

# Captain Avenger

by

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**A**s he'd been doing day after day for weeks, Ian was watching television. He was pretty depressed these days. He was getting practically no physical exercise. He had no appetite. He vacillated between starving himself to avoid gaining weight and stuffing himself to avoid losing. Though he dreaded getting fat, he feared the latter more than the former, for it might indicate that the disease he was also dreading was not just hypochondria.

At least once or twice a day, while his mother was at work, Ian sneaked up to the attic where he kept his stash and took a few tokes of marijuana—one of the few ways he knew to soothe his anxieties. Sometimes he'd stealthily bring down one of the VHS tapes he kept hidden in the attic along with the steadily diminishing baggie of grass, and watch blond California surfer boys do the unspeakable things to

one another that excited—and terrified—him so much.

In his video-stimulated fantasies, Ian could forget he was not in California anymore. He could forget that his college career at Loyola University in L.A. had been ruined in the beginning of his junior year by his father's untimely death, by his mother's inability to keep up the exorbitant tuition—even though she devoutly wanted a Catholic education for her son, and by his own stupidity and bad judgment in letting his unleashed sexual appetite distract him from school so badly that the Dean had only shrugged hopelessly when he begged for financial aid.

“This is not the 70s anymore, young man,” the Dean of Students had lectured him. “The hippies are gone and the sexual revolution is over. And *your* grades are deplorable. The R.A. in your dorm told me he thinks you’re going down to Santa Monica Boulevard, where those... those *bars* are. I warned you about your grades last spring. It’s too late to do anything about that. But, look, I am going to warn you now about your life. This is 1985. Don’t you know there’s a contagious virus spreading among those people down there? You may hate me for this,

Ian, but I'm probably saving your life by making you quit school and go home to your family."

While he watched the blond surfer boys on the tape—so like the men he'd seen in "those bars" on Santa Monica—he could forget he'd had to return to his hometown San Antonio where, as a dark-skinned Hispanic-looking boy with the all too Anglo-sounding name of Ian MacMurtrey, he felt so out of place. He thought it was just too much for him to be expected to explain to every person he met that his Scottish immigrant parents had rescued him from an orphanage in Nuevo Laredo.

Sometimes he'd pretend he was blond and blue-eyed and muscled like the boys on the videotape and that his mother was proud that her son was desired by other beautiful boys, instead of being desperately ashamed of her son's psychological constitution. Sometimes he'd think about the men in L.A. who fell in love with him—if only for a night. Sometimes he'd remember that life when he could imagine he was anybody he wanted to be. Sometimes he'd recall the elaborate stories he'd told about himself. He'd sometimes explained, for instance, that he was an exotic halfbreed of the Indian Raj. His great-

grandfather, he'd said, was a trusted sergeant in a regiment of Nepalese Gurkhas who, in his old age, sired a beautiful daughter who grew up as the darling of the British officers. As a young woman she was swept off her feet by a dashing Scottish bagpiper who married her against regulations, and fled to America and raised a family of dark-skinned MacMurtreys.

And sometimes, lost in his fantasies, he could forget that he was worried sick that the itching in his underarms and the occasional pressure in his groin were symptoms of impending doom, and desperately afraid that in California he'd let himself do one too many of those unspeakable—but lovely—acts the blond boys seemed to do so casually and with such impunity.

The Dean had made it sound like he didn't know about the gay cancer thing... AIDS, he knew what it was called. He knew it was a political thing as well as a health thing. And he knew the doctors thought they'd figured out the virus that caused it and even had a test. He'd been at one of the bars in San Antonio recently and seen there were gay volunteers urging people to get tested.

While he was sitting at the bar that night, wondering if he had the nerve to talk to one of those volunteers, a guy next to him who was already a little drunk started in on why *not* to take the test. “There’s nothing they can do to help you, even if you know you’ve got the bug. And maybe the government just wants to find out who they should round up and send to some concentration camp.”

“But wouldn’t it be good to know?” Ian challenged. “For your own peace of mind.”

“Peace of mind in the camps, maybe. Didn’t you notice it was 1984 last year. Big Brother got reelected. You can’t trust the government with personal information—‘specially ‘bout bein’ gay and all.” When Ian had read the Orwell book in high school, he’d pictured Big Brother looking like Joseph Stalin or somebody, not grandfatherly ol’ Ronald Reagan with the dyed red hair.

This afternoon he didn’t want to think about Ronald Reagan or Big Brother or about those tests. Right now he wanted to get his mind back to the beach

After the surfers, and Ian, had finished, he quickly took the tape back to its hiding place. When he came

back down, his eye was caught by a scene on the TV of the actor John Ritter sitting in a bathtub—younger and sexier, Ian thought, than he'd ever looked on "Three's Company." Wow, he's got a good body with lots of chest hair. Ian looked down disappointedly at his own smooth, and to his eyes, under-developed chest. (Here it was almost the end of October and he was still wearing only gym shorts and sweltering in the Texas heat.) Ian liked what he saw; he jumped up and stuck a blank tape in the VCR and switched on the recorder.

