

LARRY CHAIT



THE FAMILY PLOT

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The summer after my father attempted suicide, I found myself wandering through a graveyard near my house, up and down the rows of sunken headstones and faded pink cloth roses. I didn't know a soul buried there, and I didn't know what solace I expected to find. All I knew was that here, if anywhere, was an object lesson in impermanence: hundreds of graves bordered by a six-lane thruway, a storage warehouse, and two used-car lots packed with SUVs. There was no entrance, just an opening where the drooping chain-link fence fell apart completely.

For five of my seven years in Albuquerque, New Mexico, I'd been driving past this cemetery each morning at forty miles per hour on the way to my sons' preschool, and the sight of it had nagged at my conscience. I didn't know why no one picked up the plastic bags and styrofoam cups. I didn't know if the place even had a name. I didn't know why this bothered me.

It might have gone on like this indefinitely — my uneasy relationship with the graveyard — but on a Thursday afternoon in May 2007 in Spokane, Washington, my mother and father had a fierce argument. In thirty-nine years of marriage they'd fought rarely and never for long. But this time my father said, "If you want me to go, then I'll really go," and he went upstairs. A few minutes later my mother followed. She found him sitting on the edge of their bed, his eyes unfocused, his head and shoulders sagging. "What did you do?" she shouted. She went into the bathroom, where all the bottles from the medicine cabinet — a pharmacy's worth of drugs, including the Ativan my mother took for bipolar disorder — were open and empty on the counter. She called 911.

The last thing my father ever wanted was to be a character in a melodrama. He did not want to step onstage at sixty-six, his hair gray, a small paunch over his belt, and play the tragic lead. He wanted to drink Coca-Cola and watch *Jeopardy!* and listen to the Kingston Trio; to bowl and play cribbage with my

mother; to read science-fiction novels and watch movies with lots of explosions; to work as a speech pathologist in a nursing home, helping the elderly to talk again and swallow soft foods, like yogurt and rice pudding.

Two days later, on the fifth floor of Spokane's Sacred Heart Hospital, after my father had spent thirty-six hours in a near coma, the breathing tube was removed from his throat, and he slowly regained consciousness. He recognized me as I gripped his hand and touched his forehead. The agony etched on his pale, wrinkled face was clear. He did not want to be alive.

For hours my father would not speak. Tears leaked from his eyes. Over the previous two days my mother had refused to tell me why he'd done it. "Your father will have to tell you himself," she'd said shortly after his suicide attempt, when it wasn't clear whether he would pull through. She'd said it as if she were willing to let him take his reasons to the grave.

Now I told my father I loved him, and he mouthed the words "You won't."

That night my father told me two things I had never once suspected: He told me that for ten years, from the time he was four until he was fourteen, his father had molested him. His voice broke as he said this. He hesitated and looked wildly about the room. I moved toward him, but my father held up his hand saying, "I'm not done." He then told me that he had been having anonymous affairs for as long as he and my mother had been married. All of these affairs had been with men. He was gay.

I cried and told him I was grateful he was alive.

For the rest of that evening, my mother either sat at my father's side, talking to him in a quiet voice, holding his hand, and stroking his thin gray hair, or else she stood at the edge of the room, her mouth in a tight line, her arms crossed, her eyes far away.

My mother has no illusions about life's fairness. She's suffered manic highs and catatonic lows since she was a teenager,

but she went undiagnosed and unmedicated until the summer of 2000, the year she turned sixty. Since then, I've rarely heard her utter the phrase "bipolar disorder." In the summer of 2003 she was diagnosed with stage III-C ovarian cancer. She treated the surgery and chemotherapy that followed like an extended dental procedure. When her hair fell out, she didn't wear a wig. She went to work whenever she could. She bought a yellow Lance Armstrong jersey and rode her bike on a trail along the Spokane River.

That Sunday afternoon, my father was moved out of the ICU and into a room on the psychiatric ward. He asked if he could have fried chicken from Albertson's for dinner, with potato salad and baked beans. Here was the father, and the appetite, I knew. As soon as he said it, I had the same craving.

Twenty minutes later my mother and I were in the Albertson's parking lot. It was a hot day, and we were about to enter the air conditioning when my mother stopped, turned to me, and said, "This morning your father told me he's been with more than one thousand men. He goes to High Bridge Park, the park on the way downtown, beneath the interstate overpass. He seemed relieved to give me a number, an estimate." She paused. "Why would he tell me that? Why would he say that to me?"

