

Come See Stanley



by Ron Turker, M.D.

THE FLIGHT ITSELF WAS UNREMARKABLE. Locked in an oversized aluminum tube and bathed in the recirculated breath of my fellow travelers, I slept the deep, neck pinching sleep of a man cradled mercilessly in an unyielding airline seat. My first clue that it was over came with a jolt as the back wheels hit the tarmac.

My father would be by the baggage carousel. Even in the pre 9/11 world, when families traditionally met at the gate, I knew my father wouldn't be there. He would be where he always was, at the carousel. Leaving the jet way, I didn't even break stride to look for him, I just dropped myself in the purposeful flow of passengers that no matter the airport will always sweep you to a hopeful reunion with your luggage. But the black baggage belt lay quiet.

It was then that I began to scan the crowd for him. It was unnecessary and too late. The familiar shriek of a loud whistle pierced the busy din of the airport. It was that same two fingers in the mouth, ear-piercing screech that decades earlier had stopped me dead in my tracks. My father could reach across multiple suburban New York blocks to call my brothers and me to dinner like the Moslem muezzin calls the faithful to prayer. He had no need of a minaret, just two fingers. No matter how far we went my brothers and I heard it, and our friends heard it, the whole damn neighborhood heard it. It was embarrassing then, and at thirty-three years of age, it hadn't lost its edge. He smiled as he caught my eye. It was a smile that told me two things: one, he was happy to see me, and two, he still has no clue how he embarrasses me.

My father ambled up and shook my hand, glancing over my shoulder at the quiescent carousel. "The bags aren't up yet," he said flatly.

It was a ritual, one hand in my palm, the other on my shoulder and his eyes glancing past me, an unusual white bread greeting for a Jew of Eastern European decent. Some of my friends had to tolerate weeping, bear hugs after each base hit in Little League. This was never the case in my family, and for this, I was thankful. The whistle was enough.

The lazy carousel grumbled to life and reluctantly coughed up my backpack. I always marvel at the teasingly deliberate space between bags and wonder if the carousels have their own union. Collecting my belongings I made my way through the tight knot of passengers to the periphery where my father always stood and waited. My father never stands in crowds. Even when he enters a crowd there seems to be space, more space than there should be. It defied sociologic physics. As a kid, I believed that he was surrounded by an invisible aura. As an adult, I was never able to disprove it.

“How was your flight? he asked.

I replied then as I always do, “Fine.”

As long as my flight wasn’t the grim lead story on CNN, then the flights were always fine. Some people complain about the turbulence or bad peanuts. Me, I just wait for the landing. I’m like a gymnastics judge; if the captain sticks the landing, I give em’ the points. The rest is gravy.

“Come, your mother’s waiting to see you.”

She rarely came with him to the airport. She preferred instead to wait anxiously at home for our arrival, worrying that something went wrong.

The car, as always, was parked in the “No Parking White Zone.” There wasn’t a ticket, nor was it towed. To my knowledge my father never got a ticket nor was he ever towed. This oddity and the Creation Theory are two things that I find deeply puzzling. Granted, I spend much less time wondering about how we got here than I do about that damn car in the white zone. In standard fashion, my father took my bags and placed them in the trunk. This was not a courtesy. It was a statement. This was his trunk and no one knew how to pack it but him. I might have been a thirty-three year old surgeon, but trunk packing should be left to the experts.

It was a typical South Florida evening, humid and hot. At that time, I lived on the high deserts of New Mexico and never could get used to the moist Florida air. The big Mercury’s air conditioning was a welcome relief. Beads of sweat had already formed on my face as I settled into the soft leather seat. I felt the same comfortable feeling that I had when I was

a kid. This was my Dad’s car and Dad was driving, everything was copasetic.

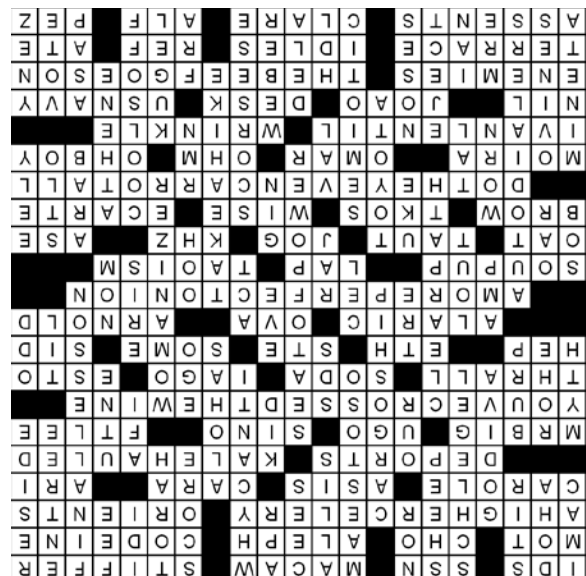
“What time is Stephen getting in?” I asked.

