

The Bandera PROPHEET

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A probe on the back side of a colonoscopy

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The Bandera Prophet

I've been running a little behind schedule this week - a pun that may be more appreciated as this story goes on. I generally avoid first-person dissertations, but in the spirit of a brutally honest transparency that may help someone else, I thought it befitting to temporarily lift the veil.

A word of caution for the sensitive, this story may not be appropriate for everyone. I am figuratively unsnapping my pajama back door - as I did literally a few days ago. After postponing a colonoscopy for a year, I decided at last to dive in, and allow my gastroenterologist to do the same.

In March 2020, during my annual post-cervical-cancer exam, my doctor recommended I schedule a colonoscopy as a routine screening. "It is time," he said.

I trusted this man with my life, a fitting confidence considering he saved it in 2014, when he discovered cancer cells quietly lurking on my cervix. I had no symptoms or signs of trouble, but there they were, gearing up to wreak havoc. Within the same year, after some treatments and surgery, those awful cells were gone - I thank God and my doctors for that, and continue to get checked every year.

So, reluctantly, out of respect, I took the colonoscopy referral form from my doctor, folded it up and slid it into my purse, with no real intention of actually doing it. Hidden but not forgotten, that piece of paper morphed into Poe's Tell Tale Heart, beating louder and louder and louder from my pretty floral bag. No longer able to ignore the pounding, or guilt that I was being stupid, I unenthusiastically made an appointment. Then Covid hit.

One by one, non-essential medical services shut down. As the months went by, and the country slowly tiptoed back into the light, all once-stopped procedures resumed. But, after reading and hearing horror stories of hospital bed shortages, medical staff fatigue and viral spread, the idea of being sedated and waking up intubated in a hospital terrified me, so I ignored my still-beating Vera Bradley bag, until last month. While watching the morning news, an anchor did a segment on Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month. He talked about how he lost his young brother to colon cancer. Then Katie Couric began talking about how she lost her husband at a young age to colon cancer, and she filmed Jimmy Kimmel as he prepared for and completed his colonoscopy. My id, ego and superego are developed enough to know the world does not revolve around my needs, but it seemed like they were all talking directly to me. I half expected them to look into the camera, say my name in unison out loud, and tell me to get my ass off the couch and onto the exam table.

Support Group

For the second time, I made an appointment. As the day grew near, my nerves were a bundle of exposed wires, waving wildly and setting off sparks. Desperately seeking safety in numbers, I joined a colonoscopy support group on Facebook. It's a busy page, with people from all over the world - America, the U.K., Australia, Slovakia, Canada - asking questions and sharing advice. It was nice to see other people who were just as afraid as I. It was even nicer to see all the positive stories, quips and suggestions.

The week prior to C-Day, my dad called me. That's not atypical, but I could tell there was something - unusual - in his tone. Right on cue, he told me he was on the pot, prepping for a colonoscopy. I had no idea. "The prep is the worst part," he said.

Then we cracked some jokes and laughed together at our silly bathroom humor. He didn't know it at the time, but he paved the way for me, and suddenly I wasn't so scared anymore.

The prep

I delayed picking up my prep prescription until the pharmacy threatened to put it back on the shelf. Call it denial or psychological avoidance - either applies. Once I relented and picked it up, the whole bag went straight to the fridge. I read it was easier to tolerate if cold.

Four days before C-Day, I went on a self-imposed liquid smoothie diet. On Saturday I had coffee for breakfast, and a smoothie (dairy-free yogurt, a handful of blueberries, a banana, a dollop of honey, a dash of ceylon cinnamon, a couple of ice cubes and almond milk) for lunch and dinner. On Sunday I did the same thing, except I had two smoothies for dinner.

On Monday - Prep Day - with the exception of the gingerale I used to mix the Suprep solution, I drank water only. The sacrifice really wasn't hard - the Suprep is so disgusting I had no appetite. I started the first of two 16 ounce cups at 4 p.m., and within an hour, I was on the pot. Again on cue, my dad texted to check on me.

"Get your Depends," he said.

The clearing process wasn't as horrific as I expected. Basically I felt like a faucet. The liquid literally and effortlessly ran straight through me - I was a human coffee maker.

After two hours, I was caught up on all of my social media browsings and Words With Friends games, and the fluid was as yellow as a sunflower and then ran clear. A rule of thumb is if you can see the bottom of the toilet, you're on the right track. I choked down the second dose at about 11:30 p.m. Instead of gingerale, I mixed it with water - big mistake. The water did nothing to dilute the horrible, salty, goopy nastiness - it just created more of it. At least the gingerale masked it somewhat.

Why no one has figured out how to make this stuff less vile, I don't know.

Just. So. Gross.

