



Goodbye to Tenth Street

A novel
by Irving Sandler

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PROLOGUE

(September 30, 1963)

On the morning of September 30, 1963, Michael Pearson (or Little Mike, as he was nicknamed), walked south from the Fourteenth Street subway on Fourth Avenue and turned left on Tenth Street. He noted the seedy tenements lining both sides of the street, which looked even drabber in New York City's slate blue light. He stopped at number 86, the studio of Peter Burgh. He climbed up the cast iron steps in front of the building, let himself in with a key the artist had given him, and looked down on Burgh's body sprawled on the floor in front of one of his canvases, his chest covered in drying blood, a revolver in his hand. Sadly, he addressed Burgh's corpse. "I knew I couldn't stop you killing yourself, but I tried, maybe not hard enough." Pearson glanced at a book next to Burgh's body. Balzac's *The Unknown Masterpiece*. "So you've aped Frenhofer's suicide in the end. You should have junked that fucking book years ago."

Pearson phoned the police, and when they arrived told them that he was Burgh's best friend, and yes he would be available for further questioning. After the police were finished examining Burgh's body and had left, Pearson phoned the artist's lawyer, Gilbert Truson, who said he would make funeral arrangements. Pearson then called the *New York Times*, *Herald Tribune*, and *New York Post*.

The following day, the three newspapers ran front-page news stories. So did the *Daily News*, whose headline read "BIG-TIME ARTIST SUICIDE." The *Times* obituary was written by Mark Wall, its senior art critic, and spread over a third of a page with a photograph of the artist and one of his canvases. It read in part:

Even a movement such as Abstract Expressionism, despite its growing worldwide recognition, is polluted by mediocrity. It does, however, include a few genuine artists, indeed, painters of sterling achievements. One such was Peter Burgh, justly renowned for his lyrical paintings of the early 1950s. They were heavily influenced by Impressionism, perhaps too heavily, but as abstractions, were nonetheless

highly original and exhibited a masterful command of painting rare among his fellow artists. Unfortunately, Burgh's last paintings, exhibited at the Sandy Jones Gallery, were failures, the issue of an artist in decline, but this should not detract from the superb work that preceded them.

In the *New York Post*, Joseph Sawyer wrote, "Had Burgh been a School of Paris painter, his obituaries would have hailed him as a 'Jewel in the Diadem of French Culture.' Americans are uncomfortable with such encomiums, but Burgh's contribution to modern painting in the global arena deserves just this sort of tribute. Indeed, Abstract Expressionism is the triumph of American painting, and in large measure, its stature depends on Burgh's paintings."

CHAPTER 1: Peter Burgh

(July 22, 1956)

Eyes to the floor, Peter Burgh paced from the rack of paintings on one wall of his loft to the window on the opposite wall. He watched his shadow change as he moved. Sweating, he glanced into the glare of overhead floodlights. *It's hot enough for July without you. This frigging heat wave's gonna give me jungle rot.* Burgh stopped and stared at the painting. It consisted of an image of toned down red, yellow, and orange softly brushed areas in the center of the picture that stretched close to the edges but left a border of bare canvas. Colors that generally evoked pleasure looked depressed. *I keep turning beautiful pigment into shit—death. That phony art critic Marshall Hill asked in his crappy review, why don't I get the painting to the picture edges? He added that I paint like a girl, arrogant asshole. Like I can't get it up. But I may damp down the colors even more and leave more canvas to show America's top dog critic that my image has to be its own world. That new critic—what's his name, Sawyer?—understands it. But he still turns me into a latter-day Monet, an Abstract Impressionist, like I'm painting hay stacks, or big tits like Renoir. God help us. Screw critics.*

Burgh looked down on the newspapers he had spread across the studio floor in front of the painting wall and grimaced at the heaps of drying pigment scattered about. A clump of cadmium red partly covered a headline, "...Miller Admits Helping Communist Front Group." *And the scribbler marries Marilyn Monroe, lucky guy. Three frigging weeks of painting, and nada. How depressing can it get?* He was suddenly aware of the jarring scratch of a needle spinning on his record player's turntable. He walked to the corner of the loft, moved the needle back to the beginning. Louis Armstrong. He stood for a moment listening, relaxing. Then, tensing up, he returned to his canvas. He glanced at his watch. *Past midnight already.*

His eyes again focused on the canvas; he lowered himself onto a wooden folding chair in the middle of the room and lit a Lucky Strike. He picked up a bottle of scotch, which was sitting next to an empty glass near the edge of a glass-topped table covered with mounds of pigment and brushes. He poured an

inch into the glass, and as he did, noted that the bottle was half empty. He glanced at two crumpled cigarette packs on the floor and an ashtray full of butts. He shook his head in disgust. *Got to cut down on the drinking and smoking.*

Burgh addressed the painting wearily. “You’re frigging hopeless.” Picking up a palette knife, he scraped pigment from the canvas onto the pile on the floor. *Three weeks of painting shot to hell.* Burgh suddenly felt exhausted. *Fourteen hours in the studio.* Eyes heavy, he shut them. Opening them, he shook off his drowsiness, downed the drink on the table, walked unsteadily to the phonograph, flipped it off, and continued on toward the back of the studio, past a dilapidated armchair, a Formica table covered with old art magazines and a radio, past a clothes closet and an unmade bed, which doubled as a couch, above which he had tacked a color reproduction of Piero della Francesca’s fresco in Arezzo, a postcard of Jackson Pollock’s *Lucifer*, and a small geometric-abstract oil painting by Michael Pearson. Stumbling on a book on the floor, he picked it up, glanced at the title, *Ulysses*, and flipped it toward a bookcase full of books surrounded by stacks of more books on the floor. He looked around his studio. *How shabby can you get? Got to clean this shithouse, straighten it up, like Neil Johnson’s loft. Got to talk some babe who stays here for more than a one-night stand into picking up a broom.* He himself did so only when a collector, critic, or curator arranged to drop by.

