

Introduction

Austin, Texas 2010

*“All this happened more or less.”--Kurt Vonnegut,
Slaughterhouse-Five*

*“But it’s the truth even if it didn’t happen.”--Ken Kesey, One Flew
Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*

The first lonely night after my biopsy surgery I paced the house unable to sleep, wandering from room to room. I stopped outside my son’s closed door. How would I tell him? How can I explain that I have a deadly disease? I felt encased in an Edgar Allen Poe nightmare with something dreadful knocking at my window. But the monster was inside my body, not lurking outside the house.

My mind reeled with contradictory thoughts, the only consistent one being: I don’t want to have cancer. The mere idea of having a deadly disease was beyond my comprehension. At first I denied it was even a possibility, moments later I was certain I was deathly ill; my emotions ranged from fear of dying to concern for my children. Then I’d become angry thinking the doctor had frightened me needlessly. I was beyond

angry; I was furious because cancer was something that happens to other people, NOT ME.

As I waited for the medical reports that would determine my fate, I began to reflect on my life; I began to question who I am. I've always imagined myself to be a happy, healthy, successful family man, at least that's how I would have described myself a week ago. Then overnight I was faced with the prospect of a serious cancer that will bankrupt me because I don't have health insurance. How cruel a joke that I exist sixty-three years healthy and get cancer just before I qualify for Medicare?

That long night I could only see the negative side of life: Images, foreign to my way of thinking, invaded my thoughts, as nightmares; I was twice divorced, my sixteen-year-old son, Bud, and I lived on Kentucky Fried Chicken and McDonald's, my business was failing, and cancer was destroying my body. The agony increased each time I thought of how I would break the news to my children and their mothers: Becky, my second wife, a lovely woman and still a confidant though we are divorced; our children Bud and Lauren, twenty-one, who still needed me financially and emotionally; my first love, Cindy, and our three daughters, Molly, twenty-seven, Kathy, thirty, and Debbie, thirty-two.

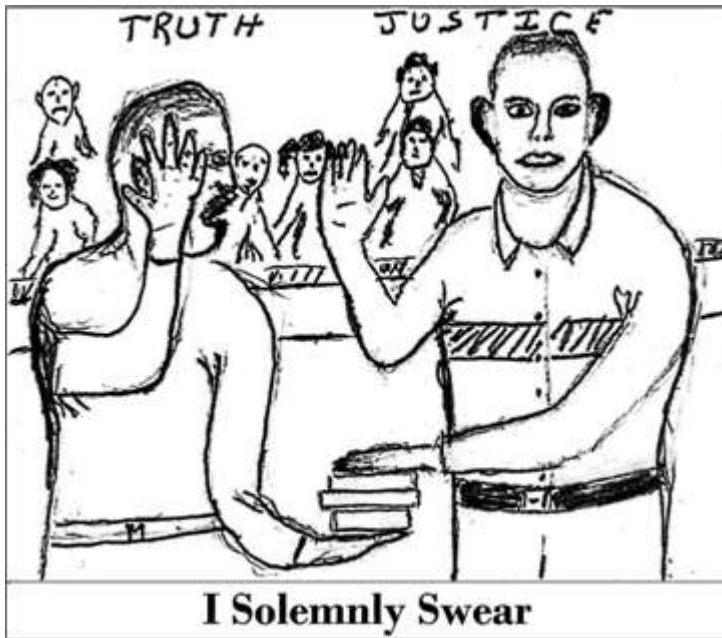
I spent all night crying the blues.

But I refused to accept this objectionable portrait of myself, because that's not who I am. I began going through my diaries and journals with the intent of discovering some semblance of my reality. What is the truth?

I don't mean the BIG truth; you know: What's it all about? What's the meaning of life? I haven't given up on solving that, but I mean, what's the truth about me specifically? The way I remember things, is that the truth? Should I color the little dark spots in my life to make them more palatable to my friends and family? Do I ignore the hidden vices and corruptions that should be left to die unknown, like the wind in the forest, should I brushstroke the rough edges of my feelings toward certain people and black sheep relatives?

