
DAVID X
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At twenty-one, I was diagnosed with brain cancer. I felt some relief at knowing why I had been experiencing fits of insanity and rage, but the whole cancer deal was a bit terrifying. For the first time in my life, I was given the chance to practice what I preached: to smile through the rough times, and to laugh when the river was by all means traveling too swift and deep.

I learned that the deep, guttural laughs that are needed to get through a Stage III cancer diagnosis are a type of mystic magic. People may not understand the madness my mother and I share when we talk about our journey from waiting room to waiting room. One man in particular managed to hit the chord of hilarity that my mom and I needed during the roughest part of my treatment. Starting the day we met him, Mom and I talked about David X on all of our trips back and forth from St. Vincent's Hospital in Indianapolis to our home in Noblesville.

The first time I saw David was seconds after one of my first radiation treatments. I still had bushels of bronze wavy hair trickling down my back. However, hair was the last thing on my mind – instead it was the brigades of radioactive waves warring on both my brain and its cancer, and questions of my own ability to be able to read and write again.

My worries halted when David X rolled in. He had to have only been ninety pounds, and I had lost enough weight at this point that he and I could have shared a pair of jeans. The afternoon David entered our lives, my mother and I shared the waiting room with two empty wheelchairs, a few worried caregivers and a hospital bed that cradled the shriveled peach body of an old man. From around the corner, Mom and I heard the massive doors buzz open. A hospital attendant attempted to navigate herself and David X's wheelchair through the labyrinth of us worn but friendly folks. I was a bit taken aback by the crowd, as the waiting room typically only held myself, my mother, and *Days of our Lives* (Stephano was back from the dead again!).

The first thing I heard him say was along the lines of, "Oh . . . I'll just . . . Phhhfft." Like a spidery crab of sorts, this wisp of a man managed hobble himself and his cane out of the captivity of the chair. Without a moment for breath or even consideration, he decided it was his turn, and hobbled past the intimidating red sign reading "DO NOT GO FURTHER, RADIATION IN PROGRESS!"

Seeing him flow by me was like discovering a sweet chocolate stream with a stripe of warm honey flowing in a valley of vegetables. I laughed, and not the ironic laugh I had become accustomed to using in order to disguise my fear from family and the few friends that weren't terrified of me. It was true happiness. This man was more damn stubborn than me!

He was quickly apprehended and told to wait his turn. His energetic stagger was reduced to a painful limp that wrinkled his face. I offered him my hand, but he just eyed me, briefly opened and closed his mouth, crumpled himself over his cane, and then lowered himself into a chair.

It started in strands. It was about fifteen treatments in. My hair began to let go, and my illness wasn't hidden anymore: I had cancer. I shaved my head and hid the taboo with a long-dead grandmother's brown and golden speckled scarf I have cherished since my early teens. That summer was the hottest I can remember. The lake's water level dropped, it rained little, and I only allowed myself to pass tears in the shower. I hid my head from the sunshine, and I couldn't swim for fear of a seizure and a true drowning. Pills became meals and meals became pills.

At this point in treatment, my mother, more than me, had become friendly with David X. She sat with him while I was latched in my radiation mask. I would get brief glimpses of his life only in saying "hello" and "goodbye." For a week or so I observed him performing the ultimate survivor's task: guzzling down a can of Ensure. We were always too thin, we needed calories, but everything in our systems, the chemo, the radiation, the stress, the cancer, told us, "Nuh uh, you ain't eatin' that." But David X did. He chased it with canned tangerines. Kind of made me want to vomit, as did his body odor, but I could hardly stand to smuggle myself and my mother out of the waiting room without hearing him bitch (he was a very talented bitcher) about how the government was treating him: a Korean Veteran and recipient of the Purple Heart. Bush and crew were denying the existence of his condition and trying their damndest to deny him his right to some good-time, lovin' insurance.

My family struggled with my coverage as well. Once I decided to return to school the January following my diagnosis, I was denied insurance because I was not a full-time student -- even though simply being at Indiana University, taking nine credit hours, reading, and above all writing had drastically improved my condition. But, to the insurance company, it was not enough to be getting better. To them I needed to be a full-time student to receive any type of treatment, even though it *could* have been that extra three hours of stress that put me over the edge. Wouldn't they want me to get better so that my parents could get back to paying them?

David had that definitive toothless old man accent, his speech altered by the falling of

his lips and his tired tongue. A shower of spit typically accompanied his various complaints. My mother would entertain me with the Davidness I had missed during treatment as she drove us home. He told my sweet mom that he spent a few years in jail. A former social worker, she is good at talking to "crazy" people, and I imagine replied in a slightly ironic yet tender voice, "Well, David, that's not good! What happened?" And he replied, straightforward, "Threw a guy out a window."

"Why did you do that?" He was so blunt, so honest, my mother later recalled.

"He was in bed with my wife."

In my opinion, it was the wife that should have gotten the window-tossing, but David was more of a man than me.

My mother soon grew tired of seeing him with Ensure and canned fruit, and resorted to making him a few meals, packaging them in a nice red rolling cooler. He gladly accepted the gift and later admitted to a slight desire to accept the cooler as an extended offering. He often hinted to my mother that he had no bed -- that he was sleeping on a deflated air mattress. The man had bone cancer. My mother, bless her heart, took it upon herself to get the man a bed delivered.

David X, despite his fiery temper, liked making people smile. I'm told I have that effect on people too. David, when not getting treated, rode the bus to the northwest corner of Market and Delaware streets, right across from the City-County Building. Calling himself the other mayor, he would sit beside what he called a donation cup, surrounded by collections of photographs of passersby and people he had befriended. The pictures were glued to old paintings and boards. His occupation, beyond being the "other mayor," was kindly wishing all that traveled by a great day. And this is how he got by, how he lived out his days. His children and remaining family had long since abandoned him.

"You look like one of them Muslims!" He couldn't help himself as I wrapped my scarf around my head.

I had learned to be quick and snappy with him. I said, "Well, Mr. David, wasn't Malcom X Muslim?"

"I was the first Muslim named David X. I'm not that anymore, though," he said. A gummy smile decorated his face and his eyes sparkled in his skull. "I want your pictures."

My mother and I posed for two photographs.

In the early days of September, he brought in a painting of a rabbit that he was pasting over with photographs. Stuck in a lower left corner, my mother, David and I, all dying at different paces, were caught together in the dungeon of a hospital, in deep enough that the morgue could have been next door.

I received a telephone call from my mother a week after returning to Indiana University. David X had died on New Year's Day. His obituary states that he spent his final days in the hospital, surrounded by Christmas cards from his fans.

He was 77, a former Black Panther. Angry, kind. A murderer. A cripple, a beggar, an American hero, a Muslim, a Christian. Abandoned, befriended, poor, but rich in character and unadulterated friendliness. In remembering this man, the effect he had on my mother and me, and the legacy of all those who spent time with me in waiting rooms, the best I can do to emulate this beast of humanity is to say what he said each day on an Indianapolis street corner: "Have a good day! God bless."

Vanessa Pippenger is a 24-year-old brain cancer survivor living in Indianapolis, IN. She graduated from Indiana University with a degree in English/creative writing, and aspires to work, live and write with the fire only a survivor can have.