



THE ANATOMY OF TODD MELKIN

CAT MALCYNKY

After seeing an episode of *Law & Order* in which a mother murdered her infant child by forcing it to swallow a kitchen sponge, forty-one-year-old Todd Melkin was even more convinced that he had a tumor in his brain. The television morticians found crystallized dish soap between the baby's brain and skull, and Todd decided that's what it felt like – like misplaced disinfectant, chemical and ravenous.

Todd had first decided on the tumor's existence when he was sixteen. He could feel it even then, sinking its roots into the folds of his frontal lobe, pushing angrily against his skull. Come December of his sophomore year of high school he was quite sure of it, but not certain enough to tiptoe into his parents' bedroom and whimper the words to his mother. He didn't know if he wanted the doctors inside of him, asking him to recite the colors of the rainbow while they poked and prodded. He thought of the starched white coats and the smell of latex and the fluorescent glare off linoleum floors. He worried that the tumor was smarter than they were.

He thought maybe he could wilt it like a flower, and for over a day he didn't drink anything. But the internal drought proved to be too difficult; he could feel its dry, chalky residue pollinating his cranium. So he tried to drown it, drinking so much water that it felt like his stomach might give way, until his throat was swollen in protest. The pain passed and Todd felt the tumor finding its footing again, having simply floated from one side of his head to the other.

For years it slept, Todd reasoned, swaddling itself in his grey matter and tucking itself in between layers of Todd's subconscious. He feared angering it by means of articulation, so he ignored the beating of its separate pulse until it slowed into slumber. Todd grew up a lot and down a little; he grew older and more tired and even grew a rather brittle goatee. From seventeen to forty-one the tumor hibernated, awakened not by sound but by silence.

...Side effects include nausea, dizziness, loss of appetite, loss of interest, sleep loss, and in severe cases...

Forty-one-year-old Todd turned off the television. It zapped to black. He missed the way their old television turned off – the pixelated colors shrank away from the corners into a single white dot that flickered out. He preferred things that ended gradually.

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TURNING INWARD

Johanna Tomsick

“I have a headache,” Todd said into the phone. The opposing voice of his mother cooed sympathetically before casually letting slip that she, too, had felt ill that morning. That kind of thing drove Todd crazy. Why couldn’t he be the only person with a headache for once? Why was it that whenever he told someone he felt weary, they felt the need to share some saga about the horrific flu they had last week? He sat, brooding in the corner of the coffee shop, until his mother finally let him go. He grunted a goodbye into the receiver, followed by a muttered “stop worrying about me.”

Then to the computer screen. Numbers and letters and columns and such. Finances for a hot tub manufacturing company (Rub-A-Dub Hot Tubs!). He turned the brightness of his screen down low; he wasn’t lying about the pounding behind his temples. Eight months ago he would have handled this at home, fiddling with fonts and margin alignments for a good twenty minutes before actually getting to work on anything substantially worth his time. But he was better now. More driven, focused. At least he wanted to be.

“Hey, Todd.”

Todd glanced up only briefly at the sound of Dawn’s voice. “Hello.”

“Just water today, I assume?”

“Yes, thanks.”

She was a sweet woman. Impossibly old, but sweet. She always smiled at him appreciatively before he even reached the barista counter, probably because she knew he wasn’t going to ask for anything fancy. Nowadays everyone who came in here spoke a second language, rolling “-accinos” and “-acciatos” off their tongues rapid-fire, tying together English and Italian with styrofoam and different medleys of espresso. It boggled Todd. He didn’t even like coffee, and the thought of lying awake for hours in bed, writhing with caffeine, certainly wasn’t worth the price. Water was free, a constitutional right.

He would ditch the groaning grinders, hissing steamers and constant babble of the coffee shop if he could still get anything done at home. There was no noise in his apartment to clutter his thoughts, since his radio was broken and the second dresser in the bedroom had been cleaned out. Home was for sleeping and eating breakfast, because breakfast food was easy to buy and takes longer to expire. So he came here after work, plowed through his nightly workload, and then found some dimly-lit place with a booth and a vodka tonic and ate until he was tired enough to actually sleep.

