

Staybridge Arrival

When I walked into that hotel room, there was nothing more satisfying I had ever experienced. An author I admire once defined an emotion she called 'fiero': it's an emotional high that we don't have a word for in English. Fiero is what I felt as I stepped into that apartment-sized suite, tore off my shirt and proceeded to remove all other items of clothing except my underwear - leaving a trail of slightly moist clothing behind me as I moved across the room. It had taken almost twenty-four hours of constant travel across four-thousand-five-hundred miles using four different vehicles to move through six time-zones and cross national boundaries I'd never crossed before. I had been alone and silent but for the few meagre interactions with single-serving friends I'd met on the journey: a middle-aged English holidayer bound for DC, a nurse not much older than me on her way to Texas to attend a wedding and a stereotypically large American cab driver who'd hoped I didn't mind if he smoked. By the time I reached the Staybridge Suites I was ready to stagger inside and bed down on the stone tiles of the lobby. I felt dirty, sticky, sweaty, exhausted, tired, jet-lagged, starved, parched but most of all relieved. I'd done it. After collecting the key that had been left for me with the friendly receptionist I went straight to the room. I collapsed first on the floor, then on the bed - and, after quickly realizing just how sticky I was, rewarded myself with the first bath I'd had (or would have) in months.

It sounds terrible in retrospect but it took me a good three-quarters of an hour to actually let Dad know I'd arrived at the hotel in one piece. "Sorted. Having a bath." I sent him at what my body clock told me was 3am. After soaking my sore body for a while, I proceeded to raid every cupboard in the suite, desperately looking for some sort of sustenance. After touching down in Oklahoma I had waited impatiently for my phone to connect to a US carrier so that (after briefly informing the family I'd arrived and was waiting to pick up my bags) I could command Dad:

"Please for the love of god bring me a McDonald's or something."

I hadn't received a reply...so I figured eating everything they had lying around was fair game. But as supremely pleasurable as stuffing my face full of ranch dressing-flavoured Pringles was, and how gorging on a slightly stale savoury wrap from the fridge made me groan with delight...nothing was as gratifying as the sound of the door unlocking and the sight of my family as they entered.

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It's March 2016; Bangor is having a rare day of moderate sunlight. Here in North Wales, where I attend university, it's usually raining or at least a little moist from the sea air. Of course, looking out from my first-floor bay window onto College Road I can see that there's a grey cloud off in the distance. On the road below, there's a trickle of students going to and from the main university building - it's nearing five o'clock and most people, like me, are done with their lectures for the day. I'm at my desk, listening to music as I stare at this empty document. The song that's playing is called *REALiTi*. Out of interest - perhaps to try and get me started, I'm listening closely for lyrics that might relate to what I'm writing here; it'd be pretty weird if there was some poetic parallel, but there's honestly not. Anything I picked out wouldn't really reflect my life or experiences - they'd be someone else's - specifically a Canadian woman named Claire. But there is something I can say about it: her music is awesome. I'm sitting here smiling, just enjoying myself in this little moment of peace. Today, we're some two-and-a-half years post diagnosis.

Five days ago I shaved my head. At a little party, with more than a little alcohol in my system, I allowed each of my friends to take a turn in going at my bonce with my beard trimmer - shaving my head-hair into various comedic styles. This wasn't an impulsive decision - we'd planned to do it for about three weeks but with assignments due none of us had the time. Personally, my second semester had been very stressful - I'd been spinning a lot of plates and needed some time to chill. So ten of us gathered in a fairly tiny student house to celebrate - something we hadn't really done much this semester. Katie - or Kitty, as we often call her - has the first go. She's got a thing for 'bullying' me - a little in-joke that even my lecturers sometimes play along with, so she's having fun with it. Murphy's hovering around us with my phone, recording the twenty-minute process that includes occasional pans down to my moobs. Katie - or 'Kitts': a name we have to use to differentiate her from Kitty - is next up. She's one of the closest friends I've made at university and I'm moving in with her next year - so it's especially important to me that she's here to see this. It's important to me that everyone that's here is here. Around me in a circle stand more friends: Charlie, Emma, Kelly, Sam, Tom, Xandr and Yoshi.

