

Trust Exercise

*In a pandemic, following the rules is an act of love. But the HIV crisis taught **Stephanie Nolen** that overlooking them can be, too.*

Stephanie Nolen is the author of *28: Stories of AIDS in Africa*. An eight-time National Newspaper Award winner, she has reported on epidemics and other crises in more than eighty countries. She is isolating from this pandemic in a fishing village in northern Cape Breton.

When I moved to Johannesburg seventeen years ago, Southern Africa was the epicentre of the global AIDS pandemic. HIV was a menacing hum in the background of life in the city. Celebrities died “of a long illness.” Politicians died “of a long illness.” The obituary pages of the Jo’burg Star were full of the faces of young people who died “after an illness.” Saturdays were for funerals—and in the townships, like Soweto, also for the parties that followed. They were called After-tears: loud, sweaty, sexy affirmations of life.

I was in my early thirties; one in three people my age in the city was living with HIV. The figure was closer to one in two in Lesotho and Swaziland and KwaZulu-Natal, where I often went to work, reporting on the pandemic. A lot of my friends were living with HIV—some openly and fiercely, some privately, some without knowing it because they didn’t want to get the test.

I adapted to pandemic life. I waited with friends picking up antiretrovirals at overcrowded public hospital pharmacies. I went for long walks with friends waiting for a call with the results of their CD4 count, the all-important measurement of how much of the virus was in their bloodstream, of how sick they were.

And I went to baby showers. Because so many people I knew were having babies.

I celebrated every one of those dimple-kneed, tiny-fingered arrivals. But when those babies were surprise babies, which they often seemed to be, questions circled in my head. Unplanned babies meant unprotected sex, and it was hard for me—the Canadian, the rule-follower, cocooned in a different logic—to understand why anyone would be having unprotected sex when the threat of HIV was so present and so powerful.

My friends broke it down for me with a patience and a kindness they did not owe me. They explained to me

how sometimes, you know what’s at stake, but you want to show your partner that you trust them. Or you want them to feel like they can trust you. Sometimes you know better, but you choose what feels good. (Sometimes a high-stakes gamble is what feels good.) Sometimes you know there’s a risk, but there are so many other risks—you’ve survived apartheid, survived a carjacking, survived an abusive father, survived malaria—that this is one more thing you can’t make yourself care too much about. And sometimes you just want to stop hearing the hum for a few minutes; you want to believe that everything is going to be fine.

Sex with a condom is the rational choice when there’s a good chance a third of the people in the bar are living with HIV. But it’s not always the human choice, and no amount of billboards or magazine ads or didactic soap opera plot lines will make it feel that way, not every time.

I hadn’t thought about any of this for a while, and then a new pandemic came to my front door in Canada. And I watched everyone around me change everything about how they lived, overnight: no Friday night at the pub, set up “school” at the kitchen table, don’t go visit Granny, stay out of the park. Wear a mask, stand six feet away, cancel the wedding. Propelled by fear, for ourselves and our families; and by love, for our grandparents and our sibling with cancer and our neighbour with lupus; and by a lack of options, as everything closed up and shut down—we remade our lives into something unrecognizable. We did the rational thing. The thing the radio and the prime minister and the Facebook ads told us to do.

Mostly, we did. In the first days of the North American epidemic, a friend of mine went on a quick trip, reasoning she wouldn’t be interacting with many people—and came home with the virus. When Covid-19 was ravaging

New York, another friend and her family left their Manhattan apartment for small-town New England, going from the global epicentre of the virus to a place with no infections, because the constant sirens were making her crazy with anxiety and she wanted to go somewhere that felt safe. A third pal had a “very small” birthday party for her seven-year-old. A couple in my extended family travelled a long way so they could ride out the lockdown at the cottage—in the teeth of a government plea not to do that very thing. And logical, Canadian, privileged me—I shook my head at those choices my friends made.

And then I bent the rules a bit myself. Had a quick coffee in the backyard, six feet (nearly) from a friend; ducked under the barrier of a closed national park for a solitary ski.

HIV taught me how viruses rely on these moments, when we give in to pleasure or need or want or thrill or risk. Their survival depends on our physiological behaviours (breathe, sneeze, bleed) and also our emotional

needs. I want to say to my friend, over coffee, *I trust you, I am not afraid of you*. I want to believe for a minute that life is normal.

With HIV, the stakes are high but the circle of risk is comparatively small—you risk your own life, you risk that of the person you have sex with. With this virus, when we gamble, we risk the people we love, and strangers, including those who will have to care for us if we get infected.

We are still learning how to do all this. We will be learning for a long time. Navigating a pandemic in its first days and weeks takes different skills than living in it for years. We will negotiate and renegotiate the rules, and our relationship with them, as this virus gradually becomes a low, menacing hum that we’re used to.

Sooner or later, you’re going to sit too close to your friend for coffee. Hope for luck, as my friends in Jo’burg did; and hope for the kindness and tolerance they showed each other then and after. 🙏

Banding Together

There’s such a thing as a solitary artistic genius—and Donovan Woods remembered this spring why he wouldn’t want to be one.

Donovan Woods is a singer-songwriter who splits his time between Toronto and Nashville.

I used to work at the Enterprise Rent-a-Car on Dovercourt Road, in Toronto, a job made up of little jobs: washing cars, talking to people, paperwork. I liked washing cars best because my arms did it so automatically it was like doing nothing. I could think of other things while I was doing it. And when it’s done, it’s done.

Now that I’m a musician, it’s still a bunch of little jobs combined together. I like touring around, playing shows and meeting people. But recording songs is my favourite part. I love the feeling of a recording snapping into focus and suddenly feeling important. Tiny little

changes altering everything. Someone walks in, plays a part I’d never conceived of and suddenly, five minutes later, I can’t live without it. I feel like I would die for it. Making something out of nothing, over and over. It completely satisfies me to get a song pinned down correctly. It’s a feeling of relief and finality, like putting vacation pictures in a photobook. You did it, there’s proof, you can move on.

There is a myth in music about the solitary genius. Justin Vernon, bearded and heartbroken, retreating to a cabin in the woods and emerging weeks later, bleary-