

PRAISE FOR *WHERE WE GO FROM HERE*

‘A remarkably honest story about love, lust and HIV in today’s world’ David Levithan

‘A powerfully honest book. Its raw and beautiful emotions will bring you to tears and leave you shouting with joy’
Rachael Lippincott

‘Captivating . . . a story of friendship, love and self-acceptance’ Jonathan Van Ness

‘This treatise on community provides comfort in an often homophobic world . . . simply fearless’
Kirkus starred review

‘The story is universal . . . it fills an urgent need . . . this deserves the widest possible readership’
Booklist starred review

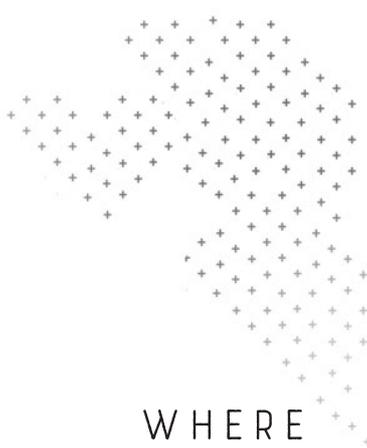
‘Effectively explores the tensions that stem from the prejudice and fear surrounding HIV’ *Publishers Weekly*

‘An authentic, deeply felt debut . . . chock-full of poignant conversation starters’ *School Library Journal*

‘Tackles the taboo subject of prejudice against those who are HIV positive with joy and humanity’
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‘A deeply heartwarming story about friendship, found family, and the journey to overcoming your fears’
The Nerd Daily

‘Rocha lets his characters make mistakes, learn, fight, grow, change, accept, hurt, heal, and love. An educational, affirming story full of hope and love’
Teen Librarian Toolbox



WHERE
WE
GO
FROM
HERE

LUCAS ROCHA

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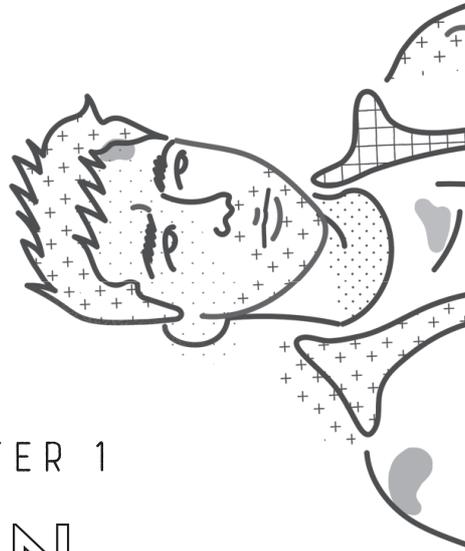


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*FOR EVERYONE WHO LIVES WITH HIV,
DIRECTLY OR INDIRECTLY*



CHAPTER 1

IAN

THE FIRST STEP IS ADMITTING to yourself that, no matter the outcome, life goes on.

The clinic is packed with people walking in every direction: To the left, a child is running in circles while an exhausted mother tries to calm her down. To the side, a man in his seventies rocks back and forth on a cane, refusing every courteous offer of a seat. A little farther down, the door to one of the exam rooms is ajar and a doctor is scanning a medical chart for information while a woman sitting across from her waits anxiously. To my right, a tall guy with a blue streak in his hair is staring at his phone, his foot tapping as nervously as mine, and I can tell that even though he's looking at the device, he's not paying the slightest bit of attention to it.

And in the middle of all this hubbub, of doctors and nurses walking this way and that, of people dissatisfied with the long wait time for appointments and a dusty fan that makes more noise than ventilation, I wait.

“Ian Gonçalves?”

A woman with shoulder-length blond hair and the coldest blue eyes I’ve ever seen looks at me; a folded piece of paper rests in her hand as she closes the door to the lab behind her. She has wrinkles that she’s probably tried to cover up with Botox injections and the full lips of someone who’s tried rejuvenating fillers, and there’s a gold necklace with a heart-shaped pendant hanging from her neck.