This was a very different crowd to the one I sat before two years ago. We filled a church hall last time. I was surrounded not just by friends but by family members and strangers too. Last time, we raised somewhere in the region of eight thousand pounds. Last time I shaved my head, my sister had cancer. And though she's no longer a cancer *patient*, she's not necessarily out of the woods yet; she won't ever be. It's a superposition, a paradox; - she's safe now, and still forever unsafe. It's probably best not to worry about it - I think that's the position I and most of my family have reached at this point. At the back of my mind, it's a concern, but I pride myself on a desire to stay in the here-and-now.

I think that was what allowed me to get through Imogen's treatment - that sort of...emotionless, almost cold mentality. It sounds bad, but when we first got the news from Doctor Morland, I just...sat there. I saw my mom and Imogen break as my dad put on a tough face. And I just thought 'Well, okay then'. I've joked with dad that his writing about my stoic un-reaction will be used as evidence against me in court one day when I'm revealed to be a psychopath. Maybe it's

because I have a deep respect for and faith in doctors - or maybe it's just that I'm not the kind of person to get upset easily...but for whatever reason, I think that was the only way I could deal with it. Someone had to be the one that didn't react badly; if we'd all fallen apart, we wouldn't have made it through. *Someone* had to be optimistic even if the circumstances didn't encourage it. I wouldn't say that any of us were cynical - but the way it seemed to me at the time was that no-one was looking on the bright side. And yeah, I get it - as a parent whose child could die or as a child facing the potential of death, it's pretty fucking scary. You're facing oblivion.

But it was different for me - the brother. I love my sister, but it's not the same kind of love as between a parent and child. Close, but not exactly. Fundamentally, I couldn't feel the same way about it as my parents and I definitely couldn't begin to fathom what it was like for Imogen. All I could think was: we've caught it. We've caught it early. We have a range of treatments lined up. We've got good doctors. We've got the NHS - this isn't like the US where a diagnosis could ruin our family financially. We don't have to go far to get Imogen her treatment. She's got good teachers who'll help her and good friends who'll support her. She's gonna *have* to try a short hairstyle like I've been recommending. I assessed the present from every angle and judged us to be in a very favourable position. Some people just aren't that lucky.

Mom didn't get that. We went to a cafe after leaving the hospital and just sat there in shock, trying to overcome it all. I was being quite adamantly optimistic - I remember saying "It could have been worse." and immediately being snapped back at by mom: "How could it be any worse?". Little did we know that, over the course of the next year or so, we were to meet some of the unlucky ones - the ones who had it worse.

Going through sixth-form I'd developed a mentality about the world that I called 'optimistic nihilism'. I'd decided that an unrelentingly rational approach to everything was best - and in that, I'd realized that, though I hoped that things in the world would go my way, I recognized that they probably wouldn't. But it wasn't until Imogen's diagnosis that my philosophy was put to the test. Adapting to life-during-treatment wasn't hard for me - at the end of the day I'd sleep in my own bed - unlike mom and dad (though I tried as often as I could to stay at the hospital instead). They were the ones that really struggled. I just went about my daily routines...not exactly pretending everything was okay but just not ever needing to confront it. I couldn't do anything dramatic like drop out of college - that would have sabotaged my future regardless of the outcome of Imogen's treatment. I just had to carry on. Even when mom, dad and Imogen shipped out to Oklahoma for her proton therapy...I just carried on.

I broke down once. Throughout the whole thing, I only broke down once. I know my parents stayed strong too - but there were times when it was clear it was getting to them. And I know for certain there were times they broke down out-of-sight, in private moments. For me, that moment was following an argument with my friends about a game we were playing online. It was a little thing - I'd been getting agitated more than usual - but it led to us ending the game early. I stayed on Skype to Eve - one of my best friends - and she managed to get me to talk. After hours of talking - sometime in the early hours of the morning, I realised what it was. I admitted that I was scared for Imogen and that my admittedly-usually-salty personality had become more abrasive as a result. I got better after that...but no-one but Eve knew what was really happening. I bottled up the fact that I'd bottled up my feelings. Only nowadays am I starting to slowly let those feelings out and talk openly with friends about it all.

