

Rocket Man

by
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It got to the point where I couldn't wear jeans anymore. I grew up in the 80's when we spray-painted our jeans on. It was tough. I couldn't bend down. I couldn't walk for an extended period of time. It just hurt. I had some swelling in my right testicle and had for sometime, probably too long. I'm a guy though. We don't like to admit that we have problems with our nuts, let alone one big enough to warrant a trip to the doctor.

I asked my wife what she thought. She said without hesitation, "Go see Darcy." I had just had blood taken at the local Health Fair. It was the first time I had ever done it, and I wasn't pumped to go see the doctor so soon afterward. (Excuses, excuses!) Dr. Darcy Turner was our family physician. He was also a friend. My wife had played volleyball with him since we had moved to Thermopolis. I never remember calling him "Dr. Turner." He had delivered our son Logan only a couple of years earlier. I went to see him.

Best case scenario, it was an infection like epididymitis. The epididymis is the tube that supplies the testicle with what it needs to function. Sometimes it gets knotted or kinked and can "back up." Darcy said that the fact that I was experiencing pain was a good sign. If it was "something more serious," pain isn't usually a symptom. He gave me a prescription for some heavy duty anti-biotic and told me to keep him posted on what happened.

I remember Mitch Homi, our local pharmacist, being a bit taken aback and commenting on the fact that I must have one heck of an infection somewhere. He filled the bottle with 15 pills at \$10.00 a pill! Thank God for insurance.

In the meantime, my Health Fair results came back. Everything looked okay, except my LDH (Lactate Dehydrogenase) levels. I had never heard of most of the things they tested for, including LDH. I was more worried about my saturated fat and cholesterol levels! An average LDH level is from 0-240. Mine was at 615. A week after I got the test results back, there was no major change from having used the antibiotics. I went back to Darcy.

That was the first time I'd heard the words, "It may be cancer." Needless to say it scared the hell out of me. The thought had of course crossed my mind, but who wants to think that they have cancer?

Darcy sent me over for another blood test, in case this was just a fluke, and an ultrasound, you know, like they use on pregnant women. I had watched my wife have one when she was pregnant with Logan, but even though my right testicle was pretty big (well over big walnut size by now) it was far smaller than Aimee's belly had been!

After my blood was drawn, I was taken into a darkened room, dressed in a gown, asked to lay back and prop my testicle up with a small rolled-up towel as best I could. The lab-tech then squirted a thick gel all over my testicle and proceeded to "look inside." Now, a "normal" nut looks like white-noise on your television. Mine looked like that with thick black "ropes" through it.

The tech said little to nothing. He was and still is a very serious man. He left after a minute and came back with the radiology specialist on call, Daryl Mathern. He then looked it over, then looked at the other testicle.

He told me to get cleaned up and to come see him in his office. I know Daryl; I taught his kids. He was very serious at this point and told me, “Dr. Turner wants to see you.” I went back to see Darcy. Aimee was with me through the whole thing.

Darcy was very up front with me. He looked a little flustered, and trust me, that scared me to death. I didn’t think anything could fluster the man. We talked about it for a little bit, and then he, personally, went out and made me an appointment with a Urologist in Casper. He didn’t have his secretary do it. That was on a Thursday. My appointment was for the next day, Friday.

Aimee, Logan, and I took the day off from school and went to Casper. Aimee was a track coach at the high school and was responsible for setting up and helping with the local track meet. Luckily, she had a big portion of the heats set before we left. She gave the rest of the work to the other coaches and the high school athletic director. None of them questioned her for an instant. That morning before we left, I ran into Darcy at the post office. He said my blood test had come back. My LDH numbers were now over 1,200.

That morning was a VERY long two-hour drive to Casper.

I met Dr. John Paul Jones III (no kidding!), my urologist, on Friday, the last day of April, 1999. He is a very serious and professional man. I felt comfortable with him very quickly. He examined me alone while Aimee stayed with Logan in the waiting

room. We looked over my ultrasound results along with my blood work results. In his opinion, I had a seminoma. It could have spread to my kidneys, bladder or lymph system. He wanted to operate right away. He called Aimee in and answered all of our questions. We had a plan.

I can remember having a real fear of the unknown on the ride down. Once I had talked with Dr. Jones and knew what was to come, I felt much better. All I wanted at the time was to get it out of my body. That was pretty much my only major thought. Whatever that entailed.

