NONFICTION

Damien

VICTOR YANG

OUR GROUP HUDDLED AT the makeshift bus stop: the grand, marble staircase at the entrance to the New York Public Library. We had spent the afternoon with Occupy Wall Street, calling for a Robin Hood Tax on the stock exchange: half a cent of every dollar traded on stocks, which would amount to billions in revenue for health and education. Our return bus to Philadelphia was over an hour late.

My neighbor on the library steps didn't make eye contact as he introduced himself. "Damien," he said, his voice both gruff and soft.* He turned his neck toward me in a slow movement, like a sentence broken by stutters. Unlike me, he blended in with the other AIDS activists. Cornrows stuck out from his black skullcap; his T-shirt hovered at the knees; and he was at least thirty years old, probably not more than forty-five. I was awful at guessing the age of older folks, especially that of black people. My gaydar was slightly better, but he didn't set off any bells. I was on guard.

The night prior in Philadelphia, I had presented myself to the group as a grad student and researcher. A man in a camouflage jacket had approached me after the meeting. His name was Melvin. I interviewed him in the morning on the bus to New York as he roamed his hands over my lap. My window seat didn't allow room for me to scooch away. Not until our Wall Street stop could I escape the hoots that Melvin had scored a new Chinese boyfriend.

As I talked with the new guy on the library steps, I had to remind my-

Pseudonym*

self: not all black men in ACT UP were gay; even if they were gay, very few would be horny for some skinny Asian ass; and even if they were, they almost certainly wouldn't be reaching for my crotch. All this man had done was tell me his name. His hands were still, and his face was handsome, even with the grimace. He told me his neck pain started two years ago, in 2011. That was the year that Pennsylvania cut back on its Medicaid program, and the same year I started studying ACT UP Philly. He couldn't afford to treat his severed nerve. My right hand fumbled the cards in my pocket wallet; at 23, I still had health insurance from my father's job.

"This bus is taking its time," I said, trying to name something in common between us. We were both stuck waiting for the bus. He told me that he, too, was protesting for the first time with ACT UP. He had joined the group a few weeks earlier, via a program for low-income people of color with HIV. I nodded. I had already interviewed the program's co-founder for my thesis. I had become interested in ACT UP Philly because it was different. Most heroes in the history books of AIDS were white gay men, stockbrokers, and concert pianists with Ivy League degrees. ACT UP Philly, in contrast, had built a cadre of African American activists, among them sex workers, ex-convicts, and drug users. It lived on a tiny budget and big ideals. It was the story of white queers with wild hairdos bonding with black Christians out of rehab. The story of friendship feeding a movement. If I wanted to capture it, this new guy was the kind of activist I needed to know.

He asked if I was cold. I was shivering, but I shook my head. The setting sun had left us in the shadow of the library. The evenings in mid-September had become chilly. That morning, I had first grabbed a coat, only to see that its greyish-green looked stiff in the mirror. I hadn't gone to many protests before. For a moment, I wondered if there was a secret dress code, to separate the wannabe activists from the real ones. I wanted my outfit to look effortless, as if I had nothing to hide. My coat gave off the wrong impression, had too many pockets. After trying on other options, I ran out with a checkered shirt and paper-thin hood.

He squirmed out of his jacket. I refused, but he still thrust it on me. "I have more than enough clothes." He was firm.

I must have looked like a kid to him, too foolish or too poor to dress myself right. He didn't know I was a researcher; he hadn't been there the night before

when I introduced myself. But even if he had, he would have had no reason to suspect that I was shelling out thousands of dollars to fly between Philly and England.

The guy's long white T-shirt fluttered in the wind. It looked thin. Taking his jacket, I muttered a thanks. The fleece lining felt soft on my bare arms.

Jittery, I bounced my legs up and down the steps. I should have told him right then and there: Hey, I don't have HIV. I'm hanging out with ACT UP for my Ph.D., but I'm still down for the cause. It would have saved me a lot of grief. But I feared that he was going to dub me a mercenary phony, an AIDS traitor, or a waste of time. Little did I know, I would be the only one who called myself those names. I had worked for years as an activist, a social worker, and a teacher in low-income communities. In those jobs, I'd been paid staff, with a title and a salary. ACT UP was different. Here, everyone was a volunteer. In name, everyone was equal. I didn't want him to think that I was a researcher and everyone else my subject, even though that was the very reality. He was supposed to become no more than a pseudonym in my dissertation. I wanted to be his friend.

My research was funded on a Rhodes Scholarship at Oxford, with a stipend of $21,000 a year. I was the direct beneficiary of the money Cecil Rhodes made off the backs of poor people in sub-Saharan Africa. ACT UP Philadelphia was fighting against pharmaceutical companies that raked in billions from the descendants of the same land that Rhodes had exploited. I could have donated my Rhodes money to ACT UP Philly. A reparation of sorts. Had I given away my grad school stipend, the organization's shoestring budget would have doubled or tripled. People at meetings were fighting over subway tokens worth $1.85 each. At one point, ACT UP stopped ordering pizza they had been feeding to the hungry and the homeless, because the thirty dollars a week was too much.

