

# Saying Grace



*short story by Alex Jeffers*



**C**lues. I live in San Francisco, in the second-floor flat of a meticulously restored Victorian. There are fitted mini-blinds on the windows, small Oriental rugs on polished tongue-&-groove floors, brushed aluminum frames around pale abstract art posters, large architectural plants. There is a small nervously good-natured black cat named Twyla Thirp. The flat has two bedrooms and I am advertising, unhappily, for a roommate. Three dear friends have died all in the last six months—all young men—all dying of the same hideous, wasteful, wasting, pointless and horrible disease. I am wary of every cough and fever. Yet I can count myself lucky, in a noxious, comparative way: I have my health, my flat, my not inconsiderable income, my pretty things: my tally of loss is low against friends bereft of more (quantitatively and qualitatively), against a city and a community whose best and brightest have set out on the long march. That I am *lucky* is no comfort. I am exhausted by grief. I am scared to death.



**I**t is a cold bright Saturday morning in midwinter, the sky scoured clean as a porcelain bathtub by last night's storm. I sit in my dining room, in a low upholstered chair set in front of the French doors onto a tiny deck crowded with pots of anemic geraniums and sad herbs. On a small glass table at my side are a glass carafe of French Roast coffee, an ashtray with two butts, a crystal vase holding a single stem of cymbidium (waxy ochre blossoms highlighted by flecks of maroon) that Twyla knocked off the big plant in the living room. Twyla herself is curled up in my lap, a paw lapped over her eyes and a sliver of tooth showing against the brushed velvet of her chin, the polished black silk of her lip. I am careful not to disturb her as I sip coffee, smoke, and stare out at the sky. She too is bereaved and requires my companionship be gentle, quiet, constant.



**I**t is almost ten-fifteen and I await both the telephone and the doorbell. At the door will be a man named Eli who believes he fits my stringent requirements for a roommate as specified to the referral agency. Across telephone lines from a condominium complex near the Embarcadero I will hear the voice of either Dan Gregory or his wife Anna, whom I will help, this weekend, to pack up the belongings—the mortal remains—of Dan’s brother, my late roommate, who died three weeks ago.



**T**his is what it is like to watch someone die of AIDS: it is insupportable.



**Y**et it goes on, the living, the dying. I stub out my cigarette. A grey impalpable flak of ash rises on my breath, settles onto Twyla’s flank. I brush it off. She stirs, moans contentedly. The sky as bright as light. Beyond miles of confused roofscape the choppy blue-grey expanse of the bay and (glimpsed among the eccentric profiles of downtown’s high rises) the cut-paper-&-thread web of the Bay Bridge. It is a view I have often wished to paint, in pale lucid watercolor: a vista so desolate as to render any simply human, emotional desolation irrelevant. I would hang this painting on the wall opposite the windows so that when Robbie lowered the blinds (as he did in daylight, happy with the view only when lit by night to a refulgent electric map) he could not escape it.

The doorbell and telephone ring together. Gently dislodging Twyla, I go to answer the phone.

“Tim?” Anna asks, a rising nervous tone tolling on the single syllable of my name.

“Yes, Anna. Can you hold on for a moment? There’s someone at the door.”

She sighs with relief, “Yes,” before I lower the handset to the shelf at the top of the stairs. Looking down, through the visible lower third of the glassed door and wrought-iron security gate, I can see the feet of my visitor, shod in pointed polished burgundy cowboy boots, standing on the steps to the street. On my way down I buzz the gate open.

He smiles at me, says, “You must be Tim.”

“Yes. Eli? Come in.” I lead him upstairs. “Look around,” I say. “See what you think. There’s coffee in the dining room, through there. Help yourself. I’m on the phone.”

“Oh,” he says. “Thank you.”

“Sorry, Anna,” I tell the phone.

“Prospective roommate?” she asks bitterly. “Robbie’s replacement?”

