

# THE TIMES AS IT KNOWS US

---

*Time will say nothing but I told you so,  
Time only knows the price we have to pay.*

—W. H. AUDEN

With regard to human affairs," Spinoza said, "not to laugh, not to cry, not to become indignant, but to understand." It's what my lover, Samuel, used to repeat to me when I was raging at the inexplicable behavior of friends or at something I had read in the newspaper. I often intend to look the quote up myself, but that would entail leafing through Samuel's books, deciphering the margin notes, following underlined passages back to where his thoughts were formed, a past closed off to me.

"Not to laugh, not to cry, not to become indignant, but to understand," he would say. But I can't understand, I'd cry, like a child at the end of a diving board afraid to jump into the deep end of the pool.

"Then let go of it," he would say. "I can't," I'd say about whatever had my heart and mind in an insensible knot. And he would come up behind me and put his arms around me. "Close your eyes," he'd say. "Close them tight. Real tight. Tighter."

Samuel would tell me to reach out my arms and clench my fists. "Squeeze as hard as you can," he would say, and I would, knowing that he believed in the physical containment of emotions in a body's gesture. "Now, let go," he would say, and I did. If I felt better, though, it was because his mustache was against the back of my neck, and I knew full well that when I turned my head, his mouth would be there to meet mine.

The day that Samuel went into the emergency room, he took a pile of college catalogues with him, not suspecting this hospital was the only thing he would ever be admitted to again. I got to him just as a nurse was hanging a garnet-colored sack above his bed. Soon a chorus of red angels would be singing in his veins. He told me he wanted to go back to school to get a degree in Biomedical Ethics, the battlefield he believed least guarded by those most affected by Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. "Do you think you'll need an advanced degree?" I asked. His eyes opened, and his head jerked, as if the fresh blood had given him new insight, anagnorisis from a needle.

"That's not what I meant to say," I said. He said, "Not to worry." He died before they knew what to treat him for, what an autopsy alone would tell them, before he could even be diagnosed.

Vergil said, "Perhaps someday even this stress will be a joy to recall." I'm still waiting.

## P A R T I

Noah called Perry a "fat, manipulative sow who doesn't hear anything he doesn't want to hear."

The endearments "fat" and "sow" meant that the argu-

ment we were having over brunch was still on friendly terms, but "manipulative" cued us all to get our weapons out and to take aim. Perry was an easy target, and we had been stockpiling ammunition since Tuesday, when an article on how AIDS had affected life in the Pines featured the seven members of our summer house. Perry had been the reporter's source. It was Saturday.

"What I resent," Joe said, newspaper in hand, "is when she writes, 'They arrive at the house on Friday night to escape the city. When everyone is gathered, the bad news is shared: A friend died that morning. They are silent while a weekend guest, a man with AIDS, weeps for a few moments. But grief does not stop the party. Dinner that night is fettucine in a pesto and cream-cheese sauce, grilled salmon, and a salad created at one of New York's finest restaurants.'"

Perry said, "That's exactly what happened that night."

"You made it sound as if we were hanging streamers and getting into party dresses," said Enzo, who had cooked that meal. "It was dinner, not the Dance of the Red Masque." He put a plate of buttered English muffins in front of us, and four jars of jam from the gourmet shop he owned in Chelsea.

Joe said, "I don't like the way she implies that death has become so mundane for us, we don't feel it anymore: Paul died today. Oh, that's too bad; what's for dinner? Why couldn't you tell her that we're learning to accommodate grief. By the way, Enzo, what's the black stuff on the pasta?"

"Domestic truffles. They're from Texas," he answered from the kitchen counter, where he was mixing blueberries, nectarines, apricots, and melon into a salad.

Stark entered the fight wearing nothing but the Saks Fifth Avenue boxer shorts in which he had slept. "Just because our lives overlap on the weekend, Perry, doesn't give you rights to the intimate details of our health." His large thumb flicked a glob of butter and marmalade off the front of his shorts and into his mouth. Our eyes met. He smiled, and I looked away.

"What intimate details?"

Stark took the paper from Joe and read aloud, "The house is well accustomed to the epidemic. Last year, one member died, another's lover died over the winter. This year, one has AIDS, one has ARC, and three others have tested positive for antibodies to the AIDS virus."

"She doesn't identify anybody," Perry protested.

"The article is about us, even if our names are not used," Enzo said. He placed a cake ring on the coffee table. Noah, who had just had liposuction surgery done on his abdomen, looked at it nostalgically.

Perry, on the other hand, was eating defensively, the way some people drive a car. "I was told this was going to be a human-interest piece," he said. "They wanted to know how AIDS is impacting on our lives—"

"Please don't use *impact* as a verb."

"—and I thought we were the best house on the Island to illustrate how the crisis had turned into a lifestyle. But none of you wanted your name in the paper."

I said, "How we represent ourselves is never the way the *Times* does."

"They officially started using the word *gay* in that article," Perry said, pointing to the paper like a tour guide to the sight of a famous battle.

"It didn't cost them anything," I said. Indeed, the *Times* had just started using the word *gay* instead of the more clinical *homosexual*, a semantic leap that coincided with the adoption of Ms. instead of Miss, and of publishing photographs of both the bride and the groom in Sunday's wedding announcements. And in the obituaries, they had finally agreed to mention a gay man's lover as one of his survivors.

"You're mad at me because she didn't write what you wouldn't tell her," Perry said to me.

Noah said, "We are mad at you because we didn't want to be in the piece and we are. And you made us look like a bunch of shallow faggots."

"Me?" Perry screamed. "I didn't write it."

Noah slapped the coffee table. "Yes, you, the media queen. You set up the interview because you wanted your name in the paper. If it weren't for AIDS, you'd still be doing recreation therapy at Bellevue."

"And you'd still be stealing Percodan and Demerol from the nurses' station."

"Yeah," Noah shouted, "you may have left the theater but you turned AIDS into a one-man show. The more people die, the brighter your spotlight gets."

"I have done nothing I am ashamed of," Perry said. "And you are going to be hard pressed to find a way to apologize for that remark." The house shook on its old pilings as Perry stamped out. Noah glared into space. The rest of us sat there wondering whether the weekend was ruined.

"I don't think that the article is so awful," Horst said. He was Perry's lover. "She doesn't really say anything bad about anybody."

Horst was also the one in the article with AIDS. Every day at 4 A.M., he woke to blend a mixture of orange juice and AL721—a lecithin-based drug developed in Israel from egg yolks and used for AIDS treatment—because it has to be taken when there is no fat in the stomach. For a while, he would muffle the blender in a blanket but stopped, figuring that if he woke us, we would just go back to sleep. He laughed doubtfully when I told him that the blender had been invented by a man named Fred who had died recently. It was also the way he laughed when Perry phoned to say their cat had died.

Stark asked Noah, "Don't you think you were a little hard on Perry?"

Noah said, "The next thing you know, he'll be getting an agent."

I said, "We're all doing what we can, Noah. There's even a role for personalities like his."

He would look at none of us, however, so we let it go. We spoke of Noah among ourselves as not having sufficiently mourned Miguel, as if grief were a process of public concern

or social responsibility, as if loss was something one just *did*, like jury duty, or going to high school. His late friend had been a leader at the beginning of the epidemic; he devised a training program for volunteers who would work with the dying; he devised systems to help others intervene for the sick in times of bureaucratic crisis. He was the first to recognize that AIDS would be a problem in prisons. A liberal priest in one of the city prisons once asked him, "Do you believe your sexuality is genetic or environmentally determined?" Miguel said, "I think of it as a calling, Father." Dead, however, Miguel could not lead; dead men don't leave footsteps in which to follow. Noah floundered.

And we all made excuses for Noah's sarcasm and inappropriate humor. He once said to someone who had put on forty pounds after starting AZT, "If you get any heavier, I won't be your pallbearer." He had known scores of others who had died before and after Miguel, helped arrange their funerals and wakes. But each death was beginning to brick him into a silo of grief, like the stones in the walls of old churches that mark the dead within.

"Let's go for a walk," his lover, Joe, said.

Noah didn't budge but their dog, Jules, came out from under a couch, a little black scottie that they had had for seventeen years. Jules began to cough, as if choking on the splintered bones of chicken carcass.

"Go for it, Bijou," Noah said. (Even the dog in our house had a drag name.) One of his bronchial tubes was collapsed, and several times a day he gagged on his own breath. He looked up at us through button eyes grown so rheumy with cataracts that he bumped into things and fell off the deck, which was actually kind of cute. Taking one of the condoms that were tossed into the shopping bag like S & H green stamps at the island grocery store, Joe rolled it down the length of Jules's tail.

"Have you ever thought of having Jules put to sleep?" Stark asked.

"Yes, but Joe won't let me," Noah said. But we knew it was Noah keeping Jules alive, or half-alive, stalling one more death.

Stark said, "I noticed that his back is sagging so much that his stomach and cock drag along the boardwalk."

"Yeah," Joe said, "but so do Noah's."

I took The Living Section containing the offending article and threw it on the stack of papers I had been accumulating all summer. My role as a volunteer was speaking to community groups about AIDS and I collected articles to keep up with all facets of the epidemic. But I had actually been saving them since they first appeared in the *Times* on a Saturday morning in July several years ago. RARE CANCER SEEN IN 41 HOMOSEXUALS the headline of the single-column piece announced, way in the back of the paper. I read it and lowered the paper to my lap. "Uh, oh," I said.

I remember how my lover, Samuel, had asked from our bedroom, "What is it?" He was wearing a peach-colored towel around his waist, from which he would change into a raspberry-colored polo shirt and jeans. There was a swollen bruise in the crook of his arm, where he had donated plasma the day before for research on the hepatitis vaccine. As he read the article, I put the lid on the ginger jar, straightened the cushions of the sofa we had bought together, and scraped some dried substance from its plush with my thumbnail. I looked at him leaning against the door arch. He was always comfortable with his body, whether he stood or sat. Over the years, we had slipped without thinking into a monogamous relationship, and space alone competed with me for his attention. No matter where he was, space seemed to yearn for Samuel, as if he gave it definition. He once stood me in the middle of an empty stage and told me to imagine myself being projected into the entire theater. From way in the back of the house, he said, "You have a blind spot you're not filling above your right shoulder." I concentrated on that space, and he shouted, "Yes,

yes, do you feel it? That's stage presence." But I could not sustain it the way he did.

Samuel looked up from the article. "It says here that there is evidence to point away from contagion. None of these men knew one another."

"But they all had other infections," I said. Hepatitis, herpes, amebiasis—all of which I had had. Samuel used to compare me to the Messenger in Greek tragedies, bearing news of some plague before it hit the rest of the populace.

"It also says cytomegalovirus," he said. "What's that?"

"*Cyto* means cell; *megalo* is large," I said. "That doesn't tell you much."

"Well, if you haven't had it," he said, "there's probably nothing to worry about."

