

## Prologue

“To deny one’s own experience is to put a lie into the lips of one’s own life.”  
—Oscar Wilde

If AIDS had never come into this world, if it had never spilled into the blood of that first soul, I would have remembered that June of 1982 as the month that I fell in love with a half-Irish, half-Sicilian woman from Connecticut. But that month marks the beginning of another journey, one I would spend the next nineteen years refusing to take.

I can still hear the voice coming from my short wave radio: *Doctors in Los Angeles have reported a mysterious virus that has caused the death of several men who . . .* That morning was like any other in my life as a Peace Corps volunteer, living among the Wolof and Mandinka twenty miles from the Gambia River. I made my Nescafé. I wrote my letters. I ate my millet porridge with the village chief.

The rainy season had begun, and the farmers were in the fields planting peanuts, seed by seed, row by row, walking behind a plow and a pair of yoked oxen. Women clustered at the well, talking and telling stories, as hand over hand they pulled up water in black bags made of used tire tubing. Outside my hut children waited for the Koranic school to start, throwing stones at the baobab fruit hoping to knock down a treat. Over their excited voices, I listened to the man in London as if he were standing behind me in my little mud-brick hut: *The virus, which doctors say destroys the immune system, has been detected in homosexual and bisexual men . . .*

I attempted to go about my work with the village women as we tried to grow tomatoes and carrots in the heat and the sand, but those words “mysterious virus” and “homosexual” and “death” fused with images I’d believed I’d erased from my memory when I’d crossed the Atlantic and joined the Peace Corps. Though I had no idea what this disease doctors were calling GRID (gay-related immune disease) would eventually mean for the world, I felt in those newscaster’s words a terrible truth had been released upon me and the world.

I’d been caught, finally, at the far end of the world in a Muslim village of black Africans, the boy, the fugitive, who’d been running ever since that day that he’d reached out and touched the mirror image of himself in the trembling body of his friend in the barn behind his house.

Each time I heard the news repeated on my short-wave radio that day, images of my sexual history returned with increasing intensity and vividness: I saw myself as a boy take my mother’s clothes out of the clothes

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hamper and slip them on before the bathroom mirror; I saw myself tip-toe through the darkness, kick off my pajamas and run naked, even in the snow, into the fields behind our house; I saw myself staring at the soapy torsos of my teammates in the showers in high school; I saw myself sucking on the tongues of black men in the blue light of video booths on Clark Street in Chicago. I'd hoped these episodes would one day be absolved by words, by love, by the body of a woman.

The finality of the announcer's voice kept ringing inside me, bringing me back, again and again, to these scenes, dredging up fragments of voices and emotions, until my memory settled on that summer day in my youth on a camping trip with my family in Maine, when my father overheard me confess "my secret" to my sister. The sorrow in the announcer's words had the same tone of truth I'd heard in my father in his speech on the "facts of life." Both men knew of the penalty men must serve for this "secret": sex would become loss—an act that instead of connecting me to the world, would forever sever me from it.

That day in the woods in Maine, my father led me to a great pile of logs, slashed and sawed, and chaotically stacked to be dragged away. We sat on stumps and stared at the wood chips at our feet. I sobbed before he could open his mouth. Over and over I pleaded for him to stop: "I know, I know, I know . . ." But my father dutifully carried on, explaining each biological stage, each effort at calming me having the opposite effect. No matter how softly spoken, each word fell like an axe on my innocence. In silence, we walked back in the sour piney heat of mid afternoon. Refusing his touch, I drifted further behind, wincing at each branch he snapped with his heavy shoes.

As a boy, I had learned in times of emotional chaos to take my body into the stillness of distance, outside and away from people and the things they made. One of my first memories as a child is riding a tricycle to the end of the subdivision where we lived. I was headed for the highway. And that is where neighbors stopped me and took me home. I think I was three. I have no memory of why I left or where I thought I might go. But I remember how good it felt to be pedaling, pedaling past all the houses, traveling further and further away.

So that day in Senegal when I heard the news, I knew I had to escape from the claustrophobia of my emotions and the reminder of my shame in every villager's face who came before me. And though it was midday and so bright you could almost see through your eyelids, I fled into the mirage of distance, desperate for the solace of the savannah. I hiked past the peanut fields and into the forest with its ancient baobab and ten-foot termite mounds. I found a wide-branched acacia and sat leaning against its trunk and watched dung beetles, like Sisyphus, roll ball after ball of goat shit in the sand.

Jokingly, the villagers nicknamed me "Tukkikat"—one who loves to

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travel, or, as an old man once explained the Wolof word: "a man always on his way someplace else." To the Senegalese, isolating oneself was a sign of spiritual sickness, and so the women, worried by this trait of mine to steal away into the bush, would send their sons to watch over me. Sure enough, my spiritual bodyguards had followed me through the peanut fields. "Mustapha, what are you doing out here?"

A few days after I'd heard the radio report, I left the village to meet my colleagues in the city of Kaolack. There in the courtyard of the Peace Corps house, my American compatriots sat under the neem tree drinking beer and smoking the local ganja, recounting stories of the past week in their villages. On the table I could see the cover of that week's international *Newsweek*. A syringe dripped blood, with a headline that read: "AIDS: The New Hidden Killer."

Almost immediately the subject surfaced. When someone raised the question of how this new disease spread, my worldly, well-educated friends snickered, and I disappeared into the kitchen to get another beer, though I already had one in my hand. When I came back, I caught the eyes of Elizabeth. They were as wide open as they were that first night on the rooftop of the Kaolack house, stunned that I'd entered her, as we lay wrapped in a single sheet under the stars, our colleagues sleeping only feet away.

"Have you read the article?" she asked later that night in the cocoon of our mosquito netting. Brushing away her brunette hair so that I had to confront each olive eye, she pleaded with me to look at the article she had with her in our bed: "There's a guy in the article from Chicago, a man who has *it*—he's in theater, too. Maybe you—you, like *know* him?"

"I'll read it later," I mumbled, rolling away, afraid and drunk from drinking all day.

Two months before, when we first met, I told her that I'd slept with men. It was a relief to tell her, to tell someone what I'd never told anyone before. When I told her what it felt like to be with a man and why I did it, we both heard something more than a confession. We stayed up the whole night telling stories about family and childhood, about friends and lovers, our stories came gushing out, fears mixed with dreams mixed with desire. When the sun came up, I wanted to follow her into the bathroom; I didn't want to ever let her out of my sight.

I stared at the wall until she turned out the lights. I understood why she was concerned, but that tone in her voice terrified me: *He lives in Chicago. He was in theater—like you.* When I was sure she was asleep, I got up, but she stopped me at the door: "Mike, where are you going?"

"I'm going to smoke a cigarette. Is that okay?"

In the dark, I wandered into the main room in our Peace Corps house. This room had become a kind of shrine to those volunteers who'd

come and gone since the late sixties. I turned on a light. There, under a torn poster of Che Guevara, lying on a bookshelf holding twenty years of paperback classics, I found the *Newsweek*. I picked it up, sank into a chair, lit a cigarette and never took a drag.

For a while I stared at the first page, not really reading but absorbing words and photos. I turned the last page of the article, and there he was: the guy from Chicago who *had it*—John on his porch with his dog in Lincoln Park.

John was the stage manager at The Goodman Theatre where I had briefly worked as a stagehand on Tennessee Williams's last play. It was John who had invited me to meet the great playwright on opening night. I'd read every one of Williams's plays in high school, hearing in his characters a voice of sadness and longing that I believed only I possessed. That night, a drunken ghost in a fur coat scribbled *Tennessee* in an old paperback of *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof*. A few months later Williams was dead. He would be spared the horrors that would consume his friends and lovers in the years to follow.