I said I didn't know. I was not angry then at my father, though I would be later, and I would unleash this anger upon him in phone call after phone call and e-mail after e-mail. Sometimes he'd listen without speaking; sometimes he'd argue; sometimes I'd yell at him until I was hoarse, pacing my backyard in the dark, oblivious to what my neighbors must have been hearing. Sometimes he'd yell back or hang up abruptly. Once, he responded to an e-mail by saying, "Thanks for bringing me to task. I clearly needed it." Another time he responded only, "I've read your e-mail."

But at that moment, in the Albertson's parking lot, I felt hollow. I could not imagine the depth of grief my mother must have been feeling; I still can't.

We went into the store and bought fried chicken, home fries, baked beans, coleslaw, and potato salad. We bought Cokes for my father and me. My mother stood in front of the refrigerator case, staring at the iced teas: Lipton, Snapple, AriZona, Nestea; strawberry, raspberry, brisk lemon, lime, diet peach, cactus, very cherry. She seemed paralyzed. "There shouldn't be so many choices," she said.

My father was on suicide watch that weekend at the hospital. My older brother flew in from Maryland, and he and I took turns sleeping on a cot beside our father's bed. On Monday our father vowed that he was no longer a danger to himself, and he came home and slept in the guest bedroom. On Tuesday and Wednesday he spent the night with my brother in a hotel, and on Thursday we helped him move into an apartment across town.

The poet William Stafford wrote, "I appeal to a voice, to something shadowy, / a remote, important region in all who talk." In 1945, when my father was four years old, that remote, important region in him was desecrated, and he did not

speaking of his abuse for sixty-two years.

As I write this, my youngest son, Evan, is four years old, and he talks about everything: friends from preschool, the plots of his favorite cartoons, the girls his brother chases on the school playground. He is capable of monologues of ten minutes or more. But there are moments when I cannot listen, because images of Evan combine with what I imagine happened to my father, and I feel a mixture of revulsion and rage and helplessness. At such moments Evan sees that I am not really there, and he says, "Daddy, what's the matter?"

In the second week of August, three months after my father's suicide attempt, I dropped Evan off for his first day of preschool. Within moments of our arrival, he went into the bathroom like a kid with something to prove. Earlier that summer he had decided it was time for him to stand up and pee. His aim was unreliable, but that wasn't the point. He was a big boy. He was four years old. He was thirty-seven inches tall and weighed thirty-five pounds. He could pull up his underpants and then his shorts, all by himself. He could turn on the faucet, wash his hands, and dry them with a towel instead of his shirt.

The preschool bathroom has no door. Evan and his preschool classmates don't care. What is beautiful is their innocence, their trust, their absence of self-consciousness or shame. They do not need a door. What is ugly is that, because of what some people might do to a child behind a closed door, there must be none.

That weekend I went to the graveyard by myself. The first grave beyond the opening in the chain-link fence was the most recent. There was no headstone. A body-sized dirt mound rose a foot above the earth and was surrounded by fist-sized rocks, like a pioneer's grave in the wagon-train West, or a potter's-field grave, dug quickly and late at night. On a small metal stand, in a frame under glass, these words were typed on weathered paper:

In Loving Memory of Esteban Salido
Born September 16, 1940
Died June 28, 2004

There was an address and a phone number for the funeral director. I dialed the number on my cellphone. It rang twice, and a man named Ed Hatton answered. He seemed unsurprised by my call and the fact that I was standing at Esteban Salido's grave. Ed was having Sunday brunch at a restaurant with his family, but he had a few minutes. He seemed like a man accustomed to phone calls involving death and odd circumstances.

Ed remembered Esteban Salido. I asked him if he knew the name of the graveyard I was standing in. He didn't, but he said there are many graveyards like it, family graveyards, spread out over the Rio Grande Valley. He named one just off the interstate by the airport and another near the Balloon Fiesta Park. He interrupted himself to order a ranch omelet and then told me about the Albuquerque Indian School graveyard, where Pueblo and Navajo children were buried between 1882

and 1933. There are no signs of their graves now; it is a 4-H park and playground. He said I wouldn't believe how many graves get dug up each year by construction workers. Our connection went bad for a few seconds, and when it came back Ed was saying how sad it made him that people were losing the sacred places of their families' pasts. I could hear, in the background, the clinking of plates and forks, but Ed was unhurried, even eloquent. I stood there in front of Esteban Salido's grave, under a hot August sun, and listened. Ed ran a mortuary now, but he had once managed a number of family cemeteries. There weren't many left. Most people now lived far away from where their loved ones were buried. They had nowhere to go to mourn. "You have called about something very close to my heart," he said. I thanked him for having taken time away from his family and his breakfast, and he said, "No, thank *you*."

