

*How to Date a Dead Guy*

Back in San Fran, before my career in movies popped, I used to pal around with a really short guy. His name was Tyler and he stood about five foot one, with legs so stumpy he was occasionally mistaken for a midget. My other buddies wondered why I was joined at the hip to someone who came up to my hip. They said we looked lopsided together (I'm 6'2"), warned he would scare off the ladies, encouraged me to blow him off. But Tyler had other qualities that redeemed him—he was puppy-dog friendly, beyond smart—so he eventually became part of the gang that gathered at O'Shea's on Sundays for 49er games. It was cool having a trusty sidekick, which was basically how Tyler positioned himself. His nickname for me was Stud and I did not discourage him.

Tyler and I had grown up in the same working-class part of San Francisco, attended the same Catholic schools, lived in similar bungalows. But we didn't become friends until our mid-twenties, when he started frequenting the video store I managed. Tyler would wander in after work in his suit (he did something involving tenant law), request various episodes of *The World at War*, and we'd get into discussions of favorite war films. We caught dinner a couple times, but looking at each other over candlelight seemed too girly and date-like, so we developed a routine of hitting the bars. Tyler was great at the research part, tracked the listings for hip new places, always knew where to find parking.

For a while we had a decent run. Once he got to talking to a girl, he could surprise you—there was the whole cute factor (think Orlando Bloom, Tobey Maguire). But I had less time for Tyler after the dot-com maelstrom hit. I was signed as writer for an online soap amid a labor shortage in the media biz, then poached by a Hollywood studio seeking to stomp out new forms of competition. My new career was a good fit: I seemed to have a gift for repurposing old stories, and my bosses appreciated my "regular guy" perspective (think young Harvey Weinstein). But my evenings had to be relinquished to the fabulous: backroom parties at DV8, dinner in the private restaurant at Zoetrope, cocktails on Nick Cage's patio.

Tyler never complained—just as he never agonized over his short stature, and just as he only smiled wryly and lifted his drink all those times I sauntered out with a girl on my arm. I had gut-ache about abandoning him, though. At the party to celebrate my new job at Lucasfilm, he sat alone on a barstool, legs dangling barely halfway to the floor. I felt better when he landed a steady girlfriend, Lisa, a nurse with silky blond hair, albeit an aggressively quiet voice and a yoga addict's need to stretch constantly.

I eventually moved to L.A., but I kept Tyler apprised of my progress via late-night phone calls that found him always perky and agreeable. I'd run my movie treatments by him and he'd offer useful suggestions. Within two years, I'd received an "original idea" credit and assumed I was headed for greatness. I bought a house in the Colony, formed my own production company. But just as quickly, things stalled out: I ended up in a condo off La Brea where my main entertainment was chatting up girls in the laundry room. In the meantime, embarrassed by my slide, I did not speak to Tyler for several months.

I'd just scored a date with Lori, the college girl in 2G, and was dancing around my condo in my skivvies when a girl named Alix called to say something had happened to Tyler. Part of my brain-screen was still picturing Lori bent over a drier in low-cut white pants, so I had trouble taking in the news.

"I'm just calling to tell you Tyler passed," Alix said.

"Passed on what?" Thinking of offers, football.

"He passed. He passed away. He was really peaceful at the end, you should know."

"The end?"

"You know the cancer had spread to his lungs, right?" Cancer? He never told me he had cancer. I'd just talked to him—well, it had been a few months, but guys don't need to blabber all the time.

I thought for a second Tyler was playing a practical joke. Our friendship had been full of that stuff, clowning around, etc. None of this made sense. Why would Alix be the one to break me the news? She wasn't really Tyler's friend—she was Tyler's girlfriend's friend, one of her circle of nurses, physical therapists, and artists. Alix had a boy haircut, virtually no tits.

I struggled to focus as she solemnly laid out the details of the memorial service. I tried to remember when the last shuttle left L.A. for S.F. and realized there'd be no way to keep my date with Lori and still make the service.

"I'm supposed to ask you if you could speak at the memorial," Alix said. "You're used to the limelight and everything."

"Yeah sure. But the thing is, Tyler never told me he had cancer. Why do you think he wouldn't tell me, of all people?"

