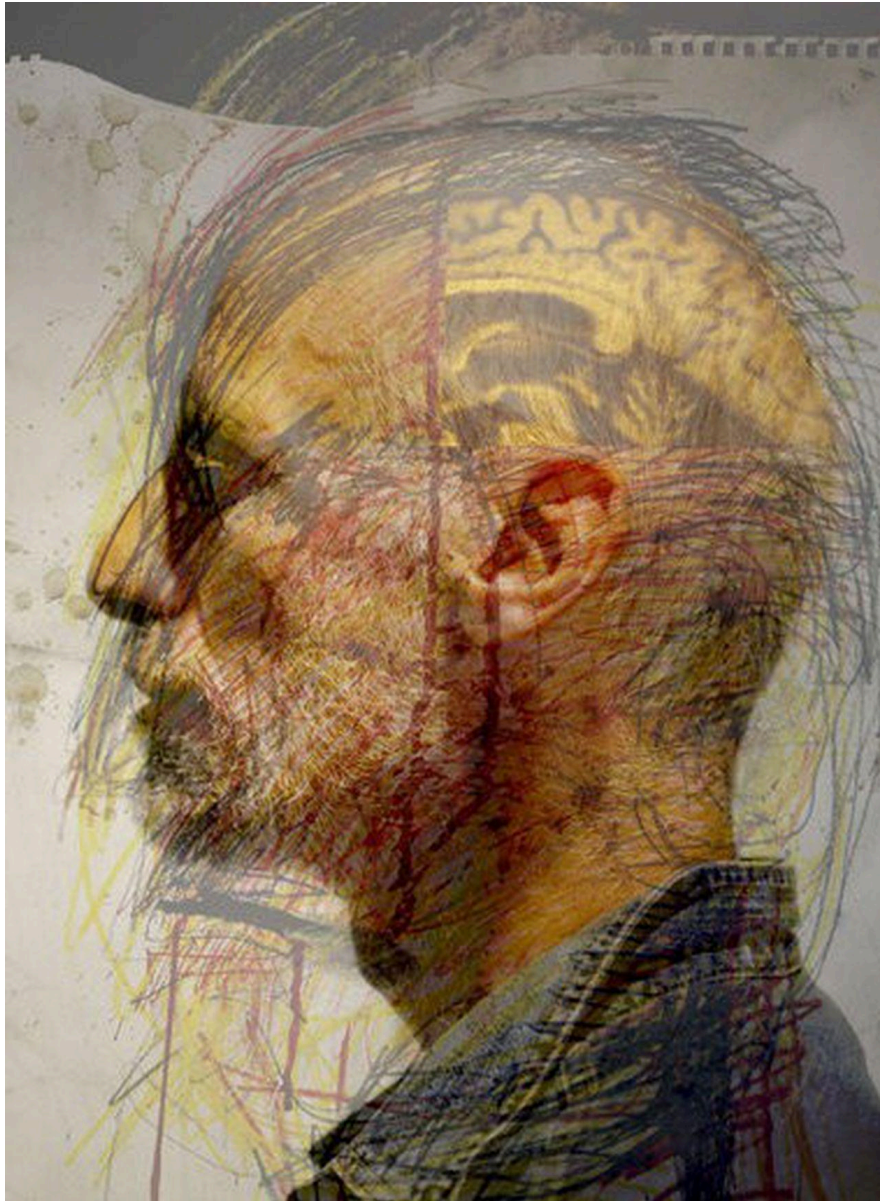


“The Accidental Artist”

What produces creative genius in someone? In most cases, the question is unanswerable. But for Jon Sarkin, the answer was clear. It was a trick of nature - a cruel trick, a tiny accident inside his brain that unmoored the happy life of a chiropractor and sent his mind on a restless voyage.

By Amy Ellis Nutt/The Star-Ledger/ 12/07/2008



A photo illustration of Jon Sarkin by Jennifer Brown blending a self-portrait of Sarkin with a photograph of him and an MRI scan of his brain.

Chapter 1: A sudden shift

The swirling waters along the North Shore of Boston are anchored by a geography of grief: Misery Island, Cripple Cove, the reef of Norman's Woe.

Jon Sarkin is comfortable in this landscape, shaped as it is by loss and etched with uncertainty. He came here to Cape Ann more than 20 years ago to build a life and start a family. That was before his brain turned against him, before a blood vessel inexplicably shifted a hundredth of an inch and, as quickly as the flap of a butterfly's wing, set off a wave of events that would change everything.

He tries not to think about any of it, even though fate, he believes, follows him everywhere, just like the sea.

The ocean appears over his shoulder as he leaves his Rockport home each morning in paint-splattered jeans, a canvas or a sheaf of drawing paper in one hand, his cane in the other. As he teeters down Broadway toward the bus stop, the sea, squeezed between the old clapboard buildings at the end of the street, seems to tower over the town.

"Like a tidal wave," says Sarkin. "Like a wall of water. I never get tired of it."

A 15-minute ride takes him to his studio in nearby Gloucester, a Colonial fishing village where the sunlight tastes of brine and the homes bear plaques inscribed with the names of Gloucestermen long dead. For ages, artists have been summoned here by the view of ships' masts tangling in the harbor and creamsicle-colored sunsets melting on the rocks. Longfellow stopped for a look and penned "The Wreck of the Hesperus"; Winslow Homer visited and painted his "Boy on the Rocks"; and T.S. Eliot, remembering his childhood summers, wrote about the rocky ledges beneath Rockport's waves in his "Four Quartets." Art did not lure Sarkin here, but it saved him.

After a brain hemorrhage and a stroke that nearly killed him, the once-shy, ambitious chiropractor awoke with an effusive, unfocused need to create. He was a different man in body - deaf in one ear, his vision splintered, his balance permanently skewed - and in mind. He didn't approach the world anymore; the world absorbed him - overwhelming his senses, swamping the filters that protect the rest of us from the minor details of existence. Colors, sounds, smells, words and images produced a cacophony of sensations.

Neurologists told him his brain had changed. It had been wounded, sliced up, and parts taken out. The neurons that were left had been forced to make new connections, find new meaning.

He learned to live a different life. He had more children; his wife weathered his storms; he did art. And the art made him, if not quite famous, at least successful. But always there was a question: Who was he? He felt estranged from his former self and unfamiliar with the new one. Imprisoned in that long moment between the "before" of his life and the "after," he belonged to neither - the future forever escaping his grasp, the past always tossing his losses back on shore.

"Time is no healer," Eliot wrote. "People change, and smile: but the agony abides."

Sarkin watched his friend's golf shot climb into the crisp blue sky. At its zenith, the ball seemed to pause for a fraction of a second, defying gravity, before plummeting back to earth. It landed in the weeds, short of the fairway.

"Nice shot," he said sarcastically to Hank Turgeon.

It was late on a Thursday afternoon, Oct. 20, 1988, and the two men were standing on a tee box at the Cape Ann Golf Course, some 35 miles northeast of Boston. The nine-hole public course rested on a spit of high ground carved out of the swamp and rocks of the ragged New England coastline. Sarkin was feeling pleased with himself. He and Turgeon bet on every hole and his friend was way ahead in money. Maybe he could take back a few bucks on this one. To Sarkin's right, shards of sunlight seemed to catch in the limbs of a tall oak, scattering shadows across the fairway. To his left, a thin slice of harbor gave way to the yawning Atlantic.

Sarkin loved being outdoors, and on short workdays the young chiropractor often sneaked away after his last appointment to get in a few holes of golf. He had begun playing regularly again when he set up his new practice in nearby Hamilton. It was a game he enjoyed, one he first played while he was growing up in Hillside, New Jersey. His father had been a hardworking professional who was born in the Bronx, worked his way through college, joined the Navy and eventually became a dentist. Stanley Sarkin married, had three children and saved enough money to buy a comfortable house in the Jersey suburbs and send his three children to Pingry, an exclusive private school, and then to college. Every summer the family spent time at the Jersey Shore, and every winter they vacationed in the Caribbean. It was a good life, a successful life, if not always an easy one.



The young Jon and, at right, with his father, Stanley, in the family home in Hillside, Union County.

While the oldest child, Richard, was an exemplary student and a three-sport star in high school, Jon, the middle child, was a mass of contradictions. Extremely intelligent, he was introspective and enjoyed reading, but he also was rebellious, once smuggling a concoction out of high school chemistry class and lighting it up - blowing it up, actually - in the middle of the family's driveway.

He also liked art. Sometimes his father would take him, his brother and his sister to a museum in New York. Jon especially loved the Museum of Modern Art, the Pop artists like Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg, and Dadaists like Marcel Duchamp. They were iconoclasts, contrarians like him, and he was enamored of their quirky, playful styles.

As a child he loved to draw - army soldiers, flying saucers, monsters - and if he wasn't drawing, he was creating his own absurd sculptures out of an Erector Set or whatever else was available. Once, while building a miniature model car, he glued its tires to the roof.

He also spent hours making posters and banners for school dances.

When he was 16, he visited his brother, then a sophomore at Johns Hopkins, and picked up a copy of Zap Comix, instantly enchanted by Robert Crumb's cross-hatch drawings. Later he discovered gonzo artist Ralph Steadman, and was so inspired he enrolled in a life drawing class at the renowned Art Students League of New York, driving into the city every Saturday with a friend.

He was in awe, he would later say, of artists who, "by the force of their will, create entire universes and then force people into their vision."

The young Sarkin did not gravitate to sports the way his brother did, but on a few occasions, he tried golf. Jon and his father played together exactly once. Jon was 14 at the time, tall and gangly, and with a tendency to swing wildly at the ball. His father, frustrated with him to the point of distraction, accidentally drove the golf cart over his son's foot. They never finished the round.

Now, on the Cape Ann course, Jon Sarkin reached for a tee inside his father's old canvas golf bag and suddenly felt something move deep inside his brain. He lifted his other hand up to his head, then froze, forming a peculiar still life against the lush landscape.

What the hell just happened? he thought to himself.

It was, he would later say, as if a freight train had just barreled through his brain - painlessly but somehow, he knew, devastatingly. It nearly took his breath away. In less than half a second, a part of his brain seemed to unhinge, to split apart and float away, and without knowing how or why, he thought he was about to die.

He was only 35 years old, but he remembered how his father had died of a heart attack in his sleep at the age of just 49. Sarkin picked up his tee and struggled to compose himself. It was like he was driving along on a perfectly clear day and suddenly his car plunged into a fog bank and then, just as suddenly, emerged back into the sunlight.

"Is anything wrong?" Turgeon asked.



In October, Jon Sarkin revisits the fateful spot - the eight hole of Cape Ann Golf Course in Essex, Mass., - where he suddenly felt something twist in his brain. (Photo by Jennifer Brown)

Sarkin shrugged, took a few breaths, teed up his ball, and swung mightily from his heels. As he often did on his drives, he topped the ball 20 yards - plunk - right into the middle of the marsh.

'You're going to break your freakin' neck with that swing,' Turgeon laughed. The two men played one more hole in the fading light. Sarkin walked the smooth green fairway, trying to play back what had just happened. He mentioned nothing to Turgeon. What could he say? That he felt as if his brain had just broken apart?

Somewhere in that thick forest of tissue and liquid inside his head, the wall of a blood vessel - as thin as a thread and no longer than a single stitch - had suddenly bulged. It now rested where it shouldn't, dangerously pressing up against the 8th cranial nerve, which controls hearing and balance.

By the time Turgeon dropped his friend off at home, it was almost dark. Sarkin got out of the navy-blue pickup and lifted his clubs from the back. As he slowly walked up the curving granite steps to the front door, he still hoped the world might tilt back on its axis to where it had been two hours earlier, before his brain cracked wide open.

When he came through the front door, his wife, Kim, looked up, alarmed at her husband's ashen complexion. "What's wrong, Jon?"

Balancing their 9-month-old baby on her hip, she watched her husband slowly walk across the room to the futon couch, sit down, and bury his head in his hands.

"I don't know how to explain it," he said. "Something happened. I was bending down, and then my brain ... just twisted." He held two clenched fists in front of his face and turned them, abruptly, in opposite directions.

