

My First Sonogram

by Michael Ayers

The slightest suggestion of anything on television sends my wife Diedre's brain into overdrive, causing a line of questioning.

"Why don't we have any stuff we like to do together?" Diedre would ask after watching an ice-climbing pair grow closer during a near-death experience. Lots of times it was relationship-oriented stuff, but recently she's started to hone in on advice that would help me—and only me—whether I was watching the program or not. There was the time she said my slight irritable nature was most likely caused by the amount of soda I drink; a *20/20* report confirmed this and it threw the husband and wife's relationship into peril. "Why would you want that?" she asked after watching me crack open a fresh can of Coke. "Fine, have your teeth rot out and bring us down, that's cool."

But that was mild, everyday stuff. It was on an episode of ABC's *World News Tonight* that Diedre learned of a disturbing new trend that had the biggest implications for me so far. Men in their 40's or 50's would go to what they thought was a routine doctor's appointment, only to be diagnosed with some disease that had been gestating for *years*.

"That's it," she said at the commercial break. "I'm making an appointment for you. I know, *obviously*, this isn't happening to you. But it's time for a physical. Now that we're married, we have to do those things."

I didn't protest then or when she emailed all of my guy friends about who their doctor was. We settled on a young, hip doctor my friend Ben recommended whose office was in the Gramercy section of Manhattan. "Ben swears by this guy and says he's 'dope,'" she said moments after booking me. I'd never heard the word 'dope' used as a descriptor for a doctor but didn't think too much of it. I trusted Ben and I trusted that my wife would only go with who she too felt was dope.

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Eight weeks later, I was on Dope's table, stripped down to my boxer shorts. While we were having a few bouts of small talk, I became fixated on my budding rolls of fat, which were at that moment slunching over my elastic waistband; this was something that had been building up over the last seven years, mainly due to a habit of daily beer drinking and not exercising. Noticing this, I sat straight up—something I rarely do, but when sitting straight up those rolls magically disappear. I'd always been self-conscious about my body, especially in front of doctors, but in Dope's case it was magnified. There was a smugness about him that only higher education degrees can give a person; as we continued through our break-the-ice conversation, he often didn't respond to my responses and instead just gave a dopey smile. And then the dynamic shifted.

"You like beer?" he asked, turning around from his sink and pointing directly at my boxers. I thought he was pointing at my stomach. He snapped on his rubber gloves and raised his eyebrows at me.

"What?"

"Those are mugs of beer. On your boxers. Do you like beer?"

"Uh. Sure...I mean, yeah, who doesn't?"

"I myself, I like a good martini every now and then." His tone suggested that I was a peasant or homeless or worse: still in college. He turned back around to get a stethoscope or something and said over his shoulder, "Do you drink a lot of beer?"

"Uh, not a lot. I used to, I think. Like 15 a week or so. But now, it's maybe no more than 7 a week. And that's rare."

"Maybe?"

"Well. Probably. I don't keep a log or anything." I nervously ran my fingers over my sort-of flattened stomach, feeling its doughyness.

"Probably?" He put the cold stethoscope up to my chest and started to feel around, telling me to breathe deep.

"Smoke?"

"Quit years ago."

"Drugs?"

"No."

"But you don't like martinis?" He stopped and looked me square in the eye and I felt as if my soul was being examined, not my body.

"No. Not really," I said. It felt like he was dropping a hint that his authority wasn't confined to this little room and the human body; that his taste for alcoholic drinks should also be considered as something akin to sound advice.

"Okay. Well. Lie on your back. Let's take a look at all the other parts." I did as he told and he pulled my boxers down a short bit, exposing my flaccidness, which was exaggerated I felt due to the coldness of the room- in both temperature and bedside manner. Before he could get to my "other parts", Dope started pushing down on my stomach, all around, a procedure I figured was normal before heading south. Although I never remembered this portion of the proceedings, it'd been five years since I'd had a physical and maybe things had changed. I got the sense that I shouldn't question him on his own turf.

"Wow," he said curiously, which was odd because up to this point, he'd never been curious. Disenchanted, sure. But something had triggered his martini-soaked mind. A firm, three finger pulsating style of pushing on my stomach was occurring rhythmically. "Has it always been like this?"

"Like what? A stomach?"

Instead of answering me, he emitted a disturbing, sex-like moan as he continued pushing down.

"No, it seems... hard. Has it always been hard?"

I glanced down and could see that at in its natural state, my stomach had taken on the shape of a little mound. I guess I'd never noticed that it protruded so slightly or maybe prominently before and I tried to suck it in again. Dope noticed my confusion.

