

Time for an MRI



My appointment is at 3:30 p.m.

Some 25 miles away from my home.

The clock says it's only 12:53 p.m..

Although it won't be rush hour when I drive to the hospital, you never know what will happen when it comes to Boston traffic, so I want to provide myself a cushion of extra time, so I won't be late for my annual MRI.

I loathe MRIs. I particularly despise the kind of MRI I must get. Of my brain and, every other year, of my upper spine as well. The doctors are looking for something new that's worrisome beneath my skin and my bones, other than the stuff they already know is awry. They're looking for more MS lesions.

When I arrive at the hospital for my annual scans, I must remember to remove any jewelry, as metal doesn't play nicely with the giant magnets inside the MRI machine. I don those hideous gray socks with the white rubber grips on both sides, along with the threadbare blue and white hospital gown, and the blue drawstring pants that are clearly not designed for anybody with hips, or thighs for that matter.

After I work these ill-fitting pieces of clothing onto my body, a technician beckons me into the large room where the behemoth machine resides.

This is when the fun starts. And when I say "fun," I mean the opposite of fun. I really mean

“terror.” I mean a trapped-inside-something-and-can’t-get-out terror. It’s at this point when, after placing my head between two hard pieces of plastic, the technician clicks a hard plastic cage over my face and into those twin pillars. There is a relatively narrow rectangular opening above my face, but there’s no avoiding the fact that I am confined. The face cage is about two inches away from the tip of my nose. Its mere presence makes me feel like I can’t breathe. Like I’m being punished. Locked up.

Did I mention that I’m claustrophobic?

Even though the technician gently hands me a plastic bulb tethered to a cord that’s attached to an alarm she says will signal the staff to get me out of this contraption should I squeeze it, I don’t necessarily believe I’ll be able to immediately extricate myself from this face cage. I consider whether I could maneuver myself out of the face cage without assistance if I wanted to. However, if I try to get out and fail, I will definitely panic because then I’d *know* I am really trapped.

The technician, who’s freely walking around without a Hannibal Lecter mask over her face, presses a button and sends me into the maw of the machine. I slam my eyes shut and keep them closed until I’m on the outside once again.

Twenty minutes go by before the button is pressed, and the scanning bed expels me from the narrow canal. But I cannot move just yet. Over a series of MRIs over the past several years since being diagnosed with relapsing remitting MS, I’ve been sternly told, in no uncertain terms, not to move at this juncture because there’s a second phase; if I move, I’ll screw everything up, a tech once yelled at me. An IV inserted in my arm conveys contrast fluid through my veins which will help discern if any of my existing or new lesions in my brain are active. I’m sent back into the Willy-Wonka-boat-ride-of-a-machine for another 20 minutes. If I happen to be due for a cervical spine MRI, I’ll get another 40-ish minutes of MRI hell.

While I’m inside the machine, with my eyes closed and my sweaty hand curled around the escape bulb, I listen to the soundtrack of my nightmares, a cacophony of discordant, sinister noises, including some which sound like somebody is outside the machine trying to break it down and I’m just lying there, easy prey. Time moves at a glacial pace during these scans. Especially because I can’t move. Because I know if I open my eyes and see the inside of the tube, I’ll panic (it happened once. ‘Twasn’t fun).

But you know what **really** feels like an eternity? Waiting for the results to find out what’s happening inside my own brain, whether things are stable or about to get worse.

1:19.

If I leave the house now, I’ll get to the hospital too early. Then I’ll wind up sitting in the waiting room and stewing over what’s to come. Then again, I’m just sitting here in my

kitchen nervously jiggling my right leg up and down. I can't be late. I can't be early. I can't really have more brain lesions, can I? I can't really have this incurable disease which has turned my future into a big, fat question mark, can I?

I dive into my latest issue of The New Yorker, hoping it'll take my mind off my brain, off face cages, off sinister noises. I force myself to keep my eyes fixed on its pages for as long as I can before I check the clock again.

2:00.

Okay, I say aloud. I give myself permission to plunge forward into uncertainty where the only thing I know for sure is that someone's going to snap a plastic cage over my face, that I'll keep my eyes squeezed shut for 40 minutes, then wait for days for the results.

Okay, let's go.