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August 1, 1998 By Sean Strub

An experience I had a few months ago haunts me. I was in Thailand, where HIV transmission rates soar and the epidemic rages, though little of it is visible to tourists. I was flying from Chiang Rai, in the north, to Bangkok, heading home to New York City.

On the same plane was a Thai man whose body had wasted very seriously; I was certain he had AIDS. He was traveling alone, and required assistance getting to his seat. His frailty was frighteningly familiar; those around him alternately gawked and averted their eyes. I remembered how people looked at me when I was frail and had Kaposi's sarcoma lesions on my face.

In my carry-on baggage I had bottles of Crixivan, Zerit and Rescriptor—making this experience, for me, a stark and disturbing confrontation between the reality of my First World privilege versus his Third World need. I fought the impulse to give him the drugs, as I was afraid the act would be gratuitous, offensive or only a way to ease my own sense of guilt. Or all of the above.

At Bangkok International Airport, he was met by a woman who helped him into a wheelchair, then wheeled him out of my view and out of my life. I felt, I'm ashamed to say, relieved. The Thai man had his AIDS, and I had mine; we were literally worlds apart, and to be brought face to face with that ugly fact made me feel helpless.

Once home, sorting through the piles of mail that had accumulated in my absence, I found a media kit from a new lifestyle magazine targeted to gay men. As I read the promotional materials, I got increasingly angry. The publishers make it quite clear that the editorial focus will ignore AIDS. Indeed, it seems that they intend to create a magazine for a gay world in which the epidemic intrudes not at all.

The long list of topics the magazine will cover makes no mention of HIV. The publishers claim that all models in the magazine will "definitely have a healthy look." They say that the publication is "not just about sex, drugs and HIV." In an interview, the editor dismisses the ongoing Sex Panic! debate about the rights and responsibilities of sexual expression, saying that few prospective readers take it seriously because "the most vocal group involved…seems to be HIV positive porn stars and/or male prostitutes." (That this debate is one of the few places where questions about how to revitalize safe-sex efforts are being asked—presumably something that most HIV negative prospective readers take seriously—the editor doesn't know or doesn't care.) The sentiment's outright bigotry is astounding; the spectacle of gay men turning on their own is pathetic.

It’s one thing to want, after two decades, to move beyond the “AIDS crisis” way of life—every PWA understands that. But this is different. With their mean-spirited, stigmatizing prejudice, the gay men behind this new “AIDS free” magazine seem not only willfully blind to the suffering and struggle that many of us—both the HIV infected and the HIV affected—have shouldered. They are also dangerously complacent about the lifelong challenge their HIV negative readers’ face in avoiding infection.

Creating walls between us and them, between positives and negatives, the ill and the well, the haves and the have-nots, the pretty and the plain—when there are already so many differences—frightens me more than the virus. I saw myself in the ill Thai man on that airplane, and though I felt helpless, I also felt a kinship with him. But these gay men who want to make AIDS invisible have deliberately chosen not to see themselves in us. To them, we’re history. Until they get infected.

If anything jolts me out of my sense of helplessness, it’s anger. Gay men have achieved nothing if our ambition as a community is to “get beyond AIDS.” That’s just a euphemism for excusing poverty, ignoring racism and dismissing disease. We must cure our inability to see our own dignity and value in those less privileged. A ghost of that Thai man visits me often. I wonder if he’s still alive, if I should have done something to help him. I wonder if the men behind this new magazine would give him a second thought.

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