

'My idea of a perfect book ... I cried several times while reading it, and was sorry to let it go when I was done. I cannot recommend it enough'

Jami Attenberg, author of *The Middlesteins*



They're
Going
To
Love
You

Meg Howrey

BLOOMSBURY

Gods

Feel what I feel.

Stand with your legs together, toes pointing forward. Open your hips so the backs of your knees are touching. Slide the heel of one foot in front of the other until it meets the toes. This is fifth position.

Under certain conditions (flexibility, training) your two feet will be firmly locked together: heel to toe and toe to heel. Your knees will be straight, your pelvis will sit squarely above your knees. It's not natural but it *is* elegant. Da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* but pulled together and not human spreading all over the place.

Contained.

Fifth is a position to begin things from. Fifth is a frequent point of return. It's also itself. Movement. Dance, even if it is still.

See what I see.

James is teaching class. He wears a soft T-shirt and a pair of loose sweatpants. The soles of his dance sneakers are split like

ballet slippers so he can demonstrate a pointed toe more easily. He's a little vain about his feet, their high arches.

"... And contain," James says, as the dancers close their legs to fifth position. "... And contain."

The class—at an Upper West Side New York City studio—is by invitation or introduction only and filled with professionals. I picture the dancers, spaced out along the barres lining three sides of the room. I see the additional freestanding barres in the center, a spot where I might have stood. I'm not there. This is part of a story that was told to me.

James is prowling the studio in his soft clothes, his soft shoes. Not prowling. Gliding. He doesn't appear to scrutinize the dancers, but they're aware of his gaze, mild but penetrating.

"... And contain," he says.

The dancers think they know what he means by *containment*. He's asking them to keep their upper bodies still and placed, to not let the motions of the legs disturb the carriage of the torso. To come firmly to fifth position and not rush through or blur the moment. James means a little more than that. He *always* means a little more. He raises his hand and says, "Thank you, Masha," which is Masha's cue to stop playing the Chopin mazurka she's been plunking out with heavy-handed precision. Masha lifts her hands from the keyboard and picks up the *New York Post*.

James walks slowly to one of the center barres, where everyone in the room can see him.

"Containment," says James, "is one of the things ballet gives us." He takes fifth position on demi-pointe: heels raised, balancing. He's not demonstrating technical perfection; he is middle-aged and wearing sneakers. He's demonstrating intention.

James steps out of fifth position, impatient with his body. "Music tells us to move, to dance," he says. "But when we are

still *within* music, we absorb all of its power. We are its container. Not every movement needs to go out into the world. We can keep some for ourselves. Contained. Powerful.”

James smiles.

“Restraint,” he says. His voice confers full sensuality to the word. “Restraint.”

Such a subtle thing to describe. “Other side,” he says, with a nod to Masha, who rustles her paper down. The dancers turn and place their right hands on the barre. It’s still morning, still barre, but the dancers feel James has said something beautiful, or true, or deep. It’s why they’re here. Even when his words don’t make perfect sense, they create an atmosphere that is pleasurable. It’s nice to be reminded one is an artist, especially on a Monday, with a full week of rehearsals ahead and a weird pain in your hip.

James looks across the studio, scanning the dancers. To teach is to hope.

His gaze falls on Alex, although he doesn’t remember his name. The boy had been brought along by one of James’s regular students and introduced as “My friend visiting from Atlanta Ballet.”

James has been observing dancers, teaching dancers, a long time. His assessments are swift. He looks at Alex and thinks, *Nice but stiff, maybe a late starter, the body is good but—*

James stops. It’s been so long since he’s been surprised.

Imagine what I imagine.

Alex has been listening hard.

“Contained.”

“Being still *within* music.”

“Restraint.”

Something turns over in Alex’s mind, like a combination lock sliding into its last number.

He raises his heels, shifts his weight to the balls of his feet, recrosses his legs. He lifts his arms. He is still.

James watches.

The music plays. Masha vamps, giving the dancers time to find their balance, “find their center,” as they say.

What Alex finds is that his body has changed. Somehow, James’s words are within him. He understands he is a container. For music, for movement. These are things he can hold and control. It’s a small click of rightness that opens everything. He’s never felt like this without drugs.

