



NEG UB2

Rick R. Reed



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“There’s no protection from Reed’s quick wit and ability to craft a winning and thoroughly enthralling love story.”

**—Shawn Decker, AIDS activist, speaker,
and author of *My Pet Virus***

...Ethan’s anger and hurt kicked in, suddenly, and with the force of a fire bursting into a conflagration. “Yeah. You should be sorry. Did you just not tell me for a reason? Did you think maybe those few times we dispensed with a condom we’d just be lucky? Did you just get infected too? Maybe while you were with me?” Ethan spat the last words out, glaring at Brian, his breath quickened.

Brian shook his head. “Ethan, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, please. Don’t.”

“Can we just sit down and discuss this? Sweetheart, I’m so sorry you’ve had this news, but it’ll be okay. There are treatments—”

“Oh, don’t patronize me. Don’t try to placate me. And no, I don’t want to sit down. I don’t want to discuss this.” As rapidly as the rage had come, so did the tears. Ethan angrily batted them away, not wanting Brian to see. “I was hoping you’d at least be enough of a human being to tell me the truth.

I was hoping you'd at least be a man and own up to the truth."

"What truth?"

"Oh, come on, Brian. There's no one else who could have infected me. As the song goes: it had to be you." Ethan almost laughed as he imagined doing his best Harry Connick, Jr. impersonation and singing a few lines from the old standard. But he was afraid if he started laughing, it would turn giddy and breathless, hysterical, and would never end...

ALSO BY RICK R. REED

Dead End Street

Fugue

High Risk

How I Became Sexually Irresistible

Man-Amorphosis

Orientation

Riding The El At Midnight

Through The Closet Door

VGL Male Seeks Same

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BY

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NEG UB2
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*For HIV positive people everywhere.
Yes, there can really be a happily ever after...*

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Ethan Schwartz was stunned.

He sat in his doctor's office trying to absorb the news. He felt numb. He had never fainted and wondered if right now was the time for losing his virginity in that arena.

The antiseptic interior of the doctor's office with its posters about flu vaccines and the latest prescription magic from companies like Pfizer, suddenly seemed unreal, like something he had conjured up in a dream. He saw and faintly heard an el train rumble by outside the doctor's window. In the corridor just off the doctor's office, he heard his nurse, Shelley something, talking to a patient, a man with a husky voice. Ethan couldn't understand her words, but then the pair

burst into laughter. Their frivolity made the news he had been given seem that much more surreal. Laughter had no place anywhere near Ethan.

Not right now.

“Are you sure?” Ethan looked up at the doctor he had been seeing far too intermittently for the last ten years.

Frank Morris had a rugged face, topped with close-cropped light brown hair that had nearly vanished on top, warm brown eyes, and a kind smile. A rakish diamond stud glinted from his left earlobe. He radiated compassion. But right now, his smile seemed to have a touch of pity in it. He leaned forward on the rolling stool upon which he perched, so he could lay a comforting hand on Ethan’s knee. Ethan glanced down at the hand, then back up at the doctor, mouth open, already knowing the gist of what his physician would say. Ethan’s scalp prickled; he felt droplets of sweat begin at his hairline.

“When there’s a positive result, we always re-test. First, we do an EIA, which is short for Enzyme Immunoassay; that’s the test most labs do these days and it’s pretty darn accurate. If the test comes back negative, we stop there. But if the lab brings us back a positive result, we verify with something called a Western blot test, which makes us very sure.” Dr. Morris caught Ethan’s eye, making sure he understood the import of what he said, squeezed Ethan’s knee, and then removed his hand. Ethan wondered how many of these death sentences the doctor doled out in an average working day.

“So, while there’s always a chance for a false positive, even with the safeguards, it’s highly unlikely the test is wrong.

I'm sorry, Ethan, but you *are* HIV positive."

Ethan stared down at the floor. How could this have happened? HIV-positive? Even as a gay man, he thought he had escaped this particular scourge unscathed. In more lonely moments he had even comforted himself with the thought that remaining neg was the one consolation he had for his long dry spells. He had always been so careful...except for a few times lately, with Brian. But he had trusted Brian and thought they were monogamous, thought there was no chance of any pesky little virus being swapped. *How could this happen to me?*

What was the harm in abandoning the condoms a couple of times? After all, they were in love, and had quickly pledged their fidelity to one another. Again, where was the harm?

Well, honey, the harm is right here, right now, staring you in the face.

Ethan's mind flashed on Brian's winning smile, his short blond hair and warm eyes. His thick arms topped with downy yellow fur. His quick wit and shared love of all the same things Ethan loved. Ethan did a quick montage of the last six months: the dinners, the weekends in Door County, the plays, the movies, the quiet evenings at home with a DVD of an old noir classic and a big shared bowl of popcorn...and the hot times in bed, which the prim Ethan thought he'd never experience.

Brian? Did Brian infect me? Ethan caught his breath. He found it hard to swallow...both literally and figuratively.

Ethan surveyed the bleak landscape of his love life before Brian, an almost barren wasteland for his entire adulthood. *I*

should be the last person turning up HIV positive, yet here it is. Join the club. And then his thoughts zoomed back to Brian. Is he positive, too? He has to be. I can't see any other way this could have happened.

Oh no, not Brian...

It felt like Ethan's stomach had dropped out of its place in his midsection and was now hovering somewhere in the vicinity of his ankles. Panicked, he looked up at Dr. Morris, who appeared poised on the brink of saying more. And there was more Ethan needed to hear: things like medications, hope for the future, how to live his life in this new role as a gay man with HIV. Ethan knew he had lots of questions because he had pretty much avoided all but major news stories about HIV and AIDS, thinking that was one health scare he didn't need to worry his pretty little head about.

But these questions—and the information he would need—were not for now.

Right now, all he could think of was Brian. The two had met online last spring. In spite of a bumpy beginning, theirs was almost a fairy (hush!) tale romance once they had gotten together. A lot of the bumps at the beginning were over honesty and Ethan thought they had cleared those hurdles.

Did Brian know? Could he have knowingly infected me?

The thought was too horrible to contemplate, nauseating. Ethan felt a hot rush of tears spring to his eyes. He may have been in his forties and had experienced his share of disappointments, but this blow had no match. If Brian had knowingly risked exposing him, what kind of man was he?

Had Ethan ever really known? Suddenly, in his mind's eye, Brian's face loomed before him once more, now cast in the role of stranger. A mental image flashed then, one that made him want to vomit: kissing Brian goodbye at the door on a summer morning, then watching as Brian went back to his bedroom and logged on to Manhunt, or got dressed and went to the bathhouse on Halsted, or picked up the phone, snickering and telling someone on the other end to come over, that "the coast was clear."

Ethan covered his face with his hands and angrily wiped away the tears gathering there. He didn't know which was worse: his diagnosis or the horrible conclusion about Brian that followed it. Dr. Morris was talking, sounding almost like all the adults sounded in a Charlie Brown TV special. *Wa-wa-wa. Wa-wa-wa-wa.* In other words, the physician's words made no sense. A couple things filtered out: "course of treatment" "CD 4 count" among them, but Ethan couldn't get himself together enough to listen to his doctor.

Ethan held up a hand. "Stop. I can't deal with this right now. You know? I need to process this." And with no regard about being rude or a melodramatic queen, he stood and rushed from the doctor's office, not looking back to what he could only imagine was a very stunned physician.

In fact, as he got the reception area door, he heard Frank Morris call from behind him. "Don't rush off! I need to talk to you."

Without looking back, Ethan said, "I'll call you." And he dashed out the door.

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There were people waiting for the elevator in the corridor. What ailments were they suffering from? Common cold? Gingivitis (a dentist plied her trade at the opposite end of the corridor)? Mumps?

Suddenly, the whole world looked healthy to Ethan Schwartz. And just as suddenly, he felt completely alone. He bypassed the elevator and headed for the stairs, rushing heedlessly down them and almost twisting his ankle in the process.

* * *

Ethan sat in his Halsted Street studio as the wan light of an afternoon sunset filtered in. He recalled the nausea and near hysteria he felt as he charged through the revolving doors of his doctor's office in the Loop, out into the sickeningly warm Indian Summer day. Wabash Avenue was all bustle and excitement: crowds, traffic, el trains rumbling by overhead. Again, Ethan felt surrounded by rosy-cheeked, hearty, robust specimens of human health and fitness. A young mother licked an ice cream cone while pushing a double baby stroller with adorable twins inside. Nearby a young college lad bit into an apple and read a book as he sat on a bench. Two joggers rushed by, vigorous and full of vim.

It was a world from which Ethan suddenly felt excluded. Worse, it was a world that didn't know about and didn't care about the horrible news he had just been given. How could he blame these pictures of health for being so craven, so blatantly disregarding their perfectly functioning systems? He even

paused to examine some of the faces rushing by him, hoping to catch a sympathetic eye or an understanding smile, but they all hurried by him, getting on with the heady business of life.

It's not like they know, Ethan, what do you expect? You don't look like you're HIV positive, and even if you did, why should these masses of strangers care about your diagnosis? If they knew, they'd probably only feel gratitude: that it wasn't them this time chosen to ride the bad news carousel.

He remembered standing there on the corner, under the el tracks, like some kind of bizarro opening-credits Mary Tyler Moore, full of pessimism instead of optimism like the spunky Mary Richards. Instead of flinging his hat (a sporty fedora Brian had bought him just last week) into the air, he felt more like flinging himself in front of a CTA train.

Like a drunk, Ethan had collapsed onto the curb, his khaki-clad legs splayed out before him. He just didn't feel, for that moment, strong enough to support his own weight. He tried to breathe deeply, but could only gasp. He wondered if he was about to hyperventilate...if he would die without a paper bag close at hand in which to breathe. He worried only briefly about how he must look, but the Loop was filled with crazies; again, no one paid him any mind. They simply skirted him, on their way to normal jobs and appointments.

They had lives.

He was still sweating, and knew his blood pressure must be going through the roof. He took off his fedora ("It gives you a little private dick flair!" Brian had quipped when he had set the gift upon Ethan's head, turning Ethan's face this way

and that, admiring, and then planting a kiss on his cheek) and set it on the ground beside him. Someone paused to drop a dollar into the hat.

That made him laugh, if only bitterly. And like the whack to the back of his head his mother used to dispense, made him feel silly for sitting on the ground in the middle of Wabash Avenue, at the heart of Chicago's downtown.

Oh, grow up, Ethan! You've had some bad news, but you don't need to act like an imbecile...at least not in public.

So he got up, dusted off the seat of his pants, and thought he needed to pull himself together if only for an immediate future. That future included calling his employer, LA Nicholes, and letting them know he was taking a very, very sick day and then going home to wallow in self-pity...preferably with whole fat milk, Double Stuf Oreos, and a bill of 1940s melodramas on his HDTV.

A nagging voice inside him, not unlike his mother's, told him he needed to call his doctor.

He knew—and the prospect made him start to feel sick, start to shake all over again—he needed to call Brian.

But, other than the call into work, the other calls could wait.

Ethan had Ethan to take care of right now.

He headed up the stairs to the el platform.

And now, he sat on his love seat with all the accoutrements of comfort around him: the Oreos, *The Big Sleep* in the DVD player, and a stiff Grey Goose and tonic *sans* lime (the whole milk could go to hell). And he had touched none of them.

All he could do was stare out the window. Gradually, a numbness had settled in over him, darkening to match the fading light of the day as the sun set to the west, its fiery orb occasionally peeking out from between buildings and tree branches before finally calling it quits for the day and heading home.

The phone chirping on his desk startled him out of his reverie. The phone sounded too loud, shrill, even though Ethan could recall making no adjustments to ring tone or volume. Ethan walked over to the desk. The Caller ID display made his already jump-started heart beat a little faster.

It was Brian.

Ethan returned to the couch to slump into its cushions and wait for voice mail to pick up the call. He was glad the days of answering machines were gone. He didn't think he could bear hearing Brian's voice—live or Memorex—just now. He stared at the phone in the dim light and watched as the message indicator atop it began to blink.

What would I say to him?

What is there to say?

Ethan turned and lifted his Grey Goose and tonic and hoisted his glass in a toast to the window, where the sky was darkening to dusk: purple at the top, hues of gray and lavender beneath it. "*La chaim*," he whispered.

He downed the now tepid cocktail with its vague slivers of ice in two convulsive gulps and got up to pour himself another. Returning to the couch, he started *The Big Sleep* over again, watched it all the way through and followed it up with

Double Indemnity. He imagined he was seeing the films for the very first time.

