



blood and thunder

MUSINGS ON THE ART OF MEDICINE

The University of Oklahoma® College of Medicine

Playing with the House's Money

The diagnosis was lymphoma. My mother went into denial but my father accepted it calmly and acted as if he'd been told that he had no more than a bad cold. He spoke casually about his symptoms and treatment like it was all something he had read about in an interesting magazine article. My sisters wanted to fight it as aggressively as we could. I was as concerned as they were but wanted to help my father face this in any way he chose.

Both of my sisters worked in hospital administration and were on a first name basis with some top oncologists. They began making calls and setting up appointments for consultations and tests. My father had been seeing a doctor who was about his age and over time they had developed a friendly relationship. Since their specialists had never heard of his doctor, my sisters encouraged my father to stop seeing him. To show his appreciation of their concern he did.

The subject of his cancer never came up unless I said, "So, how are you feeling Da?"

If my mother was there he would then tell me, in the most blasé way, about a recent trip to a doctor. If we were alone he would be clear about how annoyed he was and that he considered these doctor's visits no more than a "nuisance."

He'd promised my mother he would finally quit smoking. He didn't. He stepped down from Marlboro Red to Parliament. He felt that a milder cigarette with a recessed filter would take the edge off of the lie to his wife. He'd sometimes hide them in his sock to keep her from seeing them. We had quite a laugh when I confessed that was what I did before he gave me permission to smoke.

He was often in the hospital for overnight tests and treatments.

As I was keeping him company one night he said, "I don't have to shave anymore." "You're growing a beard?" I joked.

He rolled his eyes and responded, "It's this damn radiation. It made my beard stop growing."

He'd been shaving for an awfully long time and now missed the daily ritual. I think that out of all he'd been going through this might have bothered him the most.

He'd lost so much weight that his tuxedo no longer fit him and so he needed to rent one for my daughter's upcoming wedding. We planned a day around it. Classic tuxedo styles don't change so he was happy to be able to rent one just like his own. After the fitting we went to lunch in a nearby restaurant. I didn't have to ask my usual "How are you feeling?" to get him started. He said he was finished with tests and treatments.

He's arranged to start seeing his former doctor again. I knew what that meant. They were both old school and understood one another and what it meant to die with dignity. My father grew up poor in a rough neighborhood, lived through the depression and was a Marine in World War II. As a member of the Greatest Generation he prided himself on being a tough guy. If this is what he wanted, I wasn't going to try to stop him.

ROBERT IULO

We left the restaurant and although I had quit smoking, I bummed one of his cigarettes.

As we lit up he said, "I'm seventy-two and I've lived a life. Now I'm ahead of the game and playing with the house's money. Try to get your sisters to understand."

Two weeks after his granddaughter's wedding he went into the hospital for the last time. I got there just as he was settled into bed. His nurse asked if there was anything he needed.

He said, "How about a cup of coffee? Milk, no sugar."

My mother said, "That's not what she meant. She's not a waitress." The nurse just laughed and said it wouldn't be any problem.

My mother went with her to get the coffee and when they left the room he called me over to his bed and said, "There's a pack of cigarettes in my inside jacket pocket. Get them out of there before your mother finds them."

That was the last time we were alone together. My sisters, the rest of the family and friends began arriving. His doctor saw to it that he was comfortable. That meant oxygen, morphine and nothing else. He died early the next morning with my mother, sisters and me standing by his bed. I cried when my father died but was glad he died like the man he was.

Robert Iulo has a Master's Degree in Urban Planning from New York University. His work has been published in *The Museum of Americana*, *Culinate*, *Deep South*, *Story Teller*, *Gastronomica* and others. He's had a special feature published in *The Mississippi Sun Herald*. He lives in New York City.