

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author wishes to express his gratitude for the good graces of several people who gave invaluable support and inspiration to the writing of this book. *Frontiers* (and especially its editor, David Kalmansohn), where "Puck" first appeared. Merloyd Lawrence, for generously sharing her memories of Aunt Gert. Tad Mosel, for his definitive life of Katharine Cornell—*Leading Lady* (Atlantic-Little Brown, 1978)—written with Gertrude Macy. Brother Toby, Sister Marti, and Sister Julie, whose mission at Starcross Community is a wonder of light out of darkness. Bishop Otis Charles, for his great personal courage in single-handedly changing the balance in the House of Bishops. Ma Jaya and her tireless workers at Kashi Ranch, for the blessings they've brought to a suffering people. Neil Baldwin, Executive Director of the National Book Foundation, for uncountable kindnesses and efficiency in shepherding my lecture at the Library of Congress. The Op-Ed staff at *The New York Times*, where a portion of "The Politics of Silence" first appeared. Laurence Goldstein and the staff of the *Michigan Quarterly Review*, where "Mustering" first appeared. My doctors—especially James Thommes, Robert Jenkins, and Aaron Aronow—for keeping my head above water. And Barbara Horwitz, diagnostician *sine qua non*. Tony Johnson, for his gift of humor in calamitous times and the brave example of his own writing. Wendy Weil, my agent and friend for twenty years, for her staunch enthusiasm and her great heart. Finally, Drenka Willen, my editor at Harcourt Brace, for her intellectual rigor and unfailing good humor in the service of keeping me honest.

# GETTING COVERED

## I

THERE'S THIS TO BE SAID for being marginalized as an artist, laboring in obscurity, year after unsung year—you get to develop a voice of your own, unfiltered by fawning overpraise or the exigencies of the marketplace. It doesn't mean you don't want it all: your name in lights on Forty-fifth and Broadway, a window display at Rizzoli, a GAP full-page in tee-shirt and baggy pants. But when it doesn't happen and doesn't happen, you begin to see you've got nothing to lose. This is a good place to start taking more and more risks with your work, assuming you don't fall into bitterness and envy of the overpraised, thus chewing your own spleen like a raven. And even then you might write something true, bile being as good as ink. But mostly you will have avoided being smothered by what Gore Vidal calls “bookchat.”

When I was a kid we used to have a conundrum in the schoolyard, an early warning of the Hobson's choices life would set in your path. *Would you rather eat one bowl of Eisenhower's snots*, we would ask the unsuspecting, *or two bowls with*

as much sugar on top as you like? There was no right answer of course, but our schoolmates, ever prudent, would usually opt for the second choice. Thus in later years would they find themselves ready for bookchat.

During the years when I was writing poems exclusively, there was no bookchat for miles in any direction. Budding poets would fob themselves off on one another with reams of Xerox copies. If recognition was to be courted at all—nothing so vulgar as fame—it was by way of being elevated to the Pantheon, with Frost and Auden and Lowell and the Misses Moore and Bishop. Otherwise one masticated the crumbs as best one could. Especially a penciled scribble at the bottom of a *New Yorker* rejection slip: *nice work* or, even better, *send more*. One dared not hope that the unsigned bit of reassurance had come from Howard Moss himself, the poetry wizard of that particular Oz.

Still less did one dare to dream of an actual *acceptance*: a poem in the magazine, interleaved between the pages of an Isaac Singer story, with a Booth cartoon on the facing page. One could only imagine reaching that height of cosmopolitan splendor.

It was very rare to see a poet interviewed in print, except in the littlest magazines of the trade. No poet ever sat for a radio call-in or, heaven forbid, a television appearance. If you were *really* well connected in the poetry biz—a poetician as it were—you could aspire someday to the *Paris Review*, the series called *Writers at Work*. But that was about as far as one could go, publicity-wise. One's ambition and competition were on a higher plain entirely: tilting at the windmill of anthologies, holding out for a place among the centuries, rubbing shoulders with Keats and Emily Dickinson.

Poets weren't part of the gossip at large. Remember, this was a time when dinosaurs still roamed the earth, before the invention of *People*. Yet even without a central clearing-house

for personal trivia, poets knew all the gossip about one another, almost by osmosis. The status of various rocky marriages; who was on lithium, who was not; how drunk they were for their reading at the Y. A viper's tongue was part of your poetical equipment.

At twenty-eight I executed a U-turn and made for the ranks of the novelists. Only to be marginalized ever more pointedly, because I published a novel populated almost exclusively by gay men. It didn't feel like such a revolutionary move, and I was supremely unaware of being part of a vaster historic thrust to create a literature on the margin. Of course my novel was largely ignored by those poisoned malarial waters that constituted the *mainstream*. But I did fall into the babbling brook of the gay alternative press, whose own gathering presence announced the arrival on the scene of a wave of gay and lesbian writers and artists. *Out* writers and artists, which distinguished us from our forebears and all their brave euphemisms to keep from being labeled *queer*. With all proper deference to Whitman and Proust and Genet and James Baldwin. Perhaps it's more accurate to say that we were the first generation post-Stonewall to be out and proud in our work, no apologies. But who knew that we were a whole new literary movement?

The alternative press practiced a kind of anything-goes journalism, vital and irreverent. There was the *Gay Community News* in Boston, the *Blade* in Washington, the *Bay Area Reporter* in San Francisco. These and several more were at the urban core of our presence in cities across the country; and *The Advocate* still in its youth but fighting to be a truly national voice.

Cub reporters would call, and you could hear them typing furiously to get it all down, or covering the receiver to bellow for silence in some noisy downtown loft. Gay news was a palpable thing, its presses running on overtime. The questions



they asked were political and frivolous by turns, but in any case the opposite of the turgid academics of the *Saturday Review of Literature* and its ilk. Because my central character was a thinly disguised portrait of Dietrich, the interviewer could give it a nice camp spin, asking me to theorize as to what made an icon gay. They wanted to know my sun sign, and whether I'd ever been to Fire Island. Who was my boyfriend, and did I believe in monogamy? And my favorite color? Green, with purple a very close second.

Yet underneath it all there was a far more serious matter to be pondered: *Was there a gay sensibility?* The question would be asked in a variety of guises—but always uncertainly, as if fearful that an affirmative answer would leave us all ghettoized. Yet I agreed there was, without any hesitation, even if I had to stumble to put it into words. Yes, we wrote with an outsider's angle, and we wrote from a place of invisibility. More than most people—especially the straight white male variety—we had to invent ourselves out of whole cloth. There was a certain naivete about us, pugnacious but with a wild aim, that marked the delayed adolescence which attended our coming out. One thing was sure, this gay sensibility was a good deal more complicated than doing fabulous windows at Bendel's or sewing bugle beads for pop divas.

