I wrote *Naked Breath* because I wanted to do a performance that was full of the raw, intimate stickiness of blood and cum. I began working on the piece shortly after getting beaten up by the Houston police during my visit there with ACT UP during the Republican National Convention in 1992. We dragged ourselves back to the Motel 6 just in time to see Pat Buchanan making his famed “culture war” speech on the TV in the smoke-filled bar. This lovely encounter with the Spirit of Texas was the cherry on top of two years of being battered around as a First Amendment poster boy, as one of the NEA 4.

A bit the worse for wear, I created *Naked Breath* at a time when I definitely needed to let some light in. I had begun to doubt some of my own slogans and the in-your-face street activism that had fueled me for a number of years. My response to how AIDS was hitting my life began to be really intimate and full of memory, sex, and sorrow. This mood set the scene for this work.

Also during this time, my partner Doug Sadownick and I were primary caregivers for singer and AIDS activist Michael
Callen. Michael and I had planned to collaborate on this performance and had been awarded a Rockefeller grant to bring it to life. Sadly, Michael died before we had a chance to complete the songs for *Naked Breath*. I felt haunted by the loss of Mike as well as so many other friends and lovers.

I was drawn to two different events in my life that happened on East Sixth Street in Manhattan. One was in 1981, the day that I had bled the most, when I cut off the end of my finger while working as a carpenter. It was a day that ended with me walking back from the hospital down East Sixth Street with my boyfriend of that time, John Bernd, the dancer and choreographer. At that final moment before the AIDS era began, it was a day full of portent, humor, and twenty-eight stitches in my right arm and hand.

Somehow I knew I needed to throw this story in the blender with another day that had me walking down that same street in 1992. Eleven years later, and frayéd from the culture war and onslaught of AIDS, I was again walking down East Sixth Street with a man I had just met named Andrew, on our way to a romantic collision. On that totemic East Village street, I soon found myself in a sexy and highly intimate space as two men—one HIV-negative, the other positive—managed to connect in a time of plague. After several years of shouting in front of government buildings or being dragged by cops down the asphalt on the streets of Los Angeles or Houston or San Francisco or New York, I felt called to really honor the quiet human-sized victories that are available to us. I wanted to try to locate what has happened to us during the AIDS era and hold up the hopeful fact that men were still able to get close to one another there amid the swirl of blood within and the cum smeared on our bodies. In *Naked Breath* I am surrounded by both of these bodily fluids; I wanted to get wet in this performance.

Speaking of wet, one cool, fall evening a few months before the premiere of *Naked Breath* I was walking along the sea where I live in Venice Beach. It was the day after Thanksgiving and I watched the sun slowly set, slipping into the unruly, gray Pacific.
The days were getting short, shorter, shortest. I walked along the foamy shore. A wildly cute surfer dude peeled out of his fluorescent wet suit to a moment of nakedness (I was having a religious experience at that point) and then he wiggled into his baggies. An older African American man on roller blades dressed like Santa Claus whizzed down the bike path playing “First Noël” on his electric guitar in the fading November dusk.

A certain sadness hits me hard as the light diminishes in the weeks before the winter solstice. I believe somehow as the days get dark that we are called to become aware of light, to witness it in a deep way. To open the curtains and raise the blinds. Of course we do this again and again in performance. Fade to black, and then we have the miracle of a bright light coming up downstage left. The early nineties were dark and rocky times for our queer tribe. The relentless roll call inside our heads kept asking, “Who’s dead? Who’s depressed? Who’s left?” These questions were wearing my incisors down to the gum line. I needed to nudge my political rhetoric and find a way to say “thanks,” to life if nothing else. I needed to see the narrow places where the light was still shining, bright enough to warm our hearts and heads.

That fall of 1993 Doug and I had spent Thanksgiving with Mike Callen and his family in his room at the hospital. We had eaten turkey and played cards, as good diasporic midwesterners do. Later, I sat with Mike on his bed watching him and Doug talk as I listened on headphones to a recent sound-studio mix of Mike’s song “Love Worth Fighting For,” which we thought we might use somewhere in *Naked Breath*. Mike’s delicious voice wrapped around me and held me close as the music soared. I saw Mike and Doug talking. Their mouths moved silently; my ears filled with Mike’s song. I was graced by such a feeling of luminescence, love. Even there, as my friend Mike was being knocked around by the final troubles of his twelve years with AIDS, his voice shone through on the tape as he and Doug held hands on the bed at Midway Hospital in Los Angeles. The light was shining.
Mike Callen died a month after that hospital Thanksgiving and he never saw *Naked Breath*. My goal as I created the piece was to be sure I didn’t miss any of that available light. I didn’t want AIDS or the fucking radical right to make me miss a single bright ray that I was lucky enough to witness. The light from seeing my queer friends be good to each other. The light from hearing our voices raised in song or protest or performance. The light from the look-each-other-in-the-eye heat of our queer sex, which truly *is* worth fighting for. And the light from our ability to sit on hospital beds and be together even in the hardest of times.

I continue to hear Mike’s voice so often in my life. Of course I hear his four-vowel bel canto riff on the word “loathsome.” I can’t forget that. But mostly I hear his songs like a comforting wind, a breath that I want around me. I keep hearing Mike’s voice as a guide to how to be a queer man, lover, and faggot artist. *Naked Breath* is dedicated to the memory of the fierce spirit of Michael Callen.

*(The stage is bare except for a giant sunflower in a heavy glass vase. Tim enters from the back of the house breathing in and out very loudly. He checks to make sure the audience is breathing too. He stomps on stage and the lights come up.)*

I’m breathing. Are you? How about you? Everybody take a breath. Let me hear. That was good.

Now take a nice breath through your anuses. Here. I need to do a spot check.

*(Tim approaches some audience member who is probably dreading just such an event.)*

Would you breathe on my wrist? Would you breathe on my heart?
(Tim locates a special someone for the next bit.)

On my dick? OOPS! I’m getting ahead of myself. Time for a tattoo, I think.

(Tim pulls a Magic Marker out of his pocket and sits on the lap of an audience member and asks them to draw on him.)

Could you tattoo my arm please? Just write NAKED BREATH in bold Virgo clear letters and then put a heart around it and an arrow through the middle. Here’s a Magic Marker. Ya know, they say that with every breath we take we breathe in a couple of molecules that Leonardo da Vinci once breathed. I have always believed this. I choose to believe this because it makes life more interesting. But that also means that with each breath we make we also breathe in some molecules from Atilla the Hun . . . Mary Tyler Moore . . . Pop-N-Fresh?

A coupla molecules from Jesus on the cross. A coupla molecules from the guy I had sex with last week and he breathed so deep. His skin so beautiful. A coupla molecules from Bill and Hillary and what I hope is still their loving bed. A coupla molecules from each of us gathered here.

Thanks for the tattoo. Wow.

(Tim leaves the tattoo audience helper and is back on stage.)

I’m gonna breathe you in.

I’m gonna breathe in your warmth and the miracle of human presence in this room. You all got here! No one got hit by a car on their way to the theater! I don’t take it for granted, believe me.

I’m gonna breathe in the colors and ages and sexes and haircuts and fashion choices in this room.

I’m gonna breathe in the multiple piercings and even the presence of the butt plug this gentleman in the third row chose
to insert before coming to the theater tonight. (Not much gets past me, doll!)

I’m gonna breathe in the wish that some of you have that tonight you’ll meet someone go home together have sex and become life-connected.

I’m gonna breathe in the sadness. Oh it’s here too. Sometimes hiding there in the seams of our trousers and the hems of our dresses.

I’m gonna breathe in the joy. It’s different for each. The joy of the morning cup of coffee! The joy of the blow job! The joy of the favorite song! The joy of the touch that matters.

I’m gonna breathe in the heat that is reflected from that time last summer when you lay in the sun as naked as a shorthaired cat.

I’m gonna definitely breathe in the voice of Mike Callen. He was a singer, activist, and the ultimate diva I’ve ever met. His songs are with us here tonight. I’ll float with his breath.

I’m gonna breathe in the memory we carry of the others that have died. Some of our lovers. Some of our mothers. Some of our brothers.

I’m gonna breathe in the blood and the wood and the sacred beds in Grammercy Park that are in this story tonight.

