Forbidden Fruit

Hello, my name is River and I'm a sugarholic.

July 1, 2005 By River Huston

The first thing I did when I found out I was positive, 15 years ago, was go to the diner. Well, maybe not the first thing. Actually, my boyfriend and I first stepped on the subway, he told me it was "gonna be OK," and I broke. I wanted to scream. Instead, I visualized…pancakes. Ice cream. Frosting right out of the can. I decided the only rescue from this nightmare was food, especially sugar, one of my favorite vices.

At the diner, I ordered French toast, syrup and butter. It was so good I ordered another. I'd heard sugar was bad for the immune system, but so were the depression and hopelessness that had just swallowed me. When you get horrific news, you often stop caring about what is good for you, about what you should and shouldn't do. You escape reality by gliding on auto pilot, searching for blissful anesthesia. For me, that meant sugar's giddy highs, the feeling of fullness, the exhilarating sense of transgression and indulgence. I also became very self-righteous, feeling entitled to do whatever would make me feel better. "If I'm going to die," I thought, "I'm going to die fat. Fuck 'em—they can buy an extra-large coffin." Besides, I had endured salads and health shakes for decades to keep svelte. Now I was ready to rumble.

I've long stopped the bingeing that followed my diagnosis—but sugar still rocks my world. And that's why I've had a nonstop yeast infection in the butt and weewee for two years! I've tried prescriptions like gynolotrium and fluconasol by the boatload.What I couldn't do, despite my doc's wrist slaps and my own common sense, was ditch the Ho Hos.

Yeast beast or not, I still felt that if I had to endure the indignities of a terminal illness, even one upgraded to a manageable disease, I should be able to down my weight in doughnuts. When I found myself lying on my side as some hospital resident tried to get a biopsy needle through my back for a bone biopsy, testing for HIV-related bone-marrow disorder, I at least knew a pint of Ben and Jerry's Cherry Garcia, chocolate sauce and whipped cream awaited in my home fridge. Once I was safe in the cocoon of my bed, each mouthful would erase the pain and humiliation of exposing my ass on a gurney. Mounds of Twix bars, Oreos and Krispy Kremes worked better than any drug, recreational or otherwise, I've ever tried—and I've tried them all.

Few of us would ever admit it, but many HIVers consider the virus a gift certificate—a pass to unlimited pleasure. Some think they've earned the right to unprotected sex. But whether you're

barebacking, maxing out credit cards, smoking like a muffler or guzzling alcohol, the trigger's the same: "Compensate my terrible loss."

As in any addiction, I had to face the consequences of self-abuse. I hit bottom (an itchy one) and had to grow up. I realized that HIV isn't an excuse for a cupcake orgy and have done the unthinkable: cut out all sugar. I've been two months sugar-free and sent Mr. Yeast packing.

At first, I'd get homicidal if I saw someone chowing on chocolate chips. The real test came last week, when I went to get some test results. They sucked, and I left with a familiar emptiness. I got in the car, and pulled into one of my sugar-shack convenience stores. I sat in the parking lot for 10minutes, imagining chocolaty peanut M&Ms rolling around in my mouth. I fingered the money in my pocket…then put the car in reverse and tore out of the parking lot. I went home, sat on my deck, drank some green tea and ate an apple. I started to feel like I was going to be OK. Did I just say, "I'm going to be OK"? I never thought I could survive without my sweets, but now I know it's about quality of life—not just smoothing over challenges with a chocolate coating.

Meet River Huston—writer, poet, performance educator, sex goddess extraordinaire—at www.riverhuston.com.

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