I press my finger against a cotton ball that absorbs a drop of blood (I had to come back in for a second rapid HIV test because they told me my blood clotted the first time and they needed another sample) and ask myself if those cold blue eyes bring good news or bad.

I nod, and she signals for me to stand up.

“This way, please.” She turns her back to me and walks to a door at the end of the hallway. She doesn’t even look to check if I’m following her. Maybe she’s just used to the veiled nervousness that comes with getting tested for HIV.

The blue-haired guy next to me waves and parts his lips into a supportive smile, as if wishing me luck. His finger is also pressed against a cotton ball as he waits for his own results.

I go down the hallway, and it morphs into a blur; I’m dizzy with anxiety, sweaty from the heat, and exhausted from all the waiting. It’s been only thirty minutes but feels like an eternity.

The therapist's office, just like the rest of the clinic, isn't in the best shape: There's a bucket behind her desk, where drops from a leak fall sporadically and monotonously. The desk is made of wood, and the sawdust on the ground points to a termite infestation. The fan spins lazily overhead, spreading dust and making the October heat even more unbearable in this tiny room with nothing but a jammed window to let some air in.

"Please have a seat."

My impression of this woman is that it's impossible to like her right away. She has a sour taste about her, as if it's her job to give bad news on a daily basis and she isn't exactly comfortable with it.

"Why did you decide to get tested, Ian?"

Good question. I could tell her the truth about my sex life, about the two times I threw caution to the wind and didn't use a condom because I thought it would be a one-time thing; or I could lie and say that I got a tattoo from a hippie, and the needle he used was rustier than a piece of iron cast out to sea. Whatever my answer, the last thing I want is to face her judgment.

"I found out you provide rapid HIV testing here. I'm eighteen, and I've never gotten tested before, so I decided I should," I say, half-lying, half-truthful, looking into those ice-cold eyes that won't stop analyzing me.

The truth is, I have no idea why the hell I chose to come here. The only reason I'm not 100 percent regretting being here and having to look this woman in the face is that my health is more important than anything else. Do I *need* a reason to know my status? Every ad I see about this topic says it's important to know

your status regardless of your lifestyle or what you do in your free time. And the first thing the therapist asks me is *Why did you decide to get tested?*

Honestly, if the idea here is not to play the blame game, then her technique needs a lot of work.

“Hmm . . .” she mumbles, looking at the folded paper in front of her. She hands me my ID, and I put it back in my wallet.

Silence fills every corner of the room for a couple of seconds, but in my mind it feels like a whole week has gone by.

“I’m afraid I don’t have good news.” She unfolds the paper, and that’s indication enough that, yeah, my life is about to change forever.

The paper is marked up in blue ink, and there’s an X between two parentheses next to three uppercase letters:

HIV+

Syphilis

Hepatitis C

“The good news is that the results came back negative for syphilis and hepatitis C.” She tries to smile, and I do the same in the face of what she’s calling good news. “The bad . . .” She doesn’t finish the sentence but points to the other markings on the paper, showing that the results for the two different blood samples (so that’s why they asked for another sample!) are both positive.

I remain silent, and she hands me the paper.

What does she expect me to do? Frame it?

“Do you know who might have infected you?”

Infected. As if I were an addict's fucking syringe.

"No" is my answer.

Because it's the truth, but it's also a lie. I know who it *could* have been, but there's only a 50 percent chance that I'm right. And it's not like I'm still in touch with either of those guys, or like I can remember their names or know how to find them.

But, hey, this isn't supposed to be about blame, right?

"Really?" she insists. "It's important that you have a conversation with whomever might—"

"No," I repeat firmly.

"All right. Are you in a relationship?"

"No."

"Have you had sexual intercourse without a condom in the last few months?"

"No."

"Not even oral sex?"

I remain silent, staring at the floor, tired of this interrogation.

"Ian, it's important that you speak with your past partners so that they can get tested, too." Her voice is almost kind now, as if she's suddenly realized that she's dealing with a human being and not a goddamn wall. "The sooner you tell them, the sooner they can make arrangements to get tested. Understand?"

