

GRANDE/ DONALD LEE SEILER

Grande was such a difficult friend. His cantankerousness indelibly marked more than two decades of tumultuous engagement. Alcoholic and drug induced rages were followed, a day or so later, by conciliatory and deeply considered missives, penciled in big block letters. The envelopes that arrived in the post were often hand crafted and illustrated. We did have, enough to be sustaining, many cherished visits of a rare and luminous quality, of shared humor and perspective, and abiding warmth.

We never engaged in any erotic relationship—he referred to me as a daughter and was always honorable in that way. I can't imagine how tempestuous it must have been for anyone who did. We were comfortable with each other physically, and were affectionate; he cut my hair for me, pausing to scrutinize the work for minutes at a time, ever a sculptor. He massaged my feet with wintergreen alcohol from the time I was a teenager, before my mother died, and I massaged his hands and arms in return. Grande played drums for hours while I danced my way into an ecstatic trance state on nearly every visit I made to him over many years. He would request that I bring for the purpose a particular skirt he liked, of heavy fabric and a double weight hem which swung in perfect time, bunching and flinging as I spun.

Grande and I began corresponding when I moved from Florida to Arkansas in 1979. Our letters, even if we hadn't written in months, often crossed in the post. We seemed to grapple with the same dilemmas at the same time, penning reciprocal letters that were remarkable for their congruity of purpose and query, dissecting our feelings about events or cultural enigmas. He persisted in remarking of this phenomenon as "uncanny" even when it had been happening for many years. It never ceased to surprise him when we had hit on the same observation, and written to

each other almost simultaneously, usually in the deep quiet of the late night/early morning hours, a time for which he had a name I have now forgotten, and will have to examine his letters to recall.

When we were together, we often noticed the same particular details of something we saw, and noticed each other noticing. “You saw that!” he would exclaim. We often didn’t even need to comment beyond the arched eyebrow. I could look at his sculpture, whatever piece he was working on at the time, and in moments discern the one aspect of it that deviled him, a line or a transition, a curve of a neck that eluded him. “God! I knew you’d see that straightaway!” He would then show me the piles of reworked drawings cast onto the living room floor, or the “paper dolls,” little bent paper figures he made up to work out those problematic angles before he took the cutting torch to sheet steel.

I often sensed if he was in trouble, saying to Jeff, by way of explanation, only, “I have to go to Grande.” The first time Jeff met Grande we had been visiting Howard, another sculptor whose home and studio were about eight miles from Grande. We were due to meet my step-father in Lake Placid for dinner at an appointed hour. I had suffered a vague unease for most of the afternoon, and as we pulled away from Howard’s, I knew it had to do with Grande. Having told Jeff of our friendship previously, I now said that we must go there, that something was wrong. Jeff protested, indicating his watch, and the miles yet to be traveled, gesturing at the map between us on the seat of the little car we had rented on this first trip together from New York, before we moved to Florida.

Ignoring Jeff’s entreaties to slow down and follow our schedule, I drove eighty miles an hour down the middle of those deserted rural roads with increasing apprehension, and turned into Grande’s long grassy

driveway, beep-be-be-beeping all the way up to the house. By the time I had the car stopped, Grande, his face nearly as blue as the dolphin tattoos that leapt across those high cheeks, appeared at the doorway, long bony fingers grasping the jamb, eyes hollow, jaw slack. “Oh, shit, it’s his heart! Get him in the car, Jeff, while I find his medicine bottles. We have to go to Arcadia.”

Jeff piled into the back seat with Grande, listening fingers pressed to his fluttering pulse, while I blasted us to the pharmacy in Arcadia. We hauled him, insensible, one under each armpit, toes scraping the asphalt, through the double doors, past the gaping clerks, and threaded our way through the aisles back to the pharmacy. The pharmacist looked up in alarm from his sedate pill counting, to see two wild eyed lunatics dragging a blue man between us. Jeff barked, “One so-and-so-many milligram verapamil and a glass of water, quick!” The pharmacist jumped to it. Jeff got the pill down Grande, three spluttering sips from a conical paper cup, and we waited. Ten minutes later he threw his head back in a raspy cackle, “I *knew* if I just stayed quiet someone would come along...God bless you, dear girl...and who is this devastatingly handsome creature?” He cast a wobbling, indistinct gaze at Jeff, and I introduced them.