I’m gonna breathe in the grace of each beat of our pulse. Each snap of our fingers. Each rise of our chests. Each breath we make.

I’m gonna breathe you in and I’m gonna let your breath carry me down a street. You know we all have a street inside us. (It’s the first metaphor of the show. I’ll give you a moment.) It’s a place where some things happened. I’m gonna let you carry me down that street now to a time that was a time for building.

As my hand reaches down behind the upstage left black curtain (you’re not noticing this) and grabs my very special . . .

*(Tim craftily grabs a hidden electrical circular saw and gets it going. Loud!)*
Of all the approved boy activities of childhood, the only one I was really good at, other than beating off fourteen times a day, was carpentry. It was the one place my dad and I connected, where his expectations and my homo predilections could look each other in the eye and exchange a manly handshake.

Under my dad’s watchful eye, I built bookshelves, napkin holders, birdhouses that no bird thought were safe to go into, and glamour-filled split-level tree houses decorated with throw rugs! I’d invite my little friends into my treetop lair, pull up the rope ladder, and try to convince them that we should cover ourselves in corn oil and play naked Twister.

I loved going to the lumberyard with my dad. It was like church. Better. More authentically spiritual! Sackett and Peters Hardware and Lumber in Whittier, California, was a gothic cathedral of two-by-fours, a delicate abbey piled high with a maze of construction-grade plywood. The sunlight slipping in between the spindly fir strips dappled our bodies as my dad and I searched for just the right piece of maple wood. Most important, lumberyards were staffed by sexy men in sleeveless orange fluorescent vests showing their great arms. Their job was to meet your every woody need. The lumber workers sauntered godlike as they led you into dark hallways to offer you their mahogany. They’d turn the plank over in their hands, show you the wood’s true line, stroke the smooth sides, measure out in inches exactly how much you needed.

Then they would take the wood to an enormous table saw, a fierce machine that could rip and tear the wood. In an explosion of grating sound, the sawdust covered your body. The sensation tickling my skin and the earthy smell of a shower of sawdust made me shiver with pleasure. I breathed it deep inside me.

In my life journey through teenage blow jobs, Synth/Pop music, the Reagan/Bush years, and the rise (and fall) of the Queer Nation goatee, I have always tried to stay close to my carpenter roots. When I was nineteen, I moved to New York City and began the usual scoreboard of crummy jobs.
First I was a bellboy on Central Park South. Every Tuesday the retired dentist on the fourteenth floor (it was really the thirteenth; could that fool anyone?) would push his bourbon-drenched face into mine and try to kiss me. “You can’t kiss me in the elevator, Mr. Rothbart! Think of your wife! Your grandchildren!”

I spent two weeks as a falafel maker on MacDougal Street. The owner, a Hungarian with a heavy accent, criticized everything I did: “You stupid boy, you must put humus evenly on inside of pita bread. You would have been worthless when Russian tanks rolled into Budapest!”

I worked with my new friend Mark, who shared my interest in performance art, as a juiceboy at a busy midtown healthy eatery called the Curds and Whey Cafe. The unctuous manager explained my precise time schedule to me: “From 9:05 to 9:08 you collate juice filters. From 9:08 to 9:11 you take the carrot inventory.”

Now, my parents did not raise me in the Golden West to become alienated labor back east. Finally, I gathered my tools, chisels, saws, hammers, sexy carpenter belt, and I started my own carpentry business. I became a builder of beds. With a newfound entrepreneurial zeal, I designed an advertisement which I Xeroxed that had the look of a kidnap note: CARPENTER-PERFORMER-HOMOSEXUAL AVAILABLE TO BUILD LOFT BEDS THAT WILL CREATE A NEW YOU! The phone started to ring almost at once. I built hundreds of beds for the people of New York City. Now, in New York, no one really has space in their apartments to sleep properly, so most folks with tiny apartments more sensibly decided to have special raised sleeping shelves in their apartments that were called “loft beds” whether they were in a loft or not. Somebody had made up the word in an effort to make it sound glamorous, like we were in Paris: “Darling, let’s retire to the loft bed, have a cappuccino, and bump our heads.” Clearly there would be a market for my loft bed construction business.
No solution to the space problem was too bizarre for me: I’d build my loft beds anywhere. I’d build beds in hallways. In closets. A bed built out over the stove in a studio apartment’s kitchen was very practical in a Lower East Side tenement without heat. You could make some potato latkes and keep yourself warm in bed at the same time. One loft bed I craftily hung from the ceiling by chains attached to meat hooks in a bedroom painted slate gray. This bold design became very popular on certain streets in the West Village and Chelsea. The reassuring stability of the chains provided numerous secure places for bondage toys which solved that age-old problem that has confronted mankind, “Where do I attach my handcuffs or wrist restraints so I don’t have to pretend I can’t escape?”

I would build hundreds of beds for the people of New York City. Beds for people to sleep on. Beds for people to fuck on. Beds for people to get pregnant on. Beds for people to get sexually transmitted diseases on. I had found my vocation. I was a husband of sex! A maker of sleep!! I took Manhattan to bed!!!

Okay, running your own carpentry business when you’re a young fag performance artist takes much too much work. Trust me on this. The burden was too great, Manhattan too vast, the money too meager. So, in the summer of 1980, I gathered my saws and hammers and chisels and sexy carpenter belts (I had two now—one for day wear, the other for evening), and I found a contractor named Frank di Martini who needed an extra hand. He hired me and my life as a Brooklyn construction worker began. I now became a part of the subculture of a small construction company in Brooklyn. It was such an intense testosterone scene on the construction jobs, a mix of carpenter-jocks, ex-hippies, intensely butch dyke union wannabes, and one fag. All of us shared one thing: we were all good with wood.

Frank di Martini was a compact, pony-tailed, rippling-muscled sensitive New Age guy. He insisted on having at least one sweet and emotionally tuned-in gay man on every construction
crew. I suppose that was me. This was Frank’s version of a sort of queer affirmative action. I think he mostly wanted to have someone to talk to at lunch about things of mutual interest: metaphysics, love trouble, the latest Sondheim opening on Broadway. Frank would share with me the feelings that crosscut his life. Drilled into hidden places. Chiseled into his sense of self.

There was a darker side to this, though. I think Frank also wanted to have access to my Homo Sensitivity Gold Card. We are all given those plastic cards at birth, whether we know it or not. Frank thought he could borrow it from me if things got bad. It might help him meet his emotional payroll. We would use it to divide our feelings into lines on our lunch break over foot-long submarine sandwiches.

Okay, I know there are some people who would criticize me for idealizing this male universe I had landed in. They would say to me, “I think you are giving too much energy to a basically oppressive heterosexist job situation!” They might have a point, and I may be destined to end up on Oprah Winfrey’s “Queer Carpenters Who Give Too Much on the Job” episode.

Sure, I was giving, but I was also getting. I was getting the vibe of a world of working men in Brooklyn. Part of me had always wanted to be accepted by these guys who reminded me of my brothers and cousins. It was sexy too, being surrounded by all these straight men and their tools all day long. Mostly, I was out on the construction sites, except, of course, when hardened union guys from Queens were around. I was honored that in some way my queer gifts were being acknowledged and honored there amid the whir of the saw and the bam-bam-bam of the nail gun.

That first day on the job with Frank we did eight hours of demolition in an ancient basement on Adelphi Street. Yuk! The Pleistocene dirt of Brooklyn covered me from head to toe. This grime was made up of the grit of the writing of Walt Whitman and Hart Crane. At the end of the day, covered in their poems and black soot, I sat on the D train heading over the Brooklyn Bridge back to my
home on the Lower East Side. I caught a glimpse of my face in the shutting subway door. I didn’t recognize myself. I was filthy from the day’s work. There was a raccoony splotch of white where my face mask and goggles had been. I looked like those Welsh coal miners in the classic 1941 film *How Green Was My Valley.*

At the first stop in Manhattan, some artist friends got on the train and sat across from me. As they chatted amiably, they had no idea who I was. They didn’t recognize me. I had become the invisible worker, someone who earns his keep with the sweat of his brow.

