The Breakfast Club

August 1, 2000 By Kevin O'Leary

Port Authority is full of queers on this late-April Friday night, but my friend Catherine wants us to catch the 5:30 bus from New York City to Boston—and meet her girlfriend, Lisa, on time—so there's no time for a gander at the gaggle headed to DC. We're not boycotting the Millennium March. We just have a prior commitment.

For 11 years, the AIDS Action Committee of Massachusetts has sponsored the Bayard Rustin Community Breakfast, named to honor the gay African American who organized the March on Washington in 1963, when a quarter-million Americans gathered to hear Dr. King speak in the shadow of Lincoln. On the too-early Saturday-morning rush over, I give Catherine and Lisa a who's who rundown of the guest list, perhaps to convince myself that the color of my skin—an ever-blushing pink—does not mean I'll be on the sidelines.

We are lucky to grab three seats together. Sister Rafiki, in her full-on orange robes, takes the podium and invites us to salute, by name, the HIVers "who came before us so that we are here today." Many are called out, mystifying two kids near us who turn to catch each voice like a butterfly.

The same kids fidget when board president Michael Melendez rises to tell us about the upcoming AIDS walk, but we all perk up when gospel singer Dr. Phillip Woods—he's also a dentist, event co-chair Albert Whitaker tells us—lines up with his five leather-clad backup singers. After a sign-interpreter–defying "Is My Living in Vain?" he goes right for the Bacharach, using "Be Aware" to remind the crowd, "Somewhere in the world, someone is cold, be aware…"

Reiterating this is the next speaker, Cornelius Baker, former head of the National Association of People with AIDS and current honcho of DC's Whitman-Walker Clinic. His first words are, to chuckles, "I am not Rainey Cheeks," the dynamic beltway reverend with HIV who brought down the house last year. After a beat, Baker pushes up his wire-rims and says, "So I hope you don't mind a little dry toast with your breakfast." He *has* us.

That is, until the tail end of his speech—a rundown ready-made for Capitol Hill donors. But then Baker breaks the canned rhythm with "I don't need to tell you about all of that, because *this morning* I am with family." It gets the biggest hand of the day. We all know what he means—and we're all happy to have made the cut, even if just for this morning. Few of us in the room would feel this way elsewhere this weekend.

The best speaker is the most reluctant. Belynda Dunn, who's brought HIV ed into black churches for years, is invited up from the audience for a surprise award. She may look very put-together for someone who hadn't a hint of the impending close-up, but once cajoled onstage her voice is shaking. She tells us that she is especially glad to be "an honorary lesbian" today among the mostly gay crowd, because she needs all the support she can get in preparing for surgery to correct nerve damage from hepatitis C complications. When she says, "I am very scared," you can almost feel everyone clasping their hands as if to hold hers. Baker was right—we *are* with family.

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