





Debout en clair-obscur

A translated excerpt from the novel by **Laurette Lévy**

“I’M NEGATIVE! NEGATIVE! IT’S FANTASTIC!”
Yes, it was fantastic. Beatrice was profoundly happy. If she had infected Peter, it would have been hell.

During the weeks that followed, he beamed. Bea waited for a gesture or a few words. Nothing. Or next to nothing. Only: “Don’t worry, everything will be okay, honey.”

Bea struggled to get the resources she needed on her own. The nurse who revealed her status advised her to see a doctor quickly to have more blood tests done. Her friend Philippe, who had already gone through the same thing, helped her a lot. First, he reassured her by offering himself as an example: “Look at me, Bea, I’m in great shape. We’re going to get through this, you know. It’s not like it was in the early years. You’ll see, we’ll beat this thing.” He encouraged her to contact the AIDS Committee of Toronto (ACT), the city’s main organization, to be referred to a competent HIV doctor. During her first appointment, however, the doctor dealt a heavy blow: “You need to speak with your partner’s daughter. She needs to know. You have to prepare for anything.” Beatrice didn’t understand why she should disclose her illness right away to Emily, who was only seven, and her mother, Peter’s ex-wife. Why not write her will while she was at it? Bea’s intuition told her to wait and, most of all, to find another doctor who was less alarmist.

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Six months later, Peter dumped her. He had found a new girlfriend. Was she younger and prettier? Who knows? Bea had never met her. The only thing she knew for sure was that she was HIV negative.

The breakup occurred without a warning. Peter had just finished a long contract and wanted to relax for a few days at his friends Susan and Jack’s place near Trent River. Bea was supposed to join him for the weekend. The day after Peter left, she called him. She was already missing him

and wanted to talk to him. Susan told her Peter had gone out with Jack. She would give him the message and was sure he would call her back if they didn’t get home too late. Bea waited all evening long. The next day, as soon as she got home from work, she called him again to say she was planning on taking Friday afternoon off so she could join him sooner. Peter’s voice sounded strange as he answered:

— No, Bea, you shouldn’t come.

— Why, what’s happening?

What’s wrong?

— No, don’t come. It’s me.

Uh...it’s over, you and me.

— What, over? What are you saying? What’s going on? Faced with Bea’s persistent questions, he added:

— I’ve met someone. I’ve thought a lot about it, I can’t go on. It’s over, Bea, over.

Bea cried and pleaded. She assured him that she could understand and accept what she believed to be a passing

infidelity. Maybe they should take a break. What about a temporary separation? Naturally he was upset about her diagnosis, but surely that didn't change his feelings?

— But don't you understand? he replied. I don't love you, Bea, I never loved you.

Then he hung up. Bea was paralyzed, unable to react to this statement that denied the years they had spent together. She couldn't understand. Everything was falling apart. Had he never loved her? Had he lied to her all this time? Had she been deaf and blind day after day? Profoundly devastated, she stayed home, unable to face her colleagues and the questions they would inevitably ask upon seeing her eyes puffy from crying. With the phone off the hook, she sobbed for forty-eight hours, thinking she was the unhappiest person in the world, wondering what would go wrong next, screaming at Peter and all men who make women suffer, ruining their lives in a second. For forty-eight hours she howled with rage and jealousy. Where and when had he met this woman? How long had he been lying to her? How could she not have seen it coming? For forty-eight hours she replayed the dreams they had been building together: one day, Emily would have a little brother or sister; one day they would own their own home. Forty-eight hours remembering Peter's tender gestures, the kisses just behind her ear when she pulled her hair up, the party he had thrown for her birthday last year, the moments of beautiful and passionate lovemaking. She loved to grab his kinky hair and brush it away from his face so she could look at him as he leaned over to make love to her. Would it never happen again? It was unthinkable.

What a nightmare! Bea wondered if there was a limit to her pain and to what she could endure. The diagnosis, the breakup, would there be an end to all of this shit in her life?

Peter returned unmovable from his friends' house. He gathered together his and Emily's things and

moved out while Bea was at work. She found herself alone in the large High Park apartment they had chosen together that was now half empty and too expensive for her. Unable to relinquish all traces of hope, Bea swallowed her pride and attempted to contact him and persuade him to change his mind. His friends and family—even his mother who was always so sweet to her—repeated that she should not push things. Peter had made his decision and it was irrevocable.

Bea had the courage to carry on despite everything. A strength she did not know she had surged up from deep within to keep her standing amid the disaster that her life had become. No, she would not go under. She would rise above. She would show him, she would show the entire world that she was stronger than that. +

After working as a researcher at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (University of Toronto), Laurette Lévy has been focusing on writing over the past few years. In 2002, she published a collection of short stories called *Zig-Zag*. *Debout en clair-obscur* is her first novel.

Laurette has been volunteering with community AIDS organizations since the early 90s. Now living in Montreal, she is a member of PASF (Projet action sida femmes) and sits on CATIE's board of directors.

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Laurette Lévy talks about the art of writing a novel

It took me a good three years to write *Debout en clair-obscur* [*Standing in the half light*], which is set between 1993 and 2003. During this 10-year period, the arrival of antiretrovirals changed things dramatically for people living with HIV/AIDS. I wanted to show that even though all the characters' lives changed radically, they could still have normal lives in some ways.

I like all the characters even though I disagree with some of their decisions. They're like good friends: you acknowledge their mistakes and their shortcomings and love them anyway.

What surprises me is that I wrote this book so the general public would have a better understanding about what it means to live with HIV/AIDS for the rest of your life. I didn't think people with HIV/AIDS would like the book because it was too much about their own reality. But what happened was really the opposite: many people with HIV/AIDS are very taken with this book, especially women. One woman called to thank me for writing the book. So the fact that I touched people living with HIV came as a big surprise. I wasn't expecting it.



This column is part of art posi+ive, an initiative enabling HIV-positive artists to share their experiences of living with HIV through their artwork. The program was launched in 2005 by CATIE in partnership with Gilead Sciences Canada, Inc.