

My Worst Crisis



By Tamar Scheinberg

It was to be the end of my husband's life and my worst crisis. After 43 years together, I watched him go from a positive, healthy husband to a withered man comfortable only when bent forward with his head down. I had witnessed death before with my parents; I knew I would lose them. But losing my husband, Rafi, was different. He was my strength, my rock, and nothing could shake him.

At first, when we found out that he had stage 4 lung cancer, he poured through medical literature. Rafi studied medicine for a year in Argentina, so he looked for alternative treatments before conceding to chemotherapy.

Rafi believed in doctors, medicine, scientific research, and prayed for remission, despite his stage 4 verdict. He smoked for more than 30 years, but the smell of cigarette smoke always bothered him whenever he had a cold. In 1984, during a bad cold, he stopped smoking permanently because of a coughing spell he could not fight off.

When Rafi found out he had cancer, he thought he could beat it. I tried to be optimistic knowing his strength.

He applied for clinical trials and was particularly interested in trying the drug Iressa, which had promising results to patients with lung cancer. The oncologists did not want to "waste time" and started him on chemotherapy. This made him ineligible to participate in clinical trials for new drugs. The chemotherapy deteriorated his health, and he decided to discontinue treatment. There was no radiation therapy available to him. His lungs filled with liquid and were periodically drained.

Through a contact we got in touch with a Hungarian physician involved in research with cancer patients in their final stages. This doctor put us in contact with physicians in Hungary who gave us hope for Rafi's remission.

These treatments were discovered in 1965 when a farmer who had cancer lost his chickens to Newcastle disease, but the farmer miraculously recovered from cancer as his chickens died off. Hungarian scientists then studied the anomaly. They developed the Newcastle vaccine.

We immediately left for Budapest. When Rafi's doctors learned that chemotherapy had no effect on his cancer, he was administered the Newcastle vaccine. We remained in Budapest for a couple of weeks where Rafi was injected with the vaccine

on a daily basis and returned to Miami with additional doses. While we were in Budapest, we rarely left our rental apartment, as it was difficult for him to walk and climb steps. On those rare occasions when we ventured out, the summer weather was heavenly. We strolled along the banks of the Danube and savored the dark, rich sweetness of Hungarian pastries. While Rafi watched soccer on television, I toured without him.

Rafi continued to take the vaccine we brought back, although it was now given to him by his oncologist directly through his port hole as opposed to injections. The oncologist did not think the vaccine would be viable but went along with it to please Rafi.

When the amount that we brought back finished, we were informed that the vaccine was no longer in production. We learned a Dutch company was developing a similar vaccine; however, it would take months before we could get more of it. We discovered the Newcastle vaccine was used in the U.S. mainly for chickens, but some patients with Mesothelioma received the vaccine and had been in remission for several years.

Rafi's tumor shrank, but the fluid in his lungs continued to recur and had to be removed every two weeks. Unfortunately, during the fluid removal process, pneumothorax occurred, and one lung was punctured and collapsed. I watched my beloved Rafi fight his physicians to try to restore his lung, but it was impossible. After this, Rafi gave up hope.

He suffered during the final stages of his life. He refused further treatment. His only comfortable position was sitting in a chair bent forward with his head down. He signed himself into hospice. From that point on he was only administered oxygen and morphine.

My son flew in from Israel. We took turns sitting with him. Morphine did the job quickly and efficiently, as it had with my mother. Within three days, Rafi fell into a coma. A few hours later he was gone.

The light of my life died. Forty-three years of matrimony, for better or for worse, through good times and bad, through sickness and health. I knew I had to move on, but the months that followed were grueling.

During the grieving process my life collapsed: my daughter divorced, my dog was put to sleep, and I sold my house. I needed to make a new future. I moved to Fort Lauderdale to be closer to my family. I joined Hadassah, a women's service organization and made new friends. Hadassah became my security blanket. I watched my grandson grow into a fine, young, strong man. My daughter found a new love.

My life moved on but my companion, my love and my best friend, Rafi, remains with me always. His death was not my end.

*Painting by Marc Chagall entitled "Bride Groom of the Eiffel Tower"

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