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NO ONE SAYS



THIS IS THE SECOND INSTALLMENT IN A YEARLONG SERIES ABOUT THE LIFE OF NICKI MARSH, A 26-YEAR-OLD NEW YORK CITY WOMAN DIAGNOSED WITH STAGE I BREAST CANCER LAST SPRING. THE FIRST INSTALLMENT APPEARED IN OUR NOVEMBER/DECEMBER ISSUE.

THE AUGUST WEATHER WAS STILL HORRIBLE. ONE HUNDRED-AND-SOMETHING AND HUMID AS ALL GET OUT. EVEN THE VENERABLE *NEW YORK TIMES* SUGGESTED AN AFTERNOON AT THE MALL, OR AN AIR-CONDITIONED MOVIE. ON THE PHONE, NICKI

by liz galst. photographs by donna binder

"OW!" ANY MORE



said, "I have this cold, and it's just not going away." So far, the queasiness wasn't too terrible for her. "After last time," that is, after barfing her guts out all weekend after the last chemo session, the second of the four prescribed cycles of Cytoxan and Adriamycin, "I'm taking the Compazine religiously," she said.

Nevertheless, by that Sunday she'd thrown up twice; too hot to go outside. Saturday, vomiting aside, Nicki felt okay, but by Sunday, the exhaustion was finishing her. "I only have enough energy to go from one room to the next." Moreover, the fact of her illness, of it being cancer, began to loom large in her psyche. "Everything was fine yesterday," she said. "Today it's just weighing on me."

By Monday, she was feeling well enough to take her car for its annual inspection. And she had to pick up the Neupogen her oncologist, Stephen Malamud, MD, prescribed to build her white blood count, but none of the three pharmacies near her family's apartment in Crown Heights, Brooklyn had any in stock. Mid-morning, she called Dr. Malamud to see if she could pick up the Neupogen—which, by the way, lists for \$2,500 for a 10-day supply (Nicki's insurance picked up most of it)—Could she pick some up at the cancer center? "Now, I'm waiting to hear," she said, around noon.

An hour or so later, Malamud's office called back. A pharmacy near the hospital had the stuff; Nicki and Sherneth drove into Manhattan to pick it up, and then they would meet Donna and me back at the Beth Israel Cancer Center in Union Square, where Nicki was supposed to learn to give herself the dreaded Neupogen injections.

We were to meet them at 2 o'clock, and at 2:15 they weren't there. At 2:45, from the cavernous lobby of the Ambulatory Care Center, we phoned the Marsh's apartment, but the line was busy, busy, busy.

We called and we called and we waited, and at least the lobby was air-conditioned and cool. At 3:30 we looked at our watches—this wasn't like Nicki, who is prompt and reliable—and started to worry. Finally, at 4, we got through to the apartment, but Tamikka (who'd been on the Internet) didn't know where Nicki was. "I thought she was going to the drug store," she said.

There was nothing to do but go home.

Later, there was a message on my machine: "As a result of the antinausea drugs," the Compazine, "I had this bout of partial paralysis," Nicki said, in her Jamaican lilt. It was

a kind of pseudo-Parkinson's, a rare side effect nobody bothered to tell her was possible. Nicki hadn't been able to move her neck, or her head, and after she picked up the Neupogen at the drug store on First Avenue, she ended up in the Beth Israel emergency room, where they pumped her full of Benadryl and sent her home. Lucky that Sherneth was with her. The whole episode was pretty scary, Nicki said the next day. "I was driving in traffic, and I couldn't move my neck! I almost plowed into some guy because I couldn't move my neck!"

After that, she wasn't queasy any more, at least not for the rest of the chemo cycle.



AS BAD AS THIS IS.

A few days later, Nicki, Donna and I went to see the New York Liberty (women's) basketball game in the thunderingly loud, halogen-bright, meat-locker cold, 20,000 person arena that is Madison Square Garden ("The world's most famous arena!" the announcer boomed above screaming fans). Nicki was experiencing what she later figured out was bone pain from the Neupogen, a pretty common side effect that, again, nobody bothered to tell her about. But thinking it was muscle strain, during the game she mentioned she might have pulled something in her lower back playing basketball with friends a few days before. As the Liberty shot and defended, Nicki cheered and screamed with the rest of the crowd (Donna and I, especially, are big fans).

