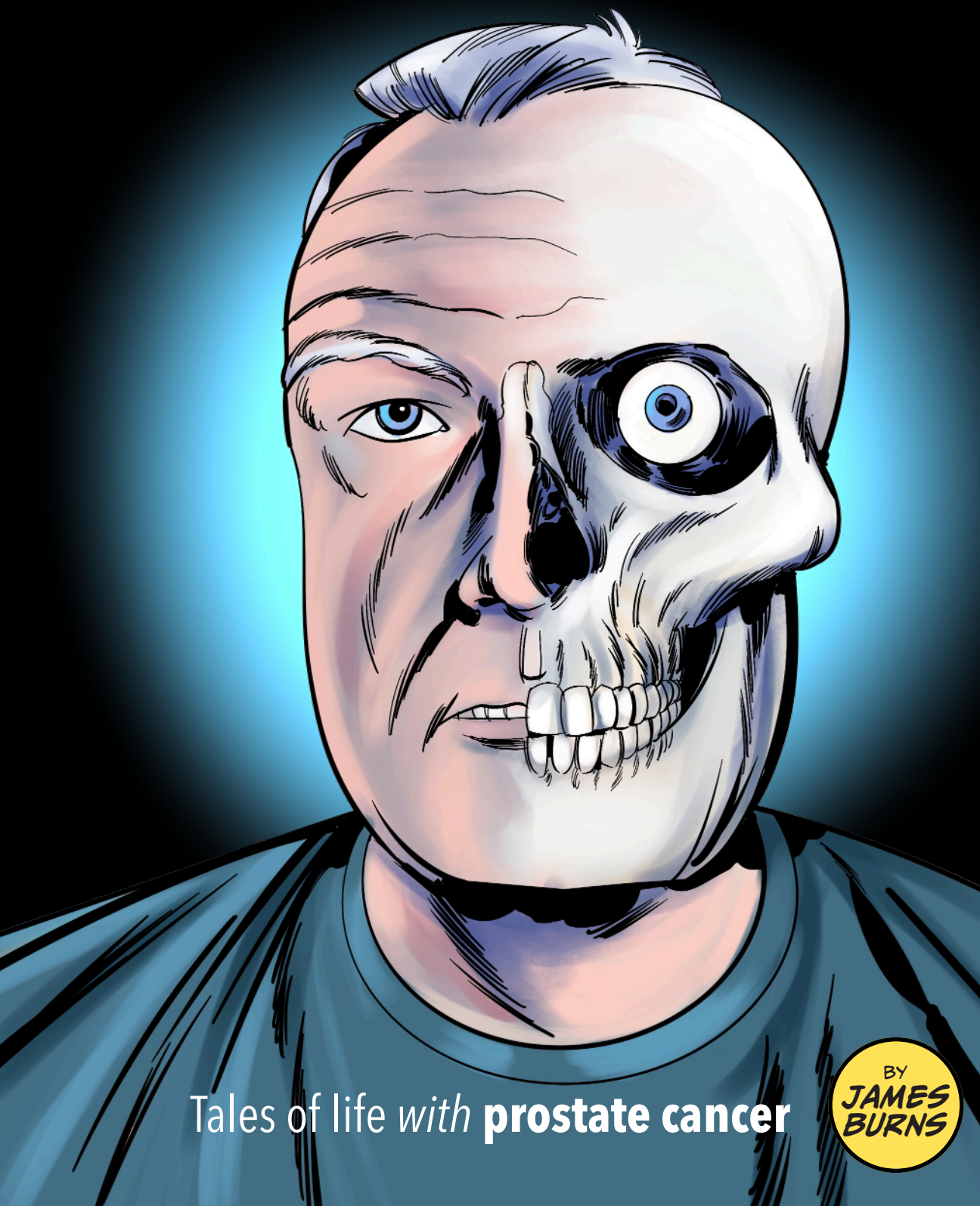




*half*LIFE



Tales of life with **prostate cancer**

BY
**JAMES
BURNS**



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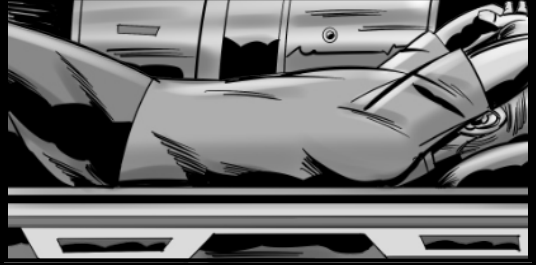
*half***LIFE**



MY STORY, SO FAR...

This comic is the **second** in a series of comics about my cancer experience. The first one was called *The Death of Me?* and dealt with my diagnosis and initial treatment.

In December of 2023 I was diagnosed with **stage IVa** (spread to local lymph nodes) prostate cancer. I was told it was aggressive, and I would have to treat it aggressively in order to have a chance of it being “curative.”



In the spring of 2024, I had 28 sessions of **EBRT** (External Beam Radiation Therapy) at **Emory Winship Cancer Institute** in Atlanta.

At the end of those sessions, you get to **ring a bell**, to signify that you’ve finished with your treatment.

In truth, **nothing** could be further from **the truth**.

After treatment, there’s a long period of waiting. Waiting for blood tests. Waiting for results. And worrying. Worrying about whether it worked. Worrying whether the cancer was still there, and spreading.

I was also taking drugs that suppressed my testosterone, and that caused lots of side effects like fatigue, brain fog, and muscle loss.



Everyone’s cancer experience is different, unique, and **their own**.

This is my attempt to explain what it’s been like for me, but I hope that others going through this disease might find some commonality with *their* experiences.

My hope is that maybe they’ll be reassured that they’re **not** going through this alone.

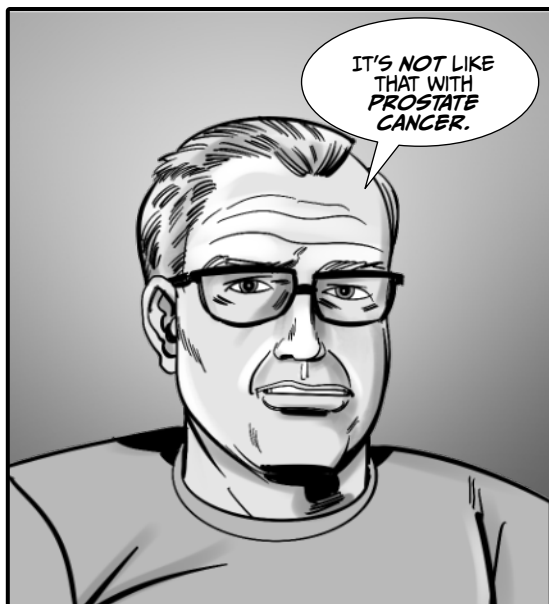
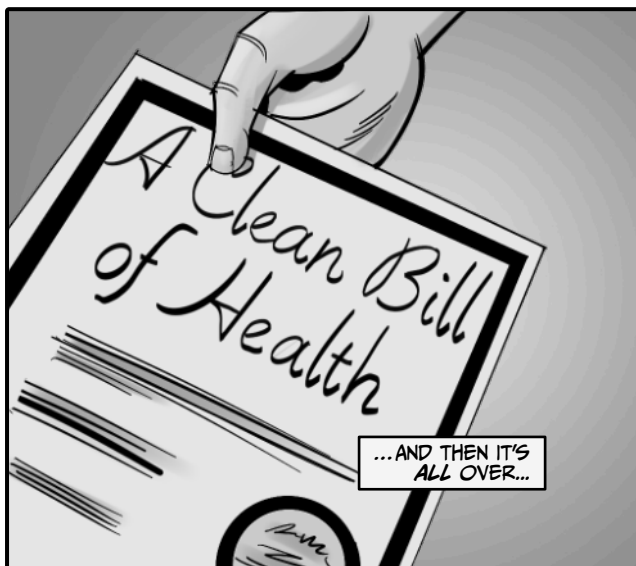


