

Still Me:

A Man, His Tuba, and a Life with Cancer

Memoir: 64,000 words

by Mike Martinson

PROLOGUE

We had just loaded several hundred pounds of salmon onto our commercial fishing boat near Homer, Alaska, when I saw another boat drifting toward our beam. I threw the engine into reverse to clear it, but instead of the usual surge, there was a violent, metallic shudder that ran through the soles of my boots—followed by a sudden, hollow silence. After hours of working next to a large diesel engine, that sudden stop is a frightening sound. I knew immediately: the prop had fouled.

Around commercial fishing boats, a loose line in the water is like a snare. When a rope wraps around a spinning propeller, it tightens with such force that the nylon feels like rebar. We managed to use the skiff to push ourselves out of the immediate path of other boats, but we were dead in the water just as the fishing reached its peak. Sockeye were jumping everywhere; even from inside the cabin, I could hear the arrhythmic slap-slap of salmon hitting the surface. We were “in the money,” as they say—a single good day like this can yield as much as two weeks of slow fishing. I couldn’t let that profit slip away.

My crew of four on the purse-seine boat included my three grown children and me: David was 21, Benny was 18, and Sarah was 14. We would spend about two months each summer fishing for salmon in one of Alaska’s most beautiful areas.

“I’m going in,” I said, already kicking off my boots. I planned to jump into that glacier-cold water with nothing more than a steak knife and a swimsuit. I knew the risks: in water that cold, the gasp reflex can seize your chest and flood your lungs before you manage a single stroke.

But we had all been in that water many times. After a long day of fishing, while the summer light in Alaska stretched on all night, we would sometimes use our seine skiff to tow one of us on water skis, much to the bewilderment of the other crews.

I went into the cabin to strip down, but my son David was already there, shirtless and determined.

“I’ve got it, Dad,” he said.

He was an excellent swimmer, but the physics were risky. To reach the prop, he would have to swim under the boat itself. When he ran out of air, he couldn’t just surface; he’d first have to find his way back out from under the aluminum hull before he could ascend.

I tied a safety line around him, trying to hide my shaking hands. Gripping the steak knife, he jumped into the dark and disappeared beneath the boat for what felt like far too long. When he finally surfaced, breathing hard, he confirmed my fear: the wrap was tight.

He dove eight more times. Each time he went under, I held the rope, feeling the faint tugs through the safety line as he sawed at the rope. Finally, he surfaced with a handful of shredded nylon and the bent steak knife clenched in his teeth like a pirate on a sabotage mission.

Sarah turned the diesel stove to its highest setting to help him thaw out. From start to finish, the mini-crisis was over within an hour: the prop was turning again, and salmon were swimming back into our net.

That was how I solved problems: invent a solution, accept the risk, dive in, and fix it without hesitation or delay. I thought that was how all problems were solved.

Years later, sitting in front of an X-ray screen, a doctor pointed at a white blur and handed me a problem I couldn’t solve—a challenge that no skill, no courage, and no quick thinking could fix. The rules had changed. The solutions were no longer in my hands.

CHAPTER 1

Gut Punch

“You need to get your affairs in order,” the doctor said, his voice heavy with concern. “You have one to three years to live.”

I could hear the strain as he delivered news he wouldn’t wish on anyone. He cleared his throat, fist pressed to his lips, then looked at me before dropping his gaze to the floor. And just like that, my life was upended.

I hadn’t even gone to the doctor for anything serious. It was just my shoulder, an ache that had been hanging around for months. I assumed it was a sprain or maybe something more serious, like a rotator cuff tear. Either way, I thought it was something that could be fixed. I ignored the pain until it got so bad that I couldn’t lift my instrument at all.

On a typical rehearsal evening with the Symphony or various orchestras in Anchorage, Alaska, I would park on “G” Street, two or three blocks from the rehearsal hall, and carry my instrument inside. But as the pain got worse, carrying my instrument became unbearable. It didn’t help that I played the heaviest instrument in the orchestra: the tuba.

