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Out Men

FENTON JOHNSON



The Limitless Heart

IT IS LATE MARCH — the Saturday of Passover, to be exact — and I am driving an oversize rented car through west Los Angeles. I have never seen this side of the city except in the company of my companion, who died of AIDS-related complications in a Paris hospital in autumn of last year. He was an only child and often asked that I promise to visit his parents after his death. As the youngest son of a large family and a believer in brutal honesty, I refused. I have too much family already, I said. There are limits to how much love one can give.

Now I am here, driving along San Vicente Boulevard, one of the lovelier streets of Santa Monica, Calif., west from Wilshire to the Pacific. The street is divided by a broad green median lined with coral trees, which the city has seen fit to register as landmarks. They spread airy, elegant crowns against a movie-set heaven, a Maxfield Parrish blue. Each branch bleeds at its end an impossibly scarlet blossom,

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as if the twigs themselves had pierced the thin-skinned sky.

My friend's parents are too old to get about much. They are survivors of the Holocaust, German Jews who spent the war years hiding in a Dutch village a few miles from Germany itself. Beaten by Nazis before the war, my friend's father hid for four years with broken vertebrae, unable to see a doctor. When he was no longer able to move, his desperate wife descended to the street to find help, and saw falling from the sky the parachutes of their liberators.

After the war they came to California, promised land of this promised land. Like Abraham and Sarah, they had a single son in their advanced years, proof that it is possible, in the face of the worst, to pick up sticks and start again.

At his home in Santa Monica, my friend's father sits in chronic pain, uncomplaining. Unlike his wife, he is reserved; he does not talk about his son with the women of his life — his wife or his surviving sister. No doubt he fears giving way before his grief, and his life has not allowed

for much giving way. This much he and I share: as a gay man who grew up in the rural South, I am no stranger to hiding.

His wife always goes to bed early — partly as a way of coping with grief — but tonight he all but asks her to retire. After she leaves he begins talking of his son, and I listen and respond with gratefulness. We are two men in control, who permit ourselves to speak to each other of these matters because we subscribe implicitly, jointly, unconditionally to this code of conduct.

He tells of a day when his son, then 8 years old, wanted to go fishing. The quintessential urban Jew, my friend's father nonetheless bought poles and hooks and drove 50 miles to Laguna Beach. There they dropped their lines from a pier to discover the hooks dangled some 10 feet above the water. ("Thank God," he says. "Otherwise we might have caught something.") A passer-by scoffed. "What the hell do you think you're trying to catch?" My friend's father shrugged, unperturbed. "Flying fish," he replied.

I respond with my most

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vivid memory of his son. He was a wiser man than I, and spoke many times across our years together of his great luck, his great good fortune. Denial pure and simple, or so I told myself at first. AZT, DDI, ACT-UP, CMV, DHPG, and what I came to think of as the big "A" itself — he endured this acronymed life, while I listened and learned and participated and helped when I could.

Until our third and last trip to Paris, the city of his dreams. On what would be his last night to walk about the city we sat in the courtyard of the Picasso Museum. There at dusk, under a deep sapphire sky, I turned to him and said, "I'm so lucky," and it was as if the time allotted to him to teach this lesson, the time for to me to learn it, had been consumed, and there were nothing left but the facts of things to play out.

A long silence after this story — I have ventured beyond what I permit myself, what I am permitted.

I change the subject, asking my friend's father to talk of the war years. He does not allow himself to speak of his beatings or of murdered family and friends. Instead he remembers moments of affection, loyalty, even humor, until he talks of winters spent immobilized with pain and huddled in his wife's arms, their breaths freezing on the quilt as they sang together to pass the time, to stay warm.

Another silence; now he has ventured too far. "I have tried to forget these stories," he says in his halting English. In the presence of these extremes of love and horror I am reduced to cliché. "It's only by remembering them that we can hope to avoid repeating them."

"They are being repeated all the time," he says. "It is bad sometimes to watch too much television. You see these things and you know we have learned nothing."

Are we so dense that we can learn nothing from all this pain, all this death? Is it impossible to learn from experience? The bitterness of these questions I can taste, as I drive east to spend the night at a relative's apartment.

Just south of the seedier section of Santa Monica Boulevard, I stop at a bar recommended by a friend. I need a drink and I need the company of men like myself — survivors, for the moment anyway, albeit of a very different struggle.

The bar is filled with Latinos wearing the most extraordinary clothes. Eighty years of B movies have left Hollywood the nation's most remarkable supply of second-hand dresses, most of which, judging from this evening, have made their ways to these guys' closets.

I am standing at the bar, very Anglo, very out of place, very much thinking of leaving, when I am given another lesson:

A tiny, wizened, gray-haired Latina approaches the stage, where under jury-rigged lights (colored cellophane, Scotch tape) a man lip-synchs to Brazilian rock. His spike heels raise him to something above six feet; he wears a floor-length sheath dress, slit up the sides and so taut, so brilliantly silver, so lustrous that it catches and throws back the faces of his audience. The elderly Latina raises a dollar bill. On tottering heels he lowers himself, missing not a word of his song while half-crouching, half-bending so that she may tuck her dollar in his cleavage and kiss his cheek.

"*Su abuelita*," the bartender says laconically. "His grandmother."

One A.M. in the City of Angels — the streets are clogged with cars. Stuck in traffic, I am haunted by voices and visions: the high thin songs of my companion's parents as they huddle under their frozen quilt, singing into their breath; a small boy and his father sitting on a very long pier, their baitless fish-hooks dangling above the vast Pacific; the face of *su abuelita*, uplifted, reverent, mirrored in her grandson's dress.

Somewhere a light changes; the traffic unglues itself. As cars begin moving I am visited by two last ghosts — my companion and myself, sitting in the courtyard of the *Hôtel Salé*, transfigured by the limitless heart. ■