

## Living life in the wake of tragedy

In all of our lives there are certain dates we always remember. Among these dates most likely are the day you finished school, the day you started a relationship with your high school sweetheart or birthdays of certain friends and family. You probably remember these days very fondly, you wouldn't want to forget what happened on them. In my case this particular day is one I would give anything to forget: 19 May 2020.

My boyfriend, let's call him Luke for the sake of his privacy, had been dealing with pain, a weird sensation for a couple days. I urged him to go see a doctor, he was embarrassed as his pain originated in a rather private area. Still, after dealing with this feeling for a little over a week he went to see his urologist. As he couldn't get a hold of the receptionist over the phone, he went to the practice himself and told her about his symptoms. When she gave him an appointment the very next day we probably should have known that something was wrong. After all this doctor was busy to the extent that no one would even answer the phone. His appointment the next day lasted over an hour. I wasn't too worried though as we're all familiar with the sometimes outrageous waiting times at the doctor's. However, a feeling of unease spread through my entire body when I asked him about the results and his text read something along the lines of "I'll explain at home". I remember exactly what we ate that day, that neither of us was able to finish even half the portion on the plate. I also remember the look on my boyfriend's face as he came home and told me that they found a tumour, he would have to go to hospital as soon as possible to get it removed. He isn't the kind of person who cries, ever. When his grandfather passed away he didn't cry, when he told me that his mother was an alcoholic, he didn't cry. He also didn't cry when he told me that he had testicular cancer but he had this very strange far-away look on his face. At the same time it felt very intense, almost as if he was trying to gauge my reaction, like he was waiting for me to laugh, brush it off and say something along the lines of "Well, that's not too bad". But it was bad, it still is and I started crying the instance he told me.

Looking back, I really wish I hadn't. I wish I could have been stronger, for his sake but I was shocked. We're only 22, this sort of thing doesn't happen to people like us, it happens to our grandparents, maybe our parents but us? No way! However, as time went on I learned that there is something beautifully simple about being diagnosed with cancer. You really don't ever have to consider your next move. Do I undergo this surgery? Do I wait and consult another doctor? None of these question crossed either of our minds because, as devastating as this sounds, if you don't act as quickly as possible, the chances of dying increase quickly. The next few days were a blur of waiting rooms and CAT scans. It's kind of weird how one day your biggest worry is that one task

you really aren't in the mood for doing and the next day you sit in a sparsely lit waiting room waiting to hear whether your boyfriend's cancer has spread.

The following day we got the much awaited message that no, there were no metastases visible on his scan which deemed his risk of needing chemotherapy very low. For the first time since the diagnosis we felt like we could breath again. The end was in sight, only less than a week until his operation after which the subject cancer would be nothing but a dark spot in our past, an afterthought at most. However, before the operation there was one more precaution we needed to take: freeze his sperm. Had anybody told me a few years ago that at 22 I would most likely not be able to have children naturally with the man I love, I would have prayed to God they were joking. I was never the kind of woman who was entirely sure they wanted to have kids but as soon as you see the possibility taken from you, your heart suddenly aches for that little girl calling you "mommy" that might never be. I felt selfish because my boyfriend had a disease which threatened to destroy him from the inside while I was mourning a child I probably wouldn't have wanted a couple weeks ago. It is honestly insane how quickly our perspectives change. While my sisters run around frantically as soon as their period is as much as three minutes late, I would feel like the biggest miracle had just occurred were I to become pregnant now. But things aren't all bad once you're faced with a tragedy like this. I realised as much as I never had before that the man before me was the only one I ever wanted to have a family with. Not once did the thought "he won't be able to have children" cross my mind. It was always us and for that I am incredibly thankful.

Fast forward a couple days and it is surgery day. We're both incredibly nervous and I have already arranged to stay with my mother during Luke's hospital stay. We leave early in the morning, it must be around seven. The nurses are very friendly while we are nothing but two nervous wrecks clinging to each other for support. We wait another three hours before the surgery begins and I don't hear from my boyfriend until I decide to visit him. Due to the corona virus, I am the only one allowed to see him with a visiting pass. I have to fill out a form where I have to confirm that I currently show no symptoms of the virus. They measure my temperature, I am nervous, sweating, scared that my temperature will suddenly rise and I will be asked to leave the hospital. When the man in front of me checks the thermometer und gives a subtle nod, I feel relief wash over me. Luke behaves exactly the way you would expect a patient who has just been under anaesthesia to behave. He's pretty out of it, confused about how it is already six p.m. but grateful to see me. There are strict rules about the amount of time I'm allowed to stay with him, so after an hour has passed I leave.

