

Dessert & Sudden Death

by Kate Kaiser

At the time the idea of lunch with Dr. Raccuia made good sense to me. More than good sense – it was a big, bold idea, bright with the promise of an explanation for my husband's death, something my entire being ached for. Of course, I could have met the doctor at his office again, although my previous attempts to get an explanation that way had failed. But lunch with the liver surgeon – that was brilliant, because the very emblem of my relationship with Bob was food: Alsatian sausage at Armstrong's, two-inch Balducci veal chops topped with mushrooms and mozzarella, German rouladen with spaetzle and red cabbage, racks of tiny pink mutton chops, feather-light ricotta gnocchis in red sauce, grade-A D'Artagnan foie gras with fruit compote and buffalo steaks, perfectly toasted baguettes, one side topped with chunky homemade applesauce and the other dripping with melted blue cheese delivered to me in bed. No wonder I gained so much weight in the thirteen years Bob Kaiser and I were together. After becoming his widow I quickly lost those twenty pounds. What remained was the memory of a shared passion for food, and it's that memory that led me to invite the doctor to Capsouto Freres for a lunch that altered my thinking forever.

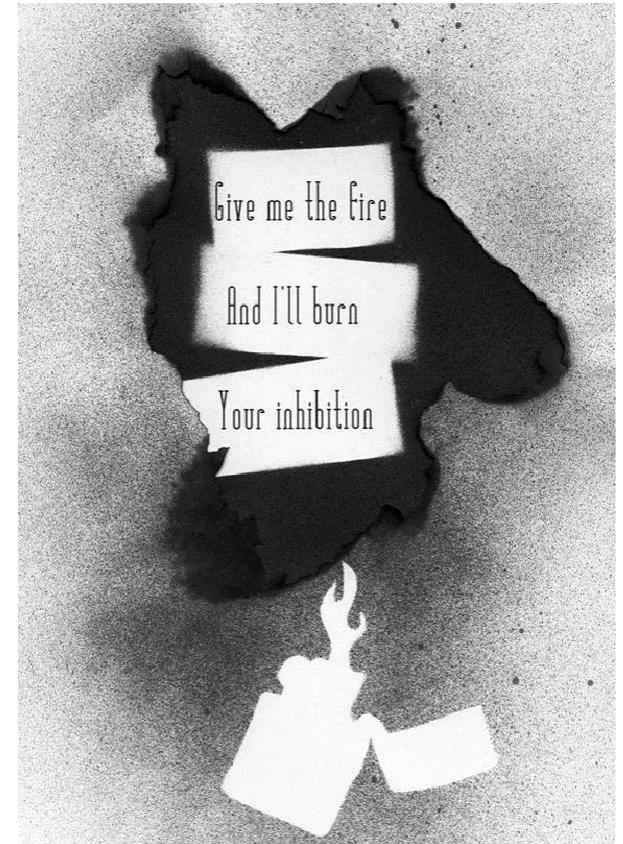
My husband and I met when I was twenty-four and working as a budget analyst for the Metropolitan Opera. Bob had spotted me on a New-Jersey-to-New-York commuter bus. He used to tell people: "I saw this vision of white. She had shoulder-length blonde hair and a white sweater-set welded to her thin body. She had a warm smile. It was like sunshine. I looked at her and said, this is the woman I am going to marry."

Bob, fourteen years my senior, had a sweet boyish face, little lips that stayed sealed when he smiled, brown eyes and brown hair. The solidness of his body attracted me, his thighs had the density of 100-year-old oak trunks. Bob could be very patient. He watched me on that bus for two months before making his move. I always sat in the front row if I could. The youngest of eight children, I had learned to grab a front row seat when it was available. On the hour-long trip from Glen Rock, I read the New York Times

or Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities* when I wasn't writing in my journal or napping. One morning Bob sat in the front row beside me with *The Bonfire of the Vanities* on his lap. Bob had been a Broadway scenery shop owner for seventeen years.

He knew how to use props. I said, "Great book." Bob replied, "Just got it," and our thirteen-year dialogue began.

On our first date at Armstrong's, a dark wooded bar-restaurant near Lincoln Center with a long diverse menu written in beautiful calligraphic script, I remember Bob ordering the sausage platter with three different kinds of meat, accompanied with sauerkraut and sautéed apples. I don't know what I ordered that night, but the next time we went to Armstrong's I ordered



the sausage platter for myself and soon after suggested a dining-out rule: Bob would order any two dishes he wanted and we would share.