I held onto my Rhodes money. The price was guilt. While I chased stories for my Ph.D., these members fought to survive. People didn't need a mid-level sociological theory that explained the group's success. They needed people to help them win money, medicine, and respect. So I did the least I could do: I donated my time. That day on Wall Street, I yelled my throat hoarse from chanting. In the next thirteen months of fieldwork, I revised the group's grant proposals, took minutes at meetings, and held banners at protests. I took on

extra work in hope that these strangers would accept me. I was a baby activist. I had never held a full-time job, won a campaign, or gone to an AIDS funeral. I wanted in.

When the bus finally pulled up to the curb, people started snubbing cigarette butts on the pavement. I was surprised when the others shoved ahead of us to the front of the line. My companion clucked his teeth. After he took his seat, the only spot left had a big Macy's bag on it. The owner turned her face toward the window. I lingered in the aisle, long enough for the bus driver to yell for everyone to sit. People glared at me; it had been a long day. My pits were sweaty. I felt unsafe on this bus full of poor black people.

He got up. "Move over!" He bared his teeth. His skullcap almost brushed against the ceiling of the bus.

"You fuck off," said Macy's bag.

"You're the only one hogging two fucking seats." His hands looked ready to fly.

I put a hand to his clenched shoulder. Don't worry about it, I begged. An older man told us to calm down. The woman finally scooted the bag onto her lap. I squeezed my butt into the seat, careful not to have my shoulder bump hers. At the drop-off point in downtown Philly, I extended his jacket in my arms. "I don't know when I'll see you next." At first he refused it, but I thrust it back into his hands, our eyes lingering before we parted ways.

Our friendship rolled like a ball on the slightest of slopes: slowly but surely, an effortless inertia with the gravity of routine. With other friends, I'd schedule out thirty-minute blocks in my Google calendar: a stroll at 2:30pm next Tuesday or brunch three Sundays from now. But time with him just happened. Before the start of weekly meetings, we'd sit side by side and chit-chat as others settled in. He told me he hoped to have a house of his own. He wanted a better life for his six or seven kids, all of whom he'd left back in North Carolina. Besides some odd jobs, he worked at a convenience store in the suburbs. When we bumped into each other once, I exclaimed at the length of his commute: "Three hours?" He nodded and said, "See you later."

See you later. He used the same phrase on the sidewalk next to the church, where he'd wait for me after Monday night meetings, even though he was

headed north and I south. “Hang out sometime?” he’d ask. I’d murmur a “yes,” but never a date or time. I didn’t want him to learn too much and decide we were too different. I pursued sixty other ACT UP members after meetings and via drop-ins at their offices. But I never interviewed him. I wanted to deny he was my research subject. The more he shared and the longer we knew each other, the more my little lie lingered, festering.

About a year after we first met, we had a meeting in the room next to our usual space; the church was doing renovations. This room was cavernous, bare white walls and sterile overhead lighting. Our circle of bodies took up only a corner of the space. We had greeted each other at the start, but that day he was sitting with a younger man. At the smoke break intermission, he beckoned to me from one of the walls. His face was inscrutable, his eyes a little narrowed, not unkindly, but different than his usual expressions.

“Victor. I’d like you to meet someone.” He broke into a smile. It was his son, a high-schooler. I had heard about his children, but I had imagined them to be tots because he looked so young. I asked how old the kid was, what he thought of school. No more than a few seconds of talk. Now, six years later, I can’t recall any of the answers, just that his son didn’t know anyone else in the room, and I was the one he went out of the way to introduce.

Like that, he folded me into the facts and figures of his life. I still hadn’t told him what brought me to Philadelphia. I didn’t tell him he was my model subject, or that I admired him for battling hellish commutes and HIV to become an activist. As he cobbled together money for his medicine and future apartment, I didn’t feel right telling him about yet another $700 ticket I had bought to see my adviser in England. I made excuses for myself. In ACT UP, I was the Asian kid with hipster glasses and MacBook Air. I didn’t want to stick out more than I did already. I felt like the lonely person in the cartoon hullabaloo on the back of cereal boxes, in the puzzles that asked kids to identify: “What is the one thing that does not belong?”

He never questioned who I was, not once. I was balancing on a plank of my own design, and to fix the wobbling I’d have to get off and come clean. But instead of jumping off, I stayed, teetering at every step.

I visited his house once, right before an impending snowstorm. We had crossed paths earlier that afternoon and promised we’d both be at the meeting

that night. Then the mayor declared a weather emergency, Philly's 2014 version of Hurricane Sandy. I had blocked out the night for ACT UP anyway, and feeling brave, I texted him: *you know meeting's cancelled?* He was playing video games. *Naked*, he added. *I'll get dressed*, he offered before I wrote back.

