

A Short Story

*Twenty-first
Century
Love*

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1 – A conference

Some time ago I've been listening to a very interesting conference about the HIV=AIDS equation. Two of the most important speakers were Dr Chermann, member of the Prof. Luc Montagnier research team in the 1980^{ies} and co-discoverer of the left part of the equation, as he likes to call himself, and Dr de Harven, professor of pathology and director of a Canadian electron microscope laboratory during the 80^{ies}, who doesn't agree at all with the currently admitted HIV and AIDS concept.

Dr Chermann was the first to speak, and he told us a lot of things. For instance, he explained that the famous virus is very difficult to track, because it changes all the time. He even thinks that all beings might have a different virus. Trying to imagine the difficulties arising when somebody attempts to discover an unknown virus in these circumstances, it became clear to me that his team must have been composed of very talented people indeed. But I started to feel really excited when he pointed out to us the reason why sometimes a virus cannot be found, even if a person was tested HIV positive. In that case, Dr Chermann explained, the viruses are pooling in a place where they cannot be detected. And he simply added: the fact that a virus cannot be seen doesn't mean that it's not there.

During his speech, and also afterwards when people started asking him questions, Dr Chermann gave me the impression that he can very easily answer any question. For instance, he explained that people can live with HIV over decades because they're very lucky and are simply non-receptive.

Dr de Harven took the microphone when Dr Chermann had finished, and started to point out that he did not really believe the virus existed, because it had never been isolated properly. Hearing this, Dr Chermann got very upset and immediately stormed out of the conference room. Well, to me he was a little overacting but on the other hand I can also understand why he lost his nerves. You know, once you've said all you have to say, it's almost impossible to stay calm when someone else starts to mess it up to a point where you have to start explaining all over again. You'll never get anywhere that way, will you? Once you know a thing, there's no sense in starting to think it over again. All you might find out is that you were wrong in the first place in which case you'll never make any progress.

But overall it was a nice and pleasant day, and on the way back home I couldn't stop chewing the "it's not because you can't see it that it's not there" philosophy. My bank account is gone scuba diving again, way beyond my banker's limit. I've finally decided to fix an appointment with him, the day after tomorrow. He's an intelligent person and I bet I'll be able to open his eyes in no time:

- Mr. Sillian, I'm worried because there's no money on your account. Even worse, you're way below zero!
- Yes, maybe, but it's not because you don't see the money, that it's not there.
- Beg your pardon?
- I said, it's not because you cannot see something that it's not there.
- What's that?

- Well, for instance, I can't see your legs behind your desk, but that doesn't mean they're not there! In reality there's a lot of money on my account, but you just can't see it.
- Hey, I never thought of it like that... . That's fantastic... . You opened my eyes! Thank you so much, Henry. I can call you Henry, can I? You surely do stop me worrying. What can I do for you? Need any cash?

Man, this is going to change my life!

2 – *My banker*

My new philosophy helps me a lot when I'm down. I can just imagine any nice thing and say to myself that the fact that I don't see it is proof enough that it's there.

But the woman I fell in love with doesn't seem to understand my new way of thinking. I don't know her name yet so I invented Angie. You know, if angels exist, I'm sure they look at lot like her. For a few months now I do my best to try to attract her attention, but she simply doesn't respond at all. Even when I turn up with my brand new bicycle, she mostly doesn't look at me once. She's often hanging around near the harbor and sometimes I have the impression that she smiles to anybody but me. But maybe she would fall in love with me if I showed up with a sailing boat, so yesterday morning I decided to speak to her and tell her about the ship I imagine is mine.

- Is that true? A white sailing boat? Can I have a look at it?
- Well, I can't show it to you right now. You can't see my boat, but that doesn't mean that it's not there.
- What are you talking about?
- It's not because you don't see my hands behind my back that they're not there! It's just the same with my sailing yacht.

For one second she seemed strangely sad. Then she looked at me in a way I don't like much and walked away, saying that it's not because I don't see the mess in my head that I'm not a fool. I don't understand. I can prove I'm right any time I want, but it doesn't seem to impress anybody. I guess I don't have Dr Chermann's talents to open other people's eyes.

When she left I didn't feel too happy, but there was not much I could do and besides, I had to hurry to the bank because of the appointment with my banker.

He sure opened his eyes in no time, but not exactly the way I had expected.

