

Everyone matters, or do they?

So here we are at last, and I feel I should be more excited. We had to wait eighteen months and rearrange the date twice for our wedding because of the global pandemic. We have worked ridiculous hours in that time chasing our tail trying to keep up with the endless admissions to the hospital. I had always wanted to be a doctor, but I didn't sign up for this when I dreamed of helping the sick. It was Daddy's fault that this became my career choice. I never did find out how he died but being only ten years old no-one was going to discuss that with me and somehow the story became overlooked. I knew he had a fatal head injury caused by an accident except there was a question mark on even that story with some distant family members at the funeral suggesting it wasn't an accident. They whispered how he was mixed up with a "bad lot" and didn't do what they wanted so this was the consequence. The result was a head injury and my deciding to be a doctor so other children's Daddy's wouldn't die because I would save them. Childish imagination that made me determined to work hard and get myself through university and medical school.

Reflecting I feel blessed to have had an exciting journey so far and of course lucky enough to have met my future husband at a medical conference. However, there was still a blot on the page as I had hoped I would have had a brood of children by the time I was forty and now it was questionable.

The sun was shining even though it was October and I tried not to think of all the people I had seen struggling with this awful virus. All those phone calls and different reactions to the news that their loved one had died. Feeling helpless to do anything for them and not even able to offer a hug. I suddenly felt tired and just wanted to turn over and sleep for a week but there was a beautiful cream dress hanging on the wardrobe and I could smell coffee and hear my friend in the kitchen. I suspected she was cooking breakfast for us, a rare night away from her family of four. I could hear the doorbell and looked out the window to see flowers being delivered. I smiled at the many promises my friend had made last night during a drinking competition with my older brother when we were supposed to be having a girly night in. I was fine as I had moved onto drinking water, but she could never resist a challenge. She always made me laugh with her antics and I never wanted her to change.

Many of my colleagues were surprised when they spotted my engagement ring and I said I was getting married. Having always been a private sort of person I didn't speak much about my home life, so they assumed I was married to my career. I guess I was until that weekend conference where the hotel lift got stuck and Will and I were literally thrown together with a bump and two hours of waiting for an engineer to get the lift going again. Most people wouldn't believe such a classic story, but that's what happened and thank goodness he started to speak to me. I was to find out later that Will was also a quiet sort and dreaded my ranting and raving at our predicament in the lift, but that wasn't my style and so he started the conversation that ended with us meeting for dinner. There was something about being stuck in a lift that took away all control of what we could do and once we accepted that we were going to be there a while, I really enjoyed getting to know him. We even laughed at some of the speakers we had sat through at the conference wishing we were somewhere else, and it helped that you were also a Paediatrician. It was obvious when he talked about

his work that he loved being a children's doctor and was in awe of how they coped at times with dreadful treatments needed to save their lives. I fell in love with him and his gentle ways at that moment.

The lift still had an emergency light which was kind as it was dull enough to cover up my tired eyes but bright enough to see each other. Being in a lovely hotel there was no unpleasant smell in the lift, and it would have been an ideal space to chat had it just had a bench or a couple of seats. We compared experiences at work related to the pandemic and our own families. I quickly established he was single with no baggage which was very unusual and selfishly wondered what was wrong with him before fleetingly thinking I was a female mirror image.

We had a whirlwind romance and were engaged a month later, and initially only told close family and went about making our plans to set up home until Covid came along. However, today was the day and we were getting married on a restaurant barge with twenty-four close friends and family followed by a big party at a local hotel. The party was my mothers' idea as we would have been quite happy to leave after the meal, but she didn't often ask for something, so we agreed. I pulled myself out of bed then feeling a bit more light-hearted and headed to the shower before the joyful madness began.

Our day was everything I hoped and planned. Although not religious we wanted to be married by a local minister who was at first reluctant until his wife, a health visitor I knew, told him to stop being a hypocrite. His reservations she told me were about marrying us on a barge and not in his church, until his wife argued that he preached God was everywhere, and anyway she told me laughing, that she really wanted to accept the invite offered to them to stay for the delicious meal after the ceremony. She won and he accepted our request.

