

Rodney looked at life. You're only as good as your last six minutes. It's not just a *set*—it's a choice between life and death. Comedy is serious business.

Whenever you talk to people about your survival, it makes them want to share their own losses with you. It's like comparing battle scars. Makes me think of that scene in *Jaws*—which I just watched for maybe the tenth time—with the great Robert Shaw, Richard Dreyfuss, and Roy Scheider, where they compare their wounds at sea.

A shark attack is similar to my sweet aunt Ruthie grabbing my face and kissing me so hard she sucks blood to my cheek. In fact, her ex-husband, my dad's brother, my uncle Joe, resembled Roy Sc-

neider . . .



And not unlike Robert Shaw in *Jaws*, he was also bitten in half—except by his ex-wife. Uh, okay, Bob. And by the way, I love my Aunt Ruthie, which means more slams to come.

Uncle Joe survived but I lost three childhood heroes to heart attacks; all were funny, handsome overachievers

with high cholesterol, and all died between the ages of thirty-seven and forty-one. First, when I was eight, I lost my uncle Ozzie, one of my dad's three younger brothers. He was only forty. He had a heart attack while running down the street chasing a couple kids who had stolen his tire. Nice, right? They tell me I look the most like him.



One year later, I lost my uncle Manny to a double heart attack.



Apparently, he had two different heart attacks—one brought on by his business, the other just by pressure in general. His wife, my aunt Millie, loved him more than anything, but she was young and a bit of a hottie—and with that comes complexity. Yes, I just typed

he's never had the privilege of saying what drunken guys say to each other in bars all the time: "I wouldn't kick *her* out of bed." Because he couldn't. Has this book been pulled out of the display windows in airports yet?

Getting back to my family, the death toll kept rising. A couple years after we lost Manny, even more tragically, Manny and Millie's twenty-one-year-old daughter, Bonnie, succumbed to cancer.

Then, six years later, when I was fifteen, my dad's youngest brother, thirty-seven-year-old Sammy, died of a heart attack while playing tennis. I guess if you were to pick which one of all these heart attacks you'd want to have, you'd choose the one during tennis. At least

you're all in white, teed up for the great U.S. Open in heaven. God was just watching Sammy play tennis that day, trying to keep score, and said to himself, "Thirty-love-to-have-him-up-here-in-heaven." It was what it was. Sucked.

Just for clarification, when I mention God watching Sammy play tennis, I'm using poetic license, not referring to the Carlin-esque version of an almighty being with a long white beard, pulling numbers out of a hat, deciding who shall live and who shall die. That's far from my view of religion. I'm more of a spiritual believer. It doesn't make sense that an all-powerful wise old man would just make a decision on a whim

He drove himself hard for fifty years—worked his way up from a butcher in a supermarket to become a VP of meat. That's right, a vice president of meat. I don't know who the president of meat was at the time, but I do know my dad was under a lot of pressure from work. Meat weighed heavily on his mind. His meat pulled him down.

No, that's not a setup for a joke. But when I was about six, my world was pulled down when my dad had a massive heart attack himself. He used to smoke six packs of cigarettes a day. Didn't even open them, just put a box of Camels in his mouth and torched 'em. It was like *Mad Men* except it wasn't about the world of advertising. It was all

about . . . wait for it . . . meat.

He really did smoke six packs of Camels a day, from the moment he got up till the moment he put the lights out. Crazy. Next to the surgeon general's warning on cigarettes they should've added his picture. It would've been the actual size of his head. He had a very small head. His head was about the size of the surgeon general's warning on the side of a box of cigarettes, to be specific.

He had a second heart attack six months later that damn near killed him. He was in a hospital in Norfolk, Virginia, and I remember that my mom, Dolly, claimed she *had* to become his nurse because she didn't like the care he was being given. But years later he in-