It is dusk in summer, and my father is seven years old. He lives with his mother and sisters in a small apartment with a porch facing the street and a fenced backyard. The evening is hot and humid, and the windows are open, the air heavy with the smell of Virginia's James River and of coal. My father is reading a *Prince Valiant* comic in the bedroom he shares with his two sisters, who are teenagers and both out somewhere. He sits at the edge of the bed, still dressed in shorts and shirt sleeves, his hair neatly combed. His mother sits at the table in the kitchen: maybe she is paying bills or flipping through the newspaper or looking out the window at the coming dark. She works a sixty-hour week at the dry dock as a timekeeper. From the alley beyond the back fence, my father hears pebbles crunching beneath tires, an engine downshifting, the familiar grind of brakes. A car door opens and closes. Then his father is shouting: awful things about his mother, about his sisters, about him. My father doesn't need to look out the window to see the drunken sneer on his father's face. He knows his father will not leave until one of the neighbors calls the police. The neighbors' windows are open, every single one, and shame stirs in my father's gut.

Other times his father lets the car idle in the alley while he gets out, stands quietly, and smokes a cigarette. He lingers there in silence for ten minutes, twenty minutes, an hour, and my father feels the horrible pull of his father's gravity, like the moon's on tidewater.

My father told me this story late at night in the psychiatric ICU as I willed myself to stay awake on my cot. We had long since turned out the lights. I still didn't trust that he would not kill himself. I heard him stir in his bed, and I asked him what he was thinking. The blinds to the locked windows of his fifth-floor room were open wide.

In an e-mail from May 30, 2007, my father wrote:

You have lost an image of me once thought to be carved in stone and it must be difficult to imagine what might eventually replace it.

My father did not attend his own father's funeral. I don't

know the name or location of the graveyard where my father's father is buried. I don't know the year he died or how old he was or what condition or event killed him. I never met him, have never even seen his picture, so I don't know if my father resembles him, or if I resemble him, or if my sons resemble him. My father rarely spoke of him, except to say that he was a violent drunk who beat his mom and sisters.

I don't want to know where my father's father is buried. I don't want to go there with my shovel and my rage and unearth his skeleton and tear it apart, bone by bone, then smash the bones and take the pieces far away, to a place where no one ever knew or loved him, and scatter them in a vacant lot.

I do not believe that my father's molestation made him gay any more than I think he chose to be gay. My father's molestation silenced him.

In that e-mail from May 30 my father also wrote:

It never occurred to me to bring it up, much less admit to it. It was enough that I felt so much hate for my father because of what he did to me. There was then, as there is now, a great deal of shame attached to sexual abuse by a family member, especially one's own father. The difference now is that children are encouraged to talk to a responsible person in literally dozens of places in their environment: TV, radio, school, church, camp, etc. This was never the case when I grew up. We didn't talk about such things openly, especially in the South. I don't know what else to say, except that it was a different time.

Psychologists estimate that 10 to 15 percent of people are "repressors," particularly adept at suppressing unwanted thoughts. "Repressors score low on questionnaires that measure anxiety and defensiveness," writes Benedict Carey in the *New York Times*. "Some psychologists believe they have learned to block distressing thoughts by distracting themselves with good memories. Over time — with practice, in effect — this may become habitual, blunting their access to potentially humiliating or threatening memories and secrets."

I want to believe my father practiced his good memories the way he once practiced the guitar. But I don't know what his good memories are. My own memories of my childhood are roiling inside me, adapting to what I know now, as all memories must.

In an e-mail from August 25 my father wrote:

I read the *New York Times* article and find it provocative. There is no doubt that I did lead a double life for a long time. I never allowed anyone from the other life into my "real" life. . . . I have always been very good at keeping secrets. I remember your mom was amazed that I could wrap Christmas packages, even my own, without looking/peeking to see what it was. . . . As to repression of thoughts, yes, that is something I have always been able to do.

Not always. Late at night, after his family had fallen asleep, my father drove to darkened city parks or the bathrooms of interstate rest areas. Early the next morning he often woke beside my mother in a cold sweat, terrified that he had spoken in his sleep. The day after he told me this on the phone, my father wrote in an e-mail, "I can't answer any more of those kinds of questions."

