Write About It.

In my head, I get up off of this gurney, hop in the car, march into Memorial Sloan Kettering and say, “I’ll have some chemo, please.”

April 24, 2017 By Allison Ruddick

In my head, it all happens in slow motion.

I’m curled up on the exam table the doctor finishes her exam. “Ok, you can sit up,” she says. I assume the requested position but the look I see on her face as she takes off the gloves is much different than the relaxed one that she was wearing earlier. “Ok, so before I go any further, I want you to know that colon cancer is one of the most curable forms that there is, and rectal is even more responsive to treatment…” she says.

At this point, things get a little hazy. To me, it’s not my real life. She didn’t just tell me I had cancer, she told a character that is playing me. She’s still talking in the background, but all I hear is a series of murmurs like the teacher in Peanuts.

“…so I want you to come back for a colonoscopy as soon as possible. I’ll come in early to perform it for you, if necessary…”

I felt the tears start to well up in my eyes. Here, she stops and looks at me. “Are you ok?” she says.

She hands me a box of tissues and then slowly moves towards the door. She grabs the door handle and reaches up to hit a large button adjacent to the door jam. I’m pretty sure she was silently calling for back up: “I JUST DROPPED THE BOOOOOMB!! SOMEONE COME IN AND CLEAN UP!!!”

And there I was. A girl and her cancer. Alone in a doctor’s office with the complete Hall and Oates musical catalog serving as the soundtrack to the scene. I shifted a bit on the table and the familiar uncomfortable feeling that I’ve had for months came back. Only, this time, I knew it was a tumor. I felt my cancer.

With the tears still streaming down my face, I reached for my phone. I pulled up my text messages and tapped in the name “Ryan.”

“I think they just told me I have cancer,” I wrote.

“What?!” blinked back on the screen.

“She did an exam and she just told me that she thinks I have cancer.”

“Is she sure? I mean, you have to have other tests, right? I bet it’s not cancer.”

“They’re setting up my appointment for a colonoscopy, but you should have seen her face. It was like she was looking at a dead man walking. She seems pretty positive that I have cancer.”

The door to the exam room creaked open and a tiny blonde girl sheepishly walks in. Poor thing couldn’t be more than 20 and they send her in to clean up the casualties. “Ummm, the doctor wants you to come in as soon as possible for a colonoscopy. The earliest appointment I can give you is Monday at 8:30am. Does that work for you?” she asks. I quietly laugh a bit to myself and consider answering, “No, I have a tennis game that morning.” “Yes, of course,” I respond. She then goes through the litany of test prep instructions. This is not exactly the weekend that I had planned.

I grabbed my jacket, and with tears still spilling down my face, I made my way down the hall towards the exit. In my mind, the staff behind the desks all ceased movement and stared at me with pity. ‘They know,’ I thought to myself, even though I knew that wasn’t the case.

People say it all the time, but the worst part about a colonoscopy is the prep. Drinking 64 ounces of anything is a lot for the stomach to handle. At one point, I swear I poked at my abdomen and watched it ripple like I just threw a rock in a still lake.

The day of the colonoscopy, I open the door and scan the waiting room. I am absolutely the youngest person here. It’s me and eight 60-year-olds peering up at me with the look of confusion as I check in. Yes, I am a bit young to be coming for a colonoscopy. No, I’m not doing it for the experience, there are a few extenuating circumstances here…

When they call my name, I’m set up in an exam room with a nurse taking my vitals. “Ok, we’re going to need a urine sample before we can begin,” he says. “Ummmm, I was told not to eat or drink anything since midnight last night, that might be a little tough,” I respond. “I know, it’s going to be difficult, but we can’t proceed until we make sure you’re not pregnant.” Bless his heart. I know he’s doing his job, but it’s really hard to produce any fluids when you haven’t put any fluids in your body for 12 hours. This, I’ve come to learn, is just the first of the many contradictory practices that I will face while running the gamut of modern medicine.

After performing a miracle and confirming that I was not, in fact, with child, they wheel me in to the procedure room where they hook me up to an IV and give me the good stuff. Propofol sleep is the best sleep ever. It’s magical. When you wake, you’re in a state of bliss where you’re floating on a fluffy cloud of pretty pink fairy dust while delightful little cherubs flit about around you. Sadly, my cherubs started to take form rather quickly and soon I was peering at the face of my doctor as she was asking if I was awake. Around her shoulder, I see my worried mother rocking in the chair with my father standing stoically at her side.

“Yes, I’m awake,” I respond.

“Ok, well I’ve confirmed that it is cancer,” she starts.

At that, my mother lets out an audible gasp and my father leans back against the doorway that seems to be keeping him vertical. I blink at them, both for clarity and to flush the tears that were starting to fill in my eyes.

“You have a tumor, it’s about 3.5 centimeters.” I can barely grasp how large a centimeter is when I’m not hopped up on anesthetics, let alone now. “I did my residency at Sloan Kettering and they will take care of you there. It’s very treatable, and they have great success rates,” she finishes. At this point, my mother turns and starts firing off questions and I put my head back on the pillow. Being in this exam room is not helping my situation. In my head, I get up off of this gurney, hop in the car, march into Memorial Sloan Kettering and say, “I’ll have some chemo, please.”

When you’re told that you have cancer, you develop this overwhelming urgency to get it out of you as quickly as humanly possible. Knowing that you’re sitting there with a time bomb ticking away in your body is the single most frustrating thing that I’ve ever experienced. Before you can even start treatment, you need a litany of tests and scans and have to go through office upon office before an oncologist will even meet with you. To me, none of the people that I was dealing with were moving fast enough, but at the same time, I had to sit back accept that they needed to put the puzzle pieces together. Now I fully understand why they call us “patients”.

Little did I know at that point that it would be two months to the day before I was going to start the treatments that would hopefully save my life.

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