



The Trade

by Michael J. Carroll

I pinched the flap back into the small cardboard box and feathered it gently back onto the desktop. Beyond reluctant, I was loath to admit it, but felt myself giving ground. Beginning to concede that there just might be a tiny bit of balance in a seemingly arbitrary universe. Whatever I felt fell far short of belief. More an erosion of a long clung-to doubt. A shadow of faith rather than faith itself.

It began in the July of the most serious sickness of my late youth, a youth slipping into early middle age. The same summer as the onset of my father's final illness. I was shocked by my yellow image in the bathroom mirror. Yellow skin. Yellow eyes where whites should have been. The low-grade fever I had been ignoring for days no longer seemed trivial and temporary.

The blood test confirmed that I had caught a virus while traveling in a country where there thrived diseases unknown in my own. Unknown at least in such virulent strength. A virus that most healthy adults defeated most of the time, but one that killed often enough to be taken seriously. The illness was hanging on stronger and longer in an unsettling way.

I got up slowly and lifted the receiver off the old black wall phone to kill the clang of steel bells. Nervous fear hummed and vibrated in the gap between the words of the conversation with my father. The curled chord stretched and shrunk as I paced and then sunk back weakly into the sagging sofa.

"Don't worry, son . . .," he wheezed.

As a teenager I had always chafed at "son." It had seemed so much a part of a time past. His time, not mine. The word that had once irritated now touched and comforted.

"You'll be all right, son. Don't worry. I knew guys in the

war who caught things like that in the Pacific. Weak as babies for a while, they turned yellow and they piss – they urinated – God-awful colors. Then they were all right. They always pulled through," he continued in a fading voice that half swallowed "always."

"We're lucky. We've always had luck, son," he trailed off.

I stared through the transparent telephone dial at the large white numbers and smaller letters bordering them, as his voice trailed off completely. Words overtaken, then passed by thoughts. Muffled by unspoken memory that things were not "always" all right.

Some firmness and volume bounced back into his voice, but a sad cadence and tone clung to it. Despite my usual skepticism I was having trouble mustering energy to doubt. I wanted to lean on him and hug him like the child running to welcome him home after a week on the road, grabbing at his legs as they swung from Chevy to sidewalk.

If "always" truly was always why was it spoken so sadly?

Steamy Philadelphia August days – days worn as much as lived – crawled by. Ridiculous to be sick with one of those illnesses that should have been kicked in a couple of days with a few doses of something. But the grey grizzled, hard drinking tropical docs, the affluent world travelers, the crucifix adorned nuns and the missionaries, they all still swore that drugs were useless or worse. Unnecessary, unhelpful, maybe dangerous. A few weeks' rest should be enough. And no booze. Absolutely no alcohol. No smooth golden whiskey relief and respite. No cool foaming amber beer relaxant. They could do you in, in

your weakened state.

Days folded into weeks and I could not shake fever or recover strength. Dad and I lived too far apart to visit in less than a day in the best of times. These were far from best. The turnpike that fed into two-lane Coal Region roads would have to wait. The phone was what we had.



Autumn began blue-skyed, crisp, and sunny. I grew better and he grew worse. Gone finally were my night sweats. He faded and then drifted into a dreamy delirious corner where his mind anxiously sprinted, slowed, then shut down. Abandoned and soon to be orphaned by its tired body. I grew strong enough to drive the one-day round trips to the hospital that now held him. A place for veterans who could not pay or who were no longer welcome in other hospitals where they were expected to recover. He was wheeled into a dark green ward from which old men rarely returned.

The visits were worth it for us both at the beginning. Later they grew even more precious for me but I could no longer be sure how he felt. He could no longer tell me. The conversations that had been slowing, stopped. Tubes and pumps blocked speech and then consciousness itself. His blue eyes were closed much of the time, but even when open did not seem to recognize.

The holidays approached with light clipped more each day. In January, in the deepest trough of winter, when family members often let go, he died. Most of the family deaths, at least those close and known, came in the heart of Pennsylvania Coal Region winters with earth frozen iron-hard, and air freezing and brittle. My father remained faithful to family.



My own son arrived the following year. I saw that shocked, pink and wrinkled face emerge from his mother. I had seen that blue-eyed gaze before. My father had worn an increasing puzzled look that grew daily more confused as he gradually withdrew. My newborn began from the same point but each

day, each week, and month, molded a more conscious face as he started to take in the world he was joining.



There is a superstitious back-of-the-mind questioning I should never do, never admit to if I did, and most definitely never write down if I did do it. I could not let go of the growing notion that he had cut a deal. I don't believe in heaven, even if hell often makes a case for itself. My father held firmly to both. He also believed in luck, in bargaining, and in driving those two-lane back roads. He had a hard time passing up a poker game, a junk sale, or a long drive to somewhere or to nowhere when he was troubled.

Who was authorized to negotiate life and death? Who gave authority? Still a mystery. Little by little, against all rationality, resistance and skepticism, there emerged a half belief. Sometimes it nagged and sometimes it throbbed. Eventually it started to shimmer and pulsate and would not be ignored. He

had cut a deal. The prize was one life. The price, another.

He could not bear and would not allow his son to depart before him. He refused and did whatever it took. He willed, prayed, pleaded or hustled. He signed in blood, cut the deck, rolled the dice, or spun the wheel. He shook some eternal hand – probably with fingers crossed. Begged or raged, but somehow made sure it did not happen.

Later, while sifting and sorting through his things, I found the small cardboard box. I flipped open the flap at one end, then tipped and tapped it over the desk. Out rolled a small shiny red car. Inside dangled from the mirror a pair of tiny dice. On the box in the familiar scrawl forged by nuns schooled in curing the devil's left-handedness, were the words:

"For my grandson, Tom. Good luck." ■

Michael J. Carroll (mcarrollnini@yahoo.com) is a public interest lawyer and a member of the editorial board of The Philadelphia Lawyer.

INCORPORATION AND LIMITED LIABILITY COMPANY FORMATION SERVICES



- PREPARATION AND FILING SERVICES IN ALL STATES
- CORPORATION AND LIMITED LIABILITY COMPANY OUTFITS
- SAME DAY SHIPMENT OF YOUR ORDER
- CORPORATE STATUS REPORTS
- UCC, LIEN AND JUDGMENT SEARCH SERVICES
- DOCUMENT RETRIEVAL
- REGISTERED AGENT SERVICE IN ALL STATES

M. BURR KEIM COMPANY

Phone: 215-563-8113

Fax: 215-977-9386

2021 ARCH STREET
PHILADELPHIA, PA 19103

www.mburркеim.com