

And Yet The Birds Still Sing follows Diane Langford, a social worker by profession, who is married and the mother of two small children. Diane was living a normal life until she discovered almost by accident that she was HIV positive.

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And Yet the Birds Still Sing

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Chapter 2

Diane walked into the lobby of her office building and found it resembling a M.A.S.H. unit. There were cots lying all over the place, and there were people in white lab coats buzzing around furiously. Diane looked curiously at all of the activity and returned to her office.

“So, how did it go with your girl,” Helen asked.

“Oh, it went fine, Diane replied splitting her attention between Helen and the papers on her desk that she’d began to mill through. “She had some half naked man over there, and she didn’t go to the training center like she was supposed to, but she and the kids are doing okay I guess,” Diane replied.

“Isn’t that the same girl that Karen was threatening to take the kids from before you took over the case?” Helen asked.

“Yeah that’s her,” Diane answered.

“Well, what’s wrong with her? I remember hearing Karen say that she was lazy, kept a nasty house, and neglected her children. You know, the type that’s more interested in partying instead of taking care of her children,” Helen said.

“Well, you know Karen with her ultra conservative ass, she exaggerates everything. If there’s some newspaper lying on the floor, then Karen considers it a nasty house. Nikki don’t hardly keep a nasty house, and I know for a fact that she loves those kids. She could use some motivation and direction, but she’s doing all right for someone her age with three kids. You know Nikki’s mother is extremely religious. No check that, her mother is a religious fanatic. When Nikki got pregnant with her first child, her mother threw her out the house because she said that Nikki was a fornicator, which in her mind is sacrilegious, and she didn’t want Nikki in her house when God swooped down on her to punish her. I guess she thought God was going to strike Nikki with a lightning bolt and she didn’t want to take the chance of getting electrocuted by mistake. Nikki probably only talks to her a couple times a year and God only knows how often

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they see each other. Nikki aint seen her daddy since she was ten, and her baby's sorry ass daddy's aint nowhere to be found. That girl aint got nobody. Shit, if Nikki was my child, I would be doing everything in my power to help her including walking on water if I could. I'm married and Walter and I both have pretty good jobs and it's still difficult trying to provide for our kids as well as save for their future! I can't imagine what that girl is going through."

"Well Diane, while that is a sad story, no one forced her to lay down, spread her legs, and produce three children," Helen rebutted pointedly as she glared at Diane.

"Yeah that's true, but I think Nikki was lying down with all those guys trying to find the love and acceptance that she wasn't getting at home. Like I said, her father was nowhere to be found, and she could never satisfy her "holier than thou" mother. Hell, her mother was too busy chasing behind people at her church instead of raising her daughter. I mean, it's good to worship God, but I don't think you should worship your religion. That's how people get caught up in all those cults and stuff," Diane responded as she rested her pumps in her chair and tilted her head back in thought. "She and her mother were never close. She really didn't have anyone to talk to about birth control or anything else," Diane said.

"You bleeding heart liberals, I just don't know what to do with you," Helen said.

Diane looked at Helen and smiled, "I'm not a bleeding heart liberal. And stop looking at me over the top of your glasses, that's the way my first grade teacher used to look at me when I used to get in trouble. "Anyway," Diane said as she put her feet down and turned her attention back to the papers on her desk, "what's going on downstairs? There's people walking around in little white lab coats, cots lying all over the lobby, I almost tripped over one of them trying to get through. It looks like they're getting ready for a disaster or something."

"Well, do you remember when we got that bomb threat last month?" Diane looked up with her mouth hanging open and slowly nodded her head. "Well now they want us to be prepared just in case

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the real thing happens. So every month for the next year, we have to do this disaster training,” Helen said.

“Get out of here Helen, what do we have to do?” Diane asked as she stared at Helen. Helen stared back at Diane trying not to laugh. “All Helen stop it. This is just another one of your little jokes,” Diane said with an embarrassed smile. Helen burst into laughter.

“Well I almost got you. No, it’s really the Blood Bank. They’re doing a blood drive here this afternoon. Didn’t you get a memo?” Helen asked.

“I probably did, but I probably threw it away. I don’t have anything to do with needles unless I have to and this I don’t have to,” Diane replied.

“What? Diane don’t tell me you’re still afraid of needles? How old are you thirty-six, thirty-seven? You must’ve been stuck a couple of hundred times by now! Seriously Diane blood supplies are really low. If Walter or one of your children were in an accident and needed a blood transfusion to survive, wouldn’t you want them to be able to get one?” Helen asked.

“Of course I would but...” Before Diane could finish, Helen interrupted her.

“Well, there’s not going to be any blood for them or anyone else to get if people don’t start donating,” Helen said.

“Well I never really thought about it like that,” Diane replied

“Of course you haven’t honey. Look, I’m going down there after lunch, why don’t you come with me. You don’t have to donate any blood: just talk with someone from the Blood Bank about donating. That way, you’ll have something to think about, and maybe you’ll be ready to donate the next time,” Helen said.

Diane stood up, stepped away from her desk, and put her hands on her hips. “Okay Helen, your guilt trip worked. I’ll go down there with you after lunch. But I’m not donating, I’m just going to look around, be nosy, and maybe ask a few questions.”

“Well, that’s a start,” Helen said while glancing at her watch. “As a matter of fact, I was planning on taking an early lunch so I can get to the blood drive early. Do you want to run down to the cafeteria with me?” Helen asked.

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“Yeah I guess so. Maybe I’ll go down there and get one of those dried up hot dogs or one of those withered up salads,” Diane said as she and Helen both began to laugh and headed for the cafeteria. Diane and Helen waded through the mass of people and the stale smell of old cooking grease and ordered their “gourmet” hot dogs. They sat and ate in silence. Diane gingerly picked at her food, her mind wandering, wondering if the woman she’d encountered outside of Nikki’s apartment building was really her childhood friend. “That had to be Brenda because she looked like her and she did have a mole like Brenda. I wonder what happened to her. What was so bad in her life that made her turn to drugs?” Diane thought. “Her father used to be an alcoholic, maybe that had something to do with it.” A slight smile came over Diane’s face as she continued to think. “I remember her coming down the street practicing my cheer leading steps with me. She was almost like my little sister. And she was so smart, she used to get nothing but A’s and B’s on her report cards. She used to talk about being a nurse or a doctor so she could help people. That girl’s probably got the cure for Cancer or AIDS somewhere in her head but we’ll probably never know. I wonder if she recognized me. I should’ve told her who I was. Maybe I could have done something to help her,” Diane thought as she tilted her head and gazed toward the ceiling. She glanced at Helen who was putting the last bite of her hot dog in her mouth.

“Well that was a lousy lunch: you finished?” Helen asked.

“Finished, I never got started. I don’t know how you ate that mess,” Diane replied. She and Helen stood up and cleaned their table off.

“Come on let’s go, I want to get down to the blood drive before it gets crowded,” Helen said as she sucked a sliver of ketchup from her thumb. They arrived at the blood drive and were greeted by a technician wearing a buttoned white waist length lab coat with a long black skirt hanging from underneath.

“Good afternoon ladies, will you be donating today?” the technician asked.

“No not me, I’m just here to keep my friend company,” Diane quickly replied, pointing at Helen.

