

VIRTUAL LOVE

People became obsessed with a boy's tale of suffering and redemption. Then they wanted to meet him.

BY TAD FRIEND

One night in the spring of 1993, the writer Armistead Maupin received an urgent phone call from a woman named Vicki Johnson. She sounded despondent. For months, Maupin, the author of the popular "Tales of the City" novels, had been talking on the phone with Vicki's adopted son, Anthony Godby Johnson, several times a week, and had come to consider Tony a very close friend. He was funny, kind, sensitive, and smart. Although he was only fifteen, he had just written a harrowing memoir about being abused, both physically and sexually, by his parents and their friends, and then being rescued by his new Mom, Vicki, a social worker in Union City, New Jersey. Maupin had read the galley of the book, "A Rock and a Hard Place," and had been deeply moved by it. He wrote a blurb for the book jacket, and got in touch with the young author, knowing that they didn't have much time to become acquainted: Tony revealed in the book that he had contracted AIDS as a result of his abuse, and his health was deteriorating rapidly.

I visited Maupin recently at his home, in San Francisco. He told me that when Vicki Johnson called that evening she had said that Tony might not live through the night and was curled up in a ball, asking for Armistead. "I waited with tremendous anxiety as she passed the phone to him," Maupin said. "Tony's voice was small, and he was breathing with great difficulty. I thought, My God, this child is going to die while I'm talking to him. We started talking about death, and I told him about my mother's funeral, the most horrible day of my life, and how I looked up and saw that one of the gravediggers had a T-shirt on that said 'Virginia Is for Lovers.' Tony laughed, and afterward he often referred to that moment. I told Tony, finally, that I loved him. He said it really helped him, and I felt heroic. I went to sleep feeling that I alone, my voice, had made that kind of difference in a child's life."

The first thing I'd noticed in Maupin's

house was a framed photograph of Tony in the living room. A handsome boy with brown hair, blue eyes, and a wide, wary smile, he held a pencil in his hand as if caught in the act of writing. That photograph is in many other homes across the country and around the world, for Tony Johnson has an extraordinary ability to connect with people and become an important figure in their lives. Over the past ten years, his chance friendship has made people fly thousands of miles to see him, made them reevaluate choices they've made, and even made them abandon their careers to take care of him. No one whose life he has touched has been left unaffected, and through letters and phone calls Tony has befriended a wide array of people, including the late Paul Monette, the National Book Award-winning writer; Fred Rogers, the host of "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood"; Mickey Mantle; the former Mr. Universe Bob Paris; Tom Robbins, the author of "Even Cowgirls Get the Blues"; Jermaine Jackson, of the singing Jackson family; the former ESPN anchor Keith Olbermann; and a New Jersey priest and an Israeli rabbi, blacks and whites, gays and straights, ex-nuns and lonely old men.

"A Rock and a Hard Place," which was published in 1993, is now in its fifth paperback printing. It still inspires fans to leave impassioned messages on Tony's Web site, and twenty-three of twenty-eight reader reviews on Amazon.com give the book five stars. Tony has become a symbol of modern victimhood, his body torn apart by the most appalling end-of-the-millennium traumas—child abuse and AIDS. Their depredations eventually robbed Tony of his left leg, his spleen, a testicle, and the sight in one eye. Yet, even as he became bedridden from recurrent pneumonia, his character sparkled. "I'm going to start smoking to even out the cough," he'd say lightly to friends. At times angry, at times bewildered, Tony always brimmed with the passionate

moral authority of doomed youth. Pay attention to those in pain, Tony said. Listen to those who are different. Hug those you love. To the faithful friends who continue to communicate with him, Tony is nothing less than a magical boy.

Armistead Maupin, who is fifty-seven and has blue eyes and a gray mustache, exudes good will and a sense of mischief. But, as he discussed how he began to have doubts about Tony and his story, he looked miserable. I had the sense that there had been a rupture in his life that was tantamount to a loss of faith. As the months and years passed, Maupin explained, he couldn't help wondering how Tony kept on living, even as he kept on almost dying. He didn't understand why Tony would never allow his friends to meet him. He couldn't help wondering—and hating himself for the thought—whether Tony wasn't too good to be true.

The first public record of Tony Johnson is a beguiling letter he wrote, in August, 1991, to Paul Monette, the author and gay activist, who himself had AIDS. In the letter, which is among Monette's papers at U.C.L.A., the thirteen-year-old Tony, who was then calling himself Anthony Robert Johnson, said that he was very sick, too, and that in the hospital he had bartered four sports magazines for Monette's books "Love Alone" and "Borrowed Time: An AIDS Memoir." In a looping cursive that filled the wide-ruled lines of his notebook paper, Tony wrote, "I just wanted to say, Mr. Monette, that I'm glad I traded with that guy in the hospital to get your books. . . . I hope you're doing good. I also *love* the way you write. I sat with the dictionary to read your book but I learned *lots* of new words." He included a photo and signed off, "Your friend, Tony."

Monette's companion, Winston Wilde, was there when Monette received Tony's letter. "Paul wasn't going to reply, because he thought the letter was a



The first public record of Tony Johnson is a letter he wrote in 1991 to Paul Monette, the author, who, like Tony, had AIDS.

little strange," Wilde told me recently. "I said, 'How can you not answer this kid? He's dying!' So Paul wrote back." Wilde, a psychotherapist in Beverly Hills, said, "That's a real regret in my life. Before I knew it, Paul and Tony were talking on the phone every night for hours."