Burgh felt hungry and recalled that he had not eaten since breakfast. He looked into a small adjoining room, at a sink full of food-encrusted dishes and a pan on a hotplate coated with acrid fat, some of it oozing. Turning away in disgust, he walked to a small refrigerator, opened it, looked inside, and closed it with a frown. He decided to go to the Cedar Street Tavern for whatever food was still available. Perhaps the bar scene would brighten his mood. Burgh washed his hands, removed his paint-spattered overalls, and tossed them on the couch. He removed a pair of corduroy pants and a khaki shirt from the closet and put them on. He reached for a knit tie but changed his mind. *Not in this heat.* He glanced at a small mirror on the wall in the bathroom and ran his fingers through his thinning hair. His reflection reminded him of Delacroix’s portrait of Chopin, but his face was not as long or thin as the composer’s. *Where had I seen it? Can’t remember.*

Burgh looked back at his unfinished canvas and shook his head dejectedly, flicked the light switch, walked out of his studio into the hall, and climbed down a flight of uneven steps. The studio odor of oil paint and turpentine faded as he registered the urine smell of bums who had figured out how to jimmy open the front door and, in inclement weather, slept in the hallway. Downstairs, Burgh opened his mailbox, removed an envelope, glanced at the return address—the

Whitney Museum—and slipped it into his jacket pocket. Out in the street, the heat intensified the stench of rotting garbage, automobile fumes, and stale liquor that wafted from a cellar bar, a favorite of East Side derelicts. The face of his former wife, Eileen, involuntarily came to mind, but he quickly suppressed it and thought he could use a woman, but shrugged it away.

From beneath the stairs leading from the street to the bar came a muffled voice. “Dime, Mack?”

“Is that you, Red?” Burgh responded.

“Yeah.” He threw down two quarters.

“Thanks, sport.”

Kicking an empty wine bottle in a brown paper bag out of the way, Burgh walked west to University Place and then south toward Eighth Street and the Cedar’s store-front window, which, like a beacon, lit up the deserted street without dispelling its forlorn aspect.

Burgh entered the air-conditioned tavern, sat down on a stool at the bar close to the door and relaxed. Just being there calmed him. He never could figure out why. Perhaps because the bar was frequented by fellow artists. The Cedar’s appearance itself had little charm—a nondescript place, no different from thousands of lower-middle class American taverns, a long bar in the front and booths in the rear. Perhaps it was the Cedar’s anonymity that Burgh liked. And it served a purpose. Colorlessness became protective coloration. The lack of arty decorations—chianti bottles, driftwood, travel posters, or far-out paintings—kept away the local bohemians who lived the life of art without creating any. And the bar’s lack of television made it unattractive to neighborhood folk. Its ordinary appearance also discouraged Madison Avenue types who posed as bohemians after five o’clock, the chic of all varieties who came slumming, and tourists from Brooklyn and the Bronx who came to Greenwich Village to gape at the weirdos. Burgh recalled Willem de Kooning’s description of the Cedar as a “no-environment.” No picturesqueness, no romance, no nostalgia—just the right hangout for avant-garde artists in New York who wanted to be left to themselves. However, there *was* “art” on the walls—run-of-the-mill 19th century English sporting prints. Burgh found them oddly restful. While studying one in which racehorses jumped over a hurdle, he thought that the trees in the background were nicely handled.

John, the Cedar’s owner, who was tending bar, greeted Burgh cordially. John was a former army sergeant. Seeing him always reminded Burgh of his stint as an officer in the Marine Corps during World War II, and he involuntarily stiffened his posture. The two veterans rarely talked about the War, but in an unspoken way, they seemed to recognize their mutual experience and take pride

in it. Burgh ordered a scotch and soda and a sandwich or whatever was still available in the kitchen. John said, "You're in luck. Cook's still in the kitchen cleaning up and he'll make you something, not predicting what though."

Drink in hand, Burgh stood up and walked along the length of the bar toward the booths in the rear to see who was there. He heard a drunken bellow, "Burgh, you sad-sack son of a bitch." Jackson Pollock was seated in a booth, and next to him, Marshall Hill, the critic.

"Hi Jack," Burgh sighed.

"Get the fuck over here, asshole."

"Not tonight Jack. Too beat." He felt a twinge of distaste and regret. Wheeling around he retreated back to the far end of the bar. He was joined by Neil Johnson who had emerged from the men's room in the rear. Burgh brightened and said, "Hey, Neil, how's the second-generation hotshot doing?"

