

Do I Look Sick To You? (Notes on How to Make Love to a Cancer Patient)

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At first you don't. You hold back, stroking the small of her back. You kiss her ear. You nestle in behind her. Finally she says, "What, you're afraid I'll break? You're afraid it's contagious? Trust me, the cancer will not stick to your dick. It's not gonna rush up your urethra, pummeling your little spermies on the way, and explode like an IED in your insides. It's only trying to do that to *me*."

This is how it's going to be—she is going to kick cancer in the ass. Everyone says this, "She is going to kick cancer in the ass," until it becomes a mantra. Everything is going to be as it was before, only now you are "living with cancer."

"Living with cancer?" she says when her oncologist uses this phrase. "What, I've lent out rooms? I'm just supposed to think it's a particularly sloppy roommate? It leaves its clothes everywhere, its dishes mound up in the sink, it leaves its towels on the bathroom floor and clots of hair in the drain, and when I say, 'This is not working out,' my cancer roommate gets to say, 'Screw you, I'm staying'? That is *so* not right." Her oncologist and her nurses love her. So do you. She is going to kick cancer in the ass.

Later, when her hair falls out in clumps, she plays games with her kids, "Look, Mommy's shedding!" and the kids take turns plucking out her hair, creepily fascinated, until she says brightly, "That's enough!" and you make love that night with her hair spiderwebbing against the pillow and she's crying, and she says, "I'm going to be fucking bald." Note to self: this is NOT the time to

say “That’s okay. I’ll pretend I’m Captain Kirk making it with a hot alien,” as you do, which goes over a lot less well than you’d think. She’s crying and laughing simultaneously, and then she says, “Honey, about this? Only one of us gets to be a comedian, and it’s not you.”

Better when she makes the jokes, such as when you are at the Courage Clinic for the first time, and she says, “Are you fucking kidding me? The Courage Clinic? Really? Who does their marketing? The same people who came up with Peacekeeper Missiles? Why don’t they name it for what it really is? They should call it The Despair Clinic. The Terror Clinic. The Give Up All Hope All Ye Who Enter Here Clinic.”

At the wig shop they also sell scarves and hats and books on healing and small stones with similar treacle faux-carved in them—*Hope, Health, A Journey of a Thousand Miles*, etc. Again she explodes. “They should have ‘Help Me’ stamped in them, and ‘Unfucking Believable’ and ‘Go fuck yourself, Cancer.’” You make love that night after that first trip to the Courage Clinic, and it still bothers her. “What the hell were they thinking?” she says, and then she lowers her breasts to your face while she’s riding you and she says, “So tell me, do I look sick to you?”

The next day she calls a friend who owns a salon. After hours, so there are no other clients, the friend supervises the shaving of both your heads because you are going sympathetically bald, too, and she takes particular glee when, to get her in the mood before her own head is shaved, the friend hands her the clippers and says, “Here, you do him,” and she takes your hair down to its nubbins saying, “So how does it feel to have collaborated with the Germans, hmm?” And to her friend she says, “You know what’s kind of cool about this? I’m essentially getting a chemo-Brazilian,” because even though her own gorgeous, thick, chemically auburn hair is about to be shaved off, she is going to kick cancer in the ass.

How to make love to a cancer patient? For a long time you don't. You say, "If I'd have known we'd be having this little sex, I'd have asked you to marry me." Which is when you do.

And she says, "Okay, but I'm going to want a big fucking ring to remember you by when this doesn't work out."

And later, when she is missing her eyebrows, and she does indeed have a chemo Brazilian, and there is something like a Captain Kirk–alien monkey–love thing going on here because you're newly engaged and you tell her she's beautiful, she says, "Bullshit, but thank you for trying."

When you make love to a cancer patient in a chemo ward, you close the door and arrange yourselves carefully around the tubes going into her chest, and you cradle her head and you whisper in her ear, "I love you." There are creases in her now-papery forehead from the green polyester Green Bay Packers skull cap she's been wearing, and she's missing her eyelashes, and there are tears leaking out the sides of her eyes, or falling on your chest when she is on top of you, and she is beautiful, beautiful in the most elemental way one can be, and you say, "I love you," and she says, "Thank you."

When you make love to a cancer patient, they want to be loved for themselves, they want not to be pitied—the worst thing you could do is pity them—and they are afraid they are no longer themselves, that the cancer has taken over, and they worry that it's the cancer husk you are making love with. They worry you're making love to them not because you want to, but because you're afraid they need you to. They are no longer sure they are themselves, they are only their disease, and you are making love to them out of obligation, or memory. They are afraid you cannot look at them, and so they look away, or close their eyes. They do not want to come, they do not want to give themselves up, to feel something larger than themselves taking hold of them because something

larger than themselves has already taken hold of them, and won't let go. So letting go is not to be trusted. Their bodies have let them down. The notion of pleasure suddenly seems strange to them. And so they are wary. Can they trust your wanting to be inside them, desiring them, commingling with them—and cancer makes three? Cancer always, always makes three. It washes away the feeling that they could possibly be desired, which is why the most common words you hear after you make love with a cancer patient are “Thank you.” And you feel awful when they say that.