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“Yes, I’ll be donating today,” Helen proudly interjected. “I’m a regular donor, and I do have my donor card with me.”

“Well good for you,” the technician replied with an enthusiastic smile. “Just follow me and we’ll get you started.” As Helen followed the technician, she tugged on her arm and whispered to her.

“You know, my friend has never donated before, she has this thing about needles.” Helen peeked over her shoulder at Diane who’d begun to read a pamphlet on donating blood. “She can be headstrong and stubborn, but she’s really a soft touch. I’m sure you can persuade her to donate if you go over and talk to her.”

“Okay, let me get you set up, then I’ll go over and work on her,” replied the technician with a devious smile. Diane had taken a seat, and was engrossed in the pamphlet she was reading. She was beginning to understand just how important it was for people to donate blood. She read a story about a little girl from a small rural town who’d died after a sledding accident because her rare blood type was not in supply at her local blood bank. The story sent a shock wave of mortification through Diane. She was ripe for the picking.

“Why don’t you want to donate today Miss?” Diane looked up and saw the technician standing over her.

“Um, it’s not that I don’t want to donate, I just don’t get stuck! I mean I don’t want to get stuck! What I’m trying to say is, I don’t like getting stuck by needles. But I’ve been sitting over here reading one of your pamphlets, and now I feel bad. I didn’t know you guys supplied blood to so many people. When I was looking through this pamphlet, I saw a picture of a little premature baby that had to get a blood transfusion when he was born and he looked so cute. When I saw his picture, I really started feeling bad,” laughed Diane.

“Don’t feel bad, that picture gets to everyone,” replied the technician with a smile. “But we could use your help. Is that the only reason you don’t want to donate, I mean because you’re afraid of needles?”

“Well yeah, but you don’t understand. I’ve been afraid of needles every since I was a little girl. I remember when my mother used to take me to get shots, I would scream so loud that people used to say that they could hear me all the way on the next floor. The only

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thing that would shut me up is when the doctor would stick a sucker in my mouth. I guess it's something that I've never outgrown," Diane said with an embarrassed giggle. "But I feel so bad now because it's such a worthy cause. And my friend was telling me that blood supplies are low?"

"We are running low on certain types of blood. Some blood types are more rare than others are. As a matter of fact, do you know what blood type you are?" the technician asked.

"I have no idea," Diane said.

"See, you might be sitting here with one of the blood types that we're low on," the technician said as she glared at Diane with that same devious smile. The technician's devious smile turned into a gloating smile because the expression on Diane's face gave every indication that she was feeling like a first class heel and was ready to cave in. The technician seized the moment. "Look Miss, what's your name?"

"Mrs. Langford," Diane said.

"Look Mrs. Langford, why don't you come over to the registration table with me and start the paper work. While you're filling out the paper work, you can decide if you want to donate or not. You can change your mind at any time. Just because you fill out the paperwork doesn't mean you have to donate."

"I don't know, I'd planned to just look around. I didn't plan on doing any paper work," Diane said.

"Remember now Mrs. Langford, it is for a worthy cause. And look at your friend. It can't be that bad, look at how relaxed she is." Diane looked at Helen. Helen was laid back on a cot getting her veins drained while dozing off at the same time.

"Well, how much do you take?"

"About a pint," the technician said.

"A pint! Wow, that's a lot of blood to take from one person," Diane said.

"It's really not that much, your body will replace it in about a month," the technician replied. "So, do you want to go over and get started on the paper work?"

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“Well I guess I can be a big girl and suffer through this torture for such a worthy cause,” Diane said as she stood up and put her hands on her hips as if she was a super hero standing up for truth, justice, and the American way.

“Well good for you. Just follow me and we’ll get started.” As Diane followed the technician, she looked over at Helen and watched the blood flow from her arm into the bag and although she couldn’t see it, she knew it was the needle sticking in Helen’s arm that was drawing the crimson fluid from her arm down into the bag. Diane’s stomach started to do cartwheels.

“Okay, this is a personal history form. It gives us an idea of your experiences, and that in turn helps us determine if your blood is safe. Just fill it out and let me know when you’re done.” The technician sat the form down in front of Diane and walked away.

“Damn, these are some personal ass questions,” Diane thought as she began to read over the form. “Let me see: do I have hepatitis, no. Have I ever paid anyone for sex, no. Has anyone ever paid me for sex? No. Although, giving my present financial state, that might not be a bad idea,” Diane sarcastically laughed to herself. Diane continued to work on the form until she was finished. “Excuse me Miss, I’m done,” Diane called to the technician.

“Okay, that was fast. Bring it over here, and we’ll finish the rest of the forms,” the technician said. Diane picked up the forms and joined the technician at another table. “Now, I just have to get your blood pressure and go over a few more forms with you and you’ll be ready.”

“I thought that the paper work would take a lot longer,” Diane said with a bit of nervousness in her voice as she rolled her sleeve up. The technician place the blood pressure cup on Diane’s arm and inflated it until Diane thought her arm was going to bust! Just when the pressure was beginning to be more than Diane could bear, the technician deflated the cup.

“One twenty over eighty, very good. Now, where do you want me to stick you: in your finger or in your ear?” the technician asked as she took the blood pressure cup off of Diane’s arm.

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“Excuse me! You mean you’re going to draw the blood from my ear?”

“Oh no Miss Langford, I’m sorry, I thought I explained it to you. First I have to test your blood to make sure you have enough iron to donate.”

“Well I don’t know about all of this now, you didn’t tell me I had to get stuck twice,” Diane replied emphatically and happily. Thinking that she’d found a way out, the cartwheels in Diane’s stomach began to subside. She could just hear herself telling Helen, “you know, I was all set to donate, but no one told me about getting stuck twice. I mean, that’s just too much damn sticking for a person who completely fears needles!”

“Miss Langford, it’s not really a stick, it’s just a little prick. It hardly hurts at all. It’s about the equivalent of getting stuck by a thorn or one of those prickly weeds,” the technician said. Diane knew full well what the technician was talking about, and she had the bruised fingertips to prove it after an all out weekend assault on her yard.

“I wonder what those kids did with my damn gloves. But, if I got bruised fingers in the name of a landscaped yard, I guess I can get one bruised finger in the name of saving a life,” Diane thought as she looked down at her finger tips. “Okay, you can do my finger,” Diane said hesitantly. The cartwheels in Diane’s were back except now they were being joined by a couple of backflips.

“Okay Miss Langford, are you ready?”

“Yeah I’m ready. No wait let me turn my head. I don’t want to watch,” Diane hung her head and closed her eyes. “Oooohh wee, is it over?” Diane asked as she opened her eyes and looked at the little puddle of blood resting on her index finger.

“Yeah it’s over. That wasn’t so bad was it? Now, we just squeeze the blood into this fluid and if it sinks to the bottom, your all good and we can get you over there so you can donate because I know how anxious you are,” the technician said with a sarcastic laugh. “Good, the blood sank to the bottom which means you have enough iron. Now I have one more form for you to fill out. Once you’ve completed it, fold it up and put it in the little box on the table.

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I'll be waiting for you by cot number four. By the way, have you eaten today?" the technician asked.

"Yes, breakfast and lunch. Well not breakfast, but I did have a little lunch right before I came here."