"Mhm."

More silence.

"Where do we go from here?" I ask.

We. I try using the plural pronoun so I can feel a little more supported, but in this moment I know I am all alone.

“You will be directed to the infectious diseases department, where you’ll do another round of exams to confirm the rapid test. After that, it’s typical to start treatment right away.” She opens a drawer gnawed by termites and hands me a photocopy. “Bring a copy of these documents to the reception desk so we can put all the bureaucracy behind us.”

The woman sighs, tired, showing a sign of humanity for only the second time this afternoon.

My ears are buzzing; I feel numb and certain that if I take a deeper breath, I’ll start crying. So I focus and stare at the leak in the ceiling.

“Look,” she continues. “People don’t have to die from this anymore. If you follow proper treatment, your life can be as normal as anyone else’s. But I’ll let the infectious diseases specialist discuss all that with you.”

You, she said.

In the singular.

I’m completely alone.

I look at the list of documents: ID, proof of residence, social security card, and public health insurance card, which I have no idea how to get.

“How are you feeling?” she asks.

I try to spot a hint of compassion in her voice, but it’s an automatic question, simply protocol.

“We have to keep moving forward, right?” I smile, loudly repeating the plural *we*, reaffirming that I am not alone, and telling myself that I can’t start crying in front of her. “I hope it all works out.”

“It will,” she says encouragingly, smiling for the first time since she first laid her blue eyes on me. “If you need any support, you can go to our psychology department, or to social services. Here at the health center, you’ll get everything you need. And one of the great advantages is that here in Brazil, the public health system covers the entire treatment without much of a hassle, all of it for free. You’re in good hands.”

You, you, you.

She never fails to emphasize the singular.

I am all alone.



CHAPTER 2

VICTOR

THE GUY WHO WAS AHEAD of me at the clinic leaves the therapist's office, holding a folded piece of paper, his head down. His eyes aren't swollen, and I didn't hear any shouting while he was in there, but he walks by quickly without looking at anyone.

I'm sure the diagnosis wasn't good. If it were, he'd be smiling from ear to ear.

The therapist walks out right after him and goes into the lab again, where she picks up another folded piece of paper and an ID.

"Victor Mendonça?" She seems tired when I get up and nod. Her eyes are pretty, a deep blue like the sky of an autumn afternoon. "Shall we?"

I follow her to the end of the hallway, the tips of my fingers

aching. My nails are all but gone from my nervous nail biting, and I'm certain I'll cry like a baby if the results come back positive.

Why did Henrique do this to me? Why did he wait until *after* we'd had sex to tell me that he was positive?

"Please have a seat." She points to a wobbly chair with yellow foam peeking out of two rips in the corners, and I comply, feeling my legs tremble and my stomach churn.

When I seem at least minimally comfortable, she hands me the ID and asks, "Why did you decide to get tested, Victor?"

I consider it for a few seconds before I speak.

"I met a guy, Henrique, and he has always been a sweetheart to me. We started going out, and things got pretty intense between us. We talked all the time, went to the movies, made out, and all that. And then we had sex." Before I realize it, the words tumble out of my mouth. "The next day—that is, two days ago—he sent me a text saying he was positive and asking if I still wanted to go out with him, the bastard! Then I got paranoid and searched for the closest testing center, and I found you."

"Did you use protection?"

"Yes, of course, even for oral sex. He said it was absolutely necessary, and I even thought he was making a fuss, because, like, who uses a condom for oral sex, you know? And then everything started to make sense. I don't know, at first I thought he was just being super cautious, not that he was sick. His text said he was something called 'undetectable,' I guess, so I looked it up. From what I can tell, it means he's on medication and can't transmit the

virus. But I could still have caught it from him, right? Like, he had an *obligation* to tell me he was sick before I got into bed with him.”

“He had the *option* to tell you that he’s positive, Victor,” she corrects me, and the authority in her voice makes me want to swallow some of what I just said. “And he’s not sick; he simply has the virus in his system. His only obligation is to use protection, and he did. Most people I know who test positive say it’s not very easy to open up about this subject with others.”

