

HIVx2 . Plays by Craig Shafer

Wizards in Phoenix

Our unnamed narrator is a grounded and fairly no-nonsense young woman in her mid to late teens. We aren't certain who she is addressing during her narrative and it may be a key point for an actor playing her to determine this audience. Beneath her spunky and at times flippant demeanor lies a pained sense of reality that she tries hard to hide. She detests pat sentimentality and it is important that any displays of overt emotionalism be more underplayed than overplayed.

-c.s.

I was in fourth grade when things first changed. It was during recess and we were playing dodge-ball. It had rained earlier that day and the cement was still wet. I slipped, trying to get away from the ball, trying to keep from getting hit. I slipped, and I skinned my knee up pretty bad. Our teacher was watching us and, uh, she came running over, her eyes all wide, like some kinda deer caught in the headlights. She came over and told all the other little fourth-graders to back off, to just let me be. She told them that I was different. She said I was sick. Fourth graders aren't as sheltered as they used to be. They knew what she was talking about. They knew I had *it*. No more sharing lunch with me anymore, I can tell you that. Scratch. Kissing boys. Scratch. Pretending I was just like all of the other kids. Big. Fat. Scratch.

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Don't even try it. Seriously. I'm nobody's poster kid, so you can go ahead and put your red ribbons away. Thanks. No, seriously, if you wanna listen, I'm going to talk, but I'll keep talking even if there's nobody here but me. The walls can listen. I just need to get it out. Sharing is caring, right? But if any of you get offended quickly, or get all butt-hurt or whatever, then do us all a favor and just leave now, okay? Because I'm just gonna talk, and to be honest, I, umm, never fit into the AIDS Club very well. You have no frigging idea what I'm talking about, do you? Okay, well, first off, I'm not a gay guy. Yeah, I mean, I could totally never be that fabulous. Don't get me wrong, I've totally tried, but, umm, yeah, no, big-time failure. And, umm, I have never shot anything up. There's times I probably would have felt better if I had of, but I haven't. And, nope, I'm not a hemophiliac. You guys are totally stumped now, right? Don't worry. It happens. My mother had it when she gave birth to me. You would think that after she had my brother and he turned up positive that once was enough, but Mommy Dearest was apparently a firm follower of the try-try-again philosophy. Well, umm, she try-tried-again with me and messed it up a second time. I was at the doctor's about a year ago and he told me the most inspirational thing. "These new medications are amazing, babies born to positive mothers today, well, almost all of them are perfectly healthy." Umm...that's just great. I mean, I dunno if this was like a head's up in case I was planning to put a bun in the oven or what, but, it doesn't really matter, 'cause here I am. *(She laughs and postures dramatically for her audience.)* Ta-da! Yeah, Mom was a real winner, lemme tell ya. Life was a party, 24/7. And good for her, seriously. I'm just not sure how kids fit into that little equation. So, we lived with my aunt and uncle, both of us, my brother and I. And we we're lucky. They're kinda new-age hippie types, but, umm, don't get the wrong idea, they totally shower every day even if they don't use deodorant. They're organic herb farmers, if you

can believe it. Organic farming is friggin' tricky in the desert, guys, seriously. And they're...good people. That's what counts.

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Okay, so I'm almost feeling like we should be stopping for like question and answer breaks or something. *She stops to role-play this.* Did you develop your smart-ass attitude to cope with being positive? Nope, sorry. Nice try though, I'd still be a wise-ass even if I didn't have it. So, really, how was growing up with HIV? Umm, humm, let's see...well, it really fuckin' sucked, actually. What d'ya think? Hold up, put away your Kleenex boxes or I'll be forced to do my infamous Kermit the Frog and Miss Piggy impersonations. What? They rock, okay? Seriously. *(She pauses, it's clear she's faltering and trying to smile.)* Seriously. I think maybe it's gonna rain this afternoon. You guys think? I like when it rains. There's this like patch of orange trees right down from our house. Like maybe a block or so away. And my brother and I would head down there, when we were younger, whenever it rained and we would sit on the curb and get all wet from the rain. There's something about how it smelled then. Like warm gummy candy or something. The rain hitting the hot sidewalk and mixing with the smell of the orange trees. We'd go down there to, like watch the snails on the sidewalk. Okay, umm, hold-on, don't call the men in white coats yet okay. Seriously. Whenever it rained, these snails would just like appear out of nowhere and go on this cross-country trek across the sidewalk. It's umm..weird, because some of them would head towards the orange trees, crawling towards the roots where it was wet and safe. But some of them would crawl the other direction, towards the edge of the sidewalk where it met the drain. I could never watch them crawl off the edge. I yelled at them, "What are you guys doing? Don't go. Go back the other way," and umm...they didn't listen, ya know? I remember asking my brother if they were okay once they fell into the water in the drain. I wanted to know if they survived, ya know? He told me they all did. That they had secret snail parties down in the sewer. With little party hats and snail cakes. Ya know, the funny thing is...I don't know if he was lying because he didn't want me to be all hurt or because if he needed to believe that too.

