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FICTION Stories

Christopher David Ewald

I WAS IN NEW YORK to administer the cure for the AIDS pandemic. I'd booked a reasonably priced flight into JFK and flagged a cab as soon as I hit the curb.

The driver insisted I stow my laptop in the trunk along with my suitcase. He appeared to be from somewhere in Africa and when I got in back I saw by his ID that his name was Macoma.

"The hospital," I directed. "And step on it, Mac."

"Which hospital," he asked without the trace of an accent.

"What do you mean?"

"There's a hundred hospitals in this city. Which one you want?"

"The closest one," I said, and we were off.

I entered through the front of the hospital and recoiled at all the people lying in rollaway beds on either side of the hall. Some were bleeding, others broken. I felt sad walking past them.

I went up to the counter and said, "I'd like the room for Christopher Coe, please."

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The man across from me looked as if we were in an unfunny sitcom, and I had to repeat the question. "Yeah I know, I heard," he said. "You a friend or relative?"

"Friend. Definitely friend," I said.

"Let me check."

He typed some on his keyboard, shook his head, sighed and stood up. "Wait here," he said.

I followed him around corners and through rooms, past massive whiteboards and wall charts marked with names he scanned on by. After several minutes he stopped, turned and stared at me, like an animal.

"What did I tell you?"

"But this is a matter of utmost life or death."

"You're tellin' me."

"I am telling you," I said, shocked. "I need to find Christopher Coe."

"He doesn't appear to be here. When was he admitted?"

"I don't know exactly when, but it was probably sometime in 1993, around the publication of his second and last novel."

We were still in the sitcom.

"Man, what are you talking about?"

"Isn't he here? Haven't you been taking care of him?"

"This is the emergency room. No one's been here that long."

"But... haven't you even heard of Christopher Coe?"

"Look, man. There's a cop down the hall. If you don't take your computer and your suitcase and clear out of here in the next minute I'm gonna call her over and then we'll see who's being taken care of."

I took an elevator to an unspecified floor and tried asking around another area of the hospital. But no one knew. Christopher Coe was on no list of any kind in any database, not even that of memory. What gave? Didn't they have Internet access? Hadn't they searched his name in quotations? Weren't they aware that Christopher Coe grew up in San Francisco but moved to New York in his later years? That he divided his time between New York and Paris, and that because of this he was likely quite wealthy? That he was a contributor to Harper's magazine (the story "Easy" in the August 1986 issue), author of two novels, *I Look Divine* and *Such Times*, the latter released a year before his death at the age of 41 from complications brought about by AIDS?

What I knew about AIDS. *Philadelphia. Angels in America. And the Band Played On*. That one after-school special that fires up with John Cougar Mellencamp's "Little Pink Houses" while shots of small town Indiana life fly by.

I had searched all over the world for the cure before finding it in Toronto, in a laboratory on the university campus. For five days I'd staked out the lab before sneaking in and swiping the cure off a technician's desk. The rats thanked me. I

spent the remainder of my time in that foreign city, freezing for late October, seated at a table in the St. Lawrence Market, nursing a bowl of Manhattan clam chowder. A young Hungarian woman sat across from me and I repeated the phrases she spoke in her own language. She stopped only once to ask me in English whether or not I was happy, and I answered yes, I was, unbearably so.

After New York I would travel to Africa, to dirt roads and dead animals, aspiring novelists and celebrities. I had a flight booked for Cairo already. From the entry point I would work my way south along the Nile in a catamaran piloted by a queen. The bribe would be ready at the border with Sudan. Whoever needed the cure would receive it. Christopher Coe would be only the first saved.

I was just about to sit down in the hall and turn on my laptop when I saw a room I hadn't yet been in. There was a figure behind the curtain even before I drew it. The figure was propped up in bed with tubes running out of his nose and mouth. He had short straight hair parted in the middle, just like in his author photo from the Vintage Contemporaries edition of *I Look Divine*, patchy in places and falling over half his forehead. As I approached his bed I knew. It was him. It was Christopher Coe.

"I'm sorry I'm late," I said. "I couldn't find much of you on the Internet. There's just not a lot there. Your name drew up only a few hits. Even mine gets more."

He looked pale, emaciated, unfit for

viewing hours. A lesion like a mole crept up his neck and another plopped itself on the skin above his upper cheekbone. He swiveled his head like a turret, twice, back and forth.

