ROBERT CHIARITO

Sicilian Trilogy Panel 1, 2017
Oil on canvas, 72 x 64 in

DOUGLAS SOVERN

Grace Notes

Not so long before he died, my father-in-law insisted we dig up his old drum kit—a scuffed-up set of Ludwig jazz traps we rescued from a moldering corner of his basement—so that he could sit in with my band at his senior home's spring barbecue. His tempo was given to rushes and lags, and his chops were more than a little sloppy, but George was unfettered behind the kit, like a Labrador retriever, I remember thinking, with drumsticks in his paws. His eyes danced, his foot pedal slapped the kick drum in time (mostly) with the fat notes of my bass guitar's bottom end. We kept things simple, running through a few basic blues numbers, but then George surprised us by calling out jazz standards, leading us on a nostalgic wander through the songbook of his youth. My own childhood soundtrack being a generation behind his, I played swing jazz like a man in dress shoes stepping gingerly onto a frozen lake. George intuited my uncertainty and led me where the music needed to go. This man who could no longer tie his own shoes or fasten a shirt button could still negotiate his ride cymbal and tom-toms, even on songs he hadn't played since his days in twiggy ties and pleated Donegal tweeds.

"That was in the pocket, son," George beamed after "It Don't Mean a Thing." "What should we try next?"

We played until he was depleted, resting his sticks with quiet rim shots instead of rattling them across the toms. Later, my wife would discover he had wet himself rather than interrupt the set to take a break.

I brought him a plate of tri-tip and slaw as we sat in the sun.

"You threw me for a loop a couple times, George. Where the chorus had an extra beat, or the turnaround went to the six instead of the five."

"You did fine, son. Just fine."

"We'll be tighter next time. I'll get the music."

"You don't need music. Get off the book. Improvise."

After lunch, I helped him pack his cymbals—or, more accurately, I packed them up while he fussed over what I was doing.

"Careful now. Those are vintage."

They seemed like tarnished relics to me but to him, they were beautiful: thick bronze Zildjians forged in the 1940s, with a deep, brooding patina from all those years in the basement.

"I can clean these up for you if you want, George. My drummer uses vinegar."

"Vinegar! You'll kill the sound. Don't you dare. They're perfect the way they are."

"But they're *green*."

"Green is just fine. They're seasoned. I got them on the South Side after the war. They must be worth a fortune. You keep them safe. For next time."

We never played together again, but I did keep those cymbals. My son plays them now.

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It took until then for George and me to stumble upon our language, to move beyond the stilted waltz of a man and his father-in-law. We found a way that day to speak through sticks and strings that we couldn't with our clumsy tongues. It came too late for me to get to know George very well. It wasn't until the downward slope of my forties that I finally met the woman who would become my wife, and by then, George was already a hollowed-out trunk, with brittle limbs and failing roots. The role of father-in-law was not new to him, having seen his younger daughter marry years before, but I was crawling into new terrain—marriage, in-laws, the fraught prospect of fathering children. The limbs of my own family tree took some dark, gnarled turns, and I wasn't certain, even in the thick of middle age, that they could support more weight.

Within a few months of that exuberant performance, George had moved into our library to die. He was barely seventy and agreed, reluctantly, to spend the last days of his life in a hospital bed surrounded by books, family photos, and a view of San Francisco Bay. I found the idea unsettling at first, but my wife insisted it would be more comfortable and dignified than the hospital. There were worse places to fade out, I supposed, and though in the end I would never again be able to sit in that room without thinking of George's final moments, the telescope of time would reveal that he opened a door for me more than I helped him close one.

We arrayed pictures around his deathbed, some from our wedding, in which we knelt to flank him because he was no longer able to stand on his own. He looked far more vital in the older photos: from his youth as a camp counselor, from his travels to Japan and Borneo, from his younger years playing piano with Louis Armstrong, from boisterous family gatherings with a sprawling brood of smiling, healthy Coles.

