



# TOUCHED

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# THE WEIGHT OF A CRISIS

OLIVIA IVANOF

On May 16, 1969, a sixteen-year-old boy named Robert Rayford died in Deaconess Hospital in St. Louis. Baffled by the multitude of symptoms he had exhibited, doctors attributed his death to the generic “loss of vitality,” trying to describe how the young boy had gone pale and skinny. According to one of his doctors, Dr. Memory Elvin-Lewis, eventually “his entire body constituted almost one wave of hard lumps and watery swellings” (People) but no one knew why. I can’t imagine how frightened and alone he must have felt among the rows and rows of hospital beds, like stark-white rows of gravestones in progress. Robert had appeared to be stabilizing in late 1968 after nearly a year in the hospital, but with the new year came a vicious return of his symptoms. His body was swollen and aching, and he exhibited genital warts, a septic chlamydia infection, and shortness of breath in addition to his increasingly pale complexion and loss of weight. When he died, his doctors had no idea what killed him.

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In 1984, a thirty-one-year-old man named Gaëtan Dugas died of a new virus that was cutting a swath through the gay community of the United States. Canadian-born himself, Dugas had begun working for Air Canada as a flight attendant in 1974, at age 20 or 21. Working for the Canadian airline meant that he spent much of his time in his native country, but by his own admission he did travel to San Francisco and New York City: hotspots for what was colloquially referred to as “gay cancer” in the late 1970s. Mysterious purplish lesions would appear on gay men, a hallmark that they too would soon fall deathly ill. Gaëtan was first diagnosed with Kaposi sarcoma, the official medical designation for “gay cancer,” in 1981. When he died, blood samples he had donated were preserved in a Centers for Disease Control study of this new epidemic: AIDS.

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I first came across Robert Rayford in October 2017, completely by accident. My sister, Juliana, is studying to be a nurse. She loves medicine and medical facts, and loves to report the weird or gross or just plain interesting ones to me whenever she can. In October, in the midst of a conversation about schoolwork, I asked her in passing if she had any good “fun facts” for me. It was only her first semester in nursing school and I knew she loved to talk about it, so I was expecting some disturbingly detailed account of a dissection in her anatomy lab. What I got instead was this:

“Did you know AIDS was first called GRID? Gay related immunodeficiency.”

My stomach physically rolled and my mouth dropped open a little. I didn’t know much about the history of AIDS, so this was shocking to me. Even beyond that, I knew I was having such a visceral reaction to the not-so-fun fact because I identify as part of what we now call the LGBTQ+ community. My sister knows this; it’s why she thought I might be interested in this particular fact, and she wasn’t entirely wrong. The AIDS epidemic is an important part of LGBTQ+ history, and one I had never studied too far in depth. While we continued to text about classes and schoolwork, I pulled up Google on my computer and headed to my favorite, reliable information source: Wikipedia. As I was skimming past the scientific medical information I didn’t understand, I stumbled upon an interesting tidbit under the “History of Spread” section. One of the subheadings was “1969: Robert Rayford” and contained exactly three sentences. I learned three things from those