Three years after that fateful bus ride I accepted Bob's twenty-five cent vending machine engagement ring, a yellow plastic band with a red rubber stop-sign that read, "I'll Never Stop Loving You." We celebrated with dinner at Carmelita's, an Italian bistro in the West Village. Then we strolled arm in arm down Seventh Avenue to Capsouto Freres for dessert. Bob was never boring or predictable -- except when it came to dessert. He always ordered the homemade sorbet. As he blissfully spooned pear sorbet into his mouth and I ate my warm flourless chocolate cake we talked about our future alongside those French doors and the billowing white curtains.

Nine years later I sat in that same restaurant as a widow and asked a very different man the loaded question I had spent all week rehearsing: *What did you learn from Bob Kaiser?* His unexpected reply literally took my breath away.

Newly engaged, Bob and I moved into a six-thousand-square-foot artist's loft in Hoboken that needed fixing up. Bob with his stage-scenery background knew exactly what to do. He painted the walls white and the concrete floors evergreen, and laid out a thousand-square-foot open kitchen with a food-preparation island in the middle. He installed a long restaurant-style stainless steel sink against one wall, a six-burner Garland stove with a double oven, gas griddle and broiler against another wall, and added fifteen feet of butcher-block countertop with black wire shelving near the dining area. I fought Bob on the costs of the kitchen, but thankfully he won out because oh, the meals that man would cook for me in that space. I've not had Bob's chicken fajitas with balsamic red, yellow and orange peppers in nine years. But if I close my eyes and lick my lips I can still taste their intoxicating tang and today I'd seriously consider marrying on the spot the person who could replicate them.

Bob was not a trained chef. He'd worked in a Long Island deli through high school and college. On Sunday nights the deli owner, an avid hunter, trusted Bob to cook his freshly killed game, usually deer or pheasant. Bob regularly read the Wednesday food section of the New York Times and the Friday restaurant reviews. We did not go out to eat often because Bob's cooking was so good, but when we did, it was to some recently reviewed four-star restaurant that would cost us a couple of hundred dollars. With each bite Bob would study the flavors of the raved-about dish, ask the waiters some pointed questions to nail down the cooking process and the ingredients, and a week later he would reproduce the fifty dollar dish in our

home. People often said to Bob, "You should open a restaurant." Bob always replied, "That would take all the fun out of it."

Bob and I married on Thanksgiving Day, 1992, in our loft, surrounded by sixty family members and friends. The ceremony was followed by a huge turkey dinner, cooked by Bob, complete with all the fixings: sausage-cranberry stuffing, mashed potatoes, sweet potatoes, green beans almandine, roasted brussels sprouts, gravy and four kinds of pie: cherry, apple, pumpkin and pecan. Our marriage was the lead story on the local news that night, because we had rented a dozen video phones and Fedex'd them to friends who lived too far away to travel to New Jersey. The best man, Mark Scott, an old scenery buddy of Bob's, gave the wedding toast from San Francisco. (This was twelve years before Facebook and the proliferation of computers with cameras attached).

Bob loved to throw dinner parties. He would choose the people, plan the menu and order the gourmet meat from D'Artagnan, a supplier to top restaurants that delivered to our door. The reason for the party didn't matter, what mattered was that Bob was in the mood to cook. One Saturday night it was a twelve-course Italian feast for twenty-five: bruschetta, fennel tangerine salad, mussels in white wine, ricotta gnocchis in red sauce, twenty-five Rock Cornish hens, a half dozen other courses, and a dessert of freshly whipped zabaglione poured over fresh berries. I licked my bowl that night.

Another time Bob read a New York Times article by William Grimes, about people who threw great old-fashioned dinner parties. Fueled by goodhearted jealousy, Bob tracked down every person mentioned in the article and invited them to our home. Everyone came except the writer, who declined because he said he ate out too often. Our dining room table was three slabs of pink marble freckled with gray, surrounded by twenty black cloth director chairs, and that night every chair was taken. Bob served venison with a sweet cherry sauce and a mashed-potato dish (creamed red-skinned potatoes with the skins on) that he'd adapted from Cafe Florent. The guests were suitably impressed.

Another time my Mom had friends coming into town for a visit and she accepted Bob's offer to cook for them. Twelve over-sixty-five-year-olds sat around our pink marble table wondering what this amateur chef would serve. After the appetizer—fifty-dollar-a-pound grade-A foie gras with plum sauce—he brought out what looked like the tenderest of filet mignons with a slab of blue-cheese butter melting on top. After everyone raved about the meal and the plates were cleared, Bob took great pleasure in telling them they had just eaten—all of them for the first time—buffalo.