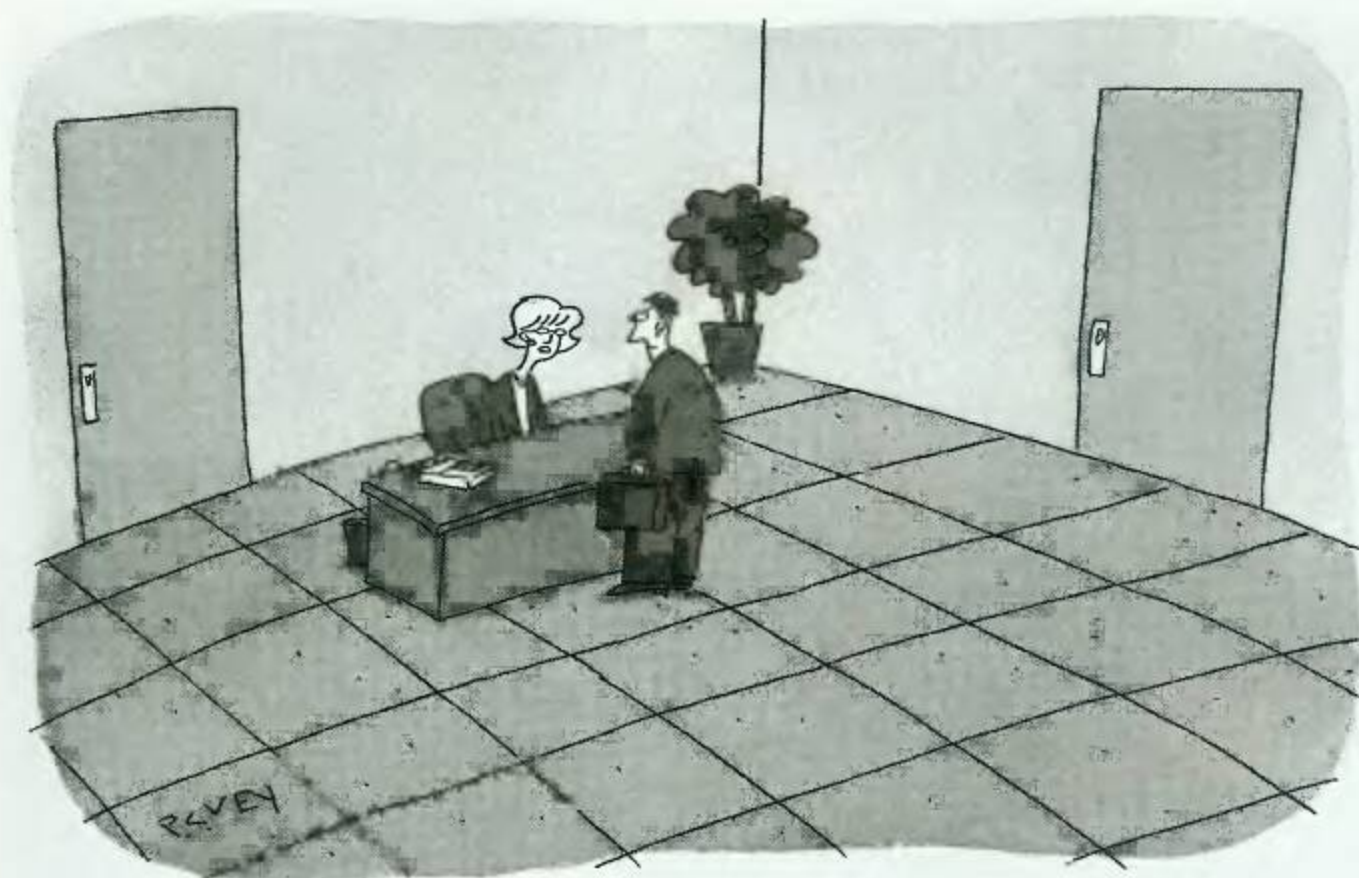
Monette later wrote that because Tony was dying, and because he was "so disarming, so ebullient, loved to laugh so much," he instantly became one of the three or four people who "could really understand what I was on the brink of." The more Monette heard of Tony's story, the more convinced he became that Tony should write it down. He referred the boy to his agent, Wendy Weil, who also represents Alice Walker and Rita Mae Brown, and to his editor at Crown, David Groff.

When Tony hit an impasse writing "A Rock and a Hard Place" and worried that no one wanted to hear an obscure boy's tale of woe, Monette urged him to remember that "the greatest human testament we have from the Second World War was written by a fourteen-year-old girl."

Born in Manhattan in 1977, Tony was a precocious boy whose dream was to be a power-hitting shortstop for the New York Yankees. At the age of seven, he asked his mother to buy him the soundtrack to "The Muppet Movie," which contained his favorite song, "Rainbow Connection." She agreed, Tony wrote in his book, if he would spend a few minutes with her friend Jake. When Tony was brought to meet Jake, the man raped him. This kind of treatment was not unusual

in Tony's household. His father, a New York City cop, and his parents' sadistic friends abused Tony regularly and pandered him to a ring of pedophiles. They gave him no bed to lie on, no winter coat, not even a toothbrush. When he was five, Tony wrote, Santa left him a note "stating that he would not be leaving anything for me because I had been a bad boy. I was relieved to find out shortly afterward that there was no such thing as Santa Claus anyway. He was just made up, like all of those other stupid stories we were told."

After a particularly brutal beating one morning when he was eleven, Tony decided to kill himself by jumping in front of a subway train. Before he left the apartment, though, he called a national hot line and spoke to a black man from



"Which door did you come through?"

the South who urged him to call a child-welfare service in Manhattan. He called the service and spoke with a woman named Vicki, who made arrangements to take him to a hospital. Doctors discovered that fifty-four of his bones had been broken and had knit badly; he also had an advanced case of syphilis. During Tony's recovery, the black man from the South, whose name was Earnist Johnson, came north to visit him. Miraculously, Ernie fell in love with Vicki, who had stayed at Tony's hospital bedside. The police jailed Tony's mother and father, and the judge was so incensed by their behavior that he excused Tony from testifying and sentenced his parents to twenty-five years to life. Tony's new Mom and Pop, as he called Ernie, got married and adopted him, and he moved to New Jersey with them and Vicki's two daughters from a previous marriage.

After leaving the hospital, Tony had a stroke that gravely weakened his left side. In his book, he implied that his fragile health made it impossible for him to attend school; but with home tutoring he earned a high-school diploma by the age of thirteen. Then, in 1991, Tony developed AIDS. When he wrote *"A Rock and a Hard Place,"* he'd already lost his left leg to the disease and had been in and out of comas. But Pop, a gruff ex-Air Force sergeant who carried a copy of the children's classic *"The Velveteen Rabbit"* with him everywhere, taught Tony that even death

can be mastered through love and faith.

Still, Tony's troubles often seemed overwhelming. Monette counseled Tony through the stroke, the amputation, a debilitating shingles outbreak, neuropathy, and other tribulations. "We heard how Ernie had been called back into secret duty during the Gulf War and wasn't allowed to write, how Vicki had had a car accident and miscarried Ernie's baby," Wilde said. "I've lost eighty-seven friends and two lovers to AIDS, and none of them went through half of what Tony did. Tony figured out right away that Paul was a phone slut who would give him endless attention. Paul was dying, and I told him, 'How many hours are you going to give to your family, how many to your work, and how many to a complete stranger who's three thousand miles away?'"

