

P R E F A C E

IN THE TIME I GET

We're all bigots. All of us prejudice people on some basis, be it race, sex, sexual preference, height, age, or any of scores of categories we use to make ourselves seem superior when we are, in fact, feeling inferior.

In the past school year, after his football coach had ordered an illegal hit on a black player from another team, Louie Banks took a righteous stand against racial bigotry and stood his ground heroically as he was stripped of his starting position on the team and generally ridiculed for "not having the stomach" to play Trout football. When all was said and done, Louie was proud of his conduct and eventually saw himself as stronger for resisting the pressure to conform.

But we're all bigots, Louie Banks included. Now, in the summer following his year of Running Loose, another challenge, in the form of his own bigotry, stands before him to be confronted. And the stakes are friendship and basic human dignity.

"You people call him Dakota. To me he's Uncle Gene."
"That right? Uncle Gene, huh? I don't think I've ever heard his real name. I didn't know he had any relatives. I mean, I
"Dakota your uncle?"

for the summer."
"Hi," he said back. "I'm Darren. I'm working for my uncle

to get through the mop-down and all the dirty glasses.
and stack up enough country tunes on the ancient Wurlitzer
or so when I'm finishing up, so usually I bypass the coin slot
never gets down from his room over the bar until around ten
thirty in the morning, and I hadn't expected anyone. Dakota
night's war, run some errands. Who are you?" It was seven-
Daytime stuff. You know, replace the kegs, mop up last
I said, "Hi, I'm Louie. Louie Banks. I work here for Dakota.

the time neither would I.
who drank here every weekend wouldn't use that word. At
only describe as elegant. I guessed the loggers and cowboys
with jet black slick-backed hair and a manner I could now
high school graduation. He was tall and thin.
I met him in the Buckhorn Bar two weeks after

never even pictured him having—Jesus, why don't I just shut up?" I put out my hand, and he clasped it in a brief, firm grip. "Wonder why Dakota didn't tell me you were coming?" I thought out loud.

"He didn't know. I only called a week or so ago, so he didn't have a lot of time to prepare. I haven't seen him for some time, but I visited here often when I was little."

"Where you from?"

"East Coast," he said. "A little town just outside Harrisburg. That's in Pennsylvania."

I smiled. "I just got out of high school," I said. "I know where Harrisburg is. And Baton Rouge, and Pierre, and Providence."

He laughed back. "And Augusta, and Tallahassee. I didn't just get out of high school, but state capitals are about all that sticks with you from those days. That and chemistry valences."

This guy had just summed up my whole school experience, though my transcript indicates chemistry valences didn't stick. I liked him, though something made me uneasy. "Right. Don't they know if you're ever in any of those cities, you'll see the statehouse and know it's the capital?"

He laughed. Then he said straight out, "You're the guy who lost his girlfriend."

Caught off guard and pretty much speechless, I no longer liked him.

"You don't want to talk about it." He said it as a statement of fact.

"That's not it, exactly," I said, partially recovered. Then:

"Yeah, I guess that is it."

"Well, if you want to, *sometime*, not necessarily now, I'd like it if you talked about it with me."

I said thanks but didn't really mean it. This guy didn't know me. I barely knew his name. You don't just walk up to somebody and cram a hot branding iron into his tenderest part before you even know if he has a dog or where he's going to college or if he's a vegetarian or something, and I resented that. No wonder Dakota hadn't told me about him; he was probably embarrassed. I snatched a wet rag from the back sink and began wiping off the bar, pretending to ignore Darren sitting on a stool at the end of it. Then I decided to hell with manners and punched up a few country tunes on the Wurlitzer. That should send him hightailing it back where he came from.

Emmy Lou came on first, singing her sweet dreams, with Patsy Cline right behind her, singing exactly the same tune. Old Rob Simes and Nolton Brubaker near to killed each other one night just before closing time, trying to settle who sings the sweetest dreams. Nolton won the fight, so that put Emmy Lou up one, but if you listen close, it's hard to pick. Patsy's got some heart. Plus she gets a few points for singing it first. And probably a few more for dying young.

Anyway, I stuck in some Hank Williams, Jr., and George Jones and Merle Haggard to let him know what kind of a tough corral he'd done rode into and got on back to my work.

"You're angry," he said.

I looked up, faking surprise. "Huh?"

"You're angry. I offended you when I asked about your girl."

"No, I'm not angry," I said. I can be *so* chickenshit sometimes. I swore that I'd quit doing that when Becky died, that I'd be honest no matter what it took, because you never know when you won't have the chance to go back and tell the truth. "I'm just in a hurry to get my stuff done, that's all. I'm not mad."

