



Ali Gertz sleeps in a queen-size bed in a lace and rose-chintz bedroom with a cat named Sambuca and a dog named Sake. She reads the poetry of Rilke and the philosophy of Lao-tsu. She paints. She writes in her journal. She parties at the night spots of the young and chic. And every night she goes home alone to the queen-size bed where once she dreamed of love, marriage and a happy home filled with children and pets. But her future has been forever changed. Alison Gertz has AIDS.

At 24, pretty, poised and privileged, Gertz is an unlikely candidate for the disease. She lives on Manhattan's fashionable Upper East Side, not in the inner city, and she has never had a blood transfusion or been an intravenous drug user. In her case, AIDS comes down to a simple situation: one night with the wrong man.

The night that took away the promise of Ali Gertz's life was in the summer of 1982, when the disease was little more than a whisper in New York City. Gertz, a precocious 16-year-old, was infatuated with an older man named Cort Brown, whom she had met a year earlier at Studio 54, the flashy New York City club where he was a bartender. "He was the most beautiful man I'd ever seen," says Gertz. "We were like brother and sister for a year, except that there was a very strong physical attraction. His best friend was gay, but when I asked Cort if he was gay, he said no." In retrospect there was another warning sign. At the beginning of the summer, Cort, 27, had been bedridden with shingles, an opportunistic infection sometimes associated with an impaired immune response.

With her parents out of town, Gertz decided to act on her attraction to Cort. She invited him over to the family's Park Avenue apartment. "He brought champagne, candles, a dozen red roses," says Ali. "It was very romantic except for one thing—when we made love, there were no fireworks. We both knew after that one night that we were not going to have a sexual relationship."

Shortly afterward, Gertz began an exclusive relationship. She drifted away from the Studio 54 scene and lost touch with Cort. His name didn't come up again until the summer of 1988. Ali had just given up smoking, was deeply involved with her boyfriend of three years and was searching for work as a free-lance illustrator after leaving Parsons School of Design in Manhattan during her junior year. That August, unable to shake a low-grade fever and chronic diarrhea, she was hospitalized. By that time, everyone knew about AIDS, but since Gertz wasn't in any high-risk group, doctors didn't suspect it as the cause of her ailments. "At one point," she says, "they thought I had Hodgkin's disease, and I was so upset because I knew all my hair would fall out." Finally, after more than two weeks of painful tests, she developed pneumonia—and a bronchoscopy solved the mystery. As Ali lay half-conscious, an oxygen mask covering her face, her family doctor came to her bedside with tears in his eyes and told her she had AIDS.

"My initial reaction," says Gertz, "was, 'Oh, my God, I'm going to die.' Then I thought, 'No, Ali, you're not,' but I was in very bad shape. I thought, 'I'm never going to have sex again. I'm never going to get married or have children.' " Nevertheless, Ali displayed great courage. "My parents were falling apart," she says. "My father couldn't look at me without crying. My mother was a mess. My boyfriend was in shock. My friends flew in from around the country, so I felt I had to be strong for them. During the day, I was absurdly cheerful. I only cried at night."

Gertz and her boyfriend lasted about three months. "We did sleep together twice," she says. "It was very protected. We used two condoms. It was a nightmare. He was too afraid, so we stopped having sex, but it was really tough. We'd curl up on the couch to watch TV, he'd get excited and then have to leave. I was only 22. What depressed me most was that I would never have another relationship."

When she discovered she was infected, Gertz notified her previous boyfriends. They tested HIV negative. "I knew pretty much from the beginning that it was Cort," she says. When she found out from mutual friends that Cort had died of AIDS in 1988, it seemed to confirm her suspicions.

After her initial six-week hospital stay, Gertz came home determined to cope with her new role as a Person With AIDS. "I started reading and learning about people who had survived for more than eight years," she says. "Eventually my whole attitude about the disease changed. I decided that being depressed was an enormous waste of energy. I wanted to channel the strength I had into something positive."