Perry's guest for the week came in with the day's paper, a generous gesture, I thought, since our house's argument had embarrassed him into leaving through the back door. His name was Nils but we called him Mr. Norway, for that was where he was from, and where he was a crowned and titled bodybuilder. By profession, he was an anthropologist, but he preferred being observed over observing, even if the mirror was his only audience. I didn't like him much. When he sat down and began to read the paper I assumed he had bought for us, I tried to admire him, since it was unlikely that I would read the Oslo *Herald* were I in Norway. I couldn't help thinking, however, that the steroids Nils took to achieve his award-winning mass had made him look like a Neanderthal man. On the other hand, I thought, perhaps that was appropriate for an anthropologist.

I picked up the last section of the paper and turned to the obituaries. "Gosh, there are a lot of dead people today," I said.

"You are reading the death notices every day," Nils said. "I thought so."

"We all do," said Stark, "then we do the crossword puzzle."

We deduced the AIDS casualties by finding the death notices of men, their age and marital status, and then their occupation. Fortunately, this information usually began the notice, or we would have been at it for hours. If the deceased was female, old, married, or worked where no one we knew would, we skipped to the next departed. A "beloved son" gave us pause, for we were all that; a funeral home was a clue, because at the time, few of them would take an AIDS casualty—those that did usually resembled our parents' refinished basements.

Stark looked over my shoulder and began at the end of the columns. "Here's a birthday message in the In Memoriams for someone who died thirty-six years ago. 'Till memory fades and life departs, you live forever in my heart.'"

"Who do people think read these things?" Enzo asked.

"I sometimes wonder if the dead have the *Times* delivered," I said.

We also looked for the neighborhood of the church where a service would be held, for we knew the gay clergy. We looked at who had bought the notice, and what was said in it. When an AIDS-related condition was not given as the cause of death, we looked for coded half-truths: cancer, pneumonia, meningitis, after a long struggle, after a short illness. The dead give-away, so to speak, was to whom contributions could be made in lieu of flowers. Or the lyrics of Stephen Sondheim.

It was good we had this system for finding the AIDS deaths, otherwise we might have had to deal with the fact that other people were dying, too, and tragically, and young, and leaving people behind wondering what it was all about. Of course, the difference here was that AIDS was an infectious disease and many of the dead were people with whom we had had sex. We also read the death notices for anything that might connect us to someone from the past.

"Listen to this." I read, "Reyes, Peter. Artist and invaluable friend. Left our sides after a courageous battle. His triumphs on the stage are only footnotes to the starring role he played in our hearts. We will deeply miss you, darling, but

will carry the extra richness you gave us until we build that wall again together. Contributions in his name can be made to The Three Dollar Bill Theater. Signed, The people who loved you.'"

Stark said, "You learn who your friends are, don't you?"

Horst looked thoughtfully into the near distance; his eyes watered. He said, "That is touching."

"You know what I want my death notice to read?" Enzo asked. "Dead GWM, loved 1950s rock and roll, Arts & Crafts ceramics, back issues of *Gourmet* magazine. Seeking similar who lived in past for quiet nights leading to long-term relationship.'"

"There's another one," Stark said, his head resting on my shoulder, his face next to mine. "Mazzochi, Robert."

"Oh, God," I said into the open wings of the newspaper.

The newsprint began to spread in runnels of ink. I handed the paper over to Stark, who read out loud, "Mazzochi, Robert, forty-four on July —, 1987. Son of Victor and Natalia Mazzochi of Stonington, Connecticut. Brother of Linda Mazzochi of Washington, D.C. Served as lieutenant in the United States Army. Came back from two terms of duty in Vietnam, unscarred and unblaming. With the Department of Health and Human Services NYC since 1977. A warm, radiant, much-loved man.'"

"What a nice thing to say," Horst said. "Did you know him well?"

"He was that exactly," I said.

There was another one for him, which Stark read. "Robert, you etched an indelible impression and left. Yes, your spirit will continue to enrich us forever, but your flesh was very particular flesh. Not a day will go by, Milton.'"

The others sat looking at me as I stood there and wept. There was Stark, an investment banker from Scotland; Horst, a mountain peasant from a farm village in Switzerland; and Enzo, who grew up in Little Italy and studied cooking in Bologna (he dressed like a street punk and spoke like a Borghese); and there was Mr. Norway on his biennial tour of

gay America. They were waiting for a cue from me, some hint as to what I needed from them. I felt as if I had been spun out of time, like a kite that remains aloft over the ocean even after its string breaks. I felt awkward, out of time and out of place, like not being able to find the beat to music, which Samuel used to say that even the deaf could feel surging through the dance floor. Robert's funeral service was being held at that very moment.

The last time I had seen him was a Thursday afternoon in early October, a day of two funerals. Two friends had died within hours of one another that week. I went to the funeral of the one who had been an only child, and whose father had died before him. I went, I guess, for his mother's sake. Watching her weep was the saddest thing I had ever seen.

Afterward, I made a bargain with myself. If Robert Mazochi was still alive, I would go to work. If he was dead, I would take the day off. When he did not answer his home phone, I called the hospital with which his doctor was associated, and the switchboard gave me his room number. I visited him on my way to work, a compromise of sorts.

"How did you know I was here?" he asked.

"Deduction."

Eggplant-colored lesions plastered his legs. Intravenous tubes left in too long had bloated his arms. Only strands were left to his mane of salt and pepper hair. He was in the hospital because thrush had coated his esophagus. The thrush irritated his diaphragm and made him hiccough so violently he could not catch his breath. Robert believed that he would have suffocated had his lover Milton not been there to perform the Heimlich maneuver. He was waiting for the nurse to bring him Demerol, which relaxed him and made it easier to breathe.

I finally said, "I can't watch you go through this."

He looked at me for a long moment. "If I've learned anything through all this, it's about hope," he said. "Hope needs firmer ground to stand on than I've got. I'm just dangling here."

"Nothing is hopeless. We must hope for everything,"

I said. "That's Euripides. It's a commandment to hope. It would be a sin not to."

"Then why are you leaving me?" he asked, and I couldn't answer him. He said, "Don't worry. I am surrounded by hopeful people. Milton's hope is the most painful. But I could be honest with you."

"The truth hurts, too," I said.

"Yes, but you could take it."

"For a while."

We used to meet after work for an early supper before he went to his KS support group. One night he said to me, "I never knew that I was handsome until I lost my looks." He was still handsome as far as I was concerned, but when he pulled his wallet out to pay the check, his driver's license fell to the table. He snatched it back again, but I had seen the old picture on it, seen what must have told him that he had been a beautiful man.

The nurse came in and attached a bag of Demerol to the intravenous line feeding his arm. "We might have been lovers," Robert said to me, "if it hadn't been for Milton."

"And Samuel," I said.

The Demerol went right to his head. He closed his eyes and splayed his fingers and smiled. "My feet may never touch ground again," he said, and floated there briefly. "This is as good as it will ever get."

The rest of the day passed slowly, like a book that doesn't give one much reason to turn the page, leaving the effort all in your hands. Perry was sulking somewhere. Stark and Nils had gone to Cherry Grove. A book of Rilke's poetry, which he was not reading, lay opened on Horst's lap.

"Genius without instinct," he said during the second movement of Mozart's *Jeune homme* piano concerto. "He knew exactly what he was doing."

"Are you all right?" I asked Enzo, who was lying in the sun, in and out of a doze.

"It's just a cold," he said. "Maybe I'll lie down for a while."  
 "You didn't eat breakfast today. I was watching you," I said.

"I couldn't."

"You should have something. Would you like some pasta al'burro?"

Enzo smiled. "My mother used to make that for me when I was sick."

"I could mix it with Horst's AL721. It might taste like spaghetti alla carbonara."

Horst said, "You should have some of that elixir my brother sent me from Austria. It has lots of minerals and vitamins."

"Elixir?" Enzo asked.

"That potion that's in the refrigerator."

Enzo and I worried what Horst meant by potion, for Horst went to faith healers, he had friends who were witches, he ate Chinese herbs by the fistful, and kept crystals on his bedside. These he washed in the ocean and soaked in the sun to reinvigorate them when he figured they'd been overworked. He said things like "Oh, I am glad you wore yellow today. Yellow is a healing color." Around his neck, he wore an amulet allegedly transformed from a wax-paper yogurt lid into metal by a hermit who lived in Peru, and which had been acquired by a woman who had sought him out to discuss Horst's illness. "You don't have to say anything," the hermit told her at the mouth of his cave, "I know why you're here." Fabulous line, I said to myself, that should come in handy.

Enzo and I found a silver-colored canister in the refrigerator. Its instructions were written in German, which neither of us could read. I wet a finger and stuck it in the powder. "It tastes safe," I said.

"Athletes drink it after a workout," Horst said.

"I'll have some after my nap," Enzo said.

"If you have a fever, you sweat out a lot of minerals."

"I'll mix it with cranberry juice," Enzo assured him.

"You lose a lot of minerals when you sweat," Horst said. He had been repeating himself a lot lately, as if by changing the order of the words in a sentence, he could make himself better understood.

"If you want me to cook tonight, I will," I said.

Enzo said, "The shopping's done already," and handed me a large manila envelope from the city's health department in which he kept his recipes. They were all cut from the *Times*, including the evening's menu: tuna steaks marinated in oil and herbs (herbs that Horst had growing in pots on the deck) and opma.

"What is opma?"

"It's an Indian breakfast dish made with Cream of Wheat."

"We're having a breakfast dish for dinner?" I asked.

"If this gets out, we'll be ruined socially," he said, and went to bed, leaving Horst and me alone.

Horst and I had been alone together most of the summer, except for a visit by his sister and brother, both of whom were too shy to speak whatever English they knew. Gunther cooked Horst's favorite meals. Katja dragged our mattresses, pillows, and blankets out on the deck to air. When she turned to me and said in perfect, unaccented English, "I have my doubts about Horst," I wondered how long it had taken her to put that sentence together. Gunther and I walked the beach early in the morning before Horst was up. He wanted to know all he could about Horst's prognosis, but I was afraid to tell him what I knew because I did not know what Horst wanted him to think. But fear translates, and hesitant truth translates instantly. I did not enjoy seeing them return to Switzerland, for when they thanked me for looking after their brother, I knew I had done nothing to give them hope.

"Remember my friend you met in co-op care?" I asked Horst. "He has lymphoma. The fast-growing kind."

"He should see my healer. Lymphoma is her specialty," he said. "Oh, I just remembered. Your office called yesterday. They said it was very important. Something about not getting

rights for photographs. They need to put something else in your movie."

"What time did they call?"

"In the morning."

"Did you write it down?"

"No, but I remember the message. I'm sorry I forgot to tell you. I figured if it was important that they would have called back."

"They are respecting my belated mourning period," I said.

"What does this mean?"

"I'll have to go into town on Monday."

"That's too bad. How long will you stay?"

"Three or four days."