"Okay good. I'll be waiting for you by cot number four," the technician said as she walked away. Diane quickly filled the form out, but it took her a whole minute to fold it up, which was about fifty-five seconds longer than it should have taken. "Come on girl, get it together," Diane whispered to herself. She stood up and began her journey to cot number four at a snail's pace. "It's not too late to change your mind," Diane thought to herself. "Nope, I have to go through with it. There are a lot of people who depend on people like me donating blood. And who knows, maybe one day I'll need a transfusion myself."

"Are you ready Mrs. Langford?"

"Yeah I guess so."

"All right then, come on and lie down on the cot. I think I'll try your right arm first." As Diane laid down on the cot, the cart wheels and back flips in her stomach went away and were replaced by what felt like the entire United States gymnastics team getting ready for the summer Olympics. Diane slithered onto the cot and tried to calm herself, but there was no use. Her heart dropped from her chest down to her stomach went up to her throat and back down to her chest again. And now that her heart was back in the right place, it was beating louder and harder than ever. It felt like someone had went into her chest and installed one of those loud ass car stereos with the thumping bass. "Okay Mrs. Langford, I'm going to work your vein to see if I can get it to pop up." As the technician rubbed her arm, Diane tried to calm herself by making idle conversation.

"So, where's the woman I came here with?" Diane asked.

"Here I am," Helen replied. She stood a few feet away from Diane's cot with a proud smile on her face like she was watching one of children walk across the stage during a college graduation ceremony.

"Are you finished already?" Diane asked.

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“Yep, it doesn’t take any time at all. Man, I’m so proud of you. I can’t believe you’re going through with it,” Helen said.

“Well don’t be too proud yet, ‘cause I’m thinking about jumping off of this cart right now!”

“Now come on Mrs. Langford, your vein popped right up. I’m just going to clean the area with a little betadine and we can get started,” the technician said. Diane again attempted to divert her attention with idle conversation.

“So Helen, where did you get those cookies, and why didn’t you bring me any?”

“Oh, they’re right over there on that table. Sometimes people feel a little drained after they donate, so we provide little snacks and juice to help get their energy level back up. When you’re done, you can go over there and eat and drink as much as you want,” the technician said. She’d cleaned Diane’s arm, readied all the equipment, and was standing ready with needle in hand. “Well here goes Mrs. Langford, are you ready?”

“Okay, wait a minute,” Diane replied, taking a deep breath. Diane turned her head, balled up her hand and placed it on her forehead. She shut her eyes tight, clinched her teeth and courageously exclaimed, “Okay, I’m ready.” “OW SHIT,” Diane yelled as she felt the needle pierce her skin.

“Are you all right?” the technician asked.

“Yeah, is it in? Can I look now?”

“Yeah it’s in honey, you can uncover your eyes now,” Helen said. Diane uncovered her eyes, looked at her arm, and watched the blood quickly drain from it. “See now it wasn’t that bad was it honey?” Helen asked. Diane looked at Helen, smiled, and shook her head. For the rest of the blood draw, Diane felt comfortable and at ease. Not only did she feel comfortable and at ease, she began to feel proud.

“I put aside my fears for the good of man-kind,” Diane thought, “Wait ‘til I tell Walter!” “When can I donate again?” Diane asked in a secure tone.

“Well, you’ll have to wait at least two months. We’ll give you a little reminder of your next donating date before you leave, and you’ll

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receive a donor card through the mail,” the technician said. Before she knew it, Diane had donated her first pint of blood. “Well Mrs. Langford, you’re all done, let me just take the needle out and get your after care instructions,” the technician said. For some reason, the thought of the technician pulling the needle from her arm brought the gymnastics back to Diane’s stomach, but she was able to quickly quiet them. “Okay Mrs. Langford, you’re welcome to all the cookies and juice you can handle. Now try to keep your bandage clean and dry. You can take it off in about five hours. I want you to drink plenty of non-alcoholic fluids and oh yeah, here’s your first time donor sticker. Do you want to wear it or carry it?” the technician asked.

“I earned that sticker, I want to wear it!” Diane said. She took the sticker from the technician and proudly attached it to her sweater. “And thank you, you were so nice,” Diane told the technician. “You were all so nice, you made it so easy for me.”

“Well come on, you’ve done your good deed for the day. We both have plenty of work waiting for us upstairs,” Helen said. She hooked her arm around Diane’s and began pulling her. While dragging Diane, Helen looked back at the technician and said, “Thanks for everything honey you were all great.”

“Helen slow down or let me go. You’re about to drag me out of my shoes!”

“Well I had to do something, you sounded like you were giving an acceptance speech for an academy award or something,” Helen said as she looked at Diane and began to laugh. Diane and Helen stepped on the elevator laughing, and arm and arm as they returned to their office.

For the rest of the day, Diane felt like a totally different person than she did when she first arrived at work. Although getting her blood drawn had the possibility of making Diane feel weak and drained, it had a totally opposite affect on her. The thought of giving blood and possibly saving a life through her benevolence made her feel grand, almost saintly. And most of all, it made her feel rejuvenated. She jumped into the mounds of paper work on her desk and went through it like a beaver’s teeth going through rotted wood. She typed report after report and made phone call after phone call. By

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the end of the day, Diane felt like Super Woman. “Well Helen let’s see, first, I went to see Nikki, I donated blood, and then I completed half the files on my desk. I think that’s enough for one day, I’m going home. Oh and I almost forgot, Walter’s off today which means it’s his turn to pick the kids up from school and help them with their homework and all that good stuff. I’m going to go home, throw something together for dinner and take a hot bath. And who knows, I might even give Walter some tonight,” Diane said with a smile on her face as she put on her jacket.

“Oh listen to Miss Thing, you’re something else,” Helen said.

“Aint I though. I’ll see you tomorrow Helen,” Diane replied as she walked out of the office.

Chapter 3

Diane climbed into her car and headed straight for home. She pulled into her driveway and heard the soulful sensual sounds of Marvin Gaye's Sexual Healing blasting from her house. "Hmm, Walter must already know what I have in mind for tonight," Diane thought. Still feeling angelic about the goodwill deed she'd done, Diane floated in the house with a Girl Scout's smile on her face. Her smile evaporated like little droplets of water entering into the throngs of hell when she walked into "her" dimly lit kitchen and found Walter standing over "her" sink cleaning fish and singing Marvin. "Walter!" Diane shouted. "Where did you get all that fish and why are you cleaning it in my kitchen?"

"Oh, hey baby, I didn't hear you come in. I got this fish from one of my broads. She dropped it off just before you came home."

"Walter, I'm serious, where did you get that fish?"

"Nah, all right baby, I was just playing. I got the fish from Mr. Keys next door. He just came back from his fishing trip. Diane you should see all the fish he caught. That man is like King Midas when it comes to fishing. He caught walleye, white bass, all kinds of fish and he gave us plenty. I already cleaned what we're having for dinner tonight. It's in the refrigerator soaking in beer. I'm gone freeze the rest of it. Damn I can't wait to taste that fish. I'm gone season it real good, corn meal it up. And it's already been soaking for about an hour so that beer taste is gone be soaked in. And on top of that, I stopped and got some coleslaw and I'm gonna make some baked beans. Umph, it's gon' be some good eatin' around here tonight," Walter said with a delectable smile on his face.