"Then why are you punishing me with that?" he said, nodding toward the jukebox. "It was an offense, but it wasn't a felony."

I smiled and dropped my rag on the bar. "Okay," I said. "I'm a little sensitive, I guess. A lot. Nobody I knew ever died before. And I didn't handle it so great if you want to know the truth. I mean, I trashed her funeral, yelled a lot of bad things about God, really messed up some people's heads. . . ." In my mind I saw my best friend and my worst enemy, a hand under each arm, helping me out of the church through the stunned silence of the congregation. That's how crazy it was.

Darren put up a hand. "You don't have to explain anything to me. I just wanted you to know I knew about her so you wouldn't be careful around me. We're going to be working together and all. I know a little bit about death."

I let his last sentence pass, wondering why Dakota had told him. Is that how people refer to me now? *That guy? Oh, that's Louie Banks. His girlfriend died. . .*

Darren asked me to show him around, so I reached around the back of the Wurlitzer and kicked the volume down a couple pegs, then gave him the grand tour—which lasts maybe ten minutes—through the back storage coolers and into the narrow opening off the end of the bar where Dakota keeps all the beer nuts and pickled things, like eggs and pigs' feet and jalapeño peppers. If it don't go down easy, pickle it.

He told me he was twenty-five years old and that he went to college at Penn State for two years before deciding to take a break and travel around the country for a while, till he could decide what he wanted to do in the world and quit wasting his tuition on Early Tibetan Philosophies and Creative Uses for Nu-

clear Waste, which I don't think is really a class but made the point. I told him I was almost eighteen and headed for a little college up in eastern Washington called Clark State, where I had a partial scholarship to run cross-country. He said since he dropped out of the university, his parents weren't exactly ecstatic about the way he was living his life and had written him out of his inheritance, which was one reason he came clear across the country to see Dakota. Dakota was never real close to his parents anyway, Darren said, even though Darren's dad was Dakota's half brother. He said the inheritance was worth probably more than a million dollars, but it didn't mean much anymore. I said it was hard to imagine a million dollars not meaning much, that I could be written out of my parents' will and never know the difference, given what they had to put in it, but that they stood by me in the very worst of times. I said I didn't know if that was better than a million dollars, but it had to be the next best thing.

He said it was the best thing. Then he told me about his death sentence. Darren had AIDS.

What I did is I panicked. I did my all-time sloppiest cleaning job and left before I found out any of the things I would want to know later: like did Dakota know, and how long did he have, and how could I get him to stay away from me if he was going to die because that was just what had happened to me already. Darren must have seen how messed up I was, because he backed way off and didn't say anything more except to ask me not to tell anybody. I said okay, because how could I say no, but God, I *knew* I'd end up telling *somebody*, because AIDS isn't something you just get, like flu. How you get it is the thing. I instantly knew why I'd felt uneasy before; his *elegance* was something I normally associated with someone who's a homo.

So who do you talk to about *that*? Nobody I knew. I did know I wanted to get as far from him as I could. I'd had about all the death I needed for a while, and *everybody* knows you stay as far away from faggots as you can.

So I lay in my bed that night, long after midnight, twisting and turning so much the sheets almost muffled me, repulsed by what I thought about Darren, and maybe a little ashamed because I thought it, because this voice in me kept saying, "Hey, this guy is *dying*, and no matter what else is going on, still, he's dying," and I knew a little bit about how final that is. Those mixed-up thoughts got me thinking too much about Becky, which created so much anxiety I knew I wouldn't get one bit more sleep, and the only thing to do was get up and run.

My family doesn't get alarmed anymore—or try to stop me—when I run in the middle of the night, though my little sister calls me Night Speed and asks in front of my friends whether I wear a cape. Night runs have been my common practice since the funeral, and they think it's what I do to keep my head on straight, which is correct.

The moon was nearly full, and I watched my faded shadow skim over the pocked blacktop stretching the three miles toward the river bridge where Becky crashed that day. I've never told anybody this—people think I'm crazy enough as it is—but I still talk to her sometimes. The reason I loved her so much—besides that she was heartbreak pretty—was that she made sense in ways most adults in my life don't. She was less cautious—ready to take risks—and she always saw things from a simpler perspective. Plus she stood up for herself, which is the hardest thing for me. Christ, after Coach Ledneck ordered a killer hit on Kevin Washington to put him out of the Salmon River game because he was afraid one

player—one black player—would wreck our perfect season, it must have taken me fifty attempts to quit. I wanted to be on the football team so bad I kept forgetting what I believed in. Quit. Want back. Quit. Want back. You'd have thought someone nailed one of my feet to the ground and whipped me with a quirt. But Becky stood right up and said what she thought, and that helped me finally stick to it, and it's the main reason I still talk to her, because I can listen to her voice and then steal her words for myself and sometimes it works because her words have so much integrity.

