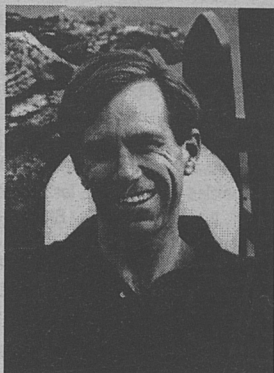


Love or Nothing

by Hugh Coyle
for A. Caston



I call our house a hive, not for the wasps that hover along the eaves on hot days or the honeybees darting from lilac to apple out back, but for ourselves: Bradley, Ben, and me, William — three men with HIV, a housing grant, and medicaid subsidies. The windows of our four-bedroom building look east into urban sprawl, west toward a cemetery where deer drift about in the evening, peaceable spirits. The tallest monuments rise in the middle, cracked granite phalluses. Around them cluster lesser stones, plain white slabs and sunken markers. With binoculars, I can squint to make out carved crosses and inscriptions, last names mostly, never Christian names or dates.

I'm the one who's lived here longest, the one whose wheelchair hums down ground floor hallways to answer the doorbell, the phone, the call of nature. Bradley and Ben have rooms above mine, but mostly spend days downstairs with me. They sometimes sleep in the fourth upstairs bedroom, the empty one we've come to call "Hope." Some days my friends drop by with casseroles, might stay for a quick round of Hearts. They ask me about Ben, the most recent resident, and his progress with protease cocktails. I tell them he's fine, no signs of resistance, but they really want to know if he sleeps in the nude, if his cock swings right or left, if he still has unprotected sex.

Some nights our living room is crowded with Bradley's activist friends, thick with the pungent stink of their magic markers and spray paint. Our tongues get all sticky and dry with the minty adhesive of envelopes. Loud music pulses around us, mostly dance mixes. "Adrenal enhancers," Ben likes to call them. "Sonic stimulants."

I love Ben.

I love the way he slips his pills into tapioca, winks and licks his lips as he raises the spoon. I love the fact that he walks around naked each morning and practices kick-boxing while watching the TV talk shows. I love his pierced nipple, the thin hoop of gold his dead lover left there. I love that he lets me wheel him around in my lap, that we dance that way when we're alone and feeling all cooped up and crazy. I love seeing him as a killer queen among drones, strong in spite of adversity, the one sting I'd die for.

I may be

senseless below the waist, but I believe in the generosity of gods, in life after death, in love despite affliction. When I close my eyes and listen intently, I can hear the bees upstairs building their combs, cell by cell in the walls. I can see Ben sleeping beside them, and send my soul up to curl and settle like smoke in the curve of his stomach. It spreads across his chest, between the thin brown hairs that cover his heart, and trembles slightly. I believe that dreams do outlive us, do last beyond the body. Even as my spirit lifts above him and dissipates, some trace will linger. It's love that keeps it there. It's either that, or it's nothing. ▼

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