I sit with her words in silence, unable to rebut them.

A while later, the therapist asks, “Was this guy the only one you’ve had sexual intercourse with recently? Did you have sex with another partner, with or without protection?”

What does this lady take me for? A *slut*?

“No,” I mutter in response, maybe a little offended by the question or the fact that she said Henrique didn’t have an obligation to tell me anything. Of course he did.

Then I feel my stomach turn to ice, because she still hasn’t unfolded the paper and she’s building all this suspense just to give me my results.

“Ma’am, can we just cut to the chase?”

She must find something funny, because she smiles before unfolding the paper and handing it to me.

- () HIV+
- () Syphilis
- () Hepatitis C

“The tests came back negative,” she says.

I let out a sigh of relief. “So that’s it? Everything’s okay with me?”

“Yes. This partner of yours appears to have been very responsible for insisting on using a condom and, I have to admit, seems like a great guy for opening up to you about his status, even though he had no obligation to do so. Doesn’t seem like the kind of guy you just throw away.”

“He could have infected me!”

“The chances of transmission by someone who doesn’t know whether they’re infected are much higher than by those who are on treatment, and *especially* if they are undetectable—which it sounds like he is, meaning he can’t transmit the virus,” she explains, interlacing her fingers, and I notice a hint of impatience in her voice. “Well, I think we’re done here. I’m happy everything is fine with you, Victor, and I hope you and . . . Henrique, is it? I hope you two sort it out. In the meantime, you can go home.”

I feel the weight of the world lift from my shoulders when she hands me the paper without any Xs on it. Everything seems more colorful now, and all the apprehension I’ve felt the last couple of days seems to have disappeared in the blink of an eye.

“The other guy who was in here before me . . . did he test positive?” I ask, trying to start a conversation as I get up. “He didn’t look too happy.”

“I can’t discuss another patient’s test results,” she says, standing from her chair to open the door of the mildewy room. “Patient confidentiality.”

Looks like I won't extract anything else from her. So I just nod, shove the piece of paper and ID in my pocket, and leave. All I know is that I never want to set foot in a testing center or hear another word about HIV again.

+

"Sandra?" The first person I call when I get to the bus station is my best friend. She's probably waiting for a text (because while I was in the waiting room, we exchanged a million messages in which she tried to reassure me and I was in a state of despair). "It came back negative! Everything is fine!"

"I told you that you were being paranoid, Victor!" she answers on her end, but I notice that her voice sounds as relieved as mine. "I only met Henrique once, but he seems like a nice guy. I mean, he was super honest. You could give him a chance."

He has a disease that can kill me, I think of saying. I don't want anything to do with him anymore!

No, that would be too cruel and would get Sandra started on one of her politically correct rants about how we should embrace all differences. So I take the diplomatic approach.

"He could have been honest *before* we had sex," I reply, looking over my shoulder to make sure no one is eavesdropping.

"And you could be less dramatic. It's not as if he refused to use a condom. From what you told me, *you* were the one who wasn't really into the idea of using a condom for oral."

I still can't bring myself to accept that Henrique was right to hide this from me, but it seems like my silence is all Sandra wants to hear. So I change the subject.

“Why don’t we meet up? You know, to celebrate?” I ask.

“It’s Tuesday, Victor. We have class in the morning. How about over the weekend?”

“Deal. But if you flake, I’ll never speak to you again.”

Maybe she’s right about my penchant for drama, but hell if I’ll concede that I agree with her. Deep down, she already knows, anyway.

“If you say so” is all she says before hanging up.

I shove the phone into my pocket, smiling.

“Congrats.” A voice catches me by surprise.

I was so relieved by the good news that I didn’t even notice someone had sat down next to me at the bus stop—the same guy who’d left the therapist’s office before I walked in.

