
NON-FICTION | SPRING 2016

Chemo Chemistry... Or How I Fell in Love With My Oncologist

By Mariel Z. Knight

I look forward to my next bone marrow biopsy. Hurts like hell, but there's a bright spot: the pain will be inflicted by Lover Boy, my 40-something, beyond-sexy oncologist, and I'll get to spend a whole 20 minutes with him, as he pokes around somewhere below my waist. I'll wear my new black panties trimmed with lace. There's always a silver lining

Lover Boy, as I like to call him, practices at a large Pennsylvania hospital, and since May 2014, has been treating me for acute myeloid leukemia, one of the most aggressive blood cancers. He is helping to make my horrific ordeal tolerable: being diagnosed out of the blue with a horrendous disease; getting treated with a potent chemotherapy drug I feared would kill me; and enduring post-chemo appointments every other day for blood work. Painful needle sticks in worn-out veins, and frequent blood or platelet transfusions requiring me to spend hours in a hospital chair are my new norm.

"I apologize in advance," Lover Boy says, as he disinfects the perfect spot in a few inches above my butt, in preparation for the "marrow."

"Are you okay?" he asks every few minutes, as he injects an anesthetic into my skin.

Such consideration!

"Anything wrong?" he checks, when he hears me exhale, releasing the breath I've been holding in an attempt to dampen my pain.

How attentive!

“Just breathing,” I reply.

We chat about buying wigs, and he recommends a few nearby salons that some of his patients have been happy with.

“Ouch,” I cry with a jolt, as the needle pierces my bone.

My chatter abruptly stops and I grimace.

“I know, it sucks,” he says softly, as he twists the needle even deeper, to collect a core of bone marrow.

What empathy!

I never could have imagined that chemo would awaken my libido. My thick, black hair falls out in clumps, leaving me bald; the palms of my hands and soles of my feet completely peel off, in sheets of dried, dead skin; my face and legs turn sunburned red, though I haven't seen the sun in months; I am gaunt. Yet, despite this, at age 50+, my hormones are raging. Go figure.

Though the exhilaration is refreshing, being treated by an Adonis has its down side. I mean, how am I supposed to listen to him explain how to calculate my absolute neutrophil count, and then describe the perils of neutropenia, when all I want to do is tear myself from the IV pole dripping cytarabine and idarubicin and fly into his arms. Never mind I look grotesque and can barely walk.

Looking back, it wasn't love at first sight. It was panic. *He's* my doctor? I wondered, thinking perhaps I should switch hospitals. Lover Boy could pass for a college kid, with his longish blond hair, large hazel eyes, and a smile as warm and welcoming as a campfire on a brisk, starry night. What could this young buckaroo possibly know about leukemia? I asked myself. Or about my terror: I'm enjoying my life, minding my own business, when suddenly,

the docs tell me — like a sadistic joke — I’ve got mutant cells on the war path. Jeez, they’re just like ISIS, proliferating wildly and decimating everything in their path! Help!

As I lie in my hospital bed rehashing my life’s sins that could explain — at least in my mind — this dire fate, in walks the god himself. He’s wearing a crisp white smock, with a stethoscope draped neatly over his sturdy shoulders. “We have a choice to make,” he begins. “There’s a clinical trial going on that’s proven effective with AML; and clinical studies, you know, help advance science. If enough patients respond to the drug being investigated, it could eventually become standard treatment.”

What! Is he kidding? There I am, half dead, and I’m supposed to care about helping science? I struggle to raise my head, and then prop myself up on my elbows. I glare at him with all the disdain I can muster. “I don’t really care about furthering medicine,” I manage to blurt out. “I just want a treatment that’s going to cure me.”

“Well, um, uh, of course,” he stammers. “The patient’s well-being always comes first.”

Well, then, don’t be lecturing me about medical science, I want to shout.

An infection excludes me from the clinical trial, so I end up getting the standard treatment. My sister and brother visit and Lover Boy describes the regimen I’m about to undergo. He is calm and patient, even though it’s 6:30 p.m., and he’s already been working 12 hours. He tries hard to explain cancer at a level they can understand. I soften. Then he gives my siblings his cell number and invites them to text if they have any concerns. I soften even more.

