

I have been told that I will likely experience a number of alarming side effects. Radiation and chemotherapy will wipe out my red and white blood cells to dangerous levels, leaving me susceptible to infections, moulds and severe fatigue. The radiation may lead to severely burned skin. My doctors have told me to expect burning of my vulva, anus, bowel, vaginal canal and bladder. This cannot be avoided as I am being irradiated right through the pelvis.

If I survive the cancer, I may end up with permanent scarring of my bowel and anus resulting in diarrhea and incontinence. My vulva and vaginal canal will likely shrink and be scarred making intercourse painful in the future. My bladder may be damaged and require, like the vagina, dilators to stretch out badly scarred tissue, and stents to hold open vessels and canals that have collapsed.

I asked my oncologist what would happen if I decided not to have this painful treatment. They told me this was not an option. They described that death by this type of disease is ugly. It is not a way anyone would want to die. It would take time and I would die in agony, regardless of pain medication and therapies that currently exist. They described how my legs would swell to gross proportion as the poisons and toxins built up in my system. And the tumour would continue to grow to explosive proportions blocking off the bowel which will begin to twist and contort under pressure. I would ooze putrescence and mucous, blood and fecal matter out of every orifice. No amount of drugs they assured me would deal with the "break through" pain.

I decided that I would undergo the treatments to try to avoid an awful death, and also because my daughter is just starting university in the fall, and I wanted to make sure that she could take her first steps into adulthood unencumbered by that nightmare. Even if I were to only get another year, I want that time.

Of course, there is the possibility that even despite all my best attempts to beat this disease, I might not be one of the lucky ones. The normal course of incurable anal cancer is that the tumour in the rectal area infects local nodes, which go on to involve the lymphatic system. These nodes enter the bloodstream and are quickly spread to the adrenal glands, then to the liver and lungs, and then if you survive long enough, into the brain. It was easy for me to deduce that if I am not lucky this first time around, I have months, maybe years of medical torture and agony to face before hitting the end of this vicious disease. Now if you were to take my place in this story, can you understand why I might want to skip the last chapter?