

What we leave behind...

Its been a decade. 10 years ago, I was diagnosed with HIV. What feels like a lifetime ago. Its hard to recollect everything that has happened since. The challenges, the defiance, the fight and the passions. So I decided to go back to that moment ten years ago in India. The beginning of a new chapter. To start somewhere...

Yesterday Was

“And so, yesterday was” I wrote in my diary, prepared to document the events of the past few days. The exhaustion of working with an Indian NGO that was rescuing girls from illegal prostitution was overwhelming – and I needed to confide in my little book. Jot down the experiences. The emotions. The thoughts and the haunting images that had been burnt into my memory over the past few days.

My colleague Alexandra and I were allowed to join these nightly operations. Witnessing the chaos and depths of Indias lurking shadows. Stepping into a heart of darkness. A world of crime and prostitution. It was these trips, these stories, that I always saved up my money to do. Work for a year to finance these expeditions. A passion project – to do something more meaningful with my life and tell stories from around the world.

Back home I was simply a photographer. Free spirited, shooting Congresses, fashion editorials and simple advertisements. Never on a financially sound side, but I couldn't complain. I enjoyed the liberties of travel and my freelance life. And of my free love.

Sure there were a few women in my past whom I committed to – special women whom I still call best friends until today. But with beginning thirty I simply enjoyed my single life too much to commit. I charmed, I rhymed and played with a passion. A devotee of the woman. I loved them all. A travelling poet, writer and adventurer. Curious about everyone, committed to nothing.

My sexuality was always a source of freedom. A liberty that was more important to me than a career or money or any material goods. The freedom to be who I am, to enjoy and to live who I am. It gave me confidence and radiated more attraction than was actually there.

To take a break from the exhausting days in the red light districts of Mumbai and Pune, Alexandra and I had decided to visit the infamous Osho Ashram – a meditation center that prided itself with sexual liberty and attracted western ideas of eastern mysticism at ridiculous prices.

“And so, yesterday was” – was the last thing I wrote at the breakfast table, when Alexandra interrupted and we would embark to the ashram. A sentence fragment that would freeze time and would act like a reminder in the years to come.

Foreshadowing the end of a chapter in my life.

We arrived at the Osho Ashram – which was oozing that horribly expensive, westernised idea of meditation. I was disgusted at seeing the contrast between the floating maroon robes in black marble halls, and the impoverished Indian street dwelling family in front of it.

Sceptically I would enter, only happy to see a beautiful, raven haired persian receptionist. I was mesmerized – and defiant to enter for her sake. And to enjoy those stunning dark eyes.

To keep its mystic aura of sexuality, the Ashram insists on an HIV test, to which I said yes and completed with ease. I used to do them when my father was alive. As a doctor he included them in my yearly checkup. Yet after he passed, they faded out slowly. Yes, I had a lot of sexual partners, but I never considered myself at risk of HIV – the older I got, the more conscientious I was with my condom use; I admit – more out of fear of unwanted pregnancies.

The flirtation with the beautiful persian had caused a static atmosphere. We were fascinated by one another. Looking forward to get the registration process over with, to exchange more information, more glances and more scents. Sex was in the air. Alexandra just smiled, rolled her eyes and walked into the blood screening room. I had already donated my prick of blood, now I could focus on getting lost in those beautiful brown eyes.

A thick dutch accent interrupted the beautiful tension from behind me...”excuse me are you Christopher?” the old woman asked coarsely.

“Yes yes” I replied impatiently, annoyed by the interruption. “Everything alright?”

“Could you come with me for a moment please? There has been an issue with your test...” Her expression was grave. Serious.

“Uh yeah sure” I got up, lightheartedly. I followed her lead into a glass cubicle. Into the prism that would swallow this version of me.

I turned around to catch the persian womans eye. There it was; the laugh of the eyes that communicated chapters of passion without saying a word – that anticipating desire of wanting to melt into one another. I smiled at her. She smiled back.

It is the last memory of my previous life. The last time I would flirt in years.

The old woman's words cast a spell.

"Your results came back positive".

A haunting few words that pierced every part of my body and mind, clenching every muscle. I was tossed into a stormy sea. I was drowning in front of this old woman. Frozen in shock. Unable to move. My eyes must have conveyed terror. For years to come, the thought of "this can't be happening. This can't be true" would return in waves. Incredulous I sat there, listening to her speak, but not hearing a word.

My mind was rattling a thousand thoughts a second. What does this mean? What would my life be like? Will I die of this? Can I have children? What will people say? What will my family say? How will I tell them? How did this happen?

A waterfall of questions filled my body with chaos and fear. I was terrified of what this means, simply because I didn't know anything.

And yet my incredulity and ability to emotionally distance myself from horrible situations provided me with the mask I needed. I knew I need to focus. To stay calm. I would need to research. Tense but focused I stuttered out the questions that I needed to know answers to.

The Dutch lady still told me that we'll take more blood. About the Elisa test method, and that in 24 hours we will have certainty. I spoke to her as if I was speaking about someone else. That I was a journalist, asking about the fate of some poor sap sitting next to me. As if it didn't concern me, my body and my life.