From the TV Guide he discovered the name of the movie was Hero At Large. Getting interested in the story, Ian kept watching it even after John Ritter got dressed—most of the time wearing red and yellow tights and a cape. It took Ian a while to figure out what the bizarre costume was about. By the end of the film, still a little stoned, he was almost crying. It was so moving...

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"Okay, so tell me about the movie," Carlos ordered. He was Ian's only friend anymore, and he

felt a sisterly responsibility to pull Ian out of this depression he'd been in since he came home from L.A. last summer. Carlos called Ian at least once a day to urge him to talk and sometimes to get him to go out with him, at least for tacos and sometimes for a drink at the Copacabana, the disco where Carlos was just getting a start performing as Tallulah Tulane, drag queen extraordinaire, "two hundred pounds of too- too- much talent."

"Well, it was just a movie," Ian answered despondently, apparently not quite speaking into the phone.

"C'mon, Ian, hold the phone so I can hear you," Carlos commanded. "Yeah, but you said it got you real excited."

"Just a dream, I guess. Maybe I got a little crazy watching it. I thought for a minute I could be like the guy in the movie."

"Maybe you could."

"Awwhh, what am I good for? Nobody likes me. I couldn't be any kind of hero."

"I like you," Carlos answered.

"I guess so," Ian replied, "but that's not the same."

"Same as what?"

"Oh, you know, same as, well, same as in California."

"Look, Ian, you're not in California anymore. You can't live your life as though that was all that mattered."

"Why not? You don't understand."

"Don't get on that 'you don't understand' kick again. I'm tired of hearing that. Tell me about the movie you watched today."

"Oh, all right." Ian sounded surly. (Carlos preferred that to despondent.) "John Ritter played this actor named Steve Nichols. He was doing some sort of promotion for a movie about a super-hero called Captain Avenger. You know, dressed in tights and cape and a mask."

"Oooh, tights," Carlos rejoined in a way that bothered Ian. (It was just so nelly.)

"He looked pretty good. Anyway, while he was in costume he went into a store when a robbery was going on and chased the thieves away. Like in a comic book. Well, the TV and newspapers made a big deal of the 'real super-hero.'"

"I can imagine. Musta seemed like the comics come true."



"Yeah, and the actor got into it. I mean he discovered he liked being a hero. So he'd dress up in this costume and do brave things. But always in secret. The guy thinks he's doing all this to give good example to the public about how people could really make society better if they just watched out for one another and helped each other. But then this Broadway promoter finds out who he is and blackmails him into doing an heroic deed so the media can cover it as a political campaign stunt. The promoter's involved with some crooked politicians.

"So anyway, then they have this rally to honor Captain Avenger and Steve knows there's something phony going on. But he shows up anyway and gives a speech about how Captain Avenger isn't important and that all the people there can do heroic things. Then suddenly the rally turns into a political demonstration for this crooked Mayor who's trying to take credit for Captain Avenger's good deeds. Steve tries to run away, but he's stopped by a TV reporter and gets exposed and humiliated. I felt so sorry for him," Ian broke into his story-telling. "I mean, I could really identify with him, you know, getting rejected and made a fool of."

"And that's how it ended? What a downer!" Carlos answered.

"Oh no, there was more. He was gonna run away and forget the whole thing. Then he sees this fire in an apartment building. It's really bad; the building keeps exploding. The Fire Chief says his men have to get away so they don't get killed, but there's this woman screaming that her baby's in the building. Well, this guy Steve is still wearing the Captain Avenger suit under his overcoat and he sees what's going on and he jumps in and climbs up to the roof of the next building and goes in to rescue the child. There's a whole crowd watching—some of the same people who'd boo'd him earlier, but now they're all cheering for him. He finds the kid and gets him to safety, but then there's another explosion and it looks like he gets overcome himself. So the people in the crowd break through the barricades and run into the blaze and somehow or other rescue him. And that's the end. I was crying," Ian admitted bashfully. "It was so beautiful."

"Sounds neat," Carlos replied. "The ending vindicated the actor and also his message that everybody can be a hero."

"Yeah."

"So. You gonna be a hero and get your ass outa the house and do something with me tonight?"

"Oh, not tonight, Carlos. I'm tired."

"From watching a movie?"

"Oh, Carlos, please. You don't understand."

"Yes, I do understand," Carlos said sternly. "I understand that you got hurt when you had to quit school and come back home and now you're feeling sorry for yourself."

"It's more than that," Ian answered. He didn't want to tell Carlos about what he thought might be swollen lymph nodes. He'd managed to keep that a secret from everybody so far.

"Well, listen here, honey, what you need is a boyfriend. Ain't nothing else gonna get rid of your blues," Tallulah Tulane offered her two-cents' worth.