“Please, Anna,” I say, feeling an abrupt catastrophic faintness. “That was very unkind.”

“Oh, Tim, I’m sorry. I’m ... not at my best.” I can imagine her rueful half-smile. I have known Anna for four months now, since September when she abandoned her career in Southern California to join her husband’s deathwatch over Robbie. She is a woman of impeccable strength whose inability to do anything substantive for Robbie has hurt her as badly as his dying. “Morning sickness,” she says, “on top of everything.”

“Anna!” I say, astonished.

“Yes. It’s so banal, but yes, I’m pregnant. I’m not working and there’s not much chance of finding a full-time position up here, so it seemed a good time. And—” her voice catches—“and Robbie always wanted nieces and nephews.”

I sit on the top step. “Robbie’s dead,” I say quietly.

“I know,” she says after a moment, “oh, Tim, *I know*. By the time I was certain, he was too far gone to understand when I told him.” She pauses. “But this is for us, Tim, for Dan and me. Nor for Robbie. Not only for Robbie.”

“I’m glad for you both,” I say eventually.



**T**his is what it is like to watch someone you care for die of AIDS: it is like the birth of a toxic dump: it is a poisonous waste.



**N**ow Anna is ready to speak of practicalities. “Shall we come over today, Tim? What’s a good time?”

I refrain from reminding her that no time is good for the task we face. “I’ll be here all day. Come anytime. Come for lunch. I’ll make lunch for you.”

“We bought boxes,” she adds.

“Good. I don’t have any here.”

“We’ll be there around eleven-thirty. Okay?”

“Fine. Good-bye, Anna.”

“Good-bye.”



**T**his is what it is like to watch someone dear die of AIDS: it is not a knife-blade so sharp that pain happens only later: it is a shallow infected

wound: the infection works deep and the wound will not heal.



**M**y eyes stinging as from a breath of ammonia, I go into the dining room. I light a cigarette and stare out the window. There are sails on the bay: bright nail-paring flecks of color.



*It is not, in fact and to be criminally precise, a disease but a syndrome. The acronym is for Acquired Immune-Deficiency Syndrome, a label of frightful antiseptis that replaced an earlier, weightier acronym, GRID, for Gay-Related Immune Deficiency, but which did not defuse the psychic damage of the journalistic tag the gay plague. The syndrome itself does not kill people. It merely—merely—creates a susceptibility to the aptly named opportunistic infections. These are diseases that, among the general population, are statistically unlikely: infections that, for all their venom, all their insidious fateful strength, are powerless against the intact, balanced human immune system. AIDS upsets that delicate balance, dissolves the precarious barriers against (among others) Kaposi's Sarcoma (a virulent skin cancer marked by purplish lesions, heretofore diagnosed primarily in elderly men of Mediterranean descent) and Pneumocystis carinii pneumonia (a disease previously seen almost exclusively among cancer patients and organ-transplant recipients—their immunity artificially depressed by chemotherapy or anti-rejection drugs).*

*The syndrome seems to be caused by a retrovirus called variously HTLV-III, LAV, and ARV. A reliable test for the presence of the retrovirus has not yet been developed. Prognosis for a vaccine is not good, for a cure worse. Fatality, five years after diagnosis, stands near 100%—if not from one opportunistic infection then from another or a combination.*

*AIDS-victim and -patient are terms that have become semantically unacceptable. The preferred euphemism is Person with AIDS, abbreviated PWA. In the United States the overwhelming majority of PWAs are homosexual or bisexual males; other groups significantly afflicted are intravenous drug abusers and hemophiliacs. Other—statistically fewer, numbered in tens and twenties rather than hundreds and thousands—victims have included recipients of donations of infected blood; the female sexual partners of members of the above groups; the newborn children of mothers with AIDS.*