We asked more questions than we answered in those early years of the seventies, as a literature slowly began to coalesce around our fundamental uniqueness as a tribe. Gay Christianity, gay teen suicide, gay substance abuse, gay Meccas, and gay families. Our differentness had as many departments as *Time* and *Newsweek* put together. It was only in 1973, after all, that we ceased to be a disease, when they finally dropped us from the diagnostic manual of crazies. We were still a fair decade or more from the tangles of Political Correctness and the locked horns of Queer Theory, the essentialists butting heads with the social constructionists. So there was a window of time where

we had the freedom to self-define, a sense of ourselves as recording and witnessing what had only been shadows before; present at the creation of something unheard of.

This situation gave us the ground to consider whether gay men and lesbians could ever be brothers and sisters. Did the passions of radical feminism dictate that we would always be on separate tracks? As to the further business of whether a truce between gay and straight could ever be achieved, the jury was still out on that. I can't begin to say how many times I was asked: *Are you a gay writer or a writer who happens to be gay?* Definitely the former, though many of my friends weren't ready to bite that bullet yet. To them, *gay writer* sounded more political than literary.

Sometimes the reviews and interviews exhibited a certain bitchiness, or a pettiness nursed by free-lance journalists who had a novel or two of their own in a desk drawer, longing to be clothbound. Sometimes, to the contrary, the critical judgments of the gay press were far too lenient, so much puffery. There was a tug-of-war between a genuine critical rigor and a well-meaning enthusiasm that owed a good deal to the shiny domain of the press agent.

But at least the coverage was by our own, and so we gave it a lot of latitude. I sold first serial rights to *The Gold Diggers* to *Blueboy* magazine, which printed the chapter about Sam the hustler in two parts, two consecutive issues. It was a bit of a stretch, I admit, to see my pages of limpid prose tucked between photo spreads of donkey dicks and fantasies of getting it on with telephone repairmen. The aspiration to Isaac Singer and the Booth cartoon still had its hooks in me somewhere. But then, there was a certain camp rightness to the *Blueboy* juxtaposition—definitely a turn-on for a man like Sam, and no less so for his creator.

Memory has mercifully blurred the details, but I still cringe when I think of the interview I gave to *After Dark*, a sort of

all-purpose entertainment guide from the seventies with lots of pictures of dancers stripped to their tights. Gay was the unspoken subtext, though it dared not speak its name. My interviewer was the redoubtable Norma McLain Stoop, an eccentric gargoyle of a lady whose gushing fealty to show biz was nonetheless infectious. So excitable she could barely sit in her chair, maybe fifty-five behind all that rouge, and with a proprietary feeling about her boys in the business. What the cruel and limiting argot of the times would have called a *fag hag*, which did no justice to her overflowing loyalty and sense of fun.

We talked for a whole afternoon, her tape recorder reeling, and I was juiced at the thought of expressing myself to what was at least a tributary of the mainstream. I was full of insufferable opinions, I fear, grand and glam and playing to the balcony. What appeared about two months later was a two-page profile called "Proust on the Pacific," the most excruciating aspect of which was that the title was a direct quotation. I argued that the mythic realm of Hollywood was ripe for a troubadour (me) who would seize its jeweled heart. I sounded like . . . well, Norma Scoop herself, overblown and blowsy and insufferably precious.

Around that time, 1979 or thereabouts, I was in San Francisco to give a reading at the oldest (indeed, the only) gay and lesbian bookstore in the Bay Area. I spent an evening with an old friend from the Boston years, a writer who was in residence at a local university. He was living in a latter-day hippie commune with a half dozen other bohemian types. Amid much laughter my friend and I went off to dinner, accompanied by the young man who rented the attic room.

A quiet-spoken, self-effacing sort, who did manage to tell me he was a stringer for one of the gay rags. All evening I thought he and my friend were an item, but I was too Waspy polite to ask them directly. I had never experienced the

particular press negotiation as to what was “on the record” and what was off. I didn’t think we were having an interview. The dish flew fast and loose as I regaled them with tales out of school about Hollywood movers and shakers. We were all entertaining one another, I thought, with no holds barred when it came to being outrageous.

On Sunday I returned to L.A., told Roger about our friend’s peregrinations in academia, and never even mentioned the tyro journalist. Ten days later the bookstore owner in San Francisco sent me a clipping from one of the alternative weeklies. The meek-mannered tyro had done me up as a feature, regaling his audience with nuggets about this glib and fatuous lightweight from Tinseltown. He repeated stories about the mating habits of stars that were never meant to go beyond the hair dryer. He painted me as a rich son-of-a-bitch, pulling zeroes out of the air as he speculated about my unearned income.

I’d talked too much, it was as simple as that. No excuse not to have realized that a journalist, however much a dweeb in person, was always taking notes for a story. And if I was too stupid to specify *off the record*, then he could hardly be blamed for assuming every word I said was *on*—fair game, as it were. I’d forgotten the first rule of caution, most tellingly expressed in Joan Didion’s preface to *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*:

My only advantage as a reporter is that I am so physically small, so temperamentally unobtrusive, and so neurotically inarticulate that people tend to forget that my presence runs counter to their best interests. And it always does. That is one last thing to remember: *writers are always selling somebody out.*<sup>1</sup>

---

1. Joan Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1968), page xvi.

My comings and goings went pretty much unreported during the next few years, when I was working as a bottom-feeder in the Hollywood sewer system. At that time anyway, writers were the very last players in the fame game. Yet even then I managed to score a few points, though I hadn't hit the ball myself, hadn't so much as taken a swing. I had just turned in a screenplay to Universal, my first for hire. In other words, I'd launched myself into a system which would tear the pages into confetti, and the confetti into dust. All of that would take a couple of years, the inchmeal cure for innocence.

But in the first flush of studiochat, some enterprising publicist had leaked a blind item. I woke up one morning to find myself, picture and all, in Liz Smith's column in the *Daily News*. The caption under my beamish face was this: *From zilch to \$150,000*. The accompanying story told of my meteoric rise to the heights of lucre, so sizzling was my screenplay. Not a word of it true, but so what? It upped the ante of interest among those bankable stars who could get a picture green-lighted. And thus ensued a period of delirious fallout, during which Dustin and Meryl and Faye and Warren were variously bandied about as "this close" to a deal.

Don't hold your breath. My screenplay would be lining birdcages soon enough. But for *years* afterward I would hear from marginal forgotten friends and guys I went to college with. They'd seen my Liz Smith item in syndication in the morning paper, from Baltimore to Singapore. I was congratulated a good deal more for the item than for the screenplay—which by then had long faded into development limbo, land of the undead. The prevailing sound bite about me, whether I liked it or not, was that I was rich and famous. Well, I didn't mind it that much. But it struck me even at the time that the press could paint an image of you without any input from you at all. And without any countervailing influence, that image took hold as the truth.

I could see why actors and other royals went ballistic when

they read the lies and slander perpetrated by the tabloid press. At the same time I could see what an easy ride they had from the mainstream Hollywood press, where the news was always soft and cutesy. A true collaboration of press-agentry and a willing mouthpiece, oiled by princely lunches and floral tributes so lush that a journalist had to paw his way through orchids to get to his computer. Good publicity was all. And of course they wouldn't dream of mentioning that anyone was gay or lesbian. The show marriages were enshrined like the spun-sugar figures crowning a wedding cake. No one ever bothered to report that the cake was made of Eisenhower's snots.

