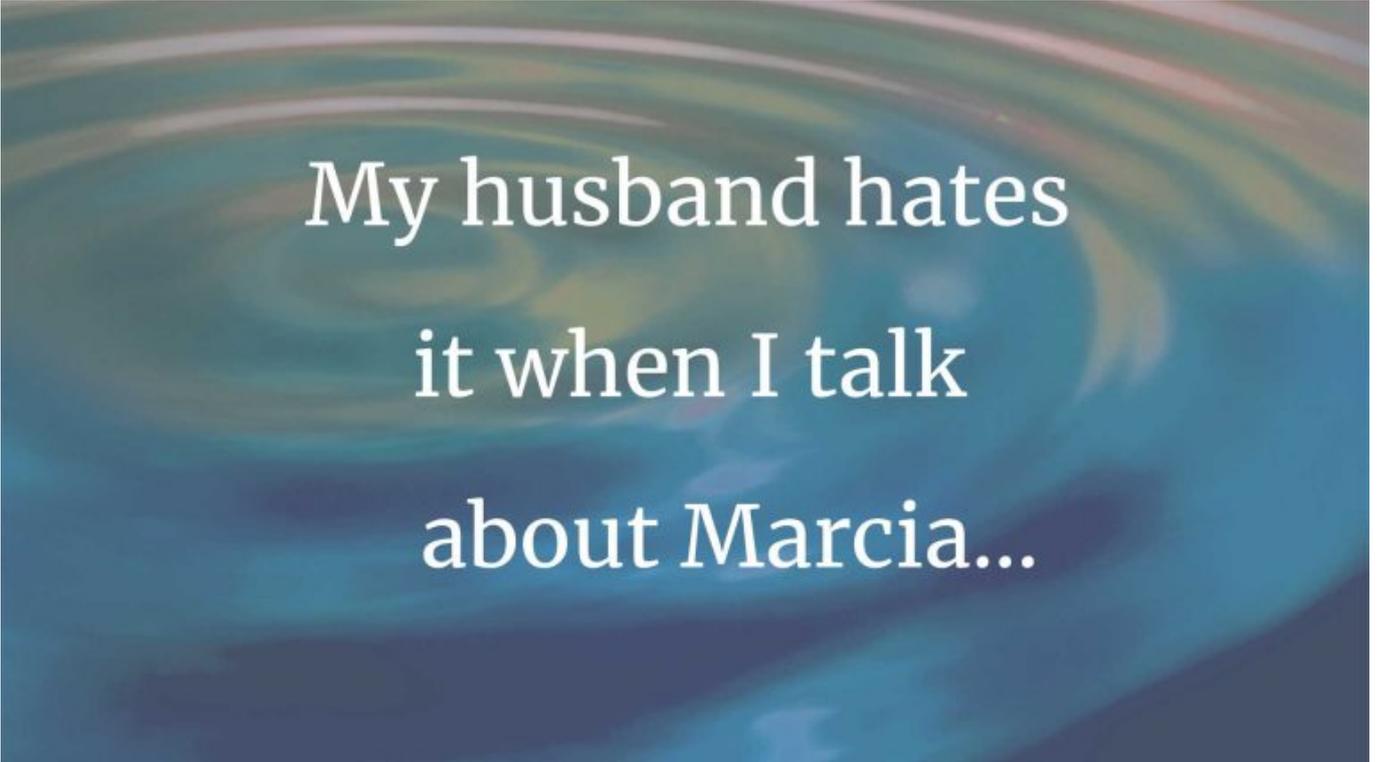


Marcia Must Exist

Category: Stories

written by Jane Ellen Dmochowski | July 11, 2025



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it when I talk
about Marcia...

Marcia doesn't know how to ride her bike very steadily. She is afraid of swimming in the ocean and has been known to proudly announce that she's "not a math person." But rest assured, she has positive qualities as well.

Her friends describe her as one of the sweetest people they know, and she loves to cook. She's not the world's most amazing chef, true, but people coming into her kitchen while she cooks? No problem! She tells them how they can help, with not a hint of impatience. She also fancies herself quite intelligent; when she was growing up, her superior IQ was an item of family lore. (Her parents had it measured when she was five, after quizzing her with flashcards for six months.) The number vastly overstates her intelligence, but still, she's not *dumb*.

Marcia exists solely in my head. Nonetheless, she is a comfort to me. Not so to my husband: She's the only woman he is allowed to marry, should I die before he does.

Marcia was created, out of necessity and absurdity, in the midst of a spousal spat. I was in treatment for advanced ovarian cancer, and in a very weak moment I asked my husband to promise me that I would never be replaced—that he would not marry again.

