All the Rage

Andrew Cunanan and "AIDS Fuel Frenzy"

October 1, 1997 By Dan Savage

The same day Andrew Cunanan murdered Gianni Versace, I got a letter (I write a sex-advice column, "Savage Love," which runs in about 20 weeklies) from a gay man claiming he was infected with HIV at some point during a series of failed relationships.

He wanted to know why gay men are such shits, and mentioned that he'd considered becoming a hustler—to spread HIV and "pay back these assholes like they paid me." In my response I brought up Cunanan, who, according to then-breaking "news," had vowed to "get" the man who'd infected him with HIV. "Reports say Cunanan began his alleged rampage after learning he was HIV positive," I regurgitated. "If Cunanan wants to punish the person responsible for his infection, or for the rest of his fucked-up life, he should turn that gun on himself." Which was what he did, on the day my column came out.

Now, I'm not taking the responsibility—or the credit—for Cunanan's suicide; my column doesn't run in Miami. But there is something I will take responsibility for: Spreading AIDS hysteria. I fell—and I fell hard—for the HIV-as-motive scenario peddled everywhere from the tabloid TV shows to the front page of The New York Times. The only problem, of course, is that a blood test done on Cunanan's corpse revealed, a week after his suicide, that he was HIV-negative. So where did this AIDS spin originate? A volunteer empath at an AIDS service organization recalled having a conversation with Cunanan about HIV transmission during which he vowed to "get whoever did this to me." From this shaky source snowballed full-blown speculation, such as this from Hard Copy: "With nothing to live for after contracting AIDS, Cunanan went on a rampage, vowing to 'get' the men responsible for the death sentence he faced."

First, no one "contracts AIDS": People contract HIV and develop AIDS. And "death sentence?" Not these days. Someone who looks like Cunanan may have exploded in front of the volunteer, but lots of men react with rage to the news that they tested positive—and promptly get over it. In fact, facing morality in the form of HIV has transformed many gay men, helping them to get their priorities in order. And most who test positive wind up turning their anger on the virus itself: Treatment and prevention activism have always been sustained by troops of HIVers. This, of course, is rarely recognized—it doesn't jibe with the HIV-as-never-ending-tragedy narrative. And, come on, if "death sentences" turned gay men into spree killers, where were all the HIV positive assassins when we needed them? Why weren't they stalking Washington, D.C. during Reagan's second term? How come Jesse Helms is still alive?

I’m embarrassed to admit my eyes were opened to the HIV hysteria in the coverage of Cunanan by the two other angles favored by the press. In the week between the Versace murder and Cunanan’s suicide, the mainstream media reported Cunanan was not only HIV positive but into S/M/ and sneaking around in women’s clothes. In kicking around HIV and “kinky tastes” as likely motives, and drag as a disguise, the media had somehow—just by coincidence?—raised the three gay-male specters that scare straight America shitless. As if being a serial killer didn’t make Cunanan monster enough, he had to be a diseased, kinky, crossdresing one: And the Band Played On meets Cruising meets The Silence of the Lambs.

But HIV-positive-person-bent-on-revenge is a seductive archetype, and for unsettling reasons. First, homicidal rage is the way many ignorant of the reality of AIDS imagine themselves responding to testing positive. It makes sense to Hard Copy’s heterosexual target audience that someone who “got infected”: After all, the actual odds of their ever getting HIV are extremely slim; unlike gay men, they haven’t been desensitized to the idea of becoming HIV positive by dealing day in and day out with it. The virus may scare gay men who are uninfected (and it should), but it does not scare us out of our wits. The so-called general public, on the other hand, can picture becoming infected only as a result of some earth-shattering betrayal of falling prey to a psycho with HIV. While the speculation around Cunanan’s HIV status told us nothing about his motives, it did tell us a great deal about the irrational fear of HIV and people living with it.

Yet there was something deeply plausible about the HIV motive—even for people who should know better. I fell for it—and felt like a jerk—until I got on the phone with my HIV positive friends and learned that, to a man, they had fallen for it, too. One had this reaction: “When I heard the news about him being HIV, I thought, ‘Makes sense—it was bound to happen sooner or later.’ It didn’t even register with me at first that the media might be jumping to HIV-bashing conclusions.” Another said, “Well, why not? I wanted to kill the guy who infected me.” Instead, like most, he quickly accepted that the responsibility for his infection was his own. But a few don’t—and probably shouldn’t: Does a man infected in a “monogamous” relationship by a lying partner have a right to stay angry? Or a man infected by a guy who, during anal sex, purposely removed the condom? Or the naïve gay man manipulated by someone older? These scenarios all happened to men I know, men too honest to play blame-shifting games forever. Each resisted the urge to murder the man who, out of selfishness or denial or plain old malice, infected him. But what if one had not? The rest of us would cluck out tongues, deplore the violence, wish it were not so—but we would also understand. Vengeance, in these cases, makes perfectly if wildly perverse sense.

For one of the most painful truths of the epidemic is this: Some HIV positive gay men have behaved very badly. While not serial killers, there have been, and still are, a tiny number who could be called serial infectors: Men who intentionally transmit HIV. Let me be clear: I do not mean all-too-human HIV positive gay men who get drunk or slip up or lose control one night or who assume falsely that a partner’s willingness not to use a condoms is evidence that he’s positive, too. I mean gay men who knowingly and maliciously spread HIV. I consider this—dare I say it?—a profoundly immoral act. Before HIV came along, it didn’t seem to me that intentionally spreading herpes, warts or hep B was especially ethical; when AIDS slammed into the gay community, I

found myself unable to carve out a double standard for HIV. But I was out of step: For 15 years, gay prevention groups have framed a PWA's decision whether to use condoms for anal sex—whether to spread HIV—not as a moral issue but as a matter of personal privacy, individual freedom or civil rights.

Yet while we've proclaimed in public that, "Each of us is responsible for his own sexual safety," we've complained in private about men who take advantage and—whether they're "getting even" or "getting away with"—spread HIV. But in the interests of the vast majority of HIV positive people who behave responsibly—who consistently use condoms for anal sex, protect partners too stupid to protect themselves or seek out partners already infected—we've refused to engage in any public discussion about those men who do not. After all, everyone who is HIV is a victim—even when he becomes the victimizer.

A few years ago, I lived in a small college town. There was a gay man who made a sport of seducing the newly out farm-boys who arrived every fall to start school. He had HIV; he didn't use condoms; he infected lots of young men. Many of us knew what was going on, but no one said or did anything. (Yet when Louis Sullivan came to town, we screamed "Murderer!") What could we do? Poster the streets with his face? Flyer the bars? That would violate his privacy, and we were committed to confidentiality and saving lives—in that order.

So now we know Cunanan's killing spree had nothing to do with AIDS rage, and for the media, The Mystery Deepens." Sugar daddies, drugs, prostitution, jealously, rejection—these motives always seemed, in a moment free of HIV panic, much more plausible. But if the autopsy had showed Cunanan was positive, the HIV motive is the one that would've stuck. That so many gay men with HIV have fleetingly felt a murderous vengeance, coupled with that handful who are serial infectors and our own complicit silence, makes the HIV-positive-serial-killer spin a winner. As my friend said, it makes sense. It had to happen sooner or later. Or maybe it's been happening all along.

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