Cut to 1988, when I published *Borrowed Time*. By then I had been in the AIDS trenches for a good five years, and my main perception of the press was nauseated contempt for their non-coverage of the calamity. To be sure, there had been an avalanche of stories surrounding the death of Rock Hudson in the fall of '85. But their main thrust was prurient, with a scarcely concealed overlay of *Schadenfreude*. And of course they affected to be "shocked, shocked"—in the immortal words of Claude Rains in *Casablanca*—to learn that Hudson was gay.

Make no mistake, the press was as much to blame as the Reagan/Bush genocide machine for the gloating ignorance and shame that attached to this "gay disease." Their constitutional inability to talk about gay in any context at all—the editors were men's men—precluded even a pretense of compassion. When I agreed to go out on the road with *Borrowed Time*, an eight-city tour, I was wary at best, frightened at worst. Already there had been reports of camera crews refusing to be in the same studio as a person with AIDS. The country was in full-scale panic, no amount of reassurance convincing the populace that the virus couldn't be passed by mosquito and toilet seat.

I went first to Houston, my virgin exposure to drive-time call-ins. Sitting across from the host in flyboy earphones,



scarcely exchanging a word with him as he zigzagged from ad spot to weather to Debbie June in the traffic chopper. He had clearly never so much as opened my book, relying on the poop sheet from the publisher. "You look all right to me," he said. "How much time do you think you have?" He seemed concerned that I might go into a coma right there in his sound booth. Always in those years one had to begin with AIDS 101, countering the stupefying lack of information. And when we turned it over to the phones, the first caller informed me that I had got exactly what I deserved, almost gleeful that the nation would soon be rid of the whole lot of us Sodomites.

That was the general tone in the summer of '88. In Berkeley, on the Pacifica station, which tended to have a liberal/rad listenership, a woman told me that she'd read in a book passed out in church that "you homosexamils eat each other's feces because you've got the devil inside you." I'd never given much thought, frankly, to the devil's diet. But I was beginning to get a grip on slinging the shit right back—ticking off the dangerous lunacies of the Christian fundies and their loving dictum that we should all "Thank God for AIDS."

In Boston, a caller to WBZ Radio earnestly demanded that everyone with AIDS be quarantined. And how were we going to do that? "All those Jap barracks in California," he replied instantly. "That'd be perfect. Or send all these sickos to live with the Indians, and blockade all the roads."

"Sir," I replied dryly, "do you know what a concentration camp is?"

"You're damn right I do. It's time we started building them again, too."

That tour was my first encounter with raw hate, and what was so chilling about it was how nationwide its reach was. On the whole the radio hosts didn't challenge any of the lies, leaving it to me to extricate myself as best I could. By comparison, the print media were a saner class entirely. Over and over I'd sit down with mainstream reporters, quickly aware of how



many were coming from a place of pain and shame. If they didn't apologize directly for their papers' sins of omission in covering the plague, they would almost always blurt out that their brother or neighbor or high school sweetheart had died of AIDS. They were determined to right the balance, to clear their own conscience if nothing else.

I didn't set out to be the AIDS Poster Boy, but willingly entered the breach in cities that hadn't yet put a face to the epidemic. Rock Hudson and Ryan White were not enough, too easily dismissed with a curt *Not me* on the way to the sports page. There were hundreds of cases all around, but none with sufficient access to the media. In many places I was the first feature profile, certainly the first taste of nuclear rage as I ticked off the culprits at the NIH and the CDC.

Generally, these encounters with the press were a nice curative for the drive-time citizen hate squad. Not that even the most passionate and well-meaning of them could keep up with the gay and lesbian press, which had been covering the horrors of the war since the first cases surfaced in '81. Our own reporters had grown leaner and tougher in the heat of battle, and they'd developed a rigorous skepticism about the numbers put out by the government. For ten years we were asked to believe that the infected HIV population in the States was a cool million. Never a change in that statistic, even as the full-blown caseload climbed above the quarter million mark. It was as if the epidemic had stopped in its tracks to allow a head count, and from then on a million was the benchmark—and such a nice round number besides, so why revise it? To admit that the numbers kept growing and growing would have made them have to face the burgeoning caseload of women and adolescents.

The mainstream press, like so many sheep, accepted whatever the government said. It was journalism by press release. Whereas the gay and lesbian journalists knew how to call a lie

a lie and made mincemeat of the bureaucrats' every pronouncement. The New York *Native* probably led the way, questioning the validity of HIV itself, accusing the establishment of fudging the basic science. Their hectoring campaign against AZT bordered on the nutty, to be sure, yet time is beginning to prove them close to the mark. Then, they were prophets without honor in a system ruled by drug conglomerates and Reagan's Mormon appointees.

And even as we covered the story better, withering all the government's forays in spin control, that group of writers who had colonized the margin after Stonewall had grown into a juggernaut of personal witness. Andrew Holleran was writing knife-edge essays for *Christopher Street*, pulling them together in *Ground Zero*. Ed White and Adam Mars-Jones had collaborated on a collection of stories—*The Darker Proof*—alternating voices of the damned. Larry Kramer, our very own Cassandra, had written a devastating indictment of complacency, "1112 and Counting," and followed it up with the white-hot Brechtian fury of *The Normal Heart*.

Witnessing was for most of us a way to keep from going mad. In city after city, the most provincial of which now supported a vital gay and lesbian bookstore, I'd face a line of war-torn refugees who wanted their books inscribed. *My lover died last week*, one would tell me; and the next, a woman who couldn't stop crying, would choke out that she'd lost two brothers in a single year. Nurses who worked in AIDS wards; the children of secret bisexuals, still in shellshock. And the sick themselves, bone-thin and limping from neuropathy, pared down to the last essential core, refined by fire until they seemed as pure as crystal, waiting to shatter. Besides being unbearably moving, they came to honor me for my writing—till I thought I would shatter myself out of sheer unworthiness.

But as far as *all the news that's fit to print* was concerned, it was all taking place in a faraway country, remote as the cloud

of flies that swarmed about the starving in the Sudan. Good for the occasional wrenching update, but not the least bit sexy. *And we were that country.* Dying in the corridors of emergency rooms because body bags were easier to fill than beds. Burnout was the general rule among those who'd stayed too long at the front, and the geometric numbers led to what they called *multiple loss syndrome*. So now we had two syndromes going at once, the sickness unto death and the emptiness after, like juggling a pair of chainsaws. And no one gave a damn unless we did, shouting into the din of indifference, in George Whitmore's haunting phrase: *Someone was here.*

I didn't go out on the road again for another two years. I gave a few incendiary speeches, and in October '88 took part in the exorcism of the FDA, working with Vito Russo as press liaison, copping a millisecond of national exposure on the CBS *Evening News*. I started getting called for sound bites by reporters on the AIDS beat, especially to comment on the latest cure-of-the-week. I tried to take my cue from Larry Kramer, spouting a whole laundry list of the closeted creeps who kept letting us die. If I didn't develop quite the reputation as a crank that Larry did, it was not for want of trying. I hammered at the televangelist queens and their brain-dead flocks, and announced that I no longer considered myself an American. Reagan/Bush had erased my citizenship.