I finally visited a medical clinic and saw one of the physicians on staff. The clinic was efficient but impersonal, sharp with the smell of disinfectant and the soft trickle of a rock-wall fountain. People stood in line, shuffling forward to explain their ailments to the receptionist. Before meeting her, I told myself my shoulder was just an annoyance, nothing more.

I sat by myself to avoid the coughing and nose blowing, flipping through magazines and thinking about the music I was going to play that evening. Outside, heavy December snow was

piling up. The city was being transformed into a clean whiteness that was great to look at but miserable to drive in. I didn't realize I was about to be transformed, too.

Soon after, an assistant called my name. She walked me through a hallway where I was introduced to the doctor who would be treating me that day, a kind-looking man in his fifties with a short beard and a balding scalp. I explained the pain and weakness in my shoulder. Without hesitation, he sent me to the X-ray room.

After the X-ray, I was asked to wait in a small seating area while he examined the results. The waiting area had three chairs and a small table with outdated magazines. I sat there for twenty minutes, watching other patients walk by and wondering why it was taking so long.

I had no idea that in just minutes, my world would never be the same. The man in that chair, worrying about an evening rehearsal, would soon be replaced by someone who would have to learn an entirely new vocabulary for hope and what it means to be human when your mortality shifts from the distant background to the spotlight.

Those were my last twenty minutes of not knowing. I was about to begin the most important performance of my life. This time, the challenge wouldn't be about music or something beautiful. It was about staying alive.

When the doctor finally approached, his head hung low, his face burdened. He invited me into his office and offered me a chair in front of his computer. I recognized the digital picture as an X-ray. My ribcage filled the screen, and near my right shoulder was a large white object. He explained that a baseball-sized tumor was destroying the second rib on my right side, causing pain in my right shoulder. He asked if I had heard of multiple myeloma. I hadn't, so he spelled it out for me and said those ominous words that are reserved for people who are extremely sick. Then he said, "You need to see an oncologist."

“Get your affairs in order” is something you say to people who are dying. But I felt fine. I just had a sore shoulder.

I later learned this cancer targets plasma cells in the bone marrow, where blood cells are produced. It only affects about seven out of 100,000 people each year. I was in an exclusive club—one I could do without.

My mind felt numb. I tried to study the X-ray like a music score I’d never seen before. This white mass, where bone should have been, was silently eating through my rib for months while I’d been conducting rehearsals above it. For thirty-two years, I had been teaching students to read and interpret music notation: black-and-white symbols that transform into sounds that words cannot imitate. Now I was trying to decipher what this white blob meant. It wasn’t music or beauty; it was disease and probable death.

It felt like he was talking about someone else. My voice remained steady as I asked technical questions about tumor behavior, maintaining the same analytical detachment I used to dissect my conductor’s score: breaking it into smaller pieces, trying to solve the puzzle.

For decades, I’d guided teenagers through their first encounters with complex musical ideas. Now I was the confused student, and there were no practice exercises for mortality. You either understand that you’re dying, or you don’t. The doctor watched me with concern, clearly recognizing that I hadn’t truly processed what he’d told me. He seemed more shaken by the diagnosis than I was, at least for now.

I thanked him politely, as if he’d just given me directions to the nearest coffee shop. My body moved on autopilot, shaking his hand, gathering my jacket, and walking through the antiseptic hallways toward the exit. I must have walked through the snow to my car, because I found myself standing beside it, keys in hand, wondering how I’d gotten there. An hour earlier, I

was a band director with a sore shoulder. At that moment, I had no idea who I was or who I would become.

CHAPTER 2

The Instrument and the Illness

Once I got into my car, I shut the door and closed my eyes. I sat there for over fifteen minutes, overwhelmed by a flood of unanswerable questions. It wasn't until the windshield started to ice up on the inside from my breath that I realized I hadn't even started the car. It was winter in Alaska. The cold was gripping, but I didn't feel it.

