



FLATWARE

Aldo Alvarez

I came home with red ink still wet on my fingers. That cheap pen exploded on me as I graded tests from my freshman literature course. Must have been anger, feeding through my fingertips into the pen. I felt like the Mrs in the Scottish play, and felt even worse that it was such an inelegant and obvious metaphor for the interior life I purport to have.

I'd taken over the course from a retiring professor. It was my opportunity to prove myself and place my stamp on the syllabus while still fulfilling the expectations of the department. But I had to accept their 'suggestion' that I keep 'Death In Venice' on the reading list—after all, I'm only an assistant professor. It's one step up from adjunct, so I shouldn't be complaining.

But I hate that story with a fuckin' passion: I hate the prose, I hate the voice, its so-called ironic quality (irony my *foot*), I hate what the story says about human beings, and about queers in particular. And I have to use the sucky translation.

I mean, enough with stories about love and death. Scratch that, enough with stupid, superficial and grandiose stories about love and death,

especially with queers. It's a NAMBLA fantasy with Nazi overtones, and the day it goes out of print, it'll be a great day for faggots everywhere. Pardon my French.

So I was grading the test on the train home, trying to contain my loathing for that story and be fair to my students, who'd had to put up with perhaps the lamest lecture I've ever presented. It was only one-fourth of the test grade, anyway. To keep my interest, I positioned it with 'The Dead,' 'Aura' and 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius.' I asked a whole heck of a lot more interesting questions about those three stories. And—in the event that I had so crippled their insight and appreciation for that abomination of a tale that they were now unable to even answer my perfunctory questions about it—I came up with an extra credit essay question that neatly goes into the *gestalt* of the selections:

'Vladimir Nabokov said that art is beauty plus pity. Please choose one of the stories featured in this exam and discuss it in the context of this statement.'

This question was especially neat because it dovetailed right into their next assigned reading, *Pale Fire*. I took pride in how I designed the course. It should all flow together, have a sensibility about it, rather than merely exist as a canonical list of books that 1 Should Read 2 B Edjicated.

In any event, Charlie didn't notice the ink on my fingers when he practically jumped out of bed with good news. He held me close to him. When he let go of me, my fingerprints were all over his silk kimono. Charlie said, 'Oops, there's a spot.'

I felt, when he held me, the little slot in the crook of his arm where an IV clips into him like a phone jack. I smelled the rubbing alcohol floating off his skin, the handiwork of Camilla and Sue, the couple who take care of him during the day when I'm away. I felt against me the reassuring layer of fat which was slowly returning to his body.

'Did you hear the news?' Charlie said.

'Calm down, sweetie,' I said. 'There's nothing to be that excited about.'

'They've come up with a vaccine!' Charlie said.

'No shit?'

‘Yeah!’ Charlie said, aswoon. ‘News just broke on the nets. Now you can go get your shots, like a good puppy.’

I couldn’t articulate my surprise. That an AIDS vaccine finally had been developed. That Charlie would want me to get it. That Charlie wasn’t bitter that it was not a cure for AIDS. That he’d still die, anyway, and that he’d still want me to live. That I am so in love with Charlie.

‘Aren’t you glad?’ Charlie asked, slowly undoing my tie. ‘Isn’t it fabulous?’

‘It’s unbelievable,’ I said, and I let him spoon me.

Spooning hadn’t frightened me like that in years. I have no fear of flatware of this kind. But this was scaring the be-jesus out of me.

I lost interest in spooning. ‘Cause I couldn’t understand what he was so happy about.

‘So how was work...?’ I said.

That came off just a tad too condescending. I was sorry the moment I finished saying it.

‘What, you don’t believe me?’ Charlie said, gathering his kimono around him.

‘Well, sweetie,’ I said, digging my own grave, ‘it’s not like this is the first time you’ve jumped for joy for cyber-gossip. Is this *absolutely* true?’

Charlie flashed a blank, accusatory stare, and sped off to his computer room. I trudged behind him, as if cutting through a forest of thorns. I stopped at the study’s open door; within, my sleeping beauty’s outline glowed with the light of the outsized graphic-designer monitor. Panels shone onscreen with his design work and open text-files (electronic mail, news wires, whatever).

‘Is *Reuter’s* trustworthy?’ he said, swiveling on the desk chair.

