



Joe Sobran as I Knew Him

I MET JOE SOBRAN in 1973 when I was working as history editor at St. Martin's Press and had begun writing for *National Review*. I don't remember how exactly, but the occasion must have been one of the open-house cocktail parties at the magazine's offices at 150 East 35th Street, held every other Wednesday evening after the current number had been seen off to the printer in Bridgeport, Connecticut. St. Martin's is established in the Flatiron Building at Fifth Avenue and 23rd Street, a short walk across midtown New York to Number One Fifty. However our meeting occurred, it was the beginning of many years of regular lunches and dinners in the company of Joe. We were often joined at these by Timothy Dickinson, an Englishman who had been at Oxford with George Will before coming to New York, where he was then established as a walking, breathing, resident encyclopedia for Lewis Lapham, the editor of *Harper's*.

In those days Joe was living in Ypsilanti, Michigan, with his four children and commuting to Manhattan by plane on alternating weeks. Despite his growing fame he was not rolling in money, and hotels in New York were, then as now, absurdly expensive. On the weeks when he was in town, Joe's bed was the conference table in the library, where he would stretch on his back at night, staring up at the reflected pattern of car lights on East 34th Street passing across the ceiling and fenced in on three sides by the collected works of Whittaker Chambers, Edmund Burke,

and James Burnham, among others. He brought a kit bag with him on the plane and set out the contents along the top of a low bookcase: razor, deodorant, toothbrush, and toothpaste. Having knocked off work at St. Martin's, I would arrive at the magazine at a little past five; afterward, Joe and I would walk around the corner to a Mexican restaurant on Third Avenue. He almost invariably ordered *enchiladas suizas*, a dish his nutritionist (had he had one) would certainly not have recommended for him. We would talk and drink until about nine, and then I would walk him round to the office and see him upstairs to say good night. It was between then and two or three in the morning that he composed his brilliant essays for the *Human Life Review*, whose offices were on the top floor of the building. Joe usually had a few words to say concerning the points he wished to make in his contemplated article, but I was not a Catholic (or anything else) in those days, and so these musings were largely lost on me. I can recall remarking on one occasion that sleeping with a woman is like drinking a bottle of wine. Joe, who at the time had lapsed in the practice of his Faith, was so concerned that he insisted on rushing me around to the Fireside Tavern on Lexington Avenue to buy me a drink and set me straight on the principles of Catholic sexual morality.

One evening in November 1975 Joe phoned to say that he had recommended me to Bill Buckley as the replacement for

George Will, who had been lured away by *Newsweek* from his job as NR's Washington editor and director of the book-reviews department. Here is how it had happened. John Lukacs, the historian—an acquaintance of Bill Buckley's but at the time unknown to me—had remarked overgenerously, in a phone conversation with Bill, on the quality of the book reviews I had been contributing to the magazine. Bill quoted him in the editorial meeting next day, and Joe put two and two together. *National Review* was in search of a new books editor. Chilton Williamson was a publishing-house editor, and a frequent contributor to the book section. Why not . . . ? The day after Thanksgiving, Bill phoned me at home and offered me the job.

I was given Whittaker Chambers' old office on the third floor, around the corner from the library and down the hall from the office of the editor-in-chief, where I sat facing a long, grimy window and pounding on one of the old Underwood manuals that were general issue at NR at the time. Mostly, I was left to work undisturbed, save by the coming and going of Bill Buckley and his chauffeur toting bulging leather attaché cases along the narrow hall, and the sharp voice of Frances Bronson, Bill's fearsome (though not to the staff) secretary, giving someone thousands of miles away hell from her office around the corner. On magazine week, though, there were interruptions—generally by Joe, who would appear in my door with a sheet of yellow copy paper in his hand, wishing to share with me the deathless draft of the editorial paragraph he had just composed. I would comment, usually enthusiastically, and Joe, smiling broadly, would vanish. In a quarter of an hour he would be back, proudly bearing the second draft and eager to introduce me to the improvements he had made in his small masterpiece. Depending on the length of the paragraph in question, this could go on for quite a long time. Eventually, Bill hired another hand (was it Rick Brookhiser?) and stuck

him into the old Chambers office, and Priscilla Buckley (the managing editor) had me transferred down to the second floor, where I shared an office with the articles editor, Kevin Lynch. Joe's office, too, was on the second floor, and, since he and Kevin were close friends, I saw even more of him after that. I can't remember whether Joe ever accepted our suggestions for revision. In fact, I don't recall that we ever made any.

