

## Alphonse

After being diagnosed with CLL, Walter became increasingly aware of just how lame the jokes he and Viv, his wife, shared about her 90-year-old father's persistent refusal to let go of his increasingly unhappy life.

"I swear, if Big Al outlives me, that'll burn my ass more than the fires of hell," he'd say.

And she'd respond, "If you die before him, I'll kill you."

Lame. Lame. Lame.

His CLL had been diagnosed by accident when Viv had to rush him to the ER because he was wracked with back pain – it would be the frowny face to the far right on the doctor's chart – after an afternoon of too much exercise. At 73, he found it was becoming easier and easier to get too much exercise.

They sat for long minutes in the ER. A memory came to him: a bus station in the middle of the night, somewhere in West Texas, passengers looking forlorn. Here in the ER, under headache inducing phlorescent lights, a few people did indeed look in need of medical attention, but most could have been in that bus station waiting to take them from one forgettable place to another place, one that would also become forgettable soon enough. He began to hum, "Eleanor Rigby" to take his mind off his pain.

"What are you humming?" Viv demanded, as though she resented his making any sound other than the moans that forced her to leave her dinner party early and apologize to the two couples who had come – the Johnsons and the Blakes. After the awkward good-byes and the sympathetic comments – "Should we come with you, Viv?" "Walt, you gonna be okay?" – Viv maneuvered her husband of fifty years into their late model CR-V, backed out of the driveway and headed to the nearest emergency room.

Ben Blake turned to the other three and shook his head. "You know Jim Fixx died of a heart attack while he was jogging." He leaned in for emphasis. "And he wrote the book on running." The three others nodded their heads in agreement.

Eventually Walt made it through triage where a nurse took his vitals, asked him to rate his pain, and sent him back to wait. Slowly, but quickly enough to alarm him, the pain in his back migrated to his stomach. "Damn," Walt said as he folded over in the plastic chair. "Now my stomach hurts."

“What?” Viv said as she turned away from the TV mounted above them.

“I said my stomach hurts.”

Viv stared at him. Walt looked into her eyes and could not tell what he saw there. Was it sympathy? Impatience? He did not know. Then as quickly as the pain in his stomach had come, it left.

“Wow,” he said.

“What?”

“The pain. It’s gone.”

“Gone!”

Walt stood up. “Let’s get out of here.” He approached the receptionist.

“I don’t know what happened, but I’m fine now. My wife and I are going to leave.”

“Sir, we need you to stay overnight. We’re finding a room for you now.”

“Overnight. Why?”

“Your blood test revealed an elevated white blood cell count, and we want to do some more tests.”

“Look,” Walt began, with more irritation in his voice than he wanted. “I have a routine exam tomorrow with my primary care. I’ll tell him what you found, and he can take it from there.”

“If you decide to leave, we’ll need you to sign saying that you are leaving against our recommendation.”

The ride home was quiet. Walt finally said, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry about spoiling the party.”

Viv reached over and patted his arm. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

As he pulled the CR-V into their drive, all he could think about was what an elevated white blood cell count could mean.

The next morning, his primary care physician, Dr. Marcus, told him what it might mean. And a week later, he sat in the waiting room of the Sitwell Cancer Clinic, again with Viv at his side. She pursed her lips as she did when she was anxious. When she looked at him, he could see the sympathy in her eyes. He patted her arm. “It’ll be okay,” he smiled.

This waiting room was infinitely more depressing than the ER had been. It wasn't so much that the people looked sad, which one would expect. But they looked lost. Sadness had sunk to despair.

Thumbing through an old issue of People Magazine, Walt was vaguely aware of names being called. Then he alerted to "Walter Wagner." He stood and dropped the magazine in the plastic chair. "That's me." When Viv rose to get up, he said, "I think they need me alone."

Half standing, Viv froze. "What do you mean? I want to go with you."