The next two days pass rather quickly and soon it's Saturday, discharge day. I feel weird heading to the hospital, I can't really describe the feeling but there's a strange sensation in my stomach. Although I am rather embarrassed to admit this, it took me a total of two minutes after leaving the hospital before I started crying. I cried on the car ride home, I cried as I parked the car and I cried as soon as we entered our apartment. Relief washed over me and a feeling of accomplishment settled deep within me. We had made it, he had made it, he beat cancer. The entire topic started to fade from our minds, it no longer determined our every day lives. There was only one appointment left where they would hopefully tell us that his blood tests came back fine. Then it would all be over, nothing but a bad dream.

On that particular I wake up, nausea settled deep in my stomach. Luke seems relaxed, so I pretend I am as well in an effort to keep him calm which works to a certain extent. He feels confident enough to enter the office alone while I stay in the waiting room staring at the clock slowly ticking. To be honest, I have seen more than enough waiting rooms for the rest of my life by now. When he comes back, I can't read the look on his face and I convince myself not to think the worst. In the hallway he tells me that the results were inconclusive, his blood tests looked better than before but not good enough so we would have to wait another five weeks while more tests were being done. The doctor tells him that it's probably nothing, that the worst case scenario would be one cycle of chemotherapy. Therefore, once again the topic cancer slips our minds and we go back to work, back to university and everything else that a normal life entails.

In the end we didn't have to wait another five weeks to hear the results. After about two weeks the receptionist calls and tells Luke he needs to come in the next day to talk to the doctor. He's at work when he texts me this and I can feel my heart sinking. This is not a good sign, frantically I try calling every single one of my family members until finally one of them picks up. My sister assures me that this doesn't have to be bad news, that maybe his blood test simply doesn't show any remains of cancer cells anymore, maybe someone else just cancelled their appointment so we get to come in early. When Luke comes home from work, he looks devastated. He keeps saying "I thought this was all over" and I don't know what to answer because I too thought it was. When we once again see the doctor the following day both of us know something is wrong. We're clinging to each other's hands tightly and this time I follow as a young nurse calls Luke's name. While we wait another five minutes in front of the doctor's office, we joke around, try not to think of what all this means. My stomach is in knots when the door finally opens and we enter, hands still tightly clasped together. The doctor tells us the results aren't good and prescribes three cycles of chemotherapy. I try to stay calm, try not to stand up and scream about how unfair the universe is and instead think of any remaining questions we may have. During this time, I really got to hate

and appreciate doctors at the same time. They keep you in the dark about specifics, during this entire process we hardly ever felt well-informed about his condition. At the same time, everything is incredibly well organised, no need to make appointments for yourself, doctors are constantly in contact with each other. That day was probably one of the toughest of my life, of both of our lives. Back in the hallway, Luke hugs me so tightly I can hardly breathe. His eyes are teary and he asks me "Will you still love me, even if I don't have any hair?". I laugh and say "Of course" even though that was the last thought to cross my mind.

So, where are we now? As of writing this essay, we are right in the middle of the first cycle of chemotherapy. It is honestly strange how quickly human beings adapt and accept a new reality as their new normal. I no longer measure my time in days and weeks, I measure it in doctor's appointments and hospital stays. Sometimes I long so much for times to be simpler again that my heart aches with the pain and I feel paralyzed. However, then I realise that we really don't have a choice and I will return to my new every day life. People can be insensitive. When they ask me why Luke hasn't been to work in such a long time and I give them the honest answer, they ask me "Will he die?". Well, I sure hope he won't but do I know for sure? No, I really don't. Some days feel incredibly hopeless. There is light at the end of the tunnel but we really can't know for sure whether he will be cured after chemotherapy. The doctor gave him a chance of nearly 100% which is probably the only good news we have received in the last few months. On some day I feel selfish, superficial even because I worry what he will look like without hair. I know that it doesn't matter and that his hair will grow back but I also know that I won't be able to look at him anymore without clearly seeing that he is a cancer patient. I am scared about the effects this entire situation will have on our relationship.

However, as to not end this essay on a sour note, there are also so many incredible lessons I have learned. Firstly, whenever I visit my family, they look at me with pity in their eyes and tell me that we are too young to go through something like this. Honestly, I am glad we are this young. Cancer is much easier to beat when you're 22 years old instead of 50 or 60. Furthermore, I get to keep this appreciation of life I have developed over the past few months forever. Secondly, I am incredibly thankful to be living in a country with free universal health care. There was not a single day we had to worry about how this disease might financially ruin us. The only expenses we had were the large amounts of chocolate I stress ate late at night. Thirdly, health and happiness truly are the most important assets in our lives. Your appearance doesn't matter, your weight doesn't matter, what others think about you really doesn't matter. What matters is to not be afraid and live life to the fullest, at least that's how we are living our life in the wake of tragedy.