

THE BODY
AND ITS
DANGERS

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And Other Stories

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PHILOSTORGY, NOW OBSCURE

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Don't go home yet," Roxy said. "The stress will blow out whatever's left of your immune system."

"I'll have to tell my mother sometime," Preston said. "It would be cruel not to."

They were both thinking of the reception he had gotten twelve years before when he told his foster parents that he was gay. Proof that homosexuality is genetic, his foster mother had said in the chilled bland tones of her Chicago accent, since there were no homosexuals in her natural family. But Preston's foster father had been warmer. Privately, face to face, he told Preston, "We make our choices where affections are con-

cerned," and then he touched Preston's face with an open palm, as if to show that he concealed no weapon.

Roxy remembered that night because she had come home from work and found Preston sitting in the dark, smoking cigarettes, finishing a bottle of the jug red wine that Preston called Cheap Lucy. "Are you all right?" she had asked, and he replied, "I'm all lit up with no place to shine."

Tonight, Preston Wallace was drinking sour mash, Roxy Atherton beer, Lorna Fairweather herbal tea. It was their first reunion, the three of them together at the same time, in eleven years. Other than the fact of his recent diagnosis, Preston thought that they were all taking their age wonderfully well.

Lorna said, "You don't have to tell your mother anything. You'll be the one they'll find a cure for."

"As if science were so specific or personal," he said, and smiled at the instant and dismissive optimism of Lorna's response. If he hadn't told his mother yet, it was because he expected her to mitigate his illness in the same manner. Or she would say, "Oh, didn't I read that they found a cure for that?" His father having died several years before, Preston did not anticipate the support that families give at moments like these.

Roxy asked, "Are you going onto DHPG?"

"I'm surprised you even know what it is," he said. He was even more surprised when she burst into tears.

"I've worried about you," Roxy cried, for she also knew that his medication would require a catheter inserted into a vein that fed directly into an atrium of his heart. There the drug would be diffused into his blood and sped through his body in a matter of seconds. She knew that the drug had yet to be approved by the FDA and that it was given on a compassionate-use basis. She knew, too, that nurses would teach him how to administer it to himself, so that he could do it alone, sitting at home beneath his own I.V. pole for an hour, five times a week. He would have sacks of sucrose, and a big red plastic container for medical waste. She knew, as much about this disease as she could know.

Lorna began to cry as well, moved by Roxy's outburst

more than Preston's illness, for he had announced his diagnosis, cool and remote as an evening news correspondent. Lorna was taking her cue from him and he was sitting with his arms across his chest, his hands under his arms, his legs stretched out. His hair was cut in the style of someone going off to war. What had become of the vulnerable and tender man she had known? This was someone who bought whiskey in airport liquor stores, and dressed, tie, shirt, slacks, all in gray. Not even the silver hoop in his ear mitigated his Marine-like, masculine reserve.

Preston said nothing, allowing them their moment of grief, as if it was his to give, a possession he could pass on, like a keepsake. His doctor had wept giving him the diagnosis, while Preston had looked in the mirror behind the doctor's desk and the reflection seemed to tell him, "This is you now. You are a sick person. What will you think about? What will hold your interest?" He knew in the way one knew these things that his death would be a fast one, the particular infection, the harsh drug used to treat it. What is more, there was a pain under his arm that had been growing for weeks. "All I can feel is muscle," his doctor had said, patting him on the back. "I should wait for more objective evidence before digging in. Maybe you should lay off the chest exercises awhile." But they both feared lymphoma.

Preston looked around the dining room as the women wept. This had been their favorite room when the three of them lived together as undergraduates. It had a south window and the sun came in all day long. There was nothing in it but a table, chairs, and a plant, a philodendron that was in the same place he had put it twelve years ago. In the decade that the three of them have lived apart, it had grown as high as the ceiling, claiming the corner with the unfolding of each new leaf. A philodendron's name implied self-love, he thought, if one was a tree. *Philo*, love; *dendron*, tree—loving tree, or love of trees. Narcissism seemed to impel this one. Philharmonic, he thought, was love of music; philosophy, love of wisdom;

philopolemic (rare), love of war or disputes. Philter was a love potion, philander actually meant fond of men. Philostorgy, meaning natural affection, was now obscure.

"Remember the night I had food poisoning?" he asked suddenly. Lorna and Roxy looked up at him at the same time.

Lorna smiled. "We found you lying in the foyer. You were white as a ghost."

"I had to drag myself along the floor until you two could hear me call for help."

Roxy wiped her nose with a crumpled paper towel. "I'll never forget driving you to the hospital. You started hyperventilating in the car and slid under the dashboard. Then Lorna fainted in the emergency room when they put the intravenous in the back of your hand."

"I was never so sick in my life," he said and hesitated. "Until now."

Lorna said, "I remember how you wouldn't let your mother visit you in the hospital because she never visited when you were well."

Preston said, "I'd better change my standards or she'll never see me alive again." And then he laughed.

Roxy got up to tear a dead leaf from the philodendron. She dropped her head to her chest and moaned the way nails do being wrenched from wood. Lorna held her teacup against her mouth. Preston saw that it was chipped along the rim, and he wanted to tell her that bacteria lived in cracked ceramic and withstood even the heat of a dishwasher, that we are most vulnerable to things we cannot see, and that the baby she was pregnant with would not have its own immune system till it was nearly two years old, and that her own immune system was likely depressed by virtue of her pregnancy.