I began to look over the recipes that Enzo had handed me, angry at Horst for not telling me sooner but far more angry that I would have to leave the Island and go back to editing films I had thought were finished. Samuel had died when we were behind schedule and several hundred thousand dollars over budget on a documentary series titled *Auden in America*. Working seven-day weeks and twelve-hour days, it took a case of shingles to remind me of how much I was suffering the loss of what he had most fulfilled in me.

Perry came in while I was banging drawers and pans about the kitchen. "What's with her?" he asked Horst.

"Oh, she's got a craw up her ass," Horst said.

"I beg your pardon," I said.

"He is mad at me for not taking a message, but I say to hell with him." He raised a long, thin arm, flicked his wrist, and said, "Hoopla."

"I am not mad at you," I said, although I was. I believed that he had been using his illness to establish a system of priorities that were his alone. No one else's terrors or phone messages carried weight in his scheme of things. If he said something wasn't important, like the way he woke us up with the blender, knowing we would eventually go back to sleep, we had to take his word for it because he was dying.

And that was something we could not deny; the skeleton was rising in his face. Every two steps Death danced him backward, Horst took one forward. Death was the better dancer, and who could tell when our once-around-the-floor was next, when the terrible angel might extend a raven wing and say, "Shall we?"

And then I was angry at myself for thinking that, for elevating this thing with a metaphor. What was I doing personifying Death as a man with a nice face, a way with the girls? This wasn't a sock hop, I thought, but a Depression-era marathon with a man in a black suit who probably resembled Perry calling, "Yowsa, yowsa, yowsa, your lover's dead, your friends are dying."

As I cleared aside the kitchen counter, I came across another note in Horst's spindly handwriting. I read it out loud, "'Sugar, your mother called. We had a nice chat. Love, Heidi.'"

"Oh, I forgot again," Horst said.

"It's all right," I said, and paused. "I'm more concerned with what you talked about."

"We talked female talk for ten minutes."

"Does that mean you talked about condoms or bathroom tiles?"

"We talked about you, too."

"What did you say?" I asked.

"I said that you were fabulous."

"Oh, good. Did you talk about . . . yourself?"

"Yes, I told her about the herb garden," he said. "I'm going to bed now for a little nap. I want to preserve my energy for tonight's supper that you are cooking." Then he went into his room and closed the door.

I looked at Perry, who registered nothing—neither about the exchange nor about the fact that his lover, who had been a bundle of energy for three days, was taking a nap.

"Aren't you out to your mother?" he asked.

"She probably knows. We just never talk about it."



"I'm surprised you don't share this part of your life with her."

"What part?" I asked.

"You shouldn't close yourself off to her, especially now."

"It wouldn't be any different if AIDS hadn't happened,"

I said.

"You'd have less to talk about."

"I almost called her when Samuel died."

Perry said, "I think we should get stoned and drunk together."

Horst came back out of his room. "I forgot to show you these pictures of us my sister took when I was home for harvest last time."

He showed me pictures of him and Perry carrying baskets and sitting on a tractor together. In my favorite, they were both wearing overalls, holding pitchforks, and smoking cigars.

"You two were never more handsome," I said. I looked at Perry, who pulled the joint out of his pocket. He had recently taken up smoking marijuana again after three years of health-conscious abstinence.

"Look how big my arms were then," Horst said. Then suddenly, he pounded the counter with both his fists. Everything rattled. "I hate this thing!" he said. And then he laughed at his own understatement.

"What time is dinner?" he asked.

"At nine, *liebchen*."

Horst nodded and went to bed, closing the door behind him.

Perry looked at me. I poured the vodka that was kept in the freezer while he lit the joint. I knew what was coming. It was the first time we had been alone together since Sam's death. Perry had known Sam from their days together working with a theater company for the deaf. Samuel loved sign language, which he attempted to teach me but which I would not learn, for it seemed a part of his life before we met, and I was jealous of the years I did not know him, jealous of the people as well, even the actors in their deafness, rumored to be sensuous lov-

ers. When Samuel danced, he translated the lyrics of songs with his arms and fingers, the movement coming from his strong, masculine back and shoulders the way a tenor sings from his diaphragm. Sometimes I would leave the dance floor just to watch him.

"It was easier for you," Perry said, referring to Sam's sudden death. "It was all over for you fast."

"You make it sound as if I went to Canada to avoid the draft."

"You didn't have to force yourself to live in hope. It's hard to sustain all this denial."

"Maybe you shouldn't make such an effort," I said.

He looked at me. "Do you want to hear some bad news?" Perry asked, knowing what the effect would be but unable to resist it. The Messenger in Greek tragedies, after all, gets the best speeches. "Bruce was diagnosed this week. PCP."

I heard a bullet intended for me pass through a younger man's lungs. I backed away from the kitchen counter for a few minutes, wiping my hands on a dish towel in a gesture that reminded me of my mother.

"Are you all right?" Perry asked.

"Actually, I'm not sure how much longer I can take this."

"You're just a volunteer," he said. "I work with this on a daily basis."

"I see," I said. "How does that make you feel when you pay your rent?"

There are people who are good at denying their feelings; there are those who are good at denying the feelings of others. Perry was good at both. "Touché," he said.

"Have you ever thought about leaving the AIDS industry for a while?" I asked him.

"I couldn't," Perry said, as if asked to perform a sexual act he had never even imagined. "AIDS is my mission."

I finished my drink and poured myself another. "Someone quoted Dylan Thomas in the paper the other day: 'After the first death there is no other.'"

"What does it mean?"

"I don't know, except that I believed it once."

"We need more occasions to mourn our losses," he said.

"What do you want, Grieve-a-Thons?"

The *Times* had already done the article: "New Rituals Ease Grief as AIDS Toll Increases"; white balloons set off from courtyards; midnight cruises around Manhattan; catered affairs and delivered pizzas. It was the "bereavement group" marching down Fifth Avenue on Gay Pride Day bearing placards with the names of the dead that made me say, No, no, this has gone too far.

"I'm very distrustful of this sentimentality, this tendency toward willful pathos," I said. "A kid I met on the train was going to a bereavement counselor."

"You've become a cynic since this all began."

"That's not cynicism, that's despair."

"I haven't been of much help to you," Perry said. "I never even called to see how you were doing when you had shingles."

"I didn't need help," I said, although I had mentioned this very fact in my journal: "March 30. I am blistered from navel to spine. My guts rise and fall in waves. Noah paused a long time when I told him what I had and then asked about my health in general. Dr. Dubreuil said that shingles are not predictive of AIDS, but I know that the herpes zoster virus can activate HIV in vitro. So should that frighten me? We pin our hopes on antivirals that work in vitro. What should we fear? What should we draw hope from? What is reasonable? I worry: How much fear is choice of fear in my case? Horst has them now, as well. When I called Perry to ask him what shingles looked like, he said, 'Don't worry, if you had them, you would know it.' He hasn't called back, though the word is out."

"I have a confession to make," Perry said. "I read your journal, I mean, the Reluctant Journal."

That is what I called my diary about daily life during the epidemic: who had been diagnosed, their progress, sometimes their death. I wrote what I knew about someone who had

died: what he liked in bed, his smile, his skin, the slope of his spine.

I asked Perry: "Did you read the whole thing or just the parts where your name was mentioned?"

"I read the whole thing. Out loud. To the rest of the house when you weren't here," he said. "You just went white under your tan, Blanche."

I laid the Saran Wrap over the tuna steaks that I had been preparing. The oil made the cellophane adhere to the fish in the shape of continents; the herbs were like mountain ridges on a map.

"I was just joking," Perry said.

"Right."

"You had that coming to you."

"I suppose I did."

"I don't know what to say to you about Samuel that you haven't already said to yourself," he said. "I think of him every time you enter the room. I don't know how that makes me feel about you."

"Sometimes I miss him so much I think that I am him."

I took things to the sink in order to turn my back on Perry for a moment, squaring my shoulders as I washed the double blade of the food processor's knife. What connected the two of us, I asked myself, but Samuel, who was dead? What did we have in common but illness, sexuality, death? Perry had told himself that asking me to share the house this summer was a way of getting back in touch with me after Samuel died. The truth was that he could no longer bear the sole burden of taking care of Horst. He wanted Horst to stay on the Island all summer and me to stay with him. "It would be good for you to take some time off between films, and Horst loves you," he had said, knowing all along that I knew what he was asking me to do.

Perry was silent while I washed dishes. Finally, he said, "I saw Raymond Dubreuil in co-op care last Friday night. He was still doing his rounds at midnight."

"There aren't enough doctors like him," I said, still unable to turn around.

"He works eighteen-hour days sometimes. What would happen to us if something should happen to him?"

"I asked him what he thought about that *Times* article that said an infected person had a greater chance of developing AIDS the longer they were infected. Ray said the reporter made years of perfect health sound worse than dying within eighteen months of infection."

Perry had brought up a larger issue and placed it between us like a branch of laurel. I turned around. His hand was on the counter, middle two fingers folded under and tucked to the palm, his thumb, index, and little finger extended in the deaf's sign for "I love you." But he did not raise his hand. I thought of Auden's lines from *The Rake's Progress*, "How strange! Although the heart dare everything/ The hand draws back and finds no spring of courage." For a passing moment, I loathed Perry, and I think the feeling was probably mutual. He had what I was certain was a damaged capacity to love.

Joe came in followed by Stark and Nils. Joe kissed me and put his arm around my shoulder. "Nils told me a friend of yours died. I'm sorry. Are you okay?"

Perry slapped the counter.

"Don't get me started," I said. "Where's Noah?"

"We've been visiting a friend with a pool," Joe said. "Here's something for your diary. This guy just flew all the way to California and back to find a psychic who would assure him that he won't die of AIDS."

"Why didn't he just get the antibody test?" I asked.

"Because if it came out positive, he'd commit suicide. Anyway, Noah's coming to take you to tea. Where's Enzo?"

Stark came out of the room he shared with Enzo. "His body's there, but I can't attest to anything else. Does this mean you're cooking dinner?"

Nils came out of my room, which had the guest bed in it. He had changed into a pastel-colored muscle shirt bought

in the Grove. I stiffened as he put an arm around me. "Come to tea and I will buy you a drink," Nils said.

"We'll be there soon," Perry said in a tone that implied wounds from the morning were being healed. Nils left to save us a place before the crowd got there. While the others were getting ready, Perry began to scour the kitchen counter. Someone was always cleaning the sink or dish rack for fear of bacteria or salmonella, mainly because of Horst, but you never know. Perry asked, "You don't like Nils, do you?"

"No. He has ingrown virginity."

"Meaning he wouldn't put out for you?"

"And another thing . . . all I've heard this week is that the Pines is going to tea later, that we're eating earlier, that there's more drag, fewer drugs, more lesbians, and less sexual tension. For an anthropologist, he sounds like *The New York Times*."