We were married on the barge which was set up with chairs and an aisle down the middle and then set off down the river with drinks and canapes to help celebrate. We stopped to embark for photographs at a lovely scenic spot before climbing back on board for the meal and easy listening music. A child of a friend came and met us at the point where we were having photographs taken, to give me a horseshoe. It was a tradition to bring luck and I met my mother's gaze as we shared the memory of her driving me every Saturday morning for riding lessons. I hadn't been on a horse for many years but suddenly longed for that carefree feeling again.

My best friend who was also my bridesmaid had done well with her hangover until the meal was served at which point, she quickly exited to the galley to be heard throwing up her breakfast. I told everyone she didn't like boats and was seasick while my brother chuckled at his victory of winning the whisky drinking competition the night before. She was fine if somewhat, embarrassed and apologetic, but nothing was going to ruin our day and I quickly reassured her I wasn't annoyed at her outburst and that the story would last a lifetime and she would never live it down. The day passed quick and happy with lots of laughter which followed into the evening and the hotel party. Many of our friends turned up excited and delighted by the surprise invite, wishing us well and allowing everyone a brief interval from the stress of work and pandemic life in general. It had been so long since anyone had been

out that they were determined to make a night of it, still dancing when we sneaked away to the honeymoon suite. We had said we were staying somewhere else that night and heading up north the next morning to avoid goodbyes.

We had booked a cottage in the Scottish Highlands overlooking a serene loch. We picked up local foods on the journey as well as fine wines and champagne. The cottage was clean and basic but warm and cosy at night with a log fire. We woke to fantastic views of blue skies and clear water with birds and wildlife within view. Travelling abroad was still too difficult to contemplate but all we really wanted was to be away from the troubled world and enjoy long walks, eating, sleeping, and reading novels. We had no internet or television, but my brother knew he could call us as we had confirmed there was a phone signal, should we need contacted about anything connected to our mother. It was glorious and signs of autumn were clear as we walked through lovely forests with crisp leaves of yellow, red, and orange falling around us.

The honeymoon passed too quickly, and we soon had to return to work and restrictions again, but it felt good knowing we had each other and a future to look forward to even if life wasn't how, it had been before the pandemic.

We were back at work about four weeks when I started to feel a bit unwell. It wasn't the virus as I was regularly tested and I couldn't say exactly what it was except I had some pelvic pain, not unlike period pain but it wasn't at the time of my cycle. Will, my husband thought I needed a rest although he was working just as hard so I said nothing and hoped whatever it was would go away. The discomfort came and went, and I continued to work swallowing painkillers when needed. Then one morning I woke up early feeling uncomfortable to find the bed saturated with blood. I felt panic and woke Will who was also shocked and insisted we go to the emergency room. I was reluctant although knew I had to tell someone as I felt lightheaded and probably needed a transfusion. I quickly showered and padded up realising I was still bleeding and allowed myself to be taken to the local hospital which fortunately was not where either of us worked.

I was seen quickly as it was early morning, and the department was unusually quiet. I was admitted for tests and as suspected needed a blood transfusion and other fluids. I had told Will not to mention what we did for a living as I didn't want anyone tiptoeing around us. No one asked and we didn't say that we were doctors.

Will wanted to know if the bleed might be due to a miscarriage. I think he secretly hoped it was as we weren't using a contraceptive, while struggling with the thought of losing a baby, but a miscarriage could mean we might be able to conceive after all. I knew it wasn't but didn't want to consider what else would cause the haemorrhage. Will was sent home as only the patient was allowed in the hospital and I was discharged following a biopsy and once I was stable. I was given a date for a scan and an appointment for a follow up clinic the next week. Staying in hospital was not an option or necessary as they needed to continually have beds for Covid patients. The bleeding stopped and I went back to work and within days had the MRI and ultrasound scans that had been arranged. I knew how long my patients waited

for scans and that this urgency was unusual and probably meant it wasn't going to be good news.

