

Headaches

Of all the fears a hypochondriac will inevitably cycle through, having a brain tumour is perhaps the most common and debilitating. Of course, it is not the benign variety, both more prevalent and treatable, that we fear, but the malignant type. What we really fear, is the dreaded Glioblastoma.

Glioblastomas are a relatively rare cancer, representing roughly fifteen percent of all brain tumours and less than one percent of *all* cancers. Meaning, you have less than a one percent chance of ever being diagnosed with it.

Most would say these are good odds. In fact, they are excellent odds. Put another way, the average person has a ninety-nine percent chance of never developing one. But, if it is so rare, why then do we hypochondriacs fear it so? Well, the answer to that is easy.

First, the prognosis. The five year life expectancy of someone diagnosed with a Glioblastoma is only seven percent. That means, despite having a ninety-nine percent chance of never developing a Glioblastoma, if you find yourself in the one percent

that eventually does, you're faced with a ninety-three percent chance of dying from it. A heartbreaking statistic.

Second, the headache. Headaches are incredibly common and almost everyone in the world has, at one point or another, experienced one. Some people rarely get them. Others, myself included, experience them every other day.

The problem starts when the hypochondriac goes online, starts researching their headache, and finds that, despite being an almost universal affliction, there are rare occasions where it is the presenting symptom of a brain tumour. In such cases, as the tumour size increases, so to does the intracranial pressure, which, among other things, produces the headache.

We dig deeper and learn the different types of tumours. The most dangerous of which is Glioblastoma. We read that it develops rapidly and carries a terrible prognosis; most people die within a year or two and almost no one lives past five. We research more and more until we come to the inevitable conclusion that - *I have a Glioblastoma.*

We place dots and then connect them, confirming our fears; *I've never had this type of headache before, it's never been in this spot, it's never lasted this long, medicine isn't working, that one person's story sounded a lot like mine.* We go back online in an attempt to dissuade ourselves - *reassurance seeking*, but only convince ourselves further. We step onto a treadmill of cyclical, pervasive self-doubt. *I know I probably don't have a brain tumour, but I also definitely do.*

I know all this because I have, on more than one occasion, been more than certain, that I too had a brain tumour. In fact, between 2012 and 2014, I had three of them.

The First Brain Tumour

My first brain tumour scare began in March of 2012. I had recently re-enrolled in University to study software engineering - a degree I only managed to complete six months of, and I had just quit my job working at a local drive-through liquor store. I was a bad employee, and management were very aware. Always on my phone, doing my absolute best to do as little as possible, calling in sick all the time - those kinds of things. My assistant manager at the time actually took me aside one day and said the manager had threatened to take my phone away and smash it with a hammer. They would have fired me that day if he hadn't managed to talk him down. I wasn't even using my phone for what you would expect. I wasn't on *Instagram* or *Facebook* or whatever. I was on an internet forum for hypochondriacs. We were all discussing one another's symptoms and postulating on whether or not we were indeed dying of Mad Cow Disease, Brain Eating Amoeba, or Ebola - *despite having never been to affected regions, nor having had contact with someone who had*. I can't really remember what I was worried about at the time, but I think it had something to do with mercury poisoning - *I don't even know how one gets mercury poisoning, too much tuna?*

I thought quitting would allow me a fresh start, and the liquor store to hire someone not completely useless. Instead of working, I resolved to focus on my studies and finally become a productive member of society. And, for a while, I followed through. But then one day, I woke up with what felt like a vice grip wrapped around my head. It wasn't overly painful, but it was very uncomfortable.

In the beginning I just ignored it and went about my business. I was still in the honeymoon phase of unemployment, excited that, except for going to university, I

was free to do whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted. Which usually meant television and video games. The headache however, never went away, and the more I googled it, the higher my stress and anxiety levels became, and the worse the headache got. It was a self-perpetuating cycle, where each part fed into the next, almost cannibalistically, until my anxiety finally reached critical levels.