Monette was only the first of Tony's telephone confidants. In addition to Mom and Pop, Tony secured a new Dad in Jack Godby, a leader of the AIDS Mastery Workshops, whom Vicki enlisted to counsel Tony over the phone. He and Tony got along so well that Tony took Godby as his middle name. Tony also became close to a friend of Vicki's named Jerry DiNicola, an emergency-room doctor and former medic and P.O.W. in Vietnam who gave up his career to treat Tony exclusively. Jerry, whom Tony refers to as his Body Mechanic, is described in the book as a rough-talking former chess champion from Brooklyn who rides a

Harley-Davidson. Jerry was in the apartment with Tony and Vicki at all hours, and friends describe listening anxiously on the telephone line as he performed at-home lung surgeries to ease Tony's breathing. He also sometimes acted as Tony's emissary, as when he called Tony's hero, Fred Rogers, in Pittsburgh, to ask if he would speak with the dying boy. Tony ended up advising Rogers about whether to deal with AIDS on his show, and Rogers wrote an afterword to Tony's memoir.

The publication of the book gave Tony entrée to a wide new group of friends. In late 1992, Armistead Maupin, after reading the galleys of *"A Rock and a Hard Place,"* asked David Groff, at Crown, if he could put him in touch with Tony. A few days later, Maupin heard a nervous, piping voice on his answering machine. When he called back, he soon realized, he said, that "Tony knew more about life than I did. He was one of the most sparkling personalities I've ever encountered, full of irony and good will. Although he was straight, he was more sophisticated than any child I've ever known about homophobia. He called me Dicksmoker, which I thought was very funny." Soon the two were speaking almost every day. Tony even sent Maupin a lucky root-beer bottle cap, the sole keepsake of his former life with his family. "By the fourth phone call, Tony was saying, 'I love you,' treating me as a parent," Maupin said. "It really got to me."

One day after Maupin had known Tony for about five months, Terry Anderson, who was then Maupin's partner, took the phone from him and chatted with Tony and then with Vicki. A plain-spoken man in his forties, Anderson remains close to Maupin, and he had joined our conversation in Maupin's living room. "I kept Vicki talking," Anderson told me, "because I was thinking, This is so weird! Vicki's pitch was higher, but her New York accent was the same as Tony's, and so was her cadence, her rhythm. A chill literally went down my spine." After hanging up, Anderson turned to Maupin and said, "I can't believe you've never noticed—they have the same voice."

"Yeah, it's very similar."

"No, it's the *same* voice."

At first, Maupin couldn't make sense of what Anderson was saying: Tony had too much intelligence and emotional force to be a hoax. He played the guitar, drew life-

like sketches, recited from memory "American Pie" and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," and loved to listen to oldies stations and read baby-boomer touchstones such as "Jonathan Livingston Seagull."

Maupin never said anything to Tony about Anderson's suspicions. He knew that Tony was self-conscious about his voice, which was airy and lilting; it had never broken, Tony told friends, because AIDS had forestalled his puberty. Tony was also eager to be liked. He was attuned to the slightest wavering of a friend's attention and leaped to address it (sending letters that said, "I guess it was kind of dumb to think you didn't like me," or "We are *definitely* friends"). He had an instinct for what a particular listener wanted to hear. With Paul Monette, he talked about how medical technicians made a ten-dollar bet across his recumbent body that he wouldn't survive until Christmas; with Maupin he was sardonic and salacious. One day, Maupin told Tony how disappointed he was that PBS had not renewed the "Tales of the City" TV series. Then Tony's call-waiting clicked. Tony returned after a minute and said that Fred Rogers had been on the other line, "and he says to tell PBS to go fuck itself."

"Mister Rogers said *that*?" Maupin asked.

"Oh, yeah, you'd be surprised how he talks." (Fred Rogers, who is a Presbyterian minister, calls the idea of his using such vulgar language "ludicrous.")

A few weeks before the publication of "A Rock and a Hard Place," Maupin, perturbed by his doubts, called David Groff. Maupin said to him, "I would not want this to get out, but do you know anybody who's actually met Tony Johnson?"

As Maupin recalls, Groff said, "Hold on," and closed his office door. When he returned, he said, "You're going through what I went through six months ago, the same doubts. Everyone goes through them."

"Have you met him?"

Groff admitted that he had not, nor had anyone else he knew. "Tony's like God," he said. "He's someone you just have to believe in."

Although Crown had paid only five thousand dollars for "A Rock and a Hard Place," it engineered an extensive publicity campaign. In the spring of 1993, Tony was the subject of a num-

ber of feature stories, including one on the front page of *USA Today* and one in the *Post* which began, "Tony Johnson is the bravest teen in America."

Then Michele Ingrassia, a *Newsweek* reporter, read the book. She thought it was strange that the jacket had no author photo, she told me recently, and she was puzzled by sentences that didn't sound as if they had been written by a teenager: "Diseases were a means of financing sports cars for cocky physicians who thought they had the world by the short hairs by virtue of their prescription pads." Ingrassia was also troubled that most of the friends Tony mentioned died or moved away in the course of the narrative. The book's facts were hard to check.

Ingrassia began to investigate. In "The Author Nobody's Met," which ran in *Newsweek* in May, 1993, she wrote that no one at Crown had met Tony Johnson and that the publishing house would not provide verification of his existence. Not even a worker who had installed a computer in Tony's house on behalf of the Make-a-Wish Foundation had met the bedridden young writer. Ingrassia suggested that Paul Monette might be the book's real author.

The article caused a stir, and the *Times* of London cancelled a plan to excerpt the book. Tony was devastated by the story, and he burst into tears on the phone with his friends, including Maupin, who pretended to be bewildered by the allegations. Monette, who had certainly not written "A Rock and a Hard Place"—as Ingrassia now acknowledges—told reporters that the article was "scurrilous," and added, "You know, I've never met Philip Roth, either, but it never crossed my mind that he doesn't exist."

Still, Monette was having doubts of his own. According to Winston Wilde, Monette couldn't help wondering why no one who had helped Tony over the years—some teacher, doctor, or tutor—had stepped forward to vouch for his existence when the *Newsweek* article appeared. And Tony's story seemed slippery in its particulars: he had altered a number of the names and locations in his book. Monette figured that these emendations—and the fact that Vicki kept changing her phone number—could be explained by the family's wish to hide from the sex ring that had preyed on Tony. Tony had told Monette that his father had been murdered in prison, but that



other rogue cops in the ring still wanted Tony dead. But could it really be, as Tony had told him, that former New York Mayor Ed Koch and Sammy Davis, Jr., were members of the sex ring, too?

Monette started to look at passages from Tony's book in a new light. For example, Tony had boasted that his school essays on "How I Spent My Summer Vacation" were pure fiction:

It was easy for me to go on for pages about things that never happened. . . . Charlotte, the spider in *Charlotte's Web*, knew what she was talking about when she said that humans were gullible, that they believed anything they saw in print.

"Paul defended Tony out of love and because he was worried about having been duped," Winston Wilde says. "He also felt that the voice of a kid with AIDS was important for people to hear, even if it might be fiction." Nonetheless, Monette and Wilde decided to fly to New York, take a suite at the Plaza Hotel, and bring Tony in from New Jersey for a press conference to settle the matter. Wilde called Vicki to tell her their plan, explaining that Monette's reputation—as the alleged author of "A Rock and a Hard Place"—was on the line.

