

My sister and I both have cancer. What happens now?

Glamour's Erin Zammett has battled leukemia for two years. But watching her sister fight lymphoma is the most painful thing she's had to do yet.



Melissa (right) and I are facing cancer together.

JUNE 4, 2003

Melissa's chemo, day one

Melissa called me today, completely freaking out. Earlier in this column, I wrote that she'd be doing six months of chemo and one month of radiation, and that after that her cancer—Hodgkin's lymphoma—should be cured. She'd even be able to have more babies.

But we were a little too optimistic. The tests they ran after my nephew, Andrew, was born showed that her cancer was still progressing. She tried a type of chemo during her last month of pregnancy that wouldn't affect the baby, but unfortunately she didn't fully respond to it. Today they told her that she'd be doing Stanford V, a combination of five drugs that she'd take for three months, before doing the month of radiation.

Stanford V includes a drug called nitrogen mustard, which will almost certainly "render me fucking infertile," as Melissa so eloquently put it to me over the phone. She said she was going to refuse the drugs. Then her doctor called and told her to go look at the baby she already has. "If you want to be alive to watch him grow up, you'll have to do the Stanford V," the doctor said. "It's that simple." Melissa loved her doctor for being so straightforward. I like the truth too, but I need

at least a spoonful of sugar to swallow it.

Melissa starts chemo tomorrow. She'll go to the hospital for a few hours once a week and have the drugs administered by IV. Too bad she can't just pop pills like I do. I take a new drug called Gleevec that's helping patients with chronic myelogenous leukemia (CML) control their disease with few side effects. My treatment is easier, but at least with her disease there's an end in sight—it's likely she'll be cured. Despite my success so

Knowing that her treatment will make her go bald anyway, Melissa decided to get her head shaved first and have a wig made from her own hair. Rodolfo Valentin, a famous hairdresser who lost his mother to breast cancer, makes one wig a month to donate to a cancer patient; Melissa is this month's lucky recipient. Still, we'll all know what's underneath: a bald head, the universal symbol for cancer. My mom, Andrew, Meghan and I went to the salon with

Melissa for moral support. We mostly laughed at what a production it was and took pictures for our now overflowing cancer albums. But when Rodolfo held out the long strands of Melissa's hair and buzzed her scalp, my mom started to cry.

Melissa has always felt beautiful. Even cancer can't change that.



Our family's closer than ever.

far, my future is as uncertain as ever, and the only known cure for me is a bone marrow transplant, a procedure that could kill me.

JUNE 15, 2003

Melissa starts to look the part

Melissa, our younger sister, Meghan, and I have survived feathered bangs, perms and three "Rachel shags," but baldness is a first.

JULY 21, 2003

I'm losing control

Since April, the levels of leukemia in my blood have been so low that they are no longer quantifiable. This doesn't mean that I'm cured, but as far as CML patients go, I couldn't be much healthier. Now my mom and I are in Portland, Oregon (where my main oncologist, Dr. Mauro, is based), for a stem cell harvest, a procedure that could help me later if I have *(continued on page 147)*

KAREN PEARSON

(continued from page 144) to have a bone marrow transplant.

I went into the hospital early this morning to get all hooked up for the harvest. The nurses put an “out” line in my left arm and an “in” line in my right hand—the blood gets taken out, run through a giant machine that separates out the stem cells, and then it’s put back in. I had to lie completely still for three hours and squeeze a squishy ball so that my vein wouldn’t collapse. The machine beeped and vibrated, and if I stopped squeezing it made a horrible, flatlining sound. The nurses tried their best to keep me comfortable; when I started sweating, they tapped a few buttons and suddenly I was cool. I asked how they did it, and they said nonchalantly, “We just lowered the temp on the blood coming back into your body.” It was all too weird. I wanted off that machine badly.

It can take anywhere from two to four days to complete the harvest, but I was praying I could get it done in one. My veins burned, and my arms were so stiff that the thought of having to go back the next day and do the same thing made me sick. The nurses weren’t going to know if they had enough stem cells until that afternoon, so I left the hospital assuming I’d be back.