"You do take up a lot of space. Maybe he didn't want you to steal the show. What was that movie you did? Wait, what was it called? Anyway, congratulations."

The movie was called *How to Date a Dead Guy*. It took in \$90 million. It's about a plucky single girl in Manhattan who's dating a brooding rock bassist she eventually realizes is the Grim Reaper. Naturally this freaks her out, but in the end she decides to stay with him, try to make things work. He's a lot better than some of the guys she's dated, and the rules she's developed for dealing with New York men apply perfectly to him. The inspiration for the movie was my realization that, if you could somehow combine the chick-flick and horror genres, you could double your audience.

After talking to Alix, I should have been paying tribute in my head to Tyler's achievements and goodness. But all I could think about was that part of my history would die with him. Like that night with Coco, the magazine editor with the diamond belly ring and high ponytail. Before leaving, Coco and I sat for one last drink with Tyler.

"Hey, maybe we should all check out another club together," she said.

"No," Tyler said. "There's a documentary on PBS I want to get home to. It's about the migration of Monarch butterflies." He loved stuff like that. Coco started asking him questions, and he impressed her with his copious knowledge of obscure Monarch facts. He described how Monarchs mated for two to four hours at a time.

"Wow, yum," she said, smiling. By the time Tyler left, she seemed more into me, like he'd cast me in a different light, legitimized me.

At S.F. International, a weird-looking punk chick ripped my carry-on out of my hand. "Over this way, dude. I'm in short-term."

She saw me looking at her like “what the fuck,” so she said, “I got assigned you. Lisa, Alix, and everybody were busy with other stuff, preparations. My name is Lester.”

She had a look on her face like she’d just seen someone blow chow. She was wearing a wool ski hat over dyed black hair and a party dress over jeans, so it was hard to tell if she was hot. They’d done the right thing, rolled out the proverbial red carpet, but what was I going to say to this girl for half an hour? She had a souped-up Corolla with mag wheels in which she did some impressive driving on 101, weaving lane to lane.

“Hey, how’d you recognize me at the airport?” I asked.

“Oh, we’ve all heard about you.” She slid in a CD, some whacked-out techno-folk with a depressed lead singer. I felt bad for Tyler. How much time had Lisa made him spend with her weird friends? It would be like him never to complain about it.

I was nodding my head, which is what I do when I’m trying to get a grasp of music I don’t understand, and Lester said, “You dig it, huh? That’s me on zither. Remind me to send you a copy, gratis. You play an instrument?”

“Naw,” I said, thinking about my lame attempts to learn the trombone in fourth grade. I’d been a fat shit back then, and when I blew that thing people called me “the elephant.”

Before delivering me to my hotel, Lester took me by Tyler’s place on Potrero Hill to say hi to everybody. People were gathered in the kitchen trying to figure out the soup, passing around spoonfuls. I had nothing to offer in this area. I expected some of our old posse to be there, nursing Anchor Steams and sporting 49er jerseys, but it was mostly Lisa’s friends.

“Are you like a coven?” I asked, gesturing toward the cauldron-size pot. No one reacted. Everybody was coming up with ways to be helpful, wiping down counters, taking out glassware.

“Are Evers or Spiegel coming by, or Tommy?” I asked, and the women shrugged at each other. “Maybe ask Lisa,” they suggested. Through the door to the living room, I spotted Tyler’s girlfriend sitting in a window seat, conversing face-to-face with another woman.

“Hey Stud,” she said in a voice that was either playful or sarcastic.

"Tyler always watched my back, man," I said, trying to say something important. "No matter what shit was going down. He was the definition of loyal." Without getting up, Lisa smiled brightly at me.

"For some reason I remember you as taller," she said.

I went out onto the deck, to check out the rest of the house Tyler had bought after I moved to L.A. It was a killer pad: up on stilts, massive windows, great view, lots of hardwood and steel. Careerwise, I'd never much noticed him: I mean all this dot-com stuff swirling around us and he does tenant law. But this place was impressive.

Leaning against the railing, I felt moist air in my nostrils, tried to look like a sad person in a movie. I heard noises from the roof and a burly guy scrambled down a fire escape ladder. It was Justin, a work friend of Tyler's who'd once come with us bar-hopping but went home early because the "whole scene" was "gross."

"I was looking in on Tyler's roses," he said, scraping dirt off his hands.

