

*R.G. Cantalupo*

—from  
***The Light Where Shadows End***

[Editor's Note: R.G. Cantalupo continues his memoir. Part I was published in WLA 13:1&2.]

II

**The Beginning and the End**

**O**ne morning, a few weeks or so after I left Dr. Afshani's office, I woke up with the flu. Every joint and muscle in my body ached like miniature demons had invaded my body during the night and were beating on every part of me with rubber hammers.

I wasn't nauseous and I didn't have diarrhea, but I was so tired I could barely get out of bed and my joints creaked like rusty hinges as I lumbered downstairs to make breakfast and feed my dogs.

I tried to put the pain and the tiredness out of my mind as I always did when I was sick and concentrated on the list of things I had to do that day.

I got through the morning okay, but by the afternoon I was exhausted and just couldn't do it any more. I looked at my list and started crossing off what wasn't essential, what I could do tomorrow. I was sure whatever I had would pass in twenty-four hours and I would be back to normal.

I guess I'd gotten spoiled by being so resistant to illnesses. Colds, flus, whatever epidemic was in the air passed by me or I got over it in a day or two like Mister Invincible. I was so confident about not getting sick that I had never had a flu shot in my life.

But this was a strange flu.

In the first place it made me feel old and tired more than sick. More than old, *old* old. Nursing home old. Death bed old. Old and frail. Shaky. Lethargic. Desireless. Depressed.

My body ached, but it ached as if I'd aged thirty or forty years rather than from some illness. And though I was tired, I wasn't sleepy, and didn't feel like

resting. I still had an appetite and ate about the same as I always did. If there was anything different about my eating habits it was that I had a craving for more protein.

But the most disconcerting thing about this “flu” was that it made my mind fuzzy, slow, a jumble of confused thoughts, which made it impossible for me to write, do research, or teach. It was like my brain had been dipped in molasses and all my synapses were stuck to each other or short-circuited.

By the following day, when I didn’t feel better, I was on the phone to Dr. Afshani’s office.

“I think I’m having symptoms but I’m not sure,” I told his nurse.

“What are they like?”

“Kinda like the flu but without the diarrhea and the vomiting.”

“Do you feel tired?”

“Yes.”

“And your body aches?”

“Yes.”

“Yes. Sounds like you are. Your body’s trying to fight the virus so it gets tired faster and your liver’s not cleansing your body of the toxins so your bones and muscles aren’t getting the oxygen and proteins that they need which causes them to ache. Look, Dr. Afshani’s not in the office right now, but I can have him call you if you want.”

“I don’t know. Is there something I can take for it?”

“No. You just have to start the treatment. What did your insurance say?”

“I’m waiting for authorization. They say you’re not part of their system. I may have to go to a network doctor. I don’t really understand it. I have to call them back and find out what’s going on.”

“Dr. Afshani wanted you to start the treatment as soon as possible. Have you called the other doctors that are doing the HCV trials to see if they can get you in?”

“No. No, I haven’t. I’ve been. . . .” I was going to say busy, but I realized it wasn’t busyness that had kept me from following up on getting treatment, it was denial. I felt fine, and as the days went by, the virus began to slip farther and farther away from the chaos of my daily life. There was no room for HCV on my “things-to-do” lists, and so I had put it off, filed it away with the other things I hated to do like sorting through past due bills or organizing my dirty laundry.

“Yes. I’ll . . . I’ll call them this afternoon. Thanks.” and then I hung up.

I felt like hell, and I had no idea how long hell would last.

In front of me on the table was today's "to-do" list. There were twenty-seven things I'd planned to do that day. Twenty-seven.

That was my life.

Running to finish the next thing on my list. Running from one place to another. Running back and forth across town. Running to finish one job or the next. Running.

I had been running since I'd come back from Vietnam. One step ahead of the bill collector. One step ahead of the past. One step ahead of fear. One step ahead of love. One step ahead of tomorrow.

And even when I'd tried to stop running, to make time for a loving relationship or for building a future, the lists would creep back in and suddenly I'd find myself running again, running out of a relationship, out of a future I'd imagined, out of another time.

No there was no place on my list for HCV. Not HCV. Not love. Not family. Not tomorrow.

No place. No time.

I took my "to-do" list and slowly crumpled it up and threw it in the wastepaper basket.

Then I dragged my old, old body upstairs and went to bed.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon.

### **The Crime of HMO's**

The worst torment in the world is to be sick and to have to fight with your insurance company to receive a treatment, or a prescribed drug, or an operation that will make you well.

