

ALL THESE CATS HAVE AIDS

by Jason VILLEMEZ

When it comes to Hugo and I, the story is this: we met in 1973 in a bar called The Townhouse, when I was 25 and he was 29. Both of us thought New York was the only city where gay people existed, so we followed our instincts. He planned on going to law school, but his gift for friendly discourse made it easy for him to get big money as a salesman, and then, when he realized it was more interesting selling ideas than selling objects, as a public relations guy. I didn't care for such excitement. I liked simple things. I'd studied history in college and was working as a copy editor at a textbook company, my hands perpetually stained with ink. We went to Coney Island for our first date and he won me a baseball bat at the arcade. He was exceptionally gifted at Skee-Ball and the game where a person has to guess your weight. He always knew how to puff out his chest, to make himself seem bigger than he actually was. The prize tickets were bursting out of my pocket. I felt so butch walking home that night, the bat swinging at my feet. Hugo said it was sexy. We fucked when we got back to my place. It wasn't my first time with a man, but it was the first time I thought it was okay, the first time I felt no need to jump in the shower and

wash off immediately what I'd just done. He fell asleep in my bed so quickly I could have sworn he was my brother, or my child. I hoped that I'd be as fortunate to live life so carefree. When he prepared to leave the next morning, I asked him to stay, and he did.

He was stubborn as hell. I liked that about him. It's why he was so good at his job: once he had his mind set on something he found a way to make it happen. When the AIDS crisis first started, he developed a theory. He said the disease would become so widespread, so nondiscriminatory in who it attacked, that people would feel compelled to throw us their support. All we had to do was wait it out. But it never broke the tipping point. It wasn't run-of-the-mill. It wasn't glamorous. There's no difference between a failing liver and a failing immune system. The problem was that we didn't have any way to treat ourselves and, also, everyone hated us.

We were sitting in our apartment on Avenue C, listening to records. We put on the portable fan because it was vengefully hot that summer and our landlord refused to replace our window unit. He said we must have broken it, and if we wanted a new one we'd have to pay. We knew gay people who'd been evicted for lesser reasons, so we didn't pursue it further. The fan at its highest setting blew at the speed of a big wheel. I told Hugo to splash some water on his face so the air would feel cooler. Or I could kiss him all over. He always liked when I did that.

He said he had a better idea and went off to the kitchen. I stuck my head out the window, searching for a breeze that I could coax into the room. We had snacks to share, we had wine, we were delightful to be around. A

minute later Hugo returned with a metal bowl filled with ice and positioned it under the fan. The air bounced off and hit him in the face, blowing back his curly brown hair. “Like a January wind,” he said and sat there for an hour.

We took the sleep when we could. Sometimes we went for days without a solid few hours. Stress came over us in waves. The worst was when the phone rang and we’d wonder for a split-second who had died. That fear was always cruel, not knowing who’d be next. We had lists in our heads of the people worse off, the ones we thought would be next. We lived in the land of the worst-case.

We had our own problems, too. Hugo often had prolonged bouts of diarrhea, and he’d moan hollowly, his voice raspy because of his dry mouth, and it wouldn’t be until morning that he had exhausted himself enough to drift off for a few minutes. In the morning I always made sure to slip out from the covers as smoothly as possible, to avoid the creakiest floorboards, keep my belt buckle from clinking when I put on my pants.

My main goal back then was to hold it together at work and let it all out at home. After I got fired from the textbook company, I found a job managing the office of a nonprofit that gave free legal services to LGBT people. Most cases involved entrapment or solicitation. My salary wasn’t much, but it did include meals, provided by one of the lawyers whose family owned a Jewish deli in Bushwick. I’d often return home with leftover chicken salad or turkey clubs, and Hugo and I would feast like buzzards.

The lawyers at my job worked at leftist firms. That they were allowed to do their “pro-homo, pro-bono” at all was a victory. A few of the highest

earners covered the office expenses and the salaries for myself and my assistant, Elmer, a gentle man who could coax anything out of anyone with his Isaac Hayes voice. He and I would often joke that one of our clients would eventually make it big, really big, like Freddie Mercury, and they'd take care of us. They'd buy us a place to live and provisions to last a lifetime. We'd never have to work again.

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The other day I received a letter postmarked Norman, Oklahoma, from a high school student doing a book report. He'd come across an old article about Hugo in *The Advocate*, and he wanted to write about gay militants. It's been thirty years since we did it. I've gotten a lot of letters in that time and I respond as much as I can in my free time. I try to answer people's questions and debunk any untruths, but mostly I just try to tell them who I am and who Hugo was. Somehow, the news reports always seemed to miss that part. The boy said he'd never written to a prisoner before, and he had an excitement running through his body that he'd never felt. He was doing something forbidden, fun. He didn't think any of his classmates would be quoting someone like me for their projects. He asked if Hugo and I knew we would alter the course of history, if that was what drove us. I wrote him that Hugo and I were not gay militants and I recommended he look up Larry Kramer and Gay Liberation Front. I told him that we hadn't thought that far ahead. We didn't know what would happen in

five, ten, twenty years down the road. All we wanted was not to die. I assume that's what drives most people, then and now.