By then the press and the country at large had found themselves a safe and tangible focus for the epidemic: the Quilt. It gave them permission to grieve and to wonder at the vastness of what was already lost. I wouldn't dream of diminishing the heart's force and anguish that stitched every patch of that monument. It resonated with healing power, bringing together legions of those left behind, heretofore isolated in scarred home towns and decimated cities. The Quilt shone with human endurance and the deepest family feeling. Wherever it went the minicam vans were there, close-up on bro-

kenhearted remnants as the beat reporter provided voiceover in sepulchral tones.

But I also understand why Steve, who'd sewn his share of panels over the years, would fly into a rage as the end approached: "And don't put me in that fucking quilt!" Being of a mind to have his body dumped instead on the White House lawn. The Quilt had begun to seem too passive, even too nice, letting the war criminals off the hook and providing the media with far too easy a wrapup. Much neater than trying to unravel the Gordian knot of AIDS activism, the Byzantine infighting and turf protection, the in-your-face bad manners of those who wouldn't go quietly. The quilted dead made for prettier sound bites, especially effective at zeroing in on the "innocent" victims, the kids and the hemophiliacs.

At the same time there began to appear a certain overview phenomenon under the general rubric of AIDS-and-the-Arts. Typically these were hand-wringing accounts of the impact of so much cultured dying, lamenting for instance the White Way silence left by Michael Bennett, the songs unsung. This litany was something of a mixed bag, bringing under the same umbrella the likes of Way Bandy and Halston, Miss Kitty and Keith Haring. Though it was surely true what Fran Lebowitz had so scathingly observed—

If you removed all of the homosexuals and homosexual influence from what is generally regarded as American culture, you would be pretty much left with "Let's Make a Deal."

—these roundups of the arts tended to foster in the general populace ever new heights of *Not me*.

As if artists breathed too rarefied an air, had far too much sex for their own good, and were generally frail from living on coffee and cigarettes. Reminiscent of Susan Sontag's

isolation of the consumptive personality in *Illness as Metaphor*, the Camille/Keats temperament, which served to distance a previous century from the country of the diseased.

Not that these various paeans to the disappeared among the artists weren't well-meaning. But they tended to conveniently not notice how many of the creative folk died with a lie on their lips, the death certificate as a kind of final cover-up. Died of lymphoma, died of a staph infection, anything but AIDS. The media couldn't seem to make the connection between the silencing by death and the Neanderthal backlash against the likes of Robert Mapplethorpe and David Wojnarowich. There was mad rejoicing among the Philistines and the family-values thugs about the double good fortune of snuffing out fags and dangerous artists in one fell swoop.

The hand-wringing reached a sort of apogee of sentimental dithering in the *Newsweek* cover story on the death of Rudolph Nureyev. While they strewed the bier with violets, eliciting prayerful reminiscences, Nureyev's doctor in Paris was rigorously denying rumors that the dancer had succumbed to AIDS. That was the final straw for this camel's back. Twelve years of fighting to tear down the prison of shame, to give the stricken some dignity, and this *prima ballerina* had singlehandedly restored to AIDS the status of dirty little secret.

I didn't question anyone's desire to keep his illness private. But to keep up appearances *after* death, especially for such an international figure, simply would not do. "I don't care how great a dancer he was," I told *Newsweek*. "He died a coward." This was not especially a popular sentiment at the time, but for my whole adult life I'd been hearing Nureyev pooh-pooh that he was gay. It was as if he lived in the high empyrean of the Muses, *hors de catégorie*, way above the tacky politics of gay. As *Vanity Fair* was quick to dish, this did not prevent him from cruising the parks and watering holes of queer Manhattan by night. So in denial about his own illness that he consistently

rejected his diagnosis to his doctor's face. And never a penny, so far as anyone knew, to a single gay and lesbian cause. But thanks for the pirouettes anyway.

I won't pretend that my burst of outrage had any effect on the doctor's decision to take back the lie, owning up to AIDS at a second news conference a few days later. He may well have realized on his own what a grotesque distortion his cover-up represented, how dismissive of the sufferings of millions. What I did manage to achieve, however, was the status of full-fledged crank—especially among balletomanes.

But here I am getting ahead of myself. I went out on the road again in the spring of 1990, this time with a novel to hawk. It was fairly quickly obvious that the press was inclined to be more sympathetic, if no bolder. A couple of print reporters who'd interviewed me the last time around had died in the interim, and not of old age. Several others actually pleaded with me to give them some new angle—any new angle—since their editors and bosses had decided that AIDS was yesterday's news.

I rose to the task immediately, sketching a portrait of the AIDS underground and its traffic in non-FDA-approved drugs. I was still pushing the fairy-tale notion that a regimen of effective medication was imminent—a mix of antivirals and immune boosters, what we called “the cocktail.” Yet even as those drugs became available, I cautioned, they'd be out of reach of America's vast Third World of poverty, where the virus burned like an inferno. I gave ACT UP a plug wherever possible, countering mistrust that we activists had gone too far this time. *What would YOU do*, I'd ask, *if you knew they had the drugs that would give you another year but refused to release them?*

Perhaps I had an easier time of it because the publisher had carefully avoided booking most of the drive-time call-in market. Or at least I was lucky to be playing the high end, Sonya Friedman on CNN and several appearances on Michael



Jackson's brainy show on ABC Talk Radio. When I reached Chicago I thought there had been some mixup, for I was scheduled to go on the air with a veteran right-wing smoothie who didn't bother to hide his upright Mormonism or his loyalty to Reagan/Bush. The publicist in New York knew only that the guy had asked for me, promising to treat me and my social diseases with a little respect. Deep down I figured he'd probably ambush me, but I wasn't afraid of a shouting match if it came to that.

I was ushered into the sound booth, two minutes to air-time, just as he was finishing sports. They went to commercial, and he shook my hand. A red-faced man in his sixties, bags under his eyes like steamer trunks and having a nuclear bad-hair-day. He told me he was sorry for all my losses and apologized for not reading my book. "I'm not going to take any callers," he said carefully. "My audience isn't exactly on your side." Whichever way he liked, I retorted. "Ten seconds, Ray," the producer bleeped in. But Ray was still taking his time, his basset face sagging with pain, looking away as he finally blurted it out. "I just found out—I mean he told me—my son is a homosexual. Good kid. I guess I've had it all wrong."

And we were on. His voice took on a craggy upbeat tone, avuncular and cozy, as he warned his audience not to change the station. I understood that what he'd told me was off-the-record, and that I'd heard all he was going to tell me. In the on-air segment he treated me with kid gloves, letting me make an impassioned plea for tolerance and complain that we'd wasted a decade scapegoating AIDS. He thanked me and went to commercial again. My publicist/driver hustled in to whisk me away, leaving me scarcely a moment to shake Ray's hand. "Your son's a lucky man," I said, and then both of us turned away.