"Well Walter I don't care what you do with it, freeze it, sell it, just please go outside with it. You got scales all over the place and the whole house smells like fish."

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“Okay baby I’m sorry, I’m about done anyway. I picked the kids up from school. Kim’s next door playing and Darren’s upstairs sleeping.”

“Sleep, how can he sleep with the music so loud?” Diane asked

“Come on Diane, you know that boy sleeps hard. Marvin Gaye could come back from the dead, go in Darren’s room and do a live concert, and Darren would probably sleep right through it” Walter said as he wiped the sweat from his face leaving streaks of fish juice across his forehead.

“He gets it from you with your nasty self!” Diane said.

“Nasty, why you call me nasty?”

“Because, you just wiped your face with your old nasty fish hands,” Diane said with a disgusted smile on her face. Walter searched for words to defend himself, but found his mind as vacant for expressions as a nightclub on early Sunday morning. So he just flashed an embarrassed guilty as charged smile. “I’m going next door to get Kim,” Diane said as she walked out the house with that same disgusted smile on her face.

Diane and Kim returned home and ate fried fish, coleslaw and baked beans in the den with Walter and Darren. They ate, talked, and laughed as they watched TV and challenged each other’s Jeopardy skills.

After dinner, Diane took the kids upstairs and although it was Walter’s turn, she helped them with their homework. After their homework was all done, Darren and Kim took their baths and got ready for bed. Darren, who was a natural when it came to sleeping, went straight into his room and lay down never mind the fact that he was still but naked. Kim felt like it was her duty to check up on Darren at all times and report back to her mother with a full and detailed report no matter how minor the infraction. So when she saw Darren’s naked behind walk from the bathroom to his bedroom and lie down, well this was a story worth interrupting the six o’clock news. But with a story so big, she couldn’t take any chances. Kim had to be sure that she wasn’t seeing things and that Darren was actually lying in bed naked because after all, Walter and Diane had told Darren several times before about running around and going to bed

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naked. She had even heard Diane say that she was afraid that Darren was going to be a little exhibitionist and although she didn't know what that was, she knew it wasn't good. So to get her proof, Kim tiptoed into Darren's room to get one last look before she spilled the beans. She peeked into Darren's bedroom and there he was sure enough lying there stark naked.

"Ooooooooooooooh, I'm telln'! Mommy, mommy," Kim went running into the hallway screaming at the top of her voice.

"Girl what is wrong with you?" Diane asked as she poked her head out of her bedroom door.

"Mommy, Darren is in bed naked again after you and daddy told him to stop, and this time I saw his dingaling and everything!"

"She did not," Darren shouted. Darren hopped out of bed and followed Kim down to Diane's room. He was standing in the doorway of Diane's bedroom still naked, dingaling swinging and all.

"Darren, come on boy and put some shorts and pajamas on," Diane said. She grabbed Darren by the arm and yanked him back to his room. Diane looked behind her and saw Kim eagerly following them into Darren's room. "Um Kim, I think I can handle this by myself. I want you to go in your room say your prayers and go to bed." Feeling satisfied that she'd done her duty, Kim complied and went into her room. Diane put some pajamas on Darren and put him in his bed. "Give mommy a kiss and promise me baby that you'll stop running around naked," Diane pleaded.

"I promise mommy," Darren replied while simultaneously kissing his mother on the cheek

"Okay baby now go to sleep." Diane cut the light off in Darren's room and went down stairs into the living room. Walter was sitting on the sofa in pajama pants with no shirt and the lights down low. He seemed to be in a mellow mood, drinking a beer and still listening to Marvin. Diane took a seat next to him and began humming along to Marvin.

"Those kids are something else," Diane said as she grabbed Walter's beer from his hand and took a sip.

"What did they do this time?" Walter asked with his eyes barely open.

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“Well, Darren was doing his regular thing, you know, running around the house naked.” Walter started laughing. “Walter that’s not funny. I don’t know why that boy likes to do that. And then Kim, with her little tattle tell self came running down the hall talking about Darren had his dingaling hanging out.” Walter laughed even harder. “Walter, now that’s really not funny. I don’t see how you can laugh at that. What if he doesn’t grow out of it or something? I don’t want my baby running all over the place showing himself off.”

“Come on now baby,” Walter said, trying to curtail his laughter, “that boy’s going to be all right. He’s probably just going through a phase or something.”

“Yeah well I wish he would hurry up and get through it,” Diane said. She killed the rest of Walter’s beer and gave him back the empty bottle.

“I’m going to get me another beer, do you want one?”

“Yeah, would you bring me one please?” Diane said. Walter went into the kitchen and returned with two frosty cold beers. He opened them both, handed Diane one and slouched down next to her on the sofa. Diane took a sip of her beer, put her feet up on the green leather sofa, and laid her head on Walter’s muscular chest as they continued to listen to Marvin. “Oooh, ‘I want you’, that’s my favorite Marvin Gaye song,” Diane said. Alternating between words and alluring moans, she quietly sang along. Leading with her nose, Diane gently ran her head along Walter’s chest up to his neck, sniffing like a dog carefully searching the ground for food, all while singing and moaning. “Ummm Walter you smell good,” Diane said in a seductive tone.

“Yeah I went in the basement and jumped in the shower, I had to get that fish smell off me.” Diane peered up at Walter, gave a sexy wink and took another sip of her beer. Then she sat up suddenly.

“Oh yeah, guess what Walter, I donated blood today!” Diane said. She looked at Walter with the excitement of a little girl waiting for heaps of accolades after bringing home a good report card.

“You did what, as scared of needles as you are?” Walter said.

“Yep, I donated blood. I’m so proud of myself.”

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“What made you decide to donate blood in the first place?” Walter asked.

“Well, the blood bank came to the office today and set up one of those blood drives in the lobby. And you know, I guess Helen is a regular donor so she was going to donate and she talked me into going with her. And Walter, you know me and needles don’t get along at all so I had no intentions of donating anything. But then, when I got down there, I started reading this pamphlet about donating blood. It talked about donating bone marrow and everything. Oh Walter let me tell you, so many black people die because there aren’t enough of us donating bone marrow.”

“Is that right?” Walter asked.

“Yep, anyway the pamphlet I was reading had a picture of a little preemie baby in it. All Walter, you should have seen him, he was the cutest little thing. There was a caption underneath his picture that said something about him not being alive if it wasn’t for some caring person donating blood. The picture of that little baby made me feel bad for not donating and Helen had already started to work on me before we even got to the blood drive. Then once we got there, the technician started on me, and by the time she finished, I felt so bad that I couldn’t help but donate.”

“Oh, so they kind of double teamed you, made you feel a little guilty,” Walter said as he took a guzzle of beer.

“Um huh, but I’m glad they did, I’m glad I donated,” Diane said in retrospect.

“Well, give me that beer,” Walter said as he playfully tried to take Diane’s beer. “You’re supposed to stay away from alcoholic beverages.”