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We needed to grab people by the scruff of the neck and force them to look at us. My first idea was a giant art installation of works painted with HIV-positive blood. Then I read in National Geographic that cats have lived with a similar virus for centuries, so I thought we might set up a petting zoo with the banner All These Cats Have AIDS. Then I wondered why we couldn't just get someone famous to speak out for us, someone who could convince the masses that we weren't a threat. Hugo looked at me like I knew nothing of the world.

According to him, we needed to be aggressive. We needed to get the publishers and TV producers on our side. We needed to seduce them, get their blood beating at the injustice. We needed to remind people that all people, men and women, gay and straight, were susceptible. It wasn't just us. He said this to me every night as he dressed for his galas and fundraisers and black-tie balls.

One night, he returned home around ten, perfectly sober, a bounce in his step.

"Guess who's gay," he said and leaned in for a kiss. It wasn't a question as much as a declaration, as if I could have said any name and he would've shouted out yes and handed me a prize. I loved indulging him in his little games.

"Prince Albert of Monaco."

“You’re probably right, but that’s only rumor. This is a game changer. Mayor Koch.”

“That’s not news, darling.”

It really wasn’t. During the 1977 election there were lawn signs that said Vote for Cuomo, Not the Homo. Everyone in New York City knew about Ed Koch.

“He’s going to come out publicly. And, a friend of mine said that he’s going to pledge support for AIDS research.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it,” I said. “And here I thought you were going to say someone that matters, like River Phoenix.”

“In your dreams, dear. He’s too cool for you anyway.” Hugo flashed me a smile and went to change into his jogging clothes.

I could rarely keep pace with him when he ran, but I wanted to tell him what had happened at work that day and I didn’t want to disrupt his routine. I searched frantically for my gym shorts and a fashionable t-shirt, and when I returned to the living room he put his arms around me and said how glad he was that I was tagging along. It was so rare he got a running buddy. Most guys we knew preferred ogling at the gym. Some of his former friends had outright refused to be in close proximity to those infected.

We went to the West Side Highway and ran uptown, past the piers, past the meatpacking district and the homeless enclave of street kids and drag queens. We’d seen some of them before, hustling at the bars, hoping to get lucky with a closeted man because discretion came with a surcharge. We turned

onto 80th street and headed into Central Park to avoid the cars and stoplights. I told him about the call I'd received.

A gay man named Desmond Morris was assaulted by a pair of cops. They'd stopped him on Bleecker and asked for identification, and when he said that he'd left his wallet at home, that he was just going to the corner store to buy a sandwich, they laughed and said he must be dying for some sausage. He tried to walk away, but they said they weren't finished with him yet. They'd have to take him in. It wasn't until after Morris had been beaten, after he'd been carted to the hospital and treated for a fractured skull, that the men discovered he had HIV. The pair of them, straight-laced Irish boys from Red Hook, went into hysterics, said they were going to kill him. They stalked him outside his home, left him damning anonymous letters, called his phone at all hours, until they finally settled on launching a criminal lawsuit, assault with a deadly weapon, and refused to talk to the press. One of our lawyers had volunteered to take the case, but his boss played golf with the chief of police and forced him to withdraw.

Hugo ran faster as I said this and I found it impossible to keep up. I relented after a few yards and stopped at a water fountain while he sprinted down the path. Good, I thought, get the rage out now, when nobody but me was watching. We all had ways to thwart our distress.

"Show off," I said when I caught up to him. He smirked and retied his shoelaces.

"Why don't you meet with Morris yourself," he said. "Screw the lawyers, for now. Just show him that people still have his back. I'll go with you."

“You shouldn’t. You don’t want to be seen in a prison.”

“Absolutely I would, if I had a client there. You said the police officers accused him of starting the fight?”

“They said he attacked them with the intent to spread HIV.”

“And they had no injuries themselves?”

“Only their feelings, apparently. The poor boys.” I wiped my head and flung the sweat to the side. “We should really be more sympathetic to law enforcement. They’re so easily hurt.”

“Oh, the trauma,” Hugo said.

As we ran out of the park, we passed a trio of cops outside an office building. They shouted something at us as we ran, but we didn’t stop, we didn’t turn around, and a few blocks later they simply weren’t there anymore. I guess they figured we weren’t worth their time.

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We went to see Morris at Rikers Island. A bruise shone under his left eye and he had stitches down the side of his cheek. He sat up straight. His broad shoulders reminded me of all the football players I’d crushed on in high school but never had the nerve to speak to. He didn’t look like your stereotypical queer. Why the cops decided to single out him, of all the people in the West Village, was perplexing.

“I wish they’d gotten it,” he said from across the table. “I could have taken them if I’d fought back.”

“How’d you get those marks on your face?” Hugo asked. He wore one of his best suits. People probably thought that he was a lawyer and I his paralegal. We took notes on yellow pads that I’d swiped from the office.

“Oh, you know, bricks, lead pipes, shivs.”

Unlike most of us, Hugo had never been beaten up, not even a schoolyard brawl. His charisma shielded him from most trouble. He could win over anyone he wanted. Yet he always sympathized with the underdog, and he loved a challenge. He looked at Morris with such tenderness, as if he’d gone through the exact same thing, that I was unsure who to feel worse for. He’d stepped into Morris’ boat and was using all his limbs to plug the holes.