“About eleven tomorrow morning,” replied my father. “He had some patients to see today and decided it would be better to fly in tomorrow.”

Easy enough for him, it was a short hop from Tampa to the West Palm airport. There is something about the first born in a parent’s eyes. The oldest of four sons he worked hard to get to where he is now. A cardiologist and an extremely focused individual, he makes an impressive physician. I spent most of my life hopping from footprint to footprint as I trailed well behind him. Being the youngest and nine years his junior I never caught up. No matter my age, or my own accomplishments, I am ever the baby to my parents. This used to irk me but time has passed.

There was silence in the car as I watched the palms slip by. An occasional pelican sailed past in search of fish or fisherman to harass. The same thought fills my mind each time that I watch these huge birds fly. This must be some accident of physics. All the negatives somehow added up to a positive and allow these ungainly creatures to cheat gravity.

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My father broke the silence with a simple statement. “I’d like to ask you a favor.”

That one sentence broke my mindless reverie. My father does not ask his sons for favors. Either he tells them what to do or he does it himself. It has always been as simple as that.

“I’d like for you and Stephen to come see Stanley in the hospital, tomorrow.”

“I didn’t realize that he’s back in.” I replied.

Stanley had prostate cancer and Stanley was dying. Stanley was one of my father’s best friends. They had grown up in Brooklyn together and known each other since they were ten. After WWII with separate travels and separate battles they were eventually reunited just two blocks from each other in a Long Island suburb. There, they lived and raised families. Thirty years later, after all the children were gone they once again went their separate ways and my father moved to Florida. After two more moves my parents ended up on the East coast just North of Miami. Once again, he was right around the corner from Stanley.

Now reunited, Stanley had told my father that he was sick. He had cancer, but the doctors had it under control. To my father, Stanley didn’t look or act sick; he was just the same old Stanley. They played golf together they kibitzed and renewed their friendship. The cancer wasn’t an issue, the long sloping green on the 8th hole was.

Occasionally and more frequently, Stanley would get sick. As the doctors began to lose control, Stanley’s disease rose to claim it. Stanley was losing his fight with cancer and my father was once again losing a best friend.

When the tumor started to invade the bone, my father started to call me.

One phone call. “It’s in his hip. They want to radiate him. Is that the right thing to do?”

Another call. “He’s having a lot of pain in his legs. They’re giving him another round of chemo. Will it help?”

As my father’s phone calls and questions mounted, it became obvious that Stanley was a patient who wasn’t getting better, nor would he ever. It was now

a matter of time. From the day we’re born we are all dying, but things seem to change when you can actually count the days.

I have watched in quiet detachment as my patients and their families went through similar loss. My brother, Stephen understands. I understand. But my father, a highly intelligent and rational man, couldn’t begin to comprehend it. I believe that he wasn’t just watching his friend die by pieces, but that he was staring through a window at his own mortality. I don’t know if he found that terrifying, or perhaps just sad. They both came into this world in Brooklyn and now Stanley was leaving via West Palm Beach.

“Of course I’ll come.” I replied to his original request. “Does Stephen know?”

“He gets in tomorrow morning. I’ll ask him then.”

His response would be the same as mine.



He arrived at the hospital around one and checked in at the desk. The volunteer “Pink Lady” handed us our visitor badges and a bit of tape. I caught a glimpse of my brother fumbling with the tape and shared his awkward moment. It was strange to be entering the hospital this way. My father must have caught it too.

“No white coats, just visitors, today, boys?”

We fell in line behind him as he led us down the twisting hallways. The scent and feel is always the same but each hospital’s twists are different. The one constant is that no corridor in any hospital will ever lead you directly where you need to go. My father’s daily visits made him as much a pro here as I would be at home.

One of the room numbers we passed was 304. Looking down at the piece of paper taped to my shirt I saw that we were close. It read 312. As we entered, I glanced around the room. Habit I guess. I like to see the patients’ surroundings, the flowers, cards, and pictures. Sometimes it gives you an idea of the support from friends and family. Nine times out of ten it’s misplaced. Usually, the recipient of big

toe surgery is surrounded by a small Hallmark shop and flower boutique. But if you're dying, and you're not quick about it, the flowers run out well before you do. Such was the case with Stanley. The room contained only his exhausted wife and mother-in-law. With my father now present, the concerned triumvirate was complete.