The lady escorted me out of the prism, out to the marble gates of the ashram. I saw Alexandra - I told her I wouldn't be able to enter. I'm not allowed to. She nodded. She understood. Smiled gently. I told her I'll see her in the hotel. A mutual sense of understanding, of kindness and friendship bound us then and there.

And I started to run. I was on a mission now. And the next 24 hours would be the longest ever lived.

As a child of the 80s my preconceptions of HIV were simple. Freddie Mercury, Philadelphia, Aids and the horrific pictures of people dying. Mostly homosexuals. And Lady Di shaking someone's hand. My fear spat out my purest ignorance in thinking that they must have made a mistake. I couldn't be positive. It's impossible.

I would have to face 24 hours of horrible uncertainty. A pendulum, slowly swinging heavily over my head. And I had homework to do. My journalistic background came into effect – I would research the hell out of HIV. Find out everything. Symptoms, side effects...every little thing there would be to know.

Within the next 24 hours I would become an expert.

I tried to put all the fear and terror away. But it continuously resurfaced in the shapes of questions. How will I tell my family? What will they think? What will my life look like?

I knew I couldn't do this on my own. Calculating the time difference to Europe, I threw out lifelines around the world. To my brother and Mona, my best friend. I knew that I was beaten, and I would need support.

"Do you have time to talk? It's not confirmed, but it looks like I have just been diagnosed with HIV..." My mayday had been sent out. And I anxiously waited for a reply.

And they answered quickly. The red alert was given, and like the amazing people that they are, they saved my sanity that night. After a few Skype calls, and telling the two of my situation, we schemed a plot to all do our part.

We would be a team of researchers to gather all the information there was. And in the next hours my mind would turn into a sponge, soaking up details of detection limits, viral loads and ways of transmission.

I followed the virus` path...and remembered. A few months ago, a strange illness had struck me down for weeks. Nobody knew what it was, but I had felt miserable as never before. Malaria-like symptoms – waves of high fevers coming and going, accompanied by a drained weakness and loud, heavy breathing. Death at the doorstep. That was it. That was the virus and its venomous claws draining my life from me. Remembering this sensation of dying filled me with panic. Until today those weeks of illness run shivers down my spine. No doctor would test for HIV though. I was a straight man – HIV simply wasn't on their radar.

Ever since I have had this dry cough. That cough I thought was caused by the pollution in India's cities. The chest pain, that I thought was from bad posture – but in reality it was my solar plexus pushing my defenses to the limit.

All the symptoms I read about; the whole timeline of HIV's attack on my body. Actions and reactions. Attacks and defenses.

It was obvious, and terrifying – and yet I found a fascination that has captured me ever since.

Fear encompassed me. The fear of the changes my life will go through; the need for medication, fear of the unknown of what will happen. Side effects? Sexlessness? Pain? Agony? Even death?

Panic comes in waves. Every once in a while I called Mona again; crying in uncertainty. She held me tight over the internet connection.

And yet the research helped. It gave me knowledge of what I could expect. Of what would happen. A glimpse of the future. Even if was abstract and far away, it seemed that a normal life was possible. I somehow had to overwrite all the information that was embedded in my 80ies memory about HIV and AIDS. Format my cerebral hard drive.

I suddenly remembered a South Park episode where two of the kids get infected – and watched it online. I laughed a lot.

And I wasn't sure anymore. I was Positive.

And although, for months to come, I could still not grasp the idea that I was HIV positive, I knew that I was. I lived a contradiction – of what I knew to be true, and what I didn't want to be true. My research simply added the facts together. It made sense. Acceptance is different – that would still take years – but the knowledge was there. And I couldn't run away.

Having slept very little, anxiously waiting for the Ashram to call me, I smoked two million cigarettes the next morning. Alexandra went ahead, did a meditation course, while I paced up and down. I knew the result. I knew what would happen. I knew I was positive. And yet I wanted to have it in writing. I already contacted the HIV organisation back home; to let them know I'll be coming, to ask basic questions. Reluctantly, I knew I had to start preparing for a life with HIV. The back in my head still told me that there was still the 1,5% statistical hope that it could all be a mistake. That it was all wrong. That I was negative all along. A hope I held on to for weeks until I returned home; to recheck everything.

That afternoon I picked up my result. Confirming what I had found out.

I had a long dinner with Alexandra. It was her first time in India, and she was afraid I might just head out back home. I reassured her I wouldn't.

We would be here for another 12 days – working on our stories.

12 Days that would be my last in this life. Before I would have to open a new chapter. 12 Days that would be filled with worries about the future and a new life I didn't want or I simply couldn't imagine. 12 days in which HIV was still a theoretical part of my life.

I knew that going home, back into a cold winter with the tasks at hand, would make everything real. Too real. At least I wanted to postpone it. I continued working, wandering, researching and thinking.

Until those 12 days passed.

Upon boarding the flight back home, I knew this chapter of my life would end. And a new one would open up.

I would have to confront the fear. This scary new life and the challenge ahead of me. Little did I know, that despite the hardships that were to come, it would make me thrive, make me live like never before. And give me a new sense of being, of joy and passion.

That old dutch woman told me, that after a diagnosis, some people would be happier, healthier and more present than before, and that it turned their life around to the better.

Now, ten years later, I have to agree with her.