Facts and Fiction

A new novel explores the early years of AIDS and imagines what lies ahead.

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Tim Murphy knows a thing or two about HIV/AIDS. Not only is he living with the virus, but he's also spent the past 20 years reporting on the epidemic for publications including POZ, Out, Advocate and New York Magazine. In his new novel, Christodora, which comes out in August, he tells the stories of assorted characters whose lives are connected by the Christodora, an apartment building in New York City's East Village. In the excerpt that follows, we meet two of the protagonists: Hector, an AIDS activist who formerly worked at the New York Health Department, and Issy, a young, HIV-positive Latina who has just attended her first ACT UP meeting. Although Hector and Issy are fictional characters, Murphy packs historical information about the AIDS epidemic throughout the novel, as he imagines what life was like in those bleak, early years—and what it will be like in the future. He also manages to name-drop a few real-life activists who have died, as a tribute to their legacy.

The rain—and obviously it was a very warm rain—had already pooled so deeply off the curb that Issy was about to step into it in her sandal up to her ankle when Ricky, his bag of flyers already wet, went, "Whoa, girl!" and sort of lifted her from the waist so she missed the big puddle. They were leaving a diner where they'd gone to eat after the big meeting— her, Hector, this guy Ricky who was obviously his boyfriend, and a guy named Korie who really didn't look good.

She had stood alongside Hector throughout the rambunctious meeting, a bit overwhelmed and dazed but also strangely relieved and safe, and then when it adjourned, Hector—and she could tell that Hector was a big shot here—had introduced her to a bunch of women, some of them Latinas but most of them looking like lesbianas, and before she knew it she was on a committee to try to get the federal definition of AIDS expanded to include more symptoms that only women had. Like not getting your periods regularly! That had been happening to her! And after, Hector had said, "Come on, we're getting something to eat at Joe Jr. Come with us." So she had, sitting there with a bowl of tomato soup and a grilled cheese (Hector picked up the tab) while the guys talked mainly about a Chinese drug and whether you could take it for AIDS or not, because Korie wanted to know. Overall, Hector didn't think it was a good idea.

"I think you should wait and get into parallel tracking with ddI," he told Korie, who took a deep breath, as though he was digesting this new idea. Everyone had been talking about this new drug ddI at the meeting, Issy had noticed. Could this be the drug that was going to change everything? What if she lived? She sipped her soup and listened quietly to Hector and Korie go back and forth.

There was a lot of new terminology she was learning tonight. Some folks had told her they didn't know jack shit about AIDS or science or the body or anything before they started coming to the meetings, and now, only a few months in, they could hold their own, read medical papers, follow a conversation. Maybe that would happen to her, too! She already had dental knowledge. (And, at her dental hygienist job, she suffered intense guilt that she had told no colleagues she was infected, as well as terror that someone might somehow find out and she'd be fired, or—worse—that she might somehow bleed into a patient's mouth and infect them.)

Ricky put his arm around her. She knew he was in his twenties, but he looked like he could be twelve with that little-boy face! "How's your soup 'n' sandwich, girl?" he asked her.

She laughed. "It's fine. I didn't eat much today before. I was nervous about coming to the meeting."

"Well, you came and you made a splash!" he said. She liked Ricky. He reminded her of when you were flipping TV channels and came across an old musical set on a farm or something, that kind of guy. All-American and smiley and wholesome, even though he had a punk haircut.

The boys were getting up now and talking about going to dance at a bar called Boy Bar. She didn't think she'd ever been there with Tavi—maybe it was new.

"What are you going to do now?" Ricky asked her.

She shrugged. "I guess I'm gonna take the subway back to Queens." God, it was so stressful living with her family, hiding this from them. What if she started looking like Korie? How would she hide it then?

"Come dance with us!" Ricky said.

She laughed. "Me? No, you guys go ahead."

Korie put his arm around her. "Oh, honey, please, if I can go for a while, so can you."