*The vectors of transmission of the retrovirus seem to be few: infection seems to result only from exchange of bodily fluids—blood or semen, possibly saliva—and it seems likely that the recipients’ immune systems must already be compromised to some extent for the full-blown syndrome to take root. The incubation period between infection and onset/diagnosis can, apparently, last up to six years. During this period the bearer is probably capable of spreading the infection. The most efficacious routes of transmission, among gay men, appear to be certain modes of sexual intercourse: those that involve exchange of bodily fluids, particularly in cases where the recipient may have small open wounds through which the retrovirus can enter the bloodstream. This has led to the codification of certain safe-sex guidelines that are all too easily and frequently ignored.*

*No-one is safe. Particularly no sexually active gay man is safe. Celibacy is a safeguard of sorts: but even this protection can be illusory—considering the syndrome’s long incubation period—for who was celibate six years ago?*



**E**li sits on Robbie’s bed in Robbie’s bedroom, holding a framed portrait photograph of Robbie that Anna (indulging his charming vanity) gave him for Christmas several years ago. Eli doesn’t look up (my footsteps silent in sheepskin slippers) so I look at him for a moment. On the fourth finger of his right hand is a large ring: between the knuckles a semicircle of heavy silver etched with dark intaglio scrawls and punctuated by an oblong-cut black stone (jet, obsidian, onyx) and three slivers of pale jade. The hand is large, heavy knuckled, scarred with the memories of childhood fist fights, and spread with fine hairs a few shades darker than the skin; a smaller ring, two thin cross-sections of silver sandwiching a white that might be ivory, foos the top pinky knuckle.

He looks up. “Who is this handsome man?” he asks, friendly.

“My friend Robbie. This was his room. It’s the available one.”

“Oh,” he says. His gaze takes in all of Robbie’s clutter. “I thought it was supposed to be unfurnished?”

“It will be, by tomorrow evening. That’s what I was on the phone about. The floor’s going to be sanded and resealed next week, and then the walls repainted. It won’t be ready to be occupied till the first.”

“What color? The walls.”

“I don’t know. Probably landlord-white, unless I get inspired.”

“I like this color,” he says, considering.

So do I, although I was against Robbie's painting a room with only one window matte aubergine. "It's a touch claustrophobic," I note.

He stands up, returns the photograph gently to the bedside table. "Paint the ceiling pale greyish lavender," he recommends, "and bleach the floor." He shrugs, laughs. "It's not my money. Could I have some more coffee? What happened to Robbie? He doesn't seem to have taken anything much with him."

I lean against the door frame and stare up at him. Even without the heels of his boots he'd be some six inches taller than I. "You can't take anything much with you to the crematorium." Eli's eyes are wide and brown and somehow blank. "He died three weeks ago."

"Jesus," he whispers. "I'm sorry. That was tactless." He looks at the floor, tips the pointed toe of his right foot three inches inward. The boots' color is similar to the walls'. "AIDS?" he asks.

I nod.

"Jesus," he says again, slowly, expressively.



**T**his is what it is like to watch your friend die of AIDS: tones of voice become important because your fine, nuanced vocabulary cannot express what you feel.



**C**almly, calmly. We will adjourn to the kitchen for another cup of coffee and to discuss the mechanics of his maybe moving in. Eli will pull a chair out from the kitchen table and sit, with the unconscious, calculated grace, the flair, the reasoned confined heat of the contemporary young urban gay man. One arm over the back of the chair as he lights a cigarette. The knees spread wide on slightly buckled ankles so that the layers of soft cloth at his fly will buckle and display two of four metal buttons. His eyes will follow the serene practiced ease of my movements as I grind coffee beans from the freezer, fill the bright red enamelled kettle and put it on a burner, fold the paper filter. Et cetera. My hands will not falter, will not tremble. Capable. Precise. Perhaps he will admire my hands—not so much their capability, their precision, as their fine bones, the long slender fingers, the well tended nails and cuticles. I will feel a faint frisson, knowing (for all my fifteen years' seniority) I am desirable.