You would think that cancer and chemotherapy would have put a crimp in Bob Kaiser's appetite and sense of humor, but this was a man who had named his company Relentless Drive. The day after Bob's colon cancer surgery his surgeon, Dr. Paty, a dark haired man with a rugby-player physique, visited Bob's room. Looking down at his clipboard the doctor recommended that Bob walk four laps every six hours that day.

Bob, sitting up in his hospital bed as best he could, replied, "I've already walked ten laps three times this morning. Does that count?"

Dr. Paty peered over his clipboard with a smile, "I guess this makes you *The Iron Man of Colon Cancer*," he said, and a respectful friendship between the two men began.

One month later Bob began taking mass transit into New York City for his Monday night chemotherapy treatments. He never complained, only nicknamed himself Bob in a Fog. With good health care insurance the medical bills weren't a problem for me. What I worried about was Bob's route home, which took him past all the new gourmet food booths in the recently renovated Grand Central Station. He would stop and buy us a few goodies, such as chicken-apple sausages, German bratwurst and liverwurst, liver pâté, fancy mustards, sourdough bread, and little chocolate cakes for my sweet tooth. The weekly tab was astronomical, but how could you get mad at a man who planned to eat his way back to health after colon cancer?

Everyone at the hospital knew how much Bob loved food because to distract himself while they poked and pricked him, he would recount in great detail all the meals he had recently cooked. When he began bringing in plastic containers of some of his homemade specialties, like the German rouladen or ricotta gnocchis, the staff swooned. Eight months later, after completing his chemotherapy, Bob said, "I'd rather die than do that again." In celebration he decided to throw an End of Cancer dinner party for all the doctors and nurses and a few close friends.

A few days before the party we drove into Manhattan in our baby blue Econovan to do some food shopping. As I turned onto Second Avenue in the East Village Bob shouted, "Stop the van, Katie. We've got to go to the Second Avenue Deli and buy stuffed derma."

I asked, "What's that, honey?"

"A Jewish delicacy," Bob replied with great joy. "It's calfs intestines stuffed with a breadcrumb dressing."

My brow furrowed. "Why would you want to buy that?"

"Well," Bob said even more joyfully, "the colon surgeon cut my colon. At my End of Cancer party I think it's only fair to serve the colon

surgeon -- some colon!" Then Bob hopped out of the van with the energy of a school kid dashing into a candy store.

What surprised me most about the dinner party was that all the big city doctors and nurses trekked with their spouses to Hoboken on a hot July Saturday night. What exactly did that say about Bob?

He had a special meal planned for our twenty-four guests: beef in a black sauce, lobster in a white sauce. He arranged the sauces on black plates to look like the Ying Yang symbol. But before the big sit-down feast at our pink table, a huge spread of appetizers was laid out in the garden; bruschetta, blue-cheese balls, a terrine of pâté, extra sharp provolone on Hoboken's finest coal-fired brick-oven bread, homemade dumplings, shrimp cocktail and, sitting in the center of that spread, a platter of stuffed derma.

Dr. Paty filled his plate with appetizers, then walked back inside to talk to Bob, who was standing in front of the butcher block in the kitchen. When the doctor forked some stuffed derma in his mouth Bob let him chew a few times before saying, "Do you know what that is?"

"No," Dr. Paty replied, "but I like it!"

"It's stuffed derma," Bob answered. "Calves colon."

Dr. Paty's face scrunched. His chewing slowed down and he said, "Oh, really?"

Then Bob cackled the loudest I'd ever heard and said, "Gotcha!"

Six months after the End of Cancer party, the cancer returned; it had metastasized to Bob's liver. Bob put together a black three-ringed binder of his medical records and research. There were seven tabbed sections. He titled it:

The Iron Man of Colon Cancer

Research for Treatment

Liver/Smiver

This Cancer Must Die

He Fedex'd the book to his four primary doctors, expecting them to read it and figure out how to save him. A week later Bob and I were sitting across from Dr. Paty in his office. The three-ringed binder was on a shelf next to the doctor's desk. Next to it was the unopened magnum of champagne we had arranged to have shipped from Napa Valley for Christmas. Dr. Paty said, "We have to drink this together."