So have me committed. I hear voices.

What I said to Becky, and I'm not proud of it, was this:

"So what if this guy's a faggot? So what do I do then?"

I think it's good to ask a dead person about someone who's going to die. Becky didn't answer. That should have meant something.

After the night of my midnight run I avoided Darren like he had AIDS. I hated knowing his awful secret, and I resented the hell out of him for telling me—like I was supposed to *do* something about it. I began cleaning the Buckhorn at odd hours when I was pretty sure he wouldn't be there, or I'd take Carter with me so Darren wouldn't have a chance to talk. He never pushed, but sometimes I'd see him looking at me in a way that made me do a major-league squirm. God, I wanted him to go back where he came from. For one thing, what does it mean when some homo likes you? Just ask anyone.

"So what do ya think of my nephew?" Dakota came down early that day, caught me sneaking around cleaning at 6:00 a.m. He couldn't have had more than three and a half hours' sleep.

"He's okay," I said. "Haven't seen him around too much. He work ull closing?"

Dakota nodded, hoisting himself up on the bar. The bar's got holes all over in it from him doing that. One of his hands is a hook. "Yeah. He says you're keepin' clear of him."

I looked away, stacking dirty glasses from a tray beneath the bar, while my face burned and my heart hammered. I can't lie to Dakota. When Becky died, he saw me naked.

Dakota came in the side door of the Buckhorn. We were two hours past my having completely trashed Becky's funeral, screaming at the big-city preacher who didn't even know her, cursing God Himself before the horrified eyes and ears of the congregation. Dakota would have been well within the confines of decent human behavior to kick my butt across the bar and back. But he looked to my pain. "Figured that must be you," he said. "Want some company?"

I nodded. "Yeah, I guess I do."

He stood there in the doorway and just looked at me. Finally he said, "Louie, it ain't safe."

"You're right," I said. "It isn't. I gotta tell you, Dakota, I don't get it. Man, what did Becky ever do to get killed? What did any of us ever do? It just ain't right."

"Nope," he said. "It ain't right, that's for sure."

For only the second time since she died, I burst into tears. My chest heaved, and snort ran from my nose in ropes. "It's just not fair," I said. "Where's God, Dakota? Where is He?"

"Louie," he said, "I ain't educated much; but I listen pretty good and I see pretty good, and one thing I'm sure of is that if there's a God, that ain't His job. He ain't up there to load the dice one way or the other." He paused, thinking, and his voice

went soft. "Boy, if you come through this, you'll be a man. There's one thing that separates a man from a boy the way I see it, and it ain't age. It's seein' how life works so you don't get surprised all the time and kicked in the butt. It's knowin' the rules."

"The rules," I said. "How can you know the damn rules? They keep changing."

"Naw, they don't," he said. "It's just that you have to learn the new ones as you go. That's the hard part. Learnin' the new rules when they show themselves. You go on blamin' God, you get no place. You got to understand that the reason some things happen is just because they happen. That ain't a good reason, but that's it. You put enough cars and trucks and motorcycles on the road, and some of 'em gonna run into each other. Not certain ones neither. Just the ones that do. This life ain't partial, boy."

As I started out the door, he stopped me. "Louie."

"Yeah?"

"If you was walkin' in the middle of the road an' you saw a big ol' truck comin' right at ya, you wouldn't stop an' ask the Lord to get you out of the way, would ya?"

"No," I said. "I'd probably just get off the road."

"Well then, don't be goin' askin' Him to get ya out of the way of all the other crap that's comin' at ya." He held up his hook and looked at it. "You go on an' take care of it yourself."

Dakota lives in my soul. To my credit, I didn't try to lie to him about Darren. "Yeah, I guess I am keeping clear of him. You know why?"

"Tell me."

"Do you know about him, Dakota?"

"Tell me."

"He's sick."

"Bet he told you not to tell me that."

"He did, but—"

"Did you tell him you'd keep quiet?"

"Yeah, but—Dakota, I don't know what to do."

"Well, if you said you'd keep quiet, you should keep quiet."

"But—"

He nodded slowly, scratching the end of his nose with the hook. Someday he's going to slip. "It's a test, Louie. He asked ya not to tell. Ain't many places that boy is safe. You must know that."