"I don't know what happened. I just know everything's different. Everything's different, and it's not ever going to be the same."

Chapter 2: The sound of pain

Pop-pop. Pop-pop-pop.

Even from a floor away, the crackling sounded less like eggs frying than like gunfire. Each burst blistered his ears and sent him curling deeper under the bed covers.

Sarkin wanted to die.

The first symptoms had taken root just a few days after his brain seemed to quiver in its place. It started with the buzzing deep inside his head, a kind of screech that grew louder and shriller until it was nearly deafening.

"Like a thousand screaming baboons," he told Kim.

Called tinnitus, the subjective experience of noise is commonly referred to as a ringing in the ear. But this wasn't ringing. This was howling.

On top of the tinnitus, even ordinary sounds - eggs frying, silverware scraping, newspaper crinkling as someone turned the pages - had become grotesquely amplified, a condition known as hyperacusis. Kim took off her shoes and walked around the house in socks or bare feet. She kept baby Curtis close by and soothed him quickly when he cried, which he rarely did. She even eviscerated the baby's toys of their tinkling bells and whistles. Kim was concerned as much for herself as for her husband. How long was this going to last? They'd been married barely two years, and in some ways she was still getting to know Jon.



Back at home in Rockport, Mass., Jon Sarkin continues to draw. He says that even when he's not in his studio, he feels the need to pour out the images that are constantly flowing through his head. (Photo by Jennifer Brown)

It had been Sarkin's quiet reserve, along with his old-school etiquette - the way he pulled out a chair for her in a restaurant - that first attracted Kim to the handsome chiropractor. She was a 24-year-old teacher's aide back then, supplementing her income by waitressing at the Blackburn tavern in Gloucester every Tuesday and Friday night. He was building his practice and going through a divorce after separating from his first wife, a woman he had met in graduate school six years earlier.

In the 1980s it was not exactly the thing to admit, but in truth, all Kim really wanted was to get married and have babies. When she was 3 years old, she found a Chatty Cathy doll under the Christmas tree. It was like a first child, and she kept it with her wherever she went. (In fact, the doll still was sitting on a shelf in her closet, "all dressed up and ready to go.")

After a series of failed relationships, Kim swore off dating for a while and even applied for a teaching job in South America, thinking she would make a fresh start.

So she was intrigued when she realized the tall, awkward doctor had become a regular at the Blackburn. He sat on a stool at the long oak bar every time and said very little. She thought it was odd, but funny, that whenever he finished his meal he stood up to wait for the check.

"There's that guy again," she told a fellow waitress in the kitchen one day. "I know he's going to ask me out."

A few days later Sarkin picked up his date in his new Saab and they had dinner at a nearby jazz club. More dates followed. They went to the movies, camped out near Moosehead Lake, Maine, and visited Boston to see an exhibit of Richard Avedon's photographs.

Kim was nearly six years younger than Sarkin, but they were similar in many ways. Both were college graduates, extremely intelligent, very independent, and both had artistic leanings. Kim's parents and grandparents had met their spouses in art school. Her father was a commercial illustrator, her mother a painter, while she gravitated toward crafts and the decorative arts.

While Sarkin was a doodler, one of Kim's three brothers was just beginning a career as a cartoonist (he would eventually work under the pseudonym "Tony Millionaire") so she wasn't surprised by the slightly eccentric drawings she would find on scraps of paper around Sarkin's apartment.

As they got to know each other, he told her more about his life, about his circuitous route to his profession. After graduating from the University of Pennsylvania, he received a master's degree in environmental science at Rutgers, but then enrolled in chiropractic school in Iowa. He told her how he fell in love with healing people's aching muscles and painful joints.

A little more than three years after they met, Kim and Jon were married. They bought eight acres deep in the Gloucester woods and built an energy-efficient home with a solarium off the living room and a vernal pond at the bottom of the sloping backyard. Sarkin would rise early from bed, dress in his usual khaki pants, white shirt, yellow tie and wingtip shoes. Then he would kiss his wife goodbye and drive off to work.

When Kim finally got pregnant after trying for months, they were ecstatic. She had waited all her life for this and now it was finally here. Jon had wanted a family of his

own, too, and relished the idea of being both a father and a provider. Now they had a bright, healthy baby boy.

When Curtis was still just a few months old, he slept in a bassinet in his parents' bedroom. One night, just before turning in, Sarkin leaned into the crib and kissed the sleeping baby on his forehead, then ran over to Kim and hopped into bed. He was almost giddy.

"Isn't it amazing how happy we are," he said. "It's almost scary."

After his sense of hearing became painfully distorted, Sarkin struggled to keep to his routine. He dragged himself from bed to his office and back home again. Early one evening, his car pulled into the driveway, spitting and crunching the gravel underneath. Slowly, he climbed the steps to the house -he had laid these cobblestones himself, just a few months earlier - and opened the front door.

Kim was in the kitchen, at the other end of the hall. She called out, "Hi, hon, how are you doing?"

Sarkin placed his briefcase on the ground, leaned back against the wall and slowly slid down to the floor. Curling up in a fetal Position, he began to cry. For a moment, Kim stood there, in shock, then sat beside her broken husband and tried to comfort him. She had no idea what else to do.

In addition to the tinnitus and hyperacusis, Sarkin suddenly was sensitive to light. When he wasn't trying to work - or trying to shut out the world by sleeping all day in his darkened bedroom - he was on the internet, looking for answers. His own physician, John Abramson, was stymied. A hearing test came up normal, and there was virtually no medication to treat tinnitus or hyperacusis.

Sarkin consulted fellow chiropractors as well as neurologists, psychologists, even an acupuncturist. No one could help him. A psychiatrist with a Freudian bent was intrigued by the fact Sarkin's father had been a golfer and the patient's cerebral "event" occurred on a golf course. He thought Sarkin was probably depressed and prescribed Valium and Prozac and, when those drugs didn't work, Depakote, an anti-convulsant normally given to epileptics. The pills only nauseated him.

"My life is hell," he said to Kim.

"Mine, too," she answered.

After nearly nine months, Sarkin visited a tinnitus specialist, Abraham Schulman, at Downstate Medical Center in Brooklyn. Schulman put Sarkin through two days of testing - brain scans, blood samples, hearing exams, the works - and then told his patient to go out and buy a white noise generator.

"That's it?" asked Sarkin. "That's all you can suggest?"

Pressed, Schulman hesitated, then offered one tantalizing long shot. There was a neurosurgeon at Presbyterian-University Hospital in Pittsburgh. He performed deep brain operations for patients with cranial nerve disorders. "But he's way out there," Schulman warned.

It was a last resort his wife, his mother and his family physician all tried to talk him out of. The surgery, called microvascular decompression, was indeed dangerous, and there was no concrete evidence it would cure Sarkin. But it was something, Sarkin thought, whereas everyone else had offered nothing.

In July 1989, Sarkin flew with his wife to Pittsburgh.

Peter Jannetta is a beefy, voluble surgeon who pioneered microvascular decompression. Like Sarkin, he graduated from the University of Pennsylvania and spent much of his childhood in New Jersey. Jannetta ran tests, scanned Sarkin's brain and read through his medical records.

"It's pretty obvious to me what's going on," he told the couple.

He explained that a blood vessel had shifted deep inside Sarkin's brain and was now rubbing up against his acoustic nerve, causing the strange and painful distortions of sound.

Jannetta said he thought he could fix the problem. The surgery was both simple and extremely delicate, he said. He would lift the offending blood vessel off the auditory nerve and insert a tiny, wafer-thin piece of Teflon fabric between the two, creating a protective cushion.

The dangers were myriad, he explained - bleeding, stroke, even death - but he had done this kind of surgery hundreds of times and he had yet to lose a patient.

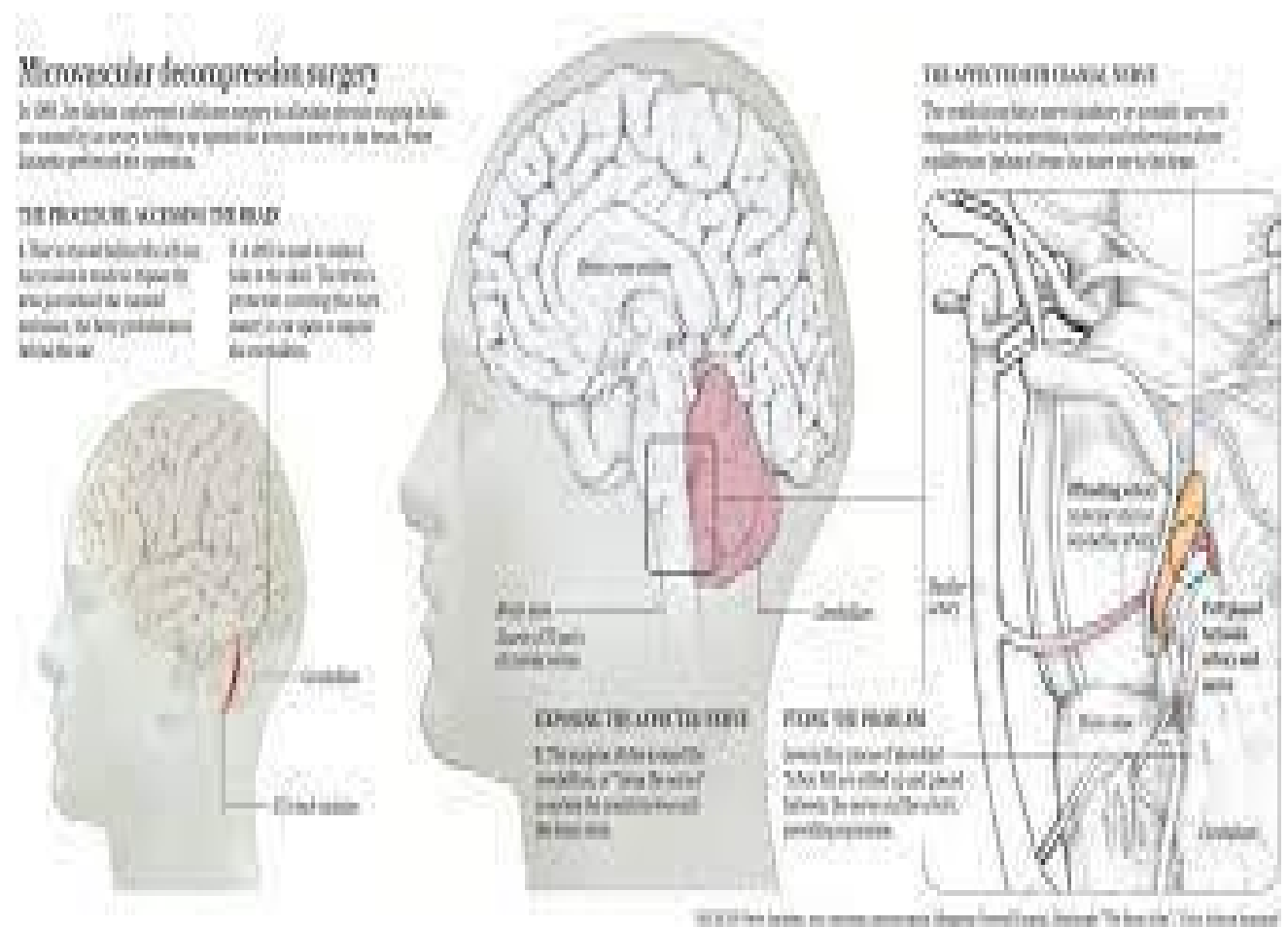
Sarkin told the surgeon he would have to think about it, but when the couple left the office he already knew he was going to go ahead. He had nothing left to lose except his life, and frankly, he thought his life wasn't worth living like this anyway. When he got home, Sarkin called Abramson, his primary care physician, to tell him he had made a decision.

The doctor's response: "I guess you decided to roll the dice."

