

SHATTERED GLASS

This can't be happening? Not again? Not now? I sat straight up in bed, sweat dripping from my forehead, startled by my recurring nightmare. I wiped the sleep from my eyes and tried to shake the fear.

It was Friday, April 16th 2004, and that time again. It happened every three months like clock work, no matter how much I tried to ignore it. Most women only made the annual trip to the gynecologist, but not me. At 29 years old, I found myself visiting the gynecological oncologist at the change of every season. I always dreaded these appointments. The poking, the prodding. No matter how many times I went, it never got easier. I was dreading today more than usual. This was my two-year checkup; a routine Pap smear was usually preformed at these quarterly appointments. However, my yearly check-ups were much more extensive. Therefore today, I needed a designated driver.

I decided not to go in to work at all today. I work for a retail company as an Assistant District Manager (ADM), which is just a polite way of saying District Manager-in-training or, as my current boss says, "Ain't a District Manager yet." My territory covers three states, supervision of 22 separate locations and a considerable amount of driving, not to mention administrative duties. I spent a few hours before my appointment catching up on e-mails from the comfort of home.

At about eleven o'clock, I heard the humming of the garage door as it opened and Mark, my boyfriend of three years, walked in. "Honey, I'm home. Are you ready to go?"

"Be right there," I yelled down the stairs.

Mark's six feet tall with an athletic, muscular build. You know the type: big arms, broad shoulders, a well defined V-shaped back and tight buns. I especially love watching him from behind. He has reddish side-burns with dark hair and hazel eye. Oh, I can't leave out the cutest freckles you've ever seen covering his forehead and the bridge of his nose.

"Hurry—we are going to be late," he shouted at me from the bottom of the stairs.

I jumped up and raced down the stairs, "Let me just grab the medicine she prescribed. I will meet you at the car."

I grabbed the pills, a bottle of water and then headed for the car. Once I was inside the car Mark asked, "What are those and why are you taking them?"

"One is Loritab® for pain, and the other is Valium® to help me relax so the procedure will go smoother. That's why you need to drive, Mr.," I playfully responded.

We arrived at the office about twenty minutes later. As we walked into the clinic I felt the medicine beginning to work. I reached for Mark's

arm and held on as we passed through the doorway. We signed in, sat down and waited for my name to be called.

Finally, "Michelle Coots," I heard a nurse call.

Only professional people call me Michelle. My friends and family know me as Michi...pronounced Mic-ki.

We both got up and walked toward the nurse. After exchanging pleasantries, she directed me to the scale, "We need to get your height and weight." I kicked off my heels and leaned against the wall. As usual I measured 5'7³/₄". I always wished I was an inch or two taller, which is why I almost always wear heels, not the skinny stilettos, but sculpted or chunky heels. My favorite are wedges! I stepped on to the scale, 130lbs. The nurse escorted us into the examination room and continued taking the usual vital statistics. She mentioned, "Dr. C will be in shortly," as she turned to leave.

She didn't have to give me instructions; I was a pro and knew the drill. I undressed from the waist down, positioned myself on the examination table with the always flattering white sheet draped over my lower half. The next few minutes seemed like an eternity; sitting half naked, freezing my ass off, waiting for the doctor again. I was beginning to feel like I downed a bottle of wine. *Oh yeah, the medicine is definitely kicking in now!* I thought.

Dr. C entered the room. She began with the usual battery of questions. "How are you feeling? Has anything changed?" Blah, blah, blah.

Then she made her normal plea, "You make me so nervous. I wish you would just get pregnant and let me remove your uterus so we can be sure you're in the clear."

Dr. C was my third oncologist and had been in charge of my follow-up care for a year. Under my previous oncologist, I refused the recommendation for a hysterectomy. I didn't know if I wanted children, but I was not ready to give up my ability to make a choice. Instead, I elected to have a non-traditional treatment—a radical trachelectomy (removal of the cervix but not the uterus) for my cervical cancer, a procedure in which Dr. C was not confident. She felt it was too new and the overall long-term success rate was too uncertain. This was also the reason my annual checkups were more extensive. She wanted to track my recovery closely, as she was skeptical as to whether my cancer was really gone for good.

"Okay, are you ready Michelle?"

"Ready as I am going to be," I responded reaching for Mark's hand.

