

My Favorite Patient (Ethan's last hospital admission)

When Dr. Emery Love saw the next name on her list of patients, her stomach clenched. A flash of joy inside her overlapped with a pang of fear.

Ethan Cadman. The strongest hero she'd ever met and, at the same time, a fragile glass vase she'd been carrying around in her shaky hands for months, terrified of seeing it drop and shatter.

What terrible complication of chemotherapy brought him back to her ICU this time?

Surrounded by a small crowd of nurses and ancillary staff during rounds, Emery didn't have much time to ruminate on her thoughts. She braced herself for a repetition of the image of him that was still burned into her memory: unconscious, his frail body attached to monitors and the ventilator. Inhaling deeply, she straightened the white coat she wore over her mint-colored scrubs and stepped into the small ICU room.

When she found Ethan awake, sitting on the narrow bed and talking on his cell, an avalanche of relief hit her.

*Thank you, God!* She had no doubt that what had kept him alive for the past six months had been ten percent medical skills and ninety percent her prayers.

Following their usual routine, she looked up at the ceiling and grunted with mock annoyance. "Please! Not *you* again!" The twitch in her lips urging to curve revealed her joking intent.

The young, bald man's ghostly pale face lit up. He disconnected his call. "Yes, Dr. Love, I can't keep out of the hospital for long! I miss the tasteless Jell-O and the nurses waking me up every hour."

She clicked her tongue repeatedly and shook her head. "I'm starting to suspect you time your admissions to make sure they happen when I'm on call."

He winked. "You got me! I have informants texting me updates on the call schedule. I hold on to my white blood cells and don't let them drop until it's your turn to round." His deep blue eyes twinkled. "I can't pass up the chance to see the most beautiful doctor in this hospital."

Emery crossed her arms narrowing her green eyes further. “You’re my hero, Ethan. You’re fighting lymphoma, flattened by chemo and walking around with half the blood of an average human—yet you *still* have the stamina to flirt?”

He gave her his signature blinding smile—the one that made the recipient forget about the ashy color of his skin. “I have to give my best effort now, before you put me on the ventilator again, Dr. Love. It’s hard enough to charm a lady when you’ve lost forty pounds and all your hair—but when you put the tube in my mouth and tape all over my face, that definitely ruins my looks.”

She shook her head, suppressing a chuckle. Ethan had certainly seen better days, but beyond the aftermath of six months of intense chemotherapy, Emery could tell he’d been quite an attractive man. His blue eyes held a lively spark in that compensated for the blurring of the facial features caused by months of high-dose steroid treatments. But even more than his appearance, he had an air of self-confidence around the female ICU staff that spoke of a man who’d once been used to tons of women’s attention.

Emery turned to the laptop on wheels the nurse behind her had been pushing around. “Let’s see why you’re here today.” It was their wordless agreement that, no matter how sick he was or how dangerous the reason for his admission, they’d joke about it and minimize it. “Febrile neutropenia again? But that’s nothing for you! That’s your *good day!*”

He rolled his eyes. “I know! I can probably treat myself by now.” He snapped his fingers and gave his voice a dramatic tone. “Start me on piperacillin, vancomycin and filgrastim. *Stat!*”

She chuckled at the accuracy of his prescription. Ethan’s work had nothing to do with medicine—it was something in real estate, if she remembered right—but he found solace for his powerless situation by constantly keeping notes and blurting out mouthfuls of medical terms. “You look too good to be in the ICU. How come you’re not on the oncology floor instead?”

He made a dismissive wave. “My blood pressure was low in the ER and the doctor panicked. Just because I went into septic shock once or twice before, they always think I’m going to do it again.”

She glanced at his labs and her chest tightened. No wonder the ER doctor was scared. His labs suggested he was on early metabolic acidosis—a potential sign of poor tissue oxygenation, heralding shock. Was he about to crash on her again?

