

Benediction

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Jim Arnold

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Dedication

For my father Jim and my late mother Gerry, who've always believed.

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1

I felt it on my ass before I heard it—the drone and rumble of the Muni 35 as it made its way up Twentieth Street. I was on my back, trying to sleep yet knowing it was impossible, head aching, eyes wide-open, forcing myself not to glance over at the translucent white window to acknowledge my failure.

Another night in that purgatory of insomnia and too many trips down the hall to piss. Forty-four; isn't that too *young* for this?

On cue, the 35—I knew it was empty by the energetic whine—turned the corner and made its way up Eureka Street into San Francisco's Diamond Heights fog.

Five a.m., the first bus of the morning.

I swung my legs over the side of the bed and sat. This wasn't like me, the Ben Schmidt of five days a week at the gym religiously for twenty years. Usually, I raced to the kitchen to start the coffee—but maybe I'd had one too many nights of fitful sleep.

Or maybe I was just fucking tired of everything and needed drugs.

Good drugs. The kind doctors prescribe and people make legitimate copayments for. Health insurance is wonderful, certainly. It's supposed to be for really important things, like AIDS, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, the errant steak knife protruding from someone's eye socket. One of the primo benefits of having benefits, though, was the legitimacy of getting really good drugs legally from a real doctor.

I didn't have any. *Got to work on that*, I thought as I shuffled into the kitchen, poured the water into the espresso machine and somewhat hesitantly checked the mousetraps—this is San Francisco after all, and the heart of Victorian Castro.

My secret—at least one of them that September—was that I had a rodent problem. Mice were running from one hiding place to another. Landlady Bunny Matthews' handyman, Tommy, insisted they were little rats, like there was some big mommy rat living in the crawl space under the house, and these were her evil offspring. Little baby rats making their home in my apartment.

“Mice have big fuckin’ ears, like Mickey Mouse!” Tommy said. “These are from the rat family that’s been in the yard and is now under your floor. I’m sure of it.”

So Tommy set out mousetraps, because the baby rats were too small for the big rattraps, requiring a more subtle approach. My job in all this, as the sole tenant at 286 Douglass, was to check the traps daily, dispose of any tiny rat-children corpses, then file a report with Tommy and Bunny.

It’s a tough thing to do before the first latte of the day. Maybe my senses were wrong and everything really was good with the world. There was milk in the fridge and the mousetraps were empty, peanut butter bait intact.

First, another trip down the hall to pee. The bags under my eyes were deep, and my gray temples seemed to have advanced another centimeter up into my dark brown hair overnight. I couldn’t remember when the process started, but it seemed to have always been that way. The red and orange of the bleeding heart on my left shoulder injected some welcome drama into this quiet, monochromatic world.

It was now five thirty, and the rising sun streaked through my enormous kitchen windows. San Francisco gets typical summer weather in the fall, so it was going to be a warm one, the kind of day die-hard natives hate because it’s just too damn hot.

* * *

“I can’t stand anything over about a seventy—seventy-three is just tops for me,” Karen Kling had said to me. Dependable, the antithesis of mercurial, Karen was the kind of friend you liked to have because you figured, no matter what happened, she would always be able to deal with it. Better, Karen would prevail. Even if it was hot outside, she’d find a way.

“I like the hot weather. That’s what I miss about L.A.,” I’d said. She shook her blond head.

We’d been working hard to finish a short film, our first—*Hell for the Holidays*—she as producer, myself as writer-director. I felt guilty because I’d talked her into helping me, and the poor woman truly had zero interest in making movies. I asked Karen because she could be bossy, and that’s what I’d always heard was the most important attribute of a film producer.

I wasn’t bossy, but I was messy. The bedroom doubled as my office, sex trap, and now, apparently, unsupervised playground for the rat children.

The building was one of several in the neighborhood that had survived the Great Quake of 1906, and it was settling. One of the recent results of that settling was a bulge in one of the bedroom walls, as if it had become pregnant. I figured Tommy would have an explanation for this, too.