After my first "flu" episode, I was frequently sick. Sometimes the symptoms would last a day or two, sometimes four or five. But worse than living with the pain and ongoing depressions, and worse than facing the reality of my diminished energy, sexual desire, and capacity for work, were the battles I had to endure with my HMO to receive the treatment I needed.

First, they wouldn't authorize the treatment with Dr. Afshani because he wasn't a "network" doctor. In fact, I couldn't even see a specialist again until I went back to my Primary Care Manager (who happened to be Dr. Boteman), so that I could be referred to a network specialist.

I ranted. I raved. I howled. I cried.

It didn't matter. That was the way the system worked and that's what I

would have to do.

One day I was so beaten down after an hour and a half of being passed around from voice to voice—some compassionate and caring, some distant and cold, and some simply obnoxious and self-important—that I really didn't care if I got treatment anymore. I was ready to just curl up in my bed, pull the covers over my head, and say the hell with it.

The logic of my HMO was as follows: The Primary Care Managers were the ones who determined the individual patient's / insurer's care. Their job was to refer the patient to a specialist when they deemed a specialist was necessary, and to consult with the specialist to determine how long and what kind of treatment was needed. The PCM would then recommend to the HMO the plan for treatment and the HMO would then authorize it.

My PCM happened to be the incompetent Dr. Boteman who couldn't even remember me let alone recommend me for hepatitis treatment. So I was caught in the trap of having drawn a bad doctor for my Primary Care Manager and needing treatment from a specialist who could only be recommended by that doctor.

I would have to go back to him and ask him to refer me to a network specialist who would then consult with him about my recommended treatment.

Or I could start over, set up an appointment with a new Primary Care Manager and have him or her refer me to a network specialist.

It didn't matter that I was sick and getting sicker. It didn't matter that it was ineffective, cost more money, and duplicated medical care I'd already received. It didn't matter that they had already paid for my visits to Dr. Afshani and all the lab tests and x-rays and biopsies. It didn't matter that this so-called efficient, cost-effective health care process would delay the treatment that a specialist had advised I start immediately for anywhere from four to six months.

It didn't matter because this was the way the system worked. It worked this way for the hundreds of thousands of insurers cared for by their program whether they were dying of breast cancer or had broken a big toe. It worked this way whether the insurer lived in Malibu, New York City, or Timbuktu. It worked this way whether it cost more money, caused more suffering, or whether the person waiting for treatment died before they ever received it. It worked this way because that's the way the system worked and that was more important than any individual's health care.

I got nauseous when I thought of going back to Dr. Boteman, so I opted for a new Primary Care Manager. I was given six names of doctors in my area.

I called all six.

Two no longer worked in my area, and the other four were not accepting patients.

I started getting a sense of how the system worked and how I'd ended up with Dr. Boteman in the first place.

Maybe in Timbuktu there was a surplus of doctors, but where I lived (which was no more and no less populous than any other city), good doctors were hard to come by, and thus always had more than enough patients. Only the newest and the worst doctors would need to build up their practices with new patients, which is how I'd gotten Dr. Boteman.

I was at the end of my rope and I didn't even have the energy to make a noose, so I called Dr. Boteman's office and asked if he would recommend me to a specialist. Predictably, he didn't remember me. I would have to set up an appointment for another physical.

—Fine. When can I get in to see him?

—Three weeks.

—That's too long. I'm sick and I need treatment.

Maybe I said it with a bit of a threat in my voice. I don't know. But the appointment maker sounded intimidated, afraid.

I was glad.

—Ah . . . You can come in tomorrow at 8:45 if you want.

—Fine. Is there anything I need to bring?

—If you have lab tests or medical records, bring them.

—Okay. 8:45.

I still dreaded seeing Boteman's chubby, arrogant face, and decided I'd try one more time to see if there was any way around him.

After getting transferred twice, I finally got a number to the Pre-authorization and Appeals section of my HMO. When I heard what sounded like a kind voice, I poured out my whole story while she listened patiently.

—Well, you've really been through the wringer on this one.

—Yes, that's definitely what it feels like.

—And Boteman won't just refer you to a specialist over the phone?

—No, he says he doesn't remember me. Wants me to come in for another physical.

—Wow. He sounds like a real winner. Okay, let's see what we can do. I can pre-authorize you to see a network specialist in Santa Monica, Dr. Siegal, is that all right?

—That's fantastic. And I don't have to see Dr. Boteman?

—Not unless you want to. I would advise you to find a better PCM

though. See if there are any Internal Medicine doctors in Siegal's office who are taking on new patients.

—Thanks. You really saved my life.

I called Siegal's office and set up an appointment.

