

Sarah Schulman, in her novel *Empathy*, describes the following scene: "Last night I walked into a room where a quarter of the men have lesions on their faces, some had small lesions, peeking through thinning hairlines like a little kiss from god. Others have those big porous oozing ones. My black friends' lesions are black. ... they were walking around with lesions holding little cocktail glasses and flirting. Oh men, they can't admit to being frail, even when running back and forth between the flirt and their diarrhea ..."

No, I won't admit that I am frail. Simple survival, as a person living with AIDS, requires that I continually determine how much I will permit this virus to control me. I feel that I am in a constant battle with AIDS each day determining what I need to give into and what I will work to hold onto as part of my life. I hope that when the virus demands greater concession from me, I will be ready. But I will not give up more to this virus that is absolutely demanded. I will hold on to the "flirt," I will not concede the erotic. For me the erotic is life, not just a part of life. I won't abandon passion to death. Since I was a child I was taught to doubt the erotic, to abuse and devalue the sexual. Sex in the mass media is used to tease and seduce, but without ever satisfying - therefore promising more than it is prepared to deliver. I have rarely gotten away with that kind of behavior in any gay bar or bathhouse I know. It is clear that in America we use sex to sell commodities, to destroy public figures and to justify the abuse, domination and rape of women. Yet that is not the sex I know as a gay man. Much of what passes as AIDS prevention and education is based on America's anti sex attitudes. The message seems to be telling us to stop having sex and especially to stop having gay sex. I am told to 'settle down' and control my needs. I am told that sex = death. All of these messages are simply not true. Many states are attempting to pass laws making it a crime for someone who is HIV+ to have sex without full disclosure. There is no sound public health issue that requires that I deny my desires. Responsible and accurate AIDS prevention talks about the joy and wonder of safe, hot sex. I will not give up sex just because others are suffering from irrational fears of sex and AIDS. Many people say that we need to talk about our fears and I agree. But talking is not enough, what is needed is to move beyond the fear and regain our simple right to the full satisfaction of our desires. If you won't have sex with someone just because they have AIDS you are simply missing out on a potentially great experience. My message to you is simple: May your fear be a lasting burden to you.

To go on living a full life which includes sex, in this time of AIDS, is an act of resistance. I believe we resist because we simply will not give in. Many of us have already been tested as queers in a straight world and we have survived and thrived. We were forced to trust our own understanding of what is normal and natural. We were forced to learn that what America preaches about sex and sexuality was wrong. To survive as a gay man, as a gay man with AIDS, I must continually push the boundaries of this anti-sexual, anti-gay world. As I keep on pushing, I learn important lessons about how to survive in this world. Sex continually teaches me about the vast depth of human energy I have within myself and that I can receive and share with others. The erotic is a reminder that I am capable of feeling and that my feelings and needs are genuine and are to be respected. Many Americans just want me to die and claim that I deserve my fate. Others, with good intentions, wish that I remain

passive and play the good little warrior. Coming in touch with my passion I am less willing to accept notions of powerlessness, or self denial or self-hatred. I am less willing to let others define my journey.

Each time I bend over and let another man enter me, I am more than merely getting fucked, I am once again reminded that I am a living sensuous being forever feeling and capable of being touched by another. Each time another man kneels before me in expectation I know I am experiencing a simple and direct passionate communion. Through sex I am reminded of the joy and communion I can and do share with others. Thanks to sex, I have learned that seeking excitement and gaining gratification are significant in how I cope with my infection. I do not choose to live merely to get by. If anything, AIDS has heightened my desire for excitement and meaning in life. The lessons I learn from sex are the lessons I need to keep on fighting. A group of gay men in Hartford, many of whom have AIDS, ran a series of jack - off sex parties a few years ago. There was an admission charge to the parties because they were fund raiser for two local AIDS service organizations. Sex parties as AIDS fund raisers are an affirmation that as little as possible will be given over to this virus and certainly not the sexual.

