Checking In: Cheating On Your Doctor

When you like your doctor too much to tell him you're feeling bad

October 1, 1995 By Dick Scanlan

At 10:45pm on a warm April night in 1992, Dick Scanlan told me he'd received some test results that day. His T-cells had been cut in half, "from 500-ish to 250-ish." We were smack in the heart of Manhattan's bustling post-show theater district, following the curatin call of the Off-Broadway hit Pageant we'd appeared in together, headed for supper at Joe Allen. It was the moment I realized that although our friendship was steeped in the high-staked dramas of show biz, this was not a rehearsal. After that moment on Eight Avenue and 45th Street, everything went in production. The meticulously creative energy that had fueld Dick's dazzling performance in Pageant began empowering his direction as an arts journalist and fiction writer. Articles published in The New York Times, The Village Voice, Vanity Fair and The New Yorker came after the diagnosis, and his collection of short stories, Does Freddy Dance, was published by Alyson Publications. As for Dick's health care, I think you'll find what follows is a man with the guts and ingenuity of a Broadway producer with a show set to out-run Cats. —David Drake

Prodigal Son

There is an element of glamour to my medical treatment, expensive and grueling, but glamour always is: Babe Paley didn't die young for nothing. Like the ladies who lunch in Sondheim's Company, my days are often booked by a series of appointments in upscale neighborhoods with a wide array of health care professionals. I don't mean to diminish the despair that comes, goes and comes back when living with AIDS, but the world of medicine can amuse as well as heal (or frustrate), in settings ranging from the slightly bohème loft of my Harvard-cum-hippie AIDS specialist to elegant Park Avenue physician's suites.

As with Sunset Boulevard's Tony for outstanding set design, excess wins hands down, so the ornate splendor of my internist's office gets my vote for the best doctor's decor, he and his sister share the kind of Upper East Side brownstone I moved to New York to find. It didn't take me long: I met my doctor and his well-appointed digs a few months after arriving in Manhattan to be an actor 14 years ago. Like most fledglings, I had no money, no connections, no doctor and, back then, not much need for one. During my initial search for the clichéed waitering job, I was asked repeatedly by restaurateurs and random New Yorkers if I was the son of Dr. Ward Cunningham-Rundles. His name stuck in my head -- I've always been a sucker for a hyphen -- so when I came down with an ailment that shall remain as nameless as the man who transmitted it to me, I looked up my lost "father" and scheduled an appointment. Neither of us thought we looked alike, but Ward was

clearly the doctor of my dreams, and though his luxurious layout indicated exorbitant fees, with leather couches, antique end tables and tapestried walls, Ward scaled his charges to fit my uninsured waiter/actor budget. I recall one early visit costing me $25, which I paid off in installments of $5.

Longevity lends a sense of history to any relationship, but our bond goes deeper. Ward was the man who called when my boyfriend's HIV test came back positive. Twelve months later, he made another phone call, just past dawn, to inform me of my boyfriend's death, remaining on the line for slow-motion minutes as I tried to comprehend how the summer sun could still be shining through my bedroom window, or the occasional cab whizzing up Eighth Avenue 17 stories below, when my life (as I then defined it) had been taken from me.

Ward's sensitivity made it easier for me to go on living. I'm a solve-the-problem sort of guy, so I was ready for an HIV test within weeks of my boyfriend's death, but Ward strongly advised against it, suggesting that we monitor my T-cells, which at that time were high (ah, memories, memories), because he knew I wasn't ready to handle the emotional and medical responsibility an HIV diagnosis demands.

East Meets Best

Though he epitomizes Western medicine, Ward's blend of small-town-concern-meets-big-city-savvy adds up to his own brand of holistic healing. While I'll wager that he's never seen *Oprah* or the inside of a shrink's office, Ward wants to hear about my inner life, needs to know if my symptoms are physical or emotional. While acknowledging the enormity of the loss of my lover, he gently urged me to put away my widow wear. And true to his word, Ward regularly tested my T-cells, and though for a long while I passed with flying colors, the count worked its way down. I took the HIV test and confirmed my positive status. Still, Ward's reaction wasn't the knee-jerk response to an imposed demarcation line, à la "Below 500? Time for AZT." Since he's not an HIV specialist, his knowledge of alternative treatments is limited, but not only was he supportive of my seeking out a doctor who does AIDS all day long, he was excited by the cutting-edge information I carried from AIDS-specialist extraordinaire Bernard Bihari's Greenwich Village office to Ward's East 68th Street townhouse, integrating Bernard's maverick take on medicine with his own establishment perspective. Indeed, Ward now recommends Bernard to his HIV patients, and they call each other to navigate my various prophylaxes through numerous drug allergies.

Truth and Consequences

As in any relationship, Ward and I have had our problems. Last summer, when I became suddenly, and somewhat severely, symptomatic with neuropathy and fatigue, I felt protective of him, unable to share the details of my worsening condition (and, irrationally, I was also angry that he'd failed to keep my T-cells in the high hundreds). Instead, I fled to the office of another superlative Upper East Sider, Catherine Carlisle Hart (daughter of New York City doyenne of the arts and *To Tell The Truth* regular Kitty Carlisle and Moss Hart, director of my favorite musical, *My Fair Lady*). Dr. Hart was top flight, but I missed the familial, perhaps paternal, connection I share with Ward. Indeed, there are days when I'm not well enough to function, but not sick enough to complain, so I sit with

my dogs until malaise passes and verve returns. Invariably, Ward will call on those days to check-in, prompted by an uneasy feeling that I am sick. That kind of unspoken communication is precious in the most intimate of relationships. The promise of show biz dirt was reason enough to stay with Dr. Hart, but I realized that if I were to find myself writhing in discomfort on a hospital bed, the sound of Ward's voice, soft-spoken at *tempo allegro*, would ease my aching heart and soothe my bruised soul. (Then again, so would the original cast album of *My Fair Lady*.)

Ward and I spent our first visit after my medical fling talking about why I turned away, and when we finished, he wanted to examine me.

"I'm not ready for that," I told him, feeling like a character Judy Davis might play in a Woody Allen film. "I thought we were just going to talk."

"I'd like to take a look," he said, "and see what's going on."

Shyly I took off my shirt, with less angst than Irene Cara's topless photo shoot in *Fame*, but an undeniable degree of uncertainty. As soon as I felt his hands on my shoulders, looking for the swollen glands I've had for more than a decade, I had to hold back tears. "I've come home at last," I said, my *au courant* reference to Norma Desmond's musical declaration wasted on Ward. I don't know what I was expecting -- a lively debate on Patti versus Glenn? -- but all I got was the slightest squeeze of my shoulder. That's all I needed, for in his hands, comforting and familiar as any man's touch I've had the pleasure of knowing (save one), I felt his relief that the prodigal son -- or at least, the prodigal look-alike -- had returned, and oh, Dr. Ward, there's no place like home.

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