

Scars

When I was three years old I fell out of bed. I found myself on the floor with a sharp pain in my side. I woke up my parents when I crawled into their bed. My mom called an after hours doctor who checked for signs of a concussion, but there were none. In the morning I felt nauseous and we booked an appointment with our family pediatrician. He sent us to the emergency room because the pain was hard to locate. The doctors thought it might be appendicitis and ran a few rounds of tests to make sure. A computed tomography scan or CT scan revealed that it wasn't appendicitis instead, it was Wilm's Tumor in my right kidney.

I was diagnosed with stage three kidney cancer. This means that the cancer had grown into nearby tissues and was larger than it would have been in stages one or two, but hadn't yet spread into other parts of the body as it does in stage four. After the initial surgery to remove the diseased kidney, it took seven radiation treatments and six months of chemotherapy to kill off the cancerous cells still remaining in my body. At the time of my diagnosis they told us I had an eighty five percent chance of survival.

About 1 in 500 kids are diagnosed with Wilm's tumors every year. The cause of these tumors is largely unknown. They can grow extremely large and metastasize to other organs before they are detected, which makes them especially dangerous. For this reason, many don't realize that they're sick until the tumor has grown too large to be effectively treated. When I fell out of bed, the tumor ruptured, allowing symptoms of the cancer to manifest. The doctors said that this fall probably saved my life.

I'm not writing this essay to talk about how much having had cancer has shaped me as a person. I'm writing this essay to explain how much it hasn't and how much I don't want it to.

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“Oh my god, I’m so sorry!”

“That’s terrible.”

“I can’t believe you had to go through that.”

These are the kinds of responses people have when they learn about my medical history. Their words aren’t ones that I need, want or like to hear. But they come regardless. They come in the car, at recess, and on vacation. They come from friends, family and strangers. They come from a kind place. I know that. The people who say them only want to convey that they care about me and what happened. In their position, I’d want to say something else, but don’t know that I could. I mean what else is there to say?

“Well, everyone’s got their thing.”

“No way really? That’s sweet.”

“Wow. Crazy, crazy.”

These alternatives are inadequate and likely offensive to most people connected to the illness. The word “cancer” demands a certain level of shock, respect and pity. The problem is that it’s a shock, respect and pity that I’ve never wanted or felt like I deserved. It’s because of this that these alternative responses don’t bother me. I even quite like the last one. It acknowledges my experience with the illness without assuming that I’ve suffered unimaginable pain at it’s hands. My cancer, compared to others, was easy.

Three year old me might have been confused and scared, but he couldn’t appreciate the gravity of the situation. He just thought he was sick and was going to get better soon because that’s what his parents told him. He could handle all the needles and tests and radiation because that’s what he was used to. For him, going to the clinic didn’t mean he had to confront his own

mortality, like it does for most teens or adults. For him, it meant being bored for a few hours and then getting a hot dog and a toy for his troubles.

I think about the thousands of people that get diagnosed every year. I think about how aware they are. I think about how terrifying it would be to know what your cancer diagnosis means. Being such a young age, my cancer could never have been as traumatizing as theirs. I don't even remember having it. How could I possibly be deserving of the same sympathy and pity that they receive?

It's my parents who took on the real burden of my diagnosis.

Whenever people start with the *oh my gods* or the *I'm so sorrys*, I bring them up. I talk about my mom, who stayed home with me when my immune system was failing, who played with me during the months that I was too weak to move, who tells me now that she always knew I'd live when I'm sure she didn't.

I talk about my dad, whom I told recently that I'd started playing golf at school. He seemed excited and told me that he used to play a lot. I didn't understand why I never knew that. Why he had never talked about it. My dad went on to tell me that he started playing when I got sick. He'd go to the driving range and hit bucket after bucket of balls. We've played together since then. He's not very good.

Yes, I was the one who might die, but it was my parents who had to deal with that reality. It's a reality I never had to face as a child and one that I've been running from as an adult.

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I've always avoided learning more about my medical history and have done my best to forget what little I do know. I conducted a limited amount of research for this essay, consisting of a brief text conversation with my mom and a few google searches. The information contained

within that introductory paragraph is the most I've ever known about the history of my diagnosis. It's a subject that I like to think me and my parents would both be better off not talking about because it makes it easier not to. But, they've always been willing to explore that part of my life with me. I've just never let them. Afraid of the knowledge that they've lived with since that first trip to the emergency room. Afraid to hear the full extent of the fear and pain I'm sure the experience caused them. Selfishly refusing to share that fear and pain with them.

My parents ask questions:

"You really don't want to know more?"

"Do you ever feel limited by it?"

"We're here if you want to talk, okay Honey?"

I hide from them:

"No."

"I was so little. I don't just remember."

"Really, it doesn't bother me."

These answers are mostly true. After enough times hearing them, my parents know to believe me and the questions come less often. In the silence that follows, exists a world where I'm not the "survivor" that I never wanted to be. A world where cancer doesn't follow me. I hide from these questions and flinch when they're asked, because they disrupt this silence. My parents know this.

Or, at least I hope they do.

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I am scared of my cancer. It's been strange to come to terms with that fact because for most of my life I never was. I was truthfully unbothered. If anything, I felt special. I mean,

everyone kept telling me I was. It was like I was Harry Potter, “The Boy Who Lived,” people who knew about my diagnosis thought I was a miracle. All of my normal childhood achievements, riding a bike, playing sports, doing well in school were celebrated like I’d just split the atom. I felt invincible then. I used to think that my cancer made me stronger, like if I could survive that then what could possibly hurt me?

Just before my senior year of high school, I had a checkup at the clinic in the city that I used to visit every month after my treatment. During these visits the doctors would conduct screenings, making sure the cancer hadn’t come back. I go now once every four years. My doctor always asks me at the end of each visit if I have any questions for her. I always answer no and we leave. But this time, since I had recently turned eighteen, she started talking to my mom about transitioning my monitoring from the children’s hospital where it’s always been done to a different facility for adults. It was the first time the lasting impact of my diagnosis really set in. My doctors implied words echoing around the room.

“This is something you will deal with for the rest of your life.”

I want to believe that my cancer diagnosis isn’t a part of me, but it is.

I’ll always feel lucky that I was gifted with ignorance when I got sick. I’ll feel lucky that I got sick then and not now. I’ll feel lucky that I fell out of bed. But, I’ve always hid behind this luck. It’s allowed me to feel normal in the face of something that is the epitome of abnormal. It’s unavoidable that, as lucky as I like to think I was, I was also unlucky. Youth couldn’t protect me from that reality forever. My cancer hasn’t made me stronger. How could it?

I feel the scars on my body and worry about them somehow coming undone. I worry about not living as long as someone that doesn’t have my medical history. I think about my

imagined children being at risk for the same disease. I don't want to feel or think any of these things, but I do.

The words of friends, family and strangers ring in my ears:

"Oh my god, I'm so sorry!"

"That's terrible."

"I can't believe you had to go through that."

These words of comfort have always bothered me. I think they always will. I've never felt like I deserved them. I've never wanted to deserve them. And everytime I hear them, I'm reminded that I might.