Sir Alick Goes To Grenada

Jesse Cameron Alick visits the Caribbean to escape from himself, but an uncle keeps him connected.

April 1, 2009 By Jesse Cameron Alick

This is how I arrived a while ago in Grenada, my father's homeland: Stepping off a little plane, my body was instantly covered with moisture. The humidity was like a foreign entity on my skin—85 degrees in December? Robby (a New Zealand native and my traveling partner) said that this was how Christmas weather should feel. Honestly, my body found the entire thing confusing.

Robby and I decided to visit from the United States because, after both experiencing confidence-crushing breakups, we concluded that we needed to find a place that wasn't where we were. Anywhere—and Grenada (a.k.a. The Isle of Spice) sure is that. It's a developing country of about 100,000 people floating out there in the Lower Antilles, a small green island on the edge of the West Indies.

My family there is all very cool, but I've never had conversations with them about being HIV positive. However, they know I am because one of the first things my father did when he found out was to call his brothers and sisters. I've always found it odd for such a private man to do that, but perhaps he needed support.

Although my relatives are all warm and kind, part of me wonders: What do they think of this strange HIV-positive queer boy from the United States? I talk a big game, but in extended family circumstances I'm actually much too shy to bring up dangerous topics.

My uncle isn't though. He's a rather accomplished playwright—fond of telling long stories and singing to himself. He traps me in his car on a long drive and dives head first into one of these stories. For a moment, I'm reminded about how my father would do this exact same thing to me when I was a teenager and he wanted to have a serious talk. My uncle talks about the character of people, and how he loves spending time with people, no matter if they are annoying or not, because it gives him so much good material. He transitions into talking about a radio series he's writing. It's about a man who contracts HIV and how it changes his life. My uncle says his goal is to teach his audience about HIV in an engaging and interesting way.

HIV is a growing problem on islands in the West Indies. He talks about how it's still difficult to teach about the disease without people disconnecting, not wanting to hear. "You have to connect

with the people—you have to find a way to teach them, Sir Alick.” My uncle uses the same nickname that my father does with me, and again I’m jarred into thinking I’m 13 years old again. “As a writer and a human, we must find a way to help others. Yes? You understand?” I do.

My uncle takes me on a hike way up into the jungle, to a place he used to visit when he was young. I can see the distant look of old memories in his eyes as we reach a waterfall with a pool of cool water at its base. Coming up for air as we swim, my uncle turns to me and smiles. He says, “This is your baptism.”

I went to Grenada to escape from myself, but instead, at every turn, I was reflected back through my family’s eyes. We may comprise a range of skin colors, economic brackets, generations and countries, but we are still a single family that cares about each other. I don’t think my uncle writes radio shows about HIV because of me, but learning that he and my family are concerned about the things that are important to me means a lot. Isn’t that what defines a family in the first place?

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