“I know a guy who’s friendly with the warden,” Hugo said. “We can get you into solitary confinement.”

“Absolutely not. I don’t want special treatment. I won’t give them another reason to single me out.”

“Morris,” I said, “we’re going to get you a good lawyer. But you have to take care of yourself until then. You need an ally in here. If people see that, they might leave you alone.” He scoffed at me.

“Doesn’t matter what cell I’m in. It’ll happen sooner or later. People keep saying I’m a child molester.” He stared at the floor. “I’ll stand up for myself, but when it’s five on one, not much you can do.”

I looked around at the other inmates. Most were talking to women, their wives or girlfriends or mothers. They all wore the same beige jumpsuits. I wondered what a straight man would do if he found himself in a prison full of angry gays who wanted him dead or, worse, infected. I would have watched that

TV show. Hugo jotted something on his pad, but when I looked closer it was only scribble. He always kept a pen with him to take down phone numbers, but oftentimes he merely used it to doodle, to give his hand something to do while his brain mulled things over.

“We’ll find you a good lawyer,” he said. “We’ll destroy their case.” His voice was calm, measured, as if he were holding a pack of cutthroat reporters at bay. “But for now, you have to keep yourself safe.”

He grabbed Morris’ hand and held it. That’s all it would take, I thought, a handshake between someone important and someone like Morris. Put that on the front page of the papers, and you’ve opened up a tide of goodwill, an unflappable burden of proof to those nurses who refused to draw blood, those caretakers who refused to nourish the enfeebled, the parents who refused to hug their dying sons. Imagine if Ronald Reagan had shaken the hand of an AIDS patient, the sea change that act would have spurred. It would have buoyed us for years.

We left the prison and took a taxi back home. Hugo had meetings and I had cases that needed attending. But something about that ride stuck with me, something about Hugo, the way he smelled, the way he held my hand tighter than normal in the space between our legs. Frustration, despair, hope. I wondered what he concocted in those moments of silence.

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Morris was right. He was found dead a week after we talked, pushed down the stairs or knifed or hung by the neck. Take your pick. We never learned the real cause. The newspapers reported only that a fight had broken out and gave no further details. I'm sure the people who did it knew he had HIV, and it was just as likely that they felt he died like he was supposed to, like he deserved, bleeding out on a cold floor.

Hugo was the one who told me. One of his reporter friends had called him and he came into the office dabbing his eyes with the cuffs of his shirt. He sat down on the windowsill and I made him a cup of coffee and had Elmer sing to him while I finished the paperwork for a bribery case. He held the mug to his lips, hands shaking, and I had to turn my chair away to keep myself from running to him.

The two cops spoke at a press conference and said that while they would have liked to see Morris have his day in court, they felt safer knowing that such a dangerous person was no longer a threat. They smiled, waved to the crowd, and that was the front-page photo on all the papers the next day. I tacked it to the wall and we doodled all over it. We drew a dick in one of their mouths and gave the other a giant swastika tattoo. Then we burned it and sprinkled the ashes out the window, a little black snow for the summer day.

This was around the time that Hugo developed a cough he couldn't kick. We spent a few weeks thinking he had a summer flu and I'd catch it soon. But I never had anything wrong with me. We'd shared so many fluids that we thought that as long as I was okay, Hugo was okay too. But when his coughing turned bloody, I told him that he needed to see a doctor. We knew a good guy

in the west village who never stopped seeing gays through the whole crisis. As we looked around in the waiting room, at men who were more bruise than skin, Hugo whispered to me that if it were him, he would never go out like that. He would die beautifully, without a smudge. He made me promise to help him with the makeup.

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We resumed our lives as best we could. Hugo kept a cadre of white handkerchiefs in his suit pocket and got good at wiping his lips without giving anything away. To all his ignorant friends he had only a terrible cough. They told him it was fine, that something was going around and he shouldn't be concerned. They offered him lozenges.

People forgot about Morris. We put up a memorial in Sheridan Square but it got rained on and ruined after a week. The flowers got pilfered and put in people's hair or redistributed to the other memorials dotting the streetlamps. Hugo tried to get the Voice to write an obituary but got turned down by the senior editor.

"They're all homophobes," he said, "they're no better than the guys at the Post."

"Why don't you write something," I said. "We could print it up and distribute it around the streets like they did in the early days, before Stonewall, before faxes. We could give copies to a motorcycle gang and offer free beer for every twenty fliers they distribute. They'd plaster the village in no time."

He laughed and pinched me. We threw the plates in the sink, switched off the lights, and made a quick retreat to the bedroom. We put on a Cat Stevens record. We shed our clothes, making a silent pledge to not let anyone or anything ruin our evening. We held each other and danced skin to skin, and when I put his legs up onto my shoulders, he requested we stay that way forever.

When I woke the next morning he wasn't in bed. He wasn't in the apartment. He'd left no note. It wasn't unusual for him to leave earlier than me, but he always kissed me goodbye or left a note on the counter. I wondered if something had happened to him, if he'd been beaten up, kidnapped, picked up by the paddy wagon. I wondered if I'd get a phone call from the precinct and have to bail him out, as I'd done many times for friends who got too friendly with an undercover cop or had their pants down during a bathhouse raid. After work I vowed to make calls if he hadn't returned, but there he was, sitting on the couch in his suit, legal pad on his lap, hand covered in ink.

