

## Realistically Optimistic

I stood on the Hawthorne Bridge overlooking the Willamette River and imagined my death. I felt a chill on my tear-streaked cheeks as the wind blew against them.

I tried to call my boyfriend. No answer. *Maybe next time he'll answer.* I called again. No answer. I left a message and hung up. I whisper screamed obscenities into the air.

My next phone call was to my mom who, unlike my boyfriend, was waiting for my call. I knew it would not be an easy conversation. I watched the river ripple as the breeze lightly agitated the water. I dialed my mom's work number and held my breath. As soon as she answered, I blurted out "I don't really know how to say this, but I have thyroid cancer." I heard a sharp intake of breath and she said, "What does that mean?" Which meant, "Are you going to die?" I said I didn't know because the doctors still needed to tell me what type of thyroid cancer I had and whether or not it had spread to my lymph nodes.

My mom did not cry. I babbled on about how I should learn to be okay with dying, and that if I did die, I would need a will and thank goodness I didn't have a husband to leave behind to take care of the kids that I also didn't have. I let those thoughts run away with me and got off the phone to stare out at the river. I dialed my boyfriend again and got the same, no response. My chest felt like it needed to explode.

That night I had a conversation with my dad about my diagnosis. He told me he loved me—a phrase I've only heard from him a handful of times. We talked about how uncertain life is. The fact that a person is more likely to die in a car accident than from a plane crash did nothing for me. I had never entertained the thought that I might one day have cancer. All I could think of was—when did I become a cancer patient? And how, at age thirty-one?

Talking about my possible death with someone thirty years older than me baffled me. My dad could talk about it though. My mother, on the other hand, could only get lost in the feeling that I was going to be okay, that I *had* to be okay. She was the optimist. Not that my dad was the pessimist; no, I think he was the realist. I teetered between the extremes. One moment I was planning my next adventure, looking towards the future; and the next I had fallen off the bridge into a black hole.

The way this whole thing unraveled confused me; it was the first of a string of slow revelations. At a routine exam with my gynecologist, a slightly overweight, tall, always smiling man, he checked my neck and felt a small bump on my thyroid. He said I should get an ultrasound, but he didn't think it was cancer or anything to be worried about. For the first time in my medical history, I did not worry.

Two weeks later, in mid-September of 2009, I went to my ultrasound appointment. The waiting room was empty except for an elderly couple that sat a few seats away from me. The ultrasound tech told me her name was Portia. I had never met someone named Portia before.

Portia slathered gel on my neck and kept slathering. Soon it felt like twenty slugs had slowly slogged across it. After she had taken enough pictures the radiologist came in and I wiped away the slimy gel. The radiologist was tall and slender, with dark graying hair. His movements were awkward and I watched as he fiddled with the images on the computer screen only he could see. I said, "It seems like you found something."

Then the radiologist tried to break eye contact with me, but I'm sure his years of experience forced him not to, he told me, "I am certain you have thyroid cancer, but we have to perform a biopsy to get more detailed information." Obviously, I was shocked. I asked a few

questions, but the only one that mattered was when could I get a biopsy done. He arranged it so that I could get one right away.

“If you have to get cancer, this is the best kind to get,” Portia said with a smile. The radiologist nodded in agreement. The synapses in my brain felt like they were slowing down, and I wondered if Portia was waiting for me to give her a high-five because *I* was lucky enough to get the “best kind of cancer”.

During the next couple of months I found out that I had papillary thyroid cancer in my thyroid and two of the three lymph nodes that were biopsied. This meant I needed surgery. It lasted six and a half hours, during which my thyroid and all of the lymph nodes on the right side of my neck were removed. I started taking thyroid medication on a daily basis; it regulates things like: the rate of metabolism, how quickly the body uses energy and calcium levels, and body temperature and weight. These were things I never thought about before being diagnosed.

After the surgery, instead of chemotherapy, I had radioactive iodine treatment (RAI) to remove any of the remaining disease. RAI targets thyroid cancer cells and kills them. It entails a special low iodine diet (no dairy, no soy, no sea salt, no sea products, and no fun) before taking the radioactive iodine pill. The diet depletes your body of iodine so that the radioactive iodine has a better chance of finding the cancer and killing it. The first week of the diet was the easiest. After that, the battle of food cravings and mental clarity was on, gladiator style.