This boy, this young man, did, in fact, come to ballet late and his love for it still embarrasses him. The culture, the music, the costumes, none of it is “for” him. He’s a straight man, a mixed-race American kid, a lower middle-class boy. He should be putting his coordination, his strength and flexibility, to use in some other field. Why should he prance around stage in makeup and tights, pretending to be a prince?

In his teens, he justified his obsession by calling it an escape, an opportunity, a place to meet hot girls. He could jump and he could turn. He was a boy; he got scholarships. Now, his career has started and he’s ambitious. He doesn’t understand why he’s also a little depressed. He doesn’t like the way he dances.

He wants it all to mean something. Ballet. His life, maybe.

Now, in James’s class, for the first time, he sees how he might *make* something. In stillness. With his body, which is not perfect, and his mind, which is a total shitshow. He’s twenty-two.

He’s beautiful. He’s making beauty.

He doesn’t feel like a man or a kid or a boy.

He feels like a god. “But not in an asshole way.” (This is what Alex tells me, when I hear his side of the story. Except for style

and point of view, it's the same as James's version. If they were unreliable narrators, they were—in this—a perfect pair.)

James watches Alex feel like a god.

Perhaps a bar of light penetrates the speckled grime of a nearby window and goldens Alex's cheek, his clavicle, a sinew of his raised arm. The features of his face are too harsh for conventional beauty, but everyone looks noble in chiaroscuro.

"Yes," says James, nodding at the young man and raising a finger. "That's exactly what I mean. Beautiful."

Alex looks at James. Confirmation. He's not crazy. What he feels is real and someone sees it. James.

James finds himself shaping the class around the young man, testing strengths and probing weaknesses. He watches his words take shape in the boy's body. It's one kind of power to understand, and another to *bestow* understanding. James feels something in his chest and notices that he's happy. When class ends, he sits on a little chair in the corner for a few minutes, approachable. He accepts gratitude and exchanges gossip. Alex hangs back, wanting a little privacy. Later, he will tell James he was afraid he might embarrass himself, say something stupid. Words aren't his thing. But when it's just the two of them and James is looking at him with kindness and interest, he does his best.

"I learned more in the past ninety minutes than I've learned in my whole fucking life," Alex says. "I'm going to be in New York for the summer. I want to, I mean, is there a way I can study with you? Is there a way, even, I don't know if you coach privately or, maybe we could, I don't know."

What he wants to say is "I feel as if I've only now been born."

"Yes," says James, in just the right way. With gravity, with depth. "Let's work together. All right."

“I need—” Alex says, and then stops. He needs a lot. “I need someone to—” He can’t finish the sentence. It’s not that he needs help, although he does need that. But help has been given to him. He’s a man who wants to dance ballet, he’s had no trouble being seen. What he needs is for someone to help him see himself. He needs love. He needs a friend. He needs beauty. He needs someone to talk to him about art. He needs—

“I understand,” says James.

This is what I remember.

James is telling me about meeting Alex. We’re in our usual positions at Bank Street, where my father and James live. (I don’t live there, I visit.) Bank Street is what everyone calls the apartment, as if it were the only one on the block. It’s the parlor floor of a four-story brownstone, the apartment purchased in 1975 by my father with money from an inheritance. James sits at the piano in the large front room, and I’m perched nearby, on the rolling library steps that serve the tall bookcases by the windows. The steps don’t roll very well and have been much clawed by the cats.

I don’t live at Bank Street, have never done so, but in my heart, this is my home.

James and I are family and not. Teacher-student, and not.

Confidants, and not.

I could be his daughter, but I’m not.

My father and James have recently started using the word *partner* for each other. James used to say *companion*. I’ve never heard either one use *boyfriend* or *lover*. They’ve been together for twenty-three years.

I love James very much. I love my father too.

Or: my father, I love, and James I sort of want to *be*. Maybe I mean: *have*? I’m twenty-four.

I haven’t met Alex yet. I will soon.

They're Going to Love You

"I'm not a young person anymore," James says. He folds his arms and frowns at the keyboard. "At a certain point—and I've reached it—you realize your moment has passed. You won't achieve those dreams of youth. You have to make new dreams. But I don't *have* any new dreams."

