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TALENT CONTRIBUTORS



JASON P. FREEMAN

Writer, "Chicago 5," p. 85

Originally from Long Island, NY, Jason P. Freeman moved to Chicago in an attempt to find himself, but he never did. In fact, if you see himself, please tell him Jason is looking for him. Assistant Editor for Chicago's premier LGBT community website, ChicagoPride.com, Jason last saw himself reporting on Chicago's best gay hotspots for GENRE's special June Pride issue. Of the prestigious honor and opportunity, Jason would have likely said, "I'm stoked!" had he known where to find himself in order to comment.



PATRICK STEVEN WAECHTER

Writer, "Virus of the Heart," p. 52

Patrick Steven Waechter escaped the Smokey Mountains (yes, where Dolly Parton is from) 7 years ago for the city he now calls home, Los(t) Angeles. He spent 3 years distracting himself from writing, while earning a degree in business from USC. Eventually, though, he gave in to writing, and came to a realization all too familiar in his life—that he was "just born this way." He lives in a cardboard box in vaseline alley in WeHo with his dachshund, Dykisha Tyrell Featherstone. Check him out at patricksw.com.



T. COLE RACHEL

Writer, "Let's Talk About SXSW," p. 123

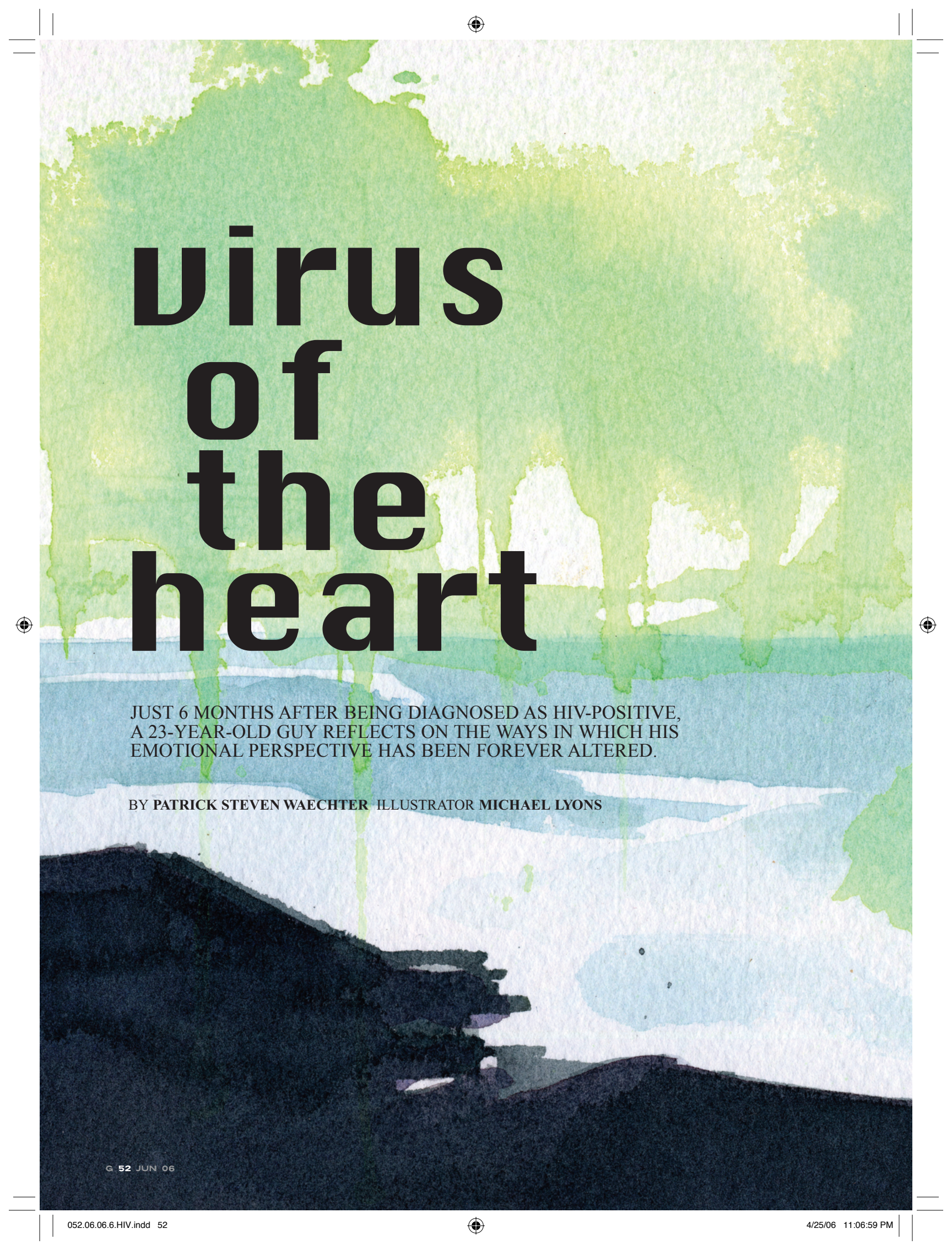
A poet, essayist, critic and native Oklahoman, T. Cole Rachel now makes Brooklyn his home. His work has also appeared in *V*, *VMan*, *Attitude* and *Alternative Press*. His books include *Surviving the Moment of Impact* and *Bend Don't Shatter*. And 3 months after the fact, he is still nursing a residual hangover from this year's SXSW Music Festival.