It was an evening perfect for oblivion. The movies helped, as did several more vodka and tonics. What didn't help was the ringing of the telephone, which came at regular half hour intervals and each time, except for once, displayed the same caller: Brian.

* * *

Ethan awakened in the middle of the night, heart thumping, sweating, and with a pain behind his eyes akin to a drill bit being applied tenderly to his brain. He still wore the chinos and white T-shirt he had on when he collapsed on top of his futon...and his mouth felt like all the moisture had been sucked out of it.

Like an inconsiderate one-night stand, his drunk had deserted him while he slept. Ethan squashed his hands to his eyes, hoping to push away the pain growing behind them and groped on his nightstand for a glass of water. Usually, he left one there for himself in case he awakened parched.

But tonight he had not been so thoughtful; tonight he had collapsed into bed in a drunken stupor, with no time or consideration for such niceties as a glass of bedside water.

His thirst and his headache, Ethan was sure, were conspiring against him having any chance of falling back into the blessed deliverance of sleep. So, he swung his legs over the edge of the bed and sat, elbows resting on knees, hand cradled in head, and tried to summon up the energy to arise

and get himself a glass of water and a couple aspirin.

He slogged through the little studio, heading for its bathroom when he came to an abrupt halt. Oblivion, like the drunk and the one-night stands Ethan could count on one hand, also deserted him. In its place rushed back his diagnosis from the morning and the fact that the man who had most likely infected him—and the man he had begun to think of as his one true love, his soul mate—had called no fewer than fifteen times that evening. It may have been even more, but finally a drunken Ethan had angrily pulled the phone cord from the wall. His cell he had shut off after calling in sick that morning.

He stood for several moments, remembered Dr. Morris' strained, yet sympathetic face, and the many, many phone calls from Brian. Even for Brian, the phone calls were a bit excessive.

Then it came to him. A little more oblivion leaked out of his brain.

Today was Brian's birthday.

Ethan back stepped to the bed until it hit him in the crook behind his knees, then sat down hard on its surface. How ironic that on a day when he had planned to give Brian a gift, Ethan would discover his still-new lover had already sent one his way. Ethan laughed bitterly into the darkened apartment.

They had had big plans. A splurging dinner at Alinea on Halsted Street, where dinner for two could run \$500.00, a romantic harvest moonlit walk through Belmont Harbor, the exchange of gifts at Brian's Lakeshore Drive apartment and

finally, fireworks in the bedroom of same. There would be laughter, tears, orgasms, and a Movado watch.

It was supposed to have been perfect. Their first birthday spent together. Ethan had wanted to make it memorable. Well, the universe had seen to that!

In light of his diagnosis, the idea of sex with Brian, once so rapturous and wood-inducing, now made him nauseous. An act that heretofore had been one of unbridled passion, deep fulfillment, and adoring love had suddenly, with the swiftness of an uttered diagnosis, become tainted.

There were a lot of things Ethan had forgotten this day, a day that would now go down in his personal history as an anniversary. He had forgotten the important meeting he had scheduled with the publicity manager at Steppenwolf, forgotten that it was time to swap out his two-week-wear contact lenses for a fresh pair, forgotten to eat his dinner or brush his teeth.

And he had forgotten Brian's birthday.

Funny, how being diagnosed with HIV can push everything out of one's brain.

No wonder Brian couldn't stop calling. Ethan was surprised he hadn't shown up at his door.

Ethan shook his head. Yesterday, his life was full of sunshine and good things. Who knew that one more revolution around the sun would throw a dark cloud over the whole enterprise?

He got up, took the aspirin, drank the water, and plopped down wearily at his desk. There were five messages from

Brian, each one a little more angry and bewildered than the last. He clicked on the little Internet Explorer icon at the bottom of his computer screen and saw that his e-mail messages eventually mirrored the pain and disappointment of Brian's voice mails.

Ethan stared out into the dark night, lit only by a sodium vapor street lamp that gave the air a sickly, yellowish hue.

He didn't know what he should feel. Anger? Despair? Should he call Brian? Make a late-night visit, outraged and demanding an explanation?

He didn't know if he could bear to look at Brian again. And right now, he was not sorry he had stood him up on his birthday. He was not sorry if the guy was worried about him.

Brian had a lot more to worry about than why Ethan stood him up...or even if the reason for that had anything to do with something being wrong with Ethan, some cause for alarm.

There was most definitely cause for alarm. But Ethan didn't know how he could talk to Brian about it.

Not yet.

Not ever?

Ethan simply didn't know. He slid back into bed and pulled the covers over his head. He thought it very reasonable to suppose he might spend the rest of his life there.

* * *

Rays of brilliant sunlight awakened him. Ethan groaned, willing the sun and its evil minions of a million cheery rays to a place in hell. "No!" he cried out, trying to reclaim his

drunken sleep, which was, admittedly, only mediocre at best, filled with restless waking and odd nightmares that found him in hospital settings and graveyards.

He threw the covers off with disgust and lay there, prostrate, in the cheerful, ignorant streaming sunlight that obviously had no concern for his newfound plight or his feelings.

He glanced over at the digital clock on his nightstand and its red letters had never seemed more alarming. They taunted him with the fact that not only had he missed work yesterday, but also he was late for work today...by an hour. He would be lucky if he rolled into the office by ten.

He briefly considered calling in sick again. He did have a brutal hangover and he was still trying to cope with the fact that he had now earned the dubious distinction of being not only a gay man, but also an HIV positive one. Missing work was entirely legitimate.

But Ethan's mother had instilled in him a Puritanical work ethic, and even Ethan knew that going into his job as a theater publicist might at least keep the demons at bay for a few hours. Work was the same thing as getting drunk the night before: just more oblivion but without the headache and upset tummy. Besides, his boss had asked him to interview a front-runner for the new receptionist position. He needed to get in the office to meet the candidate no later than noon.

Life, Ethan thought, stopped for nothing.

He forced himself out of bed, stripped, stood under a scalding shower, soaping and re-soaping every crack and

crevice, roughly dried his exfoliated and steam-cleaned hide, gulped down a too-hot cup of coffee, dressed, and hurried out the door.

Just like any other morning.

But unlike any other morning, when he got to his front door, he was confronted with something that made him stop dead in his tracks. Through the glass, he saw the usual: people rushing by, on their way to work, school, sexual conquests, whatever. That was no different. What was different was the man who stood just outside his door, facing the river of traffic flowing by on Halsted Street. His back was broad, encased in a faded blue denim jacket. His ass and thighs were taut and manly. His head was topped with fine dark blond hair, thinning in an adorable little circle at the top.

Brian was just outside.

And Ethan was stuck for why Brian would be out there for any other reason than the fact that he was waiting to confront him. As if to confirm this, Ethan watched as Brian's head dipped and he raised his left arm, checking the time. Before Ethan could retreat into the safety of the elevator, Brian dropped his wrist to his side, and with one fluid motion, turned to peer into the lobby. The lobby where Ethan stood frozen, clutching his canvas messenger bag as if it were life support, as if it had the power to keep him standing.

Their eyes met. Ethan knew he was displaying a sickly, sheepish grin: teeth clenched together in what probably looked more like a death rictus than a smile.

And Brian turned fully and was coming toward the door.

This was all happening too fast. *I'm not ready! I need time to prepare!* Ethan had thought about writing Brian an e-mail from work, an e-mail in which he could eloquently voice his despair, his trauma, and his pain. An e-mail that would be a righteous delivery from betrayal. An e-mail that would demand *why*. Theirs was a relationship that began with electronic messages; perhaps it was fitting that it should end the same way.

It was so unfair life was denying him a break now, when he could use a little slack. He felt like an understudy being thrust into the footlights, an understudy who hadn't bothered to learn his lines.

Frozen, grinning stupidly, Ethan stared out at Brian, who was now waiting by the door. His brown eyes bored into him. And in spite of the riot of confused feelings welling up within him, Ethan couldn't help but feel a warmth radiate through him at the sight of Brian's face.

But then other thoughts intruded: thoughts about honesty and fidelity, for which Ethan had no easy answers and he didn't know if he was ready to hear Brian try to explain things. He didn't want to be lied to.

Yes, he did.

Oh, he didn't know what he wanted.

He wanted to forget. He wanted oblivion back. Ignorance is bliss, right? *Gimme an order of bliss and make it fast!*

He swallowed hard and forced his feet to do that complicated dance maneuver: one foot in front of the other until he reached the door. Continuing the theater metaphor, he

would have to do what an understudy who didn't know his lines would do, once in front of an audience: improvise.

He opened the door and stepped back to let Brian in, wordlessly. Brian's presence seemed somehow larger, more solid than it ever had. It was almost as though he had run into someone famous, say Brad Pitt, right here in the lobby of his building. Brian's face was a mask of bewilderment and hurt and almost automatically, Ethan started to let his worries about HIV and dishonesty take a back seat to his need to comfort. He actually fretted over upsetting Brian for standing him up on his birthday.

Brian's lip trembled just a bit, then he sucked it in, refusing to let Ethan look away with the intensity of his gaze.

"Babe, what happened last night? Where were you? Why didn't you take my calls?" He shook his head and asked the most pitiable question of all: "Are you okay?"

"No." Ethan bit his lip and took careful notice of the black and white pattern on the tiled floor beneath him. "Not okay."

"What's the matter?"

Ethan debated briefly over whether he should make him wait. He told himself he had important things to do at work today, people he would be letting down.

But he would be letting himself down more if he didn't deal with this now. "We need to talk. Wanna come up?" Ethan didn't wait for an answer, but simply headed for the elevator, trying mightily to keep his knees from knocking.

He could feel Brian behind him as he entered the elevator and pressed the button for his floor.

"I don't get it." Brian started in.

And Ethan held up a finger, indicating that he should wait.

Once inside the apartment, Ethan went directly toward the window and stared down at the traffic flowing by. He gnawed at a hangnail. How to broach this? How to stay in charge of a conversation he could see wildly spinning out of control as soon as he uttered the first few words? And worst of all, what if having this conversation meant the end of his relationship with Brian? No more candle-lit dinners, no more snuggling in bed until noon on weekend mornings, no more recipes to try out on a new and willing diner, and no more love... Ethan shook his head, briefly surveying his life pre-Brian, the emptiness of it, the loneliness, the thwarted assumption that a cat might help assuage the nights in front of the TV with two handsome guys called Ben and Jerry.

But how could he *not* give everything that Brian meant to him up? Their union was a house of cards built upon a sand castle anyway. No real relationship ever laid a foundation of dishonesty, did it? Not one that expected to last, anyway. Sadly, Ethan thought that by losing Brian maybe he really wasn't losing the man at all, not the real man, but only the idea of him. Still, Ethan wished in the pit of his churning stomach he could just jump in a time capsule and go back to the day before yesterday, or even further, wishing he had not made the appointment for that check up. Who knows? Maybe he would have been one of those people he read about who had the virus in their systems for years with no complications.

He just wanted to not know.

But he did. And there was no way to continue now without just facing things. Ethan sucked in some breath, trying to slow his rapidly beating heart, and turned to Brian, who stood fidgeting near his breakfast bar, looking just as confused and bewildered as he had outside.

A few words, bald and to the point, could start things. Ethan propelled himself forward, in both senses: he walked so he was standing closer to Brian, and willed himself to say the words gathered on the tip of his tongue.

“I forgot your birthday yesterday because I had bad news.”

Brian’s brow furrowed in concern and he began to reach out for Ethan. “What? What was it?” He was about to wrap his arms around Ethan, but Ethan stepped back just out of his grasp.

Ethan almost relented, seriously considering the prospect of procrastinating, just putting the whole mess off for another day when he saw the hurt expression darkening Brian’s feature as he stepped away from him, obviously not wanting to be touched. It was a first for the couple.

But Ethan knew what he must say next and almost without thinking, let the words trip off his tongue. “I went to the doctor yesterday.”

Brian’s face, if possible, became even more touched by pity and concern. It was breaking Ethan’s heart. “Are you okay?”

Ethan looked over Brian’s shoulder, toward the kitchen, steeling himself for the words that would come next. “It was a follow-up to my last check-up and—” Ethan bit his lower lip.

Say it. Just say it. He let out a rush of air, on the tail end of which was the sentence: “And I found out, much to my surprise, I am HIV positive.” He returned his gaze to Brian, who stood stunned, mouth open and staring at him. Now that the words were out, it was a little easier and he continued. “My T-cells are at 380 and my viral load is around 12,000, whatever the hell those numbers mean. I just know they’re not good.”

Brian shook his head. “Babe, I’m so sorry.”

