

The Art of “Rats!”: Finding Humor When Your Cancer Causes a Midline Shift

Over time, you and your loved ones develop your own unique language and shorthand, observes brain cancer blogger Adam Hayden.

April 22, 2025 By [Adam Hayden](#)

“Rats!”

Some time ago, Whitney started saying “Rats!” every so often when minor mistakes or slight inconveniences arose.

“I got stuck by the train. Rats!”

“We’re out of milk. Rats!”

“I meant to switch the laundry before leaving. Rats!”

Like all serendipitous things that land in your lap at just the right moment, I don’t know the full story behind the phrase, but I do know that all credit goes to Erin, one of Whitney’s best friends. I think of her as one of my best friends, too. Saying this from me, not necessarily from Whitney, everyone needs an Erin in their life. She’s funny, real, raw, truthful, and a great hugger.

You can say anything to Erin, and if it sucks, you’ll get a hug, and if it sucks more, you’ll get a joke.

Whitney and I feed off of each other, and a veto-proof majority of our speech is repeated one-liners and inside jokes that we’ve collected over the years. And that’s not exaggerated. Regularly, we’ll say to each other, “We made it this far,” which is something Whitney said to me on our one month “anniversary.”

So yeah, we’ve developed our own language.

Whit and I are trench warfare people. We’ve each been in the shit. Sometimes it’s because we fucked up. Sometimes the people we were with fucked up. And sometimes shit just went down. But girl and I have been in some shit.

We're like two people who had very unique and personal experiences, but the emotions that were activated made us compatible—like we did it together, even not being in each other's lives.

Living through brain cancer is like, "We've never done brain cancer before, but shit's been real before, so I guess this is next up."

We made it this far, know what I mean?

So I'm in radiation right now, right? And something about the rad-oncs (radiation oncologists), they're built a little different.

My favorite internet meme is: "I'm built different. Incorrectly, I think."

If you've hung around awhile, you'll know that my first rad onc had a few bangers, including: "You do know you're going to die from this, don't you?" And the classic, "All we can do is hope."

Our one liners each have a place at exactly the right time and a bunch of them are from docs I've met along the way. Even the absurd things are the fuel that I burn for energy. The dirty coal of my experiences powers me through the hard times with puffs of cynical, sarcastic smoke. I think this all points to the intimacy between patient and clinician. Even if you were the one placing the IV, we were in that moment together, and the more moments we're in together, that's more moments I've lived through. More moments is more time.

More time presents more moments to consider how much coal is left in the bin, but I'm still puffing along.

We had an MRI scan for radiation planning, and over the course of three weeks, that tumor took advantage of the treatment break and decided to lounge out in my noggin and kick its feet up, raising the foot of the lazy boy across the "midline"—the place in the brain where the two hemispheres join, creating a structure that supports communication across the hemispheres.

When a brain tumor crosses the midline or causes a midline shift, it means there's enough pressure from the tumor to physically displace the structures. That's a meaningful development. The brain is organized for a reason, and when that organization is disturbed, functions can start to falter—sometimes gradually, sometimes more noticeably. It doesn't mean everything is falling apart, but it does mean the tumor is now influencing areas beyond its immediate habitat.

The doc showed us the scan, and we didn't need training in radiology to see the changes.

"Rats!" Whitney exclaimed.

"It is a rats situation," the doc replied.

All three of us laughed. Shovel more coal on the fire.

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