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Democracy Dies in Darkness

POSTEVERYTHING

I wish my friends, and all terminal cancer patients, could decide whether to kill themselves



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When I first saw the You Tube video, I hesitated to click. The image: a pretty woman named Brittany Maynard, decked out in a wedding dress. Her face was all too familiar.

Maynard, 29, has terminal brain cancer. On Nov. 1, she will self-administer a life-ending medication prescribed by a doctor, a procedure only legal in five states.



Brittany Maynard explains why she's choosing physician-assisted suicide at 29
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Her round, “mooncake” face reminded me of the way I looked four years ago, puffed up with steroids. I was 23 and had leukemia. Since then, I’ve gone into remission, but not without seeing other friends at the ends of their lives.

When I was diagnosed with acute promyelocytic leukemia in October, 2010, doctors said I had a good attitude, and my family kept telling me how strong I was. I was scared, but I also knew that with treatment, I had a very good chance of survival.

That didn’t make anything easy.

A week after my diagnosis, the doctors took me to the intensive care unit and put me in a medically-induced coma because I couldn’t breathe on my own. They strapped me to the bed and put two tubes down my throat — one to feed me and one to pump oxygen into my lungs. I had IVs depositing chemicals, fluid and blood into my body, and catheters letting other things drip out.

After a couple days, somehow, the anesthesia wore off. I woke up, and with what I imagine was a Hulk-like quality, managed to pull the tubes out of my throat even with my arms strapped down. I don’t remember much, but I remember wanting to get out of there. I pleaded with the doctors to not put the tubes back in. They did anyway, and they put me back to sleep.

Still, I knew I'd get out of the ICU. I knew my brain wouldn't always be riddled with narcotics. I knew my muscles would regain strength and I would stand on my own again. I knew I'd be able to use the bathroom and shower without help.

I longed for the time when I would be a normal 20-something again. I'm lucky. I basically am a normal 20-something again.

I can't help but wonder what would happen if there was no path out of the woods. What if I was only going to get worse? Or what if, at my worst, I was never going to get better?

That was the case with my friend Sheryl (named changed), who I met in the beginning of 2012 in a young adult cancer support group in Bethesda. Sheryl was older than me, but unmarried and without children. She was always positive, encouraging me to be creative, follow my dreams and not let negativity bear me down.

Less than six months after I met her, Sheryl's breast cancer had spread to her spinal fluid and her brain. The doctors gave her six months to a year to live. She assumed it would be a year. She even told me she wanted to go to Cuba before she passed away.

She never got the chance. Sheryl decided not to have chemotherapy pumped into her spinal fluid, the only way the drugs would cross a barrier from the bloodstream to the brain and attack the cancer. Both the chemotherapy and the cancer made her feel terrible. The last time I saw her before she went to a hospice facility, she could barely stand, she was so dizzy. In hospice, she was confused and tired, but still demanded to play hostess, offering us cookies and brownies from her bed.

A month before Sheryl passed away, she was writing e-mails and taking visitors. She managed to be positive and hopeful even though her suffering was immense. Headaches, nausea, dizziness and seizures took control of her body. The box of drugs she had to ease her suffering was bigger than an iPad, but those medicines didn't ease her pain that much.

A week before Sheryl died, she couldn't even answer the telephone or talk. The Sheryl I knew was fading. I don't know if she would have wanted to end her suffering early, but even if she had wanted to, it is not legal in the state of Maryland.

Only in Oregon, Washington, Montana, Vermont and New Mexico can doctors write the prescription necessary to end the suffering of terminally ill patients. Had Sheryl lived in one of those states, she could have chosen a point where she could have said, "I love you" to her family members and passed away in her sleep.

Maynard is not going to get better. It's not likely to be quick and painless, and she knows it is only a matter of months.

Maybe on Nov. 1, Maynard will feel the same she does today and change her mind. Maybe she will wait to take the drug. But having cancer means your body is out of your own control. And Maynard is the only one who truly knows her body, and knows when it will be too much.

I've been trapped in a body with cancer too. By choosing to die on her own terms, Maynard is choosing to take control of her body one last time.