

Tiny Stories

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Tiny Stories started out as a series of short stories.

I had been working on them for a few months, and they had become quite long and detailed, when a friend called and asked me if I would like to do a local newspaper series about people I had known who had died of AIDS. That idea fit with my idea for these stories and I said that I would be very interested.

As our discussion progressed, however, he emphasized that he was looking for a series of very small pieces.

I asked, "How small do you want them?"

He said, "Two hundred and fifty words each."

"Those aren't small stories," I replied, "they're tiny stories."

Thus the name of the volume.

As it turned out, the newspaper rejected the series because they were not exactly what they had wanted. But I, liking them more than ever before, began to see them as little poems rather than short stories. I rewrote them into poetry and made a chapbook of them in January of 1991. I printed 30 copies as gifts for a few friends and to sell at an AIDS fund raising art show and poetry reading.

The next thing I knew I had grant money and a publisher and it was a book. It sold well and even made me some money. One may still buy copies of Tiny Stories at Amazon.com. (If you care to, you may.) The e-book version shown here does have a few editing changes from the original book, but they are basically only spelling and layout revisions.

I am still quite fond of this work. And, now, I consider it to be only one poem, rather than a series.

Hope you like it,
Dennis Ciscel
April, 2002

They're not true of course.
They're probably just someone's
tiny old stories.

Spring

Forty times,
and forty times
forty times,
I have watched morning
and felt morning
come in;

but never before
has it begun singing
so clearly in my ears
outside my window.

Cotton candy clouds fill the sky,
and the bare trees reach up like children's prayers.
Pale pink, green and white buds
wait on the tips of branches for the perfect
time to bloom. The grasses green up, and all
along the highway wild flowers are beginning to gather
in ritual dances. Soon there will be color,
growth, sweet smells, and birds singing all
their favorite songs to Spring.

In the spring a young man's fancy turns and turns.
No longer so young myself I call
my younger friends and see how their fancies
are turning. As if an old man, I look
upon young lovers with a longing eye and call
deep within to my heart that we should have proceeded
with all we could have gotten back
before it was too late. But
it is too late,
and from my younger friends I get
no stories of love's concerts. I get
no tales of stolen hearts. I get no vicarious
lust filled nights in the country
with the moon shining down upon naked bodies

glowing intertwined in hopeful rituals
among the outlines of darkened trees,
salted with the stars and peppered with their kisses.

I get progress notes on how their immune systems
are collapsing. I get outlines of the latest rashes
and how much weight has been recently lost
or regained. I get speculation on how long ago they
became infected and who might have brought it
to them. I have 23-year-olds
refer to what it was like to face death
and walk away upright still. I get strangely
remorseful myself about how things have changed
in the course of my life. I get a little afraid
about how much more damage this illness is going
to do that most people still can't imagine.
I get grateful I'm here to give away
hugs to any and all that might need them.

Spring is changing. And so is summer.
And fall is coming earlier and earlier. And
winter will be very long and still.

Forty times, and forty times forty times,
I have watched morning and felt morning come in;
but never before has it begun singing so clearly
outside of my window.

1979

The woman had come in in full arrest. EMS had begun CPR on the scene. At the Emergency Room, there was still no sign of hope. So, I found her husband in the waiting room, introduced myself, and gave a brief summary of her condition: No breathing, no heartbeat, she was under CPR. I asked him for any pertinent information.

I ran back into the trauma room with a history of three previous heart attacks, lots of medication and such.

Our doctor ordered that her doctor be contacted before we give up. I went back to the husband and advised him that we were still trying to save her, but that it was most serious and she was not responding to the treatment. I told him we were contacting her doctor, but she was still not breathing and had no heartbeat.

The husband was placid. In the trauma room, they were still trying, but they had tried everything several times already with no luck. I went back to the husband and I asked if there were anyone else he might like to call such as family, friends, a minister. "A minister?" he asked,

"Is it that serious?" I'd already told him several times that she had no heartbeat, wasn't breathing, and she wasn't responding to treatment. "I never thought this would happen to us," he said almost to himself. "Most of us don't think this will

happen to us," I replied. "But it does."