"Not as well as I should be what with you old farts, pardon me, old masters, hogging the limelight and shoveling in the dough. Are Jackson and his conniving mouthpiece over there giving you a hard time?"

"Just the expected. But that fat-assed Hill really pisses me off. Did you read what he wrote about me in *Art News*? That I'm arguably the best lady painter around. The asshole said *arguably*, imagine that, arguably. That frigging pen-pusher could really use a seeing-eye dog."

"The beast would probably write better prose than he does. It could be worse. Hill might have had orgasms over your work. After all, he comes all over Pollock's dribbling. All-America's primo art critic and All-America's former supremo painter and current world-class boozier. All hail."

Burgh said gruffly, "Don't talk like that! You owe Jackson. We all owe him. Europe is finally waking up to the fact that we're number one. Jackson did that. The literati are always searching for some novelist who has written the great American novel. But Jackson may have painted the great American picture. He had his brush on this country's pulse, its space, its drama."

"Yeah, that was Jackson then, not now."

Burgh shook his head sadly. "He may still surprise us. Jack was my comrade in the thirties and most of the forties, I mean like a best friend. Looking at him now, it's hard to imagine what he was like before *Life* magazine made him a household name. Before the hard muscles we admired in the 1930s turned to flab. I was painting noble strikers getting clubbed by vicious cops and bloated capitalists sitting on bags of dollars. Jack was into the Mexican muralists. Sounds corny now, but then, God, how exciting it was to argue with him about painting and politics. Before rotgut corroded his brain."

Pollock stared at Burgh and, sensing that he was being talked about, lurched

up and started to move out of the booth, knocking over a glass, which shattered on the floor. He shouted, “I’m gonna kick that fucking wimp’s ass.” John raised a cautioning finger, and Hill waved it away. As big as Pollock and heavier, Hill reached over and held him back.

“Nah, nah, Jackson, let the loser be. It’s late. How about finishing our drinks? Let’s pay up and go.”

Pollock slouched back in the booth, “Second-rate son of a bitch.” John came over with a dustpan, swept up the glass shards, and handed the bill to Hill. “Glass is on the house, this one time only.”

Burgh looked back at Johnson and continued, “When Jack made his first drip paintings—when was it? 1948? No, 1947—he invited me to his studio on Long Island to look at them. A huge canvas was spread out on the floor, you know, it stretched from where we’re at to where John’s standing, just like a rug. It was covered all over with streaks of paint, dripped, poured, and splattered. It was titled *Jupiter*, I think. Jack was cold sober that day. He said nothing, just stood there, head bowed, shoulders hunched, not sure of what he’d done or afraid of what I might say. I was amazed. The canvas looked like a holy mess and yet it hung together. It was brand new, never saw anything like it. It was unbelievable the way Jack was both spontaneous and in control. No one who wasn’t around at the time can imagine how way-out there Jack’s painting looked. We had been schooled to look for structure, any kind of design. But what in hell was Jackson’s composition? It looked like chaos. I can still recall the shock. Whatever Jack had made, I felt it, really *felt* it. I told him this and that his pictures had some kind of presence that was really new and important and to keep at it. Some time later, he thanked me and told me how much my encouragement had meant to him in that moment. That was some confession for Jack to have made, even then. I was as surprised as I was touched.”

Burgh stopped and looked down, caught up in his thoughts. Johnson began to speak, but in deference to Burgh’s reverie, kept quiet.

Burgh went on, “Then, two years later, I had a show of my World War II pictures, my bloody war nightmares that I had translated into Greek myths. That was before your time. They made a big splash. Jack showed up stinko at my opening, looked around, grabbed me, and shouted, ‘It’s crap, phony Surrealist crap, academic crap, yellow-bellied crap. Fucking bad dreams crap. It’s all old hat, dead-end crap. When the fuck are you going to paint something modern, something risky, something real and relevant?’ I shoved him away and said, ‘Why don’t you bugger off, you pathetic drunk.’ He swung at me, missed and pitched to the floor. Muttering incoherently, he struggled up and staggered out of the gallery. Everybody looked shocked. I said, ‘Forget it. That’s Jackson doing

his Jackson number. Forget it.' But that night he did me a big, big favor. Sure, he made me furious, but I saw my painting through his eyes and he was right. I knew there and then that they were no longer believable and I couldn't keep knocking them out. A bleeding Hercules wearing sergeant stripes in a foxhole or a beautifully painted rigor mortis. All the 'C's'—critics, curators, collectors—ate it up. Yeah, my pathetic mythic sagas were hailed as the hope of American painting."

Burgh seemed to forget that Johnson was there, and looking into the distance, talked as if to himself. "I would cheer everything I painted, in my head I would cheer it, bravo, bravo, Burgh, *cher maître*. And I'd take my bows. Not after that bout with Jackson. I knew I had to change. I said to myself, 'You paint about society, hurrah for you. But what the fuck does a Greek hero in khaki mean today after Hiroshima? And where the fuck are you in your painting?' So I stopped painting. This led to months of do-nothing depression. Then I took my cue from Jackson and began to use the improvisational process of painting itself to find out what I ought to be about. I no longer began with an idea of what I ought to paint or what it meant. Nothing satisfied me. Painting became hell. I hated the agony of the not knowing. But I kept on smearing and scraping pigment, until I found something that I felt was authentic. Painting was torture—still is—except in those rare moments, those 'eureka' moments—when a canvas all comes together. They are worth the frigging struggle. And that's how I became a *painter*. Jack, that arrogant son of a bitch, did it."

