Paul Perilli

Endeavor

I got to know Sam at the café I worked in as a barista. Three blocks from Harvard Square, Java House was popular with musicians, academics, and artists. I considered myself among the latter. I had a desk and an easel in the bedroom of the Watertown apartment I shared with a social worker. One week, I painted distorted figures of people I took from magazines and old photos I got for small change at thrift stores. The next week, I wrote stories on legal pads. Now and then, I combined the two and added words to a painting that had nothing to do with the image. I justified it as an attempt to expand the viewer's experience. I documented the better ones using a Polaroid Instamatic. Puzzling as they were, the friends I showed them to liked the idea.

I earned enough money at Java House to eke by. Since most of the people I knew were broke too, it didn't seem unusual. Anyway, as I said, Java House was where I met Sam. Twelve years older, he was a composer with a burgeoning career. Much of that was the result of a piece he had titled "While Rome Burns." Played by a well-known orchestra in New York City, it won him a grant and a commission to compose another work for the orchestra. That and a few other commissions were enough money to keep him afloat. He intended to live off his art no matter what.

"I'll slip you some bread and butter on the house if you ever need it," I said.

"I don't think it will come to that," he said.

Preposterous as it sounded, I had no doubt Sam would find a way to make it work.

Two or three times a week, he came into Java House for lunch. Since customers had to order at the counter, we got

to talking not long after I started. I looked forward to those conversations. He was up-front about his career and goals. He wanted to be famous. He expected to be, and he had no qualms saying so. Much of his work was played in venues around Boston and elsewhere. In New York City, as I mentioned. Chicago too. So to me, it seemed as sure a thing as there was.

One afternoon, he gave me a CD of recordings a local label made of his music. The pieces were based on famous paintings and historical incidents and included "While Rome Burns." I'd read the reviews in the Boston papers.

Accepting it, I summarized what was written. "They said it sounded like nothing else."

"They were right for a change," Sam said and laughed. He didn't do that often.

What impressed me was his focus and confidence. His intensity. Most of the artists and writers I knew were less sure of their work. Where it was going. What it was about. Was it good enough for public consumption. In a way, Sam was showing me a path forward. I wasn't sure he knew that. It didn't matter. I went to him for advice. He answered one of my questions, saying I needed to have thick skin, patience, and the ability to take a punch.

One day when he was ordering at the counter, I asked if he would read my writing. I figured it was okay to do, seeing as I'd listened to his CD and complimented it.

"You have it?" he said.

"Next time you're in," I said.

The next morning, I sat at my desk and typed three short pieces on my portable Olivetti. They were quirky stories based on local events. When I saw Sam in Java House that Friday, I gave him the envelope with eight photocopied pages.

Two days later, Sam came into the café and handed the envelope back to me.

"Good stuff," he said and nodded approval.

That was it. Nothing about being on the mark, well-developed, or wanting to read more.

It was unnerving, I admit. I had praised his music. I was attracted to the strange connections he made with instruments and sounds that sent me to a new space. I'd gone to a concert of his that took place in a venue near Northeastern University and was impressed with the size of the audience and its reaction. Whatever my opinion was, I figured if music lovers and critics in his field thought he was working at a high level, then that was good enough for me.

Anyway, I didn't want to dig too deep into his thinking. Even then I knew he could be brusque. He didn't mince words. Maybe there wasn't much to get. Maybe I was what I was, a writer getting underway.

One thing I knew for certain, I had to expand my network. To engage the community of unknown faces who would one day decide my fate.

To do that, I applied to a graduate-level creative writing workshop. As a sample, I sent in what I thought was my best story. Titled "A Long Way From Home," it was about a guy who goes to his former barber while visiting his hometown. He hasn't seen him in ten years, and during their conversation, he finds out he's divorced, drinking a lot, and the son he remembered as a skinny kid is on the wrong side of the law.

I mailed a copy to the university address of the Professor teaching the class. She had published four books, I saw in the catalog. As well as essays and stories in magazines, many of which I had never heard of. The catalog summary mentioned it was selective. I didn't think my chances were good. If I didn't get in, I intended to apply for painting the next semester. With my hybrid work, I thought I had a good shot.

It goes without saying, I was surprised to receive a letter of acceptance. Reading it, I was psyched, as if I was bestowed an infusion of creative energy. Classes started the first Friday in

September. Two days later, a booklet with copies of the stories the selected students had submitted arrived. They would be up for critique the first two sessions. When I told Sam about it, he said he didn't believe in graduate school for the arts. That the way to learn was to find out how the best did it and bring that knowledge to your own work again and again. I mentioned I wasn't going for a degree. I wanted to meet other writers. I wanted to hear someone who had published books talk about writing fiction.

He said, "Don't let them change anything. Have faith in yourself. If you don't, no one else will."