"My car is not working," he recalls Vicki telling him.

"We'll send a limousine."

"Tony can't go in a limo—he has an oxygen machine."

"We'll send a van."

"I'm not going to let him go all that way." Vicki, who was usually quite calm, had raised her voice.

"Fine, we'll hold it at your house."

"I won't have the press at my house."

"Well, where and when do you want to do this?"

"I can't afford to put my Tony through this."

"You can't afford not to, Vicki."

The press-conference plan was abandoned, but the questions about Tony seemed to be resolved later that week, when Leslie Dreyfous, of the Associated Press, visited him in Union City. Dreyfous had interviewed Tony by phone and had written an inspiring profile of him ("His Pop is black, his Dad is gay, his disease is loathed and his arms stretch wide"), and Tony's family chose her to be the verifier. Another A.P. reporter wrote a story about the visit, and he quoted

Dreyfous as saying that Vicki had established stringent ground rules limiting what Dreyfous could say about the circumstances of the visit, but that she'd met Tony in person. She said that his face was swollen, and that he was wearing glasses and a Yankees cap, and he spoke to her in a voice that was "the same as the one I've spoken to over the weeks."

The cloud lifted. Yet after Monette died, in February, 1995, Tony phoned Armistead Maupin in tears, saying he felt betrayed by what he saw as Monette's withdrawal. He had been similarly upset by Keith Olbermann, of ESPN. They had become close after Olbermann read Tony's book and wrote him an admiring note, and Olbermann had occasionally dropped get-well messages to Tony into his "SportsCenter" broadcasts. At Tony's suggestion, they started to collaborate, over the phone, on a novel about baseball. But after the *Newsweek* article, Olbermann stopped calling, having decided, he told me, that "there is no Tony Godby Johnson."

Tony also lost the confidence of HBO, which had wanted to turn "A Rock and a Hard Place" into a cable movie. In 1992, HBO had hired Darryl Ponicsan, the author of the novel "The Last Detail," to write the screenplay, and after Ponicsan read Tony's memoir he phoned him to fill in some of the biographical gaps. Soon Tony was calling Ponicsan Poppa D. Tony loved giving gifts—many of which carried a distinctive sweet and spicy smell—and Ponicsan says that he was overwhelmed, that Christmas, when Tony sent him a watch, cufflinks, and a down vest.

Ponicsan turned in a script in May, 1993, and the network was eager to go forward. At the end of 1992, it had paid Tony an option of twenty-five thousand dollars, rushing the check through at

Vicki's request, because she said that Tony didn't have much time left, and she wanted him to have a festive final Christmas. An additional hundred thousand dollars was due when the movie got made, but after the *Newsweek* article appeared HBO and its insurers wanted reassurance. They agreed to proceed only if Tony would meet with Ponicsan, who had offered to fly to New Jersey from his home in Seattle.

But Vicki said no. Tony was down to a single T-cell and was vulnerable to infection. She also warned Ponicsan that if he learned too much the vicious pedophilia ring would be after him, too.

When I talked with Ron Bernstein, the agent who had brokered the movie deal, he said, "Why wouldn't Tony just meet with Darryl to make one hundred thousand dollars?" He continues to be disturbed by the case. "As an agent, I have to believe I know voices and can discern the truth on the phone," he said. "But I believed in Tony."

Tony's health remained precarious over the next few years. He was sometimes in the emergency room three times a week, and his AIDS-related toothaches were so severe that he told a friend, "I was begging my dad to kill me." Even so, this period was a relatively happy one for him. In 1994, he became the co-leader of an online chat room called Teen Talk, where he established many close friendships, and in 1997 he set up his own Web site, Tony's World. He contributed a regular column for the *Gregory House Gazette*, a Hawaii-based newsletter for people with AIDS. And he wrote an unpublished novel, "Blame It On the East River," which contained a character modelled on Maupin.

In early 1995, a Manhattan television producer named Lesley Karsten read Tony's book and thought that he would be a perfect subject for a documentary about children that she was working on for ABC. Karsten got in touch with Tony, and he agreed to participate. He asked Armistead Maupin and Terry Anderson to consult on the project, and in late 1995 they flew to New York and met Karsten and—for the first time—Vicki Johnson. Tony had often described his Mom as "a babe," so Maupin was surprised to be pulled into an affectionate hug by an extremely heavy blond woman. "Tony later



told me that she had gained all the weight after she took him on," Maupin said. He and Anderson had hoped to meet with Tony while they were in New York, but Vicki said he was too ill.

In March of 1997, ABC aired the documentary, "About Us: The Dignity of Children." It was a series of vignettes about people who'd had tough childhoods, among them the show's host, Oprah Winfrey, and the *Times* editorial writer Brent Staples. But the star was clearly Tony Johnson, who was filmed running in a baseball uniform and then glowering on a subway platform. As the credits revealed, "Tony" was actually a child actor named Steven Parenago, but it was Tony's voice narrating his story and admonishing viewers, "There is nothing that can kill anybody quicker than constant humiliation."

"Tony became very much a voice of the project," the program's executive producer, Fred Berner, said recently. "Out of the ashes and darkness of his own story, he was able to speak for compassion and love." Berner, who had several telephone conferences with Tony, was surprised by how protective Lesley Karsten had grown toward her subject. "His problems became her problems," he said. "Tony reached Lesley in a place that may have been beyond the call of duty for a nonfiction producer." Berner was also troubled by the mechanics of their interviews. "We had to orchestrate a series of phone calls, by Lesley, through Vicki. The logistics were mysterious at best. But getting involved in suspicion seemed to undermine Tony's profound contributions to the movie, and his message. So I never asked Lesley if she'd met Tony. I didn't want to know."

As Maupin grew entwined in Tony's life, he kept telling the story to his friends, and eventually he realized that the tale had all the enticing ambiguities of fiction. In 1994, he signed a six-figure contract with HarperCollins to write a novel inspired by Tony. But for three years he found himself unable to write a word. "Every time I allowed myself to think that he didn't really exist, I felt a clench of guilt in my gut. So I kept talking to Tony as if everything were fine. I broke my brain down the middle."

Terry Anderson had begun referring to Tony as Tiny Tim, and he came up



*"Would it be possible to get baked beans on toast?
I'm not British—I'm just crazy."*

with various schemes to unmask the ruse. In one, he and Maupin would invite Vicki to lunch while they were in New York; when Vicki arrived at the restaurant, Maupin would excuse himself and call the apartment in Union City to see if Tony answered. Maupin rejected this idea. "He didn't want to do it," Anderson told me, "because he didn't really want to know the truth."