Burgh looked back at Johnson, "Jack and I would meet again at openings or at parties and chit-chat if he was sober, or, if he was drunk, he would curse and accuse me of hating his work and being in de Kooning's camp, but we would never really chew the fat again. It was a sad ending to our comradeship."

Hill paid the bill and left change on the table. As they passed Burgh on the way to the door, Pollock thrust his gross face aggressively at him. "Think you can paint better than I can? Bullshit." Burgh waved limply at him.

Hill held back and said, "I meant everything I wrote in my review of your show. Why would a big man like you want to paint like a sissy? And your shitty gray isn't color. I don't get it."

Burgh looked directly at Hill and responded quietly, "If you ever did get it, Marshall, I'd worry. It isn't decoration, old buddy, or what you would call 'Apollonian,' whatever the fuck that is, and I hope it never will be." Burgh continued to stare at Hill.

Hill stared back, then hunched forward as if about to throw a punch. Face flushed and fat jowls trembling, he clenched his fists in front of him and began to answer, but instead turned and caught up with Pollock.

Burgh and Johnson watched Pollock and Hill as they walked across the Cedar's window, Pollock stumbling, Hill still hunched up, steadying his companion.

Johnson laughed, "How to make friends and influence people!"

Burgh said, "Him or me?" He shook his head. "Did you see that? The asshole was about to slug me. He's supposed to be good with his fists, but I bet I could whip his frigging ass. That phony, with his humongous reputation of being an 'eye.' All he ever sees when he looks at a picture is whether it apes his stupid idea of what painting ought to be. And he's out to screw me, the power-hungry creep. Neil, young buddy, I think scotch and paranoia are creeping up on me. Watch out for booze and paranoia. They're the occupational diseases of the art world. Nobody can tell you why one picture is better than another, not Hill, not Rosenberg, not Greenberg, not Hess, and certainly not those young punks clawing their way up, like that Sawyer guy. Not anybody. There are no rules for judging what's good or bad. But Hill is able to convince people that he has some special kind of eye for quality. Yeah, a third occupational sickness, crying in your beer."

Burgh smiled and took Johnson by the arm. "Be careful, paranoia can fuck up your mind. End of today's lesson. And watch the booze and yeah, the smoking too."

Johnson said, "Thanks for the sermon, I mean warning, *cher maître*. Hey, what's that paper sticking out of your pocket?"

"Oh, almost forgot about it. It just came." Burgh tore open the envelope, shook out the letter, and glanced at it. "I'm in the Whitney Annual. Big deal."

"I should be so lucky." Neil sighed.

"You will be. I should really turn the frigging bureaucrats down." Burgh hesitated. "But I won't, not yet. The painting will probably sell, and I can use the dough. But how I hate that show, surrounded by all that third-rate crap."

"Your pain gets me right here." Johnson tapped his chest with his thumb. Turning, he said, "But I've got to go now. Got a broad to wake up. See you soon."

"Sure, have a ball. Adios."

Burgh looked around. There were a half-dozen artists left in the bar, none of whom he wanted to talk to. Luckily, no one approached him. John brought him a ham and cheese sandwich with a sliced tomato and a sour pickle on the side and said, "Sorry, that's the best Cook could rustle up."

"It's fine, and I'll have another scotch."

Burgh finished the food and drink, told John to add the bill to his tab, said goodbye, and left unsteadily. The night air set off Burgh's smoker's hack. His

eyes teared, and not seeing where he was going, he bumped into someone.

“Excuse me, I’m sorry. Oh, it’s you Lewitin. You’re out past your curfew tonight.” Landes Lewitin, a stout figure dressed in a black suit and black tie, with a black beret, the emblem of his sojourn in Paris, said dejectedly, “I couldn’t sleep in this heat.” Then, sternly, “You look terrible. If you don’t stop boozing, you’ll end up a drunk like Pollock and de Kooning and then you’ll paint *really* crappy pictures.”

“Thanks for the good word, Lewitin old friend. You may be right and now I’m off to bed.”

As he passed Lewitin, Burgh called back, “Lucky you don’t drink, but paranoia is also bad, worse than booze. Take care.”

* * *

The next morning, Burgh stared gloomily at the canvas. He picked up tubes of cadmium red medium, titanium white, and mars yellow, and squeezed a mound of each with smaller piles of orange, blue, and black on the glass-topped table. He was struck by how appealing the pigment in the raw looked and he smiled as he recalled that he always thought of this every time he began to paint. *Who was it that said that the mission of the artist was to make his painting more expressive than pigment squeezed out of a tube? Lewitin? Yes, it was Lewitin on one of his better days.*

Ruffling his fingers through an inch-wide brush, Burgh dipped it in the red, moved close to the surface of the canvas, looked over the remains of the image he had knifed out, hesitated for a moment, took a deep breath, and gently made a single red mark. The aggressiveness of the red made him shudder. He quickly mixed the white and black into gray and darkened the red, wiping and scraping away what didn’t feel right. He continued applying red and gray, now with touches of grayed orange and yellow, using different brushes and his palette knife. Stepping back, the picture felt too decorative, despite the dark cast of the colors. He began to paint more quickly, growing more assured as he did. Then suddenly, the shaded colored marks began to emanate a somber light that he had been aiming for. He didn’t know how to create it, but knew that when he encountered it, his picture would be finished.