Five months ago he didn’t live like this. Five months ago he had still been bald (“doesn’t your head ever get sunburned?”) with that goatee (“babe, this thing has gotta go”), but he had also been about twenty pounds lighter, without the swell of a beer belly threatening the last hole of his belt. He’d had that glow about him that let strangers know that he wasn’t lonely

in life, and he had rushed home everyday at four o’clock without hesitation or a headache. Back then it was at his kitchen table that he sat and fiddled absently between Calibri and Arial Black, listening to Caroline hum Eagles songs as she started brewing a fresh pot of coffee. He didn’t drink coffee then, either, but he’d always liked the smell.

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“They caught it early” – that’s what he imagined they’d have said if they drilled into the tectonic plates of his skeleton and were welcomed by his tumor in full-bloom. Early because it would be five in the morning, when bad news usually comes. Early because he was relatively young, and youth was supposed to ward off ill fortune. They’d catch it early but it would still be too late.

Forty-one-year-old Todd lay in bed, running his fingertips over the sandpaper skin of his head (he needed to shave soon). The ceiling fan churned the cool air of his bedroom, the thin metal chain that dangled from its center swinging in small circles. He’d drawn the shades, but threads of the orange streetlight still slipped through the slats, projecting onto the walls in neat parallel lines. It was quiet but not silent, and this difference is what kept Todd awake. He didn’t mind the subtle whooshing of the ceiling fan – it was the creaking that he didn’t like. Like a child bouncing on a wooden diving board, too excited to back off, but too frightened to jump in. It was loudest just below the skin, pressing back against his fingertips.

If it were a tumor, you wouldn’t have felt it like that, Caroline had said one night at thirty-three, when the two of them were swaddled in sleeping bags up in Maine. *There aren’t nerves like that in your brain. It must have been a mental thing – Major depressive disorder, or something.* Todd had laughed as Caroline’s fingers swirled across his chest, her cheek pressed against his shoulder. *Major Depression, reporting for duty*, he’d said, bringing a hand to his forehead in salute. It was funny then because he didn’t feel it anymore.

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Dr. Zaul had long, brittle grey nose-hairs, and Todd considered them inappropriate for a dentist. For every hour Todd was sentenced to the examination chair, Dr. Zaul was either unaware or unashamed as he stared down the bridge of his infested nose into Todd’s mouth. The hairs reminded Todd of sea urchins, creeping out of Dr. Zaul’s nostrils and quivering with his nasally voice. On occasion a droplet of mucus would cling perilously to a follicle or two, and Todd would watch it with unyielding eyes, fully prepared to tuck and roll out of his chair should that droplet detach itself. Todd often fantasized about trimming the hairs, first with tiny cosmetic shears and then with a top-shelf electric nose-hair trimmer, the kind that sounds a lot like the contraption that Dr. Zaul was forcing between his molars. Todd mused that he might even tuck the necessary tools into the pocket of his blazer, and subtly begin the nasal deforestation while Dr. Zaul was simultaneously beginning the dental cleaning. It could be a beautiful symbiotic relationship, like shark and a remora, or a hippo and one of those tiny birds that eats bacteria off a hippo’s back. Dr. Zaul might not even notice.

“Well, aside from the one cavity the ol’ chompers are holding up well, Mr. Melkin.” Todd winced at the word *chompers*. “I’m glad to see you here, I hear it’s been a tough year for you.” Todd nodded, hoping his gaping mouth did not undermine the somber tone of his nod. “A little wider, please,” Dr. Zaul said politely. His nose-hairs danced. Todd dropped his chin, feeling like his chapped lips might split. He never knew what to do with his tongue; it was embarrassing not to know its orientation.

“Did you and Caroline sort it all out?”

“*Nuhh-uh.*”

“Well, that’s just too bad.”

“*Uhh-huh.*”

“She was a sweet lady.”

“*Uhh.*”

Dr. Zaul employed a new tool now, the kind that gently spouted water into his mouth. He imagined his tongue, dry and shrunken, expanding like a sponge as it absorbed the needed moisture.