She looked up at Hector. "Come out with us for a while, chica," he said.

The place was basically a dark pit with loud music, like Paradise Garage had been. Tavi, she thought when she walked in, the music's throb hitting her. They were walking forward in a crowd of guys and she felt herself shuffling, her hand rising to her neck. Oh, she had pushed down these feelings about Tavi! Oh God, he had been like her brother, far more than her real brother. Well, maybe he was more like her sister. And she couldn't bring herself to tell him, in his final months when he was so sick, that she had the same thing. He'd died without knowing. She'd pushed down all this Tavi stuff for months now. She hadn't set foot in a club, heard this thump-thump music, since Tavi.

Hector spied her, put a hand on her neck. "You okay?" he shouted in her ear.

“I haven’t been to a club since Tavi,” she shouted back into his ear, on her tippy-toes.

He put his arm around her. “It’s too much for you? I can walk you out.”

She didn’t share that she’d barely stepped into a club since that night five years ago, the night she was fairly certain she’d gotten the virus from that moreno in the back of the car. Four years later, she’d started having the private-area problems, catching colds that seemed never to go away, noticing her glands were always hard and swollen. The doctor she’d visited asked her if she had any reason to believe she might have HIV.

She didn’t have to think back too hard. Literally from the week after the encounter with the moreno, she wondered if she’d done a stupid thing, especially as she read more and more about the disease. She’d insisted on a condom the two times she’d had sex with someone since.

“I had sex once with a bisexual guy,” she told the doctor. “Without a condom.”

The two weeks she waited for the test results, she stopped in a church every day to light a candle and pray she didn’t have it. When the doctor called her back in and told her she did in fact have it, she felt an immediate disgust with herself for being so naive and trusting as to think God would have cut her a break. What a fool she was! She wasn’t getting a thing she wanted out of life, the deck was stacked against her, and this was fate’s last laugh at the sad, not-much life of Ysabel Mendes. That sense she’d long buried, that perhaps the world really wasn’t a fair and good place, as dictated by the church, came rushing up in a hot, humiliating blaze in her throat.

“So I’m gonna get more sick and die?” she asked the doctor, tears welling in her eyes. And meanwhile, she calculated to herself, she’d be fired from her job and would have to endure the scorn and rejection of her family, the neighborhood. That would be fun. “How soon do I have?”

“Don’t look at it that way,” the doctor had said. “You’re in decent health now. Your T cells are high. We’ll monitor you and if they ever get really low, we can talk about AZT.”

“What?”

“It’s a drug for HIV.”

“Does it cure it?”

“No, but it can keep it in check for a while. And other drugs will be coming down the pike. So meanwhile, eat well, don’t drink or smoke, exercise, don’t get too stressed. You’ll be okay.”

Taking out her anger at a cheap gym after work was Issy’s concession to the doctor’s advice. Otherwise, she suppressed the diagnosis, pushed it down inside her. If the doctor said she didn’t have to worry about it, she wouldn’t. And she wouldn’t tell anyone, either. But life became very stressful and she found herself constantly short-tempered, or breaking out privately into tears. She felt as though she may as well be walking around wearing a sign that said i have aids. She feared

that if her brother ever found out that she knew all along she had the virus after she'd held and played with her little niece, he'd turn on her in a rage, hit her.

Then, a few months before, she started noticing in the papers and on the news that there was this group, mostly gay guys, who were out there blocking traffic and getting arrested, demanding that the city and the country do more to stop the disease. She followed them with a secret thrill. They weren't afraid if anyone thought they had the disease or not—they were all over the papers. It had all led to her creeping to the meeting tonight, and to a feeling of colossal relief.

So now, the music stealing up into her feet, she let herself collapse in Hector's arm a bit. "No, I'm okay," she told Hector. "I wanna dance a little!"

"Yeah, I know, girl, we haven't danced together in a while."