“Do you have any questions?” he asks them. Then Lover Boy looks directly at me. His eyes are kind, caring.

“What did I do to cause this?” I ask, fighting back tears.

“You didn’t do anything,” he replies gently. “It’s not your fault. You just have bad luck.”

“Am I a goner?” I ask, afraid to hear the response.

“No, of course not,” he says, after a moment’s hesitation.

Lover Boy stops by daily and monitors my side effects. I am swollen, with elephant arms and legs, unable to stand — the pain from the swelling is so great. “It’s just temporary,” he reassures me. He places his stethoscope on my chest, my back, and even my stomach. I inhale, exhale, hold my breath, and do whatever else is required. By this point, I’d stand on my head if he asked.

I welcome Lover Boy’s visits. Soon, I crave them. I begin to obsess. What makes him so wonderful? I ask myself at least 28 times a day. The first time is precisely three minutes after I wake up; then I ask again at 10:03 a.m., 11:47 a.m., 12:13 p.m., and 1:52 p.m. Over the next 20 hours or so, I ask 23 more times.

I always give myself the same answer, based on my most reliable source — my fantasies. What makes him so wonderful? Everything! It all started with how he was raised, my imagination informs me. His parents and three older sisters adored him and endowed little Lover Boy with great self-confidence and a respect for all humanity. This laid the foundation for his future success and compassion. He was taught early on not only to nurture his prodigious intellectual gifts, but also to choose a career that would allow him to share them with others.

I, for one, could help him broaden his sharing regimen. For each of my next several chemo rounds, let’s say, I could wear my own sexy hospital gown: black, low-cut, and slinky, When Lover Boy entered my room and approached me, I could accidentally on purpose drop

my pen, then lean over the side of the bed to retrieve it. With any luck, he'd get a sneak peek at what could be his, and become motivated to share some of his other gifts.

My fantasies persist, as much as I try to quell them. By Thanksgiving, I complete multiple rounds of chemo. My remission is in full swing, and my energy returns with a fury. I'm ecstatic — until the next blow.

“Congratulations!” Lover Boy declares one day, as I sit, heart thumping, on the examination table. He palpates my lymph nodes, his sultry eyes scanning my face. “Your labs look great, and you're stable,” he says. And then — horror of all horrors: “You don't need to come back for three more months. We'll miss you!”

I stare at him, poker-faced. I do not smile or shed tears of joy.

B... b... b . . . but don't you need to check my hemoglobin every few weeks? I want to blurt out. Suppose my anemia returns? Suppose I get short of breath? Suppose I collapse while crossing the street?

But instead, I do the expected, which I've always done. “Okay, I'll make an appointment,” I say.

I walk out of the exam room. An emptiness I thought long gone engulfs me. For the first time in eight months I'm free of my medical team's vigil, and the frequent attention of Lover Boy. I'm not sure I can face the void.

I must confess, I'm ashamed of these feelings; they may be a tad extreme.

Act your age, I scold myself.

Take a run in the park.

Join a Meetup group.

Go back on Match. (But . . . sigh . . . who could possibly compare with Lover Boy?)

So, I strive to become the most remarkable cancer patient Lover Boy — no, damn it, any oncologist — has ever had. I eat kale, blueberries, and beets. I walk three miles a day, then do Yoga. Heck, I even commune with my white blood cells, imploring them to never, ever betray me again. “*Namaste*,” I say, bending my head in prayer, trying hard to see their inner light.

I do these things, in part, knowing that if my good health endures, it not only will be a triumph for me, of course, it will help Lover Boy, too. When you’re an oncologist, better that your patients survive, no? With my type of leukemia, though, that’s not so easy. Statistics say that fewer than half of AML patients live beyond five years.

I, for one, can’t digest that number. Instead, I focus solely on my miraculous, glorious, energy-packed remission, and on my abiding faith in Lover Boy. I’m utterly convinced that, under his care, I’ll be among the lucky 50%.

Actually, I’m already lucky. I have the ideal partner in recovery. Each day, as I push forward to that five-year mark with renewed *joie de vivre*, it is not just *my* victory — it is *our* victory.

Marriel Z. Knight is a medical editor and freelance writer.

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