(*Over the sound system we hear, naturally, the Red Army Chorus singing “The Internationale.”*)

Before too long, in that crucial summer of 1980, I became the head co-foreperson carpenter at the People’s Convention in the South Bronx, a protest shanty town designed to expose the hypocrisy of the middle-of-the-road Democratic Party, who were having their convention in New York City that summer. My partner foreperson carpenter was a fabulous dyke named Marty. She is a performance artist today too! Marty and I were Dyke and Fag Carpenter People’s Heroes, ready to build a new social experiment there in the bombed-out South Bronx. Later on in that summer, Marty and I would march with thousands of others in defiance of the corrupt Democratic Party Convention at Madison Square Garden. I took off my red plaid sleeveless shirt, the one I always wore on the construction sites, and waved it over my head to show my politics and attract the cute man with the trust fund representing the Socialist Worker’s Party. We poured past the Garden as we manifested our demands for social justice! Economic empowerment for all workers! We will seize the means of production!

(*The Red Army Chorus fades down to a whimper.*)

I do miss communism every now and then.

But my friends on the subway couldn’t see any of this. They probably thought I was just some working grunt on my way back
to the wife and kids in Washington Heights. Had they only looked closer, though, they would have noticed the Manifesto Red nail polish I was wearing that particular day. I had crossed over from my art life, and I now dwelt in a different world. I was now part of this realm of dirt and dust and beer and . . . blood!

Earlier that afternoon, while the jackhammers had pounded, Mike from deepest Brooklyn was starting to space out after his five-foot-long submarine sandwich lunch and four Budweiser and two Amstel Light (because he was dieting) beverage break. His blood sugar was not doing well at all. At about 2 P.M., he slipped on a rock and his Sawzall, which was on at the time, tore a hunk of meat from his leg. Screaming in pain, he was hustled off to the emergency room. Those of us remaining exchanged nervous glances as Frank picked up a bucketful of sawdust and threw it over the spreading red pool of blood and said, “Back to work.”

Now, every carpenter knows this is the tightrope we walk. These tools that can cut through brick and wood can also cut through our meat and bones. It is a blood contract, and nobody really knows the terms of it.

While I was going to Brooklyn to rebuild brownstones throughout 1980, I was also seeing a man, this guy named John. I met John because I saw a postcard up in the Laundromat on Second Avenue for a performance art piece he was doing. It caught my eye during my spin cycle. John was so beautiful with his mess of androgynous curls glowing in the photo. His dancer’s arm was held extended out to the side, fingers reaching all the way to New Jersey. I had to meet him. I got his phone number.

“Yes, in Manhattan,” I said to the telephone operator. “I’d like the number for the attractive man on this postcard doing minimalist dance.” (Directory assistance is amazing!)

I called John up. “You don’t know me,” I said, “but I think we should get together and talk about the new directions for gay men’s performance in the eighties. I’m putting a festival together at PS 122.” Okay, so it’s been a recurrent pick-up line in my life.
“It sounds interesting,” John said cautiously. “Why don’t you come over and we can talk about it.”

On my way to John’s apartment in the East Village, I walked down East Sixth between First and Second. This is the block with all the Indian restaurants. Shagorika. Kismoth. Taste of India. Passage to India. The Gastronome Ghandi. Ghandi to Go. They’re all there! I used to imagine that all these restaurants shared the same kitchen. I was sure there were block-long conveyor belts delivering huge piles of poori and papadam like stacks of laundry to each small restaurant. In those soon-to-arrive delusional paranoid days with the election of Ronald Reagan, I was convinced that one of his operatives (Ollie North, perhaps) was going to sneak back there with his clutch purse full of plutonium and dump it into the common vat of mulligatawny soup. In one fell swoop he would wipe out all the queer performers in the East Village because these cheap restaurants were where we ate.

I got to John’s house, 306 East Sixth Street. He buzzed me in.

“How many flights is it?” I shouted as I climbed the many stairs leading to John’s apartment.

“Just keep on coming,” John called down. “You’ve almost made it.”

“Whew,” I gasped, “That’s quite a hike.”

John extended his hand.

We had tea. We ate cashew chicken from the one Chinese takeout restaurant on the block. I was very drawn to John, so I cast my net wide and tried to pull him to my shore. John resisted me. I think he knew I was going to be big emotional trouble, so he struggled to avoid the coastline of my side, to miss the shoals of my chest, not to get pulled down by the undertow to my dick and butt.

John tried, but it didn’t work. Sorry.

Who’s the fish and who’s the lure really in all of this? I don’t know. I know we sat on wood boxes. John and I shifted near each
other, and the inevitable thing happened, the only thing that could have happened between John and me: We began to fall toward each other, obeying the law of gravity and the even greater law that governs falling bodies. It was like when NASA’s Skylab was going to fall from outer space and crash to earth. They could try with all their might to keep it from falling, but down it came anyway. Nobody really knew who the debris would hit when it plunged into Western Australia. What if a big piece had hit a future boyfriend of mine, then a little boy in Perth dressed in a Catholic boys’ school uniform? I didn’t care where Skylab fell as long as it didn’t hit me or anyone I love personally in the head.

That kiss with John happened as we hit the earth’s atmosphere. Then came the opening of clothes and the rush of feeling as we entered each other’s undiscovered countries.

“Can we go into your bedroom?” I asked, a little uncomfortable on the wood boxes.

“You want to?” John asked, rubbing my close-cropped hair.

“I think so.”

There was a voice inside of me that was telling me to wait. I wasn’t sure if I had a passport for this journey. My papers probably aren’t in order. I’d better turn back. I’ll just leave now. Well, on second thought, maybe John and I can just sneak over the frontier at night. Hope for the best. So we kissed. And ate each other’s buttoles, of course. And fucked each other.

That night as I slept next to John, I dreamed so vividly the dream came with specially composed dream-sequence music. I dreamed I was in a graceful world, rolling fields of grass extending as far as the eye can see. Feeling John in bed next to me, it seemed that this was a world we might get to live in together. On these fields of grass was humanly designed architecture, like the perfect college campus, the University of Iowa, maybe. It was all the colleges I never got to go to. I walked through this grassy dream looking for John while strange and beautiful music played from hidden speakers in my head.
John didn’t want to love me. But I forced him to. For a while it gave him a lot of pleasure. Later it would give him a lot of pain. But for now, for a few powerful months together, how we loved to fuck each other!

I should get back to work. The first weeks I was seeing John, Frank di Martini and Company was doing a job in the Fort Greene section of Brooklyn. We had undertaken a massive renovation, and now I was working all alone on this site, doing the finish work on some doors and the parquet floor. Most people don’t know that I am an expert door hanger. (I know, it’s a fascinating subject.) Now, door hanging is a very useful skill because everybody needs doors. We need doors to go from one room to the other, sure. But we also need doors to go from one time of life to another. So if you know how to make a doorway, you’ll always have work.

I had framed out a door at this brownstone and had left a space above for a transom. I was waiting for the stained-glass artisan, who was late (as artisans will be). Finally Gene, Mr. Stained-Glass, arrived with his wide grin and wider shoulders. His long hair and two-day stubble made him look like one of the cuter of Jesus’ disciples just fresh from a workout lifting rocks in the desert. He stripped to the waist as he installed his piece . . . of glass. I pretended great interest in how he was deftly placing his work of art. It gave me a reason to be close enough to him to sniff the aroma coming up from his shucked-down overalls. The stained-glass commission he had fulfilled was a sort of reedy-lake-mallardy-duck-on-the-wing thing. We admired it. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw he was admiring me quite obviously. Then Gene the Stained-Glass Hunk spoke.

“So . . . uh . . . do you like being a carpenter?”

“It’s okay,” I replied, flinging a slug an electrician had left on the floor.

“You really seem to have a knack for it,” he said, examining my rather skillful work on the doorjamb.
“I’m good with wood,” I replied, looking him in the eye.

Well, with that line, he had to make eye contact, right? So he glanced up and moved slowly toward me, brushing a fleck of wood off my cheek. His hand reached around my shoulder, and he pressed his body onto mine as we leaned against the door frame. The heat of his body made my face turn red like a bursting cartoon thermometer.

“You really know how to hang a door,” Gene said. “Let’s see if it swings.”

Suddenly, we were kissing and grabbing and poking. Soon, our cocks were in each other’s mouths as we stirred up the sawdust below our feet. The smell of the wood was in my nose and on my skin. It took my breath away. We offered each other our mahogany. We turned each other over in our hands. We showed each other our true line. We stroked our smooth sides. We measured out in inches exactly how much we needed.

