



WAITING FOR THE TOAD

A son's chronicle of misplaced hope

When my father comes to me now, he is dressed in his green pullover sweater with the Ironwood Country Club logo stitched above the breast, unfashionable black flat-front pants, tasselled Florsheim slip-ons. Around his neck dangles a ridiculously oversized solid gold Sagittarius medallion, acquired in the mid-1970s when times were good in Edmonton, very good in fact, and the future loomed panoramically before us like a prairie landscape: infinite and fertile, a vista without hills.

Standing behind him, I run my hands over strong, meaty shoulders shaped by an early life of hard work.

"You're looking pretty good, Dad."

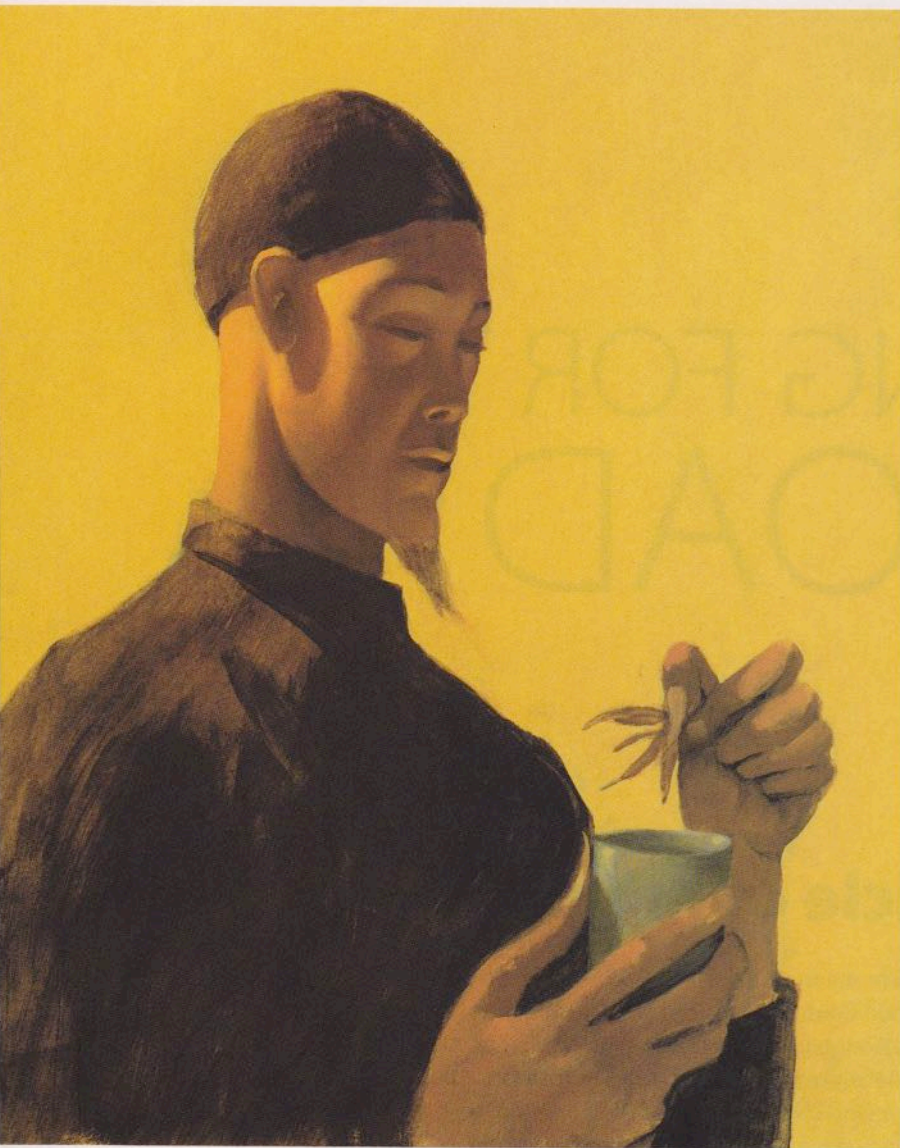
"I feel good, son."

Taking my hands from his shoulders, I crane to meet his eyes. But he stares past me through the windows of this house we are in, a house which, it suddenly occurs to me, I do not recognize.

Four years after his passing, I still tend to my father in my dreams. He is as I remember him, long before the cancer and those flutter of days when I pinned my hope on a man I'll call Dr. Yu and on the back of a toad.

BY GUY SADDY ILLUSTRATION BY FRANÇOIS ROCA

PROGNOSIS: A YEAR, GIVE OR TAKE. WHEN I HEARD THE VERDICT, I FELL TO MY KNEES AND WEPT.