Chapter 3: Voyage into the brain

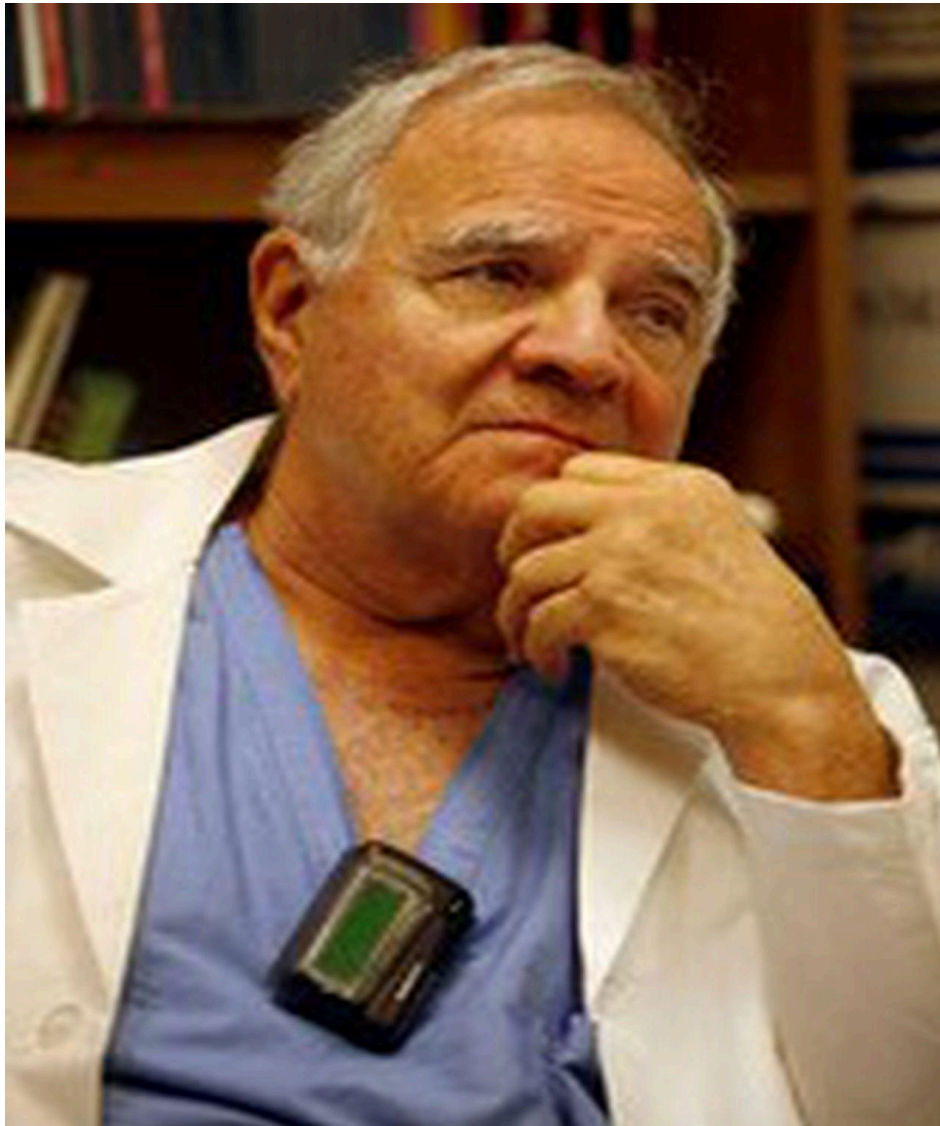
Peter Jannetta fingered the bony knot just behind his patient's left ear and, using a black pen, marked the shaved area with an "X." Only a few weeks after his initial visit to the surgeon's office, Sarkin now was asleep on an operating table, his head secured in a surgical vise, his brain about to be exposed to the world.

Jannetta's quarry was the 8th cranial nerve, the vestibulocochlear nerve, with two branches: one controlling balance, the other hearing. Cranial nerve 8 is a notoriously fragile skein of neurons that threads from the inner ear through the temporal lobe, and twists down to the lower brainstem.



The surgeon would need to tiptoe through the deepest part of Sarkin's brain and find where the blood vessel was pressing against the acoustic nerve. The part of the 8th cranial nerve sought by Jannetta traverses a tiny cistern called the cerebellopontine angle. Bounded by the cerebellum, the "pontine" angle is the gateway to the brainstem.

Damage virtually any other part of the brain, and the patient can recover function. Damage the brainstem and the result is usually death. At 57, Jannetta was tall and square-faced, with the broad shoulders of a swimmer (he was All-America in high school) and the thick body of a football player (briefly, again in high school).



Pittsburgh neurosurgeon Peter Jannetta had performed hundreds of microvascular decompressions before Sarkin's surgery Aug. 8, 1989.

Sitting on a stool, with Sarkin's head bolted in place and practically in his lap, Jannetta made a two-inch-long incision. Despite his beefy hands, his fingers moved nimbly and confidently, as if working the delicate strings of a marionette. He had been performing this type of surgery for 22 years, but only a few of his decompression operations involved the 8th cranial nerve. Most were on patients with facial spasms and pain that involved the 5th and 7th nerves.

Digging down through the skull, a surgeon is like an archaeologist tunneling back through time, with each part of the brain representing a signpost to our evolutionary development. The outermost part contains six layers of neocortex, less than a quarter-inch thick, which formed a mere 4 million years ago. Here the higher functions of language, social behavior and reasoning reside. Beneath the neocortex is the 150-million-year-old cerebrum, built out of the first vertebrate's olfactory lobes. Next is the mid- or mammalian brain, whose limbic system is some 300 million years old and is responsible for our most primitive emotions and impulses, such as fear and aggression.

Lower still is the 500-million-year-old hind- or reptilian brain. Perched atop the summit of the spine, it connects the brain to the spinal cord and controls the most basic processes of life, among them, blood pressure and breathing.

Jannetta would have to reach through and around all three "brains" to find the troublesome blood vessel. To make the final push to the stem, he would have to move aside the cerebellum, a curved lump of gray and white matter that controls much of a person's movement and balance as well as key cognitive processes.

After slicing through the scalp, Jannetta pushed through the quarter-inch-thick skull bone with an air drill. He clipped away pieces of bone until the rectangular opening to Sarkin's brain was about the width of a quarter, then finally cut through the tough outer covering of the brain, called the dura mater. The dura was the last barrier of protection.

Jannetta now had a clear view into Sarkin's brain - six cups of fluid and tissue containing billions of neurons and blood vessels. A floor-standing microscope was moved into place, enabling the surgeon to finger his way through the dangerous terrain at the back of the skull.

The team worked quickly and efficiently, with the scrub nurse periodically flushing out excess blood as Jannetta cauterized vessels.

Many surgeons, when not in the OR, will eschew anything that might make their hands unsteady. Jannetta drank multiple cups of coffee a day but recently had given up Pall Mall cigarettes.

Often, if all was going well, he hummed as he worked. On this day, everything was moving along smoothly. Jannetta's movements were so fine and focused, he seemed to be standing still.

Bypassing Sarkin's left temporal lobe, where speech, recognition of faces and long-term memories are all located, Jannetta needed to move aside the cerebellum - "turning the corner," neurosurgeons call it - in order to reach the pontine angle and the 8th cranial nerve. The cerebellum sits at the very back of the skull and takes up only about 10 percent of the brain's volume, but it contains more than half of the brain's 100 billion neurons.

Slowly, but methodically, the surgeon followed the 9th and 10th cranial nerves all the way to the brainstem, encountering a small amount of bleeding at the choroid plexus, which produces spinal fluid and sits right behind the pons, a kind of relay switch for sensory information. The blood quickly coagulated and Jannetta moved on, finally exposing the 8th cranial nerve. It was an hour into the intricate procedure, and the surgeon now could see the source of Sarkin's harrowing symptoms.

There were two problems. First, a vein, no more than four-hundredths of an inch in diameter, was running along the 8th cranial nerve near the brainstem. Jannetta carefully cut it away.

The second problem was more difficult and more perilous. The anterior inferior cerebellar artery was twisted across the 8th nerve. The artery is one of three major vessels that provide blood to the upper brainstem. Nick one of them and a stroke or heart attack can easily result. Cut one of them and the patient is likely to die.

Jannetta immobilized the artery, lifting it off the nerve, while the scrub nurse tore a piece of felt from a pad of Teflon material on a nearby tray, dipped it into a saline solution, and rolled it like a cigar in the palm of her hand. After placing the quarter-inch-long fiber in a pair of micro forceps, she handed the instrument to Jannetta, who cautiously placed the shredded Teflon between the vessel and the nerve.

This was the critical part of the operation, and Jannetta worked more slowly as he gently pushed the miniscule piece of felt into place. On the other side of the operating room, a doctor monitored a computer screen to make sure the auditory nerve was not being damaged.

The main work now was done. Carefully, Jannetta retraced his steps through his patient's brain, first checking to make sure there was no bleeding, removing the retractors that kept the cerebellum out of the way, stitching the membranes closed, inserting a cranioplasty plate so there would be no soft spot on his patient's skull, then letting the surgical resident sew up the incision in Sarkin's scalp.

Jannetta snapped off his gloves and pulled at his gown, pitching them into a nearby hamper. He thanked the staff and exited the operating room.

A little more than three hours after the neurosurgeon had entered his brain, Sarkin was wheeled into recovery. Another hour later, and Kim was by her husband's side as he woke from a dreamless sleep.

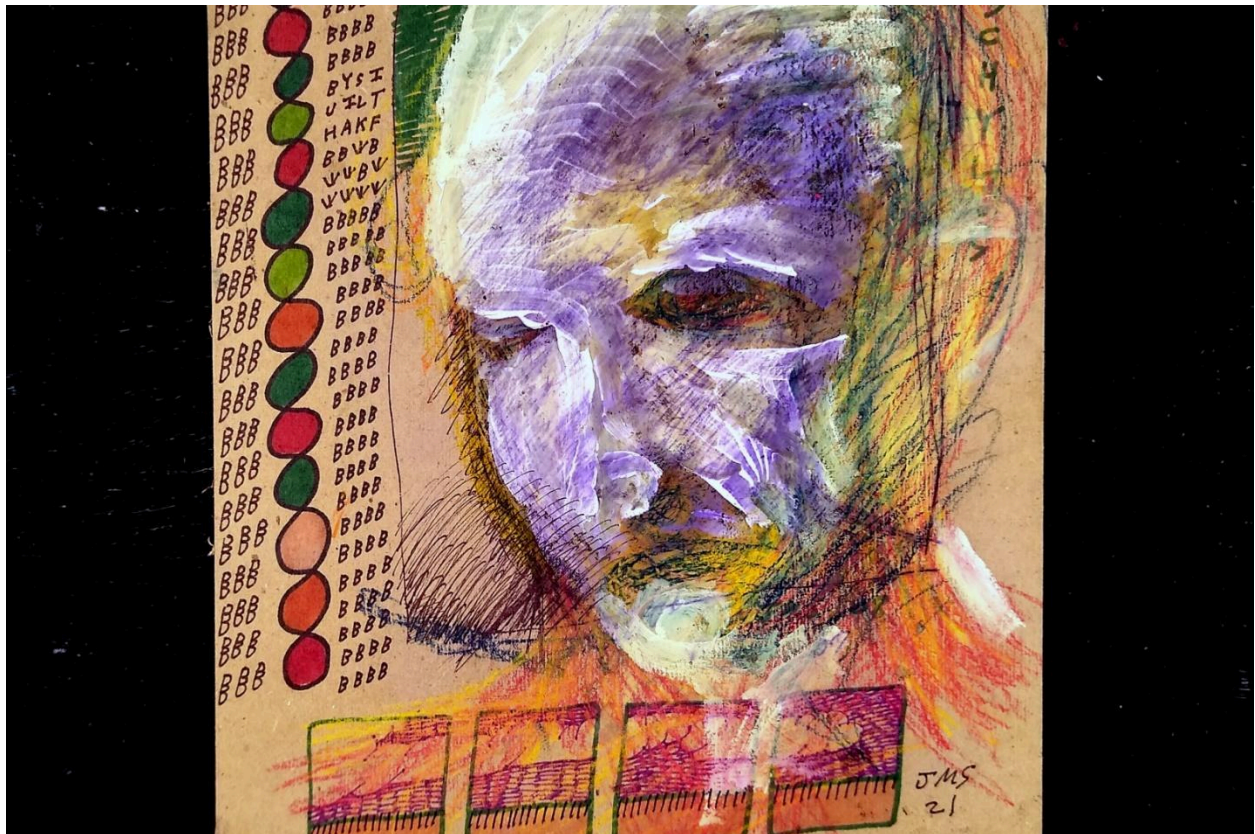
When he opened his eyes, Kim was looking at him.