People who get this treatment must be in isolation for two-days and then semi-isolation for five more so as not to expose others to unwanted radiation. The RAI pill makes you radioactive. Since I lived in an apartment that shared walls with two other apartments, my endocrinologist set-up a two-day hospital stay. I had a list of precautions for my radioactive

state, such as making sure to flush the toilet two to three times after each use, washing my hands often, and taking at least two showers a day.

The walls and floor of my hospital room were covered in heavy paper or plastic. Everything was wrapped up—even the bed rails and the TV controller were wrapped. Any books or clothes I had brought with me to wear would be thrown in the toxic waste bin that sat next to my bed. I had a *toxic waste bin* by the side of my bed.

The nurse made sure that I understood I could not walk out of the room once I had taken my pill. I could call for assistance, but anyone who entered had to stay at least ten feet away from me. There was a time limit for how long someone could be around me and how close he/she could get to me. I didn't think it would bother me, but after just a few hours, sitting in such a strangely sterile place, made me feel a little crazy.

I brought a few pairs of pajamas and underwear that I could throw away so I didn't have to wear a hospital gown. Once I got settled, someone from the nuclear medicine department wheeled in a cart that had a short steel tube on it. I felt like a character in Huxley's *A Brave New World*, but I knew I was not about to take a soma pill.

The Nuclear Med person opened the metal tube with tongs and revealed a plastic tube with two little blue encased pills in it. She used the tongs to pick up the plastic tube and dump the pills into a paper cup, next to it was another paper cup filled with water. I wished I were Alice from *Alice in Wonderland*. I could shrink after swallowing the pills and be able to sneak out of there through a hole in the wall to go to a tea party with the Mad Hatter.

For the next two hours, I needed to drink lots of fluids and then I could start sucking on lemon drops to help my salivary glands produce saliva. I felt empty. I had a metallic taste in my mouth that lasted for just over a day. Everything I ate had a metallic tinge to it. When I told my

friends that I had to go through this treatment, I often got big grins with wide eyes staring back at me. *Whoa, will you have super hero powers after? Like you'll be able to snap a car in half like a twig or start fires by looking at something?* Yes, I said, that is exactly what I'll do.

While in isolation I read a lot, but my mind was fried with stress and lack of a thyroid hormone, I barely remember reading—*Are You There God, it's Me Margaret*, by Judy Blume. I could talk on the plastic wrapped phone that was in my room, but could not use my cell phone. I felt invisible somehow, like the pills I had taken had turned me translucent. I had lost the ability to communicate how fully I had lost a part of me, of my life. In my case, I had lost something abstract and how to quantify the residual emotional and intellectual loss was even harder. I wanted to be able to convey what I was going through, to feel more connected. Instead, I felt lost in a mind that struggled daily for clarity.

Throughout the whole process I grappled with the fact that not even the doctors who I looked to for answers could tell me what I thought I needed to hear. *Give me my expiration date, like a piece of food, please.* In order to keep going, there was a certain amount of optimism that went along with the uncertainty of my overall outcome.

After two days and a couple of Geiger counter checks (my Geiger number finally got to below 7, the preferred release number) I was released to go home. I still could not be around people, but the radioactive threat had lessened so I could be home among my own things. The isolation lasted another five days until I could go back to work.

At first, I was frustrated because I didn't have any one of those epiphanies or life changing revelations that hits some people after a life changing event. Maybe I'm just a slow learner, but I finally did learn something; everything in life is uncertain and yet— there is room for optimism. After my two years of follow-up appointments I came away cancer free. That's

cancer free—for now. I know that thirty percent of people with papillary thyroid cancer eventually have to go through treatment again. Realistically, I am hoping I will be part of the seventy percent who do not. I still have reminders of the disease: a partially numb neck, blood tests, and yearly neck ultra sounds, but it's manageable.

I stand on the Hawthorne Bridge overlooking the Willamette River and imagine my life. I feel the cool breeze lightly caress my cheeks. The possibilities stretch out in front of me and I let the uncertainty wash over me.

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