

From author Patch Rose: "I'm a nobody. I'm not a famous personality or a world-class athlete. I have no money, no influence, and no hair. In short, I'm just like you. Yet, I am the new face of Cancer."

One Year To Live? A Nobody's Guide To Surviving Cancer

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*In November 2005, newspaper reporter and freelance writer Patch Rose was diagnosed with a GBM brain tumor. Statistically, GBM patients live about one year after diagnosis. So far, Patch is beating the odds.*

*Patch lives in Truth or Consequences, New Mexico, alongside his wife, Cookie, two cats and two Chihuahuas. Together, they make half a dozen Roses.*

*One Year To Live? is based on Patch Rose's true-life story. These stories originally appeared in the Herald newspaper of Truth or Consequences, New Mexico.*

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# **One Year To Live?**

**A Nobody's Guide  
To Surviving Cancer**

**By Patch Rose**

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## **A Woman Like Velma**

Velma hovers over me, a jealous lover. She searches my face for signs of betrayal, while burning, burning my skull with her poisonous, glowering eyes.

Every afternoon, five days a week, I surrender my brain and body to a device called an IMRT radiation machine, a room-sized, radioactive drill.

I call it Velma.

Velma has three hand maidens, Lynne, Tracy and Brandee. These radiation technologists prepare me for my fifteen minutes of passion with Velma. They make the bed where Velma and I will mate. They lay me down and strap on my face mask.

I am trapped beneath the tight mask, locked in a plastic cage. The pinpoint holes above my eyes allow me to see only sweeping shadows, for to look into the eyes of the goddess Velma would mean sure death.

The hand maidens silently prepare me, a sacrifice to their goddess. They secure me to the altar, offer me a whisper of encouragement, then flee.

And then, Velma drills.

Behind their protective shield, the hand maidens watch as the goddess and I couple. Loud sirens wail as Velma drives gamma rays past my skull and into the deep meat of my brain. Computers guide Velma's gaze, a feeble attempt at reducing the

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destruction of healthy brain cells. For healthy cells will die. My lover kills me even as she offers me succor.

Velma drills. Her rays hit my optic nerve. Bright flashes, blue and violet, lightning across my eyelids. Through the mask I smell the burnt hair stench of ozone. The seconds turtle by as I endure this hopeful electrocution. Velma drills.

And yet, Velma is not totally in control. Blind and bound, I still have powers. I breathe deeply, greedily sucking down Velma's heady kisses. On the exhale, I imagine great clouds of black gnats—the cancer—swarming from my mouth. I inhale again and kiss Velma harder.

Velma drills. A minute passes. Two. My scalp begins to protest. To burn.

I breathe deeper, and imagine virginal white sand beneath me. My face is not covered in a mask but shaded in a straw hat. Beside me, under the shadow of a palm tree, my wife naps, naked on the cool sand.

And Velma? Velma is a thumb-sized hole in my hat, allowing one bright burning ray of sunshine to sear my scalp. The ocean rolls. I caress my wife. Velma drills.

Silence; a pause between ecstasies. Velma clicks and whirrs in her strange, alien tongue. She moves directly over me; we are face to face. The alarms shriek again as Velma places a final, smoldering kiss on my forehead.

The alarms die and the hand maidens rush in, freeing me from the altar. My face is a crimson waffle from the pressing of the

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plastic mask. I reach up and touch horseshoe size patches of pink, angry skin where hair no longer grows.

I sway as I sit up, my senses of balance and purpose obliterated. For now, it seems, I have satisfied my insatiable lover. The hand maidens send me on my wobbly way, for there are other men—and women, and children—waiting to mate with the goddess.

Each session with Velma is very much like a blind date. Afterwards, there is anxiety and nausea and the inevitable question, “Why would I do this again?”

The answer is simple. I do it to live. But more than that, I do it because there is nothing in this world that makes a man feel more present, more profoundly alive, than having his head messed with by a beautiful and dangerous woman.

A woman like Velma.

## Little Missy

Those who live in small towns know—it can take an hour to shop for cat food. That’s because of all the chatty friends and neighbors you meet by the turnip greens. And when you write for the local paper, watch out, boy. Those turnip greens will leave the store before you do.

So, after ending my tenth neighborly chat and still cat food-less, I turned quickly down the wrong aisle.

And there she was.

Little Missy.

“Wassup, baby cakes,” she cooed from a box of Frosty Fudgy Squares. “Haven’t seen you long time.”

I took a deep breath and wheeled my cart right past her.

