Underexposed

The media love M.C. Mars' gritty memoir—except the HIV part

October 1, 2005 By M.C. Mars

A year ago, in a previous installment of this column, I anguished over whether to include a story in my memoir of 25 years as a taxi driver, Don't Take Me the Long Way. In the story—about my fellow drivers raising $672 for me during a period of extended illness—I disclose that the illness was AIDS and that I almost died from PCP pneumonia. I decided to risk including it, and I'll never forget when I knew I had had an impact. One evening, under the harsh fluorescent lights of the Desoto Cab garage, my mostly Muslim and Hindu coworkers were counting their money at the end of a shift as a Christian evangelist ranted on TV (the channel hadn't been changed since the ball game ended). A tall, stoic driver approached me. "Hey, man, I loved your book," he said."You just put everything out there."

My colleagues have become some of Don't Take Me the Long Way's loudest promoters. A laminated advertisement for it hangs over the backseat of a half-dozen taxis; 600 copies have been sold from cab trunks, almost twice the number as in bookstores. All this scrappy self-promotion has paid off: A big mainstream men's magazine featured me and my memoir—from backseat shenanigans to a psychopath who tried to kill me—in a three-page spread for its August car issue. Other interviews have followed. The funny thing is, now that I have the opportunity to be a high-profile HIVer, the disease is the last thing anyone seems to really want to talk about.

It's true that the first subject the men's magazine reporter brought up was my HIV. Though the interview topics ranged far and wide, I felt from the very beginning that he genuinely cared about my health. But his lengthy article made no mention of the virus. I can understand why AIDS doesn't fit in a men's magazine centered on stratagems for picking up hot chicks. Still, seeing the topic deleted from an article all about my ability to survive what life has thrown at me, all from behind the wheel of a cab, brought home how, for the mainstream media, AIDS is always a disease that afflicts "others."

This past summer, I did an interview at a black radio station. The interviewer, a friend, gave me 30 seconds to define the state of the plague. I said that the medications work well—but come with a price: an addictionlike pill habit and some gnarly side effects. He concurred,then deftly steered the conversation back to the beef between 50 Cent and the Game. I did a phone interview with a cable-TV producer who hadn't read my memoir and didn't know I had HIV. As I told him about my crusade against the virus and determination to raise money to fight it, I started feeling

uncomfortable—I realized there was dead silence on the other end of the line. For a moment, even I thought I might be sounding a little melodramatic. But then I remembered how,when I had PCP, I spent two weeks in a hospital bed using a nebulizer, weak as a kitten, sucking down oxygen. Melodrama be damned, I continued my speech, explaining how psyched I was about a big Philadelphia AIDS benefit concert that had happened a couple of weeks prior.

I can’t blame either of these journalists—one was keeping his audience happy, the other keeping to a schedule. The plain truth is, one man’s burning issue is another man’s ashtray. And don’t get me wrong: After so many years scribbling in obscurity, I’m loving all the attention. A couple of cute Korean waitresses in a restaurant recognized me. Passengers —readers of the magazine interview—have said: “No way, dude? Is that you?” But as long as I’m getting known for being me, I want my HIV—and the battles that go with it—along for the ride.

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