

THE CALL

There are phone calls that no one wants to receive. As a parent, any call at 2:00 in the morning that's about your child, but not *from* your child, is bad. As a writer, any call that begins with a compliment before moving quickly to a conjunctive qualifier as in, "You have a distinctive 'voice,' *but*'..." is bad. And any person who receives the phone message, "The doctor wants to see you as soon as possible...", knows their day has just taken a nose dive.

It was a top-five summer day -- featuring the kind of clear, dry, bug-free August weather that Mainers have to bank away knowing that eight months of winter lie just up ahead. I'm on the fifth hole at Toddy Brook, the local muni in North Yarmouth, deciding whether to play up or go for the short par five in two, when I got the message from my doctor's assistant. I tell Andy, my buddy and playing partner, who gives me a sympathetic grimace, before adding, "Hope it doesn't affect your shot." Brazen bit of gamesmanship tissue-wrapped in a mood lightener. Nice. Head games aside, the message does make my shot selection easy. With a medical storm cloud on my horizon, the sports cliché 'there's no tomorrow' suddenly resonates with disturbing clarity. The wedge goes back in the bag, out comes the three wood. It's everything I got to reach the green, so I give it a little extra on the way through the ball and... snap-hook two more bucks into the marsh. Apparently, the golf gods were otherwise occupied. I look at Andy whose expression is blank, but his eyes are smirking. That's what buddies are for. I turn off my phone, and we finish the round. At least now I have an excuse for playing like crap.

Three weeks earlier, I was in a car accident in Westbrook, ME. It's 6:00 P.M., on a busy two-way street, and I'm on my way to see my 17-year old son, Luke, play baseball. This guy driving towards me begins to swerve into my lane. I think it's a kid just messing with me, but he keeps coming. I turn into the bike lane, then up over the curb, onto the sidewalk. The guy's *still* coming -- I

can't believe this asshole's gonna hit me -- and CRUNCH! He rams into the back door of my Jeep Cherokee, then caroms into a street light fifteen yards up the way. My car starts to spin. I'd have done at least a full 360, except for the Ford pick-up parked in the driveway at the 180 mark. CRUNCH again. My car stops. I'm unhurt, but stunned -- in WTF frame of mind. In hindsight, I realized that if the guy had started swerving a second or two later, he hits me head on, and we're both done. However, my first thought, upon regaining my senses, was: "now I'm going to be late for the game," and I'm seriously aggravated about it.

It so happens that there're half-dozen folks hanging out on the porch of the house in front of which the accident occurs, working their way through a case of Bud Light. The porch is only about 15 feet from the sidewalk, so they had ringside seats. It was as if they'd been waiting for the accident to happen. They leapt into action -- checking on our well-being, calling the cops. I get out of the car to assess the damage -- caved in backside, broken rear axle, shot-out wheels. I'm not a car guy, but even I know this one's irretrievable. The owner of the now dinged up Ford pick-up, offers me a beer -- an exceptional gesture under the circumstances -- but I pass.

The other driver, a short dude, 30s, stands on the sidewalk near his wreck, texting. He also appears unhurt. He was driving a much nicer, newer car than mine, though I take little pleasure in the fact that our cars are now of equal value. Gazing at him, I suddenly remember that in the moment before impact there was no visible driver behind his wheel. I realize that he must've dropped his phone and was pawing the floor of the car trying to retrieve it when he veered into my lane nearly killing us both; that I am now an accident stat in that ballooning category of near-death by cell phone. I approach him -- I smell booze, but his eyes aren't glazed, he's not swaying, he doesn't appear drunk. I add new elements to his story in my mind. He probably stopped for a drink after work -- getting a jump on the his Friday night. It was the

'aw what the hell' second drink that made him late. Anxiously texting some lame excuse to his wife/girlfriend/whatever, he drops the phone, ducks down, and BAM! BAM! BAM! It also occurs to me, that had he not hit me first -- significantly slowing down his own car -- he probably drives straight into the concrete base of the street lamp at 40 mph and kills himself. In other words, I *saved* his life while he was *screwing* up mine. In the Big Picture, I clearly picked up a boatload of Karmic chits on this guy, and I look forward to the payback.

