A River Ran Through Him

A tale of two columnists

February 1, 1999 By Mike DeStefano

If my life had a soundtrack, “You Can’t Always Get What You Want” would be playing now.

I said bye to the Atlantic Ocean and hi to the Delaware River. Traded in my swim trunks for a down jacket. Gave up my bachelor pad and moved in with a woman.

It all began three years ago when I placed an ad with an HIV dating service. I got a call from a woman, River, from Pennsylvania. I loved her name, and her voice sounded foxy on the phone. When she told me her profession—sex columnist and former dominatrix—I was hooked.

She was also a poet; I ran out to buy *Leaves of Grass*. She wrote for *POZ*; I got a subscription. Boy, was I impressed. I decided she was more than a lady in leather who would discipline me—River was marriage material.

I began to fantasize about sitting on the porch with my wife, River, and our kids, Sky and Mountain. I got so caught up that I lost my grip on reality. I was lonely and in need of rescue.

Since we talked every day for a few weeks, you’d imagine we got to know each other pretty well. But I’ll admit I wasn’t exactly 100 percent honest about myself:

River: “I’m on a big health kick. I couldn’t date a smoker.”
Me (lighting up): “Yeah, smoking’s gross.”
River: “Do you like seaweed? It’s so good for you.”
Me (digging into a bag of cheese puffs): “Oh, I can’t get enough of the stuff. And, hey, you gotta love sprouts.”

When she booked a flight to Florida, little did she know that she was going to replace my late wife, make me all better and allow me to fall in love and lead a normal life, even with HIV.

I figured I’d pull up to the airport on my Harley, and River would run (in slow motion) through the gate into my arms. As her bags dropped, the theme from *Love Story*—or maybe something less tragic—would ring through the terminal. Instead, she got off the plane looking down at the ground, and the only thing I heard was some cop telling me to move my bike. I longed to be back on the phone with my dream girl.

Once we met, I couldn't hide anymore. We both had to face the fact that everything I'd told her about myself was a lie. I'm sure she could see right off the bat that I wasn't the health-food nut I'd claimed to be.

If my pasta belly didn't give it away, River discovered the real me back at my place. We felt so bad that we didn't know what to do or say, so we had sex. Afterward—I couldn't resist—I lit up a smoke. My nerves were shot. I felt so awful for dragging River down to Florida that I was in physical pain. She told me to lie on my back and touched a pressure point on my stomach to relax me. In spite of my actions, she treated me with warmth and tenderness.

And then she went to stay with a friend, leaving me to grapple with what had happened. It was more than just some blind date that bombed; the old me had packed his bags and walked out the door with her.

I thought River would be a Band-Aid for my wounds. Instead, she showed me I was more than a wound. She saw a wonderful, talented person inside me. Though I always knew deep down that I could do the things she did—write, lecture and help other HIVers—there was a wall between me and those dreams. River told me she once had the same wall and assured me it could be taken down with self-love.

We stayed in touch, and then the call came. River wanted me to fill in for her as a speaker at an AIDS conference. I flew to Michigan, where I got carte blanche at a fancy hotel. But that paled in comparison with the fact that the audience loved my talk. I was finally doing what I wanted: sharing my story, giving others hope—and getting paid for it.

I had found my calling. And then another call from River: "Why don't you move here, and I'll help you get started." She saw my potential—knowing this time that I'd turn down a tofu burger for a juicy steak any day.

So here I am in a little town called New Hope (no joke) with a sex goddess for a roommate. I've done 20 lectures, and the phone's ringing off the hook…for *me*. The funny thing is that when it's time to cook or clean, River has late-stage AIDS, but when she wants to go to the movies, she's a long-term nonprogressor.

So, it's true that you can't always get what you want, but sometimes you do get what you need. I wanted a woman to fill the void, and I got one of the best friends a guy could ask for.

Happy V-Day, girl.

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