O'KEEFFE
The Life of an American Legend

Jeffrey Hogrefe
Preface

For years I had wondered who Georgia O‘Keeffe really was. I first met her stepping out of an old black Mercedes-Benz at a friend’s parents’ farm in the New Jersey horse country. It was spring in the early 1980s. With her weathered face, sturdy build, and a long black gown, she looked like a silver shadow from an old daguerreotype as she walked serenely into the gathering. The impression was timeless. I spoke to her as soon as I could. I told her I had visited—and enjoyed—New Mexico, her home. She asked what I liked about the place. I said the sky, and she sort of smiled. Ansel Adams once observed that when Georgia O‘Keeffe smiled, “the entire earth cracked open.” It was a smile that said she knew something I did not, at once obvious and occult. She seemed potent and alive in her shriveled and shrunken body—a spirit that refused to let go of its shell.

O‘Keeffe’s secrets were not easily divulged. So many people have idolized her that the real person has been clouded by the polite reverence of the worshipful. Mysterious, rugged, insular—during my grandmother’s time, O‘Keeffe had become not only America’s favorite woman artist but an icon of feminine self-reliance, a square shooter who survived by herself in the far reaches of New Mexico. “It’s like an aliment,” the artist once said of her need to be alone in the desert. “It’s so far away and nobody ever comes.”
O'Keeffe's isolation had reached obsessive proportions long before I met her. Desiring her correspondence with friends as well as her own paintings, she said that family members who talked about her were liars, and she had attempted to block others from writing about her in any form at all. In her autobiography, a slim volume of polished comment, she wrote, "Where I was born, and where and how I have lived is unimportant."

Finding out where O'Keeffe was born and when and how she lived has not always been easy. Her family were not writing people or record-keepers, and the artist herself once declared, "Words and I are not friends." In fact, she placed more than three thousand letters between herself and Stehlgitz under restriction in the Booneke Borkaak Book and Manuscript Library at Yale. Tracing the trail of her life took me across America and through the archives of schools, libraries, and museums in twelve states and the District of Columbia. O'Keeffe was not always nice to people, and she wasn't always truthful, but her story poses big, important questions: How did a mid-scholarche from the Texas Panhandle become the best-known American woman artist of this century? What connected her madness to her art? Was she a lesbian? What connected her sexuality to her art? From what was she running? What were her inner sources of strength? How was more than a basic story of overcoming adversity. There was something I had to get at, some clue as to why her art appealed to people who did not like art, and why her female strength did not threaten even the most chauvinistic males. O'Keeffe was a legend.

Fortunately, not only did I meet the artist herself, but several of her closest friends agreed to help me piece her life together. Juan Hamilton, who cared for her during her last fourteen years, along with his wife, Anna Marie, invited me into their house and revealed what it was like to live and work with the world-famous artist. Although Hamilton eventually had second thoughts about the information he had shared with me and made it hard for me to learn more, for more than a year he assisted me in many ways—and I am eternally thankful to him for all his time and energy. From our first meeting, in the New York restaurant Le Cirque on February 21, 1966, Hamilton introduced me to a reservoir of personal sources of information: showed me places where the artist had worked and played, supplied me with countless anecdotes, allowed me to accompany him on business trips to museums to oversee installations of her work, and on several occasions invited me to dinner with her family in their stark mountain-top adobe house in Abiquiu, New Mexico. He even rented a house to me so that I could work in New Mexico.

This is, however, in any sense Hamilton's book. The artist's friend has not participated in—or even known about—the vast bulk of the arduous and time-consuming research that has gone into this book; nor has he reviewed—or even seen—the manuscript. However, his early assistance was invaluable, as it provided an intimate look into the inner workings of the artist's household and her private relationships.

So many other people have helped me learn about O'Keeffe that it would be impossible to mention all of them by name. To Robert Miller, the art dealer who was closest to O'Keeffe on her death in 1968—and who introduced me to the artist and gave me countless hours of time, assistance, and encouragement—I am forever grateful. I would also like to remember the late Luis Sanjurjo, a friend, who as an International Creative Management agent guided me through the early stages of this project and, when I did not want to, told me "Keep writing, darling." I would like to also extend my appreciation to Lynn Weibert, who graciously took over when Sanjurjo could no longer work and placed this book in the enormously supportive hands of Steve Rabin at Bantam Books. To the rest of the staff at BCM—Shirley Urban, and especially Kristine Dull, who has shepherded this book on the rough road home—many, many thanks. I would also like to thank the staff of Bantam Books, particularly Veb Weibach, whose thoughtful editing helped this book enormously, as well as copyeditor Janet Bier. Most of all, I would like to thank Deborah Fetter, Senior Editor at Bantam, a rare and exceptional editor, about whom authors normally only say Deb's deep reserve of patience, unwavering faith, and steady guidance over five years of work has provided a solid foundation upon which this book rests.

I would also like to thank all the relatives of Georgia O'Keeffe who helped me. Her niece, June O'Keeffe Sebring and Catherine Krueger, and her nephew, Raymond Krueger, gave their time generously and told me practically everything they knew about her. I would also like to thank those people who worked for O'Keeffe, particularly Dianita Lopez, her secretary.
PREFACE

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Of the many friends and acquaintances of the artist who gave me their time and insights, I would especially like to thank Betsy Winship Miller, Esther Underwood Johnson, Gretchen Johnson, James Johnson, Jennifer Johnson Dule, Harry Lasky, Carter Brown, Peter Beck, Ellen Portier, Louise Treg, Virginia Christiano, Abbot Hawking, Ford Rothling, Theo Raven, Jerry Mitchell, Jerry Richardson, Gerald Peters, Bruce Weber, Maria Gribar, John Clemm, Howard Read, Richard Pritzlaff, the late Frances Steffon, Andrew Brown, and the staff of the Goetheg Book Mart. I would like to thank the many people in New Mexico who made my stay enjoyable and who gave me insights into the unique character of the people of the state, especially Gordon Miller, Hurbert Levy, Natalie Schram, Charles Stoddard, David Sce-Melville, Robin Lavin, Joan Baker, and Sarah Moody.

I would also like to thank the following museums which opened their collections and libraries to me: the Whitney Museum of American Art, the National Gallery of Art, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Chicago Art Institute, and the Museum of New Mexico, as well as the staffs of the Robert Miller Gallery in New York and the Gerald Peters Gallery in Santa Fe. Also, I would like to thank the Art Students League, Chatham Hall, the University of Virginia, and Columbia University for their assistance.

For the tireless job of photostating the correspondence of Georgia O’Keeffe, I am forever indebted to the assistance of the Peabody Rare Book and Manuscripts Library at Yale University, the Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona, the Newberry Library in Chicago, the Archives of American Art in Washington, the Berge Collection, and the Mitchell Konnerly Papers at the New York Public Library. I would also like to thank the staff of the Sun Prairie Historical Society and the Wisconsin Historical Society, as well as the Amanita Art Association, in addition to the Citi Van Vechten Collection at Folk University in Nashville.

Biographies are made possible only by hundreds of hours of painstaking sorting and filing of information. I am eternally grateful to Keith Rasmussen, Joan Brown, Carin Stein, and Rose Bell for doing just that; and to Scott Aitken, the Computer Man of Santa Fe, who, when I thought the computer was possessed by demons, let me know in the gentlest possible way that a machine does only what it is told to do. Beth Rushbraugh, who read the first draft of the manuscript and encouraged me to go on with the project and make the whole book as good as some of the parts, deserves a special thank you. So does Nathan Kerman, a valued friend and careful reader, whose comments on the second draft were invaluable. I would also like to thank my many other friends, especially Ann Biderman, Peter Sherrin, Judith Aschincloss, and Frank Resis, who listened to me talk about Georgia O’Keeffe for five years without cease.

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I would especially like to remember my mother, Jacqueline Fuller Ho- greffe, who died in 1988 while I was beginning to work on this book. A friend of Georgia O’Keeffe and an artist herself, Mother would have been proud of the outcome of this book had she lived to see its completion. And last but not least, to the rest of my family—to my father, Joseph, stepmother, Joan, brother, Mark and Scott, sister, Andrea, and their partners—many, many thanks.

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"Making your unknown known is the important thing."
Prologue

In the spring of 1973 a hapless young adobe-seeker with hair down his back and only memories in his pockets arrived in a remote outpost on New Mexico’s high desert. He told people he had been lost there, clear across the continent, by a spirit. He was not embarrassed to say so. Most of the residents of Abiquiu were not put off by John Bruce Hamilton—better known as Juan—and his other worlds isolated by high mountains and wide and plains, in remote parts of New Mexico—like Abiquiu—natives occupied virtually the same sphere as their eighteenth-century Spanish forebears. It was believed that witches cast spells, and snakes flew in the night. Grown men beat themselves with whips made of cactus barbs in the name of religion.

Being driven across the continent by a spirit was as commonplace as long sessions and fantastic land-hogs in Abiquiu—a small place in a big land, peopled with a few hundred natives of a unique mixture of Arab, Basque, Spanish, and American Indian blood and consisting of a saloon with a swinging door, a one-room general store complete with saloon and sink, a collection of flat-roofed buildings made out of red mud, a large Catholic church—and an old white woman who lived by herself behind a high wall. Though some called her a bruja, or witch, she called herself an artist.
PROLOGUE

Having turned in conventional clothes for patched jeans, faded flannel shirts, a three-day-old beard, a bulbous moustache, and a VW van covered with road dust, twenty-six-year-old Juan Hamilton looked like a tramp, a bluffer, or a gypsy—depending on your point of view. Sometimes he wore his brown hair braided in a long Chinese-style pigtail. Sometimes he let his hair cascade across his shoulders and allowed his locks to fly freely. A tall man, slender and long-waisted, he had a way of walking that suggested there was no rush. He slunk. He used his brown eyes to good effect, either narrowing them to indicate displeasure or opening them wide like a puppy dog to please. Words felt his mouth softly in a way, like those of a lugubrious courtezan and western singer. Some women found him sexy. Some men found him weary. He liked to laugh.

Hamilton had driven thousands of miles across America to find and care for Georgia Tona O'Keefe, an eighty-five-year-old artist whose impact on American culture was so enormous that no one was certain what to make of her—at least in 1943, how to care for her. Hamilton believed. He did.

Successful beyond the dreams of most women and men, O'Keefe operated a feudal empire in a vast desert valley. Seemingly fortified behind high adobe walls and across miles of cactus-covered plain, the artist was not exactly well known to welcome strangers into her world. Over the years she had carefully trained people to accept her mysterious ways and to do things as she wished. If people of whom she was jealous, O'Keefe complained that she had to put up with someone who cared for her "her way," because she did not have time to train her "in mine." Even as a young girl, long before she achieved success, O'Keefe had felt she could control others by using what she considered her special powers of persuasion. "When so few people ever think in all," she asked a friend, with remarkable cynicism for a fourteen-year-old, "isn't it all right for me to think for them and get them to do what I want?"

With the aid of a large staff and faithful companions, she got people to do what she wanted and had arranged her life so that between two houses some twenty miles apart, she could enjoy various desert landscapes from which she drew the subjects for most of her paintings. From one house, the sun rose in the morning over a verdant river valley; from another, the sun went down across bare hill formations. O'Keefe was embittered by the desert. She referred to it romantically as if it were a make-believe place, and in some ways it was. She called it "The Faraway," "the end of the earth," or "real country." It is really absurd to a way," she wrote, "to just love country as I love this..."

In the twenties, as the first woman artist to excel in America alongside men, O'Keefe became, for legions of women who had recently acquired the right to vote, "a relic," according to her last husband and guiding light, photographer and art impresario Alfred Stieglitz. The union between these two artists became the stuff of legend, but O'Keefe's own fame came to exceed that of her already famous husband. It was an unspoken tradition to paint large flowers in which people saw both male and female genitalia; abstracted borders of stars that seemed to possess her presence as if she were a movie star. She retreated to Abiquiu, where she found the solitude she desired in the only Anglo woman in a tiny village of fierce Spanish-speaking natives. "My pleasant disposition," she once remarked, "I once remarked, "like the world with nobody in it.""

The myth of Georgia O'Keefe grew in proportion to her isolation. Five decades later, occupying a "world with nobody in it," she led America's imagination in her spell. As an octogenarian recluse who rarely ventured beyond the open space of Abiquiu, the artist attracted a new generation of disciples who wanted to be near her and know her, as if she were the Oracle of Delphi or the Palace Lama. Unlike her usual following, which had been primarily female and largely urban, these pilgrims were both male and female, urban and rural, and sometimes were simply without any connection at all. But for them, she was not as important as what she stood for. Garbed in long black dresses like a nineteenth-century widow, veiled like a nun, growing her own produce in a harsh desert—a person of the earth—she symbolized bravery at a time when many felt compelled to live outside civilization, a period marked by American invasion of Vietnam.

A conscientious objector to the Vietnam War, John Bruce Hamilton was born during the post-World War II baby boom. In Dallas, Texas, on December 23, 1896, the first and last child of his parents' marriage. He was
Having turned in conventional clothes for pawed jeans, faded chambray shirts, a three-day-old beard, a disheveled mustache, and a VW van coated with road dust, twenty-six-year-old Juan Hamilton looked like a troubadour or a gypsy or a hippie—depending on your point of view. Sometimes he wore his brown hair braided in a long Chinese-style pigtail. Sometimes his hair cascaded across his shoulders and down his back freely. A tall man, slender and long-waisted, he had a way of walking that suggested there was no rush. He smiled. He used his brown eyes to good effect, either narrowing them or squinting to indicate displeasure or opening them wide like a puppy dog to please. Words left his mouth softly in a twang, like that of a lugubrious country and western singer. Some women found him sexy. Some men found him repulsive. He liked to laugh.

Hamilton had driven thousands of miles across America to find and care for Georgia O'Keeffe, an eighty-five-year-old artist whose impact on American culture was so enormous that no one was certain what to make of her—least of all, how to care for her. Hamilton believed he did. Something had told him he might find a place in her life. A spirit had taken hold of him. He compelled her to move into the unknown it drove her across the continent and into what looked like a biblical firmament. "I believed," he said, "that maybe she was alone and needed a friend."