I had to stop at Rite Aid to get a few different medications to counter some of the side effects from the harvest, like low calcium, which causes a funny tingling in my mouth. After I waited in line for 20 minutes, the pharmacy couldn’t get me all the medications I needed. Then, on my way out, some kid about my age with designer clothes and tattoos all over his face asked me for money and cursed me when I walked by. I just put on my sunglasses and cried out of exhaustion. When I finally got back to the hotel and onto the elevator, I was pretty frustrated. Then, when the button for my floor wouldn’t light up, I was *pissed*. I hit it again and again. Truly furious—and fortunately alone—I finally just drove my knuckle as hard as I could into the button. It worked, but my knuckle was gushing blood. By the time I reached my room, my finger had blown up

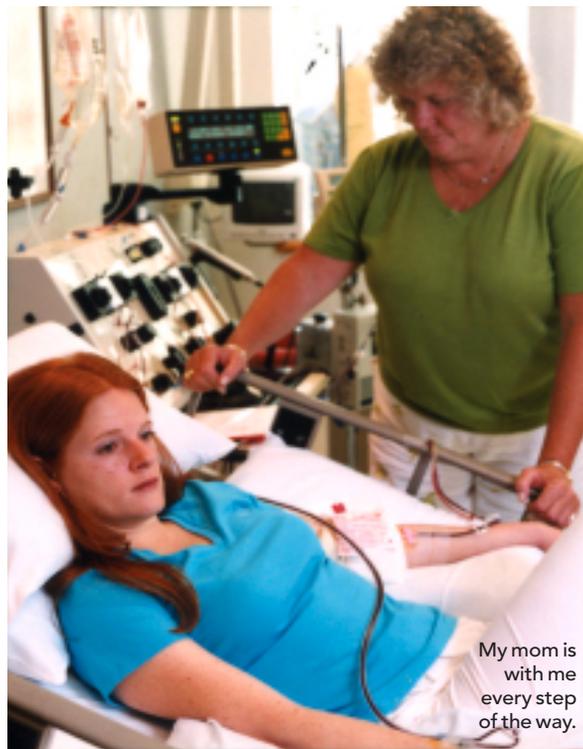


image. Even in high school when she was 20 pounds heavier and had those feathered bangs, she always thought she was beautiful. We tease her about her self-love, but really, I envy it.

She’s also amazingly tough. She’s had fevers, exhaustion and tests that make her slightly radioactive (she can’t go within 10 feet of Andrew for 48 hours after them), but she’s never complained. Of course, it helps that she has a beautiful baby boy, a husband to do midnight feedings and a mother to baby-sit. Most importantly, the treatment is working; she’s completely responded to her chemo. She begins radiation next month and should be in full remission by Christmas.

SEPTEMBER 17, 2003
Cancer and life go on

Melissa got tattooed today to begin her radiation. She was strapped to a table for 45 minutes while the doctors put tiny, permanent marks on her chest and stomach so that they’d

to twice its usual size. I just dropped down on the couch and sobbed myself to sleep.

Every time I have to do any cancer activity that’s more complicated than popping my daily pills, I find an excuse—my jeans feel too tight or my boyfriend, Nick, can’t get his car started—to freak out and punch a wall or something. Then I get a rage hangover: After acting like a psycho, I feel guilty and depressed for days. My mom wants me to see a shrink, and I probably should.

At least I’m free to go back home now. One of the nurses called to say they got the 5 million stem cells they needed. Thank God.

AUGUST 10, 2003
My sister, my role model

Melissa’s puffy from the prednisone, one of the drugs she takes daily (well, it’s partly from the prednisone and partly from the bacon double cheeseburgers she chases the pills with). And she’s bald—it’s been too damn hot this summer for the wig, so she usually just wears a scarf. She basically looks like the Pillsbury Doughboy, but it doesn’t faze her. She’s always had the best self-

know exactly where to line up the machine each day. After 20 days of radiation, she’ll be done. Then, just like me, she’ll wait and see. In some ways, achieving remission is the most difficult part of cancer. At least during treatment, when you’re constantly being poked and prodded, you know you’re doing something to fight it. Once that’s over, all you can do is wait and obsess about what the next test result will bring. At first I was a little jealous of Melissa’s “easier” cancer, thinking she’d beat it and that would be that. But now I see that even for her it’s not that simple. The radiation could cause breast cancer, heart problems or lung cancer. Her treatment could even cause leukemia—a type of leukemia that’s *more* dangerous than the kind I have. No matter how you look at it, there is no “good” kind of cancer. Cancer sucks. Period. And even if Melissa and I do beat our diseases—which I truly believe we will—we’ll always have that “what if” haunting us. What if our cancer comes back? ☹

To read past installments of Erin’s diary, and for future updates, go to glamour.com.

FROM TOP: JOHN BRENNAN, KAREN PEARSON. PHOTOGRAPHED AT RODOLFO VALENTIN SALON

MELISSA'S NEW HAIR
Rodolfo treated her like a queen. And in the end, she looked like one.



First, he took a mold of her head.

My mom cried when he started shaving.

But Melissa laughed through it all.

Her wig will take a few weeks to make.

This temporary one looks great till then.