In the photograph, John looked as I remembered him, confident, relaxed, smiling, but when I looked closer at the image, I noticed that his hand wasn't petting his dog; his hand was clutching the dog to his side.

I considered not going back to bed, knowing I would have to tell Elizabeth and arouse her fears of my bisexuality. But I had to tell her John was not a lover but only my boss. The next morning I did, but she kept asking questions as if I were lying to her about him and everything I'd told her about my past. Looking back, I don't blame her. She was scared, and so was I.

Lying in bed that night, I watched her as she slept, her breath lifting the sheet over her naked shoulder. I'd never been in love before, never known the comfort of waking up to someone sleeping next to me, never known the fear of love's loss. Looking at her body beside me, I became angrier and angrier knowing that under her sweetness and concern that she, too, now doubted me. It was her lack of doubt that I had clung to when we came together every other week from our posts.

However, desperate for the promise of love, Elizabeth and I continued our fairy-tale life for the next year, trying to teach African farmers twice our age things we didn't really know. I played the part in the romance we both wanted. I was the smiling, blond-haired hero doing good deeds to educate the backward Senegalese. I came to her village where we listened to the elders tell stories of the old times when they killed lions and fought Hitler and the Germans in North Africa with their weapons and sacred medicine.<sup>1</sup> Then we retired to her hut and drank wine and made love on the dirt floor, biting our arms and shoulders to keep from being heard. Together we dreamed grand dreams. We

would go home to get married, return with graduate degrees, and devote our lives to the Senegalese.

Toward the end of my second year, her parents and mine visited at the same time. I made the same grand speeches, professing my love and plans to stay a third year so that we could be together and continue our work. My parents, once so troubled when I'd gone to New York and Chicago to act, now looked at me as the man they'd hoped I'd become. The happy ending was a foregone conclusion.

After the dinner, Elizabeth and I snuck out of our parent's rooms in a seaside hotel to take a romantic swim. But I was too drunk to offer much affection, so I took off my clothes and jumped in to sober up. I swam as hard as I could and then stopped. I could hear her calling my name, but the salty water felt so good on my body that I swam further and further until the lights of the hotel became a blur.

When I came back, she stood hands on hips, up to her knees in the surf: "Why did you do that? Why did you scare me? Why tonight?"

I had no answer to that question or why the next month I changed my mind and decided to go home after all. I thought I was losing my mind and so did everyone else, my colleagues and the villagers, who were already planning projects with me for the next year. Elizabeth was heartbroken and humiliated. I tried to explain, pleading with her to come back with me and get on with our lives and leave this playacting of the Peace Corps. She'd been sick for months with hepatitis and dysentery. I begged her to return with me for her own health. But my about-face had confirmed her doubts. Then she got a letter from her sister in San Francisco. I saw it lying on the bed with my name sprinkled throughout, so I read it: "I know what *these guys* are like. You will never be able to satisfy him. Drop him before it's too late!"

My flight was in the middle of the night, so Elizabeth and I went out to eat and I drank as much as I could possibly get down. Back at our cheap hotel, we undressed and lay on a thin mattress supported by a slab of cement. A single light bulb dangled over our naked bodies. Wolof sex workers cackled in the hallway. Mosquitoes bore into the backs of our thighs. She turned her head away and cried.

At the airport, when my flight was announced, I got sick, ruining the shirt she'd given me as a going-away gift. With my romantic dreams and big plans stuffed into a duffle bag, I staggered up the steps of the plane, leaving behind the hopes of two villages and Elizabeth, who stood there on the tarmac, holding a shirt stained with cheap wine and vomit.



I returned to Chicago and enrolled in divinity school, hiding in the only place I knew I could—my head. And there was no better place to

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do that than the stone fortress on Chicago's South Side, The University of Chicago. Like many Peace Corps volunteers, I came home to discover that there no longer existed a place called *home*. In the two years I'd been gone, America and I had traveled in opposite directions. The Reagan era was in full bloom and the Peace Corps was earmarked for extinction. AIDS was a punch line in an office joke, a judgment from an angry God, a way to rid the world of fags, junkies, and black immigrants who swam ashore from a sinking ship called Haiti.

The HIV virus was quietly spreading across Chicago, too, sweeping through the gay ghetto of Lakeview and north into the Uptown slums, where the city corralled its misfits: refugees from Vietnam and Eritrea, Native Americans from the plains, pale-skinned miners' wives from West Virginia, drug-users, Vietnam vets, and schizophrenics. And on the South Side, where I now lived, AIDS spilled into the black and Latino gay and bisexual underworld, coursed through the drug culture, the gangs, and sex workers, and seeped into the cells of Cook County Jail.

I spent time drifting away from the troubles of the world that surrounded the ivy-walled campus created from the wealth of Rockefeller. It was 1983 and Liberation theology was all the rage. I sat in seminars and discussed the political priests in Latin America. I espoused their iconoclastic beliefs that the historical Jesus of Nazareth was a fearless radical bent on turning the world upside down, as he had the tables of the money changers. I was eager to show my scars fresh from the front. But the Wolof farmers and their families refused to conform to dinner party anecdotes or serve as examples for theological theories. Instead they sent letters painstakingly written in French by market scribes, letters which begged for help in buying sewing machines or medicines for children. I spent whole days in the library deciphering passages from Kierkegaard and Eliade, writing essays on Meister Eckhart and William James, burrowing into the thoughts of others in hopes of forgetting my own. But I couldn't forget the people of Darou Mouniaguene and Elizabeth. Seeing a map of Africa or a woman with black hair cut like hers was enough to spin me into a spell of sadness that lasted for days. It was impossible to study. So, as I had in Senegal, I took to my feet, hiking about Hyde Park and climbing on buses and trains to free myself from the thought that maybe I'd made a mistake. Everywhere I went, however, I seemed to manifest the fears and doubts that animated my despair. Thinking I'd discovered a quiet, wooded reserve near the Lake where I could be alone and watch birds, I discovered I'd stumbled into one of the main cruising spots for black gay and bisexual men in Jackson Park. It didn't take me long to realize, either, that the majority of black residents, who lived in and around Hyde Park, didn't share the welcoming traits of their ancestral relatives, the Wolofs. But then what could you expect from a community that had its businesses and bars closed, its

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houses bulldozed, and its streets patrolled by an occupying army of university and city police. In Senegal, sometimes old women cried to Allah for protection from my blond hair and blue eyes, but here, in Hyde Park, in one of the largest concentrations of blacks in North America, I represented not only the evil of segregation and racism but the hypocrisy on which this university was built.

But I refused to stay within the unspoken boundaries that kept "us" in and "them" out. I purposely took the wrong buses that passed through the wrong neighborhoods when I traveled to the Loop or North Side. Naïvely, I believed my education and experiences in Africa made me immune from the anger and distrust that African-Americans held toward the university and all who were associated with it. As I traveled back from the North Side one evening on a bus full of people coming home from work, a homeless woman with a purple hat and matching fingernails finally put me in my place. Grabbing my chin, she raised my face out of a book by Heidegger, and shattered the late afternoon silence: "See that telephone pole? We gonna string you up. We gonna crucify your ass, book boy!"