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The myth of Georgia O'Keeffe grew in proportion to her isolation. Five decades later occupying a "world with nobody in it" in her own Sangre, she still held America's imagination in her spell. As an octogenarian recluse who rarely ventured beyond the open space of Abiquiu, the artist attracted a new generation of disciples who wanted to be near her and know her, as if she were the Oracle of Delphi or the Dalai Lama. Unlike her initial following, which had been primarily female and largely urban, these pilgrims were both male and female, urban and rural, and sometimes were sorely misinformed about who the artist was. But for whom, she was not as important as what she stood for. Garbed in long black dresses like a nineteenth-century widow, veiled like a nun, growing her own produce in a harsh desert—a person of the earth—the symbolized bruttinity at a time when many felt compelled to live outside civilization, a period marked by America's invasion of Vietnam.

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tasted in South America and New Jersey in a strict religious atmosphere. Allen, his father, a tall, stern, with a slow drawl and quick temper, was a missionary who developed educational programs for children of Presbyterian converts in Colombia and Venezuela and later held an executive position at the United Presbyterian headquarters in New York. A large Bible, opened to a passage for each day, rested on a lectern in the hall of their house.

Hamilton encountered the spirit that would draw him to New Mexico in his van at Lake George, New York, where O'Keeffe and Steiglitz had spent their summers in the twentie-inf thirties in the Steiglitz family compound. As he drove along the shoreline at night, past old farmhouses sunk into deep woods of pine and birch, Hamilton says, a premonition that O'Keeffe needed came to him out of the mist on the clear blue water.

Hamilton had been heading from Vermont to his parents' house in New Jersey when he heard the voice. He was going home to recover from a personal defeat and to gather strength to move on in his life. Following a brief and tumultuous union, during which he and his first wife had built a cabin in the woods of Vermont, she had asked him to leave. He now felt abandoned and scared. He was aware that O'Keeffe and Steiglitz had spent time at Lake George because his estranged wife had hung a reproduction of an O'Keeffe painting titled Lake George with Cow (1921) on a wall of their simple cabin. His first wife had been drowned to Georgia O'Keeffe's work. Hamilton, too, admired the artist's use of space and light.

On arriving at his parents' home, Hamilton confided to them what had happened to his marriage. When they asked what he was going to do, he did not tell them about the voice or about his secret mission. He simply said he planned to spend a summer in New Mexico. His father offered to introduce him to his colleague, Jan Hall, who ran Ghost Ranch Conference Center in Abiquiu. Coincidentally, one of O'Keeffe's houses was on the grounds of Ghost Ranch, a remote retreat covering twenty-three thousand acres of badland—so named, according to legend, because from time to time the voice of a woman crying in the night for her dead husband had been heard echoing in the sandstone canyons.

Finding the artist would not be easy. Looking for Georgia O'Keeffe was one of the main tourist draws to remote Abiquiu. Over the years, dedicated fans of the artist had employed all sorts of means to get through to her, but she had increasingly learned how to avoid them in the grip of Greta Garbo, who wanted to be alone. Once, the story goes, a group of art students knocked on the gate to her house. O'Keeffe opened the gate herself. After listening to their request—they said they wanted to see Georgia O'Keeffe—the artist held them to her word and put on a show. "Point to the side," she said coldly. "Back side," she said, turning around. "Good-bye!" she added, slamming shut the gate.

When he arrived in New Mexico, Hamilton told nearly everyone he met his story: that he was an artist who had lived in Vermont and wanted to meet the great artist. People sympathized with him, but they would not help him. Seven months passed before he even spotted O'Keeffe driving her car. He lived simply, traveling, sleeping, and eating in his van. He swam naked on hot days in the cool waters of the snow-fed Chama River. Life was easy. There were a number of large communities in the area. Hamilton found out where they were and began spending time with various commune members who, like himself, had dropped out of society to live in the wilds of northern New Mexico.

One day, he was working in the maintenance department at Ghost Ranch when one of his co-workers asked if he wanted to go to O'Keeffe's house with him. Hamilton seized the opportunity. Something was wrong with the plumbing in her house, and she wanted Juan's co-worker to fix it for her. It was a summer day. The cottonwoods along the river drooped in the desert heat. Rattlesnakes sunbathed along dirt roads. As he passed bystanders, the size of elephant tusks and mounds of purple-colored earth shaped like cones on the approach to her house, it seemed he was entering another planet. A sandstone cliff, studded with bands of red and yellow, rose thousands of feet overhead, casting a long dark shadow.

On the patio of the U-shaped hacienda, bushy sage plants grew out of crevices in a flagstone patio. There was no other building in sight. A watercross salad glittered in an old Indian blanket on a rough wooden table. Various skulls and rocks were arranged hap hazardly around the interior of the cool, dark hacienda. Stark Navajo blankets—black crosses against a white background—covered the floors. Hamilton had never seen such a world, or met such a person.

O'Keeffe was a thin woman of medium height and small bones, with a face of exquisite clarity, like Abraham Lincoln's. There was a time when, because she was dark-skinned, people thought she was an American Indian.
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On arriving at his parents' home, Hamilton confided to them what had happened to his marriage. When they asked what he was going to do, he did not tell them about the voice or about his current mission. He simply said he planned to spend a summer in New Mexico. His father offered to introduce Juan to his colleague, Jim Hall, who ran Ghost Ranch Conference Center in Abiquiu. Coincidentally, one of O'Keeffe's houses was on the grounds of Ghost Ranch, a remote retreat covering twenty-three thousand acres of badland—so named, according to legend, because from time to time the voice of a woman crying in the night for her dead husband had been heard echoing in the sandstone canyons.

Finding the artist would not be so easy. Looking for Georgia O'Keeffe was one of the main tourist draws to remote Abiquiu. Over the years, dedicated fans of the artist had employed all sorts of means to get through to her, but she had increasingly learned how to avoid them in the style of

Greta Garbo, who wanted to be alone. Once, the story goes, a group of art students knocked on the gate to her house. O'Keeffe opened the gate herself. After listening to their requests—they said they wanted to see Georgia O'Keeffe—the artist held them to three words and put on a show. "Front side," she said coldly. "This side," she added. "Wishing around. Good-bye!"

When he arrived in New Mexico, Hamilton told nearly everyone he met his story: that he was an artist who had lived in Vermont and wanted to meet the great artist. People sympathized with him, but they would not help him. Seven months passed before he even spotted O'Keeffe driving her car. He lived simply, traveling, sleeping, and eating in his van. He swam naked on hot days in the cool waters of the snow-fed Chama River. Life was lazy. There were a number of large communities in the area. Hamilton found out where they were and began spending time with various community members who, like himself, had dropped out of society to live in the wilds of northern New Mexico.

One day, he was working in the maintenance department at Ghost Ranch when one of his co-workers asked if he wanted to go to O'Keeffe's house with him. Hamilton seized the opportunity. Something was wrong with the plumbing in her house, and she wanted Juan's co-worker to fix it for her. It was a summer day. The cottonwoods along the river drooped in the desiccated heat. Rattlesnakes sunbathed along dirt roadbeds. As he passed boulders the size of elephants and mounds of purple-colored earth shaped like cones on the approach to her house, it seemed he was entering another planet. A sandstone cell, creased with bands of red and yellow, rose thousands of feet overhead, casting a long dark shadow.

On the porch of the U-shaped hacienda, bushy sage plants grew out of cracks in a flagstone patio. There was not another building in sight. A waterless salad glistened in an old Indian basket on a rough wooden table. Various skulls and rocks were arranged haphazardly around the interior of the cool, dark hacienda. South Navajo blankets—black crosses against a white background—covered the floors. Hamilton had never seen such a world, or met such a person.

O'Keeffe was a thin woman of medium height and small bones, with a face of unfailing clarity, like Abraham Lincoln's. There was a time when, because she was dark-skinned, people thought she was an American Indian,
and she allowed them their fantasy—even pronomed it itself. She was in fact a mixture of Irish, Dutch, English, and Hungarian blood—born of American parents in a woodframe farmhouse in the prairie of Wisconsin. Her brown eyes were focused in a narrow gaze, seemingly to miss nothing. Her face was etched with what seemed a million wrinkles from constant exposure to the bright desert sun.

Her prominent Roman nose and high forehead were exaggerated by the way she pulled her steely gray hair from her face into a bun on the nape of her neck. She walked with a measured gait as deliberate as a metronome and as vigorous as that of someone decades younger. Her posture was so erect, it seemed she could have balanced a cup of hot tea on the crown of her head. People did not seem to scare her, and in fact, by the way she spoke to the maintenance man about the plumbing, it seemed that she was the one who did the scaring. “Dealing with Georgia is very easy,” a person who had worked with her commented, “provided you do exactly what she wants.”

Hamilton was in awe of O’Keeffe. He studied her carefully and observed the way she had had her house decorated and how she dressed and talked to the maintenance man. She did not seem to mind that he was staring at her and inspecting her house. She talked to the maintenance man about the plumbing, and when Hamilton looked at her, in an effort to get her attention, she returned his advance with a frightening reply: “You looked right past me,” he later said, “as if I were transparent.” She did not need him. She already had enough help. And anyway, she had already had years of experience in dealing with people who tried to invade her privacy. “You know about the Indian eye,” she asked later, “that passes over you without noticing, as though you didn’t exist?” That was the way I used to look at the Pueblo women at the ranch, so they wouldn’t become too friendly.”

Not even the Indian eye would dissuade Hamilton, however. He was obsessed. Meeting and working for O’Keeffe became his mission. He would not take no for an answer. Finally, months later, after several aborted attempts, the young artist entered the elderly artist’s life. He went to her main house in the Bistiwa at dawn. As a friend had instructed him, he waited outside the gate for the artist to come to him—then proceeded to the back door when she did not immediately appear. “I am not a creature of habit.” O’Keeffe had told people—“the only habit I have is getting up and seeing the dawn come.”

PROLOGUE

O’Keeffe may have been old and barely able to see, but she knew what she looked for. Hamilton was a tall, broad, young man who could surely carry a load for her. The men who had already worked for her were nearly as old as she—the young men of the village had abandoned the bitter land to find work in cities. Since she had been raised on a nineteenth-century farm where thistles had been the nastiest of all, O’Keeffe was accustomed to having people off the road to do for her. These people were addressed immediately without warning. Hamilton was this kind of person. She called him “tiny boy.”

Had she been better able to see, she would have noticed a striking resemblance between Hamilton and the young Alfred Stieglitz. Put their pictures together, and you would almost see the same face, separated by some eighty years. It was an eerie coincidence. O’Keeffe had never been old when she was young at Hamilton, but she had no doubt known him better than anyone else. Theirs had been a marriage about which books are written and movies are made. Like other women who marry older men, O’Keeffe had watched her husband die while she was still youthful. She had never remarried. The memory of Stieglitz remained a force in her life as she grew old. She told people that her male and female chow dogs represented herself and “Alfred.”

What she did not notice about Hamilton was his hands. His hands were like her own, long slender fingers and wide palms—working hands. She needed extra hands, and although she was not sure what to make of him, she asked him to stay and wrap paintings for her. O’Keeffe’s hands were famous. Stieglitz had photographed them over and over, along with many other parts of her body. His ongoing portrait of her had spanned decades and included several hundred pictures of a striking woman in her thirties and forties in various stages of decay.

As Hamilton wrapped the paintings and put them into a wooden crate, he noticed that he was moving as she did slowly and carefully, with measure and balance. A suspicious person who trusted no one, she watched carefully to make sure he did not steal from her. What she saw was impressive. He was wrapping the packages as if she would have herself. Here was someone who operated her way without having to be told.

The meeting of the young artist and the old artist soon became the freshest installation in the myth of Georgia O’Keeffe. As its details acquired
and she allowed them their fantasy—even promoted it herself. She was in fact a mixture of Irish, Dutch, English, and Hungarian blood—born of American parents in a woodframe farmhouse in the prairie of Wisconsin. Her brown eyes were focused in a narrow gaze, seeming to miss nothing. Her face was etched with what seemed a million wrinkles from constant exposure to the bright desert sun.

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the closeness of the rest of her tale, they became stylized to fit O'Keeffe's self-conception. Hamilton embraced the myth and became its most vocal proponent. Even the story of how he came to work for her became a fable. It is clear that the truth has many faces.

O'Keeffe seemed to bask in the pale light of notoriety. Taking what people thought was a lover young enough to be her grandson was a fitting finale to a life of independence. When others told her they regretted that they no longer saw her now that Hamilton was caring for her, she would say something utterly mystical. Although she rarely spoke or wrote about her beliefs, preferring to let her paintings do her talking, she occasionally made a passing reference to a higher power at work in her life. This was one of those occasions. "Jesus was sent to me," she would tell those who questioned his role in her life as she grew old and weak and frail. Almost all believed her.

PART ONE

1887–1918
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Chapter 1

SHE REMEMBERED LITTLE ABOUT HER CHILDHOOD, BUT SEVENTY YEARS LATER, GEORGIA O'KEEFE STILL RECALLS HOW IT FELT TO BE PUNISHED BY A NUN. SISTER ANGELIQUE—THE DRAWING INSTRUCTOR AT SACRED HEART ACADEMY IN MADISON, WISCONSIN—HAD ASSIGNED HER STUDENTS TO MAKE A PENCIL DRAWING OF A PLASTER CAST OF A BABY'S HAND. BEING AWAY FROM HOME AND ON HER OWN FOR THE FIRST TIME IN HER LIFE, YOUNG GEORGIA WAS EAGER TO WIN THE NUN'S FAVOR. WHETTING THE POINT OF A PENCIL WITH THE DETERMINATION OF A PERFECTIONIST, SHE RECREATED THE CAST IN PATRIOTIC DETAIL. BUT ALSO, WHEN SISTER ANGELIQUE SAW THAT GEORGIA HAD DRAWN THE BABY'S HAND TOO SMALL, HER FAMOUS PUPIL LATER RECALLED, STILL SMARTING SEVENTY YEARS LATER, "SHE SCOLDED ME TERRIBLY."

