

The characters in my Medical Dramatic Presentation (in order of appearance):

- The Worrier/The Rock/SuperRock – the husband
- The Old Family Doctor – our GP for the last 27 years
- The New Doctor/The New Family Doctor – joint GP with The Old Family Doctor
- Dr Heart – the cardiologist
- Dr Lump/The Ear Nose and Throatist – The Otolaryngologist
- The Oracle – Julie, The Cancer Specialist Nurse/Macmillan Angel
- Dr Corfu – the Oncologist
- The Most Beautiful People Ever – upstairs neighbours who run the café
- Big Boss Man – Paternity personified – which is creepy as he is younger than me
- The Emotional Support Army – infrastructure of friends and colleagues who all stepped up to the mark. The superheroes of this tale
- Big Tommy – the fainter catcher
- Mama Bear – Bless Her Heather
- Dr Teeth – The Dental Hospital Dentist
- The Other Oracle – Julie, The Cancer Specialist Nurse/Beatson Angel
- Nurse Swallow – The Dietician
- Wonder Nurse – Gemma, the GP Nurse
- Papa Pedro – Our life time friend/The Rock's Leader-astrayer/The Whoor
- My Darling Ruby Next Door – My Darling Ruby Next Door

23/01/25

The Lump (a retrospective)

It all kicked off back in November 2024 because, apparently, my body decided it wanted to star in its own medical drama. First, I was told I had a congenital heart condition and ischemic heart disease. Lovely combo. By December, I was sitting in front of a cardiologist who calmly informed me I'd need stents, which they'd pop in at the end of January. You know, just in time to ruin any New Year "new me" enthusiasm.

Around this same time, I mentioned to The Worrier (also known as Hugh the Husband) that I had a weird little lump on my neck. Naturally, he reacted like I'd grown a second head and marched me straight to the doctor. The Old Family Doctor (a man who has put up with me for 25+ years and, quite frankly, deserves a medal) sent me for an x-ray, thinking maybe the heart was to blame. X-ray came back squeaky clean; lump still very much there.

We carried on with our annual holiday to Gran Canaria of sun, sand, martinis, ogling and absolutely no thoughts of neck lumps allowed. By the time we got home, the lump had levelled up. It was no longer a "little odd bump" but more of a casual golf ball chilling beside my jugular. Still not sore. Still not tender. Still extremely unwelcome.

The Worrier immediately shoved me back to the doctor's office, but The Old Family Doctor was off duty, so I was handed over to The New Doctor. This man took one look at my neck and said he was referring me to the hospital. He then added, far too casually for my liking, "I have to be honest... this doesn't look good."

Excuse me? Who says that? Was he practicing for a role on Grey's Anatomy? I left thinking he was a sandwich short of a picnic. I went home, ranted to The Worrier about his bedside manner, then promptly shoved the whole thing to the back of my mind and got back to work. Because obviously, that's how you handle a mysterious medical golf ball.

SPOILER: The New Doctor becomes the New Family Doctor and is one of the nicest, kindest men I know. He and the Old Family Doctor are on a pedestal. So is Wonder Nurse from the GP surgery but you won't meet her for a while yet.

03/02

To stent or not to stent (a retrospective)

Stent Day finally arrived—also known as “the day I'd been dreading but pretending I wasn't.” We got to the hospital bright and early like the eager little medical beavers we are only to discover we were dead last on the list. Not fifth. Not second-to-last. Last. So we sat there for hours, slowly turning into statues while the hospital clock mocked us.

Eventually, they summoned me in, and I was laid out on the table like a car in for an MOT. Dr Heart (the Cardiologist) and his medical team gathered around and started chatting about me as though I wasn't, you know, right there.

“See how it's not coming out at 90 degrees? We can't do that now. It's common for the scan to be wrong,” one of them said, while I lay there thinking, Fantastic. Nothing boosts confidence like hearing your arteries have weird angles.

Turns out one artery was basically saying, “Nope, not today,” and refused to take a stent at all. And the other artery, previously rumored to be 100% blocked like a stubborn toilet, was actually only at 40%. A light clog, really.

So the grand procedure ended with a friendly, “We'll book you back here in a few weeks and decide what to do next.”

In other words: no stents, no answers, and absolutely no refund on the hours I spent waiting to be told my arteries had geometry issues.

13/02

The referral (a retrospective)

When the letter for my follow-up appointment arrived, I actually thought, “Wow, that was fast!” which, in hindsight, should've been my first clue that something was up. But no, I was too busy being annoyed about having to reschedule a meeting that morning and telling everyone I'd be back on campus by 10 a.m. I am the very picture of efficiency.

I showed up bright and early, still grumbling internally, and noticed a nurse with a MacMillan badge. Weird, I thought. Still didn't connect the dots. Apparently my brain had decided to take the morning off. Dr Lump (aka The Otolaryngologist; aka The Ear, Nose & Throatist) then performed the eye-watering throat-inspection routine. She looked down my throat, slid a camera up my nose and down the back like she was launching a tiny expedition, and then calmly delivered the line:

“As we thought, I’m sorry to say it is cancer.”

I must’ve looked like I’d been unplugged from reality because The Oracle (aka Julie the Cancer Specialist Nurse) grabbed my hand and kept reassuring me they’d get me through it. Meanwhile I was internally yelling, WAIT, WHAT? CANCER?

They took a biopsy immediately (no time for emotional preparation) and sent me for an MRI. Since I didn’t have an appointment, they said it could take a while. I sat alone in that waiting room for two hours, feeling like I was floating outside my own body.

Every time I thought about telling The Worrier, I cried. I’d calm down and then the moment I pictured walking into the kitchen to say the words, I’d start again. By the time I got in the taxi home, I was one blinking neon sign away from a meltdown. “Be strong,” I kept telling myself. “You know how he’ll react.”

I remember walking down the hallway, entering the kitchen and there he was, eating a sandwich. Not even a dramatic sandwich. Just a normal one. And instead of delivering the perfectly rehearsed “Darling, we need to talk,” I absolutely lost it. Through a snot fountain I blurted, “IT’S CANCER!”

I’ll never forget the moment after. I looked at him—still holding the sandwich. Didn’t drop it. Didn’t put it down. Didn’t even pause mid-chew. My brain was screaming, HELLO? THIS IS THE PART WHERE YOU LEAP UP AND HUG ME!

But no. Sandwich remained.

LESSON 1: TAKE SOMEONE WITH YOU TO EVERY APPOINTMENT—EVEN THE ONES YOU THINK ARE BORING, ROUTINE, AND NOT WORTH WAKING ANYONE UP FOR.

LESSON 2: REMEMBER EVERYONE REACTS DIFFERENTLY. GIVE PEOPLE THE TIME TO PROCESS WHAT YOU ARE TELLING THEM.

Trust me. You do not want to face Big News alone, nor deliver it to a man holding a sandwich. For the record, he did get up and gave me the tightest squeeze he has ever done in the 31 years together.

