

Courtney Cox

The Game

With my eyes covered, I was amazed by all that I could hear. The mechanical ticks of the machine summoned me, filling me with a sense of dread to a magnitude I had never before experienced. I began to shake and then remembered that I must stay completely still, like a board, rigid and lifeless. Whether it was just my overactive imagination, or my hearing heightened by adrenaline, the whispers of the MRI technicians echoed through my mind so loud they broke my concentration and shattered my inner peace.

“It’s sad to see them this young...isn’t it?”

“Yeah...but cancer doesn’t care about age.”

Instantly, the shaking began, a sensation I had become accustomed to, an involuntary response I’d been feeling for weeks. I could remember the first day I felt this fear. Back then, it was because I had no idea what was consuming my body, and the empty questions haunted me with answers that surpassed even my darkest fears. Today, it plagued me because I was just as sure of my diagnosis as they were. Here I lay, 17 years old, with death impending as quickly as the small opening of the MRI which was now closing around me.

I sensed the environment around me, seeing with internal, subconscious eyes. The details of my perception surprised me, as though my eyeballs had left my body, fleeing from behind my clenched eyelids. The MRI machine was constructed of off-white panels, as sterile and harmless as the open-backed gown I had slipped into minutes before. I hoped to keep my dignity as I walked down the hall, stepping farther from my family each second as I struggled to keep the gown around my body. They watched me through the glass windows of the waiting room, their little girl vulnerable and alone, walking straight into the capable hands of strangers who saw me as a number, a case study, medical experience. They watched me, with my wrists so thin the hospital bracelet could scarcely stay on. They watched me, with my spine exposed through the back opening of the gown, able to count each vertebra through the skin stretched too tight.

When I reached the door at the end of the corridor, I uttered my name to the awaiting nurse, and was led down hallway after hallway. My stocking feet made a slight patter on the tile, alongside the louder smack of her white tennis shoes. At first, she attempted conversation, but after sensing my introversion, she gave up. What could be said to a defenseless girl about to meet her fate? A name would be put on the wicked parasite inside of me, the monster that had taken my body and was inching quickly to take the rest of me.

Minutes passed, and I lost my way in the infinite maze of halls. This walk seemed intentional, a ploy to make me lose my way so that I had absolutely no option of escape. Within the endless walls and doorways, my family seemed miles away. Finally, we reached a door which the nurse opened, holding it for me like a forced gesture of welcome. One of the technicians pulled me onto the gurney positioned at the head of the MRI, and I was suddenly struck by the notion that I'm about to be entombed in the ground. I looked around, soaking up the insignificance of what could be my final glance. The room in front of me was small, with only enough room for the three medical technicians. I didn't have time or energy to notice or care about these individuals, and when I saw the woman step forward to cover my eyes with a cloth, my world went black. I entered into the chamber.

The gurney moved forward slowly, like a roller coaster making its ascent. I braced with anticipation for the drop...it never came. Nothingness surrounded me in the stillness of the chamber. I felt aware, yet disconnected. The outside world felt thousands of feet away. I felt so exposed here in this empty chamber, as if thousands of tiny cameras were peering at my insides. These were places I myself had never even seen, but for the next hour I would be pinned here, letting unfamiliar eyes creep into this shell of myself. Lying here I was like a specimen on a slide with the microscope on high-power examining me.

Everything here feels so sterile, so uncaring, so uniform. Where else could someone look the face of cancer in the eye and be so calm? This was my life and they couldn't even look upon this with the slightest morsel of sympathy or sadness. Life in the hospital was fueled by sickness and death, and the strange paradox of it all made me sick to my stomach. Inside me I felt my breakfast shift, and wondered if the doctors on the other side of the wall

saw my blueberries and crème oatmeal swish in my guts. I knew I shouldn't have eaten breakfast...with all the meals I've skipped lately; this one wouldn't have made a difference.

I hadn't always been this way. This apathy was a new sensation, and giving up seemed like the only option. Before my sickness, I'd had motivation and purpose. I felt like I had no control over anything, so that meant no reason to try. Every once in a while I allow myself to remember the last day I felt whole. Ignorance truly was bliss when I stepped into the X-ray machine after a routine yearly physical. Everything was entirely unremarkable until several days later, after the scans were developed and analyzed. I was home for a snow day when the phone rang, waking me from an extended winter nap. This ring was exactly like all the others I've heard before, but for some reason, I knew that this was different. Sure enough, my mother came in several minutes later, struggling to compose herself, telling me that they'd found what looked like a tumor and I'd have a doctor's appointment in two weeks. A tumor...and I was still put on the waiting list.

Tired of being alone with my thoughts, I opened my eyes, searching for some kind of distraction. My heavy eyelids parted and I felt the washcloth sliding off the side of my eyes, revealing the ceiling of the MRI which I felt was closing in upon me. Stillness. Nothing. Just as I began to become accustomed to the silence, my descent into hell began. The machine began to turn on, bringing with it the beating of machine guns, so loud it was as though I was the target in the middle of a warzone. The world around me could be incinerated in some post-apocalyptic blaze and I would still be here, protected by the machine I felt would destroy me.

"Hello? Please, I need to get out of here!"

Maybe the machine is too loud, or maybe I'm just too quiet. I try again, screaming louder this time. At last, this is it. Insanity....I was doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. I tried once more,

"Please! I can't do this! Let me out!"

I breathed in deep from my lungs, trying to expel my air out strong enough for someone, anyone, to come and save me. As I opened my mouth, I heard laughter coming from deep inside my memories.

Last summer. I was at the park with my best friend, Heather. We were

playing the game, our game. The sky was overcast, but we hardly stopped to notice, as we ran from tree to tree screaming the name of my latest crush, trying to outdo each other. Heather and I never considered that Collin could actually be in the park; we just yelled, throwing our heads back and straining our throats until we forgot about the world. “Collin!” Heather yelled from a few trees over. “Collin!!!” I screamed trying to outdo her. “COLLINNN!!!” We burst out laughing, like children making mischief. Heather never let me win this game. For us, this was our way of speaking out, letting our voices be heard. This disruption always made me feel important, somehow. Heather had this way about her that even in the most immature moments I always felt as though I mattered. Even alone in this closed chamber, this good memory made me smile. It didn’t matter that things have never been the same with Heather since I told her I was sick. It didn’t matter that my voice was weak, cracked and quiet. It didn’t matter that I was in the middle of a hospital, hidden within millions of dollars of machinery. I was going to win this game today. My chest tightened as I felt the walls closing in around me. I reached deep inside myself for my last shred of humanity and screamed, “Let me out!”

I heard the MRI stop, and within a few seconds, I was sliding out head first. Although it might not mean much, for this moment I was in control.

Today, I won the game.