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I suppose the whole tsunami thing should have given me a clue; should have served as an epic reminder that you never know when life is just going to swoop down and wash you away. I mean, just think of those people, 200,000-plus of them—Indonesian, Indian, Thai—they never even saw it coming.

And of course, like most people, after I'd heard about the near-biblical devastation-and-death festival (on TV, in the *LA Times*, on the little LCD news screen in the elevator in my office building), I spoke in hushed, respectful tones about the total unpredictability of life. As I wrote my check to the Red Cross to aid the tsunami survivors, I paid the requisite lip service to how you just have to *carpe* the freakin' *diem* because one never knows, do one? Just as I'd done in 2001 after 9-11, after watching all the airplane-meets-large-building

replays I could stand without putting my head in the oven and calling long distance to make sure all my East Coast friends were still in one piece. But now it was early May, and the nine-point-oh earthquake/killer tsunami combo had been served way back in December (the day after my forty-eighth birthday, which I realize is apropos of nothing), and now all the talk was about the John Paul II Dead Pope Tour, how Marcia Cross of *Desperate Housewives* wasn't really a lesbian after all, and whether or not Macaulay Culkin was really going to take the stand at the Michael Jackson trial; frankly, I'd pretty much slipped back into the land of Same-Old-Same-Old. So, no: I didn't see it coming. My own personal tsunami caught me with my knickers down.

The call came at 7:45 p.m. I know this for a fact because, quite by coincidence, I had just removed my watch—the basic black Movado my late husband Keith had given me for our tenth anniversary, a whole mess of years ago. Spring had sprung and the evening was a warm one in Los Angeles and vicinity—even in Santa Monica, where close proximity to the Pacific usually rendered air conditioning unnecessary—and my arm was sweaty and itchy under the watch. I'd glanced at the time as I set the Movado down on the table—7:45—golden darts forming a wide angle on the watch's shiny black face.

It had been a thoroughly pleasant Friday evening up till then. I was at Maggie and Daniel's house. Maggie and Daniel Sullivan: my best buds for—I don't know—fifteen or something years. Odd as it may seem for a middle-aged black homo to be best friends with a couple of white, married, breeder types; that particular little org chart points to Crockett Miller. I'd met Crockett back in the early 80s: a pocket-sized blond stud with a smile like a halogen lamplight and a booty that brought tears to my eyes (like a summer sunset or a Billie Holiday ballad); he was a former college gymnast, sometime actor,

pseudonymous author of ladies' romance novels, and off-and-on fuck buddy of mine for a couple of years or so in the late 70s-early 80s.

Crockett was the first person I ever knew to test HIV-positive, back in 1985. He died of AIDS in late '89. The young 'uns don't seem to believe it's true, but back in the day, most people didn't *live* with AIDS. Mostly they died. During Crockett's illness, I got to know (and eventually came to love) Maggie and Daniel. They were already Crockett's best friends by the time I met them; they were his family, really, after his mother decided she just wasn't up to it. Crockett and Daniel had been tight friends for years, had done theater together in their twenties, roomed together for awhile, I think; and when Daniel met, wooed, and finally wed Maggie Taylor, Crockett made three. Just between you and me, I always suspected Crockett and Daniel had been more than just buddies at some point; but I've got no proof, no blackmail photos—just a hunch.

As Crockett's condition nose-dived, first slowly, and then in an alarming fast-forward, we took care of him as best we could (Maggie and Daniel, and I): we drove him to and from doctor's appointments; and later, we took turns sitting in his hospital room through the nights, so if he woke up in the wee smalls and needed something, one or the other of us would be there. They really amazed me, Maggie and Daniel did. They'd only been married for three years or something at that point, and there they were, practically giving their whole lives over to their friend. Now, I've seen gay men do this for other gay men and I've seen some lesbians do the same for male friends or family members—but never the straight friends. From what I've seen, the straight friends generally brought an ostentatious bouquet of flowers and a big Mylar balloon on their first-and-only hospital visit, then dressed tastefully and wept audibly at the memorial service; but you

couldn't count on them to be there to clean you up if you had an accident in your pajama bottoms. But Sully and Mags—well, the fact is Crockett actually died at their house: they'd rented a hospital bed and hospiced him in their home the last few weeks.

And by the time Crockett left us, I realized we had become family, too: Maggie and Sully and me. Oh, yes—at some point in the proceedings (and quite without his permission, please note), I had started calling Daniel Sullivan by his last name (or just Sully), because my mother's husband's name is Daniel and it was just one Daniel too many for me. And Sully doesn't seem to mind. Not that he's ever chosen to mention it, anyway.