"So you know?"

His eyes said yes, but he didn't nod or speak.

"Can you tell me how—"

Dakota shook his head. "Nope. I said I'd keep quiet."

Frustration clogged my throat. One of the worst things ever would be losing Dakota. "Dakota, I don't know what to do!"

"Ain't much precedent for it," he said. "Leastways not around here. Guess you do what you want."

"But—"

"Louie. Anything you wanna know you got to ask him. I got no better ideas than you 'cept to tell the truth."

"Jesus, why me?"

"Same reason your girlfriend died," he said.

Just because. An accident of time and space.

I entered the back door of the Buckhorn at 8:00 a.m., back on my normal schedule, and punched up some Waylon and Willie, turning the volume up so Darren couldn't help but know I was alone. He'd already heard Carter tell me he'd take wire snips to the cord if I played that shit in *his* presence. My palms sweated so bad the broom kept slipping from my grasp,

but I danced it across the floor behind broken glass and chicken bones and peanut shells and pickled pepper stems like it was just another normal day.

"Hey, friend, how've you been?" He stood in the doorway to the stairs leading up to his room.

I looked up. "Okay. How 'bout you?"

"Some up, some down, I guess," he said. "This disease doesn't give you much warning." He looked to the Wurlitzer and smiled. "Your heroes really always been cowboys?"

"Not always," I said, wondering what Roy Rogers would think of me being alone in a semidark bar with a man of questionable sexual preference. "For a while there some of them were fighter pilots." I paused a minute, staring at my broom, then said, "Look man, I'm sorry. You told me you have AIDS and I ran away. I should have stayed and at least talked about it."

He said, "It was a pretty normal response. I'm dying. And I'm dying in an ugly way. Not many people want to have anything to do with that."

I said, "Yeah, well, that ain't all. It would help to know..."

"How I got it?"

I took a deep breath. "How you got it."

His eyes leveled on mine. "I'm gay. I got it having anal intercourse with another gay man who was infected."

Dakota would call that a "sludge hammer to the chest." I'd promised myself to be cool, but I hadn't expected anything about anal. I know I stood there looking about as stupid as is possible for a human being to look, and I know it was only shock that kept me from highailing it again.

He said, "I don't have time for anything but the truth, Louie. Would you rather I were an intravenous drug user?"

I hated to admit it, but yes.

"Can't help you," he said. "I've always taken good care of my body. Didn't want any bad stuff in it." He shook his head and smiled. "Nice try, huh?"

I leaned the broom against the bar. By now Waylon and Willie were headed for Luckenbock, Texas, and I wished I were with them.

He smiled again, but his lip quivered. "I'm pretty scared, Louie."

"Why'd you come here?"

He hesitated. "I'd like to talk about this with you, I really would. But this is a small town, and my uncle would lose this place in a flash if anyone knew about me—about the AIDS. I wasn't going to tell anyone but Uncle Gene, but after he told me how special you were—everything you'd gone through—and I met you, well, I had to try. There's something about you. . . . Your girlfriend died, and I thought that gave us—I thought it made you like me in some way, you know, closer to death. I was involved in a support network back in Pennsylvania, and that helped a lot; but things got so bad with my folks I just couldn't stay. It was as if I got sick just to shame them. I couldn't stand them looking at me like I was—like I was so *dirty*." He took a breath, began to go on, but stopped. "I have to know you're not going to tell anyone. If you are, give me a week, and I'll get out of here. I have to know. People around me have just been in too much pain—" "I won't tell," I said, and I knew this time I wouldn't.

Then Darren told me what it was like to have AIDS, to wake up every morning wondering whether this would be the day you'd start sliding for the last time into that pitch-

black pit that sucks all your energy dry and leaves you with nothing but open sores your body has no power to heal, or to walk around in a world knowing if the people on the street could look one millimeter under your skin and see your disease—or just your pain and fear—they'd whirl away in disgust. And he told me about keeping hope going, how sometimes he could do it merely by feeling an evening breeze brush his face or putting his feet in the cool water up at the lake or watching Dakota tend bar as if he had three hands instead of one. "Any little thing that seems magic," he said. "That'll do it sometimes. I've never been so scared, Louie, but I've never soared like this either."

But the worst thing he told me, at least the worst in my book, is that no one ever *touched* him anymore. No one who knew—who cared about him—ran his fingers through Darren's hair or patted him on the back or shook his hand. "Most people know you can't get it that way," he said, "but it's far too ugly for them to take a chance." He was quiet a moment, looking into my eyes, and I got nervous. "Don't worry," he said. "I won't ask you to touch me. I know why people don't do that. I know about fear."