Todd realized he was clenching his hands together so tightly over his stomach that it hurt his fingers. He wrung his hands and tried to place them at his sides. He picked at where the worn leather tucked under the chair’s metal foundations. Dr. Zaul was at the sink now, mixing something together.

“We just need you to make an impression now,” Dr. Zaul went on, scraping a purple-colored clay into what looked like a mouth guard. “Bite down,” Dr. Zaul said. Todd wrenched his jaw open again and sank his teeth into the putty.

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Todd drove to work without any music, for fear that his tumor might dance. Instead he focused on the sound of the wheel sliding through his hands, the brief roars of the lawn mowers he passed, and the starchy film left on his teeth by the impression. Todd preferred the web of back roads that led to his office, even though David, his closest work acquaintance, insisted that it was a waste of time. Todd counted mailboxes, sometimes adding up the sums of their street numbers. He assigned names to the spaniels and retrievers that pulled at their leashes. When stick-figure murals made of sidewalk chalk waved at him from a driveway, he winced at the pain in his head and tried his best not think about Caroline.

He parked in his usual spot, the one closest to the street and farthest from the office, where there was never any anxiety over finding an empty space. The sun was hot as he ambled to the door, and he wished he hadn’t worn such a thick tweed suit.

“There’s the champ!” bellowed David as soon as Todd had stepped into the foyer of Rub-A-Dub Hot Tubs!. He air-punched Todd’s bulging stomach; this almost bothered Todd more than the unconvincing use of “champ.” They had worked together for fifteen years and they still didn’t understand each other.

David began his first irrelevant anecdote of the day by saying “it’s not even funny,” but Todd heard “it’s 1914.” He knew this wasn’t right but he let himself run with it, dubbing over David’s recap of his wife overcooking the pot roast again with thoughts of what the office would look like if it were, in fact, 1904: dustier, he decided. Edith and Megan would be in corsets (and probably churning something back in their respective homes). The electricity would have to go. Or would it? He made a mental note to look up when electricity was invented. Edison was the guy, that much he knew.

“Can you even believe that?” David asked, clapping a hand onto Todd’s shoulder. Todd shook his head, imagining David in pantaloons and a powdered wig. “. . . And with a stomach full of *charcoal stew*, I had to read a children’s book about a rabbit throwing a dinner party about fifteen consecutive times before Archie and Emma would go to sleep. Exhausting, I’ll tell ya! Sometimes I think you made the right call, champ. Not procreating,” David snorted, slapping Todd’s back in an avuncular fashion.

They strode past model after model of state-of-the-art hot tubs, all of which deteriorated Todd’s 1904 fantasy. “Massage jets” and “Dead Sea filters” could not be reconciled with simplicity and tradition. Besides – if it were 1904, David would never think Todd had made the right call; everybody had kids back then, didn’t they? Would Early-Twentieth-Century-Todd have been able to grow into a father? If he and Caroline had met in 1889, would they still be together in 1904? He pictured a long lace-sleeved dress and a feathered sunhat on his bedroom floor.

“I’m sure Kathy didn’t mean to burn your soup,” Todd told David. His voice was hollow.

With every step, the diving board creaked.

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That night, Todd had a nightmare that he was getting into a hot tub, buck naked, in the middle of the Rub-A-Dub-Hot-Tubs! showroom. Edith and Megan giggled at his pasty thighs, the way his wiry chest hair had become sparse. David heckled the “little champ” between his legs. Marion, his boss, threatened his employment with a shake of his gold-watched fist. Todd sank into the white water, impervious.

The heat of the hot tub seeped into his pores. The pressure of the jets pounded the flesh of his back, the soles of his feet. If he were to respond to the crowd of his opposers, he would have sounded like he was shouting into the blades of a fan; he didn't want to say anything.

His flustered audience dissipated, and he was alone. Alone, save for the simmering in his pate. The dregs of the tumor bubbled across his cognizance, coloring the chlorinated water a deep lavender. He could smell them – Caroline's bath salts. "The Muscle Melter – Fun for the Whole Family," read the sign adjacent to the model tub. Todd tried to sink his heavy body under the humming surface of the water, but the tumor kept him afloat like a buoy.