THIRTEEN-YEAR-OLD GEORGIA—ONE OF SEVENTY-EIGHT "YOUNG LADIES" WHO WERE ENROLLED FOR THE YEAR 1901 TO 1902—WAS NEVER THE SAME AFTER HER TERM AT THE CONVENT SCHOOL. A STONE MANOR BOUCLIER BY GREEN LAWNS LEADING THROUGH BIRCH WOODS TO A CLEAR NORTHERN LAKE, SACRED HEART INTRODUCED HER TO A WORLD OF WOMEN WHO LIVED IN ISOLATION AMID GREAT NATURAL BEAUTY, A WORLD SUCH AS SHE WOULD ULTIMATELY INHABIT FOR MOST OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY. INSTEAD OF REMEMBERING THE CRUELTY OF THE SISTER, AS OTHERS IN HER POSITION MIGHT HAVE, GEORGIA LATER THANKED THE NUN FOR HAVING GIVEN HER THE FIRST LESSON "THAT MADE ME THINK AND FEEL LIKE AN ARTIST." FROM THAT DAY, SHE VOWED, SHE WOULD NEVER AGAIN DRAW ANYTHING SMALL—A VOW THAT,
although not borne out in her work, may have contributed to her eventual success. "To find a woman painting consistently in life-size or larger," writes feminist Germaine Greer in The Obstacle Race, a seminal study of women artists, "is to recognize an exceptional self-confidence."

Georgia's exceptional self-confidence had its roots on the American frontier. Francis Calvany O'Keefe, her beloved father, who was named after the Christian patron saint of wildlife, was a farmer and had been born in a log cabin Growing up on the one-hundred-acre O'Keefe dairy farm in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, the third of four sons of Pierce and Mary Catherine O'Keefe—Irish Catholic homesteaders who had arrived in frontier Wisconsin in 1849 fleeing the potato famine—cured-hair Frank (as he was known) worked in the field from sunrise to sunset alongside his brothers, Bernard, Peter, and Bernard. On Pierce's death in 1849, Kate (Mary Catherine) assumed control of the farm. Georgia's grandmother was remembered long after her death for her piety and charity nature. Naming each of her sons after saints, she attended mass religiously at the immaculate Heart of Jesus and Mary Church in Sun Prairie. In the log, books of Dane County, the name Mary Catherine O'Keefe appears as one of the few women to have loaned money in her own name—uniquely, an influence on Georgia's later independence.

The O'Keefes' was a textbook Irish Catholic marriage. Long after they had reached adulthood, the four sons lived at home with their mother. Frank, the prodigal son, left Wisconsin to homestead in the Dakota Territory, only to be wooed home after just one season by Kate. Recognizing her third-born's need for independence, Georgia's grandmother had leased a neighboring farm for him to work on his own. Years later, his own eldest daughter, Georgia, would embark on Frank's undertaking—competing with his need to travel with her and omitting, as she often did when referring to her father, his failures. "I think that deep down," she said later, "I am like my father."

The farm Frank O'Keefe worked was owned by Isabella Wycherly Totto. Born in New York into an old family that traced its roots to Dutch and English colonists, Isabella Wycherly had been orphaned as a young girl shortly after her family arrived in frontier Wisconsin. Penniless—and judging from the few pictures, as unfortunate-looking she probably had a difficult time attracting suitors—Isabella was eventually married to an older man, a Hungarian count named George Victor Totto, who was something of a rake.

George established his family, which once came to number six children, on a working farm in Sun Prairie, only to abandon Isabella and then disappear when he returned to Hungary and, by some accounts, another wife and family.

This was not what Isabella had had in mind. Not only did she raise farming, but at the inheritance of gold-edged family portraits, however penniless she was, she considered herself a notch above the simple Irish and German homesteaders, like the O'Keefe, who lived around her in Sun Prairie. Leaving the farm to remain farmers, she moved to Madison, the state capital and home of the University of Wisconsin, and established a matriarchy with her widowed sister. Eliza Jane Varney, Isabella too began to tell people she had been widowed—and she might as well have been. Georgia's grandmother never received a letter from Count Totto, although she clung to the belief that he would return one day—a family secret that doubtless caused considerable damage to the hopes of daughters and sons who believed in this illusion.

Out of the six Totto children, only one would marry. She was Isa, a dour-looking maiden who kept a diary and whose dream of becoming a doctor was laid to rest on February 19, 1884, when two businesses were joined by her marriage to the poet Frank O'Keefe in a loveless union. Reviewing the successes of Georgia and her sisters—three out of five O'Keefe daughters would die in childbirth—one of the artist's friends concluded that Isa must have been an ambitious young woman whose goals were transferred to her offspring. Georgia later speculated that Isa would have been successful in business had she been born under different circumstances.

Moving with Frank into the present, the roofed Totto farmhouses, whose Hungarian-style turret and ornament contrasted with the plain white geometric homes in the surrounding area, Isa insisted that her husband leave the Catholic Church when they were married and that their children be raised, as she had been, as Protestant. A Catholic boarding school was presumably chosen for the daughters because there was no Protestant alternative in the area. Isa tended to a rose garden and formed a literary group of farm wives—known as King's Daughters—to read classics, but mostly, in her early married years, she cared for babies. She gave birth to Francesco Calvany, Jr., the eldest of seven O'Keefes, the year after she was married to
although not borne out in her work, may have contributed to her eventual success. “To find a woman painting consistently in life-size or larger,” writes feminist Germaine Greer in The Obstacle Race, a seminal study of women artists, “is to recognize an exceptional self-confidence.”

Georgia’s exceptional self-confidence had its roots on the American frontier. Francis Calyxtus O’Keefe, her beloved father, who was named after the Christian patron saint of wildlife, was a farmer and had been born in a log cabin. Growing up on the one-hundred-acre O’Keefe dairy farm in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, the third of four sons of Pierce and Mary Catherine O’Keefe—Irish Catholic homesteaders who had arrived in frontier Wisconsin in 1848 fleeing the potato famine—curly-haired Frank (as he was known) worked in the field from sunrise to sunset alongside his brothers: Boniface, Peter, and Bernard. On Pierce’s death in 1864, Kate (Mary Catherine) assumed control of the farm. Georgia’s grandmother was remembered long after her death for her pious and thrifty nature. Naming each of her sons after a saint, she attended mass religiously at Immaculate Heart of Jesus and Mary Church in Sun Prairie. In the log, built of Dane County, the name Mary Catherine O’Keefe appears as one of the few women to have loaned money in her own name—unquestionably, an influence on Georgia’s later independence.

O’Keefe’s was a textbook Irish Catholic marriage. Long after they had reached adulthood, the four sons lived at home with their mother. Frank, the prodigal son, left Wisconsin to homestead in the Dakota Territory, only to be wooed home after just one season by Kate. Recognizing her third-born’s need for independence, Georgia’s grandmother had leased a neighboring farm for him to work on his own. Years later, his own eldest daughter, Georgia, would embroil Frank in Frank’s wunderlust—competing her need to travel with his and erranting, as she often did when referring to her father, his failures. “I think that deep down,” she later said, “I am like my father.”

The farm Frank O’Keefe worked was owned by Isabella Wycliff Totto. Born in New York into an old family that traced its roots to Dutch and English colonists, Isabella Wycliff had been orphaned as a young girl shortly after her family arrived in frontier Wisconsin. Pernicious—and judging from the few pictures, so unfortunetate-looking she probably had a difficult time attracting suitors—Isabella was eventually married to an older man, a Hungarian count named George Victor Totto, who was something of a rake.

George established his family, which soon came to number six children, on a working farm in Sun Prairie, only to abandon Isabella and their offspring when he returned to Hungary and, by some accounts, another wife and family. This was not what Isabella had had in mind. Not only did she detest farming, but as the inheritor of gold-edged family portraits, an expert peniless: she, considered herself a notch above the simple Irish and German homesteaders, like the O’Keefe’s, who lived around her in Sun Prairie. Leaving the farm to tenant farmers, she moved to Madison, the state capital and home of the University of Wisconsin, and established a matrimonial bond with her widowed sister, Eliza Jane Verney. Isabella too began to tell people she had been widowed—and she might as well have been. Georgia’s grandmother never received a letter from Count Totto, although she clung to the belief that he would return one day—a family secret that doubtless caused considerable damage to the hopes of daughters and sons who believed in this illusion.

Out of the six Totto children, only one would marry. She was Ida, a dour-looking maiden who kept a diary and whose dream of becoming a doctor was laid to rest on February 19, 1898, when two businesses were joined by her marriage to the tenant farmer Frank O’Keefe in a loveless union. Reviewing the successes of Georgia and her sisters—three out of five O’Keefe daughters would die as rich women—one of the artist’s friends concluded that Ida must have been an ambitious young woman whose goals were transferred to her offspring. Georgia later speculated that Ida would have been successful in business had she been born under different circumstances.

Moving with Frank into the pretentious, flat-roofed Totto farmhouse, whose Hungarian-style turret and ornament contrasted with the plain white geometric boxes in the surrounding area, Ida insisted that her husband leave the Catholic Church when they were married and that their children be raised, as she had been, as Protestants. A Catholic boarding school was presumably chosen for the daughters because there was no Protestant alternative in the area. Ida tended a rose garden and formed a literary group of farm wives—known as King’s Daughters—to read classics, but mostly, in her early married years, she cared for babies. She gave birth to Francis Calyxtus, Jr., the first of seven O’Keefes, the year after she was married to
Frank. On November 15, 1887, Georgia Tuttle was born, named after the mysterious cow that had left her grandmother.

Being named for an enigmatic grandfather was a curse. For years to come, Georgia regretted that she had been named after her like a boy’s name. Moreover, because she treated her badly, Georgia felt ashamed when she thought of her. By Georgia’s account, Ida clearly preferred Georgia’s older brother, Francis, as well as her younger sisters, Ida and Anita, her younger brothers Aleckus, and her youngest sister, Catherine and Claudia. When friends visited, Georgia later noted somewhat facetiously, Ida forced her eldest daughter to stay in a back room where she could not be seen. Georgia felt it was because she was ugly. Although she was not as beautiful as her sisters, Georgia was not ugly. Judging from an early picture, her eyes may have been a little too apart and her forehead may have been a little high, but she had smooth skin and an expression of semantic content that gave her an air of dignity, even as a child. “As a little girl,” she later confessed, “I think I craved a certain kind of affection Mama did not give.”

Like most children, Georgia found affection where she could. Her father, Frank, as the son of a successful farm family, had the easy-going nature of children of success, compounded by what was most likely a case of alcoholism and the ennui of those who follow the rhythm of the land. In his daughter’s eyes, Frank was a magician and worked a force of calm on her that she would seek in other men throughout her long life. Not even a struggle hurt her when Frank picked her up and chatted softly, “Speny, Spender, Go to the moon!” Frank took his eldest daughter to town in his wagon, where she escaped from her brothers and sisters, and sold her some horehound candy and ice cream cones. Later, as a world-famous artist whose picture had been on the cover of Life magazine, she allowed a rare smile when a neighbor told her that she looked just like her father—and she did.

As her father’s favorite and her mother’s least favorite, Georgia occupied a special role in the O’Keefe household—a role that had its own privileges. Out of the five O’Keefe daughters, only Georgia had a room of her own for most of her childhood. When she was an infant, she had shared a room with her brother Francis, but as a child she occupied a small room of her own on the second floor, a position that seems to have reinforced her self-image. “I had a sense of power,” she later recalled. Georgia exerted her sway over the five O’Keefes who were born after her. Catherine later remembered her older sister as a bossy girl who would not be reasoned with. Georgia “ran the girls,” she observed facetiously. “. . . she was the queen that was crowned.” The children were not allowed in the barnyard, but Georgia secretly took her sisters into the cow pen, where they put their hands in the droll beasts’ mouths to feel their tongues. It was a contest to find out who was chicken. Georgia allowed that she enjoyed seeing the expressions in the cow eyes as she felt their rough pink tongues with her hand. “From the time I was small,” she once admitted in a rare display of candor, “I was always doing things people don’t want to.”

Georgia’s memory of her father was clouded by a trauma. Virginia Christian—his analyst who worked for the artist in her old age as a companion—concluded that she had most likely been molested by her father. She normally refused to admit the betrayal, even to herself. Like many girls who have a close relationship with their fathers, Georgia gave Frank a special place without judgment. Not only did she fail to acknowledge her father’s subsequent and protruded business failures, which led to the eventual unraveling of the family, but she embellished his actual accomplishments. A telephone was installed on the parlor wall of the O’Keefe house thanks to Frank’s efforts; he sold subscriptions to the telephone service and helped string the lines. For years, even as a grown woman who might have known better, Georgia told people her father had invented the telephone.

Unfortunately, Frank was not always around to protect her when she needed it. The abandonment she must have felt when he left the family had repercussions in her later life as she refused to get close to many of her male companions. Her closest male friends were often homosexuals who did not seek sexual intimacy with her, and she frequently rejected men who did. What was more, during the divorce she indicated to her friend Florine Stettheimer that she had been abused by her brother Francis, a situation common in homes where sexual lines between children are established by parents who have crossed the lines themselves.

Georgia was actually raised by her mother’s widowed aunt, Eliza Jane Wyndoff Varney—Auntie. Auntie had been married during the California gold rush of 1849 and was widowed shortly thereafter, when Eliza Varney was killed in a gunfight. Auntie’s tragic past was not to be forgotten, but after incidents when her grandmother’s sister was particularly severe, the
Frank. On November 12, 1887, Georgia Totto was born, named after the mysterious count who had left her grandmother.

