
"Lesions" by Lockie Hunter

The last time I saw Paulo was in the garage of the Hotel Myako. My friend Sulan was loading my red jeep, "the burro rojo," for its journey east. He was laughing to show how jovial he was in a cheerless situation, so that I would remember him in high spirits.

Paulo was not laughing. He leaned against a car, his oversized linen shirt veiling his slender frame. One cigarette in his mouth, one behind his ear, one in his left hand.

"Hey Paulo," my husband said, "how many you planning on smoking at once?" Paulo lit a cigarette, illuminating the bright orange on his chin.

He was HIV positive – asymptomatic except a spot of Kaposi Sarcoma. This lesion was striking on his aristocratic face. To highlight it, Paulo chose Band-Aids of outlandish colors. Strangers commented on the Band-Aid. Paulo told them what was underneath. No mere scrape, a symptom of AIDS. It was said with an odd pride.

Paulo had been my champion through three jobs and seven boyfriends. "Promise me," Paulo had said, "that when this disease progresses that you will be here. You will be my advocate. I need my dignity."

"I'm not going anywhere," I had said.

For the six years of our friendship, Protease Inhibitors had kept the disease at bay; the only sign was the bandage on Paulo's chin. Once I asked him to remove it, telling him that it had probably healed.

"You think I'm faking this?" he had said revealing an ulcer dotted with white spots.

"God Paulo, no. I thought perhaps it was all okay."

"It may improve," he had said, "but it will never be *all okay*."

Now my husband and I were settling three-thousand miles away from this garage.

Sulan reshuffled the last item – a heavy framed canvas. My husband had stashed it behind our heads, and Sulan objected. "You'll stop short and decapitate yourselves," he said, placing the piece in a less dangerous spot. "What are you going to do on the east coast without us?"

Paulo smoked.

I started the jeep. I mouthed “please” to Paulo who roosted in place. As I backed up, I felt a thump. Paulo hit the side of the jeep with his fist and walked to my open window.

“Who will protect my dignity now?” he asked. And that was the last time I saw Paulo alive.