*Please, stay with me, Ethan. You're almost done with treatment, you can't die on me now.*

As her eyes rushed through the electronic records, verifying that the admitting doctor had taken all the right steps—blood cultures, antibiotics, ID consult, IV fluids—she forced herself to calm down. She couldn't allow her face to show any fear. Ethan was alive and in remission thanks to his unbeatable positive attitude. No matter how grim things were, she had to do everything in her power to help him keep it.

She turned to the tall, brawny male nurse next to her. “Steve, we don't have a lactic acid level back yet?”

Steve shook his shaven head. “The lab got the order but not the sample. The ER must've forgotten to draw it or lost it.”

“Please get one stat and also an ABG.”

Ethan groaned. “I hate the arterial blood gases! Do we really need them?”

Approaching the bed, she started her physical examination by looking in his eyes with a pocket flashlight and teased, “Ethan, you've had two bone marrow biopsies and a bunch of spinal taps since I met you. Are you *seriously* going to complain about a needle stick?”

“At least for the bone marrow and the spinal taps the IR guys put me to sleep,” he mumbled.

She looked in his throat with the flashlight, then felt the glands around his neck while asking him questions about symptoms, rushing through her review of systems.

“Any sore throat, trouble swallowing, cough, trouble breathing...”

His answer was always no. Ethan refused to complain no matter how sick he felt. He bragged that he could talk himself out of anything, from the chemotherapy-induced nausea to the bone pain after growth factor injections, by denying the symptoms. She thought for the hundredth time that he put to shame all the whiners and hypochondriacs of the world—starting with her fiancé Ken. Ethan was such a refreshing breath of air in the ICU, where almost every other patient was a depressing, hopeless case.

While asking him the questions, she rushed through most of the physical exam, leaving the auscultation for last, so he could talk until the end. As a pulmonary specialist, she took extra time listening to his lungs.

When she was done, she took off the stethoscope and hung it around her neck. “Well, Ethan, your blood pressure is better after the IV fluids, but we’ll watch you here for a little longer before sending you to a regular floor. You know the routine; your neutrophil count has to be above five hundred before we even talk about letting you go home.”

He nodded. “It’s going to take a few days. I can tell.”

Emery couldn’t help smiling. Ethan claimed to be so in touch with his body that he could feel when the blood counts were coming up. The freaky part was that he was usually right.

Emery went over the rest of the labs and x-rays and gave a few more orders. The team was wrapping up and moving to the next patient’s room when Ethan called out. “Hey, doc!”

She turned around. “Oh, sorry. Do you have any questions?”

There was a short silence. Ethan looked at her so intently it almost gave her a chill.

“Are you doing alright, Dr. Love? You seem a little down today.”

Sometimes Ethan’s intuition scared Emery.

The truth was that she was putting on an act that day to smile at the patients. She’d had a horrible fight with Ken the night before. She’d considered breaking their engagement more than once, but with the wedding date only weeks away—and her biological clock screaming at her—she couldn’t afford to indulge in cold feet.

The rest of the staff had already exited the room and they were alone. Ethan kept looking in her eyes. The kindness and warmth of that brave old soul enveloped her, inviting her to open up. Gosh! Here was a man fighting for his life against a lethal cancer with weapons that were beating him up as much as the cancer itself—and he was worrying *about her*? She felt a clamp in her throat. For a moment, she felt like letting the tears flow.

But she couldn’t.

She had no doubt that the survivor in front of her, whom she admired and respected deeply, had invaluable wisdom and solace to offer to her wounded soul. But sharing anything about her personal life would be crossing the lines of appropriateness between patient and doctor. The roles were clearly defined. She was there to take care of *him*, not the other way around.

She shrugged. “I’m fine. Just the usual stuff, you know. Too much stress at work...plain life.”

He nodded. But something in his expression hinted he knew she lied. Respectful of the boundaries of their roles, he didn’t press the issue.