Being named for an errant grandfather was a curse. For years to come, Georgia regretted that she had what sounded to her like a boy's name. Moreover, because Ida trusted her badly, Georgia felt ashamed when she thought of her. By Georgia's account, Ida clearly preferred Georgia's older brother, Francis, as well as her younger sisters, Ida and Anita, her younger brother Alexius, and her youngest sisters, Catherine and Claudia. When friends visited, Georgia later noted somewhat incredulously, Ida forced her eldest daughter to stay in a back room when she could not be seen. Georgia felt it was because she was ugly. Although she was not as beautiful as her sisters, Georgia was not ugly. Judging from an early picture, her eyes may have been a little too far apart and her forehead may have been a little high; but she had smooth skin and an expression of bemused contempt that gave her an air of dignity, even as a child. "As a little girl," she later confessed, "I think I craved a certain kind of affection Mama did not give."

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Unfortunately, Frank was not always around to protect her when she needed it. The abandonment she must have felt when he left the family had repercussions in her later life as she refused to get close to many of her male companions. Her closest male friends were often homosexuals who did not seek sexual intimacy with her, and she frequently spurned men who did. What was more, during the thirties she indicated to her friend Florence Stettheimer that she had been abused by her brother Francis, a situation common in homos where sexual lines between children are established by parents who have crossed the lines themselves.

Georgia was actually raised by her mother's widowed aunt, Eliza Jane Wyckoff Varney—Auntie. Auntie had been married during the California gold rush of 1849 and was widowed shortly thereafter, when Ezra Varney was killed in a gunfight. Auntie's tragic past was not to be discussed, but after incidents when their grandmother's sister was particularly severe, the
O'Keeffes considered themselves by assuming that she was upset because Varney had been killed by Indians or eaten by wolves. Georgia loved the West and looked forward to being read aloud the tales of Natty Bumppo in James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales, to stories about Kit Carson and The Life of Billy the Kid, and to her father telling her, as she did at night before she went to sleep, stories about the Indians he had encountered in the Dakota Territory.

Auntie disdained the punishments. Because Georgia liked to eat, din from the badly slopped porridge, she was frequently sent to her room to wash her face and later remembered being called "naughty child" reproachfully. She was also punished for teasing her sister Anita at the point of tears—a situation probably worsened when she tasted with remarkable indifference that she found Anita's tears "funny." When Georgia was banished to her room with only bread and milk for supper, she responded coolly, "I like bread and milk." Punishment seems to have quickly become routine for her, a routine that she participated throughout her life. As a mature woman, she frequently cut off friends when she felt she had wronged her and was known to slap young children on the face for minor infractions—both probably reflections of corporal punishment she had received in her childhood. Years later, her memory of Auntie was still clouded with resentment as being tantamount to "unfortunately Auntie." Georgia later recalled, was "the headache of my life."

Georgia became a different person at the Sacred Heart campus. The girl who had been repeatedly scolded by Auntie at home was transformed into an angel and at the end of the year was awarded a gold medal in "department." Georgia had attended the one-room Town Hall School for seven years, but instruction at the convent was so intense that, she later claimed, it was the only time she learned any new ideas in school. What those ideas were, she did not explain, but she clearly enjoyed instruction in art as well as in classical music. Music was an interest that she would pursue the rest of her life; later, she produced a series of artworks based on music, and once she even claimed, since she believed in reincarnation, that she would like to return as a beautiful soprano—and "sing very high, very clear notes, without fear."

Each Saturday, from the time she was nine, Georgia, Anita, and Ida were driven in a horse-drawn wagon to the village of Sun Prairie and the art teacher's, where they learned to copy paintings of art masterpieces from books. "I did a drawing of a spray of oats that I thought was pretty good," she said, "compared with the drawing in the book." She became familiar with the materials and techniques used and with the techniques they employed to contain worlds of space, light, and color on a flat plane. Along with thunders of other art students at the time, she followed the instructions in the Prang drawing book, a copy of which she kept by her bed.

It would be a mistake to think that Georgia received art lessons because Ida and Frank O'Keeffe recognized her budding talent. Instruction in art had been a part of her mother's and of both her grandmothers' early education. Not only was her mother a lady who would have taught her daughter to be cultured, but farm women were expected to decorate their walls and furnishings with colorful splashes of paint and floral patterns all over rural nineteenth-century America. Although the best-known example come from the so-called Pennsylvania Dutch (who were in fact German, or Deutsch) descent, painted furniture and stenciled rooms were found throughout rural New England and the Midwest. The furniture in Georgia's bedroom was painted pale gray with a spray of paint patterns outdoing the tops of the dresser and headboard—her first exposure to painted flowers, and possibly a lasting influence. "[Georgia] always wondered," noted her friend Anita Pollitzer, "if that was the start of what she later called her 'flower' life."

Georgia began to look at creation as a way to express how she felt. Problems in art began to occupy her mind in ways she tried to write and arithmetic did not. She remembered struggling to copy the image of the space occupied by snow under moonlight in a field outside her bedroom window. "I couldn't think of anything I could do about the snow," she said, "so I just left it white paper." By the end of the year at the convent, she had become an excellent art student. She won a price for 'improvement in illustration and drawing,' a watercolor of a hunter aiming his gun at a duck. When she sold her mother about the award. Ida O'Keeffe responded coldly, "Why shouldn't you get a medal?" she said. "I would be surprised if you didn't."

The convent also fueled Georgia's interest in Catholicism. The Frank O'Keeffes were nominally Protestant—the O'Keeffe girls attended the Congregational church in Sun Prairie, and Georgia was enrolled in Sacred Heart.
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as a Protestant. But since Kate O'Keefe and her sons were devout Catholics, the religion seeped into Georgia's life despite Ida's strictures. In fact, Georgia probably would not have been interested at all in Catholicism if it had been her family's chosen religion. Georgia later recalled that she looked forward to the times when her Uncle Bernard allowed her to accompany him to services at Immaculate Heart of Jesus and Mary. Immaculate Heart, with its stained glass windows, Latin mass, and incense smoke, appealed to the imagination of the artistic young girl in ways that the plain Congregational church could not match. What was more, Georgia admired and wanted to be like her Grandmother O'Keefe, a grandmother from a storybook, with a long braid around her brow and a muff of sugar cookies and suet-topped jam for her grandchildren. Georgia told people she wished she had been given her name, Mary Catherine. "I love the Irish [in me]," she said later.

Catholicism and death were powerful images in Georgia's early life. Although she never actually converted to Catholicism, she remained deeply affected by its rituals and trappings throughout her life, using crosses as symbols of death in her paintings, dressing like a nun, and sending in a hamlet populated entirely by Catholics. Years later, as a street in Vienna, the world-famous artist would be mistaken—much to her delight—for a Catholic sister because of the way she was dressed. Death first stalked the O'Keefes when Pierce, Georgia's grandfather, died, followed by her Uncle Peter, who died of tuberculosis in 1881, the year before Frank and Ida were married. Bowplace—also of tuberculosis—the year after Georgia was born. Kate O'Keefe attended mass nearly every day and wore the black of mourning from the time Georgia was born, possibly early influence in the artist's later mature style. The Church was Kate's world, and it must have been disappointing for her that her grandchildren were raised outside of its boundaries. Georgia probably experienced more feelings of abandonment when Kate died of cancer when she was nine, before Georgia went to convent. The following year, the grim terror again stalked the O'Keefes when Uncle Bernard, suffering from tuberculosis, moved into Frank O'Keefe's house. Following a prolonged convalescence, to which he was nursed by Georgia's mother, Bernard died in 1898.

Death also bewailed the O'Keefe family. By 1898, after inheriting both his mother's and his brother's properties, Frank controlled 640 acres—what...
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Death also benefited the O'Keefe family. By 1898, after inheriting both his mother's and his brother's properties, Frank controlled 640 acres—what

was known as a section—and employed a large staff of farmhands. Although he seems to have been in debt and was sued in several significant cases around this time, by most standards Frank was wealthy still, since farm work was hard work, in which profits were generally plowed back into the operation. Very few of his neighbors had cash to spare for school tuition or hands to spare to send their children away to board. (Frank even sent his son, Francis, Jr., to military school.) Frank's own resources were not inexhaustible—the convent cost him eighty dollars a year per child, at a time when a meal could be purchased for a nickel. Since the O'Keefes could barely afford tuition for one child, they rotated children. In fact, although family history does not support this claim, it is possible that the school fees were partly covered by subsidies from the unmarried Totto sisters, who later did help pay for Georgia's art school. The next year, when Anita replaced her at the convent, Georgia was enrolled in a public high school in Madison, and she went to live with her maiden Aunt Lola in a small two-story brick house on the shore of Lake Mendota.

In many ways, Georgia's memories of life on the farm in Sun Prairie were buried deep in her subconscious for the rest of her life. As a mature artist she painted detailed sections of corn plants as well as bulls, sunflowers, and other things that seemed to suggest her childhood farm. But these were subjects that she also had on hand in the garden she tended in the summer at Lake George, New York. Once when she returned to the Sun Prairie farm with her sisters, she seemed to be distracted and commented on how small the place looked. The flat-roofed O'Keefe farmhouse burned to the ground the year after the artist's ninetieth birthday. When a clerk in a gallery remarked on the news, the artist looked at her and "with a frightening detachment" told her not to worry because the O'Keefes had received their mail in a hole in an elm tree in front of the house.

Virginia Christianson observed that O'Keefe found it hard to draw upon the memory of either of her parents. Someone who had been a friend for more than forty years said O'Keefe never spoke to her of her parents. Some of her friends thought she came from Texas, while others thought she was
from Virginia. Georgia was so removed from the memories of her past that she sometimes claimed to have had a happy childhood—and on some level she probably did. But in moments of lucidity she admitted that remembering where she had come from and what it had been like was painful. "You'd push the past out of the way," she said a few years before she died, "if only you could."
Chapter 19

In the summer of 1951, Georgia O'Keeffe fetched her old friend Anna Pollitzer from the airport in Santa Fe. It had been a long trip from New York, and the small plane had made several stops along the way; moreover, there was the added difficulty of breathing at six thousand feet. The strange desert scenery was both exotic and scary. The night after they arrived, Pollitzer and her husband, Bill Charlier, were sleeping soundly when, at four-thirty in the morning, they heard a knock on the door. O'Keeffe was standing before them in a white kimono and Mexican sandals; her long black hair, which was generally pulled in a bun, flowed across her shoulders and down her back, loosely.

"Come quickly," she implored her tired guests. "You mustn't miss the dawn. It will never be just like this again."

O'Keeffe led her blustering friends through the interior of the calm adobe house and into a patio where yucca plants bloomed enticingly in the cool, dark air. They passed through a narrow doorway in an adobe garden, wall leading to a strip overlooking the Chama River valley and the spectacular land formations of Abiquiu. The three came seated in the sun at the same spectacular view that had inspired O'Keeffe more than thirty years earlier in Canyon—a view that prompted the drawings, rolled up in newsprint, that Pollitzer took to Santa Fe. Now Pollitzer could see what had moved her...
friend to create a new type of personal art—and she was impressed. The sky, she wrote, was “flaming orange and olive.”

O’Keeffe stood in her white kimono drinking the dawn, as she had for thirty years and would do for more than thirty years more, never tiring of the sight. By her side was a dog, a black-and-white poodle named Chase, and a Siamese cat named Yellow. She was proud of what she had discovered; at times she even considered the sunrise, sunset, and landscape to be oddly hers alone, as if she had swallowed the orange scenery and breathed it into her paintings.

“Isn’t it weird coming to New Mexico to see this?”

O’Keeffe was entertaining Pollitzer in a new house in the pueblo of Abiquiu, sixteen miles from the ranch, which she had acquired as a base for year-round living in New Mexico. She had found the house years before while climbing a hill that rose sharply a hundred feet from the road. What had once been the main hacienda of the tiny village, occupied by a grande named Chavez, had become a run-down vacant pile of adobes. The roof had been caved in and out of the old house pigs were kept in a side yard, through which ran a life-giving irrigation ditch—arroyo in this Spanish-speaking part of the world. Several fruit trees—apple, peach, plum, apricot—were gnarled and neglected in the walled yard. It had been romantic and eerie to poke around in the old house, and the artist had returned from time to time to see what she could find. She became obsessed by the house, could not get it out of her mind. What stood out was an old wooden door with handmade iron hinges on one of the patio walls. The way the door was placed in the wall impressed the artist greatly. “That wall with a door in it was something I had to have.”

When O’Keeffe had to have something, she lined herself up and would not let go, as a bulldog holds on to a rope. She located the members of the Chavez family who still owned the property and asked them to sell it to her. The Spanish-speaking people of Abiquiu were suspicious of outsiders like O’Keeffe. (The only other non-Hispanic was a German by the name of Carl Boeke, who owned the store.) So property was generally kept in the family, passed from father to son, or mother to daughter (the previous owners traded a couple of horses and a sapling for it), O’Keeffe found herself excluded from the sale. She later told people that the owners had wanted too much money for the house, but she thinks that she had not even been considered as a buyer. In the forties, coming from the outside and buying a piece of property in an isolated village like Abiquiu was almost unheard of. Those who did often had their houses lit on fire at night by vigilantes, illuminating the darkness to scare off the unknown. After buying O’Keeffe down, the Chavez family gave the property to the Catholic Church. The Church controlled the social, political, and economic life in the village. At one end of the village was a sanctuary dedicated to San Tomas on a small hill. A few blocks away, on the other end of the village was a coffin-shaped building known as a mortu. A mortu was where a group of village elders, or Penitentes, gathered to meditate in the days of self-suffering and mock crucifixion. The Penitentes formed an extralegal brotherhood, not unlike the Sicilian mafias, that settled disputes, took care of the needs of the people, and gave religious life one dimension in this part of the world. Outside the mortu were three black crosses, each large enough to crucify a man.

For years to come, O’Keeffe regarded visits to her walled fortress with the story of how she had finally come to own the house. She was particularly proud of herself for having acquired the property from the Church because she felt that she had outdone the village elders and had been able to assert herself as a smart person of business. Phoebe Pool later recalled that she had been annoyed with Arthur for letting Georgia acquire the Ghost Ranch property for only twenty-five hundred dollars, particularly when Georgia told people whom she wanted to impress that she had paid more. It is possible that the Catholic Church felt the same way about its deal with the canny artist. Her business sense had already saved her as good sound and would continue to be one reason she succeeded as an artist while so many around her failed. “Georgia,” Meta Chabot recalled fondly, “was tough as nails. Tough as nails.”

