A STORY TO REMEMBER

Sylvia and I knew each other for thirty-two years. Everyone knows that we were friends for the last ten years. We were especially close friends for the last five years. However, few know that Sylvia and I were archenemies for the first twenty-two years we knew each other.

This somewhat embarrassing story I want to share with you today. It is a tale about two "arch enemies" who went beyond reconciliation and became the very best of friends. Sylvia agreed we me that our story should be shared with others.

From 1970 till 1992, Sylvia and I despised one another. Our antagonism toward one another was based on political differences, some misunderstandings, and a venomous portrayal I had done of her as a reporter for Gay Newspaper in the early 1970s.

At a forum in 1989 celebrating the 20th anniversary of Stonewall, Sylvia exploded in anger at my presence on the panel. She exited the community center screaming at me as she circled behind the audience. ~~I stood there confidently declaring: "You are not a typical homosexual" which greatly pleased my traditional homosexual friends who saw it all on the Gay Cable News Show.~~

Marsha P. Johnson followed Sylvia outside.

"You know, Sylvia," Marsha pleaded, "Randy has taken me in and given me a home for the last nine years. He really isn't such a bad person. You should try talking with him."

"No way!" Sylvia retorted. "Talk to that fascist creep? Never! "

It took the death of Marsha P. Johnson to initiate the extraordinary journey that Sylvia and I would travel: the amazing journey from becoming arch enemies to becoming the best of friends, soul mates, ultimately physical saviors to one another

At Marsha P. Johnston's funeral, we ~~decided to tell Marsha's life story by having those who knew her speak in the order that they were involved in her life.~~ ~~That meant that Sylvia Rivera preceded me in that memorial service. When Sylvia arrived at the church, we both~~ agreed: "Today, for Marsha, we must bury the hatchet."

Together with Marsha's family, ~~some of who are here tonight,~~ Sylvia and I carried Marsha's ashes from the church down Christopher Street to the Hudson River. For the first time, we talked ~~and discovered each other~~ in a ~~very special and~~ different way. We would later marvel that the magic of our mutual patron saint, Marsha P. Johnson, had healed our wounds and brought us together.

After that 1992 memorial, Sylvia commenced dropping into my shop whenever she was in town. In 1996, she told me she had joined a gay homeless encampment on the West Village waterfront called 'Gay Pier".

~~We arranged for~~ Tom Iorio and ~~myself to do~~ a video-tour of "Gay Pier". ~~That tape is part of my video archives in Philadelphia.~~

During the filming, Sylvia challenged me to give her a chance to work at my shop on Hudson Street. I'd bought over a hundred clowns that needed stringing to become Xmas ornaments.

"Why not?" I thought. She will prove herself worthless. I'll give her a try anyway. To my amazement, Sylvia was not only a good worker; she was an extraordinarily good and hard worker.

Whenever traffic in the shop slowed, other employees lit cigarettes and chatted among themselves. Sylvia cleaned the dirty showcases, replaced merchandise that had sold, made herself invaluable.

In late 1996, we had the snow of the Century, 33 inches. Sylvia and a two of her best friends from Gay Pier moved into my Hoboken apartment to survive the blizzard. Sylvia lived with me for the next six months. That was really the beginning of our becoming close. During the next few years, Sylvia became my most dependable and valuable employee the manager of my shop.

Even during those first couple years while she was still an alcoholic, she was a functional. I really offended her once by telling her "You have no class". She certainly proved me wrong on that one. She could greet the top decorators from the Upper East Side—"Hello darling, what do you need today"—and charm them into spending their entire budget at our shop.

In the early years, Sylvia would work till the beginning of June and then take a few months off, collecting unemployment, to indulge her activism until business picked up in the Fall.

When things became difficult, Sylvia not only took a pay cut, but also worked weeks at a time without taking a single day off. I remember one month changing her rate of pay to hide the fact she had worked 222 hours that month.

Indeed spending so much time together in close quarters could make us both testy. I just learned a few weeks ago from former employees that whenever Sylvia was really getting mad at me, she would commence humming or singing 'Yes, we have no bananas, we have no bananas today".

So, my old archenemy had not only become my best friend, my activist soul mate, but also my physical savior by literally humming my business.

Sobriety really enabled her to bring things together and get things done the last couple years.

When Sylvia got the opportunity to work at the food pantry here at Metropolitan Community Church, many mutual friends told me how "guilty" she felt. She felt she was deserting me. She worried that the Captain of the Titanic couldn't preside over the final days of his failing business.

"Sweetheart," I reassured Sylvia when she finally told me what I had already known for weeks," I am so happy that you finally have gotten a job that pays you the salary you deserve."

Still, Sylvia insisted on remaining "on call" whenever I might need her. I knew that Sylvia would always be there for me. That was the amazing thing about Sylvia; she was there for anyone who really needed her.

They had open prayers at the end of last Friday's viewing. I am not religious but I wanted to say:" Thank you Sylvia for carrying the spirit of Marsha P. Johnson into the 21st Century."

I hope Sylvia has touched your life as she has mine. I hope you will always remember this story of how two old enemies became the best of friends.