

K A T E G R O S S

L A T E

Everything I Want to Tell You

E A R L Y

(About this Magnificent Life)

M O M E N T S

Kate Gross

**Late Fragments: Everything
I Want to Tell You**

«HarperCollins»

Gross K.

Late Fragments: Everything I Want to Tell You / K. Gross —
«HarperCollins»,

THE NUMBER 1 BESTSELLERWhat are the things we live for? What matters most in life when your time is short? This brave, frank and heartbreaking book shows what it means to die before your time; how to take charge of your life and fill it with wonder, hope and joy even in the face of tragedy. Ambitious and talented, Kate Gross worked at Number 10 Downing Street for two British Prime Ministers whilst only in her twenties. At thirty, she was CEO of a charity working with fragile democracies in Africa. She had married 'the best looking man I've ever kissed' – and given birth to twin boys in 2008. The future was bright. But aged 34, Kate was diagnosed with advanced colon cancer. After a two-year battle with the disease, Kate died peacefully at home on Christmas morning, just ten minutes before her sons awoke to open their stockings. She began to write as a gift to herself, a reminder that she could create even as her body began to self-destruct. Written for those she loves, her book is not a conventional cancer memoir; nor is it filled with medical jargon or misery. Instead, it is Kate's powerful attempt to make sense of the woman who emerged in the strange, lucid final chunk of her life. Her book aspires to give hope and purpose to the lives of her readers even as her own life drew to its close. Kate should have been granted decades to say all that she says in these pages. Denied the chance to bore her children and grandchildren with stories when she became fat and old, she offers us all her thoughts on how to live; on the wonder to be found in the everyday; the importance of friendship and love; what it means to die before your time and how to fill your life with hope and joy even in the face of tragedy.

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Kate O La Fragm

Everything I W

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William Collins

An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*

1 London Bridge Street

London SE1 9GF

www.WilliamCollinsBooks.com

First published in Great Britain by William Collins 2015

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A catalogue record of this book is

available from the British Library

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Cover handwriting by www.ruthrowland.co.uk

Source ISBN: 9780008103453

Ebook Edition © January 2015 ISBN: 9780008103460

Version: 2015-07-23

Dedication

There are two copies of this book that matter. There are two pairs of eyes I imagine reading every word. There are two adult hands which I hope will hold a battered paperback when others have long forgotten me and what I have to say. I write this for Oscar and Isaac, my little Knights, my joy and my wonder.

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Introduction

When I was three, I told my mum that I kept my words in my head, in a clear plastic bag. Now it is time for me to take them out, to arrange them into this story. The thing is, I don't know how it ends. I don't know if I will die before I finish writing it. But if I do, I know someone else will write the ending for me. My mum will step in to close off my story, just as she used to step in to help with my homework. So I can begin.

We will start on 11 October 2012. I am running along the beach in Southern California. It is dusk, and as the waves break on the shore, surfers head out to sea. My legs feel strong, my lungs full of salty air. I'm here to raise money for the charity I run, which works in post-conflict Africa. I'm a successful thirty-something woman with an amazing job through which I travel the world and converse with presidents and prime ministers. My adorable twins are three, and their father, Billy, is my soulmate, as well as being the best-looking man I've ever kissed. But inside me a lump of cells has broken free of the rules and spawned a tumour which has blocked my colon, crept through my lymph nodes and colonised my liver. Cancer is halfway to killing me, and I am completely oblivious to its presence.

The next day I am at the airport, my week-long trip over, and finally on my way home to Cambridge. As I arrive at check-in, I am hit by a wave of nausea. I throw up for fifteen hours – through security, in the lounge, and all the way back home. I feel feverish, exhausted. Now, at last, I know something is seriously wrong. I crawl into a taxi at Heathrow and ask the driver to drop me off at the emergency department at Addenbrooke's, our local hospital. A CT scan follows, and twelve hours after landing in the UK I am in emergency surgery. The blockage in my colon is a tumour, and the dark spots the doctors saw on my liver a series of secondary lesions – metastases, to use the proper term. I have stage four cancer. All this cancer-speak is new to me, but I do know there isn't a stage five. What I didn't realise then – though of course the ever internet-enabled Billy did, right from the start – was that I had only a 6 per cent chance of surviving the next five years.

Now we are more than two years on from that, the first earthquake to hit our little family. Two operations, six months of chemotherapy, and a brief, joyful remission filled that interlude. But now the cancer is back. It has spread, it is incurable. I will die before my children finish primary school, and probably before they reach the grand old age of six, which they think is impossibly grown-up, and I think is impossibly young. It won't be long now.

I began to write straight after my diagnosis. And as soon as I started to type, the words emerged, as prolific at reproducing and ordering themselves as the malignant cells inside me. Everything I wrote was a gift to myself, a reminder that I could create even as my body tried to self-destruct. And I wrote as a gift to those I love: my living, breathing Terracotta Army. Now the words spill out of my plastic bag like the magnetic letters my children stick on the fridge. I write to make sense of what has happened to our family, to make sense of the Kate who has emerged in this strange, lucid final chunk of life. I write because the imprint of disease is growing in me, and like a poor man's Keats I find myself full of fears that I will have to stop 'before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain'. Before I can write down all the things I want to tell my boys when they are thirty-five, not five. Before I can tell them who I am, and what I know, and the stories that make up my life.

