

The Gown

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I walked in wearing my white coat to make a point and because I had just rushed from my medical school rotation to my doctor's appointment. "Take everything off, including your underwear, and put the gown on open to the front." I had already drowned out the voice of the nurse. I know how to put on the gown, I thought to myself, I'm twenty-seven years old and have had enough exams to know the routine of what to do and where to stand. The nurse knew this, didn't she? Doesn't she know who I am? She not only has seen me here three times in the last two months but she saw me walk in with my white coat on. The white coat, which clearly indicated my status in the medical community. I'm the one who says "Take everything off..." I still smiled and waited for her to exit. You have to act gracefully at these visits, don't you? Say "Good Morning" with a high-pitched squeak at the end to show your enthusiasm and how much you enjoy letting everyone see you half naked. I took off my white coat, hung it neatly on the chair next to the exam table, and then quickly took off the rest of my clothing.

There I was, sitting on the cold exam table in what I would barely call a gown; it is paper after all... thin, see-through, humbling paper. Why even call it a Gown? Gowns are full, covering, and beautiful, made for parties, dances, and fun. "Isn't that ironic?" I thought. Even more ironic was me, the fully capable senior medical student having to sit here waiting for the doctor to see me. Just this morning all the patients scurrying in the halls and in the waiting rooms were waiting for me. Now, I had been waiting for hours, only to finally be triaged into a room and stripped down. I am made to sit in a freezing exam room and wait even more. I wanted to open the door and yell: "Hello, doctor, do you know who I am in here? My disease is not some routine visit, the others can wait. I need to be seen now!" But I was shivering enough now that my seat was becoming a little warmer and I refused to give up that heat by moving, even to voicelessly summon the doctor to my Ballroom exam room. And more dreadful was the thought that getting up would risk my Gown falling off, or even worse... tearing. The only help I had was a thin plastic belt that tied around my waist to keep the Gown on me. Right, I thought as I looked down at the Gown, like that belt would save my breasts from falling out, or the bottom of the Gown from flinging up and exposing my buttocks.

My Ballroom hardly had enough space to move, just about two feet to the door and three feet to the sides of the bed. I stared at the walls, decorated in pertinent patient-centered informational posters. My Ballroom, full of the things I told patients everyday in 'layperson' terms about their disease or condition. "Breast Development, Fibrocystic Breast Disease,

Finding a Breast Mass," my eyes danced over the poster titles in boredom.

The door finally opened, and then he knocked. What was that? He had already granted full view for every passing person in the hall and had made full eye contact with me before knocking. I quickly shuffled my Gown around, grasping and crinkling the paper to cover my bottom. I could feel the breeze of the opening and closing of the door and my tummy now showed, but perhaps I had to live with that for another shift of the Gown and it could be on the floor. I focused; I needed to gain my composure so I could intellectually get some work done here, and so I crossed my arms tightly over my breasts and smiled. The doctor rambled on and on, shifting through my chart. Clearly he was busy today, I thought. "So we'll need to biopsy, set it up on the way out, then be back in two weeks for a follow up. We can talk about BRCA analysis then too." His voice echoed loudly as if he were at the top of one of those long staircases you see in movies giving a speech. I sat there, shifting in an awkward dance as I felt my Gown falling and moving. My aunt must have had to go through something like this, the in's and out's of being diagnosed with Breast Cancer, a double mastectomy, a repeat surgery, and reconstruction. I had questions, concerns, worries, but he already had the door cracked open to leave before I could even recheck how much of me the Gown was exposing. I clung to my Gown for modesty, hoping not to be seen while the nurse scurried out with him to the next patient.

He didn't even examine me. Did my Gown mean nothing to him? This dress should have signaled the need to do something to me, either poking or prodding. I did not do this in vain! I quickly glanced over to my clothes, the mundane everyday clothing. I saw my white coat, hanging on the edge of the chair. Didn't I know that what he said is what I would have said? Didn't I know what a busy schedule he had, overbooked patients, and how unconcerned I should be? I stood up and tried to rip off my Gown to hurry and get dressed. The paper flew in the air landing everywhere in the room. Intruders could enter this unlocked room, so I thrashed harder to get out of the Gown; the paper had never seemed so strong and yet too thin to cover me. I had to fight it off my left arm and rip the belt off my waist. It was over. I placed my Gown on the table, now all torn and disfigured. In all its gloriousness it could not grant me my one wish and desire. I put on my white coat. I grabbed my chart and went to check out. Opening the door I peered down the hall, catching a glimpse of a woman clinging to her Gown as the doctor flung open her door.