

I haven't written in my journal for a few days, and as usual, it's because there's just been so much going on in my life that I couldn't focus long enough to sit down and put my thoughts into words, or wasn't in the right frame of mind that I thought I'd capture the true essence of the moment.

I went home on Friday for Conner's 3<sup>rd</sup> birthday party. It was everything I could do to get myself motivated to go, which isn't too odd for me. I usually just go with the flow when it comes to going home to West Virginia and coming back home. Even though I couldn't get motivated to pack my things, I was having a great surge of creative energy flowing through my body. I started thinking about Conner and what I would do for a gift. All of my credit cards were now at least a month past due, so I had no more credit to buy him anything. I needed every bit of money in my bank account to cover my bills, so I thought I'd write him a poem. For his 1<sup>st</sup> birthday, I made him a CD of dance music to listen to, because even at one, he was showing signs of loving music. I started thinking about the times that I spend with him, and even watched the video tape from the last time I was there in West Virginia. It wasn't long after I started tapping into that energy that the poem began to flow. I knew that I wanted to call the poem *The Next Best Thing*, because now that I'm HIV-positive, I've had to accept the fact that I will never genetically be a father or have a son of my own. The last part of the poem came before I had any of the rest. It took me about an hour to write, but after it was done, I knew it was just what I wanted to give him. It expressed what I wanted to say better than any card I could have found to buy for him, and at least this way, I hoped that my sister, Dawn, would read the poem to him when he was older and could understand it a little better. I hope that he keeps it forever, so that no matter where I am, he'll always be able to connect to his uncle Terry's spirit.

### **The Next Best Thing**

*I know this poem won't mean much  
To you at three years old  
But years from now I hope it's just  
What you need to be told.*

*It seems like only yesterday  
You came into my world  
Safe in my heart is where you'll stay  
All cozy warm and curled.*

*You bring so much joy to my heart  
When I can watch you play.  
It tears me up when we're apart  
That I can't stay away.*

*While I can't be there every day  
In spirit I will be  
Close by your side, one thought away  
And even in your dreams.*

*Trust in yourself and never be  
What you know that you're not,  
Sometimes the dreams that we can see  
Are dreams others forgot.*

*Since I doubt I will ever have  
A son my own to cling,  
It's nice to know I'll always have  
Truly, the next best thing.*

I put the poem in the last frame I had bought a couple of months ago on a piece of paper with a rainbow for the background. I sat the frame on the table when I got home to West Virginia and figured they'd see it first thing in the morning. I got to my mom's house around 1:30 a.m. but I wasn't really tired. My body was tired from the trip and from not getting much sleep the week before, but I was pressing on. I went to bed around 2:30 or 3:00 a.m. Saturday morning. I never sleep well in the twin-size bed that is in my sister's old room, because my feet always hang over about a foot. At least now I take my pillows with me so I have some comforts of my bed when I'm there.

I woke up around 10 a.m. when Conner came rushing into the room to tell me to "Get up!" Then he ran back of the room only to come running back in again a few minutes later with Brady, the two-year-old son of my brother's new girlfriend Christy. Christy came chasing after them, then told me in her heavy West Virginia accent, "Get up, it's 10:30." Ugh! But it felt like I had just gone to sleep. I didn't want to get up yet. I knew I didn't have a choice, because the party was supposed to start at 11:00 a.m. and there was no way I was going to sleep upstairs with a three-year-old's party going on right beneath me. I got out of bed and went downstairs and started playing with Conner. All of the kids went outside and started playing, so I got the video camera and started filming them. I didn't wake up in a very good mood, but it was becoming very clear that I was not in a social mood when I was interacting with everyone. I was glad that no one really stayed long at the party. I was exceptionally irritable on Saturday, but I had so much on my mind that I think I was standing guard making sure no one was able to peek behind the iron curtain.

