

The Piano (and Poker) Man

This Player Was Dealt a Tough Hand



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I was a second year internal medicine resident assigned to the coronary care unit at UC San Francisco's Moffitt Hospital when a man in his late 50s was admitted with chest pain. The nurses were familiar with him as he had been in the CCU several times before. His EKG strongly suggested ischemia, the chest pains he described were classical angina, and he was being treated with sublingual nitroglycerin and rest.

The CCU nurses liked him as he was graceful in his speech and behavior and they were sad to know that he was back in the unit, as they feared for his life. On each admission he would comply with his nurse's

medical therapy, rest and diet, and he improved as he followed their instructions. As he got better, he would tell them (and me) wonderful stories. He had come to America from Europe by boat just before the First World War, carried by his widowed mother as a babe in arms. Landing in New York at Ellis Island, she somehow managed to cross America and wound up in San Francisco where she worked for very low wages as a maid.

Mother and son slept in a tiny room near her workplace and they were fed largely by leftovers kindly given to them by the family that had hired her. Her son also worked as a newspaper boy, a street sweeper, dog walker and a number of other odd jobs. He never went to school but taught himself, with his mother's help, to read both in English and in Hebrew. As he got older he also got work cleaning up the many bars in the Tenderloin area of San Francisco.

There he became entranced by playing honkytonk pianos and began—through tips—to earn some significant amounts of money doing so. He was asked, when he got older, to periodically sit in on card games in the bars during breaks from the piano and, as he had a knack for it, he often won.

One day when he came home from the Tenderloin to the room he shared with his mother, he was surprised to find her still in bed as she was generally an early riser. He took her hand and it was very cold.

She was dead.

Crying, he quickly went to tell the rabbi what had happened.

Following the funeral, he went back to the room in which they had both lived for decades. He continued to work in the Tenderloin, but he would get a ride, now and again, to periodically go to Nevada where he was very good at winning poker games. Because he was losing his hearing, bilaterally, he gave up honkytonk and

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When the last of my patients left the clinic, he rose from his chair where he had been waiting and asked me to marry him. I shook my head no. "Why not?" he asked. I have money and you would get it when I die.

became a successful card player.

Then, over the next few years, he found himself having chest pain—from the thrill of winning, he thought. But it got worse over time, so for the first time in his life he went to see a doctor and wound up in the Moffitt Emergency Room at the UCSF hospital. His EKG showed marked ischemia so he was promptly admitted to the Coronary Care Unit. Over that first week he got better and was discharged home, but he had to be readmitted several times for severe angina before I met him and got to know him.

A few months after his most recent discharge he appeared in the General Medicine Clinic where I was seeing my patients. When the last of them left the clinic, he rose from his chair where he had been waiting and asked me to marry him. I was dumbfounded. He was in his late 50's and I was in my mid-twenties. I was close to six feet tall and he stood no more than five and a half feet in height. I shook my head, "No."

"Why not?" he asked, "I have money and you would get it when I die."

I got a piece of paper and wrote on it as his hearing was very bad. The note read, "I am married already."

He looked chagrined. "Oh," he said. "I did not know this."

And I did not tell him that it was medicine that I was married to.

Then he asked, "Will you come to my funeral and read Kaddish for me when I die?"

"I will if I can," I answered. (Kaddish is a mourner's Jewish prayer.)

Several months later he died in the CCU and was buried next to his mother in a San Francisco Jewish

cemetery. I read Kaddish for him there and for the next 11 months in the Jewish tradition.

I visited his grave to say goodbye when I was recruited away from San Francisco to the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. He was, and remains to me, a memorable man.



The flyer is set against a dark purple background. At the top, the title "Virtual Paint & Sip!" is written in a white, elegant script font. To the right of the title is a white line-art illustration of a bunch of grapes. Below the title, the date and time "SEP. 15, 2021 • 6:00-8:00PM" are displayed in a white, sans-serif font, followed by "VIRTUAL EVENT" in a smaller, all-caps sans-serif font. The main body of text, in a white sans-serif font, describes the event: "Last year's Virtual Paint & Sip was a huge success! Join the fun in 2021! For a nominal fee, create your masterpiece with a two-hour, guided paint session with an instructor from The Painted Cork Sacramento. Your take-home kit has all the supplies you need, including a bottle of wine! Register by September 10." Below this text is a note: "*Physicians are welcome to purchase a ticket for one guest." At the bottom of the flyer, there are three white line-art illustrations: a bunch of grapes on the left, the logo for the Sierra Sacramento Valley Medical Society (SSVMS) in the center, and a wine bottle next to a wine glass on the right. The SSVMS logo features the letters "SSVMS" in a bold, sans-serif font with a yellow sunburst above the "V", and "SIERRA SACRAMENTO VALLEY MEDICAL SOCIETY" in a smaller font below it.