

If not for...

GOOD LUCK

I'd Have...

**NO LUCK
AT ALL***

By MARK GILCHRIST
April, 2022

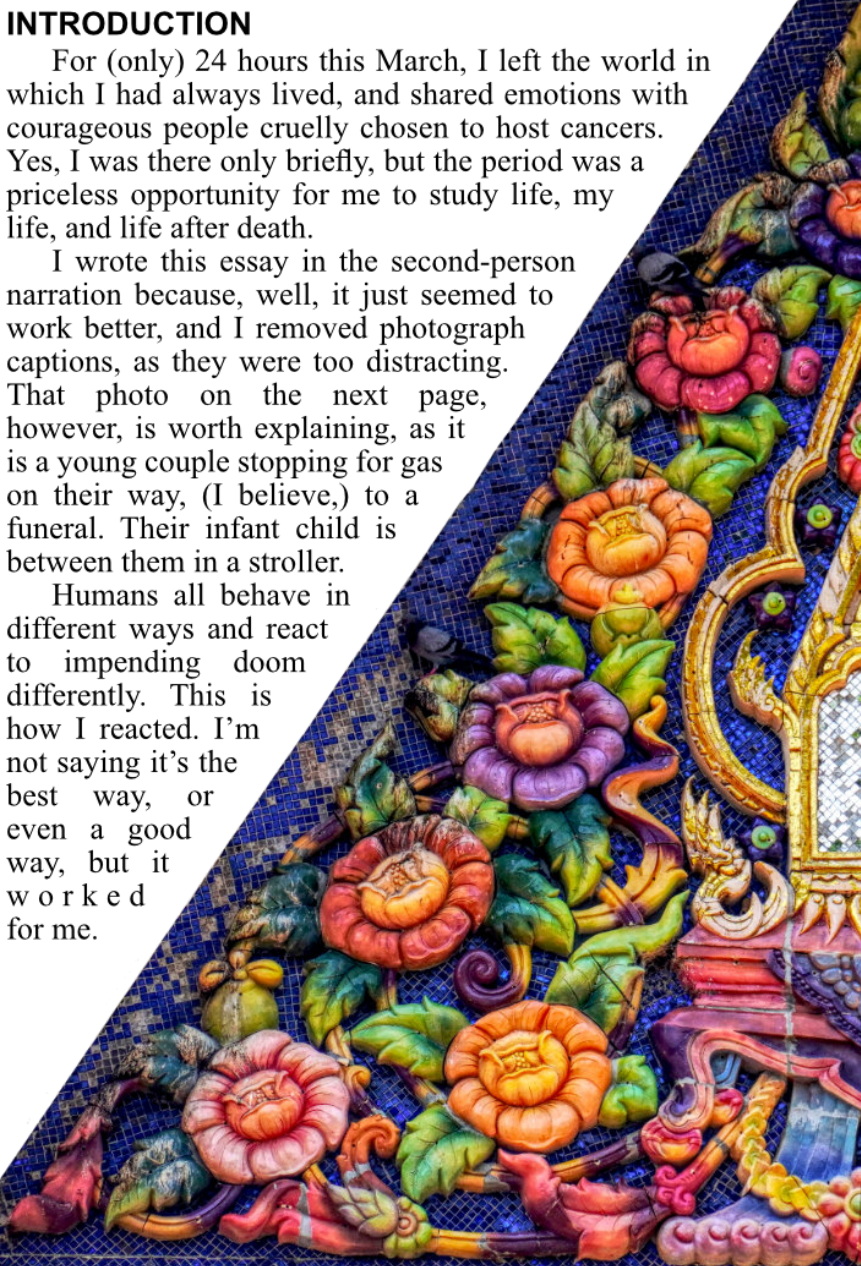


INTRODUCTION

For (only) 24 hours this March, I left the world in which I had always lived, and shared emotions with courageous people cruelly chosen to host cancers. Yes, I was there only briefly, but the period was a priceless opportunity for me to study life, my life, and life after death.

I wrote this essay in the second-person narration because, well, it just seemed to work better, and I removed photograph captions, as they were too distracting. That photo on the next page, however, is worth explaining, as it is a young couple stopping for gas on their way, (I believe,) to a funeral. Their infant child is between them in a stroller.