Maupin and Anderson made plans to see Tony on three occasions; each time, Vicki informed them at the last minute that Tony's health was too precarious or that he was too contagious with drug-resistant tuberculosis. Finally, in 1997, when Tony was nineteen, Armistead called him from Manhattan and said, "I will come see you tomorrow wherever you are and stand with a mask on and wave at you." Tony said that that would be wonderful, and he'd consult his mother and call back to make a plan.

Two weeks passed. When Tony eventually phoned Maupin in San Francisco, the novelist expressed his frustration: "I feel like I'm being played with here." Tony started crying. "Don't you think I want to meet you?" he said. "You'd be at the top of my list—you'd be there with my sisters! They can't even come into the room any-

more. The doctors are dressed in space-suits—I have no immune system at all."

Anderson, who is himself H.I.V.-positive, was dubious about these medical details, especially since he had helped get Tony into an experimental pediatric-AIDS protocol in San Francisco, only to have Vicki drop the topic.

I spoke with Dr. John Phair at Northwestern University School of Medicine, who is a leading expert in the life expectancy of AIDS patients, and described what I understood to be Tony's condition: the onset of AIDS in 1991, the minute T-cell count in 1993. Dr. Phair said that, under the best of circumstances, Tony "would have been in the five per cent who lived to get therapy" with new protease inhibitors, in 1995.

He also had tuberculosis, syphilis, and constant bouts of pneumonia, I said.

"He's very, very lucky," Dr. Phair said. And he'd had a stroke, his left leg had been amputated, he'd had neuropathy and shingles, and he had lost his spleen and at least one testicle.

There was a respectful pause. "This is one unique individual," Dr. Phair said.

In 1997, a few weeks after his third attempt to meet Tony, Maupin called to tell him that the *Newsweek* story had

fired his imagination, and that he was working on a fictional version of Tony's story. Maupin feared hysterics, but Tony said, "I know what fiction is. I know you love me and I can trust you."

When Maupin called Tony two weeks later, however, the phone had been disconnected. Friends say that Tony's phone calls became increasingly infrequent, and in January, 1998, he stopped updating his Web site's "Thoughts of the Week." Tony told some of his friends that he was shuttling between the National Institutes of Health, in Maryland, where he was being treated with human-growth hormone to gain weight, and Vicki's new house. It seemed that Vicki and Pop, whom none of Tony's friends had heard about in years, had got divorced. Vicki had become close to Dr. Marc Zackheim, an Illinois child psychologist who had written Tony a fan letter. As Tony later told Maupin in an E-mail, "One thing led to another and they got married." By 1998, Vicki had left New Jersey and was living with Zackheim, in Lake Bluff, near Chicago. They subsequently adopted four boys, all brothers.

People who met Tony online after the middle of 1997 never heard much about Vicki. Now when Tony referred to "Mom" he meant Lesley Karsten, the ABC documentary producer. As far as Tony's new friends understood, he was spending some of his time with Karsten at her Manhattan apartment, along with Jerry DiNicola, Tony's Body Mechanic; Karsten's answering machine says, "Leave a message for Lesley, Jerry, or Tony." Karsten and DiNicola, astonishingly, had sent an announcement to friends saying that they had been married in October, 1995.

In recent months, I have left numerous messages for Karsten, but she has not responded. Those of her friends whom I was able to speak with describe her as a generous woman who delights in amateur opera productions. She did leave a message on my editor's voice mail, saying that, as far as Tony is concerned, "I am Momma, and he is the gift of my life. I love him beyond measure, I love him beyond language." Tony told his friends that Lesley and Jerry were now caring for him full time, even though Jerry had recently been diagnosed with AIDS himself.

In a chat room called Wholesome Hugs, Tony befriended a former nun named Megory Anderson, and he told

her that his biological parents were Jewish. She put him in touch with her friend Ze'ev Falk, an elderly rabbi and scholar in Israel, and Falk began to exchange E-mails with Tony. Tony told him that he thought he was going to die soon, and that he wanted a rabbi. According to Anderson, Falk was planning to pass through New York in the fall of 1997, and he made an appointment to meet Tony. But when he arrived at Karsten's apartment she told him that Tony was too fragile to see a visitor. A few weeks later, Karsten summoned the rabbi and said, "Tony is dying of pneumonia. It won't be much longer."

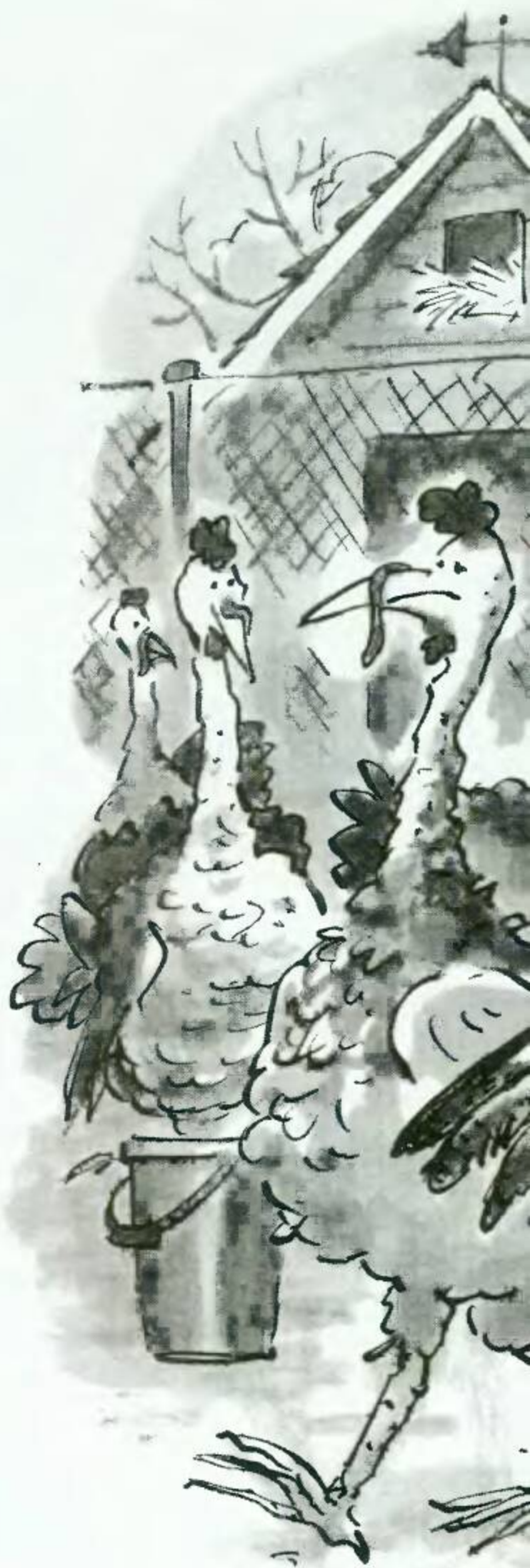
Falk flew back to New York from California. When he finally reached Karsten's apartment, he was turned away again: Tony was too sick to be seen. "We were all distraught," Megory Anderson told me. "Ze'ev kept calling to find out how Tony was, but the number had been disconnected."