There's something about you. . . . I wished I could have just listened to his story, but what was the *something*? Something that made gay people like me? I took health class. I knew about latent homosexuality and all that. God, you try to be nice to somebody. . . . The last thing I needed to think about was *something* about me.

"Look at this," Darren said, carefully removing a long blanket from the top shelf in his closet. I stood next to the window in his tiny room above the Buckhorn, as far from him

as I could get and still be in the room. I mean, what would happen when people finally figured out he was gay and then somebody found out I'd been in his room?

He unrolled the blanket to reveal what appeared to be an immaculately cared-for deer rifle. The hardwood stock was oiled and finished with such care the grain actually seemed to have depth, and the light through the tiny window facing Main Street glinted off the dark blue steel of the barrel like a laser point.

I said, "That is a good-looking gun."

"Would you like to go try her out?" he asked. "I haven't had it out of the closet since I got here."

I looked away.

"Oh, hey," he said. "I understand. You have your friends. You've been spending too much time with me... Louie, are you afraid I'm going to make a move on you?"

"What? No, of course not," I lied.

"You are, aren't you?"

"No. I mean, maybe I thought—"

He shook his head. "Jesus, Louie, I have AIDS. If I had sexual relations with anyone, it could *kill* them. I would never do that."

I stared at him, silently, and felt foolish.

"Besides," he said, smiling, "you're ugly. Give me some credit for taste."

"Actually," I said, "that's only part of it." I looked again to the rifle. It was beautiful. "See, I'm not much one for guns. I was born in the wrong part of the country. I just can't shoot things. I tried it once, but there was this chipmunk—" I laughed. "I just don't have the stomach for it, that's all. Coach said that was what I was missing in football."

"Then you'll love this," he said. "Here." And he handed it carefully to me. "Look down the scope."

I did, aiming out the window, above the buildings across the street, and out onto the North Fork of the Payette. A flock of greenheads skied to a stop on the glassy expanse of the river, more than a mile away. They appeared to be landing on the end of the barrel. I said, "Jesus, that's a powerful scope. Where'd you get that?"

"Pull the trigger," he said.

I looked up at him, then back down the scope. "No, thanks. My daddy told me don't play with guns."

"Go ahead," he said, "pull it."

I looked up again, and the crazy idea jumped into my mind that he might be grooming me to shoot him. Like when the time came and he couldn't stand it anymore. Jesus, being around this guy just kept offering up more and more shitty possibilities.

He smiled. "I'm not messing with you, Louie. Go ahead, pull the trigger. You won't hurt anything."

I squeezed. Click! whrrrr.

"Pull it again," he said.

Click! whrrrr.

"Isn't that great?" he said. His smile ran ear to ear. "It's a camera."

I lowered the rifle from my cheek and examined it carefully, then brought it again to my shoulder and pulled the trigger. "You're getting a lot of pictures of the top of that building," Darren said, pointing to the Chief Café across the street.

I said, "Jesus Christ, it is a camera. Why—"

"Because there are parts of Pennsylvania where hunting is as big as it is here. I got tired of people using the fact I don't

like to kill things to prove I was a faggot. So I cut my losses. Cost me a bundle, but it was worth it. It would have cost far less, but I had to buy a pickup so I could mount a gun rack. Then I bought a red and black plaid jacket and a baseball cap that said, 'God, Guns, and Guns Made America Great' and by golly, I was one of the guys." He looked over the rifle with pride. "And I'm getting to be a pretty darn good wildlife photographer, too." He looked down. "At least I was. Let's go. If you like it, maybe I'll leave it to you."

"No, I couldn't—"

Darren put up his hand and smiled. "Don't hurt my feelings, man. I'm dying, remember?"

I crouched forward, leaning into my wide receiver's stance as Carter Sampson stood beside me with the ball, taking a make-believe snap. "Hut one, hut two, hut three . . ." and I drove down five steps, hard, and cut across the middle. The ball touched my fingertips, and I cut again instantly upfield. "Nice one," I said. "You're gonna be too good to believe, Cart. The U. doesn't know what a deal they got." I flipped the ball back to him.

I loved working out with Carter. We had spent all of last summer—the summer before our senior year—running laps and wind sprints, lifting weights, and running countless pass patterns. It was to be my year, two years of bench time about to pay off. By the end of the summer Carter knew my every move, could float the ball into my hands with his eyes closed. And he was my best friend, the kind of friend who could and would have taken me right to the top with him.