‘Not like the *New York Times*,’ I said.

‘You don’t really trust me, then,’ he said.

‘I’m sorry?’ I said, surprised.

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After I got my shot, I imagined little robots coursing through my veins, zapping malignancies. I always cutify the frightening, if I don't outright avoid it. I chose to stay away from the crowds and the mania of the big city and got my shot after the frenzy died down. I made an appointment with my doctor on campus. She takes my trimonthly tests—invariably negative—with a tact and expediency that have earned my trust. And Carla—Dr. Todd to you—doesn't buy my bullshit.

'Relax,' Carla said as I began to unbutton my shirt when she walked into the cubicle. 'You're getting undressed and I haven't briefed you on the risks yet.'

I stopped at the third shirt button. 'I just want to get this over with,' I said.

'Want to talk?' she said. She gave me one of those looks that told me she knew there was more at stake for me than I pretended there was.

'Charlie wants me to take the shot,' I said, 'so let's do it.'

I mean, I've been with Charlie for ten years now, nursing him through good periods and bad, even making love when we're both up to it, and I've remained negative. It wasn't difficult: I've only known safe sex, and Charlie was honest with me about his status when we met. When it comes to flatware (our code-word for sex), it's more spooning than forking, so the shot is purely a formality. I don't really need it. I might as well take the vaccine to please my husband. Charlie's in remission right now, with a little help from some gastrointestinal technothingsies. He can keep his food down, and soon he'll be graduating to eating ten-course meals, God willing. So, why do I resent getting a shot?

'Let me explain how it works first,' Carla said. 'This doesn't prevent AIDS as much as tame it. I'm sure you've read this in the newspaper.'

'Charlie told me about it,' I said.

'If you ever contract it, you'll only have a very mild case, like bouts with bronchitis or fever. But that can be medicated easily and cheaply. You're at high risk, with a sick spouse, so I heavily recommend you take it.'

Charlie told me this, too. He's told me everything, everything, as if I were the one who needed to have all the facts spelled out, who needed to be encouraged and supported with my health-care choices. I decide to humor her with my attention.

'Any side effects?' I ask.

'You're a healthy guy, so it can only police your already existing immune system. Think of it as insurance,' she said. 'It only takes two weeks for the inoculation to yield protection. So play it safe till then. Though a lot of people go into the breach as soon as they run out of the office, I wouldn't recommend it.'

Funny. It used to take two weeks for an HIV test to get graded.

'I'm in no rush,' I said. 'I know it's coming someday, and, well... I'm not that important. I don't really need it.'

She put her hand on my forearm. 'Don't be so morbid.'

'I'm not morbid,' he said. 'I'm realistic.'

'Would you like some Prozac with this?' Carla said.

'No,' I said, sighing, letting go of my anger with a breath. 'Just a little tea and sympathy.'

'How's Charlie doing?'

'He's like he's taking care of me, now.'

Charlie and I can't afford to refit him with a new immune system. It's incredibly expensive, and the technothingsies take a long time to rebuild what Nature hath wrought and make him fully-fuctional. So we don't have the time either.

It's not that we've stopped struggling against his condition. I couldn't earn enough for both of us, so Charlie sold his insurance with the help of a broker friend when debt got out of hand. That makes Charlie an investment that yields when it goes bust. But Charlie can enjoy his life insurance now, when he's alive. Death Futures investors don't know that we're cheating death a little bit. We used the money for some 'amenities' (as Charlie calls them), like the technothingsies in his stomach lining. They've kept him well enough to absorb his tubloads of medicine and eat

well. And the transfusions of blood don't have to carry all the burden of his survival.

The night after I got my shot, I found enough fat on his belly for me to grasp and fondle. Oh, God, it was magic.

Carla put down her yellow legal pad. 'Oh, please, Serge.'

'I'm not kidding!' I said. 'He's talked so much about the whole fuckin' thing, it's as if it's going to make him better!'

Carla sighed, stood up, and picked up this elongated staple gun from the side of a slick-wheeled console. I felt as if she were going to pump me full of gas.

'If you don't know what's going on, I'm not going to be the one to tell you,' she said. 'Take off your shirt.'

I had never been so terrified of being naked.

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'I'm *only* going to last you so long,' Charlie said. 'If you get the vaccine, maybe you can look for someone else after I go.'

