



My dress in its early stages; I can't believe I'm going to be a bride!

# Happily ever after... with cancer?

*Glamour* associate editor and leukemia patient Erin Zammett is about to get married—but her mind is on her sister's health, and her own.

**I**n November 2001 Erin Zammett, now 27, was diagnosed with chronic myelogenous leukemia (CML), a cancer that until recently proved fatal for many patients. For three years she has shared with *Glamour* readers her experiences of living with cancer—including, in April 2003, the shocking news of her sister Melissa's diagnosis of Hodgkin's lymphoma. Now Erin opens up about what it's like to be incredibly excited about your own life while constantly worrying about someone else's.

MARCH 5, 2005

## Getting past Melissa's relapse

Talk about multitasking! My mom and I are out in Oregon for a cancer appointment/wedding-dress fitting. My main oncologist, Dr. Michael Mauro, is based here, and his wife, Anne, is designing my gown. Today I tried it on for the first time, and it was amazing. When I put on the veil, it hit me: I'm going to be a *bride*!

I haven't been paying much attention to the wedding because of everything that's happened with Melissa. Last fall, after 10 months in remission, her cancer came back. Doctors decided she needed a stem-cell transplant, an incredibly grueling procedure where they basically obliterate your immune system, then rebuild it. Right after Christmas she checked into the hospital for a monthlong stay. Her two-year-old, Andrew, couldn't visit because she was so susceptible to germs, and when Nick and I came by to ring in 2005, we had to wear paper masks, paper robes and latex gloves—not exactly a New Year's outfit to remember.

Melissa's husband, Ysrael, our sister Meghan and I took turns sleeping in a chair by Melissa's bed. One night I woke to find her shuffling out of the bathroom in a pink Juicy suit, dragging her IV pole. She was bald and literally gray, but she flashed me her profile, smiled and said, "I look really thin, huh? Do you think Ysrael will notice?" Her relapse has been tough on us all, but she makes it really hard to be depressed.

The transplant was a success, though Melissa got high fevers and pneumonia in the weeks afterward and couldn't eat without excruciating pain; the chemo left her stomach lining full of sores. But by her twenty-ninth birthday, on February 25, she was back in action. The whole family went out to dinner to celebrate both the fact that Melissa was feeling better and that she could eat again. It was a fun night, but we all knew to go easy on the toasts to her health; we've been here before, and the last thing we want to do is jinx ourselves. Still, things are good. Melissa's back at work part-time, and she's also back in her role as self-



As long as Melissa has her blankie (she's had it since she was two), she can handle anything.

appointed wedding planner. And I need her help: Four months to go and I haven't even gotten dresses for my 10 bridesmaids!

**MARCH 6, 2005**  
**Baby lust**

My appointment with Dr. Mauro wasn't as fun as the dress fitting (sorry, Dr. Mauro!). He checked me out, then we talked at length about my having kids. In the past he's been reluctant to discuss that with any specificity. But now that I'm getting married, I have babies on the brain. And Dr. Mauro does too: Three months ago he and Anne had a beautiful baby girl named Elizabeth; he adores her, and I know he wants me to experience that love some day.

The problem is, staying on Gleevec during pregnancy poses a potential danger to the fetus, but of the handful of women

who have gone off it to get pregnant, some have reportedly relapsed. When it comes down to it, Nick and I will have to weigh the risks and make the hardest decision of our lives. Nick really wants kids, but he doesn't want to do anything that might risk my life, and after watching Melissa relapse I probably

don't, either. But I've always wanted to be a mother.

Melissa says that if I ever went off Gleevec for a short time to make embryos (as she was able to do before her transplant), she'd carry them for me. "I'll alternate," she said, only half joking. "One year I'll carry one of my embryos, and one year I'll carry one of yours." Even Meghan said she'd be a surrogate for me. But I just can't help wanting to do it the old-fashioned way.

**MAY 11, 2005**  
**I can't be a cancer slacker**

I forgot to take my Gleevec yesterday. I was running late for work and didn't have time to get a real breakfast (I need to eat a pretty big meal to take the pills), so I just grabbed a piece of toast and figured I'd have them with lunch. But I never did. I woke up this morning in a panic. When I called Dr. Mauro to confess, I was shocked by his response: Apparently some patients regularly skip their Gleevec or even stop taking it altogether. Either they can't deal with

the side effects or they go into remission and just want to put the whole cancer ordeal behind them. But the cancer always comes back. Other than the occasional muscle spasm, I don't have any difficult side effects, but I can relate to wanting to put cancer behind you. If I wanted to get depressed about it, I could think how much it sucks that I'll be taking cancer drugs on my wedding day and that when I'm off on my honeymoon in Hawaii, I'll be downing more Gleevec than mai tais. But I don't think like that. After seeing what Melissa has had to endure to get her cancer into remission, I know I'm lucky that all I have to do is take a pill.



Doing a reading from my book in my hometown was one of the best nights of my life.

**JUNE 6, 2005**  
**A fight for patients' rights**

I spoke in Washington, D.C., today on a panel before U.S. Congress staffers; it was for Fertile Hope. They are trying to get a resolution passed recommending that oncologists discuss with cancer patients, early on, the risks to their fertility and ways to preserve it. Many don't know they could wind up infertile until it's too late.

Being "on the Hill" was such an honor—I wore a suit for the first time in five years (the last time was at my *Glamour* interview). It was really satisfying to speak out on an issue that is so close to my heart. But now that I'm back in New York, it's hitting me that I'd better get focused on the wedding. With less than two months to go, most brides would be stressing about centerpieces; I've been worrying about having babies and whether you have to wear pantyhose in D.C. And Nick sure isn't helping. So far he's had one job: writing directions for the guests. After two weeks he finally did them, and they were wrong. Not "completely wrong," as he pointed out, but not "completely right" either, and that's pretty key when it comes to directions! All he cares about is that the alcohol flows freely and that the band doesn't play "Macarena."

**JUNE 10, 2005**  
**Living out a fantasy**

A month ago my book about living with cancer (*My So-Called Normal Life*) was published, and last night I gave a reading at Book Revue, an independent bookstore in my hometown of Huntington, New York. Growing up, I dreamed about giving a reading there—I didn't know what kind of book I'd write (it wasn't one about cancer), but I knew I wanted to. Even more special than reading from my own, actual book was that about 200 family and friends showed up, including my kindergarten teacher, who taught me to say "I'm finished" instead of "I'm done." (Turkeys are done; little girls are finished.)

The book chronicles a very rough three years for my family and me, and to be there last night feeling great, celebrating with so many people, was truly a triumph. It's been wild trying to balance job stuff, book stuff and wedding stuff (it's only six weeks away!), but I can't complain. Life—even life with cancer—is really good. ©

For past installments of Erin's diary, go to [glamour.com](http://glamour.com).

COURTESY OF ERIN ZANKHETT

“Sure, it sucks that I'll be taking cancer drugs on my wedding day, but I'm lucky to be alive.”