

# CANCER BABBLE

By Chris Drnaso

## **Interlude One: He's wrong.**

So what the hell is an Interlude? Good question. Most of my story follows a chronological beginning to end pattern starting in 2006. An Interlude tells you what's happening in the present. Why would I do something like that? I don't know, but the truth is I couldn't figure out a better way to flip from the past to the present. I hope, Dear Reader, that you are OK with that.

Spring, 2019. I'm not sure of the exact date and, in truth, it's probably not important. It's funny in life how some things can be not a big deal, and then, in the blink of an eye, they become a big deal. In the spring of 2019, there appears to be a small amount of blood in my urine. This is so not a big deal, but blood in the urine is still blood in the urine and most medical professionals, as well as a none-to-bright lay person like me, would agree that blood should not be in one's urine. Having had my prostate removed due to cancer in July of 2018, (a scant eight months ago), I am convinced that this is just another of the myriad side effects that I've had to deal with since that traitorous and pesky prostate gland was removed. Good riddance, I say.

Believing I have nothing more than a urinary tract infection (UTI), I contact my urologist's office and ask if they would be kind enough to write an order for a urinalysis. This should be easy. I'll go for the urinalysis, followed by a healthy dose of antibiotics, the blood goes away, and I get on with my life. What, may I ask you, could be simpler?

That thing I said earlier, about how in life some things can be not a big deal and then they become a big deal, is about to come full circle. Instead of an order for a urinalysis, I received a call from my urologist. He immediately starts throwing around the 'C' word. I'm not ready to hear that word again for a long time; preferably never. I'm still dealing with issues from my last bout with cancer. Simply stated, he's wrong. There is no way this is cancer. I believe in my heart that he's wrong about this. I hope he's wrong; I pray he's wrong.

## **Chapter One-Support**

Because I'm not sure where to start this discussion, let's talk about support first. Support seems like a safe place to wade into these cancerous waters. You've been told you have cancer, and suddenly, all those things that seemed so important to you yesterday don't seem too important anymore. You're scared, you're angry, you're upset, but you are not alone.

The American Cancer Society hosts hundreds of Relay for Life events every summer, and I strongly suggest that if you are a cancer survivor, or caregiver, or a supporter that you attend a Relay. I've made it a point to attend at least one of these events each year since 2007. Survivors are given a purple tee shirt. Go to a Relay and look at some of the people in purple tees. There is nothing as heartbreaking as seeing children, some in strollers, wearing purple. It is a powerful message about who is blessed and who has drawn a really bad hand. Relay for Life events are special for another reason, they are meant as a celebration. It's even part of the Relay's catchphrase; *Celebrate, Remember, Fight Back*. Cancer all too often has more than its share of gloom and doom attached to it. Relays put a different spin on it. Go on-line, find a Relay near you, and experience it for yourself. God bless the American Cancer Society (ACS). The

ACS is one of many organizations that offer support for those dealing with cancer.

Beyond ACS, there are lots of cancer support groups. Churches and hospitals oftentimes will sponsor groups. There are even specific groups you can join where you can interact with people dealing with the same type of cancer that you have.

I chose the latter, and in 2007, after my diagnosis of anal cancer, I joined a support group with others whose anus had also betrayed them. Anal cancer is considered to be the 'clown prince' of cancers...arguably the funniest of all cancers. For those who flunked biology, that's the one where your butt hurts.

People don't like to think of it this way, but there's a pecking order to cancer and anal cancer is not high on the pecking order list. We discussed this in our support group, and we decided we were going to change that culture. We began planning a walk-a-thon. What better way to raise awareness? After all, hardly any causes have walk-a-thons, right?

If by some chance any of the 12 people who showed up for our walk-a-thon should read this book, I would like to say, 'thank you for your support'. It didn't go well ...hardly anyone showed up...we raised a total of \$81.00 which didn't even come close to covering the bar bill after the walk.

It wasn't for lack of effort; we really did try our best.

Take this for example. There are causes that adopt a certain color to help people identify with their cause. Pink is by far the most iconic example. If you see pink, you think of breast cancer, (or if you're a moron, Owens-Corning Fiberglass Insulation). We figured we would try that, so we decided on a color and had tee-shirts made up. I'm not going to tell you what

color we picked for our cause. All I'm going to say is, *"What were we thinking?"*

Our ideas seemed to go from bad to worse. Someone suggested that a slogan might help people identify with our cause. Years later, as I look back it's hard to believe we actually considered some of these suggestions for a slogan:

- "Anal Cancer: Get Behind a Great Cause"
- "Anal Cancer: We'll Crack This Yet!"

