

Death Defiant Bomba or What To Wear When Your Boo Gets Cancer

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Paseo Basico/Basic Step

His snoring will wake you. You'll be pissed off at first but then you'll welcome the snoring over the clock set to go off in an hour. It's still dark outside and although it's warm next to him, you'll get up, your bare feet searching for your slippers. You'll say a short prayer and move the bed a bit to get him back into regular breathing. It won't work.

If the doctor's appointment is early, at 9 a.m., pull out the red sheath dress, the one that you bought on sale at Nordstrom with the famous but unpronounceable designer label. The red will wake the receptionist up like a motherfucker and cause her to send you hate for daring to outshine her that morning. The receptionist will think you're tacky, loud, too much. In the bloodshot color, the doctor will notice that you wore the equivalent of a flag and think you're stately and in charge. You'll wear red, definitely red.

If the doctor's appointment is later, say at 3 p.m., then the only color you should wear is...red. Late in the afternoon the receptionist has not had time to eat the Snickers bar hidden in the drawer right next to some Orbit chewing gum, flavor piña colada, and the small box of "just-in-case" feminine napkins. The receptionist will be hungry and crabby from arguing with the old man with Alzheimer's who keeps forgetting that his appointment is not today but was last week. She can't curse at the old man but she's on the verge. When she sees the red dress, she'll think how presumptuous you are for wearing it like a drag queen, like a *telenovela* star, like a *Nuestra Belleza Latina* of the Month. But she'll remember you and that's all that matters.

You'll wear five-inch black pumps because they make that annoying noise that alerts everyone everywhere in the whole wide world that you're arriving. What you really want to wear are your red high-top Nikes, the ones that makes you feel like you're rolling back in the day with your crew of girls. You want to wear them with your baggy track jacket and a sports bra, tummy baring, all defiant. With your hair pulled up in a tight-ass ponytail and large gold hoop earrings dangling from your ears. This is what you wore when you first saw him, when he was playing handball, smacking that spaldeen like he owned it, like it was his bitch. *Toma*. If only you could reach for that outfit in your closet like an old friend, but no, you can't go back. You will wear your red, expensive-looking sheath dress and black pumps. You'll tuck in your nameplate necklace underneath the dress so that you can have some sort of protection.

Your makeup will be subtle because you're not going to El Coyote with your girlfriends to toast someone's bullshit promotion, engagement, divorce, wedding. No, your makeup will be almost drab except for the lips. The lips are going to be making a lot of moves and there's no question they have to be painted. At first, you'll make the rookie mistake of going for lip gloss like some fourteen-year-old Lolita trying to lure some *papi* in the corner. No. That won't do for today. Instead, you'll grab the orange-red lipstick. So what if it clashes with your red dress. You don't care. This is war. You're going to double up on the red.

As for your man, your boo, *tu negrito*, he's going to wear baggy jeans that are falling off his ever-thinning hips. He'll wear the dingy white T-shirt at first, but you'll force him out of that and beg him to wear a suit. When he yells at you to stop nagging, you'll give in and let him wear the Mets shirt and matching Mets baseball hat that will cover the unruly hair that you held tight last night when you guys were tearing into each other like tomorrow would never come, like the appointment would never happen, hungry for each other. Last night, when you ignored how his hips are now bones and how they're pushing up against you, hurting you. Not

like before when you wanted his bulging stomach to squash you. I like my man with meat, that's what you used to say. But you don't say that anymore. You'll let him wear what he's wearing, although he's rooting for a losing team. You'll convince yourself that at least you both match. Red on red. Blue on red. Red.