He put out his hands as though he were going to push her back into the chair. "Just wait for me out here, Viv. Okay?" Viv sat back heavily, and Walt turned to the nurse who would escort him to the doctor. As he followed her, a distant memory flashed in him. On visits to a doctor, his mother always wanted to be at his side. He resented it. "Why," he thought, "did Viv have to mother him?"

A cheerful man that Walt took to be Indian greeted him. "Please, sit and tell me what's going on." He told Dr. Patel what was going on. "Let's get you into the lab. We'll take some blood, run some tests and see where we are. How does that sound?" Walt said that it sounded good to him.

In the lab, he turned away from the needle puncturing the vein in his hand and winced. When he turned back to the nurse, she was in the process of filling five vials of his life's blood. He had no idea she would need so much, so he said, "I'm not a donor, you know."

"Sorry?" the nurse said, not looking up from her work.

"Nothing," he said. No one in the medical profession had any sense of humor, he was certain.

He looked away again as the nurse finished drawing the samples, capped the last vial, withdrew the needle, and taped a piece of gauze to the wound on his hand and secured it, too tightly, with an Ace bandage. But what was he to do? He wanted only to leave the chair and flee the Sitwell Cancer Clinic.

Five days later, Dr. Patel delivered the diagnosis. Walt had chronic lymphocytic leukemia. Not just any Big C, but the dreaded Leukemia. Walt was from a generation that considered any form of cancer a death sentence. And here was this cheerful Indian smilingly telling him that, to Walt's ears, he was going to die. "CLL is not at all uncommon among the elderly," Patel explained. Did he just say "the elderly"? Walt thought. Wait a minute. Big Al, at 90, was elderly. Walt couldn't be elderly. He was only 73, just approaching the other side of middle age.

He could not get the label out of his mind even after he left the office and was explaining to Viv that he was at stage zero of five stages of the disease – not mentioning that it was “not uncommon among the elderly.”

“I have to see him again in three months. We’ll keep an eye on it.” It was Walt and Dr. Patel against the disease. They were a team.

Alphonse Latour was a big man, 6’ 4” and hovering around 250 pounds. In the navy he had picked up the nickname Big Al, which he much preferred over Alphonse, a name he hated, a name he thought pretentiously French. He had moved from his small hometown in South Louisiana, where he had lived all of his life except for a year in the Navy and semesters at LSU in Baton Rouge. He had moved in with Viv and Walter almost a year to the day that his wife of 62 years had passed. After only a couple of months into his stay, Walt would hear, more than once, Viv say, “Worst decision I ever made, inviting him.”

It came about in this way. After Yvette passed, Al grew more and more morose. Though 90, he was ambulatory, had his wits about him, and could still cuss a blue streak. But Yvette had pampered him so much that he didn’t know how to take care of himself. He didn’t know how to use a washer or dryer. He didn’t know how to cook. He survived on baloney sandwiches. (Walt was amazed he knew how to make a sandwich. Viv smiled but didn’t think that was very funny.) He did, however, suffer pains in his neck, back, and hip, due not so much to his age as to the many operations on his neck, back, and hip. Al was a hypochondriac of the first order.

Mornings, Walt would sit with the local paper at their small dining table and eat his Raisin Bran before taking his daily meds. Viv, having risen an hour earlier, would have finished her breakfast and vacated the dining area. This particular morning, which could stand in for every morning, she was in the kitchen looking through recipes and muttering. Walt shook the paper and said, “Are you talking to me or to yourself?” Viv said she was talking to herself, so he went back to concentrating on the local news.

Walt’s medications included a drug to reduce stomach acid and two more to control high blood pressure. Over decades, acid had backed up into his esophagus until the tissue there had mutated into tissue resembling his lower intestine. Doctors called it Barretts Esophagus. One in ten GERD sufferers developed Barretts, and one in ten of those developed esophageal cancer. Walt could become one in a hundred, he thought, perversely proud.

Alphonse emerged from the guest bedroom, only a short distance from the dining area, and shuffled sleepily to the table where he sat and let out a prolonged belch. “Goddamn it.” That was Viv’s cue. She brought him his Honey Nut Cheerios, a banana, and a carton of skim milk.

