couldn't work on the book properly.

Lynn and I left shortly thereafter. For good reasons I drove across the road to the Mobil station, pumped some gas into the tank, and then went inside, bought a diet soda, and said hello to my Indian buddy behind the counter. He was as glad to see me as I was to see him. It had been two months. Outside it was growing dark by then so we drove home carefully. I was so glad that Kristin and John had included in the program a favorite excerpt from Emerson that Jake had scrawled high up on his studio wall: "We may climb into the thin and cold realm of pure geometry and lifeless science, or sink into that of sensation. Between these extremes is the equator of life, of thought, of spirit, of poetry—a narrow belt." I'd read it numerous times when Jake planted me in one of the twin director's chairs in front of his work wall, and he and I had discussed it, agreeing that it meant you had to get that perfect equilibrium between head and heart—thought and feeling—in any artwork you undertook. Otherwise you risked ending up with sterile cerebration or sloppy sentiment. Jake's work kowtowed to no theory, accommodated no drippy emotionalism. All his work, even his very early work, exemplified the attainment of this Emersonian blend, this sublime and double-barreled brilliance. He was uncanny about achieving it.

The second memorial took place at Betty Cuningham's large and

tastefully laid out new gallery on Rivington Street, on the Lower East Side, a month later, on Sunday, February 22. Betty had printed a program as well. Reproduced on the cover was *Coming Morning*, one of the two recent paintings Jake had left me with on my first visit to his studio back on July 3 and one that I had written about in my newspaper article a few weeks later. Seeing it comforted me and convinced me yet again that Jake was touched with genius. Then Betty spoke with sophisticated brevity and admiration about what representing Jake had meant to her. Roswell Rudd next reprised his playing of *Memories of Jake*, wandering around the room with his slide trombone, filling the entire space with resounding music and injecting a joyous keynote for everything that followed.

Kristin Flynn spoke under the rubric “Remembrance” and cracked me up again with the tale of her first encounter with Jake when he remarked that she reminded him of a grasshopper. She then said that Jake was the most authentic person she’d ever known, matching my estimate exactly. When she related that Jake had destroyed not one, but two cell phones, with a hammer, I laughed aloud. It instantly recalled to mind his throwback, elemental, Thoreauvian existence; no question, his spare lifestyle was truly as plain and retro as that of the Mennonite farmers of his native Pennsylvania. I recalled the night, about three months earlier, when Kristin called on my cell while the Pine Hills Trailways bus I was on wound its way into Kingston, New York. I knew instantly who she was from talking to Jake, and she giggled when she told me Jake had been calling me frantically all day to confirm that I would visit the next day, as scheduled. I told her truthfully that I’d been calling him all day to confirm I’d be there but I couldn’t get through. We laughed about his erratic phone service. Jake was tucked away deep into the woods and his telephone connection proved an insuperable obstacle a lot of the time. And, as I mentioned, cell phones didn’t work at Jake’s—even if he had not smashed two, which I didn’t know back then—because there was no transmittal tower near him. Kristen said she’d get word to him that I was coming

to see him, and then hung up, laughing. Jake's monomaniacal dedication to making his art had always impressed me, but I knew from memoirs and biographies of artists that this boon to an artist was often a bane for anyone in a romantic, marital, or familial arrangement with such obsessed creators. In her memoir, *Night Studio*, Musa Mayer had made this point emphatically clear when describing what it was like to live with her father Philip Guston.