I decided not to cancel my appointment with Dr. Boteman.

It gave me great pleasure imagining him waiting for someone he'd seen two months earlier but couldn't remember.

### **The Good and the Bad**

I learned to live for the good days and savor the simple things, the taste and smell of newly ground coffee in the morning, the sun burning gold through the offshore mist on the canyon below my house, the wagging tails and happy eyes of my dogs greeting me as if I'd been gone.

And truly I had been gone then, for them as well as for myself, for some stranger inhabited my body during the bad days, unrecognizable to my normal self.

On those mornings when I would wake up free from pain, no aches wracking every bone and muscle in my body, no heavy weariness as if I'd aged two lifetimes in a night; on those mornings when I felt great, the way I'd felt most of my life, I was deeply thankful, and filled with hope again.

In Vietnam, there had been so many days like that, days when simple things like an ice-cold glass of water, or a home-cooked meal, or simply sitting on a rice paddy dike after an all night firefight made me feel grateful I was alive.

In my life before the virus, I would have begun working on ten different projects at once. I would have run to answer the phone or call a creditor or worked on some new idea to make money. I would have made a list, a blueprint for living this day and the next and the next.

But I couldn't do that anymore. I couldn't live like tomorrow would never come, because tomorrow had come, I was living it, and it wouldn't go on forever.

The truth was I didn't know how long tomorrow would go on. I didn't know if in a few hours the demons inside my blood would launch another attack and the aches and fatigue of that battle would take over my body, or if I would feel good for days.

All those years I'd spent as a boy in Catholic school, going to mass and

confession and I couldn't have told you what grace was. I hadn't seen it in my life. Or maybe I'd just been unable to see it. There was too much misery in the streets, too many sick and homeless people sleeping in doorways, too many sins perpetuated by the powerful onto the dispossessed for me to believe in the "grace of God."

But on those mornings when I was miraculously given back my old body, when I woke up free from pain and filled with zest for the day, I felt as if I'd been given a great gift, and knew grace, and could have called it god.

### **The Inspiration of Beetles**

There's a hill near my house where I walk almost every day. It's a good hike up to the top and down the other side and then back home again. When I was well, it was a good hour's exercise.

Often I would encounter a black beetle along the path, trundling up the hill on its six spindly legs. I was always amazed at how much in unison each leg was with the other, like six oars pulling its heavy body up the hill stroke by stroke, and by their steady gait, so determined, so focused on the task at hand.

Before the virus began attacking my stamina, I would simply glance at them as I hiked my way up and down the hill and back without stopping, or when I paused on the top sometimes to gaze at the blue plain of the Pacific Ocean vanishing into the western horizon.

But on bad days, when I had to stop and catch my breath three or four times as I went up, when my body was just too tired from fighting the disease inside me to have any strength left over for long walks or exercise, the beetles became a kind of inspiration for me.

I imagined them walking for hours just to reach the top, and how it probably took them all day to go up one side of the hill and down the other.

They were no bigger than the tip of my thumb, and from the road up one side of the hill and down the other was perhaps a thousand yards.

One day I broke it down to their scale to get an idea of how long it was: three thousand feet, thirty-six thousand inches, more than thirty-six thousand times the length of their body. When I thought of it that way, pulling their body thirty-six thousand times its length up and down the hill, it was an incredible feat.

So on bad days watching these little black beetles climb up and down the

hill became an inspiration. And a challenge.

When I stopped, unable to push my sore muscles and fatigued body any further, when I felt I couldn't go on and was ready to turn back and go home, I'd see one of them lumbering up the hill inch by inch behind me, their legs working in fine harmony as they climbed, and a renewed burst of energy pushed me on.

Call it my moment of truth, my epiphany, pride, anthropocentric, whatever, but I just wasn't ready to hang up my walking shoes to an insect.

"To be passed by a beetle! No way! I may be slow, but no little black bugger is going to beat me up and down *my* hill! I may be sick, but I ain't dead."

So on bad days, the beetles pushed me to do more than I thought I could, nudging me to go on when I felt I couldn't.

And on good days, when my anti-bodies had won the battle that night, I would pass them by and smile, measuring how good I felt by my ability to pass them on the hill, by giving them a friendly wave goodbye as I passed them and headed for home while they rowed on up the dry path and into the night.

### **The Tortoise and the Hare**

Sometimes I imagine over half the world is ill, hiding viruses and infections and depressions and pain through weary, enduring eyes.

Sometimes I see it in the checker's face as she methodically scans my groceries through the check-stand.

Sometimes I see it in the eyes of the cashier at Kinko's as she counts my copies and punches the numbers into the register never looking up.

