Bumpyboobs

Life after the unexpected twist

An As It Happens account of dealing with breast cancer

By Catherine Brunelle, of Bumpyboobs.com

Author's note!

Before May 2010, I was living a charmed life. Circumstances leading up to Bumpyboobs were so romantic that if I related it to you now, you'd gag on the excess sentiment. I won't tell you the romantic tale of meeting my dream man in France, defying odds, learning new languages and marrying at the ripe age of 27 years. Nope, this story jumps a year later – 28 and living in England away from all family ties, managing surgery, chemo, radiation, drugs, hair loss, projectile vomit, etc.

But despite cancer this remains a love story and one full of adventure, all of which happens after that classic narrative device: the unexpected twist.

Relax, drink your tea, and step carefully into the story. If you are overwhelmed, put it away. If you are cheered, read another page.

Okay, ready? Let's get bumpy.

P.S. Hi! I am glad you are here. Hello. Szia. Welcome. Bonjour!

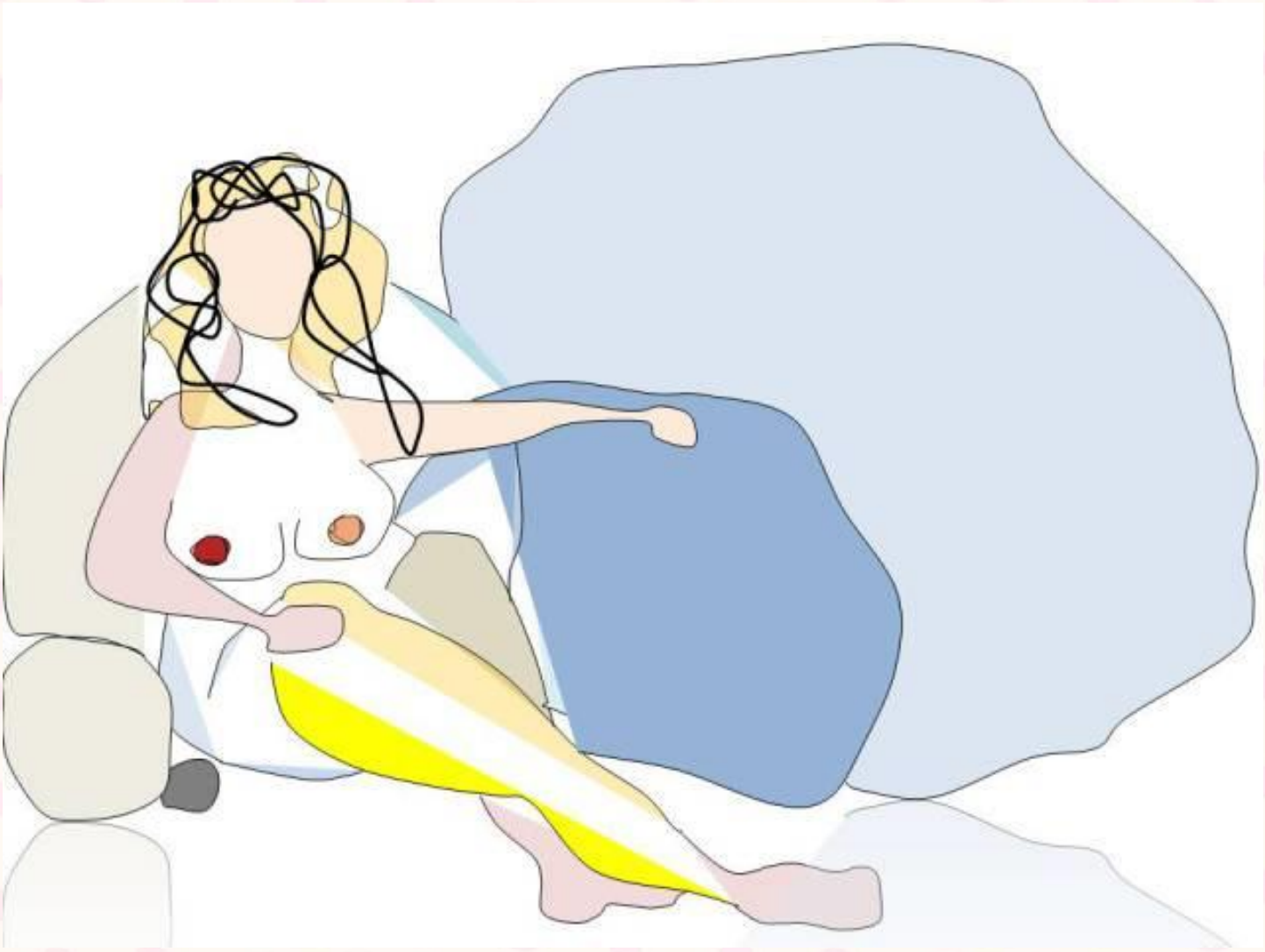
My name is Catherine, and I hope you enjoy the story.

OK! Go for the story!!

31May2010

Hello world!

Posted in Bumpboobs



31May2010

The bump in my boob

Posted in Bumpboobs

Writing about my breast feels slightly unnatural, slightly taboo. But why not, right? All the girls are doing it.

So, my breasts; I've always loved these ladies. They're tidy, petite and fit my body perfectly. When I was about fourteen, I'd hoped they'd pick up the pace and really start expanding. When that didn't happen, I came to embrace my small B cups. They feel like home, they feel like *me.*

Well now, apparently, I've decided to give myself a hard time. Because there is a lump in my breast – which rings all sorts of bells for **breast cancer awareness** – and has kicked me into preventative action.

Two weeks ago my husband and I were hanging out (*we've just celebrated our first year wedding anniversary — yay!*) when I noticed there was a bump in my chest. It feels round, slightly movable, and fairly solid. I asked him to come over and give it a rub. He does, and says that there's something, but it's barely noticeable.

It's noticeable, believe me. I noticed it.

Fast forward two days and I have an appointment with my GP. She gives me a feel too. Yep – there's a bump. She refers me onward.

To the breast clinic!

This was my first time as a hospital patient. I wasn't even born in a hospital, so this was really, truly new for me. My husband and I walked into the clinic and took a seat. The place was filled with women, and filled with their partners, husbands, caretakers etc. We waited, and waited, and then my name was called.

Here's what happened next.

I had an ultrasound. This is when the doctor squirts a clear gel on your breast and uses a smooth device to push it around. Totally painless, and rather interesting. Good thing she was an expert, because I had no idea what that thing on the screen was (they say it was my breast, but all I saw was blob shaped static).

Then she gave me feedback. Apparently it's not a fibroid (she'd been expecting a fibroid). Instead she sees balls of calcium. Okay… what does that mean?

She sends me for a mammogram.

A mammogram is awkward. Maybe some women feel pain, but I just felt squished. There was a lovely nurse who manhandled me into a large machine that flattened my breasts as much as possible. Generally they wouldn't do this on me because I'm under thirty, but because of the calcium the doctor thought it may be helpful.

That was stage two. All the while my husband is waiting and I keep popping out to see him while they arrange the rooms. I'd sit beside him and flip through random fashion magazines, squeezing his hand intermittently because last summer's fashion can't hold my attention. Quietly, I'm starting to freak out.

All along I'd figured this was a routine bump, a liquid filled nothing. But then why all the testing? Why, why, why?

Final test – the biopsy.

There is a reason this is final, and that's because it sucks. This, compared to the other tests, is more like having a cavity filled at the dentist. I felt the same anxiety, stared at the same type of ceiling, and cringed the same way when the needle with the numbing agent was injected.

But the doctor and nurse were both lovely. Just lovely. They could give lessons in keeping people calm. We bantered about my home town, and where it was, and how the doctor had visited it thirty years ago when her sister was in Toronto. And then came the needle, and *then* came the 'gun'.

It's not really a gun. But it makes a loud sound, and it takes a core of tissue from your bump. The first time they 'shot' me, the numbing hadn't taken full effect – so yes, that was a surprise. The second time I felt nothing but the pressure of their hands. The third time I felt a little pinch, but it was over. Thank goodness.

Following this the nurse held me down for a good two minutes, talking and explaining how the bandages worked (all the while stopping the bleeding from my chest). She did a good job. When I finally looked down, there was a small hole (3mm) but no blood.

Paracetamol became my best friend as the numbing faded. It felt like I'd been punched hard in the boob. Really hard.

And now, four days later, I still have the bandage in place. It itches like hell and I'm dying to take it off. But more so, I'm dying to get my results.

What is this bump in my boob?

So that's my story – that's what made me start writing. And hopefully, in a week from today, I'll get good news. Good news.

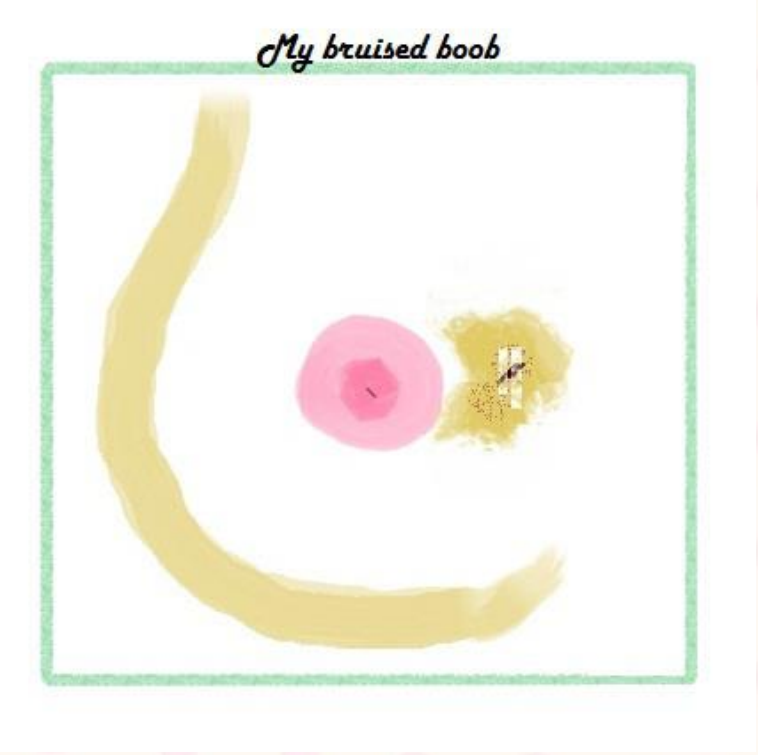
We'll see.

PS. just an fyi – I'm not writing to provide information on the procedure of breast cancer screening. I'm only sharing my experiences. If you have questions, I encourage you to ask your doctor.

1Jun2010

Bandage off!

Posted in Bumpboobs, Treatment



Five days post biopsy: I took the waterproof bandage off this morning. Here's how it looks underneath. Not bad at all. I have one tough boob! I won't remove the plaster (little white strips) till this evening. The lump is still here, but not any larger. That feels like a good sign, though a better sign would be if my lump could speak and said, *"Don't worry, I'm not breast cancer.*"

I've read online that when it comes to breast cancer (which I don't want to have), it's better — psychologically speaking — to have the biopsy and the removal of the lump done separately. Maybe it's easier to cope with an operation when you already know the results. So I'm glad for my biopsy.

Now I just need to wait for the results. . . !!! . . .

FYI: The bruising in this picture is much worse than the real bruising, but it's hard to master subtle colouring in Paint. Probably not impossible, but beyond my patience.

2Jun2010

A lot of pink.

Posted in Bumpboobs

I just realized there is a lot of pink on this page. I also noticed that when google searching ‘bumpy boobs’ a lot of porn comes up.

Hmm – a message to anyone searching for porn, or mega sized bumpy boobs: sorry for misleading you with my *risqué* key words. Keep looking, because this page is a buzz kill.

Maybe the pink is actually doing me a favour, at least in this case.

2Jun2010

Phantom bumps and cancer freak outs.

Posted in Bumpboobs

Well, yesterday a combination of premenstrual hormones and the stress of waiting combined into a quiet freak out session when I realized there may (*may, because I can't quite decide)* be another bump in my other breast.

This one feels different. It's allusive, and can only be felt occasionally with deeply probing fingers. Actually, it feels more like a hard ball of jelly that squishes this way and that whenever I try to get a grasp.

My first reaction was 'oh shit, again?' F*&%k.

My second reaction was embarrassment. Because compared to my right breast, this bump is nothing. So nothing, I can already assume it would be a waste of the GP's time. Besides, I've already been with one complaint, so to rush back in feels silly. . . Like I'm a scared woman who's spent too much time thinking about breast lumps. (*this may actually be true)*

My third reaction was to calm the heck down, realize it's right before my period (a time when my breasts usually swell and get sore) and I'm going to my consultation on Monday *anyhow,* so I can bring the issue up then. And yes, I will bring it up – because previous bump or not, I've got to take it all seriously. Right? Right. I can only imagine how many women are not getting their bumps checked because of doubt, or insecurity or embarrassment.

But we need to be practical, and practical advice says get it all checked.

Anyhow, it was a stressful hour. I work in a library and can't loudly express how I feel, so instead I stared at the screen and started thinking about this blog: writing in it, drawing for it, releasing these feelings that don't have many places to go.

I also emailed my husband. He replied with a lovely article on a some research showing that women with allergies are less likely to have cancer. However to say I don't have breast cancer because I have allergies (bad, bad allergies) feels like bargaining, and I don't want to do that. Plain and simple, I just want to be healthy.

So that was my evening with the phantom bump. It might be there, it might not. It might be nothing, it might be something. Despite my assumptions and doubts, there's no way to know till I have my consultation.

Yet another reason I look forward to Monday.

3Jun2010

Feeling guilty.

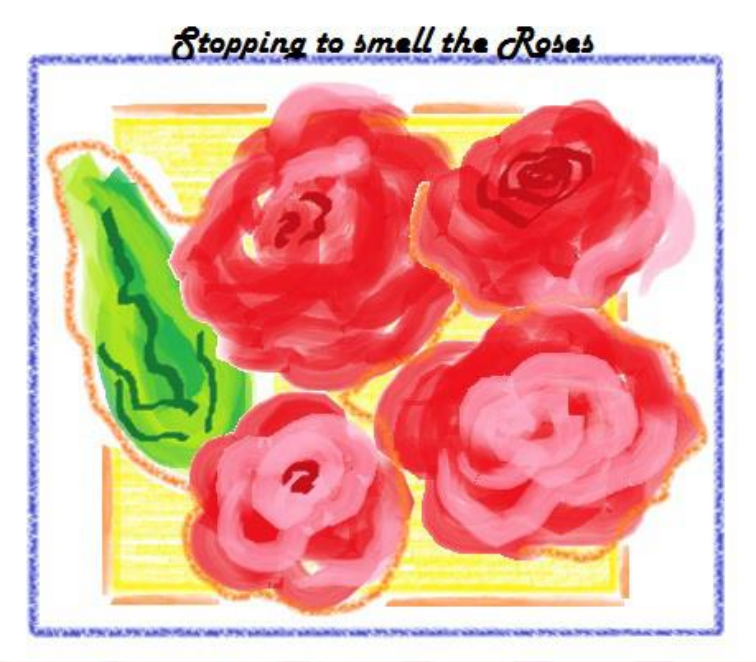
Posted in Bumpboobs

Today I realized that I feel guilty about being worried. I'm here blogging about the *possibility* of being sick, while so many people are struggling with greater things (e.g. the reality of being sick). I feel embarrassed, which must be why I haven't put my name on this site. It's not my ambition to complain, only to write things out. Chances are everyone waiting for results feels a similar mini crisis; before now the idea of cancer was never actually tangible. Even the possibility feels so strange. That's just how I feel. Guilt shouldn't be a factor, and while I cannot push away the feeling, at least writing lets me step back and realize it's there.

3Jun2010

A much needed sniff of rose.

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life, Uncategorized



I have literally stopped and smelt the roses. It feels good, really good. This evening the sun was shining, the air was warm and I was walking home after a nice day of work.

It's hard to say the core ingredient of my mood flip from yesterday to today, but this recent dose of sunshine is truly hitting the spot. I also think writing a lengthy email about my worries to a very good friend in Canada has helped lighten my load.

Not many people know about my concerns. Alright, fine – there's this blog. But I'm pretty sure its readership equals zero, excluding myself, so in terms of telling *people* it is a small number. In fact, I've only told three: my husband, and my two friends.

Before arriving at the consultation, they ask you to fill in some sheets of information about ailments, background and family history. Except I haven't told my family anything. They're busy people; I realise they should be told, but they're busy people and having more stress would only make things worse. Though it's hard to have a conversation and not say anything. Each time we talk I feel like a water balloon being squeezed tight, ready to burst.

Today is my parents' 34th wedding anniversary. Wow. So much can happen in thirty-four years. *Lives* happen in thirty-four years. I'm proud of them, they've been through a lot and are strong together. But today is their day. So I'll keep my water balloon pressure and not mention anything till Sunday, then they'll only have to wait one day for the results; me too, actually.

5Jun2010

Just waiting.

Posted in Bumpboobs, Uncategorized

Dum dum dee dum. Feeling fine and not worrying; no point worrying. Maybe I've gotten it all out of my system. I suppose this is the 'acceptance' stage, except there's nothing to accept except uncertainty.

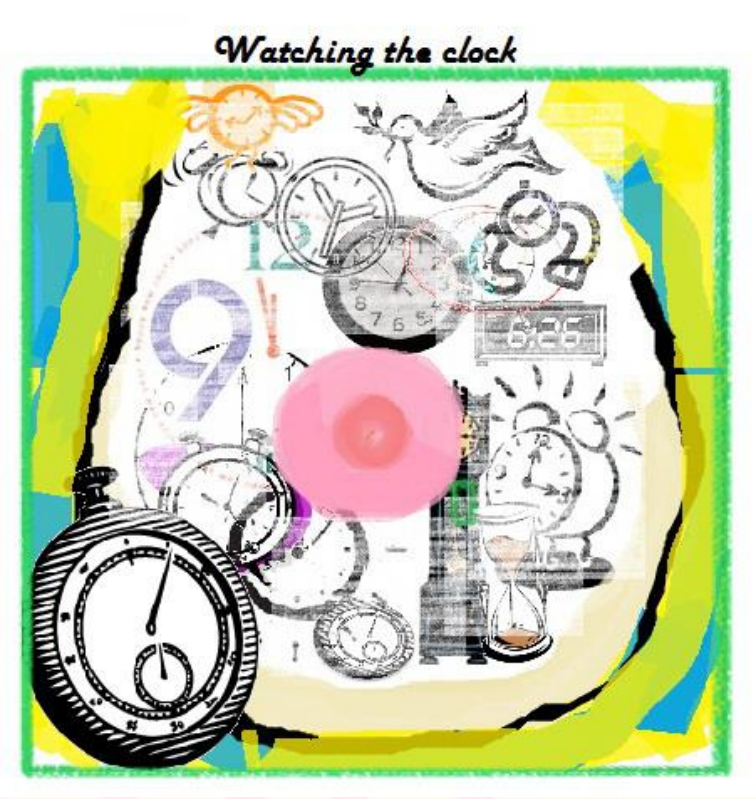
Oh, I do enjoy that last sentence and my overuse of the ex/ac sounds. Anyhow, just waiting and not minding. Just waiting.

7Jun2010

Waiting for results

Posted in Bumpboobs

Well it's Monday and I'm awake, un-showered and flipping through an online photo gallery of the MTV movie awards. When nerve racking events are set in my life, my general response is to consume meaningless brain-candy entertainment and fill my time.



So today I'm filling time.

Yesterday my parents were finally told about the lump. That was fine. My mom was concerned, saying she wished I told her earlier. Fair enough, but this isn't an simple reveal. It's not easy to change a conversation about snagging gar on the Ottawa River with 'hey Mom and Dad, there's a lump in my boob'.

There's a lump in my boob and it's been biopsied, and I've got a touch of discharge too that worries me. So was there lovely weather on the river?

Anyhow, they're now in the know, and soon I'll be too. It's 9.34 am, my appointment is at 2.10 pm. Once I shower, dress, make lunch, wrap a present, go to the hardware store and pop into the post office, time will have flown. Then it's back to the hospital and a new waiting room this time. The consultation waiting room.

It's funny because at this same clinic they also do screening for early pregnancy. Ultrasound for tiny babies. Tiny babies instead of tiny bumps. I'd prefer waiting for those kind of results.

Okay – well, odds are on my side. That doesn't mean a damn thing of course, because either I don't have cancer, or I do. No one in my family history has ever had it. No woman. My family is more prone to Alzheimer's, at least for the men. The ladies seems to go strong for quite a while.

And so will I. One way or another.

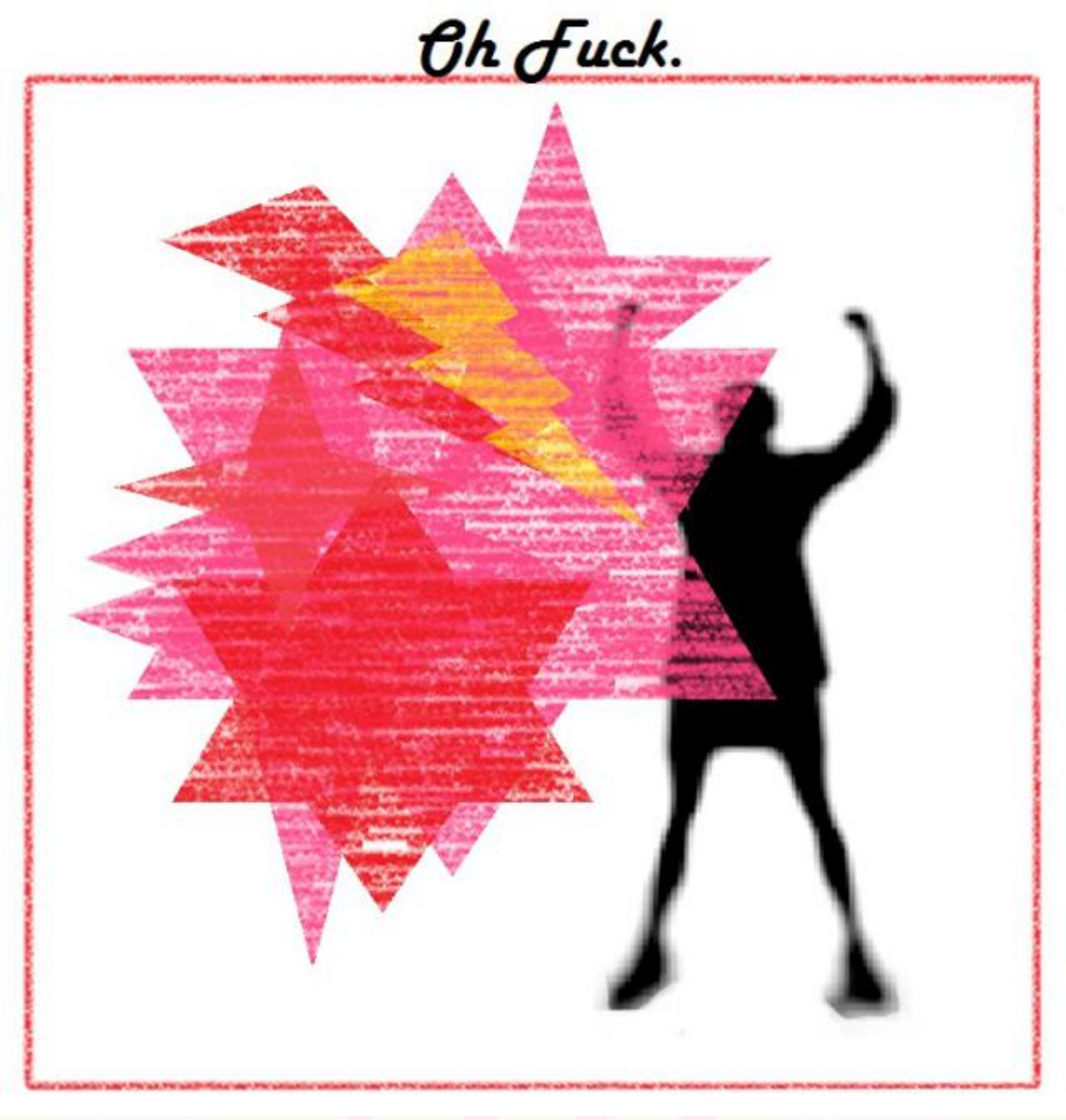
7Jun2010

I have breast cancer

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life, Treatment

AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH! Fuck.

That's how I feel right now. The doctor came into the room, felt my armpit, looked at my breast, asked if my family lives in the area . . . no, they're all back in Canada . . . then told me I have cancer.



Never have I been so physically moved by so few words. I gasped, cried, and listened. I'm still gasping, crying and listening *(as my husband reads through the Breast Cancer Care booklet and describes the possible treatments and surgeries I'll have – sweet, but more for his sake than mine at this point; I can't listen at all)*.

And all the while I just can't believe I have cancer. Me? **ME?** Are they sure it's me?

I cannot fully believe it. I wonder if people who win lotteries share a similar disbelief.

Before, in the waiting room, I watched families and pregnant women filter through the system and get called into hospital rooms. They all looked so calm, like things were going to plan. Zsolt and I were planning on having kids soon, but that will have to wait. The nurse said there is a possibility of freezing my eggs, in case I don't become fertile again after treatment.

More good news – did you know I could lose my entire breast? It's not even unlikely. It's a possibility. My tumour is near the nipple, and I have small breasts. Oh my god.

They're sending me on scans to check whether the cancer has spread anywhere else. I'm praying it hasn't. Praying very hard.

So I guess this will become a blog about cancer. My name is Catherine, and apparently – unless I can switch places with the latest lottery winner – I have cancer. Frig.

There will be more to write later. But for now, this is enough.

Oh yes, and I'm scared. That too. I'm really quite scared.

9Jun2010

Telling people

Posted in Bumpboobs

I've started to tell people I have breast cancer.

With every person I tell it feels more real, and further than that, I start wanting to fight back.

It's funny when telling people, they all say "you're such a strong person, you'll be able to fight it." But am I strong? I certainly didn't feel strong two days ago, or even yesterday. I felt vulnerable and dazed and lost. But the more I share the more real it becomes, and the more I realize I *must become strong* because this is happening and there's no going back in time.

So people are finding out slowly. Person by person I drop the C bomb, and they're all shocked and all incredibly supportive. It's amazing.

Telling people is a good thing. I was a crazy to wait so long.

9Jun2010

Kicking breast cancer ass

Posted in Bumpboobs

Now it's all starting.

Cancer is a scary word. Like my mother said, hearing the diagnosis initially feels like a death sentence. But it isn't – it doesn't have to be. And like the nurse said, *if I had to have a cancer, I'd choose breast cancer*. So there you go. It's scary, but not impossible. And now is the time to start kicking ass.

My family has dug into the research. Thank goodness for them. My husband is googling everything he can. My mother is finding food that inhibits estrogen production. My father is giving me meditation exercises. My brother has referred me to an acupuncturist (he's one himself, but I'm not in Canada). And my other brother is always good for a chat and a relief of the mind.

Today I called and booked an appointment with a TCM acupuncturist. That's Friday afternoon right before work. Tomorrow I have a MRI scan to check the rest of my body. Next week I have more scans.

I have two lists of food – those I can eat, and those I can't. Here's a list if you want to see yourself, however I have to check a few things out more comprehensively and compare to other sources of information before I'm certain on all these points.

I'm meditating. I've always said prayers to myself late at night, but now I'm focusing on releasing my fears and releasing pent up energy from my body.

I'm punching. This is something my mom always does. She 'punches out' her anxiety and issues. Normally I don't do this – I write instead. But she has been encouraging me to punch. So, late last night my husband and I started punching for about one minute. We were punching out the cancer and telling it not to spread.

I realize they aren't medically proven techniques, but does that matter? What I can say is this: all day yesterday my breast was sore, and that soreness was spreading. But last night after my meditation, punching, and cup of estrogens-inhibiting orange juice, the soreness melted away. Though it may return as new doubts swamp my mind, It's good to have a plan.

When I take action I feel like myself. I don't feel like a victim.

By the way, if anyone has any great recipes for the following items, I'd love to hear them. Keep in mind I can't eat eggs, beef, pork, potatoes (boo!), or tomatoes (and a number of other items shown through this link) because they all produce estrogen, which would cause the cancer to grow in my body.

Berries, Broccoli, Buckwheat, Cabbage, Citrus Foods, Corn, Figs, Fruits (except apples, cherries, dates, pomegranates), Grapes, Green beans, Melons, Millet, Onions, Pears, Pineapples, Squashes, Tapioca, White rice, White flour

Man, I'm hungry for lunch!

10Jun2010

Working with good people

Posted in Bumpboobs

I just tried to go to work, and turned back after about one minute. Thank goodness for my workplace and my understanding boss. I don't know how much sick leave I'm entitled to, but all I've been met with so far is '*don't worry about it'* and '*You're sorry? Don't be daft!*' and a whole lot of understanding. It's wonderful. I'm very lucky to work where I work. And now I know about my reactions to hospital visits, I think I can plan ahead more carefully for the future.

And speaking of hospital visits, my morning MRI requires a post all to itself. So I'll write that next.

Just wanted to say I work with and for some wonderful people. Really wonderful.

10Jun2010

Getting an MRI scan

Posted in Bumpboobs, Treatment

This morning I had an MRI scan. This afternoon I'm still in bed with nausea.

I just knew that corn cake with peanut butter was a bad idea before walking over to the hospital. My stomach was queasy enough before I stepped through the sliding doors of the Royal South Hants Hospital, so forget about it when I stepped into the MRI prep room. No good.

Generally a MRI is an easy test, I've been told. All you do is lay down, and there's no taking sample of tumour cores with loud banging 'guns', or anything like that. But there is a needle require for inserting the catheter.

So I sit in the chair *(I'm not used to having needles)* and the nurse chats away as she ties my arm and searches for a vein. Then she inserts the needle, but cannot find any of my 'tiny veins'. And they are tiny – at least the ones in the middle. My side veins are far more visible. Anyhow, I look away as normal and ask 'have you found it yet?' She answers 'no, not yet'.

Meanwhile the room is turning a little dark and these bright veins are filling my sight. In short, I'm passing out. Another nurse says 'keep your eyes open' and the other says 'you've gone all white' and I try and try to keep my eyes open.

Next thing I realize, I'm in my bed and I'm sleeping so beautifully and oh it feels good. But then there's a slight pressure on the side of my face, as though it's slowly being raised.

Damn! I come around and no, I'm not in bed. I'm in a chair, wearing a bathrobe, wrapped in a old cotton gown, and there's the nurse looking with concern into my face.

They escorted me to a low bed and I laid down. All of a sudden a man's voice is in the room. It's a doctor, and he's just run down from teaching a class to see whether I'm okay. *(Meanwhile Zsolt is in the waiting room area, and he's noticed a man in blue running into the room where I am. But he doesn't worry, because he just thinks it's a technician who is late for my scan. And he shakes his head at the inconsideration.)* First thing, the doctor orders an ambulance. Then he gathers information, takes my hand, and has me given oxygen. The nurse explains the situation, and I butt in occasionally.

It must be standard procedures to send a fainter to be checked. But that would mean I missed my scan. Then he asked why I was in, and I said (before the nurse could answer) breast cancer, and I really need this scan.

Ultimately the ambulance was cancelled. I think it was established that I fainted due to fear, but my pulse came back down and colour returned to my face.

The doctor left, and Zsolt was brought into the room. Zsolt has been my hero. Literally, the man is my hero. He has been saving me over and over again since I've gotten this news. Just by being near, holding my hand, making me orange juice – it gives me strength. I had him talk with me while they put in the catheter (into one of my side veins this time), and that was fine.

Next came the MRI. It's loud, and you lay there for a while, but overall it isn't a big deal. At least, it wouldn't have been if not for this morning's peanut butter on corn cake. But Zsolt held my hand and I tried my very best not to move. Sometimes I sang while the machine banged and clicked and *Whahhh Wahhhhed* around me. They had given us both ear plugs, but wow, it was *loud*. All the while I stifled the urge to vomit.

Now this is something with which I have experience. From long car rides to birth control pills taken too closely together, I am good at deferring a full-on ejection of nausea. So I waited for the tests. Finally, once it was all over, I was slid out of the machine like a pizza from an oven, and then, and only then, did I vomit.

The nurses were ready because I warned them. That was good too, because I'd already given them enough of a shock when fainting. Vomit all over the room would have icing on the unfortunate cake.

Anyhow, I got up eventually and changed, took Zsolt's arm, called a taxi. *(Poor driver thought I'd be sick in his car. Zsolt says he kept glancing over at me, particularly when I started rubbing my stomach and taking deep breaths. Ha!)*

And now I'm home. I've been sleeping, and eating orange slices occasionally, and Zsolt is attempting to force-feed me tea. About an hour ago I got dressed and left for work, but then about two minutes later I called in sick, because I still feel nauseas. My boss was great about it.

That was my adventure in the land of MRI. With challenges of fainting and thumping and getting sick. But this is worth those troubles. The scan will show exactly where this cancer is within my body — and that is precious information.

Mri and the dizzy dye. That's my day in a nutshell.

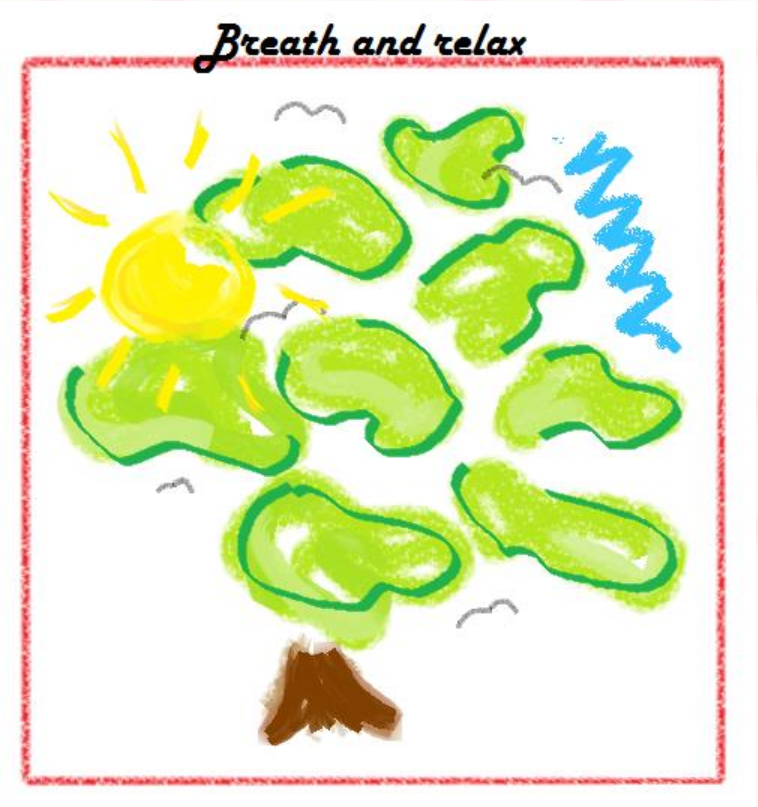
It's time for a nap.

12Jun2010

Trying to relax

Posted in Bumpboobs, Treatment

I've made it to the weekend. Next Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday I have a bone scan, CT scan and consultation (I may be given a surgery date). I'm trying for a dentist appointment next Thursday, and the Friday following is another acupuncture appointment.



So thank goodness for the for the weekend. No hospital, no work, no tests. Nothing. Just my husband and I goofing around on a lazy Saturday morning.

This week has been overwhelming. Even Postie Chris noticed that I'm off. This morning he asked me, "Are you well, Catherine?" as I opened the door in my bathrobe. But in England they often ask *are you all right?* , and I never know whether they are serious or just saying hello. Am I all right? Do I look ill?

Anyhow, I told him I was mostly fine because talking about breast cancer at 8 am was not the start I wanted. Mind you, he was delivering a packet of breast cancer information from the BCC and an order from Amazon for Chicken Soup for the Breast Cancer Survivor's Soul, so I guess the topic was unavoidable.

It feels as though many hands are reaching out and wanting to pat my back. Which is fantastic and supportive, but also a little tiring. Never in my life have I been good with receiving attention. And though a part of me craves that spotlight (to be a focus in something exciting and great), I generally run as soon as the stage becomes too warm. One way or another I find myself back and safe in my quiet life.

But the support is good, very good. I don't feel so alone and that encouragement is strengthening. Though when it comes to advice it does get a little difficult.

Obviously trying all possible therapies is my best shot at beating cancer. But I can't do everything to please everyone – and when it comes to that, it's quite crushing to let people down. Crushing and frustrating and even angering. That look of disappointment is a difficult thing with which to cope. And to know what people like my husband and parents are feeling inside is even worse – I can literally see the look on my mother's face when I think of her worried. *Which, by the by, is probably why it took me so long to tell them. Zsolt I couldn't help telling, but at least I was able to stop that worry a little longer for my parents. However, they should have known earlier – and I do realize that.*

I have these feelings swirling around inside, so thank goodness for the weekend. I need it.

Quick addition: Zsolt bought me an ‘easy pen’ for the computer. What a man! Now I can draw with more than just my fingers in Paint.

13Jun2010

Must, stop, reading . . .

Posted in Bumpboobs

Holy shit. Reading about cancer, and breast cancer, and breast cancer in young women is not helping me. It makes me realize that for young people the prognosis is not fantastic (often because it is caught late). God, I was a happier sick person when I thought it was more straightforward. Apparently, so I've read and heard, somewhere around 90% of breast cancer caught early is fixable. Only problem is that for young women like myself there is no yearly screening, and often times a lump is passed off as a cyst.

That is my bright side; I found the bump, had it checked, had the biopsy and am in the treatment stream — all within three weeks. I have hope that next Wednesday when I go for my consultation they won't slip me any news about spreading or advanced stages. But that doesn't mean I'm not scared, because last Monday I had also hoped for good news . . . and we know how that turned out.

But a little bit of ignorance isn't always a bad thing. Just knowing I need to fight is enough. Realizing I could die is more discouraging than motivating.

And on that note, I'm going to watch an episode of Lost.

"Oh television, you sweet mind-numbing box of nothingness, where would I be without you?"

However, anyone looking for a blog roll of young people dealing with cancer might enjoy this page. Another page with more information and support for young women with breast cancer is here.

14Jun2010

B-b-b-bone scan

Posted in Bumpboobs, Treatment

Ah well, home again. The day has been conquered.

Basically, it went well.

I've noticed that when Zsolt accompanies me into any sort of consultation or treatment, he's assigned a chair. This chair is always to the side. But the thing is, Zsolt is part of my treatment – when they talk to *me* they need to talk with *him* too.

So I've started asking him to sit beside me. For instance, today while I was laying on the bed about to receive an injection of radiation (I literally become radioactive) I asked whether my husband could come closer. The nurse had assigned him a seat in the corner of the room. She said no problem, and he came round by the bed. Because my arms were occupied he held my feet instead.

Quick tip: Anyone who gets nervous while receiving needles, I suggest you have a friend or loved one accompany you and rub your feet. What a great difference it made. Having that second physical sensation took my mind off the pinch.

That was stage one of the bone scan: get injection.

Stage two of the bone scan: wait.

Since we came on the bus, it wasn't worthwhile to return home. Instead Zsolt and I struck out for the only green space available – the cemetery.

I love cemeteries. They are a refuge from the busy, loud world. And while literally surrounding myself with death *sounds* morbid, it isn't. Believe me, it isn't. My father used to take me to old cemeteries and we would read the inscriptions. People display real sentiment on grave stones; love shines through a handful of words, so why be afraid? Anyhow, I love cemeteries. They are history and family and nature and art and love and culture.

We took a walk between the graves, and I sipped on my water (4 cups of water must be consumed within those two hours). Eventually we found a patch of grass that bordered a plot of land with large horses, so we spread out the blanket and laid back in the sunlight. The horses scratched themselves on fence posts, and I watched the clouds drift by.

Too bad my bladder didn't enjoy the scenery – it filled to the brim and I jumped from beside Zsolt, making a break for the nearest toilet.

Stage three of the bone scan: the bone scan.

This is easy. A breeze. Nothing to it. Zsolt and I went into the scan room, he was assigned his usual 'corner of the room' chair and I had my scan. The plates come very close to the face, but if you close your eyes that isn't a problem. The only demand is to stay very, very still.

Meanwhile, Zsolt was chatting with the nurse (*tip: bringing a partner into the scan room means they can quiz the nurses while you are laying there unable to move. She told him our doctor has a very good reputation for breast cancer surgery, and has a particular interest in young people*). And while Zsolt had his talk, I listened to *"Think"* sung by Aretha Franklin play over the radio and remembered that awesome scene from the Blues Brothers in the diner. Fried chicken and soapy dishes, with awesome back-up singers snacking at the counter. I love that movie.

And *Bing!* Scan's ready. They kept us five extra minutes to confirm the quality, but everything was fine so off we went.

There you go – a full body bone scan in three stages.

Tomorrow comes the CT scan. I'm not sure what it involves (apart from X-rays), but so long as it doesn't induce vomiting or black outs, it's okay with me.

16Jun2010

Post script

Posted in Bumpboobs, Treatment

I had originally written this as a P.S. to my next upcoming post, but it became quite long. So here it is, a post script pre post. If that makes sense.

PS. Thanks for everyone who has been reading this blog, sending me prayers, and helping me on this journey. Lu Lu, sorry I didn't write yesterday – *Je t'aime beaucoup, et j'espère que vous allez bien. (Sorry, my French is poor and I don't know if my translator is any better)* Es Joe és Melinda – *Köszönöm az imáitokat. Alig várom, hogy láthassalak titeket. Remélem hogy ti is jól vagytok. Puszi!* (Zsolt helped me with that).

PPS. The CT scan went fine. I had to drink a litre of orange flavoured punch, laced with contrast dye stuff. All the while various cancer patients with shaven heads were wheeled in and out of radiotherapy. I felt an 'oh my dear, God' moment in the pit of my stomach. It' hard to imagine that I'll get to that stage of treatment.

The scan was easy, though the nurse wouldn't let Zsolt into the room until *after* I'd gotten the needle (hmmm). However, as I lay in the machine they injected me with dye and that was unsettling – I felt a rush of warmth spread throughout my body (*imagine drinking tea, and having the warmth slide into your belly. Now imagine a bucket of tea being poured inside you, filling you up entirely)*. And then it got even warmer, and warmer, and warmer, and then *phew* it faded away. All the while I repeated a mantra of "this is normal, the nurse said this was normal".

And that was the CT scan.

And that was my P.S.

16Jun2010

This is good news

Posted in Bumpboobs, Treatment

Good news! The cancer has not spread beyond my lymph nodes. That means the rest of me is clean, according to the MRI, CT scan and bone scan. Sitting in the consultation room beside Zsolt, we both gave a sigh of relief. *Whew.*

However, the surgeon had more news: *"You've got a rotten breast."* Rotten? It's only been sweet to me this far in life. But it seems a little too sweet because the cancer has spread throughout my breast and crept into my lymph nodes. It's like a cavity filled tooth – extraction is recommended. Anything else simply won't be enough.

My surgeon proceeded to explain a little bit more. *"The operation will take fifteen minutes."* Fifteen minutes . . . surely my breast deserves more than fifteen minutes? Nope, just fifteen minutes because he *"does this all the time."* And no, he doesn't say it in a reassuring 'pat-on-the-back' kind of way; he says it in a 'I'm a skilled surgeon, and you are lucky to have me' kind of way.

Yes, I am lucky to have you. Please get every last scrap of this cancer out of my body. Please.

And that is exactly what I want – a surgeon who knows what he's doing, and believes in his skill. Confidence is a huge asset, and it makes me think I'll be in good hands.

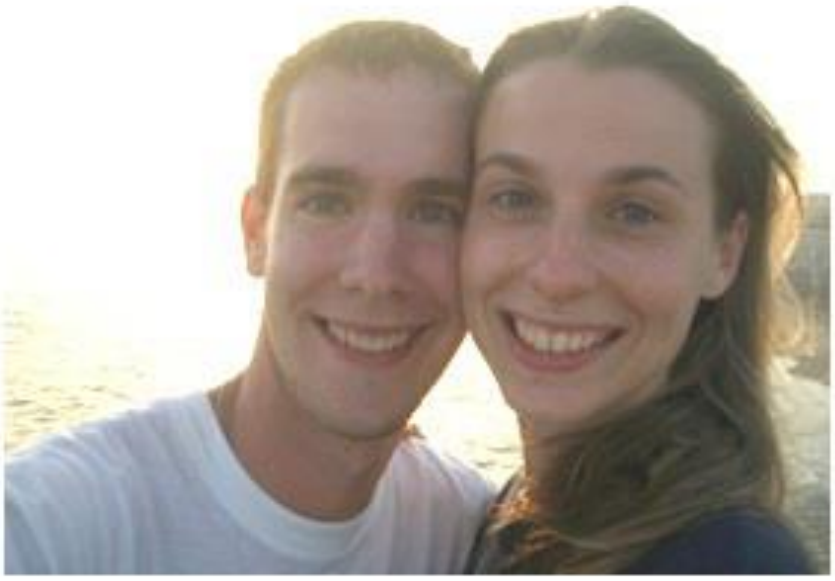
Mind you, I've never been given a general anaesthetic. I have no idea what will happen, and have a slight feeling I'll freak out before they inject the juice into my vein. Zsolt cannot even come with me. I'd rather his face be my last memory instead of the prep room's empty white ceiling.

Hopefully his face will be there after waking. Something to look forward towards: Zsolt's happy, smiling, and quietly concerned face. He is what I will strive for.

Wow – things have changed overnight. Life has shifted into high gear and turned a sharp corner; I'm along for the ride, reaching for the controls. And eventually this drama will be over, and I can return to my nice, quiet life (wiser, bolder, stronger) just like always.

I look forward to my just like always.

My 'just like always'



18Jun2010

Fertility and cancer

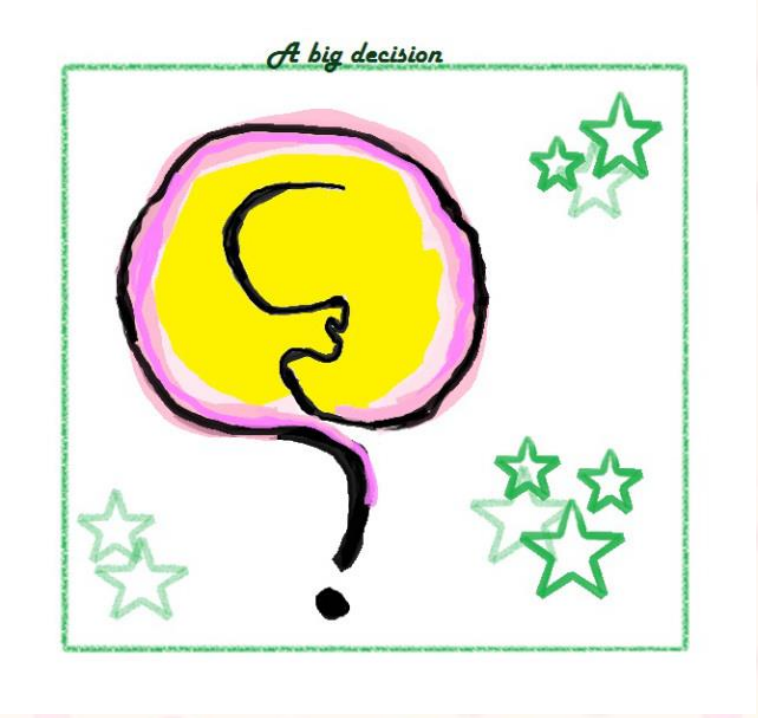
Posted in Bumpboobs, Fertility

No matter what cancer you have, if you're a premenopausal woman and facing chemo then fertility will become an issue.

Today it become my issue.

With all the speed and efficiency possible, the hospital arranged a meeting for Zsolt and I with a fertility doctor. So, today we rode the bus toward Princess Ann Hospital and for once I wasn't anxious. Today I wasn't receiving bad news.

We arrived, sat down thirty seconds, and were then (almost immediately) escorted into the doctor's office. This wasn't a clinic and there was no gown for me to change into, and no bed for me to lay on. We sat opposite this charismatic man and had a simple discussion about our options.



Option 1: Get in vitro fertilization (IVF). This means that I'll need to have estrogen shots for about 10-12 days straight. Then, I'd go into the clinic, get knocked out, and a needle would collect some eggs from my ovaries. Those eggs would then be mixed with Zsolt's sperm, and the resulting embryo would be frozen.

That's my first hiccup. Embryos frozen. I remember when I was about twelve, the teacher asked if we'd ever donate embryos for scientific research. Lots of people said yes, me and a few girls said no. Of course freezing embryos isn't scientific research, but it's still freezing. Anyhow, I could get over this – but it's a hiccup in my mind.

Here's my second hiccup. Estrogen. Estrogen is my current enemy. Maybe not forever, but for now. This type of cancer *loves* estrogen. It rode on a wave of estrogen across my breast and riddled it with cysts. I don't want those cancer cells surfing and settling anywhere else. True, and perhaps quite validly, the cancer will be removed from my body by the time I'll get the injections. And by then the chemo will be wiping all fast growing cells from my body, but it's still an issue.

Which leaves me with option 2: take my chances.

This is where I'm leaning at the moment. The opportunity to have children in the future is incredibly valuable, but more estrogen in my body means more risk. Also, some courses of chemo are less likely to threaten my ovaries, so there's a good chance my fertility will stand the challenge.

Anyhow, there you go. We're considering both options and won't make a final decision till the lab results come back. Then we'll see.

So that was what I did today, no tests or results or anything. And yet this quick meeting pressed on my mind for the entire afternoon. I'd think of this pro, then that con – back and forth like a tennis game. It was exhausting, and emotional, and difficult. Mostly I feel selfish for considering my health before my future childrens' lives . . . but there really won't be any children if I don't pull through 100%.

Battling it out in my head and getting nowhere, I wrote an email to Zsolt (because I was at work). Essentially – to summarize – it was along the line of, 'I'm **freaking out**.' And then he wrote back 'Don't worry, I've been researching and it looks pretty good.'

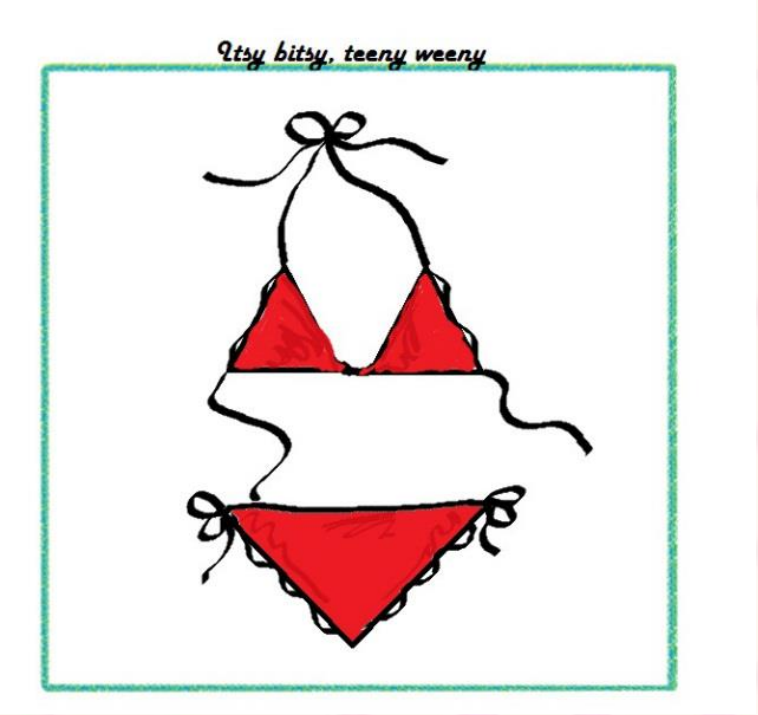
I didn't know what looked good, or what he'd found – but that calmed me down. Getting home we talked it over and decided to wait. There's enough going on at the moment with my mastectomy fast approaching.

Ideally I'll avoid the estrogen tsunami of IFV. However, if push comes to shove and the specific course of chemo is known to kill ovaries – then we'll revisit the possibility.

22Jun2010

One last ride for the girls

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life, Treatment



Just a quickie – tomorrow I hope (*hope, hope, hope*) there is time to hit the beach. We're going to blast through chores in the morning, and right when it starts to get really warm, but the sun is not so threatening, we'll grab a blanket and a train and find ourselves some beach.

It'll be one last ride for my string bikini; the very same string bikini that dropped Zsolt's jaw nearly five years back. Ha! I'm not saying things haven't changed with time, but nevertheless it has good memories. So tomorrow, fingers crossed, it'll come out once again.

And hopefully (*hope, hope, hope*) I'll find time to write more tomorrow, because I certainly have lots to say.

However, that's it for now. I'm hitting the sack; it's way too late to be blogging!

23Jun2010

Mastectomy Prep 101

Posted in Bumpboobs, Treatment

Right! It's been a few days since I've written a substantial post, but I have been trying to give myself a break from constantly thinking about breast cancer, and happily it has been working (on and off).

Tomorrow is my operation. So, in preparation for my mastectomy I've been doing all sorts of things (and not doing all sorts of things) which I'll summarize in a list for anyone who is interested. Here it comes, my "getting ready for a –*bleep*– ing mastectomy" list.

One: Have the talk.

Mmmmhum. This one-to-one pep talk was conducted while Zsolt worked some overtime on his recent paper submission. I whipped off my shirt and bra, sat down in front of my Ikea mirrors (mirror**s** because we were too cheap to buy a full length… instead we have several squares lined up vertically on the wall), and just looked in the mirror for a while. And yes, there is a physical difference between my two breasts; the right nipple (cancer boob) has started to turn in, and a bit of red spotting has appeared on the skin. I looked up close, I leaned far back, I covered my right side and tried to image it was a patch of scarred blankness.

And finally, I had the talk. Basically it went along the lines of, *"Catherine, you have cancer and losing the breast is the best step to being rid of it all."* Which I found hard to believe. *"I have cancer? Me?" "Yes, you have cancer."* [Fun Fact: people may tell you that cancer is inside your body, but it is incredibly difficult to believe them. I can go to the screening, see pictures of the lumps, have my breast removed, be told I'll need chemo . . . and all the while I'll *still* be saying: "who, me?"] *"Yes, you."* This is what I kept telling myself. And then, moving on, *"You can't be scared because this operation is a good thing. It's a good day, and a freaking miracle – and they know what they're doing – so just let go of your control issues, at least on Thursday."*

Anyhow. No more details on that. It was a discussion to remember, but I'm glad I had it. My mom suggested talking in the mirror, and I'm very thankful she did.

Two: Get on with life.

Which, *sorry Mom and Dad*, is the reason I haven't written any posts. There were things to do, people to see, and places to go. Saturday was a night out with friends, Monday turned into drinks and a £4 brownie down at Tragos, and Tuesday was my writing group, followed by a discussion on flirting and online dating. Also there was work, and acupuncture (or acupressure, which I tend to prefer), and going to the beach with my man. All the while my surgery rose and fell in my mind, but thank God for good company – they have all been so wonderful and supportive. Overall, it's been a very good week.

Three: Pre assessment.

Zsolt and I arrived at the hospital 9.00 am sharp. The waiting room was totally empty, so we sat and hummed and watched the nurses and doctors arrive. About 9.10 am we were called into a side room. Here the nurse took my blood pressure, weight, height and asked me to go back into the waiting room. She was quite nice. Then, around 9.20 am a second nurse called me into a second side room. Here we discussed my medical history, she

gave me some disinfectant to shower with, and I had to swab my nose and leg/stomach crease. It felt formal, quite quick. She was less personable, but not bad.

Also, I had a bit of Thursday explained to me. Apparently I would arrive at 12, say goodbye to Zsolt and then wait for my surgery (which could happen any time between 12 and 7pm). I would then be taken to my room to sleep off the anaesthetic. It was likely I'd be able to see Zsolt, though she wasn't definite on that.

Eh? What? Are you kidding me? To sit alone for an entire afternoon waiting for an operation while twiddling my fingers and quietly freaking out does not sound like fun. No sir. Not for me.

So today I called one of my Breast Care Nurses (incredible team of women!) who managed to calm me down. She said Zsolt would be allowed to take me into the Day Surgery Room, and we could possibly get away with having him there for a short while. Apparently the area can get crowded, so the nurses like to keep it clear. But at least he can walk me in. Then I'll see a round of doctors and someone will come round to give me some giant socks to stop blood clotting. She also said I probably won't have to wait all afternoon. Thank goodness for great people skills, because she calmed me down quite a bit.

Anyhow, there's a picture of what I've done this week, and what I may be doing tomorrow. Which leave the last step. . .

Four: show up.

And then the rest is up to them. So breath – *in, and out, and in* – and let go of the control . . . *in and out and in* . . .

Thanks to everyone for all your support and encouragement. It means an incredible amount to me. If you can, please spare a thought tomorrow at some point between noon and seven. That's when I'll need it most.

See you on the other side. Tomorrow this cancer is ***OUTTA HERE***. Whew!

25Jun2010

I’m okay

Posted in Bumpboobs, Treatment

Hello

I am back and well. The operation went smoothly – no complications. Last night I was in the hospital (had my blood pressure checked every hour) and today I’m so sleepy you could knock me over with a feather.

And on that note, I will not write anymore. Just wanted to say thanks to everyone for all your kind thoughts and prayers. I’m getting through this with a huge help from you.

I’ll write more later,

Catherine

26Jun2010

Before the mastectomy

Posted in Bumpboobs, Treatment

Okay, I love writing – (I also love yogurt, which I'm eating right now) – and through writing I can clean my system. Plus, it's a great way to share information.

So I'm going to write up two posts: before the mastectomy, and after the mastectomy. And I'm going to start immediately, here, now.

The morning of my mastectomy I woke up at 6.50, ate a piece of toast and crashed back into bed. Zsolt and I slept in till nine, then rolled around the apartment till ten. My acupressure must be working, because even with the operation looming I was able to sleep soundly. There was writing of emails, watching of Zsolt (he was eating and I was fasting; I couldn't help salivating as he ate a late breakfast) receiving of letters, and prepping of bags. I used basically nothing that I packed, but it was still good to have it all there. For the most part things stayed 'cool', until I received two letters – one from Sandie and one from Laura, which were both very touching and helped me cry a little. Light crying is a good thing.

Eleven o'clock and we caught the bus to the hospital. I kept looking down at my boobs, that happy couple sitting side by side, and would hold up my hand to cover the right one.

About ten to twelve we arrived at the Princess Anne, and we found our way to D level, day surgery. This is the area for people who are having surgery but leaving the same day. I guess they are getting things taken out, bits sliced off, etc. All the while I waited for them to take me away. One woman had to say goodbye to her husband in the lounge area and *I* burst into tears. How ridiculous is that? It's not like this was a movie scene where the couple says a final goodbye; they didn't even seem to mind. But still, the tears were rolling down my cheeks.

After my little scene, we kept on waiting. A lovely nurse came into the room – she was round, with big hair and a smiling face – and called out a list of names, on which I was placed third. She said that there were not enough beds, so we had to stay in the waiting room while the prep went on, and we'd go off and return one at a time. This was fantastic news for me – because Zsolt was in the waiting room and so long as he was there, I was happy.

Another hour passes by. Zsolt and I visit with my Anaesthetic Doctor (Nick) and he explains what we'll be doing to knock me out. I'm given robes to change into. Then it's back to the waiting room.

Around 3.20 the nurse comes and asks if I'd like to sit on a bed to wait. "I'd rather stay with my husband," I reply. And she says, "No problem, he can come with you."

No problem? He can come with me? What was that pre-assessment nurse telling me two days before?

So! There you have it! Zsolt came with me. We sat in a small curtained off area, I was on the bed and he was on the chair. By this point in the day the patients were tapering off and the nurses seemed to relax. They began to sing '*all things bright and beautiful'* on the other side of the curtain, which I had never heard before. One nurse said it reminded her of a funeral, but another – the smiling nurse from earlier – said it reminded her of home; it reminded her of festivals and how people would walk down the street singing aloud. It held a lot of memories for her. So she sang it again for them. Zsolt and I listened through the curtain. It was lovely.

Eventually a nurse popped her head round our curtain (just past 4 pm) and asked if I was ready. Ready… well, I was willing. Can you ever be ready? A quick goodbye to Zsolt, I pulled myself together and was wheeled to the prep room.

Touching is such a comfort. All this nurse had to do was touch the side of my face and I felt supported.

We wheeled into this small prep room that somehow reminded me of high school tech classes. It seemed too small – not large enough for operating. But, of course, it must not have been. Before me were two grey doors, and I have a feeling the 'theatre' was on the other side.

There was Nick, the man who'd give me drugs, and he put a catheter into my hand. I frigging hate needles. But in it went. He asked me what my favourite drink was . . . hmmm, water filled with ice cubes? (the question as an answer response, very Canadian). He had meant an alcoholic drink, because what I was about to feel would be like two gin and tonics poured into my veins (maybe that's *his* favourite drink). Earlier he had told me it'd loosen me up, make me giggle. Nope, no giggles. I started to cry instead (a very common theme for the day). But good old Nick and my nurse did their best to distract me. "Where's your favourite place for holidays?" Hmmm, Lake Balaton in Hungary? I answered (again as a question, because I wasn't sure of anything at this point). "Sounds great" he replied.

And then I was dreaming about Zsolt's colleague's German accent in conflict with someone else's accent.

And then I was waking up, and realized that I was moving – being rolled, and Nick was there in his blue outfit, and the nurse (name forgotten, sorry!) was there with her pink ribbon and I asked if it had been okay – yes it was okay – and had they gotten it all out – yes they'd gotten it out.

And on we rolled into recovery. The rest was a dream with ins and out. I think I arrived in recovery around 6, and I know I arrived in the ward around 8.40. Zsolt was there after a day of waiting, and I was so tired I could barely stay awake.

But that's after the mastectomy, and this is about before. I'll write the rest later. For now this is enough.

27Jun2010

After the mastectomy

Posted in Bumpboobs, Treatment

Today is Zsolt's 29th birthday. He's a fine kind of man and getting better every year. In the morning I serenaded him with multiple rounds of happy birthday, followed by some birthday crepes (made by Zsolt with my help), presents, and a game of football. England vs Germany – at this point things aren't looking hot for England because Germany just scored their fourth goal. Brutal.

Later today Zsolt will make us some birthday quesadillas while I cheer him on, and we'll have some cheesecake that my colleague's wife bake especially for Zsolt. It's looks really delicious and is sitting in the fridge just waiting to be eaten. Overall this isn't the birthday we expected, but to be together is enough.

Tonight my mom flies out from Ottawa and will land tomorrow morning at Heathrow. She'll be here early afternoon-*ish*. Thank goodness for that; I can hardly wait to see her. Processing this away from home can distance me from those sad emotions, but not being able to hug my family sucks.

So – after the mastectomy, as promised. If you don't want to read a long post I'll give you a quick, poetic-type summary:

After the mastectomy – short version, by Catherine

Groggy, sleeping, blood pressure, needles, pills, waking, washroom hurdles, drinking, vomit, drinking, needle, waking, talking, sitting, bored, sleep, ***Zsolt!*** taxi, bed, painkiller, painkiller, numbness, stiff arm, stiff neck, missing breast, don't look, look, don't look, look and finally get up, get out, get on. And eventually back to bed, because I'm still a little tired.

After the mastectomy – long version, by Catherine

So it's been okay. Thank goodness I'm out of the hospital. Did you know it's nearly *impossible* to sleep in a hospital? Forget about sleeping well, every moment of dreamy bliss is quickly taken away by an alarm, a neighbouring patient, or a visiting nurse. Of course, they're just doing their job and considering how low my blood pressure was, I very much appreciate that.

After Zsolt was asked to leave the ward I drifted off, but was woken soon after for a blood pressure check. Attached to my catheter was a drip, which helped me stay hydrated because I couldn't keep *anything* down. It was a slightly messy night with details I won't mention, but I must give a shout out to Lou in the bed opposite who pulled my curtains shut and handed me a tissue when the nurses couldn't attend.

The staff was busy, but still very supportive. And thank goodness for that midnight shot in the butt. It was a big needle, but stopped my nausea cold. I don't even know the name of the nurse, but I really appreciate her care.

The following morning I had a visit from one of the surgeons. She didn't do the operation, but she had been there to assist. Apparently everything went smoothly; I should have one neat scar across the right of my chest. Actually, she was very friendly and informative.

Then I was visited by one of the breast care nurses. She explained my upcoming appointments (consultation in 2 weeks, they'll examine the lumps and see how weak/strong the cancer is), and gave me a little additional information. I'll be fitted with a silicone breast in about 6 weeks time, after the scar has healed more. Also she warned me to moisturize my arm and hand, to wear gloves around chemicals, and not to get any cuts in my right arm because without the lymph nodes I'm at greater risk of illness in that area.

Finally Zsolt arrived, and we were both visited by another nurse who checked out my bandages, which I didn't look at, and gave me some exercises. Also I received two comfys, which are soft fluffy forms to slip into my bra. Frankly, a bra is totally unappealing at the moment but it's nice to know I have spare boobs available.

Pain wise it's not bad. There is a numbness beneath my arm (because they removed the lymph nodes) that is slowly changing into a tingle. But no – I'd say a paper cut with its shocking sting is more painful, though less constant. However this is my fucking breast so ultimately a paper cut doesn't compare; stupid example.

Point: it's not too painful.

Comfort wise it is different. I feel like something is constantly pulling on my side and the numbness is a bit disturbing. Also there is a drain in my chest, which leads into a long tube, and down into a container which Zsolt empties once a day because I can't stand to watch. I'm leaking fluid and blood. Gross.

Body wise it's a shock. At the hospital I never looked down. At home I was crying when Zsolt helped me change shirts. The uneven slant of cloth across my chest is bizarre. I miss my perky peaks; now it's all downhill.

However, today I *didn't* cry, and I *didn't* freak out. This is my chest and I've got to accept that. And I think that once the discomfort stops, I'll really be able to adapt to my new look. I *still* look forward to visiting the beach, and I still look forward to wearing pretty dresses with v-neck tops.

Bottom line: I still love my body.

That is after the mastectomy, as promised. Anyone about to undergo the procedure – all I can say is have a chat with yourself, know it's the best and just get through. Everyone reacts differently to losing a breast, but we all come through it. And it's better on the other side. This cancer is out of my body, and even if anything remains – I'm going to blast the shit out of it with treatments to follow.

So here's to the first step. And here's to Zsolt, my new carer and 29 year-old hunk. Happy birthday Zsolti, I couldn't have managed without you.

Cheers!

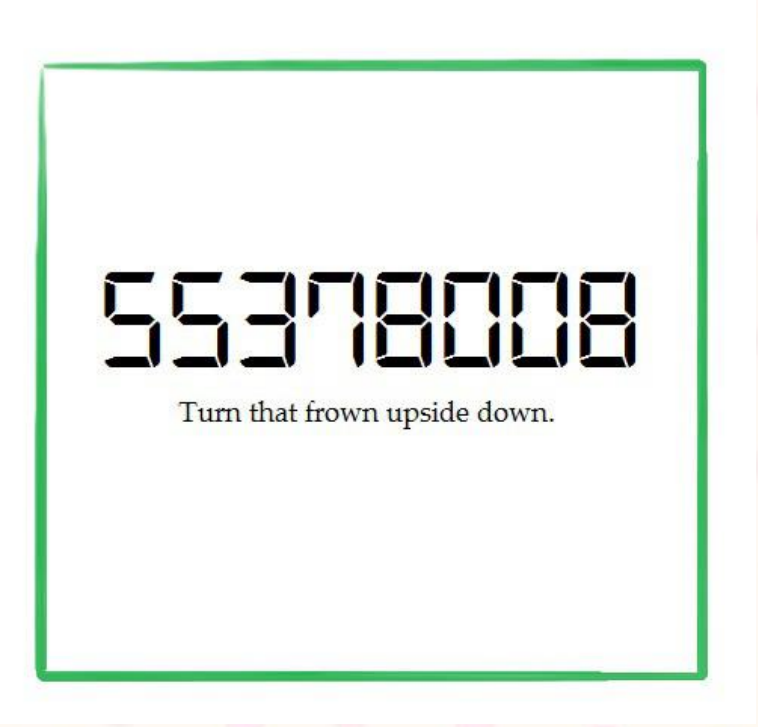
29Jun2010

Oh boobs.

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life, Uncategorized

Man-Bugger-Frig-DAMN-Augh-Frack-Fuck. Ahhhhh*HHH*!

I've been demoted a bra size. My boobs have always been two different sizes, the left smaller and the right a bit larger, but the nipples were even, so who cared? Not me. I was a happy, healthy, proportionally kick-ass 34 B–ish. *Ish.*



Well, not anymore! Post mastectomy, little lefty is all that remains and she is a healthy size A.

Okay, okay. 'Healthy' should be the key word in that previous sentence, I know. But Frig. FRACK. BOOBS!

Today I wore my first 'false' breast, which is why I'm griping. I have this post-recovery camisole with pockets for a fake breast. My mom and I spent about ten minutes with the comfy – pulling out stuffing and trying to find it the right position in the shirt. Once we finally had it in place, I pulled my dress over and took a look in the mirror – *hmm, even looking . . . but, smaller . . .* Even Zsolt has noticed, though I suppose of all people he *would* be the one to notice.

This is not the end of my world. On the brighter side, my drain has been removed by two wonderful nurses who visited my home (I really mean it, they are great. Vicky in particular was so reassuring). And on the even brighter side, my mom is here and we spent an hour in a cafe today talking; getting out was difficult at first, I nearly fell asleep on the table from exhaustion, but after a cup of tea the world become far easier.

So yes, there are good things happening. But it's a change – that's all I'm saying, and a disappointment. Big reliefs and small disappointments. These feelings can be tough, but I know they won't last.

Bumpyboobs gets a little bit smaller. Hey, they're still cute, and lefty's been good to me. She really has. Thank God she's healthy. Now I'm praying and fighting so that she and the rest of me can stay that way.

2Jul2010

There was a little girl

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life, Love

A long time ago, in a land far, far away (a magical nation of poutine, ice hockey and toques) I was a little girl who occasionally became sick. And when I was sick, if I really was sick, my mom would make chicken soup, and my dad would bring gingerale, and they'd say while stroking my forehead, "It's no fun being sick, eh kid?"

And those few words, whether I was nauseous or feverish or sniffing with a cold – they always made me feel a little bit better.

Just like now. My mom is here, and she's making me meals, bringing me supplements, and pushing me to exercise. She hasn't said *it's no fun being sick, kid* (that was my dad's thing) – but she's told me it is okay to be angry, and okay to be sore, and **okay** not to be **okay** all the time.

And that makes me feel a little bit better. Actually, it makes me feel a whole lot better.

So FYI Mom – your help has been invaluable. INVALUABLE. And FYI Dad – your treatments are really helping, really, really. I've been able to cope with so much more after working with you both.

And while there is more to say, and more that's gone on, these two deserve a post of their own.

Thanks Mom and Dad.

3Jul2010

Post Mastectomy Recovery

Posted in Bumpboobs, Treatment, Uncategorized

It's funny when they advise that mastectomy recovery takes 2-4 weeks, because my mind automatically assumes that I'll have this beat in one week, tops. Four weeks of recovery? Sorry, but I don't think so; not this girl. Didn't you hear? I'm a fighter.

And I am a fighter. But one week post surgery I can now see this taking a while. Yes, I am out of the hospital, and yeah, I'm not falling asleep on the floor, but my side is *still* tight, my wound is *still* numb, my energy is *still* low, my arm *still* aches, and the bandages won't be removed till next Monday (aka my birthday).

Like I said before, it's not a terrible pain but it is persistent. I'm all elastics that won't stretch, and pulling gives that 'about to snap' sensation. But there is my routine, thank goodness for small miracles. My routine, and my mother, are pushing me along.

So here it is, **Catherine's Feel Good Ready Recovery Mastectomy Routine** – check it out and apply as needed:

Morning.

Wake up! It's a good start to another good day. Your alarm clock will most likely be the postman with a delivery, a result of ordering way too much from Amazon because it's hard to leave the house for over twenty minutes, and stir crazy = online shopping. Wrap a bathrobe over your body and answer the door. Say hello, share a smile, and sign an electric pad with your scribble.

Eat! Now is the time to bulk-up that body. Here is breakfast, here are the vitamins, and here is the protein shake that Mom has whipped together (after many rejected trials we have settled for a mixture of powder, orange juice, and carbonated water, sometimes she makes protein powder crepes, and those are the very best).

Exercise! There is a list of exercises from the nurses that *must* be done three times a day. They are as follows: neck rotations, chicken wing lifts, chicken wing circles, beach ball, spider, behind the back, and up the wall. You may prefer to forget about these exercises (a reminder that moving is difficult, plus they're totally boring to do), but persist regardless. Apply mother's insistence if necessary.

Walk! Get out of the house, even if only for a short time. Whether we just circle the street or have a drink at Tragos, getting out and moving has been exhausting – but day by day it is becoming much easier.

Relax! Aka, come home and crash into bed. Don't move because the arm is swelling, pulling and threatening to snap. Lay still for twenty minutes till sensations subside. Then, read a book for twenty more minutes because you can, and why not relax while work has you signed off? I'm right in the middle of *Unseen Academicals* by Terry Pratchett and hate to leave it untouched for long.

WORK! Throw bombs, do visualizations, and try right-hand/left-hand writing. What do we want? *All cancer to die!* Who's gonna do it? *We are!* What are we aiming for? *The best news ever!*

Next Wednesday is my consultation, a result of med students and treatment specialists putting their heads together and discussing whether it's worth blasting the shit out of my body over the next year. And it's possible, because I'm young, they'll lean towards 'yes'. *BUT* I'm putting all my energy into them changing their minds, because miraculously the cancer is dying and the margins are very safe and, my goodness Catherine, it's disappeared all together!

We aim for the best. All I can do is take things one step at a time, and either I sit here in anxious anticipation of a terrible year, or I let my mind and body start fighting. So I'm fighting: throwing bombs and punches at any fear, doubt or preconceived notion that enters my mind. A lot of bombs have been thrown. A lot of shrapnel has gone flying.

Rinse and Repeat! Do it again, wussy! Get up and hit those targets – afternoon and evening, with a few substitutions and a gradual tapering off of activity. I get sore the longer I'm active, and the miracle of caffeine only lasts a certain amount of time. But each day stretches further than the last, and that is so encouraging.

It's taking time. I'm not out saving the world yet, or even riding my bike. But things are getting better, and they'll keep getting better.

I am a fighter – I am recovering – and I'll keep doing both for however long it takes.

P.S. HAPPY CANADA DAYYYYYYYY — WOOOOHOOOOO! CANADA!!!! I miss barbeques, fireworks, body painting, and aimless downtown wandering while draped in red and white. However I did set myself a goal on Canada day, which was to make it to a friend's art exhibit opening. It's inspiring when friends succeed, and giving them support brings us all further. So on July 1st I put on my too-tight recovery bra and a dress, went with my mom, Zsolt, Ulrike and Darren, and visited Ian Kirkpatrick's *Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger* solo exhibit. Ian and his wife Sara have been good friends since we met in Gower, check out his exhibit details here (being shown till September in the Michael Andrews Building at Southampton Solent University); he has a very impressive graphic design portfolio. Actually, Sara also has an impressive archaeology blog. Look into the past here.

Anyhow, thirty minutes there and I was a cooked goose – couldn't stand a moment longer with my arm throbbing at my side (I miss my lymph nodes). Zsolt touched my back during the opening speech and was surprised to feel sweat – yeah, I was sweating; being there was an effort, but a worthwhile one. After taking a tour of the work and chatting with the artist, we all piled into the car and took off back home where I popped two pain killers and went directly to bed. But it was worth it; my goal to visit the exhibit was achieved. So that was my Canada day, and it felt pretty good.

5Jul2010

Birthday girl

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life

Today is my birthday. I am now 28 years old.

And ten years ago I was turning 18, running off to the bars in Hull and having a great time with my friends. It was goodbye fake IDs (in Quebec) and hello all night dancing. But even then I said to myself, 'Eighteen? Man, I'm getting older.'

But today I don't feel older. I feel like myself, same as yesterday with a pinch more experience, and while there are a few lines on my face that weren't there ten years ago, getting older is welcomed, very welcomed. Every birthday is a gift.

Anyhow today I'm 28 years old, which is still very young and still oh-so-fresh, and hopefully that feeling never fades. I look forward to many more birthdays and many more breakfasts in beds and many more outings with all night dancing.

So that's good news. More good news – my bandages are coming off. Okay, honestly I'm scared for this. Scared to have the sticky sides pull against my skin – scared at the idea that it might reopen my healing scar – scared at what I'll see after the coverings have been removed.

It's a big day in more ways than one. A big day for me.

5Jul2010

Mastectomy scar

Posted in Bumpboobs

An alien has landed on my chest. It's taken over the place where my breast once lived, and is lying there flat as a beached jelly fish with a red, thin scar through the middle. Or so it seems.

About fifteen minutes ago a nurse removed the bandage and paper stitches from my wound. Bit by bit the sticky papers were gently peeled off. After several minutes of wincing and looking away, she finally leaned back. '*All clear, it's done*.'

I waited till the nurse left before looking. With Zsolt holding my hand and mom on standby with a big cup of tea – we all looked down together.

Overall this could be worse. One: I could still have the cancer in my body. Two: I could have Frankenstein stitches. Three: it could have been infected, or swollen, or just plain ugly.

Instead it is a clean wound that is healing. '*Fabulous*' was the nurse's word. '*Tidy'* would be mine. Fabulous seems a bit of an overstatement. Shopping in Iceland would be fabulous, eating Pizza on the roof of Jasper Pizza Place would be fabulous, spending the day at that spa in Kanata – fabulous.

It looks like an alien breast . . . the same way movie aliens have no hair, my right breast has no nipple and no curve either. It's been ironed flat, though a small bit of soft tissue is left behind (probably in case I decide to have reconstruction). There's a horizontal scar running across the right side of my chest, like a puppet's mouth . . . any moment it'll start talking.

First reactions – Grief. Loss. And my poor left breast looks quite alone, somehow it's also become more strange to me. Neither side seems to belong, not like they once did. But time should make things easier. Sooner than later I'll look down and not think twice. Hmm, I like that rhyme*: It will be nice to not think twice.*

A cancer-free boob. That's a first in regards to birthday presents.

6Jul2010

What I want

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life

Just got back from a barbeque with friends. It was a lovely evening – filled with burgers and flames and salads and strawberries and cards and easy conversation. Ulrike made a sponge birthday cake, which Darren carried out with the candles lit. Zsolt stole chips from my plate while patting my hand. Laura impersonated a boxer with incredible accuracy, and I finally met Gareth long enough to chat.

It was a great evening. Good friends make for great evenings. And backyards – one day Zsolt and I will have a backyard with our own little vegetable patch (or herb garden) and we'll invite friends round to enjoy a twilight meal. Won't that be wonderful?

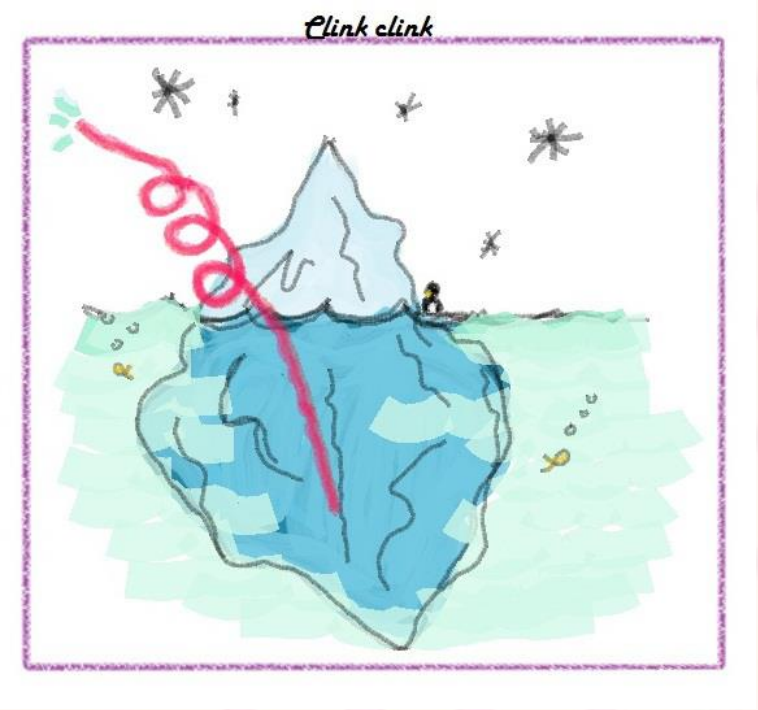
Tomorrow I visit my surgeon's clinic and discuss my pathology results. I'm throwing bombs and hoping for the best. If you don't ask for the best, you'll never get it – so I'm asking, telling, shouting and praying for the very best news possible. Safe margins and good news. That's what I want.

7Jul2010

Cancer treatment plan

Posted in Bumpboobs, Treatment

There's nothing like a dose of reality to make a girl feel crushed. But then again, there isn't much better than a long nap and a drink of ice water to make *this* girl feel better.



Cancer never felt more real than it did today. Even with a breast removed, the 'C' word doesn't become tangible until the doctor lets slip those dreaded few words: '*it's chemo time, baby.'*

Blarg.

So today (past tense) Zsolt, my mother and I go to the oncology outpatients centre. We are received and shown a room rather quickly (very quickly – last time we waited about 45 minutes, this time it was 10). The nurse asked me to put on the cape; I said '*no thank you*' and didn't, because that cape is terrible and cold.

Eventually the surgeon arrives with one of the breast care nurses. This gentleman is not one for flowery words. He gets down to it. *Your cancer is a mixture of fast and slow growing cells, it has spread to four lymph nodes. You will, most likely, be recommended a course of chemo therapy, radiation therapy and hormone therapy.*

Zsolt shoots questions from the right corner chair.

Zsolt: What about the margins, are they safe?

My Surgeon: The margins are clear, but small.

Zsolt: And the blood vessels?

My Surgeon: Good question (*points for Zsolt*). They have tested clear, but we can't be sure.

Zsolt: Has is spread beyond the lymph nodes?

My Surgeon: Result show no evidence, but because it was present in four lymph nodes, there is a risk of spreading. (*minus points for me*)

A few more questions from my mom, which for some reason I cannot remember, and then he bowed out and left the room. I tried saying thank you for removing my breast, but he waved it aside. I do not think it was a

rude wave, not at all, it was a 'don't worry about it, this is my job and I don't do well with flattery' sort of wave. It was a respectable wave, but I'll probably send a card nevertheless.

So crap. Fuck. And yeah, okay I am swearing. . . but come on. Never in my life would I choose to go through such physical bullshit, this black hole of shit (as one friend described), and to swear feels good. Really good. I'd like to spend an entire day doing nothing but swearing because at the moment I am so angry with my body, and so angry with my circumstances, that to open a big can of '**what the fuck**' and shake it all over town would be really satisfying. I'd like to get a mega phone and turn it to sonic high and just yell, and yell, and yell about how angry I really feel.

The funny thing is, there will always be people who have it worse. Walking through the hospital is a stark reminded of that reality. It's one reason why I turn my stride to speed-walk as I navigate the long florescent corridors of the general hospital; they have it much worse, and I don't want to become one of them. That's terrible, isn't it? I know. I really know. But I'm desperate to not become a sick person in the hallway. Even if others look at me and feel the same kind of dread, I don't want to 'belong'. Though I am so very sorry that any person needs to be there. Everyone fights their own battle, and I'm finally starting to realize how difficult that can feel.

Anyhow, after meeting with the surgeon we met with the oncologist. He was a nice fellow, a little more sympathetic but still professional. He must deliver difficult news on a daily basis.

The friendly oncologist slowly unwrapped my situation. Essentially, he believes that without any further treatment I hold a rather high risk of reoccurrence. Particularly in young women with breast cancer reoccurrence is a concern. Seems like the cancer gets a kick outta young blood and has a tendency to ride it around the body, sometimes showing up again quite far from the original site.

He also explained that radiation therapy, chemo therapy and hormone therapy will reduce the likelihood of reoccurrence by about 50%.

AHHHH boy. Fifty percent. That's *only* half the pizza.

But I need to do everything possible to improve my recovery – and to **stop** reoccurrence. I did not want chemo, but looking at the pathology it seems that chemo is a reasonable response. Not a happy one – but reasonable.

I know what I want: health, family, love, good things and great results. I *know* what I want. And just because I've been given a more difficult road doesn't mean my eye is off the prize. It may be the doctor's job to break tough news, but it's my job to rebound and fight on.

Gotta keep throwing those bombs, gotta keep fighting back.

The reality of chemo has been difficult today. But people get through, don't they? Many people get through and go on with their lives. Like I said before, I look forward to normal – my just like always. So long as that's in my mind, I can fight.

Next come the decisions. Do I stay or go back to Canada? One thing is for sure, I will not leave my husband. Not a chance.

When I started Bumpyboobs I had hoped to write a light blog about breast cancer screening. There is so much out there that scares me to read; I feel a sense of dread while reading the experience of others, and I never wanted this blog to inspire that feeling. But this is cancer, and emotional highs and lows are inevitable.

But I do promise this – I'll try and write the high as often as I write the low. I can be angry one moment, sad the next, and then the sky may clear, or I'll pass a rose bush, or my husband will blow a kiss, and suddenly it's all highs and smiles once again.

This blog is *not* just about breast cancer. It's about the good and the bad and the fight inside.

Keep an eye on the prize. These down moods can't last forever; there are better things to come.

8Jul2010

Braless in Britain

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life

Today I made two decisions.

First was to forget about the bra. Mom and I went in search of health food stores on the high street, and I wore my loose and lovely blue dress. Because the dress has some strategic pleats I was able to walk around *sans*-false breast (*sans bra altogether)* and it felt divine: just me and the soft caress of cotton in the breeze. You know what, I think people didn't even notice.

Today was a very good day for body image awesomeness. I also bought a shirt from H&M that has similar pleats. The neckline plunges considerably, but I figure why not? I'm only 28, and so what if I occasionally show a bit of scar? Once this wound heals it will lighten and become less alarming to the accidentally flashed, plus in general the design of this shirt means neither boob nor scar will be hanging out for the world to see.

Shopping. Oh I love it, even if I can only stand an hour before my side becomes overcome with pins and needles.

My second decision has also been made today. Zsolt and I will stay in England for the chemotherapy. While I'd love to be near my family, I also love being near my husband – and he needs to finish his thesis, which can best be done with access to the university and his colleagues. In the meantime I'll start applications in case we decide to move after chemo is completed. At the moment that future decision to move is still in the air, but for now we're staying put in jolly old England.

So there you go. Today I am feeling better, better than yesterday, for sure. To top off the good vibes my work colleagues stopped by for a visit (and brought presents, yay!). I'll tell you what, the library is the loveliest place – from the people, to the environment, to the work. Shout out to Nick and Margaret! Thanks for coming round; it was great to chat a while.

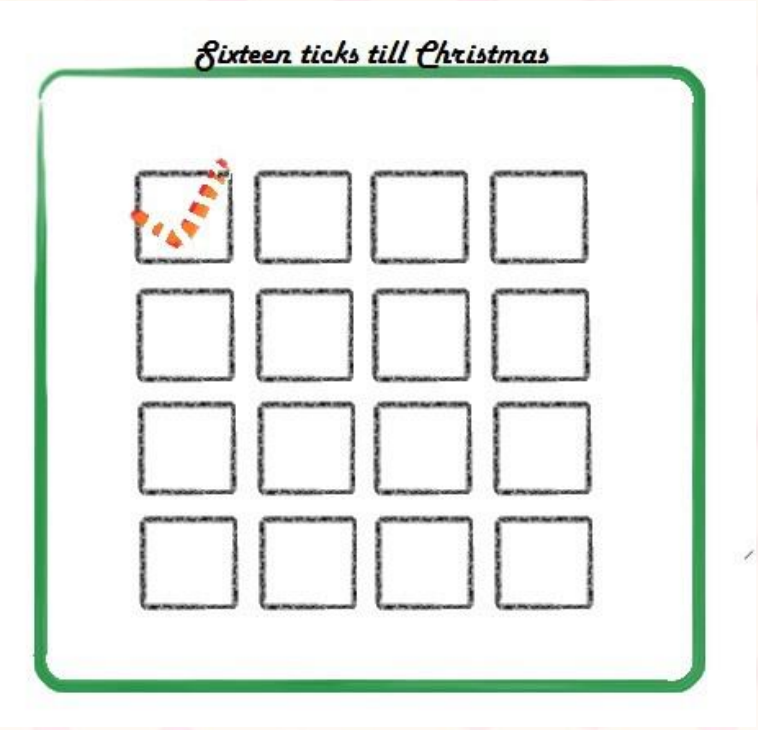
So high and lows, as promised. Today has been a high. And thanks goodness for that.

PS – an extra shout out to the generous ladies who delivered a certain lunch/dinner this past afternoon. Your thoughtfulness is very much appreciated, and I think was a highlight in the day. It's incredible how people can take care of one another. Wonderful too.

12Jul2010

The schedule cometh

Posted in Bumpboobs, Treatment



Today I received a letter from the hospital detailing my entire chemo schedule. I even know what chair I'll be sitting in for each appointment, and the length of time I'll be there for (1.15 hour and 1.45 after switching medications). There are, in total, sixteen sessions with the last session arriving just before Christmas (December 10th, 2010). This means that maybe, *just maybe*, I'll be making it home for Christmas this year. It's an idea that warms my heart.

But before running off to Canada with wrapped presents in my arms (oh, I am looking forward to that day), there are several things that must be done before chemosizing my life. Apart from visiting the local coffee shop while blatantly lacking a bra (and feeling damn good about it), I need to start Zsolt's application for residence, find a wig, take a holiday, browse apartments and eventually visit the mastectomy store.

I'm very thankful for this time off from cancer. It's been nice, and I think will continue to be nice. July 30th is ever looming, but the sooner it starts the sooner it is over. In the meantime I'll just take a few deep breaths and keep calming myself down.

13Jul2010

Snuggie wars

Posted in Life, Love

Daniel and JP, my two thoughtful brothers, have bought me a Snuggie.

A ‘snuggie’ is a long fleece blanket with sleeves – totally ridiculous, but totally awesome. My snuggie is beige, and the sleeves are giant – they hang off my arms like Princess Leia in that white gown, and if I put a little effort in I can wrap the giant beige blanket around my body so it doesn’t trip me when I move.

Give me two hair buns and a lightsaber; I’ll start kicking some dark side ass.

Yeah Snuggie!

13Jul2010

Better than 50%

Posted in Bumpboobs, Treatment

On special request from my grandmother, Lulu, I will attempt to write more often.

She put it to me quite nicely yesterday: "I don't want to bother you, but I worry!"

Well don't worry Lulu, because I am fine – *Je suis tres bien aujourd'hui. J'ai travaille avec ma mere pour etre "okay" avec ma chimio, j'ai aussi commence a faire un menu pour que Zsolt puisse me faire de la nourriture quand je suis fatigue** – and I am writing.

I was just saying to my mother the other day, 'Who are these people coping well with chemo?' because I hear of them, but haven't actually met any of them – nor have I see their blogs online. So, that started the google search mission. Both she and Zsolt have managed to find stories where people cope with the treatment and do not suffer any treacherous side effects. Mind you, each chemo approach is different depending on the cancer. For instance, one lady had chemo every three to four weeks. I'll be having chemo every two weeks, later followed by every week. However, I'm trying to ignore that side of their good news and focus on the positive stuff – people cope well, and are able to carry on with their lives.

And on that note, Mom found an interesting website. There was a little boy – three years old – who was diagnosed with a cancer that has a survival rate of about 3%. Now that's scary. But his parents took it upon themselves to give him every fighting chance possible. Years later he is cancer free. His dad ensured that every possible option was explored – and while there was probably an element of miracle in his great recovery – watching this father speak was a source of inspiration for alternative ways I can better prepare and protect my body**.

But you see, it's not that I want to turn away from the medical advice provided. The doctors I have worked with are very experienced, specialize in breast care, and know what they know. So that isn't it. I'm still having the chemo. I'm still having the radiation. I'm still doing the hormones. But . . . I still want to do more. I want better than 50%.

A long time ago I worked for PWC, and while working there – during a purge of office clutter and clean up – I acquired several pads of PWC note paper. On every page of this notepad it reads: 'Have I explored every angle?'

Apart from loving to have that sweet copywriting opportunity, I admire the statement.

Have I explored every angle? Not yet, but I'm trying. Today I went to the acupuncturist. In a few weeks I'll start treatments. A while back my breast was removed. In the meanwhile I'm taking supplements. On top of that I'm lessening estrogen-encouraging food in my diet. Tomorrow I'm going to the shop and buying glass containers to replace my plastic Tupperware (though I do love my Tupperware). Tonight I'll try to meditate. And all the while my air filter is running, getting rid of mould and mite crap from the air.

Why not fight from every angle, what's so wrong about that? Nothing. Not a thing. Nada.

So, that's encouraging.

* *Thanks for translating, Mom.*

*** Watch Bobby's father describe their efforts to beat cancer and reduce the side effects of chemo treatments. It's broken into parts. Click here for Part one, Part two, Part three, Part four. You can also visit their website, where proceeds go toward supporting other children in a similar situation: http://www.bobbyshealthyshop.com/*

15Jul2010

Sharing a shoebox

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life

Living in a small apartment with three people is an exercise in patience and respect. It's funny because each of us have our own projects to get on with, but we also have our own patterns and habits.

Let's just say it's a full house. A full flat. A small and full one-bedroom flat.

In a dream world we'd live a few streets over where the homes are large, with studies and sitting rooms and gardens full of roses. In a dream world we'd have separate bathrooms, and Cath Kidson sheets, and super king beds with mints on our pillows.

And maybe one day that will happen. But today we are getting along in this cramped apartment – not pulling our hair out, not having arguments, and not driving each other crazy. At least not all the time.

Because in my world, the one I walk through and laugh in and am thankful for every day – I have more love than anyone could ask. And while this place is chalk full of people, it's also brimming with care and concern and good company.

A little space is a good thing. But having your husband and mother nearby is quite fantastic too.

** That being said, Zsolt and I are escaping for a one-night get away this weekend to the New Forest. Ohhhh yeah! Cream tea, three course dinner, and English breakfast – here we come! This is an abnormal splurge for sure, but who doesn't benefit from the occasional indulgence? It's a little bit of dream come true.*

15Jul2010

What I shouldn't think

Posted in Bumpboobs, Treatment

Here is a secret – and I'm going to write it down, right now. This is something that I've said before, and feel guilty about every time. The guilt just swarms me because it's not only about fear, it's also about pride.

So here is my secret. I am afraid that the cancer is going to reoccur. I am afraid it might spring up in another part of my body and go unnoticed, or even in my breast – maybe I could lose the other; I'm afraid that my efforts will be ineffective, afraid about the uncertainties, afraid that despite punching and visualizing and saying *'I'm a fighter'* I'm ultimately a fool because this sick part of my body might come back and take over.

That's my secret. It's a thought I don't want in my head. Preferably I would never, ever think it again – and I wish that having admitted to my worry it would dissipate from my mind; the thought would float away and never again would I doubt myself.

Positive thinking is very appealing, but also difficult. I might say I'm a fighter – but I'm also a worrier, and a thinker, and a feeler who has been swamped with emotions during the past two months. It's embarrassing to imagine my determination could be for nothing. *And* it's embarrassing to be embarrassed.

But it is good to be honest, which is why I'm writing this post. Hopefully it brings a little freedom, regardless of whether it banishes the thought. My secret is my doubt; it's something I'm only starting to realize, and only starting to work around.

I guess we all worry that we'll fail. There must be some natural instinct or programming that is ingrained in our psyches. Who knows . . . my psychology knowledge is up to a BA level, but that was years ago and I don't claim to be an expert in anything expect Zsolt, my front yard with the maple, that feeling when you write, and how to make a fabulous Eggs Benedict.

My name is Catherine, and I stress about reoccurrence. *Whew.*

And now having admitted that, it's time to move on.

19Jul2010

Chemo wig and pretty scarves

Posted in Bumpboobs, Treatment

I bought a wig. Now, maybe a girl shouldn't admit to using tricks – but a wig is a wig is a wig, and if you know me, or you read this blog, or if you look really close – there is no hiding that fact.

It's golden blond, not too light and cropped to fall and few inches below my chin. Putting it on feels similar to putting on a hat. Except that unlike a hat, I need to spend about fifteen minutes patting and playing and rearranging the scattered synthetic hairs into place. And also unlike a hat, it looks ridiculous when messy.

Another thing, with this wig my head has gained at least an inch of height. *Oh the incredible volume.* All my life I've battled (when I could be bothered) against my fine hair. I'd tried curling, blow drying, spraying . . . all to have the style flatten within an hour. But stick on this wig and I'm 'news anchor ready'. I feel, with hair this large, that I ought to host a morning show where me and my charming male co-host (Zsolt, of course) review the latest books and drink from large mugs of fresh brewed, fair trade coffee.

Going into the wig shop was an uncomfortable experience, made more uncomfortable by the completely apathetic sales girls who were on the floor 'helping' customers. If alone I would have booted it outta there, but my mom was behind me with a prodding stick, saying – *we just need to find the right one, Catherine.*

I guess she was right, we did find one. The next day I took Zsolt to the shop and he gave his stamp of approval. No doubt this look is different, but at least it *is* a look.

So it's an option, and I'm very glad to have it. On a more adventurous note – I've totally hooked myself up with several colourful scarves and under scarves. There is this girl on youtube who explains ways to tie scarves and what pins are best, etc. She's striking, so knows her style, and easy to follow – and while I don't exactly copy her methods (e.g. I don't need to cover my neck), it's a great source of inspiration.

And that means I have another option. A funky option.

Finally, next Tuesday I'm getting my hair chopped off. It seems that there is a better chance of keeping my hair during treatment if it's short.

But no matter what I'll be ready with the accessories, and will try to be daring. The last time I cut my hair extremely short was in grade seven, and some child jackass followed me around saying "are you a boy or a

girl?" It's funny the sort of crap that kids accept, amazing really. But bullying is another topic, and thankfully I didn't have too much of it.

Anyhow – yes. I bought a wig this past weekend. I also bought some lovely scarves. And finally, to be written about later – I went to a gorgeous hotel and had an incredible Sunday night retreat.

Pretty productive, if I do say so myself.

20Jul2010

Going short

Posted in Bumpboobs, Treatment

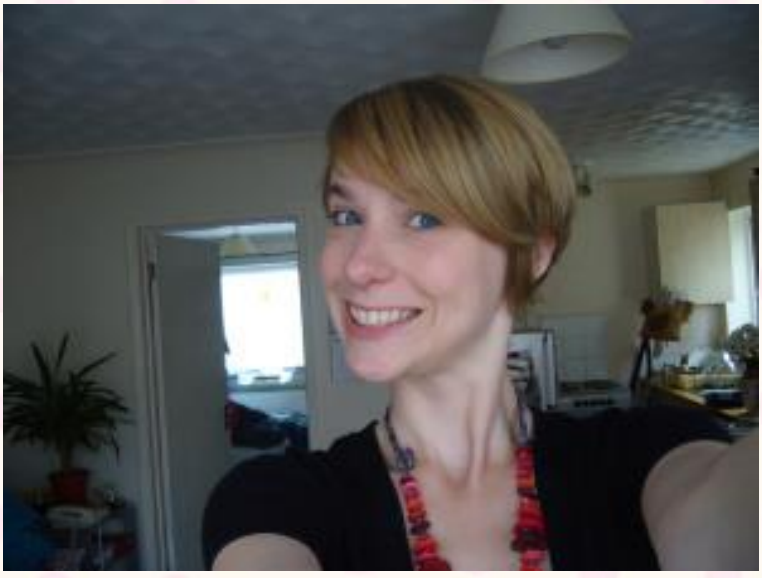
I'm getting my hair cut today and going as short as I possibly dare. It feels like lately I'm taking deep breaths and diving into things non-stop. Maybe that explains my recent desire to go swimming all the time. I'm totally craving a beach with some cool ocean spray! Anyhow . . . deep breath – time to get my hair wet.

21Jul2010

Oh, this is quite cute

Posted in Bumpboobs, Treatment

Much to my relief and surprise, short hair isn't bad on this here girl (me). In fact, it's cute.



Around 2.00 pm yesterday, after an acupuncture session and quick lunch at home, Mom and I rolled into the hairdresser's. Marcelle (my mom) stationed herself on the lounge chair and began to read her book. I was taken to my hair stylist's station for a chat before the traditional hair wash.

This was *not* like the wig shop. Not at all. My hairdresser, Becky asked how I was doing, and I replied '*fine, thanks, but I need to get my hair cut short because I'll be having some treatments soon*,' following which she prodded further and had me talking about finding the bump, getting the mastectomy, getting ready for chemo etc. She wanted to know how I was, how I found it, everything really. So I told her, because that's what I do. But you know, she didn't have to do any of that – I've only had my hair cut with her about two times prior to yesterday.

And after our chat, she pulled out a few magazines and we flipped through the models – pointing out styles and discussing what might be best. It's really nice when people speak with confidence. I remember my surgeon spoke with confidence about my surgery, which gave me some peace of mind, and yesterday Becky said no problem, my hair is great for going short and my face can support the change. She also suggesting I come round after the chemo, and she'll take whatever I have and make something great from it.

It was just such a refreshing conversation, so encouraging.

Anyhow, then came the wash, and then came the cutting – but I wasn't nervous any longer. Actually, I was a bit excited as she snipped away the pieces and gave my hair new shape. She was really conscientious in sculpting my new hairstyle, and even if it only lasts a couple weeks – I'm so glad to have made this change.

To the point: It looks great. She was great. I can 100% recommend her at Shine on University Road, Southampton.

Two thumbs up for my cool new hair. Hopefully I'll snap a picture soon so it can be posted online. But I have to say, it's like 1000% better than a wig. Let's hope it sticks around a little bit longer.

22Jul2010

Itchy fingers

Posted in Bumpboobs, Treatment

There are so many things I'd like to write about: last Sunday and the incredible trip I had with Zsolt, last night's journey down PMS lane (where I morphed into the Incredible Hulk of hormone induced mood swings and nearly threw a broom out the window – it's really a terrible broom), this morning's trip to the mastectomy shop in the middle of an industrial zone where I tried on extra large A and B cup bras and couldn't believe the drastic different in size compared to my normal bras – *it's just not right when a B cup bra can also fit the entire top of my head*, yesterday's drive through the New Forest with Carole followed by tea in her beautiful garden, my afternoon visit to Ulrike's and her magical yard of relaxation and picnic tables, the surprise email from my aunt providing a very generous gift for my mom's peace of mind, or even sipping tea at Trago Lounge with my mother and working out chemo issues – trying to get myself ready for next week's new adventure . . .

There are so many things to write about. It's exhausting to consider. And that paragraph must have been exhausting to read. Sooner than later I'll steal some time to write a proper post. **Sooner.** I really need to write again. **Much sooner.** I also really need to start drawing. My fingers are itching from the inactivity. The creative part of my mind is banging it's head against the wall.

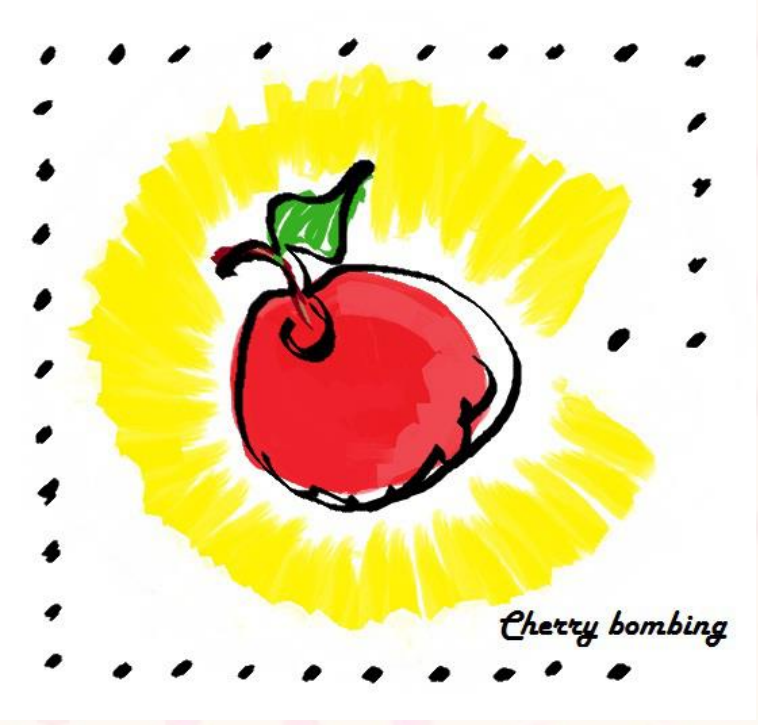
Time is such a precious thing. I'm craving it more than ever. Tonight or tomorrow. I NEED to start writing.

23Jul2010

Chemo cherries and Pac Man

Posted in Bumpboobs, Treatment

Every morning I wake up and drink the most horrible concoction of wheat germ gross. Well, maybe it's not exactly wheat germ – it's a Hungarian thing that is meant to boost the immune system and help kill bad cells (*aka, cancer cells*).



Combine that with the chemo drugs and we'll have a game of Pac Man. The little ghosty cancer cells (*if they're in my body still)* will be floating around the grid stalking my healthy Mrs Pac Man with her pretty pink bow. But ***BAM*** – here comes a chemo cherry and now it's going wild. She'll gobble them whole, boosting up on immune system lives, and send them all to ghost prison where they die-die-die. In my game the ghosts never come back; I always hated how the nasty buggers were allowed to escape the centre box. In this version they are eaten and then disappear from the entire series. If you proceed to the next level it's a breeze because all the ghosties have been eradicated, and Mrs Pac Man is welcomed to chomp in a healthy, cancer-free grid.

So I'm taking the terrible wheat germ stuff. Every morning I wake up and shoot it down with a quarter glass of almond milk. At first it was a twist in my arm, but now I'm beginning to own the habit.

My mom often talks about 'owning your space'. I know others who do this well, so can imagine what she means – wherever you go, whatever situation, you make your place. I've been so anxious about entering the chemo room, with its numbered chairs and cancer patients, and I'm a little concerned that it's the anxiety, not the chemo, that may send me into freak-out mode.

MRI and the dizzy dye was exactly the same. I had a mediocre peanut butter sandwich but that was no reason to faint on the nurses, almost take an ambulance ride, and vomit my guts up after the scan. It was all nerves. All nerves.

We're practicing 'owning spaces' but it doesn't come naturally. Another thing on my to-do list: visualizations. Every time I even imagine the treatment room butterflies start to flutter. Nerves again, needing to be conquered.

Honestly, I'm terrible at Pac Man. But with the supplements and drinks and treatments and consultations, I'll jam that grid full of cherries. It's time to go fruit salad.

25Jul2010

Five years

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life, Love, Uncategorized

Yesterday was a good day – five years with Zsolti. We celebrated by sleeping in, trolling around Ikea, having tea at Trago and watching the original Toy Story. Also, last weekend we went to a lovely hotel and had a lovely time doing lovely things. So that was very romantic too.

Right – married one year, together for five. I met Zsolt in a hostel in Nice, France. He was with a group of friends and I was with my little brother, Dan Man. It was 'right place right time' for us both. Zsolt had asked a girl to come along, but she was busily engaged with her *actual* boyfriend – and I had come out of a relationship.

We were just on vacation. But geez, it was good to be together – so good that Zsolt met us in Amsterdam when we headed up north after France.

Anyhow – details of the Anne Frank museum, canal tours, wandering streets and dodging bicycles skipped (although Amsterdam is a beautiful city, I can thoroughly recommend it) – I *knew* that he was for me. If I didn't see this guy again, it'd be a massive mistake. So after we said goodbye for the second time I swore to take action.

And five years later we're waking up together, married, and pretty freaking lucky. Zsolt is all heart, all caring, all love, and the rock in my life.

He's also a total hottie.

29Jul2010

Chemotherapy pre-assessment

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

Well tomorrow it all begins. My appointment is at 12 pm and I'll be sitting in the number 5 green chair of the chemo treatment room. It's an easy chair – lazy boy 'esque' – and beside it is a low square table and a seat for a guest. The room itself is square and the chairs are all around, people can easily turn to their neighbours, there is no hiding.

On Tuesday I had a tour of the facilities, which is why the details are running through my mind so much. The chair, the room, the smell, the people. It was all introduced to me last Tuesday.

So here's how it is going to work: Go in the day before, get weighed, measured and blood drawn. If all seems well (my white blood cell count is sufficient) come in the next day for another treatment of chemo. Ideally the treatment will last less than an two hours. So in out and home again. Ideally.

Easy breezy. Except for the decisions.

First decision: I had to decide whether or not to use a cold cap. *A cold cap is this red helmet they can place on your head to stop the blood flowing so much to the scalp. It's about minus five degrees, and circulates a very cold liquid – this cools your head to about 27 degrees (so that's like an almost 10 degree drop?). Cold cap treatments require the patient to wear the cap thirty minutes before chemo, during chemo, and two hours after.* My choice: no thanks. While loving my new hair cut, and dreading the look of a muted head without any hair, the idea of staying in that chair a second longer than required is repulsive. Repulsive. I want to get out-out-out, not stay in.

Second decision: Would I like to be part of a study? Initially I had ruled this out as a category no, thinking they'd be trying a new drug or something, however I've only been offered a questionnaire with blood sampling. *Needles! More needles* . . . Reviewing the study I decided to do it, except I'm not giving blood. Understandably this must be disappointing for the researcher, but needles and I do *not* dance well together . . . so forget about that. My body, my decision.

Third decision, explained to me today and the choice must be made by tomorrow: Fertility protection, again. **Man!** I am so freaking tired of having to make these large guilt-weighted choices. Do I protect my ovaries or not? Is there even a point? So far, having spoken with two doctors on the subject, neither are convinced that Zoladex makes any difference in regards to fertility. They say – maybe it might, possibly but could but not sure, help. The evidence is not incredible. *I don't know too much about Zoladex, though hopefully will by tonight, but it puts the ovaries to sleep with the idea that this will protect the eggs. They'll need to inject something into my stomach every month, which will throw me into menopause and stop ovulation.*

I fucking hate needles. And lately my PMS has been so bad, that I'm afraid I'll become a permanent stressed out monster as I wade through menopause at 28 years old. Plus, how many drugs are too many drugs? I take a drug for this, and a drug for that, and then a handful more for good measure.

Up until my encounter with mighty mighty morphine, I had never had a stronger drug than aspirin. I haven't even smoked a joint (and I'm from Canada, where weed is more available than fresh water) . . . but, if the side effects become difficult and I don't like the pain killers we'll see what happens. Where would I even get marijuana in England? I have no idea. In Canada it'd be a lot more straight forward. But maybe the hospital prescribes it? I don't know.

SO I sound like my head is twisted on backwards. But it's not always like this. Actually, Tuesday was incredibly good. I walked into the chemo centre and wasn't scared, wasn't nervous, wasn't intimidated. The visualizations, writing exercises and treatments were working. Last Tuesday I was in the zone.

Today not quite so much. Zsolt, my mom and I arrived at the check-in desk and I handed the secretary my appointment letter. She says 'go take a number and sit down. You need to be weighed'. And I say, 'I've already been weighed. Last Tuesday, the nurses told me to go to their room when I arrived before sitting down.' To which she replied: 'Everyone is weighed every time they arrive. Get a number and take a seat, we'll call you.'

I think people generally assume they're in the right, otherwise we couldn't walk down a street without questioning our footsteps. Today, I was in the right and Mademoiselle secretary felt exactly the same.

Taking a number I walked over to the nurses' room (a slight compromise . . .) to let them know I had arrived. Unfortunately they were occupied with patients, so I waited in the hallway. And of course, after about forty seconds, the secretary came over to repeat our conversation.

'You need to take a number and sit down'

'I have a number, but last time I was here the nurses said to come over to their room and let them know I'm here.'

'We know you are here, but there are people before you waiting.'