Ethan’s anger and hurt kicked in, suddenly, and with the force of a fire bursting into a conflagration. He had never experienced going from confusion and despair to rage so quickly. It was all he could do not to strike Brian, to punch the silly expression of concern stamping his features right off his face. *How could you? How could you?*

“Yeah,” Ethan said, a smile born of ire pulling up the corners of his mouth. “Yeah. You *should* be sorry. Did you just not tell me for a reason? Did you think maybe those few times we dispensed with a condom we’d just be lucky? Did *you* just get infected too? Maybe while you were with me?” Ethan spat the last words out, glaring at Brian, his breath quickened.

Brian shook his head. “Ethan, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, please. Don’t.”

“Can we just sit down and discuss this? Sweetheart, I’m so sorry you’ve had this news, but it’ll be okay. There are treatments—”

“Oh, don’t patronize me. Don’t try to placate me. And no, I don’t want to sit down. I don’t want to discuss this.” As rapidly as the rage had come, so did the tears. Ethan angrily batted them away, not wanting Brian to see. “I was hoping you’d at least be enough of a human being to tell me the truth. I was hoping you’d at least be a man and own up to the truth.”

“What truth?”

“Oh, come on, Brian. There’s no one else who could have infected me. As the song goes: it had to be you.” Ethan almost laughed as he imagined doing his best Harry Connick, Jr. impersonation and singing a few lines from the old standard. But he was afraid if he started laughing, it would turn giddy and breathless, hysterical, and would never end.

Brian shook his head and Ethan noticed his ruddy complexion had faded to ash. “I don’t think I am.”

“What? What don’t you think you are?”

“Positive. If I didn’t believe that, I never would have made love to you without protection.”

Ethan didn’t know what to say. A new, and even more sickening possibility dawned on him: maybe Brian was telling the truth. Maybe he was just as newly infected as Ethan...and that would mean there was someone else. That the fidelity he had counted on and prized was nothing more than a sham, another self-deluding lie he had told himself in his pathetic quest for connection.

Ethan sighed. “Just get out.”

“I don’t understand what you’re thinking. I don’t know. I just...” Brian stopped and Ethan knew he was at a loss for

words. Good. He didn't need to hear any more from him right now. He didn't think he could bear it.

Ethan said slowly, "I can't see you right now. I don't know if I ever can, or want to, again. But you need to leave me alone. Can you at least do that much for me?" Ethan's voice went up, shrill, on his question. Brian stepped toward him once more, arms extended.

Ethan put up his hands. "Don't. Out."

And Brian slowly shook his head, his expression pained, and turned to the door. He paused at the threshold, as if maybe waiting for Ethan to call him back. Ethan said nothing.

Brian left, closing the door softly behind him.

And Ethan sat on the couch and wept.

* * *

At his office at LA Nicholes, Ethan didn't have much time to think about his diagnosis or where things stood with Brian or what he should even do next. Besides there being press releases to write about upcoming opening nights, interviews with actors and directors to be scheduled with newspapers, and calls to be returned, he had an appointment with a Ms. Jan Most, candidate for the recently open position of receptionist at the firm.

LA Nicholes had just lost Benjamin Allread, a flighty little airhead of a man Ethan not-so-affectionately referred to as Bubbles, to a gay theater group looking for a publicity director. The glory of the title, Ethan was sure, was enough for Bubbles to overcome the paltry salary Ethan was certain

Bubbles was getting.

Jan Most was waiting for him in the conference room. She was a portly woman with red spiky hair, pale skin, and dark brown eyes. A sprinkling of freckles had been scattered across the bridge of her nose. In spite of her bulk, she was dressed in a flattering way, in a dark purple tunic with cream slacks. Large silver hoops framed her face. *Forgive me, God, for thinking that she looks like every other fag hag in the bars on Halsted.* And before a word was even spoken or a hand was shaken, Ethan imagined a future with Jan Most, with the two of them out at Sidetrack on show tunes nights, shopping at Water Tower Place on the weekends and spending depressing holidays together eating Thai takeout and watching old movies at each other's apartments. Ethan shook the images out of his head and smiled at Ms. Most. He even remembered to extend his hand.

"Jan Most? Hi. I'm Ethan Schwartz, senior publicist here. Welcome."

Jan stood to shake Ethan's hand and he felt sorry for the unkind way he had thought of her. From the twinkle in her eyes, her genuine smile, and the warmth that seemed to radiate from her, he knew he was wrong to pre-judge.

The two sat down and Ethan glanced at her resume, which not only boasted a solid clerical background, but volunteer work at the League of Chicago Theaters. Ethan shoved aside the buff-colored paper and asked the question that had been asked at the start of job interviews since the dawn of time.

"So, why don't you tell me a little bit about yourself?"

“Well, I was an easy birth...”

And, at once, Jan Most put Ethan most at ease. Her background and maturity alone were enough for him to be sold on her before she had even spoken, but as they talked, Jan revealed a wonderful, warm, and often funny personality. For example, when he asked if she'd be willing to take a drug test as a pre-condition of employment, Jan dead-panned and told him she'd be willing “to test any drug you cared to put in front of me.” Ethan found himself laughing out loud, a possibility that, this morning, he didn't think would be possible on this or any other day in the near future. By the time the interview concluded, Ethan was certain he'd be giving the thumbs up to Jan Most when his supervisor asked if they should hire her. It was a testimony to the depressing economic times they lived in that such a bright and experienced woman was available for such a lowly spot in the firm.

As Ethan walked Jan to the door and told her they'd be in touch, he thought back over their interview. One thing Jan told him stuck in his mind. She had a lot of outside activities (what the LA Nicholes Employee Manual called “work/life” balance) and one of them was the mastermind behind a successful advice blog, *Dear Jan*. She had told him how she had started doing it just for fun, writing sarcastic answers to silly questions she had made up herself and posting them for friends and family to read. But someone, somewhere had seen the blog, told their friends and family and so on and so forth, and Jan confessed that she was as surprised as anyone when her blog, gone viral, was getting dozens if not hundreds of hits

per day, and people were writing to her with real questions.

Ethan sat at his desk and whispered, "Thank you, Jan Most, for taking my mind off my troubles for at least an hour." He clicked on the Internet Explorer logo at the bottom of the screen and Googled "Ask Jan" and quickly found her column as the top hit in the rankings.

The column was good. Jan displayed the kind of wisdom and common sense found on one of Ethan's most guilty of pleasures: *Judge Judy*. But there was also a warmth and caring that came through. Reading her blog made Ethan hope that her appointment to LA Nicholes would happen and would happen soon. He needed someone like her to talk to. He already wanted to confide in her.

But he wouldn't join the lovelorn and write to her.

No, *Dear Jan* inspired another thought in him. A thought he was quick to reject, but then kept coming back to as his day progressed.

Why not? There are thousands of blogs out there and I would be anonymous, so what would the harm be? No one would probably even read what I wrote, let alone discover my identity. It would be a way to unburden myself...and maybe help some other poor soul in the same position, should he stumble across my blog.

See, Ethan was already thinking about creating his own blog, especially now, with this momentous and life-changing news right here at ground zero.

His mind kept returning the blog as he worked through his day, more productive than ever, probably due to the fact that

he was trying not to think about his personal life. He recalled how Jan had told him how easy it was to set up the blog and the cost was next to nothing, save for the time one put in on it.

He told himself not to be stupid. He told himself he had no use for such things. He could see a therapist or keep a journal if he wanted to unburden himself.

But the idea of the blog kept coming back to him. And when he thought of the title for it, he was as good as writing his very first blog. He would call it “Off to See the Wizard of Poz.”

* * *

It was much later in the day when Ethan allowed himself the time and the courage to make a phone call he had been dreading. *Go ahead and make it, Ethan. Most likely, he won't even be there and you can just leave a message.* After running his fingers up and down the telephone receiver several times and then decided that doing so was plainly suggestive, he snatched up the phone and punched in the numbers that had been scrawled on his desk blotter for months.

This was the way Ethan's life went and he should have known that when he dialed the number, hoping to just leave a message, he would be connected immediately.

“Hi Ethan. I'm glad you called.”

“Well, I knew we needed to talk, and I just wanted a little time to process things before we did. Can we do this over the phone or do you want me to come in?”

“I think we can handle things over the phone,” Dr. Frank

Morris said. "I don't want to put you to the trouble of coming back in."

"So give it to me straight, doc, how long do I have?"

Dr. Morris snorted and then broke out into a full-fledged guffaw. "Well, I'm glad to hear you still have your sense of humor."

"I wasn't kidding."

There was a pause and then Dr. Morris said, "No, of course not. But Ethan, haven't you been keeping up with things HIV-related? I mean, as gay man to gay man, I would just think you'd know that questions like yours aren't all that applicable these days, not with the treatments we have. I have patients who are healthy as can be and were diagnosed twenty years ago."

"Really?"

"Oh, yeah. Look, I'm not saying this isn't serious. It is. And you need to get on medication right away. We'll talk more about that in a minute. But I feel pretty confident saying you don't need to worry too much about kicking the bucket any time soon, at least not because of HIV." The doctor's bright tone seemed to darken as he delivered the disclaimer the pessimist in Ethan knew was coming. "Now, I do need to tell you that, once in a while, we find patients who are resistant to treatment. Or we have patients who have side effects and have problems with the meds. You could be one of those. But the odds of that are slim. As I said, I have a whole practice full of healthy HIV positive men who are leading normal, healthy lives with the help of just a few pills a day."

We have more options today than we ever had, so if the first thing we try doesn't work, we'll try something else. Rest assured that I will take good care of you."

"Thanks, Doc." Ethan blew out a sigh of relief. He knew he shouldn't be overly optimistic, but things looked a lot better, health-wise, than he had thought.

"Look. Give me the number for your pharmacy and I'll call in prescriptions for Viramune and Truvada. These two work great in a lot of my patients and you can just take three pills in the morning and you're good to go. You have prescription coverage at your job?"

"Yeah."

"Good. Hang on to that insurance, because these drugs don't come cheap. Just let me know how it's going after the first few days, read the information about side effects, and we'll see you in about a month to see how you're responding. Okay?"

"Sure." Ethan brought up his local Walgreens address and phone number on his computer, gave it to the doctor, and hung up, feeling both relieved and a little stunned.

It was good news, wasn't it? He'd probably be okay, albeit burdened with expensive medications he might very well have to take for the rest of his life. He might even live to a ripe old age, killed by something other than the virus mutating right now in his body.

Cheery thoughts. And cheerier still was the intrusion of another, darker idea: he could see no other way that he could have been infected other than through Brian. And that truth

made all the doctor's good news seem lessened.

All around him, the office had gone quiet as his coworkers headed out for the day. Outside, the sky was darkening. As he'd spoken with his doctor, Ethan hadn't even noticed the shift in the day. And now, he was troubled by thoughts of Brian.

He needed to unburden himself. Although he thought he'd work on the blog at home in his spare time, he felt, well, was *inspired* the right word? Whatever the word, the blog—and its initial post—were calling to him to be written.

He logged on to the blog server Jan Most had told him about and started setting up his blog. He was surprised at how easy it was. Fill in a few blanks, choose a background template and the extras you might like to see displayed in a sidebar and *voila!* You were good to go.

Ethan stared for only a brief time at the little blue button before him that said, “New Post.” He clicked on it and was taken to a place where he saw he could not only add text, but also hyperlinks, pictures, and more. Ethan was a simple guy, and believed implicitly in the “KISS” rule: keep it simple, stupid. For now, he would concentrate on the words.

And the words, waiting inside him these past couple days, rushed out of him without his having to think much.

It took only twenty minutes, then twenty more to proofread, correct, and tweak, but in less than an hour, Ethan had his first *Off to See the Wizard of Poz* ready for publication.

He read it over one more time to give himself time to decide if he really did want to post the blog. This is what it

said:

It's been only a couple of days since my doctor broke the news and told me I was HIV positive. After the initial shock wore off, I wanted to jump up and point an accusing finger at the Doc, shouting, "Hey buddy, you got the wrong guy!"

I couldn't be HIV positive. Not me. Not a gay man whose sexual history read more like a haiku than an epic.

Not me. Not a gay guy in his forties, pathetically involved in his first real love affair. Not me. This love affair that I talk about had seemed like more than "an affair." No, this relationship had more the ring of future on it.

I thought I had found my soul mate.

I thought we were in a monogamous relationship.

It's tough enough getting the news that you're poz. Tougher still to suddenly realize that this news points a very accusing finger at the man you thought you might wind up spending the rest of your life with.

That's not to say I wasn't stupid. I guess I shouldn't have believed him when he told me I was his one and only. Although my history of sexual encounters is sparse, I have known enough gay men to know that I'm the exception to the rule. My first mistake, I guess, was trusting one of my own. I should have known better than to believe his promises of fidelity.