My mother told me that a well-placed little white lie would often solve more problems than the brutal truth. She offered this advice as I was getting married, but perhaps I can apply it here. Most of this story is true, it happened to me or someone much like me. I remember an interview with an elderly Paul McCartney where he was asked about his experience as a Beatle. In his answer he claimed to not recognize "that young man" as though his younger self was a completely different person. I sometimes feel that I was a different person fifty years ago, not just in time, but in every respect, yet I'd like to think that my memories are built from a foundation of the truth.

The Cancer Diaries were newsletters written to my family and



friends keeping them apprised of my situation, the short stories between the diaries are recollections of my life and the lives of those who mean the most to me. There are some dark secrets that probably shouldn't see the light, but if I'm not honest now I never will be. Most of what's written here is the cold hard truth.

Cancer Diary
Austin, Texas June 20, 2009

Dear Family and Friends,

I'm attempting to get this e-mail out, under the confusing influence of drugs, not long after my surgery today, so some dates and times may be mangled. For those of you who don't know, I'll attempt to recreate the story as best I can. Last week I went to the endocrinologist for an annual checkup on my thyroid. She felt my throat for about five seconds and then sent me directly to a surgical endocrinologist who is, evidently, more of a specialist than she is. Why I wasn't going to him in the first place, I don't know. I jumped in my car and drove to his office where he felt my neck for about five seconds, made a snap-judgement diagnosis, and said, "Hmmm, that has to come out."

He then placed me on the examining table and began a sonogram on my throat. Taking a large needle, he stabbed it into my neck, sighing loudly, as he pounded the keyboard, stopped, reached for another needle and began the cycle all over again. That took about fifteen minutes, and I was borderline hysterical while he was staring at the screen, shaking his head and pursing his lips with what was obviously bad news; plus my neck hurt like hell.

He said, “That looks like thyroid cancer to me, and there are some swollen lymph nodes.”

I’m not sure what he said from then on, but I think it had something to do with slitting my throat and ripping something out. I relayed this to my cousin, Larry, who surmised that the doctor had probably said he would make an incision in my neck and extract the thyroid, but that isn’t what I heard.

Fortunately, the nurse was a reasonably articulate lady who gave me complete instructions on how to get to Regional Hospital downtown and what to do when I got there. Upon arriving, I was rushed from nurses to anesthesiologists to radiologists to accountants. They scheduled surgery for Tuesday (June 23) at twelve noon, and then said go home and relax. So I drove home believing that I have thyroid cancer and that my thyroid would be removed on Tuesday; the main thing I remember is I was supposed to relax.

The truth is, I felt wonderful, so I didn’t relax. I worked in my yard, played golf, and generally did things to keep my mind off of this mess. Monday night I spent tossing and turning until the phone rang at 6:00 a.m., scaring the hell out of me. It was Doc announcing that the biopsy report came back differently than he expected; we were cancelling today’s scheduled surgery. I very calmly asked why we wouldn’t be extracting my thyroid as he so pointedly and emphatically told me that first day. It has distended so much I could feel and see an enormous bulge in my neck.

He said that the thyroid tissue appeared normal, but the lymph node tissue was atypical. “Atypical lymphocytes” was the way he put it, and he wanted to see me right away. So I went, apprehensively, back to his office at 7:30 in the morning. He felt my neck and under my arms, said that he could feel enlarged lymph nodes, and that we weren’t going to rip out my thyroid after all. We were going to do a left something-something lymph node dissection because he could see an indication of lymphoma.

