



## Behind the Curtain

Time and experience have a way of complicating every cancer story.

“I just want to hang on long enough for my son to get through college. Another five years. Then I might terminate things early.”

A white curtain separated me from the gentleman in the next chemotherapy bay. He was finishing his treatment for the day. I was just settling into mine. As a newly diagnosed breast cancer patient, I was still adjusting to my new cancer routine.

The curtain was a scant veil. It provided privacy from curious eyes, but I could hear every beep and buzz of the machines that delivered his drugs and every word he spoke to his nurses. I heard the nurse walk in and turn off his infuser. I heard the wrappers rattle as she removed the needle from his port and applied the bandage to stop the last drops of blood.

“How are you feeling? Do you feel steady enough to leave?” He hesitated before he answered yes to her gentle questions. Then he continued to speak with the reflective tone of someone who doesn’t expect a response.

I heard the nurse behind the curtain pull up a stool. We listened. He said he was satisfied with his choice to pursue an experimental chemotherapy treatment. It kept him functioning and slowed his disease, he explained, when others with multiple myeloma had not fared as well or lived as long. He expressed relief that his son was off to college this year—now he could relax a little. Let go a little. His son was almost capable of supporting himself and the family.

I heard his footsteps fade down the hall as the nurses prepared the room for the next patient. “He was much more talkative today. He seemed better, more engaged.” They knew him well.

I settled back into the hospital chair, left with my thoughts and the mechanical grinds and beeps of the machine that pumped drugs into the port imbedded in my chest—drugs I hoped would keep my cancer from returning and save my life. Until that day in chemotherapy, it had never occurred to me that my treatment might fail. Or that the treatment itself could exact such a devastating toll in return for extending life.

As a newcomer to this cancer world, I was determined to learn as much as possible about my disease. To pick the best treatments and the best hospitals. To stay strong and healthy and finish my treatments at full strength, on time, so they would be most effective. I focused on making sure my treatment would have the best chance of curing my disease the first time. I planned to leave this cancer world forever as soon as I was released. I never wanted to sit in that chemotherapy chair again.

The man behind the curtain was a veteran of the cancer world. He probably started his first treatments just like me, determined to control this disease and control his life. But along the way his disease trumped the best treatment. And in the course of his years living in a world where life becomes uncertain, he evolved from the hopeful cancer newcomer to the realistic veteran.

In the four years since my active treatment ended, I still think back on this man. Today I am more humble about my ability to control an uncontrollable disease. Waiting for the next scan, dealing with the side effects of treatment, watching friends face their cancer—and watching some die—have changed me.

Today, I recognize many of the strengths in myself I heard through the curtain that day. Somehow I, too, have slowly evolved from a newcomer to this cancer world to a veteran. ▼

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