Sometimes I see it in the sad, disheartened body of the Hispanic busboy as he absently clears dirty dishes from the tables.

I see it in myself as I arduously push my grocery cart down the aisles and mindlessly toss neon-colored food packages in, not hungry, not caring, not having the energy to make a meal, yet knowing I must eat, must force myself to stay strong. I see it as I lumber up the stairs to a movie theater or a library, as out of breath as my eighty-three year-old mother used to be before her heart bypass surgery.

When you are sick, when your body aches and every small task becomes an exhausting chore, the sky deepens to a darker shade of gray and hope vanishes in the dark horizon.

It is as if overnight your body had grown denser, heavier, as if your illness was a weight, a lead armor pulling you down closer to the earth, as if all your effort must be to stay above ground, to keep from being sucked underground.

No. No, it's more like the opposite, like the whole world had grown denser in your sleep, like the molten core of the earth had turned into a heavier element and gravity had multiplied exponentially while you dreamed.

The dishes, the clothes, the fruit and vegetables and canned goods you carry from the car, all seem to have doubled and tripled their weight, while, simultaneously, you yourself have grown frailer, weaker, a tiny child in an adult's body, owning barely half the strength you had.

It's no wonder you are irritable, impatient, short-tempered, and often angry. As the rest of the world buffets by you chasing whatever dream or responsibility they enjoy, you plod along, trying to focus on what's most important, on what you hope you can get done.

And in that way day by day you change your life, alter what you used to do to accommodate what you can do now, what your sickness will allow, learning to live with fatigue, with pain.

It was the hardest lesson I would have to learn, for I had always lived my life like a juggler with one or two too many balls in the air. Women, friends, family, relationships, jobs, ambitions, dreams—I was always running to keep up with them—and there was always one or two or three falling somewhere that I couldn't catch up with so that from time to time all the balls would come tumbling down around me.

I lived on an emotional pendulum swinging between high expectations and sudden despair. Living at the extreme intensity of the edge—high or low—made me feel more alive. Crises gave my life meaning, a purpose, a future where there really was none.

But being ill changed all that. At first I half-heartedly tried to maintain my chaotic existence, keep all the balls in the air. But on bad days I just couldn't do it. And on good days I just stopped throwing them up to fall.

The lists I used to make up for myself each morning with twenty or thirty things to do in the day—the carrot that was ever in front of my nose to keep me running (since the lists were never completed and all the undone things would be passed on to the next day)—was edited down to five or ten tasks I could complete.

Whereas before, when I was well, the idea of not finishing my daily “things-to-do” lists drove me harder to finish them, so that I was always running on fourteen or sixteen hour days, being sick forced me to economize,

prioritize, and reevaluate what was important to get done that day. It was the very act of finishing what was on my “to-do” list that gave me hope.

And on bad days, on the days when I was dizzy, confused, aching, when I just wanted to pull the covers over my head and sleep forever, it was what got me through the day—hope, hope that I could finish the things I needed to do, hope that tomorrow I could do a little more, hope that little by little I would get better, hope that the next day would be a better day.

I used to skitter from here to there, race around like the carefree hare certain I could get everything done somehow, that no matter how many diversions I had, I’d still win the race.

But after I got sick I couldn’t do that. I had to learn to be like the tortoise, choosing what was most important in my life, spending a few good hours with friends and loved ones I cared about and who cared about me in places we could all be present.

I learned to put only those things that meant something significant to me on the list, to do only those things that came without a great deal of effort, without strain, that came most naturally and gave me the most joy.

### III

#### Living for the Living

So many things we were going to do in our lives.

So many.

We’d gather in the bunker after dinner at Pershing, *Devil*, *Spike*, *Baby San*, and I, and talk about them, about all that we were going to do when we returned to The World.

Raise horses, kids, goats. Travel across the country, across Europe. Build a house in Montana, a farm in Iowa, a school in Detroit, a barbecue rib diner somewhere.

We were going to set the world on fire with our dancing shoes. Kiss a smile onto the face of every beautiful girl we knew. Make love till the cocks crowed and all the cows came in.

We were going to be someone rich, someone famous, someone remembered.

When we got home we were going to have it all, in big, heaping mouthfuls, and never be full again.

When I came back alone, without them, I tried to live their dreams for them, then gave up and tried to live with no dreams at all, believing the nothing they would have forever could somehow be mine.

Now, in the weeks before I saw Dr. Siegal, I thought about my chances, about the 50% who wouldn't be cured, and how long I might live if the treatment didn't work.