I never knew Tyler gardened. "What can I say?" he said, putting his hands on my shoulders and holding eye contact for longer than I was used to. "You meant so much to him. All your boisterousness was good for him during a lonely period."

"Oh thank you," I said, and he enveloped me in a sweaty bear hug.

"Man, you should have been there at the end. You'd have been really proud of him. I was with him every day for the last three weeks and he never complained once." I had thought of Justin as more Tyler's co-worker than a close friend and was surprised he'd been so involved in the deathbed vigil. I felt strangely jealous.

"I'm curious, Justin. Any idea why Tyler never told me what was going on?"

"Maybe he was embarrassed to have you see him in that condition. Maybe he was waiting till he was stronger—he always expected to recover."

As Justin described more about the last days, others drifted outside in their painters' pants and peasant dresses. They gathered around him, nodding thoughtfully, cradling steamy mugs, peeking over the rail at the colorful homes that tumbled toward the wharf.

I'd roughed out these scenes differently in my imagination. I'd sort of been expecting an ego-boost from this gathering, to be wel-

came as a minor celebrity. It was like a fiendish P.A. had swapped the scripts. Intermittently, I had the odd sensation that Tyler was orchestrating events from the great beyond. I was edged toward the outside of the circle, and then my cell phone rang.

"Someone up there must be watching out for you," Jorge, an agent at ICM, barked into my ear as I walked back into Tyler's house and down a quiet hallway.

"*Digame señor.*" I heard the drone of Jorge's electric wheelchair, which meant he was toggling in for a closer look at one of the flat screens in his office.

"Joe Creed just got hired at Universal and for some reason wants to hear from you."

"That's great," I whispered, fiddling with the chess set on which Tyler used to insist I play with him. It became our refuge on nights when bar-hopping proved fruitless. "I'm kind of traveling right now, but I'll be back in two days."

"Got to move faster than that, bro. He meets in two days with his new bosses and wants to dazzle them with fresh stuff."

This was exactly the break I'd been waiting for. But I needed certain conditions to work my magic. Sure I had dozens of credible concepts, but those were just skeletons that required the alchemy of a meeting to bring them to life.

"I'm sort of at a funeral thing."

"OK. Just give me something to tide him over. An appetizer." I was standing in front of a bookcase, idly pulling out some of Tyler's books. In his copy of *Cyrano de Bergerac*, he'd done meticulous, color-coded underlining.

"I'm working on transplanting *Cyrano de Bergerac* to a modern day setting," I said. "But, um...the Cyrano character would be a dead guy, pursuing Roxanne through paranormal means, putting words into the head of a handsome alive guy. Think *Ghost* meets *Hitch*."

"Sounds a little close to your other movie," Jorge said.

"Whatever works, right?"

As I hung up, Lisa walked by gathering empty mugs.

"Really classy, Stud," she said. "Taking work calls at a time like this." She slammed some mugs down on a side table and droplets of spilled soup crawled along the glossy surface of Tyler's beloved chess set.

I was staying at the new hot spot south of Market, HotelWork, a former union headquarters that had been given a boutiquey makeover. I was hoping for networking in the lobby. Lester was surprisingly solicitous when she dropped me off.

"That was tough for you, right?" she said, hand lingering on my forearm. "Lisa's such a prima donna, giving you the brush-off." Lester's disloyalty to her posse surprised me. I wondered if there was a movie in there somewhere, in their alternative-crowd infighting, something like *Rent* crossed with *Mean Girls*.

"You know," she said. "That movie of yours. It was trash, obviously. But it had some real moments."

"Really?"

"Like after the woman cycles through the whole sadness montage, losing her umbrella in the rain, eating ice cream in her pajamas. There's this intense moment when you see her face gradually register her decision to give it a go with the rocker. I related to that." I heard a catch in Lester's voice and sensed she'd recently endured tragedy.

"What's that worried look, dude?" she said. "Is it that you realize I'm on to you?"

I climbed out and a bellman rushed at me, wearing a headset, fluorescent sneakers, and a fancy designer's interpretation of an industrial jumpsuit.

In my room, I had trouble getting down to business on the eulogy. I wished Tyler could be there to do it: he was a much better writer. I called around to some of our old buddies, but Spiegel was staying in with his lady, Evers had tickets to the opera, of all things, and Tommy reprimanded me for not calendaring in advance.