At that moment, however, I was livid... though nobody else knew it but me. You see... I have an anger issue which is: I don't get angry. That is to say -- I don't exhibit it. I don't yell or explode. No fireworks. I'm by no means a picture of serenity. I get annoyed when the dog takes off and doesn't return when I call. Handgun zealots, birthers and the Prop 8 crowd make my skin crawl. When my son comes home from school, he leaves a trail of teenage debris -- sneakers, backpack, papers, school forms, bottles, sweat-soaked practice gear, food scraps -- from the refrigerator to his room on the other side of house. Is that so he can find his way back or to piss his folks off? Guess. My waters are not always calm, but the turbulence never lasts long. People sensitized to this sort of thing wonder where my anger goes. Me too. It certainly doesn't spew out on my drinking, driving, texting assailant. When I ask him what happened, he mumbles incoherently -- he's in shock. He musters up an apology. He's shaking, already beaten up. The milk has been spilled, the shit has happened, and I don't feel the urge to pile on. That's usually what happens when I get 'angry.'

The police and paramedics arrive within moments of each other. Statements are taken, insurance exchanged. The paramedic checks me out, asks questions. Certainly, the hit had been jarring. My back and neck are stiff, but what the hell -- I'm 6'3" and have been fighting gravity for 53 years. My back and neck are always stiff. He asks me again: "you sure you're okay?" I pause, visions

of enriching lawsuits flit through my head. The mortgage paid off, college tuitions taken care of, a lifetime of massage therapy! I feel my neck, do another, thorough internal systems check, searching for that tweak I can turn into settlement gold, but damn it -- I'm fine. Anyway, there's still time to catch some of the baseball game. He suggests I see my doctor and releases me. One of the cops takes me to the ball field. We get there in the fifth inning, but it's already over. Luke's team is getting spanked.

A couple weeks later, I go see my doctor. Any residual stiffness from the accident is gone. I feel fine except for this little lump at the base of my neck, near my collarbone. Logically, he figures the lump was caused by trauma to my neck from the accident. He assures me that it's probably no big deal, but worth an ultrasound test to be safe.

At this point, the seasoned listener will recognize one of the cliché 'tells' of storytelling. If the beloved mother 'coughs' in Act One, you know she's a goner by Act Three; the pistol in the desk drawer will be fired; and if a doctor assures the patient that the lump is no big deal, then it most assuredly is, so cue up the ominous music. The ultrasound results suggest a biopsy is in order. A week later, a surgeon cuts into my neck, and takes out a piece of the lump for further tests. A few days after that, the test results are relayed to my doctor who tells his assistant who leaves me the phone message that leads to my triple bogey on the fifth hole.

After golf, still in stoic, Clint Eastwood-mode, I casually mention to my wife, Kristen, about the message from the doctor. "What'd he say!?" she asks, in obvious alarm.

"Uh, well, I didn't call back. It was after hours. I'll call him in the morning. Don't worry..."

Yeah, right. She's horrified. "Jesus, Kent! You gotta call him now!"

My stoicism is revealed for what it truly is: fearful procrastination. I'm not ready to let go of that one percent sliver of hope that the news might not be bad. Wives are particularly adept at pulling the curtain back on a ruse like this.

I punch in the doctor's number, my inner Clint now battling my inner Don Knotts for control. I reach the doctor's answering service and five minutes later he calls me back. "Well?" I ask. He didn't want to talk about it on the phone. Could I meet him at his office in fifteen minutes? It was 9:00 at night. Poof! went the one percent.

He tells me that the tests reveal a relatively rare form of cancer, called mantle cell lymphoma, is wreaking havoc with the B-cells in my immune system. Now, there are a variety of lymphomas that can afflict a person -- Hodgkins, non-Hodgins, B-cell, follicular. Some are curable, some not. Mantle cell is currently in the 'some not' category. It's medically 'treatable,' in the sense that it can be beaten back with chemotherapy and/or a stem cell transplant, but for how long -- weeks, months, years -- varies from patient to patient. I'm thinking, "Texting dude totalled my car and gave me incurable cancer!?" Surely a first ballot, shoe-in for the Cheap Shot Hall of Fame... but in my heart, I know it's not true, and the doctor confirms this. Mantle Cell's a relatively slow moving lymphoma. It's been in my system for awhile. At this point, I slip into a state of conversational shock -- I pepper him with questions I can't remember, and he gives me answers I don't hear. We act out this clinical charade to keep the surging emotions in the room in check.

The levy breaks soon after. Kristen and Ricki, our 15-year old daughter and youngest of three, sit huddled together on our outside doorstep, awaiting my return. We cry and hug in the dark under the stars. It's a moment of pure anguish.

For the first time as a father and husband, I feel totally helpless. I'm the comforter, not the one who needs comforting. This is not my role, not who I am. I'm a pathological conciliator who's first instinct is always to settle arguments, smooth things over, bring people together to make amends. I even want people whom I don't like, to like me. I feel terrible if I do anything to hurt someone or make them feel badly. Even guys like the texting dude. Yet, here I am crushing my wife and daughter, two of the people I love most in the world, with the news that I have this incurable disease. This is torture, the most painful moment of my life.