"Jon, is the ringing gone?" He couldn't talk yet, but he knew the answer. He nodded slowly, mouthing the word "Yes."

Kim couldn't believe it. Thank God, it was over, she thought. All those months of pain and confusion and frustration.

She finally had her husband back.

Chapter 4: Code Blue



Sarkin dipped in and out of a drowsy half-sleep. Still woozy, he was well enough to sit in his hospital bed, propped up by a levee of pillows. Bandages hid the wound in his skull, just behind his left ear, and the crescent-shaped scar that marched up the side of his head.

His mother, Elaine, who had flown in from New Jersey, was sitting with him in his room. It was early in the afternoon. Sarkin's wife, Kim, who earlier had taken Curtis to the hotel for a nap, walked back into the room with the baby.

Sarkin turned toward his wife and opened his eyes.

Kim said softly to Elaine, "Something's different." She noticed it right away: a distant, glassy look in her husband's usually warm green eyes.

"Jon?"

For a moment the room was quiet. Then Sarkin smiled, looked at his mother and patted the covers on his bed.

"Come here, Ida," he said, looking straight at Elaine.

Kim took a sharp breath. Ida was their black Labrador retriever.

Kim rushed from the hospital room out into the hallway.

"We need help," she called out. "We need a doctor!"

A young resident walked briskly into the room.

"How are you doing, Mr. Sarkin?"

"Come ... here ... Ida," Sarkin said, this time garbling the words.

The resident shone his penlight in one eye, then the other.

Normally the light will cause the pupil of the eye to contract. The cranial nerve that controls the constriction is located high on the brainstem. If there is pressure on the nerve, especially from bleeding, the pupils can't react properly and will fail to constrict. And if they fail to constrict — that is, if the pupils are "blown" — there is only one conclusion: Something catastrophic has happened in the brain.

Sarkin's pupils barely moved.

The resident quickly peeled the bandages from Sarkin's head. As the last bit of gauze was pulled away, the resident went pale.

"There's a lot of blood," he said to no one in particular.

Then to Kim and Elaine: "Please step out."

Neither moved. They were still trying to understand what was happening.

"Please step out, NOW!"

Sarkin had suffered a massive stroke.

Somewhere at the bottom of his brain a blood vessel had burst, soaking the cerebellum and swelling it until it began to cram against the brainstem. Breathing, respiration, blood pressure - all were now in danger of shutting down.

Fluid streamed into the crevices and contours of Sarkin's brain, overflowing into the thin space between the gray matter and the skull, and finally pushing its way up, breaching the dam at the site of the surgical wound. Blood poured not only from his brain but from his head.

Sarkin stopped breathing.

"Code Blue! ... Code Blue!"

The loudspeaker could be heard down the hall, in the waiting area where Kim had retreated with Elaine and the baby. Seconds later, a crash cart and a half-dozen emergency responders barreled by. While Elaine quietly wept, Kim began to pace, clutching Curtis tight to her chest. "Please God, please God, please God," she whispered as she walked in circles.

A nurse came in and offered to hold the baby.

"No way!" she said abruptly. Curtis was her sanity and her safety, and she certainly wasn't going to let go of him. When a priest entered the room, Kim recoiled. She knew what that meant — that her husband was going to die.

"No, no, no," she kept saying. "I don't want to talk to you."

Sarkin was now being rushed down the hall while a doctor performed CPR. Jannetta joined the surgical team in the operating room, cut into the wound he had stitched just 24 hours earlier, and used the air drill to widen the opening in the skull.

It took him just five minutes to reach the cerebellum. Finding the clot amid all the blood and removing it would take much longer. Somewhere in the forest of vessels threading in and around the cerebellum, one of them had ballooned and sprung a leak. For the neurosurgeon, it would be like trying to find a small hole in a boat already under water. The team worked feverishly to find the clot. For a second time, Sarkin stopped breathing. For a second time he was revived, but not before tiny pockets of oxygen-starved tissue throughout his brain began to die.

Jannetta was shaken. He had never lost a patient doing this procedure. In fact, his closest confrontation with death had not involved a patient at all; it involved himself.

He was a freshman at the University of Pennsylvania when he noticed a bulge in his neck just under his chin. For months he paid no attention to it, until he could no longer button his collar. He finally decided to have it checked out, and surgery was

recommended. Afterward he could barely talk. His doctors told him he would recover and be fine, but they never explained exactly what they'd found.

Five years later, in his second year in medical school, also at Penn, Jannetta became curious enough to obtain the tissue samples from his operation. He asked a couple of his teachers to examine the specimens. What they found shocked them. It was thyroid cancer, and over the years it had likely spread.

His teachers told him he should decide what he wanted out of life, because he'd be dead by 40.

More surgery followed and a lot of medication. Jannetta's 30th birthday came and went. Then his 40th. Then his 50th. A self-proclaimed "failed Catholic," Jannetta had nonetheless remained, much like his devoutly Catholic mother, deeply spiritual.

He believed in medicine and God. Both, he often thought, had given him a second chance at life.

Working feverishly over Sarkin, and for the first time in 30 years of neurosurgery, Jannetta truly was not sure whether a patient of his would make it. He had never seen anyone "go bad" after microvascular decompression surgery. Usually if something went wrong, it happened during the procedure, not a day later. A delayed problem like this, with the patient becoming sick so fast? That just didn't occur.

But here he was, probing the most sensitive structures of his patient's brain. "It's where we live," he often said about the brainstem. "It's an unforgiving area."

As Jannetta fingered the blood vessels in search of the tiny jelly-like clot, his mind raced through the possible causes of the sudden stroke. He realized that to find the clot he would have to remove some of Sarkin's brain tissue, or else the cerebellum would continue to swell and press down against the brainstem, eventually choking the life out of his patient.

As he probed, the surgeon thought about the residual effects of each bit of tissue he tore away — the potential damage to Sarkin's motor skills, his balance, his vision, his hearing, his emotions and cognition. What would be left of the man after all that brain matter was removed?

After slicing away at the lateral part of Sarkin's cerebellum, Jannetta found the tiny clot and removed it. When he finally sewed up the dura mater, closed the opening in his patient's skull and stitched the scalp back into place, Jannetta left the OR and collapsed in a chair in the surgeon's locker room.

He sat by himself, barely moving, for a few moments, then picked up the phone and dialed his mother back in Philadelphia. He told her what had happened, that his patient was very sick and he might well die.

"Pray for him, Mother."

On another floor, in the intensive care unit, Sarkin now clung to the barest edge of life. He was on a breathing machine, in a light coma.

Kim and Elaine were back in the now empty hospital room, where the surgeon soon joined them. Even 19 years later, Kim remembers the moment as if time had paused and etched the images in glass.

Jannetta slowly walked in, leaned his back against the wall and slid down to the floor, putting his head in his hands. It was such a curious coincidence, Kim thought. Her husband had done exactly the same thing in the hallway of their home, when the noises in his head were torturing him.

"I don't know what happened," Jannetta finally said, looking up at Kim and Elaine.

"Will he recover?" they asked.

Jannetta knew he had no good answer.

"He might live, or he might die," he told them. "Or he might be something in between."

Chapter 5: 'Absolve me'

Am I dead?

The words bubbled up from deep inside Sarkin's brain. Then, like tiny life rafts bobbing along the edge of awareness, they floated away. Beached on the sheets of his hospital bed, he struggled to make sense of where he was and what had happened. In his mind he could see land, but he could not reach it. Time unspooled. He felt like he was traveling backward, somehow starting over.

He was 6 or 7 and he was outside in an ice storm. The sleet felt like knitting needles poking his face, plunging deep into his skin. He wondered if he was bleeding, if he would be scarred for life, if people would pretend not to look at him because his face was so disfigured. He would get used to it, he thought - the embarrassed looks and the sad expressions. He would grow up and get a job in a factory where he wouldn't have to talk to people, and he would live alone and every now and then become angry that he ever went out in that damned ice storm.

Sarkin would spend two months in a semi-coma - not quite asleep, not fully awake. Medical problems followed, one after the other: pneumonia, septicemia, a bleeding ulcer, even a heart attack.

Kim dealt with the stress by staying up late at the Holiday Inn and watching "The Tonight Show," then sleeping until 10 in the morning. The intensive care unit allowed visitors only once every two hours, for just 15 minutes at a time. Kim and Sarkin's mother, Elaine, tag-teamed their visits, spelling each other so one of them could take care of baby Curtis, who was not allowed in the ICU. When she tucked him into bed every evening in their hotel room, Kim helped Curtis say goodnight to a photograph of his daddy.

Kim enjoyed her walks to the hospital, past the field where the University of Pittsburgh football players practiced in the afternoons, the 42-story limestone Cathedral of Learning, and the stately Greek columns of the soldiers and sailors memorial. It was early fall, and the old oak and maple trees swaddled the town in color.

How can I feel so happy, Kim sometimes asked herself as she strolled the few blocks from the hotel. She couldn't deny it, though: It was beautiful here, and she seemed to draw strength from the crisp cool air and the casual merriment of the college students. This was where she was supposed to be, with her husband. She couldn't imagine being back home, unable to see him every day and worrying whether he would live or die.

When Sarkin's breathing tube was finally removed, Kim was by his side. Slowly, painfully, he tried to speak.

"Kim."

"Oh my God, you can talk!"

He wanted to tell her something. He wanted to tell her he was sorry - for the past, for the present, for the future. "Absolve me," he whispered to his wife.

"Absolve me."

"From what, Jon?"

"From my sins."

There was nothing to forgive, Kim tried to tell her husband. They would get through this, she told him, though when she looked now into her husband's eyes, she did not quite recognize the man she had married three years earlier.

He had been making progress before all the infections, but then he got so much worse. The dangerously high fevers, the 80 pounds that seemed to just fall off his bones. He was a different man, physically. He was deaf in his left ear, his speech was slurred, and he suffered permanent double vision. The loss of part of his cerebellum resulted in a lack of balance, impaired hand-eye coordination, and a constant feeling of nausea. Jon

would not be able to drive, play golf or even ride a bicycle, and he would have to use a cane for the rest of his life.

Now Kim realized there was deeper, maybe irreversible brain damage as well. What had happened in that initial surgery to cause the hemorrhage would remain a mystery. A panel of independent neurologists, who examined a videotape of the operation, found the surgeon had done nothing wrong. In medical parlance, Sarkin's stroke had been "an act of God."

By the end of 1989, Sarkin was well enough physically to be moved to the New England Rehabilitation Hospital in Woburn, Mass., 35 miles from home. One of the first friends to visit was Hank Turgeon, who had been with Sarkin the year before, on the day of his peculiar "cerebral event" at the Cape Ann golf course.



Ten months after Jon Sarkin's stroke, Kim, Jon and Curtis are back home. The operation saved his life and the tortuous months of recuperation have changed Jon's personality and left him deaf in one ear and unable to see clearly.

Sarkin and Turgeon had met in the early 1980s, when both occasionally jammed with a band called the Joe Tones. Turgeon didn't know what to make of Sarkin back then. Here was this college boy, in khaki pants and a pressed shirt, but the guy knew music - jazz, folk, blues. They both played guitar, and Turgeon, who was a carpenter, was surprised

at how many songs this preppie from New Jersey knew by heart. Sarkin could play Robert Johnson's "Stop Breakin' Down Blues," and then "Route 66" the way Chuck Berry did it, and afterward the two would go drink beer and eat Goldfish crackers by the handful at a bar on Halibut Point.