That August, the same day my wife and I celebrated our tenth wedding anniversary, my parents signed the papers making official their divorce. A week later my mother's revised last will and testament arrived in our mailbox. On page three she states that her remains shall be cremated and her ashes buried in Elko, Nevada, the town where she was born, beside the remains of her mother and father and sisters, her aunts and uncles and cousins. My mother has not lived in Elko for more than fifty years.

In the six-page document there is not a single mention of my father.

My father will be buried in Newport News, Virginia, where he was born. He will be buried in the same cemetery as his mother, who is ninety-one and has Alzheimer's and knows nothing of the incest that has shaped her son's life. My grandmother does not know of her son's suicide attempt or his sexual orientation. She refuses to live in the same nursing home with black people, so it's likely that if she did know her son was gay, she would not want to be in close proximity to him, either. My father has not lived in Newport News for more than fifty years.

The day after my mother's will came in the mail, I went wandering through the graveyard. Esteban Salido's relatively recent grave was an exception: his neighbors had all been buried in the forties, fifties, and sixties. Their headstones were weathered and cracked, the letters faded and sometimes nearly illegible. The majority of the grave sites had no headstone at all. Some were ringed by rocks, railroad ties, rotted two-by-fours, or bricks. There were wooden crosses and rebar crosses. There were small metal stands with glass-covered nameplates. There were discarded pipes, a rain-soaked mattress, a pair of faded pink flip-flops, a sun-bleached teddy bear. In the far northeast corner, linden trees had grown up around twenty or more graves, and beneath their canopy I saw tarps, crates, sheets, and blankets.

As I walked between the haphazard rows of graves that August morning, my heart felt strangely light. I was happier than I had been in months, no longer disturbed by the pervasive lack of care at the cemetery. I was so surprised by the dissonance between the sad scene before me and the way I was feeling that I laughed out loud.

All that summer I had felt out of place in the most literal sense. Not one of the familiar places in my life — my home, my neighborhood, my office, the playground, the swimming pool, the hiking trails — had given me solace. Not one of those places had been able to contain my sorrow for my father and mother or my own feelings of abandonment. I think my happiness that morning in the graveyard had something to do with a congruence between place and purpose that went deeper than any

surface layer of trash and neglect. A graveyard is a wilderness, a region beyond boundaries, a home for unknowns and loss.

After half an hour of wandering, I left the cemetery and walked up a dirt road past the storage warehouse to American Legion Post #13, a low cinder-block-and-aluminum building. It wasn't quite noon. Though I had felt happy and purposeful only moments before in the cemetery, I now felt uncertain. I wanted to ask someone about the cemetery, but who would be there on a Sunday morning? If people were there and asked me why I wanted to know, why the graveyard mattered to me, what would I say? Maybe that I was sick of mystery. Though my father had begun to answer some of my questions by phone and e-mail, it wasn't enough. I do not think that any answer he might have given then, however exhaustive and full of reckoning, would have been enough. Maybe I needed to know the name of this graveyard and who was responsible for its neglect so that I might have the simple moral satisfaction of assigning blame. Not once did this desire feel irrational or misplaced; it felt essential, like most inexplicable inner imperatives.

The back door of the American Legion post opened into a dark, smoke-filled bar. Five older Latino men in jeans and flannel shirts were sitting on stools, watching a football game on a television mounted above rows of liquor bottles. Each man was wearing a ball cap imprinted with his unit's name and number. I told them I was a writer working on a story about the cemetery down the hill. Did anybody know the name of the place?

One of the men said, "There's plenty of dead people right here." He held up a beer bottle. "We'd go down there, but that cemetery's been full for a long time."

Another man got off his stool and came over and shook my hand. He smelled like rum and after-shave. His eyes were bloodshot and cloudy, his face leathery. "That's the Martinez family cemetery. The owners don't care nothing about it." He shook his head in disgust. "I tried to do what you're doing a while back. Maybe you'll have more luck."

"You tried to write a story about the cemetery?"

"Do I look like a writer?" The man held out his arms and turned around in a circle. The other men laughed. "No, but I tried to find out why the hell no one would take care of those graves."

"What did you find out?"

"Nothing."

I asked him his name.

"Ruben Espinosa," he said. "My mother is buried in that cemetery."