He plays a single note on the piano.

"It's not about me," he says. "It's wanting the things I care about to continue. To give that to someone else. Otherwise, everything I care about dies with me."

He plays a few chords. The piano needs tuning.

"That's not quite true," he says. "One wants another *chance* at things."

I think I understand about wanting another chance at things, and I'm only twenty-four.

"Oh, Carlisle." He almost smiles. "You know what's more terrible than giving up a dream? To discover you *haven't*."

He might be crying.

"It's not about this boy," he says. "You do see that?"

And then—

"Is it worth it? All this—" He shuts his eyes. "All this *wreckage*."

I'm not sure what he means by *wreckage*. Himself? His career? His relationship with my father?

Perhaps he only means *life*.

Summons

It's a shocking phone call. Not because it's a surprise but because it's so close to what I expected. Things never happen exactly the way you envision, but this really *is* James, saying that Robert's health has been increasingly bad and now they're nearing the end. It's mostly a matter of making Robert as comfortable as possible. They are thinking in terms of weeks, not months.

Robert. My father.

Nearing the end. As comfortable as possible. Even the sound of James's voice saying *Oh, Carlisle*. I had them all right. Perhaps not so remarkable. These are the things one says.

James apologizes for calling so early. It's nine in the morning in New York, only six here in Los Angeles. I hadn't imagined that part. Time. The body understands whether it's morning or evening, but it doesn't always recognize the past from the present. I've had feelings about this phone call, for years. My body has already had this conversation.

I ask if Robert wants to see me.

"He's always wanted that," says James, on a sigh. "Only he painted himself into a corner. But what does that matter now?"

When did it ever matter? Still, I think I understand. Robert wants me to forgive him, but also to have it understood our estrangement is all my fault. He wishes none of it had happened but wants to keep all the emotions he got to have. He wants—

"You know Robert," James says.

It's hard to tell if I understand my father's nature or am projecting my own. I might know Robert because I've essentially become him. What's bred in the bone.

James continues, thinking out plans. Robert's still in the hospital. It will be better if I wait until he's home and settled at Bank Street. Of course it will. Hospitals are infantilizing—the gowns, the pans. Robert would be at a disadvantage. Bank Street is the seat of their power. Which leaves me as a petitioner. One hopes to get *into* an enchanted kingdom, or to get *out* of it, if things go badly. You don't visit an enchanted kingdom to forgive the sorcerers.

"I want it to go well," James says. "Your meeting. There's a sweet spot, with the medications. When he's lucid but also sort of beatific. It's the release from the pain."

I think a deathbed reconciliation is probably a good arrangement for the dying, who are soon to be free of all burdens whether you assist them or not. It's the living who need to stumble on, heaving from arm to arm the weight of all those wasted years and now grief too.

"Carlisle." There's a pause and for a moment I think I see James very clearly, standing by the small table at Bank Street, holding the phone. "I don't know what happened," James says. "I mean, he's never told me exactly what went on between you. But I

know whatever caused the break is *not* what kept it going. It's him, it's how he is. I don't know if you can forgive him. I don't know if you *should*. I'll understand if you don't want to come."

I try to picture Robert, find his body in space and time. I feel a burning in my own chest, not in the heart but in the lungs, the ribs, spongy cartilage, bones. Bred in the bone. *What's bred in the bone will come out in the flesh*. That's from the Bible? Shakespeare?

Blood of my blood. Flesh of my flesh. I'm his daughter. He is my father.

I close my eyes.

"Of course, I will come," I say. "Of course."

Poulenc for Beginners

Bank Street. New York. Going to see my father and James.
It's 1983. I'm ten, and on a plane.

I'd fallen asleep shortly before landing and wake to find my row companion looking at me. We'd not spoken during the flight and I had only a vague impression of a "businessman," because he had a briefcase and looked at papers during the flight instead of reading a book or a magazine. "I must say you look very innocent when you sleep," he says. *Must* he say that? His comment makes no sense, but this is the year people will start to get my age wrong in ways that are uncomfortable. It's because I'm so tall.