"You don't understand," Ian complained. "I can't do that. Uh, what would my mother say?" Ian struggled for an excuse.

"Your mother's happy when you get out of the house. She told me so."

"Yeah, but not to go out to gay bars or drag shows or things."

"I guess so. She wants you to get a job. Then maybe go back to school and finish . . ."

"Oh, what's the use?"

"Ian, you're just depressed, that's all. You'll get over it."

You don't know what you're talking about, Ian thought, but didn't dare let on. For all that it was hard to keep his worries from Carlos, he didn't want to lose this friendship. It was all he had left.

"Look, Halloween's coming up next week. You've got to come out then. What if I make you a costume? How about something like this Captain Avenger?"

"Oh, all right." Ian gave up trying to justify his reclusiveness.

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The Sam Houston Mining Company was really hoppin'. Besides Fiesta in the spring, Halloween was the biggest night of the year. The Mining Company, as it was known familiarly in San Antonio's gay community, occupied a prestigious space in the old post office facing Alamo Plaza, the center of downtown San Antonio. It was something of a

scandal among old Texas blue-bloods that the biggest gay disco in the city stood right across the Plaza from the Alamo. But it was also a fact of San Antonio life that the owner of the Sam Houston Mining Company, Bobby Holtzer, was also one of the major developers of the downtown district. This area had been let go the way of so many central cities when those same rich Texas blue-bloods who complained about the fairies taking over the Alamo moved all their money to the north side to escape the Hispanicization of the city. "They have no business complaining," Holtzer was famous for saying, "if the faggots will take downtown, it's theirs as far as I'm concerned. Besides," he'd fake a lisp, "at least, they'll keep the store-windows well-decorated. And that'll be great for tourists."

For Halloween this year all of downtown was alive. The Mayor was hosting a public costume party in La Villita a few blocks south of Alamo Plaza in the heart of historic San Antonio. Crowds of people in costume surged along the scenic Riverwalk, occasionally surfacing onto the city streets.

And typical of San Antonio, known euphemistically by some as "the northernmost city of

Mexico," bands of Hispanic teenagers prowled the same streets looking for excitement and, maybe, mischief. These kids, dressed in black chinos and cut-off white T-shirts, sporting bandanas and chains, often looked to gay out-of-towners like denizens of big city leather clubs and certainly fair prey for a pick-up. But in this city, they were usually anything but. Most of these kids subscribed with a vengeance to Latin notions of machismo. Sometimes they might be fun, but they could also be dangerous.

Even though he and Carlos had the same color skin, as the two of them stood in the line outside the Mining Company waiting to get in, they were wary of the kids in black chinos.

"Captain Avenger had better protect little Tallulah here," Carlos said breathily.

"You sure I have to do this?" Ian complained. "I don't think this is such a good idea."

"Don't you like the costume? It looks exactly like the one in that movie you liked," Carlos sounded hurt.

"Sure I like the costume. You did a great job. It's just, well, oh, I don't know."

"C'mon, Ian, you need to get out more. You spend too much time at home watching TV and jacking off."

Ian was suddenly flustered. "Whaddya mean?"

"You know very well what I mean. And don't play innocent with me. I don't know one single gay man that's got a VCR that doesn't also have at least one porn tape. I'm not saying it's bad for you. But you gotta do more with your life than that."

Ian wasn't sure how to answer that. Carlos is right. He turned away from his friend to survey the line of people ahead of him. They were slowly moving in through the revolving doors that remained in the facade of the old Post Office. But he doesn't understand. He's got me dressed up like a hero. But maybe the heroic thing is to stay in the house and just wait. I mean not spread this thing IF I've got it. I don't know.

They reached the doors and went in. They had to show I.D. and then pay the cover and get their hands stamped. Ian noticed a small crowd of people standing around a brightly-lit table at the far end of a side hall behind the cashier.

"What's going on back there?" he asked as he held out his wrist to be stamped.

"The AIDS Project is drawing blood," the cashier responded disinterestedly.

"Cost anything?" Ian asked.

"They're asking for a donation, but you don't have to," the cashier answered, now obviously wanting Ian to keep moving. "You can go ask them any time you want," he said seeing Ian still hesitating.

"Oh, let's see who's here," Carlos exclaimed as he pulled his wrist away and checked out the stamp of a clown's face. In the black light that illumined the front part of the bar, the stamp glowed faintly. He grabbed Ian's hand and pulled him along into the crowd.

Reluctantly, Ian followed Carlos, his heart beating fast with the realization he could go get a blood test right now and have his worry and curiosity settled for good. But what if they tell me I've got it. I don't want to know. I'd rather just die.

A half-hour later Ian was leaning up against a pillar at the back of the disco. Carlos had gone off to get them drinks and hadn't returned. Ian didn't like getting separated. He'd brought Carlos in his car and felt responsible for him. Besides, he felt out of place by himself. He was avoiding looking at anybody and



kept the blue translucent visor that was part of the costume pulled down over his eyes so nobody would recognize him. Not that he thought anybody would. He didn't think he knew anybody in San Antonio anymore.