WILLIAM MURPHY

Grooming/Makeup, "iD Factor," p. 56


A Texas native, William moved to NYC to work in fashion and advertising. His editorial career was kick-started with assistant positions for some industry greats, launching him into the successful freelance career he currently enjoys. In addition to GENRE, he has collaborated with *Interview*, *Blender*, *Paper* and *Flaunt*. Recently William's work was featured in the short film, *Caligula*, an official selection at the 2006 Whitney Biennial. Visit William at myspace.com/williammurphy.



virus of the heart

JUST 6 MONTHS AFTER BEING DIAGNOSED AS HIV-POSITIVE,
A 23-YEAR-OLD GUY REFLECTS ON THE WAYS IN WHICH HIS
EMOTIONAL PERSPECTIVE HAS BEEN FOREVER ALTERED.

BY PATRICK STEVEN WAECHTER ILLUSTRATOR MICHAEL LYONS



When I went to get tested for HIV in December 2005, I had little reason to suspect that I would be positive. Sure, I had my reasons for going in for the routine test—I was just re-entering the wild from a relationship of decent length. Mostly, though, I was there to accompany my dear friend, who—well, let's just say his hand and footprints are on display at the sauna at the 24-Hour Fitness on Santa Monica. Convinced that neither of us had anything to worry about, I actually filmed the entire process of getting tested, including the overweight trannie who checked us in at the front. (S)he attempted comic relief by asking us as we walked up, “What kind of test are you here for today—math or biology?” and by telling me not to fill my bag with condoms, “But, fill your dreams, of course!”

In many ways, I am a gay stereotype. I used to stage choreographed karaoke sessions to my *Best of Dionne Warwick* CD when I was 14. I have 2 gym memberships and Prada glasses. I go to fancy parties with fancier gift bags, where I order

cantaloupe martinis—all while living paycheck-to-paycheck in my humble one-bedroom apartment in Los Angeles. In terms of the assumption of promiscuity, however, I've done quite well at remaining a contradiction. One man's prude is another man's ho, but I'd slept with fewer men than years I'd been sexually active. I do not now have, nor have I ever had, a Manhunt profile. And I had been mostly safe, especially in sex outside of relationships. As the test administrator revealed the red stamp, I immediately broke a sweat and felt a nearly uncontrollable urge to throw things. He tried to calm me down by saying, "Many people live up to 30 years with this virus." Note to anyone ever searching for the right thing to say to a person freaking out about his newfound status: That's not it. I remember shrieking at him in a very mocking tone at first, "Oooh! That means I could live to be 53! Well, why am I upset then?!"

The first person who came to mind was my mother. Five years ago, when I first told my mom that I was gay, she was concerned for my wellbeing. Aside from her understandable fear that I might be discriminated against, she was mostly worried that I would contract HIV. At the time, I assuaged my mother's fears, informing her that becoming infected with the virus was not an inevitable fact of gay life.