21/02

The diagnosis (last retrospective)

This time, I was smart. I brought The Worrier with me for the results appointment. And look, I’m not being a Drama Queen here, but if you Google the weather in Glasgow on 21 February 2025,

it literally says: “*There were strong, gusty winds that would frequently accompany the heavy rainfall.*” Translation: the universe was going for *full cinematic misery*.

We took a taxi through the gloom. Dark skies, low clouds, everything looking like the opening scene of a Game of Thrones episode where someone definitely gets axed from the show. All I needed was a dramatic violin soundtrack and maybe a crow cawing ominously.

Naturally, we arrived an hour early. My life may be in chaos, but my project management scheduling is not.

First up was Dr Lump who confirmed the biopsy results. She said my case had already been discussed that morning, and the oncologist would see me next. Then she dropped the code: **T4N2M0**.

What fresh alphabet soup was this?

Back in the waiting room, I Googled it like any modern, responsible adult. Turns out:

- **T** is for tumour size (1–4). Mine was over 4 cm. Being the Size Queen I am, I took this as a goal.
- **N2** means it spread to a nearby lymph node *and* popped over to the other side of my neck but sneakily, with no lump I could feel. Ninja cancer.
- **M0** means it hadn’t spread elsewhere. One point for Team Me.

Still needed it in plain English.

“Hey Siri, what does T4N2M0 mean in terms of cancer stages?”

Siri, being absolutely no help emotionally, replied: “**You have stage 3 cancer.**” Thanks, Siri. Really soothing. I wonder if The New Doctor uses Siri?

Then in walked Dr Corfu (story on the name coming later). He explained the plan: chemotherapy plus six weeks of radiotherapy. Then he had to go through *all* the possible side effects before I signed the consent form.

Those consent forms should come with a warning label like “May induce panic, nausea, and existential dread.” Every worst-case scenario imaginable was listed, including a neat little “2% chance of death.” Lovely.

His next step would be checking everything over with Dr Heart, because chemo paired with my heart condition could be tricky. But of course I signed. What was the alternative? *No thanks, I'll just keep the cancer?*

Then came the first of 189 idiotic questions but it was definitely the most important. “We’re going to Corfu at the end of May with Jewels and Danny – will I be OK by then?” He looked at me and, without a word of a lie said, “Oh, I’m going at the end of May too – where are you going?” I would have happily talked about that but he went back to the List of Doom. This was going to be the worse year of my life (really, he did!) and that it would feel like the inside of my throat had

severe sunburn. I didn't meet him many times after that but I hope he enjoyed Corfu. No, seriously, I do. Honest. Seriously.

Once we left, The Worrier and I sat in the back of the taxi in stunned silence. I honestly felt like I was observing myself from the rear view mirror. It's now 2pm and we hadn't eaten, so we stopped at our friends' (The Most Beautiful People Ever) café for sandwiches because, if cancer news has taught me anything, it's that sandwiches are mandatory.

They were the first people we told. And here's the twist: at that exact moment, The Worrier transformed. He stopped fretting... and became **The Rock**.

They asked how things were and I just stared into the void like a broken WiFi connection. The Rock picked it up immediately and calmly explained everything. More hugs. More sandwiches. (Sandwiches: the unofficial therapy.)

Back home, the big question was what to tell people. My instinct? Hide under a blanket and tell no one until I magically healed. The Rock, though, said we should be open. He was right. We made calls—family, friends—and I rang Big Boss Man, who activated “protective parent mode” instantly and stayed there for months.

LESSON 3: TELLING PEOPLE IS COMPLETELY PERSONAL. IF YOU DON'T WANT TO, YOU DON'T HAVE TO. **But**, for me, telling people was one of the best decisions I made. It revealed a support network I hadn't fully appreciated. Like discovering you've been surrounded by invisible superheroes all this time who were just waiting for the call.

27/02

The mask. The teeth.

Once you're officially “in the system,” things move very fast, kinda like Amazon Prime but for medical terror. This was my first trip to the Beatson Cancer Centre (side note: if you're enjoying this tale of chaos and emotional collapse, feel free to donate to the incredible humans there at www.beatsoncancercharity.org/donate). Today's mission? A mask fitting.

A mask? In my head I imagined something mysterious, maybe even a wee bit “gimp chic.”

They led me into a room, popped me on a slab like I was Tuesday's special, and three angelic nurses explained they were about to press hot plastic over my entire face and chest. This blue plastic had tiny holes in it which, once warmed, moulded perfectly to your face. Think of a Fisher Price version of Hannibal Lecter. You can't move. You can't blink. You can't even lick your lips unless you've previously trained with Cirque du Soleil. I hated it immediately.

After 45 minutes of warming, stretching, and tightening this contraption onto my skull, they marched me to the scanning room carrying this mask that looked like me but with added metal clamps. I looked like I'd been accessorised by B&Q. I thought the clamps were decorative. Cute, right? The clamps were actually bolts that locked me to the table like a budget Bond villain.

The mask pushed so hard on my neck that my Adam's apple considered early retirement. Panic rose. The MRI clunked away. The first scan was 14 minutes, followed by two 8-minute encores. When the first one finished I was shaking like a twink in a bear bar. They asked if I could continue but by then I was thrashing like someone who'd just learned the word "NO."

They freed me from the torture mask, I sat up and immediately passed out. Thankfully Big Tommy (yes, real name) caught me mid-collapse like the world's gentlest nightclub bouncer. They revived me with a Blue Ribband biscuit because apparently I'd decided breakfast was optional that day. Turned out the two extra scans weren't essential anyway. Perfect! All that terror for nothing. That night, the nightmares began. Me. Mask. Table. Bolts. Blue Ribband. Rinse and repeat.

Could the day get worse? Oh aye. Absolutely aye.

That afternoon I had to toddle five minutes down the road to the dental hospital. The waiting room was heaving with screaming children, none of whom appreciated the emotional fragility of someone freshly traumatised.

Dr Teeth (who I only ever met this once) sat me down to explain that radiotherapy basically turns your gums and jawbone into divas. Very high-maintenance, very prone to drama. Because of the risk of decay (he used the word necrosis, which frankly felt a bit rude), they recommend removing any tooth with fillings or crowns before treatment. And because saliva production will also drop, plaque will party hard in your mouth, followed quickly by tooth decay.

So, even though the tumour was on my neck, my mouth was about to suffer collateral damage. Yay! After an x-ray he said my teeth were in great condition except one back molar with a filling. His recommendation? Yank that one and maybe another seven just to be safe. Seven? Seven teeth? For "safety"? Safety of what? Safe from the perils of a Curly Wurly?

I chose to remove only the one and accept my fate like a hero with slightly worse dental insurance. I asked when it would happen. "Ten minutes." TEN? I'd barely processed the idea of losing a tooth, never mind signing up for same-day service.

