

Sum of the Pieces

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My chest was so tight that it was starting to hurt, but not from the same pain that had followed me around like some evil shadow for the past year. I was desperately trying not to laugh.

“Now that the test results have been replicated a few times, and the readings keep being not what we want to see, I’m going to have to recommend moving forward with the surgery,” the cause of my struggle said. Dr. L was standing across the small room from me and my mom, with his back leaning slightly against the cabinets that I knew held the needles that were used to draw my blood a few minutes before, and a powerful antiseptic they used to clean the rooms in between patients. They must have used too much of the cleaner right before I was brought back, if the stinging in my eyes and nose was anything to go by, but I didn’t say anything.

My attention was caught up in the way that the surgeon’s neon yellow underwear was being slowly uncovered as he continued to talk, by his pager that must have been too heavy for his scrubs to hold up. I tried to look around the room for something else to focus my attention on, but did not have any luck. All I found were the same childish posters of smiley faces on a pain scale and cartoon drawings of the different organs in the body that I, being fourteen and already in high school, was way too old for. My mouth twitched up at the sides, just at the bizarre and unexpected fact that I now knew the Chief of Pediatric Surgery at one of the best universities in the world wears *neon yellow underwear*. I did not dare to look over at my mom, because I knew if I did the giddiness in my chest would explode into full-blown laughter.

He shifted his weight onto his other leg, subsequently sliding his pants down even further, as he continued speaking in his warm but authoritative manner. “Now, this surgery does have some drawbacks unfortunately. Given that we will be operating so close to the aorta, we will have to keep you in the hospital for five to seven nights. We use a laparoscopic procedure, which is much better for reducing infection rates, but you will be left with around eight scars on your abdomen”.

He paused, obviously waiting for some sort of cue from me for him continue, and suddenly I did not find the whole underwear situation funny; it was embarrassing. The laughter in my chest sunk down into acidic nausea sitting in my stomach. How could a man of this caliber expect me to take him seriously when he could not even walk around without flashing his ridiculous underwear? Was I going to let a man who could not even *dress* himself cut into my body and sew me back up like some gross caricature of a Build-A-Bear?

I nodded my head once, more out of a sense of duty than anything else, and continued the rest of the appointment looking resolutely down at my fingers, not sparing a single glance back at that beacon of shame across the room.

In the next month leading up to the surgery, out of all of the tests and choices and preparations I had to make (What flavor laughing gas do I want? Can I really not wear any makeup and have to take my fake nails off the day of? How will we do Christmas gifts if I'm still in the hospital?), the one thing that continuously occupied my mind was that fucking underwear. I could not begin to explain why, but I was so incredibly uncomfortable and angry every time I thought about it. The only coherent conclusion I would arrive at during those times that I would think about it for hours was that there are some things that just should be kept private and hidden.

It was about six months after I had the surgery, right in time for summer and bathing suits and flips flops, that Dr. L had to officially declare the surgery a failure (my symptoms were getting worse, not better), and I realized the full extent of what my scars would look like. Sitting in the same room as the one I had been in when I was told I needed the surgery, the roles were suddenly reversed; I was now the one who would have something embarrassing that I would try to keep hidden, but circumstances outside of my control would sometimes force me to show.

A few years later, I heard of Dr. L's untimely death, and I am horrified to say the first image that came to mind was this incident. I realized that the reason the situation kept bothering me in the first place, is that sometimes things happen in your life that become your identifier to others, that do not fairly describe you as a whole. This is why, for better or worse, I am not open with my health issues to others. I do not want someone's first thought of me to be about my health issues, my embarrassing moment, my stigmatized identity, my yellow underwear; I want them to think of me as me.