"It just protrudes like that and is *really* hard."

"I've never noticed it being hard," I said. "Should have...." I said trailing off. I noticed he stopped paying attention and instead,

furrowed his brow as he continued to push down on my little mound. My stomach muscles, the ones buried under all those layers of small fat, were starting to feel the repetitive pressuring and were responded appropriately by becoming constricted and tender. Because I just met him, I couldn't tell if he was genuinely concerned or just blasé about the whole thing; making a mountain out of a molehill because he was bored. Still, the moaning, the poking, the obscure line of questioning kicked started my imagination into overdrive so I finally asked: "What's the problem?"

"Yeah, I'm just concerned," he said, now very strict like. "Concerned that there's something going on under here. Below this fat. It's just so...hard." That word again. Gym people had hard stomachs. Pro-wrestlers had hard stomachs. I was neither, that I was sure of. For starters, they were *visibly hard*; I was not.

"Hard? What exactly do you mean, hard?"

"Feel that?" he said poking down with his pointer finger extended. "That's hard."

Indeed, with the power of his suggestion and probing, I was starting to notice my hardness and was wondering why this could be; a strapping young man in his early thirties that didn't work out at all- logic would dictate that I wouldn't have a hard stomach. Before I could acutely self-diagnose my hardness, Dope beat me to it.

"What I'm feeling is, you might have a grapefruit sized tumor growing on your stomach," he began. "I don't want to alarm you, but this isn't unheard of for young men your age. And that's why it sticks out like this. And why it's all hard. Ya know?"

I didn't know so I sat straight up on the table, my stomach rolls spilling out over my boxer shorts again. An immediate sting of doom swept over my body in a way that I'd never experienced before; my heart started racing which I'm sure he'd be able to identify with his stethoscope, but there was no controlling it.

"Grapefruit? Those are pretty big."

"They sure are. But like I said, I don't want to alarm you."

Too late: I had my funeral already pictured and plotted. Grey day, most likely, some light drizzle. Probably wouldn't hire a live band or anything but definitely pipe in some Otis Redding over the loud speakers. If well-wishers weren't mourning before then, Otis surely would throw them into a Kleenex needing frenzy. The snack trays would contain grapefruit only; the tartness would remind people of me and my demise, for days if not months on.

"Now roll over, I'm just going to examine your insides." Standing in front of me, Dope pulled out a tube of goo and squirted it all over his finger. He then shot me a look- one that was unconcerned about what he had just told me- and instead suggested that if he had to ask me again, he wasn't going to be pleased. Maybe he saw things like this everyday- after all, they were "not uncommon," but I wasn't exactly comfortable in any sorts. Reluctantly, I rolled over wondering if strawberries or cherries or figs would be lurking next. "It's probably nothing to worry about," he continued as his finger went up inside me. "But we'll want to get it checked out." The lower half of my body shriveled up with uncomfortableness and I clutched on to my little grapefruit because it was the only thing I could do. "We'll set you up with a sonogram."

For me, I see doctors falling into one of two camps: the first types are the ones that think the general population are just paranoid freaks and have to deal with a host of uninformed people self-diagnosing every little thing, every day. Those I get along with. The second types, and I have no real proof of this, run a racket and just like to hook their other doctor friends up with money by sending their patients around for "follow ups." "Referrals." "Sonograms."

Earlier in the appointment, along with the alcohol talk, Dope also inquired about how faithful I was to my wife. I explained to him that a writer wasn't in any position to cheat because as a general rule, nerds do not bite any attractive hand that feeds them. To prove that commitment, I told him something I hadn't told anyone else before at that time. That she was 6 weeks pregnant. He said "oh, that's good news," and turned his back to me.

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As I was checking out with the receptionist, Dope came barging through the door and told the guy at the front desk that I needed to be booked for this sonogram "right away, like within the next 72 hours." My hands started to shake and my lower body became weak with fear. The receptionist wasn't acting quick enough so Dope decided to take my possible grapefruit sized stomach tumor issue into his own hands and booked the appointment himself. "You're set," he said hanging up the phone. "I had to pull some strings, but they'll see you right away. But really, try not to think about it too much. There's nothing you can do now anyways, right?" He gave me one last smug smile, one that felt like he was saying "if you're going to die, at least I'll get the credit for finding out why."

When I got home, I had to tell someone and that someone was Diedre. So I called her at work.

"Hi babe," she said. "How was the appointment?"

"Uh. Not great."

"Why, what's the matter?"