Someone asked me what was the best thing cancer had given me. I collapsed inside when she said that. Cancer is a pretty terrible kind of gift. It takes and takes and takes, leaving a trail of destruction in its path. It's taken the future I had planned for myself: a career doing Good Things, travelling the world, being important and successful on the terms I had long set myself. It's stolen the take-it-for-granted ease from my relationship with Billy. What's easy about being thirty-six and having your husband nurse you in your dying days? We should be bickering about who takes the bins out, not having heart-to-hearts about how I want our children raised. It's taken away my ability to care

for others – by now, I should be helping out my parents, but instead they are visiting me in hospital and picking my kids up from school. They are suddenly ‘spare’ parents, not grandparents. It’s taken the reciprocity out of relationships. Suddenly I am the visited, never the visitor; the receiver, not the sender of cards and presents. And it’s taken away my ability to be the mother I want to be. Where I should be careless, bossy, energetic and distracted, now I am diligent, soft and weak, because I can’t bear to be remembered as bad cop. Every cuddle is charged with electric joy at their being *there*, and misery that I won’t see their future. I find myself lying in their beds as they sleep, crying hot tears into their pudgy necks.

But disease gives as well as it takes. Or, more accurately, we take from it even in the face of its efforts to take everything from us. And so my friend was sort-of-right. What disease has stolen is the normality I took for granted and the future I would have had. But I have taken from it, too. For starters, there is a feeling of being alive, awake, which powerfully reasserts itself in the moments of wellness that punctuate a long illness. I can only explain this feeling as rather like your first time on Ecstasy, but with less pounding music and projectile vomiting. Whether it is emerging from chemotherapy, or waking up after operations, I have experienced joy – perhaps even the sublime – in an unexpected and new way. The first time this happened was in the incongruous setting of Ward L4, on the night after my first diagnosis. I opened a window in the middle of the night and leaned out to feel the cold autumn rain on my face, mingling with sharp, blissed-out tears.

Then there is the way I feel about the people in my life. Billy and I have grown a love known only in power ballads, a depth of understanding and companionship which in any fair world would last us a lifetime. My parents, now closer physically as well as emotionally. Friendships which survived on the leftover bits of time have had a renaissance. And while I like to imagine that the world may have lost a future stateswoman, I have found my voice, and with my voice an intellectual and spiritual hinterland which had been lost for too long between the answering of emails and the wiping of tiny bottoms. I am woman, hear me roar.

So despite all that has been and will be taken from us, I am happy. I am really, truly happy. These last years have been so strangely luminous, full of exploration, wonder and love. I’m not sure if this adds up to a silver lining, whether it amounts to enough to balance the loss of the future I should have had. Some days it seems crazy even to suggest it. But it at least makes the scales more even.

I am writing this book to share the sum of a life. In a normal world, I would have been granted decades to say all of this. Fat, old and wearing purple, I would have bored my children and my children’s children with stories of the world I had known. Perhaps they would have asked me about the crazy Noughties, the dying days of capitalism, what it was like working in the heart of government when America was king and credit was easy. Or perhaps they would have been more interested in my stories about Africa in the bad old days of hunger and warlords, before Lagos became a place you emigrated to, not from. Maybe they would just have wanted to know what my favourite books were as a child, what my earliest memories were, about how Billy and I fell in love. But I am living at an accelerated pace now. We won’t have those conversations; but my children will always have these words.

The Plastic Bag and the Red Coat



A certain minor light may still
Leap incandescent
Out of kitchen table or chair
As if a celestial burning took
Possession of the most obtuse objects now and then –
Thus hallowing an interval
Otherwise inconsequent
By bestowing largesse, honour,
One might say love.

SYLVIA PLATH, 'BLACK ROOK IN RAINY WEATHER'

There was a moment, a decade or so ago, when I was walking across Clapham Common on a grey winter day. The sky was flat and far too close to my head. I was in a no-particular-sort-of-mood, probably on my way to spending an afternoon in the pub. Or shopping. Anyway: engaging in delightful, consumerist, meaningless modern life. And then I saw a child in a red coat, and I experienced a moment of absolute, pure wonder. Joy, transcendent and uplifting. Did I borrow this memory from the film *Schindler's List*? Or perhaps this unexpected moment of joy reminded me of watching a scene from another film, *American Beauty*, in which the teenage anti-hero films a plastic bag with tender attention as it swirls around, suspended in the air, capturing every twist and flutter. No, I believe this memory is my own: there is wonder in the everyday, if you can only see it.

I am not pretending that I go round all the time having this kind of experience. Or that I see it only in red coats, or indeed in plastic bags. It is just that if I could give my children one thing, it would be this capacity to be astonished by the quotidian, to experience joy from the world they live

in. I would work out its formula and put it into a pair of superhero glasses – me and the former dean of Westminster Michael Mayne both, who wrote in his letters to his grandchildren: ‘If I could have waved a fairy wand at your birth and wished upon you just one gift it would not have been beauty or riches or a long life: it would have been the gift of wonder.’ But it doesn’t work like that. We all have to find wonder for ourselves. All I can do is explain how wonder emerged for me as the world and I met, and how it has grown stronger and brighter even as my world has got smaller and dimmer.

I can spread my childhood memories out like a patchwork quilt. My quilt is brightly coloured, richly textured, a mix of the familiar and the foreign. My parents showed me the world from an early age, and experiencing it – drinking in the astonishing wonder it provides – has made me who I am. Because of them, ‘the ears of my ears awake and the eyes of my eyes are open’, as ee cummings put it. Aged about four, I saw a mongoose eat a snake on the banks of the Creek in Dubai. We used to go into the city on a Friday night for curry. In one corner of the garden of the small and scruffy café by the water sat a big cage. And inside the cage lived a mongoose, and the mongoose was fed snakes. After our curry we would have freshly squeezed fruit juice in a small bar staffed by nice Indian men who would pinch my fat, freckly Caucasian cheeks. I remember our weekend trips to the beach, where we would camp under enormous, starry skies. In 1986, age seven and three quarters, I lay on the cold sand with my friend Georgia, and watched Halley’s Comet fly overhead. We made a solemn promise that we would watch it together on its next cycle through the sky, when Georgia will be in her eighties and I will be long gone. During the hot, cloudless days we would blow up our inflatable lilos and drift out into the clear waters of the Persian Gulf in search of the Utter East. In the shallow seas, stingrays lurked under the rocks along with the cuttlefish. At night we children would whisper ghost stories in our tents as the heat of the day gave way to the cold desert night, until we were lulled to sleep by the sounds of our parents drinking cold beers around the campfire.