He said instead, "Remember when I had hepatitis?"

Though Lorna said only, "Oh, Preston," Roxy was more willing to play the straight man to this old joke of theirs. "Your hospital room was yellow," she said. "You had a yellow bath-

robe, a yellow bedspread, and you were eating a banana when I came to visit. Then your doctor showed up."

Preston said, "Dr. Lo."

"Dr. Lo said that you were all yellow and you said, 'So are you.'"

Lorna laughed. "Oh, Preston, you didn't!"

"I did, didn't I, Roxy? Tell her I did."

"It was a nice color for you," Roxy said. She looked at his chest and neck. One would not guess that he was ill. His shirt stretched tightly across broad shoulders. He had joined a gym after moving to New York. The man she used to live with seemed smothered under muscle.

Preston went to the kitchen for ice. "Can I get you a beer while I'm up, Roxy?"

"Are you sure you should be drinking?" she asked.

"No, thanks for asking though," he said with his head in the refrigerator. "You've done a great job with this place. I'd like to fix up my apartment, too, but I'm only renting."

Roxy said, "I'm going to tear out your old bedroom to expand the kitchen. Which reminds me, dinner won't be ready for another half hour. Can you wait or are you dying?" She dropped her head into her hand. "Oh, Preston. I don't believe I said that."

Seeing how upset she was, he touched her face as she passed by him into the kitchen. "It's all right, my friend," he said. "It really is."

In the kitchen, Roxy opened and closed the door on the oven, the refrigerator, the cabinets. She ran hot water to feel something on her skin, and lifted the lid of the Dutch oven to have the steam from the pot-au-feu rise in her face. She toasted bread and rubbed it with garlic. She grated horseradish and blended it with crème fraîche. If anything symbolized what was different in her now than when they had lived together, it was the cooking, the need to domesticate and make her apartment into a home. For Lorna, the difference, she assumed,

were her children; for Preston, his muscular body, now perhaps, the illness. Preston had cytomegalovirus, which most people are exposed to by the time they have reached kindergarten. It could make him go blind; it could become systemic, but there was something Roxy was more afraid of and was afraid to bring up—it was unlikely that a person with AIDS would only have CMV without the presence of another opportunistic infection. Did Preston know that? she wondered. Should she ask?

"I thought she was living with someone," Lorna whispered.

"They broke up. He wouldn't marry her. She wanted babies," Preston said. Then they were silent again. Finally he asked, "Are you going to have amniocentesis?"

Lorna said it wasn't necessary this time, but he wasn't listening. In his head, he was breaking the word down: amnio, which came from *amnion*, the membrane around the fetus, was Greek for lamb; the cognate *centesis* meant to puncture or perforate. When he attempted to look the word up the first time she was pregnant, he pulled down the Oxford Bible instead of the etymological dictionary that it resembled. The passage he opened to read: "You shall be like a watered garden. You shall be like a spring of water, whose waters fail not."

"They did a sound scan," she said to him. "It's another boy."

"How could they tell?"

"They saw something down there."

He smiled at her choice of words. *Down there* was where she told the police a man had touched her, a man who had attacked her one bright morning as she was getting out of her car.

"I worry about you," he said.

"Why?" she asked. "I love being pregnant." Not only that—she had everything she had ever wanted.

"It distracts me from myself," he said.

"What about you?" she asked. "What happens next?"

"I have to wait for a room to become available at the hospital," he said. "I don't know how much time I have,

though. I mean, I don't know how long it takes this thing to progress."

"How long will you have to have the catheter?"

"As long as I want to live," he said.

Lorna inhaled deeply through her mouth. It was as if Preston did something to the air. She had been expecting this night—and for that reason did not return his phone calls, did not write him in case he should write her back with bad news.

"What are the symptoms?" she asked now. "How does this manifest itself?"

"Bright flashes of light, a floater in my eye. It's like a dirty hair in a camera lens."

Roxy called from the kitchen, "I had one of those once. The ophthalmologist blamed it on age."

Preston said, "You must have been relieved."

Lorna felt the baby begin to stir. She rose and stood next to Preston, then placed his hands on the globe of her stomach. "Feel this," she said. He kneeled to the floor, big as Atlas holding the world, then looked up at her and smiled, saying, "He's beautiful. Name him—"

She ran her hand across his hair, which was cut so short it seemed to her touch like an animal's pelt, or upholstery on a couch. Then she backed away.

"Excuse me," she said. His old bedroom, between the dining room and the kitchen, had its own bath and she slipped into it before he could rise off the floor. The tap water was instantly cold but not cold enough to numb the sensation behind her eyes. She opened the window and scooped up a handful of snow from the sill and buried her face in it. In the mirror above the sink, she saw clots of ice melting in her hairline. She was thankful for the coming baby because people made excuses for pregnant women. Even if there were anything she could do for him, she in Chicago and he in New York, her babies would have to take precedence.

Preston had told her about this as yet unnamed disease maybe seven years before in a Chinese restaurant in New

York. "How do you know all this?" she'd asked because of his fluency in a Greek-like and latinate language of cancers, viruses, funguses, and rare pneumonias. "The gay press," he answered.

"Well," she said doubtfully.

"What do you mean, 'Well?'" he'd demanded. "Are you dismissing this?"

"Well, what do you expect me to do about it?" Her voice had tightened to match his own. "There are other concerns, you know. Look at what Reagan's doing in Central America."

