# Confessions of a Jerk

And the man that got away

September 1, 1998 By Stephen Gendin

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I met George in Athens' biggest gay disco in 1994, and a beautiful courtship began. He was the Mediterranean boy of my dreams, with lush, full lips, deep, dark eyes, and a smile of purity and innocence. After dancing, we wandered the moonlit streets to the Acropolis, where, in the shadow of the Parthenon, we kissed till daybreak. I felt Zeus smiling down.

Soon I visited George in Paris, where he was in graduate school. Over the next two weeks, I discovered that Paris truly is the most romantic city in the world. We lay in bed for long afternoons, leaving the house only to buy fresh bread for brunch, or to explore a park, museum or church. We went walking and talking for hours, with no destination in mind. Love was in the brilliant fall air. Life sparkled.

Or at least on the surface. Deep down, I knew otherwise: I had HIV but hadn't told George. Oh, I had my excuses. First, because our time together in Greece was so brief. Second, because I didn't want to spoil a Parisian romance—I even went off my medication while there rather than try hiding it. Third, because the subject seemed too serious to broach by phone or letter. I dug myself deeper and deeper into a hole.

Sure, I had disclosed my HIV status right away to other boyfriends, but this was different. Coming from a country with few cases of HIV, George knew no one with the virus. Even guys in New York City who knew plenty of people with HIV had freaked when I disclosed, so what could I expect from George? And the bigger problem: He was a virgin when I met him. I should have been extra protective of him, taken things extra slowly. But I desired him so. The adrenaline was pumping, and I let it speed me along. Basically, I was a jerk.

I told myself that since we were having safe sex, I was protecting him. Now I see that while the condoms protected him in a physical sense, I was setting him up for emotional damage when he finally found out I had HIV. How deceived he felt. And how anxious—suddenly having to process all the uncertainties of safe sex when it's no longer an abstraction but something he had to believe in, in order to trust that he hadn't thrown away his life the first time he got fucked.

Right before his planned Christmas arrival in New York City, I made a sudden trip back to Paris to tell him my status. George was freaked out but still wanted to visit me. He wanted the relationship

to work. After I broke the news, he had many fears about our sex, and at first decided to limit it only to mutual masturbation. This was, at best, a good start.

But not good enough for me. Over the previous months, I had created a fantasy world with the boy of my dreams. By disclosing, I had to confront the fact that I wasn't living a fantasy. Stopping anal and oral sex felt like going backward. No longer was I in a relationship that got better and easier effortlessly. Now it was work.

So I disconnected. Only days before George's arrival, I met a new boyfriend. A boyfriend who had moved to New York City to take care of a brother dying of AIDS. A boyfriend who had no apparent HIV fears. A boyfriend who loved to fuck me even though he knew I had the virus. An exciting, new romance made it easier for me to avoid the mess I'd made with George.

And I abandoned George to the mess when he got here. His feeling of betrayal over my HIV status was minor-league in comparison with discovering that he had been replaced. I can't say that I did a great job of telling him. In fact, I handled it miserably, making things even worse by trying to justify myself. We haven't talked since. Sad, sad, sad…

The moral of my story: Disclose before having sex. People are who they are. I have AIDS. Some men can have sex with me without freaking out; others can't. And I can't change their inevitable response. Not by pretending. Not by showing them I'm a nice guy. Not by making them fall in love with me. So I often wonder about the beautiful Mediterranean boy of my dreams and the difference between fantasy and reality and whether, had I been more honest, George and I would still be together.

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