

Veronica Was Touch and Go

Veronica was touch and go. She exhibited behaviors I'd only seen in her mother, my grandmother, the ever-touring singer. Melodies flew from their mouths with minimal effort. They both hopped from country to country, state to state, trying on different selves like hats, bringing us back bits of the world in suitcases, and when they arrived, tall tales and hearty laughs bounced off rooms and our daydreams like the world's most instantaneous news flashes.

I marveled at Veronica's freedom. It made my head spin. A procession of cars, apartments, jewelry, men *and* women had Ronnie's distinct, sweet-smelling impression on them. Out of nowhere, she would jump in her red roadster. Snap! A pair of fuzzy dice, pine-fresh, a bright red blouse, and deuces from her rearview mirror. I'd look back at where I was standing unable to help feeling like a minor prop in a scene she just fled.

I would like to tap dance on Magic Johnson's face. Or maybe show up to all of his television appearances, stand right at the camera's periphery, and glare at him. Make him good and nervous. Look at him, sitting there all puffed up and satisfied. I want to stare at him in that very specific way that makes people apologize without thinking or knowing why, and prompts witnesses to confess to crimes they had no part in. Magic, indeed. Only the prenatal hocus pocus of the womb has ever been able to stop HIV dead in its tracks. Stop it from snowballing and graduating into that four-letter sentence, a death-sentence really, a four-letter dissertation.

He's just rich. I bet he wishes two things, though:

1. That he never contracted it, and 2. That he could have gotten it later, you know like other celebrities now who no doubt have it, but never took it to a press conference. I think Luther Vandross was one of those. An omission's not a lie, and your death certificate saying you died of TB or pneumonia is technically true, so.... Yeah, I'd say Magic was one press conference away from maintaining under the radar.

When I first met Veronica, Ronnie, she immediately put herself on my shitlist. I was four. Really I'd met her before, but like a goldfish's memories, she'd been immediately expelled from my brain, swapped out for the next scene. This time stuck.

My mother was in the bathroom curling her hair, yelling out updates to her sister who had just blown back into town. Their accents met in the middle somewhere between North Carolina and New York, and I hovered between rooms, captivated by my mother's primping ritual, staring at my aunt like she was some kind of mommy facsimile.

"psst. Comere," she said, wanting me come closer. I wasn't so sure about it.

"Come here. I don't bite." I did, and she leaned in.

"So, you know I'm really your mother right?"

Wow. This lady was obviously in the same league as the boogiemanager, man-sized Muppets, and those thoughts of becoming elderly that kept me up at night.

"It's true. I just had my sister take care of you until I got back, but now I'm back, and you're coming home with me."

“No.” I countered.

“Yep. You’re mine.” She came really close to punctuate MINE.

I screamed “No!” I reeled back, and socked her in the left eye.

“Keller, come get your son...”

So, suddenly I was Keller’s son? My mom walked in and just laughed.

I’m sitting as much as one can in a chat room. It’s like Pong watching those opinions go up-back, down and forth– a really dumb, transparent, 3 a.m. game of Pong. So, really it’s one of those balls on a paddle, which is pretty dumb. The people here are debating how magic the Johnson is. One anonymous chat-roomer, clearly from the Johnson camp, plants statistics in favor of early detection, healthy habits, and stress free living to vouch for Magic’s success, success meaning Johnson’s never developing full-blown AIDS. Chatbarf. Others liken him to a genetic freak, which I sort of agree with, but don’t think we all mean in the same way. “Irvin Johnson is just one of the superhuman 10%,” they say. Most of them, like me, are plain angry.

She called me “Uncle Ricky.” She called me that consistently. Say I wanted to borrow her spray starch for ironing, which she was very prone to using. I’d say, “Aunt Ronnie” and she’d reply, “Uncle Ricky.” And then we’d continue on, back and forth. I think in the beginning, maybe around age 5, I started rolling my eyes at her silliness, but the older I got the more it became expected, and I began enjoying the title “Uncle Ricky” for its

comedic subtlety and professional feel. I've thought about it a bit and here's why it's so funny.

1. "Uncle Ricky" was old school types of funny, similar to Dad humor, but better because it was Aunt humor. She was straight up mimicking a child, which is hilarious. It's like *this close* to "stop copying me...", but without using my wording verbatim- thus, entirely original in feel. Every time it was like she was thinking on her toes, even after it became kneejerk.
2. The joke was also a digression a la "Who's on first?" that would for years throw me and make me forget what I had come to her for in the first place. In times that I really needed an answer urgently, she'd laugh while watching me squirm. "Aunt RONNIIIIIIIE??" "Uncle RICKYYYYY?"
3. And finally, "UNCLE RICKY" was kind of pointing to the preposterousness of a five-year-old Uncle, a scene akin to something like an elf with a briefcase, or a squirrel with a pipe... a kitten with a nametag that says Sir Cuddletons III... I'm sure it cracked her up every time.

Man, my aunt was super funny.

Magic is talking to Maria Shriver. The way she's smiling and blinking bright and widely at him doesn't fit the words coming out of her mouth: HIV, scared, career over. Actually, the two of them look downright kooky. It's like Barney the big purple dinosaur bought a suit, Skeletor a wig, and they got together for an interview to talk about Barney's chronic, children's-show-ending-STD. I want to shout out to the past, "Get up, and wipe those shitty grins off of your faces! You, go fire your maid PRONTO, and you, write down the cocktail you're taking and send it to the following address: 3035 Draper Court Winston-Salem, NC 271..."

Despite his being on the verge of extinction, I have to say, yeah, I think Skeletor is flirting with Barney, which gives a little insight into why Skeletor loves Arnold

Swartzenager so much. Big, dense pieces of meat get Skeletor going, with a bit of danger on the side evidently.