- Mr. Sillian, I'm worried because there's no money on your account. Even worse, you're way below zero!
- Yes, maybe, but it's not because you don't see the money, that it's not there.
- Beg your pardon?
- I said, it's not because you cannot see something that it's not there.
- Huh?

- Well, for instance, I can't see your legs behind your desk, but that doesn't mean they're not there! In reality there's a lot of money on my account, but you just can't see it.
- What are you talking about, you dummy? Are you trying to fool me, or what? I don't care a shit about money that I can't see! And I swear to you that I definitely don't see a lot of money that should be on your account but isn't!
- But Dr Chermann says that...
- Who the hell is Dr Chermann and what does he have to do with your bank account?
- Dr Chermann found out about the AIDS virus and he told me that it's not because you can't see it that it's not there.

At this moment my banker's face got pale and he pushed a little button near the telephone several times. He started to stutter that time was over and that he had a lot of work to do. He gave me a week to deposit the missing money on my account and when I left, he didn't want to shake hands nor to show me the way out. Something must have taken him badly off guard to make him feel so ill at ease all of a sudden. Maybe a virus, who knows? They're all around, even if you can't see them. When I left the bank, two male nurses dressed in white just went in.

I hope his attack was not too bad.

3 – The boxes

I first thought that my new way of thinking would make my life much nicer. It certainly did change my life, but I'm not sure I'm much happier now. Today for instance, a bunch of angry people tried to beat me up and I had to run to stay out of reach.

I thought I had a very good idea this morning. My grandfather gave me something like a hundred of small metal boxes some time ago. I've never understood what use they might have, but today I figured that I might try to sell them for \$3 apiece, saying each of them contained a hundred dollars. I thought it would be nice for someone to imagine having a box with 100 bucks in it, especially if the box was bought for only \$3. So I wrapped them all nicely, and exposed them on the street a few blocks away from where I live. They looked so cute, shame you didn't see them.

Within half an hour I had attracted quite a crowd of interested people. Well, I first thought they were interested and that some of them wanted to buy a box, but after a while I started to wonder because nobody had actually bought anything yet. They just kept asking questions.

- Whadaya sell, buddy?
- You can buy any of those nicely wrapped boxes that contain a hundred dollars each.
- Are you kidding me? How can you sell a box with 100\$ for \$3 only, you moron?
- Well, I thought it might make people happy to own a box with \$100, especially if it was bought for only \$3.
- Come on dude, open up one of your packages, let's have a look inside.

- You don't need to. It's not because you don't see a banknote that it's not there.
- I can't believe my ears! Go try your little games in other places, you jerk.

In the end, the only thing left to do was to run fast. They came after me, two of them, but I ran faster than they did. Without the boxes of course so now they're lost all but one. The only one I still have is the one I was holding in my hand when they started to chase me. I might give it to Angie one day, maybe she will like it.

Well, maybe not. She gives me the feeling I'm nuts.

Boy, am I sad all of a sudden!

There's something wrong with my new philosophy but I don't know what it is. Or maybe it's just me doing everything wrong. Wished Dr. Chermann were around to help me clear things up. It's starting to become depressing. Why? It sounds so nice. Instead of being sad about things or persons missing, leaving, not showing up, getting lost... Why not try to be more positive? A hundred dollar banknote isn't worth a shit if you think of it. It's worth the equivalent of \$100 because that's what everybody agrees upon but in a way it's just imagination. So if things are often just imaginary, I'd rather imagine pleasant things than sad ones. For instance, Angie never really looks at me and that in itself doesn't cheer me up, true enough, but even: every time I think of her, the sky also somehow seems to be clearing. Sometimes it is as if she were close to me, even if I can't see her. It's like choosing between feeling down because she doesn't look at me or being happy because she exists. The situation is the same, but the feeling is different.

Does this all mean I'm cracking up?

4 – Landmark 24

I like to go for a walk on the beach, so I went down to the waterline late in the afternoon. Man, that was the best thing I ever did in my life. Guess what! She was there too! Jane, the cute girl I'm in love with. Sure, I know her name now, and it's not Angie but Jane, and we talked together. Yeah, we really did. And a long time too. I still can't believe it. Not only is she the prettiest woman on earth, but also she is the kindest person I've ever met. Can you believe it? Well ok, maybe you can. But I can't.

Boy oh boy, am I excited. Let me tell you the story from the beginning.