“Walter you better give me my beer, that sheet said to stay away from alcohol for at least five hours and that was way at eleven-thirty this morning so it’s been a lot longer than five hours,” Diane said. She rested her head on Walter’s shoulder and started rubbing his bare chest running her hand down across the rippled six-pack of his stomach. Shining through the dimly lit room, Walter’s sweaty, dark torso was reminiscent of a rough, wet asphalt street glistening under the rays of an overhead streetlight. Diane was a freeze baby. So

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despite the springtime air, Diane insisted that they leave the heat on high, which made the room rather humid and caused Walter to sweat. But Walter didn't know if he was sweating because of the heat of the furnace, or because of the heat emanating from Diane's sweltering sexually charged body.

"Girl you better stop rubbing me like that, especially while I'm listening to Marvin. You know what his music does to me.

"Umm, what does it do to you daddy?" Diane asked in a slow seductive tone. She gently ran her hand across Walter's nipples.

"Well you know, Marvin's music got that slow sensuous groove to it, and you know he's the king of talking shit." Diane giggled like a little girl as she took a sip of beer. "I don't know what's so funny, Marvin helped me get you. Remember how I used to play his music when we were dating," Walter said. He sat his beer on the table and gently pulled his wife off the sofa onto the beige plush carpet and lay next to her. Walter kissed her neck as he raised her sweater up. He pushed Diane's bra up and gently kissed and sucked Diane's thirty-four C sized breasts. He watched with erotic anticipation, as her long, large, dark nipples became erect. Walter slipped his hand into Diane's loose but comfortably fitting slacks and then into her panties. He slowly and melodically ran his hand through and across Diane's mass of dark, moist curly hair, his motions keeping time with Marvin's music.

"Umm Walter that feels so good, but let's go upstairs before one of the kids come downstairs," Diane managed to utter through her groans of erotic pleasure.

"Huh, ah baby come on, they aint gone come downstairs," Walter moaned as he lifted his head from Diane's luscious breasts.

"Uh huh Walter come on," Diane said while attempting to slide from underneath Walter. "You know how Kim has trouble sleeping sometimes."

"Yeah, you're right. Well come on then let's go!" Walter stood up and waited impatiently while he feebly tied the strings to his pajama bottoms. Diane stood up and lowered her sweater. They rushed upstairs with the enthusiasm of two teen-aged lovers rushing for the back seat at a drive in movie. As she and Walter headed

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upstairs, Diane suddenly stopped in her tracks with a horrified look on her face.

“Oh Walter, don’t forget Marvin!”

“Oh shit, I’ll go get it,” Walter said. Walter ran back downstairs with the swiftness of a kid running for the ice-cream truck. He popped the CD out of the stereo, ran back upstairs, rushed to the bedroom and like a SWAT team trying to enter the barricaded entrance of a deranged outlaw, he tried in vain to cross the threshold of what he hoped to be a room of sexual satisfaction. But it was no use; the door was as secure as the walls of Fort Knox. “Diane baby, what you doing? Come on and open the door!”

“Wait a minute baby, I’m getting ready for you,” Diane responded in a sexy voice. Walter frantically paced the floor outside the door.

“Umm baby hurry up, I can smell the perfume out here!” Walter pleaded. He was hornier than a dog in heat; he could hardly contain himself. Just as Walter was contemplating ramming the door with his shoulder, the door opened. Diane was standing in the doorway looking like a seductress. She’d pulled her hair back and was wearing a black see-through teddy and high heels with fish net stockings.

“Come on in, throw Marvin back on, and let’s do this,” Diane said in her sexiest voice. Walter slid in and closed the door behind him. He slithered over to the boom box and filled the room with the romantic ballads of Marvin Gaye. Then Walter started undoing his pajama strings, but Diane eased up in front of him and stopped him. “Nah daddy that’s my job,” she said as she pushed his hands away. She slowly massaged his crotch while looking him dead in the eyes. Walter didn’t say a word nor did he try to stop her. He stood there and stared at her with his mouth wide open like an eighteen year old boy being seduced by a forty year old woman. Diane grabbed Walter by the hand and led him to the bed where she laid him down, unloosened his pajama pants strings with her teeth and slowly pulled them down. She pulled his shorts down and mounted herself on top of him. “I guess you forgot that Marvin does something to me too!” Diane said as she began to gyrate on top of Walter.

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“Damn baby, I don’t know if I should be mad or glad about another man making you feel like this.”

“Oh believe me daddy you should definitely be glad,” Diane said as she and Walter entered into a midnight love making session with mood music by Marvin. There was plenty of foreplay, and the sex talk went from passionate phrases like, “all baby, make love to me like you never have,” to straight up nasty sex talk like, “all yeah baby, fuck the shit out of me.” And those were the phrases being shouted by Walter. Because on this night, Diane was in control. She was definitely putting something on Walter and she knew it. Diane and Walter carried their one to one orgy into the wee hours of the morning. By the time they finished, Marvin’s CD had repeated itself several times. Diane and Walter were both dripping wet and the bed, their little slab of sexual contentment, was saturated with sweat. As soon as Diane rolled off top of Walter, they both fell asleep, comatose from a night of passionate lovemaking.

The next day was pretty ordinary for Diane . In fact, so was the next week. Every other day was still Christmas for Darren, and she was still busting her but down at Social Services. When she wasn’t feeling bad about missing church for the umpteenth Sunday in a row, especially after promising herself and the Lord that she was going to go, she was haggling with Walter over the trip they’d planned to take at summer’s end. “Diane, I think we should go to California because Disneyland is better than Disney World.”

“It is not better Walter, the only reason you want to go to Disneyland is because a couple of your old army buddies live in California.”

“Yeah I know, that’s why we should go to California. Check out, if we go to California, I could get in touch with Keith and James and they could show us around. We could see more than just Disneyland,” Walter replied enthusiastically.

“No Walter this is supposed to be a family vacation. The last thing I want to do is lope behind you and your army buddies while I’m on vacation. It’s Florida and Disney World,” Diane said, ratifying her position by rolling her eyes.

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“Diane it’s going to be a family vacation, I’m just saying...”
Before he could finish, Diane interrupted.

“Look Walter, let’s finish this discussion later, it’s getting late. I took the day off from work tomorrow so I can get caught up on my spring cleaning and if I stay up talking to you, I’m going to be too tired to get anything done.”

“All right baby but I’m telling you if we go to Florida instead of California we’re going to miss out.”

“Yeah, whatever Walter,” Diane said with a girlish giggle as she went upstairs.

Chapter 4

When Diane woke up the next morning, Walter and the kids were all ready gone. “Damn I must’ve forgot to set the clock. It’s all ready eight thirty, let me get my behind out of this bed,” Diane said. She threw on some jeans and one of Walter’s old high school football jerseys with half the two and a third of the nine missing from it. Walter had outgrown the jerseys’ by nineteen years and twenty pounds but he still cherished the old blue and gold relics. Diane tied a black and red scarf around her head aunt Jemimah style, slid on her house shoes and headed downstairs straight to the living room to put on some cleaning music. Diane popped The Greatest Hits of Dinah Washington into the CD player, rolled up her sleeves and put on her game face. She gathered up her cleaning supplies, went into the kitchen and looked at the stove. “Damn, that thing must have two inches of grease caked up on it. I swear Walter and his damn fish. Lord, if mamma saw this thing she’d pull my pants down and whip my behind with a hickory stick,” Diane whispered to herself as she fiercely scrubbed the stove. Diane used so much elbow grease on the stove that by the time she finished, she couldn’t have possibly had any grease left in her elbow. She scrubbed and scrubbed until there wasn’t a speck of grease or anything else left on the stove. “Now that’s the way the stove is supposed to look,” Diane said as she looked pleasingly at her handy work. Diane admired her work for a while and then scrubbed everything else in the kitchen. She scrubbed Darren and Kim’s spilled grape juice stains from the bottom of the refrigerator as well as Walter’s dirty wannabe mechanic fingerprints off the walls. When she finished scrubbing she grabbed the bucket and mop. As she mopped, she paused every minute or so and sang the tunes of Dinah Washington into the top of the mop handle as if it were a microphone. When she finished in the kitchen, Diane headed straight for the living room where she dusted the mantle piece and straightened the green and brown paisley design pillows on the sofa.