He’s still holding the folded piece of paper. His hair is shaved short, and he has a thick, well-trimmed beard over his tanned face. His eyes are two big, brown, reddened orbs, but I see no sign of tears. He has the build of someone who hits the gym every now and again, with wide shoulders and biceps popping out of the sleeves of his shirt. His jeans squeeze his legs, maybe a full two sizes too small for his thick thighs.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean . . .” I let the words die on my lips as my ears start to burn. I know I shouldn’t feel guilty for being happy about my negative test result, but I feel horrible for making him listen as I celebrated it.

“It’s okay,” he answers with a melancholy smile.

“Bad news?”

He nods in resignation.

I'm not sure what makes me do it, but I sit by his side, the hot wind making my ears burn even harder, and I start talking.

"You know it's not a death sentence anymore, right?" I know I'm being such a hypocrite, but the words come out automatically. "I did some research before getting tested and read all kinds of stories about people with HIV who lead normal lives. Everything is going to be all right."

He's still looking down, unable to lift his gaze. I want to say he should hold his head up high and face the world, but I don't know how I would have reacted if the news hadn't been good for me. I'd probably be locked in the bathroom of that clinic, crying inside a stall and thinking the world was unfair as hell and that I didn't deserve this.

"I just . . . thought the results would be different," he says, still looking down, his voice hoarse. He clears his throat, takes a deep breath, and bites his lip. "We never think everything will go wrong until it does, right?"

And with that, he breaks down.

He presses the palms of his hands against his face and lets the paper with his diagnosis fall to the ground. I get up and grab the sheet of paper before the wind carries it away. His back arches up and down as he sobs, completely out of control, and all I want is to give him a hug—this guy I don't even know—and tell him that, yeah, it will be hard, but things can still work out.

But who am I to say that? What gives me the authority? Me, who five minutes ago thought HIV was the worst thing that could ever happen to a person?

So I don't say anything. I just stay by his side and put a hand on his shoulder, trying to comfort him as best I can.

He continues to sob, and on an impulse, I wrap him in a hug as he buries his face in my arm. I feel his hot tears soaking the sleeve of my shirt, but I don't mind. All I want right now is for him to feel better, and I know that a hug is much more powerful than any word I can say in a moment like this.

My eyes water when he finally calms down. I want to cry, too, even though I don't have the slightest idea who this guy is or what happened to him to make him end up at this clinic, testing positive for HIV. But I take a deep breath and play the strong character I never am in any other situation.

"I'm sorry, this is so . . . ridiculous," he says, half laughing and half crying, pushing away from me and wiping his tears on the backs of his hands. "You don't even know me, and . . . I'm sorry."

"No need to apologize." I try a half smile but fail. "What are you going to do now?"

He takes a deep breath before answering.

"Probably lock myself in my room and listen to Lana Del Rey until morning."

I can't help but laugh at his sarcastic remark.

"If you want to really wallow in self-pity, I recommend Johnny Hooker."

"Never heard of him."

"He's really good. If you really want to wallow in self-pity, I mean. Here . . ." Another one of my impulsive actions: I don't really know what makes me grab a pen from my pocket and the

paper with his test results, but when I catch myself, I'm already nervously, shakily scribbling my name and phone number on the back of the sheet. I hand it to him. "If you need to talk to someone, you can text me. A friend of mine is also positive, and I can put the two of you in touch."

Henrique appears in my mind's eye, and though I wouldn't want to see him even if he were the last man on earth, I don't think he'd be opposed to talking to someone who is about to go through all the same struggles he must have faced when he was first diagnosed.

"Thank you"—he looks at the scrawl on the paper—"Victor. And I'm sorry for all this."

"No worries, um . . ." I answer with a smile.

"Ian. My name is Ian."

"No need to apologize, Ian." I look up and see my bus coming down the street. "Are you going to be okay?"

"Yeah."

I stand up and hail the bus. I get on, swipe my card to release the turnstile, and, before we pull away, look back at the bus stop.

Ian smiles and waves, and then he's out of sight.

Even though I don't know him, and I'm pretty sure I'll never see him again, I hope he will be all right.