But I didn't. And I was even stupider because I let him fuck me without a condom. There, is that bald enough for you? I have no excuses. You can call me an idiot, a moron, and

someone who needs to get with the times. But there were hot summer nights when I just wanted to feel him inside me, without a latex barrier. Just us. Skin to skin, as some put it. Bareback, as others do. And once you've crossed that threshold, and passion is rising like a tidal wave, it's very easy to let the act finish...with him inside.

Yes, I let him come in my ass. There, is that bald enough for you?

I can just hear my mother now, saying something like, "Those who put their hands in the fire must expect to get burned." Mom would also tell me I have no one to blame but myself.

And I guess Mom's right. But that doesn't make me feel any better.

He doesn't know what I know. Not yet. And maybe he doesn't even know he's infected. I've thought through the scenarios and he could still be in that "window period" you've heard tell about. That still doesn't make me feel any better.

Why? Because he either knowingly infected me or unwittingly did so, with the very likely possibility that he was fucking other guys behind my back.

Neither of these possibilities is pretty to contemplate.

I can't talk to him right now. I can't trust myself not to A) break down into a snotty-nosed, sobbing mess or B) kill him.

Neither of those would solve much. So, for now, I keep my own counsel. It's just you and me. Are you listening?

Before I decide what I will do about him, I have to take

care of me first. And that means drawing this first blog to a close, and heading out to pay a visit to my friendly neighborhood pharmacist. He's got a gift bag for me: two expensive drugs called Viramune and Truvada.

Yes, folks, the guy who never smoked, never did drugs, and whose throat is still only on an acquaintance basis with hooch is about to become a habitual drug user.

God save us all.

No, Viramune and Truvada save me.

I'll write more when I'm ready. I can't promise it will be every day, but I have a feeling you and I are going to get to know each other very well these next few days, maybe even longer.

Hello my new friends: you and, of course, HIV.

How could I forget?

Ethan sat back and considered the blog staring back at him on the computer screen. He now had two options. One was preview and the other was publish. Ethan had already read his words through about four times, so he knew he didn't really need to preview. There were no photos to double check for proper loading, no hyperlinks to ensure were working. So he whispered to himself that old chestnut he had heard bandied about in his college days, "Publish or perish," and hit the publish button.

It seemed like a momentous occasion. And then he reminded himself that, more than likely, no one but he would ever read the words he had written.

But he did feel better, if only slightly. The burden on his shoulders had lessened by an ounce or two and he knew he felt better because he was hungry. And he knew there was a bag of Doritos waiting for him at home.

Ethan noticed, as he gathered up his things, that it was almost dark outside and the office was very quiet.

As he left the office, he was surprised to see Jan Most sitting at the reception desk. Hadn't he just interviewed her?

Ethan smiled and cocked his head as he approached her desk. "What are you doing here?"

Jan was wearing a pair of jeans and a man's Oxford cloth button-down shirt. She still jazzed herself up with lots of clunky sterling silver jewelry. She had a scarf wrapped around her red hair and from what he could see of the pattern, Ethan thought it might be a reproduction of Vincent Van Gogh's *Starry Night*. Jan looked up at him and grinned. "Guess who got a job offer?"

"That was fast!"

Jan shrugged her shoulders and said, "Hey, I wasn't working. I was bored out of my skull and so when they called me and asked when I could start, I said, 'tomorrow.' I just worked it out to come in this evening and play around with the computer and phone system." Jan laughed. "Don't worry, contrary to how it looks, I am not a workaholic. I just don't want to look like a complete doofus tomorrow when I officially start."

Ethan was taken aback, both by the fact that Jan was here now and that she had been hired so quickly. He was still in

kind of a contemplative mood from the blog he had just written and having Jan appear here, in this lonely, empty office, made everything seem sort of surreal. Because he didn't know what to say, Ethan simply offered, "Well, enjoy. And be sure to turn off the lights when you leave."

As he headed out the door, it seemed to Ethan that he was forgetting something. He checked to see that his messenger bag was affixed to his shoulder and that his apartment keys were in his pocket. Everything seemed in place, so Ethan shut off the annoying thought that there was one more thing he needed to do and headed out.

Outside, the now night air was fragrant with the scent of autumn in Chicago. Exhaust fumes mingled with the redolent scent of decaying leaves. Ethan was thinking about how good the chill in the air felt and how the time of year always took him back to his school days. The association was one of new beginnings and he knew most people thought of spring as more the start of new directions.

His thoughts—for once not about HIV and Brian's perfidy—were rudely interrupted, thrown on the concrete, stomped, and kicked to the curb when he saw the man himself waiting at the corner of Belmont and Broadway. Brian.

And this was no chance encounter. His—oh, what should he call him now? Lover? Ex? What?—former friend stood staring at him, waiting. In his hands was a bouquet of purple irises (Ethan's favorite) and on his face was a tremulous smile, which made him even handsomer in the warm glow from the streetlamp under which he stood.

If Ethan knew he hadn't been spotted, he would have turned and run in the other direction, ducking back into the building that housed LA Nicholes. But he had been seen and now Brian was coming toward him.

Ethan stood his ground, his stomach churning. Part of him wanted to run up to the man, who confounded him by continuing to look sexy and adorable in his plain white T-shirt, jeans, and cowboy boots—and the other part wanted to scream at him: “Why can’t you leave me alone?”

Ethan closed his eyes, groping desperately for some spit in his mouth so he could swallow.

“Ethan. Please. I think if we can just talk about this, we can work it out.”

Ethan stared at him, unable to assemble his emotions and thoughts in a coherent enough fashion to mutter a few words that would make any sense. So he stayed mute and let Brian continue.

“We’ve always been able to talk things out, get through them, and go on. Look where it’s gotten us. We had—still have, I hope—something good, something solid, something worth hanging on to. Don’t you think?”

Ethan still couldn’t speak. Hornets of rage were buzzing inside his brain. Farther south, a pall had been cast over his heart, which felt empty, yearning, and betrayed. And still farther south, his stomach did weird flip-flops, as if auditioning for the next Chicago performance of *Cirque du Soleil*.

Ethan couldn’t speak, but he could act. In gestures entirely

unlike him, he painted a broad smile across his features. He noticed how the smile immediately relaxed Brian, the set of his shoulders, tense, softened. He returned the smile with his own lopsided and unbearably cute grin.

Brian grinned even more broadly when Ethan took the flowers from him. Ethan kept smiling and held the eye contact as he flung the flowers to the ground.

And then he walked away.

He could feel Brian's gaze on him, but he would not look back. Tears gathered in the corners of Ethan's eyes, but, like the blog, his actions had made him feel a little better (and, paradoxically, a lot worse...go figure).

He thought Brian would call after him. But by the time he made it to the corner, Ethan had heard nothing more than the honking of a car horn at a distracted driver and the roar of a bus passing by.

He didn't know whether he was relieved or disappointed.

* * *

Ethan spent the next day much as he had the last: immersed in work. He had always wondered how people "threw" themselves into the work and had always had no small amount of disdain for such people, thinking they needed to get a life.

Now he was one of them and he understood.

And, at the day's close, he was ready to share with his blog another of his adventures in Poz Land. Last night, after the encounter with Brian, he had stopped at Walgreens and picked

up the first of his prescriptions.

When the pharmacist told him the cost was \$100 for the pair, Ethan at first thought they must not have applied the prescriptions to his insurance. But the pharmacist explained that \$50 each was only his co-pay. “Yup, if you were paying for this on your own, you’d be shelling out over thirteen hundred.”

Ethan gulped. “Dollars?”

“Yes. Credit, check, or cash?”

“Credit.”

Ethan thought he had better make sure to hang on to his job.

Waiting again until the end of the day, when most of the office had gone home and the office was quiet, Ethan again returned to the scene of the crime: his *Off to See the Wizard of Poz* blog.

When I got the news that I was HIV+, I had a lot of thoughts scurrying around in my brain, competing for attention, not the least of which were questions like: how long do I have? Should I begin slutting around the baths now that it no longer matters about getting infected? Will I be unable to tolerate the drugs that could save my life?

The least of the questions I had was: how will this affect my finances? I had no idea the cost of the medicines to keep me alive were going to be so expensive! I just picked up my meds last night and the pharmacist (think Jet Li in a lab coat) informed me that, together, they cost about \$1300 bucks! For

one month!

Once upon a time, and especially on bad days at work, I had thought of just chucking it all and going freelance. I was good at what I did (promoting, marketing, and writing) and had lots of solid contacts that I could most likely persuade to give me work, so the idea was one that had some validity.

But I can't think that way no more, boys and girls. This young lady has to kiss the corporate ass...not only for her salary, but for the now precious perk that comes with her job: health insurance. Thank the sweet baby Jesus, Blue Cross pays most of the costs for my meds.

Now, if only they will work. Now, if only I will not have any of the ten thousand possible side effects listed on the prescription inserts...

And, by the way, slutting around at the baths is out. My doc informed me I could get reinfected with a different strain and that medicines that worked before could stop. "Use a condom...every time," he said, as if he'd recited the line a million times before (and probably had).

Welcome to the brave new world of Poz.

Cheery, Ethan thought, as he hit the "publish" button. He breathed in a contented breath, in spite of his situation. This blog idea really wasn't so bad. It was certainly cheaper than a therapist and Ethan felt it was having much the same effect.

He hoisted his messenger bag over his shoulder and started to head out, when he paused and slapped himself in the forehead. He did not cry, "I could have had a V-8!" Instead, he

hurried over to his computer, logged off, and shut the machine down for the night.

Had he forgotten to do it the night before? He couldn't remember.

* * *

At home, Ethan felt like he had been transported back in time, as if the prior six months with Brian had never happened. Normally, when he got home, one of the first things he would do (after peeing), would be to pick up the phone and call Brian to see what the plans were for dinner that night. Should they go out? Stay in? My place or yours? Do you want to cook or should I? Or should we just order in lo mein and egg rolls from Li Wen? Or, how about we just forego dinner completely and hit the sheets?

But it was as if those happy times had been a blip in his existence, almost like something that had never happened, and now he was back to what he was used to: being alone. Perhaps, he thought, being alone was his natural, default state and he should just accept it. Hadn't this one grasp at love ended in disaster? If he was more of a sap, he would dig through the old LPs in his basement storage room, find his turntable while he was down there, and sob while "Alone Again (Naturally)" by Gilbert O'Sullivan played. The long night stretched before him, empty. Should he try and cook something? Dispirited, he looked through the refrigerator, empty save for a forlorn package of Oscar Meyer turkey wieners probably well past their sell by date and a carton of

Lactaid skim, also probably older than it would like to admit.

He slammed the refrigerator door shut, thinking, “aren’t we all?” He knew there were Lean Cuisines in the freezer, but suddenly the prospect of zapping a Mexican Fiesta Chicken in the microwave seemed like too much work.

Ethan went over to the cupboard that housed what he modestly called his bar and pulled out an ancient bottle of Jack Daniels. “At least these don’t go bad, not that I know of, anyway.” He regarded the black label and the amber liquid inside, thinking that its warmth would fill him up enough and would send him off to sleep. He could just sleep and sleep and sleep. Worry about tomorrow, tomorrow. He would eat then.

As he was splashing a finger or two of Jack into a juice glass, his cell phone chirped. He hurried, out of old habit, to snatch it from his jacket pocket. He glanced down at the Caller ID on the clamshell’s front and saw that it was, indeed, Brian.

Ethan shook his head and flipped open the phone, amazed that he could speak over his suddenly thundering heart.

“What?” he said impatiently into the phone.

Brian said nothing for a moment. “Ethan. Please. Can I just talk to you? Can I come over?”

“No. I’m tired and I don’t feel good.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Can we just talk for a few minutes?”

Ethan sat on his futon and took a gulp of the whiskey. He made a face as its burning heat invaded his mouth and throat.

“What do you have to say, Brian?”

“First of all, that I love you, honey. Don’t you know that?”

Brian's voice was so plaintive and sincere that Ethan forgot for a moment that it was just such sweet talk that had him taking three extra pills every morning with his vitamin.

"I'm not sure I do, Brian."

"How can you say that?"

"I can say it because..." Ethan bit his lip. He might as well just come out with it. "I can say it because I really don't see how it could have been anyone else who infected me. And the thought of that makes me sick, Brian, it really does." Ethan heard his voice catch. *Man up!* He thought to himself. *Do not let him hear you cry.* "I just don't know what there is to talk about."

Brian blew out a sigh; he sounded exasperated. "How about this? How about that you're jumping to conclusions? How about the fact that you're ignoring the very real feelings I have for you? How about six of the happiest months of my life...and what I thought were six of your happiest too? How about those as talking points?"