When Turgeon walked into the lobby of the rehabilitation hospital, he was directed to a room on the third floor. When he stepped in, he saw an old man and quickly turned around.

'Where's Sarkin?' he asked a nurse in the hallway.

"No, no, that's him," she said. "That's your friend."

He thought: What have they done to this guy? Sarkin was propped up by pillows, his skin was the color of pewter, and he was back on a breathing tube, unable to talk. Turgeon walked over to the bed, sat down and squeezed his friend's hand.

The rehabilitation was slow and tortuous. After all the tubes were removed, Sarkin had to learn to walk again. Ordinarily quiet and polite, he became moody, talkative and impulsive.

One day in rehab, Kim watched while a physical therapist, a woman, helped her husband take a few steps. Without warning, Sarkin blurted out he wanted to have sex with the therapist. For a moment, Kim thought she must have misheard, realized she had not, then ran from the room in tears.

She remembered what the nurses had explained to her months earlier, that sexual disinhibition is typical of patients who suffer injuries to their frontal lobes, the part of the brain responsible for social behavior. Usually the sexual impulsivity goes away, they told her, but how long it would take was anyone's guess.

When she got home, she called the hospital.

"Please tell him I'm not mad at him," she told the nurse. "Please just tell him I had to leave."

It was the first time she had broken down and the first time since his brain injury that she had cried in front of him. They had been married for a little more than three years. They had been ecstatically in love. They had given birth to a perfect baby boy.

Now she knew that no matter how much he improved physically, Jon would never be Jon again.



Chapter 6: Thinking in colors

Sarkin shuffled slowly across the boardwalk and down to the beach, tilting with each step as his cane sank into the heavy sand. Without the chunk of cerebellum the surgeon was forced to remove, he would never again walk a straight line or stand still without feeling he was somehow dropping off a cliff.

Just in front of him, Kim pulled a plastic wagon piled high with beach chairs, an umbrella and Curtis in the middle, among the towels and toys. It was a year since his stroke, and Sarkin was still trying to adjust to home, wanting to be a husband and a father again, but feeling more like a failure.

After finding a good spot, Sarkin slumped down in his beach chair and turned his gaze to the crooked coastline meandering northward.

Scooped out of the hard New England granite thousands of years ago, it was a beautiful but brutal landscape - beaten by the wind, squeezed and cracked by ice - and the houses scattered along the cliffs seemed to clutch at the ground for dear life.

For Sarkin, all of it was fractured, jumbled. He tried to focus on the horizon, but the stroke had damaged his vision as well as his hearing. He no longer had any depth perception, so water, sand and sky bled into each another, the images piling up like a chain-reaction car accident.

Low-slung waves tossed pebbles up the wet sand and chased complaining gulls into the air. Sarkin barely noticed. He felt distant and foreign.

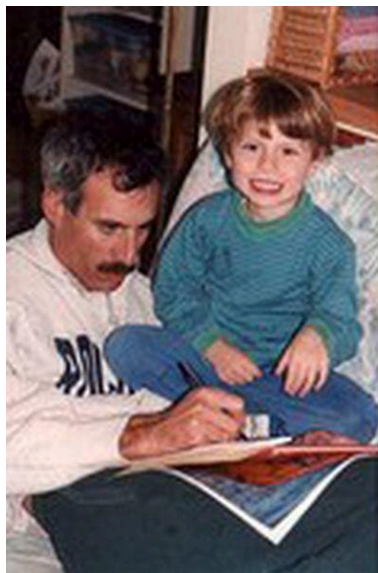
By midafternoon, the beach was dotted with small, intimate groups lying on towels, perched in chairs or huddled under the shade of umbrellas. A sand-sculpting competition was taking place and visitors to the shore mingled among the temporary mermaids and dinosaurs. Sarkin's eyes stuttered across the scene, trying to piece together the blurry puzzle of colors and shapes. Bodies twinned, overlapped and snaked across the beach. Bathing suits became a large patchwork quilt, with disembodied colors -blue, green, yellow, red - smeared across sand and sea.

Sarkin dropped his hand from the armrest and picked up a flat granite stone. Suddenly its glacial veins seemed to liquefy in his hand. His thoughts hopscotched. He had blue thoughts, green thoughts, yellow thoughts.

Suddenly, the stone was alive, streaming with "possibilities, and the aesthetic boundaries of the world began to realign.

In the months after Sarkin first returned home, he had gone through extended mood swings. When a friend of Kim's suggested he try aromatherapy, Kim was stunned, realizing how much other people didn't understand.

"They removed a part of his brain!" she fairly shouted at the woman.



February 1991: Eighteen months after his stroke, Sarkin is obsessed with drawing. Three-year-old Curtis keeps him company, but there are times when he is oblivious to those around him. His obsession continues today, in his basement studio, at right.

Sarkin had suffered intolerably. He had nearly died. So maybe it was to be expected that survival haunted him most when he returned home. This time he wanted to be prepared for a disaster.

"We need three things," he said urgently to Kim one day. "Progresso kidney beans! Progresso lentil soup! Progresso minestrone!"

"Jon, that's not really necessary," she said.

"We need them!"

"All right, Jon. How many cans?"

"Not cans! We need cases. At least 10 cases."

He told Kim to store extra jugs of spring water, gallons of gasoline and cans of Sterno in the basement.

"Maybe we should buy gold bars and bury them under Curtis' sandbox?" he said one day.

He wanted to save electricity, too, so candles sometimes replaced lamps. And everything had to be recycled.

"But Jon, there's no recycling here."

"No problem. We'll send it all to my brother, Richard. They recycle in Buffalo." Kim diligently bundled up all the things her husband deemed recyclable - everything from paper napkins to ballpoint pens - and stored them in the basement. She told him she was mailing them to Richard, but, in fact, she was driving them to the garbage dump.

The fevered survivalism subsided after the first few months, and then, as if he was finally reassured of his family's physical safety, he turned inward.

It became harder and harder to maintain the semblance of his former life. As his family grew with the birth of two daughters, Sarkin tried to go back to being a chiropractor, but he no longer had adequate coordination, his mind wandered, and he preferred to doodle and draw on his official stationery instead of seeing patients.

The doodles were different from the kinds of random sketches he made before his stroke. They were not the visual jokes and puns of the past, but distorted cartoon faces with symbols, like Moebius strips, that sometimes overlapped or grew out of the faces.

It was a difficult life for Kim, too. Her husband was, in many ways, an adolescent. His intelligence was unaffected by the stroke, but his behavior and emotions were off-kilter. In fact, he was sometimes more child than man. When he first came home, he would sit in front of the TV with Curtis and laugh hysterically at Mickey Mouse cartoons. He could be irrational and moody and have temper tantrums.

"I wanted him to look out for me, and he couldn't," said Kim. "I wanted a Brady Bunch family, and that was robbed from me. We don't blame anyone, but we've both been disappointed by life."

Before his stroke, Sarkin had helped to build their new house; now she was the only one who could run it. He still tried to be a husband and father, to make himself fit into his former roles, but too often it was forced. Instead of loading the dishwasher with soap one day, he mistakenly filled it with shampoo.

"There were 6 inches of suds on the floor," said Kim. "I decided not to get mad at him. If you ask him to clean things up, it's like asking a 6-year-old child. If I get mad at him he gets upset."

At the same, she was trying to raise their three young children. Kim never wanted Curtis to grow up as an only child. She gave birth to Robin in 1991 and then three years later to Caroline, always with the hope her husband would continue to get better.

She also took care of the finances, did all the driving and kept the house in order.

Sarkin would sit at the table and draw with his kids, or hold a child in his lap while he sketched with a savage intensity, the pages of his notebook spilling over with abstract faces containing multiple eyes and huge mouths. But as the children got older, there was no tossing a Frisbee back and forth with his girls, or playing basketball with his son.

"When you're nursing, an infant is very attached to the mother," said Kim. "When they're older, a father tends to get involved more. We never got to find out. It was absolutely heartbreaking to me."

Kim tried to keep the family together as best she could. They took vacations together - to Disney World, to the Caribbean with her in-laws, to Maine with her own siblings and their families - and every night they ate dinner as a family. Often, however, it was a sad affair. If Sarkin wasn't talking about himself, he usually was quiet, even aloof, and sometimes excused himself from the table in the middle of a conversation.

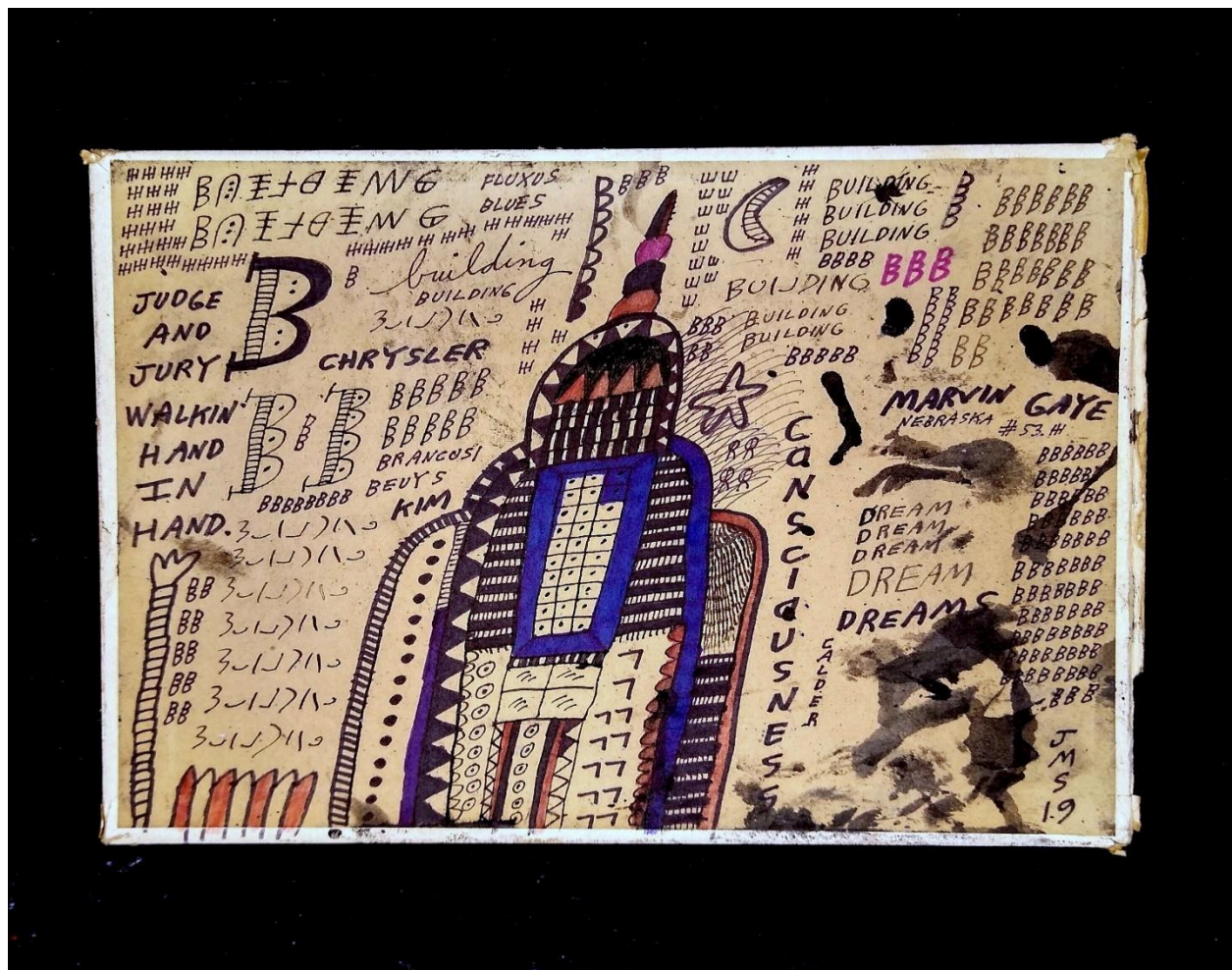
When the weather turned warm, they would spend the day at one of the beaches along the North Shore. The fine white sand at Crane Beach in Ipswich was a favorite. Embraced by acres of dunes, the beach sits beneath a granite, whale-shaped escarpment called Castle Hill. Visitors hike across the dunes on a long boardwalk that reaches nearly to the sea.

