

WOLF

As soon as Jan came across the obituary in the Tribune she realized she had been looking for it, without admitting it to herself, for a long time.

Even so, reading the words produced a sharp ping in her chest that seemed to spread all the way to her fingertips, which tingled briefly. “Chicago artist Wolf ‘wrapped structures in beauty,’” the headline read, quoting from the explanation he often gave for his odd work.

The obit was straightforward: The artist was born Richard Benjamin Wolf, but used only the single name Wolf after the example, many believed, of his artistic and spiritual mentor, Christo. He had died at the age of 58 after a long battle with cancer.

Jan skimmed the rest. She would read it more carefully later. He was born and raised in Chicago. His parents had wanted their only son to take over the wholesale clothing business his father founded, but the boy showed a talent for art at a young age and ended up studying at the Art Institute instead of going to college. Spent several years in France and Italy studying the Old Masters. Returned to Chicago and began a promising career as a painter but soon embarked on the work for which he ultimately became famous, “wrapping” buildings, particularly public ones, and even entire landscapes in gigantic swaths of colorful fabric and other material that he cut and dyed himself in a warehouse on the Northwest Side.

She skipped over the list of buildings he had worked on and read to the end, the survivors, although she knew what it would say: his wife, Carolyn; two stepdaughters and a stepson. Donations were suggested to the scholarship fund of the School of the Art Institute. There was a photo accompanying the obit not of the artist but of the Chicago Cultural Center with enormous lengths of fabric covering it from top to bottom, billowing in the wind.

Jan folded the paper in half and put it on an end table. She planned to call her friend Harriet but first she went into the den where Donald, as usual, was sitting at his computer.

“Look at this,” he said without turning around when he heard her. “This guy has a first edition of ‘Mystery of the Yellow Room’ he says he’s ‘willing to part with.’ Willing to part with! He knows he can get a fortune for it from suckers like me.” Jan could see the iridescent shine of his credit card on the desk next to his mouse.

“Wow,” Jan said. Then, “Dick died.”

Donald said, “Dick?”

“Dick Wolf. Well, I’m not too surprised. He had cancer for years. Everybody knew it.”

“When’s the funeral?” Donald said. “I guess we should go, huh?”

They did go to the funeral, which was held, surprisingly, at Temple B’nai Zion, where both Jan and Dick had been confirmed. Its new young rabbi gave the somber eulogy, calling Dick “this great artist, Wolf,” repeating it again and again. The temple

and the rabbi must have been Carolyn's idea, Jan figured. Dick had never believed in anything, unless he had suddenly gotten religion in his last cancer-ridden days.

They hadn't spoken in almost five years. That meant all the time before -- since fifth grade, as friends, then briefly lovers, then friends for a long, long time -- was down the drain, was the way Jan thought of it. And for such a stupid reason: Because they, Dick and Carolyn, were angry at her over a long profile of Dick that had appeared in Chicago Arts Monthly, the magazine Jan founded and edited.

The writer, one of her best, had interviewed Dick respectfully, then written a piece that seemed to make sly fun of his work. Jan put it in the magazine with hardly any changes. She was sure Dick would be able to appreciate it. When he first started wrapping buildings he had explained to her that the whole point of it was to make sober-looking things light-hearted and ridiculous -- the Board of Trade done up in polka-dot fabric and tied with a shiny red bow, for instance -- and she didn't think he had ever changed his mind about that even after he became famous.

Of course it didn't help that the writer had also interviewed one of his ex-wives, who spoke about his moodiness, his notorious surliness to waitresses, cab drivers and even important people in the art world. The writer mentioned all this in the article. But so what? Everybody who knew Dick knew about that anyway.

But Carolyn came to Jan's office and made a big scene, threatening to sue (she didn't have a legal leg to stand on there, Jan knew). Then she said she would "feel more comfortable" if Jan and Donald didn't come to her daughter's wedding, to which they had received an invitation only a week before.

Who ever heard of being disinvented to a wedding, Jan complained to Donald, not that they were really dying to go to one that took place on a boat that sailed around the lake out of Navy Pier. “That woman’s class is all in her ass,” Donald said, which didn’t make any sense -- she didn’t have any there *either* -- but Jan agreed with the sentiment. She and Dick hadn’t spoken since, and now, she realized with a jolt -- but why a jolt? when people are dead, they’re dead -- they never would.