Then, in the second game of the year, Coach Lednecky ordered a chickenshit hit on Salmon River's black big-city-

transfer superstar, and I got moral. So much for Louie Banks's run at the N.F.L.

But when it was all said and done, and I looked back, the games were never it anyway. It was those summer workouts with Carter. Out on the field under the hot summer sun in my shorts and cleats with my best friend, who *was* a bona fide superstar, running pass routes and dropping for push-ups and sit-ups and planning our lives. That's what it was really all about for me. Later, when I became accustomed to my role as Louie Banks, the Guy Without the Stomach for It, I looked back, and the best part was still there. And here we were again, getting Cart ready for the U. I think I'll do just fine in the world never being great if I can just *touch* greatness once in a while.

"Sideline," Carter said. "All the marbles." He crouched into the position, "Hut one . . . hut two . . . hut three . . ." and I angled for the sideline, meeting it about ten yards out, then sprinting for the goal line. Carter dropped back—danced a little for show—patiently waiting for me to cover the distance, and unloaded. The ball dropped perfectly into my outstretched fingertips as I crossed the goal line. What a magical arm on that guy.

"Where you been the past couple of weeks?" he asked as I flipped him the ball.

"Right here. Remember me? Louie Banks, slowest wide receiver to ever stop a Carter Sampson bullet with his bare hands?"

"I meant nights."

"Just around, I guess." I felt embarrassed. "Been hanging out with Dakota's nephew some. Till he goes to work. Why? You been getting off early? Wanna do something?"

"Naw, I'm still working late. I just heard you been hanging out with that guy."

"Darren?"

"You just better be careful, buddy."

"Careful of what?" When in doubt, play stupid.

"Banks, I don't know whether you've figured it out or not, but Dakota's nephew is a faggot."

"What? You really think so?" It's hard for me to lie to Carter; he's my best friend, but I promised. At least he didn't know the other part. Yet.

"Come on, Louie. Look at the way he moves. Look at the way he talks. You ever see him with anyone? A girl, I mean?"

"Sampson, this is Trout, Idaho. I haven't seen you with a girl all summer either, but that doesn't mean you're a faggot. It just means there aren't many girls here. The guy's twenty-five years old. Who's he going to go out with?"

Carter looked away, like he always does when he thinks I'm being a dumbshit. "Okay, Banks. Just remember I warned you, all right?"

"All right." I was disappointed, having thought I could get through all this without losing anything. But what did I expect? Up until just a few weeks ago, when I walked the backwoods with Darren and his trusty 30.06 deer camera, learning to look at life for the last time, sucking in everything around him that smelled of mystery—and sharing it with me—a homosexual was just about the worst thing a guy could be. Homo. Switch hitter. Queer. Queen. Faggot. And some so bad I won't say them.

But he was just Darren. When I didn't have to worry about what anyone else was thinking, he was just a funny, sad guy with a chest bulging with the kind of courage I hoped to have

someday. In the face of death he could hold steady and take a perfect shot. He never made anything that felt like a pass at me, and he liked animals. And God, he was going to die.

I wondered what it must be like to be called those names when you're going to die. It would be bad enough if you were going to live. Maybe those names could make you *want* to die. Who knows? I sure didn't want to get into it with my best friend, though, and what I thought was this: If I keep spending time with him, I could lose Carter. I've seen that look in his eye before, and it's not one you argue with. Then Darren would be dead and my friend would be gone. Boy, nothin' comes cheap.

I ran patterns for another half hour or so, until I was really bushed; but we didn't talk much, and I could feel a thin wall going up between us, which scared me more than anything. I think when somebody important in your life dies, you get afraid to lose anyone else, and Carter was one of the few people who stuck with me through all the craziness of my last year, when I must have looked like the biggest bozo this side of Ringling Brothers. I was so afraid of losing him, hating to think of myself without someone as fine as Carter Sampson—or Becky Sanders—in my corner. One down . . .

I tried desperately the rest of that afternoon to catch every pass, as if that would help maintain our connection, because the look in Carter's eye had been hard when he said that word *faggot*, and I knew Darren's sexual preference wasn't a point Carter was willing to compromise on. I didn't understand yet that Darren's sexual preference required no compromise, that it was none of Carter Sampson's business. But in one way I was no better because I hadn't accepted it either. I just blocked it out, didn't think about it.

Carter plopped on the grass next to the steel frame of the blocking sled and dug into his workout bag, drew out a large bottle of Gatorade, offered it to me.

I took a long swig and handed it back. "Look," I said, "you might be right about Darren. I don't know. But he's okay. I mean, he's not trying anything with me, and he's kind of lonely, okay?"