Because I was brought up far away, in a dusty, dry place where the inside of our blue Toyota was like a metal furnace most of the year round, England felt very foreign to me. Our summers spent in the Wiltshire countryside were as full of wonder as anything I experienced abroad – the everyday stuff of an English childhood rendered foreign by the exotica of my life on the Arabian Peninsula. I remember sunshine and an abundance of soft grass, so different from the scratchy Astroturf of our garden in Dubai. Smooth green banks of grass to roll down, to somersault over, to play leapfrog on. Delicate, pastel-coloured flowers waiting for me to snip them and stuff them in my flower press; flowers which for the first time in my experience looked as if they might actually house fairies, unlike the gargantuan, ferocious flora of the Middle East. Gentle, small butterflies landing on the buddleia outside Court House in our little village of Bishopstone, waiting for me to swoop in with my net. Paddling in too-cold streams with trousers rolled up, learning how to build dams.

As a family, we are travellers. Exploring is part of our DNA, just as much as being shortsighted. We are addicted to the smell of *elsewhere* which hits when you descend from a plane, the excitement of buying milk in a foreign supermarket. My grandfather spent his war in the intelligence corps, in India and Burma, and returned to India with the BBC afterwards. Mum remembers the presents he brought home: exotic silks and carvings, and stories of a place which captivated him. In Kathmandu, when I was six, I saw the Living Goddess, a girl about my age who was locked inside an ornately carved wooden house, with dark kohled eyes and a shiny red and gold dress. How I envied her then, being chosen to be a goddess. But I thought she looked so sad, and as though she wanted very much to be able to play as I could. In Thailand I smelled the cloying odour of durian fruit while we floated down the khlongs of Bangkok. Butterflies of incredible size and colour flitted around me as we walked through the jungle. Black leeches attached themselves to our feet and legs as we hopped over enormous puddles and overflowing rivers in the pouring rain. As a child brought up in the desert, this was my first encounter with the many-shaded green of the tropics, the clichéd wonder of independent travel which would only grow during my university holidays.

There are so many places I wanted to take my boys. Places I have been and seen, and places I have not. To India, to see the coracles floating down the river at Hampi and to hear stories of the oldest civilisations. To Vietnam, to eat soft-shell crabs on a street corner while you watch the future take shape in the concrete flyovers and skyscrapers above you. To California, to experience everything super-sized, including the boundless optimism and confidence of the glossy-haired, honey-limbed natives. To Africa, to see the misty thousand hills in Rwanda and to understand how a people can tear themselves apart and remake themselves in a generation, because history is not a death sentence. To Egypt, or maybe Morocco, to see souks and pyramids, riads and the simple, mesmerising shapes of Islamic art. To mountain ranges where you feel the bliss of solitude as you glide in a silent chairlift amidst deep, silent snowdrifts. To tropical seas as clear as glass, where you can enter another world underwater, watching turtles and stingrays glide through shoals of magically coloured fish.

I won't take my children to those places now. But still, I try to guess how and where they will experience the wonder that will make them see the world anew. Perhaps it has already come, in the Botanic Garden in Cambridge. There, we run round the lake, climb mountains, explore jungles and cross rivers on stepping stones, and are still only a mile from our front door. Or in the places we have already been: stretching our legs to cross the slippery stones of the Giant's Causeway, with the myths of Finn McCool ringing in our ears. Or in the magical house in France my dad built, where it never rains, the swimming pool is always blue, and a snake called Oliver Cromwell lives under the veranda.

The point is, I don't know how they will experience the world, any more than I can guide them through it. I hope that its breadth and variety will provide them with the endless thrill it has for me. But staying at home is fine too. I need them to know that wonder doesn't require a passport, it only requires your attention. My dad has always been evidence of that. He's a traveller too, and he told me once about wonder emerging for him as he surveyed the wild cliffs of St David's in Wales as a long-haired, dope-smoking student (remember, it was the Seventies). But his truest sense of wonder has always been found in a smaller world around him. He sees things, you see, in the details: the curve of a white tulip petal, the way a tree branch stretches over a lake, the perfect structure of the green hills and the flat *causse* near the house he built in France. Like Emily Dickinson, his holy trinity is the Bee, the Butterfly and the Breeze. He is a man who takes joy from his surroundings, someone who like Thomas Hardy considers himself a man who *notices* things.

How strange, how brilliant it is that this awareness of wonder, this sense of the sublime, has been so closely intertwined with my illness as it has progressed. How incredible that Ruskin's duty to delight in the world around has grown stronger in me as I have grown weaker.

But before I go any further, I had better tell the story of how the cancer inside me – the beast I know as the Nuisance – started, because it is the frame for everything else that follows.

I've always had a dodgy bottom. I presumed it was irritable bowel syndrome. I guessed it had been exacerbated by the various terrible afflictions of the innards I obtained while working in India, where I taught for a few months post-university. Within a month of arriving there I was sustaining myself only by gulab jamun, the gelatinous, sticky Indian sweets. Everything else on the school's menu, including the inoffensive-seeming parathas, had left me squatting painfully over the stand-up loos or running out of assembly to vomit in the verdant flowerbeds. Clearly, I thought, there was some mutant worm growing inside me. I nuked it with antibiotics when I got home, but I seemed to be left with something permanently wrong down there. In a very British style, I ignored it valiantly for about seven years. By then, I was anyway busy with being a young and ambitious worker bee, and falling in love.

