Eminent Maricones

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The Other Jaime Manrique
A Dead Soul

I first heard about the other Jaime Manrique in the spring of 1992, shortly after the publication of my novel *Latin Moon in Manhattan*. One night I received a call from a woman who introduced herself as my ex-wife. I told her that I had never been married and that I was a gay man.

"So you are not the Jaime Manrique I'm looking for," she said. She had seen my novel in a bookstore and thought I was her ex-husband. We chatted a bit. She told me that she was a lesbian and she had married Jaime Manrique, who was gay and a Colombian, so he could get his resident visa. After they divorced, she lost track of him.

At that time this didn't seem a remarkable coincidence. In the 1970s, when I was in my early twenties and living in Bogotá, I had met Jaime Manrique Sáenz de Santamaría, a wealthy and aristocratic young architect who was gay and looked like Oscar Wilde. He was a relative of mine, but because of my "illegitimacy" I didn't press our connection. Anyway, I found him snobbish, impossibly Parisian in his outlook. Quite possibly, I was jealous of him. For a moment I wondered whether the man the woman was looking for might be the same person. The last time I had heard about Jaime Manrique Sáenz de Santamaría, he was residing in Paris.

Later in the spring of 1992 I had a book signing at a local bookstore in New York City. After the reading a tall, handsome, patrician-looking man approached me, introduced himself, and told me he had come to the reading because he thought I was the other Jaime Manrique. I asked him as many questions as I could under the circumstances. The other Jaime Manrique was a banker, he explained, and they had worked together for the Mexican National Bank. He was in his early forties (my age at that time). The man added that Jaime was from Santa Marta, where my father and his wife and children had lived. Although I had many questions, I had to
turn my attention to the other people at the signing. Later, the way memory hatches what it wants to believe about the past, I embroidered this encounter and thought the man had told me he and Jaime Manrique had been classmates at Harvard. I wanted to believe this; it fit with the story about Jaime Manrique that I wanted to be true.

I became intrigued with my namesake. I told myself that the next time anyone approached me looking for the other Jaime Manrique I’d drill them with questions. I was convinced that this Jaime Manrique and I were more closely related than Jaime Manrique Saenz de Santamaria. Santa Marta is a small beach resort on Colombia’s Caribbean. Manrique is not a common name, so it was unlikely that there was another Manrique family in Santa Marta that was not related to my father’s. Perhaps this Jaime Manrique was the son of my father’s brother, or the son of one of my half-brothers, all of whom were much older than I.

In October 1992 the metro section of the New York Times published an article about Jackson Heights, Queens, that profiled me. It appeared on a Friday, in the middle of the front page of the metro section, with a big picture of me standing on a corner of Roosevelt Avenue. The phone started ringing at 8 A.M. and rang until late that night. One call was from a woman who introduced herself as my cousin. I have maternal cousins living in the States, but I did not recognize her name. She was looking for the other Jaime Manrique. We talked a bit. She said when she saw the photograph in the Times she was sure it was her cousin because I looked like him—he had disappeared many years ago, and the family had been trying to locate him ever since. She said, “Our uncle [Jaime’s father] is desperate to have news of him.” She was disappointed I was not her cousin, but she wished me “continued success” with my endeavors. After she hung up, I realized that I had forgotten to get her name or her phone number.

I didn’t hear about Jaime Manrique again until November 1995, when I was living in the Robert Francis House, a little cabin in the woods outside Amherst, Massachusetts.

One rainy Friday afternoon I was awakened from a nap by the phone. The caller was a woman from Cali looking for the other Jaime Manrique. She told me she was in New York to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of their high school graduation. Back in 1966 a group of classmates had pledged to meet in New York in thirty years. She told me that Jaime’s full name was Jaime Manrique Daza, that they had met at Colegio Hispano in Cali where they were graduated from high school.

In the three years that had passed since I had last heard about Jaime Manrique, I had thought about him frequently. This is the scenario I created in my mind: we were cousins, he had come to the States to live openly
as a homosexual, had contracted AIDS, did not tell the family for fear of rejection, and had died anonymously in the city. When I mentioned this scenario to friends, they advised me to look up the records in the city morgue. I didn’t. What if he hadn’t died in New York, after all? I started planning a trip to Colombia, to Santa Marta, to talk to his family, my relatives. In any case, Jaime Manrique grew in my imagination as a mythic creature. In many ways I began to think of him as my double: my relative, my coeval, my gay brother, the one who had grown up with all the advantages of money and social position. The real thing. The one I wished I had been.

