
Non-Fiction | SPRING 2015

Again

By Randy Hale

“He’s way too good looking. It shouldn’t be allowed.”
My sister agrees. Her guy was cute too, she says. It’s unnerving.

I lie on the gurney on my side, and he smiles at me - so handsome. He apologizes for the nasty prep, asks if I completed it, and do I have any questions or concerns before we get started?

I focus on what’s important. “I just want to be sure I don’t wake up during the procedure,” I say.

“No problem,” he responds, injecting something into my IV line.

And then, “Oh, here I go...” I murmur, as I drift away. I love this part. Like some old drug addict, I look forward to this moment every time.

Next thing I know there he is again, standing beside me. His muscular arms are folded across his chest, and he’s talking to me -- or maybe to someone nearby. I seem to have arrived in the middle of this conversation.

He speaks: “A four centimeter malignant mass.”

I’m suddenly wide awake.

“Are you saying it’s cancer?” I ask.

“Yes,” he says.

“Are you sure?” I ask.

Not possible. Polyps, I expected...But not actual, full blown cancer. And to *know* it’s cancer even before the biopsy results?

Plus, I already did cancer. My breast cancer had finally resolved only about a year ago. I was just getting comfortable in my body again, and now this?

My head swings to the right -- slow motion, like a prizefighter absorbing a solid shot to the jaw. In my post anesthesia stupor light trails follow my every move. Robert stands at the end

of my gurney. He looks small and far away -- as if seen through the wrong end of a telescope -- clutching his backpack, brow furrowed.

“You got a defective model,” I blurt. Not self-deprecation, not even an apology – just a statement of fact. Ten years of marriage and I come up with two cancers in the last four years. Not what we had planned.

Thanks to the delicious fentanyl/versed mix in my veins my awareness dawns in discrete episodes separated by black outs, like a movie attempting to be artsy. I don’t know whether I actually pass out during these lapses, or appear awake and attentive.

Someone is saying he can’t see the vein, but he can feel it. There’s a prick in my arm, and I’m gone again.

Then I’m in the lobby, standing upright, somehow dressed. I hear directions on how to pull the car around to a door I don’t remember seeing when we came in, but there it is. Magic. Robert nods and leaves. I’m offered a seat which I accept gratefully. I’m wobbly.

Robert reappears beside me, someone takes my other arm, and together they escort me to the car and install me in the passenger seat. I’m wide awake, alert.

Robert asks if we should pick up the dog from daycare on the way home. Sure. I feel great!

I come to when Miguel leaps into the car and kisses me full on the lips. I snuggle him. What seems like hours later, we arrive home.

The evening progresses in fits and starts. I am engulfed in the fragrance of my favorite Indian takeout – the blessed refeeding after days of starvation and emptying – consumed on the couch in front of some movie. Dozing off and on, I finally give up and load myself into bed.

I wake in the dark, Robert snoring next to me, both cats snuggled into me. I wait to fade out again, but it doesn’t happen. And then I remember: cancer.

I slip out of bed, tossing cats and covers aside, and head downstairs to the doctor’s report complete with snapshots of the inside of my colon. Like a photo booth strip from an amusement park -- my souvenir of the day’s outing.

I scan my shiny insides -- various rose colors with yellow highlights, a realm that’s intimately mine, but for which I can dredge up no recognition or feeling.

I turn my attention to the internet -- fount of information true and untrue, frightening and comforting. Cecum, cecum – where is the cecum? *What* is the cecum? I seem to recall that I spoke to my sister on the phone earlier, and she knew. She reminded me that she used to sell ostomy bags. I asked her to please shut up. And now there’s a picture on my screen, courtesy of the Mayo Clinic, showing exactly where the cecum resides.

And that's when I notice it. Maybe it's the drugs still in my system, or maybe it's because the colon is an internal, unseen purveyor of dirty things, rather than a valued, highly personal aspect of my sexuality and female identity like a breast – but I don't feel the same thrumming panic as when I was diagnosed with breast cancer. Perhaps it will come later.

I check in with myself. More amazed than scared, I note that my dominant feeling is fatigue, and I head back to bed.

Randy Hale is a retired oncology social worker. She has more than 15 years of experience at organizations including, Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York City, Gilda's Club, and the Swedish Cancer Institute in Seattle.