'Jesus!' I said. 'Let's just drop it.'

Charlie sliced vegetables into pleasant shapes and I perspired over stew and noodles. The ink-stains on his robe were quite flattering, really

'Nothing, Serge,' he said. 'I just want you to think about yourself, for a change.'

'Look, I've sown my wild oats. What if I want to spend the rest of my life as a widow?'

'That's so sweet. Get me a barf bag,' he said.

Charlie's strange in that he looks like Ernest Hemingway, thinks like Oscar Wilde, and seamlessly goes from butch to swish, sometimes within the same sentence.

'I don't know, Charlie. I just feel you're pushing me into this decision.'

'So, I want you to live.'

'Not if you fuckin' can't.'

‘Gee, I’ve lasted ten years, sky’s the limit, now. Why do you have to spend your days worried if you’re going the same way, too?’

‘I’ve handled it till now.’

‘You won’t have to anymore.’

‘Oh, is it that you want to have plain old unsafe sex, is that it?’

Charlie pointed at me with the cutting knife. Oh shit. ‘It really hurts to hear that that’s what you think this is all about. Though it’s nice to see you putting up a fight.’

‘Why?’

‘Do you know what it is to be married to a martyr?’

‘So, tie me to a tree and pierce me dead with a bow and arrow.’

‘Why do you make this so difficult?’ he asked.

I don’t know.

The vegetables were not quite so elegantly cut at this point of the conversation. He dropped the knife. He stood up with a steadiness and determination that almost had me cry miracle, or call for help. I dropped the cooking spoon inside the stewpot. Can the ill kill?

No. They come over to you slowly, and sidle up to you, and take you and kiss you gently.

And you drop your arms, and your defenses, and you cry.

And they let you mourn them while they’re still alive.

‘Will you do this for me?’ he said.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Yes, I will, yes.’

‘I will never understand why it takes you so long to take my word for anything,’ he said.

There once was a time when it seemed that time would just stretch into infinity, and that I could love someone so strongly, so powerfully, that the world would bend to my love, and nothing would ever hurt him, because I said so.

That time is gone.

‘I’m sorry, I’m just so wiped out,’ I said. I couldn’t make myself tell him I got the shot; I felt like I’d betrayed him.

...

I received my very first Concerned Parent letter—through e-mail, even!
The one annotation is mine, the rest is hers.

To: ProfRuiz@wordsworth.edu

From: DebFoyle@dyne.com

Subject: Morbid Articles

Dear Professor Ruiz:

Hello. Let me introduce myself: my son Walter is taking your literature course. It's been hard to see him off to school as a freshman. He is very intelligent, and, well, he is the first one in our family to go to college. Paying for his education takes some sacrifice on our part. I feel a little out of my depth writing to you about this, since I know college is different, but I'm sincere and honest and I trust I can write to you. Walter has a chance at something his parents didn't have and I'm really worried it might go wrong. I was a member of the PTA and accustomed to be personally involved in his education. So I took it upon myself to read the books assigned for the course. I already feel educated myself by reading them (some I only looked through, to be honest) but what I read frightened me.

First I am sorry to see that you have demanded of the students that they buy books on paper and not on computer. Wasting good paper like that when they could just the same read them on-screen. The money we have spent on his equipment makes it all the more upsetting. Could you consider using electronic books in the future? His other classes use them. But that is not the reason I am writing to you.

I am afraid that the morbid nature of the books moves me to give you my opinion. The course seems to be almost obsessive on death. If there isn't somebody dying, somebody's already dead! It is almost funny, but I can't laugh. You understand, Walter is young and sensitive, he gets that from me. I am afraid they might influence him. I feel Walter is a very sensitive child and we must protect him from unnecessary concern. The world is a hard place, and I do not want him to face it under such worries.

Life has been hard on me, I don't apologize for it, but it has. I do not know you, I don't know how your life has been, and why you would choose these books. But I am really frightened by the thought that something might happen to Walter, who has a real chance of not having to make do month in month out. I want the best for him. Wouldn't you? I'm sorry, maybe I am just going crazy over here. I really miss him. Please be good to my child.

