

## Mortui Vivos Docent

My head stirs as I fixate on the orange drink sitting on the laboratory table. The backroom was silent; most of the hospital staff had left for the day, all that remained was the soft green glow of the exit sign. With a deep inhale, I reach over, grab a handful of pills, and sprawl them out on the metal tray. Barbiturates, painkillers, and cardiotoxins try to roll away from me. One by one, I split open each capsule, piling the contents into a heap of white powder. I scoop the powder into the glass and mix it with the drink. Stirring the concoction with a plastic bendy straw, I see death staring back at me and want to dump its contents down the drain. Is this really how Ron wanted to go? A bittersweet saccharine end. Death by killer orange juice.

Three weeks ago, Ron had been wheeled into the emergency department after collapsing from a stroke in the Arlington subway station. I was quickly assigned to his case and started visiting him in the neurology wing with Jane—a student from the medical school connected with the hospital. She'd shadowed me a couple of times, and though she seemed young to be in medical school, I had to give it to her. She knew her stuff. She was soft-spoken, spending much of her extra time in the cadaver lab on the second floor. As a woman in medicine, she reminded me of myself at her age, though she was much further along than I was by third year.

We got to know Ron, it started like any other patient-doctor relationship. He was in his late fifties, his facial features were rough and scruffy dark hair peeked through his bandages. He told me about his time in the Air Force, taught me the difference between a song sparrow and a tree sparrow, while we bonded over our shared love for the Red Sox and corresponding hatred

for the Yankees. I started stopping by after my shifts just to check in, not because I was obligated to care for him, but because I began to care about him. Jane would accompany me sometimes, and I knew she felt the same. Though I thought some would see it as inappropriate, I deep down started to feel him filling a type of paternal void in my life that had been empty for years.

Growing up, my family was never that religious. My earliest exposure to church was at the Westside Christian Sanctuary on the corner of our block near the boat ramp. My father always worked on Sundays, but my mother went occasionally. The few times I joined her were horrific. As a child, the thought of people communicating with invisible spirits was terrifying, like talking to ghosts. After growing older and less scared of getting haunted, I now had many colleagues and patients who believed. And to their credit, I saw the appeal. Many unanswered questions about life were easily answered. For some patients, this seemed to be a source of comfort—to feel safe on the day that death came. For me, I saw death come and go every day, lacking the privilege of rare encounters. All the flatlining, body bags, and cadaver pieces brewed in formaldehyde had desensitized me. Now, when terminal patients break down in despair, of such a reaction, I deem worthy—I deem rational. No matter what they believed, their vital organs would withdraw, and they would become a lump of organic material. Death had become merely an assortment of physiological functions that had decided to finally quit working.

The night Jane and I shared the news with Ron that he likely had only months to live, I braced myself for the pain—both his and my own. Room 22B was a small room, with only a hospital bed and a small grey couch with a mini coffee table, littered with *Get Well Soon* cards from visitors. After some small talk, the damning words left my lips and polluted the room. After

a few moments of heart-wrenching silence, what happened next surprised me. “*Well, it is what it is,*” he said with indifference.

Disturbing. If I were him, I’d be scrambling to tie up any loose ends. It felt like I cared more about him than he cared about himself. I excused myself to the restroom and said I would return shortly, leaving Jane to continue the conversation. Normally, I’d hesitate to leave a student alone with a patient after such a heavy conversation. But not with Jane.

I didn’t need to use the restroom, I just really needed to get a smoke in. The neurology wing scurried as usual, with reverberating sounds of beeps at various intervals and the occasional wail. I made my way to my spot—a restricted faculty balcony, not many people knew about. That morning, I had thrown on my scrubs from the day before, and with my pager and a handful of Swishers, I was out the door. I approached the entrance to the balcony and realized it was raining hard outside. Cursing through my teeth, I checked my watch and hung up my white lab coat so it wouldn’t get wet. I stepped out into the downpour with my stogies and lighter, holding my arm up to block whatever rain I could. My hair dampened and drooped as I puffed over the guardrail.

