

## New York: 1986-9

*Lori Horvitz*

---

Lisa calls from San Francisco to tell me that Harry, her ex-boyfriend, tested positive for AIDS. “What if I have it too?” she asks.

I try to comfort her. I tell her that she probably doesn’t have it, that it’s been two years since she’s been with Harry. But I worry about her. Out my sixth floor East Village tenement window, I gaze at the Twin Towers off in the distance, the white church steeples in the forefront. I tell her about Pete, a typesetter I had worked with who recently died of AIDS. “But he shot up all the time. No one had a clue. We just thought he was a drunk.”

“Who would have thought sex could be so deadly?” Lisa asks.

Back in college, I had admired Lisa’s ability to attract and sleep with any man she wanted, when, for her, sex appeared to be a casual event, when she said variety is the spice of life, that’s why she slept with so many men. And all the while, I was her scared, uptight sidekick, when I wanted to learn how from her, when the worst consequence of her actions was a minor case of crabs.

Now she says she’ll get her test results in two days. I wish her luck and hang up the phone. And I meditate about a time when I held fast to Lisa’s “variety is the spice of life” motto, when, at twenty-four, I was fearless, a rock star, too good for monogamy, too cool for commitment. I had two boyfriends and a girlfriend and another girlfriend in England who was planning to visit soon, a self-proclaimed anarchist who said, “Imagine sleeping with the same person every night for the rest of your life. How bloody boring.”

A time when heroin and crack dealers hung out in front of my East Village apartment, an area where art galleries popped up on every corner, an area bought up by real-estate moguls who jacked up rents so only wealthy foreigners and stockbrokers could afford to live there, a time when Donald Trump let prostitutes and drug dealers live rent-free in his buildings under the guise of helping the homeless, when all the while he was trying to scare off tenants who lived in affordable apartments. A time when my boyfriend Michael, who I’d

been with since I was nineteen, on and off but mostly on, agreed to open up our relationship, to date other people. So I called a handsome-in-that-Hugh-Grant-kind-of-way Brit I had met at Bowl-Mor Lanes on University Place in the heart of Greenwich Village, where every Saturday night a group of friends bowled to the sounds of Motown and rock ‘n’ roll. The Brit was just out of a relationship with a heroin addict, had his own carpentry business, his own studio apartment, and his own vehicle, a retired postal jeep. Besides that, he had gone to boarding school with Prince Andrew in Scotland and for sure, this would be the closest to royalty I would ever come.

I asked the Brit over for dinner and he accepted. I prepared chicken, seared and sautéed in tomato sauce, uncorked a bottle of Romanian wine, took note of his big white teeth and pale blue eyes and made sure to keep refilling our cups. We played footsie and talked and laughed and I thought, thank god for alcohol, which gave me the confidence to lead the Brit to my futon on the floor, where we fumbled and groped and it was passionate and gentle and tender and I wasn’t worried about catching deadly diseases from him via his ex-girlfriend the junkie.

After all, bathhouses for gay men were still profitable businesses and HIV was not yet part of our vocabulary, so why worry about death when we could dance to the techno-sounds of Frankie Goes to Hollywood, The Human League, and Jimmy Sommerville’s cover of Donna Summer’s “I Feel Love”?

In the morning, the Brit and I ate breakfast at the Kiev, a Ukrainian diner owned by Indians who employed buxom blonde Polish waitresses, waitresses who served kielbasa and eggs and blintzes, waitresses who all the artsy guys in the East Village were in love with.

The Brit laughed at my jokes, called often and bought me presents from street vendors on Astor Place, including a black and yellow polka-dotted vest, a book on medieval philosophy and an old Brownie camera. It was common knowledge that most of the merchandise sold on the street had been stolen from cars and apart-

ments, or found in the trash, and one day, when I saw a vendor selling a vacuum cleaner and freshly cut slabs of red meat on the sidewalk, I tried not to think too hard about where the meat came from.

The Brit didn't know about Michael, but Michael knew about the Brit, and when he met the Brit through a mutual friend, he later commented about how I was going out with fancy people, people too fancy for the likes of him. Michael, whose idea of fun was getting drunk and throwing rocks at sea gulls, reading existential literature and eating corned beef hash at the local diner, grew up in a working class family in Upstate New York, far from European princes and kings and queens and castles.