"I'm going to do something," he said. "And I need your help."

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Compared to Hugo, I was always less brave. I'd never done anything illegal in my life. My general fear—of retribution both earthly and divine—compelled me to follow the rules. I grew up in a conservative Catholic town. I went to bible school and church every Sunday. I remember those priests with their booming voices, their achingly good gift for manipulation. Bad things happen to those

who do bad. Even the smallest offenses are damnable. I didn't want to be thrown into the abyss. But our pain wasn't going anywhere, and we were burning slowly. We couldn't envision a worse place. Still, as Hugo explained his plan to me, I shook my head.

The Joseph Clark Memorial Dinner was, and still is, an annual white-tie gala for Catholic charities. The ballroom at the Lantham Hotel gets dolled up with red and white flower arrangements. The mayor attends it, the chief of police, the publishers of all the major papers. The Archbishop plays host. A church secretary arranges the place cards and a massive stage is erected for the notable guests to perch on like rare birds. Invitations are difficult to come by, and they are always expensive, so I wondered why Hugo took such sudden interest.

“The cops that attacked Morris are getting an award. They'll be at the head table, right near the stage.” He handed me a copy of the press release. His hands were sweaty. I looked it over, then told him to think about what he wanted for dinner. He went to the bedroom to find something more comfortable to wear. I lay the paper on the coffee table, trying my best to not think about what was coming.

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We needed to get out of the house. It was a Friday night, still hot as hell, and the fans and ice buckets no longer worked. Hugo suggested we do something fun, so we agreed to go to the Duplex. We hadn't been to Christopher Street in

a while. A night out with singing and dancing and cocktails sounded like a perfectly civilized form of release. I was exhausted. My office had been flooded with calls that week about people being dumped in the street because morgues wouldn't store them and funeral homes wouldn't bury them and crematories wouldn't burn them. Their passage had been denied. There was no ferryman in sight.

Hugo spent an hour searching his closet for an outfit. He'd lost 30 pounds in a month. He came out and modeled a pair of bell-bottoms that I'd never seen before. "Wore these when I was 21," he said, "before I discovered pastrami." The pants still swallowed him, but I took two butterfly clips and pinched the sides like clamshells. We could cover them up with a long shirt or a belt or whatever struck his fancy. He plucked an army-green denim jacket and draped it over his shoulder, James Dean-style.

"Dashing," I said. "Now you've just got to slick your hair back and find a criminally fast car."

I put on a plaid shirt and jeans. Most of my clothes came from thrift stores like Goodwill, and I enjoyed the idea that they were worn by others before me, that I was adding to their history, that they would serve me until the fabric unraveled. I didn't pay attention to the latest fashions. I cared only for comfort. Unlike Hugo, I didn't have to worry about what people thought of my attire.

The entrance of Duplex was a small hallway that spilled out into a larger area, like the shape of a pot or an upside-down baseball cap. Near the door you got all the smells of the city, whatever happened to be wafting by, but in the

main space it smelled like polished wood and perfume and dried gin. Often times a bartender or another brave soul would stand at the window and perform Donna Summer, The Bee Gees, the latest show tunes. Sometimes the theater crowd showed up after work and gave impromptu solos, their faces still caked in makeup, a feather boa or two draped around their shoulders. I knew some of them through work. Several shows were forced to close when their actors died of AIDS and it became too costly to recast. The surviving crew weren't eligible for unemployment. Many had gotten fired from their day jobs when their bosses heard they'd been in proximity to the infected. We tried our best to get them new work, to point them towards people who would be kind to them and who wouldn't flinch at their touch, but most of the time, we failed.

Hugo got us seats across from the piano and I brought us some whiskeys sour. His stomach did better with whiskey than gin or vodka, and he sipped so slowly that by the time he finished he was drinking mostly water anyways. We said hello to a few people we'd seen in the neighborhood over the years. A few times we marveled that so-and-so was still alive, like a far-removed uncle who sends Christmas cards year after year.

Down the row, two men were groping each other through their leather slacks. We knew plenty of hypersexual creatures. We knew of the trucks where guys would fumble over one another to get lucky in the dark. We knew of the bathhouses that Mayor Koch shuttered at the onset of the epidemic. We knew of the orgies. Neither of us felt an urge to partake.

A man walked to the microphone. His face was pale and he had heavy black liner around his eyes. He wore a motorcycle jacket and carried himself

with the confidence of a performer, though neither of us knew what show he was in. He didn't say his name. After a dramatic silence, the man hushed the piano player and began to sing, and then I remembered who he was.

We rarely went to musicals, but I'd seen a billboard for Cabaret in Times Square, the man's face looking down on us from the neon heavens. He'd done the show in London to rave reviews and made the transfer to Broadway. We hadn't seen it. I remembered the film with Liza Minnelli and her bowl hat, the way her sideburns curled on her cheeks. Friends of mine loved the Isherwood novel. But I couldn't bring myself to read much of anything that rang too true to life. No James Baldwin, no Edmund White, no Armistead Maupin. The gay guy so rarely wound up happy, and I already knew enough about loss. When the man finished his number he took a seat at the bar. I walked up to him and touched his shoulder. I said I loved the song. It must have been fun to be starring on Broadway.