I look back on it now and I can't believe how young we all were, just barely into our thirties. Makes me feel old. Lately, most things make me feel old.

Anyway, that fateful Friday evening, I was sitting cross-legged on Maggie and Sully's Persian-rug-covered living room floor, pleasantly buzzed (a half-finished flute of Mumm sat in a puddle of its own sweat on the glass-top coffee table). Los Lonely Boys were singing "How far is heaven?" from the in-wall stereo speakers. And I was pretty sure I was going to domino on my next turn, and get whatever points Sully and his son Ethan were holding. (I'd taught the Sullivans how to play Dominoes—or "Muggins," anyway—the one Dominoes game I know, and have known seemingly from the cradle, the one where you score multiples of five; they were all more or less addicted.)

"Little Love," Sully said to Maggie, "is this the radio? Good music." Sully was massaging his wife's recently-pedicured right foot with one long-fingered hand, his three remaining faux-ivory dominoes face-down on the table and seemingly forgotten. He had knocked twice that round and, as often happens when he's losing, he'd largely lost

interest in the game. He scratched the tip of his nose (smallish and straight with a slight flare at the nostrils—the perfect white guy nose) with the hand not full of his wife’s foot. As usually happens at least once every time I see him, I was struck anew by Sully’s good looks—he was the personification of tall, dark, and handsome. Very Christopher Reeve, post-Superman, pre-tragic horseback riding accident.

“Johnnie brought the music,” Maggie said. She was seated across the table from me (looking casual but elegant in khakis and a white blouse), staring down at the two dominoes she had left, tugging absently at a jaw-length lock of her straight blond hair, her bangs obscuring her eyes like a window shade.

“Custom-made CD,” I said, scratching at a chronic dry, itchy spot near the top of my nearly-hairless head (my weekly self-administered buzzcut was only about an hour old). “I made a playlist especially for this evening: a smooth jazz cut for Mags, followed by classic rock for Sully, something at least semi-current for Ethan, and Joni Mitchell for me: jazz, oldie, VH1, Joni. Just play, Mags. I’m gonna domino.”

Maggie picked up one tile, put it down, then tapped the tabletop a couple of times with a red-lacquered fingernail, picked the same tile back up again, and said, “Well, no matter how long I look at these effing things, I can’t score.”

“Then *play*, already,” her husband said, apparently eager to move on to the next hand.

“Shut up,” Maggie sing-songed back, never lifting her eyes from the table and her two remaining tiles. Finally, she said, “I was wrong.” With a smile on her lips and a little flourish of her wrist, she placed a domino down at the end of the longest line of tiles and said, “Fifteen!”

“No way!” Ethan said, his nose nearly touching the table as he

counted the little multi-colored dots, checking Maggie's arithmetic.

"Fiddeeen!" Maggie shouted, holding up her diminutive right hand as if taking an oath.

"Nice job, partner," I said, reaching across the table to slap Maggie's palm with my own. Ethan retrieved the stub of a pencil from behind his right ear and recorded his mother's score on the slip of pale-pink paper (from one of Maggie's personalized scratch pads) he was using as a scorecard.

Now it was Ethan's turn to stare at his two remaining tiles, cupped in the palm of his hand. He muttered, "Shit, shit, shit." Maggie gave him a little pinch on his black-T-shirted shoulder and said, "Language."

"Sorry, Mom," Ethan said, and looked at the tiles in his hand, then at the board, then turned his head to the left and glanced at me. "You're getting bigger," he said. "Your guns are bigger and you're getting a big neck."

"Thank you for noticing," I said, more pleased than I chose to let on. "Now play."

"You juicing?" Ethan said. He laid his two dominoes facedown on the table and cocked his head to one side, appraising me.

"No, cherub, I am not on steroids," I said. "I've split my routine, I'm lifting heavier, and every day I consume more animal protein than the entire country of India has ever *seen*. Play."

"Looks good," Ethan said, leaning toward me and tracing a vein on my forearm with his long, pale forefinger, his skin like cream against the house-blend coffee of my own. The corners of his lips rose in an insinuating smile. Recently fifteen years old (born one year to the day after Crockett Miller died), Maggie and Sully's only child had come out to his parents as bisexual at the age of twelve. And like all teenage

boys, he was little more than a life-support system for a 24/7 boner. Possessing a reasonable facsimile of his father's matinee-idol face and of his mom's golden blond hair (which he wore straight and shoulder length, like one of Cher's wigs), Ethan was somewhat overly aware of his own beauty, and an inveterate tease. I imagine he flirted with mail boxes and fire hydrants just to keep in practice.