"I expect you to take me seriously," he had replied. "This isn't a novelty act."

There were no towels in the unused bathroom, so she dried her face on the hem of her maternity dress and stepped into his old bedroom. Preston was standing there waiting for her. In his hand was a pale blue envelope which caught her eye instantly, for it was the kind that air mail letters are sent in. She even recognized the Italian stamps, and, of course, the handwriting was her own. Blueprints for Roxy's new kitchen and breakfast nook were tacked on the wall, but till the renovation was complete she was using the room for storage. Roxy had thrown away nothing that the three of them had shared as roommates. There was the trunk they had used as a coffee table, an end table found in the alley, a pole lamp. There was the Raggedy Ann doll the three of them had witnessed flying out of a car window and getting run over by a bus. Its face still bore the tire marks. On the wall were portraits Lorna had taken of Preston for her photography class. "Do they make you nostalgic?" she asked.

"Nostalgic? I wish she would burn all these," he said. "I don't want to be remembered like that."

He turned around and headed for the sun porch at the front of the apartment. There he pulled the letter from the envelope and read it again. As close as they had been, it was the

only letter she had ever written him. She had sent it from Rome a year after the both of them had graduated and left Chicago.

September

Dear Preston,

My mom just told me you called. I am so sorry not to have been here. How much I miss you—often I can imagine you so vividly. The other day I was taking pictures of the Tortoise Fountain and I swear I saw you walking toward me—the sun was too strong. Thanks so much for your letter, or rather, letters. They were a real boost to my spirits, which at the present are, say, teetering over the edge of that black yawning abyss. Well, that sounds a bit too tragic.

What to say? What side of the abyss should I write from first? Since you wrote roaring about Sean's *NYR* article on Central America, shall I remind you that behind every man is a woman (or another man, whatever, you're all alike)? Yes, it was my constant reassurance, loving reassurance. Kidding aside, it is exciting, isn't it, to see him move down from the esoteric, the nous, where no one else lives, and to the daily world of action. He seems to thrive, as if he has forgiven himself something, as if the intellectual indulgence of the meaning of meaning is a luxury most people don't enjoy (or endure), especially people who suffer not at their own hands and minds, but at the hands of an oppressive government.

To top it all off, Sean and I had lunch with Sartre and de Beauvoir here in Rome!!! Just the four of us!!! We arranged to meet at a café near the Pantheon and spent an hour talking politics and philosophy. That is, they talked and I listened. I think it will be one of my most cherished memories. Perhaps one makes too much of such people, but they are great minds and their influence

on a whole generation of Europeans and Americans is indisputable.

Engaged? No, we are not engaged. I do not know what the future holds for us. I have always felt sure about our relationship, but God, I think I deserved something easier. There have got to be simpler people in the world . . . but then they would not be Sean. He has a lovely apartment in the Campo dei Fiori and seems to know the streets like the back of his hand. Time with him is time full of itself. Writing you I realize I am contradicting the mood this letter began in. Maybe you have that effect. I sometimes take the motor bike out onto the Via Appia and buy a sandwich from one of the farm stands like we used to. Remember the roasted pig, the rosemary and garlic inside it? Once you read to me from *The Four Quartets*. You are missed now, but I know we will be together again. For the rest of our lives we will be close, it must be that way, it can be no different.

"Maybe it's time to have more pictures taken," Lorna said to his back.

She saw him put the letter in his pocket. "I've put on forty pounds of muscle weight since those pictures were taken," he said. "Maybe if I had known that that was possible back then, I wouldn't have needed the lithium."

"You don't think you need it anymore?"

"Why, am I acting funny?"

She shook her head in case he was not looking out the window but at her. "I didn't realize you had quit."

"Years ago. I think I outgrew my mood swings. Or I was misdiagnosed in the first place. Maybe they just seemed the norm in New York. A friend once told me that I was always depressed, and I said to him, no, actually, that I was profoundly happy. But that never struck me as true until I said it."

A therapist had once told Preston that depression was likely to be his natural state, where the gravity of his mind

would keep him despite all attempts at levity; but now it seemed that even when he was depressed there was a tow rope of some kind dragging him back toward happiness.

"I've never heard you say it either," she said, for having heard it from his lips she also believed it. "Are you seeing anyone now?"

"A man?"

"No, a therapist."

"Talking about this won't make it go away," he said.

He could sense her trying to think of something to say. Her discomfort was comforting. It was proof to him that she recognized the end of the friendship as described in her letter, and that she was responsible for it. He had intended to give her the letter as a souvenir of their friendship, and now he realized that doing so would be like an indictment.

"An article I submitted about grief in the gay community was rejected by *The Journal of Sociology*," he said. "The peer-review panel didn't believe that gay men could suffer bereavement. They said our relationships were too shallow."

"Was that the only reason they gave?" She saw him stiffen at that, and amended it to, "Surely that's not the reason they gave for rejecting you."

"I got a phone call last week from a woman who asked me if I was a friend of her brother, Fred Pais," he said. "I said yes, and she said, 'I'm sorry to tell you this, but he's passed away.' She was calling everybody in his address book, which is what I always imagined you doing for me. Since my address book was filled with names of the dead because I couldn't bring myself to remove them, one for practically every letter of the alphabet, I thought I should start a new one, for your sake. It's tighter than the old book but lacks the emotional resonance, if you know what I mean."

Lorna said, "It hasn't touched our lives the way it has yours."