He protested (rightly, I suppose, but know your moment, dude!): "But I'm only fifty-one..."

Dear reader, these are words I have not allowed him to forget. He, of course,

regrets them.

And so I need Marcia to exist. If Marcia doesn't exist, who knows *who* he might marry when I'm gone! Besides, creating Marcia—her quirks, especially—makes me laugh and offers me assurance (illusory as it may be) that while I might be replaced, I will forever be my husband's first and absolute favorite wife.

I'm not a horrible person: I do want him to have Marcia (if he must) so that he'll have plenty of love and support in his life, should I not be here to provide it.

As you might imagine, my husband hates it when I talk about Marcia. I don't care. He can do whatever he wants when I'm gone. For now, this purely suppositional coupling with Marcia is his destiny, whether he likes it or not.

As you may already have surmised, Marcia allows me something to control at a time when everything feels so *very* out of control. Throughout all of 2023, and probably as far back as 2021 if I'm being honest, I had frequent, unexplained bloating, diarrhea, constipation and even vomiting. I would feel full quickly after eating, and often fatigued—and I experienced a persistent dull ache in my right pelvic region, punctuated by occasional throbbing sensations, resembling the most severe menstrual pain I've ever endured.

In November of 2023 I made a social-media post labeled "Shopping vibes: My daughter vs. me" with a picture of me, looking exhausted, sitting on a rack in Target. I punctuated it with a laughing emoji, because I was trying hard to laugh at what I figured (hoped!) was a mix of perimenopause and a few extra pounds.

The next morning, though, my mind wouldn't stop. As I put the puzzle pieces together, I recognized that this could *not* be normal. The following day, I saw my gynecologist. And so began the trials and tribulations of getting diagnosed and treated for stage 3 high-grade serous ovarian cancer.

The next months were a blur of my darkest emotions, but my tumor-debulking surgery went well. The grapefruit-sized tumor was extracted by my excellent medical team. I recovered with the help of my family and friends, and in mid-March I threw myself into six rounds of chemotherapy.

I am now in remission, and I try hard to look ahead with hope, but I know the statistics. Planning for the future can be a murky and daunting prospect.

According to the American Cancer Society's 2025 report, the prognosis and recurrence for average patients with my diagnosis are as follows: a five-year survival rate of 41 percent; and a 70-90 percent recurrence rate.

These figures should not, and absolutely cannot, dictate my path. I understand the importance of being pragmatic while also remaining positive. It would be silly to assume I'll live into old age without a lot of luck, excellent medical care and continued medical advances; but very little good can come of presuming my premature death based solely on the statistics.

In the months since I finished chemotherapy treatment, I had moments when I felt amazing, but many others when I did not. Fortunately, ovarian-cancer research has brought many recent treatment advances, especially with medications for maintenance or recurrence. And so, in late September 2024, I started a maintenance medication, a poly(ADP-ribose) polymerase (PARP) inhibitor.

Many women cannot tolerate this medication—but, as a relatively young and otherwise healthy ovarian-cancer patient, I thought, *I'll be the exception!* Within a couple of months, however, I ended up severely anemic and in need of a blood transfusion. I was taken off the medication that December.

By late January, I felt much better—so much so that a part of me desperately wanted to stay off the medication. Throughout my treatment, I have relied on my fancy juicer and my lifelong addiction to exercise to keep myself as healthy as possible, preferably without drugs. Nonetheless, I was relieved when my bloodwork showed I was well enough to re-start the PARP inhibitor. I've been on a reduced dose for the last few months and am happy to report that aside from the occasional late-day fatigue and headaches, I'm doing pretty well.

Will it be the silver bullet ensuring my long life? Nobody knows. The questions loop endlessly in my head, especially at night: Maybe the medication controls my fate? Maybe moving my body and staying healthy is all I need? Maybe both? Or maybe none of it will matter.

This is where Marcia comes in. Should the very worst case scenario come to be, I can (pretend to) control what will happen after. This is why Marcia must exist.

I'm trusting this woman with the man I love most in this world, so obviously Marcia needs to be a good person. She can be skilled at a few things that I've never tried to excel at (like chess and grocery shopping). She can be really good at using her shampoo until the bottle is completely empty before buying a new one, and wowing people with her knowledge of astrology or Russian literature.

She cannot, however, be smarter, more athletic, more empathetic or funnier than me. Absolutely *not*. That is where I draw the line.

Marry my husband if you must, Marcia—and you'd better wrap my kids in a million hugs and love them a *lot*. But I shall forever remain my husband's undisputed First and Most Beloved Wife.