X-ray Visions

Is that spot on Kiki's lung just a misplaced Percodan?

December 1, 1995 By Kiki Mason

I drag myself out of bed long before I want to. It is destined to be a doctor day—oh boy. I pump in my morning dosage of Zovirax, NAC, SPV-30, Chinese herbs and Bactrim, doing a fairly good job of imitating Sharon Tate in *Valley of the Dolls*. I can gulp down prodigious quantities of pills without so much as a slight gag. I silently thank God for all those years of cocksucking experience. Who knew it would come in so handy?

I call Joe at home to tell him that my lungs still hurt and let's do the X-ray. I eat a bowl of cereal in the bathtub. I contemplate a cigarette, which I still seem able to do, and mull over whether this is tacky to do before an X-ray: Doctor wear: Off-white jeans, a spunky green plaid shirt, Kenneth Cole loafers with the faggy tassles cut off, socks. Never leave any piece of skin exposed when going to the house of dis-ease.

A short walk to Diagnostic Radiology. I am led into a cubicle and told to undress from the waist up. I know the technician. He always winces as he eyes my lesions, as if to say, So pretty, what a pity. When he asks me to take a deep breath and hold it, I'm scared for the first time—it hurts. Words start going though my mind: PCP, bacterial pneumonia, TB. TB? Stop it! Says my mind, You haven't taken a subway in five years.

The Onc clinic at Bellevue hospital. A cart periodically rolls through with a little ding ding ding. Loaded with cookies, cakes, candy bars, sugared-up drinks; exactly what every immunosuppressed person should be putting in their bodies. Breathe the air, don't eat the food. A death culture in action.

My oncologist pulls me into her office. "I saved you for last," she announces. "Thank you very much," I reply, à la Neely O'Hara. She doesn't get it. She is perky, petite, pretty, and smart. I have been having an internal debate. Should I tell her about my lungs or fake my way through, do chemo on Thursday and hope for the best? Or should I be honest? Honesty wins. She immediately freaks, calls my doctor, the lab. There is a spot on my lungs. "There is always a spot on my lungs," I tell her. She says it sounds like pulmonary KS. "Don't worry," she says, over and over, "I'm probably being an alarmist." Well, I'm alarmed.

A friend tells me not to concentrate on the endless array of horrible prospects. I take a Valium, two

Benadryl, a Seconal. I believe in old reliables. If it was good enough for Liz Taylor and Jackie Sussanne, then it's good enough for me. I still don't go to sleep until after two a.m.

My onc is on the phone bright and early. She wants me to do a bronchoscopy. "Only if they give me a lot of Demerol. And I mean a lot, hon." She says it's really not a big deal. Liar. Like people with AIDS don't talk to each other.

Sarah talks me into going to the *To Wong Foo* premiere. I agree on the condition that she must be my walker. "Just pretend you're with Liz on a bad day." I wear: A purple shirt that I bought in Montana for $3; a wrap-around skirt; black stockings; black sandals from Chucky Jourdan; long drop rhinestone earrings that Susan Anton bought me years ago at Bendel's; wrap-around sunglasses. This is low-key. I am so nauseated and I sort of have the runs, which could get nasty in a dress. I take Immodium, my third today, and a Percodan (haunted by the line in the Liz tell-all: "Sometimes Liz would take a Percodan just to go out to dinner").

We make a grand entrance past a barrage of paparazzi. Three rows ahead of where I sit sandwiched between Sarah and Michael, o spot Roseanne, Patty Hearst, Thierry Mugler and RuPaul, all standing up and schmoozing as if we didn't all know they were there. I turn to Michael and Sarah. "When you die," I tell them, "if you go to hell, you will be in that row forever, and you will have to pee."

That night I take two Valiums and a Benadryl. Tomorrow is D day. The phone starts to ring at nine a.m. I put my mind on autopilot until I can see the lung specialist at Bellevue. She is young and friendly and efficient, it takes all of five minutes to evaluate my slides. I really can't find anything she reports. I practically pee on the rug with happiness. I'm outside the hospital, smoking a celebratory cigarette, when my oncologist walks by. "Hah!" I yell. "Hah!" She reminds me she's an alarmist.

David picks me up to take me to the botanic on 116th Street. I need to pick up voodoo supplies. The guy starts pulling out these greasy-looking bags of plants from a refrigerator case, David recoils. I buy a light-up-Jesus holy-water shrine, white candles emblazoned with a variety of saints and—most fabulous—a statue of Saint Lazarus, whom my Santería priest has said is my patron saint. "He's the saint of pestilence and disease," David says. Perfect. I like him because he's covered with lesions and is on crutches.

Outside, I am loving 166th Street, loving the ghetto, and I make F=David buy me a Mister Softee. Later, as I sip iced tea, it finally sinks in that I am OK. I am not going to die. I make a vow never to listen to doctors again ever. I'll tell those motherfuckers when I am good goddamn ready to die. Back in my crib I light a candle, and as I pass out, whisper: Thank you Jesus, thank you Jesus, Jesus thank you.

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