

► The show's hosts have not wasted time, assiduously attending to their brand while they still enjoy the spotlight. Three have published books this year and this month it's the turn of Van Ness. His memoir, *Over the Top*, could have been a ghostwriter's gift, packed with his witticisms and mantras for self-care. Instead it's a lightning bolt – devastating and stirring, powered by years of anguish and humiliation. Does he worry how fans will react to his own revelations? "I'm scared," he admits. "But I'm ready to pull the Band Aid off."

In the midst of all that, his stepfather, Steve, is diagnosed with bladder cancer, and told he has 11 months to live. His death, when it comes, knocks Van Ness back into the unhealthy behaviour he's been working to quit.

"Everything that happened to me that summer will always be painful to think about," he says. "It was like saying goodbye to so much of what I wanted."

Shortly after the funeral, his former boyfriend tracked him down at a bathhouse in St Louis and Van Ness's fall to rock bottom seems complete. Almost. When he gets sick, collapsing at the hair salon he is working at one afternoon, he already knows what a doctor will tell him a day later: he is HIV positive.

Van Ness writes about these bombshells with a quiet tenacity that skirts melodrama. He wonders if his reckless behaviour was a self-fulfilling prophecy, the consequence of all the fear ingrained in him at such a young age. He wants other people not to have to go through the same thing.

"It occurred to me: what if everything I've ever been through was preparing me for this moment – to be strong enough to share this, and to share it on my own terms," he says. "Part of that for me is to process what's happened, but the bigger part is that I wanted to do something to move the conversation forward in a meaningful way around HIV/AIDS, and what it is to live with HIV, and to humanise it and normalise a lot of the things I talk about." He blinks, and then adds, "I'm talking slow because I'm trying not to cry."

We are nearing New York, and the canyons of Manhattan fill the hazy skyline. Growing up, Van Ness used to fantasize he would help other people like himself. "I always felt that was part of my purpose," he says. "But I thought it would be a really chic vice studio with great baked goods, maybe a dance and yoga studio." He didn't think the way he'd help people was simply by being himself on a global TV show — or by penning a generous and frank memoir.

At a certain point, Van Ness picked himself up and decided he didn't want to throw away his life. "It really took some time to figure out how to put my life together," he says. But medical advances mean the virus is now undetectable in his blood. He remembers the day he was given his HIV diagnosis, asking the doctor if he could still live to be 75. "She was, like, 'I will keep you alive long enough to die of a heart attack or cancer like everyone else,' and then she laughed uncontrollably."

Is he making time for relationships? Van Ness shakes his head. "In the past, I've had relationships with people who I was almost using to validate myself and my existence, and that's not been a great plan for me," he says. "So, this is a season of me falling in love with myself all the way."

In some ways, he thinks that testing positive for HIV has been his liberation. In the past year, he has taken up ice-skating and thrown himself into gymnastics. And, of course, there is an election to fight. "I absolutely do not think I'd have been as socially aware or conscious or want to make as much of a difference," he says. "It gave me a reason to really fight." ■



'I want to humanise a lot of the difficult things I talk about'

Van Ness on his drive to win fame in this extract from *Over the Top*

You know those plants that are always trying to find the light? Picture me in the 7th grade: a chubby, snaggle-toothed kid with a voluminous mop of curly hair. I'd be cycling through several of my cutest looks, usually monochromatic jumpers with severe Doc Martens boots, just to go to the mall. It felt entirely possible a talent scout would be there, in the nation's smallest capital of Springfield, Illinois. I'd do ice-skating routines in my living room, trying to be like the Olympians I idolised, imagining how triumphant I'd be when I seized that gold medal.

The years of fantasising about reaching stratospheric fame through a local mall discovery had long since faded by 2017. I'd settled for much more attainable goals. I became a hairdresser, working in both LA and

New York. I'd stumbled, very gratefully, into a side hustle in the form of a web series called *Gay of Thrones*.

That spring I would move to Atlanta to shoot a dream project with four new friends. We had beaten out the collective gay world for these five coveted positions, and we all knew it was a monumental opportunity. Like Maya Angelou taught me, I was hoping for the best, but preparing for the worst, so that nothing could catch me off guard. That was just happy that I had completed my mission of escaping cornfield-small-town-only-gay-person infamy and was now free to live an authentic queer life in a gorgeous big city with nobody thinking twice about my legions.

Over the Top by Jonathan Van Ness is published by Simon & Schuster at £20. Order a copy for £17.60 at guardianbookshop.com

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