Jerry Richardson, now a Santa Fe law attorney, worked for the artist as a student during the late 1970s. One day he was helping clean out her garden, and while she was watching him work, she began to talk about the property. “Do you know how I got this house?” she asked me. “No.”

“Georgia,” I said. “How did you get this house?” She said she’d gone down to the bank in Española one day. In the lobby of the bank there was a table set up, and people from the Federal Credit were meeting with people to help support the humanistic stuff they did to connect with the war, and they had asked...
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her for money. She wouldn't give them a penny, and she told them exactly what she thought of the Red Cross, because the Red Cross had been very involved in promoting the draft during the First World War. She had seen all those lovely young men being sent off to the trenches in the war, and so few of them had come back. She could never forgive the Red Cross for selling those slaves, those beautiful little men about patriotic duty and glory and all that bullshit. And she lectured the people sitting at the Red Cross table about that.

"And on the way back driving to Abiquiu, the idea occurred to her—she said what a big contribution to the Catholic Church and have them send her the money.

And so she made an appointment to meet with the priest, and she said, "I'm a successful artist, and as you know I get my inspiration from this beautiful area around here. And I feel very connected to this land, and I feel that I see so much poverty around me and so many people that have so much less than me, and I'd like to do something to help out the village of Abiquiu. What can I do for you?" After Georgina made a large contribution to build a community center, the priest asked her what the village could do in exchange for her. She told him to give her the house.

Maria Chabot oversaw the construction of the house. The whole place had to be rebuilt. Although the two women had lived together for some time and Chabot often lived for weeks at a time when her friends were there, the artist realized that she needed her own space. She bought a "casa blanca" to do what she wanted with the house. The house O'Keeffe envisioned was a small, clapboard, Japanese-inspired modern building that would follow the original lines of the room, with an additional building on the cliff overlooking the Chama River valley for a studio and bedroom, for the artist to work and live in. The studio was long and narrow. The bedroom was tiny, with a single bed, overlooking the valley through a window. The same size as the tiny bedroom she had had as a student at Columbia. A very small place that Chabot had seen in a book on Asian architecture. This was squeezed into a corner. The entire side of O'Keeffe's house was from the street to the back of the house. Chabot's bedroom was a studio. She had said, "I don't have double beds, and she never slept with anyone else in the same bed or room after Stieglitz died. Her friends slept in adjacent rooms in their own beds.

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THE LIFE OF AN AMERICAN LEGEND

Following the fashion of the times, the artists used large plate glass windows to bring the outside in. The studio overlooked the valley and red cliffs through its glass walls. In the living room, plate glass windows presented a cool, dark walled-in garden in which she grew vegetables and fruits—peppers and tomatoes and jack-in-the-pulpits and hortensia lilies and bamboo and red raspberries and other flora—as well as peach, pear, apple, and pomegranate trees. The garden covered more than an acre within the bounds of a high wall. In the heat of the desert summers, the shady garden was an oasis of coolness and tranquility; the sound of water rushing through the sprinkling and running the watered beds added to the sensation. A friend compared her garden to a Persian miniature.

Chabot hired women to do more of the construction work. Construction of adobe houses had been women's work historically, and now of the men in the area were just returning from the war or off in the cities looking for work. They laid the mud bricks section by section in the hot sun of the summer and heated the unfinished timbers known as vigas with poles to support the finished roof. For years afterward, the artist would rest her hands along the rough walls and point out that the finish had been applied entirely by women's hands. Each room had a different color of mud plaster. In the artist's tiny bedroom, the wall was covered with a finish the consistency and color of gray pigments. She had found the mud in a river bed on Richard Trask's property.

It took several years to complete the house and garden. New Mexico, like many Latin peoples, follow a sense of time that does not depend on rushing to complete something but instead values the experience of doing it. At this time, things moved even slower than usual. During the war, a single government installation had been built at Los Alamos, a former boys' camp in the mountains about twenty miles from Abiquiu. All the available construction materials went to construct what would eventually be the barricade of the secret bomb. O'Keeffe's house had to wait for tiles and boards and other ordinary building supplies.

One Sunday in May, the water to her garden was finally released, as Georgina and Maria looked over the proceedings with friends and neighbors. The semi-arid irrigation ditch flooded her desert garden with precious water that would support life on the dry edge of the world. O'Keeffe was given water on a Sunday because she was the only person on the system.

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her for many. She wouldn't give them a penny, and she told them exactly what she thought of the Red Cross, because the Red Cross had been very involved in promoting the draft during the First World War. She had seen all these naïve young men being sent off to the trenches in the war, and so few of them had come back. She could never forgive the Red Cross for selling these naïve, young, beautiful men the line about patriotic duty and glory and all that baloney. And so she lectured the people sitting at the Red Cross table about it.

"And on the way back driving to Abiquiu, the idea occurred to her—"

I guess in the connection of charitable giving—that she could make a nice big contribution to the Catholic Church and shone them into giving her that house. And so she made an appointment to meet with the priest, and she said, "I'm a successful artist, and as you know, I get my inspiration from this beautiful area around here, and I feel very connected to this land, and I feel that I see so much poverty around me and so many people that have so much less than me, and I'd like to do something to help out the village of Abiquiu. What can I do for you?" After Georgia made a large contribution to build a community center, the priest asked her what the village could do in exchange for her. She told him to give her the house.

Maria Chahot oversaw the construction of the house. The entire place had to be rebuilt. Although the two women had fought for some time and Chahot often left for weeks at a time, the artist realized that she needed her and, according to Chahot, gave her "caro blanche to do what I wanted" with the house. The house O'Keeffe envisioned was a simple, clean Japanese-inspired modern building that would follow the original lines of the ruin, with an additional building on the cliff overlooking the Chama River valley for a studio and bedroom for the artist to work and live in. The studio was long and narrow. The bedroom was tiny, with a single bed overlooking the valley through a window, the same size as the tiny bedroom she had had as a student at Columbus. A tiny fireplace that Chahot had seen in a book on Mayan architecture was squeezed into a corner. The ascetic side of O'Keeffe loved spare quarters, like the cell monastic people occupied in medieval times. In both her houses, the beds were narrow and single. She did not have double beds, and she never slept with anyone else in the same bed or room after Noguchi died. Her friends slept in adjacent rooms in their own beds.

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The Life of an American Legend

Following the fashion of the fifties, the artists used large plate-glass windows to bring the outside in. The studio overlooked the valley and red cliffs through its glass walls. In the living room, plate-glass windows presented a cool, dark walled-in garden in which she would grow vegetables and exotic poppies and irises and jack-in-the-pulpits and marooned lilies and bamboo and red raspberries and other flora—as well as peach, pear, apple, and plum trees. The garden covered more than an acre within the bounds of a high wall. In the heat of the desert summer, the shady garden was an oasis of comfort and sensuality; the sound of water rushing through the acequia and flooding the beds added to the sensation. A friend compared her garden to a Persian miniature.

Chahot hired women to do most of the construction work. Construction of adobe houses had been women's work historically, and most of the men in the area were just returning from the war or off in the cities looking for work. They laid the mud bricks section by section in the hot sun of the summer and hoisted the unfinished timbers known as vigas with pulleys to support the flat roof. For years afterward, the artist would run her hands along the rough walls and point out that the finish had been applied entirely by women's hands. Each room had a different color of mud plaster. In the artist's tiny bedroom, the wall was coated with a finish of light gray pig-suede. She had found this mud in a river bed on Richard Pirtzfall's property.

It took several years to complete the house and garden. New Mexicans, like many Latin people, follow a sense of time that does not depend on rushing to complete something but instead savors the experience of doing it. At this time, things moved even slower than usual. During the war, a federal government installation had been built at Los Alamos, a former boys' camp in the mountains about twenty miles from Abiquiu. All the available construction materials went to construct what would eventually be the birthplace of the atom bomb. O'Keeffe's house had to wait for nails and boards and other ordinary building supplies.

One Sunday in May the water to her acequia was finally released, as Georgia and Maria looked over the proceedings with friends and neighbors. The stone-walled irrigation ditch flooded her desert garden with precious water that would support life on the dry edge of the world. O'Keeffe was given water on a Sunday because she was the only person on the system.
which ran from a spring in the hillside, who did not go to church. A few months later, she wrote to Henry McBride in wonder of her garden: "I have a garden this year. The vegetables are really surprising—There are lots of startling poppies along beside the lettuce—all different every morning—so delicate—and gay—My onion patch is round and about 15 feet across—a rose in the middle of it—Oh—my garden would surprise you and I think you would like it very much—I don't know how I ever got anything so good."

And what of Stieglitz? Did she miss him?

O'Keeffe did not cry at Stieglitz's funeral. She stood in the chapel of the Frank Campbell Mortuary on Madison Avenue and Eighteenth Street and greeted his old friends and hers, as well as his family, with what many remembered as a cold dignity. O'Keeffe had handled all the arrangements. Having searched all over New York for a plain pine coffin, she finally located one in the Hasidic Jewish community of Williamsburg in Brooklyn—only it was lined in pink satin. To the bemusement of the mortuary workers, who let her stay behind after they closed, she ripped out the pink satin and stayed up all night sewing in a plain white linen lining. (Some accounts refuse this often-told story, quoting O'Keeffe as having later confessed to a friend that she did not really stay up all night or replace the lining. However, the idea that O'Keeffe would use her hands to massage her grief seems entirely in character, as does her staying up all night.) Even though the coffin was sealed and draped with a black cloth, O'Keeffe felt that Stieglitz would have wanted to be laid out in white, not pink.

There was no music at Stieglitz's funeral. No one spoke. No spiritual passages were read. Everyone stood in silent mourning around the coffin. An old friend of Stieglitz's, photographer Edward Steichen, with whom he had often been reunited after several decades of separation, charged the atmosphere when he laid a bough of pine over the coffin. The bough was from a tree in his yard that he had been given by the art impresario—the Stieglitz tree. O'Keeffe rode alone with the body to the crematorium in Long Island. A month later, she took a canister containing Stieglitz's ashes and mixed them with the earth on the shore of Lake George.

The day after the funeral, O'Keeffe called Dorothy Norman on the telephone. She told her to remove every sign of herself from An American Place and never appear there again. She was taking over the gallery, as Alfred

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would have wanted, and there was no place for two proprietors. When Norman protested, O'Keeffe released twenty years of pent-up rage on her husband's paramour. O'Keeffe told Norman that her relationship with Stieglitz had been "absolutely disgusting" and reiterated that she wanted her out of the gallery and her life. Norman, who had been helping support the gallery, was surprised by O'Keeffe's outburst, as were countless others. Referring to her display as a "malignant whipping," Ansel Adams concluded that O'Keeffe was "psychopathic."

O'Keeffe barely had time to miss Stieglitz. Settling his affairs involved constant contact with his work—and as she later remarked, she much preferred the work to the person. Sifting through thousands upon thousands of letters and images and negatives and prints and paraphernalia that her late husband had accumulated over more than seventy years, she stopped painting. She told people she had no time for both the work of an administrator and the work of a painter. Periodically, the art impresario had attempted to simplify his life by burning his possessions in fits of despair. For the most part, however, he had been an irregenerate hoarder. From an office set up in the Fifty-fourth Street apartment, with the assistance of a young woman by the name of Doris Bry, O'Keeffe sorted through Stieglitz's things and decided what to do with them. Most of his possessions had little or no monetary value—certainly not the huge value that they would later come to have. As executors, O'Keeffe did not want to sell his things, anyway, realizing that he would not have wanted her to. What she did with them was left to her discretion. Stieglitz had not specified any gift or donation, leaving the entire disposal to her, as she herself would one day leave her own possessions to Juan Hamilton.

Some of Stieglitz's relatives contested the will. As his wife and only significant heir since he had lost contact with his only child, however, O'Keeffe was in a good position to win the contest—and she fought back. The relatives maintained that she had not been a dutiful wife, that she had left him repeatedly to go where she wanted to go and do what she wanted to do. The fact that she had not taken his name was brought up. The fact that she had been in New Mexico when he succumbed to the fatal stroke was mentioned as well. There was not very much money involved—O'Keeffe had supported Stieglitz over the years—but there was a family trust valued at around $130,000, over which O'Keeffe had inherited control. O'Keeffe

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The day after the funeral, O'Keeffe called Dorothy Norman on the telephone. She told her to remove every sign of herself from an American Place and never appear there again. She was taking over the gallery, as Alfred would have wanted, and there was no place for two proprietors. When Norman protested, O'Keeffe relaxed twenty years of pent-up rage in her husband's parlor. O'Keeffe told Norman that her relationship with Stieglitz had been "absolutely disgusting" and suggested that she wanted her out of the gallery and her life. Norman, who had been helping support the gallery, was surprised by O'Keeffe's outburst, as were countless others. Referring to her display as a "malignant whispering," Arnold Adams concluded that O'Keeffe was "psychopathic."

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was not a favored Stieglitz in-law. Since she had taken over the farmhouse and upon some of the relatives she did not like, she had become persona non grata. She won the contest, however, by settling to accept the income from the trust for life—and according to Hamilton, thirty years later, she laughed when she realized she had outlived those who had made a claim on the trust in the first place.

With Bry's assistance, O'Keeffe cataloged thousands of Stieglitz's artworks. Adopting a method of generosity that had been undergoing benefits for herself (as when she gave the Catholic Church a contribution), she made a master copy of the finest works and gave them to leading institutions: the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Cleveland Museum of Art, and the Art Institute of Chicago. Stieglitz's reputation and the value of his work benefited greatly from being housed in these institutions. Bry was a dutiful assistant: as an undergraduate at Wellesley College, she had developed an interest in photography through the Stieglitz collection in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Nearly everything was recovered and deposited in storage in New York. Stieglitz's correspondence was donated to the Yale Collection of American Letters in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, where it entered collections of letters of Gertrude Stein and Mabel Dodge Luhan. Prompted by her good friend Jean Toomer, who had donated his own papers to the institution, O’Keeffe also made a sizable bequest to Fisk University, a college for blacks in Nashville, Tennessee, where they entered the collection of the Carl Van Vechten Gallery of Fine Arts.

