

The Radiation Room

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You notice everything when you can't move your head. A hard mask of plastic mesh covers my face and is bolted to my steel bed. A cross is cut crudely out of the chalky ceiling panels. From the cross's fulcrum, a red laser stares at me. Smoky light radiates from dim bulbs above. A sound reaches my ears: muted rumblings, like football helmets in a washing machine. I am in the eye of a mechanical hurricane. The lights above snap into a white intensity; the angel of Judgment blows his brass trumpet. Seconds later, the light falters and the room is plunged into a hovering darkness. A shrill, hairy buzz warbles down my brainpan, skipping my ears entirely. My whole brain is clutched by the sound. After about ten seconds of this, a blue light flashes blurrily against the backs of my eyeballs. Riding on the wave of the blue flash, a poisonous stench rapes my sinuses from the inside out. My face curdles against the wax-white walls of its prison.

Radiation therapy was first used to treat cancer in 1899. For decades it was a crude venture: radiation couldn't be dosed, and the machines delivering the Xrays were temperamental. As radiation therapy evolved, it acquired a terrible power, a precise wielding of the most dangerous forces in the universe. Gamma radiation, the smallest and deadliest form of radioactivity, is a plaything of the beastly machines of modern radiotherapy. You can almost imagine radiotherapy equipment advertised like some military issue machine gun: *Capable of delivering ten thousand kilovolts of gamma radiation per second, your family is not safe without one . . .* The premise of radiation therapy is disturbing: human existence is only possible because our atmosphere protects us from caustic gusts of the solar winds, and we intentionally inject our bodies with the essence of those winds.

Two months before my first radiotherapy appointment, I had experienced severe, nauseating headaches. After two excruciating weeks of failed treatment for migraines, I was given a CT scan. The scan showed a fat black lump on the left side of my brain the size of a plum, near my speech center. I later learned my headaches were caused by my brain expanding to be too large for my skull. The day after the scan, doped up on steroids and sedatives, I went in for surgery. My skull was carved open and the tumor, a greasy mound of astrocytomic tissue, was removed. On the insurance billing, the operation was referred to as "minor procedure."

I recovered quickly. Two weeks after the surgery I felt the same as I had before my headaches started. The tumor was gone, I knew, though, that malignant cells remained. My life then was a paradox: while I felt glorious, I knew there was still cancer in my brain.

March 13 was a strange and intense day for me. At four o'clock I was to be zapped with the strongest variety of radiation in the known universe. As I went to bed I was to pop a cocktail of heavy metals and poisons down my esophagus. Meanwhile, life went on. I had to take the deadly serious WASL, a standardized test required of all sophomores to graduate from high school. For the rest of the week I took the test in a kind of chemotherapeutic haze, a dusty cloud of agitation and fatigue.

After my first day of WASLing, I arrived bright and cheerful at the clinic, housed in a dreary basement at the University of Washington. Nurses I had met before ushered me into a dim room full of irregularly shaped machinery, and I was asked to sit on a metal bed covered with white sheets. I had brought a CD, *All Things Must Pass*, by George Harrison, and the therapist pushed it into a small boom box on the counter. I had picked the record, George's solo opus, at random, but I later realized that the far-eastern fuzz and joyous lyrics were a perfect counterpoint to the cold sterility of radiation therapy.

I was told to lie down. My neck was supported by a plastic foundation. I was comfortable. The therapists were friendly; they quickly explained that the half-spherical device to my left would deliver gamma rays deep into my brain. They encased my face in a mask of net-like white plastic, and bolted the mask to the table.

Getting irradiated is a disturbing and humbling experience. During my treatment, I was physically incapable of moving my head and, as a result, most of my body. My field of vision was restricted to the inexplicable outline of a crucifix above me and the blurry peripherals. I was alone; I could hear nothing but industrial buzzes. All of my senses were filled by the machine. In my mind, my body ceased to exist in any meaningful sense; unable to move or see beyond the confines of the metal bed, I felt like an extension of the mechanical process.

The buzzing of the machine is tolerable enough. But the smell is excruciating. You can feel it like a nugget of rot right behind your nose. The odor is gone in seconds, but the memory of stale eggs remains until, mercifully, the machine stops buzzing.

As I lay in the darkness reeling from the smell, a familiar guitar riff caught my attention. Quick-fingered melodies reached me as if from a different universe. I recognized the absurdity: I was surrounded by hulking, awkward machinery made of metal scraped from cramped seams in dark places underground. Meanwhile, George played on, picking out harmonies rooted in ancient Indian culture, a glorious, life-exalting Wall-of-Sound blast. The music hummed along quietly and constantly, an ironic sting to the radiation's environment of isolation. It was a post-millennial Negro spiritual, a Mexican standoff of two outlaw ideas. I closed my eyes and laughed.