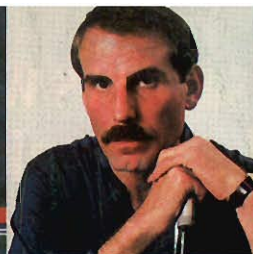


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AIDS: One Man's Story

By Patricia Morrisroe



NEW YORK

Hey, It's Rubén Blades

A Latin Star
Makes His Move

By Pete Hamill



AIDS: One Man's Story

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I COULD NEVER THINK ABOUT MY OWN DEATH," SAYS Victor Bender, sitting in his apartment on a clear July afternoon. "I wanted to live forever. It was too unimaginable not to be breathing, tasting, smelling, hearing. I couldn't picture myself sitting on a cloud with a harp and a halo. My ex-lover used to tell me, 'We're energy, and energy can't be destroyed.' But energy can't think. It can't feel and taste and smell. It can't eat a hamburger or go to the theater. I could never deal with that."

But now Victor, who just celebrated his thirty-ninth birthday, has to deal with it. In January, he was diagnosed as having AIDS, the deadly viral disease that destroys the immune system and that has killed over 6,000 Americans in the past three years. Victor has Kaposi's sarcoma (KS), a rare form of cancer that along with Pneumocystis carinii pneumonia (PCP) is the disease most commonly associated with AIDS. The average life expectancy of someone with KS is about eighteen months. "I could live another year," says Victor. "But then again, according to my doctor, I could die tomorrow."

He's already spent sixteen days in the hospital with a number of serious infections, including meningitis and encephalitis. For weeks afterward, Victor suffered neurological impairments; he had difficulty reading, talking, and walking. Now he can get around with the help of a cane, but since he has trouble with his balance, he can't go very far. Weekly chemotherapy treatments leave him dizzy, and he suffers from constant stomach pains. Then there are the KS lesions that cover his stomach, back, and arms. In January, he had 2 lesions; now he's got over 160, and they're spreading. "It's all very confusing to me," Victor says. "It's not like the aging process that gradually happens over years. It's all of a sudden. Yesterday, I noticed the seats labeled SENIOR CITIZENS AND HANDICAPPED PEOPLE on the bus, and I wondered if I qualified

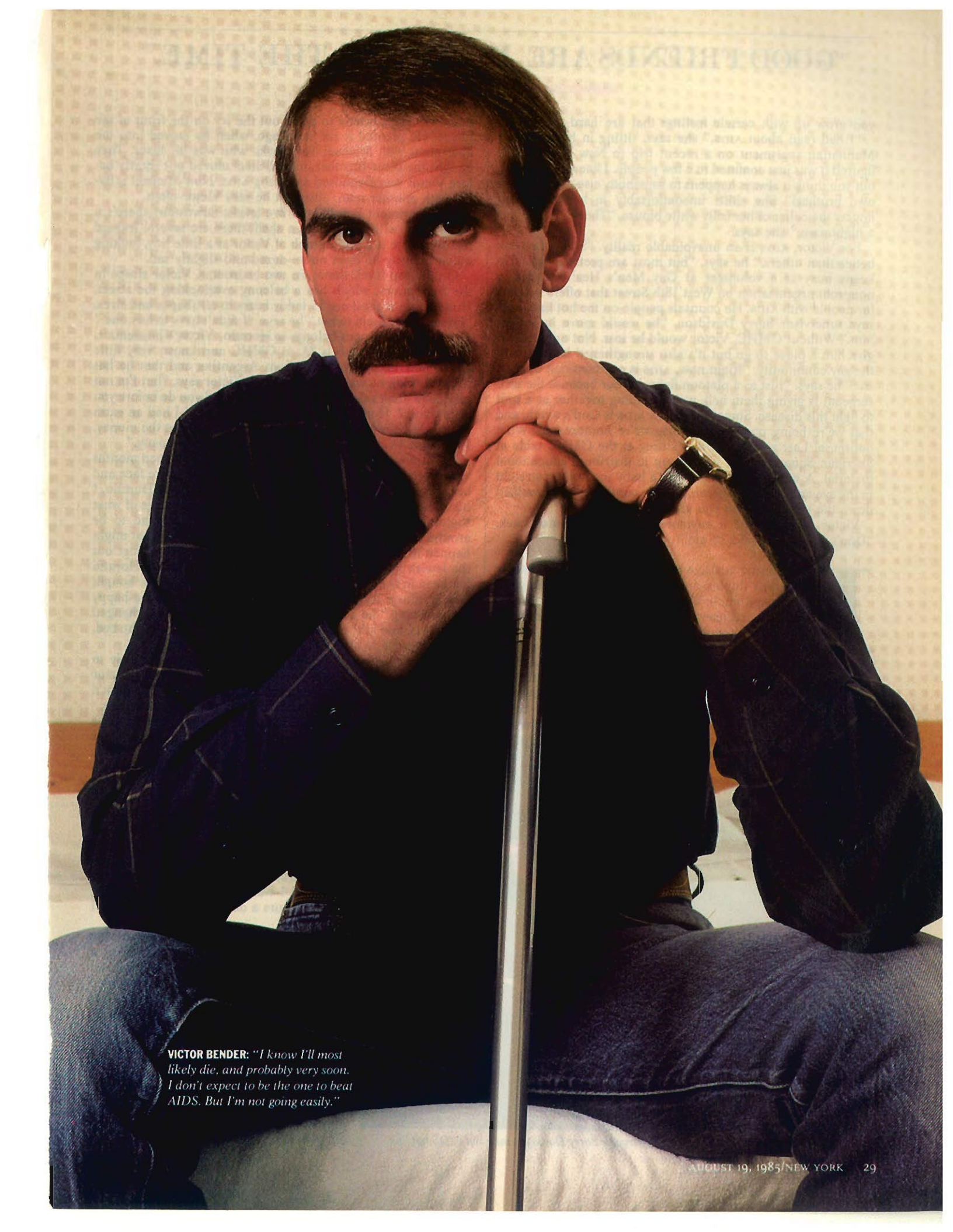
to sit down. But I'm not elderly, and I don't feel handicapped."