In my second year of divinity school, I began to recover from Elizabeth and Africa. My studies inspired interests in comparative religion and I took up a practice of Kundalini yoga. As a part of a group of seminarians and clergy, I volunteered to work with Eritrean and Cambodian refugees. And I met Naomi, a woman who worked in my neighborhood at a health food store. She told me she'd once been married to an Ethiopian prince and lived in Israel, which explained the unusual religious sect she followed—a combination of Ethiopian Judaism, Rastafarianism, Black Nationalism, and the political philosophy of Pan-Africanism. I liked her radical spirit, her overflowing Rasta locks, her hand-sewn African print clothes, and the taste of her skin on the back of her neck. She reminded me of the poised women of Dakar who nearly blew me over when they sailed through the streets, their flowing gowns ablaze in color. I'm not sure what she saw in me, other than another way to outrage her mother, a jazz singer she had me meet almost as soon as we began to date. She was also amused by my stories of Senegal and my mix of international politics and whatever world religion I was studying at the time. But there was always a tension that went beyond our racial difference. One evening at her apartment, she began talking about homosexuality. "I mean, don't you think it's nasty? Putting their things in each other's booties? Why would anyone want to do that, huh?" She went on, waiting for me to chime in, but I had a suspicion that she was testing me. When I refused either to condemn or condone

homosexuality, citing that line by Margaret Mead explaining bisexuality as normal and homosexuality and heterosexuality as abnormal, she burst into laughter: “You’re a fag aren’t you? That’s it! I knew there was something that made you—you act the way you do with your books and bullshit about Africa.” Her laughter made me feel as if I were a mouse she’d finally trapped behind the refrigerator with her broom. I quickly left without even defending myself, and I never saw her again.

I dated other women that year, but after that episode with Naomi, I began to experience deeper and deeper spells of depression. My interest in grad school, never that strong, soured and I finally dropped out. I worried that perhaps Naomi was right. For the first time, I tried therapy, but my therapist was no help, counseling self-control or telling long stories about her own struggles with drugs. I quit her, too, and comforted myself, as I learned to do as a child, with my imagination, writing pages and pages of bad poetry under the influence of bad wine. Outside of school, I drifted, spending days without talking to anyone except a fellow classmate, a Blackfoot Indian, who was struggling with drug addiction, though I didn’t know it at the time. We drank and talked for hours about theology and politics. We knew we were both being eaten alive by our secrets and shame, but we were too afraid to confess them.

It was during that time that I began to secretly return to the gay demi-monde on the North Side. Here, with heavy doses of alcohol and whatever drugs were available, I became anonymous, free from the persona that increasingly seemed false and exhausting to maintain. Yet, I was conflicted as I walked and walked the streets, entering and leaving bars, downing drink after drink, one moment wanting to be seduced, the next wanting to flee. I was disgusted and relieved all at once. I savored the darkness dancing around me and at the same time scorned the frivolity and self-absorption. I positioned myself in a dark corner and watched, a voyeur to these nightly tribal rituals of drink and dance that brought men closer and closer until hands and thighs, mouths and hair seemed to belong to everyone. Sometimes it was enough to just enter a bar and know it was there. Other times, I searched for that pair of eyes which, like me, preferred the margins: the foreigner, the bisexual, the married man, but mostly those men of color, who drifted in late. As soon as we touched, I could feel that they needed my body as badly as I needed theirs. Taste created taste. The fierceness of their grip instantly sobered me, making me feel both acute fear and sick with desire.

With them, with drugs, twisting and tunneling into the darkest hour of the night, our bodies pulled and pried each other open. Fucking often felt like we were trying to peel away our skin, desperate as we were to be freed from all that constrained the flesh. It was more like a lifeguard saving a drowning man, and the drowning man was almost always me. Stroke after stroke, I struggled all the way back to shore and then when

we arrived, I felt ashamed and wanted to grab my clothes and run. Often on these nights, I left without even remembering their names. I’d wait until they were asleep, pull their heavy arm off my back, feel around in the dark for my pants, and slip out.



Like most people who find themselves attracted to both sexes, I can’t explain how or why I have chosen this fate or it has chosen me. Nor can I fully explain the role black men have played in my sexual life. I have no theories, only experiences. But I think it has something to do with growing up in a racially-mixed neighborhood and living on a basketball court for most of my adolescence.

My parents moved to Marion, Indiana, in 1963 when my father got hired to coach basketball and baseball at the high school there. Marion was known for four things: automotive plants, James Dean, high school basketball, and a mob lynching of two black teenagers in 1930.<sup>2</sup> Like many other cities in the rust belt, Marion was a mix of whites and blacks who’d moved from farms and up from the South to work in factories after World War II. We lived in working-class neighborhood on what was known as the black side of town, though Marion was really too small to be truly segregated. So when my father erected a hoop and paved our gravel drive, our house became the place where the neighbor kids, black and white, came to play basketball.

Because I had the hoop, a good jump shot, and a father who was respected in the black community as a fair man and a good coach, I began to have a lot of black friends. That I had blond hair and blue eyes and was a know-it-all in school, they let slide. This was Indiana. This was the sixties. This was when a black and white town like Marion came together to roar and chant like hysterical Christians at a revival in praise of their seventeen-year-old sons. Basketball was everything for my hometown, and for me and my father, and the black kids who came from across the field behind my house.

One of the kids who began coming over to my house was a tall, shy, black kid named Lawrence. Lawrence and I battled for every athletic accolade from grammar school until we entered high school. I envied Lawrence. He seemed never to get angry or raise his voice. Effortlessly, he threw a football the length of our side yard, pitched a fast ball so hard, all you could see was his white teeth when he struck you out. As we matured, I remained skinny while his body turned almost overnight into that of a man’s, his biceps rising under his shirt even when he lifted a glass of Kool-Aid. My father called him “a natural,” and when we shot around, my father would come out of the house to show Lawrence how to perfect his jump shot. Fatherless, Lawrence spent almost every day at

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our house in the summers, eating with us and often spending the night. When he did, I would have a hard time falling asleep and would lie awake, marveling at his Adam's apple and long fingers—miniature bodies themselves, perfect and sleek like him. In the morning after he left, I would find his hairs—tiny black O's left on the white sheets—and quickly brush them to the floor.

My admiration for Lawrence was more than envy. In that self-absorbed world of adolescence, controlling the body became an all-consuming attempt to manage a confusing and chaotic world. Both at home and on the TV every night the world was falling apart: Vietnam, the Nixon administration, the riots in Detroit, the firebombs and fights at school. My parents too were at war, it seemed, over my father's off-again on-again drinking. As a former athlete, my father could still hit thirty-foot set shots from the end of the driveway and belt baseballs over our house. I idolized his athleticism and strength and the way every male teenager in town respected him. During games, I watched him cajole and console his players, the heroes of our hometown. But as is so often the case with men who are successful and well-liked in the eyes of those with whom they work and socialize, at home, my father seemed uneasy and uncomfortable in his paternal role. He'd never had a father himself, which he would tell my sisters and me sometimes when he was drunk. Underneath the bravado and good times, my father was sad, like my mother, who'd grown up with an Irish man's man, a copy of my father, a sportsman, who fished and played pool, and owned a tavern in the next town over.

As a coach's son, I learned early on that acceptance and masculinity depended on the successful performance of my body in competitive sports. I wanted nothing more than to become the champion in all sports, but particularly basketball. For hours I shot foul shots in the rain or during the coldest days of winter, until my mother, worried I would get sick, begged me to come inside. But I clung to the pursuit of perfection to prove to myself that even though I had broken the male taboo of taboos, on the court I could compete with anyone and often beat them.

Thirty-eighth Street Park was two blocks from my house, and it was here that the best basketball was played in town. It was known as the "black court," and few white kids or men felt comfortable playing there. In summers, my father used to sit in our car across the street from the park and watch games, checking on his players and future talent. When I became old enough, he told me that if I really wanted to learn how to play, I should "get down there and watch how the black guys played," and if I was lucky maybe they'd let me play. So I watched and waited for my chance, sitting beside the court, retrieving errant balls and going for Cokes at the drugstore if asked. Saturdays and Sundays black men came from all over town and the nearby cities of Muncie and Kokomo, driv-

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ing up in their fat Buicks and purple Lincoln Continentals blaring the Motown sound from their 8-tracks. The first game I played with older men was when Lawrence sprained his ankle and hobbled off, and, eager to keep the game going, they accepted his plea to let me take his place.

