S.O.S.—October 2000

October 1, 2000 By Sean Strub

No matter what his hair color, I always found consolation in the little scar on Stephen Gendin's right temple. It winked out, amid the magenta tangles or chartreuse stubble, affirming that the Stephen I knew was still there underneath whatever fantasy he had made of his external representation that month.

Stephen's partner, Hush McDowell woke me around 2 a.m. on July 19, at my home in rural Pennsylvania, with the news that Stephen had died suddenly, a few days after starting chemotherapy for AIDS-related lymphoma. I was alone, in shock. Before driving to New York City, I went to my computer and banged out the e-mail message to friends around the world. I wanted to tell them what a profound loss this was not only for me, but for all people living with AIDS. A special part of the heart of AIDS activism stopped beating when Stephen died. I wrote:

I have never met a man I admired more; his death slams the very worst pain and loss in my heart. I hate this fucking disease. No one deserves the agony we have endured for two decades. Activism, in the absence of Stephen's integrity, honest, and deep drive of meaning, now feels impossible. I check my anger—momentarily—with the memory of Stephen's extraordinarily gentle nature and awesome intellect. He is, was and will always be my beloved hero. I want so desperately to believe in a hereafter, one without disease, where Stephen and so may other of my friends can play and cuddle and love one another.

The next day, I want to see Stephen's body at Redden's Funeral Home in Manhattan. The ritual was familiar, as I've viewed so many dead bodies over the years, most at Redden's. In fact, Stephen was laid out on the same room where I last saw my lover Michael Misove in 1988. Stephen's face looked full—as if he had gained some weight, though I knew it was from the early bloat of death. Hush had even shaved Stephen's ever-changing hair a few days before, knowing he'd likely lose it to the chemo. Stephen's hairstyles were like a calendar of the different periods of AIDS activism; the absence of any at his death completed the metaphor.

I hugged Stephen, awkwardly, I bent my head close to his and kissed him, wishing his mouth would break into a special Stephen smile. My tears splashed on shi cool skin, forming pools in his eye sockets. I wanted to find a deeper meaning in Stephen's death, but I could not. I wanted to assign blame, get angry, make some dramatic vow or promise, (fulfill his old fantasy, say, of killing Jessie Helms). But I couldn't do that, either. Our decision to put Stephen on this month's cover—four different ones, in fact—is part of our search to find meaning in his death. Together, the four covers—empowered Stephen marching with ACT UP/New York in 1990; sexy Stephen posing

in Hawaiian sand in 1996; sick Stephen with his beloved dog, Zoom, in 1998, and his cold corpse with close-cropped hair (see the scar?)—show the complex incomparable man we knew so well. At a benefit honoring Stephen last April, I said loved him like a brother, a son, a father, a mentor, a protégé. He was, in many ways the person I most emulated. In a dozen years of collaboration—from ACT UP fundraising to my campaign for Congress to launching Community Prescription Service and *POZ*—he was an inspiration, provocateur, and most-trusted friend.

Stephen's determination to survive was unique. When the going got tough, he hit the Web, the phones, the streets. He literally fought fear with information and pain with action. Hugs weren't high n his list, or sympathetic words. Neither were self-pity or helplessness. Anyone who had benefited from an anti-HIV meds owes their survival in part for his vision and courage. He was the ultimate HIV guinea pig, putting his body on the line, pushing the envelope, testing treatment theories, experimental drugs, and new combinations. But his risk-taking, as any *POZ* reader knows, wasn't limited to ACT UP arrests ad eight-drug combos. He explored his sexual and spiritual desires with urgency uninterrupted by health problems, public criticism, or responsibilities from his family, friends, and career. He shared everything he learned—about AIDS, life, himself—I these pages (his last Sick and Tired column), so that we could all benefit. That was, ultimately, Stephen's most generous gift to the community he loved.

I like the dead Stephen cover the best. Some people remember him as a tortured soul. But to me Stephen was always the picture of integrity and peace, living in a state of grace made possible only by total honesty with those he loved. I no longer need to look for the little scar on his temple, as Stephen is etched permanently in my heart, my memory and my own quest to survive.

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