Coffee in hand, I logged onto e-mail, curious to see whether any of my online paramours had had some uncontrollable, overnight horny fit, desperate to rush over for a quickie. No such luck. There were the usual grow-your-dick notices and Ph.D.-in-your-spare-time messages.

I did notice something odd on the Yahoo home page, however.

Mixed in with the other headlines was a small report that a plane had hit the World Trade Center.

Slide viewer: Anthony Schmidt—my dad, originally from Brooklyn—once told me he’d been in midtown that day in 1945 when a plane crashed into the Empire State Building. Maybe pilots blink and that’s all there is to it, like when you’re driving and hope there’s nothing in the way if you take your eyes off the road for an instant to put the CD you just have to hear into that suggestive slot in the dash.

It’s probably like that in the sky, too.

The phone rang.

“God, Ben, what’s happening?” It was Karen. She was wide-awake, and she was hysterical.

“Good morning,” I said.

She cried and asked whether I’d heard about the plane. I switched on the TV just in time to see the giant fireball from the South Tower explode into my tiny living room.

“Oh, my God! *Oh, my God!* Did you see that? Ben, what are we gonna do?”

I took the phone away from my ear. Disbelieving, but also screaming, morning show reporters came at me from the tube. The disconnect of the enchanted dawn in San Francisco with the simultaneous catastrophe on the East Coast was too much to process. I stood planted, unable to move.

The coldhearted *snap* of a mousetrap brought me back to reality.

“Karen, *Karen*,” I said. “Shut up!”

“But, Ben,” she cried, “what should—”

“I don’t know. Screaming’s not going to help.”

She sobbed louder. Now I felt bad.

"I'm sorry I yelled at you. You know me, not enough caffeine yet..."

"I didn't know who else to call," she said, finally. A frantic scratching came from the kitchen.

"I gotta watch the news," I said. I hung up on her midsentence and, incredulous, turned the sound off on the television.

* * *

I killed the mouse with the butt of a half-full mayonnaise jar, as the trap hadn't quite done its work. This was evidence to save for Tommy and Bunny, but I couldn't. I dropped the mouse into the toilet, flushed and prayed it would disappear.

I sat there for what seemed like hours, watched the buildings collapse, not believing that a person—or in this case thousands of people—could go to work one morning and be incinerated, just like that. At the same time, as awful as it sounds, I was glad it wasn't me. I knew I was safe.

Eventually I pulled myself away from the television's ghastly but magnetic images and rode my bike downtown to my job as corporate marketing director for a software company—a cliché of a new media nightmare if ever there was one.

I'd made a promise to myself to live in the original gay ghetto, the Castro, if ever I had the chance to live in San Francisco, and did just that several years before when Safe Harbor recruited me. It had been harder to leave L.A. than I'd anticipated. I missed the zany, continuous drama of the place most of all, but lately I actually had been feeling comfortable in the City (as the real inhabitants called it).

The streets were empty so I ran all the red lights on my bike. There was a movie that often played in my head—of being smashed into oblivion by a bus because of my illegal bicycle habits. This was a very bloody scene with lots of splattered brain matter. Of course, it hadn't happened yet. Still, I often had this weird feeling that everything—the job, the movie, bike rides, Internet hookups, the mouse murders—was being done on borrowed time and there'd be a price.

Karen would say, "You worry too much, Ben. It's just life."

I wondered whether she was right, whether most people went about their days with a sense of purpose, something innate that told them how to go from one thing to the next with grace. With me, it was a series of TV

episodes interrupted by distracting commercial breaks, and I often had no idea what my lines were.

Whatever. I knew I had to call Karen back to apologize.

The office was quiet. About half my coworkers had shown up, and most of those were glued to Internet news sites or the occasional television, updating new arrivals with fresh horrors. Others trickled in with their stories of bridge delays, the rumor that the Transamerica Pyramid was next, the Bank of America after that, and that this was, indeed, the beginning of the end.