I was particularly frightened by the homosexual themes in some of the articles [Mrs. Foyle is referring to 'Death In Venice,' dammit...and Pale Fire, alas.-SR]. They are obviously presented in a way that makes them futile and sad. I don't know how homosexual's lives are, even though we respect their right to be as they are Americans too, but are they so unhappy? They can marry now. My sister is a nurse and she tells me about how really nice they are. It's sad enough to hear them die. And I stayed up awake one whole night, frightened, thinking what if Walter was homosexual? And I would not want that life for him, especially if it is as sad as those books say. That's why I want everything mean and ugly and painful out of his life. I want things to be simple and clean and good and easy to understand. And this is getting too complicated for me. I am only his mother, and I guess I can't do everything.

I keep thinking the morbid nature of the books might be wrong for him. Maybe had I gone to college and read those books I wouldn't have made the mistakes I have made... My son sent me a copy of a recent test of his. I am glad he had a B+ so he must not be ignoring his studies. The question in the test about art equals beauty plus pity, I don't understand, especially in the face of all this death.

Thanks for your time. Please ignore this letter if you think I am wasting your time.

Question: Books have happy endings, too, don't they?

So do faggots, ma'am. With God as my witness, so do faggots too!

To: DebFoyle@dyne.com

From: ProfRuiz@wordsworth.edu

Re: Morbid Articles

Dear Mrs. Foyle:

No, you are not wasting my time. It's nice to hear someone care for their children. Thank you for your concerned note.

Walter is quite definitely an intelligent young man. I certainly do not want to drive him to suicide, if that's what you're wondering about. He's doing fine. If he showed up drunk, stoned or unprepared, I would have noticed—though, as far as I am concerned, it's up to the student to take the course seriously or not. I just flunk them if they don't. What I have noticed about Walter is that he's becoming more vocal in class discussions. He shows real character as a reader. His attention to the work being discussed is becoming keener, and the semester is only starting. I can forecast an improvement on his test grades given his growth in class. You should feel no worry, at least regarding what is within my purview as his professor.

It's a real pleasure to watch someone bloom in front of you. That's why I teach.

On the point of using books on paper, I'll tell you right off the bat that I'll continue to demand paper books until the university's administration licenses an e-book reader that makes it possible to make annotations like 'Oh, that's just like me!' or 'Right on!' or 'ha, ha' or 'Metaphor' or 'Irony' on the margins of the screen. Scribbles make for easy browsing when one looks for a scene or sentence that's particularly intriguing. My books are full of such jottings.

Unfortunately, the powers that be signed a contract with the corporation who offered them the best deal but not the best product. The e-book reader that the students get for free has a strange habit of automatically misreading/mistranscribing my scribbles—they come out as 'Arena', 'Sinead ducky', and 'This book is so guy!'—and you can't do a keyword search that includes your annotations. It's really annoying and,

I'm sorry, that's just not acceptable. I could ask my students (and you, the parents) to spend money on a less institutionalized, higher quality electronic bookpad, but I'd have to go through an outside distributor for it. The institution here doesn't have a structure to order and sell other hardware (I suspect that's part of the agreement that gives us access to the 'free' reader), but they do have a structure to order and sell books (I imagine the contractor doesn't see it as 'competing technology'). So the choice has been made for me.

Sorry if I come off as kind of reactionary and insensitive. I am not afraid of technology. If I were, I'd be terrified of a lot of things I need to do to get along with people.

On morbidity and beauty:

Art is beauty plus pity because beauty never lasts. Because things are always changing, the world is always ending, beauty's always dying. What makes it so precious is what makes it so unstable and provisional. So the beautiful makes us feel sad. And if we really care about life, sadness is never too far behind. And so is joy, because, somewhere on the horizon, there is some new beauty waiting to be discovered, some strange mutation that will never be duplicated or equalled.

And if you can live with that every day, and still feel the swoon of beauty in the face of all that dying, boy, I'd say you are some kind of grown-up.

I am working on this, and so are most of the students I hope to encourage on this path.

Ask Walter what he thinks of the class. I would think he does—

The phone rang. My husband.

'Sweetie,' he said, 'you doing anything tonight?'

'Nothing,' I said, 'just going over lecture notes.'

'When are you coming home?'

'You can set a clock to my comings and goings, Charlie.'

'I know. I was wondering if you were up for flatware tonight.'

Two weeks since my shot, and, well, Charlie doesn't wait too long for a Booty Call.

'Dirty thoughts, eh?' I said.