I sometimes wonder why American culture devotes so much energy attempting to control the sex I have, why America's heterosexism seems so obsessed with controlling my body - our bodies. Sex among men and sex among women is a threat to America. Queer sex proclaims that no one has the right to tell others what is good or natural. Gay sex, lesbian sex, anything that proclaims the joy of sex, robs America of the power to control our lives, our very bodies. In opposition to American values, I have learned to accept and respect the joy of sex that is not intended for reproduction, is not sanctioned by marriage and is not defined by any government or any church. Gay sex continually reminds me of the variety of sexual expression I am capable of having. We are a community that knows and glorifies true sexual diversity. We are a community that appreciates vanilla, sado/masochism, oral/anal, bottom/top, bondage/domination, chaste/monogamy/promiscuity, man/boy, monogamy/single/serial monogamy. We are a community that demands that I decide how and when I will use my body. I learned the lesson of self definition and empowerment long before AIDS, when I had to decide which bar to enter and what color hankie to wear in which pocket. The power that I receive from my passion is not limited to the sexual, but shows me the power I can have over all aspects of my life and death.

I demand to keep on living and experience as much ecstasy as my body will allow. Through sex I have learned that once I recognize and act on my sexual desires in defiance of the sterility and shame that America demands of me, I will not accept any notion that I am unworthy of care, treatment, respect and dignity. The power that comes from acting on whatever my sexual desires may be, is the same power I use to continue my work at survival. I will not surrender the power of passion, because I will not surrender the power of life.

June, 1994

Lesions and Lust: It Happened to Me.

Jim Rann

Attraction is about a person and not a body. Isn't it odd what each of us are turned on by. There is that certain special something that each of us looks for in another, the strangeness of that unique characteristic which makes that one person attractive to another.

I walk into any room anytime and look around and decide who I am attracted to. For me it is not always blue eyed muscled blond that turns me on, and not always the dark mysterious type. Often it is the quirky guy, maybe bald, maybe not, glasses, facial hair, whatever. This is a story about one of those guys. It started with me noticing him in church. For across the pews I could tell that he matched one of my fantasy types. Dark eyes, glasses, facial hair. I called him sort of nerdy - cute. I wasn't quite sure, Italian or Jewish or Greek or maybe Spanish - French. Anyway after a few weeks we met at a Coalition meeting, where he brought his then beau. I was still interested. He turned out to be ~~Swedish - Irish~~ Italian - German. I saw that he had Karposi,

He soon broke up with the boyfriend. And as we got more friendly I could see that he was insecure about his appearance. Make - up covering the lesions on his face. He always wear long sleeved turtle necks, and long pants even in the summer. These signals that he put out, did not turn me off, I found him sexy. Lesions weren't as important as the look in his eyes, his cute butt, good taste, sense of style, and a way of dealing with AIDS that I could agree with. Finally it happen, we had a date.

He had just gotten a new apartment. He asked me over to take a look and see it. We arrive there late, it was dark, he kept the lights out and took me into his new boudoir. We did it in the dark, but his lesions were still there. I could feel them, as they covered most of his body. In the dim lighting I could still see them, they didn't disturb me. I found him attractive and passionate. Clearly he too was having a good time, and was happy to see that I wanted to do it again.

At first he still wanted the dark and kept his turtle neck on. He allowed me to lift it up, as his body from nipples to groin did not have many lesions. And his nipples were sex sensual, and were an important part of our sex scene. When he was on his stomach, I discovered that his lesions made an attractive pattern on his back.

Things went smoothly for a few weeks. Sex on spontaneous occasions, every couple of days. We discussed things like what was safe between two infected guys, whether or not we believed in re-infection, if there really are different strains of the virus, and if these questions really mattered to us at this stage of our lives.

I was getting serious, wanting this to develop into a possible committed relationship, but the magic wasn't there with my lesioned friend. We became committed pals who know alot about each other, having shared these intimate passions. The sex didn't stop completely, one summer night a few months later, he surprised me on the beach with a brief encounter of the hot kind.

He is gone now, he passed away the end of last summer having done his best to live a full life. He lived many years with AIDS, the kind of AIDS that people with KS have, where you are noticed for having the mark on you. Not everyone is willing to go beyond them and those people lose. **People always lose when they don't look at the person within.** I miss him as friend, boy friend, activist, and I miss those sparks of passion we felt between us. I still have AIDS, and I'm still looking for that passion with some quirky guy that sends those sparks down my spine. *I won't ever stop looking.*