Noah's long, slow steps could be heard coming around the house. When he saw Perry in the kitchen, he stopped in the center of the deck. Noah looked at Perry, raised his eyebrows, then turned and entered the house through the sliding door of his and Joe's room. Perry turned to the mirror and ran a comb through his mustache. From a tall vase filled with strings of pearls bought on Forty-second Street for a dollar, he selected one to wrap around his wrist. The pearls were left over from the previous summer, when the statistics predicting the toll on our lives were just beginning to come true; there were dozens of strands, in white, off-white, the colors of after-dinner mints. This will be over soon, my friend Anna says, they will find a cure, they have to. I know what she is saying. When it began, we all thought it would be over in a couple of years; perhaps the *Times* did as well, and did not report on it much, as if the new disease would blow over like a politician's sex scandal. AIDS to them was what hunger is to the fed, something we think we can imagine because we've been on a diet.

From behind the closed door of their bedroom, I heard Joe whisper loudly to Noah, "You're not going to change

anything by being angry at him." Perry stared at the door for a moment as if he should prepare to bolt. Instead, he asked, "Are you still mad at me about the article?"

"I never was."

"But you were angry."

I looked over at the stack of papers accumulating near the couch, only then beginning to wonder what I achieved by saving them, what comfort was to be gained. "I always expect insight and consequence from their articles, and I'm disappointed when they write on our issues and don't report more than what we already know," I said. "And sometimes I assume that there is a language to describe what we're going through, and that they would use it if there was."

"You should have told me about your friend," Perry said.

"This is one I can't talk about," I said. "As for your suggestion . . . I don't know how I would begin to tell my mother about my life as I know it now."

"You could say, 'I've got some good news and some bad news.'"

"What's the good news?"

"You don't have AIDS."

Noah was still taking a shower when the others left for tea. He came out of the bathroom with an oversized towel wrapped around his waist and lotion rubbed into his face and hands. I could see the tiny scar on his back where the liposuction surgery had vacuumed a few pounds of fat. Tall and mostly bald, older than he would confess to, he was certainly as old as he looked. For a moment, he regarded me as if I were a dusty sock found under the bed. Then his face ripened.

"Dish alert," he said. "Guess who's having an affair with a twenty-two year-old and I'm not supposed to tell anyone?"

"Perry," I said almost instantly. "The bastard."

"They were together in Washington for the international AIDS conference, supposedly in secret, but word has gotten back that they were making out in public like a couple of Puerto Rican teenagers on the subway."

"Does Horst know?"

"Of course. Perry thinks that talking about dishonest behavior makes it honest. As far as I'm concerned, it's another distraction from Horst's illness. Perry distanced himself from everyone when it became obvious that they were dying. Last year it was Miguel, this year it's Horst. When I confronted him, he said, 'Don't deny me my denial.'"

"Oh, that's brilliant. As long as he claims to be in denial, he doesn't even have to appear to suffer," I said. "One of these days, all this grief he's avoiding is going to knock him on his ass."

"But then he'll wear it around town like an old cloth coat so that everyone will feel sorry for him. He won't be happy until people in restaurants whisper 'Brava' as he squeezes past them to his table."

"What's the boyfriend like?"

"What kind of person has an affair with a man whose lover is dying of AIDS?" Noah asked.

I said, "The kind that probably splits after the funeral."

"He's what my Aunt Gloria would call a mayonnaise Jew, someone trying to pass for a WASP."

"I don't know if I should be offended by that or not," I said.

"But get this: He's had three lovers since he graduated from Harvard. The first one's lover died of AIDS. The second one had AIDS. Now there's Perry. So this kid gets the antibody test. It came back negative, and now he's got survivor's guilt." Noah gave me one of his bland, expressionless looks. "Perry acts as if this were the most misunderstood love affair since Abélard and Héloïse. He told me it was one of those things in life you just have no control over."

"For someone so emotionally adolescent, he's gotten a lot of mileage out of this epidemic," I said.

"Where else would he be center stage with a degree in drama therapy?" Noah asked. "He even quoted your journal at the last AIDS conference."

"What?"

"In Washington. He quoted you in a paper he presented. I knew he hadn't told you yet," Noah said. "He was certain you'd be honored. He would have been."

"Do you know what he used?"

"Something about an air of pain, the cindered chill of loss. It was very moving. You wondered if there wasn't a hidden cost to constant bereavement. You know Perry, he probably presented your diary as the work of a recent widower whose confidentiality had to be protected. That way he didn't have to give you credit."

I once went to an AIDS conference. Perry treated them like summer camp—Oh, Mary, love your hat, let's have lunch. I had seen him deliver papers that were barely literate and unprepared, and what was prepared was plagiarized. Claiming he was overwhelmed with work, he feigned modesty and said he could only speak from his heart. When social scientists provided remote statistics on our lives, Perry emoted and confessed. "My personal experience is all I can offer as the essence of this presentation." And it worked. It gave everyone the opportunity to cry and feel historic.

Noah asked, "Are you coming to tea? There's someone I want you to meet."

"Another widower?" I asked. "More damaged goods?"

"I'll put it to you this way," Noah said, "you have a lot in common."

With regard to human affairs, Noah was efficient. "Let me count the ways," I said, "a recent death, the ache of memory, reduced T-cell functions, positive sero status . . ."

"Yes, well, there's that."

"And maybe foreshortened futures, both of us wary of commitment should one or the other get sick, the dread of taking care of someone else weighed against the fear of being sick and alone."

"I doubt that Samuel would like your attitude."

"Samuel will get over it," I said. "And I'm not interested in a relationship right now. I'm only interested in sex."

"Safer sex, of course."

"I want to wake up alone, if that's what you mean."

Noah raised his eyebrows and lowered them again, as if to say that he would never understand me. I said, "Let me tell you a story. I hired a Swedish masseur recently because I wanted to be touched by someone, and no one in particular, if you get my innuendo. At one point, he worked a cramped muscle so hard that I cried out. And he said, 'That's it, go ahead, let it out'—as if I was holding something back, you know, intellectualizing a massage. I asked him if he felt anything, and he said, 'I feel'—long pause—"sorrow." I told him that I had been a little blue lately but it wasn't as bad as all that."

Noah nodded. He said, "The real reason I didn't want to be interviewed for the piece in the *Times* was because Perry invited the reporter for dinner and told her we'd all get into drag if she brought a photographer."

Before I went down to the beach, I looked in on Enzo. Stark was right. The only time I'd ever seen anyone like this before was when Horst was first diagnosed. Perry had scheduled people just to sit with him, when none of us thought he would even survive. Enzo's skin was moist, his lips dry, his breath light. He was warm, but not enough for alarm.

These summer evenings I sat on the beach in a sling-back chair, listening to my cassette player and writing things about Samuel. I recalled our life together backward. The day he went into the hospital, he had cooked himself something to eat and left the dishes in the sink. Then he was dead, and washing his dishes was my last link to him as a living being. This evening, the pages of my journal felt like the rooms of my apartment when I came home and found it burglarized. Like my apartment, I knew I had to either forsake it or reclaim it as my own. Though in this case something had been taken, nothing was missing. I was angry with Perry, but it was not the worst thing he could have done. The worst is not when we can say it is the worst.

I started to write about Robert. The words of his obituary, "warm, radiant, much-loved man," somewhat assuaged my re-

morse at having abandoned him to the attention of the more hopeful. The beach was nearly empty at this time of the day—as it was in the morning—except for those like me who were drawn by the light of the early evening, the color of the water, the sand, the houses seen without the protection of sunglasses. Others passed and I nodded from my beach chair. We smiled. Everyone agreed that the Island was friendlier this year, as if nothing were at stake when we recognized one another's existence. Verdi's Requiem was on my Walkman, a boat was halfway between the shore and the horizon. One full sail pulled the boat across the halcyon surface of the water. Near me a man stood with his feet just in the waves. He turned and held his binoculars as if he were offering me a drink. "They're strong," he said. I found the sailboat in the glasses. I found a handsome and popular Episcopal priest who I knew from experience to be a fine lover in bed. He was in collar and was praying. There was another handsome man. He was indistinct but I recognized his expression. He reached into a box and released his fist over the boat's rail. Another man and a woman repeated the gesture. *Libera me*. The surviving lover shook the entire contents of the cloth-wrapped box overboard. The winds that spin the earth took the ashes and grains of bones and spilled them on the loden-green sea. He was entirely gone now but for the flecks that stuck to their clothes and under their nails, but for the memory of him, and for the pleasure of having known him. The boaters embraced with that pleasure so intense they wept at it. *Dies magna et amara valde*. I returned the binoculars to the man. It was a beautiful day and it was wonderful to be alive.

## P A R T I I

Two old couches, one ersatz wicker, the other what my mother used to call colonial, sat at a right angle to one another in the middle of our living room. Enzo and Horst were lying on them with their heads close together, like conspiring convalescents. Horst's cheeks were scarlet.

"You aren't feeling well, are you?" I asked.

Horst said, "No, but I didn't want to tell Perry and spoil his weekend."

"How is Enzo doing?"

"He thinks he has a cold, but I don't think so."

From where I stood, I could lay my hand on both their foreheads. I felt like a television evangelist. Enzo's forehead was the warmer of the two.

"I hear there's a flu going around," Horst said.

"Where did you hear that? You haven't been in town in a week."

"I had a flu shot," he said. "I think I'm not worried."

Without opening his eyes, Enzo said, "You had better get started if you are going to cook supper before everyone gets back. I put all the ingredients out for you."

I heated oil as the recipe instructed. "When the oil is very hot add mustard seeds," it read. "Keep the lid of the pan handy should the seeds sputter and fly all over." In the first grade, I recalled giving a girl named Karen Tsakos a mustard-seed bracelet in a Christmas exchange, selecting it myself from the dollar rack at a store called Gaylord's. "Aren't mustard seeds supposed to be a symbol of something?" I asked as they began to explode between me and the cabinet where the lids were kept.

"Hope, I think," Enzo said.

"Perhaps I should put more in."

"No, faith," Horst said, lying down in his bedroom.

"Faith is a fine invention, as far as I can see, but microscopes are prudent, in case of emergency," I said, approximating a poem by Emily Dickinson. Horst laughed, but Enzo

showed no sign whatsoever that he knew what I was talking about. I wasn't so sure myself what Dickinson meant by an emergency: Could a microscope confirm one's belief in a crisis of faith, or, in a crisis of nature, such as an epidemic illness, was man best left to his own devices?

"How's dinner coming?" Stark asked, returning five minutes before it was to have been on the table.

"It's not ready," I said.

"Why not?"

"I didn't start it in time," I said.

"Why not?"

"Because I was at a funeral."

He picked up one of Miguel's old porno magazines and disappeared into the bathroom with it. He emerged ten minutes later and asked, "Is there anything I could be doing?"

"You can light the coals, and grill the tuna steaks. I've got to watch the opma," I said. "Enzo, what are gram beans?"

"The little ones."

Perry returned next and kissed me. "I forgot to tell you that Luis is in the hospital again," he said loudly. "His pancreas collapsed but he seems to be getting better."

"Enzo, I think I burned the gram beans."

"Luis's lover, Dennis, just took the antibody test," Perry said. "He was sero-negative."