In the summer of 1996 I sent out for *The World Book of Manriques*, a publication that turned out to have little useful information about the Manrique name. However, it contains a Manrique International Registry. And there, under the heading of New York State, appeared my name with my address and beneath it was listed a Jaime Manrique living in Flushing, Queens. Could this be the man I had been looking for? I called information to get his number and was informed he was unlisted. I took this to be proof that he was the man who seemed to have fallen off the face of the earth.

Several weeks went by before I finally wrote him a note saying that I was looking specifically for Jaime Manrique Daza. I added that for years people had contacted me, looking for him, and that if he was the same person, and did not want his whereabouts to be known, I’d respect his desire. I included my phone number.

One night in September I arrived home from seeing *A Delicate Balance* on Broadway and found a message from Jaime Manrique Daza. The message said that he was “*muy emocionado*” (very moved) to hear from me. I dreamed about him all night.

That morning, before I called him, I prayed that I’d be respectful of whoever he was. Since I knew he had gone underground, I told myself I’d have to make a special effort to respect his wishes and not frighten him. I called him from work. We had a brief but warm chat. He said he liked many things in my letter, he had stories to tell me that he hoped would please me, he had known of my existence for many years, he had thought about contacting me but hadn’t done it because he wasn’t sure I desired it. He added that my letter had made his day.

His diction, his accent, reminded me of my father’s politeness, his turns of phrase. A part of me mistrusted that comity. Jaime told me I could call him at any hour of the day or night if I wanted to. He added that he wanted to abandon everything at that moment and run to meet me. I replied that in any case I couldn’t do it because I was at work. We made a date to see each other the following Sunday.
I feared all the excitement would lead to disappointment. We probably had little in common—he was a banker, I'm a writer. I was sure that because we were gay (and probably related) we could have a nice meeting. Anyway, he did feel like my double on this earth. For the past four years he had taken a kind of mythic importance in my life. I was glad he was not dead.

All day long I fantasized about his looks—I tried to imagine him as unappealing, uncouth, so I could stop the erotic fantasies about the imminent encounter. Whatever it was, it was the end of a chapter that had opened some years back and that now I wanted to close.

I had to work hard not to obsess about Jaime for the next few days. We might be different sorts of men; our differences might be irreconcilable. I could tell I was also important to him—that whatever I'd felt, he had felt to some degree or other and that we'd both fantasized about each other and the moment when we'd meet.

This is a dream I had about Jaime Manrique Daza. I was in a house in Santa Marta with my mother and I was waiting for him to arrive. I had never met him. When he arrived, I was surprised he was heavy—and very nelly. I went up to him to embrace him, and I came up to his chest. He arrived with some friends who quickly evaporated in the dream.

My mother came out to see him and, in an oily manner I hated, said, “Welcome blanco” (white man). We were living in a boardinghouse for poor people, most of them black; they did not even seem to speak Spanish. We went into a common area and then a young girl appeared and, to my embarrassment, she tried to sell us refreshments: soda, beer, jugos (fruit juices). I commented that we lived in an apartment in another part of the house. Suddenly, Jaime got up and said, “I hate rats! They’re trying to come in through the window.” I looked at the window and spotted a swarm of bees. We left that room and went into the living room where my mother was sitting at a table having lunch.

As the time of our meeting approached, I hardly slept. The night before we met (the time was yet to be decided), I arrived home and found a message from Jaime. I called him back and we arranged to see each other around three or four. We chatted for a while; an easy intimacy had begun to develop between us. He told me his father was a doctor, that his mother had died two years before. Then he babbled with great animation about this and that, sounding like an affable middle-class woman from Colombia’s Atlantic coast. I could tell he was not an intellectual. A friend had warned me that Jaime might not be a fascinating person but that I might still find him enjoyable.
Jaime was two years older than I, but, unlike me, he arrived in the States when he was already an adult, fully entrenched in the Spanish language. He used melodious words such as esquela. He sounded sincere and charming—a man of strong emotions. He told me he nearly cried when he got my letter, that he was so moved that he could hardly see what was actually written in my note; he had often thought about calling me; many people had mistaken him for me when they read about me; and he mentioned, specifically, the New York Times article. He said that meeting me was a priority, that he felt like a bride meeting her intended.

Something interesting had happened: as the time of our meeting approached, I began to have many sexual fantasies about Jaime. In the dream I had of him in the boardinghouse in Santa Marta, when I'd thrown myself into his arms and he had hugged me, it felt very comforting.