The Coles, from George and his brothers to their children, all seemed at remarkable ease in those pictures, with the camera and with one another. They shared the same broad, committed smile, without artifice or pretense. If the Coles were bothered by the secrets and stresses that can pull any family apart, it wasn't captured on film. The same could not be said of old black-and-white snaps of my own large family, in which the children turn away from the camera, or feign an insincere baring of teeth in response to the unseen jabs of our mother, father, stepmothers one, two, or three, or especially my stepfather, who, while commanding us to smile, is most often seen with a grimace.

George needed around-the-clock care in our family den turned hospice. The best thing I knew to do was make sure he had his music, so I set up his old turntable, its platter warped, its stylus dull, but still able to spin his beloved LPs around and around, with an occasional scratch or skip, but preferred by him to the thinner sound of the brand-new iPod we'd offered him.

George could barely speak by then, lacking the strength to do more than whisper a word or two every now and again. Instead, he sang along by smiling, danced with his eyebrows, one up, the other down, then both up or down together, sometimes with the beat, sometimes in syncopation, expressing a remarkable range of emotions, from satisfaction to surprise, with merely the muscles in his face. I knew which were his favorite Armstrong albums, and that he liked to listen to them over and over, and when I would make a misguided attempt to dispel presumed monotony by removing *Singin' N' Playin'* or *Porgy and Bess* and putting on some Brubeck or Gershwin or, God forbid, Miles Davis instead, his disappointment would register instantly, his mouth turning down, his eyes clouding, the brows settling into an even line of disapproval, retreating to the walls of the dance hall in his memory, until I quickly lifted the needle and restored Louie to his rightful place, and then the brows would burst back onto their dance floor, wallflowers no more, jitterbugging to the rat-a-tat-tat of Danny Barcelona's snare drum and Satchmo's joyful horn.

* * *

My father-in-law heard that music in person for the first time in 1951, when he was ten. His cousins took him to see Armstrong's All Stars play outside Chicago. Irrepressible even then, little Georgie approached Satchmo during a break, walking brazenly to the lip of the stage, and let Louie know that he was a musician, too.

"You sounded keen on 'Basin Street,'" the boy enthused. "You're blowin' real cool today, Daddy-O." (This was how hepcats like Georgie talked back then, as recounted later by George's brothers after enough wine around the Thanksgiving dinner table and confirmed by a stream of letters between Armstrong and my future father-in-law that I read, wearing requisite white gloves, during a visit to the Armstrong Archives at Queens College.)

Always friendly, Armstrong asked the young fan his name.

"Georgie Cole. I play piano, and I can play that song better than Fatha!" he said, referring brashly to Armstrong's legendary pianist Earl "Fatha" Hines.

"That so!" Armstrong laughed. "We best let you sit in then, right? Earl, take a break. We got ourselves a new piano man."

And so it was that Earl "Fatha" Hines was shoved aside for one Georgie Cole, not quite eleven, yet playing piano with the biggest star in the history of American popular music.

George played two tunes to open the second set, then went back to his seat. He wasn't a prodigy on piano. But his indomitable buoyancy endeared him immediately to Armstrong, who had a similar joie de vivre. After the show, Armstrong brought him backstage, and they posed for a photograph. Most would have been satisfied with that. But not young Georgie. Two years later, when George was twelve, Armstrong came through town again, and George returned. This time, when George approached the stage, Armstrong's eyes lit up.

"Hey there, Georgie! What are you gonna play for us today?" Not only did Satchmo remember his young fan, he invited him backstage once more, took more pictures, autographed the ones George brought, and once again, sent his piano player, by this time Billy Kyle, packing for a break so that little Georgie could sit in and play a few tunes.

Thus began a friendship that would last until Armstrong's death in 1971, days before George's thirtieth birthday. As he grew older and his memory faded, incapable of making new impressions but more fixated by the day on older ones, George's relationship with Satchmo became the center of his life, and the source of his deepest solace. In his toast at our wedding, George invoked Louie and his wife Lucille in such a familiar way that two of my siblings, confused, asked me later if he was talking about relatives. In tribute to George, our first moments as husband and wife were spent dancing to "What a Wonderful World."