Grande had no phone at the time, and had for a number of days been out of the medication that regulated his ventricular arrhythmia. Jeff renewed the prescriptions, and we took him home with full bottles of his usual remedies. He insisted to ink a few fast sketches of “Dr. Jeff,” as he called him ever after, before we could go to meet my step father, who was by then frantic with worry, having phoned Howard and being told we had departed hours ago, saying we were headed directly to Lake Placid. Jeff’s chiseled profile was the first thing Grande had focused on when he “came back,” as

he said, and he simply had to draw it. We have one of those drawings framed in our bedroom.

After we moved from New York to St. Petersburg, Jeff convinced Grande to come with him to the Bay Pines VA hospital, to meet the cardiologist there, whom he felt was very good. Grande protested vehemently, his preconception of the Veterans system rising like bile at the thought. Jeff countered, “So just come have lunch with me in the doctors’ cafeteria, as my guest. Meet the docs, see the place. You can decide after that.”

Jeff and Grande walked the park-like waterfront grounds, with Grande marveling over the stately old Spanish style buildings, all on the historic register, which housed the outpatient clinics, post office, domiciliary, and cafeteria. They chatted with the other doctors over yellow plastic lunch trays. Jeff told them of Grande having used his GI bill for education after the war, to study sculpting in Paris with Zadkine, and of his sculpture strewn, rusticated residence between miles of open cattle range and a sprawling commercial orange grove. He lived in the “pale yellow oval,” as his friends called it, “the PYO,” yellow being the color denoting the lowest population density on the census map, his place nestled into the center of this most expansive and serene part of old Florida. In the telling, Jeff intimated the isolation of a reclusive old man with a heart condition. Last of all, they toured the modern hospital with its wide, light hallways hung with framed prints of good art, which Grande paused to examine, squinting through his battered reading glasses.

Grande referred to the place as “the Bay Pines Spa” after he was treated there for the first time. They somehow produced for him a private room with a lovely vista across the tree tops to the sun sparkled bay. At Bay

Pines he received competent, deferential care, and met grizzled old vets like himself who encouraged his muted early morning serenades on the harmonicas I brought him. Jeff stopped in to visit in the afternoons when he made his rounds. Grande swooned over the pretty nurses, for whom he made “paper doll” angels. Blowing horns and playing lyres, they flew on tethers of dental floss from the air conditioning vents at the nurses station when I came to take him home to his little house in the orange grove in Ona.

Once, acting on the strong impulse to go to Grande, I arrived unannounced to find the yard and the ridge of the tin roof flapping with several dozen huge black vultures. Opening a large umbrella, I swung it to scatter them. Grande’s large cement sculptures that stood sentinel around the yard stared back at me, mute and cold beneath the leafless limbs of the oak trees. I braced myself for what I would find in the house. The rooms reeked of sickness. Vultures shifted restlessly overhead, their hooked toes scraping the rusty roof panels, an echo of the dry rattle emanating from the bedroom.

Grande lay in his bed, bundled up, shaking with fever, a beret on his head and a hand knit muffler tight around his neck. He had been vomiting right out the window at the bedside. His sunken cheeks were flecked with vomit, and a bloody crust ringed his nostrils. He offered no resistance as I tucked his heart meds into my bag, rolled a change of clothing into a bundle, and steered him to the car, where he crumpled into the seat. I called Jeff from a pay phone at a gas station just off the highway in St. Pete. Would he walk across from his office to meet us in the emergency room at Bay Pines? He could lubricate the process of admission, perhaps. They got him dried out and patched up, one of several such extended visits to his personal spa.

Grande inaugurated my therapy table when Jeff retired from government service and we opened an office together in St. Petersburg.

Undergoing surgical removal of all his teeth in preparation for dentures, Grande's discomfort was substantial. He had been "going mad" with the pain of his rotted teeth, and used it as an excuse for a long, ugly bout of drunkenness. I made two round trips a week to Ona to bring him to the oral surgeon, who removed two teeth at a time.