Gertz was the subject of a film distributed by the World Health Organization and established a foundation, Love Heals, which funnels money to small, direct-care AIDS organizations. And to try to reach others who might be unwittingly exposed to the virus, Ali went public with her story, a move her parents supported. "We never hid it," says her mother, Carol, the 57-year-old co-founder of Tennis Lady, a chain of clothing boutiques. "So many parents refuse to believe that their children are sexually active and can contract this disease. We can't put our heads in the sand and say it's not happening." Her father, Jerrold, 68, a New York City real-estate developer, says, "Before Ali got sick, AIDS was something very far away from us. There are an awful lot of people out there who should know that AIDS is everybody's disease and everybody's got to fight it."

"This has been horrible for my parents," says Ali. "I'm their baby, their only child, and I'm supposed to outlive them. When I first got sick, I felt closer to my father because he was dealing with his feelings. He sobbed, he shouted, he communicated with me. My mother kept everything inside and put up a wall. But my being sick has helped improve my relationship with my parents. It has given my mother a second chance to be a mommy."

While her parents are deeply involved in a foundation called Concerned Parents for AIDS Research, Ali devotes her time to finishing an AIDS journal she hopes to publish and to taking her message to young people. "They might not listen to their parents or pay attention to the news," she says, "but they might understand it coming from me because I'm one of them." When she is well enough, Gertz lectures at high schools and colleges, as she did last March at Connecticut College in New London.

Ali and two girlfriends are picked up by a limousine for the 2½-hour drive to New London. Like teenagers at a slumber party, they gab about romance, music and TV, while chugging Cokes and gobbling potato chips. But once they reach the campus, Ali is all business. For nearly two hours she stands at the podium—dressed in a thigh-length red cashmere sweater and black leggings, telling her story and sounding the alarm. "The first time you have sex should be very meaningful," she tells an audience of more than 200 students. "It shouldn't be the result of a drunken night or peer pressure. If you're in love and you're going to have sex, then you have to protect yourself. But the only real safe sex is abstinence."

The students listen raptly, give her a standing ovation and stay on for a question-and-answer session. The queries are polite, often medical in nature. One student comments on how healthy Ali looks. It is 11 P.M. when she flops in the back of the limo, exhausted but exhilarated. "When I go in there and say, 'Listen, babes, it's okay to be abstinent,' I think a lot of people are relieved," she says. "I don't care if there are 200 people who don't want to hear what I have to say—as long as one or two kids listen, that's all that matters."

Since she was diagnosed nearly two years ago, Gertz has suffered only one serious relapse: Last October she was hospitalized with a severe allergic reaction to AZT. When doctors called for a lung biopsy, Ali balked. "I told them if they put me to sleep, I'd never wake up," she says. "My strength was gone." Released after 17 days, she recuperated at home, where her mother and girlfriends took turns nursing her around the clock. "They'd help me to the bathroom, feed me, see that I didn't fall in the shower," says Ali. "My knees were so bony, I had to sleep with a pillow between them." A switch to the experimental drug DDI, a powdery mixture she drinks twice a day, has restored her vigor, but Gertz remains susceptible to infections like thrush, a fungus that frequently affects the mouth. She has lost 30 lbs. since last summer, naps each afternoon and continues to visit her doctor every 10 days.

Unlike many AIDS patients, Gertz has the support of loving parents and loyal friends, and she has suffered none of the ostracism that others face. "I'm fortunate to live in a city where people are fairly educated about AIDS and are not afraid to touch me or share a fork with me," she says. "I have plenty of companionship—wonderful men friends who hug and kiss me—but I don't have passion in my life, and I miss it a lot." Meeting men, however, is no problem. She is often out at night with an assortment of her club-hopping comrades. "When I meet a man who begins to flirt, the first thing I tell him is that I'm sick," says Ali. "There's no point in going on unless he wants to, and the man who wants to will be worthy of my undying respect."

Gertz is realistic, but not one to mope about living with AIDS. "There are times when you don't want to wake up in the morning," she says, "when you can't sleep, when you're angry life is so unfair, but the worst thing you can do is sit at home and think about the misery of your life. When you're given an opportunity to see how precious life is, it gives you an incentive to make the most of it. The only thing that matters is what we do with the time we have."