Ethan could tell from the slight tremor in Brian's voice that he was not the only one on the verge of tears. *This would be so much easier if the man was just an asshole.* Ethan took another sip of bourbon and this one went down easier. He wondered if he shouldn't be mixing his new meds with alcohol. "I have to go now, Brian."

"What?"

"I said I need to go. I can't talk to you right now."

"Well then, when? When *can* you talk to me?"

"I don't know. I don't know when, or if, that time will

come.”

“Are you breaking up with me?” Brian’s voice went up at the end of the question, his pain apparent. “Over this?”

“This? You say that like it’s something small. I don’t know.” Ethan drew in a big breath, let it out. “Yes. I’m breaking up with you. Goodbye.”

He flipped the clamshell shut and switched off the phone. Quickly, he walked to the other side of the apartment and unplugged the cordless from the wall jack.

He sat back down and sipped his drink, poured another. Then he took off his clothes and climbed into bed. He thought it was very poetic and somehow pathetic that there were tears on his pillow.

* * *

The next day, Ethan went through the routine of work like an automaton. He had been doing his job as a publicist for so long, he discovered that he really didn’t need to think much in order to answer e-mails, handle phone calls, and write press releases, which were often nothing more, he had to admit, than boilerplate with names, dates, titles, and locations changed. He found he could even attend a staff meeting, smile, say all the appropriate things, and never once engage his mind. It made him wonder how many of his coworkers were doing the exact same thing.

He couldn’t engage his mind because the very brief phone call with Brian the night before kept replaying in his head throughout the day. The questions kept coming, rapid-fire, as

if his brain was suddenly set up to formulate pithy questions for which he had no answers. He also discovered a snippy, unkind voice in the background of his mind. Before all this had happened, he didn't know this snippy voice very well, with its sarcasm and meanness, but there it was and maybe it had been waiting all along in the wings for just the right convergence of bad luck and circumstance to emerge. The mean Ethan *did* have answers to his questions and seemed only too happy to give them:

Had he done the right thing by abruptly ending what he had considered a good, solid relationship so suddenly and over the phone?

Yes, stupid, you did the right thing. Why would you even ask that? The man betrayed you and, worse, probably had a lifelong bad influence on your health. Did the right thing? God! I wonder where the brains God gave you are hiding.

Should he have at least given Brian a face-to-face audience?

Oh, that's rich! Give him yet another chance to whisper sweet nothings in your ear and seduce you with a lot of crap, none of which, I might add, is even true.

Was he impulsively throwing away something that could have been worked out?

Sweetheart, you are nothing but an eternal optimist if that's what you think. Honey, people don't change. Kick this one to curb; he's not the only fish in the sea. And who needs a man anyway? How about that cat idea? Maybe a Maine Coon? At least it won't lie to you!

How soon would Brian begin seeing other people?

You know the answer to this. He's most likely online right now, trolling for dick. Men! They're all the same!

Had he already?

You know the answer to this, too, sugarplum. And that already goes way back, up to and including when you met him.

"Oh, shut up," Ethan said aloud, and then hoped no one was listening over the partition. Would this diagnosis and break-up reduce him to arguing with voices in his head? Was he on a fast track to an asylum...or worse, homelessness, where he could mutter to himself curled up near a Dumpster, a bottle of fortified wine clutched in his grimy hand?

He reminded himself he did have a new outlet for his thoughts: his blog. He could turn to it and pour out all his troubles, unconcerned about judgment or if he sounded crazy.

He knew he should keep this blog writing at home, but right now, he felt very much compelled to write.

He brought up Internet Explorer and was about to click the bookmark for his blog when he paused. The "mean Ethan" snickered and whispered slyly, "Before you do that, why don't you just do a quick check and see what Brian's up to? Even if he's not online, I wouldn't be a bit surprised if he's posted a few profiles here and there. After all, isn't that how he snagged you?"

Mean Ethan had a point. And it was the kind of point that dug into a person, refusing to be ignored. There was a sensible Ethan saying he should not, not, not be going on such sites like wingpeople.com (where he had met Brian) or Manhunt

(where he hoped Brian was not hanging out) or even gaydar.com (where there were zillions of men just waiting to snatch up a prize like Brian, all of them younger and prettier than Ethan). But that point, that irritation, that quest for knowledge, once noticed, would not go away and let him be.

Ethan logged onto wingpeople.com with shaking fingers. It was the personals website where he and Brian had first met, through which they had exchanged their first tentative and tender e-mails, and through which they had cemented their relationship, now broken, sadly, beyond repair. The first thing he noticed was that the site had new and spiffier graphics. It looked more streamlined and modern. But otherwise, things were the same: that virtual air of desperation hanging around the site with its promise of over 500,000 men online right now.

He told himself he should stop at once, but he knew even as he was thinking it, that there was no turning back. He did the requisite clicks that would allow him onto the site as a visitor (he had long ago abandoned his account; six months ago, to be precise) and then proceeded to search, entering the required fields for city and state, and leaving a broad window for things like age, in case Brian was making himself younger, or lighter, than he actually was. Hey, if someone lies about one thing, he'll lie about another. It's a slippery slope.

After paging through scores of profiles and their accompanying thumbnail portraits (although "portrait" may have been too grand a term for a fat ass with the cheeks pulled apart or a ten-inch dick dribbling pre-cum), he saw no one that

even came close to resembling Brian.

He was relieved. But he was also shocked by a term he had never paid much attention to, but which now appeared over and over: “Neg. UB2.” It was easy enough to translate the term into English for the non-Internet savvy: “Negative. You be too.” Ethan was surprised and dismayed by how many times the term popped up. He supposed it had been there before, when he had been a full-fledged member of the site, but not having such a personal connection to the affront, he had most likely not made much note of it.

Now the term seemed callous, cruel, and exclusionary. Neg. UB2. How could they be so sure they were neg? And even better, how could they be so sure the UB2s actually were what they claimed? Even if a UB2 claimed to B, maybe he was in a window period or simply wasn’t aware of a new status mutating in his body as he set up a hook-up with another online NEG person.

Despite the inanity of the term, Ethan found it hurt. He was no longer NEG, and he felt suddenly left behind, once again, by a world of healthy people for whom he was not good enough.

It gave him the inspiration for his next blog.

So yes, I was online, on one of those hook-up sites. And lest you think I was on there cruising, get your mind out of the gutter. I don’t really know if I’m ready to admit why I was on there, either to myself or to you, but let’s just call it a little social experiment.

NEG UB2

One thing that will let you know I wasn't online for naughty purposes was the dispassion I felt as paged through the site with its come-ons, its cries for help, its attempts at wit, and its leave-nothing-to-the-imagination photographs (or pics, I guess you would say...I really must get with the times one of these days!). Like the hopeful in A Chorus Line, I felt nothing. But this allowed me to view the site somewhat objectively and what stuck out to me and what really caught my eye—over and over again—was a little shorthand that many guys had chosen to include in their ads. This shorthand made this newly diagnosed HIV positive man feel excluded, hurt, and alone.

The term? NEG UB2.

So short, so to-the-point. So cutting. So cruel. It's equally as bad as a few other key phrases designed to keep the "unworthy" at bay, phrases like "No fats" or "No fems". But it's NEG UB2 that really got to me.

Do the people who put that in their "what I'm looking for" realize how casually hurtful that phrase can be? Do they stop for a moment to consider that someone—or even many someones—out there reading this hateful little phrase may be newly diagnosed and struggling? Or maybe they're not new to HIV or AIDS itself and came to this online community looking for a little love, a little companionship, and maybe a feeling of being included? Do they stop to think how very STUPID the phrase is? Not just in its cruelty, but also in the fact that if they think it's some kind of magic phrase to screen out all potential suitors who are HIV positive, they're using something that's probably as effective as a condom full of

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holes? Just saying you're negative and asking someone else to be the same way does not make it so.

Trust me, I know.

I also know that maybe, in their misguided, unthinking way, these guys are just looking to protect themselves from contracting a disease that may seriously impact the rest of their lives. Even though my doctor tells me that an HIV diagnosis no longer has to be viewed as a death sentence, it still is a life-changing illness, albeit one that's not quite as life-threatening as it once was. If you don't have it, you don't want to get it.

Trust me, I know.

But even if you put that phrase in your profile as a means of self-protection, consider what you're doing and how it might affect someone else online. Someone, like me, who already feels singled out and, in his worst moments, like damaged goods that no one will ever want again. That phrase makes my lowest moments plunge lower.

Whatever your intentions, ignorant, self-preservative, or just plain callous, consider this: you can make the same message without making someone feel so bad. By simply stating what you believe is your own status—healthy negative and would like to stay that way—is a gentler way of getting across the point: “I'd rather not get involved with someone who is HIV+ because of the risk.” And it's certainly kinder than saying NEG UB2.

Or maybe—and here's a radical notion—maybe you should just do away with phrases like NEG UB2 or a gentler

variation and say nothing at all. Take your chances. Make your connections based on things other than someone's medical history. There are ways to protect yourself. There are couples out there who are one half poz, one half neg...and they make it work.

And besides, if you're looking for sex online, isn't it wise to simply assume everyone is POZ? And then you can really protect yourself...rationally and thoughtfully.

Ethan pushed himself away from the desk a few inches and regarded the screen. He thought what he had written was a bit of rant (well, more than a bit, really), but he decided it needed to be said. So he pushed the "publish" button once more, thinking he was sending his thoughts into virtual ether, but wishing, for the first time, someone else would read what he had to say.

* * *

A few days later, when he got to work and logged into his blogger account, he was surprised to see there were comments left on his *Off to See the Wizard of Poz* blog. Ethan hadn't even realized one could leave comments, figuring no one was probably out there reading it anyway. How would they ever find it?

But there were not just a few comments, but dozens. Ethan gasped as he looked down at the messages left for him, spilling over onto three pages. How did they know? How could they have possibly found his blog when even Google

had yet to take notice (he had checked)?

Ethan felt a curious mixture of shock, fear, and—as he started reading—love.

The first set of comments was for the blog he had written about his new meds and their cost. As he read, he felt a twinge of shame for his complaining about how much something that could save his life and, indeed, allow him to live a healthy existence, cost in dollars and cents.

Man, you hang in there. You have lots of people out here who are sending good, strong, healthy energy your way.

Hey, buddy, you're not alone. I was just diagnosed two months ago. But you know what? My doctor is taking good care of me; thanks to the meds he started me on right away, my viral load is now undetectable! From, like, ten million copies! I will be fine and so will you. Just eat right, get plenty of rest, take good care of yourself and you'll be around to see many, many more days.

Yeah, the meds are expensive. And the drug companies are raping HIV positive people for profit. But you know what? Those meds are keeping my dad alive and healthy and that's what I (and you) have to concentrate on. Who knows if the outrageous prices the pharmaceutical companies are charging is fair? I do know that many doctors and scientists put in untold hours and lots of hard work to develop these drugs to help people live. And when you put a dollar sign next to

whatever symbol is out there for life, then, IMO, it's pretty easy to see which one wins out.

Pay the price. Live.

So sorry to hear you've been diagnosed as HIV+. Thanks to years of not-always-welcome safe sex, avoiding party drugs, and taking reasonable care of myself, I've been lucky and have managed to avoid getting infected. It isn't an easy thing to live with, as I know from many of my friends (many of them no longer around...they didn't last too long after they were diagnosed back in the late 80s, early 90s...they weren't lucky enough to have the drug cocktails you're blessed with). But you have to count your lucky stars, my friend. Yes, you are lucky. You are lucky to have caught this thing early, in a time when there are good, solid treatments for it.

So stop wallowing in self-pity. Pray to whatever higher power you pray to or think about or avoid and give thanks for being allowed to survive, to be well, and to move on into life's next chapter.

There were lots more comments, almost all of them in the same vein. And not one of the comments was negative. Not one of them told him he got what he deserved or scolded him for being careless. Ethan felt a hot rush of tears spring to his eyes. Other than Brian, he had yet to tell anyone of his diagnosis, and now (he looked down at the comments again)

he saw that at least twenty-four people knew... and every one of them were on his side. Though blurred eyes, Ethan took in all of the messages—filled with compassion, hope, encouragement, and even love. Here were a couple dozen people who didn't even know him, who took the time to write him messages showing they cared. Was this really such an awful world? Was even his diagnosis such a bad thing? Oh, sure, his liver might say, "Yes, honey, it *is* such a bad thing." But if it suddenly led to his realization that he wasn't as alone in the world as he thought, maybe there was a reason he'd had that horrible doctor's visit and depressing news after all.

