Ask Amelio

August 1, 1998 By Emily Carter

One early Sunday morning a reporter called to ask me questions about women with AIDS. Don't waste your time with me, I told her. I'm nothing more in the scheme of things than a rather charming statistical anomaly. Meaning? Meaning I come from a supportive, wealthy family who provided me with a safety net, its resemblance to a spider's web notwithstanding. I don't have children, I don't have problems getting access to medical care, I don't have to buy the groceries for the family when I'm too exhausted to stand up for more than 10 minutes straight, and I don't have a husband who will resort to physical expression if the house is still cluttered and dusty at the end of the day. I don't have your usual problems, in other words. Go talk to somebody else.

For instance, I suggested, you could talk to Amelio, the guy I think I got it from. He repaired broken air conditioners and refrigerators, a trade he picked up upstate (upstate being how a certain East-coast demographic refers to prison, the prisons being mostly upstate). I hooked up with him mainly because he was Puerto Rican and therefore had access to drugs. He was the kind of Puerto Rican man I could relate to, not like most Puerto Rican men, who seemed mainly involved in going to work, taking out the garbage and teasing their children.

He was also just the kind of boy I would hook up with. His heart was in the right place for being a street-smart tough guy, but his physique was unsuited. He was bird-skinny, with painful shoulder blades and long-lashed, emerald eyes. Beautiful but girly-girl. When we walked together on the street, if anyone said anything to me he would draw himself up and issue a series of threats. During the time that I knew him his nose got broken once and his ribs fractured several times.

We drove around in his employer's van at night when I could sneak out of one of the places I was staying, either my boyfriend's or my parents'. I didn't allow him to meet my parents, naturally. They'd put up with men who had beaten me up, they'd put up with 33-year-old homeless musicians, they'd put up with painters who constantly asked them to invest in their art, but they would not put up with air-conditioner repairmen, they would not put up with someone who looked like he was coming to do apartment maintenance. My parents are intellectuals.

Amelio often said he loved me, and I liked him very much. He had a sweet spirit, and as much of a fuck-up as he was, he had a certain bravery. Even when we were in the early stages of opiate withdrawal, he managed to stay cheerful. But I began to see less of him when it became apparent that outside of his van, which was a good place to fix, he was as much a liability as an asset. He never had any money.

I once told him I was going to have sex with an Arab grocer in the neighborhood where we went to buy drugs, on an exchange basis. I was still well enough then that I had to consider the arrangement. “If you do that I will tell everyone that you are a slut,” he said regretfully. Who was “everyone”? I wondered. Who did he know who knew me, outside of one or two passing junkies with whom exchanges were limited to “you know what’s open?” and “they’ll be back in five minutes they said.”

Amelio, feeling flush, once brought me some flowers which we put in a can of water on the dashboard of his van, and after that I didn’t see him for awhile.

The last time I heard of him, the wife of a friend of his called me to say he’d given the friend my number as a possible source of bail. My boyfriend, who was ready to kick me out of his apartment, hovered ragefully over my shoulder as I took the call. He knew what was up. My parents knew what was up. Money was missing everywhere and they wouldn’t let me in the house. I didn’t want to stay on the street, having no skill for it. I was considering suicide but I wanted to die happy, and that would take drug money, which in turn, would take time and effort to come by. In other words, I was dealing with a regular day. I had no bail money for Amelio.

He called a week later while my boyfriend was out. I was in a better mood, having obtained what I needed to want to live on a little longer and injected it into my wrists about 10 minutes earlier. “Why are you in jail?” “Well you know. I was driving the wrong car at the wrong time. Listen,” he went on, “sometimes some of the girls send us stuff in here. A pair of your panties, a ribbon from your hair, whatever.” I told him I’d see what I could do. I rarely wore underwear and my hair was short, so I understood the depth of his aloneness—I wasn’t much, but I was the only woman in his life. “Don’t call me again though,” I said. “I’ll write to you, but my boyfriend gets angry.”

“I thought you said he didn’t mind?” I’d told Amelio that when I was expecting him to call with some dope, to bypass the bullshit.

Things were getting a little more desperate in my corner. My boyfriend was going to kick me out any minute if I couldn’t think of any more excuses about missing objects and pawn tickets. The phone rang during one of our confrontations.

“It’s Amelio. Listen, sweetheart, I have to tell you something.”

“Amelio,” I said, with one eye on my boyfriend, who was pointing to the door he wanted me to walk out of with a dollar fifteen in my pocket and a January sleet-storm splattering the street. “I told you not to call me.”

“Okay,” he said, with perfect equanimity, and hung up.

Do you have to be a brilliant plot-predictor to guess what it was Amelio had to tell me? No, you do not, and in hindsight there’s not a doubt in my mind what news Amelio had to share. What he was trying to do was the decent thing. Now, eight years later, where is Amelio? Ask me a question on quantum physics. He had no girlfriend, no mother, no father, no friends who could come see him.

He may have died in prison, he may have died soon after, he may still be alive, spending his life shuttling between methadone and medical clinics.

I’m living in the love of my family and the bosom of my world. I live within the warm, fire-lit circle of privilege, under a whispering Midwestern sky that sweeps over the snow-crushed streets on January mornings. The sharp blue dawn is suffused with eternity, and the snow tinted a pale golden rose.

So don’t ask me anything about it. Find Amelio for me. Ask him. Tell him I say hello from Hampden City.

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