I texted The Rock to say I was getting a tooth out but, in my panic, wrote: "teeth being extracted now. Will be longer than thought." Plural. TEETH. This immediately transformed The Rock back into The Worrier, who sprinted down to the hospital like I'd texted "goodbye cruel world."

He arrived just in time to find out they'd already yanked the thing with the dentist apparently needing to brace one leg on the chair for leverage, like he was trying to start a lawnmower. By the time The Worrier arrived, I was off buying new jammies in John Lewis as a reward for surviving the day. I was not, as they say, popular that evening. You do get prescription toothpaste afterwards which is so strong it feels like it's trying to exfoliate your soul but you get used to it.

MISTAKE 1: Eat before your scans. (Unless they tell you not to.) Or, at least, have some Blue Ribband in your bag.

LESSON 4: You are still the boss. Make the choice that feels right. Touch wood, I made the right call about the tooth, but it made me care for them like they were rare gemstones from that day forward.

05/03

Back to School

Diagnosis Day (aka The Day of the Apocalypse). This was the day The Rock met The Oracle, that Macmillan nurse who somehow knows everything about cancer, treatments, emotions, and probably the correct way to fold a fitted sheet. If I'd asked her for the meaning of life, she'd have had a pamphlet.

Among the mountain of brochures she handed us was one for The Maggie's Centre. Yet another example of pure human kindness. Maggie's is a charity-run sanctuary where you can go with literally any concern whatsoever. Treatment worries? Absolutely. Financial fears? Aye. Side effects? Definitely. Concern that your support network consists of you, your partner and an orchid from Markies that's on its last petal? They've got you covered.

We took the train up as it is next to The Beatson for the treatment as we wanted to see how long it would take to get there (see, my project manager killer instinct is always there, no matter how sick I am). We were told there were two courses running that very afternoon: one explaining what happens during radiotherapy and another covering chemotherapy. Since life-changing news is best handled with a full stomach, we went for a sandwich first, then came back (see, I do learn lessons – see mistake 1). The sessions were incredibly helpful and genuinely one of the smartest things we did.

It was during the radiotherapy session that I first met Mama Bear—real name Heather, the radiologist. I adored her instantly. She looked like my cousin that I call Jolly Hockey Sticks. You know, that person who could simultaneously run a clinic and bake a perfect Victoria sponge. I asked all the usual, very normal questions like, “What happens if you sneeze in the mask and there’s nowhere for the snot to go?” She looked at me kindly in the same way my Primary School teacher did, as if she gets asked that hourly. Apparently, snotty masks have never been seen. They’ve not had me yet!

After the session, I mentioned the nightmares I’d been having about the mask. These were real nightmares, too, proper horror-movie-grade stuff. Mama Bear told me it was completely normal (which made me question why none of the cancer movies I’d been binge-watching all week ever brought this up). She suggested we do a practice run to ease my mind. Great idea. We’d do it after the chemo session.

That plan lasted all of 12 minutes. Halfway through the chemo talk, I suddenly overheated, my ears buzzed, and I full-on fainted. A dramatic swoon. A Victorian maiden seeing an ankle kind of moment. They had to clear the room. I’ve never felt like more of an idiot in my life. Outrageously, they didn’t have any Blue Ribband biscuits so they revived me with a chocolate Hobnob instead. Not quite the same level of emotional support, but it did the job. We grabbed a taxi home, and the practice run was postponed until the next day.

LESSON 5: Prepare yourself. Go to the classes, the sessions, the talks, the brochures, the leaflets—everything. They really do help. And try not to faint in them, if you can avoid it.

LESSON 6: ALWAYS HAVE A BLUE RIBBAND IN YOUR BAG. I CAN'T EMPHASISE THIS ENOUGH.

06/03

The Practice Run

The Rock came with me for the practice run, which meant he finally got to witness the whole “head clamped to the table” situation in all its glamorous glory. What I didn’t know, until after, was that when I panic, my feet apparently started doing that frantic little running motion dogs do when they’re dreaming about chasing squirrels. Excellent. Nothing says dignity like involuntary dream-dog paddling in a radiotherapy mask.

I managed 7 minutes before they stopped the test run, and they told me the real sessions would be 9 minutes each. Nine whole minutes of being bolted down like a DIY bookshelf. But they also gave me two pieces of hope:

1. I could bring my own playlist.
2. They’d prescribe diazepam to take half an hour beforehand.

This wasn’t so bad – it would be like going to a spa minus those hunky therapists in tight white tee shirts.

Choosing music turned out to be its own psychological experiment. You can’t take your absolute favourite songs because then every time you hear them in the future, you’d be teleported straight back to being irradiated like a baked potato. But you also can’t take songs you barely know because what if they’re pants? And you can’t take fast music because that leads to toe-tapping and handbag-dancing urges; neither of which work when you’re clamped to a table. Slow songs were also out, because nine minutes can start to feel like nine geological eras if the music is too trippy.

So after far too much thought for a nine-minute soundtrack, I settled on some reliable Café del Mar and chilled electronic gems. Relaxing, rhythmic, and unlikely to trigger any future emotional spirals. Perfect. Superpoze The Iceland Sound was my favaourite.

LESSON 7: If anything at all about the treatment is ramping up your anxiety, tell Mama Bear. If you don’t know who your Mama Bear is yet, go find her.

(Edit: although, to be fair, she’s not **ALWAYS** right—Bump in the Road 1 coming soon...)

23/03

Final preparations and a blow out

So, I wrapped up work. I told the people who genuinely needed to know, set my out-of-office to something dramatic like “I may be some time”. Very Lawrence Oates, minus the snow, heroism, and tragic ending.

The final few weeks at the office went by at lightning speed while I desperately attempted to get everything in order before stepping away. In the end, I had to accept that the University

would continue without me. Shocking, I know. Turns out the place wasn't going to collapse into administration just because I wasn't there to knock out a PowerPoint. Who knew?

What was unexpected and amazing was the amount of emails, texts and sack of gifts people gave me. My team handed over a huge bag of "helpful recovery items"—everything from soothing teas to cosy socks... and, worryingly, knitting needles. Knitting needles?! As if I needed the added stress of dropping stitches while on chemo. There were loads of books about cancer from friends (every shade of uplifting, terrifying and questionably researched) and a surprising number of colouring books including quite a few for men genitalia. What sort of vibe do I give off?? Beautiful blankets and security-scarfs.

To balance out the impending doom, I threw myself into drawing and even managed to finish a couple of travel posters. Big Boss Man gifted me a beautiful copy of the Dune trilogy, so I dove into that too. If you ever want to feel your own problems shrink, read about giant sandworms and desert messianic politics.

One thing that kept nagging at me was: how do we keep everyone updated without losing our minds? The Rock refused to start a group WhatsApp (correctly identifying that it would become 97% chaos, 3% "thinking of you!"). And I didn't want him having to text people all day like some kind of sexy secretary.