O'Keeffe drove to Nashville with Birdy Bry to install an exhibition of Stieglitz's photographs at Fisk in the spring of 1949. O'Keeffe and Bry made the drive on their way to New Mexico, where Bry would begin working at O'Keeffe's secretary and administrative assistant, during her time between New York and New Mexico for the next thirty years at the artist's factotum. A thin, tailored woman who wore sensible flat shoes, neat suits, and a crown of perpetual discontent, Bry devoted her life to working for the artist. She soon became accustomed to O'Keeffe's temper, which flared up in Nashville, as it would over the years. O'Keeffe marveled at the scale of the large gymnasium where the exhibition was held, but she soon regretted having gotten involved in the show and said she did not want to install an exhibit again. The lighting was terrible. The backdrop was not what she had en-
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On the day of the opening, the artist was confronted by a black student who asked why she associated the idea of purity with "white and not with black." O'Keeffe was not what was considered a socially responsible artist; like Stieglitz, she had rejected the then-popular social realism during the Depression in favor of a type of art that was intimate and personal. Nor had she spoken or written on the subject of race. She had spoken and written about the rights of women and in 1944 had positioned Eleanor Roosevelt to support an early version of the Equal Rights Amendment. She was a registered Democrat in New Mexico, and in the elections of 1952 she supported the Progressive party candidate. O'Keeffe was later investigated by the FBI because she employed a Chinese cook, espoused liberal views, and lived close to classified research at Los Alamos. But she was not prepared to answer any questions about her views of racial matters. "I had no idea before of the many things color of the skin can mean and do—" it is sad—That black girl had something that made me realize the color of her skin isn't so different.

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THE LIFE OF AN AMERICAN LEGEND

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Anderson had a few years earlier when he swallowed a scripture after an epic bout of marihuana drinking aboard a Europe-bound ocean liner.

O'Keeffe began working again with a series of paintings of the paso duro in Abiquiu and a study of cottonwood trees along the banks of the Chama River in Abiquiu. With there, she returned to the simple, childlike composition that Arthur Dow had exposed and that had originally attracted Stieglitz to her work. Freed of the demands of annual exhibits and a hungry press (she was ignored now), the artist again produced bold, original work. She showed it primarily through the Downtown Gallery (which was, curiously, located in midtown Manhattan). The Downtown Gallery was operated by Edith Halpert, a Russian-born, apple-gritted art dealer who showed exclusively American art. The gallery was not a showcase for avant-garde art along with Ben Shahn and political drawings, there were duck decoys, whirligigs, and other examples of American folk art, which had become a specialty for certain collectors. It may not have been an American Place, but it was where Arthur Dow and John Marin continued to show their work after Stieglitz's death.

O'Keeffe increasingly inhabited a world of women. Her dealer, her secretary, and even her doctor—Constant Preiss—were all women at this time in her life. On Stieglitz's death, she became reunited with her sister Claudia, who had moved to Beverly Hills in 1939 with her friend and companion, Hildah Hobane. Georgia raised Claudia money when she and Hildah opened a kindergarten on Olympus Boulevard. Reflecting the endemic nobility of Beverly Hills parents to which they were trying to appeal, the school was billed as "an exclusive school for particular parents"—which aroused the ire of the patriotic Georgia. "Sounds a bit sneaky to me," she wrote back to Claudia.

O'Keeffe made herself available to her family to ways she had not before. In the summer of 1946, for the first time, she entertained her niece, Barbara June O'Keeffe, in New York. June was her beloved brother Alexander's daughter, but for unknown reasons, Georgia had had little previous contact with her. They had met earlier in Beverly Hills, where June grew up, on one of Georgia's trips to California to visit Claudia, without establishing rapport. June visited Georgia in New York on her way to enroll in Vassar College as a freshman.
berlands on the backs of burros. In many ways life in the pueblo was feudal. People like O’Keeffe were considered overlords. With her property and stature, had she been Hispanic, she would have been called doña. As it was, she was always called Miss O’Keeffe.

By the time Anita Pollitzer and her husband arrived in Abiquiu in the summer of 1951, O’Keeffe had become adjusted to her new life. After another feud with Maria Chabot, the two women had parted once again. Maria, who really built this house,” she later told a visiting writer, “became attached to me and as a result, was very jealous. I told her eventually she’d have to leave and not come back.” Chabot told people that she had left O’Keeffe because she had been given Los Luceros to run, and she raised prize-winning Black Angus cattle on the Wheelwright place for the next ten years. O’Keeffe subsequently made do with various people to help her. It was a desperate life. Moving back and forth between Ghost Ranch and her stilled fortress of the pueblo of Abiquiu, the artist had made friends with some of the local teenage boys. O’Keeffe liked teenage boys. They appealed to a side of her which was adolescent and onerous.

She made friends with a local tough by the name of Jackie Sloan. A handsome, talented boy, Sloan became O’Keeffe’s first protégé—she taught him how to paint, and he produced capable likenesses of her paintings of bones. They went camping together. He sent her a Mother’s Day card one year. She loaned him and his friends her station wagon so they could play basketball games against other schools. Eventually, Sloan’s life turned on him, and for a time he was in and out of jail. O’Keeffe visited him there, although her friends were worried that she could be hurt. As with most people who got close to her, O’Keeffe lost her patience with him, too, but on her death, she left him thirty thousand dollars—more than anyone but Sam Hamilton.

Her first show after Stieglitz’s death was the last show at An American Place. The gallery closed after the 1949-1950 season—and there was little reason to keep it open. Being a generation younger than most of Stieglitz’s group, O’Keeffe now found herself left alone. Many of the other artists had either died or stopped painting. Symbols of the dissolution of the old group, is 1950 a painting Mitchell Kornbleer painted himself by his own belt strap from a light fixture in a room in the School Hotel. Sherwood

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June felt that her aunt was something of an eccentric. Georgia's plywood table impressed her because she had never seen anything like it before. Georgia was June's first introduction to Tiger's Milk and other health foods, which were unusual in 1946. They walked across the Brooklyn Bridge together. Georgia had been particularly kind to her, pointing out one day over a breakfast of wheat germ and yogurt a family resemblance. "When I look at you," she said, "I see your father looking back."

O’Keeffe became the subject of a biography, an honor usually reserved for people who have completed their careers. Before departing New Mexico, Anita Pollitzer asked the artist if she could become her boswell. O’Keeffe agreed. Over the next few years, the two women communicated about the project. Pollitzer traveled to Wisconsin and Virginia to interview people the artist had known when she was growing up. She talked to many people, put in hours of work, and tried to piece together the life of a woman who kept big parts of herself secret and scorned those who got too close.

Before they left, O’Keeffe took Pollitzer and her husband to Santo Domingo Pueblo to watch the Corn Dance. The Corn Dance, whose beating of ancient rhythms vibrated the hard earth, was similar to a dance that Georgia had attended when she and Beck Strand had met Tony and Mabel Luhan in the summer of 1929, her first in New Mexico. That was the summer O’Keeffe had found a mystical union with the land and discovered that living in New Mexico could make her feel a river running through her—as she now felt all summer, as the acacia in her walled garden opened and precious water made the desert bloom like Eden. So much had happened to O’Keeffe in the years since. So much would still happen to her in the next years to come. Although a part of her life had ended when she buried Steiglitz, in some ways her life was just beginning.

In 1957, O’Keeffe, the icon of silent film stars and depopulated Eastern European monarchs in “Where are they now?” a Newsweek column. More than ten years after Steiglitz’s death, the artist who had once shocked New York with her nude body and had been voted one of the outstanding women of the century had disappeared from the public eye. She celebrated her seventieth birthday on November 15, 1957, with a pair of Chinese chow dogs. She communicated with Steiglitz through his crystal ball, but she did not see or talk to many people at this time. “She didn’t have many friends," observes photographer Elise Porter, “because of the kind of personality she was.”

O’Keeffe told people her dogs were the “center of everything around here.” Her favorite was the Beau, a black Chinese chow that the artist had received from Richard Pritzlaff for Christmas in 1952. The first of many chow dogs the artist would own over the years, the Beau was her favorite. Fierce and loyal, the Beau protected O’Keeffe from whatever she imagined she needed protection from out in the desert. And he took his job seriously. Once he tore the ligaments of the leg of a woman who had unfortunately entered O’Keeffe’s domain without knocking first. O’Keeffe blamed the woman—she said it happened because she had not followed her instructions when she entered the yard. “Those dogs bite,” she told people. “I’ve seen plenty of shoes fill with blood.”

Phoebe Pack was terrified of O’Keeffe’s dogs. “It was just like Georgia.”
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Chapter 20

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Phoebe Pack was terrorized of O’Keeffe’s dogs. “It was just like Georgia,”
she says, “to have man-eating dogs!” One day she was walking across the artist’s property with a pan of meat to feed a pet mountain lion that she and Arthur kept in a zoo in another part of the ranch when the chows charged her. Suddenly “I heard ‘Phoebe! Phoebe!’ And all the ways away came Georgia. She was walking with her usual cane, her homemade cane or whatever it was. She was coming from her walk. Ahead of her galloped two chows. I had one look at them, and I thought, ‘You’d better get rid of the meat, Phoebe.’ They were pretty well upon me then. But I didn’t pay any attention, I just threw it, and they turned and went right for the meat. Georgia came up, and I said, ‘Your dogs ate paper and all.’ And she said, ‘Well, that’s all right. That won’t hurt them,’ Typical of Georgia. Here I was—they could have torn me to pieces.”

The dogs, always in pairs, were indeed the center of O’Keeffe’s world—as odd as the artist herself recognized that sounded. She buried a length of screen in the earth to keep rattlesnakes away from the Beau and his mate, Chia. Rattlesnakes were native to Ghost Ranch, and her dogs, like most dogs, were unaware of the lethal power of a snakebite. The dogs went with their mistress on rides in her convertible Buick. The Beau rested his arm on the armrest, like a person, gazing regally into the world. The two fuzzy black dogs and the old artist dressed in black became a local sight, as much a part of her persona as the cane she had begun to carry as an affectation and the long black dresses she had donned since she was a young girl. She joined a society of chow dog owners. The Beau, she told people proudly, was “top dog of the town.”

During the summer of 1956 the Beau was hit by a car on the Chamita Highway. He dragged himself home on his front legs. His back was broken, and he had no use of his hind legs. O’Keeffe rushed him by car to a vet in Espanola. He would be reduced to a cripple who could no longer move on his own, so the vet recommended putting him to sleep. The Beau’s death tore the artist apart. For three days, she said, she could not speak to anyone. When the shock finally wore off, she told Pritzlaff what had happened. “The Beau is gone,” she remembered her saying. She asked him not to come because she said she knew she would cry. “I almost died with him,” she explained. “It seems I never felt worse about anything.”

The effects of losing Stieglitz seem to have played themselves out over years rather than months. At first, O’Keeffe felt great relief, as people often do on the passing of someone who has tempted the Reaper for so long. But what followed was a period of mourning that stretched on without definition or form, bringing on a three-day catalectic state upon the death of a pet she had known only a few years. Replacing Stieglitz was impossible. When, years later, Juan Hamilton compared himself to Stieglitz, O’Keeffe supported his comparison even though Juan Hamilton was not Alfred Stieglitz.

When Peggy Bok—now Kiskadden, having married for a third time—visited Georgia in 1950, she helped Georgia go over Alfred’s letters and photographs in a room in the ranch. When she left, Georgia wrote to say how moved she had been by the experience: addressing her beloved friend as Peggie, as she had over the years (it is not clear whether Peggie corrected Georgia on her spelling or accepted the spelling of her name as a part of her older friend’s quaint personality). Recalling the time they spent looking over Alfred’s work, Georgia allowed how his presence was always felt at the ranch. “I wrote to him from this table so many times—so he is always here—and when you were in Albuquerque he seemed vaguely present—as you drove out the gate—it was as if that thing he had been in my life for so long was going again—driving off into the dawn.”

O’Keeffe found some of the qualities of Stieglitz in other people around her. Richard Pitzlaff, for one, autocratic and Germanic; loved horses, as Stieglitz had. Born in 1902 into a family of wealthy industrialists in Milwaukee, Pitzlaff had bought his ranch in New Mexico in 1937. He had fallen in love with New Mexico as a boy, when he was sent west as a cure for hay fever. His ranch, Rancho Ignacio, covers four square miles in the eastern foothills of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. The sparse, low-slung ranch house and buildings are tucked into a hollow at the juncture of two valleys. There are several large Alpine meadows—green most of the summer—for grazing his herd of Arabian horses. His is a glittering world: Peaceocks have the run of the portal and lawn in front of the houses, flarring and spreading their brilliant feathers; an array of silvery rocks are lined up on a wall, as are a collection of nearly life-size portraits of Chinese noblemen with crushed precious stone. Pitzlaff once gave O’Keeffe one of his Chinese paintings. A few weeks later she returned the picture, explaining that she was a “working girl” who had no use for such luxury in her life.
she says, "to have man eating dogs!" One day she was walking across the artist's property with a pan of meat to feed a pet mountain lion that she and Arthur kept in a zoo in another part of the ranch when the howl changed her. Suddenly "I heard Phoebe! Phoebe! And all the ways away came Georgia. She was walking with her usual cane, her homestead care or whatever it was. She was coming from her walk. Ahead of her galloped two chows. I had one look at them, and I thought, 'You'd better get rid of the <start delete> Phoebe</start delete>.' They went pretty well upon me then. But I didn't pay any attention. I just throw it, and they turned and went right for the meat. Georgia came up, and I said, 'Your dogs are paper and all.' And she said, 'Well, that's all right. That won't hurt them.' Typical of Georgia. Here I was—they could have torn me to pieces."

