

KEEPSAKES

So much has changed with these cocktails. My friends may seem like the mechanical figures in Bavarian clocks, their alarms going off every hour and the ubiquitous pillbox pulled from their briefcase or bag, their heads bobbing as they select and swallow. But it's nothing like those years where I seemed to keep constant vigil at one deathbed after another. And the quilts. In May of 1993, I had six friends die within two weeks of each other. For the next few months, I felt like we were in an illegal sweatshop, working nights and weekends trying to get the quilts ready for the last complete showing of the whole quilt in Washington. My fingertips were covered with so many small pinpricks it looked as if I was sweating blood.

The fights we had trying to fit everything into those small rectangles. Whole lives squished into a space smaller than a coffin lid. We didn't want anything left out—bathhouses and one night stands, long-time companions, his secret high school crush, favorite food, the face of his mother, the address of his estranged father.

"Jim would have wanted," Paul would say, laying claim. And Steve, Jim's lover for ten years but not for the last year and a half, would lash back: "Don't tell me who Jim was." Don't tell me, Steve meant, who *he* was. Or was not. We were all trying to order our own lives, salvage some meaning from all the debris. Dead people leave so much debris: papers and books, the odd, chipped yellow dish, new black leather sofa, geometric patterned sheets, briefs. As you clean out attics, closets, bureaus, the dust clings to your sweating skin like ash, but you can't bring them back.

And that's what each of us wanted—the one memory, the one memento that brought them back, one by one, bitchy or breezy, demented or sane, uniquely and for all time: Jim, Curt, Jody, Greg, Alan, Ricardo, Jesús, Mario, Luis. We wanted to stitch into those quilts the contradictions that made them complete. The way Alan couldn't walk through a room without leaving a chaotic wake—papers on the floor, books over-turned, sugar on the table, but his clothes always looked as if he had just slipped them out of a dry cleaning bag. Or Luis' penchant for multi-colored condoms and plain white briefs. We wanted people looking at our quilts to know exactly who we'd lost, just as, when our own time came, we wanted our friends to bicker and boss us back into existence: "I have a lock of his hair from—" "I have a cryptic love note from—" "I have the label from his favorite bottle of wine. We drank it just last month. A Pier 19 discount Chilean, but who's complaining?" Given all this, it felt no end weird to receive the letter from my sister Karen suggesting that the seven of us collaborate on making a quilt for our parents 55th wedding anniversary. She provided us with the dimensions for each panel and asked that we all try to contribute more than one. Laura and she would commit to sewing three each, to make up for any time pressures the rest of us might have. Each panel was to be one foot square, with a 5/8 inch hem-width border. All on permanent press cotton for easy maintenance. No constraints on color. But they wanted us all to concentrate on significant moments in our parents lives. Nothing conflictual, they added.

I put the letter down, laughing, and Miguel looked at me puzzled. Unlike him, I almost never communicate with my parents or the majority of my siblings. I visit my parents for one token weekend every year. My youngest sister, Chris, visits me every couple of years, as does the sister closest to me in age, Maggie. The whole quilt project would never have been suggested if my parents' off-spring didn't list slightly in favor of the female persuasion. But the emphasis on nice is a gender-free family trait. In all my fifty years, my homosexuality has never been spoken of directly by anyone in my family except, once or twice, by my sister Chris. They have never met Miguel, my companion of twenty-five years. They have never mentioned any of my six novels with their obviously homosexual protagonists. When asked what I do, they all volunteer the name of the university where I have an adjunct

teaching position but are vague about my discipline, leaving the impression it is something utilitarian and stultifying that begins with an *a* or *b*—accounting, business management.

When I tell Miguel about the quilt, he looks at me seriously, pushing his long black hair behind his ear. “But of course you will do this, Roberto. It is good for you. You are fifty this year. It is time to make your peace.”

I look down at my hands, suddenly able to recall all the pinpricks from those other quilts. “I’m not handy or hypocritical enough.”

“I will help you then,” Miguel says with a laugh. He flexes his paint stained fingers eagerly. Miguel is a painter, very handy, and his Latin background means he has a highly developed tolerance for ambiguity. I keep trying to explain to him how this differs from the frank repression and denial of my midwestern childhood.

“My mother, she never talk about us either, Roberto. She just say she have two sons she love with all her heart.”

I think of the first five years of our relationship when, fired by all the liberation movements, we thought there was some chance they might accept us. How Miguel would come with me to Columbus and we’d stay on the outskirts of town in a Holiday Inn way beyond our means as starving artists, and I’d go over to the house and see if there was an opening to bring up Miguel, who languished in the hotel watching X-rated movies to improve his English. There never was. Everyone made sure of that. Frank, Karen, and Laura were married by then, with a baby each. Maggie was engaged. Dan was looking for work. Mother seems to be slipping a little, they would whisper to me in the kitchen. Dad’s business is on a down-turn. It’s better not to say anything that might upset them. By the fifth year, I was as amused as I was pissed by the performance. To while away his time, Miguel began to explore the gay bars in Columbus thoroughly—since his English was now more than sufficient for all his basic needs. After that, Miguel began to make excuses—an exhibition he couldn’t miss, a friend’s birthday—which I accepted gratefully.

But we’ve made a point of going together to see his family in Vera Cruz every year. I sometimes think the visits are more important to me than they are to him. They say Latinos have no tolerance for homosexuality. But, like so many intellectual positions in Latin America, that applies only in the abstract. Faced with a competing value, like family for example, *maricón* dissolves into *hermano mío*, *hijo mío*. Americans remain the worst idealists

around human relations, and midwesterners, the most American in this way. “Our son, the bachelor,” my parents both say.

I can’t figure what Miguel is up to with the quilt, but I’m curious. So I write my sisters back and let them know they can count on us for three. I like using us and I don’t make any promises about content. Is there any story you know worthy reading, any painting worth returning to that doesn’t have, as its lure and its consolation, the equipoise of tensions, that doesn’t suggest that every storm has a quiet eye, every full heart an unquenchable emptiness? Besides, to remember my parents’ marriage at all, at least for those first twenty years which formed me, is to recall conflict. It amuses me to see how my siblings will resolve this tension, how they will manage to hit each critical stage in my parents’ marriage sanctimoniously aslant.

It would be like telling the story of my life leaving Miguel out of it.

Lavage

There are many things I dislike about my father, but his relationship with my mother isn’t one of them. I’m not speaking for her, mind you, rather for myself. When I think of my father during some of the worst times, my mother in the hospital or beginning the slow slide that would result in another stay, what I remember is his baffled constancy. My father, comprehending or not, stays the course. This may not make him the most flexible person on earth, but it makes him one of the more dependable.

And it has paid off, that is the remarkable thing. I have such a clear image of this from my last visit to see them., almost biblical in its simplicity—except, like any good story, its power comes from all the expectations it subverts. It is just something I glimpsed walking through the living room with my bag. The intimacy still startles me. My mother is leaning down to rinse and massage my father’s feet. They have been out at the mall all day. My father’s circulation is going, due to hypertension and late-life diabetes. My mother, seated in a chair opposite him, leans down over the red plastic basin, pulling one swollen foot out of the water. As she massages in some liniment, they talk quietly. It isn’t, like the woman washing Christ’s feet with her hair, an image of self-abjection, rather of simple companionship. At another time in my life, at other times in my mother’s life, the scene would