For a brief moment, Ethan thought about fate and about how we shouldn't always question the curve balls life throws our way.

"Excuse me, Ethan?"

Ethan sat up, startled, as if he had been caught masturbating. He hurried to wipe the tears from his eyes and minimize the screen upon which *Off to See the Wizard of Poz* was displayed. He looked up at Jan Most, standing in the opening to his cubicle and gave what he knew had to be a sickeningly sheepish grin. Heat rose to his cheeks and the tops of his ears. He noticed the bouquet of irises she held in her hands, like a bridesmaid ready to start up the aisle.

"Don't tell me you're here to propose?" Ethan giggled, knowing his laughter was a little too high, a bit too close to hysteria. "Girl, didn't they tell you I don't swing that way? Really, Jan, I'm flattered, but—" The giggling continued. If he were able to maneuver his legs just so, he would have kicked

himself under the desk, hard enough to leave a bruise on his shin. *Hush now!*

Jan regarded him quizzically, her carefully arched eyebrows ascending even higher. She shook her head. "Sweetheart, if I set my mind to it, I could make even an old queen like you turn. And don't you forget it!" Jan sashayed up to his desk, a big smile on her face, silver jewelry clacking, and lovingly placed the bouquet before him, with a small curtsy and a big wink. "These just came for you, Lover Boy."

And with that, she hurried from his office, leaving an aromatic trail of Shalimar in her wake.

Ethan bent down to sniff the posies, even though he already knew that irises charms lay in their looks and not their smell. He shook his head, picking up the flowers and admiring them. He knew from whom they came, and was uncertain if he should even bother to open the card. It would just complicate things.

Still, it was a much stronger man than Ethan who could resist opening a card that came with flowers. He burrowed a finger under the buff envelope's flap and tore it open. Inside, predictably, was a message from Brian:

*We cannot live, except thus mutually
We alternate, aware or unaware,
The reflex act of life: and when we bear
Our virtue onward most impulsively,
Most full of invocation, and to be
Most instantly compellant, certes, there*

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*We live most life, whoever breathes most air
And counts his dying years by sun and sea.
But when a soul, by choice and conscience, doth
Throw out her full force on another soul,
The conscience and the concentration both
Make mere life, Love. For Life in perfect whole
And aim consummated, is Love in sooth,
As nature's magnet-heat rounds pole with pole.*

Ethan immediately recognized the poem; he had, after all, been an English major and one with a undeniable bent toward the romantic. The poem was Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "Love."

He set the flowers aside and turned in his chair to look out the window. Outside, the leaves were at their peak. Brilliant orange, amber, yellow, and red competed for attention in the brilliant sun, a golden orb in a sky so blue it seemed the birds high up would be stained by its color.

You should call him. Tell him all is forgiven. What he did or didn't do...who cares? How can you ignore a man who can quote Elizabeth Barrett Browning? How can you ignore a man who cares enough to send the very best? Lesser mortals would have thought a Hallmark card might have done the trick! But not my Brian!

Ethan closed his eyes, blotting out the picture postcard landscape. *Don't. Don't let yourself be won over by cheap sentiment, by the colors of autumn, by sunshine, by a mini outpouring of Internet love. This is a man who betrayed you.*

And he deserves, at the very least, to be punished. Don't be a ninny. He took you in before. Don't let it happen again. To quote that uber, gap-toothed diva, Madonna: "Don't settle for second best, baby."

Ethan opened his eyes and tried to tell himself that he really would be better off on his own. He swung his chair back so that he faced his computer monitor. There was work to be done. He was not being paid to sit here and moon over failed romances or *blog*, for heaven's sake. There was a new play opening in three weeks at the Goodman and he still needed to write a press release about it and get it sent out.

But Sensible Ethan was no match for Compulsive Ethan. Were there comments left from his NEG UB2 blog?

Of course there were. And, in spite of the chance of interruption by Jan Most, another co-worker, or—God forbid—the IT department, he had to see what they said.

Dude! I am one of the guilty. I used that phrase NEG UB2 in my posts all over the 'Net. I never really thought of things from your perspective. I never really thought that those words could hurt someone. I just wanted to try and protect myself, like you said. You make a good point, but seriously dude, I can't really change it. But I will take it under advisement that there might be a kinder, gentler way of saying it. But I am NEG...and I wanna stay that way.

As the mother of a son who died from AIDS back in the early days (1990), your blog brought tears to my eyes. How

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can people be not only so thoughtless, but also so heartless? I hope that your blog changes some minds and gives people pause when they think of just ignorantly lashing out at a whole group of people. People, I might add, who have a lot more to offer than simply a negative HIV status.

I am right there with you, bud. I am poz as well and when I see that online, it really pisses me off. Good on you for telling 'em! I'm gonna tell me friends in my HIV+ support group about your blog.

You make some good points. But I have to make my own here: you can't blame someone for trying, even in a way that you might not consider tactful, to protect themselves from a virus that as you say, is life-changing. And sometimes the shortest way to say something is the best way. I am HIV NEG and sorry UR NOT.

Whoa! Ethan thought, just as he was ready to climb on a high horse and crown himself king—or should that be queen? *Hush!*—of all that was kind and right in online etiquette, that last comment caught him up short and he realized he wouldn't change everyone's mind.

Not today anyway.

He read on and was gratified to see, though, that the many, many messages that had filtered in were almost all supportive. Perhaps there were callous people who would use a term like NEG UB2, but there were also, obviously, tons of people out

there who were kind and compassionate...and made the time to tell him so.

There was a lump in his throat.

Work, Ethan, work! You know...that thing they pay you for. You might want to do a little before quittin' time!

Just before he clicked out of his blog, he glanced down one final time at all the comments and shook his head, his heart swelling with emotion. *Stop it! Get to work! You have meds to pay for!*

Thus chastened, Ethan shut the window displaying *Off to See the Wizard of Poz* and started thinking about an attention-getting headline for his latest press release. But just as he closed his blog, and the comments to him vanished into virtual ether, he wondered once again.

How on earth did they find my little blog?

* * *

A couple of days later, Ethan came into work early so he could be alone to write his next blog. Sure, he could have done it at home and, having done so, might have avoided the sleepless night he had endured, but somehow composing here in this little cubicle worked for him. This was where it had all begun, after all.

So, in spite of feeling weary to the bone, complete with itching eyes and an exhaustion that made his whole body feel weighted, he took a sip of his Starbucks double shot espresso, powered up his computer and tried to think about what to say. The blog, so quickly, had become like a pal and a confidante.

He felt as if he were pouring out his cares to a trusting and non-judgmental soul.

And he was.

Before long, he was free-associating, and his fingers, almost of their own will, were flying rapidly over his keyboard, translating symbols into words and words into emotions.

I didn't sleep well last night. I suppose the blame could lie in worry over the side effects of my new meds, which include such minor annoyances as liver failure, kidney problems, dizziness, diarrhea, rash, headaches...and gas. Lord knows I need no help in that final area! Anyway, so far so good with the meds: no immediate side effects anyway. And deep down, I know that's not what kept me up last night.

No, I know what kept me turning from one side to the other, then on my back, then over on my stomach. Kept me turning the bedroom TV (the lonely guy's best friend!) off and on, hoping for more entertaining fare than infomercials and the latest Lifetime thriller or rerun of The Golden Girls (and did they really need to show the one where Rose has to get tested for HIV last night of all nights? Sheesh!). One more glass of water. Two more pees.

It was a nightmare. But not really, BECAUSE I COULDN'T SLEEP!

No, what I was really tossing and turning about was my boyfriend, partner, lover, or ex...whatever term is in vogue at the moment. What I have not shared with you here on this blog

is the fact that he, let's call him Jack, has been an almost equal worry right alongside the fact that I have been diagnosed with HIV.

See Jack and I met about six months ago. I won't go into the details of our little love story, but like many people's, it was filled with a few bumps (especially at the beginning...oh, man, is that a story...maybe another blog), a lot of laughs, and eventually, what I thought was true love.

But then came the afternoon in my doctor's office and the shocking news he delivered. Once I had digested that the tests were not wrong and that I was indeed positive (and has this word ever rung more negatively?), I began thinking about Jack and asking questions.

How did I get infected?

How did I get infected when I've had a love life that probably more closely rivals that of Mother Teresa than Don Juan?

And if that's the case, did Jack give me the virus that began replicating in my bloodstream?

And if he did infect me, did he already know he was HIV+?

And if he knew, why didn't he tell me?

Oh, I know, I know, many of you are saying: "Well, didn't you ask?" And the answer is no, I didn't. And I know the sex police are out there crying, "Our sexual health is no one else's responsibility but our own." And, in a way, I agree, but I still wonder:

If you love someone and you're HIV+, wouldn't you want to do everything in your power to protect him?

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Okay, I flipped over on my other side and started wondering other things:

Maybe Jack doesn't know he's HIV+, so what does that mean?

Does it mean he's newly infected, too?

And would that mean that all of our talk about monogamy and being exclusive was just so much hot air?

Does that mean he was cheating on me?

Does that mean that my Jack was just like so many other gay men, who profess to want a relationship while they go out and trick around at the baths and bars when their "better half" isn't looking?

Bitter, party of one!

Does this mean, finally, that Jack was never the man I thought he was? Did I just build up some ideal in my mind, one that twisted and contorted the real man to fit my fantasy ideal?

No wonder I couldn't sleep.

Worst of all, right before bed, Jack called. I didn't answer. He waited a respectable twenty minutes, then called again. Lather, rinse, repeat. Finally, I crawled on to my futon and pulled the comforter around my ears, hoping for deliverance from ringing phones and praying I would not forget to take my meds in the morning, liver damage and potential buffalo humps be damned!

But you all know how well that went. Along about 3 a.m. I finally got up and checked my messages, all three of them. They all said three words.

First: I miss you.

Second: I need you.

Third: I love you.

Pretty undemanding, huh? Pretty smooth, too.

Bitter, party of one!

I don't know what to do about Jack. He sends me flowers and love poems. He whispers sweet nothings into my voice mail. For six months, he was the greatest thing that had ever happened to me.

I don't know what to do. Do you?

Ethan didn't even bother to proof the entry, nor to preview it. He simply hit "publish," thinking of the comical wit and wisdom of Thoreau and how "most men lead lives of quiet desperation." Except he wasn't so quiet. Not anymore. Not with his "song" being broadcast far and wide on a blog that was inexplicably growing popular. Wait a minute, isn't there some Internet term about going "viral?" Ethan shuddered.

Work, there is work to be done.

Already, it was ten a.m. and the offices of LA Nicholes were humming. Ethan thought how none of his coworkers had even the smallest inkling of his plight.

He also wondered how long he could wait until he started obsessively compulsively checking his blog for comments.

As it turned out, he would have to wait until that night. The day actually slipped away from him...almost unbelievably. He was immersed in meetings, scheduling interviews, and sending out press kits for a new play at a

promising little storefront theater in Rogers Park that had once, long before any of this had happened, become a pet project of Ethan's.

He was surprised when he looked at the digital clock in the lower right hand corner of his monitor and saw that it was already well after six. Were these meds affecting his mind? It almost seemed like he couldn't recall how the day had slipped away. He could tell from the sounds of the office that most people had already headed home for the evening. Why hadn't he heard them leave?

It's not your meds, silly. It's because you were simply busy. Remember how that felt? Once upon a time—before Brian and a hot new romance, before HIV, before fears of betrayal and the impulsive tossing-away of that same hot new romance—you used to throw yourself into your work...and the hours would just slip away. Just as they did today. You just forgot what it was like, before your personal life changed so dramatically.

Ethan sat back in his chair and glanced outside as the day wound down into dusk. It was already almost full-on dark and he knew that soon they would enter that depressing period when it was dark when you got up, and dark when you left work in the afternoon. Sunlight was a rare and precious Chicago winter commodity, and probably went for high prices down at the Mercantile Exchange.

The realization that he had just been busy and time passed was a revelation. Something so simple, yet it made him consider how much his life had changed since he had met

Brian, how his priorities had shifted.

You had a life, one in which the work/life balance was suddenly tipped in favor of life. Your job no longer defined you, but became, as it did for lots of happy people, just a way to make money, to provide essentials, to allow for cozy weekends and evenings with the one you love.

Or should that be “loved?”

Ethan sighed, amazed at how quickly the lavender/purple twilight had faded to almost black. Outside, the streetlights gave off their familiar, and sickly, dingy yellow sodium vapor glow. The traffic on Belmont sounded clogged and impatient. Outside, he would walk home in the chill, pushing against unfeeling commuters in a rush to get home, hurrying by tawdry storefronts...vintage clothing stores, Swedish, Thai, and Mexican restaurants, cafes, and doughnut shops, a popular store that catered to the Goth crowd, bars... All of them flush with teeming masses of humanity.

