

# A Crash Course in Brain Tumors

## A Personal Essay

By Michele Alishahi

On the day before Christmas 2000, while my husband was visiting his family in Kansas City, his body did something strange. During a lunch outing, Jim's right foot suddenly dragged when he tried to walk to the restroom. It was as if he had no control over it. Later that afternoon, he had an excruciating migraine. It came out of nowhere and lasted for several hours. The migraine was unusual; Jim did not have a history of debilitating headaches.

When we returned home to Tampa, after the holidays, Jim postponed visiting his doctor until late January. He and I were not yet married and he was between jobs. So he did not have health insurance. During this time, his symptoms grew to include double vision.

Finally, Jim made an appointment to see his primary care physician. She took one look at him and immediately ordered an MRI. I sat in the doctor's office with Jim, anxious about the results, afraid of what we would find out.

We got the shock of our lives.

"You have a mass the size of a golf ball pressing up against your left eye. That's what's causing the migraines and the double vision, Jim," the doctor said after reviewing the scans. "You're lucky you came in when you did. You have a brain tumor."

With those words, Jim and I were thrust into the scary, unfamiliar world of brain tumors.

It was the most terrifying and overwhelming experience of our lives. Jim was 27 and I was 25. We had been together for four years. Jim had just landed a job at the university where I was working on my master's degree in American history. We were young and in love. I thought we had our whole lives ahead of us.

Jim was diagnosed on a Monday; he had his first brain surgery that Friday. In the five days it took to schedule the operation, his condition deteriorated. Jim had three seizures: one at the airport when we went to pick up his parents who came in for the surgery; a second at the neuro-surgeon's office; and a third in the car while we were on our way to the neurologist's office. The neurologist prescribed an anti-seizure medication that helped get the seizures under control. Jim would continue to take the medicine for the next eight years.

Because of the rushed situation, Jim's primary care doctor referred us to a neuro-surgeon who was not an expert at removing brain tumors. The first thing he did was to put Jim on steroids to help reduce the swelling in his brain. The migraines went away soon after that. Unfortunately, during the eight-hour operation, the neuro-surgeon was only able to take out about half the tumor.

The biopsy revealed that Jim's tumor was malignant. "A glioma, a grade 3 anaplastic astrocytoma," the oncologist said the day after the surgery.

A glioma? An anaplastic astrocytoma? What did that mean?

My head spun with medical terms I did not understand. The doctors ... the neurosurgeon, the neurologist, the oncologist ... they all used words that were not a part of our everyday vocabulary: primary brain tumor, brain cancer, brain surgery, radiation, chemotherapy, seizure medication, steroids, and brain swelling.

I was overwhelmed, trying to understand something I knew nothing about. And that feeling was compounded by the urgency of the situation. Later, Jim told me, "I don't remember that week at all." But it was seared into my mind forever. I almost lost my love and my best friend. I realized that I needed to learn as much as I could about brain tumors to help take care of Jim. I was determined that he was going to beat the cancer. I also wanted to ease my anxiety. Knowledge was power.

Jim recovered from the brain surgery quickly and within weeks began radiation, followed by chemotherapy.

Over the next few months, we gradually adjusted to a new reality. It took awhile to learn that, even though Jim had brain cancer, life went on. We got married; I continued to go to school, and Jim began his new job. We started the long and complicated process of learning to live with a malignant brain tumor.

During those first weeks after Jim's diagnosis, I got a crash course in brain tumors. I learned more than I ever imagined. And that was just the beginning.

Over the next eight years, I would be able to explain to family and friends the intricacies of Jim's type of brain tumor; the symptoms he had, why he had them, the side effects of the medications he was on, how his tumor looked on an MRI scan, the way the chemo treatments were supposed to stop the cancer, and more.

Never mind a degree in history. I eventually got a real world PhD in malignant primary brain tumors.

The End

## **About the Author:**

Michele Alishahi is an American writer, living in one of Germany's beautiful wine-making regions. She writes personal essays about life and about writing. You can read more of Michele's essays [writingalife.net](http://writingalife.net).

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Michele Alishahi