'I don't need to be weighed, I'm just meeting the doctor.'

And we would have kept going in a circle of assertions if not for the head nurse jumping in to break it up. *IN this case I was right, I didn't need to be weighed or whatever, and I did need to let them know I was in clinic . . . but who cares, because by the time this was settled, I was* unsettled. *My day tipped in the wrong direction and ever since I've felt a little bit cranky.*

Therefore I need to go back to work (and write out my crank in this blog). Gotta get back to the zone – gotta re-establish my protective bubble.

And in light of that sentiment, here's a moment that has nothing to do with cancer or decisions or contradicting opinions:

Remember that cemetery by the hospital, the one with the horses? Zsolt and I go there fairly often, and lately we've been taking my mom along too. It's a lovely cemetery with a very nice memorial to WW1 soldiers who were lost at sea, there are even some Canadian graves. And in this neat, well kept part of the cemetery, there is a large white cross made from stone, and on either side of the monument are beds of lavender.

Walking up to the cross and looking down over the flowers, we saw the most incredible amount of bumble bees. So imagine the purple flowers swaying on their thin green steams, and these tiny dark bees gently hovering and landing and searching and flying. It was amazing. The thought of swarming with killer stings did flick through my mind, but it was just **too** incredible for fear. And quiet – you would never have expected the silence, nothing but the sound of a lush flowerbed mixed with breeze. The bees were too busy to buzz.

It was a bit of natural beauty that was just mmm, mmm good. One day, when I have a garden of my own, maybe I'll plant a corner of lavender – just in case the bees want to stop by for a quiet drink of nectar.

Ah, good. That was very good. I feel much better now. I love a beautiful moment.

29Jul2010

Zoladex!

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

That's it! I've had it with this afternoon of debate. Despite the lack of conclusive evidence that Zoladex protects fertility – I will go ahead with the drug anyhow.

Menopause here I come. Periods, on your way. And we'll see about the rest. Before chemo tomorrow they'll inject my stomach with something that releases the drug over a month. Therefore, I'll be getting an extra needle (amongst many, many other needles) once a month.

And if it goes wrong I won't get the second injection. But if my menopause is manageable, then on with the treatment – because if chemo turns me infertile, I'll know I did what I could – and that will lessen the guilt. Choosing not to pursue IVF was difficult, but the amount of estrogen might have been dangerous for me. Zoladex, at its worst, could do many nasty things – but it won't encourage my cancer. So that's good, at least.

Decision made. Done. Onwards. Chemo.

30Jul2010

First is over

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

Okay. One treatment down – ticking that box off right now.

I think for anyone about to experience chemotherapy, it'd be really helpful to hear about the first experience. Now, I cannot tell you about the side effect because I only *just* received my chemo, plus also I want mine to be absolutely minimal – so minimal that I have nothing to write on the subject. We'll see.

Anyhow – it was a longish day. We arrived at the clinic at 12, just in time for my appointment, and took a seat in the waiting room. Two hours later I went into the treatment room. *We left at one point to have some lunch, because the consultant advised that it'd be at least another hour of waiting.*

Today the room wasn't quite so crowded. Apparently they'd had a backlog, but I think it was clearing by the time I was admitted.

I sat down in chair number 5 – so that was as expected, and then I was met by my nurse for the hour. He was quite good, reminded me of a friend from home. The nurse explained my treatment and showed me the syringes. . . one was dark red, the other clear.

First he gave me some anti-sickness drugs, which are helping, so I swallowed those no problem. And then we started the chemo. Basically they put in a canula and start with saline solution. It's a breeze. Then the nurse gets comfortable and begins with the first injection. It's not too difficult, they feed it very slowly into the vein. The first drug is the most powerful, so there was some slight stinging occasionally in the vein, but we stopped whenever that happened and let the saline run.

Mid way through I had to visit the loo- and as promised my urine was koolaid red. Gross. And amazingly the drug made its way to my bladder quickly.

Quick aside: I'm sipping on ginger beer and think it's powerful stuff. Whew! The explosion of ginger!

Next came the second drug, this one clear. It was easier to have this given to me – no stinging pain, though it did make my head feel a bit drowsy.

And then that was it. All over. Not so bad.

Of course, I had decided to try the Zolodex for this month, so all this was proceeded with an uncomfortable shot into the stomach by a very lovely nurse. Zsolt's hand may have been damaged in the process, since I sized it like a vice as the needle just kept going. Eugh. BUT we'll see what happens next.

Now I'm at home, writing this blog. Truthfully I am starting to feel pretty darn tired, and my stomach feels rather bubbly. Optimistically I had Zsolt run out for pizza, but realistically it'll probably be boiled rice tonight. Also, need a bit of fibre to help everything move along.

Anyhow – I am alive and fine and coping. Thanks for all the texts, and the good thoughts. Time for bed!

2Aug2010

Getting better

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

Hello again, Hello.

Over this past weekend I haven't touched my computer – I couldn't stand the thought of it. But now it's Monday and one of my goals is to post a message on this blog. It's gotten me up and out of bed, and sitting at the kitchen table. So – that's great. It's the furthest I've been so far. Yay for progress.

About two seconds after posting my last blog the nausea kicked in, and kicked in, and kicked in some more. It continued to kick me through the weekend. Zsolt says I had the acute response – apparently there are two general responses to chemotherapy: acute and delayed. Well, it was acute. Unfortunately the anti sickness drug they'd prescribed didn't quite work, but fortunately the steroid did, though I had to wait a day before taking the steroid because it required a stomach with some food inside. That wasn't quite possible till Saturday afternoon.

But that is in the past. Here I am, getting over the worse (hopefully) and waiting for the nurse to drop by and show us how to administer the white blood cell shot. I need to take one shot a day for seven days. Zsolt will be administering the needle – weird! I've heard there are side effect to this as well, but have the Paracetamol ready just in case.

So, apart for this world of side effects I'm managing okay. Today has been good so far, and has certainly put me in a better mood. Mom and Zsolt keep on with the mantra, "We're learning." And we are.

Next time will be better – next time I'll get a better anti-sickness drug, I'll take the drug sooner, and the effects will be less. Why? Because we're learning.

I feel bad for my poor family, there were times when my mom and husband would be looking over the bed with concern in their faces, or off in the other room whispering about side effects and ways to help me through. However, today everyone seems in a better mood. We're listening to my wedding CD and nodding along to the music.

I think that I'll write a list of things that have helped me through the nausea – because if anyone ever does read this and wants to get prepared, this stuff could be good to have on hand.

Happy music: some of the drugs cause melancholy, so it's pretty important to have a happier distraction in the background.

Homeopathic remedies: because sometimes I couldn't even manage a mouthful of water, so taking some anti-sickness homeopathic remedies has been a good alternative.

Anti sickness bracelet: This triggers an acupuncture point on the wrist to help reduce nausea. It helps, but if you're getting up be sure to go slowly and rub the balls into your arm.

Damp, cold face towel: It's a total miracle if becoming sick, and even helped me stop the nausea from peaking a few times.

Fan: Whether electric, hand held, or a good strong breeze through the window – the movement of *non-scented* air is wonderful. . . air with the smell of pizza, soup, or warm food of any kind is a very, very bad idea. My bedroom door has been shut with the cracks sealed while my mom cooked dinner for her and Zsolt, and even then I could smell the bloody food. There's a new rule in this flat, NO hot food allowed.

Protein powder, rehydrating powder, probiotic power: mixed in very small doses with a reasonable amount of water – helps with nutrients, hydration and bowels. When you can't eat anything, these come in handy.

Good company: Essential! Even if I could not carry on a conversation, having loved ones nearby during the difficult times is something for which I am SO grateful. My mom goes away at the end of this week, which will be difficult, probably very difficult – but I'm thankful for each day she's been here, and I know that whenever I need her or my Dad, they're always on the other end of that Skype camera. And Zsolt will be here too, rubbing my back and kissing my forehead, googling every question, side effect, and noteworthy bit of information that will help make this easier.

Okay, I guess that's it for now. I don't want to plough into details, and I don't want to freak anyone out. I think the acute has passed, and I'm very, very grateful. My mind has finally turned to food, and a few more grapes seems quite appetizing at the moment. Hmm, and maybe even a cracker or two…

4Aug2010

Wake up!

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

Funny what writing can bring. I was just typing out a letter to a friend back in Canada who has been thought a similar situation, thanking her for giving me some tips on coping with chemotherapy (*Thanks again!*), when I looked at a photograph she sent me, and thought – Yeah, I want that.

It's a picture of some loons on her lake. This is a lake right by her home, I think she can even see it from her kitchen window. And when I think of that picture, and I think of how she's moved past her illness and whatever setbacks ensued to find a 'good place' like that – and I don't mean 'location, location, location' but the ability to really appreciate her circumstances. . . well, I'm left inspired.

INSPIRED.

And this is the thing I decided while writing my facebook reply. After this chemo bullshit is all over and done with (and hopefully even before) I am not going to let *anything* stop my from loving life. I mean – I'm going to love every moment I can – from the clothing I put on in the morning (I'm thinking something with bold colours and flowing material, particularly while it's warm) to the food placed in my mouth (chocolate croissants for breakfast) to singing aloud in the shower without worry for the neighbours, to going out often and meeting with friends, to making sweet wonderful love to my husband, to actually pursing my talents instead of creating a list of excuses.

Cancer is in my life for some reason, so it better be a damn good one. Maybe there's a moment when you find purpose for what happens, or maybe that never comes . . . maybe we need to create our purpose instead. I don't know. I have avoided philosophy ever since dating a fellow who never stopped philosophizing. BUT some stuff demands consideration. So this is part of my purpose: to not forget how good life is. Things are good. Even when they're bad, somewhere there's a piece of good. For me, at this moment, it's the support that I've been receiving. Thanks everyone, *everyone,* everyone and everyone. It is a huge help.

Okay, I'm going to take a shower and fix my hair; a hurricane passed through it and I never bothered cleaning up. And if it falls out from the shampoo, well, it falls out. But at least it'll look good now.

4Aug2010

Gold star for Zsolt

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

Zsolt has a new talent.

Because I'm receiving my first round of chemo treatments every *two* weeks instead of *three*, I need to receive a shot every day, for seven days following the therapy (actually I start on the Monday with these shots, which means my body is still immune deficient for the first weekend).

Therefore Zsolt has learned to use a needle.

Gross. When we were married, there wasn't a line stating: I promise to inject you on a daily basis with a prefilled syringe. If vows were that specific we'd still be in the ceremony, with the crowd long gone. However he's been a very good sport.

Apart from his initial joke about "getting to stab me" (*hmm*), he's handled it well. One of the district nurses stopped by and showed him how to insert and inject the needle (45 degree angle, into the side of my leg. We had planned on injecting the stomach till the nurse reviewed the instructions and realized that wasn't necessary. Thank goodness.). Then Zsolt geared up, pinch a bit of flesh and let the needle slide. It's a tiny thing, so the insertion isn't terrible though the injection is a definitely off putting, but isn't it always?

Anyhow, he was very professional. I chalk this up to his stellar scientific training. All that work with expensive laser equipment has finally paid off through a steady hand under pressure.

Gold star for Zsolt. Keep up the good work, hon!

(and double points for him, because Zsolt has slowly been eliminating the plastic from our lives. First he replaced the plastic water filer with a glass Brita jug, and now he's gone and obtained a glass kettle. We're almost like the Jetsons in this house with our cool gadgets.)

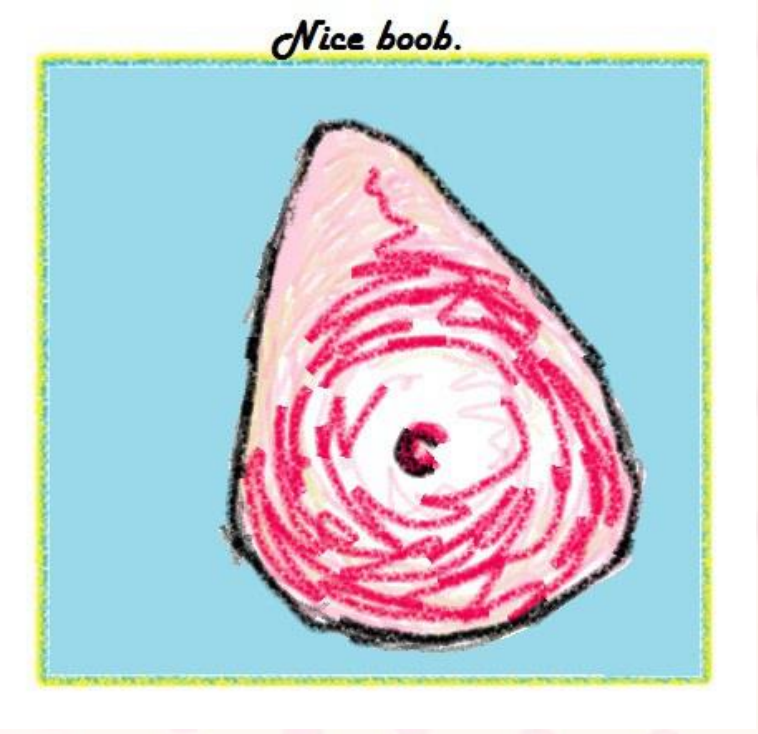
Tomorrow is boob day. We'll be going to the hospital so I can pick up a spare breast. Maybe they're offered in sherbet colours, though I doubt that. Actually, I don't like sherbet. Gelato is wayyy better.

5Aug2010

Prosthetic Breast

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

My mom is packing for Canada. I can't imagine this taking too long, she's been living out of a suit case for the past six weeks. But then again, it's my mom – and when does a job, she does it right. So I may have a little while to type.



But today I won't talk about how Mom is leaving after six weeks of being here, giving her love and support. And I won't mention how incredibly grateful I feel to have spent this time with her. So there is no point saying she's incredible, and I'll never be able to thank her enough.

There is time for all that tomorrow, because tomorrow I'll probably be thinking of nothing else. (*Last time my mom flew out from Heathrow, I left her at the departure area and returned home on the bus. Once home, I realized I had no key for the apartment. Being locked out I tried to call Zsolt, but my phone had no credit. While heading to the shop in order to add credit (couldn't do it on the bank machine because I didn't have a card with me, just cash), I dropped my phone down five flights of stairs. Suffice to say, I cried like a baby once Zsolt asked, "how you doing?" and it wasn't because I was locked out, or dropped my phone, or was exhausted – it was all about my momma. But on the plus side, I can absolutely say that those basic Nokia phones are tough stuff.* ***FIVE*** *flights of stairs!*)

Anyhow, I won't go into any of that. Not even a little bit.

Today we did something fun, and now I understand why men love breasts.

Grabbing a taxi to the hospital, Mom, Zsolt and I called in on the breast care nurse (I had an appointment). We were taken into a room with many boxes – similar to the back of a shoe store, only more hospital-*esque*, and were asked to take a seat. The nurse then asked me to pull out my bra, which I did (giant A cup mastectomy bra) and we began to try on prosthetic breasts (I tried, others watched; it was a group effort).

I had to swap my pre-bought bra for an on hand sampler because my bra had padding. Therefore, I was wearing a non-padded bra, and we were slipping in different size prosthetic breasts.

What does a fake boob feel like? It's a bit like a Ziploc back sealed with water inside. . . if you hold the bag up and touch the bottom where all the water pools . . . it's kind of that sensation, only softer. Anyhow, it feels good. Really smooth to the finger.

Trying on, trying on – a little smaller, a little bigger, a little here, a little there . . . till we hit the perfect shape.

"Run your hands over both breasts. Give them a good feel," suggested the nurse. Wow, did that ever feel good. Not like "ohhhh yeah" good. GOOD. It felt real, *really* real. Had I not known otherwise, it'd be easy to forget there was a difference between the two sides (except for the temperature). And I was fascinated, I could have spent the entire day stroking this soft boob that wasn't really mine. Not mine, but mine.

So I get the fascination. Mind you, I still don't have an urge to oogle or stroke anyone else's breast . . .

Summary: fun day boob shopping. It was a good change.

Upcoming preview: next week Zsolt's parents will arrive, shortly followed by his sister Anita and Berci-in-law. Who will sleep where? How much Hungarian will Catherine remember? And will Zsolt be able to work on his thesis?

6Aug2010

Just us two

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Life, Treatment, Uncategorized

And now we are alone.

This morning at 7.30 we made our way to the bus stop on Burgess Road. Once arrived, Zsolt watched for the National Express while I leaned against a fence with Mom and put my arm around her shoulders. It was clear and cool and traffic whizzed past.

Saying goodbye has never been nice. Over the past five years I've been saying goodbye quite often; at first it can be devastating, but eventually the idea of leaving becomes normal. I keep waiting for Star Trek to kick in and transporters to be invented that can actually transport *people*, not just photons. (Zsolt is correcting me, he says this is called teleportation – but I keep waiting for STAR TREK to kick in, not this crazy 'real science' stuff, and in Star Trek they transport everywhere, no problem . . . except maybe once when people were stuck in transport limbo and Jordie LaForge had to figure out the problem with his visor thing). It'd be a true miracle to wake up in Canada, or in Hungary, or in England; just to go there with a thought.

But enough Star Trek side track. (All day I've been side tracked, trying to avoid this post.)

Saying goodbye has never been easy, despite how often in happens, but I guess we learn to walk forward and move on. Though my poor Mom, well, she's my ***mom*** – that sting doesn't subside easily.

No more details, just want to say it wasn't a fun morning.

Things will now be different. Mom knew all sorts of useful tricks; her being here was an incredible help in my mastectomy recovery and chemo preparation. When I was sick she was ready with a cold towel, cleaning out the bucket, and giving me drops. When I wasn't sick we'd spend time together, going out for tea, watching films and having fun. I've spent more time with her in these past six weeks than in the past four years combined. How's that for a realization?

Things will be different but they won't be bad. The routine is established. We've survived the first treatment.

Anyhow, thanks mom. You also deserve a gold star, and triple points for love. Thanks very, very much. *Plus, just so you know the whole day wasn't terrible. Zsolt and I bought croissants on the way home, and the man at our fruit stand sliced a fresh watermelon in half for us. I hope your bus ride was okay, along with waiting for the flight. I've heard Dad might meet you with a cup of tea in hand, so hopefully he comes through.*

There you are. Now it's Zsolt and I alone for a few days to rest and regroup. Zsoltster has been busy washing the sheets for his family. I have been busy eating watermelon. We are thinking of buying a car next week, but it's still in the air.

Just the two of us again, for a little while. Nothing wrong with that.

10Aug2010

Cooking a post

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life, Writing

It's true, sometimes I don't write posts. But – (no worries, Lulu!) – sometimes I just like to take a break from this, that and the other. I've had a wonderful week so far, very refreshing and reassuring. If I can feel this good during chemo, then the future looks quite rosy.

However: I will post, I am to post, a post will be happening . . . just needs one minute to cook.

10Aug2010

Mikhail Bulgakov

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Reading, Treatment

Today while lying in bed with a cold, sipping on some ginger tea and gulping down my supplements, I received a wonderful gift. Giving gifts can be tricky – because guessing taste needs a mix of judgement and luck; besides even if you do know a person's taste what then? After the second box of tea, third kitsch trinket (etc.), gift ideas run dry. This is a constant challenge.

But this was a wonderful surprise delivered by my wonderful husband from a friend at his office. The gift was a book, *The Master and Margarita*.

If you have never read this title but do love to read, then I suggest you head immediately to your favourite bookstore and sink into the first chapter. In all senses of the word, this story is fantastic. I haven't read much Russian literature (*Anna Karenina* is my list topper for 'need to read') but, from what I've read, they pen a trippy ride. Man, those Russians can write!

Anyhow – I had woken up thinking, "My goodness, yesterday was wonderful but today I'm stuck with a cold," and couldn't find much good in it. Now the silver lining is clear. If I hadn't had my cold, then I wouldn't have been in bed, and therefore (*objective qualitative inference has led me to this conclusion*) I would not have been in the perfect setting to receive the perfect book. By my calculations it was approximately five years, four months since I last read Bulgakov's novel. It's about time for another dip into that pond.

Hard cover too. Extra exciting.

My cold is clearing. This I cannot attribute exclusively to the gift, because I absolutely must credit my acupuncturist. I arrived at her office feeling sluggish, stuffed, and grey as the sky; I reached my bed an hour later with the sniffles receding and now they're gone. Mixed with my mom's supplements, a pot of ginger tea, kind attention from Zsolt, and a little bed rest – that acupuncture(pressure) really makes a difference. I don't even mind that she finds painful points all over my body and rubs them till I can't stand it. (*In fact, I kinda like it – fun!)* "Pain means it's working", so she assures me.

And now, cherry on the top of my ice cream sunday: Zsolt is playing Ennio Morricone's "L'avventuriero" on repeat in the other room, and that music fills me right from the inside.

Yesterday was lovely. I made fruit salad, rhubarb crumble, and chilli for Zsolt. We took a long walk followed with a little dancing to Frank Sinatra. We went out and pub quizzed with friends over at Trago. The entire day felt good, good, and good. So good to be normal.

Today stared miserably with a cold and some sweats – but that's England for you, things change with every push of wind. Outside there are clouds, and it's still fizzing rain . . . but inside, here in this bedroom and under these covers, I feel pretty good. *[Nothing befunds me, not even not knowing what befund means . . . however, according to my online dictionary I am most certainly using this word incorrectly. What do you think, Tony?]*

My cold is finally passing. But just to be sure – I'm taking a nap!

11Aug2010

Wound up like a spring

Posted in Bumpboobs

The dishes are clean, table cloth steamed and the bathroom is in working order. Zsolt and his parents are rolling down the highway as I type, headed for Southampton.

I could clean more, but instead am going out for lunch. There's still so much to do before Friday – and it will get done, because it needs to get done. But life makes room for lunch with friends, or at least it does today.

Still so much to do; no point fixating on that fact. At least, not for the next 1.5 hours. Instead I'll savour a mix veg burger with chips on the side, and maybbbeeee a gluten-free chocolate muffin as a meal topper.

Man, I'm tense! MUST punch it out.

12Aug2010

Ding ding! Round two.

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

Tomorrow is another round of chemotherapy. Today was another visit to the oncologist.

After getting my weight and blood taken (as she draws the blood, Zsolt and I count to fifty – though today we only made it to about 22), we visit with the oncologist. Every time I've gone, I've met a different doctor. Zsolt and I have a theory that the medical community would prefer to avoid emotional attachments. So, if I always have a different nurse/doctor distance is easier to maintain. It's understandable; in my note taking job we are strongly discouraged from becoming friends with our students . . . something about a student taking things too far once with a note taker. Whatever. My stalking career once consisted of following cute boys around the mall with friends, but that was about 16 years ago. (*Holy getting older, Batman*)

Anyhow, we met with a lovely young doctor with excellent blond hair. She welcomed us into the room, Zsolt and I took our seats, and then she asked how the last chemo session went.

"Worst weekend ever," might have been a reply – but I guess there are worse weekends, considering all the possible bad weekends that exist. So instead I said, "no good," which seems a reasonable response. We explained the vomiting and the nausea and the general weakness.

Good news is that apart from the sickness, my experience was normal. I was wiped out, I recovered: *normal*. More good news is that she'll be prescribing me stronger stuff for tomorrow, and if these drugs do their job she'll be my favourite oncologist ever.

So last session was a learning experience; not just for us, but for the doctors too. Tomorrow will, hopefully, be less of an education.

You know how pets behave around the vet? My old golden retriever (sweetest dog ever) was a big coward whenever she realized where we'd arrived. I think animals can smell the fear. Well thankfully I can't smell people's fear, but I do remember my last chemo experience. Unlike my dog, I don't need to be dragged through the sliding glass doors . . . but like her, I may be shaking – just a little bit.

Tomorrow will be better, one way or another. And then I can forget that initial impression. Time for bed, and tomorrow – time to get on with it!

16Aug2010

And breath out.

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

I'd like to draw you a picture, but it will have to wait. As I type this I'm trying to avoid staring at the screen, because there is something about computers after chemo that feels repulsive.

This treatment was better. They prescribed me a stronger anti-vomiting drug, and it made a difference. Now, that isn't to say it was a walk in the park. While this drug stops the vomiting, it definitely doesn't stop the nausea. However – the more I could keep in, the more my body had to work with. And today, Monday, the nausea is passing.

This treatment was different. Instead of my mom and Zsolt pacing the floor, it was Zsolt and his parents keeping watch. I feel for the carers of people who are ill. It must be a lot on your shoulders – but I have to say, as a person currently on the other side, there are not enough words to express the gratitude. A hard situation becomes so much easier with a few kind words, a few moments of attention – Zsolt has been absolutely incredible this weekend, and having his family near has helped him cope with the heavy load. I'm very grateful.

Now is the boring part of chemotherapy. Boring because there is little to do but recover (though I'll take boring over sick any day). An exception worth mentioning: I have been playing a Hungarian card game with Anna and Anita, and that was actually quite fun. Too bad one hand of cards leaves me exhausted, but it won't last forever.

The tricky thing, which I'm doing my best with, is now the hair. Zsolt kindly lent me his black fleece to wear over the weekend, and the back is covered with strands. I haven't reached the point of shaving, but we'll see. Once it's gone, it will be gone – I can already imagine the mixture of relief and regret. But I think there is no harm in waiting a little longer.

Ok, summarize. I am doing okay. The weekend wasn't fun, but it wasn't a nightmare either. The next two weeks are mine and not cancer's; I'll be doing my best to enjoy them thoroughly. Also, as an aside, we are on the brink of buying a car. This will be our very first car – it's a purchase to remember. Zsolt is trying to strike a deal as I type. Good thoughts for my bargaining man!

17Aug2010

Happy distractions

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

Today was a nice day. It's so good to know that chemo doesn't suck forever. Okay, my energy is low as a limbo pole – but the nausea has taken a hike.

A tricky side effect of treatment that I don't often heard mentioned is depression. It's incredibly easy to sulk, dwell and recollect while sick – and that nearly always triggers the nausea. **BUT** if Zsolt comes in and talks about the European Swimming Championship (Hungarians have done well), or recollects how we met, or talk about anything that is *not* cancer linked – I forget about bad feelings. The depression lifts with happy distractions.

And today was a happy distraction. Plus, I had more energy – and as my mom points out, it's far easier to feel good when you have a little energy. Here is a list of the distractions which have made my day far better.

Reading. Not a novel (I cannot handle novels right now) but excerpts from friends. We share our work and give opinions. Choosing to write can be lonely, which is why I think creative writing groups/classes/seminars/workshops are fantastic. Maybe you don't need to relearn plotting a novel, controlling pace, or developing characters – but you probably do need a dose of perspective and like mindedness. I've made good friends through my writing, and it's making a positive difference in my life. So yes, reading was a wonderful distraction.

Talking to my mother. What the hey – skype is awesome. Today I shared a cup of tea with my mom, Marcelle, and following that we shared lunch with Zsolt. Topics of discussion ranged from supplements, cleaning the house, Ice Road Truckers, and how to find Microsoft Word through the start button.

Chatting with the Dan Man. My little brother is cool; aren't you, Daniel? Today out of the blue he rang me on skype and we talk for a little while. Nothing cancer related allowed. Instead we chatted about investments (of which I have none and he has several), holidays, university, and just random unimportant stuff. You know what, unimportant stuff makes for the best distractions. It is important to share the unimportant. Man, I miss my family so much sometimes.

Hanging with the Sámsons. Today was nice; I had the energy to enjoy company. Zsolt's family are staying at our friends' home, and on that street you need a permit to park. So, instead of buying a yearlong permit for a weeklong visit, they are parking in front of our flat. Therefore, we saw them strolling down the street this afternoon toward our apartment. And why did we see them? Because I was *outside* (this is a big challenge, but today I triumphed for about 10 minutes). It was really nice to have them over and talk. Zsolt's father was trying

to teach me Hungarian for “emergency lighting” (*vészvillogó*) and “car handbook” (*autós kézikönyv*), Anna washed the dishes, Anita made pasta, and Berci searched the internet. During the past few days I’ve been exhausted, but today I managed to be social. *Mind you*, I had to take micro naps between conversations, but at least I rested in my chair and didn’t have to hit the bed.

Miért tanított engem László magyar autós kifejezésekre?

. . . Because today we bought a car! Wooohoo! 2003 Peugeot, silver blue. Now some people may say – ‘How many miles?’ ‘What’s the make?’ or ‘How does she run?’ But not me. All I need to know: Is the colour pretty? And it is. But Zsolt is satisfied too; he actually *did* manage to bargain slightly, which impresses me incredibly, and I think we’ll be happy with the purchase. It needs to be cleaned inside, and the front left tire is a bit off – but that’s why he bargained in the first place, so it’s a cost we can cover. This is our first car. Exciting!

Now we just need to buy the insurance, and that is not quite as exciting. However, I look forward to driving around town with my man, hanging an arm out the window, and listening to some BBC radio.

So it was a day of happy distractions. The exhaustion is still there, but now passes in waves. This is the other side of the coin that I wait for. . . *this* is what enables me to go back again. For now it only gets better. Thank goodness for that.

PS- thanks to Zsolt for the Hungarian translation. If you want to translate the phrases yourself, I suggest google translate.

18Aug2010

Cath Kidson bedsheets

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Life, Love, Treatment

We have officially changed the sheets.

When Anna and László first arrived, they gifted me with the loveliest bed sheets – Cath Kidson, blue background with full red and pink roses. I cannot explain exactly why, but these sheets take me to a dreamy place with a veranda onto the beach and the sound of surf in the background. Anyhow, I just love them.

However, last week I did not put them on my bed. Instead, I waited – waited to feel good. Beautiful sheets should be for the good times. I don't want these things tainted with the memories of chemo (unlike pizza, fruit soup, and my purple tank top – all of which are currently being shunned because they were around when I got sick).

Today is another good day. No sickness, less fatigue, and still more good company; definitely time to change the sheets.

19Aug2010

chemotherapy hair loss

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

Several months ago I walked into a Southampton hair salon and had my highlights done. And no, I had not done any research beforehand, and had not asked anyone to recommend a good colourist. So, as can be expected – as I should have expected – it was a hair disaster. She took what was a lovely blond with too dark roots, and turn my hair into an ashy, trashy mess. The bleach white darkened my natural brown; I became a skunk.

Freaking out, I made for Boots and picked up two boxes of hair dye. Three hours later I was strawberry blond. Two weeks later that colour was washing out. Now, I was an ugly orange/blond/brown mixture. So again to Boots! This time I selected an even darker brown. Back home, back to leaning over the tub with the hose in my hand – give it twenty minutes to set – BAM, brunette again, finally. (It was my goal to get back to my original colour, or as much as possible, because blond was now out of the question). Two weeks later, that washed out. But I gave up, chopped off some hair, and decided to grow it out with time.

Except here is the thing, back then I had this thought, a terrible thought: "If I had cancer, I'd shave it all off."

Sigh . . .

Zsolt says I need to stop fixating on my hair. He says it doesn't look thin, and I have too early accepted the idea of a shave. Maybe he is right.

But yesterday I washed my hair, thinking '*okay you little buggers, I'm gonna wash you – and anyone who doesn't want to stick around can make their exit now.*' And then I blow dried my hair (from about 2.5 feet away) and I thought: '*Right, you stupid strands. Last chance to get out!*' And FINALLY, I ran my fingers through my head and pulled out a nest of hair. It was about then I developed an understanding.

The hair isn't stopping. It's slowly shedding, and slowly thinning. It will be on my pillow, and in my food, and across my shoulders so long as there is hair to lose.

I regret that stupid cancer thought. It underestimated the change; the physical expression. Of course it will grow back, that's not really the problem. The problem is – if I shave my head, I can't pretend to be fine.

Well anyhow. The day won't get better if I keep on sulking. Zsolt has a booklet from the Macmillian Centre called 'Coping with hair loss'. I guess it's time for some reading.

21Aug2010

Bald as an eagle

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

The head is shaved. Chemotherapy made the hair fall, so I made it all go away.

Yesterday afternoon, once Zsolt returned from the office, we sat down in our living room and Zsolt set up his barber shop. Normally I'm the one with the clippers in hand, but he did really well. First we shaved the long hair – so for about five minutes Zsolt and I had similar haircuts (I think I missed a photo opportunity here). Next the guard was removed and he cut it away, except for about 1 mm length because we'd need to take a razor to the remnants.

So forget the hair; now I'm all about cheekbones.

Besides, it really had to go. The sadness of pulling out twenty strands at a time was too much. In this situation, I *could* take control. I felt relief to shave my head, no joking. An abrupt change too, but good nevertheless.

Now here is the debate: should I go full on bald, or wear scarves all the time? *Be it resolved that Catherine is lazy.* But is it more effort to shave weekly, or to wrap a scarf each morning? Also, do I want people to see my head naked?

Well at least around Zsolt it doesn't matter. He's the one who cut it all off!

Today we and the Sámson family are taking off for the New Forest. We don't know where we're going, but we're shooting for a teahouse. Scones, clotted cream and jam with wandering ponies and stretches of purple heather. It should be a nice drive, regardless of where we end up. Plus, this will be our first chance to pump up the car radio and enjoy that highway breeze.

22Aug2010

Strike of the mouth sores

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

A leisurely trip through the country side. Nothing except the birds, bees, and the sound of two voices travelling inside a small 2003 Peugeot. Let's listen in as the couple approaches a roundabout:

"Which exit do I take?"

"Third."

"This one?"

"No – one."

"This one?"

"No – two. Here, this next one."

"This one?"

"Yes – three."

"Here?"

"Here."

"Here?"

"*Here!*"

And so on, roundabout after roundabout. Our GPS confused us so badly today we got lost in our own city centre, got lost on the highway detour, and got lost in the countryside. We got lost so many times, even the road map turned against us. And all the while Zsolt's family followed us in the car behind. They must have thought we were nuts.

But it was a very pretty drive. The New Forest is a lovely place. Today was a typically English day with the sweeping light rain and greyness all around, which might be depressing if you are stuck at home with a foggy window, but it's striking as you drive along Hardy-*esque* landscapes.

The tricky bit today was that I ate a giant scone mid afternoon, and it gave me mouth sores. I'm sure it was the scone – we were sitting round the cafe table, spreading the jams and cream, and about half way through my scone it became less and less comfortable to eat. Forward thirty minutes and my mouth was full of sores. Blah, why does something so sweet have to be so bad? Can't sugar and cream and white flour be healthy for the body?

Anyhow, my mom is helping me cope with the sores. It's gotten a bit tricky to talk, but I am hoping the right supplements, some sleep and an occasional dose of warm salt water will make the difference.

And speaking of sleep . . . I'm outta here.

Update: I wrote this blog last night but didn't publish it then. Today the sores are getting better but still present. However, I can talk and eat which is a great improvement. Still need to keep rinsing, supplementing, and all that jazz. What a freaking pain! Mind you, despite the sores, it was so *good to get* ***out*** *of the apartment. Thank goodness for that.*

23Aug2010

Just Dance

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Fun, Treatment

Last week Zsolt and I gifted Anita with a new Wii game: Just Dance. *(They – Anita, Berci, Anna and László – have given us so many wonderful gifts; in fact I'm wearing the new blue bathrobe from Anita and Berci right now, and this morning I woke up in the incredible sheets Anna and László made possible. So our gifts to them seem quite small in comparison, but it's all done with love.)*

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lVMaUdno53Y

Has anyone played this awesome game? I guess it's comparable to games like Rock Band *etc*, in that multiple players need to hit certain movement according to the screen instructions. For Just Dance there are different song choices, and then a dancer on the screen who acts out the moves (dances). And we, as the Wii players, hold the remote in our hands and follow along.

Awesome. You know why the Wii is so incredible? Because there is no age limit, no skill qualification, no language barrier. The whole family was up and dancing – I have video proof, which will not (never) be posted online. Instead I'll post some other ladies to illustrate my point. . . . (point: it's fun!)

Who cares about being tired when *Ring my bell* is blasting through the speakers, or *Can't touch this*, or *Surfing Bird*? As a post-chemo exercise, this game is excellent.

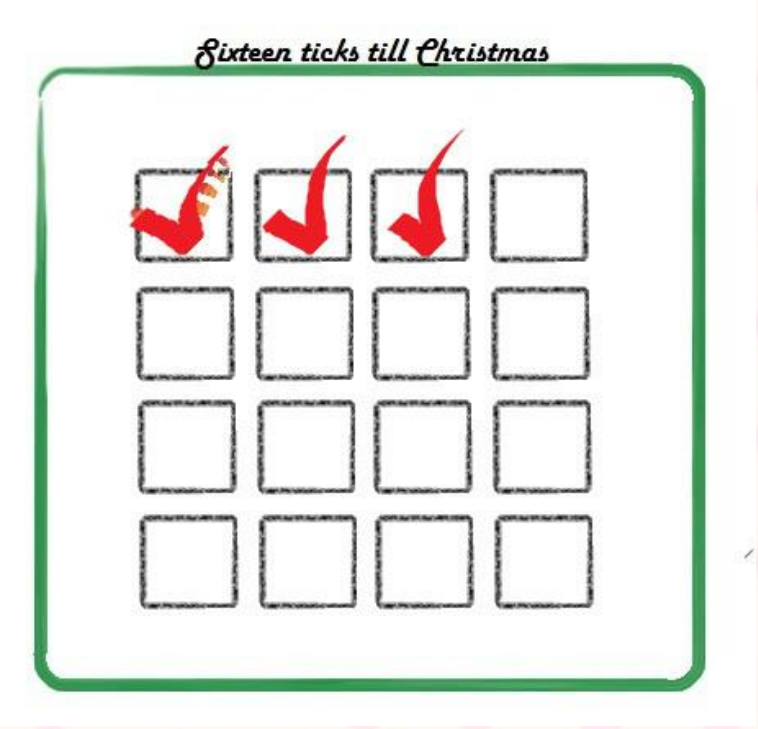
So, family fun with the Wii. And I just loved seeing my father-in-law, László cut a rug. Great.

27Aug2010

Chemotherapy confusion

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

Another day. This makes for my third session of chemo; once this weekend is over, there will be only 13 treatments left. *(I look forward to single digits).*



Yesterday we went to chemo treatment area for a weigh in and blood test, followed by a meeting with the oncologist. The nurses had a time with my arm – apparently the vein wouldn't bleed, so they called in an expert to 'find blood'. (*Honestly, sometimes it sounds like they are drilling for oil)* She was an expert and found it easily. However, the previous nurse I met, after not producing the blood, let slip that it's around this time the veins start giving trouble.

Hmm, so now I am drinking a big mug of tea and wrapped in a warm bathrobe. Apparently a lot of liquid and being warm helps with finding veins.

My weight has dropped . . . even more from last time. I guess I've lost about 3-4 kilograms so far, despite my Hungarian family stopping by and encouraging me to 'eat, eat' and making dishes with pasta, bacon, salami and sour cream all together. I've never minded being thin, but now could really do with additional weight. However, the doctor didn't seemed worried. Weight loss can be normal in chemotherapy.

But none of that stressed me out too badly. Nope, instead it was being told by the oncologist that the drug they prescribed me last time (the one that suppressed my vomiting) was a fluke occurrence. Apparently it is too expensive to be prescribed to patients in my chemo category, and I only received it because the mistake wasn't noticed in time by the pharmacy. So, the oncologist has placed a request with a higher-up to approve the prescription. I won't find out till today when I go in if the treatment was approved.

Blah – the idea of vomiting 16 times in a weekend (if drug is not approved) sent me into an immediate funk, and it took great efforts of my mom and Zsolt to pull me out. Here are the bright sides:

The drug is expensive, but not back breaking . . . if we don't get it this time, we can buy it in the future.

I've been prescribed a different anti-sickness drug which I've never tried, so maybe this new drug combined with the steroid will do the trick. I hope so.

During the first round of chemo the pharmacy lady told not to take the drugs till 'tomorrow' (i.e. the day after chemo). But 'tomorrow' was way too late and I was already on a rollercoaster of sick. This time I take whatever drugs given *today*. It will make a difference.

Lastly – if I *do* get this expensive drug, well . . . for my second round I was given incorrect instructions (again). I was meant to take it with the steroid (not provided) – but instead I took it all alone. Even alone this expensive drug helped, so combined with other drugs this time (if I get it), I suspect a real difference could be made.

Anyhow I'm hopeful because otherwise I'm despairing. Here come three days of either total crap, being nauseated, or –hopefully- just needing to sleep all the time. We'll see. It's still a learning process, and it does get better after those first few days.

It's 9.23 and my appointment is at 11.30. I need to go and eat – eat, eat – as my mother-in-law, Anna says.

Whew! Here I go!

30Aug2010

Pyramid Lake

Posted in Bumpboobs, Canada, Chemotherapy, Treatment

There is a lake in Jasper at the base of a mountain . . . well, not quite the base. If you are in a car, it's an easy uphill drive along a winding road to reach beautiful water that reflects Pyramid Mountain above. And at that water you can rent canoes, take them out and paddle – quietly, peacefully, happily – to your heart's delight.

Nearly ten years ago, while living in Jasper, I had that pleasure. *But* I didn't have a car. Instead, a group of friends and I set out on our bikes to peddle to the base of this mountain, where the lake waited with the canoes on shore.

Jasper is high, and biking up a mountain makes it even higher. To reach that water meant physical turmoil. Our group of friends became separated – those who were stronger pushed ahead, those out of practise fell behind.

I fell behind: panting, swearing, aching. Cars whizzed past, and I considered sticking out a thumb, but didn't because it was too embarrassing. Instead I simply pressed onward despite thoughts of giving up, because I knew – I just knew – that canoeing in that beautiful water, out in the open air, laughing and cruising, and being part of that incredible grandness was going to be worth it.

So bit by bit, with frequent breakdowns of determination and the occasional ten minute rest-stops . . . I finally made it to the base of that mountain. And my word, it was good.

It was so very, very **good**.

I wish that at the end of this chemotherapy there was something like that waiting. My pink mountain with the canoes all tied up. Actually, there is – another chance, a plane ticket home, a break from this crap. But right now I'm struggling uphill, and it's getting pretty damn difficult.

Bright side: I received the expensive drug, and this weekend has been much better. Apart from Friday the nausea was little to gone, which makes the whole thing easier. Instead of suffering from illness, I slept away the weekend. This was a positive experience . . . and yet I can't help feeling down. Thinking about all the treatments to come – all the needles and drugs – it's like biking up that mountain and turning the corner, only to see more of that uphill climb.

I know this will be over in a matter of months. This part of the cancer ride will come and go, and I pray it'll never be needed again. Somewhere ahead is that symbolic lake, though I do wish there was an easier way.

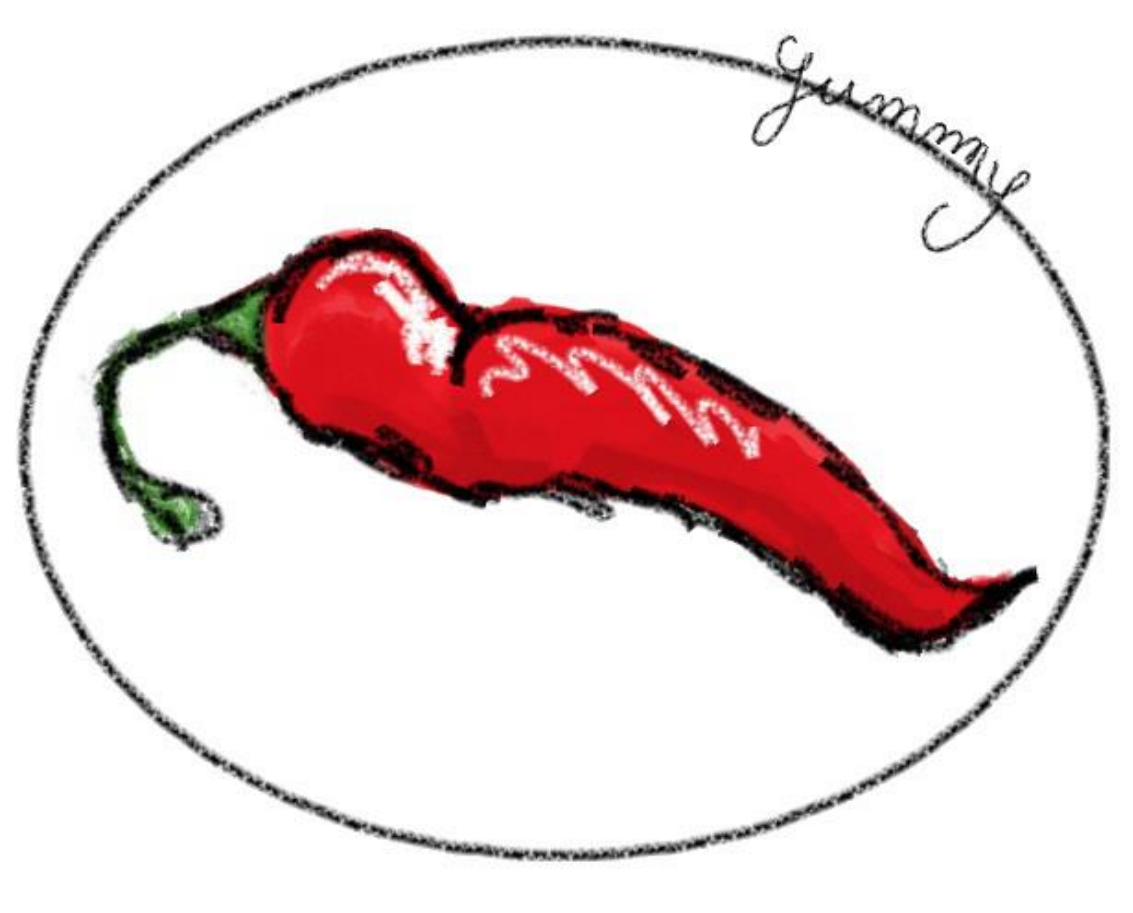
The weekend went well. That is what matters. But I feel this is a greater challenge beyond ticking off the treatments, and unfortunately there isn't much choice . . . I just need to keep on biking.

1Sep2010

Taste buds changing

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Food, Treatment

Good Goulash. Oh, how my taste buds are changing.



Yesterday evening, while watching *Location, Location, Location* with Zsolt and dreaming of our own prospective-possible-future house buying options, I opened a bag of crisps (potatoes chips, but since I'm in England, let's go with crisps). Tyrrells' chips are certainly tasty, and their Cider Vinegar and Sea Salt has a sharpness that I love in a good salt and vinegar crisp/chip.

Anyhow, happy and enjoying the show – we dig in. Stacy and Phil are selling a couple on a house that is priced £50,000 over their max budget, and I'm curious whether they can secure a deal. But that's not the only interesting thing. Once my hunger subsides and I actually start enjoying my snack, I realize I'm not *fully* enjoying it. There's no freaking taste! Zsolt is all 'vinegar lips' with the sour face, and I can hardly sense the salt. Honestly, it was like eating a plain baked potato – hold all dressing.

This isn't the first time my taste buds took a vacation. Last chemo cycle I had an unfortunate incidence with some scones, which led to a break out of mouth sores, followed by an extremely bland meal of homemade sushi (couldn't taste the side sauces), however during that last occurrence the taste came back.

Here is the question: *will my taste return?* Here is another question: *will bread ever be delicious again?* Right now, without the taste, it's really quite dull.

But I guess all food is dull without flavour. Fortunately I can still taste goulash. It may be that my diet will be amended to all things Hungarian (peppers, sausage, kolbasz, sour cream and Eros Pista) and no things tasteless.

Anyhow, thank goodness for paprika.

This round of chemo has been different. It may be related to the Zolodex and menopausal symptoms, but oh-my-word it's been emotional. How do people cope? It's no fun to be sad; the mental barriers grow exponentially.

Thankfully I have support. Mom and Zsolt have been so good to me – Zsolt dances and encourages me to relax, Mom monitors my routine (which frankly is so easy to neglect when feeling weak, so without her I'd be nowhere near doing/taking everything to help recovery). Also, a nod to my Dad who has been a great help with this car insurance annoyance. Because of their help my mood has lifted over the past two days, and it feels good to feel good.

But this is all from something I realized during my last post. While biking up that mountain I was too embarrassed to ask for help. Yes, yes, there was triumph in biking up – but wow, getting a ride would have been nice. After writing that blog I asked my mother to check on me more often, because I was slipping. She has been helping since – the support has been such a boost.

From taste buds to energy to emotions to treatment – this ride is long from over. For the time being, 'help' is the most important word in my vocabulary. Thank goodness for the people who surround me. Gold stars for them all.

2Sep2010

Immigrating to Canada

Posted in Bumpboobs, Canada, Finding Home

All right! Today is a step forward in the Sámson family. This very morning we've paid for an application for Zsolt as a Canadian resident.

It is exciting, yet slightly bittersweet because leaving England means leaving Europe, which by extension means leaving Hungary. But it's a change that we've decided upon, and frankly I think is necessary.

Home is such a funny topic. Where is home? Is it the place we live in, the people we are with, the memories we hold? I don't know. Even when I *do* return to my house in Kanata it's incomplete without my husband.

I suppose it is in the moments. Sitting under a maple tree, eating mandarins from a paper bag, meeting with friends, taking a walk, being with family, swimming in Balaton. . . anyhow, it's something I long for and will be the best medicine once found. We'll go to Canada – Zsolt and I together – and see what can be done.

We've been talking this morning about buying a canoe, or a kayak. Ottawa is so wonderful for its access to water, being able to get out there would be a wonderful experience.

Today was a good step forward. A very good step.

6Sep2010

Library Zen

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Life, Treatment

Today I'm going back to work!

After a summer away my memory will be challenged with the library computer and ESL students asking directions. Where is room 2033? I have no idea.

It's exciting, but also much like the first day of school. How will my body cope with this new type of exertion? Will I be able to sit up for 4-5 hours at a time?

Questions, questions. I can still remember my first day of grade seven at Holy Trinity Catholic High School. I walked into the school's atrium completely overwhelmed and followed the signs reading "grade 7 to twister dome." First of all, what the heck is a twister dome? Can't they just say gymnasium with wooden floors? But no, twister dome is was. I was so nervous that by the time my teacher had us in the classroom and the role call was given – I could not for the life of me remember how to spell my name.

Teacher: *How do you spell your last name?*

Catherine: "*Ah. B-R-U-N . . .N. . .L . . . L . . . E L?*

And then my head exploded from the blood pressure. Mortifying.

This won't be like that, of course. But I still couldn't get to sleep last night. Work is an excellent distraction, and they are very supportive. My mom was quite impressed when she met my colleagues – said they were all so friendly. And they are.

Breath in and out . . . slowly, calmly and become one with the library. It should be a nice day.

7Sep2010

Help for those helping

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Food, Treatment

Hello, This is a response to a question that Tara asked about supporting her mother through chemotherapy. I think a lot people may find themselves (or have found themselves) in this situation, so inside of simply replying to the comment – here is an entire post. If you've been a carer for someone please share any ideas/tips to help Tara and Zsolt through their challenge. This is a good time to try posting on a blog if you've never done so before.

*FYI these ideas are only based on *my experience* and nothing else. Since chemotherapy effects every person uniquely, please adapt these ideas as needed – or ignore them completely if inappropriate. I'm not an expert, okay? This is simply what helps me.

Ideas for helping while someone you love undergoes chemotherapy:

Emotions: Sometimes the drugs (and situation) can cause sadness, and in those cases we need to cry, talk, and have someone who will listen. Crying is a release, so if she does just let her go or even join in. Getting it out means less sadness left inside. And after the cry, you can tell her that she's doing well, you are so proud of her, and you love her very much. Reminder her that you will all get through this, and then make two cups of tea (or her favourite drink).

* there is this homeopathic spray I used to help me calm down. It's called rescue remedy and it's to encourage relaxation. Being homeopathic, it's not a drug and shouldn't interfere with chemo stuff, but you should check with your doctor if unsure.

Physical Stuff: When feeling exhausted it's difficult to be motivated. That is where YOUR support is so important. You are the motivation. Take her on a one, or two, or ten minute walk – whatever time she can handle. Walking helps to clear the drugs, so ultimately it helps her feel better. I like to play Just Dance with Zsolt, so there is another idea.

Same for drinking. We chemo people need to drink a lot (if possible) after treatment. This also clears the drugs. The nurse told me at least 2 litres a day, but that is hard to manage and when I'm sick it feels impossible. So again, bring her drinks – and have a variety in the home like juice, tea, water, etc. It will make drinking less of a chore.

I really depend on the support of others in terms of my health. My mom chases me to take supplements, and thank goodness she does. Without her I wouldn't recover so well.

Mental Stuff: Another way you can help is by simply 'visiting'. Come over and talk about your day, what you've done, the funny things you've seen. Her mind may be on cancer – *but I'll tell you what*, the minute it stop fixating on that problem the nausea and fatigue becomes less. Just being there for a visit helps. Topics like chemotherapy treatment, needles, nausea, etc. shouldn't be fixated upon unless she brings it up (and then, please do talk about it as much as needed). I have a gag reflex to the words 'chemo treatment' right now. I'd much rather talk about my friend's new kittens, or Zsolt's thesis, or what I put in the goulash to make it so awesome.

Housekeeping: Cooking and cleaning take energy. Until we chemo people have energy again, it is such (SUCH) a relief to have help. Making meals, preparing snacks, cleaning the bathroom – they're like little miracles that help us along. If you can assist in these areas, please do.

I think that carers take on a lot of responsibility and emotional stress. Groups like Macmillian have support for you if it is needed. Otherwise don't forget to talk with people about how you feel. It is okay to be overwhelmed, we all are. The key thing is to push on and find relief for the stress. There will be happy moments filled with love (laughing over a memory, sharing a hug, going somewhere familiar); savour those times, they are your life boat and a reminder that this will pass.

I hope that helps. Anyone with ideas toward supporting people going through chemotherapy please take **this opportunity** to share your experience with someone who needs it.

Thanks

9Sep2010

Eating through chemotherapy

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Food, Treatment

Isn't it nice to have a green grocer? On Portswood we have about four of them; every morning they drag crates of fruit and veg to the store fronts, adding a sense of health and colour to the street. Five peaches for a pound, two-for-one strawberries, carnations in a bunch, and peanuts for your birds. I love visiting Galloways's (my favourite grocer) and picking through the fruit. A full bag of vegetables (and I mean full, right to the top) normally costs less than £5.

This, to me, is an afternoon's entertainment. That and people watching as I sort through the corn while trying to find the best looking husk. Portswood has all sorts of people, all sort of nationalities. We have one international food shop (largely Asian options, but also with Hungarian peppers), about three Polish shops (perogies – ruskie style), several Indian restaurants, one Thai place, a Canadian girl who walks around, a hot Hungarian, all the Uni students and who knows what else? Plus there are British staples like the fish and chippie, which only opens when the lady is inclined to cook, a Post Office, and a slew of charity shops.

So – is it clear that I'm in a good mood today? When writing about food, I'm either in a good mood or really hungry. Actually, I'm both. Chemotherapy leaves me hungry all the time, but forget about eating big meals because it's impossible! Two bites in and I've had my fill (plus mouth sores make it difficult to chew). Instead I eat frequently in tiny bursts. At the moment cucumbers top my list for most refreshing snack; they're easy on the mouth. (*Frozen fruit is also very nice if your mouth is sore . . . so long as your teeth can handle the cold, and yogurt is always soothing*).

Yesterday was a workday and I loved it. Despite feeling those waves of fatigue (and waves of heat – "*Hello hot flash, shouldn't we be meeting twenty years from now?")* it's nice to get out of this apartment. Even the best flat in the world become terrible after being stuck there forever. How do those people on Big Brother do it? No wonder they all go crazy.

It's a healthy change. Now Zsolt can work on his thesis without me asking him to wash the dishes, and I can simply meet with friends – do a little digitization – and enjoy an alternative, cancer-free atmosphere. Cancer-free is the goal. In my apartment there are drops, powders, shots, vitamins, pamphlets, binders, scarves, buckets, and get well cards . . . all cancer related. Every bit of it is necessary for support, but they're also a reminder of this shit creek we're swimming in. The library isn't like that (apart from me in my scarf, clearly lacking hair). It's a break from reality.

Now I'd like to try two experiments.

ONE: go bald in public.

TWO: go wig in public.

Both are options that intimidate me. Who knew it was so hard to be different? For some people (like the guy who carries a picnic basket instead of a school bag) being different is easy. Though I suspect for the majority of us it's not natural to stand out. Visible disabilities, visible illnesses, visible visibilities – they don't leave much choice. It's either hold up your head, or – *what?* What's the other option? Disappear? Hide yourself? Stop living? I don't want to feel embarrassed, but I do sometimes and it's such a shame because it's stopping me short.

So here is the cure (I figure): Get used to it. Everything pinches at first, right? New job, new home, new shoes . . . without a little wear they never get broken in. And without getting used to it, no one will become accustomed to 'bald Catherine' or 'wig Catherine', not even me.

In order to shed the shame of being different, I have to get used to it. That shame shouldn't even exist – but that doesn't make it go away. Maybe I'll start easy and go bald to that hippie art cafe downtown. Pretend I'm actually that cool. "*Yeah, I get it. I shaved my head because I get it so bad. Organic-freerange-commune-hippie stuff rocks*."

Once done I'll write and let you know how it goes. Until then, I'm going to eat some more food.

9Sep2010

Low platelet count

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

Here is a disappointment. This week's blood results are back and my platelet count is low. Platelets, (*according to my google search and merek.com*) help with blood clotting – so now I need to be very careful of getting cuts, bruises, etc.

Why else does this suck? Because it means postponement of chemotherapy, which also means my Christmas plans have now been spoiled. So, I'm sighing to my computer screen because I really did want to go home.

I will go home. Sooner or later, I will go home – and one these years, this one or the next, or the next, my family and I will celebrate Christmas together. Maybe something can be worked out . . . maybe I'll just have to buy a proper ticket . . . maybe it would be less pressure to forget travelling to Canada and just celebrate with Zsolt.

I'll tell you what though, if I *do* have to stay in England, we are going to buy a proper tree. Not that I don't love my Woolworth £2 mini wire tree, but a proper tree would be nice – wrapped with lights and meaningful Christmas ornaments. Zsolt and I collect Christmas ornaments from wherever we travel. We have a woolly sheep from Iceland, a flamingo from Niagara on the Lake, eggs from Hungary, bears from Canada, and glass pickles from Brussels. There may be more, but right now I can't remember and the Christmas stuff is tucked away. *Hmm, however* . . . the apartment *is* quite tiny. Okay, if we do have to stay in England, then I am going to buy a proper wreath (and maybe forget the tree), and we'll make a mountain of cookies, and Bing Crosby will croon White Christmas in the background 24/7 as we roast chestnuts on our open stove top. I really do love all that.

Anyhow, on the positive side my arm has been aching and a break from injections is very welcomed. Plus, for a change, I get to feel healthy a bit longer. Two weekends in a row where I don't want to hibernate – that's not bad.

I'll take this as a holiday, and hope the rest works out. It's a disappointment – but, well, these things happen. Cry a little and get on with not being sick. I won't be sick for another week. At least I have that.

PS. I am thinking of having a picc line installed into my left arm. That is a line they feed into the vein and it goes right along to your artery. They do this to stop the complications of missed veins and pain in the arm. It would mean having a plastic tube sticking out of me, but also I think the stress may be less. My arm has been rather sore lately – it's making me dread treatment. A lady my mother knows had this line put in and says she would never go back to 'in the vein' injections. Something to think about . . .

11Sep2010

Long-distance Lunching

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Love, Treatment

Today we celebrated my grandmother's 19th birthday. That's right – *not 91*, but 19. My aunt made lunch, my dad made cake, and everyone gathered in the backyard to enjoy the weather. The family passed around food and we chatted about upcoming weddings, jobs, friends, pickles . . . it was an easy-going Saturday afternoon.

We celebrated, despite my being 5,378 km away. And though I couldn't smell the barbequed quail, and didn't run indoors when the bees came, and couldn't help extinguish any candles – I did talk with my grandmother, and sing happy birthday, and enjoy the company of my whole family.

Being away from home becomes easier with video chat. It isn't the same as really being there, but it's the next best thing. Long distance relationships (couples, families, friends) have had a hand up since the arrival of email, then icq, then msn, and now skype. I cannot imagine living *this* far from my family without being able to still see, talk and relax with them.

Next we need virtual hugs. Maybe the creators of google can get on that. Until then Zsolt can step in with a squeeze and a kiss. (not that I snog my parents, but you know I mean . . . besides, who wouldn't want a big kiss from Zsolt? Except maybe *his* parents . . .)

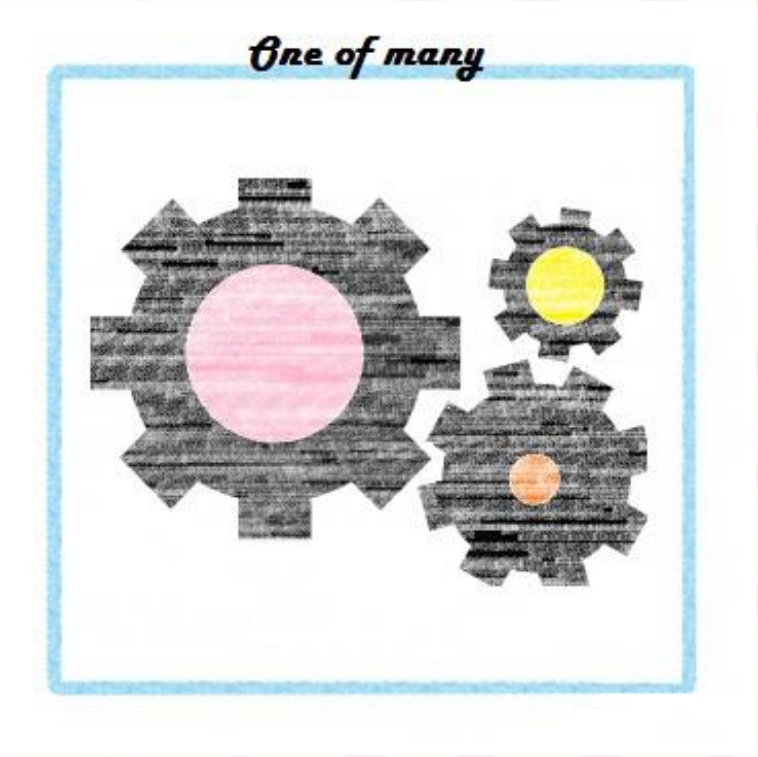
Joyeux anniversaire, Lulu! Il était bon de vous revoir.

15Sep2010

Support from NHS

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

How is your experience with the NHS? That's a question people often ask me.



Mostly it's good – they acted quickly, were very supportive, and while things felt in crisis they were a reliable crutch. And mostly it's still good. But this past week has been rather frustrating. I had wanted a picc line put in before my next chemo and tried calling to and arrange an appointment with a doctor. Maybe one week was too short notice and couldn't be done – I don't know. How could I know? I only spoke with an answering machine. And it wasn't very chatty.

Tomorrow I go in for my blood, and will finally speak with a doctor. I realize it's a very busy unit – but this week I felt hit-my-head-against-the-wall unsupported. It's too bad they don't have a 'chemo nurse' like the breast care nurses. The breast care nurses are a touchstone for women (and men) who are trying to cope with the trauma of breast cancer. Losing a breast, realizing your life is at risk – it's difficult to manage sometimes. But so is chemotherapy. It would be nice to have contacts who aren't receptionists, aren't giving treatment, aren't juggling so many obligations that you feel bad for interrupting. It would be nice to have that support.

It's been a head-shaking week. I've felt somewhat cog-like . . . fit into my slot; if I try to jump out of place the entire system breaks down. Did you know that England only has 12 chemotherapy facilities? Twelve for all the people who may get cancer. I wonder how many Canada has?

There are a lotta people (the waiting rooms are stuffed full of patients and their significant others) and a lot of demand. But I still want my picc line. Friday is coming – my veins will have to suffer the ache of another round of AC treatment. It could be worse. I do realize it could always be worse. And I'm happy in knowing that eventually it will be better.

Another round. This past week has been a bittersweet vacation, with its ups and downs, much like all the other weeks this summer has offered.

Next up – blood test and consultation. Here we go again.

17Sep2010

Yes! It was a good day.

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

Well, the NHS fairies must have read my last post because yesterday went well.

Zsolt and I arrived at the chemo ward around quarter past noon. I was wrapped in three sweaters, had just drank two cups of tea, and was shaking my arms as we waited for admittance. It's funny in the hospital – people look strange. For one reason or another someone will be limping, or be wrapped up, or have scarves on their head, *or whatever*, and there is a general understanding to not stare.

But every so often you'll catch someone (or yourself) staring. Yesterday while wrapped in my grey fleece sumo suit and shaking my arms back and forth, I caught several long glances. But what can you do? Keep on shaking those arms – get that blood pressure rising!

The number machine ticked over to 94; Zsolt and I made our way to the nurses so I could be bled. Last week it hadn't gone very well. I was cheeky and had the nurse use my right arm (my non-lymph node) because the veins in my left were sore. Problem was, my right arm produced very little blood and ultimately a doctor came in to bleed me. "Why did you use the right arm?" she asked the nurse. Hmm, maybe because I, the patient, suggested it? Anyhow. The blood was taken eventually and came to reveal a low platelet count – 31 thousand (averages range between 150 to 400 thousand, and the cut off point for chemo is 100). So, I missed chemo.

This week I was determined to do better. Sweating through a hot flash as I stripped off my fleece, my sweater, and my other sweater, I offered my arm to the nurse and told them I'd drank a river of water that morning. *So much like a little child hoping to impress a teacher . . .maybe that simple pride never goes away*. She and another nurse positioned themselves with the needle and the blood was drawn. Wham-Bam-Thank-You-Ma'am. It was a good start.

Next Zsolt and I waited about 2 hours to see a consultant. The chemo ward was packed with clients, and we were all waiting to see someone. Every now and then a doctor would pop out of their office and hurry across the room, then come back with a file – stepping over feet and shooting nods in all directions – and we'd listen to see whose name was called.

"Mrs Brunelle." That's me. I'm a Mrs . . . sometimes Ms.

Zsolt and I followed a curly haired woman (doctor) into her office. I've never met this oncologist before, apparently she had come down to alleviate the backlog. But oh, I liked her right away – boisterous, straight talking, big curly hair.

And when I mentioned the picc line she said: “I just had an email on that. Let me see.” And she opened her email to check on the next available picc slot. “How about this Friday?”

“Tomorrow?” I replied.

“Yeah, how is 1.30?”

“1.30?”

“1.30.”

“Yes!!”

Double exclamation mark for double the amazement. Honestly, I’d given up hope of receiving a picc before Friday treatment. But suddenly here was this visiting doctor who’d just received an email for availability, telling me I could get a picc the next day. If all goes well, my veins won’t have to take the drugs again. Oh my goodness – honestly, felt like a miracle.

So it is arranged. I will receive my picc today at 1.30 and my treatment at 3.30. No joking, today will be tiring but well worth the effort. Please cross your fingers that all goes smoothly with insertion.

It will be strange to have these tubes of plastic hanging from my arm. I’m already missing a breast, the hair is gone, and this will make for another visible indicator of illness – BUT – my word, to not worry about needles for the rest of the chemo course. It’s worth it. Totally.

Wanna hear more good news?

Many people only complete 10 or 11 chemo session for my next upcoming drug, despite being scheduled for 12. Therefore, by the curly haired doctor’s logic, it won’t be a big deal if I only have 11 sessions. (Though this needs to be checked with my normal doctor).

What does that mean? CHRISTMAS!!!

Every treatment has its risk to my health and we need to tread carefully. But she was very encouraging, saying that the AC chemo plays with blood levels but the next treatment tends to keep them level. Most people don’t need to miss additional weeks. I want to be most people.

Final slice of news from the happy pie:

This is my last AC treatment. This is the last time that nasty red liquid is pushed into my body. I’ve heard the next is often easier to manage. . . so let’s hope. They also say the next (*what is this next drug called anyhow? I have no idea*) treatment causes tingling in the fingers and toes. In hopes of preventing this I will be wearing dark nail polish for the next three months. It isn’t scientifically proven, but the doctors and nurses have noticed it helps.

SO! Today I am more optimistic. It was crushing when the doctor called to say my platelets were low, but the rest has been good. Despite the frustrations of being ignored by secretaries, my body has been rebuilding. Actually not just my body, my mind too.

Give me six hours and I'll be back in bed; sheets changed, bucket ready. Give me three months and I'll be home again; hanging tinsel, eating cookies.

One step at a time, eh.

19Sep2010

A whole lotta love

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

This post is for Lulu, who worries when I don't write. *Bonjour, Lulu!*

Things are coming along. Friday was treatment, today Zsolt and I spent the morning in bed talking. It's easier when he is here to distract me with chit chat. My thoughts are really the problem – they trigger the sickness to become overwhelming. And for some reason this round of chemo is more difficult than the last. Probably because we didn't stop the nausea in time.

But this has been a nice morning. I am now eating a few slices of cucumber and Zsolt is in the kitchen with the dishes. It's 11.30 am, we've been up since 8.30. The ability to rest together is a good sign for a relationship, isn't it? Back in the day Zsolt and I would spend entire (and I mean entire) morning in bed just talking. We still do of course, but not every weekend. Sometimes there is work, other times there is treatment, and others we have company. I really cherish our morning – plus it gives me something better to type about than nausea etc.

The past couple days have been draining. Keeping food down is a challenge, which frustrates me because my weight was just starting to rise again. I'd like another three weeks off, please. I'd also like a house in Balaton and a house in Canada – since I'm in the asking mood. And a promise that this cancer will never, ever, ever come back.

My mother and I have made a list. Nicole had suggested making a list of things to look forward to (see comment from past post *Help for those helping*) and I'm quite glad we did. Here are a few things that Mom and I look forward to doing:

Going to the spa.

Making Christmas cookies.

Sharing a poutine.

Playing cranium with the family.

Visiting a tea shop.

Putting up the tree.

Seeing family again.

There are more things, but that's a taster. It was really fun to make the list; mom would slowly read it back so I could imagine each activity. There is much to look forward to, and I'm trying to keep my mind focused on those goals. But thank goodness for the people around me. Without them I'd be drifting back to chemo, the room, the syringes . . . and that's no good, believe me.

The doctors and nurses keep offering me mood relaxing drugs. I keep saying no. What I really need are positive distractions and a whole lot of love. A *whole* lotta love. Luckily it's all around.

* Once I feel better I'll write about the picc line – but give me a couple days yet.

21Sep2010

The great escape

Posted in Chemotherapy, Food, Treatment

Sleep is peace and distance and rest. It is a vacation from worry. And when I wake up – no matter what stage in treatment – there are always a few moments where everything feels normal. I feel normal.

Last night I dreamt of a giant raspberry – it was about the size of a toque (or a beanie, for you non-Canadians). I peeled it from the stem; the smell was sharp, the feel fantastic, and it was wet with seams of juice. Have you ever looked inside a raspberry? The way the seeds and sacks all weave together? Well it was like that, only so large you could put it on your head. I thought – *this would be the perfect hat.*

Instead I made it into a pie.

Now that's just a segment of my dream; it's an example of the wonderful places a good night's rest can take you. Sure, okay, there are bad dreams and they happen occasionally – but normally it's a mixture of the fantastic and familiar (with a dash of action adventure – though not the pie making, of course). The nausea and the anxiety get left behind.

I love the night time. It's an excuse for me to relax. Last night I was asleep by 8.30pm. Gorgeous! It had been a long day filled with anxiety over eating and not eating, and drinking and not drinking, plus Zsolt's crazy work place. But as soon as that clocked ticked over to 8.30 – *click* – lights out, hold my calls.

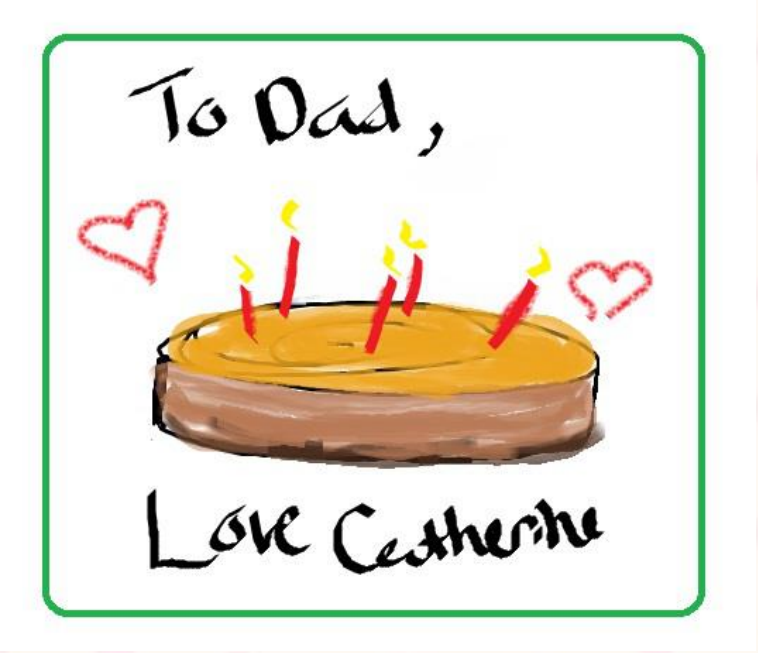
Time for a sleep vacation.

22Sep2010

My dad and his cake

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life, Love, Treatment

My dad has a rightly earned spot of pride for his caramel cake. And on special occasions, occasions *so special* they celebrate the sweet tooth, he whips out this secret family recipe and struts his culinary skills.



And I mean secret. Only one person knows the recipe . . . guess who.

I can't even remember if he's offered to teach us. My father and I hold a rivalry in the kitchen. He claims to be the better cook. I – obviously – disagree. We had a cook off one year, and because he went first (it was a nice roast, granted) I was able to step up the game with a meal of buttered potatoes and I can't remember what else (these potatoes were so good, that the rest of the night draws blank).

But when it comes to dessert I just can't whip him. Sure, he *always* pulls out the caramel cake, but I've never countered with a better option.

So today Dad, for your birthday, I will concede this point: you make the better cake.

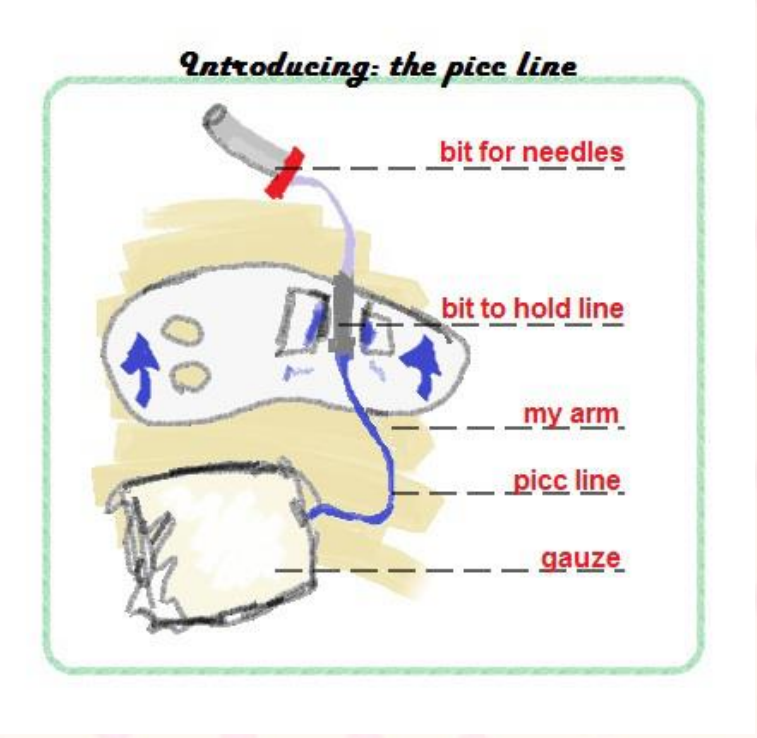
Happy birthday Love you.

25Sep2010

Getting a picc line

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

Finally I can write about the picc line. Here it is folks: having a picc line installed in your arm.



As you know, the consultant booked me in for the very next day – this whole thing was a whirlwind. Apparently she called the nurse who inserts the line and begged to add me to their list: 'very persuasive' said my picc nurse. Thank goodness for strong women with curly hair.

Zsolt and I arrived at radiology around 1.25, my appointment was for half past. Before we could sit down a short haired nurse appeared from the hallway and asked: are you Catherine Brunelle?

That's my name, don't wear it out. (I didn't actually say that)

'Here you go, put this on.'

She gave me a robe – which I put on backwards at first – and I changed. It was a typical hospital gown with faded colours, thin strings, no coverage . . . anyhow, typical. Thank goodness I kept my jeans.

Next we (Nurse Picc, Zsolt and I) headed down a maze of white bright hallways till we reached a room filled with busy nurses. "We've got another list so we're rushing now," says the nurse. I nod despite not understanding.

Anyhow, the room where the picc line is inserted has a very large machine as its centrepiece. This machine has a table, all kinds of cords and a giant circular x-ray camera thing, plus monitors on the side.

(All the while Zsolt has been with me. The nurse did say "and you'll have to go when we start" but then I said, "Can't he just stay for the needle?" and she caved. He was suited up with x-ray protection and allowed to hold my sweaty hand during the entire procedure.)

First: she scans my arm with an ultrasound and checks if my veins are accessible. The ultrasound machine has this clear rubber piece that glides over your lubricated skin. The gel is cool, but the ultrasound is totally painless. Ultrasounds are the best; my number one pick for interior body scanning.

Second: Assuming a good vein is found, a tourniquet(?) is placed on the upper arm, and you are asked to lay on the table. Picc lines are generally inserted around the inner elbow or slightly higher, because the veins widen there.

Third: The nurse will sterilize the area – it smells like hydrogen peroxide. Have you ever used those bristle scrubbers to wash dishes? Well, think of that on your arm. Not painful, but very hygienic and smelly.

Fourth: Numbing the pain. *(Zsolt came around the table to hold my hand as this all began.)* The nurse has you lay out your arm on a side plank attached to the table. I looked away during this, but essentially a needle is given to numb the pain. This stings, but is most certainly worth it. Numb = good.

Fifth: It begins. Using the ultrasound the Nurse Picc is able to insert a catheter into the chosen vein. Then it's all down to stringing in the line. I didn't feel too much, but apparently some people feel a bit of pressure as the tube moves along.

Sixth: Tube in place, an x-ray is taken of the chest area. When I say x-ray, I mean a video. Zsolt could see my heart pumping on the monitor (he has seen way too much of me now. . . my bones, my heart, my guts . . . not so romantic.) and the nurses used this to judge whether the line is in place.

Seven: Wrapping up. Literally. My arm was insulated from the outside with layers of bandages and gaze, which needs to be changed every week. This past friday I had the dressings refreshed, and the nurse laughed at how much they'd put on. Now I have less – much less – and can actually see my arm.

So that is it. Following insertion I went right to chemo, which is an entirely different story I'm not ready to write about, however, the picc line worked very well. No sore veins!

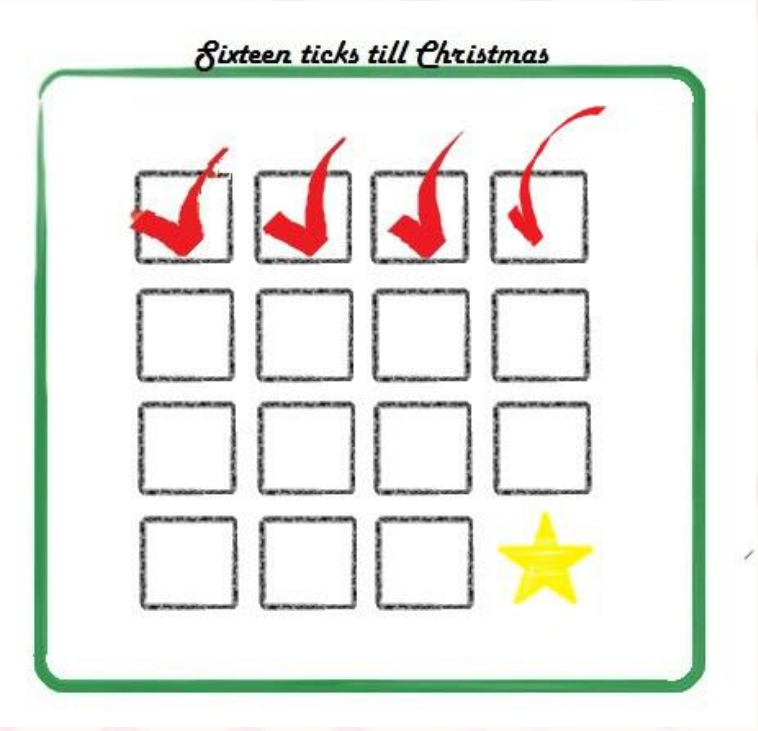
And that is the story of picc.

27Sep2010

What is brave, anyhow?

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Life, Treatment

I like watching movies; people are allowed to be brave, and we can be brave with them. Last night – against Zsolt's wishes – we watched the *Fellowship of the Ring* (Lord of the Rings book one, film one). He says it's a film for teenagers, but he thinks that of everything fantasy/science fiction. There is no point arguing, though obviously I disagree and am correct in my opinion . . .



Anyhow: Bravery.

Frodo didn't want to carry the ring. He wished he'd never found it, never been chosen, never this, never that. Never.

I wish the same all the time. As each day passes and chemotherapy approaches I wish I didn't have to go, didn't need the injections, didn't get so sick. Didn't this, didn't that. Didn't.

When BBC news reports a famous designer has died from breast cancer, I wish I'd never gotten it. Never started growing, never reached my lymph nodes, never this and never that. Because I'll never be 100% sure it's not still inside. Reoccurrence scares the shit out of me.

So how am I meant to be brave? Why can't it be like the films, where there is a moment of heightened music, tears in the eyes . . . and then a short nod, steps forward. Challenged mounted. Why can't I be brave without also being chicken-shit scared?

Last week I went to the hospital for a picc line flush and zolodex shot. It overwhelmed me; I threw up in the corridor, in the chemo chair, after my shot. The smell of the ward nauseated me, the sight of the patients made me cry, the click of the chemo drip made me gag. Bravery? No, I've tied a leash round my neck and dragged myself in. That's not brave, that's compulsory.

And I know, I really know, "it's not just the body, Catherine". It's the mind. It's the reaction, the conditioning. This is my work in progress. Throwing up is a release of anxiety, but there must be better ways. Well, I'm trying to scream. Who knows what the neighbours think, I scream each day and imagine all the fear and the nausea shooting out with the sound.

Will it work? I don't know – we'll see next Thursday when my blood is tested. I'll scream in the middle of the ward, thus triggering mass panic amongst the patients and probably get committed. Or asked to leave the country.

No, I won't really scream. Of course not.

Today is Monday. In four more days I'll be back in that green easy chair with a drip hooked up. This time it'll be a different course of chemotherapy. They say it's easier, "*a little easier*." And since it'll be every week, it sure as heck better be easier.

I can't take much more of this bullshit self-induced sickness. Even if it is resetting my immune system and clearing out those nasty fucking cancer cells that may/may not be in my body. Rude unwelcomed *FUCKERS*.

Bright side: well I'm glad to talk about being scared. That helps. We've changed the sheets (finally) to my pink rose on blue pattern. I haven't thrown up in three days. The students are back at the university. And . . . Zsolt is washing the dishes!

Thank goodness for small miracles.

29Sep2010

Footsteps in the sand

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Love, Treatment

It's 8.45 am and I've been lying here in bed as Zsolt prepares his breakfast, thinking about how fortunate we've been.

We met randomly while travelling. Two different countries, two different languages – yet here we are today, married. Circumstance suited us, and we made the most of it.

We needed to compromise. Where to live and how to survive? As with any big problem, we turned to the internet for answers. Zsolt sent out a few emails and met his supervisor, with tuition and scholarship to boot.

We got cancer, followed by a summer of mastectomy, recovery, and chemotherapy, all away from home and family. But Zsolt is writing his thesis (*no ten hour days at the office*) he is here with me and helping. I work at the library, a job that has been so flexible and supportive. Honestly, I couldn't ask for a better situation in which to have had cancer, since – apparently – that was what I had to have.

God – however you want to define God – works in incredible ways. It's like that poem, Footsteps in the sand. *Someone, something, somehow* is carrying us; it's wonderful to remember.

30Sep2010

Having enough of it

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

This is so massively frustrating.

Today I went in for my blood and consultation, and AGAIN I threw up. Obviously the problem rests in my head, I've psyched myself out.

It was the young blond consultant who met me today, I think she's not from England based on her accent (not that it's relevant). Anyhow, Zsolt brought up the question of my 12th treatment despite my stepping on his foot, which is a universal signal for 'stop talking', and it was her opinion that I receive my full treatment schedule and not miss the last one.

FRACKING FUCKING Fuck. What contrasting information. I then informed her of my plans to go home for a month over Christmas, the flight leaving on the 14th of December. She conceded that some people do stop early for different reasons, but they recommend 12 courses of the chemotherapy. However, she'll talk to the head consultant and see what he says.

Here is what I say: it's too freaking late. I want to go home – I want to go home – I want to go home. Don't bother telling me I can't.

I will, therefore I can.

I don't want to be angry with anyone, but feel so fucking **angry** inside. My emotions are a yo-yo, and when they go crazy . . . *and frankly, it's my fault that they've become volatile* . . . well, what answers are there? Drugs, more drugs, and missing Christmas? Agh!

Honestly, I'm angry with myself.

This is something to work on. Screaming, punching, writing, NOT vomiting. I'm working on it and don't need any more pressure. I don't want to give anyone an excuse to worry more.

Whew! Time to go punch something.

1Oct2010

Blood fight

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

I received a call this morning from the hospital. My blood count was low yesterday – borderline unacceptable. Borderline postponement.

!£$%*!*&%! !%$ *&!%!!!!

So. Breath in and out. The last hour has been spent drinking protein mixes and eating pork. Unfortunately there is no beef in the house, otherwise I would have gone for that first. Now we're getting ready to head off to the hospital. Chemo is scheduled for 3.00pm, but my blood needs to be tested first. At 1.00pm UK time a blood sample will be taken.

If you are reading this (I guess you must be), please cross your fingers that the results come back fine.

"Hello body! Start pumping out some better blood, please!"

Pretty please? Right now. Now. NOW!

2Oct2010

Paclitaxel

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

Yesterday was a whole bag of drama.

It started around 10.00 with a call from the hospital. Apparently my blood wasn't great, bordering on unacceptable. Would I please come in for 1.00pm and have my blood retested?

Those three hours between call and test were filled with my eating meat, taking protein powder, freaking out, calling my mom, freaking out, and writing a post. It was frustrating; like what happened? Had someone from the hospital read my last blog and decided: oh yeah, we'll see if you go home for Christmas!

No, of course not. After all, it was *my blood* that had low counts. Actually, it's still my blood that has low counts.

After giving the blood, Zsolt I retired to the hospital coffee shop to await the results.

Here is an aside: These people know my name! Walking into reception, the nurse says: 'just go on back, Catherine' before I even get to the counter. Walking into Costa coffee, the woman who's in charge of the chemotherapy pharmacy smiles at me as she waits for her drink, and comes over to have a chat. 'How are you doing, Catherine?' She even helped carry my orange slices to the table.

What the heck? It was nice, but eerie. Chemotherapy is one place I don't want to belong. But, that being said, it's nice when people know your name. Too bad I couldn't remember theirs!

And about the orange slices: they're a great distraction. As I walk down the hospital halls, with their melange of chemical and stale air smells, I bite into an orange slice and focus on the taste, texture, smell etc. It really helps with my vomiting. Okay, yes – I admit it – I still vomited yesterday, but at least I could walk down the hallway without getting sick. That is an improvement, believe me.

Another aside: I've painted my nails navy blue. Apart from the chipping, they look somewhat cool.

Fast forward 40 minutes and we are back at C3, chemo ward. The nurse checks my results . . . 'they're going ahead with it this time, but you still may miss a week.'

Bittersweet news: no immediate postponement, but the possible threat of a missed week in the future. Ah!

Here is the positive side: I have one week, *as opposed to three hours*, to bring up my blood. That means more red meat, more protein drinks, more vitamins, more this, more that. And better blood. Let's hope for better blood, otherwise it's possible you'll witness another online meltdown (and I'm tired of that drama).

So – chemotherapy commenced. And, if you read this blog often enough, you may realize I'm writing about chemotherapy very shortly after treatment. Normally I'm way too sick for writing.

They hooked me up to the anti-sickness drugs (and I threw up) for a thirty minute drip. Then the nurse came round to hook me up to the paclitaxel (and I threw up again). She offered me a muscle relaxant to stop vomiting, but I said no thanks. And it's good that I did, because this chemo drug does all the relaxing that's required. *Whew* – it knocked me out. I couldn't read or talk or anything. It made for an incredibly boring session. Two hours of sitting still.

However, I haven't been nauseated since treatment, and – so far – haven't felt like shit. Instead I came home and crashed into bed (about 6.30pm arrival) and slept, slept, slept, slept, slept.

Today I am awake, able to move around the apartment, able to eat and drink.

It's like a freaking miracle.

Whatever that red chemotherapy drug was (AC) it was madness compared to paclitaxel. Madness, I tell you.

3Oct2010

Breast cancer awareness month

Posted in Bumpboobs, Treatment

Wow – it is chucking down rain! Buckets are pouring! The wind is ripping! For mild old England, it's a positive storm.

Zsolt informed me yesterday that a cyclone was stirring off the coast, and we'd be seeing the influence for a few days. But I love a good rain storm. In Canada we used to sit on the porch during a really good storm and watch the lightening. Once it cracked the tree opposite our house; mind you, we were all asleep at the time, not watching (thank goodness), but the incredibly loud bang woke everyone up.

It's quite rare to see lightening in Southampton, but a good storm is a good storm regardless. I always think that the rain is cleansing – like it washes away all the bad you've been through. Though the very best is when the sun shines as the rain falls, now that is something special.

It's breast cancer awareness month. A whole month devoted to breasts. Boob-o-rama.

Apart from this blog, I'm not sure how to contribute. Maybe by suggesting to all younger women readers (*I can probably count all of you on my two hands*) to check your breasts, for goodness sake. Okay I know – at our age problems are unlikely, but also at our age there is no annual scan to help detect a problem. So yes, you are probably fine. Very most likely. **BUT** checking your breasts, whether they are smooth, bumpy, swollen, or whatever, means you'll know what is/isn't normal. According to this website it's good to check about the same time each month (1 week*ish* after your period). I'll link a video below with more instructions – but be warned, you will see boobs.

Worst comes to worse, you go into the clinic with a concern and see what's it's like to be squirted with ultrasound lube. Slippery good fun. Besides, most people don't get breast cancer at our age, so there's no reason to be nervous. (*Okay, I got breast cancer – but it's a freak occurrence! Not the norm. Please don't let my experience put you off checking. Besides, if I hadn't found this lump it would have kept growing inside my body. Better out than in.)*

Here is the video: enjoy the view, and give it a try.

If the link doesn't work it may be because of your region. Just search "self exam breast" and there will be plenty of information to help.

4Oct2010

The good list

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

Here are some good things that have happened today.

One: I got out of bed. This sounds like a small event, but believe me – I was very, very tempted to stay between the sheets. It wasn't about exhaustion, instead more about anxiety . . . so getting up was a big thing.

Two: Zsolt and I sent his permanent residence application off through DHL. Yay! After about two months carefully compiling evidence and documents and reference and *everything*, it's finally on its way. Now comes the waiting game. Go Canada!

Three: I did the groceries – sort of. I did *some* groceries before booting it out of Waitrose due to some strange emotional freak out. Chemo drugs make me a little bit emotional. The fish counter lady handed me some wrapped salmon and I nearly broke down crying. My god, is pregnancy like this too?

Four: I rested. Man, I needed to rest. Plus, I drank several cups of nerve calming dark tea. Oh, thank goodness for strong tea.

Five: I went to work! Boosted up from relaxation and caffeine – I *again* got out of bed. Forget my mid-day freak outs and emotional overloads. Work was waiting, and I really wanted to be there. It was good to get out of the house and change my mind.

Six: I'm typing this post. Earlier today I thought about the things accomplished but couldn't really be happy for them. Now, my mood is turning. Okay, sure, lately my mood is *always* turning – like a wave with its constant up and down, but at least it's swelling toward an up right now.

So there is my list of things accomplished. It's not always easy to celebrate, but at least there are times when my head clears. Today was a good day. They all are most often, even when my mood is low. The trick is in the list. Making the list; it helps.

10Oct2010

Hospitalization

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

Four nights in the hospital is more than enough for me. I'm out now and fine, so no worries. Actually my neighbours are having a party next door and some awesome music is filling my apartment. So, I'm more than fine. Plus the sun is shining and my fever is totally gone.

I'll write more later, because how could I not? Four days – no computer allowed. Twitching fingers were aching to express a little hospitalization rant. But in a nutshell here it is: I developed a fever, went into the hospital, and they took forever to let me out (or did I take forever to recover?). Better safe than sorry, but my goodness – there's no place like home.

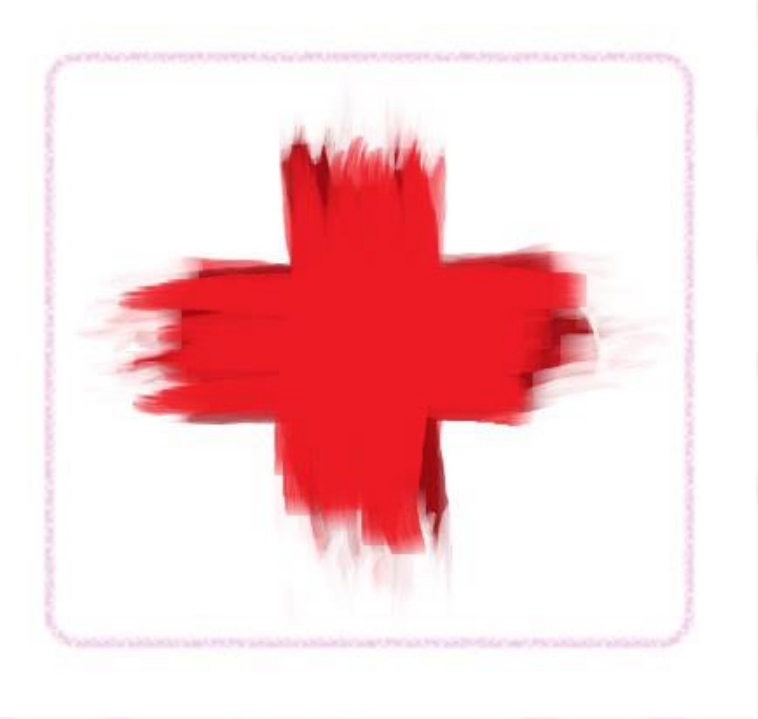
11Oct2010

My hospital thanksgiving

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Life, Treatment

"Cough, cough. Excuse me.*"*

And that is how it started. I became sick on Tuesday. By Wednesday my little cold had graduated into a fever and pneumonia. Fevers are bad news when having chemotherapy.



Why bad news? Well apart from the physical threat, which I was never too worried about thanks to blissful ignorance, it meant going to the hospital.

Has my dislike for hospitals has been made clear? Let me make it more clear: I hate hospitals. I distain hospitals. I fear hospitals.

This has been a problem for me, since, you know: cancer = hospital. But last Wednesday the universe conspired to solve that problem.

Once my temperature hit 38 degrees, Zsolt called the chemo hotline; we were told to come in immediately, like *right now guys, hurry the heck up*. We went in immediately (minus the twenty minute wait for a parking space).

First was the A&E: we sit on the hallway while I suck on oranges to protect myself from the smell (and anxiety and people and injuries and everything). Zsolt holds my hand and we people watch.

Next I'm taken to the chemo ward and given a bed in a small room where five other patients are receiving their chemotherapy treatment. Despite laying on the bed with closed eyes, I can hear the 'click swish, click swish' of the drips and I *hate hate hate* being in that room. Zsolt continues to hold my hand.

There is a quiet period of me resting and Zsolt keeping guard. But this is a hospital and I have a fever, so quiet doesn't last forever. In comes a doctor; she's originally from Nigeria, has a husband and children in England, misses home but really doesn't know many people there anymore except for her parents. This doctor has a good bedside manner.

I am asked questions. My temperature is taken. I give blood. I hack mucus into a cup. I am given oxygen. A seriously strong antibiotic is given by drip. More questions are asked. There is peeing into an impossibly narrow cup. We wait for a bed. My weight is taken (I'm shockingly light). Doctor one pierces my artery for blood while doctor two nods in approval. Blood pressure. Temperature. Nebulizer. Wait.

“You’ll have to stay the night,” says my blond doctor with the slight accent. I have trouble deciding whether or not I like her. Well, I could easily like her if she wasn’t directly connected to my shit-express adventures. But she is.

“Really? Can’t I go home?”

“It’s probably just a chest infection, but we have to be careful. It’s best if you stay a night or two.”

“Or TWO?”

Where was my Zsolt with his carefully crafted questions? Was this mad woman with the clipboard serious? Why didn’t my temperature stop rising? Would I miss chemo this week? Once we were in the hospital it was as though a current took us. Decisions were made, plans formed, information sometimes given. Staying wasn’t a choice, it was a decision – and not mine. But we were in the current, and frankly, I was sick with a temperature. Can’t argue temperature.

They gave me a single room, thank goodness for small blessings. They gave me a single room on a night when patients waited 12 hours for a bed. Patients were being turned out, asked to leave and make room for new people (“Sorry, you aren’t sick enough”). Had someone been kicked out so I could have a bed?

And there followed five days of waiting to get out with rises and falls in my expectations; first I thought it’d be one night, then maybe two, then maybe three, then maybe forever. The doctor read my face when she said I’d have to wait longer: “We can’t let you go until you’re stable.”

Ahhhh. Okay, fine.

But you know what? I was getting used to the hospital – getting used to the smells and the IV and the steady tests. In my private room I was able to close the door from the rest of the world, but at the same time – couldn’t avoid that I was a patient . . . couldn’t avoid all things hospital.

Slowly but surely it became easier. I hated the situation less.

People who I could never hate: the nurses (except maybe the ones who inject my chemotherapy . . . and I don’t actually hate them, but their presence makes me sick)

Nurses! Again you were wonderful. Funny and supportive and patient. They would come into my room and talk about their day, take a seat to rest, show me how the machine worked. One nurse even took my, hers, and Zsolt’s blood pressure in the middle of the night, and we all laughed when the machine went blank on Zsolt’s trial – judging him to have no pressure at all. He *is* a fairly relaxed man.

It was a woman’s world; the nurses were a balance between chaos and composure. They took the time with me that the doctors couldn’t afford.

And that is why Bedside Manner is as much a treatment for illness as the drugs dripping into our veins.

Nurses and doctors *(apparently Dr Blond had mentioned to another doctor – Dr Artery Stabber – that I desperately wanted to go home for Christmas. I appreciate that she remembers, makes me like her a bit more)* are **healers** when they stop looking at the chart and acknowledge the person. Not just medical professionals.

Point in case: Dr Busy. This woman comes into my room with her nose in the chart, one of the nurses follows her and smiles at me. “Where is this lady’s blood sheet?” demands Dr Busy. “It’s not in the cubby” replies Nurse Smile.

Dr Busy: “Yes, it *is* in the cubby. I put it there myself.”

Nurse Smile: “I can’t find it.”

Dr Busy: “It’s there. I put it there *myself* last night; find me the chart.”

And out goes the nurse, chastised in front of a patient and probably fuming.

Finally Dr Busy, after thirty awkward seconds of her making more notes and me waiting in silence, looks up and announces herself.

This person put me in such a rotten mood, it was hard to contain my disgust. LOOK AT PEOPLE, SAY HELLO, PUT ME BEFORE YOUR CHART. Oh, she ticked me off. Clearly this is an intelligent woman, but what a first impression to make. The only other time I saw her again was when she came in the next day on the heels of another doctor (only male spotted entire week, except for the porter) and *didn’t* look up, *didn’t* take her face out of that bloody blooming chart.

Here is my point: Medicine is more than medicine. *Most* people, thankfully, realize that truth. My nurses were wonderful for helping through such a frustrating few days. It was all about bedside manner.

And apart from being in the current with that ‘you’ll never escape!’ feeling. . . well, it was restful. Zsolt was allowed to spend nights beside me on a cot. We read books and magazines like we were on a beach in Cuba. I didn’t have to make a single meal, nor clean a single toilet. And there was a quietness that – while a bit boring – made me slow down.

It made me slow down, it made me calm down. Hopefully it will make chemotherapy easier. We’ll see next Friday whether or not I vomit at the sight of that metal tray with the drugs. This Friday’s chemo was cancelled due to illness. So that puts me two sessions behind my target (and yeah . . . Christmas in Canada . . . hmm.)

And then – day five – we were released. That was it, over. Happy thanksgiving.

When we arrived home the apartment building was rocking with some easy-going Caribbean flavoured dance music. People were sitting in the staircase, children were playing in the yard, food was being passed around on paper plates. Anna, my neighbour, said they were giving thanks. Thanksgiving. Her husband had had an operation and it’d gone well. They were giving thanks to God. (Them and the thirty some people stuffed into that micro apartment)

I thought it was such a beautiful idea – a different sort of Thanksgiving.

We gave thanks a different way too, not with Turkey or stuffing, but by changing our hospital clothes for summer attire and going to the common to play Frisbee in the sunshine. What a day, a perfect autumn afternoon. We were thankful for each other, for the weather, for the freedom.

And soon that will be how it is all the time. Soon this will be over and life will go on. If ever there were a time for laughter and dancing and music, that would be the moment. I look forward to giving thanks.

12Oct2010

Alligator tears

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

I find it hard to stop crying. My eyelashes adhere in salty clumps from all the tears. And it's always for the same reason: I'm just so fucking overwhelmed.

Overwhelmed by my exhaustion. Overwhelmed by all the effort. Overwhelmed by my body's reactions. Overwhelmed that this isn't over. Overwhelmed to be so far from home. Overwhelmed that responsibility and hunger and housekeeping don't stop even when I so desperately want them to all go away and not come back for at least three months, maybe four.

I don't know if it's the chemotherapy drugs having an effect on my mood, or if it's simply my mood. I don't know if it's my diagnosis, or the never-ending worry, or the uncertainty that clouds my future like some ugly fog threatening in the distance, rolling toward my fucking life. My livelihood. My *life*.

So I cry. What else is there to do? I cry and cry and find some relief in the act.

One day things will be better and this will stop. I know that because sometimes there are moments – glimpses of normal – like Frisbee in the park, tea with friends, chatting at work, Sundays in bed. Sooner than later I'll stop crying.

Sometimes it's so hard to look *forward.* But forward is the only place to go, the only way I can survive. Forward is inevitable, though getting there has been a struggle.

Two months left of chemotherapy, maybe a little bit more. One month of radio-therapy. Five years of medication. Cancer had better stay away from me, because I'm tired of its company.

And in the meanwhile I'll just cry a little, because it helps. Because I can't stop. Sooner than later this will be over. I look forward, when I can look *forward,* to that time.

13Oct2010

Feeling better today

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

Whew! It felt good to write that last post.

Today I'm feeling better. It's my first day back at work since the hospital, and I DON'T feel exhausted for a change. Also, Zsolt and I bought all kinds of ready-made meals today, and I think that will be a great help over the next week or so.

Writing about my feelings was a release. I slept soundly last night, despite a difficult day. I think it's the sharing that made the difference. Just admitting how I felt was very good. Like someone released the pressure in my head. Hey, wait a second, that was me. *I* released the pressure in my head. Like an overblown balloon getting some relief.

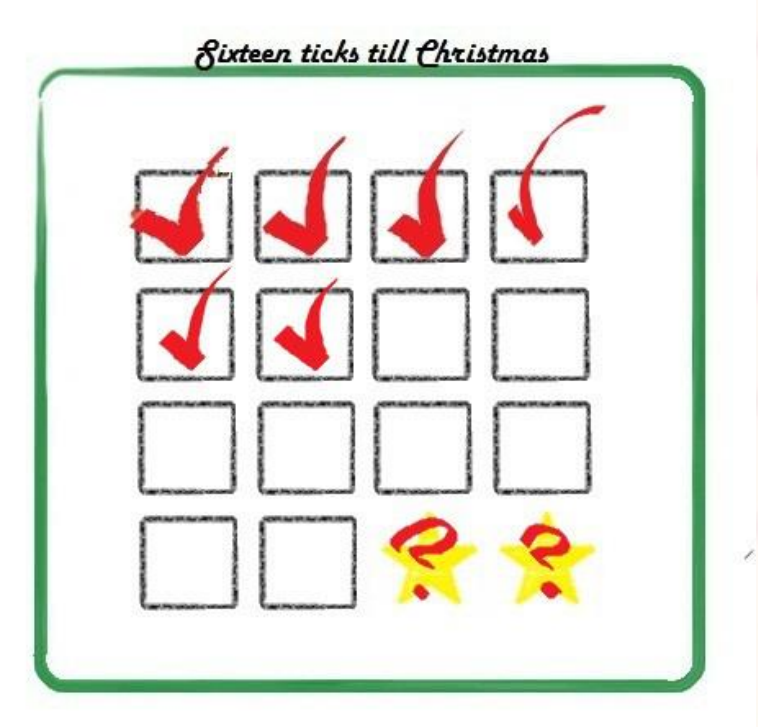
Anyhow. I just wanted to say thank you for your good thoughts and prayers and kind words. They're very helpful – and sometimes all I need is a kind word. So thanks, thanks and very much thanks.

15Oct2010

Number six

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

Okay – here we go, treatment six. Any takers on whether or not I keep my cool (*keeping cool, aka not vomiting*)? After last week's experience at the hospital maybe that 'exposure therapy' will make a difference. Actually I'm optimistic.



This week I've got fresh blood, and rest, and . . . hope?

Zsolt was reading that people's number one fear with chemotherapy is nausea. I totally agree. Last treatment was my first without any nausea – and every moment for the following few days I waited to feel that lurch in my stomach. Wait, wait, wait. Didn't happen.

Today I'll wait again, with a little more hope that it won't happen.

Things we'll bring to the chemo ward:

My new toque (*hat, beanine)*

Eat Pray Love (*I'm enjoy this book – though the chemo makes me tired, so maybe I won't get around to reading today)*

Mp3 player (*only to drown out chemo conversations I don't want to hear: "oh yeah, I was sick as a dog last week . . ." etc*)

Blanket

Orange slices

Water

Patience

Last chemo I was so tired afterwards the only thing I could do was sleep. Even as the treatment progressed I become more and more desperate to drift away. It was something like a long flight – I can *never* sleep on those planes, but oh, do I ever fantasize about my bed. Same with the chemo chair, comfortable enough (for a chemo chair) but not my bed.

Anyhow – here we go again. Fresh blood. Rest. Hope. And no getting sick. *No* getting sick.

Fingers crossed.

Another question I need to ask myself: Having now missed two treatments, should I lose those chemo sessions or have them? Frankly – I don't want them. But how will my overall success be impacted by missing treatment? One doctor said that I shouldn't miss any. Another doctor (or was she the head nurse?) said that people often stop about 10/11 treatments because of the side effects. Who can I talk to in order to clear up this confusion? I don't know. I just don't know. Zsolt isn't happy with my missing 2 treatments. One was fine, two makes him uncomfortable.

What the heck am I supposed to do, and how can I make an educated decision?

16Oct2010

Too early for Christmas?

Posted in Bumpboobs, Canada, Chemotherapy, Finding Home, Life, Love, Treatment

I'm starting to think about Christmas. And no, I do *not* mean Christmas in Canada.

Every year Zsolt and I celebrate Christmas together, but in actual fact – only one of those celebrations has actually been on the 25th of December. Long distance means long distance families, long distance celebrations, long distance flights and, ultimately, high priced tickets. It'd be awesome (if not also exhausting) to celebrate Christmas in Canada, then hop on a plane and continue celebrations in Hungary. Awesome, but totally ridiculous. So, until that Star Trek transportation option becomes available, we generally spend the holiday apart.

But not quite. We have our own celebrate before separating, and it's an event that I love. The month of December starts with the revival of old favourites on the speaker: *Santa baby, White Christmas, Rudolph the red nosed reindeer, Silent night, Jingle bells, Baby it's cold outside,* and so on.

Next comes out the box stored above our dresser marked 'x-mas decorations'. We have years old tinsel, paper snowflakes, greeting cards, lights, and a bent up Woolworths tree that cost £2 and stands at about 75 cm tall. The box also contains ornaments in the shape of stars, wooly sheep, pickles, beets, angles, birds, fish, and those tiny bells you can pull off Lindor chocolate figures. Whenever Zsolt and I travel to a new country (or any place we like) we buy an ornament. So, nothing matches but everything has a meaning or memory attached.

And following the decorations I turn my mind to baking. Not sure how it'll work this year, but I traditionally like to prepare for the celebrations with cookies. My grandmother, Lulu, makes the most wonderful gingerbread cookies, and while my cookies pale in comparison – I still give it a try. Back when I must have been three or four years old my family would go to Lulu's for Christmas, and I would watch the baking gingerbread men inside her oven. Then, on Christmas eve after réveillon, we'd put out a plate for Santa Claus with some milk on the side.

I bet Santa thought they were the best cookies on the block, or even in the whole of Montreal. Or the world, for that matter. I did too.

And so I bake cookies every year to celebrate with Zsolt. Running up to the occasion we might go to the Christmas Market in town, or Winchester if time (and energy) allows. And then we start watching the movies – *White Christmas, Nightmare Before Christmas, How the Grinch Stole Christmas, Love actually.* Any suggestions for a new film?

“Don’t get too Christmassy yet,” says Zsolt just now. “It’s only October. That’s more than two months.”

Pshhh. I’m waving away that idea. Heck! They don’t even celebrate Halloween in England. There’s nothing blocking my view of the upcoming festive season. Okay, okay! Clearly I’m getting ahead of myself. But what else is there to do? This year I only have a couple productive days per week – without planning ahead, where will I find the energy to *make* and *do* and *prepare?*

Well, anyhow. Chemo went well yesterday. Apart from the drowsy drug they fed me at the start, it was tolerable. I lay in the chair with my toque on and waited to leave, and once home things improved. Second treatment no nausea. Now it’s time to rest, which explains my drifting mind.

The final bit of Christmas with Zsolt is when we make a large meal and share presents and dance to our favourite music. So this year it might be Indian take away instead of chicken with stuffing. That’s okay. Zsolt will be there. I will be there. We’ll still dance.

It’s all two months away, but time is flying. It’s flying. I *has* to fly. Afterwards – after all this – it’s welcomed to slow again. Crawl if it wants. Time can turn into treacle for all I care.

Right now is good. I’m not sick, Zsolt isn’t sick, and we’re enjoying the sun through our widow. Now is good. But time is still flying, as it must, at least until this is all over with.

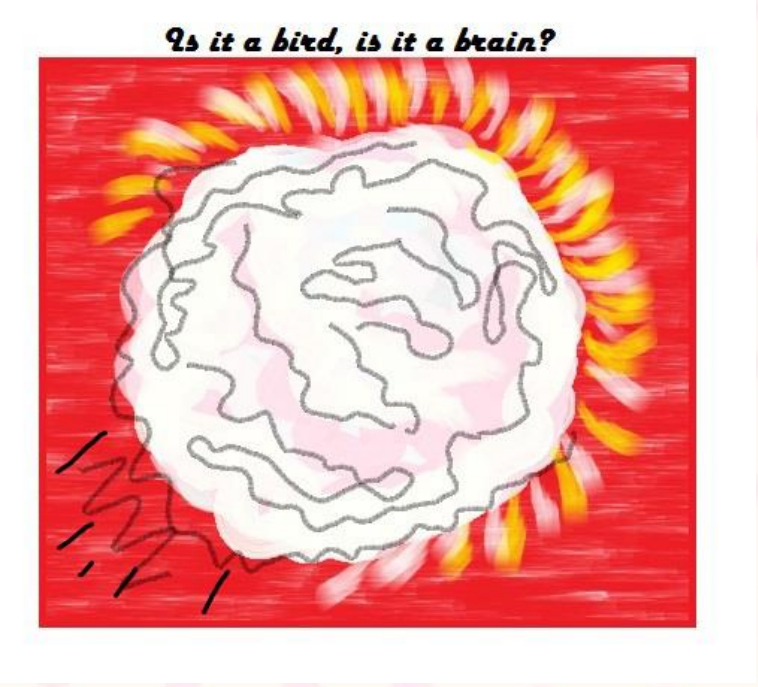
At which point, I demand a vacation.

