

I Will Never Forget

Category: Cold

written by Thelma Zirkelbach | February 5, 2024

I will never forget the doctor my husband, Ralph, and I met with after Ralph had routine bloodwork that revealed an elevated white cell count. Dr. R glanced at the folder on his desk, pushed his glasses up on his nose, and said, "You have acute myelogenous leukemia. Your type is especially difficult to cure."

Ralph sat stoically, eyes fastened on the framed diplomas on the wall.

Dr. R glanced at his watch; a physician's time is precious. His next words were delivered in an indifferent tone: "Ninety percent of patients with that diagnosis are dead within a year." He sounded as if he were reading from a script. Doubtless he'd given out death sentences many times, but this was our one and only. He shut the folder in front of him with a snap. "Well, sir, you said you want to enroll in a clinical trial."

"What if he decides not to do the trial?" I asked.

The doctor glared at me, then turned to Ralph. "Leave! Go back to your regular doctor. That's not what this hospital is about." He shook his head. "Where would medical science be if we didn't do clinical trials?"

He was halfway out of his chair when my husband said, quietly, "I want to do the trial."

"The nurse will tell you what to do," Dr. R said. Then without another word, he marched out of the room.

On the way home, my ever-optimistic husband said, "Someone has to be in that ten percent."

Still in shock, I nodded. I knew, whatever the outcome for Ralph, that I'd remember that doctor—with his crisp white coat, horn-rimmed glasses, and heartless words—forever.

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I will never forget another doctor from long ago, when I was nineteen and critically burned, hovering between life and death. Fate stepped in when, at a medical convention, my doctor approached a famous plastic surgeon and asked if he'd take a look at me.

Dr. Truman Blocker was world-renowned for his treatment of burned soldiers during World War II. After the war, he became chief of plastic surgery at John Sealy Hospital in Galveston. When he stepped through my door, the room seemed to shrink. An imposing man with a booming voice, he still looked like the defensive lineman he'd been in college.

He read my chart and examined my charred skin. "Bring her to Galveston," he told my parents. "I'll treat her there."

Then he turned to me and said, gently, "We'll have to make you sick to make you well."

In Galveston, through weeks of brutal treatment, his words stayed uppermost in my mind, and I never doubted that he would make me well.

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I wish all cold-hearted doctors could observe that famous physician, whose kind, compassionate words inspired me to trust that he *would* make me well. Seventy years later, I still remember them.

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