



By filming
my father's death,
I hoped to
bring our troubled
relationship into
focus.

Final Cut

BY JULIAN RUBINSTEIN



He stopped in the middle of a snow-covered dirt road near our house in Parker, as if he couldn't wait a moment longer to relate the following:

"This hat that I have on my head comes from Lancaster's. Which is a little Western store on East Colfax, so far east that it's almost in Kansas, where the cowboys in the eastern half of Colorado like to shop for their boots, hats, buckles, guns." He counted them off on one gloved hand. "This summer I took myself over there because I knew I could get a beaver hat at a great price in the heat of August. Because no one is buying beaver hats in August."

That was my father, age 59 in January 2002, on one of those Colorado mornings when the fresh snow and clear sky stretch time like notes on a soundstage. I stood watching him through my video camera's viewfinder: my father, who many in Denver knew as Dr. David Rubinstein, psychiatrist, medical director, and staff physician at several area hospitals for more than three decades; my father, the Bronx-born Jew who grew up on welfare and became a Colorado horse owner; my father, with whom I never got along growing up but who—for reasons I couldn't yet explain—had unwittingly compelled me earlier that week to begin documenting his every move; my father, the doctor turned cancer patient, then in year 11 of an illness that was supposed to have killed him in three.



WHEN TIMES WERE GOOD: The author and his father in San Diego, 1987; (opposite page, bottom from left to right) The author's parents vacationing in Tanzania, 1995, and the author's father hiking the Swiss Alps, 1993.

"The cat's out of the bag," is what he said. Sometimes he repeated this phrase real fast, adding that that's how he heard it in his dreams. It was what the radiologist had said to him in November of 1991, after reading my dad's X-rays, which showed not only a malignant tumor in his prostate but also blurred lines around the gland indicating that the cancer had already spread to several nodes.

When the call came I was in a dorm room on the Upper West Side of New York. I was attending Columbia University's graduate school for journalism, only a few miles from the Bronx apartment my parents lived in when I was born. Both of them were now on the line. "I had some test results that weren't so good," my dad said. "I may have some form of cancer." Then it was my mom talking, kind of slow and about things we already knew. "So you're still coming next week, right?" she asked, as if I'd ever canceled a Thanksgiving trip home. "Wednesday, you get in around 7. I'll be waiting at the regular place." Then dad wanted to talk to me, alone. After the click, he lowered his voice. "I can't believe I neglected myself," he said, as if to confess something, perhaps even to me. "I see patients every day, but I hadn't had a checkup for years."

I sat on my wafer mattress, blinking at the wall, numb. Over the next few days, my parents spooned me information like I was a child: The doctors didn't think it was a good idea to operate. The reason not to operate was that it was an unnecessary risk. The reason it was unnecessary was because the cancer had already spread. The cat was out the bag, so to speak. That's what the radiologist said. My dad had three years to live.

CANDID CAMERA: Video stills of the author and his dad living and loving.

I wish I could say that my father and I had a good relationship when I was growing up; that, because he was a well-respected psychiatrist who specialized in adolescent behavior, he also was a model father. I wish I could say I was a loving son, but until I began making my film about him that wasn't the case.

Growing up as a Jew in Denver circa 1970s was no picnic for me. I had a big nose and a "girl's" name. Worse, at age 6, I took up the violin, encouraged by my parents, both classical music fans. We had a living room that was sort of like our situation room. It was only used when something serious was happening, like when the dog died or when my younger brother Daniel or I was being "docked," my dad's word for grounding. It was also the place where I went and cried to my mom after being pelted with rocks and called "Jew boy" and "orchestra fag." "What happened?" she would say. As I told her, my mom's mouth would tighten and I could see the hurt in her eyes. She got it.

My dad would get home after we'd all eaten dinner. "How's school?" he'd ask, confirming his obliviousness to my life. Sometimes I could see his mind wander while I answered. And I would just stop talking. "Julian, I'm listening," he'd insist, but I wouldn't continue. A few times he sat me down and asked, "Are you feeling depressed?" Once he even said, "Are you having suicidal thoughts?" He sent me to a child psychologist.

In every other way we were a nuclear family with no bleeding wounds. Daniel and my father had no problems. Maybe that was because they had more in common or because my brother simply was less troubled than me. Our one household secret was my ailing relationship with my father; still, as if he could will it to be so, my dad liked to say he and I were alike. We did bear a close physical resemblance: blue eyes, narrow facial structure. And unlike Daniel, who was born in Denver, my father and I were both native New Yorkers. But as far as I was concerned our similarities ended there.