When people are anxious, some of them turn to drugs - prescription or otherwise, others to alcohol, and others still to professional help. I turned to David Attenborough. I had caught a bit of one of his programs on TV once and his voice alone had been enough to soothe me. So, I went out to my local JB Hi-Fi, the Australian small goods and electrical appliance store, and bought every David Attenborough DVD I could find. The Blue Planet, Planet Earth, Frozen Planet - basically, if a DVD had the word *planet* on it, and the name *David Attenborough* was attached, I bought it.

I spent the next few weeks devouring it all. I lay in bed, all day, everyday, convinced I was going to die, soaking it all up. I would watch, and re-watch, episode after episode after episode. And, for one reason or another, it actually worked. It helped to take my mind off of my fears. I was awestruck by the sheer scale of it all, by seeing how interconnected, yet completely separated, we all are from one another and the world around us. Watching the lengths to which other animals have to go to simply stay alive, or feed their children. Seeing how life and death are two sides of the same, fucked up coin. Witnessing hundreds of animals converge on the carcass of a whale, whose death has meaning; it provides life.

Seeing all this, it liberated me. It made realise that I am insignificant. That my death would have less meaning than that of some random whale. That my coin was of no greater worth than any other living creatures coin. This whale couldn't speak, it

couldn't cook pasta, it couldn't do math - *not that I could either*. But this whale's death would breathe life into every animal that came into contact with it. My death on the other hand, would make a few people sad, but would ultimately be meaningless, until completely forgotten.

I don't think David Attenborough meant for my insignificance to be the main takeaway, but it really did help me to navigate through the fears and anxieties compounding in my head. It helped me come to terms with a harsh truth; that even if I was going to die soon, all of this, everything that I was seeing in these TV shows, it would all continue on, unperturbed by my passing. Mountain goats would continue to traverse ridiculous inclines, dolphins would continue to fish in majestic ways, there would still be frogs capable of flight; everything would stay the same, only I would no longer be there to witness it.

It sounds like a downer, but it really did help me to not only get over my hypochondria - at least for a while, but also to contextualise my fears as they related to the real world. I had lived a comfortable, pampered life up until that point. I had never had to work half as hard as a penguin fishing for food for its young, or an elephant protecting its young from becoming prey. I had had a good run. Maybe twenty one years was enough. Maybe my punishment for wasting my time worrying about dying, instead of actually living, would be to be reborn as one of these animals that actually had to work hard to stay alive. I guess I will never know.

I obviously did not have a brain tumour, despite what my copious amounts of googling, coupled with my dedication to misinterpreting symptoms and facts, would have had me believe. Getting lost in the world of David Attenborough had drawn my

attention away from the headache just long enough for me to forget it was ever there. I didn't even end up seeing a doctor about it.

David Attenborough had been all the doctor I needed.

The Second Brain Tumour

I'm not going to lie, the second brain tumour scare was almost identical to the first, and, looking back on it now, I really don't know why it got me so worked up.

It had been roughly six months since the first scare, I was no longer at University, I had just started a new job that I was enjoying, and everything was going really well, when, just as I had six months prior, one morning, I woke up with a headache.

This time, David Attenborough wasn't enough. I didn't even wait to see if the headache would persist. Instead, I went straight to the doctor's office and told her about the headache, and, that this time, *this time I knew*, I had a brain tumour. She laughed, so I went to a different doctor. The second doctor also laughed, so I went to another doctor. The third doctor laughed even harder, so I went to yet another doctor. But this time, I stayed ahead of the curb; I outright lied to her.

I walked into my new doctor's office, looked her straight in the eyes, and dribbled absolute shit. With a straight face, I told my new doctor that I had knocked my head playing soccer - *I hadn't*, and since then my eyesight had been a little blurry - *it hadn't been*, and that I had had a near constant headache. It was a cheeky tactic to get what I really wanted from her; a brain scan.

