Second Coming

AIDS never kept River Huston out of other people's beds, but it took an adventure in abstinence to bring her to orgasm on her own couch of self-acceptance.

May 1, 2001 By River Huston

You may remember that for years I wrote a sex column in these pages. Though these pieces were brimming with juicy accounts of sexcapades past and present, I've recently had reason to question how much of a sexpert I really was. I quit writing the columns when a funny thing happened: I took my own advice, became a goddess and stopped settling (I had styled a typical partner "tall, dark and needy"). I began to delve deep into the spirit. I chose abstinence -- not out of fear, shame or guilt, or loss of interest or opportunity -- but because I began a love affair with myself. Yes, this included my vibrator, but it centered on taking supreme care of myself. I found a stone cottage on six acres and awoke each day feeling lucky to be alive. I still had to deal with all my HIV meds, but I was awash in a wonderful sensation of self-acceptance. Not having sex can be the most erotic thing in the world.

Then another funny thing happened: My body began to announce how healthy and happy, kind and gentle I was being to myself. The 50-pound adipose armor that had shielded me from the harshness of my diagnosis melted and resolved itself into a "Do it to me!" body. I remained oblivious to the fact that men were eyeballing me -- until Christmas Eve 2000.

I'd gone to the movies with friends, but the theater had closed early, so I invited everyone over to my house for a video. No takers -- except for one guy I knew only vaguely. We settled into the couch with *The Thomas Crown Affair.* Watching Rene Russo and Pierce Brosnan humping and bumping on a tropical island might have been a setup: The guy and I brushed against each other -- and it was all over but the panting.

Then I took a good look at him. I saw creamy skin and a 26-year-old body buffed by six years in the military. I've rarely been attracted to beauty or brawn. Intellect, creativity, wit -- those usually register on my thermostat. As I reveled in this Adonis' arms -- quite aware, thank you, of each peak and valley in his highly developed musculature -- I wondered, "Why have I always ended up with the short, nerdy guy?" I was to drink from that HIV negative fountain of youth and beauty for the next two days -- straight, no chaser.

Between the sheets we transcended the boring, unsensational, second-bestness of safe sex. It's the intention, not the act, that makes copulation erotic, and our focused desire and willingness to experiment helped us penetrate the barriers. Our safe-sex kit contained spontaneity and

aspiration instead of some clinical sense of disease prevention. We were motivated by the wetness of emotional risk-taking rather than a dry sort of fear. The bed was littered with bottles of goo, condom wrappers, empty boxes of Saran Wrap, dog leashes, leather cuffs, dildos, vibrators, candles, scarves, lacy underthings and a riding crop.

I had never had this kind of sex before, so once my body fluid-soaked mind returned to rational thought, I had to try to figure it out. I believe that the sex this twentysomething guy and I had was possible only because of my recent spiritual journey. I've arrived at a place where I can exist in the moment and enjoy life to its fullest, believing that the future will take care of itself. This may sound irresponsible, but it isn't: Setting myself free with my body and my guy has profoundly changed me. All the extra weight I had carried suddenly dropped from my heart, just as it had from my hips.

Of course, my new guy helped enormously by not being fazed by my HIV. With HIV negative boyfriends my age or older, I had always felt their fear -- silently tinged with loathing. To them, HIV was alien. Disclosure left me feeling unworthy even to seek admission in the dating pool. But my new guy grew up in the epidemic. He understood.

It has been a few months now, and my man and I are still at it. We rarely discuss anything profound, sticking instead to talk that makes us laugh. There are gaps between us: age, tastes, interests. I try to stay firmly in the moment, however fragile it may be. There, I know that deep pleasure can be more than just passing gratification -- it can be the opening up of the heart, the beginning of true love.

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