

'Fifteen Minutes'

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I sit wooden, staring at my x-slashed calendar, calculating the days remaining. Prison is peppered with waiting, twenty plus years of maximum security captivity has habituated me to this reality. But this is different, this wait is for a pending HIV test. A critical screening, precipitated by a sexual assault. A tacit insult heaped atop an acute injury, regardless of endgame result.

The consequences of a positive reading weigh heavily upon me I know the odds, the stakes of a loss in this toss of dice - the limited accessibility and low quality of critical health care in the New York State prison system. These downsides hyperlink my mind back to the source, the cause - the rape.

I am healing, processing the incident. Men aren't supposed to get raped. I'm reaching deep, reforming my psyche. We weren't supposed to talk about it when we are. I'm working at reordering my worldview, all I once knew, now crashed askew.

Men weren't supposed to allow themselves to get raped. Nor to cry - or scream. To scream out the rage born of hurt, failure, and helplessness.

Time ticks, and I lick my wounds - those seen, and those not. More days crossed off. My fears, anxiety and depression converging into an amorphous spectre, looming and haunting - invisible as the virus cells swimming in my blood, maybe. Silent as the prison staff who allowed this savagery, out of spite - or simple sloth. Omnipresent as the rape culture in our society, a full contact sport championed by our patriarchal primacy. Vibrant as the flight signals pulsing through my nerves. But there is nowhere to run to. No escape.

- This spectre has cast its shadow over me before. A personal HIV scare in the nineties. A garbled communication of test results. Then, AIDS patients were seen as lepers - and shunned as such. Back when HIV was still a short term death sentence. Where you had to pay for your stay on death row. Forsaken and soon forgotten.

These fright echoes, ever resounding, serves as a background score for today's dread. Even though it's better these days, with meds and social tolerance. Sort of - kind of... One can live, but damned nevertheless.

The appointment notice flutters in my hands, the test - tomorrow. My shiver does not shake the chill. Twenty-four hours. There will be no rest tonight, no sleep. I can't halt the thought train, steaming hard - relentless.

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The nurse is trim, middle-aged and indifferent.

"Reason for testing?"

Sexual assault incident. These words don't stick in my throat, not anymore, by now I may as well be reciting my DIN number. Our system at work, redundancy rules the day. Her eyes flick up to mine, assessing, the stigma of male rape, untouchable. Her face tightens, an expression set, grim and stony.

The questions, filing in blanks that nobody will ever look at, less to care. Questions, questions and more questions. The onus on me for answers, yet none forthcoming for my questions.

- I used to be a certified HIV test counselor. I know these questions, this routine. I can do this.

"Zip code of last outside residence?"

I think hard, but it's been so long.

"Zip code Sir?"

I don't know.

"Zip code Sir?"

She is a machine. An automaton in white, unstoppable - soulless. I make up a number, a ridiculous number. It fills the blank. I feel adrift, a man apart - the only human present.

I am handed a plastic specimen tube, it's cool to my touch. A Dr. Suessian toothbrush nestled within.

"Apply the swab to inside of your cheeks, and replace in the tube, Sir."

This is new. No more blood needed. A rapid test. Just a bit of spit, and fifteen minutes. The swab is rough and alien to my flesh. I fumble with the tube - Childlike, helpless.

"Sir, place the swab in the tube." Her eyes are dead. Stones.

The quirky swab contraption finally mates into place. I slide it across tabletop, gently - as is it were a vial of nitroglycerine.

"Wait here."

As if I have a choice... The door hisses closed. The first moment ticks off, as if my heartbeat has been conscripted to clock duty.

Fifteen minutes, what used to take a week, then days - but for all the new technology, the progress, it matters naught for the one waiting. It is agonizing, seemingly endless - a lifetime.

- I am sucked back in time. To that key instant, when I realized the true intent of the assault. The narrow bridge from simply physical to sexual dominance. A span timeless. Incomprehensible as it is unforgettable. Unbelievable, even as fully present and experiencing the brutal shock of forced penetration. This is not really happening to me... I fight my way back to the present, paling as paradise - yet preferred over that bookmarked chapter of hell.

The electric hum of antiquated light ballasts sings backup to the too loud beat of my heart, its' glow gone sickly yellow and pale. No means to tell the time elapsed. My ears strain for her sounds, her footsteps.

I rise, my joints mechanical, pacing the few steps of available space - just to fill the void. I peek through scarred plexiglass, smeared from noses pressed alike - what were their thoughts, their feelings - their fears. A flicker of movement, a phantom in my peripheral vision. A squeak of rubber on overwaxed tile floor. An accent note of sensible shoes, nurse's shoes.

I backpedal and sit - a Bauhousian steel stool, bolted secure, to battleship grey concrete floor. I struggle to appear poised, but this blunted stalagmite feels like a toxic toadstool under my overcompressed form. I try for relaxed, at least neutral. Who am I kidding - I'd rather swan dive the nearest abyss, than endure another moment of this.

The steel doorslab cycles - open, closed. The nurse is posted again, on her side of the narrow table. The no man's land, all that separates me from the enemy, or at least the karmic telegram.

Her face is blank, betraying nothing, clueless. A whisp of paper clasped lightly between her pasty fingers. The results. I freefall in the moment - suppressing a wild urge to wrest this slip from her grasp. Madness, reined in, but barely.

"Sir, the results of your test is negative for HIV antibodies." Negative. I read the words over and over again. They shimmer and swim in my vision, awash in unshed tears.

"...Sir?"

I can't speak, can't open my mouth. I am numb, drained and relieved. But I feel no elation.

"Sir?"

There is no victory - Only less loss, less damage.
I am still broken, awaiting repair.