The dogs, always in pairs, were indeed the center of O'Keeffe's world—as odd as the artist herself recognized that sounded. She burned a length of screen in the earth to keep rattlesnakes away from the Beau and his mate, Chris. Rattlesnakes were native to Ghost Ranch, and her dogs, like most dogs, were unaware of the lethal power of a snakebite. The dogs went with their mistress on rides in her convertible Pack. The Beau rested his arm on the armrest, like a person, going steadily into the world. The two happy black dogs and the artist dressed in black became a local sight, as much a part of her persona as the cane she had begun to carry as an affrontation and the long black dress she had donned since she was a young girl. She joined a society of dog owners. The Beau, she told people proudly, was "top dog of the town."

During the summer of 1936 the Beau was hit by a car on the Chimayo highway. He dragged himself home on his front legs. His back was broken, and he had no use of his hind legs. O'Keeffe rushed him by car to a vet in Española. He would be reduced to a couple who could no longer move on his own, so she was forced to put him to sleep. The Beau's death, unlike the artist's garb, was love. For three days, she said, she could not speak to anyone. When the shock finally wore off, she told Pratt it was what had happened. "The Beau is gone," he remembered her saying. She asked him not to cry because she said she knew she would cry. "I almost died with him," she explained. "It seems I never felt worse about anything."

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When Peggy Reel—now Viskidenn, having married for a third time—visited Georgia in 1950, she helped Georgia go over Alfred's letters and photographs in a room in the ranch. When she left, Georgia wrote to say how moved she had been by the experience: addressing her beloved friend as Steiglitz, as she had over the years. (It is not clear whether Peggy corrected Georgia on her spelling or accepted the spelling of her name as a part of her older friend's quixotic personality). Recalling the note she spent looking over Alfred's work. Georgia allowed how his presence was always felt at the ranch: "I wrote to him from this table so many times—so he is always here—and when you were in Abiquiu he seemed vaguely present—as you drove out the gate—it was as if that thing he had been in my life for so long was going again—driving off into the dusk."

O'Keeffe found some of the qualities of Steiglitz in other people around her. Richard Prisall, for one, an autocratic and Germanic, loved horses, like Steiglitz had. Born in 1902 into a family of wealthy industrialists in Milwaukee, Prisall had bought his ranch in New Mexico in 1937. He had fallen in love with New Mexico as a boy, when he was sent west as a caring boy for his fever. His ranch, Rancho Hondo, covers four square miles in the eastern foothills of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. The sparse, low-lying ranch house and buildings are tucked into a hollow at the junction of two valleys. There are several large Alpine meadows—given most of the summer—for grazing his herd of Arabian horses. His is a glittering world, Pancho's have the run of the parol and lawn in front of the horses, feeding and spreading their brilliant feathers; an array of silver rocks are lined up on a wall, so are a collection of nearly life-size portraits of Chinese noblemen, with crushed precious stones. Prisall once gave O'Keeffe one of his Chinese paintings. A few weeks later she returned the picture, explaining that she was a "working girl" who had no use for such luxury in her life.
Priztlaff was best known in the realms of horse breeding for having introduced Blunt Egyptian Arab horses into America. Over the years, he has won awards and set record prices for foals from his stock. He speaks with authority of his horses, calling them "the best blood in the world," admiring their flesh like a doting parent: "perfect head, perfect body, perfect croup." There were those in the Arabian horse community who claimed that he had overbred his horses and that he had failed to keep good records. In response, Priztlaff denounced the world and the horse community as "crooks who are money crazy." A constant refrain on several occasions when I spoke with him at his ranch was: "The whole world has gone to hell!"

Among a socially active set in Santa Fe, visits to Priztlaff's ranch were as de rigueur as opening night at the opera. He entertained lavishly in an ample adobe house decorated with six-foot-high pairs of Chinese ancestral portraits. Slings of rare snow leopards covered the floor. In the dining room, four-foot-tall candelabra illuminated rare Chinese landscape paintings and a pair of Tang dynasty ceramic horses. The walls were chocolate-brown mud with flecks of straw. A maze of six-foot pine trees, cut regularly from the forests on his land, graced a nook. The overall effect of the elegant trappings in the primitive dark dwelling was awesome. His dinner parties for ten or twelve were often served by tall, handsome cowboys wearing tight blue jeans and silver belt buckles.

Stories about Richard Priztlaff generally involve his quick temper and his horses. He was apt to command people to leave the ranch who said or did something he did not approve of. On one occasion, a visitor for lunch told him when he arrived that he had to leave at three to return to Santa Fe for a cocktail party and dinner before the opera. "In that case you'll have to leave right now," he instructed the dumbfounded guest. "Get off my ranch. I have no use for people who go to cocktail parties in the afternoon, and less use for people who go to the opera. Leave my property immediately." Guests were often surprised to discover that his lengthy disciples about breeding included not only horses but people. "Lazy Native!" he barked at the healers who worked for him.

O'Keeffe spoke highly of Priztlaff. She considered him an "old, old friend," probably one of her few close friends in New Mexico. Her letters and reminiscences from this period are full of praise for him. She loved looking at his horses and often attempted to use them as subjects for her paintings. They shared an interest in Chinese art and Chinese cooking. She once lured a Chinese cook away from Priztlaff by offering to double his salary. (The cook stayed with the artist only for a year.) They shared an interest in Hawaii and in traveling to exotic places. They were both simple, and there was a gap of only a little more than ten years in their ages. They both disliked so many other people that it seemed to some that they were stuck with each other.

But O'Keeffe enjoyed other male friends as well. She liked being around men, and she tended to prefer sensitive homosexual men who would not make any aggressive demands on her and would allow her to take the lead in the relationship. Around this time she took a long driving trip to Mexico with the poet Spald Johnson, who, along with his male lover, Winters Byrner, had been her friend for some time. She had been planning the trip with Johnson since the Pan American Highway into Mexico was opened. Johnson was a thin, lanky man who wore T-shirts and blue jeans and had filled his tiny adobe house in Taos with tin toys. He had driven O'Keeffe back east during the forties.

When Spald suggested that they join his good friend Elliot Forrester and his wife, Alice, Georgia consented onlyudgingly. Georgia had known Elliot since the 1930s, when she had helped Alfred to stage a show of his nature photographs at An American Place. (A former chemist and the brother of famous American landscape painter Westfield Forrester, Elliot took up photography under the tutelage of Ansel Adams.) The problem was that Alice and Georgia did not mix well. Alice was also a painter and would later exhibit her work in Berry Parsons's gallery in New York. A sophisticated Bostonian, her precise diction and easy culture probably unnerved the rusticated artist.

They traveled in a caravan of station wagons. The Porters led the way, and O'Keeffe and Johnson followed in their wood-paneled Ford. The first day on the road, trouble began. The Porters pulled over promptly at five for an evening's liquid libation that lasted until seven. Then they set up a tent camp along the road, since there were few lodgings on the newly opened Pan American Highway. O'Keeffe was not drinking at this time, and being self-centered, she did not want to watch other people do so. She said how she felt. Johnson wanted to drink with his pal after driving all day (he did the driving, while O'Keeffe looked out the window) and insisted that they
O'KEEFE

White was best known in the society world of horse breeding for having introduced Blenheim Arab horses into America. Over the years, he has won awards and set record prices for his stock. He speaks with authority of his horses, calling them "the best blood in the world," admiring their flesh like "doting parents" "perfect head, perfect body, perfect coat." There were those in the Arabian horse community who claimed that he had overbred his horses and that he had offered to keep good records.

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O'Keefe spoke highly of Pritzlaff. She considered him "an old, old friend," probably one of her few close friends in New Mexico. Her letters and reminiscences from this period are full of praise for him. She loved looking at his horses and often attempted to use them as subjects for her paintings. They shared an interest in Chinese art and Chinese cooking. She once lured a Chinese cook away from Pritzlaff by offering to double his salary. (The cook stayed with the artist only for a year.) They shared an interest in Hawaii and in traveling to exotic places. They were both single, and there was a gap of only a little more than ten years in their ages. They both disliked to speak to other people that it seemed to soothe that they were stuck with each other.

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When Spud suggested that they join his good friend Elsie Porter and her wife, Aline, Georgia consented only grudgingly. Georgia had known Elsie since the 1920s, when she had helped Elsie curate a show of his nature photographs at An American Place. (A former chemist and the brother of famous American landscape painter Fairfield Porter, Elsie took up photography under the tutelage of Ansel Adams.) The problem was that Aline and Georgia did not mix well. Aline was also a painter and would later exhibit her work in Betty Parsons's gallery in New York. A sophisticated Bostonian, her precise diction and easy culture probably intimidated the rusticated artist.

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step when the Porters did. She and Johnson courted, and Georgia became testy around Aline. By the time they reached Mexico City, the car canvas had separated and was not reunited for the rest of the trip.

O'Keeffe was enraptured by the power of the ancient cultures of Mexico and by the seeming occurrences of violence in the new nation. She and Johnson visited Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo for lunch one day. She stayed with Miguel Covarrubias, one of the premier Mexican artists, and his wife, Rice—they were friends from New York. Visiting the Mayan ruins south of Mexico City and touring the famous mansals by Mexican artists to whom she referred as "the boys." O'Keeffe was deeply impressed by the personal approach to art in Mexico. "A feeling of violence and revolution—They are all that way," she wrote of Mexican art. "You feel it as part of their lives." Although they did not see each other for some time after they returned from Mexico, the Porters eventually invited O'Keeffe for Thanksgiving dinner at their house in Toscaque, a pueblo in a wooded canyon outside Santa Fe. Elliot recalls that he invited Georgia to dinner because he felt indebted to Stieglitz for giving him started in photography and because he felt sorry for her that no one else invited her to their house on holidays. Georgia and Aline eventually established a working peace, but Georgia remained close to Elliot. Elliot and Georgia later joined friends for a rafting trip down the Colorado River. On one night after the group pulled the rafts onto shore for the evening, they hunted for rocks and fossils. Porter found a magnificent smooth river rock. O'Keeffe, who collected rocks, admired his find. Not being shy, she asked Elliot to give her the rock.

"I wouldn't give it to her. I said it was for my wife. And then she came to our house for Thanksgiving, and my son Steve and I thought we would play a trick on her. So we put the stone on the middle of a black marble table in the living room without anything else on it so if she would spot it. And she did right away and when she thought we weren't looking, she put it in her pocket. I eventually confronted her with that, and she gave it back—not at all embarrassed. After talking it over, my wife and I decided to give it to her when we next went up to Abiquiu. So we gave her the stone."

O'Keeffe's intransigent behavior underscored her isolation. Life without Stieglitz seems to have been lonely, and she floundered without an anchor for some time. In 1953 she even built a bomb shelter behind her studio in Abiquiu, reflecting her fears as well as her preoccupation with her own individual needs. She hired a deaf housekeeper, she told people, so she would not have to speak to anyone. With the exception of her nephews William Schuhart, who managed her investments, she had little contact with the Stieglitz family. After the death of Claudia's companion Madijah in 1938, Claudia's summer visits turned into lengthy stays. Phoebe Pack is under the impression that Claudia lived with Georgia at this time.

Claudia was Georgia's companion for the rest of her life and probably her closest relative. Although they would fight "like cats and dogs," the two sisters, who had shared a idyllic summer on the Texas Panhandle in 1917, were very much alike, a fact that Georgia never would have acknowledged. "Oh, she said the most kind things to her," said a friend. Georgia surprised people by talking fun of her sister because she had been used to live with another woman. Claudia had been freed of the burden of having to work when oil was discovered on her property in Los Angeles, and she set out for New Mexico each spring in a Lincoln sedan with a pair of lama spans and a Pilgrims named Fis. Claudia eventually took on the vegetable garden; her older sister tended with pride when she grew a five-pound tomato one summer. To keep a semblance of peace, the two sisters divided Georgia's property: Claudia stayed in Abiquiu, while Georgia stayed at Ghost Ranch. They visited each other for meals.

Georgia had little contact with her rest of her family. After the particularly painful visit with Anita and Bob in Palm Beach, she stopped visiting them altogether. Anita never visited Georgia in New Mexico—her family felt that she was too dry and too primitive for her. When Catherine came to visit in the fall, Georgia often put her with Claudia in the Abiquiu house and remained by herself at the ranch. She did not spend holidays with her sisters. She spent one Christmas in Old Wick, New Jersey, with Esther and Seward Johnson and their two children, Jennifer and James. O'Keeffe enjoyed both Esther and Seward—an unusual situation for the artist, who did not tend to like both members of a couple. Estes was her walking companion, whom she had met in Nassau in 1940. The two women now took long hikes on the Johnsons' three-thousand-acre farm with Esther's standard poodles. Esther loved dogs almost as much as Georgia did. Georgia later told Esther's daughter-in-law Gretchen that Esther used to stand on silk upholstered furniture and throw her dogs greasy bones—a disregard for
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Although they did not see each other for some time after they returned
from Mexico, the Forters eventually invited O’Keeffe for Thanksgiving dinner
at their house in Trescuque, a pueblo in a wooded canyon outside Santa
Fe. Elise recalls that they invited Georgia to dinner because she felt undervalued.
Because he felt sorry for Steglitz for getting him so intoxicated, he too, wanted Georgia
to feel the same way. Georgia and Elise established a working relationship,
but Georgia remained closer to Elise and the Forters divided the property.

O’Keeffe enjoyed spending time in New Mexico, and she frequently
visited with Aline and the Forters. She would bring her rocks and
minerals, and the Forters would bring her fresh fruits and vegetables.
O’Keeffe would often stay with them for a few days, and she would
provide them with fresh produce from her garden.

Abiquiu, reflecting her fears as well as her preoccupation with her own
individual needs. She hired a maid housekeeper, she told people, so she
would not have to speak to anyone. With the exception of her nephew
William Schubart, who managed her investments, the artist had little contact
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upholstered furniture and throw her dogs greasy bones—a disregard for
finery that the elderly artist applauded. Esch, recalls that O'Keeffe insisted that they sit on cranberries for the tree—she said it was "good for the soul to use the hands." Although James Johnson, known as Jimmy, seems to have been afraid of his mother's severe-looking friend, he was impressed that O'Keeffe knew what he wanted as a present—she bought him a toy model of a Cadillac sedan that was popular at the time.