"Slide down a little further," she instructed, as she made a tent with the white sheet over my knees. Even though I have done this a thousand times, those words always make my stomach queasy. I reluctantly slid down until I felt the end of the table on my exposed butt cheeks. *I hate this position!* I screamed internally.

"Okay, this is going to be a little cold and you're going to feel me insert the speculum...now I am going to open it up. How are you doing?"

"Fine!"

"Okay, I am going to need to numb the area with some local anesthetic, take a deep breath and hold it in, you are going to feel the prick of the needle and a little burning sensation."

As the needle penetrated the base of my uterus, where my cervix used to be, I felt the instant burn of the medicine. My body tightened and I clenched Mark's hand as I gasped for another breath because of the pain.

"Are you still with me?" Dr. C inquired.

"Yeah!" I mumbled back.

"Remember deep, slow breaths," she coached me.

I didn't respond again. I was too busy focusing on my breathing so I wouldn't flee from the table.

"Okay two more quick sticks. Now we are going to wait a few minutes and give the anesthetic time to take effect."

My head felt fuzzy and my eyes were heavy. Those few minutes felt like hours. Then finally the doctor checked to see the area inside me was numb. She proceeded, performing the wet PAP first. She wanted to take an extra step to ensure there was no cancer present. Dr. C talked me through the procedure, explaining she was making a small incision at the base of the uterus. Next, she performed endocervical curettage (ECC), inserting the spoon shaped tool into the incision. She scraped around the interior walls where the uterus and the upper end of the vaginal canal were sewn together

after my last surgery. I breathed in and gnashed my teeth from the discomfort. A moment later, she was finished and instructed me to get dressed.

I was told the results would take about two weeks and my next appointment was scheduled four months out rather than the standard three. I was elated with this news.

Mark helped me to the car. Between the medicine and the stomach cramps I was ready to get the hell out of there. He took me home and helped me inside to our bed where I settled in for an afternoon 'recovery' nap. I knew he made dinner plans but they would have to wait until the drugs wore off. Sleep was my best remedy. I fell asleep quickly and snoozed for several hours.

I awoke still a little foggy from the medicine.

"Hello sleepy head. How was your nap? Are you ready for our big night out?" Mark teased as I struggled to adjust my eyes to the overhead light shining in my face.

"Can't I have just a few more minutes?" I pleaded.

"Not a chance, Baby—I've been planning this all week! Get those pretty little baby blues open and your feet on the ground. I'll start your shower."

He entered the bathroom and turned on the water, just as he did every morning. Starting my shower was part of our usual morning drill. I hate climbing out of the warm, snuggly sheets and being smacked in the face with the chill of the air conditioner. A hot shower was one of the tricks Mark learned in the three years we'd been together to get my ass out of bed. The lure of the hot water and fresh steam always motivated me. I climbed in and let the hot water cascade over me. As I stood there with my eyes closed, I felt a sigh of relief and the tension of the day being washed down the drain.

I heard Mark shout, "Hurry up! Our reservation's at eight. We need to leave in thirty minutes, Hot-lips. Chop, chop!" I got out of the shower and positioned myself on the vanity stool in front of the mirror. This happens to be one of my favorite places. After applying my favorite moisturizer, I slowly dusted powder across my face to even out those splotchy areas, and then pulled out the blush, a light peachy color to emphasize my high cheek bones. Next, I grabbed the lip-liner and traced it around the edges of my lips and used my favorite shade of lipstick to fill them in.

Almost perfect, I thought as I looked in the mirror, *all I need now is to accent my best facial feature, my hypnotic blue eyes.* I reached around in the drawer trying to decide on the perfect color. I finally chose and dusted a light burgundy color in the crease and under my eyes to really make them pop. I highlighted my brow with a baby pink; then added rich black mascara

for the finishing touch. The last step in my beautifying regimen was a quick run of the blow dryer over my shoulder length red hair. No it's not real, but I have a thing for loud, attention grabbing red hair. I slipped into my favorite jeans, a low cut cotton shirt, pulled my three-inch wedges off the shelf and slid them on. I took one final look in the mirror just as Mark poked his head in the door, "Any day now!" I grabbed my bag and off we went.