We didn't tell anyone, particularly my mother. She was now seventy-eight and had struggled this past eighteen months, living alone, and becoming lonelier with every passing week. I felt guilty not being able to see her often, partly because it was too risky and partly because of the long hours I was working. When I did go to her house about once a week to leave groceries on her doorstep, I could see her getting thinner and her eyes getting sadder, but she insisted I needed to help "those people who had this awful disease. There were those much worse than her who needed me". Prior to the pandemic she had her social circles, her weekly groups and led a busy life. She had learned not to be lonely having been widowed young and living the life of a single parent for many years. She worked hard in various jobs to help my brother and I fulfil our dreams and never entertained the idea of a second marriage. She also denied emphatically that Daddy had been mixing in criminal circles before his death, saying it was malicious gossip. She had loved him passionately and no one else could fill his shoes. I decided she didn't need to know what was happening with me, not yet. Soon it was the day of my appointment and I had prepared myself while dreading potentially what lay ahead.

"So, Elizabeth" said the masked surgeon gently, she had kind eyes. "As you know when you came in following the bleed, we did some scans and biopsies. Unfortunately, they have come back showing you have an adeno-carcinoma or cancerous tumour in your uterus". This opening to the appointment in the cold stark office, painted institutional green was followed by a pregnant pause while she waited for my reaction. I was non-committal, I could sense my husband who was sitting beside me was shocked behind his mask, by what had just been said. I thought he must have on some level realised that this may be diagnosis but clearly preferred denial until now. I on the other hand wasn't surprised, I had worked out the odds were stacked against me and would have only been shocked had she told me all was well.

"What happens next?" was my response, as the lovely surgeon taken aback by my reply went on to explain the process of surgery. I probably come across as unemotional and distant which was how I was feeling, and it was surprising me too as I had a tendency for drama and overreacting. I didn't feel shocked just disappointed.

"You will have more scans and blood tests in the next couple of weeks to help us gauge the extent of the tumour and then you will go on the urgent list for extensive surgery which is likely to mean removing the uterus, cervix, fallopian tubes, ovaries and some lymph nodes". Another pause to let this sink in. All I was thinking was how good she was at breaking bad news, a topic I had taught to medical students in recent years. She was following the rules by allowing time for questions or reactions and not bombarding us with details or making us feel she was extremely busy which of course she was. I liked her for this.

"You are taking this extremely well as though you were expecting this news" she said gently, almost waiting for the crying, hysteria, or outbursts that often followed such news.

“I’m not surprised” I replied quietly, “I guessed from our conversations when I was having the earlier tests that it was probably going to be cancer” at which point my husband interrupted blurting out “she’s a doctor”. I wasn’t going to tell her this, but he said it with a tone of hesitated pride while appalled that I should become a patient of the condition I treated in others. This removed any annoyance I may have felt at his disclosure. I was a neurologist and had many patients with a diagnosis of brain cancer. I was experienced in giving similar news to others, but it was surreal to be at the receiving end.

“Ah now it makes sense” she said, “the questions you asked when we met previously and today, made me think you had a background in medicine. I can explain in more detailed terms if you want, what to expect in the weeks ahead but don’t want to insult your intelligence so if you prefer, we can leave it for today?”

I smiled at her new enthusiasm for a kindred spirit “I just want to be treated like any other patient as I clearly didn’t notice my symptoms being serious and have never worked in gynaecology, please don’t assume anything. It’s a long time since I covered this in my junior years at medical school.” I was feeling guilty and stupid that I hadn’t went to my family doctor sooner, but I justified it to myself as we were in the middle of a global pandemic. She noticed my silent internal war as though reading my mind “You need to know that presenting earlier would have made no difference to the outcome as I wouldn’t have seen you so quickly had we been in normal times, all non-emergency appointments are cancelled allowing patients like yourself to be seen sooner.” I appreciated her sentiments, but they didn’t help, I said nothing.

She gave us the usual reading material to take away for another day when we felt ready to read it knowing we would be on the internet that night doing our own research. The other bad news was that I would no longer be in her care because she was a general gynaecological surgeon. I would now be referred to an oncology team who specialised in this type of surgery and other treatments. Although I knew this was due process it made me sad as I had very quickly felt an infinity with this lady who was wonderful at communicating.

I would send her a card and tell her she was appreciated before my lonely journey began.

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