"You have an inquisitive mind," he said.

"The baby takes up so much time."

"You don't even return my phone calls," he said. "I talk to Sean every time I call. I didn't even know you were pregnant again until you walked through the door; you didn't call me when the last one was born. You knew I was sero-positive. How much time did you think I had?"

"We never thought it would go this far."

"But it's always been there, Lorna," he said. "You knew people were dying. Didn't you ever even think that I might know some of them?"

"You're right, Preston," she said. "I'm sorry."

"I always thought that you would be there for me."

"I will now."

"You're going to have another baby in three months. By the time you've weaned it, I could be dead."

She started sobbing at that. "Tell me what I can do for you."

"I could send you a pamphlet called *When Someone You Know Has AIDS*. It's filled with helpful hints for friends of the afflicted," he said. "Or, better still, you could continue on as if I never existed."

That gave her an exit. She pushed her arms into the sleeves of her coat as if it were a life jacket and was out the door. That was what she must have wanted, he thought, an annulment. When Lorna had entered the apartment that night, she immediately said that she could not stay. "Take your coat off," he had told her, "this will take more than fifteen minutes." That's when he saw that she was pregnant again. He listened to her running down the steps, and from the sun porch he could see her walking briskly up Sheridan Road. It was below freezing, but he suspected that the cold night air felt good against her face.

After the doctor had given him his diagnosis, Preston had gone home and begun to clean his apartment. He took blinds from the windows and soaked them in the tub. He took books from their shelves and wiped them with a damp rag. He pol-

ished brass and waxed wood and relined shelves with new paper till the apartment was astringent with the smell of powder cleanser and bleach. The cleaning was an addictive tonic that kept him going for three days.

Not satisfied with surfaces, he emptied the closets of clothes that didn't fit anymore or had gone out of style (kept out of a lower middle-class phobia of waste). He threw out gifts he never wore, and impulse purchases that proved his taste was not impeccable. Bureau drawers gave up a T-shirt proclaiming SO MANY MEN, SO LITTLE TIME, old jock straps, unmatched socks, silk shirts and silk underwear he wouldn't be caught dead in. He had once read an article by a journalist whose neighbor had died of AIDS. The writer had described the contents of the dead man's garbage, reducing an entire life to a leather vest, chaps, and sex toys. Writing about the clothes was more invasive than wearing them would have been, he thought. And he thought about what people would find cleaning out his own apartment.

Into the night, Preston threw out record albums and photograph albums, school diplomas, high-school literary magazines, ribbons won at speech tournaments, his draft card. Did he cling to this stuff or did it cling to him? he wondered. How much space should the past be given in a one-bedroom apartment? The police showed up because the neighbors were worried, and Preston asked them when it was legal to throw away old tax returns. (He threw the recent ones away as well. What could they do to him now?)

Only his college notebooks slowed the process down, as if there should be a reason to stave off their destruction, as if there was something in them he might have forgotten and needed learning again. He found notebooks for classes he couldn't remember having taken, he read half sentences followed by exclamation points, dates that were starred and circled; he had to wonder what fault, or lack, or need, or uncertain sentence had responded to the teachers' lectures with such useless scribbles. Better to throw it all away than to have someone find it, lay claim to it, or reduce his life to it.

Worse were the journals. Inside these were drafts of poems he had tried to write when he was still in college: "The Moth and the Flame" ("This is the darkness, this is the light / I cannot make it more simple than that"); "The Gas Chamber" ("Its lips are as tight as a bronze virgin"); "The Dark Horse" ("The dark horse died today. It should have been expected"); then "Stillborn," "Allergy," and "Freesia." Preston ripped the pages from their black bindings, then burned them in the sink like love letters after a divorce till there was nothing left but ash and smoke that hovered near the ceiling and made the fire alarm scream like a banshee. He needed to do the same with old friends, affect their memory of him, introduce himself anew and say, "This is me now."

Some things he saved: letters from friends, and two papers he had written in college, one on the Pardoner from *The Canterbury Tales*, and one on Walt Whitman. "The first angry homosexual," he had written about the Pardoner, "the first camp sensibility in English literature." And then there was Whitman's vision of love between two men, almost a civic duty, and one that had flourished for a while. The latter paper he had turned in late with a note to the teacher, "I have gotten a disease in a Whitmanesque fashion, perhaps a hazard from the kind of research I have been doing lately." Something had made the glands in his legs swell up till it was impossible to walk. "Are you homosexual?" the school doctor asked, having seen the same infection in the gay neighborhood where his practice was. "Well, now that you mention it," Preston replied.

"Dinner will be ready soon. I need your help in the kitchen," Roxy said to his back. "What were you thinking about just now?"

"Sexually transmitted diseases."

"Well, be sure to wash your hands," she said.

"I had so many of them back then I should have gotten an honorary degree in public health," he said. "You connect that with this, don't you?"

"It's hard not to," she said.

"I used to pray that you would be asleep when I brought

men home," he said. "Otherwise, you would turn the charm on and I would never get them to bed."

"I suspect that's what I had in mind as well," although she did not tell him that it seemed as if she stopped existing when he brought strangers back from the bar where he used to work. "I'm Roxy," she would tell them. "I was named after the movie theater in which I was conceived. Someone had turned on the cloud machine and there were stars in the ceiling. My mother was only worried about how she would preserve her wrist corsage."