I knew from all my research that these were all classic indicators of bleeding on the brain, and, sure enough, the doctor said that I was probably fine, but they would

need to run a quick scan to make sure there wasn't a small bleed somewhere. *Victory.*

The perfect plan.

The doctor sent me through to the radiology department where a plump, overly chatty radiologist was waiting for me. He went through all the normal safety stuff, talked me through the procedure, how long it would take, what I could expect and so on. He was doing a great job of making me feel comfortable until, right towards the end, just as he was getting ready to go into the little observation room adjacent to the machine, he turned to me, and as nonchalant and matter-of-factly as you like, said, "you know the radiation from this scan could actually give you a brain tumour in a few years."

Umm... What...

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Why the fuck would you say that now!?

I replied as calmly as I could, "Oh.. well maybe I shouldn't have this scan then, you know...the doctor said it's probably nothing anyway... the headache is not that bad.... oh look! I can see clearly now! It's a miracle!"

But he wasn't having any of it. "Trust me, you would rather get a brain tumour in a few years than die in a few days because we didn't do the scan."

Fuck. The logic was infallible.

I had managed to somehow trap myself in my own lie, and there was no way in hell I was going to tell him that it was, in fact, all a lie.

So I did the scan.

And, unsurprisingly, I was fine. No imaginary brain bleed. No real brain tumour. Just a healthy twenty-something brain.

I would love to say that this experience taught me a lesson and that I never lied to a doctor, or over-exaggerated my symptoms, again. But, I have, multiple times since. Really, the only positive of the whole experience, apart from finding out I wasn't dying, was that all the time I spent waiting for appointments while doctor hopping that week had allowed me to read the entirety of the seventh Harry Potter novel exclusively in waiting rooms.

The Third Brain Tumour

Of all the brain tumours I have thought I had, this was by far both the funniest, and most debilitating. It began in early 2014.

At the time I was living overseas in a share house with ten similarly fresh off the boat expatriates. We all had our own rooms but shared a communal living area, three shower rooms, and what could only be described as a slightly cleaner version of regular, old, public toilets. It was rent and utility free and food was provided. It was a good deal all things considered.

Trying to make my room feel as homely as possible, I very quickly decked it out. I moved a small bar fridge in, bought a cheap kotatsu - *one of those Japanese tables with the heater built in underneath*, and purchased a small television to connect my laptop to. I also bought an Xbox so I could play games with family and friends back home. I had made it, a home away from home.

As time went on however, one thing that I found to be rather difficult was getting any privacy. Sure, the rooms had locks, but with ten other people in such close proximity, privacy was hard to come by. This made doing certain things difficult. Certain things that we all do, but are too ashamed to admit to, or talk about, publicly. I

am of course talking about masturbation. Everybody does it. It is universal. But, that didn't make trying to do it while surrounded by ten strangers any easier. The sound of footsteps, the creaking of doors, voices coming from the hall; all of these things were enough to put you off. Not to mention the tendency of some people to just barge into your room if you had forgotten to lock your door - *which happens more than you would think when it is something you're not used to having to do*. Just imagine being a teenager again, but you have ten nosy mums waddling around. It was hard - but there was nothing you could do about it. *Ba-dum tish*.

Lack of privacy aside, there was another, more pressing reason for my inability to masturbate effectively; every time I tried, just as I was getting close to finishing, an explosion would go off in the back of my head. I couldn't move for at least a minute afterward, the pain was so intense. The only way I can describe it is if you were to imagine someone placing a grenade in the back of your head and then pulling the pin, while simultaneously kicking you in the dick. The pain from the grenade is so unbearable that you don't even feel the kick. It was crippling. And it kept on happening. For three months I was effectively the boy told not to push the big red button or something really bad would happen, who then tried to press it anyway.

I was worried, so, as any good hypochondriac does, I googled it; *severe, explosive headache during sexual climax*. Not a sentence I ever thought would come from my fingers. But, surprisingly, I wasn't alone. It turned out to be much more common than I thought it would be.

