

IN EVERY ISSUE

I Laughed

BY KRISSY DIETRICH GALLAGHER

When it comes to cancer, sometimes all we can do is laugh.

I laughed. I know that sounds outrageous, but it's what came out. I leaned my head back until it hit the wall behind me and let out a strange chuckle. It wasn't that I didn't get it. I got it. But there wasn't anything else I could do at that moment. Scream in anguish? Cry out in despair? Rage against the doctors sitting before me who calmly delivered this horrific news?

No, Austin was asleep on my chest. The least I could do was let him sleep. He was peaceful. So I put my head back and laughed.

It had been five weeks since the storm that is cancer took over our lives. Five weeks since six tumors were found on the kidneys of our 10-month-old son. Five weeks since we'd learned new terminology, developed new routines, allowed a new definition of normal to settle over our lives.

And we were doing well. We made it through his first surgery and 11 days in the hospital; we'd started weekly chemotherapy. That kicked-in-the-stomach feeling we got each time we remembered our child had cancer was fading. We were still standing, and we were as optimistic as ever.

And then, things changed. The primary tumor that was supposed to be getting smaller under the evil magic cast by chemo fought back. I found myself measuring Austin's abdominal circumference—wrapping a ribbon around his belly and holding it up to a yardstick: 50 centimeters around on Sunday, 51 on Monday. By Tuesday, he was admitted for another CT scan.

Then the parade of six doctors marched into our room. Austin was asleep against my chest. Mark and I breathed and looked at each other.

Finally, they asked if we had questions. Yes, like why did this happen, and what about the chemo, and is he going to live?

But we were not ready for this news. The tumor on the right had grown—big time. It had grown by 50 percent to the size of a small watermelon! They said this with straight faces. They shared what they'd seen on the scan, what they planned to do, what we might learn next. Finally, they asked if we had questions. Yes, like why did this happen, and what about the chemo, and is he going to live? That was the question, the only question: Is Austin going to live?

But there were no answers. We faced the possibility that Austin's cancer was much worse than we'd first thought, and that something rare and deadly was happening inside his little body.

Everything shifted. Treatment options I had so wanted to avoid, such as radiation, seemed acceptable. Roads I had never wanted to go down, like kidney failure, seemed almost bearable. Nothing was off the table now. There was only one scenario, one outcome, that I could not, would not, accept.

The tumor and the kidney it devoured came out three days later in a five-hour surgery. A 6-pound weight lifted off our shoulders and out of his small body, one tiny step in the right direction. But we waited for the news that mattered: the pathology results that would define the rest of Austin's cancer treatment and the rest of our lives.

After six days, our oncologist showed up, bouncing like a kid with a secret. Then this glorious news: The skinny boy lying in my arms with an 8-inch scar across his belly and tubes in his nose and chest, with five tumors still growing on his only remaining kidney ... this boy would be fine. The tumor grew for other strange reasons. But this cancer was still treatable, still beatable.

I held my baby and we spun around the room, dancing, crying. Then, imagining the sun in the sky outside the hospital walls, I leaned my head back with my face toward the ceiling and I laughed.

Ohio writer Krissy Dietrich Gallagher reports that Austin, almost 3, is doing well. Follow his progress at krissygallagher.wordpress.com.

Send us your story! Whether you are a patient, survivor, caregiver, or health care provider, we want to hear your stories about cancer and the people, places, and moments of the journey for possible publication. They can be funny, poignant, or practical. Send them to editor@curetoday.com with "My Story" in the subject line. Please limit your story to 1,500 words, and include your name and e-mail address in the e-mail.