"It's a routine," he said. "Like any other job."

"You're in a hit show. You get applause every night. How many guys can say that about their job?"

"True." He stared at the floor and lit a cigarette. "People love watching a good genocide."

I bought him a drink and invited him over to our table. When the man sat down, Hugo recognized him and said he'd done work with his agent. He asked the man what he felt when he got the starring role.

"I got the call," he said. "I told my boyfriend. We went out to dinner. One year later, he's dead, and I'm still here."

“I’m so sorry,” I said.

“It’s fitting.” He gulped the rest of his drink. “My character winds up in a concentration camp. Everyone around him dies, too.”

Hugo leaned across the table, as if he didn’t want to be overheard. “Do you think he would have fought back, if he had the means?” The man laughed.

“Like what? Lead an uprising of deviant whores? Charm the guards to death?”

“No, I mean if he somehow found himself with power. Stole a gun or something like that.”

“You mean kill one guard if he’s lucky, then get slaughtered by the next one? No, I doubt he would do that.”

“Why not?” Hugo said.

“Because killing people is wrong.”

“You wouldn’t stop a murderer from doing it again?”

“No,” the man said. “I couldn’t justify that. My character couldn’t. I don’t think many people could.”

“You wouldn’t fight to keep people you care about alive?”

“Keep alive for what? To get spit on? Treated like a leper? No. I wouldn’t fight for that.”

Hugo tried to stand, but I put my hand on his leg and held him down. This man didn’t deserve any ire. Even if he didn’t see it exactly the way we did, maybe the art he made was his form of protest. Maybe he left his anger on the stage.

“Please forgive my partner.” I turned to Hugo. “We’re exhausted.”

“You can’t shoot an idea,” the man said. “As long as people believe we’re the devil, anything you do is moot.” He thanked us for the drink and left the table. We watched the next singer, and the next, and the next, until we lost track of what we’d seen.

Around two-thirty the bar emptied out. We walked back on Tenth Street, past the NYU kids, past the fifth avenue condominiums and neon-lit bodegas, past the drunks splayed on front stoops and the lovers sitting on fire escapes with their feet dangling down. We paid them no mind. We had nothing more to say.

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Somebody had to write the story, Hugo told me. I’d begged to accompany him to the dinner, and he shot me down without a moment’s hesitation. Somebody needed to say what happened. Somebody had to say why. But we agreed that I would walk him through the lobby and stay until he went upstairs. In my mind that was non-negotiable. I owed him as much for our years and years together, for his courage, for his kindness. The least I could do was send him off with a smile.

On the day, we played a record in the apartment. We picked at the errant fibers on the couch and we talked about the night we spent riding the Staten Island Ferry, staring at the lunar eclipse and making fools of ourselves as we howled. We were always different at night, more fun, more free. It was easy to become someone else, to slip through double doors and emerge among

friends, to feel the rush of a bare fingertip on your body. At night, we were in control; we knew who we were.

If someone had told me that in ten years there would be drugs that could keep people alive for decades, that there would be evidence showing our touch was harmless, that people in real power would be rallying for us, if I'd known all that then yes, of course I would have told Hugo not to do it. I would have held him down with my own hands and told him grace was near. But we didn't know any soothsayers. It was impossible for us to imagine that world.

Sometimes I couldn't believe that Hugo and I had ever met. I couldn't believe we'd been together for fourteen years, that we danced to Sylvester at Studio 54, that we shacked up on Fire Island four summers in a row, that we made blueberry pancakes on Sundays. Every time I saw two men together, walking down the street, sitting in a bar, emblazoned on a movie screen, I thought of him.

But sometimes, even when he was alive, I tried to forget him, too. I tried to forget all that had happened. I tried to rid myself of the smells and sounds of the sick, the calls for firing squads, the jeers from the old ladies on the subway. I questioned whether coming out and escaping to New York had made my life any better, whether it was worth the agony I'd caused my parents and myself. There were days when I would see Hugo's face and wish he were a stranger, someone who just happened to stop by. It frightened me that he and I were so entwined, that we were locked in to all this trauma, all this hate, all this pain, without escape.

He'd gotten a few sarcomas on his neck and one on his forehead. They looked like islands, like New Zealand or England or Japan, and every week it seemed a brand new country bubbled up from his flesh. The marks would make him suspicious. People would look at his skin and wonder what was wrong. It was plausible that someone in the audience would see his bruises, assume it was AIDS and cause a stir. We'd already bought him a teenage-sized suit because of the weight he lost. Now we needed to cover him up.

I got some makeup and an applicator at Macy's. The salesgirl thought it curious that I was buying different skin tones. She said my wife couldn't possibly be that many colors. I laughed and told her that we all change, but people didn't pay enough attention to notice. The truth was that I didn't know which shade would look the most natural on him, so I bought ten. We couldn't have him looking patchwork.