Burgh suddenly stopped, stood back, contemplated the painting, and lit a cigarette. His hand was shaking. *Anxiety? Alcohol? Nicotine? All three? Anxiety.* He felt a tightening in his chest and a shortness of breath. He sat down still staring at the canvas. *No, the image is not there yet, but what more can I do?*

Burgh tried to steady his hand. Then, he spun around and walked out of the

studio, not bothering to lock the door. *Which way to go? Toward Fourteenth Street or Houston?* He stood rigid for a moment and headed north on Fourth Avenue to Union Square. He stopped to listen to a soapbox orator bad-mouth President Eisenhower as the tool of American imperialism. The text was hackneyed, but delivered with passion. *Passionate enough to shoot a Trotskyite in the back of his head but not smart enough to be a Soviet spy.* Burgh returned to the studio. *Back in the thirties, we used to call any anti-communist or even non-communist “a running dog of American imperialism.” We actually said things like that, and believed them, or did we?* The walk calmed Burgh. Back in the studio, he studied the canvas close-up, moving first to one side, then to the other. He backed away. It was coming along.

Burgh lit a cigarette, took two puffs, and pressed the butt into a bucket of sand. He picked up a brush to begin again, thought better of it, and stopped. He would let the canvas rest for now.

* * *

Burgh continued working on the painting for another two weeks to the day. That morning, as he looked at the canvas, he suddenly began to sweat and felt a panic attack coming on. *Snap out of it. You can finish this picture. You always have.* Staring at the canvas, he dipped his brush into the yellow mound as the doorbell rang. It both startled and disturbed him. *Not now! Who could it be? Don't answer it.*

He looked out the window. It was Stanley Jones, his dealer. Burgh shouted down, “What are you doing downtown? Why aren't you minding the store?”

“I was visiting de Kooning. Thought I'd look in on you, if you weren't busy.”

“Of course I'm busy—painting masterpieces. But it's okay. Come on up. Here's the key.”

Burgh dropped it. Jones caught it, let himself into the building, and walked up to Burgh's studio. He stood before the canvas. “So that's what an unfinished Burgh looks like.”

“You may be the first to see one, and I don't know why I didn't turn it to the wall. It's still nowhere.”

“Looks pretty good to me. What's wrong with it?”

“Well, that grayed red area looks good. But that off-yellow next to it is still dead, deader than the proverbial doornail. And that bitch of an orange, even that small area, kills the light. Wrong orange. It all needs changing, but how? Change what? Why? The colors? The brushwork? The interval between the colors?”

Why? Change them? Like I said to Kline the other night, ‘It’s the intervals between the colors that count.’ Look there in the lower right corner. Mark Rothko snuck in while I wasn’t looking. I love Mark, but he’s gotta go. Why?”

Burgh paused and peered at the canvas and said more to himself than to Jones, “It’s still that frigging orange and yellow. I’ve diggled those frigging colors more than a hundred times, at least a hundred, and I still haven’t got them right.” He turned to his dealer, “Now you know what the romantic life of the painter is, Stan, old man, diggling orange and yellow. I think I’ll cut my ear off. What’s it for? Why am I breaking my balls? Nobody asked me. Still, why and what for?”

“Go ask Piero or Pablo. Their names start with ‘P’ like yours. I wonder what they’d say?”

“They’d probably empathize. They’re not like the moneybags you peddle my art to.”

“Bite your tongue. Don’t bad-mouth the golden geese.”

Burgh smiled. “You know Stan, once when I was asked ‘what’s-it-mean’ by one of your fat-ass collectors, I rolled my eyes heavenward and then looked him straight in the eye and said, sensitive-like, ‘It has my light.’ He seemed to want more, so I floated three inches off the floor and intoned, ‘It’s also the light of our time, a kind of *zeitlicht*, as the Germans would say.’ *Zeitlicht*, pretty impressive. And the funny thing is that, pretentious though it sounds, I think I meant it.”

Jones looked up. “The light of our time, the *zeitlicht*, I like it. I’m going to use it. Make you a fortune.”

“Lotsa luck. Do you think Morton Nichols would buy that rap?”

“You bet. That vulgar money-grubber is in the dog house after he flipped the Kline he bought from me and sold it at auction for a big profit, the one I sold him less than a year ago. I told him if he wants to be a dealer to take his business elsewhere. But if you want to sell him something, be my guest.”

“He asked to see me.”

“Double your prices, triple them. And remember I get my cut. By the way, I need some young blood in the gallery. Grapevine has it that Joan Mitchell is an up-and-coming painter. Do you know her work?”

“Yeah, she’s the real thing. Check her out.”

“Well, it’s time for you to return to your glamorous misery.”

“Thanks for your condolences.”