By the time I entered ultra-cliquey Cherry Creek High School in 1983, my relationship with my dad was little more than perfunctory. Within six months I quit the violin, and to counter the fact that I was in accelerated classes, I made a big show of never doing any homework, cheating on tests, ditching classes, chewing Copenhagen, drinking alarming quantities of Coors Light every Friday and Saturday night, and occasionally getting stoned.

"We need to have a talk," my dad said after the first time he found



a bag of pot in my car. He drove us up I-70 into the mountains. I don't remember what he said, only that he was wasting his breath. I finally had attained cool status—a card-carrying member of the jock crew—and there was no one I treated more dismissively than my father. Our communication deteriorated to the point where the only interaction we had was my handing him a plastic cup he made me pee into once a week so he could have my urine drug-tested at the hospital. I failed the first test: I peed in a cup the previous day, hid it under the sink, and then poured the old specimen into the test cup. I was too much of a jerk to consider that fresh urine is warm; as soon as I handed the cup to my father, I was busted again.

By the end of my senior year, a sort of détente had set in on our relationship. The fact that I'd maintained respectable enough grades to get into college more or less proved I wasn't flushing my life down the toilet. My dad supported my choice of a college way off in a part of the country where we had no roots, Emory University in Atlanta. I joined the jock fraternity, partied my ass off for a year, and then started to realize I had nothing in common with my friends and was bored out of my mind.

It was journalism that rescued me. I knew I loved writing, and the idea of being licensed to enter the lives of others was invigorating. Maybe I thought I would find myself in the process. The day I got my acceptance letter to Columbia, I felt, for the first time in my life, like I was on the right track. I was two months into my journalism master's program when I got the call from my parents.

Diary entry from my father, written in 2002, about our year in Pueblo, Colorado, in 1972, when he was a fellow at the Colorado Mental Health Institute: "That society [the state hospital in Pueblo] was fascinating and it's taken me many years to realize that I've lived like a long-term tourist watching but being an outsider most of my life, trying, tasting, but not involving myself, "hiding in the bushes."



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In the months that followed my father's diagnosis he was haunted by the radiologist's words. It wasn't clear how much fight he had in him. My dad, who had been trained to analyze and help solve patients' problems, seemed completely adrift. Was he a fighter or was he just another unlucky loser?

I didn't know myself. It was like, at 22, I was regarding him for the first time. When I went home for that Thanksgiving, I remember feeling like my dad was looking for some kind of sign from me. Like he was trying to gauge whether our relationship was a goner as well or if perhaps it could be salvaged if we had enough time. I wasn't sure about that either, but I made a point of joining with my mom and brother in prevailing upon him not to give up.

He began flying around the country seeking second opinions, and the following spring he finally found a doctor at the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota who was willing to operate. The idea was that eliminating as much of the cancer as possible might at least slow the growth of the disease. My dad agreed to have the surgery, a radical prostatectomy that would leave him occasionally impotent and mildly incontinent.

As I finished grad school and began my career as a journalist, first in Washington, D.C., and then back in New York City, I watched my father from afar in amazement. Referring to his illness as a "new lease on life," he and my mom moved from the modest south suburban Denver home they'd owned since 1974 to a wooded three-acre, ranch-style property outside Parker. My father, who sometimes had wondered aloud about replacing his Toyota with a Jaguar, bought one horse and then another. He stabled them himself in the barn on the property. Every morning he spent an hour shoveling manure.

Then he went to work, not telling anyone in his professional circles he was sick, despite at first having to wear a catheter under his pants to facilitate urination and later enduring exhausting rounds of radiation. In fact he increased his workload—serving as medical director of Columbine Hospital for five years on top of his private practice and his attending and teaching duties at several other area hospitals. He also insisted on continuing to travel with my mom to far-flung places such as Kenya, Tanzania, and Turkey—places where emergency medical care would not be readily available. Before going, he taught himself the basics of the native languages, including Swahili. Doing things any other way, he said, would be "like spitting on my survival."