As I said, I went down to the beach to change my mind. That's a good thing to do if you're depressed, you know, go for a walk on the beach. Today it was very nice weather, almost no wind and neither too hot nor too cold. Just perfect, you know how it is. I was heading for Landmark 24, near Big Bear's, the place with the blue and orange umbrellas. And that's exactly where Jane had spent part of the afternoon. So she came from where I went! To be honest, I wasn't too happy when I first saw her. Well, yes, I did feel happy but also I felt like hiding away. I'm quite shy if it comes to it, you know, I really am, and also the last time we met she told me I was a fool, remember? When she came closer I saw that she didn't look too happy either. In fact, she didn't look happy at all. Later, after we had started to talk, I found out that she had been close to tears when I first saw her. Not because of me of course, but because of things that happened to her before.

Always when she's around my head feels like cotton and really, I don't remember exactly how come we started to talk, it just happened. Maybe we felt attracted to each other because we both needed somebody to talk to. Maybe I sort of asked her why she looked sad or something or maybe she asked me, I can't remember. But that's not the point anyway. The point is that we ended up talking, sitting on the beach and all and close together too. Me and Jane. Can you believe it? You can? Well, I can't.

Maybe it was because there was just the two of us in the middle of what seemed to be a desert all of a sudden, but at first I felt really impressed, much more than the other day when we met near the harbor. I didn't feel much like a hero of some sorts but that feeling didn't last too long. Jane sure has a way to make you feel at ease, it's incredible. She told me about how much she likes the sea, how much she likes to go sailing. But that it always ends up badly with everybody only wanting to go to bed with her and all that. She asked me if I liked the sea and I said I did but that I'd never been out there on the waves. I said that I didn't have the money and that all I could afford was just to imagine being a sailor. She smiled when I told her about my imagination and all that and she asked me with a grin if that was also the place where I had anchored my boat. I said yes, for me it was a way to keep a dream alive in a certain way. She said that she was sorry for saying I was fool and that she understood me better now. Because imagination was very important for her also. And then she told me about her little brother, Allen. Drowned four years ago. Big sister Jane and little brother Allen. They had been very close. And they still were. Jane said that she very often felt Allen being around and that she didn't need to see him to know he was there.

- You know Henry, it's not because I cannot see Allen that he's not there. It help's me a lot to think that way. But some people think I'm silly and I thought you were laughing about me too, the other day. So I felt sore and said you were a fool.

Can you believe it? Well ok. But I can't. Jane saying this to me. About things being there even if you don't see them. That and what she told me about little Allan. All of a sudden I felt like a lot of liquid behind the eyes but I managed to keep it all inside. You know how it is. Once you let it go, it never stops anymore. So I rather not start in the first place.

After she had told me about her brother and all we just sat there looking at the waves. I really felt like holding hands but I didn't dare make the move. Too bad I'm so shy. Then she got up and said she had to go home.

- I'm on my way, Henry. Where do you go?
- Landmark 24

Stupid me. I could have walked all the way back with her. Well, actually it didn't matter that much. Guess what!

- I've really enjoyed talking with you, Henry. Tomorrow I'm not in town, but what about the day after? Same time, same place?

Yeah, that's what she said. To me! Can you believe it? Oh yes, I forgot you can. It's strange. Sometimes I feel like a fool, words and tongue on a trip to the backside of the moon. I must have been stuttering far worse than my banker the other day. But she didn't seem to bother. Man, the smile she gave me before she went home, sent me straight to paradise.

Words and tongue on the moon, feet chasing pebbles on the beach, the rest of me in heaven...

5 – Messy thoughts

There are a couple of things I should take care of urgently, but I can think of nothing but Jane. It's too bad. Yesterday I was depressed and didn't feel like doing anything I needed to do. Today I feel happy yet I'm still absolutely passive. I just hang around and look at my watch every two minutes to count the hours until tomorrow same time, same place. It's going to be a long long day.

I should do something about my bank account. But I don't know what. I could try to compose the most touching love song ever, or write a #1 bestseller. I could try but even, the week he gave me to deposit the money, it's already come to an end. How much time does it take from the moment somebody begins to compose or write one of the all-time hits, until the day the money starts pouring in? I have no idea, but I'm quite sure the period won't fit into my banker's patience. At all. Let alone that I've never written anything besides the story you are reading right now.

