

The chronic condition of life

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The young branches of the poplar trees moved lazily, wrapped in the pale blue spring, embraced by a soft breeze. How many times in those years had I stopped the car in that little grassy space and taken a shortcut which led to the courtyard at the back of the house. As usual, time seemed to stand still, allowing me to admire the shadows created by the windows which, depending on the season, were either wide or half open in their monotonous succession of fear or of desire for the sun which invaded without pity and assailed the façade during summer afternoons or else brought a little warmth and some temporary relief from the fog of winter.

Antonio had been born when Europe had already forgotten the promises of peace signed in November 1918. At a very early age, thanks to his father, he began to understand the power that the land bestowed upon him. However, a paternal aunt persuaded Antonio to attend the lyceum of classical studies, after which he enrolled at university to study jurisprudence.

The young branches of the poplar trees again moved lazily the day that Antonio received his degree. He began a period when, with wisdom, he knew how to reconcile and live happily with the laws of the civil code and with another law: that which the life of the fields gave as a gift.

I met him many years later when his family doctor, who was a frequent visitor, noticed a lump on Antonio's neck which, up to that point, had not created any discomfort. On examining Antonio, the doctor discovered several enlarged lymph nodes. After confirming the results, he advised Antonio to see a specialist in hematology, and my name was mentioned. At that time, I was very young and had just finished specializing in hematology.

Our first meeting—more than an hour spent listening, explaining, understanding ourselves and each other—was the beginning of an honest and sincere relationship which would never become anything less. After completing the tests to confirm the diagnosis and to define the stage of the disease, Antonio started a brief cycle of therapy which he tolerated very well. He was, however, amazed that an illness such as leukemia, whose name carries so much terror even when accompanied by the word chronic, could be treated with just a few daily pills. The lymph nodes disappeared, the volume of the spleen reduced, and Antonio invited me to dinner in that court which I already knew would provoke many unforeseen emotions in me.

And so our friendship began. He found a silent serenity walking with me while he recounted his recent emotional experiences or regaled me with stories from his past.

He had married Rosanna, but tragically, she had been killed in a road accident some years later. The loss led him

to question the futility of a love which had left him with no children and no hope, but continued to be a part of his life. Since her death, he had shared this house with his sister's family—becoming the lonely uncle. He spoke elegantly of his pain using very few well-chosen words: there had been a period of profound passion, but it had gone forever. Antonio understood that he would have to live the rest of his life with his illness and all the consequent uncertainty. Nevertheless, he repeatedly expressed his gratitude to me as a doctor who continued to listen to him in those moments of apparent good health, and it was my privilege to have this friendship with a rare individual who had been able to reconcile his professional life as a lawyer with the wisdom of his family's farming traditions.

One autumn, years later in the 1990s, his condition began to deteriorate rapidly; the lymph nodes enlarged once again, an unforgiving tiredness became his constant afternoon companion, and what had initially been a slight fever began to torment him, confining him to the house. Once again treatment was started using those few drugs which were available in those years.

He accepted to come into hospital, and the use of a new drug brought a considerable improvement, which allowed him to return to his normal life for several months. Unfortunately, however, the fever came back, together with his discomfort, and the lymph nodes increased in volume once again. The disease had changed; it wasn't the same as twenty years before.

After a second period in hospital and another unsuccessful attempt at stabilization, Antonio asked to go home permanently, where he would be protected by the poplar trees, the river bank, and the dogs which had often accompanied us on our interminable walks.

In the shade of those trees which moved lazily in the breeze, I entered the house accompanied by the hushed music of the leaves. Immediately I realized that his condition would not allow me to be completely honest about the coming days, and I had to accept that, for the first time, our conversation would be denied that transparency which for many years had been the cornerstone of our relationship. I felt profoundly uncomfortable, as though I were failing to keep an unspoken promise, betraying the trust of a person who had never manifested resistance, had never imposed conditions, had always believed everything I had explained, proposed, or suggested.

Antonio was lying on his bed, which his sister had set up in a room on the ground floor to save him the effort of climbing the great staircase. A profound sadness took hold of me, which I tried to mask with an insipid smile. Antonio understood. Reading on my face feelings which

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I was convinced I was able to hide, he invited my silence with a frail nod of his head. Slowly he gave me his hand and whispered, “My friend, you have illuminated the last twenty years of my life.” Words spoken in a confidential tone which was new to me. I tried to look into his eyes, motivated no doubt by some weak attempt at rebellion against a profound awareness. I murmured something without realizing exactly what, but then, with Antonio having let go of my hand, and wanting to remain faithful to his last request for honesty, I accepted his invitation, a sweet melancholic invitation, to leave his house just as I was leaving his life—forever.

Many seasons have passed since then; now, I’m an old hematologist and oncologist. I have known both life and death, moments of serenity and others of anguish. Often my lips have parted in a smile, and sometimes my eyes have moistened in public pain and for more private

suffering. I think of Antonio sometimes, and I realize that I don’t know how to find the wisdom that sustained his heart at the death of his wife or even where that road that he loved so much leads: that search for peace of mind in the language of the land.

Time passes. Other seasons will tell their stories on other evenings. I will again perceive the loneliness of one who feels cheated by life, unable to defend myself when I am touched by the most personal, most hidden, most profound emotions.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

I have read and understood *Current Oncology*’s policy on disclosing conflicts of interest, and I declare that I have none.

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