I started thinking about all I'd wanted to do before I'd left Vietnam.

Some were small things: Riding in a hot-air balloon. Learning to kayak. Sleeping at the bottom of the Grand Canyon. Owning a red sports car.

Some were nostalgic: Traveling to Budapest where my grandmother was born. Drinking champagne in a gondola in Venice like my uncle Salvatore had done. Visiting Naples where my father grew up and where my great uncle Rosario had been a well-known writer.

Some, exotic: Exploring Galapagos. Spending New Year's Eve in Paris. Climbing to the top of Machu Picchu. Racing at Laguna Seca.

I hadn't done any of these things. And sometime long ago I'd stopped caring. But now when I looked back, I saw a black hole in the center of my life where all the unlive wishes were.

And suddenly I wanted to rush out and do all the things I'd always wanted to do, to somehow make up for my lost life.

If all I had was five years before I would become seriously ill, if that's all I had, then I needed to live my life fully while I could.

That was impossible of course. The virus rarely left me the energy to pursue or enjoy these wishes, and many had grown irrelevant over time.

But I decided right then that I was done living for the dead. I would make a wish list of what I wanted to do before I passed on, and come what may, whether sickness or cure, I would live my life as if it mattered, as if it was so important that everything I wished for could somehow come true.

I would start living for the living and by that honor the dead.

### **The Color of Arrogance**

In the midst of another "flu" episode, Dr. Siegal's office called. It was a few days before my appointment and they wanted to make sure everything had been set-up with my insurance.

Really, all they wanted was to make sure they would be paid.

I had little patience for these phone calls when I was well, but when I was sick, it was like pouring gasoline on a bonfire.

Why didn't they call my insurance company if they were so worried about getting paid?

I felt my anger charging up from my chest as if a red flag was being waved before my eyes. Worse, the clerk on the other end of the phone possessed my least favorite combination of personality traits, arrogance and stupidity.

—Why are you calling *me* about this? I said with acid clarity.

—Because we need to know if you're going to pay cash for your visit or if we can bill your insurance company, she chimed back cheerfully.

—But my insurance company referred me to *you*, remember?

—You have a pre-authorization number then?

—No, they didn't give me that.

—We need that before you can see Dr. Siegal, otherwise you'll have to pay cash.

—No you don't. You are a network provider. All you need is my insurance card. If there are problems with my insurance I will deal with it after you bill them. And if you don't honor my appointment, I will call my insurance company and tell them that you shouldn't be a network provider since you don't accept them as an HMO.

I could hear the growing uneasiness and the surprise rising in her voice as I calmly and matter of factly told her what she was and was not going to do. It was a lesson I would remember through all my future confrontations with medical clerks and quasi-secretaries who handled billings and appointments in these small offices and clinics: if you held a loaded deck full of knowledge, they were completely paralyzed.

In fact, the only way they had power and self-importance was by preying on your ignorance. Ignorance of the system. Ignorance of your illness. Ignorance of their responsibility and yours toward payments, medical records, insurance protocol, and your rights as a patient.

Ignorance.

Ignorance and fear.

Fear that if you or your insurance company weren't able to pay for it, you wouldn't receive the treatment you desperately needed.

Fear that if you didn't have the money, or the right coverage, you would get sicker and there would be no one to help you.

Fear that you would never get well.

But today I had knowledge, knowledge and courage and little patience, and when she started again, this time tentatively, I was all over her.

—Ah...what are you seeing Dr. Siegal about?

—Don't *you* know?

—Ah . . .

—Don't you have my medical records from Dr. Afshani's office?

—Ah . . . no, no we don't?

—Why not? They faxed them to you over a month ago?

—I'll check, but . . .

—If you don't have them, you need to call and get them, otherwise there's no reason to see Dr. Siegal. He needs to have my medical records in order to set up the treatment program Dr. Afshani advised.

I hung up before she could finish another question. I was tired. The battle had worn me out, and the other battle, the one over my liver, was still raging inside me.

Later that week, when I got to Dr. Siegal's office, I tried to pick out the person I spoke with on the phone.

It didn't take long. There were only three women who worked in the office. I could tell immediately by her attitude and her voice who she was. I stared at her until she became uncomfortable and figured out who I was, then she turned away and tried to busy herself with other work.

It wasn't that I was trying to scare her. I just wanted her to know that people suffering from illnesses don't need her kind of treatment, and that I for one wasn't going to tolerate it.

When I finally got in to see Dr. Siegal it was the same nightmare all over again. No, he didn't have my medical records. No, he didn't know why I was there. And then I realized where his clerk got her arrogance, it was the spillover from his.