It was only when I paused and left London that I vowed to get my health sorted out. We had moved to Cambridge – home of Billy's technology start-up, which he'd founded the very month he and I went on our first date, in 2004. It was my turn to do the commute to London, but I was avoiding that, and indeed reality in general, by going back to university to do a Masters. Being a student again gave me plenty of time to go and get things checked out. After I had described my symptoms to my

GP, she sent me off to hospital, where they put a little camera up my bottom. The nice consultant found nothing to worry about, and told me to eat more fibre to regularise things down there. Little did I know, not being the bottom-health expert I now am, that I had only had a sigmoidoscopy: in layman's terms, a camera that peeks only partway up your arse, rather than exploring the whole lot. If the camera had poked a bit further round my innards, the consultant probably would have found an adenoma, a pre-cancerous little polyp in my colon. He would have cut it out, I would have been booked in for regular screening, and life would have proceeded to plan. But that didn't happen. To make matters worse, I always confidently told subsequent doctors I had had a clear colonoscopy, and that everything down there was Just Fine.

In any case, the ensuing years were eventful for other, more pressing reasons. With (I thought) my health problems sorted, I got pregnant in 2008. My twelve-week scan revealed two little swimmers thrashing around in my uterus. Twin boys. Billy and I were petrified. Like cancer, twins didn't run in the family. What were the chances? One in eighty, apparently, significantly greater than the one in twenty thousand chance of getting colon cancer aged thirty-four. But back to the story. In May 2009 my little swimmers emerged, full-term and healthy. Motherhood took over my body and my mind, as is its way. I was swept along on a wave of oxytocin, and apart from the sleep deprivation felt happier and healthier than I ever had.

Being a mother consumed me, and what energy was left over I applied to work. Halfway through my Masters I had set up the Africa Governance Initiative, working again for our former prime minister Tony Blair. Not only was he the smartest, kindest and most relaxed politician I had ever worked for, he also had a belief in the role of government as a force for good which profoundly appealed to my public-servant heart. He wanted to use what he'd learned in ten long years in power for the benefit of some of the poorest people in the world, by working with the leaders of Africa's emerging democracies, countries coming out of years of war and mismanagement. As someone who had always seen myself as a bureaucrat with the heart of an explorer, this seemed like a perfect fit. With Tony working alongside presidents and prime ministers, the charity we founded put teams of international staff – capable, passionate, bright young things – into the heart of burgeoning democracies, countries like Liberia, Rwanda and Sierra Leone. There we worked with many incredible African public servants, sitting alongside them in bombed-out, sweltering buildings, with more chickens in the corridors than staff in the offices, assisting with the task of rebuilding a country and shaping a fair, effective and clean government. Between wrangling with twins and being CEO of this new enterprise, I didn't have much time to worry as my old bottom troubles worsened. Anyway, it was all too easy to blame things on the Rwandan goat brochettes.

Fast forward to October 2012. The kids are three and a bit. I am thirty-four, and something inside just doesn't feel right. I am very, very tired. On Saturdays I stick the boys in front of the TV while I sleep. I go to the GP. I tell her I've had a colonoscopy. She asks when. I say 2007, and she tells me they are valid for five years. Now the problems really begin. I start getting terrible abdominal pains. These reach a peak during an excruciatingly dull interview I'm conducting for a new chief operating officer. Suddenly, it feels as if a giant boulder has rolled across my intestines – a pretty accurate metaphor, it turns out, if you exchange 'boulder' for 'tumour'. But still, life continues. A return trip to the GP, who tells me I probably have a blockage down there, but it's nothing to worry about. I wonder whether, if my problems had been in a less, well, shitty area (say my armpit) I would have fought harder over the years to sort them out. But I didn't, and so off I go to California, to running on Laguna Beach, to that accursed United Airlines flight home, and to the CT scan and finally the operating table on 12 October when my tumour and its liverish little friends finally come to light.

I woke up after the operation with Billy next to my hospital bed. It was he who told me, then, that I definitely had cancer. He was reassuring, gentle, a little wild-eyed but surprisingly calm. I was euphoric, full of morphine, and overjoyed to see him. Terrified of my first general anaesthetic, I

hadn't really expected to wake up from the operation. But there I was, on a general surgery ward, midnight on a Friday, with a diagnosis of advanced cancer. And ecstatic to be alive.

God knows what it had been like for Billy to get my phone calls that day: first, telling him I was in hospital. Next, that I'd had a scan and was likely to need surgery. Then, just an hour later, that there was a chance it might be cancer, and that they were operating immediately. He stayed with me right up until I was wheeled into surgery, then walked away. He told me afterwards that while I was under the knife he sat in our little garden smoking and crying. The surgeon had rung him afterwards and confirmed the worst. Then, in the dead of night, Billy came in to be by my side when I woke up. And as I drifted back off into my euphoric, opiated haze he returned home to scour the internet for survival strategies, treatments and miracle cures.

Gentle reader, you may have the misfortune to know all about cancer already. If so, forgive me for what follows. Cancer comes in four easy-to-remember stages. Picture your body as a house – your 'bone-house', as it was called by the Anglo-Saxon poets – and cancer as your formerly domesticated dog, now running wild and intent on rampaging through the neighbourhood, destroying all in his path. Stage one is 'local' cancer, your dog confined to your kitchen: just the one bodily organ. Here he can make mayhem, but be relatively easily tamed and managed. In stage two, your dog has managed to outgrow the kitchen, and has burst through the wall to colonise the living room, getting his messy hairs and doggy smell everywhere. Taming this beast and removing the traces of him will now be harder. Stage three sees Dog getting all the way to the front door and bounding out (with the front door being the lymph nodes, in this tortured analogy). You can shut the door at this point, but once the blighter has tasted freedom it's hard to contain his desire to explore the neighbourhood. And so stage four comes. Here, Dog has run amok, taken a giant crap on the pavement, eaten out of the bins and settled into the chippy down the road for a snooze. Your cancer has spread from its initial home to other vital organs. Because of our inability to speak of our rear ends, most colon cancer is detected somewhere between stages two and four, and the chances of cure decline dramatically as the patient progresses through the stages.

