

Jimmy Holyfield's Last Joke

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In mid-December, when the long Carolina autumn gives way to winter and the trees weave their tracery of stark branches against the early sunset, gifts begin to arrive in our office. There are gifts from patients, gifts from other offices, gifts from pharmaceutical companies: boxes of candy, baskets of fruit, plates of cookies, tins of popcorn, fancy nuts, cheese wheels. One lady brings baklava; another, 6 trays of her famous fudge. But our most unusual Christmas gift by far was the outhouse that BJ Holyfield brought us the year after his father died.

The senior Mr. Holyfield was a kidder. Jimmy kidded about everything, even his diseases: diabetes, atrial fibrillation, and hypertension. He called his pro times "my port wines."

His longest-running joke was about the Holyfield Memorial Outhouse. It started out innocently enough with his observation that he made so many visits to our office, the least we could do was to name a wing of the office for him. Then he decided that he'd be satisfied with a bathroom. Finally he said he would settle for an outhouse.

And so the Holyfield Memorial Outhouse was born. At every visit he would ask about its progress. "How you comin' on that outhouse, Doc? I want a two-holer with chrome-plated fixtures." Through hypertension, diabetes, atrial fibrillation, congestive heart failure, and angina, Jimmy Holyfield never lost his sense of humor.

One morning we received a panicked call from Mildred, Jimmy's wife. "Jimmy's not breathing too well and he looks all pale and sweaty. What should I do?"

"Mrs. H, hang up right now and call 911. Have them take him to the hospital. I'll meet you there." She hung up, but I never did meet Jimmy at the ER. He died en route.

I met Mildred and their son BJ at the hospital. There wasn't much we could think to say to one another. We just shook our heads and said we couldn't believe he was gone. We reminisced about his sense of humor. "You know," BJ commented, "I'd like to think that the day my Daddy died,

heaven became a happier place where it was more fun."

BJ was a younger version of his dad. A crime scene investigator for the police, he loved puttering in his workshop. He made jewelry: exquisite, one-of-a-kind hand-carved rings and medallions. He also made intricate, highly detailed scale models of anything he could think of—cars, ships, planes, and houses.

One day in mid-December of the year after Jimmy died, BJ appeared in our waiting room holding a mysterious object covered with a cloth. The office staff gathered around and summoned me from the examination room. BJ clearly enjoyed being the center of attention. "Dr. Keller, this is a present from my Daddy and me," he said. With a flourish he yanked the cloth off the object and solemnly intoned, "Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the Holyfield Memorial Outhouse."

On a plywood base he had constructed a tiny but perfectly detailed outhouse about 5 inches high. It was made of weathered-looking wood, complete with half-moon window and stovepipe through the roof. A small brass plate proclaimed this the Holyfield Memorial Outhouse. The staff oohed and aahed.

"Now open the door," he commanded. I pulled the tiny door by its perfectly detailed brass doorknob and . . . BAM! A loud clap and the outhouse collapsed into a pile of tiny boards. Watching our astonished faces, BJ doubled over in laughter. He had constructed an intricate mechanism made of a mousetrap, some springs, and wire that was triggered to make the whole thing fall apart when the door was opened.

As the office staff marveled, BJ deftly reassembled the outhouse. After a hearty round of "Merry Christmas'es, he left us with his amazing creation.

And he left me with a lot to think about. After all the Christmas candy had been eaten and the rotting fruit thrown out, deep in the doldrums of January, I keep the Jimmy Holyfield Memorial Outhouse on my shelf to remind me of the devotion of a son to his father and of Jimmy Holyfield's last joke.

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