Humans all behave in different ways and react to impending doom differently. This is how I reacted. I'm not saying it's the best way, or even a good way, but it worked for me.



** Every single word of this story is absolutely true – well, all that really matters, anyway.*



He had heard the word often, but always from a distance, so to speak. He had walked in research fundraisers and watched victims and survivors, had a good friend die from it, but the day he heard the word “cancer,” from his doctor was the first day in 62 years that he really knew what a ton of bricks felt like.

Wandering around Thailand for a few years, he had settled down for a month in Prachuap Khiri Khan, a beach town with a Thai Air Force training base a few hours south of Bangkok. He was enjoying his stay in a quaint, old guest house, right in the center of everything when everything crashed down on him.

It all started with a sleepless night, on a mattress that



seemed to be jabbing a sharp stick under his ribcage. “What could it be?” he thought in the delirium of sleep and pain. “Minor heart attack?”

At 4am, he gave up trying to sleep, and he called his friends in the states, 12 time zones behind, telling them he may have fractured a rib. They balked.

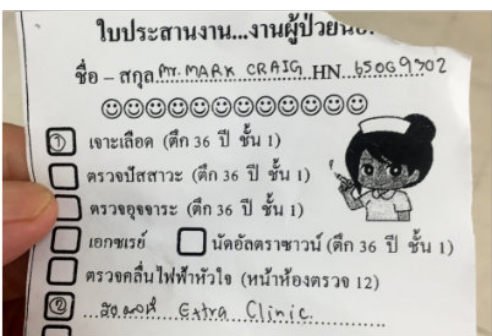
“What, from a hard sneeze?” Then she mentioned Pleurisy and he Googled it. “Well, okay,” he thought, and promised to see a doctor that day.

Thailand is actually a destination for medical tourism and has many fine hospitals. Most are less shocking than some he’d seen in Sri Lanka, Laos



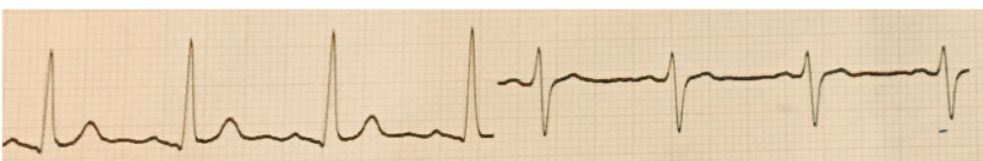


and Vietnam, for example, where families of patients encamp in the hallways or grounds for weeks so they can tend to their recovering loved ones in the open wards. But if you're in a small city and you don't speak Thai, illness can make your life an adventure.



He spent most of that day stumbling through the process of getting blood drawn, getting wired for an EKG, and other tests.

Totally illiterate and unable to even ask directions, he pretty much spent a half-hour finding any certain room for any certain test, and then an hour waiting, so this dragged on into the late afternoon before he could get any idea why his mattress loved sharp sticks. Then finally, he took his shirt off and embraced an awkward machine for a chest x-ray, which was the plane that dropped the C-bomb.



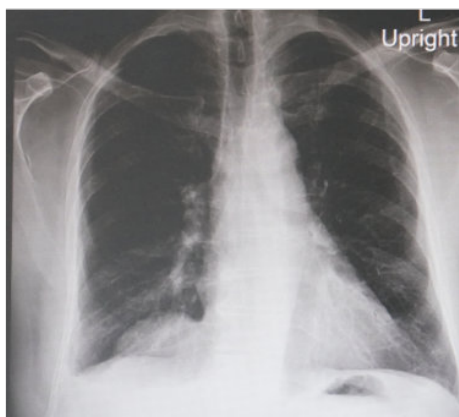
THE PRE-DIAGNOSIS

He walked into the room where a doctor sat looking at his x-ray on a computer, and he was not at all amazed that the doctor looked only about thirty years old, because this was Thailand and this was a small hospital – but he yearned to see a little gray at the temples.

