

Jimmy in San Francisco
1981-85

We all worked for a start-up software development company in a large corner office at San Francisco Public Health. I could see the golden dome of City Hall. It was a Sunday morning. I worked almost every day, and today I was alone.

Outside my window was a huge demonstration. The plaza in front of City Hall was filled with thousands of people. A terrible new disease was ravaging the community and demonstrators stood on the steps of city hall to protest. They wanted more done to deal with AIDS.

Later that day, I saw sanitation workers cleaning up the trash in the plaza were wearing masks and gloves. News reports told of muni-drivers running buses from the Castro District wearing white masks. The Castro was a major community of gay men.

“What was happening?” I worried. “Could I catch this disease?”

On Monday, I went to my dentist. The office was in the Castro District. The dental hygienist now wore a mask and a large plastic visor over her eyes. I had never seen this before.

“What was happening”

At this point, we were all pretty ignorant about AIDS, but we knew it was something new. It was contagious, but how? The newspaper was filled with stories. Public health officials became important. We hung on their every word. The street scene in the Castro previously filled with all sorts of happy gay people now included some very ill, very thin men. People were dying. We could see them. People were becoming frightened.

At work, I overheard some of my gay friends talking about AIDS.

“They’re trying to blame it on us.”

“They want to close the bath houses. Why should we do that?”

“This is some kind of conspiracy. This disease was created by the CIA.”

“The press is calling it the Gay Plague.”

In this milieu, I met Jimmy. He was tall and skinny with red hair and freckles. It all combined to make him look very young. Although six years younger than me, the difference in our ages seemed irrelevant. We instantly became close friends. We liked the same music and often the same crummy diner food. Jimmy liked the effect of ordering a grilled cheese “sammich.” We often wandered into bars near work.

Jim and I went on long walks all over San Francisco. We talked constantly about our families, gossiped about our coworkers and what was happening in the world. We seemed to agree about everything.

I suddenly had a real best friend. He was a work friend. I lived a separate life with my wife and children in Berkeley. He lived his own life with his lover in the Castro.

Walking one day, I asked Jim: “How do you know if a man is gay. You seem to know from secret cues. What do you see?”

Jimmy laughed. “I just know. It’s obvious to me.”

In a few months, Jim would begin to invite me to his parties in the Castro. Often, I was the only straight man present.

Yes, now it was I who “just knew” I was the only straight man.

Jim and I often climbed up to the back stairs of our workplace above the Orpheum theater. We sat in the dusty stair well. We liked talking alone. We were never interrupted. There, we could conspire on how we could change our future lives. We dreamed of becoming rich. We played The Fantasy Game. **The rules:**

You can dream without restriction. No limits. Anything was possible.

Mike: “Maybe someone will buy our company and our shares will be worth a fortune. They will go public. We’ll buy homes and drive fancy cars. “

Jim: “I’ll buy a Porsche.”

Mike: “I’ll take Sarah to Paris.”

Jim: We’ll get a modern dramatic office on the bay.

Mike: We will eat in the best restaurants. No more diners.

Mike: We’ll pay off all our debts.

Mike: Jimmy. Some day you and I will sit at a table on a balcony overlooking Lake Como drinking wine.

Neither of us had been to Lake Como, we just like the sound of that word and the imagined elegance of the image.

Jim and I and Carol (the only woman in our company) soon became three drinking buddies. Almost every night we walked half a block down New Montgomery St. to the Pied Piper Bar in the Palace Hotel. This was a truly grand bar with a giant mural behind the bar of... guess what? The pied piper. He was leading the children of Hamelin away. They were leaving a plague of rats.

Carol happily joined Jim and me. As colleagues, we worked closely together. We worked very hard and focused on the complex task of introducing computer technology to the vast San Francisco Public Health system. But we also liked to take a break and be silly together.



Mike, Jimmie and Carol
(Sarah in photo behind Mike)

Since none of us drove to the office, we could safely drink after work, sometimes at length. Carol was recruited to play the Fantasy Game and

we all sat in darkened elegant bar and watched and listened to the other patrons sitting at the bar. We came often and watched the show like an evening soap opera:

Carol: "Oh look, she took off her shoe and is rubbing his leg."