It was clear to me that Stained-Glass Man was about to come on my pricey birch-veneer clamshell molding. I breathlessly said, “Not there! Shoot on the inexpensive knotty-pine door saddle!”

We both came by the door hinge. Lazy dollops of cum, like a dentist’s office abstract expressionist painting, meandered slowly down the length of the wood. We looked at each other and laughed, brushed each other off, and pulled up our pants. Stained-Glass Man chuckled, hoisted his tool bag, pecked me on the lips, and went off to his next delivery.

I grabbed some sawdust and threw it on the dripping splooge. I got down on the floor and rubbed the queer cum into the arrogant pride of these rich people’s brownstone. Put that on your croissant, Class Enemy!

For the last part of my job that day, I needed to shave one thirty-second of an inch from the back of some of the pieces of parquet floor to fit flush around the door. For this job I was going to use my hand electric planer. A hand electric planer has eight to twelve razor-sharp blades whirring five million times a second. It’s
basically a death machine. Now, this was not exactly a case of using the right tool for the job. In fact, it was completely the wrong tool. But since I’d enjoyed an unplanned sex break, I was in a hurry and needed to finish up.

I carefully held the first piece of parquet floor between my fingers. Errrrrh! One thirty-second of an inch off. Good. Glued and installed. I gripped the second piece and carefully brought it close to the whirring blade held in my lap. Careful. Careful. Careful . . .

Now, if we were looking at this scene from outer space, what would we see? We would see a young queer carpenter in a hurry about to make a grave error. From space we would see the swirl of sawdust from where their bodies had recently been, the lingering heat of these two men’s mingled breath as visible as any nebula’s gases on the opening credits of Star Trek: The Next Generation. From outer space we would see that in 1897, the Italian workman in the Bronx who had fashioned the piece of parquet floor had noticed a hard little oak knot there on the underside. Uh-oh. I want you to all watch that oak knot very carefully now as it moves toward that leering blade. Closer. Closer. Closer . . .

The knot hit those blades, the machine jammed, and my hand was pulled into the planer’s teeth. Blood spurts everywhere: a tidal wave of gore. I have cut off my entire arm, I think. No, my arm is still there. My hand. No, my hand is still there. My fingers. No my fingers are still there. Wait, the end is gone. I’ve cut off the end of my finger.

What could I do?

On automatic pilot I decided to go St. Something-or-Other, the Catholic hospital by the De Kalb entrance to the subway. Now, I believe whenever you cut off a part of your body, you should first find it, then put it in a teacup of ice, and then remember to bring it with you to the hospital. They can do amazing things with these cut-off parts. (I’ve seen the John Wayne Bobbitt penis restoration video.) I picked up the bloody tool and poked through
the blades. I found the cut-off piece of finger, but it seemed like it wasn’t going to be much of a help. It didn’t look so good: sort of like a little spoonful of steak tartare. I left it in the electric planer.

I tore off my red work shirt and wrapped it around my squirting finger. Bursting out the door, I ran down the street leaving a trail of blood behind me. If anyone was looking for me, they’d know where to find me that way. Each drop of blood there on the pavement was for someone in my life. This one, for John. This one, for Frank di Martini. This one, for me. All these, for everyone here tonight.

As I ran down the street, I remembered all the jobs I’d done in this neighborhood. I put two doors in that brownstone for a Wall Street stock analyst. I made the cabinets in a bathroom in there for this fuck buddy of mine. I was proud of the window sashes for the yuppie family across the street.

I finally arrived at the Catholic hospital and rushed breathlessly toward the emergency room, my hand clutched to me like a relic of the one true cross. I burst through the doors and screamed, “I’ve cut off my finger! I’m bleeding to death!”

Everyone in the emergency room was screaming too. The nurse and orderlies were weeping and throwing themselves on each other. This seemed an extreme response to my, admittedly, bad problem. But they weren’t paying any attention to me. They crossed themselves and said “El Papa” this “El Papa” that.

Finally, a formidable nurse with a faint mustache and the name Ramirez on her breast screamed over the loudspeaker, “The Pope has been shot in Rome! Let us all pray.” They all fell to their knees.

My mind took this in and quickly made a checklist of the situation: I have cut off the end of my finger. I have run bleeding through the streets of Brooklyn. I have come to a Catholic hospital emergency room six minutes after Pope John Paul has been shot at the Vatican! Is this fair, God, really? We have to talk.

An old woman with cataracts was weeping uncontrollably next to me as she grabbed at me, thrusting her rosary into my bleeding
hand. I had never felt more like a WASP in my entire life. Finally, the commanding Nurse Ramirez glided toward me. She gathered me unto her and put me in an examining room. Capably, she placed my whole hand, red shirt and all, into a metal bowl and poured a bottle of antiseptic on it. She began to peel the cloth away, unwrapping my finger like the Mummy revealing himself. My finger was chewed up pretty seriously. It looked like I had stuck it into a garbage disposal and then dipped it in a bowl of salsa ranchera.

Nurse Ramirez remained calm. “Young man,” she told me, “we’re going to cut off some skin from your arm and sew it onto the end of your finger.”

My eyes replied, “Yes! You’re beautiful, Nurse Ramirez.”

She grabbed a scalpel and neatly cut a nickel-sized piece of skin from my upper arm. Peeling it off like a Band-Aid, she then flopped it onto the end of my finger and sewed it on with deft strokes. The flesh winked shut as Nurse Ramirez stitched the wound closed.

“Sit!” she ordered me. “Keep your finger extended over your head. Wait here for twenty minutes, then call someone to bring you home.”

The woman with the rosaries sat next to me. She was calmer now. Patting my shoulder, she said, “I will pray for you even as I pray for the Pope.” The TV news reported to all assembled that the Pope would live and so would I.

I waited exactly nineteen minutes and then walked slowly to the pay phone on the wall. I called John and hoped he was home.

“Hello,” John said sweetly after the fifth ring.

“I’m in a Brooklyn emergency room,” I panted. “I cut off the end of the finger. I’m lucky I didn’t die. Please help me.” I felt the tears start to come.

“I’ll be right there, okay?” John knew to say the right thing. “I’ll get there as soon as I can and I’ll bring you home.”

I don’t think any words had ever soothed me so much in my life up to that point: John will bring me home to the East Village.
“Okay.” I stifled a sob, wanting to be a big boy. “Hurry.”

A half hour later John walked into the emergency room. I can still see him now, this most confusing man in my life. I can see him like he is in front of me. John’s beautiful face, so generous with his smile. His brown curls tumbled down his forehead and made a place that I would have liked to hide in. John had on his old winter coat even though it was May. It was cinched up with a wide belt.

“I guess my finger slipped,” I said, holding up my enormous bandaged hand. “Do you think we can use this in a performance?”

“Don’t think about that right now,” John cooed. “Let’s get you home.”

John helped me up from the plastic seat, which was damp from my nervous sweat. We went outside to Flatbush Avenue, the afternoon light making Brooklyn look good, and John hailed a cab. This was a luxury not usually indulged. Feeling special, I nestled down into the seat like it was a stretch limo and leaned my face against the window as we crossed the Manhattan Bridge. The suspension cables framed my view of New York, chopping New York’s skyline into little shapes, like the slices of pizza John and I loved at Stromboli’s. These bits of Manhattan visible through the thick bridge cables were manageable bite-sized pieces, just like the end of my finger back in the electric planer.

The cab left us at St. Mark’s and Second by the Gem Spa newsstand where I often browsed in the porn magazines. John quickly bought a half dozen bialys for us to snack on from the woman at the Second Avenue bakery who loved us and pretended we were yeshiva boys.

Walking quietly down the street, I felt so old. I leaned on John. I felt scarred and scared by this day in my life. I looked up at the buildings of the Lower East Side. I had built beds in so many of these buildings. And I’d had sex in all the rest. I knew their insides. I knew where the studs hid under plaster walls, waiting for the nail. I knew which brick would take which exact spike. I knew
what dwelt there in the mystery under the floorboards, the dark places between the joists that we walked on every day of our lives.

I had sawed and screwed. I had nailed and pounded. I had opened my body, and the blood had started to pour. I would try, but I would never be a carpenter again. I might even build another bed or two, but I would never really be a carpenter again. But I would always know, inside me, that there had been a brief time in my life when I was good with wood.

