

There are some things they don't tell you about HIV. You will cry. On November 2nd, my body didn't feel right. Cramps and pains in my stomach, waking up in the middle of the night to drenched sheets in a cold sweat. The sweats had been occasional for the previous six months, but then began occurring nightly to the point I would sleep on top of a towel to save having to change the sheets. I felt weak, tired and fatigued, which made the first few weeks of college much harder than they should have been. The nurse at the health center asked if I was sexually active. Intuition told me where this line of questioning would lead, because in my heart I already knew the answer. "Don't Go Chasing Waterfalls" had been sending me signs for the past few months every time I heard it. My answer of no to using protection only intensified my intuition.

On Tuesday, I followed the nurse's advice and went to Health Promotions to get tested. The signs for Anonymous testing were on every campus bus. I had been tested twice in the past, once in the fall of '02, and then again six months later. I was due to be tested anyways. I met Betsy for the first time. My hands didn't shake but my heart brushed against my ribcage often. The slight claustrophobia from the small size of the office didn't help. A couch sat in front of the window winged by two armchairs, and her desk sat next to the door. As well as a chair, with wings that folded up to support the arm. She talked to me a bit about my sexual history, as well as gave me some advice on protected sex. The body wants what the body wants. Her kind manner, though, was calm and relaxing. Even though I felt my palms sweat and each individual beat of my heart, I could focus on her calm as she drew the blood. And then she told me to come back on Thursday for the results.

Wednesday involved a follow up appointment about Sunday. The nurse asked if I had gone to get tested, and after telling her yes she recommended the usual battery tests for STDs. She then offered support, and sent me to the lab for more blood work. Thursday I returned to Health Promotions, but the receptionist informed me they hadn't come yet. By this time my anxiety kicked into high gear. The past few nights were with very little sleep, and I'd remain restless for the next couple of days. When I returned on Friday, Betsy invited me back to talk a bit more. She informed me of treatment options were I to test positive, that it wasn't a death sentence, and ways to prevent another scare like this if the test was negative. She then told me that the tests still hadn't come in, but they would be in on Monday. My intuition rang again, almost in confirmation.

For Saturday, we had made plans to celebrate Laura's birthday, as well as mine and others, in Atlanta. That night, we made our way with Kevin Pusch, Michael Davis, Laura Aikens, Laura Bryant, and Caroline Covington. We dined at The Cheesecake Factory, because Laura and I both preferred cheesecake to regular cake. The previous year I had thrown the annual surprise birthday for Laura, getting her cheesecake instead of the traditional cake. Celebrations were good, and we wished we'd been old enough to order wine and make the night more festive. Concerns over the test result had been plaguing my mind, and the dinner proved to be a good distraction. Around midnight, we went by the house of Caroline's friend to hang out and for her to pick up something. I forget what. Sitting in Kevin's old Jeep Cherokee, "Hallelujah" by Rufus Wainwright played in the background. I stared out the window as tears welled up in my eyes. I took it as a sign from intuition about the current state of affairs in my body, and prepared myself for Monday's news.

On Monday, November 10th, I went back to Betsy's office. Her demeanor was different than Tuesday's and resembled Friday's. "I wanted you to enjoy your weekend," She told me. "If you need to cry, that's alright, and if you'd like to talk about it I understand." I told her my heart had already confirmed what she had just revealed. I'm not sure what the normal reaction is. For me, there were no tears. In my head I rationally accepted this would be one of the possible consequences of unprotected sex. I was calm. Most of the anxiety had come from not knowing. True to the military teachings of my father, I asked her, "What are the next steps to getting on medication and controlling the disease?"

She made an appointment that Wednesday, November 12th, for me to talk with one of the doctors at the clinic. I first talked with Dr. Chin and explained the recent news. She asked about insurance, and a couple of other questions before taking me to see Dr. Forehand, the chief of medicine. While Dr. Chin and Betsy were not quite sure on how to proceed from that point, Dr. Forehand directed me to where I could get help. He knew this, having retired from the military himself before working at the Health Clinic. Athens had a naval base in town, and my health insurance was through my dad who was still employed with the military. After giving me the necessary details, he talked to me about treatment options and how they had changed from the past. What had started out with countless pills every couple of hours was now down to once a day doses, and pharmaceuticals were combining medicines for even less pills to manage. I thanked him, and shook his hand.

