Misplaced Lust

Sometimes feeling empowered isn't a victory-it's a consolation

March 1, 1997 By John Weir

My friend David Feinberg, who died about two years ago, was the first sex columnist for *POZ*. He was planning a new column the month he died. It was called "Hospital Sex," or maybe "Sex in Diapers." My favorite thing about David was that he was completely willing to make himself look totally foolish, even icky, in print. He said all the stuff that people in polite society-A-list fags, mute muscle queens and Chelsea boys in immaculate t-shirts-pretend they're above. He talked about blood and body odor and bad sex and anxious nights where you make obsessive hang-up phone calls to the gym buddy who doesn't know you're alive and won't care when you're dead. Dave was wholly unpretentious. The more self-consciously discreet and appallingly self-important the so-called gay community becomes, the more I miss him.

So, in Dave's honor, I'd like to share with you the most humiliating sexual experience I ever had with someone from ACT UP. This is suppoesd to be a column about my ACT UP summer of love, but it wasn't summer (it was February), and it wasn't love, exactly. It was more like wishful thinking. I was actively involved with ACT UP for maybe nine months, and there were six weeks that winter when I slept with anyone who wanted me. "Anyone who wanted me" turned out to be about six guys. That was the winter I learned the precise limits of my charm. Later I learned other things. I learned that sex is a footnote, and denial is a necessity, and anger is a tactic, not an ideology, and that feeling "empowered" isn't a victory-it's a consolation. People who truly have power don't need to keep reminding themselves that they're using it.

ACT UP made me feel powerful for a while, but it turned out that my feelings weren't important. My power didn't keep David alive, and neither did my six-week winter of love. Nothing stopped the awful spectacle of his demise. I saw a sappy Hollywood movie recently about a guy who won't let go of his wife even though she's been dead two years. "I can't believe she ever left," he says, which is the opposite of my experience. Dave's death took everything with it, and now I can't believe he was ever alive. What I have remaining are some photographs and my bad response to his death. I wrote mean things about him after he died. I stopped talking to all his friends. And the night before his memorial service, two months after his death, I went home with someone I knew he never liked.

It was another winter, a January night. Dave's service was the next afternoon, in a big loft downtown. I was supposed to speak, and I hadn't decided what I was going to say. Instead of

writing something down, I figured I might as well get uncontrollably drunk. So I went to a bar not far from my apartment and ordered a double bourbon on the rocks. Now, I don't really drink. I don't like to. A glass of red wine once a month is a lot.

So a double bourbon was like heroin. I drank it down, dutifully, and ordered another. Then I went around the corner and binge-gulped four martinis. What else do you do when somebody dies? Someone you knew you couldn't live without, except, oops, it turns out you can? I'd already walked to the end of the Christopher Street pier and screamed his name for 40 minutes, until one of the guys living in the cardboard city that clung to the side of the pier like kelp came out and screamed with me. I wrote an angry letter to every member of my family, in which I used the word *fuck*. I skipped work for a day, and called 550-TOOL, and played all my old Neil Young albums very loud. I could have soaked in gasoline and set myself aflame, but I have some sense of where to stop.

I stopped at five martinis. That's when this guy who used to have different hair sat down next to me along the wall and started talking. His hair was short now, and I was drunk, and he was cute. I knew him from ACT UP. Sitting in a bar the night before Dave's service, I couldn't remember much about him except that Dave didn't like him. Dave liked more people than you'd think-he was a gay populist, and you had to be really rude or a Republican in order to piss him off. Even rude didn't really bug him. So I figured this guy must have done something awful. The thing is, sitting with him in a smoky, empty bar at closing time on a weeknight, with the jukebox playing a gospel version of U2's "Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For," and my money spent, and my head spinning, I thought he was swell. His new haircut was working. His eyes were the color of Haagen-Dazs chocolate-chocolate-chip ice cream. He offered to walk me home, so I went outside and unchained my bicycle, and when we reached my apartment building, I invited him up.

It was my Blanche du Bois moment. I might have said, "Sometimes, so quickly, there's God." We got to my apartment and sat down in the living room. We were side by side on the couch. I said, "I can't believe I drank so much," my voice going high on the last word like I was *That Girl*. Then I leaned over and unbuttoned my friend's shirt. I won't say his name because so far he's still alive. He was nice to me. I got his shirt open and his pants down, and I thought, "If I touch any part of him, I'll die." He watched me and laughed. He said, "You're drunk, honey." I thought, "I don't want to die, exactly, but I don't want to *not* die, either." Dave wanted to not die. I remember thinking, as I watched him writhe and churn and bark and lament in his hospital bed, that I hoped to God I wouldn't ever *not* die.

My friend let me put my head on his chest. After awhile, he went to sleep. I slept three hours, and then I woke up and wrote my eulogy for Dave. In fact, I'd been writing it since the day we met. I don't remember what I wrote, but when I finished, I think I returned to the sleeping guy, kissed his chest and his belly and put my chin against his testicles and thighs and looked up at his face and said, "Is this working for you?" I haven't spoken to him since. I called him the following day and left a sincere apology on his phone machine.

I can't remember why I thought Dave didn't like him, and I can't remember why I thought I did. I

lost whole realms when David died-five years in either direction, my sense that sex might be enough. Certainly love isn't. That's another thing I learned, sometime later, after my not-really-summer-but-winter of love.

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