"Look at those three-inch CFM shoes."

"Jimmy, stop flirting with the waiter."

Eventually we would all look at the time. I would say: "OK, I've got to go I want to catch the next train back to Berkeley."

Carol would say "I'm going down the stairs for the muni-underground to the Mission District"

Jim would take a different train up to the Castro. We each went our different way every night.

We didn't talk about AIDS. It was front page news every day. Our computer company began to build an AIDS patient database for the public health department. We did it for free. The printer near my desk would list the hundreds of names on paper as it folded back and forth into a tall pile. The printout showed AIDS in big letters. The pile of paper got bigger and bigger.

After a few months, Jim asked me to come over on a Saturday afternoon. He didn't say why I was invited. Carol and some of our mutual friends from work were already there sitting in Adirondack chairs his sunny back yard. I sat next to Carol.

I knew Jim had been to the doctor. He had sores on his face. I imagined why were invited there but I forced dark thoughts away. "It could be acne, couldn't it? Don't be paranoid," I told myself. "Don't be so negative."

Jim told us he had lab results. AIDS was a confirmed diagnosis. In those days that was a fatal diagnosis.

We were sitting in a semi-circle and Jim stood with the sun behind him. I tried to look at him and thought what I should say. The sun was setting behind Jim and we could not see his face.

Shortly after that, Jim told Carol and I that our evenings in the bar were over. In fact, we rarely saw Jim outside of the office.

For the next several months, I shuttled back and forth between our office in San Francisco and my home in Nashville. I lived in a downtown hotel for a week or so then returned to my home with Sarah in Nashville.

On one of my trips back to Nashville, I dropped my rental car at SFO and headed to the ticket counter. I was tired, so I decided to check my bag. I was going through the routine answering questions from the person behind the counter.

"Where are you headed today,"

"My final destination is Nashville"

"How many bags?"

"Just one."

My cell phone rang. I was done at the counter, so I could step away.

It was Carol: "Mike, Jimmy died last night. He wanted you to speak at his memorial."

I got back in line and spoke to the same person.

"I just got a call that my friend in the city has died. I have to get my bag back."

Next, I had to call Sarah. She was having a huge Christmas open house at our home in Nashville.

I told Sarah: "I just have to stay here."

"Jimmy asked me."

Sarah understood but was very worried about handling a big Christmas Party without my help.

I took a cab back into the city and checked into my regular little hotel.

The memorial was only a few days away, and I knew I had to write out what I would say. It proved to be very difficult.

I wrote by hand. I tried to read aloud. Alone in a somewhat cramped hotel room, I read it over and over. My first draft was my last draft. But, I

could not get through the reading without crying. Not just crying, it was wracking sobbing.

I thought by practice, I would get myself under control. When I finally thought I could do it, I took the wrinkled paper into the office. I read it to Carol. I knew she loved Jim just as I did.

Again, I broke down, only now I had both of us weeping.

I was determined to say what I had to say without punctuating the paragraphs with my tears.

I went back to the hotel room.

I remembered the advice from a rabbi when I was 13 and studying for my bar mitzvah. He showed me how to make a mark where I should breathe. He was teaching me to sing a prayer, but I decided this strategy would help me.

I marked my thoughts with breathing marks, just before I knew I would cry. It was that predictable. At the mark, I would take a big breath and I would relax enough to exhale through the words.

The memorial was in a lovely small neighborhood church. Jim had planned this event, including the speakers. I climbed the stairs and stood at the pulpit. I looked out at the packed pews. There were many friends and many of our company's customers who had driven in from around Northern California.

My thoughts included:

How annoyed I was that Jim trapped me into speaking.

I looked up inside the church and said, "Jimmy, I just know you are sitting up there on a rafter watching this and making sure it goes off just as you planned."

I told the audience:

We liked the same music.

We liked to walk in the city.

We dreamed together.

I loved my brother Jim.

Because Jim was a fan of musical theater, at the end of the service, a bag piper surprised the silent assembly as he played amazing grace. Jim had the last word.