What am I doing playing Captain Avenger? I'm a coward, scared of my own life. Guess I oughta go get tested. But . . . What if my mother found out?

Just then Tallulah Tulane showed up with a little coterie of followers. She extended her hand with a drink for Ian.

"Hey, Superman himself!" one of the guys with Carlos remarked.

"Not Superman," Carlos exclaimed, "Captain Avenger."

"Who you avenging?" the guy quizzed Ian.

"Look, it's just a costume. Carlos made it."

"Great costume," somebody else in the group spoke up.

"How about avenging the queers?" the first guy suggested. "Like that Gay Guardian cartoon that used to run in The Gay Calendar."

"Is there something to avenge?" Carlos asked excitedly. He obviously didn't want to have missed any news about gay harassment.

"There's always something to avenge," his friend answered.

"Hey, you guys, come here," another of Carlos's followers whispered loudly, motioning to them to come around behind the pillar.

Afraid of getting separated from Carlos again, Ian followed. Somebody had produced a joint and was just lighting up. For a moment Ian got scared what the grass might do to him. It might make him more uptight. I don't need that. Maybe it'll relax me so I can enjoy myself. I'm here, what's the use of suffering through it.

Coughing out most of his hit, Carlos introduced Ian to the others and passed him the joint. Ian made an effort to smile and then let the marijuana lift his consciousness. While the rush from the first toke hit him, he felt himself sail up into the air above the dancefloor. Hey, maybe I really am Captain Avenger and can fly. He giggled quietly as his mind cleared a little and he waited for the joint to come around again.

"I don't think Bobby Holtzer would like us smoking dope in here," somebody said.

"Well, fuck him," Tallulah answered in her throatiest best.

"Wouldn't you just love to?"

"Moi?" Carlos answered, feigning amazed innocence.

"Bobby Holtzer's a hot man . . ."

Ian wasn't really listening to the dish about Bobby Holtzer. He was thinking about John Ritter and Steve Nichols and that movie he'd watched a couple of times now. He remembered the speech Captain Avenger made to the crowd. "I'm not important. You're important. You can do the same things." He's right, isn't he? I mean I could do something heroic. That's what I need to do with my life. And Carlos is right that I shouldn't just waste my time watching TV. In his stoned reverie, Ian got to thinking about all the things he could do: saving children from burning buildings, preventing robberies, saving drowning people—"avenging the queers," he remembered Carlos's friend had said.

Ian looked around and realized he'd lost Carlos again. Oh hell, how am I gonna find him. I can't

leave without him. He'd just started hunting for Carlos when he saw the guy who'd produced the joint.

"Have you seen Carlos?"

"You mean Tallulah?"

"Tell him I've gone outside to get some air. He came with me, maybe he could find another ride?"

"Sure, no problem. In fact, we were just talking about going over to the Copacabana in a while. I'll take him. You sure you don't want come too?"

"Maybe I'll meet you over there," Ian fibbed. Well, that was easy.

He walked out to the front lobby and then toward the exit. For a while he stood looking down the long corridor at the AIDS Project table. Then finally rushed outside.

All of a sudden he didn't feel heroic anymore.

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Ian wandered around downtown for a little while. He was pleasantly stoned and he liked the cool air, especially after being inside the hot and stuffy bar. He walked over to the Mayor's Halloween party in La

Villita. He observed that the costumes were not nearly as good as at the Mining Company. He also observed that there was practically no drag at that party and what there was was poorly and obviously done. Real straight crowd. Ian felt out of place. He left and headed down toward the Riverwalk with its shops and restaurants a storey below streetlevel.

Maybe I could be a Captain Avenger, a real hero . . . if I don't die. He straightened his spine and took longer strides. He was bounding along—able to leap tall buildings. He walked along the river for a while and then turned up at the Hyatt and strolled through its little urban river valley cut into the line of buildings along Alamo Plaza. At the far end he bounded up the steps and into the Plaza. To his far left was the Mining Company. Right across from him was the Alamo. He climbed up on a wall at the top of the Hyatt steps. Fighting for Truth, Justice, and the American Way.

Suddenly his heart started racing. He saw a group of Hispanic teenagers huddled in a tight circle over near the bandstand at the far end of Alamo Plaza. They were all dressed in the familiar black and white. But in the middle of them he could clearly see flashes

of brightly colored red and blue. Abruptly the huddle opened and he saw a woman in an extravagant evening gown run from the teenagers. He heard her scream.

Captain Avenger. Ian jumped down from the wall and ran toward the fleeing woman. As he crossed the street between the wall he'd been standing on and the wide plaza with the bandstand, he hesitated. The teenagers were fanning out, obviously still interested in the woman in red and blue, playing with her the way a cat might play with a mouse it's finally going to kill. Ian was wary, but he saw she needed help. How can I chicken out now?