In February, 1998, Tony sent a disturbing E-mail to his friend Amanda Kernish, a senior at the University of Delaware. They had been close for nearly four years, and she had helped Tony lead the Teen Talk chat forum. Tony told her that he was undergoing lung surgery at the N.I.H. the following day and that this might be it. "Pray for me," he wrote.

Over the following weeks, Kernish called and E-mailed Tony repeatedly. He did not reply, so she E-mailed Lesley and Jerry. "I was incredibly anxious and upset," she said. "But I never heard a word from anyone. I finally decided that he must have died."

After listening to Tony's friends tell their stories, I decided to go back and check some of the details. I began with Leslie Dreyfous, the A.P. reporter who had verified Tony's existence in 1993. In September of 2000, after Armistead Maupin published his novel about Tony, "The Night Listener," he received a letter from Dreyfous, who had married and is now Leslie McCarthy. She said that she had experienced "a clammy flashback feeling" when she read a review of the book. She had stayed in touch with Tony, and he had sent her gifts at the births of her first two children. But something had always seemed amiss.

McCarthy told me that although she felt that she had seen a boy of the "right



age, right height, right voice, and with what appeared to be one leg," now she had begun to have "creeping doubts" that it was Tony Johnson. Abiding by her original agreement with Vicki, McCarthy would not clarify the precise circumstances of the meeting, but she said, "I did not sit on the bed with him for hours, as I would have liked—the ground rules were very strange." She went on, "I was always bothered by the disappearance of Ernie"—Tony's adoptive Pop—"and their vagueness on that point. I thought of staking out Tony's house, believe me. I still have questions."

I called the Manhattan district attorney's office: no one there recalled a trial of a cop who had abused and prostituted his son. And no one at the New York State Department of Corrections had heard of a former cop being killed in

prison between 1988 and the present.

I called a number of current and former employees at Crown, seeking to discover what evidence had made the house feel, as a spokesman had said in 1993, "satisfied" about the truth of Tony's story. The few who returned my calls professed ignorance. Tony's agent, Wendy Weil, declined to speak with me. The book's original editor, David Groff, responded to several of my questions about Tony by repeating, "I know he does exist." He said, "To me, what's really interesting is how little people allow themselves to believe." Then he hung up.

I was unable to search for Tony at New York hospitals or the N.I.H., because patient information is private. So I looked for him at Lesley Karsten's apartment house—a big white brick building on the Upper West Side—during the

day and at night, and spoke with the doormen on each shift, both of whom had worked there for years. I showed them photographs of Tony and Jerry. Neither man recognized them. Fred Berner, the documentary producer, dimly recalls meeting Jerry DiNicola once with Karsten, but no one else I spoke with had met him in person. Furthermore, DiNicola is not licensed as a doctor in either New York or New Jersey, and his name is absent from the data banks of the American Medical Association and the American Board of Medical Specialties. According to Department of Defense records, no Jerry DiNicola was ever a P.O.W. in Vietnam.

I made two visits to Union City, just across the Hudson River from Manhattan. The neighborhood where Tony purportedly lived for most of the nineteen-nineties is largely Hispanic; the apartment where he received mail, and where he told Armistead Maupin he lived, is in a nondescript gray building above a Sav-Mart pharmacy. Everyone in the neighborhood remembered Vicki, who had lived in that building for years with her parents and her divorced brother, Vicente. Her name wasn't Vicki Johnson, though; it was Vicki Friginals. Her father had died shortly before my first visit; her mother is still alive, but I was unable to get in touch with her.

None of the neighbors I interviewed could recall seeing either Ernie (Pop) Johnson or his son, Tony. "I've lived on the block thirty years," said Raquel Rojas, who runs a local day-care center, "and I've never seen anyone like a white boy with one leg. A neighborhood like this, you would notice."

I spoke with Marlena Friginals, an eighteen-year-old who seems to be the model for Tony's sister Gina in the book. She was working at a day-care center down the street from Vicki's former apartment. She and her sister, Amy, are the children of Vicki's brother. Marlena said that she'd heard about Tony from Vicki, but had never seen him in person. Nor had she ever seen Ernie. I called her father, Vicente, to ask if he had ever seen Tony. "I don't know who this kid is you're talking about," he said. "I don't know anything about him at all."

Marlena told me that she thought Vicki had worked as a nurse and as a writing teacher. But records show that Vicki was never licensed as a nurse in



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New York or in New Jersey, or as a social worker in either state.

I went to Emerson High School, Vicki's old school, a few blocks away, and looked her up in the Class of 1975 yearbook. She was listed as Joanne V. Friginals. She had blond hair and a pleasant smile, and was noticeably overweight. Joanne had not been voted Most Anything in the senior poll, but, as a former teacher and a former classmate told me, she'd seemed "nice." Under Joanne's yearbook picture, the legend read "Appreciates 'Oldies but goodies' . . . warm-hearted and friendly." Her plans were listed as "Free-Lance Journalism."

Vicki did not return any of my messages. But Jack Godby, the AIDS counsellor who became Tony's dad and who remains close to him, warned me that my inquiries were futile. "Before I came along, names were changed and all kinds of things were done with records," he said. "So you have no chance of ever finding out the real story."

Years ago, Vicki told Darryl Ponicsan that she knew Mario Cuomo through their work together on a children's committee. She said that Cuomo, as governor, had helped to speed up Tony's adoption, to alter certain records, and to keep the trial of Tony's parents out of the papers. I called Cuomo at his law office in Manhattan. He told me he did not recall dealing with a Tony Johnson or a Vicki Johnson or a Vicki Friginals.

At that point, last April, a surprise expert weighed in with a definitive explanation for the Union City mysteries—Anthony Godby Johnson himself. "I have heard that you are trying to find information about me," Tony wrote in a brief E-mail. "Why don't you ask me?" I wrote back, expressing pleasure at the contact and explaining that I was trying to discover what had happened to him. I also asked if he didn't think it might be time, at age twenty-three, to meet some of his friends.