We walked on to East Sixth Street. I felt the sticky blood still on my arm. On my pants. On my shoes. I felt this blood on Sixth Street. It was slippery under my feet. It was hanging over my head. I saw my boyfriend John that day in May of 1981 on East Sixth Street. I looked to the East River. For an instant I saw the blood that was about to rise up from that river. I saw a wall of angry blood that would sweep away so many, that will sweep away John. I saw this for a second, a deluge about to come.

John nudged me and asked, “Are you okay?”

“Oh, yeah, I’m fine,” I replied. “Can I stay at your house tonight?”

“Sure.”

We walked into his building and climbed up the stairs very slowly. We went into his apartment. John carefully took the clothes off of me and helped me into the bathtub in his kitchen. He took his clothes off too and then got in behind me. The water surrounding us both, John washed the blood from my body.

(The lights fade to a deep blue. Tim carefully slips his clothes off until he is naked in this light. We hear Michael Callen singing the song “They Are Falling All Around Us.” A performer who has been seated in the front row slowly rises from the audience and walks toward Tim. He carries a bucket with water and a wash cloth. He sets the bucket down and he slowly washes Tim’s body as Michael Callen sings. He holds Tim close when he is finished and
then quietly returns to his seat. As the song ends, Tim speaks.)

We’re walking down East Sixth Street. In December of ’92. Eleven years later and eleven years into the plague. How many times in my life had I walked down East Sixth Street in New York? How many times had I walked down this street with blood on my clothes from the cut-off end of a finger, with groceries in my arms for a dinner with friends, with a new man at my side for a night’s work? How many times had I walked down East Sixth looking for sex? Or Indian food? Or both?

(Tim pulls his pants up, shimmying the whole way.)

Sometimes I would sit afterward in an Indian restaurant, beloved Kismoth or tasty Shagorika, snuggled into a booth with a man I was seeing. The cum would be still marking our bodies, crackly on my neck or sticky between his legs. The Bengali waiter would arrive with his freshly-starched-white-shirt smile.

Waiter, I’ll have the mango chutney and a large Wash’n Dri, please.

How many footsteps have walked here before me, the memory of their soles wearing that East Village concrete into sand and dust? How many footprints of the dead who came before us are layered beneath our striding feet? Right now I might be stepping on the tiny footprints of Doug’s dead grandma. I can follow her path as she walked up to Fourteenth Street from Delancey in 1912. She walked uptown to buy a book or a piece of meat. Maybe she was window-shopping for a dress she’d never be able to afford for the new year.

Our feet joined that throng.

Am I being sentimental here? Well, I’m sorry, but I listen to doomy and gloomy music frequently and this makes me remember the footfalls of the dead. I hear that music loud in my head. I do what it takes to keep the memory alive of each slaughtered
queer poet on each battlefield or immune suppression ward. I remember every dyke and every faggot erased by this culture. I spend hours looking at the photos of my dead lovers on my altar at home. I touch my first Silence = Death button with a nostalgia I can’t help but feel for 1988, my first tour of duty with ACT UP. I jab that Silence = Death pin into the palm of my hand. I hope for blood. I hope that the blood might actually mean something.

The light . . .

(Right on cue, a fierce diagonal of light bisects the stage.)

. . . pours in.

I had met him earlier that day, this man I’m walking with down East Sixth Street. We had become acquainted at Performance Space 122 during a gay men’s performance workshop I was leading. The light had poured in PS 122’s tall windows as I opened the curtains and swabbed the deck to get the room ready for the workshop. One by one the two dozen guys arrived, bundled up against the even-for-December cold. We gathered to tell some stories about our lives. I hoped the warm breath of our raised voices would keep us toasty. The weak 4 P.M. sun spread long and low on the floor as it shone through the somber stained-glass window that had preached to generations of immigrants this inscribed poem:

Every waking hour we weave,  
whether we will or no—  
Every trivial act or deed,  
into the warp must go.

That “party on” message spread its soft glow on the group of huddled-together faggots eleven years into the plague. Arms around each other’s shoulders sweaty and swaying. We’re close enough to smell each other. We’re close enough to listen to each other as our stories weave together. I look for these circles. Conjure them, too, sometimes.
“I’m Andrew,” he had said as we went around sharing our names. This was the man I would walk down East Sixth Street with later that night. Andrew was broodingly dark and handsome, a Heathcliff on Houston kind of thing.

*I know you,* I thought to myself.

Andrew and I rose to our feet even as the workshop’s tales of sissy boys and first loves swirled about us. I looked at him, and he met my gaze. Andrew and I were wearing almost exactly the same outfits (how unusual). We were boldly duochrome in our beat-up black sweatpants and white sleeveless T-shirts with crosses and religious medals dangling from our necks, sort of a City Ballet meets Saint Mark’s Place kind of look. It was like we had spoken on the phone to decide what to wear to the first day of East Village High School!

“How long have you two known each other?” someone asked me, commenting on our similar getups.

“Not long enough,” I whispered to myself as I maneuvered my way nearer to him. He was pretty big! Tall, I mean, a bit taller than me. I hated that. It meant that if we kissed later, I would have to twist my neck up and around to reach him. I would be sure to get a neck ache. I should probably just call my chiropractor right now and make an appointment. Andrew wore a religious medal I didn’t immediately recognize. What was it? A petite Saint Peter and Saint Paul medal. Understated yet boner-producing.

Who was Andrew, anyway? His dark eyes and black hair reeled me right in. I could fight that tight fish line, try to get that hook out of the soft flesh of my cheek, but I knew the story would end up with me flopping around on the deck.

We snuck a look again, longer this time. What happens when these eyes meet? How can we fulfill the promise of that connection? How to receive it like an orange held in an open palm toward you? Well, there’s all kinds of things you can do, of course. You can linger near each other, nearer than normal. You can yawn and extend your arm over the back of the chair. You can do this in your seats right
now. You can ask each other silly questions like “Got the time? How about a light? Want some tea?” But when we feel the sacred buzz of this connection rise up from the earth, why can’t we just go right up and say, “Hello Human, I am me! Who you are?” Why not? Why can’t we do that? Is there a law or something? Do something. Cross that line. Take the scariest chance and seize the slippery day. Whatever it takes. DO IT! Like your life depends on it. Which it does.

Well, Andrew and I opted for the “linger near each other” approach. It’s low-risk but also definitely low-yield. The workshop ended after three hours of creating performances about the secret powers we held as gay men; PS 122 was bursting with metaphors and hormones. Andrew and I hung around the room till almost all the participants had already left. We stood by our shoes, which had ended up next to each other (oh, fate!) on a well-worn seating platform. Those black boots waited for us to get our act together. They engaged in Doc Martens gossip.

The size ten and a half wide muttered, “I just wish they’d go talk to each other.”

“I just wish they’d go fuck each other!” the eleven narrow complained through the sock that was suffocating him.

Finally, to shut the boots up before they said something really embarrassing, Andrew and I grabbed those Doc Martens and stuck our feet in their mouths and flattened their shoe tongues as we threaded every last eyelet. These were the eleven-hole, not the eight-hole variety, so this trying activity took a little while. Each diving swoop of those shoelaces drew Andrew and me nearer and nearer. Face-to-face while we waited for the last person to leave, we tugged the laces tight and made a knot. Everyone was now gone. One of us had to do something quick. I crossed my fingers and stepped into the void.

“Um, would you like to hang out for a while?”

“Sure,” Andrew replied. “That would be great.”

“What shall we do?”

“What would you like to do?” Andrew tossed it back to me.
“No, you decide,” I countered.
“No, you,” Andrew parried.
“It’s up to you,” I said almost shouting.
“You’re the visitor in New York, it’s definitely your decision,” Andrew said, putting his Doc Martened foot down. Checkmate.

I wanted to say something like, “Let’s just find a place that is quiet to sit and recognize the essential truth and spirit in each other.” Because that is really what I hoped would happen. In lieu of that, I floated a more conventional proposal: “Why don’t we go to Yaffa Cafe and eat something?”

Wrapping our Bob Cratchit scarves around our necks, we pushed our way out of the big oak doors of PS 122 and into the flow of the pre-Christmas jostle of First Avenue.