Banality prevails, even on days like this. I realized the feeling was perhaps a flaw in my makeup, but the world was not going to be ending anytime soon. I still had to show up at work for the paycheck; I still had an unfinished fucked-up movie with a looming deadline. I was still the only gay man in the Castro who wasn't cheating on his husband, because I didn't have a husband. There was Jake upstairs, of course, but more on him later.

In most ways it was turning out to be a day like any other.

If that realization wasn't depressing enough, Tony Mallard, my boss, was one of the few whose sense of duty forced him across the Bay Bridge all the way in from Orinda.

Tony was British, a middle-aged guy slightly older than me who had either not been instructed in or did not care about most aspects of personal hygiene. He was a bit overweight—but, then, just about everyone was; that wasn't the issue. The problem was that he persisted in not wearing any kind of deodorant or antiperspirant, neglected regular nose- and ear-hair trims, and not only wore socks that didn't match his trousers, but wore the same pair for days at a time.

I knew this because Tony would take his shoes off in his office and conduct meetings in his socks. The first day with a new pair was always OK, even if we stayed till early evening, but day two and day three—and sometimes day four—became so unbearable that concentration on anything other than his feet was impossible.

I had to pass his glassed-in office, as it was impractical to avoid it. He looked so forlorn. I stuck my head in.

"I don't believe those buildings collapsed," I said. "I saw it, but I don't trust my, well..."

He didn't move.

“My sister-in-law’s on holiday in New York. Wife’s been trying to reach her all morning but can’t get through,” he said.

“Mobiles must be overloaded—can you imagine all the calls? I’m sure she’s fine and you’ll hear just as soon as she can get to a phone that works.”

I wanted to reassure him and at the same time extricate myself. My little experiment at being empathetic with Tony would backfire if he drew me in.

“Hope so,” he said, glancing out the window. “If they fly into us here, it would be over right quick, wouldn’t it, Ben? One of those things where you don’t feel a thing?”

Shit. Now I was supposed to be the expert on ways to die that don’t hurt.

“I got meetings stacked up all day. Bet most are canceled, but I better check, before someone starts a conference call from somewhere,” I said, the last part drifting off as I backed away down an aisle lined on both sides with gray cubicles.

The mice at home would’ve been jealous of this setup. Plenty of places to explore, plenty of places to hide; some of the larger rodents—ones I casually called coworkers—were even known to occasionally take naps on the floor under their desks. Sometimes, the younger, geekier kids actually slept there overnight, though management officially discouraged it. Unofficially, they loved having slaves.

I wasn’t surprised that only one member of my staff of three—Jason, who lived close enough to walk—had made it in. He was shouting into the phone in the cubicle next to mine, his lanky, six-foot-two frame towering over the flimsy walls.

For all my troubles as head of marketing I got a slightly larger cubicle, but a cubicle all the same. No office like Tony. So much for prestige, and so much for spending the last fifteen-odd years in this business.

“But you’re OK; that’s all that matters, right?” I heard Jason say.

The other two members of my staff, both women, lived in the East Bay, and I knew they’d be afraid to either drive over that bridge or take the BART train in, fearful that’s where the next strike would be. Like a snow day only different. It was up to me and Jason—whose mother just happened to be a flight attendant herself, and was, by now, frantic on the phone with him—to take care of the business or nonbusiness of the day.

Since I’d had so little sleep, I was secretly pleased. I’d be able to spend furtive yet quality time on the business of the *Film That Would Never End*.

The plot of *Hell for the Holidays* involved a short chapter in the lives of two middle-aged gay men, lovers with adopted children, who split up one momentous Thanksgiving Day. Simple enough, or so you would think. We were beset with problems, trying desperately to finish for the Sundance deadlines, now less than a week away. One thinks of actors, usually, as the temperamental ones. It’s rare to think of the other personalities on a film, such as casting agents and composers, as difficult.

On my voice mail were three frantic calls from Glenda Bourne, our editor, a nervous South African lesbian with a walk-up bachelorette pad in the Tenderloin, where she lived and worked. Glenda, who favored the dubious top-of-head ponytail made popular by Madonna a few years back, subsisted almost entirely on the greasy yet fragrant food of the Vietnamese storefront restaurant down her block. Recently, I’d wondered why my Castro hillside apartment was overrun with vermin and her ancient tenement, littered with used take-out boxes, was not.