It was a hard year. I'm obviously not going to say that I'd rather Imogen had cancer than not. But if I knew for sure that her scans are going to be clear for the rest of her life, I'd be more inclined to speak positively about the experience. Cancer changed all of us forever. And despite the hardship it caused, I'm tempted to say it was for the better. It'd be nice to be able to say that the trauma 'meant something' in a sort of Old Testament kind of way. But it didn't - shit just happens. That doesn't mean it was an entirely worthless experience, though. There were good things that came out of it all. Imogen and I went to America for the first time - and saw places we would never have otherwise seen (who vacations in Oklahoma?). I made 'mixtapes' for her to listen to during MRI scans and proton therapy (therefore educating her in good music) and with the our newfound time together we developed new in-jokes, bonded over TV shows and played far too much *New Super Mario Bros*. In the midst of it all, we raised money for TCT and other charities. The time I spent on my own whilst the rest of the family were at hospitals at home and abroad I dedicated to the graphic novel I'm working on with Eve. Plus, Imogen got to safely try opiates and have her first drug-induced trip (something I'm not...entirely sure was a positive, but hey, life experience).

But most of all, that year brought us all closer; especially me and Imogen: we're stronger friends than ever before. And with the Facebook page we'd created an online community that had clustered to share in our adventure - and that support was indispensable. The cancer year brought many people together from across the world - not just our family. We made new friendships and strengthened old ones. That said, I'm not sure it'd be accurate to say we're better people because of it - we're damaged, changed people. But we're improved in other ways. For me, it was a bittersweet reminder of our limited mortality; a sobering, maturing process that molded us anew.

So why did I shave my head a second time? Well, after Imogen finished chemo and began to grow her hair back, so did I. That was always the plan and I didn't see any reason to stay bald - to be honest, I think that somewhere at the back of my mind I still had a burning desire for floppy 'skater' hair. But no haircut has made me feel more like 'me' than a clean-shaven head. When I lost my locks in that church hall in April 2014, I changed. My adult personality, nurtured at college and further cemented by the experiences of the two months prior was fully formed. Losing my horrible attempt at the shaggy-haired-teenager look was a symbolic event. I stopped being a teenager.

These days I have a job and as I'm finishing my degree, I'm preparing myself for the future and whatever it holds. I'd got a job at Asda the summer before I started my second year at university - by which time I'd grown out my hair again - so none of my colleagues have ever known me as a bald man. When I came back to Bangor, my flatmates who'd only ever known me as bald were amazed to see me with a full head of hair. This...kind of gave me a crisis of identity. For the first few months, I didn't really think about it - I talked about perhaps one day going back to baldness, but never seriously. But by the second semester, I was unable to stave off the feeling and the realisation of what I needed to do. Things were getting to me - stuff that, given how I'd coped over the course of Imogen's treatment, I didn't think would or should get to

me. Work was one thing - but petty social dramas were taking a toll on me; I didn't feel in control.

The day after I shaved my head, I went into work. Having cleared the decision to go bald again with my boss a few weeks earlier but not specifying a specific date that it would happen, all my colleagues looked at me in shock. One asked if it was a Buddhist thing. It wasn't - the cancer year hadn't made me turn to religion. But it *was* a spiritual thing - which is strange for me. I say it's spiritual because I can't really explain it any other way. There's something about being bald that makes me feel *right*. I've thought about it in literary terms, and that makes some sense. Specifically, I can map it onto Joseph Campbell's *Monomyth* - a model for storytelling that we were taught in my first year at university. Campbell mapped out seventeen stages or 'story beats' found in mythological stories; it was most famously used by George Lucas as a framework for *Star Wars*. One of the later stages - after the hero's journey is over - is called the 'Master of Two Worlds'; it's the point where, having returned home from their quest, the protagonist has to reconcile the person they've become with the old life. Coming back to Bangor was my return, but the journey wasn't over. I had to face who I'd become - not try to continue being who I was before. So the hair had to go.

The final stage of Campbell's model is called 'Freedom to Live' - and it's exactly what it sounds like: a release from the stresses of the journey and ability to live in the here-and-now. I think that's where I am now. It's where we all are, now: sitting comfortably, happily in the sun; but not forgetting that there's a rain cloud on the horizon.