Over Bite

Naomi Morrison learns that the customer's not always right

June 1, 1998 By Paul Harris

I was sitting on a bench on Dixie Highway, wearing high heels, a short skirt and see-through tank top. Elmer Hutto stopped his car near the liquor store, beeped his horn and pulled down his window," Naomi Morrison, 24, says.

It's not hard to figure out what Hutto wanted from Morrison—they don't call it the "oldest profession" for nothing. But at 88, Hutto may have been one of its oldest consumers. A part-time job mowing lawns kept him fit and in the money, which Hutto often spent on Morrison and other West Palm Beach prostitutes. Morrison had tricked with him a dozen times, revealing her HIV positive status early in their business dealings. "He said, 'I don't care. Everyone has to die of something,'" says Morrison.

Though Morrison says that Hutto preferred oral sex when the woman was the recipient, he was in a rare mood for getting rather than giving that day by the liquor store, squiring Morrison to the railroad tracks and paying $20 for her services. "After-wards, he tried to take the twenty dollar bill from my bra strap. I said, 'What are you doing, Elmer?' He replied, 'I'm not happy, so I'm not paying you.'"

Morrison claims that a struggle ensued when she tried to take the money back. He grabbed her by the throat, she says, and she responded by biting his thigh, his hand and his arm. Fleeing from the car, she took his wallet with her, removing $90 before discarding it. "I hadn't done any drugs for almost six hours, which is a long time for a crack addict," says Morrison. "I'd been up for days, and was totally out of money. Besides, he had no right to take back the twenty dollars. I earned my money."

Before long, her conscience kicked in, and Morrison anonymously called 911 to send help Hutto's way. Because of her serostatus, Hutto was tested for HIV. The initial results were negative, but when he was retested several weeks later, Hutto had seroconverted.

By then, Morrison had been arrested and charged with aggravated battery on a senior citizen, robbery and burglary of a vehicle. "I had six prior arrests for misdemeanors, but I never had a felony," Morrison says. "I asked my lawyer if I could go into a drug treatment program, and he assured me that I would get it if I pled guilty to the judge." Instead, she got jail time, and while

none of the charges referred specifically to Morrison's HIV status, she believes that the judge took it into account when she was sentenced. "The judge said my crime was cruel," she says. "I was sentenced to ten years, when the guidelines said four to six and a half."

Morrison unsuccessfully appealed her sentence, and is now halfway through the seven years she will most likely end up serving. She's put her prison time to good use, attending weekly 12-step recovery meetings. Dressed in her light-blue prison smocks, she looks much more like the mother of young children—which she is, with two daughters, Elizabeth and Lailani—than the strung-out crack addict Hutto hired for sex almost four years ago. But her cuffed hands are a constant reminder of her past and present problems.

Not to mention her future woes: Elmer Hutto died of pneumocystis carinii pneumonia (PCP) last year. "A friend mailed me the newspaper article [about Hutto's death], and I read it standing on a canteen line at Broward Correctional Facility," says Morrison. "I fainted. I wouldn't wish this disease on anybody, not even my worst enemy." It took the Palm Beach County medical examiner three months to do sophisticated DNA tests, and the results revealed that Morrison and Hutto had identical strains of HIV. Morrison was shocked. "I didn't think he got it from me," she says.

To some experts, the DNA results don't prove transmission, but under state law, Hutto's death suddenly became a homicide in the eyes of the law. "It's very scary for me," Morrison says. "My medical records have been subpoenaed, and the state may bring murder charges against me."

If the state of Florida does charge her with second-degree murder, the key question will be: When did Hutto contract the virus from Morrison? She claims that she didn't draw blood when she bit him, nor were her gums bleeding. Since most authorities agree that it's nearly impossible to transmit HIV through saliva, Morrison's only explanation is that Hutto contracted the virus two days before the biting incident, when he performed oral sex on her while she was menstruating.

Morrison's CD4 cell count is a troubling 120, but her regimen of Crixivan, d4T and 3TC has knocked her viral load to undetectable. She estimates that a staggering 65 percent of the 786 female inmates at Gadsden Correctional Institution near Tallahassee are HIV positive. In addition to the more than 70 prisoners with whom she stands in the pill line to receive AIDS medications, there are many others who she thinks are in denial. "They believe God is going to cure them. I've tried to explain that if you don't do the footwork and take the medication, you're going to die," says Morrison.

Morrison hopes to work as an AIDS educator when—and if—she is released from jail. But her main priority is her children. "I have a lot of guilt about what I did. I even had thoughts of suicide when Elmer died. Then I thought about my kids," she says. "I want to get out to give them some good memories to make up for all the bad ones."

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