“Sleep okay?” Viv offered cheerily.

Al shook his head and continued cutting the banana. “Had to get up every damn hour to go pee.”

“Well, maybe you can take a nap later.” Viv glanced at Walt, turned, and retreated to the kitchen and her recipes.

Walter shook the paper and placed it to block Al from his view. Try as he may, he could not focus on the news. He listened to his father-in-law chew and slurp until, fed up, he got up and left the table. If Al took his departure as rudeness, he did not show it. As Walter walked down the hall to his bedroom, another loud belch followed him into his safe place.

At first, when Alphonse moved from his hometown in Louisiana to his daughter’s home in Texas, Walter had more patience with him than Viv had. Walt was sure it because Viv’s history with Al was longer than his. When Al came to the table and rested his head on his folded arms, Viv would get upset. Walter took Al’s side. “He’s 90. Let him put his head down if that’s what he wants to do.”

“But does he have to moan? Does his misery have to become my misery?” Viv became more bitter by the day. Walt wasn’t too bothered by Al’s misery or his picayune complaints. Viv poured too much milk in his cereal. The banana was too ripe. His electric blanket was not warm enough. Until one day when Walt was reading his morning paper and heard a shout from Al’s room.

“Wally!” Al knew Walter hated to be called Wally.

“What’s up, Alphonse?” Walt knew Al hated to be called Alphonse.

“I need you to come in here and give me an enema.”

Walt bowed his head, shook it, and had to chuckle to himself, “My God, my God, my God. Has my life come to this?” Of course, Walt was not going to administer an enema to his father-in-law. Surely Al knew that. But in asking, he forced into Walt’s brain his constipation. Or his diarrhea. It was one or the other. The man seemed incapable of having a normal bowel movement. “You want to go to the ER? Maybe they’ll give you an enema.”

Al shuffled into the dining area, his white T-shirt soup-stained, his gray Depends sagging.

“Haven’t had a BM in a week.” Walt was pretty sure that was an exaggeration.

“I wish you’d put some pants on before you come out here.” Walt got up to bring Al his cereal, banana, and milk. With Viv visiting her sister in Dallas, Walt took over caring for her father, and he fairly quickly began to agree with Viv that feeling sorry for Al and inviting him to live with them might indeed have been the worst decision she ever made.

Walter was reflective enough to know that Alphonse wasn’t the only reason he was feeling low. He had recently gone to see a cardiologist, who after some tests diagnosed mild atherosclerosis. Dr. Keller had put him on a statin and a daily baby aspirin and ordered a stress test. Now with the eye vitamins that his ophthalmologist had suggested to prevent macular degeneration, he was taking five pills a day. When he looked at Al’s pill dispenser, he wondered how long before he would be taking fourteen pills a day.

Since he jogged three miles four days a week, Walt assumed he would have no trouble getting his heart rate up to its target. But as the treadmill sped up, the technician increased the incline so that after only a few minutes, Walt was leaning forward and gasping for breath. After the technician had stopped the test and peeled off the electrodes, Walt said, “I know I could do better if the surface stayed flat.”

“Sorry. We have to follow the protocol, which dictates the speed and incline. You’re done.”

It turned out, he learned a week later, that he had passed the test. Dr. Keller praised his jogging routine and told him to lose twenty pounds.

That was in September. Al had been with them a year. Viv’s sister, Susan, came down from Dallas to help them celebrate Al’s 91<sup>st</sup> birthday. Viv made a seafood gumbo – Al’s favorite – and after eating, the daughters and son-in-law sang “Happy Birthday” as Al stared at the small German chocolate cake in front of him. The singers beamed, and Al frowned his Eeyore frown and blew out the single candle. “This cake’s not going to eat itself,” Walt said and cut pieces for everyone.

