My Clementina

Back in Disco Frisco, frisky young men would pack the VD clinic with a name like a goldminer's whore, giving blood to crack a dread new disease. Today, one of the last survivors looks back at those dusty vials to find AIDS' coming of age -- and his own.

January 1, 2003 By Kevin Bentley

There's always been hot blood between us. It started shortly after I arrived in San Francisco in 1977 at 21. That first trip to the city VD clinic was like a straight boy's pilgrimage to a prostitute. It was a rite of gay manhood; you earned your spurs. You took the six-inch cotton swab up your dick or butt and the two fat hypodermics or pills like a man, drank Perrier for five days and caught up on your reading -- and the next weekend hit the ground running at the Stud. The clinic was in a seedy location; it had the Lysol-and-rubbing-alcohol smell of doom and the name of a Gold Rush whore: Clementina.

"What happened to you last week?" someone would ask when you reappeared.

"Clementina."

My face would assume a rueful expression as I walked to Clementina and Fourth in the cool morning air, frightened but proud to be bad. Leaving behind the respectable financial-district throngs, I'd pass empty, chain-link fenced lots; the ancient, lost-looking red-brick hulk of St. Patrick's; the gaping hole that would become the Moscone Center. Inside the nondescript stucco building and up a flight of stairs, the waiting room teemed with love's nervous martyrs, pacing or seated in rows of multicolored plastic chairs. Clementina had the atmosphere of a rowdy detention hall -- electric, shameful, defiant. A couple screaming recriminations would make it sordid; a black queen sweeping out of a treatment room ("And I say, 'Girlfriend, you are not stickin' that thing in me!'") could dissolve the crowd into revolutionary laughter.

Over the next several years, my dance card -- literally, a lined index card -- at Clementina filled up. Sometimes the tickle and drip would only be urethritis, or "strain"; sometimes I'd be summoned, having been reported as a "contact" by some temporarily diseased sex partner. When diagnosed with gonorrhea, you had to sit in a sour little room with a counselor, a calendar spread out in front of you, and try to match names and phone numbers with the previous 10 days -- seldom a simple task.

You couldn't escape the clinic without a visit to the blood-draw table. As I turned away from the digging needle, the view through the windows -- a dry little housing-project vegetable garden,

traffic and the distant houses of Potrero Hill -- became for me the landscape of hope and regret: love, at any price.

In late 1978 I signed the first of many release forms allowing extra tubes of blood to be drawn and tested for hepatitis B. Now I was summoned for blood-taking and injections for a new study of an experimental hep B vaccine (or, as it turned out, a placebo and, a year later, the real thing), and going to the clinic became a kind of public service. The people who drew my blood and took down my responses to the sex-contact and drug-use questionnaires were friendly and grateful. I'd stroll back to the used bookstore where I worked, wounded but virtuous, a cotton ball taped to the crook of my arm. Thus was born my secret superstition: By taking part in the vaccine study, by letting my blood at appointed intervals, I staved off the Bad Thing: syphilis, hepatitis, misfortune -- my apprehension was as vague as that of a peasant with a garlic necklace.

On my quarterly visits to the clinic, I saw my life quantified in the battery of questions: Was the number of partners with whom you had sex to orgasm since your last visit greater than 10? On average, of the three days a week on which you drank alcohol, how many drinks did you have? My answers went from belligerently high numbers to wistfully low. Then the hep B study was over, and my visits to the clinic dwindled to nothing. It was during this time, of course, that the Bad Thing took the very specific shape of the swelling AIDS mushroom cloud. Hunkered down, nobody was getting VD anymore. When the HIV test debuted, I didn't; I assumed I had been infected.

I heard about the AIDS death of an ex-boyfriend in October 1985, the night before I was to move in with my new lover, Jack. Jack changed my life entirely, twice: first, by showing me a handsome, smart and charming man could love me; second, by showing me that I was someone whose love could support another through terror, physical horrors and death. When Jack became ill six months after we moved in together, we both got tested. We were positive, of course, and he was diagnosed with PCP pneumonia. I didn't think much about my results, as I was otherwise healthy. All my attention was on Jack and his survival.

A year later, someone from Clementina called me again. The AIDS Cohort Study the research project was now called -- that strange statistical word cohort suggesting accomplice. Now I heard for the first time of that eerie vault of frozen blood samples at the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta -- row upon row of vials, like old bottles of poppers lodged in the back of the freezer, or ancestors in a family crypt, with only one date on each: December 11, 1978; June 4, 1979; May 12, 1980; June 12, 1982. I signed another release form and antibody tests were run on an array of thawed-out samples of my blood to see when I had seroconverted. I imagined myself being siphoned into the past with every resuscitated teaspoon, becoming more transparent here in the present.

As with all the T-cell counts and viral load results since, waiting for the next piece of information was like being dangled over a bottomless pit, and then yanked back onto firm ground.

"Some people don't want to know," I was warned.

"I do. When was it?"

“June 12, 1982.”

