

LOSING TIME



AIDS Lessons
in Love and Loss



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PARLEYING

By rights we should not have been able to sit outside, but it had been an unusually warm day in early March, enticing robins to bob and race along the trails by the river. Pink blurs of wild plum glimmered through the bare willow thickets fringing the river. We were drinking martinis, triangular glasses glinting in the darkening light.

On an impulse, I reached over and took your hand: "I'm in love with you."

You left your hand in mine.

"I could never have said this before. I can't believe I'm saying it now."

Several moments passed.

"I just wish I had met you twenty years earlier," you said quietly.

"But twenty years ago neither of us would have been ready."

Again a long silence.

"I'm thinking about my health."

When we first sat in the frail evening sunlight, you glowed in well-being: your eyes a clear azure; your lower lip full and bronzy pink.

"You're on Invirase and other new drugs. People are living longer now. Even those who have picked out their caskets are returning to life, like Lazarus called back. The last memorial service I went to was almost two weeks ago."

"The doctor told me today that my few remaining T-cells can't stand up against the highest viral load ever

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recorded in his office. How we all eye each other in that waiting room, sizing up what the virus is doing to us. . . .”

“But they’ll get it right, the drug cocktail. They just need to figure out the right combinations.” You were on your second re-configured pill regimen. You carried an ice pack to keep your meds chilled. A pill case with a beeper rang the times you were to take them.

How singular it must have been for you to hear of the virus’s rampage on the very day I would first declare my love for you. I did not then join the two messages in my own mind as you must have: the new lover is always an arrant egoist, centered in his own wonder. This early March day marked for us an odd merger: my moment of heightened feeling with your grim new awareness of the relentless viral onslaught. You showed me a dim swirling in the distance. But I saw detours before we reached that roadblock. I could not share your urgency then.

I do not know how to write about beginning to love. Most people learned about loving long before I did. This I think I know: love is at first more about the self than about the other. The lover is in renewal. At least I was. New love impels one to throw out and discard, to make donations to good will. So inward a renewal for me was loving that you did not even have to know you were loved. The lover makes himself new, his world novel.

As a new lover, I was forever monitoring feelings and perceptions. I inventoried emotions, fascinated by the shifting hues and shadows. That is the reason sex between us in those early days was so insistent, never frequent enough. In lovemaking, I could for a time step into the sway of your stride. I could know you then when you were most open to me.

"I want us to be monogamous," you said out of the darkness.

"Monogamy is for breeders," I said disdainfully. "Gay men were not made to promise never to touch another man. A quick blow job at the Steamworks in Berkeley on a solo Friday night? So what? Emotional monogamy, definitely. But sexual monogamy evolved to protect straight child-bearers against outside disruptions in family life. What has that to do with us?"

"Stop talking," you said. "I don't need a lecture on gay sexual politics, especially not right now."

I waited out the silence.

You sighed. "Just don't let me ever hear of anything."

I know now, I thought, that love exists. And I was happy. We were bold lovers that night.

What can I not know? Much: Why did love come to me during the plague and with you, already stricken? Why was our love plighted in impermanence? Was George right? Did I allow myself to love at last because at some level I knew that AIDS would lift from me the burden of love grown bald and corpulent and querulous? Because I surmised we could thus avoid the love-crippling compromises most lovers eventually come to make over time?

Did you love me? One can never really know if one is loved. This uncertainty joins the clutter of unknowable things jumbled together in the black-lacquered drawers of the unconscious, useless and vital things all tangled up together. You told me you had never been in love before. You had dated someone once, for about six months, but you had soon found him bland.

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Did you love me? For the first months of our time together, you insisted regularly that you could not find anything wrong with me. I lost patience at last: "I'm tired of interviewing for this lover position," I finally said. "Do I have it or not? And can I earn tenure?"

Whenever I told you I loved you—infrequently, even after that first twilit time—you responded, automatically, "Love you too!" with a lilt on the adverb, sounding like some teenager in a mini-skirt saying goodbye to her girlfriends after a day shopping together at the mall. But one day, months later, I called to check in with you from a lonely hotel room in a suburb of San Francisco, oppressed by its fake Biedermeier furniture, its tired mauve bedspread. For some reason I paused. A beat or two passed. You filled the small stillness: "I love you."

There it was—you first, no lilt.

"Surprised you?"

"Thrilled me."