Life

Come out, come out wherever you are

April 1, 1994 By Kiki Mason

There I was, in the waiting room at Stich Radiation, as I am four days a week, pretending to read an ancient issue of *Vanity Fair* while eavesdropping on the gabby group next to me -- two young men with KS, one middle-aged woman with cancer. One of the men has several dark lesions on his cheek. He says that he stays near the telephone in his office, in case the hospital calls, because no one at work knows. I straighten up and look him directly in the eye over my magazine, silently challenging this assertion. I want to fall on the floor and start screaming, to ask him, “Honey, do you really believe what you just said?” He shifts in his seat uncomfortably as I go back to my faux reading, saying nothing.

The working title for my as yet unstarted book about AIDS is *You Look Great, Too Bad You Feel Like Shit*, because I look better now than when I was “healthy.” I have had the luxury of deciding whether to come out about my disease. I haven’t been forced out of the closet by wasting; my hair hasn’t fallen out from chemo; I don’t look “sick.” When I came out to one of my editors, he told me that he was sworn to secrecy by some of the most beautiful men in town. Beneath their pumped up bodies and smooth faces lies a secret, ticking away. It’s not chic in the fast and fashionable set to admit one’s status. Discussions are about raising money for AIDS or promising treatments one has heard about, always couched in terms of they and them. We all have friends who have it and talk turns to their travails, but never to our own. And never, ever do we come right out and ask “what’s your status anyway?”

I ignored the very real possibility that I had AIDS for years. Pretending not to know, even though you do, is a wonderful panacea. I worked nonstop and booked my social life solid for weeks in advance, as if I could outrun the truth. But none of us can.

Back in the disco days, we had a group of people who were nightclub celebrities. While everyone else had mundane jobs, theirs seemed to be defining ours. They spent hours and days developing a personal style and, except for the occasional slumming celebrity, were the most important guests at any party. Many of them had great plans for wider success in the real world. Very few have achieved it. I still see these types on the much-dampened circuit, floating through, looking for a drink ticket and a free meal, describing the latest project or deal in the making, which, if you check back in a few months, has never quite materialized. They exist in all mirror images, at whatever the new trendy place of the minute is and believe that they are happening because of

who they know. I call this way of life “living the dream.”

It’s easy to live the dream in America. It’s a walking fantasia, this country. We have the illusion of democracy, of benevolent corporations, productivity and prosperity. We all look like models and athletes. Products can change our lives, and the *Oprah Winfrey Show* is reality. If we don’t like reality, we can change it with a pill. In this world, disease is something that happens to other people, and when it does we all look like Ali McGraw in *Love Story*. Geraldo may show you a live sex change operation, but he’s not going to let you see or smell the hospital rooms of the dying.

Many of us who have AIDS lived the dream in some way, whether through sex or drugs or material things. It’s tempting to live a new dream, one of denial, because AIDS forces us into reality in such a big way. My doctor’s waiting room, for example, is very real. Denial is a lovely, and ultimately dangerous, state. Denying your condition undermines not only your mental, nut your physical health and takes away from our collective power to save our lives.

Fighting for my life ultimately meant coming out about my condition. In a country as narrow-minded and blatantly bigoted as this, it isn’t easy. But if we can’t even look each other in the eye and say, “Yes, I have AIDS,” we’re doomed. Because closets kill.

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