

Uncle Sam Wants Me. Chapter Six. One Hand Washes The Other.

Sue and her mom wanted us to get married and I wanted to avoid getting drafted. After the pregnancy scare and me agreeing to get married, “the other shoe dropped” when I received my notice to report for my pre-induction physical, which I inexplicably passed.

While at Ft Des Moines I received an informational packet about the draft. One sheet listed all of the possible draft classifications starting with the dreaded I-A, eligible to be taken immediately. But as I read further down the list, another classification caught my eye. III-D hardship to dependents. Only to be taken in times of national emergency. I was only a few weeks out from marrying a young woman with a very debilitating chronic disease who often needed significant daily care. And they couldn't really deem Viet Nam a “national emergency” as no declaration of war had been issued and it was officially a “police action”.

When I got back to my apartment in Iowa City, I immediately crashed for sixteen hours since I had not slept in the previous thirty-four. As soon as I woke up, I drove back to Sue's folk's place in CR and talked with Sue and her mom about getting a

III-D deferment. They thought it was a great idea and set up an appointment for us to visit Sue's physician later in the week. We did and he promised to provide a letter stating that Sue was suffering from Cystic Fibrosis and would need frequent care for the rest of her life, as soon as we were married.

The notice to report for induction (numero uno) arrived the next week but my report date was not until two weeks after the wedding day. We were married on Saturday, August 30th.

It was a classic church wedding with an extremely immature twenty-year-old groom (who looked about fifteen) and a beaming and significantly more mature bride. About two-hundred family and friends of our folks were in attendance. Except for the groomsman and ushers, only two of my buddies showed up. The following Monday I went to the office and picked up the letter from Sue's doc. I then hand carried it directly to the local draft board. The following week I received a notice from them canceling the order to report for service and a new draft card indicating that I was now classified III-D and would not get drafted as long as Sue and I were married. Whew, that was too damn close.

Sue and I, with some help from our folks, bought a charming used little single wide mobile home with central air conditioning in excellent condition. It sat on a nice end lot with a large front yard and no other trailers visible from our front room. We got a kitty, I got a job in town, and we and settled into domestic living. Sue had always been very neat and organized which I had not. Her frequent illness precluded her from seeking employment, but since we had bought the home outright our monthly expenses were modest except for one. Her medications ran about \$50 a month which was a lot of money in 1969. Sue's mom contacted Social Services to see if Sue would be eligible for some help paying for her prescriptions. They told her that we should make an appointment and come in. We did so. Even though we were only asking for help paying for the meds, they put us on Medicaid which covered all medical expenses for both of us and a monthly allotment of food stamps. The upshot was that my meager check from my factory job was going to cover everything else with a little left over.

Life was good. We loved living together and even when she was feeling sick, Sue worked hard keeping the home spotless and preparing my favorite meals. She never complained about her situation or the pain when she was sick. I was in awe of her courage and determination. That first year went swimmingly. Then her condition took a hard turn for the

worst. She started experiencing excruciating pain in her lower back that made it impossible for her to get out of bed unaided. Her mom stepped up once again and we worked out a schedule where she would come over about an hour after I left for work and stay until about an hour before I returned.

Sue was prescribed powerful pain killers which did dull the pain but caused her to be in a dream state for most of the time. Looking back, I believe that the dosage was too high for someone who only weighed ninety pounds at the time. She could rarely eat and spent almost all of her time in bed. Since she was no longer up and moving around the over-production of mucus in her lungs reached lethal proportions. She was in danger of drowning in it. It got to the point that her mom and I decided that it would make more sense for us to move back in with her and her dad so she would have around the clock care. We bought a used hospital bed and set it up in her old room and placed an army cot next to it.

Six months later, in the middle of the night, I was lying awake next to Sue's hospital bed in her parent's house. I was twisting and turning the narrow cot experiencing extreme anxiety and depression. She had been in and out of a coma and/or dream state for about six months due to her chronic Cystic Fibrosis, the over prescription of pain meds, and what later turned out to be a ninety-eight per cent crimped bowel. Due to her

frequent and long bouts of semi and un-consciousness, she could not be left alone for a minute, because she had episodes that could have resulted in her choking to death on the copious amounts of mucus that her lungs produced because of the CF. Not being able to get up and move around was exacerbating the buildup of mucus. The doctors had told her family and I to be prepared for her demise. That was excruciatingly hard to do.

It wasn't just her impending death that was affecting my mental state. It was the roller coaster of emotions that her family and I had been experiencing. Meanwhile, Sue was so medicated and so often in a fog of illness and pain medication, that she rarely realized how grim her prognosis was. At times, the doctors would say that she was improving and with the help of cutting-edge research there might be a cure or at least a significant prolongation of life. A couple of months later the message was; "the end is near". This cycle was repeated over and over. My emotional capacity to process these swings was clearly overwhelmed.

On this particular night I felt like I had reached my limit. Sue's dad Ed was a hunter and had a full array of shotguns and rifles in the basement. I made my plan. Everyone in the house was asleep. I was going to quietly slip down into the basement, load one of the shotguns, stick it in my mouth and blow my

brains up against the basement wall. I just could not take the emotional pain any longer.

But something happened. I had a live saving epiphany. I knew that if I walked out on Sue, for my own well-being, I would be consumed with guilt resulting in an emotional state that might be as bad or even worse than what I was currently experiencing. But....., if I was willing to “pull the trigger” right then.... I could always do it at some point in the future. The revelation freed me up to do anything that I had ever imagined. If things went horribly wrong or if the guilt and/or depression became too debilitating... kablooe! So, I put off that dreadful decision for the time being. But I always kept that “Get out of life free” card handy in case I needed it. And having it in my holster gave me an immense sense of freedom to do whatever I wished.

A couple of months went by and Sue rallied once again. She was still emaciated at five-foot one inch tall and now weighing eighty pounds. But she was awake and conscious of her surroundings and manifesting a life spirit that few people possessed, let alone a person that had endured grievous physical pain and had teetered on death’s doorstep for so long, and for so many times.

As cruel as it seemed to leave her when she was starting to feel like her old self, I believed that it was better than having her wake to find that her husband had split. She had no memory of me spending my nights in the cot by her bed. She just figured her mom and aunt had provided all of her care while I was partying with my friends. Yes, I had done some partying, but I was always by her side when it was my turn on the schedule. And numerous times, when she was choking on mucus, in the middle of the night, I would pull her out of bed and hold her upside down by her ankles while hollering for her mom, who would then run down from her and Ed's bedroom in order to pound Sue on her back dislodging enough of the mucus so that Sue could resume breathing.

After she had gotten strong enough that we could to return to our home and some time had passed, I finally got up the nerve to tell her that I was leaving, which meant that she would have to permanently move back in with her folks. We both cried our eyes out as I packed my car, leaving her with our fully paid for mobile home, a late model VW Bug we had purchased with wedding present cash, and whatever possessions that would not fit in my 1959 Volvo, then drove away. Her parents were wonderful, kind, loving people who were always very sweet to me, even after they learned that I was about to abandon their sick daughter. But I was enamored with the idea of being totally on my own, to do

whatever I wanted for the first time in my life. I had been out of college for two years and no longer felt the need to go back to school just to show my folks that I could do it without their help. I did not know if I could survive one single day with the crushing guilt that I was feeling, but I had to give it a try.