During those summers of the early seventies, I lived at Thirty-eighth Street Park. It was like I'd traveled to another country, a place that had different rules, where people wore different clothes and listened to different music. Here another language was spoken, one not bound by words but extending into symbolic movements of the body. Stepping on court was not done with haste or without style; men used special slaps and handshakes or nodded upward with their chins. The bar was set high for flare, drama, and attention to detail. Players dribbled the ball through their legs and yours and pulled up for a jump shot and "pissed in your eye," scooting backwards down court with that smile that demanded that you match the skill and aesthetic of their game. This was not the white game of passing and working the ball to the open man underneath; this was a faster, meaner, more expressionistic game, where rules were broken and new ones created. This was a game of honor, where anyone could rise to momentary glory with a coast-to-coast weave, gliding up and over a sprawling opponent to the rusting rim. The point was to transcend the gravity-bound world that existed off court. In full display of the street, basketball became a theater where I learned to perform.

I studied the game of the older guys: watched how they flicked their wrists at the top of a shot; listened for phrases they used to play with your head; copied the way they tore their sleeveless sweatshirts. I yearned for their age and strength, their oiled revolver-colored backs, their long-legged speed. Off court, too, I tried to model myself on their style, mimicking their dress and slang, practicing their pimp walk swagger in the mirror before school. But more than their strength and style, I was drawn to what seemed down deep to animate them—their rage. I wanted whatever it was that made them mock the police and the ways of the white world. When these guys fought over some foul or some disrespect to their character, it was as if they'd awakened in me a terrifying energy and knowledge. I'd been brought up never to fight; no matter what, I was told to walk away. When anger was leveled at me, for blocking out too well or for shoving them as hard as they did me, guys would trip me to the asphalt, screaming epithets that always ended in "you mother-fucking white punk." But I never said a thing or lifted a finger. I was too terrified. And then once, a teammate got so angry at me for not saying anything after a guy cussed me out for blocking his shot, that he passed the ball so hard at me that he broke my middle finger. That night I wore my bloodied t-shirt and deformed finger like a badge, proudly telling my father and our doctor where it had happened.

As a white teenage boy, with the deck stacked in my favor, I had no conception of the psychological roots of their rage toward me or the world I represented. But as a young man aware that my sexual desire secretly segregated me from the male-dominated mass, I studied how they used this rage to infuse their spirit and protect themselves against the fears of white America, which refused to accept that its identity, as James Baldwin once said, was forever linked to those who came in chains from the African coast.



I lived between the straight and gay world for some time, escaping and returning, returning and escaping, until that spring day of 1996, at the age of thirty-eight I found myself with a baseball cap over my eyes in a public health clinic on Chicago's near South Side. Surrounded by young black and Latino men, I sat in a plastic chair, waiting for results from a test that nobody wants to take.

"You didn't expect this did you?" the Latina social worker asked frowning, exhausted already at 10 a.m. with who knows how many more "death slips" she had to hand out before she got to go home.

I don't remember what I said. I remember only staring at my name on that piece of paper, studying it like a traitor, entertaining the thought that perhaps after all these years it wasn't really mine.

I got into my car and drove around for a while, not sure where to go, landing at a sporting goods store, where I sat in a parking garage and stared at trash twirling in the wind. Keep moving, keep moving, I heard some voice inside urge. I walked in to the store and sat on a bench between two stacks of tennis shoes, sinking deeper and deeper into the reality of what that piece of paper meant.

I looked at the shoes and the bright athletic pants, the baseball mitts and caps, the tents and sleeping bags and the life-sized, cardboard Michael Jordan palming a ball. Buying shoes always reminded me of my mother taking my sisters and me to the shoe store every August before the start of the school year. The boxes and the tissue, the rubber, and the newness all smelled of the year ahead, gym class, recess, the sixth grade team. An employee in a referee's shirt came to my rescue, the first voice to speak to me in my new life: "Sir, can I help you?"

This teenager's face, full of wanting to do right, full of all the life that would bloom before her in the decades ahead, looked at me as if she were peering down into a well. I had to hold my arms down on the bench to keep myself from reaching out and grabbing her legs. I looked up, and forced a smile. "No, not now, thanks."



But I didn't have time to freak out. That afternoon, I began rehearsal for a monologue, a one-person play, to go up in a month. I'd been acting off and on in small productions and doing short dramatic readings at open mics around town more and more. For years I'd wanted to perform my own work, and now I had my chance to make fun of myself and the Peace Corps with a little theater group in Wicker Park.

Denial and anger carried me until the first week of performances. The first night I struggled, skipping large passages from my script. But the play was the least of my problems. I had to start telling friends and family not only that I had been diagnosed with AIDS, but also that for twenty-five years I had not been honest about my sexual life. Worse, I had to tell women I had dated and those men for whom I actually had a name and telephone number. My immune system was a tenth of what it once had been and was fading fast. I woke many nights freezing from sheets drenched in sweat. The doctors promised new treatment, but in the waiting room there were no promises in the eyes of the thirty-year-old bodies leaning on canes and coughing under coats that had become suddenly too big for them.

In the middle of my third performance, I opened my mouth and nothing came out. Not a stuttering paraphrase, not a sound: silence. These were lines I had painstakingly written and rewritten. These were lines that described my own life, lines that drew upon memories and stories of Senegal I'd retold scores of times to friends. But I couldn't retrieve them. It was as if I'd come to the end of speech. I looked into the stage lights begging to be blinded. Standing there in the silence, I felt a kind of perverse pleasure in fucking up. If I never uttered another word again, so be it. My time was up, I thought, what difference did it make now.

But my old friend Paul, who was the first person I told of my diagnosis, jumped out of the lighting booth and up on stage to hand me my dog-eared script. "Just read it, Mike. It'll be alright."

I tried, but I was so humiliated I could barely move my lips. When people, trying to encourage me, chuckled at my comic lines, I became enraged. All I could think about was the window back stage that dropped twenty feet to the street. I could be out to my car in a few minutes, I thought. From there it would take only a couple of hours to get to Michigan. I'd had it all worked out before I'd gotten my diagnosis. I would drive there and buy a gun, rent a boat, and take it out into the middle of a lake. I'd even looked at a map and picked a few lakes. I would wait till dark. Drink myself into proper numbness. Sit on the bow and hope the blast would carry my body overboard.

I made it through that theatrical nightmare but didn't know how I'd ever finish the run. I couldn't call it off. People were coming from out of town, including my parents and sisters. Critics were scheduled. My

director had spent weeks on the performance along with her fledgling theater company's money.

The first night of the next week's run, I got to the theater early and lay on the floor trying to calm down, but I kept thinking about where in the show I'd blank out. I'd hidden a bottle of Jameson's back stage and sat down on a folding chair to wait out the inevitable, pouring shots into lemon tea. The voices of the audience as they filed to their seats made me shrink. It was a small theater, but they were expecting a full house.

I closed my eyes. The music began, and as it did I felt the cold hand of panic reach under my ribs and squeeze my lungs of breath. I took another quick swig and grabbed a hold of my chair. My director had chosen Senegalese music for the show: Youssou N'dour, Baaba Maal, Cheikh Lo. I reached down for my script one more time, wanting to know it was there so I could get it myself this time. There was nothing I could do now. So I began to meditate. Within seconds the sound of my breath gave way to the voice of Youssou N'dour, a voice I'd first listened to on homemade tapes anyone could buy for fifty cents in Dakar. I'd listened to his music hundreds of times, but I realized I'd never really heard the emotion, the sadness, the longing in his voice. As I listened to him, I began to feel as if his voice were vibrating inside me. Then out of the voices and the drums and electric guitars came the faces of the people from my village: the children, the Chief's sons, El Hadj—the village Chief, his wives—Amina Ba, Ome Lo, Isitu Cissay, old Loum, the prayer caller, and Babacar Jeng, the healer. Face after face, they all came before my eyes. When I could no longer think of anyone else in the village, I began to conjure up the faces of my friends and sisters, Elizabeth, my old girlfriends and lovers, my mother and father, and my dead grandparents. Then the music stopped, the lights went out, and I walked out on stage.

