

The Mask



by

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Dedication:

To Dana King, my wife and best friend. Through the anti-cancer smoothies, the vegan diet, the aerobics, and all of the medical trips we turned into dates. We will beat this together.

To Claire and Willow, my daughters. May you one day understand that the time spent archiving my life was for you. May your genes be blessed. May your diet prevent all disease.

Acknowledgements

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I cannot be thankful enough for the caring, methodical, patient mind of the Dr. Kurt A. Jaeckle, who holds immeasurable knowledge of cutting edge research; and for Dr. Kent New, who took on my surgery when no one else would. They have literally saved my life.

My Cancer Story



I have a grade II Oligodendroglioma, which is often called a mixed glioma. It was found, incidentally, in 2004 with a random CT Scan. It is located in my right parietal lobe, the area that controls my left leg and arm. Due to its location and size, doctors decided to treat it with a hurry up and wait procedure for several years. Basically, if it wasn't growing, they weren't going to touch it.

New growth was noticed in 2008. At first I could not find anyone to perform the surgery. All surgeons claimed that it was too risky. Since then, I have had two brain surgeries. One in 12-2008 and another in 1-2009. Feeling was lost in my left side, which is my dominant side. After surgery, I was treated with one year of Temodar, oral chemo, in 2010.

Unfortunately, I had a recurrence on 3-2012. After the recurrence, I had 33 doses of brain radiation at Mayo Clinic Jacksonville from June through August 2012. The radiation was also treated in parallel with 44 daily treatments of Temodar.

Today, 2-23-2013, I finished a one week per month Temodar regimen with bi-monthly MRIs. My prognosis is good. A recurrence is not expected for many years. If anyone would like to discuss brain tumors and possible

treatments, please feel free to contact me at byronking@gmail.com. We all become neuro-nerds through our treatment. I will do what I can.

I put this collection together for several reasons. I wanted to document the treatment process for my friends and family; to have a record of the details of my experience for my own reflection, and to share with and support others who are going through treatment; to put a book out there that is about the truth of cancer treatment, not painting it with a broad smiley face brush, but showing it as it can be. Difficult. Hard. Tragic. Through being true to myself and sharing as honestly as possible, I hope to help others find perspective and to help turn their hours in doctors' waiting rooms into imagined days at the beach. We all do what we can.



The Mask





The Trigger

I sit here looking at the barrel of my gun.
It is the loaded, same commercial rerun.
Looping, NOW, only for a limited time.
Two shotgun shells genetically loaded.

So many pellets they can disperse.
Blending into healthy tissue.
Turning the good into the worst.
Inserting stress, not easily withstood.

Both shells are lodged inside my head.
Which direction will they decide to take?
How much time will they make?
Will I be crippled or lose my take?

As order grows out of chaos.
As new cells decide they need more.
As cells decide to grow for,
they are that part of me
Which never had enough.
Growing wild and free.
Fed inadvertently,
Digesting the toxins that have infested me.

I sat in front of the T.V.
I labored in front of computer screens.
I ate and drank what I did not need.
I slowly pulled the trigger inside of me.



Writing Through The Storm

In the height of battle a samurai should be able to compose a poem.

Mindfulness. Focused observation.
Words forming images, forming a new vision.

I am no samurai. I am no warrior.

Strong storms have a way of making even gray days seem nice.

As the water puddles have collected and the birds begin to come out.
Speak out. I am here.

The sun should come out again soon.

My stomach is not strong enough, now.

It is only nerves they say, but I don't want to feel this way.

I want to be that samurai. I want to write through the war.
Writing through the Storm.

Know what each drop of blood was spilled for.

As the rain drops fall.
Bombs bursting and all.



Unrestrained

I am that part of you that grows without restraint
Dividing inside your skull,
Growing as I pull matter together and apart.

I don't know your name.
I don't know your words.
I don't define me.

Like the air
I blow sublime.
I am a tumor.

