

## **Bad Breath by Gail Loon Lustig**

This morning I saw Sara running in the park. I almost missed her as she jogged past me. The sunglasses and white toweling peak cap hid her pale blue eyes and long strawberry blond hair that she usually wore loose. She was wearing tight black lycra running- pants and a shirt with blue stripes down the side that hugged her chest. She was gone before I could even try and acknowledge her. I had noticed that she was heavier than she had been, seemed to have gained weight evenly over her light frame. A striking figure as she strode down the stone path towards the Eucalyptus trees at the other end of the park.

It was a cold afternoon some fifteen years back when she and Uri came into my clinic. They were a handsome couple, he the perfect match for her, tall, dark hair, muscular, pleasant face, crooked smile. A bit like Rock Hudson.

"We're back from the States and we'd like you to be our doctor if that `s ok....?", said Uri.

"Sure, now tell me a little bit about yourselves. Not often that couples make a joint appointment", I said.

Uri was the softer spoken one. He was serious and his face showed little emotion as he proceeded to tell me that they had returned to Israel to bury their son of fourteen who had died of leukemia in Florida.

"How awful, " I said.

"Yes, we're pretty shattered", said Sara. "It's been tough".

"But we have three other kids, all of whom are healthy and we need to move on..."

Over the years, I treated Lital's anxiety problem and Rinat's anemia and Uri's hypertension. It turned out that Eran was far taller than his father and a budding basketball player.

"He's going to be a champion. He has the makings of one if only it weren `t for his meniscus..."

"And how are things otherwise?" I found myself asking.

"Pretty tough. It's been a struggle being back. The rag-trade is up to shit here. I'm transferring my business to Romania. More chances of making it there..."

Sara's visits became more frequent.

"It's taken me some time to tell you, but I think my breath smells", she said one day.

Halitosis is one of those embarrassing symptoms that people don't talk about to their doctors. Most symptoms to do with odors are embarrassing. Bad breath is top of the list.

"How do you know?" I asked.

"My husband has hinted at it."

"And....?"

"We don't make love any more. You have to help me."

I tried every approach I knew. From diet to the dentist and then to the gastro-enterologist. Sara became more and more depressed and would sit talking to me with her hand over her mouth. I was running out of tools to help her. An approach is only an approach, not a solution.

A few months later, Uri came to see me holding an envelope.

"Eran has been selected for the junior basketball team of Tel Aviv. I need you to fill out this form please"

I filled out the form and then looked at him.

"How are things between you and Sara?"

"Avi looked down. We both froze and waited for each other to break the silence.

"I have a girlfriend in Romania. I never believed this would happen to me, but it has. You might not believe this, but I feel like putting an end to my life."

I covered my mouth and looked at him.

"I don't believe in marriage counselling, or psychologists for that matter," said Uri.

"I understand that, I said," but then again you might need to discuss this with someone professional who could help you.

"I've told you. You're the first person who knows. "

"Since I know, do I have the privilege of advising you?"

"I don't expect that of you, doctor. You help us with other problems...."

"Ok, well I'm here if you need me to listen again"

The next day Sara was sitting in the waiting-room when I came to work.

"I'll wait for you however long it takes", she said.

An hour later, she was in my room, her eyes red and swollen.

"He told me", she said.

"I am devastated."

Her shoulders heaved as she sobbed.

What'll you do? I asked.

"Not sure yet. But God gave me strength to deal with Doron`s illness. He`ll help me through this.

"You`re special", I said.

She came over to where I was sitting and hugged me.

"Men are so weak", she said.

"They only look\_strong – they use guns, kick balls and carry heavy loads on their backs."

"I`m not giving up, doctor – it'll be alright one way or the other.

I'm not sure it was alright; but the persisting symptom of bad breath disappeared overnight. And yes, years later there she was jogging in the park. It felt like she was right after all. She was alright..

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