Scared Straight

Hetero HIVer MC Mars remembers catching the “gay disease"

October 1, 2004 By M.C. Mars

The recent hysteria over gay marriage—the crazy rhetoric about how Tom marrying Dick, and Jane marrying a dyke is the end of civilization—made me think back to 1988, when I first had to deal with being a straight man with a “gay disease.”

As a cab driver/writer living in San Francisco, I had some gay friends—not to mention the experience of ferrying countless gay men and women around the city. But driving gays to bars and bathhouses and fending off the occasional advance was one thing. Walking into San Francisco General Hospital and taking my place among all the homosexuals who had contracted HIV was quite another.

One week after my diagnosis at a city clinic, I was riding the elevator to SF General’s fifth-floor AIDS ward, caught in an insane loop of interior chatter—*Who did I get it from? Probably a prostitute*—and nightmarish visions of Jerry Falwell’s finger-pointing God vomiting rainbows in a fecal sky. And, of course, the hovering, horrifying equation HIV = AIDS = Death.

When the elevator doors opened, standing before me was a six-foot, pink-haired drag queen wearing enormous Elton John glasses. “Welcome,” she said and pushed a tray piled high with blueberry muffins under my nose. In the waiting room behind her, a gaggle of tattooed trannies cackled. *Take a good look at your new friends*, the chatter in my head continued, *your new family, your new home*.

I snubbed the muffin maiden and took a seat at the nurse’s desk. “I wanna know my T-cell count,” I told her. Elton wiggled her index finger in the air in an obscene gesture. “I only have one measly T-cell left,” she said. Someone chimed in that he wanted to be buried with his lover. I couldn’t believe this was happening. The nurse, asking me questions about my medical history, acted as if I actually belonged with these people. I glanced at the elevator, contemplating an escape. And then I saw someone I knew.

Michael R was an actor who had once had the principal role in a staged reading of one of my plays. AIDS had withered him to skin and bones, but it had also transformed him from a soft, oval-faced kid into a man with a look of fierce determination, a rugged, angular warrior striding on weak legs down the corridor. His strength gave me chills, but I felt ashamed being there under the sway of his gay disease. I turned away before he could recognize me.

When Michael was gone, I bolted for the elevator and pressed lobby. Seconds after the door closed, it flew back open. I hit the button again, and the same thing happened. I heard one of the trannies say, “She’s leaving us.” I suddenly felt caged and on display—those queens could see right through me to my vulnerability and fear. And yet, like Michael, they didn’t seem to be afraid. Had they already come to terms with their mortality? Or were they some of the stupidest fuckers ever?

Sixteen years have passed since my first wild ride at the AIDS ward. Few reasonable people would still argue that AIDS is a gay disease. But HIV has brought me into contact with gays in ways I would never have imagined. The result hasn’t always been heartwarming. Once, in the depths of depression, I was turned down for care by an AIDS agency because I wasn’t gay. But for the last five years, I’ve had a gay doctor and few relationships could be more personal. Labeling AIDS a gay disease or defining marriage as straight are both fraudulent attempts to protect something limitless: one’s right to live.

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