

## **SHELBY**

In this passage (Ch. VIII, pg 80, Canadian edition), young Shelby has days earlier lost his virginity to the woman he loves, a thirty-two-year-old feminist, chain-smoking exotic dancer by the name of Lucy Moon. He has since been dumped by her as well.

Overcome with grief and confusion, he enters a Venereal Disease Clinic, certain of nothing, and stoically resigned to his medical fate.

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Fittingly, it was rainy and grey when I slipped into the Venereal Disease Clinic the following morning. I gave the woman at the front desk my real name and then instantly regretted doing so. She didn't ask for identification. I could have said anything. Now I was forever enshrined as one of those who consent to sex with people they barely know—a fact that, if leaked, could get me shot should a military and/or moral majority government ever rise to power.

While waiting for my name to be called, I browsed through a few pamphlets. CHLAMYDIA: DO YOU KNOW THE FACTS? I obviously didn't—I'd never even heard of it. The pamphlet said it was rampant among college students and virtually undetectable in males—no discharge, no irritation—but left untreated could cause sterility and pelvic inflammatory disease.

My name was called out loud enough to be heard stateside. I shuffled into the examination room feeling like I should have been wearing a trench coat and rubber boots with nothing underneath. My underarms were sticky. The door opened and I was stunned by the woman who walked in. She had

olive smooth skin straight off a Mediterranean isle, straight teeth, facial hair and a starched white lab coat that, like everything else, aroused me. Cursed addiction!

"Hello," she said, but I knew what she was thinking—what everybody, thinks when a patient arrives at a venereal disease clinic. I searched my brain for a tactful way to tell her, "It's not what you think."

"It's not what you think," I said.

She smiled. "It rarely is. What can I do for you?"

"I...I'd like to be tested for venereal disease, please."

"This is the place to be. What are your symptoms?"

"Um...anxiety, headaches, fatigue..."

"Any genital irritation?"

"No."

"Discomfort when you urinate?"

"No."

"Have you been with someone who has informed you of having a sexually transmitted disease?"

"No."

She paused, her mouth flexed as though about to speak. "Why are you here?"

"Well...it's just...I thought...as a citizen, it's something I feel everyone...should be here."

She put the pad down. "You're sweating an awful lot," she said gently. "Are you all right?"

"Yes...good...somewhat anxious...I understand chlamydia can be difficult to detect."

"Have you been involved with someone who has had the disease?"

"Who can know?"

"So you've had multiple partners?"

"No. But I've had sexual intercourse without the use of a prophylactic. We used one at first and since but in the heat of a brief moment, my inner reproductive drive outwilled my internal yearn to survive and we didn't...and the problem is I don't know her sexual history. I think she's quite...well, let me put it this way. She's in her thirties and she dances nude."

The woman cleared her throat. "It doesn't sound like you have much to worry about. But just to be sure, we'll do a swab. Take down your pants, please." My penis slipped into my groin like a sinking ship on a vertical sea. Opening a draw on the examination bed, the woman pulled out a pair of latex gloves, snapped them twice and slipped them on. I couldn't move, paralyzed at the thought of exposing my genitals to a stranger. I'd done that with Lucy and the results were obvious. I hedged my way towards her.

"I must confess," I said, "I'm mildly afraid of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome." She looked up as though wanting me to continue. "I've been run down lately. Actually, I feel relatively healthy today, but I've had what felt like the flu for about six, maybe seven, days."

"Are you at risk?"

"Pardon?"

"Do you practice high risk behaviour...anal intercourse, needle sharing —are you bisexual?"

"Bisexual? No. Never. I'm hardly heterosexual...none of the above. I just...high risk? Good Lord. Fifteen *million* people have the disease! We didn't use a condom! What does it take to be high risk!"

"Sir," she said, "I'm going to ask you to sit down."

"Oh...sorry." I sat down.

"So...how long ago did you have sex with this person?"

"A month?"

"Hm."

"I'm not promiscuous. I loved that woman."

"Did you know there's a three-to-six-month incubation period for antibodies to show up in testing for the AIDS virus?"

I slumped. "So you think there's a chance?"

"I think you're fine, sir, but we can take a test to ease your mind. Then, if you so choose, you can get tested again in a few months."

"Thank you," I said, "very much."

She smiled. "Now, stand up and take your pants down, please." She turned away and up a urethral swab off the table. My pelvis took a step back. I undid my pants and let them drop. She turned around and looked at me—and then at my mid-section. "And your underwear," she said.

"Oh, of course," I said. Not knowing procedure, I had hoped she wouldn't mind if I just let my penis peek through as though not really belonging to me. I lowered my boxer shorts, dismayed to find my penis resembling a withered mushroom. The woman readjusted one of her gloves and I had a flash of her returning home after work and relaying in Italian to a massive extended family the story about the man with no genitalia who came in for a V.D. test.

With the thumb and index finger of her left hand she held my penis. With the other hand she held a urethral swab dart-like and cocked. "This is going to sting," she said.

In it went. I grunted, feeling as if my urethra had been pierced by the fat end of a pool cue.

She pulled it out. "We'll take a culture of that and then let you know." She turned and put the swab in a test-tube and then turned back to me. "Now we'll take a blood test—you can pull your pants back up at any time..."

"Sorry."

The blood test was less traumatic. In fact, by its completion we were deep into a non-venereal disease conversation and I, young fool, felt urged to ask her out on a date. Unfortunately, blurting, "It's queer this game of

love," was as close as I got. She responded with "Call next week for the results" and offered a smile (the closed-mouth kind) before leaving.

I stood for a moment in silence—save the hum of the fluorescent lights—while my armpits exuded that pungent odour characteristic of nervous sweat. No, I and the nurse would not become lovers; and yet in the sharing of a few brief sentences I felt we'd both gained a greater empathy for the sexual plight of humankind. Lifting my jacket from the coat rack, I slipped it on and walked through the door. I could tell that a pair of nurses at the front desk and a man in the waiting room who undoubtedly had V.D. were staring at me—probably gathering assumptions and judgements to soften the horror of their own existence. Willing to be their temporary scapegoat, I strutted past them, exiting via the main entrance into a dull Vancouver morning.