During my father's illness, I would try to archive memories of him. Many were elusive, and some of the most vivid recollections were the most trivial...

We first met Dr. Yu at my father's hospital bedside, maybe five weeks into the ordeal. At this point, my father had already been through much. It started with the cough, which, after becoming

progressively worse, finally sent him to an internist. An X-ray revealed a "density" in his right lung and a biopsy later confirmed adenocarcinoma, a strain of non-small cell cancer. Like many lung cancers, by the time symptoms appeared, it was too late to attempt anything beyond palliative measures. Prognosis: a year, give or take, sometimes longer. When I heard the verdict, I fell to my knees and wept.

Still, it was not without hope that I purchased a return ticket from Vancouver to Edmonton, intent on spending a week or two with my father to help get him started on what promised to be a difficult fight. After booking, I phoned my father.

"I'm coming home," I said. "I'll be there Thursday."

"Hold on, son," he said. "Don't go jumping the gun. I don't want you spending money you don't have."

I cut him off. "Special rate, Dad. It's, like, 118 bucks, return."

There was a brief pause. "What are you waiting for?"

Together, we laughed like we always did. The laughter, however, was short-lived. Within two weeks, my father was admitted to the Cross Cancer Institute, almost drowning in fluid produced by his collapsing lungs. Just barely, he lived.

In the wake of this reprieve, our family enlisted Dr. Yu, a practitioner of traditional Chinese medicine. His treatment necessitated procuring a certain Vietnamese toad, which secreted venom through glands on its back. Since the venom attacked the respiratory system, cancer-killing toxins would therefore be delivered directly to the primary tumour site. There was, however, a catch. My father would have to consume a special tea until he was strong enough to tolerate the poison. There was another catch. The doctor said that it was illegal to import this particular toad.

Despite the hurdles, Dr. Yu offered something our Western doctors hadn't. "Lung cancer is a very difficult disease," he said through an interpreter. "Your father's cancer is very advanced. But," he added, "there is hope."

And so, we waited. For the special tea, and the toad.

I WATCHED MY FATHER AS HE SLEPT. THERE WAS MUCH ABOUT HIM THAT I NEVER TRULY ABSORBED.



...At an Oilers playoff game, Messier splits the "d" and lifts the puck past the Bastard Billy Smith, and we scream ourselves hoarse.... Dad loudly clearing his throat before shaving and showering every morning....

At his hospital bedside, I watched my father as he slept. There was much about him that I had never truly absorbed, so I'd try to lock his features, his quirks, into memory. His hands were large, much larger than mine, and perfectly suited to the amateur boxing career he

briefly embarked upon. His hair was curly, its coarseness grown baby fine with age. He would often clench his eyes shut when he slept. At 67, his chest was still broad, and as it rose and fell and rose again, I would mentally count the seconds between breaths.

Once, he woke quickly and caught me staring. "What? What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Look, it's almost time for Dr. Yu's tea."

"Great," he chuckled. "As if I'm not sick enough."

The tea was prepared daily from fresh herbs, and while not every ingredient needed for the optimum medicine could be found, Dr. Yu had cobbled together a suitable alternative. Often, it was left to my mother or one of my two sisters to make sure that Dad drank the dose at the appointed time, just as they made certain to monitor every pill that went into his mouth, to record every blood pressure reading. It was their way of exerting control over the uncontrollable.

On this day, though, the administration of the special tea fell to me. Filling a teaspoon with the green-black liquid, I shoved the medicine toward my father. He swallowed, then clenched his eyes.

"What's in this stuff?"

"Sprig of hemlock, eye of newt...."

"You got that right," he laughed.

My father was born near Brooks in southern Alberta, so he sometimes sounded like a Coen brothers' film. We were so different. Raised in a tough, lower-class neighbourhood, my father was a self-made businessman who rarely listened to music and almost never read books; in my 20s I played and taught guitar for a living, before becoming a writer. His life's central focus was an unselfish devotion to family, while mine was a slavish devotion to self. He was tactile, expressive; I am neither. Our differences, though, never amounted to a wedge, and, even though he didn't fully understand what I did for a living or why I did it, I felt his pride.

During the 1970s and 1980s, before his fortunes soured, my father would throw huge parties. His appetite for the good life, food in particular, was spectacular. A few weeks before he became ill, he visited me in Vancouver, and among his bags was a very heavy one.

HIS RIGHT LUNG, WHICH HAD LONG SINCE COLLAPSED, SUDDENLY, INEXPLICABLY, REVIVED.