Aimee's mom was already on her way to Casper. I had held off calling my mom until I knew something for sure. It's a weird feeling calling a parent to tell them something like that. My mom said she was gone within a half an hour. She just handed her Rolodex to a colleague and left work. She called a friend who lived in Casper and told her that she was coming in and why. I knew Jill and her husband. I had taught both of her boys as 8th graders. Jill's husband, Chuck, who was an Episcopal minister, got on the Internet and had a bag full of information ready for us when Mom arrived. I called my dad and told him what I knew and what the plan was. I know it had to be tough, being that far away, and having your son tell you he has cancer. Dad had to feel pretty powerless. I could relate.

I had surgery on Saturday, May 1, at about 8:30 to remove a tumor from my right testicle (actually, to remove the whole thing). (I'll pause here for you to do the guy-groan and crotch rub!) I checked into the hospital at 6:00 a.m. and was prepped right away. The

two young gals in charge of me felt the brunt of my nervous sense of humor. They were very patient (pardon the hospital pun.)

They first had trouble finding a vein. After the third poke, she left the needle in and left to get the second gal. She then tried a couple of times with no success. I told her she really needed to either get it or stop. She called in reinforcements.

About 15 minutes later, a very short tree-root of a woman, in full scrubs, came in. She was about 120 years old, and she told me to move over on the bed so that she could sit down. Her feet didn't even touch the ground while she was sitting on my bed. Within seconds she had a vein and had me taped up to the IV. (Ever wonder if Roman doctors call them 4's?)

A little while later I was wheeled down to the pre-op room. I met the anesthesiologist. He told me that since I was a bit younger than his typical patients, he gave me the option of a local, or the full boat. I wanted to wake up within the week; I went for the full boat. Aimee stayed with me until they took me into the operating room. The last thing I remember was the bright light of the OR.

I woke up sometime late that morning or early that afternoon. Looked around, apparently got very emotional in front of my wife, then fell back to sleep. The hospital required that I do three things: walk on my own, urinate, and hold down a meal. I walked to the bathroom, peed, then came back in and ate lunch. I was out of the hospital by 6:00 that night.

Before I was discharged they wanted to get a CT scan. I was freezing as they wheeled me in and set me up! They covered me with a heated blanket, put my hands over

my head, and set up the iodine solution that makes you feel like you have to go to the bathroom as soon as it hits your bloodstream.

After everybody went into the other room to watch through the window, I heard a “pop.” The “V” shaped tube that was attached to my arm, burst. The iodine solution began leaking onto the table and into my hair. One of the attendants came in quickly and fixed the IV without having to re-poke me.

Aimee and I, understandably, were very tired. Aimee’s mom had picked up Logan and had taken him back home with her. So Aimee, my mom, and I got a room and crashed in Casper that night. The hospital picked up the bill.

I woke the next morning in pain, took a pain-pill, and went back to sleep. I was supposed to take my Vicodin with food. I quickly found out why! I became very sick to my stomach and very sensitive to motion, light, and sound. We went to breakfast in the hotel restaurant. I tried to walk all the way down, but Mom met me halfway with a wheelchair. The restaurant was packed, smoky, and bright. I went outside while Aimee and Mom ate!

I slept all the way home (which I’m prone to doing anyway!). All I remember was hearing the song *Rocket Man* by Elton John on the radio.

She packed my bags last night - pre-flight
 Zero hour, nine A.M.
 And I'm gonna be high as a kite by then
 I miss the earth so much, I miss my wife
 It's lonely out in space
 On such a timeless flight as this
 CHORUS: And I think it's gonna be a long long time
 Til touchdown brings me 'round to find
 I'm not the man they think I am at home
 Oh no, no, no, I'm a rocket man
 Rocket man, burnin' out his up here alone

Mars ain't the kinda place to raise your kids
 In fact it's cold as hell
 And there's no one there to raise them if you did
 And all this science, I don't understand
 It's just my job five days a-week
 Rocket man - - - rocket man
 And I think it's gonna be a long long time
 And I think it's gonna be a long long time

When we came home, somebody had broken into our house. They had found the back window that wouldn't lock, climbed in, cleaned, cooked a ham with scalloped potatoes, and even mowed the yard. I found out later that it had been some very dear friends of ours. (Thanks Bob, Lynda, Carol, and Russ.)

