Dear Gillian,

Here's the thing: in September 2010 I decided I had a brain tumour. The pain that had developed in my left eye was intense. Of course, I tried not to tell anyone and tried to ignore it – FAIL on both accounts. Eventually, a colleague convinced me to go to the ophthalmologist who diagnosed optic neuritis. He told me it would eventually get better and asked me to come back in three days. Three days later, when I returned, he asked if I'd googled 'optic neuritis' and when I said no, his reply was, "Oh that's good, because you'll always find a link to Multiple Sclerosis when you do."

It was like giant boulders came crashing down around me. What the ophthalmologist didn't know was that for the previous four years I had been experiencing neurological symptoms which had been diagnosed as a series of other conditions: carpal tunnel, sciatica, Bell's palsy... All of a sudden, all of these symptoms fit neatly under one umbrella. I gave the ophthalmologist my 'health history in a nutshell' and what followed was an avalanche of appointments and an MRI, culminating in a referral to the only neurologist in town – I did not feel positive about the impending doom.

I sat in the neurologist's waiting room and watched people in wheelchairs and on sticks and with the shakes. Can you imagine? I was <u>definitely</u> in the wrong place. I was young (37 is young, isn't it?) and healthy and I just had a sore eye, for goodness sake. Why was I here with all these people who obviously had serious health issues?

Now Dr J is a gorgeous man and in the years that have followed my diagnosis I have come to love his relaxed approach. Nothing fazes him. But when I was flipping out with panic about what I was about to hear, I couldn't believe this guy was so calm. Didn't he know he was about to ruin my life? He started with some polite chitchat and then a few little tests mainly about walking on my toes and heels and touching my nose. He then put up my MRI scans (what the hell was I looking at?) and explained something to me about the typical shape of scars on the brain in MS patients. He pointed to my scans and said, "Like this."

There was silence. I looked at him and he was just waiting for my response. I asked, "Are you saying I have MS?" He nodded. And that was it. I had MS. Fuck me; I've got MS. Is this guy for real?

The next thing I knew he was talking to me about MS Australia and the local MS nurse and treatment options and giving myself needles (but you can chat with the MS nurse about that) and giving me brochures and did I have any questions? Dude? Are you fucking serious? Let’s just go back to that black and white blob on your screen and explain to me again how that shape means I have a disease that I know nothing about and that I associate only with wheelchairs and read-a-thons.

Luckily for me, my sister had had the good sense to suggest she come along to the appointment with me and while all the words just bundled up in my brain (which I now knew was covered in scars), my sister was taking it all in and asking the questions.

You know, I think it probably took three months for the diagnosis to sink in and another nine months to feel OK about it. Now I’m three and a half years along on my MS journey and doing just fine. In fact, I think I am healthier now than I was pre-diagnosis.

So that’s it, the story of my diagnosis. I’m guessing that it’s not that different to many others.

Cheers and let’s kick this disease in the butt, yeah?

Nicky