

# AIDS

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**R**OSS DIES OF AIDS AND RED IS ENRAGED. He, himself, oddly enough, considering the huge amount of sex on his plate, will be HIV negative for the rest of his life. We think we know why, although our opinion is based more on anecdotal evidence than science. By this time, his sexual activity is more mental than physical. In the eight years or so during which AIDS has killed nearly everyone it touches, orgasm has ceased to be the point. Like a bunch of boys, he and his playmates have redirected the energy they once used for fucking into elaborate games; dressing up, strutting, and detailed erotic scenarios in which the sex goes on forever and pornography sets the standard.

Not that orgasm has vanished. Far from it. The basis of sex is still fucking, and there are those who think that anything else is fraud. Consider Bill Clinton, who will deny that the blow job he gets in the oval office is sex. I'm not sure what he thinks it is. That's not ever very clear. But, he does deny it's "real."

Admittedly, sex is a physical act, but the nature of that act is largely determined by the mind and the Red-Headed Kid and his buddies have tweaked that understanding to the level of great art. One result has been far less fluid exchange, which is the known vector for AIDS. Be that as it may, the virus is still killing everywhere and observation suggests that those who get fucked are the ones most likely to become ill. The Kid doesn't do that. We think that's why he avoids the virus.

But, Ross doesn't. He suffers beyond reason, and that's why this needs to be discussed in such stark detail. Watching his sweet friend die is one of the most terrible things our boy has ever endured, and he wants anyone evil enough to suggest that such a death is God's vengeance to experience every dreadful moment.

The Kid knows Ross for twelve years. He's one of the few people who rates a single telephone button, and during most of that time they get together once or twice a week for a drink or some play. The first time they meet, Ross is romping stark naked around a field in New Jersey. Red isn't dressed in much either, but these are *his* observations, so a detailed description of the two or three bits of leather he's wearing isn't germane. The occasion is the summer camp-out of one of the first social organizations formed in response to the fact that sex has become so dangerous.

The *New York Jacks* masturbate. Jerking off in large groups is their sole activity. It must be remembered that, at the time, no one knows *why* so many people are dying. At first, it's blamed on drugs. Poppers are accused, as is cocaine and heroin. Acid is in wide use, as is marijuana, hash, and, when it can be obtained, peyote. But, these things have been around for a long time and they've never been associated with anything like this before.

Whatever the cause, a plague is spreading and the *Jacks* have responded by adopting social masturbation as a path to sexual release. Mutual masturbation is all that's allowed and the rules are rigidly enforced. At their meetings in Manhattan, fifty to eighty horny men congregate every Monday night—mostly naked and always hard—to jerk themselves silly while looking at, performing for, and enabling one other; at times, reaching erotic heights that most men experience only in fantasy.

I'd like to point out to anyone who might be horrified by this that masturbation is *safe* sex. Dressing up and strutting

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around is ubiquitous on *Halloween* and *Mardi Gras* and at every Friday night football game. The fact that nudity and exhibition have been added to this mix is as human as eating or sleeping. None of us invented anything.

That aside, Ross and the Kid's friendship quickly develops beyond the confines of recreational sex. Among other things, Ross was once a congressional aide. I forget who he aided, which must be a great relief to whomever it was. The point being that Ross is more than familiar with the nation's capitol. On one occasion, he drives the Kid and some of the droogs down there to a big rally meant to force Ronald Reagan into noticing that American taxpayers are dying of AIDS. While there, thanks to Ross' insider's status, they are treated to a Washington tourists seldom see. They meet politicians and bureaucrats and lobbyists; see the actual *Constitution*, weep helplessly in front of the *Vietnam Memorial*, and shake their fists at the Supreme Court, which has recently done something unforgivable. I forget what.

Over the years, Ross and the Kid share many campfires. They smoke a lot of cigars, interestingly enough, since Red doesn't smoke at all and Ross smokes only sparingly, and they drink way too much tequila straight out of the bottle. During all this, Ross' quiet sense of humor is a continuing joy. He's a fine friend.

Their last camp-out is in Connecticut. The first part of the trip is somewhat vague, because the trail they take is familiar and easy. The only difference between this trip and the others is what happens to the forest between walking in and walking out.

It's autumn, a time when the trees turn almost overnight. When they leave the woods after four days of camping and head west to catch their ride back to the City, they walk into a flood of gold; every rock, every tree, every surface painted with freshly-turned gold leaf. The air is almost solid with sheets of

amber floating through the afternoon sunlight. The trail, where it winds down the mountain, is ankle deep in fluttering yellow. It is a stunning day, and it could have been such a fine memory if it hadn't been for what happened just a few days later.