About thirty minutes later we pulled into the parking garage in downtown Memphis just blocks from the mighty Mississippi River. We walked down Union Avenue toward our favorite restaurant, Sawadhii—the best Thai restaurant Memphis has to offer. We crossed Main Street and watched the trolley cars glide by while the slow trot of the horse drawn carriages filled the night. The smell of the night air and the lights of the city reminded me of a few years earlier when we first moved here and lived just a few blocks away.

We opened the double doors into the dimly lit restaurant. It is a narrow but very long restaurant with dark red walls, brushed oak wood floors and a short bar immediately on the left as you enter. We had a reservation; however every table was filled when we arrived. We approached the podium to inquire about the wait. The woman behind the podium immediately recognized us as we used to eat here at least once a week when we lived downtown.

"Mark, Michi where have you been? We have missed you!"

After a brief exchange, she told us to wait at the bar and she would get us seated as quickly as possible. We pulled up two stools and ordered two glasses of Santa Margherita Pinot Grigio. As we began enjoying our wine I found myself staring into the large mirror across the bar lost in thought. Moments later, I turned to Mark, "What do you think I will look like in fifty years?" Mark chuckled and smiled at me. All of the sudden he got this serious look on his face. He began telling me how much he loved me and loved our life just the way it was. He continued telling me he did not think he could love me anymore than he loved me at this moment. He imagined being married would not change his feelings about me. I felt my heart begin to beat faster and it felt like a brick dropped to the bottom of my stomach. As I sat in silence trying to avoid making eye contact I felt my eyes growing heavy with the weight of oncoming tears.

Mark instantly noticed the change of expression on my face. "Baby, what is it?" he said. "What is wrong?"

"Nothing, I am fine," I responded in my usual code which really means, "everything is wrong and, no I am not telling you about it".

Mark continued trying to get me to open up, "Baby, please talk to me."

After several attempts to resist sharing my thoughts as I stared at the ceiling, an old trick I learned to fight back tears, I finally broke. "If you didn't want to marry me you could have told me months ago. You let me think our relationship was leading to something more." Mark tried to interrupt, but I

immediately cut him off and continued, "I was fine before, thinking we would never get married—but then lately you started talking about marriage and got my hopes up. Hell Mark, you even took me to the bookstore to look at wedding vows." By now, the tears and my black mascara were flowing down my cheeks and unbeknownst to me we had the attention of the entire restaurant.

Mark turned, "No Baby, you have it all wrong. Will you marry me?"

I felt my face turning shades of red, "No, don't patronize me by asking me now."

Mark slid his chair back from the bar, "I am really serious Baby; will you marry me? I was trying to ask you all along—I brought you here to propose!"

"Mark this isn't funny; Stop it!"

Mark went down to his knee and asked a third time, "Will you marry me?"

"Mark stand up and stop this charade, people are looking at us."

Mark climbed back on his feet and placed his hand in his pocket, "What do I have to do...pull out a ring?" I was speechless. As I looked down at his hand, there he held a beautiful gold, pipe cut band with a round, sparkling diamond. "Yes, of course," I shouted as I threw my arms around him.

The sound of wild applause filled the restaurant. The hostess was standing behind us, "Mark, Michi—your table is now ready and

congratulations.” He placed the ring on my finger and we followed the hostess. As we walked back to the table, everyone in the restaurant shared their congratulations and stood admiring my lovely diamond. Over dinner we laughed and joked at what a catastrophe Mark’s proposal almost became; I truly thought he was telling me he never wanted to marry me. That night as we drove home I pulled out my cell phone and called to share our news with everyone I could think of. *I couldn’t believe we were actually getting married!* My mind raced.

Every June we went on a trip and celebrated the anniversary of the night we met. We were headed to Negril, Jamaica this year. The Couple’s Resort came highly recommended from a colleague and close friend of mine. We made the reservation several months ago and were looking forward to our beach getaway.

Saturday morning, as I began to talk about wedding plans, Mark set a few ground rules. He wanted a barefoot beach wedding and insisted on selecting the vows. He rejected the thought of traditional vows, instead choosing the exact vows he read to me at the bookstore a few months prior. They were from the book Conversations with God by Neale Donald Walsch. My only stipulation was the date—June 18th, our anniversary. It seemed obvious our vacation which was only two months away was the perfect time and place to make it all official.