For the next hour I watched these two highly intelligent men talk about how to attack Bob's cancer. They both were pointing and analyz-

ing the x-ray of Bob's abdomen. On pieces of note paper the surgeon drew pictures of Bob's colon and liver and then added arrows. I felt as if I was watching two sports commentators talk about an upcoming game and all the plays each team might try. Then Dr. Paty touched his forefinger to his thumb, making a circle, and said, "This is the percentage of people who live past five years with what you have. I'd take drugs now, save surgery for the next round and then take drugs again." Bob nodded his head and looked out the now darkened window behind Paty's desk. Bob had hated chemotherapy. To him, muddying the mind was worse than losing a limb.

The following week Bob's older sister Anne, a brown-eyed brunette who lived in Chicago, visited us. Bob cooked for her one night and we took her out the second night for a fabulous meal at Bob's favorite restaurant, Lupa in Greenwich Village. Bob ordered saltimbocca, osso buco, ricotta gnocchi with sausage & fennel, pancetta brussels sprouts and sauteed baby carrots that were so sweet and tender they made you not want to share. Our forks crisscrossed all evening. Everyone's cheeks were rosy from the red wine. Bob confided to his big sister, "I just wish I could get hit by a Mack truck. I want a miracle or an exit."

Unhappy with Dr. Paty's recommendation, Bob researched different hospitals and found a Dr. Joseph Raccuia who worked at St. Vincents in Greenwich Village and specialized in liver cancer surgery.

Two weeks later Bob emailed his friends and family:

Dr. Raccuia will do a resection to my liver, remove my gall bladder and attack the lymph node system where cancer attaches itself. It is an aggressive plan. I will be in the hospital six to eight days. Please do not send flowers or any of that crap. If you cannot control yourself, make a contribution to a cancer center or donate some blood.

You never know, in the Chess Game For Life, you may be next! Black or White?

The weekend before the operation, at Bob's insistence, we took a trip to San Francisco to see his brother and enjoy Napa Valley. Work friends of mine gave me an envelope of cash so Bob and I could stay in a fancy bed and breakfast. My high school girl friend Megan (who had moved to San Francisco) gave us her frequent-flyer miles for the airplane tickets. On our last night in Napa, after a wonderful meal with Bob's brother Rick, his sister-in-law Theresa, his nephew Danny and my friend Megan, Bob and I went back to our inn with one thing in mind. Bob, who had the whitest, softest skin because he hid it from the sun, didn't love his jiggly body. He never

worked out and had a big belly. But that night he frolicked around our room naked, stretching his arms out as he told me stories. In the big jetted tub we took a bubble bath and in the blue canopied bed under the clean white sheets we made love for what would be our last time.

The next morning we slept in. Then we drove our rental car to Regusci Winery to pick up wine for Dr. Raccuia and to a gourmet grocery to pick up pâté and a crispy French baguette for us. On the ride to San Francisco Airport Bob got hungry. He lay a white plastic bag on the dashboard, took out his Handyman knife, and began slicing the baguette. After he had about twenty slices, he spread a hefty dollop of pâté and a brown-yellow swoosh of Dijon mustard on each slice, all while I was driving fifty-five miles per hour to catch our plane.

Just as Bob began eating an old friend of his called on his cell phone. Doug and Bob had worked together on Joe Papp productions in New York; now Doug was Scenic Designer for the Broadway revival of "42nd Street." Bob had not talked to Doug in a decade, but the cancer had made him want to get back in touch with his old theatre friends.

I remember turning my head frequently just to watch Bob's facial expressions, his rosy-cheeked smile as he reminiscenced about the good old days while snacking on his pâté spread. There would be big rolling laughter in between many "Do you remembers?" and then silence while Bob listened and then big laughter again. I had not been with Bob during his theatre days. He had given all that up and switched to a career in computers before we fell in love, and I think he had stayed away from his old Broadway buddies for the same reason a heroin addict stays away from the dope scene: to avoid being sucked back in. But now he seemed to revel in those memories. Fourteen hours later he lay on a cold silver table under some bright lights with strangers in scrubs all around him, while one of those strangers cut his belly open in a long-odds effort to save his life.

The surgery lasted eleven hours instead of the expected four to six. Bob didn't die that day, but something had gone terribly wrong because Bob never left the Intensive Care Unit. He died at the hospital seventeen days later.

