A Spy in the House of Love

When HIV makes you a double agent

August 1, 1999 By Jeff Hoover

In 1990, my friend Jim and I were discussing what we feared most about having HIV. While I melodramatically lamented that I would “die before I turned 30”—a full six years from then—he, always the deeper thinker, focused on love. “I want love so badly,” he said, “but I’m afraid I’ll never find it because no one can love a positive man.”

Well, both of our predictions proved false. I’ve passed the 30 mark, and he found true love—with another positive man. That love was not enough to save him from AIDS, though, and now, more than three years after his death, I’m still a bit jealous of someone whose ashes were scattered at the base of a tree that he and his sister planted when they were children in Texas.

My envy doesn’t stem from having any particular medical complaint that makes life unbearable. I’m surviving, as are thousands like me, rising each day to battle the world with reasonable success. Although I can’t help but feel some satisfaction for 13 years of survival, I’ve recently concluded that HIV has robbed me of the capacity to love as strongly, fearlessly and completely as Jim did. And I want him back badly, even if it’s just to ask how he did it.

I’ve been in love before—three times, in fact, including two extended periods of peaceful cohabitation—but I’ve always held back vital emotions that would have helped to send my feelings to a deeper level. What’s particularly frustrating is that I usually know all along what’s happening (or not happening), yet I can’t stop myself from charging forward.

To the outside world, these relationships often seemed quite ideal: I rarely reported to my friends about heated arguments or profound dissension—only about occasional whiffs of dissatisfaction that, in the face of more intense queries, I would dismiss rather lazily.

To my partners, too, I was an expert at subterfuge. It’s not that I didn’t love them; I just didn’t love them with Jim’s unrestrained fervor and devotion. Inevitably, my holding back inspired breakups, and I emerged almost lightheartedly because, well, my heart had never been full in the first place.

All along, the virus was there. “You need your independence,” it whispered. “You’re going to die soon, so why waste so much time working something out?” Though I’m one of the least forthcoming people I know about my health situation, I have failed to be strong or astute enough

to prevent my core emotions from being co-opted by HIV. In a perverse way, that's probably why I've had long-term relationships; they enabled me to forget about HIV while being in secure arrangements, yet at the same time to leave unchallenged the virus' gauzy wrap around my heart.

I don't recall being unduly unhappy in years past, but then again the opposite of *unhappy* isn't necessarily *happy*; it can simply be a resigned stasis. Lately, though, I've become dissatisfied with allowing my heart to tread water.

I've thought more intensely about Jim, about his ability to defeat HIV by accepting and giving love, and my own inadequacies in that area. The determined look on his face, the slight catch in his voice, the capacity to look his lover straight in the eye and proclaim a love with no strings attached—even as his failing body seemed determined to overwhelm him—were all so powerful and warm and real. That fire didn't wane when he suffered greatly in those final weeks, nor did it abate afterward in the memory of the lover who had experienced this joyous gift of unbridled love.

The late playwright Scott MacPherson put it best in the words of the character Bessie in *Marvin's Room*. Dying of leukemia while caring for two elderly relatives, she asserts that her happiness has come not from being loved but from her ability to love. I no longer consider that the defensive reaction of an essentially unloved person, but the essence of what I can aspire to.

My virus isn't going anywhere. But am I, finally? I don't know yet, but I have hope that recognizing my inadequacies and weaknesses—and facing up to all aspects of the virus' insidious hold—will at least enable me to tackle the issue. The possibility of having my heart broken is something I have never allowed myself to contemplate. But it's a chance I want to take.

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