"You going bowling?" I asked.

Smiling, he unzipped the bag and pulled out four large plastic-wrapped bricks. He handed one of the bricks to me and placed the others in the refrigerator. "It's ground tenderloin, Alberta triple A," he explained. "For steak tartare. How long has it been since you had a good tartare?"

...He drank Crown Royal rye and saved the blue felt bags the bottles came in as if they were valuable.... He always smelled of Aqua Velva, which I liked....

Dr. Yu would come by regularly to monitor Dad's progress. Every day, one of us would ask about the toad, and inevitably we'd get the same response: "Your father must get better before he takes the toad venom," and, against my naturally skeptical inclinations, I would accept this. Because after a week spent taking his tea, my father indeed seemed to be getting stronger.

And then, this was the strangest thing - his right lung, which had long since collapsed, suddenly, inexplicably, revived. We could barely contain ourselves. Everything was falling into place. Everything except the toad.

...Still other memories were unrelated, tangential, and, if not for present circumstances, would have never resurfaced at all.... One in particular comes to mind....

It happened gradually, and without warning. I know this sounds contradictory, but that is what happened. One day, his appetite diminished; the next, it disappeared. His voice slowly became strained, then quickly descended to almost nothing. To counteract this, Dr. Yu increased the dosage of special tea to one teaspoon every hour, which necessitated

waking up my father several times over the course of the night and only added to his difficulties. Lethargy was taking over. Eventually even the smallest decisions seemed too difficult to make.

"Do you want some water, Dad?" I would ask.

"Whatever," he'd whisper.

"Do you want the nurse to get you some more pillows?"

"I suppose."

"Dad, do you want me to help you into another position?"

"If that's what you think."

In the sitting position, my father was having trouble keeping his head up. It would occasionally loll to one side, and drool would accumulate on his lip. Every few minutes I would dab at his chin, wiping it clean. "Here, Dad, let me get that," I'd say casually, while suppressing a scream. His shoulders, once strong, had shrivelled and the blades stuck out grotesquely, at severe angles.

...One year when I was very young, there was an infestation from the adjacent ravine....

Then all of a sudden, he had lost the ability to put thoughts into spoken words. For a full day, I sat in his presence, slowly becoming resigned to the gulf that separated us, until someone suggested a simple fix.

...Our neighbourhood was crawling with toads, huge, monstrous things, too slow-moving to avoid the traffic....

My father slowly brought his head up. His eyes squeezed shut for an instant, then, for the first time in a long while, opened brightly. Of course. He would write what he couldn't say. Positioning the paper on his meal tray, Dad took the pen and began to write.

IN THE END, HOPE PASSED FROM ME—SLOWLY, ALL AT ONCE.

...At the height of this plague, Westbrook Drive was pocked with their dried carcasses, which, having been pounded flat by passing cars, we would fling like Frisbees....

The first word began with A and it clearly was an A. He wrote another A. And then another, and another still. A line of A's, each more shakily drawn than the one before. There was nothing more. Slowly raising his head to look at me, he forced his eyes open and pushed out the first word he'd managed to speak in well over a day.

"Dying," he mumbled.

I panicked. The word was clear, but the context wasn't. Was it a declaration of the obvious? Or did he want me to console him, tell him everything was going to be OK, and that no, he wasn't dying at all, the special tea would help him to get stronger, strong enough to take the toad venom when it arrived? If I said "yes," would it be like pulling a knife across his throat? But "What's that, Dad?" was all I could say.

...And we thought the toad invasion would never end, but as abruptly as it began, it was over....

Deep down, however, I was sure he understood. For some time, every bit of good news had been countered with twice as much bad. The reinflation of his lung was met by a dire escalation of calcium levels and plummeting blood pressure. An MRI that ruled out a brain metastasis also revealed that cancer had spread throughout his entire spinal column. Death was coming at him like a hydra, and nothing could stop it or even slow it down. There would be no more reprieves.

That evening, we decided to put away the special tea and let Dad sleep through the night. Over the next five days, his body shut down slowly, as if he were a house and someone was going from room to room and, one by one, turning out all the lights. On Wednesday, June 25, 1997, almost two months to the day after he first developed a nagging cough, the interval between my father's chest rising and falling began to lengthen and then, at approximately 10:15 a.m., it fell and never rose again.

In the end, hope passed from me in much the same way that life passed from my father: slowly, and all at once. The day after my father died, while in the shower, I am jarred by a terrible wailing sound. Some time passes before I can even identify the source. At long last, though, the wailing crescendoes. Launched from my lungs with the force of a thousand leaping toads, in a second it is gone. 