It was hard not to admire him. In the old grudges I'd held against him, I now saw my

pettiness. We began to enjoy more frequent phone conversations and visits. One afternoon, following one of our walks together, my dad smiled and said, "You know we've not only remade our relationship but we've become friends." I nodded, but in truth I didn't agree. There was still an important piece of me he hadn't accepted. Although he loved the woman I had moved in with and seemed proud to send me to an Ivy League school, he hadn't fully accepted my career choice. "You know, you'd make a great lawyer," he sometimes told me. But I didn't want to be a lawyer. Instead, I left a staff job at *Sports Illustrated* to strike out on my own as a writer. Doing anything else, I told him, would be like spitting on my survival.

Year after year ticked by with my father's bone scans showing the cancer seeping through his body like an oil spill. Occasionally these results would be accompanied by the onset of some frightening complication requiring hospitalization and more tests.

I became accustomed to a constant, low-level anxiety, like being in the dark hold of an unseaworthy vessel. I threw myself into my work, landing higher- and higher-profile magazine assignments, each one more pressure-packed than the last. I also got engaged. It was nearing a decade since my father's diagnosis. I was going on with my life. What else could I do?

Then, in December of 2000, while I was in Budapest working on a story, I got another call in which both of my parents were on the line. A new bone scan had revealed that several tumors were on the verge of entering my father's spinal column; if it was breached, he would be paralyzed from the neck down. No one in Denver was willing to perform the operation he needed, but after a flurry of calls they had found a specialist at Sloan Kettering Cancer Institute in New York who was willing to attempt the surgery. It would be a six- to eight-hour procedure. There was a chance he would never wake up.

My whole family flew in the next morning. The following day, after my brother and mom already had headed back to the waiting area, I found myself holding onto my dad's hand as he was wheeled, flat on his back, through the halls to the operating room. When the attendant finally said I had to leave, I started sobbing. For the first time, I thought, don't go yet. "Hey," my dad said, gripping my hand. "I'll see you soon." He was the one reassuring me.

Eight hours later, we were finally called to the ICU. There was my father, swollen and

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exhausted but giggling as he wiggled his toes from under the covers, the sign that he had averted paralysis. The surgery was a success. But back in Denver he slipped into an obvious decline. Having already exceeded the allowable amount of radiation, my father resorted to chemotherapy. With each month that passed he seemed to age a year. He lost his signature thick, brown beard as well as his hair; his previously fit body became pale, shrunken, and lumpy; he began to have good and bad days.

I had just landed my first book contract to do a full-blown treatment of the story I'd been in Budapest to write about the previous year. It was a big step in my career, but even though I got my wife's blessing we were both scared. Researching the book would require me to spend about a year over the next two in Europe. She worked a regular job in the city and wouldn't be able to accompany me. And, of course, I would be even farther from Denver—when it seemed time really was about to run out on my dad.

Not exactly understanding why, I began taping my phone conversations with my father. Then, before a visit home in December 2001, I bought a professional video camera and microphone and showed up asking if I could begin filming him.

"What do you hope to get out of it?" he asked. He seemed puzzled. I wasn't sure either, but not wanting to scare him off I told him I thought the film could be a source of inspiration for other cancer patients. He thought for a few minutes then said, "If it helps one person, it's worth it."

At first I thought, 'I'm going to be the best cancer patient ever;' then I realized, 'what an asshole, that's doing it for other people. It doesn't matter what anyone else thinks. Do it for yourself.'—David Rubinstein, on camera, 2002.

I'd never made a documentary film before, and I approached it as if it were any other journalism assignment. I was the fly on the wall; he was the subject. Everywhere he went, I followed him with the camera—to the bookstore, to the pharmacy, to walk the dog. I couldn't tell if he was indulging me because he wanted to spend time with me or because maybe he or I had something we needed to say to each other. But, like the best subjects, he quickly forgot he was being watched, so I just let the film roll.

I also sat him down and interviewed him. This seemed to make him happy. As a psychiatrist, he was someone who had trafficked in words, and for so long I'd made it clear his

had meant nothing to me. Now, holding the camera, I was, at last, listening.

He kept talking about his childhood. There were millions of stories, but the one I knew had to be in the film was the one he told of his father, who died when my father was 8, of lymphoma, a deadly form of blood cancer. I suggested we go together with the camera to the Bronx.

It was September 2002 when we went. The chemo treatments had left my dad too unsteady to drive, but he still knew the way to his old neighborhood. He pointed out old, decaying landmarks in a borough that had changed from immigrant to black and Hispanic since he'd been back. The obvious destination was the apartment he'd grown up in, so I let him take us there first. When we got to his block he peered in at the street-level kitchen window of what used to be his family's home, a two-room flat in which he shared a bedroom with his older sister Renee, while his parents, both immigrants from eastern Europe, slept on the living room couch.