Needless to say, Kristen and I sleep little that night. We talk, we cling to each other. Much of the night, we lay restlessly side by side. Her anxiety is palpable. There are no soothing words of comfort to be had. We've been married for 26 years -- a lovely, loving relationship -- our lives completely intertwined. It occurs to me that it isn't just me who's sick. It's we who are sick. There's another crack in my heart.

My mind sifts through unanswerable questions. Why did I get this disease? Is this where my anger's been going all these years? Unable to find an outside vent, had my anger turned inward and attacked my immune system to prove that I'm not immune to rage? No question, there's a connection between emotional well-being and physical health. When angry, I can feel it roiling in my stomach, pulsing in my temples. Suppressed anger may be at the root of my balding pate or the sore on my ass, but did it really cause the genetic alteration of chromosomes 11 and 14, something called an 11:14 translocation, which is the distinctive feature of mantle cell lymphoma? That just seems too high tech to me, out of anger's range. It also feels like an unjustifiably harsh outcome for not getting pissed off enough. But maybe not. Who knows?

The doctors don't. The adjective 'incurable' has already tipped their hand. Incurable doesn't mean impossible to cure, and I know

there's an army of researchers out there to prove that. But right now there are no aisles at Rite Aid, no remedies on the shelf between decongestants and bandaids for me. I'm out there in the wild frontier, beyond the current boundaries of medical science. I'm a cutting edge, cancer cowboy. Yeeee-effing-haaaa.

In the realm of unanswerable questions, it's a short jog from 'incurable' to 'spiritual.' It's also a lot nicer there -- more opportunities for optimism and light. I'm not a formally religious person, but I do believe in a higher spiritual presence. I do believe that when my body dies, my spirit will continue on; that it's my body, not my spirit that's infected with mantle cell. There's comfort in that. The roles of Fate and Destiny in all this are a bit murkier, as, I suppose, they should be. If the texting dude fumbles his phone a second or two later, we hit head on, and we're dead. Fateful intervention? Perhaps, but why spare my life then hand me a cancer diagnosis three weeks later? Maybe I'm part of some edgy, ironic comedy being played out in the Beyond. I can live with that. I'm hoping they're laughs in the next round. Or maybe I'm a bit player in the larger destiny of the texting dude, who, recognizing he's been given a major do-over -- a life-saving, stupidity reprieve -- dedicates his life to developing a phone chip that incapacitates the texting option when the phone's moving at more than five mph. He becomes wildly rich and, for reasons he himself does not understand, decides to give the bulk of his fortune for the research and development of a cure for mantle cell lymphoma! Hmmm. I wish I remembered his name, just in case.

4:00 A.M. and it's beginning to lighten up outside. By my side, Kristen breathes softly, sleep having come at last. I lie on my back -- perfectly still, not wanting to wake her -- and continue to wonder at this profound development in my life. I have cancer. It's weird. Except for what remains of the lump in my neck, I can't feel it at all -- no temperature, no flu-like symptoms, energy's good, all systems are go. Except, as the tests show, all

systems are not go. Though I don't physically feel it now, the cancer has clearly infiltrated my conscious and subconscious thoughts; I'm certain that everything I do in the coming weeks and months will, in some way, be rinsed through the filter of cancer.

I hold no outward malice towards the mantle cell growing in my body. Typical. But this time, I know I'm not suppressing any anger, either. While cancer naturally provokes the unanswerable questions, it also prompts one to take stock of one's life and, upon review, I've got no complaints. I'm a well-educated, American, male WASP, which (thankfully) doesn't mean what it used to, but is *still* like pulling three cherries on the slot machine of Life. I've got great friends. I'm part of a fully, functional family -- wife, kids, parents, sibs, in-laws -- that, together, constitutes an awesome arsenal of love and support for the endeavors we undertake and the challenges we face. Fate owes me nothing. I see no cosmic unfairness in my ass getting kicked at this point. Everyone gets a death sentence; it just appears that mine has been issued earlier than expected. This is not to say I won't be fighting back; that I won't spend the rest of my life appealing it with all the spirit and enthusiasm; with all the love and *life*, I can muster. The fact is, Fate gave me a reprieve on that busy, two-way street in Westbrook, too. I don't know why, but I look forward to finding out.

So resolved, I get out of bed, and nearly face plant over the sports bag Luke has left on our floor on the way to his room last night. But it's a stumble not a fall -- a fitting start as I begin the next chapter of my life, determined it not be the epilogue.