But I wasn't in the mood for arrogance anymore, not from him, not from his secretary, not from anyone, not now, not ever. The virus had taken me past all that. I didn't have the time. I didn't have the patience. I didn't care.

—I'm here because I have Hepatitis C and I need treatment. I'm here because you are a network doctor and my insurance company says that I need to see a network doctor to receive treatment. I'm here because you are a doctor of internal medicine and I have a liver disease. I expected you to know why I'm here because Dr. Afshani's office assured me they faxed over copies of my medical records over a month ago, and because only three days ago I spoke with your office and told them how to get my medical records if they didn't have them. I'm here because I thought you'd know why I was here since it took me six weeks to get an appointment to see you.

By this time Siegal was as angry as I was. Clearly, no patient of his talked

to him this way, and I could tell he was on the verge of throwing me out of his office.

—If your office can't find my medical records I brought copies with me.

I handed him the brown envelope with my lab results, x-rays, and biopsy, and waited as he scanned through them. He was angry, but I was silent, and I guess he figured he might as well look at my records—how else could he justify billing me?

From time to time he asked me a question—when did I first start having symptoms?—had I ever done intravenous drugs?—etc., etc. I got the impression from his questions he didn't know much about Hepatitis C, but when he felt around my stomach area and said he could tell my liver was enlarged I was certain he didn't.

There was no way my liver was enlarged. That wouldn't happen until my cirrhosis had become severe, at least another four or five years away. I could feel my face starting to heat up again.

Finally, he looked at me and said, "Well, I used to treat HCV patients a few years ago, but I really don't do that anymore. I'll have to refer you to Dr. Saab over in Westwood. He's treating HCV patients now."

I was too stunned to react at first. I'd waited six weeks for a doctor to tell me he couldn't treat me which he would have known if he had taken the five minutes to get my medical records or to talk to Dr. Afshani. But that would have been a free five minutes since there was no way to bill a patient you hadn't seen and whom you couldn't treat. No, you would have to set up an appointment to see them, make them wait a month or two while they were sick and suffering from whatever illness they had, and then tell them you couldn't treat them. That's the way the system worked and Dr. Siegal like Dr. Boteman were masters at milking the system. It had nothing to do with medicine or health care, but it had everything to do with money.

But all that didn't matter to me now. I wouldn't start the treatment that I needed. That's what mattered. Not today. Not tomorrow. I wouldn't start it for at least another two months and I would have to call up my HMO and probably have to start all over with the pre-authorization to see Dr. Saab. I was sick, and I was angry, and I just didn't give a damn anymore.

When I finally spoke I was calm, careful with my words.

—Can your office set up the appointment with Dr. Saab?

—Yes.

—You know, it would have saved us both a lot of aggravation if someone in your office would have told me you didn't treat HCV.

He didn't nod. He didn't acknowledge anything. He simply looked at me, a slight irritation moving across his face, obviously glad to be rid of me.

I turned slowly and walked out, the ache in my muscles telling me how once again the virus had won a battle.

### **The Unlived Life**

I don't know how it happens.

I don't know how one day we start accepting less from all the days of our lives.

I don't know when I began giving up parts of my self to maintain a relationship, or to make a living, or to be accepted by my friends and peers.

But I knew how it felt not to be whole, how it felt to be empty, and to have grieved over an unlived life.

For a long time I'd made excuses, called it survivor's guilt, said I'd lost my life in the war, lost my present and with it my future life.

And it was true, I had lost my life, or a piece of my life, or the life I'd had before, but that wasn't the only story, and perhaps it wasn't even the one that was the most significant.

No, I'd settled for less long after Vietnam had become a faded map in the far reaches of my brain. The big things, the things I'd wanted most, the dreams I'd imagined, the life I'd envisioned for myself when I was young, I had given up bit by bit, piece by piece, the way one gives up chips at a card table with each losing hand until there's nothing left to bet with and so you just sit by and watch the others play.

And so in that way I'd come to be a spectator to my life.

Every day, in a hundred different ways, I accepted less than I'd expected from my life.

Mostly it was the little things—the shoes that didn't fit right which I kept instead of returning; the noisy, fringe table at the restaurant that I accepted when really I'd wanted the one by the window; the waiting of a half hour or more for someone who was perpetually late and then hardly saying a word; the hidden charges in tires, credit cards, cell phones, and insurance premiums that I paid and paid and rarely protested against—all the minor disappointments and dishonesties that I accepted silently which diminished my daily life.

And beyond the small things, there were the larger, more important things that I compromised.

The relationships I endured not out of love, but out of fear of being without.