So I came up with what I thought was a genius idea. People never know what to say, so I removed the need for words entirely. I bought 15 crocheted teeny tiny animals and sent them to my closest people with a wee card that said, "Thank you for being a friend." Cheesy? Absolutely. This was the birth of my Emotional Support Army which grew way beyond the animals.

The system was simple: send me a photo of your little animal wherever you are. No caption. No explanation. Just a photo. That way I'd know you were thinking of me, and I'd get to see a slice of your world without needing an essay. And honestly? It worked a treat.

(Retrospective edit: The Rock STILL got too many texts. I wish I'd been clearer about waiting to hear from him instead of panic-contacting.)

Last night, we had a night out with The Most Beautiful People Ever. We headed to The Blythswood for a couple of durty martinis (durty with a "u," the correct Scottish spelling), and then to Red Onion for a cracking meal. It felt celebratory. It felt needed.

Tomorrow is day one. Tomorrow everything changes.

(edit: and looking back, I'm unbelievably glad we did that night out, because I had no idea it would be over six months before we'd manage anything remotely similar.)

LESSON 8: The world will not implode because you're out of circulation for a few months. You cannot solve everything before treatment starts. Calm yourself. Breathe. Chill.

LESSON 9: Tell people you hate knitting. Immediately.

LESSON 10: Find a communication system that doesn't overwhelm you or your partner. And be firm: "Don't text us. We PROMISE to keep you updated."

LESSON 11: I wish I'd planned the Emotional Support Army with The Rock in mind too.

24/03

And so it begins...

Surprisingly, I didn't sleep. At all. Today was Day One of Treatment, and apparently my brain decided the best way to prepare was to rehearse every possible disaster scenario between midnight and dawn. I got up at 05:30 to check my bag for the 47th time. Jammies? Check. Toiletry bag? Check. iPad and chargers? Check. My sanity? Missing, presumed dead.

The Rock didn't sleep either, which made the whole thing feel like we were both about to sit the world's most important exam but with no revision notes and an invigilator called Fate who hates us.

We arrived at The Beatson a full hour early (because – obviously) got a coffee, and wandered up to the ward. I didn't realise each ward is cancer-specific, like Hogwarts houses but significantly less magical. I was in the Head and Neck ward. Two other newbies were already in the room, also starting treatment that day. It was strangely comforting, like meeting fellow contestants on a bizarre reality show you didn't sign up for.

Then came the first radiotherapy session. Now, I've always been a nervous pee-er, but this was next level. I must have gone to the toilet eight times in the hour beforehand. If they'd hooked me up to a hydration monitor, it would have short-circuited.

True to their promise, 30 minutes before the session they gave me a diazepam, and off we toddled to Treatment Room 1. The staff were instantly amazing. They are the kind of people who radiate competence and warmth. Best of all, The Rock was with me, and Mama Bear was waiting.

The room is huge and echoey, with a long table covered in white paper. Very "clinical spa day." You take your top off, lie down, and then they go to the cupboard and bring out The Mask. The infamous torture device. They try to soothe you by painting a blue-sky-with-fluffy-clouds scene on the ceiling, but frankly, unless those clouds are passing me a martini, it's not helping much.

Then the [insert many many sweaty words] clamps. You can't move. At all. I tried licking my lips and discovered you can only move your jaw about half a millimetre. Basically a hostage in your own face.

Mama Bear told me they were ready then abandoned me in the room (which felt rude) and the machine started its mechanical song. I gripped the little handle things like they were the last two crisps in a tube of Pringles. Mama Bear spoke through the microphone, keeping me calm, while I focused on breathing and, apparently, doing a full on Riverdance routine with my feet. She told me later I'd upgraded from dream-dog paddling to the London Marathon.

And then done. Session 1 complete. Only 29 more to go. Easy, right?

I got a huge hug from both The Rock and Mama Bear, and we minced back to the ward for chemo. Now, chemo involves being pumped full of fluids. It felt like about 60 litres, though it

was probably more like three. They load you up with anti-sickness meds, then ceremoniously bring out a mysterious black bag containing your chemo drug. They hold it at arm's length like it's radioactive soup. Fair.

Because it's in a black bag, you have no idea what colour the drug is. (Post-edit: I googled it. Cisplatin is "deep yellow to orange-yellow," so essentially pee-coloured. Charming.) An hour later, I was officially infused with platinum—the only metal I wear, darling. No rose gold for me.

Then the nurse plonked 20 cardboard pee bowls beside my bed, The Rock went home, and I spent the entire night peeing out those 60-ish litres.

The next day, The Rock came back, and we headed down for Round 2. Same process. Same mask. Same attempt at cloud-based relaxation. Mama Bear hugged me again afterwards and told me I was doing great, and I'd likely feel rough at the weekend, but that was "just the chemo doing its job," which made it sound almost productive.

The rest of the week became a routine: hospital at 2:08pm (yes, very precise), home by 3pm. Almost manageable. Almost easy.

LESSON 12: Just do it. It's terrifying. It's awful. It's surreal. But one day, future you will look back and say, "Bugger me, I actually did ALL that." And you'll be proud. Promise.

30/01

Bump In The Road number 1

Mama Bear is a genius. Truly. She had warned me I'd feel rough at the weekend and wow, she was not wrong. By Saturday morning I felt TERRIBLE. Capital T. The pain in my chest and back was so bad I tried every position in the yoga dictionary. Unfortunately, I have never done yoga, so this basically meant contorting myself into shapes that would alarm a chiropractor. Nothing helped.

Meanwhile, The Rock didn't just return to The Worrier. He evolved into Superhero Worrier, cape, tights, the whole emotional ensemble. All day Saturday he hovered like a very anxious hummingbird, while I insisted, "But Mama Bear said I'd feel crap." As if her words alone could banish organ-level agony.

We'd been given a wee card with a special number to call "if anything unusual happened." I had just been pumped full of radioactive drugs, so frankly, I wasn't sure what counted as unusual anymore. Glowing in the dark? Growing an extra toe? Becoming telepathetic?

By Sunday, Superworrier was pacing the floors, insisting we phone the number. I kept chanting, "Mama Bear said!" like some sort of medical cult follower. Finally, on Sunday night, I gave in. I called, explained the situation, and the nurse said, "Please hold."

If the next thing I heard had been "Your call is very important to us..." I swear I would have hung up and taken my chances with the pain. But instead she returned and calmly said, "The

ambulance is on its way.” Ambulance? But Mama Bear told me I’d feel a bit unwell. A bit unwell does not usually involve sirens.

Ten minutes later I was in the back of an ambulance with a very cute driver I couldn’t even flirt with because I was folded over like a collapsed deckchair.

A quick x-ray later, the doctor announced it was acute pancreatitis and I’d be staying for a few days. Lovely. I got my first proper dose of morphine and watched the pain melt away like butter on warm toast. I had to miss a couple of my daily spa-torture mask sessions, but honestly? Didn’t care. The pain was lifting.