JAMES



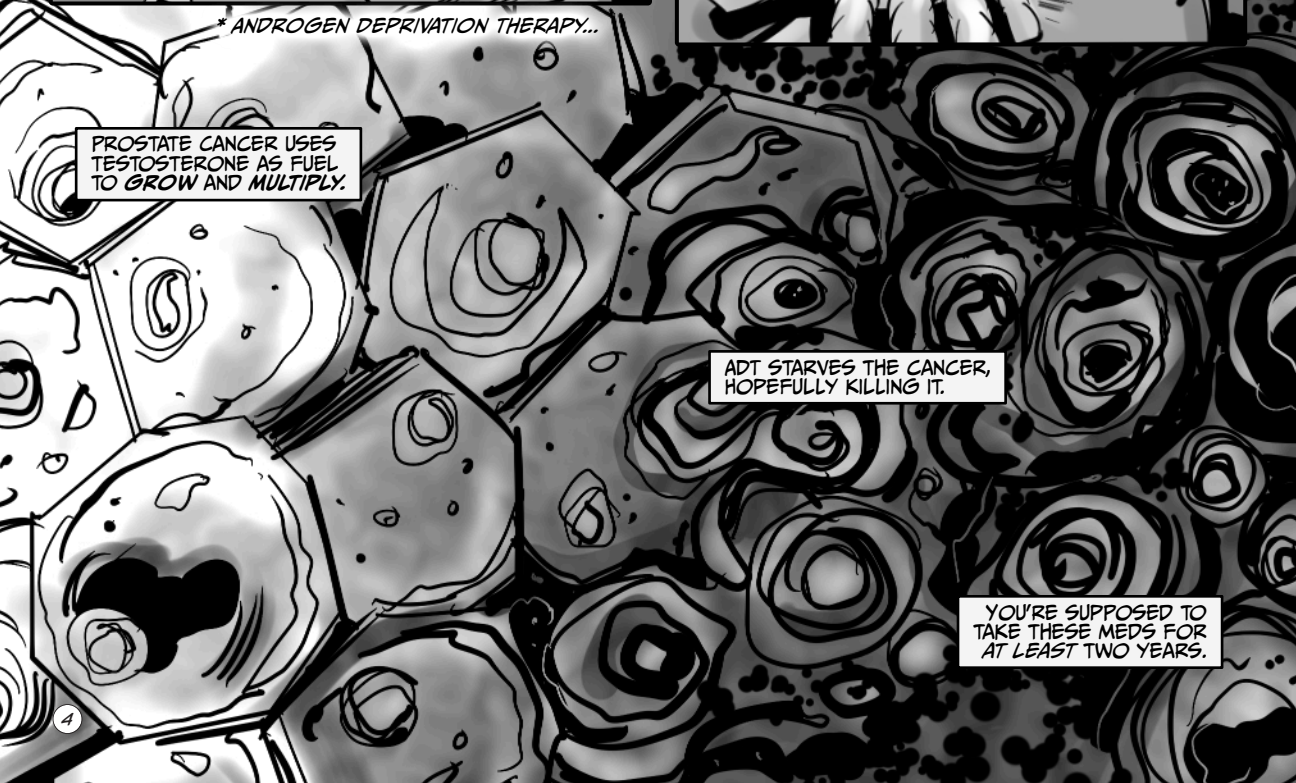
IT WAS GREAT TO GET HOME AFTER MY CANCER TREATMENT...

...BUT IT WASN'T OVER YET.





50/50





THIS HORMONAL THERAPY COMES
WITH A LOT OF SIDE EFFECTS.



LIKE FATIGUE AND
MUSCLE LOSS...

(I CAN SEE MY MUSCLES
LITERALLY MELTING
BEFORE MY EYES...)



...HOT FLASHES...



... BRAIN FOG...

(IT'S LIKE I'VE
FORGOTTEN ALL
MY NOUNS!)



...AND RAMPANT
MOOD SWINGS.

(CANGER, CRYING,
SADNESS...YOU NAME IT)

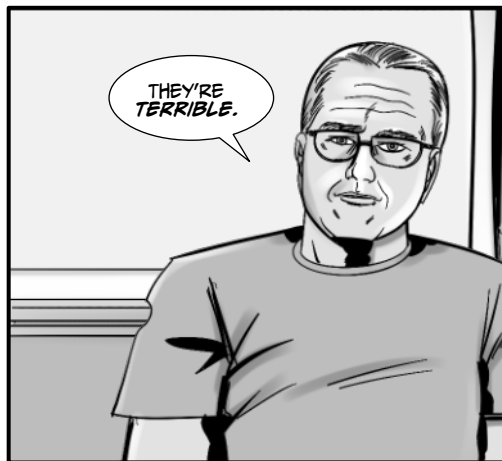


I'M TOLD THAT
IT'S LIKE
MENOPAUSE IS
FOR WOMEN.



LET'S TALK A LITTLE MORE ABOUT THE HOT FLASHES...

...OR "HOT SWEATS," AS I CALL THEM.



THEY'RE TERRIBLE.



THEY HAPPEN ALL DAY...

...BUT ARE MUCH WORSE AT NIGHT.



I WAKE UP AND KICK OFF THE COVERS...



FIRST, MY HEAD GETS DAMP...

...AND THEN THE REST OF MY BODY.



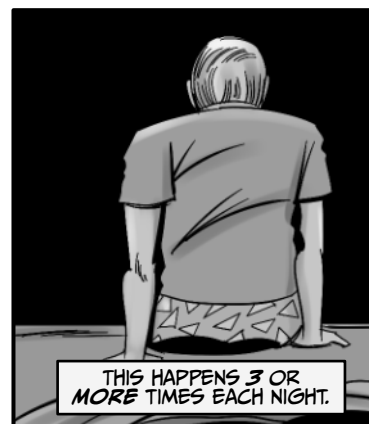
AT SOME POINT I PULL OFF MY PYJAMA BOTTOMS AND LAY BENEATH THE FAN.



...AND AFTER A WHILE, I'M FREEZING...

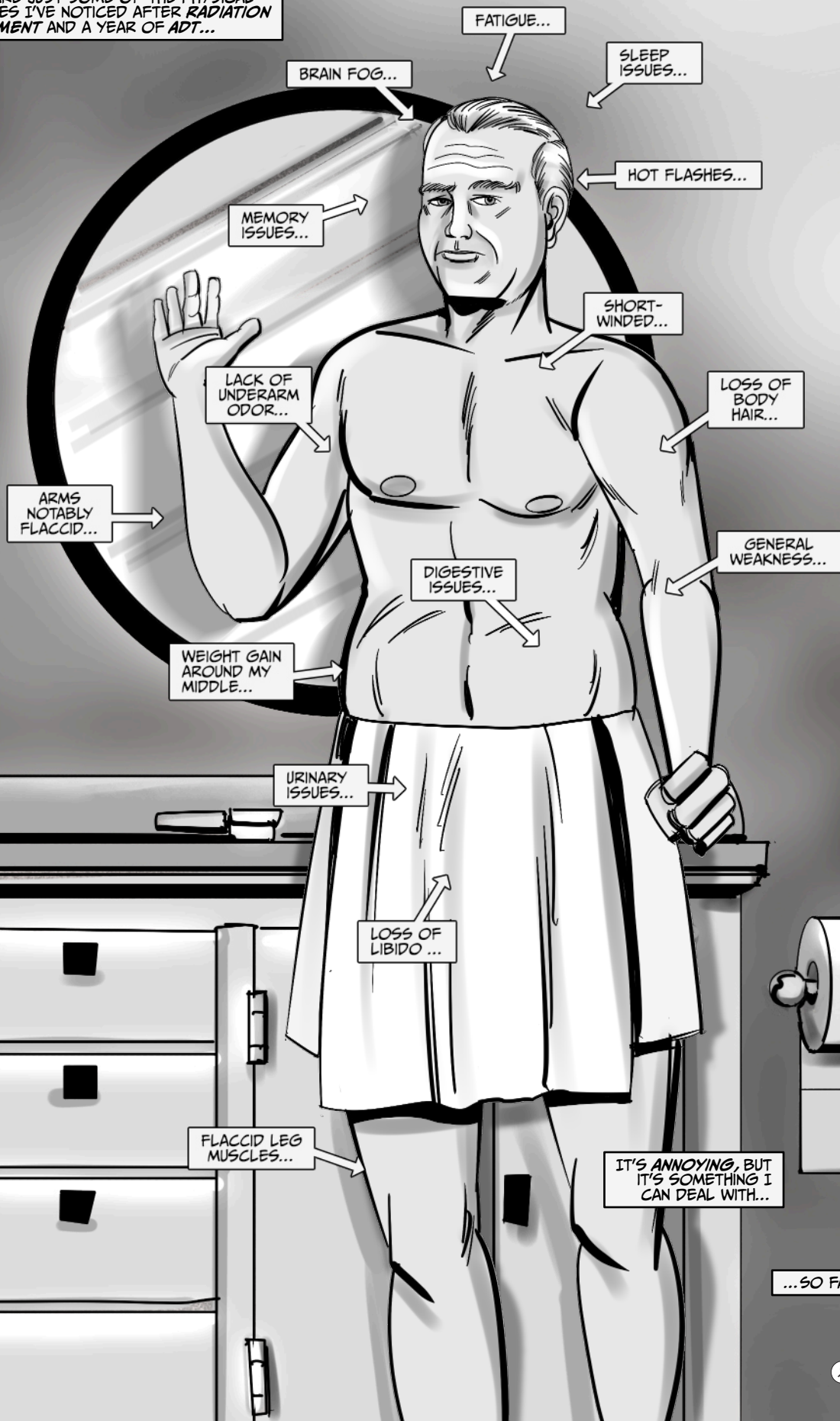


...AND PULL THE COVERS BACK ON.



THIS HAPPENS 3 OR MORE TIMES EACH NIGHT.

HERE ARE JUST SOME OF THE PHYSICAL
CHANGES I'VE NOTICED AFTER RADIATION
TREATMENT AND A YEAR OF ADT...

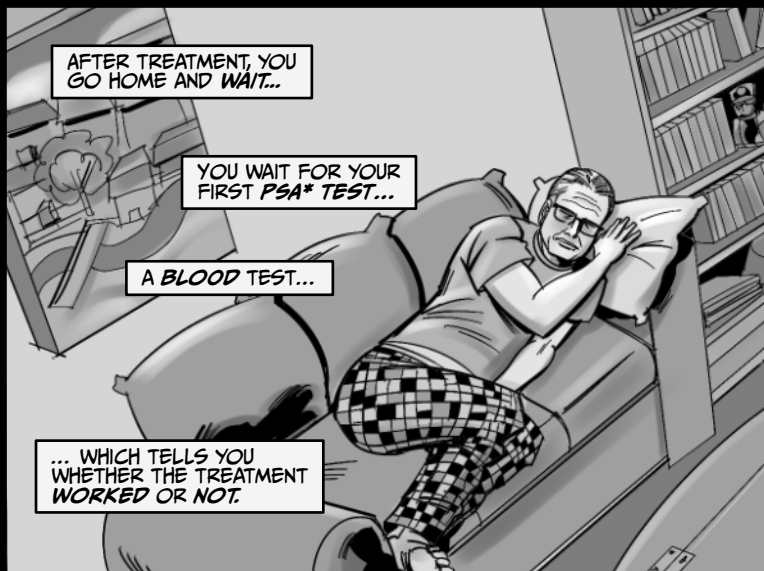






* ATHENS, GEORGIA...





