PWK

This isn’t the way it was supposed to go.

Should have been Peter talking for me, twenty-five or thirty years from now. With a lot fewer people in the room.

As Salinger’s Seymour Glass once said about the Gettysburg Address: Instead of making a speech, maybe Lincoln should have just stood there and shaken his fist.

*Feel free to use this as material*. This is Peter talking, on Friday, November 22nd, 2013, a date with its own kind of infamy, and also the day when his stern but gentle transplant doctor, Dr. Van Besien, told him that there was nothing more the doctors could do.

A week to the day before we lost him.

A few of us were in his hospital room, Room 243 on 10 West at New York Presbyterian, his address for the last three months. Charlie. Paul Friedland. Karen and I. Lisa was holding his hand. Peter was telling us, with quiet calm and incomparable courage, that he had run out of options. An extraordinarily dramatic, heart-wrenching scene. Then Peter grinned a tiny bit.

Feel free to use this as material, he said.

The editor — don’t call me Chief! as Perry White said to Jimmy Olsen; one gloss on Peter’s life is his own comet-like transition from Jimmy Olsen to Perry White — the editor to the end.

Apologies in advance if I steal anybody else’s material today. There was never any shortage of material where Peter was concerned! But some of the great stories belong to more than one of us, if not many of us.

Two stories right at the top, apropos of not much at all, except for Peter’s visceral and unending love of Manhattan — wotta town! — the town in which he was born and where he died, in hospitals just ten blocks apart.

Story One. Thirty years or so ago. Peter and I are walking up Fifth Avenue, after lunch, back to the Warner Brothers office at 75 Rockefeller Plaza we so proudly shared until they threw us out. We’re headed back to our little screenwriters’ office on the 14th floor — one window, not much of a view — when we find ourselves, as is inevitable on Fifth Avenue, trapped behind a slow-moving mass of tourists, gawking at the sights, as tourists are supposed to. At the corner ahead of us the Don’t Walk sign is beginning to flash. We’re stuck, we can’t cut around them into street traffic. Suddenly, Peter starts clapping his hands, fast and loud, and barking out, in his best Sgt. Bilko style: “Come on! Let’s move it! Move!”

They moved.

Story Two. Around the same time period, a magical but painful period for both of us, in retrospect. We’re Warner Brothers screenwriters! With our own office in Rockefeller Center! And our own 1985-model IBM computer, with green letters on a terribly black screen, mostly black most of the time.

Sometime around that time, we got a glimpse of what our screenwriting future could hold, should we decide to stick with it: a stack of screenplays on a desk outside our door, all with the same title: KING KONG RETURNS – ELEVENTH DRAFT.

But that’s not the story.

This one takes place on another block, Sixth Avenue just below Central Park South. Wintertime. Another after-lunch walk back to the office, and there, suddenly, right on the corner of Sixth and Fifty-Eighth, is Gene Kelly himself, looking so much like Gene Kelly you wouldn’t even believe it, standing with a beautiful woman and wearing a magnificent camel’s-hair overcoat. It is exactly — and I get goose bumps as I say this — as if Gene Kelly had been materialized out of the ether specifically for Peter Kaplan’s benefit. “Mr. Kelly!” he called. “Hiya!”

“Hi!” said Gene Kelly, with that lopsided Gene Kelly grin.

Things like this had a way of happening around Peter.

A dirty secret is that I might have had very little idea of who Gene Kelly *was* if not for my younger brother.

We were partners at the start, sitting next to each other at the kitchen table, in a story our mother liked to tell frequently — very frequently — sitting next to each other at the kitchen table, drawing: Peter rendering Popeye and other comic-book heroes, I doing army tanks and airplanes and other rectilinear things. And as our mother so frequently told it, then Rob came along and upset the applecart.

But here’s the thing: in the writer’s room that our kitchen table became, with jokes and repartee zinging around from all sides — mostly masculine sides, I’m afraid — Rob quickly came up to speed. And, by the way, became the only one of us who ever wrote comedy, of the situation variety, for a living.

Peter and I were partners early on, but another dirty secret, or dirty not-so-secret, is that to an oldest brother as he ages out of the household, the lives of one’s younger siblings can begin to seem like distant noise. Peter was three grades behind me in school — a crucial separation — and Rob, seven grades back: a gulf. So after a while, there I was, out in college and then out in the world, having what felt to me like very important experiences, while the two of them did God knew what.