A year or two after I was hired as books editor, the senior editors, assembled in one of their fearful biannual "Agonies" following dinner at the Buckley maisonette at 73 East 73rd Street, transferred Joe's responsibilities as section manager of *Arts & Manners* to me. Joe was hugely relieved; I got a raise; but very soon after I found it necessary to appeal to the editor-in-chief to prevail personally upon Joe's sense of responsibility as his column deadline for the new *Books, Arts & Manners* approached. The problem was resolved—more or less—by Bill's threat to withhold Joe's biweekly paycheck until he had assurance from me that Sobran copy had been delivered to my desk. A further problem proved to be less tractable. Joe's former protégés took what seemed to me an unconscionably long time to fix it in their heads that Williamson was now the arts and manners wallah, not Sobran. For months or years after the transfer of power, contributors continued to direct their brief exercises in genius to M.J. Sobran. Their lack of attention was nothing to Joe, but for Linda Bridges, the managing editor, and me it meant a janitorial nightmare. Joe's office on the second floor was hardly larger than a closet—a stuffed closet. The bookshelves had overflowed years before, and books, newspapers, and magazines lay piled in sloping slippery stacks on the linoleum floor, among the saucepans and canned goods from which Joe made his supper, when he wasn't dining out, in the kitchenette off the library. A precarious, whale-backed mass of newspaper cuttings, ignored letters, and unopened

manuscripts covered the desk entirely. On one off week, Linda and I—in search of a manuscript a contributor in good standing with the magazine, but clearly inattentive to bureaucratic change, was ready to swear on his mother's coffin he had mailed six months before to Mr. Sobran at *Arts & Manners*—were compelled to bulldoze the formidable mound. Joe's office had a window (it hadn't been raised for decades), looking out onto an air shaft. Beneath the window Linda and I noticed a biggish hole in the plaster below the sill, exposing the bricking beneath and about the size a very large badger would make. We concluded, after consideration, that Joe must have been trying to "exscape" (Flannery O'Connor's spelling) one evening, and had not succeeded in doing so. We never did locate the missing manuscript; and I was compelled to write a letter of apology to the author, excusing myself by explaining that the floor of Mr. Sobran's office had collapsed into the basement and all of his correspondence had been lost amid the rubble.

JOE WAS AN AMUSEMENT around the office on his trips to town, but he could also be a distraction—a major one, in fact. Once relieved of his administrative responsibilities, he had nothing to do during his three days in New York but write his assigned editorial paragraphs and more lengthy multiparagraph editorials, deposit them in the dumbwaiter going up to Bill's office, and attend the Tuesday editorial lunch at Pao's and drinks and dinner at East 73rd Street that evening. At other times during the day, when not writing his editorials, he would venture out on errands in the neighborhood from which he would return hauling the dirty canvas tote bag he carried instead of a briefcase, stuffed with the latest numbers of *Time* and *Newsweek*, the afternoon editions of the *New York Post* and the *Daily News*, the *Enquirer*, the second-hand books he had picked up somewhere, and a stash of candy bars to hold him on

the flight back to Ypsilanti. Beaming with satisfaction, he'd appear in Kevin's and my office, his tie pulled down from his collar and his soiled shirt bulging from the pale green polyester jacket he favored. "Kev!" he would begin; and Kevin and I, putting in a little hard labor over our respective magazine departments, knew we were in for it. So we relaxed, pushed back from our desks, and enjoyed his company. Joe was always full of some particular enthusiasm, usually lasting for weeks, sometimes months. In the early 80's, one of these enthusiasms was Pope John Paul II, who had been elected to the papacy in 1979. Joe had recently returned to the Faith, and on those days when he was in a particularly popish mood he'd present himself before us carrying a Catholic Bible or missal and swooning over John Paul. "My Pope!" he would exclaim, raising his eyes to the ceiling. "My Pope!" A second enthusiasm, ultimately much more than that (it ended in Joe's second marriage), was Jeanne Wacker, a highly intelligent woman with a degree in philosophy who had been a student of James Burnham at New York University. (Jim claimed that she had been his best student.) The two had met at a regular salon conducted at the home of John Murray Cuddihy, the sociologist and author of *The Ordeal of Civility: Freud, Marx, Lévi-Strauss, and the Jewish Struggle With Modernity*. Jeanne was a native of Ogden, Utah, and she was old enough to be Joe's mother, though she didn't look it. There was a story around the office at the time that Joe had confided to Jack Cuddihy his desire to be married again, and Jack suggested, doubtless with a Celtic twinkle in his eye, "Why not Jeanne?" I don't recall how long it took him to propose—and be accepted—but for many months Kevin and I listened, sympathetically but with one ear only, while Joe made cow eyes at the ceiling and mooned on about Jeanne's many virtues. After their marriage (or perhaps before) she took a job as an editorial assistant at *National Review*. This was, in fact, a