As I rode my bike toward him, West Philly transformed like an animation flipbook. Block by block, boarded-up windows and flying newspapers replaced mowed yards and new paint. I huffed and puffed in the cold, but I worried less about the snow and more about our hangout: if he'd interrogate my life, ask for money, or make advances, like Melvin on the bus. He was stronger and bigger. My fears shamed me—they had no basis in reality, and I pushed them out of mind as I rang the doorbell. The exterior of the house was purple, his own place at last. He didn't greet me at the door, let alone hug. Like the dollar-a-pound heap at thrift stores, his clothes were strewn all over the front room. The chips on the wall were shades of off-white. The heat was on high, or maybe it was the oven. He got out a pan of rotini and marinara, as picture-perfect as Olive Garden pasta ads. The burnt crust of cheddar on top smelled familiar. I learned that he was the chef behind the food at ACT UP meetings.

"I used to cook with my grandmother," he explained, opening the freezer door. It had homemade candied yams, fried chicken, and the chicken noodle soup he had offered me when I fell sick weeks earlier.

Against the wall, I admired his command of the kitchen. He threw a second helping of cheese onto the pasta as his other hand opened cabinets. He didn't need measuring cups or eyes to dump sugar and flour and cocoa into a mixing bowl. He grinned. "Chocolate chip cookie dough." One cabinet, he left ajar. The golden sheen of prescription bottles glared back at me.

"How many do you take?" he asked.

I cringed. He had assumed I was HIV-positive. "None," I muttered.

He rattled off his regimen: three blue pills in the morning, and four green in the afternoon. His facial expression didn't change. I released a breath I didn't know I was holding.

He turned to the pasta. "Want a bite?"

I shook my head. As much as I wanted to call us friends and equals, it didn't feel right taking his food. It was a cold and patronizing calculus, I'd think later, deciding for someone else they couldn't afford to be generous.

There was only one place in the apartment to sit: the comforter of his full-

sized bed, the frame almost as big as the width of his bedroom. On his side, he slurped up pasta and rattled on about plans to visit his kids. We carried conversation in the usual way; he talked and I nodded. He lit a cigarette. I didn't tell him smoke triggered my asthma. He didn't ask about my HIV status again. We sat in front of his boxy TV as the meteorologist spelled doomsday on the red and orange circles over Philadelphia.

"I should get going before the snow gets bad," I said. The sky was still clear when a gust whipped my face in the dark. The city would deploy 350 salt trucks. They predicted up to ten inches, but barely half-an-inch would fall.

My dissertation became a story about difference, how ACT UP Philly forged bonds among the most unlikely of people. If I'd practiced what I preached, I would have biked once more to his purple house, confident that he didn't care about the pills I didn't take, nor the reasons that had drawn me to ACT UP. I would have eaten his pasta and said it was the best marinara sauce I ever tasted. I would have admitted I was writing about him in a useless four-hundred-page book that'd collect dust in some archives across the Atlantic. "Why didn't you tell me earlier?" he would have asked, erupting into laughter over the bashfulness on my face. I would have sent him my dissertation, only for him to tell me how I got it wrong, and then I would have corrected it so that at academic conferences, I could offer our story as a model practice of honesty with subjects-turned-friends.

In real life, we never hung out again. After the blizzard that never happened, I finished my fieldwork and flew around the world on my scholarship stipend. I wrote from my dormitory window overlooking an Oxford quad, the bed of a migrant shelter in Mexico, and the front room of a castle in Austria. During one of my interviews, a longtime ACT UP member described the socioeconomic rift between black members like her and the white activists in the group; the latter traveled between Philadelphia and Kenya for their AIDS work. "Some people are still homeless, hungry, helpless, low self-esteem, while other people get to their own boats and fly, and say, 'I'm leaving, I won't be here.' There's people going out of their minds, and there's other people going out of the country." I was part of that revolving door in ACT UP, those who left not because of eviction or illness, but because we wanted to and could. According to the group's emailed minutes, Damien must not have moved, quit, or died, because he is still going to meetings.

In a find-and-replace within the PDF of my dissertation, his pseudonym appears on ten of the 456 pages. Once, at a meeting, he schooled everyone on the Congressional Ways and Means Committee, proving that he knew more about U.S. politics than I did; U.S. politics was my Ph.D. subfield. In heated discussions, he interrupted with jokes that'd crack everyone up. One time he facilitated a debate over housing policy. When he wanted to offer his take as a formerly homeless person, he paused to have someone replace him up at the chalkboard. "I want in," he said. "I'm too invested in this to be a good moderator." He sounded like he had run meetings all his life.

On trips back to Philly post-ACT UP, I schedule beers and brunch with my college-educated friends. One is a teacher who says he should stop teaching at his top-tier private school. He is still there; the money is too good. Another is a former ACT UP member who wants to return to the group, but she is racked with guilt for having left. I commiserate over what we have common. My phone still has his number. I have not called or texted since. In my dissertation, he is no more than a disembodied name.