On June 14, Victor had to quit his job as a tour guide on the Circle Line. He had worked there for six years and loved it. "Towards the end, I wasn't my old self," he says. "I used to jump around and have a lot of enthusiasm. But I was getting exhausted very quickly. I was sitting on a chair, sweating, with my hands on my knees. Finally, I could barely hold the microphone. It broke my heart."

Victor had been making \$800 a week. Since he isn't eligible for a pension, he has no income now except for his weekly \$135 disability checks, which will run out in 22 weeks. The maintenance on Victor's co-op is \$782 a month, so he's had to draw heavily on his savings. He figures he has enough money for another four months, and then he will have to ask his mother for help.

But Victor counts himself among the lucky ones. Unlike the many AIDS victims who die in poverty, he has a nice place to live and access to family money. But Victor has always been proud of his independence and feels that his "dignity is slowly being stripped away." "It's heartbreaking to leave the job you love," he says, "and live off what you've saved for retirement, knowing you'll never retire. I don't want to ask my mother for help. It hurts to be so dependent. It hurts a lot."

As Victor is trying to cope with his increased vulnerability, the members of his family are being forced to confront their attitudes about a number of highly charged issues, including Victor's homosexuality. Though AIDS is not a "gay plague"—41 percent of cases in the city have occurred among heterosexuals—gay men, along with intravenous-drug users, fall into the highest-risk category. "AIDS in itself is a frightening disease," says Victor's older sister, who lives in the Midwest. "On top of that, you're broadcasting your sexual preference to the world. I'm a very conventional person. I love my brother, but



VICTOR BENDER: "I know I'll most likely die, and probably very soon. I don't expect to be the one to beat AIDS. But I'm not going easily."

"GOOD FRIENDS ARE DYING ALL THE TIME."

you grow up with certain feelings that are hard to change.

"I had read about AIDS," she says, sitting in her mother's Manhattan apartment on a recent trip to New York. "But I figured it was just confined to a few people. I knew it was fatal, but you think it always happens to somebody else—not to your own brother!" She shifts uncomfortably in her chair and fingers the collar of her frilly white blouse. "The whole thing is a nightmare," she says.

For Victor, AIDS is an unavoidable reality. "Some days are better than others," he says, "but most are pretty lousy." He keeps busy as a volunteer at Gay Men's Health Crisis, a nonprofit organization on West 18th Street that offers support for people with AIDS. He counsels people on the hot line, and, says supervisor Barry Davidson, "he would move in if I let him." Without GMHC, Victor would be lost. Not only does it give him a place to go but it's also strengthened his ties with the gay community. "Right now, AIDS is our common oppressor," he says. "Just as a platoon fights harder because the drill sergeant is giving them hell, we're banding together as a unit to fight this disease. Some people say AIDS is God's wrath, and that we're being punished because we're homosexual. What nonsense! Last weekend, I was sitting at the GMHC table at Sheridan Square, which was set up to distribute educational material. A middle-aged man with a baby looked me straight in the eye and shouted obscenities. He continued as he walked down the street. 'I hope you all die,' he screamed."

Victor couldn't take it anymore and finally shouted back. "Don't worry," he said, "I am."

IT'S A BRIGHT SUMMER DAY, AND THE GRASS IN FRONT of Victor's duplex on Charles Street has a pungent, just-mowed smell. Victor is standing in the doorway, wearing faded jeans and a Yankee T-shirt. Except for the cane, Victor doesn't look terribly ill; his face is tanned, and chemotherapy hasn't caused any noticeable hair loss. But his arms betray the symptoms of Kaposi's sarcoma. They're covered with strange-looking purplish marks, as though someone had stubbed out dozens of cigarettes on his skin. Supporting himself with his cane, Victor heads inside the apartment, his body lurching in several directions at

once. He stops briefly to point out the ivy on the front of the house. He planted it six years ago, when he moved into the apartment with Michael Torzewski, who was his lover. They bought the place together, but Michael moved out shortly before Victor was diagnosed as having AIDS. Now Michael is living with another man, although he sees Victor often.

The apartment is split into five levels; downstairs, there's a study filled with books. On a shelf, there are several framed pictures. One is a photograph of Victor as a little boy, looking much the way he does now—dazed and slightly sad.

