How to Survive.

I'll miss the ignorance I used to have with my spaghetti and meatballs. That I used to wash down fervently with my favorite Cab Sav.

March 25, 2018 By Jen Hodson

My oncologist told me this day would come. There were many days I didn't think I would see it. But here I am, opening an email, a recommendation on how to survive. The letter in question is my "Survivorship Care Plan." I never thought I'd see those words being used seriously towards me, not unless there was a Zombie Apocalypse taking place. But that isn't the case, this isn't that life, this is now and how I can survive it. Against cancer. Maybe.

Opening the letter was difficult for me, I read it swiftly then put it away, not to be thought of. The time has come, however, to review my entire cancer journey broken down into medical terms. Terms that I actually understand now. And to accept those terms to the best of my ability, even if most of it makes for a somewhat boring life. A life is a life, right?

Let's take a look at the signs and symptoms I should be making my medical care team aware of: anxiety/depression, weight changes, memory or concentration loss, pain, pain, PAIN, MORE PAIN. Is it just me or do I already suffer from all of these things as a result of treatment? How in the world can I know when they present a more serious problem? Is a headache truly a headache? Is my knee sore because of the expected joint pain or is something more sinister hiding there?

But ok, sure, I'll keep those in mind. I feel like I'm getting more cynical as I'm reading this letter. And then I hit the payload, the recommendations for a better tomorrow, for a better life. Kind of unproven but proven enough that we should abide by them as cancer survivors. Let's talk the ones that really stick out for me, shall we?

Alcohol use: My oncologist has asked me to limit alcohol intake to 1-2 drinks a week. Ok, I get that alcohol should be consumed in moderation, maybe in my early 20s I didn't quite get this, but I cottoned on to it eventually. And I certainly understood moderation long before I was diagnosed… but now the tiniest notion of having a bit too much fun should be dismissed. And it fucking sucks. Goodbye to the days of sampling wine with my besties, of taking shots to relive the glory days, of partaking in my favorite scotch without restraint. I hope I like the taste of guilt, because that's what any type of tipple will taste like from now on. I'm like a handmaid from Margaret Atwood's famous tale, I must ration and live on the edge. And hope it doesn't give me cancer. The choice has been stripped from me. I hate that. That's what this is really about, the removal of choice.

Limit meat intake (especially processed): No more double cheeseburgers for me, how sad. Except,

I had one the other week and now I'm convinced I tempted fate. You see, I get how easy it is to assume these recommendations are an opportunity. An opportunity to right the unhealthy wrongs of my past and jump on that keto/vegan/glutenfree/paleo/organic train that promises an end to body woes. Except, cancer doesn't seem to have discriminated against those people, right? Vegans get cancer. Organic lovers get cancer. But, doing this will still help, right? My oncologist says it will, and so I buy only the most organic of meats from the grocery store, losing a large chunk of my paycheck in the process, and feeling like I've fallen into a black hole of food guilt I'll never get out of it. Will this cake kill me? Will this burger kill me? Will I ever know peace while eating again? Probably not.

The rest seems fairly manageable: maintain a regular exercise routine, wear sunscreen, keep my medical team informed, make my appointments, stay on my medication (this will be a separate post, as there is too much to break down about that right now). Sure, sure, sure. I can do all those. But wow, I'll miss the ignorance I used to have with my spaghetti and meatballs of the past. That I used to wash down fervently with my favorite Cab Sav. None of this seems like concrete science to me, but I have nothing else to go on. So, what's a girl to do?

Survive, I guess.

Survive and endure with all the rest of the side effects, in the hopes that the future will be better.

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