

“I don’t have to fight my leukemia alone”

Last November, *Glamour*'s Erin Zammett, 24, was diagnosed with chronic myelogenous leukemia (CML), a cancer that until recently proved fatal for most patients. Now she's battling back: participating in a clinical drug trial, helping to raise money for research and learning to lean on the people she loves. But even the relationship Erin cherishes most is changing.



Nick and me on the beach in Oregon — he's my best friend.

JULY 25, 2002

Sharing the burden

I just arrived in Portland, Oregon, where my drug trial is based. I'm here for my six-month bone marrow biopsy to see if I'm still responding to the medication—a combination of a new drug called Gleevec (a pill I take daily) and chemotherapy (injections, also daily, but only for two weeks a month). My boyfriend, Nick, came with me this time, to learn more about the disease that is so much a part of my life now.

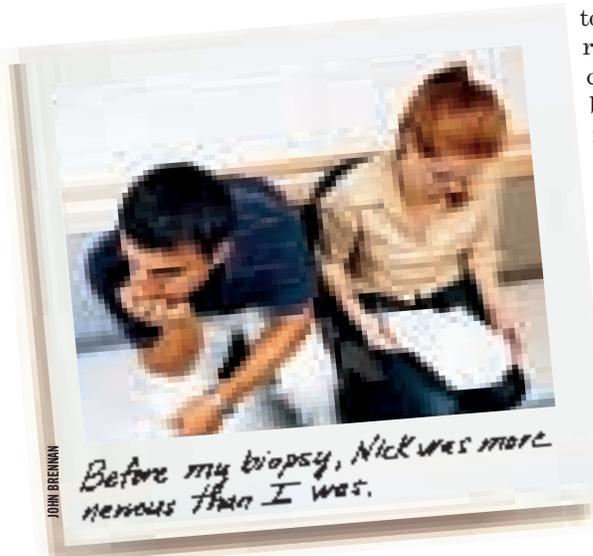
Nick wants to help, but he doesn't like to be told what to do, and somehow, no matter how nicely I ask him for things, all he hears is orders. The other day, he told me that I treat him like an assistant, not a boyfriend. When I protested, he said, "OK, you're right—I'm your sidekick." I hate that he thinks this, but in some ways he's right. I have so much going on, so many thoughts swirling around in my head, that I do need help.

In the three years we've been dating, Nick and I have never been on vacation together (spring break in the same hotel room with five of our friends doesn't count), so we're really excited about being here. Of course, he invited our friend Jeff to come down from Washington to play golf with him. And Nick hates to fly, so he had about eight gin and tonics on the plane. Needless to say, I drove us to the hotel. But between the one-way roads and bus-only lanes, I almost killed us. We were fighting before we even checked in.

Nick and I are so different. But that's what drew us to each other. We met at the beginning of my senior year at the University of Tennessee, when I was stressing about what to do with my life and

he'd just been fired from his part-time job at Banana Republic for not showing up to work. I was a straight-A student, a big campus achiever. Nick is smart, but learning wasn't really his "thing," so he spent his days playing Ping-Pong and Frisbee golf with his five housemates. But whenever he was with me, I was happy. He's a bit of a goofball and a huge dreamer, but he can also get deep and talk for hours, and he really understood me, which is no easy feat. We balanced each other perfectly: I revved him up, he calmed me down. We loved each other more than anything.

I know it seems on the outside like I have it all together, but I get really wrapped up in so-called small stuff—and *beyond* stressed about all the speeches, fund-raisers and TV appearances I've been doing (I was on *Nightline* tonight to talk about my cancer, for crying out loud!). Either I'm so stressed that I lash out at Nick or I'm so busy that I ignore him. I'm not sure which is worse. Last night he came into the city to see me (he lives out on Long Island, where he's finishing school and working for a computer company), but I had a speech to work on, so we lay on my bed and I wrote while he



Before my biopsy, Nick was more nervous than I was.

JOHN BRENNAN

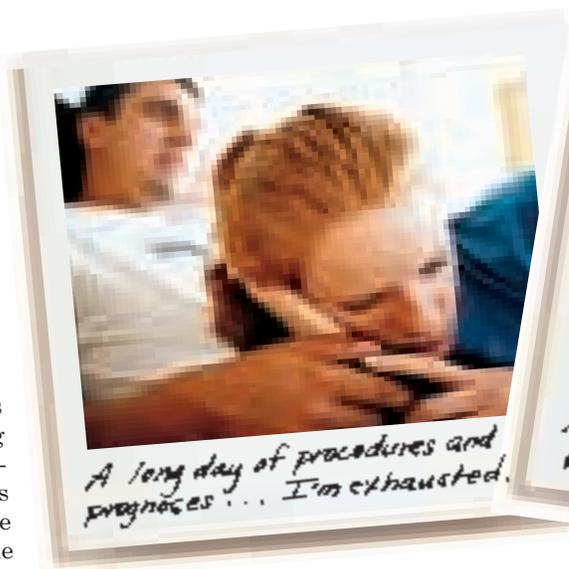
watched TV. After 20 minutes of not talking, he turned the volume on *South Park* way up to get my attention. It pissed me off, but all he wanted was a hug or a kiss or a “How was your day?” He moved to New York to be closer to me, and now he feels as if I’m pushing him away. I’m not trying to, but because of my cancer, there’s just so much on my plate that I don’t have room for fun with Nick. And I guess I’ve always been better at working than living. Nick is so good at enjoying life and living in the moment. His carefree attitude, his ability to make me laugh out loud—those are the things I love about him. The other day, when I was running late for an appointment and stripping off outfit after outfit in disgust, he told me to relax, that I was so beautiful I’d win the Miss Leukemia Pageant, if there were such a thing.