Once we agreed on Jamaica, we jumped out of bed and ran upstairs to the computer. Mark typed 'Couples Resort Jamaica' into the browser line, and within a few minutes we had all the answers we needed to arrange our wedding. We sent an email to the resort wedding coordinator reserving our date and requesting the last ceremony of the day. We were hoping for the sun setting over the ocean as our backdrop. With all of the excitement in the air, the weekend flew passed. Before we knew it, it was time to begin a new week and our busy work schedules.

The next morning at work, I composed an email to my friends and colleagues sharing my good news and the exciting story behind my engagement ring. Mark took a 1.75 karat diamond out of a ring his father gave him many years earlier. Knowing I preferred thick bands, he selected a pipe cut gold band with high mounting, setting the diamond almost a half-inch in the air! In short, not only was the ring beautiful—it was made especially for me and full of sentimental value, making it all the more perfect. All of my colleagues were excited and everywhere I went people were eager to hear the story of how the almost catastrophic proposal went down. This coupled with the fact I was covering for the out-of-town District Manager made the beginning of the week fly by. I didn't even know where Monday and Tuesday went. Wednesday, however was a long day. Eleven hours to be exact, but I didn't mind because mentally I was still on cloud nine.

I pulled into the driveway a little before nine o'clock and noticed Mark was not home yet. As usual, when I opened the door, George and Charlee, our two dogs came running—wagging their tails, and covering me in their wet kisses. Next to Mark, these two were the loves of my life. Both dogs are pure breed German short-haired pointers; however, there is a vast difference in their physical statures. "George is a genetic mutation of the breed," so we tease. At ninety-six pounds he is about twenty pounds over the standard male size for this breed. He is solid muscle and probably the prettiest dog I have ever seen. *As his mother I am, of course, not biased.* The right side of his face and part of his large floppy ear is solid liver brown while the rest of his body is roan (small liver and white tick marks). Charlee, a girl with a boy's name, is very small for the breed. In fact, soaking wet she may weigh fifty-five pounds, but like George she is extremely muscular. We often refer to her as Charlee Brown Cow because of her distinct patched markings of liver and white, accompanied by her white paws which are covered in liver chocolate chips.

Once the excitement of "mommy" arriving home wore off, George and Charlee settled down. I noticed the blinking red light of the answering machine on the kitchen counter. I didn't check the message immediately, and instead began my evening ritual of running a hot bath in our large Jacuzzi tub. I undressed, dropping my clothes on the floor and waited for the water to finish filling the tub.

While I waited, I called our voicemail. I assumed it would only be a telemarketer; anyone who knows Mark and I know we don't answer the house phone and seldom check the messages. If our friends want to reach us they know to call our cell phones. I dialed in and heard the automated voice say, "You have one new message." I pressed the button to hear the message. "Michelle, this is Dr. C, please give me a call back at the office as soon as you get this message, thank you." My mouth dropped open as the phone slipped from my hand and crashed to the floor! I stood there frozen, unable to compose myself. Instinctively, I reached down, picked up the phone and before I knew it I could hear Mark's voice on the other end of the line.

"Michi, hello...what's going on?"

With my voice trembling I simply said in a 'matter of fact' tone, "I have cancer... again."

"What? What are you talking about? That's crazy!"

"Dr. C called and left a message on the machine today."

"Well, what did she say?" Mark inquired.

"Nothing...just to give her a call at the office."

"That's it, that's all? Okay Baby, so she wants you to call. That doesn't mean anything. Why are you so freaked out? I am sure it's nothing. We will call her tomorrow."

“No! You don’t understand. If everything was fine her nurse Robin would have called with the results or they would have sent me a postcard saying everything is okay—see you in four months.”

“Baby, maybe Robin was busy and Dr. C thought she would make the call herself. Don’t you think you’re jumping to conclusions?”

“No, Dr. C would only make the call if something was wrong. I am telling you, I have cancer, again!”

“Michi, calm down, I am going to be home in about ten minutes. Why don’t you get into your tub and try to chill out for a minute. I will see you as fast as I can get back to the house.”

I slid into the hot water and rested my head against the back of the tub. Mark came through the door and immediately joined me in the bathroom sitting Indian-style on the floor. We must have replayed the same conversation several times before I finally told him I wanted to be alone for awhile.

As I lay soaking with my skin pruning, my mind raced. *No, no, no, this can’t be happening! Not now! He finally proposed, and I am making wedding plans. It’s my turn for the fairy tale, for the happily ever after! This just can’t be. I cannot have cancer, again, and especially not now....*