I was kept company by a pretty steady stream of visitors. It was great. An amazing amount of people brought me cards, balloons, food, and presents. It really meant a lot to me as I recouped. Aimee's mom brought Logan back, then stayed with me for two weeks while Aimee went back to school. Then my mom came up again and stayed for another two weeks. I had great care!

At home, I made sure that I didn't repeat the same mistake with my medication. Even at night, I would eat some graham crackers and drink a little juice with my Vicodin. Mom and Aimee set me up on the couch and kept me supplied. I listen to CD's a lot. I had just bought Stevie Ray Vaughn *Live at Carnegie Hall*. Good stuff. I also still had *Rocket Man* in my head. The problem was that I didn't own it, and I couldn't get it out of my head. My friend Hans dropped by to give me a card and a neat little book that I still like to read. He asked if he could get me anything. I said, "Yes, do you have *Rocket Man*,

and can you tape it for me?" Hans brought me a tape the next day that he had made the night before. He also stopped by every day for almost two full weeks.

I took the entire month of May off. I probably could have gone back to work if it wasn't for my radiation treatments. I was even able to go to school and have lunch with my friends from time to time before I started radiation. My 8th grade students made me a huge card and everybody signed it. They bought me a huge stuffed monkey and asked if I could come to a pep-rally to accept it. I did. I was still keeping ice on my incision, but I set it aside for a quick second, hobbled out in front of the entire student body, and accepted their gift. It was one of the most humbling and rewarding things I've ever done as a teacher.

I was up at school to visit when the school nurse cornered me. Janet is great, but she doesn't pull any punches, that's for sure. She had a student assistant with her. Sarah is a sweet kid that I had taught in high school and directed in a few plays. She was shadowing Janet because she was thinking about becoming a nurse too. Janet asked me about my stitches, and I explained that they had simply taped my incision, right above my hairline. Janet asked to see it, so we ducked into her office restroom so that I could have a little privacy. Sarah was mortified and red faced.

When we came out, Janet told Sarah, in no uncertain terms, that she needed to toughen up and that it was no big deal. She would see MUCH worse than that just in nursing school. So, Sarah swallowed her embarrassment and went with Janet and I back into the bathroom. By the time we came back out she was asking great questions about the procedure and had gotten over it. I'm sure she'll be a great nurse.

The amount of people who helped me during my convalescence was amazing. I had just started play practice with the high school students, so Joan Fuchs, the 7th grade English teacher, stepped in and took over. She used to direct both the middle and high school plays, so I felt very comfortable turning it over to her. I felt bad for my kids though and didn't want Joan to have to do the whole thing.

As soon as I felt moderately up to it, I went back into the auditorium. I was pretty pale and heavily sedated, but felt good about going (and getting out of the house!) Phil Miller, my auditorium technical guy, brought a La-Z-Boy recliner up from the prop room and put it right in the middle of the aisle so I could see everything. The kids waited on me hand and foot. We got through it. I needed all the help I got though. Phil had *Elton John's Greatest Hits* on tape in the auditorium, and he'd play *Rocket Man* for me every night! I couldn't get it out of my head.

My classroom was another matter. There was no way that I could've gotten through a whole day of teaching. As much Vicodin as I was doing, Lord only knows what I would have prepared for the kids! Lily Seaton, a retired teacher and principal turned substitute, stepped in and took over as only a veteran teacher could have done. I gave her the book and told her what I hadn't covered, and she took it from there.

I had a sophomore class at the high school that year too. Lily liked the 8th graders pretty well, but I think she could have lived without my sophomore class. Kevin Brook and Linda Odde helped her prep. Lily would watch one of their classes work on a writing or reading assignment for part of the class, and they would take turns coming down and teaching my kids. Like I said, the amount of people that helped me was amazing.

The high school students, most of whom I had taught as 8th graders, rolled out a piece of butcher-block paper the length of the high school lobby's trophy case. I bet almost every kid in the entire high school, and most of the teachers too, signed it and wished me a speedy recovery! I even got choked up when that came to the house.

RADIATION

I had to do 3 1/2 weeks of radiation as a preventative measure, 18 total. The surgery wasn't bad, but the treatments sucked. At least I could do Vicodin for the pain after surgery. Nothing prepared me for radiation.