Dore Ashton succeeded Kristin at the lectern and spoke of her luncheon meetings and studio visits with Jake years ago when he lived in that great loft on the Bowery. Then a series of old friends, most of them prominent artists, recalled highlights in their lives provided by Jake. In the midst of this lineup gallery-owner David McKee reminisced about his years representing Jake and how much satisfaction that privilege had given him. A handful of painter friends then followed and spoke heartily about the pleasures of being in Jake's inner circle. Naoto Nakagawa recounted the funniest anecdote. He told of a night when Jake was among a group dining at a Chinese restaurant. They ordered the dishes family style, and Naoto suggested a favorite appetizer, a shrimp dish. When the dish came Naoto was deep in conversation with a fellow diner. When he turned back to the table he discovered the shrimp were all gone. Jake saw the stunned look on his face and explained that he had eaten three of the five shrimp, and that Naoto had to pay more attention to the food and less to the aesthetics conversation if he wanted to eat well. It was quintessential Jake, purely impish, totally playful, firmly instructive, endlessly charming, and supremely hilarious. The whole room cracked up, no one more than me.

The closing note took the form of Riley Brewster reading Wallace Stevens's *The Poem that Took the Place of a Mountain*. I realized instantly that this was the Stevens poem whose title Jake couldn't recall one night near the end of one of my last visits. He kept saying it was near the end of the *Collected Poems*. I looked and looked but it was late and, failing to find the poem and faced with the long drive home, I convinced Jake to give up the search. Yet I knew then that Riley had

hit it just right. I knew that was the poem Jake intended. I don't know how I knew, I just knew. When I got home that night I checked and the poem is near the end of the volume, but not as near the end as Jake had said it was. In any case Riley's reading of this potent poem furnished the perfect ending to the memorial.

The provenance of the poem also furnished an insight. On one of my first visits the previous summer we discussed Jake's extraordinary show of fall 2013, the one I wrote him my initial letter about. I mentioned how much I had liked the drawing of the mountain that appeared in that show—on the back wall, in the second room. I suddenly realized that's how Jake knew I'd choose the drawing of the mountain nearly a year later when he insisted I take a drawing as a gift. As I've emphasized, he missed nothing.

After the memorial I waited upstairs to introduce myself to Riley and tell him how spot-on his selection of the Stevens poem had been, and how effectively he had read it. Then I went out into the unseasonably warm and sunny day, a classic instance of a false spring February stunner, a day seemingly catapulted forward from early April. Snow-melt formed rills against all the curbs, and puddles spotted the sidewalks everywhere, making every pedestrian play a game of enforced hopscotch. Out of the blue I briefly wondered where She-Gray was and how she could cope with her unbearable loss. One of the speakers just now had mentioned the *Navajo Prayer* Jake had inscribed on the wall of his mudroom. On an early visit I was so impressed with this combination poem and hymn that I asked permission to inscribe it in my notebook. It opens with "In beauty may we walk all day long"; and its concluding lines, in refrain, are: "It is finished in beauty. It is finished in beauty."

That pretty much sums Jake up. But it doesn't sum up what he did for me and what he can do for anyone striving in the arts. For that I look to what he said to Zachary Keeting and Christopher Joy during an interview videotaped in June 2012 and now posted on their website, *Gorky's Granddaughter*: "I'm interested in painting.

I'm not interested in theory. It simply doesn't interest me." Later in that interview he said, "I choose to be free," reiterating what he had said way back when we discussed his late-career switch from abstract expressionism to a more representational style, just the way Philip Guston had switched styles. For this they both drew heavy fire from critics and from painter friends loyal to—and, in my opinion, stuck in—the over-mined and exhausted abstract expressionist vein, now unspeakably banal.

Technology is wonderful. You can Google Jake and hear his voice on some websites, telling funny anecdotes. On others, like *Gorky's Granddaughter*, you get to see him moving around in his studio, talking and demonstrating. It's nice to visit with him posthumously. I like to hear him say that his paintings concern the sublime, and that means, in Jake's own words, that they deal with "space, which is scary." I only wish I could tell him about a Stevens's poem recommended to me after Jake died by a friend, herself a celebrated Stevens scholar. It's called *The Sail of Ulysses* and is about that inexhaustible seeker after knowledge and beauty ever on his endless quest. It contains a line that echoes Jake's great remark that starting a painting is like being told to cut the lawn with cuticle scissors:

"Always and always, the difficult inch,
On which the vast arches of space
Repose..."





