Oh, Viagra!

An ode to daddy's new little blue helper

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The indignities HIV inflicts seem limitless. Although we have miraculously made it through the dark days of quick death, the present era of hope is disfigured by daily diarrhea, maddening medication schedules and an increasingly bizarre array of deformities. Yet, unlike protease paunch or buffalo hump, the remedy for impotence—to my mind the most humiliating side effect of all—may have materialized in the form of a small blue diamond. I am one who happily calls Viagra the new crown jewel of my medicine cabinet.

Viagra has done more than get the lead out of many a man's loins; it has shattered the sacrosanct silence long enshrouding male impotence. In the Viagrification of America that succeeded the little pill's arrival—570,000 prescriptions were filled last April alone—the media has left no prurient point unprobed, including the obligatory disaster scenario or two. Beware a new wave of HIV infections unleashed as men jab women and one another unsafely—never mind that condoms are a lot easier to put on a hard dick than a soft one. Rejoice not! Gay men are sure to be big abusers, adding it to the circuit pharmacopoeia of priapic party favors.

But I rejoice. Like many positive guys, what kept me limp is what keeps me alive—my antiretroviral cocktail. Just as protease inhibitors have given me and thousands of others in their prime something like a lifetime to look forward to, they cause a breakdown of our manly machinery. And while a man is certainly more than the sum of his parts, I would be lying if I didn't admit that my cock had furnished me with my fair share of male pride.

No longer. Sex once again became something to fear, not because of HIV but because I would break out in a cold sweat wondering if I could get it up. Frustration choked desire as it became apparent that fucking someone—with or without a condom—was out of the question. On more than one occasion I pleaded the half-truth of intoxication, rolled over and went to sleep; on many others, this once-proud top tried his best to be a better bottom.

Often, as things got hotter, I got limper. And then humiliated and angry. "I'm 39, not 70," I would whine to my self-pitying self. "Why does this, of all things, have to happen to me?" When nothing gets your gonads going, performance anxiety takes on a whole new meaning. So it wasn't long before I narrowed my repertoire to the one guaranteed way of getting off: Masturbation.

Soon I swallowed what was left of that male pride and took the issue up with my doctor, mumbling something about my erections not being what they used to be; she gave me testerone injections. The shots got my hopes up but not my penis. A year went by—time flies when you're jerking off—and I decided to bring in the big guns, so it was off to the urologist. But a course of yohimbine, an extract from the bark of an African tree, only made my heart race. Adding a daily dose of the anti-depressant trazodone, I was all set to blast off, especially when he cautioned that its erectile-inducing side effects caused priapism—persistent hard-ons that can be relieved only by a hospital visit—in one in 1,000 men. But still no go. Other options—penile suppositories, injections and implants—gave me pause. Every man has his limits, even when it comes to putting the wind back in his mighty wurlitzer.

Voilà, Viagra! Suddenly, finally, my dick was rock hard. Not just swollen and spongy as it was wont, but—Mirabile dictu!—solid as steel. And it stayed at ferocious attention for what seemed like eternity. When I came, my load bolted out like mercury bursting from a thermometer on the floor a good four feet away, rather than oozing out as a sluggish curd. Was that the Hallelujah chorus I heard? Even after falling asleep, I'd wake up intermittently and give myself a satisfying tug—it was still standing. "It is a miracle drug," I thought, drifting back to sleep.

The next night, I popped another before hitting a local bar and, fully charged, felt a rush of confidence I hadn't enjoyed in some time. Sure, I had a distracting blue tinge to my vision. And, yes, the morning after I had a pernicious headache. But this satisfied customer thinks these—and the pill's $10-a-pop price tag—are small prices to pay to become reacquainted with a guaranteed erection.

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