The run ended without any further incident. Afterward, my doctor and therapist suggested I attend a support group. So every Wednesday night, I sat in a church basement on old couches and listened to rambling rages about failing bodies, ineffective drugs and T cells. Arms crossed, I rarely spoke. Then one night, I looked around and saw an empty seat where a funny but very sick man used to sit. After that night I never went back.

As people I knew became infected, as the virus rampaged through the gay communities of America, the Caribbean, and the mining camps and villages of southern Africa, I struggled to keep AIDS and anything to do with it out of my mind. The ribbons, the walks, the quilts, the bike rides, the growing media fascination. I did what I always did when the word appeared in front of me: I turned the other way.



My introduction to yoga had come in high school when I followed my girlfriend to a meeting on Transcendental Meditation. A week later with a couple of oranges, some grocery store carnations, and thirty-five dollars from my mother's purse, I had my own mantra. Ten years later, in the pursuit of mental stability, I found myself on the fringes of the University of Chicago campus purifying my soul with tantric poses. Yoga kept me inside my body, diminished my spells of depression, and curbed my addictions. Over the next ten years, I dabbled and experimented with one form of Eastern spiritual discipline after the other, coming back to yoga again and again for its pragmatic body-centered practice. After my diagnosis with HIV, I devoted more of my time to its study and practice. I went to classes two or three times a week; I went to retreats and workshops; I read the sutras of Patanjali, mouthed the verses of the Gita, and studied the commentaries of Iyengar, Feuerstein, and Eliade. Though I respected its ancient mystical traditions, I was never under the illusion that doing headstands and backbends had much more than a psychological effect on me. I had seen the numbers before and after the first few months on the antiretroviral cocktail, and I became a believer in the periodic table and the alchemic magic of the pharmaceutical industry.

I began to hang around these so-called yogis: people who'd given up jobs, divorced spouses, gone on pilgrimages to India and Nepal. It felt good to be around men and women who were unapologetic about their fascination with how their own smooth, sinewy bodies functioned. Even though, at times, they seemed ridiculous in their zeal and devotion to Indian gods and gurus and disinterested in the political world, I wanted what they had: a belief in the promises of the ancient Hindu sage Patanjali: "Whether old or young, man or woman, sick or healthy, all who practice can find freedom." When several of the yogis decided to make a trip to India to study under the guru of Astanga yoga, Sri K. Pattabhi Jois, I decided I had to go with them.

I'd heard the horror stories of travel in India: the bouts of dysentery, the days bedridden with typhus, the chills and fevers of malaria. But I persisted with my plans, ignoring all those who doubted my sanity. When I called my parents to tell them about India, I could hear my father sigh, and then after a long silence my mother's voice trickled out: "Honey, you do what you want; we gave up on telling you what to do a long time ago."

Hoping my yoga teacher would be supportive, I finally revealed my status and asked if that might be a problem. His eyes registered what I did not want to see: "Do you know what an Indian hospital is like? I've been sick over there, it's a nightmare."

But I was used to nightmares. Those nights before making my decision to go, I would lie in bed imagining Indian hospitals full of brown faces too afraid to touch me, or see my friends wheeling me through an airport with an IV bag dangling over my head. As I lay there in the dark, I thought about what it would be like if I didn't go. Was this going to be my future? A stripping away, one by one, of possibility and adventure? Where would be the next place I couldn't go? What would be the next thing that I couldn't do? Just the thought of traveling had given me hope. In my mind I heard the well-meaning words of my sisters and friends: "You know you can always stay with us if you get sick." "Don't worry, we can fix the basement up." Those nights alone in my room, the walls and the ceiling seemed to be closing around me, inch by inch, stealing my breath, boxing me in and away from the world.

The next day I drove to Devon Avenue, counted my money three times in the car, and hurried into the Indian travel agency to buy my ticket.

When I finally informed my doctor, he wheeled around in his chair and exclaimed, "India? Are you kidding?" When he heard yoga, he shrugged his shoulders. "Well, all I have to say is, you better have an open ticket back."



Six weeks later, I was sitting on the cement floor of Mumbai's airport, frantically counting through bags of pills, making sure I'd packed enough to last six weeks. In total: 624 pills with three extra days of doses.

After another flight and a train ride from Bangalore, I got to Mysore, found a hotel, dropped my pack on my bed, walked to the window and looked down to see a corpse, covered in marigolds, being carried on the shoulders of bare-chested men through the narrow street. An ominous beginning, I thought, until I walked out into the evening air and felt the city and its swarm of children and shoppers absorb me into the kaleidoscopic dream that is India at night.

Early each morning, I rode on my rusty old bicycle through the empty streets to the yoga *shala*, passing women scrubbing the stone thresholds of their whitewashed homes and decorating them by sprinkling colored powder into the shapes of lotus flowers. Because I was not an advanced practitioner, Jois made me wait until his accomplished devotees had completed their practices. By then, the great guru was too tired to bother much with my tight hips and hamstrings, and left me to his grandson. But it didn't matter, the space itself had a power to untangle the body and mind. I would lie alone on the floor in the corpse pose listening to the jasmine vendors and the milkman calling until the housemaid came to sweep away our Western dirt. As the days passed, I began to realize that it wasn't the yoga that mattered. It was the faith in myself that allowed my

body to open and stand as if I belonged again in this world.

On our first day off, I went with a couple of friends to take in the famous Hoysala temples near Mysore. I returned to my hotel exhausted and dizzy from the thousands of stone gods and maidens still dancing in my head. Hours later, I lay naked on the cement floor before the toilet, staring at a spider spinning a web in the corner. On a nearby rooftop I heard horns and chanting voices from a wedding party. Drink water, drink water, I kept telling myself. You must drink water. Somehow I pulled myself up and held onto the walls until I collapsed into my bed. I slept through practice and didn't wake up until I heard knocking on my door. It was the six-foot-two, red-haired, twenty-one-year-old Irish woman I'd met the week before on a rooftop, chanting devotional songs to Shiva. She opened the door, clapped her hands, and broke into laughter. I looked down at the sheet wrapped haphazardly around me and could see the stains of shit from the night before.

"Yoga fever!" she announced, as if offering both a prognosis and cure.

I took a shower and dressed, she waited in the hall.

She had warned me that I would get sick when we spent the day together a few days before, giving each other medicinal mud baths and making love: "Everybody gets yoga fever, the body must purge itself. Some recover and some go home." She shrugged when I told her of my HIV status, and scolded me for taking myself so seriously. "You Americans, you're always worried about something."

She ordered me to follow her to the market to buy flowers and fruit in celebration of my recovery and purification. Once there, she told me to meet her back at the hotel. Then she disappeared into the crowds along the street.

So I wandered through the market. I passed mounds of red roses. I watched men sewing marigolds into marriage wreaths. A man wanted to sell me hash. A silent little girl took my hand and led me to her grandfather's shop of scented oils. As I wandered among the narrow passages, sensual echoes of Senegal came back to me: in the smell of tomato paste, in the sounds of the muezzin calling the faithful to prayer, in the heat pressing against my skin.