But in the hospital that weekend, I don't yet know any of this. Billy researches the statistics for me. Over time he tells me that while my prognosis is poor, the numbers apply to old people, and since I am so young and healthy I am *bound* to have a better shot at things. The information on the internet is about five years out of date, and new treatments, surgical techniques and so on have bumped up survival rates. If the tumours in my liver can be operated on, I actually have a chance of a complete recovery – admittedly it's still only fifty-fifty, if we even get that far. But those odds feel brilliant to us at this stage.

There were a lot of ifs, in those first few weeks. I could explain them all, and all the ups and downs that followed during the next months of chemotherapy through till my liver operation, and then the reappearance of the Nuisance all over my body six months later. But that would litter the pages of this whole book with jargon, and make it incomprehensibly, boringly medical. It is enough to say that as Billy and I looked ahead in those strange hours after my operation, we saw a landscape of uncertainty. My vision was blurred by morphine and pain. His was sharper, and he could see, more clearly than I, the life we had thought stretched before us disappear into a fog of disease, hospitals, statistics, and just plain luck.

But through the haze I had my first taste of the bitter gratitude that has accompanied my diagnosis. I have already told you about the almost transcendental experience I had feeling the soft October rain on my face as I stumbled from my hospital bed to lean out of the window after the operation, and the joyful feeling of aliveness which consumed my mind and body despite having been told I might die. But there were more practical things that brought me joy too. First, everyone else on my ward had stoma – or colostomy – bags. I never actually saw one, but I knew that they lurked under the baggy hospital gowns, catching the poo from the piece of the colon that peeked out of the stomach, a second bottom carved by surgeons in many, many abdominal operations. Somehow, my

genius surgeon had managed to piece me back together without the need for one of those things. Second, though my body had let me down by allowing this cancer to take root, it had also propelled me home. Somehow, it had found the strength to travel five and a half thousand miles back to Cambridge to receive this unreceivable news in the only place I could bear it. And so there I was, the old world around me crashing down. Everything I had taken for granted swept away. And yet I was full to the brim with an irrepressible joy.

Back to now. No more smell of hot *elsewhere* as I disembark from a plane. Life is quiet. My joy comes from small things; no travel documents required. I watch the crocuses pop up on the Cambridge Backs, little purple and orange heralds of the winter thawing. The bare trees in the park at the end of our road look like an Aubrey Beardsley etching on the big East Anglian sky. I swim in the sea in Devon, too early in the year for those sensible people with time to spare. Breaking the oncologist's rules, I feel the thrill of dangerous, wild nature enfold me as hypothermia rises from my feet upwards. I roll over to Billy in the morning and watch him sleep, nosily at peace. Reading *Four Quartets*, the words imprint my mind, filling me with amazement at how Eliot grapples with the sense of time that haunts me. 'At the still point, there the dance is.' I search for the still point every day, and sometimes I even manage to find some peace there, because, after all, there *is* only the dance.

There is wonder in my past, and in my present. As I write this book, I lay out my memory quilt to see all the dancing I have done: places I have been, people I have met. I have fitted so much colour into my short life that I wonder if I lived on hyper-speed, as if, somehow, I knew my time was limited.

Soon my wonder will come from watching the tree outside my window as it shakes in the sky, and from my children curling their small hands around mine. My world will shrink to one room. But I know wonder will still assail me.

The Terracotta Army



My friends are my 'estate'.
EMILY DICKINSON

Once upon a time there was a girl who lived in a town of hills and honey-coloured stone, where putrid steam rose from ancient hot springs, and it almost always rained. The girl was called Kate, and she was a teenager. Kate was an unpleasant creature, because back then she didn't know who she was. Really, as a foetid little grub she should have been cocooned in a dark chamber for ten years before emerging as a bright, sparkling (stealthily cancer-ridden) butterfly, but a defect in human evolution means this most unpleasant and painful of developmental stages is carried out in the glare of daylight. And it was only when Kate finally hatched out and shed her caterpillar skin that she found the people who have walked with her ever since. The people who have made life like Oz, even when gloom, pain and drugs sucked the Technicolor from the world and tried to turn it to Kansas.

This was originally going to be the chapter which provided a bit of light relief, some laughs to relieve the solemnity of a book about dying. But writing it is, strangely, more painful for me than anything else, because being a teenager – and specifically the years thirteen to sixteen – were without doubt the worst period of my life. Yes, really. Far worse than my acquaintance with the Nuisance. As far as I can tell, becoming who you are as an adult requires a period wherein you are possessed by a wicked spirit who hates everything. Your childhood. Your parents. Old friends. Your bedroom. Your clothes. Your face. It's messy to watch, and even messier on the inside. But it's Darwinian, a necessary stratagem for the self to evolve into something which is no longer a child, and which can survive and thrive outside the nest. So I shall provide some gruesome details of the grub years, because in every good story there is a period of despair before hope arrives.