June 1982: I’d been pining over a bad-news boyfriend I’d broken up with, running around with my friends Gary, Michael and Gina. Amid my frequent complaints about not having a lover, I’d been having lots of what is now termed “unsafe sex”: with a blond dentist on vacation from his teaching post in Saudi Arabia who admired my straight teeth; a former high school tennis coach-turned-massage therapist from Texas I met sunbathing one lunch break; a darkly handsome French teacher from Boston University in town to visit an old friend dying from “that weird new gay cancer”; a hunky, closeted computer programmer with a stack of Kosinski novels beside his bed; a skinny, wild-eyed hairstylist who embarrassed me by yelling, “Give me all those little Kevins!” as I fucked him; and Michael, Gary and Gina.

After I had accompanied Jack on so many lab visits, getting stuck at Clementina for the AIDS study became freighted with the potentiality of terminal illness. They took more blood now, too -- which took more time and a bigger needle -- FedExing it off to half a dozen studies around the country. I climbed up on the paper-covered table and lay with my eyes shut.

There were still the sex questions, and the cigarette, alcohol and pot queries, but things had taken a morbid turn, and sexual braggadocio gave way to the dementia parlor games of the neuropsych battery. I’d listen to a tediously detail-crammed story problem: The cruise ship Regina left port on Tuesday, February 22, at 3 a.m. On the third day out, Anna Thompson, the cleaning lady, a redhead with bad dentures, had her purse stolen. She had six children, two of whom were undergoing expensive dermabrasion procedures.... I’d then proudly recite back the torpid details. It was like having your gossip quotient measured.

A few days after a clinic visit, I’d get the call: “Your T cells are 1,160” (or 1,210 or 1,050) -- and I’d go home to my dying lover who had 10, ashamed of my selfish elation at my good marks.

I cried during the blood draw the first time I went back after Jack died in June 1988, suddenly too aware of having a body when he did not -- and yet terrified that grief had peeled my gripping fingers off the cliff edge of nonprogression. “I’m sorry,” Dr. Buchbinder said. “Am I hurting you?”

Then I fell in love with Richard, who had to start AZT a few months after we met. A Southern gentleman, he was too gentle to fight HIV. He infected me with the love of collecting -- in my case, old photos. Like me, he loved the past, but then he disappeared into it himself. Weeks after he died of AIDS in December 1992, I got a package of antiquarian children’s books he’d ordered for me.

The study relocated to plusher health-department offices on Van Ness (the old VD clinic at Clementina became an art gallery for a time) and threw “socials” at which researchers reported new information culled from our blood. Staring at images on a screen in a darkened room, I felt like a ghost drifting through data: the DNA bow ties, the line graph whose bony arm rose ineluctably upward with “years of infection” and the “numbers dead or diagnosed.” We long-term nonprogressors (LTNPs) crowded the center of our ever-smaller slice of the pie chart, scrambling as the music jerked to a halt and a few more chairs were gone.

In 1997 I was informed that I carry the CCR5 mutation, one of two defective genes that appear to delay the progression of HIV. At that time, of the 622 men whose blood samples have been tracked back to the early ’80s, 12 percent remained LTNPs. The questions continued: On a scale of one to 10, which of the following do you feel is responsible for your continued good health? Being a basically happy person (3). Spirituality (0). Eating well and exercising regularly (5). Meditation and alternative therapies (0). Having a living boyfriend (10).

Three years after Richard died, I met Paul, who charmingly misunderstood the discreet reference to “positive nonprogressor” in my Bay Area Reporter relationship ad and fell in love with me anyway after he learned that I hadn’t meant “happy-go-lucky slacker.” Paul and I both arrived in San Francisco in the summer of ’77 -- and (we discovered after we’d known each other for a year) had not only lived across the street for a time but had concurrent affairs with the same man. We’ve lived together happily for six years now, despite our so-called serodiscordance (he’s negative).

I’ve been having safe sex for 15 years, serial-monogamously. In light of my youthful promiscuity -- recently detailed in the book Wild Animals I Have Known: Polk Street Diaries and After, drawn from the journals I’ve kept since 1977 -- I can neither explain nor sufficiently express my gratitude for the fact that I’m having the best sex of my life.

I hear less and less often from the AIDS Cohort Study -- funding was cut, research priorities changed. They may call once a year for a blood-draw. My T cells continue to range from 800 to 1,000. I’m no anti-treatment maverick -- I’d take the drugs if I had to. It’s hard not to assume I’ll remain healthy when my counts remain stable after 20 years, though the noncommittal researchers cheerfully tell me that today only 2 percent of the original study group remain nonprogressors. I still have to fight a gut fear that if I talk too much about my good fortune, I’ll be in for a rude surprise.

Without symptoms or daily pills, it’s the blood-draw that invariably highlights what I often allow myself to forget for days at a time, until I cut myself at work or the conversation comes ’round to retirement planning: I don’t believe I’ll get sick, but I can’t depend on my good health. I stick out my arm, turn my head away and remember that housing-project garden and a vista promising the encircling arms of a lover at the cost of a week’s discomfort. The needle enters my vein and I’m adrift again -- neither dead nor entirely among the living, lost in my heart’s own current.

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