He sat on our bed and I dabbed the foundation on the sponge like children's paint. I lined up all the different colors and searched for the one that matched, the stripe that would render the best camouflage. We decided on 25C, cool beige. I traced around his eyes, down the ridge of his nose and the circumference of his lips, across his neck. I glammed him up like a rock star, like a headliner at Webster Hall. He didn't speak the entire time. He just sat there silently, smiling, moving only when the pressure of sitting was too much for his tailbone. When I finished he looked happy and bright, as if no time at all had passed since our first date.

“You do what I told you,” he said while he checked himself in the mirror. “Get out of the hotel as soon as I go up to the ballroom, leave the city, and lay low for a while.”

I held him from behind and kissed his ear. “Of course, darling,” I whispered. “Sly as a fox. Stealthy as a ninja. They’ll never find me.” I put my head on his shoulder. We stayed like that for a moment.

“Do I look believable?” He turned and reached out for a handshake. His hands were cold, too cold, even for October. I rubbed them like I was rolling dough, like I was trying to light a fire with twigs.

“I’ll keep them in my pockets,” he said.

“You’ll be a lot warmer with the vest.” It was on the bed, a pack of cigarettes and lighter alongside. I stared at it. It took us a month to secure all the materials, then a week to sew the pockets in all the right places. Remember, this was the ‘80s. Nowadays I have no doubt that we would have been caught in a few hours. But if we’d been planning this today, that would have meant we’d both survived. I wish to god that was true.

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The lobby of the Lantham smelled like verbena. Tourists walked around the hallways, staring up at the chandeliers, at the carved ceilings and the Venetian tapestries. Women carried their purses in one hand and their drinks in the other. Men smoked cigars at the bar. I saw a family of four walking side by side, the boy in blue and girl in pink. I recalled the one vacation my parents and I took in

the early 60s, when I got lost at Disney World and ran up to anyone who looked friendly. If a stranger had looked me in the eyes then and said they were my parent, I probably would have believed them, if only to rid myself of that sudden, inescapable loss. I told my father, when he finally found me, that I never wanted to feel so alone again.

Hugo's cheeks glowed as he passed under the lamplights. We didn't hold hands as we walked and I'm glad we didn't. I have no idea what he was thinking, but I suspect that if it were me, I would have wanted to be alone with my thoughts. I would have pulled my body along while my mind went someplace else. I wouldn't have wanted a long, tearful goodbye. I'd want to say my piece and go.

A few people waved at him and he waved back and said hello and did everything one is supposed to do in his line of work. He always liked his job, he liked the conversations and simple pleasantries. Through all of this—the illness, the fear, the hate—he still loved to hear stories about people who'd made it big in art or business or politics. Even more, he loved the stories of the people behind the celebrities, the kingmakers we never knew existed. That was what he wanted to carve for himself. That was the space he wanted in the world.

More guests arrived. We didn't linger. We didn't want anyone to have a chance to talk long to Hugo, to appraise his suit coat or his cufflinks or his shined shoes. We couldn't chance someone seeing a flaw in the makeup I'd applied or the four stitches I'd added to the bottom of his shirt to make the vest fit underneath. It would be all we wished for if he simply got into the room,

took his seat, and faded into the background. If that happened, we would succeed.

I couldn't kiss him goodbye. I couldn't even hug him like I would a friend at the airport, a friend who I wouldn't see for a long time. But nobody we knew got a proper goodbye, none of our friends got to be with their partners in the hospital rooms, so it felt right that we wouldn't get a grand sendoff either. We didn't have time to dwell. All I did when we got to the elevators, when he got in line behind a woman in a lush taffeta gown, was turn to him, smile, and wave as if I'd passed him on the street but had no time to stop. He smiled, put his hands in his pockets, and I left him there, waiting to go up.

*

When I was nineteen, I got a draft notice. Many of my classmates had already died in Vietnam. Men my age were among the first to get called up. I didn't believe in the war, but I wasn't about to spend my life in Canada, branded a traitor. I would do what I was told to do. I went to my appointment as scheduled. I spoke with a grey-haired officer about my life. I told him that I grew up in Virginia Beach and my father was a fisherman, that I'd seen plenty of soldiers around and respected their stoicism. I said I used to play the violin and I was proficient with a typewriter. I hadn't done sports, but I could run as fast as anyone in gym class. He led me into a big room sectioned off with white curtains. I sat on an exam table and stared at the vision chart across from me. A

while later a doctor entered and asked that I undress. When I was younger I always felt shamed at disrobing in front of the pediatrician. I thought that without such cover they'd be able to see past the boy I pretended to be, the boy who flirted with girls, the boy with nothing wrong. I thought that if they looked at me in such a state, I wouldn't be able to hide.

The man shined a flashlight on my face. Fine. He pressed his hands hard against my lower back then reached around and prodded my stomach. Fine. He asked me if I felt any pain and I said I felt nothing. I turned my head to the side and coughed. He placed the stethoscope on my ribs and asked me to breathe deeply, then normally, then to exhale and hold it. He asked me to do it again. He wrote some things down onto the paper and said I could get dressed. When I returned to the officer he said I was free to leave. He gave me a pamphlet and said that there were other ways to serve, and then another boy was ushered into the room and he shouted off the same spiel. The doctor had heard an erratic beat in my chest, an abnormality that refused to behave. Too slow, then too fast. The lines didn't match up. There would be no war for me.