I had Bob cremated and held a memorial service for him in our loft. The pink marble dining room table was covered with food from a local caterer: gourmet sandwiches, salads, cheese trays, paté and bottles of wine. Everyone was telling stories about Bob, but every-time the doorbell or phone rang that day, and for the whole week afterward, I realized I was waiting for something. I had sent Dr. Raccuia an invitation. Where was he? From the

day of the operation we had talked everyday for seventeen days. On the first day, when Bob was not walking around like he had after Dr. Paty's surgery, I told Dr. Raccuia something is off and he spent time with me in Bob's room, observing his patient and studying the charts for clues. To be released from the intensive care unit Bob had to have a bowel movement and his body was not performing. Every few days there was a new symptom to address with a procedure, then we all would hope for no new symptoms. At one point Bob's colon ripped open. They rushed him into emergency surgery and re-stitched. After that procedure Dr. Raccuia said, "I don't normally say this, but I think it's going to be alright." I had Dr. Raccuia's personal cell phone number, and as long as Bob was alive the doctor would call me back within an hour. The day Bob died we had a brief conversation on the phone and that was it. Not a word since. Shouldn't he have sent flowers? Shouldn't he be checking on me now?

Two days after Bob's service I called Dr. Raccuia's office and left a message. No answer for four days. I knew Friday morning was his quiet day in his office. So I drove into the city, parked my car nearby and knocked on Dr. Raccuia's frosted-glass door.

"Come in," he said. Dr. Raccuia, a petite man, was sitting behind his large brown desk. In his casual clothes of tan slacks and a white dress shirt without a tie, he looked startled at the sight of me and his eyes popped.

"I don't have an appointment," I said, "but I needed to see you today." Dr. Raccuia came around his desk and hugged me. We were two stiff boards, circling our arms around each other like loose ropes.

"Sit," he said and I sat down in his guest chair with the desk between us. I could feel him sizing me up. He asked me how I was doing. He wanted to know if I had family in the area and if I had a shrink. He told me about his own experiences with shrinks. Then he said, "I think I know what happened to Bob and I want to take an afternoon to explain it to you, but I can't today. I'm empty." Then he held up an empty plastic water bottle. "Like this, see?"

A few weeks went by. Then one night, after drinking some red wine that Bob and I had picked up on our trip in Napa Valley, an idea floated into my head. I said very slowly to myself, as if I were solving a math equation, *If Bob Kaiser made the colon surgeon eat colon, then I would make the liver surgeon eat liver*; and then I laughed this oh-my-goodness-that's-good belly laugh. Then I thought, *Bob Kaiser, are you channelling me?*

The next day I emailed Dr. Raccuia, "Do you eat liver?"

"Yes," he wrote back, "I love it and cook it often with onions. Even

my daughters love it."

How twisted I thought.

"Well, Bob taught me to love foie gras," I wrote back, "And I was thinking that when we have our discussion let's add some warmth to it by having it over lunch."

I called Capsouto Freres and confirmed that they had liver on their lunch menu. Dr. Raccuia agreed to meet me at noon on Friday, May 4th, forty-eight days after my husband's death.

When I arrived Dr. Raccuia was standing outside the restaurant in his white Izod shirt and khaki pants looking like an ordinary man, not the superhero of whom his colleagues said in awe, "In an operating room the knife dances in his hands."

We were seated at a table for four and to my right were the French doors with the billowing white curtains that I remembered so well from the night Bob and I were engaged. It felt bittersweet to be there without him. The waiter handed each of us a leather-bound menu, which we immediately began studying as if our lives depended on the choice we made. After a short while Dr. Raccuia asked, "So, what are you going to have?"

"I have to order the liver," I replied, "but I'm not sure I'll like it."

"Order the liver," Dr. Raccuia offered, "and order another dish you know you like and I'll eat the liver if you don't." I closed my menu. When the waiter arrived I ordered the calfs liver and veal scaloppine.

"Pellegrino?" Dr. Raccuia asked me.

I really want wine, I thought. *Bob Kaiser would have ordered red wine. But will wine make me less sharp?* "And a big bottle of Pellegrino," I said to the waiter before he trotted off.

In the bag that sat in the chair beside me I had six pages of questions for Dr. Raccuia that I had been writing and rewriting for weeks. I wanted to go over every detail of the operation. I wanted to understand what happened. I wanted my husband back.

We did the small-talk thing you do when you hesitate to tackle the really big thing you want to talk about. He asked me where the kids and I would be going that summer. The question made me angry. It assumed we had enough money to travel. He told me that his wife and kids went upstate for the summer. He visited them when he could, but he didn't like being away from them for weeks at a time. He was the cook for his family, just like Bob had been my cook. On Christmas Day he always made a goose dinner for his wife who was Scandinavian. On his way home after a day at the hospital he always picked up a carton of milk. Against all my expectations I liked

hearing him talk.