Eventually, O'Keeffe stayed at home on holidays. The local people in the village of Abiquiu had adopted her as one of their own and took her in. On Christmas they fed her bowls of posole, hominy stew with pork and hot green chile, hot chocolate, and brochitos—thin cinnamon-coated wafers. The artist wrote to a friend, "Christmas is very pretty here with many candles in paper sacks outlining roofs and walls—and luminarias—trees of pitch wood that flares very brightly in front of all the houses where people can afford it—each one has 9 or 12 trees in a row—it makes the little village very pretty and smell very good as the pitch wood burns."

Easter was the most exciting holiday in deeply Catholic, Hispanic Abiquiu. While the seasonal spring winds blew fiercely from the west, the local people reenacted the biblical twelve stations of the cross around the morada and sang slow and mournful alabados grieving the death of Christ, often accompanied by a mock crucifixion. A few of the locals insist that occasionally a man was actually crucified, using iron nails to prevent lead poisoning from iron nails. O'Keeffe loved the violence and mystery of the secret procession. She hid behind her wall as the Penitentes passed on their way to the morada. She wrote: "I have never experienced anything like this week—the church overpowers the little group of houses—and there is so much praying—so much parading—with sad and doleful singing—tunes that seem to come from a long long experience—every day feels like Sunday—I've just been up on the roof listening—The old fellers who were important handed down the word that they should sing so that the hills would ring back the song—the songs are short and get their strength from being repeated again and again as the procession comes down from the hills and goes to the church—then after a time leaves the church and goes back up the hills—it is oddly moving with the faintest touch of green just coming—and the long dark mesa back of it all."

O'Keeffe did not paint either the Penitentes or their morada, one of the most beautiful buildings in northern New Mexico. She told people she respected the tradition of their ways and the privacy of the people. The Abiquiuans were an indigenous people at risk of being subjugated, and for some time they had been ridiculed for their primitive customs. She restricted her Abiquiu paintings to the landscape and the door on her patio wall.

O'Keeffe's painting style became simpler and simpler as the years passed. She began to see the world in a minimalist painter, with less emotion and greater intellect. She did not use the energy and bravado of the popular abstract painters of the fifties, however. She had no use for Jackson Pollock. She said she thought his work was a big mess. Pollock's big " drip" paintings were frantic compared to her own work, which was quiet and calm. It had no place in the brisk fifties. For the most part, it consisted of compositions of rectangles, like Pace with Black Door of 1955. She returned to the themes she had begun in Canyon forty years earlier—of zigzags across the sky at night. She began to try to imitate the style of simple Chinese brush paintings and read books, short poems in which a thought is contained in a breath, to train her mind. In 1946, on the death of Stieglitz, she had painted a single black bird crossing a field of white shapes—symbolic, in occult circles, of death.

O'Keeffe showed her work in group shows at the Downtown Gallery. Sales were slow. The market for her work did not disappear, as it did for works by Arthur Dove and Marsden Hartley, but not as it failed. When she was in New York, she spent time with Doris Bry, Spud Johnson, and a few other old friends. She ate beef with oyster sauce and garlic shrimp at Chinese restaurants on Third Avenue. She stayed in a plain room in the genteel Stanhope Hotel, across Fifth Avenue from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Dressed in black, she haunted the Chinese art exhibitions at the Met. She became obsessed by a woman who ran a bookstore, Frances Steffon, a single woman, owned the Gotham Book Mart, a popular literary gathering place where authors like James Joyce and T. S. Eliot had launched their books. Copies of contemporably D. H. Lawrence books were sold there, and O'Keeffe deposited back issues of Camera Work for its shelf. Steffon was an attractive, curious woman, most likely a lesbian, who dressed like a girl in dirndl skirts and a pony tail, although she was in her early sixties. She had had close friendships with writer Anais Nin and other women over the years. O'Keeffe became as obsessed with Steffon as she had been with the house with the door; as Mabel Dodge Luhan had noted more than
ficery that the elderly arts—applauded. Eicher recalls that O'Keeffe insisted that they string cranberries for the tree—she said it was "good for the soul to use the hands." Although James Johnson, known as Jiminy, seems to have been afraid of his mother's severe-looking friend, he was impressed that O'Keeffe knew what he wanted as a present—she bought him a toy model of a Cadillac sedan that was popular at the time.

Eventually, O'Keeffe stayed at home on holidays. The local people in the village of Abiquiú had adopted her as one of their own and took her in. On Christmas they fed her bowls of people, honey swirled with pink and 104 green chilis, hot chocolate, and broccoli—thin cinnamon-coated wafers. They wrote to a friend, "Christmas is very pretty here with many candles in paper sconces outlining roofs and walls—and luminaries—fires of pitch wood that flares very brightly in front of all the houses where people can afford it—each one has 9 or 12 fires in a row—it makes the little village very pretty and smell very good as the pitch wood burns."

Easter was the most exciting holiday in deeply Catholic, Hispanic Abiquiú. While the occasional spring winds blew fiercely from the west, the local people resurrected the biblical twelve stations of the cross around the morada and sang low and mournful alabados grieving the death of Christ, often accompanied by a mock crucifixion. A few of the locals insist that occasionally a man was actually crucified, using silver nails to prevent local poisoning from iron nails. O'Keeffe loved the violence and mystery of thesecret procession. She hid behind her veil as the Penitentes passed on their way to the morada. She wrote: "I have never experienced anything like this week—the church overpowers the little group of houses—and there is so much praying—so much pandering—with sad doleful singing—tunes that seem to come from a long long experience—every day feels like Sunday—p I've just been up on the roof listening—The old fellows who were important handed down the word that they should sing so that the hills would sing back the song—the song are short and get their strength from being repeated again and again as the procession comes down the hills and goes so the church—then after a time leaves the church and goes back up the hills—it is oddly moving with the tallest touch of green just coming—and the long dark mass back of it all—"

O'Keeffe did not paint either the Penitentes or the morada, one of the most beautiful buildings in northern New Mexico. She told people she respected the tradition of their ways and the privacy of the people. The Abiquiúans were an indigenous people at risk of being subjugated, and for some time they had been rectified for their primitive customs. She restricted her Abiquiú paintings to the landscape and the door on her patio wall.

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twenty years earlier, when O'Keeffe liked someone, she grabbed them. She wrote to Stetoff, pleading with her to come to New Mexico. An occultist who followed the stars in her astrological chart, Stetoff replied that she never left the Gotham, invoking a spurious source as her guide in this matter: "The Gotham Book Mart," she said, "is not mine to do with as I wish."

For several years in the early fifties, O'Keeffe pursued Frances Stetoff with steely determination. She ordered books on housekeeping from her, on Chinese art, and on inca civilization in preparation for a trip to Peru, and brown-paper-wrapped copies of Ulysses and Lady Chatterley's Lover to be sent to Mrs. Seward Johnson in New Jersey. O'Keeffe kept contact with the Gotham Book Mart from Abiquiu: "I know you will come!" she wrote. She sent Doris Bey to the Gotham to clerk after Stetoff complained of being short-handed, as if Bry were hers to do with as she pleased. One day in the fall of 1953, O'Keeffe visited the store and readied her invitation to Stetoff to come to New Mexico. She suggested Thanksgiving. Again the devoted bibliophile said she could not leave the store. (Stetoff lived in a couple of rooms above the store until she died in 1988 at the age of 101.) She said she had no one to run it for her in her absence. O'Keeffe seized the matter and turned to the young man who was her assistant. "You," she said, "pointing to the man, "you can run the store, can't you?" He looked at O'Keeffe and at Stetoff. He said yes. He could. Stetoff boarded a train for New Mexico at the end of November 1953.

O'Keeffe met Stetoff at the tiny adobe train depot in Lamy, south of Santa Fe, and drove her through the same spectacular scenery up the Rio Grande and through the desert badlands that she had enjoyed ever since 1929, when she first took the trip north in Mabel Dodge Luhan's big Cadillac. She was thrilled to have her friend in New Mexico. She drove Stetoff to Taos to visit Luhan, Frieda Lawrence, and Dorothy Brett. Stetoff had already met them in her store in New York and now wanted to see them in New Mexico. She later remembered that Mabel asked her to stay one night with her. O'Keeffe then drove them along the ridge of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains to Richard Pettiford's ranch in Sapello. After a few days with Pettiford, O'Keeffe and Stetoff headed back for Ghost Ranch over a steep mountain pass that descended thousands of feet to the desert, where Abiquiu was located. O'Keeffe was eager to impress her friend. She had planned activities for her so she would not be bored, although Stetoff later recalled she would have been happier staying at O'Keeffe's, where she slept on the artist's narrow bed and watched the sun rise in the morning over the badland. O'Keeffe even planned vegetarian meals for her friend, an extreme sacrifice on the part of the artist, who generally ate red meat at nearly every meal.

Stetoff recalled, too, that O'Keeffe was a terrible driver. She drove fast and recklessly. As they sped over the mountain pass on their way home in a big Ford station wagon, Stetoff was frightened. It had begun to snow as they drove into the mountains, and the snow was sticking on the dirt road. O'Keeffe drove down on the car and squinted to see where she was going. Suddenly the car swerved and stopped. They were stuck. Stetoff, who did not know how to drive, got out of the car, intending to push them out of the snow. As she climbed out, she slipped on the ice and landed with a thump. She had broken her arm. It was incredibly painful. The next day she left New Mexico and never went back. For some time, O'Keeffe wrote to her, apologizing repeatedly for what happened, telling her it hurt her more than it did her. Stetoff did not seem to hold it against O'Keeffe. Years later, in a conversation with this writer, she referred to the visit fondly as if it were a divine respite from her life in the bookshop. Their correspondence was thereafter reduced to a few cordial lines. O'Keeffe ordered books, and occasionally she asked Stetoff how her arm was.

In the fall of 1953, O'Keeffe went to Europe for the first time in her life, at the age of sixty-six. She went with Mary C rnley, a friend and artist who had traveled extensively in Europe and knew her way around. In the months before the trip, she had confessed to Pritzflaff that she was afraid to go abroad. She said that she had traveled all over "this country when I was young and that did not scare me. But foreign countries are another matter. I don't think I can do it." C mlnley took O'Keeffe on a whirlwind trip of European capitals. Like Evan Connell's Mrs. Bridge—the Katers City matron who confessed after returning from Europe that she preferred Kazan—O'Keeffe was particular about her likes and dislikes and held most places in lofty disdain. She dismissed Rome as vulgar. She felt uncomfortable in France. She felt at home in Spain—which was not too surprising, since she also felt at home in the Spanish-speaking parts of America and had been comfortable in Mexico. She became intrigued by bullfights, and in both Seville and Madrid she attended one every day, insisting on sitting right over the chute so she could watch the bulls charge onto the ring from...
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For several years in the early 1950s, O'Keeffe pursued Frances Stieglitz with steady determination. She ordered books on housekeeping from her, on Chinese art, and on intact civilization in preparation for a trip to Peru, and brown-paper-wrapped copies of Ulysses and Lady Chatterley's Lover to be sent to Mrs. William Johnson in New Jersey. O'Keeffe kept contact with the Gobi Book Mart from Abiquiu. "I know you will come," she wrote. She sent Donna Bos to the Gobi to clerk after Stieglitz complained of being short-handed, as if her were hers to do as she pleased. One day in the fall of 1953, O'Keeffe visited the store and received an invitation to Stieglitz to come to New Mexico. She suggested Thanksgiving again the devoted bibliophile said she could not come to the store. (Stieglitz lived in a couple of rooms above the store until she died in 1989.) She said she had no one to run it for her in her absence. O'Keeffe seized the matter and turned to the young man who was her assistant. "You," she said, pointing to the man, "you can run the store, can't you?" He looked at O'Keeffe and at Stieglitz. He said yes he could. Stieglitz boarded a train for New Mexico at the end of November 1953.

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above. She made some sketches of bullfights, but they never materialized into finished artworks. She visited the Prado in Madrid, where she was enchanted with the brutality of El Greco’s tortured figures and the serenity of Goya’s portraits. Because the Prado was a dark museum whose paintings—although masterworks—were badly in need of repair, O’Keeffe later reflected that there “must be something wrong with you, [because] I was very excited about the Prado.”

In France, Callery asked her if she would like to meet Picasso. O’Keeffe said no: “I don’t speak French,” she pointed out reasonably, “and he doesn’t speak my language.” O’Keeffe was probably aware that Picasso had been besieged by admirers at La Californie who sought an audience with him even though they did not speak Spanish, Catalan, or French. In London, because she wore a turban, she was mistaken for Edith Sitwell. In Paris, walking into a museum one day, she noticed the Russian sculptor Constantin Brancusi, whose work Steiglitz had first exhibited at 291. “Georgia O’Keeffe!” the artist exclaimed on remembering who she was. “But I thought you were dead.”

Chapter 21

In 1964, O’Keeffe was driving from Ghost Ranch on a brilliantly sunny day when she experienced the shock of her life. As her Buick convertible rounded a curve in the road and the valley narrowed to a patch of greenery along the river, her vision was obscured. It felt, she said later, as if a cloud had entered her eyeballs—and, in a way, it had. She called a friend on the phone. “My world is blurry!” the artist cried into the receiver. For years, only those very close to the artist knew about her problem.

Although some days were clearer than others, her eyesight grew progressively worse in the years thereafter. She said she knew this would be the case even before she consulted her medical doctor. She saw Dr. Fries in New York in the fall of 1964. Fries told her she was suffering from what was known as macular degeneration, a disease that would progressively erode her central vision. The actual date of the onset of O’Keeffe’s blindness differs in various accounts. Although many people put it at 1974, when she stopped painting, it is now clear that there was a problem as early as 1964, when she consulted Fries. In the spring of 1967, O’Keeffe told Pintzaff that she could not come to New York because she was blind and her eyesight for several