I was supposed to go to dinner with my best friend Pat after she got home from shopping with her daughter, Samantha in Beckley, WV. After Conner's party ended, I decided to go take a nap. I certainly wasn't in the mood to talk to anyone at my mom's, and I could definitely use the sleep. I was also hoping that Pat would call while I was sleeping to wake me up and I could go see her. I slept until around 6 p.m. but she hadn't called yet, so I got up and played with Conner some more. He got a Hot Wheels Harley Davidson for his birthday, so I chased him around the yard while he drove, and then he would chase me while I pretended to run scared. We did that until his battery ran completely dead from exhaustion. I was pretty exhausted myself from all the running around I was doing. We went inside and started watching Blue's Clues. Conner loves to imitate them in front of an audience. He's quite well at it, too. After that video ended, my mom asked me if I wanted to watch one of their movies, but I really wasn't interested in watching a movie. I

wanted to get out of the house. I didn't want to go visit my friend "Burris" (Carrie), because I knew if I went to visit her, I'd have to tell her I was poz, and I didn't have the emotional stamina to deal with that. It was also weighing very heavy on my heart that I hadn't told my mom. As we sat in the living room watching TV, she knew something was going on with me. She asked me if I was feeling ok? I told her that my stomach was a little upset, but that was nothing unusual. All the while hearing my new friend Eli's voice in the back of my head telling me to tell her! Eli is a guy that I met online who is also HIV-positive and lives in Seattle. We have already established a great friendship even though we've only known each other a couple of weeks. We talk on the phone all the time now, and usually for hours on end. We've definitely connected on a lot of different levels. He called me on Friday afternoon and we started talking about my situation with my mom. He said that he waited three months before he told his mom and he kept getting sicker and sicker until he told her. I explained to him that I understood the importance of telling his mom, but they live in the same city and see each other all the time. I don't see my mom that much and didn't want her to have to experience the hurt of having to cope with this if she didn't have to. Of course, as much as I wanted to believe that I could go forever without telling her, I know that the conscience I have for telling the truth will overpower any attempt I have of keeping it from her. I know that it's just a matter of time before I tell her. I just haven't summoned the courage or emotional stamina to experience the pain she will feel when I do. I've already felt that pain. Not just from hearing the news myself, because I am strong, but one day when I was in the shower, I started thinking about telling my mom and I could just feel the hurt inside my chest: the thoughts, emotions, all of it. I didn't want to deal with all of this on a day my mom would then associate with my nephew's birthday, so as soon as my sister took Conner to bed and my mom went to her bedroom, I went upstairs and started packing my things. I had been debating whether I would stay another night for several hours, and since Pat hadn't called, the decision was easy for me. I had to get out of there. I had none of my emotional support system there and I needed it badly. I was already having tears well up in my eyes before my mom went to bed. I knew it wasn't going to be any easier staying another day. When I brought everything downstairs and was ready to pack the car, my mom came out of her bedroom. I guess she knew I was leaving. I told her that I was leaving because I didn't want to deal with the traffic during the day, which wasn't a lie. It just wasn't the real reason I was leaving. I couldn't even look my mom in the eyes because I knew she would see exactly what I wanted to keep from her. I hugged her good-bye as she told me she was glad I got to come in, but wished I could have stayed longer. I just told her I wish I could, too.

I knew that the drive home would refresh my spirits. Not only was it cathartic to listen to the music while I drove, just knowing I was coming back to Virginia Beach was a release. At least I have people here that I will turn to for emotional support when I want it. Part of me hated that I didn't tell my mom that I'm HIV-positive, because it made me feel weak. I related the entire experience to being in the closet with my mom about my sexuality, which she still thinks is a "phase I'll grow out of." Or if she prays enough prayers that maybe I'll see the light. Even though we never talked about it before I told her on March 12, 2000, the fact that I hadn't told her made me uncomfortable in the home I grew up in, and I knew that was why I never stayed long when I would go home. Another part of me also knew that telling her, no matter how hard it will be, would be a

healing process for me, and it, too, would make me a stronger person. Regardless, it was weighing heavy on my mind and heart. The drive home did help. After I cried for a little while, I decided that there was no use crying anymore. I had escaped the situation for the time being. There were a couple of songs that I heard that really spoke to me. The Eagle's song "Hole in the World," and "Where is the Love?" by Black-Eyed Peas. The lyrics to both of those songs spoke to my heart to help me gain a clearer perspective on my situation, and how I felt about it.

