

Gary Schiro



Slow Dancing in West Virginia

We had only been there a few hours when I asked about the murder. It was all I could think of since we'd arrived. My companion, Bob, and I had come to West Virginia for his niece's wedding. "I don't know that we'll make it to all of them, but this is my first niece getting married and I want to be there," he told me when the invitation came. "Look," he said, holding up the envelope, "she purposefully wrote Uncle Bobby and Uncle Gary."

We're seated in the back room of a crowded Italian restaurant for the rehearsal dinner, surrounded by his immediate family and all the other out-of-towners here for the wedding. Only last week, news of the killing had reached us miles away in upstate New York: "Slaying of a Gay Black Spurs Call for Justice." Actually, it was the dateline that caught my eye. Fairmont, West Virginia, is Bobby's hometown, and I couldn't think of another time when the *New York Times* had filed a story from there. Of no one in particular, I ask what the coverage of the murder has been like.

"It's been on the front page every day," his sister Kathy says. "Just awful, what happened. You know, they had a memorial service, and there were about a thousand people there."

"Oh, it was just terrible," his mother says, shaking her head and closing her eyes. "It's so terrible what they did to him. I was so upset that night, I went to church."

Responses start coming from all around the table.

"I don't want it to be a hate crime," Bob's sister Susie angrily pronounces. "If it's a hate crime they'll only get ten years and I want them to get life!"

"We were out the night of the vigil," says her husband. "I saw the crowd. It was huge."

For a few moments it continues. Almost everyone chimes in. Head shaking, frustration, gruesome details not reported in New York, and even a little bit of shame. That feeling we all get when someone in your town, your class, your tribe, has done something that you just can't understand. Then the groom clinks a glass and stands to make a toast, and we all turn to give him our attention.

I'm surprised by their responses and touched by their conviction. Ten years ago when I first met them all, I know their reactions would have been different, or at least much less vocal. I feel hopeful that they reacted this way, that the news has been in the paper every day, and that people are able to talk about it.

Arthur Warren Jr. was a 26-year-old man from Grant Town, a small former coalmining town outside of Fairmont. Last week, two 17-year-old boys beat him to death. When they were through, they drove a car over his body to make it look like a hit and run.

Bobby and I have been through Grant Town and in and out of a dozen small towns just like it as we've traveled out to his grandparents' farm. Just driving through these hill towns makes me feel anxious; I don't even like to stop for gas.

True to what Kathy said, on the morning of the wedding, the front page of the local paper has a story about the investigation and a picture from the funeral last week.

We make it to the church with plenty of time to sit up close with all the other relatives. The wedding goes off without a hitch. Jennie, another niece, is singing throughout the service; responsorial psalms, gospel acclamations, a quiet solo during communion. She gently raises her arms up in the air when it's time for us to sing with her, and we all do. Everything is perfect. This morning it was cloudy, but the rain holds off, and by the end of the service the sun has broken through just as it's supposed to. Even the awkward moment when family photos are taken seems casual. "Siblings and spouses!" the photographer calls out, and Kathy, the bride's mother, says, "Come on, Bob and Gary," just as she summons everyone else. "Peggy, Mark, come on up."

Bobby comes from a huge family, and we all pile together on the

steps to the altar. The photographer obviously works mostly with children, because he's jumping around waving and startles all of us by occasionally blowing a loud coach's whistle. You can easily imagine him shaking a teddy bear just above the camera.

"If you're right behind someone, you're going to be hidden!" he says. "We want to see you!" he keeps repeating. "We want to see you in these pictures years from now."

It's a minor detail, and I don't know if it will be evident in any of the photos, but I purposefully put my arm around Bobby's shoulder in such a way that my wedding ring is visible. There were times when I was left out of these group pictures, and now I want to do everything I can to be certain that down the road no one mistakes me for a distant relative, that they will know who I belong to.

We all smile and say "cheese" or "beer" and laugh. The photographer snaps away with the two different cameras hung around his neck and then blows his whistle to release us.

The reception is across the street, in the auditorium on the second floor of the Elks Club. It's an enormous room with a high ceiling, paneled walls, and floor-to-ceiling drapes where, I imagine, there are windows, though no evidence of daylight can be found in the room even though it's 3:30 in the afternoon. The room seems not to have been altered since the early sixties, but everything has been carefully maintained: the paneling is shiny, the celadon drapes are neatly pressed, and each of the shaded lamps on the aluminum chandeliers is softly glowing. Even the stackable melamine chairs are in good shape and still have all their small chrome feet. A few months ago in New York City, a restaurant opened that looked exactly like this and its retro/modern design was hailed as a triumph.

The dance floor in the center is surrounded by dozens of long banquet tables. No seats have been assigned, so after standing around with a couple of drinks we all scramble to find seats. Just when it looks like we may need to sit with strangers, Bob's sister Susie waves us over with her husband and kids where she has staked out a table for all of us. All the typical wedding reception events take place: the best man's toast, the couple's first dance, the bride and father dance. A giant mirrored ball above us is lit and begins to slowly spin and the

hall is filled with tiny spots of light. The songs they've chosen are the schmaltzy standards that Bobby and I both love even though we're too young for them. Jerome Kern, Cole Porter, Gershwin.