“If you’re not out sucking cock in Collingwood Park or trying to pick up teenagers who leave those goddamn disco postcards on my windscreen, call me back straightaway,” she’d recorded.

A quick separator beep led to “Where are you, baby director? I thought you came to work early. It’s already five; I’ve been trying to fix this piece of shit all night.”

I didn’t get around to listening to Glenda’s message number three, as the real-time phone rang.

It was Presidio Medical.

* * *

Kenneth Carlson was one of those legendary AIDS doctors, the kind that made breakthroughs in treatment during the worst plague years of the 1980s, who stuck by all those dying guys when no one else would. San Francisco’s gay community worshipped the ground he walked on, and for good reason. When I’d joined the HMO, I asked if they had any gay-friendly doctors on staff and surprisingly enough was assigned to him, as simple as that.

He clicked me off hold, and I stopped Net surfing on the World Trade Center attack.

“Mr. Schmidt? Mr. Schmidt, what a horrible day,” he said.

“No kidding. Hope you’re not going to make it any worse with this call, Ken.”

He was progressive and liked it when patients called him by his first name. I thought I heard some papers shuffling, like a smallish bird beating its wings against my ear.

“One of the tests we did when you were here for your physical came back...elevated, so we need to run some more...tests.”

The president was about to address the nation. I wondered whether he’d be able to put a coherent sentence together.

“Which test?”

“It’s the PSA, prostate antigen. Normal range is under 4; yours came back 17.9, so it’s...mmm, high. I’m referring you to Dr. Kim, one of our ranking urologists out at Presidio.”

Suddenly, the images of exploding buildings and planes crashing and angry words in large bold type all melded together in my head and made no sense at all.

Focus, Ben, focus.

“Mr. Schmidt? You there, Mr. Schmidt?”

“What does all that mean?”

I knew what it meant. I wanted him to say it.

“It’s a really high PSA for someone like you, someone so...*young*. Kim’s going to want to do a biopsy of your prostate.” He cleared his throat. “We have to test for cancer.”

There. He said the C-word, and I no longer could remember that he was this AIDS visionary, revered by the entire medical establishment and an intercontinental gay überconsciousness. Today Ken was a chubby, middle-aged guy with glasses and a wart on his neck telling me I might have prostate cancer.

The other line rang. Caller ID told me it was Glenda Bourne, and the urgency with which the red numbers flashed reminded me that she was pissed.

“See, you did make the day worse, Ken,” I said. “I’ve got to go; another call here, and the staff didn’t show up today.”

“Wait. Kim’s office will call you later today to set it all up.” He paused. “You OK?”

“Yes, thank you.” I hung up on him and clicked Glenda.

“Asshole, didn’t I tell you to call me back?” She was her usual cheery self.

I didn’t say anything. I was scrolling through Web pages on the disaster, but thinking...*celebrities with cancer*. Hadn’t Frank Zappa died of prostate cancer at a relatively young age? For sure.

“Goddamn movie’s not working again,” she said. “I don’t know why you picked that fucking idiot to play Steve.”

“He’s not a fucking idiot; he’s a damn good actor, and you know it.”

Even though she was right, I hated it when Glenda trashed the movie, which happened constantly.

Karen always said, “Patience, dear, patience. She’s a great editor; that’s why you chose her, not for her disposition.”

Karen was correct—again—but I had little patience with demonstrative people, especially those with zero chance of ever being my sexual partner, even in some highly deranged dream state.

“This isn’t particularly helpful,” I said, furiously typing Bill Bixby’s name into the search engine. “This your way of telling me I should stop by there after work?”

“For a fag you’re smarter than you look. See you at six?”

“Earlier—not a hell of a lot going on here. You might try turning on your TV.”

Yes, Bixby had died of prostate cancer as well, way too young, a sunny sixth-generation Californian who always seemed so cheerful.