I got home around 4:30 a.m. and was completely exhausted physically. I managed to get my things into my room, but did not have the energy to unpack anything. Even though I was so tired, I had so much on my mind that I couldn't fall asleep until after 6 a.m. I slept until 2:30, but woke up in a very morose state of mind. I started trying to pump myself up by listening to music and thinking positively, but wasn't having much luck. I stayed in my room for most of the day, trying to motivate myself to go over to Jackie's to visit her and my uncle Larry, aunt Judy, and cousin RJ, who were all over there visiting from West Virginia. I didn't know if I was going to tell Judy or Larry that I'm poz, but I wanted to talk to Jackie about it because it was all weighing heavy on my mind still. My Granny had stayed over here, so she was downstairs, but I was in no mood to socialize even with her. All of my family is very sensitive, so it's hard for me to put on an act of normalcy to them when I can to others. They may not ask me and I usually don't tell them, but they would certainly know something was wrong. I finally got myself showered and motivated around 6 p.m. and went downstairs to leave. Nancy told me I should ask my Granny if she wanted to go with me since she would be at church. I didn't want Granny knowing, so I didn't really want her to go, but I also didn't want her to stay at my house by herself, so of course she had to go.

I did my best at being social while we were there, but never really had a chance to talk to Jackie, and wasn't really in the mood for my typical banter, so we only stayed until 9 p.m. I wanted to get home in time to catch Sex and the City, but we didn't get going until it had already started. I spent the rest of the night talking with my friends online and watching HBO.

When I woke up on Monday, it was everything I could do to put a smile on my face. Even though I woke up bright-eyed and bushy-tailed at 8 a.m. I promptly told myself that I was not going to get up that early when I didn't have to be at work until 5:30 p.m. I wasn't able to get much sleep after I woke up, but I guess I got a couple of hours of sleep between the time I woke up and the time I finally got out of bed, which was around 1:30 p.m. I got out of bed because R.J. was throwing a tantrum. He didn't want to go home yet so he was crying. I went downstairs to see what was going on and got him to get up and give me a hug. I told him it'd be all right. I was honestly afraid to give my Granny or Judy a hug. When I'm as emotionally vulnerable as I was that day, it's everything I can do to keep my façade of happiness in place. After they left, I went back upstairs to my room, trying desperately to talk myself into wanting to go to work when all I really wanted to do was call in sick and go back to bed.

Somehow, I was able to pump myself up with my music and Emotional Freedom Technique, so that I was in a good frame of mind and had a smile on my face when I

went into work at 5:00. When I got to work, we were slammed. My Server Assistant Mark didn't come in until 6:00 p.m., but I don't really worry about when we're busy, because there's not much I can't really handle now. I had a pretty good night overall. My guests were pleasant to serve, and most of them tipped me well. I thought I was going to be able to chalk it up to a great day, considering how it started. But then while I was in the back cleaning up, I happened to tell Ian, one of the other gay servers at work, that I had talked to his roommate, Jason, online a couple nights before. His roommate Jason works with Jackie at Dollar Tree, but I've never met him in person. I've only talked to him online. We got into a lengthy discussion about his two roommates, both named Jason, that I know. I met his other roommate Jason a couple years ago. He was always fun to talk with online because we could engage in intellectual conversation, but one night he was complaining to me that he was digging through his couch to find some spare change to buy gas (because he was broke). He lived in Hampton or Newport News with his boyfriend Damon at the time, so I asked him if he had enough gas to get here, we could hang out and watch a movie, and I would buy him some gas. I didn't even have enough money to pay my bills at the time, but because I thought he needed it more than I did, I offered it to him. We had a great time (I thought) talking about lots of different things while we watched the movie, and when it was done, he said he wanted to go home, so I drove behind him to the gas station and put some gas in his car. I never heard from him after that. The next time I said hello to him online, he had some lame excuse that he needed to go, but then was in the chat room long after he said that. I was disappointed, of course, and felt like he had used me, but reminded myself of the saying, "If you loan someone \$20 and never see that person again, it was probably well worth it." Ian said that's not how he heard it. Jason told him that I got upset when things didn't go the way I wanted and he had to leave. I just laughed and said, "Hrmmm. I wonder how he could've gotten THAT!" Obviously he had misread something I did or said, because there was no physical attraction on my part when he came to my house. I just enjoyed his company for what it was, someone to talk to and watch a movie with. After Ian and I dismissed that topic, he said, "Can I ask you something?" then looked around to see who was standing near us. Without even thinking, I told him, "No, because I know what you're going to ask" then walked away saying, "I've got to get my work done." I went back to him and asked him who told him? He said that it was all over the chat room and one person at work had told him. Immediately a rage started pulsing through my body. I was livid. Who had told him? I knew that I had only told a few people, including the managers and a couple of my close friends, all of who I would never have thought would have told Ian. I went to the office and told Sonny, the manager on duty, that Ian knew. He said that he knew that none of the managers had told him and that I should go back and ask him who told him. Ian didn't want to tell me who it was, and I already had a hunch I knew who it was. Ian finally told me that my friend Kate had asked Tim Woody-Lepre, who is the biggest gossip in Hampton Roads "hypothetically" if he had a close friend who had just tested positive for HIV, what could he do to help them? Well, it didn't take a Kindergarten student to figure out that they had covered all of my shifts the week after I tested positive, and I am Kate's only gay friend, so the rumor mill started running. I was furious when Ian told me that not only had Tim told people at work, but he had also gone online telling people. What right did he have to tell my business!?! I was also so disappointed that Kate was so naïve to trust someone who was a known gossip with my personal information, however "hypothetical" it was. I was so mad that it