A week later, Al had his first fall. He was in the bathroom. He routinely got up throughout the night, at least four times, sometimes as many as eight. Viv woke immediately when she heard his cry. She rose quickly and went towards the sound. Walt, mumbling to himself, followed. Big Al lay sprawled out next to the toilet, his pale gray eyes looking up at them. Breathing heavily, he said, “Help me.”

“Get his walker,” Viv said. Walt came back a moment later with the walker, and he and Viv got under Al’s arms and lifted him so that he could get a hand on the vanity. Then they maneuvered him to the walker. Viv pulled up his Depends. “What happened?” she asked.

“I don’t know.” Al shook his head. “I felt dizzy.”

“You have to use your walker, Dad.” She spoke slowly, enunciating each word. Al nodded and pushed the walker towards his room as though hurrying to leave this embarrassment behind. Walt reached over to flush the empty toilet.

Back in bed, Walt could not find sleep. He had turned 74 a month before. Seventeen years, he thought, is that what I’ll be? Getting up four to eight times a night to go to the bathroom? Even now there were nights that he would wake with pressure on his bladder that he could not ignore. He could count on one hand the nights that he had to get up to relieve himself more than twice. But already he was answering to himself the questions the doctor asked Al. Do you feel the urge to go but can’t? Does the stream start and stop? Do you feel like you empty your bladder? Yes. Yes. And no.

He had even experienced incontinence. Just a few drops, rarely going through his boxers, but it was always a shock, an embarrassment even if no one saw. He turned over in the bed and faced away from Viv. The future scared him. Whenever he looked at his father-in-law, gaunt, graying, and looking lost, he felt that fear like a body ache.

Al fell two more times, one requiring a visit to the ER, where in the waiting room he moaned and sighed that he was dying. After an hour, Walt could take no more. He stepped up to the receptionist and in a voice he hoped sounded panicked, said, “He’s having chest pains.” Al was wheeled in immediately. Walking by his side, Walt felt Al pull at his sleeve. He bent down. “Tell them,” Al said breathlessly, “to give me an enema.”

In March, Walt and Viv made the decision. Big Al would have to go into a home. By that time Al had gone from a walker to a wheelchair, had lost 60 pounds. Though physically very weak, he was still fairly sharp of mind and could still moan and cuss like the old Al. The three of them toured a half dozen homes before Viv found one she thought would be right for her father. It had to be right because she was carrying, and would continue to carry, a ton of Catholic guilt.

When they went from the spacious, brightly lit foyer through the French doors that opened onto a large courtyard, Viv exclaimed, “Look how beautiful!” Walt had to agree. Potted plants and flowers and scalloped wrought iron tables and chairs were placed appealingly across the courtyard. A few elderly ladies sat enjoying the first warm spell of the month. Viv looked back to get Al’s reaction and saw that he was crying. Though his crying added another ton to Viv’s guilt, Shady Grove became his new home.

Viv went at least four times a week to see her father and called when she couldn’t go. Walt accompanied her perhaps half of the time because he knew she wanted him to be there. The visits were never not awkward. Viv would try to engage Al in conversation, eliciting a nod or a soft yes or no. She would fuss about the condition of the room. She would try to spoonfeed

him. Walt would occasionally toss in some lame comment. "Looking good, big Al," or "You behaving yourself with these pretty nurses?" Mostly Walt felt like another piece of furniture.

They spoke little on these drives to Shady Grove. On one trip, out of the blue, Walt said, "I don't think I'm going to have my father's longevity." His father had died at 89, as had his two aunts and an uncle on his father's side. On his mother's side, however, no such luck. A stroke had taken his mother at 55. Atherosclerosis. Her brother keeled over with a heart attack while mowing his lawn at 50.

"Don't say that," Viv frowned. She always said that when he talked about dying as if talking about it would make it happen. He understood. They had been married so long that neither one could imagine living without the other.

"Well, you know," he began, "I've got heart disease. And Barretts esophagus."

She paused, thinking. "And there's the leukemia."