I received a long E-mail in reply. Tony began by calling my letter "presumptuous, disrespectful and contemptuous," and went on to suggest that he wasn't worth writing about: "I am boring, sometimes depressing and lovable only to those who really love me. I don't love many people and call very few friends." He said that the house in Union City was just his mailing address; his real address had been—and remained—confidential, because people

often responded to his story by wanting to make him their guru. One man, he wrote,

sent me a photo of his penis, a penis he claimed was too large to slide a condom on and that was why he got HIV. There was a woman who staged her death and memorial service and wanted me to "be there" while she took pills to "euthanize" herself. People wanted me to talk to their children, a teacher wanted me to write to her students once a week. . . . I paid a high price for people calling me an inspiration, and it wasn't anything I sought. . . . Just because I choose to speak to people or chat on the computer it doesn't mean that I have to go further.

Addressing other points of concern, Tony said that he treasured his friendship with Rabbi Ze'ev Falk but would never have asked him to attend his deathbed, because when you're dying you want to be alone: "If in fact Rabbi Falk was misled someone else did it because I did not." He also said that he considered Armistead Maupin only "a casual friend":

I did care about him because he was funny, sometimes loving, and I thought he was a decent person. I felt he respected me. He didn't and now that is clear. When he told me that he intended to write this book, he acted as though he and Terry Anderson were my champions and my dear friends. I asked Armistead point blank, "Do you believe in me?" And he, in his most reassuring voice, said, "Of course."

He concluded with an anguished rumination on the problems of the world, and advised me to write about children who live in misery, because he himself was a symbol of nothing. "I haven't hung out on the Web for close to two years, because I don't feel like it anymore," he said. "It takes energy I don't have. You ask about my health. I wouldn't wish it on anyone. What more can I say?"

I wrote back and asked him if he ever thought about why so many people saw his life as a parable. (I also apologized for having hung up a few days earlier, when I had called the Zackheim house: I hadn't expected the old phone number to work, and was unprepared to conduct an interview.) And I noted, delicately, that Vicki had lived in the building in Union City for most of the nineteen-nineties, and that he had written a book that centered on being adopted into her house. As they both often spoke on the same phone calls, how could he not have been living there, too? He did not reply.

I was therefore unable to broach an-

other topic: through someone close to Tony, I had received an audiotape, made in 1993, of a phone conversation that included the voices of both Vicki and Tony. I had asked two premier voice analysts to examine the tape. One expert said that because the quality of the tape was poor, and because Tony and Vicki hadn't used many words in common, he was unable to attempt a determination about whether they were the same person. But Tom Owen, who has worked with the New Jersey State Police and the Justice Department, felt that the tape provided sufficient material. Using a machine called a spectrograph, Owen compared such characteristics as "aural mannerisms, perceived pitch, rate, breath patterns, and syllable coupling." He concluded that "the adult female" was speaking nearly throughout the tape—that Vicki, in other words, was pretending to be Tony. Confoundingly, however, Owen believed that a small percentage of Tony's speech on the phone tape was the voice of an actual child. This conclusion of Owen's made no sense at all. If Tony was real, there was no need for Vicki to fake his voice. If he wasn't, why would she fake his voice at one point and then have a real child play him at another?

It was another instance in which it seemed that Tony simultaneously both did and did not exist. He was like Schrödinger's cat. In 1935, the physicist Erwin Schrödinger explained a core principle of quantum mechanics by proposing a thought experiment. If you placed a cat in a cage with an apparatus that has a fifty-per-cent chance of killing the cat within an hour, then what is the state of the cat after the hour? Quantum theory says that until you observe the cat it can be thought of as simultaneously dead and alive.

By eluding definitive observation, Tony remained perpetually real and perpetually imaginary.

After Tony cut off communication with me, I flew to Chicago and drove to Lake Bluff to try one last time to speak with Vicki. I found her house, walked up a slate path, and rang the doorbell. Two minivans were parked out front, so I expected that both Zackheims would be at home.

Dr. Marc Zackheim, a burly man in his fifties with a pleasant smile, came to the door. When I introduced myself, his expression clouded. "Hold on," he said before

I could explain further, and shut the door. After a minute, he poked his head out: "It'll be a second—we're on the phone."

Ten minutes later, a police car pulled in to the driveway. A young cop hopped out and charged me at a half run. "Could you take your hand out of your pocket, sir?" he said. "Could you move away from the house?"

A second prowler car drove up, and an older cop got out. After conferring with Dr. Zackheim, the older cop told me, "He wanted you led away in handcuffs."

Back in New York, I began to hear from a number of people in Tony's inner circle whom I had tried to reach earlier: many of them sent me E-mails that were copied to Tony's agent, Wendy Weil. Often, a question I had asked one person was addressed or dismissed in an E-mail from another person. In June, a seventy-six-page dossier arrived at *The New Yorker*; it had been put together by Lesley Karsten and was intended to prove Tony's existence. It contained letters testifying to Tony's extraordinary qualities and decrying my supposed persecution of him, lengthy résumés detailing the credentials of the letter writers, and excerpts from Tony's writings.

More recently, the magazine received letters from three friends of Tony's who declared that they had met the boy in person. Tony's godmother, an artist named Sharon Kagan, said that a few years ago she was "in the same room with Tony and Vicki, at the same time." She added that Tony no longer looked like his earlier photos: "AIDS has taken its toll on this sweet boy. He is thin, to the point of being emaciated, and has a horrible skin condition." Leana Jones, a twenty-three-year-old writer, noted, "I am not a member of Tony's family and there is no motive I could possibly have to lie about any of this. . . . I would only be risking my own integrity."

At no point did Tony's friends provide any medical, educational, or financial records to make their case, but Lesley Karsten followed up with an E-mail and a long letter to the magazine that dismissed the idea of a hoax. She denied having summoned Rabbi Falk to Tony's deathbed, quoted from an article she said Tony is working on about the unhappy experience of being written about, and said that his work was a gift to everyone who had ever been abused: "If Mr.

Friend discredits Tony's experiences, he does the same for hundreds of others. But perhaps that is the ultimate goal." She added that she could forward "hundreds of letters attesting to Tony's existence and his impact on people's lives."

A few weeks ago, I received a phone call from a woman named Lisa Lieberman Doctor and her husband, Dr. Ron Doctor, who had both contributed letters to the dossier. Ron's letter, written in his capacity as Tony's psychotherapist, warned that my inquiries were driving Tony into a potentially fatal depression. The Doctors now told me that Lesley Karsten was an old friend of Lisa's, and that she had stayed with them in Los Angeles for several months during the past two summers. Throughout this period, Lesley had told them, Tony was in an isolation ward of the N.I.H. Their understanding was that Lesley's husband, Jerry, was the only doctor allowed to see Tony, whose weight had recently dropped to fifty-three pounds; Jerry lived with him in quarantine and was treating him with experimental bone-marrow injections. For three years, Lesley told the Doctors, she had not seen her husband or her adopted son. (Karsten denies saying this.)

