



A Bump in the Road

By James Myer

James grew up in Connecticut and worked there as a firefighter for 30 years. He spends considerable time caring for senior citizens and farm animals. He looks forward to helping as many people and animals as possible in the future.

It is 5:45 AM, time to get going. Another warm, sunny day and summer is on the way. I have many appointments today at MSKCC. Although not as many as yesterday — that was a grueling 16 hours and the start of another new trial, XL281. I am so tired and could use more sleep, maybe just a couple of minutes, but not today. I need to shower, run the dogs, and get to the train for the commute from Westport, Connecticut, to Manhattan. I park at the local fire station where I used to work. It is a quick walk to the train station, and I walk from there.

My friends at the train station offer me coffee along with kind words. “Sorry guys,” I say, “I have to be on my way to MSKCC.” This morning was my turn to unlock the doors and turn on the lights. I will most likely have to turn off the lights and lock up as well, so I will be back at around 10:00 PM.

I board the train and begin to doze off within the sea of commuters. In the distance I hear a woman’s voice: “Tickets! Tickets!” I must have been dreaming because the conductor

questions me. “Sir, sir, where are you going?” “I am going of course where everyone else is going, to Willoughby,” I reply. “Sir you must be confused, as this is the 6:37 train to Grand Central.” “No,” I respond, “I am not confused as Willoughby is a quiet, serene town with the most beautiful, sparkling fresh water lake you can imagine. Everyone is going there.” Awake now, I daydream of this most beautiful, verdant spot in Vermont that I fondly recall from childhood vacations “OK,” she responded. “You go where you like.”

My story and the reason that I am writing this article begin almost five years ago when I was diagnosed with ocular melanoma. My first visit to MSKCC commenced with an explanation of my diagnosis. The first of my many doctors began outlining my options. Although he was within arms reach, all that I heard was “cancer.” I was distraught, beside myself, almost breathlessly wondering if I had heard this diagnosis correctly. “This simply cannot be happening to me,” I thought. “I have a family to care for, a job to report to, senior citizens to look after, an entire barnful of animals

that I care for,” and the list goes on. “Was the future lost or is there a plan to go forward?” I asked. My doctor assured me that there indeed was a plan and a sub-plan and a sub-sub-plan if need be. Day two: I go into attack mode. What a beautiful morning. The birds are singing, the sun is bright and warm, not a cloud in the sky, and I won’t be surprised if this has all been a dream.

Fully awake to the situation, I need to collect my thoughts and separate fact from fiction, address reality despite the cloudless sky. My family and friends adjusted to the news that I would lose my eye and my career, though I would not lose my courage and everyone who stood beside me. I thought, “Could I be the only one to realize how lucky I am to continue forward with all of the plans I have made over the years?”

A cancer diagnosis has a way of shifting everything, some things that were important are suddenly not so important and some things taken for granted become paramount. Needless to say, the next few weeks were filled with anxiety and tears all around. The surgery

was routine, and I was asked to participate in a trial vaccine. I was reassured by professionals and friends alike that if one has cancer MSKCC is the best place to be. Somehow this does not make me feel better and I suppose it should. The new vaccine, trial 007, sounds like a secret agent. James is the name, GP100 trial 007. I hoped that this would be a good omen, even stronger than Bond in the war against cancer. The trial was soon over, and life progressed. For the next three years I adjusted to a monocular existence. There were times that I almost forgot about the cancer and life was good. But cancer is a relentless agent. Shortly after my three-year mark a routine scan showed that the cancer was back. "How much and where?" I asked. "It is now in your lung," my doctor stated, and another surgery was in order. This brought me back to cancer reality. How could I have gotten eye cancer? From the environment? From almost 30 years of exposure to hazardous materials? By-products of combustion? Where? This particular cancer is so rare, and now I was facing a metastatic melanoma tumor in my lung.

It is now September 2008. My surgeon and his team perform the surgery and tell me that everything looks good, clean, no malevolent agents hiding in the recesses. A subsequent scan three months after surgery, however, locates another lung tumor and three on my liver. Now what? Lung surgery was painful with a protracted recovery. Now what would we do? Family and friends do what they can; my daughter forms a cycle team and raises money for orphan cancer research — great job!

Now I will do chemotherapy for eight weeks. This is energy draining, and my whole body is sore, sort of like a permanent bout of the flu. Unfortunately, the chemotherapy did nothing not even slow the cancer down. I need to get my vintage jitney that I have owned since college on the road. You see, it is a 1938 deluxe Ford woodie wagon. It doesn't need much work — just a little restoration. The jitney has been sitting for 35 years and prior to that it had been in a barn in New York State for another 30. With only 45,000 miles on the odometer, I hope to get it on the road in eight weeks or less and ready for another 45,000.

But for now I need to start a new trial: XL281. It is the beginning of April, and this new trial has a protocol of eight weeks. I will work on my car and rest as necessary. The doctors say that this medication could be a bit draining. But I envision going on picnics in my jitney, maybe grilling veggies and chicken with fresh fruit for dessert for my vintage tailgate feast. When my doctor offered me this particular protocol I thought that perhaps I should reject it and try something else, but the team of doctors assured me that if they had this malady they would welcome XL281. The doctors went on to say that this could actually be a cure for ocular melanoma.

For now I plan on spending quality time with family and friends. I am also being included in a study to determine why my body did or did not respond to earlier treatments. I do feel fortunate that I am in the care of the best and the brightest doctors in the country. I still believe the best is yet to be. Go forward with your life, hold your head up high, and if you see me going down the highway of life in my vintage Ford give me a wave and a thumbs-up!

If you are interested in submitting your story,
please visit www.mskcc.org/bridges



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