Problem-solving had always been my secret weapon. This time I had nothing.

That evening was our first orchestra rehearsal for the holiday pops concert. I planned to go home, pick up my tuba, and head over around 6:30. I would see good friends and colleagues. Telling anyone about my prognosis was not in the cards — not yet. I decided to attend as if nothing had happened.

I parked on the street as usual. John, a trumpet-player friend, happened to be walking by. I asked him to help me get my tuba out of the car. My sore shoulder was my excuse for soliciting help. He gladly gave me a hand and continued to carry the beast into the concert hall. I carried his trumpets in a much smaller case.

I couldn't look him in the eye as I felt a twinge of guilt for not being entirely truthful. He was doing me a favor, and all I gave him in return was a half-truth about my shoulder hurting without an explanation of why it hurt. I knew staying silent about the truth was the right choice. I tried to make small talk, anything to cover my secret and help me think of something else. I mentioned the snow on the sidewalk had been plowed recently. He looked confused, as if he sensed something was off.

Once inside the concert hall, I managed to lift the tuba from the case and onto my lap. The pain from lifting it was excruciating, but I now had a secret to keep. Using my good arm to do most of the work, I pretended there was nothing wrong. I forced a smile as I sat and tried to carry on as I had done for many years in countless rehearsals and concerts. Pretending I was “fine” gave me something to focus on. It also helped me think about anything other than the haunting thoughts of an early death.

The bass trombonist, who sat next to me, was a friend I had known for decades. She glanced at me and asked, “How has your day been?” I blurted, “Great,” so quickly it didn’t sound real. She gave me a second look of confusion. I felt another bit of guilt as I kept the news to myself.

As the rehearsal continued, I maintained the deception. I went out of my way to seem normal and even content. But with each short break, my mind would detour back to those thoughts. Most were the same questions without answers that I had been repeating for the past two hours. Should I be doing something different with the short time I have left? Would I be extremely sick and hospitalized? Would playing music become impossible? Would I be thought of as a full-blown cancer patient? I finally had an answer to one of my questions. The answer was a resounding no!

I found tremendous comfort in having exactly one answer to my running list of questions. Cancer might take my body, but it would not take my identity. In that moment of clarity, cutting through three hours of chaotic questions, I had one answer. I wasn’t going to be “the guy with cancer.” Not in that room. Not anywhere.

I was a music educator, a tuba player, a conductor, a colleague, and a friend. My bachelor's degree was in music performance — tuba — with a second major in music education.

I also picked up a master's in music degree and a principal certification. I was someone who solved problems and helped teenagers discover the joy of making music.

Cancer might have been living in my bones, multiplying in my blood, but it didn't get an introduction while I was greeting people or seeing old friends. It was nothing more than a heartless disease. It did not get to define me.

For the last hour of a three-hour rehearsal, I focused on being normal, not allowing my new enemy, called cancer, to seize me entirely. I focused on my warm timbre that can only come from a tuba. I consciously felt the air fill my lungs, as if breathing on a mountain hillside covered in fireweed. I noticed the beauty of my instrument, how it sat at the bottom of the chordal structure, supporting the entire symphony. It was always a wonderful sound, but it seemed especially full and vibrant that evening.

I felt the vibrations from my tuba against my arms and on my lap more than ever. My tuba felt light and, for a change, more melodic. By the end of the rehearsal, I was still very confused and overwhelmed. But clinging to who I was allowed me to produce a genuine smile.

As I was putting the tuba back in its case, John casually made an offer. He said, "I'm walking right past your car again. Would you like me to carry the tuba?" I clicked the latches and answered with a reassuring smile, "Thanks, I've got it." I picked up the case with my left arm to show him I could at least lift it. I didn't know how I would get it to my car, but with one good arm, I hoped I could figure it out. I watched John stroll off stage and disappear.