"Oh, that's good."

"Yeah. Luis said, 'Thank God for hemorrhoids.'"

"Enzo, which of these is the cumin?"

"Don't cumin my mouth," Perry said, going into his room to check on Horst. I watched him brush the hair off Horst's forehead and take the thermometer out of Horst's mouth to kiss him. Perry's face darkened when he read the thermometer, as if he didn't know what to think. I added the Cream of Wheat to the gram beans.

Nils came up to me and wrapped a huge arm around my shoulder. "They told me down at tea that if dinner was scheduled for nine, that meant ten in Fire Island time."

"Dinner would have been ready at nine o'clock if I hadn't been given this god-awful recipe to make," I said, sounding more angry than I intended, and Nils hastened away. Noah came to the stove. "You are bitter, aren't you?"

"He's like Margaret Mead on steroids," I said.

"He's writing a book," Noah said.

"Yeah, sure, *Coming of Age in Cherry Grove*."

"What's this here?" Noah asked.

"Opma."

"Where did you get the recipe?"

"From *The New York Times*."

"I hate that paper."

Stark came running into the kitchen with the tuna steaks and put them in the electric broiler. The recipe said to grill them four minutes on each side.

"The grill will never get hot enough," he said. "Is that opma?"

"In the flesh."

"It looks like Cream of Wheat with peas in it."

Noah found the radio station we always listened to during dinner on Saturday nights. "Clark, what's the name of this song?" he asked, a game we played as part of the ritual. Enzo usually played along as he did the cooking.

"The Nearness of You," I answered.

"Who's singing?"

"Julie London."

"Who wrote it?"

"Johnny Mercer." Enzo didn't say anything, though the correct answer was Hoagy Carmichael. Perry sang as he helped Joe set the table, making up his own lyrics as he went along, the way a child does, with more rhyme than reason. We were all aware that he and Noah were behaving as if the other were not in the room, but their orbits were getting closer. As the song closed, Perry and I turned to one another and imitated the deep voice of the singer: "It's just the queerness of you." Then I made everyone laugh by stirring the thickening opma

with both hands on the spoon. Jules, the dog, began hacking in the center of the room.

"Did you have a productive cough, dear?" Joe asked. Horst laughed from his bedroom.

"Enzo, come tell me if the opma is done," I said. He kind of floated up off the couch as if he was pleasantly drunk. I knew then that he was seriously ill. He took the wooden spoon from me and poked the opma twice. "It's done," he said.

We went to the table. I sat in the center, with Enzo on my right, Nils across from me, Joe on my left. Perry and Noah faced each other from the opposite ends, like parents. This was how we sat, each and every week. The guest was always in the same chair, whether he knew it or not. For the first several minutes of dinner, the table was a tangle of large arms passing the salad and popping open beer cans.

"Eat something, darling," I said to Enzo, who was only staring at the fish on his plate. "You haven't eaten anything all day."

Perry said, "This is the best opma I ever had."

Horst looked up as if he had something to announce, his fork poised in the air. We all turned to him. His fork fell to his plate with a clatter, and he said, "I think I have to lie down."

Perry said, "This opma will taste good reheated."

"So Fred told me this story at tea about the last of the police raids on the Meat Rack in the early seventies," Noah said.

"You're going to love this, Clark," Perry said.

"The cops came in one night with huge flashlights and handcuffs. There were helicopters and strobe lights; they had billy clubs and German shepherds. And they started dragging away dozens of men. The queens were crying and screaming and pleading with the cops because they would get their names in the paper and lose their jobs, you know, this was when it was still illegal for two men to dance with one another. The guys that got away hid under the bushes until everything was clear. Finally, after everything was perfectly quiet, some queen

whispered, 'Mary, Mary!' And someone whispered back, 'Shhh, no names!'"

"Nils, would you like this?" Enzo asked. I looked up at Nils, whose forearms circled his plate. Everyone looked at me looking at him. I picked up Enzo's tuna steak with my fork and dropped it on Nils's plate. Enzo got up and stumbled to the couch.

Stark and Joe cleared the table. Perry went outside and smoked a cigar. With his back turned toward the house, he was calling attention to himself. I sat on the arm of the couch, looking down at Enzo and looking out at Perry, wondering who needed me most. But Noah was also looking at Perry. I could see him in his room, a finger on his lip, looking through the doors that opened out onto the deck. He stepped back from my sight and called, "Perry, this doesn't fit me. Would you like to try it on?"

The next thing I knew, Perry was wearing a black velvet Empress gown, like the one Madame X wears in the Sargent painting. In one hand, he held its long train, in the other, a cigar. Between the cleavage of the dress was Perry's chest hair, the deepest part of which was gray.

"Where'd you get that dress?" Stark asked.

"Noah inherited Miguel's hope chest. It was in the will."

Enzo was smiling, but I knew he was faking it. I whispered, "Do you need help to your bed?"

He clutched my hand and I helped him into his room. His forehead was scalding. "I'll be right back," I told him. I ran into the kitchen and pulled a dish towel from the refrigerator handle and soaked it under cold water. By this time, Noah was wearing the silver-lined cape that went with Perry's gown, a Frederick's of Hollywood merry widow, and silver lamé high heels. On his bald head was a tiny silver cap. I smiled as I passed through them, but they didn't see me.

Horst was sitting on Enzo's bed when I got back to him. This was the room in which Miguel had died the year before, and which Horst did not want this summer, though it was



bigger and cooler than his own room and its glass doors opened onto the deck. "I could hear his breathing over all the commotion," Horst said. "Have you taken any aspirin?"

"I've been taking aspirin, Tylenol, and Advil every two hours," Enzo said, his voice strengthened by fear's adrenaline.

Horst asked, "Did you take your temperature?"

"I don't have a thermometer."

Horst got his own. "I cleaned it with peroxide," he said. "I hope that is good enough." Before I could ask him how to use it, he was on his way back to bed.

I pulled the thermometer from its case, pressed a little button, and placed it in Enzo's mouth. Black numbers pulsed against a tiny gray screen. I watched its numbers climb like a scoreboard from hell. Outside, Nils's arms were flailing because the high heels he was wearing were stuck between the boards of the deck. The thermometer beeped. Perry and Noah, in full drag, walked off with Nils between them.

"You have a temperature of a hundred and three point two," I said. This was the first time in my life I had ever been able to read a thermometer. "Do you want me to get the Island doctor?"

"Let's see if it goes down. Can you get me some cranberry juice?"

I went into the kitchen. Stark and Joe were reading. "How's he doing?" Joe asked.

"I think we should get him to a doctor."

"The number's on the ferry schedule," Joe said, and went back to his book.

A machine at the doctor's office said in the event of an emergency, to leave a number at the sound of the beep. I could not imagine the doctor picking up messages that late at night. But what I really feared was the underlying cause of Enzo's fever. I put the phone in its cradle.

"Don't we know any doctors?" I asked.

Stark and Joe shook their heads. Joe said that Noah or Perry might. I suddenly realized how isolated the Island was

at night. At this point, there was no way of getting Enzo off the Island short of a police helicopter.

He was asleep when I took him his juice. He was not the handsomest of men, but at this moment he was downright homely. He cooked all our meals for us, meals to which even Horst's fickle appetite responded. He overstocked the refrigerator with more kinds of foodstuff than we could identify. We wondered why he did it, even as we stored away a few extra pounds, telling ourselves we were delaying the sudden weight loss associated with the first signs of AIDS. Perry had put on so much weight, his posture changed. He tilted forward as he walked. If he should develop the AIDS-associated wasting-away syndrome, Noah told him, months might go by before anyone would notice. I took the towel off Enzo's head and soaked it in cold water again.

"You'll be sure to clean Horst's thermometer before you give it back to him," he said, holding my hand, which held the towel to his face.

"Yes, of course."

"I mean it."

"Let me take your temperature again. This thermometer is really groovy." His temperature had risen to just shy of 104. With all I knew about AIDS, I suddenly realized I did not even know what this meant. "When was the last time you took some aspirin?"

"An hour ago. I'll give it another one."

The house shook as Perry, Noah, and Nils returned, all aglow with the success of their outing. Perspiration hung off Perry's chest hair like little Italian lights strung about the Tavern on the Green. Nils got into a clean tank top and went dancing.

Noah snapped open a Japanese fan and waved it at his face. "Dish alert," he said. He could be charming. For a moment, I forgot Enzo, the thermometer in my hand.

Joe said, "Clark thinks Enzo needs a doctor."

Noah asked, "What's his temperature?"

I stood in the doorway. "It's one hundred and four," I said, exaggerating a little.

"That's not too bad."

"It isn't?"

"Is he delirious?" Noah asked.

"What if he's too sick to be delirious?"

Perry said, "Miguel's temperature used to get much higher than that. He'd be ranting and raving in there sometimes."

"Yes, but Miguel is dead," I said.

When we opened the house this summer, I threw away his sheets, the polyester bathrobes, the towels from Beth Israel, St. Vincent's, Sloan-Kettering, and Mt. Sinai that filled our closets and dresser drawers from all of Miguel's hospital visits. Noah had watched me, neither protesting nor liking what I was doing. But I could not conceive of any nostalgia that would want to save such souvenirs. The hospital linen was part and parcel of the plastic pearls, the battery-operated hula doll, the Frederick's of Hollywood merry widow, five years' worth of porno magazine subscriptions, the measure of the extremes they went to for a laugh last year, the last summer of Miguel's life. Why did we need them when we were still getting post-dated birthday presents from Miguel: sweaters on our birthday, Smithfield hams at Christmas, magazine subscriptions in his name care of our address—anything he could put on his Visa card once he realized that he would expire before it did.

"If Enzo's temperature gets too high, we can give him an alcohol bath, or a shower, to bring it down," Noah said.

"So can I go to bed now?" Stark asked.

"Sure," I said. "Just don't sleep too soundly."

I went into my own room, which smelled of Nils's clothes, his sweat and the long trip, of coconut suntan lotion and the salty beach. I missed Samuel at moments like this, missed his balance of feelings, of moderated emotions as if he proportioned them out, the pacifying control he had over me. I fell asleep, woke and listened for Enzo's breath, and fell asleep again. I halfway woke again and sensed my longing even before

Nils's presence woke me completely. In the next bed, a sheet pulled up to his nipples, Nils's chest filled the width of the bed.

Drunk one night on the beach, he had said to me, "Perry doesn't think there's hope for anyone who is diagnosed in the next few years."

"We've pinned our hopes on so many," I said, aware that Nils was delving for useful information, "that I don't know what role hope plays anymore. They're predicting as many deaths in 1991 alone as there were Americans killed in Vietnam. Some of those are bound to be people one knows."

"Hope is the capacity to live with the uncertain," he said.

I had read that line myself somewhere. "Bullshit," I said. Nils stepped back and looked at me as if I had desecrated the theology of some deified psychotherapist.

"You don't need hope to persevere," I said.

"What do you need, then?" Nils asked.

