Physicians write volumes about breaking bad news. None of it helped me with Mr Price.

Mr Price was 89 years old, a powerful man who owned half the country. He was also surrounded by minions who followed his orders unquestioningly. If he wanted to stop or to double a medication, or to try another prostate operation, it got done. I saw him every week to prevent that.

Mr Price was something of a legend as a rich, liberal democrat—a rather rare creature, especially in Texas. He had integrated his many businesses years before the first civil-rights legislation, and was famed for his corporate largesse and individual acts of kindness.

Mr Price was always accompanied by a cowboy, one of the large, stolid men who had worked on his ranch for many years, and now in their 60s, had evolved into full-time caregivers. But he was driving his family and employees crazy. Every day he went to his office, and by lunchtime was tired and irritable. This man, whom his family and workers had always seen as a saint, was becoming a tyrant and a bully.

Mr Price trusted me. When I first saw him I had stopped monthly injections for non-existent prostate cancer and started him on an antidepressant and angiotensin-converting-enzyme inhibitor, and his gratitude at his improvement in wellbeing did not diminish, even though the benefits of my manipulations did.

Mr Price did not want to die, and did not want to talk about it. He would deftly change the subject whenever I tried to talk about his outlook. As his mental powers diminished, his brain was constantly in the “send” mode of telling stories and giving orders, and rarely in the “receive” mode of listening and empathising.

The cowboys and Mr Price’s adult children telephoned with tales of nasty verbal abuse. But no drugs seemed to help, and Mr Price refused to discuss the issue with me.

Mr Price was stylish. He wore elegant cuff-links and bolo ties. He was a polished raconteur, with a stable of stories involving famous Texans. He could always make me laugh. And, he was a gentleman. Hence the tragedy of his recent nastiness.

One day I decided that I would have to confront him, so I stood in front of him and almost screamed, “Mr Price, I’m sorry, but you are seriously ill. I really don’t think you’re going to live that long. I never know anything for certain, and I’m wrong all the time, but I really don’t think that you’ll be alive in a year.”

Why did I do that? It was almost an assault. I knew that he did not want to talk about death, and I almost always do what my patients want. But this time something snapped, and I pushed the bad news on him.

He acted as if he hadn’t heard me. He changed the subject and told a joke. I felt guilty. I had not been a gentleman with Mr Price. I worried about whether he would come the next week, whether I could still cheer him up.

A week later he greeted me with a big smile and two boxes, containing his beautiful cuff-links that I had often admired. He sent his cowboy out of the room and told me that this was only the second time in his life that he had given a man a gift.

He died a year later, but in that year the cowboys told me that his mood had changed. He was no longer so angry, no longer trying to maintain control over all his possessions. Instead, he built an addition to the public library named after his late wife, and worked to develop literacy programmes for people in Texan prisons—a liberal and a gentleman to the end.

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