Then I told him I wanted to go to Mount Sinai Hospital. That was where his father, Irving, a fur salesman and advertising jingle writer, spent the last several months of his life. "OK," my father said, hardly sounding sure. It was about a 15-minute drive. When we arrived, my dad got out and wandered around until he found a spot on the sidewalk. He looked up at the rows of hospital windows. And it's this image that now comes first to my mind whenever I think of my father: him, at age 8, standing right there and waving up to a window at the tiny head and hand of his weakened father. "Children weren't allowed in the building back then," my dad said, looking back down at the sidewalk. "By the time they agreed to let me in, he was already in a coma. He was gone." Then, for the first time in my life, I saw my father cry.

After my grandfather's death, a family friend who was a physician gave my dad a doctor's bag. While the other kids played stickball in the street, he ran around with his stethoscope and tongue depressors, telling everyone that when he grew up he was going to be a doctor and heal people.

By this time, I was living part-time in Budapest to work on my book and it was impossible to pretend my father's illness wasn't taking a toll on my life. On an almost daily basis, my dad seemed to be having a physical breakdown or dealing with the shocking death-zone results of yet another test or scan. I would get back to my Budapest



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Hung Liu, *China Mary I*, 2006, oil on canvas, 36 x 24 in., photo by Benjamin Blackwell




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This was a man who had come to revere life so much that he chased moths and spiders around the house, capturing and setting them free rather than killing them.

apartment, after an exhausting day of reporting through interpreters, and be on the phone to New York or Denver till at least midnight. My wife was having a hard time with my being away. And my mom was fragile, as might be expected of someone watching her husband wincing in pain from small bone fractures where the cancer was eating away his marrow. Sometimes, even before I got off the phone, I took a large dose of prescription sleep medication.

The next time I went back to Denver I brought the camera but wasn't sure I would use it. I was beginning to feel uneasy about the film. I still didn't know what purpose it was serving. And after our trip to the Bronx, it felt exploitative. This was my father, dying in front of my eyes. Not just any subject. Ironically, I'd chosen a career that required me to operate in a way that could be described as "hiding in the bushes." For better or worse, the

camera had become my doctor's bag.

But my father had a chemo treatment scheduled, and I couldn't help asking if I could accompany him. He agreed, and as we drove out to the center in Lakewood, I braced myself for a distressing afternoon. My dad was anxious, knowing he'd have to sit for hours with a chemical IV in his arm, and perhaps receive another round of dismal test results. But as soon as he walked through the door he was joking and chatting with secretaries, nurses, and patients alike. He looked more comfortable than I'd ever seen him. "There's something about coming here I do look forward to," he admitted. "Everyone's rooting for one another. It becomes something of a club."

The strength he got from being around others like him—the ultimate outsiders, the walking dead—was so powerful that he began volunteering as a counselor at Hospice of Metro Denver, a program for terminally ill patients designed to make the last months of their

lives as comfortable as possible. My dad was so committed to this work, he hired a driver to ferry him there so he wouldn't miss a day of counseling dying people who didn't know they were talking to a dying man.

It was hard for me to understand how he could face death so close up or why he would want to. This was a man who had come to revere life so much that he chased moths and spiders around the house, capturing and setting them free rather than killing them. When I asked him what it was about Hospice that kept him going back, he said, "It's a special privilege to share people's lives when they're so vulnerable," as usual sounding unaware of the camera trained on him. "It's so sweet to see people die a good death."

I wasn't sure I wanted to watch his, or even if that's what he was suggesting. But I couldn't take my eyes off him. Girding for the final battle for his life, my father had become at once stronger than ever, weaker than ever,

and more vulnerable than ever. He was an emotional kaleidoscope that I found myself drawn to, awed by, and in fear of. During one week, despite never having drawn before, he turned out a savant-like set of charcoal sketches he could have sold. And then there were times when his lungs filled with so much fluid that when he talked it sounded like he was drowning. Sometimes he was so uneasy on his feet he had to use a walker. There was something keeping him going, but I wasn't exactly sure what.

Then one night while I was up late reading in the living room after my parents had gone to bed, my dad stumbled in and sat down in a chair. He began rocking slowly, in obvious pain. We sat in silence for a few minutes as he pinched eyedroppers full of liquid morphine into his mouth. "Is there anything I can do?" I asked. "Don't you want to get the camera?" he said.

