Road Trippin’

Our hemo-hero rock star Shawn Decker resurfaces after a 10-month drug binge feeling bruised and confused.

September 1, 2000 By Shawn Decker

Dear loyal and loving reader, I apologize for my column’s lengthy absence. It’s been a trying year, but I’ll try not to sensationalize The Shawn Decker Story: Safe Sex, AIDS Drugs and Rock ’n’ Roll.

Although 1999 started off just right—I rediscovered love—after three years of doing my drug-free positoid schtick, I decided to focus on some non-AIDS extensions of my being—most notably, creating music. But Cruel Papa Fate made me delay those plans. In May, I suddenly got a terrible flu, and over the next few months I saw a steady decline in appetite and weight, so I began pill-popping medical marijuana…oh, my sweet Marinol.

During one memorable Marinol moment, I called my mom to ask what her plans were for Mother’s Day—a week after the whole family, not excluding yours truly, had celebrated the occasion. In retrospect, I guess I needed that two-month Marinol buzz to avoid the reality that by summer, despite Prince’s grand purple party vision of 1999, I was dying.

That’s when my positoid godfather, Steve, got on my case about starting meds. He stepped up after my former godparents grew distant because my HIV didn’t mesh with their religious beliefs. And I trusted his wisdom about protease inhibitors, which he said spewed out of the pipeline in 1996 just in time to save his life. Now, the Gay Skipper couldn’t bear watching his Hemo Gilligan fade without a fight.

For me, the thought of taking anti-HIV drugs had always been much scarier than having the virus itself. After reading about how their toxicity would affect my thin blood and weak liver—and having an inherent distrust of Western medicine after the industry’s carelessness got me infected—the whole proposition was a tough, er, pill to swallow. On the other hand, taking a dirtnap at age 24 was never my life’s ambition. So in August 1999, with less than 50 CD4s and a viral load around 750,000, I was dragged kicking and screaming into murky Highly Active Antiretroviral Therapy waters.

All of my fears about the side effects were confirmed—and then some. I took to throwing up in public, getting my hemo period (nosebleeds) all month long and spending the better part of my day on the porcelain throne (becoming well-read in the process). Week after week, acres of forest

were annihilated just to keep my ass wiped (apologies to Greenpeace).

There was a bright spot. One breezy fall afternoon I woke up feeling as fresh as Will Smith in Bel Air. That oh-so-happy day was followed by another, and then a good week stretched into a good month. I began to take a liking to the new me. I discovered that I could actually walk through a mall without feeling drained. I even had the energy to pursue my music (under the moniker Synthetic Division), play some gigs and cut a CD (Tainted Goods, check out www.positoid.com).

Soon, what had been a week's worth of activities fit comfort-ooo-ably into a day. Thanks to the Viracept and Combivir, I was able to emerge from my shell and and fully indulge in the human exper-ience.

At the same time, I painfully realized just how much my health had held me back over the years, forbidding activity that required more than absolute minimum physical investment. All the spiritual successes and triumphs in the seclusion of my black-and-white existence paled in contrast to my new Technicolor world.

After two months of good health, things began to level out, and fast. I lost Christmas dinner in memorable fashion, and my old friends Johnny Fatigue and Sammy Dragass joined in for a welcome wagon. To add to my frustration, my CD4s peaked at 150 and my viral load boomeranged after being undetectable. I returned to the same physical state I had occupied before getting sick, but without the mind-set that had allowed me to get this far. After having improved health, it was painful to watch it slip away. I started on antidepressants.

My doctor advised "intensifying," adding two more anti-HIV pills to the dirty dozen I was already taking. But after 10 months of HAART, I felt that the meds had pounded the virus as hard as they could, and now they had nothing left to do but beat up on me. So I end this bleeding episode, exhausted and ditching my meds at this crossroads, even though my disappointed godfather advocated switching combos. I'm back, but I'm not the same happy-go-lucky positoid you've come to know. And maybe not the same one you love.

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