Carter looked at me that way he does, without speaking, and took a long drink.

"Cart..."

"Better stay away from him, buddy."

"Maybe you're right," I said, and at that moment believed I would simply avoid Darren for the rest of the summer. No way I could afford to lose Carter, and besides, if Carter thought he was gay, then so did a lot of other guys, and I didn't need everyone thinking that about me. Not along with everything else.

"I am, right," he said back. "You're my friend. I don't give my friends bad advice." He stood to walk to his car.

AIDS didn't tarry. On the afternoon of July 19, two days after my birthday, I came home from my second job—pumping gas at Norm's service station—to find a message on Mom's answering machine: "Hey, Louie. Haven't seen you for a while. Look, I'm up in the county hospital for a while. Why don't you come up and see me if you get a chance?" There was no mistaking Darren's voice. I mean, in one sense Carter was right. He did sound like what you think of as gay. Stereotype or not, that's what he sounded like.

God, I didn't want to go. My commitment to Carter aside, the remembrance of death was so fresh I could almost smell it, plus I'd seen enough news stories on TV and pictures in the paper to

know some of the bad things AIDS usually does before it lets you go, and I was really afraid to see that up close. But *because* of last winter, I knew there isn't any time to hesitate or be squeamish about death. It comes when it wants, and whether you're the one going or the one staying, you better have your shit in order, or you're going to wind up hating yourself for all you wish you'd done. A day hasn't gone by that I didn't wish I'd said one more thing to Becky, or touched her one more time, or told her who she was to me.

I should have parked around back, out of sight of the main road, but I pulled up directly in front of the main entrance. The rooms are small, and Darren was back by himself all the way at the end of the hall behind the front desk. There were probably only three or four other patients in the whole place. I remember wondering if they put him back there in case anyone in town figured out why he was in there, so nobody would have to go by his room.

The worst part is nobody touches you.

"Hey, man," I said at the doorway, "how you doin'?"

"Been better," he said.

I stood there, nodding my head.

He said, "Come on in. I'm no more contagious than I ever was."

"What happened?"

"Sometimes it just comes after you," he said. "Any little old germ just has its way. You have nothing to fight back with."

I knew Darren couldn't have lost much weight in such a short time, but he looked like he'd dropped about fifteen pounds, most of it around his eyes. I walked on into the room and sat in a metal chair beside his bed.

"Guess I don't look so hot, huh?"

I shook my head. "Not so hot."

He said, "Tell me about Becky."

"What do you want to know?"

"I want to know what it's like to be left behind, what happens to the people who don't die. I'm worried about the people I love."

No time for anything but the truth. "Well, it hurts," I said. "A lot. You get angry that you didn't do every little thing just right when the person was alive, and you get angry at the person for dying. It's crazy, I know, but you do. And sometimes you hate everybody in the world who isn't feeling as much pain as you are, and as much as anything you hate God, if you can still believe in Him, for not stepping up and fixing things."

Darren looked up at the ceiling, and there were tears in the corners of his eyes. "That's not how I want it to be," he said. I remembered Dakota's words to me and said, "Well, Darren, that's the way it is."

He was quiet a minute. Then he looked over at me and took a deep breath. He said, "Louie, would you hold my hand?"

To this day, I hate myself for what I almost said. I almost said no. And it wasn't because I was afraid I'd get AIDS. It was the other reason. But I love myself for what I did say. I said yes. I said yes, and I reached over and put his hand between both of mine. It was real awkward, and I know he probably felt that; but I did it. And I'm glad because now I don't have to look back and wish.

It's funny. It's almost as if we weren't in Trout anymore. Nothing inside that room was like anything else in my life. As I sat with his fingers sandwiched in mine, I thought again about what it must be to go through the last part of your life without being touched. Especially if it happened

when you were only twenty-five. Becky and I had touched each other all the time. I don't know how I could live now if we hadn't.

I told Darren about all the good memories I had of Becky and how I'd get together with her dad once in awhile and just talk about her—how we kept the good things about her alive by mentioning them, how people who die can actually stay alive through the people who cared about them and learned things from them. I told him I still talked to her. And I promised I would talk about him, too.

Then I looked up and saw Carter standing in the doorway. He said, "I saw your car..."

Instinctively I jerked my hands free from Darren's, but it was too late. Carter grimaced and shook his head, then walked away. Darren opened his eyes in time to see Carter's back, and I think he sank a little. If there's one thing I could change about all that happened, it would be that moment.