AFTER TREATMENT, YOU
GO HOME AND WAIT...

YOU WAIT FOR YOUR
FIRST PSA* TEST...

A BLOOD TEST...

... WHICH TELLS YOU
WHETHER THE TREATMENT
WORKED OR NOT.

PSA = PROSTATE SPECIFIC ANDROGEN



CANCER CELLS EXPRESS
PSA, SO THAT'S THE WAY
YOU TRACK PROGRESS.



BUT BECAUSE DYING CANCER
CELLS SHED A BUNCHA PSA...

...YOU DON'T GET YOUR FIRST TEST
UNTIL 3 MONTHS AFTER RADIATION.



...SO YOU WAIT FOR IT...

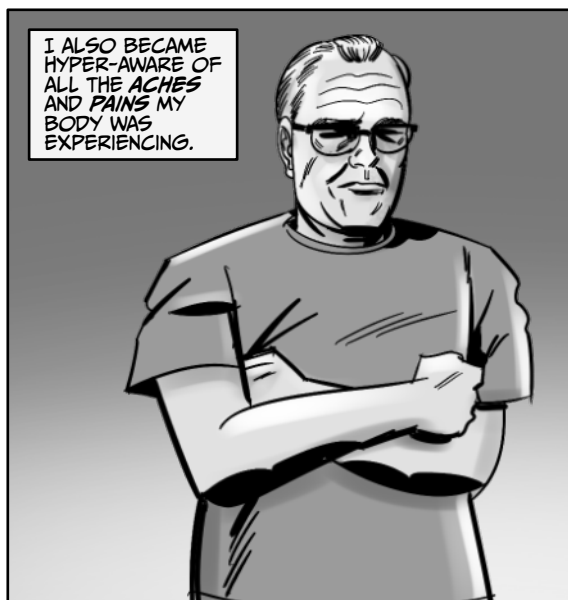


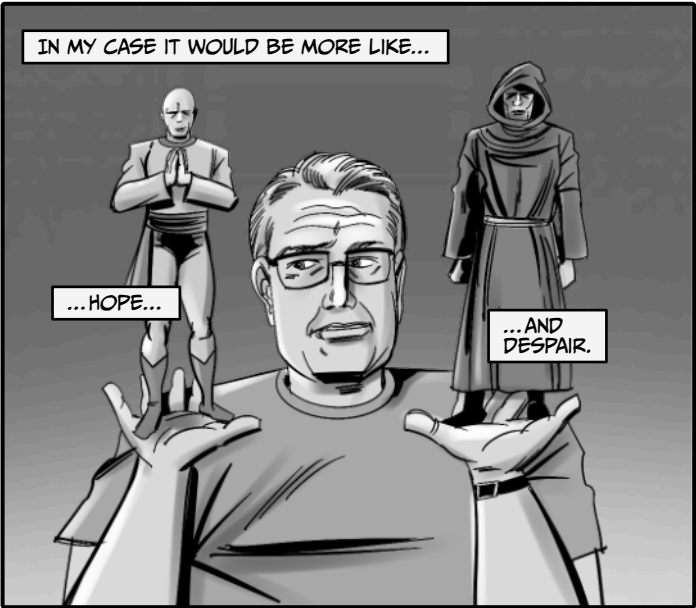
...AND YOU IMAGINE THE
WORST...

...AND YOUR MIND IS FILLED
WITH DARK THOUGHTS.

EACH NIGHT I LAY AWAKE AND THINK
ABOUT WHAT *MIGHT* BE HAPPENING TO ME.

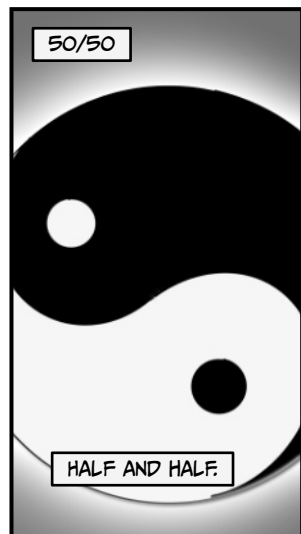








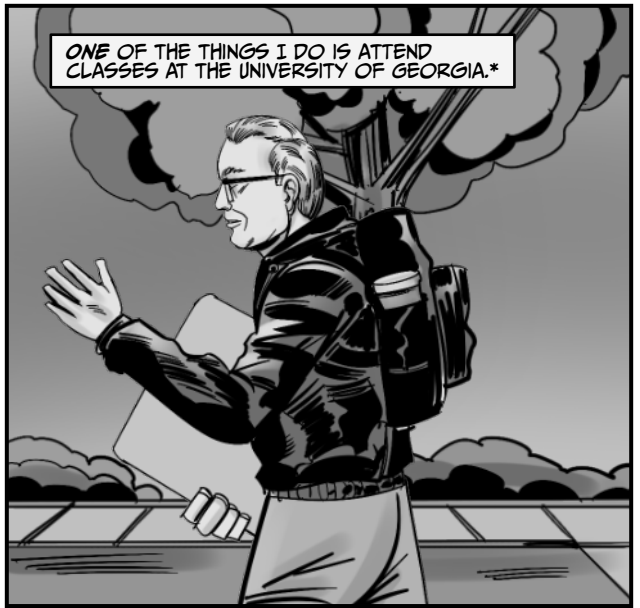
* CANCER WITH SPREAD TO THE LOCAL LYMPH NODES.





SOMETHING THAT **HELPS** IS TO **KEEP BUSY.**

FOR ME, IDLENESS SEEMS TO ENCOURAGE RAMPANT, **SPECULATIVE** THOUGHTS.



ONE OF THE THINGS I DO IS ATTEND CLASSES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA.*

* SEE MY COMIC "OLD MAN ON CAMPUS"...



I TAKE **ART CLASSES** TWICE A WEEK.

DESPITE ALREADY HAVING A **FINE ART DEGREE.**



I ALSO EXERCISE REGULARLY, GOING TO **THE GYM.**

IT SEEMS TO HELP WITH THE **FATIGUE.**



...AND I TAKE REGULAR **NAPS** IN THE AFTERNOON.



I ALSO SPEND TIME TRYING TO DO **CREATIVE THINGS...**

...LIKE DRAWING **THESE COMICS.**

...AND OTHER CREATIVE THINGS....



FOR INSTANCE, OVER A YEAR BEFORE MY DIAGNOSIS I ORDERED A KNOCK-OFF **STRATOCASTER**.

I HAD **NO** MUSICAL TALENT...



... BUT I THOUGHT...

...**MAYBE** I COULD LEARN?



TO BE FAIR...

...IT **MIGHT** HAVE BEEN SOME SORT OF MID-LIFE CRISIS.

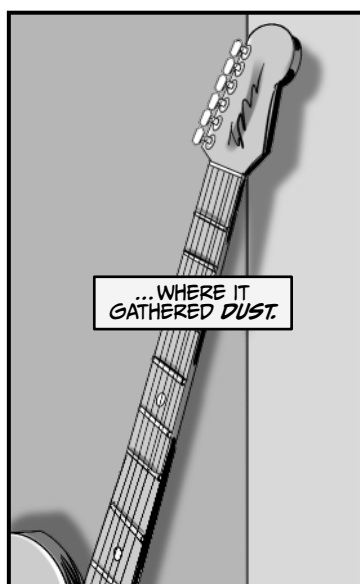


I TRIED PLAYING IT A FEW TIMES...

... BUT IT JUST SEEMED LIKE MY FINGERS WERE JUST **TOO FAT** TO MAKE **CHORDS**.



SO I SET IT ASIDE...



... WHERE IT GATHERED **DUST**.