All through Washington, Philadelphia, and New York I

couldn't get it out of my mind. Did he understand that I meant the boy was lucky to have him as a father? Didn't his Mormon bylaws require that the kid be shunned, his name unchiseled from the stone mountain of the blessed forever? Was he just gay, or did he have AIDS? I can still see the grappling in his father's eyes, the shaken faith. But more than anything else I saw the transfiguring power of a truth that had finally hit home. For better or worse, Mormon-wise, Ray was on our side now.

In New York we had managed to set up an appearance on *Geraldo*, and I agreed to be on the panel as long as Larry Kramer would join me. Talk about a venue where no respectable poet had gone before. Media-savvy friends warned me I was heading into quicksand, a tabloid format that managed to cheapen everything it touched. But I couldn't pass up a chance to address so large an audience, especially if they weren't the sort that ever read books. And the actual experience proved to be wholly satisfying, not least because Geraldo Rivera himself was superbly informed. He'd read the books and understood the numbers, and was using the occasion in a conscious effort to elevate the debate among his viewers.

Larry and I fell naturally into good cop/bad cop mode. Larry held up a sign accusing the writer on the plague desk of *The New York Times* of being "the worst AIDS reporter in America." We'd both been doing it so long that we were able to bulletin the tragedies and crimes of the epidemic rapid-fire, scarcely pausing for breath. I was the widow, reeling off the unimaginable pain and grief of families and lovers. One of our panelists was a lachrymose TV reporter from San Francisco, clearly very far gone himself. We left it to him to cover the dying part. And poor Mary McFadden, there to represent the design industry's commitment to stopping AIDS. When she proudly announced that they hoped to raise a million at some event, Larry turned on her in high dudgeon. Million shmillion. Calvin Klein could write a check that big himself

and not even miss it. Larry was especially hard on the self-satisfaction of charities. McFadden scarcely uttered another peep.

It was the AIDS circus in miniature. All that was needed to complete the circle was an official government liar and a peabraind televangelist. But I left that Times Square studio in a state of real exhilaration, figuring we had mixed it up in a way that showed how Hydra-headed was the monster we were fighting. And the upshot was that for *weeks* after the show aired, strangers would come up to me in the street, in coffee shops and multiplexes, to shake my hand and tell me they had seen me on *Geraldo*. Flattering in a surreal way, and meant to show support for my personal battle. But I was hard put to understand how so much individual decency would ever translate into public policy, however many minds we managed to change.

Over the next months I found it harder and harder to get it up for a one-man show of defiance and tempered optimism. I'd written four books about AIDS, and began to despair that a hundred books like *Borrowed Time* couldn't seem to save a single life. A period of diminishing returns, which ended up leaving me feeling both useless and used. I received plaques and proclamations from various organizations, glad to do it if it helped raise money to ease the dying. But I started to feel like a monument before my time, already stuck in a niche. And then Steve died at the end of the summer, not a month after I'd finished writing a love story whose joy was all because of him.

Sometime that autumn I heard that Larry was telling the press and our so-called leaders that the AIDS war was over and we'd lost it. That expressed it best, it seemed to me. Those magic bullets we'd smuggled in from Thailand and China and Mexico and France had all proven to be duds. The scientists bickered, and the politicians slashed. Nothing was going to stop the deaths of hundreds of thousands more gay men before

this beast was brought under control. And as salt in the wound, new studies were reporting that younger gay men weren't practicing safer sex anymore. Who cared, after all?

And yet, like a trained seal, I went out on tour again in the summer of '91, happily with Winston at my side. I talked about the novel I'd written for Steve, and what it meant to fall in love in the midst of war. AIDS was an absolute fact of life by then, intractable as poverty, no new angles and not much hope except among the New Age happy talkers. It was all I could do to speak about the difficulty of love in a race with time. I got about as much coverage as any other AIDS institution—a certain *pro forma* respect, lip service to the notion that two men could love as wholly as anyone else. As to how grotesque it was to bury two lovers and know that a third would bury me—that was a bit too much for the lifestyle pages.

By the time I took the dog-and-pony show out for *Becoming a Man*, I was six months into my own diagnosis, having nearly bought the farm with a drug reaction over New Year's. Two months later I had my first KS lesions, on my shoulder blade and the roof of my mouth. In June I was in for toxo, forcing me to cancel the East Coast leg of the tour, but somehow pulling it together in time for the western leg. By then the only occasions that meant anything to me were the bookstore signings, especially the queer ones. You knew that whoever showed up didn't need AIDS 101, and they seemed as ready as I to talk about something else for a change. In this case, the suffocation of the closet and the struggle to free ourselves from the last vestiges of self-hatred.

That ought to have been my swan song as a public figure in the flesh—though admittedly the last five years were beginning to resemble the farewell tour of an aging mezzo-soprano, milking those high notes for all they were worth. But I hadn't counted on the nomination for the National Book Award. Thus we found ourselves in tuxes, Winston and I, in the solid gold ballroom of the Plaza. Sitting around a table with my

editor, agent, and publicist, as well as the Joint Chiefs of Harcourt Brace. Having sternly announced to everyone I knew that I didn't stand an iceberg's chance in hell of winning.

Be careful what you don't dare wish for. When they announced my name the table fairly levitated in shocked delight, and the next five minutes were practically an out-of-body experience as I made my way to the judges' dais. All the Oscar speeches I'd made in my pajamas since I was eight—or kneeling before the King in Stockholm—happily didn't fail me. Like Maureen Stapleton I had the urge to thank everyone I'd ever met.

But I never did get back to my veal scallopini. With barely a segue I was in the middle of a press conference, grinning ear to ear as I answered the questions they lobbed at me, not a spitball in the bunch. I only recall them asking if I was the first gay writer to cop the prize. Probably not, I replied, but certainly the first person with AIDS. Of course I could've talked all night, but they had deadlines to meet. And it was time to yield the mike to Mary Oliver, who'd won the prize in poetry for an unsparing body of work—the smell of skunk in the morning air, the “old woman made out of leaves.” In her own acceptance speech she'd paid tribute to her lover, so the story of these awards was a gay and lesbian story, one way or another.

The avalanche of press attention would continue from mid-November to Christmas. Camera crews tracked heavy cable through the house, sending the dogs for cover. The print photographers had me frozen in various pretzel poses for hours at a stretch. But what was not to like about so much attention? The level of intelligence was gratifying in the extreme. They weren't too timid to include the dying part, and yet managed not to exploit it either. If this was my swan song with the press, it was easy as eating ice cream. All the same, by New Year's I was weary of it—time to go back to my essays and this race against the clock.

I had my moments of comeuppance, to be sure. A friend from Boston had left an impish message to the effect that now I had my Oscar for *Butterfield 8*—a reference to the prize they withheld from Elizabeth Taylor for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and the sympathy vote that put her over two years later in homage to her tracheotomy. The implication was that the powers that be in bookdom were making up for *Borrowed Time*. In some quarters there were dark rumblings that the judges had bowed to Political Correctness—though one of their number assured me at the ceremony that PC had worked against me first to last.

