

MY SURPRISE DINNER DATE WITH CANCER

by Andy Smithyman

I met Cancer on a Thursday night. At a restaurant. The one between Mr Tilley's corner shop and Cath's Café. I wasn't expecting to bump into such an infamous figure. If I had, I would've dressed up for the occasion. My mother always told me that important meetings required smart trousers and a pressed shirt.

In hindsight, I should've spotted my evening wasn't following the typical rules of normality. It's not every day a hooded, faceless taxi driver pulls up outside your house with a glimmering silver scythe on the back seat. I assumed I had mistakenly ordered one of those novelty rides; I'm not good at navigating new apps on my phone these days.

The taxi ride was as comfortable as one could expect. Sitting next to an oversized curved blade crafted in the fires of eternal death was never going to leave much room for my legs. Small talk with the driver was an obvious no-go; the sign on their headrest gave it away. 'BE YE SILENT AND CONTEMPLATE THY DOOM'. So, I did just that, apart from the bit about contemplating my doom. That seemed a bit too serious on a weeknight.

When we arrived outside the restaurant, I asked the hooded figure how much the fare was. They pointed to the sign on the headrest. Aware that I hadn't contemplated any sort of doom, I left a ten-pound note on the passenger seat and departed with haste.

My table-for-one was laid out with an extra chair already occupied. The uninvited stranger kindly informed me that they had chosen the menu and that it was their treat. Unfortunately, they ended the announcement with a very slow and very deliberate, "... considering the circumstances."

"Circumstances?" I replied.

"Hmm. You better take a seat."

I did just that as they announced their name.

Up until that moment, Cancer was a word that lingered in the far off never-worlds; a scary illness away from my safe and secure orbit. Now, it was front and centre, sitting opposite me with their fortune-telling eyes. They attempted to soften the blow with a bowl of herb and chilli olives, but all I could do was respond in silence.

Fear-filled silence.

As the first dish arrived, I mustered up enough energy to blurt out a random collection of words; darting from shock, disbelief and anger, to sadness, regret, and concluding with a late surge of determination. Graciously, (not a word often associated with my

guest), they attempted to answer every question as best they could, but clearly they were struggling with the evening as well. Sporadically, then regularly, Cancer would anxiously look over towards the swing doors of the kitchen.

Between dishes, I gazed out of the window, catching a glimpse of a busy street full of busier people. A question balanced on my lips.

“Why me?”

Cancer shuffled awkwardly in their seat.

“More olives?”

I repeated the question. “Why me?” Still looking at the lucky ones without a dinner date that evening.

My guest beckoned the waiter over. Another top up of wine was needed.

“You and me both.”

Not the answer I wanted. Not the answer I expected. Not the answer I needed. My wide-eyed stare said it all.

“What do you mean... you and mean both. You’re the thing I’ve got. YOU’RE B@\$%@ CANCER. Surely YOU know why you picked me!”

“It’s not that simple.” Their hand slowly moving towards the centre of the table.

“I don’t care... and don’t you dare offer me some more flippin’ olives.”

Their hand stopped mid-motion. Considering the peculiar nature of the evening, Cancer’s reply was both practical and to the point.

“Every morning, a card gets delivered to me, listing all the people I have to visit that day. You’re number seventy-six out of ninety-eight. After this, I’m off to Hampel Street, a few miles away from here. That unsuspecting soul likes pizza, so I’m delivering the news over a stone-baked buffet and cheesy garlic bread.”

Cancer paused for a moment and contemplated trying an olive. They decided not to.

“And before you ask, no, I have no idea who sends me the card or why the names are on there.”

Their clenched fist clearly indicated the whole mysterious vibe was frustrating for them. A short intake of breath revved up their verbal engine.

“Trust me. If it was down to me, I would have a rock-solid grading system. Help a granny, get some points. Eat your five-a-day, get a few more. The higher the score, the better chance of avoiding the grand prize from the dark abyss.”

Cancer’s pitch was cut short with the return of our bottle-less waiter. This time, they were holding a piece of paper. A disgruntled snatch, followed by a huge sigh, but never once did Cancer open up the note and read it. Instead, they scrunched it up, chucking

the ball of paper into the middle of the table. Through resigned lips, they informed me, "It's time for me to bid you farewell."