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Just as she grabbed the vacuum cleaner, the phone rang. “Damn, just as I was about to get in my groove,” Diane said as she ran for the phone. “Hello, hello,” Diane paused for a minute. “This is who from where? I’m sorry I can’t hear you. Wait, let me turn the stereo down,” Diane said as she jogged over to the stereo, “Now who is this?”

“This is Carly from the Blood bank. May I speak to Diane Langford?”

“Speaking,” Diane replied.

“Oh, hi Miss Langford. As I said, my name is Carly and I’m calling from the Blood Bank. I need to talk to you about the blood you donated a couple of weeks ago. We have some important information for you.

“Well, okay, go ahead and talk,” Diane said.

“No, Mrs. Langford, you don’t understand, we need to speak to you in person. We need you to come into our office.”

“Well, when do you want me to come in?” Diane asked in a slightly irritated tone as she glanced over the living room at all the work that she still had left to do.

“Well, do you think you can come in today at eleven-thirty?”

“Today?” Diane asked.

“Yes Mrs. Langford, we do have an important matter to discuss with you,” Carly replied with a bit of insistence in her voice. Diane didn’t reply immediately, she hung her head in thought.

“If I go down there, I know I’m not going to feel like cleaning up when I get back, but then again she did say it was important.”

“Um, I guess so, yeah, I’ll be there at eleven-thirty,” Diane reluctantly replied.

“Good, do you know where we’re located?” Carly asked.

“Yeah, I pass your building on the way to work everyday,” Diane said.

“Okay, good. When you come in, you’re to see Laura Long. She’s one of our counselors.”

“What is this all about?” Diane asked.

“Mrs. Langford, we’d really rather discuss it in person.”

“Well all right, is there anything else?” Diane asked in a tone clearly exemplifying her desire to get off the phone.

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"No, that's it Miss Langford. Thank you for your time." Carly replied.

"Damn, let me try to hurry up and get some more cleaning done," Diane said as she hung up the telephone. She grabbed the vacuum cleaner, and just as she turned it on, the phone rang again. "Damn it, I aint never gone get anything done if that damn phone keeps ringing," Diane said as she ran back to the phone. "Hello."

"Hey what's up baby?"

"Hey Walter, what's going on?"

"I was just calling to let you know that I'm going to stop at the gym and work out and probably shoot some ball or something. So I probably won't be home until sometime this afternoon."

"Oh okay, I forgot you were off today but that's fine. I got to go down to the Blood Bank at eleven-thirty anyway."

"The Blood Bank, for what?" Walter asked.

"I don't know, they called right before you talking about they had something important to talk to me about," Diane answered. She held the phone between her shoulder and chin and used one hand to emphasize her statement by placing it on her hip and the other to dust the end table.

"Well why didn't they tell you what they wanted over the phone?"

"I don't know. The lady on the phone said they needed to talk to me in person; she was kind of pushy about it too. They probably found out that I have some type of rare blood and they want me to donate some more, but they can forget that."

"Oh, now you don't want to donate any more blood. You were the one talking about how good donating made you feel," Walter said with a sarcastic chuckle.

"I know, it did make me feel good, but I'm not ready to go down there and get stuck again. Besides, it's too early anyway. They said I had to wait at least a month before I could donate again."

"Yeah that's true, well, I'm going to go on and get off this phone. I'll be home later. I love you."

"I love you too," Diane said. "I'm not answering the phone if it rings again, I don't care who it is," Diane said to herself as she turned

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the vacuum on. Diane vacuumed moving fluidly from room to room like a swan dancing on water. She was so into her cleaning that she almost lost track of time. "Damn, it's ten thirty, I better go and get dressed so I can make my appointment," she said. She put away all of her cleansers, mops and brooms and poured out all of her dirty buckets of water. Diane ran upstairs, got herself together, and was out the door in a half an hour. Diane had to stop for gas on the way. She contemplated turning around and going back home, but decided to continue on since she'd made the effort of getting dressed and stopping for gas.

Diane pulled her car into the parking lot of the Blood Bank and found a parking spot close to the door, "whew, thank God for that. At least I don't have to walk a long way. I wonder what these people want anyway. I hope they aint wasting my time. I could still be at home doing my cleaning," Diane said to herself. As she walked in the building, the pale plain white walls and sterile smell of the place reminded her of the disinfected medicinal smell of a doctor's office that she hated so much. Diane walked over to the receptionist's desk and introduced herself. "Hello, I'm Diane Langford. I have an eleven-thirty appointment with Laura somebody. I can't remember her last name um, but I do remember the woman on the phone saying that this Laura woman was a counselor or something," Diane said.

"Yeah, hi Miss. Langford, I'm sorry, is it Miss or Mrs.?"

"It's Mrs.," Diane replied.

"I'm Carly, Mrs. Langford, I spoke with you on the phone. You're to see Laura Long. I'll let her know you're here," Carly replied with a smile. Carly buzzed in the back and announced Diane's arrival. Within minutes, a short, slender woman wearing glasses and braces on her teeth emerged from the door just behind the receptionist's desk. She was a youthful looking attractive woman about five feet two inches with bleached blond hair. She must have been a confident woman, because the evident black roots sprouting from the scalp of her head didn't seem to bother her. "Laura this is Mrs. Langford, she's here for her eleven thirty," Carly said.

"Hello Mrs. Langford, I'm Laura," the woman said extending a bronzed colored hand. Diane looked at her and was immediately

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convinced that her skin tone was the product of a tanning booth. For no woman, black, white, Hispanic, Asian or other could have such a perfect skin tone without the help of modern science.

"Hi," Diane replied as she shook Laura's hand.

"Nice to meet you Mrs. Langford. Please follow me, I have a room all set up for us in the back." Diane followed Laura to a drab little room that couldn't have been any bigger than a jail cell. It was painted dark brown and had no pictures or decorations on the walls. There was a tiny desk inside the room with a chair behind it. On top of the desk was a thin file with Diane's name on it. About two feet across from the desk sat another chair. Assuming that the chair was for her, Diane took a seat as Laura closed the door and took her seat behind the desk. "Mrs. Langford, I'm sure Carly told you that we had an important matter to discuss with you so I'm going to get right to the point," Laura said as she folded her young hands on the desk trying to look professional. "Mrs. Langford, we tested the blood that you donated a couple of weeks ago, and it came back positive for HIV. Now, I don't want you to panic because science has come a long way and..."

"Wait a minute. I'm sorry, did you say that I tested positive for HIV?" Diane asked.

