

## The first time I gave plasma

BY JAY THIEMEYER

The first time I gave plasma, was in a storefront on Peachtree St, Atlanta. Windows covered completely with brown paper, slick butcher paper.

The place was a one-story, window-clad storefront, full of men and women wearing summer clothes, others in white. It was in the hottest part of summer. Jimmy Carter was in DC. OPEC and the Shah were in the news. Khomeini was in Paris just like Ho Chi Minh used to be.

You don't have to be the Shah, I remember thinking, to be beholden.

I laid out my arm and observed the contraption set up to bleed us.

It looked like some kid's science project, something thrown together out of nothing great, not intended to impress just to get the ordeal over quickly. A puzzle made of left-overs; I was thinking guillotine/erector set and how the stick might sting like mercurichrome on a cut. They swabbed each puncture site with purple antiseptic, a lovely shade. As pretty as mercurichrome.

The whole process of being drained for a bag took forever. Being brand new, meant having to wait. I sat in a straight back foldchair that squeaked. And listened to a baby with a chill.

And when the paper work was done, whatever good that was, I had to wait again. Like the lines for feeding. Same with bleeding. It was all in how much time you wasted to get to it. That was the essence of the thing: It was all just more wasted time.

I was exhausted, my feet hurt from walking on cement, my soles were a dull ache and one ankle twisted when I first came in. By the time it came my turn I was ready to lie down on the flat gurney. The crack in the black plastic stuck in my back. No matter. My eyelids felt like steel hatchs on an old rustbucket. It would take a storm to rouse these rusted lids. They'd clamp shut before the first time I got poked. It was the surprise of something new. I felt, a thrill of joy, a sense of joy. It was new. And my blood running out was something to see. Like a riverbed being born in the still flat plastic bag. It looked like a placenta hanging there.

I was too tired and broke to protest the inept nervous stabber. I could only laugh. I had been dreaming I remember but can't remember the dream. I woke with the poke.

I didn't care. I turned it off. It was nothing to divert me.

But the surprise of something new. A moment of caught-by-surprise, lids shut, then back to the same wornout rut. A bubble bursting, forgotten at once. The image of draining blood. I needed the 7 dollars. When I was told I had to cash the scrip they handed me at the neighboring package store at a charge of 25 cents, I didn't rise up. I was too tired to protest. I would have enough with what I was handed to get where I wanted to go and fallout somewhere invisible to the naked cop's eye. It was the naked cop's eye I always watched out for. It was my treat to watch for the naked cop's eye. And weeds high enough to conceal me.

I still have the vision: this hobnail hanging over me, held by a girl, bearing down. I am smiling as it nears, a smile designed for her. I wonder how long just as I am wondering now how long this Spring shade of green will last- how long her skin will hold its color how many donations will it take for that shade to disappear? I smile at her and then the point of the steel gray hobnail descends then enters, that sea lion of a vein. The whale, my whale, and the point disappearing in my whitening skin a drop of blood leaching from the corner. the needle does nothing for me save for the seven dollars. And believe me at that time 7 dollars was 7 dollars; and my blood was almost all I had besides. 7 dollars was treasure, worth its weight in blood or yellow gold or amber ale-like plasma soon to be spun to corporate purpose and sold for real money.

As I lay flat, I fell to sleep with that blithe needle in my arm. And I noticed others likewise asleep on their gurneys. Like children during rest when we were all quite young. The man next to me big as a whale woke and raised his arms clasping his thick hands behind his head. The trail of tubing hanging around him. Swinging like hair on a head. Everyone seemed to notice but him. He'd been here so much He wanted something to laugh at. When I looked at him, he laughed. The gurneys whose old wheels resembled gimlet eyes of a shark or a very tired ancient of days, a whale in short, old and resigned to the ocean as master, like donating plasma for chump change or to get out of the heat, shrieked when we moved in our sleep. All the gurneys like ships of the line ranged out as if for a glorious blood-letting. My desensitized neighbor winked and I did the same. Not knowing what else to say. We were sharing the same crow's nest after all. We were skanning the horizon for the same whale.

We were grateful for the chance

to get out of the sun and have a place to lie down: It was more than half what mattered till the bleeding was done and we had to go. Leaving the cool hands of the phlebotomists behind. And the cool flow of saline in my veins. It was cool this storefront environment, cool to the touch of the hobnail. But we had to go. There were more of us waiting behind.

The phlebotomists I talked to, who apologetically stabbed us, knew what it was like. To be on your back and beholden. It had been their training for the job. It was a time of no good jobs. Jimmy in DC lost his.

And it was how the phlebotomists supplemented their minimum wage. The joke, I suppose, was on us. The Shah got a plane ride to the White House if memory serves. All the way to Walter Reed Hospital. And shook the hand that fed him. And the president was fired. And I have craters in my arms, fallen arches and memories that serve to recall the harpoon sailing over my outstretched white arm, the blue vein bulging like a seal waiting for the bite, or a great sperm whale full of blubber and blood. More than enough to fill the waiting bag. "Down bag!" was our repeated call when the bags grew full and dropped fat with our blood. 800 ml strong. In the bag, as it filled, the blood looked like a pricey foreign delicacy. The balance lever would lift its flag and a white coat would come to clip the bag from its umbilicus, and haul it off to the back where the blood would be spun in the lab. And the blood corporations would profit from our fluid and ruin. The gimlet-eyed wheels squeaking, our bodies shifting in a powerless seething mass, a truth to be told, a whale or a seal waiting for the hit, the next one, as we lay and rested for just this one moment out of the sun, on the old donated gurneys in a storefront I was told had once sold flowers, a hippie shop on the Strip. In retrospect, a lot to pay simply to get away from the sun a lot to pay to rest sore feet and get scrip for 7 dollars. But after all, 7 dollars was almost 7 dollars. When you allow for the quarter. A short distance from zero. I donated from then on, the same way I bummed change. I gave it my all; every ounce of me. My daily nullification I turned to my own odd profit. And always drank to that acumen I had in this untiring vein. For several days more than twenty years straight, I explored every avenue for every bit of nothing and void I could find, leaving nothing to rumor. I explored them all, the above being only one. Call it success of the obverse kind save for the one thing I failed at.