Don’t project, I told myself. You don’t know anything yet, and often doctors are wrong. They just are. Besides, I’d always been one to ace tests.

* * *

Even the Loin was unsettlingly quiet that afternoon, as if its usual denizens had taken up a siesta tradition overnight. On Glenda’s block, just off Ellis, normally one had to duck past real crack whores in the storefronts. They must’ve figured out I was gay, as they always asked for cash only, never a date. I found this somewhat disappointing and blamed it on style rather than orientation. Apparently, I gave the impression I didn’t have enough money for a cheap blow job.

Like everyone else, the girls were gone. As I climbed up the stairs of Glenda’s tenement, I heard the muffled soundtrack of *Hell for the Holidays*.

It was somewhat surreal, being an airplane scene, which opened the film. Steve, Warren and their two adopted kids are about to land in a flat, brown, unidentified midwestern city, and Steve is unhappy about this. The kids are crabby, and Warren is the put-upon spouse.

The way the actors' lines were repeated, over and over, while I climbed those stairs and walked down that hall of peeling paint, used syringes and dried vomit, made me certain that Glenda had decided it was not going to work.

If she was right, that would be a problem. The airplane set was where we'd really spent what little money we'd raised. It had been constructed in an old shed near the Lawrence Livermore Laboratory out past Dublin, next to a cow pasture.

We'd struggled to get the lighting right. Even on a dedicated set like that, making it believable as a real fuselage interior was no small chore. I thought it "passed." Less successful was our choice for one of the two lead actors who played the gay couple. The character Steve was ostensibly the film's star and probably most transparent as my alter ego, since I wrote the piece and was directing it, too. Steve was played by Ron Frankhauser, who had answered our cattle call.

Ron had done a bit of community theater in Marin, following a less-than-stellar acting career spent playing nonfeatured roles in musicals at Healdsburg College. (He was tall, so they put him at the back, where you really couldn't see him dancing.)

He was graying, good-looking and present enough to memorize his lines. Most important, he was cool with the twenty-five-dollar honorarium for the nonunion work. To Karen and me, this meant *star*.

To Glenda, this meant *problems*.

Her door was open, and I walked in.

"Hey, Glenda. Aren't you afraid criminals will just walk right in?"

Her face was eerily lit from below by computer monitors. She'd entered her own horror movie.

"They're afraid of me," she said, without looking up. "Pull up a chair, sport; you didn't get coverage on this scene."

Shit! My stomach turned. This was the climactic moment of the setup. It had to be perfect.

"I took your advice and looked at the telly for a bit. So I don't have it in me to raise my voice and tell you exactly what I think of your filmmaking talent today."

I sat down. "We may not have the ideal coverage, but I know you have a solution."

She looked at me in a way that made me wish I hadn't said that. "Chalk this up to experience and go make a real movie?" she asked.

I didn't answer. My eyes were fixed on her screen, the actors frozen mid-word, Ron's pixellated mouth hanging wide open. He really was a guy from the suburbs, those teeth betraying a lifetime of expensive dental work.

Glenda pressed a key on her computer, and the characters came to life again. She showed me how the scene was constructed back and forth, and how there wasn't enough footage in what we'd shot for the actors to react to each other.

"You can cut this one out and still hold your narrative, such as it is," she said. "One or two lines in the car scene and everyone will get that these two are at each others' throats."

For the first time, she looked right at me. "What do you...?"

My eyes were filled with tears that hadn't yet spilled over.

"Jesus, Ben. What's wrong?"

I closed my eyes tight and felt the wetness on my cheeks. I was crying in front of Glenda fucking Bourne.

"Do it both ways—your suggestion and also following the script. Just pretend the coverage is there," I said. "I'll look at both versions tomorrow."

I got up and nearly tripped over Somerset, the requisite lesbian's cat, lying on the wooden floor next to me. I didn't hear whether Glenda responded as I hurried down the stairs and out onto the street.

Jake should be home by now. It was still possible he'd make the day all right.