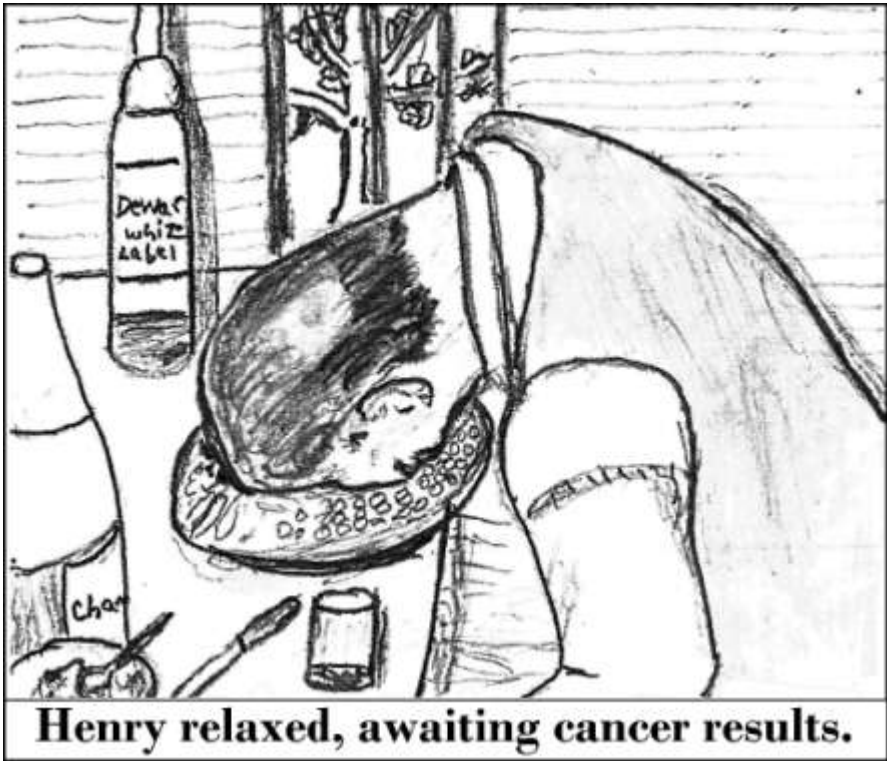
I said, “Is that better or worse than thyroid cancer?”

He replied hesitantly, “It’s different.” Does this guy have a great bedside manner or what?

Today I had this aforesaid biopsy. After arriving at the hospital at seven, I was rushed from the lab to the waiting room and finally to a prep room, where at 8:30 I was speaking very coherently and knowledgeably with Doc; he asked me how I was feeling. The conversation must have become jumbled in my mind, because at 10:30 I awoke in a chair, completely unaware of the surroundings, and I was answering the same question as though it’d just been asked. I don’t remember anything about the missing two hours.

The gist of it is I still don’t know what is wrong, if anything. There is a large growth in my neck and some kind of atypical lymph node cells. What that means, I won’t know until I get the pathologist’s report, which will not be available until next week. They told me to go home and relax. Evidently this is a universal medical instruction. I think I have a bottle of Dewar’s and that should meet their relaxation prescription. I will let you know what they find.

I'm thinking of you, love, Henry



Family Life

Comanche, Colorado July 18, 1952

Cumulus clouds, white and fluffy, highlight the cobalt blue Colorado sky delineating the Rocky Mountains in the distance. Henry watched a livestock truck slowly make its way down the long gravel drive toward his house. Dust billowed behind the wheels as Henry whirled and ran to Betsy, shouting, “Momma, a big truck is coming.”

“Really,” Betsy answered nonchalantly as she continued working on her dill pickle preserves while the two younger boys played in the corner. The small kitchen was full of the smell of chicken soup boiling on the stove.

“Don’t you want to see what it is?” Henry asked, charging through the screen door without waiting for her answer, his red hair gleaming in the summer sun as he paused just inside the fence. The truck pulled up in the yard, its brakes squealing and dust blowing off to the west toward the Rockies. Henry’s eyes were wide with anticipation and no little fear as he looked back for reassurance from his mother. Then he was relieved to see his daddy coming from the barn, a cheerful smile on his face. Harry picked him up in stride and hoisted the five-year-old effortlessly to his shoulders.



“What is it, Daddy?” Henry asked.

“A surprise,” was all that he would venture. The cab door opened, and a large, burly man climbed down. “Hello, Harry. How you been?” he asked. “It’s dryer than a Mongolian desert out here.”

“You been to Mongolia have you, Warren?” Harry laughed good-naturedly, walking to the back of the truck where they could see something moving between the slats of the stock panels. Harry Edwards lifted his son from his shoulders and placed him on the ground. “What day is it?” he asked Henry.

“My birthday,” the boy answered.

“Well, I’ll bet this is a birthday present. Better go get your brothers and your momma so that they can see what it is.”

Henry ran to the house and breathlessly urged his mother to come outside, “Momma, come on, it’s a birthday present, Daddy said.”

Betsy had already put Diana in her crib and was moving toward the yard with Butch, four, and Darrel, two. Henry watched as the driver opened the rear doors, lowered a stock ramp, and then disappeared into the truck; a commotion of shouts, scraping, and snorting emanated, but he couldn’t tell what it was. Soon the man came back leading a fine-looking black horse. Henry stepped back in amazement, looking into the eyes of the most beautiful animal he’d ever seen.

