

(Not) The Sound Of Music



“Are you claustrophobic?” asks the radiologist.

I awkwardly respond, “No, I’m not...”

As I walk down the hallway and into the room with the MRI machine, I ponder...does another scenario exist where that is the opening question from someone I’ve never met before?

Magnetic Resonance Imaging (better known as MRI) is an annual ritual to be endured by most individuals with multiple sclerosis. The machine, weighing over 11 tons, takes pictures of the lesions on my brain, neck and spine which my neurologist then uses to evaluate the progression of my MS.

As I enter the room, it looks so peaceful and quiet... I know this won’t last for long.

The truth is, I am claustrophobic. But really, is there anyone who enjoys having their entire body in a tube – just big enough to fit your frame – for two hours? For previous MRIs, I took a sedative...which made me drowsy enough to fall asleep, even amid the loud, torturous sounds of the scanning process.

But this time, an “open” (i.e., no skinny tube) MRI was scheduled; however, when I arrive the MRI tech tells me the quality of an open MRI scan doesn’t meet the standards for MS patients. I nod my understanding while struggling to hide my disappointment.

After answering a few additional questions and changing into a hospital gown, the process begins.

I lay in the cylinder, my legs slightly elevated by a pillow and my head held in place by a cage-like helmet. A mirror is strategically placed within the headpiece so I can see out of the tube.

I wear headphones that the radiologist uses to communicate updates or reminders to remain as still as possible. He briefs me on how to use the panic button, should it be necessary.

As the MRI starts, I'm distracted by my eyebrows that I see in the mirror. One, long, stray hair protrudes out. Annoyed, I make a mental note to take care of it later.

The noises begin to swell from the machine. They change, rather frequently. There's what sounds like rapid machine gun fire, then the construction zone phase followed by various other loud, jarring noises.

As my senses adjust to the chaos, several random thoughts pop into my head, including:

After "The Wizard of Oz" came out, did parents who lived in Kansas stop naming their daughters Dorothy?

Does a woman that is born on Valentine's day, get jilted with "combo" presents the same way somebody does that is born on Christmas?

Medically speaking, does an individual tend to itch more when they know they can't scratch it?

If the intention is to reduce stress, can't they think of a better name than "panic button"?

I wonder, why am I thinking these things? I've never even watched The Wizard of Oz!

Music from the radio also plays through the headphones. Unfortunately, most of the songs are marred by the loud noises.

Suddenly, there is moment of silence and, as if on a cruel (and ironic) cue, Celine Dion belts out "All By Myself" - the timing is perfect. I almost start laughing.

I wonder, did the radiologist plan that? I then realize he is back in the room and I am exiting the tube. As is standard, a dye is then injected into my arm and I go back in to the machine.

It's a cruel tease, even though I knew to expect it. The radiologist informs me I have a "solid half hour" left. I politely thank him while musing over his choice of the adjective "solid."

I start to fantasize about breaking free and making a run for it and humorously wonder how my wife, who is in the waiting room, would react to seeing a flash of me in a hospital gown sprinting out the door as I make my escape.

What seems like an eternity has passed and the radiologist informs me I have 12 minutes left. I challenge myself to count down these final moments. Twelve, sixty-second intervals, how difficult can that be?

I count well past what I think is 720 seconds and disappointment sets in as sounds of the apocalypse continue to blare in my face. I worry that I misheard the number "12" and then suddenly, it ends.

The room is now silent. My body slowly glides out of the tube and the helmet is removed. Overcome with jubilation, I resist the urge to give the radiologist a hug.

Thoughts of William Wallace screaming "Freedomm!" dance in my mind as another annual MRI is now complete.