

HIV, Mon Amour

Are we becoming a community split into HIV positives and HIV negatives?

by Andrew Miller

Duncan and I were having dinner at Benny's Burritos again. We were sandwiched in between two tables of straight couples out on dates. A table of football-player types were just finishing their enchiladas.

Loitering at the door were three gay men who looked vaguely familiar to me from the two years I've spent covering ACT UP meetings and Queer Nation demonstrations and going to parties at Maria's house in the East Village.

Duncan and I were deep in conversation when my eyes drifted over to the cute red-haired boy wearing a leather jacket. No uncommon occurrences so far.

He was facing away from me, sitting at the table where the football players had been. But it was the back of his jacket I was staring at. In fine AIDS-activist, radical-mod fashion, he had affixed a huge sticker to the leather, right between the shoulder blades. But far beyond the standard pink-and-black silence/violence fare, this manifesto was unlike anything I had ever read before.

The sticker, printed with its first three words enlarged and overlaid on the smaller, black-and-white text, began, "Male/Positive/29."

"The last one dumped me for a pretty negative," the text continued. "Although he was accepting of my status, he said there wasn't enough passion in our relationship. I agreed: It's hard to feel passion when your partner's afraid to kiss. This guy was smart: He knew his facts, but still, in his heart, kissing me meant death. OK, brother, follow your heart, and get the fuck away from me. Happy as I was to curse him, I began to worry about my future and my chances of feeling passion again. Was the last one truly the last? For two weeks I fantasized about suicide and celibacy. Then I met the next one, and we didn't talk of status or acceptance: We talked about art. And in bed we shared so many kisses, so much passion, unhesitating. I felt alive and was alive, and I forgot about the last one, the smart one, the passionless one."

That sticker could have been the catalyst for dozens of conversations I have had in the past year, at dinner parties in Brooklyn living rooms, on the beach at the Pines, in the locker room at the Y and on the telephone late at night from my apartment on the Lower East Side.

I have discussed the implications of positive-negative romance with a friend whose lover died a year ago last spring, after he found out that the boy he was dating had 350 T-cells. I have analyzed it theoretically with another friend who has been single, and HIV negative, for years.

I have counseled my friend Marc, who recently broke up with his boyfriend and now feels that being 37 and HIV positive takes him out of the category of potential-boyfriend material. I have steadfastly avoided talking about the issue with two men I've slept with in the past year, privately railing against my dissatisfaction with the choices the age of AIDS has served up.

And when I had my second HIV test this past summer after a bout with shingles, I understood just how radically those test results would alter my perspective on all proceeding discussions.

As it turns out, the owner of the jacket was also the author of the sticker, one Rick Jacobsen, an administrator at the University of California/San Francisco, who works with a new AIDS and gay activist art collective that calls itself Q Think.

Rick told me that the collective is planning to put out five stickers a month from now until June, when its members plan to assemble a book with all of their work. The stickers are reportedly becoming a part of the Castro landscape rather quickly.

Other texts produced by the Bay Area artists include a monologue by a black lesbian whose brother is a drug addict with AIDS, and a gay man describing a dream in which all of his dead friends urge him to become an activist.

"As an HIV-positive person, it's distressing to think that I'm unsuitable—not for sex, because I can have sex in an anonymous setting, but for the trappings of love," Rick explained to me the next day on the phone.

Rick sees a community losing faith in the idea of "safe sex." And he sees some pretty ugly divisions cropping up along antibody-status lines.

"The announcements around oral sex this summer have shaken people's belief in safe sex," he commented. New studies have led some to believe that oral sex without condoms is not as safe as many would like to believe.

"And there is a new generation of gay people who grew up in the age of AIDS, but the people

who are most afflicted are the people of an older generation. There is some feeling that there should be a barrier between the two."

Jacobsen understands that the growing division is based on more than just fear. "If I had a lover die, and went through that painful process, I would be wary of going through that again," he admitted. "Perhaps."