Todd awoke with a start, his head floating off the pillow with nauseating buoyancy. In the cacophony of silence he heard Eagles songs. *Take it easy*, they crooned, but he couldn't. He spread his limbs across the mattress in an effort to shrink the empty space. He remembered being a child, tiptoeing into his parents' bedroom and wriggling in between them to ward off the nightmares. His father was alive then, the cancer having not yet made up its mind. He would die three months before Todd's sixteenth birthday, when Todd was too old to take refuge in their queen-sized sheets.

I don't want to be a father, he had told Caroline eight months ago. She was holding onto a cup of Sumatra and a fraying hope that he might change his mind. What he'd wanted to say was "I *can't* be a father," but he knew what would follow – he didn't need encouragement, didn't need reassurance. He knew his makeup, knew he couldn't make enough room in their bed, knew that he carried the gene for cowardice, knew the hibernating growth beneath his brow would one day yawn and stretch its branches. He was never sure when he was going to disappear. In the end, it was Caroline that vanished.

He fumbled with his nightstand and retrieved a sleeping pill. He popped it into his mouth and swallowed it dry.

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The next day Todd drove to Dr. Zaul's office. Even after he'd parked his car, he kept his hand on the wheel, breathing heavily. His head ached. His ring finger glinted in a shard of sunlight. His fingers had grown too swollen to shimmy the gold band over his knuckles. Too few walks and too many beers.

He didn't have an appointment. He had been to the dentist only a few days before. There was nothing wrong with his filling. Dr. Zaul was not expecting him. Todd slipped his right hand into the pocket of his blazer and ran his fingertips over the electric nose hair trimmer he had stowed there that morning. It was heavy in his pocket, the handle smooth and cold to the touch. His pulse was thick around his temples.

Todd got out of the car and walked briskly into the dentist office. He marched up to the counter and stopped there, staring through Pamela, the mousey secretary. She smiled at him. There was lipstick on her teeth.

"Good morning, Mr. Melkin," she chirped. She looked surprised to see him. "Is everything alright? I don't believe you have anything scheduled for today..." she licked her thumb and shuffled through her papers. She should use a computer, Todd thought. It's neater.

"I don't have an appointment," Todd said. His voice came out colder than he meant it, and he felt a bit bad about it. Pamela's penciled-on eyebrows raised, and she paused in her file-fumbling.

"What can I help you with, then? Are you scheduling a future appointment? If so, you can always give us a call." She was looking behind Todd now at a young woman who had just walked in. She seemed eager to dismiss Todd, which annoyed him.

"I need to see Dr. Zaul."

"He has a patient, Mr. Melkin." Pamela's usual sweet-tea tone was icing over.

"I am a patient."

"Not today, I'm afraid. If you could –"

"NO," Todd bellowed, slapping a hand against the desk. Pamela and the woman behind Todd both gasped. "I need to see him *now*."

Pamela was abashed. "I will see if he can spare just a minute of his time," she replied, slowly and firmly.

"Thank you, Pamela." Todd could feel a rush of heat overtaking his face, his palms, his underarms. He abruptly felt tired, so much so that sleep seemed an urgent matter, and even as he saw Pamela bustling back into Dr. Zaul's office he was unsure that he could wait for her return. He leaned against the reception desk; the nose hair trimmer in his pocket clinked against the edge.

"Mr. Melkin?"

Dr. Zaul looked professional as always, crisp shirt and ironed pants, his shoes so shiny that it was almost irritating. He gave Todd a lukewarm smile that politely requested an explanation for this conversation. Todd stared at the edges of his nostrils, where the very tips of the grey anemones barely poked out.

“Mr. Melkin, is there a problem I can help you with? I’ve only got a moment, I’m with another patient and her fluoride treatment will be over in sixty seconds. What can I do for you?”

Todd’s fingers enclosed around the trimmer in his pocket. He could feel the ragged breaths invading and fleeing his body. Behind his rectangular, wire-rimmed glasses, Dr. Zaul’s eyes were beginning to look more concerned. Todd’s heart seemed to have stepped onto a treadmill.

“Mr. Melkin?”

