# The Tales of Hofmann

Three and a half years after publicly disclosing her HIV-positive status on the cover of this magazine, POZ editor-in-chief Regan Hofmann reveals deeper insights into her life as a journalist, an advocate for positive people—and a woman living openly with the virus. Here, an excerpt from her memoir, I Have Something to Tell You.

October 1, 2009 By Regan Hofmann

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On a sharp March night, I sat curled up in my office at *POZ* feeling incredibly nauseated, clutching my knees to my tumultuous guts. After a decade of doing everything I possibly could to keep my secret, I had followed through on my promise to Jody. I put a photo of myself on *POZ*'s cover above the words: "I am no longer afraid to say I have HIV." I thought that if I said it enough, inscribed it indelibly in a public place, I'd come to believe it. I knew that sharing my story would change everything—but whether it would make anything better for me, or the world at large, was anyone's guess.

I didn't know what my disclosure could do for those of us with HIV; I only knew that trying to do something had to be better than sitting back in fear, or complaining. And fighting AIDS publicly gave me an illusion of control in what was certainly a situation that was tragically out of control.

It seemed rational, in the abstract, to remind the world that this disease can happen to anyone. But as I stared at my face on the match print of the cover that was about to go on press the next day, I struggled to believe that this would make a difference. Part of me felt deeply disconnected from the woman I saw staring back at me from *POZ*'s cover. The image of a stern-faced woman in a green V-neck shirt, skinny arms akimbo, hands dug into hips, seemed strangely defiant and tough. The photographer had captured something in my eyes that I had never seen before in my reflection.

Staring and staring at the photo, I finally realized it was resolution—grim resolution that I would stand my ground even if it meant that doing so would be the end of me.

Gripping the shiny replica of the cover that would be printed 150,000 times that night, I went into my creative director's office.

"Can we stop the press?" I asked.

He stared at my end-of-winter pale face, drawn tight with fatigue and anxiety, and he slowly and silently shook his head.

After 15 years in publishing, I knew the answer but just wanted to hear someone else say it. I leaned against the wall and closed my eyes. My stomach still ached, but deep inside something was beginning to let go. There was a strange relief in knowing that my free fall into truth had irrevocably begun. All I really had to do was wait to see what shape I'd be in when I hit the ground.

At 8:40 p.m. my office phone rang. Who was calling this late? Maybe because the world would soon know anyway, or maybe because I was sick of feeling terribly alone, I answered. Technically, I wasn't supposed to, since for maximum impact we had decided we wouldn't announce my arrival at the magazine until after the April issue came out.

The decision to wait until the magazine came out before telling anyone allowed me to get adjusted to working at *POZ* before being distracted by an onslaught of questions from my friends and extended family, and the world at large; it also gave me the space I needed to deepen my knowledge of HIV/AIDS so that I could speak easily and knowledgeably about all aspects of the pandemic.

I had told my friends and my former publisher, Cheryl, that I was going to work for a secret start-up and that if it worked out, I could tell them about it come April. I felt awful for having to lie about it, but I believed they would understand, and hopefully forgive me, when I eventually came clean.

Given that it was nearly time to let the beast out of the cage anyway, I lifted the receiver and said,

"Hello?"

"Hello, I'm trying to reach the editor of *POZ*," a woman said.

"Yes, who is this?"

"This is Lia Miller, from *The New York Times*. I'd like to get a quote from the editor for a story I'm writing about AIDS."

Lia. Lia Miller. I'd gone to high school with a girl by that name.

"Lia, by any chance did you go to Princeton Day School?" I asked.

"Yes!"

"Lia," I said slowly, "This is Regan. Regan Hofmann."

"Oh my gosh, how are you?"

"Well, I'm fine, and I'm now the editor of *POZ*."

"Wow. Why did you take that job?" she asked.

And then, as if someone had given me a shot of truth serum, I said, “I have HIV.”

There was a brief silence on the phone.

“How did you get it?” she asked.

“From my boyfriend. Ten years ago.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yes,” I said.

“That’s great,” she said. “I mean, great that you’re okay.”

I told Lia how lucky I was that I’d found out about the infection right away. And that I was still alive because I’d had the support of my family and money for health insurance and medicine. I told her that I’d come to *POZ* because I was afraid: afraid that AIDS—a disease that infects more than 56,000 Americans a year—was being portrayed by the media in the United States as “under control”; afraid that women, people of color, young people and people over the age of 50 didn’t know they were at significant risk for contracting HIV; afraid that the stigma was worsening; afraid because people still die of AIDS in America—more than 14,000 of them in 2007.

“Lia, you may know this stuff already, but since it seems to never appear in stories about AIDS, I want you to make sure your readers know that this is not a disease confined to gays, blacks, Latinos, poor people, homeless people, drug users, promiscuous people or sex workers. It’s everyone’s disease. It’s an equal opportunity offender. Infector. Oblivious to behavior, geography, race, ethnicity, gender, age, sex habits, bank balances or morality. A resilient and deadly disease.”

There was a long silence after I stopped. I pictured her face, her lips pressed together to keep her jaw from hanging open. Maybe her face was contorted, maybe she was mouthing “oh my gods” and “no ways” to the editor sitting next to her as I unraveled my story. Or maybe she didn’t care. I hadn’t even considered that horrifying thought.

Then she said, “I was going to ask you for a quote for another story we were thinking about doing on AIDS, but now I think I’d like to write your story instead.”