Further tests revealed I was also harbouring a nice big gallstone, which at this point ranked about 47th on my list of medical bingo concerns. I simply added it to the collection and moved on.

Once home, I headed straight back to treatment the next day. Mama Bear was waiting, and the first thing she said was, “Right. I’m never telling anyone they’ll ‘feel a bit rough’ again.” She may not be perfect, but she is still one of the loveliest humans walking the planet.

LESSON 13: If something feels REALLY wrong, speak up. The world does NOT need a hero while you’re going through this. Best case: they reassure you. Worst case: well... an ambulance turns up.

14/04

Bump In The Road number 2

The next few weeks were, shockingly pretty uneventful. My days became a predictable little routine: wake up, take meds, lounge about like a Victorian lady with “nerves,” feel a bit crap but nothing dramatic. Then off to the radiotherapy spa for my daily mask-and-internal-screaming session. Home. Sleep. Repeat. Groundhog Day but with more pharmaceuticals.

Then 2 weeks later I started feeling... not great. More than not great, actually—properly ropey. Mama Bear hadn’t mentioned this particular twist, but given she forgot to warn me about pancreatitis, I decided not to judge.

By Saturday I felt like I was coming down with the flu. By Sunday I felt drunk, dizzy, and unsteady on my feet. I couldn’t concentrate, I was shivering like someone living inside a fridge, and I was eating basically nothing because my body had decided to return every single thing including water AND toothpaste. That takes talent.

The coughing had started to get worse too. Proper hacking, with bonus blood in the phlegm for added drama. They’d given me a nebuliser to help clear my throat, and while it worked, it also made me sound like a dying chimney sweep.

On Monday I dragged myself to the spa session and asked to see a nurse. Enter The Other Oracle, who took my temperature, raised her eyebrows so high they nearly left her face, and immediately phoned ahead to warn the ward I was coming.

If you had pneumonia on your medical bingo card: congratulations, you can now dab that square. My temperature was in the 40s, and I could barely lift my head off the pillow.

Now, you might have realised from this blog that I'm a fairly upbeat person. But this? This was the moment I hit rock bottom. (Edit: this would turn out to be Rock Bottom #1 of several. Lucky me.) I lay there thinking, "Why me? I'm a nice person! Okay, sure, there are a few people I happily bitch about or slap into next Tuesday but, generally, I am one of the GOOD ones." How on earth was I supposed to get through this when I was only halfway through?

The Rock, bless his delusional optimism, said, "Things can't get much worse." Lies. Absolute lies. But we'll get to that.

LESSON 14: It's easy to say this with hindsight, but some days are just going to be awful. And that's OK. It's OK to have a wee cry into your pillow. It's OK to be quiet with your Rock. Just don't let every day turn into one of those days.

15/04

The Tube

You get weighed every day in hospital. Temperature every four hours. Morphine on tap like some sort of dystopian cocktail bar.

"You're losing a lot of weight very fast," they said. "Well," I replied, "I am a fat bastard and could do with shifting a few kilos." Medical banter at its finest.

I told them I couldn't keep anything down. Enter Nurse Swallow). At some point I must come up with a more appropriate name for her, but for now let's work with what we've got. She breezed in with the energy of someone about to host a children's party game and said, "We'll do a few tests!"

She brought out multiple plastic cups filled with liquids of... varying thicknesses. It felt like a weird science fair. "Let's see how far along you can get!" she chirped, in the same tone as that overly enthusiastic Primary School teacher who insists spelling tests are fun.

Cup one was plain water. One sip was followed by three minutes of coughing, choking, retching, seeing stars, and mentally preparing my will. Game over. Didn't even get to the jelly stage.

What Nurse Swallow forgot to tell me was that failing Cup 1 came with a prize. A glamorous, luxury, all-inclusive feeding tube. Food and water were taking a detour at the tumour and heading straight to my lungs, which apparently is frowned upon.

Remember those COVID tests where sticking a swab up your nose made your eyes water? Now imagine that BUT FOR TWO MINUTES. Or, in my head, three hours. A tube is threaded up your nose and down the back of your throat while you try not to vomit, faint, scream or flee the country. My eyes watered so much I could've irrigated a small allotment.

But in it went. And that was that. Mouth: retired.

For the next few months, EVERYTHING, including crushed meds, went through the tube. My main meal became a mysterious feeding bag that dripped...something (don't ask what) into me for twelve hours at a time. They advised sleeping upright. Sleeping upright? Who does that? Vampires? Horses? Not me. So I fed during the day like a very bored plant pot.

They gave me a cute wee rucksack for the feeding bag, so at least I could wander around like an anemic Boy Scout. Nil by mouth meant literally nothing. Not a sip of water. Nothing.

And you'd think, just think, after shoving a tube into my brain and starving my mouth, they'd ease up on the treatments. Nope! Feeding tube or not, I was still strapped to the Cloud Bed of Doom every day to imagine being buried alive in my lovely spa mask.

At this point, the throat pain was brutal. Constant coughing, hacking, wheezing, roaring. Basically I sounded like an elephant on the rampage. Add a feeding tube wrestling my throat for dominance and it was like they'd installed a kazoo inside me.

There were a few VERY bad days and a few angry ones. But The Rock came EVERY SINGLE DAY. Never once missed. I adore my Rock. Hospital wards are depressing, even with wonderful staff, so having him there was everything.

We were eventually pointed to The Beatson Wellbeing Centre. And let me tell you that AMAZING doesn't even cover it. It's like walking through a portal into peace. The Rock got tea, biscuits and an Easter Egg. I got nothing. Apparently resident guests (I like that more than "in-patient") get the real treats—massage, reiki, proper haircuts, even wigs. Although they said I couldn't have a wig because I was already bald. Sexist.

At this point they told me I'd be staying in hospital for the rest of the treatment. It was boring—nothing Pulitzer Prize-worthy this blog is worth. The only truly exciting moment was when my beard fell out. Traumatic.

I was sitting drawing and, between bouts of coughing, sleeping, and almost vomiting, I looked down and noticed I was covered in grey hair. I scratched my chin—more fell out. I was devastated. I loved my beard. Yes, it was grey, slightly patchy, and holding on for dear life but it covered my eight chins beautifully.

But only part of it fell out. What remained? A perfectly formed goatee. I was ecstatic. I've always wanted a goatee. And now I had one, courtesy of cancer, chemo, and fate's twisted sense of humour. You're not allowed a full beard during mask sessions, but a wee goatee stubbly thing is fine. So now I didn't even need to shave. Bonus!

They told me it might grow back a different texture or colour. I hoped for a black afro situation. Maybe it would even trigger hair back onto my head. It didn't. (Post-edit: It did come back softer, fluffier, and darker. My family is full-on carrot-top ginger, but I'm brown-haired. My goatee returned almost black with grey flecks. I look like an angry badger.)