On the top level, there are two bedrooms. Victor sleeps in the front room, which has a balcony overlooking the street. Huddled on a chest are 35 teddy bears in all shapes and sizes. "Friends gave them to me," he says. "I didn't have to buy one." The second bedroom belongs to Horatio, Victor's housemate. He met Horatio, who is 35, at GMHC and knows very little about him except that he's from Argentina and that he has AIDS. "I think he was a bookkeeper," Victor says, "but I'm not sure. You don't ask someone, 'Hey, what did you do before you were dying?' Horatio had no place to live, and I had an extra room. He pays a little rent, but I don't care about the money. We watch TV together and keep each other company."

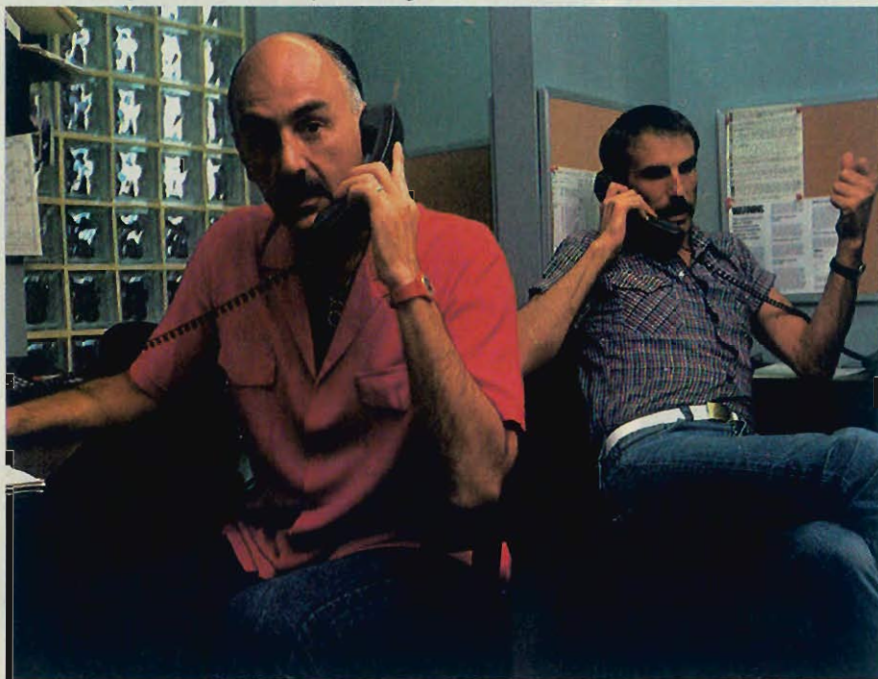
Horatio was diagnosed as having KS about eighteen months ago. According to Victor, the lesions cover his entire face and body, right down to his toenails. "When I first saw Horatio, I burst into tears," Michael says. "It's an advanced stage of what Victor has, and I don't know how Victor can stand to be around him. It's a constant, horrifying reminder of what might happen to him." But Victor dotes on Horatio. "He brings out the Jewish mother in me," he says, laughing. Though Horatio has been in the hospital for the past three weeks, Victor bought new furniture for his bedroom. "I want him to have a happy homecoming," he says. So Victor vacuumed the rug, changed the sheets, and laid out two fresh towels on the end of the bed. He even put a teddy bear on Horatio's night table.

Victor says Horatio is "deeply spiritual" and is "ready to die." "A few months ago, he stopped chemotherapy," Victor explains. "He just wanted to go out peacefully. Well, he didn't. He was in tremendous pain and had to go back on chemo."

"It's a choice each of us has to make," he says. "Chemo gives me nausea, fever, chills, and muscular aches and pains. But chemo offers hope, and I'm willing to suffer any physical pain for that."

"I'm not an optimist about the disease," he says. "I don't plan on dying, but I know I'll most likely die, and probably very soon. I don't expect to be the one to beat AIDS. But I'm not going easily. I want the plug of the respirator fused to the socket in the wall, and I want an armed guard at that plug 24 hours a day. If there's a chance, I want it."

Victor heads downstairs to answer the doorbell. It's a young man delivering a flier about a memorial service for his lover, who recently died of AIDS. The dead man was a friend of Victor's; Victor glances at the flier and then places it on his desk. "After a while, you just get used to it," he says. "It doesn't mean I'm getting hard or callous. Good friends are dying all the time. I go to their memorial services. I don't cry or grieve. It's expected." Victor says that three friends have died in the past three weeks, and that he's tired of crossing off people's names in his address book.



COMFORT IN NUMBERS: Victor and supervisor Barry Davidson man the AIDS hot line.



RALLYING POINT: "Right now, AIDS is our common oppressor," says Victor (center).

"There was one man who was a brilliant makeup artist and hairdresser," he says. "He did all the big stars. I saw a tape of a TV show he did in California, and I couldn't believe it was him. By the time I met him at GMHC, he looked like E.T. Three times he was given up for dead, but even though he couldn't walk anymore, he came to visit me in his wheelchair. I wasn't home, and he lay down on my front lawn. When I got back, he told me how much he appreciated the smell of fresh grass in the middle of Manhattan. Later, we played Trivial Pursuit. He died the next week."