It was here the Sarkins planted their umbrella that day in August 1990, and here that the 37-year-old chiropractor realized he was no longer in control of his life.

As he sat on the beach, the unrelenting chaos that had rummaged blindly through his brain when he first returned home, now began shouting at him, demanding attention.

Sarkin was preoccupied by the lizards in the terrarium back home, and how when he watched them they always seemed to be watching him back with their unblinking primordial eyes. As a teenager in New Jersey, he had kept chameleons in his room and sometimes sketched them when he was bored.

The images kept coming, spilling out of some dark, unknown place in his brain: the chameleons; the tail fins on his mother's old Cadillacs with their sleek, simple lines; the favorite buildings of his childhood, the shimmering steel web of cables and catenaries holding up the Brooklyn Bridge and the terraced arches atop the Chrysler Building.



Now fragments of these images overflowed in his head. They were unlike those he drew when he first came home - cartoonish characters whose faces appeared to have been assaulted by knives, carved into parts or riven by pipelike instruments. It was as if those early drawings were remembrances of the deathly ill man lying in a hospital bed with tubes running in and out of his body. The ones now seeking release also were familiar, but they were deeper, embedded in memories that shaped his earliest impressions.

Holding the flat stone in one hand, he scoured the sand around his chair for something, anything, to use as a drawing tool. He found an old nail buried just beneath the surface, and without hesitating, began to scratch. Back and forth, back and forth, his fingers searched for a picture.

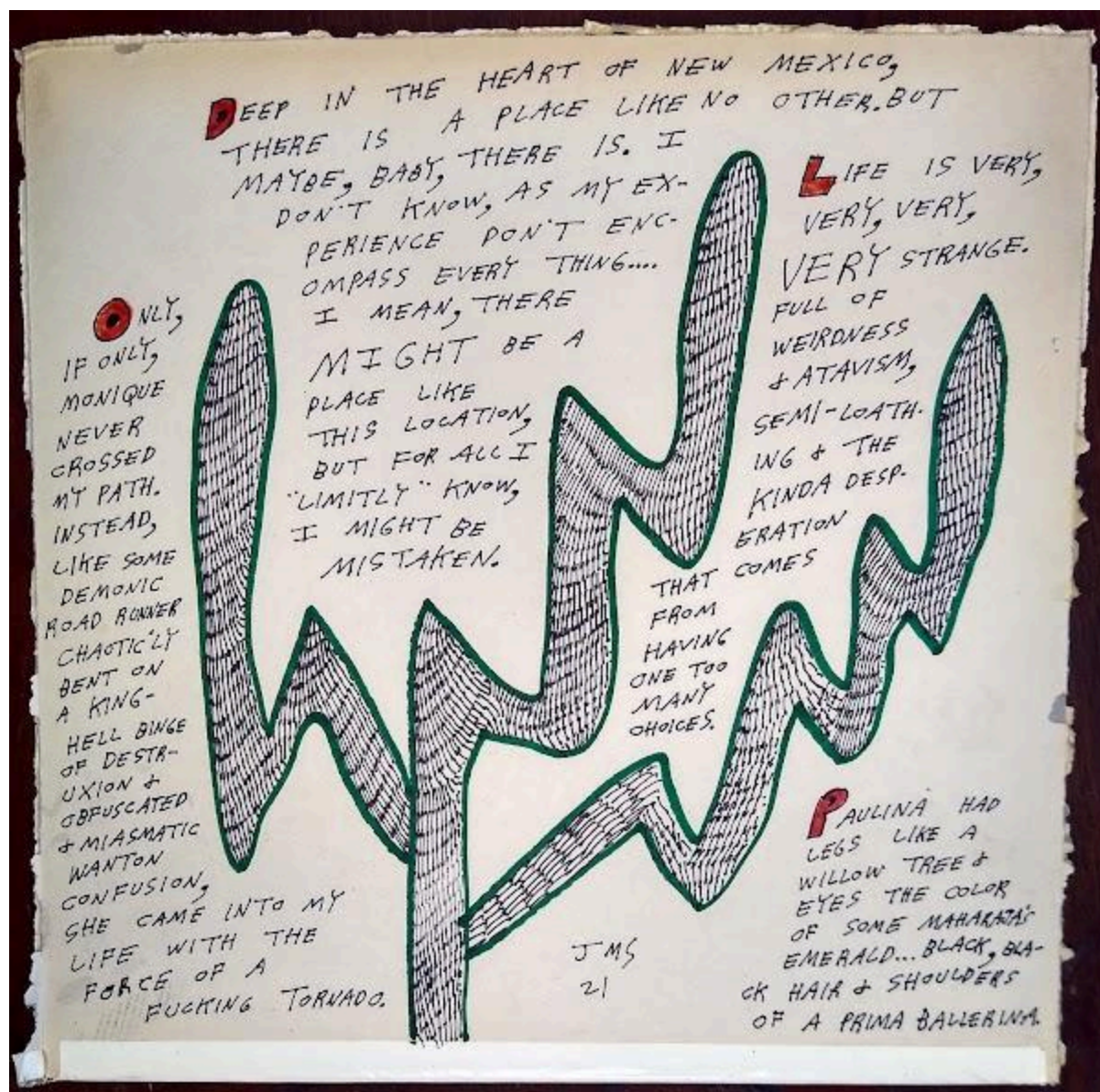
He knew it was there and he knew that he would find it.

Chapter 7: The fierce palette



A grimy mirror in his studio, in a basement in Gloucester, Mass., provides Jon Sarkin with an image on which to base one of his many self-portraits as he charts his own evolution. (Photo by Jennifer Brown/The Star-Ledger)

The walls of Sarkin's studio bleed paint into the baseboards. He uses a staple gun to nail a working canvas to the wall, then reaches into a wire wastebasket for whatever colored pencils his fingers find first. Ferociously, he scrawls across the canvas, working various colors into the piece.



"You know the stories of old blues guys who go to the crossroads and meet the devil and come back and they can suddenly do anything?" he asks a visitor. 'Well, I met the devil, too. The real thing is, though, it's hard work. You don't go to the crossroads and the devil says, 'Now you can go and paint really well,' and suddenly you can. Drawing is hard. If people had to learn how to draw to a certain level of proficiency, like reading or driving a car, everyone would do it: 'Hey, I see you passed your life-drawing test.' Yeah, it took me three tries.' "

Sarkin's studio smells of Sharpie markers and mold, with a slight hint of Comet, which he uses to wash his hands at the end of the day. Sometimes he burns incense next to the large digital clock that reminds him when he needs to take the bus back home. But he could paint and draw here for hours at a time -or for only a few minutes - before taking a break, usually to wander the streets around his studio and visit one of the

town's many private art galleries, or the Cape Ann museum where he lingers over the detailed maritime paintings of native son Fitz Henry Lane.

"He draws the same stuff over and over," says Sarkin. "That's what you do."

In his meanderings through Gloucester, Sarkin stops at the town library to check out the wildlife photos on display in the foyer. Later, after buying an espresso, he drops in to see Ken Riaf, who works in a storefront law office opposite Sarkin's studio. In true Gloucester fashion, Riaf describes himself eclectically as a lawyer, filmmaker and fisherman, in no particular order.

"Whenever I have a cup of coffee, I bring one to Ken," Sarkin says. Riaf then regales the artist with news about his short documentary on the late Gloucester poet Charles Olson.

Though a solitary pursuit, art has given Sarkin a broader social life. It is how he is known, and it is what he shares, especially with other artists and musicians, like Willie "Loco" Alexander, the former member of the Velvet Underground, who lives in town.

But often Sarkin reaches out indirectly, through his art, sending what he calls "boltflashes" to acquaintances, new friends, even strangers who have, in small way, touched his life. The boltflashes are pieces of art stuffed into envelopes that are themselves festooned with drawings, writing and cartoons.

A recently returned envelope (incorrect address) lies on the floor of the studio. Sarkin had tried to send a boltflash to magazine writer Hilton Als after reading Als' review of a new Sam Shepard play in the New Yorker magazine. Actually, it was a single sentence of Als'- "Another gone critter in the sad purple light" -that inspired Sarkin to write.

Sarkin no longer remembers what that sentence meant, or even what the reviewer said about the play, but the words are beautiful to him - rich and mysterious. On the envelope he has scrawled in black marker: "Writing don't get no better."

The boltflashes, the wandering around town, the people he meets and the inspiration he finds -nothing is predictable. Nothing is planned.

Only the art is constant.

Three years after his compulsion to create took hold of him on the beach in the summer of 1990, Sarkin was producing art at a furious rate. He was not afraid of repetition. In fact, he embraced it.

"It appeals to my obsessive thing," he says. "I'll draw an eye over and over and over and over and over again. I'll make it square or I'll make it round. I'll draw it this way and then that, with eyebrows, without, over and over, and eventually I'll go, 'Huh. I get it. It's how the light interacts with the matter.'"

He has found inspiration in many artists of the past, from Rembrandt to Rauschenberg, Botticelli to Beuys. He first discovered them in the museums of his childhood, in New York City, in college at the University of Pennsylvania's Institute of Contemporary Art, and now in New England at the Gardner, the DeCordova and the Museum of Fine Arts.



Now he tries out his own vision, again and again, by looking at the art of the past through the prism of his changed brain.

"You stare at it long enough and it starts to reveal its magic," he says. "I just get better because I do this all the time."

Sarkin joined a portrait group on the advice of an artist-friend.

"She thought I should do it because it's the only time I'll draw something that I know what it's like to be that thing. 'You'll never know what it's like to be a bowl of fruit, or a building or a cat,' she said. 'Only when you draw someone else will you know what it's like to feel like a human being.'"

Art exploded out of Sarkin and it did not stop.

He carried a backpack full of paper, colored pencils and pens wherever he went. He drew on guitars and guitar cases. He painted on the basement walls, on pieces of wood, on diaper boxes, on the covers of books, on glass, on metal shards he found in the street.

He painted the words "Art Boy" on one of his old sweaters, and when he walked the streets of Rockport or Gloucester he would stumble on the detritus of other people's lives and find new instruments of art: old newspapers, candy wrappers, even seagull feathers.

When he wasn't drawing, he was writing poems, songs, letters to himself - keeping up a kind of interior monologue, as if trying to find just the right words and pictures to unlock the secret of his strange new life.

Sometimes the art and language collided on the canvas. Words repeated, tailed off into puns, or were shaped into pleasing patterns of sound. He liked to inscribe his art with the names of favorite artists and writers. Sometimes he added snippets from Bob

Dylan's songs or Shakespeare's plays, parcels of words he read long ago and committed to memory, now suddenly blossoming into his consciousness like wild mushrooms after a soaking summer rain.

Sarkin was especially attracted to words that did not require him to lift his pen off the paper- words like "Rauschenberg," one of his favorite artists -- as if he was in too much of a rush to get everything down. He also liked writing the name of another famous painter, Vermeer, because it has no descenders - letters like g's and j's that dip below the line.

The images, like the words, kept repeating. The Chrysler Building, Cadillac tail fins and cactuses. One day Sarkin ordered \$500 worth of succulants. A few days later a florist's truck pulled up to the house and several 5-foot-high cactuses were unloaded.

"They live in desolate places, and yet they survive," he says.

Sarkin could have been describing himself. Or his own family. His furious compulsion to create exhausted Kim and often estranged him from his children. At times they all seemed to be wandering through an emotional desert, waiting for the loving husband and attentive father to return. His stroke had opened him up to his art, even as it had impaired his ability to connect.

Still, Kim regarded her husband as her best friend. They laughed together, and she always confided in him, though she often had to work hard to get his attention. He was, after all, the man who had given her everything she ever wanted - a home, babies, a life. When Kim's friends asked her if she ever thought about leaving her husband, she would say, "No." And add, "Leaving Jon to be a single mother? Are you kidding?"

"Everybody says children are resilient," she would tell them "but children have no choice if you decide to leave."

