

ENCOUNTERS

The pink room

It starts with me sitting in this little pink room and him telling me I have inflammatory breast cancer, and he can't look at me. Then the nurse is grabbing my arm at the elevator, and I plead with her to let go, and she lets go, and I go home, and I fall apart, and I make phone calls in between gasping for air ...

On Oct. 26, 2010, my life changed and I entered into what life is like for a patient with cancer, something I was familiar with from a distance — distant in that I knew nothing about it.

Cancer is silent while it grows, feeds off you, then it hits hard physically and emotionally, strips you down to nothing, taking pieces along the way, forcing you to stand up, only to be knocked down again. Cancer is silent, but it packs a punch.

My life went into fast forward with blood work, biopsy, lung x-ray, CT scan, MRI, PICC line insertion, blood clots, chemotherapy, emergency surgery, physiotherapy, more chemotherapy; I am no longer distanced from life as a patient with cancer.

I feel like it's been so long since I've had a good day. I'm lying in the bath hoping the water will provide relief to my aching body, my head against the cold tile a reminder that I need to stay awake, which is ironic because I can't sleep. I remove the plug with my big toe, not moving as the water drains; I envision all the pain and disease swirling away, and I feel numb. I think about the person who said "this is your NEW body, and you need to learn how to live with that." There are so many things throughout "cancer world" that I need to learn to live with. I KNOW I have to learn to live with this, I just need some time. Everything is happening so fast, yet time goes in slow motion; I'm lying in an empty tub and there's a pool of water that's collected in my collarbone from tears.

I have cancer, I have lost parts of myself, yet I'm still me, and I still have



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a sense of humour, and I still like to laugh and talk about current events.

I have two oncologists, one is British and humorous, the other is calm and Zen-like; they complement each other in a unique way. They treat me like "Caloren," not as a number, not as a cancer patient, but as a person; they speak to me and not just to the disease. I wish I'd come across more people like them in the system. It's hard to know if the decisions I make are the right ones. I feel with my oncologists I have the best shot; they know how far I can push myself, and when I need to say when. It's very difficult to let go of being in control of my body, but I have to in order to get through this, and I'm struggling with that. I have to put aside my fear when my nails turn brown and threaten to fall off, when my hands, feet and face go numb, when my hair, eyebrows and lashes fall out, when my stomach does flip flops and my tongue turns white. When people listen, it makes life just that much easier; when people listen, you feel like your life matters to more than just you, and it makes letting go that much easier.

I've never been able to wrap my brain around the concept of dying, of leaving this world; the thought of death puzzled and scared me all at the same time. After Oct. 26, 2010, that changed. Death

became real, and peacefulness took over from fear; as well, I gained a new level of happiness that was clouded before by useless information, and for that change I am grateful. I've started living my life in a way I hadn't before. I enjoy life as it happens without thinking of the past or future; I am truly in the present moment. This is living. I'm no longer afraid of dying; I just don't want to leave.

Although I feel I have windburn from life, my feet scarred from the journey, all I want to do is dance; I have three secret wishes I look forward to, and I dance in anticipation of them coming true.

This life started with me sitting in that little pink room, and I believe it will end under similar circumstances, in a little pink room where they'll be looking me in the eye. Someone will touch my arm in support — but this time, I won't be pleading with her to let go. I go home, and I fall apart, and I make phone calls in between gasping for air as I tell my friends and family I have my life back.

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This article is based on writings in the author's blog (<http://mymoonstonejourney.blogspot.com/>).

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