The doctor looked away from the computer and directly at him, and about the first thing that doctor said was about the last thing that patient wanted to hear.

“It could be cancer, but a CT scan will tell us for sure.” This brought him down a dark road – not the darkest he’d ever been down, but pretty damn dark – and the next 24 hours would be spent frantically hoping for a U-turn.

Walking back to his guest house, he thought of the stages of grief and decided right there to go right to acceptance. I may explain later, but it was a smart move – a desperate, depressing and likely pathetic move, but somehow

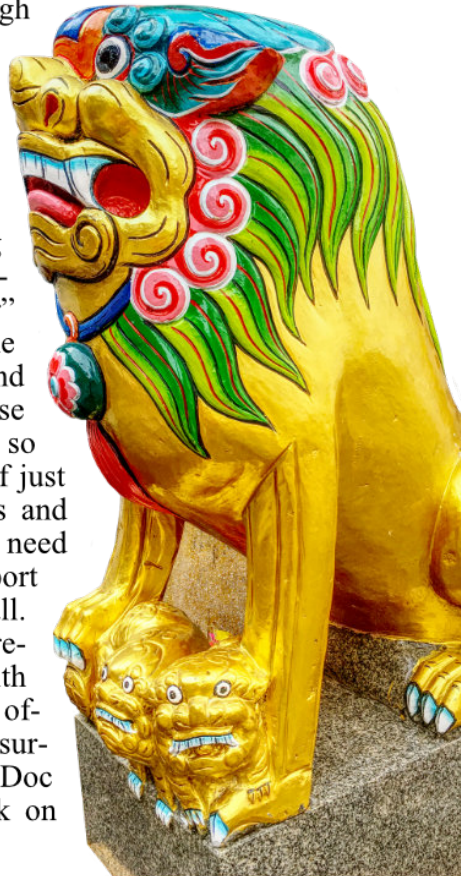


it saved him. It saved him from flailing through all the other stages, all alone I might add.

He thought he was taking all this well, but then he arrived at the guest house and saw a few friends sitting out front. They said, “how you doing?” and he cried.

Yep, well, it was a quick cry, of course, more of a gasp, but everyone saw it, and then he worked on his escape. “I’m all right, I... I just. I gotta, well, see ya,” and he climbed up the wooden staircase to his room. A few guys came up later to see what the hell was wrong and, trying to laugh to try to distract himself, he tried to tell them. They said get a second opinion and he began planning a hasty trip up to Bangkok.

He emailed his friend, a doctor in the states, attaching a photo of the x-ray and mentioning the “possible-cancer” diagnosis. Doc went with the local doctors, of course, and couldn’t even try to diagnose him from 12,000 miles away, so he replied with a summary of just how ruthlessly cancer works and spreads, and about the great need that a patient has for support while getting through it all. This brought an invitation to return to the states and stay with Doc and his wife, a beautiful offer, except that his medical insurance is useless in the U.S. Doc also suggested that he check on his relationship with Christ.





So, it was easy to focus on the worst. It wasn't like he had only seen a scary x-ray, and it wasn't like he had only felt serious pain, but what could cause both of those? Call him a hypochondriac, but he prefers "realist" – and he is actually just another pessimist – and so he easily came to terms with the fact that he might have cancer.

This was also a defense of sorts. He would rather go into this fearing the worst, so that anything else would be good news, but the more he thought it out, the more he worried about riding the runaway C-Train. He sailed right past the Denial Stage, refusing to shout, "why me!" Because, after enjoying such a privileged life, he could only ask, "why not me?"

