

Away in a Manger

by Gary Paul Kroening

I met "Little" Stanyan when I first moved to San Francisco in 1982. I was new to the city, fresh off the bus and hungry for everything it had to offer. Within a month, I met my first boyfriend, Kevin. I'd been living a block away from him for barely a week before I moved in with him and his three roommates in the Haight — a free-spirit arrangement that could fill a book of its own. Little Stanyan was Duane's troubled boyfriend. Cute, mischievous, and razor-quick with his mouth. Over the years that followed, he and I crossed paths almost exclusively when I needed to score drugs. He was my middleman. I was his Court Jester.

Little Stanyan — LS, from here on — was out of work on disability from the Ritz Carlton, done in by AIDS. He'd been off for over a year by the time I really got to know him, and his health was slipping fast, dragged down by a relentless addiction to methamphetamine. He used with the devotion of a monk — Crystal was his only comfort in a life that had twisted itself into something unrecognizable.

There was a stretch of time when we both got sober. His lasted five months; mine lasted a year and a half. That was the happiest time I ever had with him, and I mean that without any softness or sentimentality. For the first time, I was genuinely celebrating life with someone I used to get high with, and there wasn't a drug in sight between us. It was night and day. We had money. We had real friends. We actually gave a damn about each other.

That didn't last, of course. Nothing that good does. By 1994 I was back to using weekly, and Stanyan's apartment in Pacific Heights had become my regular stop. He'd hit a vein; I'd snort a line. There was one afternoon I won't forget — he was trying to hit himself, but his hands were shaking so badly he couldn't do it. He asked me to do it for him. I got the needle to his skin and then couldn't stop talking, telling him to relax, calm down, breathe. That drove him out of his mind. And then I said, probably without thinking, *"Maybe your hands are shaking because God doesn't want you to do it."*

He called it off.

I was a professional at saying the wrong thing at exactly the right time. Truth is relentless that way.

As his health declined and my conscience clawed in the opposite direction, I started doing small things for him. He was burning every dollar on drugs, so he'd taken to washing his

clothes in the bathtub. I remember walking into his apartment one afternoon and finding the tub filled to the brim with sopping, heavy laundry — globs of undiluted detergent clinging to everything like wet cement.

"Come help me twist my comforter," he said, wrestling the thing across the edge of the tub. It had to weigh twice what he did, which wasn't saying much anymore. Stanyan was down to about ninety-eight pounds.

I was there to buy drugs, so when he said jump, I jumped. There was never any question about who held the power in that apartment. Once I scored, I was gone — back under my rock, quick as smoke.

But something was shifting in me. I started wanting to take care of him. I felt a responsibility to his spirit that had nothing to do with the needle in his arm or the pipe on his coffee table. I had to look past all of it and see him for what he actually was: a trapped bird, flapping wildly in an oil pond.

Needle or not, LS was a more decent human being than most people I've ever known. On more occasions than I can count, he'd saved my ass — fed me, sheltered me, guided me. The fact that his addiction had grown bigger than mine didn't make him smaller. His door was always open to me. Maybe too open for his own good. Mine certainly was.

By the time his life was in full tailspin, the apartment had gone to ruin right along with his body. I was there one afternoon when Project Open Hand arrived with his meal. The doorbell rang just as he took a long pull off his pipe, and mid-exhale he croaked at me: *"Get that for meeeeeee... Upph."* A long breath of smoke, and then he folded onto the floor.

I moved to help him up. He waved me off.

"No — get the door, or they'll leave with my food."

I navigated to the front door by stepping on — and I mean directly stepping on — clothing, because there was not one free inch of floor space that wasn't covered in what I came to think of as tweak debris. I got the meal from the smiling bald man at the door and shut it behind me.

Later that same afternoon, a dealer stopped by. Stanyan coaxed him into fronting a small bag on credit. And standing there, watching the transaction play out, the full weight of what I was doing hit me with the clarity of a slap.

I was using a dying man to score my drugs. I was waking up a corpse to cop.

I had actually outdone myself.

LS had lost control of his bowels. He'd mumble in his fog, mid-shuffle across the apartment, *"Oh God, more's coming out now,"* then wander into the kitchen for a frozen Popsicle. When I asked what was happening, he said, without blinking, *"I'm shitting in my pants. The herpes sores are so bad I can't hold anything anymore. I've just been stuffing rags in my pants."*

From that day forward, I told him I would do his laundry. It gave me a reason to be there beyond feeding the monkey.