LESSON 15: If Nurse Swallow invites you to "play a little game," the answer is NO. Always no.

02/05

Ring The Bell

The Rock and I have very different study vibes. Mine is sleek, minimal, and 100% paperless. Apple Store chic. His, on the other hand, is a hoarder's paradise; an ecosystem of papers and books living in what he optimistically calls "organised heaps." I'm pretty sure if you carbon-dated one of his piles it would pre-date the internet.

I mention this because The Rock LOVES a list. A man who worships at the altar of stationery. He took the schedule given to us at the very start of treatment and crossed off every single day as we completed it. Weirdly, this helped me so much. Watching those days disappear one by one felt like someone turning up the dimmer switch at the end of a long tunnel.

Before I was allowed to leave the hospital permanently, we had one final training session with Nurse Swallow, who taught us how to use the feeding tube at home. The Rock had to be trained too. It was extremely straightforward—no exam, no quiz, just a practical demonstration. However, The Rock was absolutely devastated that he didn't get a certificate. Not even a "Well Done for Participating" sticker. The man was robbed.

Then came the final mask torture session. At the end they asked if I wanted to keep the mask. And obviously, I did. You don't survive all that and then bin the trophy. I fully intend to make something beautiful out of it. Either sculpt it into something artistic or, more likely, hand it over to My Darling Ruby Next Door, who is a floral wizard and can turn it into a garden sculpture covered in blooms. If anyone can make trauma look fabulous, it's My Darling Ruby Next Door.

Mama Bear was waiting afterward for a special hug, and then she led us to the Beatson café where the bell is. If you don't know the bell, it's the one you ring when you complete treatment. It's a symbol of survival, resilience and finally being allowed to stop smelling of hospital disinfectant.

I'd seen plenty of other people ring it and had clapped along proudly. But when it was my turn, I rang the bell, and the entire café erupted in applause, I burst into tears. Weeks of emotional sludge finally forced its way out like a blocked drainage pipe.

Then came the worst part: saying goodbye to Mama Bear. I hope she reads this one day, because she has no idea how much she meant to me. And then, wonderfully, she gave us gifts. I'm sure that's not how it's supposed to work, but I wasn't arguing. I got a fake beard and The Rock finally got his long-awaited certificate.

It was the first real belly laugh I'd had in months.

LESSON 16: Either use your schedule or create a page with the dates on it and cross each day off. It really helps.

LESSON 17: Empty yourself of all emotion before ringing the bell. Failure to do so may result in public weeping.

LESSON 18: Ring that bell like you're summoning Thor.

14/05

The Big Sleep

Something they tell you, repeatedly, is that the effects don't stop when treatment stops. That would be far too easy. Instead, you're informed (with suspicious cheerfulness) that things will actually get worse for a few weeks afterwards. Such fun.

Apparently, and I quote: "You're still cooking for a few weeks.". Personally, I'd have preferred to be medium rare. Maybe a nice pink in the middle. Instead, I emerged somewhere between well done and black.

Mornings became bleak. The Rock made a long, terrifying list of meds: first thing meds, mid-morning meds, lunch, mid-afternoon, teatime, mid-evening, bedtime. He laid them all out next to my daily food bag like some sort of pharmaceutical tapas. At the beginning, I was on 30+ tablets a day. Every single one had to be crushed, mixed with water, syringed into the tube, then the tube flushed. Over and over. It took about 45 minutes to do the full routine, including hooking up the travelling food machine. Mega boring. Zero glamour.

They told me I'd be tired. Running a marathon makes you tired. This wipes you off the face of the earth. I was sleeping up to 20 hours a day. Not gentle naps on the sofa either. Proper deep, can't-wake-me-with-a-brass-band sleeps. Life shrank down to three core activities:

1. Shove things down the tube.
2. Sleep.
3. Judge Judy.

I did eventually manage to get out for short walks. At first it was just to Kelvingrove Park at the end of the road, sit on a bench, then shuffle back again. I felt like a complete muppet shuffling down the street like a very tired octogenarian, tube dangling out of my nose and taped across my face. But hey, I was outside. Fresh air! Trees! Other humans! Life was still crap, but at least it was crap in sunshine.

The tape that holds the tube to my face starts peeling after a few days, so Wonder Nurse at my local GP has been replacing it for me. I love Wonder Nurse. The inside of my throat may be quietly dissolving, but I fully intend to look fabulous while it happens. Meanwhile, the weight keeps falling off and none of my clothes fit. Every day is a surprise in the "which trousers will fall down today?" game. Our dear friend, Papa Pedro also plays that game but with very different rules.

LESSON 19: Be prepared to sleep like a baby (a drunk, jetlagged baby) for 2–4 weeks. Find a programme you can drift in and out of. Judge Judy was perfect for that. I love Judge Judy.

LESSON 20: I know. No energy, tube hanging out your face, feeling like a side character in a tragic medical drama. But get out there. Even a tiny walk. A wee bit more each day adds up.

09/07

The tube extraction

Very little happens for ages after treatment. The days all blur into the same crappy routine: sleep, take pills, walk a tiny bit further than yesterday (usually to the end of the street), watch Judge Judy, be sick, cough up things that look like they belong in a medical museum, spray fake saliva into your mouth like you're marinating yourself, and then...do it all again. Day after day. For six to eight weeks. Time becomes meaningless. I could have been in there for three days or nine years.

The weight kept dropping off and suddenly I was four stone down. I didn't tell anyone, but secretly I was THRILLED. I've done every diet known to mankind—keto, paleo, Atkins, high fat, low fat, points, sins, shakes, powders, farting cabbage soup, and that one where you convince yourself mashed cauliflower tastes like mashed potatoes. Now here I was, back to the weight I'd been during The Great Diet of 2016. I even had to buy new jeans and tees. Silver lining? More like a whole silver coat.

I was still on the tube, but they had reduced the amount and started me on bottles of flavoured chalk. Apparently this is food. I could swallow again and take tablets without crushing, but only one at a time. The mountain of medication had finally become a small scenic hill.

Then, yesterday, a GREAT DAY. After two months of a tube dangling from my nose like a sad party streamer, the phone rang. They said I could take it out. Either I could do it myself, or the community nurse could remove it the next day when she came for the weekly weigh-in. Well, obviously I decided to do it myself. The instructions said: Do it slowly, and once you start, don't stop.

As I write this, I realise that is actually excellent advice for life. LESSON 21: Whatever you do in life, do it slowly and don't stop. Unless it's sex.

The Rock was in Edinburgh visiting Papa Pedro, who always gets him tipsy. I didn't tell him about the tube coming out because I thought it would be an adorable surprise. He came home (pleasantly sozzled, as expected) and talked for an hour about his day. I waited for him to notice. "Night night," he said and that was that.