18Oct2010

No, it's a white blood cell!

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

I'm trying to encourage my immune system to step things up. Therefore, today, I honour my white blood cells through art – like an overenthusiastic talk show fan with far too much time. Oh mighty white blood cells rocketing like meteors through my blood stream, please keep up your strength and find any potentially lingering cancer cells floating around.



Seek. Kill. Destroy! **Ah, hahaha!**

And now I sound like an evil villain. But honestly, isn't seeking and killing and destroying exactly what needs to happen? Yes, it is. So – *Ah, hahaha!*

With this new chemotherapy drug my body experiences less exhaustion, so I'd like to use my extra energy to address the cancer (preferably my lack of cancer, but because there is no test to say 'yes' or 'no' as to whether it's still in my body, I will just say – address the cancer)

But honestly, chemo or no chemo, cancer still scares me. How can I work on a problem that makes me contemplate life expectancy? I guess that's the challenge.

I know that I don't want to get cancer ever again. I know I don't want to do chemotherapy ever again. I am 100% positive that I'm ready to get on with my life, totally cancer free. If I can't be sure of my chances, I can at least be sure of these things. It's a starting point. Funny how these starting points keep appearing and reappearing. Mood goes up, gets knocked down . . . and there is another starting point.

Today I will try and focus on having a really healthy immune system, which targets any oddities and removes them from my system. I've drawn the picture, and now I'll try and write about it – in private, away from the blog.

Honestly I just wanted to show everyone my superhero white blood cell. Sometimes it feels like I'm still in grade school doing show and tell. *"Hey, look what I did!"*

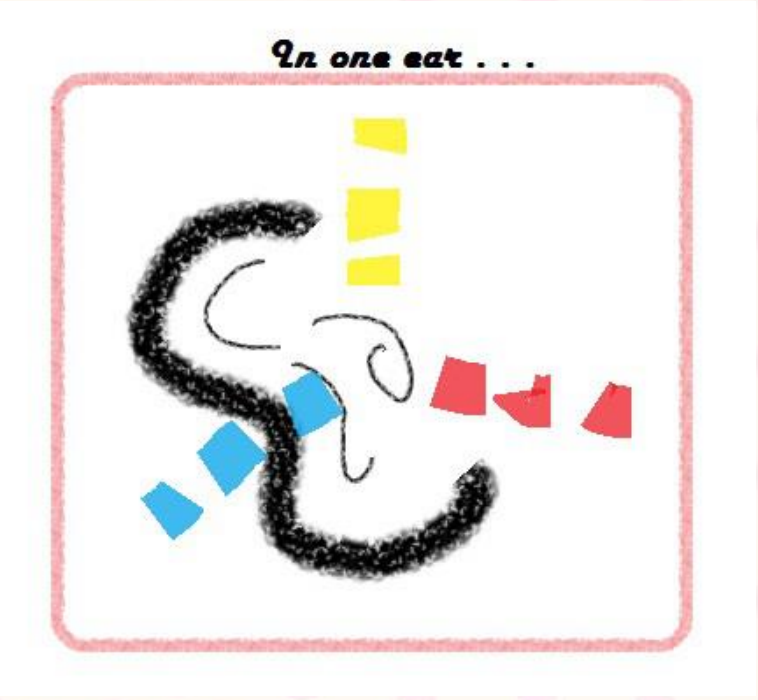
PS – Zsolt just introduced me to Purple Rain. Twenty eight years old, and I've never heard this song before!

22Oct2010

Lucky number seven

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

And now the calendar pages start flying from the wall. *Flip-flip-flip-flip*. Just like a movie.



Is it Friday already? Wow. In a matter of hours I'll be back in that green easy chair doped out of my head and receiving treatment. Then, in a matter of a few *more* hours, I'll be back home in my blue sheets with the pink roses, sleeping it all off.

I asked time to fly. It is flying. Maybe I should have asked time to just fast forward instead so that I don't need to actually experience all this chemo, but can still reap the benefits.

Ok. No more moaning! It's chemo day again! **Treatment seven.**

Yesterday Zsolt and I went in for my blood and consultation. This week our consultation was with the lead nurse – she's the curly haired woman who arranged for my picc line. Definitely likeable. There's a willingness to help that I feel more inclined to tap compared to the doctor team. For instance, my chemotherapy was meant to be at 9.30 am today. Maybe for the seasoned morning person that's a good time. For me, it's just . . . just . . . unimaginable. I've *never* been my best during the morning, and for something so BIG it'd simply be a train wreck.

Well, she fixed that problem in a second. Now my chemo is at 1.00 pm today.

And we talked about going home. "Okay, so how are your plans around going home?" Did she remember? Is it detailed in my chart? *HOW* do all these people know my story? (this blog is not advertised within the hospital for fear of offense)

I told her we still hadn't decided and that I honestly felt quite torn. From there followed a chat about ideal vs. optimal treatment. She said that paxlitaxol is a very good drug for treating breast cancer, but also relatively new so it may be difficult to find studies that follow success rate in terms of number of treatments. So ideally I'd have all twelve treatments on schedule. That would be 'best case' scenario.

But don't many people stop early? I asked.

Yes. People can stop at nine, ten, eleven treatments depending on their reaction. Apparently the tingling felt in the fingers and toes isn't temporary – it's permanent . . .like, lifelong. So, they carefully monitor how much sensation you feel in your fingers, whether you can pick things up, whether you stumble on the stairs, etc. If it's gets too extreme they stop.

And here she mentioned something called ‘optimal treatment’, which is about 80-85% of treatment on schedule. At this moment, I’m still having optimal treatment despite my fever last week and my bad platelet count a while back. If you have optimal treatment then things are looking good.

But again – with this drug, there aren’t many (or any??) long term studies with hard(er) numbers.

So here is what Zsolt heard from this conversation:

You gotta do all twelve.

Here is what I heard from this conversation:

You only have to do 85%.

What was the real message? Probably this:

Decide for yourself, because I can’t tell you.

Next week I think we’ll make our final decision. The nurse is going to arrange for us to meet with the lead oncologist – the guy to which everyone refers – so we can have a direct conversation. Honestly, I can see now what he is going to say. But I want to have that talk. And next week, after that talk, I will make a decision and stick to it (*for goodness freaking sakes already, Catherine!*).

Here is a bit of really nice news: My fingers, so far, are fine. I haven’t had any tingling or weird reactions. I hope I don’t *ever* have that sensation. Every week I paint my fingernails a dark blue/purple. One of the nurses once mentioned that sometimes this helps with the tingling, so I’m hopeful!

Ok, that’s it for now. Yesterday while going to the hospital there was that familiar dread in the pit of my stomach. It sits there and begins to swell as I walk into the clinic. If only they could surgically remove the fear, this would all be fine. And today is also Zolodex day. Anyone care for a giant needle in the belly? Ugh. But it’s for the babies. The future babies.

I think a little meditation is required – so that’s what I’m going to go and do. *Breath in, and out, and in, and out.* Followed by a little punching and bombing and kicking around my bedroom.

See you on the other side, as always.

23Oct2010

Bushy eyebrows

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

I'm developing the opinion that thick eyebrows are fantastic. They give definition, they accent . . . they're **beautiful**.

Many years ago at camp (I think I was about 14) girls were observing each other's eyebrows. This one girl whose sister was a model was showing us how to pluck. Start at the bottom, not the top and create a smooth line.

Bollocks. I love my bushy eyebrows. Okay, *maybe* there is the occasional creeping hair that ought to be removed – and I say 'ought' because I never get around to plucking it away. But strong brows make for strong looking women. Of course, back at fourteen I didn't have the same opinion and instead stared in the mirror and wondered whether I was stripping away enough, but I wondered similar things about my makeup, my pimples and my entire appearance. *"Why don't boys like me?"* etc. If you were to see a picture of 14 to 16 year old Catherine, you'd see a girl in oversized sweatshirts, her father's jeans, and totting a whole lotta awkward.

In the past couple weeks my brows have started fading. First they became more polite; now they're straight out meek. So finally I see what Catherine of the plucked brows would look like, which brings me to this posting and my love of the full-on brow.

Wear them thick, wear them proud. Eyebrows: good for the face, great for expression.

I have some brow powder in the bathroom awaiting the day when all the hair falls out and I need to revert to makeup. Or maybe I'll switch my glasses for some really high, thick frames.

And that is my bit about eyebrows. This is well and truly a girl's blog.

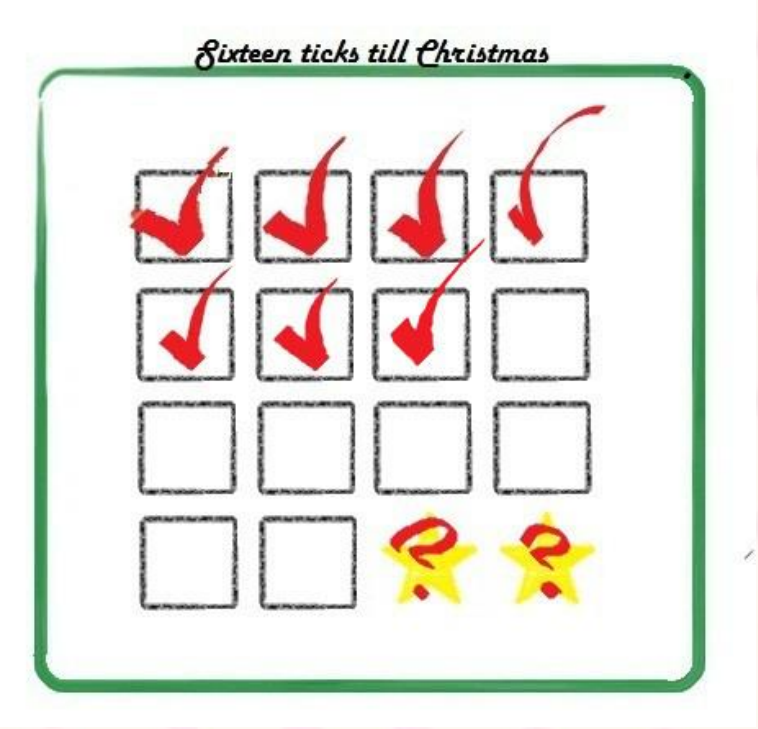
24Oct2010

Killing with Chemo

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

How are things going? They're going well.

This past chemo was the easiest session thus far. Why? Well, Zsolt and I have a few theories.



Theory one: Could they have reduced my dose? The doctor had mentioned something two weeks ago about a possible reduction in my dosage. I have mixed feelings on this, but better reduced dosage for one week than to get behind another treatment. Maybe this will give my blood the chance it needs to recover – even if it's only a slight recovery. Anyhow, that is one theory. Next time we see the doctor we'll ask if they changed something in the chemo plan.

Theory two: AC is wearing off. My God, AC chemotherapy is difficult. Not impossible – *I'd like to stress this*, it is not impossible to weather, but yes, it is difficult. A lot of rest is required.

This past treatment I was able to sit up on Friday and watch a little Channel 4od. Yesterday I went for a walk that lasted a good twenty minutes. Today we tidied the flat and did some groceries. I still get those waves of exhaustion and need to take breaks – after Saturday's walk I crashed onto the bed. BUT just being able to do those things is such a drastic change. Could it be that the previous treatment is finally leaving my body?

Theory Three: Have I finally accepted my situation? Well, actually – will I ever accept my situation is a better question, though last Friday was a good switch in my mind. Thursday I'd gone in for my blood and felt that nervous tension, that same resentment for my situation. Then Friday morning Zsolt talked to me about how much *he* worries. Poor guy, he started researching my chemo treatments, which led to him reading about stage 3 breast cancer, which got him onto reoccurrence topics and so on. This is why I avoid combining Google and key words searches for 'breast cancer'. It's just fucking depressing. Anyhow, he came to me with these worries and for a change it was my turn to comfort him.

"We're going to be fine. We are fighting this cancer. We are doing everything we can. We will get through this."

We are fighting. Chemotherapy is fighting. The idea clicked into my head, and that afternoon before leaving for treatment I didn't punch out my fear of chemo; instead I punched to kill the *fucking-fucking-fucking* cancer that may still be in my body. It has no right to be here, and going to chemo is part of killing that cancer. And all

throughout my treatment (*walking into the ward, sitting in the chair, getting the dopy drug, waiting for the drips*) I thought: **I am killing this cancer. We are killing every last bit of this cancer.**

Best treatment yet.

So whatever the reason. Reduced dosage, recovery from AC, acceptance of this method – whatever the reason, it was easier this time. No nausea and less exhaustion. Let's hope it stays easier.

I can't promise to always be friends with chemotherapy; it's a process that is draining and difficult. But for Zsolt and for myself – I will use it as my weapon.

I have to get better. There's no choice in this matter. I **have** to get better. 100% must.

So we fight, fight, and keep on fighting. Chemo is my weapon.

25Oct2010

Another fertility consultation

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Fertility, Treatment

Today I have an appointment at the fertility clinic. What this appointment is about, well – no one seems to know.

I don't know. Zsolt doesn't know. The nurses don't know. But the appointment exists and since we didn't cancel it properly all of three months ago when receiving notice of the booking, we're going in.

I had tried to cancel this meeting. Calling up the breast care nurses we'd had a conversation about why this meeting was scheduled and had concluded it was a mistake. The nurse said she'd cancel it for me and I decided not to worry. That was three months ago.

Last Friday while having *just* received the dopy drug into my vein, the chemo nurse says, "So, I see you'll be going to the Princess Ann on Monday."

"No . . ." *My body is sinking.*

"Yes," she replies. "Someone called for your notes yesterday. You have an appointment with the Fertility clinic."

"What?" *And the world feels so heavy*. "We cancelled that meeting."

"Oh."

"Do I have to go?" *Even my thoughts are getting heavy: have I done something wrong? Will this mistake get me in trouble?*

The nurse now wishes aloud that she hadn't mentioned the appointment because there I am drugged up trying to contemplate another unexpected twist. Thoughts of invitro fertilization and Zolodex are running through my head and I can't help thinking, "*why do they spring these things last minute?"* When really, the appointment has been set for three months – regardless of my ignorance to that fact.

Could we still cancel the meeting? It was Friday afternoon, and the meeting was for today – Monday. *Should* we cancel the meeting? Maybe the doctor will be able to provide new options, or let me know what happens next, or tell how we can check fertility in the future. . . maybe it's *fate* that the meeting wasn't cancelled.

Anyhow, I generally think it's rude to cancel without sufficient notice. Therefore we are going to this appointment with the doctor who is – as he once mentioned – extremely busy. People wait ages for an

appointment, and we'll be walking in saying something like: hey, how's it going? Long time no see . . . why are we here?

Oh well. Worst case scenario everyone is confused and we leave within five minutes. Best case – I don't know! We'll see.

25Oct2010

Just checking up

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Fertility, Treatment

That's that.

Turns out this was a follow up appointment. They just wanted to see 'where we were' in our thoughts toward fertility testing, and how far along treatment had progressed. No one scolded anyone for wasting time.

Basically, the fertility clinic is positioned beside the maternity ward, *and* beside the breast clinic. Therefore walking in for my appointment was slightly emotional. First there are pregnant women everywhere and happy families with gift bags reading 'baby' in pink or blue bubble letters. Next there is the breast screening clinic where I had my original biopsy. Finally, the fertility clinic waiting room is beside – can you guess? – beside the very room where I first learnt I had breast cancer.

So Zsolt and I sat for an hour and a half, facing opposite that unfortunate room, until we were called in to see the doctor.

I went through several stages of emotion. Sadness, surprise, resentment (aka jealousy towards these lovely, pregnant mothers) followed by simple exhaustion with the wait time.

Breast cancer care in England is very comprehensive. Not only do they treat the problem, they treat the implications. During our meeting the doctor discussed future testing and how we could 'get started' on the road to pregnancy once all my treatments were over. She even mentioned testing Zsolt's sperm, which surprised me because I had assumed that the emphasis was on *my* fertility. However – we are a unit, both sides matter.

Comprehensive.

Today was okay. Before the appointment I was nervous to the point of freaking out **why? I don't know . . . let's blame it on the menopause.* Now it's done I feel better.

Plus on the way home while listening to classic fm, they played a rousing bit of music where the fellow kept singing "Figaro, Figaro, Figaro!" That was wonderful. Zsolt and I rocked out.

And there you have it: Fertility mystery appointment solved.

27Oct2010

Halloween pumpkin

Posted in Bumpboobs, Fun, Life, Love, Treatment

Boo!

Zsolt and I have decided to celebrate Halloween. I know that back home 'deciding' to celebrate Halloween is as inevitable as deciding to rake the lawn, but here in England it is 100% optional.

It's been years since I've dressed up for a party, and since we're not going to a party (too many potential germs!) – it may be several more. But there are other ways to get into the Halloween spirit. First and foremost: carve a pumpkin.

Today after work we dropped into the green grocer's on Portswood and selected a pumpkin. My experience vetoed Zsolt's desire for a tiny pumpkin because – frankly – it's really hard to carve a face onto a tiny surface. Now our pumpkin (about 1 foot tall, and somewhat narrow) is sitting by the door waiting for Sunday. Though by Canadian standards this is a small pumpkin. Back home we would go to the farm where there'd be a mountain of pumpkins – massive pumpkins, big as a man's torso. We'd buy a few, because why not? But our English pumpkin is perfect for our English apartment. Plus, it's Zsolt's first time; don't want to overwhelm the man.

Tomorrow is blood. Friday is chemo. Saturday is rest. Sunday is pumpkin. It'll be all the activity I can handle, made easier by Zsolt deseeding and carving while I sit by and nod, occasionally napping. After we carve the pumpkin (once it's dark and spooky outside) we'll watch a Halloween film. Trouble here is that I have zero tolerance for scary. So, as to what Halloween film we'll watch I'm not sure. Maybe the Rocky Horror Picture show? Although it looks several kinds of crazy. Is there a Halloween film that leaves you feeling warm and fuzzy (instead of jumpy and paranoid)?

Or we could watch *Love Actually* again, for the thousandth time.

Anyhow, it'll be fun. Why not have a bit of fun?

28Oct2010

Sunshine sketches of a little town

Posted in Bumpboobs, Canada, Finding Home, Life, Reading

Last night I savoured nostalgia the way you would a chocolate truffle that melts in your mouth. Taken from a box tied with a ribbon, made from butter thick cream and the darkest coco; it flowed over me.

I have never been so impressed with a final chapter. Stephen Leacock's thin novel *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* stirs up memories of a home that I never had – Mariposa – but can entirely relate to, even having been raised in the suburbs instead of a small town off a dirt road along winding river.

It's deeply satisfying to read a well written piece of work. And just as he began to talk about home, and Home, and the place that is buried in the past, I knew this was going to something about which to write. He has you see the train that everyone has forgotten, the train that carries you back to that place you grew up, the place with all those sunny memories . . . and he has you take that train and watch it transform into everything good you know about those times.

It made me think of my home – not exactly the one in Kanata 2010, but more the one in my mind, the one I visit to watch giant snowflakes drift through the air, or the maple leaves turn yellow, or the sun that streaks with redness across the field, *and I grew up in the suburbs*, far less sentimental than a small town where everyone knows everyone, but nostalgia is a strong cocktail, I figure, no matter where you grew up.

Anyhow, having slowly plucked my way through the pages of this book and laughed along with the ridiculousness of the narrator and characters, it was a disarming to read Leacock sober up and take us on this sad journey into a place to which we can't actually return.

I long for Christmas because it's what I knew back when things were far, far easier. And I miss Canada because not only is it an excellent country, but it is Home, no matter where else I live – no matter where else I may go – it will always be Home. And funnily enough, I *know* that those feelings are placed back in time. This is now, this is my life *now* and it is a good one (a **very** good one). Ten years into the future I'll probably long for the time Zsolt and I lived in a one bedroom apartment along a busy street filled with students, and we'd walk to the green grocers to buy our vegetables.

Nostalgia is a funny thing. Being emotional lately I think it catches me more often, and yesterday's final chapter (*L'Envoi. The Train to Mariposa*) caught me right up, wrapped me right up, and sent me to bed with dreams full of Young ponds, and popsicle outings, and sitting under my maple.

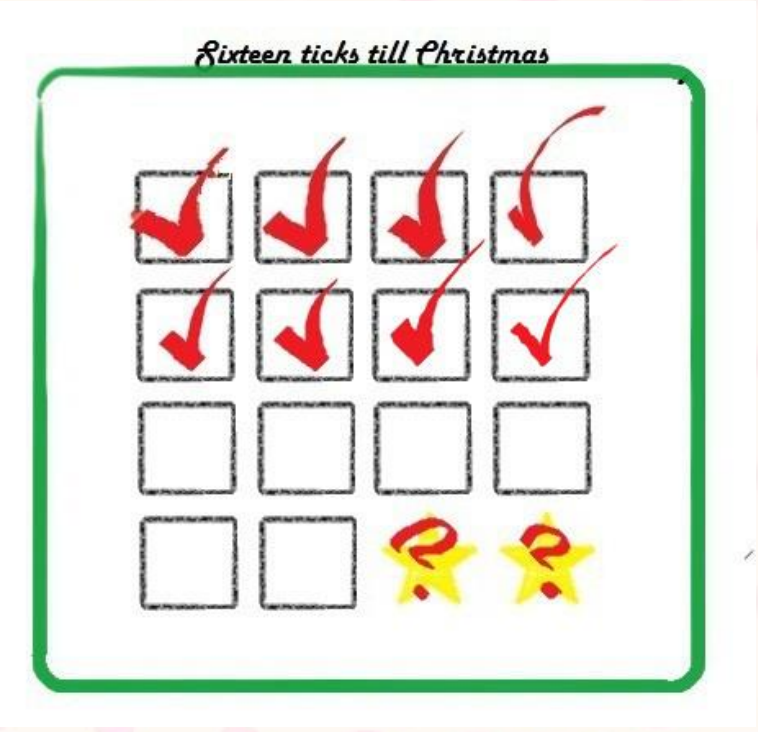
Nostalgia is a nice place to visit, though I certainly couldn't live there. That would be too hard. Instead I'll go and give Zsolt a kiss on the cheek, make a cup of tea, and look out the window for something interesting. I love my life now: my independence, my husband, my friends, my family, my writing, my adventures – all despite this breast cancer blip. But it *was* nice to ride Leacock's train, if only for the night. He is a talented writer, which is always a pleasure.

30Oct2010

Eight!

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

Thank goodness this is getting easier. Yesterday, apart from a tryst with menopause, went very well. Easy.



Quick aside: If you are unsure about whether to get a picc line, please let me state my opinion (this is in no way a professional opinion and yes, there are also some risks with a picc so please talk to your doctor before deciding): This picc line is amazing! The anxiety of searching for veins is gone, the anxiety of giving blood is gone, the anxiety of hospitalization followed by days worth of drips are gone. If you are having chemo, particularly any chemo known to irritate the veins like AC, and if you generally have small veins – I'd most certainly bring this subject up on your **first** *consultation. Funny this idea is saved until the arm aches from a simple touch; in this case I think preventative medicine is the better approach (i.e. picc line), though of course more expensive to the health care system. But so is chemotherapy, so why not go ahead with what's best for you? The picc line makes like easier. Show up, plug in, drip, unplug.*

Yesterday morning I was punching things out once again, but it wasn't having the same effect. Okay, yes, I'd feel better *while* punching, but afterwards the blanket of dread would fall back down. This anxiety lasted all the way into the chemo ward. I wanted to cry, to run away, to panic.

Behind the reception desk was the curly hair lead nurse. "There's a bit of a wait, Catherine." *They know my name* . . . "We're about 45 minutes behind, so you can wait here or go off for a while."

Given the choice of waiting in a chemo ward or going somewhere else, I will always choose to 'go somewhere else'. We went back to the car and ate orange slices. And while I was waiting in the car, still full of my dread, I thought '*this is the perfect time to cry'* so I spoke with Zsolt about all those sentimental things that I miss (e.g. Balaton bike rides and buying giant watermelons from the market) and let the tears work their way out.

Now I'm not saying this to complain, or because crying was so difficult – exactly opposite – crying was easy, it was exactly what I needed to do. My emotions didn't have a 'reason' for overspilling, and while poor Zsolt kept asking, "why are you so sad?", I had no particular response. All I needed to do was cry. Sometimes the best thing a man can do is rub his wife's back while she cries. Nothing needs to be fixed.

And after the crying I was another woman. The dread was lightened, and with the addition of sucking on orange slices for distraction, it eventually disappeared. I returned to the ward ready for chemotherapy.

In went the dopy drug and anti sickness; down went my head onto the pillow. I lay there for thirty minutes and thought '*this isn't so different from my acupuncture'*. Qing, my acupuncturist, often leaves me to rest while the heat lamp works it's beautiful magic. So I imagined I was on her table with the blankets and the heat, and I did my best to meditate. Somehow that meditation turned into mentally dancing at the club with my friend Catherine – complete with disco ball and smoke machine, but the nurses were playing radio 2 in the background so I blame it on the pop music.

Zsolt sat close by reading *Love in the time of cholera* (but in Hungarian). And we waited.

Afterwards – drip of saline for five minutes, change of wrapping for my picc, then unplugging and done! Like I said, it was easy.

At this point I think it's more the aftermath of chemo rather than the chemo itself that needs to be handled. Exhaustion comes and goes, along with my crazy emotions, and there are things to think about like food and cleaning and work – but I'm learning. I miss work if I'm too exhausted, I don't cook unless necessary, and any cleaning only takes place when my body feels strong enough to manage.

Oh! The appointment with the doctor. Well, guess who is on vacation this week? Fair enough, everyone deserve a vacation. Instead of seeing the lead oncologist I visited with another doctor. She's quite nice, very smiley and wears cool black boots. The curl in her hair often fights back against the ponytails she pushes it into. Let's call her Doctor Boots.

Not the lead oncologist, but still a very interesting visit. I asked her about my Christmas question and she said of course, they will always recommend the full treatment, but people do stop early and – *very interestingly* – she used to work at Portsmouth Hospital, and over there someone with my exact same situation would have been given about **three weeks less** treatment.

But, as to which treatment is better, she couldn't say. Apparently each hospital follows whatever approach they think best – but there aren't any studies comparing the results of Portsmouth Hospital's shorter course of chemotherapy to Southampton Hospital's slightly longer plan. She can't say which is better.

Bottom line once again: Do what you feel is best, because we can't decide for you.

Well, I wish someone would! Doctors must be tied up in all kinds of legal obligations. They probably need to memorize a booklet called, "how not to be sued".

Anyhow, no matter. It was an interesting conversation that helped me gain another perspective. Next week when I finally talk with the head fellow, I'll have better questions to ask.

So there you have it. That was **eight**. Yay!

30Oct2010

Orange slices for chemo

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Food

This deserves its own quick post. Here's a tip for chemotherapy: It can be a nerve racking process, so if you need an outlet for your energy may I kindly suggest orange slices?

The idea was developed by my scientist husband in our kitchen lab while I was going through my vomiting spree. I couldn't drink my Avemar without throwing it all back up; the taste becomes quite unpleasant (terrible) after hard core chemo. BUT it's been shown to help, so what's to be done?

Zsolt's answer: Slice oranges.

After drinking the Avemar I immediately bite into an orange (think tequila shot but orange instead of lemon) and gargle/spit the juice. This really helps with the aftertaste.

Also, the chemo was causing me to have superhuman smelling power – making trips to the hospital really difficult. How to cope: open that bag of oranges and start chewing. So what if the juice runs down my chin? So what if I smile at everyone with the peel in my mouth?

So what?

They probably call me the Orange Girl, because whenever it's blood or chemo time I'm always in the waiting room chewing on the orange slices – I see them staring! And oranges smell too, only good. Citrusy. Hopefully I'm not making anyone nauseas.

Therefore, I'd like to award a gold star to Zsolt for his ingenious solution to my problem. Orange slices. Give them a try. *(Bring tissues for the juice!)*

31Oct2010

I just love food

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Food, Treatment

Yesterday morning a large package arrived to my door. *"Sign here."* And in comes a very cold box. This wasn't a total surprise (I'd been told two days before to expect the delivery), but it was a total pleasure. My cousin Luc and his wife Marie Claude decided to gift Zsolt and I with a substantial delivery of frozen food.

A couple weeks ago, Zsolt and I started to buy premade meals to help reduce the stress of cooking (after I had my little breakdown). Waitrose provides a decent line of frozen food, but you really need to pick and choose – some stuff is okay, other things are dreadful. Honestly, I'm a bit, hmm . . . . *selective* in terms of food because I grew up in a household that only cooked from fresh ingredients and didn't often turn to ready meals.

But yesterday's delivery was from Cook. Have you heard of them? They're a company that promotes 'home cooked' style meals that are easy to warm up and serve. All these ingredients are fresh and they seem to take care in creating their menu. Zsolt and I had wandered into their shop a long time back and were impressed then, so when the box arrived full of meals I was totally excited.

Opening the package there were curries and pies and lasagnes and desserts and all sorts of goodness. And, amazingly, they all fit into our tiny freezer!

Today we baked the pork stroganoff, which was creamy and full of flavour (an area where many, many frozen meals fail). Zsolt ate a man's share, and I ate a lady's (*See picture, it might not look too pretty after being mixed in with the pasta, but it still tasted nice!*)

Merci Luc et Marie-Claude pour la bonne nourriture!

Plus, as icing to this happy cake – Denise *just* stopped by with some freshly baked pumpkin bread, candy, and cream cheese. The bread has a lovely smell and as soon as I'm done this blog I'll be cutting a slice. I'm on a photo kick, so I'll take another picture right now. (*Pumpkin carved by Zsolt and I!)*

I love food – but even better, I love good food. It seems that without a costume or actually leaving my flat, I'm still managing to rack in the treats. This is one excellent Halloween.

Thank you so much.

1Nov2010

Mr Spooky the pumpkin

Posted in Bumpboobs, Fun, Life

Yesterday, Zsolt and I carved up a little bit of pumpkin! Though I can't help thinking we somehow missed Halloween because looking at our street last night there wasn't a single pumpkin on a single porch.

No matter! It was fun. This was Zsolt's first pumpkin design and he did a great job. Mind you, he also refused to touch the stringy inside goop and I ended up scraping that out, but otherwise he took to the carving well. Though it may have been a little too exciting because today I'm totally wiped. Oh well, one active day followed by one rest day – that seems to be the trend.

Carving the pumpkin was a lot of fun, and lighting it was even better. Mr Spooky did us proud for Halloween night. I hope you enjoy the picture.

3Nov2010

Thinning eyelashes

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

Do you know the pleasure of scratching your eyes? If you've ever had allergies I'm guessing you can relate. There's that instant satisfaction that keeps you rubbing.

Rubbing and rubbing, till it becomes uncontrollable. Your eye goes red. Pleasure turns into **ITCH**.

AH! It's the bane of my facial existence. Why do I scratch my eyes? Is it allergies (very likely), is it habit (also likely), is it *insanity*?!

That's right, baby – I just pulled out **double punctuation**; much debated, but ultimately useful for expressing my confusion *and* exasperation.

?!

Unfortunately my eye lashes are starting to fall out, no thanks to my scratching. The bottom row is nearly gone, the top is hanging in there – but today I've spotted a thinning patch. A friend suggested I get eye drops, and so I have, because lashes and eyebrows serve an important purpose. Who knows what little dusties will find their way onto my retina?

It's really strange to become so physically transformed. This lack of hair makes me feel like a blank slate . . .like Wooly Willy, that magnetic face I used to play with during car trips – you know him? He's got a bare face and you can shape tiny iron filings into moustaches and beards and hair. Well I'm that guy, but without any metal shreds. And my nose is smaller.

It's strange. I see students with their long wavy hair and actually feel jealous. Ugh, frankly, I am not interested in being jealous and so remind myself that while they have hair, they also have essays. And essays are no fun. *Ha!* I have no essays!

Maybe I'm getting a little crazy, a little facially fixated. This too shall pass, and when I'm not thinking about it, I don't worry at all. And I don't even worry too much when I do think about – but writing condenses my emotions to make their flavour stronger.

Anyhow, there it is, my facial hair is still falling. On the bright side Zsolt and I have been debating whether or not my head is more fuzzy. We think it may be, which would be a good sign of regrowth.

Fuzzy wuzzy was a bear, but fuzzy wuzzy had no hair . . . Yeah, me neither.

Alright, I'm going to stop writing about this. Have a lovely day!

5Nov2010

Chemotherapy conversations

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

Well today went smoothly. I'll tell you this, I'm getting used to the process – and not having a needle makes it all much easier.

Zsolt and I arrived on time and were seated in green chair number four. I think waiting all depends on whether or not you catch them at the right moment. We walked into the treatment room and every chair was full except for one. Lucky me, my chemo had arrived and a chair was available.

A very nice nurse, bless her, who has an extremely nervous disposition, set things up and began the drip. She's a nice woman, but quite hesitant in her language. There's no doubt in my mind she knows what she's doing, but nevertheless she vocalized her every action. "Here is the antihistamine, I'm just getting ready and, umm, putting it in. There it, ahh, goes. So you should soon feel a bit, umm, sleepy."

The first time meeting her I was overwhelmed; not by her manner exactly, but by the amount of information she was gave. Nurses have to consider many aspects while administering drugs; the checklists in their minds appear endless. Actually it was from her that learnt about the sleepiness. Before I thought it was just the drugs making me ill (well, it sorta is the drug making me ill/dopy) afterwards I realized it was the antihistamine. Mentally that helped in accepting the process.

I've heard that the word 'like' gives people time to think while forming sentences. She was probably, like, doing the same thing.

And then my head lay down on the pillow with hopes of sleep. Hmmm . . . Problem with trying to sleep in a chemo ward: *chatter!*

Take a room full of women getting chemotherapy and you have chatter. Someone may as well roll in some tea and biscuits to make a proper tea party. Most people *are* hit by the dopy drug; there's a period where ladies calmly tilt back their heads with closed eyes – but it never lasts.

Drug wears off, eyes pop open, mouth starts moving.

Today these two women were discussing the side effects of paxlitaxol, which is the same therapy I'm on currently. This one poor woman is losing her nails. First came a brittleness, then nail loss.

Oh my goodness. Here is my problem, unfortunately we are all tied by this common experience and it's ultimately our first point of conversation. "How's the chemo, Fran?" "Oh lovely, Sarah – my diarrhea has slowed and that rash went away." *(Okay, no one discusses their diarrhea, but your likely reaction is similar to how I feel about missing nails)*

So I slept on the pillow, but also, and quite uncontrollably, eavesdropped on conversations. At one point I had plugs shoved into my ears and hands over my toque but I could still hear the ladies lunching.

Another, potentially more serious bit about treatment room: illness.

It's that time of the year when everyone is sick. During the week I am either a social hermit or an overly paranoid germaphobe. Any hard cough and my office door is closing. If someone is sick our plans are cancelled. Essentially, I'm being proactive. It's only for two more months and afterwards I'll make up for my lack of social life. But in the chemo room there's no choice with who you sit beside. Today there was a lady with a fierce cough. She picked it up from her husband (*again, I was totally eavesdropping*) and hasn't been able to shake it off. Anyhow, at this point in my listening I turn away and bury my head into the pillow. Stay away cough!

It's really interesting in the room. Everyone wants to share their experience – except Zsolt who reads his book while I'm resting; he purposely avoids eye contact with the other people so he can get on with his novel.

But no wonder they chatter. We're making the best of our situation, and part of that is through conversation. New families come and sit in worried circles, and of course they're curious. Other people are alone and talking helps establish community. While I hardly talk with the ladies (because I'm sleeping, and I must look crazy to them with my oranges and pyjama outfit) the idea of talking is normal in a room filled with women. However, I still don't want to hear about the nasty side effects, *or* pick up anyone's bug.

Hmm, just realized I haven't mentioned my meeting with the doctor. Okay, will do tomorrow. It was a good meeting, but the result won't be confirmed till I hear from Canada.

It was a busy chemo today – every chair was filled and (almost) every mouth waggled. Now that we're home (now I've finally napped) it's far more peaceful. Good to be home, as always – and yes, I'm doing well.

Shout out to my parents and the group at Ultimate Wake Up! Have fun this weekend, it's a great experience.

6Nov2010

What's up, doc?

Posted in Bumpboobs, Canada, Chemotherapy, Life, Treatment

Last Friday, Zsolt and I met with the lead oncologist. We arrived with a list of questions, but before I could even mouth the word "Christmas" we had to first cover the basics.

The basics

Doctor: How are you feeling?

Me: Fine.

Doctor: Any mouth sores?

Me: No.

Doctor: How are your fingers and toes?

Me: Good.

Doctor: And your energy?

Me: Still tired.

Doctor: How's your mood?

Me: Okay.

Doctor: And your bowels?

Me: Fine.

Doctor: What about nausea?

Me: No.

. . . . .

Doctor: Okay, let's talk about Christmas.

FINALLY! So that ended the basics. Basically, I'm coping with chemo and plugging along. I get tired, I get sore, I get better, I go to work and proceed as normally as possible.

The conversation then shifted to how many doses of paxlitaxol are 'enough'. Honestly, he gave the same vague answer that all the doctors have given – in that, studies are based on twelve doses, reducing that dose

might/could/possibly make a marginal difference in my chances, but he can't say for certain. It was his opinion, however, that I finish the entire course.

Blah. Okay, fine.

It was also his opinion that finishing chemo in Canada is entirely possible. He would send an email to the hospital in Ottawa, and we'll see what they say. Nice!

I realize that travelling during chemotherapy will be exhausting. I am aware. But I want to go home, and this is a compromise. So, if everything works out on the Canadian side of things, I will be able to see my family over the holidays. That means a lot to me. Zsolt will drive me to the airport, an airline rep will take me through the airport, and then (with thanks a whole lotta air miles) I'll fly first class home – where I'll be helped off the plane and delivered to my family. It will be exhausting, but at least I'll be supported. Plus Air Canada has those pods up in first class, so I'll be able to lay back and sleep.

Next week we should hear more – hopefully by then the ball will be rolling.

It's good news that satisfies everyone. Zsolt is happy, I am happy, and hopefully the journey isn't too difficult.

Thumbs up for a good meeting! Yay!

10Nov2010

Making time

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

This past weekend my parents ran their annual 'Wake up' seminar – so that meant they were crazy busy and we didn't talk on Sunday. Didn't talk on Sunday, and it wasn't till late Monday that we actually met up on Skype.

Somewhere between Sunday morning and Monday night I realize the following: I'm hooked on talking with my parents.

I kept checking skype for that little green bubble to appear beside their names – over and over, compulsively.

It never used to be like this. There was a time that we'd go a week or two between conversations – I was busy, they were busy, no one had time. But then I was diagnosed with breast cancer and that all changed. We talk every day, either working together on my issues or just chatting. Even though they are in another country I still feel their support. Actually, I depend on it.

Who knows what will happen when the chemo and radiotherapy is over. Chances are we won't chat *every* day. I'll be busy, they'll be busy, there won't always be time. But this has been a very good experience. In some ways it brought me closer to my parents, and I'm really thankful for that.

It's a heavy thing to take care of someone, but it makes a difference. From Zsolt doing the dishes, to friends bringing food, to talking with my parents – it's all made a difference. I guess I'm hooked on the support, but for now that's okay. For now I can let myself be supported.

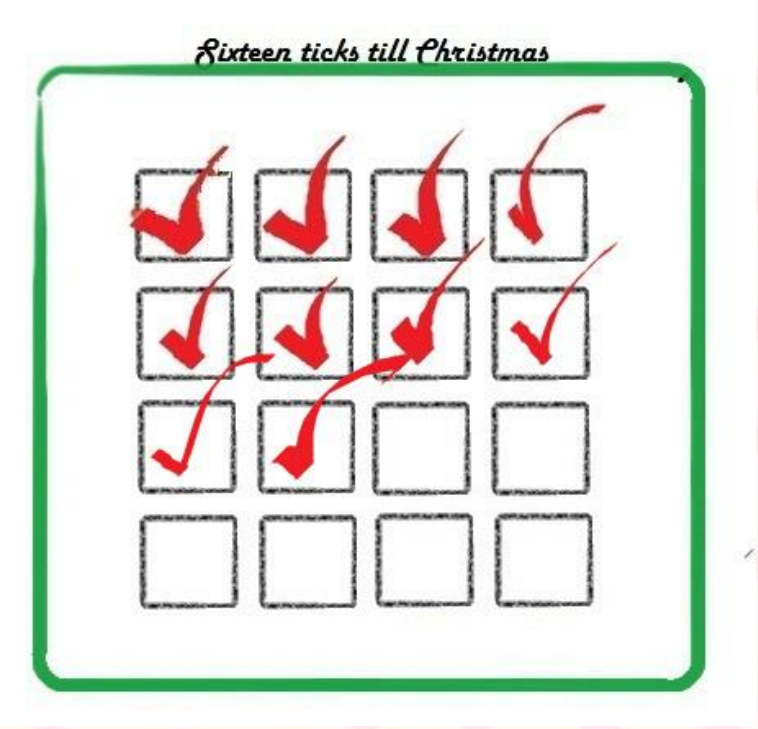
And then, when this is over, I'll do what I can to show my thanks.

12Nov2010

Worst dressed list

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

No one can accuse me of having fashion sense, particularly when I still – almost thirty – insist on wearing different coloured socks. But you can't say I'm a clothing monster, either.



Like most people, I have a few favourite pieces, a favourite season and a time to shine (summer dresses, summer tops, summer shoes = yay!) and alternatively I have outdated tops, bottoms that deserve the garbage and sweaters that do *not* flatter my shape.

Whatever. Winter and fall have never been my good seasons. It's my philosophy to simply keep my head down from the wind, wrap that scarf tighter, and for goodness sakes put on a toque. And for this reason, *and this reason alone*, I'll never win best dressed actress of the year.

However Zsolt has another award he'd like to bestow upon me: **worst dressed chemo patient ever.**

Do I deserve this? *Hmmm . . .*

Today we arrived for the TENTH treatment. *¡Ay, caramba!* Time has granted my request and started to fly. Only six more sessions and that green chair will be history.

You know what, I'm incredibly lucky. There are people in that ward who don't know when their chemo ends . . . chemo ends when it ends; things either work or stop responding. Who's brave? They are brave. This lovely woman was chatting to me today and she was giving such a positive front despite this being her second round to clear cancer. "We don't know how long I'll be here" she said, then quickly mentioned this was her second attempt. And all the while she smiled – now there is bravery.

Things are coming along. It's funny because the nurses still expect me to get sick. This one lady was changing my picc line and talking about how AC chemo was difficult. "I just hated giving you that red stuff," she said, which was surprising. The nurses know what's coming, yet they do their best to chat about the weather, wear that '*this is normal'* face, and make the experience pleasant . . . as pleasant as possible . . . I had never realized they might just hate what they're inflicting.

That was an insight.

So was my husband's response to my 'Going to Chemotherapy to Kick Breast Cancer Ass' outfit. It's not the first time I've worn these cloths, but it is the first time he's noticed.

Going to Chemotherapy to Kick Breast Cancer Ass Outfit (worn every Friday since the second dose of Paxlitaxol):

Really thick socks.

Shoes – preferably with shoe laces undone, if remembered.

Sweatpants. (the more loose, the better)

Tank top.

Giant husband-sized hoodie (sweater) discarded by Zsolt due to faulty zipper. (Zsolt's main cause for protest)

My woolly toque.

Oranges in the mouth.

Frankly, the only people dressed more causally are the C5 patients in their robes. But this outfit has purpose! The socks keep my ankles warm; the sweatpants don't restrict movement so I can lift my legs while sleeping; the tank top gives me a choice between warm & cold (hot flash protection); the SWEATER keeps me warm with its excessive size, and also the arms are so big that I can wear it and my picc line remains available for the drip; the toque blocks out light so that I can nap happily.

It's a thoughtful outfit, despite looking terrible. Zsolt doesn't understand, and I guess none of the other chemotherapy patients do either – many of them actually show up looking GOOD. Fashion as defiance in the face of adversity. Well, I tried that and couldn't sleep properly in the chair.

So award for the sloppiest fashion in the chemo ward goes to me. It's an honour.

Who doesn't love a great outfit? But there's a time and place – and when I feel tired, well frankly, I don't give a damn.

It was a good session.

P.S. I'm waiting on my oncologist to send a letter to the doctor in Ottawa. It seems my file was misplaced, so they didn't have the needed information. Enough of that – I called the secretary on Thursday and gave her the missing contact details. On Monday I'll call again to confirm that the letter has been sent.

14Nov2010

Why do we fight?

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Love, Treatment

Now here is something a little personal. And no, this post isn't about sex – although I could go on about that as well. But today is about fighting.

One and a half years ago, Zsolt and I promised to be loyal to one another. We promised for better or for worse, for richer or poorer, and to love one another till death do us part.

But we never promised not to fight.

Generally speaking Zsolt and I are an easygoing and happy couple. Things happen, we adapt, we have a talk, we share a laugh, we watch a movie and move on. Plates have never been thrown, and voices are hardly ever raised. Generally speaking, we don't fight.

But then put us in a small apartment, add a splash of chemotherapy, a dose of cancer-scare, a shake of lower income, and a large scoop of thesis pressure . . . mix it all together, let it bubble over a few months, and then see what happens.

What happens?

Irritation, micro fighting, nit-picking, wit's ends, and some poorly chosen words.

There is a new sort of pressure on our relationship that we need to push through. Life isn't always easy; we've *always* been on student incomes, we've *always* had PhD pressure, we've *always* come from different cultures. And yet, we've *always* been happy. With Zsolt my choices are clear, my opinion is set. I've never doubted us as a couple, not even for a second.

Not even now.

Today, I just want to write about pressure. Pressure and fighting. It was such a relief yesterday when he and I finally spoke about this and realized we were both feeling that same tension. It was a relief to **admit** that we were becoming frustrated. Of course that doesn't solve all problems, but it make me feel more united with him.

Maybe other people can relate to this? It must be normal, right? The pressure and stress and frustration has got be normal, yeah? *Right?*

Well at least I'm not alone.

Zsolt agreed things have been hard; it was a good moment for us both, and today was easier, lighter. We both recognized and stopped a fight before it happened. It certainly could have gone bad today, for no good reason but an open door. *(I won't go into details, but it involved 'heating the outdoors' as my dad would say).*

Zsolt and I have been in situations of pressure before, but not often at the same time. So this is new in our relationship. We can't always be each other's rock.

And yet, at the same time – just knowing that he and I are in the similar boats makes a big difference. I don't feel as alone, and hopefully neither does he. We'll probably still fight – because hey, this is still stressful. But if at the end of the day I can slide into his arms, and he can kiss me on the head, and we can talk about our feelings . . . then I'll guess things will be okay.

Fighting and pressure are worth mentioning, if also a little personal. But if you're reading this blog to know what can expected during some cancer killing – I would expect some tension, and probably towards the people you love the very most. But it doesn't have to conquer us, does it? Nope.

Because they are the people we love the *very, very* most.

I went half way around the world for Zsolt, and I'd go a lot further still. We might fight a little, but we love a lot more. No cancer is going to stop that.

15Nov2010

Swedish roots

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

Ohhh yeah. The hair is growing back!

Zsolt measured my hair today, it ranges in length between 2mm and 1cm. Still tiny, still invisible – but hey, it's growing. And on top of that, it's coming in blond. I'm gonna look Swedish!

16Nov2010

Bonjour Lulu!

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Love, Treatment

So I've been posting a lot lately – it's a response to Lulu, who asked about my posting, or lack of posting. Well here you go Lulu! Freshly pressed, as they say here.

Sunday afternoon, between my waves of sleep and hot flashes, Zsolt and I put up the Christmas tree. And please, don't check your calendar – yes, it's still November. But if I *do* end up leaving for Canada (if, when, etc) our Samson/Brunelle family needs to have covered a certain amount of festive celebration.

The stockings are hung, the tiny tree is standing and covered with ornaments, tinsly stuff is around the doorway, and we have Christmas music playing. I love it.

After decorating the tree we snuggled down and watched *The Santa Clause*, which Zsolt said was the stupidest movie ever (fart jokes are never a good sign) – but still sat through because I got a kick out of it. Funny how the cheesiest films can hold a place in our heart so long as they're connected to a memory. I remember watching *The Santa Clause* in my basement with Mom and Dad as the wood fire burned. Mind you, I fell asleep toward the end and Zsolt had to carry on watching (I fell asleep *on* Zsolt, so he was stuck there). Poor fellow :)

Today we are still in the Christmas cheer, but life hasn't stopped. Yesterday Zsolt discovered MOULD along the skirting in the bedroom, *and* behind the washing machine (and around the blasted windows, though we already knew about that). No wonder my eyes itch. AHHH. No wonder. The idea was that he'd clean it all away yesterday while I went in to work (which I paid for later in the form of Zombieism) and I could avoid the mould madness. Unfortunately the spray ran out after about two shots. So! Today we try again.

I dream of a flat with no allergies, and sunshine, and heating, and a nice view. It'd take all the good elements of our past three apartments and wrap them into one perfect package. The Dream Flat – which is actually a house, since I'm dreaming. A house with a yard and big trees nearby (but not so close as to threaten the structure).

Well, if we can just get rid of the mould our current home will be quite good. Zsolt needs to start spraying.

And that, Lulu, is all that is happening over here. Not much else to say. Zsolt and I are doing well; he's working on his thesis and I am getting rest. Only six treatments left till chemotherapy is over, and if this Ottawa Hospital thing works out, only four more treatments till I go home. Things are coming along. :) See you soon.

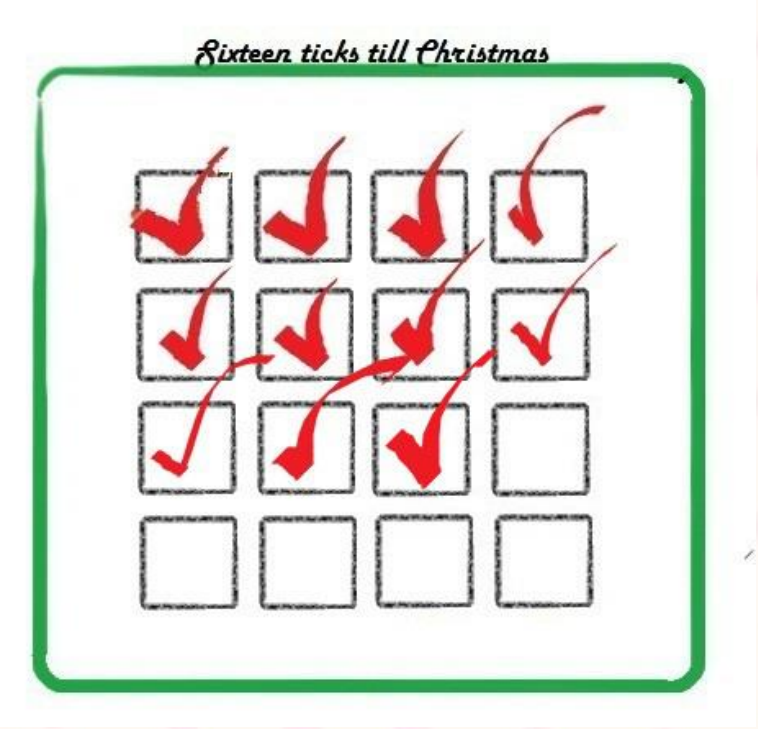
18Nov2010

Gotta sleep tonight

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

Six!

I'm done with counting up. It's time to count *down*. Woohoo!



As of tomorrow noonish, that'll be SIX, then next week five, then four, then three, then two, than one, than ZERO. Happy new year!

While discussing scheduling with my boss, he said to me today, "I'm not going to stop you going home for Christmas, I don't think anything could stop you." He's mostly likely right. The juices are flowing between Canada and England, connections still need to happen but things are looking good. I don't want to jinx anything by delving into details before they've settled – so let's just say it's looking good. Will discuss more later.

And speaking of later . . . after chemo come radiotherapy. My oncologist will be setting up a meeting with my soon-to-be radiotherapist (is that a real term?) At which point they'll let me know how many treatments I can expect. Because I don't want reconstructive surgery I should be given *less* as opposed to *more* radiotherapy. Fingers crossed that's true, because I hear it burns.

Way back in July while meeting with the surgeon, reconstructive surgery was brought up in conversation.

"That breast is rotten, it's got to go. Good news is we can build you an ever better breast."

No thank you, sir. It isn't his breast sculpting abilities that I question, it's my patience level. When given the choice (a choice that doesn't involve life-threatening growths) I always choose NOT to have surgery. I'm a 'just say no' kinda girl. Though I sympathise with women who want to have the reconstruction. Losing a breast sucks and the chance to get another is appealing, but the idea of more scalpels and drugs and pain is not.

So far in this post I've talking about counting down, going to Canada, radiotherapy and breast reconstruction.

I'm rambling.

Why?

Because it is nearing bedtime in the Samson/Brunelle household, which means if I don't spill my thoughts now they'll keep me up tonight. Two nights in the past week I haven't been able to sleep. There is tossing and

turning and attempts at meditation – useless! The only cure for my insomnia is writing. It helps the chatty part of my mind deflate, and after I've written three or four pages of ramble, drifting to sleep becomes easier. Poor Zsolt gets woken up by the light and the clicking pen. But what can I do? I'm a writer with urges.

Apparently Paxlitaxel can cause insomnia. I'm not sure if that's an official side effect, but I've read about it on the message boards. Paxlitaxel strikes again, another women has a sleepless night. And then comes morning, by the time I've finally drifted off and entered 'log' like sleep, well the neighbour babies start crying and the sun starts shining and Zsolt wakes up to wash the dishes.

Frankly I'm getting more tired as each week passes. The night is still a blessed time of calm, but when my mind refuses to shut down it turns into a game of patience. Can I be patient enough to *not* flip over, to *not* blow my nose, to *not* kick my legs. The answer is inevitable: No. I must flip over and blow my nose and kick my legs. I might even do it all at once.

So despite my mounting fatigue, I'm having trouble sleeping. It doesn't make sense.

Please excuse my rambles, but they won't shut up without expression. Writing is my preventative medicine to a sleepless night, so hopefully this works. But to be sure I'll stop typing now and turn to my journal – that's a whole other sort of expression . . . the page and the pen and the ink, they're so physical. My fingers ache from the uncomfortable pen shape, and unlike the keyboard, the journal page actually resists my scribbling – writing is an effort in my journal. It's an exercise. It's a workout.

Maybe that's why I'm able to sleep.

Anyhow – to the journal. See you on the other of SIX.

P.S. Oh my word, I almost forgot, tomorrow is my last Zoladex shot.

Sigh What a freaking relief. I'm so sick of needles in my belly, if I never have another needle in my stomach I'll be a very happy woman. After this shot I'll have one more month of menopause, and then – *fingers crossed* – my period will come back. Please let my period come back. Bring the flow, bring the inconvenience, bring the PMS if it means that one day I can be pregnant. One more month of menopause . . . until actual menopause, which is hopefully still a long way off. These hot flashes are positively melting me! Sweat drips down my bald head, and I'm forced to strip in public. Off with the jacket, off with the head scarf, off with the sweater, off with everything! Or almost.

Off to write!

19Nov2010

My Zoladex/Goserelin story

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Fertility, Treatment

Zoladex is now over. It's been a memorable journey, which I'd like to mark with a quick recap of injections. Five months of chemotherapy means five injections of Zoladex, otherwise known as Goserelin. Here goes (*Dad, be aware, you might not want to read this – and that goes for anyone bad with needles*):

Shot one: With time pressure, I agree to have the shot and leaving my decision on continuing for later. Zsolt, Mom and I had spent a busy afternoon trying to weigh up the pros and cons of Zoladex – will it save my eggs from chemo? Will it screw up my body? Are there any answers?

The message boards are full of stories about early menopause, several cases brought on by Zoladex, but every patient's experience is different. Some women have terrible symptoms (hot flash, killed sex drive, aching body, mood swings) other women have less. But like the doctor said, "We can't say how you'll be affected."

Anyhow. Immediately after my first AC chemo treatment I go into a consultation room and lay back on the bed. My shirt is rolled up, the nurse preps for the injection.

"Okay I'm going to shoot you with a numbing spray, then insert the needle. Tell me when it's cold."

I had heard she was the Zoladex expert. . . looking back I'm not positive about that assertion, but it was my first shot and I cannot be sure. She never again gave me a needle.

She sprays me with liquid cold. I say, "Okay, it's cold." And with me squeezing Zsolt's hand, she injects the needle into the 'numbed' skin.

Sorry, did I said inject? She buries the damn needle – it's length was never ending. All the while I'm breaking Zsolt's hand and moaning with shock, wanting to kick this woman back, but instead simply repeating: "Ohhh my God, ohhh my God" over and over.

"Almost there," says the Nurse One. And she pushes further.

Click goes the needle and the pill is inserted; I have officially entered menopause. The nurse takes out the rod of a needle: "There we go, all done!"

Yes, we were done. I was never getting that crazy-ass shot again.

Shot two: I am prepared for pain.

Having receiving advice from the doctor that while Zoladex isn't unquestionably proven to protect fertility it's also not shown to hurt, I decide to have another needle. By this point my hot flashes had set in, and time to time I would have back pain.

This is also the start of the nursing medical mantra: "Wow – big needle!" Because for a lot of these ladies (and gentleman) they'd never given, nor seen, a Zoladex shot before. Great.

Anyhow – all the nurses are avoiding me after my treatment as I wait in the green chair. I'd finished my AC about fifteen minutes earlier but still need my shot. Problem was, none of the ladies wanted to administer the giant needle. Ha, well, too bad for everyone.

Like fishing, we snagged one. Poor Nurse Two was passing by and inadvertently made eye contact.

She stopped. Looked away (*looked for rescue?),* and sighed.

"Okay."

And off she went to prep for my Zoladex injection.

Frankly, this second injection was far less painful than the first. Maybe it's because I knew what to expect, maybe not. Zsolt said that Nurse Two inserted the needle at a very shallow angle – but it hurt *wayyy* less, so who cares? And all the time she says, "What a big needle. That's a big needle."

**Click* over. We all laughed as I said thanks. She'd done a great job.

Shot three: Vomit bucket!

At this point in my therapy even the *smell* of chemo made me sick, but that wasn't all . . . The doctor had called that previous Friday to say my platelets were low and I needed to miss a week of therapy. I felt crushed by the idea of missing Christmas in Canada – so my mental health was already fairly low. On top of that, I had to come into hospital and get a giant belly needle. Yay!

Arriving at the hospital, I made it halfway down the hall before throwing up. But you don't need those details. Let's just say, there's a certain corridor where I often relive the public shame of vomiting without a bucket.

But I still needed my shot.

Going into the ward, I waiting for my picc line change (every week bandages must be changed, no skipping) and Zoladex. Okay, I vomited again as my bandages were changed – oh, did I ever hate that smell . . . actually, I hated the entire place, the whole establishment! And afterwards a new nurse, Nurse Three, arrived on scene with my third shot and a student nurse observing her work. Nurse Three and the student were about my age, maybe younger. I always enjoy the young nurses because I feel a sense of equality. They might be a nurse, but I know what they looked like drunk off their ass during fresher's week; working with students for the past three years, I just can't see these ladies as 'in charge' despite them being 'in charge'. Maybe it's ageist? But we have a different type of rapport, which I enjoy.

Right: teaching a student how to inject Zoladex.

"You need to get a good pinch of skin." *She pinches my belly, and yeah – she pinches really hard, harder than necessary, like, man, she has a* ***handful*** *of my belly, and there isn't much to start with!* The student nurse is making 'oh yeah' type noises. I'm holding Zsolt's hand and cringing at the ceiling.

"Then you use the cold spray." *She shoots me with the cold spray. I tell her when to stop.*

"How long does it last?" asks the student nurse.

"Oh, about a minute or so." *No, not true. Cold spray lasts* seconds, *yet I don't correct her. She's with a student; who wants to look back in front of a student? Mind you, that young woman now has the wrong impression of cold spray*. Cold spray is wearing off. Nurse Three gets out my 'giant needle.'

"Wow – giant needle," says the student nurse.

"Huge," agrees Nurse Three.

Awesome.

"Okay, so you put it in like this. Ready?"

"Yep," I reply. And in goes the needle.

Hot damn that hurts! I'm doing my best not to **freak-the-fuck-out**, but it's hard. Young nurses may be cool, but what pain! Zsolt's eyes went saucers as I'm starting up into his face. Later he told me that Nurse Three inserted the needle at a ninety degree angle. So, squeezing my blob of belly fat, she vertically inserts this giant needle, and obviously it doesn't go in far enough so she needs to push further, and further, and further.

Click

Wow, I've toughened up. First injection for the MRI and I passed out. Now I'm cringing my teeth as metal rods are being forced into my belly muscle. Ugh. Gross. But also, kinda amazing I've come this far. And afterwards, as always, we laugh.

Maybe laughing helps dispel the tension? We *always* laugh.

Shot four: A male nurse was training in C3, day-case unit, where I get my chemo. He'd never seen such a big needle, and couldn't for the life of him stop letting me know.

Wow that's a big need. Woah. Boy, I've never seen such a big need. Okay I'm going to stick it in, ready? Yeah? Are you sure, because this needle is huge!

I was looking away, but Zsolt later reported that Nurse Four used a very shallow angle. I hardly felt any pain, so despite all his going-ons it was a great job. (The lead nurse – the nursing mother – even asked him to stop telling me how big the needle was, but this poor guy couldn't contain his amazement.)

Shot Five: Oh good, my last needle. Bring it on, Baby.

Again, like everyone else, Nurse Five had never given a Zolodex shot. In fact, she didn't even look at the needle till before insertion – so this time there weren't any exclamations about size. But she was nervous for sure.

"Can you please shoot me with cold spray right before injecting?"

By this point I know what I like. She was going to use cold spray immediately before injection, and she'd be inserting at a thirty five degree angle.

But you can't control a person's nerves.

There we are behind the privacy screen, and I can only imagine what the other patients thought. Between the nurse asking, “Are you okay, Catherine?” as she *slowly* inserts the needle and I cringe at the ceiling, to my replying, “Yes, yes! Don’t worry – keep going!” to her asking, “Are you sure you’re okay, Catherine?” to my urgent assurance of, “Yes! Please! I’m okay!” And our voices are getting louder and louder and louder. . .

Well, who knows what others thought.

Click it was over. We laughed. For all the trauma, we laughed. It didn’t hurt this time round, it was just slowwww. But she did a good job. They all did.

And there you are: my Zolodex story. If you’ve made it this far in reading, congratulations – you are tough. I hope your stomach is fine; mine’s full of holes.

Would I do Zolodex again? Whooo . . . please don’t even ask me. I hope I *never* need to do any of this again. With my final injection in place, the pill should last about a month. After that it’ll be a waiting game with crossed fingers. Please, oh please let my period return.

Last night I dreamt that Zsolt passed me a crying baby and I held it against my chest. It cried and cried, and I patted it’s back while singing a Jewel inspired lullaby. Eventually the little one quieted. And in my dream I said to Zsolt: okay, let’s start trying.

Then I remembered I was in the middle of chemotherapy, and next is radiotherapy, and after that it’s years worth of Tamoxifen. But nevertheless it was a beautiful moment, even if only a dream.

The shots were worth it, because I do want to have a family. Like my oncologist said – they don’t hurt, and they may help. Well, I’m taking all my chances; you’ve got to.

And that is the story of Zoladex.

21Nov2010

Smiling in the mirror

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

When I look in the mirror I see a pale face with dark circles under her eyes. I see a bald head, too much skin, and traces of peach fuzz hair. I see a woman who doesn't look like a woman, but doesn't look like a man either. She looks alien. Alien to me.

One of these days I'll look in the mirror and see what I picture in my mind: long hair, blushing cheeks, thick brows and lashes, and an expression of contentment, because I'll have the peace of mind to be easily content. I imagine sweeping the hair out of my eyes, and enjoying the view.

It's hard to feel pretty sometimes. Not always, though lately. But this will pass, because there have been other times when I've felt ugly, and times when I've felt beautiful. Besides, when that woman in the mirror smiles – well, there I am. That's me, no doubt. Thank God for that.

When I smile, I see myself.

23Nov2010

Soon!

Posted in Bumpboobs, Treatment

Tomorrow I plan on writing a blog about my Christmas plans. I'd have done it today but it involves too much typing. Also, I'd like to spend some time doodling on Paint.

So soon! Soon. First I need to get some sleep, because man-oh-mercy am I tired. For the past two hours I've been obsessing over the US body-scanning fuss and spending way too much time reading articles when I ought to be heading to bed. But I guess a breast cancer blog isn't the place to spurt my pro-dignity opinions. Well I could . . . I mean, at least they have an option in the US – in the UK, last I heard, refusing a body scan is reason enough to be kicked out of the airport, no alternative available (does anyone know if that crazy policy is still in place?).

Ah! There I go again, distracting myself from getting sleep. My body says 'SLEEP' but my mind says 'THINK'. These two really need to get in sync. If I'm not careful this will turn into another sleepless night.

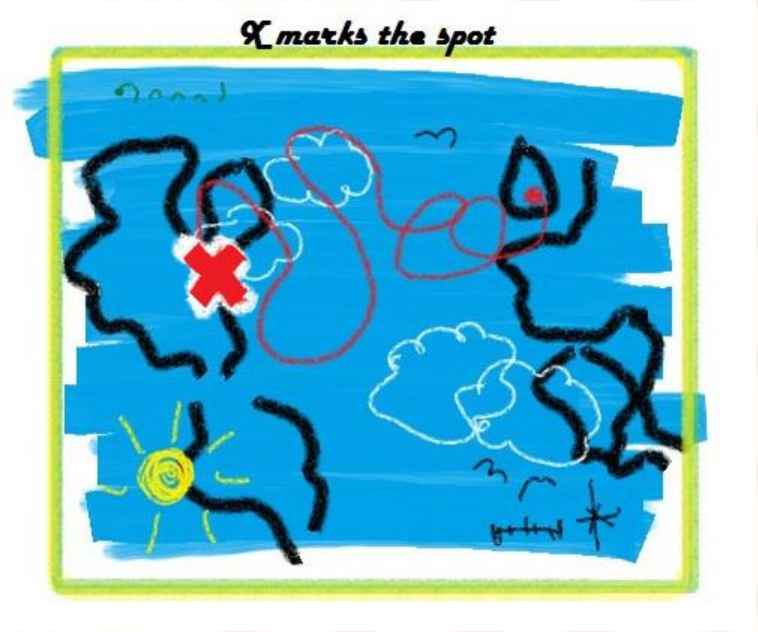
Tomorrow I'll write about Christmas.

24Nov2010

December fourteenth

Posted in Bumpboobs, Canada, Chemotherapy, Life, Treatment

Alright! Good morning and good news: I am going to Canada!



Wooohooo! *Happy dancing!*

When I first mentioned the idea to Doctor Blonde at C3, she said to me: "Theoretically it's possible, but you might have to work through red tape."

Which is why it's best to go to the top. When asking the lead oncologist he said, "I can't see why that'd be a problem. I'll send off a letter."

Two weeks after that meeting I still didn't have any news. First my file was lost (may still be lost) and then the doctor's secretary kept telling me she 'had the tape' but hadn't transcribed it. For a while I was stressing over how LONG everything takes. But, in a second meeting with the lead oncologist – let's call him Dr Lead, because 'lead oncologist' is time consuming – he told me he'd sent an email, not a letter, and it should have been with the doctor in Canada two weeks ago.

Two weeks with no response? Fishy . . .

My mom sent her own email, to which the doctor in Canada, Dr Canada, responded with a phone call to the house. He told her that he hadn't heard from England.

Ah! Okay. Now at this point I wonder – who was right – Dr Blond or Dr Lead? *(Sometimes I wish I could use their real names, because these nick names are just silly!)* Was this communication mix up 'red tape' or simply a misfired email? In either case, I'd say there's been a handful of confusion . . . and yet, things are working.

I wrote an email to my UK oncologist, Dr Lead, asking him to please resend his original email to the address I provided again (hopefully correct this time). Wow, email is awesome. In other circumstances I would have waited till clinic or gone through his less than friendly secretary. But with a quick Google search of his name: *BAM!* Email acquired.

Monday morning he resent the introductory letter to Dr Canada and CCed me and my mother. The oncologist in Canada wrote back yesterday (Tuesday), saying he's happy to have me and will start things rolling.

Not only are plans unfolding well, but now I'm in touch with an apparently excellent oncologist in Canada who, according to Rate-your-doctor, is kind and supportive. Furthermore, back when I started chemo it was my goal to fly home on the 14th of December. Now, even if I do have another setback, that goal *will* be met. All of this feels really good.

Next up, I'll arrange things with Air Canada. Apparently they can help me through the airport, which is great because I have a feeling December 14th will be an exhausting day. Mind you, I've never been pushed in a wheelchair before; it's another physical admission of illness, but geez – thinking about those long walks, I guess there's little choice.

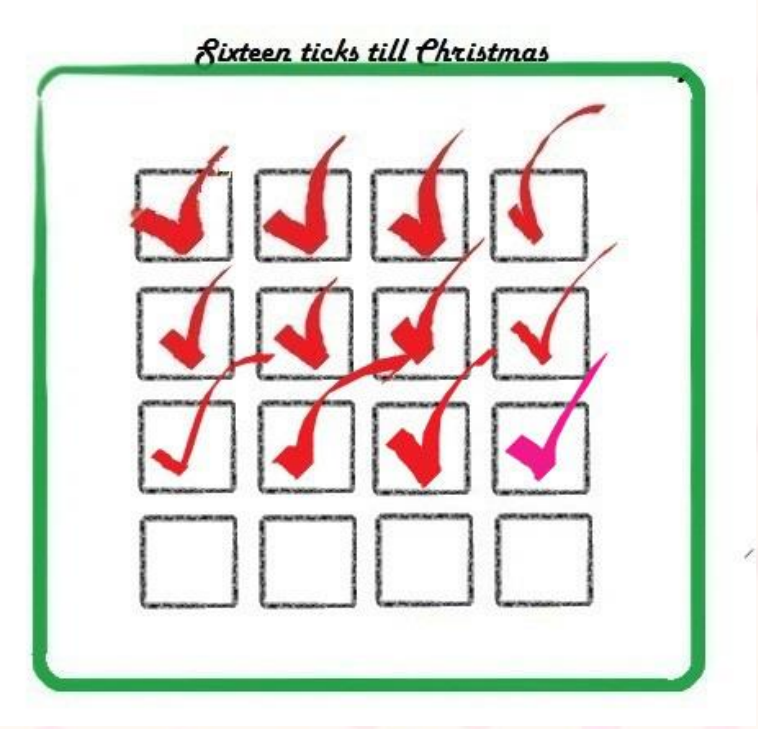
Less than three weeks and I'll be with my family again. True it's only for a visit, but it means the world to me nevertheless. Isn't good news fun?

25Nov2010

Give me FIVE!

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Food, Treatment

I'm now have eleven chemotherapy treatments done, which means FIVE treatments left, and THREE until I go to Canada.



My parents are rolling the ball in Canada, working things out on my behalf. We have to decide upon critical issues like when to put up the Christmas tree, who will decorate, and how many presents can fit into one stocking?

Essential matters.

Plus the OHIP (Ontario health care), scheduling, patient info and transferring of files – all that too.

But the ball *is* rolling.

Breaking news: my Swedish roots are abandoning me, instead I'm turning into a Monk. Zsolt was kind enough yesterday to point out that I have a 'bald' spot across the top of my head, with dark hair growing all around. MONK (also MANLY). Should I be embarrassed by this development? Well, maybe if the hair grows out an inch or so and the top is still shiny. . . then I'll wear a hat. Meanwhile I'm simply glad to see it growing.

Breaking news part two: My weight is back to pre-chemotherapy measurements. Ever since Paclitaxel started I've been slowly putting the pounds back onto my shrunken frame. My rib cage is less pronounced, and I feel a tad more womanly. Meanwhile, the other side of my head is saying, "Alright lady, that's enough with the weight gaining, time to slow down."

But Christmas is coming, which means good food –plenty of good food. So whatever. Now is not the time to worry over weight (though that doesn't mean I won't worry, because it's compulsive – BUT I know I'm being an idiot). Beside, who can say no to gingerbread cookies, and stuffing, and turkey, and mashed potatoes, and cheesecake, and baked filo wraps, and hot chocolate, and this and that, and all the goodies I'll soon be eating.

Right. Twelve down (as of tomorrow), and four left.

This is progress.

PS. Today is my Name Day. Happy Name Day to all Catherines everywhere!

PPS. My big toes are starting to have a slight tingle. I'm not too happy about this, but it is still quite slight.

29Nov2010

Chemotherapy crazy

Posted in Bumpboobs, Canada, Chemotherapy, Treatment

Yesterday was my third annual visit to the Christmas Art, Craft and Gift Fayre; I suppose it's something I would normally have skipped (due to chemo) but a friend was showing work, and I really wanted to pick up a few of her matchbox masterpieces.

Ulrike and I arrived early to avoid the crowds; we hovered table to table, chatted up vendors, sampled truffles with oil, and shopped – I bought three matchbox ladies from Barbro, who also had a stall showcasing her beautiful hand-woven, hand-painted cardboard baskets.

So that was a lovey morning, but by the time Ulrike and I had gone full circle and decided on a cup of tea, my legs felt like tree trunks and my head slightly fuzzy.

But sometimes a girl needs to socialize.

Mind you, I go crazy strange in the midst of exhaustion. Just this evening I was freaking out over *nothing* and Zsolt had to calm me down. It's 100% a result of 'too much activity', which is tricky to manage during chemotherapy. This drug gives me the allusion of health . . . like, *hey, I feel fine this morning so why don't I do this, and this, and this, and this* . . . except that come mid-afternoon I'm flat on my ass from a spinning head and can't think straight.

It's tricky, tricky stuff.

But nevertheless it was a lovely Sunday.

Another friend of mine who once had breast cancer advised that chemotherapy becomes more draining as time passes. She was concerned that flying to Canada would be too much. She's probably right – I admit there is high risk of 'Crazy Catherine, the Exhausted' making a special appearance once home in Kanata.

So long as she doesn't appear before, like when I'm talking to customs and trying to explain that hello/bonjour I'm Canadian, but I live in England, and yes I work there too, and no I don't have anything to claim, and no I didn't stop at duty free, and yes I'm home for a visit, and PLEASE stop asking questions because my parents are on the other side of that barrier and I'm dying to see them. At which point Crazy Catherine would take over and dive past the checkpoint, run across the luggage carousel, jump the security dogs, rip off her toque mid hot flash (revealing a suspiciously bald head) and probably end up tackled to the ground by that last fellow who checks your landing card and decides whether or not to search your bags.

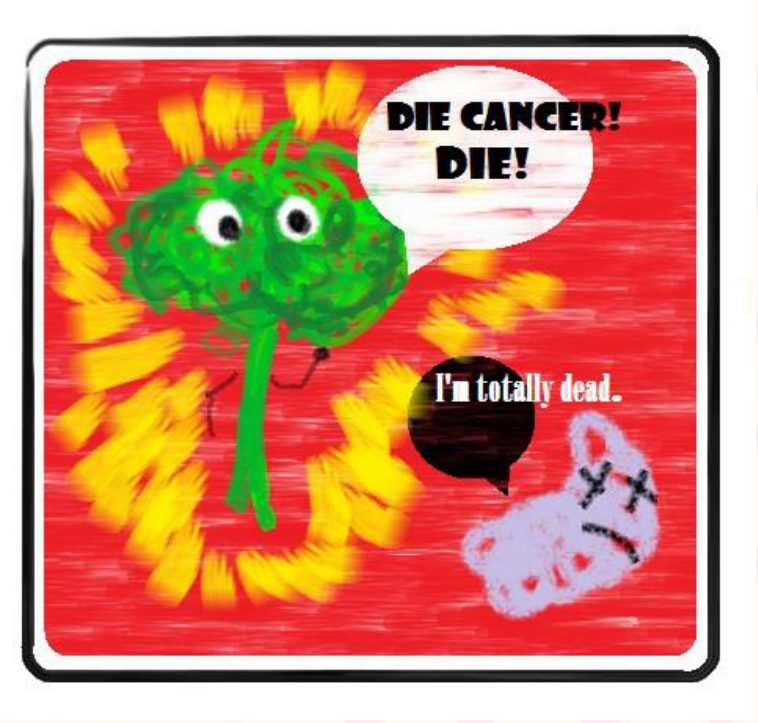
Whew – sounds like an adventure I don't want to have. Therefore, the crazy will be saved for later.

30Nov2010

Warrior watercress

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Food, Treatment

The University of Southampton recently published a study suggesting that watercress may help stop the reoccurrence of breast cancer. Isn't that convenient?



Apparently they had a small group of women fast 24 hours and then eat a cereal bowl of watercress, after which blood samples were taken. The results were promising.

Findings *suggest* that watercress blocks a signal vital to tumour growth. You may or may not know, but cancer tumours need a lot of blood to grow. When scanning the body and looking for tumours (e.g. with the MRI, etc.) they are looking for splotches where an abnormal amount of blood has developed. Probably there is a lot more to this body-scanning science, but I'm happier without the details. Point is, tumours need blood. When they use up the blood around them, they send out a signal for more. Like waving over the waiter at a restaurant.

But in this case the cancer cannot signal the waiter. No blood arrives. Tumour dies. DIE TUMOUR!

AH HA HA HA!

Obviously this is just the start for watercress research, and is only *one* of the many studies with many possible cancer solutions.

But it's been published at *my* university, and it targets *my* particular problem. I've taken it as a sign, and have now started eating a small cereal bowl full of watercress per day. Because, like I once mentioned, 50% of the pizza is not enough. I don't want to play with my life expectancy like someone flips a coin. Screw that.

So along with everything else, I'm eating watercress. Add that to my pile of cancer fighting treatments, supplements, and therapies. Fifty percent is bullshit, though better than the ten percent they first quoted. Bit by bit I'll raise my chances. By the end, we'll eat that entire freaking pizza for dinner, and a watercress salad on the side.

1Dec2010

Customer service

Posted in Bumpboobs, Canada, Chemotherapy, Travel Log

Hmm, I just called up Air Canada to arrange wheelchair assistance through the airport.

First, I must admit – it feels strange asking for a wheelchair. Wheelchairs should be for people who are really sick, or much older, or unable to WALK. I'm a 28 year old woman and I *can* walk . . . I just can't walk for very long. My legs start feeling thick, I get tipsy (literally tipping over), and of course there's fatigue.

I can understand someone's surprise at my needing a wheelchair. But what I do not understand is being made to feel like an idiot for asking.

Calling the UK Air Canada customer service line today, I requested a wheelchair. The conversation went *something* like this (following the conversation about my reservation number, which was difficult in itself but quite possibly my fault):

Me: When I fly on the 14th, I'll have just finished chemotherapy and will be really exhausted. Is there any kind of assistance I could have through the airport?

Lady: What kind of assistance do you want?

Me: Maybe a wheelchair or something?

Lady: Oh, wheelchair assistance.

I think the idea clicked into her head here. Before she wasn't certain where to place me.

Lady: Is there any medical reason you need a wheelchair?

Me: I'll have just finished chemotherapy and will be exhausted. I can walk a little, but not for long.

Lady: But is there any medical reason?

This is where I start to feel like an idiot.

Me: I'll just have finished chemotherapy. I'll be exhausted.

Lady: So you'll need a wheelchair because you'll be exhausted.

What is going on here? How many times do I need to say 'chemotherapy' and 'exhausted'? Thinking about this now, I probably should have said: 'I'm in the middle *of chemotherapy' – but totally forgot that fact during our conversation. But regardless, to have just finished chemotherapy and to be in the middle is essentially the same, because the effects are still felt a week or two (or more) after treatment.*

Lady: I'll put in a booking— sorry, a request for a wheelchair.

Me: (*in my head: a request?*) So I won't know till I arrive if I have assistance?

Lady: That's right.

At this point I want to cry, and don't stand up for myself. Instead I say 'fine' because I feel like such an ass for even having asked.

Isn't that crazy? Being challenged really throws me off; I totally lose my train of thought and can only say, 'yeah, okay, fine' like a stupid lemming. Mind you, if Zsolt is being challenged and asks for my help – no problem, I can tackle that issue. I'm a tough woman in other people's battles. Not so great with my own.

Essentially, because I didn't receive any sympathy from the Air Canada woman, I didn't know how to handle myself. She treated my request like a form to be filled, which isn't horrible, but at the same time – I'm not a form, I'm a person. My medical reason (apart from having been stated four times) goes beyond 'exhaustion and chemotherapy' – it extends to the fact that I need help, and I need it badly enough to ask.

Who asks for a wheelchair unless they **need** the bloody chair?

But she'll put in a request.

Bah! It pissed me off enough to write, and maybe it'll piss me off enough to call back later, when I feel less sorry for my passive self.

Though honestly, I had expected better.

2Dec2010

Snow day!

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Life, Treatment

Last night it snowed in Southampton, and today it's still on the ground. This winter miracle has stacked up over fifteen centimetres and warranted a university closure just as I was due in to work. As normal, southern England is shut down by a mild snow storm . . .

Yay!!

It's so beautiful outside, the trees are coated in white and cold fluff. If I had the energy (and the equipment) I'd cross country ski through the common and have a hot chocolate at the Cowherds. I'd throw snowballs at my husband and complain when he returned fire. I'd boil maple syrup then spread it over snow.

Reality: I took a bus to the hospital. Wohoo!

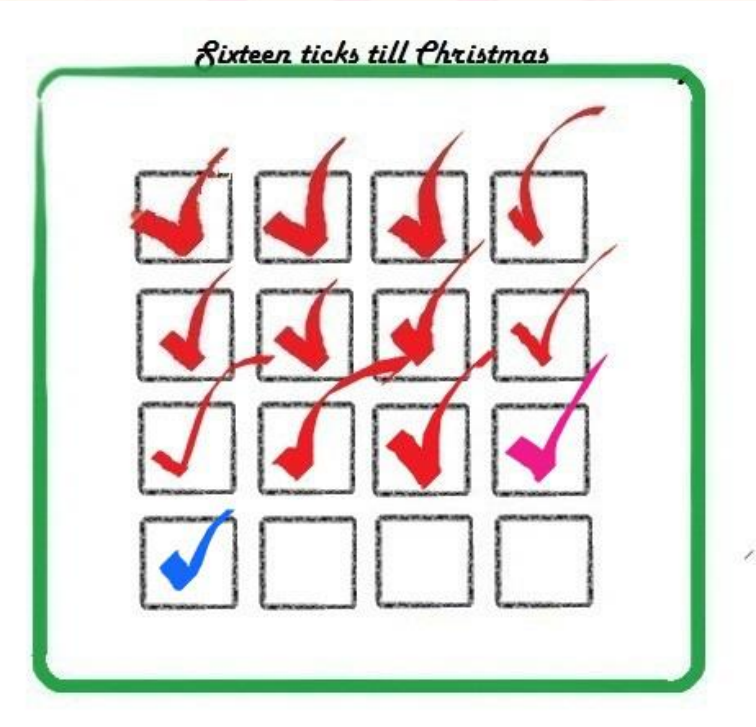
But even if I didn't do all those lovely winter*esque* activities, this change in scenery is good for the soul. White, fresh and beautiful, covering all the grey; I really like snow.

Happy snow day, everyone.

3Dec2010

Threeeeeeee!

Posted in Bumpboobs, Canada, Chemotherapy, Treatment



Now we are rolling! *Thirteen down and three left to go.*

BAM: appointment made with Canadian oncologist

BAM: ticket bought for flight home

BAM: Christmas presents under the tree

BAM: Air Canada troubles sorted

In the end it was my Dad who called back Air Canada. That's not to say I couldn't do it – but if I had called the UK office I would have gotten the same woman (I always get her) and would have felt the same stress. My dad instead called the Canadian customer service line and received a basket of apologies; the representative said that they shouldn't be asking 'why, why, why' when a customer requests a wheelchair. Like I said before, the fact that we even ask ought to be enough.

Honestly, Air Canada has been a helpful company in the past, which is exactly why I had expected better treatment. When my mom needed to extend her compassion ticket to stay for my first chemo session, they went out of their way to help.

When I arrive at the airport, I'll ask about a 'meet and assist', which means someone will come along to help me get through the airport (UK lady didn't mention that!). It's booked and ready to go. So Dad totally gets a gold star for helping smooth things out.

The snow is *still* on the ground. Chemo went well – I had my treatment yesterday instead of today. We arrived for a blood test, and because so many people had cancelled the lead nurse suggested I stay on for chemo as well. Once my blood results were returned (and my chemotherapy drugs released) I was taken to a spare room; this place was empty except for one other woman. It was

such a quiet chemo room. The nurses flitted in and out, hooking me up to the machine, starting the drip, giving the anti-sickness, and finally attaching the chemotherapy. It took an hour longer than expected – Zsolt chased after our booked taxi as it drove away (*not really, but it did drive away despite his arriving on time . . . taxi competition was fierce!).* But the nurses were understaffed and I was tucked away in a deserted room; it was a wonder they remembered me at all!

Yesterday was chemo as usual, no surprises or interesting stories. The highlight of my treatment was the nurse popping round to change my drip and getting a shock when I appeared from beneath a pile of jackets on my chair. So that was a laugh, but otherwise it was totally uneventful.

Today Zsolt and I are hiding in the apartment. We've been watching cars pass by and seeing how they manage the ice. England and ice do *not* mix.

Still tired, still recovering, and so I cannot write anything interesting. This happens time to time.

Three left, baby! Thanks goodness for that.

Oh! Next week I have my radiotherapy consultation. That'll certainly be something to write about.

4Dec2010

Packing my suitacase

Posted in Bumpboobs, Canada, Chemotherapy, Treatment

Today is meant for packing, except I'm a terrible early packer. Last minute is the best way to roll, but this year Zsolt and I will be moving across the Atlantic at some point (whenever the permit is granted . . .), meaning *now* would be a great time to take the essentials: wedding photos, breakables, sentimental items I'd hate to lose. All that good stuff.

With that in mind, I've pulled down the suitcases and dusted them off.

So far the following has been packed:

DVDs I've borrowed and need to return to my parents

My wedding shall

Fake hair and boob

Post card collection (once belonging to my great grandmother)

Winter sweaters

Miska (our man-jug we bought in Budapest during a snowstorm last Christmas)

Our 'home' (a paper collage made during the marriage course)

. . .

But looking around our apartment, I don't really feel like packing the rest of it. It's hard to imagine the transfer of objects into a new environment. When we finally sort out the international move and pack all the boxes, I bet about half our stuff, if not more, will be left behind; from outdated magazines to little-worn clothing, books now unwanted, tip collected shelving, food that'll expire, and even the couch – loved though it is – not being worth the cost of shipping.

It's weird. The past 4.5 years in England we've been building a nest, and once we move that nest will be picked apart. Mind you, we arrived here with only three suitcases between us, so maybe it's fitting to leave with a similar amount (plus the boxes shipped by boat). Our first night in England (back in our previous apartment) dinner was served directly from the one pot I'd 'borrowed' from my mother and we slept on jackets spread across a bare mattress. We had airline cups and take away cutlery. I remember feeling so damn proud once we'd finally bought spices and arranged them in the kitchen cupboard.

There is something very sad about moving, yet . . . something wonderful about a new home. Packing this weekend gives just a peek of that transition.

Change is quickly coming – I could do with a little change, so long as it's awesome. And Canada *is* awesome.

7Dec2010

Upright position

Posted in Bumpboobs, Canada

One week to the hour I'll be arriving in Canada – prepare for landing, seats returned to their upright position.

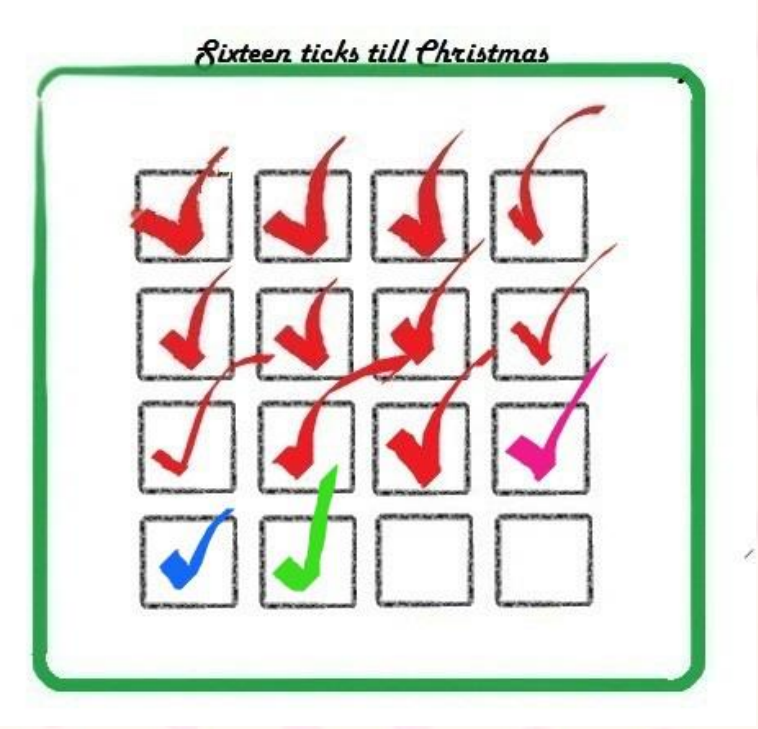
WoooHoo! See you soon!

9Dec2010

Two for the road

Posted in Bumpboobs, Canada, Chemotherapy, Life, Radiotherapy Treatment, Treatment

Today I said goodbye to the UK chemotherapy ward. This was my last chemo treatment in England, and now (2 more left) it's all about Canada. My doctor was thanked (I'll see him again in about 18 weeks), the chemo coordinator hugged, and a Christmas card was given to the nurses. Job done.



Last June I longed for this moment – *these* moments – but found it difficult to imagine time would pass. Everything was overwhelming, yet not tangible; goals were blurry shapes in the distance. But guess what? This is real. Soon chemo finishes and we'll move forward to the next phases: radiation and hormone therapy.

The doctors like to warn me that despite chemotherapy being over, I'll still likely feel its effects for about six months. Maybe my emotions will go bananas, maybe like treatment I'll be left exhausted, maybe I'll still get tree trunk legs and tingle toes and crazy hot flashes . . . maybe I'll recover beautifully. Won't know till we get there.

In the meantime I'm thankful for the people in England who have supported me, fed me, encouraged me, humoured me, helped me, entertained me (*all those cups of tea!*). You've seriously made a difference in my life; these past six months could have been shit, but they weren't and that's all down to support.

Of course that support goes beyond UK borders, but next week begins a holiday in Canada – 2010 may keep its Cancer Catherine, because 2011 starts with a cancer-free me. England will be a fresh start when I get back (with new treatment), we'll have overcome a lot of crap. Therefore my Southampton friends and hospital ought to be honoured. Happy Almost New Year everyone!

Fourteen chemotherapy treatments down. Two more to go.

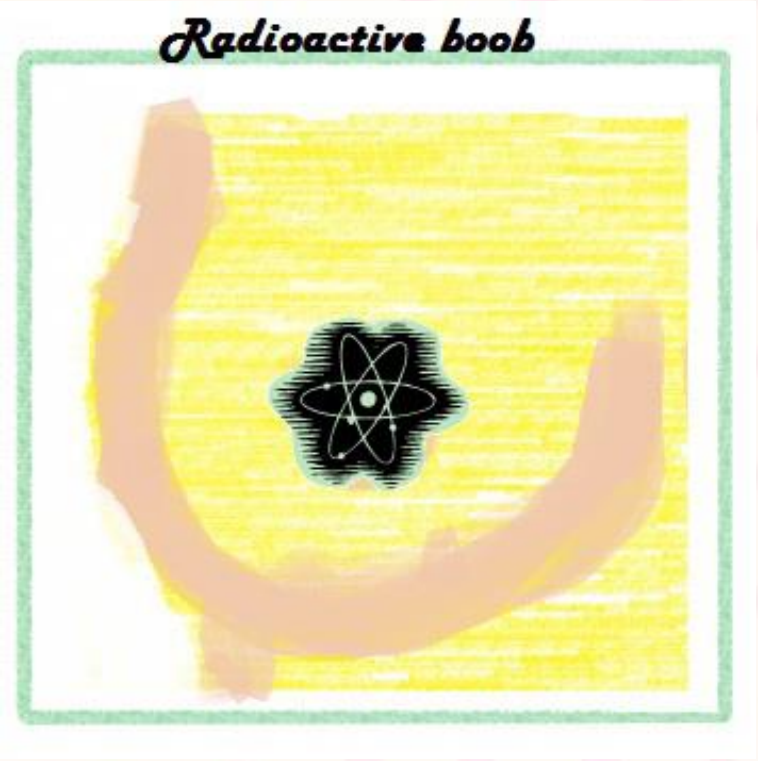
I'll write about radiotherapy this weekend, and maybe some other stuff too but in a separate post.

11Dec2010

Radiotherapy step one

Posted in Bumpboobs, Radiotherapy Treatment, Treatment

As one door closes, another opens. This entrance is labelled ‘Radiotherapy’.



Zsolt and I went to the hospital level D last Wednesday, which is where all cancer related consultations take place. It has a large reception and waiting area. The walls are painted blue and orange and beige, the seats are coloured to match. There are piles of magazines because doctors never run on time, and a wait is inevitable. So far we’ve gone here three times. Once to meet my surgeon, once to meet my oncologist, and last Wednesday to meet the radiotherapist (radiologist?).

Eventually we were shown to a consultation room, and eventually the doctor appeared. I really enjoy meeting these men (they’ve all been men), because they are so incredibly confident in themselves. Whether they ooze charm, reserve, or whatever – they all know they know what they’re doing. And because *they know it*, I believe it.

In walks my radiologist and the first thing he says to me is, “Dr So and So told me you’re Canadian! Where are you from?”

“Ottawa.”

“Ottawa! My wife and I skated down the Canal,” and he launches into a story about how while living in Toronto he and his wife took up skating with the aim of conquering the Rideau Canal.

Clearly this man has some people skills.

He then sat down and dove straight into the concept of ‘radiation’ and how we’re always exposed to radiation, and how we’ve been using it for a long time to treat illness, and how the process has become much better over the years so things are now at a point of low risk and better recovery. Etc.

Why radiotherapy? Because apparently, somewhat like chemotherapy, it stops cells from dividing. Fast growing cells possibly remaining in my breast/chest tissue (if missed during surgery) will be stopped dead. At least, that’s the idea.

He drew me a picture of a woman’s chest, and demonstrated which layers will be struck by the beam. Apparently they angle the beam so a minimal amount of lung is effected (though yes, my lung will get an unnecessary dose). However I may be a ‘candidate’ for a more precise form of radiotherapy that uses CT

scanning to move the beam according to the bumps and dips of the body. (*he mentioned this after examining my scar and chest area . . . so perhaps my theory of having an overly bumpy rib cage is correct, hmm*). This CT scanning helps reduce the side effects.

And then he gave me a choice. There are two routes, 25 treatments or 15 treatments. *If* I were having reconstructive surgery then 25 would be better because the treatment is spread over time, which therefore protects the tissue more. But reconstruction won't be happening. No thank you.

I cannot tell you the exact pros and cons of 15 vs 25 treatments. I cannot tell you because as he explained each option, my head went into a slight tailspin and my ability to focus stopped (interestingly the same happened to Zsolt). Maybe something was in the air, or maybe it was the force of this doctor's personality. Who knows? All I remember is him saying "gold star treatment" for the 25 shot option. But frankly, I'm leaning toward 15, it's an overall lower dose, despite being very similar to the 25, and gets things done more quickly. I think the real difference between these two is time and flexibility. 15 is faster, 25 is more flexible.

Anyhow, I'll google it before deciding.

Here is another interesting bit of opinion. Dr Skates mentioned that much of radiotherapy is done to improve surgery results. He seemed quite confident in the skills of my surgeon (which is why my armpit, neck and shoulder areas won't be getting radiotherapy), but suggested that some surgeons he's worked with in the past are less reliable, which means they need to shoot a larger area to cover up for any potentially missed bits of cancer.

Another good reason to find a surgeon with a strong reputation.

I get such a kick out of these doctors. These are men of power – and I suppose they are powerful; lives are held between their fingers. Maybe some people would also suggest they're men of ego, but better ego than uncertainty or meekness or lack of experience.

Now that doesn't mean I won't double check their opinions, look around online, talk to other doctors and ultimately make my own decision . . .

Zsolt always says that I don't believe him. He tells me one thing, I need to double check it. The other day I had him meet me at a restaurant because it was snowing outside. I was on the mobile phone with him saying, "I can't get a ride because the road is covered with snow" (this is England, driving stops when it snows), and he's on the other end of the phone saying, "But there's no snow outside!" to which I reply, "yes, there is, I can see it from here – come and get me."

He came and got me, but there wasn't a snowflake on the ground. From the back of the restaurant where I looked out the window, the orange street lighting *did* look like snow. Really! But – no, he was right. This was one instance where I should have listened.

But the doctors realize we'll look up everything they say. Dr Skates wrote down the two treatment options and told us there will be tons of information once we start typing into our computers. They know. And still, they are confident in their own expertise. I appreciate their confidence, because ultimately I rely on it.

That was radiotherapy step one. In January there will be a planning meeting, which will include tattooing my chest and possibly a CT scan.

As one door closes another will open. Chemo is almost done. Soon I'll have a rest, and then it's onward in the road to breast cancer recovery.

We are getting there.

13Dec2010

Pre-flight turbulance

Posted in Bumpboobs, Canada, Chemotherapy, Life, Treatment

Bags are packed and stationed by the door. I'm ready to go home. Except . . . this morning I received a call from Air Canada reservations, letting me know I needed medical clearance from my doctor otherwise I wouldn't be allowed to board the plane.

Big sigh.

When I asked why they hadn't notified me earlier, she said they only realized the requirement today while reviewing reservations. When asking why they didn't inform me two weeks ago when I'd originally arranged for special assistance and told them about the chemotherapy – she didn't have a good reason.

So, here's what went down.

1. Phone call from Air Canada saying get the letter, or don't get on the plane.

2. Panic attack.

3. Call my doctor's secretary, who was actually helpful (probably because I was swallowing back tears), and let her know about the situation. At the time my oncologist still hadn't arrived to work, but her tone suggested they would get things sorted.

4. Call back Air Canada and give them my doctor's fax number and contact details.

5. Wait an hour.

6. Call secretary and check if they're received the fax. "Yes, we received it. The doctor has filled it out and I'll be faxing it back soon."

7. Wait another hour.

8. Call Air Canada to confirm they have received the fax. "We have the fax; we'll call you before six pm to let you know."

Let me know . . .

AH! Bugger this game of nerves. They'll let me know by six pm if I'm allowed to fly home. As Zsolt would say, 'now that's something.'

Therefore: let's envision the happy Air Canada Reservation employees sipping on their warm cups of tea and eating scrumptious muffins. It's a lovely day in the office, and oh look here – a medical clearance form for a woman in chemotherapy. La la la, happy thoughts with a stamp of approval! Let's be nice and send her home. Yay!

Good thoughts and crossed fingers. That’s what I need at this moment.

I’ll save my outrage for later.

13Dec2010

Whew!

Posted in Bumpboobs, Canada, Chemotherapy, Treatment

It must have been a very nice muffin and cup of tea.

9. Air Canada calls to notify my approval for flight. I am allowed to go home!

Geez, that was a bad joke. Seriously messed up.

15Dec2010

No place like home

Posted in Bumpboobs, Canada, Chemotherapy, Finding Home, Life, Treatment

It's six in the morning and the house is silent. *Almost silent, I can hear my dad sniffling in the other room.* Silent and very dark, where are all the streetlights? I've been up for an hour and after many attempts to crack the password on my mother's computer, have given up the battle and pulled out a sheet of paper. Well I am home. Home sweet home, and let me tell you this: it feels really, really good. That's the short version. Here is the long. . .

Zsolt and I woke up yesterday morning around 6.30 am . . . the past two days are the earliest I've risen over the last six months. Early bird gets the worm, but the late bird snuggles in bed. Who doesn't like to snuggle? (Particularly when the heat has been turned off and beyond the sheets is a freezer-like climate.)

So we get up with the intention of leaving for 7 am, by 7.36 we are in the car and rolling. It was a typical drive to the airport with lots of traffic and iron bladders.

Wohoo! Dad is awake and offering the password – I'm switching to the computer now and creative freedom! Typing is glorious. And wow, Mom has a whole lot of icons on her desktop, and a really stunning mountain range picture.

Where was I? Driving. Airport. Check in. Right.

Checking in was not a problem. There was a momentary debate over whether I was cleared for departure, but no trouble ultimately because, of course, clearance had been organized the day before (PS – springing last minute arrangements on people who are sick/tired/whatever is really poor customer service and most certainly a practise that needs to be changed).

I checked three bags and arranged for a buggy to pick me up from the lounge. Yes, I walked my little butt through security despite worries that I'd be too tired. It was fine – no looks please, because I felt in control (and it was *not* a long walk at all).

Zsolt carried my bag up to the security point and we said goodbye. That involved a lot of hugs and a lot of 'I love you', which is as it should be.

Points to Zsolt for getting us to the airport really smoothly. He was the perfect early morning driver.

So there goes my husband for a month. He had he own little journey to conquer after dropping me off. The poor guy had to drive to Gatwick, drop off our car in one of the nearby villages (we rented a parking space for 40 pounds; that's less than a pound a day and significantly beats Gatwick parking fees) and afterward catch a train over the Gatwick. By the time he caught his flight to Hungary, I was at home in front of my Canadian fireplace. Talk about a lonnng day.

Meanwhile, back at Heathrow, I was enjoying the first class lounge. Hello, I had no idea stress-free travel existed. For a whole load of money (or a whole load of points, as in my case) you get to skip much of the security drama, are given a quiet area with breathing space and comfortable chairs, *and* there's a buffet with breakfast cereals, drinks and assorted snacks. Man!

Totally awesome. Totally worth it. Zsolt'll be upset because my pallet has now sampled a finer type of flying, and you know I'll be craving it again! **a girl can dream* :)

When due to board I took an electric buggy to the gate. That was odd – I sat at the back beside an elderly gentleman and looked out at the people we passed (like sitting in the trunk of a car, which I did once at a debating tournament and was given a taxi ride through Toronto with my legs sticking out the back window). People would watch us passing, and I would watch them shirk into the long corridor. It felt a little like a parade, but without the waving.

Which bring us to the flight, another example of stress-free flying. I once heard that animals are given more space during transport than people on airplanes. While this may/may not be true, it certainly makes a difference to have a little room. The flight was still tiring (must be related to pressure change, altitude, radiation etc), but the experience was pleasant. Key perk was the full flat bed – an excellent addition to the miracle of flight.

So after all that trouble Air Canada finally treated me well, though I did pay them to, but I suppose that's the case for many services.

At the border I *think* I was meant to wait for a wheelchair. Bugger that. I hopped off the plane (with a sideways glance at the wheelchair attendant) and floated over to security. Words were said at customs, at one point I blurted out, "My husband's Hungarian!' when asked why I was alone. Thinking back, that doesn't quite answer the question, but communication becomes difficult when exhausted. There was also confusion over whether I was bringing in a jug with or without water. "A water jug" I said. "A jug with water?" she asked. Maybe she had a point, no rule says that water jugs need water – they could hold juice or wine or sangria.

Anyhow, customs was fine. And once through my luggage appeared on the carousel almost immediately. First class service.

This next bit is the best – my favourite moment when arriving home. The parting of glass doors, with Mom and Dad on the other side. What a frigging good and rewarding moment. We hugged and were teary eyed and couldn't say too much. If you know the Ottawa airport international arrivals area, then you know it's a bit of a stage. People come through the door, and everyone watches as family reunites. There's always an audience and yesterday they had a little Brunelle-Family reunion show.

Oh! And Mom gifted me with a Canada hat and scarf, which matched perfectly the Canada mittens I was given (thanks Sandie!) to keep warm. Plus, there was a cup of Tim Hortons tea. Oh Canada!

Going home – being home – was emotional. On top of the long day, it's been a long six months and finally reaching my goal was somewhat beyond words: *aching, smiling, crying, holding, talking, laughing, loving*. It felt almost too much.

Downstairs in my bedroom there is a waterfall of paper cranes. Beautiful. A thousand paper cranes with which to make a wish. And a wish has been made. Thanks to Christina and her folding team for their thoughtfulness, and to my family for hanging them up. They're quite something to see. I may even need to post a photo once the camera is unpacked.

And so that brings me to now – this dark morning. The ground outside is white with snow. Dad is now in the kitchen eating breakfast, and I think I'll go over to join him.

Despite the ups and downs, I'm so glad to have kept this goal. It feels wonderful to be home.

16Dec2010

Acu-brother

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment, Uncategorized

Lovely day with the family. Still incredibly exhausted, which leads to my becoming emotional, but food seems to help quite a bit. This afternoon my weepiness was dispelled with a plate of sweet potato fries (*a la* Tony).

JP, my older brother, lent a hand with some acupressure and massage today; it was divine, I mean *divine*. He has a lighter touch than my Southampton acupuncturist, but still so effective. And, unlike in Southampton, he added on a massage in the arm, legs and back.

Really fascinating – he massaged my right arm without any issues, but as he moved to my left I suddenly felt overwhelmed. Why? Because that's my chemo arm, and the experience of chemotherapy pre-picc line apparently runs deep. Pretty freaking deep. JP had me do some visualization and breathing: breath in, out and smile.

Tomorrow we're going to meet with my new Canadian oncologist. Oh boy, I'm a little nervous. But, of course, one step at a time.

One step at a time!

So, see you tomorrow. Maybe I'll even draw a picture.

17Dec2010

Meet Dr Canada

Posted in Bumpboobs, Canada, Chemotherapy, Treatment

This blog is for Lulu, who wanted to hear about my day.

Dad and I went to the Cancer Centre at the local hospital this afternoon. Fancy! This place is far more airy, comfortable and simply nicer looking than what I've been used to visiting. Mind you, I have no complaints toward the NHS service in England, but first impressions with the Canadian version are quite positive.

Arriving at the hospital we were shown into a consultation room. My height and weight were taken, followed by a quick chat with the nurse. She gave me some emergency contact details and arranged for my blood to be taken. It's so funny hearing the Canadian accent, which on one hand sounds perfectly normal, but on the other hand so incredibly different. I suppose this is my first Canadian nurse. Anyhow, she was very friendly.

Next came in my Canadian Oncologist. Funny, I had expected an older and smaller man – nope, Dr Canada is tall and impressive. Again he oozed confidence, but also has this hard to describe sensitivity. I can feel that he cares. We went over my situation and he provided his perspective on several interesting matters (eg. ovary suppression vs tamoxifan, genetic testing, MRI vs mammogram), so that was interesting. He then checked my chest – said it felt okay, and ordered two weeks worth of chemo.

I often feel paranoid about my chest – like, near daily self-inspection type paranoid. Chances are other breast cancer survivors feel a similar anxiety. It's hard to trust your body again after it betrays you in this way. There is the fear of cancer returning, though when the doctor quotes a 50/50 prognosis, no wonder there's fear. And fear and hope. Depends on the day/hour you ask me.

Anyhow, I feel confident in my Canadian oncologist, and when I come back to Ottawa will most certainly reach out to him again.

After our meeting I went up to the chemo lounge (whoa – still so fancy) and had a blood test, following which we loaded into the car and crawled our way home along the 417. I was nearly sick to my stomach by the time we finally pulled into the driveway. Night driving needs to be removed from the menu; doesn't sit well with my stomach.

So there we go. That was today. Tomorrow will be another something, but I probably won't write about it immediately . . . we'll see.

In any case, I think things will be fine. Fingers crossed. TWO MORE LEFT!!

18Dec2010

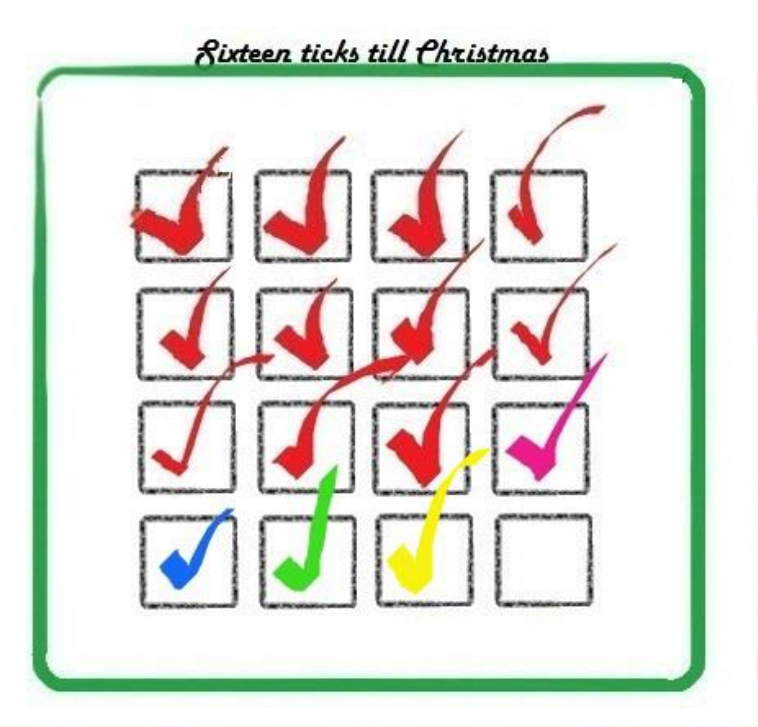
Only one left! Ahhha!

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

Today we picked up a chocolate and peanut butter ice cream cake. It's all planned out: I have my last chemotherapy treatment on Thursday (December 23rd) at 2.30pm, after which we'll come home and order a pizza. Following the pizza we'll have a champagne toast (really non-alcoholic fizzy apple juice) and cake. When asked what should be written on the cake, Mom told them "W-O-H-O-O-!-!-!" *Wohoo, baby!*

Chances are I'll be a chemo zombie during the celebration – but nevertheless, I'll be a happy chemo zombie. It may be emotional. (what else is new?)

Last Friday went really well. I showed up to the Cancer Centre and was shortly thereafter shown to my bed.



Differences between England and Ottawa:

England: I have an easy chair. Premeds are taken in one bag. Treatment takes 2 hours. I know all the nurses. There is a terrible chemical smell. Someone changes my picc line bandages. No one takes my blood pressure.

Ottawa: I have a bed. Premeds are given in several small bags. Treatment takes 2.5 hours. I don't know any of these nurses. There is a state of the art facility that does not smell. No one changes my picc line bandages. Someone takes my blood pressure.

The chemo ward in Ottawa is really beautiful. It's so big and light and spacious – quite fancy. Yet I do miss knowing the nurses and having that familiarity I had so struggled to originally achieve (*but which made the process much easier*). It's strange because I can't quite joke with them, or ask how things are going, or see what's new from last time. Mind you, so what? Right? This isn't my life, and I never want to it become my life. Chemotherapy is done (almost) and so those connections would have ended regardless. But I do miss my nurses.

Mom, Dad and I arrived at the Center in Ottawa and Dad had to stay in the waiting room. Only one person per patient allowed. Dr Canada said 'serious things are happening, so we take that seriously'. He then said it was basically to reduce the amount of chatter. Funny eh, chatter. In the UK the chemo ward was *full* of chatter. Serious things were happening, but everyone was happy for a distraction.

Apparently in Ottawa it's policy that with my chemotherapy I'm given a bed. I choose a berth beside their giant window (a wall made of windows) and enjoyed the view. Frankly, it is nicer than back in England . . . I can't lie – money has clearly been poured into this place and it makes a difference. There were so many times over the past five months that I thought, 'wouldn't it be nice to see the sky?' as they pumped the drugs into my veins. I

more or less envisioned a spa-like retreat with cedar flooring, a central fire place, Enya music, people in bathrobes and tempting steam rooms – well, this new centre isn't exactly spa like, but it's still quite nice.