Now she thought of a list of things that could kill him: *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia, Kaposi's sarcoma, lymphoma, toxoplasmosis, cryptosporidiosis, mycobacterium tuberculosis, cytomegalovirus, Hodgkin's disease, multifocal leukoencephalopathy, encephalitis, cryptococcal meningitis—over twenty-five diseases that constituted a diagnosis of AIDS. She thought of wasting-away syndrome and dementia. On her nightstand and desk was a pile of books on the immune system, subscriptions to treatment updates, newsletters out of San Francisco and New York. She knew as much about the subject as anyone could. And she thought of the Frank Lloyd Wright up the street that Preston had admired; in 1978, the year he moved to New York, it could have been bought for a hundred thousand dollars. There were things, that when you bought them, made you feel immortal.

Roxy looked around the room. "Where's Lorna?"

"She left rather suddenly. Something I said."

"Oh, Preston. I hardly ever get to see her anymore. You know how married people are," she said.

Preston loved the illicit smell of steam rooms, the way he loved the smell of cigars, or the whiskey-soaked wood of old bars. Sean wore a towel around his waist, though the steam enveloped him like a screen; Preston did not wear one, though he knew he should be concerned about the fungus and herpes that thrived in the heat, the dark, the puddles of sweat on the

ceramic. Sean, Preston suspected, had brought him into the faculty steam room either to drive the despicable Jesuits out of it, or because of the way Preston eyed the students, homogeneous in their haircuts and their tangible innocence, in their Spandex shorts and bicycle pants that held their genitals up high as forbidden fruit, heavy as a Tre Scalini truffle between their legs. But he had also watched them stash their notebooks in their lockers, and wondered how much of their education would be of use to them.

Preston said, "The pilot forgot to turn off the P.A. system after he told us that we had reached cruising altitude, so the whole plane heard him when he told the copilot, 'I could sure go for a cup of coffee and a blowjob right now.' The stewardess started running up the aisle, and the man sitting next to me shouted, 'Don't forget the cup of coffee!'"

Preston could smell Sean, a rich, bitter, earthy smell, like sculptor's clay. He ran his hand across his chest and under his arm. There was a gland swollen in his arm the size of a golf ball.

"You look really good," Sean said.

"I doubt I'll be able to keep this up once they put the catheter in," Preston said.

"Where will it go?"

"Right here," Preston said, and pushed his finger against his heart where the blood that drained beneath the pressure left a white print. "I was cleaning out closets the other day, and found my notebooks from your classes."

Sean said, "I have a nightmare that everything I have ever tried to communicate will only be remembered through my students' notebooks."

"Don't worry, I threw all mine away," Preston said. "I suspected you were educating me beyond my intelligence."

"You were one of my most sensitive students."

"You mean, I saw things feelingly."

"You can't discount what you learned," Sean said, although he could not argue Preston's assessment of himself as

a student. Preston had been a student who took things to heart instead of learning them. It was for students like him that Sean had inverted Socrates' "An unexamined life is not worth living" into "An un-lived life is not worth examining."

Sean had been one of those students himself. Eighteen years old, he had bawled like a baby while reading St. Augustine's *Confessions* in the bathtub. The book wet in his hand, tears streaming down his face, he had taken Augustine's prayer as his own: "Whisper in my heart. Tell me you are there." There was nothing wrong with learning like that, he thought, it had a tendency to stick.

Preston never felt that Sean had thought much of his intelligence. When Preston had requested a letter of recommendation to graduate school, Sean had written, "For Preston Wallace, style is sacrament—an outward sign of inner grace." It was a personal compliment that Preston cherished, but it didn't say whether or not he could do the work.

Preston said, "Do you remember, you called your intro class 'The Crisis of Meaning.' There was the Religious Crisis, the Psychoanalytic Crisis, and the Existential Crisis."

"And I probably dragged you through all three of them," Sean said.

"I sometimes wondered if you knew what you were doing."

"I probably didn't."

Preston leaned forward into the steam to see Sean's expression. He doubted his sexuality made Sean nervous, but he was not sure. "You used to move about the classroom like a half-feral priest," he said. "I'll never forget when you opened your copy of *The Confessions*. It opened in the palm of your hand to 'We had forgotten what we had left behind and were intent on what lay before us.'"

"Something remains," Sean said, "Augustine and his mother at Ostia. You have a good memory."

"I've been refreshing it." Preston recited from recent memory, "The flame of love burned stronger in us and raised us

towards the eternal. At last we came to our own souls and passed beyond them. And while we spoke of the eternal, longing for it and straining for it with all the strength of our hearts, for one brief fleeting instant we reached out and touched it. Then with a sigh, we returned to the sound of our own speech, in which each word has a beginning and ending.' And you stood there in your dirty blue jeans with tears in your eyes, and you sighed into the book as if love had been the lesson for the day. No wonder Lorna and I had such a crush on you."

"Blame it on my youth." Sean smiled with what Preston called "that bandaged look" straight men get in the presence of a homosexual. But Sean was thinking of another passage from Augustine: "Tears alone were sweet to me, for in my heart they had taken the place of my friend."

Preston pressed on. "There was a lecture titled 'The Death Instinct.' You asked, 'How can we un-repress Eros and Thanatos and put them into a unity that would be the basis for humanity?'"

"Well, Freud did."

"I wish I could take your class again. I think I would find it more entertaining."

"It's not the mannered soap opera you seem to remember. The course is more political now. I've even taken students to Nicaragua."

