

Loretta Neal

## Where did all the red ribbons go?

A turquoise Honda Civic pulls behind a thrift store and parks near a metal bin with “Donations” stenciled on its lid in white paint. The driver of the car gets out and pulls four brown paper bags from the trunk, and walks them two by two to the metal bin. He opens the lid and sees its already packed with other bundles of clothes, mostly men’s. He closes the bin and leaves the bags in front and drives off.

As patrons enter the thrift store, the stale smell of mothballs and dust mix with the voice of Annie Lennox, her song coming from the speakers in the ceiling. The racks of men’s clothes are laden with designer labels. Armani suits. DKNY cashmere sweaters. Hugo Boss jeans. Doc Marten boots.

A thin man pulls a t-shirt from a rack. It is a spoof of a RAID bug killer ad and reads, “AIDS, kills faggots dead.” He rolls his eyes, shakes his head and returns the shirt to the rack. He moves two aisles down and finds a Calvin Klein jacket and tries it on. The original price tag is still attached. \$69.99. It fits him perfectly.

The cashier rings him up.

“That will be \$5.25 with tax, please.”

At a party that weekend Patrick, a handsome young man with dimples that could melt concrete, compliments the man. “Hey, nice jacket. Where’d you get it?”

“Oh,” the man nods casually, “DMC.”

It is 1991. AIDS is a rampant public health crisis. Gay men are dying everywhere, filling thrift stores with their high-end wardrobes, a phenomenon referred to as “DMC” for short; Dead Man’s Clothes.

Patrick<sup>1</sup> was nineteen then, fresh out of Catholic high school where the priests held frank sex education talks and gave out condoms. The school understood that they were in the midst of an epidemic and preferred their students stay alive rather than force an irrelevant abstinence only curriculum.

During weekly confession in the cold damp church, Father Fete fished for details after Patrick admitted to swearing and having dirty thoughts, the standard sins of any teenage boy.

Father Fete asked about the dirty thoughts from behind the confessional lattice and Patrick would recite a generic fantasy about him and some girl rather than admitting to gay fantasies. Then the Priest would ask if the dirty thoughts led to masturbation to which Patrick would begrudge a “Yes.” Along with five Hail Marys and two Our Fathers assigned for penance, the Priest would slide a few condoms across the confessional saying, “Use these if it’s ever not masturbation.”

Despite all the education Patrick received, and the safe sex practices he employed, he tested positive for HIV in 1992.

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<sup>1</sup> This name is fictionalized in accordance with my source’s desire to remain anonymous.

At that time, testing positive for HIV was a death sentence. It meant one thing; you were going to die in ten years, period. Eight of those could be expected to be relatively healthy; the last two would be grim, dying slowly from some opportune illness, the flesh of your body wasting away revealing the striations of the tendons on your face and limbs. Histoplasmosis, which is contracted from being around pigeon shit was a common killer, not because the fungus in the bird's droppings is particularly deadly, but because the compromised immune systems of those with HIV/AIDS couldn't fight it off.

A few months after his test came back positive, Patrick had a new boyfriend. When Patrick told him of his HIV status, his boyfriend said, "I hope I'm strong enough," to which Patrick asked, "For what?"

"For your funeral."

the reality TV show *The Real World*, San Francisco where Pedro Zamora, a gay man living with AIDS, openly discussed his illness on the show. His efforts as an AIDS educator and TV personality are credited with humanizing the epidemic. He died of AIDS in 1994 at the age of twenty-two.

Phil Donahue and Oprah both interviewed teenager Ryan White on their shows, bringing AIDS much needed national attention. Ryan, a hemophiliac, contracted HIV from a contaminated blood transfusion and was expelled from middle school for his infection. He became the sympathetic poster child for AIDS before dying from complications with the disease in 1990 at age eighteen.

It was common then for those facing the end of their life to actively plan their memorials, making a mix tape to play at their ceremony. "Aint No Mountain High Enough," and "Someday We'll Be Together" by Diana Ross were common

selections. Often the family would insist on a traditional funeral, regardless of the wishes of the departed and his partner. Partners could be excluded from family events, not regarded as real family members. In the eyes of the law, they had no rights compared to those of married straight people.

For some in the early stages of the disease, there was no future. It made sense to take drugs, have orgies with other HIV positive men, run up immense debt, cash in your life savings and enjoy life while you still could.

