

A neurodivergent guide to your radiation treatment

The radiation simulation session is where they map out how they will deliver your individualized treatment. They're also going to map you – and no one told you that. You'll close your eyes because the ceiling has bright lights; you'll feel ballpoint pens sliding across your body, writing on you...then, measuring tape, which is cold and metal, then other sticky tape that rolls on in different places and you wonder what it looks like but keep your eyes closed. The light is bright and you have to stay still because they're going to teach you how to breath during radiation. It's a tube, like a snorkel which they stick in your mouth. You are to take a deep breath until the tube kind of makes your throat kind of, stop? There's no more air going in then. And you just hold your breath until they say breathe normally.

You're there for practice. So the next time you come in, for the real thing, it's not really the first time. This is good because now you can get used to the sound--a rolling mechanical whirr, to the taste, like silicone but it's not too bad, to the smell, of cold, of alcohol prep pads ...and the conversation, because they're going to be talking about you as a body. Most of what they say is a code you can't decipher, about your ISO numbers, about measurements. You'll hear some words you know like *scapula*, then their talk shifts into something that sounds like Latin Mass, or incantations of a familial language you never knew. Keep your eyes closed and dream. You've done this before and you will remember how.

After that, they roll you out of the machine to make tiny tattoos on you where they will be pointing the heat, the heat is what they call it, and the tattoos are really ok, it just takes a second, like a pin prick...not like the needle biopsy.

The needle biopsy is a terrible memory if no one told you how bad that would be. Probably the worst thing in all of this. It happens right after the horrible news, when you're still trying to process that. At the needle biopsy they keep the room strangely dark and it hurts way more than anyone told you it would. And you didn't know this either, but that's the moment when you say goodbye to the body that was whole and simple and just a part of you, before the needle biopsy.

By the time you've gotten to radiation, you've been through a lot, with biopsies, surgeries, chemo and appointments. You know now to have a plan for these appointments...what to do if you get bad news. Have someone with you, always, for any news. Know when that might be coming. And know, too, where you're going. It's a big hospital and there are a lot of different elevators...you might be very tired and also alone now, because of the Covid restrictions. Map your route to include the cafeteria with the quiet table by the window, and the chapel with its stained glass and tiny red candles...even though that wasn't in the cancer plan they gave you.

At least once along the way, you will meet someone who is more lost than you are. This is where you'll stop, clear your head and calm them. You know, expertly, how to do this. You will listen and say just the right thing. You'll give them the full directions that they understand. You

will bring them the quiet they needed.

Between different treatments, you get time to rest but you won't want to. You'll want to feel alive and like yourself again. This day, this simulation, is the last day of a normal-feeling break. Tomorrow you'll be back at the hospital for your first radiation. They do everything on time there. They will call you in on time and it will be predictably like the simulation. There's no gray area in radiation, no crossover, there can't be...a course has been mapped and everyone sticks with the plan. You do what you need to do. While you're doing that, they're doing what they need to do. And all of this can save your life.

On the first day after your radiation, walk home. You'll want to feel closer to life--and walking helps. If you see an ice rink at City Hall that's miraculously open, be impulsive and go get some skates. Don't worry if it's been a while: your body will remember. You will glide through every tremor, every odd bit of snow beneath you, past crowded shoulders, through the buzz of the neon sign: Skating and the rumble of the food trucks lining the street. As you skate, you might briefly wonder what would happen if you fall and break your scapula: *would they have to stop treatment?* Then the City will turn on the Christmas lights because it's sunset and you'll pull your jacket open to feel the cool air --skating, around and around the rink in a perfect, infinite loop.