"Oh my God, shut up!" She slapped his arm, mortified but smiling. He tossed back his head and let out a deep, satisfied laugh. Suddenly she realized he'd lost those nerdy, chunky glasses he'd had the night he met her. That's why he seemed sexier and looser. That, she figured, and his new muscles. And maybe because he was so popular in this activist crowd.

"Come on, chica," he said.

They got beers and went downstairs, which was packed and sweaty. A huge drag queen with oversize false eyelashes and a blond cotton-candy wig sailed through the crowd like a cruise ship, kissing hello left and right. "That's the Lady Bunny," Ricky shouted into her ear. "She's a southern girl."

Issy nodded Ohhh. The music got her excited and she jacked her body along with the boys. Except for her periods, she wasn't sick yet—she felt fine! She started to let herself think that maybe everything would turn out okay.

Then she noticed frail Korie standing by the bar, alone, with his beer, sort of staring into space. But Hector and Ricky were with her. They watched her jack her body, went, "Work, girl!" They were bumping and grinding on either side of her, pressing her in the middle. "Wooooh!" she went. She felt better, and she didn't see, nor could she hear them over the music, when Ricky pressed a little pastel smiley-faced pill into Hector's hand.

Hector glanced down at it. "Where'd you get that?" he shouted in Ricky's ear.

"Korie gave them to me," Ricky said.

"Korie? He shouldn't be doing this shit."

"That's why he gave them to me."

Hector frowned. "I have a lot of work and meetings tomorrow."

“One pill’s only gonna last you a few hours,” Ricky said. “You’ll be fine. It’s only ten thirty.”

“I suppose you already took yours.”

Ricky grinned a Cheshire cat grin. But Hector felt a rage rising. “You don’t fucking care about yourself, Ricky! You make me so fucking mad.”

Ricky grabbed his arm. “Don’t go there tonight. Let’s have fun with this poor girl.”

“Don’t you dare fucking give her an X.”

Ricky looked offended. “Do you think I would?”

They just stared at each other for a second, mechanically dancing in place. Finally Hector shook his head and popped the pill in his mouth, washing it down with a swig of beer. “Ooh, bad boy,” Ricky gibed him.

“You just don’t care,” Hector said again.

Ricky shrugged. “You care too much,” he said, but said it smiling, then thrust his tongue in Hector’s mouth before Hector could respond. We always hang in a buffalo stance, we do the dive every time we dance, went the song now. Hector could feel Ricky’s powers of assitude begin to exert themselves over him now, and when he finally pulled away from the kiss, he saw the new girl, Issy, slipping away through the crowd, which now included about three dozen people from the meeting. Where was she going? He resigned himself to wait for the X to kick in, danced—something he’d “taught” himself to do in the intervening years, how to move his body. They should feel good about themselves, about parallel tracking, he told himself, watching Ricky bump it with Micki, the magenta-haired dyke. Ricky was in really good spirits now, Hector knew, because Ricky loved X’ing and dancing all night, even if it was a Monday night with Ivana’s roots to do in the morning.

Data suggested that AZT plus ddI would squelch the pathogen, Hector reminded himself. Things were probably going to change in the rest of 1989: symptoms and mortalities were going to plunge. Then bang! That moment when the X kicked in and the world popped to life in Day-Glo colors. That feverish wave of horniness and joy.

“Can you feel it?” Ricky asked, in his arms. And now, oh God, the Shep Pettibone remix of the song of the summer: When you call my name, it’s like a little prayer. I’m down on my knees, I wanna take you there. The room screamed and collapsed into the pounding beats. Hector followed suit with some of his more extroverted buddies from the meeting and pulled off his T-shirt, stuck it in the band of his jean shorts. Ricky’s ass was in his hands, Ricky’s tongue in his mouth—Ricky was here, Ricky was here, it was summertime, Madonna was on their side, parallel tracking was coming. Everything was going to be okay.

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