I am cancer.
A word with so many connotations.
Having killed so many people.

So many affected nations.
So many have lain helpless in my path.
I grow because I will it.

Not because of what you ate
or what you did out of spite or hate.
I grow because I can.

I am what you wanted to be.
Your dreams of the future wild and free.
I am pressure.

The time you think of that is not here.
I am present.
I am all the anxiety you have stored up over me.

Combustible.
You can cut me out but I will grow back.
You can poison me but I will continue to attack.

Your world likes to try and cure me.
I am your blood. I am your heart. I am your brain.
I am all cells free to grow unrestrained.



Harder To Hear

I am to speak to you
So you might know where you are
Who you were
Where you are going.
I am to help you cross over.
Be it a path or your next stage,
I am the bard of this family's age.

Appointed by happenstance
As if I stepped in it,
A piece of gum on my shoe.
I cannot shake it without you
For we do this together.
This dance.

This going the distance,
We waver in our situations
Flicker in our consciousness.
Over and over and over.

We followed our orders.
We played the cards we were dealt.
Where we were to end up no one knew.
We sit here, now, me and you.
A child, a man, all passing through.

Tethered to the ground by body
A light within seeks peace.
A space to live and be
where there is no fear of recourse.

No anxiety of the wars we export
from one generation to another.

We are war.

We are peace.

We are all the paradox we teach.

We come into this world as we go.

A juxtaposition of the world we tried to know.

This miracle.

This breath.

This chance to sit and speak.

To look into each other's eyes and repeat.

The three words we often hide and seek.

"I love you."

Maybe even harder to hear.

Speak love and live it.

For that is all there is to preach.

For there is only now at last.

Seconds strung together from

infinite pasts, streaming

into the present.

Reaching for the future.

Passing through the hourglass.



Once Fallen

Hair wraps our bodies.
Covers it like cheap makeup.
Distorting our frailty.
An evolutionary step
not needed.

For we are stronger.
More agile,
More adaptable.

Once fallen
the distortion is clearly seen.
The fur body cleansed.
The flesh body uncovered.
No cap on balding head.
Even if expected, cheeks go red.
Human weakness reminds
one of the dead.

With hair falling out
What frequency sings this song?
What else is going wrong?
What chemistry exists
As cell apoptosis resists?

Looking into the mirror I see
What is looking back at me.
No longer a mystery.
Treatment is working.
For each hair lost at a time

May a thousand tumor cells die.
May room be made for life.
May my balding be a warning.
An earned branding
To cause fear in the heart of darkness.



Take a Number

I stand in this line waiting
For my name to be called.
To be approved.
To be poisoned.
To be irradiated.
For cells to be killed.
The ones that grow too quickly.
The ones who grow confused.

Where am I?
Why do I grow here?
Why do I not fit in here?

I need more room
To grow your tomb.
Please kill that part of me.
The cells that want too much from me.
The cells that risk taking life.

Not ALL of me.
Let the healthy ones be.
But please. Please. Please.

No more waiting.
No more calling.
No more faxing.
No more consulting.

This is me, at the beginning
Of a major voyage.

About to pick up everything.

To place my life in the hands of science.

In the hands of specialists.

In the minds of genius.

Who practice life extension.

Doing all they can.

So that I might live.

So that I might one day be free.



Geronimo

They can take your body.
Enslave it.
Make it work for others
So you might have food and water.
Make you a slave to your flesh.
They can make you do all of this
Through false promises.
Through fear many succumb.

But they can never take your spirit from
The world from which it comes.
For your spirit
Feeds on passion,
Feeds on conviction.
Needs no space
to show its perfect face.

IT IS A GOOD DAY TO DIE...
an Apache warrior cries.
Thrusting his spirit before body.
Thrusting his lance into enemy.
Running seventy miles a day.
Never knowing which friends will betray.
Legs are the only friends that obey.
To keep on fighting slavery.
To keep alive the raids
From Mexican and Anglo pay.
Stripped from lands of their ancestry.

