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ABOUT MEN

BY FENTON JOHNSON

Lucky Fellow

A LONG YEAR AND then some since my companion died of AIDS, and it's a Friday, the birthday of Mark, an old friend whose companion of a decade has been dying-as-we-speak for the last two years. Early in the day I call and offer Mark these options: 1.) Coming to my place for lunch; 2.) Going out for lunch, my treat. He chooses coming to my place, which on this particular day carries some sad and delicious possibility of making love.

So, fine. I'm enthused at the excuse to leave work to spend a Friday afternoon with drop-dead handsome Mark. We never talk of our companions, dying or dead, but we have established that it has been years since Mark has made love, and nearly as long for me.

Fenton Johnson's novel about the H.I.V. epidemic, "Scissors, Paper, Rock," will be published by Pocket-books in June.

We've carefully avoided talk of the future, content with holding another person's commiserating hand. (The hand-holding has been mostly metaphorical, Mark being caught up in that man thing, and also after two years of living-with-dying very much into guarding his heart.)

So I go out and buy birthday candles and a couple of chocolate cupcakes and a book for a gift, and come home and wrap the book and set the table and stick the candles in the cupcakes and take a shower.

And I'm climbing from the shower and searching for a clean pair of Calvin Kleins when the phone rings and it's Mark, saying that his companion just got the results from his latest test and it's Pneumocystis again, and his doctor has exhausted all drugs to treat it and doesn't know what he can do, and Mark wants to spend the afternoon consoling his companion at this latest, grimest turn of events.

So, fine. I hang up, get

dressed (the ragged old Fruit of the Looms will do) and eat my bowl of soup and one of the chocolate cupcakes and resign myself to resuming work, albeit without much enthusiasm.

And as I'm sitting to my work the phone rings again, and it's Mark again, and the doctor has called back to say there's this one experimental drug he has remembered that he hasn't yet tried on Mark's companion and he's sending it over to start treatment right away. And since for the moment Mark's companion is feeling O.K., all things considered, and since it is Mark's birthday, maybe he will come over for lunch. So he does in fact come over, and I feed him soup and light the candles on the remaining cupcake. He carves it in two and gives me half, and in his gesture I understand what we both want: that short triumph over fate, over time and memory and circumstance that desire may bring at its best.

And on this day it turns

out to be very much at its best. The old confusion of love and sex and death carried (safely) to the limit; a modest act of defiance, a declaration of life, thumbing our noses in the face of the beast.

And then I take his hand and he takes it back and pulls on his clothes and goes home to his dying-as-we-speak companion.

The next day, Saturday, I meet for coffee with Fred, a friend whose companion of 12 years died a couple of months ago. As we talk the sun moves around to the west and catches Fred's graying hair. I'm not certain of his H.I.V. status, but the sun catches his graying hair and the parched skin stretched over his temples — the veins glow blue through the translucent flesh and I'm certain he's taking AZT. I've come to think of this premature aging as a side effect of the drug, or maybe of H.I.V., or maybe both. I look at my friend so sunk in grief and feel first grateful, then guilty, knowing that however tough things are, at least I have a full year of grieving behind me, and that I, a healthy, H.I.V.-negative man, will surely come easier than he to hope — for another love, another life.

Fred tells how when he started losing weight, his sympathetic boss arranged to hire him full time for the minimum number of months required to qualify him for disability payments. (I was right in my guess about his H.I.V. status.) So he's working in this high-powered venture-capital start-up even though he hasn't any energy or desire to work — he goes to work knowing that everyone around him is working 50-, 60-hour weeks, but he just goes in and stares out at the traffic and waits for the day when he can quit and go on disability.

Then he talks of taking his companion's ashes to Paris to scatter and begins to weep and I want to hold his hand but don't — all this death and I'm still trapped in that man thing. He's maybe 40, a boyish face. He once looked younger than his years but now he looks older. There's no putting an age to him because his is not an aging that has come

about from time's passing. As he speaks he is dwelling not in hope but in memory, and it is this, more than the graying hair, that is making him old.

I walk him to his car and give him a big hug and promise to call, wondering where I will find time in my life, room in my heart for another friend confronting his death.

And now it's a week later, and I have for the first time since my companion's death a real date, with a landscape architect whom I'm taking to a play. Tom, my date, is a nice-looking guy with a steady paycheck — every writer's fantasy. When he tells me he's *reading a novel*, I'm impressed and for a long minute bedeviled by stupid, involuntary fantasies of a partner, someone to fill this void in my life.

So it's after the play and he's driving us back to my car and the air is charged with possibility. Never good at leaving well enough alone, I break the silence by asking what he's reading, which turns out to be Stephen King, but that's O.K., I don't hold it against him. "I'm an Anne Rice fan myself," I say. From "The Vampire Lestat" it's an easy non sequitur to complaining about the mess of blackberry briars my landlord calls a yard. "What you need is a landscape architect," Tom says.

"We'll both be old men before I can afford you," I say.

An awkward pause. Tom clears his throat. "There's something you ought to know," he says, but I know it already, I don't need to be told and I don't want to hear it. I cover his free hand with mine. "Next date," I say.

And now I'm homeward bound after a chaste peck on the cheek from Tom and all I can manage is a sad smile, but the next day when I tell this to a straight friend from the suburbs he looks at me as if I'm losing my mind. And maybe I am; or is this just the difference between those inside the epidemic and those looking on? What have I been brought to? "The lucky fellow," Elie Wiesel writes of the terrorist leader in "Dawn." "At least he can cry. When a man weeps he knows that one day he will stop." ■