Our girls went down to defeat all the same.

Eventually the weather broke, and New York had a

few cool, clear days of summer blue. Then it got worse again, but not terrible, at least not for a while. Soon, like clockwork—it was a three-week cycle—Nicki was back again in the chemo suite at Beth Israel in Union Square, sun streaming through the plate glass windows.

“The American Cancer Society has a thing called ‘Look Good, Feel Better,’” Nicki explained from her post in the vinyl La-Z-Boy recliner. (Unlike last time, when we were put in a private chemo room to protect the privacy of other patients, for this session, Nicki was out in the main room. She was one of about five or six patients in the 10 to 12 La-Z-Boys lining the arched wall of the linoleum-floored chemo suite.)

This time, here with her mother, Nicki looked almost content. The routine was almost old hat by now. When the nurse, a warm, bespectacled woman named Eileen Heron, stuck the needle into the port located above Nicki’s left breast, Nicki didn’t cry out for her mother, as she had the previous time. She didn’t mutter, “I hate this! I hate this!” When Heron, needle in hand, said, “Take a deep breath,” and stuck the needle in, Nicki made a kind of guttural, staccato “Ah” and dug her fingernails into the arm rest of the recliner. Heron joked with her, “No one says ‘Ow!’ anymore.” So then Nicki said, “Ow!” And then, as if she’d waited too long to let it all out, said, “Ow. God. I thought after I’d stuck myself so many times [with the Neupogen] I wouldn’t feel it anymore, but I was wrong.”

Nevertheless, it was less bad, less out of control than the last time. There was an ease about the way Nicki, in a striking black tank-dress with a yellow, green and blue print, sat in her chair. (“Except for the blue,” Nicki said of the dress, “it’s the colors of Jamaica.”)

She took off her white, knitted cloque hat, purchased

to continue the shots.

A little later, Nicki and Heron and Sherneth figured out that even though the Marshes are Jamaican and black, and Heron is from Staten Island and white, they have a deep connection, because Heron’s maiden name is Marsh, and Nicki and Sherneth have cousins in Jamaica named Heron. And soon Heron, big and soft in a white lab coat, took out a small photo album of her new baby, DJ, her first one, and Nicki, in particular, though Sherneth too, ooh-ed and ahh-ed over the little red-headed boy.

Nicki and Sherneth talked some about the radiation treatments that were coming up. “As bad as this is,” Nicki said, looking over at her mother, her mother who’d already had the radiation, a woman who knew whereof she spoke, “As bad as this is, I really dread the radiation, because that’s every single day for six weeks.”

Indeed, at least as Sherneth experienced it, the radiation had been fairly debilitating. Every day after treatment, she’d come home, eat a big meal and fall into a near-narcotic sleep.

So far, her advice was practical. “If you’re working,” Sherneth said, from her chair against the wall of the room, “they may give you [a regimen of] three times a week.”

“Yeah, but three times a week extends it.”

Then Nicki shrugged her shoulders, a bit resigned. I could tell in her head, she was figuring out whether the radiation would cut into her planned trip to Jamaica. She and her parents got inexpensive tickets that had to be used by December 15; Nicki hoped to go in late September. And even though Nicki never said it quite this way, from the way she talked about the trip, with gasps and sighs, from the very relish in every description of Jamaica (“A little bit of heaven”), these two

REALLY DREAD THE RADIATION

at the Gap for the bargain price of \$16 (instead of the exorbitant \$50 they were asking at the cancer center’s boutique for a similar model). Nicki took off her hat and handed it around so we could all feel how soft it was, marvel at the price. She sat there baldheaded in front of Donna and me for the first time, a little awkward initially but not making a big deal of it. Then she joked with all of us about “Look Good, Feel Better,” saying she probably didn’t need to go, even though they give out free makeup. “I mean,” she said, winking her right eye, “I think I look good. I think I feel better.”