"Hey, queer," he heard one of the guys shouted, "your lipstick's smeared."

At first he assumed they must have noticed him, but then he realized the woman they were taunting must not be a woman after all but a drag queen. Probably going over to the Mining Company—maybe she felt as out of place as I did at La Villita. And now she's gotten caught by those kids.

Ian followed at a distance. The Hispanic kids were too fascinated with their game of cat-and-mouse to bother noticing him. But he wasn't sure what to

do. Should he try to find police? Should he intervene? Could he intervene?

He thought about his costume. Captain Avenger. He thought about that movie with John Ritter. He remembered how in California he'd played at being anybody he'd wanted to be; he recalled his story about the handsome Scottish bagpiper and the lovely Gurkha maiden.

Just then he noticed that the taunting teenagers were carefully maneuvering the drag queen into a dark side street. She's in real trouble. He looked around for help, but though there were lots of people strolling through the Plaza, he didn't see any policemen. Captain Avenger may have to do this on his own. All of a sudden Ian felt more strength than he'd felt in months. Maybe this is my chance to be a hero.

"AIDS, AIDS," he heard one of the teenagers jeering at her. Ian's body filled with rage. He was furious that such a thing could happen.

He turned to a man and woman couple costumed as giant M&M's—one with nuts and one without—who happened to be walking by. "Call the cops," he shouted, pointing toward the circle of teenage

delinquents slowly closing in on the drag queen. The yellow, peanut-shaped M&M seemed immediately to recognize what was happening and started running back in the direction he'd come from. Maybe he'd just passed a cop, Ian thought gratefully.

And then he made his move.

With a suddenness of purpose, Ian shouted a comic book roar and hurled himself across the distance right into the circle. As he broke through he delivered a kick to the nearest kid that sent the guy sprawling—and surprised Ian with its power.

For a moment the kids seemed dumbfounded. They had not been expecting a Superhero to come to the rescue of this pitiful drag queen. They scattered.

Hey, it worked. I really am a hero. Ian turned to the bedraggled queen, "Are you alright?" he asked solicitously.

"My heel's broken," she declared through tears of rage and fear.

"You broke a bone?"

"No, I mean my heel," she said holding up her once-spiked red patent leather shoe."



"C'mon, let's get outa here." Ian offered his arm to support her as she hobbled back toward the lights of Alamo Plaza.

Just then Ian heard a shout. "Superman's a queer."  
"Yeah, man, let's see about this Superman."

The drag queen kicked out her foot, something bright red flew away from her, and then she was running. All of a sudden the circle of threatening teenagers had formed again. And this time Ian was at the center. Oh my God, he managed to think and then before the fear overwhelmed him he reminded himself he was a Superhero tonight.

Instead of letting himself get played with, as the drag queen had, he lunged at one of the kids, striking him hard in the chest with his fist. Two others jumped him from opposite directions. But before they could grab him, in a move almost like a dancer, he spun around and shot out both arms, hitting each of them hard against the side of the head. They both fell to the ground. Yeeaah, I'm winning. Ian felt a surge of adrenalin. It's like those people who can lift automobiles to save a child or something.

As another of the kids came at him, shouting imprecations, he kicked high, throwing his whole

body into the kick. He expected his foot to strike the kid right in the middle of the chest, knocking the wind out of him, maybe even breaking his ribs. He was surprised to discover how fast he was thinking. It was almost as though he could deliberately plan each move.

But his foot did not connect with the kid's chest. Instead the kid turned abruptly and grabbed Ian's ankle. Ian suddenly found himself flat on his back on the pavement. Pain surged up his spine, chattering his teeth.

"Hey, Superman can't fly." The kid announced victoriously. "C'mon now," he danced teasingly around Ian, beckoning with one hand, "get up, faggot. Now it's your turn."

Painfully Ian got to his knees. He looked around hoping help might be on its way. "Police," he shouted, "help, help." All of a sudden his surge of adrenalin was gone. His whole body ached. He couldn't quite catch his breath and everything was happening too fast. He looked around him to see two, maybe three of the kids coming at him. And then his heart sank: a glint of steel. One of the kids

had produced a switchblade knife and was flicking it back and forth in front of Ian's face.

Ian managed to get to his feet and then started to stagger back, when two of the others caught his arms. Fear—sharp, chill, and paralyzing—coursed through his body. He couldn't move. He just stood there, no longer hearing the taunts of the guy with the knife, just waiting for the blade to cut deep into him. He couldn't even scream. He just looked down at the ground hoping to make himself invisible.

Suddenly Ian felt a burning pain shoot through his gut. He looked up, dazed, to see one of the boys dancing around, a knife gleaming in his hand. Ian thought he could see blood flying in every direction. He looked down to see the yellow tunic of the Captain Avenger costume slowly turning red.