"What? No. Wait. What do you mean?" My staggered words battling through the incoming reality that my time had run out. It couldn't have. Not yet. We hadn't finished the meal. I hadn't tried the olives!

Cancer was oblivious to any of my emotions. They were wading through their own frustrated disappointment. "Kitchen's shut, again. Who knows why, again?" Their monotone mumbled line had the air of something pre-rehearsed, something they had experienced way too many times before. A long sigh broke their zoned-out spell, bringing them back into the room. "Which means laddie, no final course, no final line delivered. You live to fight another day... sort of."

Relieved and somewhat confused, I shakily pointed to the scrunched-up note, convinced there was something on there about me. Something good. Something about why I deserved another chance. "Nah. Nothing like that", was their reply. Not believing them, I flattened the paper and my world closed in on itself.

Nothing.

The note was blank.

I slumped in my chair, unable to take in the illogical madness of it all.

"Sucks, doesn't it? The not-knowing. The not-certain." Cancer flung their credit card on the table to pay the bill. "I guess some things don't make sense until their time. And some things don't make sense because they're not supposed to."

The waiter handed back the card, thankful for the generous tip. Cancer stood up, reaching for their coat. "I think the note is maybe both things."

"Wait. You said earlier... fight another day... sort of. What did you mean?"

They stood there in silence, mouth stretched wide with regret. Cancer had a job to perform. But in that brief moment, their face revealed countless heart-wrenching stories that birthed from the lines they were about to deliver. It wasn't compassion for me. It wasn't a desire to keep silent. It was simply a recognition that it was a crappy hand they were dealing me in the card game of life - and everyone deserves a winning pot.

"The meal. It continues. In bite-sized appointments. For a bit. Maybe longer. The side effects suck." A pause. Their eyes playing back an endless series of storylines. "But sometimes the conversations can be something else."

"I don't..."

"Understand? You might. In time."

We never said goodbye. I couldn't tell if that was on purpose or just because it didn't need to be said. I waited until they left before moving from the table. Stepping outdoors, I took in a grateful, deep breath of the cool night air. Instantly, my gut clenched up in shame. I thought about Cancer's next guest, the one who loved pizza. God, I hoped they received a note, too. What if they didn't? What made them get the prize I didn't?

Gratitude with a twist of guilt - how was I ever to balance out those feelings?

In the madness of the rushing world around me, I stood still, staring at the city street that was lit by lamps and guarded by trees. Out of the corner of my eye, the concrete path rippled, and the grass-lined border swirled like waves. In between the cracks, on the edge of everything, a splurge of colour outlined my world in shapes and forms not seen before. In the distance, beyond the car engines and spoken words, I heard tantalising sounds from beyond-the-beyond. This world. My world. A world here, yet rarely seen by my eyes. It was calling me to see... to really see. To really hear. To really experience. I craved to stay in that captured circle of time, but as quickly as it came, it disappeared.

My magical other world faded away.

The walk home was slow and broken, with nervous scans of every street. The taxi. My uninvited guest. Please God, don't let them be around the next corner. As I reached my front door, my heartbeat pounded in dread. The letterbox! Half-opened! Tentatively, I unlocked the door and stared down. There was no dinner request. No restaurant booking. It was just the wind. And my tears of relief.

Getting ready for bed, I wondered if it would get any easier - living with the unknowing. No answers came; I never expected any. My hand pulled back the bed sheets. I remembered the colours between the cracks and the waves along the paths. Through heavy eyes and long, sleepy sighs, I made a silent commitment to myself. Tomorrow morning, I would look for that world again. Spend a little longer exploring it, maybe build a den, maybe craft an adventurous tale to act out.

Minutes later, those thoughts rocked me to sleep. I dreamt of blank notes and whose mysterious hand wrote them. I dreamt of Death ditching the taxi business and Cancer getting lost down a dusty path in the middle of nowhere. And I dreamt of building a home in the magical world the human soul calls... the present.

I liked that last dream most of all.

Not The End