

Epilogue

I'm Still Here

June 2009

I had better hurry and have my sweet Anni get this little story down before it has to be in the past tense. My life story was written between the two of us and appropriately titled *Don't Throw Away Your Stick Till You Cross the River-The Journey of An Ordinary Man*. "Tell Dad don't slip on the banana peel before I get there," quips my son Kris. That pulls a little smile from my nearly immobile face. I'm doing my best to hang on but right now I think I'm into what they call *The Final Stage*.

I have a movement disorder called Parkinson's Plus or Progressive Supranuclear Palsy-a big name describing the fact that my body hardly moves at all. I don't shake or twist or do any acrobatics-I just lie still in my hospital bed. The good thing is that my nifty bed is parked in the middle of the living room. The foot traffic is heavy. The Jam Pak Blues 'N' Grass Neighborhood Band practices all around me three times a week. The many children come in and I feel surrounded with noise and love. Mama Cat and Chandler Cat keep my legs warm and Coco Rose, my rambunctious puppy, reminds me with her wet kisses to wake up.

Hospice of the Valley has been in charge of my care for the past nine months. They seem to be happy I'm still alive. The nurse is pretty and the gorgeous CNA, who gives me delicious bed baths three times a week, both love me. They visit every day and take care of whatever I need. But my wife Anni does the major work of feeding me, changing my pants, kissing me very often, sharing memories, and those words of love. Sometimes I can respond, sometimes I just soak in the words and can't say a thing. My lips won't form a sound. I, who used to blow that flute and sax to kingdom come, can't make a puff of air.

Why am I writing now? Just to remind us all, and myself especially, that we don't get out of this life alive. We're hugely blessed if we live long and have time to think, mend any fences, give and receive love, and experience the final stages. My family is planning a big party with lots of

music and Chinese food and my body to be in the living room until they haul me to the VA Cemetery, in a homemade box, for full military honors. I smile when I hear all the plans. I do hope I can hover around for awhile so that I don't miss anything.

Don't Throw Away Your Stick Till You Cross the River

1. Well, times are tough, you know times are hard

Ain't always feel that you come too far

Counting your pennies from the old change jar,

Better days ain't far.

Don't throw away your stick till you cross the river,

Cross the river, cross the river

Don't throw away your stick till you cross the river

And you get to the other side.

2. Well, the road is rough and the way is rocky,

Mountains steep and the ocean choppy

Don't you be afraid to lean on somebody,

Better days ain't far.

3. If I had a roof hanging over my head

And a little bit of straw to make my bed

I wouldn't be cold and I wouldn't be wet,

Better days ain't far.

4. Some follow their heart, some follow the stars

Some cross the desert and carry the scars

It might seem like a trip to Mars,

Better days ain't far.

Words and Music by Lil Rev in Honor of Vincent Beach

Around the Campfire-CD "Walking Stick"

www.lilrev.com

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"How does death happen? How did he die?" asks a young boy standing by the bed. It's already midday and the house is crowded with children, parents, neighbors, and family. Smiles, tears, touching his still body, and asking over and over about how it happened.

The quiet of the night had enfolded us in its comforting arms. The time was close and his favorite songs were playing. A little morphine just to ease his breathing-sweet breaths growing farther and farther apart. So relaxed and ready. A little after midnight on Super Bowl Sunday, February 7, 2010, I maintained my vigil with Mama Cat-she nestled in the crook of his arm, a place of refuge for me as well. Kisses and words of thanks for our lives, and then I said, "Vincent, it's time to just let go. Everyone is waiting for you." A minute later, at exactly 0015, and with a light and happy expression, his breathing just stopped. "All Through the Night," a favorite song taught him by Mother Xavier as a child, was playing. I took photos of his beautiful face that had just received the supreme gift of freedom. And then I sat with him, resisting the urge to call everyone and to make notes. It seemed best to relax and be there for him.