When Victor was first diagnosed, he thought about traveling. "I wanted to see all the places I never got to see," he says. But he quickly became too weak, and now he's afraid to go too far from home. "A couple of weeks ago, GMHC organized an outing to Fire Island," he says. "By the time I got off the ferry, I was exhausted and depressed. I went into a bedroom to change. I took off my clothes and looked at myself in a full-length mirror. I couldn't believe it. My body had spots like a leopard, and I started to cry. I used to look good." Later in the afternoon, Victor developed stomach pains on the way to a bar and had to be taken back to the house. "I was so tired, and I didn't want to be a burden on anybody," he says, "but all I wanted was to go home. Finally, it was time to take the ferry back to the mainland. I tried to walk to the boat, but I couldn't make it. They had to pull me in one of those little children's wagons. I felt so embarrassed."

"So now I don't think I can go away again," Victor says. But then his face brightens. "Well, maybe I can. Maybe tomorrow I'll be a little better." He smiles. "At least I can dream."

BEFORE HE GOT AIDS, VICTOR USED TO DREAM A lot. He was writing a history of New York City, and when he wasn't at the Circle Line, he was doing research at the New-York Historical Society. Victor is fascinated by New York, and that's why he became a Circle Line guide. He talks lovingly about his job, particularly about the way the weather affected the tours. When fog obscured the shoreline,

he could be as creative as he wanted; he'd let his imagination run wild, giving tourists his idiosyncratic view of the city.

"I never saw a guy love a job so much," says Steve Moran, who is also a Circle Line guide. "After he was diagnosed, he came back with a cane and was walking like he had multiple sclerosis. I remember someone offered him a chair, and he shot them a look that said, 'Get the hell away.' Victor was so determined."

"My mother once said I was like my father," Victor says, "and that was the biggest compliment I ever got." Victor's father was Dr. Morris Bender, a neurologist who taught at Mount Sinai and NYU Medical School. "I guess you could say we're a medical family," Victor explains. His older brother, also a neurologist, is married to a pediatrician; his sister in the Midwest is married to a neurologist; another brother became a dentist; and his younger sister is a psychiatrist. "And don't forget the male cousins. Most of them are neurologists, too."

"My father used to say, 'Get your M.D. and then you can do anything,'" Victor says, "but I never wanted that." Instead, Victor wanted to be an actor. Growing up on Long Island, he was the president of the high-school drama club and won the leads in all of the plays. Even so, he felt like an outcast. "I didn't admit to anyone I was gay," he says. "I wanted to be friends with some of the guys, but I was afraid to socialize with them because they wanted to talk about their girlfriends and I couldn't. I also couldn't tell them that I was attracted to them. I kept it all inside, and I hated myself."

Later, as a student at the University of Pennsylvania, Victor suffered a nervous breakdown. "I can't say what made me fall apart," he says. "It involves my entire life experience. A lot of it might have been the homosexuality thing. I can't pinpoint it. I just know that one night I started to cry, and I couldn't stop. I cried for eight straight hours. I was a mess."

Victor spent four years in a private mental hospital in Philadelphia, during college and after. "Somehow I managed to get my B.A. in English literature," he says, "and then I went straight from the graduation ceremony to the hospital. During the next two years, I had some of the most horrible and won-

"THE ADVICE WAS TO LIMIT YOUR PARTNERS. I DID."

derful experiences of my life. I witnessed some awful things. I saw a man push his fist through a pane of glass and then rub his wrists back and forth on the jagged edges. I saw myself do things that I regret. Terrible things."

But Victor also had a psychiatrist who helped him come to terms with his sexuality. "Finally, I felt good about myself," he says. "When I left that hospital, I was 23 years old and I felt like I had just been born." Victor says the experience in the mental hospital has helped him cope better with AIDS. "I learned that psychological anguish can be worse than physical pain," he explains. "That's why I judge every day not by how I feel physically but how I feel mentally."

After Victor was released from the hospital, he met his first lover, who was getting an M.B.A. at the Wharton School. Together they moved to Paris, where Victor taught English. They lived there for two years and then came back to New York. The couple split up three years later. "One of the nice things about gay life," says Victor, "is that there are no papers, and no divorces." Several years later he met Michael in a bar; their relationship lasted nearly a decade. "We had a good life," Victor says. "We'd go out with friends to the movies and have brunch on Sundays. We took vacations together. A few years ago, we spent two weeks traveling throughout New England during the fall-foliage time. I spent weeks planning the trip. We also went to Europe together. Michael had never been to Paris, and it was wonderful to see the joy in his face."

Since Victor is a gourmet cook, they threw lavish dinner parties, with Michael acting as host. "Victor was Julia Child to the tenth power," Michael says. "For his parents' anniversary, he cooked for a week." Victor prepared terrines, and Cornish game hen stuffed with apples and sausage and topped with foie gras. "I borrowed some eighteenth-century silverware and linens," Michael says, "and the table was beautiful."

Victor's family accepted his homosexuality, but not without some difficulty. "My mother said, 'It's a stage, you'll outgrow it,'" Victor says. His older sister admits she was "extremely upset" when she discovered Victor was gay. "It didn't make me love him any less," she says, "but I wished it wasn't true." Still, Michael accompanied Victor to all the family functions. "It was never discussed with the relatives," Victor says, "but they always saw me sitting next to Michael. We didn't dance together or kiss. We didn't talk about it. But we didn't deny it."

During the time they were together, Victor and Michael had an "open relationship."