As a kindness to Lesley, Ron Doctor had informally counselled Tony, without pay, over the phone and by instant-message for much of the last year. Jerry DiNicola told Ron that these sessions brought Tony's fever down from highs of a hundred and five degrees, and Ron felt that he was helping to keep Tony alive.

A few days before they telephoned me, the Doctors said, they had got a call from an acquaintance of Lesley's who had mentioned that Jerry DiNicola had AIDS and was a patient at the N.I.H. They were astounded. Why hadn't Lesley ever told them this? They began thinking, Why was it that Tony's and Jerry's vocal patterns were so similar? Why couldn't they recall ever hearing a story from Lesley or seeing a photograph which established that she and Jerry had, at least once in the

course of their six-year marriage, been in the same room? Were Tony and Jerry merely voices created by Vicki Zackheim? Could Lesley have been hoodwinked into believing that she had a husband and son?

Ron went to his computer that night and instant-messaged Jerry, bluntly announcing his suspicions. Jerry kept dodging his questions, and grew increasingly defensive. "How do I deal with Tony?" Jerry wrote. "You tell Tony that you are a phony, and that that aspect of you that is Tony should forgive you," Ron replied. He has not heard from Tony or Jerry since.

During this online exchange, Lesley telephoned the Doctors. Ron angrily asked her, "Are Jerry and Tony the same person?" and Lesley hung up. Since then, Karsten has cut off all communication with the Doctors.

Right after Ron logged off with Jerry, the phone rang again. It was Marc Zackheim, and he sounded uncomfortable. When Lisa told him about Jerry's shiftiness, Zackheim explained that Jerry was in the Witness Protection program. This was completely bewildering—as far as the Doctors knew from Lesley, he'd always been Jerry DiNicola from the DiNicola family of roofers in Brooklyn. (In an E-mail to the magazine, DiNicola said, "There were name changes and they are confidential and they will remain so.") A few days later, Ron received a blistering E-mail from Father Anthony Fedell, a Franciscan priest based in Fair Lawn, New Jersey, who ran the Wholesome Hugs chat room. Father Fedell said that he had met Tony and Jerry, and that Tony was devastated by Ron's "amazing, perfidious change."

Ron answered Fedell by laying out the case for a hoax, and concluding, "Here is my concern. I believe that Vicki will 'kill off' Tony after the article in order to bypass any further inquiry. . . . You and I are going to be used to perpetrate these exits. I will be blamed for Tony's death because I abandoned him in his moment of need. . . . Jerry will follow from a broken heart and his own struggle with AIDS. You will be asked to give last rites and to comfort Lesley," who will be left "alone and abandoned."

A few months earlier, Fedell sent me an instant-message telling me, "I have been with Tony many times and have blessed him, and even given him the last rites!" I asked Fedell why Tony



was wary of letting anyone meet him. The instant-message dialogue continued:

FATHER FEDELL: There are those who do not believe, even if they see. It has to do with not being pure enough, I think, to understand someone as remarkable as Tony. . . .

ME: If I could meet with you, and you could tell me in person that you've spent time with Tony, that would be very substantive. (The problem, I'm afraid, with all respect, is that online I can't be sure who "you" are.)

FATHER FEDELL: You cannot disprove the existence of truth. That simply renders you a fool. You are on a mission of folly, I assure you. And I am outraged by it. . . . If you had any IDEA of Tony, you would be humbled by knowing him and ashamed of your current activities.

It seemed to me that Tony's story is a powerful sorting device that confuses even as it clarifies. It separates the cynics from the romantics, yet leaves both wandering in the enemy camp. Cynics decide that Tony's story is simply too filled with darkness, death, and shocking incident to be true; that human nature, in other words, is gentler and more predictable than Tony says. Yet romantics who choose to believe in Tony must also believe in a world where celebrity sex rings operate with impunity and orderlies make routine bets on when sick children will die—a savage world, indeed.

Armistead Maupin's fans snapped up *"The Night Listener,"* and it became a *Times* best-seller. On a book tour last fall, Maupin was buttonholed a few times by readers who asked if the book was based on Tony Johnson. He always ducked the question, trying to assuage his conscience about having written the book in the first place. Maupin told me that he also hoped that the book would encourage Tony—if he exists—to come forward and meet with him at last. He had sent Vicki an early copy for Tony to read. She had told Maupin that she'd send it along: "Don't worry. I'm very good about not reading Tony's mail." Having completed the book, Maupin had a fresh perspective. As he talked with Vicki, he thought, It's him—I can hear it in her voice. He has not heard from Tony again.

"The Night Listener" has an ambiguous ending. When Gabriel (the character based on Maupin) arrives unannounced at the house of Donna (the character based on Vicki), she shows him an empty hospital-style bed and tells him that Pete (Tony) has just died.



"You know, I've often wondered where the fuse box is myself."

A few days later, Pete calls Gabriel in San Francisco: "I know what Mom told you, but she was just trying to get people off our backs. . . . I couldn't stand the thought of you thinking I was dead. You're the only reason I even feel alive."

When I visited Maupin again recently, I noticed that he had removed Tony's photo from his living room. But he told me, "Tony's still more real to me than many people who demonstrably do exist. I wrote the ending of the book the way I'd like it to be in life, because I'd have great trouble killing that child in my head."

For her part, Lisa Doctor says, "It blows my mind that I was ever drawn in. But in some sick way I'm going to miss Tony. I liked knowing that he was out there in his oxygen tent espousing love."

After I stopped trying to find Tony, I started thinking about "The Velveteen Rabbit," the book that Tony's Pop carried with him everywhere and that Tony sent as a gift to his friend Amanda Kernish. It occurred to me that the children's classic embodies the yearning at the heart of the Tony Johnson story. In Margery Williams's tale, a stuffed rabbit, given to a boy as a Christmas present, becomes a real rabbit after the boy contracts scarlet fever. The rabbit comes alive because the boy loves him:

"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real."

"Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.

"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt."

Armistead Maupin and Terry Anderson recently sent me Tony's first letter to them, from 1992. It was a Christmas card. The front shows a jolly Santa, and under it is the famous question that the schoolgirl Virginia O'Hanlon asked the *New York Sun* in 1897: "Please tell me the truth. Is there a Santa Claus?" Inside was a warm note in Tony's hand, and also a printed message, the reply that the *Sun's* editor, Francis P. Church, made to O'Hanlon. Beside it, Tony had written, "My favorite," with an arrow. "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus. He exists as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist," Church reassured Virginia, and Tony sought to reassure Maupin and Anderson. "You might get your papa to hire men to watch all the chimneys on Christmas eve to catch Santa Claus, but even if they did not see Santa Claus coming down, what would that prove? The most real things in the world are those that neither children nor men can see." ♦