

BLOOD BROTHERS

I shouldn't even have been in the jail and the police knew it but just didn't care. Finally they took me over to the nut house where I belonged, but not before I had to watch a big riot put 37 men in the hospital. It was a weird thing to watch, men getting broomsticks through their necks and their heads stomped against steel benches. Especially since I was hallucinating anyway. Parts of it looked like a cartoon to me and I even laughed. I used to be ashamed of my inappropriate affect, but lately I've noticed lots of other people getting the same way.

What was worse than the riot, from a part-time psychotic's perspective, was scrubbing up the blood afterwards. They'd taken all the rioters out, which temporarily created a situation in which white men were a majority and everyone had a bed to sleep on. They gave me a special solvent to remove the blood soaked into the plaster walls. It seemed to kind of crawl, to leave veins deep in the white walls. I was getting pretty artistic about smearing it around, but a man named Silva kept harassing me. Nobody liked "Silva the Sadist"; he was a brutal, sarcastic wife-beater who picked the weak to torture and menace. He called me "Psycho" and always tried to intimidate me and push me around. I may be crazy, but I'm not even close to being stupid. I pointed out a trickle of pink-stained foam on his hands and said, "Watch out you don't get than into a cut." It took a second, then fear pounded up in his eyes and he

jumped up as if he could run away from himself. I'd neutralized him. All it took was a remark that turned innocent human blood into a treacherous serum of despicable, unmanly death.

AIDS has transformed blood; turned the vessel of life into a symbol of death as definitely as any shotgun could do it. A lot of men in prison are the kind who like blood; the sight of it, the taste of it, the implications of it. It's a sign of a job well done, a clue to places where things work out, a spoor of vital and unauthorized life. As long as you're bleeding, you're alive.

I'm a fan myself. A woman once told me I gave her the creeps by laughing when I was injured and bleeding, by obviously enjoying the taste of my own blood. I liked the taste of her blood, too, and considered it an aphrodisiac. It's probably peculiar to males. Blood plays to mixed emotions in female sexuality, but for men sex is resolutely rooted in blood being up to full pressure.

But AIDS makes it different thing altogether. It's gotten all queasy and scary to have somebody's blood on your hands. I came into the penal system literally soaked with strange blood. The cops handled me with rubber gloves, which first gave me the clue that disease was contaminating the open air of violence itself. At my trial I watched the rabid, yapping prosecutor brandishing my bloodstained machete and wished he would cut himself on it. A slim chance in the HIV lottery, but he might have found himself ripped out of his world as fast as they

ripped me out of mine.

Blood banks and blood tests have become dark corridors where death can pop out unexpectedly in its most shameful and disgusting guise. Men highly devoted to blood sports are starting to become delicate, betrayed by a promiscuous sexual taint the way they are betrayed by women. All inmates admitted to the California state prison system are tested for HIV. I've sat in a holding cell and watched a man taken out by men in white medical shirts. I sat and listened to the steel and concrete corridors echoing with his long, keening scream of useless denial. Nobody looked at anyone else, nobody said anything for a long time. His blood, not ours. For now.

The transcendence of this insidious contamination is becoming more widely known and felt. Even television announcers were quick to leap from Isiah Thomas's blood, splattered on a basketball court by a blow from Karl Malone, to Magic Johnson's blood, widely remarked to contain the poisons of shame and death. An intravenous segregation was suggested--only decades after cutaneous discrimination was rejected. Suddenly the NBA shrinks down to microscopic interaction, the wide playing fields are traps where even the fastest men alive might not escape from death, and athletics becomes a relationship where even the strongest and toughest men look at bloodshed with fear. And look at each other in a way different from ever before.

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I remember playing Blood Brothers as a kid. My friends and I cut our hands and pressed the bleeding wounds together, mingling our blood in a ceremony of the ultimate male intimacy we could imagine. We got the idea from the film "Broken Arrow", where we saw the ceremony done between a white man and an Apache. Beneath the obvious appeals of bloodshed, pain, ritual, and access to weapons I had a glimpse of what it had meant to the men who did it for real--a tingle of the feeling that some universal bond of life and death coursed like a river beneath the surface of our separate and individual skins.

There is a special prison unit in Chino, California where HIV positive inmates--like the faceless screamer who managed to twist the word "no" into a broken, guttering aria of utter despair--are kept segregated. I talked to a trustee who took them their meal carts, curious about that microcosm of death walled away within the prison. He was vehement in his distaste for it, furious at ever having set foot there. I was not to imagine emaciated queers from TV disease movies, wasting heroically away. These were largely heterosexual and very dangerous men; junkies, rapists, violent homosexual predators. A close cage full of the definitely, desperately damned. Men with nothing to lose, not even the pathetically shreds of worth they'd had before they knew.

They taunted him when he brought them their food, almost perfunctorily sliding in on him and reminding him that they could kill him practically with a touch. One ravaged, gray-bearded spook would spit within an inch

of his feet every time he passed. Saliva as menacing as any blood or semen. In short, the unit is the inner circle of our most modern-day hell. The main word was "careful". He moved through the unit like an old man, like he was inching through a den of poison serpents, with the grinding deliberation that lies just short of panic. That's where his fury came from, from all the taut caution.

My own AIDS test must have turned out negative, because I never heard anything about it. Which would be a comfort, but it was before I did time and got bloodied a bit inside, before I got out and started mingling my fluids with border whores and literary groupies. I could get another test now. For free. Get the word. Lots of people do it. Maybe I'm afraid to know. Or of sitting in that waiting room braced for another endless scream of agony from the back room. Or maybe I've just given them enough of my damn blood.

When I was in jail awaiting trial, we shared razors, hurrying to get presentable for the judge in the short time the razors were allowed in the tank. Some cheap Bic disposables were used by 10 or 15 men in an hour. Some men were oblivious to the new symbolism of the cutting edge, others well aware of it. Once I finished shaving and turned to offer the razor to another man, who took it, then eyed it closely for bloodstains. I let him know I saw him checking my face for nicks. He grinned sheepishly and asked me how many people had used the razor. I told him just two, myself and Martin. Martin; tough, bluff, manly.--

emphatically hetero. He looked at his scruffy reflection, then back at the razor. He shrugged, facing up to our powerlessness in matters like bad blood. He said, "Well, I guess Martin's all right." Martin; intravenous amphetamine user. I said, "Nobody's all right." He laughed and lathered up. I watched him shaving. Shaving very carefully. As fine an edge as technology can produce for the price, moving over the finest skin on our body, any micrometer-fine movement a potential link to Martin, to me, to the rest of the scum in the cell, to the locked-down abattoir of disconsolate death in the Chino unit. You take a deep breath and concentrate the mind, let me tell you--lean in close to the mirror for a real good look.

Let me put it this way: when you can't bleed any more you're a dead man, brother.