

Dear Gillian,

I am writing to you to tell you about the way I was told I have MS. It was on December 23rd, 2013. My mum had flown in from interstate so that she could be by my side when I finally got the news. The neurologist broke the news to me on my own first and then I called my mum in, as I knew she'd have questions. It wasn't at all a surprise to me. The symptoms had been around for about four years, but various doctors I went to were reluctant to test for it, putting my symptoms down to any number of other complaints from pinched nerves in the back to my shoes being too tight!

At that time, putting all my symptoms to the back of my mind, I had gone to live in San Francisco for a year. I've always loved to travel, and when the opportunity came up to take up a yearlong student/ work visa, I jumped at the chance. I had done a voluntary internship with a Not for Profit Organisation a few years earlier and had made some great friends, especially a very sexy firefighter I wanted to spend more time with.

That year flew by, my romance transitioned into the greatest friendship and support outside of family I've had the privilege to experience, and soon I was winging my way back to Australia. One of the first phone calls I made when I got back to Melbourne was to my doctor to make an appointment. I presented on his doorstep with a very long written list of symptoms to give to him. It was important for me to write it down, as added to my balance and numbness issues, I had started noticing cognitive issues creeping in and was forgetting things.

Seeing my list, the doctor sent me off for a barrage of tests: ECG, CT brain and spine, X-rays, MSU, blood tests... All of which came back negative. But rather than dismissing me as others had done, he referred me to a neurologist, who requested an MRI. I think even the neurologist was skeptical to begin with as he couldn't detect any objective weakness and was relying solely on my account of my symptoms.

The MRI day came and my big brother came to lend moral (and physical) support. Knowing how petrified I was at the thought of being confined in a small space, he made sure I went fortified with a very large glass of red wine. It was a big help! He also talked to the technician and was allowed to come into the room with me and held and stroked my foot (the only part of me he could reach) throughout the entire process which lasted almost an hour.

I was given the film to take to my next neurologist and so had a peek at the pictures. The many large spots on my brain and spine made me pretty sure I had MS, but I still had a few weeks to wait before the neurologist confirmed it. My response was mixed. I felt relief to finally have a diagnosis; anger and frustration that it had taken so long to get here; overwhelmed at the amount I didn't know about what was happening to me and part of me was scared about the unknown progress this disease would take.

I still don't have the answers to those questions. Each day I'm learning more and more about MS, trying to equip myself with knowledge, as I believe therein lies the power. I've changed my diet, I'm trying to meditate, I'm getting better at being consistent with exercise and yoga and trying to remove stresses from my life. I'm paying more attention to what my body is trying to tell me each day, and doing what I need to do to live my best life. I'm also, for the most part, at peace with my diagnosis and even the frustratingly long time it took to arrive. For example, I may never have gone to San Francisco and had a great love affair if I had known earlier.

Talking about MS with my brother, I came to the realisation that, if someone gave me the option of having my MS cured, but the price would be that I would never grow, change, and develop into a better person in meeting these challenges, then I choose the MS. It isn't a life I would have chosen for myself or for anyone else, but now I'm on this journey, I'll do all I can to embrace it.

Rebecca Lowe