It will lead nowhere. It will come to nothing. I am scared to death.



**I**t is a bright cold morning in early January, the air as sharp and chilled as a sterile scalpel. On the deck I lean over the railing, past a pot of desiccated tarragon (brown leaves like so many minute daggers), a dense aromatic astringent mat of creeping thyme. Eli's hand presses lightly against the small of my back. "Breathe deep," he instructs. I comply as well as I can past the obstruction in my throat. Salt glazes my eyes.

"Are you okay?" he asks when at length I straighten up.

"Yes."

Concern has made him squint: thin lines etch the fine skin around his eyes. "You cared for him a lot."

"Yes, more coffee would be nice."

He follows me into the kitchen. "Tea," he says. "Tea would be better. Weak tea with honey and lemon. If you've got it. Sit down."

Impelled by Eli's generous compassion and a weak desire to be cared for, I sit, lean my head on the butcher-block tabletop. "You're right," I murmur. Everything he needs to make tea is, in this kitchen, out in the open, in plain sight, and already he strikes me as capable and kind. He'll need no help from me. Twyla comes into the kitchen talking to herself, rubs against my leg, leaps onto the table and sits beside my head, begins to wash.

"Who are you, Eli?" I ask of my left forearm. "Why do you live in San Francisco? Why are you looking for a place to live?" I hear him bustling around behind me, the click and shuffle of boots on tile.

"I'm a nurse," he says. "I've been in San Jose for a couple years, but I just got a job at SF General so I moved up here last month. I've been staying with friends."

"Why here, though? Why San Francisco?"

"Why not? I'm from Montana originally. I don't want to be there. For one thing, I hate snow. I like living where getting through winter doesn't require survivalist tactics."

"A nurse," I say. "Robbie died at San Francisco General."

"I'm not on the AIDS ward. Not yet." I hear tea being poured. He sets a mug before me. "Drink this. That's where I want to be, though. Is that enough reason for San Francisco? Who's this gorgeous creature?" he asks, sitting down, holding out his hand for Twyla's inspection.

"Twyla."

"Tharp?"

"Thirp. It's a noise she makes."

She pushes her head into his open palm. "Aren't you a charmer," he tells her. "I like your apartment, Tim."

“Thank you.”

“But I was hoping to get a place before the end of the month. My friends are getting tired of having me around. How’s the tea?”

“Fine.” I sip. Under the tartness of lemon is a faint breath of cinnamon. “Very good.” I like him, I decide, on short notice. His thick black hair (styled and gelled into a becomingly punkish neo-brushcut) and his ginger mustache bristle assertively. His dark eyes sit comfortably in his face.



**T**his is what it is like to watch someone you cherish die of AIDS: he changes and changes but stops learning, stops growing, stops becoming; he dies long before death claims him.



**E**li holds his mug in both hands so that steam condenses on the hairs of his mustache. The doorbell rings twice, pre-emptively. The mug returns to the table, the hands, surprised, splay out on either side.

“Dan and Anna,” I say. “Robbie’s family. They’re coming to pack up his stuff. I asked them for lunch. Will you stay too? Please. Maybe we can work something out: an accommodation, a timetable.”

After a moment he smiles slowly. “I’ll think about it,” he says. “You should let them in.”

Footsteps on the stairs, a door gently closed. “They have a key.”

“Tim?” Anna calls.

Standing up, I call back, “In the kitchen.” Eli stands too, polite.

Anna and Dan come, flushed, exercised, mournful, around the corner. “Hello,” they say.

“Dan,” I say. “Anna. Good morning.” They reciprocate my greeting kisses with surprising warmth. Dan’s embrace is remarkably, tenderly, affectionate—considering his gender identity and affectional preference. He does not look well. “This is Eli.”

“Hello,” Eli says and, like a trouper, shakes hands.

“Eli’s just made us some tea. Will you join us? I haven’t started lunch yet. Or I could make coffee?”