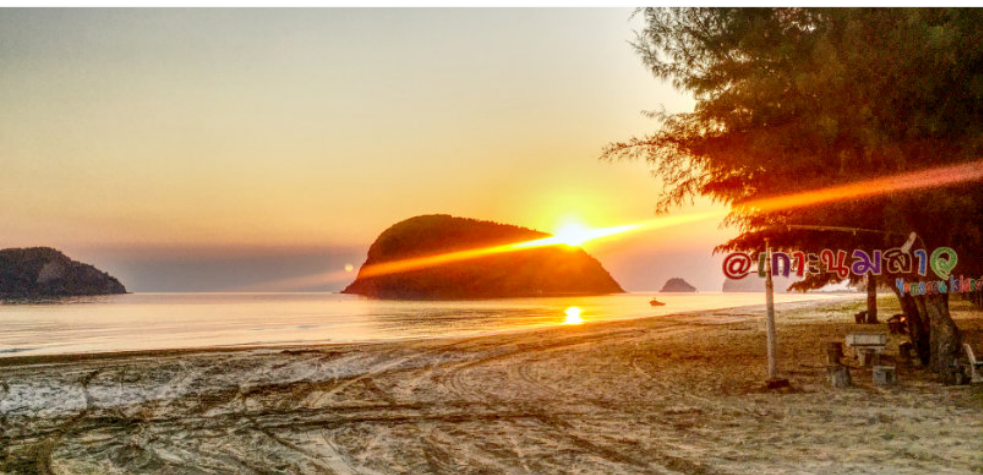
Should he go out kicking and screaming? Life just didn't seem that unfair toward him. He had just spent two years watching a million of his fellow Americans die from Covid, and the past two weeks watching thousands of Ukrainians fleeing their homes from a brutal invasion.





After all the crazy things he had done, from hang-gliding, SCUBA and skydiving, and riding a motorcycle thousands of miles through the insane traffic of countries like India and Vietnam, it was, frankly, only because of miracles and crazy, good luck that his ticket hadn't been yanked long ago.

Sleep was but a frequent visitor that evening, shoved out the door every hour by pain, and he rolled from side to side to try and lock that door. At 5am, he got up, crept outside, walked out to the beach and watched the sun come up over the Gulf of Thailand. He promised himself he'd watch a few more sunrises.





This is where he felt the most alone, and he filled his cup with regret. He knew he had wandered through his life alone and had squandered the most valuable thing of all; friendship. He had saved enough money to retire early, he had met enough people and made plenty of fast friends, but he had held onto only a few, and right then and there, he had no one person right there and then to hold onto.

He watched a few pilots training maneuvers over the bay and it reminded him of growing up on and around military bases. The guard gates, displays of old airplanes and just the well-organized grounds and simple, efficient ar-



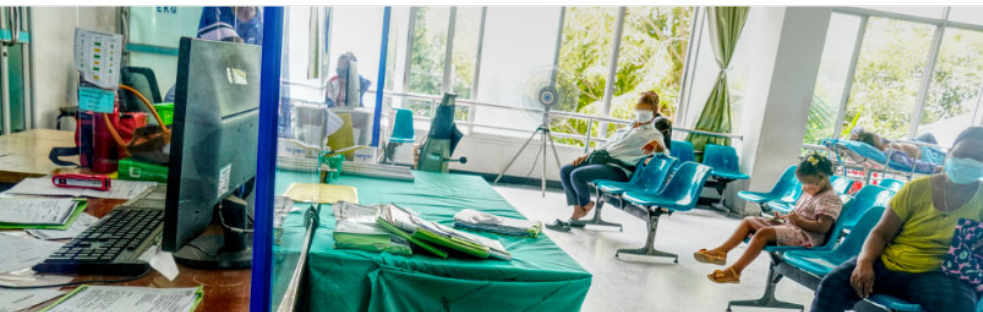


chitecture made him feel at home. Traveling with the military, he thought, it was harder to be alone, as you always had that military “family” around you, and the support that came with it all.

And as far as; “why now?” it wasn’t like he was about to leave a wife and kids stranded or anything, and a good part of him was relieved that he wouldn’t drag anyone he loved through C-Country. In fact, aside from a few close friends, his brothers and distant family, he had not at all lived up to his recently adopted credo; *“Be Somebody Somebody Can’t be Without.”*