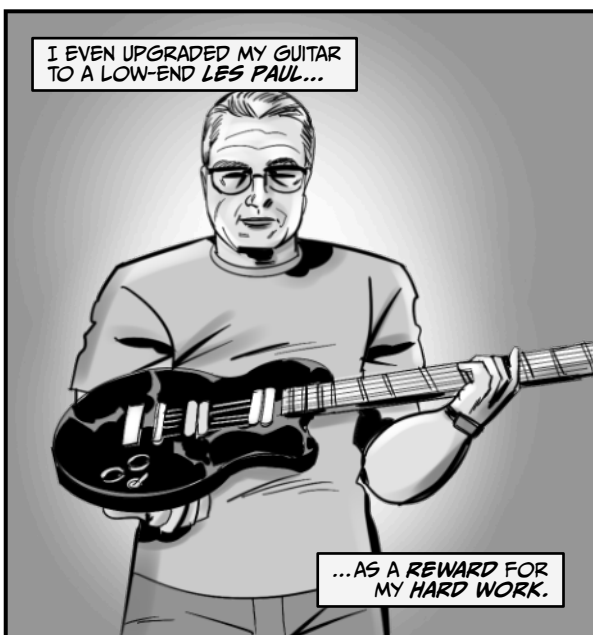


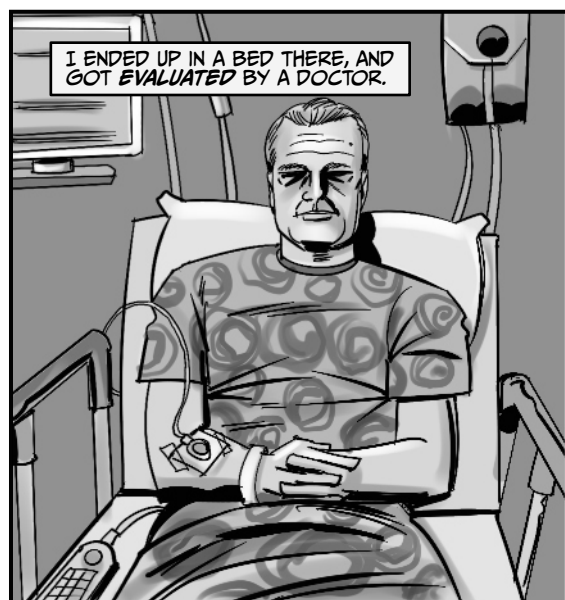
AFTER **DIAGNOSIS** I PICKED IT UP AGAIN...



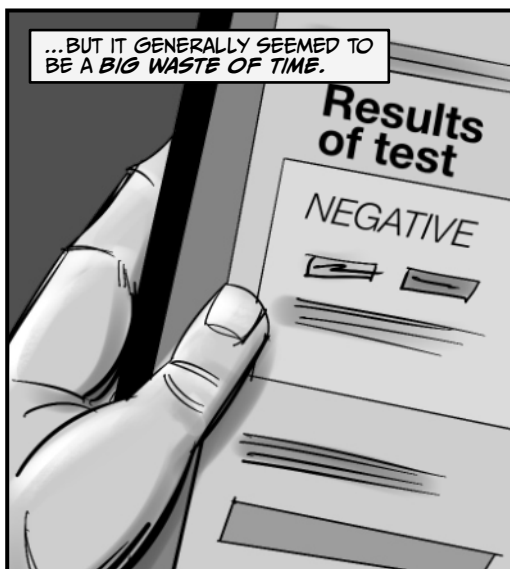
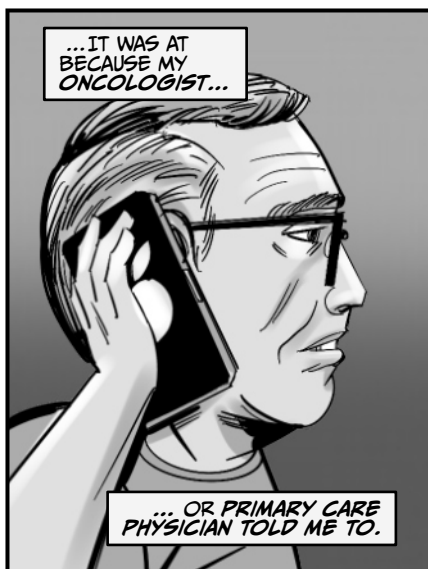
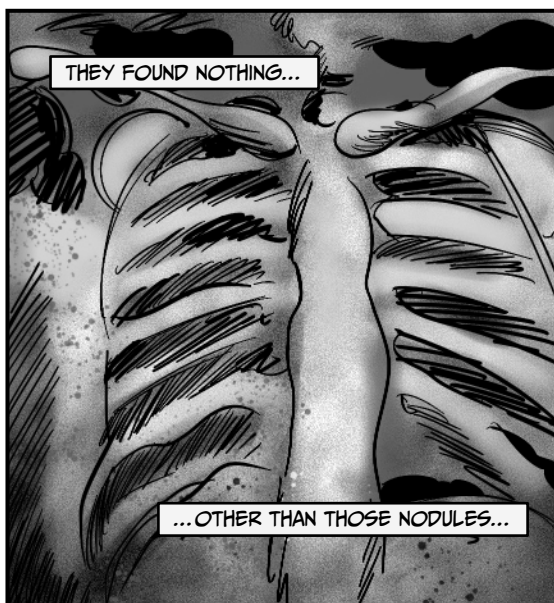
... AND SOMETHING JUST **CLICKED**.

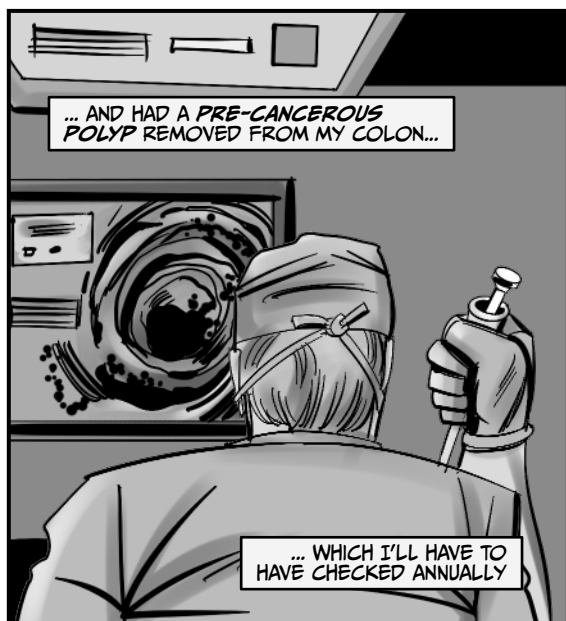
NO, I DIDN'T SUDDENLY BECOME **TALENTED**...











* I FIRST MENTIONED IT IN MY LAST COMIC...

REBECCA, AS ALWAYS, IS MY
ANCHOR, MY *SOULMATE*.



SHE WAS THE *ONE* PERSON I COULD
TALK TO DURING *ALL* OF *THIS*.



TALKING ABOUT MY FEARS
SEEMS TO *HELP*...



... BUT I WORRY ABOUT THE
BURDEN I'M PUTTING ON HER.



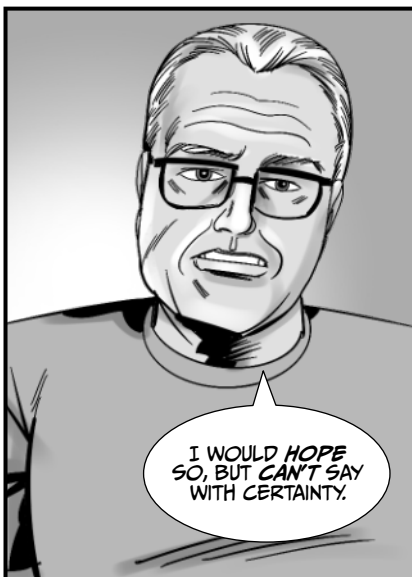
I OFTEN ASK
MYSELF...

... WOULD I BE AS
LOVING AND AS
SUPPORTIVE AS
SHE'S BEEN...

...IF OUR
ROLES WERE
REVERSED?



I WOULD *HOPE*
SO, BUT *CAN'T* SAY
WITH CERTAINTY.



50/50

LIGHT/
DARK

ON/OFF





WE SOMETIMES
USE *SHORT HAND*
WHEN WE TALK TO
EACH OTHER
ABOUT MY
DISEASE.



WE EVEN USE
GALLOWS
HUMOR.

IT'S HOW
WE COPE.



FOR INSTANCE, IN THE MORNING,
SHE *MIGHT* ASK ME:

HOW ARE
YOU DOING?



... AND I WOULD REPLY...

NOT BAD...

...EXCEPT FOR
THE *CANCER*,
OF COURSE.



AND WE'D *LAUGH*.



...BUT THERE WAS *SADNESS*
ALONG WITH THE *LAUGHTER*.



I *HATE* PUTTING ALL THIS ON REBECCA.



DESPITE HER HELP...

...I HAVE HAD PERIODS OF...



...IS IT *DEPRESSION*?

...*ANXIETY*?



...IT'S *WORSE* IN THE MIDDLE OF THE *NIGHT*.

THAT'S WHEN I THINK OF WHAT *MIGHT* HAPPEN TO ME...



I FIGURED THAT I SHOULD GET *DIAGNOSED*...

... BUT TRYING TO GET *HELP* HAS BEEN A *STRUGGLE*.



I ASKED MY *ONCOLOGIST*...



...WHO CONNECTED ME WITH A *SOCIAL WORKER*...



...WHO GOT ME AN APPOINTMENT WITH A *NURSE-PRACTITIONER*.

THIS PROCESS TOOK ME *MONTHS*.



WHEN I FINALLY WENT TO HER OFFICE,
I WAS TOLD SHE WAS *SICK* THAT DAY...



... BUT WOULD TALK
TO ME VIA *ZOOM*.

I HATE *ZOOM*.



SO I FOUND MYSELF IN
AN *EMPTY* OFFICE...

...TALKING TO A LAPTOP THAT
WAS PERCHED ON A DESK.



I FELT *AWKWARD* AND
SOMEWHAT *DISCONNECTED*
FROM THE WHOLE PROCESS.

WE TALKED FOR
ABOUT *20 MINUTES*...