It's a Friday in 1985, a cold, rainy day in September. On this dark afternoon, the Kid is stunned to learn that he has lost two of his best friends. Even worse, although he doesn't know it right away, he has also lost Ross. On this sad day, all three are told that they're HIV positive. At the time, this is a death sentence. As it happens, the first two will live into the twenty-first century. Not so, Ross.

It takes a while for Red to understand that his friends are gone, though he does realize this before he learns about Ross. All too soon he sees what happens when a good friend is faced with death. He doesn't have to die, or even disappear. Once he *thinks* he's going to die, the damage is done. People are dropping dead everywhere, so it's not much of a stretch. "Someday" is gone. The future is here. Without warning, what mattered is meaningless, and any commonality there might have been has vanished.

This is what happens to the Red-Headed Kid. He has to watch helplessly as men he loves age overnight. He has no idea what to say or how to help or what to do. It's deeply painful, and that shames him more than anything because down deep he knows that nothing he has ever experienced can equal what is happening to his friends.

Ross never directly says "I'm HIV positive," not to Red, anyway. A year or so later, when this is over, the Kid learns that Ross is hesitant to confide in him because of the way he reacts to the news about his other friends. Typically, he doesn't want to add to Red's distress. But, I have to admit, after all this time it's hard to remember *how* the Kid reacts. He remembers hiding his shock. He remembers giving advice. He remembers saying

“now, now,” and “there, there,” and all the other useless bullshit people spout when faced with things utterly beyond their control . . . and he remembers Ross’ unending consideration.

God! How can he fail to know? How can he be so obtuse? Is it that the panic engendered by the inexorable slipping away of his other two friends simply inures him to Ross’ condition? To this day he doesn’t know. He remembers he makes every effort to hide his reaction from the others. To them, he is concerned, worried, as helpful as possible considering that he has absolutely no help to give. But, to Ross, because he’s unaware of his buddy’s diagnosis, he laments and whines and moans at his helplessness, at the stupidity of his friends for becoming infected in the first place, at the iniquity of a God who could allow such a thing. In other words, he thoughtlessly carries on as if everything that’s happening is about him.

Through it all, Ross is calm, loving, and helpful. He never gives the slightest indication that he’s infected, and so it goes for about four months.

In December, Ross marries a lovely woman, a grocery store heiress from Connecticut. This is a real kick in the butt. I mean, who knew? Bisexuality never comes up around the campfire. Red knows many bisexuals, of course. A lot more people fall into this category than is generally supposed. They don’t stand out very often because it’s way easier for them to pass and why destroy yourself if you don’t have to? It *is* possible that Ross is bisexual. In the Kid’s experience, however, that’s not the case. Whether he’s lucky enough to be turned on by women never comes up. We hope he is. My God, he marries one. But, we don’t know. The only reason it comes up now is because I want to mention the wedding.

It’s a stunning, black-tie affair, held in the penthouse of the *Rihga Royal Hotel* in mid-Manhattan. The Red-Headed Kid is one of many guests; the men wearing black-tie, the women a

collection of shimmering gowns. We have to content ourselves with that. Contrary to general opinion, neither the Kid nor his friends are interested in women's fashions, so nothing he can add would be illuminating. Suffice to say that he remembers the women as beautiful and the men as handsome—formally dressed in black, as men have dressed for well over a century.

Ross' father-in-law does his daughter proud. There is a sit-down dinner for forty-five, with a full orchestra for dancing and a view of Manhattan that illustrates quite clearly why the people who live there think they live at the center of the universe. From the fifty-fourth floor on fifty-second street, the millions of lights spreading like a glittering sea in every direction merge into an almost palpable glow that reaches into the clouds like a living thing. It pulsates and flows across the horizon, drawing the eye over the curvature of the earth until it blends imperceptibly into the Milky Way. It makes us feel far more important that we are, which is, perhaps, the reason we find it so appealing.

It is an evening of beauty and joy. The Kid has a terrific time. He eats too much, then surpasses himself dancing with all those beautiful ladies; some as young as six, some as old as eighty-five, reflecting all the while that it's much more fun to dance with women than it is to dance with men. In all honesty, our hero has to observe that women just follow better. It's a fact.

Two month later, Ross learns he has AIDS.