THE DREAM

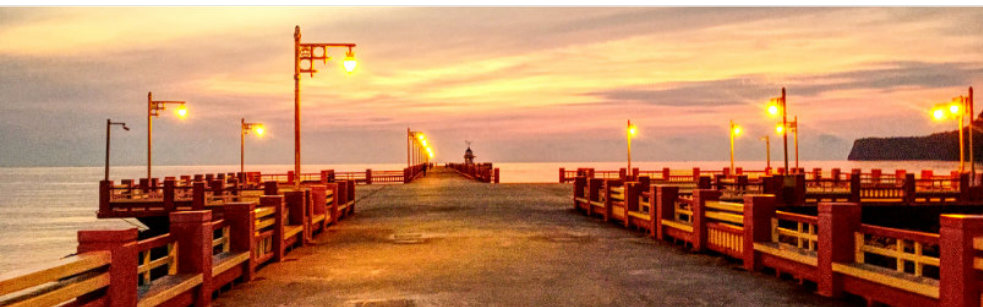
At 8am, it looked like it might rain, so he tucked his favorite, (well, only,) umbrella into the small of his back and headed out for the hospital a half-mile away – no pain as he walked – and that walk set him off on a journey that would take him through the next ten hours until he could see the CT scan results. He would spend that day waiting in lines, waiting in rooms, wandering from room to room, from line to line, and he needed something to keep his mind off dying. He had to get off of the dark path he had been tumbling down, and somehow, he found a way to make it a beautiful trip.



First, if you're going through something like this, it actually helps to do it in a small, public hospital in a developing country. Any pity he could muster for himself was washed away as he watched the beautiful people around him, most of whom were, honestly, less privileged than him, a truly "lucky one." They were born poor and would die poor, and aside from perhaps enjoying more friendships, they would have few of life's charms that had been so randomly squandered on him.

Then, he did what many people do when they have the luxury of seeing their own deaths coming; he planned it. Not the actual death, and no, not the funeral. He planned a project that his brothers could build with his estate, and it was greatly satisfying in its brilliance. They certainly would not need the money and, he thought, they would likely find the experience to be fairly rewarding.





It occurred to him, that living another 30 years would use up all the money for such a project, but, by dying soon, he would actually be able to achieve something significant. So, what a great feeling to know that there was some kind of beautiful upside to this crazy downturn in his life.

Details aren't important, and I promised him I wouldn't tell you, because he may actually draft up this plan today, just in case he gets hit by a bus tomorrow.

That's the thing about death; there are easy, quick ways to die and there are tough, drawn-out ways, and what annoyed him more than death was that it looked like he was headed for possibly months of dying, months of invasive, painful and ugly treatment, perhaps, and though he usually

enjoyed being alone, this was one trip he did not want to take solo.

He knew why so many older men came to Thailand and paired up with young Thai women – well, yeah, the obvious reason, but also for the utility, the same utility that makes so many marriages and relationships so successful.

