28 Years to Life

December 7, 2007 By David Weiss

I wasn’t expecting there to be much. Just some junk in boxes - an old man’s things left behind in an apartment he would never return to. My father didn’t have many possessions of his own when his wife and family took him into the nursing home over in Davie, on the east coast of Florida near my sister. His brain was scarred and eaten by Alzheimer’s, his body a shuffling shell that could no longer even store the memory of his only son’s name. I had let the family down there run things once I had seen him there in that nursing home and had assured myself that there was nothing I could have done. The finances at the end of his life had been left in the hands of a capable and trustworthy stepsister, an arrangement that had satisfied everyone. I hadn?t given much thought to his possessions, the objects of his life.

So when he died there, alone in a hospice ward room in a back corner of the Sunshine State a few months after his wife died from cancer, and my stepbrother and his wife called to ask me if I wanted my father’s things, these things suddenly were there, things that had to be dealt with so that they could empty out his wife?s apartment. My sister and my stepbrother hadn’t been on good terms so it wasn’t surprising that my stepbrother and his wife called me instead of my sister even though my sister lived near Boca Raton and they lived in Cape Coral and I lived all the way up in New York City. It was a sad and lonely detail that had to be done. They asked me if I wanted them to store my father?s things in their garage for a while or have them shipped up north. It was just a few boxes of stuff - some pottery shards from when he and his wife threw pots together, a few small stones my father had carved to look like owls and an abstract black marble statue that he had gotten many years ago and that was supposed to have been the work of a sculptor friend of his. I remembered the statue because my father kept it on his office desk, and as a child I used to run my hands over its cool, smooth contours. In my child?s mind the statue always reminded me of a big black cat. I thanked them for calling and told them I would let them know, but I didn?t.

A few weeks later they called and offered to bring his things to Cherry Hill, New Jersey, where I could pick up the boxes at my stepbrother?s son?s home. I thanked them, and when they brought the boxes up a few weeks later I rented a car and took the New Jersey Turnpike down to South Jersey.

As far as I know, there are no hills at all in Cherry Hill. Cherry Hill isn?t even a town in the sense that we ordinarily think of towns - it is a seemingly endless sprawl of subdivisions, chain stores and strip malls that begins near the northeastern edge of Camden, east of Philadelphia, and stretches up towards Trenton. It?s a two-hour drive from Manhattan down the turnpike past Newark and through the enormous tanks and sprawling refineries of the New Jersey industrial corridor.

I pulled into the driveway of my step-nephew just before noon, and after a polite chat I loaded my father?s ?estate? into the back of the car: two boxes of pottery shards and carved rocks, and the sculpture. The sum of my father?s life. Driving back home with his things, alone in that rented car with the manifest of my father?s existence, it made me think of my own life.

I grew up on the North Shore of Long Island, twenty five miles east of Manhattan. My father commuted back and forth by car on the Long Island expressway every day for twenty years until my parents split up and he moved into the City, where he worked as an industrial interior designer. I was the youngest of their two children. My father was a creative and likeable man and both of my parents were reasonably intelligent and responsible and never abusive. Nevertheless, they did not seem to be particularly communicative in the ways that mattered to me as a child. My sister and I never spoke at all. Only fragments of any happy memories from the first ten years of my life are retrievable now. I stumbled through adolescence as mindlessly as most of us did.

In the late 60's I went off to college at SUNY Binghamton, where I majored in theatre before dropping out 12 credits short of graduation. I spent my early twenties in vain self-absorption. Despite a good measure of material success, I wasted my late twenties either too blind or unable to deal with life, and from roughly mid 1979 to the late spring of 1980, I sought refuge from the pain of my confusion by injecting myself with cocktails of cocaine and heroin, and for those ten months I lived in that chemical dream with a young woman I knew who made her living by selling herself to other men.

When the money ran out, as it always does, so did she. I woke up from my stupidity and started to use the gifts I?d been given by life. The year was 1980.

Still searching, but lacking direction, I tried writing for a while and I did manage to have at least one short piece published in the now-defunct American Heritage magazine, but it very soon became very clear that I was not really meant to be a writer, so I finished college and then law school. It was a practical decision and it gave me a sense of purpose and meaning that I had never really known before. I followed that path, met my wife in 1985 and after I married her in 1986 we lived a happy, if not boringly conventional life, blissfully unaware of a cunning invader that I had unknowingly injected into my arms and into our lives six or seven years earlier.

Like everyone else in those days I thought of HIV and AIDS as a strange new plague fueled by tainted semen and bottled blood that fed on the flesh of gay men and hemophiliac children. And then, in late 1987, as the epidemic continued to spread and the world learned that HIV also sought out intravenous drug users and that it could sometimes incubate hidden for years inside us, devouring our bodies from within, only to emerge years later, I began to wonder if I was also one of those who had been infected. At that time my concern was mostly for myself; I had never had any signs or symptoms of the opportunistic illnesses that science and medicine grouped so neatly together as resulting from this new "acquired immune deficiency syndrome.? I hoped I was wrong, but somehow I knew I was part of it all.

I went to a clinic down on Ninth Avenue operated by the New York City Health Department and left a small sample of my blood, and on a cold clear day in January of 1988 I learned that I was one of those people whom the doctors so clinically referred to as "long-term slow progressors." Like all of us who are HIV positive, it was a day I will never forget. If there is a god, it is by his or her grace that I did not infect my wife.

This brings me to the question that you may be asking yourself: ?why is the author of this blog hiding his face?? The obvious answer to that question is that I prefer to maintain some dignity even as I disclose so much of my personal life, but the larger issue is the stigma that is still associated with HIV/AIDS in this nation and around the world. Having lived with HIV for 28 years might well make me the longest-living heterosexual male with HIV in the country, if not the world. I do realize that is a grandiose kind of statement in a very twisted way, but it's a distinction I could live without. I prefer to write anonymously

not only because I do not wish to be judged but also because there are other people in my life whom I need to protect, and although coming out of the HIV/AIDS closet can be an act of courage, I am not ready to make that leap just yet. Like it or not, we live in a world that too often judges us not by the good that we do for others, but for the mistakes we have made in our own lives. It is a tabloid society that wallows in our sordid failures even as it pretends to celebrate our achievements, a society more concerned about our wealth, our sexual preferences and the short-sighted way we may have lived our brief and insignificant lives than about the short-sighted way we manage the planet that is our only home.

I hope that someday that will all change, and that someday I will feel confident enough about our grace and our humanity to decorate these pages with a recent picture of my face. Until then, I feel fortunate to join the talented bloggers here at AIDSmeds.

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