

. 14.02.01 . 3 RCC . Bin. T4 .

London is expensive on Valentine's Day, more pricey than usual and you can't get a table for love. The tube doors opened to Tash saying, "As we are over West for this appointment, there is an Italian I want to try". It was then two years after her primary cancer, she was at that point 27 and this, along with her mother's early passing, were the reasons why we were standing on the up escalator of Sloane Square Station that particular Tuesday evening.

February in London is cold and dark. A furthest point away from beautiful stirrings of love and beauty the date implied. The Tube was empty even though it was still rush hour. Tonight the metropolis seemed split between those that had somewhere to go and the rest who were already indoors, alone or otherwise. It was no surprise that the station was sparse and that there were even fewer people out of the bleak streets, just us, walking.

If you drive across London, you'll recognise where we went, the old Edwardian red brick on the corner of Chelsea Bridge Road and the Embankment, along from the Royal Hospital where the flower show is. Tash had been referred here by one of her treatment team in Sydney. He had spotted something. The genetics team at the Royal Marsden Hospital are the best there is. Innocently we had not considered why they had persisted in trying to contact us.

Don't worry Tash said "this will just be a quick visit, we will be out again in a minute". After this evening I would tell her to not say things like that again.

Dr Eeles sat in a rather small room, not only small, but because this venerable building had had several masters already, each with a use more removed from the original, the room was the weirdest shape, not an expected rectangle. She was a nice woman, thin, wiry and very *Médecins Sans Frontières*. We got to know her well, but this initial was not to be a pleasant meet and greet.

Sixty minutes later we left. Neither of us had spoken for forty, even when Dr Eeles enquired, "Any questions", there were none. We just got up and left.

Whilst I cannot say that either of us remember the meeting with clarity, the words that Dr Eeles had said, the descriptions, the statistics and the probable outcomes. The bleak statement that, genetically, her abnormality grouped her with only sixty other family groups in the western world. These words, in a few years, would become the basis of our joking comment that, considering the type of cancers she could have had, she should of had; the multitude and rare invasions into any soft tissue in her body. The fact that she only had Breast Cancer, rather treatable in the larger scale of things, even secondary in her liver as it was, was a bonus really. But tonight that evolutionary thought process was yet to come, just now we were walking up a very cold street in the dark London night, cocooned in a disaster that might be. Tash can be curt at the best of times, and at the worst she maintains the *Bella Figura* with an iron fist, but she was silent. I had no grand thoughts, I just wanted this to be a mistake, but knew already that it wasn't. I spoke, "I am not hungry", she replied, "no neither am I"

I finished; "lets go home then"

I never knew her to do this again. There are two types of people, the weak and the rest of us. The rest of us are not always strong, we fear too, but we also know that this has its place and this was one of them. If we were a castle, our feeble defences had been truly breached; the forces to lay siege to us now camped well within sight. They had simply pushed a little and our walls had fallen. This would simply not do, no, not at all. There was no fight from us, we both understood that this could not be the way. If this is the future we are to be given we revealed to each other without words, then this is not how we will approach it, we would clearly have to regroup.

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There are Three Rules of Cancer Club:

1. Have a party
2. Buy some shoes
3. Go on holiday

This is how we lived, because cancer is not about death, it is about living. Live you must when your mortality is challenged. And live we did.

Under these rules... I have watched her twirl for hours, shoes discarded, her feet bare on dance floors, front rooms and back yards of London, Sydney and Verona. She would dance, she would smile, she would move; twirling one hand in the air and the other piloting it's own upward spiral holding a Jack and Coke. There she would stay into the early hours, until the party would end, and home we would go, my wife whooping, punching the air in celebration of a good night out. She always looked wonderful, not glamorous in hiding, but luminescent for *Now*. From her head to her toes a glorious escarpment of the best you could buy. Our flat overflowed with clothes and shoes, so much that she would hide her illicit *scarpe* at work, sneaking the massed footwear back on nights I was out. When we finally took her home, we made sure she looked good, her best shoes, her best frock, her best as ever, her last. *Always the most beautiful Bella Figura*. There was always a holiday before treatment, a *piss off* to the prescription. The first; back home to be married; *"..don't try to arrange your wedding from the other side of the world in six weeks,"* she informed our guests triumphantly as we dined at Aria embraced by the Opera house, Bridge and Harbour. The last; to Iceland. Really, she was too sick to fly, but wanted to go, so we went anyway. From Sydney though Sicily, Verona to Paris, Mallorca, Sweden and around again, everything was always possible. My albums of photographs now digital chronicles of life once lived; bright sunsets, close poses, pictures of living as statements full of intent. Only now I see, in the back of her smile, the knowing that we could never avoid *the what might happen next*.