Then suddenly running figures in dark-blue uniforms raced into his vision. "Put down that knife," he heard a strong voice command. And the guys that held him let him go. He almost dropped to the ground.

"Hey, buddy, you okay?" The face of the policeman loomed in front of Ian—a *deus ex machina*.

Ian struggled to answer. His mouth and throat didn't seem to want to obey the commands from his brain. "I . . . I . . . guess so," he choked, then doubled over as a jolt of pain exploded in his abdomen.

"Get that medic over here," the policeman shouted.

A moment later a man in a white uniform was struggling to get Ian's arm over his shoulder, while the policeman was still helping to support Ian.

"I think he's hurt," the policeman said. "Look at all this blood. It's..." Before he could finish the sentence, suddenly the officer's face twisted into a pained grimace.

One of the other black-pantsed kids had run back and was suddenly jumping around behind the policeman. He must have stabbed the cop, Ian thought. He could see the kid's arm coming down repeatedly against the policeman's back. And then he passed out.

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"The medics, fearful of exposure to AIDS-contaminated fluids, collected some of the blood that had been soaked in a bandage and submitted it for

testing," Ian's mother was reading to him from the morning paper. He didn't like what he was hearing at all.

"MacMurtrey's lawyer, Juan Ortiz, announced this morning that his client would not agree to be tested for AIDS. Ortiz cited a report from the federal Centers for Disease Control recommending that mandatory, reportable testing not be implemented. "The Fifth Amendment to the Constitution was designed to protect citizens from just this kind of invasion," Ortiz was quoted as saying at an impromptu press conference on the Courthouse steps this morning. "Besides, my client is not guilty of any crime. He was acting as a good samaritan. There is no justification for turning his well-intentioned actions against him." "See what you've done to us," Ian's mother scolded as she looked up from the paper. "And after everything we've tried to do for you. Now what's gonna happen. Everybody's gonna know." She got up and walked over to the window, throwing the paper down on the hospital bed.

Ian didn't say a word. He was so frightened. So hurt. So confused. There were tears in his eyes that blurred the banner headline:

AIDS carrier stabbed at Alamo  
Policeman possibly infected

"But, Mama, I didn't do anything wrong," he struggled to defend himself.

"Like hell you didn't. You were out there in California, uh, uh, screwing around." She said the words with obvious distaste. To Ian they sounded strange coming out of her mouth. He didn't like his mother saying awful things like that. After all, she didn't understand. "It's not our fault you got AIDS."

"Mama, please. Look, I don't have AIDS."

"Well, what does it say right there in the paper? On the front page," she added shrieking.

"I don't know. I just don't know—"

"What it says, Ma'am," spoke up a young woman who had just walked into the room, "is that the antibody to the AIDS-related virus was found in blood in a bandage in the ambulance that brought Ian and the policeman here to the hospital."

"Who are you?" said Mrs. MacMurtrey defensively. "What are you doing in my son's room?"

"My name is Beverly Harcourt. I'm with the hospital social service department. I'm assigned to work with people with AIDS and related conditions."

"See, you said it yourself. He's got AIDS," Mrs. MacMurtrey exclaimed and then burst into tears.

Ian remained silent, his eyes downcast. The pretty young woman extended her hand as she closed the door and walked into the room.

"I'm sorry to come in unannounced. I hadn't realized you had a visitor."

"That's okay. Uh, is she right?"

"Huh?"

"My mother. Is she right? Do I have AIDS?"

"Oh no," answered Ms. Harcourt quickly. "A person can only be diagnosed with AIDS if he or she comes down with a serious opportunistic, life threatening infection like pneumocystis pneumonia or Kaposi's Sarcoma."

"You mean I'm okay? The paper's wrong."

"Well, Ian, I think you misunderstood what the paper said. I mean, I don't know about that.

"You don't know?," interjected Mrs. MacMurtrey exasperatedly. "Does my son have AIDS or not? I'll sue the newspaper."

"What the paper says is that Ian might be carrying the AIDS virus," Ms. Harcourt began to explain very slowly and carefully. "There was evidence that one of the people who'd been stabbed the other night had the antibody. Now the fact is we don't know whether it was Ian or the policeman or maybe one of the hoodlums. We don't know know who all was bleeding."

"But what about AIDS?" Ian asked.

"The presence of the antibody only means that one of you had been exposed to the virus. It doesn't mean anybody's actually got the disease. I'm afraid you've gotten blamed unfairly because you admitted you'd been in the Sam Houston Mining Company earlier."

"What does that have to do with AIDS?" Ian's mother wailed.

"Mama, please calm down."

"The club is known to be a gay bar," Ms. Harcourt continued calmly. "The media has assumed that means Ian is gay and therefore a member of one of the high risk groups."

"My son is not a homosexual. And it's none of the media's business."

"But, Mama, I am gay—"



"Shut up, Ian. Just shut up."

"No, I am gay. But you're right it's none of the media's business."