In any case, lest I be getting a swelled head from so much attention, I could always bring myself down a peg by recalling the *People* interview. During which I expatiated at length about the Greeks and the river of wisdom that coursed through all the centuries. When I finally paused for breath after fifteen minutes of loftiness, the interviewer grabbed his chance to ask the overriding question: “Who does the cooking?”

## II

Bear with me now—I have to backtrack to September '91. I'd finished the draft of *Becoming a Man* on Labor Day, seventeen years to the day after I met Roger. Winston and I were scheduled to leave for New York in mid-September, where I would attend two days of meetings at WNET, preliminary to writing a script about a multicultural cross-section of people with AIDS who are brought together in a drug study. We planned to drive up to Provincetown afterward, for a weekend on the cusp of autumn. Before we left I spent a few days answering a pile of mail from my readers, the old Wasp etiquette rearing its head: no letter must go unacknowledged.

An unusual missive had arrived that very week, written on lined paper in a kid's most earnest penmanship. His name was Tony Johnson, age thirteen, and he was writing to commend



me for *Borrowed Time* and *Love Alone*. Apologizing that he hadn't actually bought them, but traded them with a guy in the hospital for a stack of sports magazines. He didn't have AIDS, he told me, but understood about pain and chronic illness from his own experience. Parenthetically almost, he revealed that he'd been physically abused for years by his birth parents, hastening to add that he'd been adopted since by wonderful people. No self-pity, and especially no wish to bother me.

I sent a reply, just one of a couple of dozen, wishing Tony Johnson well and telling him he probably had the distinction of being my youngest fan. Ten days later we were back from our East Coast jaunt, and I discovered a message on my machine from Tony's adoptive mother—I'll call her Gayle. She said my note had really given him a boost, especially as his health just then was very rocky. She asked nothing from me either, but on impulse I picked up the phone and called. I coaxed from her the details of the boy's punishing journey—the sex abuse by his parents and their friends, serving him up like a sacrificial lamb for the sake of their darkest pleasures. Virtual starvation. And constant savage beatings, such that when he finally escaped the horror, the x-rays showed fifty-four bones broken throughout his riddled body.

As I would later say in my foreword to Tony's book, all I wanted to do right then was run. I'd been through enough torment and meaningless tragedy for close to a decade, and the last thing I needed was another case assignment. Gayle could hear the flinching in my voice and hastened to reassure me: "You don't *have* to talk to him. But you'll like him, I promise. He's not depressing at all."

Well, all right. And a half-minute later he was on the line, shy at first or a little in awe, but with an overriding hunger to talk to someone who understood. Now I have to say how cautious I was in these matters, having heard a veritable Homeric catalogue of miseries in the previous few years, as readers

reached out to connect. I drew a certain line in the sand, answering a letter once but almost never writing a second time to the same correspondent. I couldn't serve as everyone's support group; couldn't begin to slog through the piles of manuscripts that arrived every week, written in blood and tears. Besides, I wasn't in the market for any new friends. Even if most of my own friends were ghosts now, they were still the only ones who really understood *me*—as opposed to the Paul Monette who wrote my books. Otherwise I had Winston and the dogs and Victor, and that was about the limit of my heart's capacity. And I need to add that I'd never been especially good with kids, old as I was before my time, old by the time I was ten in fact. I never quite got the hang of them as a species.

But this kid was so disarming, so ebullient, loved to laugh so much, that I made an exception and found him room in the inner circle. It probably had a lot to do with the imminence of our two diagnoses. Tony might not have AIDS officially, but I for one wasn't buying that. When they first brought him in he had second-stage syphilis; and he'd suffered a stroke since then, having to learn to walk all over again. He was subject to "bleeds," which sounded like spontaneous eruptions from the magma of his tainted blood.

I got into the habit of calling him late at night, after Winston had gone to bed, because I knew they only slept in snatches in Tony's house. I got to know "the body mechanic," as Tony called him—a doctor friend who'd moved into the Johnson household for the duration, bearing the kid to the emergency room sometimes three and four times a week. Gayle's husband had meanwhile been called up from the Reserves and was mostly incommunicado. Tony would talk for hours about how lucky he'd been to land in such a loving home, where he actually had his own room, the first bed he'd ever slept in. A pair of sisters came with the deal, who bragged about having such a supersmart big brother. Indeed, he was exceedingly bright, finishing high school with tutors before he

was thirteen. We'd talk until the grate came clanking down, announcing that the bar across the street had closed for the night. It meant to Tony Johnson that he'd made it through another day.

Then, it must've been a month later, he finally broke through with an AIDS infection—no news to anybody in his inner circle, though the family were devastated all the same. I said all the appropriate hollow things, but at least convinced Tony that now we were “moonmen” together, referring to the exile Roger and I had felt in *Borrowed Time*. Mostly to distract him, I proposed with his permission to use him as the model for a character in *Trials*. He eagerly accepted, demanding copies of every outline and memo, then every scene direct from the computer. He was the one who helped *me*, if you want to know the truth, not the other way around. When he confided that he'd always wanted to write himself—an ambition second only to being inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame—I encouraged him to start keeping a journal. The least he'd be able to do was leave something behind for the people who loved him. Who knew how many others he might help?

He was skeptical and uncertain, too sick most of the time to hold a pen. He'd already lost the sight in one eye, and during the next several months would be diagnosed with TB and lose a leg to lymphoma. They were living in quarantine now. Tony was on the losing end so much that he could hardly keep track of it all. Happily, one of his growing circle of lifeline friends—which now included Mister Rogers from the TV Neighborhood—had the foresight to contact the Make-a-Wish Foundation on Tony's behalf.

After all the paperwork was done, all the doctors' signatures concurring that the boy was on his way out, the Foundation came through with a computer. Tony got so wrapped up in it that in a matter of weeks he could practically get the machine to make peanut-butter sandwiches—whereas I have

always compared my own ten years' progress with computer technology to teaching a slow monkey how to tell time.

Throughout most of the winter and spring of '92 he worked like a demon, instinctively discovering a form for himself in the short personal essay. Tales of life on the meanest streets, filtered through the strays and throwaway children who constituted his outer world. What was so unusual right from the start was a rare consistency of tone, at once plucky and philosophical, racing against his own clock to try to figure out what it all meant. But here again, no self-pity, so that when he waxed sentimental he'd earned it. Somehow he had survived his tormentors with his heart intact, and he had a gift for the quick study of character, the *David Copperfield* eccentrics who crossed his path. As his battle with AIDS intensified, he saw the rank intolerance and dehumanization that went with it, refusing to be seen as an "innocent" victim. He had a lot to say about prejudice.

Not that every insight didn't come with a struggle, for he had to husband all his strength to get through the 106° fevers and the treatments to drain his lungs, a surgical procedure performed without anesthetic. Nurses would grab the toys he'd brought from home and toss them in with the infectious waste. Doctors would leaf through his chart and irritably inquire, "Isn't this kid dead yet?" Just loud enough for the kid to hear.

