It is not one of "them"; it is one of all of us

Ian Verber

I had been looking forward to going to see *The Pearl Fishers* at the London Coliseum with Peter. I had retained an interest in opera since my college days and more often than not Peter would accompany me. We would take turns to choose the performance and buy the tickets. This time it had been his turn.

Our friendship had grown up in college in that curious haphazard way that friendships do. Four of us (three medics and a dentist) had been planning to share a flat. One had dropped out, and Peter, a microbiologist, had somehow been drawn in to make up the numbers. We had a lot in common. Our politics, our way of thinking, our sense of humour, and our place of origin. We were two northerners in a sea of Celts and southrons—we lived only 12 miles away from one another at home. Our other link was the unusual one of horseracing. I had always been vaguely interested in the sport but Peter's knowledge was encyclopaedic. He cared little or nothing for gambling but everything for the beauty and power of the thoroughbred horse and for the skill of the trainers in bringing them to their peak. When I was in Australia one of his letters was full of praise for Dancing Brave and how only the vagaries of jockeyship had deprived him of adding the Derby to his other crowns. He would not, however, go so far as to speak of him in the same breath as his all time favourite Nijinsky.

We had differences, of course, as well as similarities. He was from a working class background, his mother a German refugee, and his father a Lancashire mill worker. I was from a Jewish middle class background—my accent almost undetectable beside his. This never bothered us; why should it? There was another difference as well—something that neither of us knew about at the time but Peter had realised after moving up to London to teach on the completion of his BSc course. When he told me about it I cannot deny that it shocked me, but I do not believe that it made any difference to our relationship. In fact, I rather selfishly took pleasure in the fact that of all my friends Peter would never desert me for a wife. Like many people who are prejudiced but cannot admit it even to themselves, I adopted Peter as an honorary heterosexual. You could make jokes about queers, of course, but that did not include

Peter. In the same way my Christian friends made jokes about Jews but said, "Of course, we don't mean you, Ian." So I would listen to silly jokes about limp wristed gays and pansies with perhaps the occasional protest that one of my best friends was gay. Interestingly, I never got the response, "Ah, but would you let your brother marry one?"

And so our friendship went on unabated. Five days before we were due to go to the opera I got a telephone call from a mutual friend. Peter had been taken ill while on a biology field course and had been admitted to St Stephen's Hospital, Fulham. He had a pneumonia and by the way, "did I know he was HIV positive?" We went to see him the next day. He was a little breathless and feeling very sick because of the high dose Septrin he was on. He managed to talk although we were obviously trying to avoid discussing his illness in too much detail. The only amusing feature of the visit was a kindly visitor of a neighbour who suggested to my wife that she should not let our son crawl around on the floor. "They don't clean the floors very often you know," she whispered. She was obviously afraid Thomas would lick the human immunodeficiency virus up off the floor. Peter and I exchanged amused glances. Otherwise, it was depressing to look at a ward full of very sick young men with their worried, anxious, and, sometimes, I am sorry to say, ashamed parents sitting by their bedsides afraid to look one another in the eye.

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When I visited him a week later he was much better. They had stopped the Septrin and he was much more cheerful. He was on a different drug. I knew that this drug frequently had even more severe side effects than Septrin, but my anxieties were allayed by his wellbeing. We talked as in the old days about horses, singers, music, and also about painting. I had long since ceased to be amazed by his range of knowledge but even I was surprised at his brief comparison of Gainsborough and Reynolds, with the work of whom I was only vaguely familiar. He talked enthusiastically about going back to work, although he said that with luck his convalescence would take him up to half term so that he wouldn't get back to work too soon. We discussed what opera we would see

instead of the now postponed one. Peter roguishly suggested that *Der Rosenkavalier* was on in the new year—what about that? He knew I had never been to see it, as a protest against Strauss's antisemitism. "But the music is wonderful," he said, half serious, half mocking.

The shock at seeing him a week later—the second drug also having failed to treat his pneumocystis—lying in bed, struggling for breath, was overwhelming. It was obvious from his eyes that he thought he was dying and probably obvious from mine too. We said very little to one another for what is there to talk about in the face of the enormity of death? He seemed already to be quietly withdrawing himself from me as if to try to spare me the pain of separation. I knew that even though he said little he wanted me to be there but I could not bear watching him for long and so I made my excuses and left. Although I knew I was leaving him to die, I pretended to myself that this was not so. I would see him again next week, he would be better, we would be able to talk then. There was no point in staying longer that night while he was so unwell. And even as I thought these thoughts to myself I cursed myself as a coward and a liar. And so I left him with all the words I wanted to say still unspoken. I have never felt so inadequate both as a doctor and a human being.

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Before my planned visit after the weekend I telephoned the hospital on Monday and somehow I knew even before the sister spoke what she would tell me—he had died just a few hours before, alone. He had refused to let anyone tell his mother of his illness but he had relented on that last day. On being told that she was rushing down to see him, his last duty done, he slipped away.

And so passed a brave spirit and a dear friend, more loyal to me I fear than I ever was to him. I marvel that I could have listened with equanimity to the news of so many young men dying because I thought it would never have any effect on me or those I loved. When you next hear of a victim of AIDS do not think that it is one of "them" that has been lost; it is one of all of us.

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