But Peter broke through my oldest-brother solipsism and got back on my radar fast. It began around the time when he was working, at age sixteen, as a busboy at Don’s Drive-In, the legendary Livingston, New Jersey burger joint, and lodged a historic reverse-sex-discrimination suit against the restaurant for allowing women, but not him, to wait tables. He won.

Not long afterwards he went to Japan as a high-school exchange student. He climbed Mount Fuji in the late afternoon, got stranded in darkness at the summit, and was led back down by Japanese monks bearing torches. I swear to God. He was also kicked out of his Tokyo high school, for general misbehavior. Peter was, many of you can attest, a merry prankster well into his twenties. The Japanese schoolmaster told him: “You are worst experience of my life.”

His early capacity to collapse into helpless giggling — we shared a bedroom as boys — resulted in more than a few late-night explosions by our father, who had to get up very early for work the next morning. There was a crack in our bedroom door where Bob Kaplan’s fist smote it. More than once. For all I know, that painted-over crack is still there at 316 Redmond Road.

Yet sometime in Peter’s early adolescence, a crucial transition occurred. The little boy who had idolized Popeye — who had been convinced that if he stuck out that Wennik chin just so and squinted one eye just so, he *was* Popeye — underwent a political and cultural awakening. Somehow, sometime in junior high, that heroic, jutted-out Popeye chin smoothly morphed, in Peter’s consciousness, into the jutted-out chin of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Some alchemy of our family’s liberal beliefs (though our father professed Republicanism), a deep identification with our parents’ 1930s and 40s childhoods, the books and show tunes in our house, the Gershwin and Cole Porter and Rodgers and Hart and Hammerstein playing on the hi-fi, liberally mixed with Million-Dollar-Movie reruns of *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, and *The Grapes of Wrath*, instilled in him a reverence for New Deal politics, along with the exquisitely crafted popular music and popular cinema of the thirteen FDR years.

At some point, Peter, having transitioned from drawing cartoon characters to drawing jut-jawed self-portraits, created a character for himself and stepped right into it. He put on a slouch fedora, like Sam Spade or Spencer Tracy, and kept that hat on for a long time.

I will admit that his political enthusiasms were a mystery to me. He began attending state and national conventions at an alarmingly early age, including his first Democratic National Convention, in Miami, in 1972, at age eighteen. He recently told me, perhaps bending the truth only slightly, that he attended every presidential convention, Democrat and Republican, for the next 40 years. If he missed any, it wasn’t many. He was politically passionate and passionately observant: he took everything in, he missed nothing. Faces, personalities, motivations, alliances. He would walk into a room of power brokers — county, state, or national — and make his presence known. Once in South Orange I was riding in a car with some local worthy, a guy of my parents’ generation but not of their style, a cigar-smoker at the wheel of a Cadillac. He turned to me and said, “Your brother has big brass ones.”

It got my attention.

As did his brassy college application essay, a brilliant eight-page work of illustrated fiction, featuring a character named Leo Skida in a post-apocalyptic Newark, New Jersey. It got him into Harvard, and he quickly and naturally gravitated to the *Crimson*, where he wrote about movies and popular culture and now and then drew terrific cartoons. He truly could have been a professional cartoonist, except for one thing: as he always complained, he had trouble with hands and feet. He was great with heads. On his interview trip to Harvard, he happened to visit the *Crimson* at the same moment John Updike descended upon the newspaper’s offices to be interviewed. As Peter sat watching, he sketched a portrait of the great man, big honker of a nose and all. “This looks like me, I’m afraid,” Updike wrote on the drawing.

One night early in the winter of Peter’s sophomore year, he phoned me at my West Village hovel — I was a miserable postgrad painting student — and said, “What’s the most fun thing we could do?”

I had absolutely no idea what he might be talking about. “What?” I said.

“Let’s go to Hollywood and write about the Oscars,” he said.