He didn't know that as soon as he turned the corner, my "reassuring smile" would vanish. At that point, I had no idea how complex my treatments would be or how weak I would become. I didn't know how close to death I would be from potential sepsis, from transplants, or from the cancer itself. I had just one answer to cling to.

I wouldn't let cancer define me.

CHAPTER 3

Small Victories

Getting the tuba back in the car was a challenge. It became a stubborn shuffle, my left arm doing most of the work as pain shot through the right. I lifted in segments, improvising with my legs instead of my arms, until I finally got it done. It wasn't pretty, but it was the first victory of the night.

In the sudden silence of my car, without an audience of colleagues, the mask I'd worn for three hours finally came off. I was no longer the principal tubist, the guy with all the answers, but just a person sitting in the dark, aching with confusion. For the first time all day, it wasn't about holding things together for my colleagues or mustering up another "I'm fine." It was just me, alone, facing a new reality where my body was working against me, cell by cell.

I started the drive home, first through downtown Anchorage. The plows and dump trucks were removing snow from the streets. The cold temperatures made it seem even darker than usual. The only light came from streetlights reflecting off of the snow. As I drove through the city, I thought about how, for thirty-two years of teaching, I had always prided myself on pushing through pain. I had always seen working through pain as a sign of strength. I asked myself if I were being foolish about ignoring pain.

Earlier that night, I was faced with a pain that would not yield to willpower. This was not about being tough enough to ignore my limitations. It was about being smart enough to work around them. As I started to leave the city, headed for Eagle River, I realized getting that damn tuba in the car was the first time I claimed a victory over cancer. That would later become my

daily goal: one small victory after another. For the first time, I thought, Maybe I can beat this thing.

The twelve mile drive to my home seemed to take so long as I drove in silence wondering what to do next. The burning question was whether I should tell anyone about this. It seemed selfish to withhold the truth, but I did not know how accurate my initial prognosis was. Even if I explained that a visit with an oncologist was imminent, they would be sick with concern until I had more accurate information. I was torn, knowing I would cause anxiety either way.

When I pulled into my driveway, the house was dark. My wife didn't know what I was going through and that felt right. It was almost like the cancer didn't exist if nobody knew about it. But then I had to unload the tuba out of my car. The sharp pain was a check with reality that the tumor was real. I couldn't just pretend it wasn't there. As I snuck into the house, I decided I would see an oncologist and go from there.

Around 11:30, I pulled out my laptop and searched for "multiple myeloma life expectancy." I checked at least five or six websites, hoping to find a better answer. Every site posted the same alarming message: the typical life expectancy was one to three years.

Age also seemed to be a factor. At fifty-five, I was considered young for this cancer. My age was the only encouraging statistic. There were no hopeful headlines, only illness, painful treatment, and a probable early death. It was after midnight, and I had to be at the school by six. I slept a few minutes on and off, but mostly I lay awake and worried about the future, about dying. I planned to call an oncologist's office after my third class at the high school. They opened at nine.

At 3:15 in the morning, my mind was still racing. I needed sleep, so I focused on my breath, imagining myself playing my tuba. A full breath in and then focused air into my horn,

creating a full, vibrant sound. I thought about playing folk songs. In my mind, it was a comforting sound, one that lifted my soul and finally sang me to sleep.

The alarm shocked me awake at 5:00. For a split second, I'd forgotten. Then it crashed back: the X-ray, the white mass, the doctor's face. One to three years. I had to be at school by six.

My jazz band would file into the band room at 6:25, expecting their teacher to be the same person he was yesterday. None of them could know that everything had changed.

I showered, dressed, and practiced my smile in the mirror. It looked fake. I tried again. The sun wouldn't consider rising for several hours. It was dark and cold as usual. As I left the house for the ten minute drive to my high school, I tried to think of anything else but cancer. I failed.

At 11 a.m., during lunch, I would call the oncologist's office. Until then, I had to teach four classes while carrying a secret that felt like it weighed more than my tuba: I was dying, and I was the only person in the building who knew it.