Friends suggested that Jaime and I could become lovers. After talking to him on the phone, I doubted it. He sounded too Colombian, in a way that I find charming but makes me uncomfortable. But I couldn't deny the powerful sexual fantasies I was having about him. When he mentioned—twice—feeling like a bride (he said his best friend had told him he sounded as excited as one), he brought that element into the situation.

When I opened the door of my apartment and saw Jaime Manrique Daza walking toward me, he didn't look like any Manrique I had ever met. He was short, and he didn't have the double chin that runs in my father's side of the family. Jaime Manrique Daza's appearance betrayed the strong influence of his Goajiro Indian roots. I wondered how anyone could have ever mistaken us. On the other hand, being from the Atlantic coast of Colombia, we shared Indian, African, and white blood. In that sense many costeños are of a certain generic type—fleshy lips, cinnamon skin, chestnut eyes, dark-brown hair.

We hugged warmly. I still harbored the hope that perhaps we might be distantly related. I decided not to ask any questions, just to let him speak at his ease. This he did. He told me about coming to this country after being graduated from college in Bogotá; he talked about growing up in Cali, where his father was an eminent doctor who had a pavilion named after him in one of Cali's hospitals. This was a mere preamble. What he really wanted to talk about was his mother: she had been a Goajiro Indian princess, a woman of great beauty, descended from one of the great clans of La Goajira peninsula in northern Colombia. I knew that the Daza name is prominent along the Atlantic coast of Colombia, and the Dazas are Goajiro Indians of high rank. He went on at great length about the closeness of his relationship with his mother; his father, Jaime said, had died many
years back. Jaime had no siblings. His mother had died two years earlier, and he had gone back to Colombia to be by her side. In minute detail he described her last days and how devastated he was after she died. From his description it seemed her death was the most important event in his life, something from which he would never recover.

I sensed how important it was for him to tell me all this, so although I wanted to question him about our blood connection, I let him express fully the nature of his grief. He was certainly a mama's boy; his mother had been the center of his universe. As he talked about his mother's death, I began to suspect that he was ill with AIDS. There were moments, when the light of the lamp caught his face at certain angles, that I detected the ravages of HIV wasting. Clearly, he had been ill at some point recently, had recovered, and now he looked almost healthy. When he finished speaking about his mother, he talked about his relationship with his lover, a Mexican who had left him for another man a few years before and had moved back to Mexico. Around then he had lost his job as president of the Mexican bank in New York. He boasted nostalgically about what a big shot he was once and how he used to sign checks for millions of dollars and entertain Latin American billionaires. It wasn't clear the circumstances under which he lost his job, but he was bitter about not working anymore. He complained about the impossibility of finding a job in New York after having such an important post.

As the contours of his current life were revealed, it struck me that this was a man whose life had already ended. He talked about his old friends abandoning him after he lost his job and could no longer entertain them lavishly. His mood perked up, his voice warmed, his bitterness relented when he talked about his dog, a blind poodle he loved. Jaime was no longer in touch with any family in Colombia and had no desire to return. I finally brought the subject around to our blood connection. There wasn't one. His father, Dr. Manrique, was from Cali and was doing his internship in Santa Marta when he met Jaime's mother. After Jaime was born, and Dr. Manrique finished his internship, they moved to Cali. Jaime didn't seem to know anything about my relatives in Santa Marta and was not curious about my family.

As he talked, he revealed himself as classist and racist, making many disparaging remarks about poor Colombians and about people of color. He reminded me of so many Colombians I knew who were blatantly prejudiced and lacking in compassion. Although he looked distinctly like a Goajiro Indian, he referred to Colombians as "Indian savages."

I wanted to end our meeting. And yet, at the same time, I started feeling physically attracted to him. In those moments when he didn't look sick
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with AIDS, he was a good-looking man. He had beautiful hands, a sensual, slender body, his eyes were rich and glossy like the sap of the rubber tree, and his lips were the color of ripe mamey. As he described his loneliness, his alienation, how at odds he felt in bars, in the gay community, with other Colombians, I commenced to feel pity for him.

I had many unanswered questions, so I asked him about the woman who called me claiming to be his ex-wife. He denied knowing her. I mentioned the cousin in Long Island who contacted me to say Jaime’s father was desperate to find him; Jaime didn’t seem to know who she was. When I mentioned the high school friend from Cali who had reached me in Amherst, he was evasive. The only person he seemed to acknowledge was the Colombian banker who had approached me after the book signing. Predictably, Jaime had nothing nice to say about him. In fact, he had nothing benign to say about anyone, except his mother, who was the perfect embodiment of love, kindness, wisdom, and elegance. For the rest of humanity he exuded contempt.