I took that to mean Sam liked what I was doing, even if he didn't use those words.

Over the next weeks, I read the stories in the booklet. I wrote a paragraph about each. Of course, I thought my piece was better than the others. The unique thing about it, or what I thought was unique, was that it was all dialogue. Which, to me, made it stand out as the most creative.

The first Wednesday in September, I went to a room in a building on Commonwealth Avenue. It had a long table with enough chairs to seat the small group of devoted students. Asked to introduce ourselves, I was surprised to find out most of my classmates had published stories and other writing they weren't shy to go into detail about. Yet, instead of intimidating me, it made me confident it wouldn't be long before I was a published author.

With the formalities out of the way, the Professor started the critique. Throughout, it was obvious much of it was opinion instead of critical discussion. Some reveled in the praise. It was obvious others didn't like what was said. Being new to the process, I was entertained. As for the Professor, she complimented each work to varying degrees. Which I supposed was known as constructive criticism.

"A Long Way From Home" was the last to come up that day. Several wondered why I didn't set the scene before my characters started in on their conversation, even if it was clear

from the get-go they were in a barbershop and the protagonists hadn't seen each other in a while. A few dismissed it as a good effort for a newbie. Whatever they said didn't bother me. Though I took note of who said what.

When the class was over, I headed to a nearby bookstore. I spent an hour checking out the journals my classmates were published in. While their stories weren't in the issues I thumbed through, I wrote down the addresses of those and others. Dreaming didn't get one published. I had to submit to be in it. The next day, I went to a copy shop, bought a roll of stamps, a box of envelopes, and mailed my barbershop story to four magazines.

I didn't have a strategy on how to go about sending work out. Though writers I asked at Java House and elsewhere did.

"Better the marksman than the buckshot approach," one told me.

Another said I had to submit to as many venues as possible. Far, wide, and often was her approach.

The following semester, I took another workshop. By the end of it, I saw how it was a ruthless business of opinion and rejection. Jealousy too. And while I preferred my own secluded space where I dreamt, wrote, and rewrote, it was inevitable I had to face up to the public side of things to get beyond that.

Sam held no illusions. "It's about connections. Without them, it will be hard to move on."

I found out that was another of his mantras. Though I got the impression those words were meant as a reminder to himself as much as they were for me. And although I didn't put myself all the way out there, I did make it a point to keep in touch with the writers I came across, even with my workshop mates who weren't so keen on my stories. Since we were all jockeying for the same few spots in the same magazines, I was never sure if what they said mattered.

That was pretty much how it went the next few years. I wrote. I sent stuff out when it was ready. I waited for replies that weren't in a hurry to get back to me. When they did, most

were rejections. Sometimes an encouraging comment was written on the slip. On two occasions, my pieces were accepted by little-known publications in Buffalo and Philly.

Both times, I received a copy of the issue it was in. I supposed a few people read them. I didn't know. In truth, the only pages I read were of my own work.

It must have been five or so years later that Sam moved to New York. By then my social worker roommate had moved to Maine, and I found a cheap efficiency in Allston to live in. Along with that, I landed a gig as an assistant to the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts at UMass–Boston. The work was routine. My main tasks were to make sure bills got paid and to flag any discrepancies between costs and payments.

Overall, I didn't have much to do. By the time I went to lunch, most of my work for the day was out of the way. Before eating, I went to the gym. Back at my desk by two, I spent the afternoons writing. One benefit was I got to use the word processor and printer. It added a clean, professional look to a finished piece.

I supposed it was inevitable Sam and I lost touch. Though, little by little, the rumors about him reached me. He lived with a poet on the Lower East Side. He had two CDs out from a reputable label.

Then through a mutual friend, I got ahold of his address. I decided to send a letter. A long time had passed, and even if I hadn't seen him in those years, I felt a strong connection. I told him I put painting aside. I didn't have time for both. Though I assumed I'd go back to it at some point. I said I heard he was doing great things and wondered if he planned to get up to Boston. It occurred to me he might have visited by then. Perhaps several times. No matter. The next time he was up, I wanted to see him wherever that might be.

It took a month for him to get back to me. His response was longer than I expected. He mentioned he was busy with his compositions. His one-bedroom apartment on East 5th Street

was in an old building not in the best shape. The neighborhood was run-down. That was when I realized despite his success, he continued to live on the edge. Yet he was adamant New York was the only place to be.

A week later, his award-winning CD *Revelation Revisited* came in my mail. Hesitant to play it, I let it sit on my desk. I admit I was jealous he had a finished product with ten pieces of music out in the world getting attention. I was sure it was bright and sharp. I was afraid to compare it to my own stuff.

Three days went by before I put it in my disc player. I sat on the couch, closed my eyes, and listened. It had a crisp, rhythmic beat. An unsettling atmosphere. I saw it as a breakthrough that would send him further skyward. I didn't know when that would be. It was bound to happen, I felt sure.

