Mark

April 19, 2012 By Aundaray Guess

I had never flown in a plane before as I made my way to my seat in the non smoking section of the plane. As I settled in I was reflecting on what brought me to a place where I was flying from Minnesota to Colorado. What momentous occasion was having me experience such newness of the plane ride, going to a new state and meeting a new friend?

His name was Mark.

We met online in a chat room. We were both looking for friends and both living with HIV. We were both looking for something that let us forget about our day to day struggles. The conversations were mostly from the computer, a time when AOL ruled the internet and the only thing high speed were your fingers typing on the keyboard.

From his picture he looked like a cowboy the way he wore his hat and the snowcapped mountains in the background. The only thing missing was a straw hanging from his mouth. Our conversations was filled 'me too's' as we shared stories of past loves, life adventures and our sharing of our personal experiences with our HIV care.

Now here I was on a plane after six months of online and phone chat going to meet this new friend face to face. The greatest thing was this was no romantic hook up or a very long distance one night stand. It was two souls on this earth who crossed paths on the digital highway.

After knocking on the door Mark opened it and there he was. I tried to hide my surprise. All this time my visual was of an older picture of him but Mark didn't look like the Mark I had imprinted in my brain or the picture of which he looked younger. The Mark before me was frailer and he had a slight shakiness to his body. He still had the same smile but it was placed on a face that was battling wasting.

Up until then the physical aspects of AIDS was prevalent with the recent death of Rock Hudson and very few drugs to help. Traces of Kaposi's Sarcoma was covering the right side of his face. I had been fortunate to not have my disease being visible unlike Mark. Of all the newness of this trip this was defiantly new.

I was still in my vain early twenties and Mark was in his 30's. Like most young people gay or straight you have those periods in your life when you feel everyone wants you. That's where I was at and didn't have the tools to handle the public's reaction to someone who visually looked as if they had AIDS. In a crazy way even though I had it, because I couldn't see it, I fooled myself into thinking it didn't affect me.

Mark was great as he made a joke about his appearance as if he read my mind. In his joking mood

he made me realize this was the same person I was talking to all those months. After getting settled we found that connection of conversation that brought us together. Whatever hiccup I created was gone.

Mark lived his life despite what people thought. As we went out to see his city I could see the stares people gave him or the fear on their faces yet Mark didn't let any of it deter him or make him run away. It was if he was saying it's your issue not mine. The way he went about his life regardless of people's ignorance, it gave me courage.

My own ignorance was kicked to the curb and my heart opened to my new friend as I ventured into new territory. The greatest moment is when we went to his favorite spot. It was in the mountains. As this city boy learned about hiking we suddenly stopped. He had this calm over his face and I could see why as there was nothing but nature around us. No phone, no technology, nothing man made. From the mountains in the distance, the tall trees towering over us, the clear blue sky and the sounds of wildlife, it was a peaceful place. Another checkmark of something new for me.

When I got home I immediately wrote Mark and thanked him for the great trip. It was a short response as he wasn't feeling well. Days passed and looking at my email I saw the subject line- Mark. Mark's subject lines were often funny or insightful but never just his name. Even before reading it I knew what it was going to say. Sure enough according to his friend Mark had moved on to a better life. He was truly at peace.

After the numbness washed over me I had moments of reflection. Reflections of a person who lived his life fully until he passed. A man who didn't let his disease stop him from enjoying his life. One which didn't let strangers force him into a life of shame. A person who didn't live as if he had HIV, he simply lived.

People come in and out of our lives for a reason. They may not be there for the whole journey and often they keep you company while you travel. They help you see things you may have missed or help steer you from dead ends. They keep you going when you want to give up and sometimes they just have you stop and look at the beauty of God's world that surrounds you and make you forget and if just for that moment they remind you of the life you were blessed with.

Mark thanks for the company and the lessons and even though you're far away you're still close in my heart. Miss you, your friend always Aundaray.

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