I looked to the bed, but I didn't see Stanley. There was a gaunt presence there. He looked to me to be a typical picture of a patient with a little bit of sand left in the glass. The picture that I had of Stanley was from my youth. It had been ten or fifteen years since we last met. I remembered him as an imposing figure with thick black hair that rimmed a strong face, chiseled with deep lines and creases. I remembered the large powerful hands that would smother mine with his handshakes. When I was little he would shake my hand. When other adults would pat my head or kiss my cheek, Stanley would grab my little hand and shake it. His deep voice would boom from the etched face above me. It was thick with a New York accent and always cheery. "Hiya Ronny. Your father treatin' ya OK? or should I smack him?"

Then I looked back to the bed. Stanley was still unaware that we had entered. He was dozing. The radiation had done away with the thick black hair. The face was now lined with haphazard wrinkles instead of the deliberate etched lines. His bulky frame was grotesquely prominent, as the cancer had devoured all his muscles in its parasitic frenzy. I looked at the man in the bed and it was clear that most of Stanley was already gone.

He opened his eyes to the coaxing whispers of his wife. "Stanley, Bobby and the boys are here."

Only those who knew my father when he was young, still call him Bobby. The same holds true for me. To most, I'm Ron, but my childhood friends retain the right to call me Ronny. It confers warmth, this password that my childhood friends still share. It was nice to see my father still shared a common key with his friend, even if not for much longer.

"Hiya, Bobby. I see we have the medical team in full force." The voice didn't boom. It was hushed and cracked.

He turned to Stephen and took his hand. "Hiya Stevie. Thanks for coming."

It always amazed me. Stephen automatically turned on the bedside manner. "Hi Stanley. How are you feeling, my man? You look a little worse for wear but tough as always."

Now, I had thought about this greeting since my father asked me to visit. I never found the words. What could I say? It's different, you know. Stanley was not my patient. He was my father's dear friend and I hadn't seen him in years. I also knew that I was to be one of the last few people to come say hello to him. Only something profound would be appropriate. I disappointed the hell out of myself,

A stuttering "Hi Stanley." was all I could muster.

He took my hand in his, as he always did when I was a kid. The withered hand that enveloped mine was not quite as large as I remembered, nor was it anywhere near as powerful. He shook my hand with great effort. "Hi Stanley." I repeated, awkwardly.

"Sit down boys, rest a little." Stanley motioned to two chairs by the bed. My father stood. Roberta, his wife, stood. I felt awkward but my father motioned to the chairs and nodded. Stephen caught it too. We knew not to question him. So we sat.

I looked back to the man in the bed. I still wasn't convinced. Was this really Stanley? Stephen began to chat. Of the two of us I am easily the more verbose, but in tough situations Stephen spoke and always, comfortably and appropriately. I was content that he was bearing the weight of the conversation. It was difficult for Stanley. The sores in his mouth brought on by chemotherapy made each syllable a misery. But they spoke on. Stanley would pause to rinse his mouth with water, while my brother and father filled in the gaps. I just sat in the chair, and wiggled uncomfortably. Perhaps, he noticed.

"So Ronny how's the new practice?"

"It's great, Stanley. I'm finally doing what I want to do."

"New Mexico must be beautiful."

"You have to come visit." nearly slipped from my mouth. But I bit down before it passed my lips. "It is Stanley. It's very beautiful."

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"Your father tells me you found a girl."

"Yes Stanley, a great girl. She tolerates me and that says a lot."

"Listen to me," he croaked. Then he took another sip of water. "I've been married since 1968 and I've never regretted a single day. You should have such happiness."

"Since 1954, Stanley", corrected Roberta. "If you count your first marriage."

"Since 1968!" he retorted. His voice almost boomed. He reached over and sipped some of the antiseptic solution that helped numb his mouth. The pain from his retort was obvious.

I looked to Roberta, and she was blushing. The compliment wasn't lost.

"If your girlfriend is anything like her. You'll be just fine." Stanley continued through his cracked lips.

Ostensibly, I came to cheer up a dying man but that's not the way that Stanley saw it. He always liked the conversation, the repartee. He was still

cheery, still Stanley. We talked for some time more. The subjects varied from politics to AIDS. Here was a man on enough morphine to drug a bull but still able to carry an intelligent discussion.

Time passed and as the conversation grew more drawn out, Stanley fell asleep. Roberta commented that he hadn't spoken this much in weeks. My father said the same. Stanley woke up in time to say goodbye. And that's what we said, both Steve and I. It wasn't the place for "See you soon." or "Talk to you later." And Stanley replied in kind.

We walked silently, the three of us, to my father's sun drenched car. I sunk back in the soft seat and welcomed the air conditioning. Stephen sat up front, as that had always been his place. It was nice to be riding in my father's car. It felt safe. As he drove, he thanked us both for taking the time. I didn't reply but sank back further into the seat and savored both the powerful Mercury AC and the warm comfortable feeling. I couldn't help but wonder, how much longer I'd get to enjoy this ride. ☺