“It’s fucking cold!” I complained, feeling like my lips were going to fall off with frostbite.

“Let’s run,” Andrew said and took off.

We quickly covered the short distance to the cafe, shoved through the crush in the narrow entry, and slipped into a cozy, warm corner table.

“I hate the winter,” I, the typical Californian, complained. “I think it’s why I left New York for California.”

“Hey, I’m a Californian too,” Andrew said, removing several layers of jackets and sweaters.

“You’re kidding! Where are you from?” I was pleased to have discovered our common origin.

“Well,” Andrew began, lavishing several vowels on this one word, as though this were a huge tale to tell, “I was born in Stockton in a manger, then when I was six . . .”

We were off and running in the delicious orgy of two native Californians comparing their tan lines as we shared nostalgic memories of hitchhiking in the San Joaquin Valley and which sex acts we had had on which rides at Disneyland.

We had tea surrounded by the late-baroque punk splendor of Yaffa on Saint Mark’s. For two hours we talked and traded and
teased and tempted as we lunged our pita bread into the spicy humus dip. Feeling daring, I licked the last bit up off the plate with my tongue and winked. This could have been the opening salvo of our intimacy, but Andrew glanced down at his watch.

“Oh, look at the time!” he said getting up. “I have to go to work. I’m late.”

“Yikes!” I exclaimed, using a characteristic retro expression that made me sound like one of the Hardy Boys. “I have a show to do. I need to go too.” Then I added nervously, “Would you like to meet later?”

“Sure,” Andrew shouted through the pullover sweater that covered his face as he climbed into it. “This time I’ll decide where to eat.”

Later that night, at 10 P.M., I walked down First Avenue feeling pretty good. I was addicted to the feeling of excitement that came from having a rendezvous scheduled with God Knows Who to do God Knows What with each other. I walked down the avenue. Past Holy Stromboli Pre-Lubricated Pizza. Past the sour-cream-filled pleasures of Poland and the Ukraine. I went into a restaurant at East Sixth Street and Avenue A where Andrew and I were to meet. It was called Banditos or Caballeros or something like that.

I looked around the restaurant for Andrew. I couldn’t see a sign of him. I’ve been abandoned! I thought to myself as I turned into a puddle of panic. Then I saw Andrew waving madly, trying to get my attention from the little table behind the pillar. Counting my breaths in an effort to calm my involuntary hyperventilating, I lugged my “abandonment issues” in their enormous mismatched steamer trunks across the restaurant and sat down across from him.

“Hi!” Andrew said as he leaned across the table and gave me a matter-of-fact kiss.

“Hi,” I replied. One breath. Two breaths. Three breaths. “Nice to see you. Have you been waiting long?”
“Nah. Long enough to order a margarita. Are you okay?”

“Oh, sure, I’m fine.” I improvised nonchalance, kicking the panic-filled steamer trunks further under the table till they fit. “I just got a little nervous as I walked here.”

“Relax.” Andrew rubbed my forearm. “I won’t bite.”

The margarita arrived: a frosty tureen the size of a bassinet. The salt chunks trembled in slow motion down the melting sides.

“Waiter,” Andrew asked, “can we have two straws?”

Nursing our beverage, Andrew and I swapped stories of love and families and school and coming out and hopes and fears. In other words, we had a conversation. The stories bounced back and forth like a first round of tennis between a couple of people getting to know each other’s skill. Our game plan included the usual dinner conversation topics: hustler boyfriends, drama queenism, international travel, and adolescent erotics.

“I had a boyfriend once who was a hustler on Santa Monica Boulevard,” I started with an easy overhand serve. “He told me he did it so that he could buy a grand piano. But after all those blow jobs, once he got that grand piano, he found he could only play in E minor.”

Andrew returned the lob with a free association: “Well, now that you mention blow jobs and the performing arts, I got my first blow job at the International Thespian Conference in Muncie, Indiana. It was with a boy from St. Cloud, Wisconsin, and happened backstage during a parochial girls’ school production of *You Can’t Take It with You.*”

Lunging to display my backhand, I sent the ball back with a difficult corner shot. “Oh, yes, travel brings out the best in us. My friend Doug and I once had a big fight in the Parc Royal in Brussels, so we split up for a couple of days and then met to the train station in Berlin Bahnhofzoo. We saw each other next to the express train to Moscow. Doug and I were so happy to see each other as we hugged and kissed our way onto the U-Bahn that we almost missed our stop at Karl Marx Platz.”
Andrew was good, very good; he stretched long and thwacked the ball into my court with a story that psyched me out: “When I was seventeen, I lived with my mom in a house in the San Joaquin Valley next to some alfalfa fields. Every night of my seventeenth year, I walked far out into those fields. I would carefully take off all of my clothes and then jerk off over those green alfalfa leaves, dreaming of the Latino workers of those fields.”

I reached for the ball but missed. Game and match!

The edgy cultural politics of this alfalfa field story had given me an instant hard-on. “Waiter, can we have the check, please? Por favor?”

Andrew and I quickly paid the bill. Finally, our bodies brushed together as we walked down East Sixth Street in the direction of his house on this cold night in New York City.

We strolled past the mysterious fort-like walls of the Con Edison electrical plant at Sixth Street and Avenue A. It looked like a Wild West outpost for some minor John Wayne movie. The sides of our bodies moved closer yet as we wandered past the bright facade of my favorite gay watering hole, the Wonder Bar. The hopeful primary colors were as brilliant as my third-grade Jonny Quest lunch box. We walked on and on toward Avenue B.

*(Tim walks toward someone in the front row and addresses them.)*

Now, you’re probably saying to yourself, “My God, Tim does go on about meeting men!” Well, that’s true. I’m guilty as charged. But I do this because I believe these connections are a great gift and secret adventure of life. It’s like the prize at the bottom of the Cracker Jack box. You dig way beyond the sticky stuff, the bodies, the sex even, and there at the bottom is the magic decoder ring! It can help us understand the world and how we move through it. It’s like a doorway that opens. A window creaks up through all the layers of paint and opens over our hearts. And maybe only one moment of every year, the dawn sunrise on winter
solstice maybe, can the light shine all the way to the back to the darkest place inside us.

And at that exact moment, one human being can dare to ask the other, “Do you wanna come in?”

OOOOOOHHH! What a question! It’s the question of our time. In these lives are a meeting at the corner of East Sixth and Avenue B.

We got to Andrew’s building. Was this the building in which I built a loft bed for that New York University film student who then bounced his Citibank check on me?

Andrew asked me, “Do you wanna come in?”

I wish that life were that simple, that tidy. This wasn’t how it happened at all. Andrew didn’t ask me. I had to ask him.

“Gee,” I enthused, channeling Joe Hardy this time, “here we are at your house. Can I come in?” What a cad! But I dared to take a chance.

“Oh, sure,” Andrew said, pleased but a little surprised.

We went up the narrow stairs. Up, up, up into his apartment. Andrew struggled heroically with the police lock, the dead bolt, and the door-handle lock (part of the nonstop glamour of New York living), and we tumbled into the dark apartment. No one else seemed to be home. That was good, I thought to myself. The solitude would make the preliminary moves toward grabbing each other’s bodies more smooth. No distracting conversations à trois in the kitchen.

Andrew began to show me his sacred things, the apartment relics and icons. He had his extracted wisdom teeth placed on the altar next to the TV. His barbells stacked next to the radiator by the shelves with the hand-painted ceramic dinosaur collection ordered from the Franklin Mint. Three Virgin Marys on the toilet tank.

Finally, Andrew tugged me into his whitewashed bedroom to see a sixth-grade class photo. I was dismayed to notice his bed, a beat-up old futon, in one corner on the floor! I couldn’t stop myself from beginning to redesign Andrew’s bedroom. I had a
vision of how this room would benefit from one of my loft beds. I saw where I would put it on the wall, bolting the bed frame to the wall halfway up on the window, keeping the light above and below. Drawing the plans in my head, I imagined how this would open up an area underneath for a desk or a love seat.

For now, we flopped down on his futon on the floor, and I admired his black, black, black hair against the bed’s white, white, white sheet. With a studied casualness I flopped one of my legs over one of Andrew’s as we stared up at the ceiling in an uncomfortable what-will-happen-next? silence. Andrew and I now faced that most challenging of existential situations: Who is going to make the first move?