Hateful Carolyn was Dick’s third wife. They had only been married a few years but it was the consensus among their friends that she had made a sustained, successful effort to draw him away from all his old attachments. Jan liked his other wives -- including number two, a young Japanese woman who hardly spoke any English -- and she and Donald had often gone out to dinner or concerts with Dick and whoever he was married to at the time.

Donald knew that Jan and Dick had slept together, but it was so long ago -- during the Summer of Love when they were in college and everybody was sleeping with everybody else anyway -- that it seemed to belong to prehistory, the land before time or at least before he had entered Jan’s life. He was no more jealous of Dick than he was of a boy named Richie Kreitman who had been Jan’s “boyfriend” in kindergarten. Richie moved away when they were in the third grade.

After they got home from the funeral Jan sat on the couch for a while, staring straight ahead at nothing. Really she was rehashing everything to herself, especially how Carolyn, sitting in the front row with her three grown children, the daughter from the wedding boat now pregnant, had nodded tightly to her and Donald. It was, Donald said, a tinier, even more grudging nod than the Queen of England gave when Diana's funeral cortege passed by. He was an aficionado of the royals.

After a while Jan got out her senior yearbook and looked at Dick's picture. His astonishing good looks -- full lips, a shapely nose and large brown eyes with long lashes like a girl's -- were evident even from the little black-and-white image. She turned to her own. Her hair was pulled back off her face and tied in a ponytail, giving her a severe look, and she had only the tiniest smile on her pale lipsticked mouth. She wasn't the least attractive girl in the class, when such things counted, but she wasn't the prettiest either.

She and Dick were best friends in high school. Other kids had considered it a little daring, having a best friend, as opposed to a boy or girlfriend, of the opposite sex. Jan and Dick listened to classical music and scorned the Beatles (Elvis Presley was unthinkable) until the Sgt. Pepper album came out, with its nuances and reviews in highbrow magazines.

What Jan remembered best from those days was a paper she and Dick had collaborated on in their senior year (the school not only allowed but encouraged it) on *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. For reasons she still didn't quite understand it felt like one of the most exciting times of her life, and reading the poem always brought back those feelings, the breathlessness of it all as she and Dick quoted lines to each other: "In

the room the women come and go/Talking of Michelangelo.” What, she wondered now, did that even mean?

Had she been in love with Dick then, was that it? He was only the second man she had slept with, but wasn't it the first (in her case a short, hairy chemistry major she met at a freshman mixer on her second night at college) that you were supposed to glom onto forever after? With Dick, it had begun one weekend when he visited her at college before a big anti-Vietnam War march in Washington. They went to it together and were tear-gassed on the Mall, along with thousands of others. Jan was wearing contact lenses and the gas irritated her eyes so badly she could hardly see and thought she was going blind. Dick led her to a tent with a big red cross on it where a med student washed out her eyes with something soothing. They held hands while next to them a kid on a bad acid trip sobbed.

All that, too, stood out in sharper focus in Jan's mind than almost anything she had done since, with the exception of marrying Donald and giving birth to their two children, of course. But that was because the march and the tear-gassing were peak experiences, she told herself, vaguely recalling some article she had read on the subject, though not what the point of it was. Still, what did it matter now anyway? If she had been “in love” with Dick -- the very expression seemed foolish -- it had happened more than 30 years ago. What possible relevance could it hold for her life today?

In this practical mood, Jan sent a tasteful but impersonal sympathy card to Carolyn and prepared to get on with her busy life without mooning over the death of an old boyfriend, if that was even what he was. After all, he wasn't the first or the most

important person in her life who had died (she loathed the expression “passed away” and made a point of never using it). Her father, uncle, a young cousin killed in a car accident, a co-worker who fought breast cancer and finally lost the battle at 40, a dear friend’s baby born with a malformed heart who only lived a few weeks, even the beloved dogs and cats whose lifespan was, cruelly, so much shorter than hers -- surely each one meant more to her than this one.

