

The Death of My Brother's Lover

by Helen Patti

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One hundred and seventy-five people assembled tonight to grieve the death of my brother's lover. David was dead at the age of twenty-eight following a struggle with acquired immune deficiency syndrome. The memorial service was held in an enormous and beautiful stone church. Dark wood carved like lace surrounded the organ pipes and climbed with them high up into the dark recesses of the domed apse. We sat in silence during seven slow and resonant chimes from the bell tower, and with the tones of the last chime still reverberating, an organist hidden from view brought the massive pipes to life and sounded the first notes of "Since By Man Came Death" from Handel's Messiah. A cello joined the organ and together they held a note, pure and deep, while the singers before us prepared to begin the aria.

The stained glass windows some fifty feet overhead caught the dying rays of the sun and laid them gently over the deep brown rows of pews and across the marbled floor. During this unexpected infusion of light, the priest rose from the chancel to deliver the eulogy, written by David's sister Mary and a close friend. Earlier, when the priest had gone over the eulogy with Mary in preparation, he had stopped and said; "So I am to understand that David was Sebastian's lover, that Sebastian has organized this service for him, that I am to speak not only of David's birthplace and accomplishments, but also of the dedication, the love, and the bond between these two men." It was a point that really did not need clarification. And, as I imagine the scene between Mary and the priest, I am sure he saw that there was no room for irrelevant questions of impropriety as he searched her eyes. Mary has beautiful, clear eyes, and she loved her brother deeply. David was one year older than her, and she had often said that he was the closest person she had on this earth. And Mary loves my brother nearly as deeply, for the peace and happiness he brought to David. This priest was wise enough to understand the real issue, and he did not further hesitate to conduct a service unlike any he had undertaken before. During the eulogy, with the air full of sun and stilled music, he looked directly at Sebastian — who had never been far from David's side, not as he lay dying for nearly a week, nor in all their years together — and he said to him, "Sebastian, David adored you. For nearly ten years you have loved each other. You upheld him with your humor and compassion..." At the end of the



eulogy and throughout the next selection, the soprano soloist looked at my brother and sang to him, her voice and the accompanying violin moving gracefully through the two hundred and fifty year old score.

At the end of the service, David's family and my family made a line at the front of the church for the people attending the service to pass by. David's mother and my mother stood together, forming a curious, yet perfectly natural pair. My mother is a somewhat rigid woman, but she had come, and her presence spoke loudest of all. Her son's grief was unequivocal, and I was proud of her humane understanding. She had lost her companion of forty years, my father, just three months ago, and when she greeted my brother at the airport, she was somehow able to construct a bridge over water which is, I am sure, unfathomable to her, and reach Sebastian with the words, "Now, you and I have both lost our loved one."

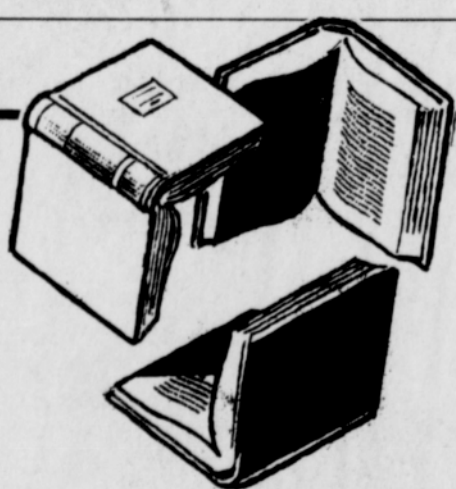
Standing in the receiving line I met and shook hands with many different kinds of people, among them high level EPA officials whose

names you or I might read in the newspapers. My brother works for the EPA as an environmental lawyer here in Chicago. They shook my hand warmly, saying; "What a wonderful man your brother is and we are sorry for his tragic loss." There were social workers, supervisors, colleagues and patients of David's from Chicago's Martha Washington Hospital where David worked as a therapist in the chemical abuse program up until ten days ago when he himself checked into the hospital. One young black woman, a supervisor of David's and an inner-city social worker, upon meeting David's mother in our line, clung to her and broke the somber tension with sobs which came from deep within her and filled the high expanse of those stone walls. The priest was one of the last people to come through our line. He was moved, and told us so. I think his own unfaltering complicity surprised and moved him as much as the beauty of the service itself.

If six thousand white children had died of a mysterious, infectious virus, there would be teams of doctors working feverishly. The public would demand it. Federal funds allocated for emergency epidemic research and control would have been granted immediately and generously. Not so with the AIDS epidemic. And not everyone who mourns the death of a young man or woman who dies of this syndrome can afford to mark his or her death with the gravity and beauty which my brother organized. More commonly their passing is accompanied by embarrassment, shame and euphemistic phrases. The grief of lovers must be all the more deep and confusing without honest public acknowledgement of broken bonds and the loss of love and companionship.

The hour David died, Mary and Sebastian stood on either side at the head of his bed. Friends and other members of the family were lined up on either side. Sebastian and Mary had placed earphones on David's head through which came a recording of the Messiah. The oratorio was his and my brother's favorite piece of music and they had heard it performed together in April at the same church in which the service was later held. Moments before his heart stopped, Mary lifted the earphones and whispered to him: "We are going to be all right. I love you and thank you for being in my life." Sebastian then, from the other side of the bed, leaned down and said quietly: "You and I have walked together. I will walk alone now, but I will be all right." They replaced the Messiah, laid their hands gently on him all around, and were with him until they could follow no further.

Helen Patti lives in Cannon Beach. She is the founder and director of Kloochoy Theater.



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