

Dying and Living

In 2015, the only new clothes I bought were from discount supermarkets. Leggings that came in two colours and three sizes, wrapped in plastic. Sweatshirts from sweatshops. Fluffy socks that shed pink hairballs all over my carpet. I did buy two dresses for my brother's wedding, both elegant and demure, classic styles. They'll look good in a coffin, I thought.

I was dying, that year. According to statistics, I had thirteen months to live from November 28th 2014, so that would see me through 2015, but not beyond.

People would talk about events that were going to happen in 2016. I drifted out of these conversations, not feeling anything, just knowing that it was irrelevant to me. Like someone discussing cricket, or New York Fashion week, or hair extensions. Probably exciting and interesting if you're into that sort of thing, but not for me. 2016 was someone else's business.

It was my baby's first birthday in March 2015. At least I was there for that. I knew now how her green eyes would look as they reflected flickering candlelight.

I would stop the car when a song came on the radio, to add it to my new playlist called Funeral. Going Underground by The Jam (even though I knew I was going to be cremated). Rebel Rebel by David Bowie, with its opening bars blaring out as the decorative crematorium doors close.

Each time my phone rang with another hospital-prefixed number, my heart sank. I came to hate the ring tone, and yet it was my lifeline, my saviour.

Hugs that lasted just a moment or two longer than before.

Saying goodbye to friends that I would usually see once a year, both of us knowing but not saying that this would be the last time.

Making friends with fellow terminal patients online, sharing our fears and hopes.

The time passed, as it does.

By November, one year after I had been diagnosed with more than a dozen liver metastases from a sigmoid colon tumour, I had had chemotherapy, selective internal radiation therapy, and an anterior bowel resection. I was about to start back into another round of chemo. I had had a PET scan that showed one or two hotspots, and that was all.

I was a bit stumped.

What will I do now? What about my funeral dress? I wore it to a ball, and was lifted up in the air by an enthusiastic man I had only just met, who wasn't quite sure if I was serious when I told him my stitches

were about to burst. I had a big moonface from steroids, and acne-ridden skin from an EGFR-inhibitor. But it was very apparent that I was alive, and unlikely to die any time soon.

Hmmm. A conundrum.

Of course, I was still dying. If you have stage 4 cancer, you are dying. That's just how it is.

My online friends died. I didn't make any new ones.

My GP, who had helped me through my diagnosis and soothed my fears, was diagnosed with motor neurone disease. She died.

My gorgeous medical school classmate, who had reached the five-year post-cancer milestone, relapsed and died.

I had stopped working as a GP when I was diagnosed, because it seemed the right thing to do. But I became bored and anxious at home, so I went back for a few hours per week, first doing paperwork and behind-the-scenes stuff, and then seeing patients again slowly, cautiously.

I sent a patient of mine for investigations. He turned out to have bowel cancer with liver metastases. He died.

I started to see more patients, spend more hours at work when I wasn't in the chemo ward. I became a bit blasé about it all, and would check my lymphocyte count in the morning to decide if I would see sick patients in the afternoon. When the man walked into my tiny consulting room with his TB mask hanging around his chin, I realised I may have been pushing my luck.

I began to write a blog, tentatively but unashamedly, knowing that it was only going to be read by my friends and family. It would save me the effort of having to explain myself over and over again. I discovered the safety of the written word, the passive-aggressive refuge of someone with strong opinions but a shaky voice.

After a while, strangers started to read my words. This suddenly gave me a new freedom, but also a responsibility to be better, to be good at what I was doing, which inevitably made me worse at it. I grew self-conscious. Started to use the delete button. Waited a few hours before pressing "publish".

Eventually, I wrote for money, and for publicity, and (briefly) for A Cause. I added the word Writer to my Twitter profile.

But I was still dying.

I arranged social events, ostensibly to fundraise for the organisations who had helped me postpone my death, but really to have a funeral party that I could attend. I didn't want the living to have all the fun on my behalf. I wanted to go dancing, and show off how alive I was. The event ran three years in a row, until I got bored of it.

I met old friends, reconnected, rekindled, revived. We made some plans. Time began to stretch a little further. I started to plan six months ahead instead of three, matching the increase in the time between my scans.

I started to enjoy saying “yes” to invitations to future events, giggling away to myself thinking well sure I might as well pretend I’m going to be there. One by one the events came and went, and I had had to show up.

I took a notion to start an organisation for female doctors and medical students, knowing that if I got the ball rolling someone enthusiastic and alive would keep it going for me. I booked a hotel for a conference, and organised some speakers, and developed a website, but I knew I wouldn’t have to actually go through with any of it because I would be dead. When I stood on the stage to welcome the delegates I wasn’t all that nervous because I was speaking from the afterlife. This wasn’t really me, it was a parallel alive-Sarah, so it didn’t matter if she messed up.

The conference finished, and to avoid the terror of scanxiety I started to ask more people for more money for another one. I had no qualms about asking doctors I barely knew to come and speak. None of it mattered, because I probably wouldn’t be there myself anyway.

The clock ticked past four years from my diagnosis. I had had a few other bits and pieces of treatment: a hepatectomy, some more chemo, a few rounds of stereotactic radiotherapy. It came to a year since my last treatment of any kind. The scans remained stable.

But I still had stage 4 cancer. There is no downgrading once the horse has bolted. No one in their right mind is ever going to use the word “cure” in my presence. As sure as eggs is eggs, if someone is foolish enough to utter that near me, I’m a goner.

I have a portacath in my chest for nearly five years now. It hasn’t been used for the past three. Superstition is all that is keeping it there, mine and my oncologist’s. Neither of us wants to be the one that breaks the spell.

Those of us with cancer very much dislike the clichés that are so frequently attached to it. The battle terminology, the pinking of breast cancer, the sideways head-tilt of the person who wants to sympathise with you about your “journey”. Ugh. It’s all so saccharine, nauseating, depressing. Yet there are so many truths, too. Life really IS too short to be unkind or bitter. You really DON’T know what you’ve got ’til it’s gone. Love IS all you need.

I have developed an insatiable appetite for knowledge, Hoovering up books and podcasts and essays and documentaries, frantically filling my brain with Interesting Stuff. I move from one obsession to the next, learning about history or feminism or sociology. But hardly ever about cancer. I am fascinated and repulsed by other people’s stories of dealing with disease. I cannot bring myself to unfollow the people on Twitter who complains loudly, daily, whinily, about having metastatic cancer.

My baby was eight months old when I was diagnosed, my other children four and six. Little kids. Small faces and hands. Now they are all solid pieces of human being, with shoes that take up a lot of room in the hallway, and schoolbags that weigh a ton. We have mini spelling bees in our house, and I throw words like *borborygmi* and *oesophagectomy* at them, and they usually figure them out.

My youngest daughter has been tiny since she was born, but perfectly formed. Who knows if her growth restriction in the womb was related to the adenocarcinoma festering just a few inches away from her. But she is breathtakingly beautiful, and clever, and vibrant, and when I see her lying asleep in her bed with her golden curls caressing her porcelain-perfect cheek, I know that she is the antidote to the mitotic mess with which she shared my abdominal cavity. She, and the other two, have been the real medicine.

For thirty-seven years I lived life without ever thinking about my death. For five years I have been dying, and I have never lived so much.