Over the next few weeks, though, things didn’t feel quite normal to Jan, as if the world had tilted just one tiny degree. Her explanation to herself, and to anyone else who would have bothered to ask (no one did) was that she was upset over the death of an old friend. Yet oddly she felt more elated -- was that it exactly? excited? -- than depressed. She considered that the feeling might be vindictiveness, *Schadenfreude*, directed towards Carolyn: the exhilarating notion that Dick’s death served his wife right.

But feeling that way wasn’t at all typical of Jan, and besides, she figured, Carolyn probably wasn’t even so terribly grief-stricken. She had only been married to Dick for a few years, and she could always console herself with his money, which was considerable. Maybe she wasn’t even sorry he was gone; after all, living with him was no picnic, as his ex-wives made all too clear.

Jan tried to sound Donald out on how he felt about the situation but he had no patience for relationship intricacies. He had taken early retirement from the high school where he taught English for 27 years and was supposed to be starting an educational consulting business from his home office, but he spent much more time ordering books off obscure websites or logged onto a discussion site, Gaslight, where he and other

middle-aged geeks spent hours chewing over the finer points of Victorian crime fiction. When he was at the computer Jan knew there was no point trying to bring him back to a world 100 years later than the one he so clearly preferred.

Instead she called her mother, who had gone to the funeral with them. She had known Dick well, and she took an avid interest in gossip and all human foibles, but she had already taken her nightly sleeping pill -- without it she'd be awake until all hours of the morning. Her conversation consisted mostly of rambling about how handsome Dick had been in high school. Jan quickly said goodnight.

A long talk she had with Harriet, another old friend from high school, was more satisfying. They reviewed some of Dick's early idiosyncrasies -- he went through a phase of smoking only Galoises, which he bought from a high-end tobacconist on Michigan Avenue -- and remembered that before he even had a driver's license he would sneak his father's big black Cadillac out of the garage, take the two of them for rides up and down Lake Shore Drive and sneak it back in without anybody finding out.

They discussed the Carolyn situation in some detail. Harriet thought she had primarily been after Dick's money because her children were ne'er-do-wells who would never be able to support themselves. Jan opined that possibly she had really been in love with him in a silly, schoolgirlish way. Dick seemed to have that effect on women, even Harriet, who in college had been so absorbed in her romance with Stu, the man she eventually married, that there hadn't been any room in her sexual life for Dick, as there had in Jan's. Still, Jan remembered that for years Harriet got giggly and coy whenever she was around Dick, even when Stu was present.

Harriet was a widow now -- Stu had suffered his first and last heart attack three years ago -- and she spent her weekends making the rounds of the Jewish over-50 singles events, running from a hummus and falafel tasting at the JCC to a lecture at one synagogue to a dance at another. But she hadn't met anybody and was despairing of ever doing so, although Jan was always full of encouragement for her efforts. After they both watched a *Sex and the City* rerun where Carrie lamented the lack of the "za-za-zsu" -- the excitement of romance -- in her life, they commiserated about it on the phone the next day. If (relatively) young, beautiful Carrie couldn't get the za-za-zsu, what chance did they have?

But what was Jan complaining about? Harriet asked. You couldn't expect to feel that kind of excitement about somebody you had been married to for 30 years, at least not all the time. "Half wouldn't be bad," Jan said in a breezy way. She knew the consensus among their friends was that she and Donald were still in love with each other, and she supposed that was true. "We're just a couple of boring old geezers," she said to Harriet. Harriet laughed, but Jan knew she envied her.

Now they spent close to an hour telling stories about Dick and ended up with some sound putdowns of Carolyn. After they hung up Jan didn't feel sleepy even though it was almost 11 -- she had missed the 10 o'clock news, which she and Donald usually watched together, with their cat cuddled between them on the couch -- and she had to drink a glass of wine before she felt like going to bed.

When she finally did get to sleep she dreamed about Dick -- not surprising, considering -- but she could only remember the details in a hazy, unfocused way when

she woke in the morning. There had been something about a house that was open to the sky, with both of them in it, and something about cats, which she and Dick both liked, and a feeling of alarm for reasons she couldn't recall. She and Donald often recounted their dreams to each other but she didn't this time because there was so little to tell.