"What do you think about taking the HIV antibody test, Ian?" Ms. Harcourt asked gently.

Ian looked at her, then looked down at the bed. His eyes ran over the bold headlines. Then he looked up at her again. "I'm scared."

"I understand," she answered and lay her hand on Ian's.

He flinched and then relaxed. "I, I thought about taking the test that night. They were doing it in the Mining Company. But I was afraid."

"That was a very brave thing you did the other night. You probably saved a life." She paused for a moment. "Maybe you can be brave again. It might save your own life, I mean, knowing about your antibody status—"

"Yeah. And it might mean I'll be ostracized. I heard they might round up gay people and put 'em in concentration camps."

"Listen, Miss Social Worker, my lawyer said he wouldn't take the test. It's his Constitutional right."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. MacMurtrey. I don't mean to upset you. I truly am concerned about Ian's well-being. Not about the media circus."

"Well, you should be."

"I'm also concerned about another of my patients. The policeman who was stabbed, Officer Hernandez, he was hurt much worse than Ian. The knife cut into vital organs."

"You mean, he's dying?" Ian asked.

"No, no, I think the surgery saved him. But now he's very depressed and despondent."

"So is my son."

"Well, yes. But maybe not as much as Officer Hernandez, Ma'am. He says he can never go back to the police department and that he might as well die."

"I don't understand," said Ian.

"You know the new Police Chief has been trying to reform the force after all those scandals last year. I think Officer Hernandez is afraid he'll be black-balled."

"Is that realistic?" Ian asked.

"I don't know. It seems like this is just one of those things one risks in the line of duty and that it shouldn't be held against him."

"But I'm still the villain, aren't I?"

Ignoring Ian's guilty comment, Ms. Harcourt continued, "We won't be able to do a test to see if the Officer was actually exposed for at least three months. I thought maybe if we tested you and the others we could find out where the antibodies in that bandage came from and give you some useful information about yourself."

"Would that help the policeman?"

"It might. I mean if you can remember the sequence of the stabbings, maybe we can determine that Hernandez wouldn't have been exposed — especially if you turn out positive and we can tell that's where the antibodies came from—and maybe that news would, you know, lift his spirits enough that he'd recover okay."

"Is he gonna die otherwise?"

"I don't know that. Sometimes when people are despondent and don't want to live, especially when they've been hurt real bad, well, they don't heal."

"This is none of my son's business."

"But, Mama, he saved my life. I think I owe him something."

"Look, Ian, you have to deny all this business about being homosexual. I don't want that to come out in public. It's embarrassing. And I don't want you taking that test or cooperating at all."

"Mrs. MacMurtrey, I don't think that's very good advice. It doesn't make any sense."

"I don't care whether it makes any sense to you or not, Miss. I don't want my name dragged through the dirt."

"But refusing to cooperate will only make it worse—"

"It will protect our family honor," was the adamant reply.

Ian looked at the young social worker with appeal for help obvious in his eyes. He lay back in the bed, mumbling, "I don't know." Then he perked up momentarily and, half whispering to Ms. Harcourt, asked, "Can I go see Officer Hernandez?"

"No," his mother shouted as Ms. Harcourt nodded, smiling.

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"I'm afraid they'll ridicule me, maybe black-ball me and drive me off the force," Officer Bill Hernandez stammered. "What else can I do? I've been a cop all my life." With a wide swatch of bandages across his chest, two IVs in his arms, and a tube from a urinary catheter coiling out from under the bedsheet, Hernandez indeed looked much more badly injured than Ian.

"Are you worried about getting AIDS?" Ian asked. He was sitting in a wheel chair next to Hernandez's bed.

"Yeah, I guess I am."

"You know, I don't want to think I could cause something like this. I mean, I know you saved my life and all—I feel so guilty."

The officer looked at Ian with an odd expression that Ian took to be contempt. "Maybe I should just die," Hernandez said. "I thought about jumping out the window."

"No, don't do anything like that. It'll be okay."

"Maybe for you." Then seeming to change the subject, Hernandez, pointed weakly at the newspaper at the foot of his bed. "You seen the paper today?"

Ian looked at the paper. He'd been avoiding reading newspapers. He knew his mother would be showing up with anything really relevant anyway. The whole thing embarrassed, angered, and confused him.

Police Chief calls for Ethics Investigation

"What does that mean?"

"Whaddya think? It means the Chief's gonna clean up the Department. And that means getting rid of anybody, you know, irregular."

"You afraid that'll include you?"

"Sure. I mean what if I turn positive for this AIDS bug? That'll be evidence of misconduct and they'll boot me out."

"That seems unfair," Ian objected. "'Specially if they know you got exposed in the line of duty."

"Well, maybe so. But I know the Department's gotten so much shit lately, well, they're just looking for people to crucify."

"But you ought to be a hero!"

"I thought you were the big hero, huh?, Captain Avenger."

"Hey, don't make fun of me. It was Halloween."

