

**Still Me:
A Man, His Tuba, and the Fight to Stay Himself**

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. Most things were. I ignored the pain until it got so bad 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.

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 20 minutes, watching other patients walk by and wondering why it was taking so long.

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."

I later learned this cancer targets plasma cells in the bone marrow, where blood cells are produced. It only affects about 7 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 32 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.

CHAPTER 2

Climbing Spikes

I knew that most people, faced with four dead trees leaning over a house, would pick up the phone with a checkbook nearby and consider the problem solved. I never learned to make that call. My first real job was on a family gold claim a hundred miles north of Nome, where the nearest help was a day's drive of bad road and the answer to every broken thing was the same: you thought up a solution, and then you fixed it with what you had. My father never paid someone to do a thing he could figure out himself, and neither did I.

I knew, as always, my wife would protest if I asked her opinion. She would say, "It's worth the money to let someone else do it." We've never agreed on that point. So I put the belt and spikes on without telling her my plans. I did let her know by calling her on my cell phone as I was climbing the first tree. She stepped outside, took my picture, and went back in the house. She couldn't watch.

Dead trees don't fall politely — any hard wind could put one through the roof or the shed. I'd picked up a used set of climbing spikes and a belt a few years before. This was the fall of 2014, and a dull ache had settled into my right shoulder that I figured would work itself out. The snow had already fallen, and soon its weight would burden the trees even further.

The first tree was the most dangerous. If it fell anywhere wrong, it would have landed on the roof. That kind of damage, especially in cold weather, would be devastating. I could have dropped the trees from the ground and tried to steer the fall with a notch, but with trees that close to the house the risk wasn't worth it. So I went up instead — spikes on, belt set, chainsaw hanging from a chain off my hip — limbing the trunk as I climbed until each tree was a bare

pole, then taking it down from the top in eight-foot lengths. Small enough to control. Nothing left standing that could hurt what was underneath.

The first tree went the way it should have. Its top had to be thrown to clear the roof; after that, the sections dropped five feet out with a thud. The other three came down the same way. Each section made enough firewood to last a couple of weeks.

It's a different world on top of a tree in October in Alaska. I could see dozens of houses, all trying to stay warm. It was freezing, probably in the upper 20s. There is something about that kind of cold that feels perfect. The air is crisp and dry, each breath like a cold glass of water. Leaning back on my belt with boot spikes stuck into the tree was like cheating death. If something went wrong, I knew I wouldn't survive the fall. But the solution was simple. Don't fall.

The feeling of being that high and leaning back on a rope and a piece of leather meant I trusted that nothing would break. At one point, I decided to see how fast a 55-year-old could climb. I'd been to many logging shows as a child, watching my dad compete in the axe throwing and cable splicing. One cousin did the tree-topping event. He would climb the 90-foot spar tree, then cut the top with a bucking saw. As I climbed near the top, I flipped the rope up but it caught on a branch stub. My reaction was to hug the tree, which caused my spikes to slip out. My joy of pretending I was a fit 20-year-old turned into an instant fearful adrenaline rush as I slid about 10 feet down. My rope was slack and my spikes were drawing a vertical line down the tree. Finally one spike held and I was saved from falling to the ground. I knew I was being foolish by hugging the tree. I didn't think I was foolish by seeing how fast I could climb. When it was over, my only thought was, that was a little scary but also a little fun.

The shoulder flared every time I hauled myself up. I told myself it was a job that had to be done and the pain was something I could manage. I didn't know I was climbing on a rib the cancer was already eating through. I was carrying the tumor up the tree with me. Up and down, up and down. Each time I lifted the chainsaw, the tumor protested, but I wasn't listening.

When the last section came down, like the three trees before it, not one piece of wood had touched the house. The reward for my efforts was huge. Four trees lay on the ground in pieces, and I had days of good work ahead — bucking into 16-inch lengths, splitting them, stacking firewood for winter, hauling off the brush. It was physical, the kind of work I've always liked. It hadn't cost me a dime, and I didn't have a tree service crew milling around my yard. By the time I finished, the ache in my shoulder was constant. But I was sure it would fade with time.

I thought about that two months later, sitting in my car in the clinic lot with the snow coming down. Back then I'd been protecting the house from the dead thing that might fall on it. Now I was the house.

CHAPTER 3

The Instrument and the Illness

Back in the clinic parking lot, I got into my car, 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.

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. I wasn't going to be "the guy with cancer." Not in that room. Not anywhere.

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.

