

Valediction

by **Terry Richard Bazes**

Although we were strangers when I was a young man, in time my father and I became very good friends. It was, I think, the experience of being business partners that did it—an unlikely circumstance since neither of us knew anything about real estate. But somehow, we got caught up, knee-deep in the subdivision of a one hundred-year-old Chappaqua estate where we were decidedly the interlopers. In that improbable heyday of our time together, we bought stock, bartered and schemed. I navigated the politics of a fractious stepfamily, and he lent money that he couldn't afford to lose—and worried so much that he lived on Tums. Eventually he got his money back and we made our profit—and our friendship. “I didn't think you had it in you,” he said.

After that—when I lived far away and had sons of my own—my father and I spoke mostly on the phone. At first, in that shy way of his, he wouldn't quite know what to say, and so there'd be a moment's silence until I would find a way to begin. But there were always all the things we didn't say—not because they couldn't be said, but because there was something more articulate in the noiseless depth of feeling between us. And so, when I went down to Florida to visit him, I always sat beside him and it never really mattered what we talked about.

Like so many of his generation, my father had never entirely recovered from the terrors of the Great Depression. Although he had succeeded admirably—financially and as a surgeon—the fear of poverty that had seemed so close when he was seventeen still haunted him in his nineties. Mostly because he had been so generous and made my life so comfortable, I never completely understood what had terrified him so.

But I did understand that, although his family had never lost everything, he had felt that they were on the brink of ruin—and the panic he had felt had driven him to succeed. This indelible fear, even in his prosperous old age, lay behind the way he obsessively focused all his brilliance on the stock market—and behind the urgency of

his insistence that I count my change and that I keep my wallet in my front pocket. Of course, I knew that he was thinking of his own father then.

At the height of the Depression, my grandfather, Sam, lost a hundred-dollar bill. It was my father who found it again, lying in a gutter.

This one episode of my father's young manhood seems to sum up the saga of my grandfather's bad luck and of my father's life-long drive to get back what had been lost. I never knew my grandfather because he died long before I was born. But I've heard stories about him—that he was a bon vivant who owned a racehorse, that he loved to gamble, that he lifted weights with his teeth, and that he was (according to our cousin Rosette) "the most generous man I ever knew." I've never been able to reconcile these stories with the photo I have of him standing between his two boys, in a cardigan sweater, with the eyes of a broken old man. This picture must have been taken after the crash of '29, after his fur business went bust.

By the time my father needed to pay the tuition for medical school, my grandfather had no money to offer. When my father started selling his own blood to raise cash, I know that my grandfather was heartsick. But I also know that it was from his father that my father learned his excessive generosity—that he always gave me too much so that I would never suffer the terror he had felt. Maybe it was because his own father had been unable to provide for him that my father became, for those of us who loved him, such a bastion of capability and brilliance. Gambling was another of my grandfather's legacies to him. For my father, in his own way, was a gambler too—yet never improvident like his own father, but with a shrewd, poker player's instinct for how to play his hand.

He made so much money from playing poker in the army that he had enough to open his first medical office. That was because he had an extremely intuitive practicality, an uncanny ability to grasp the facts of a situation and find a solution. Even my mother's father—that impossible old man who had been my father's professor in medical school—conceded that he was the finest diagnostician he had ever known. For he was, quintessentially, the doctor. I will always remember him, when I was little and

he came to kiss me good night after surgery, with the smell of ether on his face. He belonged to the last generation that still made house-calls, and my memories of what he was to me in my childhood—when I rode in the backseat with his black leather bag—are infused with the security of his quiet strength. When, as a little boy, I fell and cut my lip, he was there to sew me up. When I nearly died from pneumonia, he was there to heal me. He was doubly the giver of my life, both my father and my doctor.

His penetrating intellect and enormous resourcefulness somewhat oddly coexisted with his occasionally awkward shyness. But as a doctor he had a way with people and would take the time to explain what they needed to hear.

For he had a faith in human worth: it was an integral part of his optimism. He traveled all over the world, as soon as he could afford it—and gave up a lucrative medical practice in order to donate his skills in Afghanistan.

Any kind of trip would put him in one of his expansive moods, when all things seemed possible, an effusive excitement that there was something more to be seen that would gratify his curiosity and hope. He was never happier than when he was moving. “All will be well,” he often said.

But then, even to him, it happened—the failing eyesight, then the blindness, then the hallucinations which—at first—he knew weren’t real.

And then came the broken legs, the frailty and his falling asleep even in the middle of a sentence.

One afternoon I got the call that he’d be dead within a day and that I’d better fly down if I ever wanted to see him again. So I got on a plane and, by the time I arrived in Florida, he was unconscious and breathing only two or three times a minute. But by that



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night he was sitting in a chair and talking: he had come back from the brink of death. And when I told him how infrequently he'd been breathing, he diagnosed himself—in that dispassionate, scientific way of his—saying that it sounded like “Cheyne-Stokes respiration” and adding that he “must have been far gone.”

And for those few, precious hours he was altogether himself again and we talked and talked and talked late into the night. We spoke of many things, but, beneath the surface of the words we spoke, the real subject was the understanding we had reached—and in his own quiet, deep, understated way, he blessed me.

And when he lay dying, I sat beside his bed and asked him questions so I could hear him tell me all the old stories one last time. He told me again how his first memory was of walking up the Grand Concourse with his Uncle Max and buying a newspaper that announced the end of World War One. And he told me again that his father had never allowed him to work with him as a flesher in the fur factory, but had saved him for something better, and fulfilling his father's prediction he had been the young prince, the prodigy who'd skipped so many grades that he graduated first in his class from Columbia College when he was just nineteen. Thinking of when the family lived on Fox Street, I asked where had Grandma's sisters lived, and where was Uncle Rome's store? And what was the name of his first grade teacher who had complained about him to Grandma because he was too defiant? And did he remember the street address of the elegant Emperor apartment building on Riverside Drive where the family had lived when they were plush? Because I knew I was losing him forever, I made him tell me again about our crazy Brenner cousins, who'd cornered the karakul trade and been held for ransom by Chinese bandits, and about the troop plane he was on that nearly went down in a storm when he was stationed up in Gander, and about how in the army he'd made a bundle playing poker and caught so many lobsters that he only ate the tails.

But there was one story I needed to hear more than all the others.

And so, though he could barely talk, I asked him to tell me again how, during the Depression, when the family had lost all their money and couldn't afford to send him to medical school, he and his brother Joe had gone to the races and bet everything they had on a long shot. For the very last time, he told me how the miracle had happened, how the horses in the lead had fallen but their long shot had kept driving on. Lying there

on his pillow with his eyes closed he told me how, when—against all odds—their horse had come in first, he'd stuffed the winnings in his jacket pocket. And then he and his brother Joe had walked out through the crowd together, side by side, pressed close against one another to keep the money safe.

“How many horses fell?” I asked him.

“Every one but ours.”



Terry Richard Bazes is the author of *Lizard World* and of *Goldsmith's Return*. His personal essays and fiction have appeared in a number of publications, including *The Washington Post Book World*, *Newsday*, *Columbia Magazine*, *Travelers' Tales: Spain*, *Lost Magazine*, and *the Evergreen Review*.