"We were not monogamous and never claimed to be," Victor says. "We'd be together all week, but one night we'd go out on our own. If we were going to do something, we did it at the other person's house. No big deal."

"But if I knew what I know now," Victor says, "if I'd heard that 2 million people in New York had been exposed to the virus, and that I was killing or

being killed, I think I would have stopped. But three years ago, the advice was to limit your sexual partners. I did. I still went to the bars. Maybe I didn't go far enough."

IN SEPTEMBER 1984, VICTOR WAS taken to St. Vincent's emergency room with severe gall-bladder pain. Doctors couldn't figure out the cause, and Victor was discharged after three days. A year before, he had developed oral thrush, a thick white coating on the tongue that usually indicates an immune deficiency. According to Michael, he was also experiencing night sweats and fatigue. But Victor says he never thought about the possibility of AIDS. "A lot of gay men have lowered immune systems," he says.

By November, Victor had developed a lesion on his right forearm. "It was just a small red dot," he says. "Kaposi's sarcoma had been described to me as a big purple thing the size of a quarter. This wasn't purple, and it wasn't that big." But Victor went to his doctor, who told him to see a dermatologist if it didn't go away. It didn't.

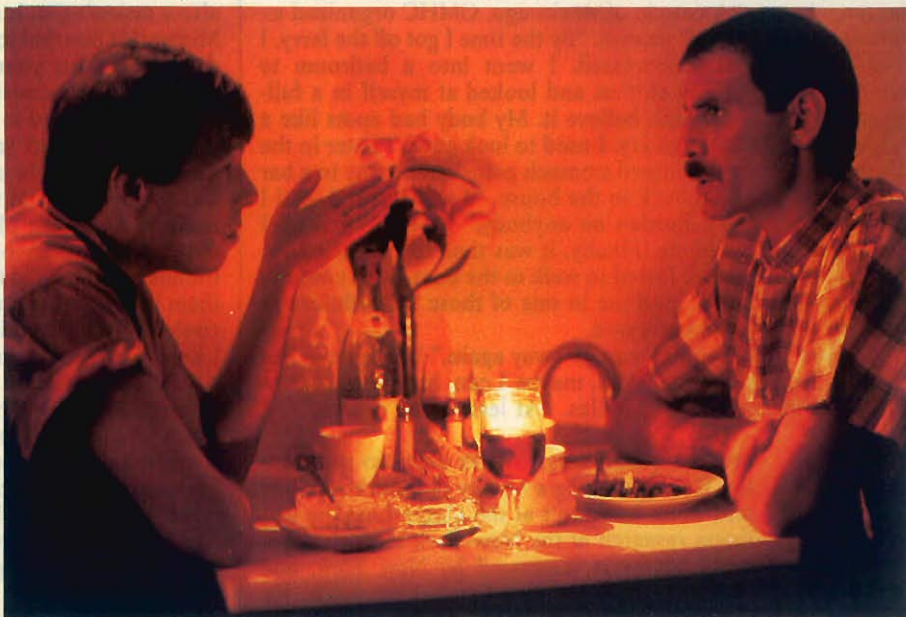
Meanwhile, Victor and Michael decided to end their relationship. Michael was in love with another man and wanted to move in with him. The breakup couldn't have come at a worse time for Victor. His best friend, who had suddenly developed neurological problems, was near death at Bellevue. As it turned out, he was suffering from ARC (AIDS-Related-Complex), a milder form of immune deficiency that may or may not lead to AIDS.

Several weeks later, Victor woke up one morning and noticed that his left arm felt "sunburned." Immediately, he made an appointment with his doctor, who told him it was herpes zoster, a virus that is sometimes an early symptom of AIDS. The next day, Victor had fever and projectile vomiting.

"When Vic told me what was going on, I said, 'This is bad news,'" explains his younger sister, a warm, outgoing woman



MEMORIES: Boyhood pictures and medical bills.



TIES THAT BIND: With former lover Michael Torzewski.

VICTOR'S FAMILY WAS THROWN INTO AN "UPHEAVAL."

who practices psychiatry at a prominent New York hospital. "I picked him up in a car and brought him to Mount Sinai," she says. "He had a high fever, and he was shivering. God, I was scared. I kept on patting his head and calling him 'baby.'" Immediately, the virus spread to Victor's central nervous system, and then to the brain, resulting in meningitis and encephalitis. "They did a battery of tests," Victor says.

"I had three spinal taps, a CAT scan, a bone scan, a body scan, a liver scan, and blood-gas and bone-marrow tests. They biopsied a swollen lymph node, and they did an endoscopy and colonoscopy. I dreaded waking up in the morning."

Still, Victor continued to deny the possibility that he had AIDS. He says it didn't occur to him until the doctor walked into his hospital room and shut the door. "He never did that before," Victor says. "Then he sat down on the chair next to my bed. 'I have some bad news for you,' he said. I felt a chill. He told me they had found Kaposi's sarcoma in the biopsy of the lymph node. I just sat there, calmly. I didn't say a word. Tears just started to fall out of my eyes."

When his younger sister heard that Victor had AIDS, she was just about to leave with her husband for a symposium in Africa.

"Immediately, I burst into tears," she says. "It was like 'Oh, my God! What do I do? Should I cancel the trip?' My husband convinced me to go, but I cried all the way to Africa."

