



WINNING THE TONTINE

by Daniel J. Bressler, MD, FACP

Based on my long interest in the experience of people facing the last chapter of their life, I've concluded that most of them, when given the chance, tend to reflect on events that stand out to them as most vivid, even if many of those events are incidental to the broad strokes of their life history. I've heard a crusty old retired railroad engineer tearing up remembering the first time he saw the new toy railroad set he got for his 10th Christmas.

Winning the Tontine

For MB

*All of them are gone now except for you.
The CCNY Sigma Alpha Mu Pledge Class of 1940
Sons and grandsons of immigrants
The rough and tumble cream of the city schools
Their accents scrubbed of Yiddish + Lithuanian
They spoke Brooklyn and Bronx and baseball and jazz.*

*Arnie, the smartest of this smart clique
Who tested with an IQ of 170
Who took off his thick glasses to swim in the afternoons
He was destined to be first in the class.
When the war broke out your sophomore year
He was the first to enlist, the first to complete Officer Training
And the first to fall, killed leading his even younger recruits
Kids from Flatbush and Hell's Kitchen and Yonkers
Up a hill in the slaughterhouse the historians
Later sanitized as The Battle of the Bulge.*

*Your best friend Howie had convinced you the summer before
To take a train to Connecticut and work as farm hands
For 15 cents an hour plus room and board plus stories
This wasn't a fortune but was a fair wage in a country
Still out of work and waiting for war.*

*So you pulled weeds and potatoes for the laconic
Mr. Ledbetter and slept on his haybeds warm from curing
You picked fruit on the estate of Mr. Pratt, a Morgan Partner
Who, hearing you were college boys, would engage you in banter
And let you speak your classroom French to his precocious daughters
Two summers later, Howie, too, met with the Nazi killing machine
His good manners and enthusiasm unable to save him.*

*Walter got a Japanese bullet through his wrist
And other injuries that never kept him long from battle.
After the war, a VA doctor recommended that he take up piano as therapy
His lucky wound, he called it, because he married his quiet piano teacher
Who planned on escaping poverty through her fingers
And seduced him with her Schubert and Beethoven soulfulness
In one of the listening rooms below the Steinway store in Midtown.
Walter, like you, moved to California and lived to see old age
Your friendship persistent and sweet but muted
By the losses you had shared but could never discuss.*

*You survived your Navy service in the Pacific
Your landing craft always too small a target for the kamikazes
You missed a few days in sickbay with a jellyfish sting
And a few weeks in the Philippines with dysentery
The hospital, all its windows broken by the Marines and sailors
Rioting in protest after hearing about a tanned and coiffed Douglas MacArthur
Starring in a made-for-Hollywood newsreel shot on the beachhead
Outside the hospital where yes, he had returned as promised
While they had stayed, slogging through the mud and mosquitos
Losing their limbs and eyes and comrades.*

*Now only you are left.
You have won the tontine, this chalice of memories
Paying out a steady royalty of recollection and regret
For decade after decade
And for a little time yet to come.*

“To win the tontine” means to be the last survivor of a group that had formed for a specific purpose.

A frail arthritic widower once sat on my consultation room couch and relived out loud the details of an unconsummated love affair she had with a young man she met while traveling in Europe in the 1950s. Many of the women acutely remember the seemingly trivial anecdotes of early motherhood. Many of the men remember their experiences of war as if it were yesterday.

More than 16 million Americans were part of the armed services during World War II. Of those, slightly less than 600,000 remain, according to the Department of Veterans' Affairs. The very youngest of those who served is now in his or her late 80s. Most are in their 90s — as is my father, Marty, who provided the source material for this poem. In geriatrics, we call people in this age group (85–94) the “old old.”

By way of clarification, the phrase “to win the tontine” means to be the last

survivor of a group that had formed for a specific purpose. Its origin is from the 17th century, when a banker from Naples named Lorenzo Tonti set up an investment fund based on subscribers who would put money into a “pot” with the interest paid out only to the survivors. As you might imagine, such a setup has given rise to a number of interesting and amusing books, movies, and plays. It has also, indirectly, has given rise to this poem written for my father and his group of college buddies, now all gone but for him. **SDP**



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