"Yeah, some trick or treat!"

"What do you want me to do?"

"Why should you do anything for me?"

"You saved my life," Ian answered astonished. He didn't understand why the cop was so hostile. My God, we've been through the same experience. I thought he'd be friendly.

"So far you ain't seemed very concerned about that!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean your lawyer's out there refusing to let 'em give you that blood test. That leaves all the suspicion on me."

"Huh? You must be reading the wrong papers." Ian felt a wave of anger. "I'm the one the paper's are blaming for this. They say I gave you this virus."

"Yeah, but you won't prove it. You're bound to have it, aren't you? I mean, you are queer and all?"

"Uh—" Ian stammered.

"Some hero you turn out to be?" Hernandez retorted.

"What's with this hero business? Why keep bringing that up?"

"You started that, kid."

This isn't going anywhere, Ian realized. "Well look, Officer —"

"Call me Bill."

I don't understand this guy. One minute he's chewing me out, the next he's getting chummy. "Okay, Bill, I'm probably getting out of here tomorrow or the next day. Maybe I'll come back and visit." Ian started to wheel himself out of the room, then realized it was just easier to get up and walk the chair out. He didn't quite see why the nurse had insisted he take a wheelchair in the first place.

"Yeah, do that. And, say, kid, take the test, prove it's you. Keep the secret for me, will ya?"

What secret, Ian wondered as he left the room, more confused than ever.

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The Mining Company was hoppin'. It was a Saturday night. The place was packed. And Ian was having a hell of a good time. He'd been surprised to discover he'd become a sort of gay community hero. Even Bobby Holtzer had congratulated him a while ago. "Refusing to take that test was a real blow for



gay rights," Holtzer had said shaking his hand vigorously. "We can't let them force us to use that information against us. It's no crime to be seropositive. And the only way we're gonna make 'em recognize that is to stand up for our rights to confidentiality."

Ian smiled as Holtzer said that. Wouldn't he be surprised?

He wasn't wearing the Captain Avenger costume tonight. He probably never would again. The blood stain won't come out of the tunic, and besides, it had a hole in the middle of it. But he sure felt like a hero. He'd managed to satisfy almost everybody. Only the medics were not satisfied. But, what the hell. they hadn't been exposed to anything but some fresh blood. They ought to have known how to take simple precautions.

His mother was still upset he was gay. But he knew she'd get over that. The gay community thought he was a hero. Ms. Harcourt had gotten what she wanted, though not exactly the way she thought she wanted it: Officer Hernandez perked up and got better. And Hernandez had even managed to

keep his secret, though it had taken Ian a while to realize what that was.

In fact, it was only about an hour ago that the whole thing had finally made sense to him.

It was then that Ian had been scheduled to talk with the volunteer counselor from the AIDS Project. They'd met in one of the little offices off the Mining Company's main lobby, down that hall where Ian had first seen the Project's volunteers drawing blood, and where last Monday—after all the public furor had quieted down—Ian finally got his own blood drawn.

"I guess you were expecting this to come out positive," the counselor had said. Ian just nodded.

"With all the publicity, I suppose, so had we. That's why I asked them to run the test again. It came out negative, I mean, both times it came out negative."

Ian had sat stunned for a minute, then asked about the symptoms he'd been experiencing.

"Probably psychological. That's not uncommon. I mean stress can cause lymph node enlargement. The weather's pretty changeable around here; at night that can make you sweat; with a little imagination and some hysteria, it's easy to think that's symptomatic of something serious.

"I've seen a number of guys come in here and take the test convinced they've got symptoms and then when it comes out negative, the symptoms disappear. That's the real use of the test, I mean, to give people the results when they're negative. The positive test doesn't mean as much. We don't understand all those implications."

Ian left the little office. And halfway down the hall he could already feel like he had more energy. When he walked into the disco, he felt excited and pleased to be here. I think I'll get me a job tomorrow, he resolved. And then maybe apply at U.T. I could finish school on my own. He was feeling almost reborn.

He ran into his friend Carlos who slapped him on the back and then invited him to dance. In the middle of the dance, as Ian was feeling the life flowing back into him, feeling really brave for the first time in a long time, he unexpectedly thought about Officer Hernandez. And he thought about the blood the medic soaked up in that bandage. And he thought about the AIDS antibodies in that blood. And where they came from. And he thought about the purge in the police department and Bill Hernandez's fears. He

thought about how Hernandez had saved his life. And he realized by standing up for his civil rights and refusing to take the test and letting the press think the antibodies had come from him he'd returned the favor. Of course, at least for a while now he'd have to handle people thinking he was positive. But, what the hell, Ian thought, safe sex is safe sex. Just as important when you're negative as when you're positive. He hoped Officer Hernandez understood such things too. He smiled at the pretty blond boy dancing next to him. And the blond boy smiled back.

Ian started laughing like crazy right there in the middle of the dance floor.