As it happens, I'll never fall asleep on a plane again.

I'm wearing white linen pants and a tangerine linen top with fluted cap sleeves. This ensemble had been chosen by me, over my mother's objection that white pants are not practical for New York City and linen always wrinkles. She taught me to iron, although

ironing is something my father enjoys. I think she's forgotten what he's like.

My father is waiting for me at LaGuardia Airport, a *New York Times* tucked under his arm. He likes the crosswords but always saves one easy clue for me. He compliments my outfit right away. "Don't you look terrific." He remarks on my new hairstyle, my additional inch and a half since the last visit, and that I'm wearing the bracelet he sent for Christmas. He's a great noticer of these kinds of details. He likes seeing effort.

My father does have a car—a Cadillac Eldorado with pillowy white seats and a red steering wheel; he claims this is the last comfortable car ever made—but he never brings it to the airport. I'll get to ride in it if we go to someone's house outside the city on the weekend, if there's an invitation that is not, as James puts it, "too *too*." (Without understanding the distinctions, I've gleaned Fire Island is too *too*, but the Hamptons are usually not.)

We always take a cab to Bank Street.

It's the end of August. Everyone says August is a terrible time to be in the city, but for most of the summer my father is running the Boxhill Dance Festival in upstate New York. He's the managing director, not the artistic director, which means he's the one to solve problems. My trip (I also come for a week at either Easter or Thanksgiving) is timed for when the festival has concluded, and my father is back in the city. James sometimes goes to Boxhill to teach, and sometimes not.

This visit, when I am ten, my father tells me James is not well. He says this while we're in the queue for cabs at the airport.

I ask what's wrong.

"Feelings," he says. He puts his arm around me. He wears a heavy gold watch. His Izod shirt carries the scent of the laundry detergent they use, different from the one my mother buys. My

father's body is very solid except for his midsection, which is soft. You might not guess he was once a dancer. My mother, you can tell instantly even though now she just works in an office. Her posture is performatively straight and she walks splay-footed. She can get her long hair up in seconds, and needs only one or two pins to secure a perfect bun. I have bushy hair and need more pins.

My father did dance professionally, for a few years. He's older than my mother and has bad knees, which cause him to move stiffly. He also has bushy hair, if you see it in the morning before he's smoothed it down with Vitalis hair tonic.

"The thing is," he says, "some of our friends are getting sick. It's been happening for a while and James is upset about it. I'm sad too, very sad, but James isn't always able to put his feelings to one side. He's not," my father says, "like us."

I'm not sure about this alliance. I want to be like James, who is so brilliant. After every visit I return to my mother with extracts from his vocabulary, complete with mid-Atlantic accent.

My father says he and James are okay. They're fine, very healthy. They're worried about *other* people. "You may have heard of things," he says, "from your mother."

I have not. Just now, my mother has a man in her life. I've never seen her do dating before because she's so particular about everything. I've caught Ben looking at her boobs. Realizing my mother has boobs a man wants to look at makes me anxious. I feel, obscurely, it's a bad portent. *A bad portent* is a James phrase.

My father tells me not to worry. It's only that James is blue, and we need to be gentle with him. We all need to be gentle with each other, he says. I add this quality to the list of how I will behave during my visit. In the cab, I practice being gentle. I look out the window in a tranquil way and answer my father's questions in a soft voice. It feels nice to be like this. He hands me the

newspaper and a pen so I can fill in—with a little help—the last clue of the crossword.

We take the Williamsburg Bridge. The city skyline is too important to need to be welcoming. It tells you to get with the program or go home. I love it. Once in Manhattan, my father gives the driver instructions because Greenwich Village is so twisty. We're almost there. The cab turns and the pavement changes to something that looks like cobblestones, but I know is correctly called "Belgian blocks." We're here.

Stepping through the front door of Bank Street is my favorite entrance to perform. The sitting room and dining room are one grand space with thirteen-foot ceilings. When the curtains are drawn on the tall street-facing windows, it's like being inside the set of a play. In fact, you can sometimes catch even locals pausing on the sidewalk, arrested by a glimpse of the William Morris Strawberry Thief wallpaper, or the crystal-and-bronze Beaux Arts chandelier. Everything at Bank Street is either a reproduction or a flea market find—except the wallpaper—but you can't tell that from the street.