After the meeting, I had already dismissed the notions of any classes that day. I'd been wanting an SLR camera for a while, after borrowing my father's for the past year. He had bought the camera when he graduated from college. I'd decided to do the same for myself, but as my 18th birthday present. I settled on a Nikon, bought some film, and spent the rest of the day reading poetry and taking pictures of campus to remind myself. Later on that evening I hung out with Laura, and she gave me my birthday gift. She'd taken a photo from Magnolia, and in a David Hockney manner covered the front of a photo album with it, along with an inscription inside –

I held out my hands and asked where I could help and somebody grabbed me and pointed me towards the future and said, "You've got your work cut out for you." And I said, "Isn't there anything easier?" And he said, "You could dig around in the past, but it's just busy work." And that made perfect sense so I shrugged and started right where I was, along with everyone else.

I thanked her for the gift, and by now it had gotten late so I made my way home on the bus. When I got back to my apartment, I said hello to my roommates and went into my room. I went to my desk to my computer and signed into Instant Messenger. Tripp, who I had declared "mi numero uno compadre", was on and I began talking to him. He began wishing me a happy birthday, and also about all the tests I had taken. The first wave of emotion hit me, and I told him about the news I'd received that day. He told me not to joke around, and I told him I wasn't. He then asked me if I was serious, and I told him I was. He told me to wait just one minute, and he'd be right back, he promised. I suspected what he was off to do, so then I went to do the same

myself as the second wave of emotion hit. I went into the bathroom and cried. A good long cry, though silent as the most painful ones are, and let out the day.

There are some things they don't tell you about HIV. You will cry. A lot. Often, at unexpected times. You will learn: about yourself, insight into others, and the limits on yourself. The doctor visits are another thing they don't tell you after testing. There will be many doctor visits, and plenty of needles. Doctors and nurses will reassure you how it is treatable and controllable on drugs. They don't tell you how the entire process will make you feel as though you are a test subject. How is this drug working? They will poke and prod, and sometimes forget you are human, with feelings and fears. Sometimes they will think them irrational but none will tell you to your face. You will see the look in their eyes. They will tell you of possibilities but constantly remind you of reality through the five senses. You will feel the needle lodged in your vein. You will smell the antiseptic rooms and experience the cold of the lobby. You will taste the occasional blood. And you will see and hear the seconds of the clock tick away, falling in a steady stream collecting in a pool beneath.

You will also spend a lot of time with therapists, and possibly psychiatrists who try to place themselves in your position but never understand your point of view. You will deal with many professionals in white coats. Some days you will be nice, and others less than pleasant. Some days you will want to talk, and others without saying a word. Some days you will listen to music as therapy, and sing. With the medication, the side effects can be hallucinogenic. Depending on your own psyche, the experience can be pleasurable or terrifying. You will feel drugged and medicated, but you will adjust. The slightly hallucinogenic medication will also present you the opportunity of meeting St. Michael, because the metaphor of death will manifest.

They don't tell you how you will confront your own mortality. With HIV, as with cancer, diabetes, car crashes or death of a love one, you will question your existence and life itself. The process can and will get ugly. For someone older, perhaps the process is tempered. Someone older may reflect on the accomplishments they were able to achieve in life, the people they met and loved, and have the ability to move forward. If younger, however, all life plans will be readjusted. You will dream of Paris, London and the children you want to have. The house you will live in and possible mates. You will think about your career, and whether you want to work to live or live to work. The same goals and dreams are still possible, but you must now change a few details.

