

Climbing The Wall

Or better yet,
still more ways in which
AIDS can make us miserable.

BY MICHAEL S. REED

Over the witty clinking of cocktails, we gather. We talk of the world, finance, literature, theatre, gossip. Again, as always, the subject veers to AIDS. The latest rumor, the current news, the newest anxiety. It never fails to cast a somber shadow each time it appears, like some unpassable brick wall.

"The AIDS organization in Houston took in 90 new cases in July," someone says.

"Diagnosed?" I ask.

"Diagnosed. Forty-two-deaths."



"In July? In July?"

"Just July."

Brick wall, baby. Smack.

A book lies on my coffee table. *The Politics of AIDS* by Nancy Krieger and Rose Appleman and available at Laughing Horse Bookstore, A Woman's Place, Powell's or Catbird Seat for \$4.00. Someone asks about it. I tell him it's intelligent, although it doesn't provide much

that's new but has a few interesting political positions. One interesting thing about the book is that it's the first place I've seen in print that says natural skin condoms aren't safe. They're too porous. I've heard rumors before, but have seen no medical test results or anything concrete. I do think it's a rumor worth repeating, nonetheless.

Later on, in a quiet corner, a beautiful, muscular man mentions, in an offhand way, that he's not always safe. A great sadness fills me and I cannot hide it from him. "You were so worried a few months ago," I tell him, "that's why you got tested. They told you that you were negative. You've been unsafe since then?"

He nods. I am angry, regretful. I want to yell at him for his stupidity, for putting himself and others at risk. Then I remember. It's not my place to judge him. Besides, I ask myself, have I always been completely safe?

I simply tell him, "I love you anyway, you know — but for chrissake please be safe from now on, okay?" I know it's not enough. Nothing is enough.

Brick wall. Smack.

I overhear a conversation:

"Did you see the article in Newsweek?"

"Something about AIDS and the face of America?"

"Yeah. All those faces."

"I read all the captions. Did you see the one where the guy wanted to know why God was picking all his flowers at once?"

"Yeah. I saw."

Why, indeed? Small silence.

I am beginning to feel bruised and battered by this fucking brick wall. It's enough to encounter

it at cocktail parties, but it's also my vocation.

My editor hands me news clippings.

How about this one (it's from the *New York Native*, July 25, 1987 issue): "SYPHILIS ALERT — If you have ARC or AIDS, insist that your doctor administer all available tests for syphilis, not just the VDRL. Insist on the MHA-TP. And educate yourself about what syphilis does to the immune system."

I called the Multnomah County Health Department, Venereal Disease Center to see if they administered the MHA-TP. They only administer the VDRL and another test called the FTA. Both are blood tests that check for antibodies for syphilis. The gentleman I spoke with had never heard of the MHA-TP.

The ad in the *New York Native* is sponsored by the New York Committee of Concerned Physicians. The chairman of the committee is Steven S. Caiazza, M.D. More information can be obtained by writing P.O. Box 4523, Highland Park, New Jersey 08904.

A couple of women at my house celebrating a birthday. They mention the recent walkathon. They mention a fellow named Dr. Tom who passed out condoms and a pamphlet about AIDS and safe sex. The discussion turns political. I snarl churlishly, "I don't have to fight this battle tonight, let's change the subject." They do, after exchanging worried glances.

After telling the story to another friend the next day, he tells me it's a 24-hour battle, insinuating that to want to escape from the issue — even for a brief time — is something akin to treason. My response is that there must be time for just living, for celebrating birthdays and loving friends. It must not taint everything. It may always be there, but there must be time to look away from the damn brick wall.

Yet I always come back, looking for a way over — a way to conquer it.

In another quiet corner, someone tells me they have been fucking men without wearing condoms. "It's like they know but just don't care," he says. "They tell me it doesn't matter."

I am beginning to realize how many of us are

not practicing safe sex. I am caught by the thought that perhaps we have become so accustomed to loving in a way that is considered wrong by so many that being unsafe is yet another rule to break — like children playing gleefully and guiltily with matches while no one is looking.

Or what about the man who says, "So you've been dating this guy for a few weeks. One night, you're in bed — maybe you've had a few drinks — and he starts to rim you. What then? Do you stop him? How? Jump out of the bed? Throw something across the room? Scream about a violation of trust? Or maybe just lie there and say 'please don't do that' although it's too late and his tongue is where it oughtn't be. Or do you think, 'oh well, the damage is done, might as well enjoy it.' Then what? Then what?"

That brick wall. It's there whenever you get a sore throat, whenever a friend says he thinks he's coming down with the flu and for some reason everything inside you stops and you wonder what to say. It's there when an overnight guest asks if he can use your razor and you say no, feeling cowardly and petty. It's there when you think, "If I have to do one more mutual jerk off session I'll die of boredom." It's there when you can't even watch a porno movie without thinking about each unsafe activity those men are doing and you feel resentful and lost because you still get turned on by it. It's there whenever someone says, "Did you hear about Jim (or Bob or Ted or Jerry)?" and you steel yourself for news of death.

That brick wall. It demands our attention. It affects how we touch, how we dream (careful with the five-year goals, kids), what we think about, how we love. It is implacable and relentless in the way it tries to stop us, block us from the healthy, happy life every human ought to have. It forces us to ask tough questions of ourselves and will, in the end, teach us to find our answers so that we can live out our lives with a dignity, grace and beauty that has never been seen before.



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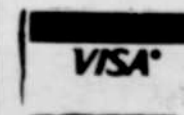
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