

Patriotism, Tissue Paper, and Showers

By Jeff Shearl

Dr. Yee had his hands around my throat.

“How long has it been like this?” he asked.

“About two weeks, I think.” I wasn't sure. It didn't seem like such a big deal.

“Just woke up with it?”

“Yep.”

I thought at first my lymph nodes were swollen. I felt like I had a head cold coming on. However, twoish weeks later, I was in the doctor's office with a thumb sized lump in the side of my neck. It wasn't really noticeable at first, but once I pointed it out I caught people staring at it. Not like they were actively thinking about it, but like their subconscious lingered.

I had been going to Dr. Yee's small practice for my entire life, and I was sure he would know exactly what was wrong.

“I don't know what it is.”

Dr. Yee sent me to a local nose and throat specialist, Dr. Park. In his waiting room there were framed newspaper clippings, some written in languages I couldn't read, detailing Dr. Park's accomplishments. There were a lot. Dr. Park was a small Korean man with graying black hair. His command over English was a little rough around the edges.

“Blood tests don't say anything about cancer,” he said. He started feeling my neck.

“It gets smaller sometimes,” I said.

“It is big now.” He went to a cabinet. “I don't think it's cancer, but we take things like this seriously.”

He had a tongue depressor, and he shined a light in my mouth. I had eaten onions not long before.

“Now,” he traced his finger along a diagram of the respiratory system that hung on his wall, “you can see that looking in the mouth doesn't show the whole throat. Looking through the nose we get a better idea of what's going on.”

“Cool fact, Doc,” I thought.

Dr. Park picked up a small funnel.

“Now, nobody like this,” he said. “Doesn't hurt, but you not going to like it.”

He stuck the funnel in my nose and sprayed something down it. It stung, and it made my throat go numb. He looked through the funnel with his flashlight for a few seconds. The only sound in the room was the gentle hiss of air conditioning. He removed the funnel and I thought, “I don't see what the big deal was, yeah it sucked bu-.”

Dr. Park was now holding a skinny black tube with a light on one end, an eye piece on the other. It was about one and a half feet long. My mind raced through excuses I could use to stop that stick from tunneling through my nasal passage. Before I had the chance to realize I

was late for a meeting or start a small fire to distract everyone while I made my daring escape, the probe was in my right nostril.

He was right, it didn't hurt, but I could feel it. I could feel everything. The first half inch wasn't so bad. My finger goes in that far. About two inches in the scope hit a kind of nasal hill, but it bent to fit the incline. Dr. Park asked me to inhale through my nose, and when I did all the snot that had been smashed and compacted fell into my throat. I didn't gag because I was afraid to move. A few seconds later I felt something brushing against the back of my throat. Dr. Park looked in there for awhile. I don't know how long. Time really doesn't matter so much when you've got something all up in your nasal passage. When Dr. Park withdrew the scope the suction caused mucus to shoot out everywhere.

He handed me a tissue and cleaned the scope for awhile. Dr. Park wasn't sure what it was either. He guessed it was a cyst. He told me they sometimes wait years and years to flare up. I scheduled a CAT scan with the nurse and went home.

Independence day is a big deal in the Portage Lakes, where I'm from. The fire works there are, according to the radio, the largest privately funded firework display in Ohio. The fireworks are launched from one of the state parks. A friend lives very near that park. His modest back yard ends in one of the many lakes that connect to the canal system. Every year his parents throw a viewing party, and the view is perfect. A majority of both boat and car traffic pass his house, so for a few hours after the show we sit on his two story deck and watch the anarchy resulting in too many boats trying to fit through the narrow bend.

The party was in full swing when I got there. Friends from out of town and high school were on the large balcony, and his parent's friends were below on the patio. People were sitting in lounge chairs talking about school, work, etcetera.

It was one of those rare perfect July evenings when the breeze wafts nostalgia that fills your lungs with sticky-sweet dewdrops of calm and the sun paints the air a soft haze of green and gold. Boats were already making their way along the lake, which resembled more of a river at this specific juncture. There is another landmass across the lake, probably only about one hundred and fifty feet from water's edge to water's edge. A nice house nestled in the giant oak, maple, and willow trees. A man wandered down a path from that house to a white pontoon and joined the boat traffic that lazily streamed along the blue-green currents to take their place for the ignition of all that sulfur, saltpeter, and charcoal. Bird song met with people song met with far away radio song met with the lapping of waves.