“Where you goin’?” Little Missy breathed, this time from a box of Sugar Snap Snacks.

“Far away from you,” I said, pushing the cart faster. “Now let me be.”

“Come on, cupcake,” she called out from a box of cinnamon swirls. “Come and see me. We can work it out. Ain’t Little Missy been good to you?”

Oh, had Little Missy been good to me. My whole life, I never smoked. I never drank. I didn’t freebase Vicks cough syrup. But my oh my, did I have a gripping vice. I loved to do Little Missy.

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I'd eat anything with Little Missy's scrubbed pink Midwestern face on it. Cherry Flips, Ladyfingers, Fig Bars. I dunked Missy's donuts, nibbled her nutty bars and greedily licked the cream from her oatmeally pies. Little Missy was my wanton slut, my freak and believe you me, I was hooked. Bad.

Then I got the brain cancer.

"Look," I told the freckled, grinning girl on the boxes of Astral Kisses, "You've been very good to me. Very good at being very bad."

She gave out a throaty laugh. I pushed my cart further. "Later, Little Missy."

Brain tumors, you see, love sugar. My Thai Yoda neurologist made it clear at our first consultation: If I wanted to survive past six months, I had to say bye-bye to sugar.

I fought daily cravings for Missy's Marshmallow Treats and Strawberry Shortcake. The withdrawal was killing me, but I was resolute. If I wanted to live, my torrid love affair with this sweet, hot eight-year-old girl had to end.

"Honey, honey," Little Missy soothed from a box of Nut Crunch, "I've changed, baby. See? Zero grams trans fat! One-third less sodium! I got it all going on, all for you, sweet thing!"

I stopped short, stared hard into her cornflower blue eyes. "And how much sugar you got, sugar?"

From a box of Devil Bites, I thought I saw a blush darken those freckled cheeks. "Ah, come on, mini muffin..."

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I snatched up her Sweet Rolls. (Oh, God...Little Missy's Sweet Rolls!) I flipped Missy over and scanned her backside.

32 grams of sugar.

"Pure poison," I told her. "I'm out." I started to replace the box.

"Baby," she whispered. "Don't I feel good in your arms?"

Oh, did Little Missy feel good in my arms. I brought the box up to my nose, inhaling her sweet perfume: granulated sugar cane smothered in fructosy fudge. It was like slipping into a chocolate Jacuzzi.

My resolve melted like a Hershey kiss. I looked over each shoulder, then I slipped Missy into my cart.

She purred at me. "You won't regret it, honey buns."

I felt high, jazzed. I jumped onto the back of the cart and popped a wheelie. Missy laughed. I laughed too, nervously flushed with nectary delight.

And there he was.

He was 17 or so, a pretty young thing. He bopped down the aisle, his jeans held on by nothing but hipbone. His silky long hair bounced as he jived. He wore sneakers, and a T-shirt that said, "Eat Peaches."

Peach Boy gave me a "s'up?" head nod. Then, he looked down at *my* Little Missy.

"Hi sugar," she cooed up at him. "Wanna try something sweet?"

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“Little Hussy!” I hissed. I flung the box to the floor. “Skanky Ho-Ho!” I stomped away, leaving Missy and my empty cart in the middle of the snack aisle.

“You’ll be back!” she shrieked. “They always come back! Ain’t nobody can quit Little Missy!”

I fled around the corner into the beans and pet food aisle, my hands clammy and shaking. Behind me, I heard Little Missy’s silky voice rising from the floor. She was working Peach Boy, hard.

“Forget him, sugar cube. You wanna try my Jelly Roll?”

I snatched four cans of cat food from the shelf and bolted for the front of the store.

And there she was.

Sylvia, my wife, stood waiting at the checkout. I guess she’d come to buy some things on her way home.

I looked into her hands. Wheat pasta. Green tea. No-sugar peanut butter.

When I got cancer, my wife started making foods she didn’t like, because it was what I needed to live. In the process, she left behind her own Little Missies. White bread. White rice. Potatoes. She gave them all up, to save me.

Sylvia turned, saw me. Her eyes grew bigger than root beer barrels. Her face lit up like a lemon drop. She waved to me, her smile warm, sweet and smooth as Caramello.

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I knew right then that Little Missy was wrong. I *could* quit her. I could spend the rest of my days quitting her. My life was sweet enough.

As I joined Sylvia at the checkout, and checked out her creamy white, Haagen-Dazs face, I suddenly remembered my wife's lifelong nickname:

Cookie.

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