I knew I looked ridiculous. What kind of doctor puts carcinogens into their lungs? I had my first cigar when I was twenty to celebrate my acceptance to Boston Medical. Growing up in Maine, it was a big deal for me—but even more so for my dad. He owned a locksmith business by profession but was a seaman by heart. My earliest memories were of him on our boat with a puro between his fingers—smoke from his lungs mixing with the exhaust. It’s no surprise that he offered me my first at such a huge milestone. For him, this was a special occasion; for me, it was a gateway. I never really wanted to be the smoker type, and I still didn’t. Yet, I continued to stock

the drawer and find reasons to whip them out. Celebrating after an exam, after long days in the clinic, and apparently right now in the rain. Part of me resented my dad for introducing me to such a destructive habit, even though it always eased the edge when I needed an outlet. Since his business had picked up in Maine and my medical career started, there had been an unspoken allowance to grow our separate ways.

I reached for the second cigar in the pack but realized I'd probably been gone long enough to seem suspicious. Embarrassed, I slipped back in, threw my dry coat over my soaked scrubs, and put the cigar in my coat pocket for later. Heading back to my floor, I found Ron's room and searched for my composure.

As I reentered, I was met with his scruffy smile and a look of confusion, considering my hair was soaking wet. By the looks of it, Jane had already left.

"Jane told me about the dissections she's doing down on the second floor. How cool is that? Man, that girl is going places." He huffed as he readjusted himself in his bed.

What happened next was probably unprofessional of me, but I couldn't help myself.

"Don't you feel sad about dying?"

His eyes met mine, staring through me for a moment, dry and still. "Sure... I'm sad about dying. My kids are wonderful, and I'd give anything to see them raise their own. At the same time, I'm also okay with dying, returning back to where I came from. I don't care who you are; you've gotta admit that this place we live—not just Boston—but this world, the solar system, beyond the stars, life—it's incredible. Tears welled and were absorbed by his bandages. "Life really is a privilege."

I combed through his words as I listened, and had to admit, he had a point. I'd spent years grueling over the details of the human body in my training—every bone marking, every vessel, every condition. There's no debate, the body was meticulously crafted to carry out a magnificent function, somehow. Seeing that he was opening up, I pushed further.

“What do you think will happen once you... pass on?”

“To be honest Doc, whether it's Jesus or Allah or Buddha or Mother Nature up there, I really have no clue. I just feel there's *something*. And if it's something, does it matter who it is? This *thing* gave us life to create. *And to act*. That's the greatest gift—to choose to learn, teach, act. Agency is—at least to me—a kind of salvation. It's almost as if—”

He stopped and stared at my coat pocket. As I had leaned forward to follow his thought, a shimmer of light from the cigar foil had caught his attention. His lip raised into a half smile as he gave me a teasingly disappointed look. I was confused by the sudden shift in energy, but as I noticed, I felt myself turning red.

Pointing teasingly, “Hey, I recognize a Swisher packet when I see one. You know those are never good for you. No matter how good they make you feel, they'll always bring you down lower than you were. Took me years to shake 'em.”

It took many days to process what I'd heard, but for once in my life, I *felt* what Ron was saying, both in my mind and my heart. The body—so intricate in its design—plays life's song with strings of the heart and drums of the ear, whose vessels and alveoli resemble the trees that sway in the wind, in a way that felt comprehensive—that felt familiar. Though I'd never assumed

it was due to a higher power, it did feel hardly coincidental. I smoked the second cigar on my way home that night but stopped restocking the drawer. Because my stockpile was now limited, I grabbed fewer each day.

While Ron's body began to slow, his mind started to race—hyper-fixated on one thing. Action. I tried to convince him otherwise, but his mind had been made. He wanted to die with dignity on his own terms. Confused, I thought about his monologue on life's beauty. If life was so incredible, why would he want to end it early? If his greatest wish was to see his kids be parents, why couldn't he just hope for a few moments longer? His family had come to accept his terms, but I still couldn't. I returned to his words. "Agency is salvation." What the hell did that even mean?