Then a brazen urge took hold of me. I sent him a long story about a photographer who got caught up in a rebellion in a South American country. It was the first story I set outside the US. Even if I wasn't sure what Sam would think, I wanted to see his reaction.

When I heard from him six months later, he didn't mention it at all. Instead, he said I should go down to New York. He'd be happy to show me the Village, Brooklyn, the art. He was sure I'd be drawn in by the energy. At the end, he said something about not giving up. Restrained as the wording was, I got the feeling something wasn't right.

The weeks and months went by. Then a year. I didn't hear from him. I didn't hear any gossip. As happens, people move on. They get involved in where they're at, what they're doing, and who they're with. The past was just that. I was the same. In fact, I was writing more than ever. Sending more pieces out than ever. Cleaning up old ones. Cringing at the bad prose and unconvincing plots, then taking them to a new place. Added to that, I had a steady companion. Her name was Martha. She was from Westchester County and was a disease researcher at Mass General Hospital. We didn't live together. She had her

own apartment near Davis Square, and that was where we spent most nights.

Then one evening, I got home from work to find out a lightning bolt had struck my mailbox. A piece I titled "Time Flies, Money Goes Fast," about a day in the life of a cab driver, won first place in a short story competition in a newspaper published in London that was circulated weekly throughout the English-speaking world. The envelope I mailed in with international reply coupons was returned to me with a check for £1,000 and a copy of the issue with my story. Cashed at my bank, the exchange rate brought me $1,343. A sizable chunk of change in those days that I stashed away for a rainy day.

A week later, I mailed a copy to Sam. I wanted to tell him the good news. I wanted him to read it. I expected a congratulatory reply. Or at least a comment saying he was happy to see I was pushing ahead. It came three months later. Carrying his letter up to my apartment, I told myself life in New York was a nonstop eruption of activity that left little time for extraneous matters. When I opened it, instead of a comment about my story, Sam told me he ran into trouble.

My letter back was brief. I said whatever it was, I hoped he was going to be okay and to let me know if there was anything I could do.

I waited to hear back. How long, I wasn't sure anymore. Many months, it seemed to me. In that time, Martha and I visited her family in Mamaroneck. We went into the city twice to meet up with friends of hers. Much as I wanted to see Sam, we were busy, and I didn't contact him. Back in Boston, I saw in a local arts ad a piece of his would be one of several played in a venue in the South End. Before it took place, I got the bad news. His companion, Rosa, sent a postcard informing me Sam had lung cancer. It had spread to his liver. It included a phone number. It perks him up to talk to friends, she explained. When I dialed it, she answered. Sam was sleeping.

"He's not good right now. I'll have him call you."

Disturbing as it was when I heard his voice two days later, the thought came: it would be the last time I talked to him.

One of the first things I told him was how I had played *Revelation Revisited* after Rosa's call.

"It's like a piece of classical music with a damn sharp edge" was how I described it.

We went on for twenty minutes about Cambridge and Java House. He was interested in what I was up to with my writing. He planned to get to the long story I sent him a while back. We didn't talk about his health. By the end, I could tell he was getting tired.

"Talk soon," I said.

"Sure, let's do that," he said and hung up.

From there, the reports about him got worse. Then two weeks after it happened, I got the news he died. While I expected it, it shocked me all the same.

The obituary published in *The Globe* mentioned he was a former Boston resident and noted his professional accomplishments. There were comments from colleagues. Another from one of the paper's critics. After reading it, I took out his tapes and CDs and played them. A month later, I got a call. It must have been about ten o'clock. It was Rosa. She wanted to let me know about the memorial service Sam's family and friends were having for him. We were invited.

"No pressure if you can't make it," she said. "If you come, bring any photos you have of him and you that you want to share."

On a Friday evening two weeks later, Martha and I rode the Amtrak to New York. The next afternoon, we took the subway from our Brooklyn hotel to the Poetry Center on the Lower East Side. I didn't know what to expect. In the door, I saw the space was packed. Folding chairs were lined in rows. A string quartet was set up.

The photo I set down on the long table with dozens of others was of the two of us in the time I got to know him. We stood outside Java House on a bright afternoon. I had a white apron on. I held a hand towel I used to wipe down the tables. Sam gazed at the camera with a confident expression.

The service was long. There were speeches. A clarinet player performed a solo piece of his. A trio played a longer work. During it, I decided to write a story about his last months in Cambridge. I intended to show he was in high spirits before he left for New York. In the middle of that thought, Rosa came by to say a few words. She told me Sam was pleased to hear I was having some success.

"He thought you would thrive in New York," she said.

"Martha and I are planning to move here," I said. "It's too bad he won't be with us."