The mundane and superficial friendships that I maintained out of security rather than true closeness or vitality.

The city I lived in that burned me up, but where I still remained out of habit and apathy.

The hour upon hour I wasted in traffic traveling back and forth across freeway to freeway to nowhere.

The insignificant jobs I did to make a living instead of making a life.

The innumerable times I passed up making contact with someone simply because I was afraid, or self-conscious, or preoccupied.

The moments of incomparable beauty I gave up when I glimpsed a stunning sunset as I turned a corner, and instead of stopping to take it in, just went on driving, while the sun vanished behind a building or a truck.

The lovely flight of a hawk that I caught out the corner of my eye as I walked into the grocery store to buy groceries that I didn't really need.

The trivial tasks I did for no reason other than habit, no purpose other than the comfort of doing the same thing I'd done the day before.

No, I hadn't lived the life I'd thought I would.

I'd never found the time.

Instead, I grieved for lost loves, for loved ones who died in movies, or books, or news stories, and felt their suffering as if every sad ending was my own.

And it was my own. I *was* grieving for my own lost life, for the life I'd imagined but had never lived, for the life I'd buried with compromises, excuses, fears, denials, and white lies.

I was mourning for the life I'd never lived, for my unlived life.

So the day I left Siegal's office, I made a promise to myself.

I would no longer give up a single scintilla of my self-worth, or my integrity, or my dreams for anyone or any thing. I would not live in fear, or for habit alone. I would not grieve another moment for my unlived life.

Each day would not only be the first day of my life, it would be lived with the recognition and presence that it could be my last.

I started writing down a list of things I wanted to do before I got too sick or old to do them.

Europe was on it. And a hot-air balloon. And a kayak. A loved companion. A book of poems. A journey down a river in the Amazon. A project to help an endangered species. Another to heal some aspect of the ocean. A

promise to look in people's eyes and see and honor what was there, and to make contact whenever and where ever I could.

Some were idealistic. Some were meaningful only to me. Some were larger than life.

And nothing I promised happened in a night.

But in the days and weeks before I saw Dr. Saab, I felt myself changing, becoming less of a spectator, more of a participant, denying less, telling fewer white lies, and although my list continued to grow, I had already fulfilled more in a few weeks than in all the years it took me to get here from the past.

### **Luck**

Almost six months had passed since I had been diagnosed with Hepatitis C by the time I saw Dr. Saab.

I hated being sick. I hated not having my old energy and desire. I hated not having the sharpness and clarity of thought I used to take for granted. I hated living in an old man's body with a young man's mind.

And yet, I had learned to accept the virus, and had begun to change my life.

At UCLA Medical Center, where Dr. Saab's office was located, there would be none of the confusion, chaos, arrogance, or incompetence I had experienced in the past. UCLA was a training center for doctors, known worldwide for its high standards both as a medical school as well as a hospital.

All of my insurance authorizations had been processed weeks earlier. Whatever medical records they needed they had already acquired from Siegal and Afshani long before I got there.

I waited about five minutes and then went in to see Dr. Nielson, a resident doctor, who gave me a physical examination, then asked me a number of questions about my medical history, present symptoms, and where I thought I might have contacted the virus.

When he was done, he left to consult with Dr. Saab who came back with him a few minutes later. Both Saab and Nielson were young, in their late thirties I guessed, but very knowledgeable about HCV, and right on the cutting edge of treatments.

As Saab asked me about my medical history, about Vietnam, and getting drafted, we discovered that we had both grown up in the same small town in

Los Angeles, and gone to the same high school. Although I was ten or fifteen years older than he, we both shared memories of the same teachers, the same hangouts, and knew the same local characters.

For ten minutes or so, Dr. Saab and I became less doctor and patient than old school buddies, Westside transplants reminiscing about the old neighborhood. We chatted, recollected, laughed, and suddenly all the diversions and disappointments I'd had to end up in his office somehow made sense, as if he had been the only appropriate doctor to give me treatment all along.

I had come full circle, back to the place where I had grown up and been drafted, back to Bell High and 1966 and Dr. Saab's father who oddly happened to be on the draft board during that time, and probably was one of the members responsible for drafting me.

When we finally got around to talking about treatment, he gave me an even greater surprise. His clinic had recently discovered a new treatment that had a much higher effective cure for my particular genotype, generally 80 to 100%. They had been in trials with it since January and they were ready to begin a regular treatment program in a few months. There was already a long waiting list, and they were only accepting twenty patients, but he would make sure I would get into the first program.