For Michael, the news was just as traumatic. "Victor called me right after he was diagnosed," he says. "I put down the phone and told him I had to call him back. I couldn't talk. This was someone I shared a bed with for nine years, and even though I was living with someone else, I still loved him. I never expected Victor to have AIDS. I wanted us to be friends and grow old together."

After Victor was released from the hospital, he was bedridden for several weeks. His mother and Michael took turns caring for him. By then, his younger sister was home from Africa and was thrown into a "major family upheaval." "They didn't know who to tell and what to say," she explains. "They were afraid to call Vic and worried that he was going to have a breakdown."

She acted as intermediary, keeping her family posted on Victor's progress and getting his calls in the middle of the night. "He'd call me up and say, 'I'm scared of dying,'" she says. "Once, he pleaded with me to come down to his apartment. The place was 95 degrees, but Vic had terrible chills. He was covered in a million flannel things and was in such pain. I gave him a body massage, and he was so grateful."

"A few days later," she says, "I ran into a doctor at the hospital and asked him about Victor. 'We're talking maybe eighteen months,' he said. Then he told me he always wore rubber gloves when examining AIDS patients. I couldn't believe it! Vic is my brother. How could I wear gloves?"

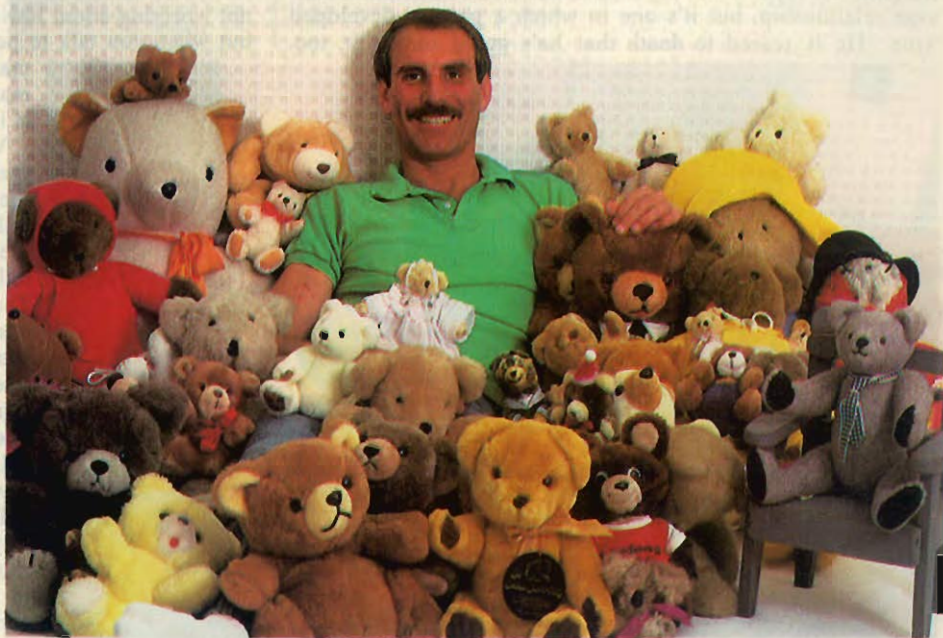
During the first few weeks at home, Victor says he stared at the four walls and did a lot of crying. When he couldn't stand the isolation anymore, he went to Gay Men's Health Crisis, where he met Bob Cecchi, who serves as a liaison between the organization and AIDS patients.

"I just happened to be on duty when Victor walked in the

door," Cecchi says. "He tried to talk, and then he burst into tears." Cecchi told him about GMHC's services and suggested Victor enroll in one of the weekly group sessions.

"After he finished talking to me," Victor says, "Bob asked, 'Is there anything else I can do?' Then he said, 'How about a hug?' I wanted that more than anything else, and I fell into his arms, and he hugged me hard. My arm and back were in excruciating pain from the herpes zoster, but it didn't matter."

Victor stops to wipe the tears from his eyes. "It was like he was giving every inch of his strength to help me," he says, "and I'll never forget that hug for the rest of my life."



SYMPATHETIC CHORD: Friends have given him 35 teddy bears.

AS SOON AS HE COULD, VICTOR WENT BACK TO work at the Circle Line. Only his friend Steve Moran knew he had AIDS; Victor's other co-workers thought he was suffering from cardiovascular cancer. "When Victor told me he had AIDS, I said to myself, 'What is that?'" Steve says, sitting in a Spanish restaurant. He's a heavyset man in his mid-fifties, with a shock of white hair and the deep, resonant voice of a radio announcer. "Immediately, I called a friend who is a physician, and he said, 'Sit down.' He told me what was happening, and I said, 'This is a horror.' Then I started to read everything I could about the disease, and it made me angry the way people were being treated. They wouldn't even bring Victor's food into the room when he was in the hospital. What is this? The fourteenth century? And why the hell isn't the government doing more?"

"Victor is like my kid brother," he says. "His life-style doesn't have anything to do with mine, but AIDS isn't a moral issue. For Christ's sake, these people aren't lepers." Steve raises his voice, and his face gets red. "I'm sorry," he says, "but I've got a lot of anger. I refuse to accept his dying. Three weeks ago, he called me up, and he was in such pain. 'I have such a need to hold on to someone,' he said. I told him to come over, and I just held him in my arms." Steve weeps openly in the restaurant. "We were friends," he says. "I'll miss him."