Grande stayed in our house overnight each visit for the time he was being treated. I coaxed him to eat whatever we were having, knife and fork at our places, a spoon at his, with generous portions of succulent grilled meat or fish, and vegetables, all blended with broth until smooth. At first he had balked, unwilling to eat "baby food," but once I got him to taste it, his protest dissolved. I drove the seventy five miles each way on sequential days, back and forth with Grande and his art materials and notebooks, a full complement of conga drums lashed into the back of my van. He would drag them out behind the house to the bamboo grove early in the mornings, to play "before the beginning of the day's aggravations," meaning the painful dental work he endured at the time. Nana fielded the bills and she sent me a gas allowance for all of that.

When his gums had healed sufficiently, a dentist fit him for his new dentures, which Grande insisted must have crooked teeth, mismatched in color, punctuated with a gold "crown" clearly visible when he smiled, and "not a mouthful of perfect pearly whites like Ed McMahon." He asked to choose the individual enamel shades himself. The dentist was appalled at first, saying, "The lab will never do that!" but Grande prevailed, and both men were delighted with the resulting "tools," a credible semblance of the natural teeth of a seventy year old man.

On one of several overnight stays at Grande's little place on Gause Road in Ona, I suspended my hammock between the exposed rafters in the

living room, with a specialized mosquito net on it, as there were of course no screens on the windows, and the clouds of mosquitoes whined like machinery all night long. We visited within a ritual circle of smoke rising from slow burning mosquito repellent coils. Following a long evening of dinner, talk, and drumming, some drawing, and an hour of quiet letter writing together, we retired. Grande was in his room, his voice thickened with rum, swearing and slapping for most of the night, moaning in his sleep when he finally succumbed.

A family of possums had once inhabited the “attic” above the one part of the house that still had a ceiling, over Grande’s bedroom. Their malodorous and ill-tempered presence became intolerable, and neither persuasion nor threats could dislodge them. He had resorted to shooting them one by one with a spear gun once used to hunt fish on the reefs of the Bahamas. Now I lay awake in my hammock listening to the big red corn snakes who made their residence in some materials Grande had stored above the rafters of the open house, who swayed along with me from their perch atop the wall as I moved to Grande’s drums in the torpid afternoons. They hunted mice in the kitchen all night, with noisy tussles amid the pots and pans. Little squeaks of terror punctuated the hum of insects and the intermittent choruses of frogs and crickets. At dawn I finally slept.

With the first rays of sunrise, I was awakened by a piercing three-toned whistle. Grande moaned. The whistle again. Another moan. Another whistle. I crept out of the hammock to peer through the wood bead curtain at the door of his room. A small brown bird was standing on Grande’s chest. As I watched, it crouched and emitted another shrill, three note whistle. Grande stirred, arm thrown over his face swollen with the thick red welts of mosquito bites. He muttered “Alright, alright, go on in there. I’ll be right

there.” As he roused himself up, the bird took flight, darted out of the bedroom window, then wheeled back in through the open kitchen window, braking for a landing beside the two burner propane stove on the roughly hewn planks of the kitchen counter.

I froze in place as Grande stumbled through the rattling strings of beads. He pried the plastic lid off a can of walnut halves, and crushed a fistful of them onto the counter right in front of the expectant bird, murmuring to her all the while. After yawning and stretching, he shuffled back to his bed, barely noticing me where I stood.

The next time I visited, Grande was in tears, distraught. The same dowdy little brown bird had made her nest in the pocket of a jacket he hung on a peg inside the bedroom door. The jacket had blown down in the first strong gust of the thunderstorm I had just driven through. Noting the approach of the darkening squall line, the sculptor had swept up, put his tools away, and come inside to find his little friend fluttering around her two broken eggs, the yolks seeping across the pitted concrete floor. Eyes welling over, Grande pulled the back of his hand across his cheeks. We sat together without speaking as raindrops began to clatter like marbles on the roof.

Jeff and I went to the Musee Zadkine in Paris last February. What a wonderful little cozy museum, housed in Zadkine’s home and studios, full of work that was clearly of the same lineage as Grande’s. The influence was obvious. It was odd to wander those intimate rooms, with their high walls of windows framing barren tree limbs against the leaden winter sky, and imagine the young Seiler, as Zadkine’s apprentice, just after the war, passing through those same doorways, his head full of planes and angles.