I stood on the street, feeling for my pulse and trying to understand what I'd done wrong. It started to rain. I took shelter under a bus stop, but with no money in my pocket and no end to the deluge in sight, I gave up waiting and walked back to my dorm room. I toweled off and began my lessons for the week, resuming a life that was, as I always learned, completely out of my control.

*

I wish I could have seen it, what it was like in the ballroom. I'm sure that people saw different things. To one person in the crowd it might have been a firework boom, another might have seen a crashing stage light, a table buckling. If a person had experience with demolition, or coalmines, or a warzone, perhaps they could have correctly gaged that it was an explosion caused by dynamite. But I'm sure, in the heat of such a moment, that even the most battle-worn among them had trouble seeing the truth.

I watched a security guard sprint down the lobby. The stairwell doors flung open. People emerged, shouting at each other, tripping over the carpets, holding tight to the nearest sturdy object. A woman fell in front of me. She opened her mouth but no words came out. Her dress had been ripped at the bottom so it looked fringed, like something Josephine Baker would shimmy in. I helped her to her feet and told her not to worry. I went to the door. The crowd ran in all directions away from the hotel, east on 48th, north on Lexington, south to Grand Central. People sped around me as I walked down 47th Street. I walked and walked and walked. I walked the perimeter of the island, until the sun came out and I heard men shouting for ice at the Fulton Fish Market. Then I returned to the apartment and got in the shower. I didn't watch the news. I drank coffee and I ate the last of the fruit salad in the fridge. I sat on the couch and tried to make sense of what happened. I stayed there for days.

I wrote out on notebook paper what we did. I listed all the materials we used, where we purchased them, the lies we told the salesmen. I described how

we sewed the explosive into the lining of the vest. I told them how Hugo wanted to wait until the end of the night to set it off, but I convinced him to do it as soon as everyone had arrived and before the speeches began. I wrote why we did it, but people would assign their own reasons. There was no use in trying to change their minds.

I tidied the apartment. I put all the photos of us into boxes along with any paperwork that seemed important. I gathered up our vinyl and books and left a note for them to be donated to the gay community center. I threw the food away. It would rot before too long. Mid-afternoon, as the East Village traffic crawled along, I stuffed the letter into my pocket and walked out the door.

*

So many articles were written about that night. But I was always more interested in what happened after, to the people in the audience, the bystanders running confusedly through the streets, the reporters who didn't know Hugo had AIDS, the policemen who didn't realize I had helped him until I turned myself in. I wondered how their lives would change in the days, months, years later.

The Archbishop, our darling Senator, used that night as a springboard to run for Congress and spurred the trend of high-ranking clergy shifting to politics. What we didn't know, until the man died last year, was that he'd been getting treatment for HIV infection. He was sitting in the front row of the stage and ran to help the wounded. His hands were covered in their blood, and

Hugo's, too. People lauded his heroism; he campaigned on that night for decades. He was one of the last people to see Hugo alive, perhaps the very last.

Mayor Koch had a few cuts and bruises, but only because he'd tripped as his security hustled him out of the room. He was off to the side when it happened, chatting with a potential donor. It pains me to say that after that night, many in the gay community forgave him for treating them like nonhumans. They forgave his refusal to do needle exchanges, to buy condoms for health centers, to ban hospitals from dumping bodies. It was as if all his soiled deeds had vanished. He got such sympathy when he spoke at one of the pride rallies a few years later, around the time that I'd finally adjusted to prison life. People cheered for him. They wanted so desperately to be absolved of wrongdoing, to be liberated from Hugo's crimes, as if they'd all been branded terrorists by association.

No matter what I said to police, or the judge, or anyone else, nobody believed that Hugo and I acted alone. They bathed in conspiracies. The NYPD created an AIDS terrorism task force. They raided the offices of ACT UP and brought the staff in for questioning. I remember reading an article that said Hugo had taken cues from the Irish Republican Army, another that called him a kamikaze, another that called it an echo of the embassy bombing in Beirut. I think they missed the point. Our motivations were basic. We had no divine cause.

The Catholic charities raised so much money from that night that it sickens me. Just as the Archbishop did, they fundraised at every mass, in every neighborhood, on the airwaves of every state. They held a benefit concert at

Madison Square Garden for the six people who died. Six. It's a big number. It's horrific. But it's just not as big or horrible as sixty thousand. Sixty thousand is a city, an entire world gone. So when people say that six good souls were taken, all I can think is that six of my friends died, then six more the next week and the week after, again, and again, and again. We couldn't help them.

One of Hugo's acquaintances was there that night, a professor of political science at Columbia who often went downtown for unsavory fun. He and Hugo had slept together back in the day, but Hugo didn't think much of it and they remained strictly platonic after that. His table was towards the rear of the ballroom, so he was one of the first people to escape. He did interviews. A long time later he wrote a book about what happened. He believed that Hugo had surrendered to a misguided impulse for revenge. He suggested that the evening had set the gay rights movement back fifty years and caused more harm than AIDS ever did. Things would have righted themselves eventually. People would have come around.