I was scheduled to go back to Casper and meet with the oncology team. We would look over my test results, pre and post, and then lay out a plan for my radiation. Because my cancer hadn't seemed to spread, and we seemingly caught it early enough, I was spared the rigors of chemotherapy.

Logan again went to stay with Aimee's mom, and she drove me in our '95 Buick LaSabre to Casper. It's about a 130 mile trip one way. I had noticed that the car was making a slight ticking sound, assumed it was bad gas, and took steps accordingly. It wasn't bad gas. About a half mile out of Power River, a town of about 20 people, the ticking turned into a banging.

The rod went through the oil pan.

Here we are, about 40 miles out of Casper, literally the middle of nowhere. I'm supposed to be starting treatment for cancer; I can't walk very far, and our car dies in a steam and oil spewing mess. I remember getting out of the car, looking at the sky, and

asking God what I had done to anger him so. I was really looking wits-end in the face. I sat back in the passenger seat and Aimee started walking.

Remember the old story/joke about the guy who is stuck on his house during the flood? He prays and prays for God to rescue him. Suddenly a fire truck comes, but the man refuses help saying that his savior will rescue him. He says that to the boat driver and the helicopter pilot too. Finally, when he dies, he meets God and asks why He didn't save him. God replies, "What did you want? I sent a fire truck, a boat, and a helicopter!"

Aimee had made it a good 200 yards when our first help arrived from Heaven. It came in the form of a small unassuming gray pickup truck. I watched as it picked up my wife, turned to take her to the phone in Power River, then turned back toward me again. The driver owned the Thunderbird Hotel in Riverton. His daughter was going to school in Casper and the school was having some sort of awards program. He also needed supplies for the hotel.

He picked us up, let us use his cell-phone to call the Cancer Center, and had us there about five minutes later than scheduled. I was afraid that we'd be so late, we'd have to cancel! Not only that, but he had a buddy, Wayne, with a garage. He dropped us off, gave us his buddy's name, and left. Amazing.

It gets better.

Aimee called GMAC to see if they would honor our extended warranty. We were 1,700 miles over. They said no. Then she called Wayne while we waited for Dr. Tobin, my oncologist. Wayne said that he had to coach a little league baseball game and that he

didn't own a tow truck, but he did have a flat bed trailer with a winch, so if Aimee could leave right then, they could go get the car and be back in time for him to coach.

He was there within minutes. It was the only part of all of this that Aimee wasn't right there for. Dr. Tobin's assistant, Doug, took me into a room that looked like x-ray. There was a large table in the middle. The table had an arm or boom that came up over the head of the table. At the end of the boom, there was a large disk shaped apparatus, maybe three to four feet across.

Dave said that this particular machine was used to just set the pattern that would be used on patients. I wouldn't actually get a dose of radiation until tomorrow. I stripped down and lay on the table. They were able to cover my legs, but that was it. Dr. Tobin would set a pattern that ran down the middle of my chest to my waistline, and then it would angle off toward my right hip. The pattern was about three inches wide all the way down. It looked like the state of California, backward.

If the cancer had spread a little, the radiation was designed to hit my bladder, kidney area, and some of the closer lymph nodes; all the most likely places for my cancer to spread. My private parts, if I could call them that after all this, were placed in a lead "clam-shell" that would protect what I had left. It was like a hollowed out shot put. There was a wide rubber band that held it in place. Aimee and I still very much wanted to have another child.

I was on the table for almost an hour. Luckily the treatments would only last a couple of minutes. It was just getting set up that took so long. Dave used a small pin-tattooing device that embedded a small but deep spot of ink above, below, and to both

sides of my pattern. That way, if I had to come back in due to a relapse, they could call up the pattern in the computer, and line me back up by the tattoos. After the setup, I went back in and talked with Dr. Tobin and some of his staff. They answered all of my questions and showed me the results of my CT scan. I sat in the waiting room for only a short time before Aimee returned. Wayne had just given her the keys to his van so we'd have something to drive for that night!

Amazing. But it gets better!