In between each song the DJ says, "Don't anybody go anywhere, you know what's going to come next." I am sure he's going to say it's time for us to join the happy couple on the dance floor, like at most weddings, and I'm thinking this might be our chance, but he never says it. There are more ritual dances, the groom with his mother, then some line dancing, and then suddenly the priest is brought forward to say grace, and everyone returns to their tables and dinner is served.

After his meal break, the DJ returns and begins his set of classic dance hits, and five minutes after I predict it to Bobby, he begins to play The Village People's "YMCA." As is always the case, people leap from their chairs and run to the dance floor to start forming the letters with their bodies as they dance. Waving their hands wide over their heads for a Y, folding them into an M, waving to the left for a C, and then back above their heads for the A. Half the people on the dance floor could not have even been alive when this song was first released, but they all know the dance. It is kept alive, I'm convinced, at straight weddings, even though a famously gay group recorded it, and the song invites you to "hang out with all the boys." If any of the people out on the dance floor understand this irony, it doesn't seem to dampen their enthusiasm. Bobby and I are glued to our seats, but right in front of us his brother Pat and his wife, Debbie, perhaps my most uptight in-laws, are throwing their arms about in wild abandon.

After this it's more disco classics. Kern and Porter and Gershwin are long gone.

Bobby and I are sitting alone together, various relatives off dancing, when the DJ mumbles that other tired phrase from the disc jockey handbook, "We're gonna slow things down a bit here." He starts to play Eric Clapton's "How Much I Love You." It's not the kind of song I get excited about dancing to, but it seems clear this may be our only chance. As the first few guitar twangs fill the hall, Bobby leans over, holds out his hand, and I take it. We stare at each other for a moment, wondering if we are really going to do this. Then slowly we rise and, in an odd mixture of determination and reluctance, make our way out

to the center of dance floor. It feels somehow safer to be surrounded by the crowd than to hover on the periphery.

We haven't done this much. I wish I could say I danced every time I felt like dancing, but it is not so simple. There is always a quick calculation about who else is in the room. Who is the host? Do the friends outnumber the strangers? Do I care who will be offended if we do this? We danced at my sister's wedding because I knew that we could. There have been many more times that I sat out. Or never even asked Bobby if he wanted to, and he didn't ask me. Maybe it was that stupid Village People song, and that it doesn't seem fair that all these straight people get to flail about so gaily, but not us. Maybe it's the couple of glasses of wine, or maybe even the death of Arthur Warren, and this seems like some kind of way to fight back. But tonight we dance: at the Elks Club, in Fairmont, West Virginia, just like Bobby's parents must have done a hundred times.

I always want to dance like chaperoned kids at the junior prom, standing straight up, a respectable distance between us; but Bobby always cuddles against my chest and smiles. I usually talk the whole time, as a way of seeming casual while I look over his head and watch the reactions around us for any sign of trouble. A few people gawk and do double-takes, at first thinking we are just two guys goofing around, and then, in horror usually, realizing we are not. Time seems to slow down and speed up all at once.

Kathy and her husband are out on the floor. They dance their way over to us and she elbows us in the side, and I'm relieved. "Hey," she says by way of greeting. "Hey," we call back. When the song ends, her husband leaves, and she comes over and throws her arms around us.

"I'm so glad you guys are here." She's had a bit too much to drink, but at this point we all have, and it doesn't make me believe her any less. When Bobby and I invited folks to our own wedding five years ago, Kathy was the only family member who immediately said, "I'll be there – just tell me when and where."

"This boy was mine," she says, tearing up and grabbing Bobby on the chin. "He was mine. My little boy." Kathy was twelve when Bobby was born, and she spent a lot of time feeding, changing, and carrying her baby brother.

“I’m so proud of you two. I have gay friends who want to meet you so badly. I tell them about you all the time. About your home and your neighbors and friends. I brag about your church wedding. I just want them to be able to see the way you live. It’s so hard for them here.”

“Well, you’ve got to live your life,” I say, which, I suppose, is what I always say. But living your life is so much more complicated than always doing exactly what you feel like doing. Tomorrow, we’ll get back in the car and drive back to New York. Sure, we live in a small country town too, but it’s only two hours from New York City, and it seems worlds away from this place. Would we be out here on the floor, laughing and crying and dancing, if we lived just down the street from these folks?

After dancing to a few fast numbers, we call it quits, in a pathetic puddle of middle-age sweat and exhaustion. If anyone is offended or upset with us, I can’t tell. Even Bob’s mother seems untroubled – even if she isn’t.

She, in particular, struggles to know what to make of us, though I know she loves us. She has a hard time reconciling the way we live – out, open, and happy – with her strict Catholic upbringing. She goes to prayer retreats; she asks for guidance. The priest says just to pray for us: to love us, and to pray for us. And I don’t mind that one bit. Out and proud and happy as I am, some night, alone on a dark country road, I may need all the help I can get.

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