How to begin. First, it must be noted that being HIV positive and having AIDS is not the same thing. *Human Immunodeficiency Virus* weakens the body so that other vicious agents can attack the victim's system. A person who is HIV positive can live for years without coming down with what is often referred to as "full-blown AIDS." At any rate, they can today. That doesn't happen nearly as often in the eighties, although his other two friends seem to benefit in some way from whatever mutation it is that makes HIV a trifle less virulent than it has been.

It's the other things that kill. In Ross' case, whatever dreadful agent it is first appears as a tiny brain lesion. The Kid can't remember what it's called. No reason to burden Ross' story with another long word. It kills him, so does the name really matter. AIDS happens when the body can no longer defend itself. The tiniest pimple explodes into a cancerous web that turns the legs into petrified wood, and nothing can be done.

The first indication that Ross has AIDS comes when he phones one night to rearrange a play date. He says he's not feeling well and can we meet at his place. I can still hear the the Red-Headed Kid's response. In retrospect, the shame is almost unbearable. He says it's much too far to the upper east side and that he'd rather not and can't Ross just come down to Chelsea like he's supposed to. Ross agrees, good-naturedly as always, and arrives forty-five minutes later. They do what they do. They sit down for a beer . . . and Ross says he's sick.

No dialogue here. A dialogue can't do it justice. Directly put, Ross says he "stumbles" one day on the way to an appointment. He worries about it, goes in for a check-up, and finds out he has a brain lesion.

I think it's shock that makes me want to be funny here. Otherwise, I can't explain the impulse. Suddenly, I'm tired and the world is so remote. Ross still doesn't use the word "AIDS." Indeed, he never does. But, brain lesions are not associated with colds and Ross is barely forty. What else can it be? The truth roars through the Kid's head as he gulps and swallows and desperately tries to rationalize. He denies the implication. He tries to associate this deadly symptom with something less lethal. Maybe it *is* a cold. Can it be a cold? Please say it's a cold.

"It might be a cold," Ross laughs through his lie . . . but, of course, that's what he *wants* to think, so it's not exactly a lie. "We have to do some more tests," he adds hopefully, and that's the only coherent thing the Kid remembers, other than how guilty

he feels when Ross leaves. But, as Red keeps reminding me, it's not *about* him, is it?

Ross remains immortal for another three weeks. The Kid's daily calls elicit no more useful information. The tests are inconclusive, other than confirming his friend's brain lesion, which means more tests and more guessing and hoping. Then, one day, Ross tells the Kid he's having trouble walking and that's that. Pretense is no longer possible. Without doubt, it's AIDS. From then on, there is no hope at all.

Red visits Ross on the upper east side. He lives with his wife on East 70th Street. His father-in-law's generosity has been extended to include a ground-floor apartment in one of the most expensive neighborhoods in New York City; two bedrooms, a full kitchen, a living room, a dining room, walk-in closets, two baths and a large, fenced-in backyard. It is a long way from Chelsea, much farther than most non-New Yorkers are able to comprehend, but Red manages to get up there about twice a week, in hindsight, not nearly as often as he should have done.

Each time he visits, Ross is worse. It seems as if something new is gone every time they meet ... and it happens so quickly. At first, they sit in the garden and drink scotch. They laugh and badmouth the Republicans, wondering how so many people can fail to notice Ronald Reagan sleeping through his cabinet meetings. It's on TV, after all.

Then, one day, Ross can't make it to the garden. He's set up in the second bedroom and still nothing much appears to be wrong. He looks comfortable, lying back on the pillows. They laugh, drink, discuss politics again. The Kid thinks they do, anyway. It's hard to remember after a quarter of a century, but they always discuss politics, so it's a good guess.

The next time they meet, Ross has an attendant, a young man who helps him to the bathroom as Red stupidly tries to



think of something to say. The next time, Ross can't turn over without help and there are no drinks. The time after that, he can't finish his sentences. That's when Red first reads to him from the *New York Times*. Ross can no longer lift the paper and it seems appropriate.

The *Times* doesn't like Ronald Reagan either, and reading aloud helps to fill the terrible silence as Ross gradually loses his ability to speak. This seems to go on forever, but it doesn't. It's not more than two weeks later that Ross checks into Roosevelt Hospital. It's the last time he ever sees the sun. It's there, in a white, sterile room, that he spends the rest of his life.

