

# Falling in Love With My Doctor

Category: Stories

written by Judith Lieberman | September 10, 2010

## **Judith Lieberman**

The other doctors I consulted called him brilliant. His past patients praised his compassion. He actually responded to e-mails. And, lastly, he was known as the best-looking doctor at the cancer center. What more could I ask?

On the other hand, what choice did I have? After twelve years, I was facing a recurrence of a relatively rare oral cancer, located inconveniently at the base of my tongue. The treatment options were not great. The radical surgery recommended by one prominent cancer center could have left me unable to swallow, talk or eat normally.

My incredible husband stayed up many nights researching surgery, radiation, chemotherapy and all the combinations. On the bright side, my teenagers cleaned their rooms without being asked!

The last straw came when, while talking on my cell phone to yet another cancer center and making the turn into a parking lot, I crashed my car. Just one more broken item needing to be fixed.

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I prepare for eight weeks of combined chemotherapy and radiation, which my new doctor candidly describes as "setting off a bomb in your mouth." Sitting in the exam room, I know that my husband is paying close attention as the doctor shows us the details of my uncooperative oral anatomy on his computer screen.

But I am watching my doctor.

His eyes are brown, and they look directly into mine while he speaks. His voice is calm, and his hands are firm and warm when they touch me. My heart flutters, and I feel like a schoolgirl, excited and shy.

It certainly feels much better to have a crush than to have cancer.

I decide to go along for the ride. I buy "loungewear" to replace office casual, and a fancy overnight bag for hospital trips. My husband buys me a Kindle so I can download books from my anticipated sickbed. We stock the kitchen with Jell-O and flaxseed oil, easy to swallow and full of purported healing powers.

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Several weeks and many radiation treatments later, I am back at the cancer center for another all-day chemotherapy session. I am attached to the IV, have only half my hair and "eat" nutritional glop via a stomach tube. (My

teenage daughter rationalizes this as the ultimate in body piercing.) My neck is raw, and I do my best to cover it with a variety of cheery scarves. I have that delightful “chemo grey” complexion.

One late afternoon, I wake from restless sleep to see my doctor sitting in the corner. The curtains are drawn, and he is writing on a chart in the room’s only shaft of light, waiting patiently to talk to me. He looks up. His sad eyes meet mine, and he smiles at me.

At that moment I fall in love.

I fall in love with hope. It pulls me through the weeks of being unable to eat, days where my only goal is to make it to the next day, and moments of pain that must be endured. I remember this instant clearly as my entry into a place beyond my rational experience.

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Eventually, though, after weeks and months in this nameless place, the intensity of my feelings shifts. I begin to eat again, and I wean myself from the narcotics and medications. I throw away the scarves and the “sick clothes.” My prognosis improves, and I return joyously to the routines of daily life, with my ability to eat and speak intact.

I begin to arrive at my doctor appointments late instead of early, and my beloved doctor now has new patients whose situations are more dire and urgent than mine.

For cancer patients, and many others, the doctor-patient relationship is as delicate and complex as that of any pair of lovers. You, my physician, know the secrets of my body in the most strangely intimate ways. I submit willingly. It was important for me to fall in love, to cling intensely to you as I traveled this strange road—to trust totally in our relationship and believe with all my heart.

I don’t know if my doctor knew about the wild love affair I had with him. For me, the boundaries changed as I struggled with death, disease and suffering. Ultimately, I know that my doctor loves his work in a profound way. In so doing, he made me feel loved.

I hope it was okay that I loved him back.

#### **About the author:**

Judy Lieberman lives in the San Francisco Bay Area and has written all her life for work, pleasure and the amusement of her friends and family. Anyone interested in the oral cancer journey can visit her blog at <http://jlwordofmouth.blogspot.com>. “It seems that a lot of medical professionals beat themselves up a lot. A part of what I wanted to convey in this piece is that we (patients with serious illness) know that doctors and nurses are also only human.”

#### **Story editor:**

Diane Guernsey