The next morning, he got up, laid out the meds for the day, and set up the food machine. I silently put it all away again. All day was water in, chalk gunk in with no tube. Pth9ng from him. All evening, NOTHING. Finally, at 10pm, I said:

"Do you honestly notice nothing different about me?" He squinted, studied me, and said: "Have you shaved?" I despair.

You get a scan four months after treatment ends to see if it worked. Before that, you get an interim check-up. I saw Dr Lump and The Oracle, who stuck a camera up my nose again. The Rock winced. "Why are YOU wincing?" I said. "I'm the one getting skewered!"

The tumour still feels like a beach ball strapped to my neck, but apparently that's fine. The weight loss, however, is a concern. They want an interim-interim check-up in two weeks before the scan. They told me maintaining weight is the goal. I nodded obediently and absolutely did not mention that I wouldn't mind shedding a few more pounds.

Are you still playing along with my Medical Bingo? Get your dabber ready, because we have TWO new squares to mark off.

First up: permanent lymphoedema which basically means my lymph nodes have gone on strike and refuse to drain properly. The advice? Sleep sitting up. This is now the second time I've been told to do this. Is sleeping upright something normal people are doing and nobody told me? Have I been horizontal like a fool my entire life? Am I supposed to hang upside-down like a bat? Someone clarify.

Thankfully it's mild and I just need to go to the special clinic where, presumably, they teach you how to be a graceful, fluid-draining swan. I have to manually drain each morning by massaging my neck.

Next bingo tile: hearing loss and tinnitus. I had a hearing test last week because chemo and radiotherapy, especially to the neck, can mess with your ears. And surprise! I apparently now have some hearing loss AND tinnitus. Leveled up tinnitus at that. The have gone from one monotone high-pitched squeal to a melody of two or three tones. Harmonies. Layers. Texture. Who knew cancer was so musical? If it develops a bassline, I'm calling myself a synth pop duo.

LESSON 22: If you want someone to notice something about you, get a giant neon sign. Possibly with flashing arrows.

01/09

The big scan

Things have actually been getting better and better. I can now walk for about 45 minutes without fainting, collapsing, or needing revived with a biscuit. The New Family Doctor has declared that I can return to work on a phased return, and Occupational Health have signed me off too provided I do less work and slowly build back up over 8 weeks to the full-time thrill of writing papers and making PowerPoints that nobody reads. Living the dream.

Then came the 4-month review scan. A PET scan, no less. I received a letter explaining that I would be injected with radioactive goo and should avoid pregnant women for the rest of the day. VERY specific. I'm not in the habit of hanging around pregnant strangers, but I appreciated the clarity.

The whole thing was hilariously uneventful. You check into what feels like a medical spa, they inject you, and then tell you to sit quietly for an hour to allow the goo to "percolate." I assume this means steep like tea, but inside your organs.

The scan was ordered from my head to my thighs and was supposed to take 30–35 minutes. Another paper-covered bed but thankfully no mask this time. However, they still put your head in a vice and strap it down, just in case you were thinking of escaping. Then they take what feels like a giant plastic blanket attached to the bed and wrap you like a newborn burrito, arms pinned to your sides. They tell you not to move. As if movement is physically possible. I'm trussed up like a Christmas turkey, swaddled, clamped, and gift-wrapped, and they're warning me not to wander off. Then, right on cue, the tannoy announces they're

starting and instantly my nose develops the most INTENSE itch known to mankind. Every. Single. Time.

LESSON 23: Be prepared for a lot of being tied up. And not in a fun, adventurous, consenting way.

02/09

Back to work

My wardrobe hadn't been updated since pre-Covid and I had finally accepted that the "round" silhouette only really works for snowmen and circus clowns. Now, having lost 5½ stone, not a single item fits. I've gone from XXL (42") to L (34"). I caught myself in a shop window and, instead of seeing a version of my father, I saw someone I didn't recognize.

The Rock has some gorgeous clothes he'd been "saving for when he lost a few pounds." Well, guess who fits into them now? There was a beautiful suede jacket and a denim shirt I have coveted for years which now live in my side of the wardrobe. Possession is nine-tenths of the law and ten-tenths of marriage.

What nobody tells you is that your feet shrink when you lose weight. I have been a size 12 for years, but apparently I am now a size 11. The Rock gleefully tells people that I was never a size 12, just a "fat 11." The man has no shame.

So back I went to workwearing nice chinos, smart shirt, looking sharp and absolutely LOVING the look on people's faces when they saw the new me. The most common phrase was "WOW, you look well!" I think people were expecting the Hollywood version of a cancer survivor: gaunt, grey, haunted, with bags under the eyes and a tragic violin soundtrack following them everywhere. Instead, they got the post-breakup glow up but with chemo as the bastard ex.

I met with Big Boss Man almost immediately. He's still in paternal mode, and I thanked him repeatedly for his support. I genuinely pray that if anyone reading this is going through something similar, your boss is at least HALF as good. I also pray that Big Boss Man never reads this because I will NEVER hear the end of it.

I did emphasise the need for flexibility. I still go to the dentist every six weeks. I have a string of appointments. And now I have a rehab fitness trainer who specialises in cardio and muscle recovery. Given my role, this hasn't really been possible before, but if you can't ask for what you need after having cancer, when CAN you? We agreed to a compromise to be reviewed later.

One thing Big Boss Man was right about is that I may not be able to return to my 100mph "everything completed by lunchtime" work persona. I hadn't expected to feel so tired so quickly. I am currently doing 10am to 1pm, four days a week and building gradually. I eat lunch at 1pm and am asleep by 1:14pm. Efficiency!

A little retrospective note: it's genuinely great to be back. Seeing my team, catching up with friends. I know around 1,000 people there and love 997 of them. I have spent a fortune on lunches and coffees, but honestly? Worth it.

LESSON 24: I never played the cancer card until negotiating work-life balance. It's a powerful trump card, but use it sparingly unless you want people to plot your assassination.

LESSON 25: You will see everything differently. You'll learn what really matters. Don't lose that clarity. Work might be very important to me but I want more and I am determined to make that happen.

LESSON 26: Your brain will feel ready to conquer the world, but your body won't. Do NOT expect to instantly return to that pre-The Apocalypse Day version of yourself.

19/09

The long long long long wait

To be fair to Dr Lump didn't realise how literal I take things. She said the results normally come in about a week and that I'd get a call. Like any good project manager, I built in contingency, five days plus 20% slippage before contacting The Oracle asking for a status report.

Nothing. So I tried again the following week. And again a few days later, with increasing levels of panic. I cannot help myself. I have never been patient. Waiting is my kryptonite. This was eating me alive.

LESSON 27: Sometimes you just have to sit and wait. Sorry. There is nothing you can do. Have a sandwich and/or a biscuit. Preferably both.