I walked on, eating cashews and oranges, filling up sacks with flowers and fruit, trying to find my way out of the market, when I felt something grab onto to my leg. Looking down, a leper without hands held my shin with his stumps. Revolted, I yanked my leg away. But he refused to let go, clenching his teeth, pleading with his eyes for rupees. Searching my pockets, I only found large rupee notes, so I dropped some worthless half pence coins in his lap. As I wrestled free, he spat on my leg and cursed me, his stumps waving wildly in anger over his head.

cluster of street urchins in a parking lot, young black boys hovering by a fire of two-by-fours in a rusted out barrel. Behind their fire, cavernous brick warehouses parallel empty streets, billboards hawk luxuries and the fantasies that go with them. A black steel bridge arches upwards into the night. Kippiies is a jazz club, named for South Africa's famed saxophonist, Kippy Morolong Moeketsi. The club recently reopened in Johannesburg as part of an arts complex trying to attract people back into the downtown area.

A saxophonist by the name of Khayam is playing; Mngadi tells me Khayam was once a part of Hugh Masekela's band. The clientele is primarily black. It reminds me of a blues club on the South Side of Chicago, which used to let in a few of us white souls from the divinity school. I flirt with the cigarette woman passing out Marlboros, making her light a cigarette I don't want but will smoke to keep her near us. She smiles with her sculpted shoulders and swaying hips, her long fingers flicking on her lighter, brightening my face with the flame. Buzo is enjoying himself, listening, as I am, to the dreamy reverberations of the sax, rooted in Khayam's legs, making our own bodies vibrate along with his.

### Cape Town, South Africa (June, 2000)

I drop my naïve ambitions of finding my way about Johannesburg and Soweto and head to Cape Town. At the airport I pick up a newspaper and scan the headlines. Clinton and Blair, in a transatlantic joint press conference, applaud the completion of the DNA molecule map as the "greatest invention since the wheel." Locally, an oil spill has stranded hundreds of migrating penguins off shore and people are flying in from around the world to help in their recovery. Even the South African military is lending a hand, flying the birds up the coast where they were headed to nest. Then, in the far left corner a headline catches my eye: *UN Predicts 50 Percent of Male Teens Will Die of AIDS Before Age 30.*<sup>2</sup>

I check into my hotel and head across the street to a health club, barely noticing the magnificence of the mountains that tower over this coastal city. Craving adrenaline and the need for control, I swim, lift weights, and do a short yoga practice. Satiated, I take a long shower, noticing the array of mixed-race men who seem more comfortable in their bodies than the whites and the few blacks around. I see shades and facial types of all kinds, mixtures of Malay, European, Black African, Indian. *This is the future*, their bodies say as they walk through the dressing room with their dark hair and refined lips, their warm skin, glistening and moist.



Restless and pumped, I search for Cape Town's famous nightlife. At a dance club, I'm invited home by a white tennis pro, a Malayan tailor, and a black teenager who wants to take me first to see the drag divas at another club. I'm exotic, I'm an American, I'm a new body in a tight-fitting blue t-shirt. No one has anything to say when I decline their offers and explain over the dance music why I've come to South Africa. Nobody wants to talk about the subject I want to talk about.<sup>3</sup> The tailor leans in close as if to kiss me, but asks instead, "Are you working for the police?"

I am deciding to head back to the hotel before the very handsome but very drunk tennis pro shoves another beer at me when I catch the eye of a man on the other side of the bar. He is thin, handsomely dressed in expensive, tight-fitting clothes, with a glistening, bald black head and unusually bright eyes. But something else attracts us and moves me past the tennis pro, who grabs at my arm as I cross the crowded dance floor. That something isn't necessarily sexual; it is some innate understanding of each other's bodies. Within minutes we've revealed the code visible only to others who share it. His name is Andre.

"I've been dead so many times people have quit coming to the hospital," he jokes. When I introduce myself and explain why I'm here, he assures me he can help. "I know everybody here." And when I tick off some of the names on my list of contacts, he knows almost all of them personally.

Andre grew up on the Cape Flats, the segregated city of mixed-race and black South Africans, a city built in the lowlands outside Cape Town near the sea. He, too, is of mixed heritage. Though his father was absent with another family in Germany, he provided support for Andre and his mother, which helped him escape a community that would have been brutal for a boy who fancied other boys. "I was good in school. I knew I had to get out of there. I was ruthless," he chuckles nervously. "They hated me there." He'd gone to university then worked his way up in one of the major department stores. He is now a marketing executive. He supports his mother and helps with his nieces and nephews, even though his brothers and sisters refuse to talk to him because of his lifestyle and his positive status.

Andre gives me sketchy details of his HIV history. He has stopped taking AZT, he tells me cavalierly, because he became too sick taking it. Now he uses an herbal treatment, which he swears is helping him, though he admits with a shrug, "What else can I do?" He is sick of being sick and knows unless he can stomach the side effects of antiretrovirals, he'll not make it. The last time he was in the hospital, he'd fallen into a coma and was surprised (as were his friends) that he came back.

Then Andre puts his hand on my chest; the brightness in his eyes turns off and something else turns on. I get the hint: the interview is over. “Let’s go next door, the music’s better.”

Next door the crowd is youthful, dancing to a mix of European, Latin, and African music—sukous guitars, West African drums, Cuban rhythms—ethereal, earthy and unabashedly sexual. It is impossible to stand idly and talk, so we dance. Andre closes his eyes. I scan the room, envious of youth, realizing we are the oldest on the floor. I can’t tell who is who or where I am or who is straight and who is not. Next to me, two women dance around each other, hips in sync, dark hair, their dark eyes smiling at each other, one Indian, one mixed-race. They seem to be in a world where bodies exist not to be questioned but to be expressed. My body finds those rhythms inside rhythms that take us into the beat of ritual time. But as these women dance and weave, their hips touching mine, I feel an aching sadness.

Others dance around us, drinking, laughing and talking, drunk on life. But I can’t help thinking about the world that lies ahead of them in a country where it is expected that AIDS will not level off for another decade. How many in this room will make it? How many funerals will they attend? How many children will be born infected? But these young people are hardly the most at risk; they can afford to be in a nightclub in Cape Town. The vast majority of South Africa’s youth live in poverty and powerlessness, particularly young black women, who are not only more vulnerable to HIV but increasingly to sexual assault.<sup>4</sup>

I kiss Andre outside in the cold. It’s the heat that tastes good, the warmth of surprise and change. As his tongue rolls around mine, the Indian woman and her colored girlfriend dance in my head, reminding me of Sita, my last lover of months before, who for six weeks made me believe that fearlessness was the precursor to love. In every Indian woman, I still see the stabbing intensity of her black eyes, still hear her haunting voice, accusing me of not being able to take care of her: “Look at this hovel you call an apartment. You can’t even take care of yourself, how could you ever take care of anyone else?”

I accept Andre as my guide. I’m tired. I’m sad. I’m alone. We speed away through the empty streets of Cape Town in his new BMW. He leads me onto a rooftop next to his apartment and points out the landmarks of Cape Town as though the city is his creation. Table Mountain looms ominous and dark behind us. Among the dark trees, he points out the old Parliament building, the historic first capital of the British Cape Colony. To the right is the Anglican Cathedral, where from his pulpit Archbishop Desmond Tutu called for Mandela’s release and an end to apartheid. Beyond that stands the city hall where Mandela spoke to the world after South Africa’s first free and democratic election only six years before.