I remember a feature in *The New Yorker* about the one-year-anniversary, the ramped-up security at hotels, shopping malls, train stations. The author interviewed a woman who was sitting at a balcony table. She didn't notice Hugo in the crowd. Everyone had just gotten their salad. When it happened, the man next to her screamed. They all looked down at the stage and saw two tables burning and a gentle red mist. During their chat, the author showed photos to the woman, images of the aftermath and the hole in the stage, and as she thumbed through them, she fainted.

I learned something about Hugo from all the coverage. Amazing that you can spend years with someone and still not know them fully. His hometown paper published an obituary. It wasn't an actual obit, they wouldn't have shown him such respect, but they sprinkled in bits of his life for context. He graduated from high school in 1964. I knew that. But I didn't know he was the class valedictorian, and that he gave the commencement address. I wonder so much what he spoke about, if he bored people or made them laugh or mesmerized them. I wonder if they remembered his words. After all these years, I haven't been able to track them down, even though he's the most famous person to come out of Laurelton, Mississippi.

The two cops died in the ballroom. Sometimes people forget that they were the reason behind all of this, what they did to Morris. I said as much when I gave my statement in court. My lawyer warned me not to, but I wanted people to remember what they did. I suspect, though it's never been proven, that Hugo was right next to those men, hovering. Maybe he spoke to them. Maybe he smiled. Their names were in the paper like everyone else. They got the most publicity of all the victims. People put up memorials in Brooklyn. A middle school in Bay Ridge was named after them. But nobody remembers what they did to Morris.

Hugo did what he wanted to do. Everyone knows his name now. He set the course for as many lives as those men. And yet, I can't put him in the same breath as them. I can see horror in what he did, but I can't see him as a symbol of death or hatred. I see him only as he was when we were together, when we were friends, lovers, young and unmoored and free.

I told him, the night he told me about his plan, that it would be so much more effective if we could just turn those two men gay. One morning they would wake up and see their wives and find themselves as limp and dry as week-old flowers. They'd go to work and have to hide their erections in the locker room showers, to suppress the urge to stare at their colleagues from behind. They'd have no idea what to do. Perhaps they'd seek help. They'd find us at the Stonewall, at the Duplex, at the Monster. They'd tell us that they've never felt so adrift in their lives, and we'd say that everything would be all right, that the distance to shore was not as great as it looked, and we'd bring them back, safe and sound.

*

I've been in here for thirty years. I wake up every morning and I see the slate gray of the walls, the sliver of light that looks like a line on a tennis court. I'm served all my meals inside my cell. I read books. Once a week, under the eye of a guard, I can check a pre-approved list of websites: The New York Times, The Advocate, The Guardian. I read the features on gay people getting married, gay people forging their own path, and I think that could have been me, if I'd just waited and done nothing. I could have been them. But it would have been too late for Hugo. He didn't have a chance at any of that, so it feels right that I don't, either.

At three in the afternoon I'm allowed to go outside for forty-five minutes. I talk to a few people, but most keep their distance. I don't know what

sort of mythos has clotted around me, but it's palpable. I get stared at. I get glances from the corner of the eye, around the shoulder. I get line after line of puzzled looks, because how could a person possibly survive with the weight of the world's anger on their back. Yet, they're still scared of me. I've never been touched.

They have pills now to prevent HIV, to render the virus moot. It still infects people, but it's no longer the danger it once was. I've never taken them. After Hugo, I figured it would be a few years for me, that I'd die like so many men I knew. I waited for the bruises to appear, for my mouth to go dry and my bowels to cannibalize themselves. Every time I woke with a new scratch or bruise I thought: this is it, I'm ready. Knowing that we'd see each other soon was one of the reasons I agreed to help Hugo. But nothing happened to me. I'm fine. I don't know why.

Do I regret what we did? I know I'm supposed to say yes. I know I'm supposed to say that if I had known that there would be medicines, that in twenty-five years most people would survive on a daily pill and would stop being treated like spittle to be washed away, I would have told Hugo to wait. But even if I had said that, maybe it wouldn't have mattered. Maybe the promise of relief wasn't enough.

The original plan was that he would stand far away from people, that only his blood would splatter them, that they'd become one of us without even realizing. I've never told anyone that before, because I still don't know why it didn't happen that way. I was surprised as anyone to hear that people died, but all the conjecture in the world won't bring them back. He never said anything

about killing others. And yet, I wonder in the end if it would have mattered either way. Perhaps those cops would have kept beating people. Perhaps I would have had to watch Hugo disintegrate, bit by bit. Perhaps I'd still be in this small concrete cell, writing a slightly different ending to the same story.

All of this happened, in one way or another.



Jason Villemez’s short fiction has appeared in *F(r)iction*, *Post Road*, *Ruminate*, *Foglifter*, and *Cosmonauts Avenue*. His nonfiction, which centers on LGBTQ history, has appeared in the PBS *NewsHour*, *Philadelphia Gay News*, and *Seattle Gay News*, among others. He has an MFA in creative writing from Boston University and has taught at BU and the Boston Arts Academy. He lives in Philadelphia with his husband and their dog. Learn more about Jason at www.jasonvillemez.com or say hello to him on Twitter @jasonvillemez.