

One night, while I lay in bed, feeling sickly after hours of receiving chemotherapy, a mosquito flew into my bedroom, landed on my arm and bit me. I then wrote this poem.

MEMOIR OF A CHEMO PATIENT

Last Night A Mosquito Bit Me.
It Sucked Up My Poisonous Blood.
I Watched It Fall Fast To The Ground.
And All Of Its Little Black Hairs,
Fell Out Of Its Little Black Legs.
It Was Stilled Forever.
Good.
That's What You Call Sweet Revenge.

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ONE MOMENT IN TIME
Marla Lukofsky

I want to tell you a story.

It took place during the radiation phase of my breast cancer treatments. My radiation sessions ran at the same time, every day, for six weeks. I saw the same patients, and the same technicians. I saw the same hot chocolate-cappuccino-coffee machine, the same plastic bowl full of fresh apples, oranges and bananas, the same stack of well worn, out-of-date magazines, the same relatives accompanying their cancer-laden loved ones, and the same zapping of radiation. The only thing that wasn't the same was our changing bodies. We were all deteriorating.

Not only was my body changing from the radiation but the deep chemically induced menopause I was in, was affecting my quality of life. If you can imagine how regular menopause affects women who lose their hormones gradually over a period of years, just think how it was for me to lose mine in two weeks. I was having extreme hot flashes every 10-minutes, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Some left me faint. Menopause can also create a depressed feeling and I felt that creeping in as well.

My doctor told me that losing my hormones so fast due to chemotherapy was doing such a job on my body, it was like driving my car into a brick wall at 40 miles an hour. His analogy was validating because that's exactly how it felt. Smash! Bang! Boom!

In case you were wondering, radiation in itself is actually quite painless. However, as time wears on, the skin that has been radiated gets burned, sometimes looking like a sunburn. Unfortunately, there are times when a patient's body can get so badly burned that the doctors are forced to stop the treatment altogether and that's what happened to my friend and breast cancer comrade, Lily.

Lily and I met in radiation. She was of Asian decent and even though she stumbled with her English, and I lacked the ability to speak Chinese, we understood each other perfectly. We connected on many levels and as the weeks moved along, we developed a great love and respect for each other. I don't know if Lily's skin was more sensitive than mine or if her level of radiation was stronger, but I do know that Lily's chest became extremely burned, and her treatments were stopped permanently. I was never able to locate Lily again.

While sitting in the waiting room day after day, I also became friends with Peter, who had prostate cancer. Due to his treatments, Peter was going through male menopause; complete with all the symptoms that women experience. He used to discuss his symptoms with me in great detail because he knew that I would understand. We developed quite a bond and played pranks on each other regularly. Everyday, while waiting for his name to be called, Peter ate a banana from the fruit bowl. He just loved bananas. One day, when Peter was late for his treatment, I noticed that there was only one banana left. I didn't want anyone to grab it, so I snatched up that last banana and hid

it in my pocket. When Peter finally arrived, he ran to the bowl looking for his banana, but none was there. He couldn't hide his disappointment.

“What's wrong Peter, you look so sad? I asked.

“I wanted a banana but there's none left”, he answered.

“Oh...that's too bad. Well, look down here. Is this a banana in my pocket or am I just happy to see ya?”

I quickly whipped out the banana and Peter's face lit up like a Christmas tree. It sounds like such a little thing but those types of exchanges amused us to no end. That's not the story I wanted to tell you.

Just in case you don't know, here's the routine in the radiation waiting room. First you sign in. Then you walk into one of several closet-like change rooms located right in arms reach of the patient-filled chairs. Then you put on one of those terribly revealing hospital gowns and leave your clothes on the cubicle hook praying that no one steals them. Of course, I didn't have to worry too much about that. Being 5 feet tall, my pants would look like knickers on any one else. After changing, you sit in the waiting area, have a drink, read or chat with someone next to you and wait for your name to be called.

Each day was becoming harder than the next. My spirits were plummeting. Was it the menopause, the accumulation of treatments, or the series of personal losses I'd recently endured? Whatever the cause, I started to feel as if I had nothing important to do or to give. To bring in some money and keep myself somewhat active, I got a part time job at the only place that would hire me, Tusquellas' Fresh Fish Market. Can you imagine feeling sick and nauseous and still accepting work in a FRESH FISH MARKET? What was I thinking? Talk about upsetting aromas!!! The only plus was, whenever I went into a huge hot flash, I'd just leave the customer in the middle of their order, and jump into the walk in freezer to cool off. Sometimes I'd come out with icicles on my face.

Every day like clockwork, I'd leave work and go to my radiation sessions. When my name was called, I'd go into the cold radiation room, have my Polaroid picture compared to my face, lay down on the sterile slab, take off my hospital gown and watch the huge high tech radiation machine move around the ceiling until the grid pattern that it projected, hit the permanent tattoo marks on my chest. Then the machine would zoom in close, and the technician would run out of the room as fast as they could and hide behind a 5-inch thick Plexiglas sealed container. Every time they ran like that, I'd think “Heck, if it's that dangerous for them to be in this room, then what am I still doing in here?”

Then they'd call over the intercom,

“Are you ready Marla?”

“Yes I am.”

“Ok then. You can keep breathing, but DON'T MOVE.”