Five years after coming out and having been kicked out of the family—even involuntarily committed at one point—I had finally been re-accepted. My mom even seemed to be coming to a very mature understanding that being gay was not a shameful part of my existence. And now this? In that moment, the stereotype was affirmed and all of the seemingly meaningful conversations we had were undermined. The very thought of having to approach the issue was nauseating. I had to admit something to myself that I spent so long passionately rejecting: Stereotypes exist, because they are often true.

As I sat there in the chair, they took more blood for a confirmation test (while my friend attempted to comfort me, saying the news wasn't final, and the man with the needle reminded me that the other test was 99% accurate). I was nauseous. Vomiting sounded appropriate, but there I was, nibbling chocolate-chip cookies to keep myself from passing out. I started to question my friend rhetorically about my future: "Who the hell is going to want to date me now? Where am I going to get medical treatment? Do I need to be on medication right now? Where did this come from?" I cried a little bit. I hugged my friend tightly, sort of like we were at a funeral of someone we both really missed. Then, rage resurfaced, and I grabbed the arms of my chair and shook around and screamed for a while. Then, all at once, my vision blurred a bit, as I stared blankly at the faux wooden door in front of me. An air

of calm came over me. I took a deep breath, and said to my friend in a stage whisper, "We should go now."

On our walk back to my car, some jerk yelled at me, "Nice shoes, faggot" (in West Hollywood, of all places!). Awestruck, I stopped, looked down at my beloved kelly-green-and-pink Pumas and looked back up at him. "You know, there really is enough in the world that we're fighting for together, without us fighting each other, as well," I said. Then, I kept walking. Farther down the sidewalk, my friend likened my post-diagnosis forgiveness to Jesus.

The next morning, I opened my eyes and reminded myself, "This is day one." I stared at the ceiling for a bit and told myself that it really would be okay to give myself the day off of work if I felt I needed it. Appropriate, even. I made a decision not to begin a habit of making excuses, since this was something I would be living with every single day. As I made my way into the office early, I stopped in at the coffee shop downstairs first. A flamboyant homo who accessorized with glitter and listened to glam rock always worked mornings there. He used to flirt with me innocently, writing my name on my cup with little stars and cartoonish circles on the ends of the letters. I had always been entertained at how he seemed perpetually on the edge of asking me out. This particular morning, as he handed me my change, he got up his nerve. I stared at him blankly for a minute and then began to cry. I abandoned my coffee at the register, and ran up to the office. I put my head on my desk and sobbed for a solid hour. I wasn't even into him. While I liked him enough and definitely found him entertaining, I had actually been rehearsing a graceful and non-offensive phrase to let him down easily whenever this day did come. And, of course...here it was, in what I perceived to be the wake of my dating life.

My first weeks after being diagnosed were largely filled with frantic Internet searches—desperately seeking the cure in the rubble of 1s and 0s that the rest of the world *must* have simply overlooked. I sought reviews for the best medical care, for alternative or experimental treatments and for general coping resources. Immensely frustrated, I nearly threw my Powerbook against the wall at one point. Almost every website I visited shamelessly displayed its affiliated bias for one of the many pharmaceutical companies. Essentially, each of the articles read the same, illustrating Western medicine as the supreme lifesaver, barring alternative treatments as risky, dangerous or, even, fatal. The research seemed so hopelessly infinite. HIV was, indeed, a time-consuming endeavor.

Life is a hectic enough brew without a chronic illness. When you stir in the HIV, though, all



**this one
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family life
and work life
forever.**

kinds of new responsibilities churn through the realm. You could say that it's sort of like a life-long accidental pregnancy with Satan's love child. You are truly carrying another life inside of you. It responds to the way you care for yourself. It's not a death sentence, just a lifestyle change. That is a standard response of comfort issued by fellow positive folk and medical professionals, and it's fairly accurate, even if it sounds annoyingly simple.

Aside from the inherent terror of the viral initials, being diagnosed positive comes loaded with responsibilities. This one random Tuesday would affect my health, social life, family life and work life forever. And, each of these sectors required pivotal decisions, which I felt an immense amount of pressure to make immediately in order to gain some semblance of control over my life. Ask anyone who has ever dated me—giving things time is not my strength. Through all of the fear, pain and anger, however, decision-making was mostly impossible at first. As with most matters of

tionships with the people in my life different. In truth, HIV had made a very large difference in how I related to myself, so it seemed fair that the alterations would go all the way down the line. If someone can't respect my own boundaries with respect to my status and can't treat me the same way—they can suck it. The truth is they probably didn't care anyway.