"Don't deny it," I continued. "But you can get better. Here. I have something for you. I'm here to save you, Chris."

He made as if to cough out the tube in his mouth. I reached to aid him in his effort. Free to speak now, he whispered, "Please. Call me Christopher."

"All right, Christopher. Take this."

I held out the bottle but he did not move. Maybe he couldn't. I was supposed to give it to him then. I unscrewed the cap and he said, "What is that?"

"It's the cure. For AIDS."

"It's NyQuil."

"No. It's the cure for AIDS."

I leaned in toward him, the bottle poised above his mouth. "Open."

"Piss off."

"Christopher," I sighed. "If you don't take this cure you're going to die."

"I am dead," he insisted.

I withdrew, the bottle capped by my thumb. "You used too many commas," I told him.

"Excuse me?"

"Your prose. Both your novels are currently ranked in the millions behind so

many self-published books. Don't you want to increase your sales?"

"In the millions," he wheezed.

"In the several millions. *I Look Divine* is only 1,648,074 on the Internet sales list, and *Such Times* is faring even worse. Rank number 5,678,708 at last look. Even a self-help guide published by a ninety year-old widower out of his home in Kansas is outselling it."

"I'm sorry?"

"You shouldn't have let your publisher put in your *I Look Divine* author bio that bit about what you were currently working on. Because you never finished it."

"I did finish it," Christopher said. On the chair next to his bed I saw a manuscript, a collection of stories that was due out in 1991. I flipped through all 111 pages.

"It's a bad title," I said. "*Rich People Having Fun*. Of course they're having fun. They're rich."

"Take it," he said. "Give it to the first person you see."

After slipping the manuscript into my suitcase, I sat in the chair next to Christopher's bed and held his lesion-laden hand. "I'd like to say that's enough, but the truth is you could do so much more if you were alive. Seriously. If you only took the cure, and then got online and created a profile..."

"What do you mean, profile?"

"You don't know? Huh. Okay. I

understand the Internet as we know it today was in its infancy in 1994. Fair enough. But the company's come so far since then. You really should see it for yourself, Christopher. It's the world as we know it now. Everything's happening there. Everything. People live in worlds, worlds they create. You don't have to be alive to do it, but it helps if you are. So come on, man. Drink this down, get yourself up out of that bed and get online already. Creating a personal profile takes what, like, five minutes max... Here. I'll even help you get started using my computer."

Christopher tried to turn away then, on his side, but I held fast. He spat, "I am not doing anything but dying."

"But... you can choose the latest cool music from your favorite garage band to play on your page every time someone views it."

Christopher succeeded in yanking his hand from mine, and I went after it. After some struggle consisting of swatting and clawing, I again grasped his hand, this time even stronger.

"Tell me about your childhood in San Francisco," I said.

"You first," he said. "Tell me about your childhood in San Francisco."

"I didn't grow up in San Francisco."

"Yes you did. I saw you in the Marina holding your mother's hand in 1964. You were eight, I was eleven."

"I wasn't alive in 1964." I let go of his hand. "My mother was twelve."

"And I was eleven," Christopher whispered, eyes closed. He hacked horribly. "Oh why does this have to be so difficult. Nurse. Nurse! Send me home to my apartment where I belong, please. I'm supposed to be there now. My end's less than a week away. Nurse!"

"The nurse can't help you," I explained. "Only I can. Please. Take the cure."

"No. I'm dying there."

"Take this."

He clamped his mouth shut in anticipation of the pour.

"Damnit, Christopher. Don't you want to be part of the world?"

"It's enough," he yelled and sat up in my face. The tubes flew out of his nostrils when he snorted. I was thrown back from the bed and into the chair. Christopher was beginning to rise. I grabbed a pillow from behind his body and pushed it into his face, forcing him back down. He tried to wiggle his head but I wouldn't let him. His claws beat at the sides of my head but missed my eyes. I pressed on. At last his struggles ceased. I released the pillow and looked around for the cure. The bottle was lying tipped over on the ground, a bloody trail stretching.

I started to cry as I picked up the bottle and saved what little I could. When I returned to Christopher I saw that he was gone, the bed had been made, the flowers

had been removed. A woman in white
stood next to me. She touched my arm.

"Sir," she said, "I'm sorry for your loss."

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