GOLD FOR THE FERRYMAN

Yes, this is a death scene, a vignette rather than a full-fledged story. It was inspired by the movie, Long Time Companion, *and deals with the great and terrible plague of our times: AIDS. There is no requirement that you read it.*

SILENCE = DEATH

M. FAE GLASGOW

The raddled body on the bed mocked him. Where was their pride now, with all their strength debased to this, a hollow shell with racking breath and putrid sores. Flesh melted down to skin, cows to tallow, that's all they were become. Nothing more than this bed, with its burden of agony, instead of all the love and laughter. Arguments, even, had had a home in this bed, cosying up to the passion, snuggling down with the cuddles. They'd lived in this bed, gone through everything here. This was where they had almost come undone; this was where they had forged unbreakable links.

Unbreakable. He could almost laugh at their youth and folly. Almost, but not quite. His knuckles were white on the bedstead, but still they were not as white as the skin that yet clung to the living skeleton in that bed. He forced himself to straighten, to let go, coming instead to sit on the bed, as he had done a million times in health, and a million more in sickness. Singing softly under his breath, for that seemed to soothe some of the pain away, he picked up a bony hand to hold in his own two strong ones. Such beauty, these hands had always been to him, and even now, his memories erased some of the ugliness that decay had brought.

The man in the bed shifted, feeble movements to protest the torture, and suddenly, there were tears again, where for weeks there had only been the dry eyes of coping. Another movement on the bed, and a few more tears spilled, to drip, one by one, on their hands as they lay entwined. He felt the wetness of his tears upon his own hand, and wondered if his lover could feel them too. He had been so lost to feeling, this last episode, gone adrift in the dementia that struck so many, stealing their minds from them as the disease stole their vitality.

And life.

Still stroking that cool hand he held, Doyle looked at the pain lying in the bed he had shared with Bodie. That was all Bodie was now, pain, and pain, and more pain. Screaming in the night as the agony of his body tormented him or the breaking of his mind filled him with terrors unholy. He'd had to give up work to stay home with Bodie, although nursing him through the night had only been an excuse, there being more than enough helping hands, from nursing visitors to home helps to friends. But he hated the risk of leaving, hated leaving even for the minutes it took to go to the bathroom, or for the breathers that kept him sane in the face of this horror. Hated leaving, because he had nightmares of his own. When little he slept, his own terrors would haunt him: leaving, to tend to the needs of his own still healthy body, and coming back, to find that Bodie had died, alone. Alone. He'd never let Bodie die alone, never. It was the first promise Bodie had made him make, that day coming out of the doctor's office. The stunned, terrified silence had been exploded by that dreadfully quiet, small voice.

He'd never heard Bodie beg before. Nor since, for that matter. Just that once, that Ray wouldn't let him die alone. And he wouldn't. He'd stayed there, side by side, fighting this as they had fought the enemies they had been able to see. They had refused to yield this battle: they had never given in to terrorists before, they wouldn't this time. But this was a war without weapons, without battlelines, without rules. So blind they had been, and there had been so little to pick

up and use to destroy before the disease could destroy Bodie.

And every day the disease would mount its flanking action, trying to undermine them with every new illness that struck Bodie and with every new day that dawned without Doyle so much as sneezing. It was as hard to watch your lover living, perhaps, as to watch him dying. That was what they had to do, every single day. Snatching at happiness, while watching the other die. Even with Doyle's body so healthy, they both knew it was a matter of time before HIV+ became ARC, as it had in Bodie that bright summer's day. And then it was only time before ARC became AIDS and AIDS became this lying on a bed, body lost in agony, mind lost in dementia.

There was a movement on the bed again, but this was not the mindless stirrings of the body. Doyle leaned forward, very close, giving his breath, his life, for Bodie to take in, to give even another second of living to this man he loved beyond himself.

"Ray?" Scratchy, unused, as sepulchral as the body.

"Yeh, I'm here. Promised, didn't I? Wouldn't leave you, Bodie, never leave you, love. I'm here…"

No more words, for there wasn't the strength for them, but there was the brief blessing of respite, the mind coming back for a second or a minute or an hour. Doyle hoarded it to him with the single-minded greed of an infant, hugging it to him, treasuring seeing Bodie back. He kept close, watching him, face wet as he stared at Bodie.

Bodie's eyes were empty of all, save the one thing Doyle didn't want to see: the desperation for it to end. Doyle'd never had to actually face it before, for Bodie even in illness had kept that from him, always turning away before his eyes could betray them. But today, God help him, Bodie was too weak to turn away, to hide the fear. Not of death, not now, when life was such purgatory. Somewhere, in the long dark days and the abyss of night, Bodie had made a truce with Death. He would go, if Death would take the pain away. And he was begging, too weak to speak, begging Ray to give him to Death, to take away the pain that the medicines couldn't defeat.

Rough, hand shaking, Doyle wiped his face clear of tears. He wouldn't let Bodie's last sight be one of tears. He clenched his jaw, pushing himself and what he needed back and away and down: Bodie would leave with love around him, not tears. He forced a smile, his tear-dampened hand stroking tenderly down Bodie's cheek, unable after all to rid himself of all the tears. "I love you," he whispered.