However, it isn't surprising that one's status affects dating in a huge way. Some choose to date exclusively within the positive community. Others are open to the possibility of a sero-discordant engagement (that is, a relationship in which the couple differs in HIV status). Sufficient research has shown that, statistically, sero-discordant relationships are doomed for failure. Sure, almost everyone knows that *one* couple, who have been together forever despite the difference in their HIV statuses, but the statistics remain. At first, I felt my dating life was restricted completely to "poz" guys (and, for the record, I *hate* that word). But, I realized, in time, that

rawest emotions, I can become extremely angry at the notion that the virus could impede my ability to get to know someone. Ultimately, though, I can understand where a lot of negative people are coming from. I would have been cautious, if not unwilling, to approach a positive guy before my diagnosis. What really gets me, though, is that those without HIV do not always feel compelled to make such an effort to empathize. From day one, I have felt burdened by an expectation to retain completely graceful form in handling the virus. The expectation of my attention to work did not pause following diagnosis. I've had insulting phrases pelted at me in response to some apparently insensitive remark I made about my own virus. Obviously, it's easier for me to walk in the shoes of a person without HIV, since there was a time when I wasn't wearing these devilish leopard-print heels. But that realization alone should yield the understanding that learning to handle this part of one's life is a gradual process that takes

at the time, i assuaged my mother's fears, informing her that becoming infected with the virus was not an inevitable fact of gay life.

the heart, time is the best medicine, even if the most difficult to administer. Eventually, I realized that forcing myself to take some time out to decompress was truly what I needed to regain my sanity.

Disclosure of one's status is a heavy and constant responsibility. An advice website I consulted immediately after my diagnosis counseled, "It is important to remember that you can tell everyone, but you cannot untell anyone." I've observed firsthand that many people who have trouble owning up to their HIV status have the most difficulty disclosing their status to the people they consider the closest. Lovers and family are the hardest. I can only speculate that this is all based in a fear that the relationship will be forever altered, plagued with constant health-related questions or, worse yet, dissolve into total estrangement. I have seen and heard of the destruction of so many relationships as a result of deception relating to one's HIV status. After thinking it through, I decided that I really just didn't care if HIV made my rela-

my dating life was really only limited to those who considered HIV a surmountable obstacle. I refuse to let my HIV status determine to whom I can become close. I'm always upfront about it. It's delightful first-date dessert conversation, really. Segueing from the dish on the latest episode of *America's Next Top Model* to the dissertation on my viral load and T-cells is super-fun. And sure, some guys can't handle it. I've already encountered my share of text-message breakups that read something like, "I'm sorry. I just can't do this. I hate to do it this way, but I guess I'm just scared of the issue." But I've also met a few who are equally as bent on not allowing such a thing to become a factor in how well they can know someone, even from their perspective as HIV-negative. Unfortunately, there hasn't been anyone yet worth more than 3 dates, but I wouldn't mind being half of that couple that everyone refers to as an example of harmonious commitment against all odds.

For a control freak like *moi*, the real doozies of HIV are the things that remain entirely out of my grasp. If I give in to my

time. It just isn't fair to assume that a switch should have flipped the moment the red stamp hit my forehead.

What has helped me the most in all this is the realization that my biggest asset can be my biggest liability: My attitude. As long as I'm alive, I want to live. I have spent enough time trying to alter the unalterable. I have had enough duvet days staring at the ceiling through lenses of tears, pleading to the powers that be, trying to convince them that I do not deserve this fate. This abortion-proof, bastard-child-of-Satan virus is a part of me, and I am a part of it. I love myself; therefore, I love my virus. Ironically, nothing else in my life has given me more strength, more insight into my own identity and more motivation to succeed and make things happen. HIV has a special place where it has affected me the most—in my heart. **G**

Patrick Steven Waechter resides in Los Angeles with his dachshund, Dykisha Tyrell Featherstone. He banters regularly at patricksw.com.