"Maggie," I whined, making a big show of leaning away from Ethan's touch, "your son is distracting me."

"That was the general idea," Ethan said, working his fingertips up under the short-short sleeve of my Calvin Klein cotton-Lycra-blend tee.

"Stop molesting your uncle Johnnie," Maggie said in her habitual even tone. "He's about to domino."

"I thought you were looking particularly sturdy of late," Sully said, then knocked back the last swallow from a glass of Chianti. "What's that about?"

"Just wanted to put on a little more muscle," I said. "Five foot eight and 147 pounds struck me as a physique for a boy, not a middle-aged man. I thought I'd try for maybe a nice, lean one-seventy." I thumped Ethan on the shoulder and said, "You ever gonna play?"

Ethan said, "When I'm ready. What do you weigh now?"

I confessed, "I seem to have stalled at one-sixty-two."

"You already had a great body," Sully said. "Why this need to further humiliate me?" He made a sour face at me and gave the belly beneath his white Lacoste shirt a playful pat, as if it were an unruly but beloved pet. It wasn't a bad belly for a fifty-year-old straight man, but it was definitely a belly where, once upon a time, there had dwelt a six-pack of abs.

I said, "I thought it might give me a slightly more masculine look."

“You going on the downlow?” Maggie said, a self-satisfied little smile on her face.

Ethan laughed a puppy-bark of a laugh as Sully asked, “Going on the *what*?”

“I’ll explain it to you later, Dad,” Ethan said, chuckling.

I leaned in toward Maggie and said, “You’ve been waiting for *weeks* to use that term in a sentence, haven’t you?” Maggie nodded, stifling a giggle. “Well, as it happens, going on the downlow presupposes that one is able to pass for straight. Which has never been an option for me.”

“Got *that* right,” said Ethan.

I poked my tongue out at Ethan, like a third-grader on the playground.

“Still and all,” Sully said, “those of us who can’t imagine having to try to gain weight, can’t help wondering why.”

Suddenly Maggie’s eyes widened. “Oh my God,” she said, motioning as if to reach across the table for me, then stopping herself, “you’re not sick, are you?”

“No, no, no, I’m fine,” I said. “It’s just that—” Did I really want to go into this? It was silly and vain, and I had never actually verbalized it before and, besides, I was about to domino. Finally, I said, “The thing is, I’m forty-eight years old.”

“I’m going on fifty-one,” said Sully, picking up one of his dominoes and looking at the face of it as if it might have changed its spots since the last time he’d looked. “What’s your point?”

I said, “It’s different for straight guys, Sully.”

“What’s different?” he asked.

“I’m gonna tell ya,” I said. “You asked me, so I’m gonna tell ya.” I glanced at Ethan, then turned to Maggie and said, “Parental discretion

is advised.” Ethan executed an eye roll involving his entire head and neck.

“You gonna get graphic?” Maggie asked. She was, I suspect, less concerned for her young but disconcertingly sophisticated son than for herself: her threshold for discussions of man-on-man action was not particularly high.

“I don’t think so.”

I looked to Sully, who shrugged and said, “You may proceed.”

Suddenly, wishing I’d prepared a PowerPoint presentation (title slide: “Johnnie Ray Rousseau’s Theory of Urban Gay Male Aging”), I began.

So, here’s the thing: I am forty-eight years old. In less than two years, a year from this Christmas I’ll be fifty. Now, you may have heard how fifty is the new forty. This is (as they say in the scientific community) a total crock. You know who made that shit up? Somebody who’d just turned fifty. Fifty is fifty. It’s middle age, big-time middle age, and that’s if you’re planning to live to be a hundred.

Sully nodded and said, “Granted,” then shrugged and added, “So what’s *gay* got to do with it?”

“You gonna let me do this?” I said. Sully put his hands up in an actor’s pantomime of acquiescence, and I continued.

Now, once a gay man turns fifty, he’s basically got three choices as far as his physical image, the image he’s likely to convey for at least the next twenty years of his life (if he’s lucky enough to last that long). Those three choices are:

1. *The Troll*. As the name alone should tell you, this is by far the least attractive alternative. As just about everyone knows, youth and beauty are the coin of the realm in the Gay World (even more so than in the world at large), so there’s no sin like being an ugly old ’mo.

