Stranger than Fiction

Journalist and author David M. Hancock apologizes in his opinion piece titled “True Story.”

September 23, 2014 By David M. Hancock

True story.

Back in 1996 or ’97, I was washing dishes in a house I owned in Surfside, Florida. I was scrubbing a wine goblet and thinking of a guy I’d met, a hand-some Tony-nominated actor who’d come through Miami in a road show of Angels in America.

In the bar he told me he was positive; we later enjoyed a moonlit safer-sex quickie by a lifeguard stand on Miami Beach. Sure, I could armor up for one-night stands. But was that something I was willing to get involved with on a more intimate level?

While I was asking myself that question, the delicate glass suddenly burst in my hand. And there it was, the blood. I couldn’t get past the blood. Goodbye actor.

True story.

I recently gathered some of my short fiction in The Man Who Lost His Gayness. My stories, cloaked in magic and metaphor, reflect my twisted relationship with HIV. Living 30 years under the shadow of HIV has done a number on my head—and I have a lot of deviant fiction to prove it.

One story in my collection has a special connection to POZ. “Far Away, And In Someone Else’s Ass” won first place in the POZ fiction contest in 2005. Back then it was titled “Rape Potion No. 9,” which now seems to me a bit cheesy. “Far Away” is a grim depiction of a gay rape; it encompasses all my fears about contracting HIV.

A story I wrote in 2013, “I Don’t Know Why,” describes a safer-sex glitch that happened to me in real life. It was a reminder that, even with the best intentions, shit happens. I like this story because even as the protagonist considers whether transmission has occurred, he’s already planning his medical strategy.

Those two stories reflect an evolution in my attitude to HIV. “Far Away” represents all the scary years of the 1980s and ’90s. The second story is calmer. It reflects the knowledge that even if I finally contracted HIV, I would have a lot of medical options and many good years ahead of me.

I recently had an epiphany about how I think about HIV-positive folks. In 2012, I was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes. And it struck me: This is what HIV would be like, if I finally got it. Meds and tests and doctor's visits. You wouldn't wish either malady on anyone. But both are doable. It's not so scary.

I had another revelation when the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommended the HIV drug Truvada as a pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) to prevent transmission.

At this stage, I'm not ditching my condoms, and I don't care what anyone is promising. But the idea that you could have an HIV-positive partner, practice safer sex and also take PrEP as extra security has wormed its way into my mind. It seems like an acceptable risk. It cuts to the heart of my own hesitation.

One thing more. True story.

Back in 2001 or '02, I met a guy in New York City at a bar in Chelsea. I wasn't smitten, but we had some fun. Two weeks after we met, he called me on the phone and said, "Look, I have to tell you something." I listened and then assured him it was not a problem. And then I never spoke to him again.

To dudes with HIV: I'm really sorry for the shitty way I've treated you through the years. The way I cold-fished you after you put your cards on the table. Or worse, the phony way I pretended it was no big deal—and then promptly dropped you. Or how I've sped past your online profiles when I saw the "+" sign.

I wouldn't open my heart for you. I was too scared. And then it just became an ingrained habit to excise you. I want to free my mind. I want to shake off knee-jerk behaviors that are rooted in decades-old fears. I want to include, not exclude. I'm tired of living in fear of HIV.

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