IT IS A GOOD DAY TO DIE...
To work towards inner peace.
To know no mortgage or lease.
To live on the sacred ground we seek.
Taken from us through deception.
Treaties broken and bounties given
For new bodies to work the mines.
From gold to coal.
From databases to mold.
For the Internet we now toll.
Sedentary legs grow weak and old.
I sit here generations later
In the battle for my soul.



The Mask

The mask is put on wet
like a warm wash cloth.
Slowly it is pulled skintight, downward.
Your teeth grip a mouthpiece
so there is no breathing
but through covered nostrils.

No eye holes.
No mouth hole.
No nose hole.
No movement at all.
No chance of freeing oneself.
Strapped down to a table.
No defense possible.
You are at the mercy of technicians.
People you have never met.
This makes you feel helpless.
This makes you feel introspective.

Energy is measured and focused.
A specific part of the brain the main locus.
To project all the hopes of your world.
All the dreams of a family.
All the possibilities of a lifetime.
The technician announces it is over.
The mask is removed.
You are told it is alright to move.
The mask has been marked
for the area the radiation will embark.

Shotgunned through bone and tissue.
The nurse tells you that
Ions will cook off mutating cells.
Leaving the healthy ones to slowly repair.
Warning you your brain might swell.

Warning you fatigue will set in.
All of this is finely calculated and planned.
You remember that it has only begun.
As you put your faith in Western medicine.
So that you might weather future storms to come.



To Define

I define you
So I can speak to you
So that your name holds no power.

What are you?
Are you the individual or the culture?
Are you inside me or everywhere?

Where do you begin and end?
I see your photos.
I know your pathology.

I consume you in my food and water.
I see you in the mirror.
In our hospitals.

You are sickness.
You are greed.
Always taking more than you need.

You are my enemy.
A cellular IED waiting to explode.
A bioterrorist pushing me to implode.

You kill by living.
When you are well others are sick.
When you grow strong others shrivel.

Your name brings fear.
You are always needing to be cut out.
To be starved.

Poisons are taken.
Surgeries are gotten.
Technology invented and forgotten.

Many now beat you and survive.
But, you often return stronger.
We evolve so that we might live longer.

How much of me do you need?
How much space must I concede?
For without me, you are nothing.

The Sensitive

Lights, camera, action.
 Brain drain, the stimulus must refrain
 From glaring and snapping and moving quickly at me.
 I hear a boy dropping his plastic water bottle
 Over and over for giggles.
 I hear men speaking over me of their second homes.
 Maybe bragging, maybe informing one on
 How far out of the city is a good commute?
 And the lights are glaring, piercing, unsettling.

Standing in Walgreens to buy constipation
 Medicine I ask for assistance.
 Too many colors, too many choices.

A week into treatment.
 My brain is being irradiated and poisoned.
 A one-two punch, making me feel a daily hangover.
 A brain leftover to calculate too many details.
 A brain swelling and seemingly dwelling
 On the minutia of our world.

Where sight and sound are taken for granted.
 Where the volume of a cellphone conversation
 Is so easily lost in translation even with
 Large iconic signs which read to turn them off.
 The steroids might help soothe the swelling beast.
 Help my senses become finely tweaked

For the loud, bright uncaring world of the sensitive.



The Enemy

An enemy worth killing
Is not small
Does not beg
Does not know your name
Has done the economics
Knows you are not to be fed in prison
Knows that there is only so much to consume
So much water to be drunk
So much corn to be eaten
Uses you for slave labor.

As you generate all the capital
As you generate all the real estate
Grows stronger using fear
Does not know what is human
Has ties in everything produced
Robs the soil of all that is natural
Never resting
Never gives an apology
For you are the food it eats.
You are the cells it needs.
For you are nothing, to a disease.

There are some remedies worse than the disease.