Our arugula salads arrived and we quickly emptied the plates. When the waiter placed the liver entree in front of me I looked at the dish with a feeling of revulsion. Whatever lay under those sautéed onions it was not velvety smooth, fifty-dollar-a-pound grade-A D'Artagnan foie gras. I took one bite. It was mealy and slippery. Dr. Raccuia read my face and said, "Let's switch plates." I exhaled and felt my spirits lighten. We talked some more, about his father, also a doctor, who was emotionally unaccessible, about his grandmother who taught him that "Dried shit doesn't stink," and about how whenever he went to New Jersey he shopped at Costco, "Because the paper towels are cheaper."

At the beginning of the third hour all that was left on our table was the empty Pellegrino bottle and our glasses. I had stalled long enough. I took out my six pages of questions and turned to Dr. Raccuia and said, "What did you learn from Bob Kaiser?"

Dr. Raccuia's eyes closed. He groaned. His fingers drummed on the table. Then he said, "That," and he firmly tapped the table, "is exactly," tapped again, "the right question," tapped a third time, "to ask," final tap. Then he looked me in the eye and said, "I no longer perform two surgeries in one day. It is too difficult to isolate the variables when there is a problem. I cut the only blood supply to your husband's first-surgery colon stitches, which caused that part of his colon to die. This is why he could not go to the bathroom and then the pressure caused his colon to rip apart. I now perform the lymph node and liver surgeries six weeks apart."

A gust came out my mouth. I doubled over. My arms wrapped around my waist and I rocked. I don't know where I went. In the weeks leading up to his lunch I had never thought about his answer. I had thought only about having enough courage to ask the question. He had just told me that he was responsible for Bob's death and I didn't know what to do with this information.

Dr. Raccuia looked distressed. He asked if I felt able to go on. I took a few big breaths and told him I could. On the back page of my questionnaire he drew a picture of Bob's colon and liver. "There," he said, "I cut there and that was the only blood supply when usually there are many." I couldn't believe my husband was gone because of one tiny misdirected snip. Bob had said many times, "I want a miracle or an exit. I don't want a slow drip death." Had Dr. Raccuia done him an unintentional favor?

For another hour we sat at the table as I went through all the other questions on my list. We talked at length about the mixed quality of the care Bob received in the hospital. But everything else seemed so inconsequential

now. It struck me that the famous surgeon had come to this meeting without a lawyer, willing to talk about his fatal mistake. Was this a sign of supreme confidence? In himself? In me?

On the way out of the restaurant, I grabbed some matches. Dr. Raccuia said, "You collect them too?" He got in a yellow taxi. I watched it drive away. I wondered if he ever cried over patients he lost. Then I went to visit our friend Chuck in his painting studio in Chinatown. I told him what had happened with Dr. Raccuia and then I sat and watched Chuck paint. While he worked, he talked about the co-existence of positive and negative space in a painting. He said, "A painting hopes to attain a perfect balance of negative and positive space; both need to be fully present, dancing with each other, for a great work of art to exist." I looked at him and said, "That's what Dr. Raccuia and I just did, but we did it with words."

For the next two days one word kept surfacing in my mind: intent. Dr. Raccuia didn't intend to kill Bob. He'd done the best job he could; I was convinced of that. But I also knew that a person's "best" changes from day to day. The only possible constant is our ability to learn from experience. Was that letting him off too easily? Or was my forcing him to confess to me a harder challenge than a lawsuit that could at worst increase his malpractice insurance? I wondered if he would ever forget the expression on my face when he answered my first question.

Two days later I sent the surgeon a note:

Dear Dr. Raccuia,

I chose to address this letter using your formal title instead of Joe because what you did on Friday deserves respect. Bob treasured the truth. You honored his spirit by revealing it. I honored him by asking for it. It was as good as it gets for us mortals.

When Bob and I went to California in February he went to the Regusci Winery specifically to buy you wine. Your strength, integrity and generosity with me earned this wine. Bob was a big roll-the-dice kind of guy. Maybe you were a gift to him making his exit quick and because you learned, you'll be a gift to the next guy who wants it slow. It is all in how you look at it.

Drink to Bob, a fabulous spirit, who will live on in the lessons we've learned.

*Warm Regards,
Katie*