Beg your pardon? Yes, I know. It's quite good for a beginner, isn't it?... You can't believe I'm a beginner? Well, I can, so now it's the other way around. Anyway, why bother about money and a greedy banker? I'm in love so I couldn't care less, really. It's incredible when you think of it, Jane talking about things being there even when you can't see them. Angie! Of all people! I just can't believe it. Maybe she can explain to me what went wrong when I tried to sell my grandfather's boxes for example.

It's crazy though. This Dr Chermann, he really convinced me with his argument about things that are there even if you can't see them. Or am I just a silly ignorant who believes everything anybody tells me? But even, I cannot think of any reason why somebody would desperately hang on to the idea of a dangerous virus even if it doesn't exist. Actually, that was what Dr de Harven said, that he didn't believe HIV exists. Which in a way would be the solution of the whole HIV=AIDS problem ... Now wait a minute. Why didn't I think of this before? Why the heck didn't the Chermann guy want to listen to Dr de Harven's arguments? He stormed out of the conference room like a crazy bull when de Harven said that he couldn't believe the virus existed. Instead of being glued to his seat. Because, after all, Dr Chermann and Dr de Harven, they're both fighting against AIDS. So for both of them, is there any better news than something like: "War is over boys! The enemy, well, we got it all wrong. Sorry. False alarm. Sorry."

I don't understand why this didn't occur to me before, but now I start to think of it again... All of a sudden, Dr Chermann's angry reaction seems to me about the craziest thing in the world.

Let's try to focus the picture again. Here we are, listening to two renowned scientists. What are they talking about? About HIV and AIDS. Two things I'd rather live without if it were up to me. Wouldn't you? Wouldn't we all? So then, why did Dr Chermann refuse to listen quietly to Dr de Harven's speech, instead of running away waving his arms like a windmill in a hurricane? I mean, these two scientists, they're both engaged in a war against HIV and both are equally qualified. Yet, when one of them states that he thinks the battle is over simply because the enemy does not exist, or at least that the battle should be fought differently, the other guy goes crazy, starts to angrily scream something about years of research and runs away like a spoiled kid. Just as if he

couldn't stand an attack against the idea of a virus that is rooming around even if it cannot be detected.

All of a sudden I get the strange impression that Dr Chermann isn't fighting against HIV at all, but that he actually defends the virus idea as if for some strange reasons he couldn't face a world without HIV! Isn't that really weird? The idea of people *defending* something they supposedly fight *against*?

I'm sure Jane will have some very bright ideas to help me sort out all those messy thoughts. What time is it? 11:25 am. Tomorrow same time is about 18:30 pm. Just over thirty-one hours.

One thousand eight hundred and sixty five minutes.

One hundred eleven thousand nine hundred seconds.

... Sigh...

6 – Green's jetty

Oh, I'm sorry. Do I really bother you?... That's too bad!... Why I came here? Well, it's just that I've got used to our little conversations and I felt like telling you about what happened last evening. And also I think that you might enjoy the story. Do you want me to get you a coffee?... No, you don't want me to. ... What did you say?... I see. Well ok then, let's start straight away.

At four o'clock in the afternoon I couldn't stand waiting any longer so I left my house and went straight to Green's jetty, the place where I met Jane the other day. Again I had nothing to do but observe an endless procession of seconds creeping past like lazy snails, but finally some merciful God must have looked down on me and I dozed off on the beach. I'm absolutely sure you'll never be able to get anywhere near the answer to the question of what made me wake up, so I might as well tell you immediately: Jane's hand touching my hair! Yes sir! I must have been sleeping for at least one hour and I swear to you that I've never ever felt any better than the moment I realized I felt the stroke of Jane's fingers on my head. Although I must admit that I also felt kind of silly when I woke up, but Jane didn't seem to mind finding me asleep.

We had such a good time on the beach. You know, Jane had felt a bit hungry when she was about to leave her home and meet me on the beach. So she had brought a pizza and a bottle of red wine and we have dined together, talking like grown-ups and laughing like kids.

What did you say? ... My story is boring and you want me to hurry up? ... I'm so sorry. Well Ok, I'll stick to the part of the evening that might interest you most.

I told Jane about what has happened to me since I have adopted the "it's not because you can't see it that it's not there" philosophy. And because she was really interested, I gave her the long version, the one you already know, with all the details about the conference, my bank account, the boxes my grandfather gave me, and also the messy thoughts I had yesterday.

- Don't you think that's really weird, Jane? People *defending* something they supposedly fight *against*?