I saw Darren one more time before they transferred him to the hospital in Boise, though he didn't see me. I went for a visit; but Dakota was there, and I didn't want to interrupt, so I stood in the doorway. Dakota was up on the bed with him, his grizzled old arms around Darren's shoulders, and he was kind of petting Darren's head with his good hand.

"... really scared, Uncle Gene. Really scared."

"You'd be damn fool not to be."

"I wish I could clear things up with Mom and Dad."

"Some things are just too hard," Dakota said. "Your daddy just don't have the heart for it. He's gonna be real sorry, boy, an' I'll sure tell him what you wanted for him."

"He just couldn't understand about me being gay. I tried to tell him—"

"I don't understand it neither," Dakota said, "but it ain't the point. The point is you're blood. An' you're sick. An' you're a good boy. Somebody oughta rap your daddy one alongside his head, but I don't reckon it'd do much good."

"You'll tell him, though."

"I'll tell him."

Darren shifted a bit to get more comfortable, his eyes still closed. "About Louie..."

Dakota looked up at me in the doorway. He'd known I was there all along. "Louie'll be fine," he said. "That's not a boy you need to worry about."

Darren relaxed. "See that he gets the camera, okay?"

"Done."

"Tell him if he gets tired of talking to Becky, he can talk to me."

Confusion passed briefly over Dakota's face, but he said, "I'll tell him."

"Uncle Gene, I wish I understood this. I only learned I was gay a couple of years ago, and then, before I even got to deal with that, I was sick, and now I'm almost gone. I've been a Christian all my life and a pretty good person, I think. I haven't stolen, or lied more than the next guy, or cheated anyone out of much. There are all these things I was supposed to learn, and it just feels like I need more time to learn them, but I'm not going to be here."

From across the room I saw Dakota smile. "You're gettin' the crash course," he said. "I think there's only one lesson if you want the truth. I think we're just supposed to see how far we can go in whatever time we get. I figure a lesson you learn on the last day of your life is as good as one you learn on your tenth birthday. It don't much matter when you step

up and face things. It just matters that you do. I guess your time's here for that."

Darren was strangely quiet then, for what seemed like minutes. Just when I thought he must have gone to sleep, he opened his eyes and looked at Dakota. "You're right," he said. "That's all there is left: to see how far I can get. I need to experience every minute of it, no matter how scared I am." He was quiet a moment more. Then he smiled. "In that second before I go, I'll know something almost nobody else knows." He closed his eyes. "Will you stay with me, Uncle Gene?"

Dakota held him tight, and it's the only time ever that I saw a tear in his eye. He told me later it was an honor to walk to the edge with a true hero.

Darren silently cried himself to sleep; but he was still smiling, and Dakota stayed. I went to my pickup and drove to the woods.

"Long time," I said, stepping from the pickup. I reached into the bag in the back and pulled out a football, flipping it to Carter.

"Yeah," he said.

"You quit throwing for a while?"

He looked right at me. "Nope. Been throwin' to Mark Robeson some. A little to Boomer."

"Boomer. You must really be pissed at me."

"I told you that Darren guy was a fag," he said.

"I already knew it."

Carter shook his head. "Now we all find out he had AIDS. I suppose you knew that, too."

"Yup."

"Man, Banks. I don't get you. I thought we were supposed to be friends."

"We are supposed to be friends," I said.

"So what kind of a guy hangs out with a homo with AIDS and doesn't tell his friends? AIDS is serious shit, man. When it's around, everybody should know it. What if somebody caught it somehow?"

I started to answer. I started to say I wasn't doing anything that could give me AIDS and neither was Carter so he didn't have to worry. I started to say how being careful is one thing, but being crazy is another—and to tell Carter what it was like to look a dying man in the eye, how much bigger my heart was. But I didn't. I didn't say any of those things because I was getting ready to lose him. "Look, Cart, I don't have AIDS, okay? Let's just throw some balls."

He was steamed, and the first four or five passes came so hard they almost went through me, but I held on to every one, jogging back and flipping him the ball as if he'd just floated another feather onto my fingertips. We didn't talk anymore, and that was the last time we worked out before leaving for our respective colleges.

I think I passed Carter up that day. All my life I've wanted to be like him, be able to throw a football fifty yards through a tire or pop a twenty-five-foot jumper or drive through the streets of Trout leaning back in my bucket seat with an elbow out the window, people on the sidewalk truly believing I owned the town. But that day I was bigger. That was the day, knowing all I had to lose, I quietly turned and stood my ground.

I'm in college now. I made the cross-country team. I'm not the best they've got, not the worst. But I'm going to do what I heard Dakota tell my dead friend Darren. I'm going to see how far I can go in the time I get.