Talk about an oxymoron.

They'd turn on the radiation machine and it would shout out a disturbing high-pitched sound, which turned into the sound of a machine gun, and in a minute or two it was done. Then they'd do it all over again on another spot. I had three spots in total. After ten minutes, it was over. They'd done their job in zapping me and I'd done my job in lying

still and taking in the rays.

Sometimes the technicians would ask me how I was doing. My answers varied from time to time but the sentiments were the same. “Okay. Fine. Not great.” The technicians never said much back to me except for the regular platitudes. I hate platitudes. On a regular basis I challenged them. “Don’t be so guarded. It won’t hurt you to get to know me.” I guess what I said had an impact, because when I got my Certificate of Completion from the Comprehensive Cancer Center, there was a handwritten inscription on it saying ‘Don’t be so guarded.’

OK. I still haven’t told you the story.

One day, while sitting on the cold slab in the radiation chamber, my technician du jour, Andrew, asked me, “How are you doing today Marla?” This time I just couldn’t put on my stiff upper lip as I had in the past and bared my soul to him.

“Well Andrew, to tell you the truth, I’m awful. I’ve lost my showbiz career, my agent’s dumped me, the job that I loved has closed down, my friend has died and I’m working in a smelly fish market every day. I’m worried about my future. I feel useless, like I don’t have a purpose anymore.” Then I cried my heart out.

Andrew handed me a Kleenex and said, “Marla, I think you do have a purpose. Maybe you can’t see it right now but I can.”

“What are you talking about Andrew? All I do is come in here every day, stink like Tilapia, get zapped, and leave. That’s all I do”, I cried.

“Well Marla, I’ll tell you what I see.” Andrew calmly continued. “Do you remember the other day when we had a new patient? She was middle-aged, came in with her husband, wore a blue scarf on her head and sat in the waiting room? It was her first day here and, as you know, we take a mandatory Polaroid of new patients so that we can compare the picture to the patient’s face to make sure we’re giving the correct radiation to the right person. When we came into the waiting room to take her picture, she refused to let us and cried out,

‘No! You can’t take my picture. I’m ugly. I look terrible and I feel terrible. I don’t want anyone to see me like this. No, I won’t let you take my picture.’

We explained to her that we couldn’t start her treatment until she consented to the Polaroid. Her husband tried to change her mind, and we tried too, but she wouldn’t budge. She just sat there crying. Then I saw you, Marla. You went over to her, knelt down in front of her, put your hands on her knees and gently said,

‘Hi, my name’s Marla. I couldn’t help but hear what you said about the picture, and the way you look. I understand how you feel and I have to tell you something. Underneath that scarf of yours, I look just like you.’ And Marla... you took off your bandana and exposed your bald head to this woman, this total stranger. Then you said to her,

‘You see. I look just like you. And you know what else? I think you’re beautiful, and I know beauty when I see it and YOU... are beautiful. I wished I had your

looks. Now, if you don't let them take your picture, you won't be able to start your radiation treatments. And the sooner you start them, the sooner it'll be all over and you'll feel better. So... let them take the picture. It only takes a few seconds and then it's done.'

Well Marla... that woman sat there for a moment, thought about your words and said, 'OK... I'll let them take it.' As soon as she said that, we scrambled in, took her picture, and got her into the radiation room. Her husband was so grateful to you and so were we. And now you come in here and tell me you have no use, no purpose in life? Well, I can tell you that what you did for that woman was a wonderful thing. I saw you save that banana for Peter and make him laugh. I saw you get that hot chocolate for Cheryl, and she opened up to you. I know you're feeling sad right now, but you have to understand that you help people in more ways than you realize, and in my books, that's having a purpose. A very important purpose."

"How the hell did you know all that Andrew? Do you have hidden cameras everywhere?"

"Actually, yes, we do - in every room with intercom systems. We watch everything that goes on around here", Andrew replied.

I sat there and absorbed what he had said. It made me feel better. It gave me a new perspective on things. I had taken the time for someone and someone in turn, had taken the time for me. It was only one moment in time, but it gave so much. Sometimes it's just that simple.

That's the story I wanted to tell you.

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Bio: The Toronto Sun called her "the reigning queen of comedy in Canada." The Globe and Mail called her "suave and stylish". For the last thirty years, Marla Lukofsky has performed as a stand-up comedian in every major city in Canada and the United States. As well, she represented Canada in the International Comedy Festival in Glasgow, Scotland. As a writer and columnist, Marla's credits include CBC radio with such shows as Dayshift with Erika Ritter, Basic Black with Arthur Black and The Vicki Gabereau Show. On Saturday mornings you can hear Marla's voice on The Care Bears Cartoon as Good Luck Bear. In July of 1998, Marla was diagnosed with breast cancer that had spread to her lymph nodes. After enduring surgery, chemotherapy and radiation, Marla completed her treatments in January of 1999. Since then, she has written a memoir and a collection of short stories and poems describing her experiences. In them, she talks proudly about her cancer journey with honesty, frankness, and humor. Marla is currently doing inspirational speaking engagements across the country, entertaining and informing people of her cancer journey in hopes that it will help people.

"If I can touch even one person, and make them feel that they are not alone with their thoughts and feelings, then I have succeeded."