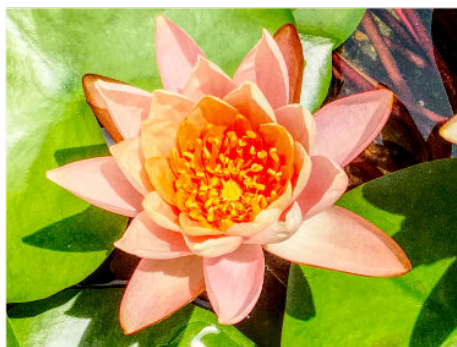


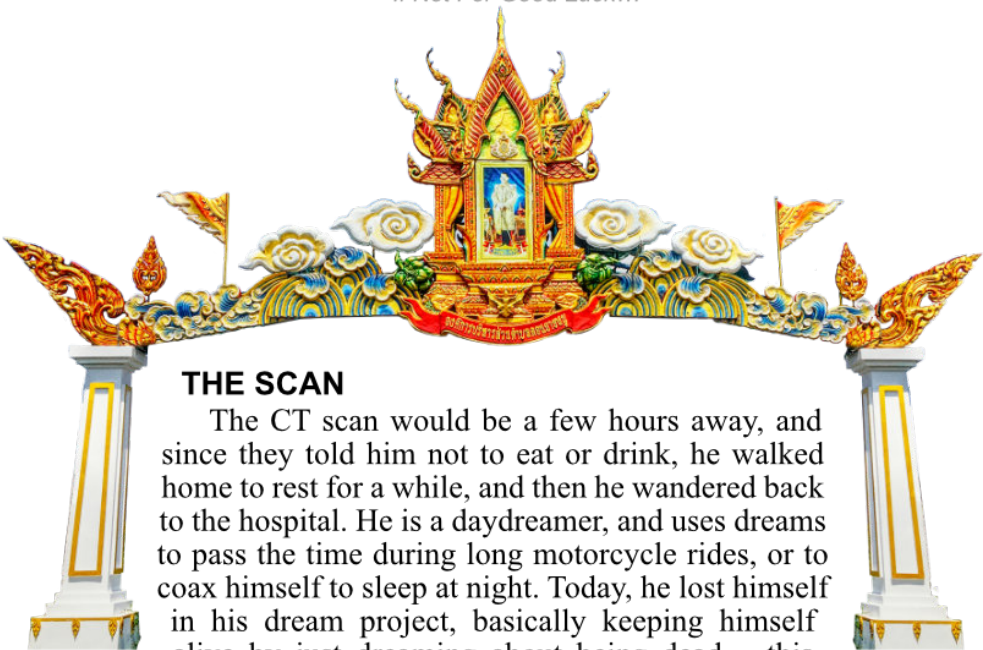
He remembered the first time he did a hospital-thing here. He had a Thai girlfriend, and she made the whole experience much easier – not just with language, but just by being there – just by being by his side.

Before a CT Scan, he had to take a covid test, so he found the temporary set-up at the emergency entrance and waited, watching ambulances come and go for two hours.

Then he not only had to go to the cashier, but first, he had to figure out that he actually had to go to the cashier, and then where that cashier was – this all took another hour.

The large hospital was empty for him. There is a certain energy in a building when someone you love is in it. Without them, it is just a giant, empty building, and that is how it felt that day. Every month, lately, he would roll into a new town filled with strangers, stay for a month and make a few friends, giving that place a more comfortable energy – security – and then he would just pack up and take off. Tough life, he thought, a tough, exciting, lucky life.





THE SCAN

The CT scan would be a few hours away, and since they told him not to eat or drink, he walked home to rest for a while, and then he wandered back to the hospital. He is a daydreamer, and uses dreams to pass the time during long motorcycle rides, or to coax himself to sleep at night. Today, he lost himself in his dream project, basically keeping himself alive by just dreaming about being dead – this helped him the most during the anxious hours before the CT scan.

He'd had a few MRIs, which is all he knew about CT scans, which is to say, very little. He thought that they would shove him into a tube for 20 minutes, and bang on pipes while he struggled not to move a muscle. So, how the hell could he hold (his lungs) still for 20 minutes when it hurt like hell to lie on his back for even five minutes?

As he waited, he drew a diagram to show the technicians how he had to lie with his knees up, or his spine would pinch and give him fits, and he Google-translated questions, like; "How long?" and "How still?"

At some point, a young lady came out and gave him the costume he would wear in the machine. The skirt, which looked just like a giant pillowcase with both ends open, had no tie-strings, so he clutched it with one hand until another patient mimed to him that he should just tuck it in, like a towel – such was his state of delirium.



Maybe, just maybe, if he could just understand a word anyone was saying, and if he could just ask a simple question or two, and if maybe he could just get this ALL OVER WITH! He had no idea how or why he didn't run out into the hall, screaming like a child, dropping his pillowcase, and then just find a corner somewhere to curl up all-fetal.

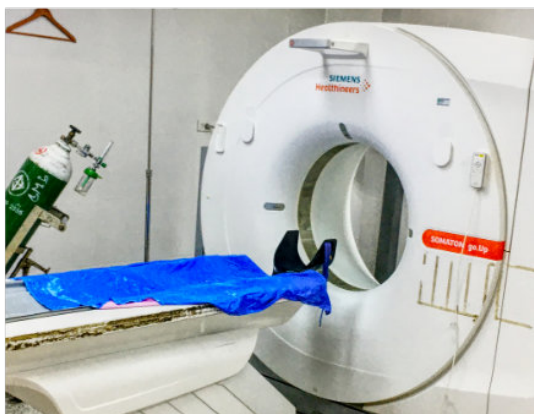
But, 62-year-old him insisted that he had to do this, and if not today, then it wouldn't be any easier tomorrow... and well, he just had to behave. He actually really impressed himself with his apparent ability to not panic, (but he always easily and really impressed himself.) He kept blissfully occupied with his Big Project, and before long, it was his turn.