When I held her maybe, maybe she could. In those moments I would write cheques I knew I could never cash, borrowing the strength to keep ahead of her by sacrificing any of me. I did this because I loved her, I did this because I knew I could, because I wanted to. All she wanted was to lead a *normal* life and all I wanted to do was make sure that she could. In the end perhaps, we lived more than that.

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“Quick get a bucket.” It was almost a whisper.
I half gazed up from FHM, and then back again.

“Get a bucket quick I am going to be sick! From the toilet, hurry.”

This is a strange thing to hear in the circumstances, but when it jerks you away from an article on *Boobs and Beer in Bulgaria* and makes you focus upwards to see your wife sitting resplendent on a white leather dentist type chair minus the dentist. Nothing other than her, me, on a very uncomfortable plastic chair, shoe horned into the curtained cubicle and a long steel pole holding the litre and a half of diluted clear chemotherapy wired down her arm. Strange, suddenly, is not descriptive enough.

“Bucket.” She snapped through understandably clenched teeth.

I am English and she is Australian. There are cultural differences. Had the situation been reversed I am sure this *gung-ho* Aussie would have leapt to my aid. As it was I just sheepishly enquired, “Do I have to?”

She growled her response and I snapped into action. This Oncology unit was long, hi-tech and very, very hushed. I showed my wife all the intentions of immediate action, my running motion morphing into an expectant walk as soon as the curtain closed. My gait though, belayed the conflict in my mind. “Quick! Bin! Vomit! Toilet? Where?!”

Toilet she said, so I went out of the swing doors, into the corridor at an increasingly brisk pace, increasing with every vision of taking a vomit stained spouse home on the tube.

The toilet had a very small bin. Had a gerbil vomited, this bin would be overflowing.
Fuck
Fuck Fuck.

I didn’t want to, but had to. I *soo* didn’t want to make a fuss, I didn’t want to utter the words, I didn’t even know how to say them. “*umm wife-mine-vomit-maybe?*”

“*Help!*” I whimpered across the desk of the nursing station. Clearly in their eyes, the only help I needed was a stiff drink. “What’s wrong with her?” the nurse replied. I explained in quick one syllable utterances. “Ohh,” she said spreading a calm around me and then my wife as she pulled back the curtain, handing one of those odd kidney shaped dishes to her. The type of bowl that looks like it should be for the other end, but smaller and made from recycled paper that makes you unsure if it will contain any liquid or just soak it up, turning in to a vomit paper wheat-germ mess.

There was to be no vomit today. The nurse turned down the drip and her nausea passed leaving just the two of us engulfed in a pregnant silence that can exist between two people after a *puke-bin-chemo* incident such as this.

This could go on for days. I broke the silence.

“What bloody bin?”

“The *one* in the toilet.” She laboured in a manner that clearly indicated that I was an enormous idiot and a failure of the highest order for not knowing exactly which one she was referring to.

“The big bin?” I ventured blindly.

“Yeeeaah.”

“Oh,” I quietly ended this part of our jousting, I knew.

“You mean the big bin in the toilet that you go to, don’t you?” I asked poking the now cantankerous bear in my midst with my finely worded stick of light revenge.

“Yesssss!” I was going to get a belting in a minute, it was all in her eyes.

“The toilet that you go to,” I repeated, “with the enormous yellow sign on the door that says Patient Toilet - Patient use only, for transference of Chemotherapy waste - that toilet you mean....that obviously has this big bin.”

