Fit to Print

Nearing his book debut, M.C. Mars wonders: Tell all?...or some?

July 1, 2004 By M.C. Mars

I have a dilemma. This summer, I'm publishing my first book, *Don't Take Me the Long Way*. It's a memoir of the people I've met in my 20 years driving a cab at night in San Francisco: pimps, whores, hustlers, transvestites and party people. A Florida manure salesman who wanted to find the ugliest hooker in SF. A suburban family that mistook the Folsom Street leather-fetish fair for the county fair. And a guy with a garrote and box cutter who tried to murder me while we were on the freeway.

There's one story, though, in which my work life and my life with HIV are a little too close for comfort, and I don't know whether I should include it. Not that I don't touch on the virus elsewhere in the collection. In the story "Blood," I recount the strangeness of delivering a package of blood from the Irwin Memorial Blood Bank, my cab company's regular customer, to a hospital the day after I was diagnosed with HIV (7.28.88). From there, I write about my T-cell nosedive in 2000, an almost fatal med reaction later that year and the onset of PCP, during which a beautiful young woman in my backseat raved about her boyfriend's band while I drove drenched with fever on the coldest night of the year.

My book will not be the first time I've disclosed "in public." In 1990, before several hundred Buddhists, at a meeting whose theme was "overcoming insurmountable obstacles," I read a story I'd written about learning that I had HIV while sitting in a clinic festooned (for no clear reason) with balloons and streamers. A few years later, visions of an *Oprah* gig dancing in my head, I took the story into a workshop for writers who act, creating a performance piece, "Alone in the Blue With My X-panding Song." The love and support I felt developing this piece among a peer group of artists, then performing it in the San Francisco Solo Mio Festival, sent my T cells skyward.

Public disclosure is a gift that can give back tenfold. It can also backfire, or yield murky reactions: Once, back when AIDS was still considered a death sentence, I was driving a young guy in a wheelchair. He'd been run over on his bike and crippled for life. To inspire him, I told him about my battle with HIV and how I would never cave in to despair. He didn't say another word for the rest of the ride.

My worst disclosure moment? In 1995, I turned that one-man show into a musical radio-play, which I put out as a CD. I sold one to a cashier at my cab company. In a crowded room of drivers, he addressed me through a microphone. "I listened to your CD last night." Pause. "You're not *really*

HIV positive, are you?”

“Poetic license,” I lied. “For a more dramatic piece.”

He nodded. “Yeah, it was a good story.”

Why didn’t I own up? Why should I? At that moment, sensing that my audience of bored, homophobic cabbies was not as nurturing as Buddhists or artists, I chose not to turn my suffering into fodder for endless gossip.

Which brings me back to my dilemma: Whether my book should include “The Envelope,” a detailed history of my PCP collapse, punctuated by the names of my coworkers and their donations, delivered to me inside a manila envelope while I recovered from what they were told was “acute pneumonia.” I wrote it to capture the irony of nearly dying from AIDS before my coworkers’ unknowing eyes. But how badly do I want them to know the truth, which publishing this detailed blueprint may ensure?

What would you do?

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