“No, thanks, Tim,” says Dan. “I think we’d better get started.”

“Okay. Do you want help?”

“No,” says Dan, and goes.

“Not yet,” Anna says apologetically, “not in the bedroom.” She starts to follow her husband, then, an afterthought, “His clothes, Tim? They’re taken care of?”

“Taken care of...” I breathe. “Yes. Anything you and Dan don’t want. Chris will take them, gratefully. He and Robbie wear the same size.”

“Oh!”

“I’ll take everything to be cleaned on Monday.”

“Dividing up the spoils,” she whispers.

“Oh, Anna. This is how it is. It’s hard. Chris doesn’t *want* three new suits, not at this price. But he can use them. Robbie knew that.”

She sighs. “I know,” she says, and follows Dan.

I follow her as far as the dining room to retrieve my cigarettes. Eli stands in the doorway, watching me. “It is hard,” he says.

I nod my agreement. I light a cigarette. I stare outside. “Robbie’s will,” I say, “was admirably precise. He left Twyla to me. His savings and life insurance and proceeds of anything that gets sold go jointly to Dan, Anna, and his father. Dan and Anna have first refusal on everything tangible—what they don’t want is mine to dispense as I choose. You look about the same size as Robbie and Chris: would you like some new clothes?”

“I don’t think so,” he says carefully.

“I feel like a ghou. *Dividing up the spoils*. Lunch,” I say, “the subject at this juncture is lunch. Talk to me while I work.”



- It seems unlikely that Dan and Anna will want much of Robbie’s furniture. None of it’s very good, and surely their holdings duplicate most of the pieces, more stylishly.
- I like Eli. He seems considerate and capable. We can work out an arrangement.
- It seems unlikely Eli will have much furniture of his own. I will offer Robbie’s to him. Otherwise I’ll have to hold an estate sale or give it to charity. Robbie would prefer it go to someone charming like Eli. As he wanted Chris to get his clothes.

These plans. These arrangements. These contingencies. Oh, Robbie, am I as cold blooded as this moment I feel? Dying is the easy part.



**D**ying is not the easy part. Dying is not easy. I don’t want to remember how to die.



**E**li pulls a chair out from the kitchen table and sits easily, one arm over the back of the chair as he lights a cigarette. His knees spread wide so that the layers of worn denim at his fly buckle and display two of four metal

buttons. The lowest of the floor, in code, is unfastened. He watches me forage through cupboards, drawers, refrigerator. My hands falter, tremble.

“Would you like some help?” he asks.

“Probably. But since I don’t know what I’m doing I can’t ask for it.”

He grins. “Then what shall I talk about?”

“Tell me,” I say, “why you in particular are uniquely qualified to be my new flatmate.”

“Oh, my,” says Eli, and, with many pauses for deliberation, “I’m quiet. I don’t know many people so I won’t be wanting to host large parties. On the other hand, I *like* parties, so if you want to have them I’ll help. I can cook. I’m neat. I smoke and drink in moderation but don’t do any other drugs. I like cats. Twyla likes me.” Indeed, she sits in his lap. He spreads his hands. “I like the flat. I like the neighborhood, the view—I like your taste in art and design. I like *you*. I—” here the longest pause—“think I would have liked Robbie. From all the evidence. I’m very . . . careful.”

“Safe?” I ask mockingly.

“Safe,” he agrees. “I’m not going to die any time soon.”

“Not of AIDS anyway.”

“No.”

“Confident, too. A paragon of value.” I decant the blender-soufflé into its dish and slip it in the oven. “You pass the test. If you want. Help me set the table.”

“Flatware?” His voice is flat, dazed.

“Middle drawer.”