“It’s mine,” he whispered.

“No, that’s Daddy’s,” his mother answered. Henry looked at her, momentarily deflated and confused. The man was gone when he looked back, and Harry was tying the halter rope to a fence post. Suddenly another horse danced sideways out of the truck, almost dragging the large man down the ramp after it.

Henry took two steps back. “Is that one mine?” he asked anxiously.

“No, no, that one is mine,” Betsy said, nervously pulling the younger boys back into the yard.

Henry looked at his daddy, who smiled at him and said, “Wait just a minute.”

Then he saw the third horse, a smaller pony, with a long mane and tail, a white blaze on its forehead. “Oh, wow!” he said.

It was July, and the Colorado summer was hot, but with winter the pasture would be hushed and covered in snow for the horses to paw, searching for grass. Henry thought about these things as he wondered if he would be able to ride in the snow; if he could ride to school next year when he started first grade, would his mother let him.

It was 1952, and the Edwards family was secure in their lives on the farm. With cattle fattening in the pasture and horses to work the cattle, Henry and his daddy rode nonstop that week. Betsy was careful of the skittish mare that she called Cactus and was a bit put out with Harry for insisting on the third horse. She didn't have much time to ride anyway, with the responsibility of the younger children, not to mention the chickens to tend, the laundry to wash, and meals to prepare.

Harry suggested a trip to the movies for a double feature at the drive-in on Colfax Avenue in Aurora. "Come on, Betsy," he said, as Henry and Butch danced around urging their mother to accept. They loved going to the drive-in, even though they usually fell asleep before the second picture show.

"All right," Betsy agreed, "but let's get rid of Cactus. I'm not going to ride her, and she scares me. I'm afraid someone will get hurt, probably me."

That Saturday night Betsy made sandwiches, popcorn, and a thermos of lemonade before they piled into the 1950 Dodge Coronet for the forty-five-minute ride to town. The line of cars waiting to get into the movie contained several neighbors and friends; they shouted at each other as they parked next to the speaker pole and dragged the cumbersome audio

box into the car. Everyone kept their windows down to take advantage of the cooler air gradually forcing out the heat of the day. The Edwards family parked next to Betsy's brother, Rob Hastings, his wife Dorothy, and the cousins Larry and Lilly. The children scampered to the playground at the base of the giant screen while the adults visited. The cousins hurried back to the cars at twilight when the snack bar advertisements began because the cartoon would start soon after.

Henry climbed into the rear window shelf; as oldest he was given the place of honor. He watched the opening credits of *The African Queen*; Humphrey Bogart and Katherine Hepburn filled the big screen towering above them. Betsy slid over next to Harry and leaned her head against his shoulder. The baby, Diana, was in the front seat next to them. Butch and Darrel sat together in the back eating popcorn. Betsy and Harry were giggling over a private joke as they cuddled behind the steering wheel. Henry's eyes grew weary from the excitement of the past week, and he drifted into a deep slumber from which he wouldn't wake until the next morning.

America during the war, just a few years earlier, had been a sad and dreary place. Food deprivation and patriotic sacrifice had hardened the population at home. The troops reported unthinkable atrocities from the battlefields. A real possibility of losing the war had cast a pall over the people. Now the victorious citizens were full of confidence; the soldiers returned home glad to be alive and exploded with a yearning for the existence that had been so brutally disrupted. They made babies around-the-clock and looked forward to life with an optimism not seen since before the depression. Harry and Betsy Edwards were no different. Harry,

the tall, curly haired young man from Missouri, and Betsy, the full-figured redhead from western Kansas, were lovers, fated to meet on the great High Plains. They were destined to share a legendary affection every bit as romantic as Jane Eyre and Edward Rochester or Lancelot and Guinevere.

“As fair art thou, my bonnie lass,
So deep in luv am I;
And I will luv thee still, my dear,
Till a' the seas gang dry:”--**Robert Burns, A Red, Red Rose**

Their passion for love was fulfilled on the farm. Life was more than good; it was bursting with a lust for the earth, the crops they grew, and the animals they raised. Most importantly there was the family. Henry didn't know anything else. He couldn't imagine any trouble in his life and wouldn't have believed it if someone told him there would be.