“*Oh yeah*”, she started to realise, “what you’ve never been in there then?”

“Is it *my* arse hanging out of a hospital gown?” I replied. We laughed, what else could you do.

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We flew in to Mallorca in September then drove into the old town of Palma. It was a gloriously sunny afternoon. Spanish hot, like the Chorizo, peppery in the light, prickly on the skin. The old town was a disaster, too many streets, too busy, too pokey, not enough signs. I swore at her directions, she criticised my driving, we laughed after a fashion and parked outside the city walls. The sun started to burn our skin, map in hand she added some distance and I paced behind her up the cobbled hill, a walking Buckeroo, two bags balanced on either shoulder, our suitcases in either hand. Her shoulder hurt she said; I was not surprised “there must be twenty magazines in your bag.” There we were, hot on holiday.

The bright sun from our carefree Mallorca set behind a working October in London. She still complained of a sore shoulder, I brought her a new bag, a proper rucksack, not a skeleton twisting wrap around. Her shoulder was still sore. She is not one to complain, but is one to spend money. First one Physiotherapist appointment, then another. By the fourth visit, he had bought his Porsche and she was no better.

Soon the Physio’s influence was to melt away in the face of the behemoth that was to rise to claim her again. Once every 3 months we hold our breath. Over ten airless days we respire for each other through one combined anxiety. Many tests, many different rooms, many different machines, bleeping electronica acting as the hand of fate to our next quarter.

Together we try to skirt the inevitable conversation; soothsaying over dinner, predicating the future based on little more than runes and false confidence. "I've had some stabbing pains in my liver again" she confides. I countermand with care "I don't think it is more cancer dear, you said that last time and we were fine, remember". She will pause, shrug, then tell me that she does not know why, but she isn't so confident that we will be OK this time. I will, as I always do, put aside my fear and tell her it will be fine. This time she is scared, last time it was me. Here we are, gambling on outcomes we have no influence over. Forming our fears into armour that will be useless against a *fait accompli* delivered at the Oncologist's office.

When the results are good, we exhale and start to breathe again, taking a slap on the back for surviving the unsurvivable once more. If not, then we wheeze for sixteen weeks, her treatment becoming incorporated into our normal routine. This is how Secondary Cancer lives with us.

Her first scan, an MRI on Wednesday, curtails any thoughts of a clean escape, "The Oncologist called," she tells me that evening, delivering the most difficult of sentences, a coup d'état on herself. She maintains her composure. "they've detected a narrowing of one vertebrae, this could be either Osteoporosis or bone metastasis." The food in front of us becomes cold as we contemplate our choices; a wheel chair or a significant slip down the darker and deeper.

Thursday becomes a dead loss. We spend Friday together in the bowels of a building. Tying her gown, light blue to light blue and dark tie to dark. I make idle egg shelled conversation as we sit uncomfortably in a corridor while she forces down a pint of white drink, comfortably coloured, and not the radioactive yellow that you'd expect for a bone scan. The weekend falls quietly beside us. The following week contains scans to the second Wednesday; CT, PET and Ultrasound. Tests so complex that we only know them by acronym. This mirrors our life. Not living. Just an abbreviated existence.

We meet after work on Thursday, thankful for the distraction of the 9-5. The taxi silently navigates the rush hour to Harley Street, the driver reads our mood and does not converse. The Oncologists office is her domain, they have a relationship, she offers herself more to him than me. He is, the "...*a trois*" in our marriage. Without him, there would be no us and he has only eyes for her. Tonight he is a harsh lover, straight to it, translating the Radiologist report. His lips turning speculation to ugly concrete. The pain in her shoulder. It is her spine. Her T4 vertebrae. More cancer. Somewhere new.

We exited out onto the street. It was a stark November night. I was unravelling. "I want to go home" I told her. She fixed me with a stare colder than the air, caring, but some things are more important. "No", she said, "I have booked the bar, people are expecting us, we are going out." Now the First Rule; we will deal with the rest tomorrow. Tonight we are alive.