The technician, who just looked to be somebody's kid, came out to get him ready for The Tube. He asked her the questions best he could, but the only answer he could understand about how long he would be crammed in



there was “five minutes,” which he thought was impossible for such an elaborate scan, and... what?

“Sleep,” she said as she jammed a needle in the back of his hand. “Supine.” These were apparently the only two English words she knew, but then he swore he



heard the word “die,” which he assured himself was not that, but maybe she was putting some dye in his blood? Was this why he could feel something in his toes? Wait... was she putting him to sleep? This thought actually calmed him a bit, because he would just love to sleep through this nightmare. But when would he wake up? “Would someone drive... how would he get home?” No one had any idea what he was saying, and he had no idea what anyone was saying, or what was going on, except that it was time to lay down.

He did, and they put a prop under his knees, just like the diagram, and they Velcroed him in like he was about to be airlifted, and they put him in the... what? Not a tube? Just a ring? Okay...

And in five minutes it was all over. He got up and out of there, apologized to everyone for, well, anything, put his clothes back on and thought of what to do during the two hours before

5 **CLINICAL RECORD**

ชื่อ-นามสกุล : Mr. MARK CRAIG GILCHRIST วันที่ : 21 มีนาคม 2565

HN : เลขที่ : 62 0 11 7 เลขที่บัตรประจำตัวประชาชน :

ประวัติการตรวจ : สำรลงเดินด้วย (เดินได้)

ประวัติการเจ็บป่วย : ไข้ High Risk

Chief Complaint : ท้องในขณะเดินได้ ไม่เจ็บ

UID :

2 day PTA

no cough, no fever

img: scan

filter

น้ำหนัก : 80 Kg. ส่วนสูง :

T : C P: 105 /min. R: 20 /min.

BPI: 142 / 91 mmHg BP2:



he could see a doctor with the results, and since he had not been able to eat all day in preparation for the CT scan, he thought of only one thing; food. And since he was not in the mood to worry about trivial things like heart disease cutting his life short, he went right for a plate of fried chicken.



About halfway through his second drumstick, he wondered why his umbrella wasn't still jammed in his shorts, and where the heck did he leave it? He was great at leaving things behind, but lucky enough that he seldom actually lost them – like the backpack with \$8,000 in gear he'd left on a public

bus in Odessa. Other people lost things, but somehow he fully expected his umbrella to just show up somewhere. So, he wandered back to the Covid area – no umbrella. Then back to the CT lab – nope.

It's not like it was expensive. He'd bought it for only \$6.50 U.S. at a Circle-K store in Hanoi, but it was “just



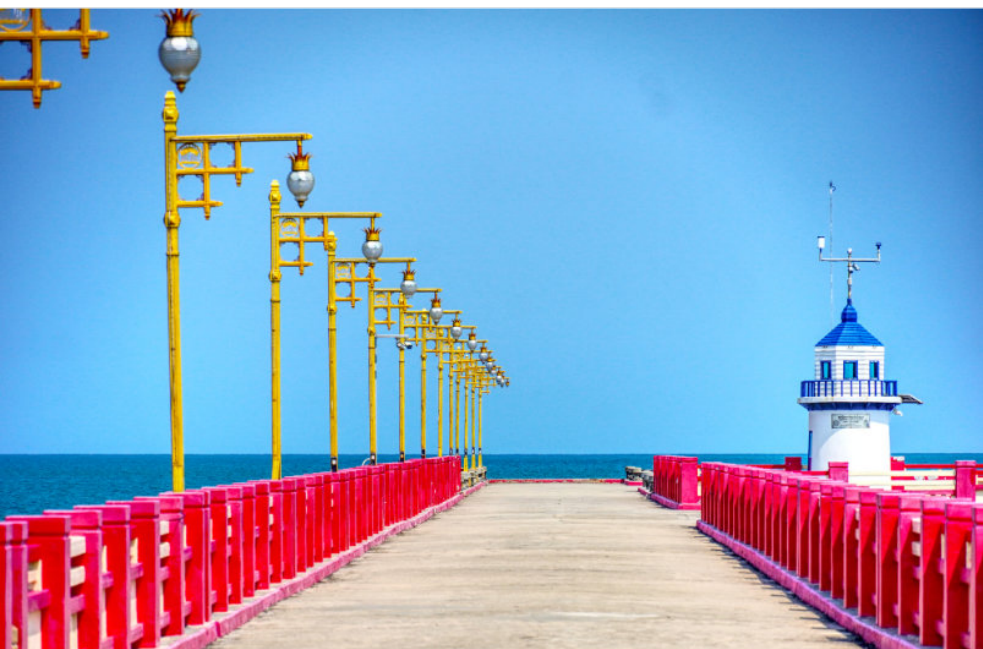
right” for him, and when you travel light and carry very few things on a small motorcycle, things that are “just right” are precious gems.