Back to Kate, in her blue bedroom in the small, honey-coloured town, nestled amongst seven hills like a damp, Austen-ified version of Rome. I kept a diary. At the start of 1992 it began with the line, 'It is January. But which January?' (This arch opener because I expected my juvenilia to be anthologised one day.) But there wasn't anything dramatic about that January, or indeed any other January at that point in my life. After the holidays I went back to my slightly-better-than-bog-standard comprehensive school. There are two pertinent facts about this school. First, the existence of a wonderful English teacher. Second, it was single-sex. No boys. This gave it a particularly rank smell of female sweat and cruelty, the sort that only gets dished out girl-on-girl. Back then, friendships were toxic, obsessional things. The wound of my first ever best friend Rosie Lee (who I loved for her curly blonde hair and extensive knowledge of Kylie Minogue lyrics) leaving me for another still smarter. One day, I was cast aside on the long walk to school in favour of Katrina. Katrina was older than Rosie and me. Worldly. But Rosie provided no explanation for this abandonment. There was no process of separation, no divorce. I trailed behind them day after day like a sad Labrador, silently ignored.

This was my first realisation that I was not one of the cool girls. It would have been hard to be cool, looking as I did in 1992. First, there was my hair, which was coloured bright orange with henna. My fringe was blunt. I had many freckles and a very round face, and even rounder tortoiseshell glasses. Then, as now, I was quite sturdy ('Built like the rest of us Tanner gals!' my heftily-bosomed grandmother would say brightly). Though my name sounded like hers, I was basically the antithesis of Kate Moss. The fashion, back then, was grunge, which is ideal teenage wear: grubby, shapeless old clothes, band T-shirts and tie-dye. My favourite outfit that January was a pair of bottle-green corduroy culottes paired with purple tights and one of my hand tie-dyed T-shirts (with Dr Martens boots, of course). Someone else – say, Kate Moss, or my erstwhile friend Rosie Lee – probably could have rocked this look. But it's safe to say I didn't really own it; I let the corduroy culottes wear me, and that is something no woman should ever write. So neither the way I looked, nor the way I dressed, was particularly beneficial in helping me to join the school Cooliverse I so longed to be part of.

My brain was a problem too. There was something profoundly uncool about being clever, at least at my school. I was one of those children who are desperate to please teachers, who work *very hard* and do *very well*. I got enough As to bump up the school's shonky results, had enough gumption to ask interesting questions in class, but not enough attitude to be disruptive. It didn't help that I had no cool hobbies. I never really got into pop music; books were my thing, which was marginally better than playing the trumpet, but nonetheless not conducive to being kissed. So, as time went on, I started going to ever-greater lengths to hide my nerdish and teacher-pleasing tendencies. I made a show of falling asleep in lessons, so that it looked as if I had the kind of social life I coveted. I skipped physics, because poor old Mr Whale didn't really notice whether we were there or not. I didn't stop getting good results – diligence prevailed, and I pored over my books outside school, where I could indulge my owlsh obsessions under the safe wings of the wonderful ladies of literature my mum had wisely chosen as her friends (especially my godmother Louise and my friend's mum Susie, both English teachers). But at school, I stopped being an interested, engaged student. I stopped being proud of what went on in my head. And worst of all, like Rosie Lee, I cast aside the friendships I had with people who talked to me about books in favour of people who talked to me about boys. The girls with whom I had laboured over a papier-mâché game of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the gang with whom I had created the fashion house NiftWear (and its lucrative sideline of FIMO earrings) – I ditched them overnight.

There is something profoundly sad about not being able to show people who you really are, and about having friends who don't reflect the inside of you. Of course, every one of us is lots of people over the course of our lives. We try on different selves like outfits for different occasions, and wear different friendships for different outings. There are friendships which only revolve around doing *stuff* together. Friendships which, if you held a mirror up to them, would reflect the people we want to be at a certain moment, not the people we are inside. Some of that exploration is fun.

Some of it is painful. But these disparate selves are occasionally only connected to the real *us* by a frail thread, and never more so than during the grub years.

It's lucky, really, that I didn't die in 1992. I don't think people would have had the happiest of memories of me, especially my long-suffering family, who had to put up with the smell of martyred saint wafting around our house (I pretended it was weed, but actually it was mainly joss sticks and the smell of *my pain*). There would have been some hand-wringing about my dying so young, but as a teenage grub I hadn't done much for the world. Something happened, of course, to change things. Call it evolution. Or maybe just growing up. Anyway, I escaped my girls-only torment and went to a different school. Things were better there. I didn't mind wearing my brains on my sleeve so much. Somehow I was accepted into the Cooliverse, even though my wardrobe remained ludicrous. (I must have been the only teenage raver who wore the clothes of a middle-aged woman. Why, when I actually had the body for it, did I not wear actual hot-off-the-streets fashion?)

And then, of course, university, where for the first time things were defined differently. The metric for cool was no longer the number of boy-racers you could kiss, the amount of cider you could drink or whether you had the moves to dance on podiums. Instead, people seemed proud of who they were inside their heads. I met girls who had posters of William Shakespeare on their bedroom walls back home, and were proud of it. Girls who knew who Kant was, even if they pronounced his name cunt (ah, the dangers of being an autodidact). Here it was OK to try hard. It was OK to want to impress the grown-ups. These things contributed to, rather than depleted, your cool status. This was a huge relief for me, though I was overawed too. Who *were* all these confident young people who were both kissable and clever? What rare alchemy had created them? There was an alarming correlation between private schooling and those who emanated this glow. We products of the state school system seemed chipper, more aggressive, less polished, perhaps less comfortable with ourselves. But in any case, here was a place where I could hatch out in safety. With the friction of trying to be something I wasn't removed, and the waves of adolescent hormones calming down, I started to settle into myself.