The men with the “Party hard. Die early. Leave a pretty corpse,” mentality would throw massive circuit parties and dance until 5am high on Methamphetamine. Having unprotected sex right there on the dance floor was not unheard of because hey, what did you have to lose? When there is a time limit on your life, when you can see that the end is near, there’s no sense in playing it safe any more. Those “living with,” as they were termed, had a God-like awareness of exactly when they would be taken from the Earth.

For one party, the televangelist Tammy Faye Bakker was hired to stand out front of the venue, welcoming the attendees. Her garish blue eye shadow sparkled in the streetlights and seemed less out of place among the Trannys and Drag Queens. With a big smile on her face she said, “Welcome, and God Bless you.”

Patrick attended one, and only one, of these parties. A boxing ring, elevated ten feet in the air, acted as a dance floor, sagging under the weight of crowd. Sipping his beer, Patrick looked over to see a man fall over the side of the ring and land on the floor, motionless, as a pool of blood spread from his head. People approached the body but then turned away in horror.

Patrick took a path in the opposite direction of those intent on leaving a pretty corpse. He found support and community in healing retreats organized by Catholic nuns and priests.

Twice a year he and other “queeny gay guys” living with HIV would stay the weekend in a nunnery, their meals taken cafeteria style, plastic trays topped with camp food: mashed potatoes, dry turkey, fruit cocktail, orange drink.

Patrick attributes his health and survival to the faith and hope cultivated at the retreats, even if it was just the placebo effect. The retreat would always close with the spiritual practice of laying of hands. Participants formed an inner and outer circle. Those in the outer circle would lay hands on the ones in the middle, rotating down the line, transforming something ordinary into something deeply holy when healing intent was added to the stranger’s touch.

Once everyone had a turn, the two sets would switch so each person had a chance to both lay hands upon others and to have hands laid upon them. Those in wheel chairs took their turns in place and no matter how much time it took, everyone got their turn.

The retreat closed with the Carole King song “Now and Forever” written for the movie A League of Their Own, the lyrics of which brought forward any feelings that had been held back during the retreat and everyone just “fucking died” crying as the lyrics rolled through.

We had a moment, just one moment  
That will last beyond a dream, beyond a lifetime  
We are the lucky ones  
Some people never get to do all we got to do  
Now and forever, I will always think of you

Didn't we come together, didn't we live together

Didn't we cry together  
Didn't we play together, didn't we love together  
And together we lit up the world

Patrick was always the youngest one at these events. People would look at him and shake their head in sorrow saying, “Oh my God, you’re so young.” To them Patrick was one of the Innocents who hadn’t been apart of the wild sex and drugs of the 1970s and 1980s and so didn’t deserve to get the virus.

Deserved or not Patrick was HIV positive and facing death, just like everyone else.

But a funny thing happened during the AIDS epidemic. Because so many people were dying, pharmaceutical companies were able to run through drug trials at an accelerated pace. And the drugs got better and better. And people stopped dying.

For those who took the “Party hard. Die Early. Leave a pretty corpse,” attitude and ran up massive credit card debt, this posed major problems.

Today, Patrick’s been living with the disease for nineteen years. His white blood cells are just now dipping low enough to warrant taking drugs. The drugs have gotten so good at targeting HIV’s ability to replicate itself that sometimes Patrick’s blood work comes back as if he isn’t infected at all.

In 2006, he ran into a guy he knew from the healing retreats. They went through a list of common friends, checking to see who was still around and who had past. They were all dead and buried.

Bewildered, they looked at each other and said, “Can you believe we’re still alive?”

Since fewer people are dying from AIDS, there is less fervor around safe sex, education and support for those living with the disease, an unfortunate side effect of effective medicine. The healing retreats which were pivotal in Patrick's journey are now only available for the extremely poor and sick. Patrick currently only has one friend with the disease as opposed to the community he had before. The younger generation thinks of HIV/AIDS like diabetes, like a disease you treat with medicine.

Americans on the whole have allowed the fatality of the AIDS epidemic to fade from the collective memory, red ribbons traded in for pink ones. Today, every store has at least an end cap with merchandise in the militant pink branding of breast cancer awareness. As Patrick puts it, "Fucking breast cancer took everything. No one will show up for an AIDS Walk but the city shuts down for Susan G. Komen."

HIV/AIDS infection rates are now on the rise because young people are coming of age in a time when safe sex practices aren't drilled into their heads. But they certainly know that breast exams are important.

But Patrick continues on, his fortieth birthday is around the corner. He doesn't plan on having a big party to celebrate the significance of surviving HIV for this long because his HIV positive status is still largely a secret. What he needs to plan is the next decade of his life, from now until age fifty, which he never thought he'd need to do.