Before we mere humans could answer, Andrew’s pet feline, Hamster the Miracle Cat, poked into the room. Hamster the Miracle Cat probably was really on the lookout for some extra wet food from that morning’s still-open cat food can on the roach-friendly kitchen counter. But, meanwhile, Hamster proceeded to perform the “cat head thing,” when a cat drops all pretense of aloofness and caresses you with its entire face. I suppose the animal kingdom was daring us to be more spontaneous and find our touch together. By example, Hamster tried to teach us how to rub the head into the crotch and drag our body’s side against another body’s side.

Taking the lead from Hamster, Andrew and I began to rub our faces together. The tip of my nose caressed Andrew’s cheek as his lips grazed over my stubble closer to my open mouth. We kissed.

Oh, I liked Andrew. He was kind and smart and hot and he was a Californian like me, yet he wore even more black clothes than I did! We savored taking those black clothes off—hands reaching into the 501’s, tugging down the thick sweat socks, yawning out of our shirts with a sigh. The thrill of each touch given and received made my thoughts tumble in my head like clothes in a dryer.
Wow, I thought to myself as my hands searched Andrew’s skin. *His leg goes into his hip right there. Unheard of! He has a little hair here on his belly but not here on his shoulders. Fantastic! His recently shaved balls are attached to his dick in a bouncy sack-like structure. Wonder of wonders! The skin is so soft. His mouth tastes good. This all feels good.*

I sensed Andrew’s ceramic dinosaur collection beginning to stir from the shelf above. The prehistoric creatures slowly levitated above us as we licked each other’s cocks. One ceramic Virgin Mary statue floated in just to bless us as we got closer. All of Andrew’s childhood snapshots sneaked out of the drawer where they had been stashed. The photos set up a camp around the bed, the past witnessing this present moment. Even his barbells started to move a little nearer to each other and, at last, began to clang together as well.

Well, to make a long story short, I came on his chest. He came on my leg. I was glad I was there. I was glad I was alive. I loved New York. This was too good. Something bad was bound to happen. With that doom-laden thought, I fell into a deep sleep full of nightmares of exploding buildings and machine-gunned nuns.

The next morning we woke up early in the flashbulb-bright sunshine coming in from the East River. I was covered in that sticky-cum-closeness of waking up with someone for the first time. I felt the splurge of feelings that can happen as you wake up in bed with another human. One or two of my masks came down: scary, even though there were still lots held in reserve. Turning tentatively onto my side, I looked to Andrew to see if he was awake. His eyes were open but still sleepy.

“Hi, handsome,” Andrew tossed my way. “Good morning.” I yawned out the words as I stretched. “Do you mind morning mouth?”

Andrew kissed by way of reply. We were tentative about opening our mouths to each other, like checking the milk with a sniff
after you’ve been away from home for a few days. The morning kiss floated on the grace of trusting that we liked each other, and neither one of us was going to make a hasty exit.

“So,” Andrew said, beginning the cross-examination as he abruptly broke off the kiss, “you probably have a boyfriend, right?”

“Yeah.” I opted for a matter-of-fact tone. “We’ve been together ten years this month. His name is Doug. We have an open relationship.”

“If I were him,” Andrew said, rubbing his knuckles playfully, though a little roughly, on my forehead, “I wouldn’t let you wander around without a chaperon.”

Andrew and I lounged as we talked shop about boyfriends, present and past. I could slowly see our conversation was inevitably going to come around to the subject, the AIDS tune-in.

Now, at that time in my life, I usually didn’t engage in this conversation on the first date. Being a good ACT UP boy, I assumed all my partners were positive and behaved accordingly. Normally, I would wait and have the HIV talk after I had sex with a fellow a couple of times. I don’t think I’m alone in this. Let’s see a show of hands.

(Tim scans the audience.)

I did this because I believe in safe sex. I believe in safe sex and its principles. I structure my life around its precepts. I have to believe in safe sex just like I have to believe in other forces essential for life: gravity, photosynthesis, friction. This faith allows me to get up in the morning, make my breakfast, and not have a nervous breakdown. I do believe in safe sex, I do I do I do!

Since Andrew and I had been careful—RESPECTFUL—in our sex, according to the accepted mores of the time, this was a perfectly responsible time to have the discussion, if indeed we even needed to have it. The subject came up on its own, as it so often does.

I said, “Andrew, it’s intense to be here, lying in a bed on East Sixth Street, talking about all this relationship material. My
boyfriend John that I told you about, who died of AIDS, he used to live on East Sixth, just down the block.”

“Ouch,” Andrew said, hugging his arms around me. We breathed together for a bit. “It sucks, I know. My ex-boyfriend back in California is pretty sick right now. I worry about him a lot.”

We held this close between us.

“So, Andrew . . . um . . .” I hemmed and hawed, trying to spit out the obvious question. “Where are you in all of this AIDS stuff?”

“I’m positive,” Andrew said, looking directly at me. “I just found out a little while ago. What about you?”

“I’m negative. The one time I checked anyway. I could hardly believe it, considering my history. You know . . . John and all.”

Well, the cards were on the table: It was a full house. The cameras zoomed in for the close-up. Everything was going real slow, spooky and sci-fi. At this point there was a hydrogen bomb blast over the East River. This explosion blared through the windows onto our bodies, burning away the bullshit between Andrew and me. I witnessed a powerful moment between two human faggots at the end of the twentieth century.

I felt as if a strange bird, strange as the subject at hand, had flown into Andrew’s bedroom. This creature was a little clumsy, awkward as Big Bird, as it broke through the glass and flapped around Andrew’s room, knocking his high school graduation pictures off of the wall. This bird landed there at the end of Andrew’s futon and looked at us. This bird, like this moment between us, could be fierce or friendly. It was totally up to us.

I looked Andrew in the eye. I had nothing useful to say, nothing that wouldn’t collapse under the weight of its own structure of obvious verbs and insufficient adjectives. I felt our fates float around us for a moment. There was a hurt that hovered over Andrew’s face for an even tinier instant.

“I hope you’re not freaked out that I didn’t tell you earlier,” Andrew said quietly, looking down toward our feet.
“No.” I said the right thing, though I knew no single word could describe the snarl of feelings that were revving up inside. Without thinking, I quickly toured the inside of my mouth with my tongue to see if I had any canker sores there. Everything seemed okay. “I’m a big boy. I know how to take care of myself.”

Then, I put my lips on Andrew’s. Our tongues touched, and it was like a promise, eyes open, hearts too. Andrew and I started to make love again. We moved our hands over the hills and valleys of our bodies just as we had a few hours before. I felt a powerful mix of excitement and fear. What was different now? There was an honest thrill in knowing who we really were.

I knew something special had happened. I didn’t want to make it into a big deal. In a way it was just how things were, our lives as we needed to live them. I wasn’t even sure what any of this positive/negative information meant anymore. But if I tried to say it meant *nothing* to me at that moment, that would have been a lie, a whopper of a lie. I was so tired of lying.

I had been in this situation before, of course, with other men who were positive. There was that time with the guy from Cedar Rapids. Or the fellow from Spokane. One man was white. Another man was black. I confess they were all cute. All dear. All very hot. I am weak.

One of these men used to lead workshops in Texas for ex-gay born-again Christians. That didn’t last too long before he met a nice boy at a gay bar in Tulsa. They moved to San Francisco, and he now works in a card shop in the Castro.

Another man won a scholarship to Princeton where he pored over medieval texts while eyeing the water polo players with his feet propped up on the back of the swimming arena bleachers.

One man escaped the death squads in San Salvador and walked all the way through Guatemala and Mexico to make a new life in Los Angeles. He sent money each week to his family.

Another man went home with Jeffrey Dahmer yet managed to live and tell the tale. (If that’s not a fucking success story, I don’t know what is.)
All of these men were positive. They told me this. They knew. I’m negative. I was pretty surprised that the coin flipped that way. It always scares me to tell people this. I worry that they’ll think I’m a lightweight-know-nothing-who-said-you-could-talk-about-AIDS-from-your-position-of-negative-privilege queen.

I put my skin next to the skin of each of these men. I needed their touch, maybe more than they needed mine. I loved one man’s crazy Brillo hair, his crooked smile, his deeply dimpled ass. I loved another man’s wild courage at his job, his scary family story, his dick that veered to the left like a stretch of road.

