

health

AN APPOINTMENT WITH DESTINY

The scariest thing in the world is to be told you have the 'Big C.' But the doctor didn't say that.

by John Stark | Tuesday, February 10, 2015

The message light was blinking on my landline when I got home on Friday night. I almost deleted it, assuming it was going to be from a solicitor. Anyone who knows me calls my cell.

“We got your test results back today,” I heard a man’s voice say.

It was from my urologist.

I had almost forgotten that I’d had a biopsy a few weeks before, what with work being so crazy. I sell real estate in Boston, and it was the height of the spring market. Besides, the procedure wasn’t anything I wanted to remember. Call me a wimp but I hate hospitals, needles and knives.

“You need to make an appointment with my office to discuss treatment options,” I heard the doctor say. “Make it for the 29th. That’s the day I get back from vacation. I’ll be out of the country for two weeks.”

With that, the message was over. I played it again, and again.

Treatment options? What did he mean? Did my transrectal biopsy results show I have prostate cancer? The scariest thing in the world is to be told you have the “Big C.” But the doctor didn’t say that. I’d have been admitted to the hospital if something were truly wrong. And besides, what doctor would be so insensitive as to leave a phone message saying you have a potentially terminal illness, then head to the airport?

I called several close friends that night to ask their interpretation of the phone message. They agreed with me. “Treatment options” could mean anything. I decided to put it out of my mind for now. No use overreacting.

I was at work the next day when my good friend Karie made a surprise visit. She was with her boyfriend Keith, who’s a PhD cancer researcher at Harvard Medical School. They asked me to join them for coffee at a bistro across the street.

Although brilliant, Keith isn’t exactly known for his tact. He talks super loud, and has a Boston accent that requires subtitles. He’s bald and dresses like a Hell’s Angel. Looks-wise, you’d never guess his profession.



"Hey, you'll get a handle on it, I told Keith, after we were seated at a table in the packed canteen. Knowing Keith's cynical nature, I figured he'd find the urologist's message pretty funny in a black-humored way. But Keith wasn't laughing when I got to the punch line of my story.

Karie has always complained that Keith is incapable of censoring himself. He just blurts out his thoughts, often offending people, even though he doesn't mean to. This time he topped himself.

"*You got cancah!*" he loudly exclaimed. Heads turned all around us.

What I thought was going to be a funny little story that would have us all laughing had turned dark and ugly. I didn't know whether to bolt or crawl under the table. I felt as if I had just been thrown into the deep end of a pool, and couldn't find the ladder. I didn't know what to say.

Karie said it for me. "How can you say that?" she asked Keith. "You don't know!"

"I do know," he replied. "'Treatment' means cancah."

Keith's face was turning red with anger. "This really pisses me off," he said. "This doctor drops a bomb in your lap then goes on vacation. While you're left hanging, he's on some tropical beach getting a blowjob."

The two moms sitting at the table next to us scooped up their tots and moved away.

Two weeks later, I was in the urologist's office.

I went there with the hope that Keith was wrong. But he wasn't. The urologist confirmed his public diagnosis, only in gentle, hushed tones.

He even apologized to me. "I'm sorry for leaving you that message. I was running out of my office, late for a plane. I get two weeks of vacation a year. I spend that time with other doctors doing volunteer work in Sierra Leone. People line up for days to see us."

"It's OK," I said, "You're a good man." I meant it.

He asked me to sit next to him at his computer as he showed me the slides of my cancer cells. Then he put his hand on my arm. "People act differently when they're told they have cancer. Tell me how you're doing."

"Pretty good," I said. I was past the shock factor. Keith provided that for me. I was just hoping my cancer wasn't too serious.

The doctor told me that I didn't need surgery, and may never: "A few years ago we would have operated. Not anymore." Seventy percent of men over 70 have prostate cancer," he explained. "We're learning more and more about it. It's very slow-growing, and may never cause any problems. Be glad you didn't get it when you were in your 40s." I'm in my mid-60s.

Over the next few weeks I confided my condition to selected friends. I thought they'd be horrified and insist on taking me to dinner. But no one seemed shocked or even phased. Their reactions were surprisingly blasé. They all had friends or relatives who were living with it. "My father just had surgery," a neighbor told me. "He was up and about in a few days."

"No big deal" was the man on the street diagnosis.

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But if prostate cancer is no big deal, why am I always reading obituaries of men my age who've died of the disease? Did they have it since they were young? Did they get diagnosed and ignore it? Were they just unlucky?

My urologist wants me to have a yearly transrectal biopsy to see if the cancer has become aggressive. The time is approaching, and I can't decide what to do. Why put myself through the unpleasant, painful procedure? Even if the cancer has grown, it doesn't mean it's going to kill me. Or does it?

Most old men have prostate cancer when they die, I've been told, even if they were never diagnosed. No big deal, right?

I haven't always made the wisest choices in life. But I've always hung in there, even if it meant going back to college at age 60 to get a master's degree so I could teach. And when that gig ended, I got a real estate license. I don't think I was put on earth to sell houses, like some of my younger colleagues. But I'd like to keep at it.

Better book the appointment.

2 COMMENTS



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Jus Lisa

Please get checked, being left to wonder "what if he'd known sooner" is lonely and for most, an unnecessary place to be. RIP R.H.- my 66 yr old friend buried 2/11/15 left a wife, son, 2 beautiful grandghtrs. Everyone whose life he touched now lives wondering 'what if'.

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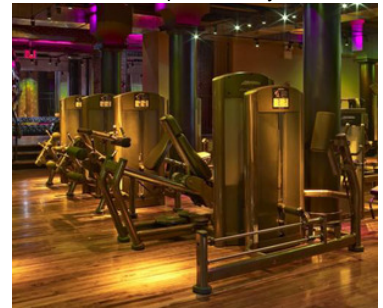
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