I was telling my friends what it was like having a tube crammed through your mucus packed nostril. The night after the doctor's visit I came to the realization that I may have some kind of cancer. I didn't feel like I had cancer, I knew that. I felt fine besides the swelling lump just under my left mandible. That was, I guess, the scary thing about having cancer. Maybe you don't feel it until it's too late. I didn't want anyone acknowledging I wasn't well, but I wanted to tell the story. Each time I told it there was an awkward bit at the end that always went something like this:

“What do the doctors think it is?” asked the hypothetical person created for this example.

“They're not really sure yet, I'm going to get a CAT scan next week,” the hypothetical version of myself would respond. A dove would land on my shoulder and St. Elmo's fire would appear around my personage.

“They can't guess?” most would say, not realizing doctors aren't really supposed to just wing it.

“Guess not,” I would respond, “but I'll tell you one thing. I'll be really pissed if I have cancer. I have things to do.”

I started panicking when I first realized I was disarming people's genuine concern. I realized I was pushing people away, and that fact was probably obvious to them, meaning it was obvious I was scared, which meant they should be too. However, after awhile I started to trick myself. There was no way I had cancer. My actions, which were probably part of some list about grief or anxiety, were just me being silly.

I was led by an older nurse to the CAT scan room. She was tall and had steel gray hair and glasses. The CAT scan room was big and so was the CAT scanner. There was a bed shaped slab of leather colder than ice covered in thin doctor's office paper. The CAT machine was a big ring with a bunch of fancy medical junk shoved in it. The bed was suspended part way into the machine. I sat on the bed and took off my shoes. The nurse took my glasses.

“Ever done this before?” she asked.

“No.”

“Okay, there are a few things I need to warn you about.”

“All right.”

“We're going to put an IV in you. It has iodine dye in it. Are you allergic to that?”

“Not that I know of.” I haven't experimented with dye based drugs since middle school, so who knew?

“The dye is going to feel warm in your veins. Once it reaches your genitals its going to feel like you're peeing your pants. You aren't, so don't freak out.”

“Of course it will,” I laughed.

“Okay, and this is most important. Don't swallow while this is going on. It could ruin the test and we won't know for a week.”

I probably never would have swallowed if she hadn't said that. My immediate thought was, “I need to practice because if I don't I will swallow, ruin the test, not know I have cancer, die of cancer, and be dead forever.” I spent the next five minutes consciously not swallowing. I laid on the bed and the nurse ran an IV of clear stuff through me.

The doctor came in with another nurse, everyone but me put on a lead lined body bib, and the dye was introduced. The large wheel started spinning around my body. It would have been fascinating to watch all the small moving parts if I hadn't been trying to prevent my body from swallowing, and by effect killing me. Forever. The dye hit my genitals. It felt like I was peeing. I didn't freak out. I was proud. The doctor told me it was important not to swallow again.

Since I was on my back, spit had started to pool in the back of my throat. Usually your body takes care of that problem by swallowing, and when it can't it sure tries. I started to squirm, and I realized I had two options;

1. Swallow, ruin the test, don't detect cancer, die forever.
2. Allow the spit to bubble out of my mouth, covering my face like a dummy.

I went with the second option, and it felt like a relief for about half a second. When the saliva bubbled over like a lackadaisical Vesuvius my body swallowed reflexively. So there I was in a room full of strangers, doing the only thing they told me not to, covered in my own spit, all the while experiencing the sensation of pissing my pants. A new personal low.

In the week I waited for my results a silent war raged between the part of me that believed I could never die, and the part that knew I would. I did my best to stay occupied. I went to work, I met up with friends to further persuade them —and myself — that everything was all right.

Dr. Park showed me a piece of paper with a lot of stuff on it, but circled were the words “NO SIGN OF CANCEROUS CELLS.” Being told you don't have cancer is one of the best things in the world. I felt something deep in my chest move and I could breathe again.

“Now, we still need to take care of your neck,” said Dr. Park.

“I know.”

“So we going to do a needle biopsy. It probably won't take care of it forever, but it might make it collapse and never swell again. Schedule to come back in January for a checkup.” Dr. Park turned to a cabinet in front of me.

“Sounds great,” I said, figuring I would need to make another appointment for the biopsy.

Dr. Park turned to face me holding a needle about six inches long.

“Now,” he said, “nobody like this. It doesn't hurt, but it doesn't feel good.”

Dr. Park told me not to swallow, and somehow it was easier this time. He stuck the needle into my neck, and started drawing out cyst juice. It pinched pretty bad. I focused on being cancer free.