There is a difference. I think it reflects funding. But you know what, the nurses are still lovely. I really admire nurses and couldn't toot their horn more loudly. They always have a smile and a kind word. Cheers to the nurses!

After chemo we came home and I slide into my parents bed. The rest of the day was spend watching Modern Family, talking to Zsolt, eating some rice pita pizza and just resting. It was tiring, but it's always tiring. Today I feel better, and that follows my pattern. Chemo day, followed by two good days, followed by two difficult days, followed by a better day, followed by chemo again. And so we go – until next week.

What will happen in the weeks to come? I don't know. Will I be on a high from the freedom? Will I be on a low from the sudden lack of drugs? Who knows. But one thing is for sure, this part of the journey is nearly over; I will cope with the change and move past it.

Goodbye chemotherapy. I hope we worked well together. So well, in fact, that this job never need be repeated. *Goodbye.*

(Until next Thursday, but after that I really mean it. **GOODBYE!**)

PS – tomorrow is the Brunelle Family traditional Christmas trip to St Hubert's. Oh yeah baby! I am looking forward to some ribs, fries and awesome gravy. Yum *freaking* yum.

21Dec2010

Quarantined

Posted in Bumpboobs, Canada, Chemotherapy, Treatment

My father came home today with a few sniffles and somehow it escalated into voluntary exile. He's been in his room all day – alone – with the door closed. Once in a while I'll call out "hello" from the hallway, to which he replies, "hi!"

He doesn't want to get me ill. Now there's love, eh? Mind you, I don't think he's *actually* sick . . . since when is a sniffle sick? He's just being overly-highly-excessively cautious. Actually, it's pretty sweet.

See you soon, Dad. Love you too.

21Dec2010

Small things for now

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Life, Treatment

When mortality is thrust into your face like a lemon cream pie, a certain heaviness descends with that awareness. It's a cloud, or maybe better – it's a fog: thick, obstructing, enveloping. And that fog is what gets me on the bad days.

Somehow with all this cancer crap, it feels like I've aged about 30 years beyond my time. Or maybe 20. Before the bump (btb) there were no aching joints, no grey hairs, no empty nest to trigger a life crisis . . . now, however, I'm a 28 year old who is far too aware.

It's funny how you read in the news about breast cancer survivors. We're all survivors so long as we're here, survivors and fighters, but the threat of breast cancer doesn't disappear. Women can have reoccurrences (granted it becomes less likely as more time passes, but we're still checking over our shoulder for quite a while – plus there's that bloody 50% stat which the doctor was so kind to gift me with). I self-examine my boob every day because of the paranoia.

But even worse than the awareness is how it creeps into the good times – that fog of mortality, of possibility, of reoccurrence. Totally ruins the picnic.

So, talking this all over with my mom I'm telling her how it's difficult to *enjoy* like I once did. Sure, I can enjoy a conversation, a cup of tea, a lovely day etc., but when thinking about the present those past enjoyments don't seem relevant. The real question is: How am I feeling *now*? And when it's bad, it's bad. And when it's good, I worry about losing everything.

My mom works with many people who have gone through cancer. She says the fog is something everyone struggles with, something we need to work through.

She's absolutely right. I'd rather be living than worrying. Not only physiologically living (because yes, I like living in the physiological sense too), but **LIVING** – steeped into the world, feeling the vibes, sharing the love, dancing in pyjamas.

First however, I need to manage this fog. Anyhow, it's a big goal and won't happen immediately. However, Marcelle suggested a first step: little pleasures.

Therefore, while typing this post, I'll ask: What am I enjoying right *now*?

Answer: Typing – love to type! Sitting – this sofa is amazingly comfortable. Talking – I love talking with *you*, those who so kindly read this blog.

Here is another question worth asking: What can I do to enjoy this moment even more?

Answer: Open the front windows.

And so I have. Outside it's white and beautiful; a very perfect Canadian Christmas.

When that heavy fog rolls it can feel nearly impossible to clear my head. Things are difficult, fears are strong and it's damn hard. But this is a start. Micro steps to bigger goals – and my ultimate goal is to be happy, healthy and living well. In the meantime I'll look out the window.

PS – secret pleasure for the NOW. Eating from the hidden stash of mocha chocolate pecan ice cream. With three men in the house, it's good to hide these sort of things.

23Dec2010

Night before Chemo

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

Thanks to the writer of The Night Before Christmas, which my Dad used read me and is a wonderful story. I've totally ripped it off, but all in the spirit of good fun. There are many original lines within this version, and they are – *of course* – the most beautiful.

Tomorrow is my very last chemotherapy. WoHOOO!

The Night Before Chemo

Twas the night before chemo and all through the house

Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse

The picc line was wrapped on my arm with great care

In hopes that a nurse would soon make it bare

My parents were nestled all snug in their bed

As wheat-free cookies danced in their head

And me in my pyjamas, bald head in a cap

All settled and cozy for a long winter's nap

When out on the lawn arose such a clatter

I sprang from my bed to see what was the matter

Away to the window I moved in a flash

Tore open the shutters and threw up the sash

The moon on the breast of the new fallen snow

Shone like the hospital scrubbed to a glow

When what to my wandering eye should appear

But a glimpse of the future, now approaching so near

With a sack full of hope, packed full and so thick

I knew in a moment it must be St Nick

More rapid than eagles his courses they came

And he whistled and waved and called me by name

“Now Catherine, now girl! Now don’t give up fighting.

Life is a changing and that’s right exciting!

To the end of tomorrow, to the end of the year

And into the future, you’ll live with no fear!”

He was chubby and plump, a right jolly old elf

And I laughed when I saw him, in spite of myself

A wink of his eye and a twist of his head

Soon gave me to know I had nothing to dread

“Your chemo is coming and nearly is done.

Life is now waiting and it’s promised good fun.

Let Christmas release you from this long test

As the new year Catherine, holds only the best.”

He sprang to his sleigh, to his deer gave a whistle

And away they all flew like the down of a thistle

But I heard him exclaim, as he flew high out of sight

“Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good night!”

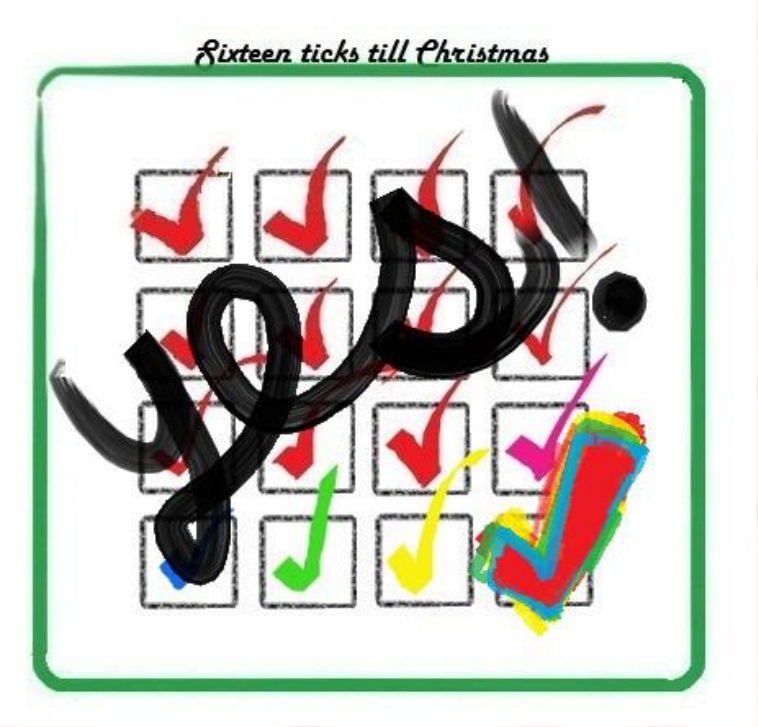
And good night to you – I’m up way too late considering it’s chemo tomorrow!

23Dec2010

Chemotherapy is OVER

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

DONE! WOOHOOO! AHHHH! YEAH BABY! YES YES YES! OKKKKAY! And a big thumbs up! Ahhh – no cause for another infamous swearing streak, today is only for happy words. HAPPY! JOY! RELIEF! RELEASE!



Mom and I went in for chemo today. The hospital called our house at 7.30 am inquiring whether we'd like to push our appointment forward. Seven thirty felt a bit *too* early, so we arranged it for sometime before 11. "Any time before 11."

So, at about 10 am we rolled into the deluxe chemo clinic. Again, things went well. That is a pattern I'm glad to have maintained during the paxlitaxel. The nurses seemed in a fine mood (but they would, as of the 25th they'll have a 4 day weekend), one was even dressed in red with an elf hat. Very festive.

Chemotherapy took two and half hours, pretty normal. Afterwards the nurse removed my picc line. Let me tell you – removing a picc line is no big deal. Inserting the thing is a procedure (needles, x-rays, heart a pounding – though worth every second) so comparatively this was a walk in the park. ***Here is what they do:*** *a heat pack is placed on the arm to 'relax the vein', the picc bandage is removed, and then the nurse gently pulls the line centimetre by centimetre till out, after which she presses down with gauze for a few minutes so the hole seals and no air can enter my body.* Actually, I only realized half way through that she was pulling the tube from my vein. It was hardly noticeable. Why can't all procedures be like that?

After my arm was released, we packed up the standards (oranges, pretzels, sweater) and GOT OUTTA THERE. Eighty sixed it – outtie five thousand – see you later alligator – hasta la vista – let's blow this pop stand – I'm gone! High fives for everyone.

At the house Mom and Dad had a surprise gold star waiting for me. It's a helium balloon in the shape of a star and is currently floating beside their bed. Pretty clever. Also there were lovely gifts from a few friends, and that was a wonderful surprise too.

Now I'm in the kitchen. Daniel and JP dragged the mattress upstairs so I could sleep yet still hang out. I'd tried sitting in a chair before but ended up sliding my tired ass onto the ground for a nap. This, clearly, is better. Mom just finished making red onion preserve and Daniel is sterilizing some jars. There's festive music in the background and I'm sitting (sleeping) pretty. Lovely.

Sixteen down and no more to go. Over. Good bye Chemotherapy. Let's never meet again. *Never*.

Next up is a vacation, followed by radiotherapy. After that it's all about reclaiming my life. We're starting now, which is a great reason for my being here. Marcelle is making sure I eat properly, Tony is treating me, and JP is putting me through a chemo-recovery routine.

If Zsolt were here it'd be absolutely perfect.

About 15 treatments ago I looked at the chemo schedule and thought, '*how can we get through this?*' Talk about your obstacles; treatments felt like an uphill battle. But look where we've gotten – look at the view from the top of this mountain. Big goals were set (are set), and afterwards life became about the baby steps. One week at a time and you can survive. Survive to thrive. This next part (after the radiotherapy) is all about getting better.

I'm so thankful for everyone's support. Thank you thank you thank you. Your thoughts, prayers, words, and food have been wonderful.

Right – time to lay down. Someone break out that cake! WOHOO!

25Dec2010

Merry Christmas

Posted in Bumpboobs, Canada, Life, Love

Just a quickie post today – We've gotten up and shared the presents, up next are Eggs Benedict followed by a day of Family FUN (i.e. eating, relaxing, making dinner).

Merry Christmas to everyone. I hope your day is full of love and celebration. Later on I'll write some more, but for today I'd like to simply enjoy the moment.

Joyeaux Noel, Boldog Karácsonyi, Merry Christmas! Wohoo!

30Dec2010

Hair regrowth

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

Christmas is over! And now life moves on. But it was a lovely holiday filled with family and quiet and all the good things for which I had yearned. Who says a little nostalgia is a bad thing? This Christmas has been soul food.

Up next: 2011! Another year, another decade, fresh from the garden and ready to be savoured. And speaking of gardens, I have a lovely little patch of growth all around my head. Hmm, maybe that sounds gross. I'm not talking actual moss or anything. This is hair – *real* hair.

An excellent description of my hair growth would be 'reverse balding'. It's coming in, middle-aged-man-style. There's some dark fuzz around my ears, bridging up to my crown and fading as it crosses the top of my head. The peak of my hair (closest to forehead) is still yet to grown, but up top it's a fuzzy mess of random baby hairs.

The hair garden is growing, and I'm quite pleased. The nurse had mentioned to hair growth during the latter part of chemotherapy. She said it would grow in as baby hair, but that would stop after the first cut. No way no how are any scissors getting near my new locks, but I look forward to the day when this mess can be styled.

Sometimes I'd look in the mirror and simply not see myself. Losing hair was in many ways losing my femininity. Funny, you think the breast would have done that – and it did to some extent, but the loss my hair was so obvious. First of all, women aren't meant to be totally bald, that's a job for men. Secondly, women aren't meant to have middle-aged-man style bald heads. I look like a fuzzy monk. For a long time it was discouraging (mixed in with hormones and chemo drugs), but now I'm looking up. Things are growing back. Even if I still look like a baby chicken, or a man, or a monk . . . it's growing back, baby! There's hope in my reflection. I've never been so glad to see my mousy brown hair colour. *Whew!* It's coming.

Yay for new hair.

3Jan2011

Walking home

Posted in Bumpboobs, Canada, Chemotherapy, Finding Home, Life, Uncategorized

So today I visited with my oldest friend. She and I have known each other since we were about three years old. Having lived on the same street for over twenty five years, it's easy to keep in touch. Sure, we've both now moved away from the area – but so long as our parents remain here, our roots stay connected.

Anyhow, she and I had a nice outing which involved Starbucks –*pumpkin spiced latte, hello*! – followed by some Walmart browsing (flash back to age ten and us walking to the Hazeldean Mall for a first sans-parent shopping spree. We went to Zellers and tried on some mini-skirts, followed by the dollar bin where I bought cheap florescent red lipstick), and after Walmart she dropped me off at her house (instead of mine) so I could take my well-loved, fondly remembered 'walk down the street'.

Walk down the street: How many times have I strolled home along this road? Many. Countless. Each time with my head in the clouds and some stupid grin on my face. Who knows why it makes me so happy. Maybe because of the houses.

Here is the two story red brick; that women in the window had breast cancer but it's not like I'm going to ring her doorbell. Further along is the home of my first crush, another two story; I used to bike by his house and hope that he'd be watching. And that home with the tree fort just by the path, they had a dog who kept getting loose. Over there with the fancy garden and dark windows, the dad here once gave me a music box and I still have it today (unfortunately, the mechanism broke). Next is the place with those little blond girls, and beside it the house of our neighbours, who always have a wine opener when we need one. And there is my house, single story – the place where so much has happened. It's like being on a game show of 'this is your life' except it's not only *my* life, it's my community – these people are part of me in some weird way that almost no longer seems relevant, and yet is unforgettable. I love walking down this street. It always feels good.

Funny, eh. I look at the houses and the paintwork and the driveways and the snow soaked lawns . . . but forget home renovations, it's the feelings that impress me – I *feel* the memories. Maybe that's why I smile.

3Jan2011

Post script 2011

Posted in Bumpboobs

P.S. HAPPY NEW YEAR!

I wish you all a wonderful 2011. Welcome to a new decade – and just think of all the possibilities. From this moment 2011 (not to mention the rest of your life) could become anything you want, a blank page waiting for your story. I want to be healthy, cancer-free, totally in love and incredibly happy.

Of course it's good to ask for what you want, but it's better to go out and get it for yourself. So here is the starting point with a fresh year ahead:

On your marks, get set, *GO!*

4Jan2011

Tea and a muffin

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

Well, guess who got in touch? The lady in the red-brick house who had breast cancer, and I am quite glad she did. Yesterday afternoon she stopped by while canvassing and left her number with my parents. So of course, happy to see this slip of paper as I arrived home, I called her right away.

Fast forward to this morning, walking through the snow back up my favourite street and being greeted at her door. With an invitation for tea, we got together and had a chat (and some lovely gluten-free, lactose-free muffins). Honestly, I never imagined this scenario; it must have been over ten years since I was last in her home to babysit. One time while she and her husband were away (and I was 'on the job') her son and I somehow managed to get locked outside of the house. Desperate not to look like an idiot, I asked the neighbours if they had a key – but no luck. Instead they had a ladder. . . essentially I broke in through the window and climbed into the kitchen sink (then crawled along the floor to deactivate the alarm). Yeah, that was a bit embarrassing overall, but also rather resourceful now that I look back.

Anyhow, never in my life would I have imagines a conversation about breast cancer taking place at the home where I once crawled into the kitchen sink. But life is surprising (with breast cancer being a surprise for everyone involved) however, it was real pleasure to sit down and compare experiences (and catch up; funny how it's so easy to lose track of someone's life, even if they only live down the road).

Despite some differences in treatment and diagnosis, both systems seem to move quickly. I guess that's a reassurance to women freshly diagnosed in both Canada and England. You will be attended, and it'll happen right away. In England my medication was all covered, in Canada a drug plan is very helpful. In Canada they have a nurse designated to help during chemo, in England they have a nurse designated to help with overall breast cancer. I think it'd be ideal to have both types of nurses available. When first diagnosed questions swirl around and it's useful to easily find answers, and chemotherapy is such a tiring process that having a contact would be reassuring.

Anyhow, we compared notes. Talking was such a pleasure, and talking over tea made it all the better. It's very nice to connect with someone who has been there and done that. For various reasons I've never been to keen to join support groups, but chatting with a neighbour was different.

Overall, I'm quite glad she had guts to start the conversation. I should learn from her example.

6Jan2011

What comes next?

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Treatment, Uncategorized

Yesterday morning I visited a clinic in Ottawa that combines medical practices with alternative therapies. For me this concept is far from radical; my parents' practices involve chiropractic, naturopathic, holistic, and intuitive healing approaches. I grew up learning about craniosacral therapy and homeopathic medicine and how emotions effect our bodies. But this clinic does offer something different: intravenous vitamin C.

From what I've researched there's been evidence showing that intravenous vitamin C can help reduce tumours in the body. Apparently the vitamin C turns into hydrogen peroxide and somehow (can't remember how, but feel free to look this up if you like) cancer cells fail in that environment. Anyhow, that is the idea. So yesterday we (Marcelle and I) hoped to learn more about this option and see whether I'd be eligible for treatment. *I don't have a tumour in my body, but do I really have to wait until one appears before trying to kill more cancer cells?*

After a really long 'taking of the history' (about 30 minutes worth of questions where a man stared at his computer and typed in my answers) we met the doctor. He seems a competent fellow.

"First thing, you have to give up gluten," he tells me. *Sigh*. Further enforcement that I can no longer eat my pizzas, langos, or molasses cookies from Starbucks. But Mom (Marcelle) has been telling me this all along. Fair enough – during chemo I ate everything and anything, but now that it's over my diet needs to adapt.

He then proceeded to question why cancer appeared in my body. He has five areas that might cause illness: *physical trauma* (surgeries, injuries etc), *emotional trauma* (any big stessors in the past?), *infections* (do you wake up feeling achy, do you get chills unexpectedly?), *toxicity* (have you been around any factories lately?), and fifth – the category he thinks I fall into – *immune system problems*.

And maybe we should add genetics, which can give one a predisposition to cancer . . . although, that cancer still needs to be activated, so maybe the question here would be: what triggered your cancer gene to wake up?

Anyhow, why immune system problems? Well I get allergies like crazy, I *may* have had chicken pox twice, and clearly my immune system wasn't working properly when it failed to kill those original cancer cells forming in my breast.

Interesting aside: cancer cells are often forming in our body, but a tip-top immune system destroys these rude buggers before they become a problem.

And here is something strange – for about a year before my cancer I had terrible allergies. Frankly, I should have left my apartment ages ago, but the location and rent are both excellent. So I tolerated the allergies. But after my mastectomy those allergies disappeared for months, only returning recently. Was it the strangely dry summer? Was is the shock to my body? Was it because the cancer was gone? Who knows. All I can say is that allergies have always been a problem, and never *ever* would I have connected them to cancer. In fact, I'd once heard that people with allergies were less likely to get cancer because they react so easily. However, on the other hand (and now I'm rambling) maybe an overworked immune system begins to tire eventually and miss important stuff.

Anyhow, in order to look at what may have caused my cancer he suggested the following (much of which my parents have already suggested, and in some cases done)

First, some tests to check what caused the cancer:

Allergy testing – what foods do I react to?

Hormones – what type of estrogen does my body produce?

Well, this is where Marcelle, my mom, steps in: we're going to wait on the allergy testing for my body to recover from the chemotherapy. At the moment, I'm likely more reactive to all kinds of things. And as for hormones, I've already had my estrogen tested. Shame I didn't' have it tested *WAYYYYY* earlier, because one of my estrogens – 4-Hydroxestrone (4-OHE 1), which apparently has been connected to cancer development, is really high. Like, *really* high. It would have been nice to catch that earlier (i.e. before the cancer developed).

But good news: it's a baseline for me to compare against in the future. We're working on correcting my estrogen, and so in the future I'll get tested again and see if the bad stuff has been reduced.

Next: addressing the cancer at hand.

He had a lot of ideas, and I thought, 'this is good, it's great to be able to keep fighting even after the treatment has finished.' And true, Mom already has me doing much of this stuff (even though I didn't know it) but I think it might be useful to write it down here in case anyone wants to bring it up with their doctor (or their naturopath, or doctor who focuses on alternative therapies, etc).

Read "Anti-Cancer" – Haven't read this, can't tell you if it's any good. However, the doctor yesterday thought it was absolutely worth a read. I wonder if my library carries the title?

Start exercising – Easier said than done following chemotherapy, but certainly a good idea. I'm starting with Just Dance and will hopefully begin walking when I'm home – then soon Yoga and maybe swimming. We'll see.

Take anti-oxidants. He gave me some specific ones, though I cannot quite remember why – apparently it will help with my liver, damaged nerves (fingers are *still* messed up) and address the toxins in the body. How this is specifically cancer-related is a bit confusing to me.

Medicinal mushrooms. Oh man! I just hate mushrooms – but apparently they're great for fighting cancer. This isn't the first time I've been told to increase my mushrooms. Mind you, he said it might interfere with the

tamoxifem, so it was then crossed off the list. However, if I *wasn't* taking Tamoxifen, I'd consider these 'medicinal mushrooms'.

Eat brassica vegetables – this is something my mother-in-law pointed out to me ages ago. Broccoli, Cauliflower, Brussels sprouts, etc. Apparently they're great for reducing the bad estrogen that is so outrageously high in my body.

Melatonin. I don't know the exact story behind this one. Apparently this is something we produce in our sleep, and a lack of it has been related to cancer. Anyhow, he suggested to take one before falling asleep each night. It's not a sleeping pill, but does induce deeper rest.

Mistletoe shots. Ewww, more needles. Apparently there is evidence that this can help, even though it's not a shot any oncologist has mentioned to me. I want to look into this more before deciding whether or not to move forward.

Intravenous vitamin C – the entire reason for my presence at this clinic, because honestly my parents are aware of all of the above for fighting cancer. Apparently they administer this treatment and tumours can (not always, but can) shrink. However because I don't have a tumour it seems slightly unclear about how he would proceed.

Now here is the thing. It's great to have these lists and all the ideas for fighting. After the treatment I think – apart from tamoxifem, because my cancer was estrogen positive – we patients are kicked out of the nest and expected to fly. "Go forth into the world, my patients, and live!" (i.e. keep being alive, and then in five years if no reoccurrence has developed you are cured! Yay!)

BUT regardless of this list with proactive initiatives, I'm still exhausted. It is EXHAUSTING to navigate through the shock, the coping, the chemo, the therapy and then, of course, the suspense. Anyone who has been sick can understand – and I do not only mean cancer, but the kind of sick that kicks your ass and slaps you down.

And frankly, without my parents and husband pushing me along –getting me these tests, checking on my diet, encouraging me to exercise, helping me cope with stress – all this 'fight fight fight' would deflate into 'sleep sleep sleep'. Lucky for me that my parents are health care practitioners, lucky for me that my brother is an acupuncturist, lucky for me that I have people who know what to do next.

But if I didn't have these incredible resources, it'd be worth seeking them out. After all, I'm only 28 years old – there's a whole life ahead of me and I don't want to miss a thing.

What the doctor told me yesterday helped solidify the efforts that my parents have all along been promoting. Therefore, it was a worthwhile visit. After all, it isn't instinctual for a kid to listen to their mom and dad. Doctors yes, parents . . . not so easy.

One more thing for the list (to cope with the fall out of chemo, and something that's unique to my parents because this doctor didn't mention it at all): detox. That'll be coming up soon, but not until the radiotherapy is done.

Anyhow, it was a really interesting visit.

** Another thing to consider, did birth control play a role in my getting cancer? I was on the thing for seven years, it's connected to my hormones . . . funny the topic didn't arise during my consultation. Anyhow, it's done with now, but I'm still curious. I guess there will always be questions.*

9Jan2011

A little night maddness

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Treatment

Last night was slightly manic. Combine watching the last episode of Ugly Betty where Molly dies from cancer with staying up too late *and* an itchy nipple, and things turn a little crazy.

Before finding the cancer in my breast, my nipple had become permanently erect and frequently itchy. Stupid being stupid, I didn't go to the doctor and ask for a check up. Instead I kept thinking, "how annoying, how very annoying." And that was all.

Now I think: OH MY GOD, CANCER.

The other end of the panic spectrum.

It was late last night when I felt an itch, about 11.30 – I reached across my nipple to scratch, felt it was erect and sat up in bed immediately. Light switch on, finger probing and I'm checking for lumps (for the `1000th time in the past two weeks). Rubbing here and there, I check every possible area and feel every possible dent, rise, mound, rib and space. But this breast *is* bumpy – it's a dense breast; bumpy is the natural state. So what am I looking for? What would be different last night from yesterday morning, or the day before, or the day before?

But all this rubbing spreads the itch and now I see red marks. Red marks. 'RASH!' I think to myself. (or was it all that rubbing?) Checking this morning I can spot a spot here or there, but then again, I can spot a spot all over my body. It's not hard to find panic signals when you're desperately looking for them.

Therefore, my panic tail spins and I am convinced it's a reoccurrence. I want to cry and hide and scream and crumple. It's now about midnight and the house is silent, everyone is sleeping. What to do? GOOGLE!

So on goes the computer and my fingers start tapping in key words: itchy nipple. Erect nipple. Rash on nipple. Itchy nipple erect rash.

Breast cancer breast cancer breast cancer.

This is not helping me sleep. Instead my mind is turning in circles. My baseline fear of reoccurrence has suddenly jumped from here to HERE. I'm just fucking scared.

But what can you do in the middle of the night, head exhausted, nipple itchy, no one to talk to? Well, all I could do was write Zsolt an email and say exactly how I felt, exactly what I was seeing, and exactly how freaking crazy this was becoming.

It is crazy – crazy that fear is so gripping. Before I'd heard that people often become paranoid, hypochondriacs to some degree, following a battle with cancer. Every ache, scratch, fever, or itchy nipple is a symptom. How long does it take for this fear to stop?

Eventually I fell asleep, and first thing the following morning marched upstairs to my parents room and had my Mom look over the breast. She checked it out, talked me down, and reassured me this is probably an overreaction. This soon after chemotherapy it is unlikely I'd have a tumour developed within my breast.

Unlikely.

Today I'm calmer (following some quality family time), but nevertheless battered from my crazy night. Come next Tuesday I'll be meeting with Dr Canada, so maybe he can take a look and provide an expert opinion. And Zsolt says that if I keep being stressed we can visit the doctor in England to get an ultrasound arranged. After all, peace of mind is wonderful for one's health.

Peace of mind. It sounds lovely. Another thing on my 'cancer recovery list' is peace of mind. Maybe I'll even write it twice: Peace of mind, and more peace of mind. It's worth a double helping.

10Jan2011

Finding the zen

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Treatment

In preparation for this posting I've tried to enter a relaxed state. Therefore, I've just taken a warm shower with a variety of scrubs including goats milk soap and cucumber body wash (sounds like a nice salad), as well as washing my head fluff with some lemongrass shampoo. Following this, I splashed my face with water and patted it down with almond oil (a drop will do you). And now, while sitting beside my dad's puzzle and typing on this keyboard, there is a hot cup of 'oh so good' tea, mixing chamomile lemongrass and peppermint. It's DavidsTea, so you know it'll be quality.

All of this in effort to forget about the other night and recapture what I was feeling the days before. What was that feeling? Pretty freaking zenned out (i.e. good).

Last week kicked off with a facial from my mother's long-time friend, Jane. Ohhh delicious. I've never had a facial before, so it was quite something. Hmmm, one word for a facial: refresh.

Chemo leads to exhaustion, and exhaustion means a lack of attention – I stopped washing my face, stopped wearing make-up, stopped trying to look pretty. Heck, I stopped enjoying showers, which was unfortunate for anyone within 2 meters. The facial Jane gave was a refreshment, it stripped off the past six months through lotions, soaps and scrubs, and helped me find a new face (and neck and chest). I've since been trying to reinvigorate my skin. And just the other day my good friend said I have more colour than before. Awesome.

Two days following the facial (and an afternoon of rest, for some reason I was knackered after the facial, though Jane did warn it would happen) I had a massage from Brian at my parent's office. It focused on my lymphatic system, targeting areas that were holding stress. Any guess where my stress was held? Ding! You've guessed it: my right breast, arm and back area. Apart from being relaxing, the massage is designed to get things draining. One word for a lymphatic massage: release.

Funny, in England cancer patients have access to free massage therapy, acupuncture, reiki and aromatherapy – but I never managed to use any of these services (except acupuncture, but not free since I wanted TCM). So, why not? Partly because the treatments took place at the hospital, and party because of nerves – I was too nervous to accept this complimentary help. Chemo drugs are tricky, for me they really affected my anxiety. However, now that I'm having complimentary therapies, it is clear that massage would have been really helpful during treatments. But at least I had the acupuncture.

Finally, last Friday, I cashed in my Christmas present: a trip to le Nordik. Going to the Nordik is somewhat like having chocolate fondue – decadent, hot, and oh so amazing. This is a spa set on the outskirts of Gatineau park. Amongst the trees, rocks and waterfalls, the Nordik visitor goes through a circuit: sauna, cold pool, steam room, cold pool, rest. And repeat as desired. Mom and I love this place. By the time we hit our third cycle, sweat was pouring down my face. This lack of hair means that sweat can drip unhindered (drip, run, pour, glisten, gush). One word for visiting the spa: escape.

All these treatments are designed to remove toxins from the body – facial, massage and sauna. Whether you push it out, scrub it out, or sweat it out: key word is *out*.

And last Saturday I was feeling excellent. Woke up singing, put on makeup, went out with a friend, and had a great time. Yes, later in the evening I had a panic attack – but I don't blame the detox, not to say it wasn't involved. A rash on the body *is* the body's reaction while trying to remove toxins – but it's also an indicator that the body's garbage-removal-service isn't in good order. But let's not focus on the down moment. There are better things to talk about.

Anyhow, this week I'm back with my brother and the acupressure. Therefore, I'm back to feeling good about feeling good.

It was a lovely week, which might explain why I didn't write (too stuck into the good vibes). Since this ordeal can be so overwhelming, it's got to be broken down – helping my body heal is a great first step.

Hmm, now it's time to stop typing. Computers are wonderful, but they're totally not zen. Right now, I choose to relax. That's another awesome treatment and totally effortless (which is the point).

Bye!

11Jan2011

Dr Canada and the hug

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Canada, Chemotherapy, Treatment

Today was a nice experience. Around new year I'd received a letter in the mail advising me of an appointment with Dr Canada on the 11th of January. The letter didn't specify what this meeting was about, but it doesn't take a genius to guess it was a follow up visit.

So this morning, way too early, Mom and I hop into the car and join the highway rush. Why does traffic slow down? What's happening on the road that so many cars needs to clump together? Anyhow, we drove to the General. Mom (Marcelle) had awoken me early for a shower with the idea that I ought to look good today – and she is right. I ought to have looked good, and despite my lack of hair, puffy eyes (too sleep deprived from a certain younger brother who kept me awake while he had his midnight snack), and groggy expression, this morning's effort paid off. With a bit of blush on the cheeks I looked . . . hmm . . . acceptable.

But wouldn't you believe it – first thing Dr Canada says to me as he walks into the room (with me having been weighed and observed), "You look pretty today."

Wonderful man.

Though honestly he is excellent and I consider myself lucky to have him as an oncologist. Both he and his assisting medical student checked my breast. Like my mother, he suggested my itchy nipple was due to hormonal changes – "keep it moisturized" he suggested.

And then we got onto the topic of radiotherapy. I presented him with my options: 50 grey over five weeks, or 40 grey over three weeks, with grey being a measure of radiation. According to him, there's little difference between the two. In some cases there is a worry about toxicity and the heart for 40 over three week, but because I'm having my therapy on the right side (away from the heart) it shouldn't be a problem.

Little difference, but ultimately less radiation *and* a shorter time span . . . why wouldn't I choose three weeks of radiotherapy over five? Maybe there are reasons, but they're not shouting out.

Which led my mother to ask, "are there any supplements she should take/avoid during radiotherapy?" and Dr Canada suggested avoiding vitamin E during treatment, **but** deferred to my mom, saying that she was the expert in that area.

Expert in that area! You know what that means? Mom was totally googled.

And yet he was quite cool about her alternative health background – not the least bit condescending or on edge. Instead he gave us his opinions about which supplements help, which to avoid, and which are rather unclear in their effectiveness. He also followed this up by suggesting I read some books on diet because while they may not be proven methods, they have sense behind them. “There are some well thought out ideas.”

AND then! So surprising – he gave me a hug and wished me luck. Seriously, no joking, we hugged. It was nice. Considering the heavy implication of our conversation, the reason for the visit, the fear I’d experienced last weekend, his hug was curative.

Medicine mixed with compassion, it’s the very best treatment. Today was a good visit, and it’s left me highly impressed.

14Jan2011

It’s been wonderful

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Canada, Finding Home, Life, Love, Treatment

This is my last night in Canada. *_sigh_ of reflection. It’s been wonderful, how else can I describe it? Wonderful. Being with family, resting, seeing friends, letting go of stress (maybe not all, but a lot), starting to get better, finding comfort, giving comfort, real hugs instead of skype conversations and sleeping in my old room. Wonderful.

But Zsolt is waiting – and I’m anxious to launch into his arms for a giant, awesome, homecoming embrace. Nothing is complete without him. He’s the cherry on top of everything, and an important part of my recovery.

I’m leaving home and I’m going home. Funny, eh, but it’s the truth.

15Jan2011

AC 888

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Canada, Finding Home, Life, Love, Travel

Just a quickie tonight. I'm sitting in the executive lounge at Ottawa international Airport (fancy stuff) and waiting for my flight to board. Mom and Dad dropped me off just minutes ago, which is always hard and always tearful, and now they must be navigating the parking payment system. I suppose it means you have a good parent-child relationship if saying goodbye never gets easier. Life has treated me very well – despite whatever ups and downs are served, I've always been surrounded by love.

Okay, time to board. Thanks for keeping me company. It's time to fly home.

(PS – this post will be posted *after* I arrive, because otherwise I have to pay for the wi-fi, and that's not cool.)

15Jan2011

Home safe

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Finding Home

We made it! Many hours later and here we are again – Southampton, UK – cosy in our flat thanks to Denise and her wonderful touches. How nice is it to walk into your home after a month away, feel its warmth, see desserts on the table (and a beautiful pile of fruit), have milk for your tea and then crash into bed?

How nice?

Incredibly nice.

Zsolt and I both had safe flights, and we found each other easily. Apart from a crashing GPS system and a few minutes of motorway panic, all went smoothly.

So now it's on to the next phase of recovery, coupled with the next phase of our lives. Within the upcoming six or seven months we'll have a thesis defence, uprooting of home, touring of Europe, graduation, and immigration. MAN what a blockbuster year ahead.

17Jan2011

Happy ant

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Treatment

Today I was a happy worker ant. Finally! After a semester of being exhausted, work passed without any incidents of fatigue or worry. It was a beautiful thing and makes me hopeful for the months to come.

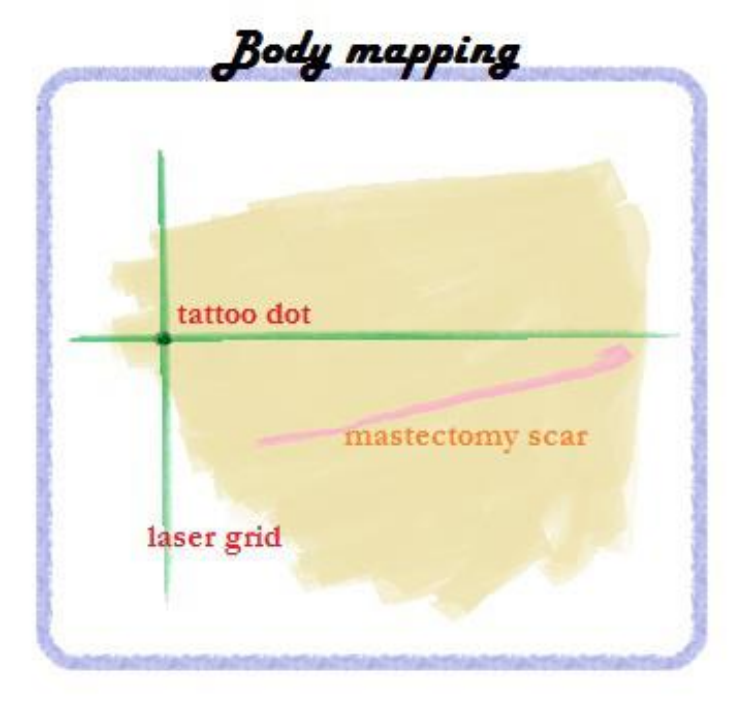
Yay for recovery!

19Jan2011

Radiotherapy planning

Posted in Bumpboobs, Radiotherapy Treatment, Treatment

Welcome to the land of radiotherapy: Witness the waiting room filled with glossy magazines; revel at the sight of chocolate bars on sale behind the counter; marvel at the doors, whose signage warns of radiation; tremble at the nurses calling you in for consultation. And get your parking validated, too.



Yesterday Zsolt and I went in for a planning session. It was really quite simple, and surprisingly we *didn't* wait in the waiting room for an hour. They called me in before I could settle with a magazine.

"Catherine Brunelle?"

"Here!"

And in we went. I was taken into the CT scanning room, and the nurse explained the process.

"I'm Karen, and that's Louise, and Shelley, and Amy, and Tanya."

"Hi! Hi. Hello! Hey." (a chorus of hellos from the nurses – all so very friendly)

"We'll be scanning you today and making marks on your body."

Apparently I was to have a CT scan, but no injections or dyes were needed *(thank goodness, my last CT scan I had to drink a litre of Koolaid dye in about thirty minutes. Ugh*). The doctor would come in and put marks on my chest (around the scar/breast area), they would then line me up, draw more lines, take the scan and give me some tattoos.

Here is how you are measured: They have you put your butt against this cushion and lay back into a head rest. The table is a **table**, no cushioning. Feet are placed against some plastic slider that keeps them steady. Arms are raised together over the body, then back above the head into some arm rests. There's some strange medical bondage happening behind hospital doors, but all in the name of health management. It reminded me of old torture devices, except everyone was smiling and happy, and I wasn't uncomfortable, and there wasn't any pain. So maybe a torture device isn't the best description . . .

The doctor came in and wrote with green marker around my right chest area. All the while I stared at the ceiling. Finally it was time for the CT scan. This scan is designed to map out the dips and bumps of my chest wall, as well as measure where each type of tissue starts/ends (e.g. lung, rib, skin, etc.). Therefore, when I get my radiotherapy, the machine will account for those differences and change so that my lung gets less radiation than my skin. It's a good thing.

The nurses taped little wires and buttons to my chest according to the doctor's instructions. Afterwards the nurses and doctors left the room and the machine began to whirr. Slowly I was slid back and forth through a giant grey doughnut (CT machine) and something in that doughnut spun around me – this, I later was told, was taking x-rays in a spiral motion. The CT scan lasted about five minutes.

Finally it was time for the tattoos! Ugh! Three permanent tattoos are required for radiotherapy: one in the middle of my chest, and two on either side of my body. They line you up on a laser grid and mark the places.

Here is how they administer the tattoo: a drop of ink is placed on the body. The nurse then makes a semi-deep prick of her needle into your skin, through the ink. That's all. I guess the ink seeps in behind the needle and stays. I now have three tiny, dark dots across my body. They are too small to resemble moles, maybe small blackheads is a better description. Clogged pores.

It could have been worse.

And after all this, the nurses gave me my schedule for radiotherapy. Guess what? I don't start for THREE WEEKS! How bizarre. I feel as though someone has extended my vacation.

Finally, cherry on the top of my day, I took my first tamoxifen pill yesterday. This drug is designed to scoop up estrogen before cancer can take advantage, and it's intended to be taken for *five* years. We'll see.

One step at a time – and look no further. For the time being I have three weeks off, which sounds pretty freaking sweet to me.

And that, in a nutshell, was the radiotherapy planning session.

21Jan2011

Yes, we can

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

Well, mark one for small victories. Yesterday I walked to work and it *didn't* wipe me out. Ha! Recovery is a very good thing. And yes, I felt incredibly proud – evidenced by the stupid smile plastered on my face, and whenever I passed someone (construction workers, lady with groceries, man on bike) there was a deep urge to shout out: "Look at this! I'm walking to work!"

But I didn't really do that. Everyone was walking, except man on bike, so really . . . *Or*, maybe everyone should have been celebrating their ability to walk? *Yes! I can walk! Yes! I can breathe! Yes! I can see! Yes! I can bike! Yes! I can shout!* And so on.

Not only can I walk, see, bike, shout, breath, but I can also read, smell, laugh, love, study, think, eat (and eat and eat), draw, write, sing, rest, sleep, run, skip, dance AND more.

Life should be one big party all the time.

I suppose we forget our blessings the way we forget our pains. Mothers tell me that while child birth is traumatic they forget about the pain, like the mind purposefully shelves it so that the body can continue making babies. Perhaps it's the same for good things too, because if I never stopped marvelling at how amazing it is to walk, I may never stop walking – and thus be really late for work.

Who knows, it's just a theory. Yesterday was nice because it was new, and a marker in my post-chemo progress. Walking is a simple pleasure. But yesterday, it was a great event.

22Jan2011

Follow me on twitter

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Writing

Phase two for my bumpyboobs (*Bet you didn't know there was a phase one. Well there wasn't I just like the term 'phase two', as though I'm really organized and have my life planned*) . . . Where was I? Right. Phase two for bumpyboobs: *Twitter.*

Sometimes I can't be asked to write an entire post, but shooting off a short comment is less intense. So here we go, off to twitter land. My handle is **bumpyboobs** – do follow me if you are on twitter. I'll follow you too. We can follow each other. It'll be a congo line gone circular.

Yay for brief statements about the weather, news, food, books, writing, random apartment occurrences, immigration and whatever else is on my mind! Plus notification of bumpyboobs postings (the best part).

Ok – now I need to go and work. By work, I mean read. And by read, I mean cruise the internet. I'm trying to write a story set in the late 1920s and need some inspiration.

Bye!

24Jan2011

Relearning how to be alone

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Life

This weekend was an interesting case study. Having done a BA in psychology (with no follow up) I love to think of my experiences as personal case studies. And here is another for publication . . .

Zsolt, my wonderful husband, spent all of Saturday fixed to his keyboard pounding out thesis corrections. I spent all of Saturday with my ass fixed to the sofa, doing little else. Contrast that to Sunday where I left Zsolt and his thesis behind and headed out to Tragos to meet a friend, which was followed by having another friend over for lunch, to finally topping off the day with a little Zsolt/Catherine Donkey Kong Country marathon.

So, time to guess – on which day did I fall into a depression?

Finding A: Getting out of the apartment is my favourite non-writing activity in England. What to do on the weekend? Get out of the apartment. Doesn't matter if you go down the road, to the tea shop, or visit the tip – if it's out, it's good, and for me, typically involves family or friends.

Finding B: I need to starting being active *alone*. If friends are busy, if Zsolt is occupied – who's to blame that I collapse into sulksville? **Me.** A hundred percent me. And that is a problem.

Anyhow, getting out is good. Being with friends is better. Sharing time with my husband is awesome. But what about being alone, acting alone? When did I stop enjoying my *self*? Back in highschool I used to take walks to the football field and sit by the playground, watching the kids play soccer while I picked blades of grass. Sometimes I would lay in my backyard and count the sparrows that flicked overhead. Other times I tried to shrink the clouds by projecting warm thoughts in their direction. And then at night, if no one was around, I'd wash the dishes and sing with my reflection in the window.

Now that was quality alone time. Something has happened to make even visiting the tea shop difficult when solo. And I don't like that.

I love being with others and I love going out. But, it's about time I loved being alone.

Conclusion: It's nice to realize this problem – because a problem identified is on the way to resolution. At least, it's a start. Zsolt has a lot more thesis to go, and I don't want to fall into that chemo depression all over again (*or make him feel guilty*). For some reason ever since chemotherapy I hate to be alone, but that's over now; time to resolve the fear. Sometimes the best option is simply to step forward, take the risk. Hopefully next

weekend when Zsolt is busy working and my ass has returned to the sofa, I'll remember this post and get up – get dressed – and GET OUT.

26Jan2011

Writing about nothing.

Posted in Bumpboobs

Oh I'm knackered! It's been an interesting day that mixed work and pleasure. About eighty percent of me is saying 'no blogging tonight'. So, no blogging tonight – except for this quick post to say I'm doing well. Zsolt is reviewing spreadsheets and graphs on the computer screen. Potatoes are boiling on the stove. And I'm in my pyjamas. Life is good, but I'm tired.

Hmmmm, maybe tomorrow I'll write about my fingers. Yes, that is an idea. And possibly killer whales. We'll see.

27Jan2011

Post-chemotherapy physical

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

And finally I can relax. The past few days have been jammed packed, so it's very good to lay here in bed and talk with you. Outside, in typical British style, the sky is grey. For Canada winter means snow and ice and deep freeze. In England winter means grey and rain and wet. I could take either climate, but my apartment grows mould with too much humidity and *that* is not fun, nor healthy. Sooner than later we'll ditch this accommodation.

Anyhow! Good morning! Today I'm doing a body check. It's been a little over one month since my last chemotherapy treatment. So head-to-toe inventory:

Toes: Still painted and enjoying the result of a post-Christmas pedicure with Mom. The ladies are lovely in their pale green varnish, though if I could go back I'd have gotten a hot pink instead. During the pedicure, despite the tingling that had occurred during chemo, there was no discomfort. And since then no tingling has returned. This is a very good thing for which I'm thankful. Paxlitaxel did not disable my toes.

Shins: Leg hair is sparsely returning, though not as Amazonian and fierce as it once was (it was like a black jungle). Due to winter and my new adoption of legging/tights beneath my dresses, I *will not* be shaving this season. But it doesn't even matter. I've now got my father's legs (what every woman wants), totally bare of hair.

Nether Regions: aka *The Lady*. Five shots of Zolodex threw me into menopause and took away my menstruation. It's a dry well. Unfortunate for several reasons (use your imagination) but the greatest worry is that my period hasn't returned. Right – here is the thing. If chemo knocked out my baby-making abilities, then the periods will never return. If the Zolodex is simply taking time to wear off, it'll return eventually. Some women get it back immediately, others wait months – like even up to half a year. I'm not too worried, just sick of the hot flashes.

Belly: Happy. It hasn't had a needle in over a month. Yay! I'd like to maintain the trend.

Boobs: Or boob. Whatever. Chest. Apart from my bi-weekly meltdown with fear of reoccurrence (something I *really* need to work on) things are great. At the moment my skin is a rich cream colour, and the scar is still red, and will likely become redder as radiotherapy progresses, but for now things are okay. My left nipple still intimidates me. I try to ignore it.

Hands: Improving daily. The extreme sensation has reduced significantly, and it's only my thumbs that feel the discomfort. Mind you, my *nails* have all suffered. Oh they are UGLY. Like rotten teeth. Hopefully this disgusting mess grows out quickly. Although, as a reflection of what happened within my body during chemo, it's quite revealing.

Face: Smiling. It's good to be done chemotherapy. Oh, and my left bottom eyelid is essentially without lash, and I suspect my eyebrows have further thinned since I've returned to England. Cursed allergies! This apartment has got to go. (or rather, we need to go from the apartment)

Head: *Give me a head with hair! Long beautiful hairrr!* I get hair-envy, and wonder what Freud would say about that? I look at people's gorgeous heads of hair and crave. I crave hair. At the moment it's thickening up on the side and back, but the top front is completely sans new growth. Hopefully I'm reverse balding, but there is a fear that I've simply gone bald at the front of my head. That would suck: Bye bye bangs. AH! No way! It's got to grow back.

Overall: I'm doing great & feeling good. Sure I get tired, but this little island between treatments has been an excellent holiday destination.

There you go – body check complete. This is the body of a post-chemo babe, and it's coming back nicely. Yes, the hair could grow more quickly (and more evenly) but I'm thankful nevertheless.

Have a lovely day and thanks for reading this self-fixated post. Next time I'll talk about the killer whales, which has a further reaching meaning than stuff like leg hair, pedicures and reverse balding.

27Jan2011

Permanent residence! Oh, yes!

Posted in Canada, Finding Home, Life

WOOOOHOOO!

Yes-yes-yes! Happy dance – *spin*, stop, *counter spin*, razzle dazzle good times

Zsolt's application for permanent residence is approved. Now I must go. Dinner is waiting.

WOOOOHOOOO!!!

29Jan2011

Killer whales and cancer

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Radiotherapy Treatment, Treatment

My Disney Land perception of whale behaviour was shattered last week when Marcelle told me a story about killer whales attacking mother grey whales and their calves. *Sigh* Nature is ruthless . . . Beautiful, but ruthless. In the end it's about survival. If the mother whale pushes back against the orcas, then the attacking group will retreat. If not . . . hard luck for the baby.

So why am I writing about this? Good question, which I'm ultimately wondering myself – but having promised a discussion on whales, I've got to deliver.

Here Mom's take: Nature is ruthless, and if you want to survive you need to push back; same with cancer, same with any illness. Passivity doesn't pay. This extends to all corners of life (e.g. trying to negotiate internet fees, getting a refund, etc.). If you want to win, you have to fight.

Thank goodness there is help, because it's one thing to tell a newly diagnosed patient to 'fight fight fight' and it's another thing to know what that really means. How do you fight cancer – how can you fight something without knowing the cause?

It's the eternally frustrating question that still haunts my twenty-eight year old, no family history, doesn't smoke, doesn't drink, and exercises regularly, diagnosis. What am I fighting against?

Initially it's the problem: fight the cancer. Push back against the tumour – surgery, chemotherapy, radiotherapy, hormone therapy. The surgeons, oncologists, nurses all helped me to fight, and I'm thankful for their expertise.

Next there are the emotions: Fight the saturation. Cancer seeps, it seeps into your life – like a stain on the carpet that's sunk deep and low. It spreads, it settles, it stains your mind. Fighting means connecting with other survivors, letting family and friends support you, talking about the depression or the fear, finding release when life gets too heavy. Stress is linked to illness, and I'm sick of being sick. I fight back by talking about my feelings, releasing that stress. Thank goodness for my support network, they've been incredible.

Okay, and now treatment is nearly over and we're left with this window of possible reoccurrence, what is there to fight? Fight the cause. I do not know what caused my breast cancer, but nevertheless, changes must be made. From taking supplements, re-examining diet, going home, pursuing writing, chasing dreams, and having fun. Change will be the name of 2011, and hopefully it'll be a really healthy year.

Screw those killer whales (though they are lovely creatures). I'm pushing back. We've got to push back.

29Jan2011

Immigration to Canada: Step one

Posted in Bumpboobs, Canada, Finding Home, Life

Ok! Moving away from breast cancer topics onto more interesting things. That is, moving away from England.

The UK has been incredible, and I wouldn't say that we'll never return. It's a definite possibility. Look at the pros: England's primary language is, duh, English. It's a 'bridge' between Europe and North America. The people here are awesome. Planes, trains and automobiles make this place easily connected to *anywhere*. And we've built a home here once, we could do it again.

Cons: My apartment is driving me crazy with allergies – not in itself a reason to leave the entire country, but I'm an aggravated women. Also, it's not Canada and it's not Hungary. Neither side of the family has plans to immigrate to this giant Island (I miss having tea with my mom, meeting with friends, listening to Dad's fishing stories) and during the next three years, as a minimum, being situated close to family is a priority.

The plan is to officially move later this summer. We'll be doing some travelling beforehand, but our deadline for a Canadian touchdown is September 15th, when Zsolt's 'welcome to Canada' window expires.

Here is the checklist as it develops:

First – get permanent residence.

Second – investigate moving companies.

Third . . . not sure, will update later.

We're on steps First and Second. This week Zsolt received an email stating that his application has been approved (WOHO!) and we need to submit a bit more paperwork, plus passports. So, I can't check off this step until the permit has been collected, but we're getting there. The entire application process took about five months total – *however*, that doesn't include all the time compiling the application, medical checks, background checks etc. Man, that was a long process, and mixed with chemotherapy too. But we managed. On average they say the application takes around six to nine months. I'd like to think Zsolt's application was so well organized that it zoomed through the system. However, that's only speculation because the inner workings of consulates are a mystery.

Sometimes I wonder whether it was crazy to uproot and go back to Canada. . . but going home for Christmas was incredible, and Dr Canada was quite impressive too. Plus, maybe a little North American flavour would be good to chew on, at least for now. Assuming Zsolt can land a job and I can pick up more writing, things could look good. Besides, there is that canoe and the lake and the image of paddling in the water on a gorgeous fall day. What's more wonderfully Canadian than the great outdoors?

Looking ahead helps me focus on the present. First step, finish the permit process. Last step, go for a swim in the lake.

Side tip for visa applications: Collect evidence. From the moment you form a serious long-distance relationship you should start collecting proof – *some examples: plane tickets, email exchanges, receipts with both names, joint bank account statements.* The more official the better. Many places won't accept a relationship is genuine unless you've lived together for two years, and can prove it through paperwork. *

* I'm no expert or professional regarding immigration. These tips are based on personal experience and several visa applications gone well. That's all. If you need actual help, seek a professional.

31Jan2011

How to rub your belly

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Fun, Treatment

Just got back from my Southampton acupuncturist. Her message for the day: ***rub your belly!*** Belly rubs don't just feel good, they help with digestion which means the body absorbs more nutrients, more energy and functions better. "Have I told you the story?" she asks. "Nope." I reply.

Apparently she was watching the television and this prominent acupuncture doctor, now eighty years old, was being interviewed. He was showing off his hair, his teeth, his muscles, saying he's one healthy man. And his secret (at which point she lowers her voice and leans in close), he massages his stomach every day.

How do you massage your stomach? This is what she told me. It's not exact advice, so if you have a sensitive stomach or any kind of concern, please don't start rubbing your belly on my account. Be sensible.

Right, so you 'find the middle line', which is essentially a vertical line that runs from your solar plexus to a bit below the belly button. And you poke it. Just poke away.

Next you poke along the horizontal axis (essentially around your belly button again).

Lastly you rub the area in circles. Not too hard, just a light massage.

Also, she likes to give a little heat to the area. I guess this can be done with a hot water bottle wrapped in a towel, laid across the stomach.

Every morning she pokes and strokes her belly – "Get the digestion moving. Good for the bowels. Good for the energy. Make immune system better." That's what she tells me. Frankly I often forget to rub my belly (and meditate, eat broccoli, take my supplements, get enough exercise) . . . so these visits are great reminders.

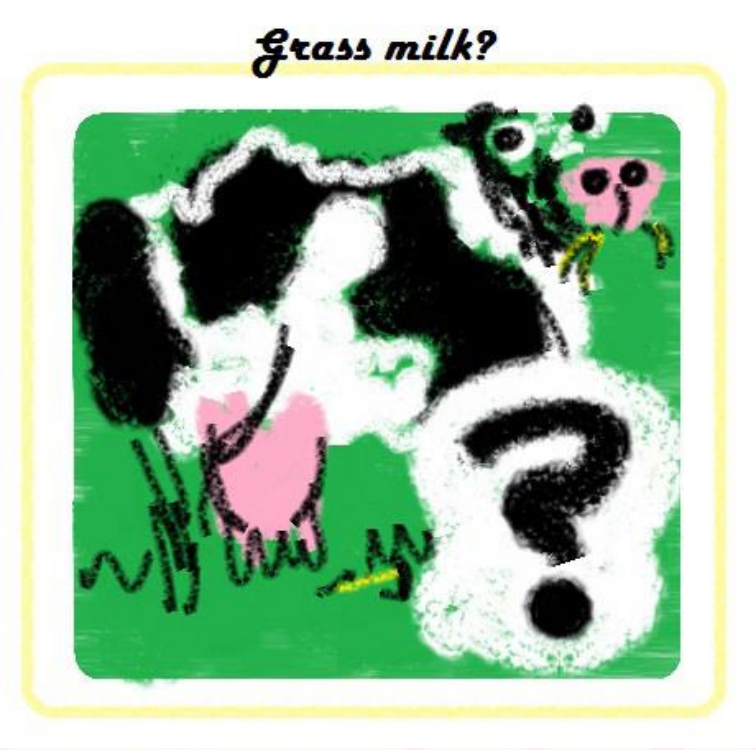
I'm rubbing my stomach right now, more from hunger (lunch is cooking) but it's the right track.

1Feb2011

Re-learning food

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Food

So today I go into the grocery store to buy lunch and dinner. Lately I've been 'popping in', which is the *least* economical way to grocery shop, but it's because I'd like to make a change in our diet and have almost no idea how to start. At home on my table (we don't have a kitchen table, dining table, end table – just ***a*** table) are some cookbooks that focus on healthy eating and a paperback entitled, *Anti Cancer*. They are calling out to me: "Eat Healthy, Eat WAY Less Meat, Eat Broccoli!" and I don't know how to answer back. It's not in my cooking repertoire.



Right – back on track, so I go into the grocery store today looking for a healthy meal. What's a healthy meal? I don't know, something that involves watercress, broccoli, cauliflower or kale and something that *doesn't* involve gluten (for some), sugar, preservatives, trans-fats, phosphoresces etc.

Okay. So I go into the grocery store looking to buy some food. And as I get to the dairy section I recall that Mario recently dropped off some Mexican hot chocolate that is grade-A tempting to make. Therefore, I'll need milk. But not just any milk, *ohhh no*. Not anymore. According to this book, *Anti Cancer*, if you're going to have milk it needs to be organic and grass fed, which balances the Omega-3 and Omega-6 somethings. And, preferably, in a glass container.

Well Waitrose is good, but they're not *that* good. All the milk is in plastic.

Strike one.

Next up – I look at the organic milk, which is promising. Organic equals good, right?

Right?

Ah! I don't know. Because new questions are now forming in my mind: what do these cows eat? Do they get the proper nutrients? Do they eat organic corn, or organic grass? I start to doubt the organic milk. Strike two.

Therefore I turn to the label. Oh copyrighting, you are wonderful, and there is a small blurb about how Dutchie Organic milk adheres to the standards of So-and-So, but no mention about being grass-fed. Strike Three. I put down the milk. Maybe we'll make soya-milk hot chocolate instead.

My point: A trip to the grocer's is no long a trip to the grocer's. It's a freaking obstacle course of questions and confusion.

BUT this is how I look at things. At work we just switched to Windows Seven. It's my guess that workplaces across the country are switching to Windows Seven – nice layout, pretty pictures, handy tools – so perhaps you can relate? Anyhow, the computer receives its upgrade and suddenly everything appears different. All the old programs are there, nothing has changed in regards to content, but my thoughtless everyday interaction suddenly doesn't work. Once again, like the grocery store, I need to start thinking.

When I think, my brain grows new muscles and in time that behaviour becomes second-hand – this is inevitable (thank goodness!), and makes things go back to their quick, thoughtless, and wonderful ways. Sooner than later trips to the grocery store will *not* take fifteen minutes for a carton of milk because I'll know what to evaluate and how to proceed. No more run on tangents about the books on my table, the lessons I'm learning, the food for the cows. I'll know. I'll recognize. I'll be healthy with ease.

And those are good things.

3Feb2011

Time for a cup of tea

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Food, Treatment

So here I am sitting at Tragos alone. Alone except for my computer and you, because while writing a post isn't the purpose of my visit to the coffee shop, I'm pretty pleased to be here and thought it was worth sharing. The original purchase of my laptop was made with the intention of daily visits to Tragos (or the library) while Zsolt wrote his thesis. We thought I could get out of his hair in the mornings.

Well, *you-know-what* ruined that idea. But nine months later here we are, tea on the table and a gluten free (chocolate) muffin ready to be enjoyed. This blog has been a frequent advertisement for my local coffee/tea/tapas/drinks shop – Tragos in Southampton, and while I've come here a *tad* too often, it's important to have a place of escape.

Anyhow. That's it. Here I am, about to get writing. Creating a bumpyboobs post doesn't count as proper writing; it's catching up with friends. Chatting *a la* keyboard.

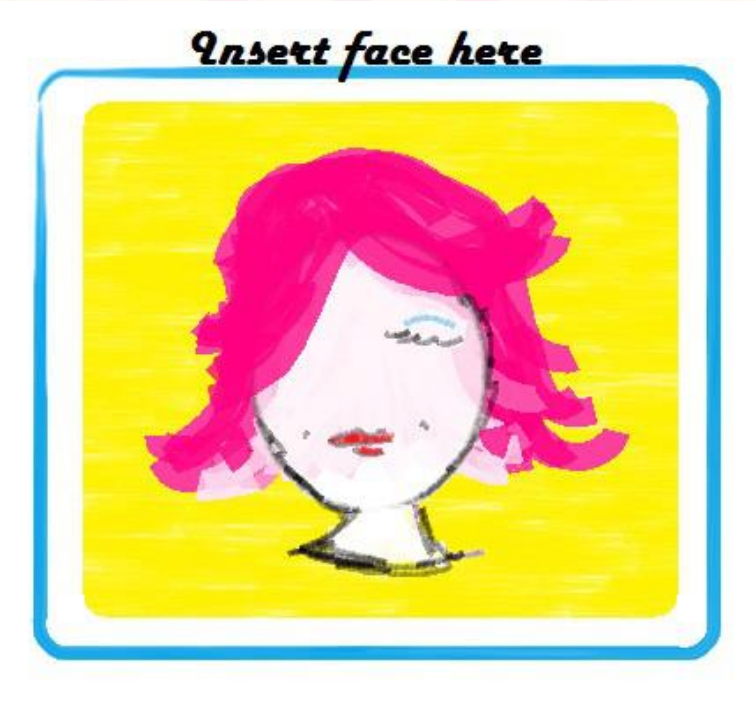
Okay. I'm OUTTIE FIVE THOUSAND.

Catherine

4Feb2011

One Wig Stand interview

Posted in Articles, Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy



A few good things have come from using Twitter – and one of those good things is my introduction to a young woman who is the power behind One Wig Stand. Her blog connects with those who care about breast cancer – but it's focused on the stories of Lebanese women in an effort to crush taboos. This is a good blog, and it's worth checking out.

Now here is the flattering bit. She asked *me* for an interview. You know how third party compliments are the very best? "Jessica said the other day that she thought you are brilliant." Well, another great compliment is being asked to interview for an inspirational blog.

If you want to read it : follow this link to One Wig Stand.

5Feb2011

Friendly in real life

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs

As my day passes – and maybe you can relate? – I'm constantly barraged with ideas for posting. They shout out as me while walking through the corridor, sipping tea, checking messages, picking my nose. If it were quantified, I'd estimate that around 6% of my ideas actually make it to the internet.

So when I signed up for twitter with the intention of meeting people, building connections, talking to friends and all that other networking/social mediafying buzz, who knew it'd become so overly stimulating and nearly explode my brain with inspiration.

Twitter and facebook are significantly different. Facebook is more targeted, more personal. Twitter just never stops – it's the social media equivalent of pi. Hopping on for a 'quick look' means staying too long for a peruse of people's links, topics, ideas, and so on – and you know what, about 97% of these people are strangers. Strangers! I'm stopping to exchange with people whom I've never met before, and because it's online that is A-okay.

So why isn't it in real life?

Here is what happened to me yesterday while on break from the library. Contrasted against the social ease of Twitter, it was totally bizarre.

Right. There I am in my blue exercise top and too saggy dark jeans, slouched over on the beaten leather sofa that is situated against the only heater in the corridor of my campus, opposite the canteen, with a navy sock-thing covering my chicken-fluff hair. (*How is that for an excessively descriptive sentence? I'm gaging on the adjectives.*) It's a public area and I'm hugging the radiator with a cup of tea in one hand, and a newspaper on my lap opened to an article about Egypt.

Things are normal for the Avenue: students are scattered around, everyone is involved in their worlds. My glasses are on the table.

Okay – stage is set. Here is the bizarre bit, which honestly should *not* be bizarre at all, considering I just started a conversation with @completestranger on Twitter.

A lady walks by and I glance up as she passes. She slows – not a full stop, but a kind of 'I recognize you but my feet are still moving' type of slow down – and says, "Hello!"

So I smile, and say, "Hello."

And *then* she stops just a moment, gets slightly closer (but not too close, don't worry) and says: "How are you doing?"

Which was so strange!

Of course, what could I do? I say, "I'm doing well, thanks." (Never say you're 'good', because there's a high chance an older lady will swoop down from nowhere and correct your grammar, as I once experienced.) And she walks away.

This is why I feel the entire exchange was different – and by different, I mean really great, but also really unexpected:

1. In England, people do not generally say 'How are you?' in passing. They say 'Are you alright?' instead.
2. I have never seen this lady before. Mind you, my glasses were on the table and she was essentially a passing, blond, smiling blur – *but* I didn't recognize the fuzzy features. (And if you are reading this post, and I should have recognized you – I really do apologize and would like to blame it on my lack of glasses. Normally I'm excellent at remembering faces . . . not names, but faces).

So what warranted the slowdown and smile? The smile, I get – I smile at everyone who's looking. But the slowdown and smile? Followed by an inquiry of wellbeing?

And so, I was 'liked', or 'retweeted', or plainly said: made to feel good by a stranger. A stranger in the real world. Why was it so startling?

Everyone feels better when someone cares, even in small portions. A smile shows you care (if only in small portions), and I firmly believe people ought to smile as they pass. It's one Canadian habit that is highly commendable. But this woman took things a step further. She *actually* wanted to know how I was doing, *it wasn't a passing substitute for 'hello'*, and I was not prepared for her interest.

But you know what? I remembered her. Her fuzzy, blurry shape has been seared into my mind and for the rest of the day I reflected on the exchange. This is more than I can say about the tweets and comments of social media. They have their use, and are great for introductions, but I think significant connections must go beyond 140 characters.

What's really fascinating and significant is that **bottom line** – inspiration hits from all angles, and twitter/facebook are no exception; but it's the real stuff, in the real world, those real feelings and emotional experiences, which create an impression on my life. And it's that stuff, the best stuff, which makes it into Bumpyboobs.

I'm quite happy for the lady and her kind inquiries. It was a great treat for the day, and gave me a whole lot to consider.

5Feb2011

Facial hair re-growth

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy

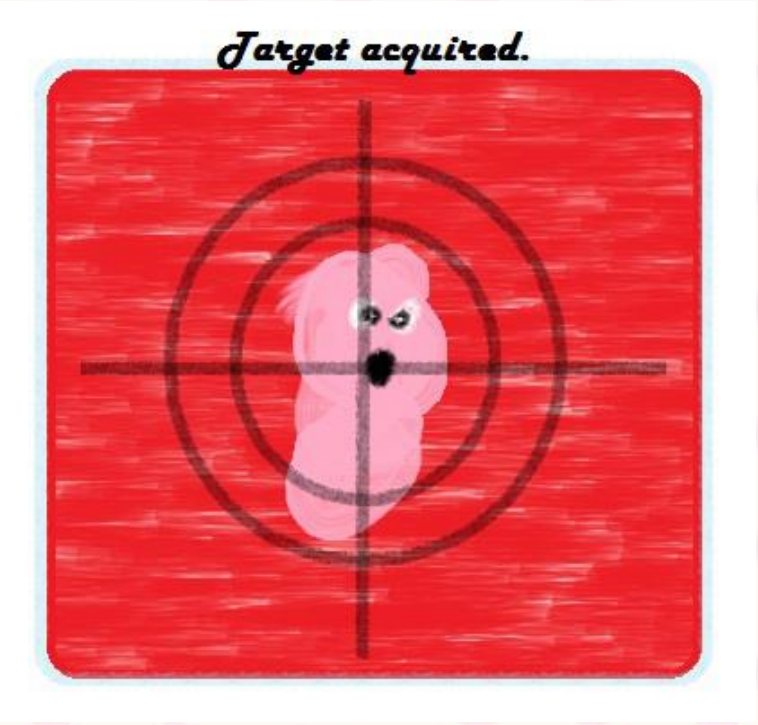
Here is a pictorial representation of my eyebrow re-growth. Now, cover up the brows – doesn't that face look happy? Yes she does. Uncover the brows and she looks rather devious, once again.

It is 100% good news that my brows are growing back (and my lashes). They've already added more expression to my face, even if it's the look of anger. And sooner or later they'll fill out entirely. Until then, I'll take these slanted brows – thanks very much.

6Feb2011

Radiotherapy is about to start

Posted in Bumpboobs, Radiotherapy Treatment, Treatment



Tomorrow is radiotherapy.

From the experience of others, I've heard it's not a difficult process: Go in. Lay down. Get Radiated. Leave. And that was a relief to hear, but not *entirely* relieving. Tomorrow is radiotherapy, which means tomorrow I'll start another bout of hospital visits and another therapy that could possibly give me more cancer in fifteen to twenty years time. Okay, so it is a small possibility, but nevertheless . . . (*wouldn't it be nice if there was a medical therapy that* wouldn't *possibly give me cancer in fifteen, twenty, thirty years time? Yes. It would be nice.*)

And this will help kill any lingering cancer cells in the right chest area.

It is my great and ardent hope that *at this moment* there are no cancer cells remaining. All the cancer cells have vacated the body, with my recovering immune system accompanying them to the door. Good bye and good riddance. But, if there are some lingering little buggers who think they've escaped – I have a message for you:

DIE.

And leave me alone.

I've never wished death on any person, nor would I – and I certainly don't wish it upon myself. But sometimes we need to be tough; we need to survive (think animal kingdom and our omnivore roots). And cancer isn't a person, it's a disease. Besides, I'm feeling a bit shitty about having to do radiotherapy – so funnelling that frustration into some anger bullets for cancer-hunting is constructive.

BANG! goes the cancer.

At least, that's what I'm aiming for.

...

Frig. I'm still freaking nervous. Frig. Frig. Frig.

7Feb2011

Sometimes I get angry

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Life, Treatment

Alright. Here we go. Radiotherapy has begun and today wasn't so bad. Honestly, sometimes I get so angry at being in a situation that requires chemo, surgery, radiotherapy, hormone therapy (etc), that it's easy to forget the benefits. Chemotherapy coupled with hormone therapy dropped my chances of re-occurrence from 90% to 50%. Not the whole pizza, but not terrible. And radiotherapy will help ensure I don't redevelop cancer in the site where the original tumour grew.

These are good things. So when I harp about the possibility of cancer down the line (because admittedly it's a very low chance of secondary cancer resulting from treatment), it's mostly defensive against the fact that I have cancer, and that I need to hurt my body to help it.

I'm angry – you know? Not all the time, but sometimes.

However, I nevertheless appreciate the smiling doctor who recollects skating the canal, and the nurses who chat about their day, and the patience with which my left breast is repeatedly checked. I appreciate it. They are on my side.

So I forget that occasionally and get mad at every damn thing associated with cancer. From the ache in my side to the drip of a medication.

Zsolt pointed out to me today that having such a negative perspective isn't helping, and he's right. Sometimes I get angry, but that doesn't mean I'm not appreciative (even when it doesn't sound like it). This crap is hard. I think the treatments could be better – but then, who doesn't? That's why bazillions of dollars of research are poured into the area. In twenty years, who knows what great advances will be made?

SO, that's me eating my words. Filling.

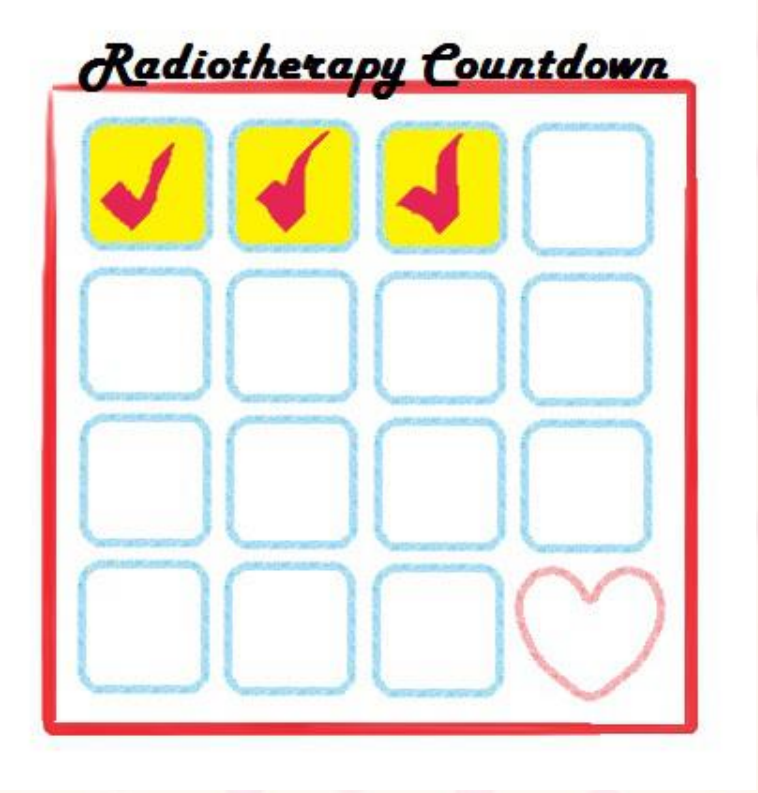
Tomorrow (or sometime soon) I'll write about radiotherapy – the actual session. It was certainly an experience, if only a brief one, and totally worth sharing.

9Feb2011

Radiotherapy in a nutshell

Posted in Bumpboobs, Radiotherapy Treatment, Treatment

No joking around, I am t-i-r-e-d. They say that radiotherapy can cause exhaustion, and while the majority is due to radiation, at least some of it has got to be due to routine. And speaking of which, here is my Radiotherapy Routine, which I'm guessing is similar to others undergoing treatment.



Every morning I take a shower and scrub down. Why not in the evening, you might ask? Because revealing two sweaty armpits while a group of people lean into your chest is *embarrassing*. My first radiotherapy session, I go in and take off the three layers of shirts (undershirt, t-shirt, jumper) and was most definitely sweating with nerves. Getting on the table, the nurse asks me to raise my arms above my head and – *whew!*—in that shaming moment the lesson was learnt. No more night-time showers, it's every morning from now on. Nothing like complete strangers having to inhale your body odours to drive a lesson home.

Right. So I take a shower and put on fresh clothes. Makeup, deodorant, perfume *etc* are not allowed.

Next Zsolt drives me to the hospital. This is generally pleasant until we reach the hospital parking lot. The radiotherapy ward shares a teeny tiny parking lot with eye care emergencies . . . and I don't know how many people are sticking objects into their eyes per day, but this parking lot is *always* full. So, per routine, I get out of the car and check to see whether any places are available. If not, we wait at the parking lot entrance until someone finishes their business with the hospital and leaves. Today while waiting, cars behind us somehow assumed we were broken down and started driving into the parking lot, totally gong-ho on finding a spot, only to reverse their metallic butts back into line once they realized there were no places, *duh* (expect for one line cutter, but she got a honking).

Anyhow, at this point, with or without Zsolt, who may or may not still be waiting for a spot, I head into the radiotherapy department. It's essentially a large hallway with padded chairs and magazines. The ceiling is high, the lighting is bright and there is a garden area that is currently seal off due to poor weather. I scan my bar code – there is no receptionist – and wait to be called.

The longest I've waited to be called is about ten minutes. These people are fast.

"Catherine Brunelle" and I go in.

During my first appointment they took several measurements – by the time I was allowed to move again my arm had gone numb. However, since then it's been much faster.

They escort you into a large room, center of which is a scanning-type machine with a long, hard bed/table covered in paper. The table has a rest for your butt to be pushed against, a board to anchor your feet on, and some holders for the arms. It's like the dentist chair taken to a higher, harder level of discomfort. And it's flatter.

In the background music plays. You take off your clothes (whatever may be necessary) and get onto the table.

At which point they ask you to look up at the ceiling, totally relax your body, and let them move you around. As this happens the nurses have a very strange discussion: "A little emph here" "9.8 emph" "Lined up here" "A bit emph to the right" "13" "9.7" "10" "Emph?"

Okay, so if aliens were to abduct me tonight and lay me on their hard lab table, maybe they would use a similar language to these nurses. I have *no* idea what they're talking about, and they have *no* time to explain. It's all very quick.

But this isn't an abduction. On the ceiling there is a picture of a tree with blossoms.

They move me very slightly here and there – I'm not quite sure what the point is because despite doing my best 'rag doll' impression, I'm bound to be moving a millimeter here and there, plus when the table rises or falls those vibrations shake me around.

Anyhow, they move me into position and the nurse put this rubbery/gel-ish 'blanket' across the area to be shot. Apparently this fools the machine into thinking it's treating the area, and the skin ends up with more radiation. This is a good thing? Anyhow, they tape the blanket to my chest and then boot it outta there.

It's just me and the machine.

The sounds start – machine sounds, a lot of quiet whirling, and then the radiation . . .

Firstly, it doesn't hurt to be shot with radiation. Apparently the reaction comes later. Secondly, the beam is invisible. But there is a sound. An ugly sound. The loud static buzz of bees. Ugh.

And then the machine does it's thing on one side, then the other, and *then* it's done. Presto. The entire treatment take about six or seven minutes.

After which I throw my clothes back on, say goodbye to the nurses, Zsolt validates the parking and we go home.

Three days down. Twelve more to go. As of yet there is no reaction, but it's still early days. Fingers crossed for some good progress!

9Feb2011

Gluten sensitive sucks

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Food

Today I've been given the results of my gluten test. This is a test where you scrap the inside of the mouth and send it away to a lab for analysis. They analyze and tell you whether you are sensitive to gluten, which can be found in all yummy tasting food incorporating wheat.

Guess what my results were? Bah.

This is why I am pissed off to be gluten sensitive. It feels like another pleasure has been removed. No more pizza, thanks. No more langos, okay? No more toast with butter and honey. No way. Obviously there are worse things than being sensitive to gluten. But nevertheless I am frustrated, I feel – for some reason – like my body has failed *again*. It's absolutely maddening, and the only person to be mad at is myself. Where the heck did my genes go wrong? Cats, smoke, mould, *gluten* and cancer. All reactions gone haywire.

Yes, I realize this is a pity party. Sometimes when not feeling well I like to have my comforts – Zsolt is a comfort, my bed is a comfort, and cookies are a comfort. Taking away gluten won't be impossible, but it's so annoying. It's taking away a comfort during a time when everything already feels hard.

I'll get used to this change. Of course – people get used to things. And frankly, being told you're gluten sensitive is not the worst news a person can hear. At least this is something that I can control, and know 100% it is being managed. For some reason I feel a loss, but it'll pass. Food isn't worth mourning . . . or at least, not gluten.

A good thing also happened to me today. I will write about that in a separate post tomorrow, because it was so lovely that I don't want to taint it with this gluten-centric writing.

Tomorrow!

10Feb2011

Awesome business cards

Posted in After treatment, Blogging and Other Fun, Bumpboobs, Writing

Good things happen every day, some of which – and my particular favourite good thing – are in anticipated delights. Anticipated delights, those little things to which we look forward: a hot mug of coco, reading in pyjamas, a letter from a friend, eating good food, snuggling in bed. Not to forget flying home to Canada at Christmas. That was a big one, but still – delightful.

Yesterday something very good happened. A package arrived in the mail and when opened, even before seeing the contents, I was instantly transported into the land of 'good moods'. There they were, all snug in a tiny box – one hundred Bumpyboobs in a rainbow of colours. These things are gorgeous!

It started last week on some random evening. Zsolt's Amazon package arrived with a flyer promoting free business cards.

Free, did you say? I was all over it.

But you know what, free business cards aren't even an 1/8th as cute as non-free business cards. I went to this site called Moo.com and started to play. The internet is amazing when it comes to designing books, cards, photo collections etc. It's easy and accessible. Now, I firmly believe that pre-made templates will never trump a talented graphic designer – because I've seen some awesome graphic designing in my time – but for late evening online cruising, they fit the bill perfectly. *(Side note: you can upload your own designs, so customize the card as much as you like, but I'm a bit lazy and thought the text-only approach much easier)* I started to play with designs and words and colours. It was good fun.

You may ask – why do you need business cards, Catherine?

To which I'd answer, I don't know . . . they looked good? Why do women buy $500 shoes? Certainly not because it's practical. But cute is cute, and that's hard to resist.

So yesterday my Moo.com package arrived in the mail, presented in a tiny box with bright orange lining – 100 mini cards with BUMPYBOOBS on one side, and my name and website on the back.

Wow.

Next up: what the heck do I *do* with 100 mini cards? Zsolt has one, and I'll keep a few . . . and after that, *hmmm*. . . one idea is to leave them in places where women dealing with breast cancer may find them. Another idea would be to hand them out personally. But where and who and when, I have no clue.

But – if you build it, they will come. The cards now exist. Surely a circumstance of use will eventually materialize. Here is hoping, otherwise that's £15 wasted on impulse.

No, I take that back. Even if these little gems stay in their box for the rest of their lives, the cards are representative – they are labelled with a declaration to 'screw breast cancer and get on with the show' – and somehow, in a sense that is deeper than pretty colours and printed cardboard, they represent this past year of my life.

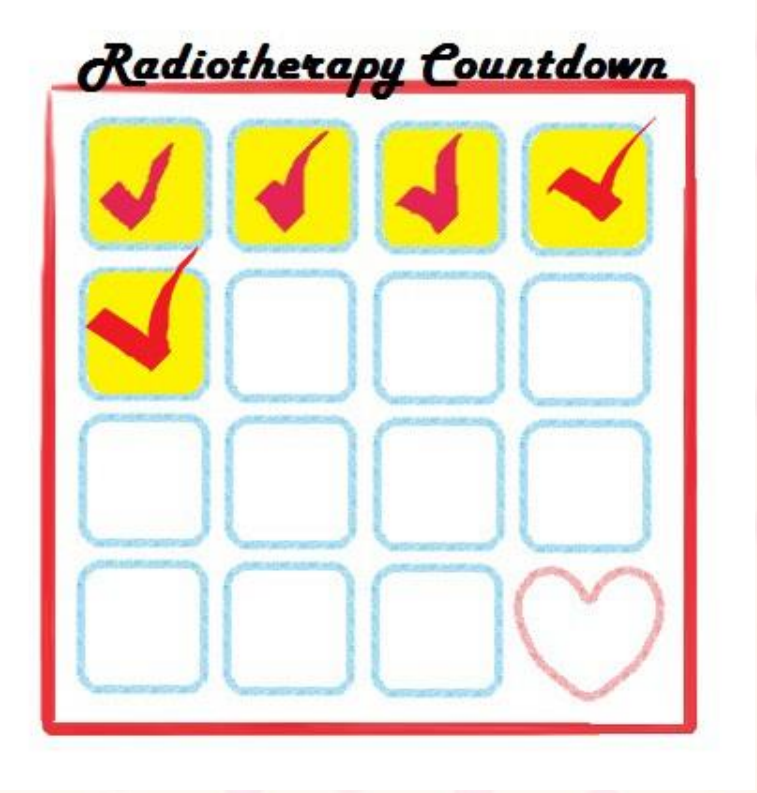
So that was my good thing. Amongst others. Thinking about it makes me smile all over again.

13Feb2011

Radiotherapy 33% done

Posted in Bumpboobs, Radiotherapy Treatment, Treatment

One week down, two more to go – that is 33% of the treatment completed. By now there is a light redness to the area and you can literally see the line along which they shoot me. But one foot in front of the other, in three weeks time who knows how it'll look (maybe I'll draw a picture once we get there).



Apart from the itching everything is okay. It's funny because a lady was kind enough to suggest I get loads of rest, which was the only thing that helped her. This upcoming week we'll have a moving evaluation, there is a talk at the uni, I work each day, then writing group and eventually we'll have to do the groceries. It's not overwhelming, but I wouldn't call it restful.

Tomorrow I'll visit my GP in the afternoon. She needs to refill my prescription, and I'd very much like if she could give my left boob a feel. There are some bumps in there that worry me, and if I could get sent for an ultrasound it would be very good. Frankly, it's embarrassing to be so worried – so obviously paranoid – but maybe a scan would help ease my mind. Until an ultrasound says, "nope, not cancer" I cannot help worrying that something is lurking.

Tomorrow is another week, and another chunk of radiation. I'm sitting pretty at 33%, and looking forward to knocking off another third. One step at a time. Sooner than later treatment will be over.

15Feb2011

Happy Valentine's Day

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Life, Love, Treatment

Happy Valentine's Day! How are you celebrating this love-filled day? Roses and wine, maybe some chocolates? Sounds very good. Throw in a bubble bath and I'll be there in ten minutes (with a book to read while the bathroom door is closed and I sink into the suds – no funny business allowed, thank you very much). As for Zsolt and I, the day was business as usual with a card here and personalized stamp set there. Also, I'm making *töltött káposzta* for dinner with a Hungarian recipe that I cannot read – handwriting being so subjective – and hoping things go well for a nice romantic dinner. Zsolt is snuggling up to his supervisor at the University, going through his thesis.

Today was busy for various reasons: radiotherapy, career fair, lecture about internet marketing, work of the library, visit from the shipping company, and doctor's appointment. It was the appointment that really had my attention. Looking at the day, it *appears* to be busy, but in reality it is distracting.

Distraction was needed.

Half way through my library shift I left to walk over to the Doctor's office. Two things were required: *One*, renew my prescription and *Two*, get a referral to the breast clinic.

Arriving at the doctor's I checked myself in and took a seat. At the moment I'm reading this book called "Mennonite in a little black dress" which is, somewhat like this blog, a light encounter with shitty circumstances (and great family stories) – plus, the author is funny. I love funny. So there I was waiting for the doctor, reading my book, and trying not to stare at the children in the reception playing with the table of shapes on windy painted wires. Remember those? There's a table with different colour blocks – and somehow, as a child, it is fascinating to wind them along the wire. I remember many a doctor's office and health food stores where that windy wire captivated my imagination.

Lately children bring up weird feelings – I'm not sure whether to like them, resent them, want them, play with them, or just ignore them. Heck, some are adorable (e.g. my friend's tiny girl with the ever-smiling face; she saw me without any hair and just smiled, so innocently, like I was anyone else and there was nothing wrong with that. Geez, she was cute), actually *most* kids are adorable. Lately, I haven't spotted a child who wasn't totally sweet and charming. But they always remind me that I still haven't gotten my period. And more so, they remind me of the baby/breast hospital where I was first diagnosed. Clearly this a bad association, and something I ought shake off. But for now, babies remind me of 2 things: possible infertility, and possible breast cancer.

Which takes me back to the chair in the waiting room, ignoring the children, and anxious to speak with my doctor about these lumps in my left breast.

She opens the door –sporting a stylish new haircut – and calls me in with a grin. This is a university health care center. The chances of being remembered by your doctor are generally not high, but she remembers me (flattering) because of my breast lump (less flattering), which she referred to the breast clinic. Let's call her Dr Kind.

Why Dr Kind? Because I like her. She is genuine in her concern, and for some reason I find it infinitely easier to talk with this woman about my worries than any of the other doctors. It's not just because she is a woman (thought that's partly the reason, I guess); when the cancer was first confirmed she was notified by fax from the general hospital. Upon receiving this fax, she called me on my mobile and invited me in for a chat. That's good doctoring.

Anyhow, I go up on her table and take off my top, and she starts prodding around. Funny, taking off my top is like *nothing* now. All that self-consciousness has flown out the window. She commented on how my scar has healed nicely, and I didn't realize I was showing her my scar – In my head, this is my chest. I forget that a breast is missing, because I don't notice as much anymore.

That's a good sign, eh.

Anyhow, she starts prodding. There are bumps and lumps in my left breast, which is normal for a young woman with dense tissue. The question here is: are they cancerous?

"They couldn't be reoccurrence," she assured me. "Not this long after chemo."

Whew

"It'd have to be a new cancer."

Augh!

"But I really think you have nothing to worry about, it's really quite soon."

Whew

"Though that's what I said last time."

Augh!

And then we laughed, because it was funny – a little dark, but funny. Here we were in the same situation as last May, and she was giving me the same reassurance (*don't worry, it's probably nothing*). Except it was something.

But not this time. That's what I'm praying. Fingers crossed, legs crossed, arms crossed, eyes crossed. Not thing time, okay? Tomorrow I'll call the clinic to arrange an appointment. She's faxed off the referral so they'll be waiting for my call. But this time I want better results. The hot springs of Hungary are waiting. It's time for some peace of mind.

Weird going back to the doctor's office, the very place I first took my initial lump. Weird laughing at how far we've come. But sometimes all you can do is laugh. Laugh or cry, they're not too different after all.

And that – in a nut shell – was my very busy Valentine's Day.

15Feb2011

Tomorrow's scan and consultation

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Treatment

Well this is quick! I have an appointment for tomorrow morning. And I feel totally nervous – stomach is all twisted up. Frack.

Okay! Too nervous to blog!

16Feb2011

Good.

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Treatment

The scan went well. That was good. I have to go – but will write more later. The breast care nurse said that 'what your feeling is perfectly normal'. Anyhow – no cancer and that is a great, grand, awesome thing.

Later!

18Feb2011

Reoccurrence reassurance

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Treatment

So I guess the general rule for this blog is that when I say, 'I'll write about this tomorrow', it really means, 'I'll write about this in a day or two or three' because things get busy. Yesterday morning I woke up with the intention of doing three things: Washing the dishes. Making Lunch. Writing a post about my trip to the hospital.

Two out of three isn't bad. And here we are today – somehow more dishes have sprung up overnight and lunch will need making again. However, they had their chance yesterday. Today is for the writing.

On Monday I went to my GP and asked her to refer me to the hospital. Apparently this was an unnecessary step – I could have contacted a breast care nurse at the hospital directly, but it was good to catch up with Dr Kind (plus I needed to refill my prescription).

Tuesday morning I had a call from the hospital, "Hello Mrs Brunelle, we've got a space for you tomorrow morning. Can you make it?"

Yes. I could make it. This call came just as I was entering my acupuncturist's office, but not even she could help me relax after that point. There was something she did with my eyebrows that was divine and always knocks me out, but five minutes later I was thinking about that breast exam and getting wound up again.

[Zsolt is sitting here on the bed as I write this post, eating some yogurt. Every twenty seconds he asks a question: are you a biolife? Are you a chumbawumba? Are you a konyec? *But I have no clue what a konyec is, apparently it means 'the end'.*]

Anyhow! It was nerve racking. My body revolted against me later in the day and served up a killer stomach ache, which was subsequently blamed on a leftover Valentine's day dish of cabbage and pork, but was likely also due to stress.

Wednesday I went to the hospital. They sent me to the clinic that contains all things cancer – this is where the oncologists, surgeons and radiation doctors meet and mingle. Passing us in the waiting area was my surgeon who nodded to Zsolt (I was absorbed by my magazine), and as we were shown into a consultation room my oncologist passed by and waved hello too.

Again the nurse asked me to remove my top and put on the cape. You *do not* have to put on that terrible cape. Maybe if it takes five minutes to remove your clothing, do what they ask, but so long as you can whip off your shirt – why bother with an ugly, cold, and awkward cape?

Generally we wait about 30 to 45 minutes in those consultation rooms, but this time things were quick. In walked a doctor, a student (baby doctor) and – ***ugh!*** – the same breast care nurse who was in the room when I was first given my diagnosis. Panic threatened to set in, but then I thought to myself, '*why would they bring a baby doctor along if they had bad news?*' which was logical. It turned out they couldn't have given me bad news, because they literally had no idea why I was there. A file had landed on their desk (with most of the contents missing because my original file was lost) and they knew I was worried about lumps. But that was all.

After retelling my breast cancer story, showing off the tidy scar, and having my breast checked by yet another doctor, I was assured this was probably nothing, 'but we'll send you for a scan anyhow.'

The breast care nurse was very generous in telling me that my fear was normal. 'If you didn't feel this way, then we'd be worried.' I suspect that isn't true, but it was kind of her to say.

And one hour later I had my ultrasound.

Fast, no?

Again they shot cold gel onto my chest. Again some slippery rubbery thing glided around my breast. Again it probed the lumps. 'I can feel what you mean,' said the doctor, 'but everything looks normal.'

Whew. This was a relief. One – I hadn't imagined the problem. Two – it wasn't cancer.

Awesome!

And now I can finally enjoy how much better my body feels. Wednesday afternoon I *ran* up the stairs at work, and only realized half way through that I was RUNNING. My face has regained colour (blood), and my energy is picking up. True, my finger nails are *still* dying, but significant progress has been made in all areas.

There's so much to look forward to now; the next six months will be wonderful. Hard in some ways because we'll leave our home, but amazing in others (travelling, spa-going, resting, hanging with husband, graduation, Zsolt turns THIRTY). I'm finally free to enjoy, boob bumps and all.

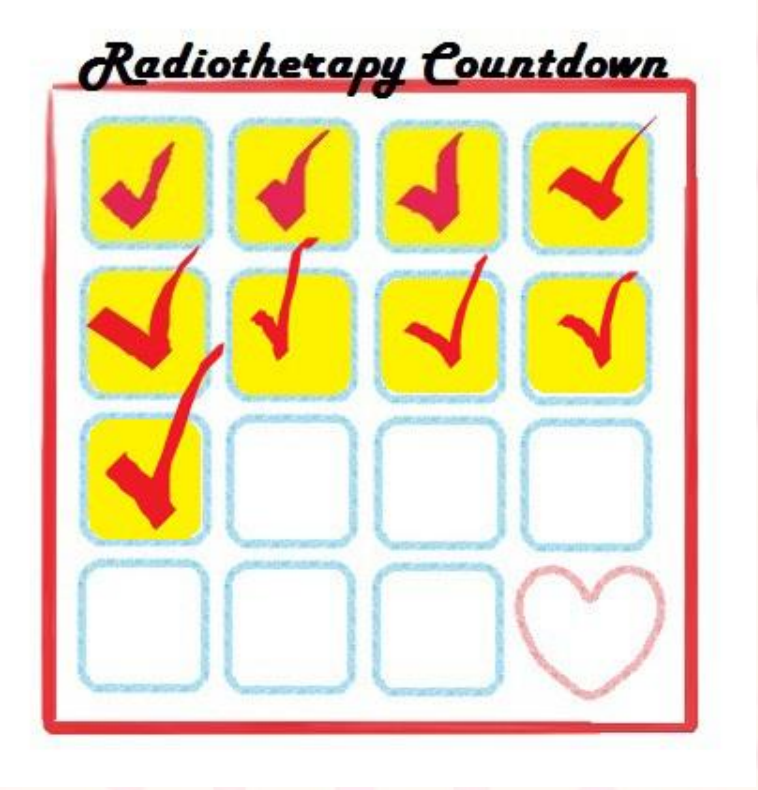
So there you have it! I admire women who get past the fear of reoccurrence. It's something that I need to learn. But at least until my next scan I have this release. It feels really good, amazingly good, and I'm thankful.

20Feb2011

Three nice things

Posted in Bumpboobs, Food

Two really nice things happened to me this past week. Firstly I was given a pint of daffodils at work from a colleague, which are now sitting in my kitchen window (*I was walking home from work on the day these were given and stopped into the grocery to pick up some bits – essentially, I was sloshing around with a pint glass filled with water and flowers, trying to look like this was business-as-usual. The security guard did a double take, but I find if you act as though nothing is wrong people will generally assume all is well.)* And secondly I was given a bag of gluten-free goodies from a specialty bakery.



When there are great little shops like this bakery catering to special dietary needs, gluten-free becomes a whole lot better. Yesterday I ate a piece of vanilla sponge cake that was awesome. Not a bit of wheat in the thing, and you would never have realized. And today I'm going to (about to) sink my teeth into a brownie *sans* gluten. I'll have to eventually remind myself that just because there's no wheat doesn't make this beautiful food any *less* like a dessert (with all that sugar, cream, and sugar and cream). Oh well, I'll probably still eat that brownie.

Isn't food the ultimate comfort? From a nice meal you didn't have to make (*speaking of which, just ordered another load from Cook!*), to crafting a new concoction (*last night it was 'everything in the pot' with miso for flavour. Turned out surprising well*), to whipping up dessert (*the choice fuel for Zsolt's thesismobile*), to a hot pot of tea. Yum.

So those were the two very nice things that happened to me last week. And now here we are in a new week. What nice thing has happened? Well, I'm 2/3rds through radiotherapy – so that is awesome. My chest has turned pink, and sometimes feels slightly sore. I'm thankful for my two days away from radiotherapy because it's a good chance to rest.

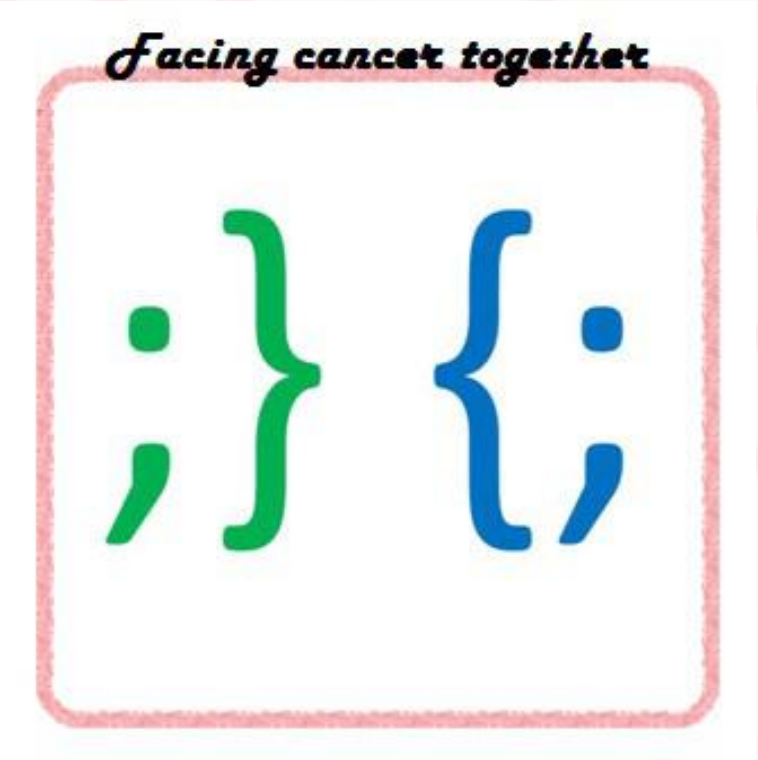
Honestly I don't have any more to write. All I know is that Lulu was waiting for a blog post – so here it is, Lulu! Good food and Radiotherapy updates. Write more later, so stay tuned.

20Feb2011

Facing Cancer Together

Posted in After treatment, Blogging and Other Fun, Bumpboobs, Writing

One more nice thing happened to me this week. I started blogging for a website called Facing Cancer Together. It's presented by the Canadian Cosmetic, Toiletry and Fragrance Association (CCTFA) Foundation, and sponsored by Shoppers Drug Mart. This is a Canadian based website that offers a supportive online community to anyone effected by cancer.



This is part of my 'become a writer' plan. It's one thing to want to write, it's another to get out there and promote yourself. But promotion is essential to becoming an active writer, and becoming an active writer is essential to my recovery.

I mean, okay – cancer is random and horrible and unexpected. Right? Yes. So when asking myself 'why the hey did I get cancer?', all I can do is shake my head, and stomp my feet, and forget the question because no grand voice from above has ever shouted down an answer.

But – *but but but* – even before I was officially diagnosed, probably the day Bumpyboobs was established, I thought to myself, 'the least I can do is write. If I have cancer, I will write. If I don't have cancer, I will write. No matter what, I've got to write about this experience.'

There I was, totally freaking out, and *writing* was at the forefront of my mind.

So maybe that's why I got cancer? Really, it's a mystery. Like mentioned, no booming presence has ever shouted down from above: HEY CATHERINE, YOU GOT CANCER BECAUSE _____. OKAY? NOW STOP ASKING ME.

And because of that, I'll have to assign my own meaning to this past year. Whatever the reason, the outcome is my wanting to be a writer even more than before.

So when there was a tweet on my Twitter timeline asking for bloggers to contact facingcancer.ca, I jumped at the opportunity. This is a great chance to grow my network, reach people who 'have been there' (and those who are actually going through it), and WRITE.

Following my instincts has never lead me astray. It took me across the world, took me to my husband, and now it's taken me to writing.

So feel free to check it out and browse the webpage. I'll always be Bumpyboobs, but will post maybe once a week on Facing Cancer Together (sometimes a repeat post from this page). This is a good step, and good thing. There are many good things happening. And that in itself is **good**.

24Feb2011

Big things and little stuff

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Life

While big things are happening in the world, little things are happening at home. At the moment Zsolt is having a little tiff about my extreme and constant sloppiness. It's true, I'm a slob – and if it weren't for my husband I'd be a MONSTER slob. Proof of that was my old bedroom over Christmas with clothes and towels and papers and suitcases scattered around the floor (and doors, and chairs, and bed.)

Little things.

There's a little bit of radiotherapy left. Every morning I arrive and am greeted by one of a few varying nurses. They ask how I'm doing, I give them a report. Normally it consists of: "Fine." Because I am fine. Sometimes I get tired, my skin still has that shadow of pink, there is that occasional wheeze . . . but all that is wrapped up in 'fine,' because nothing's changed or gotten worse. Do they know I was freaking out over my left boob last week? Maybe, maybe not. Since the results were great, I'll not bring it up.

Another little bit of excitement lays ahead. Call me stupid if you must, *only if you must*, but I've planned a trip to London the Wednesday after my last radiotherapy session (i.e. two days after). My old professor is launching a book, which sounds quite exciting and while I've been told book launches are generally not so thrilling, I would nevertheless like to see one for myself. Therefore, London is calling with a day trip on the train, an early meal, a speech with a reading (at which point I'll strive to find seating because goodness knows I'll be tired), and a train ride back home. It will be an adventure. Plus, I've got a really cute dress to wear.

And continuing the adventure – here is a little thing that means oodles to my little life. I'll be getting a haircut. What hair, Catherine? This hair! See it? Get the magnifying glass and take a look. There is a shallow carpet of hair spreading across my scalp, but it looks crazy because of the patchiness and varying lengths. Did you know that your hair doesn't grow evenly? Different sections grow at faster/slower rates. It's true. So I'm off to the hairdresser. It's incredible because last July I can remember sitting in that chair pre-chemo and talking with my hairdresser about chopping it all off. And she told me, 'come back in when it starts growing. Even if there's only a little bit we can fix it for you.' So next Tuesday that promise will be tested. Thank goodness the monk style reverse balding has finally filled in.

Here is one last little (BIG!!) thing before this post ends. Zsolt Samson – the handsome and charming scientist who has worked so very hard over the last four (.5) years – is nearly ready to submit his thesis. This past month has been *push push push* for Zsolt, with late nights, full weekends, and frequent meetings with his supervisor. To say I'm proud of Zsolt is insufficient (*more like I'm bursting with exploding sun-bright gushes of enthusiasm, excitement and pride for this man's accomplishment*), but will have to do. Another week or less should result in submission. GO, Zsolti, GO!

These are the little things in our steady life that have been coming and going over the past while. Frankly, I'm more interested in the news and all the change that is being pushed through, though am in no way qualified (or knowledgeable enough) to write about those topics. But can appreciate that it sometimes takes a big struggle to accomplish big things.

And that is the end of this posting. Next week, hopefully, I'll have something a bit more exciting to say!

26Feb2011

Awesome visa to Canada

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Canada, Finding Home, Life

Good Saturday to you. Outside my apartment the bed sheets are drying – or were drying, because it's broken out with rain – and the day is (otherwise) going well. On the kitchen table are several piles of books, the beginning of our moving purge, and on Zsolt's desk beside his papers and text books and calculator and pen is . . . HIS TOTALLY AWESOME VISA INTO CANADA!

WOOOHOOO! It arrived in the mail today, and it's GIANT. This larger than A4 visa and has his name, country of birth, photo, visa class, and says something along the lines of, 'don't write on this paper until you are with immigration inside Canada.'

She is a tease, this immigration system. While we've jumped the hoops and filled the paperwork, there is *still* a stipulation stating that this visa is not a guarantee they'll let Zsolt into Canada. *Bah*. I'm not worried because clearly Zsolt is perfect for Canada, and has a truly valid case. Confidence in your situation is a really good thing – it gives a determination that even if things take time or are questioned, they will work out. I know Zsolt will get into Canada a-okay. That is that.

And apart from this I'm taking today for a little housekeeping – *yes, the rain sheets count*, sorting, chillaxing (relaxing), and of course, blogging.

In celebration of this writing, and because I was told that it's the thing to do, I've made a website/online CV. It's www.CatherineBrunelle.com , feel free to check her out if you have the time.

So – as previously said: Good Saturday to you. (If I ever create a business it's going to have a four day work week: Four days on. Three days off. Screw precedent.) Hope you enjoy this wonderful weekend!

PS – Oneeeeee Treatment LEFTTTTT Ohhhohohohdfohsfoasdhsdljf! *[Too excited to write properly]* OOhkjsdf Yeahhlkjad YWwOoohoooo! YES! YESSSSIIRRRREEBOOBBBIES!

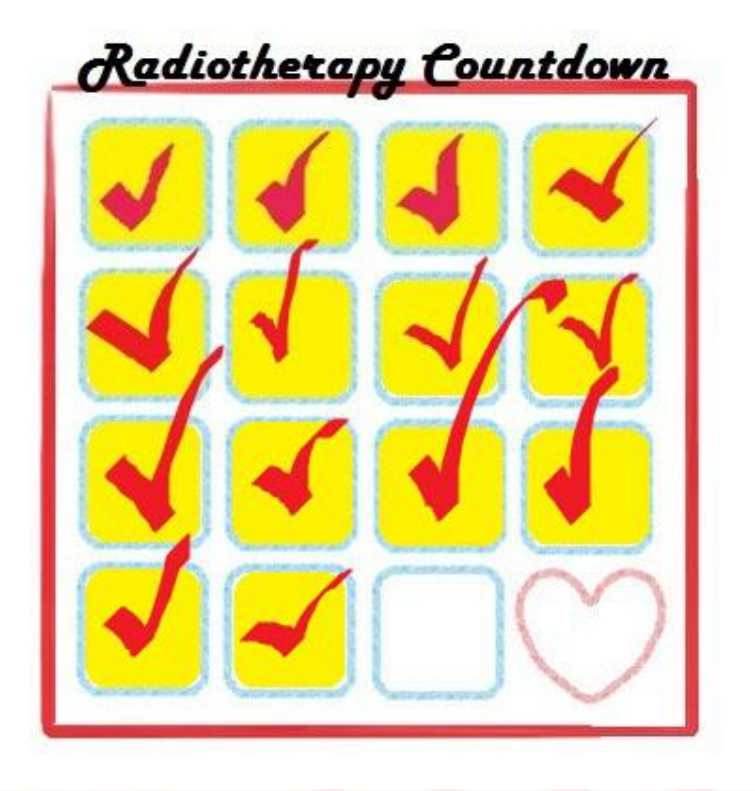
PPS- Seems the rain has now turned into hail. Hmmm. Maybe I *should* have grabbed the sheets earlier. . . oh well!

27Feb2011

Interview with myself

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Radiotherapy Treatment

Tomorrow is my last day of radiotherapy. Last day of treatment. Day of treatment. Treatment. Day. Last . . . Sorry, bit of a tangent there. Anyhow, I'm going to interview myself about this experience and see what happens. *Warning, my stomach is all bubbles right now, and this may influence my answers.



Me: Catherine, how do you feel about finishing treatment?

Me: Great, it's been a heck of a process and I'm glad things are wrapping up.

Me: Any nerves about the future? I've heard that patients often feel a loss after finishing treatment and aren't sure what to do next.

Me: Nerves? Hmm. Yes. I've heard recurrence is most likely within the first two years, and then there is that five year mark as well. Also, I guess I'm a wee bit nervous to learn whether or not I'm genetically inclined toward breast cancer/ovarian cancer because if so it might mean tough decisions in the future . . . when really, I'd like to forget this ever happened.

Me: Do you think you'll ever forget?

Me. Nope. Maybe I'll forget to remember, but this past year has been life changing – the impact is ingrained into my life, kind of absorbed, for better and for worse. So that's hard to forget, though I hope I might eventually forget to remember.

Me: What do you mean, better and worse?

Me: Better as in I value life, value health, value everything more than before. Mind you, I've always been thankful for being here. . . but cancer was a wake-up/shake-up, which everyone probably has in their life – and they are good things because in hard times we cling to what most matters. I clung to my family and friends, and to my writing. It really made priorities come into the forefront. That's incredibly valuable. Plus, I'll be going home for a while too, which is nice.

Me: And worse?

Me: Worse . . . worse as in, there is this shadow that I push into the background but can't detach myself from. I'll always have the appointments, the screenings, the need to take medication and supplements galore . . . when really I'd rather just ditch it all and go live by Horseshoe Lake as a reclusive writer who brews excellent tea, loves her husband and is often visited by friends and family. . . but that's just hiding from the problem (and it's

not like I can't have both realities at once, I can have a lakefront home and take medication, of course). Hiding is no more a solution than whining.

Me: What has cancer meant to you?

Me: That's a stupid question. It's not like cancer is some long time friend who means the world to me, cancer is cancer. It means struggle, but if I can make this past year worth something, then cancer will maybe mean change. Change . . . opportunity. I guess it's not a stupid question, but cancer isn't my friend. Even if my life improves as a result (*which is great and I'm open for that to happen*), even then, cancer isn't friendly. However, there are worse wake-up calls.

Me: What's next for you after treatment?

Me: I have a long list of obligations, holidays, plans . . . but I guess at the core of everything is the idea of moving forward and reclaiming my life. My plan is to reclaim my life – feel good in my skin, feel good in my efforts. I also look forward to my period, which I'm still hoping for, because it'd be lovely to start a family in a couple years.

Me: Would you like a cup of tea right now? Or maybe a sliced orange?

Me: Yes, how did you know?

Me: Lucky guess.

And so I'm going now to steep some tea and slice an orange. Tomorrow is radiotherapy for the last time. And I really, really want this to be the LAST time. Fingers crossed for long-lasting positive results! Hopefully this past year has been worth the effort. Yay for the end of radiotherapy!!

28Feb2011

Radiotherapy is OVER

Posted in Bumpboobs, Radiotherapy Treatment, Treatment

It's past nine pm here in Southampton, so I'll keep this post short. In fact, I could let the entire thing slide, except that it's not right and I'm willing to bet my grandmother is waiting for an update.

Today was the LAST day of radiotherapy. And on top of that, the last day of treatment.

Mastectomy: check.

Chemotherapy: check.

Radiotherapy: check.

CHECK.

It's incredible. Incredible. Today I lay on the radiotherapy table and stared at the ceiling as the normal procedures went on around me. The nurses were '*ant*'ing and '*ent*'ing, shifting me here and tweaking me there, and I kept thinking 'this is it – today it's over'. That's when the music (*did I ever mention they play music during radiotherapy? They play music. It's a pleasant distraction*) . . . when the music switched and the entire treatment room swirled into a vortex of time travel. UB40s Red Red Wine began to play as the nurses left me alone for the radiation, and while the machine clunked and buzzed, I disappeared into a memory of my first dance.

