

Karen's story

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John wasn't particularly the type I usually fell for. I liked the tall, lanky, long-haired, pale-skinned brooding type. His red hair, bright chubby cheeks and khakis, often paired with plaid shirts and Birkenstocks, tended to give him the appearance of a lumberjack more than aspiring lawyer.

He was funny. He made people laugh out loud and he made people think. I loved to hear him talk of politics and philosophy; weaving Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle into some sort of poetry.

In the fall of 1992 we were both at the University of Toronto. I was studying international development at Scarborough Campus. He was studying politics at St. Michael's College. A mutual friend told me John was giving a talk at her church one Sunday morning. He was going to talk about AIDS.

I didn't admit I was going because I thought he was cute or funny; I was going because it was a topic important to a university student studying international development. I am not sure what I thought I was going to hear that morning, but I wasn't ready for what he said.

"I was eighteen, president of my high school and had my first real girlfriend." He looked into the distance, like this was a story he had told too many times. "The day the doctor called was a snow day, so I was home from school. But he didn't talk to me, he talked to my mother. It was my mother who told me that the test was positive. We didn't even really know what it meant at the time, but we knew it wasn't good."

I kept waiting for him to say it was all a mistake. I kept waiting for him to say that they did the test again. He never said it was a mistake.

I gave John my phone number after the talk – after all I still thought he was cute, and funny, and smart. But I never really expected him to call. I figured I would stop thinking about him in a few days and that would be that: life would go on. Still, even with midterms coming up and assignments due, I found myself at the library, picking up books on HIV. Even before he called, I made a decision, like we would decide again and again and again, that it didn't matter.

Three days later he called, and we had our first date.

I later found out that he couldn't stop thinking about me. But as I was thinking about life and death issues, he was more concerned about whether it would be appropriate to ask me to his fall formal and whether I would have anything to wear. For him, he had already been living with HIV for almost ten years. Asking me out was about whether I was interesting, looked good, felt good. It was more about the things that a boy looks for in a girl.

Eight months later we were married.

I thought HIV would be all consuming, but living gets in the way. You never forget that it is there, but in the end it isn't the disease which defines our life together, but who we are and how we relate to one another. It is about being bored and lazy together, it's about living up to responsibilities and getting jobs done. It's washing dishes, doing laundry, cleaning bathrooms, paying bills, raising sheep, caring for parents, working when you'd rather play; suddenly discovering that years have passed.