I learned that its technical name is a 'sexual headache', *which is not so technical if you ask me*, and that people describe it as a clap of thunder in the back of their head. Perfect, this was definitely it. But was it serious? I had to find out.

At the time, if I wanted to go and see a doctor, I had to get it approved by my company. This is because they also paid for all medical expenses, in addition to all the free food, rent and bills. Like I said, it was a good deal.

So, after a couple of months, I finally walked myself into the office, requested to speak with the manager in charge of us foreign staff, sat her down, and told her that I couldn't masturbate and a brain tumour was likely to blame. God bless her for not laughing at the melodramatics, she actually took it incredibly seriously. She immediately booked me in to see a neurologist (in Japan you don't need to get a referral to see a specialist) the following Thursday, and I spent the remainder of the week waiting, convinced I was going to die.

When Thursday rolled around, I woke up bright and early, hopped in the tiny company car that was waiting for me outside, and alongside my manager, drove down to the local hospital.

If I wasn't already dying of a brain tumour, I was certain I was going to die driving down to that hospital - my manager drove like an absolute maniac. Driving double the signed limit down a mountain full of bends and turns, blind corners, and families of animals crossing the road, I honestly feared for my life. It made me forget why I was in the car in the first place. But, thirty minutes and several close calls later, we arrived at the hospital unscathed.

For months my fear had affected both my performance at work and my private life. As a hypochondriac, most of the time you can scrape through by keeping yourself occupied and focusing on other things, but, there are times where the fear floors you. You can't sleep. You wonder what is the point if you're just going to die soon anyway. It's all encompassing and it completely consumes you. So I was glad I would soon be able to put the fear to rest.

At the hospital I got in to see the doctor quite quickly. I entered his tiny office with my manager and told him what had been happening. My manager had to translate for me, which must have been really awkward for her. The doctor laughed, wrote down some notes, and said that it was most likely nothing to worry about, however, just to be safe, as this is a new headache for you, we want to do an MRI.

If you have never had an MRI before, what they do is stuff you into a hollow tube, strap you down to the table, tell you to stay as still as possible, give you a pair of headphones - to help block out the noise, and then the machine fires up and you realise what a useless gesture the headphones were. It is unbearably loud. The noise comes in a series of sequences and patterns; it goes from high pitched, to low, from fast beeps, to slow - and you just have to lay there, motionless. So I did. I closed my eyes, and, for the next twenty minutes, tried to trace the patterns and predict which sound would come next.

Once the test was completed, I was helped out of the machine, sent back to the waiting room, and instructed to wait until the doctor was ready to see me with my results.

Then, the good news.

I was fine.

The doctor went through the pictures with me, said everything looked completely normal, and then prescribed me some pain killers and sent me on my way. I was ecstatic. I felt like a weight had been lifted off of my shoulders. I could finally move on.

When I got home from the doctors that day I decided I would celebrate. I opened my laptop, unzipped my pants, and went to work. Thirty-five seconds or so later, just as I was about to finish, the grenade went off again in the back of my head, but this

time, I stared it down, and I finished. I fell to the floor, the pain excruciating, the ecstasy profound, but, at least I knew that even if this was my life now, I was no longer in danger of losing it.

The headache went away a week or so later.

To this day, whenever I get a headache - a still very common occurrence, I take some medicine, have a lay down, and think nothing more of it. I have had so many different types of headaches throughout my life that they no longer surprise me. But, most importantly, they no longer scare me.

Ok. I lied. I actually had two more scares. One in 2017 where I felt tingles all over my body, immediately rushed to the doctor, made up some bullshit story, got another MRI, and again got the all clear. And another, in 2018, when I felt completely spaced out for an entire week, which turned out to be a reaction to a medicine I was taking at the time, as confirmed by my doctor, who told me as such after I once again went rushing to them convinced I had a brain tumour.

One day. *One day* I will learn my lesson.