Memory Serves

Dominic stares down the night he was infected and ends up wiser

August 1, 1996 By Dominic Hamilton-Little

How could I not remember him, with his wide, slightly sad brown eyes, thick Brazilian accent and that charming mole above his lip? Had he not been the one from whom I believe I got HIV, would I remember him so well? Maybe. Perhaps he would simply have disappeared into that welter of half-forgotten dreams and torrid sex memories.

We meet at a dance bar, indulging in the universal precoital tribal merengue. He is shorter than me, which I adore...it's so easy to feel like a leggy Vegas showgirl with a hot, diminutive Latin stud rubbing one's behind with strong hands. Knocking back the drinks, we walk to my flat, stopping for a thrusting kiss along the way beneath a lilac tree in full bloom, its heady perfume imprinting the moment in my mind's eye.

Having volunteered for different AIDS organizations and lived the ghettoized life of the urban queen, I knew everything I was supposed to know about safer sex that night -- or so I thought. Indeed, having led a couple of workshops and been practicing safer sex, I thought I was fine. Yet I was caught unawares by a depression that followed the recent death of a dearly beloved friend and ex-lover from this disease.

Within a month of this particular death, I had unsafe sex three times. Each time I awoke the following morning terrified, full of remorse and swearing it would never happen again. I called Matt and/or Bubbles, the only close friends who would not judge me for my foolishness but merely listen and offer advice -- which later I would not take -- as I sought to forgive myself for living while friends who were too young to leave me without their love and companionship had died.

Our clothes are off before we've even reached the bedroom. Fingers and tongues cover endless inches of exotic new flesh, and the scent of a strange man spurs each of us on. His olive skin, with just the right amount of hair all over, is taut as his muscles flex, and I lift him and carry him over to my bed, our lips not unlocking for an instant. So quickly -- even in retrospect it seems as though it is faster than a thought -- he pushes my legs back and is deep inside of me.

Perversely, I knew, always, what I was doing. And thus, if blame must be laid somewhere -- which many feel must be the case, similar to the smoker who contracts lung cancer -- I go no further than my mirror. And though I wonder whether he knew about his own status, I only wish to believe that his desires were similar to mine: To connect as fully as possible, and maybe for a moment, to

forget.

The ecstasy and joy of feeling him within me, skin on skin, as we pant and tongue one another and look into each other's bedazzled eyes, is exquisite and tinged with a sense of danger. We both cum, almost howling from the savage, feral thrill that can come from wild sex with an unknown male. We don't linger in each other's arms -- this is a trick, after all -- and quickly, he is gone. I lie naked and alone as the terror begins to gnaw at my mind almost immediately, as it always does after sex without a condom. Natural sex.

Many do not know, or do not care to know, from whom they bought this ID card, those four scarlet letters, or how it happened. But in my overtly analytical Geminian mind, I am glad that I am able to pin down this turning point so precisely. I had not had sex in well over four months when my Brazilian flight attendant and I met, and two weeks after having had unprotected sex with him, I became exceedingly ill with a fever that would not abate for nearly a month. I, who had never known a day of illness since growing out of a sickly childhood, knew as I lay sweating and puking that this was "it." The big "A." It was the seventh time I had had unprotected sex, and I had gambled once too often.

What I had never realized until after my own seroconversion was that all my wisest intellectual assertions and intentions were merely a house of cards when faced with my more immediate emotional desires. And until I had incorporated heart, body and mind as a whole -- which has been best achieved through remembrance of joys and disasters side by side -- my behavior would not change. It hasn't been easy, but with one irreversible danger now a reality in my wondrous life, I have learned and remembered that thought and action must at all times be as one -- often when I least want them to be. And so I do remember his eyes, the mole and that voice, with a weary, but wiser, smile.

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