You'll take your car and do the driving even though he hates that more than anything. He doesn't like to feel like a weakling. This is what he'll say but he'll give in to your driving. You'll drive to the city and curse at all the cars getting in your way. The drive will be quiet, minus your cursing. No salsa. No smooth jazz. No NPR. Nothing to distract and take away from your bleeding dress. You'll pay to park your car in the hospital's overpriced parking lot and shove your mid-sized car into a compact space. Because you are nice, you'll drop him off in the front of the building so that he won't have to walk all through the parking lot. You won't expect a thank you for this generous move. There's too much pride in him. You'll convince yourself that this is what you like about him. Two strong people doing their own thing, no questions asked, anchoring each other.

You'll surprise yourself and take his hand while walking towards the elevator. His hand is cold although it's hot outside. You will squeeze his cold hand but only slightly, only enough to let him know.

Saludo/Greeting

Your stomping heels will arrive first at the doctor's office. You'll immediately go up to the glass window, the one that resembles the *bodegas* back in the day when you would pay a dollar for a loosey in the middle of the night. The receptionist will smile and say good morning. You will not smile. You will say good morning and let her know why you are there. Why you are both there. You'll say it all angry because that's how you feel. Like everyone is at fault all the time, even the person that held the elevator door for you seconds ago. You'll say thank you but the thank you will sound more like a fuck you.

You'll fill out papers while your boo grabs the *Sports Illustrated* magazine. You'll fill out the medical history. You have it memorized but you'll pull out your iPhone and pretend to look up the information like an executive assistant. You'll have insurance. If you don't have insurance, you're not wearing red; you're not waiting for an appointment. You and your man are fucked. But you'll have insurance and when you get to that part where they'll ask you who is the emergency contact person, you will feel good knowing that your name goes in that slot. Your number goes in there. And you'll feel secure because this is your weapon of choice. You are the one for emergencies.

There is the waiting game and you hate playing that game but you know the rules already. You give them a few minutes, maybe more, but usually less. Then you'll get up and ask them when they're going to call you. It doesn't matter that there are others waiting. It doesn't matter that the old man with Alzheimer's is still at the window trying to figure out how to get back home. It doesn't matter. You will approach the window and demand to know a specific time, right down to the second. And your man will shift his bony ass uncomfortably in the sunken leather brown sofa but he won't tell you to stop.

And then they'll call his name. You'll grab everything and rush out to the door because you don't want them to change their mind and call the Alzheimer guy. No, *viejo*, you want to tell him, this is mine. You will walk so closely to the nurse who is leading you to the office that you will almost trip her. You are doing this on purpose. You want to watch her fall, to create a distraction, an obstacle you can use to climb over and show your man that whatever comes your way, you know what to do. But he is only looking at the nurse's tight ass. You will make a mental note to start working out again. You'll squeeze your butt and keep it squeezed.

When you are led to the doctor's office, you'll glare at all of the diplomas. If he got his degree from some city college, you will look at him like he's your cousin who got his degree at DeVry Institute. If the doctor got his degree at any of the Ivy League

schools, you will still look at him like he's your cousin but you will do so only for a second. If the doctor is older than your own father, you will listen to him respectfully, taking down notes while he speaks, nodding when the moment is right. If he is younger than you, you will listen to him but know that you will get a second opinion because no first-year-at-my-damn-job doctor is going to know what he's doing. Hell no.

The doctor will have graduated from Columbia University. You will shake the doctor's hand firmly and will look carefully at your man to make sure he does the same. When you feel that your man's handshake was too weak, ended too quickly, you will be embarrassed by him and wish he had worn the suit. The suit would have given him the allure of power but now he looks like a punk. You'll notice that his baseball hat is almost covering his eyes and you'll fight the urge to slap it off of his face.

Piquetes/The Exchange

You will bring out your file first and lay it on your lap. One folder in it is composed of all the photocopies you insisted on making after each appointment with your man. There are annotations and articles you've torn out. Another folder has pages of your notes and a notepad. The file is marked with his name. It's your very own dossier, the type of file given to Jim Phelps of *Mission: Impossible* on the TV show, not the movie with Tom Cruise. There are images of doctors and specialists attached to the copies. It took you hours to organize this file and you're already eager to update it tonight with new notes, new revelations, new whatever.

