

IHTM

IT HAPPENED TO ME: I Got Cataract Surgery At Age 20

As if the mysterious white lesions in my eye weren't bad enough, treating them caused a cataract. I guess I'm an overachiever.



MADELEINE FELDER · OCT 27, 2014

Being told I would need surgery to remove the cataract in my left eye wasn't a big surprise. I'd spent the last two years visiting eye doctors' offices in an effort to save my vision, so it was inevitable that I would need surgery sooner rather than later.

Two years ago, I went to my optometrist for new glasses. It was a few weeks before I left for my freshman year at Sarah Lawrence College, and I was nervously trying to get all my "chores" done. That routine check-up for a new prescription turned into a surreal trip down a medical rabbit hole to solve the mystery of lesions that had suddenly appeared on my retina and were causing me to slowly lose my eyesight.

I left the office with a prescription and a referral for the best eye doctor in northern California.

Dr. H had no idea what was wrong. OK, that's not super-fair to him; he had no idea why I had these white lesions (as everyone calls them) on my retina. He wanted to know what caused them, so his solution was to send me to get a bunch of blood test.

I got tests for a lot of things, including syphilis. I made a joke about being a 19th-century prostitute. My mom was not amused.

The downside to all those tests (besides the obvious needles and blood) was that they proved nothing. That meant there was one test left, and it was the scary one -- the one that when Dr. H told us, made my mom and dad cry: I had to get an MRI for lymphoma.

The good news was that it wasn't cancer; the bad news was that I needed a lot more doctors' appointments and treatments.

My doctor had me on a regimen of different eye drops, and as my vision got steadily worse, the trips to the doctor became more frequent. The average appointment took two hours. I had to get my ocular pressure checked, get my eyes dilated, and get pictures taken before I could even see the doctor. I had a regular doctor in San Francisco, but when I was away at school in New York, I was bounced around between eye doctors. For a while, I had to go out to the Bronx, to a doctor who did nothing and passed me off to an assistant. By the time I got home for Christmas break my vision had gotten much worse from the inattention.



All my meds.

Dr. H decided that the eyedrops weren't working as well as he'd hoped. They didn't get the medicine as far into my eye as he wanted. He decided to take a new approach.

The eye has limited ways to get medicine into it. The best way to get medicine into the eye is through shots. Or as the popular rhyme says: cross my heart and hope to die, stick a needle in my eye. Clearly I'd told a secret I shouldn't have.

The first shot I got was a biggie: steroids behind my eye. This one, as Dr. H explained, was especially dangerous because if he missed, I was getting a lobotomy. OK, he didn't say that, but if he messed up, there were serious consequences.

To get behind the eye required two people to do the procedure: the nurse and Dr. H. The nurse numbed my eye so I wouldn't feel anything. Then she held out the eyelid and told me to look right. Two minutes later it was done.

Unluckily for me, that was not my last shot. The next one was a couple of weeks later, a different medicine and a different area. Instead of behind my eye, this shot was actually *in* my eye. It didn't hurt until the day after, when my eyelid felt tender and it hurt to blink.

So that was my life now: every couple of weeks, I would get a shot either in my eye or behind it. Still, all the medicine going into my eye had side effects. The big one was developing a cataract.

Dr. H wasn't a cataract surgeon, so I went to see Dr. L for a consultation. He explained the procedure using words like scalpel and incision and laser, and I felt a bit nervous. I couldn't be put under for the surgery because they needed my eye open. It was an outpatient procedure, so I only had to take a day off from my job as a summer camp counselor.

My surgery was scheduled for 7 a.m., I wasn't allowed to eat or drink except for some water with horrible steroid pills. I showed up, filled out the paperwork, and was shown back to this weird waiting room/bed area. The beds around me were all full and I can say without a doubt I was the youngest patient there.

I was tucked into the bed with warm blankets and nurses flitted about asking me questions about family history and medications. They put a heart monitor on my finger and the IV through my hand, which hurt almost more than the surgery. An oxygen mask went through my nose, which was supposed to keep me calm; for the elderly patients in the next bed, it kept them breathing.

When it was my turn for the surgery, they wheeled my bed into the operating room, put a mask over the right eye and shined a light onto the left. I remember little of the actual surgery except that it was bright and dark all at once.



When it was over, they wheeled me back out into the waiting room. I sat on the edge of the bed and drank a juice box while the nurses checked my vitals. She taped a clear Phantom of The Opera mask over my left eye and told me I was free to go.

My vision improved, but it didn't mean the end of doctor visits. While the cataract had been cleared and a new lense put on my eye, there were still more shots to be done. Normally, the doctors wouldn't schedule so many procedures all at once, but I was leaving the country for my year abroad. Clearly, my eye has no sense of timing.

A few weeks after my surgery, I was back in Dr. H's office; or more accurately, I was back in Dr. H's operating room. He prepped me for the shot and explained the risks involved with the shot behind the eye. Apparently one in four times, the eye bleeds after the shot, and well, it was my fourth time. I looked like a James Bond villain when I stepped back into the waiting room.

Instead of going home to hide my “disfigurement” in peace, I was also due for a laser treatment, because when you get cataract surgery at 20, the fun just keeps on coming. Or, more accurately, the lens is more vulnerable and gets cloudy really fast. And because eye doctors are sadistic assholes, the only way to get rid of that cloudiness is through a laser. A three minute laser to be exact.

All I wanted to do was put an eyepatch over my eye, but instead, I had to hold it open while blood ran down my cheek. Gross right?

Thankfully, that was the last of the shots and lasers and all that shit. All I had to do was get a new glasses prescription and be on my way.

Except my life isn't ever that simple. I have no idea what I did in a past life to deserve this, but instead of enjoying my year abroad in Italy without a care, I have to go see a doctor every six weeks. Plus, thanks to the medicine I still have to take to help slow the growth of still-existing white lesions, there will be no sipping vino in Italy.



Just call me Le Chiffre.

At least not very often.

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