It was after midnight—by which time I'd had three beers in the hotel bar, watched a bad porn movie on pay-per-view, and ordered highfalutin mac-and-cheese from room service, which was still half-eaten and congealing on the unmade bed—when I finally sat down with pen and paper. I knew I needed to break the ice with a joke, figured I make a crack about Tyler's height: he was always riffing on it himself. Then I should tell some stories about the fun we had together, though tales of picking up chicks were probably out. I realized I needed to say something significant about his character

and what sprang to mind was his stoic quality—that he refused to burden you with complaints.

Once I'd filled a page of hotel stationery with material, I decided to sleep and let the rest issue forth from my subconscious.

The stainless steel clock said 10:45, which meant I had fifteen minutes to shower, dress, and cab it to the church. My hair was still dripping wet when I took an open seat next to Justin in the front pew. I was grateful this time for his reassuring hug. It was an odd church: exposed beams like a ski lodge, no stained glass, not even much of an altar—nothing like the ornate, solemn chapels of our Catholic school days. I was too late to get a rundown on the service, but I assumed there'd be some hymns, a sermon, some readings, and then I'd give my eulogy, which was folded in my pocket.

For a while we sat in silence and there didn't seem to be a priest on hand. Then a guy stood up with a microphone, big old beard, thigh-length cardigan. "Welcome to our house of worship," he said, handing the mike to Lisa.

"Anyone who wants to share a few words about Tyler, feel free," she said, stretching out her arms. I finally understood that when Alix asked me to speak, she meant as one among many. "And let's turn off those cell phones," Lisa added. Before shutting mine down, I quickly checked last night's message, discovered Jorge needed to hear from me by the end of the day.

The first person to share had fluttery fingers, a tailored pinstripe suit, and an elongated bald head. He mouthed platitudes about Tyler being a team player and devoted five minutes to a breakdown of the firm's five divisions.

"He was Tyler's boss," Justin whispered. "Tyler hated him."

Other work colleagues got up and described little episodes when they'd collaborated with Tyler on a report or a meeting.

"They're trying to kiss the boss's ass," Justin whispered. Then colleagues who seemed to know Tyler better chronicled episodes of his kindness, humor, and soul. Several female colleagues maintained that without Tyler's advice they would never have reeled in husbands. Justin's contribution emphasized Tyler's willingness to express inner feelings. He was followed by outside-work friends who wanted to "piggyback" on Justin's comments with further examples of emotional generosity.

Justin elbowed me and said, "Go for it."

"The good news is," I began, "with a short guy like Tyler, you save money on the casket." There were a couple of nervous titters.

Glancing at my notes, I realized it would be silly to praise Tyler's stoicism after what had been said about his emotional openness. The anecdote I'd planned about me and Tyler skipping out on our bill at a bowling alley now seemed juvenile. I put my script in my pocket and stumbled through a few sentences of ad-lib.

"I'm going to be honest, man. Much of the time I spent with Tyler we were on the town, chasing women." I realized my voice was shaking and it wasn't from nerves. I got this image in my head of Tyler's tiny withered body dwarfed by a giant white bed. For the first time I considered the reality: what was he thinking at the end, was he totally freaking out about what would happen next, or was it like when you're getting your wisdom teeth out and you know something awful is happening but you're so hopped up on drugs that everything seems remote and silly? I gripped the podium.

"But I had just as much fun afterward, when we repaired to Jack in the Box for post-game wrap-up, which often turned into talks about heavy stuff, meaning of life or what have you. I'd gladly give up every second we spent in a bar for a chance to be chilling with Tyler at 3:00 a.m. Just shooting the shit or playing chess. He could talk intelligently about so many things—Zen Buddhism, Big Bang Theory, World War II—he taught me so much."

It's not like I was saying anything so intense, but I felt moisture on my cheeks, so I had to abandon the mike.

The reception was held in a low-ceilinged hall decorated with kids' collages on the theme of "Peace Is..." One kid had written "Peace is when my brother puts a sock in it." Refreshments were laid out on card tables. I skipped the carrots and celery and filled a plastic cup to the brim with white wine. I couldn't believe I'd uttered the word "shit" in a church, even if it was a hippie church. What a mess I'd made of my little speech.