The more I disliked him, the stronger my sexual feelings for him became. I extended my hand, and he took it, and then we got up from our chairs and embraced and kissed and went to my bedroom. We lay in bed, caressing each other. His skin had the heat of the tropics, and there was a softness and tenderness in the way he expressed his desire. As we were undressing each other, I pulled away. I didn’t want to cross a line I’d regret later. Jaime seemed disappointed but did not press me.

I invited him to go out to dinner. We went to a Basque place on 14th Street. He seemed disappointed I had not chosen a first-class restaurant. He ordered a steak and ate with a voracious appetite that surprised me. During our meal I tried to tell him that even if he had AIDS he shouldn’t feel life was over. I told him about my liaison with an HIV-positive man with whom I had a rewarding relationship. I added that when it ended it wasn’t because of the HIV. He received this story with a blank expression. He wasn’t interested in anyone trying to offer hope—his misery was all he had left. Because he complained about having nothing to do to fill his hours, I suggested the names of organizations for which he could do volunteer work. A part of me had made up my mind not to see him again, but he talked about how he hoped we would become intimate friends; he even hinted at exploring the sexual attraction.

After we said good-bye that autumn night, I felt cheated and lost on a wintry steppe, a glacial wind howling around me as all my blood slowly bled out of me, my soul escaping my body, leaving me wandering aimlessly in a dark world. An unstoppable sinking feeling of loss and grief grew over the next few days. I’ve been in close proximity to dying people, but being
with Jaime was akin to being with a ghost, a corporeal ghost: he was a man whose heart seemed to have stopped dreaming long ago. His was a dead soul.

A couple of weeks later he called to complain that I had abandoned him. He talked about his loneliness and it was painful to listen to him. It was as if he expected me to fill the void of his life. I said that I was busy, that I would visit him soon. I was busy, but I had no desire to visit him any time soon. We made vague plans to meet in Jackson Heights and to go for a dinner at a Colombian restaurant. He was suffering and I heard in the back of my head Simone Weil’s words: “The capacity to give one’s attention to a sufferer is a very rare and difficult thing. It is almost a miracle. It is a miracle.” It is exceedingly painful to love the unlovable. Yet I felt responsible for having written to him—for having entered his life, making the first move, disturbing his peace.

We made plans to see each other around Christmas. It would be, I told myself, my one Christian act during the season. I would go to him reluctantly after searching for him for many years. But I couldn’t bring myself to face him again or come in contact with his affliction.

One morning at the beginning of January, a man called looking for me. He identified himself as Jaime Manrique’s Mexican ex-lover. He informed me that Jaime had died the day before, and he had returned from Mexico for the funeral. He was calling because he had found my name on Jaime’s night table. He told me where the wake would be on Friday night in Jackson Heights, and he invited me to attend it. Then he broke down crying. He said that Jaime was a complicated person, that he wasn’t easy to get along with but that he liked Jaime’s defiant spirit and had loved him despite all this.

I asked him the same question I had asked of Manuel Puig’s driver-gardener in Mexico: had Jaime died of AIDS? “I don’t know,” his ex-lover said. “There were things he would not talk about. He was a private person.”

I had asked this question not so much out of gossipy curiosity, but because I believed that Jaime, like Manuel Puig, like so many gay Latinos at the end of the twentieth century, had been silenced by fear after a lifetime of rejection.

I debated whether to go to the funeral. I wanted to go so that I could put some closure to this chapter of my life. But I was afraid of confronting Jaime’s corpse: after all, like everybody else, I had failed him. I had lured him from his world of shadows and then had shut the door in his face once he had revealed to me his unlovability. This I found unforgivable. So I did not attend his wake, knowing my failure to attend it would haunt me.

Over the next few weeks I spent many hours thinking about the other Jaime Manrique. Not the real person I had met. But the one I had con-
structured in my imagination: the rich boy who had grown up with all the advantages; the one who, when I was growing up, I would have given everything to be. Rainer Maria Rilke wrote that "perhaps everything terrible is, in its deepest being, something helpless that wants help from us.” All the real Jaime Manrique, not the imaginary one, seemed to have wanted from me was help in lightening the burden of his solitude. But I had been unwilling to enter his dark world to bring him comfort. Once he did not fit my image of him, what I wanted to be the truth, I discarded him—carelessly.

Months later I mentioned this story to a friend. He paused to think and said, “Perhaps you met Jaime so you could finally grow up. Perhaps it’s time to let go of all that.”

I suspect that was the gift the other Jaime Manrique had to offer me.