

Fred

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Big Piney, Wyoming

I had a patient called Fred, an old hunting guide. He lived in Daniel, a spot on the map next to the Green River, 22 miles north of Big Piney on Highway 189, which continues north through the Hoback Canyon to Jackson Hole and the Grand Tetons. A brass plaque on a big rock in a grove of cottonwoods proclaims this was where the first rendezvous was held between Indians and mountain men.

The Daniel General Store sells the best steaks in the county. The only other public establishment, besides the small post office, is the Green River Bar across the street, a log pub with its own paperback library and reading room. The hosts and owners are Pat and Hack Walker. Hack flew B-24s during the Second World War. The Walkers watch over some of the old-timers who live in cabins not far from the saloon. Joe Hausen is one of these. He was a great reader and his collection of paperbacks started the library.

The Green River breaks up into several meandering channels as it comes through Daniel. The eastern branches run through the Quarter Circle Five Ranch owned by a California family. Gnarled cottonwoods shade the cattle grazing in lush meadows. A village doc can get permission to fish there.

Fred lived in a scruffy old trailer not far from the rock and its plaque. He had lung cancer. My policy was, and still is, to see patients in their homes as often as necessary when they arrive at the end of their lives. My nurse, Deanne, and I do this together. Often we charge nothing for these calls, which is about as close as Medicare comes to paying anyway. The government has no billing codes for nonprocedural, compassionate care of a terminal patient, or for comfort given to a devastated family.

On a fall day, just before the start of hunting season, I drove over to Daniel and, turning into Darlene's Camper Court, parked next to Fred's trailer, the only one there. Bag in hand, I climbed the three rough steps he had

hammered together under the narrow door. It was time to sit down with him and have a talk about his disease and his options. I pushed on the doorbell, which didn't work, and walked in. Fred was lying on a cot with a faded army blanket across his middle. He was surrounded by his hunting gear: well-used pack saddles, harnesses, tools, cans of nails and staples. Crumpled clothes were scattered everywhere. The place was a mess except for his guns, which stood neatly in an oak cabinet with brass fittings.

"Hello, Doc," he rasped. "Take that stuff off the chair and sit down."

"How's it going, Fred?" I asked.

"Great," said the old guide.

He looked terrible. The deep creases in his face running on either side of his sharp nose were filled with stubble. His grey hair was uncombed, and a strand stuck to the sallow skin of his wrinkled forehead. He was wasting away.

As I wrapped my fingers around his wrist to check his pulse, he propped himself up on an elbow and started to cough—a deep, chest-rattling cough that squeezed the air out of his lungs in long, painful wheezes. He spat into a paper towel and lay back, his face a dusky blue, gasping for air. I reached across him and turned on the oxygen, then slipped the plastic tubing over his head and placed the prongs in his nostrils. After a little while, his breathing became more regular and the lines of pain on his face and around his eyes relaxed.

"Thanks, Doc."

"Let me see what you coughed up."

He opened his fist, and I took the crumpled paper and saw a big glob of green phlegm streaked with bright red blood. Stepping into the bathroom, I dropped the paper towel into an overflowing garbage bag, then ran the hot water and wet a towel. I sat back down and washed off his face. He liked that.

I watched him as he lay on his back with his eyes closed. The coughing episode had, for the moment, cleared his "bronchials" as he called them. A truck roared by on the highway, and Darlene's dog yipped as it chased a rabbit into the sage. The only sounds in the trailer were Fred's breathing and the oxygen softly hissing into his

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nose. Outside, framed by the long window near the door, the leaves on the cottonwoods were bright yellow, some floating to the ground on a mountain breeze. Others had almost covered the empty cans of Coke and Coors dropped by tourists as they stood enjoying the unspoiled country where years ago trappers and Sioux had dropped their empty bottles of whiskey and broken arrowheads. Off in the pastures of the Quarter Circle Five I could see the hay stacked for the winter, and cows were calling to their calves, now old enough, after a summer in the mountains, to be a little independent.

I checked Fred's heart rate and pressure while a thermometer I'd stuck under his tongue was cooking. His pulse was up to 110; blood pressure O.K. I pulled the thermometer out of his mouth; it read 100°. I wiped it off with alcohol and put it and the other things back in my bag.

"Now, Fred, we have to talk."

"Shoot, Doc. I think I know what you're gonna say and if I'm right the answer is no." He closed his eyes again.

"Fred, you have a pretty bad tumor in your lung. It's plugging up some of your smaller bronchial tubes so that mucus in your lung has a hard time getting out. As I told you a couple of days ago, when mucus can't get out it gets infected and that makes pus and makes you cough the way you do. That's why I gave you those antibiotic pills to take last time. You have been taking one of those capsules four times a day, haven't you?"

"Sure, Doc."

I looked around but didn't see the pills. "If you want, I can send you to the hospital where they can give you some x-ray treatments to shrink up the tumor and make you feel better."

"You can't take care of me here?" Half question, half statement.

"Sure I can. But I can't do anything about the tumor."

The old guide looked out of the window, thought for a while, then turned back to me. "When I was in there before they told me that the x-ray treatment might shrink down the tumor for a little while—not for very long, and that the treatment might make me sick in other ways."

"That's true."

He looked directly at me. "I've had a good life, Doc. I've got no regrets. I don't want to go to no hospital." I nodded my acceptance. His old ice box turned on. It hummed and rattled in the background. Neither of us spoke for a while.

Darlene, who ran the trailer court, brought him on a hot meal a day. As far as he was concerned, that was enough. His eating arrangements were simple. He had cereal and coffee out of a tin cup in the morning. In the evening he ate his dinner off the glossy pages of a Sears catalog. After each meal, he tore off the page and was ready for the next one without having to wash dishes.

"You know, Doc, all I really want to do is go up to Gun Sight Pass one more time and watch my elk go by. Can you give me the strength to do that?"

I thought for a moment. "Fred, my wife makes a meat broth with some stuff called Bovril. She adds all sorts of her own mixings. It has everything in it. It'll make hair grow on a billiard ball."

He chuckled.

"I'll bring you some in a thermos every other day, and we'll see about getting you up to the Pass."

Bettine's broth, although never approved by the Food and Drug Administration, had been good medicine for many people, including me, over the years. Once, in Zaire, the Chinese ambassador had a rough bout of diarrhea which had left him dry and done in. I had given him the usual medicines, but it was Bettine's broth that had him back on his feet quickly. He came to our house in the paratrooper camp a week or so later and brought, by way of thanks, cartons of Chinese cigarettes and boxes of tea.

Fred looked forward to my wife's broth. He sat on the edge of the cot and told me some of his hunting stories as he sipped from the plastic top of the thermos. Mostly he had hunted alone, carefully and thoughtfully, killing only what he needed for meat, like the bears and coyotes. But he had to guide to make a living. When he was through drinking he handed me the cup.

"This stuff's a hell of a lot better than all those pills you give me, Doc. Thank her, will ya?" I did.

Fred died peacefully in his sleep a few weeks later. He never saw his elk, but he never lost the hope that he might.