Granted, everybody's somebody's Troll (to misquote Connie Francis). For a twenty-year-old twinkie, a handsome thirty-year-old gym bunny may be a Troll. But Troll isn't simply about chronological age. I've known men to go Troll in their late thirties, and men who never have, well into their seventies. Troll is about the ravages of time left to run amuck, with absolutely no effort put forth to slow down said ravages. I'm not talking about laugh lines around the eyes and a bit of a wattle at the neck. I'm talking about haystacks of untrimmed nose and ear hair and a pelican pouch under the chin. I don't mean middle-age spread, going from thirty-inch-waist Levi's to thirty-four's. I mean sagging manboobs lying atop a penis-obscuring belly, and a derriere with more pleats than a Japanese fan. As my mother says, if you keep saying good morning and good night, you're gonna get old. Age (or early death) is inevitable. Troll means you're just not trying. As God is my witness (clutching the dirty, half-eaten radish), I will *never* be a Troll.

2. *The Auntie*. Auntie isn't so much about physique as it is about attitude. It's about the sort of androgyny that can be charming, even sexy in a man of twenty-five—fluttering hand motions, a pronounced sibilance, the habit of calling absolutely *everyone* “Myrna”—but that can prove to be considerably less charming and sexy in the same man twenty-five years later. You can spot the Auntie at any gay bar on any Sunday afternoon (for brunch, if such bar happens to be appended to a restaurant), usually in the company of one or more brightly-colored cocktails and one or more fellow Aunties—they often travel in gaggles. He may be round-bodied or willowy, but you can bet your lunch money he's wearing a loud, loose-fitting Hawaiian-print shirt (the caftan of the early twenty-first century) and probably some large-ish jewelry (in the western United States, usually silver-and-turquoise jewelry).

Unlike the Troll, the Auntie is generally quite well groomed—look closely and you may detect just a bit of judiciously-applied foundation makeup, and it's better than even money that his hair has never actually *been* that color.

Also unlike the Troll, the Auntie is often lots of fun to be around, especially if you, too, have been in the company of one or more brightly-colored cocktails. The Auntie is witty, knows every Broadway ballad ever written (not just the chorus, but the verses, as well), and (again unlike the Troll) will usually apply his hand to a younger man's knee, thigh or *tuchus* (all the while calling him "Sweetie"—the Auntie calls absolutely *everybody* "Sweetie") only after said younger man has given some cue, verbal or non-verbal, that he might, in fact, welcome such attention, or at the very least, tolerate it.

Left to my own devices, given that I have been cursed with my mother's mid-alto speaking voice, that I could recite the screenplay to *All About Eve* in its entirety while in a deep coma, and my penchant for hand gestures bordering on semaphore, I would consider myself an Auntie just waiting to happen. And I suppose I could live with that. But my overwhelming preference would be to spend my silver years as:

3. *The Daddy*. The Daddy is exemplified by the sixty-year-old dude with slate-grey hair in a military cut strutting down Santa Monica Boulevard on Pride Day wearing a pair of black jeans, a white tank undershirt, work boots, and a handsome man thirty years his junior, and it totally works because this old guy is so effing hot. While there are, of course, exceptions, carrying off the whole Daddy look usually requires a certain amount of lean muscle mass. A modest paunch is often permissible, but only with enough arm, chest, and shoulder to balance it out. With an impressive enough set of guns, you can make

a habit of calling absolutely *everybody* “Sweetie,” and still be a Daddy. This is the goal to which I currently aspire.

Sully chuckled quietly but vigorously, his superhero shoulders shaking. He finished off with a sound halfway between a sigh and a wheeze and said, “My friend, you are truly disturbed.”

I shrugged. “So tell me something I don’t know.”

“Sounds a bit mean-spirited,” Maggie said.

Another shrug. “I don’t make the rules.”

“Bro,” Ethan touched me lightly on the forearm, his eyebrows raised in a parody of grave concern, “you are seriously vain.”

I made a lemon-sucking face at him and said, “Glass houses, Junior. Now, *play*, already.”

I unbuckled the band of my Movado, glanced at the time (7:45), and set the watch down on the tabletop, when from across the room my cell phone shouted, “Flavor *Flav!*” the ring tone I had downloaded from *vh1.com* and, in a spasm of silliness for which I have no excuse whatsoever, assigned to my mother (who wouldn’t know Flav if all the members of Public Enemy were sprawled across her bed in their respective birthday suits).

“Oh, shit,” I said.

“What is it?” Maggie asked.

“Something’s wrong.”

“Because your cell phone rang?” said Ethan, raising a blond eyebrow.