So, as the session began, she was chatty and her white cell count was good—3.7 as compared to last time’s 1.2. Nurse Heron and Dr. Malamud’s nurse, Denise Mesa, a petite white woman in high heels and a ponytail, agreed that despite the bone pain, Nicki should take the Neupogen again, and if the pain came back, she should come in and have some blood work to see if she needed

weeks on the isle were to be her present to herself, for finishing chemo, for surviving everything she’d had to survive so far.

Abruptly, Malamud’s nurse came back with some free samples of Zofran, an anti-nausea drug, that Nicki was supposed to take instead of the Compazine. “You leave it in your mouth and it dissolves,” Mesa told her. Sherneth and Donna passed one of the samples back and forth, examining the packaging, a single pill mounted in silver foil at the center of a card, almost like a jewel. (At almost 28 bucks a pop, it had better be.)

Heron came over and hung the clear bag of Cytoxan up on the IV pole. “Let’s start with the drip,” she said.

Nicki cocked her head to look at the bag. “Cytoxan?” she asked.

“Uh-huh.” Heron replied. “Did you drink fluids today?”

“Not so much.”

"But you'll drink more today, right?"

"Yeah."

I looked down for a second and when I looked up, Nicki was in tears.

"It's okay," she shook her head, wiped a drop from her eye.

"Sometimes it happens," Heron comforted, looking down at Nicki in the La-Z-Boy.

"I just hate this," Nicki sniffled. "I hate the Cytoxan."

"Do you feel light-headed?" Heron asked, putting her arm on top of the recliner.

"No. I don't. I don't," Nicki said, still crying and wiping her eyes.

"Do you taste it?" Heron wanted to know. If Nicki could taste the chemo, Heron could slow the drip. Again Nicki glanced up at the IV bag.

"Don't watch it," Heron said, kindly.

"I'm just—," she shook her head, "I've just been emotional all week. Don't worry."

"Pretend it's not even there," Heron advised. "You're just hanging out, getting your picture taken." She winked at Donna.

"Do you want anything to eat?" Sherneth leaned over, Tupperware in hand.

"No, I'm fine. I'm fine." She was still crying.

"We know you're fine," Heron said. "There's no question about that."

"Are you having pain?" Sherneth asked, a concerned mother.

"I don't want anything to eat," Nicki replied. "It's just..."

"You think Cytoxan's the baby killer," I said. Nicki had told me this before. She worried that the chemo, the Cytoxan in particular, would render her sterile. She wanted nothing more than children.

"I think it's the baby-killer," she perked up, "and I hate it. Because I had a short period this month." It was just a couple of days, and light as well. "And I see the Cytoxan and I think, 'Oh my God, my period might not even come next month.' But," she took a deep breath, "I'm fine."

Wanting to be helpful, and really, having the most approachable, non-threatening manner any nurse could have, Heron leaned over and asked Nicki if Malamud had given her anything to relax.

"No," Nicki said. "I just need to cry and get it out of my system. I'm just looking to the end of it," the end of the treatment. "But after a while, it starts to sink in that this doesn't end. It continues."

Malamud, tall, in a light teal sports jacket and one of his slightly psychedelic ties, walked through the doorway.

"Hi, Dr. Malamud," Nicki said, brightening a little.

"How are you doing?" he asked.

"Oh, I'm all right. I just feel—I've been thinking about this whole thing, and it's been depressing me a little."

"Thank goodness we don't have much more time to think about it," he replied, bending down towards her in

the La-Z-Boy.

"Thank God. That's the thing. I feel like it's not going to end anytime soon."

He nodded his dark head. "Uh-huh, uh-huh. It's not going to end anytime soon?"

"Well, the treatments will end—" Nicki tried to explain.

"Maybe not soon enough," Malamud answered.

"But not soon enough, because then my radiation—Am I going to have my radiation here? Is this where I'll have it?" At this moment, it was easy to see the treatment horizon recede into the distance. Three weeks before, at the last session, Nicki had only been concerned about getting through chemo. But now that there was just one more session to go, ("Just one more session to go!") the radiation, with its daily treatments in a dark, cold basement, the daily positioning under a giant machine, loomed. And after the radiation, what next? What gaping, unsupervised maw awaited her?

"You have it in the basement," Malamud replied. "We keep it in the basement," he quipped. "You wouldn't want radiation to roam around."