OK, but… how on earth did this ever actually wind up happening? It was Peter all the way, in all his brassiness: I was just along for the ride, though I guess there was some reason he called me. The plan was to do a big, glossy piece about the 1974 Academy Awards for a national magazine — magazines were very important then — even though neither of us had ever been to Hollywood, not to mention ever written a word for any magazine, national or otherwise. We created a highly colorful, highly fictionalized cover letter listing our many imaginary accomplishments and sent it around to all the big journals, waited a few days, then, expectantly, began making follow-up calls. I’ll never forget what Lee Eisenberg, the editor-in-chief of *Esquire*, told me over the phone: “I should pay to send two rich suburban kids to Hollywood? Give me a break.”

But somehow we wangled an audience with Lewis Lapham, the editor of *Harper*’s, and somehow, with Peter at the top of his charming form, we euchred him into giving us $500 in expense money — big money in those days — and a letter testifying that we were actually on assignment. Not imposters! We flew out through a blizzard, Peter wearing his fedora, and landed in the land of Oz. It was azalea time in Hollywood, and our heads spun with the sheer phenomenon of it all. Our magic letter and Peter’s friend Chris Lawford opened doors for us, and we did a lot of pre-event reporting. Peter interviewed John Huston and George Cukor; I got Roddy MacDowell. Peter was in hog heaven. One night we went to a party at the home of Chris’s father’s Peter Lawford: John Lennon and Ringo Starr and Mick Jagger were there. Of *course* they were there. The Oscars themselves were a blur. Peter got to meet Groucho backstage — far more exciting for him than John or Ringo or Mick. We tried to write about it all afterward. We didn’t know how. Not yet.

Peter graduated and went to work — for *New Times* Magazine, then the New York *Times*. And almost exactly a decade after he’d first skyhooked me to Hollywood, he did it again, asking, out of the blue one day in the early 80s, if I would help him out with a screenplay he was working on. It was called *Native Genius*, and it was a very Frank Capra-esque — and also a rather prescient — story about a young science whiz from the hinterlands named Billings Swoon (Peter came up with the name) who invents a car that runs on hydrogen. Swoon gets to the big city, where the powers that be almost corrupt him, then don’t quite succeed. Goodness wins out in the end.

I helped as best I could, and then something life-altering happened: Warner Brothers liked our screenplay, then bought our screenplay, then flew us out to Hollywood to rewrite it with the director they’d hired for the project, Peter Bogdanovich. Bogdanovich, who had not only directed a couple of brilliant films but had written wonderfully about the movies for *Esquire*, was just as attuned to Old Hollywood as Peter Kaplan. He lived in a fabulous Spanish Mission-style mansion just off Sunset in Westwood; in his study was a silver-studded saddle that had been given to him by John Wayne. I’m not sure if Bogdanovich actually wore an ascot and sunglasses while we were working together, but he might as well have. Peter and I were thoroughly charmed.

Warner Brothers eventually shelved *Native Genius*; who knows what our lives would have been like if they hadn’t. But for a few months, on the strength of that script, we were hot hot hot in Hollywood — kind of a first draft of the Coen Brothers. Everyone wanted to meet with us, and we happily accepted. Fun to be sought after! I remember driving around Hollywood a lot in rental cars, getting lost a lot and being late a lot. No GPS in those days. We got the New York office, wrote a follow-up script that didn’t go anywhere, then closed up shop. Life had other plans for us.

The absolute truth of the matter is that as co-writers, Peter and I never quite gelled. He had his style and I had mine, and a certain amount of tension and competitiveness cropped up. I say a certain amount. At one point, in that Warner Brothers office in Rockefeller Center, we literally came to blows. I later found out that Sam Shepard wrote a play called *True West*, about two brothers who write a screenplay and come to blows. I’ve always felt he cribbed it from us.

We were partners at first, drawing side by side, then writing side by side, and then we weren’t. Another applecart overturned. But as Peter turned from a writer to an editor, and I became a magazine journalist, a novelist, and a biographer, we stayed in touch about our various projects; we advised each other. I got, by far, the better end of the bargain. By the time Peter landed at the *New York Observer* at age 40, he was poised, by sensibility, experience, and maturity, to become one of the transformative editors of our time, right up there with the two Harolds, the *New Yorker*’s Ross and *Esquire*’s Hayes. He made that paper into the living, breathing, giddy essence of all his enthusiasms: for the city itself, for popular culture and old songs and movies — and old newspapers! — and for puns and the brand of lightning-like humor that once caromed around the family dinner table. And, just as important as any of the above, he made the *Observer* a showplace for his love of great illustration. He once agonized to his mentor Clay Felker over the question of whether he should put photos in the paper. And Clay, a great editor himself, explained: “It’s a journal of interpretation.”

