

## AIDS, and other Dreams: Part 1

The ceiling is a different shade of white today, but it hasn't been painted over in years.

The clock on the other side of the room reads 03:27 in a ghastly neon red. I've been lying awake for what feels like seven days. The scarlet numbers stared back at me, beckoning me to arise. I tried to imagine my body sinking down further into the mattress out of spite, but it remained stagnant.

The glow of the incandescent bulbs from the hallway filtered into my room, the door set wide open so the nurses could pop their heads in every so often (read: not at all, until I pulled the 'help' cord at which point they were obligated to come in). I'm sure they cared just enough. The sound of coughs and stifled sobs also made their way into my room every so often. Perhaps their lotto tickets all read "PLEASE TRY AGAIN". Maybe they found out they had a short amount of time left on this Earth. Or, more plausibly, their porridge was served too cold.

It was not always 03:27. Some time ago it was 12:04 and I found myself plucking blades of grass from the earth to pass the time. They all had names. I named the first Sevrin, after my first love; I made sure the blade of grass was torn up at the root, and then into tiny, irreparable pieces, green juice trickling down my fingertips and staining my nails. The next was named Valerie, after the one whose touch I longed for the most; the blade of grass was torn right down the middle. Another's name was Max, after my first dog – but I'm not sure where that one went. Others had names such as Waterbottle, Mr. Wiggle, Bus 96, Gondola, Fern, and so on. None of them made sense. Two of them were clearly phallic.

My neighbour has the same thing as me, even though they initially told us that being in the same room would make it all worse. They told people not to touch us, not to breathe our air, and, most importantly, not to do anything that might 'excite' us, as if we had so much to be excited about the hospital bed hurts my back. At this rate, there might as well have been 10 of us in the same room – or 50, or 1000. Shove 1000 fags into a room and kill them all! Eradicate the epidemic: they'll fuck each other to death – no sacrifice, no victory, I suppose.

My neighbour's mother – bless her soul – told his father that "God might forgive a dick up his ass, but Jesus certainly didn't die for butches to scissor each other – it makes no sense anyway". Did Jesus even know what scissors were?

At another time, the clock read 01:00 sharp. We were naked. He held me close as I thought about the theory that atomically, because particles of a similar charge repel each other, our bodies never truly touch. Some people long to feel the skin of another, but I think I could live without that warmth for at least 17 minutes. It was all atomic attraction – nothing more. He acted as if a knife plunged into his chest 56 times. It might as well have.

The words, "You're insignificant" slipped from my mouth, unafraid and unreserved. Another knife wound. He asked me what I meant. I told him not to take it too personally. Another knife wound, gouged in deeper than the last.

They give everyone surgical masks when they come into the AIDS rooms. Will a surgical mask stop someone from sticking their finger in every pie? You've got the mask over the wrong opening, sir.

My own father never showed up. He had a cold and didn't want it to get worse.

My own mother stayed for 14 minutes and 37 seconds, approximately, after she was done at church. When she saw me, she pat my face completely dry with a towel and gave me a very light – almost absent – kiss on the spot on my forehead furthest away from any orifice. Usually she had a lot to say. This time she didn't. Perhaps she had won the lotto and didn't want me to know. Completely ridiculous considering you can only own 6 marriage aids in Texas, and her lotto winnings would certainly cover much more than 6 vibrators. When she left, she kissed her fingers, and then touched her fingers to my forehead in the same spot. She didn't look at me. She didn't want to jinx anything – it was Sunday, after all, and the lotto numbers were pulled on Mondays.

Inscribed on her wedding ring was an ominous message: "God always watches." Perhaps my father had another reason for not wanting to visit the AIDS ward – perhaps he was praying for a dick up his ass. Or maybe he was filling out the lotto numbers.

The devil once appeared to me, sitting across the room in the blue chair (not the red one – that was for my neighbour). Strangely, the devil looked like the server at a restaurant I frequented in my youth. She had a long tail with a penis at the end of it. She laughed at me. I laughed back. Her tail extended towards me: a coax, a plea.

"Go on – touch it! Don't be shy, you're already on your death bed," she said.

Another knife wound, except in *me* and not in my 1AM pseudo-lover.

I extended my arm and grasped on to it with no point to prove other than to assure myself that the devil was sitting in my room. The devil gasped in pain, but I didn't let go.

"With a grip like that, you might as well be straight. I'll talk to the Big Guy and see if he'll let you walk. He's not too forgiving though. The irony!" she laughed.

Some other time – 36:108, if I recall correctly – I found myself in the middle of a game of Reverse Russian Roulette. It's essentially the same, except the barrel had all the slots filled apart from one. It was a much greater feat to survive triple R than any other version of it. I was playing by myself, and I hadn't died – twice! The audacity. How was I going to get my money's worth of the coupon I had for Melinda's Maid Service if the gun didn't do its job?

A day or a week later (I can't remember), the nurse, armed with her surgical mask, came in and unstrapped me. "You can go for a walk," she said, "but only on this floor, and not into other rooms."

She placed a surgical mask over my face as a final condition for my freedom, however finite. She left almost as quickly as she had come in. I had been strapped in bed for too long to know what week, or second, or fraction of the year it was. Could I move my legs? Could I think straight if I wasn't straight?

I lay in my bed, free, thinking about lotto tickets, with the mask on my face. The humidity of my breath built up on my face. What day was it? My neighbour was sleeping. I had an urge. I thought to the devil, the penis in my hand, the grip I held. My neighbour awoke, frightened. He pulled the 'help' cord.

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### AIDS and other Dreams: Part 2

I woke up prematurely, but kept my eyes closed.

"She's not... gay, exactly..."

"She's still one of them. She's got AIDS. It'll just be easier."

"She's obviously trying to tell us something if she's sneaking around her room touching—"

"Molesting, you mean? She's a liar, and that's that. I'm sorry, but she has her sentence."

As if I didn't already have a sentence: being queer was enough to get killed. Their stares burned into my skin. I opened my eyes at once and saw my mother and an officer. I was in a new room.

"Oh! She's awake!"

"Can you explain yourself?"

I shrugged. Explain what? The devil's penis tail? The fact that I was going to die anyway?

"What was his name?" I asked.

"That doesn't matter," the officer said. Of course it didn't.

"Please, honey, just explain yourself," my mother begged. I shrugged again. What explanation could I give for my yearning to have a penis in my hand as a gay woman? For their hatred?

She burst out in tears, and the officer shook his head.

No one escapes the little tag on the big toe. Should they?

I asked for a lotto ticket and cold porridge for my last meal. The ticket was a winner.