All Apologies

The odd one out looks back on his wonder years

September 1, 1998 By Kevin O'Leary

Some time between the morning that my kindergarten teacher switched Jimmy Carter's photo for Ronald Reagan's and the night my grandmother prayed for Rock Hudson's soul, I first heard about AIDS. The closest I can come to pinpointing the exact moment is when during recess Jeffrey Quinlan, previously known as "faggot," became "that AIDS faggot." If I had turned a blind eye to Jeffrey's bullies *before* his rechristening there was no way I would defend him after.

Later, in the seventh grade, Ms. Adler told us a cautionary tale about the cousin of a friend. She said in hushed tones that the man had gotten drunk one night on a business trip and slept with a woman he did not know. When he woke up alone in his hotel, he went to the bathroom. There he found a message scrawled in lipstick on his mirror: "Welcome to the world of AIDS."

We gasped accordingly, though most of us still didn't know what AIDS actually did to you—just that it made you really thin and gnarled like Kimberly Bergalis on the cover of *People*.

After Kimberly, it was over between me and my dentist, Dr. Hanrahan. He was my best friend's father and I had a monster crush on him for years. Blue eyes, salt-and-pepper hair—at his son's birthday party he'd taught me how to bowl a strike, a rite of passage in my hometown. Lying back in his office chair, any pain seemed well worth the salty slick of his fingers in my mouth. Then one day I went to him—and he put on gloves. I immediately thought, "He can tell there's something wrong with me and he doesn't want to get AIDS." It never occurred to me as a young gay boy that the rules might be there to protect me.

And that was it, really. On the news, normal people like Kimberly were described as *getting* AIDS, while gay people—the men Jeffrey and I would someday become—were described as *having* AIDS. It wasn't something that would come into us; it was already there, waiting—like my sexual desires—to burst out and destroy everything. We never stood a chance.

This fear intensified when puberty hit. Since I'd messed around on sleepovers all my life, there was no question in my mind that I had the virus. No touch could be safe if it was in the least bit gay. As these little slips in my otherwise buttoned-down life became more frequent, I became more convinced that I was drawing myself closer to AIDS; that every time I so much as looked at a boy in the locker room, I was inching that much closer to retribution.

I remember puberty as a horror movie set in familiar surroundings. In the midst of insistent erections that sprang up at the worst times and girls running from classrooms bleeding like saints, the spontaneous generation of a virus did not seem so far-fetched.

Amid all this confusion, I turned to God. To the surprise of my family, I joined a church youth group and invested in rosary beads. And it was an investment. On the weekend retreats they told us that no one loved us more than Jesus—He would deliver us from evil. I prayed—or rather, bargained—incessantly. If He made me a real man, if He sent me an understanding woman, I would be saved from what was inside of me. And in return, I promised to stop daring the boys in school to do things. To stop taking advantage of their innocence. To stop being the Judas in their midst.

But, like all crushes, my infatuation with Jesus faded and I fell in with a bad crowd. I came out and moved to New York City. I began to meet real live people with HIV. And frequently, at some point deep in conversation with a new positive friend, when we've revealed so much to each other, I am asked when I tested positive. At those painfully awkward moments, I think of my cousin Jimmy, who never tired of the joke, " I don't have any children—that I know of…" I worry that if I just say, "No. I'm not," a wall would go up between us that I could not get over. I would become a voyeur, a different kind of Judas. I've begun to see my refusal to get tested as a way to suspend myself in limbo, a place where I can touch both worlds. How much of what I grew up in controls who I am now or who I will be? How am I ever going to find my place in this world?

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