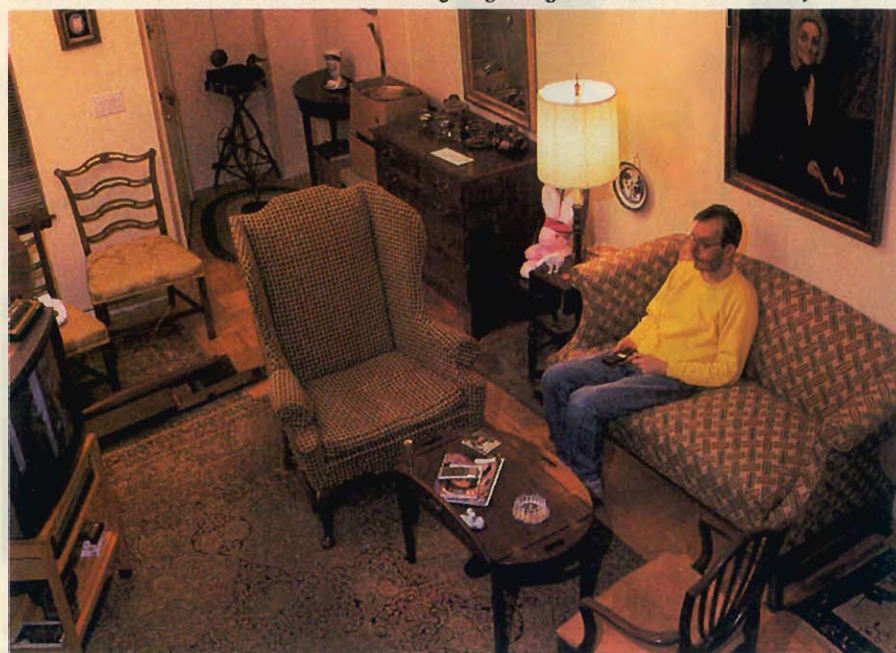
When Steve finishes the season at Circle Line, he says he plans to do volunteer work at Gay Men's Health Crisis. "In the past, I used to go traveling," he says, "but now I want to do something more."

"VIC IS MY BROTHER. HOW COULD I WEAR GLOVES?"

On the other hand, Michael, who is 36, has turned into a recluse. A handsome man, with brown hair and a deeply tanned face, he speaks in flat, sorrowful tones, like a soldier who's suffering from shell shock. Soon after Victor's diagnosis, he had a complete physical. Though he has lowered immunity, he doesn't exhibit any signs of AIDS. But Michael is realistic about his chances.

"I'm in the highest-risk group," he says. "I could die tomorrow, maybe even before Victor."

Michael and his new lover recently bought a house in Texas, where Michael intends to "hide for a while." "It's been hard for him," he says. "Not only is he faced with a nine-and-a-half-year relationship, but it's one in which a partner developed AIDS. He is scared to death that he's going to get it, too."



BLOOD BROTHERS: Victor's housemate, Horatio, has a more advanced case of AIDS.

"But we don't talk about it much," he says. "My tears come after he goes to sleep. If I hadn't met my lover before Victor was diagnosed, I would never have gone to bed with anybody again. How could I, knowing that I might be the cause of someone's death?" Suddenly, Michael looks very tired, and under his tanned skin his features seem to sag. "The world is changing," he says. "Everywhere around me people are dying."

Victor's younger sister feels equally fatalistic. "Our family was like *The Waltons*," she says. "Now I feel like I can never be happy again." She has trouble concentrating on her work and has difficulty sleeping at night. "A few days ago, I burst into tears in front of a psychiatric nurse," she says. "Sometimes in the middle of the night I start screaming, 'My brother's going to die!'" She shakes her head. "I still can't believe it," she says softly. "My brother's going to die."

IT'S 5 P.M. AT GMHC, AND THE HOT-LINE PHONES ARE ringing off the hook. "It's been a madhouse since 10:30 this morning," Victor says, answering about the hundredth call of the day. "Insertion can put the other person at risk," he explains. "Yes, that means even a person wearing a condom." He puts down the phone, and immediately it rings again. "Gay Men's Health Crisis," he says. Victor gives out the name of one of the few funeral homes in the city that will take AIDS victims. "Yesterday, I

got a call from a hospital that wanted to know a company where an AIDS patient could rent a wheelchair," he says. "All the places they knew had refused."

"Gay Men's Health Crisis," Victor says. "Yes, I know," he answers soothingly. "You're well, but you're worried. Two million have probably been exposed to the virus, and out of that 2 million, probably 10 percent will come down with AIDS. Just hope, pray, and believe you're among the 90 percent who won't." Victor, who is wearing a BELLEVUE IS BEAUTIFUL T-shirt, unwraps a Reese's peanut-butter cup and leans back in his chair.

"The most wonderful thing about having AIDS," he says, "is not worrying about having AIDS. That may be hard to believe, but when you talk to people on the hot line and realize that many of them perceive themselves as human time bombs, well, the relief of dying is incredible."