In Ohio, I have a friend who lives in a big house with stairs and a giant lawn in front *and* back. Her parents have a water bed. These are what I take to be the markers of rich people. (I have no understanding of Manhattan real estate.) I've been told by my mother that Bank Street is valuable. "Just, you can have a valuable thing and not be wealthy," she's said. I know money is a thing to be careful about and most things are too expensive to have.

Bank Street is precious. It doesn't matter if the things inside it are real or not, because they are beautiful.

James is not waiting in the central room when we arrive. I'm greeted by Olga and Maria, muscular white cats of indetermi-

nate breed. (All their cats are named after the murdered Romanov children; my father is good at naming things.)

I look around for my favorite objects. Everything is always the same because everything is *supposed* to be old. I'm mildly allergic to the cats and the prewar-building mold.

Beyond the front room is a large and meticulously organized kitchen. (Things do change here; my father has a weakness for culinary gadgets.) Continuing on, there's a tiny bedroom, a bathroom, and a medium-size bedroom. These all have small windows looking into an alley. A hall with closets runs the length of the apartment. If someone asks for "the tour" they're not shown past the kitchen.

I hear James coming down the hallway from the bedroom. My father puts down my bag, straightens, smiles. I try to make my eyes gentle and kind.

James appears. He's not as tall as my father, who is extremely tall. Unlike my father, James is quite thin. He laughs and says my name and crosses his arms and smiles. We don't hug. At the end of my visit, he'll kiss my cheek. For greetings he crosses his arms and smiles. (I have seen him hug adults.)

James says I am going to be a Gloria Govrin. I don't know who this is but don't ask because sometimes when I don't know things James will raise his eyebrows and sigh and say, "Well, I suppose soon *no one* will know these things."

James is only forty-one, this summer. He seems the same age to me as my father, who is fifty-two.

My father explains that Gloria Govrin was a very tall and glamorous dancer with the New York City Ballet. He tells James he's going to get me settled in and James says wonderful, and the weather is *beastly*, but he's made a cold soup. "Then we will want

to hear all your news,” he says, as if I am a regular grown-up guest.

My father and I go to the tiny bedroom I’ve been told was probably a maid’s room when a single family occupied the entire building. Now it’s referred to as “Carlisle’s Room” even when I’m not there, which makes me happy. For most of the year, it functions as a catch-all storage space and den, undergoing a transformation just before my arrival. “Carlisle’s sheets”—purchased at intervals by my father according to his notions of my maturity—are washed and pressed—by my father—and dressed on the single bed. The small bookcase is emptied of old *New Yorkers* and paperback mysteries and restocked with things my father and James have chosen. (I’m an early and good reader and their choices flatter me.) The everyday rug is replaced with a fluffy one thought to be more girlish.

I’m here for only seven days but my father doesn’t like “living out of a suitcase” and drawers in the bureau have been cleared for my use.

My father and I are quiet because he’s not a big talker and I’m saving conversation for James. I move around the room, touching things. The window just misses facing a frosted-glass one across the alley. You can make out the shadow silhouettes of shampoo and conditioner bottles lining the inside of that window’s sill, and occasionally hear the toilet flushing. I’ve never seen the people. Instead of curtains, my window has shutters, which open like doors. I think this is magical, and “like Europe,” where my father and James sometimes go. The closet has four empty hangers for me and is otherwise jammed with all the things that have been in the room before my arrival. Everything smells strongly of rose. I’ll learn later that James hates my father smoking inside, but since it’s my father’s apartment, James sometimes compromises

by allowing him to smoke out the window of this room. While my father is at Boxhill, James sprays it daily with a rose-scented spray he says reminds him “favorably” of his mother. You can just detect the cigarettes underneath it.

There are five teddy bears lined up on a shelf too high for me to reach. A nighttime ritual is for me to select one for my father to bring down. This summer, the summer I'm almost eleven, we realize I can reach the shelf if I stand on demi-pointe.