He wasn't lying about the rags. Every week I carried them to the laundromat, holding my breath as I dumped them into the machine.

It wasn't that LS was a pig. It wasn't that he lacked self-respect. It wasn't that he had no class.

It was that he was in the final stages of AIDS, and his body had completely imploded on him.

Strong and determined — but only in his mind now — he refused to tell his family the true state of things. He wouldn't consider hospitalization. He wouldn't put his situation on anyone else's shoulders. He couldn't bear the thought of being taken away from the last thing he still had.

His home.

His independence, the quality he'd always worn like armor, had become the very thing working against him.

One evening after work, I went over to score. It was my weekend, and I needed to disappear from the world for a while. What cut me open wasn't the apartment, or Stanyan's condition — I'd been looking past those for months. It was the look on the dealer's face when he handed LS the bag. Empty. Practiced. Already somewhere else.

"Jesus Christ," I said under my breath.

The dealer glanced at me. *"There's nothing I can do."*

He wasn't wrong, I thought later. There was nothing he could do. But there was a hell of a lot that I could.

The next morning, I got on the phone and called San Francisco General Hospital — my chaperone, over the years, for more dying friends than I care to count. A kind woman answered. I told her everything. I told her I had a friend in the late stages of AIDS, and that I believed he had become, in the truest sense of the word, demented. That he was incoherent. That he was stuffing rags in his pants because his body had stopped obeying him. That my real fear was that he'd leave something on the stove and burn the building down — because there was certainly enough clutter in that apartment to fuel a fire.

She asked about my relationship with him.

I told her the truth: I went over there to buy drugs. But I couldn't watch him live that way anymore.

She listened. Then she mapped out a plan. I would call Stanyan, tell him I was coming over, and get inside. She would arrive shortly after with paramedics, and they'd assess the situation themselves. I agreed.

I called LS. He told me to bring toilet paper, Pop-Tarts, and Band-Aids for his feet. The skin on the soles had cracked so badly it was catching on the carpet and tearing open. There were small bloodstains scattered across the floor like a trail no one had followed. I said I would, hung up the phone, and walked out of my apartment to turn him in.

On the walk to Cala Foods, I turned the whole thing over in my head.

What in the hell am I doing? On my day off, I am orchestrating the institutionalization of my friend of twelve years — because he is dying of AIDS and can no longer take care of himself. Why is this my mission? Why do I care more than his parents? More than his ex-lover, who lives in the apartment directly below him? Why me — the guy who only shows up to score drugs and then disappears, leaving him to his torment? The shitrag washer?

Because he was always there for me. That's why.

Let me be the heavy. Let me be the bastard who shuts him out of his freedom and puts him in a hospice. Me — the speed freak, the hustler, the one who kept showing up for the wrong reasons and somehow wound up being the only one who showed up at all. I took the liberty to do what no one else could bring themselves to do.

I was the self-appointed assassin of his freedom.

I bought the Pop-Tarts, the toilet paper, the Band-Aids, and walked to his door.

I arrived at four o'clock. The Mobile Unit was set for four-fifteen. I rang, he buzzed me in. I had to pry the door open — a wrought-iron bed frame that someone had dragged inside had toppled and was blocking it from behind. The dealer who "couldn't do anything" had apparently been busy enough.

LS was moving through his apartment like a man hearing music no one else could. Slow, deliberate, following some internal rhythm. He was talking about Duane — his old boyfriend, who had died the year before without ever telling Stanyan he was sick. He drifted to the weather, which was warm and clear for once, and asked if I'd gotten the Pop-Tarts.

"Yeah, here."

No response. I couldn't see him from the kitchen table, so I looked into the living room. He wasn't there. I found him in the bathroom — sitting on the toilet, his arm resting on the edge of the sink, moaning softly that he needed to get up and find a cigarette.

I stepped back into the middle of the apartment and took it all in. One long, slow look.

If you could gather everything Goodwill had already rejected, pour grief on one side of it and sickness on the other, backlight it with a thirty-five watt bulb, and press play on a record with no label — that was LS's life. That was what remained of it.

The knock on the kitchen door came at four-fifteen.