Two months into my royal romance, the Brit drove me to midtown, to my job at the Irish-American newspaper across from the Empire State Building, and on our way, at a stoplight, an old woman wearing a Glad Bag approached the jeep and asked the Brit for money. Instead of ignoring her, or saying sorry not today, the Brit jerked his car up and back and told her to fuck off.

Although he was still sweet to me and bought as many gin and tonics as I could swig down at the tiny bar we frequented, Downtown Beirut, I started to lose interest in the Brit. The only thing that really excited him was his catalogue of circular saws and electric sanders, unlike Michael, who raged about the CIA's involvement in Central America, who spit at stretch limousines, and when he was in a bad mood, tromped up and down Avenue D, location of abandoned buildings, low-income housing projects and swarms of junkies on every corner.

While cleaning his marijuana pipe, I told Michael I was getting bored with the Brit, but I didn't tell him about Margaret, blonde-haired, blue-eyed Irish-Catholic Margaret, whom I'd been flirting with at work, where we'd cut out shamrocks and leprechauns and place them atop Irish pub ads, where together we'd roll our eyes when Pete, the typesetter who always reeked of Bourbon, commented on how nice our asses looked. I wasn't sure it was flirting, but I liked the tension, the way she looked at me for a second or two too long, the way she rested her hand on my shoulder, the way she made me nervous, in a good way. She told me I was her role model, her hero, for having two cute boyfriends, for traveling alone in Europe, for inspiring her to plan her own European adventure.

A week later, Margaret and I drank White Russians and danced to Aretha Franklin's "Who's Zoomin' Who?" in my apartment and right before the song ended, she fell on top of me and we kissed and held each other and she asked if I had ever done this before.

Margaret and I spent the entire next day holding hands and kissing, right up until the sun went down, when I walked her to the subway and hugged her goodbye. Then I met the Brit, who escorted me to an East Village art opening, where artsy people in black outfits stood outside and drank champagne while Dominican and Puerto Rican kids rode their banana-seat bicycles in circles and screamed for their abuelas.

Saturday, I met my ex-roommate Debby for iced cappuccino and miniature canolis at Veniero's, where we talked about men, where I told her about the Brit, and even though she never met him, she was happy for me, as she wasn't too fond of Michael, especially after Michael had punched a hole in her bedroom door when I beat him at a game of chess. An opera singer who supported herself by cutting keys at a locksmith shop, Debby was living with her clean-cut boyfriend who we called "Pointy" because of his pointy features, a Midwestern boy who worked at a fruit stand and snorted heroin.

When I saw Margaret next, at work, she told the office about the amazing date she had gone on the night before, a date with a law student, Brad, whom she had so much in common with that it was "uncanny," a word she kept repeating over and over, uncanny this and uncanny that, and all the while I stared into the light box in front of me, slowly cutting out leprechauns and shamrocks and harps with an X-acto knife.

Finally Margaret flew to Amsterdam and left me with her clean-cut frat-boy buddies to hang out with, but I preferred to spend time with Michael, who, one night, told me that Bill Kane overdosed on heroin. Bill, whom I had a brief fling with the year before, a filmmaker guy I had gone to college with, a guy my age with a life ahead of him, dead and gone. Bill, who, I later learned, shot up all the time and could have killed me too.

Surrounded by Kenny Scharf and Keith Haring paintings, the Brit and I waited for watered-down free drinks in exchange for our VIP passes at the Palladium, where I ran into a friend from college, a painter named Mio, who had recently returned from Europe and

bragged about the thousands of dollars he and his new boyfriend had spent in only two weeks time. When I introduced him to the Brit, Mio looked him up and down and nodded in approval, and as soon as Mio found out that the Brit was a carpenter, he hired him to do carpentry work at the art gallery he managed. So the Brit and Mio became friendly, perhaps too friendly, and two weeks later, Mio told me that the Brit got wasted and stayed over his house. "And by the way," Mio said, "the Brit's got a huge dick."

The anarchist woman from London came to visit and spent most of her five days in New York ignoring me and hanging out with anarchist and communist contacts who lived on Grand Street by the East River.

When I ran into the Brit at the Pyramid Club, he hugged me, bought me a drink, and introduced me to his new girlfriend, a petite blonde-bobbed French girl who made hats. I introduced him to Debby, the opera singer, who had just moved into a one-room studio sublet on MacDougal Street because she had just broken up with her junkie boyfriend, Pointy.