What’s “safe” anyway in this crazy life? Not getting out of bed, that might be safe. Except, I live in California where an earthquake might drop your house on you while you slept. Not crossing against traffic and getting hit by a delivery truck like I almost did on the way to the theater tonight. Not climbing on slippery rocks, which I simply must do every day at my beach in Venice. Not ever getting close, close enough to touch.

Oh, but this kiss, I gotta have it. It’s that simple. I gotta have it if my friend allows it to me. I can’t stand on one side of a stupid river and wave a clumsy oar. No. I need this kiss and I want to know its whole story. I worry sometimes. I get scared. In my life that is too much ruled by fear. I fear everything. Earthquakes. Plane crashes. My face in the mirror. I get scared I’ll trip on this crack on the stage and break my leg. But I have a special wing of fear, about the size of the Louvre, dedicated to the things that I might “get” from the men I get close to. Do sex with.

(Over the sound system we hear the scary whine of an electric planer, redolent of that day in Brooklyn.)

CLAP! WARTS! HEPATITIS! CRABS! AMOEBAS! HIV!

This fear chews me up for breakfast. This fear is a tidal wave that is hovering above me, whirling, threatening. My mouth frozen in a scream. This fear is a virus too. It’s a fierce enemy, takes no prisoners. Can haunt my dreams. After some sex that, okay, wasn’t so safe, it keeps me sleepless and tortured at 3 A.M.
in South Kensington, London. Spitting distance from the gloriously tacky memorial to Prince Albert, who long before he was a dick piercing, was the beloved of Victoria. When Albert died, Victoria (that queen) took whatever was good and hot in her and entombed it with Albert, her dead husband, and worshipped them all as dead things!

Lately, I’ve tried to turn this fear around. To flip that word “get” upside down. Like a fried egg. Over. Easy. To see things another way. I want to honor the things that I actually “get” from other men.

LOVE. TOUCH. INSPIRATION. SEX. KISSES AND WISDOM.

These are the things I get and give and get again. Just like I’m getting from my new friend, Andrew, on East Sixth Street. I want to kiss him. To feel his wet, wet, wet tongue. To feel our hearts grow with us together. To feel the way this sex pulls us somewhere good even while the frozen wind howls over the scary water towers of Grammercy Park and tomorrow morning, after the blizzard of the century, there will be absolutely no subway service to Brooklyn.

“Wait. Wait. Wait. Wait!” I hear a voice in my head say. “I paid my twelve dollars. Isn’t it about time something BAD happened to these guys? Toward the end of the show, it’s the agreed-upon time. Shouldn’t one of them get sick and die now? You made your bed Mr. Fag Carpenter. Now lie in it! Or maybe somebody could come in with a chain saw and cut some stuff off, splatter those white walls with red blood. God needs his pound of flesh!” This voice says to me, “You don’t deserve this pleasure.”

Sorry. Nothing so dramatic tonight, nothing so tragic. I hope you’re not disappointed. Andrew and I became friends. Made love a bunch of times. Once, even, in Annie Sprinkle’s sacred bed next to the crystal dildo collection. We have swum in each other’s oceans. Santa Monica. Coney Island. Seen each other with other men. Run up high phone bills between New York and LA.
Another big cost of intimacy. We have been in life together. And that’s a pretty good story.

But like in every story something did happen that December in 1992. Andrew and I knelt in a circle, our knees to the earth, cocks in each other’s hands. Can anybody here tonight really see those positive and negative signs hovering over our heads? I can’t. But I could feel the electricity we were generating. I felt the juice come up through the floors of the tenement on East Sixth Street. I felt this buzz come up from the earth and move through me. I could feel it, the actual conjure of this thing.

Maybe in that circle of dicks and tongues and the past and the future we can throw a mess of slippery K-Y-covered marbles in front of those four cranky dudes on horseback as they pound down the streets inside each of us.

Maybe we can smack those jaws of fate and grab a shiny gold cock ring from that creaky dental work and slip it on.

Maybe our laughs and brave chests and saucy attitudes can find the punch line and the way out.

Maybe as I dangled my cross around my neck on its bathtub chain into Andrew’s open mouth I’ll find some answers.

Maybe as Andrew leaned over and pinched my tit and dropped his Saint Peter and Saint Paul medal between my lips and it fell deep inside me we’ll learn something important. We’ll get our hooks into each other, fishing for some truth or at least a gasp and a squirt. Testing and tasting each other’s metal. Catching good things and not throwing them away waiting for something bigger and better.

Andrew came on his belly and chest and then so did I. I leaned over him and kissed him as I dragged this cross on this bathtub chain through that cum. Mixing it up. Now, no chemistry class ever taught me this experiment. I had to learn it myself. How to find the alchemy to mix this stuff up into something neither this nor that. Neither only him nor only me.

What do we do from this maybe knowing that maybe one of us will maybe die before the other maybe and in a fashion we
know too well for sure? Well, we better have that fuel us and focus us cause we got work to do. Cause that cross belongs in our mouths. It should be moved from tongue to tongue and taste to taste. I pulled it from between Andrew’s teeth with a clank and my cock was in a rubber in his ass and there was only yes and pleasure and it’s one small step for man one giant leap for homokind and we’ll plant that flag wherever we choose but always looking for the proper soil and ready to sing the needed psalm.

Then . . . we came again. It’s nice when it works. It’s like a handshake. A tip of the hat. A thin rubber skin between us. A contract.

Then we had the ultimate ritual. We walked naked to Andrew’s dark kitchen, opened the fridge, and there—by the soft light of Amana—we drank some orange juice from the bottle.

(The sound of waves at the ocean slowly washes over the theater. Over the sound of the sea, we hear some delicate and more-than-a-little-melancholy music. The lights pull close and blue around Tim.)

Then we slept. The deep breath of sleep. Faces next to each other. Breath swapping. Atoms dancing around each other. And I dreamed. I dreamed I had built a bed. I’d found my tools and I’d built a fine bed that was floating on the sea. It was a seaworthy bed! And my friend and I were sailing toward a safe harbor. I dreamed of that bed on the sea. Of beautiful trees on the shore. Graceful gestures between humans. And good bread that had been baked for us to eat in the morning at our leisure.

What if we were looking at this scene from outer space. Oh. God. What a thing to see. It’s a beautiful sight. We would see many men, many people floating on their beds at sea, dreaming their dreams. Reaching for the touch, the best part of ourselves.

We would see how those men had once been little boys who cried too much before Sunday school. Or dressed up too much
in their mom’s clothes. Or touched themselves too much under the covers at night. And needed other boys . . . just enough.

From outer space it would seem that Earth is a very strange planet ’cause people made war upon these boys. Priest and parents and politicians teased them and tortured them. So, these boys learned to run fast. Maybe too fast. Some of you are here tonight.

They learned how to find each other. On the street and in Laundromats. Construction sites and theaters. This is a very good story. It’s a story we should tell again and again. It’s that magic decoder ring given to us as our birthright, at the same time as we got our black leather jackets and superior sense of humor. We queer people made a place for ourselves. Cooked the meal. Made the bed. Waved that red shirt above our naked bodies. Dared to ask each other “Do you wanna come in?”

For a while, things were pretty good. Well, okay, they weren’t that good. But they were better than they’d been in seventh grade at Andrew Jackson Junior High in Fruitland, New Mexico. From outer space we would see that a great plague fell upon these beds at sea. And of these boys who had become men, fine men, many had fallen. And the ones who still breathed felt a cold place. It hurt so bad. A frozen tear. A tear inside. A wound that would numb us. Stop us. Cut us. Hurt us.

From outer space we would see that these brave people found many ways through this hard time.

They found ways to keep dancing that dance. Holding each other. Caring for each other.

Finding each other. In Laundromats. Construction sites. Theaters . . . and on the street.

We all have a street inside us. A place where some things happened. Some wounds opened. Others healed. Food was eaten. Losses mourned. I am a carpenter. And I will build a bed. I’ll build a place inside myself to honor my friends, my journey, and the streets I’ve strolled. As I live and breathe. In. And out. In. And out.
(Lights begin very slow fade to black.)

And with this breath I will draw us close.
Wrap you all around me.
Float on your SIGH . . .
As these lights . . .
slowly . . .
fade.