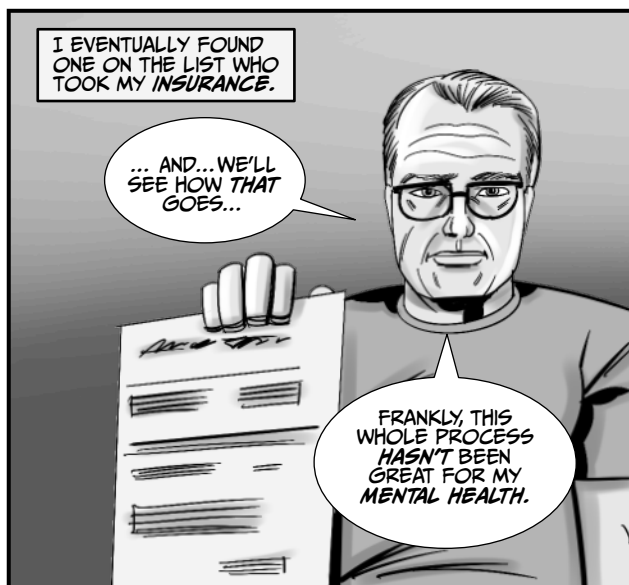
I EXPLAINED ABOUT WANTING TO
BE PROPERLY *DIAGNOSED*...

SHE SAID MY ANXIETY WAS
TOTALLY UNDERSTANDABLE...



IN THE END I WAS OFFERED AN *ANTI-
DEPRESSANT* TO HELP ME *SLEEP*...*

...AND A LIST OF THERAPISTS.

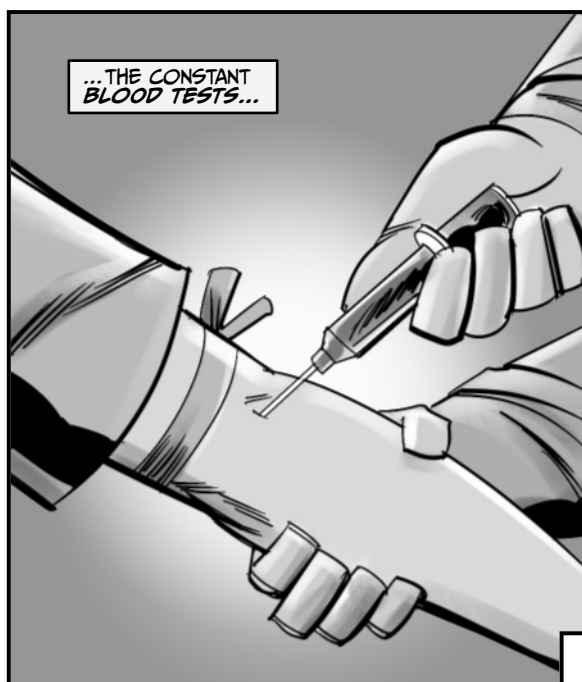


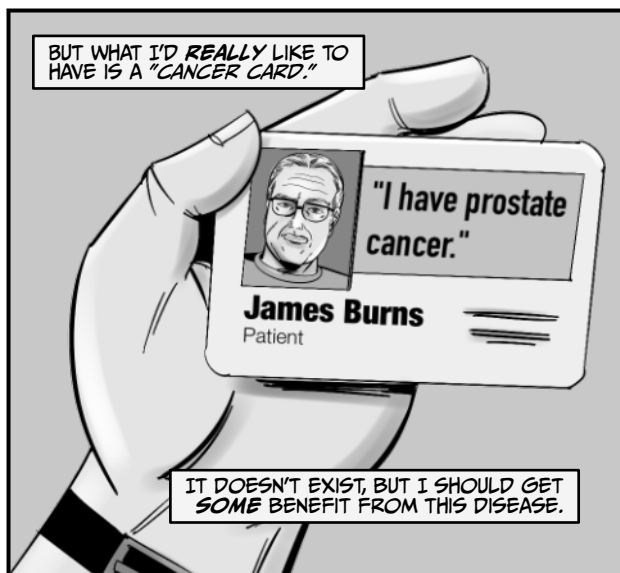
I EVENTUALLY FOUND
ONE ON THE LIST WHO
TOOK MY *INSURANCE*.

... AND... WE'LL
SEE HOW THAT
GOES...

FRANKLY, THIS
WHOLE PROCESS
HASN'T BEEN
GREAT FOR MY
MENTAL HEALTH.

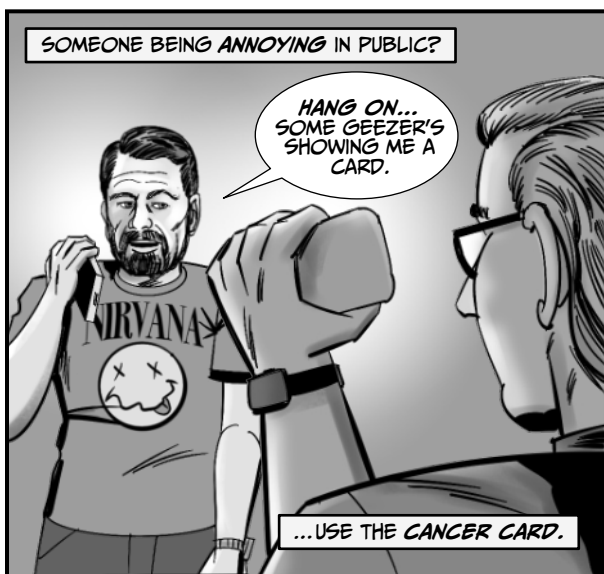
* I TURNED THE DRUGS DOWN...FOR NOW.

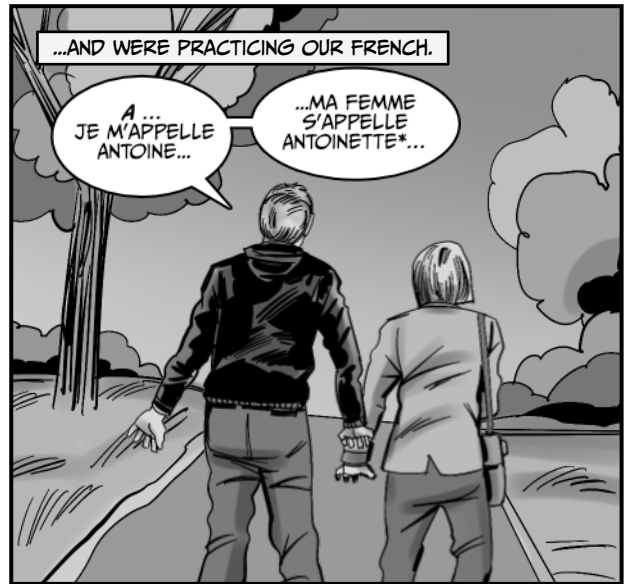
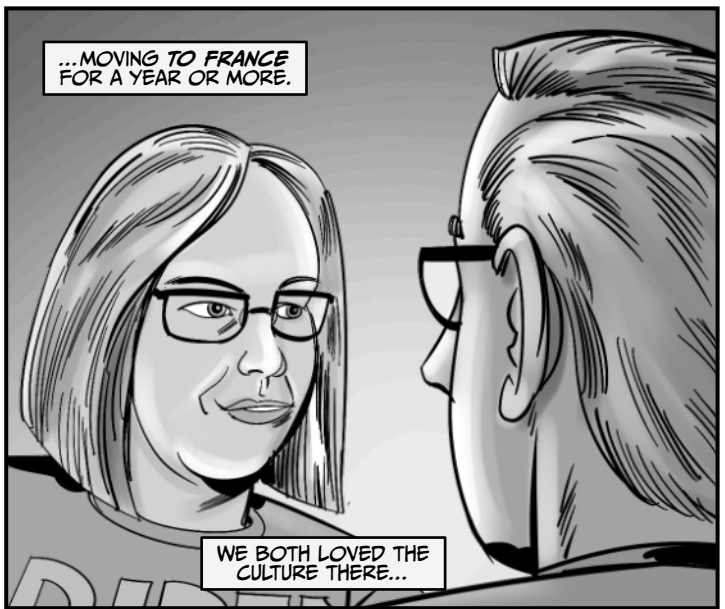




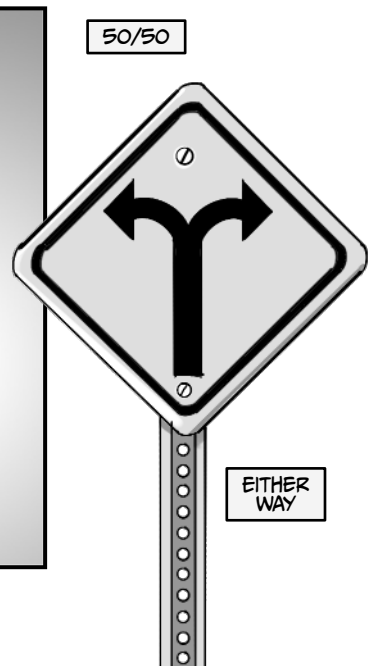
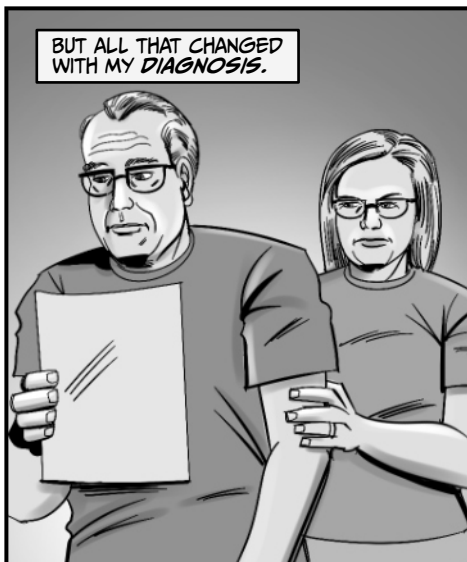