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I'd like to describe my brother to you, like, that's really important to me, but umm..I don't really know how to. I feel like anything I say is just gonna sound stupid ya know, and I don't want to sound stupid about him. I don't. He was, like, my protector, ya know? He made me lunches and put stupid notes in them, little cartoons about Kermit and Miss Piggy. Drawings of what their kids would look like. Scary thought, huh? It's kinda like we lived on our own little planet, and we were the only ones who really got "it". He made up this like language, our own language, and we would speak in it to each other when we were out in public. It was like, "Feedle-meedle-beedle-nee." "Weedle-sheedle-deedle-bee." I'm surprised my aunt and uncle didn't disown us. I mean, we'd do this shit at like Taco Bell, at like top volume, okay? Like, I think they thought we were just talking nonsense. But, umm, we got it. We did. We'd lie awake at night, really late, and he'd tell me stories about how this beautiful guy was gonna come sweep me off my feet, I mean a really hot guy, and then I'd be happy forever. He painted. I have his paintings of the desert all over my

room. He umm, painted the desert in all kinda colors. Like the rocks would be bright blue and the sky would be hot pink and the lightning lime green. Stuff like that. Like he saw the world a different way, and it was real for him. I, umm, wasn't there the last time he went to the hospital. I had been out for a few days, drinking with my friends and getting stoned. I umm, got home and found out I had to go down there to see him. He just looked like he was sleeping. His long hair flat against the stupid white pillows, his lips all rosy-pink. So I sat. I sat and I sat. I read to him from *The Wind in the Willows* and *The Jungle Book*, stuff we read when we were kids. And I sat. I didn't sleep, not really. And I didn't eat. I just sat. And I convinced myself that he was just sleeping, and that it was really a joke that all those machines with their tubes and their wires were all hooked up to him. It was just a bad joke and he was gonna suddenly jump up from his bed and be like, "Hey, fooled ya. Let's go drive into the desert, biscuit." I willed him to do that. I silently commanded him. And, umm, he didn't, ya know. My aunt and my uncle came to sit with me, so quiet, ya know? Just waited with me. When the doctors said that it was almost time, I was like, "Time for what? Time for this all to be over. For it to be a really bad dream and now I'm gonna wake up and have a real mom and a brother who's gonna out live me? Is that what it's time for? Is it?" I need you know that I talked to him about the Wizards. I did. I told him that I was sorry and that I was just being a little bitch, and that I believed. I believed *so much*. I needed him to know that I believed him, ya know? I did. He didn't wake up. I don't know if he heard me. I had my hands on his cheeks ya know, afterwards, and they were still warm. I was laughing and crying, at the same time and babbling like an idiot about the Wizards and they had to take me out. I wouldn't leave. No, that's not true. I couldn't leave.

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A few months before that, he and I had driven out into the desert in his busted-up old pick-up truck. I mean we friggin' had a party every time it started up, okay? Seriously. And umm, we went out because there was gonna be a storm and we wanted to see it. So, we drove out offa the road and just sat with some peanut butter and banana sandwiches and watched. *Lightning in the desert is like spider webs*, ya know? You can feel the electricity. We just sat in silence, because we didn't have to talk. We didn't. He umm, he told me that he wanted to tell me a secret, and I said that was cool. He umm, started talking about the lightning and he said, "Biscuit, the lightning isn't just random you know. Everybody thinks it's a natural phenomenon with heat and everything, but it's not. There's wizards up there. We can see 'em, from right here in our city. And they're painting the sky, Biscuit, they are. It's their way of telling us how beautiful it's gonna be when we go up there." He went on to talk about how mom was gonna be up there, all healthy, no drugs and how, umm, it was gonna be like a paradise or whatever. That we were being tested here, and up there it was gonna be different. That the wizards were telling us that. And, ya know what, I got really pissed, ya know. I got really really pissed. And I yelled. I yelled at my brother. "What the fuck is that, seriously, you know? There's no wizards, man. There's not. This is it. We had a drugged up mom who gave us this shit in our bodies, in our blood. We're gonna die and then that's it. You just need to wake up, dude, cuz this is it. Last call." And then I just sat there, and he looked straight ahead. He didn't say a word. Nothing, ya know. Just

straight ahead. And I wanted to take it back, I did. But I couldn't. So I felt my eyes sting, sting real bad. And I sat there. He drove us back home and we never talked about it. Until I told him. When I knew I had to, ya know?

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So, umm, most of you guys have seen all those great ads for the medications, right? I'm sure you have. They show these hot guys like frigging mountain climbing or white-water rafting or whatever, right? Like, umm, I've conquered my AIDS! (*Makes the "conquering" sound.*) Go away, evil HIV! I conquer thee! Umm, I've umm, run through all of those drugs. Okay, so I haven't climbed Mt. Everest, but, shit, I'm alive right? I've broken through, as the doctors call it. The disease in my body has become resistant to the drugs...all of them. There aren't any left for me to try. And I really wanted to go white-water rafting, ya know? I did. Umm, anyway, I'm sorry if any of you feel like I pulled the ol' "one-two" on ya or whatever. Maybe I should have told you the truth in the beginning. I know what you're thinkin' now..."Shit, that girl's a real smart-ass for being that sick." Well, ya know, it's kept me entertained, okay? It has. I need you guys to know where it goes from here, tho. I'm not gonna go in any hospital, okay? I'm not. I know what I'm gonna do. And I know it's gonna be soon. I'm going to pray that the truck'll start up for me one last time and I'm gonna head out to the desert and wait. It's gonna be like he's right next to me, in the passenger's seat. "Biscuit, it's time for us to go, babe. It is." And I'm gonna wait for the Wizards. And when they start painting the sky with their giant wands, I'll know I'm ready. It's gonna be soon, and I'm okay with that. I am. There's gonna be some hot guys up there, and lemme tell ya, I've waited long enough. It's gonna rock. I know my brother never lied to me. I believe you. I'm ready.