It was a lame joke, but we all laughed anyway, to free ourselves from worry.

"How long of a break do I get between the chemo and the radiation?" Nicki asked. Malamud's presence didn't exactly buoy her, but she pulled herself together in front of him.

"Normally, during the—who did you meet from the radiation department?"

"I haven't met anyone yet."

"Normally, you get the same amount of time as you would for the next [chemo] cycle. So about three or four weeks."

"Oh, good."

"We try to keep everything tight. That way you get dual impact and—"

"Because I was going to go away on vacation and I wanted to—"

"Make some plans?"

"Yeah."

Then they talked about the Neupogen, joked about the basketball game during which Nicki thought she'd injured her back. Why did it hurt? "All that bone marrow's being whipped"—Malamud made a fist and punched the air—"that bone marrow's being whipped into working faster." He told her she could stop the Neupogen as long as her blood counts were high enough, and having been given permission to stop, Nicki decided she probably could handle the shots after all.

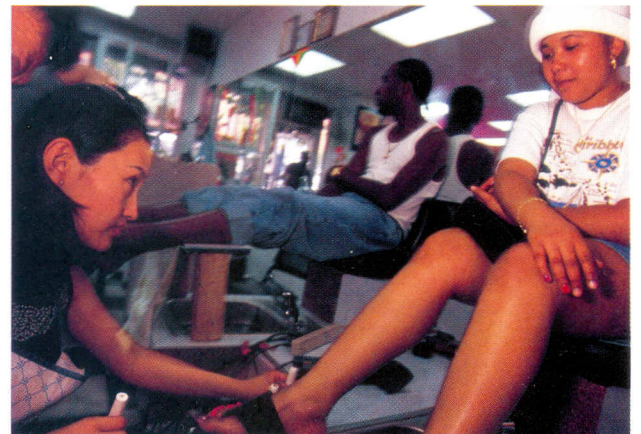
"All right," she said with a confident nod. And then to herself, very quietly she said, "I'm almost there. Well, this section anyway."

"Just make the call and you can see Dr. Pisch," Malamud said, of the radiation oncologist. "I'll let her know you're calling."

"Okay. Thanks, Dr. Malamud," Nicki said cheerfully, as he walked off. "Okay," she said, again to herself, very quietly, "I'm getting there." ■



I KID YOU NOT: THE LABEL READ "BOSCH CORNER SANDER"!



"NORMALLY ON SUNDAY I WOULD WASH MY HAIR," NICKI SAID A COUPLE DAYS AFTER HER THIRD CHEMO SESSION. "NOW I HAVE NO HAIR TO WASH."

INSTEAD, ON THIS SUMMER SUNDAY, SHE AND HER YOUNGER SISTER LENNOX-ANN WENT TO HAVE THEIR NAILS DONE. IT'S SOMETHING THEY DO TOGETHER OFTEN, BUT NOW THAT THE CHEMO HAS DISCOLORED NICKI'S NAILS, IT HAS TAKEN ON A NEW IMPORTANCE.

NICKI HAD A PEDICURE, SITTING UP ON A SORT OF THRONE, WITH HER FEET IN A SINK. AFTER THE SOAKING, THE PEDICURIST SANDED EACH FOOT WITH A POWER SANDER FROM HOME DEPOT (I KID YOU NOT: THE LABEL READ "BOSCH CORNER SANDER"!)" "IT TICKLES," NICKI SAID OVER THE WHIRR.

LENNOX, A SOCIAL WORKER, SAYS THAT AT FIRST SHE DIDN'T KNOW HOW TO DEAL WITH NICKI'S CANCER. "THE FIRST THING I THOUGHT ABOUT WAS OUR GRANDMOTHER," SHE SAID. SHERNETH'S MOTHER, HYACINTH, DIED OF BREAST CANCER. THAT LENNOX'S MOTHER-IN-LAW IS A 22-YEAR SURVIVOR OF BREAST CANCER HELPS. AND SO DOES WORKING IN A PROFESSION THAT VALUES DISCUSSION. "WITH MY GRANDMOTHER," SHE SAYS, "WE DIDN'T TALK ABOUT IT. BUT WE TALK ABOUT IT NOW—AND THAT'S GOOD."