I would eventually understand. Yes, he was still alive. Yes, his family would still visit. But his life had become bedbound. He would never hear a song sparrow again—at least in the wild. He would never make it back to Fenway Park. He knew deterioration was imminent, and he wanted to be fully present for his family's last memory of him. He wanted control over the last big decision he had left in his waning life—a decision he knew time could steal from him at any point. Still, I made the arrangements reluctantly, and he began the paperwork to set a date.

That day had finally come. Jane helped me find various medical ethics articles that now littered my office. According to current clinical research, the most ethical way to perform physician-assisted suicide was to mix lethal dosages of medication into a sweet fruit drink to

make it easier to ingest. One article said, “To be *successful*, the patient must ingest the concoction in under 5 minutes, while their physician acts as a witness.”

Swirling the orange drink with the bendy straw—the most innocent-looking death-causing agent—I want to push it far away, I want it nowhere near Ron. Yet, this was his life, his decision. I know I have to put his needs above my own, but I needed him there.

They bring him into a special room, with pink walls and soft blue couches—occupied by his three adult children. He wants to be free from his hospital bed, so two hospice nurses prop him up in a padded chair and place napkins over his chest for any spills. When I enter, the drink becomes the center of the room. I bring it over to him with both hands. Since his hand-eye coordination had already begun to deteriorate, I would hold the drink to his mouth for him.

“Are you ready?” I say, trying my hardest to remove my own emotions.

“I am.” He musters, eyes dry.

His mouth meets the straw, and he sucks, death rising up the bendy portion. As the mixture touched his tongue, I think about his family—his kids—who would now be fatherless. I think of the Air Force. I think about Jane and how much he believes in her, my untouched cigars, and God.

The next morning, I head to the student section of the hospital to meet Jane. I wonder if she slept at all last night. As I approached the classroom, I heard the instructor's voice.

“We received a new cadaver this morning.”

My ears perked up. There was only one person at this hospital who had died last night. Peeking inside the classroom, I saw rows of students, turn to the corner of the room. As they unzipped the black bag, the body is revealed.

Ron's body is pale and lifeless—shell-like. The instructor continued, “Ronald Kilmer died by physician-assisted suicide last night with terminal brain damage from a hemorrhagic stroke. By the looks of his body and from his chart, he had an appendectomy, chronic hypertension, and COPD from smoking.” They begin lecturing, instructing the students to grab a scalpel to start performing multiple dissections, but I don't listen. Jane stands above him with her lip curled. Wiping away a tear with her gloved wrist, she pinches a scalpel with her other hand, holding it for a moment—holding on to the last glance she had of him intact. With her hands steady and eyes soft, she cuts into Ron's body. She cuts his ribs and chest lining, pulls back his scarred smoker's lung, and holds it in both hands. Above the table his body lay on, a sign reads the words in Latin, *Mortui Vivos Docent*.

“The dead teach the living.” I mouthed to myself.

That's when my breath left me. My entire life, I've been afraid of death because it challenged me to question the unknown. I don't know what has happened to Ron, but I do know his influence was real—a force that was bigger than him—one that keeps this world moving and passes the torch. I realized that this *something* above is part of us, and we are part of it. Ron had, at least in some part, lit my torch, opening my eyes and teaching me action. Looking at Jane, she looked so beautiful and professional—glowing. It was my turn to pass the torch to her. She was the future, part of the cohort who would likely treat me on my deathbed, and it was my duty to teach her what I could in this role—this death-filled, sorrowful, incredible role.

The exit sign glowed green as I left the hospital that Friday evening. Cicadas droned among the greenery and sparrows sang to the wind. With the weekend ahead of me, I had a visit overdue that required a trip up to Maine.