A few months later, in August of 2003, my family took a trip to Aspen. Dad had been having a particularly brutal run of side effects from the chemo, and several times in the weeks leading up to this trip had threatened to quit treatment

altogether. Worse, this time he was also down to the final experimental drug.

Within several hours of arriving at the condominium, his legs went numb, his mouth dry, and he lost the strength even to stand up on his own. I filmed while the rest of the family called around to doctors. They wanted him to go immediately to Denver, via medevac helicopter if possible. We packed our just-unpacked things and drove back to Craig Hospital in Denver, watching the star-filled sky watching us.

He spent several days in the hospital before being discharged without any clearer idea of what had caused his latest round of complications. When we got home he asked if I wanted to interview him. I was surprised by the request, but over the past few months it had become clear that the camera was enabling us to communicate. We found a quiet spot and sat down. I could see he was wrestling with something big.

"I had been feeling for some time that I wasn't finding much meaning in living this way," he said, speaking in the past tense. "Just seemed like I was doing what I had to do, but in reality it was very hard to stay alive." He looked down at the floor. "There wasn't much I was getting out of it. It was the pain, the loneliness of being at home, of not having any meaning to my life. I'm

kind of real surprised to hear myself say that...."

"For how long was that going on?" I asked. He paused for a long minute, then continued, not answering the question.

"A couple of times you said something to me as though...you hoped I was still going to wait for Aspen, or wait for your book [which was not yet finished]...and it just occurred to me that nobody wanted me to die."

"Was that surprising?" I asked. "No," he said. "But it was surprising that nobody was sort of getting it. That I didn't want to continue."

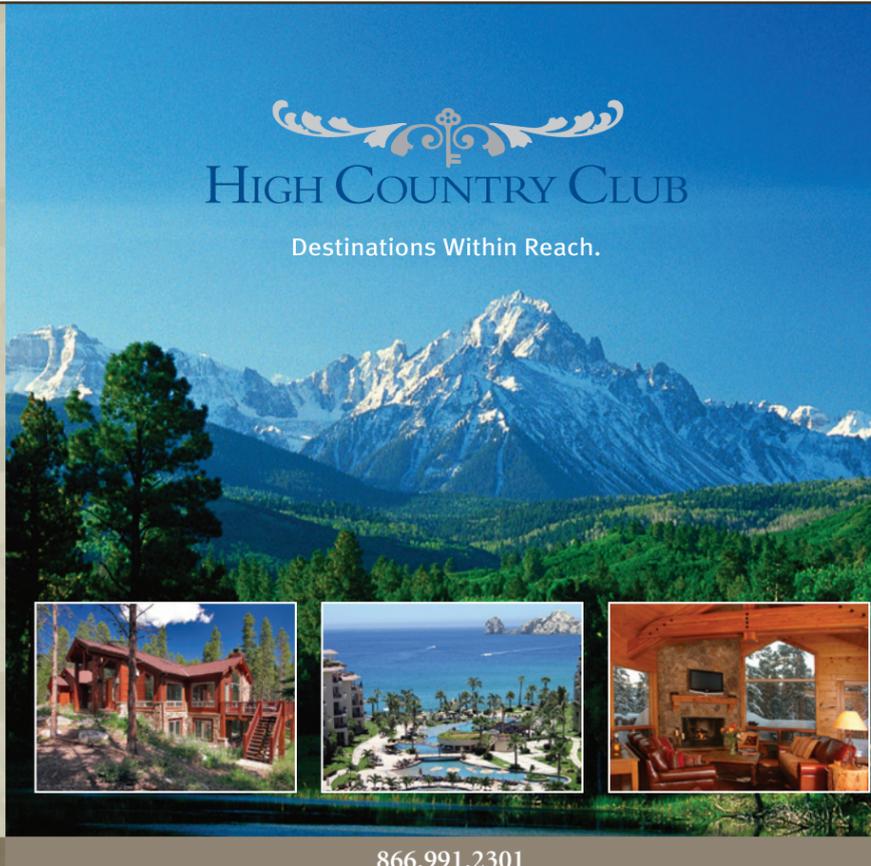
I tried to steady the camera as it hit me that my father was making his final request. He needed permission from his family—from me—to die. Fixed in my role as filmmaker, I said nothing. Nor did I speak out when, later that week, the volunteer psychiatrist for Hospice of Metro Denver became its newest patient.