Towards the end of the interview, Shriver asks what kind of medicine Johnson takes and how much. That is a private matter he says.

/Gloss/

They cut away to Barney and Skeletor shooting hoops. Wait, what the hell just happened? Why wouldn't he say what drugs he's on? Is he afraid to cause a riot, scared that everyone whose virus actually matured into AIDS will seek him out and ascend on him? Well, now I hope they fucking do. Why wouldn't they just edit that part out?

Proximity to health is directly related to capital worth. Money is life.

The fact that Magic Johnson can't say the word "THAT" brings my rage to a fever pitch. It comes out "D-A-T," Like, "Hand me DAT basketball, Skeletor," or "DAT is none of yo business what drugs I take to stay alive twenty years longer DAN your loved ones."

He says friends spread rumors that he's gay, and that really hurts his feelings. Boo fucking hoo. He doesn't really think about having HIV, forgets about it unless someone mentions it.

Then Johnson finishes by saying, "The best sex is no sex." But it's never quite clear from this hindsight rant whether his "no sex" occurred in the midst of his marriage or pre. He says he doesn't know how he got it.

A parallel life trajectory in seconds:

The way I see it, I've always been just a series of graces away from not having a mother.

Ronnie and my mother both grew up in transit, passing hands between New York, North Carolina, and London. Both had a boy and a girl, leaving the older boy to be raised by their grandmother, with the girl held close like a second chance. Both picked up crack habits in the 80's and proceeded to piece back together their lives in the 90's. While in the streets, Keller and Veronica dated a pair of brothers, Jerry and Pete respectively, both fatally doomed affairs. I was seven years old; Jerry was 15 years old, while my mother was 25. He was closer to my age than hers, but he sold the drugs she was on, which turns amorphous scenarios into unthinkable things.

Pete was older and abusive. One night at a party he turned to hit Veronica one too many times, and she then turned to her friend who in turn handed her a gun. She killed Pete. Keller, shocked, went to a 12-step program to rebuild, and Ronnie went to a state penitentiary for two years, where they revealed to her that she was dying. She didn't know how she got it.

Oprah is sitting down with egg on her face. Let me back up. Oprah is interviewing a woman, Bridget B., who is suing her ex-husband for \$12.5 million for giving her HIV. He was on the D.L., and she is currently on fire.

Oprah: You look at people like Magic Johnson, and you realize that you can live a healthy, happy, long life.

Bridget: Let me stop you here. Magic Johnson does not have the same life that an average person [with] the disease... Magic Johnson can buy any doctor, any medication in the world. He has people who cook for him. He has people who clean for him.

In this moment you realize that Oprah-Jesus is limited in scope, out of touch. Her frame of reference begins in the celebrity realm, then outward to the most popular guests on her show (who themselves are small-scale celebrities), and then finally to the average person. She who has everything— chopped in half by this ballsy lady who hasn't much to lose.

Oprah: Okay, well, let's look at somebody other than Magic Johnson. Look at the thousands, and thousands, and thousands (*that's three thousand*) of people around the world who have been diagnosed with this disease who don't have chefs to cook for them, who don't have access to the finest doctors, but who have created a life that has allowed them to live well, live happy, live functioning lives.

She's back peddling.

Bridget: But let's really look at them. Let's look at the fact that the medication that they have to take has not been tested for long-term use. I can't go to the doctor once a year like everybody else. I go way more than I want to be there. But, yes, people can live with it, but it's not simple like everybody says.

Bridget isn't having it.

Oprah: So, how are you feeling today?

Bridget: Right now you got me hot. Pissed off. But I'm doing well. It's a new normal. I can't nearly do the things that I used to be able to do. I don't have the energy and the endurance that I used to have.

Oprah: I stand corrected, and I honor the correction because I think that I and so many other people look at Magic Johnson as the poster child for survival, and I think that what you've said is absolutely spot-on correct. The fact that he has access to the best of everything does make a world of difference. I really appreciate your bringing that to our attention.

A friend of mine tells me I talk about AIDS too much.

I mean, what constitutes too much? I feel like bringing it up twice, not even in a conversation but ever, twice ever, is too much for most people. Plus, this friend is not credible in that he's a dick. He's the type to say things like, "You talk about AIDS too much," or "You smell like a bong," when you get into his car. Granted, I did smell like a bong at the time, but he gifted me that in lieu of "Hello."

Then there are people, friends, who think just because you mention AIDS and you're gay, you must have it. You can feel the distance and suspicion mounting as you speak to them.

Another friend flinches every time I mention the word. If I were demented, if I were rude, I'd just follow her around saying it at random "AIDS, AIDS, AIDS!!!" People would think she's prone to seizures, but then they'd also think I have Tourettes. I have other friends who feel the need to make a lot of AIDS jokes, which to me feels just as indifferent to reality.

I've actually had a friend say that the topic of AIDS doesn't apply to them. For all my love of humanity, I really wish I were blind to those parts of the condition.

Another person, an artist, said to me that losing loved ones to the AIDS crisis is like surviving with PTSD. I lost Ronnie and two others. What does that say about me? Will I talk inappropriately about this forever?

I think it affects us all differently. My mother, after her death, started listening to Ronnie's club music all the time, dated Ronnie's ex boyfriend, and eventually started dating women— Just. Like. My aunt.

I used to go back and listen to the tapes of Veronica speaking at the 12-step program. On their anniversaries they go up to a podium and tell their tales. "Men, don't get me wrong," she said, "I love you, but I just can't do you right now." Record the voices of your loved ones before they're gone. You don't know treasures until you do.

My cousin, Veronica's daughter, Lorelei, told me that she couldn't remember anything about her mother before she died, which I think is truly sad, and sadly, kind of liberating.