

# The Waiting Room

by Lisa Pawlak

While I am sitting in the oncology waiting room, I often wonder what I am doing here. I pass the time by flipping through magazines, browsing the web on my smartphone, and sending text messages to my husband. Often, I complain that I am still waiting.

I glance around the room at the others. Today, an elderly couple stands by the registration desk. The frail-looking woman leans on her bony husband who, in turn, is leaning on a wooden cane. I wonder which one is the patient. Another older lady in a wheelchair, afghan tucked around her lap, is nodding off as her daughter fusses over her, stroking her hand and

myself – I am much too young, I look way too healthy, and I am far too stubborn for it to ever come back.

Although I don't doubt that my husband, or a friend, would come with me if I asked, I have always preferred to go to the oncologist alone. I don't want anyone to see me here, because that would make everything more real. Although I go in regularly for my recommended check-ups, lab work, and various scans, I generally like to pretend that I am not a cancer patient. I just don't think of myself that way.

I certainly don't want anyone else to think of me that way, either.

What am I waiting for, anyway? To talk to my doctor, to have him listen

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smoothing her hair. A middle-aged woman, with a scarf wrapped around her hairless head and her missing eyebrows meticulously penciled in, sits across from me reading a novel. She deftly avoids eye contact, though probably senses me staring.

The minutes slowly tick by.

I wonder who is newly diagnosed. And who is in remission. I wonder if any of them are about to discover a recurrence. Or if anyone is dying. I wonder what type of cancer they all have.

I wonder if any of them are wondering why I am here, since – I assure

to my lungs, to go over my latest test results? Am I waiting for the day when he tells me there is another "something" to monitor? To biopsy? To surgically remove? To attack with chemotherapy? To radiate? And, if that day comes, will I freeze up in shock? Will I burst out in tears? Will I run screaming out the door? Or will I simply sit there, calmly, and discuss my options with him?

What a crazy thing to sit around and wait for. So I wonder, again, what I am doing here, here in this waiting room. I don't belong here; I am sure of that. Yet despite the conviction that I have been misplaced, that I am not actually

a cancer patient, and that none of this could have actually happened to me, there is no denying it when the cheerful nurse pops her head out and loudly calls my name.

"Yes, I'm right here," I say. And this is true.

Suddenly, intensely, I am filled with hope. I hope that I am still waiting here when I am a frail old lady, leaning on my husband – and maybe even on his cane – for support. I hope that one or both of my kids will fuss over me, stroking my hand and smoothing my hair. I even hope, if I should ever have a hairless head and missing eyebrows, that I will quietly allow someone to openly stare at these battle scars, recognizing



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that they are a source of pride and survivorship.

We are survivors here, in the waiting room. We have scars, some visible and some hidden, but we are all still here – sitting, standing, reading, texting, staring, complaining, wondering, waiting, living.

I put my magazine down, and my phone away. I breathe in deeply and slowly – because, stubborn as I am, I don't actually know what is coming my way.

I follow the nurse through the door. I hope that I will feel just as out of place during future visits to the oncologist. I hope that my primary complaint to my doctor continues to be about the waiting.

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