One day, just after they were married, and before the incident on the golf course, they had been driving near their home. Sarkin was enjoying success in his practice and had been invited to give a talk to other chiropractors. Kim asked him what was the most important thing to him in the future.

"Working," he said.

"Before family?"

"Yep."

"Before your wife and kids?"

"Yep."

At first she thought it was a strange answer. But then she realized that working was the thing her husband did best, and that he did it for her, for the family they were planning to have, just as Sarkin's father had worked to support his own family.

Sarkin's job was different now, of course, and his ability to be a husband and father forever compromised. Luckily, he had taken out private disability insurance when he first began his chiropractic career, and combined with the supplemental security income from the federal government, the family had enough to live on.

But it was hard for Kim to let go of her dream of a perfect family. She was a "glass-is-half-full" kind of person, and so she found joy in other things - in her children's successes, in the health of her family, in the pink amaryllis, with its funnel-shaped petals, sprouting out of that little brown bulb in her kitchen.

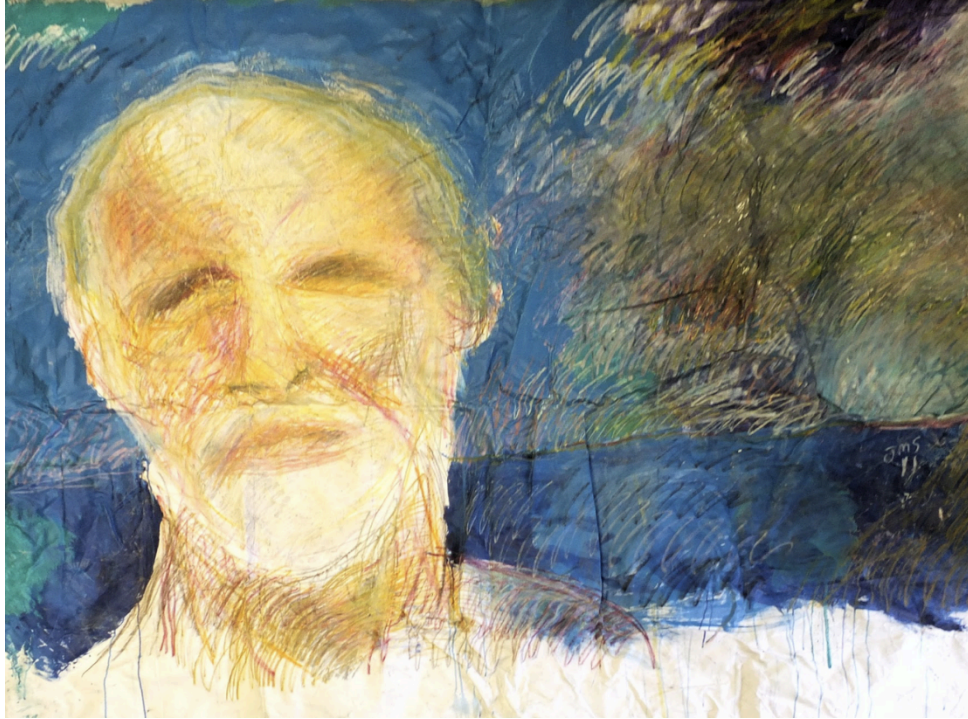
Her greatest fear in life was not having children. His was not being able to work. She would never have to face her fear, but her husband would have to face his for the rest of his life.

It was in the summer of 1993, when the entire extended family was on vacation together, that Sarkin's sister, Jane, suggested to her brother he submit his "doodles" to the New Yorker. As the features editor at Vanity Fair magazine, Jane told him she knew someone connected to the "spot" illustration department who might be interested in taking a look.

When Sarkin got a call from the New Yorker a couple of months later, he thought it was a joke. The magazine wanted to buy eight of his illustrations for \$125 each.

The first one appeared in the Halloween issue that year, two more in the spring of 1994. It was the beginning of a gradual realization that maybe, just maybe, his art wasn't simply a strange, solitary obsession, the result of a cerebral "accident." Maybe it was actually good.

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The New York Times Magazine and the Boston Globe Magazine bought drawings in 1995 and 1996, respectively. Sarkin's sister had some of his work framed for her own office, and soon others wanted a drawing or painting.

Sarkin began to show his work in Gloucester, and a few commissions rolled in. He didn't know what his art was worth on the marketplace, so he usually let others decide. one man offered him \$20,000 to draw a fish. Using 120 different pencils on a 4- by 3-foot canvas, Sarkin colored the fish with 20,000 scales.



.Sarkin with his mother, Elaine, at his first art show at the Diane von Fustenberg Gallery in New York City in 2003..

At one of his local art shows, a group of kids stood entranced by his paintings. When one of them asked how much the artwork cost, Sarkin said, "What do you think?"

"Five dollars?"

"You're right!" he answered, and promptly sold four paintings for 20 bucks, total.

He also bartered his art, once trading a painting for a hand-made dining room table, and when the landlord of his studio admired a drawing, Sarkin exchanged it for two months' rent.

The money was never steady, but it didn't bother the artist.

"The income from my art is icing on the cake," he says.

Recognition of his art came slowly, and it came initially because of his unusual back story. The local newspaper, the Gloucester Times, wrote Sarkin up several times, and in 1997 GQ magazine ran a long profile. Several months later, Tom Cruise bought the rights to his life, and the money helped the Sarkins build a new home in Rockport. Since then, he has been interviewed by Ira Glass for the public radio program "This American Life," and was filmed by ABC's Bob Brown for a segment on "Medical Mysteries," which aired a couple of months ago.

Increasingly, though, he is becoming known solely for his art.

"I'm not interested in Jon's work because he had a stroke," says Nick Capasso, the senior curator of the DeCordova Museum, outside Boston. "I'm interested in him because of what he's creating. I think his drawings are technically excellent and formally beautiful and they have an interesting interplay between text and image.

"There's a visual poetry and a poetry of words that is mutually reinforcing. There's a long history of that in art. Jon does it in a unique way."

In 2003, Sarkin had his first major show, at the Diane von Furstenberg Gallery in New York City, then one several months later at the Budman Studio, also in Manhattan. In 2006 the Earl McGrath Gallery in Beverly Hills exhibited his art, and from April to August of that year so did the DeCordova in a major annual exhibit of 12 prominent contemporary New England artists. The program, which also included a life-size reproduction of Sarkin's studio, never mentioned the artist's stroke:

"Sarkin is a prolific, even compulsive, artist who creates elaborate drawings and paintings cluttered with words and images. Using a form of concrete poetry, Sarkin sets up quirky and brilliant juxtapositions among references from art history, literature, jazz, comics and philosophy."

The newfound fame was flattering, and the money, of course, helped out the family, but it would never make up for what he had lost.

"I'll always have the anger," Sarkin says. "I'll always be pissed off. Big deal. So someone wants to give me half a million for a painting? Money doesn't buy back my self."

For the most part, Sarkin kept the anger at bay. So did Kim. But sometimes, when he walked to the bus stop in the morning, or when he wandered down to the water's edge in Gloucester, to the esplanade with the 8-foot statue of the fisherman at the wheel, he looked out to sea and thought about everything that had happened him. Then he'd gaze at the thousands of names on the 10 bronze plaques, a memorial to Gloucester's lost fishermen, and read the inscription taken from the 107th Psalm: "They that go down to the sea in ships."

The mystery of his lost self continued to torment Sarkin and everything he did. He continued to draw and paint, each canvas a monument to his own loss. What irrevocable and unrelenting force in his brain was controlling his life now?

The answer, he would learn, was hidden in a picture of a very different nature -- in the still life of science.

Chapter 8: Beautiful brain

When the body is injured -- a broken bone, a cut, a bruise -- there is usually definition to the damage. A wound to a brain, however, is often diffuse, the symptoms more like insinuations than signposts of trouble. There is no well-defined gash in the terrain, but there are myriad places where the rivers of electricity that crisscross the cortex are suddenly diverted or dammed up. The outer surface of the cerebral landscape may look recognizable, but even the smallest of insults reverberates undetected, forever changing the functioning of billions of neurons.

When trauma, disease or stroke impairs the brain, there are scores of skills and attributes that can be compromised: the ability to speak, to write, to reason; coordination of movements; recognition of objects or faces; the capacity to express emotion or to understand the emotions of others. Diminishment has always been the rule, not enhancement.

Sitting in front of a computer screen in a mildly cluttered office at Boston's Massachusetts General Hospital, Alice Flaherty ponders the shadowy images of Sarkin's cerebrum. The two have known each other for four years, but this is the first time he has brought his MRI scans for her to analyze.

"You have a beautiful brain," she says matter-of-factly.

Flaherty, like Sarkin, grew up in New Jersey. The Harvard-trained neurologist was contacted by Sarkin in the fall of 2004 after he read her newly published memoir, "The Midnight Disease: The Drive to Write, Writer's Block and the Creative Brain." A few years earlier, Flaherty was overtaken by a compulsion to write (a condition called hypergraphia) following the deaths of premature twin boys. The torrent of ideas she experienced and the overwhelming desire to put it all down on paper reminded Sarkin of his own hypercreativity.

Maybe she could tell him why his own drive to paint and draw was so ferociously unyielding.

Several others had tried. In 2001, after hearing neurologist Todd Feinberg talk on National Public Radio about his book, "Altered Egos," Sarkin called the doctor at Beth Israel Medical Center in New York. Feinberg, who is also a psychiatrist, is an expert in identity disorders resulting from stroke, disease or injury to the brain.

Virtually none of his patients have an awareness of what they have lost, of how their personality, behavior or thinking has changed. Sarkin, however, was that rarest of cases: He knew who he was before his stroke, and who he was after it. And they were not the same person.

Feinberg had Sarkin undergo a SPECT scan, and the neurologist later conceded he remained mystified. There was the obvious loss of cerebellar tissue, and he found hypoxic injuries - pockets of brain tissue damaged by low oxygen - that were probably the result of the stroke. Some of these "insults" could explain Sarkin's lack of focus and his obsessive behavior, but, Feinberg said, there was nothing specific he could point to that made sense of Sarkin's intense artistic output.

Flaherty's sun-splashed office is Sarkin's latest stop in his long voyage to discover the cause of his relentless, cascading creativity. She is not his doctor, but the two have become friends since Sarkin reached out to her. Flaherty, he says, is one of the smartest people he ever met.

The neurologist is thin, even wiry, but has the muscular arms of someone who works out regularly. As she scrolls through dozens of brain images on her computer, she keeps up a running commentary, describing what probably happened to Sarkin, and occasionally sprinkling her scientific descriptions with a colorful New Jersey bluntness.

"When you have a cerebellar bleed, you need decompression surgery to let the blood out, get the hematoma out," she says. "So you have to cut away tissue. It's remarkable how much of your brain is left. Most people just have a big old hole there."

Sarkin looks at Flaherty expectantly. He knew he was diminished in so many ways. He was not the husband and father he once was, the one his family so desperately wanted him to be again.

"There may be a few dead cells in there," Flaherty says, "but there is no swath of devastation."

There was damage, yes, and there was loss, but his brain also seemed to have been augmented. He was at once both lesser and greater than the sum of all his parts.

“What I think is also very likely is that stress - from the stroke, the surgeries, the long hospitalization and then months of rehabilitation - has contributed to the changes in your brain,” Flaherty says. “Heightened activity is an adaptive reflex in the face of stress. You’re getting too much action in your brain trying to find a solution to your problems.”

That action, she says, is especially heightened in the brain’s right hemisphere, which plays a special role in solving problems with creative insight. And a part of that mysterious right-hemisphere activity involves the processing of visual information.

Sarkin, perhaps, was experiencing a kind of double dose of creative urgency. His left hemisphere was damaged from the stroke, and his right hemisphere function was amped up by all the stress as well as his continuing, free-floating anxiety.

For more than a century, scientists have suspected this “split-brain” explanation for excessive artistic output.