He searched more places, and then it was time for the verdict, so he went to the doctor’s area and waited another hour, easily passing the time with his beautiful project.

More than once, hospital employees hurriedly cleared people from the hall, saying, “Covid! Covid!” Then, they quickly wheeled an elaborate gurney past as everybody peered at the patient under a clear-plastic tent.

He thought about “life” after death and how humans are so preoccupied with it. Religions try to accommodate this, especially many of the Eastern ones, where Buddhists





burn token money and items to send to their ancestors in the hopes that people will do the same for them, and they “make merit,” every day, by donating food, items or cash to monks to keep that system working. Western religions are a little less specific, promising that you will spend eternity up in a place called Heaven if you behave, and down in Hell if you don’t. He’d been raised Lutheran, but left that friendship in college, and he knew that his life would be all about his days spent living, so he had decided long ago to make the best of those days.

So, how much did all this cost? The CT scan was the only large expense, at \$460.61, while he spent \$58.18 on lab work, including two chest x-rays, EKG, blood, Covid and TB tests, \$7.55 on two sets of antibiotics and “Tylenol” for a week, and yes, for four doctor visits, he paid only \$9.40.



Close to 6 pm, he was summoned into the room, where he met a man young enough to be his grandson. The doctor, apparently a specialist in lungs and such, was 26 years old. Great.

THE DIAGNOSIS

Not cancer? “No,” the doctor said and then patiently waited as Grandpa cried right in front of him. Then he explained why, pointing to one note on the CT Scan report; “No indication of cancer,” and then why he believed it was pneumonia, going on and on with technical things – beautiful, technical things – as his patient’s head reeled with euphoria. Giddy from the news that he wasn’t about to die, he promised the doctor he would return in 10 days for another x-ray, then he picked up a week’s supply of antibiotics, and headed home.

He was well aware that he’d only had just a taste of the horror that cancer victims go through every day. It’s like a giant door closes on them, and then slowly, another door as the cancer debilitates them, other doors close with the

chemo, trauma and depression – and their lives get darker and darker – and at some point, some will have to accept that those doors will never open again, and then more close, until that very last door...

But, for him, something magical happened, a lucky wind, perhaps, hit that first door and swung it right back open.

He appreciated how this experience had given him an actual sense of purpose after his death, and he hopes that his story will not take away from the very real tragedy that is cancer

and the lives it ravages, but maybe it will inspire some for the beauty that is life on this planet Earth.

Walking on the pier near his guest house, he heard sounds above him, like a flag in the wind. He looked up into the Southern Thailand sky to watch training paratroopers opening their chutes. Mere moments ago, they had been hurtling down at more than 100mph, but thanks to a beautiful collection of fabric, string and yes, luck, they were now quietly floating down to safety.

He got back to the guest house just as an evening rain came to cool things down, and he ducked in under a gazebo. One of his friends was there, and he told her the good news. She then picked his umbrella up off a chair, the very chair where he'd left it hours ago, and said; "Any idea who's this is?" And he smiled and said; "I sure do."

If it wasn't for good luck, he thought, he'd have no luck at all.



MARK GILCHRIST, 2022