



The Cane



By Ed Rudin, MD

HE WAS EIGHT when his mother bought him a well-tailored green and brown tweed overcoat. It buttoned to his hips and fell elegantly to below his knee. With an olive green felt fedora rakishly tilted over his right eyebrow and a jaunty green marbled cane of some early Dupontese, he was the quintessence of urbanity.

The cane was the unmistakable mark of the debonair gentleman. Light, easy to swing, it was alive with the insouciance of the flapper era. This was the heyday of white shoes, with or without black or brown wing tips; the era of buttoned cloth spats, diamond studded tie-pins, homburgs — and ivory-tipped walking sticks.

He loved escorting his hair-bobbed young and comely mother in this high fashion, opening doors for her, walking on her streetside, and helping her in and out of local buses and streetcars.

When they traveled with friends who had an automobile, his father was generally there to take over the gentlemanly functions. That was so rare that he could anticipate the people who would stop to smile and admire this cosmopolitan couple, this unusual mother and son.

HE WAS 28 and an Air Force captain when he and the Protestant chaplain on the air force base talked about starting a little theater. The chaplain had been a reservist managing his denomination's radio work in the western third of the United States when the "police action" on the Korean Peninsula "activated" the captain — and him.

Among the other ex-reservists on base was a wing from New York whose theatrical and scrounging skills was the envy of the "regulars." The chaplain and the younger captain thought they could harness those talents and raise the morale of many on base with a theater group that would perform 1930s comedies at the base theater.

They began. One in the series was a mystery so light it could succeed as a comedy if it failed as a mystery, Agatha Christie's Ten Little Indians. The boyish 28-year-old was cast as the retired British brigadier, exuding patrician manners and detailed accounts of battle exploits, but mute about the circumstances of his retirement.

His bearing said he was too young to retire for reasons of age; his leathery, wrinkled skin said he was too old to do more battle; his walking stick said both. He flourished it as a venerated weapon, but held it close as a faithful companion.

The 28-year-old relished the cane, a prop that bespoke his character at least as much as the full and imperious mustache he wore on stage. His false mustache conveyed the cantankerousness of a young brigadier, but his cane conveyed the venerability and mystery of an old man.

He loved this character and its totem, the cane. After the first performance, he could anticipate that the audience would love it too.

AT 78, HE FACED A DECISION. A cane could make his travel safer. Could it make his heart lighter?

Neuropathies, flagging muscle tone and deceptive depth perception sometimes left him unsteady, unsure where his feet were, where steps and curbs were, and whether he was vertical or atilt. Changes in heart rhythms and vascular pressures left him reeling.

Could a cane be his stabilizer and his swagger stick? His warning to barking dogs and boisterous boys and his invitation to esteem?

It would surely be something more to manage, something more to forget, to leave behind, to trip over when he rose to make a stately departure or to greet a lady.

Suppose it were a burnished mahogany walking stick sculpted with representations of some revered ancient lore. Stable in time and substance and sophisticated in its artistry, such a cane could divert him and others from thoughts of frailty.

With such a prop he might be ready to repeat the role he had played 70 years ago and 50 years ago.

He need only remember to add elegance to equilibrium and suavity to steadiness.

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