'Yeah,' he said. 'Don't shoot your wad, eh?'

Charlie and I can be very Canadian about sex.

As I hung up, I thought: do I love him because he's going to die? Do I hate myself because I cannot? Am I being just a tad grandiose?

I didn't finish the letter, but I saved it to finish later.

...

The two weeks during which the C3PO immuno-expressant corps began to take over my body went pretty much without incident. Other than Charlie being particularly cuddly and patient with me. It was infuriating. The first signs of dementia settling in. I don't know, maybe the feeling that he had something to support me about made him feel that much closer to me, made him feel useful. And of course I make show of trusting him right and left.

The other day, I let him take me out to dinner and the movies. He got the popcorn. I held our seats, frightened that he would faint or something while standing in line. I was so grateful when he came back, even if he forgot the Good & Plenty. But I'm not supposed to be courted, I'm not supposed to have problems, he's the one who's sick. He was not very mopey to begin with, but now he's positively bursting into song at the onset of some emotion—or a bowel movement.

Other than that, my health is more or less the same. I would hope to mutate into some monster, something more frightening, like a dung beetle. At least I'd have an excuse to leave him. All that's changed is that I'm sleeping better. And I wake up with this furry guy curled up against me, this guy who's growing chubbier all the time.

Charlie's too good for me. I'm going to have to leave him. After all we've gone through, he's still too good for me, and I don't deserve him. Living with him is such excruciating torture nowadays, knowing he's going

to kick the bucket, and him having nothing but sweetness for me. Me, who's probably going to get tenure. I just feel so...I feel so wrong.

So I'm going to have some unprotected sex with him just to please him, and then I'll find some way of moving near campus in a jiff. That's my parting gift: the contamination of my precious bodily fluids. Then: exile.

I can't stand this anymore. I'm burning my candle at both ends, and I forget how the rest of this quote goes.

I hope Charlie will understand.

I get home to find Charlie pouring white sauce over cannelloni stuffed with some high-cholesterol paté and ground beef. His only greeting is a lifted eyebrow and a stroke of his goatee. I drop my briefcase on a kitchen table chair.

'How are you feeling?' I ask.

'Abominable,' he says.

There are candles on the table, flowers in a vase as if they were arranged by Robert Mapplethorpe, and, displayed where I cannot help but notice it, a can of Crisco.

'I've been slaving over the stove all day,' he says. 'Dinner will be ready in half an hour.'

It's so weird to have Charlie take care of me. It's so wrong. He's the one who has to be taken care of, not me.

'This takes my breath away,' I say, 'and quite possibly my appetite, too. You can't be spending your energy like this. What a spread you've put out for me.'

'In a manner of speaking,' he says, cocking his butt.

Let me change the subject. 'No, I'm serious. You shouldn't be overextending yourself.'

'Oh, Camilla and Sue helped out. And I paced myself. I've been working on this all week, really. No need for you to feel guilty.'

'It's a sin.'

'Well, ain't it just!' Charlie licks a speck of sauce off his wrist. 'Help me toss the salad? Or shall I toss myself—that is, shall I toss the salad?'

'Let me overcompensate on the salad,' I groaned.

So out comes the cutting board and the cucumber. The cuke I slice so thin the slices should melt in his mouth. After hubby puts the pan of pasta in the oven, he sits down to watch me slice.

I am so nervous I slice my middle finger.

‘F-f-fuck!’

‘Let me have a look,’ Charlie says.

‘Oh all right,’ I say, and give him the bird.

And then, he takes my cut finger in his hand.

And he ever so slowly kisses it, and pops it in his mouth, and sucks it.

Dinner burns in the oven. Spoons, forks and knives remain untouched on the table, all in their correct order and placement.

The amazing thing is one can love something that can die. The irrational thing. That is the enchantment. That one could love a losing proposition, that one can love the transitory, and still remain in the moment, in the moment before that beauty passes away.

And if this is turning into a world where mystery and pain are eliminated to make for a—

Let me not overinterpret this.

I would hope that my bionic ImmunoHelpers have traveled into him through the spit in my kisses, and through other methods of injection—methods that I will not reveal in order to remain within the bounds of good taste. And if my attempts at sharing my love and my health fail to extend his life, or make mine uncomfortable...well, fuck it.

At least I gave it a shot.

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