"Well. He thinks, but doesn't know, but thinks I might have a grapefruit sized tumor on, in, or around my stomach."

"God. Oh God. What?" She was doing this whisper-yelling thing. "Why didn't you wait until I got home to tell me. I'm about to go into a meeting?"

"I know, but I'm freaking out. Freaking out. But the weird thing is, I don't feel like I have any tumors."

"God. God oh God. Okay. Well. What's next?" I could hear her starting to tear up.

"Well. I have to get a sonogram."

"Sonogram?" she said, suddenly not tearing up at all anymore. "I can't believe *you* get to go first."

For the next 72 hours, I proceeded to poke, prod, pinch, stretch, feel up, molest my stomach area until it was en route to a bruise. End of day one, tenderness had set in. By day two, it was downright sore. It hurt to get off the toilet and to do average things like pour a second cup of coffee. I'd disturbed muscles that weren't

meant to be disturbed. And I became very self-conscious about it, where the only place I could go with that would provide me uninhibited examinations of my body was the shower; I'd stretch them into the 20 to 30 minute mark those three days, tugging at my grapefruit, free from the odd looks I could get on the street or did get around our apartment. "Quit bothering it," Diedre would say. It. As if "it" suddenly had a personality or feelings or existed.

By the morning of day three, I entered through some sort of five or seven phases of death thing, where in one hour I became sad, teary, scared and spiteful. I told my wife that she should've never have watched the news or taken advice from Ben, the only person we know who loves Vin Diesel films. She too hated Dope and agreed "if we both make it through this" we would never see him again. It was something to subside the worry and dwelling on what I'd miss when I'm gone. As the day wore on and the appointment got closer, the erratic, downward spiral that Dope had sent me in was entering into a new phrase: sheer panic. I was clawing at my stomach, rubbing it to a raw redness. I looked deranged.

On the subway ride back to Manhattan, Diedre tried to make it more of a scientific inquiry; we'd both done the requisite web searches, and in fact, coming up with positive proof that tumors — random, massive ones- can grow on a stomach for years without detection. Dope was right. The six cases out of the 8 billion people on the planet confirmed how doomed I was.

"I wonder if they'll use the same gel they use for women?" she said out loud. I had no idea.

"You'll have to tell me how it is, though. I've heard that the machine can be right next to your head or maybe a screen mounted on the wall. I'm really curious."

"Well, I'll be sure to let you know."

After we checked in, both took our seats and sat in silence; I pretended to read waiting room magazines but instead wondered if I could get a stomach transplant, if those even existed. Seemed unlikely and complicated. But on the flip side, I never really heard

of a “stomach transplant” waiting list, so I could be relatively close to the top, if not number one.

At one point, Diedre tried to comfort me by putting her hand on my arm, but her touch reminded me that she was in good health; it jerked my arm way in defiance of her robustness. I envisioned myself becoming one of those terrible cancer/tumor patients that no one likes instead of the ones that are in the movies. No one ever does movies about the terrible patients, only the ones who are better than non-cancer people in every facet. I'd throw bed pans and complain about nausea and the fact that in hospitals, there are no seasons- thus a phrase like “spring's just around the corner” meant nothing to me anymore. People would suggest I go bungee jumping like the inspirational patients they've come to love but I'd slough it off, commenting that bungee cords were meant to be affixed to the stomach area.

After thirty minutes, a woman peeked her head from behind a partition and said “Mr. Ayers, follow me.” I got up and slowly walked towards her and decided to take one look back at Diedre. This could be the last time I ever saw her, I thought.

“Just follow me, right through this hallway. Don't mind the curtains. Go sit in there, I'll be right in.” As I walked by her and followed her instructions, I noticed that the room, the office, everything about back in behind the waiting room was abnormally dark. Like, too dark. Over head lights were supposed to be the norm, but not this place. Maybe it was purposely set up this way: gloomy so no one ever got their hopes up.

“It sure is dark in here,” I commented when the lab technician returned. She was a husky, Brooklyn woman who smelled like cigarette smoke.

“Haff to keep it dark in here, ” she said coldly. “Need to see the screen.”

““Now, take off your shirt. Less take a look.” I removed my shirt and exposed myself once again. There were machines all around me, so I had no idea where to put it. I balled it up and just placed it gently on my crotch which was wrong. “Here, I'll take that,” she

said. I gave it to her and started to squirm around; it was cold and my stomach clinched up.

“So. Why ya here?” She had no idea and instantly I felt that was a bad sign. That Dope hadn't properly communicated things to her or worse: she was going to become an extreme version of Dope, determined to find tumors and viral infections and meningitis type things all over.