Another Brick

I lie strapped to a table.
A dark sterile room.
Red lasers crossing in zoom.
Lining up skull to table
So robots can rotate.
Mapping brain to correct frame.
Pink Floyd streaming.

You are invisible.
You are applied in measure.
Given in small doses.
You navigate through me.
Computer guided feed
Through bone and tissue.

There is no sensation.
No realization.
All this magic is numb.
Waiting inside my plastic mask.
Eyes squinting.
Teeth grunting.

A pop popping.
A zap zapping.
As Floyd fills this sterile void.
For years, just another brick in the wall.
Answering MRIs and radiation call.

The Prophet Motive

We pool our resources.
We list our skills and passions.
We ask how to be a good neighbor.

How to reach out,
educating without alienating.
How to find one common cause.
How to find our prophet motive,
Doing good without compensation.
To become whole inside this global nation.

Fear can be crippling
as we face the reality of the human disgrace.
The environmental destruction we now face.
A new world we now embrace.
Where each decision and action
multiplies ten fold up the food chain.

Into the falling rain
Radiating the plants we maintain.
We grow in order to become less dependent.
To pull away from the system
that has made us believe we are helpless,
That our actions are useless.

Feeding us nothing but lies.
For we are the system we so despise.
Through the products we buy and dispose.

We grow the cancer that morphs the rose.
Makes the dandelion's stem repose.
As we trace the isotopes across the ocean
let our decisions not be a choice but an obligation.
To be watchmen of what is left.
To lay hands on the hungry and bereft.

Because we know we can.

I'm Batman

I have hidden and watched.
I have had my back broken.
Been kicked over.
Muscles ripped open.
Terrorized.
Devoured slowly from the inside.

I have screamed publicly
For mercy from the prison of my body and mind.
I have had my skull strapped to a table.
Sawed open. Examined. Mapped.
Had brain matter scooped out, twice.
I have been poisoned.
I have been irradiated.

I have had to relearn how to walk.
Have known paralyses.
Have known fear.
Have faced my reckoning.
Have lost all hope and have regained it.

Through my children.
Through my wife.
Through my family.
Through my friends.
Through our choices.
To make a better world.

Gotham is inside me.
It is the city I create.
The energy I regulate.
The positive versus negative I ingest.
The actions I reflect.

Through each bite.
Through each word I choose.
Through each movie I view.

I choose life.

I Got In

They are going to ask where I was.
They are going to wonder why I was not listening.
Why I was not interested.
They are going to remember me
saying "Daddies don't play with dolls.
Daddies only play monster."

You are going to remember my eyes clouded over.
Searching.
Seeking something not there in front of us.
You are going to remember all the times you repeated
yourself.
How often you wanted someone to talk to.
How alone you felt.

I want you to remember me trying to solve problems that
were unsolvable.
I want you to remember me trying hard to put myself out
there for causes I believe in.
For equality.
For the environment.
For peace.

I want you to remember me trying to be an example for
our children to follow.
Through the food I ate.
Through the transportation I took.
Through the words I chose to write.

In the end I will disappear without fear.
Merged with the technology I did seed.
Into the digital grid, knee deep.
All my love and wonder downloaded into a database for
you to keep.
A memento of the time we had together.
A guidebook for our children.

I tried to think of the world's problems as stanzas.
I tried to think of global solutions through prose.
A photo or song merged with words to grow
To save a moment in time for our children to grasp.
For them to have something to remember, to last,
So that they might think of the future, not the past.

Maybe when that time comes
You can look into your heart and forgive me.
Try and understand that I was searching for you and for
them.
That the problems I tried solving will hopefully one day
end.
That men will be able to stop their seeking and begin
To live in the moment, when children really need them.



33 Days

A mountain to climb.
Time to count.
Checking days off a list.
Monday through Friday.
Monday through Friday.
Head strapped to table.
Your mask of fate.
Your brain is baked.
You hope there are no mistakes.