One night I cooked dinner for Debby and then we walked along the Hudson River, strolled down Christopher Street in the West Village, and together we found women's bars, where, as soon as I walked in, I giggled nervously and calm my nerves by swigging one drink after the next. We met two or three times a week and walked and talked and swigged drinks, and one night at a women's bar on Sheraton Square, when we were watching women slow dancing, I asked Debby if she saw any cute women, and in response Debby stared at me and said, "Yeah . . . you."

I smiled and we left the bar and walked toward her apartment, where we jumped around to Billy Idol's "Dancing with Myself" and ended up holding each other all night. Debby still flirted with men, and I still slept with Michael who had no idea about Debby, but Debby and I talked every day and continued to spend nights together.

Six months later, Mio and his boyfriend hastily left on a night flight to San Francisco. It turned out that they'd been dealing cocaine and paid a thug to beat up a young Mafioso who owed them money. Now, the Mafia men wanted to kill with a vengeance.

Margaret had come back from Europe and invited me to a party where she introduced me to her new boyfriend, a painter from Poland.

After Debby threatened to date an actor boy, I

called it quits with Michael and made a go at monogamy with Debby, now that I wasn't sure about variety being the spice of life anymore.

Debby and I laughed a lot, improvised comedic skits, composed music, but something didn't feel right; I wasn't sure why, but all the while, I was in the closet about our relationship. Debby didn't understand why I was so secretive, but I told her I wasn't ready, that I didn't feel comfortable with the whole lesbian thing, not yet anyway.

Three years into the relationship, I agreed to go to therapy with Debby, but after two sessions, I sublet my apartment for a month and left for San Francisco, where Lisa created sculptures from neon lights and Jesus heads and wasn't yet worried about dying. Upon my return to New York, Debby broke up with me and started dating a magician, a man she met while bartending at The Village Idiot, the tiny bar that used to be Downtown Beirut. Because of the poor economy and exorbitant real estate costs, just about every gallery in the East Village had closed down. Mio, my painter-friend from college, died, not from a gunshot wound but from AIDS. And Lisa called to tell me about Harry, who just tested positive for AIDS.

Two days later, she found out she was HIV negative. She remained friends with Harry after they had broken up and often brought him bee pollen and spirulina, until ten years later, when Harry was too sick to take care of himself, when he flew home to Indiana where his parents took care of him, until he died in 2002, when his parents honored his request to be cremated but didn't know what to do with the ashes. They sent them to Lisa and to this day, Lisa's not sure what to do with them. "They're in a box in my closet," she told me.

But now it's 1989 and Debby just broke up with me and I am grieving and I don't even know if I like boys or girls and I find myself in the Cubbyhole, a lesbian bar on Hudson Street, dancing to R.E.M.'s "It's the End of the World as We Know It" with Paul, a tall, handsome, heterosexual man who lives around the corner from me. We exchange numbers and he calls the next day to invite me over for a chicken dinner.

The chicken is tender but my feelings for Paul aren't, not in a romantic sense, yet we become buddies and he is more than willing to accompany me to lesbian bars.

One night Paul and I walk home from Cave

Canem, a bar that was once a gay men's bathhouse but is now a trendy straight bar, except for Sundays when it's Girl's Night. And it's Sunday and I'm tipsy and Paul and I walk along First Avenue with Kiki, a tiny Japanese woman who speaks little English. I feel hungry and want a burger so we stroll into McDonald's and I get my burger and we sit down and I'm laughing with Paul and Kiki and then I start to choke and I can't breathe and I think, Jesus Christ I'm going to die right here in McDonald's and would anyone believe I haven't stepped into a McDonald's in years and Paul asks if I'm okay and I shake my head from side to side and time stands still and Paul moves over and prepares to do the Heimlich maneuver.

But I cough up salty onions and live. And I leave McDonald's and walk out into the brisk autumn night and pass an old black man tap-dancing to "Tea for Two." I take a deep breath, then hug Paul and Kiki and walk toward my apartment. I don't know it at the time, but I'm happy to be single, happy to be healthy, happy to watch leaves chase each other in circles until they pause, until the wind shifts, until the leaves disband and scatter in all directions.