

A Soft Bell Hummed Midnight

By Miles Beller



The author, left, with his friend Jeff, 1981

A few months after my close friend Jack Angeles died, several of his good buddies met for dinner at an Italian restaurant Jack loved. Yet as 10 PM approached, the fourth and final member of our small band still had not arrived.

“Something must have come up,” I suggested to Peter and Doug, trying to explain why Jeff was missing. “Maybe he scored a surprise date or something,” I then half-jokingly continued. Peter said not to worry. After all, there had to be a reason Jeff was not here. But as 11 came and vanished even Peter’s natural optimism ebbed. Doug called Jeff’s house. The machine picked up. I dialed his cell, greeted by voice mail.

At 11:30 — still no Jeff — we disbanded. Before leaving, Doug, a cardiologist who had roomed with Jeff in college, decided he should stop by Jeff’s place to check up on things. “I’ll give you a ring after I get there,” Doug said, adding he and Jeff had exchanged house keys a while back. There had to be an explanation for Jeff’s absence. Where was he? What had happened to him? I slid into my car and drove home.

Jeff had been jolted by Jack’s death that Spring. Though radically different in temperament and size — Jack was boisterous and commodious, Jeff edgy and compact -- they both commanded agile intellects dazzling to encounter, especially when going at each other with giddy zeal. For Jeff, the loss of Jack was like removal of a planet from the solar system. At the end of Jack’s intimate church service in Beverly Hills, Jeff’s eyes were red and wet as he struggled upward from the pew, his heart a keening wound. And as Jeff left the small shaded chapel and out into the sharp Los Angeles light of actualities and aspects, his very being was fighting the fact Jack was dead. Jeff and Jack had been fast friends since meeting decades earlier at a New York City law firm where

Peter also worked; this soon after all three had graduated from law school. In fact it was Jeff, a pal of mine since high school back in Brooklyn, who brought us all together.

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Jeff was the conduit through which friendships flowed and flourished. He made true and enduring friends and then made these friends into friends of friends, a skill that exponentially generated a richly diverse constellation of folks who knew each other by virtue of knowing Jeff. In addition to his virtuoso skill in brokering abiding friendships was Jeff's rebellious comic spirit, his wryly-combative outlook on being here. Jeff's verbal gems were enthusiastically passed from pal to pal, gifts collected and prized, spanning continents as well as generations. Once when filling me in on the intellectual reach of an actress/aerobics instructor he had dated the night prior, Jeff summed up matters by noting how she had forgotten a month of the year. "But that's OK," he assured me, "'cause it was one of the shorter months." Jeff could propel a phase so it ricocheted and careened with the controlled grace of a linguistic hustler whose cue was his mind. He was Tom Stoppard mashed up with Damon Runyon; Jeff's Brooklyn-marinated English effortlessly issuing insurgent insights about some essential truth concerning love or leisurewear, God or golf, revolution or prostitution. Jeff put things brightly concisely. He was profound even when goofing around. What he said took root in your head, making you laugh yet daring you to break free of rote reflex thinking. And when it came to sizing up his own life, Jeff was far more acidly sarcastic than you could ever be. His humor was smart and it was galvanic. It elbowed and it shoved. It had sinew and muscle, blood, and breath.

But where could he be this night? Why hadn't he made it to the Italian restaurant? At midnight my home phone trilled lowly.

I heard what sounded like Doug gathering a breath and then I heard him say "Jeff's dead." Jeff had been found down by his treadmill, the machine still purring and whirling in the night. "He must have had a heart attack." Doug explained. I stammered out a banality and then found myself saying goodnight. I called Peter. Peter said it was hard to believe Jeff was dead. I put the phone down and lay in bed for a long while. That Jeff as well as Jack was now gone was impossible to accept.

At a memorial service for Jeff several days later someone told me that on Jeff's kitchen table were some magazines, and on top of these magazines had been a copy of Jack's memorial service. It was opened, as if Jeff were about to read it.

Miles Beller served as the Joan Nordell Fellow at Harvard University's Houghton Library while a Scholar in Residence at Cabot House. He is currently completing a biography of Robert Sherwood.