

For All I Know

HOSPITALS ON WEEKENDS have an after-hours feel. Walking the quiet halls of the Sacred Heart Hospital (Eugene, Oregon) on Super Bowl Sunday, I feel as if I'm roaming the mall after the Cineplex has let out and all the stores are gated for the night.

I've seen too much of the inside of this hospital over the last few months. Non-Hodgkins lymphoma, a hematologic malignancy similar to leukemia, is running helter-skelter through my body. Usually my wife, Louise, accompanies me here, listening attentively to the doctors and then translating the medic-speak for me on the way home. In waiting rooms, her endearments soothe me as she responds to my nervous prattle. Other times, I wait with my eyes closed; my hand hooked in Louise's elbow, as she thumbs through magazines with the address labels torn off.

Louise herself survived a nasty bout with cervical cancer five years earlier. I know from that experience that, as much as I feel the stress of what has been diagnosed as an ultimately lethal disease, it is easier to be the patient than the hand-wringing loved one. Louise offered to come down with me this Sunday, but I'm only here for a finger stick. I can handle that. She's earned a day off.

The Temporary Care Unit waiting room sits empty when I arrive. The nurse turns on the TV to the Super Bowl for me and then kindly puts on a pot of coffee, since I may have to wait awhile for the mobile lab technician who will administer a blood test to measure the relative clotting level of my blood. They'll keep testing me until they can settle on the proper dosage of Coumadin to help dissolve the blood clot that ballooned my left calf earlier in the week. Clots are common in cancer patients.

Opposite:
Shell Mask.
American Indian,
Mississippian,
conch shell,
7¹⁵/₁₆ x 6¹³/₁₆ x 2³/₁₆ in.,
ca. 1700–1200,
Tennessee.
Cincinnati Art Museum.
Gift of Thomas Cleneay.
(1887.20607)

After a few minutes, two older gentlemen join me in the waiting room. We chirp a cheery “Back again?” to each other. They were here yesterday at the same time I was. Twenty-four hours earlier, the man who is under treatment confirmed that he was born in 1920 before he gave up a few vials of blood for testing. I remembered the year because my father was also born in 1920. Hospitals often ask patients to state their full names or birth dates before chemotherapy, blood draws, or surgery. It’s a last-minute double-check to ensure they’re about to treat the proper patient.

The man under treatment is diminutive with crew-cut white hair and carries a plastic-handled shopping bag as if it were a briefcase. A tube leading from the bag disappears under his blue sweat suit. I surmise the tube leads to a catheter. His friend seems close to the same age, though he dyes his hair a Ronald Reagan reddish-brown. He wears a turtleneck under a stylish black leather jacket. I presume that the fellow in the leather jacket is the other’s caregiver and gay partner—the hand-wringer in the relationship. They may simply be friends or neighbors, brothers-in-law for all I know.

Gay men my age—Baby Boomers—led the mass breakout from the closet. Gay men my father’s age—the World War II generation—tended toward closeted public personas that became lifelong second natures, passing themselves off as “confirmed old bachelors.”

Fairy tales feature queens and kings, princesses and princes. Books, movies, and music reinforce the heterosexual norm as we grow older. Husband and wife, Louise and I shine in society’s mirror. On the other hand, these two men are conditioned to stand before smudges in the mirror. They don’t touch hands or whisper in waiting rooms. All the same, the entwined roots of their love run as deep as ours.

I turn my eyes back to the Super Bowl, but my thoughts remain on the worry that deepens the crow’s feet around the caregiver’s eyes. If the men are gay partners, God blesses and manifests their love as He manifests His presence to me through Louise. There’s no distortion in God’s message to love one another as he loves us.

Maybe the white-haired fellow isn’t really that sick. Maybe they’re brothers-in-law. But if they are gay partners and death does slip in their door, I pray it tiptoes into their closet so that they may squeeze hands a final time and whisper: “Don’t worry about me, lover” in the presence of God and beyond the range of those who don’t bless their devotion.

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