And not one of them would pay him one second of attention.

Ethan felt like crying, but suddenly, he also felt there wasn't even the energy for tears. He considered logging on to his blog before he left, but he saw Jan Most hurry by his cubicle, a stack of Xeroxed copies in her arms. She looked brusque, in a hurry to finish up her business, and did not, for once, glance his way.

Maybe he should see if she would be up for grabbing a bite to eat at Ann Sather or a cocktail at Gentry, where maybe someone might already be manning the piano?

Ethan shook his head. He wanted company, but not hers, as nice as she seemed to be. He knew there was only one person whose company would really make him happy.

And he wondered for the umpteenth time, if that person even existed.

He gathered up his messenger bag, switched his Cole Haan loafers for Reebok walking shoes, and headed out.

Jan was at her desk, collating and stapling papers and stuffing them into bright blue folders. She looked up at him as he passed and smiled. She rolled her eyes. "Press kits, you know? They have to be ready for tomorrow night's opening."

Ethan shook his head, wondering if he should just drop everything and help her, so she could get out of here. He knew nothing about her home life, not even the basics such as if she was married or had children. *Maybe you should be less self-absorbed and find out a little something about the person who works each day just over the partition from you.* "You have the most thankless job in the office, Jan. But I, for one, really appreciate what you're doing."

Her eyes seemed to light up at the small compliment. "Why, thank you, sugar!"

"Want some help? I could stick around for a while. Many hands make the work light, you know."

"You're an angel. But really, I'm almost done here. You go on."

"Okay. 'Night."

"Goodnight, Ethan."

Just as he got to the exit door, she called after him. "You

take good care of yourself, now.”

The phrase was innocent enough, but Ethan still couldn't help but wonder what had compelled her to say it.

* * *

When he got home, Ethan felt he was already sinking into old patterns, even though it had only been a few days since his diagnosis and the subsequent fallout with Brian. He set down his messenger bag and thought of his “plans” for the evening: change into sweats and T-shirt, heat up a Marie Callender chicken pot pie, watch some TV, pay a bill, brush his teeth, go to sleep with the TV on timer. Lather, rinse, repeat. Was this really to be his life? It was as comfortable as an old shoe. And just as boring.

Well, why not shake things up a bit, then? Ethan wasn't ready, and was just too plain tired, to contemplate shaking things up on the order of going out to a restaurant, theater, or bar. But he wasn't too tired to log on to *Off to See the Wizard of Poz*.

Who knew what new comments might have come in from his last blog? Ethan, when he began writing this online journal, had never even entertained the possibility that someone might comment on what he had to say. Hell, he hadn't even thought he'd have readers, other than himself. It still rankled him, wondering how all these people had stumbled across his online thoughts. But the Internet was a strange and mysterious beast. He wouldn't have been surprised, he thought as he waited for his PC to boot up, if

there were no comments. Or a hundred. Or a thousand. The Internet was capricious that way. Maybe the phrase for the new millennium should be: What the Internet giveth, the Internet taketh away. It certainly had given him Brian.

But, he thought dejectedly as Internet Explorer brought up his home page, the Internet had nothing to do with taking Brian away.

The Internet had not taketh away his readers. And his last blog had caught them in a talkative, opinionated mood. Before even beginning to read what they said in response to his worries over Brian (aka “Jack”), he scrolled down and saw that he had more than a hundred comments.

Good Lord! A new question, aside from his wondering how he’d been “discovered” emerged: why did people bother? Why did they care so much to sit down and write to someone they didn’t know, couldn’t see, and couldn’t hear? Why did they care?

He started reading:

Honey, you need to kick that man to the curb. If what you say is true, and you know it is, he’s a cheat. My mama always told me, “Once a cheat, always a cheat.” Lies are like cockroaches: there’s never just one. You seem like a good man. You just need to buck up and get on with your life.

Relationships are not like broken appliances. You do not toss them away and buy a new one just because they aren’t functioning the way you’d like them to. Real relationships take

work and give and take. You say nothing in your blog about talking to this man, only that he's tried getting back in your good graces. If things were as wonderful as you say, don't you at least feel like you owe him a bit of your time to sit down and talk everything out?

Just from the little I've read, I can tell you're sweet and wonderful, a real caring and feeling man. Hell, I'd date you. There doesn't seem to be many of your kind in my neck of the woods. So what do you say? Ever been to San Antonio?

So what if he's HIV positive? Aren't you? At least now, you can throw away the rubbers and fuck bareback with impunity!

I may not have HIV and I may not be gay, but I am at an age where people have started calling me wise. I don't know how true that is, but I do know I've learned a thing or two in the sixty plus years I've been on this earth. And five marriages and six kids later, I can tell you the lessons I learned weren't easy.

You need to remember that love is about trust. Now, I'm sure there are people on here that will jump right in and tell you the same thing and will say that, for just the reason of trust alone, you should stop seeing this man you seem so in love with. They will say that a relationship without trust is one built on a foundation that's sure to collapse.

I say that's too simple. Human beings are black and white

only in skin tones. Morally, ethically, intellectually, we come in all different shades of gray. Maybe this man of yours did do wrong. Maybe he did cheat on you. Maybe he didn't. Maybe he was HIV positive from long before you met him, and just has buried his head in the sand and doesn't know himself. And yes, maybe he knows and knowingly infected you. If the very last of these scenarios were true, then I would agree with those who tell you to move on. A person like that truly carries way more gray in his heart than you need.

But about the other scenarios, I urge you to get things out on the table with "Jack." It sounds like he's waiting. Find out what you're dealing with and then make your decision.

And then, remember two words: forgiveness and faith. They apply very well to God, but they also apply to love and the people whom we hold dear.

Ethan's vision became smeared with tears as he read this response. He scanned through the others and they were all much the same mix of the first few: those on the side of leaving, those on the side of staying, and those who (surprisingly, at least to Ethan, whose self-esteem had never been too high) wanted to date him themselves, taking the place of "Jack."

But it was the words of the sixty something year-old that he kept coming back to.

How could I have been so stupid? Oh, sure, I was in shock and everything over my diagnosis and the possibility Brian might have played in it, but I haven't yet even given the man a

chance to talk with me, not really. Mean Ethan says I shouldn't give him the opportunity, but I know in my heart I should. That reader was right: no one is perfect. We all make mistakes. Maybe Brian made one. Maybe he didn't.

This last thought chilled Ethan. *Maybe he didn't.* In spite of his jokes about his barren love life, he wasn't a virgin when he first hopped into bed with Brian. Sure, months would often go by without a date, but he did have them now and then and, often, out of either optimism or desperation, they usually ended up in someone's bed. Ethan was always careful. But condoms broke. And sometimes he had oral sex without them...and who knows where that could have led?

It only takes one time, Ethan.

Good God, have I been blaming the man for a crime he didn't commit?

A short sob escaped him, explosive. He angrily wiped the tears from his eyes, enraged at himself for being so single-minded and sure of himself.

Ethan realized that the odds still were in favor of Brian being the one who had infected him. But even if that were true, didn't he owe this man he had come to love in the past few months at least some time to talk?

Sensible Ethan told him to wait until tomorrow, to place a phone call or send a text or e-mail, asking for a time to get together. But Sensible Ethan didn't stand a chance against Impassioned Ethan, who was already struggling into a pair of jeans and a pullover navy blue sweater. The clock hanging above his kitchen sink warned him that it was already past ten

o'clock and that showing up at someone's door unannounced was just plain rude.

Ethan shook his head, unworried about impropriety. After all, what did he have to lose?

And tonight, he thought the answer might very well be: *everything*.

He hurried out of his apartment, hoping the wait for a cab would be short.

* * *

The front door to Brian's high-rise had never looked more foreboding. *Oh, what are you doing, Ethan? Just go home and wait until tomorrow. Sleep on it. You'll be more prepared come morning. You can think out in advance what you want to say.* He hesitated in the shadows of the shrubbery at the front of Brian's building, uncertain of whether or not he should listen to the voices that were telling him to go home, wait until tomorrow, procrastinate.

But he knew, deep down, these so-called sensible voices were not sensible at all. They were fearful. They were the voices that had Ethan back away in the past from promising relationships, finding fault with every Tom, Dick, and Harry. And Ethan realized now that he was afraid of getting too involved...no, make that he was afraid of being rejected. One way to avoid being rejected was to end things early yourself. You could always take comfort in the fact that you were not the dumpee, but the dumper.

Tell that to the cat you buy to keep you company some cold

winter night.

And right now, he knew he was afraid to talk to Brian, to find out where things stood now that Ethan had ended their relationship, told him he was HIV positive, and been just plain mean to him. Maybe now that Ethan was willing to open the door to reconciliation (maybe), he would find that Brian had acquired the good sense to firmly shut it.

It would serve Ethan right.

Tomorrow would be one more night spent in limbo, lost and alone. Tomorrow he might not feel as passionately and may give himself permission to wait one more day and that day might follow another, then another, until Brian was nothing more than a sweet, but flawed, memory, something to think about as he cleaned out a litter box and opened a can of Fancy Feast.

And tomorrow, he would not have the fire that inspired him to leave his apartment, lights burning, computer online, the TV playing in the background. Had he even bothered to lock his door?

He needed the passion that caused him to rush over here to Brian's.

Several months ago Brian had given him a key to his place. Now, from so many visits, even the doorman knew him by name and Ethan could easily waltz right in, just like any other resident, and go right on up to Brian's apartment.

But that was before. Now, he didn't feel right using the key, even if it was in his pocket. Now, he felt demoted to a caller, a guest, and needed to rely on the formality of ringing

Brian's buzzer outside and—hopefully—being let in.

Ethan closed his eyes and breathed in deeply, imagining himself an actor in the wings. He strode up to the intercom box and, without letting himself hesitate, punched in the code that would cause the phone in Brian's apartment to ring.

"Hello?"

Ethan was surprised when he answered so quickly, his voice sounding slow and sleepy...and unbearably sexy. Memories of early mornings and late nights rushed into his brain and, for a moment, Ethan was speechless.

"Hello?" Brian said again. "Anybody there?"

"Hi. It's me."

There was a long pause and for a moment, Ethan was afraid Brian had simply hung up the phone. Wouldn't that be just what he had deserved after how he had treated him? Ethan thought of a bouquet of beautiful purple irises flung to cold concrete, to wither and die among discarded can, papers, and cigarette butts. But then Brian spoke again, "What are you doing? You're downstairs? Why didn't you just use your key?"

A good sign! "I don't know. I guess I didn't know if that was appropriate...any more."

He could hear Brian's sigh come through the box. "Oh, for God's sake. Do you have your key?"

"Yes."

"Then just get up here."

And this time, Brian really did hang up the phone.

Ethan put on his mask again and walked breezily through

the marble-tiled lobby, smiling at the doorman as he always did and even commenting on the weather and the chilly turn it had taken. In the doorman's eyes, he knew he was probably still "the boyfriend" and how good that felt!

Riding up in the elevator, Ethan realized he had no idea what he was going to say, no game plan or agenda. No talking points.

His heart answered him: *you don't need any of those things. Just listen to me and you'll say the right stuff. No filters. No judgment...for once in your life. Puh-leeze!"*

Brian was already waiting for him, standing at his door and watching Ethan as he made his way down the corridor. He looked so good—his dirty blond hair sticking up, his plush navy blue robe open enough to display his hairy, firm chest. Ethan was half-tempted to run the length of the corridor and just fling himself into Brian's arms. Or yank his robe open and drop to his knees before him, without even bothering to close the door.

But he did retain sense enough to remind himself that there were still questions to be answered and issues to be resolved, no matter how much easier it would be to ignore them. He kept his pace steady, and allowed himself to give Brian a small smile, to at least let him know in advance that he was not here to be confrontational.

When he got to Brian's doorway, both men were awkward. Normally, at this point, there would be a passionate kiss, even before closing the door behind them—they simply could not wait. But that was before everything had happened.

Now, they stood and stared at one another, Brian looking a little unsure of himself. And Ethan feeling the very same way.

“Well, don’t just stand there. Come on in.”

And Ethan followed him inside.

It had only been a few days, but as he looked around the apartment, with its bank of windows facing Lake Michigan, its distressed leather furniture, and its contemporary, manly charm, Ethan felt more like a visitor than he ever had. It also seemed like much more than a few days had passed since his last visit. He guessed that’s what happens when one receives life-changing news.

It helped that Brian was also a little unsure of himself. Ethan hoped he could detect a little happiness beneath Brian’s wary expression, but maybe that was simply wishful thinking.

