La Dolce Morte

If life is a box of chocolates, then eat the whole damn thing

May 1, 1997 By Niq Shelbi

Gianfranco Zamboni, an aged purveyor of fine European antiques, once said to me, “If you want something to last, don’t use it.” Persuasive by nature, his belief in a passive existence has stayed with me, unwavered, for nearly two decades. Gianfranco could sell Versace to a Quaker.

So it was no wonder I had little to consider 11 years ao when I was first recognized as a seroconvert. As I recall the austere occasion, I break into a feverish sweat: In the waiting area of San Francisco’s general hospital, I became uncharacteristically gassy and anxious, not from anticipation of a mere test result, but in reaction to an environment of retro foam-rubber love seats in brilliant lime green and fuchsia collected around a clever cable-spool coffee table. Not a moment too soon, an imposing figure of an obese social worker lost in a mane of living dreadlocks and sunggly fit in a blinding-white gunnysack called out my special secret code: “Number 17? Potential AIDS Victim 17?”

Joining me in a dangerously intimate cubicle, she promptly delivered the news that I should expect to be dead by dawn, maliciously asking if I had considered altering my visibly extravagant *lifestyle.* I replied, “Isn’t a social worker just an undereducated nurse with bedpan fear?”

She thrust a small booklet in front of me as she attempted a painstaking exit from the miniature bereavement box and threatened to return shortly. The pamphlet, whimsically titled *The Do This or Die Diet,* contained a detailed list of surreal measures I was expected to undertake in order to prolong my newly acquired suffering. Included in the plan was complete abstention from tobacco, caffeine, cheap liquor, fast boys, hard drugs and red meat.

It wouldn’t be hard to imagine, then, how I almost fell over backward into a coma. Then I reached the end of the roll, which casually suggested exercise. According to the text, unless I restricted myself to a macrobiotic diet *and* observed sexual restraint *and* strained myself physically, my chances of surviving until the bill came due were, unlike the embittered social worker, slim.

When Medusa returned, I humbly thanked her for her gnawing sympathy and announced that I was unquestionably in favor of the more practical teachings of *il vecchio porco,* Gianfranco Zamboni. I did, after all, want to last.

Within weeks I developed cryptosporidiosis. Initially, I was thrilled to death (so to speak) at the prospect of quick weight loss with no effort on my part. I chose wisely to refrain from any drug that might have distracted me from my desired weight goal.

But in almost no time at all, I took on characteristics not unlike someone just liberated from a death camp. My dates stopped putting out as they began finding sex with me akin to necrophilia. In a panic, I quickly turned to the Liz Taylor Fat-Fast Plan, which involved a complicated formula of Percodan, Johnny Walker and raw turkey parts. In no time, I was once again sought after at all the steamier night spots.

Then came the telltale lesions. Since Gianfranco was being detained in a Turkish prison for attempting to smuggle Syrian side chairs out of Istanbul, I was forced to seek the wisdoms of a degree-wielding professional. But the doctor I chose said, “Chemo,” to which I replied, “No no.” From neck to toe, I was quickly covered in rich hues of purples and browns. My face was spared. (I credit the further insights of a self-assured Gianfranco, who once said, “Your face does not belong to you. It belongs to everyone who looks at it.” My body could never fight raw logic.)

Relieved that I avoided inciting a public outcry should I have had to hide my face under a yashmak, I finally conceded to indulge a modicum of effort toward self-preservation and sent away for an exercise machine known through infomercials as the E-Z Crunch (for three E-Z payments of $35).

I remained thrilled with my decision until I did the math and discovered that those E-Z payments totaled a substantially more difficult $105. I canceled the order. The money could be better spent on math lessons.

Any anyway, it’s like Gianfranco says: “Unless it’s a hooker, beauty is something money can’t buy.”

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