Swamped as I was myself by then with the tortures of the medically damned, it was all I could do to hold onto a couple of hours a day to write *Trials*. Our check-in calls to one another grew more infrequent, though Tony would always call when he had a new piece finished. He read each one over the phone, in that pre-adolescent voice that stubbornly refused to deepen—the only thing among all his troubles that seemed to bruise his vanity. At the end of every recital I'd tell him what a good job he was doing, but now go on to the next one. No time to bask in it yet.

When at last he had a presentable manuscript I told him I would send it along to my agent, Wendy Weil. But I cautioned him not to get too invested in publication, because the market forces were out of our hands. I was hard put myself to figure who the audience was, and certainly hadn't a clue how the Young Adult sector worked. In any case, I knew I was far too close to his work to judge its merits. Fortuitously, Wendy responded with enthusiasm, submitting the manuscript to David Groff, my editor at Crown. And after an agonizing interval, building support in-house, David came back and said yes. Amidst the ensuing blizzard of contracts and revisions, I consciously pulled back, allowing Tony the full measure of an experience he'd hardly dared to dream. He turned out to be quite a skilled negotiator, actually, absorbing the arcana of the system as quickly as he did the rest of the world, with a street kid's smarts.

Of course I was thrilled for him, proud as a stepfather once removed. Sometimes after all, it seemed, there were motions of grace in the fallen world. Yet I couldn't imagine how he'd ever survive long enough to see it in print. On the hustings last summer with *Becoming a Man*, I referred to Tony often, especially as an example to illustrate the glass walls of the pharmaceutical cabal. What had saved my brain from toxo that very month was a new drug, still experimental, which was also a good last-ditch treatment for the AIDS pneumonia. And yet, though Tony's lungs were in shreds by then, he proved ineligible for "compassionate use" because he was too young or didn't weigh enough or some other idiotic Catch-22.

Whenever Winston and I were in New York, of course, Gayle would ask us to come visit Tony. But I was too scared of being exposed to TB, no amount of reassurance quite convincing me that all I'd need was a mask and gown. I did write a foreword for the book, however, now officially titled *A Rock and a Hard Place*. By that point I was deep into my own volume of essays, and didn't doubt that Tony's example had

helped to crystallize the form for me. Perhaps it's I who don't exist, and Tony Johnson's the ghostwriter.

His book was scheduled for publication in April of '93. I didn't have any input with Crown's publicity engine, though I understood Gayle's passion to protect the boy's privacy. Of course he couldn't go out on the road, couldn't even leave his oxygen tent. Gayle agreed to let him be interviewed by telephone, unless it took too much out of him. He couldn't have his picture published because there were still people out there who could retaliate, criminals who'd abused him. Tony was understandably terrified about any further contact with the source of all his nightmares. This wasn't just paranoia on the Johnsons' part; but even if it had been, I didn't blame Gayle for standing firm.

In February I was diagnosed with CMV retinitis and had to submit to a daily IV drip. I was also going to radiology five times a week, to try to zap the swelling in my leg. My brain was beginning to misfire again, despite the new drug. For a while I pulled back from a good deal more than Tony, sick of giving status reports on the breakdown of my mortal flesh, frightened that the juggle of meds and treatments was starting to feel unacceptable.

Even so, I followed Tony's literary progress. Generous quotes had come in from the likes of Bernie Siegel, the wellness guru, and Marva Collins, distinguished advocate for children and founder of Westside Prep. The movie rights were grabbed up by Lorimar while the book was still in galleys. With that windfall Tony bought himself a jukebox. The early reviews in the trade publications were excellent, and the book-chat press seemed comfortable with the rules laid down by the publisher—no pictures, no face-to-face, all interviews by telephone. The only advice I remember giving Tony at the outset was the Didion caution: journalists aren't your friends, however cozily they may present themselves.

A reporter for the Associated Press, Leslie Dreyfous, sent



out on the wire a sympathetic story that ran in several papers across the country. A poignant feature about Tony appeared in *USA Today*. He made a phone appearance on one of the afternoon talk shows in New York. He was already receiving mail from other abused kids, applauding his courage and example. A teacher in Pennsylvania wanted to use the book in her middle school health classes. Winston said he was going to sell more books than all of mine put together.

But at the same time, gremlins began to rear their heads. In the Midwest, a self-important booby who called himself a doctor (which in fact he wasn't) took it upon himself to mount a one-man disinformation campaign, calling up reporters at *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, and the Associated Press. He contended that no fourteen-year-old could have possibly written such a sophisticated book as *A Rock and a Hard Place*. There was clearly no Tony Johnson at all, but the booby had figured out the scam. The actual author of this meretricious book was Paul Monette, a homosexual writer whose own work about AIDS had failed to garner sympathy from the straight world. Therefore I had made up a pediatric case to get attention for the cause—which of course was that old right-wing bugbear, the homosexual agenda.

The first word I had of it came from a reporter at *The New York Times*. She asked me if this slander bore any truth at all, and when I said no, she warned me there was a troublemaker out there who wanted my scalp. He had pestered Crown for proof that Tony existed and had been rebuffed. It only made him more fanatical, as he contacted reporters who'd written stories about Tony and demanded they expose this fraud. I wasn't too concerned about it, wondering idly if I'd drawn the vengeful wrath of some balletomane. But from the snippets that reached my ears, I began to suspect we were dealing with a Christian fundie. They can't bear that the truth be told about child abuse, because they're at the top of the list of perpetrators. The Bible *tells* them to beat their kids.

Thus flippantly did I ignore the rising slime. I was stable again, and had just finished "Mustering" in the latter part of May. Then, one Saturday afternoon, I had an ashen call from David Groff, who told me *Newsweek* was going to press on Monday with a story that Tony didn't exist and I was the ghostly author. David hadn't yet seen the story himself but expected to have it in hand by nightfall. In the intervening hours I thought first about poor Tony, who'd spilled his guts to tell the hard truth, only to have it dismissed as a fairy tale. And I of course was the fairy in question. Backed into a corner by innuendo, forced to issue denials, a classic no-win case of *Do you still beat your wife?*

Then David called back and read me the full allegation. Under the title "The Author Nobody's Met," the reporter triumphantly detailed the results of her personal sleuthing—*Nancy Drew and the Missing Wunderkind*. The burden of it was that none of us had ever met Tony Johnson in the flesh—not me, not David, not Wendy, not Mister Rogers, not Make-a-Wish. We were all being deluded by a telephone voice, "a soprano that could belong to a woman as convincingly as to a boy." I'd been talking to this boy two or three times a week for almost two years; it was dumbfounding to hear it all reduced to the level of a cheap thriller. And the tone of the piece? Mocking and sardonic: "Trying to find the real Tony is like getting trapped in a page of *Where's Waldo?*"

It was two days before I had the magazine in hand, so the full-bore tabloid breathlessness didn't hit me until then. But Nancy Drew, in her mind anyway, was clearly on the trail of a Pulitzer:

Who's the author behind Tony? One possibility is Monette, 47, whose moving works about AIDS Tony seems to mimic and who declared in a *New York Times* interview last year, "I've become a very political creature." He couldn't be reached [they never tried], but

Weil, his agent, denies Monette scripted Tony. Still, both know baseball and books. Both find themselves in Connecticut. Both loathe book reports and love plush afghans.