"Perseverance," I answered, and laughed at myself. And then I told him a story I had heard at a funeral service. It was the story of an Hassidic rabbi and a heckler. The rabbi had told his congregation that we must try to put everything into the service of God, even that which was negative and we didn't like. The heckler called out, "Rabbi, how do we put a disbelief in God into His service?" The rabbi's answer made me think that God and hope are interchangeable. He told the heckler, "If a man comes to you in a crisis, do not tell him to have faith, that God will take care of everything. Act instead as if God does not exist. Do what you can do to help the man."

Nils put his arm around me and pulled me up close to him as we walked. There was a strong wind that night, and the waves were high. The moon was low across the water and illuminated the waves as they reached for it. I felt massive muscles working in Nils's thighs and loins, a deep and deeper mechanism than I had ever felt in a human body, and which seemed to have as its source of energy that which lifted the waves and kept the moon suspended. He was that strong, and

I would feel that secure. A bulwark against the insentient night, his body: if I did not need hope to persevere, I needed that. He stopped and held me, kissed my head politely, and pushed me out at arms' length. He made me feel like the canary sent down the mine to warn him of dangerous wells of feeling, wells that he could draw upon but needn't descend himself.

When I woke again, the oily surface of his back was glowing. The sky held more prophecy than promise of light. I got up to check on Enzo. He was not in bed. Stark was sitting up waiting for him to come out of the bathroom. He patted the bed next to him. I sat down and he put his arm around me.

"Has he been sleeping?" I asked.

"Like the dead."

"Do you think we should have gotten a helicopter off the Island?"

"No, but I wish we had."

Enzo could be heard breathing through the thin door. Stark said, "It's been like that all night."

The toilet flushed, we heard Enzo moan, then the thud of his body falling against the bathroom door.

Stark carefully pushed it opened and looked in. "All hell broke loose," he said.

Enzo was lying in a puddle of excrement. In his delirium, he had forgotten to pull his pajamas down before sitting on the toilet. When he tried to step out of them, his bowels let go a spray of watery stool. His legs were covered, as were the rugs and the wall against which he fainted.

"You're burning up, darling," Stark whispered to him.

"I'm afraid he'll dehydrate," I said.

I pulled off Enzo's soiled pajamas, turned the shower on, and took off the old gym shorts I slept in. "Hand him over," I said from within the lukewarm spray.

Enzo wrapped his arms around my back and laid his hot head on my shoulder. Our visions of eternal hell must come from endless febrile nights like this, I thought. I gradually made

the water cooler and sort of two-stepped with him so that it would run down his back, and sides, and front. The shower spray seemed to clothe our nakedness. If I closed my eyes, we were lovers on a train platform. We could have been almost anywhere, dancing in the sad but safe aftermath of some other tragedy, say the Kennedy assassinations, the airlift from Saigon, the bombing of a Belfast funeral. Stark used the pump bottle of soap—bought to protect Horst from whatever bacteria, fungus, or yeast might accumulate on a shared bar—to lather Enzo's legs. I slowly turned the water cooler.

"Can we get your head underwater a little bit?" I asked, though Enzo was barely conscious. "Let's see if we can get your fever down."

"I think we're raising it," Stark murmured. He was washing Enzo's buttocks and his hand would reach through Enzo's legs and wash his genitals almost religiously. He reached through Enzo's legs and lathered my genitals as well. He pulled on my testicles and loosened them in their sack. He pulled and squeezed them just to the pleasure point of pain. He winked at me but he didn't smile. I noticed there were interesting shampoos on the shelf that I had never tried.

"I can't stand much longer, you guys," Enzo whispered in my ear. "I'm sorry."

I maneuvered him around to rinse the soap off. Stark waited with huge towels. While I dried us both, Stark changed Enzo's bedclothes, tucking the fresh sheets in English style. Then he helped me carry him back to bed.

"Let's take his temperature before he falls asleep," I said. Stark stared in my face as we waited. The thermometer took so long, I was afraid it was broken. It finally went off with a tremulous beep. "Dear God," I said.

"What is it?"

Despite the shower, his fever was over 105. "Do we have any rubbing alcohol?" I asked.

Stark couldn't find any after checking both bathrooms. I said, "Get the vodka, then."

He returned with the ice-covered bottle from the freezer; the liquor within it was gelatinous. "Do you think this wise?" he asked.

"Not the imported. Get the stuff we give the guests. Wait," I said. "Leave that one here and bring me a glass."

Stark brought the domestic vodka and a sponge. "Do you know what you're doing?" he asked.

"Alcohol brings a temperature down by rapidly evaporating off the body," I said. "Vodka happens to evaporate faster than rubbing alcohol. Other than that, no, I don't have the faintest idea."

Stark watched me for a while, then took Enzo's temperature himself. It had fallen to 104.8. "I think we should get some aspirin in him," he said, which we woke Enzo to do. He drank a little juice. Fifteen minutes later, I took his temperature again. Enzo's temperature had gone down to 104.6. While waiting for this reading, Stark had fallen back to sleep. I wondered whether he didn't want me in bed with him. That would have been pleasant, temporary; he was a solid man, like a park bench.

But instead, I went out to the living room. My stack of newspapers was near the couch. I could look in on Enzo if I clipped the articles I intended to save. Just the night before, Noah had shaken his head at all the papers and said, "It looks like poor white trash lives here."

"My roots must be showing," I said.

I clipped my articles and put them in an accordion file that I kept closed with an old army-issue belt. Sometimes margin notes reminded me why I was saving something, such as the obituary of an interior designer, in which, for the first time, the lover was mentioned as a survivor. Or the piece in which being sero-positive for HIV antibodies became tantamount to HIV infection, indicating that our language for talking about AIDS was changing. "With the passage of time, scientists are beginning to believe that all those infected will develop symptoms and die," the article said. It really doesn't sit well to read about one's mortality in such general terms.

In the magazine section, a popular science writer wrote that there was no moral message in AIDS. Over the illustration, I scrawled, "When late is worse than never." Scientists had been remiss, he said, for "viewing it as a contained and peculiar affliction of homosexual men." In the margin I wrote, "How much did they pay you to say this?"

Then there were those living-out-loud columns written by a woman who had given up on actual journalism to raise her children. Some of them were actually quite perceptive, but I had never forgiven her for the one in which the writer confessed that she had been berated by a gay man in a restaurant for saying, "They were so promiscuous—no wonder they're dying."

Horst emerged from his bedroom to blend his AL721, which was kept in the freezer in ice-cube trays. He did not see me and I did not say anything for fear of frightening him because he concentrated so severely on his task. If you did not know him, you would not think he was ill, but very, very old. He had always been a vulnerable and tender man, but now he was fragile. He hoped that the elixir in his blender could keep the brush of death's wings from crushing him entirely.

When Samuel called to tell me two years ago that Horst had been diagnosed, I began to weep mean, fat tears. My assistant editor sent me out for a walk. I wandered aimlessly around SoHo for a while, once trying to get into the old St. Patrick's, its small walled-in cemetery covered with the last of autumn's spongy brown leaves. I fingered cowhide and pony pelts hanging in a window; I bought a cheap stopwatch from a street vendor, some blank tapes, and spare batteries for my tape cassette. Eventually, hunger made me find a place to rest, a diner with high ceilings and windows looking onto a busy street. After I ordered, I thought of Horst again, and something odd happened: the room—no, not the room, but my vision went, like after you've looked at the sun too long. All I could see was a glowing whiteness, like a dentist's lamp, or the inside of a Nautilus shell. For a brilliant moment, I saw nothing, and knew nothing, but this whiteness that had an-

esthetized and cauterized the faculties by which one savors the solid world. Like a film dissolving from one scene to another, the room came back, but the leftover whiteness limned the pattern of one man's baldness, glittered off the earring of his companion, turned the white shirt my waitress wore to porcelain, fresh and rigid, as it was from the Chinese laundry. She stood over me with a neon-bright plate in one hand and the beer's foam glowing in the other, waiting for me to lift my elbows and give her room to put down my lunch.

"Oh, shit," Horst said, knocking the orange-juice carton over and spilling some into the silverware drawer.

"I'll clean it up," I said softly.

"I knew you were there," he said. "I heard you in here. How is Enzolina?"

"His temperature was very high. We got it down a little bit."

"You must sleep, too." He leaned over me and kissed my cheek. "It's okay about Perry and his boyfriend," he said, obviously having heard Noah speaking that afternoon. "Perry is still affectionate and he takes care of me. And I don't feel so sexual anymore. But Noah shouldn't have told you, because it would only make you angry."

Whether it was the lateness of the hour or the sensitive logic of pain, I thought I heard resignation in Horst's voice, as if he were putting one foot in the grave just to test the idea of it.

"Have you met the boyfriend?"

"Oh, yes. He's very bland. I don't know what Perry sees in him," Horst said. "Perry thinks the three of us should go into therapy together, but I'm not doing it. I don't have to assuage their guilt."

"Where will Perry be when you get really sick?"

"Probably at a symposium in Central Africa." He laughed and waved his hand like an old woman at an off-color joke. Horst used to be hardy, real peasant stock. He was the kind of man who could wear a ponytail and make it look masculine.

Here was a man gang-banged for four days by a bunch of Turks on the Orient Express who lived to turn the memory into a kind of mantra. He said, "Perry needs so many buffers from reality."

"Most of us do."

"Not you."

"You're wrong," I said. Then I showed him the article on the death of an iconoclastic theater director that had started on the front page of the *Times*. "Look, there's a typo. It says he died of AIDS-related nymphoma."

He laughed and laid his head in my lap. "I am homesick for Switzerland," he said. "I'd like to go home, but I don't know if I could handle the trip. And I don't want to be a burden on my family."

"You wouldn't be."

"I've been thinking lately I don't want to be cremated. I want to be buried in the mountains. But it's so expensive."

"Horst, don't worry about expenses," I said.

"How is Samuel?" he asked.

"He's dead, honey. He died this winter."

"Oh, I'm sorry," he said, and covered his face with his hands. Memory lapses are sometimes part of the deterioration. I wondered whether Perry had noticed or ignored them. "I forget these things," he added.

"It's late, you're tired." He started up. I said, "Horst, I think you should go home if you want to. Just make sure you come back."

My fingertips were pungent with the smell of newsprint, like cilantro, or the semen smell of ailanthus seeds in July. "Did you see that piece in today's paper?" we asked one another over the phone when a point we held dear was taken up on the editorial page. "Yes, haven't they come far and in such a short time," we responded. I filed it all away, with little science and what was beginning to feel like resignation: *C* for condoms, *S* for Heterosexuals, *P* for Prevention and Safer Sex, *R* for Race and Minorities, *O* for Obits.

"I can't tell you how bored I am with this," a man said to me on the beach one evening when he learned that another friend had gone down for the count. He said, "Sometimes I wish there was something else to talk about," which is what my mother used to say as she put her makeup on for a night out with my father. "I just wish we could go out and talk about anything but you kids and the house," she'd say with the vague longing I recall with numbing resonance. "I just wish there was something else to talk about."