They don't tell you, though, that with HIV you must take time out of the day to take care of yourself. This includes daily hygiene, as washing the feet and brushing the teeth will have new significance, but also mental hygiene as well. Perception and outlook play a pivotal role in treating the condition. Society demands much from everyone, in the form of jobs, loved ones, communities, positions within social organizations and even random encounters with strangers who may need help. You will begin to feel that demand, you will feel tugged from every commitment, and you must learn to delegate time. Or, you will break. After all, your mortality is in question. Should you reschedule the doctor visit or the deadline that can't wait? Should you take that trip for six weeks, stressed about what would happen were you to lose your medication,

or should you travel closer to home? At first the months began to stick out, then the days, then the hours, and then the minutes until you realize there's only so much time in one year.

525,600 minutes or 31,536,000 seconds. You begin to measure a year with sunrises, different phases of the moon, midnights and cups of coffee. You begin to mete years by conversations with friends, glasses of wine, curls of cigarette smoke and leaves on a tree. And, meted out by the tears you cry, the shoulder you cry on, the days you spend in bed, the seconds ticked by in doctor visits and the vials of blood they draw. You begin to measure years by one day and one pill at a time. Your entire sense of time will radically change from that of everyone around you.

You will experience the five stages of grief. You will feel denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance in each tiny battle you face as you readjust your life. These battles won't always come in major form. They will be tiny skirmishes, such as forgetting whether or not you've taken your medicine. Brawls over whether you should eat even though you feel nauseous. Clashes with the change of life taking place. In each of these battles you fight. In your war against mortality, you will experience denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance as you stumble upon limitations. You will go through them. Over and over, often out of order. Often, the stages will meld into each other. This is a process, and the condition will cause a crisis of identity and beliefs, as you work through each stage.

You will need support. You will learn how to take this support. Doctor visits are lonely and cold, and often waiting is involved. You will need someone to distract you as your mind races over regrets and concerns. There will also be days upon days where you may not leave the house. You will need someone who will sit with you. Sometimes you will talk, about politics or wine or friends. Sometimes you will watch marathons of *Law and Order*, *Spongebob SquarePants*, or *Charmed*. *Law and Order* is always on, and it combined with the act of a friend sitting with you can provide a temporary sense of stability when uncertain about how to proceed. You will need someone who asks if you'd like to go out and get sushi or a Manhattan. You will need someone to pull you from bed, and hold your hand while you leave the house. Someone to run errands with, and make the process slightly less lonely.

They do not tell you how isolating the diagnosis will feel. They do not tell you that cooking chicken marsala, Coq au vin or whatever is in the cabinet for friends and family will bring warmth and lessen the feel of isolation. You will need certain people who make you feel normal, you will need certain people who are concerned for you, and you will need certain people to listen as you express your fears without expressing their own. You will need random strangers in your life who surprise you in unexpected gestures. If you've happened to run away to Paris, you will need the help of strangers to eat, find wine and cigarettes. You will need a stranger to help pay your way to the airport. These random acts of kindness will shock you. These are the things they fail to tell you upon hearing of your condition.

You will find it hard to express to others how you feel.

When you think you've reached acceptance, the cycle will then continue until you work through each personal battle, some from the past and others over issues to come. When you reach a

certain level of acceptance, after confrontations with mortality, crises of identity, dreams dashed, lifestyle changes, abandoning responsibilities and asking the world to wait for one second, after all the combat in the tussles, fights and scuffles, you will begin to build again. It doesn't get better, but it doesn't get worse. You learn that sometimes you will take life second by second, other instances week by week. Until you realize how to take it year by year. You will craft a new identity or merge this identity with the old, but you will experience ego death and start life again. You will learn to listen for the voice of the universe, and hear the clockwork cycles of nature.

Being in this liminal state, you will see past the exterior of everyone you meet and stare into their souls, see their hopes, dreams and desires. You will understand the emotions of ecstatic pain and ekphratic joy. You will understand the human condition, that time is eternal but this experience is limited. Reassessed and battle weary, you will understand the elderly like no other. Sometimes they and children will be the only ones without their hearts blocked. Unconcerned with the constraints of time, they will gladly share minutes and seconds because they will be present in the moment, unfettered by plans and commitments except to love whomever happens to be around. You will regret the dreams you failed to pursue pre-diagnosis, and pursue as many as possible post-diagnosis. You will not take time for granted.