Also 1979

Bobby had been a drug user and a people user. I had known him for a year or two before he arrived at the Emergency Room. I had seen him with many beautiful women, and I had heard from several about his taking them for money, food, sex, drugs and shelter.

Wrinkled and beaten, Bobby sat in the nurses' station quietly waiting his turn. This was not the Bobby who had won every woman he had ever wanted.

His skin was pale and dry and wrinkled. And his hair was coarse and faded. His eyes were hollow and empty. Like all good lovers, his eyes had called out, "You. You are the one. You are the one I have been looking for."

His eyes had always lied before. But now they told the truth. He was sick and weak and did not care about anything anymore.

He didn't care if we noticed him or made him wait. "He started losing weight a few weeks ago. But he hasn't felt good for months." "Why did he come to the ER now and not before?" "He can't breathe. He's sick. He's too weak to score. And he's coming down."

He was admitted to Intensive Care for addiction and impending withdrawal.

But we all knew there was more wrong with him than that. He was put on methadone: He was too weak to survive withdrawals. That night he was comatose. The next day he was

dead. Bobby had been in and out of drug abuse treatment all over town. But no one who had ever worked with him knew much about him. We couldn't find family or any real friends. He got a county burial without any known middle name, birth date, or gathering of mourners.

The autopsy had shown health problems, but nothing that could be called the "Cause of Death."

The pathologist who worked the case was an old friend of mine. We had worked lots of cases together. He was open with me. "These guys do so many drugs," he said. "Who knows what it was that killed him? I don't."

Sometime

Mario called to me as I passed by admissions and triage, "There's an old man, Mr. Miller, that just came in from an accident on 35, who needs his family called." "How bad is he hurt?" "Just cuts, but they won't let him out of bed to call because he fell at the scene and they don't know if something else is wrong. I know you're busy and he's not hurt bad, but he said he needs to reach them cause he had a lot of money in the glove box of his car. He was on his way to buy his grandson a new car, and he was afraid to tell the cops or the wrecker because he thought that they might steal it. He's a sweet old guy."

No one was at his home or any of his children's homes or even at the dorm room of his grandson at U.T. I told him we'd have to wait and try again. And I went on with the other cases I was working: A suicide, a murder, and the drowning of a child in a commode.

A lousy afternoon to say the least, and all three families were doing bad. Fifteen, maybe twenty, minutes later Mario called back into the nurses' station saying that the family was out front by the office. I told him that I hadn't reached them. He said, "They asked for him by name. There must be twenty of them here." Passing by his bed, I told him that his family might have turned up and that I'd be back. Mario finished talking to Mrs. Miller as I walked up. She was turning to the people crowded round

her, and I heard her say, with handkerchief in hand, "It must be very bad. They said someone would be right out to talk with us. We should wait right here." Shaking hands, I held her hand and said, "He isn't hurt that bad.

He has a cut on his forehead. We just need to watch him and to X-ray him to make sure nothing else is wrong. He fell down on the scene and so the ambulance was hesitant to let him stay alone. He says he is fine. He's fine. I tried to call you, but no one was home. And I called to everyone he knew, but no one's home." "That's because we're here," she said, waving her old hand across the crowd of their children and grandchildren and great grandchildren gathered in the hall. One of his sons had seen his car at the scene and was told that he'd gone off in an ambulance. But no one there had known if he were hurt too bad or not.

All the family had gathered to come down and be together for this. We talked about his car and how he needed someone to go after it and get the money out of it. They all decided it could wait. They wanted to stay here with him. They wanted to be back with him in the ER. Of course I couldn't let them all go in at once. We had a lot of people who were very badly hurt and we couldn't have them all in there at once.

I let his wife come back to see him for herself, and made a plan that when she came back out, the children could go in, one at a time, to visit for a while. "Except the little ones. No children under twelve."