I don't have as many illusions about myself....There's more of an acceptance of—this may sound odd, but I call it 'nothing special.' I used to harbor this idea that I had to be something special. I realize I'm just another person among billions and billions of

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people. —quote taken from an interview with my father, 2003.

The last time I saw my father was Thanksgiving Day, 2003. He had been doing the hospice at home program, and, despite some bad pain, seemed happier being off the chemo. Most days he was able to walk on his own, and on that morning the two of us went to Whole Foods. As usual, he sampled everything available, then bought up about four times as much cheese and nuts as we needed. He was in good spirits, and before the guests arrived I sat him down for one of our regular interview sessions. By now our intimate little dance had taken on the aura of ceremony. For him, I think, the filming was like supreme validation; for me, it signified his belief and trust in me and my work.

"Here it is, Thanksgiving 2003, 12 years since I was diagnosed," he said, proudly. "In September I went into hospice and was given eight weeks to live. And once again, they're wrong."

When it came time for dinner, dad raised a glass to toast the large gathering of friends and family. "To the usual suspects," he said with a big smile, as I hovered over the table with the camera. "Here, here," a few people called out, and we all clinked glasses.

The following week, when I was back in New York, dad began having serious trouble breathing, even when hooked up to the oxygen machine next to the bed. He couldn't urinate. His pain was so bad that he had no choice but to take massive amounts of morphine, leaving him foggy and sometimes hallucinating.

By Friday he was speaking gibberish; my mom, normally a paragon of strength, crumbled to pieces and couldn't stop crying. I wanted to get back, but a blizzard had struck New York and none of the airports were operating. I spoke to Dad briefly that night, but it wasn't even clear if he recognized who I was. He kept muttering something about going to the movies. I couldn't help wondering if it was our film he was seeing in his mind's eye.

On Saturday he fell into a coma. When I called, my mom put the phone up to his ear. Aware I might not make it home in time, I did what I knew I had to do. By now I'd realized this film was as much about me as it was about him. And this time the tape was rolling in my New York apartment, big flakes of snow coming down outside the window. "I love you," I said, trying to make the words clear through my tears. "And it's OK for you to go." I wished I'd had the courage to say it earlier so I would know he heard me. I certainly wasn't expecting him to answer. After all, he hadn't spoken or moved in almost 24 hours. But then from

the other end of the phone came a ghostlike groan. "Julian," my father said.

The next day I got on a plane about 6 a.m. It had been six hours since I'd spoken to my mom, and it was now too early in Denver to call her. When I touched down at DIA I turned on my cell phone, prepared to see a message waiting with the news. But there was none. Hurrying through the terminal with my carry-on to meet my brother, I dialed his number. "He's still alive," Daniel told me.

It was a bright winter day, and as we sped home from airport I squinted out at the landscape, brown and lifeless. We were racing against time, and I tried not to be annoyed when Daniel missed the exit and had to get back on the highway going the opposite way. About 10 minutes from home, his phone rang. The caller ID showed it was my mom. "We're almost there," Daniel said, picking up. Then a pause. "OK," he said and hung up. "He died," Daniel said, and as we rode along the quiet backcountry roads toward eastern Parker, my younger brother took my hand in his and we wept.

After uttering my name, my father had said only one more thing before he died. While my mother was sitting with him, he'd sat up with a startle, grabbed her arm, and whispered, "It's going to be OK," before falling immediately back into a coma. That was December 7, 2003, more than 12 years after his initial diagnosis. He was 61.

Until earlier this year, his number remained in my cell phone and the plastic bag full of mini-DV tapes I'd shot sat in the closet, unedited, unwatched. The two-plus years since his death had been full of major life changes. My first book had been published to critical success and picked up by Hollywood. Meanwhile, my marriage, after five years, had ended. In the fall I'd applied for and was accepted to do a residency at an artist colony in New Hampshire. I planned on working on a novel, but at the last minute decided to take the bag of videotapes with me.

I spent the first few weeks there in my cabin, watching the footage. Alone in the stillness of the New England woods, I cried and then cried some more. Partly for the losses I had suffered. But also because I saw a piece of myself in the man on the tape: my father, the Bronx-born Jew and Colorado horse owner. My father the doctor turned cancer patient. My father, who'd helped me learn to live, asked me to let him die, and left me to tell the story. ▲

*Julian Rubinstein is the author of *Ballad of the Whiskey Robber*.*

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