For some reason I had thought it'd be a good idea to wear a knitted, long-sleeved sweater to a dance. A purple, knitted, long sleeve sweater. With a hair band to boot. The girls would all dance in a circle, and the guys would huddle in the corner, and whenever a slow song played people would group up in whispers till one by one it was revealed that so-and-so wanted to dance with her, and so-and-so wanted to dance with him. A kid named Steve asked me to dance, and I flat out refused. Why? Two reasons. ONE: I was wearing a knitted long sleeved sweater to a *dance*, and was thus *sweaty*, and therefore *smelly*. Man! I stank. And these were the early days of puberty, so I hadn't mastered the whole 'put on deodorant regularly' thing. And TWO: I was head over heels for the boy down my street and wanted my first ever slow dance to be with him.

Which goes to show, it's good to push for what you want – because at the *next* dance (where I wore no sweater, but tons of deodorant) I had my very first slow dance with the boy down the street. Red red wine wasn't playing… it was boys to men's I Swear, but Red Red Wine played at that first dance and it is so burned into my memory that just the mention takes me back in time. The entire thing reminds me of being giddy, and uncertain, and just so incredibly excited.

Life's bag of experience suits me now, but I get why it's fun to be a kid. Anyhow, that's what I listened to on the radiotherapy table, and that's what I thought of as the very last bit of radiation was shot into my chest.

And then it was done. Over. The nurses gave me some parting paperwork, I walked out to the waiting room to collect my husband, and we went home. Easy Peasy. This evening Zsolt and I went out for a date (dinner and dessert) to celebrate the end of treatment. That was good. This is good. Everything is good. Tomorrow I'll have my hair trimmed to equal lengths, and very soon Zsolt will submit his thesis.

Some things are ending, while others are just getting started. There's so much to look forward to, it's really a great feeling. Thanks goodness – THANK GOODNESS – treatment is over. What really felt impossible not too long ago is now here, here and real and right now.

Wow. What a relief. What an experience. And here we are, on the other side.

[There's still a ways to go, but I think the biggest hurdle has been jumped. Now it's about recovery, change, and prevention. That's a lot, but it's an adventure that I look forward to. In the meantime, I'll keep slathering cream onto my radiotherapy burn and hope it heals within the next few weeks. All I need to do is look at my skin, or my finger nails, or my hair to know that just because treatment is over, doesn't mean that the fight is done. Plenty left to get done, plenty left to flush away, plenty left to strive toward. But – this is end of treatment, and that is very good thing. A VERY good thing.]

4Mar2011

Onto better things

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Life, Reading, Writing

Whew, good morning and good day. Yesterday I couldn't bear to write a post for this blog – it wasn't for a lack of ideas, but rather a lack of BRAIN power. That is it say, I was tired.

Ho Crap! Have only just checked the clock. It's 7.58 am, which means I have woken up abnormally early considering I was so incredibly tired yesterday. But that is what writing does to me: I get these ideas inside my head, and sooner than later they turn into running narratives . . . almost like a dictation . . . and if I don't write it all down, the words will keep circling around and prodding me. This may sound crazy (maybe?), however, it is also the truth. But it's no wonder Zsolt is still in bed. Normally he's first up and out, so this morning when I rolled away from the covers and he was still totally asleep, I just thought it was because the poor man stayed up till like 2am last night with his thesis. Nope. It's just crazy early here.

At least, in the student world it's crazy early. For normal 9-5ivers to wake up at eight must be equivalent to sleeping in. Anyhow…

Right! Went to London last Wednesday and believe this is a city not to be eaten in small bites. Yes, you get a taste – but really, a visit in the afternoon isn't enough time to soak up everything the capital offers. It's easy to understand why people take a 2m x 2m apartment just to stay in the city; with all those shops and pubs and restaurants and BOOK LAUNCHES and shows and incredible neighbourhoods, what's so wrong with living in a closet? Not a darn thing.

Anyhow, we navigated the subway system and found our way to Holland Park. First things first (and being about 2 hours early), we stopped in at a French Patisserie named Paul. This place was lovely, and all the servers with their white cook hats had French accents. Are they really French? Quite possibly. Anyhow – they had all sorts of gluten-filled goodies, so I abstained and ordered a large mug of tea instead.

One hour later it was onto the pub for dinner with friends (and a twenty meter walk down from the bakery). Funny, I'd arrive for the evening with black stockings on, but my built-in slip did *not* extend to the actual bottom of the dress. This is inconvenient, because while walkin the bottom strip of fabric would start to inch-inch-inch-up with every freaking step. Anyhow, I made the executive decision to remove the stockings and just wear my knee high socks – thus flashing a lot of bare legged thigh, and ended up looking like an Asian-fusion stewardess/school girl with my combo of dress and socks, all wrapped up in a polka dot jacket that also cuts at the thigh (*thus giving no help to the rising skirt situation*) – but then throw on top of everything my incredibly short hair and I really must have come off as eccentric (*or as a breast cancer warrior, maybe I should have*

pinned a ribbon for clarity). But if there's anything chemo has taught me it's that even when you feel/look like shit, it always pays to stand up straight. So on Wednesday night when I doubted my outfit (*though it was fine, not chemo-bad at all*), I at least tried to stand up straight.

Did you know that London, or at least Holland Park Avenue, is **chalk** full of late twenty and thirty-somethings? This is a mecca for the post-uni, pre-middle age crowd. I loved it.

Anyhow – finally we arrived for the launch of The Cloud Messenger, held at Daunt Books. It's strange going to someone else's party; I always wonder, 'who the heck will I speak to?' And indeed there were moments of awkward milling (*And nerves! I'm just terrible in new situations*), but thanks to social lubrication (wine) and a friend graciously making introductions, it was an interesting evening of chatter, new people, listening to Aamer read his lovely passage, and essentially enjoying that bookish buzz. Great stuff.

Fast forward to the train ride home, then a crash into bed. Best part of the evening: snuggling with Zsolt and talking about the party. Followed by sleeping, which is always wonderful.

And speaking of which, Zsolt has just woken up. I'm going to go and jump on him. (*this poor man is spiriting to the finish line and banging his head against a wall simultaneously; PhD theses are not for the weak-willed, that's for sure. But he's almost there. Almost there! All I can do is make him tea.)*

Signing off!

PS- it's so nice to write about a day that has NOTHING to do with cancer. Okay, talking about cancer now kind of ruins it, but really, I have to say how wonderful it feels. The entirety of Wednesday was dedicated to things other than cancer. Awesome x 20.

6Mar2011

Thesis mayhem

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Life, Radiotherapy Treatment

This is a working weekend. What does that mean? It means proofing my husband's 160 page thesis, helping with the abstract (if that's possible), going to the library (it's my turn to cover the weekend) and writing for my blogs. Blog**s.** But, it's a good weekend too.

OH MY GOODNESS! [*breaking news*] Again I've woken up early. Rolling out of bed today, Zsolt reported the time as 9.30 am, a respectable Sunday start. HOWEVER, it's actually now 8.30 am, which means it was probably even earlier when we first got up.

What is happening?

I'll tell you what's happening. Life is busy, and so is my brain. Here is the *Sunday Things To Do* list:

1. Write: In process.

2. Eat: Also in process. We just bought two containers of yogurt for £2, which isn't a bad deal considering it's organic and absolutely delish. Two flavours were purchased, apricot and mango & vanilla. I'm really looking forward to trying the mango & vanilla, *YET* this morning I opened the apricot instead. As a BA psychologist, I find this behaviour interesting.

3. Take shower: still not using deodorant on my radiotherapy arm, therefore a daily scrub is important.

4. Clean: Questionable/unlikely.

5. Tea break: Absolutely.

6. Work: one to five at the Avenue Library. Can you believe students actually come in on Sundays? Diligent young workers.

7. Thesis: this is going to be peppered throughout my day. Yesterday it was GO GO GO for thesis revision, but thankfully most of that is done. At least, for me it's done. Zsolt is still in the midst of madness and revision.

8. Practice reading aloud: This upcoming Monday I'll go give a public reading (eep) at the Portsmouth Write Invite. Essentially you get up, read for no less than 6 minutes, and then in the end everyone votes for their favourite. So, if reading in public wasn't enough pressure, add on some judgement for another level of nerves. Yowsers. But it's good practise. Really I'm just doing this to add content to my writing website, but hey – it's

also an opportunity to meet other writers, listen to new work, and have a good night out. (I foresee another day of exhaustion come Tuesday)

Here is Zsolt's Sunday Work List:

1. THESIS.

And that's all. This guy is correcting, nit picking, aligning, editing, rewriting and **stressing** his butt off. All thesis, all the time. There was this beautiful hope that he'd be able to submit come Monday, but that was dashed last week when plans had to be changed. But submission will happen, and it's gonna be this upcoming week. Any bets for the day and time?

Anyhow, life is busy and it's seems to be getting busier. Thankfully radiotherapy exhaustion hasn't struck me yet. Maybe I'm just holding on with will power, not sure what might happen once Zsolt finally submits. My radiotherapy burn is managing well. I'm slathering it with Traumeel and the redness is reducing. Mind you, they say it can keep reddening for about two or three weeks following treatment, so I keep waiting for the blisters to erupt. However, so far so good. The area is significantly darker than my light skin – something like a deep tan (mind you, a deep tan for me is like *no* tan for others), and the area is speckled with some very un-sexy freckles.

It's now just past nine, and that's us on this cloudy Sunday morning here in England. Status check updated, now time for more yogurt. Happy weekend to you!

6Mar2011

Menopause vs. ovulation

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Fertility, Treatment

You may or may not know (though I do chat about it often) that I had taken Zoladex (goserelin) during my chemotherapy. What does Zoladex do? It shuts down your ovaries. Why was I taking it? In hopes that it might protect my ovaries and eggs while they were pumping in stuff to kill fast growing cells. What was the result? Bye bye period.

A potential risk of chemotherapy is the loss of fertility. Yes, ok, fair enough. So I asked the doctor: how will I know if I'm fertile? To which the doctor replied: You will get your period.

I'm not in the mood to freak out, but about two and a half months have passed since the Zoladex should have 'worn off'. But for some women menstruation doesn't kick-in for months, so this delay is still in the range of normal.

Either it will come back eventually, or if chemotherapy killed my fertility, it will never come back at all.

Anyhow, so this has left me clinging to any and all signs of possible ovulation/PMS/period. Signs of ovulation/PMS/period:

Mood swings – I'm awesome one second and weeping the next. . . Similar to chemotherapy, actually.

I get randy – like a week or two before my period a whole new kinda woman emerges (studies have shown that when women are ovulating they wear more revealing clothing. Interesting – we are programmed to project ourselves (and to notice others) when most fertile. Isn't that fascinating? Next time you're in a public place, look at the women around you guess who is ovulating.)

Cramps and bloating – the less fun side-effect of fertility and menstruation. Thank goodness for hot water bottles.

Food cravings! And just this past moment I was nearly ACHING for dark chocolate. As this craving surged through me, I thought – hey, hold on, does this mean I'm ovulating? But then I was hit by a hot flash, so it's quite possible I am *not* ovulating. Can a person ovulate and hot flash at the same time? Maybe . . . isn't that part of menopause? Not everyone turns off their ovaries with the pop of a pill.

Anyhow, why am I sharing this? Because it's interesting and I'm in the mood to chat. But now it's time to stop, because Zsolt's abstract is waiting and I'm yet to look it over.

Final word: **CHOCOLATE!!!**

8Mar2011

Time for common sense

Posted in Bumpboobs, Treatment

Today I opened my twitter account to find a message from an old friend. She forwarded me a link (this link, in fact) to a Globe and Mail article discussing how a woman, Jill Anzaru who has breast cancer is not eligible for the needed medication coverage. Why? Because her tumour was too small. The *cancer* in her breast was too small. . .still ***cancer***, but small. Less than 1 cm.

My head is shaking.

Yes, I understand lines need to be drawn – but you would think that *cancer* would be more black and white. Did you get cancer? Okay, here's the treatment. I'm in a similar situation; at the moment while living in the UK, my tamoxifen is covered. Tamoxifen is a drug that significantly drops the likelihood of reoccurrence in breast cancer patients (like Herceptin, this lady's needed med). In the UK I am covered because I had cancer. In Ontario I'm not covered.

Why?

Because I'm under 65 years old. Yes, I had breast cancer – but too early for coverage. Luckily for me, Tamoxifen is an affordable medication. Unlucky for Jill and her too-small CANCER tumour, her medication costs a whack load of cash (if you even have a whack load of cash to spend, apparently Herceptin costs about $40,000/year for treatment).

Fighting cancer is expensive, and with so many patients I understand that guidelines need to be drawn. Right. But with that said, common sense has got to be employed. A *thirty-five* year old woman gets cancer. One of the first things they tell you as a young BC fighter is that, 'considering your age the doctor is likely to recommend an aggressive therapy,' because we have a long road (i.e. life) ahead of ourselves, and we need to fight with all possible weapons. Obviously, that includes medication.

I'm sorry to hear this woman needs to battle for better, affordable treatment. She's just about to start chemotherapy, and I remember that apprehension and fear. There's already one fight going on between you and your body, anything extra is just not okay – heck, I got stressed out when Air Canada gave me trouble over a flight home. Just imagine her anxiety over a fight for her *future*.

Anyhow – Jill, if you can hear me: I'm wishing you loads of courage, strength, and determination. Hopefully common sense grants you the medication. Fingers crossed.

P.S. I *am* glad to hear your cancer was caught early. Despite all these troubles, that in itself is a very good thing.

9Mar2011

Living in a crazy mess

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Finding Home, Life, Treatment

At the very end of *Edible Woman* there is a scene where she bakes a cake. Her entire apartment is catastrophic with mess, mould and disarray. Instead of cleaning the place, she buys new ingredients (flour, sugar, salt, etc), a new baking tray, new cake moulds, new measuring cups – new everything, and she bakes her lady cake. And somehow in that mess, once the cake is iced and ready, somehow she finds a little freedom from the madness.

This is how I feel in my apartment. For the past three days I've had one slipper missing, so have been walking around the flat with double layer socks on my right foot, and a moccasin slipper on my left. There is a constant pile of dishes across the counter, and the mite protection sheet of my bed (which last week I washed) has been sitting on the sofa waiting for me to strip the mattress – in the meanwhile it's attracted my handbag, backpack, toque, apron, headphones, sweater, jeans, track pants, running shoes, jacket, blanket, scarf and shall. The floor needs a good vacuum. The bedroom needs to be tidied . . . the bathroom is okay, so at least there is that.

Anyhow, it's a little crazy here. Zsolt in the meanwhile is at his computer totally absorbed into this thesis (because if he wasn't, I'd never get away with leaving my things *everywhere*). I'm counting down the hours to his submission because: 1) It's an incredible achievement and I'm bursting with pride over my brilliant man and 2) I miss having the dishes washed every morning.

Honestly, between Zsolt and I – he is the better housekeeper. Lately we've been taking turns. During chemo he did the tidying. During thesis I'd do the tidying . . . but now we're both managing projects (radiotherapy recover and thesis polishing) at the same time.

Here is a good question: how do people with children manage? I really, really admire all the mothers and fathers who somehow produce a liveable household for their family. I *cannot* understand how you do it, which makes your results all the more impressive.

So – waiting for that moment of clarity now. Maybe it'll come in the form of moving boxes, charity shop donations, and the inevitable vacating of this property. Who knows? Hopefully, eventually, I'll at least find my other slipper.

13Mar2011

Sunday night rambles

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life

This weekend was great – excellent – wonderful – tiring! Yesterday morning (and early afternoon) was all about cleaning. We tidied, then scrubbed, then dusted, then vacuumed, then basked the in glory of an attractive apartment. One highlight was the 'opening of the windows', which means stripping away the sealant we applied last October (our windows are terrible. They're double glazed, but not installed properly so the cold wind just pushes through).

Life has been full of small, enjoyable activities like reading events, cleaning, hanging with Zsolt, meeting with friends, an laughing till I cried. It's been lovely. Driving home today from our downtown excursion (I set off with 'new jeans' as goal, but didn't find anything great. Zsolt, however, landed some nice trousers.) we passed the hospital where I had my MRI. It was strange, all in a flash it felt as though we were going there again. I felt what it was like to walk through the entrance, to put on the gown, and wait for the scan. In the snap of a finger, I remembered.

Maybe that's how it'll be. Life will pass quickly as ever, with post-traumatic memory snaps.

Things to do this week:

1) Write. (as always!)

2) Measure my mattress to send away for a shipping quote.

3) Look up discount flights. Zsolt and I are thinking of going on a mini-break during the first or second week of August.

4) Go through closet and get rid of an optimistic 50% of clothing.

This past weekend has been a lovely holiday from life. But Monday's coming (Monday's here?) and therefore it's back to work. And that's is all I have to say. Just a quick Sunday night update for Lulu, who is probably checking and thinking, 'it's been a few days since Catherine has written.'

Not anymore! *Bonne journée*!

Catherine

14Mar2011

Winchester writer's festival

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Writing

The Winchester Writer's Festival is quickly approaching –and as a warm up for the conference, the organizers are giving a taster weekend workshop at the end of this month (March). Last year I had been highly stoked to attend the writing festival. Firstly, they had one-on-one discussions with agents and publishers, so it was a chance to see whether my ideas were sale-worthy, and also show off my work directly. Secondly, Sir Terry Pratchett was going to be speaking, and since he's an incredible story teller/writer/talent, I was PSYCHED at the opportunity. And of course thirdly, it's always inspiring to surround yourself with those who are equally (if not more so) as excited about writing.

That was last July. Unfortunately, I had to divert from the event and have a mastectomy. Less fun, but still important. Honestly, the surgery finished two or three days before the conference and there was *no* way me and my messed up chest could make it to any conference. Noooo way.

This year, Zsolt and I are going to Hungary. And ain't nothing gonna stop us getting out vacation on. Besides, to remain in a country (*with rent, bills, tax, etc*) an entire extra month just for a conference is madness – therefore I'll be missing the event again.

Oh well.

So last week I pop onto the Winchester Writer Festival website, just in case they decided to switch it from July to May. Nope. But there *is* a 'taster' weekend being offered toward the end of March. Looking up the speakers for the weekend, they are creative writing teachers (the writer's main income of choice? Apart from actually writing, I mean). What's on offer? Essentially it's a weekend of revision, editing, and lessons on marking. But here is the thing . . . and this is why I haven't yet book a place, and am not sure I will . . . I've already gone to school for creative writing. I don't want any more lessons on how to construct a narrative, or a character, or a plot, ETC. *–and yes! It feels pompous of me to write all that down, but it's true. Not to say I've mastered all forms of literary device, however my interest is not in 'how to construct a novel', but rather ' how to get people noticing your work'.*

The website advertises marketing as part of the experience. And editing. Editing is a beautiful thing – often in short supply for blog posting, but very useful when writing creatively – and I certainly would benefit from learning more in that area.

Oh, back and forth and to and fro. Not sure what to do. All I know is that attending workshops is a healthy practice, like brushing teeth – keeps things in shape, keeps habits productive, and maybe it'll help push so that I finally finish the story that began last year, before diagnosis. THAT would mean so much to me. It's an important (to me) piece of writing and really deserves to be completed. Honestly I had wanted to complete it even before the writer's festival last year but didn't meet that goal, so maybe it's finally time to try again (*this time skipping any surprise cancer diagnosis).*

Workshops: good practise, but can I be sure *this workshop* offers what I need? After all, £160 is a lotta groceries *and even more cups of tea at Tragos. Something to think over . . . we'll see.

Quick Afterthought: Do writers make for the best teachers? I guess there's a theory that experience is the best education, so why not use those who have all the experience to educate? Us of the never-been-published cling to a 'real' *(published)* writer's every word, just hoping that somehow, someway the association will get our work miraculously noticed. "Here, boys and girls, is how you get an agent to accept your manuscript." Well, it's certainly a starting point.

15Mar2011

Day of the FUZZY BRAIN

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs

Today, despite being sunny and beautiful, was thick with brain fog. This morning, I forgot about my acupuncture appointment; this afternoon, I had to rearrange work around a seminar I *thought* was tomorrow but was *actually* today; and this evening I went to my friend's house a day earlier than planned! Ah!

My head must be screwed on funny.

And so, as any person would do, I turned to playing Donkey Kong on the wii for some needed mental relief. Nothing like a little harmless distraction to help relieve the mind.

But I must say, that the afternoon seminar was quite something – it was a LookGoodFeelBetter presentation and basically involved 14 pre/post/during chemo & radio ladies in a room together, learning how to be pretty again. This might sound frivolous, but it's deeply impacting – never before has mascara made me want to cry and cry (in a good way). However, that story will have to wait because apparently my brain has gone scrambled eggs for the evening. Better to leave things till tomorrow.

Today's screw-ups are coming to a close (unless anyone can spot a typo in this post, which is highly likely). I guess everyone has these days . . . though maybe if you keep a daytimer it happens less often. I've tried planning things, writing them down, being organized . . . but 'scheduling' fits me like a turtle neck sweater (ie. suffocating) and never lasts more than a few days. Well, at least my friend's husband was entirely welcoming (since she was out) when I rocked up to their house and rang the bell. Zsolt had just dropped me off so I was temporarily stranded until he could turn the car around . . . man, their place smelled wonderful with the chilli he was cooking.

Anyhow – GOOD NIGHT fuzzy brained day. I've had enough of you!

17Mar2011

Look Good Feel Better

Posted in After treatment, Chemotherapy

It's funny to be in a room full of women who don't want to cry. Fact is that all of us in yesterday's seminar had good reason to burst into tears, but not a single lady let the waterworks flow. Was this an act of strength, or a retreat into cowardice? I don't know. All I know is that never before has makeup application been so emotional. Tear jerking, without the tears.

And that is how it felt to start the LookGoodFeelBetter seminar. Delayed due to bus scheduling, I arrived five minutes into the session when everyone had already found their seats and were each positioned in front of a placemat and mirror. Some of them wore headscarves, others wigs, some hats and a several, like me, had their hair. The room was thick with that 'first day of school' kind of anxiety and excitement (with glances around the table, quick smiles, and fidgeting fingers).

Part of me wanted to say, 'Hello my name is Catherine. I had breast cancer, have finished my treatment, and life is getting better.' But there were no round of introductions. Instead each woman wore a name tag and volunteers (one esthetician for every two or three women) would call us all by our names as though we'd all known each other forever.

"Oh, Mary has the good blush."

"Doesn't Catherine look like Mia Farrow?"

"Now watch how Trudy's eye pop with this mascara"

So despite no introduction, we were all on a first name basis.

I suppose when you only have two hours to guide twelve women in a makeover, there's no time for crying. Introductions would have led to inevitable tears – Goodness knows I wouldn't have made it past 'hello' without bursting. Even coming through the door was an effort of nerves and determination; I truly admire those who attend during their chemotherapy, it's more than I could have managed. (*But what a difference it made to those women!)*

Anyhow, there we are in front of the mirrors feeling emotionally delicate, and we're handed these large white bags as welcomed points of focus. What's in the bag? My goodness, what *isn't* in the bag! You've got full size

cleansers, toners, moisturizers, concealers, blushes, powders, brushes, foundation, pencils, lipsticks AND a bottle of perfume. Wow.

Wow.

And then the volunteers launch into the day. Step by step (there are twelve steps all outlined on a handy sheet they provide) we moved through the afternoon with a series of 'technique explanations' when the women, in theory, would stop chatting and pay attention to the lesson. Of course, it's hard to get a group of women with free makeup to stop talking. They don't even stop talking when receiving chemotherapy, and there's nothing thrilling about that. So while demonstrations went on, we were charging ahead with opening this product, testing that colour, and sipping our cups of tea.

Now you may think, 'great opportunity for company X to hook you on their products via charity', but you'd be totally wrong. Yes, there are great products, but the LGFB ladies don't advocate any particular brand over the other, and the goodie bags are full of various (randomized) brands donated by a variety of cosmetic companies. It's a collaborative effort across the industry.

And as we moved along – cleaning milk to toner to moisturizer to concealer to foundation to loose powder, I watched a substantial change in my mirror. Suddenly my face was glowing (*Thank you make up!*), and I looked like the young and pretty thing I was twelve months earlier. Then throw on the eye makeup and *wowzers,* it was so different.

There was this moment with the mascara . . . who knew mascara could be so powerful . . . I was holding up the brush *straight up first, sideways after* for the lump on the end to catch all the wee little bottom lashes, and as I was moving that around, my lashes picked up the black and turned *so dark* and became *so long.* I knew they had grown in, but hadn't realized how much.

Needless to say, I was amazed and *again* could have started crying like an idiot. It might have been cowardice not to cry – because since when are tears of joy a bad thing? But it's hard to be the first. . . plus, *and most importantly,* I'd just applied mascara. So, come on. Buck up, woman.

However, I'd propose a LGFB follow up session where we all get together for a big cry fest – crying for the losses, crying for the hopes, crying because we're so pretty in our makeup. Actually, that sounds depressing once written. Okay, how about a LGFB session that lasts 3 hours instead of 2 so that we can get the introduction and tears out of our system?

After the session was over – *and it was wonderful. The volunteers are so positive, and the ladies around the table are so transformed* – after it was over I packed up my white bag and left, throwing 'thank you's and 'you're lovely's over my shoulder. I would have liked to stick around, but wasn't sure what to do with myself. I remember there was one woman with very short white hair who kept it covered with a hat. But she looked entirely beautiful when she *didn't* wear the hat, particularly after the makeup session. I had wanted to mention her good looks, but she was too far down the table and I was too shy to approach her afterwards. Oh well. Hopefully someone else let her know.

Overall it was an event that exceeded my expectations with how easily things moved, how much support was available, and how much LOOT was in the bag. Really quite exciting.

And this morning, after my shower, I'll crack open that white bag and give it another try. It's true, to look good is to feel better. After the crazy, ugly, and depressing few months I've just navigated, it's wonderful to feel pretty once again.

This calls for a song:

“I feel pretty, oh so pretty. I feel pretty and witty and gay! And I pity, any girl who isn’t me today.”

20Mar2011

Calculating square footage

Posted in Bumpboobs, Canada, Finding Home, Life, moving to canada, Uncategorized

Lately Zsolt and I have been calculating the square footage of our lives, or rather, our belongings. I'm in the bad habit of associating my possessions with my 'life', which actually can't be further from the truth. Yesterday we were watching videos of what's left in the tsunami ruined areas of Japan – you know, the ones where people pick through the damage and hope to find something salvageable? And I thought, yes it's stressful to move, but what if it was a choice between your goods or your life? What would sheets, pots, and books matter then? I find it's a bad habit to tightly associate life with possessions. Because, as we've seen, everything can be lost in a moment.

Anyhow, it's something I'm trying to remember. I would trade everything except the people I love to be guaranteed absolute health. . . and I bet people suffering from the terror of war and natural disasters would do something similar for a little peace of mind.

So, Zsolt and I were calculating the square footage of our possessions the other day, trying to decide whether we can ship our paintings via a tea box or special carton. A tea box (apparently standard shipping size) would be less expensive. Therefore, we had to revisit grade nine math. Funny how what used to be so easy eventually becomes so easily forgotten. Thank goodness for Wikipedia providing easy to access formulas.

Anyhow, the painting – without the frame – will fit into the tea carton.

Things are starting to look up in the world of moving. We found a company with reasonable prices, and while I'm suspect of the incredibly good deal they offer, I won't say no. Don't say no. Gotta say yes . . . Our plan is to order X number of boxes, fill them up with whatever matters most, and sell/give the rest away.

What matters most? Sentimental things go first: the photos, the fridge decorations, the albums, and Christmas ornaments. Next come the clothes: there's an entire closet of stuff to pick through, but we have time for purging. After that it's about the kitchen: my pots and pans, everything else can be left. And finally it's computer related goodies: games, dvds, the computer, the screen (maybe) . . .

Too bad food cannot be easily shipped into Canada. I'd love to bring home some beautiful paprika and kolbasz from Hungary. Oh well.

Step one in the moving adventure: find a company for shipping. Check! So that's quite a relief.

22Mar2011

Yeo Valley Deliciousness

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Canada, Food

Breakfast of champions:

Frozen blueberries and raspberries (less expensive than fresh) in a pot and topped off with mango & vanilla Yeo Valley yogurt, add some pecans and you have one WINNER of a treat.

Oh my goodness. I'm eating this right now, and just have to say it's delicious. Delish! Honestly, it's not *entirely* filling (I could do with a few silver dollar pancakes made by my imaginary helper monkey), but at least it's healthy, tasty and right in front of me.

That is all I have to say about that.

OH WAIT! Breaking news from the other room. Zsolt has been given a viva date: **May 6th!** WOOHOO! He's grinding his teeth with nerves while I'm doing a happy dance. Life sure moves forward, eh? Here we go!

25Mar2011

Busy weekend ahead

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life, Writing

This upcoming weekend is big in several ways for several people. Mostly – for a few hundred thousand (etc) or so, it's about the march in London. Now I have to be honest and admit that I 100% chickened out on this march due to a list of excuses that I won't go into. However, even though I am not attending, it's still worth mentioning. So in defence of the public sector – check out this link to learn more. March for the Alternative and take a (virtual) step for the alternative. I hope the day will be as HUGE as they anticipate.

Right. So like said, I chickened out on the march, and therefore was left feeling restless. Not only that, but two nights ago I woke up (hot flash!) and could not get back to sleep. This is what happens when I get off my track. For a while things were ticking along well with the healthy eating, vitamins, exercising and writing – but then things got a little sideways and I've slipped up on my gluten-free diet (though in my defence, when eating pad thai you'd expect the noodles to be rice), scaled back on the supplements and totally lost track of my writing. Good intentions are one thing, but total lack of initiative has poisoned my well.

However, no complaining. These mood funks are impacting, and my melancholy runs deeply while it lasts . . . but only while it lasts. TIP: Don't write while moody. Nothing good comes from it. Writing while angry is A-Okay so long as it's edited with a cool head, but moody – moody sucks. It turns good ideas into long winded complaints. With blogging it's almost too easy to *wha-wha-wha* all over the internet, and sometimes I post unwisely (see my blog history and pick out my moods – they're totally obvious), so this is a habit I'm trying to break.

Therefore, yesterday I was moody. Today I am not. Instead of sulking I've taken action and signed myself up for that intensive weekend writing workshop mentioned last week (or the week before?). My final conclusion on the course was that no matter what goes on this weekend, it will force me to examine my story, focus, and will hopelly set my head back onto track. While taking the MA in creative writing, I wrote tons of material. Since then I think my writing has improved (through a bit of trail and error), but the quantity has diminished. Therefore this evening after work I'll start this Writer's Pitshop Weekend. Fingers crossed it's a great experience.

Oh my goodness, (*Quick aside)* I didn't mention earlier, but ought to send a shout out to the spring time. Spring is *here*. It is *now*. Birds are singing, the sun is waving and our curtains are blowing with a warming breeze. Nice stuff. Soon it'll be summer dresses and sunglasses. I love this time of year.

Anyhow, back on track: this weekend. Here is a final big thing happening this weekend in England. THE CENSUS. This is mandatory, apparently. Every household needs to fill out the questions, and I happen to have the light purple census booklet beside me at this moment. Let's take a look inside:

Who usually lives here? Me, my man, and our Yucca. Not to forget the hundreds of lady bugs who push away the bits of sponge I've jammed into the cracks in hopes of blocking them – next step in ladybug removal involves duct tape.

Do you stay at another address for more than 30 days a year? I wish. If given the choice of 'second homes' it'd have to be a holiday house on Lake Balaton and we would fly there often, reside in the summer, and live in a time capsule of paddle boats, ferry rides, and goulash over the fire.

How is your health in general? …. hmmmm….. Great? They have a range from 'very good' to 'very bad', but I guess I'll be choosing 'very good' because unless sometime tells me otherwise, I'm cancer-free baby.

How do you usually travel to work? Walking! We're so very green in this household. But honestly, walking is awesome. I used to take the bus to PWC everyday (30 minutes) and so never walked . . . my hips really began to expand and it wasn't until I switched to a closer work location that they shrank back down to size. Interesting, no? Green and healthy. Plus, walking has been shown to reduce the chances of breast cancer reoccurrence (actually, exercise in general does the trick, apparently).

OK, one last question…

What's your country of birth? CANADA!!!!! WOOOOHOOOO!!!! Having been a foreigner for the past five years, my sense of identity has become increasingly more Canadian (*mind you, I do love England, but the moment I start talking it obvious I'm not from here – so there's no escaping the difference*).

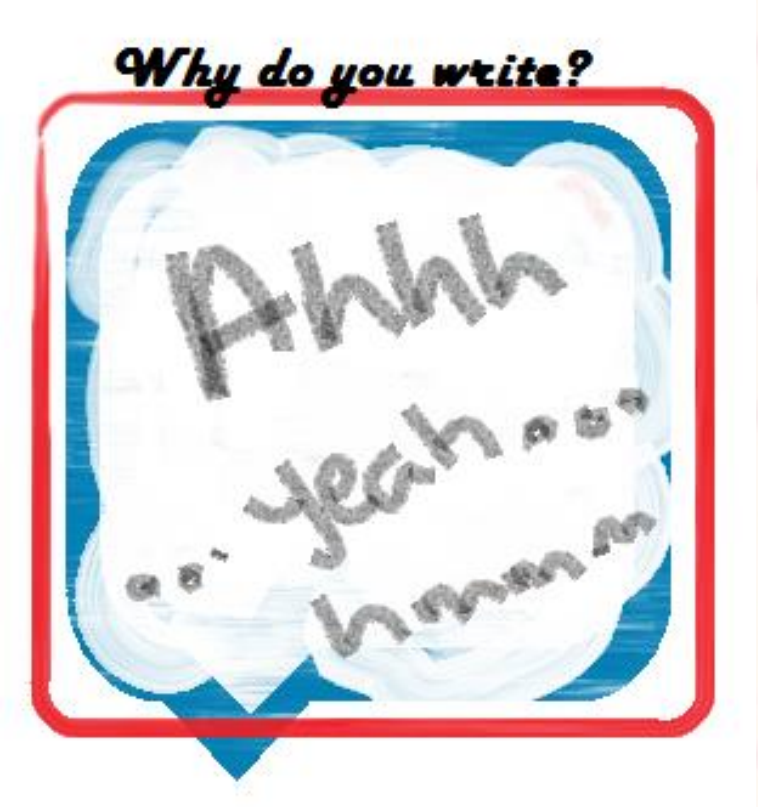
Right. Time to go to work. Have a lovely weekend, hopefully it's as eventful for you as it is for a huge slice of the British population (and me, with my writing). Cheerio!

28Mar2011

The writing workshop: results

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Fertility, Writing

Good Monday to you! *Whew,* what a weekend. Totally exhausting. I'd say it was about 65% interesting and 35% frustrating, but that had more to do with the teachers rather than content. One of my teachers was brilliant, the other a little scattered – and so the result was a very productive start with a petering finish. But it's better in that order. No matter how much I wanted to vent and rant (and this opinion may be quite singular because other people seemed to find Sunday very productive – like *very* productive – but it wasn't my cup of tea) there was the feeling that, *yes, overall this weekend was valuable.*



It's exciting to be in a room with other writers – feels like camp (the musty smell in the building contributed toward that atmosphere) where we're all there to play games, learn about ourselves (our writing) and take home priceless memories (aka tips on finding an agent). And the opportunity to meet and chat was really helpful. Actually, I even met a fellow Canadian – so there you go! And she has an agent, is on her way to publication, and is crafting the second draft of her novel. Apparently she had gone to the Winchester's Writer's Conference and attracted her agent's attention with just a synopsis and a thousand written words. Hello! That's lovely.

So we were asked a question this weekend: why do you write? This wasn't something to answer aloud, but to ask yourself. And I thought about it – about the project I'd been working on (having shelved it for almost a year) before my breast cancer diagnosis, which is the same project I'm coming back to now . . . why am I writing it? Well, originally I began to write this story because I wanted to get pregnant. I had planned (for the fall of 2010) to start trying for a baby. That was the plan between Zsolt and I, which frankly left me feeling nervous as heck. So – what to do when nervous and uncertain? Write it out. And so I began this lovely story of nine women across nine generations. It was like I could pull on their strength – their representation of those who have been there and done that – and this would make everything okay once it was finally my turn. Anyhow. Why did I write it? Because it was a coping process.

But now I can't have children for at least two more years, and that's assuming my ovulation resumes – and so far, no clear signs indicate that having happened (fingers crossed, please). Giving birth has become a question mark, but not becoming a mother. That will happen no matter what.

So . . . eleven months later (according to my blog archive of entries) and here is the question again: Why do I write?

Maybe I'm writing to heal (certainly blogging to heal, but this goes a little deeper). Plus, I take such pleasure in this story, it'd be an incredible shame not to grow the characters to the end. I guess they're my responsibility now, so it's time to step up and support them. And besides, one day – *someday* – I'll be a mother, so there's still a reason to wade through the uncertainties of that change.

I think other writers sometimes read this blog (you know who you are!) . . . so it's a good question to ask yourself: why do you write.

Actually, it could be expanded to any kind of project, couldn't it? Maybe we often do things without realizing our internal motivation? Who knows. Why do you do what you're doing right now?

This past weekend was really interesting and helpful in defining my story. It helped me create an overall understanding of the work – because this is a *novel*, not a short story collection. My fuse was shortening come Sunday, mostly because it was what I had feared (all exercises, all the time) and less tailored to our own work/style. But, there you go, not every workshop is perfect. It was certainly something to remember, however, if I'm ever asked to teach.

Wanna hear my one line pitch (still to be perfected)? *"I've got a story about that uncertain time between pregnancy and motherhood, a coming of age across nine months and nine lives."* Add some explosions and fireworks, and that'll be a real winner.

Anyhow, in the meanwhile I have a pile of clothes beside my bed asking to be sorted, Zsolt is still loving the post-thesis (pre viva) life, and the weather here had dropped from warming to cool. Now it's back to work for one more week and then… and THEN…. HOLIDAY IN FARO!!! Watch out Portugal, we're coming to support your economy with our tourist dollars. Woohoo!

30Mar2011

Sticky notes on campus

Posted in Bumpboobs, Fun, Life, moving to canada, Travel, Uncategorized

Today at the Avenue campus someone (a student, I'm guessing) left a trail of sticky notes throughout the halls. Some were on cupboards, others doors, a couple bulletin boards . . . and I spotted one more in the stairwell. And written on these little yellow sticky notes were a variety of positive messages. For instance, one of them was a stick person with two speech bubbles. On the left speech bubble (and crossed out in red) it said: *Why me?* In the right speech bubble it read: *Try me!* I guess it's equivalent to 'turn that frown upside down', eh?

And then I started to find the quotes. Now look, my short term memory is a sieve so I can't recount them all, but one was from Ghandi (i.e. a quote from Ghandi): *Don't cry for it ending, smile because it happened*.

I am happy it happened.

Not the cancer, nope, not that.

The friends, the challenges, the writing, the working, the living, the grocery shopping, the tea drinking, the sofa shopping, the *Lost*-a-thons, the orange eatings, the portswoodings, the guy foxings, the spring flowerings, the movie nightings, the self-explorings, and the apartment hoppings. Plus that fabulous fried chicken served at Pleasure Garden.

I'm so incredibly happy for all of it.

So here is to smiling, not crying. And to good memories, not bad. Mind you, come May I'll be a human rain machine. Sentimental expression has become my middle name (Catherine Sentimental – Geez, is she crying again? – Brunelle). But it's because of all the good things, and not the bad, that I'll cry come next May. That is a positive contrast to last year.

Sticky notes with positive messages. Maybe you could try some yourself? Afterall, there's no need to sign a name to your little kernel of positivity. It's good vibes *sans* embarrassment. Believe me, people WILL notice.

Here is my sticky note for this post: *When one door closes, another one opens.* Like my time in England and moving to Canada, and like the end of this posting followed by dessert.

** Oh! I burnt the apple crumble. Blog posting is too absorbing.*

The end. For real. For real, for real – because it's time for dessert! (minus the burnt bits)

3Apr2011

Mastectomy shopping

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Life, Treatment

Beauty is good for you, don't you think? Yesterday I sat in a cathedral and listened as a touring choir rehearsed for the evening's concert. It was absolutely fulfilling. There's something so awe inspiring about high vaulted ceilings and light shining through stain glass windows; Somehow a place that large inspires peacefulness. Throw in a round of fifty harmonized voices and wow – that's something powerful.

But – Zsolt and I didn't travel along the A3 to Chichester just to visit pretty places. We were shopping for boobs.

The last mastectomy store I walked into (in Southampton) was not impressive. The sales lady stood behind her counter the entire time, the selection was minimal, and my bra size turned out to be way tiny on the UK sizing charts. FACT: in England they have a AA cup, which is essentially the same size as a North American A cup. Ugh. Therefore, I can kiss any hopes of ever reaching B again my life good bye. Good bye, you curvy mounds of womanhood.

But whatever. I'm a double A, and thankful to at least have one remaining breast. She's small, but she's mine. And according to the last ultrasound, she's healthy too.

Right – so, shopping for boobs.

Since radiotherapy it's been uncomfortable to wear bras. The burning and strain made the entire idea impossible. However, it's now been one month since radio finished, and while the tan remains – the burn has faded. Wearing a bra is less uncomfortable.

Therefore, I decided it was time to try another mastectomy shop. This one, Nicola Jane, has an online presence and several shops across the country – one being in Chichester.

Unlike a proper retail shop, this place doesn't have a displays in the window. In fact, it doesn't have a window. Instead the store is located amongst offices, and you (me, we the clients) need to enter a small hall, then push through the door marked, "Come in."

So Zsolt and I went in. And you know, at first I was a little disappointed. It looked almost exactly like the previous shop – samples on the racks, but otherwise you didn't get that 'pretty lingerie shop' feeling. You know those shops? Carpet flooring, pink everywhere, long gilded mirrors, lace, candles, potpourri . . . well it didn't have any of that.

But it did have two shop assistants who were eager to help.

(Maybe a little too eager? At one point I was between bras when the sales lady waved her hand, “Hi ya, can I come in?” and before I could utter the ‘neh’ to ‘no’ – in she came. Chalk up yet another person who has now seen me topless.)

It was a true group effort. I’d try on the bra, then pull back the curtain to show everyone – Zsolt and the two sales ladies received a mini fashion show, and I was helped in identifying which bra size works best. That’s a win-win-win situation.

Fifty pounds later and I have two mastectomy bras that fit far better than my original one. And while I whinge about being a double A, they’re some pretty good looking double As. Today I took my spare breast out for tea and it looked totally normal. Actually, better than normal – perky!

Really, going without a bra is no big deal, and having a small chest means that it’s okay to not always strap on that particular bit of underwear. But once in a while I really love to have some nice, perky BOOBS.

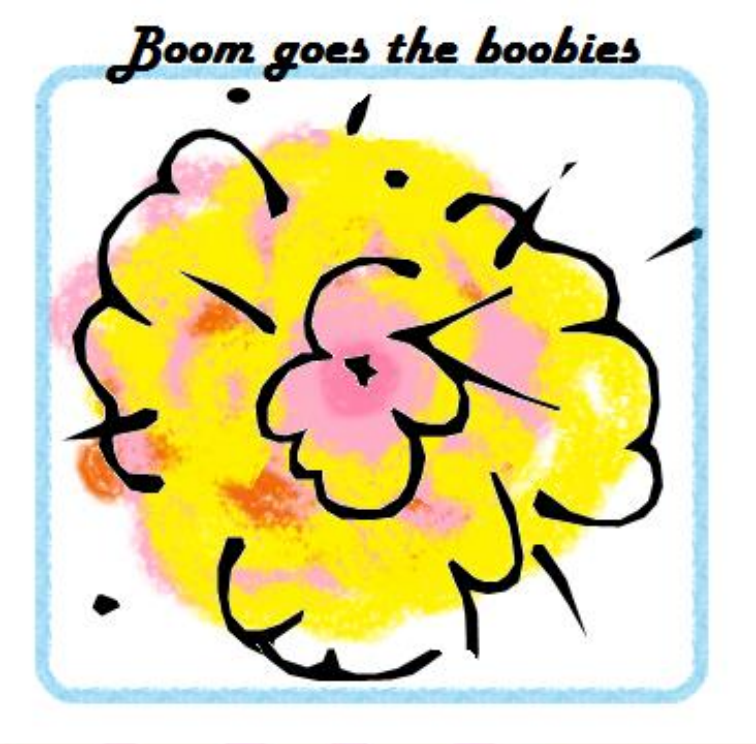
So there you go. A good purchase, which had better last me at least two or three years – because my goodness, this stuff is expensive!

4Apr2011

Travel insurance trouble

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Travel, Uncategorized

As you may (or may not) know, Zsolt and I have decided to get away. Where to? Portugal. Not for long, just a short break – the Ryan Air ticket was so inexpensive that we jumped on the opportunity for a reasonably priced vacation. I've heard rumour that the weather is above 20 degrees and sunny (drool) in Faro, which means for the next few days I'll be sprawled across a beach towel and soaking the vitamin D.



Anyhow, jump back to last night. What's an essential when travelling abroad? Finger on nose if you've guessed it: travel insurance is essential.

When comparing prices we generally go to moneysupermarket.com. I'm not positive they're the best, but their advertising is hilarious – good marketing wins again. With their search engine narrowed to 'travel insurance', the enter button is pushed and a long list of options appear on the screen. Hmm, cheap.

The EU has this scheme established where you can go into another EU member country and have access to their medical assistance in an emergency. There are limitations, but in general if you fall and scrape your knee – and you're an EU resident – you won't need to pay 100$ for a bandage. However, what is covered varies country to country, which is why buying travel insurance is smart.

Which takes me back to moneysupermarket.com – £6 for two person coverage sounded almost too good to be true. And guess what? It was. Okay okay, for £6 (about 9.50 Canadian bucks) you cannot expect too much from an insurer. . . but I wasn't quite ready for the shut down they delivered.

Looking over the policies and conditions I 'CNTRL+F'ed (aka searched) "cancer" and found nothing. Then I 'CNTRL+F'ed "illness" and found lots. Essentially most insures state they won't cover any medical costs arising from an existing illness. Fair enough. It's not as though my boob(s) are about to explode, so no worries on my end about the existing illness.

Onwards. Click "purchase" and proceed to the next screen.

This is where the brick wall showed up. Essentially, the medical screening consists of a question along the lines of "have you or anyone being covered by this insurance have or ever had any of the following," and of course – *of course*, there was cancer. It's not like they cared what type of cancer, or whether it's gone, or in recession, or appeared once and then disappeared forever . . .they don't care. It's just: tick this box if you've ever had it.

So I ticked the box.

And of course was denied insurance.

Anyhow. I became a steaming kettle of indignation. Like I said, my breasts are not going to explode because last year I had cancer. Right, my lymph nodes are gone – so maybe there is a risk of lympodemia . . . but the question didn't ask about lymphodemia, it asked about cancer.

Grumble grumble.

That's when I gave up on the hunt for cheap insurance and went digging through my breast cancer information. There is a company called 'insurepink' who cover those diagnosed with non-terminal cancers (specifically aimed at breast cancer) – it was still more expensive than what moneysupermarket.com offered, but I suppose that's to account for my pre-existing medical condition.

Even on this site I had to answer about 25 questions about my condition, but at least they bothered to ask the specifics rather than apply a blanket policy of exclusion.

Funny . . . imagine being cancer-free for over 35 years, and you still need to tick that little box. Even when cancer is gone, it's not totally gone.

So that was an interesting experience. Thank goodness for Insurepink. Righto – on a brighter note, time to fly away to warmer places. No more cancer thoughts for the rest of the week. Have a lovely start of April. See you soon.

9Apr2011

Travelling is good for you

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Fun, Life, Love, Travel, Writing

Yes! Punch in the air! Cross off my first vacation of the summer. It's been about two years since Zsolt and I travelled (apart from trips home, but that's more comfort than adventure), so landing those excellent tickets to Faro was a real treat. I mean, it was essentially a confirmation of my recovery from chemotherapy. For anyone going through the process of chemo, it will knock you down – but you *will* get up.

Totting a badeau bikini I went sans prosthesis to the beaches in Lagos. Really, my chest is so flat anyhow it's hard to notice the absence of a second breast. Plus, my bathing suit has a busy pattern, which helps disguise the difference. Because it's early April, Lagos hasn't hit its peak tourism season. Therefore, we were actually able to find a beach to ourselves – like, literally, only the occasional sightseers came along, and even then they stayed just a few minutes. Essentially we had our own little resort amongst the cliffs.

In the mornings we would tour the old town, then pick up some pizza (gluten alert!) and fruit, head to the beach, and then eventually return to the guest house. We stayed in this lovely place outside of the city centre – it was about a fifteen minute walk, but worthwhile due to the kindness of the owners, the cleanliness of the rooms (five stars for cleanliness) and utilities provided. Plus, everyone who stayed at the guest house was really easygoing. I had forgotten how enjoyable the company of other travellers can be. When people are on vacation, they're generally pretty cool. In fact, we even met a lovely Hungarian couple – honestly, for such a small country the Hungarians seem to be everywhere. I haven't gone on a trip yet without hearing Hungarian at some point. We cornered this couple in the kitchen and essentially twisted their arm to play a card game with us (*Zsírozás*) – Zsolt was the reigning champion, but Dávid was quite a competitor. Meanwhile Hajni and I did our best, but seemed to get trumped every round. And I ate ice cream the entire time.

Now we're back. I have the month of April off work because the students are all gone, and that's how my contract rolls. However there's plenty of writing to do. Tomorrow I need to rework a chapter of my fiction, plus add to Catherinebrunelle.com and figure something for facingcancer.ca. Also, I'd like to start an online literary magazine for breast cancer survivors and fighters. Something light, quick and easy to digest. I'm naming it The Narrative Nipple. (*If you think this is a stupid name please do let me know, but otherwise it makes me laugh*). And finally I'm filming a quick video for this website called 'the day I found out' which features stories from cancer survivors about the – duh – day they found out about the cancer. I'm not 100% positive there is a pin point day that I realized the cancer existed. . . first came the lump, then the uncertainties, then the worry, and finally the diagnosis . . . but I'll run with the actual diagnosis date for this video.

And in the meanwhile Zsolt will be studying for his viva. The date is set for May 6th and the man is about to engage into full throttle study mode. Again. But I'm crazy proud of him.

Overall, it was wonderful to take a vacation. I think if you can afford the time, then make the effort to vacation (sitting in your backyard sans responsibility for a day counts!). If you can't afford the time, then try and at least have a cup of tea in the sunshine. Pause is a very good thing.

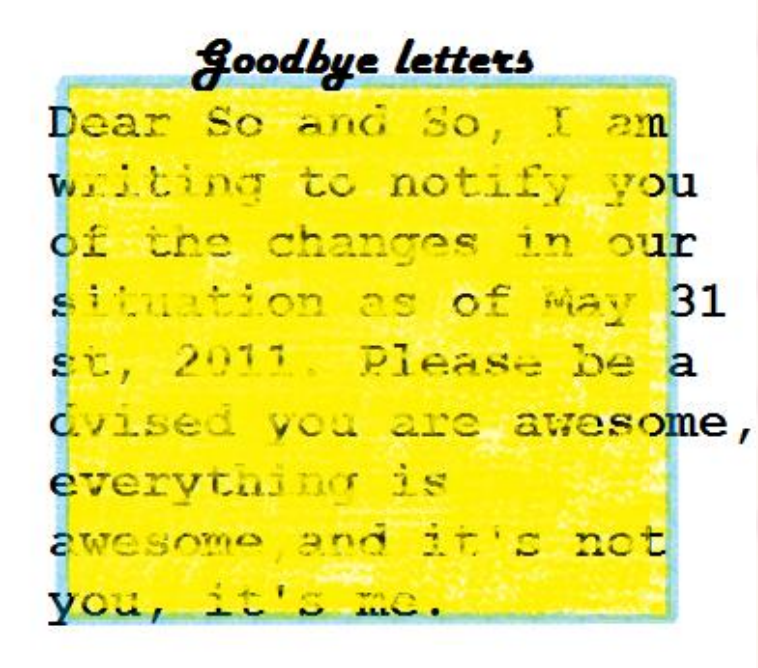
Cheers to travelling, and being healthy again. Man, it was wonderful to walk the cliffs of Lagos and not get winded. Really wonderful.

12Apr2011

Slowly saying goodbye

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Finding Home, Life, Love, Writing

Ah the pain! I just wrote a page long posting in Word, only to absent-mindedly close the entire program (not saved) and lose my work. Blarg! *Who says "blarg" anyhow? I think it's a female. Maybe Felicia Day from the Guild? I don't know.*



Anyhow, this post was all about writing letters. Basically moving home (moving countries) means a lot of ties must be severed. In the past two weeks I've written some very final notices. Work involved a gushing letter – professional yet personal – of resignation that took a few drafts to achieve. Ever since a bad experience leaving a big employer ("pass me your vest and get out"), where I gave a thank you card and felt like an ass for the effort – I have hesitated in expressing too much gratitude.

But then, when people provide incredible support shouldn't gratitude be shown? Yes, it should.

Therefore I started off my resignation letter like this:

"Many thanks for the opportunity. Should you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact me. Kind regards, Catherine Brunelle"

And finished it like this

"You're all so awesome, this place is awesome, our job is awesome. Everything's awesome! And I'm going to miss every last bit of it. Hugs, Catherine"

Well, that may be an exaggeration – but you get the gist.

And then yesterday I wrote a letter to our landlady [if you want a good example of how to be a landlord, she's it. Responsive yet distant. A very good combination in the world of accommodation.] and let her know we're moving. Final month in Southampton: May. Beautiful sunny May when the roses bloom and smell like perfume. May, the month I felt my bump. May, the month my life changed. It'll be post-cancer one year when we finally leave the UK.

. . . maybe we'll come back, because apparently anything can happen . . . but for now, Canada and Hungary are waiting with open arms (of our parents).

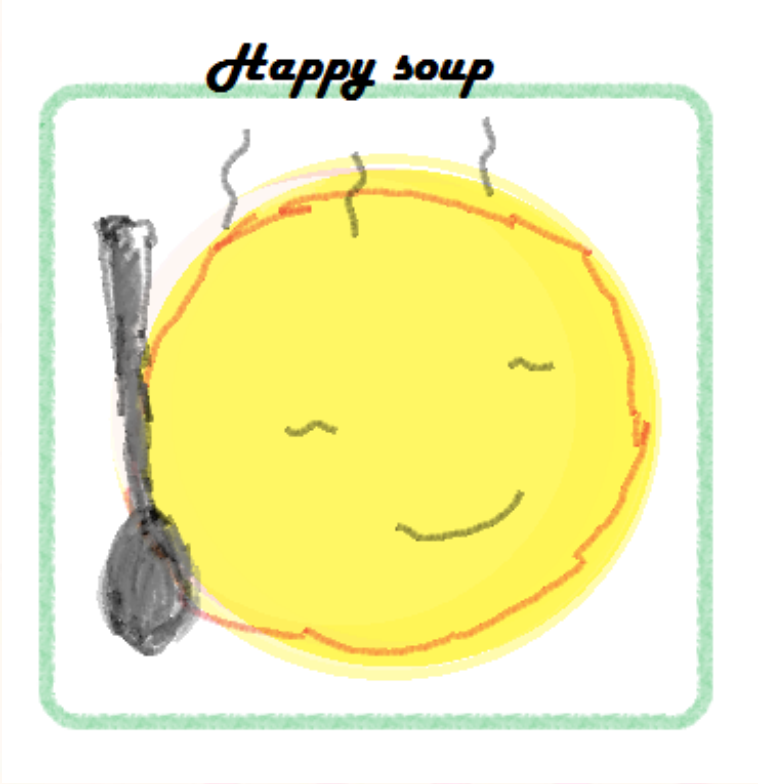
So that's the start of the letters. Next will come the papers for shipping, the agreements for money transfers, the ending of contracts and all the inevitable red tape of life. Over the past four years we've settled in. Now it's time to squirm out.

There you go – post about moving, take two. The ball is rolling and it's only a matter of time.

13Apr2011

The best comfort soup going

Posted in Bumpboobs, Food



Okay here is a quickie for any hungry stomachs. Now normally I don't blog about food – leaving the culinary exploration of deliciousness to sites like Pink Kitchen, etc. But this soup has carried me across the past nine months. It is *the* comfort soup of champions, and coupled with a comfort grilled cheese, or comfort chips, or a comfort sandwich, it has never failed to make me feel more human.

Therefore, whether you're going through treatment, have a cold, or are just plain peckish – consider this very easy recipe. It's the soup that keeps on giving. And I'm eating it right now.

Slurp!

Please treat this recipe as an Aesop fable. Read to the very end, get the moral of the story, and then make this soup however you remember. I find that's a far easier way to cook.

Righto. You'll need some/all/or a variation on the following list of ingredients:

One big carrot *(or a couple small – peeled, or scrubbed well, and sliced into flat pieces. They don't have to be tiny, or even small, but you'll need one flat surface on the carrot)*

One onion *(peeled, whole)*

Few stalks of celery (*chopped into bite sized pieces)*

One potato *(peeled, whole)*

Half a red pepper, cleaned *(not sliced)*

A clove of garlic *(peeled, whole)*

Handful of fresh parsley *(if you don't have fresh parsley, try one of your favorite dry, leafy spices. This is an easygoing recipe, choose the flavour you prefer to cook)*

A few pepper kernels.

Eros Pista (*optional secret ingredient alert! Also known as 'Strong Steve' in English. If you live in Ottawa, this amazing pepper paste can be found at the Budapest Deli in the Market. If you live in the UK – hop a plane to Hungary and visit a local Spar. If you live in the US, I don't know where this stuff can be found, but it's worth a Google search.*)

Hock of Ham (Ham on the bone) OR chicken thighs. The key here is to have something with meat and bone combined. Zsolt and I really prefer the Ham, but it's a matter of taste.

Paprika, pepper, turmeric, & salt

Right – now this is what you do. First get the carrots ready and find your soup pot. In the pot add a gulp of oil (like 1.5 tablespoon) and place the carrots flat side down. Heat those up so the oil turns yellow and the carrots brown. As this happens, prep the remaining ingredients. Once the carrots look nice and toasty (a little caramelized), add all the veggies, parsley and meat of choice into the pot. Fill with water. Add salt, a scoop or two of paprika, a dash of pepper and a bit of turmeric . . . not sure if you actually need to turmeric, but ever since cancer I just stick it into every recipe (turmeric cupcakes?).

Bring to a boil, then simmer for at least two hours. Rule of thumb: the longer it cooks, the better it tastes. AND once it's been served and there's only half in the pot – add MORE water, a bit more of the spice, and stick in the fridge over night. Tomorrow you'll have another pot of delicious soup waiting for you. *But be sure to leave the majority of veggies and bone in the pot- otherwise you remove the source of flavour.*

If you like, boil some fine noodles on the side and serve with the soup (soup poured over noodles).

Now looking over this document it appears as though this wonderful miracle soup will take forever to make. But don't be fooled by word count. As a writer, I get very long-winded on things that please me, in reality it takes about 15 minutes effort to get this soup on the boil. Afterwards it's just a case of waiting.

I used to make this every week before chemo, and it was the first thing I had when coming home from my taxol treatment (weekly treatments, so my stomach could handle food). Now that chemo is long gone, I still eat this soup. It's a great comfort.

And if you don't believe me, believe my husband. Zsolt's verdict: "It's pretty good soup."

18Apr2011

Eggs in many baskets

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Fertility

Monday morning. Have spilled orange juice all over myself, but thanks to a damp sponge and a (once) clean tea towel, have cleaned up mess. Weather: cloudy. Apartment: messy. Allergies: active. Temperament: not so bad.

I nearly forgot that Easter was coming. This year we're staying at home for the sake of Zsolt's study habits and the impending viva. But I will miss having an Easter with family. In Canada we go to my grandmother's home (*Bonjour Lulu!*), or someone's home in Quebec, and share a lunch. My family is comprised of cooks and bakers, and people create excellent food. Like, lick your fingers and smack those lips excellent. When we were younger (proper grandchildren rather than adult grandchildren) Lulu would always hand out these large chocolate bunnies with marshmallow filling. They were pretty to look at – I loved the idea of them, the idea of the chocolate and the bright pinks, yellows, blues on the wrapper . . . of a bunny who also collects painted eggs and carries a blue tinfoil basket . . . but could never bring myself to love that marshmallow filling. Oh well.

In Hungary, Zsolt's mother will hard boil about two dozen eggs, and his sister will prepare the dyes out in the garden. Then we'll sit around for an hour or two and dye the eggs. I love it. After you have your egg dyed with whatever colour arrangement you choose (all red, half red, half blue, some purple in between, or yellow and blue with a green band, etc) you take some pork fat and rub into the egg shell to make it shine. On Easter morning people crack into the coloured eggs, but Zsolt's mom saves the prettiest ones from hungry fingers.

And speaking of eggs, I have a fertility appointment this week. Wednesday. It'll be a family gathering *of sorts*. In that it's about family, and there will be a gathering. A good friend recommended I stop thinking about fertility and just give my body a break. Good reasoning. It's on my 'to do' list (along with some meditation). But first there's this appointment.

Right, back to Monday morning. Orange juice is under control. Time to make some breakfast if I can find a clean dish in this mess. Yesterday I made a fantastic meal of some curry chicken and a soup. But fantastic meals leave me knackered, and I can never bother with the dishes immediately. As a result my flat looks like a culinary Armageddon.

But that's okay. And now, onwards with the day.

18Apr2011

Boxes have arrived

Posted in Bumpboobs, Canada, Finding Home, Life

Yowzers. The moving boxes have just arrived at our flat. They're a month early, but this will leave plenty of time to select, cull, and browse our belongings. Now comes the game: what's worth keeping? Geez time flies. I can hardly believe it's the middle of April, tipping toward the start of May.

20Apr2011

Dressing for the boobies

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Fun, Life

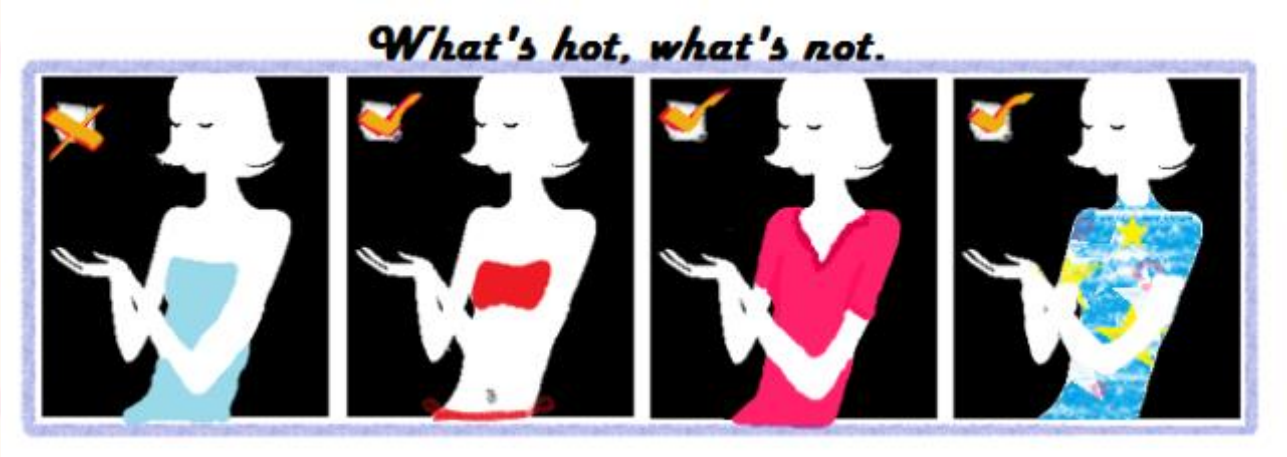
Once upon a time I bought a dress online from H&M – a cheap red dress that I wore *once* to a Christmas party, and may never wear again. I say 'may' because 'maybe' next Christmas I'll start feeling festive and try it on once more. But honestly, it kinda reminds me of the chemo days, so thinking about it as I write, it's probably better to send that red number along to the charity shop as a donation.

Anyhow – not my point.

Ever since ordering from H&M, they've been assailing me with magazines. Every other week I receive a magazine about their new spring line, new summer line, new home line. This morning the delivery boy dropped off H&M's 'Shades of Summer 2011' and I'm just cracking into this baby.

Thankfully, magazine browsing somewhat satisfies my craving for new clothes. Somewhat. And I pour over these pages as though if I stare hard enough, the fashion will materialize from thin air into my apartment. I wish!

I'm noticing a lot of loose tops, which bodes well for my post-mastectomy figure. If you've had a mastectomy and don't want to wear an overly structured bra every day (and if you have a small breasts, because I doubt this would work with a larger cup), then it's somewhat easy to pull off the *sans*-boob look with the right clothing.



For example – sans boobs: Tube tops are OUT. Bandeau bikinis are IN. V-necks are GREAT. Plain t-shirts are OBVIOUS (obvious you're missing a breast). Patterns, flowing material, and asymmetrical cuts are the best. Apparently crochet tops are back? But I don't think that looks good on anyone, boobs or no boobs.

Talk about body image battles. If a woman can go without her breast and still feel sexy, then you've got to admire that. There are times when I feel like there's been no change. Small or no boobs, the figure is still androgynous. And when I throw on my pink sun dress with those oversized shades and white flip flops, damn – I *do* feel sexy.

But then, I totally get why women wear prosthesis breasts. If you have B and above curves (which most women do) a missing bump will become far more noticeable. I've seen bras designed for the Amazonian woman (one cup only) and some really nicely structured clothing to hide any unbalance (or even the total absence of breasts). Actually, ever since my trip to the mastectomy shop, I've been taking my floppy falsie out on the town, and the response has been surprising.

So I'm out and about meeting friends, going to work, whatever, all while wearing my spare boob. And here are the comments:

"Oh, cute top."

"I like your shirt."

"Is that new?"

1) They are cute tops. 2) I am glad people like my taste. 3) No, they're not new. They're way old, and I've been wearing them every other week for the past nine months.

BUT – I haven't worn them with my boobs on.

It's so absolutely fascinating that as soon as I put on two breasts instead of one, my tops become all the more attractive. Maybe it's because they're cut for the typical women's shape? Maybe it's because my new mastectomy bra makes the girls pop out to their best advantage? Maybe people feel awkward when they notice my chest isn't shaped as expected, and so look away before noticing how cute I'm dressed?

Maybe, maybe, oopsy daisy.

Anyhow. For this reason I'm starting to reconsider the idea of mastectomy lingerie. I love the bras we obtained two weekends past. And have my eye on purchasing a couple more before leaving the UK. There is this provider called 'about a girl' who I'm becoming curious about. They have silk mastectomy lingerie, and the stuff looks quite – *dare I hope?* – sexy. I'm thinking of making a pilgrimage to their store (because when it comes to mastectomy clothing, you generally have to make a long trip or order online) and see what's what.

Anyhow, that's me and my cup of tea – pouring over this morning's junk mail, an easy start to an easy morning.

21Apr2011

An AMH to count my eggs

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Fertility

Six months later and we're at the baby doctor's office, waiting for our consultation. Again, we're back at the same clinic where I was diagnosed, but thankfully – this time – they have put us in a different waiting area. No more having to stare at the door, the room, the memory of where I was first told about cancer. Thank goodness for that.

So. Today's appointment with the doctor went rather quickly. Apart from waiting (we always wait) for fifty minutes, everything was straightforward. [*Zsolt and I now arrive at a doctor's office, any doctor's office, and immediately find the best magazines. Then we plop ourselves into some chairs and engage in the waiting. This is a-okay with me for one reason: when I had my emergency, we didn't wait more than ten minutes. Now that my crisis is over, it's okay to let others go first.*]

Essentially Dr Baby-Maker recommended that I test my Anti-Mullerian Hormone (AMH) which will help ascertain whether I have any eggs left in my ovaries. And then later on (whether it's here or in Canada, but most likely Canada) the test can be repeated and we can see what's happening with the girls. It's a game of 'how fertile are you'. Apparently from a blood test this lab can determine the number of eggs in a woman's body- described as 'Ovarian reserve' ranging from optimal fertility, satisfactory fertility, low fertility and very low/undetectable. Boo for very low fertility, and yay for optimal to satisfactory.

Again, there were reassurances not to worry about my lack of menstrual cycle. So, I am trying not to worry – and what's the point anyhow, now I'm going to take a test that will monitor my level of eggs . . . so whatever mystery exists is soon to be resolved. Tomorrow I'm calling the clinic to arrange for the test. Because it's new, the test isn't covered by the NHS, but – obviously – Zsolt and I think it's worth the reasonable £50 fee.

Speaking very honestly, I'm not keen to have a treatment like IVF – at least, not at this point. Hormones got me into this breast cancer mess, so avoiding a surge of drug induced hormones (more, following eight years of on-and-off birth control and now the estrogen blocking tamoxifem, though that's a bit different, it still pertains to estrogen) doesn't feel like a good idea.

Anyhow, I've been surprisingly calm about this entire day. Soon Zsolt and I will learn whether I have eggs left in my ovaries. That's an important thing. And then we'll get on with our lives (and our family planning), one way or another.

PS. Zsolt and I followed this visit to the hospital with a visit to the cemetery. We found the resting place of Benny Hill, a British comedian who Zsolt quite admires. If you are ever around the Southampton general, and you're a fan, it's worth stopping by to pay respects.

PPS. The weather here is *amazing*. Today was all sundresses and shades, with a great dose of clear skies and a warm breeze. Perfect for a walk through the cemetery.

25Apr2011

A mushy self-discovery post

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Canada, Finding Home, Life, Love, Writing

You know what? For the past five years – *ever since meeting my Hungarian husband and flying away from Canada* – for the past five years, I've been asking this difficult question: where do I belong? And it would keep me up at night. Honestly, I'd be awake trying to reason whether we should move somewhere in Europe, stay in the UK, go back to Canada, hijack things to Australia . . . when you're in an international relationship, the concept of home and belonging are suddenly challenged. Growing up, I had no idea how much Ottawa was a part of my identity – and when taken away, there was this lingering question: Where do I belong?

This mini crisis peaked with the event of our wedding, one moment planned for Europe, the next moved to Canada . . . and *still* nothing was resolved in terms of the future. Zsolt and I had a dream: house, family, kids, day-to-day happiness and settlement. We wanted to settle. But where? I began to imagine myself behind a wooden counter in a kitchen, with a red and white chequered apron tied around my waist and a hot pie cooling on the window ledge, which looked out over a lovely green yard with tall, solid trees – and everything would be just right. From the tidiness, to the location, to our lives. Everything, one day, would be just right . . . eventually . . .

And then I got cancer.

Which isn't to say the dream of a clean kitchen disappeared. I still dream of a clean kitchen. And it isn't to say the crisis of 'where to live' was resolved. Because we're moving to Canada, but will we stay there forever – who knows?

However, getting cancer (surviving cancer) did change an essential aspect of my life. I stopped asking: "Where do I belong?"

It suddenly felt like a stupid question.

Where do I belong? Duh. I belong right here – *right now* – in this moment. And what do I belong to? I belong to my passions, my writing, my Love, and myself.

It's like a light was flipped on. In the past five years I've been hunting for my identity. It was challenged when I left Canada. It was challenged when I was married. It was challenged when I got cancer.

And so it was sharpened.

I am Catherine. I am a writer. I am a wife. I am a breast cancer survivor. And those are things that have no passport, no national identity, no alien status, and no dependence to anything beyond myself (and Zsolt, in terms of marriage). Where do I belong? *Geez Louise*, I belong within myself. Geography is a luxury, to be close to family a bonus, to have spectacular views, clean kitchens, pies on the windowsill – that's all wonderful and welcome. But *in this moment* I've got my essentials. I'm where I belong, finally.

All right, today's blog post is totally inwards, and so sorry for spilling this revelation all over the page. But it's a good revelation, and nothing but experience could have brought me to this point. I suppose as things change, my identity will keep shifting and shaping, but at least right now, age 28, tipping over into 29 and feeling good, I've found myself. I've found my passion (writing, creating, doing). I've found the love of my life. And it all feels amazing.

Happy Easter!

PS. I might have found a sense of identity – but my apartment is still a mess! The other night – in the pitch black and total silence, there was a huge CRACK (I started screaming even before waking up from the shock of the noise and Zsolt had to settle me down). Turns out, my wardrobe collapsed onto the ground. Now there's a pile of clothes tangled with hangers and shelving on the floor. What a way to get the moving purge started. I'll need to pick through my clothes/tidy this mess and decide: Canada (*to live*), Hungary (*to vacation*), charity (*to give me an excuse for more shopping*). So, with a push from providence, the packing has begun!

27Apr2011

Cue the dramatic music

Posted in Fun, Life, Love

Oh boy, things are getting tense! I've been up since eight typing away at the keyboard – just a mindless chatty Cathy with my twitter, blog, email and facebook accounts open. This morning I woke up brainstorming a short story, flipping through perspective, sketching characters, and trying to figure out a start (startings are the most difficult things to approach). Essentially, a happy lady enjoying the morning.

Then walks in my poor husband with doom and gloom rolling behind him. His arms are resting behind his back, (he stands exactly like his father – just a taller 6'5 version of Laci) and he goes toward the window to look out. This poor guy, I can see his heaviness. Not sure if it's his face, or his quietness, or what, but Zsolt did not wake up on the lighter side of the bed. Today is the 27th of April. His viva is the 6th of May. Like a shark through the water, it's coming. Cue the dramatic music, cut to the hapless swimmer.

Duh-duh. Duh-duh. Duh-duh-duh-duh-duh. !!!

Don't worry. If things get too bad, I'll pull him out of the water.

27Apr2011

Dancing with Aeroplan

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Canada, Life, Travel

Ah, Aeroplan – we meet again.

For better, for worse, in good times and bad, wrestling with Air Canada's Aeroplan has become a yearly (bi-yearly, when I'm lucky) tradition. That's what you get in long-distance family relationships. We live in England, my parents live in Canada. Therefore, about every nine months (give or take several months), I look up flights that can utilize the generous donation of my parent's flying miles.

Normally this isn't a problem. London to Ottawa is a fairly steady route – but when it comes to the busy periods, those times of the year when everyone is pushing and shoving to ride a plane, well, flying becomes a bitch.

Last time it was a Christmas blocked-out period, anxieties over a chemo deadline, and trying to fly when everything and everyone was saying, 'it's not gonna happen'. This time it's far less intense. Zsolt and I will be leaving Hungary toward the end of August, and we were hoping our arrival in Canada would correspond with my parent's cottage vacation.

Okay, honestly – this is 100% no way like last Christmas. Last Christmas it was essential that I go home before the 15th of December. This time around we'll be going to Canada whether or not the holiday cottage plans work out. So that's fine. Therefore, what's my problem?

Ah, just the same as ever. Every time we have a date (the 25th, the 28th, the 30th) and wait, say, one day to make sure it jives with my family back home-*BAM!*-Aeroplan does a little dance and the flights for that day are GONE.

Poof.

This is not a life and death situation. I love being able to fly for less. One-way tickets are astronomical in price when not bought with points. I should be thanking Air Canada for all the free (plus tax) rides they've allowed me over the years (or rather, thank my parents).

It's more of an irritation than emergency. Actually, it's no emergency. It's like your little brother sitting in the back seat of the van and flicking your ear every five minutes. (Hi, Dan.) Annoying, but ultimately I'll stick by them.

Eventually this will be sorted. That's the beauty of life – one way or another, stuff works out. And so, it's back to the Aeroplan website. After all, every relationship demands a little work; and when it's good, it's so *very* good.

30Apr2011

The anxiety of going alone

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Life

There is a movement across England that promotes street parties. These parties are seen as a way to bring communities together (*sorta like a twitter party – for instance, the #tellhermovement twitter party on May 5th! Plug alert!)*, and from what I've heard, they work fairly well. One friend of mine helped with a street party when a halfway house was established in her area. She said that before the kids of the home were strangers, threats to a certain degree. There was vandalism and curtain twitching and uncertainties about leaving the door unlocked. After the street party (which involved plenty of food, music and a game of 'dunk the police officer') these kids became kids. Kids on the street, which is what they were all along, except now people know one another. (*That's not to say curtain twitching disappears – because who doesn't love twitching the curtain? But at least you could put a name to the face: "Oh look, that John boy is doing a handstand".*)

Last Friday was the royal wedding and across England street parties were thrown. My street remained free of any flag waving, but the city centre was hosting a large 'street party' in the centre square. They viewed the wedding on a jumbo screen, and afterwards celebrated with swing bands, music, games and a general 'hanging out' on the lawns.

Zsolt and I watched the wedding through the YouTube stream. We started at around eleven – *oh, her dress was nice, eh!* – and stopped during all that singing, then picked it up again for the kiss on the balcony. Apart from the human bits (Kate waving from outside the cathedral, Will trying to get the ring on her finger, Harry looking back as she walked down the aisle, and Will & Kate's mixed expressions between wanting to smile, and not wanting to smile) I'd have to say the most impressive part of the day were all those hats. It was like a gallery of pink, purple, black and beige headwear. British women own the hat.

And after the wedding I was faced with a dilemma. Should I go to the city centre street party? Zsolt was mule-like in his resolution to study (less than seven days now till his PhD defence, so can't blame him) and I became more and more dejected that we couldn't go downtown. There would be music and people and possibly a great selection of highly cheese memorabilia, and here we were in our flat missing the day.

Which is when I remembered my 'do it alone' resolution. I *hate* doing things alone. It's a design flaw in my personality, initiating a solo activity (except for reading, writing, and general day-dreaming) take a momentous amount of energy. Essentially, I feel so awkward to be alone that I stop the activity before it even starts – and that was yesterday. I was stuck in my flat, mood dropping, and wishing I wasn't such a coward.

So, I stopped being a coward. (*wishes do come true!*) Because if I can do big things like move countries, fight cancer and learn to drive stick (*still in progress*), I can certainly face a day in the park.

But, I had to give myself a goal. Goal: to find and buy souvenirs of the Will & Kate wedding to possibly give to relatives who I'm pretty sure would love them.

And suddenly it became much easier to go to a party alone. It's a baby step, but a step nevertheless. I'm sure many people would fly solo to yesterday's event without any anxiety, but this is just the way I work. Therefore, to help the situation, I gave myself a purpose.

Fast forward an hour and I'm wading through the paper cups, union jacks, tables, children, dancers, swing band, games, picnickers, and general celebrations of the Southampton Street Party. No names were given to the faces (this isn't a *real* street party, after all, and I'm still too chronically shy to randomly introduce myself to a stranger), but it was nice to see what was happening.

But most importantly, I got over my inhibition. Okay, well, I cannot say it was entirely comfortable drifting through the scattered crowds, but a step forward is a step forward. A long time ago, way before meeting Zsolt, I spent a month in Quebec City alone. That was quite something. By the end of the month I was visiting museums, taking long walks, eating in cafes –all with pleasure instead of purpose, but that took time to learn. (*A lesson which has faded, but at least it's there to be remembered*.)

I guess it's good to remember that **even when others cannot offer their support, you can still support *yourself***. That's easy to forget, but important to remember. It takes a little courage too.

Hmm, there's an Andy Warhol exhibit in Southampton that my husband doesn't want to visit (*plus he's still studying, studying, studying*). Maybe I'll go alone this week and check it out. After all, practice makes perfect.

1May2011

Statistics stashmisticks!

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Life

Today I read a blog post on JBBC's site – a guest post from Tami Boehmar, author of *From Incurable to Incredible: Cancer Survivors Who Beat the Odds* which touches upon her experience with breast cancer reoccurrence. And something she mentioned reminds me of a long-ago decision that feels very relevant today. Tami says, "Statistics are just numbers that lump together a large, diverse group of individuals. They don't apply to me, and they certainly don't apply to the people who've shared their stories of hope with me."

It seems everyone (or every other person) with breast cancer has a story to share, and a lot of us – particularly a lot of the computer-savvy crowd – turn to blogging, twitter, facebook etc. And through this online community I've gotten to hear from many women who are fighting breast cancer and taking control of their diagnosis. There's talk about grabbing boobs, changing diet, meditation, positive focus, reconstruction, reoccurrence, moving on, getting started, etc. And it's this sort of cancer-related dialogue that I appreciate reading.

What I cannot stand, what I've never been able to tolerate, are the statistics.

Sure, 90% of breast cancer cases caught early are curable. Excellent. That's a friendly stat, very nice to read in a women's magazine. But then you google 'breast cancer' and read further – read about later stages of the disease, about young women diagnosed, about numbers that don't look so glossy on the page. And that's when I need to turn off my darn-tootin' computer, because it's scaring the crap out of me. What good are these numbers? Who do they comfort?

In a past life (aka, my undergraduate degree) I studied psychology. Psych is a really fascinating topic, and there's lots to say in its favour. But ultimately, after three years of study and a year of experimentation, I decided to walk away from the field. Why? Because of statistics.

When you turn a person's experience into numbers, you lose everything that was important in their journey. You lose the highs, the lows, the tears, the celebrations, and the realizations. You lose their beauty. Tami is right. Statistics are like processed food taken from a wide range of unknown faces, blended and pureed into easily packaged products. That essence of living, of growing, of exploring – it's all lost.

So I'm reminded today of why I left psychology, and why when the doctor tells me I have a 50% chance of reoccurrence, I file that bit of news into the "unnecessary info" folder. Too bad they don't hand you a pamphlet of success stories during those consultations. "You've got half a pizza, but look at these incredible women and how they're challenging those numbers. Maybe if you follow their awesome example, you can improve your chances." Because what's the worst that can happen? We improve our lives – regardless of outcome – and find meaning from the bullshit.

Statistics have their moments. They give guidance. They provide protocol. But as a woman who's already beaten the odds by getting cancer way too young, I think, ultimately, they can take a hike.

5May2011

The Day I Found Out

Posted in Bumpboobs

Just over a month ago I was asked to create a video for a project called "The Day I Found Out". It's a page where survivors of cancer talk about the day they heard their diagnosis. Sounds like heavy stuff, eh? Well, it is. But it's also really uplifting, because these videos don't just talk about cancer diagnosis – they talk about inspiration, and courage, and determination. The thing I found most incredible when watching these videos is how survivors turn to their joys for support. Whether it's helping others, creating music, writing, family – the diagnosis of cancer, while potentially devastating, was also a turning point for so many.

I won't write a long posting about this. Instead, I'll invite you to view the video. It took several takes (and an overloading of memory on the computer), and I have to admit – I was surprised by the results. Now-a-days I can ramble on about post-chemo wonders, and *la la la*, but take me back to "the day I found out" and the emotions are still there, still bubbling.

That's my battle to keep fighting. But in the meanwhile, please do have a look. The creators worked hard on this page, and I think they have every reason to be proud (as do the stars of each and every video!). Here's my five-minutes of youtube fame:

http://www.thedayifoundout.com/videos/hETDpri2xIU

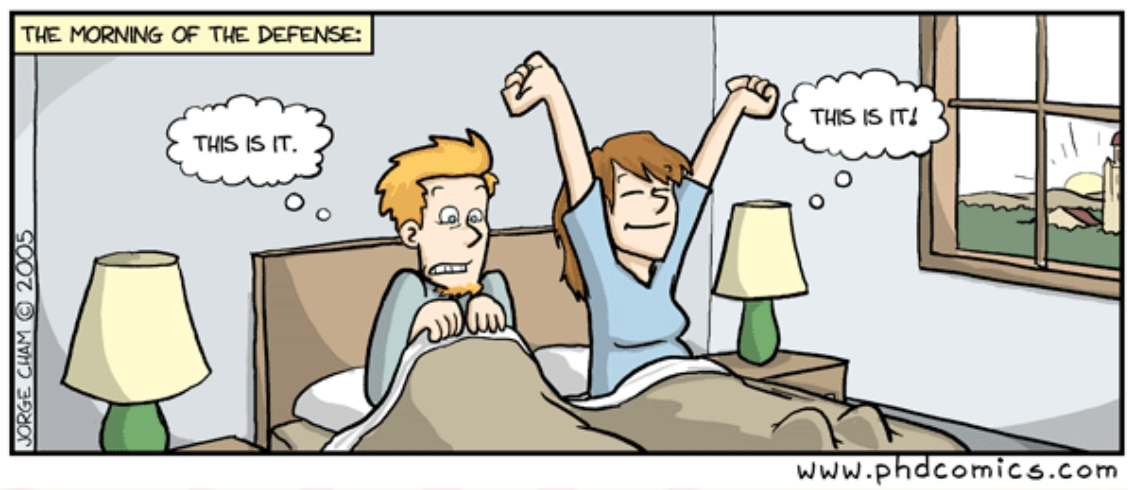
Thanks to Cliff for getting me involved.

6May2011

Zsolt defends!

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life, Love

Zsolt is defending his thesis RIGHT NOW. *Eeep!* Please send the man some brain-activating & positive thoughts. May the physics be with him. Here's a little PhD comic to illustrate our pre-viva morning:



Gold Start to my Zsolti for being brave and persistent. No matter what, I'm proud of him.

6May2011

Update: He Passed!

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life, Love, Uncategorized

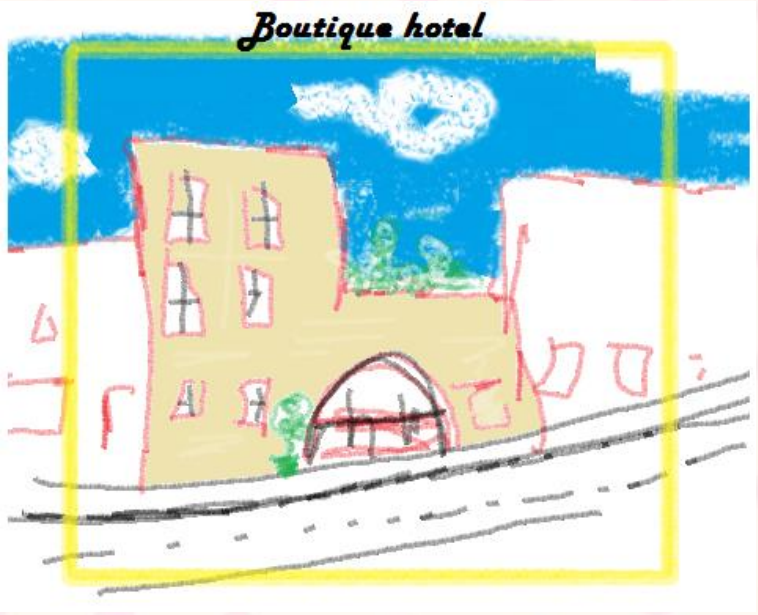
Title says it all. Now it's time to celebrate!

10May2011

Playing catch-up

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Fertility

In my head I've written about two blog posts this week, keeping things nicely up-to-date and chronlicalized. Chronicalized doesn't seem to be a word (according to spell check, which I trust in this case), but in my head it makes sense. And, in my head, this apartment has been packed, furniture sold, and we're already soaking in the hot baths of Budapest.



Clearly I'm living in a dream land, but, as you may know, sometimes we all need to visit our 'happy place' in order to get through the day. So now I'm posting, and next week we'll be packing, and eventually I'll soak in those baths.

This weekend Zsolt and I had each 'secretly booked' ourselves a get-away night at a fancy hotel (Sunday is a very good day to book if you're looking to get away). Upon discovery of this double booking, there was laughter and decision making. I cancelled the room at Chilworth Manor, and we went to Lymington instead (lastminute.co.uk has this £20 administration charge for cancellations, which is obvious garbage considering a cancellation means clicking 'update' on the computer, but there you go, we didn't want to lose the £20). It was a lovely boutique hotel, and we had a nice time.

The one problem neither of us had considered when booking on the Sunday (Sunday savings!) was that I also had a hospital appointment the following morning. So, what can you do? We woke bright and early at the luxury 'relax your ass off' hotel, and headed over to the hospital. There is a fertility clinic within the hospital that offers privately funded care. For £50 (not bad) I can take a test to determine how many eggs are left in my ovaries. This doesn't necessarily mean I'll start ovulating again, but it will let me know my fertility options and give me a number to work with in the future.

Anyhow, we arrived at the clinic promptly and were struck by how it felt 'spa-like'. When it comes to private health care offices, there is a significant hotel/holiday feel to the places. Last time I visited a private clinic was in Canada, and that was *quite* fancy, and before that it was with Zsolt in England (for his chest exam a la Canadian Residency Permit) and that felt like a proper hotel. Yesterday's clinic had wood panelling everywhere, fancy seats, a nice smell – it was like an island oasis in the middle of a sterile hospital dessert.

The test (at least my contribution) was straight forward. A nurse took me into her treatment room, and had me roll up my sleeve. I was wearing my LuluLemon jumper (gorgeous) and rolled up the sleeve. Then *I* proceeded to tell *her* where it's best to draw the blood, and maybe she should use a smaller needle because often people miss. However, she disagreed about the needle size: "let's try this one, and if it doesn't work I'll get another" – to which I said, "alright" – but what I really thought was: *Damn*. Because no one likes to be a human pin cushion.

However, first try and this lady scored! “Sharp scratch” she says as the needle goes in. Meanwhile I’m looking away and clinging to the table with my free hand, waiting for this moment to be over and wondering whether she got it right. But then she says, “all done”, so she *did* get it right. Happy days. The nurse had commented that the vein felt quite hard, which I really do think is a result of all the chemotherapy. However, it still worked.

The problem came after the needed. She passes me a bit of puff to press over the entry point, which I do, and then in a minute she tries to put on the bandage – but, nope! My blood rises up everytime I stop pushing. The damn thing won’t clot! Again and again we wait, check, and ‘Hello!’ there’s the blood again. At this point I was getting worried. What if I can’t clot? What if my blood keeps leaking? What if I had been in an accident, and the wound was bigger and they couldn’t get *that* to clot? What if, what if, what if?

The nurse leaves to get help.

I keep pushing the cotton into my arm.

Zsolt sits beside me, thumbs up.

And then the nurse returns with another lady. This second nurse checks out my arm, which I’ve been pressing super hard, and sees that the bleeding has stopped (for now), she then tapes another cotton thing onto my arm, wrapping my arm in tape (which resulted in a lot of ‘ow!’ later on as it waxed the circumference of my arm of any hair), and then, *and then*, we realized that my stupid LuluLemon sleeve was acting as a ‘strapy thing’ [not technical language] which they normally tie one when taking blood. Essentially, my fashion choice for the day was unfortunate because the cuffs of a LuluLemon shirt are very tight, and rolled up onto the top of my arm, it became *extremely tight*, which then caused me to bleed continuously with the pressure it caused.

Mystery solved! We rolled down my sleeve and there were no more problems.

That blood now goes to a lab in London, so we’ll see what they say. It’s possible I’ll receive my results on Friday, but if not, then the Friday following. Zsolt is optimistic, which makes me feel better.

And speaking of Zsolt and good vibes. Can I please have one more ‘proud wife’ moment for my husband? He received a written review of his viva, and it’s so great I just want to share it with everyone. So, here it is:

“Zsolt Sámson performed well in the viva. He was able to discuss his work in depth, was confident in his explanations and able to extend the discussion beyond the immediate issues raised in his thesis. He was also good in understanding questions and ensuring appropriate answers. We spent nearly all of the viva discussing science, and it was clear that he understood his topic well and could relate the experimental results with theory in a critical manner. We were happy that he was of PhD level and, taking his viva and thesis together, are happy to recommend award of the degree subject to the minor changes which are detailed below.”

Wohoo!

12May2011

Marking time through roses

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Canada, Finding Home, Life

It is May and the roses are back in Southampton; spread wide in bloom, layer upon layer of petals, pinks, reds, and yellows, and nearly as large as a grapefruit. And again, despite the memories of last May's roses, I'm stopping to smell them (smell, drink, inhale, absorb – who can get enough of that rose scent? It's intoxicating). They are beautiful.

In my alter-ego world, I plant roses in my garden along the gate so other passer-bys can stop and smell. Though roses must be difficult to manage – or at least they *look* difficult to manage (*a similar snap judgement like thinking a person is 'high maintenance' – which is such a catty idea, but sometimes these terrible thoughts just jump up into my head and stomp around. It's not to say these women look bad, in fact, they look incredible, but the amount of time spent achieving that incredibleness must be great. Like the roses. However, gardening is therapeutic, and often time it's our little morning rituals that ground us best. Who doesn't benefit from some extra attention?*) Besides, in my 'real-world' imagination, I'd probably plant a bush instead with the assumption it might need trimming once or twice a year.

But the roses are back, whatever my daydreams, and they're a signal that I'm nearly one year post diagnosis. A friend told me that you count after the day of diagnosis, *not* the day after finishing chemotherapy. Interesting. Before she mentioned this idea, I had been incorrectly imagining a post-chemo timescale. Based, instead, on the roses, it's nearly one year.

Coincidently (and in a new line to recognize the separations of events), I'm also coming up on my wedding anniversary. Zsolt and I have saved a bottle of wine from the wedding, which we plan to drink with his sister and brother-in-law as we drive across Europe toward our Hungarian holiday adventure.

Maybe spring roses will become a marker of time from now on. How many blooms till I'm officially (statistically) cancer free? Their arrival ticks a box in my mind, and I think every time I smell one: 'you've made it this far.'

I've made it this far.

And the roses keep on blooming.

16May2011

Women role models rock

Posted in Life, Writing

Recently I read an article about role models for women that essentially had my blood boiling. While the author made some occasionally interesting points (e.g. women trying to 'feed the hungry without knowing the causes of poverty), overall I felt like the entire premise was ridiculous. It made me wonder: is this written just to stir the pot? Is this paper trying for a reaction? Does it take brash statements to get people to read an article? Maybe, because I read half the article on break, and the remainder at home after finding it on the web.

Here is the crux of the article: women are no longer great role models. Why? I don't know. Because they get famous for doing things within their comfort zones. They do well with what they know well. And this, somehow, justifies questioning whether women today are worthy of admiration and influence.

Ugh.

Firstly, if someone is ever going to succeed, they'll need to stretch their comfort zone eventually. Secondly, personal struggles are often personal (i.e. not for public knowledge – unlike this blog!), so who are we to judge a women's journey as unworthy? And thirdly, what's with the 'famous woman' obsession anyhow?

Every day I have the privilege to know and work with great female role models. These ladies aren't on magazine covers, I don't think they've won awards (at least not lately), and who knows if their 'greatness' was forged during times of trial – who cares? I look at them now, and find inspiration. Whether it's encouraging culture, family, gardening, art, security, adventure, light-hearts, passion, calm, or good humour – their lives inspire me. And not only my colleagues at work! What about my mother who works so hard and believe so vehemently in her vision; who can't admire that? Or my friend who is *so good* at knowing what others need and making sure they're comforted (a huge help during my chemo treatments)? Or my other friend who has followed an impressive career with pursuing a PhD? Or my GRANDMOTHER who at 91 has become an expert in the condition of Alzheimer's, and has contributed hugely to the well-being of everyone involved in that unfortunate situation. Or my aunts who move across the country, learn new languages, go to retreats, reach out after years of disconnection, send cards to help the healing; how can I not admire them? And – because I'd be daft to overlook – what about the women my own age who are shaping their identities, taking risks, holding convictions, starting families – aren't they admirable for their courage too?

AH. OKAY. Now my blood is boiling again. Because how can *anyone* question the presence of female role models today when they're everywhere I turn?

The women in my life are amazing. They are *amazing.* And everyday (particularly with this blog, and since joining breast cancer forums, twitter, and exploring the post-diagnosis life) I meet increasingly more women who leave me inspired.

How can other people be missing this? Incredible women are a world-wide phenomenon, just as they were in the days of Emily Bronte and Helen Keller, and just as they will be in the future with spaceships and transporters and holodecks (*have I just discredited my argument by referencing Star Trek? Hmm, Captain Janeway – also an incredible, albeit also fictional, woman*).

Women role models are everywhere. And so are incredible men. Yes, I've overlooked them in my defence of women who are awesome, but must say that the men in my life have been really quite something too. Don't even get me started on my husband, or my dad, or my brothers, or my friends, or my manager . . . let's just leave it as a thumbs up for men.

Point: There's a role model in many people, and hopefully you're like me: really lucky to be surround by them.

Anyhow. There's my two cents. The boil has been reduced to a simmer.

18May2011

Cue the fireworks, please

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Writing

Oh boy! Good things are cooking this week. Zsolt has finished his corrections, *and* he's volunteered to pack up the entire household ("Don't worry, Catherine, I'll pack everything" – he's almost like Superman); plus one of my very best friends will be visiting in Hungary (with the specific request to party at a European nightclub, however I have to say that in general European clubs share a striking resemblance to North American clubs: darkness, sticky dance floor, cheesy but fun music, overpriced drinks . . . actually, there is a difference, the men dance, and they dance well). And – oh boy, here it comes – and I've been asked to write an article for an awesome magazine! WOOOOOOHOOOOO!

WHOOOOOOHOOOO! Whoot-Whoot! Yes! Distribute the exclamatives, and high fives all around. If you're at the screen reading this post, please – give someone a high five on my behalf.

It's really exciting news. I'll be writing a piece around my experience with Facing Cancer Together, which is a site for women/carers/family to meet and ask questions, find support, connect with others. When dealing with a cancer diagnosis so much STUFF begins to spin (e.g. will my work keep me, what's treatment like, how can I cope?) so having a common area to ask questions and share stories is basically essential for coping. Plus, when you *do* reach a high moment (e.g. successful surgery, treatment completion, feeling good about life) there are others who want to celebrate that success with you – everyone 'gets' it. I'm quite proud to blog for their site.

Anyhow – it's exciting. And I'm not blurting this out for bragging purposes (though a few more WoHoos might push the 'obnoxious' button soon) but keeping good news hidden is somewhat similar (though less extreme) as keeping bad news hidden. The act of hiding creates a strange balloon-like pressure inside my chest; it's like my cheeks are going to puff out with me holding my tongue when all I want to do is laugh and smile. Anyhow, it's a great opportunity and positive step forward.

Further good news: my parade of social engagements continues. Yesterday it was dinner at a quality Polish restaurant in Southampton (**Stacja PL Restaurant)** with mulled beer for Zsolt, and a stewed sauerkraut & sausage dish for me. Yum. This morning it is Tragos (surprise!) for breakfast with friends, and so on, and so forth right through to next week, when everything stops and the packing begins.

This assignment is exactly the boost I need to distract from all this change, and it's exactly the sort of challenge I love. What's better than that?

What about you? Any good news to share? Don't keep it bottled up – it's okay to have a shining moment. (*Took me a long time to realize that, my mom often said: Catherine, you hide yourself so others don't feel bad – well, hopefully she approves this post, because there's no hiding here! – and no one feel bad either, I hope.)*

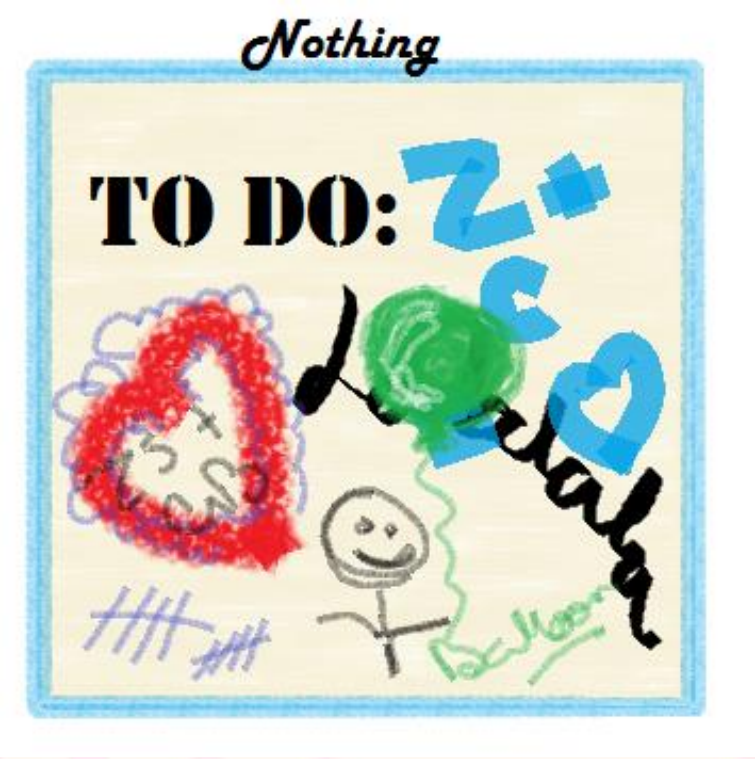
* I'm late for Tragos! No time to grammar and spell check (probably shouldn't post in that case, but screw it! I'm posting.)

19May2011

Early morning 'To Do's

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Canada, Finding Home, Life, Love, Writing

This morning is waking me up with a mental 'to do' list knocking at the door. It first started knocking around 5.30am, but I sent it away through various mental images of babies being put to bed, boats adrift in the water, river currents taking away my thoughts (plus the addition of a shirt over my eyes to block any/all light) and it must have worked because eventually I fell asleep. However, it didn't work for sooo long, or maybe the t-shirt fell off my face, because here I am typing away at 7.30 am and hoping that the *clackity clack* of this keyboard doesn't wake up Zsolt.



TO DO: Firstly, call the various utility companies and request a cancellation of their services. Unless I want to pay for another month of service, this needs to be done today.

TO DO: Zsolt has to drop by the printers to arrange a hard-binding of his thesis. It's an expensive errand (most are these days) but the results are forever. For generations to come, his work will sit somewhere in the University of Southampton's archive of past graduates, and maybe one day – when either he or I become hyper-famous, they'll remove the book from its shelf and display it in the small gallery tucked toward the back of the library. "And here we have the writing of Zsolt, Hungarian scientist extraordinaire". Well, regardless of whether that happens, the thesis, hard-bound and pressed with gold leaf lettering, will take a place of honour on our bookshelf.

TO DO: Little Peugeot needs to be sold. This is a must. Today we'll be taking it around to the used car dealerships to see what type of prices they quote (so we have a sense of its value, but also, if we don't find a buyer before leaving we'll get the best of the worst prices, because used car dealers probably wouldn't offer the 'actual' value of a car, considering they need to sell it later and make money from the exchange). Poor little Peugeot, she's going to be poked and prodded.

TO DO: Sell the blooming mattress. Unfortunately despite being quite comfortable and good quality it has two strikes against its favour: strike one – it's used, even if only for a year, it's nevertheless used. Strike two – it's a king size, which apparently doesn't jive in this chocolate box land of petite and practical housing.

TO DO: Clean this apartment! Life imitates schedule. I'm busy: my apartment goes bizerk. For the past month things have been quite smoothy running in terms of housekeeping, but as soon as I began my marathon of goodbyes (aka, a great excuse to go out everynight and many mornings), the tidiness of this place has suffered. IF time allows, I'll pop in a DVD and clean this entire mess up. When cleaning, always have a source of entertainment – whether it be music or a show in the background. For me, who hates cleaning in general (it's not in my DNA, just ask my father), entertainment is essential.

TO DO: Say more goodbyes, heart breaking stuff. Yesterday I left a friend who I've known since my MA days at the Uni – she's one of those inspiring women I was raving about the other day, and it was quite crap to say goodbye. And today there will be more of the 'goodbye'ing, no crying, as work begins to wind to a halt. Friday is my last day.

TO DO: Pack. Ugh. Not worth discussing at this point.

TO DO: Write! Which clearly I've started on, and will need to continue once a bit of sky breaks in my day of busy activities. Yesterday I had some time alone in the flat, which is a rarity, and was able to use the main computer to begin my article-writing adventure. So far, so good.

Okay, time to get a move on – and maybe draw a picture.

Thank you for your company, and for reading my to-do list. Now that I've blurted the whole thing out, it feels far more manageable. Writing as therapy always does the trick. And so, onto the dishes.

19May2011

Fertility AMH results

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Fertility, Life, Love

Today I received a phone call. *The* phone call. I'd been expected the used car salesman to ring me up and name his offer on our car. This morning we stopped by the lot, and having checked it over he said, "yes we're interested in your car, but I need to talk with the boss about pricing. Leave your mobile number with me." Which we happily did, meaning that today I carried my mobile on my person, whereas normally it's left in my purse in the back office as I work in the library.

But today it was on me. And when it rang, I nipped into the back to answer it away from the students. Good thing for that because twenty seconds later I was in tears.

Results are in. They're not great. My eggs are quite depleted with .7 pmol/L (or something like that, I've only heard the results, not seen the paper detailing the anti mullerian hormone (AMH) test results). The nurse said she was so sorry to deliver bad news, but the consultant thinks my best option for the future would be egg donation. Meaning, not my eggs.

Good on the .7 for hanging in there, even if that basically classifies me as 'barren' – it's better than zero. "You just need one," said both my husband and mother.

Anyhow – cue the tears, hang up the phone, start the profanity (a kind of medicine not recommended by professionals, but definitely recommended by me). Quiet utterances of 'fuck' interspersed with sobs of disappointment. My poor boss opened the door during the phone conversation and saw that look on my face (the 'ugly cry' look of uncontrolled emotion), but he handled things very well. After I sucked up my outburst just long enough to fill him in, again rose the tears and he was a great comfort. Poor fellow! It was my last day working with him, and the Avenue has been such a wonderful experience – leaving on a tearful note really does not represent my time within the library. It's been all laughs and conversation (plus diligent work habits), even during the chemo months the library has been a place of refuge.

But he responded quite well. Didn't try to fix anything, just let me go home for a private cry.

And then there was my husband. I called him up thinking 'can't share this news over the phone, must relate in person' so just said: "I don't feel well and need you to pick me up. Like right now, please." So he came – but not before running around the flat to change his stained t-shirt and throw on some jeans instead of sweat pants. He thought we were going to the hospital! And when he arrived (I had decided to sit on the ground while waiting, which probably increased his worries), he jumped out of the car, and *again* I broke into a fit of tears –

"I got the results and they say I can't have children."

You should have seen his relief! *Relief*. I wasn't sick, we didn't need to go to the hospital. Considering the panic situations that'd been running through his mind, things were okay.

"That's fine, we'll be fine." And he let me cry a little more.

And we will be fine. Today I'm grieving the loss of those eggs. Ever since flipping through Zsolt's baby album I imagined having my own little big-headed baby, and now – well, we'll see. Unlike a cancer diagnosis, I am

not filled with fear. Sadness, yes, because there has been a loss. This is a loss. But no fear – instead there's hope. There are options, there are possibilities, there are opportunities. And when we're ready, we'll see what can be done.

For now, I'm grieving. For today. Maybe again a little later. But Zsolt and I both feel that things will be okay. We want a family, so we'll get a family (Hello! We already *are* a family, but children would be a wonderful gift).

And until then, there will be adventures. Moving to Canada, trips around the world, chasing careers, getting involved, making a difference, enjoying life. With every year – every bloom of the roses – I'm reminded that things are always beginning, always full of opportunity.

In time we'll grow our family. For now, we'll grow ourselves.

23May2011

The procrastination continues

Posted in Bumpboobs, Canada, Fertility, Finding Home, Life, moving to canada

Ok – packing has STILL not started, and it's Monday. Movers are due Thursday, so yeah, time's getting pinched. It's just hard to get focused. Between a great party last Saturday, selling the car and furniture, planning a road trip across Europe, dressing for that photoshoot, and visiting the theatre in London. . . those boxes aren't likely to fill anytime soon.

Even writing this post is munching on time. But what the heck, I'll skip the picture scribbling today.

Right. Last Thursday I was given the crappy news. Fine. Since then I've been struck by waves of sadness – but otherwise I'm just moving forward. Things are so busy I don't even have time to google 'egg donation' and that's probably for the best at this moment.

Zsolt said that while an AMH measures the level of hormones produced by eggs (thus measuring the amount of eggs –ish) it doesn't measure the quality. So that could be either good or bad, though honestly at the moment I cannot be asked to investigate further. And my acupuncturist said she knew a lady who had similar AMH results, and then several years after the test was pregnant.

Anyhow – this is clearly a situation of "he said this" and "she said that" and "I once heard about a women who" . . . a lot of speculation and encouragement to hope.

But honestly, at this moment (and I'm sure this will change) I'm just tired. I feel tired. Not chemo-tired, just emotionally exhausted and ready for a break.

Cue the summer. I keep telling people about lake Balaton and the spas of Hungary. I keep dreaming of floating through hot water and tanning in the sun. And then there's this new world over in Canada that I'm trying to imagine – but it's all water colours – I've got a sense, but no shape of what will unfold. This is one of those 'trust the gut' situations where everything hopefully works out.

Anyhow. Just checking in to say hello. At this very moment the Zsoltster is going through our filing cabinet trying to empty contents for shipping/binning. Considering he stops at every-single-item for a lovely trip down memory lane, I think it's going to take a while.

Time to stop typing and help un-file that cabinet.

Later Gator.

26May2011

Packing through panic

Posted in After treatment, Canada, Fertility, Finding Home, Life

Packing update (still no time for pictures):

The boxes are slowly filling. One after another, I'm stuffing them with clothing, books, computer games and cooking hardware. Attempts to sell the mattress have failed. Such is life. We'll be shipping it to Canada. Time is running out since the movers arrive tomorrow to collect our goods, which means tonight will likely involve last minute quick-fixes – tape and cardboard flying. Went shopping yesterday in attempted retail therapy. Bought amazing dress (Sales Lady said it looked, 'striking' then commented how she remembered me from the last time I'd tried it on. That essentially sold the dress. Not sure why – but the word striking suited me perfectly. I'd like to be striking, particularly after this past year of being a Vaseline smear of myself in the mirror). Soon to leave for Hungary with a European road trip in the works. Not planning this trip, instead leaving everything up to my husband and his family. I'll just be the tired girl in the backseat, typing away on her laptop. Article writing is coming along, but I'm suffering from 'cheese' syndrome. It's like when attractive people suddenly appear ugly in front of the camera. As soon as a spot light is turned on my writing it freezes up – fills with formality and tension – thus resulting in a lost voice. But life is a learning process, problem has been identified – now must rise above. Shake off those nerves.

And that is my situation in the form of facebook status lingo, or twitter tweeting. Many nouns are lost in the process, but too bad so sad. I'm too busy for nouns today. Essentially things are ticking along, but I'm finding it overwhelming. Also, throughout the madness of moving, there is this lurking sadness that keeps swooping down and resting heavily on my mind. It's funny – when I found out gluten was a bad thing, that really pissed me off. Finding out that my eggs are so low . . . I'm not at the point where I can be pissed off, instead I'm just well-deep sad.

Chances are I should be writing more. It's such a relief for these feelings, but because of the move there's no time. So! I've snuck in a pinch of typing this morning for Bumpyboobs, thankfully, but now should be off to eat some breakfast. Early morning writing is good for the soul. Helps to lighten my mood (because I shove all my worries on this electronic page, 'worry distribution' so that they're free from my head).

Okay, now it's really time to go. Zsolt is awake and getting dressed.

Soon this madness will be over and I'll be floating in spa waters. Almost there, Catherine, you're almost there.

29May2011

Stepping out the door

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Canada, Finding Home, Life, Writing

Alright, I'm at Tragos using the internet – last Tragos of the UK, last posting from England. Next up – Euro cruising with the Hungarians as we head to Zsolt's homeland for a much needed vacation. I'll write some posts in the car and then publish them as we arrive at various internet cafes. Until then, have a lovely week. The boxes are shipped, the flat has been cleaned, and the photo shoot is over. We're on our way, baby!

See you soon

29May2011

P.S. – how could I forget?

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs

Two year anniversary with my most wonderful husband (Zsolti) is today. Happy anniversary, Babe!

There is an unfortunate tendency for me to associate my wedding anniversary with discovering the lump in my breast last year. But sitting here at Tragos with Zsolt's arm about my shoulder, bopping to the music and drinking a mint tea – every single moment, including our anniversaries, is a moment to celebrate loving my husband. I need to shake off that stigma from last year's traumas – that was LAST YEAR. Past tense. This is now, here, happening. And it feels quite nice.

2Jun2011

The photo shoot

Posted in After treatment, Articles, Bumpboobs, Writing

Last Saturday, Zsolt was left to clean the apartment while I escaped to London for a photo shoot. Here is Zsolt: rubber gloves on both hands, Mr Muscle (cleaner) in one fist, rag in the other "There's so much to do," he says, correctly. Here is me: Shoes on, jacket wrapped, backpack filled, "See you later" and out the door.

Perhaps it wasn't the best timing, but it was the only timing possible. What with this mad week of packing and shipping boxes and cleaning the flat, there was very little choice in terms of 'waiting for a better time' for this photo shoot. So, things fell onto last Saturday.