“It’s my mother’s ring tone,” I explained to the room in general. “My mother calls me once a week, early Sunday evening, between six and seven—after her dinner and before *60 Minutes*.” I pushed myself up from the floor, bashing my knee on the edge of the table on the way (I said “Ow!” and my phone said “Flavor *Flav!*”). I quickstepped

across the living room toward the antique church pew hunkered against the wall of the entryway (and used primarily in lieu of an entryway closet—coats are parked there when coats are necessary), speaking half to myself and half to the Sullivans: “A phone call from my mother at any other time can mean only one of two things: either somebody’s dead or, best case scenario,” I snatched the phone up from the seat of the pew, “somebody’s dying.”

I flipped the phone open (“Flavor *Fl*—”).

“Mom?” I said, the pitch of my voice shooting up into castrato country (an Auntie voice if there ever was one).

“John, it’s Daniel.” My mother’s husband had never called me on the telephone, much less from my mother’s cell phone, in the eighteen years of their marriage. I heard myself saying, “Sweet Jesus,” before Daniel had finished saying (in the resonant bass-baritone voice I have always envied), “I’ve got some bad news.” It occurred to me that I might fall down, but then I realized that I had already sat down on the pew. Daniel said, “I would have called sooner, but Clara couldn’t find her address book and it was hours before either of us remembered that, of course, you’re programmed into her cell phone. We’ve been a little bit scattered.”

I waited, listening to my pulse pound in my temples.

“John,” he repeated. My actual first name is Johnnie: Johnnie Ray Rousseau, happy to make your acquaintance and how are all *your* folks? Dr Daniel Weinberger is the only person in my life who insists on calling me John. “Are you there?”

“Yes,” I said, “I’m sorry, Daniel. Tell me. What, what is it?”

“It’s your mother, John.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, Daniel,” suddenly I was shrieking like a bad actress in a B horror flick, “I didn’t think you were calling to give me

bad news about Condoleezza Fucking *Rice*, now, would you please just *tell* me!”

“I need you to calm down, John.” Daniel was now using his Medical Professional Voice, the one I imagine he uses when assuring a patient that testing HIV-positive was definitely *not* a death sentence or encouraging another to remember to use a condom, every single time. “Breathe, John. I need you to breathe right now.”

“All right, Daniel. I’m breathing.” Which was a lie. I was actually scratching a groove into the finish of the pew with my thumbnail and clenching my teeth against the painful pounding in my head, a merciless assault by a six-inch-tall bloody-red imp wearing oversize brass knuckles, snickering as he executed rapid punching-bag work with my brain.

I don’t know if Daniel believed me or not, but after a moment, he said, “Clara has a brain tumor, John.” The imp was striking a boxing bell in my ear, over and over. Through the ringing in my head, I may have heard Daniel add, “It’s growing. And, because of its position against her brain, it’s inoperable.”

The imp tossed the boxing bell aside and pulled a switchblade out of a magic pocket in his naked hip, a knife longer than he was tall, and slit me up the middle like a pig, pubic bone to breastbone. I watched my vital organs tumble, steaming and shiny pink, into his little red hands.

“Please tell me this is your idea of a joke,” I said.

The imp yelled, “You fuckin’ *WISH!*” and disappeared in a puff of red smoke, leaving me only the sound of his cackling laugh and a brain-shredding headache the likes of which I had never dreamed existed.

“I’m sorry,” Daniel said.

I heard a sound of abject heartbreak, a wheezing, rasping sound of the sinuses and throat, all saltwater and mucus: Daniel was weeping. I said, “Shit.” It was the only thing that came immediately to mind.

I heard Daniel sniff and hiccup and finally say, “Yeah.”

“I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Clara said to tell you not to. She doesn’t want you to make the drive.”

“Do you always do what Clara says?” I asked.

He paused a moment, sniffed again. “Pretty much.”

“I guess it’s a husband thing,” I said. “But she’s my mother.”

I flipped the phone closed and looked up to find Ethan squatting next to me. From the expression on his face, I must have looked like seven different kinds of hell. He rested a long hand on my knee, squeezed softly.

“What is it, Johnnie?” he asked.

It took a moment. I couldn’t find the words. I suddenly understood why people in holy roller churches, in the throes of spiritual ecstasy, speak in tongues; resorting to rhythmic clicks and nonsense syllables, a sort of extraterrestrial scat-singing understood only by themselves and God. There are times when earthly language simply does not suffice. Finally, I managed to say, “Tsunami.”