They smiled so when she got to him. And kissed like children: On the lips without another touch. I went back to the other families. The suicide, the murder, and the drowned child had now been added to with a heart attack and another shooting. I was busier than I had been before. But whenever I passed Mr. Miller, he always had another family member with him. Mario assured me that the family was doing fine and taking turns to go and see him one by one. One time I was going through the waiting room, and Mr. Miller's family was gathered in a circle, arm in arm. Briefly, I wondered what was going on. I stopped, as I was walking by, and heard one of his sons saying, "And thank you for protecting him this afternoon when he was in this accident. And thank you for restoring him to us to take back home. And thank you for this time with all of us together here. Thank you for this time with all of us together once again. Amen." "Amen."

1981

James was an old friend. He had been a kind and helpful person to me down through years.

He had been successful in his business. He had been a small prince in his field. Then, financially secure, but living quite simply, he had retired and worked full time in helping other people find their way.

All the time I knew him, he smoked cigars and had a cough. In his seventies, he developed throat cancer and couldn't breathe or eat with any ease. So, slowly, he began to starve and wheeze to death. A year or more into the process, I saw him one time in his hospital room. He was going through both radiation and some chemotherapy. His skin was gray, and his face and throat were painted with lines to guide the radiation therapist. But it was a happy visit. We both spoke quietly and joyfully at seeing one another once again. Even there.

I had always felt he had adopted me as a surrogate son. His only son had Down's syndrome and, although he was blissfully happy and affectionate, he was institutionalized most of his life with many health problems and an inability to relate to someone who was over five or six years old.

His only daughter had produced only one son and one daughter as well, and that young grandson had fallen into heroin.

And then I came along. I had never had much contact with my father, and I wanted one and needed one. In the end, we adopted each other, in a way.

James sat on the side of his hospital bed dressed in an open backed hospital gown. He spoke of how sad it was to talk with all the other people there for treatment in this hospital. He spoke of how they all asked each other where they had failed in this life. Hadn't they been good enough? Hadn't they been fair enough? Hadn't they been kind enough to others? Women, who in their youths had been lovely and pursued by all the boys in town, now walked the halls bent slightly and with no hair on their heads, he said. Some of them had taken to some sort of knitted caps or others to spring hats with flowers on them to conceal their balded heads. Wistfully, he commented on how the blossom passes. He coughed and hacked up yellow slime from deep within his throat. He then excused himself, and I said it was nothing. A few years before, he and I had been in my backyard and he had commented on a fading peach tree that was just outside my bedroom window. I told him it had bores, and, even though I tried to kill them off, the bores were winning and the tree was probably in its last spring. Speaking of the tree, that day in the yard, I said that it seemed strange that god would make things reach maturity just to begin to die. And James had replied, it does seem strange, but that's the way it is.

The last time I visited him, he lay on his side with his knees drawn up against his chest and his arms about them gently.

He didn't even know that I was there.

The blossom was completely gone, but still,
somehow, he breathed through spring and then beyond.

1983

Joe and I were awakened one night by a phone call saying his mother was on her way to the hospital. She had had emphysema. She was on oxygen all the time. We were at the hospital when the ambulance arrived, and Marie was slate gray. Her eyes the only color on her. I have never seen anyone alive look so dead. The doctors spent hours with her in surgery. They told us her lungs had collapsed. They hoped the surgery would help. She would be in ICU for several weeks. We visited her daily in ICU surrounded by others on their beds in their glass walled cubicles.

She was frail, but she got stronger. Still, by Christmas they said she needed to stay in ICU into the new year. Joe packed up all the Christmas things and we went to ICU for dinner and presents. There was only one other patient left in ICU for Christmas. All the rest had been moved out into more open spaces.

Because there were so few patients, staffing was fairly light and relaxed and we were allowed to spend quite a bit of time with Marie. The other family also stayed much longer than usual with their patient.