Burgh accompanied Jones to the door and returned to his canvas. He reached for a tube of white and brushed it into the yellow. He said out loud, “It’s there—or almost there.” *Just like that. But like Maître Lewitin said, “No matter how light the painting is, it’s not light enough.”*

Burgh lightened the orange. He stood back and lit a cigarette. *That's it.* Then, dejectedly, he stared at the canvas and shrugged. *It looks too pat, just like my painting is supposed to look. It's like a Peter Burgh knock-off.*

Burgh shifted the brush from his right to his left hand. The anxiety began to build up in him again. *The yellow's not working, it's like piss, goddamn piss.* He was suddenly exhausted. He backed away from the canvas and stared at it. *It's really not bad; the light's looking good.* He felt better and decided to stop for the day.

* * *

Before going to sleep that night, Burgh removed his journal from the drawer of the night table near his bed and wrote, "Stanley Jones asked what would Piero or Picasso think about my work? That's not the issue. The question is, why am I painting differently from them?"

In the middle of the night, Burgh bolted up, eyes open, just as he had once or twice a week since the battle of Guadalcanal. Sweating and groggy, he fumbled for a cigarette and lit it. He was awoken by the Dream—a skirmish in the jungle during World War II. As his head cleared, Burgh recalled every detail. A squad in the platoon he commanded was on patrol, working its way out of swampy vegetation in a ditch. A flare. Then a burst of machine-gun fire. A cry, "I'm hit, I'm hit." It was Corporal Jim Ryan who had been sent out to scout. Burgh and the rest of his men pitched to the ground. Then Ryan cried out, "They got me in the gut. God it hurts. Help me, it hurts."

Burgh whispered to the men on his right and left, "Pass it along. Move back into the ditch. Hug the ground. Don't fire back. Pass it along."

Frankie Smyth, his sergeant, said, "I'm going out there to help him."

"No, stay put. That's an order." But Smyth had already begun to crawl out.

In a few minutes, he crawled back and said, "Jim's guts are all over the place. He's bought it." Another flare. A burst of machine-gun fire. Before he could take cover, Smyth rolled over dead on top of Burgh, blood spurting over both of them.

Ryan kept moaning, "Help...hurt." Then a shot—and silence. The Japanese machine gun opened up.

Burgh began to fire his carbine in the direction of the sound and shouted, "Commence fire!" His men opened up. Then, a few minutes later, "Cease fire!" Silence. Burgh said, "I think we got the bastards or they've shoved off. We'll wait here till dawn." When he and his men were convinced that the Japanese had retreated, they retrieved Ryan's body. Burgh suspected that his corporal had been

shot by one of his own men. Was it necessary? It was clear that the man was dying. Why let him suffer? Burgh asked no questions and did not include the mercy killing, if it was that, in his report.

Fully awake, Burgh stubbed his cigarette in the ashtray, lit another one, lay back, and wiped the sweat from his face with his pillow. He was suddenly overcome with fear and hate, like the fear he felt that night on Guadalcanal but hadn't shown, and the hatred of the enemy whose brutality he had not forgiven and never would. Burgh recalled that, in the Dream, the image of Smyth's face was that of his father with a bullet hole in his right temple. He later wondered what Siggie Freud would make of that.

Burgh never talked about the skirmish, except once to Eileen. One night, after waking up shaking and wet with sweat, he blurted out the Dream. He then confessed, "I was scared in Guadalcanal. Scared shitless. Sure, back at company headquarters, I acted the cool cat my men admired. If they only knew the truth! I told my captain that Smyth deserved a medal, even though he disobeyed my order to stay put. Still, I couldn't help feeling I should have gone instead of Frankie. Dammit, he was younger than me. He was battle-savvy and his know-how carried me through the frigging campaign. I loved that son of a bitch. I looked down on him the next morning, crumpled on the ground, brains and blood spattered on his blonde hair. What a great-looking guy, what a waste, almost as handsome as my old buddy, Little Mike. What helped get me through the war? It was Captain Carson. He was a shoot-from-the-hip career Marine who had seen more than his share of combat, but he understood my anguish. He said, 'You did right out there. Your sergeant should have obeyed orders. You gotta forget it.' But I couldn't. The nightmares kept recurring and so did the guilt. And the question I kept stewing over was could I have done something different that night on patrol? That goddamn Dream is sucking my lifeblood. It's my Dracula. Well, I did become a hero later, knocked out a machine-gun nest in Saipan; was awarded a Silver Star for bravery. Big frigging warrior. What did that prove? We all knew that we could have been killed at any moment, and it mostly depended on luck. Frankie's death hit me like no other death I had ever witnessed except my father's, and I had seen a hell of a lot of dying. Maybe if I had time to mourn when Frankie bought it, I wouldn't have these panic attacks, but there was no time. The goddamn war didn't stop."

Eileen had cradled his head in her arms and wiped his face dry with the end of the sheet. Burgh began to shiver. Eileen held him tighter. He looked up at her face, classic features, a mass of blonde curls, and for an instant, it reminded him of Smyth dead on the ground, then of Pearson. She reached down and kissed him. "Like what's-her-name said in *Don Giovanni*, I know what'll make bad

dreams go away.”

* * *

Burgh looked at his canvas the next morning with great expectations. From a distance, he addressed it, “Sensational.” But as he approached, he was overcome with feelings of inadequacy. *Of course it looks good, so pretty, so frigging pretty. I’ve copped out again.*

For years, Burgh had been debating with himself, Rothko, Guston, Pearson, and other artist acquaintances of his, as to whether art ought to focus on the artist’s traumas, fears, rage, and depression and, by extension, the awareness of death and of the world’s senseless bestiality and violence—the Holocaust—or whether it should provide a release from anxiety and anger, and even convey something of the beauty and joy of life.