Walt burst out laughing, "Yeah, there's that."

In August, Walt turned 75. A month later, Big Al turned 92. By that time he had lost another forty pounds and appeared to Walt to be ready to meet his maker. The hospice nurse who had taken over his care said it was impossible to say how long Al had, but because he was sleeping a lot and was on mostly a liquid diet, she thought one to three months. Walt wanted to ask him how he felt about dying but couldn't bring himself to.

In September, Susan came down again from Dallas to celebrate Al's 92 birthday and almost certainly his last. As Walt and the two sisters hovered over Al, his eyes unexpectedly cleared and focussed on them. "I don't exist," he said firmly. He said nothing else on that visit, simply smiled at his daughters. Walt couldn't remember him smiling at anyone since going into the advanced nursing care facility. They left after a few minutes. Later, Viv and Susan agreed that he was delirious. Walt wasn't sure. He said, "I think he might be on to something." The sisters looked at him like he had lost his mind.

The next morning, while Walt was eating his cereal and reading the paper, Viv's cell rang. He heard her answer it. He paused and listened. "Thank you. Thank you," he heard her say. Then she was at the doorway between the kitchen and dining area. He dropped the paper on the table and went to embrace her. She sobbed into his shoulder and between sobs, said, "He went in his sleep. This morning. At 6:30." Al did not speak but continued to hold her. But he was



thinking. How could they know unless they were at his bedside? It did not matter. It was the right thing for them to say.

Al had donated his body to the University of Texas Medical School, so there would be no funeral. Together Susan and Viv contacted relatives and the few friends of Al's that were still alive. (There weren't many.) Together they cleared out his room at Shady Grove. (There wasn't much.)

Susan stayed on for two more days. The sisters went through boxes of old photos, each one, it seemed, with a long story. They remembered Al's sense of humor. He was quite the raconteur, weaving stories that his audience assumed were true until he reached the punchline. They remembered his generosity. He had taken the extended family to Italy twice, once to Tuscany and once to Umbria. But both humor and generosity died along with Yvette. A long standing depression took hold and, though not clinical, was enough to make his final years a torture not only to himself but to those around him.

When Susan left to return to Dallas, Walt gave her a hug and said, "He lived a long life and had a good death. That's more than most get." He later thought to himself how cold that must have sounded, but Susan had simply nodded.

Walt kept going back to Al's last words, "I don't exist." What could Al have possibly meant? What did it mean to not exist? How was that even possible? He told himself that Viv and Susan were probably right that it was an old man's delirium. Yet there was something in Al's smile, the firmness and clarity in his voice, that suggested more, an epiphany perhaps. But what exactly did he realize at the very end of his life? The words continued to nag at him, distracting him during the day, keeping him awake at night.

Several days after Susan's departure, Walt and Viv were in their small kitchen getting in each other's way. "Why don't you go out to the patio, and I'll make us a couple of sandwiches," Viv said.

"What can I do?"

"Nothing. I've got it." And Viv shooed him away.

Walt slid open the glass door and stepped onto the cobble-stoned patio. He sat in one of the two dark green Adirondack chairs, which they had bought after a vacation in Maine years before. He stared at the stones of the patio, his mind restless. Lifting his eyes to the still green lawn, already anticipating its turning to brown in the coming months, he traced the flowers and

shrubs abutting the fencing that surrounded the yard. But he could find nothing to focus on, nothing to stop the endless babble in his head.

Then a movement caught his eye. He turned his head to see a caterpillar inching its way up the trunk of a palm plant slightly to his right. He bent down for a closer look. Pale green, it measured perhaps an inch. Its motion was liquid, flowing up the trunk, grasping with suction-like legs. Underneath the segments near the head were pointed appendages, and from the top of its head rose three sharp red, yellow, and black-banded spikes.

Walt was mesmerized. The caterpillar filled his vision. He lost awareness of all but the caterpillar and its flowing motion. There was no more patio, no lawn, no fence, no Al, no Viv, no Walt.