Late in the afternoon, the nurses asked us all to leave for a few minutes so they could take care of some procedures. And Joe and I joined the other family in the waiting room. We made small talk. They hoped our mother would be okay. We thanked them,

and we hoped their person would be okay too. No, they told us, he had AIDS. Back in the room, Joe and I stood next to Marie's bed surrounded by wrapping paper, food in Tupperware containers, and a small Christmas Tree decorated with small balls and teddy bears. We looked through the glass wall between us and the next family. AIDS.

We had heard of it, had read the papers and seen the evening news. We had not noticed that the family in the next room was made up of one mother with three young male friends gathered around the mother's only son. The next day the four of them went away crying. Joe and I stood next to Marie's bed looking through the glass walls.

1986

Jim died in the winter. Suddenly. I hadn't even known that he was sick. I learned of his death from a friend who had called to invite me to his memorial.

It was to be an opportunity for any of us to talk about our recollections of Jim. I was told each of us would be able to speak of why we loved him and how he was important to us. Jim and I had known each other for several years, but our friendship had been sporadic. We would see each other and it would be great fun. We would feel close. Then we wouldn't run into each other for months. Thinking about how to share my friendship at the memorial service, I didn't know if I could describe my distant but intimate feelings for Jim to friends who would have known him better and more consistently than I. My favorite memory of Jim was of our laying naked on floats out on Lake Travis. The two of us floating in the sun, talking.

Occasionally we rolled off into the water and hung between the floats in the water eye to eye like the fishes.

Then we crawled back up onto the floats and drifted more together: Talking, napping, glad to know each other. I wanted to share that memory at the memorial, because it was a special part of him in me. But I guessed that the others would have known him better. How could his real friends know how important drifting with him on

Lake Travis might have been to me? At the memorial, the first person who spoke began, "I met Jim out at Lake Travis . . . "

All of our stories overlapped, and they reflected the same adventures, interests and ideals. I had been one friend among many. All of us knew him and loved him, so whether speaking about music, work, faith, playing in the sun, or visiting into the night, our stories reflected the same light. And our loving him had brought us all together briefly, joyfully, intimately, to drift together for a while with our memories and be glad.

1989

"What does Kaposi's sarcoma look like?" a friend asked through the telephone. "Purple, brownish lesions. Sometimes fairly dark and sometimes not. They probably look more like bruises or hickeys than anything else."

I went on with the routine answer as if this were simply another question in a workshop, and I talked about the classic necklace pattern around the throat but how they might appear anywhere and be big or small. Then it finally hit me that this was a friend and not another professional question. "Why do you ask?" I asked slowly and deliberately.

"Tom has some marks around his throat. I had noticed them last week, and today I think I saw some more. I asked about them and he didn't know what they were." Tom was my friend's ex-lover. They had been apart for nearly four years. "What did the marks look like?" I asked. And, as if he had not heard me answer his original question, he said, "They look like bruises or hickeys. Kind of purplish brown. They come down around the curve of his neck onto his upper chest." "Jesus," I thought deep inside, "Tom has AIDS too." I thought to myself deeper down inside, "Even Tom." As calmly as I could, I finally said, "KS sometimes has that kind of look. Has he seen a doctor?"

"No. I asked if he had seen his doctor, and he said he was thinking about it."

"He should have someone look at them." Outside

I was acting calm and reassuring.
The rational thing is see the doctor.

But inside I feared I knew. A week or so later, Tom hadn't seen a doctor and I chastised my friend a little bit about our responsibility for our health in times like these. He said that he would try to encourage Tom. A week or so later Tom had made an appointment.

A few weeks after that Tom had seen his doctor, and he had referred Tom to a dermatologist. A week or so more and Tom saw the dermatologist, and he referred him to a specialist. A week or so after that, Tom learned from the specialist that he had AIDS and KS and was HIV antibody positive. A couple of months later, he was told that he had two weeks to live.

The KS was into his lungs. And once it got into the lungs, it was too late.

Spring 1990

A coworker and I were returning to Austin from a workshop on AIDS for a group of human service professionals.