That night we settled into a hotel. In the hospital, I started radiation for real the next morning. The actual time I spent on the table was probably only a couple of minutes, like a big x-ray. I would come in, the nurse would take me back, leave me, I'd drop my pants to my knees, lay on the table, and put on the clam-shell. They left me a pillowcase to cover up with. The nurse would then come back in and rubber band my feet together. If my legs came apart with the clamshell on, everything I still had would have hit the table!

After my first real treatment, Aimee and I went to see Wayne at his shop. Our car was up on the rack, and we could easily see the hole the exiting rod had produced. Wayne explained that he couldn't fix it; we'd have to take it to a GM garage. We got some stuff out of the back, and Wayne called a buddy of his at the GM garage and explained everything. The GM shop manager said he'd take a look and see what he could do. We didn't expect much. Wayne only charged us something like \$30 for the tow!

Aimee called her Mom and asked if she could loan us a vehicle. She left with their van and Logan shortly thereafter. Aimee and I went to some friends of ours, Bruce

and Sabrina, who now lived in Casper. I was very tired and needed a rest. Sabrina and Aimee visited while I rested, and we waited for the van and our son to arrive.

Then it hit. Because the radiation was aimed right down the middle of my abdomen, all of the vital organs that were in the way felt the brunt of the treatment. They had seized up after the treatment, which I didn't really feel. When they un-seized, I felt it. Uncontrollable vomiting, stomach cramps, and diarrhea was what I spent the next two days contending with.

Bruce was only home that evening, but Sabrina immediately clicked into Mom-mode and took care of me. I felt really bad, not only physically, but also for making a huge mess in her bathroom and for being such a slug. We thanked them the next day for their purple-heart hospitality, and went to a hotel.

Aimee was a track coach for our high school, and the State Tournament was to start that Thursday, so we spent Wednesday at the same hotel. It worked out well because we were already settled in before the kids got there. It also gave me a good place to feel free to be sick! After the third treatment, the doctor's office started me on Compazine. That made a difference. If I took it about an hour and a half before the treatment, I still felt the nausea, but at least I wasn't so violently ill. I toughed out the rest of the weekend with the track team then went home.

Before we left we received a phone call from Big Wyoming's (The GM garage in Casper) shop manager. He had talked to a connection he had at GM and they said they would honor our warranty! A \$100 deductible. The engine would be there within a week. I told you it would get more amazing. What, on the surface, looked like abandonment by

God, had been a blessing. We would have a brand new engine in our car for \$100!
(Sounds like “Footprints” doesn’t it!)

My mom came up and stayed with us that weekend, then took the bus with me to Casper the next Monday. The Casper Cancer Center runs a small bus, very nice, from Lander, to Riverton, Shoshoni, and then on into Casper, everyday. I would just drive my in-law’s van to Shoshoni (about 32 miles), and then Vern would drive us all into Casper. It was really nice. I couldn’t have driven myself down everyday, but then again, that was the purpose of the bus in the first place. It really afforded me time to read, listen to music, reflect, and most importantly, to sleep! I was zapped.

The whole time, back and forth, I had *Rocket Man* in my head again. Usually, after listening to a song that’s been running through my head, it goes away. For some reason though, it just wouldn’t leave. I started to really look and listen to the lyrics, and for some reason, I started to relate to them. “All this science, I don’t understand. It’s just my job five days a week...”

I took my treatments each day for about three and a half weeks, Monday through Friday. Not bad. Several of the people I rode the bus with were much worse off than I. Heah, my car was worse off than I was.

A typical day would start with me getting up and showering. I’d drive the in-laws’ van to Shoshoni. Vern the bus driver would pick us up, out of Lander. We would drive to Casper and all of our appointments were scheduled for the same time. I would pop a Compazine then settle in to listen to tunes or read a book.

When I got there, I would strip down and put on a gown, and strap on my lead “clamshell” over what was left to protect it from radiation burning. It only took a second, like an x-ray, but it locked up all of my internal organs. About two hours later, they would let loose. The Compazine kept me from getting sick; I just felt like I needed to.

I would ride the bus back to Shoshoni, drive the van home, and go to sleep. On the weekends, I would just start to feel better before my next treatment. I did that for a month.

It's funny, almost a cliché, but I see the world in a different way now. I hope and pray that I appreciate each one for what it is. I look at sunsets a little longer, I hug a little longer, I try to understand more, and appreciate beauty for the gift that it is. After all of this, Aimee and I had another son too.