Rothko said to him, “You want optimism? In your grave?”

Pearson countered, “Sure, life under capitalism is shitty, but do we have to make it worse? Society has gotta get better. Can’t our art speak to that future?”

But Burgh asked, “How can we avoid lapsing into decoration?” Or, with a scornful edge in his voice, “designer art?” He quipped to Pearson, “It’s either angst or self-indulgence.” But Burgh knew that he had no choice and that he had to paint from his “inner necessity” as Kandinsky said, without sentimentality—ruthlessly. He was often surprised that what he considered his tragic paintings sold and he felt somewhat guilty about it. One of his collectors, Morton Nichols, told him that they were “lyrical.” Maybe his pictures were more decorative than he thought.

Burgh picked up a brush and put it down. *That frigging orange!* Reaching for a rag, without looking, he whipped it across the orange. He said aloud, “holy shit.” Rather than depress him, the smear elated him. It presented fresh options. He suddenly *recognized* the image. Burgh weighed a tube of orange in his hand, squeezed two inches out on the glass table top, then added small piles of yellow, white, and black. He placed three brushes within reach of one hand and a palette knife in the other, moved close to the canvas, and began to paint without backing up—barely thinking, barely looking—literally with his nerve ends. The cerebral phase was over; it had only been preparation, prelude to this moment. He mixed pigment and brushed it quickly, using his palette knife to cut away what looked unfelt. Caught up in the intensity of the flow, he pivoted from the canvas to the glass tabletop. He painted as if by instinct, his eyes barely scanning the surface. His eyes ricocheted to and from its four sides as he brushed and scraped, bonding the strokes and searching for his light.

As Burgh painted, the shapes became weightier, darker, and massed in the center of the canvas. To contain them, the space became more three-dimensional. He suddenly stopped and stood back, surprised. He hadn't painted shapes like those before. They were new. Then it struck him that the ones in the middle looked like figures, blurry figures. He reached for his palette knife to scrape them out. He stopped in midair. The forms were at once strange and oddly familiar. He would leave them as is. Burgh stepped back in order to take in the entire canvas. Sweating and exhausted, he lit a cigarette, took a gulp of scotch, and looked at what he had done. Then dragging himself to his feet he examined the surface of the canvas inch by inch. It looked better. He stood straight up and studied the canvas. *Now what to do? Nothing. It has my light, even with those peculiar heavy shapes in the middle. It's done.* Burgh felt an upsurge of elation tinged with fatigue, a momentary sense of conquest.

* * *

Burgh slept late the following morning. He then examined his canvas closely. It was indeed finished. As he dressed, the phone rang. He picked it up. "Little Mike here. Just checking in on you, old comrade. How are you?"

"Couldn't be better. Just finished a painting. I'm looking at it now, and you know, the image reminds me of some pictures I made in the 1930s, you may remember, like the one of striking workers grouped around a union organizer with a clenched fist on a soap box haranguing them. Would you believe this? It's got bulky shapes that look like figures, one even has a brush stroke for a face, and they're in a kind of circle. But don't tell anyone. I'm an abstract artist, aren't I?"

"How should I know? Am I an art critic? I called to say that I'm going out of town for a few weeks. I have a teaching gig at the Oklahoma School of Art. They never heard of my commie past or don't care."

"Great, phone as soon as you return."

Burgh hung up. He continued to mull over the remark he made to Pearson. If the forms in the new picture resembled those he painted two decades ago, was there some underlying connection? Maybe even something in his psyche? He had repudiated his earlier Social Realist works, even told a collector not to exhibit the one he owned. Burgh would rethink the issue of figuration versus abstraction, but not now.

Suddenly, Burgh didn't want to look at the painting anymore and turned it to the wall. He remembered that he had promised Johnson to meet him at the Cedar. But that was later. He would shower, get a decent meal, maybe take in a

movie. As he walked out of his building, head erect, rays of the setting sun broke through a bank of leaden clouds. *Even the Good Lord rewards a good painting.* Burgh looked up into the glow, and raising his hand to his temple, saluted it. Even Tenth Street—polluted, desolate Tenth Street—looked agreeable in God’s light. He caught himself. *Come now, don’t get sentimental. It doesn’t suit you.*

Johnson was waiting for Burgh at the Cedar nursing a beer. Burgh joined him and, after the how-are-you’s, lit a cigarette, ordered a scotch, and announced, “I just finished a painting, and I’m still on a high. Weeks of thinking this and thinking that, pushing this, pushing that, and then, bingo, the moment you stop thinking and just do it. You know that feeling. What a moment, like a world-class ejaculation. No, truly, truly—it’s better than sex.”

“Whoa, don’t get carried away.”

“And then it’s over, and you want the damned picture to go away. Like some broad you’ve had a one-nighter with but don’t know what to say to her the next morning. You want the picture out. OUT! Maybe it’s because you’re out of it. Who said it, de Kooning? When you begin a painting, the whole art world—artists, critics, curators, dealers, collectors—are in the studio with you, trying to get your attention, ordering you around. Then they leave by one until only you’re left, and then you leave.”