The doctor will follow your lead and spread out his files on his large mahogany desk. He will ask for your man's name and medical history and this will piss you off because he should know this already. You will let your man speak, for once, but will interject to clear dates, episodes, dramas. You know more than he does and he's tired of repeating it over and over. But you enjoy this part. You know more than the doctor. For now.

You will look out the window and notice that the hospital is building another facility and you will ask the doctor what the building will focus on. And you will laugh when the doctor mentions the price tag like money is some funny punch line.

You will pull out an expensive pen, not a cheap Bic and not a Number 2 pencil. A pen with black ink that you will use to highlight, jot down, and mark up your file after every word the doctor utters.

The doctor will not use a pen but his ring finger will display a rather large wedding band that you will find hard not to stare at. And you will wonder how many diamonds are in that band and how much it costs. You will absentmindedly search for your nonexistent wedding band, the one your man promised to give you but instead you both ended up in city hall with his stupid friend Manny as the only witness and no ring. An idiot is what your Mami called you when you told her what you did. And you didn't argue with her.

You will lead by asking a question first because you are in control, because you are wearing red, because you're burning up. The question will be a timid question, a starter question, just something to test the waters. You don't want to start off the bat with the big question, no, that can wait. Start slow, then build up from there.

The doctor will answer your question quickly. His lips are dry and you wish he would use Blistex. His breath stinks of coffee and not the good kind. You will sit back and make a note into your file.

The doctor will change the subject and you'll hold your breath because the moment of truth is coming and there's nothing more to do but wait for the doctor to speak.

You will notice that you have accidentally placed a pen mark on the right-hand corner of your dress. This will cause you to have a mini-panic attack. No one in the room will notice. The mark will grow larger with every passing minute until you feel as if the pen mark is now standing over you, reprimanding you for not being more careful. The pen mark is breathing down your neck and you feel your head being pressed down to your lap. And you look at your man but your man is nodding at you like nothing is happening.

When the doctor dares to say the words, when he finally utters them, birthing exactly what you and your boo were afraid to even utter, when he finally says that word, you will not cry. Not even when it hurts your throat, when your eyes feels like burning. You will not cry. Not even when he says words like, ‘we will try all we can, it’s growing at a rapid speed, it’s an aggressive disease.’ You will not cry. You will be stone cold, just like the doctor who is spurting out statistics like he’s trying to impress some dumb bitch at a bar. You are impressed but he will never know that. Those same statistics you will find on Web MD and utter them to your friends later when you will all meet for tea or something stronger. No, definitely something stronger.

You will insist on asking about the trial clinics. And you will not accept the doctor’s answer that he is not qualified. You’ll believe it has something to do with his last name or the fact that you didn’t donate money for that new building.

The doctor will start to close the file.

You must not let that happen. The file must stay open.

The doctor will close the file and will start to stand.

You will not stand and you will place a hand to stop your man from leaving. You are not done yet.

Your voice will crack.

The doctor will look nervously at your man. He won’t meet your eyes. He’ll excuse himself, something about having to pull up another chart. He is running away.

The desk has expanded somehow, taking over the whole room, pressing your body up against the wall. You can’t breathe. There’s no air. You can’t move.

Despedida/Goodbye

Your man will call you by his secret nickname, the name he christened you that night at the handball court. He will call you this name, the same name he whispered in your ear last night. And you will learn how to breathe again. You will breathe and lock eyes with him. And for a moment, that’s all you’ll do.

Then you will take the lead again.

When the doctor returns, you will alert him of his next steps, not the other way around. The doctor will agree with you. You will firmly shake the doctor's hand goodbye. You will take his card.

When the receptionist tells you that she likes your dress, you will thank her.

Tomorrow, you will take the dress and give it your cousin. Better yet, you will donate it. You will never wear that red dress again. ☹