Life

Surviving a big city breakdown

June 1, 1994 By Kiki Mason

Oh, yes, I know precisely when it started.

My hairdresser Armondo got meningitis and the salon was trying to get me to let someone else cut and color. It snowed and I fell on the ice, injuring my wrist. I couldn't hold anything with my right hand for two weeks, so lifting weights was out, not that I wanted to crunch across ice at 8 a.m. for a workout, anyway. As my roots came in, so did panic. No one could tell me when Armondo would be back as I desperately began phoning other salons. No one seemed to understand what I was going through. Someone recommended X, who had become renowned during the 80s for his hair creations. As I walked out of the salon with clumpy, over-bright hair, it started to snow.

I just wanted to lay down, but when I came home there were two strange men with Irish accents knocking holes in my walls. "Ye 'ave a leak," one said. This, of course, meant that I would have to deal with my super, whom I'm positive is an ex-war criminal of some kind. I ended up laying on the floor of my office (which, coincidentally, had no heat and was 40°f), feeling homeless, watching the snow fall.

Leaving my house the next day, I experienced a strange new feeling. Light headed, sort of faint, with my heart racing. I had an overwhelming sort of sensation. It passed, and I shrugged it off, but the next day I experienced the same feeling, only worse and it continued to get worse and worse. Now, I am no stranger to anxiety. As my sister once put it, "You've been having a nervous breakdown since you were 5 years old." This was new though. I tried massive amounts of exercise each morning, feeling great during and terrible after. I sat at my desk drooling. So much to do, but look at all those pencils that need sharpening. I sent the first draft of a story off to an editor, more of a mess than usual. He called me back at 3 p.m. on a Friday. "There are some good things in this piece...," he began. Oh, shit, total rewrite time. I found myself sitting in my office, sobbing, utterly unable to face the day, let alone the rest of my life.

"You don't seem depressed, you seem anxious," said my doctor. (*Duh*. Where'd you get your first clue? Was it my constant lip biting or my torn garments?) My doctor continued, "You seem angry, very angry." (I can't imagine why. I mean, didn't they find the cure last week?) I didn't want Prozac or its cousin Zoloft. I knew too many people who had stopped living when they started popping those "miracle" drugs. "Have you tried therapy?" asked my doc. "Of course I've tried therapy," I

howled. I was in therapy for five years. I now know that I hate my parents and what a feeling is, thank you.

My real martyrdom began, however, with the search for low-cost or free psychiatric help. Do you know why, besides the twin demons of poverty and despair, that the inner cities in America are blowing each other to bits? Because you can't get psychiatric care in this country unless you are well-to-do. After a couple of weeks talking to shrinks on the phone, I wanted a gun too. I had this fantasy of walking into a psychiatrist's office and saying, "Help me or I'll blow your head off." Then I could go away.

One psychiatrist brusquely told me that he couldn't prescribe serious medication unless I was attending weekly therapy sessions. "Do you want to pay for these weekly sessions?" I shot back. Finally I found a sympathetic doctor, who spent almost an hour with me, *gratis*, on the phone. "Maybe I just need a vacation," I told him. "You need a vacation from AIDS," he replied. Yes. I certainly do.

Underneath all of this was the anxiety of living in a constant war zone. AIDS has been hanging over my life since I was 21. I am 33 now and AIDS shows no sighs of abating. Someone told me that more people died from AIDS last year than in the first 10 years of the epidemic. This epidemic has become a permanent way of life. I have watched it kill some of the most fabulous people on earth and terrorize the rest. It looms over every aspect of our lives.

I had reached this point of paralysis but decided to go ahead and live. I don't know exactly how I've gotten better. I have started meditating several times a day and I have checked into short-term crisis therapy. I am no longer taking Librium, and I have stopped screaming for drugs. There is a lot of pain sometimes, tempered with joy and hope. Armondo got better. Spring arrived. I did get away for a vacation. Maybe all that helped.

My adviced, besides getting the best hairdresser money can buy, is to go ahead and live. Why wait?

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