Like a hippo and a bird, Todd thought. Dr. Zaul’s breathing quickened as he glanced down at Todd’s hand held tight in his pocket; the nose hairs fluttered.

“Are you alright?”

You’ll be alright, Caroline had said. Her hand had been on the door. He had watched her go.

Todd’s hand fell out of his pocket, leaving the trimmer inside. Todd’s eyes fell to the floor and his chest caved, leaving him a slumping mess. “I’m not alright,” he gasped, clawing at his head with his fingers. “I’m *not* alright!” he said again.

Dr. Zaul’s hands gripped his arms tightly, forcing Todd to look up at his bespectacled eyes. “Go home, Todd,” Dr. Zaul whispered, surveying the uncomfortable patients waiting behind them. “You’ve been through a lot lately. If you don’t have anyone to talk to, call Pamela later and maybe she can write you in for one of my lunch breaks – maybe we can get coffee for a few minutes next week, or something, if you think that would help. This isn’t about your teeth, is it?”

Todd heaved in the air necessary to reply. “No,” he said. “It’s not my teeth.”

“Okay,” Dr. Zaul breathed, releasing his grip. “Then that’s the most I can do for you right now. Go home, okay? Take a bubble bath or something. Get some sleep.”

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Todd did not go to work after that. He went to the park where he proposed to Caroline. He had asked her on a bench that faced the lagoon. They were feeding ducks. In nights before, he had tried to translate Caroline into spreadsheets of pros and cons, risks and benefits – but ultimately his love for her defied his pattern of hesitation. They were happy. He was happy. According to David, “love” and “happy” were words that three-year-olds understood in full, even using them avidly in conversation. At forty-one, Todd had forgotten how they worked; the vowels and consonants were stale on his tongue.

Now the lagoon was ailing, pushing discarded beer cans and plastic bags around with its algae and lily pads. Kids ruin everything, he thought.

He ignored calls from David, from Marion. He took his shoes off and walked in the grass, but he felt no younger, no less ill. It was a dewy day and the hem of his trousers got wet. A jolly man was playing a harmonica on a rock across the lagoon, and Todd wondered if he had ever felt this way.

Raw and defeated, Todd walked back to the parking lot. He was still holding his shoes in his hand. He was only a few yards from his car when he saw a small turtle meandering across the pavement up ahead. Every movement it made was awkward; it lifted its clawed feet high, bringing them down with such conviction, yet every step offset its balance. Todd felt a fondness for the creature that momentarily detracted from the pain in his head. The turtle’s struggle was slow and lonely, yet he stumbled on. Todd watched it march its clumsy body toward the park, and he could feel its thirst in his own throat, feel the dryness of its skin in his very bones.

When the truck pulled around the bend of the parking lot, Todd didn’t hesitate for the first time in his life. His body, the opposite of aerodynamic, hurled itself across the asphalt – his skin peeled back against the pavement – his chin cracked. His eyes were closed, but his body saw in tangible color – the tires of the truck thudded over the backs of his knees, and the pain screamed red before the blood even started to gallop out of his veins. He cried out, but he wasn’t sure his lungs made a sound, for the echo of his bones cracking shot through his body at a staggering volume. Time stumbled, and Todd forgot for a moment whether he was eight or eighteen or thirty-six or forty-one. Nothing was relevant but the frenzy of his nerves.

When the kaleidoscope of anguish finally settled just enough, he pried open his eyes and saw his fingertips stretched out before him across the ground. Just beyond them, the turtle was flipped onto its back, waving its legs about in earnest.

“Jesus, God!” a voice exclaimed. Todd heard a car door shut. The sounds were underwater. “Are you okay?!”

“No,” Todd wheezed. His lungs ached in disdain.

“I’m calling an ambulance,” the man panted, and he heard the sounds of the truck’s driver rummaging through his car for his cell phone. Todd closed his eyes again, allowing himself to feel the decimation of his lower body. For a moment his mind confused the throbbing of his arteries with excitement.

“Holy *crap!*” A different voice. “Mister, are you okay?! Mister?!”

Todd squinted one eye open, blinking crimson out of his vision. As his eyes adjusted, he saw a small, chubby hand reach

down and flip the turtle back over. Flustered and highly inconvenienced, the turtle scuttled away. Behind it, a small pair of hands and knees pressed against the ground.

