

After decades of dazzling tricks, a magician reaches his final act

By BOB TEDESCHI
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ARMELLA LEUNG FOR STAT

The man was 64 and he was dying of lung disease and this was his place: a stretch of concrete laid at the foot of an empty storefront and a bodega in Portland, Ore. If you'd walked down NW 3rd Avenue 18 months ago, you might have noticed him on the sidewalk, most likely wrapped beneath blankets that were cleaner than those shrouding other homeless people in the area. It's possible you would have noticed the slightly younger woman bringing him warm food and discreetly helping change his clothes late at night and then kissing him sweetly before leaving it all to whatever the night might hold.

The man's name was Kelly Craig and the woman was Lisa Craig, his wife of nearly 40 years. She lives in a single-occupancy housing unit across the street from where Kelly lived for more than a year.

As a younger man, she said, Kelly Craig was a magician and an escape artist of the Houdini variety. The two met while working with a traveling carnival in Northern California. She was 18 and working the kiddie rides and game booths; he was 24 and ran the Twister and practiced magic on the side.

He got good enough to later support himself performing card and coin tricks and bigger feats along Venice Beach. When he was sober, and sometimes when he was not, he would have spectators wrap him in a straightjacket and chains and lock them up and watch as he launched himself into the ocean, then emerge unshackled.

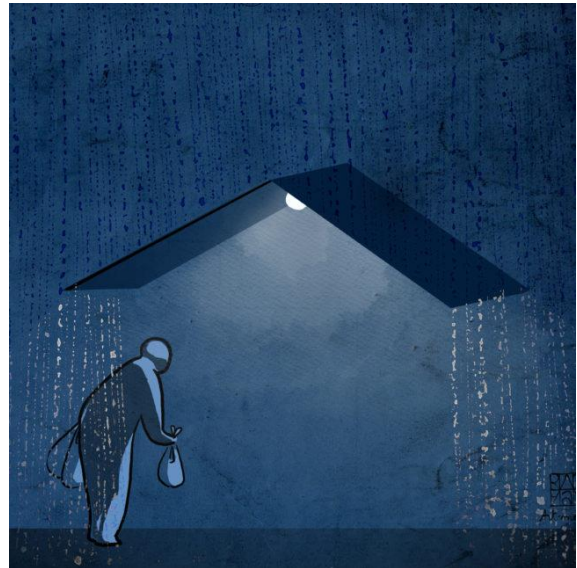
Did he tell her his secrets?

"I knew some of them," she said.

She saved her money from housecleaning and caretaker jobs and paid a tattoo artist to cover her husband's back with a portrait of a wizard pulling a rabbit from a hat while a fairy watched from one shoulder. His stage name, Cartoon the Magician, was emblazoned across the top.

Kelly Craig had a showman's personality, she said. He loved delighting people with his magic and he shared his gift with strangers and friends at every opportunity.

He performed tricks through his 30s and 40s and 50s, and even in his early 60s. He performed through stints of homelessness and the birth of three sons and the death of Kelly Jr., at age 9, and many short-term jobs. But he could not escape his alcoholism. That, and the American medical system's inability to serve people like him in their final days, is how he ended up on NW 3rd Avenue as his body failed him.



In early 2014 Craig's emphysema and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease had grown so bad that he needed medical help to get through the day — to help him with his treatments and basic care when he was too breathless or tired to move much. Local medical and social service workers found him an assisted living facility three blocks from Lisa, where he could get care and receive frequent visits from her.

But he was still drinking, and when he wasn't he was often forgetful or confused, as sometimes happens with chronic alcoholics who also have advanced lung disease. He would forget the rules against smoking with his oxygen tank nearby, and the risk of explosion understandably alarmed the staff.

Health care workers are not well-positioned to solve this problem. Some of it is logistical; they lack the time to methodically address one patient's needs when others need help, too. Some comes from lack of training in working with people with substance use disorders. And some still believe such patients lack moral fiber and should be turned out for their behavior.

When Kelly Craig was turned out, he had a choice: He could check into a state-funded home far away from the neighborhood and his wife, and do his best to comply with the facility's rules. Or he could seek refuge in the alcoves of NW 3rd Avenue, where his wife could visit many times each day.

Lisa helped him find a spot across the street from her building.

"It was really hard watching him dying on the streets," Lisa Craig said. "That was horrendous."

She did the best she could with his care. He could not walk a block without falling desperately short of breath. He lasted seven months before Portland's rain and cold forced him to an adult foster care home. His plan was to make it through the winter, then return to his spot near Lisa.

She visited him maybe once a week. He was depressed, she said. There were no magic tricks for the staff; no jokes or wisecracks.

A doctor called from the hospital. She got there in time to say goodbye. She's not sure if he heard her, but he died with a smile on his face, she said.

In the health care system, as in many other realms, money often follows the stories of well-known, sympathetic characters, be they celebrities or other beloved members of a community. The plight of the homeless at life's end has largely lacked narrative force because few have positioned themselves to observe them.

A small but growing crosscurrent to that trend flows through Portland, where health care and social service workers have lately confronted the city's homeless crisis. Kelly Craig's story, among others, rippled through this community in the months after his death in January 2016.

In 2018, a facility will rise in the city's east side, offering longer-term palliative and end-of-life care to the medically complex homeless. Spouses will not have accommodations there, but the level of care may prompt them to find housing nearby.

The building will occupy a lot that now hosts an abandoned pizza joint. At some point in the next year or so, a demolition crew will arrive on site, and, in the spirit of Kelly Craig and his many unseen assistants, they will make it disappear.