Train. London. Subway. Walking. Arrival. I push through this corner building's heavy black door and entire a stark white room. This is the reception, it's huge. In the big white room, there are small white desks, and trendy white computers. To the far, far, far away right is a large entrance to a darker room with music pumping out. It all feels very . . . cool (*i.e. hip, fashionable, 'with it'*). Hmm. Suddenly I transform in a large floppy goldfish that has jumped from its tank. Fish outta water.

"Hello" said the receptionist – white blond hair, dark clothes.

"Hi, I'm looking for studio B," I reply – dark blond hair, green scarf, blue jacket, white shoes, red bag. I'm a freaking rainbow compared to this office/studio/other world).

She directs me to a door across the large, empty reception. I thank her and figure 'what the hell', going forward to open the door. On the other side of this door, is another door labelled 'Studio B' – so guess what's behind there?

I open the door to studio B and head down the stairs. There's more loud music pumping away. I have a slight pause in the hallway that involved me fiddling with my purse, but really I was procrastinating that moment where I'd walk through the *final* door to studio B and meet whatever was on the other side.

Then I remembered that they were expecting me, and I was *meant* to be here.

Open the final door.

Music, loud pumping music, and people – all kinds of people scurrying around; everyone looking beautiful, everyone looking busy.

Within seconds I'm noticed and one of the assistants points me out to the photographer, who comes over and welcomes me. Actually, this group of beautiful and busy people were incredibly welcoming. I was given tea, and a place to hang out, and everyone – *everyone without fail* – introduced themselves. Some of the girls showed me wardrobe choices, guarded the change room (empty room, no door or curtain) while I tried things on, and then I had a lovely chat with the Japanese makeup artist who prepared me for the camera. Apparently the photographer had lined up several jobs at once for that day. I was the last shoot on the list.

Which is why, after the final models had taken their snaps, this entourage of assistants, artists and fashionistas disappeared, leaving me alone in the studio with the photographer for the shoot (Thank freaking goodness, because everyone loved to poke their heads around to the place of shooting and see how things were going. Before everyone left there was a small audience watching my test shots, and that was a-w-k-w-a-r-d.). Once things quieted down I really did begin to enjoy myself. The photographer is a fellow Canadian, so and – as Canadians are – was very friendly. We chatted about all kinds of stuff in between photographs, and he taught me this trick for the camera. When someone's taking your picture and you want to look like you're laughing, just say "Ha Ha Ha" aloud – and then you'll actually laugh, because it's a ridiculous exercise.

During the shoot, he showed me some of the photos, and yes, they look like me. This sounds strange, but they look like I feel I look, so that' s a good sign (ever have a photo snapped and then checked the reviewed imaged, thinking "ugh – do I really look like that?" Well, no, you don't. You just look like that when snapped by a camera without saying "Ha Ha Ha" beforehand.) We took three sets of shots: Me in my pretty dress in the studio. Me in my pretty jacket on the roof. Then me back in the studio, sitting on a stool in my pretty jacket/dress. Anyhow, the whole thing was painless.

And then, once the shoot was over, I looked around and thought, "Wow." Because it's been a year since that stupid lump in my breast, and if you'd have told me then (or even when the nurse was saying "you've got a rough year ahead") that I'd be at a photo shoot in London one year later – posing for a photo to be run alongside an article I'd written for a national magazine . . . well, I would have pinched myself to wake up.

On Saturday I felt beautiful and excited. You never know what life has in store – for better or for worse, but when the good moments come along, good moments like last Saturday, it's certainly worth a pause to remember how sweet life can be.

(And speaking of which, we're now driving toward Brussels in Zsolt's sister's car. Time to pause again and appreciate how wonderful life is at this moment. Outside the sky is grey, rain is falling and the temperature has dropped. But who cares? I'm done with cancer, Zsolt's done with his studies, and it's time for a vacation. Woho!)

5Jun2011

Road tripping through Europe

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Fun, Life, Travel, Writing

Ah! Due to my absolute lack of wifi, I've decided to write a collection of short blog entries to document this trip across Europe, to be presented below. It's essentially driving me crazy not being able to connect my computer to the internet. I've got lovely images and thoughts to share, but can't transfer the work. Argh!

On the other hand, I am enjoying myself on this trip. There are times when – normally – I'd be the one in the front seat beside Zsolt (driver) saying "turn right here!" or "there's a parking spot!" but not this journey. This journey, I'm the one in the back seat sleeping. It's gorgeous.

Right.

31/05/2011 Brussels.

Both Zsolt and I have been here before, we've seen the little pissing boy, tasted the crunchy waffles and snapped photos of the flower market, which means arriving today was nice but not totally novel. Most of the day was spent trying to find a free toilet (impossible), followed by trying to find a gyro stand. Therefore, most of the day was wasted wandering the same 200m by 200m area over and over till all our goals were accomplished. Afterward we visited the Arcade, which is basically an old-fashioned mall with very high, glass ceilings and the most beautiful store fronts you could ask for. Inside the arcade were chocolate shops, book shops, toy stores and jewellery boutiques, all quite standard for that higher class of shopping that generally fills these kinds of places (arcades are far more charming than malls, there's such a lovely aesthetic to the place that despite affording nothing, I still really enjoy to visit). And then it was time to go back home. As the car navigated through rush hour, I spotted the hostel where Daniel (my little brother) and I originally stayed while first visiting Brussels. Across from the hostel is a park filled with lovely animal statues, and it made me smile to remember Dan perched on top of the lion giving a roar for the camera. Geez lousie, that was almost six years ago now – but visiting this city makes it all so fresh in my mind.

Good times seem to linger in my memory.

And now it's about nine twenty pm, Zsolt is sleeping beside me and I'm about to head to bed too. This day has been tiring (I'm out of shape, tourist-wise) and tomorrow promises to be another long haul. We're off bright and early to Amsterdam (see below) to visit the canal, bakeries, and indiscrete prostitution. This will be my second time in Amsterdam. I hope to visit an internet cafe, sample some hot beverage, and just enjoy the beautiful city. People might assume it's all about sex and drugs, but really – Amsterdam is a wonderful place to visit. And so, to bed. Tomorrow is another big day.

01/06/2011 Amsterdam.

The car has broken down. We were driving back from Amsterdam when this little gas tank light turned on, and shortly afterward the engine started to sound funny. Luckily, apart from one moment where everything went silent and the car stopped running, we were able to return to the house where we're staying. That's the good news. Bad news, it's tipping onto a 4-day long weekend here in Belgium, meaning we're potentially screwed in terms of servicing the car, meaning our Euro-road trip is also potentially screwed.

Amsterdam was beautiful as always – but too full of memories. Maybe if I'd had more time I could have stewed in the nostalgia, but as it was – the meat was tough and I had trouble enjoying myself (contrasting then/now and missing my little brother and thinking about that sweet little baby I'd met in the morning, plus starting to realizing I'm not going to see my friends again for quite some time. Can anyone say, 'pity party'?). This is the city where I decided to stick with Zsolt (nearly six years ago), but today it was the city where I moped. Sometimes it's hard to be happy. Apart from when we rented a paddle boat and cruised the canals, that was good fun and reasonably priced . . . and the French fries. Oh my G, they were amazing. I went back for seconds.

02/06/2011 Brussels.

Zsolt's sister and brother-in-law have called the insurance company and they're trying to find a garage to service the vehicle. However, the problem remains: today (Thursday) is a bank holiday, meaning most garages will also take tomorrow (Friday) as a holiday. Will we get our car serviced? Is Cologne, Dresden, and Prague off the menu for this journey? We'll see.

In the meanwhile I've been graced with internet – though yet to actually have access to the computer. I had been hoping for wifi, but at this point will take whatever is available. Zsolt has a portable hard drive so I can transfer my files to the actual computer.

Maybe today I'll take a walk outside.

04/06/2011 – Belgium to Germany to Austria to Hungary

How is it possible to cover several countries in one day? By driving straight through them. Unfortunately the mechanic could only apply a temporary fix to the car, and so we've decided it's most practical to go straight home. Bye bye Cologne, Dresden and Prague – maybe we'll meet again some other time? I feel badly for Zsolt's sister and brother-in-law because this was their holiday. Zsolt and I are still easy riding in the car's backseat, and apart from facing a 12 hour (or plus) drive, everything's feeling fine. My little episode with the baby proved not to stick, because I saw the tiny lady again and this time everything went well. She was entirely charming and I didn't feel one bit of sadness. Maybe I was just having a bad day when we first met.

Now we're in the car cruising across Germany, which is, didn't you know, huge. Not Canada huge, but Europe huge. I've heard the cities and food in Germany are great, but they'll have to wait for another occasion because at the moment I'm looking at field after field of green, with pit stop menus and pay toilets along the way.

Secretly I'm quite excited to arrive in Hungary, and hold no grudge that we'll be returning sooner than planned. Those sweet lawns of Balaton are calling my name: "Catherine, Catherine, come swim in the water," and the temperature has jumped up many degrees in the past few days. It really, truly feels like summer.

I enjoyed Belgium, despite the car troubles, and was very happy for the rest. Sometimes in planning a trip, actual 'resting' gets factored out of the equation. It's terrible that the Euro-holiday has been cancelled, but if we had to get stranded, I'm quite happy it was with a kind family, in a beautiful home, with a cherry tree in the backyard and an amazing bakery around the corner (okay, so that's gluten, but it's also a holiday). Can't say Zsolt and I will ever buy a hundred year old house with twelve-foot ceilings, but you never know. The main vibe about the place was 'home sweet home'– which I'm forever seeking though have made considerable peace with – and no matter where we end up (whatever building – cottage in Balaton, apartment in the city, basement in the suburbs) I hope we can make it loved-filled, family-gathering, and with simple charm like that house in Belgium.

Now to Hungary. To arriving. To Zsolt's parents, and, mostly likely, to a steaming pot of goulash.

05/06/2011 Hungary

And here we are on the porch. Last night's drive lasted about 13.5 hours, which is enough to flatten anyone's ass into a pancake. But it wasn't a bad day, and this morning is the pay off. On the front porch table is a bowl of deep red cherries, and beside that a bowl of aging strawberries. Behind me are not-yet-ready fruit trees with budding pears and plums. Hungary has its pros and cons, but the gardens are most certainly lovely.

Everyone around me is speaking Hungarian, and maybe I can understand one word per sentence. Okay, I'll listen in right now – these are the words I understand:

One, two only, no, colours, oh how nice, Volvo, car, 170 kilometres, cherries, in Canada, two hundred, Balaton, one thousand, money, gasoline, two litres, four hours, more Volvo talk and stuff about gas mileage . . . and so

on. From context, I judge this conversation to revolve around cars, the comparison of cars (it was an Opel that broke down during this trip, just four years old too. That's the third Opel to break down. Time to switch companies, maybe try a Volvo like Zsolt's father's car).

And apart from that everything's great – smooth and easy goes the day. Plus no one minds that I'm sitting here clacking away at the computer.

Pretty nice.

So I guess that's the end of this trip. Not what I'd expected, but who cares. I feel sorry for Zsolt's sis and bro-in-law, but it sure is nice here on the balcony.

(*Confirmed goulash for lunch. We have indeed arrived in Hungary!)*

See you laters, alligators.

6Jun2011

Summer of wonderfuls

Posted in After treatment, Travel Log, Writing

This is me on the beach in Balaton. Have I told you about Balaton? Most likely. It's the place I named when the anaesthesiologist asked: "Where's your favourite place to go on vacation?" right before I was knocked out and wheeled into surgery. So this is me, here in Balaton, writing to you.

It's off season, everything is quiet and the stores are all shut (little kiosks actually, where you can buy langos and soda and burgers), but the water is a very comfortable +23 degrees – or something like that, I just went in up to my thighs no problem, so whatever the actual temperature, it's most certainly a good one.

This morning Zsolt and I boarded the slow train from Budapest and rode the rails to this little village on the lake (*Balaton is the lake, and it's spotted all around with villages*). Riding the train was excellent, serving as both research for a story I'm writing, and just a great way to have fun. The windows were all down and we had a berth to ourselves – I was like a dog in puppy heaven with my face out the window, waving to the garbage man (etc). Trains in Hungary are slightly antique, not all of them of course, but many, and before they arrive at any station – if you're standing on the platform waiting that arrival – the rails ring out with a metallic snake-slithering kind of sound that announces it's approach even before that lady's voice makes a speech over the intercom. Since it's off peak and a Monday, the train was essentially empty. This, believe you me, is *the* way to get around Europe. I suppose we should have trained it from England, but – while a great ride – it's also expensive. Not as expensive as Canada trains, mind you, but still costly.

So here we are in Balaton. I totally dreamt of this place during chemo sessions – imagined myself floating on the water with that hot sun beating down. Hmm, well, I've waded – not quite floating, but it's a start.

Zsolt suggested that I'm getting everything I had wanted too quickly – goulash, Balaton, smoked cheese, train rides, paprika chips, swimming – but I say, can't get them fast enough. What's the use in pacing yourself, when good things are available – right there in front of you – just asking to be enjoyed? Can I over indulge in this experience? Frack no. When I'm full of summer rest, then I'll start diving back into my writing projects. Today on the train I did some writing, not blogging, but story writing, and maybe tomorrow I'll do it again. Time is this summer's ultimate luxury.

Anyhow- one year has passed and I'm in Balaton. That's reassuring. One year, and the whole world can (will) change. But not everything, I guess . . . not this place, at least. Maybe it's good that I'm here alone today (Zsolt is at the cottage building an IKEA shelf with his father). This way I can say hello to the water, and hello to a piece of me that's been waiting to come back. Feels good to be here – feels like home. I'm so damn thankful to have made it this far, and I'd like – I want, and I will – make it much, much further.

One year since that stupid dirty frustrating (life saving) diagnosis. Thank goodness. Thank GOODNESS, gracious, and golly gee. And thank *you* for your support, your kind words, your thoughtful comments, and your excellent company.

Okay, now I'm getting off this computer and am going to stare at the sky. Why not? This is my summer.

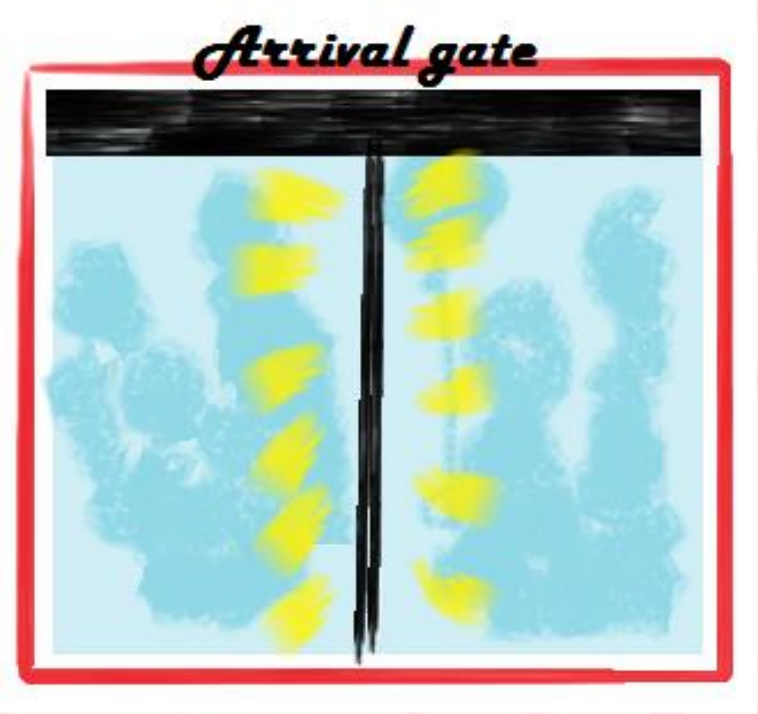
8Jun2011

Back at the arrival gates

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Life, Travel

Oh boy, oh boy. Tomorrow a friend is arriving here in Hungary – a *Canadian* friend. I won't mention her name because, in general, she's a stickler for privacy, though at some point I may be forced to assign an alias, because "my good friend from Canada" runs slightly long.

She arriving tomorrow around noon. Zsolt and I will cruise along the highway starting 9 am(ish) in order to meet her on arrival. Something tells me that the 9th of June will involve a lot of ass-flattening *a la* car seat, again, but at least the reward of seeing "my good friend from Canada" is worthwhile.



Man, I can remember so well the first time I arrived in Hungary nearly six years ago. I'd worn a green hooded sweater, and my Dad's undershirt (which I thought was a cute top, wearing my Dad's clothing was a less-than-hip trend I followed all through high school, and then maintained well past university). The flight from Toronto was about nine hours, and I was totally knackered upon arrival, despite having had the middle four seats of the row to myself. (at this point I remember an instrument, maybe a trumpet . . . I think one of the passengers had a brass instrument with them, but that's speculation at this point . . . sometimes my memories feel more like dreams than reality. Time deconstructs the facts.)

Anyhow, I arrived and went through customs – all prepared for a difficult line of questioning about where I was going, who I was visiting, why I was in Hungary. Instead they stamped my passport and waved me through – nice. And then, having collected my luggage, I walked through the gate.

That sweet, universal, gate – where someone you love is on the other side waiting, and seeing them is *the* best thing to happen in that moment.

And there was Zsolt, looking tall and handsome and lean, with pink tulips in his hand. The guy has the sweetest smile, really. Sometimes I look at him and think, geez – he's with *me*? But then again, sometimes I look at photos of myself and think, geez – I look like *that*? But I guess Zsolt and I match rather well. My old neighbours spent a good chunk of the acquaintance thinking we were brother and sister. Yowzers. That's what I call matching a little too much.

My first impression of Hungary: Zsolt.

I wonder what my friend's impression will be? We'll try and show her the cream of the cream, and rest in between the efforts. A rough sketch of our plan for her is as follows: Pecs, Balaton, Budapest. That keeps things rather broad, but I'm also thinking: Spa, Lake, Spa to align with each city/village visited.

Right. Time for bed! This morning I work at 6 freaking AM, way too early, with ideas ringing between my ears. So, I'm outtie five thousand. Take care, and good night!

PS – Thank goodness for my little Spanish fan, because I'm so hot flashing right now, it's ridiculous.

11Jun2011

I'm no tourist, baby

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Canada, Finding Home, Food, Life, Love, Travel

Ever since reading that green tea helps fight cancer, I've been sucking it back on a daily basis. But, now in Hungary, my Anti Cancer regiment of ass-kicking foods has been challenged, meaning that I had my green tea around 9.30 PM, instead of 9.30 AM today. This explains why Zsolt is in the bed beside me with a pillow over his head, and why I'm still here at the computer clacking away on this large keyboard.

So, that's the explanation. Not that it helps anything, because I still don't feel like hitting the bed.

My CAN friend is here and it's been such a surreal experience – a wonderful experience, of course, but surreal to mix worlds together. In my dreams, worlds are constantly overlapping (Zsolt at my elementary school, my parents at a house party, etc) . . . but in the real world they're rather well defined. Canada has my family and close (currently visiting) friend. England has my English (and international) friends, Hungary has my other family (Zsolt's family) and my Hungarian friends. These people do not mix and meet. Ever. With three exceptions: my wedding, my BC bullshit, and right now.

Watching Cami (alias suggested by a website called Rum & Monkey, a page forwarded by another, non-visiting, friend from Canada – so Cami is now short for 'my friend from Canada who is visiting') mix with Zsolt's family is so much like my first time in this country. There are the wild gestures, the miscommunication, the repeating "jo" meaning good, and "egan" meaning yes, etc. And seeing this helps me appreciate how far things have come. I'm no longer the guest, I'm the daughter in law. Their conversations do not allude me (not entirely) and I can actually contribute with my barrel scraping knowledge of the language. No one minds when I wash a dish. And most importantly, Hungary isn't a place to visit, it's a place to go home.

So here I am at 11pm, household sleeping all around, typing in my Hungarian bedroom, waiting for the tea to wear away. Thank goodness for this blog. She keeps me company no matter what time of day (or night). And thank goodness for green tea too – despite the buzz, because it's helping fight a good fight.

But now I'll post this and get off the computer. Zsolt must be going bonkers with all this clacking at the keyboard. Tea or no tea, it's time to sleep.

Good night!

13Jun2011

Much love for the pretty bras

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs

As you may know, I am not always a fan of mastectomy fashion. When I think mastectomy bras, I think of words like: practical, suitable, supportive. But, what I'd rather be thinking is: sexy, beautiful, fun. So, today, I'm going to share with you three people's online projects – all created with the wonderful intention to support breast cancer survivors (and have a little fun at the same time), and all playing on the idea (what a realization!) that women like to feel pretty.

In today's post, it's all about feeling sexy; sexy is self-confidence. And looking beautiful, as you well know, instantly helps in feeling better. Check out what these online ladies are up to.

Hot shop:

About a Girl – aka ***At Forty One*** – has been nominated for "New UK lingerie design 2011" (vote here, if you'd like to help them win). This is a fresh company on the scene and looking for support. I'll tell you what – their silk bras are gorgeous. I mean, many mastectomy bras offer support and comfort, but these pieces offer *style* too. From cherry reds, lilac purples and champagne accents, my jaw dropped when I saw Amy's (the creator) pieces of pretty. "Finally!" I said to myself, *or to the computer screen, depending on how you want to consider the scenario*, "something other than beige!"

What also makes About a Girl so wonderfully exciting is that Amy (*who has had a mastectomy herself, which was what kick-started her interest in finding better lingerie*) actually designs her own bras and – *AND* – recruits hot bathing suit designers who agree to turn their designer bikinis and full pieces into mastectomy-ready wear (*speaking of which, About a Girl has offered a kind 10% off any swimwear purchase made over the next week, so if you want to look pretty (and double breasted) by the pool, stop by and check out her shop.* ***Discount code***: BB080611OAS).

Being on the internet, About a Girl can ship worldwide – which is why *call out to any 34 AA women near Brighton in the UK* I'll still keep waiting for their silk bras to be tailored for my small chest, even once arriving in Canada. If you're near their shop, At Forty One, and want to lend a hand, they're looking for a model in that particular size to fit the bra.

Hot cause:

Bras for the Cause – Middle East.

One Wig Stand (who, by the way, oozes with creative bursts of awesome) has teamed up with Fustany to launch this bra design competition in the Middle East. It's all about awareness, and (hopefully) will have pockets for your falsie of choice.

Good news: the competition is *still* on if you want to get involved, with voting to take place later this month. It's a collaboration of designers, fashionistas, and simply anyone with a great idea. How could beautiful bras *not* result from this competition? (I*'m freaking excited to see what get produced from this engaging initiative. What do you get when mixing creative minds with a good cause and a bra template? I don't know, we'll see.*)

Better news*:* The bras should be available for international shipping, meaning everyone can look pretty.

I love these sort of things. They build awareness, and improve my wardrobe. Click here to check this out for yourself.

Hot alternative:

Because sometimes one breast is all you need. Cathie in France has developed a new kind of bra for the beautiful Amazonian women, Souti1. She's been working hard to make this possible, and the result is a lovely, lacy number that will support your remaining breast (if you had the other one removed). It's a single cup sensation. Now, at the moment, her bras are all handmade – so you know the quality is high (which also corresponds to the price). Check it out and see what you think. And keep watching this space, because you never know what may develop in the land of single sided bras.

Cathie was one of the first women I met through the internet. She left a lovely comment on a guest post I'd written, and I was so happy to have her support over the months of recovery and treatment. Even though she's all the way in Paris – that never hindered her ability to drop a kind word. See, that's the internet used well.

*

How's that for a slice of international pie? England, France and the Middle East. And it reflects a worldwide shift in after-surgery lingerie. Mastectomy (bi lateral, lumpectomay, etc) no longer translates into 'boring, practical, and beige' (a*m I harping on the beige too much? Well probably, it is very practical. I just think if you're going to offer me a variation between black and white, give me blue, or purple or yellow or – goodness me – pink!*). And so, we can feel pretty in our under things as we pose and twirl before our mirrors.

If you know of any more great shops/products/causes that help women feel beautiful within themselves (e.g. look good feel better workshops) please don't hesitate to let me know. Here's a quick list of today's mentioned sites. Why not treat yourself to some virtual browsing (and maybe some creative thinking for Bras for a Cause)? Can't hurt, can it?

http://www.aboutthegirl.co.uk/

http://www.fustany.com/brasforacause/index.html

http://www.souti1.com/

16Jun2011

Taking care of someone else

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Food

Today I'm taking care of a friend who doesn't feel so well. She was great yesterday, but then for some reason came down with a fever overnight, and has been sleeping this entire morning in bed. Therefore, I'm whipping up a pot of always delicious chicken soup: the cure-all in a pot.

And, interestingly, beside me as I make this soup is a bag of chips (crisps) – which in my opinion go with soup like bread and butter.

Anyhow, this takes me back to late 2010 when every Friday following chemotherapy I had several bowls of soup and at least one bag of chips. It was healing for me then. Maybe it will be healing for her now? In any case, it feels nice (this is slightly selfish, I suppose) it feels nice to be taking care of someone else, rather than being the one who needs help. This is most certainly the better side of things.

Here we are outside of Budapest, at Zsolt's sister's house again. After a relaxing few days in Balaton and a relaxing few days in Pecs, we've come here to get our tourist on. As sure as she has recovered, we'll be heading up to the Duna to take pictures and sightsee.

But until then Zsolt and I are resting on the porch as she (Cami) sleeps upstairs. The soup is on and bubbling. And of course there's that ultimate medicine – ***time***, and plenty of it, for her to recover.

17Jun2011

A time to dance, hopefully

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Fun, Life, Travel, Treatment

Friday, Friday – gotta get down on Friday. Tonight I'm going out, and hoping it'll be fun, fun, fun because I'm looking forward to the weekend. With my friend in town (*literally in town, she's gone off sightseeing and I'm still at home taking it easy – this possibly makes me a bad host, but at least it prevents a severe case of the grumps. Seems to me that while I've recovered so much from what chemo changed, I still have no tolerance for long, hot walks on the heat-waving pavements of capital cities.*) she's requested we visit a real European nightclub.

Hmm. Real European night club? I've been to several clubs in Europe, all with a general vibe of 'small hole-in-the-wall place to dance' as opposed to the monster clubs you might get in, for instance, Cancun, Mexico. So I believe this might be a case of reality not meeting expectation. However, another friend, a Hungarian friend, has promised to take us out on the town tonight – he has a club in mind that is, apparently, "Hungaricum". Whatever that means! (*Geez, I hope it's not rude, but then he isn't a fellow to be crass, so I'm guessing that whatever Hungaricum means, it's a nice phrase*).

Anyhow. Why is this night special? It's special because I haven't gone out dancing in over a year. More than a year. For ages!

First: will I remember how to dance? Meh, it's not too hard, I'll likely remember.

Second: will I stay awake? My general bedtime is 10pm, which is pathetic for a woman not yet thirty, but there you go. I love my bed, and my bed loves me. We have a close relationship. So fingers crossed I've enough energy to shake my booty, at least till midnight.

Third: will it be a good night? Yes. That shouldn't even be a question. It will, for sure, be a good night.

And then Saturday will follow Friday (duh), and we'll sleep in and visit another spa. This time we'll be going to Széchenyi Gyógyfürdő (http://www.budapestgyogyfurdoi.hu/hu/szechenyi/elerhetoseg) which is a beautiful old spa in the park area of Budapest. This will be Cami's last day in the city, since on Sunday she'll fly out, and hopefully it's a nice end to her Hungarian experience.

And then (and then, and then, and then) . . . I'll get back to the real world – sorta – and start figuring out this online lit mag idea I've been having. It's an attempt to give breast cancer fighters, family, carers, friend a place for creative thinking. Should be good, if I can ever get it started!

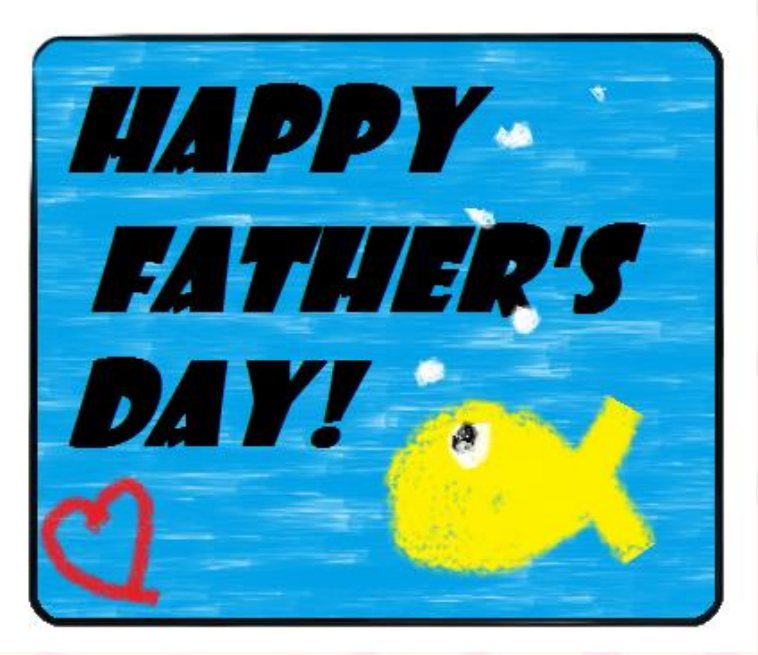
And while I type this, Goofy the dog, is pushing her muzzle against my arm in a constant attempt for attention. I'd forgotten how sweet and earnest dogs can be; they're happy balls of fur and slobber.

19Jun2011

Budapest: a great night out

Posted in Fun, Life, Travel

Before my Monday post, I'd just like to say that Friday night was fantastic. FANTASTIC. We began at this hole-in-the-wall Slovakian restaurant behind the Hungarian Parliament and ate some truly delicious food. It was jammed packed with flavour. Cami ordered something off of the menu that no one recognized, which translated to her plate – it was like a pork pancake, combining potatoes, meat, cheese, sour cream and gravy.



After the food we stuck around the restaurant and had some drinks (couldn't get a tea, settled for a milky coffee instead) and some friends came by to meet up.

I love meeting up with Zsolt's friends in Hungary. These are people who I've known as long as I've known Zsolt – actually, I met them before I met Zsolt (exclusively) and there hasn't been an instance where we haven't had fun together. Therefore, we were a happy table of laughter and good times. It's been too long since I've seen them, because last summer all plans of a Hungarian visit were cancelled (duh) and last Christmas I was lucky enough to fly home to Canada.

Turns out that one of them – you know who you are – reads my blog frequently and uses it to improve her English. Wonderful, eh? I'd like to say a big "**Hello, Szia!"** if she's reading this today. Maybe that's a good idea for me as well. Can anyone recommend some easy Hungarian blog to follow? There must be a million to choose from. It might be a good learning experience for me as well.

And after the restaurant we headed out in search of a nightclub. Honestly, this was my favourite part of the evening. Trolling around Budapest, passing the hen parties in the Octagon, stopping at every fast-food joint available (complete with bouncers at the door, things must get crazy in Budapest if even McDonalds needs a bouncer), and just having a laugh. It was great.

Eventually we ended up at this club called Instant, which was really cool and I'd definitely recommend it, but their main disco was closed for the evening, so we ditched Instant (*because Friday was set with a mission to DANCE/TÁNCOL*) and caught a tram across town.

(*By this point I was nearing a state of sleep-walker, but we hadn't even started dancing yet, so there was no way I was going to call it a night*).

Eventually we settled at this outdoor disco on (*I think*) Margaret Island. It was huge, the night was warm, the music was loud. Tick off my box to 'go dancing' because finally, finally, finally I had my chance for fun. Geez, eh. Things have come a long way, and I'm so thankful my body has recovered so well.

It was a fantastic night. Fantastic. So to preface tomorrow's post (authors are allowed to do this, we can preface anything with an explanation if we want, because it's our story to tell), Friday night was wonderful – everything I'd hoped for and more.

Have a lovely Sunday.

OH MY GOODNESS. It's father's day.

Ok, PS. Today is father's day, and I've yet to call my Dad. However, it was in my plans, and I will do it right now. Dad, you are awesome, as you know, and I'm lucky to be your daughter (and I don't even mind that people constantly say I look so much like you, even though you're totally a man.) Have a wonderful day, and I hope a garr bites your line – that'd probably be the very best father's day gift you could receive. Fingers crossed.

20Jun2011

The worst song lyric EVER

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Writing

The voted worst song lyric of all time slapped me in the face yesterday as I danced under the stars in Budapest. There we were in an open-air nightclub on Margaret Island (*I was clinging to consciousness, this being my first night out post chemotherapy and it was already ticking past 2 am*), Zsolt was pulling his signature 'I'm pointing my fingers' dance move, and I was head bopping and body rocking along when the DJ mixed in Rhythm is a Dancer, by *Snap!* You know this song? It's a bit of a classic, and I must have heard/danced to it a hundred times before. So this gets me excited, because finally here's a song I recognize and I begin to make attempts at actual dancing (*rather than my 'I'm totally exhausted' head bobbing'*) when out comes the line: *I'm serious as cancer when I say rhythm is a dancer.*

What?

And all head bopping stopped. I was shocked.

Snap!, apparently, is serious as cancer when they say rhythm is a dancer. But really, are they? Well lucky for them to not (at least at the time of lyric writing) have cancer in their lives – that's great for anyone – because if they did, I'm sure this line would never have made the final edit. Really, you have to assume (you just have to) that the creators of this song look back at this lyric choice and shake their heads with regret. But there it was last night, regret or no regret, shouting over the speaker system and reminding me about something I had really hoped to forget for the evening.

However I'm not writing this post to shame *Snap!*, because chances are they've already been shamed. Nope, I'm writing this because *Rhythm is a Dancer* is such a well known song – I've heard it many times, and yet last Friday night (aka Saturday morning), was the first time I've ever noticed that lyric.

Which goes to show, perspective is all about experience. BC (before cancer) I would never have been so impacted by such a dumb lyric – nope, I would have waved my arms, shook my hips and spun in a circle, and maybe, *maybe*, registered in the back of my head that I'd heard something strange, but certainly it wouldn't have winded me, thrown me back, stopped me dead.

I can remember this other time when *I* was the idiot (*cause in fairness to Snap! we all make mistakes – just too bad theirs was cut, produced, and distributed*). All throughout my childhood was this expression: "*that's so gay*", i.e. that is stupid. And my unknowing mouth would pronounce this or that as gay, and my distracted brain would never, ever connect it with the bigger insult *(I don't mean calling someone 'gay' as in homosexual is the bigger insult, I mean using the term 'gay' as a bad thing is insulting to anyone who is, actually, gay. Seeing as there's nothing stupid about homosexuality, heterosexuality or being bi – it's a true misrepresentation of words.*)

ANYHOW – it wasn't until a summer spent in Jasper, at the too-old-to-know-better age of 20, that I remarked (*for the last time)* "that's so gay" and a friend turned to me and said, "Catherine, I expected better of you."

At which point, I woke up to the absolute rudeness.

Like last Friday night, when I woke up to the world's worst song lyric and felt disguised, buzz-killed, and angry at the flippant remark.

Which makes me think, what else have I allowed to slip past my internal radar of decency? Plenty, I'll bet.

Rhythm is not serious like cancer. Anyone post diagnosis knows this. Anyone with family who have battled knows this. Anyone who has helped support others through a whole lotta crap knows this too. Everyone should know this, cancer or not.

But it is a reminder to be aware, and be considerate. Even when spoken with a light heart, there are people who will feel the impact of such ignorant language.

So last Friday I learned a lesson. And I danced, which – FYI – was really the highlight of the evening. It's been over a year since I've danced all night, and the experience, right until that 2am face slap, was incredible. I felt young, healthy and totally care-free. From a night out at the restaurant, to walking around the boulevards of Budapest, to finding a giant outdoor club and a spot to dance – it was a wonderful evening. I'm 100% thankful to have made it past last year's nightmare. Just another reminder that there is another side – the after-side – of treatment, and it was worth the fight to dance again, finally, under the stars.

24Jun2011

Spiritual thrill ride with a Balatoni storm

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life, Travel, Writing

Here we are on the porch in Balaton, sitting underneath the awning and watching the rain. There, on the table, are my indulgences: a cup of steaming tea and an unwrapped bar of dark chocolate (70% coco, if you're curious). Everywhere – here at the table, there in the garden, beyond through the houses, up in the grey sky, and down along the cloudy water – is a sense of calm and peace and tranquillity. Except for last night.

Last night, after a successful stewing of goulash over the fire pit (and after eating that tasty goulash), a storm kicked up that put me in the mood for some night-time wonder. Zsolt and I (wise or unwise) headed to the lake side and watched the lightening streak across the far off northern shore. And ten meters away, on our southern shoreline, the water crashed into the rocks – while Balaton might be shallow (shallow, but very wide) there's no way I'd have been enticed into that water.

The storm was, in short, magnificent.

I love to be overpowered by nature, made to feel small – and yet, and yet totally plugged in. Like I took my personal plug and inserted it into the storm's crazy energy socket. You know what I mean? It's a feeling of awe and wonder and fascination. Almost spiritual.

Sometimes it's good to be reminded that we are small, and the world is big. I cannot exactly say why, but that is my sense. It's a beautiful thing (and very fitting for the gothic horror novel I'm currently reading, *The Woman in White*, by Wilkie Collins).

Anyhow, after deciding the storm was a little *too* intense for safety standards, Zsolt and I retreated from the beach and I scribbled everything down in my journal. Now there's probably a touch of Mr Collins' voice in this description (because I absorb other people's styles like a sponge), but I think it might actually fit the scenario.

Here is the Balaton storm, painted through words and jotted down in my journal, in the epistolary format of Mr Collins.

"We stood at the lakeside as my sweet Balaton turned into a churning mass of storm – wind gusting at near hurricane speeds against our faces (and bodies, and trees, and huts, and shore) as lightening cracked and crawled along the northern shoreline behind the Badacsony hills. Amazing! It's awesome to witness a developing storm – awesome with the incredible power and force. Loved every second (despite being scared the waves would suck us up into the froth). It was an experience, inside and out. Awesome, absolutely Awesome."

It's been a long time since I've seen a great storm. (blame it on the UK fizz and permanently mild weather)

There's no particular reason I'm sharing this with you today, except that beautiful things ought to be shared. And last night was truly spectacular. Sometimes we need to feel small. Sometimes we need to be awed. Sometimes we (I) need to plug into a higher power, whatever that may be.

26Jun2011

Another kind of healing

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Life, Love

The sun is setting and there's a three hour train ride to Pecs, Zsolt's home town, on the horizon. But a sunset train ride is certainly the way to go, if you've got to go anywhere, and I've got that last burst of dusk to enjoy before twilight settles (*and the vampires come out . . . we are close to Transylvania after all, and Bela Lugosi was **the** vampire of vampires, and a Hungarian to boot.*)

Today Zsolt and I were alone – just the two of us. That hasn't happened in a long, long time. I love (LOVE) the company of friends and family, but this morning Zsolt suggested we stay in bed and just hang out, something that hasn't been done in months, and without any obligations to meet or people to host, it sounded like a fine idea to me.

For some reason (menopause, worries, allergies, etc) my 'nerves' have been on edge lately. Any little thing is enough to get me cranky, and poor Zsolt is the receiver of my outbursts. Just yesterday I kicked up a fuss (i.e. got angry) because Zsolt thought it was a stupid idea to raise my bike seat . . . okay, the seat *is* already very high, I guess that's reasonable, but I simply didn't like my idea being rejected so outright, particularly since it's my seat. Anyhow – cue my hissy fit, followed by day-long discomfort between the two of us. All over a stupid bike seat.

Never – ever, ever, ever – would I get so bent out of shape with friends, or co-workers, or even (probably) family over a bike seat . . . but Zsolt is my Zsolt, meaning for better and worse, we get the honest raw truth of one another.

There are some things I don't often talk about in my blog, for instance: sex, grudges, and arguments. Doesn't mean they aren't vitally important, doesn't mean they don't play key roles in my life, doesn't mean I'm disinterested in the subjects – actually, I'm a fan of chatting about one's sex life with the right group of friends, but my grandmother reads this blog, so this has got to be the wrong arena for a frank conversation about s-e-x).

But occasionally, I do allude to the tension. For all the amazing things Zsolt and I have become with each challenge, each move, each triumph and each hurdle, I'd be a blatant liar to pretend that the past year hasn't caused a strain in our relationship. Don't get me wrong – I in no way doubt my love for Zsolt, nor his love for me, and I in no way doubt that he's my moon and stars and turquoise Mediterranean sea (or my wide, blue Balaton with the grass beaches and twenty year old bicycles, or my Canadian maple under which I read) – he's all those things and more. But it's just damn hard to go through a year of cancer battling and *not* have things change, *not* have that tension.

I think we need to heal in a way that doesn't get mentioned in the online forums or how-to cancer booklets. And this morning was an excellent step toward recovery. We were alone. We were together. We talked about our feelings. It was restorative, and ought to be done more often.

So today has been lovely. Today I've tried to worry less and relax more.

And tomorrow is Zsolt's birthday. He's turning 30. Thirty years, and going strong – that's my man. I love him to bits – bits and pieces and scoops and dollops. Meeting him was the best thing I've ever done. Marrying him was the best decision I've ever made. Being with him is the best medicine I could ever take. And all the while,

he's just trucking along – being Zsolt. Turning thirty isn't a bad thing, not in the least. It's a gift of time, and hopefully, *hopefully hopefully hopefully*, we've got plenty of time ahead. Plenty of time, and a few good slices of birthday cake too.

1Jul2011

Happy Canada Day, Canadians!

Posted in Canada

Happy Canada day!!!

This time of year Ottawa becomes crazy with red, white, hot dogs, burgers, beer, bbqs and fireworks. It is a slice of Canadiana – our mass assemblage in the streets of downtown (where people sell Canada t-shirts, Canada-whistles, Canada-hats, Canada-anythingyoucanstickalabelon), and a day when everyone smiles at everyone, and people are in a damn good mood.

Ah, one of these days I'll take Zsolt along to the party. Maybe even next year?

And in the meanwhile, I'd like to wish everyone back home a wonderful, exciting, and safe Canada day – have fun, eat food, visit cottages.

Yay for Canada! Wohoo!

1Jul2011

Introducing Narrative Nipple

Posted in After treatment, Writing

Good morning!

I ought to be writing a post about re-focusing, re-centring, and *re-re-re*laxing . . . because that's what this week has been about. Slowing down (*to the point of 8.30pm bedtimes, but I think I was drunk on too much corn that night*). But alternatively, this week has also be about readdressing my goals . . . and because, much like my Dad, I can't contain myself when I get excited over something – here is a project I've been tinkering with:

She's called "**Narrative Nipple**" and she's an online literary e-zine that associates itself with the ups, downs, lights, darks (and colours) of breast cancer. Basically, it's a mini stage online for people who have been touched by BC, and have sought refuge through creativity. At the moment I'm trying to collect material for its launch issue. Which is why I could use your help.

Have anything to share? Know anyone who might? Please, please (please?) pass on the website and encourage people to submit. I'm not amazing at online marketing, but am about to give it my best – so hopefully by the end of this summer there will be a shiny new website chalk full of dynamic ideas and right-to-the-core honest expressions, stories, pictures, etc.

I think, if done right, this will be a very good thing. We'll see.

In any case, do check out the website and give it a browse. It's rather K-I-S-S*, but who cares! It's a great start.

www.NarrativeNipple.com

*Keep it simple, stupid

2Jul2011

The Haunting

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs

It's pretty late and I'm upstairs in Zsolt's childhood (teenage-hood) bedroom alone with the computer. Today I reckoned it's been about a year since my mastectomy. So one year past diagnosis, and now one year post surgery. It's funny, and it sucks, (so funny, like strange – not ha, ha, ha funny) how I am associating big dates with fucking cancer.

Today Zsolt's family celebrated a collaborative birthday between Zsolt and I. He just turned thirty, and next week I'll hit twenty nine. We were given some wonderful gifts (flowers, lottery cards, chocolate, a trip to the bath, clothing) but to knock everything out of the park, we were given an incredible painting which Zsolt and I had spotted several weeks ago, and Anna and Laszlo were kind enough to sneak out to buy. It's now on Zsolt's bedroom wall, and I think it's grade-A beautiful – an abstract watercolour that reminds me of wind, and dust, and far off trees, with a field of dry grass and a storm rolling in . . . mind you, the painting is called, 'island' so I'm likely off the mark, but who cares? The great thing about this painting is that it is unique to everyone.

So today brought some lovely things, and, of course, lovely company. But in the midst of rapid Hungarian conversation (of which I understand very, very little) my mind began to drift . . . drift, drift, drift – and where does it go? Where it always goes. One year back, one year back, one year back . . . my mind always drifts, and it always goes there. I can't even help myself – suddenly I'm lying in bed recovering from surgery, or I'm trying to walk following days off my feet, or my mom is urging me to eat, or I'm back in the chemo room getting a drip – and then *_snap_* Zsolt asks what I'm thinking about.

"Nothing."

I think about it so often, it might as well be nothing.

Anyhow, birthdays now remind me of mastectomies. Maybe not forever. In time, everything will fade; this will be like the time I got a boil on my knee and had to stay inside for an afternoon . . . not a great day (I was like five back then), but just a memory – not an emotion, not an immersion. Will my thoughts ever stop taking me back there so vividly? I hope, at least, the sensation wears away. (except for the good stuff, I'd like to keep all that – there's so much good stuff too . . . friends, family, jokes, crushes, meetings, marriages – so many *better* places my mind could wander, and yet it keeps returning to cancer like there's some stupid magnet on the memory.)

Katie at The Daily Breast talks about this constant hum of cancer that haunts her. And I read her post today, nodding along, and thinking 'how appropriate – this is exactly how I feel' . . . because it is exactly how I feel.

Yes, I know that things need to move forward. And if I could disconnect this entire past year (if I could erase what has happened, with the promise that it will never happen again) maybe I would. Not sure. On one hand it *has* shaped me. On the other, it has also scarred me.

What about you? Would you remove a past pain, if you could be promised it'd never, ever, ever return? I guess a brave person would say no. But it's tempting (as if this option actually existed), it's tempting . . .

I love who I am, and I accept that cancer was once part of my life – but seriously, this habit needs to change. I guess there's still much work to do, and much healing required. Time will tell. I'm counting on time.

4Jul2011

Vote for your favourite bra

Posted in Bumpboobs, Fun

As mentioned earlier, Bras for a Cause, Middle East is having a breast cancer awareness competition which involved designing bras. Well, the designs are in, and now – NOW – everyone gets to share in the fun. Visit the site, enjoy the pictures, choose your favourites.

It's almost like shopping, but without any post-purchase guilt.

Enjoy! Visit the galary and vote here. http://www.fustany.com/brasforacause/

5Jul2011

It's totally my birthday!

Posted in Bumpboobs, Finding Home, Fun, Life, Love, Travel Log

Happy birthday to me! Yes, it is my birthday and I could hardly fall asleep last night because I was so excited. Doesn't that sound ridiculous? But there you have it: twenty-nine and still excited about birthdays. Beside, every marking occasion that takes me forward in life is a *good* thing. Further I get, the better the news.

This morning Anna and Laszlo sang me happy birthday while carrying a large plate filled with raspberries and two candles (in shape of a two and a nine), they sang in English, they sang in Hungarian, and I cheered in the universal language of two hands slapping together.

Last night was so excellent (*quick jump to the topic of language learning*). Anna and Laszlo were saying how they never study English since it's so easy to get distracted (*tell me about it, I'm meant to be studying my French lesson right this moment, and yet, here I am typing up a post instead*), so then I said, 'no problem, I'll just speak English from now on', though I said it in Hungarian.

Which of course isn't true – I won't stop speaking Hungarian, everyday my skills are improving, and it's nice to be understood, but last night I *did* feed them some slowly spoken English sentences

"Tomorrow is my birthday"

"Tomorrow morning I will wake up early"

"I will go to the city and eat ice cream"

"You have a nice house." – to which they immediately protested, saying it's way too small, and the conversation spun off in another direction, until I reeled them back in with:

"What will you do tomorrow?" and they both answered, one at a time, listing what they'll do tomorrow (now today). Shopping. Cooking. Accountant. Eat ice cream. More cooking. Sleep.

Anyhow - it was wonderful to have that exchange. They have way more English than I realized and, even though it took time, understanding was there.

So that was one thing, on top of my birthday, that had me all keyed up last night as I flipped and flopped in bed. The third thing (it's no wonder I didn't sleep immediately) was this crazy dance urge I've been enjoying lately. It all started when Zsolt was like, "come on, stay up and watch music videos." And I was like, "Ah, but I'm so tired. Ahhh, fine."

It was a countdown, and mostly (honestly) totally crap music – except for this song. This song has been running through my head, picking up my feet, and I can't stop wanting to dance. Therefore, I've been playing excessive amounts of Just Dance and loving every second. When approached with a 'workout' mentality, it's really effective.

And so, as a birthday gift to you, I leave this music video. May it pick up your feet too.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KQ6zr6kCPj8

Take care and have a great day!

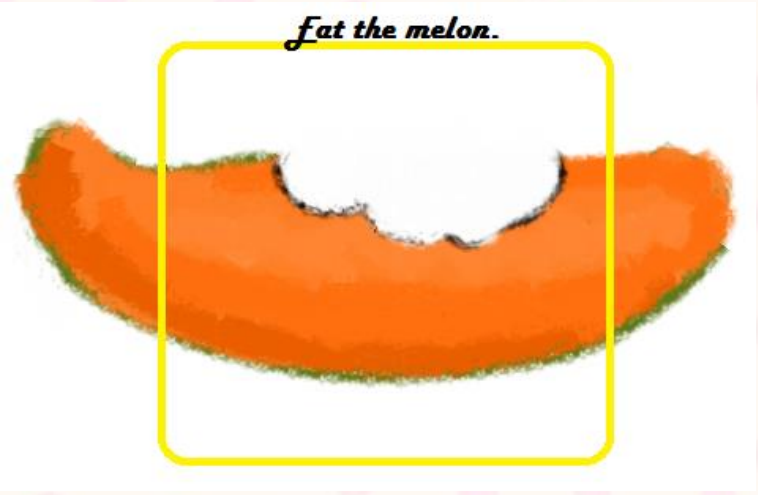
7Jul2011

Living in a fruit salad

Posted in Food, Fun, Life, Travel

"Catherine, it's so delicious. Oh, it's so sweet! *Finom, ez finom!*"

This is Anna the fruit pusher (aka Zsolt's mother) trying to convince me to eat a piece of the orange coloured melon she's just sliced. The table is covered with fruit – melon, apple, pear, peach . . . this morning there were raspberries, now finished off, and a few weeks earlier there were cherries too.



Hungary in the summer has a never ending parade of fruit. Organic, locally grown (aka the backyard), sweet, juicy, fruit.

But I'm no fan of melons, with the exception of watermelons.

"Oh *de jo*," she says, meaning 'how good' and looking earnestly at my face. You know, there's something about her lovely blue eyes and absolutely eager expression that almost temps me to try the melon piece. But that would open flood gates. First comes one piece, then suddenly a slice, and then, of course, a whole half of the melon she's trying to have finished.

"Lots of vitamins," Zsolt reminds me. That's the ultimate argument around here: lot's of vitamins.

So I say to Zsolt, "how come your Dad isn't eating fruit?" Laszlo is finishing off an ice cream (*I also don't want an ice cream; it's too sweet for this hot weather. And I do not want a melon. Instead, as all this transpires, I'm slicing into peach after peach – recently picked from Zsolt's grandmother's peach tree in Pecs*.)

"We're all thinking of you," replies Zsolt. "You're the one who got sick."

And it's so freaking true too. For years I was saying his family eats too much bread, too much sugar – actually, I think too much anything is probably too much. And then *I* go and get the cancer. So there's egg on my face. But nevertheless, I'm not eating an ice cream when fruit will do just as well; mind you, I'm also not eating that melon.

"*Jo borat, finom.*" I comment – nice peach, tasty. And the conversation is deflected into peaches. Ground has been held, no melon has passed my lips.

Next up in the fruit parade will Hungarian-grown watermelons. I'm looking forward to this stage of the summer, because unlike those other melons – watermelons are wonderful.

Now Anna has turned toward her husband, Laszlo, and is trying to sell him the melon. He's not budging either, though his ice cream is nearly finished. I feel like he and I are allies in our dislike toward melons (*just ignore*

that I tried to throw him under the wheels in an effort to deflect attention from myself – we're allies now. It's all okay.)

This is a fruit salad summer. Lots of vitamins. Lots of juice. Lots of natural sugar. I'm not sure if so much fruit is or isn't cancer fighting (I'd say all those raspberries were probably quite helpful), but they are certainly delicious.

Anyhow, no melon for me, thanks very much. But I'll certainly have another peach.

11Jul2011

Zsolt as Piros and Vörös

Posted in Fun, Life, Love, Travel

You may have noticed (or may not) the several-day gap between this and the last post. Well, honestly, the weather is warm and we're by the lake, and it's so lovely in the water . . . all my 'things' have been neglected (blogs, twitter, writing, narrative nippling).

My daily ritual of wake, eat, write, surf (the internet), workout, eat, surf/blog/tweet/get to business has been substituted with wake, eat, swim, eat, swim, eat, swim. And in between there's an awful lot of laying on the grassy beach and playing UNO.

But today I'm popping by to say hello and teach you two interesting differences with the Hungarian concept of RED.

Hungarians have two words for red. *Piros* and *Vörös*. I'd like to use Zsolt, my handsome husband, to illustrate the difference.

On Saturday, a day that struck 35 degrees in the sun, Zsolt and I went for a swim in the water immediately after lunch. To be fair he was protesting this activity, saying "you shouldn't swim for thirty minutes after eating." and I was calling him a giant-baby, asserting that it "isn't swimming when the water is only two feet deep." Plus I was *desperate* to escape the suntrap porch of his Balaton cottage and get our asses to the water for a cool-down post goulash lunch.

Anyhow, we went into the water for a very 'quick dip' since it was midday, we had no sunscreen, and we'd just eaten. This was mission to cool down.

Except that it's really fun in the water. And two minutes turned to five, which turned to ten, which turned to about 20 minutes in the water.

So while I was safe with my t-shirt (Zsolt's giant nightshirt, actually, which I wore to protect the area of my body exposed to the earlier radiotherapy of February), he had just a little too much sun.

Saturday afternoon, post mid-day swim, Zsolt had a slight burn across his chest. This general colour of red is called *piros*. *Piros* can apply to apples, bicycles, swimming trunks, red vending machines, etc. It is your average red.

The next day was also hot. And so, again, we went for another – but this time, really seriously no joking – 'quick dip' in Balaton. Again I wore a t-shirt and Zsolt went bare skinned (by the by, all this time I'm there saying, "Babe, wear a t-shirt" but he's like, "no way, not cool." Which is true, I do look like a dork in this giant-sized white t-shirt, but at this point in my life I can hardly give a shit.)

Quick dip. With sunblock applied.

Half an hour later, we're back on the beach to dry off. Zsolt looks down and asks if I think he looks more red. No, I tell him, you're fine.

But did you know that sometimes skin burns slowly? Like, the extent of the damage isn't immediately visible?

Anyhow – *Vörös* is Hungarian for a really rich, deep kind of red, and generally reserved for special entities. Blood is *vörös*. Wine is *vörös*. Zsolt is now *vörös.*

And today we're sitting in the shade midday; he's wearing the t-shirt, and every time I go to touch him (lovingly) on the shoulder, all I get in return is "Ow!" The man has turned into a human lobster. A *vörös* lobster.

So there's a quick lesson in Hungarian language. *Piros* vs *Vörös.* And a good reason to wear your t-shirt in the water. Cuddling is cool, even if t-shirt's aren't, which makes looking like a dork worth the fashion faux-pas.

15Jul2011

Get a haircut and a real job

Posted in After treatment, moving to canada

It's the fifteenth of July, and I'm starting to think about work. This summer is dedicated to vacation, and there's really no point in applying anywhere till Zsolt finds a job himself and we suss out the local area (*because neither of us want to make 1 hour commutes* ***everyday***). But the reality of reality* is slowly lurking at the back of my mind.

This weekend Zsolt, his brother-in-law, sister (Berci and Anita) and I are going to a small Hungarian town named Mezőcsát. *(Looked up on Wikipedia, Mezőcsát is quoted as being: "a small town in Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén county, Northern Hungary, 35 kilometers from county capital Miskolc.")* Though I'm sure it's much more than that. Firstly, it's Berci's home town. Home grown country boy. And secondly, it's small town living complete with pigs, chicken coops, hard alcohol and thermal caves. The weekend should be quite an adventure. And I imagine, not fit for vegetarians. (*The meat produced from this family is incredible: sausages, kolbasz, bacon, rind, ham everything. They use all the pig.*)

So we'll be going there this weekend. And then, ticking in the back of my head, will be Zsolt's upcoming graduation (*here comes the stupid floppy hat for my Dr Zsolt!*) plus that inevitable question: do you have jobs yet?

Ay. No.

I've told Zsolt our standard answer is as follows: 'we're still on vacation' (*though secretly looking online and thinking, just as soon as we finish grad, to begin drafting Zsolt a resume . . . the man has been a professional student up until this point in his life. PhDs are very impressive, but along with that piece of paper, another scrap of paper (i.e. the resume) is required.)*

And yet – even though 'work' *is* starting to nibble on my toes as I float across lake Balaton – I'm not entirely worried. Things work out. One way or another, things will work out. They always do. Zsolt thinks I'm ridiculous for assuming everything will be peaches and cream, but I can't suppress my optimistic tendency. Besides, when haven't things worked out? Okay, I personally have worked a number of crappy jobs in the past (experience building), but I've also worked some wonderful jobs as well. And frankly, one slice of experience raised me up for another, and so *things have worked out*. Just like I'm certain they will in Ottawa.

In honour of these 'future flashes' I've started trying to improve my French. All the lovely placements in Ottawa require bilingual speakers (hey, I can *do* French, but to call myself fluently bilingual would be a generous, very excessively way out and probably too much, falsehood.) However, bit by bit things are refreshing and I'm optimistic (again) it will improve more as time ticks forward.

Anyhow, we're at that limbo stage of our careers – where things will happen, and yet, haven't happened. In the meanwhile I really ought to avoid Monster.ca, because it's depressing. Instead I'll try to focus on this weekend's adventure in the Hungarian country side. And let this summer be as it was intended: a vacation.

* PS – This opens onto a fairly interesting subject. What will happen if my possible future employers Google my name and 'oh!' find breast cancer everything. Am I worried about discrimination? You bet your sweet ass I'm worried about discrimination. And yet, at the start of my blog – it felt absolutely impossible to hide the truth

of my reality. Secrets were *not* healthy or supportive. So I made a choice between anonymity and saying my name aloud. To this day I don't regret the decision, but do worry how it might impact my future. Will employers reject me? Will possible donors/adoptive agencies/birth mothers reject me? I don't know. All I know is at this moment I'm cancer free. And anyone who discriminates because of my history is *not* someone with whom I need to work. That's for sure. I'm bursting with good stuff to offer – cancer is part of my story, but it's not the longest chapter. (*Okay, I'll get off my high horse now. It's a touchy subject.*) Things will, I suppose, work out.

20Jul2011

Getting high off social media (& tea)

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Fun, Life, Writing

So I'm totally going to write a real post one of these days soon (considering Zsolt is about to graduate, that's certainly something to write about), but just wanted to go on a little about how much FUN I'm having with RSS feeds.

Why I've always ignored that little 'RSS' icon posted across the land of blogs is a mystery. Really, the power of observation should have tipped me off that something good is happening (*somewhat like linkedin, which I will, eventually, join . . . though with twitter, facebook, two (sometimes three) blogs, and google+, another account to check feels slightly annoying. Maybe I'll create it, then ignore it . . . . though I've heard linkedin has different connotations than facebook (family) or twitter (BC community) – it's about professional engagement, or something.*)

Anyhow: to do, look into linkedin.

But I diverge!

RSS feeds are an actual pleasure in the world of social media obligations. This is because it does a giant group hug presentation of all the blogs I'm reading. So each morning, I open my lovely reader, and before me is a list of every new post. No more having to remember each URL, no more subscribing to email notifications . . . everything is here, everything is easy.

I. Like. Easy.

Lately there's so much talk about social media – and you know, I enjoy the conversation. Clearly (*and saying this shows how 'behind the times' I currently am*) social media is the next step in marketing and advertising, which has always held a fancy for me. Ever since that single Mass Communications class in university, first year, I've found the area fascinating. There's so much PSYCHOLOGY behind communication, and now social media (*live-feed communication*) is on our phones, in our laptops, on the news . . . even in the freaking **newspaper** with 'local tweets' 'celebrity tweets' 'prominent tweets' etc (*there should be a section called, 'Catherine's tweets' – ha! I'd talk about which ice cream I'd sampled that day. Hazelnut topped with chocolate and cream.)*

Gosh, if I had a single inclination to go back in time and re-do university (*which I don't*) I'd totally study communications. It's fascinating.

Anyhow, so here I am this morning with my cup of green tea, scanning the daily blogs. [*Coincidently, bumyboobs can easily be added to such readers since it's WordPress. Yes, I just plugged myself*.] Maybe it's the tea that's got me so excited. The morning caffeine punch has just kicked in.

In any case, I'm off to do a little reading.

23Jul2011

Zsolt and the floppy hat

Posted in Life, Love

While my tea cools I'll tell you about yesterday.

Zsolt has graduated. You should have seen in him that gown – the man is already really tall, but drap a gown with vertial panels of maroon and blue on the guy, and suddenly he's a freaking giant. Topping off this outfit was a large (like your Christmas dinner plates large) floppy, circular and velvet black hat with a tassle in the middle. No one looked spectacular in that hat – why they make Doctors and Professors wear it can only be chalked up to history, because certainly it's in no why fashionable (or flattering).

So, adorned in his gowns, we then hit up a photography/party with his school at the ORC (Optoelectronics Research Center). This was lovely because many of our friends were there – five years of a PhD with these folks, so we've become rather good friends. Everyone started at the same time, and everyone is finishing (roughly) around the same time too. To imagine *not* having these folks in the same city feels strange, just like it does with my other incredible Southampton (Hampshire) friends.

[In the meanwhile, except for grad yesterday, I keep running off to meet with people. Anna, Zsolt's mother, is amazed at how social I am . . . though I'm not actually that social, I'm just in a hurry – there's really no time!]

With the bunch in a group, along with some professors and tutors, pictures were taken. Wow, they did look good in their stupid outfits – I was impressed. And proud. Pride was lapping over the edges of my smile and splashing over everyone. This was my husband graduating, and he's done *so* well. I know the ups, the downs, the frustrations, the victories – his story is partly also my story and we've gone through a load of stuff (good, bad, the unremarkable) together. To see him yesterday all dressed up and with his class was really a great feeling. Hopefully (apparently) he also felt quite fine.

Photos were followed by champagne and strawberries. Lovely. Unfortunately due to not having lunch – I was essentially *rather* buzzed after one glass of champagne (a lasting chemo after-effect) – and while people say alcohol loosens them up, it simply unscrews my head. Therefore, I ditched the champagne and ate three bowls of strawberries (drown in cream), which did the immediate trick of restoring my balance.

More photos, more conversation, more enjoyment.

Anna and Lászlo managed alright considering they don't speak any English. (Actually, that's not strictly true because between the three of us a conversation can be held – *yes! finally* – however it involves making ourselves look slightly idiotic with word fragments and hand motions, and so, of course, they didn't want to play charades yesterday with the director of the ORC. Zsolt translated.)

And it was off to the ceremony.

Ahh so long. We had excellent seats, but it meant arriving perhaps a bit too early. So, after an hour of waiting – the procession began and everyone (staff, chancellor, porter, etc) took their seats. There were plenty of tipping floppy hats and speeches. One nice looking older man became a fellow, and another – after a long bio of his life read by another floppy hat professor – was given a doctorate in science.

Zsolt looked wonderful getting his degree. He had removed his hat and 'hood' and the porter fellow walked with him over to the chancellor (who was also wearing robes, but his looked very grand with a bumblebee gold and black striping across the front). Then Zsolt knelt down in front of the chancellor, who put the hood across Zsolt's shoulders. Next, Zsolt stood up and put his hands together as if praying. The chancellor placed his hands over Zsolt's and they had a small, whispered, conversation.

"How you doing?"

"Fine you?"

"Not bad."

"Okay then . . ."

No, it was more about 'what are you doing next' and stuff. Anyhow, after this, Zsolt walked off the stage (and since he was one of the last of the people I knew graduating, my interested followed him off the stage as well). Then it was about another hour of clapping and speeches.

But enough with the details! Zsolt is Dr Zsolt, and I'm just bursting with pride. A big gold star for my husband, cause he was great yesterday and he's been great these past five years. Way to go Zsolt!

And now I'd better get off this computer. The family is waking up, and each time they see me typing they say; "Catherine, you're working again?" and I say, "No, no," because this isn't work. It's total play.

Ah! Too late – they just said it. "Catherine a dolgozike, work." I'm totally busted.

(Apologizes for misspelling the Hungarian words – Zsolt isn't awake yet to check my mistakes.)

27Jul2011

Aunt flow pays a visit

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Fertility

Whew – touchdown. We're finally back from the graduate weekend. Zsolt is officially Dr Zsolt and we now turn, to borrow a phrase from Terri, to a fresh chapter in our lives. He is no longer a student, instead, he is officially unemployed. Ha! I am joking. At the moment our status is "we're on vacation so leave us alone." Employment can wait a little longer (though not too much longer).

Oh, big surprise this weekend. With the steady decline of my hot flashes (essentially disappearing with the heat wave some weeks ago) followed by a bout of cramps and what I could have sworn was 'Ovulation Catherine' – *you know that woman, Ovulation Cindy, Ovulation Grace, Ovulation Anna, Ovulation anyone who is ovulating, craves chocolate, feels emotional and is above all* ***horny***. Following these signs (plus a week of absolutely no signs, except perhaps a tender abdomen), last Sunday after a particularly happy weekend where I visited so many friends and had such a good time, well – there she was in the morning: Aunt Flow.

She arrived promptly in the AM with bagfuls of luggage. Heavy luggage. More luggage than I'd ever seen in my life, which frankly was worrying, because after a year of no luggage, to have so much suddenly was quite a shock. I was off to the pharmacy every two minutes buying bulkier and bulkier supplies to deal with the onslaught. It was a very interesting day.

All the while (as we tour the Isle of Wight with Zsolt's parents, who kindly never asked why the heck I kept disappearing) I'm wondering to myself: "is this normal? Is it menstruation or a sign of ovulary cancer? Am I about to bleed to death?" But then I looked at the obvious: flow with no dizziness, pain or fatigue . . . everything was normal.

Normal! After a year of menopausal mayhem in my twenties, suddenly something *normal* was happening. It felt weird.

So bye-bye menopause. Except, of course, for yesterday in the plane ride back from England where I was riding successive hot flashes as the plane descended for landing. "*Zsolt, is it warm in here or am I having a hot flash?"* Apparently my body in currently in limbo between menstruation and menopause.

So – babies, anyone? This is absolutely confusing now. If I have my period, then it *must* mean something ovulated. Whether it's a usable egg is unknown . . . actually, the entire thing confuses me, which is why I've decided to rely on the words Zsolt's lovely friend said to me the other day (*as we sat on Margaret Island and watched the fountain rise and fall with the Mozart soundtrack*). This is what she said, and I found it incredibly touching: "Catherine, you don't have to worry about having children, because I pray for you everyday."

Very touching.

And so, for now, I've decided not to worry. Her confidence is reassuring, and while everything can be so confusing (*test results, my body, menopause, menstruation*) I prefer to take refuge in faith . . . even if it isn't always my own.

So I try not to worry as my body switches and questions come soaring into my mind. It is a constant struggle to stop the anxiety, but then I remember her kind words and suddenly life becomes calm.

Calm like the glassy turquoise ocean round the Isle of Wight, gently peaking with tips of froth and deep in that ‘swim in me now’ color. And I listen as the waves lap against the shore, and a lone seagull in the sky – calling – dives away from sight.

Calm like a moment in the sunlight, with nothing but horizon and quiet and blue.

Calm.

I love me a little Calm.

And so, my body tumbles forward, changing toward the normal. It’s a good thing.

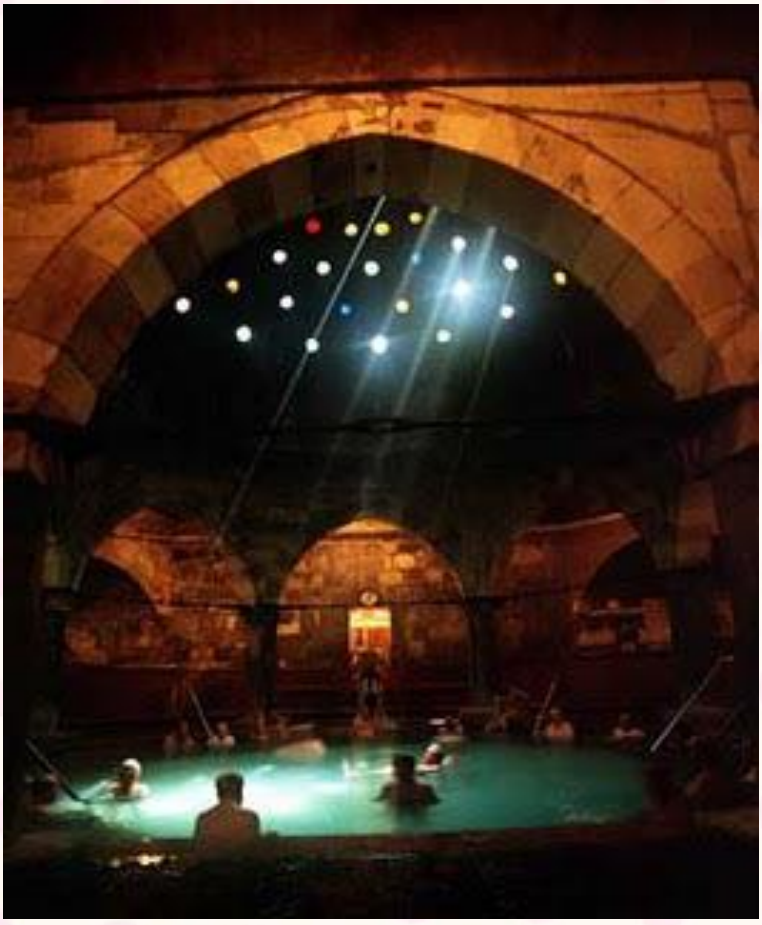
(*And as you can see, gets me going rather lyrically. I can’t help it – really, I can’t. Writing taps into my heart, and my heart is abundantly sentimental. I cannot help the tone. It’s a little cheesy, but then, I do love a strong slice of cheese*.)

31Jul2011

The old Turkish bath

Posted in Life, Travel

Yesterday afternoon Zsolt and I continued our exploration of the Hungarian bathes. Yes, we're still in Budapest (Erd) and haven't returned to Pecs . . . the plan after his graduation was in fact to just go home and get to work in Pecs (*sorting immigration stuff, getting paperwork in order, doctor appointment arrangements, going for ice cream, drinking tea, etc*) but instead we were lured by the promise of a spa-filled weekend to stay on at his sister's a little longer. So essentially I'm computer-less and sketch pad-less, meaning this post will be short because I'm on borrowed time with a borrowed computer – and Zsolt's fingers are itching to get back and check the latest sport news. By the by, Hungary won and gold medal for some kind of swimming race at the world championship. Thumbs up for Hungary.



So, yesterday afternoon we rode the bus, then the tram into Budapest and walked along the Danube toward *Rudas*, an old Turkish bath erected (1550) during the era of Turkish occupation in Hungary. Hungary's past is filled with troubles, the Turks being one of them . . . but I've got to say, the introduction of these hot-water baths was certainly a GOOD thing for the country. All the wars and deaths and strife: very, very bad. Hot water to float in: good.

We're walking along the Danube toward this decrepit building that I had assumed was abandoned. The windows were blackened with dirt, panels of glass broken away, and the exterior walls had many crumbled patches. This was, in my mind, another instance of beautiful architecture neglected. Budapest is stuffed full of beautiful architecture, but unless you're talking 'city center' it's almost guaranteed the striking buildings and boulevards are in desperate need of paint.

Anyhow, we arrive at what I'd assume was an abandoned building until Zsolt says: "This is it," and we head through some grimy glass doors into what I'd describe as the entrance to an old movie house . . . bad rug, ticket tellers, a waist-height gate guarded by a teenage girl looking at her nails, pop music blasting from the snack bar. Not so charming. Not so spa-like.

But hey, appearances can be deceiving, and we've seen pictures of the interior – so with hope and curiosity, two bath tickets were purchased.

And in we went.

Whew. Beautiful. Creepy. Beautiful. It's like you've suddenly transported in time and come back to a place, long long ago, when rooms were built not for purpose but for impact – and it was believed (much like old churches) that the aesthetics of a room can create spiritual awakening. Walking into the dark, humid bathing room (*unlike other spas, this place is centred around only one room – and not too large either, just enough for maybe sixty people to comfortably mill*) there is a round pool in the centre with posts all around, and above the pool is a dark dome with holes along it's ceiling coloured with stain glass. Sunlight shines through these holes, and depending on where you stand, beams of light and colour shine into the bath like rays through a cloud. Quite impressive. And around the large bath, one for each corner of this square room, are smaller pools ranging from 28, 30, 33, and 40 degrees in temperature. Plus the steam and sauna.

So, in this dark space with colourful beams of light, we dipped in and out of the water, making circuits. I'd say it's a cozy little bath, and far better than I'd expected based on first impressions. The only missing element – something I so miss from the Nordic in Canada – is silence. Without the acoustic damper of open sky, everyone's voice bounces and resonates around the bathing room . . . the only escape from the voices is to either arrive really early, or stick your head under the water (not advisable in a 40 degree bath!).

But regardless it was lovely and we had a wonderful time. Today we're going to some place called Gellert. I again have little idea what to expect. But hopefully it will involve more floating. Life is better when floating.

3Aug2011

Stressing over stress

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs

Zsolt just walked into my makeshift 'office' in his sister's old bedroom here in Pecs, Hungary, and asked if I could take a break from my work. (*Quick aside: this isn't work. I love doing this – writing, blogging, social mediating, and all the while enjoying the breeze through this large open window before me and listening to the sounds of the neighbourhood – mostly dogs, a few cars*). And since Zsolt never walks into my makeshift office asking me to take a break, I immediately listened to the man.

"I sent you an email," he tells me.

Catherine opens her email.

There in my inbox is an article link. It's a piece from the Huffington post by David Katz, M.D. on the "super six" – his list of factors to help prevent recurrence (or occurrence) of cancer. With the inevitable reminder that "lifestyle practices are the ship and sails, but there is still the wind and waves", which I thought was a rather well-put reminder. Do what you can, but there are no promises. However, we can at least do what we can.

Anyhow, here are the six factors suggested by David Katz to give attention when trying to fight cancer – feet (exercise), forks (diet), fingers (no smoking), sleep, stress, and love.

And then Zsolt says to me: "You've got all of those covered, except for your stress."

Ah! Nailed.

Before diagnosed with cancer I was stressing over 'where will we live' and 'where do I belong' . . . then came the cancer (a stress-pie in itself) . . . and Zsolt's application for residency in Canada . . . and now that we're finally here in Hungary, enjoying our summer of time and leisure, and I'm stressing over our move to Canada and how things will go at the border and how we'll settle into adulthood in another new country (new for Zsolt, and I've only ever been a student in Canada, so this will most certainly be different).

Now I realize this post is essentially a written rant on worrying about worrying. And Zsolt has just told me that he's getting worried over my endless list of concerns (poor man, I don't want him to be dragged down). Plus, I'd hate to leave you with the impression that all day, everyday my brow is furrowed and I'm ruminating over the next difficult hurdle (*because really, and I know this, every hurdle is surmounted whether you want to climb that obstacle or not. During chemo I thought, "this is impossible" and yet – it's done.*) but it's just a realization reminder: In the words of my husband, "Catherine, you need to relax."

This entire summer was constructed with the idea of relaxation, but it seems location and convenience alone are not enough to master the art of calm. My mind still picks on the wriggling points of uncertainty – Will we have problems? Is the paperwork arranged? What will come next?

Same thing it's been doing ever since I was a kid.

However, I also learned a new trick this past year. Talking about said stress – writing, blogging, journaling, releasing – I don't know how that factors into the 'super six' but for me personally it's a great help. I let out the pressure . . . which is a start.

Anyhow, with the conclusion of this post I will try and not worry any longer about worrying. Instead, I'll google meditation classes in Ottawa I can slip into once we arrive in the country. Like all other aspects of that super six (particularly diet and exercise) I'll feel better – physically, mentally, emotionally – once this issue is challenged with some proactive behaviour. And in the meanwhile, maybe I'll go for a walk. That's meant to be stress relieving, right? Never mind the barking dogs – they're all stuck behind their fences. Everything will be just fine. (*As she breathes in and out, now anxious to leave this post behind.*) Everything is fine.

I need a cup of tea.

7Aug2011

Captain Super Bucks

Posted in Canada, Finding Home, Life

Zsolt and I are playing a waiting game. Well, at this very moment we are sitting by the lakeside of Balaton – Zsolt on my Acer with the LCD screen half blacked out, me on his tiny Samsung hoping his patience holds out till this is posted – but we are, despite the appearance of beach bumming, waiting.

What for?

Two things.

Moving to a new country involves so many details, there is the visa, the shipping, the accommodation, the job-hunt, the unsettling upheaval, the anticipation of new things . . . and then there is the money.

Six years ago when we first moved to England, Canadian/UK currency exchange was at about two to one. For each two Canadian dollars you'd get one pound. Not a glorious exchange, but it did suggest that when (if) we ever moved back to Canada our one UK pound would be worth a brilliant two Canadian dollars.

Then the recession hit. Which still wasn't all that bad, because we reckoned we'd stay in the UK regardless so no exchange was necessary. Then cancer came knocking.

And so plans changed and – as you know – we're off to Canada at the end of this month. What money we have (used to have far more before one year of treatment plus Zsolt writing his thesis, but nevertheless I think we've still managed to get away with a reasonable chunk of savings. Certainly we could have lost far, far more if we'd been studying/treating in say, the US.) is now worth less than it might have been six years ago.

So now we are watching and waiting. First we need the card reader – a nifty device provided by the banks so that secure transactions can be conducted without coming into the branch. The card reader looks like a calculator. But beyond that I know nothing, because while we've order the card reader maybe two weeks ago, it still hasn't arrived.

Card reader is essential. Without this, we cannot move our money to Canada.

Second we are waiting for the exchange to improve. Unfortunately, the only way the UK exchange with Canadian dollars can improve is if Canada puts out some negative reports on the economy, or if the US goes bizerk. I'd rather neither situation happen since we're moving there. Cause, seriously, with a strong economy we can earn way more than our current savings . . . but nevertheless we are watching the exchange.

It's like watching a horse race. With every advance of the exchange we cheers. With every drop we groan. Overall I'm still hoping that Canada stays strong strong strong, but when it comes to watching your money shrink or grow, sometimes it's hard to look beyond the end of my nose (aka bank account) and into the future of 'potential earnings'.

Maybe this is a bit boring. It's actually rather exciting, the freaking exchange is high right now, at least, higher than it's been all year, but our hands are tied until the card reader arrives. Every morning we're checking the mail box, and ever afternoon we're looking at the dollar, the business news, and trying to create some make-shift amateur forecast of what the dollar is doing.

Alternative. The exchange could work in our favour not because Canada is suffering, but because the UK is doing great. That would be nice for everyone, except the Canadian exchange students.

Anyhow, enough about money. Things not to talk about during polite conversation: politics and money. But I figured this blog isn't always so polite, so it wouldn't be a problem.

Now, back to the horse race. I am, quite honestly, curious to see what happens.

(And back to the grassy beach. Zsolt said to me the other day: "Anyone who wants more than this is crazy. We've got a beautiful view, beautiful water, beautiful weather and here we are together. Can't get any more perfect." To which my mind began to image how else our lazing on the beach could be more perfect . . . but you know what, all that other stuff is speculation. In that moment Dr Samson was correct. We'd be crazy to want anything more. We'd be crazy to alter that picture with any wishes or wants. It was, as it is right now, a very lovely time on the beach.)

(PPS. Speaking of Zsolt. He is totally hooked on the game 'hearts'. That's good news for my Dad. Finally he'll have someone willing to play round the table after dinner. Add on the fishing to come, and Zsolt's like the perfect son-in-law.)

(PPPS. Man, I love it here.)

(PPPPS. I realize the title has almost nothing – or rather, entirely nothing – to do with the post. But I thought it was fun.)

11Aug2011

Scandal and the bikini boob

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Fun

Earlier this summer as we set to leave England, I spread my bathing suits and bras across the bed (accumulated over about six years) and began to say goodbye. Goodbye slippery pink cups, goodbye plain white t-shirt bra, goodbye your clever push-up, goodbye string bikini top . . . goodbye. Everything went in the bin (or the charity bag, depending on condition) except for my ancient O'Neil red string bikini – and *not* because I could wear it to the beach this summer . . . cause really, those triangles are *small*, but rather because of the memories.

Which was, if you consider it, what the pile of lingerie also was – memories. Memories of boobs. And the deed was done, I had myself a good cry.

But today was lovely. Today-today-today I bought a string bikini. Not a bandeau wrap across the chest, those they are nice too post-mastectomy (*particularly since I bought two for eight pounds at Matalon, though I think, perhaps the price is reflected in the quality of my butt-in-bikini, which is why I was on the hunt today for a new, discounted, end-of-the-season quality designer suit*.).

Oh, I feel so naughty. Girls with only one breast aren't meant to wear string bikinis. At least, according to the post-mastectomy land of lingerie product catalogues we aren't. And I can see the point. Firstly, if we could all get away without the false-breast pockets they would be out of business. Secondly, most women don't have tiny boob(s), and the difference between right and left would be like staring at a single hill in the middle of a plain. Something like that giant red rock in Australia.

But after going shop to shop and not finding any bandeau style, I just said, "screw this" and tried on a few cuts I never imagined acceptable.

Gosh, I'll tell you what. If I still had both boobs (*say I had reconstruction, or old rightie magically grew back*), I'd have scandalized Lake Balaton this summer with my risqué so-damn-near-to-the-nipple outfits of string and fling and bikini hotness, it would have been awesome. And while that hasn't happened, I have happily noticed that despite having a neat and tidy scar running across my right chest, it is, one year post surgery, less noticeable.

So I put on this striking blue triangular thing (*O'Neil has such fine quality suits*) where the area isn't quite so close to the nipple (*which is good, because I'm down one of those*) and BAM – Sexy bathing suit Catherine has returned from her summer of cheap, Matalon frumping. My ass looks great; my eyes are popping; and best of all – BEST of all – my boob, while looking small, is not strikingly missing.

Okay, if you know it's missing, than you aren't going to miss the 'missing'ness. (*Am I misusing the miss?*)

And I know it's not cool to brag. Hey, my body isn't 22 anymore, so yes, I'm fully aware of those cellulite jiggles and mystery circles rippling out from my thighs. But fuck it. I feel pretty. I feel like all those stupid bras and bikini tops last May thrown into the bin (or charity bag) weren't discarded because I can't wear them . . . they were tossed because I'm a spanking new woman who needs flattering, lovely clothes.

After all, it never hurts to feel good about yourself. And I *never* imagined a triangle bikini would ever again make me feel so freaking good.

This post is so absurd. I know it's all 'me, me, me' but I'm excited. It's like being told you can wear miniskirts again after thirty five (*not my rule, I took it from 'What Not to Wear' so if you don't like it, please refer to Stacy and Clinton*), if you've ever been inclined to wear miniskirts – which, to Zsolt's disappointment, I've never been.

Anyhow. Maybe I look just like any girl on the beach. But Zsolt thinks it's beautiful too, so there you go.

Happy days, and just in time for my trip to Greece. Boyah! Great stuff. Sorry for so much self-indulgence, but I really needed to cheer.

And to top off this lovely day. Zsolt found a brand of clothing that suits his tall, lean frame and actually makes him look like . . . like a man. Like, a *hot* man. Like I could just grab him with both hands and sweep him away to never, never land. His outfit, in my opinion, is money well spent.

(*Whew! Just had a wee scare. I had dropped my computer-drawing pen and thought it fell behind the radiator, so started groping the ground underneath and stuck my hand right through a thick spider web. Gross. Thankfully, with a second look, the pen actually only fell behind the computer screen. But still, my hand is totally grossed out. And I bet the spiders aren't too pleased either.*)

12Aug2011

Out for lunch, be back soon.

Posted in Fun, Life, Travel

Okay, I am off to Corfu for the week. Cheap accommodation in Kavos means no internet. Zsolt has plans for us to leave the 'sleepy' village of southern Greece ('run from it' might be a better phrase) and visit Corfu Town and Albania. *Albania*. The only thing I know about Albania is there was once a Simpsons character from that area.

But I would like to treat this as a proper vacation, rather than a touring trip with day-in, day-out excursions. There is a pool, there is a beach. I will bring my laptop in hopes of writing more of my generations story. I'm on the sixth generation and she's just flowing from my fingers like maple syrup onto pancakes.

I'm looking forward to sporting my new bikini and trying something with feta. They do good feta in Greece, right? Ok, honestly the only thing I know about Greece is that the watermelons are larger than . . . than . . . Canadian watermelons.

So wish us luck. And I wish you luck as well with whatever you aspire for the week.

See you later, alligators!

Catherine

22Aug2011

Finding the Greek

Posted in Canada, Finding Home, Fun, Life, Travel

Good morning to you. This has got to be a quickie – there's way too much to do this week, way too much to do today . . . really, I shouldn't even be typing right now, I ought to be sorting through stuff and packing bags and calling Air Canada . . . but what can a few minutes hurt, right?

So – clearly – vacation is *over*. BUT, it was lovely despite complications.

We arrive in Corfu two Saturdays ago about 11pm and grabbed a taxi to Kavos. That was the first experience, swerving between cars like the driver was in a racing slalom, passing three cars at a time, passing cars that were *passing cars*, running off the mopeds and doing 90 km through villages. And yet I wasn't scared. It was fun.

Then we arrived in Kavos. If whipping along the narrow, busy streets of Corfu doesn't scare you, arriving in Kavos will do the trick. All I could say was, "Oh my God." Choked full of Summer-breaking Brits ages 17-23 having a good time, the taxi was forced to crawl its way along the main road as smashed, high and horny throngs of kids swelled through the road. Panty-dropping pop music didn't just blast, it kaboomed from every single club (one after the other after the other after the other) trying to compete for attention. It was a bit hilarious, if not also horrible. The taxi driver couldn't stop laughing.

Anyhow. That was my first impression of Kavos. The noise, the crowd, the party. That Saturday it lasted until about 4am (*and yeah, our incredibly well-priced apartment, very clean too, was right over the street in the restaurant area – so it could have been worse, but it was still rather loud*) and Zsolt and I used ear plugs to try and get some sleep.

Next morning – Catherine was grumpy.

However, thank goodness my bad impression didn't last forever. While I'd never again return to Kavos no matter how inexpensive the accommodation, the locals were fabulous and helpful in 'how to enjoy Greece when there is nothing Greek around you'.

[*Interesting aside, I heard a British tour rep call Kavos a 'resort' . . . not a town, but a resort . . . as though it had been crafted for the leagues of young Brits that arrived every week. And while I – with my North America gone south experiences of Mexico and Antigua – would never call the vomit-stinking streets (the smell wears off around noon each day) and trashy parade of bars a resort, I can absolutely understand that this town has bent*

itself to appease the British crowd. It's basically the American equivalent to Cancun or wherever people go in Florida for spring break. Every restaurant sells Mexican, Texan, or British food. Greek is available, but must be sought out carefully. Anyhow, she called it a resort, which I thought was sad because it takes away the local identity of those who live and work there – the lovely Greek people with their good humour and long stories.]

And so we began to explore.

It was a very, very good time. We rented some quad bikes, roamed around the island – driving through olive tree forests at sunset, curving cliff side roads to the beach, off route farmer's tracks over to abandoned monasteries, puttered through the quad-bike-wide streets of an unexpected, totally beautiful, and absolutely tiny village on a hill, visited a little restaurant that overlooked the amazing turquoise sea . . . swam, swam, swam . . . and enjoyed, enjoyed, enjoyed.

We even found a 'secret beach' which the owner of our hotel let us know about. Only a 40 minute walk from Kavos (20 minute drive on the quad bike), this place was gorgeous, empty and just . . . just a perfect escape from the world.

Despite the first night's madness (*I avoided that scene for the rest of the week, instead at night we played Uno in the flat, or went to the beach, or walked. Once we went out dancing, but I can't take late nights anymore and abandoned the endeavour about thirty minutes into the evening, letting them go on without me – stupid post-chemo buzz killer*.) By the end of the week, I was really freaking pleased with the break. Greece turned out to be an excellent escape.

I am very glad we took the time for a little adventure.

And now – now . . . NOW . . . it's time to move to Canada.

PS. Another wonderful thing, wearing my bikini – loved it!

22Aug2011

In memeory of Jack

Posted in Bumpboobs

You know I turned on the computer this morning just for a little entertainment before I started the big pack for Canada. We're moving this week, finally, after over a year of planning and longing to be closer to my family. On the day I found out about my breast cancer, I said to Zsolt – "I want to go home." But life isn't always that straightforward. And so we waited. And filled out paperwork. And defended a thesis. And visited his family in Hungary.

But now . . . *now* it's time for home – Canada is calling.

So I turn on the computer this morning for a little entertainment, logged into Twitter – and what do I read? The crushing news that Jack Layton has passed on. This is not a political thing, not for me . . . it's about surviving and fighting and being inspired by stories like his – fighting through the disease for a cause he believes in, and not letting cancer stop him for one moment from living and loving life.

It never helps when people tell you they know someone who passed away from Cancer. It hurts. It's scary. It's the story you never want to hear. And perhaps today – maybe like many of you who are watching the news or flipping through the internet – maybe Jack's passing scared you like it did for me this morning. But then I read his 'Letter to Canadians' and decided maybe it's not worth being scared today. Sad, yes. Hopeful and determined, always. Scared . . . not today.

I'll leave a slice of his letter below – because it's touching and it's for us. The rest you can read for yourself if you like. I'm sure in about ten minutes it'll be all across the internet. Jack's message:

"To other Canadians who are on journeys to defeat cancer and to live their lives, I say this: please don't be discouraged that my own journey hasn't gone as well as I had hoped. You must not lose your own hope. Treatments and therapies have never been better in the face of this disease. You have every reason to be optimistic, determined, and focused on the future. My only other advice is to cherish every moment with those you love at every stage of your journey, as I have done this summer."

Which is another reminder of why I'm going home and why Canada means the world to me. For a year I have fought, and this summer I've rested. Now I want to have family near – to go for tea with my mom, dance with my friends, tease my little brother, listen to Dad's fish stories, and meet my older brother's girlfriend while he cooks us some soup. I want to visit my grandmother too. Every moment is to be cherished, and every day is an opportunity. So let's be determined today, okay? Let's be full of hope and ass-kicking gusto.

I'd like to say that my heart goes out to Jack Layton's family. And I wish them all the love and support possible in this difficult time.

And Canada – I'm coming home. Oh, I've missed you terribly. I am coming home this very week. How wonderful is that?

25Aug2011

Causing other people pain

Posted in Canada, Finding Home, Life, Love

Alright – here it is. I am packing, things are being packed, the packing is nearly complete. Who knew an entire room full of stuff could fit into two suitcases? Well, now I know. The bigger question at this moment (after combining my room of stuff and two suitcases with Zsolt's one suitcase and carry on) is how are we going to fit it all into the car?

One of life's fun challenges.

Another fun challenge? Heat waves. Today I think it might push forty degrees here in Pecs. That is hot. For this little Canadian who likes her summers humid and near thirty and her winters cold and below zero . . . 40+ degrees is absurd. Absurd. ***Absurd!***

Yesterday I was like a tired dog on the doorstep: sprawled out and panting. Today, I'm expecting a similar activity come three or four in the afternoon.

And between the packing and the sweat – there has been a lovely parade of family gatherings this week here in Pecs. You know what, if you ever feel like your social life is lagging – just move! Move and the whole world will erupt with plans for a visit. It's a bit bittersweet because *yes, for sure* you want to see all these people. They are your people. They're worth more than gold. But the clock is ticking and the paperwork for immigration isn't finished and the luggage weighs too much and you still need to clean the apartment before moving out . . .

But the grandmothers and Zsolt's aunt came over for lunch yesterday. Only for a couple hours since no one could stand being too social in this heat. It was nice. Oh my goodness, one of these days I'll have to write about Zsolt's grandmother and his aunt (*mother and daughter*). Together they are a team – like a comedy team. Not intentionally funny, but with their bluntness and their humour and their age and they way his grandmother laughs herself into tears . . . really, you would like them. I like them.

So the grandmothers came over for lunch. We had BBQ chicken (*in Hungary, BBQ means an electric Teflon grill . . . but hey, they're trying*) and beautiful salads and potatoes and rice followed by ice cream. Everything was going so nicely until they all started crying.

Sometimes I feel like a vixen who has knocked Zsolt on his head with a love-hammer and stolen him from his family. And I wonder if they feel the same about me (*though they love me very much, that's so very clear. And I love them too . . . but I just can't help but wonder . . . hmm, maybe my parents secretly feel the same about Zsolt. You know before I went to Europe and met Zsolt for the first time, my dad said to me, "Catherine, don't go falling in love with any boys over there." And I was like, "Duh, Dad. That would be stupid."*) Growing up

can have its fair share of tricky decisions. But it's also full of freedom to choose and opportunities to grow. Life takes us forward. Zsolt is my forward.

So there was a round of crying. I guess that's fairly normal (*it's normal in Canada too – mostly between me and my mom*), particularly after having spent such a long time here this summer and it really feeling like we've been *living* in Hungary rather than visiting.

Anyhow, it just reminds me that Saturday will be one heck of a day. We'll have to rip off the Band-Aid, and no one looks forward to that moment.

Speaking of Saturday – here is the plan so you can follow along (yeah, right) as we head toward the New World.

Saturday:

Go to Balaton for lunch with Zsolt's sis and bro-in-law.

Go to Austria and check into the flight.

Fly to Brussels. Spend the night.

Sunday:

Get to the airport and check into the flight.

Fly, fly, fly to Montreal.

Do the immigration dance.

Head over to the Cottage and catch up with my family for the next week.

Nice, eh. It will be great. Just need to get over the hurdle of saying goodbye. And need to live through the next couple days of extreme freaking heat. Oy!

And that is that. Now I need to go and melt into a puddle. Have a lovely day

30Aug2011

Studying Canadian Living

Posted in Canada, Finding Home, Life, Writing

Monday morning as I woke up from my nap and walked into the cottage lounge (*Yes, I had a nap in the morning. After two days of non-stop travel and immigration, napping is the sweetest remedy to exhaustion. I recommend naps.*) there was Zsolt sitting on the 1980s sofa facing the window's view of the St Lawrence and engrossed – *totally, utterly, engrossed* – in the magazine 'Canadian Living'.

"Have you seen this?" he says to me. "Look at these models; they're normal people. And look at this – look at all the vitamin advertisements, every page has a vitamin. And the cake recipes! Take a look at this cheesecake."

So I tell him: "Zsolt, you are reading a magazine that's targeted toward women and mothers . . . that's why the models have normal bodies, that's why it's selling vitamins and breakfast cereals, that's why it's full of recipes. Now let's go outside in the sunshine."

But the man wouldn't budge.

"It's called (*he says, flipping back to the cover to show me*) *Canadian Living*. It's the guide to everyday living in Canada." And he turns back to his saved page to review the latest juicers and determine which one we should buy in the future, considering our old juicer was left behind in England.

So I had to smile at his determination. Every booklet and pamphlet and women's magazine with the word 'Canadian' has become a guiding light for 'how to get along in Canada', and he's taking it all very seriously.

What does that mean?

It means: We. Have. Arrived!

WOOOHOOO! Wooot! Wooo! Yeahhhhh, baby!

Sunday afternoon we landed at the airport in Montreal and immigrated Zsolt's Hungarian butt into Canada. It was relatively straightforward (following the months of preparation and visa waiting). Here's how it went down.

We arrived and went to the customs desk. This was fairly standard. There was the Bonjour/Hello and I said "I'm a returning resident and my husband is immigrating today." And the officer wrote some codes on our landing cards that meant we couldn't just leave after collecting our luggage – instead we would be directed to a different area.

Luggage was collected. *Whew.* All three pieces had successfully travelled from Hungary to Brussels to Montreal. Then we wheeled the luggage to the fellow who checks the landing cards and sure enough he says "Returning and immigrating?" and we say, "yes," and he says, "follow that sign and go around the corner."

So we go to this *very* quiet part of the airport where officers are standing behind desks with long metals tables where luggage is meant to be searched. We wait. We are called forward and a this lovely French lady processes our paperwork. At this point everyone around us is having their luggage searched. And I kept waiting for her to open our bags and have at them . . . but the moment never arrives. Instead she took my prepared lists of 'goods in possession' and 'goods to follow' and checked them over, then signed and stamped a lot of stuff, did some extra paperwork for Zsolt and then, finally, said to Zsolt "Congratulations, you are now a permanent resident of Canada."

Fireworks and a cheering crowds erupted.

And she let us go. Just like that. (*Frankly, I think it pays to have all the paperwork filled out and ready. Makes her day easier, and everything go more quickly*).

So we leave the airport and there are my parents – lots of hugging and hellos followed, they had these Canada bags all ready with tea and water and Tim Hortons. – and we wheeled our stuff out of the airport.

Two days of travelling, three months of Hungary, Six months of treatment, six months of application preparation, five years of England . . . and as we leave the airport toward the parking lot, having now officially arrived and officially checked into our new Canadian life – I turned to Zsolt said,

"Now what do we do?"

And he said,

"I have no idea."

Hmmm.

It's like at the end of that movie, *The Graduate,* when they get onto the bus having left everything they know behind them and that moment of triumph is followed nearly immediately by a moment of . . . uncertainty?

What happens next? I don't know. Maybe that's what Zsolt was trying to decipher from *Canadian Living*. But this is what I am sure of: something *will* happen next. Stories never finish, instead they rise and fall like waves. And after this week at the cottage, life will go on.

It's unnerving. It's exciting.

So, here we go. Let's see what happens.

* PS – a big PS this week. I've just had an article published in *Glow* magazine for Facing Cancer Together, p.71. Freaking exciting or what! There's a picture too – so if you want to see what I look like with super white teeth on a London roof, please do pick up the article. It's my first published piece of writing, so that's pretty exciting.

PPS – Zsolt is amazed at the giantness of Canada. Giant bag of chips. Giant tissue box. Giant paper towels. Giant jugs of water. Giant fridge. Giant oven. Giant wasp and hornet can. Giant cars. Giant roads. But so what?

We've also got giant hearts. And he'd like to send a special thanks to the lady at immigration, who was kind and patient. She set a great tone for Canadian's hospitality. Sometimes giant is awesome.

5Sep2011

Bittersweet realities

Posted in Canada, Finding Home, Life, Writing

I'm sitting at my desk in the basement of my parents house. Around me are piles of boxes, and piles of . . . of, well let's call it stuff. Some of it looks useful, other bits feel random. Why did I ship the thermal socks with holes in the toes? Can't really say why, except that it felt right at the time.

Happy labour day weekend to you. The leaves are starting to crunch and children are about to shuffle off to school. Tomorrow I have an appointment with my long-time GP to renew the Tamoxifen subscription. It kinda gives me butterflies.

You see, coming home I had – in a sense – wanted to forget all about the cancer. But tomorrow I have an appointment with my GP, and at the end of this month I meet with my oncologist for a little catch up and review. It seems no matter how far I travel the presence of this situation refuses to fade away. However, the tree outside our house is reassuring with it's whishy, windy leaf-blown sounds . . . my family is near-by (*though Dan's about to take off to BC for three weeks – wish him luck as he treks through the mountains*) and it's nice to see them, Zsolt is cuddly as always . . . and I think, *I think* in a matter of days (*like later in the week, maybe Friday*) . . . the unpacking and the arranging will all settle down and I'll be able to just write.

Write and work on Narrative Nipple. And meet with friends? That'd be lovely too.

So my point? My point is that despite the never-ending reality of 'checking up on the fucking cancer to make sure it's gone, dead, and over' . . . it's good to be home.

Very good to be home.

6Sep2011

Dan, Dan, the Adventure Man

Posted in Fun, Life, Travel

Tomorrow Dan (my little brother) strikes out into the wilderness to become a man. Six days, three guys, one tent and a long winding mountain trail. Good luck little buddy, don't go crazy and keep yourself safe.

And.

Of course.

HAVE **FUN**NNN!!! (like a lot of fun, like twenty-years-from-now-and-he-is-*still*-talking-about-it fun)

Hello anyone reading this blog post. Please lend a moment of your time to my little bro, and join me in sending good vibes for his trip. *no bears, no cats, and nothing with teeth.*

Thanks

8Sep2011

Enjoying the view of home

Posted in Canada, Finding Home, Life, Love, Travel

This week I receive two emails of Canadiana (sp?) from some lovely ladies who read this blog – seems that the "*Canadian Living*" post inspired a little bit of Canada reminiscing. From 'land of the silver birch, home of the beaver' to reddening maples, sugar shacks, beavertails, loons across the water, cottage days, and even to the sharp dip in September weather; it was pleasing to see that our stories (Zsolt and I combined) touched a chord.

On my desk in my new office is a painting by a fantastic local artist (who also happens to be the mother of a very good friend). I love her work – her paintings can bring me the chill of a winter morning, the damp of a rocky shore, the electric humidity before a storm, or the ripples of water as you dip your paddle for another push . . . talk about your touch of Canada, if I can write it – *she* can paint it.

And even better (if you want to get away from the arts) have been the walks. Everyday Zsolt and I go for a walk. He's trying to learn Kanata so that he doesn't repeat his 'one hour walk' that occurred the year we were married. Zsolt, Anna and Laszlo (his folks) set out for a walk on lovely May morning and didn't come home for ages. Why? Because they were lost in Kanata . . . wandering street to street, trying to decipher one bungalow from another.

So he's learning. And I'm enjoying all the green. For all the cookie cutter formulas and expectation in terms of lifestyle – the suburbs most certainly have greenery covered. From the gardens, the trees, the sports fields, and the micro forests . . . I love green.

The painting on my desk depicts an autumn day. It reminds me of walking through Gatineau park – you know the walk circling that deep, narrow lake? (*If you even live in Ottawa or Canada, that is . . . and if you don't, you are probably gagging right now on all this talk of Canada this and Canada that. My apologies.*) It reminds me that soon the leaves will turn and another season will arrive. Already the temperature is dropping, and already I've stepped on a few crunchy leaves.

All this to say, I love our Canadian landscape. Europe's got class. The world is an oyster. But oh, Canada, you are beautiful.

(Just don't ask me to exude so much love come next January – cause by then I think I'll have had enough of the darkness and ice . . . but for the moment, we're in a very good place.)

*Quick aside: My energy has been rather low lately; even these leisurely walks are tiring. Maybe it's the settling in, the jetlag, or my little 'vacation' from taking vitamins . . . whatever it is, I'm knackered – and that isn't cool. This is a problem to be solved **asap**. Though it could just be the travelling . . . it always gets me.*

Another quick aside: Today I was stung by a wasp. What the frack! There I was, hanging out by Young's Pond – and BAM – pain! Thankfully I'm not allergic, only offended. Stupid wasp.

14Sep2011

Panic attacked in the loo

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Food

So there I was in the bathroom. Zsolt had suggested I take a hot bath to calm my cramping, and it had sounded like a good idea. Except suddenly they became really strong, and I thought, "oh shit, what if it's ovarian cancer?" and next thing I know, I'm kneeling on the ground (*hadn't even managed to run my bath*) of my parents lovely white tiled bathroom, trying not to pass out – not from the pain (*though geeeeez it was painful*), but from the fear.

Now, I'm not exactly familiar with the panic attack . . . but reckon that the whole "I'm going to pass out" thing is a symptom of the event.

Why did I panic?

Sigh . . .

Because as mentioned in other posts, I'm a wee bit haunted by last year. And now, when things go wrong (*today's situation revolved around strong cramps that wouldn't let up . . . okay, so about forty minutes after they started everything had subsided . . . but that was one heck of a forty minutes.*) my initial thought is: What if it's cancer?

My second thought today was, "is this what labour feels like?"

Obviously I have issues to work out. I know that. My mom is going to help me. But there's nothing like dipping back into fear and pain and memories to reiterate the fact that this journey isn't over. I have a lot of healing to cover. Which is why, and yes I guess I occasionally need reminding, we came back to Canada. Heal, baby, heal. Make it all feel better.

This is a work in process.

It may be my cramps were triggered (or rather, enhanced) by a few stressful events of late . . . which I guess is quite possible. Way back in grade seven I had my first round of exams – six in one week, or something stupid like that. I broke out in fever and rash. Stress rash. That's just what happens. And today when my mother said to me, "Catherine, you're panicking because you think this is worse than it is," it clicked in my head that I really out to chill. Relax.

And not long after that the pain began to subside.

Anyhow, there you go. But I don't want to leave you on a sour note. Instead I'd rather leave you on a sweet one.

Want to get hooked on an amazing snack food? Please, feel free to join me in the addiction called "Cha Cha Chipolte". It's nuts. NUTS that almonds can taste so fantastic. Okay, here is what you do: Go to your local Bulk Barn or wherever these things are sold, and BUY twenty packets (or just one). Believe me, you won't regret this. My family introduced this addictive, sweet, crumbly, soft, crunch, salty treat into my life, and now I'm Ha Ha Hooked.

So today I've written about panicking and sweet nuts. Not exactly consistent in theme, but whatever. It's my blog, I'll write what I like with it.

Sa sa see you later. Enjoy the nuts!!

15Sep2011

Hopped up on Ukrainian rock

Posted in Articles, Writing

Suddenly I'm busy. Today I woke up with *xyz* on my plate, tonight I'm going to bed with *acb*, *lmn*, *qrs*, and *tuv* – not to mention the original *xyz*. Okay, I overestimate the influx of work – but it's nevertheless influxing all over my life and I think that's 100% awesome.

Maybe you know, maybe you don't, but I'd love to make a living as a writer. Fiction is my heart, blogging is my voice, and type-type-typing is my tool. Why *wouldn't* I want to be a successful writer? (*Hmmm, or librarian, cause libraries are another great love . . . or both, most ideal and balanced.)* Plus, if Zsolt and I are ever going to achieve the 'international living' dream between Canada in the autumn and Balaton in the Spring, then a mobile career seems best.

Anyhow, ever since arriving in Ottawa I've tried to get things going. Narrative Nipple is shaping up, just need to link the site to the URL, and my blogging is expanding *away* from Cancer – which is awesome by the way, plus I'm taking a course on freelance writing and this morning I wrote 600 words of my next story. But don't be fooled by that stupidly low word count; it's about easing into the story (particularly cause I have no idea on what will happen, who the characters are, what the vibe is like . . . instead I just write my way in.).

So today I am in a good mood, though slightly overwhelmed as my google calendar begins to fill with obligations, shows, meetings and other cool stuff.

Busy – which is how it should be. Next up on the agenda: Actually earning money.

But you know what, I cannot forget my purpose here – it's like, essential. So, today I'll call the office and book a couple appointments with my mother. It's time to work through some issues, particularly since I want all incoming awesomeness to grow and bloom. Panic attacks like the other day are counterproductive. Fear and complacency with 'what might happen' are equally unacceptable.

It's a lesson that needs constant knocking into my brain.

Anyhow – deep breath – here I go.

* Want to hear the crazy music I was listening to while writing this post (accidentally had it repeating and didn't realize till I was done writing) – check out the music video here: http://www.ukrainia.org/

16Sep2011

Brain exploding Rubik's cubes

Posted in Fun

Here's a story in 100 words. Zsolt is slowly mastering the Rubik's cube (Hungarian invention) and yesterday decided to teach *me* the secrets of its colourful patterns and algorithms . . . except my brain has a difference sort of brilliance, and no matter how long I stare at those blocks of colour, I *cannot* figure how to align a single thing. And then he takes it outta my hands and goes 'click, clack, clunk' and BAM – cube is nearly done. That's when my brain exploded. On the other hand, I'm a much better cook. So I guess we're even.

P.S. Scientists are sexy! No? Oh, yes.

20Sep2011

Come on hair, GROW!

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs

Back in England I had a really great hairdresser. She gave me my last haircut pre-chemo, and my first haircut post-chemo. There was a trust. So when I visited her for the final time before moving – hoping she could help tidy my bizarrely curling re-growth, she gave me the following advice: "Catherine, just let it grow."

Just let it grow.

Four months later I'm at this computer with mop-top hair; it's thick, it's curly, it's straight, it's blond, it's brown, it's crazy. One thing it's *not* is long. Longer, yes, but not long.

I don't know about you, but I crave longer hair. Once in a while I dream of my once straight, chin-length hair and think, "fantastic, I can pull it into a ponytail" only to wake up and realize that no – I can't. Not yet.

But you know what people keep on telling me, and I bet many short-haired women hear the same: "It looks great short. You should leave it that way." My cousin told me the other day that I standout more with short hair. Well, if I pop with this short hair, I must have kaboomed with my bald head last year. There's nothing like being totally bald to totally get noticed. Combine my cue ball looks with the dark nail polish I wore everyday (in hopes of keeping my fingernails) and I was downright punk chic.

And actually, I've known women who keep their hair short following chemo and *do* look fabulous. But for me, I just think back to when the hair started returning . . . that moment I realized there was a *shadow* across my head (Zsolt pointed it out), and it was fracking **hair.** Forget about winning the lottery – hair growth is an incredible feeling. Happy dances are followed by tears – tears leaking through my newly grown lashes, being whipped across my face and soaking my newly grown brows. Those first few strands are a promise of normality. The possibility of looking like yourself again.

It was like a promise that everything could pass. A new Catherine was growing.

Anyhow, maybe in fifteen years or so I'll cut it short again. Variation is the spice of life, and I do like my life tasty. But for now it's got to keep GROWING. Just because it's confusing the heck out of me at the moment (*it is curly, is it straight, should I cut it, should it grow – is that a MULLET behind my neck?!)*, doesn't mean I'll abandon my goal for achieving a cute, chin length style.

It’s not exactly about looking fabulous – well, okay, it’s *always* about looking fabulous – but it’s also about moving on with my life. For me, at this time, short hair is linked to a bad year behind me. And so the mop-top needs to grow.

(*But, if anyone has any tips on how to grow hair, or what to do with it between acceptable lengths, please pass along your slice of genius. So far I’ve considered the headband (child-like), hair clip (a good idea though I left them all in England), headscarf (but nixed that idea – too chemoesque) and just letting it go wild. Wild has the best results, but as time passes . . . I’m thinking it’s a little too crazy.)*

26Sep2011

Morning list of random stuff

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Fun, Life, Travel, Writing

Here's a quickie posting and hello.

Two things I ought to mention:

1) I really adore the cucumber that hangs outside my bedroom window. I sleep in a basement room, and the plant hangs down into my 'dug out' window. This is the loveliest cucumber, and I regret that it'll soon have to be picked. But what can I do? Use it or lose it. Well . . . lose it either way, I suppose, but eat it as a bonus. Feels so savage.

2) Tonight I'm off to Ashbury College to attend a Q & A plus signing with Chef Michael Smith. He's just released a new cookbook called Chef Michael Smith's Kitchen. This book is meant to contain 100 of his favourite recipes, which makes me wonder what his other books contain, and whether he's allowed to do repeat performances of meal ideas. Can this be the 'greatest hits' of Michael Smith, and are these *really* his favourite recipes, and if so – why? And why weren't they included before?

It's like a mystery to unpick. But mostly I'm looking forward to sampling the appetizers and listening to this very tall man speak. He says that food is about creating stories. So I'm hoping he's got some great stories to tell, considering all the food he makes.

I'm excited for tonight. Super cool! Plus it will be my first review for the Ottawa Writers Festival pre-festival line-up. Awesome.