I was not the only grub who hatched out at around this time. I think of our university bedrooms as a series of little cocoons – messy, sweaty little pits of essay-writing, cigarettes and drunken liaisons from which butterflies eventually emerged. We entered our hatchery in different states; not everyone has their ghoulish period between thirteen and sixteen. Some have it earlier, some much later. And different grubs had different coping strategies. Two I know very well spent their teenage years in hock to a particular brand of Christian evangelism. Now, I have nothing against evangelism (that's not quite true, but let's not go into that now), but religion for them was a mechanism for entering some kind of Cooliverse, since they were excluded from popularity by their nasty little classmates at school. It was a place of certainty and security, while at home a cold war of marital decline reigned. So instead of hanging around their local park drinking White Lightning and lusting after boys doused in cheap aftershave, they directed their unrequited love towards Jesus and his ministers here on earth, handsome young men who played the guitar and whipped up devotion in their female followers. And then they entered the hatchery, there was glasnost (or bust) at home, and the tambourines and guitars no longer seemed quite so necessary.

Another grub arrived with his lank brown hair in curtains, a greasy face and large round spectacles, an oversized Harry Potter without a wand, outwardly full of bonhomie and jollity, inwardly wrestling with whether he wanted to kiss boys or girls. Eventually he decided that boys were his thing, but let's not pretend the hatchling period was easy for him. It was long, messy, and largely private, except for one memorable phone message all his friends received about 4 o'clock one night: 'Ecstasy! Little ginger man! I just want to kiss *all* the boys. And you! And you!' After that great revelation, things got better.

Some grubs arrived at university appearing to be butterflies already. Taken in at first by the cool girl who lived below me, with her leopardskin coat, London accent and directional hairstyle, I didn't realise until much later that this was her armour – underneath she was every bit as much of

an uncertain, pained little thing as I was; she had just developed better ways of camouflaging herself than me. You had to in the big city, I guess. Gradually, over a seemingly endless supply of Jacob's crackers, cheese and Marlboro Lights, she showed me what was under her London armour. A brother disabled from birth; a wealth of anxieties (surprisingly not related to her directional haircut); a little disability here and there of her own. Even through her cocoon I could see that she would end up being my best woman.

I count my time at university as precious not just because it is where I hatched, but because it is where I made the friendships that have accompanied me ever since. I love the company of men. Especially Billy. But for me there is something special about female friendship, and it was at university that I began to meet the women who have really mattered to me. I have photos of us back then with wide eyes, big hair and a series of questionable cocktail dresses. We sat around smoking fags, plotting our futures, confident that the world would unfold its riches before us. Like the friends described by Wallace Stegner in *Crossing to Safety* (which is, incidentally, one of the finest novels about friendship I've come across), we 'cut the future into happy stars and circles like little girls making Christmas cookies'.

Together, we were an unstoppable force. Our grubby insecurities and doubts were lost in a haze of cigarette smoke and weak lager, surrendered to the noise of the college jukebox as we shook our cheaply-clad bottoms to the sounds of Nineties girl power. We took our terrible haircuts around the world for adventures; squashed them next to chickens and market ladies in day-long bus journeys; showed them off in the big city in summer temping jobs; flattened them under hats in ski season. When we weren't together, we spent our time writing endless email epistles to one another, recounting tales of our disastrous love lives, moaning about our parents, and generally avoiding the data-entry jobs we were being paid to do in the stifling heat of summer in the city.

While other relationships might define us more – with our parents, partners, or children – for me female friendship has been the steady tick-tock of adult life. And maintaining these friendships over decades was a sign that, finally, I knew who I was inside. The fine thread between myself and *my self* had thickened and settled. I was one with me.

I wonder what it is about women's friendship that is so important. A thousand glossy-magazine articles on the subject haven't helped answer this question. I think conversation is at the heart of it, and it is certainly a truism that there is a lot of verbiage when this particular estate is gathered. Some themes are rather ubiquitous, like a song we keep remixing over the years. Our bodies, whether our thighs look like sausages in leather(ette) leggings, how many sweets have been consumed in the past twenty-four-hour period, whether anyone can see the new-found hairs under our sagging chins. We peer into other people's lives, and yes, we can still be mean girls when we do this. We talk about men, of course. Back in the day, 'Is he into me?' (Usually with an inverse relationship between how into you he was and how much you talked about him.) Now, more mundane: 'How can I teach him to see dirt?' 'Whither the romantic mini-break of old?' I find that parents, and especially mothers, get a decent crack of the lady-chat whip. Children get a look-in too, but not till they are either wanted or have arrived. To the outsider listening in to our discussions, our world might appear limited, narrow, superficial. But listen more carefully. These discussions are just the bacon fat in the stew. They bring things together, keep the friendship well lubricated, make everyday fodder tasty. But without the rest of the conversation that this intimacy permits – the big discussions about life and our place in the world – our friendships would be no more than the dreadful pass-the-time chats had at the back of toddler groups.

I cannot speak here for friendship between men. It is not within my jurisdiction. Billy has been known as the most over-friended man in Britain, and as someone who exercises no judgement at all over his friendships. Perhaps the two are connected. In any event, his smiley face and enjoyment of whisky have gathered around him a bunch of people nearly as interesting, funny and kind as my own friends (some of them I love enough to wrinkle away and add to my entourage). I don't know what

binds him to his menfolk. I don't pretend to understand what they talk about when I'm not there. My suspicion is that they have their own kinds of conversational bacon fat, perhaps revolving around electronic gadgetry, sex and bottom jokes – but like the female equivalent, it is just the grease in the engine of the more profound discussions.