We were driving down a two lane road through farmland that sparkled from the lush green spring we'd been having. We were in his car, and we were driving smoothly and quickly while listening to classical music he had tuned in on a station out of Dallas or Fort Worth. The music finished and the evening news began. The lead was the death of Muppeteer Jim Henson. He had died of pneumonia that morning.

They quietly reviewed his life and work and included comments on his talent and this sad loss from friends, peers, critics, and Muppets themselves. We silently listened to the whole report. It finished with a summary repeating time, location, and the cause of death: Pneumonia.

Many times, in my work, I've had to talk about how some people with AIDS get a specific kind of pneumonia, called PCP, but pneumonia itself is not a sign of AIDS. PCP is just a certain kind of pneumonia that strikes some of the people who have AIDS.

After the report on Henson's death, I turned to my coworker and said, "I hope they mean regular pneumonia, and not PCP. I couldn't stand to have Henson die of this. It would be too much. But when they say pneumonia, I go

on red alert. Sometimes I forget there are other things out there killing people."

"I'm sure it's not PCP," he replied.

"I think they would have said so, if it were."

As we drove on through the green farmland toward home, I was thanking God. I have seen AIDS touch education, poetry, science fiction, novels, radio, TV, film, rock and roll, opera, stock car racing, politics, clothing design, coworkers, photography, painting, theater, clients, neighbors, friends and lovers. Not the Muppets yet though. And thank God, not the Muppets yet.

Summer 1990

On the road, my work in educating about AIDS came up in a casual conversation with a salesclerk. She was a pretty woman, and seemed fairly young.

She wore no wedding band. She said to me of AIDS, "Oh no. No. We don't have that here."

I didn't try to argue that there might just be some cases because I didn't know statistics for that county, but I guessed that she was wrong. We parted friends, "Thank you now. And you come back again, honey."

At a meeting, later on that day, the chairman had a KS lesion on his nose. He had more on his arms. He spoke of how, five years before when first diagnosed with AIDS, he'd almost given up. He spoke of how he sought out health and personal well being. He spoke of how his body had reacted to the various kinds of medicines his doctors had tried out.

He spoke of how some friends had stayed with him and others had abandoned him and still others had already died. He spoke of visiting friends in the hospital, and he asked all of us to join in this type of service so people would not have to live alone in sickness or die alone.

He spoke of his peace with God and all the many gifts that were a part of his life.

He spoke of knowing that the lesions were his illness coming to the surface, but

how he lived knowing and celebrating life until he was to pass away. I didn't count how many people he had referred to who had AIDS or HIV in his acquaintance, but I became sad for the salesclerk I had met that day. She and her circle of friends were not as safe as she'd said. "Oh no. We don't have that here."

Here sat one person with AIDS recounting five years of experience that he had, in that town, struggling to survive while others had tried to look the other way.

Another Time

My friend didn't know for sure if I knew this man who'd died. So many of us have been dying lately, it's easy to get confused about who knew them and who cared about them. Yes, I knew him. The last time I saw him was about a year ago, in the hospital, right before he moved away to Europe to die. I'd heard that he had come back because he was too sick to stay there alone. I'd heard that he had decided that at least he wasn't going to be buried in the family plot, between his father and his brother, both of whom had abused him as a child.

Maybe not be buried in the old country, but he damn sure didn't have to sleep with them eternally. I'd heard that he was doing pretty well, all things considered.

But this friend was calling to tell me that he had died early yesterday morning, and if I had known him, I might want to attend the memorial service next weekend. I wanted to attend. My friend said he wasn't sure how he remembered that I knew him, but he vaguely recalled that I did. He was glad that I would be able to attend this. I was glad too.

He was my first lover's younger brother. I hadn't known the history. But I was abused too, and then my lover went away. The first time I met him was long after my bad affair with his brother,

when he had tried to commit suicide.