“Just when you're too old for teddy bears, you can reach the teddy bears,” says my father, and looks sad. I'm surprised to learn I'm too old for teddy bears and remember again the plane and the way the man looked at me. There's an additional worry here. My mother thinks I'm going to be too tall for ballet.

Later that week I will learn my father is a gay man.

They all thought I knew. I'm a good reader. I can carry on adult-sounding conversations on a number of topics. No one has ever tried to hide anything, it's simply I've never been told, explicitly, that my father is a gay man, or that James is a gay man, or that they are lovers. My curiosity is for the imaginative, not the actual, and I sometimes don't notice real things. Perhaps all children are like this.

What *did* I think? James is James. I've heard my father refer to him—to a waiter or perhaps an usher at the theater?—as his friend: “We're waiting for a friend.” They're not physically demonstrative, and I've never seen them kiss or hold hands. The bedroom they share has only one bed, but it isn't a room I'm ever really in. James stays up late, and my father gets up early.

My mother never talks to me much about my father, or James. It isn't a *forbidden* topic. I've been told my parents like and respect each other, and they both love me. None of my friends have divorced parents, but fathers aren't usually visible, so I think mine

being absent isn't so noticeable. I'm aware—always—of tension or stress, a possible fracture, in the lines connecting the adults of my life. Silence is a kind of suture over this potential problem, which does have something to do with James, who needs to be sheltered or protected or preserved. I'm happy to help. James is the most wonderful person I know. My hope is that if I behave well, the lines will hold, and I'll be able to keep coming to Bank Street.

Coming to Bank Street is my ambition, even above ballet. Coming to Bank Street *is* a ballet. The version of myself I present here takes effort and I'm sometimes uncomfortable and don't know what's happening and it's absorbing, and I like to be absorbed.

I'm not *perfectly* clear about the word *gay*. At school, in Ohio, people say it when they mean someone, or something, is cheesy or uncool. Like a spaz. *Don't be gay*. I've heard my mother use the word *homosexual*, without emphasis or judgment, and my maternal grandmother with audible italics. I think *homosexual* means unmarried or possibly theatrical, like many of the people I see in New York.

I understand that my father is a gay man in the same conversation I learn about a disease killing gay men.

"You've been told about it, yes? AIDS?" James asks. We are several days into my visit. My father is out—maybe at the store, or the small Midtown office he and his Boxhill staff share with a theater company—and James and I are having one of our talks. He sits at the grand piano and I've rolled the library steps near one of the street-facing windows. These are our places. I'm often among adults, but James is the only one who tells me about people, about himself, without trying to make it a lesson. The talks are moments of confidence, gossip, explanation. They're dioramas of adult life.

They're Going to Love You

James has been explaining about depression. He tells me he's been quite seriously ill at different times in his life with this sickness, and he always tries to hide the worst of it from Robert. I'm proud he's not trying to hide it from me. I tuck away the phrase *quite seriously ill*, for use later. It sounds serious and brave.

When James asks me if I know about AIDS, I say I know a little. (I know nothing, but with James if you say you know a little, he will keep talking; if you say you know nothing he will sigh.)

"They called it the 'gay cancer' at first," he tells me. "A plague. Like a judgment on the seventies. Because for a few minutes we all stood around in the sunshine."

Neither James nor my father has it. He says this several times, although it's 1983 and they can't know. There are no tests. It's because the government doesn't care about gay men, he says, and starts to speak of gay men's lives.

After a while, I realize he's talking about my father's life, and his life. I keep still, and nod, so that James will go on talking.

He says something about how my father "passes."

"Well obviously Robert passes," James says, waving at me. "Though his brothers go on pretending like they don't know. Maybe they don't. One assumes their wives do."

I understand now about gay—with some hazy spots on the mechanics—but don't understand about passing. I think it means Robert has passed from being someone who could be my father into being a gay man. I keep repeating *gay man* in my head over and over. Does my mother know? My grandmother? I'm passed too, as in I have passed the point where I can ask.

"He's always been private," James says. "That's just who he is. We don't all have to be the same kind of gay man. But people will go on thinking it's about shame or calling him a Republican. And, of course, there's you."

