Missing Person

One day you wake up and the whole world is different

June 1, 1996 By Tod Roulette

My hospital roommate died this morning. The nurse didn't tell me when she woke me up to give me my meds. But I immediately noticed how quiet the room was. There was no hum from the respirator Tom was hooked up to and no labored breathing coming from the other side of the curtain. It was mysteriously calm, and the large, bright light glared overhead. The morning sound of respirator and Tom's coughing had been a constant these past eight days.

Four years ago, when I was diagnosed HIV positive, I would look away whenever I saw someone obviously struggling with AIDS. You know, the ones limping on canes, covered with KS blotches, staring out with glazed eyes. In such situations I could be laughing in a restaurant with friends one moment and the next be stopped in midsentence: What would I do when my time came?

To date, I've only personally known two people to die of AIDS; three if you count my aunt's neighbor in suburban Chicago. A good track record for a black, gay 28-year-old, I think. My friends Craig and Tim, who attended college with me in my native Kansas, both silently went away like elderly Native Americans waiting for the ominous gong. I never saw them sick or thin or trying to fight for more time. Tim never even told us. He just went home to Missouri. His parents called about two months later to give me the news.

Still, I've grown accustomed to seeing seriously ill people. But nothing could have prepared me for sharing a room for more than a week with someone so close to death. We were never formally introduced, but on the second night, Tom forced out a whispered "Excuse me." There was a full minute before the next phrase as he strained to keep down the mucus filling his lungs. I was listening to Jessye Norman and Kathleen Battle sing spirituals on my stereo, desperately trying to forget how much I resented hospitals. I didn't know if he was speaking to me or if he didn't realize his lover had left the room.

I took off my headphones and asked, "Do you need something, Tom?" He gasped for air as I leaned closer toward the half-closed curtain between us. He tried again: "I need..." Then the volume and his ability to form intelligible words dissolved. Incomprehensible sounds followed. I was frustrated with myself for not being able to figure out what he wanted. I didn't want him to think I was unkind or unconcerned. I felt sadly helpless. His lover came back in the room and said, "I'm sorry. Was he bothering you?" I said he wasn't and that I was just trying to figure out what he wanted. Then we both returned to our respective spaces. He never looked at me or spoke to me

again.

Despite turning my headset on full blast, I heard every word on his side of the curtain. I heard Tom's lover offer him water: "That's good, that's going to help you get better." I heard the doctor say it was useless to continue suctioning the fluid from Tom's lungs: "It simply makes him weaker." I couldn't not hear. It was too real. Death, that is. There was nothing secret or hidden about it. Last night I heard Tom's lover say in a hushed tone, "I love you, Tom. I love you so much, and I'm sorry you have to go through this." I could hear him crying as he lay close to Tom on the bed. Tears flowed onto the pillow as I buried my face deep into the cotton case to muffle my pathetic, howling cry. At some point I guess I stopped pretending not to listen.

After the nurse left the room this morning, I lay there and looked up at the ceiling. The room was so still. It was over. No more gasping. No more machine-humming.

This is what death is like. It is so close, but I'm not scared or even sad. I quietly get up and walk over to the other side of the curtain -- the same curtain I would often ask the nurse to close completely so I wouldn't have to see how very sick Tom was or how sick I someday might become.

Now I walk over to look at his dead body. He is so pale. And still. I breathe deeply and think about me lying there. Standing so close to Tom's body and watching his lover take care of him these past eight days has changed me. I don't know exactly how, but it has.

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