They would eat at a place called D'Amico's Steak House, where the menus were as large as parking spaces. She would have frogs' legs, which she told me tasted like chicken, but were still a leap toward the exotic, no matter how familiar the landing. Her desire had no specific object; she was not an educated woman; she did not even encourage fantasy in her children; but it still arouses whatever Oedipal thing there is left unresolved in me, and I often wish to be able to satisfy it—to give her nights and days of conversation so rooted in the present that no reference to when we were not happy could ever be made, and no dread of what to come could be imagined. But we both know that there's no forgetting that we were once unhappy. Our conversation is about my sisters' lives and their children. She ends our infrequent telephone conversations with "Please take care of yourself," emphasizing, without naming, her fear of losing me to an illness we haven't talked about, or to the ebbs of time and its hostilities that have carried me further and further away from perfect honesty with her.

But language also takes you far afield. Metaphors adumbrate; facts mitigate. For example, "Nothing is hopeless; we must hope for everything." I had believed this until I realized the lie of its intrinsic metaphor, that being without hope is not being, plunged into the abyss that nothingness fills. We have not come far since the world had one language and few words. Babel fell before we had a decent word for death, and then we were numb, shocked at the thought of it, and this lispng dumb word—*death, death, death*—was the best we could come up with.

And simply speak, disinterested and dryly, the words that fill your daily life: "Lewis has KS of the lungs," or "Raymond has endocarditis but the surgeons won't operate," or "Howard's podiatrist will not remove a bunion until he takes the test," or "Cytomegalovirus has inflamed his stomach and we can't get him to eat," or "The DHPG might restore the sight in his eye," or "The clinical trial for amplitgen has filled up," or "They've added dementia to the list of AIDS-related illnesses," or "The AZT was making him anemic," or "His psoriasis flaked so badly, the maid wouldn't clean his room," or "They found tuberculosis in his glands," or "It's a form of meningitis carried in pigeon shit; his mother told him he should never have gone to Venice," or "The drug's available on a compassionate basis," or "The drug killed him," or "His lung collapsed and stopped his heart," or "This is the beginning of his decline," or "He was *so* young." What have you said and who wants to hear it?

"Oh, your life is not so awful," a woman at my office told me. She once lived in India and knew whereof she spoke. At Samuel's funeral, a priest told me, "I don't envy you boys. This is your enterprise now, your vocation." He kissed me, as if sex between us was an option he held, then rode to the altar on a billow of white to a solitary place setting meant to serve us all.

Enzo's temperature remained the same through the night. I poured myself a drink—though I did not need it—to push myself over the edge of feeling. I took it down to the beach. There were still a few bright stars in the sky. Everything was shaded in rose, including the waves and the footprints in the sand, deceiving me and the men coming home from dancing into anticipating a beautiful day.

Since the deaths began, the certified social workers have quoted Shakespeare at us: "Give sorrow words." But the words we used now reek of old air in churches, taste of the dust that has gathered in the crevices of the Nativity and the Passion. Our condolences are arid as leaves. We are actors who have over-rehearsed our lines. When I left the Island one beautiful

weekend, Noah asked, "Were you so close to this man you have to go to his funeral?" I told myself all the way to Philadelphia that I did not have to justify my mourning. One is responsible for feeling something and being done with it.

Give sorrow occasion and let it go, or your heart will imprison you in constant February, a chain-link fence around frozen soil, where your dead will stack in towers past the point of grieving. *Let your tears fall for the dead, and as one who is suffering begin the lament . . . do not neglect his burial.* Think of him, the one you loved, on his knees, on his elbows, his face turned up to look back in yours, his mouth dark in his dark beard. He was smiling because of you. You tied a silky rope around his wrists, then down around the base of his cock and balls, his anus raised for you. When you put your mouth against it, you ceased to exist. All else fell away. You had brought him, and he you, to that point where you are most your mind and most your body. His prostate pulsed against your fingers like a heart in a cave, *mind, body, body, mind,* over and over. Looking down at him, he who is dead and gone, then lying across the broken bridge of his spine, the beachhead of his back, you would gladly change places with him. *Let your weeping be bitter and your wailing fervent; then be comforted for your sorrow.* Find in grief the abandon you used to find in love; grieve the way you used to fuck.

Perry was out on the deck when I got back. He was naked and had covered himself with one hand when he heard steps on our boardwalk. With the other hand, he was hosing down the bathroom rugs on which Enzo had been sick. I could tell by the way he smiled at me that my eyes must have been red and swollen.

"There's been an accident," he said.

"I was a witness. Do you need help?"

"I've got it," he said, and waddled back inside for a bucket and disinfectant to do the bathroom floors.

Enzo opened the curtains on his room. I asked him how he was feeling.

"My fever's down a little. And my back hurts."

Stark asked him, "Do you think you can stay out here a couple of days and rest? Or do you want to go into the hospital?"

"You can fly in and be there in a half an hour," I said.

"One of us will go in with you," Stark said.

"I'm not sure. I think so," Enzo said, incapable of making a decision.

"What if I call your doctor and see what he says?" I asked.

The doctor's service answered and I left as urgent a message as I could. I began breaking eggs into a bowl, adding cinnamon and almond concentrate. The doctor's assistant called me back before the yolks and egg whites were beaten together. "What are the symptoms?" he asked.

"Fever, diarrhea."

"Back pain?"

"Yes."

"Is his breathing irregular?" the assistant asked.

"His breathing is irregular, his temperature is irregular, his pulse is irregular, and his bowel movement is irregular. My bet is he's dehydrated. What else do you need to know?"

"Has he been diagnosed with AIDS yet?"

"No," I said, "but he had his spleen removed two years ago. And Dr. Williams knows his medical history."

"I'll call you back," he said.

"How is he?" asked Noah. It was early for him to be out of bed. I began to suspect that no one had slept well.

"He's weak and now his back hurts. I think he'd like to go to the hospital."

"It's Sunday. They aren't going to do anything for him. All they'll do is admit him. He might as well stay here and I'll drive him in tomorrow."

Horst came out of Enzo's room. "That's not true. They can test oxygen levels in his blood for PCP and start treatment right away. And the sooner they catch these things, the easier they are to treat."

Horst had said what none of us would say—PCP—for if

it was *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia, then Enzo did have AIDS. One more person in the house would have it, one more to make it impossible to escape for a weekend, one more to remind us of how short our lives were becoming.

The phone rang. Dr. Williams's assistant told me to get Enzo in right away. "Get yourself ready," I said. "Your doctor will be coming in just to see you. I'll call the airline to get you a seat on the seaplane."

"Okay," Enzo said, relieved to have the decision made for him. He put his feet on the floor and got his bearings. Stark helped him fill a bag. Then I looked outside and saw what appeared to be a sheet unfurling over the trees. Fog was coming through the brambles the way smoke unwraps from a cigarette and lingers in the heat of a lamp.

"Oh, my God, will you look at that," Joe said. "Another lousy beach day. This has been the worst summer."

Perry called the Island airline. All flights were canceled for the rest of the morning. Visibility of three miles was needed for flight to the Island, and we couldn't even see beyond our deck. Even voices from the neighboring houses sounded muffled and far away for the first time all summer.

"We're going to have to find someone who will drive him in," Perry said. "Unless he thinks he can handle the train."

"He's too sick for the train," I said.

"Who do we know with a car?" Perry asked. Joe took Jules out for a walk. Noah went behind the counter, where the batter for French toast was waiting. He began slicing challah and dipping it into batter, though no one was ready to eat.

Perry said, "I wonder if Frank is driving back today."

"Call him," I said.

But Perry didn't get the response he expected. We heard him say, "Frank, he's very sick. His doctor said to get him in right away." He turned to us. "Frank says he'll drive Enzo in if the fog doesn't clear up."

"Well, I can understand why he would feel put upon," Noah said. "I wouldn't want to give up my weekend, either."

At that point, I said, "I'm going in with Enzo."

Noah said, "He can go into the emergency room by himself. He doesn't need anyone with him." I said nothing but I did not turn away from him either. Perry looked at me and then to Noah. His lower lip dropped from under his mustache. Noah said, "Well, doesn't he have someone who could meet him there?"

"Enzo," I called, "is there anyone who could meet you in the city?"

"I guess I could call my friend Jim," he said.

"See," Noah said.

"Jim's straight," I said, not that I thought it really made any difference, but it sounded as if it did. We did, supposedly, know the ropes of this disease. "Enzo, who would you rather have with you, me or Jim?"

"You."

Noah raised his eyebrows and shrugged one shoulder. "I don't know why you feel you have to go into the emergency room."

"Because I am beginning to see what it will be like to be sick with this thing and not have anyone bring me milk or medication because it isn't convenient or amusing any longer."

Noah said, "I have been working at the Gay Men's Health Crisis for the past six years. I was one of the first volunteers."

"Oh, good, the institutional response. That reassures me," I said. Starting into my room to pack a bag, I bumped into Nils, who was coming out of the shower and didn't have any clothes on, not even a towel. Although Nils walked the beach in a bikini brief that left nothing to—nor satisfied—the imagination, he quickly covered himself and pressed his body against the wall to let me pass.

"I'm sorry if I kept you up last night," he said to me.

"It wasn't you. I was worried about Enzo," I said.

By eleven-thirty the fog was packed in as tight as cotton in a new jar of aspirin. Our friend with the car decided that since it was not a beach day, he could be doing things in the city. We were to meet him at the dock for the twelve o'clock



ferry. He could not, however, take me as well, for he had promised two guests a ride and only had room for four in his jaunty little car.

Enzo and Perry seemed embarrassed by this. "I don't mind taking the train," I said. "I'll be able to read the *Sunday Times*."

Nils put his arm around me and walked me to the door. "I'll be gone when you come back. I'd like to leave you my address." I wanted to say a house gift would be more appropriate, something for the kitchen or a flowering plant. "It's unlikely that I'll ever get that far north," I said, "but thanks all the same. Maybe I'll drop you a line." The last thing I saw as I was leaving was his large head down over his plate, his arms on the table, a fork in a fist. He was a huge and odd-looking man. Stark said he had a face like the back of a bus, but it was actually worse than that. Nils was also the author of two books, working on a third about the Nazi occupation of Oslo. I saw the others join him around the table. He was probably ten times smarter than anyone there. Sharp words and arguments often defined the boundaries of personalities in this house, but Nils did not touch any of our borders. He simply did not fit in. And though tourists are insufferable after a point, I knew I should ask his forgiveness for my sin of inhospitality, but I couldn't make the overture to deserve it.

On the ferry, Enzo said, "I'm glad you're coming."

"I wanted out of that house," I said.

"I know."