"I'm surprised you have to go so far from home," Preston said.

Sean paused for a moment. He said, "Lorna came home very upset last night."

"You think I'm to blame?"

"I imagined it might have to do with your illness."

"Tears alone were sweet to me," Preston said. "Do you know she once accused me of being jealous of her for getting you?"

"I thought you were jealous of me," Sean said. "Do you remember that night in Rome when we first went out to dinner? We ate in a beer hall."

Preston said, "Walking by the Il Gesu you sang 'Recondita Armonia.' A policeman asked you to be quiet and praised your voice at the same time."

"And you kept walking between me and Lorna," Sean said. "I thought you were trying to keep us apart."

"I just didn't want to be excluded," Preston said.

Memory, Preston had always thought, was like an old bomb shelter, holding cans of Del Monte, boxes of Bisquick, forgotten gifts of expensive wine. He had begun to learn, however, that the body can recall things on its own. There were nights when he felt the recent dead getting into bed, climbing over him as if they had just come from the shower. He felt their bodies against his own, or beneath him, a sack of balls loose between their legs, wet hair on the nape of their necks. He could feel the way each of them used to push into the mattress on their way to sleep. It was even comforting to have them there, to be remembered by them before they got up to lie briefly, like this, in someone else's bed. There were dead men he could still arouse himself for.

From his pocket he pulled out another letter he had saved. "Preston, dear Preston," he read.

Just got your letter, and am glad that you're OK. I don't understand the depths your depressions reach at these times, and wonder if they aren't somehow preventable on your part. It sounds as if that is the effort you are now trying to make. I am glad you joined a gym. I find it helps me a lot.

A couple of things I have figured out: I don't want to get married or have kids, live in the suburbs, or duplicate my parents' lives, although they are happy. You were and are the closest thing, person, that is, to the dream I had of what I want, and so I was scared of you. I didn't expect you quite so soon, didn't think you'd come so easy. Being with you, seeing you, acknowledging that you actually existed, confronted me with someone that I didn't want

to know could really exist. When I am able to deal with my homosexuality—and despite what we've done together in bed and the bars we've been to together and the clap I gave you, this is the first time I have used that word to describe myself—I will be better able to be with you. Up to you, and now, I have not met anyone that I am attracted to who has a mind I can deal with. You scare me a bit.

Write, love, Jim

There were times when things, like love or a pact with life, seemed possible only in the past. It was finding Jim's letter that made Preston finally realize what Eliot had meant by mixing memory and desire, a combination so intoxicating, Preston feared the room would begin to spin, that he might need help out of his clothes and into bed, and his head held if he was to sleep. The letter went right to his head and set off a chain of events that had never even happened. In his mind, in the past, love had proved itself on a daily basis. He did not think it would ever be possible in real time again.

That was his one regret, not that many options were closing off to him, just that one. It wasn't reasonable to believe that he could arouse old feelings in Jim Stoller, but he also believed that one has to ration reason. Preston believed that he would survive, not the illness, but death itself. It was one of those things that one believes despite one's self, a tiny bubble of thought that hangs suspended somewhere between the heart and mind, fragile and thin as a Christmas tree ornament yet managing to last decades. He believed in his consciousness, that it would do more than last, but would have impact and consequence, that wherever it went, there would be discourse and agitation; decisions would be made and adhered to.

Preston tried Jim Stoller's old home number, but it was no longer in service. He dialed the number on a ten-year-old business card Jim had sent with the letter, but the receptionist at the architectural firm did not know him.

Preston said, "I'm the executor of the estate of a friend

of Mr. Stoller's. I have something to give him his friend wanted him to have." And then he tossed the ball in her court. He said, "You really must help me. I don't know how else to reach Mr. Stoller." He bargained on the lie, that the community of gay architects in Chicago would be so small that someone in that office would know Jim's whereabouts. Of course, he didn't even know for certain whether Jim was still alive. The receptionist said that she would ask around and call him back in half an hour.

He wandered into Roxy's bedroom. She once had snapshots of her ex-lover—who had posed for her naked, on a dare, on a golf course—stuck in her bureau mirror. The man had had a beautiful body. And Roxy loved telling Preston about him. Paul once had said to her, "Roxy, I want you to come as hard and fast as a freight train." And she replied, "But freight trains come real slow." "Oh, wrong metaphor," he said.

Beneath the phone on her nightstand he saw a photocopy of an article from *The New England Journal of Medicine*. It was on an experimental drug for which protocols were just being established in Manhattan. His first thought was that by the time the drug could be proved effective, it would be too late for him. Beneath that article he found treatment updates out of San Francisco, which Roxy would have had to subscribe to in order to get. As he looked through the papers on her desk, he found descriptions of other drug protocols at Chicago-area hospitals, pamphlets about herbs and the miracles expected from them, a book on the immune system and one published by the National Academy of Science, and a list of gay doctors.

Once her mother, who did not know he was gay, said to Roxy, "You know what Preston needs? He needs a girlfriend. Oh, not for sex, but just someone he can sit and talk and have a beer with." And Roxy had cried out, "What do you think I'm here for?" And more recently, a joke he made about how easy it would be to find a woman to marry was met with a long silence on her end of the line. Finally, she said, "I'd kill you."

He thought about Roxy's wrist the night before, a kind of watch on it that he did not think women wore anymore. Tears had slid down her wrist and off her watch, and now they seemed to tear across the darkness, the way the headlights of a passing car can illuminate rain as it courses down a window. He thought back and saw that a tossed-off joke, a moment of hilarity, could cover a deep resentment, that a Xerox from a medical journal could be like a love letter never sent.

