

Bad Lungs

By Kany Aziz

They said I had bad lungs.

Bad lungs, I wondered. How could that be? They didn't steal or lie. They didn't murder anybody. Were they bad like a child who needed a time out? Or were they bad like a criminal who should be put in prison? Were they bad like a student who didn't study for a test? Perhaps they were bad like a cheating husband. Have they been deceiving me my whole life?

No, of course not! I didn't have bad lungs, I had amazing lungs. I wanted to tell these people that my lungs were the best lungs in the world. They kept up with me while I played volleyball in high school. They helped me out that one summer I tried to play the saxophone until I realized it was only sexy when men did it. I wanted to tell them that when I was ten years old, I won a screaming contest among five girls. I should politely interrupt them and inform them that they were wrong, and in fact, I actually had good lungs.

And what was this picture they were pointing at? It was as though a child lost all the crayons except the black one and wasn't good at staying in the lines. Black, gray, lighter gray blobs. I looked at these people in their white coats. The walls were white. There was a lot of white in this room. I cocked my head at the person speaking. Come to think of it, what was he saying?

Maybe I was abducted by aliens, I thought. I don't know what they're saying so it must be a foreign language. There was something around their necks that only they knew how to use and somehow it told them what was inside my chest. How bizarre! Maybe they had no written language, instead used pictures to communicate. And why were there no colors? Pictures should have colors.

There was no way that was a picture of my lungs, if it was even a picture of lungs at all. This person wasn't there when I went into the giant donut they told me to lay down in. How does he know that the technician saved the right picture under the right name? Maybe the computer was wrong. Maybe this person was wrong. There were so many people who could be wrong. Did he even double check to see if it was me?

I looked at the young woman standing behind the man at the computer. She had been looking at me until I looked at her and then quickly looked away when our eyes met. I felt suspicious. They were definitely aliens. I looked back at the black and gray picture. If that was really a picture of me, then where was my stomach? I ate a huge hamburger before I got that scan done, surely I would be able to see my stomach.

"Where's my stomach?" I asked.

The two white coated aliens stared blankly at me. I had interrupted him but he seemed more unsettled by the question than by the interruption. He pointed to gray and black lines. Then he continued talking.

That's definitely not me. Where's the hamburger? They have the wrong person, I thought. I was only having a little shortness of breath and this picture—the part that was gray which should be black—looked like someone who needed help breathing. And look at me, I'm

fine. I wanted to interrupt them and tell them I was fine. That someone should find this person who the picture belonged to and help them. Not me. Two months ago I went to Disneyworld. There's no way a person who went to Disneyworld had lungs like that.

And what was so wrong with gray anyways? My mom used to say that life wasn't black and white. That it was full of gray. Maybe so much gray was a good thing. I tried to think of all the things in life that were gray. All I could think of was clouds before a storm. That's not a good example.

Nausea crept up my sides and my chest felt heavy. Maybe the gray was bad. Maybe the gray was cancer. Blood rushed in my ears and I couldn't hear what the doctors were saying. This picture was me. Those were my lungs. I had cancer. And a lot of it. The cancer would slowly deflate the little balloons in my lungs. Then I would have no lungs left. I felt like I couldn't breathe and wondered if all my lungs had been popped already.

This was going to kill me, I realized. My lungs, the ones that kept me alive all these years, were slowly going to take my life away. I stared at the gray circle in the picture and images of polka dots filled my head. Then I saw apples, oranges, and peaches. I saw baseballs, basketballs, soccer balls. It was so round, a perfect circle, a perfect sphere. And then I wondered how many shapes I could name. Rectangle, square, diamond. What about the harder ones, the ones I learned in geometry so many years ago that I've probably forgotten by now. Rhomboid. Parallelogram. Shoot, that was all I could remember.

I stared at the circle and the lines of gray and darker gray. It looked like a moon. A full moon. Like the one in the sky the night my granddaughter was born. The thought came to me like a whisper but the affect was nuclear. The world stopped. In that moment, there were no doctors or cancer. I remembered holding my granddaughter when she was born. Her first steps. She would turn five in a few months. Would I be alive to see it? I needed to be alive, she would want me there. I had to be there.

I felt my heartbeat quicken. The shortness of breath was back. It felt like my lungs were filling up with water, like my body was a sinking ship and the water level was rising, slowly rising until I could feel it at the base of my neck. I had a nightmare like this once but I woke up before I drowned. Would I wake up again this time?

The look on my face must've shown something because the young lady sat down next to me and placed a hand on my shoulder. She looked me straight in the eyes, unwavering and unapologetic yet concerned and sympathetic. Her eyes told me I had a choice. I felt my breathing ease. I had so many questions. But which one to ask first? Would they know I hadn't been paying attention? Was I a bad student like my lungs? We could work on being good together.

Kany Aziz is a third year Internal Medicine and Pediatric resident at West Virginia University. She is originally from Florida where she completed medical school at Florida State University. She hopes to one day work for an international health organization and complete a Palliative Care Fellowship.