The Procedure

C-Day arrived. I applied a palmful of calming essential oils, put on my lipstick and headed out the door. Check-in was fairly painless and streamlined. I confirmed a few personal details and took my seat in the waiting room, wondering if anyone else was anxious because everything seemed so...calm.

After a few minutes, a nurse called my name. I walked into a triage area where I was weighed, asked a few more questions, and hooked up to a blood pressure machine. The nurse asked if I was nervous because my blood pressure and heart rate were a little high. She couldn't see me smile behind my mask, so I nodded.

She closed the curtain, I stripped down to my socks, slid on my cotton gown - open in the back - and climbed into the bed, which was comfy enough and warm. Within 15 minutes, I was visited by another nurse who started an IV line with saline, the anesthesiologist stopped by, and I was wheeled into a dimly-lit exam room. There, the doctor and a couple more nurses were waiting for me - masked, jazz hands gloved, ready to go.

The last thing I remember is being asked to roll over on my left side, looking at a big monitor that I guessed would soon be airing the Jessica's Colon Show, and trying to cover my backside, realizing my efforts were futile.

Then I woke up in a different room.

It was literally Just. That. Simple.

I guess the nurse saw me stir because she was immediately at my side with a tiny can of apple juice in hand. I was groggy, but able to get myself dressed, almost comprehend what she was saying, and ask for a second tiny can of apple juice.

She said everything went well. No polyps. No lesions. No strictures. No evidence of malignancy. No glaring or obvious abnormalities. The doctor took some tissue to biopsy for lymphocytic colitis. If it comes back positive, there is no cure, but it's not a precursor to cancer, so I can live with that.

The report further stated I had an "excellent bowel prep providing high-quality visualization." So, yay me.

The actual procedure took about 15 minutes. I took a little longer to wake up - I was expected to be alert and ready to go in another 15 minutes but doubled that time, apparently. Guess I needed a longer nap. In total, I was at the facility for about two hours. Extra bonus: I don't have to go back for 10 years.

A Few Tips

**The Prep*

I was not directed to fast or change my diet four days before my colonoscopy. I chose to do that on my own. Everyone is different with regard to what they eat and their digestive systems. I know mine, and it worked for me.

The gingerale helped make the Suprep a little more tolerable. I kept it cold and sucked it down with a straw. I ingested the first 16 ounces in about 10 minutes. Then a lot of water. The second 16 ounces did not go down as easily, and I almost threw up. The only reason I didn't was because I sucked on a piece of candy in between gulps.

By about 1 a.m., I was ready for bed, and slept through the night.

**Know what you're being charged for, and what your insurance will cover.*

One hitch was my financial responsibility. On the Friday before my Tuesday morning appointment, I found out my procedure was coded as diagnostic, instead of preventative - which translated means a zero dollar co-pay versus \$165. Luckily, the doctor agreed to change the coding so I didn't have an immediate out-of-pocket expense. Because the anesthesiologist bills separately, I don't know what to expect, but I expect I'll find out soon enough. I'm blessed to have insurance, so no complaints.

**You may bounce back right away completely ravenous, and you may not.*

I was given general intravenous anesthesia propofol, and it nauseated me. There is medicine to help with that. Ask for it if you need it.

I tried to eat a light lunch afterwards, but I was quite tired and I had a slight stomach ache. I also passed more fluids and blood a couple of hours after my procedure, but it didn't last long. Whether you're hungry or not, stay near a bathroom. It's better to be there and not need it than the reverse. My poor dad learned that lesson while walking his dog. I won't give details, but his experience provided yet another good laugh together.

Finally, allow yourself the time your body needs to recover - whether it's an hour, or two days. Be gentle with you.

All joking and intimate detail aside, my biggest piece of advice is to set aside your fear. I realize my worry and dread were such a waste of time. I slept through what I was scared of, and I woke with no recollection of it. Days, weeks, a year of anxiety reached its peak in 15 minutes of something I wasn't even awake for.

On the other side of fear is peace. Remember that. I have to remind myself often.

Colon cancer is the third most common cancer in the United States. In February 2000, President Bill Clinton dedicated March as National Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month.

“Learning about any disease that takes many lives is difficult, but the fact is that early detection through prevention and screening is proven to dramatically reduce fatalities from colorectal cancer,” the Colorectal Cancer Alliance states, adding 149,500 Americans will be diagnosed in 2021.

“Most colorectal cancers develop first as polyps, which are abnormal growths inside the colon or rectum that may later become cancerous if they are not removed. Colorectal cancer is very treatable when it is discovered early,” according to the CCA. “Research is constantly being done to learn more and provide hope for people in all colorectal cancer stages.”

To learn more, go to www.ccalliance.org.