When the phone rang, he realized that he had not breathed deeply in several minutes. He had a habit of holding his breath, he held it when he combed his hair, at the gym his trainer admonished him, "Breathe, Preston." At night, he woke himself out of a deep sleep gasping for air, once three times within an hour.

The receptionist called him back with the firm where Stoller was working. Preston called there, but Stoller was in a meeting and wouldn't be out for forty minutes. Instead of leaving a message, Preston began to dress to meet Stoller. He put on a deep green shirt and a plum-colored tie, which brought out the flecks of color in his tweed jacket. His trousers were rust, his cowboy boots added an inch of height. He caught a taxicab and was sitting in the reception area of Stoller's office as the architect was walking his clients to the door.

"Jim," Preston whispered when the elevator door closed on the clients.

Stoller stared through an overlay of memory. "My God," he said when he recognized Preston, "I thought you were dead."

"Well, I suppose we'll all be someday," Preston said. Stoller reached down and lifted him from the deep seat of the Le Corbusier chair. They embraced like jocks, like athletes after a winning game.

"You look terrific. If you'd looked this good ten years ago, I wouldn't have let you move to New York," Jim said, "What are you doing here? Tell me you just bought a brownstone and need an architect."

"I just wanted to see you," Preston said.

"What are you doing now?"

"I work in the Department of Thanatology at Columbia. I'm doing a study there, on bereavement in the gay community."

Stoller paused. "No, I mean *now*. We can have lunch. There's a restaurant up the street this firm restored. I live upstairs from it. You can come up and see my place."

In the restaurant, their drink orders taken, Jim pointed out the details of the room. He had headed the research team that recovered the light fixtures from the archives of a famous Chicago architect, the patterns for the upholstery and wallpaper from New York's Cooper-Hewitt Museum; the missing table sconces, the salt and pepper shakers, and the flatware had taken weeks of detective work. He said that tracing down the lost designs was like finding the original meaning of a word in a dictionary. "Do you still look up words like that?" Jim asked.

"Sometimes, despite myself," Preston said. "You used to say that when you grew up you wanted to be visionary."

"Well, I'm heavily into restoration now." Jim smiled.

Preston asked about Jim's lover. "I can't remember his name . . . Was it Seth?"

"Enoch."

"Right. Who ascended straight to heaven."

"I don't think so. But we're still together."

"You make that sound tentative," Preston said.

"We're afraid of splitting up. We're afraid of trying to start all over with someone new. There's so much you have to know about someone nowadays before you start a relationship, isn't there? Sometimes I'm glad you didn't persuade me to move to New York."

"What do you mean?" To hide the trembling of his hands, Preston buttered a breadstick and rolled it in the architecturally significant cheese bowl.

Jim said, "There's more of it there."

"It's here, too, as I recall."

"Not in the magnitude."

Preston asked, "Have you both been tested?"

"No, neither of us think we could manage knowing that we were sero-positive," Jim said.

"I've heard that one before. People are capable of living with more knowledge than they allow themselves, I think," Preston said. "Of course, there are all kinds of denial."

"What about you?"

"I have it."

"You're positive?"

Preston said, "More than positive. I was just diagnosed."

Jim's lips parted slightly. He stared for a moment, made a tent of his hands, and hid his face under it. "I can't believe how stupid I just was."

Preston said, "I should have told you we'd be playing hardball."

"I'm sorry, Preston. I guess I've been one of the lucky ones. I haven't lost anyone who was close. You used to say that architects were all whores, but it's not really true."

"You must really be glad you didn't move to New York now," Preston said. He opened his leather portfolio and pulled out Jim's letter. "Do you remember this? It's ten years old."

Jim smiled uncertainly at the self-conscious, architectural handwriting of his youth. As he read the letter, Preston said, "You know, I still remember the night we met. You were wearing a tan corduroy jacket with patches on the elbows, a blue shirt, and a rep tie undone at the collar. You ordered a Heineken. I remember your face in the light of the pinball machine, the fact that your hair was thinner than mine, and the way you smiled when I asked if I could join you."

Jim smiled again, despite the sudden, knotted sadness in his throat. Preston said, "I may live to regret saying this, but then again I might not: There is no one, no one anywhere in the world, and I've been around, whose mouth I remember like I remember yours. You still have the same shit-eating grin, and you still use it to great effect."

"I know that."

"I can remember your skin. It was powdery, like a boy's. In bright light your eyes were the color of green beach glass . . . Of course, you were wearing contact lenses, but so what? You weren't the first, and by God, I could probably figure that there were hundreds after you, but when I think of them all—and I've had to for studies because they all want to know how many men you've been with—I always think of you. I don't have any regrets, but sometimes I wonder if you had come to New York when I asked you to, if things would be different now. You could call that examining the un-lived life, but the imagination knows what it will know. I can recall you coming home from work at night with irises. You've had a bad day. I get you drunk on cognac so you would be more pliable in bed. I can recall holding you when you were grumpy and stale and loose-limbed with a fever, and even how happy you were when your bowling team won. The last ten years would have been nice with you, I think. That is not to say that I blame you for anything. In any case, I brought you something."