secondary job, her chief responsibility being to look after Joe and put his life in order. She began by taking charge of his finances and getting him off the hook with the IRS, on whose point he had been impaled, squirming, for several years.

Both Joe and I were extremely fond of Timothy Dickinson, the Oxford man. Timothy knew more than most encyclopedists have forgotten, but that was not what you first noticed about him. Week in and week out, he dressed in a morning coat possessed of its own peculiar elegance, but not of the sort that would have brought Bertie Wooster's friends at the Drones Club flocking to learn the name of his tailor. The waistcoat was spotted, the trousers fell short of the ankles, and Timothy's socks were usually falling over the tops of his shoes. He wore a monocle and a (more or less) fresh boutonniere and invariably carried a walking stick that ended in a bare protruding screw from which the head of the stick was missing. Timothy was (I hope he still is) one of the most charming men I have ever known, and lunch with him and Joe (as well as, now and then, Tom Wolfe) was an occasion straight out of an English literary memoir dating from about the period of Ronald Firbank. I shall never forget the afternoon when Timothy, standing with me on the sidewalk outside the Lebanese restaurant where we had lunched with Wolfe, dropped his cane on the pavement and got down on all fours to retrieve it, scrambling blindly at the feet of the tall, impeccably white-suited figure of the author of *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. I don't remember whether Joe was present for the occasion; if not, his superb sense of humor would have known what to make of it. I do know that he was along when, returning together from lunch at Paoni's, the three of us breasting the hill side by side, Timothy was hailed by Linda Bridges following behind on East 35th Street. "Oh, my dear Linda!" Timothy exclaimed, turning round in his tracks. "You do have the most remarkable ability to recognize peo-

ple from behind!"

In 1981 I moved to Wyoming. I saw much less of Joe after that, since I was in town for only a few days each month and had many other old friends to see and catch up with when I visited. After his marriage to Jeanne, Joe moved to Princeton, where his wife owned a house. Ordinarily, he took the train from New Jersey to Midtown Manhattan, but on occasion he made the trip by car. Late one afternoon, looking down through my office window onto 35th Street, I saw his battered and faded van parked at the curb, directly in front of the building. Having something to say to Joe, I hurried downstairs and into the street. Joe was not behind the wheel, or anywhere else. The van was a long way

from empty, though. Every seat except the driver's was piled with books, magazines, newspapers, and cassette tapes of Bach's and Mozart's music, also recordings of the George Carlin performances of which Joe was always a big fan. There were books on the floorboards, front and back, paperback volumes of Shakespeare's plays had been jammed between the dashboard and the windshield, and half-smoked cigars protruded from the ashtray. Joe's means of transportation was a bookmobile. Rather, it was a Joemobile.

I had intended to ask him for a lift as far as Grand Central Station. Instead, I went back upstairs, packed a heavy briefcase, and set off on foot for the nearest subway entrance. ♦

To the Grand Canyon

by Mark Amorose

Time's massive monument in weathered stone,
 chronicle of the ages of creation,
 you silence tongue and stun imagination:
 your spectator seems doomed to feel alone.
 And in that quietude of isolation
 the tininess of all he calls his own
 (his insignificance of flesh and bone)
 can tempt him to the edge of desperation.

But I defy your mute intimidation,
 for I can count your thousand cubic miles,
 which you, for all your bulk, can't comprehend.
 Nor can you know my final consolation:
 when your enormous ruin lies in piles,
 my mind will loom for ages without end.