A few months earlier, I would have started a treatment program with Dr. Afshani that had an effectiveness of less than 50% and many adverse side effects. But because my insurance company didn't authorize Dr. Afshani, I'd made a circuitous route here, to a doctor who had grown up in my neighborhood, whose father was on the draft board that had sent me to Vietnam and now lived only two or three miles from my home, and who had discovered a treatment with almost a 100% effectiveness on my particular genotype.

It was hard to believe, hard to imagine this reality that was stranger than fiction. I had definitely come full circle, back to the beginning where yesterday's misfortune turned into today's blessing in disguise.

I was thankful, relieved, amazed. It seemed whenever things looked the darkest, whenever my doubts were consumed in shadow, just on the other side of the shadow was a brilliant light, a new hope, and a new wonder at life's mystery.

When I left Dr. Saab's office that day, I knew that the battle raging in my body and mind for all these years had finally reached the place where they would end. Whether the treatment cured me of HCV or not, I had come home, I had returned to the beginning, and I would find reconciliation.

It was why I was here.

It was why this was the beginning of my life.

### **Pietro's Story**

No one knew I had HCV.

I hadn't told my friends, my mother, no one.

I'd been reclusive, rarely going out after the symptoms and the "bad" days had imposed on my life and forced me to change, trim down to bare essentials.

But after I saw Dr. Saab, I decided it was time I started telling my closest friends what was going on. Some knew I'd been sick. But mostly they saw a change in my attitude and wondered what was going on.

So tonight when I meet my friend Pascuale at "The Art Gallery" where the following week I am supposed to give a workshop on "Freeing the Creative Spirit," I think about how I will tell him.

I laugh, try to be charming, professional. I gaze longingly at the few single women in see-through summer dresses. My eyes wander along their sensual contours while my mind brings me back to the ache in my muscles and the battle between my white corpuscles and the virus that is taking place under the surface of my smile.

It is the second day of another episode and I feel like something my German Shepherd dragged in. My nose won't stop filling with mucus. My bones are stiff as two by fours. I want to curl up in some corner and feign death.

I don't know how I'm going to give the workshop. I've been too sick and depressed to even think about it. I've had no desire or inspiration to create anything for weeks let alone to inspire others.

Later, Pascuale invites me for dinner. He knows something is wrong. I have stopped going to the Italian Institute for movies. I no longer go to poetry readings. I rarely even call him anymore. This is the first time I've seen him in almost a month.

—I've been sick, Pascuale. That's why I haven't been going out much these days or been calling. I just don't have the energy.

He listens to me silently, as one who knows about illness, depression. I catch something I haven't seen in him before. Maybe I see him for the first time. He is an old man, seventy-eight now. Six months ago, he thought he had a tumor in his stomach, cancer, and went through three doctors before they

finally diagnosed it as a hernia.

Yes, Pascuale knows what it's like to be sick, to have death's shadow slide over your eyes.

—It's a virus, from blood I received in Vietnam. Hepatitis. Hepatitis C. I'm waiting for treatment. I was diagnosed about seven months ago. I've been sick on and off since then.

When I'm done, I notice his eyes are moist, sad, a little nostalgic, and it takes him a long time to speak.

—Hepatitis. Yes. Yes, I know about that. My friend Pietro died of that two years ago. He was a doctor. General Practitioner. We were friends forty-five years. I met him in Boston when he was an intern. One day about five, six years ago he just starts getting sick. His belly swells up. Cirrhosis. They don't know what caused it. He's not a drinker. Never was.

—Anyway, on and off, on and off for the next two years he's sick, his liver swelling then going back to normal. No one knows what causes it, how to treat it. Finally, they realize it's a new type of hepatitis, Hepatitis C. They figured out he got it in Tuscany, during the war, giving blood, receiving blood, who knows which. The virus had been in his body over fifty years. But there's still no treatment, so he keeps getting sicker and sicker and then a couple of years ago he dies.

—One day, about six months later, his wife calls me. She says they've discovered a treatment for the virus, interferon. "If Pietro could have hung on six more months he might have survived," she says. Pietro knew they were developing a treatment, a drug to slow the virus down. "But it's too late for me, Pascuale," he says. "I'm seventy-six and too far gone. A year ago maybe, but not now."

—So you see my friend, you're lucky. You got it at the right time. A few years earlier and . . . well, you know.

Lucky, I think. Lucky.

I try to think what that means.

I try to remember what luck was.

**R.G. Cantalupo** was awarded a Combat Bronze Star and three Purple Hearts during his tour in Vietnam. He has published four books of poetry. The excerpt which appears here is from a book-length memoir currently seeking a publisher. He lives in California.