Several suggestions bordered on being Zen-like:

- "The Hole is Greater than the Sum of its Parts"
- "There is a Light at the end of the Darkest Tunnel"

But finally, after much debate, the back of our tee shirts read:

- "Rectum?...It Damn Near Killed Him"

It wasn't all bad. In fact we had offers from two companies who were interested in being our corporate sponsor. We politely declined the offer from the Roto-Rooter people, but I did want to thank the people at Charmin for their sponsorship. Charmin was very generous. They made up goody-bags for all the walkers and included some of their most popular and absorbent products.

In retrospect, one of the worst things about anal cancer was living in fear of alien abduction. There seems to be a lot of rectal probing in an alien abduction. No thank you, I was already getting plenty of that.

OK, it's time for full disclosure. I tend to make stuff up, but keep in mind that I'm a writer; a storyteller; a fabricator. On that note, none of that stuff I wrote about the walk-a-thon to raise awareness for anal cancer is true.

The real truth is, in 2007, going through cancer for the first time, I was scared. Cancer is scary, but it was less scary on the days that I had the ability to laugh at cancer. I tried to look at cancer like it was the bully in the schoolyard. If you can laugh at the bully, it empowers you. Cancer is not a sacred cow, and if it's OK with you, I'd like to spend as much time in this book as I can thumbing my nose at cancer. I want to put a thumb tack on cancer's chair. I'd like you to join me when I go to cancer's house and leave a bag of flaming poop on his doorstep.

Now, on the other end of the cancer pecking order spectrum is breast cancer. I was awed the first time I attended a breast cancer fundraiser with my wife. I went expecting to see wailing and gnashing of teeth but there was none of that. As horrible as cancer is, and I can only imagine how devastating it is for a woman to go through breast cancer, these brave women put aside their angst and their grief and celebrated life. Many group members carried pictures of a mother or aunt or sister or friend who had fought and lost the battle, but I saw no look of despair on the faces of the women carrying these pictures. Instead, there was a look of steely resolve and determination in their eyes. Every man, woman, and child had a reason to be at that event, and I'm sure many of those reasons were tragic, but for those few hours the collective thought was, SCREW YOU CANCER.

Laughter outweighed tears as humor was a huge part of the event. Tee shirts and signage that read 'Save Second Base' and 'Save the Ta-Tas' were everywhere along with numerous clever and inspirational messages. My favorite was a tee shirt that read, *'Of course they're fake...the real ones tried to kill me'*. Bras, mostly dyed pink, were everywhere. It was as if the participants challenged themselves to see how many uses they

could come up with for their old bras. At several places along the walk, bras were strung across the street between trees. The fire hydrants wore bras, and in some cases skirts and tiaras. Bras were hung from flagpoles.

There was even one man walking around wearing a bra, but as it turned out he wasn't part of the event. He apparently was dealing with some separate issues. They asked him to leave.

And I think we all know why breast cancer gets so much support. Because they're BREASTS! "Breasts," (you can't see me now, but I have a dreamy faraway look of wonder and awe on my face as I whisper the word aloud). Breasts have always been an iconic part of the American landscape. I grew up in the mammary infatuated 1950s: *The Golden Age of Bosoms*. Thinking back on my youth, it was unfair for a young boy to be figuratively smacked in the face by a giant boob at every turn. Jane Mansfield and Marilyn Monroe were at the top of the Double-D list. Breasts are so mesmerizing that even Sophia Loren couldn't help but stare at Jayne Mansfield's impressive cleavage in a famous and iconic photograph from the era. Don't play dumb with me, you know damn well which picture I'm talking about.

Lest I linger too long on this subject let me bid adieu by asking, "Do you know who has a nice rack?" My Uncle Nuncio, I'm serious; if you can picture Sasquatch with about a 'B' cup that would give you a pretty good idea of what my uncle looks like. Nuncio, a sweet but clueless man, had no problem going outside and doing his yard work without a shirt on. I can picture him now. He's waving to the neighbors as he jiggles along on his riding lawn mower. It is a disturbing image to say the least. And the grief he caused my aunt; I can still hear her, "Nuncio...put a shirt on...there's enough suffering in the world."

I love my Uncle Nuncio, hairy boobs and all. Last year for his birthday I bought him a tee shirt...it read, *'Save the Ta-Tas'*.

Here we go again, I didn't have an Uncle Nuncio, but most of what I wrote about this breast cancer walk is true. It was therapeutic to see all these people who had been victimized by this disease gather together for a few hours to show their support for one another. Whether you have cancer or are caregiving for someone who does, remember this; there is support for you out there, and support is a big deal when going through cancer. No matter how powerful your resolve is on the first day of cancer you may find that this disease, in time, will wear down your tenacity.

You don't have to go through it alone.

The thought of anyone going through it alone is just plain sad.