Ghost Reader

A dead author watches over his manuscript's completion

June 1, 1999 By David Groff

Lover of men, passionate and contrarian AIDS activist, Robin Hardy had written more than half of *The Crisis of Desire* before the October day in 1995 when he fell to his death hiking in the Arizona desert. A writer of male adventure fiction, he died adventurously. Later, as I worked to finish his manuscript and struggled to augment his argument with the tricky truths of HIV in the late 1990s, my friend's voice badgered me, second-guessing, challenging every elaboration and qualification I made. When our collaboration was at its best—when, say, I could decipher his loopy handwriting or riff off what he had written—I felt animated by Robin's spirit. It was as if he channeled his own words on the keyboard, and I was his fingertips. As I worked on his chapter on sex and risk, with all of its subtle distinctions around desire and brotherly responsibility, I felt Robin was calling me to take the same kind of complicated care that safer sex requires. And I felt myself a painfully intimate witness to his life's pivot point: the story of his infection with HIV from a lover in West Berlin in 1983. What carried me through was the belief I share with Robin: that a crisis of desire runs rampant among gay men. "AIDS is over. Gay men lost," Robin announces on the opening page of *The Crisis of Desire*. But even as he tallies our losses, Robin's vehemence itself presumes that hope persists. And hope was his last bequest. Robin Hardy aspired not just for a cure for AIDS but for the renewal of the great gay promise—that even amid plague gay men can build a fraternity of love.

EXCERPT

Every human with HIV has a point of departure. I carry HIV because I am a gay man, and because in the early 1980s I lived in New York, Amsterdam, Berlin—all centers of the maelstrom. To journey back to those beginnings is to find the source of the crisis of desire that afflicts us now.

Although I'll never be completely certain, I think HIV passed to me that summer in West Berlin, from a man named Rollo, a skinhead punk rocker who sported a leather cord around his neck, owned a successful café and lived in a squatter's house at the far end of Kreuzeber, where his porcelain teacups sat amid a scaffolding of black steel stereo equipment. We met that June and became lovers. Rollo did not see any contradiction in being a well-to-do owner of a café who was also an anti-establishment punk, nor was he bothered that his squatter's quarters contained thousands of marks' worth of audio. Grand, devious and a little silly, he bullied his contradictions

into silence. He was also an ostentatiously sexual man, taking delight in danger. Once, when he had mounted me from behind and I was about to come, I abruptly felt his leather thong tighten around my neck. Rollo was cutting off my breath. Deprived of air, my nerves and muscles tensing and surrendering, I had an orgasm that was transcendent, a dance with darkness. By the time he let me breathe again, Rollo was laughing and holding me. I was limp with joy.

By Friday night I was feeling nauseated and had a growing fever. By Saturday morning it was definitely the flu, mysterious, severe, abrupt, out of season. By Sunday evening, I was burning with fever and delirious….

Rollo and I corresponded for a few years, lost touch. Then in 1987 I received a postcard demanding, “Are you still alife?” There was another exchange, then silence. I have chosen to think that Rollo is my murderer, but I attach no blame to him. I only love his memory more. Everyone was ignorant then. It was no fault of his. It could just as easily have been me, because I’m certain that in those years of ignorance, through no intention of my own, I was a bringer of disease to other men.

Hearing the story of Rollo wrapping his leather thong around my neck, some people will take it as a fearsome and tragic metaphor, the outward and visible sign not just of a death unwittingly delivered but of a life already half in love with easeful death. The HIV transmission that occurred that day was tragic, or at least unfortunate; no one should have to die young. Those people are right that my dance with Rollo is a metaphor. I ask, however that they consider that moment with something approaching awe. I very much regret that I have HIV. I do not regret for an instant the intense, connective, vivid, enlivening sex I had with Rollo.

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