“When would it come out?” I asked.

She cleared her throat. “Monday morning.”

It was Friday. That left me roughly 60 hours to tell everyone that I had HIV. Even though the magazine was scheduled to be on the street the next week, I figured I’d have plenty of time to tell the people I knew. *POZ* is distributed at doctors’ offices and AIDS service organizations; no one I knew would casually encounter the magazine. But *The New York Times*. Jesus.

“Okay,” I said, surprising myself and feeling as if I’d jumped out of a plane without checking to see if I was wearing my parachute.

“Okay! I’m going to tell my editor and we’ll call you back,” she said, and added, “Thank you.”

I hung up the phone and looked again at my face on the match print of the cover of *POZ*. I wanted to run for my life. Wanted to sprint to my parking garage, get into my Ford Mustang, drive halfway across the country to our printing press and throw a wrench—literally—into the whole damn thing. Why had I decided to do this?

But it was too late to think about that. Lia called back in a matter of minutes and we got the facts straight. I walked her through the details and avoided answering questions about things I wasn’t ready to talk about yet. She told me that the story—along with a reproduction of *POZ*’s cover—would appear in Monday’s early edition. She thanked me again and said I was brave. I said that I hoped the article would help someone, somewhere.

I lay awake all night worrying that everyone in my life would think the worst of me. I knew all too well the powerful brew of hysteria mixed for more than 25 years around AIDS. Few words had the power to conjure the levels of discomfort and terror you can invoke by saying “AIDS.” Not even words like “witch” or “plague” have similar power. I get it, the crazy fear around AIDS. The ingredients mixed in the AIDS brew are particularly potent in their own right: blood, sex, drugs, promiscuity, prostitution, needles, condoms, homosexuality and death.

The deep irony is that the stigma created by people’s unreasonable fear of AIDS—and their intense desire to judge those living with the virus and separate themselves from HIV-positive people by believing that there’s a great difference between themselves and positive people—puts them at greater risk for contracting HIV. That’s because stigma makes those living with the virus less likely to know their status, treat the disease and disclose.

It’s not the decisions or sexual acts that separate people who live with HIV from those who don’t. It’s just that when we made the same choices as many others do, the retrovirus was present.Which is why I was doing all of this: to show people how very wrong—and potentially deadly—this thinking is.

After the article about me ran in *The New York Times*, an editor at *Vogue* asked if I would like to write about having HIV for their June issue.

Though I’d been a writer all of my professional life, it was much harder than I thought to describe what it was like to live with HIV—even after I’d taken the initial plunge of public disclosure. It was agonizing to try to render emotions I’d kept locked away for a decade. To do so, I had to go back in time to the most painful moments of my life. But after spending hours circling my laptop, which was perched on a tiny table behind a brown velvet loveseat looking out the glass doors of the second story of my barn, I finally sat down and hammered the piece out. I wrote without a thought about what the women who read *Vogue* would think of me and my repulsive, terribly

unfashionable disease. If I managed to tell my story right, maybe more women would believe this could happen to them, and not end up like me.

I decided to go online and look up *Vogue*'s circulation. It was 1.2 million: one point two million women, girls, tweens, grandmoms, fashionistas, editrixes, soccer moms who love Hedi Slimane, women in their seventies who can still rock Dior, women in their twenties who can afford Balenciaga, women who can spell, properly pronounce, pay for and pick out of a crowd the two men comprising Proenza Schouler. One point two million women who would soon know that it could happen to them too.

I was embarrassed to admit that I'd been stupid enough to have unprotected sex without getting tested with my partner first. But if I did, maybe other women wouldn't find themselves in the same situation. One point two million was a lot of lives. It was also a lot of people who could say that I was a tramp, a fool, an idiot, an inconsequential waste of a woman. But if my story could save their lives, I really didn't care what they said about me.

A week after the issue of *Vogue* containing my story hit the newsstands, I pulled into the barn. It was dusk. A thin lunar slice had appeared on the horizon with the authenticity of a paper moon being hoisted above the set of a high school play. Deer grazed in the fields; the grooms had yet to turn the horses out for the night.

I parked the car, and as I was about to get out, I saw the hulking frame of a chestnut mare step behind my car. A woman stepped out of the barn, then another, and two more rode up on horseback. They surrounded the car, waiting for me to get out. My throat constricted, and I took a drink of water, stalling.

I finally opened the door and looked at the women dressed in fancy European britches and gleaming black custom-made leather boots. They stared at me. The one I knew best, a pretty, jaunty woman named Lorraine, whose hair was the same ruby red as her horse's hide, started to clap. She beat her gloved hands together slowly in a dull leather thump. The other ladies joined in. I smiled wanly, still not sure why they were there—or why they were clapping.

"You're very brave," Lorraine said.

"We read *Vogue*," another woman said.

"Thank you," I said to both at once.

And they stepped in closer, tossing questions and praise and comfort into our small circle. I couldn't say a word because I was absolutely overcome by their support, and I didn't want to cry when everyone was being so very kind and saying that I was such a strong woman.

And as I listened to them talk about HIV, how surprised they were that I had it, and how they planned to call their daughters and speak to them about it, how well I look, all things considered,

and how great it is that you can get HIV and still survive, I thought: five women down, 1.2 million more to go.

Available online and in bookstores on September 22. Click here to order.

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