I go out to the dining room, clear off the table and lay four place mats, napkins, and glasses from the corner cupboard. Eli appears with fistsful of gleaming silverplate. “That’s Robbie’s,” I say. “Oh—never mind. I’d like to use it one last time. As I said, the room won’t be ready till the first. I can’t get around that. But if you don’t mind being primitive and camping out in the living room you could move in anytime. Staying with a friend, as it were. I’ll want a deposit, but the rent’s covered for the rest of the month.”

“Easy as that?” he asks dully.

“Easy as that. There’s an agreement that’ll need your signature—I’ll show it to you—but we can leave that till the first, give you some breathing room.”

“I’ll have to think about it,” says Eli.

“But you’ll stay for lunch?” I ask, contrite, appalled by my own briskness. “It’ll be ready in about half an hour.”

“I think I’ll take a walk around the neighborhood,” he says. “But I’ll be

back for lunch. Thank you, Tim.”

He looks at the toes of his boots for a moment, then turns and leaves. His heels sound on the stairs.

I look in the door of Robbie’s room. Anna and Dan have stripped the bed: a box of folded blankets and linens sits by the door. Anna and Dan sit on the bare mattress. Huddled together like orphaned children, Dan’s bright head on Anna’s shoulder, they leaf through one of Robbie’s many photo albums. I won’t disturb them just now.



**T**his is what it is like to remember someone you loved who has died of AIDS: it is far too easy to forget there was a time before his illness: that he was (for seven of the almost nine years you knew him) alive and well and alert and splendid: that he was not always a focus for pain.



**T**hese days my response to any stimulus is contingent on grief.



**T**he first thing Dan does, seated at table while I serve the soufflé, is pick up his fork and say, “This is Robbie’s silver.”

“His dishes too, Dan,” I say, choking on his clumsiness. “A memorial gesture, poorly considered. An excess of sentimentality. I’m sorry. I’ll wash them and pack them up for you this evening.”

“It’s only plate,” says Anna apologetically, “and we have my mother’s sterling, Dan. And it’s not a full service.” (Four complete place settings plus a few extras and a couple of serving pieces. Victorian. Robbie picked them up at an antique shop, at a good price because so many were missing. He always intended trying to match the pattern.) “Do we need to clutch everything he owned to us, Dan?” she asks gently. “Other people loved him too.”

“What’s the *P* stand for?” Eli asks. He is examining the scrolled, foliated handle of his salad fork. He looks up into our silence, smiles nervously. “The monogram. It’s a *P*. Whose initial?”

After a moment I say, “Mine. Robbie found it very amusing.”

Dan looks down into his lap. On the table his right hand twitches. Anna brushes her hair off her face, wide eyed.

I dispense the plates efficiently. Eli passes the salad, Anna pours the wine. When everyone is served Dan lifts his fork again and says, “This looks awfully good, Tim. Thank you.”

“It smells delicious,” Anna says.

I look at Eli. The skin around his delicate brown eyes crinkles briefly. Then he lowers his head. Almost whispering, almost under his breath, he says, “Thank You, Lord, for Your grace and the favor of this meal. Thank You also for bringing me here, among these my new friends. And thank You for letting me know Robbie in the only way, now, that I can. Please let me know him better, so I may remember him as he deserves. Hold him safely, Lord. Keep us well. Amen.” He lifts his fork, lifts his head, his eyes clear and brown and brimming. “I don’t usually do that,” he says hesitantly, “—say Grace. It seemed ... useful. I’m not sure why.”

“Thank you, Eli,” Anna and I say together. I am stunned by gratitude, by the fragility of my feelings, by the delicacy of his gesture.

“Thank you, Eli,” whispers Dan.

We eat in silence until Eli says, “Tim, I’ve decided to accept your offer, with thanks. *If* I can choose the color paint.”

I look at him. I look at Dan. They look back at me. I look down at my fork. Around the acanthus leaves that surround my initial on the handle the silver is dark with tarnish.



GRACE. *From the Latin gratia favor, charm, thanks, from gratus pleasing, grateful; akin to the Sanskrit grṇāti he praises.*



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