“There was a lot in there!” he said holding the needle full of yellow liquid. We walked back to reception. He gave the needle to an office worker to mail it somewhere for tests. “Looks just like lemonade!” she was delighted to find out.

A few days after I had a follow up appointment with Dr. Yee for the biopsy results.

“I thought for sure you had lymphoma,” he said.

“Me too,” I said.

In January I was eating macaroni in an Applebee's with my girlfriend when I got a cramp in my chin. I massaged the muscle, and by chance my hand wandered down to my neck. Something was there that hadn't been before. A hard lump. My mind fought me. For a few days I was convinced that the cyst had originally grown on the other side of my neck, but searching through the vaguely repressed memories brought me to one conclusion. I was going to get neck surgery.

After another invasive nose probing we determined that we'd have to cut it out. The cyst was directly over a few of my important neck parts, so I would be put unconscious. Since the doctors were pretty sure the growth wasn't cancerous, I decided to focus on being afraid of waking up in the middle of my surgery instead of dying a slow death in a hospital room.

The day of my surgery a nurse hooked me up to an IV of clear mystery liquid. She said, “here's breakfast,” which made me pretty mad because I was fasting, but I found after awhile it did make me feel a little less hungry. She returned after about two hours with a cup of pills. She said they were just some things to help with the surgery. I wasn't really in a position to ask questions because I was hungry, tired, and thirsty. I can't swallow more than one pill at a time so I had to take them separately. The nurse told me to ration my water because I couldn't have more.

Finally two nurses came to take me away from my tiny blue tinted room. One of them put something new in my IV. "This will take the edge off before the surgery," she told me. I felt it work immediately. The breeze ran gentle fingers through my hair as the nurses dragged my wheeled bed through the labyrinthine halls of Barberton Summa Hospital. I felt good.

"They told you about the throat tube, right?" said the nurse behind me.

"What?"

"The throat tube?"

"No, I don't think," we rounded a corner.

"You'll be asleep for the whole thing, no worries."

I had three thoughts between that exchange and when I burst into the blue cavernous operating room. The first thought was, "wow, its a good thing I can't worry about that." The second was, "man, I should probably be concerned that I can kind of see where morphine addicts are coming from." The third thought was, "I think I need to pee."

I burst into the blue cavernous operating room. Dr. Park said hello to me. Someone circled my neck where the inert puss bag had burrowed itself just over my cardioid artery.

I woke up in recovery and realized I hadn't woken up during surgery.

I woke up in recovery. My throat was dry and sore. A nurse told me I was in recovery.

I woke up in recovery. Dr. Park was walking by. He said, "it was way bigger than we thought it was!"

I woke up in recovery. My anesthesiologist was there. She told me everything went well.

I woke up in recovery. A nurse asked me if I wanted a coke. I asked for water. I could feel something on my neck. It was a padded bandage that stretched from my left cheek to my left collar bone. It didn't hurt, but it throbbed when I pushed on it. Dr. Park told me to be careful with it and avoid getting the area wet for a week and a half.

The bandage started coming unglued the second day. By the third day it was flapping in the frigid winter wind. I kept it in place with medical tape. Since I did this myself it looked like it was done by a three year old, and the bandage slowly began to occupy more and more of my face. I was unshaven since I was unable to access the left side of my face with a razor. My house's water heater has two settings; ice cold or scalding hot, so any time spent under the bath's spigot was limited to what was necessary for standard hygiene, and as someone who takes long, leisurely showers this really harshed my mellow. My scalp was rapidly drying out due to lack of prolonged exposure to moisture.

I was at Dr. Park's office half an hour early to get my stitches out. He showed me a piece of paper that said I didn't have cancer again. It's just as good hearing that a second time. The bandage didn't hurt coming off since it wasn't really attached to my face anymore, but the stitches did. I counted fifteen before I stopped, but there were more. I had a little drain stitched into me somehow. I didn't look at it. I traded the bandage for three narrow medical strips. I could turn my head again. I had to wait another three days to shower. The pain was never bad thanks to the pills. They don't make a pill that makes you ignore a dry scalp.

Three days later I tore the medical strips from my neck. There was still black residue from the large bandage around my neck, and there would be for a long time after. When the warm water met my hair I nearly wept, but instead I laughed and laughed and laughed. I was safe. My neck would never hurt anyone ever again. Probably.

Jeff Shearl is a writer from Akron, Ohio. His story “The Doormen Diaries” appears in Belt Magazine's “Akron Anthology.” He has difficulty taking most things seriously, which inevitably leads to good story material.
