The Picture

June 9, 2008 By Peter Staley

The picture is faded now, much like my memories of the day it was taken. I was in Amsterdam on vacation from my job as a bond trader at JP Morgan.

I was free... free from the closet I carefully built and lived in back in New York. No one from the bank, or members of my family, would see me there. I could just be me, at least for a week.

So I smoked some semi-legal weed, laughed at the mime that blocked the tram in Dam Square, walked for miles along the straten en grachten, and fell in love with a Dutchman. His name was Peter, like mine. His hair was dark, not Dutch blond, from his Spanish ancestry.

We asked someone to take a picture of us on one of the canal bridges. It's my B.H.I.V. picture - before HIV - that last picture of me before I got the news.

Fast forward a couple of months to a Monday night in November, 1985. Peter surprised me by making good on his promise to visit me in New York, and we're watching An Early Frost on NBC. It was the first major made-for-TV film about AIDS, and a young and beautiful Aidan Quinn was playing the son who has to tell his family he's gay and has AIDS (within weeks, I would have to do the same, and called it the "Early Frost Double Whammy").

Quinn's character finds out he has AIDS after a persistent cough, which turns out to be PCP pneumonia. As we watched, Peter kind of laughed nervously, and said "he's coughing like you." For me, it was only a persistent cold, but the comment prompted me to visit my doctor two days later.

My doctor was the late Dan William, one of the best gay docs in New York. Having a large, mostly gay male practice, many of whom were now dying from AIDS, Dan got in the practice of running a complete blood count (CBC) on his undiagnosed patients that showed up with absolutely any health concern, including a common cold.

On Friday, November 15th, 1985, his office called me at my trading desk, and told me I had a low white blood count - could I come back to the office that day for further tests. I pressed them to tell me what their suspicions were, and they eventually told me "it could be indicative of an HIV infection."

That was the moment. Every moment after that was A.H.I.V. I grew up fast. I made a lot of hard decisions. I had to fight like hell if I was going to make it to 25 or 26 years old.

Innocence was lost. No, I don’t mean I was now “guilty,” or even felt that way. I mean that my carefree youth - the innocence of youth - had come to an abrupt end.

I look back on that picture in Amsterdam, and I see the innocence of youth in my face. Even though the best years of my life were still to come, I still mourn the loss of that innocence.

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