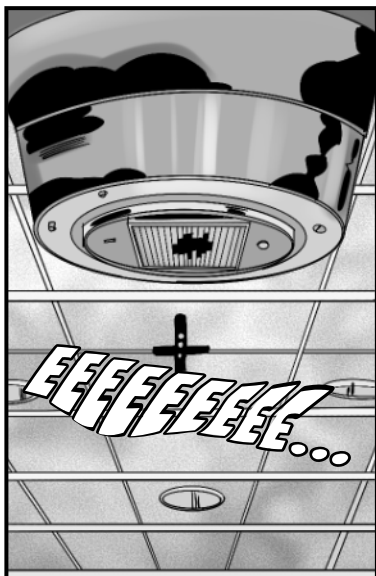
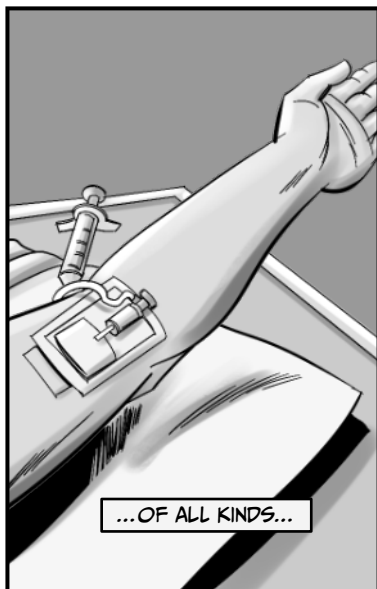
* METAPHORICALLY.

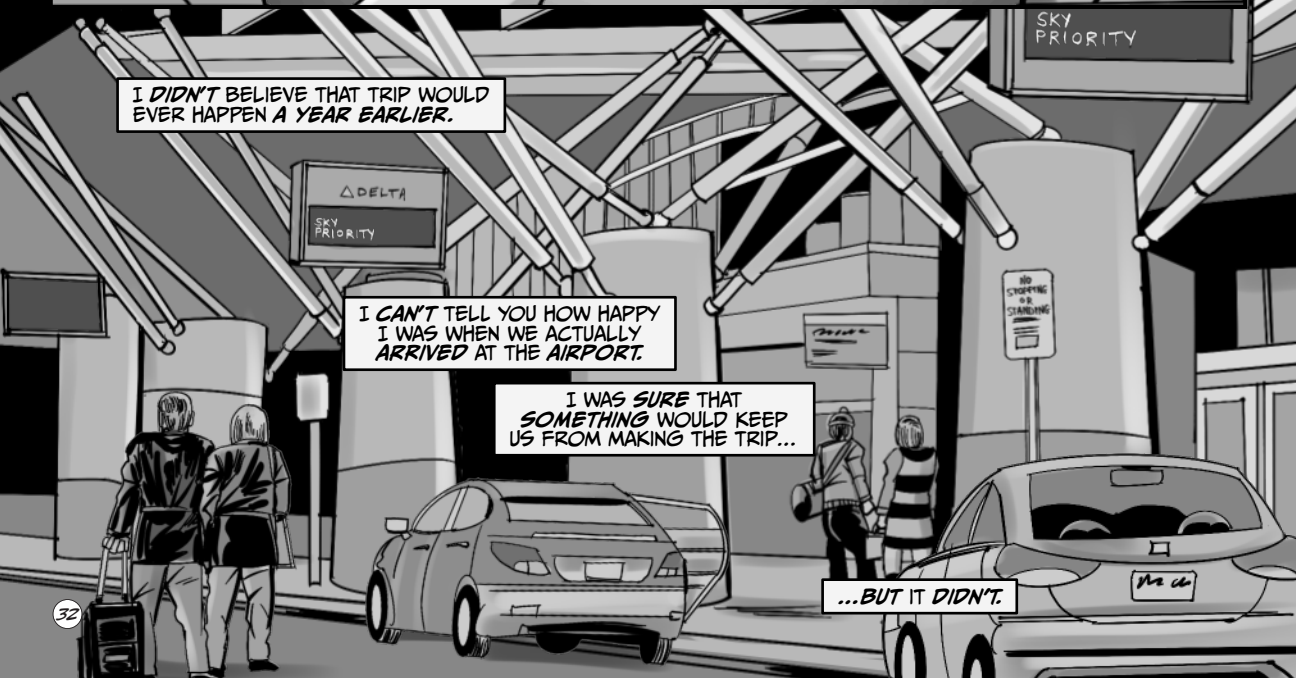


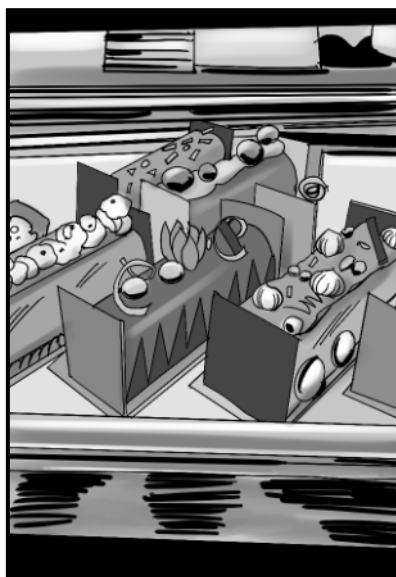
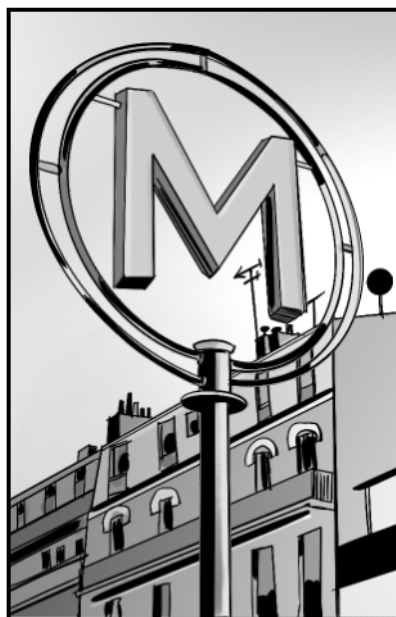
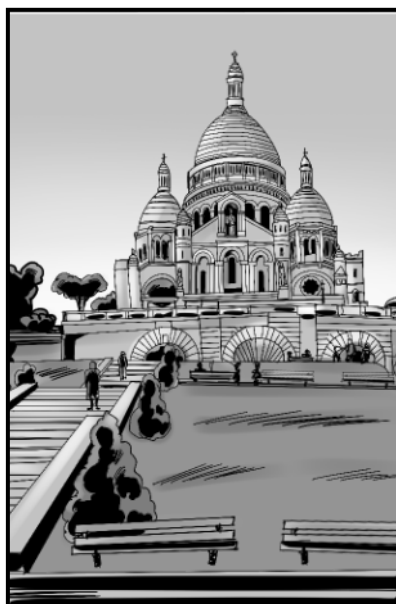


* LIKE "A, MY NAME IS..." IN ENGLISH.











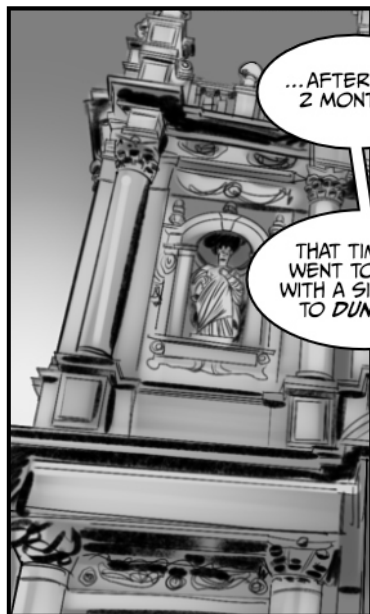
WE HAD A
GREAT
TRIP!

IN FACT WE HAD
SUCH A *TERRIFIC*
TIME THAT WE WENT
BACK TO FRANCE
AGAIN...



...AFTER *JUST*
2 MONTHS!!

THAT TIME WE
WENT TO *LILLE*
WITH A SIDE TRIP
TO *DUNKIRK*.



OK...

...THEN...

...*HOLD ONTO*
YOUR *HATS*...

...AFTER *JUST*
ANOTHER 2
MONTHS...

... WE WENT
TO...



VIENNA!

WE'D BEEN
THERE BEFORE...

BACK IN MARCH
2020...

...BUT YOU CAN GUESS WHAT
HAPPENED BACK THEN.

PEOPLE TALK ABOUT
BUCKET LISTS...



...BUT WE WERE JUST
TRYING TO COMPLETE
SOME UNFINISHED
BUSINESS.



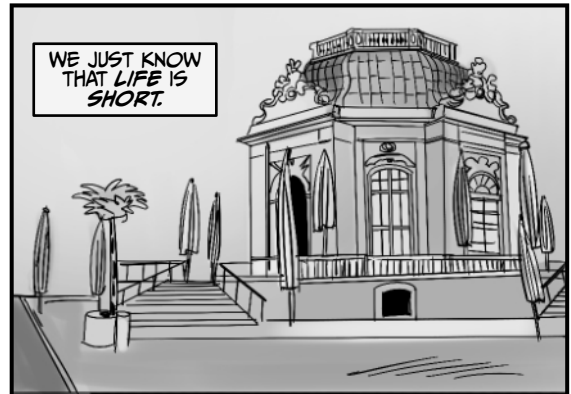
...ONE LESS
THING *UNDONE*.