* * *

By the time we brought George home to die, we'd had to learn some unexpected steps. We had joked about the prospect of becoming sandwich parents, caring for infants and invalids at the same time. Instead, we were about to be breadless.

After the second miscarriage, we'd grasped for silver linings.

"We'll have more money," I said.

"We'll get more sleep," said my wife.

We hadn't surrendered—nor had my ambivalence—but now George had become a more immediate priority. My wife gathered extra blankets to bring down to the library. I fussed with a recalcitrant latch on our bedroom window.

"Why are you doing that *now*?" my wife asked when she came back upstairs. "Sometimes I don't understand your brain."

"It's going to be a cold night."

"Do you want the first shift with Dad?"

"Whatever you want."

I'd made room on the dresser for my toolbox by pushing aside the stacks of fertility drugs to which we'd been slaves for months. I grabbed a smaller screwdriver to fix the latch. My wife neatened the boxes of Bravelle and Menopur.

"You have to want this to work," she said. "It won't just happen by itself."

"What I want," I said, struggling to close the casement, "is for this damn thing to work." The latch caught. "There!" I said. "I got it!"

"Leave it open. We need the air."

The next morning, my wife sent for her sister and one of their uncles. And we arranged for a night nurse through a hospice service.

* * *

The nurse came in the early evening, as dusk fell, tombstone gray, across the water and sky outside George's drafty bay window. Elizabeth was a tiny Filipina with strong hands and quiet feet. For a nurse, she had a puzzling aversion to providing actual medical care; she was more attendant to George's soul than his body. She would sit at his side and clasp his hands, muttering a prayer (I assumed) in Tagalog (I guessed), gazing into his gauzy eyes, petting his flailing hair. "You have a warm heart, George," she would say. I know it gave my wife comfort to have her there, and so it did me, easing George through the long, slow nights and allowing the rest of us a few hours of uneven sleep. I could hear muted trumpets and Elizabeth's rhythmic chanting from downstairs as I tossed and turned.

In anyone else, that heart, failing now, would have given out years before. But George was one of those warriors you could not kill, like James Bond left alone by an overconfident villain.

He was given a death sentence when he was just thirty, diagnosed with end-stage renal failure. Dialysis was still in its infancy and the kidney disease he had was considered unsurvivable. But survive he did, somehow, becoming a pioneer in self-dialysis, purifying his blood through a machine that did the work of his poor, shrunken kidneys, for years longer than the best experts said was possible and always with the brightest of dispositions, cheerfully reading to his two daughters, teaching them to play chess, correcting errors in their homework while the surrogate kidney cleansed his system. To his girls, it seemed perfectly normal to have a father chained to a machine. They did as they were told. They sponged up his tutelage. They embraced the importance of self-reliance, perseverance, and living on the sunny side of the street.

Later, George would receive a transplant from my wife's sister, so he soldiered on, finally free of the machinery, but not unburdened by compromising health setbacks for very long, as he suffered a minor heart attack, and then prostate cancer, and finally, a small stroke, but even then, his eyes danced with the light of someone who saw only the wonders of the world he was blessed to witness in barefaced awe, even if he could no longer feel his extremities, or walk without leaning on someone, or play the piano he had once made sing in time with Satchmo.

I was forced by circumstance to find my own brand of resilience. My childhood was a tangle of upheavals, from my parents' divorce before my third birthday to our many moves around the country with my mother and new stepfather, to my stepfather's premature death. Friends were a fleeting thing. Family had an impermanence that fostered caution and reserve. My widowed mother was saddled with seven children, just five of them her own, and little money to raise us all. I was given to daily nosebleeds and fidgety bursts of nervous energy even before my stepfather began to thrash me with a folded newspaper, and then his belt, and then, as I grew bigger, his open palms, and finally, his fists. I came to know the scent of his rage well enough to veer into our backyard, or the orchard behind it, or a friend's house beyond that, if I sensed it when I came home from school. I survived, and he didn't, so my torment was confined to just a few years, but in those years, as a boy, its only ending was in my imagination. It was little wonder I waited so long to marry, to even consider having children of my own, even if I'd managed to emerge with my optimism intact.