But then a string of people told me how much they liked what I'd said.

"Thanks for that," Justin said. "That was very real."

"Hey Stud," said Lisa, teary-eyed. "There was a lot of honesty in your words, a lot of heart." She lurched into me, smelling heavily

of sweat and Obsession, pressed herself against me in a surprising way.

And suddenly there was Evers with a high five. "Way to represent for Tyler's homeboys," he said. Spiegel appeared and we knocked back more wine and it was like old times. Turned out Evers had given up on the Pacific Stock Exchange and was a sculptor now, making totem poles out of discarded car parts. Spiegel was now dating one of Lisa's friends, Kaylani, who nuzzled in and held his hand, wearing a billowy skirt with amoebal patterns. Go away for three years and everybody's funkified and experiencing personal growth.

Despite the solemn occasion, I felt oddly elated, but also quivery, like I'd shown too much sensitive side. I was noticing how Lisa's group and my buddies' group seemed to be melding together, and it seemed kind of miraculous and beautiful, like on Saturday morning cartoons when the wall between shows would sometimes magically drop and unrelated superheroes would join forces in a supergroup.

It was the best party I'd been to in a long time.

"This is cool, to have my own personal driver," I said, as Lester gunned down Divisadero. Peppy punk was blaring, the windows were rolled down. Her outfit was little-girlish but I liked it anyway: ankle-length floral dress, shiny black shoes.

"As if you're not used to it," she said.

"Well. I'm used to broken-down Italian ex-cop chauffeurs, but not cute females like yourself."

"Ooh Stud, is this one of your patented come-ons? I feel so honored." She pinched my thigh. I was seeing her differently from the day before at the airport. Her dyed black hair was pulled off her face by one of those headbands girls use to put on face cream. Her cheeks were rouged up from the wine, like a girl who's been sledding.

"Seems too early to go home," I said. It was still afternoon, cool air rendering the city in sharp focus, rows of brightly painted Victorians cascading down the hillsides.

"Ditto. Why don't you take me home and fuck me."

"Whoa now."

"What? Isn't that your specialty? Tyler told me tales."

"This is kind of abrupt."

"Just being honest—you should try it," she said. "Come on man. You're in movies. This is what always happens: people get drunk at the funeral and have bittersweet sex they regret in the morning."

"Wouldn't the script call for me to sleep with Lisa? The people closest to Tyler clinging to each other in a vain effort to keep his spirit alive."

"I'm afraid that role would go to Justin. You're more peripheral now."

Lester lived above a grocery store in the avenues. The living room resembled a dollhouse—red gingham tablecloth and matching drapes, grandfather clock, green sofa. She grabbed two bottles of vitamin water from the fridge as if we were going on a hike and led me to the bedroom.

"Hold on," she said, a few minutes into things. "What is that?"

"What?"

"There's no flow to what you're doing. Just banging away." She wriggled out from under me, sat up. "You come on like a tiger and then.... Tyler was a much better lover."

"You and he?"

"We had kind of a side arrangement. He'd want a break from Lisa's whole queen bee routine. And I was going through my stuff—the break-up with Alix, tending to Dad when he got Lou Gehrig's."

"That doesn't really sound like Tyler." I was in a half-crouch, wilting.

"He was a complex guy. Here." She took my hand, put it down there, moved it this way and that, placed my other hand so it was pulling her pubic area upward, had my fingers doing various dances. Later, she talked my tongue through some detailed choreography. I'd never made a woman come more than once in a sitting, but this time I may have scored a hat trick.

It was a very different experience. At one point, I almost didn't even care if I got off: I just wanted to linger over her smooth back, run my hands up the perfect indent of her spine. I completely understood what Tyler had seen in her, what I initially hadn't: that her rough-edged manner and odd appearance only added flavor to her complex, tangy attractiveness.

"You knew Tyler better than I realized," I said as we flopped back on her platform bed. "Tell me, why do you think Tyler didn't tell me he was dying?"

“He knew you were in a difficult place, emotionally. With your career struggles, etc. He wasn’t sure you could handle it.” It was a completely different explanation from Alix’s and Justin’s but seemed just as reasonable.

