

## In My Veins

Heads swiveled. Pupils undulated, fixated, and then pitied. I strode across the waiting room, determined not to show the fear that lay crumpled in my stomach. But I wilted and shrank from eyes wrinkled like the surface of a frozen lake rendered imperfect by a rock haphazardly thrown by a passerby. The intricate lines on their faces told stories of happier times as they followed me to my destination. My face must have been shocking, even offensive, in a place so unaccustomed to youth.

I took my chair, and the nurse hung plastic bags filled with fantastically colored liquids onto the steel pole that towered over me. She smiled at me lightly while the needle in her hand pierced my chest. The taste of saline welled in my throat, instantaneously provoking nausea I knew would not soon subside.

I was always surprised that the cocktail of drugs that coursed into my veins did not cause me to scream with the pain they soon would bring. Sometimes, I fooled myself into believing it would never come. I was always wrong. I often lied to myself back then, not to make the experience more tolerable, but to create an existence that I controlled, no matter how fleeting.

Before being diagnosed with cancer at 21, I could never have foreseen the abrupt turn my life would take. I was a senior in college, mere weeks from applying for medical school. I was pushing myself to the limits of my abilities, utterly convinced of my invulnerability. The lump in my neck could wait.

Then suddenly, I was dying. The scans showed that my rib cage cradled a tumor the size of a fist, which gently caressed my heart. I was told not to be frightened by my prognosis, but the look in my doctor's eyes told me more than any CT scan ever could. My nervous system shot electric pain through my body as the disease made a mockery of my invincibility.

I became a pilgrim. I journeyed time and time again to that room. Each trip was a facsimile of the last. I would creep past the cracked ice, sink into a faux leather chair, and be held in the warm embrace of agony and salvation.

As the tumor melted away, my plans to pursue medical school materialized into something solid for the first time in many months. My smooth skull proclaimed courage I did not feel to the world around me while I awaited the results of my final scan to return. Finally, the phone rang, and tears wet my face. Improbability ruled that day as it had come to rule my life. Cancer was not yet done with me.

My chances at survival dwindled as one failed treatment became two. I crossed into a murky land of unapproved treatments and silent prayer to a god I thought no longer existed. I was told that a bone marrow transplant would be the next option. It was a process I had heard whispered about that a friend of a friend had done, but I did not know what would come.

Frankly, I did not care. I was desperate for anything to save my life, so I underwent the transplant.

Two years passed. As I sat in my medical school lecture hall, a serious physician approached the podium. I had been dreading this day for months. He began his discussion on cancer, and a chasm opened between my peers and me. Only I knew its terrible depth. When I decided to attend medical school, I knew the day would come when I began to study the one thing in this world that terrified me the most. I was hoping that no one would notice the glassy look in my eyes or how I suddenly found my shoes to be the most entertaining items in the room.

I felt almost embarrassed sitting there, as if a veil of privacy that once surrounded me had evaporated. No longer was just a disease being scrutinized. Instead, I was lying on the examination table, bearing my humanity. I was transported back to the room where I received countless rounds of chemotherapy, but smooth faces replaced the wrinkles I came to know so well.

My disease was no more real to my classmates than the pixels that conveyed its mechanisms and treatments. Cancer was just the next unfortunate affliction we were learning about among many, and it could be managed and defeated through logic and science. To them, a bone marrow transplant was a carefully choreographed act performed by turning page after page.

To me, it was pulling my hair out fist full after fist full in a single night. It was the feeling of liquid fire pouring down my throat as my body disintegrated after being barraged with chemicals designed to bring me face to face with death. It was the kindness a nurse showed me when I thought I could no longer take the pain. It was food that turned to ash in my mouth for weeks because every taste bud on my tongue was chemically eviscerated. It was weeping on a bench after being released from the hospital.

Cancer is anything but logical, and while I may be able to turn to a page in a textbook to find how to treat it, the true knowledge of how to beat cancer is etched into my soul. My path to becoming a physician will force me to reconcile with my past and pain whenever I look into a patient's eyes, holding the same fear I once did. The scars I carry mark my body as undeniable evidence that I share an irrevocable kinship with every patient I see. One that was not acquired through books, nor could ever be. It is a bond forged through the humility that severe illness brings. Cancer is terror incarnate, but it is life at its most insatiable. I know now that cancer was not brought into my life to change who I was. Instead, it was to show me that an indomitable spirit exists within us all. I was lucky enough to get to know mine.