At work later that week, for a break from the task of trying to liven up a pedantic story on the Chicago Symphony scheduled for the next issue of the magazine, Jan found herself looking at various websites devoted wholly or partially to Dick's work. There were all the buildings he had wrapped, big and small, from the Lyric Opera House to the old Aragon Ballroom to a Starbucks in a distant suburb that had commissioned him to do a job on it. On one she found a photo of the industrial warehouse on the West Side that he had covered in enormous sheets of brown wrapping paper, to the consternation of the employees, who had no idea what had happened to their building when they came to work on a Monday morning.

That reaction, Dick (or "Wolf," as he had already begun calling himself) had explained, was a part of the whole thing. The installation, he said, encompassed not just the building but the human beings who worked inside it. In fact a photographer colleague had been on hand to take pictures of their surprised expressions, and blowups of those photos were included in a multi-artist exhibit, "New Ways of Being and Seeing," at the Museum of Contemporary Art.

Meanwhile a song had lodged in Jan's brain, and she realized it was the one she most closely associated with her affair with Dick and the anti-Vietnam War days: Simon & Garfunkel's *Feelin' Groovy*. What an embarrassment for her to go around

absentmindedly humming it all day -- to the younger people in the office it must have seemed as old hat as Frank Sinatra had to her when she was their age. Besides, the words were corny, and Jan cringed inside as she remembered that she had once told Dick she was “dappled and drowsy and ready for sleep.” Yet she couldn’t stop singing it -- to herself, very softly -- and she felt a little of the old thrill, a kind of soaring, opening-up feeling, when she came to “Let the morning come drop all its petals on me/Life I love you, all is groooovy.”

Jan got the idea -- how stupid of her not to think of it before! -- of doing another story on Dick for the magazine now that he was dead. Of course she couldn’t write it because of their personal connection -- bad journalistic practice -- but she could assign it, not to one of her own writers but to an eminent art authority, who could assess Dick’s work and the impact it had on other artists. She chose Hamp Warren, a modern art curator at the Art Institute, who seemed delighted to take on the assignment.

At home that weekend she got out some boxes of photos that had been piled haphazardly into their storage room 10 years ago when they moved to the condo, after their youngest child graduated from college. These were ones she had never gotten around to putting in albums, as she had done with the pictures of the children. She was sure there were some old photos of Dick in there and thought they might be useful for the article -- the artist at various ages, something like that.

She found dozens: Dick in a suit for high school graduation, looking surly in a James Dean pose; hippie Dick a few years later with shoulder-length hair, wearing a velvet cape he had tie-dyed himself; Dick with Jan, with Donald, with his parents, both long gone, with various cats, with various wives, at two of his own weddings, at Jan and Donald's, raising a glass as he gave a toast, his perfect lips parted in congratulatory mid-sentence.

Donald wandered in from the den as Jan was going through the boxes and making piles: one to keep, one to take down to the office for possible use in the story and one to throw away (pictures with people's thumbs in front of the lens -- why in the world had she kept them?)

He sat down next to her on the coach -- some of the piles spilled together from the impact -- and they looked at pictures and laughed at the old hairstyles and clothes. That night in bed Donald reached for her -- this still happened, though of course not as often as before, and Jan usually complied with something like resignation. But tonight their sex was surprisingly satisfying. Jan fell right asleep afterwards and had another confused dream with Dick in it, something about being on the beach with him and catching brightly colored fish in her hands. That was all she could remember.

The next day, waiting at her gynecologist's office to get her annual Pap smear, Jan leafed through a women's magazine and stopped at an article on scrapbooking. Who knew that it had become such a popular pastime that it had even spawned a verb form, as in "Do you scrapbook?" There were not only special scrapbooks for the purpose but

scissors that cut with a fancy edge, borders you could put around pictures, special fonts for captioning and fabrics to cover the books.

She wouldn't bother with any of that, of course -- she put it in the same time-wasting category as selling Avon or giving Tupperware parties -- but maybe she could put the old pictures of Dick into a plain scrapbook, along with some articles about his work she had saved over the years. She found a suitable, fairly inexpensive one at Target that weekend and set to work, beginning by affixing a blown-up copy of Dick's logo -- a stylized version of a majestic wolf -- to the cover. She found that she was starting to think of him as Wolf now -- certainly a more exciting name than the namby-pamby, semi-pornographic "Dick."