I felt myself crashing, that post-coital sinking sensation. It so distorted my perceptions that I found myself actually envying my sidekick, little Tyler now looming larger than life with all his diverse friends and generous gestures and cool house and alternative harem. Meanwhile, I’d be returning the next day to a shrunken life where everything depended on a last-ditch pitch I couldn’t get myself to focus on. It didn’t help that from the pocket of my floor-strewn pants came intermittent electronic tinkling, alerting me to missed calls from Jorge.

I was clinging to Lester’s back.

“I gotta go,” I said.

“Suit yourself,” she said.

I awoke in my hotel room, disoriented by darkness, sour-mouthed from wine. I remembered my phone, picked it up, dropped it. There were five messages from Jorge, repeating “Where are you?” with increasing irritation.

Trying to wiggle things loose in my brain, I took a walk, meandering around SOMA past all the bars Tyler and I used to frequent. On Folsom, when I came upon the Zebra Lounge, our favorite, I had to go in. The animal-print booths teemed with incestuous clusters of work friends. I drank a beer, but it only made me melancholy. It wasn’t right, I thought. There should be a rowdy group of us, doing shots in Tyler’s honor.

Back outside, two guys in rugby shirts jogged toward me, tossing a football in perfect spirals. As they neared, I held out my hands, clapped twice, hoping to get involved. They looked at me as if I were a homeless person and continued past, laughing.

I walked some more and after a few blocks came upon something I’d never seen before. Someone had fixed up the vacant lot where Tyler and I had sometimes knocked back preparatory tall boys. It was now lushly planted, with lines of Aspens demarking the side borders, squares of grass, triangles of flowering plants. Entering on a gravel path, I saw a plaque reading “Memory Garden.” In the

middle of the garden, flat stones were arranged in a spiral path that arced around to a dead end in the center.

"Think of your loved one as you walk the spiral," another sign said. I stepped on the first stone. Part of my brain was sifting madly through half-formed movie conceits. There had to be something here I could use, something involving memory, memory gardens—that might be a good title—some aspect of our friendship—how about a movie called *The Sidekick*?

"Come on Tyler, man, talk to me," I said to myself.

All that came to me was a niggling memory of an insignificant night when I was feeling resentful. We'd been at the Oasis, working some big-haired East Bay girls who initially seemed into us but then declared they were looking for something better.

"Don't get me wrong," the willowy one explained. "We usually go home with your type. But tonight we're looking for something a little higher grade."

Indignant, I pressed her: "Come on, you're from the suburbs, you'd be lucky to have us. What's the problem?"

"Duh. Your friend is a midget." Tyler uncharacteristically flinched. Of course I felt sorry for him as we licked our wounds with a night-cap at his house. But I was also horny and frustrated and hated him for our failure. He didn't stew over the incident, just mixed our drinks and stoically changed into his tiny checked pajamas. He suggested chess and to humor him I complied. I quickly cut a path of carnage through his men and this seemed to make things worse. It was heart-rending, looking at him in those kids' pajamas, frowning. But then he checkmated me, and I realized the whole time he'd been setting me up. He had this look on his face, sort of a smirk, but more complicated, like there was so much going on in there, a fierce intelligence, sure, but a fire too, an anger even.

Walking the stone spiral, I kept seeing that face and it filled me with stomach-flipping remorse—that I'd never really known Tyler, that I'd been blind to all these great things about him. And this realization made me weirdly insecure, like a guy worried a chick is going to drop him. Or maybe Tyler had dropped me and I'd been too dense to know it.

I looked up from the central rock and saw others had entered the garden: a foursome of well-groomed handsome men, two in leather jackets, two in brightly colored untucked shirts. I noticed for the

first time words etched in stone at my feet: "In memory of neighborhood residents who died of AIDS."

I started out of the spiral, this time jogging, trying to carry my body like someone athletic and manly. It seemed important they not think I was one of them. As I picked up speed, I tried leaping two stones with a single jump, but landed awkwardly and my ankle rolled over. I staggered to solid ground, but my foot was throbbing. I stumbled along a path, swearing wildly, tears streaming down my face.

"Hey now. Hold on now," one of the handsome guys said. "That's awful."

"Goddammit," I yelled. The pain was excruciating.