Preston handed a square box over to Jim, who opened it as if there was risk involved. Inside was a bowl of hand-carved, sandblasted glass, just larger than a softball. In its surface were philodendron leaves, carved against deep green glass. The jagged edges of the bowl's mouth were the split leaves.

"I don't know what to say," Jim said. "It's the most beautiful thing anyone has ever given me."

"It's signed on the bottom. It was incredibly expensive," Preston said. "I wanted to make sure you got it. You were the only person I knew who would appreciate it. I've been giving lots of things away: vases, polished shells, etchings."

"You talk—I mean, you're acting as if you're giving in to this thing. They might find a cure; you could live for years," Jim said and began to cry. A waiter came to the table and walked discreetly away.

"I thought of it as clearing space," Preston said, "my own form of denial."

"I'm overwhelmed," Jim said.

"I am not without my own designs."

Jim excused himself. Preston was so pleased with the effect that he had had on Jim that his excitement sharpened the blurred edges the drink had given him. While Jim was away, he ordered another. For a moment he considered writing Jim a note and leaving. He even called the waiter back to ask for the check. The waiter, however, told him that the check had already been paid, and Preston panicked at the thought that Jim had indeed left him. But then he saw him coming out of the telephone booth.

Jim said, "I had to call Enoch about tonight. We're meeting at Orchestra Hall. You and I used to get student passes, remember? Enoch and I've had a subscription for years, but I always think of you when we get there, something about the slope of the aisle. He's always been jealous of you for being my first."

"I never knew I was."

Jim said, "We live in this building," as if it was a fact that might be disputed. "Would you like to come up?"

"Don't you have to be back at your office?" Preston asked.

"I also called them to say I wasn't coming back today."

"What was your excuse?"

"That I was spending the afternoon with a friend who just found out he has AIDS," Jim said. "Come on, we don't have much time." He reached across the table and gently tugged on the sleeve of Preston's shirt, pulling a quarter inch of cuff beyond the sleeve of his jacket.

"It's too dangerous," Preston said.

"I'm not afraid of you anymore," Jim said. "And I want some say in how you remember me."

The cold night air felt like cocaine in his nostrils. Preston had the doorman get him a taxi, hoping to get on the Drive before rush hour began and home before Roxy got off work. It was not as dark outside as it appeared from the east-facing windows of Jim's apartment. Intersections and ramps were beginning

to thicken and clot with cars and buses, and though it was mostly behind him, he felt the surge of human traffic pushing him forward, like Jim's hand between his shoulder blades, and then later, Jim inside him, which was not something he had expected ever to feel again. The smell of Jim was still on his beard, the taste of him under his tongue. If he had been Jim's first lover, he suspected that Jim would be his last. "Dear Jim," he wrote in a note left on the nightstand, "I have set the alarm so that you will wake in time to get to Orchestra Hall. I suspect and hope that somewhere I stalk your dream, that you'll wake from it, and find that I'm not here, and attempt to go back to it. I'm in the book. Please call me."

Roxy was waiting for him. She left work early but still had the blush of cold on her face. She was standing on the sun porch, looking down on the traffic. "Lorna's coming in a few minutes. She wants to take you for a drive."

She pointed to the wall where the tenants previous to them—Japanese students at the Art Institute—had carved something in the plaster. "Do you remember this? I wonder what it means." She asked, "Do you still have that beautiful platter they left?" Both of them had wanted it, but she had let him take it to New York because she thought he had appreciated it more.

"Yes," he said, "would you like it back?"

"It depends on the cost," she answered.

"It will be cheaper if I send it to you now."

"Would you consider moving back here? There's plenty of room. You could be close to your family without having to live with them."

"I have a good doctor in New York. I trust him," he said. "But I'll think about it."

She asked him whether it wasn't the case that people with CMV usually had other opportunistic infections. "Nothing yet," he said, holding back the pain under his arm.

Instead, he said, "I'm sorry things didn't work out for you with Paul. He sounded good for you. He made you laugh. He made you exercise. He got you to quit smoking."

"Actually, he used to kick cigarettes out of my hand," Roxy said. "And when I got up at six in the morning to go to the gym before work, he told me to wear sweat pants because tights made my ass look like a tea bag."

"I thought you tossed him out because he wouldn't marry you."

Roxy said, "I got pregnant. He told me that it was fine with him if I kept the baby, but that he wouldn't be tied down. When I had an abortion, he was furious. He said I should have known that he wanted it. He said that I should have known what he was really feeling. That's when I told him to move out. After I had aborted my baby."

Preston hesitated a moment, then said, "You'll find someone else, Roxy. You're beautiful, intelligent. Great sense of humor."

"Oh, Preston. I'm so common I could be a franchise." She pulled a letter from her jeans pocket. "I saved this letter that you wrote me after you moved to New York. 'Dear Roxy,'" she read. "'Right before I was to leave for the airport, I looked out the sun-porch window, and saw you standing across the street on the corner of Sheridan Road. You were wearing your jeans and green silk shirt, the tail of which was pulled out of your pants. Your hair was blowing behind you in the wind off the lake, and your blouse clung to your breasts. You had gone across the street to buy cigarettes, which were in your hand. You were watching the light, waiting for it to change, and I was watching you, wishing that it never would.'"

He looked down in the street where she would have been standing ten years before. Lorna was standing on that corner now. The wind whipped her hair under her chin and up the other side of her face. She was waiting for the light. Automatically, a habit from the days they all had lived here, she looked up at the sun-porch windows to see who was home.

Preston said, "Then my wish came true."