“Um, do you want something? A beer? Glass of water?”

Ethan didn’t respond. He crossed the room and stared out at the broad, black expanse of the lake below him. Rows of car headlights on Lake Shore Drive rushed by. He turned back to Brian. “No. I’m not thirsty. But thanks. All I really came for was to talk. Can we talk?”

Brian’s handsome face softened. Was it gratitude Ethan read there? Or was that just wishful thinking once more?

Quit it with the second-guessing. You came to talk, so just open your mouth and sing out, Louise!

“Of course, I was hoping we could talk. I mean, aside from you telling me to get lost.”

“Can we sit down?”

“Oh, Ethan, do you have to ask?” Brian plopped down on

the couch and patted the place beside him.

Ethan briefly considered the chair opposite the couch, then relented and took a seat next to Brian. Their bodies touched, and the feel of him was electric. Ethan felt like a man who had been in a desert for days taking a seat by a pool of cool water.

You know where this is headed, Ethan. Careful, now. You came to talk.

Ethan couldn't look at Brian, so he simply stared at the bank of floor-to-ceiling windows opposite them, where the night looked like something solid, trying to press in, and began.

"We never really have had a chance to sit down and talk...rationally, I mean, since I got my diagnosis. And, for a while, I didn't want to give you that. I was—and maybe I still am—furious at you. But we've shared too much to just let things slip away. Not without at least a heart-to-heart."

"It's all I wanted, Ethan. You wouldn't even give me a chance. I just needed to know about what had happened. You're HIV positive?" The concern in Brian's voice was real, yet Ethan still couldn't allow himself to look at him. Ethan had come here with something to say, even if he didn't know quite how to put the words, and he needed to be able to talk, without the distraction of things like comfort, denial, rejection, or any other emotions that could more easily come up if he allowed his eyes to meet Brian's.

"Yes. As I told you, I got the news a little more than a week ago." Ethan lowered his head. "You can't imagine how shocked I was." He paused, took a breath. "I need you to just

let me say this without interrupting...and then we can talk, back and forth. Because I know you're gonna want to interrupt."

Ethan stood, crossed the room, and stared at the starless night outside. He kept his back to Brian as he began. "I was shocked because, well, I haven't exactly been a slut. Sometimes, it wasn't for lack of trying!" Ethan let a bitter laugh escape his lips. "But we talked about this. I never 'got around' much. So, when I got the news I was positive, I immediately thought that the only person who could have infected me was you."

"Ethan, I—"

"Just let me finish. I'm almost there." He turned to Brian and forced himself to meet his gaze. Brian looked plaintive, confused.

"It made sense, you know. When passion got the best of us, we weren't always careful. And we've talked about our checkered pasts and—no judgment here—but we both know yours was a lot more checkered than mine. So, again, it made sense."

He sat down again beside Brian, the words tumbling out making things seem more real and yet, at the same time, better, an issue that could maybe be resolved. He took Brian's chin in his hand and locked gazes with him. "I only need a truthful answer to one question: are you positive?"

"Positive about what? That I love you? Yes, yes, of course. Positive that I want to spend my life with you? Yes, yes, of course."

Ethan smiled. “That’s lovely to hear. But you know that’s not what I meant.”

Brian moved his head so Ethan’s hand dropped from his chin. Now it was Brian’s turn to stare at the bank of windows opposite them, as if there was something to see beyond a wall of darkness. He sucked in some breath. When he turned to Ethan, his eyes were shining.

Oh God, no, he’s going to tell me he was positive all along. He knowingly infected me. Oh God...

Brian bit his lower lip. “I feel so horrible, but I don’t know. I don’t think so. I had a test maybe a year, year and a half ago and I was okay. I had been grateful then because I had gotten careless and so, after that I was super-careful, and then when we met and everything was so great and I knew we were being exclusive, I didn’t think there was much harm in throwing caution out the window.” Brian choked back a sob. “Babe, I’m so sorry I was stupid, really stupid. If I gave you this, I could never forgive myself.”

Ethan closed his eyes and leaned back into the couch, letting the leather cushions surround him. This was what he had wanted to hear, not a denial, but not a confirmation either. The wise words of the sixty-something woman on his blog came back to him: something about none of us being perfect. Something about the only reason to really move on was if he had knowingly exposed him to the virus.

And he hadn’t.

Ethan realized, at last, that maybe it didn’t matter—right now—if Brian was positive or not. They would have to find

out for sure, and soon. But the truth was, Brian was not perfect and he had perhaps erred on the side of love and passion. So had Ethan. It didn't matter, really, in the end, if Brian gave him the virus or if he got it during some careless moment in his past. What mattered, and what he should have known all along, was that he and Brian loved each other.

Love was based on faith, and faith was really nothing more than hope, something indescribable and real in our hearts. And certainly not something that could be quantified or proven beyond a reasonable doubt.

"Sweetheart, as long as you didn't know, then the rest doesn't matter. I guess what really does matter is this: I am HIV positive. No doubts. You might not be. And I would understand if you—"

Brian simply leaned forward, pushing Ethan even farther back into the couch and kissed him deeply, his tongue exploring the inside of his mouth, his breath hot on his face, grizzle on his face scraping deliciously against Ethan's smooth skin, eyes open to stare into Ethan's. The kiss was hungry, a physical manifestation of the divide, now bridged, that had gone up between them. Ethan wasn't counting, but he would have guessed the kiss lasted for more than three minutes. Finally, Brian pulled away and smiled down at him.

"Don't even say it."

"But it would be okay. I mean, if you're negative and you want to be with someone else who's also negative, that would make sense. I would understand."

"Neg? UB2? Honey, that worn-out line ain't for me, never

has been. People are more than the viruses they may or may not contain. Sure, if it turns out I am negative and you're not, our condom-free days are behind us. But that doesn't mean I stop loving you." He grabbed Ethan, pulling him to his barrel chest and stroking the stubble on Ethan's head. Brian whispered into Ethan's ear, "I couldn't stop, sweetheart, if I tried."

If possible, Ethan pulled Brian even closer, until his body was atop his own on the couch, the weight of him above a great and comfortable presence. Ethan buried his face in Brian's neck, hoping to hide his relieved and grateful tears, but also just to breathe in the scent of him, manly, sweat and just a hint of Irish Spring soap.

They lay like that for what seemed like an hour, until finally Ethan didn't think he could breathe any more. Romance wasn't always graceful, like in the books. He pushed hard against Brian's chest, gasping, "Get off me!"

Brian laughed and stood, holding out his hand for Ethan to take. He cocked his head. "Know what the best part of breaking up is?"

Ethan thought he knew, but he played dumb. "What?"

"Making up. If monsieur would be so kind as to accompany me into the *boudoir*..."

Ethan took Brian's hand, and with the squeeze of his palm, all the tension between them seemed to dissolve, to fade away as if it was of little importance, tangible as smoke. He followed his man into the bedroom. Brian pulled back the comforter, lit the candle on the nightstand, switched on the

Leonard Cohen CD that was already in his little nightstand player, and dropped the robe from his shoulders.

With the warm amber lights from the city streaming in the windows, their clothes hit the floor, their gazes never wavering from the other. Brian wore a cockeyed smile and, if he didn't think it would spoil the moment, Ethan would have collapsed on the bed with sobs of happiness. Instead, he dropped to his knees in front of Brian and got busy...sometimes the best way to say "I love you" had nothing to do with using one's mouth for the formation of words.

Brian closed his eyes and gently stroked Ethan's face as he sucked. "How could we ever let this go?"

A new Leonard Cohen song came on and Ethan had to take a break from his work to smile up at Brian. The song was "I'm Your Man."

"Perfect." He stood up and led Brian this time, to the bed, where he pulled him down on top of him.

Brian reached over him, to the nightstand drawer for lube and a condom, which he tossed on Ethan's chest. "Put it on me," he growled.

Ethan raised up to sheath his lover. He could barely wait to feel him slide inside.

Afterward, Ethan snuggled his head onto Brian's chest and played with the hair on his chest. There was contentment, complete and all encompassing, in their silence. Just as he was about to drift off to sleep, Brian said something that completely broke his calm, something, in fact, that so alarmed

him that he shot up suddenly and stared down at Brian, mouth agape.

“What did you say?” Perhaps Ethan hadn’t heard right. He was amazed at how fast he could go from the warmth of being on the brink of slumber to the needling heat of utter surprise.

“I said I like your blog. You know: *Off to See the Wizard of Poz.*”

“You knew? You knew all along and you didn’t tell me?”

“How could I? You weren’t speaking to me. I’m glad you could finally share with me what was in your heart, rather than with those anonymous fans of yours.” Brian grinned at him. “Lie back down here. I was just getting comfortable.”

“But how did you find it? How did you know?” The question was one that had plagued Ethan from the start, not just from Brian, but in general. He lay down beside him and looked up into his eyes.

“I read about the blog on another blog.”

Now, that was a surprise. Some other blog had mentioned him? How? He had just started the stupid thing!

Brian continued. “I have been reading *Dear Jan* for over a year now. She’s so funny...and smart. Everyone I know reads her. Don’t you?”

Ethan closed his eyes and thought of their new receptionist, her spiky red hair, her warm smile, her large, comforting bulk...kind of like the hip, caring mother he had never had. She was part of the reason he began his own blog and her *Dear Jan* blog was exactly what Brian had said...funny and wise.

“She wrote about me?”

“Yes...a few days ago. She said you were a wonderful writer and that you needed support.”

Ethan blanched. “She didn’t say who I was, did she?”

“Of course not.”

Ethan thought of all the times he had written the blog at work...and the times he wasn’t sure if he had clicked out of the blog when he went home, depressed and distressed. She must have seen it on his monitor. Ethan wondered if he should be mad at her. But the thought vanished just as quickly. Jan Most was like a guardian angel. He might not be here, right now, in his own little version of heaven, without her intervention.

He snuggled back up to Brian, rubbing his hands over his broad chest and tweaking his nipples. He reached lower and could feel that someone was already getting in a state for round two. And that was just fine.

Ethan rolled on top of Brian and kissed him deeply. As he reached for another condom, he thought of the last words Jan Most had said to him, “You take good care of yourself.” That was exactly what he planned to do.

RICK R. REED

Rick R. Reed's horror/suspense fiction has been referred to as "a harrowing ride through cutting-edge psychological horror" (Douglas Clegg, author of *The Attraction*) and "brutally honest" (*Fangoria*). His most recent books include *IM*, a thriller about a serial killer preying on gay men through internet hook-up sites; *In the Blood*, a tragic vampire love story, and *Deadly Vision*, about a small town single mom who begins having psychic visions into a series of murders of teenage girls in her small Ohio River town; *High Risk*, a sexy thriller about a bored, promiscuous housewife who brings home a very handsome—and very psychotic—stranger; and *Orientation*, a paranormal love story about reincarnation, love, and sexual orientation. Other published work includes *A Face Without a Heart*, a modern-day version of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Published in Dell's acclaimed Abyss horror line, *Obsessed* and *Penance* together sold more than 80,000 copies. All three novels were re-released in 2006. Rick's short fiction has appeared in numerous anthologies and magazines. A collection of his short horror fiction, *Twisted: Tales of Obsession and Terror* was published in 2006. Rick lives in Seattle with his partner, Bruce, and is at work on a new novel.

You can read more about Rick and his various titles at:

<http://www.rickrreed.com>

* * *

**Don't miss VGL Male Seeks Same,
by Rick R. Reed
available at AmberAllure.com!**

Poor Ethan Schwartz. It seems like he will never find that special someone. At age 42, he's still alone, his bed still empty, and his 42-inch HDTV overworked. He's tried the bars and other places where gay men are supposed to find one another, but for Ethan, it never works out. He wonders if it ever will. Should he get a cat?

But all of that is about to change. At work, Ethan hears about a website that promises to deliver more than just the tawdry hook-ups associated with so many other sites. Ethan wants romance, and although he's always been a little shy about the whole cyber-dating scene, he figures he has nothing to lose.

Well, maybe he does have something to lose: his self-esteem. After he posts his profile, he gets zero responses. But Ethan realizes one thing about the cyberworld that isn't true in the real one: Online, Ethan can be anyone he wants to be.

And a new persona is born. The new Ethan is handsome (with someone else's pic) and the sudden recipient of dozens of online come-ons. What Ethan doesn't count on, however, is finding—among the propositions and the flattery—his one true

love. Not just a gorgeous man, but one who suits him in almost every way.

How does Ethan turn his budding cyber love into a real one? And can he hang on to his mystery suitor without turning him off with his deception?

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