Donald, on his way from the kitchen to his computer, didn't seem surprised to see Jan cutting and pasting. He stopped to ask if she was planning to give the scrapbook to Carolyn, or one of the stepchildren, when she had finished it.

"Not to that bitch, but maybe to Nina," she said. The daughter from the wedding boat was the stepchild Dick had disliked the least, and they had formed a semi-affectionate attachment. Donald said he thought that was a nice idea.

Jan worked on the scrapbook in spare moments for several weeks. A couple of times she thought how silly and childish the enterprise was, but she kept it up anyway. She had no intention of giving it to Nina. It was for her alone. Donald lost interest in it and paid no attention to the project as Jan sat at the kitchen table cutting and pasting. She might as well have been gluing in pornographic pictures for all he noticed, she thought.

“Well, you sound very perky,” Harriet said when they spoke later in the week.
“What is it? Is there some new dude in the office?”

Jan was annoyed not only that Harriet would ask her that, but that her language had never moved beyond the '60s. Those were her glory days, Jan knew, because she had seduced Stu and won him away from his sexy girlfriend, a dancer in a go-go bar. Wasn't it time to let it go, though?

“Of course not,” she said crossly. “I can't believe you would say that. That happened years ago and it was nothing anyway.” It was actually only three years since Jan had told Harriet that she had “a little crush” on a new freelance writer she was using at the magazine, some years younger than herself. They had had lunch together a few times, that was all. Before that there was an attorney in an office down the hall from hers who had occupied her thoughts and fantasies for a while.

She was sure this was perfectly normal and supposed that Donald had had his little infatuations too, although she couldn't imagine who with -- one of the younger teachers maybe, though he had never given any indication of it. No, from what she could tell his interest in other women was restricted to the demure, ladylike, soft-spoken heroines of the Victorian detective stories he devoured -- but who really knew?

Still, Jan had to admit, she did feel “perky,” more so than she had felt in a while. Everything had been going along on an even keel -- not a bad thing -- and then there was this little uptick in her mood. Maybe it had something to do with her hormones. Could

they still be active, influencing your moods, even after you were done with menopause?
she wondered, and decided they could.

Of course, she had to remind herself, she also felt sad about Dick's death. After all, they had been friends for a majority of their lives. Now it was as if they were still friends. As Jan put together the scrapbook she imagined the years with Carolyn wiped out -- she had no pictures of her at all -- and she and Dick together in a sort of limbo world, outside of time. It had nothing to do with an afterlife, of course. When Harriet made a suggestion that they might all "meet again some day," Jan, who believed in nothing, snorted scornfully, "I don't *think* so." Harriet didn't bring up the subject again.

Jan finished the scrapbook and began planning several other projects involving Dick, or Wolf, as she now liked to think of him. She would write a personal remembrance of him for their high school alumni bulletin, which she was sure would be well received. Then perhaps she would send a proposal for a story on environmental artists, including him, to a national art magazine. And she would soon have Hamp Warren's piece to read and edit.

She made a few notes about these ideas as she sat at her desk in the evenings -- it was impossible to get on the computer while Donald was home, and they had never bought a second one, although they talked about it. That was one of the downsides of Donald's retirement, but there was a good side too: Jan could get him to go to concerts and plays with her more often now that he didn't have to get up early to teach.

For the same reason their sex life improved a little too. One night when Donald was pumping away above her Jan looked at him and for an instant saw Dick, his young face, eyes closed in ecstatic concentration and those girl's lashes casting fringy shadows on his cheeks. A second later, he was gone -- Donald again.

The next morning Harriet called and left a message on Jan's voicemail at work before Jan even got into the office. She recounted how she had gone to a Torah and Taffy Apples singles party at her synagogue and met somebody there and he had asked her out to dinner next Saturday. She described him in breathless detail -- the gist of it was he was almost six feet tall and still had most of his hair -- and ended in that upbeat voice that so annoyed Jan, saying, "I think there's some za-za-zsu going on!"

As Jan erased the message she had to admit grudgingly -- only to herself, of course -- that she had some going on too, although she couldn't for the life of her figure out where it was coming from.

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