How do you make love to a cancer patient? Much of the time you don't. There are times you want to run away screaming, and she knows this. “It must be hard,” she says, “wanting to break up with me so you don't have to be here for this, but then you'd be the guy who broke up with the cancer patient, and that must suck. Gingrich, Edwards, and you. Yep, yep,” she says, “it must suck to be you.” You know what she is doing, picking fights and throwing this in your face—*Can you take it? Can you take it? Can you?*—because she only wants people around who'll be there through all of it, and also, she is trying to give you an out, being a bitch, because then she'll feel justified, dying alone, and she can curse you as well as God, though she doesn't say any of this. What she's really saying is, “It's going to be tough, babe, don't leave me. Please, don't leave me.” You are scorched by her being right—you do, at various times, want to run away screaming. But what you say is, “I love you,” and she says, “So, are we gonna fuck or are we gonna fight? I'd rather not fight.” And it bothers you a little that it's stated as a negative—not that she'd like to make love, but rather that she'd rather not fight. So you say, “I'd rather not fight either.” And she says, “Well, I'm too angry to fuck right now, so give me a minute.” Then she pushes you backwards onto the bed and arranges herself on top of you and says, “There, better.”

And later, when a work colleague who's been out of the loop asks, “Is this a new look?” and wonders why you are looking like the

guy from *Breaking Bad*—you have a starter goatee to compensate for your shaved head—you say, “Charlotte has cancer,” and watch his face try to recover. That you take a perverse pleasure in this—you have never liked this colleague, and saying “Charlotte has cancer” feels exactly like saying, “Fuck you!”—forces you to realize that this is deep shit territory you are in now, and you, too, are sinking.

And later, when you go to Jamaica—her Make-a-Wish trip only with booze and jerk chicken—after the chemo and before the radiation, when she is wearing sunglasses and a big straw hat at customs, and the officer says, “You don’t look like your passport picture, miss, I’m going to have to ask you to lose the hat and the glasses,” and she takes them off and stands there in her sun dress, proud and fierce, and the officer says, “Oh,” and “I’m sorry”—that night you want to make love tenderly, but she is angry, and what she wants is to pound you and herself into oblivion, but you both know that’s not what she wants pounded into oblivion.

More and more she makes love with a kind of ferocity. It is as if she is trying to fuck cancer to death, or maybe to outfuck death itself. But she is mistaken. You cannot fuck cancer to death. That is the conundrum—the thing is in her, it feeds on her, and it’s so happy to be alive inside her it’s going to keep growing until it kills her. Death comes on little cat feet—like fog—and it sits at the end of the bed, licking its paws and cleaning its whiskers, patiently waiting for you to finish.

And always she says, in the midst of riding you, her breasts, beautiful, lowered to your face, brushing against your cheek—“Do I *look* sick to you? Do I look *sick* to you? Do I look *sick* to *you*?”

Note to self: Later, when her hair comes back, and it’s like peach fuzz, call it that when she asks you to touch it, and resist the urge to say, “It’s like petting a dog’s groin,” unless you want to be swiftly

knead in yours. Remember, there is only one comedian when making love with a cancer patient, and it is not you.

It's only later, after the chemo and radiation have failed, and her oncologist stops talking in specifics—*It's shrunk 9 millimeters, its overall mass is down 17 millimeters*—and he starts talking in generalities—*There's been some growth. We think it's spread to your omentum membrane, but we think we might be able to contain it with more chemo*—that the love-making turns tender again.

But even then misunderstandings abound: You are extra careful because you really are worried that you're going to hurt her. You worry she will feel sore later, and whether she gets anything out of it at all. You worry that this thing has taken her over now, and isn't a cock inside her just one more invasive species, like those mussels crowding out everything else living in Lake Michigan? Soreness, dryness, discomfort—those are the physical worries. She names the other one. “How can you possibly find me attractive right now?” she asks. You understand—she's bald, there are tubes in her, ports for putting drugs in and draining things away. She's bloated here, skinny there. She asks, “Isn't it like making love to that malnourished kid in those ‘you can donate now or you can turn the page’ ads that used to make you feel guilty when you did turn the page?” You say, “No, I love you,” and she says, “Babe,” and then she's softly singing, a little off-key, *If you feel like giving me a lifetime of devotion*, but she breaks it off there.

It only works with her on top now, and you no longer sleep together. It's too painful for her to have you in her bed. Still, she says, “Make love to me, baby,” and you do. You notice, though, that she has given up wanting foreplay, that time you spent happily at the juncture of her thighs. She really is doing this now for you as a gift, just to get you to come. She is making a nod to memory, to what you used to be, and are still, or at least are trying to be. It's not much, but it's something.

You do not sleep much, and neither does she, but you no longer are sleepless together. You're in the spare room and you get one of those baby monitors, and the sound of her glucose pump goes all night. It's like an asthmatic old man wheezing, the suck of the air in and letting it out. Soon enough it will be her making that sound, and you wonder, with each pause at the end of the intake suck, and then the release, if it's the machine doing that or if it's her.

And later, after her brain surgery because it's spread there, too, and the radiation that follows that, and the ascites that causes her belly to swell like a late term pregnancy, which gets catheterized so it can be drained daily—three liters, four liters, where is all this goddamn fluid coming from? you wonder as you empty the bags into the toilet—when she asks, “Wanna make love?” you say, “Can we just cuddle?” And she says in a tiny voice, her grin exhausted, “Why, do I look sick to you?”

Then she sees the look in your face.

“You're really afraid you're going to hurt me, aren't you?” she says, and you say, “Yes.” And when the tears start to your eyes, she says, “Good, I was waiting for that.”

“I won't break,” she says, but instead of climbing on top of you, she lays next to you, her thumb rubbing the spot between your thumb and your forefinger. And that's when it hits you that you will never make love with her again and that this is only the smallest of your losses.

Her tenderness tears you in two.

This is how you make love to a cancer patient:

You pull her towards you as closely as you can and your thumb plays over each of her knuckles and you say, “I love you.”

You say, “I love you.”

You say, “I love you.”

She says, “I know.” ☹