My wife told me, sometime after we were engaged, that she recognized in me the same light she saw in her father. She hoped he and I would bond over music and politics, engage in vigorous discussions of history and current events, but in reality, given my own limitations and the slow but certain advance of his dementia, my efforts in those areas came to rough halts on bumpy conversational cul-de-sacs, stubs of silence curbing our best intentions. It wasn't until that spring afternoon, the sun warming my bass strings and glinting off those green Zildjians, that we finally found a way to converse in comfort.

* * *

The night before George died, I took a turn on a stiff chair pulled to his bedside, the nurse in a recliner in the shadows, working her rosary. As always, Satchmo played softly in the background. George was calm, his breathing even, assisted by a tube connected to a ventilator. He hadn't spoken for several days. He hadn't eaten in as many. The record on the turntable was *The Great Summit,* a historic collaboration between Armstrong and Duke Ellington. George had already listened to it a handful of times. On Monday, he'd smiled and tried to hum along, his eyebrows moving in tandem with Satchmo's trumpet. But by now, late Wednesday, the brows were still, the smile gone. If the music was still penetrating his consciousness, he showed no sign of it.

A bouncy track called "The Beautiful American" came on, led by Ellington's piano, then Armstrong taking charge with his horn. The snare drum was especially prominent. I'd heard this song half a dozen times that week and hadn't noticed the snare. I leaned forward. Something was different. I watched George breathe, the pure oxygen force-fed to his nostrils by the ventilator and the rhythmic pumping of its compressor. In a moment of wonder, I understood: It wasn't a snare drum at all; it was the compressor. George's ventilator was keeping perfect time with Satchmo and the Duke. The machine keeping him alive was also providing percussion. If I'd tried a thousand times to line up that record with that compressor, I couldn't have made it happen once.

"George," I whispered. "Listen! Do you hear it?"

I wasn't sure if he was asleep or just had his eyes closed.

"George, do you hear that snare? That's you! It's your ventilator." His eyes fluttered."You're jamming with Louie, George. To the end, you are still jamming with Louie."

His eyes shot open. A broad smile filled his face. He parted his lips.

"Oh yeah," he rasped, mimicking Armstrong's signature phrase, the way Satchmo signed off songs with a drawn-out *yes, sir* to life. "Oh yeah!"

Elizabeth sprang to her feet. "He is awake! George, you are talking!"

He turned, smiled warmly. Perhaps he mistook her for someone else. "Oh yeah," he whispered, then closed his eyes, but the smile stuck, even as he faded back into something resembling sleep.

Those were the last words I would hear him say.

* * *

"George is wet." That's how Elizabeth greeted me the next morning as I came down to the library, still blinking sleep out of my eyes, hard reality confounding my unreasonable hope that perhaps he was still smiling, maybe even talking. The man hadn't eaten since Monday. This was Thursday. It had taken every ounce of his remaining energy to muster those two words the night before.

She pulled back the top sheet to reveal a pool of urine puddling around his midsection. His condom catheter had slipped off, its tube no longer collecting the dark drops trickling from his dehydrating body.

"Put it back on!" I instructed her, pointing at the flaccid rubber and his stubby, pale manhood.

"I can't touch that," she said.

"But you're the nurse!"

"No. I can't touch that."

Handling my dying father-in-law's private parts was not part of my job description either. I went upstairs and woke my wife.

"Honey, I can't help you with that," she said, to my surprise.

"But he's *your* father!"

"Exactly. He's my *father.*"

I returned to the library, where Elizabeth had a clean sheet ready, as soon as someone would sheath George.

"She says you have to do it," I lied.

She shook her head.

I stared at George in exasperation. He was in deep sleep, seemingly unperturbed by the sting of his urine, which at this point was the color of Grade A maple syrup. The flesh between his legs, almost wider than it was long, lay in a silvery nest, dribbling pee on his thigh.

When one is young, some things seem impossible. That morning was when I recognized, as you do if you live long enough, that sometimes one does what one must.