Burgh added quietly, “Funny, I never know whether I can finish another picture, find my light, whatever that is, but I know when I have it. I wish I could figure out how to produce it. But what do I know? Let’s celebrate. Your next drink is on me.”

“Thanks, last-of-the-big-time-spenders.”

They ordered their drinks and Burgh said, “I read your statement in the new *Art News*. You called yourself a professional artist. Did you really mean that?”

“Sure do. I’ve got an MFA, certified by Yale even. I would hang it in my studio, like some dentist’s diploma, but you old farts would sneer at me.”

“More likely laugh.”

Johnson stated, “You can get a good art education, make honest art in your studio, and have a career in the art world, and even make some dough. It may help to kiss some collector-curator-critic ass, but you don’t have to jump on any bandwagon.”

Burgh interjected, “I’m also interested in fame and money, but it bugs me that I am. It doesn’t seem to bother you.”

“I take what I can get, but I won’t sell out.”

Burgh shrugged.

Johnson added, “Not starving may make it easier to paint but it doesn’t make painting any easier.”

“I’ll buy that. But I don’t feel like a professional. I once thought I knew what that meant but no longer.”

Johnson downed his drink and tipped the empty glass at Burgh. “Thank you for your charity, old sport. You won’t mind if I run out on you. I’ve arranged to visit the studio of a lady artist. Maybe get laid, if I tell her how great her art is and seem to mean it.”

“Don’t tell her she paints as good as a man.”

“Not until after.”

Burgh watched Johnson stride to the door and admired his slim young body. *The question remains, do you really believe what you just told me? Can you, young friend, make honest art?*

* * *

Burgh returned to his studio, flicked on the lights, and turned the picture around. He was suddenly overcome by doubt. Pacing up and down in the back of the room, he could no longer fathom why he thought it was finished. On the other hand, he could think of nothing more that he could do. *Is it any good? What would Piero or Pablo say? Is this the latest word in the grand tradition of Western art? Or the best I can do in the aftermath of Stalin, Hitler, Mussolini, and Hirohito? Millions butchered—Frankie. Was Piero’s time any better? Did he have any doubts? Is it like Rothko said, “you can’t avoid doubt, not if you’re for real?” Why can’t I, after a quarter century of painting, just make a Burgh picture, fabricate it? Why the anguish, the pain? Be a professional, like Neil says he is. Turn it out. Who would know the difference? The few that count. That’s who.*

Burgh lit a cigarette. *Does the world need this picture, a picture of my private feelings, my existential anxiety? Meyer Schapiro says that today’s kitsch culture needs authentic art to combat it. In the thirties, Meyer would have asked if it was good for the proletariat. I would have too. Burgh snickered at the thought. Enough beating myself. I’ll never get it right, get it all. That’s what the hero in Balzac’s novel, Frenhofer, tried to do—paint pure passion, and he ended up killing himself. Could I ever do myself in? Nah, no future in it. Go out, take a walk. Look at some chess players in Washington Square.*

As Burgh was about to open the door, he turned and looked again at his canvas. *Should I dig into it once more or begin another? It is finished! Start a new one. But why did he feel depressed? Is it the painting’s depressed look, its tragic cast, or what it’s still missing? The Beyond!*

* * *

Two days later, Burgh sat at the Cedar bar making water circles with his scotch glass. John stood nearby looking over some bills. Burgh glanced at the clock in the rear and said to John, "Two A.M. Ought to go home." John grunted. Burgh remained where he was. He watched Joseph Sawyer enter and walk towards him.

Burgh spoke first. "It's kinda late. Don't baby art critics have a curfew? So, what's the word from *Art News*? Does Tom Hess still not love me?"

Sawyer looked distraught, "I don't think you've heard."

"Heard what?"

"Jackson Pollock is dead, killed in a car crash."

"What? When?"

"I heard it from Joan Mitchell. It happened several hours ago. Out on Long Island. Smashed his car into a tree. A lady friend was also killed."

Burgh's stomach knotted up. "Son of a bitch. Bet he was drunk. Son of a bitch. Car crash. Hit a tree. Dead."

He sat silent, looking at the floor. Then he ordered Sawyer a scotch and himself a double. "They should have confiscated his driver's license years ago and impounded that goddamn Ford of his. Was it suicide? Did they say? Where was Lee?"

"No, no word about him killing himself. I thought you and Pollock didn't get along."

"What does that mean? That we didn't hold hands? He was a great painter—and my comrade—until he became a household name and a drunk. I owe him my life as an artist, more than I can say."

Burgh beckoned to John for a refill. Sawyer refused a second drink and said, "You're heading for a world-class hangover."

Burgh wanted to get drunk but the liquor was having no effect. "The son of a bitch was younger than me. August the eleventh, 1956, mark this day, August the eleventh, a milestone in American art. I gotta get out of here."

"Let me walk with you."

"Thanks. But I'll be okay. Need to be alone."

Burgh staggered out into the dark and began to wander the streets aimlessly.

* * *

Weeks after Pollock died, Burgh could not paint. *Why am I chained to the brush?* He would pore over his collection of art postcards. *Was any painting worth a life?*

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