Roosevelt Hospital looks like a fortress, a looming edifice at the top of a mountain on Tenth Avenue. The facade stretches upward like a Gothic cathedral, a citadel of intimidation. The first time the Kid visits, he's transported. Manhattan fades away. The doors whisper shut and he is on a broad *Dalimian Plain* where the lines converge and vanish at a tiny reception desk opposite the entrance—a minuscule lump of darkness in an ocean of white. It's changed since then. Perhaps in an effort to make it more human, three gazebo-like structures have been built inside the entrance. When Ross is there, however, it doesn't even seem to be part of the City. There is no crowding, no noise, none of the swirling activity or barely controlled hysteria that occupies every inch of other public buildings. It is quiet, anti-septic, and private; a fine medical facility. No wonder it's the place Ross has chosen to die.

When home care is no longer feasible, Ross' brother, Will, comes from Texas to nurse him. During the ensuing months, he lives in his brother's hospital room, leaving it only sporadically. A couple times a week, Red spells him so he can go outside or see a movie. Other than that, he attends to his brother's personal needs, and one can only imagine how hard a row that is to hoe.

Even before he checks in, Ross is helpless. Already, he can't walk or talk or turn over or wipe his butt. He can still blink, but that goes very soon. His room is on the seventh floor; a single room, no windows, walls painted the same startling white as every other surface the Kid sees there. In memory, it's very large. Or, maybe, it just seems large because Ross is shrinking. When we walk out of the woods on that beautiful day in Connecticut, he weighs about 185-pounds. By the time he's admitted to Roosevelt Hospital he's down to a hundred and ten, and his weight keeps dropping day after day after day. Yet, Ross is still in there somewhere. His limbs are curling into knots, but his eyes are bright and he seems to respond when the Kid reads him some particularly stupid item from the *Times* editorial page.

This rest of this moment is incredibly hard. Ross suffers one horror after another and there's not an iota of hope to lighten his story. Afterwards, the Red-Headed Kid truly believes that nothing he will ever experience can equal the unremitting pain he sees in his sweet friend's tears. So, it is a life-altering shock when twenty years after the fact he undergoes an epiphany that slaps him in the face with the truth.

A few years into the twenty-first century, staph pneumonia makes Red helpless. He can move, blink, and swallow, but he can't walk. It's a terrible time during which the Kid learns that it's not death we need to fear, it's losing the everyday abilities we take for granted. But, he does know he'll recover, and that keeps him going for the four or five weeks during which he can do nothing but watch the second-hand on the clock tick, tick, tick from one black dot to the next.

It's not until sometime later, when the Kid is healthy and looking back on his experience, that it hits him. He's thinking about the horror of being helpless, and suddenly, without conscious thought, he sees Ross, his moist, unblinking eyes

staring out from the husk of his shriveled body. Just five weeks of being helpless sends the Kid into unremitting despair. Ross lays there, paralyzed, for *seven months*, day after day, hour after hour, during every second of which he knows that his pain is never going to end and that all he can do is watch the clock tick, tick, tick away the remaining seconds of his life.

For a moment, I can't breathe. Such an thing would drive me mad, and I can't be entirely sure Ross *isn't* mad before the end. God, I hope he is. If there is anything at all to that mercy we're supposed to believe in, he *is* mad, his mind gone, closed around warm, technicolor dreams of love and joy and hope.

The Kid speaks at the memorial service. Over four hundred of Ross' friends are there. Here, more or less, is what he says.

"Ross had a sound business sense, which made him an exception among the many musicians and actors in my life. He also had common sense, which is lucky, because he was always ready to give advice whether you wanted it or not. He was also ready to back up his friendship with real actions, to lend a hand, whether it was picking up a television set or building a bookcase. Most of all, Ross was a friend.

"I loved him and already miss him terribly. I've missed him for months now, ever since the cruel disease that killed him robbed him of his ability to move and speak. I feel lucky to have known him, and I think you'll all agree that his dying so young has created a void in our lives that will take a long, long time to heal."

That's what the Kid says. Here's what he wants to say—it's why he's enraged—and to this very minute he regrets that he didn't have the balls to say it.

"Fucking hypocrites. Damn you all, crying and sniveling and whining. Frauds. Despicable cowards. You are utterly beneath contempt. Where the hell were you when Ross was

dying? Fuck your reasons. Where were you? No matter how terrible something is, a man stands up and does what's right. We have responsibilities, as human beings if not as friends. Where were your hearts? Where was your compassion? God in heaven, where was your humanity?"

On the day Ross died, he weighed eighty-seven pounds. According to his brother Will, not a single soul, other than the Red-Headed Kid, had been to see him for over three months.

Shame. Shame. Shame. ■