Andre pours some orange juice for me and goes to the bathroom. I

undress in his bedroom and wait. His fashionable clothes are strewn on chairs beside his glowing computer, fish tank and plants. Lying on his bed, I fold into a forward bend, more relaxed than I can remember in a long time, my face eventually touching my knees. I begin to wonder why he is taking so long in the bathroom. As I almost always do when I plunge into this other life, I begin to second-guess myself, thinking I should slip out now while I have the chance. The energy from the dancing and the dancers has worn off. Then the light is turned off in the bathroom, and out of the shadows Andre appears. I muzzle a gasp. His body is not only thinner than I’d imagined but covered in whitish scars like a leopard. It is Kaposi’s sarcoma, a form of skin cancer associated with AIDS. Apparently, he has covered those on his head and neck with make-up.

I fold back into my forward bend to hide the shock on my face. Andre jumps into bed and covers himself quickly with blankets, shifting attention onto my body with flattery: “Look at you. So supple. Bending over like that.” He rubs my back with his hands. “Those muscles in your back. I want to look like this.” I flinch, unable to speak, unable to look at him. He turns out the light and explains: “The scars? You’re wondering about the scars? They’re from being stabbed and beaten.”

“Oh?” I say, not sure if he is talking about his lesions or something else.

“I found them in my apartment, in Jo’burg. We lived there, did I tell you? Jahn and I, my lover. I’d just gotten home from Berlin, my last trip before Jahn’s death. I caught them, going through our stuff.”

“I’m . . . I’m sorry,” I say, completely lost, forgetting he’s told me, in the whirlwind of the evening’s storytelling, about his lover’s death from AIDS.

“They stabbed me with a broken bottle, see this right here, on my head and back.” I try to find the scars, touching him for the first time on his smooth dark scalp. He points to the top of his head and neck, and then takes my hand so that I can feel them. But I’m fixated on what is so visible, the spots on his face and back, that I can’t see the scars that mean so much to him.

“They nearly killed me,” he says. I close my eyes to keep from having to look at him. “After that and after Jahn’s death, I couldn’t stay in that apartment. So I moved here.”

His stylish clothes, his boots, his make-up, his silver BMW are all gone. I see now who lives behind the glowing eyes and charming manner. I see a frightened man’s body that feels more and more like a boy’s. Some other instinct arouses me. I caress his head where he told me that bottle was smashed. I pull him into my body and hold him, kissing the top of his head as his face is buried in my shoulder. Like an animal, I run my tongue to the creamy white splotch on the top of his head, and he moans.



I am late and lost. I am to meet a woman by the name of Villas Tyeku, a community organizer who runs an association for women with HIV out of her home in the sprawling, dusty township of Cape Flats, where I'd driven through with an activists the night before. She told me she'd be at a bar on Long Street in one of the city's more fashionable areas. I can't find her. The bar is shabby and filled with pool tables. I'm angry with myself for being late. I called her five times to arrange the meeting. Someone calls out my name from behind. A black woman wearing a beret sits alone with two satchels at her side. "Are you Michael?"

"Villas?"

"You're late." She is suspicious, cell phone in hand and ready to go. "How did you get my name and number?"

I apologize and try to explain. She frowns, standing. "I've been waiting here almost an hour." Understandably, she sees me as another white journalist on assignment. So as quickly as I can move my mouth, out comes the HIV card and my story.

She sits back down, studying me, finally remembering the name of the man who gave me her name and number. "Oh, Michael Nixon, I know him, okay."

The waitress, whose eyes roll in suspicion that Villas is my pickup, angers Villas so much that we're forced to look elsewhere. "This is your town," I say, "where is a good place?"

She laughs, "I've never been to any of these places."

Across the street, we sit outside at a restaurant. Villas is built low to the ground with a round face and short-cropped Afro. She seems nervous and sad, and in her face I recognize the face of HIV loneliness. Reaching in my bag for my notebook, she stops me, "Are you married? Do you have children?"

I smile, "No wife, no kids."

She shakes her head, smiles, then begins her story without any prompting, her face drawing me in as she speaks. "I'm from Zambia. I'm a foreigner. That's where I met my husband. He came to my country to work. I didn't know he was infected. He didn't tell me because he didn't know. I went to the clinic when I was pregnant with my daughter and found out."

Villas's story is the story of how AIDS has devastated all of southern Africa; it's also the story of capitalism's appetite for migrant workers. Men must leave home for work, traveling far from family and community (in this case the mines of South Africa—gold, diamonds, platinum, and chromium). The labor is hard, tedious, and dangerous. The men spend half their day underground, live in dorms in worker compounds, and have little life outside of the mines. These miners do what all

exhausted, lonely men do—drink and have sex. The mining camps attract poor young women from neighboring towns and villages and migrant sex workers (female and male) who visit the camps. In the eighties, when AIDS was largely seen as a disease of gay men in America and Europe, it was spreading ferociously through the mining camps of southern Africa. Today in the gold mines of South Africa alone there are nearly 300,000 workers from across the region. They travel home to rural towns and urban townships and infect wives, girlfriends, sex workers. It's no surprise that the highest rates of infection are precisely in the rural areas where so many of the miners come from: the South African provinces of Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal, and the neighboring countries of Zimbabwe, Botswana, Mozambique, Lesotho, and Zambia.<sup>5</sup>

As we eat, Villas tells me of her husband and how his family treated her when they found out. "They accused me of giving it to him because, you see, I'm a foreigner. Nobody trusts the foreigner." But Villas is not bitter. She sits up and her eyes show she wants all the world to know the truth about her husband. "My husband was sick, he was dying. I had to help him. I had to keep my family going. He died building our house. It's so big, so nice. It's got two stories with a balcony. He wanted to give us this. That's all he wanted in the end—to build this house for me and my daughter."

She fishes into a large satchel and hands me a grant proposal and a pamphlet with the ubiquitous red ribbon and the name of her organization, Wola Nani ("embrace" in Xhosa), printed on the cover. The grant asks for sewing machines, a computer, and some other materials to bring in money.

"You're a writer. Is it good?" Her face is so open, so hopeful. "You can help us, can't you?"

I bury myself in reading the grant to avoid her question. I want to return to the interview: "Where is this, this place, your organization, Wola Nani?"

"It's at my house in Cape Flats. My daughter and I now live on the second floor. The women come and stay, sometimes they bring their children. Many don't have any place to go. Their families are scared, they don't want them staying with them."

Encouraged by the possibility of my assistance, Villas explains how the monies would be used: "We want to work and make money to support ourselves, to feed our children." From her satchel she pulls out a catalog and some samples of the women's craftwork. Key chains and bracelets made of beadwork, tie-dye dresses and t-shirts, bowls made from intricate weaving of telephone wire, papier mâché toys, and bowls decorated with canned food labels. Villas pushes a key chain and a pen across the table. "Here, you take these."

The food comes, and I reach for my medications but pause and look

at Villas. She carefully cuts her food with fork and knife, lifts it to her mouth and swallows. I feel the pills in my pocket—clumps of chemistry—that I have been living on for four years. I try to quietly pull them out of my pocket, but two spill onto the ground, and I pick them up and pop them in my mouth. When I reach for my water, she has stopped eating and folded her hands in her lap.

“You take the medications?”

I nod.

“I used to take some but they made me sick. And they didn’t do much good.”

She goes back to her food. I go back to mine.

“We got them in a special program at the hospital. You had to come and get them every week. Get on a bus, stay there until they decided to give them out, sometimes half a day, then get on the bus, and go home. I had to miss a half or more day of work. Sometimes I took my daughter. Sometimes someone looked after her. I got sick anyway. I decided they were not worth it. We don’t even have much good water to drink out in Cape Flats. All the drugs, what good are they if we don’t have the good water and the healthy food? This is what makes me so mad sometimes. I decided to just spend my money for good food for my daughter and me.”<sup>6</sup> She goes back to carefully cutting up her food. And then, she looks back up, “But they work, don’t they? Look at you, so healthy and strong.”

