1001 Beds

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Tim Miller’s account of awaiting the results of a test for HIV, a nearly universal experience for gay men of his generation, comes from his journal for 1990. Though he is always aware of the complex effects his HIV status can have on his art and his career, this account also provides a glimpse behind the assertive persona of his activist writings. The psychological and ethical impact of being HIV-negative became a principal focus of Naked Breath, the performance work of 1994 that is Miller’s most extended treatment of the impact of AIDS on gay men’s sexuality and relationships.

OK, here in the countdown. I get my results tomorrow. Finally went and got an HIV test with Doug, almost two weeks ago. This has been a roller coaster of weird emotions and logics and reasons. I’m not sure why we’re doing this now. For years I always felt like there was a pretty good chance that I would test positive, so why find out? It was as if I enjoyed the intensity of feeling vulnerable to this time, but also feeling the escape hatch of not knowing what my status was so I could go about my business without the worry. Hmmm. This is sort of like having your activist edge but avoiding it too. I think I felt like the not knowing made it easier and stronger for me to do my work as an activist and artist without getting spooked by my own
health concerns. I know this would rate fairly big on the Denial-O-Meter, but it seemed to work. There was a funny thing about sex too. I wanted to feel like I could have safer sex with my boys on the road without having to deal with my own HIV status (my version of which is to assume that everyone, including me, is HIV positive). Dwell in the land of the unknown.

My biggest worry about testing positive, if I do, is that I will have crossed a border that you can’t ever go back over. I will be in the very particular fraternity of seropositive folks. This is, of course, scary. But it’s also wanting to keep having a few more years of my young life there on the field as it were. Not that testing positive means I won’t be able to have sex with other people. It just will never ever be simple again. There will always be the discussion. I guess I am focusing on sex stuff as a kind of life force that keeps me connected to the world. I worry about getting cut off from that. Of beginning to worry about every cough and cold. I know that if I test positive I am in good shape to take the information in and to activate even more my life and creative work. This is a comfort. And if I do test positive, it will probably mean that I have been positive since 1980 or 1981. So that means I will have already functioned most of my adult life as someone who is HIV positive—so no big deal. You know now.

The existential playing field of knowing you gotta die at some distant future to knowing that you’ll probably die at a somewhat less distant future is a pretty big jump. I know if I test positive that I am already pretty lucky in the scheme of things. I could have gotten sick eight years ago. The incredible fear of that time, before there was some kind of coherent community, political, and cultural response to the plague. To deal with AIDS before ACT UP was probably really different. At least it would have been for somebody like me. I guess also, that if I am positive I have a responsibility to deal with it and look after my health more and charge up my work and not waste any time. I would probably pull back from some of the administrative stuff at Highways. I would probably be pretty out about testing positive. That opens up whole cans of worms. Doug and I
AIDS Test

have been communicating real well about all this stuff. This two weeks has brought us closer. We’ve been sharing our feelings and thoughts about what we’re going through. I am not alone. I am in good health. I know what my work is in this life. These are all powerful things that can help me deal with this situation. I am just afraid to get the information; I am not so concerned after that. My WASP survival mechanism will probably kick in. I just don’t wanna go to the testing place and have some stranger tell me this news. It’s so fucking intimate. That intimacy scares me.

And what if I test negative? It is possible. Though my ex-boyfriend did die from AIDS and he and I did have a considerable amount of unprotected sex in 1980 and ’81, I guess it is possible that I would test negative. Not real likely, but possible. And that will have its own set of crazy responses. How did I escape? Will it make me afraid to ride my scooter? To fly? To have sex with new people? Will it make me lose my “edge”? I know that sounds dumb but it is a real fear. What if Doug tests negative and I test positive? The reverse isn’t so likely, but I guess it could happen. I think our relationship is strong enough to weather that stuff, but it would be a challenge. All kinds of angers and resentments come up. God! This is like being thrown into a pot of boiling water. Well, this time tomorrow something will be different.

Next day. Tested negative. I can’t really believe it, but there it is. Doug and I were so nervous on our way there. I felt like we were about to face a firing squad. We were both a little in shock I guess. We got there and we seemed to be parked in wet cement, so we moved the car and then went for a little walk. I looked at the plants. We went inside. We didn’t have long to wait. We sat there for a coupla minutes, and then they called Doug’s number. He went inside and I slipped over towards the door to see if I could hear anything that would give it away. I didn’t hear any big emotional thing, but I wasn’t sure if that meant anything. The weird counselor with the moustache glared at me for eavesdropping and I sat down. The painter Andre Mirapolsky came in and asked how I was doing. I
said, “Well, right now, I am in a bit of an existential situation.” He said he hadn’t quite thought about it in those terms. Doug came out and looked at me almost sheepishly and said “I’m negative.” He sat down beside me and we hugged and I felt so much. I said, “We’ve won already.” I felt that the worst was past. That at least I hadn’t infected Doug, which had been a weird subtext to our relationship all along.

Then I went in and sort of collapsed into a chair. The nice woman looked at me and said, “Well, your test results came back negative.” I felt a rush and said “God, I can hardly believe it.” We talked a little bit and I told her why I always assumed I would test positive. She didn’t seem overly interested. I went outside and told Dougie “negative,” and we hugged standing up there. Andre Mirapolisky was looking at us and I felt a little bit on display, but fuck it. We went outside and Dougie started blessing everyone—the lab technician that had taken our blood, the reception person. We walked a little dazed to the car, trying to believe what we had heard. Doug wanted me to drive very carefully. We had been least prepared for this result, so we hardly knew how to respond. I didn’t feel a huge relief, just a huge feeling of not knowing how to respond. But I also felt so fucking lucky to be feeling that confusion.

And where does this leave me? A little confused. A lot grateful. And totally humbled and ready to become even more committed to ending this crisis. I thought of John. I thought of Jackson. I thought, why them? And why not me? There is no order to it, certainly no fairness. No describable criterion, just a big dice roll that has nothing to do with anything. This is also no dispensation, no permanent freebie, no bought indulgence. It just means that probably my blood didn’t get infected so far. Will this make me afraid to fly again? It can’t. If it does I’m a wimp that doesn’t deserve the luck of this particular draw. I gotta jazz up the total involvement with my time and my community. The world is HIV-positive in some weird way. I gotta keep doing my works in the world. Heat it up, make it stronger. I already felt so blessed to have gotten through so long, now I gotta turn up the heat. Feel the blessing that this body probably isn’t gonna be
going down one particular path, but there are plenty more where that came from. Keep bringing my spirit and energy to the world and my community. Be good to Douglas. Keep loving sex as I always have. Write articles. Make pieces. Start another performance space if I fucking have to. Honor the memory of friends and lovers who are gone and oh Jesus, every day is so good that I am here to remember them and make the day matter. I have not eluded death. Fat chance. Just maybe one particular version of it that might have cut things short in a certain way. Keep alive, knowing that it is all frosting at this point. I very easily could have died in 1986 or 1987, or 1984 for that matter. That I did not is a good thing because these years have been strong and as full of good works, good sex, and good friends as I could possibly make them. Keep it up, dude.