"Yes I did Mrs. Langford," Laura replied unassumingly. Diane sat unresponsive, staring at the dark brown plain wall. She sat motionless for a while like a little defenseless mouse after being paralyzed by its venomous predator. "Are you okay, Mrs. Langford?"

"Okay? Yeah I'm okay," Diane said. She slowly turned to face Laura. "But there must be some sort of mistake. There's no way I can be HIV positive. I haven't done anything to be HIV positive. I mean, I don't do anything. So there must be some mistake, you must have me confused with someone else." Diane fidgeted around in her chair, but kept her eyes fixated on Laura's.

"No Mrs. Langford, I have the right person." Laura said.

"Well then the tests must be messed up, there must be something wrong with the way you do your testing because like I said, I don't do anything to expose myself to that type of disease. I'm married, I don't do drugs, and I feel fine. So, you probably need to

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check your testing machine or something,” Diane said, expressing herself using her hands and arms.

“Mrs. Langford, our tests are very thorough and reliable. Once blood tests positive, it’s re-tested twice more to ensure that the results are accurate,” Laura replied in a melancholy tone. Diane’s eyes began to fill with water as she looked away from Laura. “Are you okay Mrs. Langford,” Laura asked, handing Diane a piece of tissue paper. Diane took the tissue paper from Laura, cleared her throat and tried to stop the quivering that had begun to control her voice.

“Are you telling me that you found HIV in my body?” Diane quietly asked as she began to wipe away her tears.

“No Mrs. Langford that’s not what I’m saying at all. Let me explain. We use a very reliable test, but it doesn’t actually test for HIV. Instead it tests for the presence of HIV antibodies in the blood. If the test comes back positive for the presence of the HIV antibodies, the test is repeated. If the test comes back positive after the second test, like it did in your case, then we test it one more time using a test called the Western Bloc, which is basically a conformation test and is very reliable. Now, if the Western Bloc comes back positive, then there’s more than a ninety percent chance that the blood is infected, and yours came back positive Mrs. Langford,” Laura explained.

“So then there’s about a ten percent chance that I’m not infected right?”

“Mrs. Langford our tests are very reliable and accurate. However, I do encourage you to get the test redone.”

“Well I don’t understand,” Diane said as she sat up in her chair, “you said that I have HIV antibodies, but does that mean that I have HIV, I mean I don’t understand.”

“Well here is how it works Mrs. Langford. About three months after being infected with HIV, the body begins to generate these HIV antibodies to try to fight off the disease. Now the only way your body will produce the antibodies to fight HIV is if there is HIV present in the body to begin with. So basically what I’m saying is that the HIV disease has to be present in order for HIV antibodies to be present. Now do you understand?” Laura asked with a sympathetic smile.

“Yeah, I guess so,” Diane replied in a hushed tone.

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“Do you have any questions Mrs. Langford?” Diane had many questions like, how in the hell did she go from being a happily married woman with two beautiful children, spring cleaning her house, to sitting in a ugly ass room across from a woman who looks all of twenty years old telling her that she has HIV. But Diane knew that Laura couldn’t answer that one. Diane leaned over in her chair and looked intensely at the tissue paper that she’d began to tear up.

“Um, I do have a question. You said that the HIV antibodies form about three months after infection right?”

“Yes that’s right Mrs. Langford, they start showing up approximately three months after the initial infection,” Laura said.

“Well, does that mean that I was infected three months ago?” Diane asked, as she looked Laura directly in the eyes.

“No, Mrs. Langford. I mean you could have been, but there’s no way that we can tell exactly when or how you became infected. However, I do encourage you to think back and see if you can remember doing anything specifically that may have exposed you to HIV. Because the person that infected you may not even know that they have the disease and they need to know so they can start acting responsibly and stop infecting other people. Now, I’m sure you have more questions, so I took the liberty of putting together an informational folder for you,” Laura said as she pulled a folder out of the top desk drawer and handed it to Diane. Diane took the folder and sat it on her lap as she kept her teary eyes on Laura. “There’s some pretty good information in the folder Mrs. Langford. It’s pretty basic, but it does answer some of the most commonly asked questions about HIV. Um, I do need to ask you Mrs. Langford, do you have medical insurance?” Diane nodded her head in acknowledgment. “Good. Mrs. Langford, please follow up with your doctor as soon as possible.”

“Okay, well what do I do after that?” Diane asked in a frantic tone as the tears began to flow more freely. “I mean there’s no cure for this right? I guess I just go home and wait to get sick right?” Diane said, as she became more emotional, more scared, and more pissed with each word she spoke. She began to cry so hard that her face was covered with tears and the snot that she couldn’t suck back

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into her nose and that she was too upset to care about wiping. Laura got up from the desk and walked over to Diane.

"Mrs. Langford, I know you're upset," Laura said in an empathetic tone. She placed her hand on Diane's shoulder and tried to calm her down. "I'm not going to even try to act like I know how you're feeling right now, but I can tell you that science has come a long way in the treatment of HIV and AIDS. There are a lot of new drugs on the market now and people have been doing really well with them." Laura said with a calm assurance.

"Well, I certainly don't want to spend the rest of my life taking drugs, I'm only thirty seven years old!" Diane said emphatically through her tears as if she had already given a lot of thought to the idea.

"I know Mrs. Langford, but right now, that's all we have to offer. And on these new drug combinations, people are doing a lot better and who knows, maybe someone will come up with a cure in the near future," Laura said. She walked back around to the other side of the desk, opened one of the drawers and started fishing around. "I want to give you a card, if I can find it. I thought I put them in this drawer. I can't find her card, but I'm going to write down the name and number of someone I want you to call that works over at the AIDS Awareness Center. Her name is Betty Smith. You're probably going to need someone to talk to," Laura said. She jotted down the number on a large piece of paper and handed it to Diane. Diane folded up the piece of paper and placed it in her purse. She helped herself to another piece of tissue paper and wiped her tears and nose.

"Is that it, can I go now?" Diane asked in a way that made her seem like she was afraid Laura had more bad news for her.

"Yeah, we're just about done here. But please Mrs. Langford, call Betty Smith, she'll be more than happy to sit down and talk to you. And I want you to promise, promise me that you'll see your doctor as soon as possible.

"I am, I'm going to call him as soon as I get home," Diane said as she stood up and tried to put on a courageous face.

"Okay, well, good luck to you and I'm sorry that I had to give you such bad news," Laura said. Diane quietly thanked Laura, and

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walked out of the office. Diane walked along the halls of the Blood Bank with an expressionless face. She looked like one of those state troopers with the dark sunglasses walking up to a car after to write a citation. Her legs felt extremely weak and heavy as she walked. It was as if she had to concentrate all of her efforts on manipulating the muscles in her legs to perform what was usually an effortless task.

"Oh my God, I can't believe this is happening to me," Diane said to herself. She got into her car and locked both doors. "I need to talk to Walter. He needs, he needs to find out as soon as possible. We got to find out why they're in there saying, why they're saying I got HIV. I better page him right now," Diane whispered to herself as she punched Walter's pager number into her cell phone. "No wait a minute, I can't call my husband with this garbage. I'm not even sure that I have the damn disease. All I have is the word of some counselor named Laura who looks like she's about twenty years old. I mean, she's not even a doctor. She probably don't have the slightest idea of what she's talking about. And she did recommend that I have the test redone," Diane said to herself. She dumped her cell phone back in her purse and covered her face with both hands. "I'm going to go home, call Dr. Baker and make an appointment. And when I go, Dr. Baker's going to tell me that I'm fine, Walter's fine and everything is fine," Diane said to herself. "Laura Long, you've got me confused with someone else," Diane said out loud as if Laura Long was sitting next to her. Diane started the car and headed for home.