I want to tell her that they made me sick, too. But the fact is without them I’d probably be dead. So what should I tell her? That they were the difference between life and death? That she, her daughter, the women of Wola Nani, and the other 99 percent of those like her in South Africa will all die, while I and others like me from wealthy countries will go on living? But Villas isn’t interested in my emotions; she sees something else that has nothing to do with pharmaceutical know-how, she sees how I live in my body: she sees perhaps better than I can why I’m here. So I deliver the message I came to give: “The drugs, yes, they work, but it’s yoga that has helped me the most.” I lose myself and Villas in my rehearsed words about yoga’s benefits, until she brings me back down to earth.

“Well, I want to learn this yoga. Can you come to our center in Cape Flats to teach the women?”

“Well, yes. I could, but I’m going to Durban for the conference, you know, and I’m going to do a workshop.”

“I am going to the conference too, so I will come to your workshop. And when the conference is over why don’t you come back to Cape Town and give the workshop?”

“Yes, yes, I’d like to do that,” I say, nodding emphatically, wanting to believe that in the days ahead I will find the courage to fulfill her request and Andre’s, who also asked me to return and offer a workshop.



The convent for the Sisters of Nazareth sits high on the slopes of Table Mountain. Earlier that week, I’d tried to hike, or rather climb, to the top, getting lost, dodging thieves who’d jumped the couple in front of me, and bushwhacking up through vines and brambles until I found myself fingering holds on a ledge in the middle of a trickling creek bed, with arms and legs covered in bleeding scrapes. I admitted defeat when I turned and could see no further than a few yards below as clouds had blown in from the sea and swallowed the mountain.

I check in with two guards positioned in a brick guardhouse. They look at my ID and call to make sure I’m expected. The plant life of the Western Cape is like no place else on earth, and I can’t help but stop and admire the vibrant yellow and red roses in a garden along the stone path. I wander up to the roses and smell them, and as I bend over, I see a name on the stone I’m stepping on. Looking around, I see others. Then it comes to me: I’m standing on a graveyard for children. I turn and walk back out of the garden. Just as I reach the gate, the guards who have been watching call from the gatehouse. “Sir! Up ahead! That is where you go!” I walk fast then break into a jog.

At the orphanage, a pleasant, old, white woman answers the bell and leads me to an antique chair in an anteroom. The place reminds me of my grandmother’s: antique furniture, jars with striped mints, doilies; everything is drab and outdated, orderly and spotless. I fold my hands and wait in my chair like I am back in grammar school sitting outside the principal’s office.

Sister Irene comes bustling in and I stand at attention. In a colorless tweed sweater, a practical, nondescript gray-green dress and black shoes, Sister Irene has that ageless look of Irish nuns: trim, milky complexion, sharp hazel eyes, narrow face. “Now Mr. McColly, tell me then, what can we do for you? You’re interested in the orphanage, I take it?”

I hand her my university card. “Chicago. My sister lives in Chicago,” she smiles warmly. When I tell her of my project, stressing the importance of trying to write about HIV from the perspective of someone with the virus, the acronym HIV brings the blink, the piercing look, and eventually that knowing nod. “A writer, then?”

She apologizes for her lack of time as I follow her down an echoing hall, passing elderly white nuns with canes and young black nurses and housekeepers; she greets all with equal energy. We stop at the Public Relations office so that I can be added to the long list of journalists who have come to do stories on the convent and South Africa’s escalating population of AIDS orphans. The PR woman tells me that there are over 500,000 orphans in the country and that figure is expected to

rise to over 2 million by the year 2010, accounting for almost 2 percent of the population.<sup>7</sup> The convent has other missions—caring for elderly sisters and working with women’s groups, children, and the poor.

Sister Irene then takes me to a site where they are building a wing for the ever-growing numbers of children they receive each month. “Here’s the school area and here will be dorms for the children.” Walking back to the main building, I can barely keep up with her. “My yoga is hiking up there,” she says, pointing to Table Mountain. “I go as often as I can.”

“Up to the top?” I ask, not wanting to hear that this older woman hikes up a mountain that nearly killed me.

“Certainly. Have you been?”

“I tried. But I kind of got lost.”

“Happens all the time. You have to watch it when the clouds roll in. People have had to spend the night up there.”

As we walk down a long hallway, I hear children. Entering a kitchen, I see a low table with abandoned bowls of cereal, half-eaten crusts of bread, little cups for juice. The sounds of the voices are bright, supplanting the image I fear of babies dying in cribs with eyes bulging out of disproportionate heads. Passing a small side room, Sister Irene stops. “Here is a boy who needs to be on a respirator.” The boy sits in a miniature bed, hooked up to oxygen, rolling a red race car over his blanket, up the wall, and off into the air. His head lolls, his eyes regard us as if we are creatures from another world. “This little boy’s name is Thomas.”

“Hi Thomas,” I say, hardly able to hear my own voice. He looks up and sticks out his little hand.

Sister Irene brushes back his hair: “The nurse says he is doing much better.” I nod, trying to be the writer, noting the details of him and the room, but what I really want is to touch him again, feel his little hand in mine.

The main room is like any kindergarten: numbers and letters painted in bright, happy colors on warm wooden walls; toy boxes overflow with balls and stuffed animals; piles of red cardboard bricks; chairs and tables that come to my knees.

One by one they come out of a far room. A few run, heads bobbing, arms fluttering, legs in tights and dungarees, bending and bouncing, as they spill forth. Girls in groups of twos and threes, absorbed in talking, head toward the play kitchen and stacked boxes. Seeing Sister Irene, many of the boys run toward us, surround me, grab onto my legs and pull on my arms, like I’m a tree that needs to be climbed.

“This is Michael, and he comes from far away, in America,” says Sister Irene trying to get their attention. “They just finished their lunch and now will have a resting time.” I can see cribs in a far room. She sinks to her knees to talk with one of the boys.

A boy looks up at me with his head so far back I’m afraid he’s going to fall over. He says something, but I can’t understand his South African brogue. I lean down and he repeats his question, “What’s *your* name?”

I kneel and put my hand around his back, placing my big palm on his bony shoulder. I look into his face, and a tremor moves up my spine. I stand, searching for something to steady me, something to do, some question to ask Sister Irene, but she has left me alone with these little boys. They take hold of my hands, playing with them as if they were toys. They call up to me, begging for me to come down and play, wondering what’s wrong, wondering how I can be there but at the same time so far away. Fatherless three-year-old boys, their heads back, their mouths agape, hang from my knees. I tighten my jaw, smiling, clinging fiercely to myself.

Sister Irene, on her knees, her arms around two boys, talks with a swarm of other children. Entering the play room, she confessed that she had a room upstairs where she often sleeps at night to be near the children. She signals to me, pointing to two little girls, walking slowly, the last two to emerge from the nap room. One girl leads the other, holding her arm as if they were two old sisters. Step by tiny step, patiently they cross the playroom. “You see, they become like a family. They are always together, these girls. They even sleep together.” Sister Irene explains that the little girl being led is blind and has been sick ever since arriving. I can see now too that the blind girl’s face and body are deformed, making it difficult for her to walk. The little girls make their way through the chaos of playing children. I ask Sister Irene about how her work began with the orphans. “At first, we took children with incurable diseases. We were already set up for this, you see. Our mission is to care for children with incurable diseases. We began in 1991. Nobody would take them, so we began to take these children. We are just social workers. In most cases the parents have both died. We try to find homes with the relatives. But sometimes they can’t always take them.” I ask her about the plots out front among the roses. “Yes, we have a little ceremony for each of our children. Thirty nine have died so far, and many of them are buried out there.”

Sister Irene needs to be on her way, so I thank her and prepare to leave. Some part of me turns back, half hoping a child will notice and come running to grab my pant leg, but they have returned to their world of play.