Chemo is taken by pill.
Lack of energy takes your will.
Steroids keep brain from swelling.
Keep skull from pressing.
Only so much room to grow.
Only so much time to know.
This will be over soon.

All trials.
All tests.
Will give you time to bless.
Your life and family.
To have more time here, now.
Many more MRIs to come.
33 days on the table soon done.

Nuclear Summer

A marathon has been run.
Days, weeks, many many miles.
Combat has been done.
Bones tired and piled.

The mask was strapped on and on.
33 days in the nuclear sun.
Lasers and poisons my savior or Armageddon.
This bald head sign of things to come.

Weeks spent away from work and family.
Worst case scenarios questioned.
Best outcomes planned for and met.
All memories to not forget.

The new challenge now ahead.
What will the MRIs discover.
Measuring the cell death of tumor.
Enough to extend life further.

Will I have a year or decades.
More time for my family to grow.
Will I lose track of time and let it flow.
How much time, no one knows.

I did my best.
Now time will be the test.
One day at a time.
Like all the rest.

Strive

On his way back from war.
His mind and body are adjusting for
The hard work ahead.

His brain swollen.
So many memories.
So many stories.
So many reasons to cry.
So many reasons not to die.

He has to put it all behind him.
To realize that today is new.
The fresh breeze he feels now, few.
Remembers the laughter of his children.
Feels everything that bound his love.

He will come back stronger
To love his wife longer.
Flying back from overseas
He looks out through the plane's window.
Sees the clouds and fog.
The sun setting on distant time zones.
Remembers the flesh and bone
That has been sewn back together.

So many friends and family
Have gone through this.
News comes out each day as we twist.
Be it a disease or IEDs.
It is our love we protect.

As bullets and bombs fly by.
All the surgeries and MRIs.
Hold it close and do not just survive.
Strive, to be thankful for your life.

For second chances are rare indeed.

S-T-R-E-T-C-H

If I could only ask
For all the time I wasted.
I could take it back.
Could it be different?

One lives to eighty
Drinking and smoking
Cursed words choking.
Some are born to die.
Inflicted before they open eyes.
From their first breath
Loved ones torn, bereft.

If I could have it back
All the time I wasted
I would only ask
To make it different.

If I was given ten years to ask
How much love have I tasked?
Taken to its max
Looked deeper than deep
Felt harder than hard
Photographic memory charged
The thirty second flash
Streaming video when I fall back
Stealing glimpses to help relax
As I pass.

If I had one question
I would have to ask
If I could have it back
All the time I wasted?

If I was given three months
To think about life's tide
The lower than lows and the higher than highs
I would see we are all grasping
We are all reaching
As we pass.

Stretch it out and make it last.

Another Day at the Beach

We sit here all in silence.
 Waiting for the clicking machine.
 The magnet that is not seen,
 To scan our brains.

The setting is a waiting room.
 Hospital gowns worn by all
 Except by our partners down the hall
 And the wife of the man in the wheelchair.

The minutes tick by.
 Tempers begin to flare.
 New skulls with no verdict.
 No knowledge of possible conflict.

Of what might be growing
 Of what might be glowing
 When the dye is injected
 A woman says to ask a nurse.
 She looks in her purse.
 She says the time has flown.
 Sitting here not knowing
 They begin to talk
 About the hours they have spent
 Waiting on the machine
 That might help them redeem
 The security that was taken.

A man says, I'm in no hurry.
I'm not worried.
My tumor isn't going anywhere soon.
25 MRIs and this is my vacation room.

This is a vacation day earned.
That hallway is my beach.
The MRI tube helps me lose my speech
And for a moment I listen.

Thrive

Thrive

In order to survive cancer, one must accept death.

Death is an adventure.

The next step in an infinite journey.

One prepares.

One archives.

One says goodbye.

After one survives cancer, one must learn to live.

It is seen as a chore.

As a long tedious list of tasks.

One is baffled.

One is lost.

One must learn to say hello.

In order to thrive.