was everything I could do to focus on finishing my work to get checked out for the night. Sonny was very supportive and told me that he didn't know how I was handling this as well as I was, but that he was very proud that I could.

On my drive home from work, I called Kate to let her know what she had done. I asked her why on earth she would ask HIM of all people? She said that she knew he had dated someone who was HIV-positive and thought he could offer her advice. I asked her why she didn't go to someone like Cathy or Joann, or anyone else that she knew I had told. Anyone but him!!! She didn't really have an answer for that. I told her I couldn't talk and hung the phone up and called Alison. Kate called back but I didn't answer the phone or even listen to her voice mail message. Alison, of course, was extremely supportive and understanding. She tried to help me understand that Kate was just naïve and young and didn't realize that Tim would've been so unscrupulous with the information. After I talked with Alison, I logged online and Mike was online. Thank God! I knew I could vent to him about my problem.

**VB Terry25** (12:16:15 AM): hey Mike

**FSUking99** (12:16:24 AM): hey terry

**VB Terry25** (12:16:41 AM): how are you?

**FSUking99** (12:16:47 AM): ok, tired

**FSUking99** (12:16:48 AM): how about you

**VB Terry25** (12:16:53 AM): madder than a wet hornet

**FSUking99** (12:18:03 AM): why

**VB Terry25** (12:18:42 AM): I just found out tonight that one of the servers, Tim, has been telling people in the chat room and at work that I'm HIV positive

**FSUking99** (12:18:53 AM): which one is that?

**VB Terry25** (12:19:05 AM): He's leather something or other in the chat room

**VB Terry25** (12:19:11 AM): he's got a big beer belly

**FSUking99** (12:20:17 AM): how did he find out?

**VB Terry25** (12:20:47 AM): Kate asked him a "hypothetical question" that if he had a really good friend that just found out they were positive, what would you do to try to help them?

**FSUking99** (12:20:57 AM): uh oh

**VB Terry25** (12:20:59 AM): and he figured it out

**FSUking99** (12:21:03 AM): naturally

**VB Terry25** (12:21:06 AM): not that it would've taken a brain surgeon

**FSUking99** (12:21:10 AM): ugh

**FSUking99** (12:21:16 AM): r u mad at kate at all?

**VB Terry25** (12:21:23 AM): She's no longer my friend

**FSUking99** (12:22:26 AM): ugh

**VB Terry25** (12:22:29 AM): I called her on my way home tonight to let her know what she did

**VB Terry25** (12:22:37 AM): but that will be the last time I speak to her

**FSUking99** (12:22:51 AM): who did you find this all out from?

**VB Terry25** (12:23:22 AM): Ian, another one of the gay servers at work. We were talking while we were cleaning and he said, "can I ask you something?" and I told him, "no," because I know what you're going to ask