He smiled weakly. “If you ever need a dose of *perspective*, just let me know.”

Emery laughed. She knew he was changing the strategy to humor.

Having overheard the last sentence, Steve the nurse rushed back in to the room. “Wait! I want my dose of perspective. I dig those!”

Ethan’s smile widened to a grin. He clapped his hands once and held both palms up, flexing and extending the fingers. “Bring it up, big guy!”

Steve lifted a finger. “I just found out that my stupid credit card company has been hitting me with hidden charges and raised my interest rate without me knowing it. It cost me hundreds of dollars on my bill.”

Ethan scoffed. “You want to talk about credit card bills? After six months of vacations in this *luxury hotel*—” he moved his hand around him, indicating the ICU room, “—my out-of-pocket hospital bills are so large I’m going to need to sell my organs to get out of debt. I actually tried! I went to *sell-your-organs-on-the-black-market-dot-com* and tried to sell a kidney, a cornea and half my liver.” He rolled his eyes. “Nobody wants them! Just because I went into multi-organ failure a time or two they say my organs aren’t good enough for them!”

Emery and Steve laughed. She resisted the temptation to be the buzzkill and remind them that no transplant recipient in the world would ever take an organ from a donor with history of cancer. A few other members of the staff were rushing back in to take part in the comedy improv routine.

Steve continued. “An a-hole policeman gave me a ticket for driving five miles over the speed limit. Five freaking miles!”

Ethan groaned. “I wish I got a speeding ticket! *That would mean I’m driving!* My neurotic neurologist refuses to clear me for that.” He rolled his eyes, then fake-sobbed. “The closest thing to driving I’ve done in months is sit on a stretcher while they transport me to x-rays, and twirl the bedpan in my hands, pretending it’s a steering wheel.”

The staff laughed.

Steve charged again. “My girlfriend dumped me last month and I haven’t gotten any action since.”

Ethan grunted. “The closest thing to action *I*’ve had in the past six months is a nurse shoving a urinary catheter down my—”

“Whoa, whoa!” Emery waved her hands while laughing. “I think we all get it, Ethan. Compared to you, we should *not* complain.”

He joined his hands up in a victory gesture. “I’m the ultimate winner of the suckiest-life award! ”

The whole staff mock-cheered. In the middle of the laughter, Emery wanted to cry.

*He’s my hero.*

Why couldn’t she be more like Ethan? Strong and resilient, able to laugh at himself and joke about his worst tragedies. Her mother’s daughter, Emery’d spent her life feeding on small drama. Facing an iron-strong survivor like him made her feel ashamed of herself.

His deep blue eyes met hers again across the room and a strange flutter overtook her heart. She reprimanded herself and looked away. He was her patient. He was her ultimate inspirational story. She could never allow herself to see him as more than that.

“Wait, doc!” he called her out again before she walked out. As usual, he seemed reluctant to let her go.

“Do you have any questions?” she repeated, in a hurry to get back to her rounds.

A hint of eagerness flashed in his expression; his voice sounded tentative and apologetic. “You forgot your line.” He fluttered his uneven eyelashes, giving her the begging puppy eyes she was now familiar with.

Silence fell between them. Emery wasn't in the mood to perform their little banter routine today. And she acknowledged that sometimes they pushed the physician-doctor boundary.

But she would do anything to make Ethan smile—and he knew it.

With a theatrical gasp and mock-indignation, she recited her lines. “Ethan! Do you have any idea how hard I've worked to keep you alive?” Flipping her long auburn hair, she put a hand on her hip, squared her shoulders and stamped a foot on the floor. “*If you die now, I'm going to kill you!*”

Ethan burst into laughter—that clear and beautiful laugh she relished so much because it was an unquestionable sign that he was doing better.

Yes. She was blurring the lines of doctor and patient. But if that made Ethan forget about his struggle for a moment and smile like that, she'd gladly bend the rules.