"Do we have any gloves?" I asked Elizabeth. Without a word, she handed me a latex pair. I slapped them on, tight. As delicately—but as quickly—as I could, I lifted the Cole family jewels with one hand and pulled the condom on with the other. It took some wrangling to secure the rubber, its hard rim snug against the curls emerging from the folds of his skin. It was all over in a few seconds.

I rolled George's dormant body back while the nurse pulled the soaked sheet from under him. She fitted the new sheet and I moved him back into position. She came around to my side of the bed and tucked in the other corners. I pulled another clean sheet and a blanket over him and smoothed his hair. I could feel his breath, warm, mixing with my own.

* * *

George's brother and two daughters spent hours at his

side that Thursday, telling him stories he did not hear. I watched from across the room. Outside the broad windows, the day's inevitable parade: the sun's path lightening, then darkening, the shades of blue on the surface of the bay; the soft sea-green branches of the acacia and eugenia leaning in the breeze; two Steller's jays nagging each other, squabbling over a bit of food, then hopping off to share it on a branch of cedar. Inside the room, the arc of George's day felt as inescapable. We made some lunch, then ordered some dinner. The sun settled behind the sea, the moon rose, and the blue jays ceased their squawk. And when the nurse returned, George's family retired for the night, ready to resume their vigil the next morning.

I was too anxious to sleep. I took as long as I could to get ready for bed. The boxes of fertility drugs glared at me from the dresser. Nearing midnight, I sat on the edge of the bed as my wife began to doze off.

"He might die tonight," she murmured.

"That's what I'm afraid of."

"They'll never get to know their grandfather."

"Who?" I asked.

"Our kids."

"We might not ever know them either."

"Don't even say it."

I kissed her good night and drew the blankets tight. I did not want George passing in the night, a stranger at his side. I told myself if I woke the next morning and he was gone, I would have let him down.

I crept back downstairs. Elizabeth was surprised to see me. The room was warm with gentle threads of trumpet and the calm rhythm of the compressor's whoosh. I sat at George's bedside and took his hand. I touched his cheek, cool and sallow.

A loud rat-a-tat-tat burst from the speakers. I jumped, my first instinct to turn the music down, but too late: just as he had the night before, George came to, opening his eyes wide and raising his eyebrows in their now familiar, quizzical way.

"You hear that drum solo, George?" I asked. "Listen to that!" I leaned close, my lips almost touching his ear. "You're going to be playing with Louie again soon, George! Real soon." He burst into another broad grin, even wider than the last. He didn't speak.

"Look at the big smile!" Elizabeth beamed. "Such a big smile." Then, as suddenly as it had come, the smile was gone. His eyes closed. The music settled down, and so did he. I sat, holding his hand. The nurse got up to lower the volume but I motioned her not to.

I was thinking about heading upstairs to try to sleep when his color darkened. His cheeks flushed, a deep red, then almost purple. His eyes snapped open. He looked scared.

"What is happening?" I asked.

"He is leaving," Elizabeth said.

His breathing became more labored, his chest heaving, the gasps heavy and close. I put my hand on George's chest and whispered again. With each rise and fall I could feel his ear brush my lips.

"He is fighting," the nurse said.

"You've been a fighter all your life, George," I murmured. "You don't have to fight anymore. It's okay. Let go." I appealed to Elizabeth. "What should I do?"

"Help him. Make him comfortable. This is what happens."

George's eyes were wide open, his face crimson, his breathing shallow and fast.

The music had turned upbeat and brassy. Maybe something mellower, I thought. I remembered an Armstrong concert in Chicago from the early 1950s, around the time George and Satchmo had first met. Perhaps that would bring him peace. Take him back. Move him forward.

I found the LP, slid it on the turntable. The music was calmer, more soothing. George began to relax. His gurgling quieted. His color lightened. I tightened my grip on his hand. I alternated between whispering and humming. It seemed to make a difference. I kept it up until the end of the song, then the next one, and the next.

Elizabeth put her hand on my shoulder. "You should wake your wife. He is leaving."

I still wasn't sure.