"It must have been recent," one said. They descended on me with sympathetic faces, arms reaching to comfort me. I threw out my elbows, tried to push by, but they latched firmly onto my arms. I worked my thighs like a running back trying to break a tackle.

"Easy. Easy. It's going to be OK."

"Come on buddy. We've all been there." Each taking a limb, they lifted me into the air and lowered me to a patch of grass. I thrashed to get loose.

"Grief's a motherfucker," one said.

"You don't understand, it's physical pain," I said.

"I'm sure it feels that way," one said.

I wriggled and squirmed some more, but I realized I was being stupid. What was so bad exactly about four people tending to me, showing they cared?

I remembered one time when Tyler and I were looking for a new club on a dead-end street near the Bay Bridge and we stumbled into a gay bar by accident. I immediately turned to leave but Tyler said, "No, wait. Maybe we could learn something." He convinced me to grab a beer and observe for a while. We didn't end up gleaning much practical know-how, but it was a new experience. Two guys tried to hit on Tyler, but instead of being embarrassed, he teased me that I wasn't getting any action. I ended up talking to a guy who gave me a good referral for a dentist.

Lying there in the Memorial Garden, it hit me, now that Tyler was gone, who was going to tell me, "No, wait"?

The four guys released me from their grip, as if by pre-arranged signal.

“He seems to be through it,” one said. Muttering encouragement, brushing off their clothes, straightening collars, three of them strutted off, turning left at the gate. One of them stayed, though, seeming to have drawn the assignment of getting me home safely. He crouched down next to me in his leather jacket, staring thoughtfully, and when I sat up, he put his hands on my shoulders and began giving me a massage. Part of me wanted to run screaming into the night—the San Francisco Catholic boy terrified of appearing gay. But it felt good. The guy knew how to get right in there, how to hone in on that spot behind my right shoulder blade where I store all my tension. What the heck, I thought. He had such a reassuring presence, with his deep, confident voice, his conservative haircut, his strong jaw and graying sideburns. He reminded me of a high school baseball coach, especially when he mentioned the Giants’ upcoming home stand against the Dodgers.

For some reason, I thought about this tradition Tyler and I developed for rainy Saturday afternoons. When the skies opened, we’d go into my guest room, open the curtains so we could see the storm, climb under the covers of the twin beds, all snug and cozy, and just talk.

“OK, dude, that’s all you get,” the guy said, and we headed out onto Folsom together. Back in civilization, I was less comfortable in his presence. I wondered how I was going to separate from him and decided I’d duck back into the Zebra Lounge. We passed into its sonic shadow and I said, “Well, this is my stop.”

“Maybe I’ll join you,” he said. “Could be educational.”

I started to say, “No thanks.”

“OK, that’d be cool,” I said. We steered through the crowd and found a spot next to a leopard-skin column and I bought Vinnie, that was his name, a Jim Beam and soda. I couldn’t believe how much attention we were getting. Women kept looking over and smiling. A nice-looking woman with pigtails and a sunburst tattoo gave a little wave.

At that moment I got the idea for my next movie. It’s going to be a remake of *Cyrano*, but *Cyrano*’s handsome friend will be gay. *Cyrano* and his friend will be roommates, actually, like a gay-straight version of the Odd Couple, sleeping in matching double beds. They’ll review the day’s events as they brush their teeth in tandem—like Will and Grace but both male—call them Will and Chase. The friend

will catch Roxanne's eye with his great fashion sense, his meticulous grooming, his hiply decorated pad. Then he'll act out Cyrano's desires as dictated through an ear piece. I'm thinking Johnny Depp or Matthew McConaughey, someone eager to play gay in pursuit of an Oscar. I can't tell you more. You'll have to go see it.

I put my arm on Vinnie's shoulder, seeking his indulgence while I made a quick call. I was planning to call Jorge on my cell, but my fingers started dialing a different number. It felt like someone else saying, "Hey Lester, what's up?"

"This better be good. You got me out of the shower," she said.

"I had a movie idea I wanted to run by you," I said. I was thinking about all the great notes Tyler used to give me.

It was like someone else was speaking through me as I said, "Hey, I'm sorry I left so abruptly."

"Don't sweat it," she said. "It's just your code. It's who you are." I didn't really care what she was saying. She could have been talking about the joys of playing zither. I just liked hearing her tart, playful voice.