24/09 –

The Call

Normally I keep my phone off during meetings, but I had set my iPhone to MAX volume with a siren ringtone if the NHS called. I was in the middle of a Teams call when the siren exploded. It was someone from not on the character list telling me I needed to come in this Friday. (It was Wednesday, for those without access to a calendar.)

“Can you tell me what is happening?” “Is this good or bad?”

Response: “We can discuss everything when you come in.” No amount of pleading, grovelling, or dramatic whimpering helped.

I couldn't concentrate for the rest of the meeting. The moment it ended, I went straight through to The Rock for a panic huddle. Why wouldn't they tell me? Why do they want to see me so fast? It can only be bad. It's spread. I know it has. I have three minutes left to live.

26/09 –

Two Sleepless Nights Later

I have now read the entire Cancer Research website on failed treatment. I had trawled the Macmillan forums for other people who had failed the chemo/radio exams. I now understood immunotherapy. I had mentally prepared for: a full neck dissection; tongue removal and; voice box eviction. I had researched the workplace ill-health retirement policy and had my trigger finger ready.

We arrived 45 minutes early because, clearly, I was eager to receive my devastating news. The Rock had a coffee. I stared out the window like a Dickensian orphan wondering if this was the last time I'd see the sky.

Dr Lump and The Oracle came in and must have seen our faces. We were radiating doom.

“Why the long faces? It’s not bad news.”

EH???????? The Oracle explained that they don’t discuss over the phone as there are always more and more questions which is better face to face. Not helpful.

The cancer is still there, but it hasn’t spread. During my increasingly frantic emails, I had mentioned that the golf ball had vanished from my neck about a week after the scan. Another glamorous camera-up-the-nose expedition confirmed things were heading in the right direction. I am still scarred and a little swollen, but the sat-nav map is correct. It’s just slower. How dare they? I am slow at NOTHING. If they had at least told me there was a speedometer, I would have tried to heal faster.

So now I have to wait another two months and repeat the whole thing. More waiting. This is absolutely my favourite part of the journey.

LESSON 28: It’s inevitable. You will imagine the very worse. It’s your mind preparing you for the worse news. Just try not make it into Shakespearian tragedy.

03/10 –

A New Tired

I am now back at work full time. I am TRYING to stick to Lessons 24, 25 and 26, but I am slipping back into my pre-Apocalypse work brain. I need to shake myself. A few weeks ago, I had three minutes to live, and already I am awake at 3am worrying about a very minor problem in a report.

My mum said I was fiercely independent and insisted on doing everything myself, in my own way, from a VERY early age. Apparently this trait has followed me into middle-aged-hood.

So it was against every fibre of my being to email Big Boss Man to say I needed more people in my team. And it worked. THANK YOU Big Boss Man (and MentorMan). I feel more in control and calmer.

The University has honestly been amazing. They have launched a cancer support page on the intranet with stories and ambassadors staff can reach out to. I signed up. Nobody may ever contact me, but I want to be there just like my Emotional Support Army was there for me.

Other side effects are now: permanently cold hands and feet (I have a hot water bottle strapped to me every night like a thermal life jacket) and the tinnitus louder than ever. Now waiting for hearing aids.

LESSON 28: Ask for help. People genuinely want to help, but they can't if you don't say where you're struggling.

For the record, I don't struggle. I fight on stoically, in silence, until I have a full brain meltdown.

06/11 –

Let's Try Again

So it's PET scan attempt number two. Yet another day avoiding pregnant ladies. I kept imagining what I'd say if a pregnant woman sat beside me on the train home: "I'm sorry missus, but I'm radioactive, so I'll sit over there. It's not because you smell."

Obligatory weigh-in: Now 6½ stone down. WOOHOO. Another half-stone and I'll have my 22-year-old body back but with the lucky bonus of saggy extra skin. Why did nobody warn me about this? My backside now hangs somewhere behind my knees.

Then another swaddling, another head vice, another session of being wrapped like a leftover sandwich, and—of course—another huge itchy nose the second the machine starts clunking.

And another wait. Another long, agonising wait.

30/11 –

Battle (0): Cancer (1)

It's taken me a few days to pull myself together enough to write this one. After another three-week wait, we returned to the scene of the crime to see Dr Lump and The Oracle.

I was quietly optimistic. The lump had disappeared. I felt better. Stronger. Just the ongoing dry mouth, hoarseness and extreme tiredness. Basically I'd convinced myself I was a miracle patient and the doctors would applaud, throw confetti, and send me home with a medal.

I am such an eejit. The wee shit hasn't gone. The tumour is still there. Excuse my French, but what a wee jobby bastard shit.

Honestly, this hit as hard as The Day of the Apocalypse (Diagnosis Day). The only difference is that now I'm carrying a whole wheelie suitcase of trauma, experience, memories, and medical bingo cards and I know exactly how bad the next stage can be.

The reason for my sweary laden outburst? I'm getting a neck dissection. Which, in medical terms, means slicing down your neck, peeling you open like a satsuma, and removing the wee jobby bastard shitty bastard jobby shit entirely.

The aftermath list can be extensive: a huge scar, reduced mobility in my shoulder, stiff neck are 100% going to happen. Lymphoedema may possibly throw an enthusiastic comeback tour and mysterious leakages causing god-knobs-what chaos.

LESSON 29: Don't Google cancer surgery pictures. They WILL make you feel worse and they're rarely your outcome anyway.

I've cried more in the past few days than I have in the entire cancer journey so far. I genuinely can't see a light at the end of anything. Just darkness, exhaustion, and swear words.

They wanted to operate in two weeks but we already had Christmas and New Year booked away. And after the year we've had, a few days not smelling like antiseptic felt like a human right. We explained this and Dr Lump said waiting a few more weeks makes no difference.

She said "consider it over the weekend. I considered it for approximately eight seconds and then emailed saying: "We're taking the break. Then we'll return for the next crappy chapter."

As soon as we left the room, I could feel the walls closing in. We turned the corner and I just broke. Full collapse. The Rock held onto me while I ugly-sobbed into his chest like a damp woodland creature.

We had arranged lunch with Crazy Hazy (you will be hard pushed to find someone else crazier and lovelier and generous and just plain beautiful) but I wanted to cancel, crawl home, and hide under a duvet until 2037. The Rock said it was too late.

Thank god. It was the BEST thing. She was so kind and listened while I tried to get actual words out through sobbing, and then, expertly, took my mind off everything entirely. To say she can talk the hind legs off a donkey is wrong. Try the hind legs off the entire donkey sanctuary.

Now comes the hard part: telling everyone. Telling work. Telling my team. I need more time off and just as I finally felt close to achieving the things I've been building towards for three years, everything is on hold or sliding gracefully down the pan.

LESSON 30: Read your own damn lessons. The most beautiful human in the world sent me a screenshot of Lesson 14 “It’s OK to cry.” Let me amend that: You ARE going to cry. A lot. But eventually, you have to do the next thing no matter how terrifying.

And when you can’t do it alone? Cling onto a Rock.