Molly was there, cell phone in one hand, walkie-talkie in the other. I leaned in and whispered: *"Come on in. He's in the bathroom. I'm not sure he's awake."*

She stepped inside, two paramedics behind her. Her purse caught the cat litter box on the way down the hall — the one that hadn't been tended to since, as God is my witness, Christ left Chicago. The smell bloomed outward and swallowed the room. Everyone moved in slow motion, searching for somewhere to put their feet without breaking something. To us, it all looked like rubble. To Stanyan, every piece of it mattered.

Molly announced herself.

"Whoa!!!"

That one word said everything — shock, recognition, betrayal, comprehension. Then he went quiet, and in a voice that had found its composure somewhere on the way down, he said he'd be out in just a few minutes. Molly told him to take his time, that she'd wait outside while he packed a bag.

We gathered on the sidewalk as the fog began rolling in off the bay. I pulled Molly aside and asked her quietly — needing someone to tell me — if I'd done the right thing.

She stopped. Looked at me directly. *"Hell yes."*

I turned away from her and watched the fog curl over the rooflines, and I thought about freedom — what it looks like when it leaves a place.

What none of us anticipated was that the moment we stepped outside, LS slammed the gate shut and locked his apartment door behind him. Locked in. Us locked out.

Molly pounded on the window. *"Stanyan — Stanyan, you have to come out. The police will break the door in. Listen to me—"*

"I'll be out in a minute," he yelled.

She got on the phone and called for backup. The firehouse sat right next to his building, and the Captain stepped out, assessed the situation, and summoned his crew. Within moments, five firemen in full gear were walking toward us — each one carrying an axe.

"Oh my God," I said. Then I leaned into the window and let it fly, because it was the most honest thing I could think of: *"Stanyan — there are five firemen walking this way, and every one of them has an axe, and I am not shitting you!"*

The five were nearly at the door, debating their point of entry, when we heard it — the iron bed frame scraping across the floor, and then the doorknob turning. And there was Little Stanyan, stepping out as bright and easy as a man who'd just decided to take a Sunday stroll. Perky. Composed. That was always his way — meet the bad thing with a smile and dare it to blink first.

He said he was ready.

He walked toward the ambulance, and then, just before he reached it, he stopped. He turned around on the ball of his shoe and looked me dead in the center, and said:

"And you — I will never forgive."

Then he turned back around and got in.

The next morning at seven, Molly called me, furious. SF General had released him overnight — no available beds. Could I help get her back into the apartment?

"If you think he's going to trust me right now," I started.

"Just get over here."

I got dressed and ran. When I arrived, Stanyan was already outside, dressed neatly in a small blue vest. I smiled when I saw it — couldn't help myself — because I recognized that vest. It had a hidden interior lining. I knew exactly what he'd done. The moment he'd been left alone in that apartment, he had swept it clean of every drug he could find. And now he was wearing them.

He caught me looking. A slow smirk crossed his face — that old mischievous grin, the one that had never really gone away, no matter what the disease had taken.

"That's a nice vest," I said. "I really like the lining. Wh—"

He cut me off. Thanked me. Got into the ambulance and pulled the door shut behind him. A paramedic had to open it again for Molly, who was left standing at the curb.

I walked home through the morning with the sun at my back, and I was not sure about a single thing in the world.

A few weeks later, word came back through the grapevine. His mother had asked his ex-lover to pass along her thanks. That I had done what no one else had been willing to do.

It wasn't that no one else was capable. They were. Every single one of them. They were just afraid of the repercussions — afraid of being the one who made the call, who changed things, who couldn't take it back.

How any of them slept before he was in a hospice is something I'll never understand. AIDS and death do different things to different people. It was not the first time I had turned in a friend who had gone over the edge. It would not be the last.

LS lived for eight months after what I can only call his arrest. He had full visitation rights — free to come and go as he pleased. Kevin, my first boyfriend, who like me has managed to outlive the epidemic, told me later that all of Stanyan's visitors were eventually searched, because he'd built himself a small but reliable drug-smuggling network from inside the hospice.

That kind of determination, I have nothing but respect for.

When I heard he had died, I sat with it for a while, and then I thought: *I wonder if Stanyan, in his permanent state of tweak, even realizes he's gone. He probably just thinks he's really high.*

Well.

Actually, he is.

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