She could tell I was a nervous wreck and put her hand next to my shoulder for some reason. “C'mon, hun, you can tell me,” she said.

I found her permed afro comforting, in that it reminded me of my grandmother, or any old lady, so I spilled.

“Doctor says I might have a tumor. A grapefruit sized tumor. On, in, or around my stomach.” I wanted my tone to suggest lunacy but instead it suggested defeat and that I was scared to death.

“Well, less see then.” No “you're crazy” or “Dope said that? He's a nutjob anyways.” She got out her own brand of goo and shook the tube like you would a bottle of ketchup.

“This might be cold,” she said as a pile mounted up on the little mound. A wand flicked on, followed by the machines and a “woop-woop” sound. In a counterclockwise motion, her wrist started to rub it all in.

For nearly four minutes, she said nothing. At around the minute one and a half minute mark, I cocked my head sideways so I could get a read. I'd never seen one of these before, so I didn't really know what the numbers and little lines meant, but the bulk of the tiny screen was made up of a bunch of grey matter that was clearly my insides.

“What's that?” I finally asked. “Is that a tumor?”

“No, that's your bladder. You need to pee, don't you?”

“Yeah, I do. How'd you know that?”

“We see everything hun. Even wee.” She continued to look away and with that, I diagnosed myself right then and there: I told myself I was alright. That because she saw pee/wee, and told

me about that, but no tumors, that I was going to be fine. A tumor sighting would surely take precedent over pee/wee spotting. And one as large as mine would surely jump out on the screen.

"Okay, then, less take a look around your stomach," she continued. "We're just getting warmed up." She turned a knob that flicked the screen to a different part of my body.

"But..." I started. "Weren't we just looking at it!" I cried out.

"Naw, not at all. See, different parts are seen by different depths by this wand. So there's lots more. Just sit back, this'll take 45 minutes or so. Try not to think about it."

So I laid there, trying not to think about it, but was fairly unsuccessful at that. I had no idea how tumors even worked and wasn't even so sure about the difference between benign and malignant. Both required operations. I couldn't see myself recovering from an operation. I'd easily be one of those that died on the table. Blood would be everywhere, doctors shaking their head, saying "an apricot, maybe. But grapefruit. Just couldn't get it. Too big." Dope would be looking on, in a supervisory role, taking notes while sipping a martini of some sorts- probably an apple one, just to rub it in.

"I'm through," my nurse said after twenty minutes. "I'd like to go over some things with you. You want your wife to join? She should probably hear this." I gulped, rolled my eyes and said "fine. That's fine." My death was upon me. I had no idea where I'd be buried. Or cremated.

"Here, use this," she said, handing me a brown paper towel. I guess she had expected me to start crying and wanted to be prepared. "For that goo on your stomach," she then explained.

We walked out into the hallway, and she peered her head around the partition again, catching Diedre's eye. Her look was of dire concern and there was a puffiness around the upper portion of her face that suggested she'd been crying. I'd never be able to hold

up if she couldn't. Reconciliation with terrible news has never been my thing.

"So, Mrs. Ayers, good news," she began. I looked up at her from the floor. "Your husband, as far as I can tell, does not have a tumor. Of any size."

"Really?" I said. I was shocked and wanted to hug this husky Brooklyn woman but didn't. "Your positive? There's nothing?"

"Well there is one thing," she began. "And I don't want to alarm you, because I don't really see it as a big deal. But your husband-you Mr. Ayers, have a kidney stone. 'Bout the size of a small seed."

My wife thought about it for a moment and said "size of a seed, huh. We'll probably have to get that checked out."

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Later that evening, we were watching *World News Tonight*. Something about a new birth control pill came up and during the commercial break she started a line of questioning I never thought I'd be able to answer. But now I could.

"So, what was it like?" she asked. "You know. The *sonogram*." Her eyes were wide as coffee saucers and she was dying for some scoop.

"Well. I don't know," I said blandly. "It was a machine. I didn't have a baby in me, so it wasn't exciting. I was also kinda preoccupied."

"But could you see everything?"

"I saw some of my bladder. And I could see the kidney stone."

"Crazy," she said. "That's just crazy," and went into a daydream about her own pending sonogram. I on the other hand cracked open a beer and took a large, satisfying gulp. Since I was 17, I'd had kidney stones. No big deal.

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His work appears in/on the Village Voice, AOL, New York, Billboard,
Stop Smiling, and Reuters. He no longer eats grapefruit.