ARE WE
NUTS?



I DON'T
THINK SO.



WE JUST KNOW
THAT *LIFE IS*
SHORT.



RETURNING HOME
FROM VIENNA...

...I HAD A *SURPRISE* WAITING
FOR ME IN THE MAIL.



I RECEIVED AN ORDER FOR A *PSMA/
PET SCAN* FROM MY DOCTOR...

...SCHEDULED FOR
LATE JULY.



I HAD *MIXED
FEELINGS*
ABOUT IT.



WOULD IT SHOW
GOOD THINGS?

*BAD
THINGS?*



*BEATS
ME.*



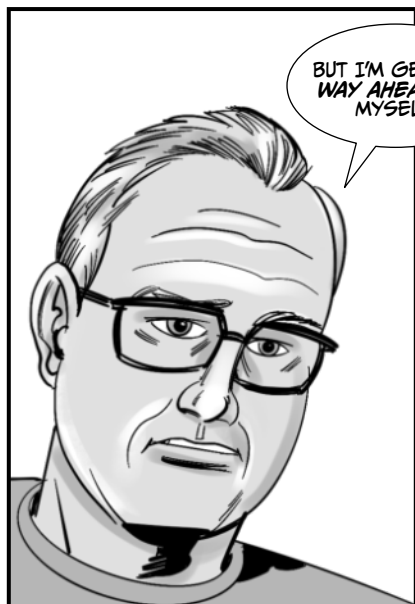
IF IT WAS CLEAR, THEN
I COULD STOP THE *ADT.*

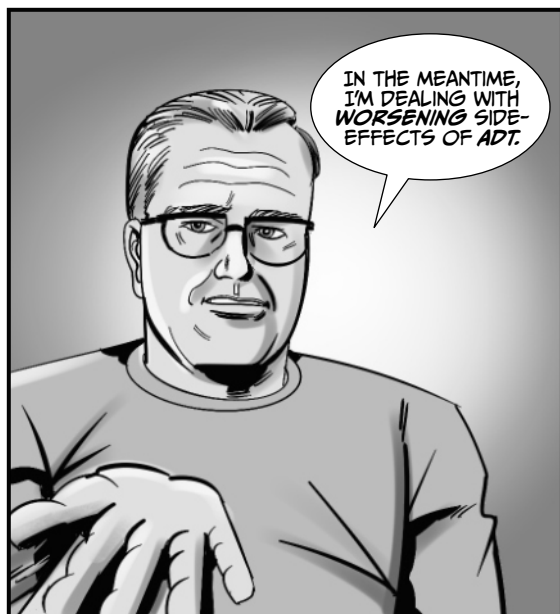
RADIO



THEN I'D SEE
IF MY *PSA*
STAYS LOW...

... AND IF MY
TESTOSTERONE
RECOVERED.





IN THE MEANTIME,
I'M DEALING WITH
WORSENING SIDE-
EFFECTS OF ADT.



ESPECIALLY
THE *FATIGUE*.

I HAVE NO
ENERGY
ANYMORE.



THE OTHER DAY,
SOMEONE GAVE ME
TWO BANANA PLANTS.



I WAS *EXCITED*,
SO I WENT OUT
TO PLANT THEM.



I ONLY GOT *HALFWAY*
THROUGH DIGGING
THE *FIRST* HOLE...



...WHEN I SUDDENLY
HAD TO *SIT DOWN*.

REBECCA FINISHED
THEM FOR ME WHILE
I SAT THERE...



...WEAK AS
A *KITTEN*.





A WEEK BEFORE MY THIRD
PSMA/PET SCAN*...

... I HAD ANOTHER
PSA BLOOD TEST.

* PROSTATE-SPECIFIC MEMBRANE ANTIGEN,
USED TO CHECK FOR SPREAD OF CANCER...



THE RESULTS SHOWED
UP THAT AFTERNOON.

THEY WEREN'T
ALL GOOD.

OVER THESE LAST 9 MONTHS MY
PSA WENT FROM LESS THAN .01,
TO .01, AND THIS LATEST ONE WAS
.04 NG/ML...

A LOW NUMBER,
BUT RISING.



I TOTALLY FREAKED OUT.

MY FIRST THOUGHT WAS...

WELL, HERE
WE GO...

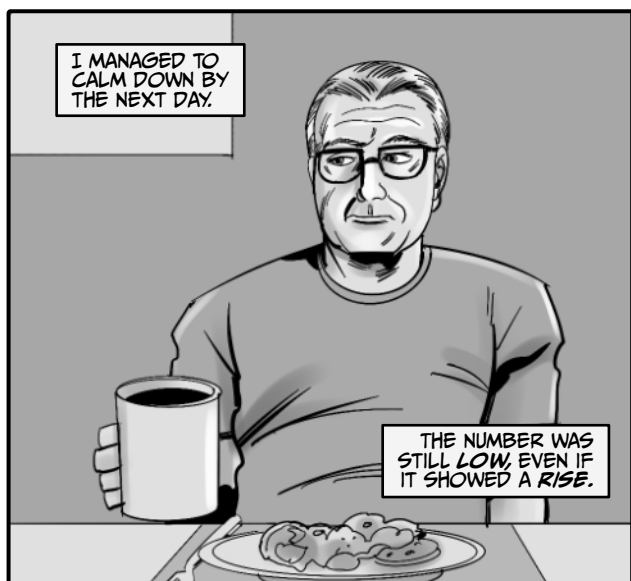


I IMAGINED MY CANCER
GROWING INSIDE ME...

... AND WHAT
THAT MEANT.



I EVEN POSTED MY
FEARS ON THE VARIOUS
PROSTATE CANCER
FORUMS I FREQUENT...



I MANAGED TO
CALM DOWN BY
THE NEXT DAY.

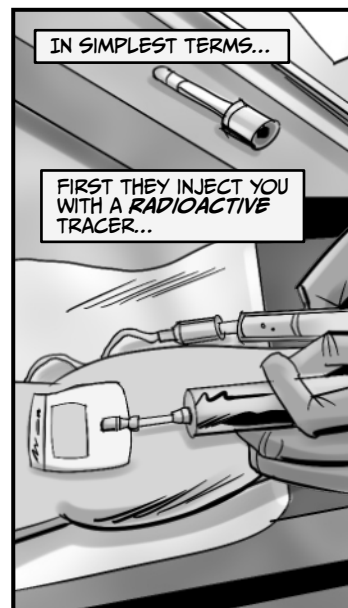
THE NUMBER WAS
STILL LOW, EVEN IF
IT SHOWED A RISE.



FINALLY THE DAY CAME
FOR MY *PSMA/PET SCAN*.



THIS WOULD BE MY *THIRD*.



IN SIMPLEST TERMS...

FIRST THEY INJECT YOU
WITH A *RADIOACTIVE*
TRACER...

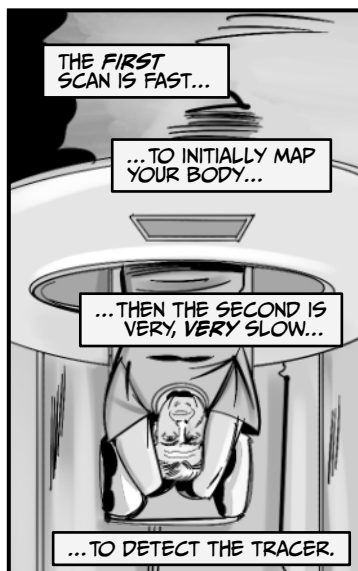


...AFTER ABOUT *50 MINUTES*...

...THE TRACER HAS ACCUMULATED
IN ANY *PROSTATE CANCER*
CELLS FOUND IN THE BODY.



THEN THEY PUT YOU IN A *PET SCAN*
MACHINE TO TRY TO FIND THAT TRACER...

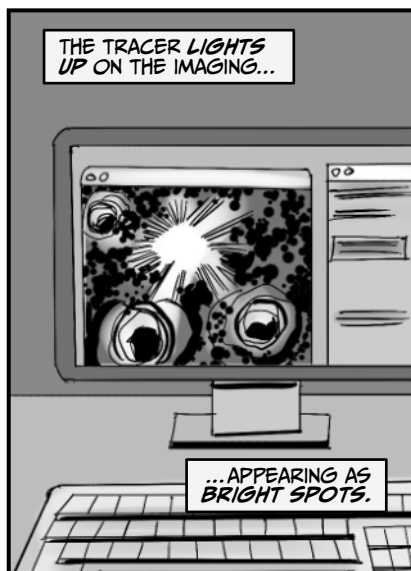


THE *FIRST*
SCAN IS FAST...

...TO INITIALLY MAP
YOUR BODY...

...THEN THE SECOND IS
VERY, *VERY* SLOW...

...TO DETECT THE TRACER.



THE TRACER *LIGHTS*
UP ON THE IMAGING...

...APPEARING AS
BRIGHT SPOTS.



LIGHT/DARK.

YIN AND YANG.

50/50.





WHICH THREW ME INTO A QUANDARY.





AFTER TALKING TO MY **ONCOLOGIST**, I MADE A DECISION.



