HEALING ARTS

Materia Medica

The Forgotten War

Joseph Chiovaro, MD

Division of Hospital Medicine, Department of Medicine, Portland VA Medical Center, Portland, OR, USA.

Jim introduced the other man in the room simply as Paul... no other descriptor offered. A defensive tension was in Jim's eyes; a learned response from his time in the military—"don't ask, don't tell" implied in the space between his answer and their relationship. I shook hands with Paul and began my interview.

Jim was a vivid, if at times tangential historian whose booming voice filled the room. He had somehow managed to squeeze into hospital pajamas that were at least two sizes too small, his protuberant belly barely confined by a single button. His unruly white beard rustled with each word, keeping cadence to his story. The account of his chest pain was interspersed with off-color jokes, sports trivia, and tales of hunting conquests. I listened intently, only interrupting when the narrative veered so far off course as to be unrecognizable as a medical encounter. We verbally ambled our way through the interview, with Paul occasionally interjecting to correct dates, doses or time lines. Jim happily told me about his nieces and nephews, his penchant for restoring old cars and his weakness for Southern cooking ("if it's been fried, it's been tried!"). He begrudgingly confessed his drinking and smoking habits, looking something like a reprimanded miscreant. I asked where he lived, and he not only gave me the geography and local history of the neighborhood, he provided the actual physical address. I asked whom he lived with and he paused.

The abrupt halt in the otherwise near stream of consciousness monologue made the room suddenly feel empty. Paul shifted uncomfortably in his seat, as the silence seemed to engulf us all. "Paul and I are roommates and friends," Jim finally said quietly. Paul emitted a barely audible sigh. Desperate to return to the comfortable interaction that had been, I moved on to the exam.

Jim's hospital course did not go as either of us had expected. What started as chest pain progressed to a "spot" on the lungs, then to "I'm not sure, but it doesn't look good," and eventually to widely metastatic cancer. I came and went from shift to shift, but Jim never did and neither did Paul. His constant companion, Paul was always in the room when I saw Jim, regardless of the time of day. I

marveled at the way Paul's hair was always perfectly combed, his shirts always pressed and his cot always made up with hospital corners. This stood in stark contrast to Jim, whose disdain for personal hygiene became a running joke among the three of us, and who adamantly protested any exam or interview prior to his third cup of coffee. Eventually, I went off service. In my naïve way, I wished Jim well and told Paul to "hang in there." "I always have," he replied.

Some months later, I returned to that hospital and was surprised to find Jim and Paul back on my service. They had gone home, but Jim's health had continued to decline and he had been readmitted more than once. His hospital pajamas now fit comfortably, his voice was softer, and his stories less exaggerated. Even his beard seemed to have shrunk somehow. This time, my questions were mostly answered by a haggard and weary appearing Paul, with Jim only speaking occasionally in a voice borrowed from someone else.

Paul had become a student of Jim's care; taking notes when doctors came, helping the nurses with Jim's personal hygiene and even feeding Jim when he became too weak to feed himself. At the end, it was Paul who had to make the decision to withdraw support, and it was Paul who stood by while Jim took his last breaths. The flag at the funeral was given to Jim's remaining sister, who quietly gave it to Paul when the other mourners had left.

Some weeks after he passed, I ran into Paul at a grocery store in the neighborhood in which we both lived. He seemed to have aged years in the preceding months. In his basket were the telltale signs of a newly single life—pre-made meals for one, ramen noodles, soup in a can. *No fried food in sight*, I noted to myself. I said hello, asked how he was and offered my deepest condolences for the loss of his friend. "He wasn't really just my friend, you know," Paul replied. "I know," was all I could think to say in return. "He always introduced me like that, even at the end," Paul said. "I loved that man, but that always bothered me."

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There in the produce aisle, he shared how they met in the service during the Korean War, with Paul in the infantry and Jim serving in military intelligence. The Cold War was in full swing and had brought with it the “Lavender Scare,” based on the assumption that gay military personnel would be susceptible to blackmail by enemy agents who might reveal their secret sexual identities. Jim and Paul had to keep their burgeoning relationship hidden or face court martial and prison time. At first, they found this exciting, he admitted. They were their own little secret, and it brought them closer. They moved in together shortly after they were both home from the war, but Jim’s continued employment in government meant their relationship remained hidden. They were careful to always keep two bedrooms for appearance’s sake, even when getting such a place strained their finances. They never told their parents and even referred to each other as “roommates and friends” to Jim’s siblings—though both his sisters knew better.

As the years passed and social ideology evolved, their relationship engendered fewer and fewer awkward questions. Still, they remained “roommates and friends” to all who asked. “Old habits die hard, I guess,” Paul said sadly. Without knowing what to say, I stood silently while he returned to the present moment. “I just wanted to tell you we weren’t really just friends, I guess,” he said. “I am sorry for the loss of your....,” I paused, not exactly knowing what standard colloquial term would adequately convey the depth of their nearly 50-year relationship. “My roommate and friend,” Paul offered, winking.

Corresponding Author: Joseph Chiovaro, MD; Division of Hospital Medicine, Department of Medicine, Portland VA Medical Center, 3710 SW US Veteran’s Hospital Road, Portland, OR 97239, USA (e-mail: jchiovaro@gmail.com).