And my friend Marc sees some irony in this tacit, incipient division growing in a community so obsessed with civil rights and anti-bias laws. While choice of sexual partners is discrimination on the most personal terms, as Marc puts it, "these are the terms that hurt the most. I may be HIV positive, but I still need to be kissed. But it's my responsibility to find somebody for whom it's not an issue. It's not my responsibility to convert someone."

And it sometimes works both ways. At another point in his HIV saga, just after his diagnosis, Marc was reluctant to get involved with anybody, but especially someone who had tested negative. Other friends have had similar experiences.

"It definitely has an effect on people," Marc told me last week. "It's the central sexual issue."

Just scan the personal ads in any bar rag or skin mag to discover the topic's growing popularity. Ads for "healthy guy seeking same" or, more bluntly, "HIV negative only" appear more and more.

And in a community of men whose common bond is forged initially through sexual relations, any potential division along those lines is serious business.

Rick is angry over what he sees as a trend away from "safe sex" and toward "safe people." "If a person is not ready emotionally, I'm not a sadist. If he can't deal with the fear associated with AIDS, he shouldn't have a boyfriend who is HIV positive. But the idea of safe sex is that safe sex is for everyone. Safe sex means HIV prevention."

Now, I know many happily married couples in which only one of the men is positive or has AIDS. I know some men who have gotten involved with people with AIDS willingly and who would never change their minds, despite the emotional toll caring for a person with AIDS can take.

I never knew anyone who ran out on his lover

because he was sick. And my old roommate moved out of our apartment and into a tiny one-bedroom flat in Morningside Heights to take care of his best friend until he died.

But I don't know anyone who hasn't thought about how his own antibody status, and that of his love object, would impact on the course of that relationship.

Some men absolutely refuse to allow the issue to become a factor in the decisions they make about love. After all, the personal is political, and safer sex is for everyone. Others treat HIV status as a component like any other in the choices they make about boyfriends and sexual partners. But for a community that dares to shout the name of love, most people's positions seem to have evolved underground.

In an address book that I have owned for about five years are the names of 10 men who are dead. Another 20 are HIV positive, and about a dozen of them have AIDS, or are sick enough for HIV to have an impact on the way they live from day to day. An old boyfriend of mine moved back to his parents' house in the Midwest last winter, after becoming too sick to stay in New York any longer.

In my own life, I am beyond the point where I can pretend that AIDS hasn't become a part of everything I do. My HIV test this past summer cured me of that fantasy. Although it was negative, it reminded me that this division between positive and negative is imprecise at best, because for people who are negative, the possibility of slipping across the line always exists.

And as HIV has become part of all of our lives, whether it's in our own blood or in a friend's, it has by necessity become part of our relationships, too. I've tried to stop pretending otherwise, and to start talking about how I want to incorporate it into my decisions about love, and why.

"One of the social issues of the year is the distinction between the positive and the negative," Rick Jacobsen noted wisely. "It's ugly in some respects. And it's going to get uglier if we don't talk about it openly."

Andrew Miller is the news editor at OutWeek magazine. This article was first printed in OutWeek magazine Jan. 9, 1991.

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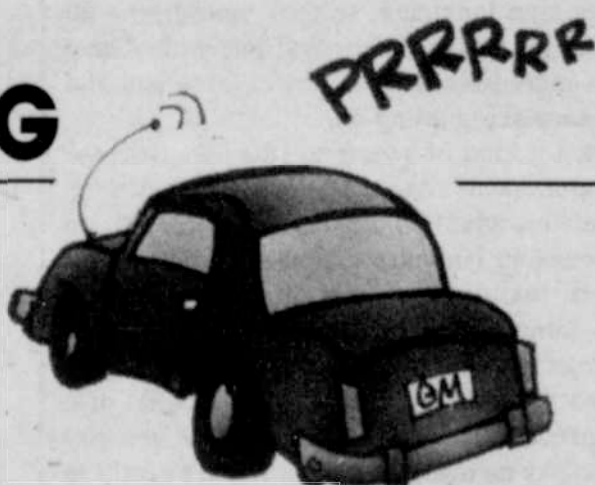
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