That was all Peter needed. And so he made the *Observer* a home not only for terrific writers with strong points of view, both established and up-and-coming, but for great illustrators with strong points of view like Bob Grossman, Ed Sorel, Barry Blitt, Drew Friedman, Victor Juhasz, Philip Burke. Peter wound up becoming a kind of cartoonist by proxy.

Now and then I used to stop by the old *Observer* offices, that great, moldering townhouse on East 64th Street, with Peter’s tiny, neo-Colyer Brothers office up at the top. We’d go out to the Viand, as I’m sure many of you did with him too, watching him tuck his tie into his blue Oxford shirt and tuck into a turkey leg or a bowl of chicken noodle soup. But mostly I kept a distance from his shop. It was his domain and he was its master; an older brother was a superfluity. I could tell he was proud of me and that was nice; I was more than proud of him. The staff’s reverence for Peter was palpable. I delighted in it, and in all he had created.

His skills came to bear more and more on my work. At first he was mainly my title guy: there was simply none greater. I’m not quite clear on how many of my books Peter named, but it’s probably more than I think. In all likelihood the ones I remember as my own were his.

As I began on my two-volume Frank Sinatra biography, Peter’s antennae perked up. Here was fruitful ground for all his obsessions: music, movies, politics and popular culture of the 1930s, 40s, 50s, and 60s. Not to mention Sinatra himself. We conversed constantly; I showed him drafts; he was enthusiastic, but he also came back at me with tough suggestions. He didn’t hold back. As I got up to speed on my subject, I sometimes found, to my amazement, that on certain topics I knew — for the moment — as much as Peter did. The difference was, he retained it longer.

He retained everything, of course. As you know. And this, next to Peter himself, is my greatest loss: where will I go anymore for the deep archives? Who can I go to to talk about the films of Leo McCarey? Or Lubitsch? Google? IMDB? Who will turn over, along with me, the exquisitely weird, endlessly fascinating gem that is a great Berlin lyric? *Be careful, it’s my heart — that’s not my watch you’re holding, it’s my heart*….

Toward the end, I was delighted to realize, we had become partners once again. I was not only his big brother, but just as proudly, I was one of his writers.

There was always an aspect of parallel play to our relationship, our brotherhood. Getting along in person wasn’t as easy as talking on the phone — and I often had to be the one to place the call. Peter’s essence was over-commitment.

But over his last fifteen months, our relationship changed. Change is possible, sometimes for not so good reasons. Once he was out of the hospital last spring, we would walk together in Larchmont, on Sundays, down to the water. We’d stare out together at the distant bridges and the blue strip of the North Shore. It got easier to talk about all kinds of things, not just Irving and Frank and Bing.

And once he was back in the hospital — the slammer, he called it, or the joint, the clink, the hoosegow — I visited, frequently, and we spoke eye to eye, about all kinds of things. We grew warmer and easier together. I was staggered by the grace, courage, and wit he showed in the face of relentless pain and indignity. He was scared, make no mistake, but his openness about his fear was itself a form of courage. All his life he was scared of so many things, but he was also amazingly brave. Not for nothing was his hero Bert Lahr’s Cowardly Lion, who combined the timing and delivery of a great vaudevillian with the lines of a great lyricist, Yip Harburg — who Peter knew! — and mixed in another thing, too: for all the Lion’s flinches and shudders, he stood up to everything the story had to throw at him.

I see him so strongly in each of his four children. These days it’s such a delight to see Davey, who’s so similar to the boy Peter used to be: solemn and mischievous and full of words.

Not to mention Cannie, and Charlie, and Pete, each with a different mix of the ingredients but a direct line to the sensibility. This is our consolation, and our hope. As is the unique and long-reverberating voice of Peter himself:

*You are fucking kidding me!*

*That’s the ticket!*

*Enjoy, dolling!*

And….

*Nighty night*.