- You are so cute, Henry. You certainly are the most idealistic and romantic dreamer I've ever met and I can love you for that. But I also think that you should be a little bit realistic every once in a while. You know, some times people simply want something to exist not because it's nice in itself but because it gives them some kind of benefit. And if you love someone who is far away, then it can make you happy to just imagine him or her being close and your imagination doesn't hurt anybody, so it's merely something perfectly positive.
- Well yes, true enough. But why would anybody want to be negative and imagine the existence of something that would hurt other people?
- No, don't get me wrong. People don't wish something because it hurts somebody else, well, normally they don't, but because it pleases themselves. But you don't seem to have the slightest idea of what could be the impact on the life of a man like Jean Claude Chermann were the concept of HIV and AIDS proven totally wrong. This man is a renowned scientist, Henry. Through HIV and AIDS he has become famous all over the world. If somebody would prove tomorrow that HIV is just rubbish, which it actually is, I confirm, then people like Jean Claude Chermann as well a Robert Gallo and Luc Montagnier plus heirs of virologists and all will be way up shit creek without a paddle and as far as I can judge, not even with a leaking and totally rotten canoe.
- I didn't think of it like that. In fact, I hate to think of things that way.
- That's because you're a dreamer, Henry. But today we live in the 21st century. Who cares for romance and poetry? Not love but money is what people need to be happy, at least it is what they think will make them happy. You want to be rich and famous? Invent a tale about a new virus and the more dangerous you say it is, the more wealthy and powerful you'll become. The only thing you need to do is get your story in the newspapers and on TV. Once people have seen an artist impression on CNN of the latest horror virus, you can make them pay whatever you say you need for research. People are scared shitless, Henry. That's why your banker didn't want to show you the way out. He was convinced you were infected with HIV.
- Hey, that thought never occurred to me! Yeah, I'm sure you're right. That explains his behavior! But what about you Jane, what do you think of AIDS and HIV and all that.
- But it's just nonsense, Henry! You should have listened more carefully to Etienne de Harven, really.
- You seem to be well read Jane, how come you know all this?
- Well you know, I've been very skeptic about the whole AIDS issue almost from the beginning. A new virus that has come with the wind all the way from our black and beautiful brethren in Africa we love so much, and merely infects homosexuals and drug addicts. Isn't that cute? Or, if you prefer, we can also look upon HIV as a stroke of lightning from God to save our Victorian standards! Look at the TV! Violence, no limit, you can have it as you please. Cut 'em in pieces, blow 'em away, blood all over the place, no problem, they all just love it. But give her a kiss or show a piece of a woman's breast, and you get your ass sued off. And there's a lot more. The retrovirus idea has been introduced in the late sixties I believe. Do you remember Richard Nixon's slogan "War on cancer"? Well, that war was actually a war on retroviruses. But ten years later not one single retrovirus had been found guilty of causing any cancer whatsoever. So in the end one party cut away the budgets and the other party invented AIDS and more retroviruses and back the budgets came. And one of the leading scientists of that other party was Dr Robert Gallo. Isn't that some very interesting coincidence? When it became clear to all that

war on cancer was just another failure, Gallo and consorts happily changed the "war on cancer" slogan for the AIDS ribbon.

We've been talking for hours on the beach near Green's jetty, me and Jane, and later we've slowly gone back to the city lights and Jane said to me that she couldn't care less about 21st century love because it's only about money and fitness and smoking is bad for your health and be the best and the smartest and the cutest and sleep together the day you meet and split two days later and all that and she said she dreamed of an everlasting and romantic love affair and I said that's what I longed for too and she gave me a kiss and she said "Prove it to me" and she opened her front door and she said "Tomorrow, same time, same place?" and she smiled to me just like the other day and honestly, I don't remember how I found the way back home, writing love letters in my mind and thinking about how I would try to make Jane the happiest fairy tale princess in the whole wide world.

... ..

I'm sorry, I didn't listen... What did you say?... You think me and Jane, we're dangerous fools? Because we believe in romance and think AIDS is a hoax?... That makes me sad.... You want me to leave immediately or you might become aggressive? That makes me feel even worse ... Ok, don't get upset, I'm off. Take care of yourself... Well, if that's what you wish ... No, no, don't worry, I won't be back...

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Some people are crazy people when you start to think of it. If you tell them there's no need to be afraid because the thing they fear doesn't exist, then they say you're a fool and want to put you behind bars...

for Gene

Cornillon-Confoux, the 18th of Mai 2005