Pulp Friction

A newly diagnosed guy reports on his maiden voyage into the wild world of disclosure.

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It’s 16 months since I tested positive. To say that the time has been “interesting” is an understatement. Usually, the real fun starts not when I disclose my status but when I tell someone how recently I was infected. Two longtime HIV positive friends hit me when I told them. Actually one slapped my face, and the other punched me in the chest. This was not exactly the support I was expecting.

Then there’s The Interrogation.

Q: “How did this happen?”

A: “It happened just like you think it happened.”

Q: “Well, didn’t you use a condom?”

A: “No, of course not! I was getting bored with my fabulous life and felt I needed a new challenge.” Then I tell the truth. “Yes, we were using a condom. The sex was incredible. And we realized why the sex was incredible when we saw the condom hanging in shreds off of my friend’s penis. I guess we lost our heads. One too few ’rubber checks.’” A likely story, they might think, one brow cocked -- but that’s what really happened.

Q: “Were you partying?”

A: "No, I was not partying. My idea of partying was never staying up for four paranoid, lube-encrusted days, shoving improbably huge things up my rectum while grinding my molars to dust. There were no drugs involved in this infection. For the record, I did not catch this from my boyfriend at the time, who was positive. And yes, your implication is correct: *I am a total loser!*"

I should have known it was just going to get weirder. When I was HIV negative, I often felt like everyone else was positive; I didn’t let anyone near me without a rubber. Since testing positive, the point of condoms is to avoid transmitting the virus. But so many men are forgoing them now. And I’m still debating what to do about it.

On the one hand, there are so many other lovely bugs besides HIV to consider. Then there’s the spectre of reinfection. And I know for sure I’m not interested in becoming an actor in some messed-up neggie’s infection fantasy. Even if someone says he “doesn’t care,” I still do. But while

it’s lame for positive guys to feel no interest in keeping other guys negative, what happened to individual responsibility on everyone’s part?

Once you get to third base, either through the magic of matching status or the fact that it hasn’t come up in conversation, it’s not so obvious. You could ask yourself, “What would Jesus do?” (It works for George W. Bush and it worked for Al Gore.) You could say, “I am really hot for you. I am also a disease-infected cadaver in the making and the stench of death follows me wherever I go. Can we continue?” Or you could utter a simple, to-the-point “Raw or wrapped?” -- like Karen Black before everyone gets sick in *Airport*.

Scant weeks after my diagnosis, I found myself in San Francisco having unprotected sex. Of course I assumed he was positive, because what kind of a dope would actually have condomless sex if he wasn’t already infected? Well, I had to look no further than just south of my navel, because there was one such dope, sitting on my penis at that very minute. Said gentleman, who was having a rip-roaring time, looked at me mid-shag and said, “Yeah, man, I’m gonna get pozzed this weekend.”

“Pozzed”? *Qu’est-ce que c’est* pozzed? Silly me. I had assumed that this guy had already been “pozzed.” Gently, I explained to him that I only gift-give on Wednesdays, and as it was Saturday, we would have to interrupt our tryst.

A barebacking party with other positive guys seemed like a way to dispense with the whole conundrum of rubbers, risk and disclosure. Meet guys who want to have unprotected sex and for whom avoiding HIV is no longer an issue.

To be fair, after the party, the hosts and a few guests chatted about their own experience of being positive and what they thought of negative guys barebacking -- the prospect both mystified and appalled them.

But while the heat was on, cries of “Fill me up with your pozcum, man!” ricocheted through the air. I felt like I was at a fertility clinic. One acquaintance informed me that he had “taken” 15 loads. The only response I could think to muster was, “Your mom will be so proud!” Rather than the opportunity to take a break from one’s pariah status, the bareback party seemed more a way to own it, even revel in it.

I’m not there yet. What’s more, I still fear that I am not the last of my friends to seroconvert, although I would prefer it that way. I understand that people ask me these questions because they see in me a reflection of themselves. “Am I being safe? Are my risks smart? Can HIV happen to me?” Whether my answers are what they want to hear is another question. Sixteen months after getting the news, I know that life is not always safe, nor am I always smart. And yes, this could and did happen to me.

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