One of the first to study the connection between art and brain irregularities was John Langdon Down, the superintendent of Earlswood Asylum for Idiots in Surrey, England. Down, the man for whom Down syndrome is named, also coined the term “idiot savant,” now known as “autistic savant.” In 1887 Down gave a talk in which he claimed that a number of his patients, “while being feeble-minded, exhibit special faculties which are capable of being cultivated to a very great extent.”

Down’s most famous patient was James Henry Pullen. Nearly deaf and mostly speechless, Pullen spent his days in the asylum drawing and building ships, including a 10-foot-long model of a British steamship that took seven years to construct and included more than 1 million hand-carved wooden pins.

When Pullen died in 1915 at the age of 69, his brain was examined by pathologists searching for clues to the disabled man’s extraordinary artistic skill. Among the findings was a lack of general development in the left frontal lobe.

In 2005 scientists re-analyzed the original autopsy report and decided Pullen was, in all probability, an autistic savant and that his creativity, obsessive focus, even his lack of social skills could be attributed in large part to his underdeveloped left hemisphere.

Today scientists know, as a rule, that the left hemisphere, where Sarkin’s brain suffered the brunt of his stroke, is responsible for language, analytic thinking and established knowledge. The right, on the other hand, is all about details and the raw, unfiltered data of experience, especially visual data.

In most humans, the left hemisphere controls the right, making order and meaning out of the chaos of perception. But when the left side suffers injury, disease or, like Pullen,

structural deformity, the checks and balances of the two hemispheres are upset. In some ways, it is like a car whose wheels have become drastically misaligned. No matter how much you tug on the steering wheel, the car continues to veer off in one direction. With the controls of the left hemisphere knocked out, the capacity of the brain to filter irrelevant stimuli in the right is compromised. Freed from the left hemisphere's constant attempts at generalization, the right thrives in the momentary details of experience.

Progress in understanding the relationship between brain anatomy and creativity has been slow. In 1995, Oliver Sacks wrote about the case of Franco Magnani, an Italian painter living in San Francisco who suffered a high fever, probably due to encephalitis, and who, after his recovery, began to paint and talk obsessively about one thing, Pontito, the city in Italy he had left as a child.

More recently, British scientists have written about a patient, Tommy McHugh, who had a stroke similar to Sarkin's and, though he had no apparent interest in art prior to his illness, became obsessively artistic afterward.

Sudden artistic creativity, they say, seems to go hand-in-hand with neurological disorders that produce obsessive-compulsive behavior.



Sarkin sits passively as Flaherty begins interpreting the hazy black and white images of his brain. Although he has longed for answers, he is uncomfortable listening to others talk about him.

“This is an image of Jon’s brain sliced parallel to the floor, and here’s the cerebellum,” Flaherty says. “The unhealthy part is on the right side of the image, but it’s actually the left side of his brain because of the way they take the picture.”



The artist's yearning to know just how his mind and personality made such a dramatic change brings him to the Massachusetts General Hospital office of neurologist Alice Flaherty in Boston. Flaherty holds up some MRI scans of Sarkin's brain to the light.

Pointing to a shadowy mass in the lower portion of the skull, she adds, “And this would be where the bleed was.”

Sarkin is not really paying attention now. Instead, he gazes out the office window at the pattern of roof tiles on the building opposite the hospital.

Flaherty then focuses on the healthy-looking folds of gray matter in Sarkin’s cerebral cortex. She does not see much structural scarring, and instead suggests the changes in Sarkin’s brain are chemical, not anatomical - the result of electrical rewiring.

Flaherty tells Sarkin she can see the cerebellar damage, but elsewhere the white matter and the folds of gray tissue look surprisingly healthy.

“Now does this mean his brain is the same as everybody else’s? No,” she says. “It’s obviously doing a lot of interesting things that no one else’s brain is doing.”

In many ways, she says, he appears to have Waxman-Geschwind syndrome, a personality disorder characterized by excessive verbal output, an intensified mental life and an obsessive preoccupation with detail. A few scientists have identified writers and painters as possible candidates, among them Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Franz Kafka and Vincent Van Gogh.

Flaherty thinks the chances are good that Sarkin suffers from Waxman-Geschwind since he was recently diagnosed as being bipolar, the likely result, said doctors, of a pre-existing condition exacerbated by the stroke.

Everything is so intense for Sarkin, whether it is his emotions or colors and shapes, and all were ramped up by his stroke. He didn’t just see the world differently, he experienced it differently - directly, deeply, immediately. What could not be perceived, his fantasy filled in, and kept filling in, seemingly without end.

“We live in the imagination,” says Joe Carroll, whose research at the University of Missouri-St. Louis integrates literary studies and evolutionary science. “We locate our sense of ourselves and our actions within imaginative structures. We don’t have the option of living outside our own imaginative constructs. Meaning is always a part of them, and art works constantly at forming and re-forming them.”

Sarkin and Flaherty talk about how much of his creativity is due to loss of cerebellar function, and how much to pre-existing tendencies.

“Your temperament was always interested in ideas and your emotions were always up and down,” says Flaherty. “It just seems like they’ve all been intensified more than in the usual person. All the stroke did was amplify them, tweak them.”

Sarkin is getting anxious now, eager to return to his basement studio. He is in the middle of a storm of self-portraits, and the mammoth canvases, some 20 feet long, hang expectantly on the walls. All he really knows is that he is unlike everyone else, that even though his wife is the best thing that ever happened to him, he still disappoints her and the children, and that he cannot change.

For better or worse, art is now his most intimate friend.

Chapter 9: A riotous river



The train sways drunkenly as it speeds through the ground-down cities of Connecticut. Sitting by the window in a pair of old jeans and a faded T-shirt, Sarkin is on his way from Rockport to visit his mother in New Jersey. As usual, he is carrying a backpack full of art supplies, with a few items of clothing thrown in.

His legs are crossed, and an empty sketchbook lies invitingly on his lap. He picks out a colored marker and draws a circle on one page, a square on another. Then he takes out another colored pen and goes back over the pages, adding new images and then words.

“You must work for a newspaper,” says a well-dressed, middle-aged woman sitting next to him.

“Why do you say that?”

“It just looks like you’re working on a puzzle.”

Sarkin likes that. He *is* working on a puzzle, he says to himself. Pieces of him were laid out in front of him after his stroke and his life, like his art, has become a process of re-assembly. It was hard to feel so unfinished, so incomplete, and yet the ordering force of his art was powerful and profound. Without it, who was he?

He looks out the smudged window of the Amtrak train and lets the trees, buildings and lonely homes blur by him.

“I feel like I’m in a haunted house,” Sarkin often says. “I feel at home, but also uncomfortable.”

Only once in the past 20 years has Sarkin’s free-floating anxiety found an absolute focus, and it was the worst day of his life



At left: the 23-year-old Jon, with guitar, and 26-year-old Richard pose back home in Hillside in 1976, when they persuaded friends to join them in growing "Beards for the Bicentennial." Jon lost his brother in 2004; Richard, a pediatrician, was on his way to speak at a medical conference in northeastern Missouri when his commuter plane crashed.

Early in the morning on Oct. 20, 2004 - exactly 16 years after Sarkin's strange cerebral "event" on the Cape Ann Golf Course - his brother-in-law, Martin O'Connor, called from New Jersey.

"Jane wants to talk to you," he said. A few seconds of silence. Then his sister's voice:

"Jon?"

"What's up?"

"Richard was in a plane crash. He's dead."

Sarkin repeated the words slowly in his mind, trying to get his bearings.

His brother was scheduled to be a keynote speaker at a medical conference in Kirksville, Mo., and the previous evening he was a passenger on a twin-engine turboprop flying through rain and thick fog. The commuter plane went down in a stand of old oak trees, two miles short of the runway.

It took a day for emergency workers to identify Richard's remains.

When Sarkin got off the phone with his sister, he immediately began to make travel arrangements. He called the airlines, packed his best suit, then flew with Kim and the kids to Buffalo. It was the first time in years he had felt so calm and coherent. For Kim, it was the first time in years she was able to lean on her husband for emotional support.

“He was so normal,” she said, “because he had a focus for his anxiety. He wasn’t needy.”

Sarkin, too, was buoyed by the rediscovery of his past self.

“It felt good in a way. I knew exactly what to do. I just knew. For a period of about 10 days I was just on automatic pilot. My brain was totally detached from my fingers on the computer keyboard when I wrote the eulogy for Richard. It came tumbling out. It just wrote itself. I knew what to do at all times.”

It did not last, of course.

Richard’s death had been a way to reconnect with the family, to give Sarkin a renewed sense of the steadiness and wholeness he had lost with his stroke. But once he was back in Massachusetts, the unpredictability and anxiety of his life returned. By the end of October, he descended into a black, unforgiving place. Sarkin was depressed and irritable and looking for a way out through his art.

“Now I’m on my own again,” he said.

In the late fall, the still grief-stricken artist walked down into his basement studio and stared for a moment at a blank 4- by 6-foot canvas unrolled on the floor. Then he took a bucket of green paint and threw it on the stiff fabric. For the next two weeks, he worked on the painting day and night, adding slashes of black and gray.



Crane Beach on Massachusetts' North Shore is where Sarkin discovered his desire to draw anything — even a rock — and he often revisits it. The verse on the steps is by a local poet, Colleen Michaels.

When he decided to include it in a new exhibit, he couldn't think of a title.

"Into the Fog," said a friend, Dan King.

"Perfect," said Sarkin.

He had been weighed down by the baggage of loss for so long. Now, in taking up his artist's life again, he realized all the pieces were there: his youth, his wife and children, his work as a chiropractor, his stroke, his brother's death, even his success as an artist. He would always be moving and changing, it's just that he would feel the motion more than most.

Here, in this moment and place, art was his true north. His life was his art and his art was his identity.

The world would always feel fragmentary, he said. One moment would never lead to the next. Instead, each was an island in time, isolated from everything except his own imagination. Like a spectral Robinson Crusoe, he would forever be shipwrecked on the rock of his own consciousness.

On a bright, sun-splashed day in August, the operatic cries of Gloucester's seagulls float down the basement steps into Sarkin's studio. The walls are covered with larger-than-life self-portraits. Random drawings and paintings lay in heaps on makeshift shelves, and shards of colored pens and pencils are scattered across the filthy floor.

"It's too nice to be indoors," Sarkin says.

So, with a 20-foot-long abstract seascape rolled up under his arm, he begins to walk down to the beach. He wants to see what will happen to the chalky colors if he bathes the canvas in seawater and rubs sand into its seams.

The five-minute walk twists and turns through pieces of his past. On Main Street is the Blackburn, where he first met Kim. On the corner, the American Legion Hall where the couple were feted before their wedding and Sarkin played the drums with the band.

Down to Rogers Street and the empty lot where his first chiropractic office once stood, past the Capt. Vince seafood company with the curious sign, "Live Lobster Entrance," then between the Chamber of Commerce and the abandoned Bird's Eye Frozen vegetables factory - Sarkin makes his way to the beach.

He kicks off his old Docksidiers and leans forward, letting his feet find purchase in the sand. At the edge of the water, he tosses away his cane and stumbles into the gently lapping waves. As he unfurls the painting, it billows, settles on the surface and then sinks.

The seascape mingling with the sea. Art with life. Never one without the other.

He knows he is a neurological freak, unable to see the world as a whole and unable to ignore it in its infinite detail. His brain constantly tries to make sense of the world, and he constantly tries to make sense of his brain's failure - through colors and images and words. He cannot stop, he does not want to stop. In fact, he is afraid to stop. He is an accidental artist, but the need to draw, to put it all down on paper, is his engine, his purpose for living.



"INTO THE FOG" (2004) Dealing with the death of his brother, Sarkin tossed a bucket of paint onto a canvas on the floor and added slashes of other colors onto it for the next two weeks. It was a friend who suggested the title.

There are pools of perception that lie untouched in most human beings, like the water beneath a frozen river that churns and swirls but remains invisible.

Sarkin's stroke punched a hole through the ice. Set loose from the constraints of normal reasoning, he plunged into a riotous river of unmediated perception. His brain refocused on the random details of life, mixing with memory and emotion, distilling his experiences into words and images.

And art flowed out of flesh and bones.