As soon as Diane got home, she picked up the phone and called her doctor. She felt a sense of relief when her doctor's office was able to squeeze her an appointment in on the next day because she could hardly wait to vindicate herself from this terrible news. But Diane didn't dare tell her doctor's secretary the real reason for needing the appointment; she made up some story about having the flu and being afraid that it was turning into pneumonia or something. After she got off of the phone, she noticed that the message retrieval light was blinking on the telephone answering machine. Diane stared at the blinking light in silence. "Lord what now? I hope aint nobody left a message telling me more bad news. I hope nothings happened to Walter and or one of my babies!" Diane said to herself. Her growing

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paranoia caused her to shake. She had to use her left hand to stop her right hand from shaking as she pushed the button on the answering machine.

“Hey baby it’s me. Listen, I got a call from work asking me if I wanted to work over time today and of course I’m going in to make that money so we can have more to spend when we go to California. Naw, I’m just kidding, we can go to Florida and Disney World if you want. So anyway, you’re going to have to pick up the kids. I’ll talk to you later, bye!” The fear that had manifested itself in Diane as a quivering heaviness in her chest retreated from her body like air leaving a deflated balloon.

“My baby, always working hard for me and the kids. He’s such a good provider. Yeah, me and Walter and the kids are going to be just fine,” Diane said to herself with a smile on her face. Then it suddenly dawned on Diane that she had to pick the kids up from school and it was getting close to that time. Diane grabbed her jacket and paused before walking out the door. “What if that Laura Long girl was right and I am HIV positive. How am I going to handle it? How is Walter and the kids going to handle it? Walter has been a good provider, working all the over time he can get but, what if he’s been lying to me. Instead of working, he could be sneaking out on me with some other woman. And his job offers him all the opportunity in the world, working those twenty four hour shifts and all,” Diane thought to herself. Her optimistic out look began to see saw back and forth against her fear and paranoia like Mr. Hyde relentless fighting for the soul of Dr. Jeckyl.

While driving along, Diane began to pay close attention to the people driving beside her. At every stoplight, she analyzed the people sitting in the car next to her. Some were laughing, some bobbing their heads to the music. Others sat there with serious concerned expressions on their faces, oblivious to the critical situation that Diane found herself in.

When Diane arrived at the school, she saw Kim and Darren standing in their usual pick up and drop off spot. Darren had taken off his jacket, and Kim appeared to be trying to do the big sisterly thing convincing him that it was still too chilly to be walking around

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outside without a jacket. Darren was naturally fighting Kim's every effort but that didn't deter Kim. She was following Darren around in circles trying to wrap his jacket around his shoulders while he covered his ears and stomped his feet. They both had anguished expressions on their faces like they'd just found out that they were going to have to attend summer school. Their mouths were flapping wildly and widely, but Diane couldn't hear what they were saying. It was like she was watching a comedic silent movie.

This was one of those rare occasions that Darren beat Kim in their race for the front seat. As Darren opened the door and tried to get in, Kim grabbed him by the back of his shirt and pulled him back.

"Mommy, tell Kim to stop, she sat in the front this morning," Darren whined. He began to fall backwards from Kim's powerful pull but he held on to the seat with a death grip trying to hold his position. Kim was behind Darren working diligently and tirelessly to remove him from the front seat. The children's rambunctious behavior during pick up time is something that would normally get on Diane's nerves especially after she noticed that Kim had pulled and tugged on Darren's shirt so hard that it was probably two sizes too big now. But today the kid's comical conduct served as a feel good pill for Diane. She busted out in laughter. It was like she was appreciating motherhood for the first time all over again.

"All right Kim let your brother go, it's his turn to sit up front," Diane chuckled. Kim let go, and Darren happily took his rightful place up front.

"Your lucky mommy made me let you go or I would've pulled your little butt all the way out the car," Kim declared with much confidence as she got in the back seat. Diane pulled off and looked at Darren. He appeared to still be reveling in his small victory. He had the grin of a little boy who'd been bad as hell all year, but had still gotten everything he wanted for Christmas. Kim sat in the back seat biting her bottom lip and staring out the window with a vindictive look on her face. Diane was convinced that Kim was surely planning revenge against Darren, conspiring a plan that would assure her front seat privileges from now until her eighteenth birthday. Diane looked

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back at Darren and then again at Kim and busted out in laughter again.

“What’s so funny mommy?” Darren asked.

“Nothing baby,” Diane said in between her laughter, “I just love you and your sister so much,” Diane said. When Diane and the kids got home, she went in the house and immediately started to cook dinner. She fried up some French fries and hamburgers. Although burgers and fries were a main staple in her diet, be it she cook them herself or get them from a burger joint, Diane didn’t have much of an appetite. It seemed like every time she put some food up to her mouth, she would get a queasy feeling her stomach and she would again start to worry about her “supposed” HIV status. So Diane just munched on a fry or two and after dinner, she insisted that the kids go outside and play in hopes that they would tire themselves out, never mind the homework tonight. She wanted them to go to bed early so she could get to bed and put an end to a not so great day. And on top of that, she wanted tomorrow to hurry up and come. Because the sooner tomorrow came, the sooner she would be at Dr. Baker’s office finding out what she figured she already knew. That somehow, Laura Long and the Blood Bank had made a terrible mistake. After about an hour and a half, Diane called the kids to come in the house. Kim and Darren took their baths, and since Diane had already ironed everyone’s clothes for the next day and it was only eight thirty, she was batting a thousand. After Kim’s bath, Diane directed her to go in her room, put on her pajamas, say her prayers and go to bed. Diane personally escorted Darren out of the tub and into his room. She wanted to make sure that he had on his pajamas before he got into bed. After Diane put the kids to bed, she went into her room and took off her clothes. For some reason or another, she didn’t feel like rolling up her hair and although the house was somewhat chilly, she didn’t feel like wearing any pajamas. She cut off the lights and laid down in her bra and panties figuring that she’d just put her hair in a ponytail in the morning. Diane lay in the dark room with only a sliver of light sneaking through the cracks of the mini blinds to disturb her serenity as her mind fell into a silent prayer. Even though she instructed her children to pray nightly, prayer was an exercise that Diane had slowly

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and unintentionally gotten away from. After not hearing from her for so long, Diane hoped that the Lord wouldn't ignore her prayers, "Lord, I know I don't pray often but if you please just get me through this. Please let there have been some type of mistake made Lord. If you please, just let me not have HIV, I promise that I'll start going back to church and be a better servant to you. Please Lord, in the name of Jesus, Amen." After saying her impromptu prayer, Diane pulled the covers over her head, rolled over and went to sleep.

And Yet The Birds Still Sing follows Diane Langford, a social worker by profession, who is married and the mother of two small children. Diane was living a normal life until she discovered almost by accident that she was HIV positive.

And Yet The Birds Still Sing

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