

AN ABSENCE OF SINATRA

My friend Marc Lanzoff died about two months ago. The end came swiftly, savagely, and suddenly the friend I'd known for nearly 50 years had gone silent. And, truthfully, it had been a thorny friendship—his withering self-absorption, the phone hang-ups, the weeks of pride-fueled silence. I'm trying to remember if I ever heard him say *I'm sorry* or *I made a mistake*. Instead, there was the sudden phone call after long silence—with a review of the movie he'd just seen. But that was Marc—a guy who lived with a sense of moral absolutism....

He shared a birthday (May 24) with Bob Dylan, and he admired the early prickly Dylan (of the *Don't Look Back* period): the Dylan who relentlessly satirized himself and those around him in a sort of universal put-down (and put-on). From his early 20s, when I met him, Marc embraced Dylan's bohemianism. Marc refused to learn how to drive. He didn't own a television. He never used email. He detested cell-phones and the culture that embraced them. Quite recently, outside the Menlo Mall, he'd seen a young black male wearing his pants sagging down below his knees. Marc told him he looked ridiculous. The young man cursed him and then returned a minute later with a carful of friends. They emerged from the car, pulled Marc's hat down over his eyes, and beat him up till he was lying on the sidewalk. He later told me this story with a bemused pride. "I was an idiot. But those pants were laughable."

We often disagreed; he didn't tolerate it well. He loved the movie *Tár*. I found it slow and confusing.

"What do you mean slow and confusing? What was confusing about it?" He then proceeded to *explain* the entire movie to me.

"I found it slow and pretentious," I said. "Can we just agree to disagree?"

Apparently, we couldn't.

Yesterday, the radio was playing Sinatra singing "A Foggy Day"—from his vintage 1950s period—and I remember thinking that, for me, the nature of death would mean *no more Sinatra*—that this rich expressive baritone that had been the soundtrack to my parents' lives and mine would be forever silent. And I thought again of Marc. And that silence. This morning's *New York Times*' obituary reads, *Al Jaffee, Whose Wit Added Wrinkles to Mad's Back Page, Dies at 102*. Marc would have been on the phone to me one second after he'd read this. We had both grown up with *Mad*—including Al Jaffee's fold-in on the back page—and Marc loved citing memories from the magazine, particularly Don Martin's absurd cartoon of a man cutting a tree branch growing from Abraham Lincoln's nose on Mount Rushmore. I think that, perhaps, for Marc, death might be, most acutely, the absence of the *New York Times*. Or maybe the absence of Al Hirt's instrumental hit "Java", which he whistled whenever his mind was otherwise occupied...

Marc died penniless. No family could be located, and so his body and his affairs were left in the hands of the State. God knows what they did with his body and his few possessions (an old cathedral radio, a collection of tiny wind-up toys, posters for *Carnival of Souls* and *Double Indemnity*, a tee-shirt whose graphic was a yellow 45 r.p.m. adapter...) It all must be lying in the landfill somewhere, picked over by seagulls.

No one at JFK ever told me what he died from. ("I've got a bad kidney," he explained near the end.) When I saw him in the E.R. the morning he passed away, his eyes were closed and he was softly repeating "I want to sleep" without cease for the entire half-hour of my visit. I'm not sure he knew I was there—and maybe *I want to sleep* simply meant *I want to die*—and be free from this misery.

He was a friend of half a century and a tireless cheerleader for my work. He passed out copies of *Me and Orson Welles* to any celebrity he encountered on the streets of New York—and there were many of them; he kept a photo book of them all...a photo book now somewhere in the landfills of Jersey.

He loved the Mets. He loved the hipster comedian Lord Buckley. He loved the musical group The Guess Who—“These Eyes” was the one song he could play on the piano. He loved eating at Jose Téjas on Route One because they refilled his giant diet soda for free—and the chips were hot. When someone else was paying he ate like Oliver Twist freshly sprung from the workhouse—devouring everything on the table.

You may have seen him—panhandling outside the State Theater in New Brunswick. For 71 years he lived entirely in the present tense. He was incapable of saving money; incapable of holding a job for long. He read three newspapers from cover to cover every morning: the *Star-Ledger*, the *Home News*, and the *New York Times*—while he ate his hot bagel on a bench in the park.

Impoverished iconoclasts probably don’t age very well—and Marc ended badly—but he leaves (in the tangible silence I feel every afternoon when the phone no longer rings) a hole in my life. I miss his Soupy-Sales humor; I miss his dreams of opening an art cinema (“When I win the lottery”); I miss him telling me I need a haircut. There was no one else like him.

Rest in peace, old buddy. *Don't think twice; it's all right.*