And a few things I'll ramble on about:

3) I have started taking my vitamins again. It's this weird personal battle with me – what to do, don't want to do anything, hate to acknowledge there was ever a problem, and mostly I just want to move on. But I'm part of a large community of women who have fought through cancer one way or another, and when I hear about someone's reoccurrence it's so sad (horrible) for them, and completely unnerving for me. This is *not* the reminder I want, yet it happens, and it says: 'Keep going Catherine, you lazy butt. Keep fighting this!' But nevertheless, it happens and then shocks me out the treatment depression. Treatment depression. Sorta like no-job depression, or not-yet-finished-writing-this-damn-book depression. I have the horrible tendency to do *nothing* when things fall into a slump. And it takes a lot of effort (or a wake up) to get me moving that ambition once again. It also takes a lot of effort to be in the slump – cause mentally no one likes to feel stagnant.

Horrible stuff. So starting with little things like taking my vitamins and signing up for the local yoga class and visiting Awakeing Potentials for a session . . . slowly I'm making things better, to become better. I really like better. Or ever more – awesome. I love awesome. And the steps make me feel proactive. Being proactive gives me hope in all areas of life.

4) I've started eating scrambled eggs. Free range, preferably vegetable grain fed. For some reason I can suddenly stomach the cooked up puffs of yellow. All other eggs are still not welcome, but scrambled I can handle. It's a good change.

5) Next week Zsolt and I should be going to Tremblant for a little autumn revelling and family-time. Plus, I'm bringing my laptop and feel intent on locking myself away until this next chapter is finished being forged. Maybe we'll find a canoe and take to the water?

And this, ladies and gentlemen, has been the 'I just got up and have all these things on my mind' list. Brought to you by English Breakfast tea and dried cranberries, which I've already finished eating.

Have yourself a wonderful day. I think the weather in Ottawa is outstanding. Ten points to Ontario for having a lovely climate this late into September. Bonus points promised if it lasts into October.

27Sep2011

Brain mush

Posted in Articles, Writing

Just finished my first draft of the Michael Smith event – it was a great evening, and putting down the powerful messages he was trying to relate is a considerable challenge. Ah! Brain mush.

To be continued.

28Sep2011

Working out the kinks

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Life, Writing

Let me introduce my two Catherines.

Catherine A (let's just call her 'Ay') is waist-deep in life and loves every second. She writes, she laughs, she licks her fingers after eating ribs, sings as she drives, dances in the kitchen and she *never* passes up the opportunity to chat over a cup of tea. Ay knows herself, and she's thrilled to be here.

And over there, standing a little in the back, is Catherine B (aka Bea). And she's a variation – she's me being watched by other people. Bea has a tendency to choke on her words, blush to near-purple colours, feel dizzy with nerves, and avoid the spotlight as though it was really a laser beam sent from aliens hovering above earth to blow her into smithereens.

Frankly, I cannot stand Bea, and yet she's always coming out at the very worst of moments. Just when Ay is gearing up to be brave, bold, and undeniably awesome – in swoops the alter ego, and out swoops the verve for life.

If you can relate to this division, I think that's because it's really rather rather normal for people to have some degree of split between their perception of self and the reality. There's the 'real you' the 'ideal you' and I'd argue, the 'scared you'. Though never before had I stopped to consider the drastic contrast between, for instance, *me as a writer*, and *me as a person who talks about her writing*. Totally different Catherines. When I write – I'm free. Words are better than chocolate, better than water, better than wind in your hair. Yet go ahead one day and ask me in person, "So Catherine, what do you write?" and I'll get quiet, anxious, and mumble something about a blog, some copywriting, and a little fiction too.

A little fiction? I *LOVE* writing fiction. So who is this nervous wreck who can't admit to her joys?

Well I guess she's just scared. Timid. And frankly, she's also incongruent.

Okay, okay. It's weird to talk about myself so extensively in third person. Maybe I should have used a lemon meringue pie, sliced into various portions instead. But I had hoped Ay and Bea would illustrate the division. The point is, sometimes we're fabulous and sometimes – in my case when it comes to pursuing goals in person, beyond the screen, face to face – sometime we crumble into idiot dust. And today I suddenly realized that division between who I am (healthy, cancer-free, and creative), and how I act.

It's simply not on, to spin it with a British phrase. And not acceptable. Certainly hiding what I love, and how I love, does nothing in my favour. But for some reason there's a "freak out" switch when it comes to aligning my goals and my behaviour.

Now please, ask yourself – right now: Who are you? What do you value most? And is that congruent with the way you present yourself to others? Do you live, breath and *project* the very essence of yourself, at all times, in all company, against all doubts?

Whether it's health incongruence (*feeling optimistic, yet scared about cancer*), objective incongruence (*having a dream, but not admitting it aloud*), life incongruence (*Loving your life, yet feeling incomplete*) or whatever kind of incongruence you might have . . . it's a hinderance, don't you think?

And it means things need to be fixed. Realigned. Addressed.

Anyhow, practice makes perfect. So in my case, if you do meet me in person and we have a lovely conversation – please ask about my writing, and about my health, and about any darn thing you think I might be hiding. And if you like, I'll ask you about your goals too (*though you'll need to let me know what they are first*). Cause the only way to get over the anxiety (*at least for me*) is to face it head on.

So that was today's mini 'ah ha' moment. Next up comes the follow through. And that's a whole other blog post.

***Exciting news!* My first review as a blogger for the Ottawa Writer's Festival is being posted *today*. Follow this link to read my thoughts on Chef Michael Smith's Ottawa appearance, and why he's way more than a tall, handsome fellow who knows how to cook. Like a lot of us, he's got a story and he's passionate to share. Read it here! Woohoo!**

29Sep2011

Locked out in the sun

Posted in Fun, Life

Zsolt and I were ‘locked out of the house’ today. And yes, the quotation marks are on purpose. We had taken the bikes to the local shop for a break fix, and upon returning found the front door locked. Great (*not*). Next we opened the garage and checked the door . . . nada. *Then* Zsolt hopped the fence into the backyard to try the back door. Locked.

And so, for about an hour and a half, we were locked away from our basement den and glowing computer screens. Instead we threw the football, hit the birdie (*with badminton rackets*), played a game of HORSE with the basketball and net . . . when thirsty, we drank from the hose (*and someone sprayed me in the face with a little trick of water pressure. Someone being ZSOLT*), and when hungry we pulled up rhubarb.

It was – amongst our annoyance and grumbles about needing to get work done – fun. It was really fun. Like being kids on a sunny day with little to do but play.

Beautiful afternoon when I stop and think about it.

And as I began to realize that my parents wouldn’t be coming home for *at least* another two hours, and I might actually need to bike over to their office – I took one last-ditch attempt and again tried the garage door.

OPEN! Not locked. *Never* locked.

Zsolt says I was the one who originally tested the door. I say he’s the culprit of misinformation.

Either way, we’re idiots. But we’re idiots who had a lovely, sunny, fun-filled afternoon. So I guess that’s okay.

4Oct2011

Wonderful to each other

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Love

"This is your time. This time we are for you." Last year around this time, that was my French Canadian grandmother of ninety-one years, Lulu, cheering me onward as we spoke over skype (as I tried to look 'healthy' with my bald head and worn out expression, since no one wants to look sick in front of their grandmother). She sent her support, like everyone else – and I was so incredibly thankful. 'People are at their best during the worst', I heard that the other day on *Lost* (I think), and during my worst, people were truly incredible.

And last year I thought to myself while pre-made food arrived, as friends visited, when family called from across the ocean and coached me via skype, I thought to myself, "once I'm all better, I've got to give back."

The number of ways to 'give back' are endless, from blogging to volunteering to donating to running marathons . . . possibilities stretch before a thankful survivor who needs to honour the goodness they've experienced. But I hadn't imagined giving back would start so close to home, so close in the family.

This week Zsolt and I are thick in the woods of the Mount Tremblant area, hanging out at my aunt's cottage and keeping her and my grandmother company. Now, one year later, this is Lulu's time, and this time we are for her. While I haven't written a single word of fiction (or fact, apart from this blog) during this mountain retreat, I have cooked some lovely meals, watched my husband stoke the fire, enjoyed driving tours with my aunt, played rummy with family, listened to my grandmother's memories of her parents (and her parent's parents, and her aunt, who was a nun) . . . and I am reminded that sometimes the best way to help another person is simply to be available.

Being here. Cooking food. Listening to stories. Going for a latte.

Last year those were the little things that made an incredible difference in my fight, and this year – though the circumstances are completely different (though the exhaustion isn't, I can imagine) – these are the same things that helps everyone smile. And when we're smiling, all else moves aside like sunshine through clouds. A generous reminder that life can be wonderful, and we can be wonderful to one another.

11Oct2011

Looking at the past, again

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Life

This week I'm digging out my old diary (which is buried in one of my fifteen moving boxes and I don't know which box it is in) in order to travel back in time. Where to? Well, to the day of diagnosis. Again.

You might think I'm a sucker for punishment, the way I've been continuing my blogging in regards to cancer – cause every time I have to remember cancer, there's a little pinch on the side saying, "That was pure and total shit, Catherine. Remember?" And honestly in many ways I'd rather forget.

But when it comes to such a life-altering experience, to forget completely is 1) impossible and 2) possibly equivalent to denial.

Plus, there are too many reminders in life that cancer exists. Too many people die. Too many people suffer. Too many people are diagnosed. And a lot of people run around in pink this time of year raising money to end breast cancer, which I appreciate, but which also serves as a steady reminder that breast cancer happens, and, oh yeah, it happened to me.

But I'm not complaining – just trying to explain why when people ask me to recollect what it was like, I don't just say, "no way, Hose," and go find a pile of sand for my head to fit under.

Next week on the 19th of October I'll be going to Orillia to give a talk for a palliative care conference. It's slightly daunting. I feel like I should approach this conference with my fingers crossed and held out for protection – palliative care is *not* for me or my future, and there's a little intimidation when being around someone who cares for those who are dying.

Because I am not dying.

Okay, okay, we're all dying. But I am not dying.

You know what I mean? And I really don't want to face that situation until I'm good and old and maybe around the age of 89, so long as I can still dance.

But this talk I'll be giving focuses on that moment of diagnosis – that sudden shocking change. And I think it's an important moment to reflect upon, because in that second, the second reality sinks in, so many things happen so fast – and while I appear to be just a slobbering mess of a woman who can't stop crying, really I'm starting my journey (my battle) and everything has just shifted in my life. It's immense. And I guess that's what I ought to get across to the lovely people who will be listening next week. That and what happens next. Not in terms of the 'process' though that is huge, but more in the emotional challenge, and how life itself must be reshaped.

Okay, okay. I'm just procrastinating now. Time to go and shape this talk, and dig through those boxes for my journal. There's some hard, never-shared stuff in there. But it's an essential reminder. And I guess (and this is a good thing, cause lately I haven't though about cancer 24/7, which I like very much), I guess I need a little reminding.

So – here we go. Into the boxes.

12Oct2011

Narrative Nipple goes, “WOOOOOHOOO!”

Posted in Fun, Writing

She’s here, and she’s looking good! Finally Narrative Nipple is dressed and ready to be seen. So please – go see her.

Okay guys, I guess this isn’t exactly a post, it’s more a big ‘WOOOHOO’ cause I’m stoked to get this project rolling. So with no more words, I invite you to check out the page and let me know what you think. Submissions are always welcome, and you certainly **do no** need to have had breast cancer to contribute.

Right – here’s the link: www.narrativenipple.com

Please, go have a look Maybe even leave a comment. *High fives all around!*

14Oct2011

Greasing up for breast cancer

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Fun

Well it's ten p.m and I should be going to bed and not blogging, but Zsolt and Daniel are behind me watching "Maximum Overdrive" so what the heck.

Guess where I was tonight? The Mayfair. They were hosting a fundraising event for the Canadian Cancer Society, specifically raising money for breast cancer. Katie from The Bald and the Beautiful brought me into the know of tonight's event, and I have to say it was a fun evening.

Firstly – I met Katie. She's way too young to have gotten breast cancer, but nevertheless counters the crap with ample amounts of determination and involvement, helping spread awareness to other young people about the dangers of BC. We both write blogs for Facingcancer.ca, and this afternoon was our first 'in person' meeting.

So there we were in Starbucks drinking our green tea, having our first ever chat, and I swear, it must have been a conversation to catch the ears. Literally thirty cementers from us was this long haired woman trying to focus on her papers, but yeah right. I don't mean to be self-absorbed, but we had a good conversation rolling, and it was all about breast cancer – how does that *not* attract attention? (It's like eavesdropping on a couple who are having their first date. I don't *want* to listen in, but I can't help it; they are so fascinating. So very hilarious and fascinating.)

Maximum Overdrive Update: Okay. Emilio Estevez is now feeding gas to the angry eighteen wheelers, who moments ago just shot dead the waitress when she ran out of the restaurant and screamed, "we made you. We made you!" ACDC is now ringing out with 'Hells Bells'. Rock and roll.

Anyhow, so after our Starbucks meet and greet, we headed over to the Mayfair to enjoy the pre-show fun. That included buying popcorn with really terrible butter, and getting a quick manicure and face treatment. Lovely. They woman who was doing the spa session had me put a mud mask on my lips. But I have to say, it worked really well. These pink puckers are smooth.

And that's when the real fun began.

Grease Lightening, baby.

Wow! That movie is all camp and cheese. It's been so, so long since I've watched it in full, I didn't remember how charmingly cheesy this film gets – and Danny Zuko was brilliant – he was so incredibly cheesy, it was an absolute hoot. The women behind us were singing, hooting, clapping, and shouting.

But wowzers, it's totally crass too. Funny crass – but some of the lyrics! Some of the lines! Beneath all that grease and hair spray and push up bras and ice cream colouring is a truly racy movie. Oh, the language. It was hilarious.

And then Danny and Sandy flew up into the sky in their pimped up hot rod, and the credits rolled.

Overall I think it was a good night. Great to meet a fellow blogger, and really fun to go to this film. The showing was a bit sparse – certainly someone needs to be paid to do some marketing for that group. But otherwise, really fun.

Anyhow – Estevez is now formulating a plan to escape the angry trucks and machines. I think this Stephen King movie (also incredibly cheesy) is nearly over. Oops, there goes a tracker driving over a few cars. Oh crap, and here's a killer ice cream truck. Well anyhow, the film is climaxing, so it's time to stop writing.

Have a great night, and a lovely tomorrow.

Bye-o!

17Oct2011

Give them the truth

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Writing

Good afternoon, lovely people. Welcome to another great day.

I'm in a good mood today – and you wanna know why? Because I've finally finished prepping for my talk. Okay, not exactly finished. (*My mom has a surprise waiting when she gets home from work: me giving her this speech!*). But the structure has been hammered out, and I feel good about the contents.

You know, when I agreed to give a talk on the 'patient experience' for this upcoming Palliative Care conference, I knew that going back to the dark times might be difficult, but I didn't expect it to also be relieving. In this talk I dig down into some of the hard packed crap that made treatment particularly difficult, and I'll be exploring it with the very people whose jobs are to help alleviate that stress. So how great is this? Certainly a group I can appreciate, and now I get to show them a little of the 'hard truth' I never brought with me into the hospital.

None of my nurses knew of Bumpyboobs during treatment. None of the doctors knew either. Because really, they inspired a lot of that content, and I didn't want any grudges held against me.

But this Wednesday in Orillia I get to be honest. Really, truly honest. And we get to go over the highs and the lows.

I'm looking forward, and hoping my knee caps don't shake too much. (*Oh, I used to debate in high school and as I was up there talking, my knee caps would shake and shake and shake. Good thing I wasn't carbonated*.)

On a different note – I think November ought to be the month I gear down and get internal. Falling leaves, preparations for winter, the lessening of sun – can there be a better moment for down shifting? What with the Writers Festival blog, Narrative Nipple design, the palliative care talk, and the writing course, I've totally neglected any actual, love-of-my-life writing. There are projects that need completing and characters who deserve my attention.

And so November will be a time to breath. I'll keep you updated on how far that takes me. Resolutions are not promises, but I really do want this time to write. (And not be distracted, Catherine, so stop surfing the internet!)

You know, there was a time when I craved a busy life, a life that wasn't restrained to the treatment chair or bed. And now I'm living that beautiful reality. It feels good. It feels great. And today I'm happy.

22Oct2011

The conference went well

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Fun, Travel

Okay I'm heading for the bed because tonight I need to stay up late (like past ten) so that I can review the Ukrainia concert that is going to be happening. Honestly, the review will probably go like this: they were awesome! And we danced. Because I'm no music critique.

But I wanted to first stop in here and tell you about the conference. It went great. Great! The entire audience was composed (with a few exceptions) of nurses. Wonderful, beautiful, ever-learning nurses. I know that as a patient, I might over-idolize the people who helped me (and demonize, since my mood can change depending on the drugs getting pumped) but when it comes to nurses, well, can they get enough praise? Like I said in my earlier post, during treatment there was no way I could handle saying what I really felt – but last Wednesday in the Midland country golf course, Catherine told it like it was.

And how they had helped.

What was inspiring.

How the journey became easier.

Which was all down to simple humanity. People being kind.

Anyhoo – they seemed to enjoy the speech, enjoy my way of presenting (Dad was all, "don't stand behind the podium, get a clip-on mic and no power point. So I followed his urgings to, I believe, my benefit. It was a great talk), and most importantly they enjoyed my content. Hugs followed. Many, many hugs.

So it was a day to smile. Zsolt and I had a small vacation from Ottawa, and the conference was really enjoyable. Two thumbs up for a positive experience. May there be many more in the future.

22Oct2011

I should be napping!

Posted in Life

Right. I should be napping so that I can fight against the to-be-expected snooze of late-night staying upping. But I have one more thing to say.

Sometimes it's worthwhile to say when you're unhappy. Now this is something I've had to adjust in my mentality, because in the past I'd never complain. But then, one day, I simply became fed up with being really, really nice (*gag!*) and decided to tone it down at least one level of really.

(*Perhaps I'm overemphasizing my kindness. It's not like I rescue kittens or give to every charity. In fact, I'm only moderately sweet and equally, if not more, also selfish. But certainly I am polite. And have also been known to be meek. I guess it's the meekness that's really being conquered when it comes to complaining. Because we can complain in a kind way too, no? But being meek means keeping silent.*)

So I had a haircut. As you might remember, my stylist in Southampton was FANTASTIC. Yes, she deserves capital letters. It took trial and error to find her, but I did – and actually, I found her by going back for a re-cut (Cause the previous girl made me look five years old. Not cool.). Anyhow, coming over to Canada I'm debating who will now be my designated hair designer. *hair designer, don't you love how language changes? What happened to the hair dresser? Or the barber?!

Anyhow – so like, three days before my talk I call my mom's hair place in desperation. Except that the lady I wanted to see (*she's really very talented and confident with those scissors*) wasn't available. Well, okay, I booked with another person. And came out with a bowl-shaped hairstyle. Ugh, just terrible. So square, so awkward, so ugly.

And I didn't want to complain, didn't want the stylist to get in trouble, but ultimately decided that I looked like an idiot, and went in for a re-cut.

That was today. This morning. And the results are 100% better.

But you know what else? They didn't even have a problem with my asking for better results. And lately I've found that most people don't. Just so long as we're polite and patient, people are often happy to get it right – make it right for you.

I guess they're the ones who are really, really nice.

Okay, not everyone will be accommodating – but if someone is a jerk when you're complaint is valid, then whatever they were/are offering is just not worth your time. Either keep on pressing your point if necessary (*which I've also had to do before when the shipping company didn't want to send out a van to collect our stuff and we were leaving the next morning*) or, if you have this luxury, forget about that company/individual/product and never look back.

Anyhow, life lesson: It's okay to ask for better. About time I wrapped my head around that one.

25Oct2011

Old furniture, new nest

Posted in Canada, Finding Home, Fun, Life

Welcome to Kanata – here is a land full of suburban streets and sprawling yards. Living in the heart of this green, golf, and park filled paradise are me and the Zsoltster. We're tucked away in my parents basement slowly plotting our transfer to a dreamed of apartment with a buzz in the streets. It will happen, we haven't given up hope.

And in the meanwhile, we keep an eye on the streets. You know what people do here on a weekly basis? They discard furniture. *Every week* there's a new (well, ancient but new on the road) drawer, table, chair, or stool on the edge of someone's driveway. Zsolt and I keep an eye out.

To date we have accumulated the following items from people's driveways:

Dining Table

Drawers

Toaster

End tables

Coffee table

All somewhat ugly, all incredibly old, all unwanted.

But we want them. We love them. With each bit of furniture, I feel like we're piecing together a puzzle that was taken apart in England. All that's left now is to find a sofa, and I think we're set. (*Though we'll likely buy the sofa, new or used, because I don't want to gamble with any bed bug infestation possibilities.*)

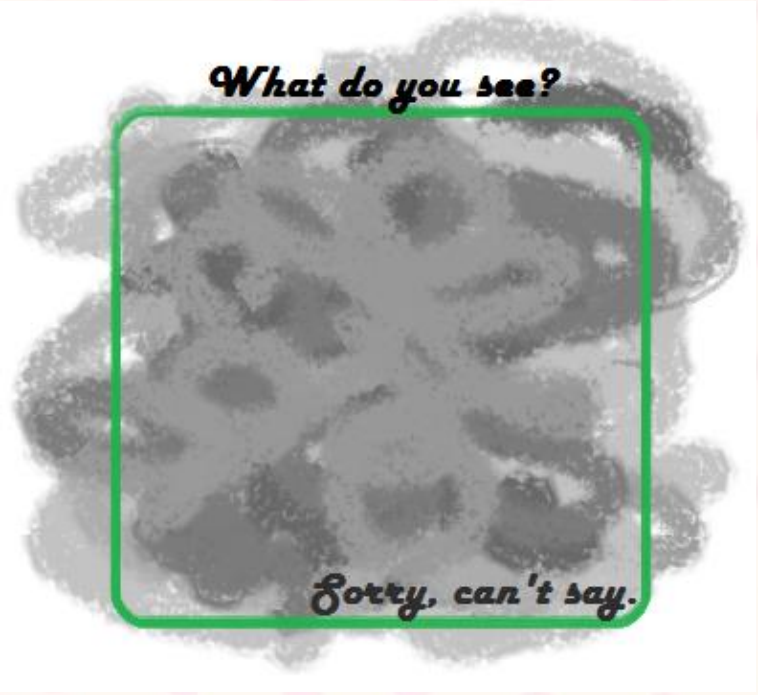
Anyhow, I love this recycling idea. And I love all our free new/old furniture. Each time we find another piece, it sparks a bit of excitement – gives a little reminder that we're making a new nest here in Canada. And things are coming along.

28Oct2011

Follow up ultrasound

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs

Blarg. Today I went to the hospital for 'follow up' scanning. This is a check-up that every post treatment person needs to endure – and while I say, 'endure' it is not because of the hardship of getting a scan. No. Getting scanned is fantastic. This is exactly what I need to monitor my health, and frankly I feel very lucky that my oncologist, Dr Canada, has sent me for a variety of tests.



(Over the next month – October to end of November, I am/was schedule for an abdomen ultrasound, chest x-ray, and chest MRI. Also, I'll be applying for genetic testing, but haven't yet received those papers.)

So – these tests, as Zsolt reminds me, are fantastic. But what's not fantastic is the dread.

Dread sucks. Uncertainty sucks. Not *immediately* having my results sucks.

So today was the abdomen ultrasound and chest X-ray. Please, let me tell you all about them.

I arrived at the Queensway Carleton and Zsolt, Dan and I found our way to the x-ray department. Oh my goodness. You can certainly see that these folks *don't* have big money. Unlike the Ottawa cancer centres (designed to be like day-spas and brimming with fountains, sky light and marble), x-ray looked like the basement of some Halloween-themed mad doctor's clinic. Blue walls with scuff marks, people clustered in a tiny wait area, low ceiling, bad smell . . . here they will give me a scan that is essential for maintaining my health, and yet all I can think of is how crowded it feels and how the walls need repainting. Apparently, as a cancer patient, I've been a little spoiled.

Anyhoo – Daniel hightails it out of the room to wait at Tim Hortons. Zsolt and I check in and take a seat. Eventually I'm called and a lovely nurse takes me into her ultrasounding room. It's dim, I remove my top and stick on the gown (*also ugly, and not so fantastic at keeping me modest*). My bladder is BUSTING, since I drank tons of water an hour before as instructed, and the nurse says that is a good thing – the busting.

She squirts goo onto my belly.

(*As I'm typing this, Zsolt just gave me a hug. He is my wonderful.*)

She squirts goo onto my belly and begins the scan. This lasted about thirty minutes, partway through I was allowed to pee (*whew*) and all the while I attempted conversation.

Me: So, what are you scanning?

Her: I'm scanning everything, your uterus, ovaries, bladder, liver, kidneys.

Me: Hmm, I remember my first ultrasound, the doctor looked at my breast on the screen and knew it was cancer. Though she didn't tell me then.

Her: Yeah, we're not allowed to say.

Me: Hmm. Though she knew on the day. Any chance you can say something?

Her: Sorry, I can't say anything in case it's wrong.

Brutal. So I just laid there the rest of the scan thinking, *what does she see?* And not knowing. Beside me, for company, was a baby poster. Babies and ultrasounds . . . well, I don't want to get depressive, but babies and ultrasounds are what I used to imagine when thinking about blue goo squirting onto the belly. Not this other stuff.

So who knows how today went? My hope is that everything is fine, fine, fine. One possibly good sign is that when she scanned my ovaries from outside my body, she said:

"Okay, I got quite a good scan of your ovaries so I'll give you a choice. Normally there's no choice, but I have quite a good image. Normally we insert this device into you, and scan your ovaries from the inside. But this image is clear enough that it's not absolutely necessary. You can decide."

So here is what I think. If there were any problems with my ovaries or uterus, she would have insisted on doing the 'inside' scan, right? Cause that makes all kinds of sense. But she gave me the *choice*, as though it wasn't necessary, as though everything looks fine.

I asked her to do the inside scan regardless – because I was already there and already gooey. And I'd hate to go back to that stinky x-ray waiting room unless absolutely necessary.

And then I had the lung x-ray, but that takes about two seconds and there was little time to worry over the state of my lungs.

And then we left the hospital.

Ever since today's hospital adventure I've been . . . hmm . . . unsettled. You know? I've been . . . ruffled. Frankly, someone had better tell me soon that everything is fine, fine, fine and write me a clean bill of health. Someone needs to do this soon, otherwise I might get a little more than ruffled.

The good thing about scans is that ultimately they can give relief.

The bad thing about scans is that sometimes, they don't go your way.

But I think – I really think, that I'm fine. Today I am fine. Tomorrow I will be better. And in two weeks I'll go knocking on my family doctor's door and get those results.

AH. Life is so sweet when we can forget, forget and just live on. But it doesn't really work that way, eh? I guess not. Not in my case. Or rather, at least not today.

4Nov2011

The crunch of an apple

Posted in Life, Love

This week took me back into the Tremblant hills, and frankly my mind is still there despite having returned to Ottawa. In Tremblant the leaves have fallen, leaving the forest a mixture of bare grey and coniferous green. And up one particular dirt road, along which you'll find slews of frozen water (*where Zsolt and I threw rocks to break the ice*), past the scattered houses with lights on in the windows, up, up, and up to the top of a forest-covered hill – that's where my grandmother is staying. It is my aunt's log cabin in the woods. Smoke pours from the chimney, fire crawls in the hearth and conversations are whispered. This week Zsolt and I kept them company. Together we waited. And we are still waiting, even now as I type this in my parent's kitchen in Ottawa, now away from the chalet.

My grandmother, Lulu, is ninety two years old, and for all the wonderful things she is, has been, may become – right now she is dying. And that is hard for everyone. Hard to even write about.

But it's wrapped up in my mind, so what choice do I have? This week I don't want to blog about cancer or homecoming or Canada or my husband. I'd rather write about Lucienne, or Lulu, as I call her.

The other day I walked into my grandmother's bedroom and sat down opposite her. She said her 'Bonjour' and so did I before flipping open my laptop and beginning to work while she stared across the room. And then I pulled out an apple that was in my pocket (no bananas), polished it off, and took a bite.

Lulu smiled.

I offered her a slice, since suddenly she was watching me, but Lulu declined.

"I can't eat it." Her teeth are no good for chewing hard fruit.

"Do you mind if I eat it?"

"No, no."

And so for a while it was all: type, type, type (*I was working on a project for my parents. This week they are hosting this large workshop and I was sussing out some inspirational ideas to write on cards.*) and chew, chomp, crunch.

Crunch, crunch, crunch. Apple juice running down my hand, being wiped on my pyjamas, spraying into the room with every juicy bite. Crunch, crunch, crunch.

And she turned to me – which she doesn't do too often anymore, and she smiled.

"I like that. I like to hear you eat it."

"Does it feel almost like you're eating it?"

"Yes. I like the smell. I like the sound."

And she laid back smiling as I continued to eat that red McIntosh. Eyes closed. Crunch, crunch, crunch. Sour sweet juice.

What she thought about with those eyes shut, I have no idea. My French is not fantastic, and her English isn't incredible (but it is good). We normally manage fairly well, though lately she's having trouble so I avoid in-depth questions like, "What is it you're imagining right now?" or "What is it you remember when I eat this apple?"

But whatever it was, it made her smile. And maybe in that moment, maybe it took her somewhere other than the bedroom in my aunt's Tremblant chalet. Somewhere she felt more herself. Maybe –*and this is me being sentimental* – maybe it took her back in time, to when she and Benoit would sit on the veranda of their Montreal home after the girls had been put to bed. And they'd lean back on their lawn chairs, side by side, and laugh as the apple juice dripped down their fingers. Crunch, crunch, crunch.

That's what I'd like to imagine.

Sometimes we feel so helpless seeing other people suffer. And as things progress, that helplessness builds for everyone. It's a familiar picture. Last year I was on the other side, the one in bed and beneath the blankets, and even now I need to say: '*Catherine, you are not sick. This is not you. You are fine and done with that garbage. Done, done, done*.'

But nevertheless, whatever side – there is a helplessness. And so I'm thankful for the small moments. The smell of an apple, the gift of a memory, the comfort of company.

If I could do nothing else, at least I could help her smile; it's one of the most lovely things in the world – and hopefully, for at least that moment, she felt lovely within herself.

And that is all I have to say about that.

4Nov2011

Full circle to the MRI

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Treatment

Back from the MRI.

It was basically exactly like the previous MRI, except that instead of fainting and barfing I just burst into tears instead. *Blah!* Honestly this time the scan was no problem. But as the technician had me change and was asking questions about my kidneys – I asked him if Zsolt could join me for the IV insertion, and he said no, and I was like, well, it's just that last time I passed out.

And bam. There go the tears.

But regardless of the trickle that kept leaking from my eye, the IV was put in (Zsolt could have joined me at this point, but in the end I went in alone.) and I calmed down while waiting for the scan.

After that came about thirty minutes of loud bonks and zapping sounds (though I wasn't actually zapped, but the noise gets to be like a discotheque after a while. The technician had told me not to move – not even a little – but with all the MRI techno beats, it was a little difficult not to at least tap my toes.

Now I've had enough with the scans and am hoping that no one from the hospital calls within the next week. That would be a good sign, right? Frankly, I have now had my share of tests. Clear results! That's what I'm looking for.

And that was the MRI – no more dizzy dye, just memories that unexpectedly came flooding back.

After the hospital Zsolt and I hit up *Little India*, a restaurant in Ottawa and enjoyed their ass-kicking lunch buffet. Totally delicious, and a nice reward for a test well done.

8Nov2011

Carpet of yellow leaves

Posted in Finding Home, Life, Love

Today Zsolt and I lay on the lawn beneath my giant maple. We looked up at the yellow leafed branches framed against the sky – hard, clear blue and not a cloud in sight. And all around us on the ground was a carpet of yellow. Our front yard was the picture of autumn perfection, and it felt incredible to watch leaves flutter and spin and drop down beside us.

That was the best part of my day.

Twenty minutes later we raked up the yard.

8Nov2011

A final post for Lulu

Posted in Life, Love

Beside her bed in the chalet where Lulu slept are two photographs. One is her at age 20 – it's a portrait of a beautiful young woman who has her hair cropped short and curled upon her head with pins. She's smiling and looks fantastic. The other black and white photograph is from when she is twenty two. It is a wedding portrait: she and Benoit smile – teeth showing – past the camera and look young, happy and in love.

Lucienne was born in 1919 the oldest of many children (like seven or eight, I think). When she hit grade four she was forced to drop out of school. The family store had burnt down, and Lulu needed to give up her education to go and clean houses. She dreamed of becoming a nun, but couldn't afford to join the covenant.

Instead she met Benoit, fell in love and had a family. Parties were always being hosted in her home. All night card games and laughter that would wake the children. And later, I remember, whenever we gathered as a family to celebrate a birthday, we'd all sing a rendition of *Happy Birthday* after which Lulu would belt out: "Hip, hip, hip!" to which everyone would answer: "Hurray!" and then she start again: "Hip, hip, hip!" "Hurray!"

When I was maybe five years old, I can remember going to Lulu's Montreal home for Christmas. Every year she would bake her gingerbread men cookies. And I'd stick my face before the oven and watch as the cookies slowly puffed and hardened. It was the best when she iced them, giving them eyes, buttons and jackets – but the worst was when she stuck on raisons as well.

She spoke and read French. She loved politics. She taught herself English. She headed the Alzheimer's Society up until the age of ninety, after Benoit himself passed away from the disease and she saw a chance to make conditions better for those in need.

She was stubborn. She had firm opinions. She was smart. She could be difficult. She loved her girls. She loved her grandchildren. She knew her own mind, even if you didn't like it so much. And in so many ways, I can see that in myself and my mother too. Bull headedness, firmness, determination – call it what you like, but we also have big hearts.

And when shit hit the fan in my life, she was a significant supporter – reading each blog post, talking over skype, saying I looked pretty when really I looked a mess. I am grateful to have been with her on and off these past few months. I am grateful that we laughed together, ate together, rested together and talked.

Lulu died Tuesday in the early AM. She was ninety two years old and had laughed, loved and lived.

To me, she was an excellent grandmother. I miss her already.

How about one last time for Lulu, eh?

“Hip, hip, hip!”

“Hooray!”

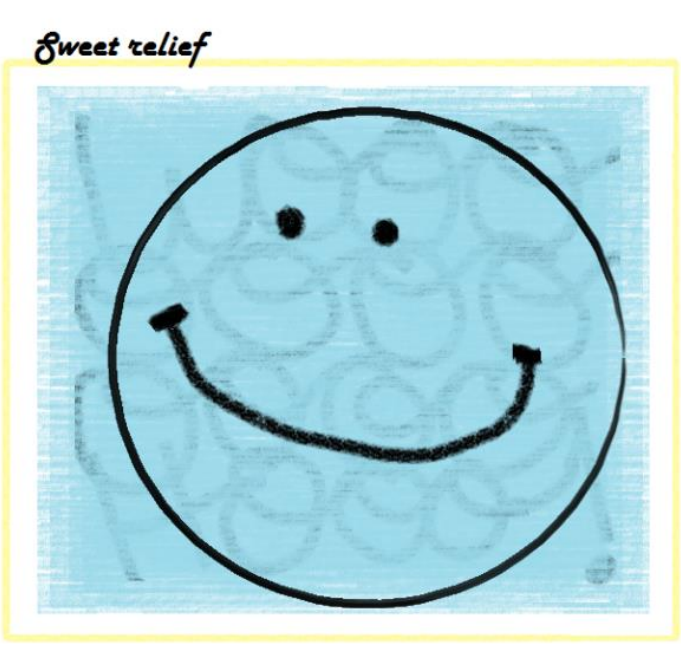
P.S. You should have seen her at my wedding reception two years ago – geez! Talk about stealing the show. Everyone was coming and saying, “Hey Catherine, your grandma is *cool*.” She danced like ninety had nothing on her.

10Nov2011

And the results are in

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs

Yes! Today is a good day – today I receive the exact kind of news you want to hear: Good results. Woohoo! Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes!



Dr Canada called this morning – it being early morning, I was just waking from my sleep and slipping on a bathrobe, therefore my mom took the call.

"Hello?"

"Hello, is this Catherine?"

"No."

"Who am I speaking with?"

Now that is funny, cause he called *our* house and was asking who *he* was speaking with – but you know what, I love that assertive behaviour in a doctor. Generally it means they know what they are doing, or at least feel confident in their actions. And from what I can tell, that's a good thing. Besides, we already know that Dr Canada is a great guy, so his direct early-morning questioning might have surprised my mom, but everything was resolved as soon as he actually said who he was – i.e. Dr Canada calling with my results.

So my mom says she's "Marcelle, Catherine's mother." And he says, "Oh great – well you can pass along the news." Apparently my scans came up clear except for a cyst on my right ovary. And my mom was like, "it is really a cyst?" and he says, "yes, it is." Or something like that. At this point I was heading toward the upstairs washroom with my bathrobe wrapped tight, so I never actually participated in this conversation and am totally fabricating this dialogue based on the summary provided by my mother.

Anyhow – because of the cyst I'll have another scan in December. I guess this time instead of walking into a gross old waiting room decked out with Halloween cobwebs and skeletons, it'll instead have tinsel and a plastic tree.

Hopefully by then the cyst will have gone away, away, away. I am hoping, cause I'd hate there to be any reason for further investigations.

But you know what – yes, they found a cyst (pretty normal stuff, I think), but hey: NO CANCER.

WOOOOHOOOOO! YES! YES! YES!

Feel free to join me in a happy dance. I'll tell you what, this morning was quite a relief. Oh my goodness, eh, what good news today. I hope good news comes your way too. Good news for everyone! They don't charge for this stuff.

13Nov2011

Green Tea Magic

Posted in Bumpboobs, Food, Fun, Life

Here's a Tea Tip. My mother and I were walking around Westboro this past weekend (*taking a break from the world*) and I was on the lookout for decaffeinated green tea.

So we walk into this little tea shop that is full of bamboo, tea settings, small round tables and tins (presumably with tea inside) lining the walls. And I ask the young woman there for decaffeinated green tea.

"We don't have any decaf teas here, because of the processing, but you can naturally decaffeinate your own tea, if you like."

Yes, I like. And how do I do that?

Apparently caffeine dissolves fairly quickly once the tea leaves hit hot water. Therefore, take your tea of choice, submerge it in very hot water (Does it need to be boiling? She didn't specify, but I would imagine *not* simply because green tea isn't meant to be served at 100 degrees.) and let sit for about a minute. Then drain that water. About 75% of the caffeine will have drained away.

Now how is that for a useful tip? After wowing us with her helpfulness, she then proceeded to show us several varieties of green teas and had us sniff each container as she explained the tone and taste of each tea. Clearly she knows her stuff.

Honestly, I had just put on some sample hand cream at the previous Westboro store we'd visited, so half the smells were lost on me (*She suggested I might notice how one tea was more grassy than the other, but the subtle smells were overcome by rosehips and lemongrass – though it was very lovely hand cream*.) However, smelling and learning was nevertheless a lovely way to buy tea. Considering green tea is meant to be all kinds of good for you – it's nice to see shop owners who take it very seriously, and want you to have the right choice. Actually, I think it somehow gave the tea additional magical powers, because we treated it with reverence, as though it was not just a drink but a total experience of the soul. In the end, Mom and I settled on a green tea which is high in amino acids but has a delicate flavour. It's in my tea pot and steeping at this moment.

I'm counting down the minutes before I can indulge. Maybe one more. Then I'll pour a cup.

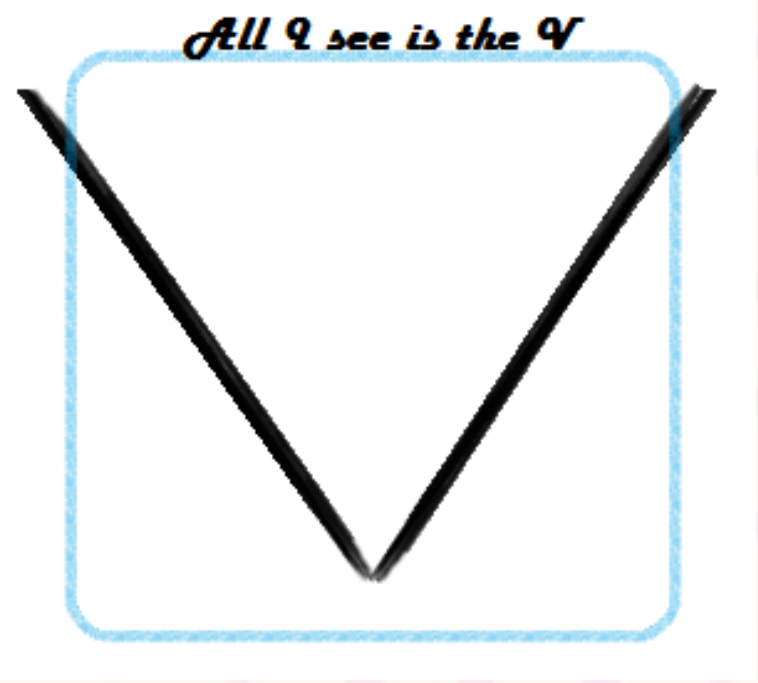
And that was your Tea Tip, brought to you by that charming tea shop in Ottawa's Westboro Village.

16Nov2011

Tamoxifen and Receding Hair

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Treatment

So yesterday I stepped out of the shower and my hair was slicked back (*I like to imagine I'm that girl in the waterfall and lush greenery and my hair is down to my butt*) and catch a glimpse of my face in the steamy mirror.



I just about gagged.

My hairline has a startling V-shaped quality. It's not actually noticeable when dry and styled (*though I did think to myself the other day that there were some rather empty patches*). But when wet and slicked back – it's startling. Geez Louise!! What, am I going bald?

"You're not going bald." My mom tells me, "but your hair is thin there."

Thinning in my opinion, because I think it wasn't always like this.

"Your hormones are going a little crazy," she continues, "and it's normal for women's hair to thin when that happens."

As part of my post-treatment life I'm taking a drug called Tamoxifen. It's blocks estrogen receptors, so all my lady hormones are in a mess – which may explain why my hair is fading on the edges like a man's. Augh! But at least (and I'm very thankful) I don't have any other side effects of Tamoxifen, cause it can be way worse than just a little hair loss.

Anyhow, you can't notice when it's dry. And I'm still growing it out, so maybe those places will eventually decide to stop messing about and grow in too. Who knows? All I think is that in 2 to 5 years, I'll be off this Tamoxifen and remembering what it's like to be estrogen receptive (and totally cancer free).

For now I need to place fighting cancer above thick hair. But nevertheless it was a surprise.

Anyhow – despite my slow-to-grow hair great things are happening. Tonight I'm going to a LookGoodFeelBetter, this weekend is the Mirror Ball, and I've also got a pass to the Breast Quest Film Festival.

Awesome, or awesome? Totally awesome.

17Nov2011

Snow!!

Posted in Canada, Finding Home, Fun, Life

It's snowing!!! Wooohoooo!! First snowfall of the season!!! Excuse to over-punctuate my sentences!! Here is a picture to note this momentous occasion:

19Nov2011

Rethink being alone

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Fun, Life, Treatment, Writing

I'm writing to you from the Royal York in Toronto, seventh floor and on a queen sized bed, sitting on top of the white duvet (*as I sip on my dark tea and hope not to spill*). This is all thanks to FacingCancer.ca and the Mirror Ball (*Twitter Ball it here*) that's happening this weekend – tonight, actually, and I'm really excited to attend this fantastic gala and report back with all the details. But since I had a covered trip to Toronto, I decided to couple this fantastic event with another, and that's Rethink's Breast Quest Film Festival. This past morning and last night (*I was up way past bedtime)* I've been attending Rethink events, and let me say this: it was refreshing.

So, last night I attended a screening of a film that features ladies from the SCAR project, a powerful photography exhibit that shows young women and their scars after having had mastectomy, bilateral, reconstruction, etc. This film goes behind the photographs and actually taps into the story of several of those women. It's freaking touching. There were four of us sitting there in the theater (*plus Zsolt*) who had had breast cancer, and we were all tearing up as again and again issues were discussed that had impacted us all.

And after the film, there was schmoozing. Zsolt put on his new 'brave guy who networks' hat and dragged me over to meet the photographer and a couple from the film, all of whom were attending the festival. That was quite something to hear their visions and listen to where they think the SCAR project might go next. (*Maybe Ottawa? Though when I asked the photographer, "so will you bring the exhibit to Canada?" he turned it on me and said, "The question is, will you bring the exhibit to Canada?" Oh my goodness. I have never even considered the possibility. But this is an extremely powerful show . . . it might actually be an amazing experience to organize its debut in Ottawa. But anyhow, that's an aside.*)

Oh, this tea is really strong. I made it in the coffee machine, and it tastes like English Breakfast with heavy traces of coffee.

So there was the networking part of the evening, which was cool. But you know what was even better? The meeting of women. All these women, in one place, and all having been diagnosed with breast cancer. This early afternoon I attended a Lunchen (*which involved an amazing quinoa & kale salad*) and met girls like Joanne, and Ashley and Rebecca, and Terri and Katie, and Cat and this other woman who was really cool and chill, but had a name I cannot remember. All these women have been where I've been – we've all been the youngest in the treatment room, and we've all been sideswiped so unexpectedly while trying to forge a life – normally I can't connect with these people unless I'm online. It was so, so, so nice – so very nice to meet them in person and share a laugh and a cry.

Next year Rethink will have another Breast Quest Film Festival – and will I attend? Absolutely. How could I not? This young and fresh not-for-profit has such a innovative and targeted approach (*true it isn't for everyone, particularly those who dislike the use of 'boobie' with 'breast cancer'*), I can't help but feel excited every time I hear about their organization. And after this weekend, I'm 100% sold on the power of coming together to live, laugh and learn.

SO that was today and yesterday. Whether or not I actually post this depends on internet access and whether I can motivate myself down over to Starbucks where the wifi is free, but the green tea isn't. Last night Zsolt and I stayed in a hostel and had free wifi. Tonight we're in the Royal York and it costs about 15 bucks a night. WTF.

However, this duvet is incredibly cosy, and I love the wall paper. Really, it is luxurious and gets me quite excited for tonight's gala. But come people, 21st century. FREE WIFI, already!

PS. Everyone in Toronto seems to be around my age – at least in this Starbucks . . . yes, I've now gotten out of the hotel room and am having a green tea at Starbucks. Funny how time flies when you're reading a blog post, you probably didn't even notice that I got up, got dressed (more dressed) and walked outside and into the coffeeshop. But I did, all while writing this post.

23Nov2011

Mirror Ball 2011

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Fun, Life, Writing

Last Sunday morning about 8.00 am, I woke up totally buzzing with Mirror Ball, and I was like, "Catherine, you've got to write about this, *now*." But then another part of me couldn't even see straight since I'd stayed up till 2.00 am the night before, and Zsolt was beside me in bed still 100% asleep. I've tried before to type my thoughts out while he sleeps . . . but it causes him to wake up grumpy. This is a shame since there's no better time to write than when inspiration hits, but the thought of click-clacking too early and his reaction was enough to make me say, "Catherine, wait a little bit."

Therefore I am today, Wednesday afternoon, at Starbucks. Not the local library, not the basement of my parent's house, not Tim Hortons (*for sure not – that place is crazy*) . . . but Starbucks, with my green tea and laptop out. I feel very productive and stimulated (*thanks to the jazzy Christmas music in the background*) and ready to recount the weekend.

Okay, for anyone who doesn't know – because if you don't work in the Canadian Cosmetics, Fashion, Media industries, or live in Toronto, (or read any of Sherry Abbott's or @cancer2gether's tweets), why would you know? I never knew until told . . . Anyhow, for those of you who don't know, the Mirror Ball was originally named the Look Good Feel Better Ball, but was recently rebranded to incorporate Facing Cancer Together. This is a gala that raises funds for women with cancer. And wow, they raise funds in a big, big way.

So the party started around 5.30pm, though I didn't roll in till 6.00pm (*and Zsolt about 6.30pm, I left him upstairs in the hotel while Chantal took us around and showed us (*i.e. Katie, Terri and me*), where we'd be standing during our testimonials*). The event was held at the Royal York in Toronto, which has a fascinating history tied into the Fairmont chain and being connected to the wonderful Canadian Pacific Railway. When I see a Fairmount in Canada, I think about the history and roots of our country – the formation of not just colonies but a *country*, you know? People had a big vision when they began to unite Canada – and I admire big ideas (with positive results). Anyhow, our history isn't all puppies, kittens and choo-choo trains, but nevertheless visiting a Fairmount fills me with the fuzzies. So that was cool. Though I still wish they had free wifi.

After the technical bits of seeing where we'd talk, Zsolt and I grabbed our silent auction machines (*handheld devices for bidding and donation making*) and began to walk around the hall. Amongst the donated products (*decanters, hammocks, paintings, Canada Goose outfits, wines, holiday packages, laptop chargers*) a vaudeville theme was happening. Flappers seemed to be everywhere, and then there were the mimes (*Scary? A little*), contortionists, and so on. Mixed in with waiters serving drinks and savoury treats, Zsolt and I had quite a good time walking around seeing how much people bid on various items.

Oh yeah – quick aside, Zsolt wore his beautiful charcoal suit originally purchased for our wedding, and I wore this strapless black dress originally purchased for a PWC Christmas party (like 6 years ago). Going strapless

with a prosthesis is slightly tricky and involved several safety pins strategically placed, but I think I pulled it off. And I wore heels, but barely . . . with the help of Zsolt's arm and a decision to 'walk very slowly, all the time, no matter what' I wore heels. My mom knit my shall, and it received several compliments.

And alongside this lovely silent auction and party was the Twitterball. Did you catch that, by any chance? I was assaulted with a Ipad to give a 'hi & hello' to the Twitterball participants, so hopefully pulled that off okay. You know I would have *loved* to have gotten in on the tweeting, but have no means of social media'ing' when away from the laptop. That will soon be corrected, but I need to wait till Christmas. My parents were at home following along and trying to stream the event. It's just amazing what technology is doing nowadays. My brother's graduation had the same thing: round the world live-streaming. So everyone can join the party.

This post is so long. But the night didn't end here! I've got to keep writing! And you are invited to continue reading.

After the auction and milling and meetings (*I finally meet the lovely and charming Both Sides, aka Dr Alexandra Ginty. She is so full of life & verve. AND I met Chantal, the community coordinator for Facing Cancer Together and my regular e-mail correspondent – she is as lovely in person as she is in the forums. It's so wonderful to actually meet the women behind the writing, you know?*), it was time to eat dinner in the dining room . . .

Oh boy. So we walk into the dining room and it's all dim, and black velvet and sparkly. The walls around this giant room have equally giant screens showing the progress of the silent auction, the stage is by the far wall, and the tables are set with more wine glasses, plates and cutlery than I've ever seen on a table. We had the honour of sitting with fellow blogger Terri from a Fresh Chapter, Terri's friend – who I loved talking with across the night, Chantal, some young women who had been involved in the LGFB program (and looked stunning!) and several photographers for the event. It was so fascinating to speak with Korby and Jodi about photography. Korby Banner has this whole philosophy on how to bring out beauty with his makeup application and photography. I always find it inspiring to speak with someone who clearly adores their work – but even more so, throws themselves into it with the idea of becoming the *best*. That's a good way to do things, no?

Anyhow, we were having a great time at our table. And then the soup arrived.

That's when my heart basically exploded.

You see, Katie, Terri and I were giving one minute talk/testimonials that evening, which meant getting up in front of that giant crowd of professionals and baring a few scars. (*Though not literally, because I'd worked really hard to get that strapless dress to stay in place.*) To me, this felt rather different than my presentation in Orillia. In Orillia, they were nurses and who doesn't feel comfortable around a kind-hearted, albeit overworked, nurse? Last Saturday night had 'industry people' . . . hmm, I didn't know what to make of that.

My heart pounded.

So after the soup we were led from the table and snuck around backstage. Sherry Abbott (who looked stunning in her gown) took to the front of the stage and presented the Tamara Wig, then introduced us as we came up. And then, one by one, we gave our stories.

It was incredibly touching, my fellow bloggers are inspiring women – high five to Katie and Terri! After the testimonials Sherry called for donations and in about 5 minutes we raised just over 30,000 dollars. My goodness.

And for the rest of the night these successful industry people who had so intimidated me came up and shared their story. They had been involved in the Look Good Feel Better program for over 20 years. They had posed for the first cover of the LGFB magazine after fighting cancer. They had lost a wife to cancer. They appreciated our honesty and bravery.

And for me, with all the wonderful glitz and glam, those moments were what made the night. Cancer doesn't just impact people in a certain area of the world, a certain age group, a certain social or economic sphere . . . *cancer simply impacts.* And the explosion hits you, no matter what your situation. Every person in that room had their connections, their stories, their experiences. We had more in common than I had realized.

(*So the next time you feel intimidated, just remember what you've endured, and how this disease has hit so many. I guess we're all survivors, in a way, whatever the story or situation*.)

The rest of the evening involved fantastic food, a decadent dessert, magic, comedy, more contortion, and late night dancing (*first time in forever I've danced late into the night and not felt like a zombie. Amazing! And in heels, too!*).

I feel honoured to have participated in this Mirror Ball, and glad to have helped raise more funds. For sure, Look Good Feel Better helps women reclaim their identity, and for sure, Facing Cancer Together forms a bridge for relationships and connections.

The Mirror Ball was a great night for a great cause. And it certainly deserves this extra long post.

25Nov2011

Space, Life, Death, and God

Posted in Life, Love

The other night Zsolt and I were laying in bed and wondering about space. You know, how it keeps going and going and going? You get to the end of *one* universe, and hey, there's another. And then what? How far does it all go? What does it all mean? Where does that place us?

A long time ago I decided to stop wondering about the universe. It was simply too huge and unknowable, my brain would tick-tick-tick at the possibilities and vastness . . . I'd lay in bed not sleeping, simply being overawed. Until I decided to stop thinking about space.

And like I said to Zsolt last night – "no matter how big this thing is, whatever this thing is, I'm awfully glad to be lying here next to you."

But then when it comes to funerals and death and life-after-death (*we're going to Lulu's funeral this weekend, and it will be a lovely memorial*) when I think about death, that's like the only time I find it incredibly comforting to think about space.

Because space is so huge, and so unknowable (even if we explore, there will always be more that stays a mystery) . . . and death is so huge and so unknowable. And yet – space happens, and space exists. And death happens, and death exists. And somewhere in all this is something called God, or god, or however/whatever you want to call God. And God is huge and unknowable.

So while I cannot say what happens after a person passes away (thought I know what I'd like to have happen, to a degree, which is to be reunited with everyone you've ever loved and then go off together and explore the rest of the universe, kinda like Dr Who and his Tardis) – I know that while I cannot ever fully realize the unknowable, it nevertheless exists. And within that not knowing are so many possibilities. So many incredible, whatever-you-allow-yourself-to-imagine possibilities.

And so I hope whatever Lulu wished for most, she has right now. I hope she is surrounded by love. And I hope she's really happy.

Space and God and Life and Death, it's all so absolutely incredible. But thinking too much about these things tends to blow my mind. That's why I've written it down and shared it with you. And that's why I'm going to go to bed now, and snuggle up with my husband. Because no matter how big BIG is, or how far existence stretches, or tiny we are in the grand scheme of things (or hey, maybe we're huge and this is all like some giant Trumen Show) – like I said to Zsolt, "I'm just happy to be here beside you."

The author of Peter Pan said something about death once I found rather encouraging. He said something like, "death is the best adventure you'll ever have."

So Lulu, I hope you're having the best adventure of your entire life. Be sure to give grandpa a kiss on the cheek for us, eh.

28Nov2011

Health care in Canada – yay!

Posted in Bumpboobs, Canada, moving to canada, Uncategorized

Today is the 28th of November. As of *today*, my husband Zsolt is now fully integrated into the Canadian system (short of being a citizen). He has his license, he has his residence cards, and finally he has his health care too.

Three months after arriving to Canada, Zsolt is now eligible for health care. Why he's not eligible from the date of arrival is a real mystery to me. Because it's not like he arrived in Canada unscreened – he gave blood, he had his eyes checked, he had an x-ray, he had a physical . . . basically, they declared him healthy before allowing him to touch down in Canada. And then we *still* had to wait three months before he became eligible for OHIP.

If it sounds like I'm complaining, that's because I am. Considering we played by the rules, it annoys me that he had this waiting period.

However, bright side is that he's now all settled in. Yay for that! We're still in my parent's basement (*it's lovely down here with the fire*) and things are slowly settling. It's my hope that sooner than later we both see Canada as 'home sweet home', but I realize that takes time. It took time in England, it will take time here too – even though I *am* Canadian. Making a place your home takes an investment of time, interests and relationships. That had all been done in England, so transferring everything back here is honestly a challenge.

But what's life without challenges? Boring, I reckon. Boo for boring. Yay for healthcare!

2Dec2011

The Fresh Tree Debate

Posted in Canada, Fun, Life, Love

Yesterday afternoon my brother and I were sitting by the fire, conspiring over plans to put up a Christmas tree. Daniel suggested that we buy a real tree this year since Home Depot was selling them cheap, and I agreed this would be great since Zsolt is used to having a real tree whenever he celebrates Christmas in Hungary. The Zsoltster will be here with us this year in Canada, so maybe a real tree would help him feel more at home. (?)

So that was the plan – we were off to buy a tree. Until Tony Buzz-Kill showed up and said, "no tree for two more weeks," claiming it was "way too early" to buy a real tree for Christmas.

WordPress has this lovely feature that allows me to create a poll in my post. So – first time ever, here's a bumpyboobs poll: Should we buy a tree and enjoy the Christmas cheer, or is my father, aka. the grinch, right and we need to wait?

What do you think?

5Dec2011

BRCA and Queen Victoria

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs

This morning I was productive. Some days this can happen. I woke up early, tided the house, ran on the elliptical, ate breakfast and went to the post office. Along with a stack of Christmas cards (almost entirely addressed to friends in England) I mailed an envelope to my local children's hospital. Really, having just typed this, it would be great if I could follow that sentence with 'and it had a huge donation inside' but that would be a lie. So what was inside?

Nothing to do with children, or at least not directly.

Last September when I went to visit Dr Canada he *again* suggested I get tested for the BRCA gene. This is genetic testing that basically explores whether or not you're body is predisposed to get breast cancer. Maybe there are similar tests for various cancers? I'm not sure. But if there are, I bet all your doctors have suggested a similar investigation once diagnosed.

Hmm. I wasn't entirely sold on the necessity of genetic profiling my life. No one in my family has had cancer. No one. Period. That's all. But then Dr Canada says, "well, no one in the royal family had haemophilia until Queen Victoria introduced it." Turns out the Queen who had *insisted* the disease hadn't come from her side of the family, was in fact the carrier.

Some people say her side of the family, the Coburgs, were cursed by a monk in the early nintheenth century. This monk envied the Coburg prince and his excessively rich Hungarian bride. So he cursed the family. ("*Bam! You are cursed!"*)

Other people say the haemophilia may have derived from mutation in Queen Victoria's genes or her father's sperm.

Okay – enough with the history.

My point, or rather, Dr Canada's point was that there is always a beginning. For the sake of future generations (and possibly current ones, but I really think not) it may be good to know whether I carry this stupid gene. Mind you, having BRCA doesn't mean you'll absolutely get cancer. It just ups your chances to like 80% or something.

Anyhow, I digress. So he prescribed this test. The genetics department sent along a family history questionnaire to my house. My family history literally comprises itself of NO cancer. But I filled out the papers regardless.

And now it's in the mail on the way to the local children's hospital. I guess if I have children it would be nice to know whether they're at risk. And also, if I do have this gene (highly doubtful) than that will leave me with the not-fun decisions to :

1) Remove my other breast?

2) Get rid of the ovaries?

3) Say bye-bye to my uterus?

Boo for any of these three possibilities. And boo for having to consider these wonderful parts of my body as threats. Boo (since I'm booing) for cancer, too, cause it's blows chunks!

But nevertheless I have submitted the test, thus proving that while I don't want to worry, I nevertheless worry.

Curiosity killed the cat, or had her remove her ovaries . . . or maybe it didn't kill her. Maybe it saves her life? Well crap, I don't know. I'm just doing my best! (*You know what, I don't really even love cats. They make me sneeze & wheeze like crazy. So whatever that cat does with curiosity, she can leave me out of it*.)

P.S. The family had compromised. We will get a tree from a tree farm on Friday. Thanks for your votes – it got Dad to sway and me to wait (*but only a little bit, and in the meanwhile we put up lights on the house. Too bad half of them are burnt out, but once they're in place it's such a pain to go back up and remove the duds. So we have some lights and some duds, but all good intention. It's uniquely Brunelle.)* And Daniel is making cinnamon buns AS I TYPE. Okay, so that extra bit has nothing to do with anything, but hey: ***CINNAMON BUNS.*** Ah, I'm already drooling.

9Dec2011

The great tree hunt

Posted in Canada, Finding Home, Fun, Life, Love

Today my family and I hunted down a Christmas tree. It involved sharp objects, muddy fields, roaring fires and free cups of hot chocolate. A reader of this page and all round lovely lady (*you know who you are!*) suggested we visit Ian's Evergreen Plantation and to get into the holiday spirit (*after Tony the Grinch tried to stomp out of seasonal fun*). Therefore, the entire family minus my oldest brother piled into the truck and we drove about thirty minutes outside of Kanata to the Tree Farm.

Hey, if you have children, you have *got* to take them to this place, assuming you haven't yet purchased a tree. Driving onto Ian's Evergreen Plantation, there are Christmas trees everywhere as you curve along the drive and head up to the main area with its small log cabins, pre-cut trees and – yes – more fields of pine, fir, spruce, etc waiting for the chop.

We pile out of the car and Dad grabs a tree caddy. He looks, basically, like a giant kid with his red metal sleigh, and we head into the land of trees (Daniel carrying the axe, because no one trusts Tony with a giant blade in his hands.) The lady who works there comes out and gives us the quick low down on how it works at the Plantation. Basically if you cut a fresh tree, you have access to hot chocolate, playgrounds, hay rides and reindeer. If you buy one pre-cut, then the rest costs extra.

Honestly we're all adults – though young at heart – and going on a hay ride in the snow as my butt gets soaked to the core is less appealing than it might have been twenty years ago (oh sh!t, I'm getting older). Had I been wearing snow pants, my opinion would have been different. Live and learn.

Going back to the story: we head into the growing trees. Dad is going on about how awesome this or that tree is, and my mom is shushing him to keep quiet because there are other people around looking for the 'perfect' Christmas tree. We don't want them poaching our choice. Therefore we try and whisper, but that doesn't last cause everyone's ridiculously excited.

Stomping through the field Tony sets eyes on the perfect tree.

"That one!" he calls out.

We all move in and I pull out my camera. “Get in the picture!” I say, and everyone gets in the picture. With the photo snapped I head over to the giant fire that’s roaring by our chosen tree. Zsolt, Mom and I go over to warm our fingers. Therefore, I blame what happens next upon both Daniel and Tony.

Mom and I look back over to the men as they take out the saw and begin to cut through our tree.

“Tony!” Mom shouts, “It’s crooked!”

And it is. This tree is shaped like an **S**. I am not kidding you. But they didn’t notice and by the time my mom yells again, Dad’s gone and cut through the tree.

So there you have it, we’re committed. After we cut down our tree (*drive 30 minutes out of town just to cut down a tree that has scoliosis*), the tree-lady feeds us hot chocolate and we go and visit the reindeer.

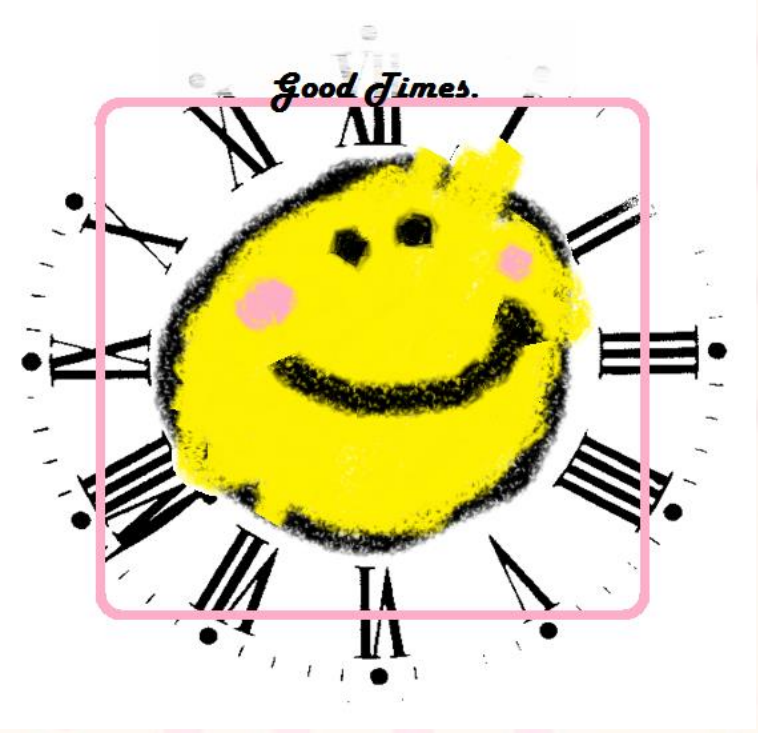
Overall I’d say it was a great little trip. The best bit of the entire day was getting that tree home and watching Zsolt, Daniel and Dad try to balance this sideways, crooked, curving tree in the tree-stand. However, they managed and it now stands (leans) on its own. And that, I think, is a little bit of a Christmas miracle.

12Dec2011

Routine for success (and tea)

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Canada, Writing

Now I realise that success should not be measured in material gain. Giant homes, diamond rings, oil fields and speedy yachts parked in Monaco for the winter can't make you happy unless you have friends, family and time in which to share the joy (*these are just some examples, feel free to define your own idea of material gain*). And I personally think a small backyard BBQ with awesome people is one of the best ways to spend a Friday night, and that really costs nothing except an investment of time (*to cook & clean*) and organisation (*to get people to bring along a pot-luck dish*), and a little bit of cash to buy the sausages & salad.



So please, don't get me wrong when I say the following:

This chaise lounge is like sitting on a cushion of happiness, and together we float in the living room as the fireplace warms, the sun shines, and the walls whisper into my ear with their deep red tones. (A bold paint choice, no?)

This is my dream living room. Thankfully it's also my parent's house. And I think, one day soon, it'd be nice to have a similar place that makes me feel this cosy. (*My old flat in England came quite close with our green sofa and giant windows . . . But then I was incredibly allergic to that place after the mold incident, and the "double glazed" windows leaked with British cold.*)

Anyhow, while material goods aren't the be-all and end-all. They are quite nice on a cosy December afternoon by the fire, and I think there's nothing wrong with wanting a little piece of heaven in your living room. So long as it doesn't get excessive. (*i.e. No diamond studded coffee table. Although to be honest, I'd very much like to have two homes – thus exceeding what most people would consider sufficient. I'd love to have a place in Ottawa and a place along the shore of Lake Balaton. That would be awesome. The excess is debatable.*)

But in order to achieve any kind of material gain, we first need to have long-lasting splurges of success. That basically translates into 'make money' – which sounds a bit . . . *hmm*, unromantic, but it's the freaking truth. And so for the past week and day (*including today*) I've tried to be more productive than normal.

Here's my routine. It helps prevents rising entropy (my natural-and-hard-to-resist tendency of personal disorder). Right:

1) Wake up at a reasonable time.

2) Tidy the house. (*Every morning there are grocery bags to stick back into the car. How do they keep on getting inside?*)

3) Eat breakfast.

4) Get on the elliptical and exercise. (BURN ESTROGEN, BURN!!)

5) Take a shower.

6) Go out and write. This generally results in my visiting Starbucks. Today I tried the library but the chairs are all facing the window and it blinded me as I squinted at my light-reflecting computer screen. So I packed up my stuff and went over to the coffee shop. *Notable:* coffee shops are a constant trend in my life; places of both comfort and inspiration, plus cups of delicious tea!

7) Come back to the house and make lunch for my family.

The rest of the afternoon is left for the distractions. There are always distractions like cooking, cleaning, 'responsibility'ing, visiting, tweeting, job searching, blogging (yes, blogging is distracting. Lovely, but it doesn't help my novel-writing progress), etc. You never know what the afternoon holds.

And while this routine-following doesn't directly trigger a cash parade through my bank account, it nevertheless leaves me feeling AWESOME, and feeling AWESOME is great. (*I guess success is really more of a feeling, rather than a measurement of 'where you are', no? Today I feel successful. Not much has changed in my life, except that feeling, and about 300-1500 words per day of writing*.)

So I'm going to try and stick to my pattern. It makes me feel productive, and that's a powerful thing – I'd even say it's better than this chaise lounge. Way better. Although the chaise is a beautiful piece of furniture.

Anyhow. Here ends my brain ramble. Have a wonderful, productive day, and may you be filled with a sense of success.

Finger crossed the routine continues!

20Dec2011

Melancholy is stupid.

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Canada, Life

Today I made a potato salad – the worst potato salad ever. Woke up with this brilliant idea for lunch; a triple salad extravaganza. It was going to be a hit outta the ball park. You see, every week my family has this competition entitled: *Cook of the Week*. Last week I totally owned with a grilled burger topped with a three cheese melange (with garlic and oil mixed in, and a bit of pepper); a pickle, sprout and cabbage side; and baked potato chips.

Geez. Just remembering that meal has got me salivating.

Anyhow, I woke up this morning with a plan to rule the kitchen. Except that I slept in late, and therefore busted my entire routine. That's the first bit.

Then I began to peel and boil the potatoes . . . got that salad going, and simultaneously began the quinoa boiling and cleaned the kale. The third salad was meant to be mixed greens with a kinda vinegar dressing and roasted red peppers.

Anyhow – I managed the kale salad, but just barely. As I rounded the corner with the potato salad I forgot to premix the mayo, mustard and salt. Instead it just all went into the pot without comparison or pause. Ugh. What resulted was just this over-salted mess of mushy potato.

So, I had the quinoa, the gross potato, and no third salad. It was at this point that I said to myself, "screw this" and called my dad's office, asking him to bring home a roasted chicken.

He has brought home a roasted chicken. They are now in the kitchen eating lunch. I feel totally knackered, and am wondering: is it because of a potato salad?

Not sure. But one thing is for sure – right now, at this point, I can barely motivate myself to get off this lovely red chaise and serve myself a plate of food. So weird right? You know that saying, "woke up on the wrong side of the bed?" Yeah. That might be me. I don't feel entirely un-awesome. There's a trickle of awesomeness running through my fingers and on my head (wherever the sunshine hits) . . . but today I varied from my routine to the detriment of my potato salad.

Really this whole 'do a routine' thing has been going fairly well. I guess it's just on those slip up days when things get a bit messy again. However, the remainder of this day continues to be my oyster. And I don't want a dumb thing like mayonnaise:salt ratio ruining this Tuesday.

Screw this screwing it. I'm getting up, eating, and seeing what I can do with this day. Right now.

P.S. Lunch is done. These people finished the entire *potato salad – I wasn't even going to serve the mess, but they got their hands on it and ate the entire batch. Maybe it wasn't so horrible after all. Hmm.*

25Dec2011

A christmas card

Posted in Fun, Life, Love

Normally I love to send real, paper-in-hand cards to friends and family during the holidays. But in this case, I'll be making an e-card exception. Have a wonderful, love-filled day and enjoy the holiday to its fullest. Merry Christmas. And hey! Look at all this snow we have. It's a fantastic gift from mother nature.

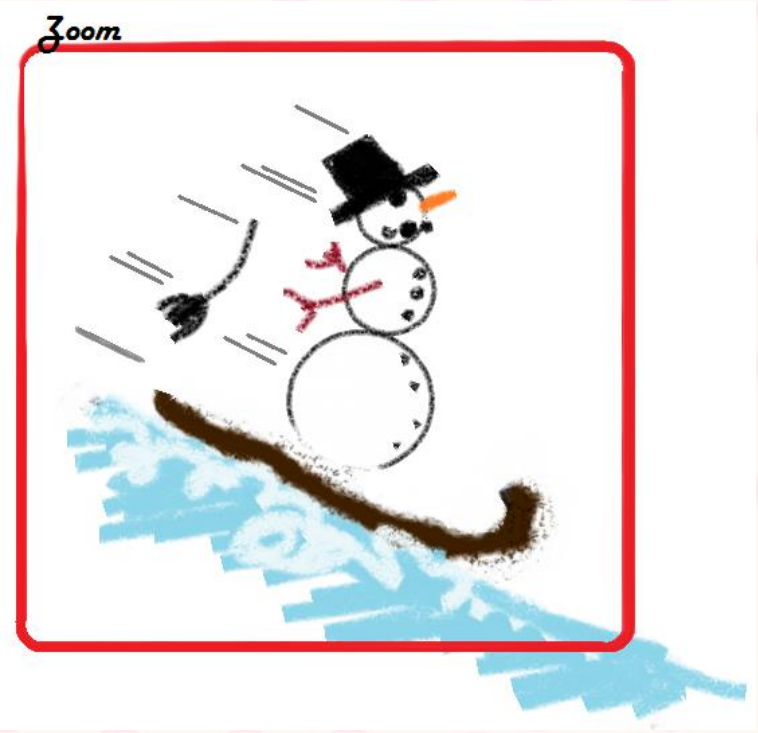
Merry, merry, merry Christmas!! Woooohoooo!!!

30Dec2011

Echoes upon echoes

Posted in Finding Home, Fun, Life, Love

The temperature has dropped to **minus** twenty degrees (-20) here in Ottawa. Zsolt is ready to board a plane back to Europe. Having recently acquired a long, kick-ass jacket I'm not minding the cold so badly. Yeah, it's freezing. But yeah, we've also got a cosy fire here in the basement. So in my opinion, as long as we don't step out of the house during this cold snap, everything will be okay.



Mind you, the hill behind the house is deep with snow and those sleds are just waiting in the garage . . . how cold is too cold to toboggan?

Ever since Christmas, Zsolt and I have been vegetating. It's not like we've been leading extremely busy lives, but nevertheless looking for work does have its own kind of pressure. So we've taken a few days off from the search. But very soon we'll be back at it. No point going on too long in the land of holiday and diet-breaking. (*I've eaten cookies, cinnamon buns, bread and more cookies – none of them being gluten-free. But hey, it's only over Christmas. Today I made two healthy meals and feel quite good about the proactivness*.)

One distraction we've been indulging in heavily is RUMMY-O. You know that game? My grandmother used to play it obsessively. Well, maybe not obsessively, but she was always up for a game. Right before she passed away, like a month or two, she had my cousin play with me, Zsolt and Daniel so we could all learn. And since she's passed, we've played upstairs in the living room more than a few times. Like many times. A whole lot. Bunches. It's a quiet game of thought and puzzling . . . except for when my Dad plays and begins to sing during everyone else's turn (*after that game of his loud serenading, I totally banned him from joining again unless he promised to maintain* silence. *Now he only sings when it's his turn*.)

And as a memorial to Lulu (*at least, in my mind*) we say the very important words that follow a person's turn.

If you pick up a chip because you cannot play, you say: "Je piège." And pick up the chip.

If you choose to play your chips and not pick up, once you've played all your chips, you say: "J'ai joué." And the next person is allowed their turn.

These are very important cues that Lulu used to insist upon, and frankly I can see their advantage. When we forget to say 'je piège' or 'j'ai joué' after a turn everyone just sits there waiting, thinking the person is still contemplating their move. Everyone except my dad, who instead begins to sing.

So I guess it's a nice way of passing along a bit of her memory. Little habits like that carry on. Another would be slicing the cucumber. My mom, when slicing the tip of a cucumber, then rubs that bit against the remaining vegetable until a froth emerges (oh my word, this sounds inappropriate. But really we're just dealing with vegetables). I watched her doing this as a little girl, and now when I slice a cucumber, I do the exact same thing. Well, guess what? Lulu did the very same thing. And I reckon my daughter will also pick up the habit.

Anyhow, I have no point in this ramble about habits trading one generation for another, except to say it's a little bit amazing how we pass along our story, bit-by-bit to those who love us most. Chances are 'j'ai joué' and 'je piège' go back several Rummy-loving women in our family. For sure the cucumber slicing does. I can just imagine my great, great grandmother handing a cucumber and foaming it's tip.

It's little things like that which I find so inspiring. Things like that make me love the story I'm currently writing – a story which is nearly there, apart from the editing and rewrites, and has been along for quite a ride over the past two years.

The idea that we can know those who have come before from simple habits, simple 'tendencies' is really quite awesome. Did my father's side of the family always sing aloud? (he sure does, and so do I – just not when playing Rummy.) Did my mom's side always play games? Did we always clean our vegetables like this? Could we stop if we wanted to? Are we just like our ancestors, or only a gentle impression of their habits?

And so we've been playing our game and enjoying the holiday. I hope you have as well. Stay warm, stay safe, and I'll see you in the new year.

Happy holidays!

4Jan2012

BRCA testing and genetics

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Treatment

Sooo…today I did two things. **One:** tobogganed behind the house and slide into the school wall several times. (Does that make sense? There's a school behind my house at the bottom of a hill. We slid down the hill. We slid into the school's brick wall – our sleds were just *that* fast.) **Two:** went to the CHEO hospital in Ottawa and had a visit with a genetic consultant.

Let me tell you how it went.

Having braved the Canadian winter morning and arrived at the hospital, we headed up to level three and checked in. Apparently there was some blip with my health card, I have no idea what was wrong, but as the receptionist frowned at the screen I waited patiently. In my opinion when things go wrong, so long as I know I'm in the right, there's really no reason to worry.

Eventually she fixed the problem. Something about the number being entered improperly. And we were escorted into a small office. In came the genetics consultant – a very pretty woman about my age, and so we had our meeting.

Q) She asked me who my doctor was and why they referred me.

A) My doctor is Dr Canada, and he referred me because he reckons I ought to be tested (see my Queen Victoria connection for the reason why).

Q) And having had no history of cancer in my family, why do I want to get tested?

A) So I know. Once I know, I will know. I get why people delay getting tested for the BRCA mutation when they've had it in their family . . . say you are told you have it, then what? Then you need to make some huge decisions. Personally, I'm in absolutely no rush to cut off any more body parts, but nevertheless, knowing one way or the other would be useful. I guess.

Q) Did I study biology?

A) Yeah . . . in highschool.

Zsolt was with me, holding my hand. He had also studied biology in high school. Therefore, everything seemed to make sense as the lovely consultant took out a binder and gave us a page-by-page presentation on how cells have chromosomes, and those chromosomes have two bits (like shoelaces have two bits that tie together) that

spell out who we are and sometimes those genes can have a mutation. The more mutations, the worse off the cell . . . worse off, as in, cancerous.

Did you know that the BRCA gene is a GOOD thing? It PREVENTS tumours? And here I was thinking it was a bad old gene that caused a lotta trouble. Nope. Not at all. It's when both dangly bits in the gene have that bad mutation (effectively stopping BRCA from killing weird cells) that things become a lot more risky.

Q) And have you considered the implications of this test? On your well-being, your treatment options, your life insurance [by the by, my life insurance is essentially shot – except I may already have some thanks to Mom and Dad – but otherwise ticking that box of 'cancer' on an application isn't going to get me anywhere too quick. Mind you, the consultant *did* say that if I get this test and it comes back negative for the mutation, there are some Canadian life insurance companies that will take that into consideration.]

A) Yes I have. (Well, kinda.) Please give me the test.

Well heck, like I said in a previous post – what am I going to do? Having already gotten sick *once*, I'd be crazy not to investigate further. And my well-being has already been challenged. Fact is things are as they are; knowing or not knowing isn't going to change the way things are. Therefore, I choose to know.

Maybe that's why Eve ate her juicy Red Delicious. She figured, hey, what's the harm? And then – BAM – kicked outta paradise!

Ignorance is bliss to a large degree. Not knowing I had cancer *was* easier than knowing. But it certainly didn't do me any favours. Sometimes (rarely) I imagine what it would have been like to have found my bump earlier. Would I still have a right breast? Would I have needed months of chemotherapy? Anyhow. I want to know – regardless of the possible difficult decisions that may or may not follow.

I have decided. Give me the test. I want to know.

(And in four months I'll get the results. Talk about building the suspense.)

(OH! And good news for Zsolt and I, the test is covered by OHIP because I'm absurdly young for this disease. My 'freak of nature' status has worked in my favour this time. Fantastic.)

(One final thought. Please keep your fingers crossed that result come back negative: nothing found. I'd rather still wonder, "why the heck did I get cancer," than know a BRCA mutation was at the root. Much rather.)

8Jan2012

Getting a grip on the ice

Posted in Canada, Finding Home, Fun, Life

For all your ice and slipping needs, Dr Zsolt (not a medical doctor) recommends DRYGUY GripOns. He's been strapping these studded things onto his boots whenever we take walks lately, and while I think it's 100% goofy, they also appear to be incredibly effective. Plus, really, they don't look bad. I'm thinking of getting some myself.

While this cannot be counted as a 'real' post, it's nevertheless important information for anyone tolerating a minus zero winter. If slipping is a worry, get yourself some studs.

And no, no one paid me to say that. That would be awesome if someone had, but no, no one did. Full disclosure. My opinion is purely based on 'wow' results.

Plus I've been editing this entry to a writing contest all day long – thus my brain, in terms of writing articles/posts/stories/content, is slightly fried. Truth is with these literary contests that little ever comes from submitting, BUT this contest is for Canadians under 35s and has no entry fee. Now that's my kind of contest. So whether I *A)* Win! or *B)* don't win, I'll still have a finished, short-story length piece of writing which I feel is quite strong (and therefore worth submitting to literary magazines). So I feel this has been a very productive day. It's not often I managed to squeeze a story into 2500 words. Frankly, I feel quite proud at having mastered it this once.

Therefore, yay for studs on ice and hammering out a short story. Two unrelated items, one feel-good post.

11Jan2012

A distraction and a reality

Posted in Bumpboobs, Canada, Fun, Life

The distraction:

We took sledding up a level today by adding another person to our team. Zsolt, my brother (new addition) and I headed over to the KRC hill this afternoon and glided into some winter madness. Side runs, spins, trains – you name it, we sled it. The only thing missing were some GT Snow Racers, which, due to lack of foresight, were unfortunately discarded several years ago. It was a disappointing moment upon returning home from abroad to learn that the GTs had been carted off.

But nevertheless with a saucer and this body shaped board, we had a great time. And no one on the hill! All the little kiddios were at school, so we owned the hill. The only thing is that Zsolt and I are nearly both in our thirties (with Zsolt already having crossed that line). I have a feeling our limbs aren't' t quite so resilient as they once were. However, even today when we flew off sideways from the sled-train and skidded down the hill, even when my ankle flipped and hands were flying and snow was shooting into our faces . . . even then I couldn't stop laughing.

One awesome way to exercise in this Canadian winter: go sledding. Maybe wear a helmet, and keep all limbs tucked inside. Just don't blame me for any wipe outs, okay? It's part of the experience.

The reality:

Tomorrow I have an oncologist appointment with Dr Canada. So I guess I'll hear how my ovaries are doing and whether that cist cleared up. After this appointment, to help shake off the nerves, we're going out for Indian food at Ottawa's Little India. That is, we'll be going if we can get a seat. The place is always crammed. And then Thursday I have *another* doctor's appointment with a different doctor. So – a lotta appointments all at once. (Including my other appointment yesterday at my parent's office.) Blarg. All in the name of better health, eh.

15Jan2012

Letting the tea cool

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Canada, Life, Travel, Writing

This has been some week. One for the grey matter, that's for sure. What started with a string of doctor's appointments led into going to Montreal, visiting friends, and learning how to balance the accounts at my parent's office. So now it's Sunday. And now I'm done. Next week – that's tomorrow, there will be more. There will be forms to fill, more travel to arrange, friends to meet (yay!), accounting to learn and hopefully, if I can cram it in, writing.

Something about doctor's appointments never settle well in my stomach, particularly when overwhelmed with new ideas. I went to an appointment last week with a doctor who has many novel approaches on how to best battle cancer (and just be healthy in general). This is a good thing, because the more perspectives the better and she's very informed and totally passionate. But by the end of our session, particularly considering I'd been to visit Dr Canada the day before, I was 100% exhausted. Exhausted and mad. Mad. Mad. Mad. Having to *deal* makes me mad. You know? Having to examine my diet, having to take supplements, having to give blood – simply having to *deal*. Too much at once can make me retreat into nothing all together.

Most often my preferred behaviour would be to hop on a plane for the south of France and live along the beach with the shells and sand castles. Zsolt could join me, just like he did when we first met. Or maybe we could rent a quad bike and get lost at dusk in the hills of Corfu. Or visit a market where we don't speak the language and ask the locals to show us their cheese. Wander down cobblestone passages as we explore the heart of Rome. Spend a day dipping in and out of both thermal and cold waters. Biking along the shore of Balaton. Driving through the rocky mountains. Hiking along the coast of Nova Scotia. Canoeing in pyramid lake. Sitting in my parent's living room as the fire burns. Playing Rummy with my family.

Sigh.

And then I remember why I need to stay better. You know? Why I need to keep working on health. Why I have to guarantee myself I'll do my best. These are the things to remember.

So yes, I get mad. I get so incredibly overwhelmed. I become disconnected in response. It can happen to anyone.

But thank goodness for writing, and remembering too. Thank goodness for taking the time to blog and reflect. Writing reveals what's most important. It's a reflection, a time machine, an opportunity.

Did you know that in 2013, Zsolt and I will travel to India? We will. Now there's an adventure to look forward to.

(*Another element, beside having seen family and friends this past weekend, to improving my mood was eating a serving of pecans. Not a cheap nut, but a good one. Mixed with light honey and a few dashes of cayenne pepper, broiled in the oven till they sizzled . . . cooled, and then popped into my waiting mouth. Just you try and be grumpy after* that.*)*

18Jan2012

A winter-night blackout

Posted in Finding Home, Fun, Life, Love

Last night, as I sat in bed and began reading the pages of my latest Terry Pratchett (*and when I say latest, I mean most-lately-picked-off-the-shelf, but likely read at least five times before*), the power went out. Blackness. It flicked back on for a moment (*hope!*) and then again, gone. Dark.

And this was the beginning of our evening. Turns out the entire street had lost power, which – while my mother may debate me – happens often enough in this area, like once every few months, and more so in the winter. Then again, it's often a fuse blown in the house when the space heaters are turned on . . . but nevertheless, blackouts happen frequently enough that my family has an unspoken protocol.

First, turn on the flashlight. There's always a flashlight. By my bed is a light so bright, it illuminates entire rooms. I flicked this on and headed for the basement room where my husband had been on his computer. He had his tiny flashlight going as well (just this weak orange light) and we proceeded to head upstairs. On the way up, we came across my brother leaving his room with a candle lit. Something about him with this long white candle reminded me of a Dickens novel.

Ready with our lighting of choice, we proceeded to the second step: Go upstairs to the living room.

I think darkness has a sort of magnetism. It brings people together, you know? Before the blackout my parents were upstairs watching NCIS, my brother was in his room watching Netflix, Zsolt was playing card games online, and I was in my room reading. After the blackout we instinctually gravitate to the living room and each other's company.

There's a gas fireplace in the living room, which offers a nice amount of light and heat. With a bit of searching for the matches (at which point my brother passes me his candle, which is easier than searching for the matches in the dark), we light up some more candles and group them on the coffee table.

Here the third step of blackouts came into play: Entertainment. Zsolt and I played some card games (*like real, card in hand games. No computer involved*), Daniel whipped out his ipod and he and my parents collectively played angry birds. Later we decided to look outside and slide on the ice rain. And eventually we all settled into conversation.

I love blackouts. I love those dark nights with candles spent with my family. They're a special time, so long as the lack of power doesn't extend into an actual emergency. In Canada there is a national holiday called "Family

Day". Maybe we need to have a national, monthly blackout called, "Family Night." That or we could just turn off our computers and televisions occasionally. Sometimes it feels like there's so much 'on the screen' that we forget how much the real world offers.

Once the lights were restored that dark-night magic vanished and everyone went their separate ways. But at least we had that lovely hour by the fire. It's almost a shame that the lights hadn't stayed off all night . . . or at least until the house began to turn cold.

Almost a shame. Though I have to say, I do also love reading my Terry Pratchett in bed.

18Jan2012

Internet on Strike

Posted in Life

Okay, I have no idea how to make my webpage go ‘on strike’ but I can, at least, direct your attention to this page. Things are happening in both the USA and Canada that make me go, “Hmm.” But in particular, if this video is right, it will make things tricky for, say, future literary magazines like my NarrativeNipple.com. Mind you, my contributors present original content on that page, but nevertheless, I’d hate to get sued for an old link where some user, for some reason, uploaded illegal content. Anyhow, here is the video. Take a look.

https://vimeo.com/31100268

And if you’d like to sign the petition. That’s right here: http://sopastrike.com/

23Jan2012

Live with Kelly!

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Fun

Just hopped off the elliptical, and thought I'd write this down. Every weekday morning I take a twenty minute (*sometimes more*) run on the elliptical. While running (*or ellipsing?*) *Live with Kelly* is on the television, entertaining me with its opening 20 minute commercial free chatting.

Anyhow – I speak the truth: the better Kelly's co-host, the easier it is to exercise. Just this morning Kim Kardashian was on the television (*and it is a secret fixation of mine to watch all things Kardashian . . .*) talking about her divorce with that basketball fellow, Kris Humphries. So there I am sweating and running more quickly than ever and with a stupid smile plastered across my face. (*This happens occasionally, I watch television and start making facial expressions . . . today I kept realizing that I was smiling like an idiot over* Live with Kelly.)

You may or may not watch this morning show. After Regis left it was certainly a little sad, but nevertheless I really enjoy Kelly. She's been ripping through new co-hosts day after day, and I'll tell you this – many famous actors who appear very charming and wonderful on screen are actually awkward or boring or too self-focused in 'real life' (i.e. reality television). My *best* workouts have been to the entertaining mixture of Kelly and Neil Patrick Harris, Kelly and Josh Groben, Kelly and Michael Buble, and now Kelly and Kim Kardashian.

And as I ran lap after lap, this realization dawned: *good co-hosts* equals *good exercise*.

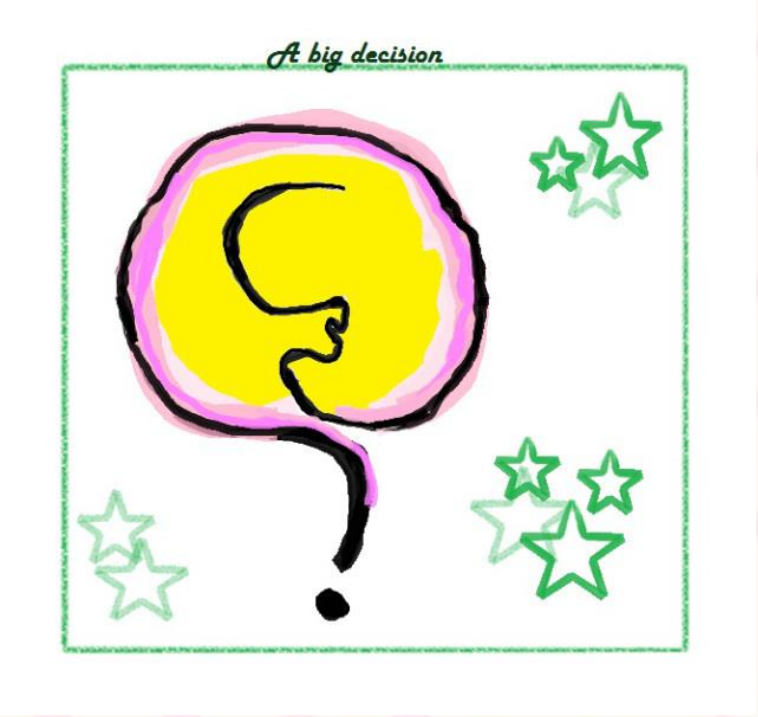
So Kelly, hurry up and choose Neil Patrick Harris already for your co-host. It'll be better for my health.

26Jan2012

Fertility Clinic Surprise*

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Fertility, Life

One year after chemotherapy and I'm back at the fertility doctor. This is because I pressed my oncologist for the referral, though he insists – absolutely insists – that I wait at least two years with my hormone therapy before doing *anything* in regards to having a baby. If I can have a baby. . .



Let me catch you up, real quick: Before chemotherapy I was given the option to freeze an embryo. I said no, because my tumour was estrogen loving, and goodness knows IVF involves a lotta estrogen. Therefore, we took a chance on Zolodex. For the five or six months that was chemotherapy, I had the Zolodex pill (and that GIANT needle) inserted in my belly each month which repressed my ovaries and stopped all periods. But then after the chemo and Zolodex were over, I still hadn't gotten my period. Waiting, waiting, nothing ... doctor orders an AMH test, the results of which are very bad – i.e. low. Nurse tells me on the phone that I don't qualify for IVF, I realize my eggs are super low, and extreme panic ensues because – what the heck? Do they mean I can't get pregnant? And then, a few months later, my period returns. I am confused.

Fertility becomes so stupidly confusing after having had chemotherapy. We're all told it can strip our eggs, throw us into early menopause (*now that I've had my taste of menopause, I'm in no hurry to revisit that hot-flashing experience again, though it is inevitable.)* and just make things difficult. Alternatively, it might not. But if you are like me and want a family one day (*or want to grow your family*), there are questions that need to be answered.

So we go to the fertility clinic in Ottawa. This place is located at the back of a business park complex, and it's a freaking miracle that we found it. Zsolt and I were working from a map when we pulled into a random parking lot (I almost freaked out without my GPS, but Zsolt is actually quite competent with a map) . . . we pull into this parking lot and stare at all the 'you must have a blue pass' signs for parking, and we're about to turn back out onto the main road when I figure, 'Hey, let's just drive around this place and then loop back ... what's the building number again?' Zsolt digs out the address number and reads it aloud as we're passing through the back of that labyrinth lot and – hello! – there is the building, and – look! – there's a parking spot for visitors.

How perfect is that?

We park. We go in. It's not like the hospital with narrow halls and florescent lighting. Instead there's an indoor rainforest, and the fertility clinic is carpeted, with curved reception desks and a sofa-filled waiting room. (*The waiting room is huge, by the way, like three little rooms divided by Ikea bookshelves, and I wonder how many people do they normally expect? At that moment, it's just Zsolt and I waiting.)* We sit down, ready to wait the

standard 1 hour. In England, we always waited approximately 1 hour. But instead the doctor comes out and calls my name immediately – I haven't even finished filling my form!

Another good sign.

We follow her into her office. She has one of those giant screen computers that I'd like to eventually purchase myself. This Doctor is quite young (*or at least, young looking*) and I like her calmness. She has us sit down, and begins to ask questions . . . you know, all those personal things you need to divulge to every new doctor at any initial visit. And once the history and physical stuff is filled out on her computerized form, we start to talk about babies.

[This is approximately the conversation. I can't remember the *actual* words spoken, so if you'd like real medical advice for fertility, definitely go and speak to a real doctor.]

"So you want to meet today, but not actually do anything for about 2 years?" she asks.

"That's right," I answer.

I've told her about my previous AMH test in England, and the terrible result. I've also told her I'm getting regular menstruation every thirty days. (*And now you know too!*)

"Well the AMH is more a test to see if IVF would be an option for you. With results like yours, it may not be, but something is likely there if you are menstruating. Basically you could still get pregnant naturally, even if we'd have trouble with the IVF."

"WHAT THE HECK?!"

I don't really say that, but I feel it. All the freaking time I think I'm eggless – even having my period didn't convince me to anything different . . . girls can get their period without ovulating . . . but . . . they still have eggs, don't they? Hmm.

So I'm all – what the heck, how come no doctor ever mentioned this? (*Well, my mother who is a naturopath and chiropractor mentioned it, as did my acupuncturist in England, but not once did I hear it from one of my medical doctors until this wonderful lady.*)

And she's all – hey, that's how it works. You *may* get pregnant naturally, I've seen it happen.

While I'm doing a happy dance in my head, and we can assume Zsolt was too, she begins to discuss egg donation. Get these numbers:

If you find a donor here in Canada, because there is no egg bank, the process costs ~ 15,000 dollars.

If you go to the USA, where women get paid for their eggs, and therefore candidates are plentiful, the process involves six tries and costs ~ 34,000 dollars – money back guarantee if you don't have a baby. (*Money back guarantee! I thought that sort of thing only happened in retail.*)

If we adopt, she *thinks* it costs about 20,000 dollars and can take several years.

With egg donation they'd have the donor take the IVF hormones but I'd also have to take hormones . . . I'd be taking estrogen and progesterone to sync my period to that of the woman who is donating. (*Why can't we just*

share tea and bond? We'd sync up naturally.) Meaning I'm still exposed to that excess estrogen. Alternatively they could create embryos and then freeze those little guys to be de-thawed when my uterus is ready . . . that's one way to avoid the extra hormones, *but* not all embryos can withstand the freezing, and I could possibly have less chances of success. The final alternative would be to have a surrogate, but I'm not hot on that.

And there are my options. Now come the tests. (MORE TESTS) Two blood tests to see if I'm ovulating, another shot at the AMH, plus . . . wait for it . . . a sperm test. Zsolt is about to become involved. Apparently he's to stay out of hot tubs beforehand, since they slow the boys.

Okay, this is a long post. All this to say, really, that I *might* get pregnant naturally – so that's something I'll definitely try doing in another year or so when I'm **still** totally healthy and cancer free and have been on Tamoxifen for 2 years. Assuming I am still menstruating regularly, we can give that a shot and see what happens. If nothing happens, then I'll likely go back on the Tamoxifen and wait for the 5 years to finish. After that we can break our piggy bank (*if necessary – fingers crossed we get preggers naturally*) and go to the USA, or something.

So, if you've been through chemo and want to know your options . . . why not ask? At the very least they can paint you a picture, and for me, though I expected anxiety, it's actually left me optimistic.

First a great parking spot in front of the building, and then not waiting for the doctor – good signs, I think. So who knows what else might be possible?

(*Plus I'm working with some alternative health doctors to help with my fertility and ovulation, much like I'm also working on staying HEALTHY. These are good things, and I pray pray pray it all amounts to me going on to live a long, happy, successful and most certainly family-filled life.)*

* No, this is not a type of cassarole.

1Feb2012

Snow Shoeing in Winterland

Posted in Canada, Fun, Life

If you haven't noticed, exercise is a big thing in terms of health. Everyone needs exercise no matter what your weight, no matter what your medical history, and no matter what your 'lazy' levels. Even walking around the house when there's no strength left is good exercise. (*That's an extreme example, but I've been there with chemo and know others who have as well. My mother once had chronic fatigue, and just getting out of bed was a struggle . . .*)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kUlvmspfw4k

Right, so Dr Canada once told me to 'burn off that estrogen'. Forget about fat or calories. I'm burning estrogen.

What my husband is burning, I have no idea. He's six foot five with a slim build. But maybe we could say he's building up the muscle? Burning on that muscle! And improving circulation, too.

All this to say that we've found a new way to exercise, which I'd like to recommend to you today. What is it? Snowshoeing!

Yesterday afternoon we drove out to a quiet spot in the Ottawa Greenbelt just off the highway, and tried on our (*my parent's*) snowshoes for the very first time. Unlike the experiment with cross country skiing (*which was, by the way, disastrous*) there was no trouble getting into the shoes, and no trouble keeping balance.

[Side note: Zsolt has this impression that Canada equals animals. But where are all the animals? We see squirrels, birds, chipmunks . . . but what about the bear, moose, elk, wolves, and deer? He's not the only one expecting the suburbs to overflow with wildlife. I do believe that nearly anyone visiting from outside the country expects to step off the plane and spot a moose. It's not their fault, it's ours. Canada has injected the world with giant-animal propaganda, what with the stories of polar bears and seals and moose and wolf packs, and grizzly bears. Anyhow, I'm just saying – if Ottawa is a tourist destination, maybe we should import some elk or something?]

So we begin to walk into the bush, and we're determined to find some animals. There are tracks everywhere. Some two-hoofed and spaced, others tiny and very close, a few that are quite dog-like (*or wolf-like!*), and others remarkably human. But that's all we see – tracks.

Maybe twenty minutes later we're crawling through the branches of some thick patch of spiky trees (*the best bit of nature walking*) and come across a train line. Fan-freaking-tastic, a nice smooth path. Obviously animals and people walk along this line – we can see by the tracks, and obviously no train uses this thing because it's totally snowed over.

Safe to walk on? Of course!

So we start walking. Beautiful day, the sky is so blue, the trees have that glisten of a past ice storm . . . and we are stomp, stomp, stomping along till we reach this 'thing' I don't know the proper name for. It's a light for the train, as though there were once *two* train lines here, as opposed to one (*because the actual lights points off into the forest – i.e. to nowhere and no one, not sure how a train on the main track would even see it*.) and at the

bottom of this thing is a pile of old seeds. And chickadees. Little tiny, black, grey and yellow chickadees, hopping around and picking at the food. Zsolt pulls out the camera and one of the birds *flies onto his camera*.

We became excited.

Next Zsolt passes me the camera, and I film him picking up a few stray seeds and holding them up in his hand. A little bird arrives and hops around his palm, pecking at the seeds and hopping about some more. Charming or what? It was like a scene from Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* with all the little birds. (*And since Zsolt is such a great beauty*.)

We get this on film. And then I decide to try.

Holding up my hand and waiting, the birds seem less certain to land on my palm. But I keep waiting with my hand held out – until Zsolt says,

"There's a plow!"

And I say,

"Oh shit!"

Roaring down the 'apparently-*not*-abandoned' train track, is a giant plow throwing snow into the air like little waterfalls off its side blades.

Well hey, we weren't going to argue with its progress. Scrambling to pick up our poles, and our mitts, and my dropped scarf, Zsolt *then* says,

"Jump across the creek!"

Because this train line is quite, hmm, narrow? With dips on each side – one side goes quite steeply down into the trees, the other rises quite steeply up in to the trees . . . the stream is on the 'up side'.

So in my snow shoes, I run and take a flying, big-footed leap to safety. (*Though the snow was sliding, and that stream looked really deep just next to my heels*.)

What does Zsolt do? Does he follow his panicked wife?

Oh, no, he doesn't. He's suddenly struck with reason, and simply steps to the side of the maybe-wider-than-I-realized path, and the plow slows down to pass.

There I am, clinging to the side of this hill as the plow man looks at me and gives an uncertain wave . . . and they carry on.

Leaping across a stream is easy when you're panicked. Getting back off that steep incline is more tricky. With help from Zsolt's reaching arms, I managed to jump back across that stream (*onto the upward incline of the train line*) and back to safety.

Anyhow, by the time we walked back to the car, we were both totally knackered. However, in terms of exercise and reclaiming your health (*Cause, really, that's the bottom line despite all the extra life-threatening fun*.), I couldn't recommend it more. Crazy adventure with snow shoeing, and good health to boot. Totally worth the price of the equipment. And maybe, *maybe*, next time, we'll spot a moose.

3Feb2012

Choo-Choo! Chuga-Chuga.

Posted in Bumpboobs, Canada, Finding Home, Fun

Sitting on the train: rocking and rolling toward Toronto for a weekend of peer support training with the classy organization, **Rethink**. Frankly, I find train prices in Canada to be drastically more expensive than the European (*or US*) system . . . but hey – at least there's internet. Though I'd rather save half the price of a ticket and *not* be able to check my email.

Zsolt is at a bus station as I type this waiting for the Greyhound. He's coming down to Toronto to meet me later in the day. (*Why aren't we travelling together? Well, my trip was arranged by Rethink, and Zsolt's was arranged by Zsolt . . . bookings did not coincide. Plus, when paying out of pocket, the bus is way, way less expensive*.) The poor guy was dropped off this morning at about 7.15am for a 9.30am ride to Toronto. Goodness knows what he's been doing these past two hours. But I imagine it involves the playbook, and a whole lot of Fruit Ninja.

This weekend we'll be on hiatus from Ottawa. While Zsolt visits the Royal Canadian Museum (*or something like that*) to learn about the Mayans and their pyramids . . . I'll be hanging out with other young breast cancer ass-kickers, being trained on how to give support to those newly diagnosed. Rethink is this entirely cool, flashy, worthwhile organization that supports young women diagnosed with BC. They are the folks who put out the 'Your Man Reminder' app/you tube video. You can get a sense of their philosophy by watching that piece of work. (*However, I cannot include a link because apparently VIA rail discourages streaming, and won't let me access youtube to find the video. But seriously, it's easy. Just search 'Your Man Reminder Video' in the search engine.)*

Sitting on the VIA train reminds me of high school. Maybe it ought to remind me of Europe since Zsolt and I rode the train all over, but no – high school. Back in the days of awkwardness and poor fashion choices, I was a debater. Our club would take the train to tournaments held at U of T, Queens, Waterloo, McGill . . . and let me tell you, if you're looking for great company, look for a pack of debaters. Generally you'll find people who are full-on convinced of their opinion and perfectly capable of discussing it to death (*followed by going out to a bar, having pillow fights, or riding around in the back of taxi's with their legs sticking out*). Frankly, I don't even know how I managed to keep up . . . but it didn't hurt to be one of the only girls. It never does. J

All that to say I'm on a train. Zsolt is still waiting at the bus depot. And there's no snow on the ground in Toronto.

Let the weekend of adventure (and 9-3.30 training) begin!

9Feb2012

That is enough of that

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs

This past weekend involved my travelling to Toronto to meet, share and learn with a group of ladies who had in the past been diagnosed with cancer (*A bitter sweet experience. On one hand, it's amazing to get together with women and chat-chat-chat ourselves silly about fertility, chemo, treatment and diagnosis . . . on the other hand, stepping back from the tea and biscuits, it's also a little bit sad so many wonderful people had to have gotten sick.)*. The idea here (*and in this case, it's specifically a breast cancer charity, though similar sorts of support are offered through many cancer centers, such as Wellspring*.) is that those newly diagnosed can reach out for information or a quietly listening ear from those who have 'walked that walk' before.

Really, it's all about the sharing. There are times when we desperately need to share, to reach out, to connect. Personally, I had a negative first experience in terms of finding support. I've told this little story before, and now I'll tell it again: when I asked the breast cancer nurse (*moments after being told about the cancer*) if there were any breast cancer support groups in the area, she basically said:

"Not for a women your age, at your stage of treatment."

Gag. Really? *Really?* Then she went on to tell me that I was in an exceptional position, and the last time a woman around my age was diagnosed was maybe two years ago. I guess considering the surgeon performs several mastectomies and bilaterals a week . . . this 'one every few years' thing was small peanuts.

But I digress.

Support is a great thing. Before finding Facing Cancer Together (*my first and still very important experience of peer support within Canada*), I guess there was the blogging. To share, even with just my family and the people they referred Bumpyboobs to, was alleviating.

It wasn't because people could write back with all the answers, and it wasn't because writing would carry away my problems . . . it was because . . . . . because I could share.

Release that ball of pressure. Let others know how I felt without having to make things 'nice'. (*Or at least, not too nice. My grandmother was reading that blog, so I'd be lying if I said there was no censorship . . . but it was, on the whole, a very honest medium*.)

So there I was last weekend ready to volunteer my time and energy to a program I think is essential (i.e. Peer Support for Young Women with Breast Cancer).

And here we go – into training! Friday starts with some emotional 'what inspires me' stuff, then Saturday rolls into picking apart pity versus compassion, and all the while we eat-eat-eat (*sushi & Thai food for lunch . . . ahhh, so good. I made some Thai last night just to recreate the experience.)* and as we eat, we chat-chat-chat.

"Fertility. Babies. Children. Drugs. Surgeries. Options. Chemo. Radiation. Depression. Exercise. Side Effects. Projects. Reconstruction. Discovery. Advocacy. Research. Doctors. Diagnosis. Family. Energy. Nausea. Work. Sick Leave. Hair growth. Marathons. And so on!"

I really should have known better. Saturday night following the training, I ought to have curled up in the hotel room with room-service pizza and ordered some stupid movie for distraction. But instead, since this was a great opportunity to meet people (*and it was, which is why I couldn't say no*), I went out for dinner with the ladies. We ate this gorgeous pizza, and we talked-talked-talked.

"Babies. Children. Drug Plans. Lymph nodes. Prognosis. Treatment. Studies. Genetics. Birth Control. Fertility drugs. Family planning. Tamoxifen. Herceptin."

Listening-listening-listening. I felt my head get heavy and the room tilt sideways.

What the heck was happening?

This is what happening: I suddenly had had enough. Exhaustion replaced interest, and I basically fell asleep in my pizza before interrupting the conversation and asking to be taken home. The following Sunday involved a lot of role-playing (*very useful but also intense)* and I think everyone had had enough of 'cancer' by the time the weekend was over.

Which is why I think, really, sometimes it's better to focus on the "Everything else we go through" as opposed to the cancer. Yes, sharing is incredible. Meeting like-experienced others is confirming in the 'you are not alone' sense. This is all so very good, so very supportive, so very helpful.

But it's also a wonderful thing to breath and be quiet. To remember that the sun is shining. To lose yourself in a book. To run that mile alone. To just let yourself be everything and anything *except* a person who has had (or has) cancer.

Stepping away is a wonderful thing. So for me, this week, I've tried my best to step away. This post speaks otherwise . . . but along with writing this post, I've been working on Narrative Nipple, looking at places to move, applying for jobs, and arranging a reading group. Not bad, eh?

So, here's to stepping away and letting it go. Those are the best moments, after all. The moments where you're nothing but yourself, and the pressure is forgotten. Just let it go. Once in a while . . . just let it go.

12Feb2012

A golden kind of silence

Posted in Fun, Life, Love

Okay, so I wouldn't go quite so far to say Zsolt and I are *cheap* people. We're simply thrifty. Go to a restaurant and skip dessert; split on the lunch buffet instead of an evening meal; enter a mall with clear goals and no additional purchases (almost, I mean . . . if it *really* looks cute, I might bend.); never order alcohol; check the charity shops before the outlet stores . . .

And this morning, in honour of upcoming Valentine's Day, we "*went to a movie before noon, so we can get half off the tickets*."

Sounds like fun, eh? It was.

This morning, close to noon, we attended a showing of *The Artist* at our local AMC theatre. This is a show that features a charming male lead who, in The Artist, is a popular silent film start. Talkies enter the picture and his career goes crashing down. Meanwhile, he meets this young and equally charming actress whose career is on the up. They don't spend the entire moving making passionate love to one another, but they are present in each other's lives – even if from a distance.

Zsolt and I were enthralled with this picture from the opening scene. It's sweet. It's funny. It's very clever. Frankly, I'd say it's a perfect Valentine's day picture simply because of its light, humorous and love-struck aspects, but also because of the quality. Quality film, no doubt.

Just because romantic comedies are cheesy as a rule doesn't mean there cannot be some shining exceptions.

Once upon a time, in a memory far away, I was reading some interview with the Canadian author Modicai Richler. And in this interview, he talks about a letter he once found that his son had written to his school. Basically, the son is swearing and angry and ripping up the school, and plans on sending in the letter. Mr Richler reads it, and instead of getting angry with his son's horrible language . . . he edits the letter. All the *"Fuck yous," and "Fuck this" and "Fuck everyones"* were removed. All except for one at the end, where he left a final 'Fuck You'. Passing the letter back to his son, he explains that when going for impact: less is more.

I've never forgotten that. It's one reason I detest the triple, or even double, exclamation mark (!!!). (Except when in brackets; you can get away with anything if it's place between two brackets.) And it's one of the reasons that *The Artist* is such a success despite being a mainly silent movie. The music takes on more meaning. The movements are more important. The looks are deeper. And subtle background noises suddenly gain huge significance.

A movie about silent films, which is silent, and which struggles within that silence . . . Gosh, it was good.

Just go and see it, eh? I could write more – but what's the point? There's a cute dog, fabulous physicality, great style . . . but none of this matters unless you see the movie. (And try for before noon, if you want to catch that discount.)