“I saw the whole thing – that was *rad!*” A freckled face was brought before Todd’s, the buck-toothed child crouched low. “You *saved* that turtle! You’re a hero, mister!” The boy’s breath smelled like fruit punch. Todd tasted salt. “How do you feel?!” The kid demanded, bringing his face even closer. With great effort, Todd blinked.

“Shouldn’t...you...be...in...school?” he managed.

“You’re bleeding a lot, mister.” The boy’s blue eyes bore into Todd’s, alight with awe and the thrill of fear. “Are you okay?”

“—I-I’m so, so sorry, sir! The ambulance is on its way.” It was the first voice, accompanied by a hot hand on his shoulder blades. “Isaac, leave him alone!” the man added, and Todd watched as the boy retreated in shame.

“No, Isaac...don’t,” Todd mumbled weakly, “not yet.”

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The ambulance was bright light and pricks and tubes he couldn’t feel and agony that muted everything. Isaac’s father told the EMTs that he’d accidentally run Todd over, but didn’t mention the turtle. This bothered Todd. *I wasn’t trying to die*, Todd wanted to say. He wanted to rudely interrupt, like someone with authority. Instead, Todd alternated between opening his eyes and closing them, but both options were starting to look the same.

“We’re almost there, sir,” one of the EMTs assured Todd, and he wondered if they were touching him.

Todd wondered if he should tell them that he had been harboring a brain tumor for the last twenty-five years. He wondered if it would matter. He decided that, if he had just one story left, he would tell them about the turtle. *I was a hero*, he would say. *It was rad*. Besides, he couldn’t feel it just then. What an odd time for a tumor to take a nap, he thought.

E THICAL DILEMMAS TO AMBIGUOUS DEFINITION OF AUTONOMY: ADVANCED CARE PLANNING AND END OF LIFE DECISIONS FOR CANCER PATIENTS

ELIZABETH MAGILL

Introduction

With an aging population and higher mortality rates in hospitals than ever before,¹ the process of advanced care planning (ACP), or “communication between individuals and their health care agents to...discuss and plan for future health care decisions for a time when individuals are not able to make their own health care decisions,”² is becoming increasingly important in the United States. In November 2015, Medicare issued a statement outlining changes that will fund ACP appointments for Medicare patients beginning in January 2016.³ While this marks a general acceptance for ACP, the process has not yet been successfully utilized for specific illnesses such as advanced cancer. There are a variety of reasons, including younger patient age and unwillingness to appear pessimistic,⁴ that doctors are hesitant to discuss death with these patients, but evidence suggests that without ACP cancer patients’ end-of-life wishes are not met. Although most cancer patients want to die at home, unless patients have explicitly discussed or written down their preferences proxies are more likely to provide all care possible than limit life-prolonging treatment.⁵ Some of these treatments, including ICU admission, are linked to substantially worse quality of life for patients’ last weeks.⁶ Despite the clear necessity for more ACP with cancer patients, the potential for remission makes beginning these conversations extremely difficult.

While it is clear that ACP should be implemented to increase patient autonomy in end-of-life decisions, there is controversy surrounding the timeframe of such interventions; some ethicists believe that ACP should begin as soon as possible, but others argue that these discussions should only be started once cancer is at its terminal stage. Both groups, despite their different perspectives, state that their method best preserves patient choice—highlighting a broader tension about the definition of autonomy in end-of-life medical care.

Timeline 1: Outpatient Visits after Cancer Diagnosis

Many scholars argue that ACP for cancer patients should occur right after diagnosis of the disease during outpatient oncology visits. This perspective is backed by both the American College of Physicians and Canadian Medical Association⁷ and echoes the push for ACP to be integrated into all general adult medical visits. Much of the stigma around ACP, it is argued, comes from the modern stigma around death. Surgeon and public health researcher Atul Gawande, in his book *Being Mortal: Illness, Medicine, and What Matters in the End*,⁸ states that with current medical technology, death has become regarded as abnormal rather than part of a natural course, as it was characterized through most of history. He argues that