Earlier in the evening, news went out on Facebook that Mr. Beach wasn't doing well. Several Jam Pak members just showed up, prepared to spend the night, bringing pizzas and comfort. Nurse Connie of Hospice of the Valley came and confirmed what was happening. We sang his favorite bluegrass songs "White Dove" and "November Rain" and played some banjo tunes. Joelle, Elyssa, Francisco, and Neil left to go bowling at 10:00PM. I trimmed his nails, tried to convey all the love we felt for him, how he would be missed, but that we would live his legacy. When the young people returned they were surprised that he was gone. We cried a little, sat by him, and then they moved to the kitchen-their soft laughter as they played the game "Apples to Apples" reassurance to me.

The memory quilt was done; the feather pillow from Toyei Boarding School (1983), his Air Force dress uniform which still fit, all ready. White tee shirts bearing his photo and the words - "*Life is not a journey to the grave with the intention of arriving safely in a pretty & well preserved body, but rather to skid in broadside, totally worn out & proclaiming, 'Wow, What a Ride!'*" were given to everyone who came to visit. These "party favors" had been here for months in preparation for the big event. He approved of them saying, "AC, you think of everything."

The angels, Sandy and Jessie, from Angels Mortuary in Mesa, came in the afternoon and everyone helped load him up, wrapped in a soft blue angel blanket, wearing his Calvin Pete golf hat, and we sang the song written about him by Lil Rev, "Don't Throw Away Your Stick Till You Cross the River". Lots of food and flowers were arriving, many settled in to watch the Colts and New Orleans Saints battle in the Super Bowl, flights were scheduled, and plans were in the works. My own, and only, personal meltdown came that night when I was truly alone-his bed empty-only a small crocheted angel left by the angels on his pillow and all the animals, including Webster, our goose, maintaining a bedside vigil. I wondered, "Is this what it will be like the rest of my life?" My sister Janette called at that moment and said she'd be there in the morning. I slept.

His homemade box designed and built by Kris and our banjo teacher Mark, with handmade stainless steel rails by Jam Pak Dad, Dan, was ready. The fat Sharpie markers were used by everyone to write loving messages to Vincent on the lid when he was brought back home for the farewell party. Rev. Bobby Robertson, also known as The Jam Pak Dad Mechanic, led us in The Lord's Prayer. Several months later, Thomas Porter, well-known bluegrass singer and song writer, composed a song "Simple Box of Pine" which expressed what so many felt about this man who felt so ordinary, but in his ordinariness, has become an extraordinary example of living and dying.

He loved being here in the living room surrounded with children, pets, music, lots of good food, and Hospice of the Valley for the last year and a half of his life. The Chandler firemen would come and load him into the motor home so he never missed a gig with Jam Pak. He was loved dearly in life and continues to be honored after his death. Indeed, September 25th, his birthday, will be known as "Beach Day" and we will celebrate with parties, dancing, and lots of love. And we will honor his legacy of Patience, Perseverance, Practicality, and Peacefulness.

Simple Box of Pine

1. Vincent was a gifted man he served his country well,
He cared more for the children than words can ever tell.
Never have I seen a man who touched so many lives,

Many came to sign the box when Vincent Beach had died.

2. A simple box of Douglas fir, crafted by a friend,

Scent of pine and lacquer stain upon a metal stand.

Littered with the writings of the ones who stopped to pray,

Never seen a casket with more beauty to this day.

Many rich men are buried in coffins so fine,

Satin and exotic woods and wreaths of flowers fine.

When I die please bury me and grant this wish of mine,

Send me home to see the Lord in a simple box of pine.

3. When I am old and weary and my time on earth is come

Pray that I have touched the souls of each and every one

If they come to visit and see me one more time

I hope they sign and send me home in a simple box of pine.

Words and music by Thomas Porter

www.thomasporter.com



"I can never fill his shoes, but I'll dance on top of them."

Anni Beach

The book is available through several sources. See www.vincentbeach.com