

DAVID WATTS, MD, BEDSIDE MANNERS: ONE DOCTOR'S REFLECTIONS ON THE ODDLY INTIMATE ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN PATIENT AND HEALER, HARMONY BOOKS, N.Y., 2005.

JOKE MAN

The police called to say they found my patient in a motel room with sleeping pills and a bottle of vodka. He left a note of apology and a \$50 bill for the maid who found him.

Next day a letter arrived. I never lied to you before, Doc, it said. But I did this time. Sorry. I hope you'll forgive me. Inside the letter were two \$100 bills. Take your wife out for a nice dinner, he said. Go have a good time.

Charlie the joke man, the button salesman, spent his life collecting jokes for his clients. Long since retired with no place to tell them, he brought them all to me. Stacks and stacks of them. So many I kept the recycling man busy.

Now let's talk about what *I* want to, he had said on his next-to-last visit. I need some advice. When the time comes I don't want to be here . . . if you know what I mean.

I had a good idea, but I wasn't sure. I was always wary of surprises, knowing Charlie.

Bedside Manners

A friend of mine will get me a gun, but I don't know the right place to point it. And he made a few gestures at his head and face. Does it bother you to talk like this?

I knew the situation: Charlie had terminal lung cancer. And, on top of that, advanced emphysema from all those years on the road partying and drinking and smoking. You give the client what he wants, he always said to me. If they want poker, you start up a game. If they want girls, you get girls. Lungs so bad the surgeons wouldn't touch him.

A gun is a hell of a way to go, I said. Painful. Messy. His expression was like a child's, learning some new constellation in the sky. I leaned over the desk. And think about the person who has to clean it up.

Hadn't thought of that, he said, and took a deep breath. I could hear the sound of cars passing outside the window, the scrape of a bulldozer down the street.

I'm dying, Doc. It's not a major deal. Even the redwoods . . . have to die . . . sometime . . .

He was breathing hard just from the effort of conversation. I sized him up. A couple of weeks, tops.

He paused. And in that pause there was no world outside.

Do you know my history?

I do.

Do you? Do you know the condition I was in twenty years ago—just about dead from all that Crohn's disease stuff? First time I came here, you guys put me in the hospital and changed all my medicines. I should have been dead twenty years ago. I think I got a pretty good deal.

I could feel the unspoken tension of my patients in the outer office, waiting. But I felt no pressure to hurry. This would take as long as it wanted.

Yeah, pretty good, he said. A pretty good deal. And I realized he thought of all those years as a bonus. A gift. To die after he'd cheated death was easy. It was a level of contentment I had to admire.

And that's about it for me, he said. I guess I had better get going. Oh, incidentally, I'm going to need that renewal on my sleeping pills, you remember.

I didn't. And suddenly it dawned on me that this was it. There would be no speeches. No good-byes. He was just going to walk out the door and never come back.

He talked about his computer, the e-mail, how there were so many jokes on the Internet these days *anybody* could be a comedian. I watched him like I was watching a movie with the sound turned off.

And in that moment the room was empty of training and law. There were just the two of us in a quiet place. Even the term *each other* changed its meaning. Here was a friend when only friendship mattered. And there was nothing else in the world but this, this and the river-rush of understanding that deepened between us.

He leaned over the desk, looked hard into my face, and said, How are *you* doing?

The question caught me off guard and I couldn't think of an answer right away. Fine, I said, awkwardly, surprised at the unsteady tone of my voice . . . I'm . . . and then with

resolve, knowing it was not an idle question . . . I'm just fine.

That's good, Doc. That's good. Oh . . . did you hear the one about . . .

And I *had* heard this one, and I knew when he turned from the door he was going to tell one of his tasteless, off-color jokes that I would never retell to anyone and five minutes later wouldn't be able to remember . . . and I laughed, I remember I laughed anyway . . .

Thanks for everything, Doc, he said.

And then, I let him go.