"What was her name?"

"Pauline. Polly Espinosa. There's no headstone for her, no cross, no nothing," Ruben said. "It isn't right. You could put that in your story."

In an e-mail from July 20 my father wrote:

Your mother was my life. I didn't have friends outside her circle of friends and acquaintances. There is now a gargantuan hole where a normal existence used to

be. I can't even begin to describe the depth of that hole. Now, given that, please don't think that your mother's grief is not wider and deeper. I am aware that all these years, I knew what I was doing and she didn't. I am also aware of how deeply she loved me and how utterly devastated she must be. As bad as I feel, her pain is worse than mine. I wish there was something I could do to alleviate that pain. I will try to find some way if I can. . . . I have thought many times in my life that if I could start over again, I would find a way to not be the way I am. Unfortunately, there is no way to turn the clock back and do it over. I am who I am and must find a way to live with this self and this way of life.

In an e-mail from September 19 my father wrote:

I was in absolute denial for many years. I cannot remember at what point in my life that it finally dawned on me that I was really gay. I know it was well into my late thirties or early forties.

My father is a mystery. I have known him all my life, but I feel now that, in some essential way, I know him no better than I know any of the dead in the Martinez family cemetery. He is a stranger to me.

In an e-mail from August 9 my father wrote:

I remember saying quite forcefully that I am the same person I have always been, the same person you've always known. I think I realize now that is only partially true. The person you've always known is still here, but the inside is different, even to me.

In November 1998, just weeks after Matthew Shepard, a young gay man, was murdered in a brutal hate crime, playwright Tony Kushner wrote an impassioned essay for the *Nation* calling the pope, among others, "homicidal" because of his "cynical political silence" — specifically, his failure to speak out against the murder of homosexuals. I distributed the essay to my students in a class on argumentation. We talked about it as a lament, a jeremiad; we talked about the heartsickness and outrage in every sentence. We talked about the analogy Kushner drew between Shepard's murder and the deaths of four black girls during the civil-rights movement and "their sad, small coffins." The students and I agreed that this was one of the most important cultural issues of our time. Kushner wrote:

If you are a heterosexual person, and you are reading this: Yeah yeah yeah, you've heard it all before, but if you have not called your Congressperson to demand passage of a hate-crimes bill that includes sexual orientation, and e-mailed every Congressperson, if you have not gotten up out of your comfortable chair to campaign for homosexual and all civil rights — cam-

paign, not just passively support — may you think about this crucified man, and may you mourn, and may you burn with a moral citizen's shame.

But I did not call or write my Congressperson. I did not burn with a moral citizen's shame. I did not think that Matthew Shepard's murder had anything to do with *my* life, not then.

In an e-mail from September 9, my father wrote:

I was very isolated as a child and have continued to be so into my adulthood. No matter how close I was to people, especially your mother, I never felt connected in a certain sense. I said many times, "I never understand how you love me," to your mom. I have always been afraid to get really close to anyone as a friend for fear they would be able to figure out my secret and not want to be my friend anymore. I still have that fear.

His suicide attempt was an exhumation. The person my father could not speak of has been unearthed. My father is more alive, and more alone, than ever.

I don't have any burial plans of my own. I don't know that I want to be buried at all, much less where. I have no family graveyard.

The headstones of the soldiers in the Martinez family cemetery are the best preserved. There are twenty or so of them amid the garbage and sunken graves and wooden crosses. These stones are white marble and perpendicular to the earth. To me they feel right.

Henry Jojola

New Mexico

Pvt 33 Cav

Oct 19, 1915 — Oct 20, 1945

When I look at Henry Jojola's headstone, I think, *Hero*. This has nothing to do with any action or deed on the battlefield, but with the bravery I imagine soldiers must show amidst fear and confusion.

In all the years of my childhood, my father never hit me. He was never in any way sexually inappropriate. He did not rage or curse. He did not drink to excess. He was humble and calm and kind. After my basketball practices for Rotary Club #14, he took me, every Tuesday night all through middle school, to Goodrich Dairy for a butterscotch malt. He was a good father. He still is. Given the circumstances of his childhood, I consider this heroic.

There is no one right way to see all of this, no one way to accept or forgive or understand, no one way to gather all the memories into a single, coherent story.

Here is one story: My father left our home for unaccounted hours, but he always came back, because he loved each of us — about this, I have no doubt. This is how he tried to hold his family together, and he did, for a long time, and now that time is over. ■