But it was too late. Bodie had gone again, although his body lived on, flailing weakly, fighting death with the mindless instinct to survive, no matter the cost. There was the faint smell of urine rising from him, another sign of the mind's absence from the body's struggle. Automatically, Doyle got to his feet to change Bodie as he had done for so long now… Then he stopped. He would have to let go of Bodie to change him, to go and get the new package of pads. He stared down at the ashen face, and thought of Bodie, of Bodie being left.

Of Bodie, dying.

It had to come. If not today, then a week from now. And all that life offered his Bodie now was the continuation of suffering and the humiliating loss of control. Doyle saw, bright lit with the neon glare of memory, the first time Bodie's bladder and bowel control had failed him. Remembered the bitter, helpless rage. Remembered the fear, the gnawing, rat-like fear.

He sat down again, fingers trembling on soft hair that had grown longer and thinner with the passing of the illness. It had seemed criminal, almost, to cut off a part of Bodie when so much was already dying in him, so Ray had let it grow, teasing Bodie when Bodie was well enough to get up and about, caressing it when Bodie was trapped in bed. He was caressing it now, with all the tenderness in him, with all the love.

Thinking about Bodie, about him living, and loving, he smiled, for all the goodness they'd had, the high spots that had made the low points something to be worked through, even if the effort had drawn blood.

He shouldn't think of blood, not when he was trying to remember how good their life had been. Blood, inescapably, made him think of the disease, the one that was killing Bodie, the one that was lurking somewhere inside his own cells, waiting, just waiting, to get him. He was too

exhausted to be angry now, although he knew the fury would come soon enough, when Bodie was…gone, and he had to face the future alone.

He wondered, idly, as he sat loving Bodie, if there might have been a cure found in time, if the governments had seen this for the threat it was, and not just some disease that was ridding the world of poofs and a load of wogs in Africa. Still, he didn't know if it would have made any difference if people had been warned, or if he and Bodie were already infected by then. The doctors simply kept on extending and extending the incubation period, until it seemed that there was no-one left who hadn't been exposed. Even now, with Bodie in front of him, these thoughts stirred a bitterness in him which threatened to choke him. But he swallowed it down, determined not to let it destroy.

He had a virus in him which was going to do that without any help from him. Bodie had gone very still, his breath rasping, his chest rising with vile shallowness. Doyle wanted to rage, to scream that Death couldn't have them, that he was keeping Bodie with him, that he was never going to let him go.

But he remembered the expression in the eyes that had looked at him with such pleading honesty.

Slowly, with infinite care lest he should cause any more pain where there had been more than enough, he got into bed with Bodie, sitting up against the pillows, cradling Bodie in his arms like a child. He was so light, so heart-rendingly light, this man who had always seemed so solid and strong to him. Now, he was no heavier than a feather, as light as a soul that the Egyptians said could enter Heaven. Doyle hoped there was a Heaven, hoped that there was, at least, absolute oblivion, where there would be no pain. Holding Bodie carefully, stroking his face, he began whispering to him, loving him in the only way left to him.

"Let go, Bodie. Just let go. Stop fighting, love, and let go. It's time to die, Bodie, time to make the hurting stop. Let it go…"

Blue eyes fluttered open, faintly, but there was no doubt: the dementia was gone for the moment and Bodie was with him. Doyle smiled at him, refusing to cry, letting Bodie go with nothing but love. He leaned down, kissed the dry lips, his breath soughing gently into Bodie. There was almost no response, the lungs too damaged and the heart too weakened to bring enough breath in or out to disturb the air around them. In stillness they sat, Bodie draped across Ray's lap, Ray's arms around him, one hand stroking his face, endlessly, a continual caress to tell Bodie he was still loved, that he was still beautiful.

They were in a silence all the more profound for the smallness of the noises that broke it: the rasp of Bodie's breath, the whisper of Ray's voice.

"Let go, Bodie, let go. Time to make the hurting stop, love. Let go, sunshine. I'm with you, you're safe, sunshine, you can let go now, I'll take care of you. I'll be there, watching your back, mate…"

He could cry now that it was over. Bodie wasn't there to see him, so he allowed himself the luxury of tears, of sobs that ripped his heart apart, even while part of him was thankful that for one of them, at least, the suffering was finished. Now that he could hug Bodie without bringing more pain, Ray still caressed him, stealing what he could before Death stole all the heat from the man he held so closely to his heart, But there was no strength to be gained from holding Bodie, not now. Not now the flesh was beginning to chill and the spirit that had been Bodie was gone, and he was left behind, bereft.

Eyes finally dry, he got up from the bed that he had shared with Bodie for what had become a lifetime, though all too bitterly short a lifetime it had been. Still moving with tender respect, he straightened Bodie out, giving him back the dignity the disease had tried so hard to steal. It was time to phone the undertakers, to let them know that the arrangements should go ahead now. There were other people waiting to help, waiting to be there for him the second he told them he needed them.

But it wouldn't change anything, not with Bodie lying there so still and dead. Without Bodie, when his own time came, there would be no-one for him to beg not to leave him alone.

For he already was.

Alone.