These discussions are the other side of friendship. The conversations and the memories and the fun you have together permit you to reveal the weak, scared vulnerable self that emerges every now and again. My second operation – the one I had to chop the pesky tumours out of my liver, six months after my diagnosis and my first op – was tough. It took place in a shiny, cancer-defeating factory in Houston, because Billy's careful research had shown that it had the best chance of successfully ridding me of cancer. We spent nearly a month there, and Stateside I was the glummiest of glum girls. The operation depleted me in a way I could never have imagined. Agonisingly painful. Full of complications and miserable rehospitalisations. I finally returned home feeling drained of everything, including optimism. This was ironic, as post-operation I was in a better place, statistically, than I'd been since my original diagnosis six months previously: my odds of surviving the next five years leapt (briefly) from 6 per cent to 50 per cent. And yet for me it was the darkest part of the night. Maybe because everyone breathed a sigh of relief, and thought the crisis was over. Maybe because I was physically weaker than I've ever been. I don't know why, but for several months there was a loneliness to my sadness which I hadn't experienced before.

In that kind of situation, there are two options. The first is to battle through on your own. To grit your teeth, put your head down, and say things will be better tomorrow (whenever tomorrow comes). I call this the Scarlett O'Hara; it is a noble approach, one I've taken before, and one that I know appeals to the proud, quiet, maybe more masculine side of all of our natures. But I chose the second option, which was to write a list of my best women, and ask them to come and help. We sat in the garden. The tulips were out, and I howled snottily on their shoulders in a way I hadn't before. After that I told them about my fears and loneliness, and how bloody awful everything had been. Then things got better.

Not long before the Nuisance, my fear had been that the really good times were over for these wonderful friendships. Thirty-somethings with children, jobs and partners to attend to, we were no longer as available to one another as we used to be. While I might wish we all lived in some kind of giant child-rearing commune, that isn't the case. Friendships survive on scraps of time and emails, squeezed between the rest of life, and very often conducted thousands of miles apart. We live off well-trodden stories, the space in our lives for making new memories mostly taken up by family and work, where the real drama happens. The odd dinner, more often a cup of tea balanced precariously over a baby's head while we converse, but never enough time for the real stuff, or for new adventures together. I always hoped there would be time for that again, if only in the Home for Neglected Mothers of Sons in which we would end up in our dotage. But now it seems that I won't be checking into that particular nursing home. All the same, there is a happy postscript to this story, at least in Nuisance land. As one of these wise women says, quoting Mike Tyson, 'Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the face.' We all had our plans. Our paths criss-crossed as we got on with life, friendships always there when they needed to be picked up. But then my family got punched in the face, far earlier and far harder than we could have expected, and our plans melted away. Suddenly time was carved out for friendship again. So cancer has given as well as it has taken – though perhaps it is more accurate to say that our friendships take from it what they can, a collective two fingers to all the Nuisance stands for.

I have spent so much of the past few years under the spell of chemotherapy, existing in a half-life where every fortnight is split into seven days of misery and seven days of life. Aside from (temporarily) taming my cancer, the other benefit of having this wicked set of toxins poured into me is that I see more of my resplendent friends from around the world than I have done for years. I am accompanied into the chemo ward. I am visited at home. This is lucky, because 'therapy' is a

complete misnomer for the cruel concoction of drugs which is infused into my bloodstream in an attempt to keep me alive. But it has to be done: as Claudius puts it in *Hamlet*, ‘Diseases desperate grown by desperate appliance are relieved, Or not at all.’

I imagine my own desperate appliance as a particularly inept vigilante marauding through my body on the hunt for cancer cells. He shoots – he kills! Oh no. More often than not, what he has slaughtered is a perfectly healthy cell just going about its taste-creating, nausea-controlling, body-hydrating business. Chemo is all about this clumsy collateral damage and how to manage it: hence the phalanx of steroids, anti-nausea pills and so on, each of which brings its own wicked side-effects. But what I hadn’t reckoned with was the mental stuff. My vigilante seems particularly adept at shooting down serotonin, so that for a few days the chemicals replace my soul with a shrivelled black void. With each cycle the physical and emotional scar tissue deepens. I elect to return, but only just.

If I wasn’t accompanied by my very own Terracotta Army of friends, returning to the chemo ward would be harder. They make things bearable. They understand the little things. That, even facing death, for me (like Hillary Clinton and her scrunchies) it’s *still* all about the hair (and lack thereof). That seeing the oncologist is easier when I’m in a tough-girl leopardskin coat with a slick of bright red lippy. That though my heart’s desire cannot be granted, that doesn’t mean I don’t desire stuff. The ancient Egyptians had it right – the urge to accumulate beautiful treasures increases the closer you get to death; and I intend to go into the afterlife looking polished, surrounded by the luxury goods given to me by the best women. They understand the big things too: how I need to live in Technicolor in the time I can. They plan holidays. We visit Paris in the rain. They take me to the newest restaurants, and send me extravagant bunches of flowers and richly scented candles so that in the evening I can draw the curtains and pretend that everything is *just fine*.

I sometimes sit in my chair, too tired to move, too brain-dead to read or write. With my eyes closed, I feel a pleasant weight pressing on my shoulders. It is the weight of all the time Billy and I have had with our friends, enveloping me like a heavy blanket. They are brave, these people. They were there the day after I was diagnosed, uninvited, hugging Billy and regaling me with tales of dreadful in-laws that made me laugh so much my new scar throbbed through the morphine. They are there when I come out of the claustrophobic scanning machines, squeezing my hand as I fretfully try to interpret every look the radiographers give each other. They arrive at our door with elaborate dishes for lunch, and then stay to do the washing up. Part of the reassuring weight I feel from these friendships comes from the discussions we have had about Afterwards. These are the kind of friends who want to be in my children’s lives forever. The kind of friends who will buy seven-seater cars to ferry them around as well as their own families. The kind of friends who will tell stories of Mummy long after she’s gone. The kind of friends who will pick Billy up when gritting his teeth and saying tomorrow will be a better day just doesn’t cut it.

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