I agree there is me although I'm beginning to wonder *how* there is me. James sees I'm distressed and calls me over to the piano to turn pages for him. "Poulenc is good for restless souls," he says. "If you don't like one part, just wait. Every eight bars he becomes a completely different composer."

My father returns and I feel intensely shy of him, for about an hour. Everything he does and says now feels mysterious. *I* feel mysterious, with this new understanding. Important. We get dressed up and go to a musical that turns out to be, of all things, *La Cage aux Folles*. The show is about a son who is bringing his fiancée and her goofy religious parents home to meet his family and he wants *his* parents—both men—to pretend not to be gay and running a nightclub of drag queens. It's the first cultural representation of gay parenting I've seen—or will see for over two more decades—but I mostly notice the differences from our own arrangements. (For them, the mother is absent, the child is a boy and already grown up, everyone sings.)

The show is wonderfully funny but also there is crying in the audience when the man who has always been a mother to the son sings "I Am What I Am." I cry a little too, impressed and wanting to join in the feeling of the men onstage, in the rows around me, my father and James.

A few days later I watch my father, standing in the Bank Street living room, listening to someone on the telephone. He looks up at James and covers the mouthpiece of the phone and says, softly, "Danny." His face looks like a little boy's when he says it. James crosses his arms and goes to the window and looks out.

I don't know if Danny is the same person, but the previous summer I'd spent a wonderful afternoon with a Danny in the pool of someone's house in Montauk. When the rest of the adults gathered for cocktail hour, Danny stayed with me, practicing dance

lifts. “Arabesque,” he’d say, and he’d sink down in the water and I’d stand there on one leg, giggling, until strong hands were on my waist and leg and Danny was hoisting me high up in the air. We’d pose, the people on the patio would applaud, and then Danny would pop me up out of the lift and I’d dive back into the water. He had curly hair, and it was so hot it would almost instantly start to dry when his head came out of the water. Dark curls springing up around his face. He had brown eyes and told me he missed his sister. Is this the Danny they’re talking about? Does he have the sickness?

It is. He does. He’ll be dead in eight months.

My father’s face, outrage and grief. James crossing his arms and standing by the window, looking out. There’ll be so many phone calls, so many men and stories and images, but whenever someone says “AIDS” or “the AIDS crisis,” it’s that moment I see. A vision of a young man in a pool, his strong hands. My father, looking at James, and saying, “Danny.”

At the end of every visit, my father takes me out for a fancy afternoon tea at a hotel. Neither of us likes tea but we both love the little sandwiches and scones and cookies and pastries. We have a sweet tooth. My father always wants to hear about my favorite things from the week. I want, very much, to ask him about being a gay man and if he’s worried about the gay cancer, but I can’t think of a way to put it. He suggests we go to FAO Schwarz. At the store, so lavish and hectic, I become shy. I’m embarrassed to look at toys in front of my father. My mother doesn’t like shopping and always seems irritated by what she supposes are my tastes. “So, I guess you want a *cute* one,” she might say, grimly surveying a kitten-themed selection of notebooks for school supplies, causing me to hastily grab something plain. Also, I’m not supposed to ask my father for things. But my father enjoys the toy store and is in

no rush. When I pick up a small, cinnamon-colored teddy bear he says, “Well, I think we better take him home with us.” I suggest that maybe this bear can sometimes sleep on *his* bed. “With you and James,” I say. He puts his hand on my shoulder and I know *for certain* we’ve made each other happy.

Oh, the way things combine: those white linen pants my mother thought were a mistake, the expression on a man’s face as he tells me I look innocent while I sleep, the secret sorrow of James, the curse that had struck the lives of gay men, the tune “I Am What I Am,” from *La Cage Aux Folles*, and the young man who missed his sister, his dark curls springing up around his face, gone forever from this world.

I feel the cat-mauled nap of the fabric covering the library steps scratching my bare thighs, smell the cigarettes just under the roses in Carlisle’s Room, hear the out-of-tune creak of the floorboard as I rise on the balls of my feet and just touch the corduroy paw of a teddy bear.

I blink. Sit up straight. I’m forty-three and living in Los Angeles. The last time I stood in Carlisle’s Room, I was twenty-four. I haven’t seen my father in nineteen years.