JULY 27, 2002

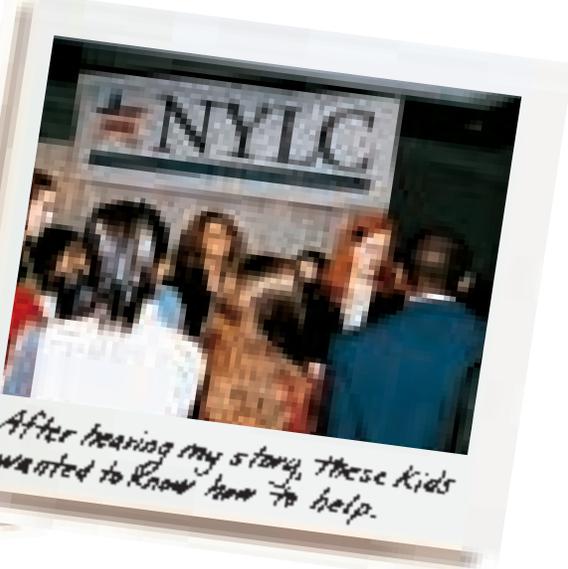
In and out of sync

Jeff arrived yesterday morning and spent the night on a cot at the foot of our bed—so much for a romantic evening. After dinner, I went back to the hotel room and watched *Monsters Inc.* while the boys went to the bar and drank Johnnie Walker. They woke me up when they came in, then again at 5:30 this morning when they were getting ready for golf, stumbling around the room, still drunk. I can’t get mad, though—if I didn’t have cancer, I’d be boozing it up with the boys, but that’s not an option now. And just because I can’t get wild doesn’t mean Nick shouldn’t—he’s only 23! I try not to give him a hard time, but I do get jealous.

After Jeff left for Washington this afternoon, Nick and I went to a great



A long day of procedures and prognoses... I'm exhausted.



After hearing my story, these kids wanted to know how to help.

restaurant for dinner and finally caught up. We talked about how great it is to love someone so much and know that the other person loves you back just as much. And how no matter how much we annoy each other—and we do—we feel lucky, even though one of us is clearly unlucky.

JULY 29, 2002

Cancer and fertility

Nick doesn’t even know what the M in CML stands for, but he was amazing today. He asked Dr. Mauro great questions, mostly about how I got this awful disease—a question no one can answer—and what I can do to improve my chances of being cured. Dr. Mauro said I’ve had a great response to the drug treatment but that I still need to have more. And if I don’t have a full response soon—if I don’t go into what they call molecular remission—we’ll have to consider other options. A bone marrow transplant (a risky procedure that could kill me) isn’t out of the question, as it’s still the only known cure for CML. Fortunately, I have a perfect bone marrow match in my younger sister, Meghan.

We also talked about babies. If I get a transplant, I’ll definitely lose my fertility. If I keep taking Gleevec—well, no one knows. Doctors don’t recommend getting pregnant while on the drug, and for patients who do conceive, they recommend going off the Gleevec to protect the fetus. But that would mean nine months of *not* taking the drug that appears to be saving my life. We discussed the possibility of my going off the drug for a short period so that I could harvest Gleevec-free eggs. Of course—here’s the catch—I’d have to get Nick’s sperm, too. There have been some successful

pregnancies from frozen eggs, but the chances are much better with frozen embryos—fully fertilized eggs. That’s why Nick and I have already discussed “having children” even though we don’t plan to get married anytime soon. I have no idea what I’ll do about the fertility thing. I want to finish the drug trial, which ends in February, before I make any more decisions.

AUGUST 16, 2002

More progress, more questions

Dr. Mauro called me on my cell phone tonight to discuss the results of the bone marrow test I had in Portland. Nick and I were waiting to pick up a pizza, but I really wanted to hear what Dr. Mauro had to say, so I sat on the curb and listened. It was a little weird to be chatting with my oncologist while people stepped around me with their steaming white pizza boxes, but that’s life now. And the news was good. On the most sensitive test, the PCR, my score was only .034, down from .092. Still, Dr. Mauro thought I might be upset that it hadn’t gone below .015 (closer to the goal for the trial), which is why he called to tell me himself.

There’s nothing like a 30-minute Q&A with your oncologist to set the mood for a Friday night. Nick and I went home and watched *Happy Gilmore*—a golf movie, of course—to zone out. Maybe we need to take a real vacation together, one that doesn’t include an invasive medical procedure. Our relationship has definitely gotten stronger since I was diagnosed, but it’s also gotten more emotional. I don’t know if it will survive the leukemia—I don’t even know if I will. All I know right now is that I love Nick, and I can’t imagine going through this without him. ©

The next installment of Erin Zammett’s diary will appear in January 2003.



This picture of me makes Nick cry. How could this girl get cancer?

TOP LEFT: JOHN BRENNAN. TOP RIGHT: RONNIE ANDREIN