

Invisibility

Category: Cancer

written by Deborah Levin | June 1, 2021

The glass doors yawn open, first one set, then the other. They don't see me; they don't hear me. They just sense me—automatically, electronically, a body approaching. It doesn't matter my size, shape, or color. The doors don't know whether I'm walking slowly or quickly; they don't care whether I'm smiling or crying. They just blindly do their job, usher me in (and later out) of the building. Another patient, another day.

Three women sit at the reception desk. More glass separates the sick from the well. Masks make everyone look like no one. A hand reaches out to grab my parking ticket and stamp it. Cancer is the price you pay for free parking.

I feel invisible as I am buzzed into the inner sanctum of the radiation therapy suite. Like a horse with blinders, I march straight ahead. I pay no attention to the blur of color and motion in the aquarium strategically placed to project a sense of tranquility in an otherwise untranquil world. I pass the nursing station, where no friendly voice calls out to greet me. I continue on toward the women's changing room. It's been just two days (with eighteen more to go), but I know the drill. A pile of white, waffle-weave robes sits alongside a stack of standard hospital-issue faded blue gowns. No one chooses those, of course; everyone wants to forget they're in a medical setting, including me. Why not go for the spa look and feel? I undress from the waist up and slip into a robe, which makes me feel more rather than less exposed, as I tie it tightly around my petite frame. Stuffing my clothes and bag into a small locker, I grab the key and shuffle back out to the atrium waiting area.

It is a lonely place: eight stark white pillars, a glass skylight high above. Designed to calm and soothe, like a relaxing, luxurious resort, the space is filled with potted plants, sculptures, and plump-cushioned armchairs. A piano adds the effect of a hotel lobby waiting to be filled with happy, healthy people. But I am neither fooled nor comforted. It has the opposite effect on me: it swallows me whole, diminishes me, makes me feel like nothing more than the host of diseased, dysfunctional, destructive cells in need of radioactive beams to kill them. I will never be comfortable with this.

Out of nowhere, I hear my name called; a technician suddenly appears behind me. It's my turn to be positioned, tugged into place, zapped painlessly—save for the psychological and emotional suffering inflicted on a cancer patient. I lie on the hard, narrow table, sliding back and forth under the million-dollar machine whose purpose is to save my life.

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