**VB Terry25** (12:23:26 AM): I don't know how I knew, but I knew

**VB Terry25** (12:23:37 AM): and then I went back to him later and asked him how he knew  
**VB Terry25** (12:23:41 AM): even though I figured it was Tim  
**FSUking99** (12:23:49 AM): is he the sully old guy  
**FSUking99** (12:23:52 AM): who looked bitter  
**FSUking99** (12:23:56 AM): or the one who wanted to date you  
**VB Terry25** (12:23:59 AM): no, they fired him  
**VB Terry25** (12:24:03 AM): Ian is the one who wanted to date me  
**FSUking99** (12:24:08 AM): oh i see  
**FSUking99** (12:24:12 AM): i dont think i know tim then  
**VB Terry25** (12:24:19 AM): you'd know him from the chat room, I'm sure  
**FSUking99** (12:25:33 AM): well, not anymore  
**FSUking99** (12:26:26 AM): im so sorry terry  
**VB Terry25** (12:26:46 AM): so am I... so am I  
**VB Terry25** (12:27:18 AM): and it was everything I could do today to put a smile on my face and go to work. I woke up feeling like shit  
**VB Terry25** (12:27:27 AM): I was already having a hard time dealing with the fact that I hadn't told my mom yet  
**VB Terry25** (12:27:36 AM): it was eating me up inside... that's why I left WV early  
**FSUking99** (12:30:29 AM): so what is your next course of action  
**FSUking99** (12:30:33 AM): u have to work with these people  
**VB Terry25** (12:31:13 AM): I told Sonny that if Tim was not fired, consider my two weeks notice in  
**VB Terry25** (12:31:39 AM): and that I would take it as far up in PF Chang's as I had to  
**FSUking99** (12:32:36 AM): think sonny will help out  
**VB Terry25** (12:32:47 AM): If he doesn't, Cathy will  
**VB Terry25** (12:33:25 AM): How can they expect me to work with someone like that?  
**VB Terry25** (12:33:27 AM): or anyone  
**VB Terry25** (12:33:38 AM): Or more importantly, why would they want someone like him in their store?  
**FSUking99** (12:33:52 AM): yea....stuff like that is supposed to be confidential  
**VB Terry25** (12:34:16 AM): and anyone with morals would not go around telling other people  
**FSUking99** (12:35:10 AM): well....it is something alot of people dont know how to handle

Just talking to him for a few minutes was all I needed to release some of the anger that I had built up inside me. Since my computer crashed and interrupted our chat, I decided to go on over to see Kelley, who was hanging out at Teddy's house not far from where I live. I didn't realize there was going to be as many people there or I probably wouldn't have gone, but they were hanging out with Ray, Ian, Trina Gallop, and Iva, all drinking wine on Teddy's back porch by the pool. I felt awkward being around them at first because Ian, Trina, and Kelley all knew what was going on with me that night, but I didn't want Teddy to know because he is almost as bad with gossip as Tim is. I didn't mind telling Iva, but didn't want to tell her while Teddy was around. I ended up staying and hanging out for a bit. When Teddy went out front to tell Trina good night, I told Iva what was going on. She had a lot of common questions like where I got it, etc. We all decided to leave because it was getting late. I didn't expect Mike to be home when I got back, but he was still up. We talked until 3:00 a.m. until he went to bed. But like always, he helped me to change my outlook and frame of mind to where I was not angry anymore

about what had happened. I was even smiling by the time he went to bed. I don't think there's a poem in the world that could convey the appreciation for him being in my life.

After Mike logged offline, I debated whether I'd try to get some sleep, which I figured was pointless since I was still wound up, or whether I should write in my journal. Then I realized I hadn't talked to Eli in a couple of days, so I decided to give him a call. When I got home Monday night and hung up the phone with Alison but was still furious, the thought came to me to call Eli, because I said to myself, "Eli can fix it." While I'm still getting to know him, one thing that I do know is true is I will do anything I can to keep him in my life on whatever level. It's very apparent to both of us that we have a very deep connection that we can't really fully understand yet. He's a Cancer, born July 4, 1978. I haven't seen a crabby side of him (yet), but he has most of the Cancer. They always have this incredible caring feeling about them. Sometimes, depending on the person, just talking to them (by phone or in person) is like a warm, embracing hug. I don't think that Eli and I have ever had to think about what we wanted to talk about in a conversation, and we've talked almost every day since we met. We talked until 5 a.m., but probably would've talked longer if my cell phone battery would've lasted. I took it to mean that it was time for me to try to get to sleep again.