Victor is sitting in a cubicle in a small gray room with two other volunteers. In the corner, supervisor Barry Davidson is talking to a middle-aged man who is huddled in a chair, shaking. "I can't eat," he tells Davidson. "I don't have any saliva." The night before, the man had threatened to commit suicide, and Davidson spent several hours talking to him on the telephone. Finally, he convinced the man to meet him at GMHC the next morning, and now Davidson is trying his best to calm him down. "I can't sleep," the man says. "I'm afraid."

Later, Davidson explains that some AIDS victims have committed suicide; he also gets calls from people who seek help in killing their lovers. "Of course, we can't offer advice in that department," he says, "but sometimes they're so desperate they don't know what else to do."

Davidson worked in hotel management before he organized the hot line three years ago. He says it's the most

gratifying job he's ever had.

"Someone wants to know if this is a real-estate agency," says another hot-line volunteer. "I mean, if you were looking for an apartment, would you call a place named Gay Men's Health Crisis?"

"Well, we *do* have an inside line on vacancies," another man says.

Though much of the talk in the hot-line office centers on death, the mood is curiously upbeat. People joke and do a lot of hugging. Friendships, however short, are usually intense. Victor considers his new friends at GMHC his "second family."

His younger sister says she is "envious" of the support. "It's like the Jews in the ghetto," she explains. "They're being persecuted, and they're losing everything. But even though some of them have this dread disease, they smile and make jokes and go on with life. I'm jealous of what he's found."

But despite Victor's new friendships and the support he receives at GMHC, nothing can erase the pain of AIDS. Today, Victor's doctor gave him a G.I. series in order to determine the nature of his stomach ailment.

"I don't care what they find," he says, "as long as they find something. I'm tired of these cramps." He also feels more depressed than usual, and every time he puts down the phone, he is close to tears.

When his shift ends, at 6 P.M., he carefully wipes his cubicle

"I STOOD ON THE PIER, TRYING TO HIDE MY TEARS."

with a liquid cleanser and then starts to leave for his apartment. But he feels dizzy and can only manage to get across the hallway to where Bob Lugo, GMHC's educational assistant, sits, surrounded by AIDS literature. Victor leans against a table and starts to cry.

"I'm not doing well today," he says. "I don't know why." Lugo puts his arm around Victor and takes him home.

THREE DAYS LATER, VICTOR IS ARRANGING HIS birthday cards in his living room. He spent most of his birthday at the hot line, and in the evening, he and Michael had dinner at their favorite restaurant, Le Bistrot. After the cards are stacked on a chair, Victor turns on the TV to watch a tape of himself on the *CBS Morning News*. Last Labor Day, the show did a series on people and their jobs, and Victor was interviewed about the Circle Line. He's standing in front of the boat, looking tan and fit. "There I was," Victor says like an old man reminiscing over pictures in a family album.

Recently, Victor organized a charter on a Circle Line boat for the volunteers at GMHC. He didn't go because he thought it would be too awkward. "I have two different sets of friends," he says. "But I told people at the hot line that I'd be standing on the pier at 10th Street. I said I'd have my hand in the air, although I wasn't going to wave because I didn't want to attract the attention of the captain.

"I watched the boat go down the river," he says, "and when it passed 23rd Street, it seemed to be getting closer to the shoreline. Finally, it came right by the pier, and a lot of people on the boat were waving and yelling 'Victor!' The captain came out onto the wing and waved to me, and then he blew the horn—one long and two shorts. That means hello to a friend on a passing vessel.

"I stood on the pier, and I tried to hide my tears," he says. "Then I watched the boat until it disappeared."

AS THE WEEKS GO BY, VICTOR IS GETTING THINNER; his face looks hollow, and his eyes stare blankly into the distance. "There's a serenity there," Michael says. "It's like a veil that's slowly closing down over the eyes. A terminal disease is like an inescapable partner; at some point, you just have to hold hands with it and go off together."

A few days ago, Horatio finally came home from the hospital. Victor made dinner for the first time in months.

"I cooked steak with a wonderful sauce, and broccoli with cheese," Victor says, "and I served it to him on a tray. He ate every bit, including four scoops of Häagen-Dazs vanilla ice cream."

Horatio was fine the next day, but that evening, around 10:30, Victor heard some erratic, congested breathing. "He was gasping for breath," Victor says. "I called, 'Horatio,' but he didn't answer, and his hands were cold. I dialed 807-6655, the hot-line number, and got Barry Davidson. He told me to try to wake Horatio up. I shook him hard, turned the light in his eyes, and yelled in his ear. But he was comatose. Barry rushed over and took him to Bellevue in an ambulance."

In the morning, Victor visited Horatio at the hospital. He's now suffering from severe neurological damage as well as Kaposi's sarcoma.

"I used to call him my 'Argentine gentleman' because he was so well mannered and refined," Victor says. "Now he's strapped to the bed because he gets violent. He can't talk anymore, although he said one word: 'music.' I told Horatio how much I missed him." Victor's voice breaks, and he starts to cry. "Then I held his hand, and he squeezed it back. I didn't want to let go."

When Victor returned from the hospital, he immediately cleaned Horatio's room and put on fresh sheets. He folded the towels, and placed them neatly on the end of the bed. "I want it to look nice," he says, "when Horatio comes home."



HAUNTED GROUND: On the Hudson River pier near his apartment.