George turned his head and looked me in the eye. If he could have, I'm sure he would have rasped out one more *oh yeah*!

She shook me. "Go!"

I roused the others. By the time they made it to the library, George's breaths were much further apart, his face fading, his struggle ceasing. My wife's uncle took George's wrist.

"He's at peace," he said.

The last song on the side was "You'll Never Walk Alone." It ended with a flourish. The crowd, recorded in 1952, all long gone now, roared.

As their cheers faded, George rattled one last breath, then his eyelids came down, a curtain, falling slowly.

My wife took her father's hand and held it to her cheek, sobbing softly. I put my arm around her and drew her close, letting her head fall on my shoulder.

* * *

In the morning, two men with a thick black plastic bag came to take George's body away. Two more with a truck full of hospice equipment arrived to dismantle his bed. Elizabeth filled a red garbage bag with the catheters and condoms and stained sheets. My wife sat with her uncle and filled out forms. In a photo on the mantle, George still radiated life, his arm around a beaming Louie Armstrong. In another, on a bookshelf he could see when he died, his ten-year-old self banged away on the piano with Armstrong blowing hard on the trumpet, Cozy Cole in the background pounding the drums and grinning madly at the brash kid who had shoved Fatha Hines aside.

I couldn't hear the music. The air hung heavy and stale. Someone needed to pack away his records, take apart the stereo. It wasn't going to be me.

I imagined we needed something from the outside world. I volunteered to be the one to get it.

Bright sunshine filtered through an incongruous stand of redwoods hard against a gas station on the main thoroughfare. Those trees never made any sense to me. Presumably they were there first and no one had the gall to take them down as the city rose around them. There was a small concrete pad at their feet, a square of pavement, maybe twelve feet by twelve, sometimes used to park vehicles in need of repair. On this day, at this moment, instead of a wheezing, leaking Buick, there was music. A jazz trio. A young black man leered wildly—a drummer's crazy grin—as his arms flew across his simple kit. Another thumped away on a worn standup bass, strips of laminate peeling from its side. And a thin white man blew the trumpet, aiming his biggest blasts at the browning needles hanging from the old growth trees above.

I knew the song in less than a heartbeat. "Basin Street Blues."

I'd never seen musicians occupy this space. I never have since.

I stood and listened, nodding with the music. They were good, the drummer and trumpeter especially. When they finished, the trumpeter freed his lips, moistened them with his tongue. "Any requests?" he asked.

"What are you doing here?" I asked in return.

He smiled. "I don't know that one."

"Do you know any more Louie Armstrong?"

"Of course." He smiled again, licked his lips, and turned to the band. "A one, two, three . . ."

It was "What a Wonderful World." They slowed it way down, the trumpeter playing the melody, with a mournful vibrato that made it sound almost like a New Orleans funeral march.

I let its comfort wash over me, drowning out the passing cars and the honks and squeals and shouts of the town around us. Years later, when I gave George's cymbals to my son, and his piano music to my daughter, I thought about how their grandfather gave me the strength and grace to bring them into the world, and how much this song meant to him. "Learn the rudiments from these charts," I told them. "But always, be ready to improvise."

I tossed a five into the trumpet case and walked away, the music following me back up the hill, toward my home. The sound of the trumpet faded as I climbed the last block, and when I reached our library and went to the window to point out the band on the avenue below to my wife, they were gone.

Douglas Sovern wrote the first-of-its-kind Twitter novel *TweetHeart* in 2011. Since then, his short stories have appeared in *Narrative*, *Sand Hill Review*, the *Madison Review*, and over a dozen other magazines; have been honored by *Narrative* and *Zoetrope: All-Story*; and have been nominated for four Pushcart Prizes and *Best of the West*. A graduate of Brown University, he is the political reporter at KCBS in San Francisco and has won almost 250 journalism awards, including the duPont-Columbia, Edward R. Murrow, Sigma Delta Chi, and National Headliner Awards. In 2017, he was elected to the Bay Area Radio Hall of Fame. He lives in Oakland, California, with his wife and two children. Follow him on Twitter @SovernNation.