Trip or Treat

On fright night, Joe Westmoreland bunks with the Phantom of Sustiva.

October 1, 2004 By Joe Westmoreland

This Halloween, my two black cats will work overtime. All year long, they help me detect whether the phantoms and spirits who haunt me are real—or merely nightmares. If the felines remain asleep, I know I'm safe. Last night, for instance, a tall man in a black overcoat and rain hat stood by my bed. I froze with fear. The cats were curled up unconscious, so I found the courage to stare the guy down. I kept telling myself: "It's a hallucination, Joe. It's not real." Then I got up, went to the bathroom and crawled back under the sheets, muttering, "Just another night on Sustiva."

When my doctor first prescribed Sustiva, three years ago, I had few treatment options left. (Indeed, my combo of Sustiva, Kaletra and Epivir has hiked my T-cells from two to 200, and my viral load is undetectable.) But as if my everyday struggle with HIV weren't surreal enough, my doctor said I could expect "vivid dreams" as side effects. That first night, I dreamed of medieval castles swarming with Technicolor maidens. Things hadn't seemed that trippy since I last dropped LSD, more than a dozen years ago. I complained to Doc, and he joked, "Do you know how many patients wish they had that problem?"

True, the spirits have never proved "real"—but their mirage is so vivid, their impact so profound, that they might as well be. They're as far removed from normal human experience as HIV must have seemed when it first turned up 20 years ago. But they don't scare me as much as losing touch with reality. In my younger days, I used to love to get so high that I'd forget everything. Not anymore. Yet getting sick again simply isn't an option. To keep my health, I've gladly made the zombie trade-off. To keep my sanity, I must accept the visions, make them part of my routine, just as I've accepted having HIV. I now take my combo well before bedtime, giving me more control over the weirdness, but the images now appear while I'm awake, too. Smoky clouds of red, blue and green waft through my apartment while I type or talk on the phone. I feel like I'm sleepwalking on cloud nine. But when I come to, I always still have HIV.

Thank God my friends and loved ones have supported me during my brush with the supernatural. Last summer, I stayed alone at a friend's cabin in the Catskills. Before going to bed one evening, I took my Sustiva—then tried catching up on e-mails. I wrote a few friends saying the computer screen was starting to look like a curtain blowing in the wind. I must have really been wigged out that night, because I spent the next afternoon doing damage control. My phone rang off the wall with worried calls.

My partner, Charlie, has long been accustomed to seeing me wandering around the house at night, talking about colors and spirits creeping in through the back windows. He just laughs and says, “Joe, you’re tripping your brains out again.” As he and I lay in bed with the cats the other night, watching TV, Day-Glo spots blanketed him. Terrified, I tried to herd them up with my arms and whoosh them into the other room, where they could hang comfortably, undisturbed. I feel it’s my duty to guide the spirits toward their next destination.

Sometimes, I think they could be ghosts coming from the funeral home two doors down. Take the Woman in White—her glowing dress pulls me toward her. Then there are the three hot guys in jeans and T-shirts hanging around, smoking cigarettes, hoping I’ll leave Charlie, the cats and my Sustiva-restored earthly life to join them. They seem cool—like they could be my friends. But I don’t want to go with them. I’m not ready. Not yet.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/Trip-or-Treat-455-2015