

John and Elizabeth Edwards

If my wife came home tomorrow with a diagnosis of breast cancer, I know exactly what I would do.

I would support her.

How? I don't know. The only way I could, I guess. Be with her.

An old pal of mine has been through it, and he says it's like the two of you, after hearing the news, being escorted into an unfurnished, featureless room with a wide window overlooking the world outside. Behind you, he says, the door closes, no knob on the inside, and the room becomes hermetically sealed. In this room the two of you live, until death do you part, looking out at a life you will never again be a part of.

He told me he read that many husbands in that situation cut and run, refuse to go with her into the room, leave the marriage. I can't imagine that. On that, John Edwards and I agree. Three years ago, when his wife Elizabeth received her diagnosis, he walked with her into the room that my pal describes. That is the coolest thing I could ever say about John Edwards, even if he were elected president, Pope, ruler for life, entertainer of the year, Oscar winner, Nobel Prize recipient, all on the same day.

You learn things, so I'm told, inside this room. At first, the man has two great needs: knowing what to say, and knowing what to do. And there's this sudden distance between him and his wife. She is different. Outside, time was elastic. In here, it is not. Early detection, promising treatments, etc., but the statistics are still cold: a woman alive five years after diagnosis is considered a "survivor." Sidebars to the Edwards story say that breast cancer kills around 44,000 women a year, and attacks more than 180,000 new victims annually.

"If breast cancer were a foreign nation," my pal says, "Congress would have declared war a long time ago."

He said after almost three years in the room, John and Elizabeth Edwards have established a whole new life together. Apparently the husband learns fairly quickly what to say, and what not to say. He also, once the treatment begins, suddenly has a lot to do and a willingness to do it. He must learn more about breast cancer than he ever wanted to know. I have another old friend, who escaped Russia in the 1970s and became a success as a restaurateur in this country. But in his existence was so much terrible reality. One afternoon I watched him lean his elbows on the bar, rest his face in his hands, and say, "I know too much for a man my age."

Reading about John Edwards, I think that is how he must feel. In one story,

Elizabeth told about some kind of needle procedure, a nurse trying to get a needle into a vein. She said John was squeamish and had to leave the room. My pal had read the story too, and he laughed. "I wasn't squeamish," he said, "but every time I was there, it took the nurse two or three times to find a vein. I figured it was me, hexing it. So I'd go for a cup of coffee, and every time, the nurse would hit it on the first try."

Now Elizabeth Edwards has had a recurrence, and the cancer is in her bones. Obviously, with his presidential candidacy, they had to go public with it. This week, John Edwards is under attack by many for choosing to continue his candidacy "for the duration," he says, instead of devoting himself to his wife and her condition. Katie Couric challenged him on it in an interview: "How can you say that, Senator Edwards, with such certainty? If, God forbid, Elizabeth doesn't respond to whatever treatment is recommended, if her health deteriorates, would you really say that?"

It makes you wonder: what would I do?

"You know exactly what you would do," my pal said. "Read the stories. Think about it."

Reading the stories again, it seems obvious that John Edwards knows what he is doing. Both of them say she is going to live for years. John would certainly not do or say anything to throw doubt on that. In fact, it dawns on me, he *can't*. Love won't let him. Suddenly I know exactly what I would do. I would support her. I would no more quit the campaign than tell my wife anything else than she was going to live forever. Elizabeth Edwards will never in her lifetime hear John Edwards waver. It's the one thing she knows she can always, always, count on. She knows it, and he knows it. The value of that should be obvious to all.

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