After they had saved him, I had to do the evaluation to decide if he was going to have to go to the state hospital for psychiatric treatment. I didn't think he should. So, I had worked with his lover to make a plan for them to go to counseling to see if they could find their way back out of the chaos caused by the illnesses and the shadows from the past. Two weeks later, I saw them both in a grocery store. His lover was very kind and happy to see me, but he did not remember me at all.

As the years passed by, I saw him every now and then, and he recalled me as a friend of his dead lover. He never seemed to know why his lover had loved me so much, but because he had, he cared for me (politely) as well. Now, he is gone too.

Late in the Autumn

I was at my computer working on a poem that I started earlier that day about how frightening it is to be surrounded by people who are dying of AIDS and sick with AIDS and still working to save the others from getting AIDS, and how overwhelming it is to be constantly talking with friends about how they have learned that their ex-lovers have died of AIDS and classmates have died of AIDS and coworkers have died of AIDS, and my brother called, and, because he had a few questions, we talked about AIDS for almost an hour, and then I asked that we change the subject. We spoke about how our mother was doing now that she is old and hard of hearing and having to live with the other old people and how much she hates living with other old people because they're all so old. And my brother mentioned that our uncle apparently has AIDS.

And then my brother and I said goodbye, and I turned back to my computer screen and tried to go back to work on the work I had been revising when my brother called, about what it's like to be always surrounded by AIDS. And I began to think back on what it was like to have my uncle take off my clothes when I was a boy and touch me the way no one else would touch me and look at me with a magic in his eyes that no one else would have when they would look at me, and the computer screen went blank. This many years later, and surrounded by people who are dying and sick and working to save others and

constantly talking about ex-lovers and classmates and coworkers with AIDS, and the poor computer couldn't stand it and just went blank. Inside, the memories were still in place, but the face had gone blank and no one on the outside could see or have access to all the stuff inside. All the spinning memories of other times and places scratched upon a disk with light, blank.

And I wished that I could have gone blank too.

I wished I could have just switched off. And I sat looking at the blank screen with no tears and no wash of emotions thinking of all the gentle hands that have touched me down through the years, and how many of them have gone away in cars or planes or even on some trains wondering why I would miss these sets of hands so much that go away with AIDS. I came up with no good answer.

Perhaps it has to do with my knowing that all the ones who went away in cars and such could come back someday, although they never have. Perhaps it has to do with not really believing all of the stuff about meeting on the other side. But I think I really do believe in that.

Perhaps it has to do with knowing that we'll never touch again. Even when we meet on the other side, having progressed into pure spiritual beings that glow in the light and communicate with prayer and stirrings of the air, we still won't get to touch. Angels in the heavens in the company of God wrap each other up in wings and lay inside the light, but they just don't have skin. In missing all the

ones who have gone on, I miss the skin. I miss the simple touch. And even though the angels are among my favorite beings, no angel's wings can feel the same as skin.

The spinning memories of other times and places blank, I realized that I'd gone blank as well. Otherwise I would have been screaming or raging or unable to get up in the morning to go to work working to save others and talking about AIDS. Do you have an idea what it's like to hear the uncle who had caressed you when you were a child has AIDS? Or, at the opposite extreme, do you have any idea what it's like to have the pretty young man you've been dating, who is delicate and gentle and nice to look upon, have AIDS? Pray not to learn if you want, but you will learn anyway.

Winter

Ellie was an old black woman. Her house had caught on fire, and, escaping, she tripped over a grandchild's toy in the hall. The fire caught her where she lay and covered her.

It was too late for us to help her.

She asked the doctor if she were dying. "Yes," he told her, "There's nothing I can do but help you be comfortable. Can I give you something for the pain?" "No," she said, "I do not hurt." She turned and looked up to the ceiling. She drew in a very long and slow breath and said to the ceiling as if none of us were there, "Jesus, all my life I have wanted to be with you, but I was always afraid of dying. I was afraid of the pain of coming to you. And here you are taking me without any pain at all. Jesus, thank you for taking me without my having to hurt."