We listened to our tape players so as not to speak about what was on our minds. People wore white sweaters and yellow mackintoshes. They held dogs in their laps, or the Sports section, or a beach towel in a straw purse; a man had his arm around his lover's shoulder, his fingertips alighted on the other's collarbone. No one spoke. It didn't seem to matter that the weekend was spoiled. We were safe in this thoughtless fog. The bay we crossed was shallow; it could hide neither monsters from the deep nor German submarines. It seemed all we needed to worry about was worrying too much; what we had to fear was often small and could be ignored. But as we entered the

harbor on the other side, a dockworker in a small motorboat passed our ferry and shouted, "AIDS!" And in case we hadn't heard him, shouted again, "AIDS, AIDS!"

A man slid back the window and shouted back, "Crib death!" Then he slunk in his seat, ashamed of himself.

I read the paper on the train. I listened to Elgar, Bach, Barber, and Fauré. An adagio rose to its most poignant bar; the soprano sang the *Pie Jesù* with a note of anger, impatient that we should have to wait so long for everlasting peace, or that the price was so high, or that we should have to ask at all. I filled the empty time between one place and another with a moderate and circumspect sorrow delineated by the beginning, middle, and end of these adagios. Catharsis is not a release of emotion, it is a feast. Feel this. Take that. And you say, Yes, sir, thank you, sir. Something hardens above the eyes and your throat knots and you feel your self back into being. Friends die and I think, Good, that's over, let go of these intolerable emotions, life goes on. The train ride passed; I finished mourning another one. The train ride was not as bad as people say it is.

And Enzo had only arrived at the hospital ten minutes before me. The nurses at the emergency desk said I couldn't see him.

"I'm his care partner from the Gay Men's Health Crisis," I said, telling them more than they were prepared to hear. "Can I just let him know I'm here?" The lie worked as I was told it would.

Dr. Williams was there as well, standing over Enzo's gurney, which was in the middle of the corridor. "Was there any diarrhea?" he asked. Enzo said no, I said yes. "Fever?" "Over a hundred and five." "Did you have a productive cough?" he asked, and Enzo smiled. He pounded on the small of Enzo's back. "Does that hurt?" It did. The doctor was certain that Enzo's infection was one to which people who have had their spleens removed are vulnerable. We were moved to a little curtained room in the emergency ward.

"I'm not convinced it isn't PCP," Enzo said to me.

"Neither am I," said the attending physician, who had been outside the curtain with Enzo's chart. "Dr. Williams's diagnosis seems too logical. I want to take some tests just to make sure."

He asked for Enzo's health history: chronic hepatitis; idiopathic thrombocytopenia purpura; the splenectomy; herpes. Enzo sounded as if he were singing a tenor aria from *L'Elisir d'Amore*. The attending physician leaned over him, listened for the high notes, and touched him more like a lover than a doctor.

"You don't have to stay," Enzo said to me.

"I want to see if he comes back," I said.

"He reminds you of Samuel."

"A little bit."

"Do you think he's gay?"

"I don't think he'd be interested in me even if he was. Maybe you, though," I said.

Enzo smiled at that and fell asleep. The afternoon passed with nurses coming in to take more blood. He was wheeled out twice for X rays. A thermos of juice had broken in his overnight bag. I rinsed his sodden clothes and wrapped them in newspaper to take back to the house to wash. But his book about eating in Paris was ruined. He had been studying all summer for his trip to France the coming fall. Restaurants were highlighted in yellow, like passages in an undergraduate's philosophy book; particular dishes were starred.

He woke and saw me with it. "My shrink told me that we couldn't live our lives as if we were going to die of AIDS. I've been putting off this vacation for years," he said. "If there's anything you want to do, Clark, do it now."

"Do you want me to call anyone?" I asked.

"Have you called the house yet?"

"I thought I'd wait until we had something to tell them."

"Okay," he said, and went back to sleep. I read what I hadn't thrown away of the *Times*. In the magazine was an article titled "She Took the Test." I began to read it but skipped past the yeasty self-examination to get to the results. Her test had

come back negative. I wondered whether she would have written the piece had it come back positive.

Enzo woke and asked again, "Have you called the house yet?"

"No, I was waiting until we knew something certain."

"If I had PCP, you would tell them right away," he said.

"Yes, Enzo, but we don't know that yet," I said, but he had already fallen back to sleep. He hadn't had anything to eat all day, and hadn't been given anything to reduce the fever. Because he was dehydrated, they had him on intravenous, but he seemed to be sweating as quickly as the fluid could go into his body. I felt the accusation anyway, and it was just. I had not called the house precisely because they were waiting for me to call and because I was angry at them.

It was eight o'clock that evening before the handsome doctor returned again. "There is too much oxygen in your blood for it to be PCP," he told us. "But we found traces of a bacterial pneumonia, the kind of infection Dr. Williams was referring to. Losing your spleen will open you up to these kinds of things, and there's no prevention. We'll put you on intravenous penicillin for a week and you'll be fine."

Enzo grinned. He would not have to cancel his trip to Paris. His life and all the things he had promised himself were still available to him. An orderly wheeled him to his room, and I followed behind with his bag. It was not AIDS, but it would be someday, a year from now, maybe, two, unless science or the mind found prophylaxis. He knew this as well as I did. Not this year, he said, but surely within five. No one knows how this virus will affect us over the years, what its impact will be on us when we are older, ten years after infection, fifteen—fifteen years from now? When I was eleven years old, I never thought I would live to be twenty-six, which I thought to be the charmed and perfect age. I think fifteen years from now, and I come to fifty. How utterly impossible that seems to me, how unattainable. I have not believed that I would live to the age of forty for two years now.

"You'll call the house now," he said as I was leaving.

"Yes."

"I appreciate your being here."

I turned in the doorway. Several responses came to mind—that I hadn't really done so much, that anybody would have done what I had done. Enzo saw me thinking, however, and smiled to see me paused in thought. "I wanted to say that reality compels us to do the right thing if we live in the real world," I said. "But that's not necessarily true, is it?"

"It can put up a compelling argument," Enzo said. "Don't be mad at Noah. I didn't expect him to drive me in."

With Enzo in his room, the penicillin going into his veins, feeling better simply at the idea of being treated, I submitted to my own exhaustion and hunger. I went home and collected a week's worth of mail from a neighbor. There was nothing to eat in the refrigerator, but on the door was a review from the *Times* of a restaurant that had just opened in the neighborhood and that I had yet to try. The light was flashing on my answering machine, but I could not turn it on, knowing the messages would be from my housemates. I called the man who drove Enzo in to tell him how much suffering he had saved Enzo from, exaggerating for the answering machine, which I was glad had answered for him. I turned my own off so that I couldn't receive any more messages and left my apartment with the mail I wanted to read.

Walking down a dark street of parking garages to the restaurant that had been reviewed, I saw a gold coin-shaped wrapper—the kind that chocolate dollars and condoms come in—embedded in the hot asphalt. Pop caps glittered in the street like an uncorked galaxy stuck in the tar.

Horst's prediction came true. While Horst was dying two years later, Perry was at an AIDS conference with his new little boyfriend. When confronted, he'd say, "Horst wanted me to go." Perry would include Horst's death notice with fundraising appeals for the gay youth organization he volunteered for. Everyone who knows him learns to expect the worst from

him. And Enzo would be right, also. A year or so later, he was diagnosed with KS, then with lymphoma.

The *Times* would eventually report more on the subject and still get things wrong. Not journalism as the first draft of history, but a rough draft, awkward and splintered and rude and premeditated. They will do a cover story on the decimation of talent in the fashion industry and never once mention that the designers, stylists, illustrators, show room assistants, makeup artists, or hairdressers were gay. How does one write about a battle and not give name to the dead, even if they are your enemy?

The dead were marching into our lives like an occupying army. Noah's defenses were weakening, but the illness did not threaten him personally. He was sero-negative and would stay that way. Even so, he had found himself in a standstill of pain, a silo of grief, which I myself had not entered, though I knew its door well. Perry thought of Samuel every time he saw me, and, in turn, probably thought of Horst. I suspected he saw his new boyfriend as a vaccine against loneliness and not as an indication that he had given up hope. We had found ourselves in an unacceptable world. And an unacceptable world can compel unacceptable behavior.

But that night, I turned around without my supper and went back home to listen to my messages. The first was from Horst, who would have been put up to call because he was the closest to me and the closest to death. "Clark, are you there? It's Horst," he said, as if I wouldn't have recognized his accent. "We want to know how Enzolina is. Please call. We love you."

For a long stretch of tape, there was only the sound of breathing, the click of the phone, over and over again. Perry's voice came next.

"I was very touched by your going into the hospital today and how you took care of Enzo last night. I want to tell you that now," he said, in a low voice. "I hope you understand that there was nothing to be done last night, and you were

doing it. Sometimes I don't think Horst understands that the nights he is almost comatose that I am suffering beside him, fully conscious. I saw your face when Noah did not offer to drive Enzo in. I thought perhaps it was because they can't take the dog on the train, or because he had taken tomorrow off to spend with Joe. But I can't make any excuses for him. You are so morally strict sometimes, like an unforgiving mirror. Oh, let's see . . . Horst is feeling much better. Call us please."

Then Stark called to find out whether either Enzo or I needed anything, and told me when he would be home if I wanted to call. And then Joe. "Where are you, Clark? Oh, God, you should have seen Noah go berserk today when he took the garbage out and found maggots in the trash cans. He screamed, 'I can't live like this the rest of the summer.' He's been cleaning windows and rolling up rugs. She's been a real mess all day. Oh, God, now he's sweeping under the bed. I can't decide if I should calm him down or stay out of his way. The house should look nice when you get back."

Finally Noah called. "Clark, where are you, Superman? I have to tell you something. You know the novel you lent me to read? I accidentally threw it in the washing machine with my bedclothes. Please call."

My lover, Samuel, used to tell a story about himself. It was when he was first working with the Theater of the Deaf. The company had been improvising a new piece from an outline that Samuel had devised, when he said something that provoked a headstrong and violent young actor, deaf since birth. "I understand you," Samuel said in sign, attempting to silence him, if that's the word. The young actor's eyes became as wild as a horse caught in a burning barn; his arms flew this way and that, as if furious at his own imprecision. Samuel needed an interpreter. "You do not understand this," the actor was saying, pointing to his ears. "You will never understand."

You let go of people, the living and the dead, and return to your self, to your own resources, like a widower, a tourist alone in a foreign country. Your own senses become important, and other people's sensibilities a kind of Novocaine, blocking

out your own perceptions, your ability to discriminate, your taste. There is something beyond understanding, and I do not know what it is, but as I carried the phone with me to the couch, a feeling of generosity came over me, of creature comforts having been satisfied well and in abundance, like more than enough to eat and an extra hour of sleep in the morning. Though I hadn't had either, I was in a position to anticipate them both. The time being seeps in through the senses: the plush of a green sofa; the music we listen to when we attempt to forgive ourselves our excesses; the crazing pattern on the ginger jar that reminds us of why we bought it in the first place, not to mention the shape it holds, the blessing of smells it releases. The stretch of time and the vortex that it spins around, thinning and thickening like taffy, holds these pleasures, these grace notes, these connections to others, to what it is humanly possible to do.