I WOULD STOP TAKING MY **ORGOVYX** WHEN MY PILLS RAN OUT, AT THE END OF THE WEEK.



I FELT A SENSE OF RELIEF WITH ONLY A SMALL TINGE OF **FEAR**.

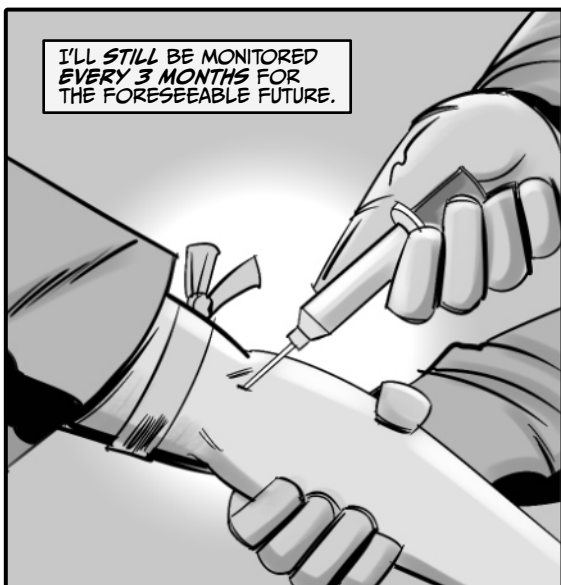


I **HOPED** I WAS DOING THE **RIGHT** THING.

THE POINT IS, I **WON'T** KNOW IF IT WORKED FOR MONTHS...OR **YEARS**.



I'LL **STILL** BE MONITORED **EVERY 3 MONTHS** FOR THE FORESEEABLE FUTURE.



THAT'S THE NATURE OF HAVING **ADVANCED** PROSTATE CANCER.



YOU ARE **NEVER** FINISHED WITH IT.



BLACK OR WHITE.

LIGHT OR DARK.

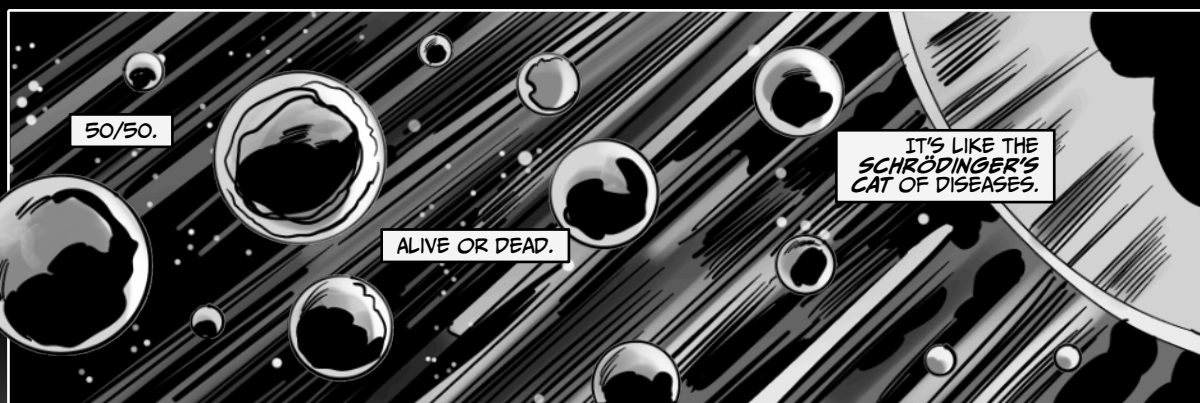
YIN OR YANG.



GOOD OR BAD.

ODD OR EVEN.

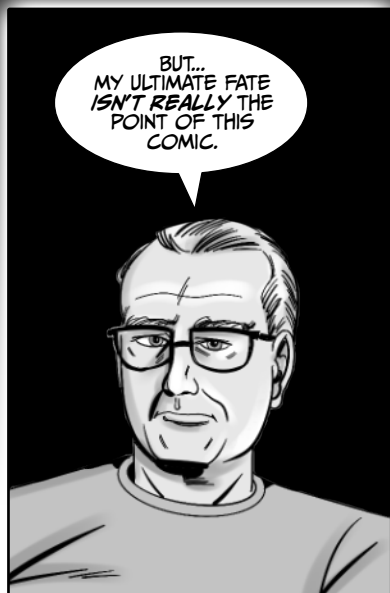
HOPE OR DESPAIR.



50/50.

ALIVE OR DEAD.

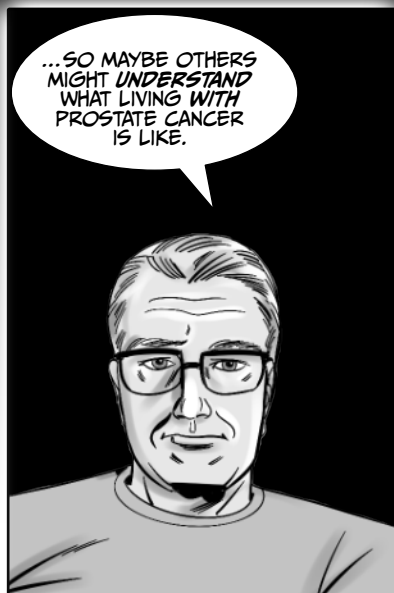
IT'S LIKE THE
SCHRÖDINGER'S
CAT OF DISEASES.



BUT...
MY ULTIMATE FATE
ISN'T REALLY THE
POINT OF THIS
COMIC.



I JUST WANTED
TO *SHARE* WHAT
I'VE GONE
THROUGH...



...SO MAYBE OTHERS
MIGHT *UNDERSTAND*
WHAT LIVING WITH
PROSTATE CANCER
IS LIKE.

Thanks again!

Thank you all for all the nice things you've said about my last comic, *The Death of Me?*, about being diagnosed with stage IVa prostate cancer and having 28 sessions of external beam radiation therapy (EBRT). When I started writing it, I had no idea what was going to happen to me (thus, the question mark in the title). A lot of it was written and drawn as it happened, actually drawing pages between radiation sessions. I'm fairly proud of the final result, which is an honest representation of what I went through.

I published it the way I publish all my comics, as both physical media that I sell at local comic or art events, and digital versions, available on **Kindle** and **Kindle unlimited**. In addition, I made a special free PDF version available on **MaleCare.org**, which hosts an online forum for patients with advanced prostate cancer. Apparently thousands have downloaded that version, and I've heard from many of you, who have said nice things about it. Obviously everybody's cancer experiences are their own, but I was gratified to hear that many folks found my telling of my story truthful and similar to their own stories. I'm glad that some of you have gotten something out of it.

Links to the various versions of these comics can be found on my website, **burnscomics.com**.

Thanks to my doctors and technicians, both here in Athens as well as those at Emory Winship in Atlanta. Thanks also to the American Cancer Society's **Hope Lodge**, where I stayed during my treatment.

Also, thanks to my perfect wife Rebecca, who has been here for me every day, and even more so every single day since my diagnosis. I love you with all my heart.

What this comic is about

So what happens after treatment? Prostate cancer isn't fixed overnight, and whether someone has surgery or radiation, there's a long period of recovery, and hormonal treatment to try to make sure the cancer is truly gone. This is that untold story of waiting — waiting for results, for answers, for tests, and for it all to end.

I guess I could have drawn 48 pages of me twiddling my thumbs for the nearly 2 years of treatment, but that's not what happens in real life. Life continues, and cancer patients try to get the most out of it, no matter what their prognosis is. The months go by, and life doesn't stop for this disease, although it is affected by it. That's the story I wanted to tell, and one I was uniquely qualified to tell.

So I see these two comics as a set. They tell a more full and complete story of what I, and other patients have gone through. I hope that others might get something out of this comic, as well. Let me know.

The process of getting diagnosed

I frequent lots of online forums dealing with prostate cancer, and lots of people have questions about whether what they have is cancer, or how it is diagnosed. I end up pasting the following text into those forums in order to answer their questions.

The normal path to diagnosis is:

Worrying PSA (prostate-specific antigen) test (over 4). Retest a month later to make sure it's not a fluke.

Then either a DRE (digital rectal exam — but requires a skilled practitioner — not very reliable) or a pelvic MRI to look for lesions.

If the MRI shows troubling areas (measured on a Pi-Rads scale — 4 or 5 are concerning), then a fusion-guided (guided by that MRI) biopsy is used to actually diagnose cancer. Without a MRI, the samples are taken randomly, which is less accurate. Pathology on those samples will determine if cancer is present.

The samples will be given a Gleason score — 9 or 10 are particularly bad and require action, 6 or 7 might indicate a need to do active surveillance (AS).

If the biopsy finds cancer, this might be followed by a PSMA/PET scan to determine spread.

Useful resources

cancer.org (The American Cancer Society) - a great place to learn about diagnostic tests, staging, and treatment. They also run "Hope Lodges" around the country — free places for patients to stay during treatment.

healthunlocked.com/advanced-prostate-cancer - a great forum for those already diagnosed with PC, or their caregivers. A place to find support from others. I check in here regularly to get answers.

pcf.org - The Prostate Cancer Foundation - a good place to find out about symptoms, treatments, and diagnostics.

reddit.com/r/ProstateCancer - oddly enough, a pretty good source for information.



Questions? Comments?

If you're interested in getting a printed copy of this or any of my other comics, you can find additional information at my comic book website, **burnscomics.com**.

That's also a good place to **contact me**.

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