It was ludicrous. So fiercely do I detest the National Pastime that one of my strongest memories of growing up is fleeing the house at the mere sound of a baseball game on the radio. Baseball represents to me all the hetero torment of being forced to be "normal."

But how do you issue that kind of denial? Obviously Nancy Drew had only looked at one book of mine—*Halfway Home*, a novel about two brothers, one gay and one straight, whose backstory paints the straight one as a jock hero while the gay one's mocked as a sissy. The brothers grew up in Connecticut. I was furious at this bald manipulation of my work, the slur on my reputation, but my reaction was as nothing compared to Tony's. He left a sobbing, guilt-racked message on my machine: "I never wanted to hurt you, Paul. You were just being my friend."

He simply couldn't understand how this woman could have talked and joked with him and praised his grit, then shifted gears and spewed this wretched travesty. At his own peril he'd forgotten the Didion rule of engagement. My own phone was already ringing double time. I savaged *Newsweek's* irresponsibility. It was just what abused kids feared the most, that no one would believe them. Nancy Drew's text was riddled with AIDS-phobia. I told *The Wall Street Journal* that I'd never met Philip Roth either, but it hadn't crossed my mind that he didn't exist. I told *The Washington Post* that I couldn't very well have written Tony's book, so busy was I writing Vikram Seth's.

I told David that he had to convince the Johnsons to let a reporter come and meet him. Reluctantly they assented, inviting Leslie Dreyfous from the Associated Press. She spent an

hour talking with Tony, assuring herself that this was the very kid she'd interviewed over the phone. AP prepared a story refuting *Newsweek's*, detailing the visit to the Johnson home. By week's end other news organizations had distanced themselves from *Newsweek*. One of the magazine's editors remarked offhandedly to the *Post* that they no longer believed I had written the book, but that was the sum total of their retraction and apology.

I was advised by my lawyers not to say a word to *Newsweek* in my defense, but to wait and see if the libel would go so far as to merit a lawsuit against them. All parties assured me that the magazine was being inundated with outraged letters. *Newsweek* had so far made no direct attempt to contact me, but I had a call that week from David Ansen, an old friend who served as the magazine's film critic. Him I called back. He was clearly red-faced with embarrassment and swore he hadn't heard anything about this flap till now, because he'd just flown back from Cannes where he'd been covering the film festival.

"David," I declared in a withering tone, "you realize how nuts this whole thing is. Why the fuck would I want to write under a pseudonym? It's all I can do anymore to finish my *own* work."

Harrumphing sympathetically, not really wanting to get into it, David admitted he'd been asked to call by the editors, who hoped I would be willing to talk to one of their writers. It didn't have to be Nancy Drew herself.

"They've got to be kidding," I retorted. "You think I'm going to dignify this *National Enquirer* bullshit?"

Yes yes, he understood. He was more eager to get off the phone than I was.

We had to wait three weeks—till the June twenty-first issue—to hear the upshot, what turned out to be the second bowl of Eisenhower's snots. Indeed, *Newsweek* had printed several scathing letters. Amy Amabile, executive director of Northern Lights, an AIDS empowerment organization:

*Your article is a perfect example of why there are laws to protect the confidentiality of minors and people with AIDS: many so-called journalists are willing to expose and exploit people with AIDS and victims of child abuse for the sake of a story.*

She went on to describe her own two-year friendship with the young man, adding that Tony was serving now as editor of the Northern Lights newsletter. The director of the Make-a-Wish Foundation assured the magazine that they didn't just arbitrarily grant wishes, that they didn't act without painstaking documentation. Best of all was Tony's letter, a fierce declaration of his reality:

*I exist; prove to me that you do! There is something unreal about a reporter who can joke and laugh with a person and then turn around and suggest that person does not exist.*

But *Newsweek* gave no quarter, upping the ante of its pit-bull tactics, as if this story were as big as Watergate. They pointedly dismissed the AP account of Leslie Dreyfous and her visit to the Johnsons. "Paul Monette, who did not return calls for *Newsweek's* story, has since publicly and vehemently denied *Newsweek's* suggestion that he might have written or helped write Tony's book." The only call ever made to me was David Ansen's, which I returned. But by now the little lies were blown off the board by new heights of investigative gobbledygook:

A spokesman for Manhattan District Attorney Robert Morgenthau said, "Our office has no institutional memory of this case." Officials in the New York City Police Department's Pedophile Squad and in the Special Victims Squad . . . could not recall a case resembling this one.

Quick, somebody go get Nancy Drew a Prozac! Of course there were no records in their files, because the whole story had taken place elsewhere. Place-names had been doctored to protect the victim, as the publisher made quite clear on the copyright page. It's standard procedure; I'd done the same thing in *Becoming a Man*. The magazine's update ended with a flourish worthy of *Dragnet*:

Apart from Dreyfous, no individual has come forward to claim he or she has ever met Johnson in person. *Newsweek* continues to report the story.

How's that for playing hardball? So far as I know, their further investigations haven't posted a trenchcoated gumshoe outside my house. My phone remains untapped. Curiously, what Nancy Drew failed to investigate from the get-go was the parallel between her own debunking of Tony Johnson and the forty-year campaign to deny the truth of Anne Frank's *Diary*. In Europe there's a whole crypto-fascist industry whose only raging purpose is to prove that the *Diary* is a Zionist hoax. All part of a master plan to deny the Holocaust. Not crypto at all in fact, but put forth boldly by so-called scholars, and repeated often enough that in the end it becomes just another breeze in the climate of opinion.

I don't know why we expected any more of the media, those of us who nursed the publication of Tony Johnson's story. Not this summer anyway, infected as it is with shrieking bulletins about Heidi Fleiss (Madame to the Stars) and the Menendez killings and Michael Jackson's trial by headline ("At eleven, more celebrity reaction to the Michael Jackson story!"). Not to mention Woody and Mia. "Tabloid" doesn't mean anything anymore because there's nothing else.

But the *disappearing* of Tony Johnson's account of the unaccountable world is rather more sinister. Because it's a way of denying AIDS as well as him. And a hundred years hence,



when all the tabloid victims of 1993 will be dust and ashes, the names no longer ringing the teensiest bell, the course of the plague will still attract the bewildered gaze of history. And when the Elvis sightings no longer fire the populace, and everyone has chewed Howard Hughes's two-foot fingernails to the quick, the storm troops of revisionism will trumpet their distortions from the rooftops.

So Nancy Drew, as it turns out, has just got an early start on the trivialization of AIDS. A picture from Cobb County, Georgia, in the current issue of *The Advocate* shows a crusty old coot proudly displaying a placard which reads PRAISE GOD FOR AIDS. If things get tame at *Newsweek*, I'm sure there's a good position available at the *Cobb Gazette*, or whatever they call their hate sheet down there.

One small piece of advice, Nancy: Don't forget to bring a lot of sugar. A boxcar full, because the snots get harder to swallow every day.