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DEAR DEPARTED: BILL HAYES REMEMBERS HIS PARTNER
NEUROLOGIST OLIVER SACKS

By Farhad J. Dadyburjor, March 11, 2018



Bill Hayes left San Francisco after 25 years of living there when his long-time partner, Steve, died unexpectedly. He wanted a fresh start and moved to New York City, not realising that this would lead him to fall in love thrice over – with renowned neurologist Dr Oliver Sacks who Hayes was with, till his death from cancer in August 2015; with New York and its people as a muse to his creativity; and his own internal love affair as a writer and photographer. He chronicles all of this in his exquisitely written memoir, *Insomniac City: New York, Oliver, and Me*.

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Ask him how he managed to remember specific details and conversations after all these years, and Bill says, “There was a very important event that happened to me on May 9, 2009. Oliver Sacks, who I was just getting to know, told me that I

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must keep a journal. And I wrote those exact words down on a scrap of paper: ‘You must keep a journal’,” he smiles. “From that day on, I would write down stories, encounters on the subway, conversations with taxi drivers, go-go boys, homeless people... When I came to write this book after Oliver had died, I had a 750-page journal to go through. The dialogues, the conversations, the details were all there.”

Love, life, lifetimes

Hayes first got acquainted with Sacks through a series of letters over the proofs of one of Hayes’ books (The Anatomist: A True Story of Gray’s Anatomy) that the doctor had enjoyed and promised to provide a blurb for, but forgot. When they met many years later in New York, they bonded over a common ailment – insomnia. Whether it’s their walks in the parks, conversations about classical music or literature, it is all intimately detailed. On Sacks’ 76th birthday, Hayes writes, ‘After I kiss him for a long time, he has a look of utter surprise on his face, eyes still closed: “Is that what kissing is, or is that something you’ve invented?” I laugh.’

Sacks, who was 30 years his senior, was not openly gay. In fact he had not had sex for three-and-a-half decades till he met Hayes. Was it a conscious decision to not include sexual details in the book? “In a way,” says Hayes, in Mumbai for a book promotion. “I aimed for discretion. I didn’t want it to be explicit, but I wanted it to be intimate. I think there’s a fine line between the two.”

The last quarter of the book was the most challenging to write since it dealt with Sacks’ illness. “Oliver gave me a great gift in a way that he wrote about his own sexuality in his biography, he wrote about us and he wrote, of course, about his illness and facing death. So I felt freed to write about it; that it wouldn’t be indiscreet. But to write about someone’s death is not easy, and I wanted to honour that. To let the reader know that Dr Sacks faced his final days exactly the way he wrote about it in his essays for The New York Times – with bravery and candour.”

Cities of light

While it does deal with grief, *Insomniac City* is a book that’s bursting with life; with positivity. One of the stories that didn’t make it to the book involves the two things that they did as a couple in Sacks’ last year. “We marched in a Black Lives Matter protest and we also went to a gay bar together for the first time ever,” Hayes laughs. With his writings and photographs having appeared in publications such as *Vanity Fair* and the *New Yorker*, Hayes’ photographic book *How New York Breaks Your Heart* came out last month. “It’s a history about exercise,” says Hayes, about his new book *Sweat*. “It’s going to be a mix of memoir and history.”

Whilst going on to talk about his travel plans of enjoying the backwaters in Kerala before his return to New York, you wonder whether he’s exhausted New York as a backdrop to his works. He nods slowly. “Well, that has been on my mind and I’m here in Mumbai now, so you never know,” he smiles. “I still love New York and I have work there, but I’m curious to get to know other cities.”