So, that was our Valentine's Day adventure. Two days early because we don't want to pay extra on the actual day. And yeah, we're a little stingy . . . but I still enjoy a beautiful moment. This film was full of beauty. As was the experience of snuggling up to my husband in a dark theatre, and enjoying our splurge purchase of pop corn.

Lovely date, no? I hope your Valentine's day is just as nice.

(*And after the film, we attempted to walk around outside, but Zsolt was wearing his street shoes – no boots – and basically froze to the point of non-enjoyment. Therefore, we hid in Walmart and called home for a ride. I felt like a 14 year old again.*)

14Feb2012

The first sign of spring

Posted in Canada, Fun, Life

Spring is peering round the corner. Just yesterday afternoon my little brother and I were cruising for some groceries (i.e. grocery shopping) at the huge waste-of-space outdoor mall in Kanata. Driving into the Centrum (the mall) we spotted a sign:

"Look at that sign!"

"Which sign?"

"Right there"

"There's three signs!"

"The second one."

(pause for observation)

"Wooohooo!"

"Yah!"

"Alright"

"Awesome!"

"Wooohoo!"

The mall has just become a little less of a waste-of-space with the recent addition of a Basking Robbins Ice Cream shop. I adore BR mostly for the childhood memories, but also largely for the delicious flavours of ice creamed delights inside their store. Personal favourites: Cookies and Cream, Peanut Butter and Chocolate, Jamoca Almond Fudge, and Pralines and Cream.

Fast forward past the grocery shopping, and we are driving around this open-concept outdoor mall thing looking for the Baskin Robbins. It's conveniently next to the LCBO (liquor store). We park, go into the Baskin Robbins, and two minutes later exit the store with one cone and one small cup. Then, wrapped in our winter jackets and wearing heavy winter boots, we lean against the LCBO window where the sun is hitting and enjoy our treat.

Ice cream in February . . . who would have imagined?

So I heard that the ground hog saw his shadow, but forget that because we ate *ice cream* outside. Now that's a real sign of spring. It's coming people. Get yourselves ready.

P.S. Happy Valentine's day!

17Feb2012

Silent mentorship

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Life, Treatment, Writing

This past Wednesday woke me up bright and early to attend a WXN breakfast networking session. WXN is an organization that connects women in "management, executive, professional and board roles." Basically that means there's a lot of networking, acknowledgement of success, and mentoring opportunities. As I sat there during the breakfast in Ottawa's Rideau Club, pushing around a sausage that I suspected contained gluten and listening to the panel of speakers, it made me think of some of the incredible people I've met on this journey through to recovery and beyond. Though none of us ask to join the cancer club, we've nevertheless been inducted – and I've got to say, bright-side-thinking, it's connected me to some incredible people.

So am I an executive? No, no, no. I'm a writer who was invited by my mother (*president of her own consultation and health company*) to the breakfast. We planned on visiting the spa later in the day, but before going to the Nordic, she invited me along to this breakfast event. (*I sound like Zsa Zsa Gabor – Hungarian, by the way – living in the lap of luxury and flaunting it! But the spa is really quite a special treat. Those saunas are great for detoxification.*) And therefore I found myself meeting and greeting with a sharp group of high-level women in this high-rise, thick curtained, wood panelled room with a view of Ottawa that would drop the jaw.

It was slightly surreal to meet people and say, "Hello, my name is Catherine. I'm a writer." And hear them replay, "Hello my name is _____. I work in _____." It's not a natural way to behave, I think. But then, networking is a funny business. Feels a bit like speed dating, eh? I've never speed dated – but I can *imagine* that they are quite similar. You meet, exchange information, get a sense of how/if their business fits your business, and then move on to meet others. Like my mother says, "you only need that initial impression. If you like them, ask to go for a cup of tea later!" Which makes good sense.

(*Actually, I met some really cool women and it was interesting to learn how communications, writing, and social media fit into their businesses. One lady was head of communications – which makes me think, "wow." And another woman had just started her own mentoring business and was looking for a blogger . . . so there you go, well worth an early morning.)*

Speakers included Rear Admiral Jennifer Bennett, Chief Reserves & Cadets for the Canadian Navy, Judith Shamian, President & CEO of the Victorian Order of Nurses Canada, and Janet Longmore, President & CEO of Digital Opportunity Trust. And as the room drank their coffee, ate their eggs and tweeted on their ipads – these ladies were lead by Tobi Cohen of Postmedia news in a discussion about leadership, chasing opportunities and mentoring.

It was the mentoring that really caught my attention. Rear Admiral Jennifer Bennett – a women very high up in the Canadian Navy – spoke about the silent mentor. This is someone who sets the example in the way they handle situations, support others, forges opportunities, etc. And it made me think of the men and women I've met over these past two years who have inspired me with their confidence and drive.

I think of . . .

. . . My surgeon. He inspired me with his self-confidence as he quietly, but most certainly, let me know *he was the best* in terms of mastectomies. I've never claimed to be the best at anything, so seeing his confidence was such a different perspective. It made me wonder, what am I the best at? His approach was totally outside my normal way of thinking, but it caused me to consider that being very, very good is not necessarily cause to act very, very humble. Okay, so this doctor *was* quiet and not showing – but humble? Well . . . he wasn't going to self-depreciating, that's for sure. And really, why should he? He *was* the best.

. . . The blogger whose site was about moving *beyond* cancer. I've been following her webpage ever since diagnoses and through it connected to a larger #bcsm community. Back when my life was first being blown to bits with shock, fear and oncoming chemotherapy . . . I found hope in her journey beyond all those troubles. There was another side, and I could reach it too.

. . . my friends at Facing Cancer Together, who are so quick to respond to questions – go off around the world on journey, fight to make things better, give care to a loved one, stay strong for their children, defy the odds and succeed beyond expectation, and simply tell their story. People on this site lead with courage. It gives me strength to be open and honest.

. . . That woman who went into chemo every week cracking jokes and looking, quite frankly, very pretty. She was staring chemo in the face and spitting at it, laughing at it. Clearly this was her her defence, and I know it wouldn't work for me (*because makeup and nice outfits were the last things on my mind*), but seeing her determination made me smile. And goodness knows, it's good to smile.

. . . The bloggers, the tweeters, the facebookers, the friends stopping by with food, the family writing letters and talking on skype, the husband finishing his PhD . . . the people who made life so much more bearable!

You never know where strength can derive, and I guess it's also easy to not realize the strength you provide. But people are wonderful, people have been wonderful . . . and I'm quite thankful to my silent mentors for all they've been able to share. They've challenged me to think differently.

And so, as I finished my green tea at the WXN breakfast and passed out a few business cards, I reflected on the community of woman, and how good it was they wanted to grow with one another. And then I reflected on *this* community, and how lucky I am to have met so many incredible silent mentors.

So thank you, everyone, for giving me those slices of perspective, signs of love and friendship, flashes of hope, and amazing patience . . . because you've read to the end of this post – and I appreciate that very, very much.

Now I'm wondering: am I alone in all this inspiration, or do you have your mentors too? Who are your mentors (silent or otherwise) and how have they impacted your life? Do share – cause I'd love to hear your story.

Till next week!

Catherine

18Feb2012

Saturday afternoon doodles

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Food, Treatment

I'm making this into a poster. Should be a good reminder for the kitchen.

23Feb2012

My American Idol eggs

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Fertility

“What a beautiful uterus,” says Shannon the technician. “All dressed up in her Sunday best.”

Yep, that’s my uterus – a real girly girl, getting all dolled up before trips to the fertility clinic. I tell her it’s no big deal, just wear sweat pants like me and my lulu’s – but no, she likes turning heads when she leaves the house.

So my uterus is on the display screen and looking good. Having established that (and having taken a picture with her fancy machine) the technician takes a short break in her ultra sound scanning so I can go to the washroom. One hour before the appointment I drank about half a litre of water. Zsolt was pushing for the full litre, “Come on, drink more!” and I pushed back, saying, “I’m full! I can’t manage another drop!” What I didn’t mention was that I was mainly full because (only two minutes before) I’d stuffed two cookies down my throat in a bit of a ‘need a snack, oh, there’s a snack’ quick-fix indulgence. But nevertheless, I drank the minimum required amount of liquid one hour before my ultra sound, which meant by the time we arrived at the fertility clinic and were escorted in for the scan, I was bursting to use the washroom.

A minute later and I’m back in the scan room, relieved of holding it in, and with a sheet wrapped around my lower body (trousers and pants removed) as the technician has me sit back on the table.

Earlier, as Zsolt and I waited to be called for the test, Shannon (the technician) came out into the waiting lounge and asked, “Catherine?” To which I replied, “That’s me!” and hurried over to her side. She then asked, “aren’t you taking him with you?” So Zsolt, who is used to *not* accompanying me on my tests because generally speaking, nurses at the hospitals here in Ottawa are not keen on a second person in the room, put away the Playbook and joined us for the scanning. Today he was allowed to hold my hand as Shannon investigated the status of my ovaries, and I’m really thankful for that. It means we both know more about the situation.

(I’m strong in my belief that a patient ought to be allowed a source of support during tests and procedures. Even if they are sitting across the room, it so helps to have a loved one nearby during those challenging moments.)

So I’m on the table, and we’re getting down to the real stuff here. In goes the ultra sound wand. (In where? You guess.) After a few uncomfortable attempts to capture my left ovary, where she pushed down on my abdomen and prods upwards with the wand, we have a clear picture.

Basically, we are examining my ovaries today to learn about the eggs. Now, Shannon is not a doctor, so the results of my scan cannot be 100% confirmed until someone trained for years up on years in ultra sounding has examined the images, but she does explain what she sees.

"Basically your eggs are like contestants for American Idol. There are so many, that you can't see the individual people (i.e. eggs) on a scan. But every month there are try outs, and the people who succeed for those try outs (i.e. eggs that try to ovulate) and get through to the competition are given costumes and makeovers – and *then* we can see them. (i.e. the follicles change in a way that makes them apparent in an ultra sound)."

So, looking at my left ovary . . . not too many contestants made it to the try outs. The blob that represents my ovary is small, and she counts only three follicles. That is a low number. (But better than zero, in my opinion.)

Onto Ms Right. Moving to the other side, with more compression and squeezing of my abdomen, she takes a picture of my right ovary and then explains what she sees.

"See how it's so much larger?"

And it is – it's like three times larger than my left ovary. Apparently, according to Shannon, the left ovary often takes the hit when it comes to declining fertility. Mine certainly has. But in my right there are seven follicles. That's not horrible.

Apparently, the minimum number of follicles (eggs that made the competition) the doctors are happy to see in women when combining numbers from both left and right is eleven. *Eleven*. My combined number was ten. *Ten*.

Therefore, I have low fertility levels . . . but . . . well, ten is *almost* eleven, right?

"You might have to get on that earlier than other women," she suggests. What Shannon means is, I ought to be trying for a baby *now* as opposed to *later*.

Which is more easily said than done, considering I'm only one year out of treatment. But Zsolt and I have a plan, and it involves waiting at least another year before trying. And in the meanwhile, I'm on tamoxifen and trying to keep this body healthy.

The truth is, there are more tests they could run, more scans they can take – because knowing the state of my eggs is really only a starting point. But I promised Dr Canada to abstain from the fertility yellow brick road . . . and though I agreed to have my eggs tested (because I WANT to know), there will be no further investigations for quite a while. Yes, I have to go back and get my blood taken on day "21" of my period, so we can know whether I'm actually ovulating those American Idol eggs . . . but that'll be the end of things for now.

Fertility can become so confusing, so overwhelming, and so panic-inducing after having had chemotherapy. Last summer when I thought I couldn't have children, that was totally crushing. This past Autumn when the doctor gave me some hope – that was relieving. But one way or another, things are going to work out, and I have faith in that eventuality. Chasing down this information is a good thing: I look forward to learning the results because then, finally, I can plan for the future with a clear picture of the options. But there are times to step back too, and after this upcoming consultation – that'll be my time to step away from the babies and just focus on here and now.

Maybe you know what it's like to run this fertility race? If you want to share, please do – it will help others reading this post who are hoping to learn what comes next.

What was your experience?

And in the meanwhile, have yourself a lovely loved-filled day. See you next week.

1Mar2012

How to set up a RSS Reader

Posted in Fun, Life, Reading, Writing

This morning I was at the coffee shop with my mom (*again*), and as we sat there drinking our drinks (*me: green tea, she: soy-milk latte)* the conversation rolled around to blogs, facebook, and social media in general. You see, my mom often mentions that she'd like to do more with the internet, but having so many projects on the go, time is not always available.

(*Never mind that we spent our morning at a coffee shop, because tea with people you care about is, in my opinion, a valuable use of time. It offers connection, reflection, and stillness. Something* everyone *can use . . . even my husband, Zsolt, though he 100% believes it's ridiculous to pay for a cup of tea when we could brew and entire pot at home. But he's a man, and that's just man logic.*)

So, anyhow, I suggested, once again, she learn the wonderful world of the RSS Reader.

Have you heard of a RSS Reader? Because for *ages* I had no clue what this was, but heard it mentioned occasionally . . . some pro blogging site had been discussing those 'share' links at the bottom of posts, and mentioned that a really good blog will always have a 'RSS Reader' option.

(*Unfortunately this blog doesn't have that link. I'm no WordPress Wizard, and haven't a clue how to add one. But thankfully wordpress works in RSS easily, all you need to do is add the website address. And I guess it's likely you didn't understand that last sentence. But hey, if you keep reading this post, you will by the end! Exciting prospect, no?*)

Okay – because I'm such a huge fan of online ideas, and online community, and learning through experience, and keeping up on local happenings, and having my interests targeted . . . I 'heart' my RSS Reader, and think you might as well. So here is a very short introduction. There are tons of options online for getting a reader, but I use Google Reader and it's damn convenient, therefore that's what I'll be sharing.

Right. . .

RSS Reader: A page that groups your favourite blogs, and presents new posts collectively on one page. This basically means you don't need to bookmark a blog or subscribe by email. *(Unless you want to, 'cause that works better for some*.) Just add your blog of choice to the reader, and all notification of updates will arrive to this page.

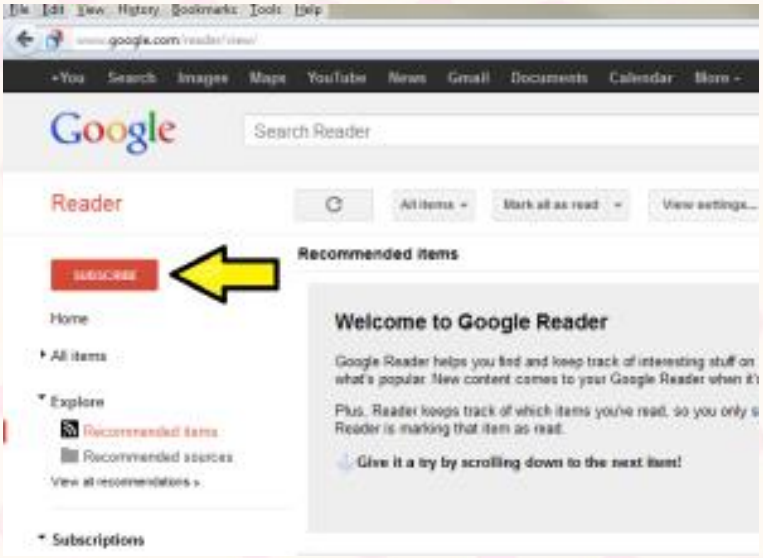
Pros: Eliminates email clutter. Cuts down on browsing time. Allows you to preview a post before deciding if it's worth the read.

Cons*:* Well, you actually need to set it up. I guess that's half the battle. The other half is using it – but I check mine every morning like I check the news.

Steps:

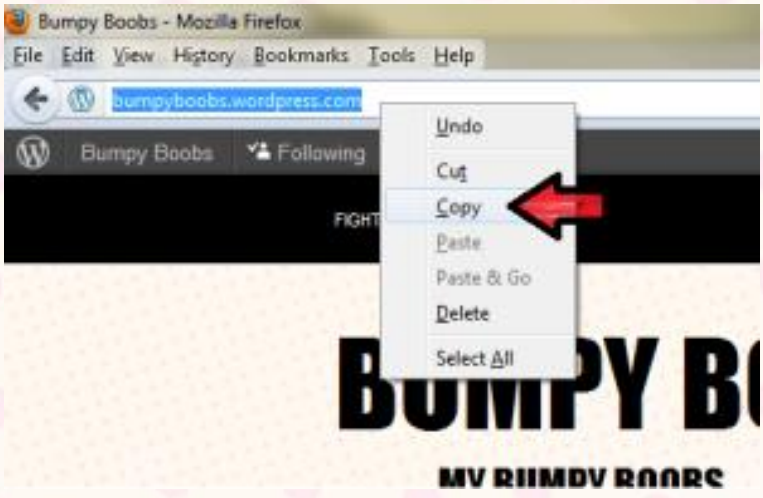
1. Go to Google's RSS Reader sign in page. If you have a gmail account, sign in using that username and password. If you don't, then create an account.

2. You'll be taken to a page that welcomes you to the reader. If you love reading detailed instructions – go nuts! Otherwise, hover over that red button that says 'subscribe' and click it. Here is a picture, I've drawn in an arrow, which won't appear on your screen.

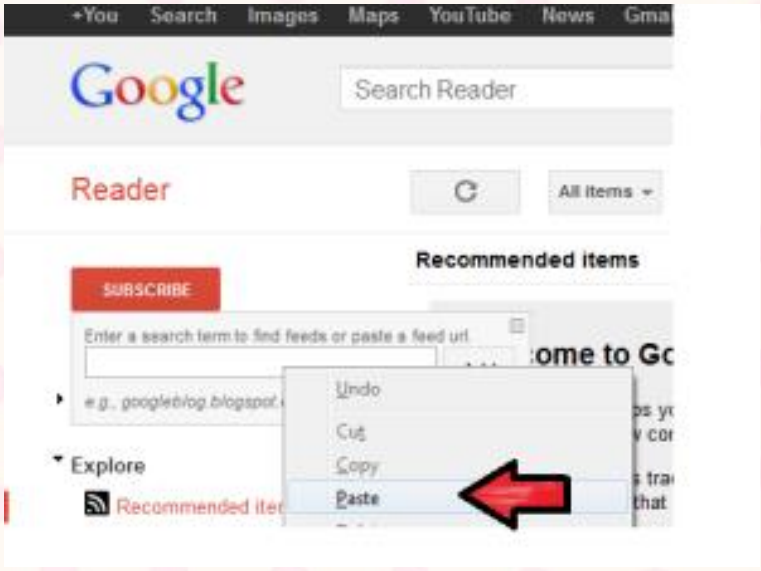


3. After clicking subscribe, a little box will appear below the button. Here's what you do with that box:

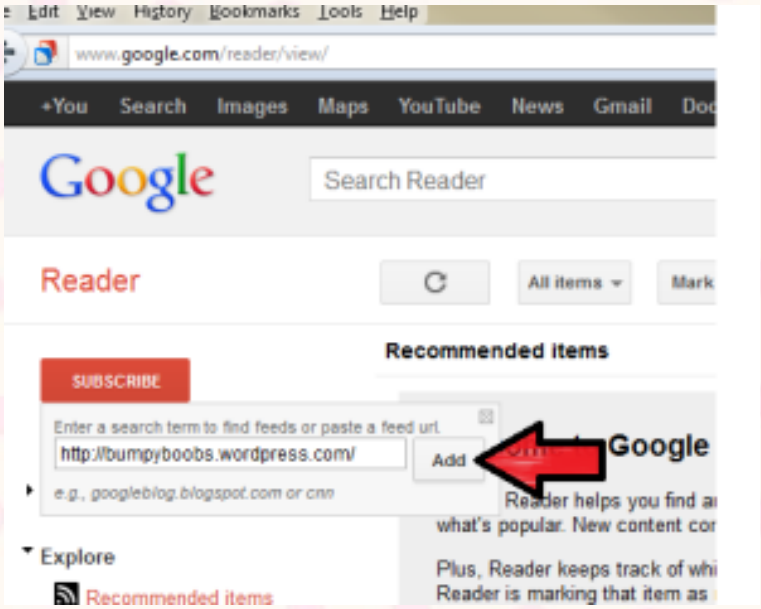
- Open your blog of choice in a new window.
- Copy the entire web address of that blog.



- Paste it into the little box on the Google Reader page.



- Click Add.



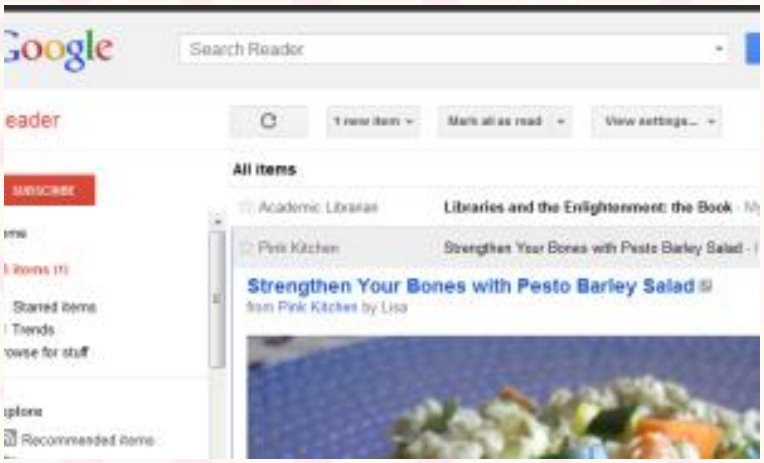
You have now added a blog to your reader. This can be done with nearly any blog online – so whether you like to follow someone's cooking page, comics, breast cancer journeys, inspirational people, news sites, TED, local event blogs – whatever, just cut, paste and add them to your reader. (*And if that doesn't work try a CNTRL + F with the phrase 'RSS' to see if they have a reader friendly version*.)

4. Choose the settings you prefer. I like to have a list of blog titles when opening my reader (for quick scanning), other people might prefer the title and the first paragraph of text. Just play around with the 'View settings' button and find your preference.

If you click on a title, it will open a preview. If you click the title *again*, it will open the actual blog page.

5. Now that your reader is set up, you can keep abreast with all the latest posts very easily. It's like a miracle if you are involved in social networking, or enjoy getting your news online. Loads of wonderful people have

blogs, and it's fantastic to follow their stories – pick people you admire, choose topics that interest you – the great thing about a reader is it's completely tailored to you, by you.



And this is what I do, because I hate online clutter. Every time I scroll the page of new posts, and read/skip whatever appeals or doesn't, I then click "Mark all as read" – and 'poof!' they are eliminated from the screen. All cleaned up.

Okay – so this post isn't for everyone, I get that. But sometimes there are tools that are simply so worthwhile, I have to write about them. Of course, for many people setting up this reader isn't worth the time (*cause you only read a few things online, and I'm totally honoured to be one of them*). But if you follow more than, say, three blogs – try the RSS Reader and see how it feels.

I'm sold, even though it's free.

And that's what I told my mother this morning. I even put an app on her tablet so she can quickly access the posts . . . whether she *uses* it is another issue. But I've tried. Sometimes that's all you can do.

2Mar2012

BRCA genetic testing result

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs

Well we have arrived, it is the end of another week. And *this* week was particularly interesting not only for having done some volunteering, seeing my (i.e. Facing Cancer Together's) PSA advertisement hit the electronic news stands – see page 31 for me and my very white teeth, or trying to arrange a photo shoot (*an attempt to describe my current state of hair may not have been so clear, as they kept asking me to bring along my wig*), but also because *this* is the week of my BRCA results.

Genetic testing has been done. And I'll get straight to the results, then talk about their meaning. Basically – for the two BRCA genes where they have identified a known mutation linked to high probabilities of cancer – I am A-Okay! No mutation. Everything works tick-a-dee-boo.

WooooHooo!!!

(Insert here the happy dance that Mom, Dad, Zsolt and I did this afternoon after sharing the news. Dad cranked up Depeche Mode's Question of Time and made us all dance around the kitchen in celebration. And you are welcome do dance as well, if you'd like.)

So while the mystery of 'why did you get cancer' remains unsolved, I've nevertheless been spared this additional weight in my journey. What that means is I am lucky, very lucky, to not have to consider removing my ovaries and uterus due to high risk . . . and my left breast is also giving a sigh of relief.

None of this means I cannot be vigilant – checks, scans, tests must all be done regularly. After all, I did have cancer, and yeah, that doctor in the UK quoted me at fifty percent of a pizza . . . so yes, I need to remain on guard.

But I guess my chances of developing a second cancer are not drastically high. The genetic consultant did this lovely test for me where she calculated the likelihood of my developing a second cancer . . . she arrived at a life-time risk of 16%. But that is when I'm eighty. Right now, here in my thirties, it's like from less than zero to one percent.

They did, however, find a bizzaro mutation on my BRCA1 gene that cannot be identified. Generally speaking, they feel it's not pathogenic (i.e. not cancer causing) but they cannot be positive. This means that every three or five years, I'm meant to call into the clinic and check to see whether that particularly (currently mystery) mutation has been linked to cancer. Hopefully it becomes confirm as 'not a bad thing' as the gene is further investigated.

Honestly, I am thankful to not be identified as having hereditary breast cancer. I am thankful for myself, and my body/baby related choices, but also for my mother, my cousins, my family, and – hopefully – my future children. I am very, very thankful.

People who are diagnosed with the messed up BRCA genes live incredible lives beyond cancer (or even without cancer!) – think about Terri from a Fresh Chapter, for instance. But nevertheless that's a heavy slice of knowledge about a body that could potentially turn on you. (Of course this is the case for everyone, not to be too 'doom and gloom', but imagine having a doctor say, "there's a 80% chance you'll get cancer if you don't

remove those breasts.) I cannot speak for their journeys, but I do know they are *journeying* despite a certain monkey on the back, and that in itself is hugely admirable.

Anyhow, today was a relief and I am thankful, very thankful. It's such good news . . . I don't want to boast, but it's such very, very good news.

And for today, that is all I'll write about that.

6Mar2012

For Zsolt's Grandmother

Posted in Life, Love

Zsolt will be flying home to Hungary early next week for the funeral of his Grandmother, Gyöngyi Angyal, meaning something like Pearl Angel, a.k.a. Gyöngyi Néni (Old Lady Pearl), who passed away yesterday evening. I'm telling you this because she was an opinionated, cheeky and hugely emotional woman who deserves at least one small story written about her. Really, I think she and her daughter (Zsolt's aunt) combined could fill an entire novel with their antics (goodness knows I've been tempted), but I guess for this moment a blog post will have to do.

When he was a little boy, Gyöngyi babysat Zsolt and his sister. Looking back on this, as he and I lay in bed yesterday – twenty some years later – with our late-night wonderings, Zsolt remembers three things in particular about his grandmother. First, were the doughnuts; she'd bake puffed-up, golden doughnuts with jam-filled centres. Apparently they were like heaven on earth. Second was the dinner table; no one was allowed to leave until they'd finished their meal, as served by Gyöngyi. But as soon as his grandmother turned her back, the pot suddenly became a little more full with discarded soup or cabbage, or whatever they were eating that day and

didn't want to finish. (*Presto! An empty plate.*) Thirdly, probably shortly after the 'magical empty plate' trick, he remembers being chased with a wooden spoon – though she was never able to catch him. As they ran around the furniture and tables (something Zsolt *still* does), Gyöngyi would wave her spoon and say, "*No, megállj csak*!" meaning, "Wait till I get you!"

The first time I went to Hungary, after Zsolt and I had know one another for about two months, I met his grandmother (and his aunt, a whole other story, but one that always goes alongside Zsolt's grandmother – they were a mother/daughter power team). From the first meeting onward, she'd ask when we were getting married. Then, later, she'd cry because her grandson was going away (to England) . . . and made me promise to take care of him. And as Zsolt graduated from university with a doctorate degree, there was even more crying – but this time with tears of happiness. "A doctor in our family!" she kept declaring. Tears upon tears upon tears. "A doctor!"

She was a woman who didn't just give one kiss on the cheek. She'd get you in close and kiss-kiss-kiss-kiss-kiss you on the cheek, because she loved you, and she wanted you to be happy, and because she couldn't stand the idea of saying goodbye.

She messed up her hair when her daughter tried to fix it. She'd burp at the table. She'd speak her mind. She'd give generously to her family. She was a property manager of various apartments (her tenants called her granny – and they were of the rougher crowd, yet somehow she charmed them all). She tended her garden meticulously. She made delicious wine with the grapes from her yard. And she loved her family, very, very much.

Ever since meeting the Sámsons, they've taken me in and held no grudge or prejudice toward me as an outsider (i.e. someone who couldn't even speak their language!). In a country where people are weary of strangers, I was instantly considered family, and Zsolt's grandmother was in every way a part of that acceptance.

I guess the very best thing I can say about Gyöngyi, is that she was funny. Really, really funny. To her, there were no formalities, only pure emotion – nothing ever hidden. There would be tears, but alongside that there would be laughter. Lots of laughter, and even at the age of eighty-nine years old, she could giggle with the best of them. I hope she's laughing now, free from the pains of old age, and looking down like an angel from heaven. That would be a fitting end (or beginning) for Zsolt's grandmother, Pearl Angel Sámson, who loved and laughed with all her heart.

10Mar2012

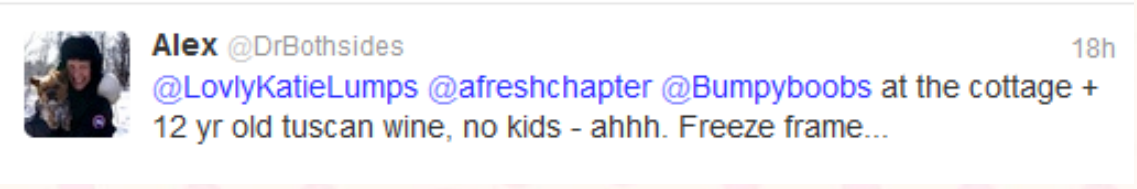
Your Freeze Frame Moments

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Treatment

The freeze frame moments – moments so good, so wholly, purely, simply good, you'd like to stick a pin in them and keep 'em forever. Those are the moments I try to remember; sitting here, laying there, holding my dog when she was a puppy, celebrating the publication of an article, cuddling up to my husband, walking through a warm sun shower, meeting up with friends, feeling good just because . . . those are the freeze frame moments I'm sure everyone can relate to.

Dr Alexandra Ginty tweeted me, Katie and Terri this week about a freeze frame moment, saying she was enjoying a beautiful wine while at the cottage. And I thought, "what a fantastic expression, 'freeze frame'."

The only problem with trying to remember those moments as vivid recollections is that so often the mind moves on, the goodness slips away, and while we might want to re-submerge ourselves into 'that time when everything was wonderful' it instead becomes a shadow of the past.



During treatment I longed for those memories to feel real. After my third or fourth treatment of the 'really intense' chemotherapy (*with over ten more sessions to go*), as determination began to subside to exhaustion, more often than not I found myself dreaming of better times. Better times in the past, and better times to come.

Maybe you are right there, right now, fighting through the shock, the physical changes, the strangeness of seeing a different person in the mirror (*you, but not you*) . . . and all around life goes on, and you go on too. Sometimes you have the strength and find those moments of goodness, other times (*quiet times, when hardly anyone is looking*) you break down and just wish – wish so hard – that you could return to one of those freeze frame moments.

I think everyone remembers differently, but whenever I was longing for a bit of goodness, here's what helped me. Maybe it could help you too? And really, I think this is applicable far beyond a cancer treatment. Anyone can call upon their favourite moments to help alleviate a down moment.

Write it down. When things are good, write them down. Describe how it felt. Tell yourself a story in that moment so when you read it over later (years later, days later) those emotions can be regained.

- Draw a picture. Just doodle it on a piece of paper – doesn't have to be good, and you don't need to show it to anyone. Drawing taps into a different sort of memory, and coupling that with the movement of your hand and texture of the page, it becomes in itself a wholly, purely, simply good freeze frame moment.

- Tell a story. This is what you do when out for tea with friends, or lying in bed, or having someone who loves you rub your feet: tell them the memory that's floating through your mind. Don't worry about it making sense or sounding eloquent – just tell them about that time you laughed till you cried, or felt totally happy and the world was just perfect.

- Look at pictures. There's a great way to trigger lost memories. Have a photo book on hand and flip through, taking time to enjoy the memories that you had forgotten. Zsolt and I print out photo books after our adventures; it's a fantastic way to make sure the good times never fade.

- **Make a plan.** This is a BIG deal, and basically one that will carry you out of that slump. Make a plan to go somewhere you love, do something you love . . . even if you are in the middle of treatment, make a plan. Whether or not your follow through might depend upon your determination and energy levels, but don't give up if it's at all possible. Heck, I dreamed of going home for Christmas despite chemo, setbacks, and the general opinion of its impossibility. And guess what? *It happened*. And honestly, being at home was one of the most healing times during my entire journey through treatment. So if you remember being happy by the lake, or with some friends, or whatever, make a plan – *believe in that plan.*

Happiness is a huge bit of 'awesome' in life, and goodness knows it can be challenged and withheld at times. During my chemotherapy (and a little bit afterwards too) I experienced depression for the first time in my life. Thank God that passed, but I cannot forget what a sluggish, discouraging, deep situation it threw me into . . . and during those times, all I could do was remember those freeze frame moments. Since those times, since coming through treatment and trying to regain my life – I've *lived* those wonderful experiences, and plan on living a whole lot more.

(This is also a great way to establish what matters most in your life, don't you think?)

What were your freeze frame moments that helped when things were discouraging? Is there a particular feeling, value or memory you like to recall?

Anyhow, there's my list of ways to recall the good times. If you yourself have any ideas, please share them in the comments section. My list was quite 'Catherine' centric (i.e. focused on what I love) and you may have a way to remember that's completely your own – do share. If nothing else, I'd just love to hear all the different ways people enjoy themselves.

Until later! Catherine

12Mar2012

Even lovers need a holiday

Posted in Canada, Life, Love, Travel

Sitting here on the red chaise in my parents room with the front windows cracked open. Outside there's are two crows calling (squawking) to one another. One of them is picking around on the front yard where we had throw some seeds over the winter, but it can't see me staring at it from inside. This morning I woke up, exercised on the elliptical, read the news, made a cup of tea, and now I am here writing this out.

Last night we took Zsolt to the airport and he flew off to Hungary. Actually, he's still in the process of flying to Hungary and I can only imagine his state of exhaustion. By the time he makes it to his sister's home in Erd, he'll have been travelling for about 24 hours on very little sleep.

This morning I woke up, exercised, made a cup of tea . . . had some yogurt, fixed the bed, read the news . . . and now I'm here writing.

Make a plan: so this is my plan. Morning will be for writing, as it should always be but often is not, and this afternoon I'll be reading up on NLP in order to better write around the topic of coaching, mentoring and leadership. This evening I'll gorge myself on reality television and maybe help my dad with making dinner.

Zsolt and I often separate for long periods of time. He's from Hungary, I'm from Canada . . . so when the holidays roll around, (and considering we currently have no children) one of us generally takes off to visit family for three to four weeks at a time. And when I say, 'one of us' that really means *I* take off to visit family, and leave Zsolt alone to fend for himself.

So I cannot hold a grudge against his going away for so long this time. Particularly since he'll be attending his grandmother's funeral and, I imagine, helping sort out things that need sorting.

But I guess it's been a while since we split like this . . . about 14 months since our last separation (Christmas to Canada, which lasted for five weeks.)

Zsolt is a man full of wise words. This is largely because as a child he had a book of proverbs, and tried to memorize as many as possible. And while they don't *always* make sense after he translated the Hungarian version to English, this particular expression (something, I think, that came from a movie) works well. He says to me, "Even lovers need a holiday."

And so he is right.

This month will be focused on my world, and my projects, and my wonderful work. It's nice to have this time, even if being away from Zsolt *does* feel rather bizarre.

Even lovers need a holiday. It's okay to be away from one another, and turn the focus onto yourself. And I like that that's okay.

But geez, I do miss him. After being together so long, I think I may have forgotten how to be alone. However, I reckon it starts with routine.

This morning I woke up, fixed the bed, made tea, had some yogurt, checked my emails, read the news, and now I'm here writing . . . and it's going to be a lovely day.

20Mar2012

Going on a business trip!

Posted in After treatment, Articles, Bumpboobs, Fun, Writing

Eight days since I've written a post! Wow. Well, here's a quick update that I'm excited to share. At this moment I'm at the Ottawa International Airport about to fly off to Toronto. This is a business trip – and it gives me goose bumps all over to say, "Business Trip" – how very professional, eh? Can you imagine me here in my charcoal business suit with the pencil skirt and too high heels? Leather briefcase by my side and a crisp button up shirt underneath my suit jacket?

Probably not. Because in reality I'm in my trainers, with lulu lemons I forgot to wash after getting saw dust on them yesterday, carrying a purse that reads, "Keep Calm and Carry On" with my favourite polka dot jacket draped behind me.

Not exactly business class apparel. But certainly more comfortable for travelling.

Here's the fun bit that only Canadian readers would appreciate – I'm going to be flying Porter Airlines, which will basically cruise me into Toronto and deposit me directly in front of my hotel (Royal York). This is certainly an easy way to fly – I wish international travels could be so perfectly executed.

Anyhow – this post needs to be a quickie. I'll write and tell you more later, when I've actually had the photo shoot. In the meanwhile have yourself a lovely day. Enjoy this ridiculously warm weather. And eat your vegetables!

Catherine

22Mar2012

Sex and Cancer reposted

Posted in After treatment, Articles, Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Fun, Love, Treatment, Writing

Hello Ladies and Germs,

This past week I hopped off to Toronto for a photo shoot. The photo shoot is to be coupled with an article I've written for the upcoming (i.e. August) edition of *Lives Affected By Cancer* magazine. But, before I indulge myself with a blog post all about how fun it is to get dressed up and look pretty . . . I thought it might be high-time to share the source of this article inspiration.

A while back I wrote a post on my other blogging home, Facingcancer.ca, entitled "*Sex after cancer – how we coped with the difficulties*" and had a huge reaction on the site. You lovely people here at Bumpyboobs – the original boob, didn't get to read that article simply because, at that time, my grandmother read this page and I was not keen on exposing her to my lady parts.

However, things have changed and it's high time this was shared. So here you go, below is my original post about coping with the challenges of sexuality and intimacy. Feel free to comment, share with someone newly diagnosed (so they can brace themselves and know what's going on – or even better, get prepared!), or just read in silence. Sex is the pink elephant in the room (because it's blushing so much), but man, it matters hugely. Anyhow, enough stalling. If you are family/friends and are uncomfortable with these past couple paragraphs, then stop reading now and save yourself further anguish. Otherwise, enjoy the ride.

Sex after cancer – how we coped with the difficulties.

You know what I don't talk about – or at least, what I don't blog about? Sex. This is partly out of respect for my husband, who was an incredible gentleman during the past year, and partly out of the fact that my grandmother reads each and every entry of my Bumpyboobs.com blog.

However . . .

Grandma doesn't read *this* blog. (*I never gave her the link, otherwise she'd totally be reading this right now.*)

And my husband understands that when talking about recovery and moving on, essentially when talking about life after diagnosis – sex matters. While during treatment it was more than a slightly difficult subject (*for reasons I'll explain below*), now we're in our summer of healing, which includes (*te-he*) sexual healing.

But I'll spare you the HBO drama details. No risky scenes of dropped clothing and ferocious passion (*Though yesterday after that glass of wine and a night to ourselves, there was, I'll admit, a copious amount of both – but you know what, it hasn't come easy. No sir re bob. Not at all. It's taken heaps of effort to recover from what was, essentially a very difficult year sexually speaking**.) Instead I'll write you two sections.

1) Ways in which cancer messed up my sex life.

2) Ways in which I took my sex life back.

So, first: ***Ways in which cancer messed up my sex life.***

Surgery.

Often times the solution to cancer is to cut-it-out, meaning often times, the body undergoes a drastic loss. I was lucky, the cancer was in my breast, and as far as invasive surgery goes, so the nurse told me, this was the best cancer to have. (*Wohoo?)* All I lost was my right breast, many women lose much more.

But nevertheless – it was my *right breast*. For ages it was difficult to see the scar. I didn't trust that part of my body. I was terrified of lymphodemia. I wasn't sure how to dress. I threw away my bikinis. And if my husband's hand would even hover above the area – *swap* – I'd swat it away like a fly. No touching. Because touching meant I dipped into instant depression and rumination over cancer, and our lives changing, and the threat, and the treatment, and will anything ever be the same again?

No touching.

It took a while to recover, and to be honest, I feel like maybe *just* now I can allow my husband to freely explore that side of my body and not flashback to the chemo or surgery. It's gotten better, but it's also taken time.

Exhaustion and Depression.

This is like a game of duck, duck, goose. Exhaustion is walking around the circle of possible reactions, hand above their heads, and we all wonder who she'll pick – then bam! Exhaustion picks Depression, and Depression is up and running, chasing Exhaustion in a circle – running, running, running – and Exhaustion makes it to the open space, sitting down untouched! So now it's Depression's turn to pick a goose . . . duck, duck, duck . . . then guess who he picks since chemo is tomorrow and everything starts again? That's right: Exhaustion. They're up and running again.

Well that long winded description was basically to say that I was tired. Dead tired. No matter how many times my husband might have poked me in bed, or kissed me on the neck (*when the depression hit hard, I didn't even understand how he could look at me with that thought on his mind. Ugh. Chemo Catherine wasn't like your average 28 year old. She looked sick. Sick and bald and sick)* . . . my answer was a constant and firm: "No."

The Narrowing.

Now this is a tricky topic. Who wants to talk about their vagina (*who wants to say vagina?)* narrowing. But it happened. Who the heck knows why? Why does chemo narrow a woman's downstairs passage? Two things happened. First, menopause struck and I dried up like the Sahara. Second, I tightened. Dry and tight. Guess how fun sex becomes when *that* happens? It was like trying to squeeze your head through a children-sized turtleneck.

The pain was sharp – in fact, it's still sharp today – seven months post chemotherapy, and every time there is that moment of supreme discomfort . . . only now I know it will pass. Back then I thought it might never stop. That's a horrible feeling.

So my shop closed up for about five months straight. Also coinciding with some of the most difficult days of our relationship. With the stress of cancer, the difficulties of chemo, the lack of energy and the absence of love making . . . well, it was challenging.

Now for the happier list! ***Ways in which I took back my sex life.***

Actually, I'm no longer in the mood for listing things. I'll just tell you straight. Firstly, we waited.

Also, once chemo ended, I decided to try some vitamin E. Now doctors can prescribe a variety of things to help the juices flow – there's even a forum conversation on facingcaner.ca, so do go check that out. But for me, I'd had enough of the lubricants and certainly didn't want any more drugs . . . so I combined vitamin E with a dilator. And step by step, with a tolerable level of pain, the dilator was expanded over a month or so. Ugh. I cringe at the thought of my grandmother – or anyone's grandmother – reading about my expanding lady part.

Whatever!

And finally we used the ultimate ingredients: patience and persistence. After five months of no action, even with the dilator helping, things were madly uncomfortable down there. But we tried again and again (with several instances of me saying, "Stop!" because it was really too much), and the discomfort began to last shorter periods of time. Now, here in August, it's only in the first moments that I feel that pain . . . and I think it's worth enduring for the fun that comes after.

And that's where we are today, having fun, thank God, after months of really having to try and persist and work to regain our sex life.

Frankly, I was lucky. Not all partners are able to cope with the intensity of chemotherapy or cancer . . . and I'm guessing none of them initially realized that all 'fun, slippery times' will be cleared from the table till recovery starts to happen. I've heard of relationships which have crumbled . . . I've heard of relationships that have strengthened. Also, I've heard of women who had sex all the way through chemotherapy – so good for you are one of them.

And if you are in the middle of a sexual slump, and feeling guilty or frustrated, all I can say is this: hang in there, this isn't your fault and any good partner will keep that in mind. Let the body react as it needs, and recover at its own pace. Then, when you feel ready talk to your doctor about options. Maybe buy yourself a dilator (with vibration for added blood flow) and get started on the project.

Right – sitting up from the computer – enough sex talk. It's not even breakfast yet and I still haven't had my cup of tea. But if you have anything to add, or any advice to give, do take this chance to say something. You never know who you may help. I was certainly scanning the forums when this problem first developed, and it was a relief to learn that other women had similar issues.

Now. Time for tea.

Have a lovely day.

PS. A big thank you to my husband for kindly allowing me to discuss this intimate aspect of our lives. While it *is* intimate, it's also so universal. Thanks, babe. You are an incredible man.

PPS. An updated PS here – the response to this article was huge. If you'd like to read some of the insightful and touching comments, scroll to the bottom of this page and learn that you are not alone.

23Mar2012

Picture day in Toronto

Posted in After treatment, Articles, Bumpboobs, Fun, Writing

Okay, I'm here at my cafe and ready to write. The weather outside is bizarrely fine considering it's still March, and I'm dressed in an outfit that my husband would 100% hate (I look like a neon pink hippie). So, the time has come to relive yesterday in the written form, and it involves owl eyes, bright yellow dresses, and throwing flowers in the air.

Doesn't that sounds quite idyllic. Actually it was a photo shoot in Toronto (not exactly idyllic, but still good fun) for the Look Good Feel Better 20th anniversary magazine, *Lives Affected by Cancer*. As mentioned, I've written an article for the issue that dips into the impact of cancer and treatment on a couple's love life, which is huge, freaking huge, and ripples out into everything, then ripples back in upon itself . . . like some freaking never ending cycle of crabbiness and – *!!!! A man in the cafe just unleashed a hurricane from his mouth* – Where was I? Oh, it's a difficult situation that hardly ever gets discussed. So we're discussing it.

And it's a tricky concept to photograph as well. But wisely the art director choose to work with the idea of flowers and lightness – and hey, how brilliant? While sex is SEX (*Wohoo*!), it's also sweetness, gentleness and romance. Flowers are very appropriate.

So yesterday morning I go up way too early and joined the art director (*I so want to say his name, but lately I'm not really sure if I'm able. Am I able*?) as we took a cab across Toronto and arrived at the studio. We initially arrived at the *wrong* studio, a few buildings down and only realized this upon knocking on the wrong apartment door, which sheds some light on how tired we felt.

But eventually we made it.

Unlike the first photo shoot for Glow, this place had a completely different vibe. Firstly, it was empty except for the photographer and her assistant. Secondly, it was a huge space. Big windows and 30 foot ceilings, white painted everything and pillars so large I couldn't wrap my arms around them. Why, why, why don't they make these buildings anymore? It was magnificent.

People began to trickle in. And in. And in. Seems to me these photo shoots are highly complex – not to mention the editing and planning of a magazine. The magazine designer was explaining how much work went into the project, and it sounds nearly endless. No wonder every little job needs to be considered, and it's incredible to watch them integrate their roles like clockwork.

So we stared with makeup and a lovely man helped me look natural, fresh and beautiful. He took the curlers to my lashes and gave them a good pinching (during which I was frozen – mannequin like), then added mascara

and a tiny bit of shadow at the edges of my eyes. Sexy! Yet sweet. Way more make emphasis than I'd ever dare to use, but the result was striking.

And then came the dress. Think of something from the 1960s that a woman would wear to lunch out with the girls . . . think lemon drops and traces of white flowers . . . think about Jackie Onassis and Audrey Hepburn. That was my dress. (*It was too large so they clipped it at the back, and I wore my hiking socks since they weren't photographing my full body. Ridiculous yet comfortable.)* The makeup artist (*and he was certainly an artist*) touched up my lips with a bit of pink that popped against the yellow.

And then the shooting began. Goodness me. I am NOT a model – it makes me wonder, why is it easy to look interesting and friendly in front of the mirror at home, but when people are watching and the camera pops, and someone says "Happy! Be happy" . . . why is it suddenly so darn awkward?

But I did my best. The previous Glow shoot photographer had me saying, "Ha ha ha!" so I tried it here: "Ha ha ha!" And then other people started saying "Ha ha ha!" along with me . . . we were all standing there saying, "Ha ha ha!" and it was quite surreal.

Ha-ha-ha.

Surreal, but fun. The makeup artist came over and fixed my hair constantly, thank goodness for that because often times he'd give me little tips on how to move or what to do with my legs which was really helpful.

Along the theme of flowers, I threw petals into the air, picked at a bouquet, and smelled the chrysanthemums. It was all very light and fun. Really fun, despite my nerves.

And then there was the video. Talk about uncomfortable! You see, during the shoot not everyone came round to watch – just the photographer, the prop stylist, the clothing stylist, the assistant, the makeup artist and the designer. There were a ton of other people hanging around too. But with the video EVERYONE had to watch.

Basically this video is going to be shown around the web and at events. It's about Look Good Feel Better and Facing Cancer Together – my particular bit was mostly about blogging and the online community. (*Hello community!)*

Therefore, the light switches were flipped off and spot lights were turned onto my face *("Good lighting" assured the makeup artist, which somehow made me feel comforted – not that lighting worries had ever entered my mind . . . but nevertheless, I felt better.*) and everyone had to be quiet. No mobiles. No moving. No talking. No light (except for the spotlight.)

So basically it was impossible to not watch the filming. However, while the *idea* intimidated me, the actual execution was alright. When bright lights get shot into your eyes, the watching crowd disappears. Hopefully I was coherent – sometimes I'd use the wrong word and catch myself about ten seconds later, way after the sentence had passed by and couldn't be corrected. But whatever. It was the real, second-guessing, me, and I reckon that translates okay onto film. (Or at least, I hope!)

The truly remarkable thing about this photo shoot was how smoothly it ran. With so many people criss-crossing one another, and so many aspects of the production collected in one room – it's a miracle of good planning and professionalism that the project ran so smoothly. I'm truly impressed with each person in that room and the role they played.

Despite being nervous – totally nervous – about getting my photo taken . . . it was great to be in such a capable crowd, and supported 100% by their kindness and vision for this magazine. The upcoming issue of *Lives Affected by Cancer* will be hitting stands (*as an insert in fashion magazines – how exciting*) come next August. Judging by the way things went yesterday, it's going to be an outstanding issue.

Sometimes you get lucky, eh, and get to be part of something great. Yesterday was something great, and I *know* Look Good Feel Better and Facing Cancer Together are programs that certainly deserve greatness.

So keep an eye on those newsstands. But don't let this weather trick you, it's not August yet.

P.S. I met Michael Carrera – blogger at Facing Cancer Together and personal trainer extraordinaire. But you know what, I'll write more about that later, because I feel quite strongly about the usefulness of getting a physical trainer post chemotherapy, and it deserves a separate post.

29Mar2012

Taxing trials and after-quakes

Posted in Canada, Life

This week has been a head-spinner. It's been a week where I've had to remind myself the golden lesson that cancer has the instant ability to teach: *just lay off the stress, girl. Relax, sister*. Of course it took me a while to remember this valuable lesson, since I was head-deep in my 'what the frack' mode . . . but practise makes perfect, and eventually I gave up my load. You know what that's like? Sometimes stepping away from a problem feels like an impossible option . . . so then how do you make the impossible possible?

In the meanwhile, great things have been happening. Over the past couple weeks I've had a photo shooting adventure, finished my eighth out of nine stories for my lovely creative project, blogged for this great start-up company (*and wrote the posts well, if I can say so myself*), and largely became used to being alone. In fact, I started relishing my walks to the cafe. Alone Catherine is a productive Catherine. (*Though I still miss my man!*)

But!

Then I tried to do my taxes, again, and my head spun off into the atmosphere. You see, last year I earned a modest amount of freelancing income. Yay! But at the same time . . . how the heck do I prepare my taxes as a 'small business – other'? Apart from the wonderful discovery that expenses equal deductions (*cue me combing my past visa bill and sourcing receipts online. Oh my goodness, did I really spend that much on my writing . . . yes, apparently I did*), this tax season has my brain sizzling with anxiety.

Zsolt and I were in disagreement over getting an accountant. He wanted to save the money, I wanted to save the headache – but when push came to shove, and my meltdown alarms were ringing with the complications of my situation, we found ourselves a compromise (*with the guidance of my parents, and considering the money saved from all those expenses I dug up*). I guess we all move beyond times when we cannot find solutions, it's just that limbo between problem and answer that gets me all stressed and stupid.

Whew.

But you know what? Even after agreeing on a compromise, the stress was still resonating through me! Like after-effects of an earthquake – my mental health was having after quakes: nerves and emotions totally unstable.

Which is when I remembered the blog post I'd written not so long ago, and thought, "yes, what a good idea," and decided to do something to counteract that stress. Basically, I returned not to my writing (*though this is lovely*) and not to my conversations, but opened my Bonusprint program and began picking through pictures of our Greece vacation, making a photo book for the company to print.

Ah, the loveliness of creativity coupled with happy memories. And as I indulged in something that made me feel good – a creative project that had nothing to do with taxes, work, or obligation (*and yet wasn't television, cause while that's entertaining it doesn't change my mood*) I began to feel more and more like myself.

I have a two-for-one deal with the Bonusprint people, so today I'm going to make a second photo book: the summer of 2011. It was a pretty freaking glorious summer, even if the winter involved a lot of catching up . . . and so why not? Right?

Sometimes when you've dipped your head in the pool of stress, and even after you've pulled back out and found a solution to the problem . . . sometimes you still need to recover yourself. Heck, we all know about that! Anyone facing any kind of challenge has had to nurse the after-effects.

So there you go, photo-booking and it feels soooo good.

P.S. The above beautiful photo was shared by Jason Kang on Totem Brand Stories' facebook wall, and was snapped by the talented Donna Griffith at last week's Lives Affected by Cancer shoot. This was before the return of winter, where Chantal and I look optimistic in our spring dresses!

30Mar2012

Going KALE Crazy

Posted in Food, Fun

I'm sitting here in my kitchen nibbling on kale chips and reading over Journey Beyond Breast Cancer's latest round up of posts . . . and I'm thinking isn't this just perfection? Okay, add in a cup of tea and all the world becomes a pinch more lovely, but I won't brew a pot right now since friends are coming round later, and I don't want to get a premptive caffeine buzz.

But you should know about these chips. Firstly, kale is awesome healthy for you. It's a tough leaf, no doubt, and normally it takes considerable baking or slow-cooking to break it down . . . but with this chip trick, it's just so darn easy (*and so darn delicious*) I can't think of any reason we're shouldn' all be snacking on kale right this moment.

So here's what you do:

Buy kale

Go home and turn your oven onto about 375 degrees.

Slice the leafy bits off of the stem (*don't cut yourself!*) and stick the stems in your compost (*or whatever, save them for later if you'd prefer – and let me know what you're doing with them, please. I'm totally curious*).

Clean the leafy bits.

Put leaves into a dish and drizzle with oil, and add some salt. Mix.

Stick the kale onto a tray with that silicone sheet thing, or some parchment paper. (*Or maybe directly onto the tray, but I haven't tried that method*.)

Stick into oven for 5 minutes. After 5 minutes, take out and check . . . then stick them back in for about 4-6 minutes depending on your oven. I generally cook for at least 6 more minutes, totalling about 11 minutes.

Take out and make sure it's all crispy, if not then stick it back in for another minute.

Take out.

EAT.

And bask in the glory of kale chips. Healthy and delish!

6Apr2012

Daydream fallout

Posted in Fun, Life, Love

Funny story, today my father lost the car keys. So I'm in the kitchen minding my business (*mixing brownies, boiling eggs and prepping some curry*) as he runs around the house huffing and puffing over 'where the heck are they keys'.

And I think to myself, *Should I help him*? And I answer myself, *"Don't worry about it.*" Because I know 100% that they will turn up. Key always turn up, hardly anything ever gets lost, and 'misplaced' is not a reason to stop what I'm doing.

Except my Dad feels differently, and he's pulling up the bed sheets and remaking the bed; he's going through the newspapers and shaking them for that 'jingle' sound; he's going back to the car and retracing his steps; he's checking the kitchen (*and I am mostly ignoring him, except for suggesting he leave it alone for a while so the memory can float up in his brain*) and having no luck.

So I slip into my little pre-Easter world. There's loads to do, plus I have all kinds of side work I ought to be focusing more on . . . this whole 'multi-tasking without over loading' thing is posing a bit of a challenge. I have work to do. I do it. But then sometimes I can't calm down, and photo booking isn't always the answer.

Today I had to walk away from my computer because it was making this 'whirring' sound so loudly I thought it might crash. Crashing computers suck. So do crashing brains (*like my brain last Tuesday after two meetings and a nerve-wracking viewing of the Hunger Games, which was good, but not exactly the post-exertion cool down I should have followed.)*, which means this upcoming Easter weekend in general is going to be awesome. Family, food, and chocolate – hello, heaven on earth!

But thank goodness for the weekend . . . and yet there's still so much to do . . . and the brownies aren't looking their best because I overcooked them by about five minutes . . . but the curry looks divine.

"ARE THESE THE KEYS?" my dad declares, heading into the kitchen and waving them around.

"Yep," I reply, still lost in my world and trying to be Zen with my food.

"They were in your coat pocket!" he tells me

(*Now he wasn't furious or anything like that, actually he was relatively cool headed considering he'd spend a good deal of time thinking he'd gone crazy, searching the house and getting nowhere*.)

And all I can say is: “Hun?” Because I didn’t drive the car today, and I sure can’t remember picking up those keys.

But there you have it – totally my fault. Apparently I’m the one with too much on my mind and absent-mindedly picking things up and placing them elsewhere.

(*Once I put a container of milk in the cupboard with the dishes, but I was distracted by a boy so maybe that’s okay.)*

So Dad, I apologize. You are not crazy. I’m crazy. Poor man was put through the ringer and all along I was totally nonchalant, and all along it was totally my fault.

But at least the curry is delicious. And he seems pretty happy eating it right now, so I guess all is forgiven.

Moral of this story . . . Sometimes it’s better just to stop and help others, despite being wrapped in ourselves . . . next time he loses his keys (*and he will – and it will not be my fault),* I’ll help discover where they were mislaid. It’s basically the least I can do!

Happy Easter!!

10Apr2012

That's when it jumped in!

Posted in Fun, Life

Oh my goodness!

So I've been quite computer-screen focused these past couple weeks. Just banging away at the key board, working to help a great client with her vision, and getting really productive while Zsolt is away. (I sound really cool and calm while writing this, but right now I actually feel very: "***!!!***" and you'll soon hear why.)

Right, so working and staring at the screen and concentrating for periods that are unwise

[On an aside note, I'm realizing I need to work on my time management skills, because whenever I get deep into one project, my other projects suffer – and meanwhile my ultimate baby, the fiction portion of my life, goes neglected . . . well not 100% neglected, but I won't be happy until it starts receiving more time, which, I think, means I need to schedule more strictly.]

Anyhow!

So having stared at a screen for way too long, it seemed that post-lunch before dinner was a great time to enjoy the luxuries of living at my parents. There are pros and cons to living at home for a married woman who is nearly thirty, as you can imagine, but the pros are really quite substantial – and one of them, that is the hot tub in the back yard, is also very tempting.

Right – take a break and take a soak. Life is good.

I change into my two piece (yes!) sans false boob as always, and grab my 'newest' Terry Pratchett, The Last Continent, which is really quite ancient and it's probably my third time reading this particularly novel . . . stop to help my dad choose glasses online at his favourite webpage, 39dollarglasses, and finally head outside to the tub.

Open the tub. Sink into the water.

And, oh baby, that's good.

Relax. Breath. Enjoy.

Then **splash** something dropped into the tub and I look at this thing thinking it's a fish that's fallen from the sky – except NO. It's a freaking chipmunk swimming around with me in the tub.

Basically I gasped and rose up (no screaming, interestingly) and the little chippy turns a circle and scrambles out of the tub lick-ity-split, and I'm left there partly in shock, and partly debating over whether to stay in the tub – cause I still need that break, and the water *is* divine.

Fortunately my Dad comes out with a print out of possible glasses frame and as I tell him the story, he suggests I get out of the tub. Clear thinking.

So, my mom is going to freak out. But I had to tell this story because it’s ridiculous and I’d never be able to keep it a secret anyhow. A freaking chipmunk!

And there you go. Break time is over.

11Apr2012

Bada Bing! Stock Photograpy Spoofed.

Posted in Blogging and Other Fun, Writing

Stock photography success

View more presentations from CBrunelle

P.S. I really enjoy this whole 'picture and slide show' format. Today I was looking at women jumping as they celebrated their successes (that sounds weird, but it's true) and started to wonder, "why?" which led me to reflect upon other concepts that represent success . . . and that's how I ended up at this website, adding a slide show.

16Apr2012

Lint in your inbox

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Fertility

Just back from the Fertility Clinic . . . I felt soooo nervous driving to the appointment, numb inside and near panicked in my mind (so maybe I shouldn't have been driving). Post coming soon, like tomorrow soon, about the results. And then there's that question: what the heck comes next? But when does that question NOT sit upon our shoulders?

Okay – this isn't really a post, it's just an update. It's a faux-post and I apologize to email subscribers for this piece of lint in your inbox.

More to come soon. Promise and cross my heart.

17Apr2012

The fertility story unfolds

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Fertility

Yesterday afternoon was our appointment with the fertility doctor. I've already had the scans and blood tests, so this meeting was to review the results. Now just about a year ago, I received my AMH results by phone and the news was essentially devastating – so driving to this appointment yesterday, my nerves were on high alert.

All these scenarios were running through my mind as I moved light to light to light across Ottawa. Zsolt all the while was assuring me everything was fine, and I should calm down. I told him, "I know everything is fine," but that nevertheless I couldn't calm down.

Your mind can say one thing, but your body may say another. The anxiety felt like a thinkness inside me.

We drive up, we park, we go in . . . we're directed to a side waiting room and it gives flashbacks of the Southampton Princess Anne Hospital where all the baby-related cases are ushered to these tiny waiting rooms where people generally sit for an hour flipping through year-old magazines of Elle, Seventeen and Cosmo. Oh yeah, that's also where they put the ladies who have cancer, right before breaking the news. So these stupid memories are clearly doing little for my composure.

However, Zsolt starts talking to me about his family and shopping for televisions, and in listening to his description of this debate between 3D television or 46 inch screens, somehow I'm calmed down. That's husband-power right there.

The doctor calls us in, we go in. Her office is bright and comfortable. She has a computer that I'd love to own (those big screens on the desk).

And she basically dives in. It's not so bad. While my AMH test was abysmally low – other tests give reason to hope. My progesterone is tickity-boo; my follicle count is low, but a high type of low; some hormone is a bit higher than it should be (the hormone that tells the eggs to release, which causes ovulation), however not too high . . .

Essentially, yeah, my fertility has taken a hit. My eggs are low. I'm not where the average 30 year old woman would be in terms of baby-making goodies.

However, it's not bad.

She says, “you’re nowhere near menopause.” And that is totally awesome, because I’ve had enough of hot flashes and anxiety attacks for a while.

But she cannot say how my fertility will be in a year, or two years, or five years . . . which is why I’m thinking of trying to extract some eggs sooner, and then actually have a baby later. However we’ll see. Before you’re allowed to do anything, they need to get permission from your oncologist – which kinda frustrates me simply because I hate people telling me what to do. Suggesting what to do is fine. But telling me? No. No. No. However, Dr Canada is excellent and understanding. If I keep an open mind to his suggestions, I’m sure he’ll keep an open mind to mine as well.

And that’s my baby story. Not too much to say. Zsolt is ship-shape. My uterus is looking lovely. And apart from all of this, I guess we’ll just have to wait and see. Hmm, that’s a concept that never seems to lose relevance. Wait and See. See and Wait. Wait See.

End of story.

21Apr2012

Loving the unforgettable

Posted in Canada, Finding Home, Fun, Life, Love

It's cloudy outside and the rain is cold, but I'm here sitting in our living room as Nat King Cole sings his classic *Unforgettable* in the background on the record player. It's smooth, slow and romantic. Today is a day that's perfectly lovely.

Saturday often translates into cleaning. Cleaning day. Except that this morning my entire family (mom, dad, Zsolt and I) were positively knackered. Maybe it's the weather. Well, actually, more likely it was all that dancing Zsolt and I did last night while attending a friend's stag & doe party.

So we cut back this morning to focus solely on the living and dining rooms. They were covered with things from my grandmother's apartment, which had been sitting around for weeks. Amongst the items were her record collection and record player.

There's all sorts of ways you can know a person; going through their music is a particularly rich experience.

Zsolt wired everything up (it'd been disassembled during the move) and put a record on the player. The sound of Hawaii flooded into our living room with its hypnotizing sounds coupled with visions of women in bright coloured leis, gently moving their arms like the waves. I bet Lulu and Benoit used to play this music during their midnight parties.

We began to clean. Packing dishes, moving spice racks, looking at tea pots and serving trays. And as we cleaned, we kept on listening. Hawaiian songs were followed by a Starlight Concert and its incredibly beautiful compositions of Hungarian Rhapsody, Czardas, and something familiar from a Midsummer Night's Dream. Then I pulled out some Bing Crosby and was reminded of A White Christmas during this wet spring day.

And all the while, I was just so happy. So glad. Here we are with my family, enjoying each other's company and doing trivial little things that are coupled with such lovely memories and emotions. Happy, healthy and cancer-free.

It's for days like this I moved back to Canada.

Good times, hard times, stressful times, out-of-work times, simple times, lovely dancing times . . . all part of the journey, I suppose. And today is a good time. So I've got to be thankful for that. And for Nat King Cole and his beautiful voice. And for the memories and impressions that come through music. For memories of Lulu. For my family. For good friends. For Zsolt. I guess, for a whole lotta stuff in general.

26Apr2012

The Peanut Butter Paradox: working from home

Posted in Fun, Life, Writing

Is there anything better than peanut butter on the spoon? What about being wrapped in double layer bathrobes while nodding your head to grooveshark, AND eating peanut butter on a spoon? Cause I'm doing all those things right now. Plus – let's add some extra joy – actually doing work as well. Like, work I get paid for. (It's a miracle!)

Ever since arriving in Canada, Zsolt and I have been trying to find our space but it's been slow going. For some reason our plan of 'show up and let it fall into your lap' didn't quite work out. Of course I'll never *ever* want to retract our summer of loveliness that involved little else but family, fun and gelato, but it did mean that upon arriving in Canada – finally separated from England's happy nest – we were starting from scratch.

And from scratch I've begun a small business of blogging/writing/and social media-ing for other people. Unlike copywriting, copyblogging this doesn't make me want to hit my head – cause it's fun. The topics are fun, and I can choose what areas to work within. Obviously writing is a passion. Now it's becoming a passion that (soon) pays the rent. Fantastic.

But you know what the downside of working from home can be? I'm sitting here in *two* bathrobes, licking peanut butter and have yet to take a shower. And if I stay like this all day than I'm officially a total slob.

So I propose a work-from-home support group. What this involves is meeting others who work from home at Starbucks or Bridgehead or your public space of choice (*like the library if you have a good one . . . no one of those depressing ones*) and working together. Yesterday afternoon this is exactly what a girl friend and I did, and it not only got me outta the house, it also gave me reason to shower, look pretty, and exercise (*cause I walked*).

And we went to the cafe, sipped on our teas, read our papers/wrote our stories, and time-to-time chatted to one another. Almost like working in a open concept office where the boss doesn't stare down your neck, except the tea wasn't free. It was productive in so many ways that I have to recommend it.

The stay-at-home and work support group – aka: the Time for Tea and Get Yourself Pretty For Once support group. Getting you out of the house, one coffee or tea at a time.

;P

6May2012

Toilet Troubles

Posted in After treatment, Canada, moving to canada

Friday morning the toilet was running – that valve inside the tank wouldn't lift all the way up, so it instead kept filling and draining continuously. This had been going on for a while. While the toilet reigns from Japan (*where apparently, they do toilets very well*), I suppose all good things come to an end. A repair was required.

So off my Dad goes to the hardware shop. He returns with a 'one size fits all' toilet valve thing. "I don't think this will work" he asserts. "We've got a Toto, and I don't think this will work." But nevertheless he takes apart the Toto valve and tried to install the new part.

It didn't work.

So then he goes back to the store and instead of returning the generic 'one size fits all' valve, he instead picks up the Toto brand in addition to the generic he already has, and come back.

But then he needs a special sort of wrench, so run back to the shop.

He returns, ready to tackle the toilet. As he fixes the main hall Toto, he then decides to also refit *another* toilet (not a Toto) with the generic valve. And what follows is a journey of leaking pipes, second opinions, and nearly buying an entirely new toilets.

But he persevered, and about three hours later everything was running fine, all drips and leaks contained. *(Whooohoo!)*

Sometimes you think you're dealing with a sticky valve, and wind up tackling an entire home renovation. Which is kinda the journey we've taken ever since coming back to Canada.

The great news is that my freelance writing is going well, and Zsolt is doing some consulting for a patent agency. He thinks it's an interesting field, so that's very promising. Apparently it can take about 3-5 years to become a patent agent – but first you need to get hired as a trainee within a firm. (*If you know any patent agency looking for a trainee to join their team, do let us know.*) Consulting doesn't count toward the patent agent exams, so far as I know, but it's a step in the right direction in terms of experience.

Anyhow – I haven't written very much on my blogs lately, largely because my mind has been all wrapped up and absorbed in 'making it' here. And like I said once before, I don't generally write about a subject if it

involves another person's problem. Zsolt and I are a super-duper team, but that also means his problems are my problem, and my problems are his problem.

So the toilets need fixing, and it's taking much longer than expected. However, I remain 100% optimistic that everything will turn out well. In the meantime we plan to move out very, very soon (*to the relief of my parents, I'm sure*) so that in itself will be a great adventure.

And of course there's that oncologist appointment at the end of this month. I get these occasional pinging feelings in my breast that worry me, though I think they're related to my cycle and hormones, but nevertheless I seem to be at my "pre-scan" stage where my worries begin to escalate. Dr Canada wants me to get a mammogram . . . I'd much rather have an ultra sound. We'll see what happens.

And so we keep on keeping on. Life as of late seems full of transition. Transition is great and variety is fun, but my goodness, I'm hankering for some stationary living. Unpacking those boxes we've had stored in the basement, buying a welcome rug, feeling really truly within my own home. They're coming. They are coming. It's just taking a wee bit longer than expected.

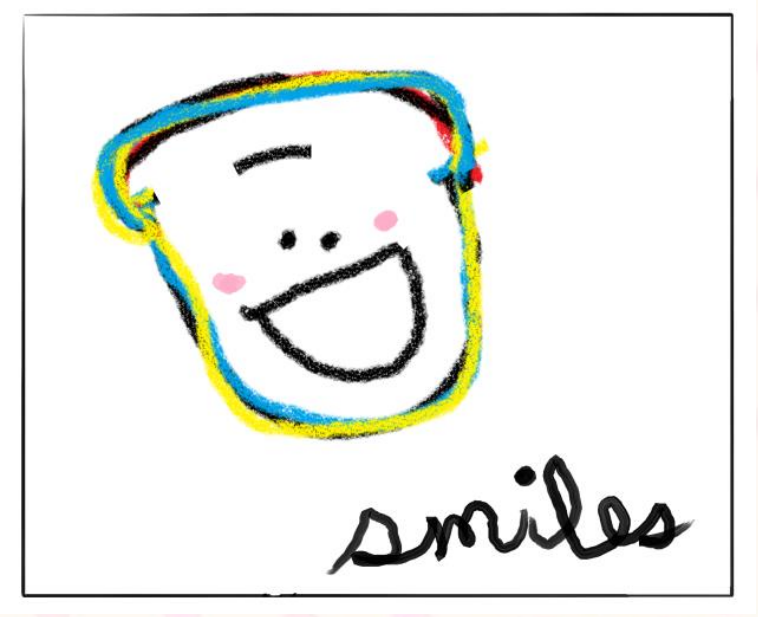
10May2012

Here comes the hair!

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Fun

Okay I have a smile on my face because today's post is about NOTHING important. You know how lovely it is, I assume, to think about unimportant things as opposed to those scary-oh-shit-this-isn't-happening-it's-all-a-dream sorta stuff. None of that today.

Instead this is about hair. Not the loss of hair, but the growth!



Christmas 2010 – sooo long ago, yet very vivid in my memory, I was cracking jokes about reverse balding as my monk-like hairdo slowly began to spread in wisps of light brown hair over my bare head. It was almost worse than being bald, because bald can be sexy, cool, edgy, hip . . . but random wisps around my crown with a bald patch on the top is not sexy. I covered my head more in those days than when my scalp was completely bare.

Christmas 2011 – not soo long ago, but a bit of a memory by now. The hair had grown back across my head, and while it was about an inch, it was cute. Downside was that I had a massive V-shaped hairline, exactly like my brother's, and it wasn' exactly feminine. But the hair was coming . . . ohhh baby, it was coming!

Spring 2012 – I shake my head and bangs fall before my eyes, over my eyes, hanging all the way down BELOW my eyes. HAIR. HAIR. HAIR. Beautiful, glorious hair. No matter that it flips out to the sides like some Archie Comic character. No matter! It's hair!

And I predict that by Christmas of 2012, this stuff may just be styled into a proper bob. It may even have BLOND HIGHLIGHTS.

Okay, I'm abusing the use of capital letters. Okay, I'll stop. *BLOND HIGHLIGHTS!!!!* Okay, I'm done.

[Zsolt just came upstairs and massaged my shoulders . . . oh my goodness. Every home should have a Zsolt.]

Anyhow, it's still a little strange and crazy, but it's coming in. No way do I look bald, and it took about two or three months after treatment for it to fully grow in and cover the head. Short hair looks gorgeous on women, by the way, and I truly believe each and every one of us can rock this look.

Sometimes I look at women who are 2 or 3 years out of treatment, and I literally ogle their hair. It's almost hard to focus on their conversation. (*Is this how men feel about breasts? No wonder they get distracted*.) For

some reason, the importance of hair is so deeply ingrained into us. It's associated with health, with femininity, with sexuality, with glossiness and – really, it's deeply linked to identity.

And honestly, I'm almost kinda nervous to grow it out into a bob, to dye it blond again, to go back to that look I had before chemotherapy (*though I love that look*) . . . I guess I'm a little afraid I'll lose it all over again. But I can't be afraid of things just because they were associated with cancer. Can't abide with the fear.

My wedding anniversary is upcoming. I will be excited for it. I will not freak out that I've got an oncologist appointment right around the same time (*this is where the important stuff starts creeping into the conversation, and I promised not to go there today – so it stops here.*).

Blond is good. Hair is good. And sweetness of all sweetness, it's finally coming back.

14May2012

Where do the memories go?

Posted in Life, Love

Last Friday involved a lot of heavy lifting. (*Not for me, of course. There's to be no heavy lifting with my right lymph node-less arm, but for Zsolt and my father*.) We were collecting the last of the furniture from my grandmother's old apartment in Montreal.

It is so strange to see the place empty. This is where we used to sit in a giant circle with the family and catch up. This is where she used to put chocolate bunnies filled with marshmallow on the table for the kids. This is where she made her sugar cream, baked her cookies, and did her work for the Alzheimer's Society.

As you may know, Zsolt and I are growing in optimism that we'll soon move out of my parents house. And as you know, we upped and left our previous place (and previous furniture – except the mattress, which was impossible to offload) back in England. So the collection of free and gently used furniture is a very welcome thing.

But it's a little strange to have this nest of Lulu's old stuff, waiting to be turned into 'our stuff' as we move into a new home. It's strange because I look at the sofa that was hers, and I can remember sitting on it when we visited, and it's been in her home for so long . . . and it makes me wonder, "Is Lulu in this sofa? Is this sofa part of her?"

Same goes for the kitchen table where we'd eat the take-away St Hubert chicken and gravy – a Forget Family Favourite. Or the dishes on which she'd serve meals back when she was better, less worried, and still cooking for guests.

So we have a household worth of furniture, and her apartment is now essentially bare. Empty. Sold.

"Is she in that apartment? Is she in the bits and pieces we take away?"

Where is she now?

Well I'm not qualified to answer that last question. But as for the others, I reckon she's not in that empty apartment, and she's not in the cushions of her old sofa. Mostly, I figure, she's right deep in our memories and our hearts – the good and the bad, the woman as a whole. She's in the memories. And as for her soul? Well, Lulu believed in heaven, so that's where she's bound to have gone.

Looking at the empty rooms, the bare floors, the naked shelves . . . I can feel that she's not here anymore. Lulu is somewhere else. We get to keep her memory in the knickknacks and the photos . . . but *she* is not here anymore. She's moved on.

And so shall we.

It couldn't be easy on my mother and her sisters to pack away their mother's life. But maybe they've come to the same conclusion, that Lulu's life does not rest in her things. The objects and furniture are memories, good emotions, happy moments . . . but they are not her.

It's not easy to say goodbye to a person you loved. But once you realize they've already left, I suppose it becomes just that little bit easier. (*I'm not saying it's entirely easy, and I'm not saying I don't miss her . . . but she's not in that apartment, I know it for sure. So I have to imagine she's somewhere else far better, with my grandfather and her siblings. And they're having a laugh with those angle wings on and acting some ridiculous pantomime like back in the old days. Why not? Anything is possible*.)

P.S. Today (Monday) Zsolt and I are steam-cleaning Lulu's old furniture. It's been a while since they've been cleaned, plus she used to smoke. So we're out here in the backyard with this foaming, splashy, steamy machine trying to fix things up real nice. Her furniture is becoming our furniture, and so it takes on another life.

P.P.S. That's a photograph of Lulu (Lucienne) and Benoit. Aren't they a handsome couple?

23May2012

What is your picture?

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Canada, Finding Home, Life, Love, moving to canada, self growth, Travel Log

Today is a post in response to Marie from 'Journeying Beyond Breast Cancer', who found the idea from Jen of 'Keep the Calm'. The challenge is to post a photograph of yourself (or something that represents you) which captures the 'you' of the past little while.

So this is my photograph. It's so peaceful looking and calm, but in reality we were travelling across Hungary in the backseat of a car, and I was trying not to vomit from the motion sickness. Zsolt thought I looked pretty. And I think so too, in my no-longer-nauseous reflection on the photograph.

But that's not why I chose this photograph. The past six months . . . okay, the past NINE months (gag!) have been both wonderful and difficult. We are searching for 'the big break' in terms of careers & living on our own (cause yes, we're still with my parents), feeling as though we haven't settled, desperate, once again, to find a sense of home. And yet I am home with my family – something I've lacked for many years. We can get together for dinner, go for tea, share a beautiful day . . .

Both wonderful and difficult. All the while, I'm there in the back of that car waiting for resolution. With little bursts of success like my freelancing (at the detriment to my creative writing) and Zsolt's consulting, we move forward. We are moving forward. I am saturated in the family I've been missing so much. Things are good. Things are a little hard.

But what you don't know is at the end of this car ride we pulled up to a home where there were dogs in the yard, pigs in the pen, chicken running round, and a family with open hearts and tables filled with food. The good stuff exists (and much of it is already here), so I can tolerate this 'in-between'ness, because I'm certain it won't last forever.

(*Though displacement does appear to arrive in waves. That is the life of a person who travels, home is where the heart is . . . except we leave bits of our hearts wherever we go*.)

Would you like to join the challenge? Post a photograph of yourself, or something that represents you, and let us know the story (or don't since a picture is already speaking at least a thousand words). You can post the link here, or on Marie or Jen's pages. I'm sure we'd all love to see. Take care, Catherine

4Jun2012

The Peacock Perspective

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Life, Love

This has been a week of notables – those dates that get bookmarked into life for better or worse. From my three year wedding anniversary (*May 29th*), to two years since finding that blasted bump (*May 31st*) and coming up to the date of diagnosis (*June 6th*), date of mastectomy, husband's birthday, my birthday (*turning 30*) and pushing forward across the summer. We talk a lot about these markers here in the blogosphere . . . and to be honest, the good and the bad have this way of mixing together in associations – a pain in the ass mentality I'm trying to kick but have yet to master.

[*Our wedding anniversary in particular is a bit tricky since I was diagnosed so shortly after my first wedding anniversary . . . one day we were celebrating on the Isle of Wight and I was a little worried about this bump in my breast, the next week (*or so*) I was being told it was cancer and the breast was going to be removed. Sigh.*]

But yesterday evening was a particular day to be noted in this past week.

Let me tell you why: it involved another wedding.

Not mine of course, but a friend who dates back to my high school days of debating and hanging about in the corridor between classes. Nearly everyone of that old crowd was there, it was this huge party with great food, good outfits (*Is it really possible that we all look this good ten years after highschool? Apparently!*), open bar, and music galore. The groom was handsome in his black tuxedo, the bride was stunning in her short & playful gown that shaped her like the ultimate hour glass (*plus those stunning fuchsia heels*). They were so happy. They are so in love.

And that's why I got married in the first place – it had *nothing* to do with cancer. It was because we were so happy, and so darn tootin' in love. It was because we were going to stick together **through better or worse** and give that solidity to our commitment that somehow comes from a marriage.

We're still so happy, still so darn tooin' in love. We are sticking together through thick and thin, we are solid in our commitment and know it will see us through the transitions.

And that's all darn good stuff. My wedding anniversary shouldn't be tainted with cancer fears and hospital flashbacks. It should be dosed with certainties that Zsolt and I are a team, we make it together, and I'm really lucky to have someone who is determined to grow old with me. It should be a day to celebrate this awesome advantage we have in the fight against bad health, low income, displacement. I'm talking about LOVE here, people.

A good girlfriend of mine was in town for the wedding. She was amazing when I was diagnosed & went through treatment – doing those little things that matter like asking how I was, writing an occasional message, following my blog . . . (*For me, I do not forget the people who made an effort during those times. Starting with a simple, 'how are you' to writing letters/emails, paying visits, keeping company . . . they are heroic in my mind because each of their efforts rescued a little piece of my sanity*.)

Anyhow, she is a good friend. As the evening rolled on (*open bar!)* and the music played and we shifted from the dance floor to the lobby to the parking lot (*why, I don't know . . . apparently someone was dropping off beer*), to the lobby to the dance floor, to the sidelines . . . we all loosened up and had the chance to get in some lovely bonding.

This is what she said to me – she told me that I'd kinda inspired her, like if I could get through all that crap, she could take on her own challenges too. She reckons we ought to live our preferred lives because it doesn't go on forever, and so long as we hurt no one else we ought to do what makes us happy. (*As you can see she's a smart cookie.*) For her, that happiness is an incredible peacock tattoo that covers her back from shoulder to bum – she loves it completely, and one part of her (*just one part, because she's a strong woman to start and certainly doesn't need my help in summoning determination*) pulled a little courage from my story. From *this* story here on Bumpyboobs.

"If you can go through that, I could handle this" and so she did something that brings her deep joy.

Isn't that amazing? Yeah, it's freaking amazing.

You know what? Here is another date to remember: **May 31st 2010, the day Bumpyboobs came into existence**. Sure, it was because of hard things like fear . . . but it was also about comfort, sharing, and finding strength.

Bumpyboobs is a good thing. It's not just about cancer. It's about pushing to love and live as much life as possible.

So while the end of May and start of June are littered with difficult dates . . . it's also a time of wonderful accomplishments, starting first with my marriage, followed by this blog (*contributing in part to that AMAZING tattoo on her back*), and rolling over toward our birthdays where we celebrate being alive.

Yesterday's wedding helped me realize a lot (*in between the dancing and tinging of glasses for the bride & groom to kiss*), and I really appreciate my friend opening up in that way – saying things that are often left unsaid simply because they are too emotional.

It was good. The whole thing was good. And today, apart from the post-party exhaustion, I feel **really freaking good.**

8Jun2012

My “mention it” Post

Posted in Novels and Stories, Writing

I’m in a Friday state of mind, which essentially translates into: can’t bring myself to do paid work. But sometimes I reckon that’s okay, because it leaves time for the other things . . . like writing my story (which I’m doing, by the way – 2000 words and running hot!), and participating in the Goins Writing Challenge.

Well, I don’t often mention my Catherine Brunelle writing blog here on Bumpyboobs, but today’s challenge in the Goins thing is to take a risk. So I’m taking a semi-risk by posting some fresh & childish writing on my CB page, and only *mentioning* it on my Bumpyboobs. However, I will include a link.

If you’re so inclined, you are welcome to read. It’s nothing, really, but a bit of fun. This is not literature to change the world, though it does change my mood.

Discreet Link to Writing!

Have an awesome Friday – may it involve Hawaiian shirts, flip flops and white sand beaches . . . or just a bit of relaxation in general.

P.S. The house is full of mystery today. Where have all our sunglasses gone? How could they *all* be missing? Maybe it’s the chipmunks again . . . yes, let’s blame it on the chipmunks.

17Jun2012

Happy Father's Day!

Posted in Life, Love

Today is father's day, which mean we've spent the entire Sunday eating great food. First there was the truck stop by Arnprior, then we had a BBQ, and *then* there was a beautiful pavlova. So today's post is going to be a short one. Really, a million things are happening right now here in the world of Bumpyboobs (i.e. my life) but I have a gag order placed on several of them. You'll hear more about that later.

In the meanwhile, in honour of father's day, here's a list of some top-ten dad moments from my dad, Tony Bony. I am sure there are more, but at the moment, these spring to mind.

- Dad pulling a giant fish from the water – cursing like a sailor, and smiling like a fool.
- Dad making me sweet potato French fries after my chemotherapy, when I was so hungry and emotional, it was more than many men could tolerate.
- Stories after dinner, when he rolls back time and entertains us with something hilarious that happened in his childhood. Our narrative nature must come from his side of the family.
- Dad giving a speech on the day Zsolt and I were married, basically saying how proud he was, and holding back the tears.
- Dad as a hippy, which I've only witnessed through old photographs.
- Dad picking me up at 3 am in the middle of nowhere, after I had decided to go for a walk (let's not worry as to *why* I was in the middle of nowhere at 3 am.) and *not* giving me shit until the next morning.
- Dad coming home from work when I was a little girl sick with a cold and saying, "It's no fun being sick, eh kid?"
- Dad pushing me to go out to Jasper, Alberta for the summer. It was a completely amazing experience.
- Dad walking out of mass on Christmas, leading the entire line of people who'd just received communion, and then breaking down laughing when we realize this wasn't the right way to go.
- Dad talking to me every other day during the chemotherapy via skype – taking my mind off all the crap with a little light conversation, and some funny stories to pass the time.

Even though he can sometimes drive me crazy, he's been a great father. I guess we all drive each other crazy occasionally . . . what really matters, I reckon, is the polar moments – whether it's shit hitting the fan, or all the good stuff happening at once, what really matters is that for those highs and lows, we support one another. It's something to be counted on.

So happy father's day. I hope your dad is as awesome as mine. Please do share your best dad moments if you have some.

See you later,

Catherine

P.S.

We bought an inflatable, two person KAYAK!!! More later. Let’s just say, I decided to finally realize that long-awaited chemo dream of paddling on the water.

21Jun2012

Screening and Screaming (i.e. frusteration)

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs

Today was a heavier day, and not just because of this heat. Every six months, now moving forward to every year, it's scan time. This morning I had a mammogram, and I was meant to also have an ultrasound.

Anyhow. We go to the hospital. They squish my breast till I'm standing at the machine (as the nurse move it ever so much tighter, and tighter, and tighter) making rude faces at the wall. But apart from the ridiculous compression of flesh, it goes smoothly.

It should be said that I'm not crazy for mammograms mainly because I'm only thirty (in about 2 weeks), and to receive this sort of scan every year, with all that radiation, really annoys me. I was hoping very much that ultrasounds would be an alternative to the mammogram.

Except after I get the mam done, the radiologist tells me he doesn't want to do the ultrasound. He thoroughly believes that ultra sound screening produces too many false positives, and he'd have to do a biopsy, and I'd be left on 'stand by' (monitored) for six months at a time for years to come.

"But if you really want to do it, we can do it."

Not. He didn't really mean that. You should have seen his face when I said, "Well why don't we just do it?" It was a,"not a good idea" kinda face. And maybe he's right?

I became an emotional puddle. (*Darn tootin' emotions! They make it impossible for me to express any words except for, "sorry," which I shouldn't even be in that situation*.) Zsolt started asking questions about lymph nodes and such, and the doctor was answering his questions. So a mammogram, of course, is a reasonable way to screen . . . not perfect, but I suppose less false positives than an ultrasound. Fine.

But I don't want to be shot with radiation for forty some years in an area that I already know is sensitive to cancer. I just don't want to do it – even this incidence was a twist of the arm following my oncologists request to get "at least one mammogram."

Anyhow. The radiologist said that MRIs would really be the best option, *if I have an overall lifetime risk of breast cancer that is greater than 25%*. (i.e. we can't justify spending the money otherwise.) Fuck. You know what the oncologist in England told me about my more immediate odds (*as I made the decision to do chemotherapy*), he said I had about 50% chance of not having reoccurrence *if* I had the treatment. Of course, that number changes over time . . . but right now, I'm really pissed about the 25% lifetime crap when I had breast cancer in my body and lymph nodes only two damn years ago. And I know we all face this screening abyss, and I'm not entirely sure if I have a right to be so annoyed, but I am. So there.

Right. **Bright side of things:** I learned a lesson today. My options as a young woman aren't fabulous in terms of breast cancer screening. I need to become more proactive in choosing my screening, even I need to pay for it myself.

Oh Geez – even brighter side! I didn't get my results, but the radiologist looked at my mammogram and didn't order any additional tests, which I take as an awesome sign. Next day or two I'll call the doctor for the official

reading of the correspondence between specialists (results). It's not really stressing me out, because if he'd seen a lump, I'm sure the ultrasound (to a specific area) would have been done. I suppose it was just such a frustrating feeling, being told I didn't have the power to choose my screening, that really left me in such a lurch today.

That being said, there has to be a better way. Mammograms for decade upon decade? There just has to be a better way.

(And I'm not going back to ask again for an ultrasound. I do believe that the mammogram is enough, but that's not the point. The point is, I don't think it's the healthiest option for a woman at my age in terms of long-term health. Maybe I'm wrong, but going forward I'd really love to explore other options, whatever those may be.)

30Jun2012

Stroke-Stroke Glide-Glide

Posted in Bumpboobs, Canada, Finding Home, Fun, Life, Travel, Writing

We are at the cottage (*rental*) and I don't have my drawing pad with me. If I *did* have the drawing pad, I'd sketch you a doodle of the view from this window. There's the lake in the background and the green forest of Tar Island, and here just in the foreground are a sparse layering of trees – their trunks are thin at the top (this cottage is set upon a cliff face, and so I'm looking through the tops of these trees), and the branches are tapering to a point, like a very tall Christmas tree or something. Reminds me of a painting I did for my grade six art project. It was a tree trunk, with a branch, and a lake behind with blue sky above.

This is the cottage. We arrived here Thursday evening, and are able to come and go as we like. Tomorrow I'll be back in town for Canada day. But today we are here. And today it is nice.

Zsolt and I have been making many decisions lately – several of which I am not allowed to talk about. (*Which is really, really difficult.)* Let's just say sometimes stuff works and other times stuff really doesn't work. However, we're fine and eventually we'll manage this whole 'career' thing. In the meanwhile something good has come from a series of infuriating events, which is (*cause I can talk about this, thank freaking goodness*) a trip.

Soon Zsolt and I will fly to Hungary for a month. Following that we'll fly to England and visit friends. After this we'll take a boat to New York from Southampton (*7 night cruise*) and hang with family and visit the city. Then we'll take the train up to Montreal (*12 hour trip*), where we'll finally catch a bus back to Ottawa. We're leaving mid (*ish*) July and returning September.

I'll let your imagination create the reasons for our booking this massive, non-refundable trip when neither of us has full-time employment, and then say that while plans can change beyond our control, it is not the case with non-refundable bookings. So the silver lining in all this crappiness is that my husband and I are going on an adventure. And that's a really awesome silver lining.

When we return, we are 100% determine to move out of my parent's house – even if it means living in someone else's basement (*hopefully with a separate entrance*), and working on getting my man Zsolt into the intellectual property field. He's got a talent for it. He'll be even better when working for a company full-time. (*If you know anyone looking for a patent agent trainee, please do let me know.*)

And I think everything will be alright. We're at the cottage today. I'm going to have the first draft of my book finished before we leave for Hungary. (*Really I am, I've only got like 3000 words left to write before that's done.*) Zsolt is planning to help me turn my Bumpyboobs adventures into mini e-books (*woohoo! So then I can make myself a large button to wear that says, "Self-Published Author!").*

And everything is going to be alright.

Everything is going to be alright.

Maybe I should tattoo it onto my forehead, just a reminder.

As support to this assertion, my mammogram checkout A-Okay. I'm still totally annoyed with the screening situation, but hey – **no cancer**. Woohooo! *Noooooooo Cancer!!*

AND, I turn 30 next week.

Plus, the canoe we bought is turning out beautifully. Another big purchase we may never have made . . . but was inevitably done. (*Because I said to Zsolt, if not now, when?)* And so we've been paddling around this lake at the cottage and the rivers near Ottawa – enjoying the beauty of the area and just stupid happy with every stroke. You know, back in the land of chemotherapy day-dreams, one of my musings was to buy a canoe and just forget about the bullshit. That's what happens whenever we take it out – it's not about looking for work, surviving cancer, growing up, staying healthy . . . it's about stroke-stroke-stroke, and glide-glide-glide.

Right now, for our lives in general, I think we'll just have to focus on the present. Just stroke-stroke-stroke, and glide-glide-glide.

P.S. kudos to Zsolt who is circling me as I post this outside the cottage, killing black flies and keeping me bug-bite free!

5Jul2012

Here comes the thirty train!!

Posted in Finding Home, Fun, Life, Love, self growth

My birthday is in 25 minutes and counting down. It's not like fireworks are going to erupt at 9 a.m. but I *will* suddenly and officially be thirty. Zsolt likes to say that I've been 30 these past six months, which reeks of logic and tastes like haste. I'm 29 this very moment, and then, once the clock ticks ahead – WHAMO – 30.

A lady editor once taught me that numbers over ten are to be written in word-form. Like forty-six or eighteen or twenty-nine. She did not teach me about those little dashes, however, and I put them in only because I think it looks better. Much of my grammar is based on 'what looks better', which likely explains why much of my grammar is incorrect.

So here is a secret about my thirties (*which I hope by declaring will no longer make it a secret and banish away this stupid notion*) . . . I'm a wee bit worried about them, because for the entirety of my life – thinking back to when I was ten, or 12, or 19, or 20, or 25, I could never *imagine* what it would be like in my thirties. What would my face look like? How tall would I be? What sort of work would I be doing? Would I live in a house, have a dog, babies, purpose? Marriage . . . I could never imagine my wedding until it had actually happened.

And I thought to myself (*very quietly*) what I was wasn't going to turn 30? What if I couldn't imagine it because it was never going to happen? Would I die before I turned 30? (*Now you have a sense for how dramatic my stupid thoughts can get!*)

Flashback two years ago when I was diagnosed with cancer at 27 (almost 28), and my panic mode was really kicking in. It was all – "*oh, shit, Catherine, you have cursed yourself with this stupid unknown decade obsession. Now hurry up and start WANTING something from your next chunk of life, and the one after that, and after that, and etc.*"

Because I reckon when we really, really want something, we can accomplish that desire even if it takes time. Actually, I think it's a powerful sort of thing to want something badly – and to know in your mind that it *will* happen. That stuff is better than magic beans and three wishes combined. That's determination, and I think it makes all the difference.

So what am I determined to do in my thirties? Live, survive, become a novelist, love-love-love, buy a cottage in Balaton (Hungary), have those babies (*this desire is attached with many other quiet and dramatic fears, which need to be dealt with eventually*), be with Zsolt, laugh with Zsolt, explore with Zsolt, have family dinners, keep

my amazing friends and make even more (if *it's possible since we keep freaking moving!*), stay in shape, **never** have cancer again, get a dog, and be good to others – take care, support, encourage, contribute, be there.

Anyhow, that's my life. My life in my thirties. Once the forties creep up I'll need to revise this list.

Everyday is a good day and every birthday granted is really the best gift possible. I love living, so am very glad to be doing so today.

There it is – ten minutes left! Here comes the 30 train, and I'll be hopping on quite happily.

(*Psst. I bought myself a big 30 piñata that I'm going to smash to pieces, therefore showing 30 that I can indeed conquered this stupid age-hump of unknowingness that is in my mind. Plus I bought myself balloons that say 30 on them, and napkins, and this blow-up thing that shoots out 30 everywhere, and a candle in the shape of a 30, and fireworks for the evening. Because I figured that for me today was special, even if on the outside it looks like yet another birthday, and it was going to be celebrated in a ridiculous way here at this cottage . . . even if the party only consists of my closest family, that's okay. I'm turning 30. Everything is okay.)*

And if it's your birthday soon too, of if it's just past, or you just want to join the party – HAPPY BIRTHDAY to you too!! Wooohoooo! Isn't it nice to celebrate good things?

(*Hey! It's now past 9 a.m. – we made it!!!)*

12Jul2012

Sole Searching

Posted in Fun, Life

As I sit here in the airport lounge, waiting for my flight to London to board (*with Zsolt beside me trying to sleep*), I'd like to stop a moment and consider my footwear: the sandal with socks.

Blue strapped Birkenstocks with a sole shaped to my foot from seasons of wear; thick hiking socks for the winter with heel, toe and arch support. The whole is more powerful than the parts. Put together you not only have a great sandal and warm toes – you have *the ultimate* source of comfort that your feet could ever enjoy, just short of a pedicure massage with that scented oil mixed with salt. You have, ladies and gentlemen, the perfect compromise.

Support from the study cork sole mixed with security of the leather straps. But unlike a shoe the sandal is an open forum of air, sweat, and exchange. "My feet will get cold!" you say? Meet the sock – the thick multi-coloured hiking sock: often found 'too warm' within the conventional shoe, coupled with a sandal, the warmth provided is of the perfect temperature – moisture is whisked away from the body, preventing stink, and air conditioning can't get at you with its chill.

Okay, so people – some people – hate the combination. But I would say they've never really given it a good shot. Just spend a full afternoon in the mix, and you'll be a convert.

Socks and sandals are totally cool. They're cool because they're quality. What else really matters?

So on that note we are flying off to England, then on to Austria, then on to Budapest (a la bus), then Erd (a la car). It's a lonnnnnnnng trip. So long, I had to insert those extra 'n's just so you could get a sense. But the end will be totally worthwhile. Visiting family is always fun, plus a change of scenery never hurts, *and* I happen to be a great big fan of Lake Balaton (where time stands still and the sun always shines).

This week I've heard some hard things – not related to me directly, but with people I know both online and in the real world. Hard, stupid things that made me stomp my feet and say 'what the frack'. Unfortunately, that's the way it is and in these situations it's out of my hands. Maddening stuff – infuriating stuff – heart-breaking stuff. It's really hard to be diagnosed with cancer, really freaking hard, but also even more heartbreaking with people you care about suffer the same fate.

But I read something this week that struck a chord and made me think: 'yes.'

It was a plea from one of the bloggers online who has been told some very rough news. She asked us to enjoy the moment. Do it for her. Do it for yourself.

So here we are in the moment. My feet are comfortable. The plane is loading. I'm married to an incredible man. We are okay. We are a-okay. And despite all the stress of jobs and hospitals and doctors and whatever . . . we are about to have an awesome adventure. Despite all the crap, good things can happen, and it's not worth feeling guilty over. Is it – no, it's not. It's worth celebrating, and appreciating . . . cause you never know when the party ends.

Sorry – my light hearted post about footwear just turned sombre. I'll stop. The thing with writing these posts is all kinds of emotions can pour onto the page. (*And honestly, I've got the stopper in pretty tight, so this is just some of the really determined stuff getting through.*)

It will be good to eat goulash. Good to sit by the water. Good to go for bike rides. Good to escape the stressors. Good to eat a langos. Good to see Zsolt's family. Good to meet with friends. And SO good to sail across the Atlantic.

Look out – there's a heck of a great summer on the way so we may as well enjoy it. Here, in the moment, life can be so good. (*Thank goodness.*)

P.S. No time for spell check! Boarding!

17Jul2012

Could-Not-Stand-It!

Posted in Fun, Life, Travel

Something strange has come over me, something that has never really happened before. Upon arriving to Hungary, after about 22 hours of travelling, Zsolt and I first visited his sister in Budapest where we stayed the night, then travelled onward to Lake Balaton. At the lake (*a lake that holds a big piece of my heart, as many of you know, but where the cottage also gives me crazy allergies after about two nights of sleeping in the big room*) we met up with his parents for the weekend. Six of us in the small cottage: Zsolt's sister, brother-in-law, parents and us. When we pulled up in the car his parents had already arrived; Anna (*mother-in-law*) came running towards us with her hands waving and say, "Hello, hello!", then gave us careful and restrained kisses on each cheek. Zsolt followed that up by giving her a hug (*even though they normally only kiss on the cheek*) and I think she appreciated the affection.

Where was I going with this? Oh, right. . .

Something strange has come over me. I think it's a combination of last year's adventure where we moved A-to-Z every half a week visiting friends and family, plus this past week before leaving when we were at a cottage with my family in Canada, then added to by moving from location to location once arriving in Hungary. Somewhere in there a switch has flipped. Suddenly, without warning, I have developed an extreme need to unpack my suitcase.

Never do I unpack the suitcase, unless we've finally arrived home . . . and even then, it takes me a week to bother. But upon leaving Balaton (*see you later, you big blue water . . . and allergenic reactions of itchy eyes and throat*) and arriving in Zsolt's beautiful home town of Pecs – I HAD to empty that suitcase.

Didn't matter if the clothes had to be piled neatly on the floor, the shelves, the desk . . . the only thing I could really think about was taking everything out so I didn't have to root through the case one more time for a spare sock, or bra (or boob!), or whatever. Thankfully, Anna had made some room on the shelves, so there was the perfect amount of space for my stuff. It's all out now. The t-shirts, the dresses, the sweaters, the underwear, the vitamins, the beauty stuff.

And what's even crazier, is that today I TIDIED. Couldn't stand the growing mess of two days in the same room – had to put everything away where it belonged. Could Not Stand the mess!

What, I ask, has come over me? Back when I was a little girl, I used to push the toys and clothes under my bed (*hidden by the dust ruffle*) whenever instructed to clean. Even today I don't love pulling out the gloves and attacking grime and/or dust . . . but an untidied bedroom? No. No. No. No.

So, clearly someone has secretly hypnotized me into a compulsion for order. I have my suspects – you know who you are *(mother, father, or husband. Most likely husband . . . Zsolt probably whispers in my ear at night, "clean your side of the bedroom, pick up the mess."*)

Lesson Learned: Apparently some things do change – like patience, temperament, and preferences for having an essentially clutter-free room.

I don't know how it happened, but it has happened.

Maybe soon I'll feel a compulsion to clean the bathroom, scrub the floors, vacuum the house, dust the shelves and clean out the fridge. Maybe. But that would take some really strong hypnosis . . .

21Jul2012

The Resolution List

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Canada, Chemotherapy, Finding Home, Fun, Life, Travel, Writing

Today the sky is grey, I'm about to get my period (*so guess what my mood's like. Or rather, ask my husband*), and this room is rather dark. Having described all that, I'd like to talk about the bright side of things.

(*And I'd like to turn on a light in this place. One moment please.*

Okay, better.)

Right. So being diagnosed with cancer absolutely and undeniably sucks. I will never be a person to argue against the position, and don't wish the illness (*in any of its varieties*) on anyone. Not even the most horrible of horrible people, because chances are someone loves them nevertheless, and cancer is most certainly terrifying and devastating to the ones we love.

(*Okay, so I warned you already. I'm about to get my period and am therefore sliding toward a darker tone – but it's not all bad, because I KNOW I'm a little moody, and can therefore attempt to apologize whenever things get a little too dark. Unfortunately there are no more lights to turn on in this room – oh! But there another widow shade that could be opened. Excuse me.*

Better. Much better. Oh, hello natural lighting.)

So we've established that cancer is bad. But here is another thing – a potentially good thing. It's also like the BIGGEST perspective-whacking-stick you could ever have, well that and I guess maybe an out of body experience where ghosts of Christmas past, present and future visit you with each stroke of the clock.

And if you had anything in the way of a similar experience to myself (though fair enough if you didn't, because everyone's journey is unique), you most likely found yourself making resolutions. These aren't New Years Eve's resolutions where you give up chocolate, or promise to go to the library more, or aim to lose five pounds. These are "if my life is at risk, and my mobility and health could end at any time – these are the things I'd wish for most before any more of this crazy shit happens." So there's a lot of honesty and desire behind these feelings. These are the resolutions that tap into what it is you want/need most.

So I'm challenging you to make a note and keep it someone. To share it with us. To write it in your diary. To stick it on your fridge. Whatever. If you have been here – if you are here in now in treatment, or were here sometime in the past – or forget cancer even, if you've had your life threatened, or hit rock bottom, or just woke up and said: "Oh shit!" then I'm challenging you to sit down and make a list. Get it together in one place.

Back when I was diagnosed my initial and strongest desire was to return back home to Canada. Ultimately we waited things out, and I'm glad that we did, but cancer firmed me up – Zsolt would immigrate, we were going to move.

Whether this is/isn't a good thing in our lives remains to be seen. (*It'll be a great thing just as soon as a few strings get tied up . . .*) But I can tell you this. While I miss my incredible friends in England, I no longer have this feeling that a piece of me is missing. You know? Like, before diagnosis it dawned on me that Canada and I may be permanently parting ways, and that was totally crushing. Crushing. It broke my heart. This was realized after getting married and setting up life in England. Canada was not in the cards. Crushing.

But then I made a resolution based on a deep, demanding urge. It uprooted *everything* we had had planned for our lives, however this past July when Zsolt and I boarded the plane to travel to Europe and spend the summer – I didn't feel sad. I didn't feel sick. I was nothing else but happy to be going. And that is really new.

Resolution = accomplished.

Other resolutions were to spend a summer in Balaton and Pecs, which we did last year. It was one of the most healing things I could have chosen. The fact that we are lucky enough to do it again this year is just a freaking miracle. *(See, my perspective is brightening, along with the lighting*.)

I yearned to travel. After treatment we flew to Portugal and I went in a bikini on the beach. Sure, I don't have a right boob – but we were on a beautiful beach! The water was gorgeous. The markets were busy (*don't get me started on that awesome cheese*) and it was just so freaking fun. Next up! The Atlantic ocean for 7 nights! **Resolution = done. And will do again.**

I wanted to buy a canoe. How ridiculous for someone who doesn't even own a car. But guess what, this past June we bought that damn canoe – and even though it's currently waiting at home in Canada – the pleasure of paddling with my husband on a quiet and lazy river has been huge. Yes, we spent money at a time when it was really stupid to do so (*kinda like this trip*), but screw it. I used to sit in that chemo chair with those drugs dripping in, and imagine the rivers in Canada – imagined showing Zsolt a loon, and splashing water onto our faces. **Resolution = owned.**

And yeah, there are BIG resolutions too. Moving to Canada, as I said, was one – and that's still proving difficult. But my gut took us there, and my gut says this will work out. Having a baby is like the biggest, more life changing resolution ever – but it will happen, and we will get there. Being a professional writer, one step at a time . . . **resolutions = still in progress!**

It's not easy.

But it's good to reflect on the big and the small, and one-by-one tick off the list of chemo/cancer resolutions.

So what are/were your resolutions? I dare you to look back (or look around) and write them down – make them real on the page, and then see what can happen next.

My List:

-travel

-go home

-write more & publish

-have a family

-get a canoe

-go to Hungary for the summer

-buy real estate (and a cottage in Balaton)

-split time between Canada and Hungary,

-bring food to those who need it

-dress well/stand out

-eat good food

-be with family

-be with friends

-make this work

24Jul2012

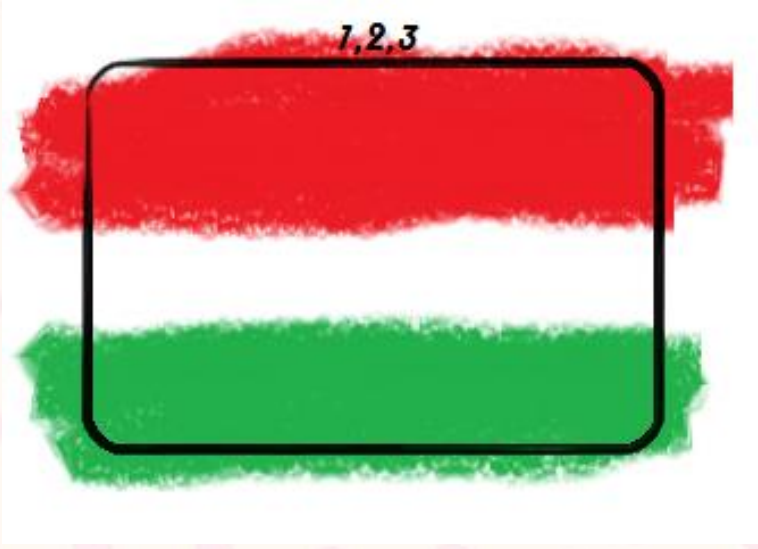
3 tiny stories about Hungary

Posted in Life, Love, Travel

One.

Spring and summer in Hungary aren't tracked by time. (*How could they be when the heat leaves you so sluggish, minutes take hours . . .unless you're swimming in the lake or visiting with friends, in which case hours take minutes.*) Instead days move through blossoming trees and changing appetites. With each passing week another fruit comes into season and the previous fruit goes out. So for instance, last year I arrived here at the start of cherry season. That meant my mouth was permanently stained with the sweet dark juice of cherries, which essentially explode as you pop them into your mouth. Until I started finding the bugs. Then I couldn't bring myself to 'pop' any more cherries, no matter how tempting. Those little white worms are everywhere. However, not a single other person in Hungary seems to mind. Now we're in peach season, which is my favourite (mostly bug-free), and watermelon season. Before we leave for Canada, it will just be creeping into apple-picking-time. Fruit litters the street, suburbs and gardens. Free, juicy, organic fruit.

I love idea of tracking time with food. From pig killing season, bread making day, to the growing of ripe produce across the year – it's all about the food.



Two.

A long time ago the Turkish made a play for Europe. They essentially invaded the region – them and every other culture, it seems to me. Anyhow, during this time of the Turkish invasion *(lasting a way long time)*, the Hungarian fighters managed to beat them back. There is a man on a horse (statue) here in Pecs in the main square. He is accredited for pushing back the Turkish.

Anyhow, the Hungarian win was a win for Christianity (*I'm not purposely mixing religion and storytelling, but it's true – that's just how it was perceived at the time*). And the pope declared that churches everywhere would ring their bells at noon to honour the Hungarians who fought for Europe. Now all across the world, not only in Europe, church bells ring at noon – signalling lunch for many, but for those in Hungary who keep it in mind, also signalling respect and memorial.

The other day Zsolt and I were working in the garden when the bells began to ring, and it made Zsolt recount that story. Who doesn't love listening to church bells ring over a city? These traditional markers of the day are so familiar that I don't even think to 'expect' them. And yet once the bells are tolling, I can't help but stop my work and listen.

Three.

There is an excellent culinary dish in Hungary that's familiar in all the homes. It's called Kaposta. I almost 100% for sure spelt that word wrong. Basically it's stewed sour cabbage with pork meat balls mixed with rice and wrapped in cabbage leaves, plus the addition of fried onions, smoked sausage, possibly bacon and of course paprika. (A*nd salt.*) It is thick, tasty and one of my favourite meals. Served with a heaping of sour cream with Eros Pista on the top (*a puree of hot pepper*) and you've just entered home-cooked paradise.

Yesterday while we were eating this meal, Zsolt's mother remarked that it's really good for hangovers. Apparently weddings in Hungary will always make available kaposta to their guests after midnight has passed, in order to ease the following day's hangover. Looking back on a friend's wedding we attending, this is true. We ate the awesome cabbage stew after midnight. This tells you two things about the Hungarians: they like their liquor in times of celebration, and they really know how to please a guest.

And there you have it. Three stories about Hungary, my home away from home.

1Aug2012

The Magazine article is HERE!

Posted in Articles, Bumpboobs, Writing

I'm rather proud of my association with Facing Cancer Together and the work they do alongside Look Good Feel Better (*both a product of the CCTFA*) in helping people feel supported after a cancer diagnosis. So, of course, it was my honour to be included in the latest ***Lives Affected by Cancer*** celebrating the 20th anniversary of the Look Good Feel Better campaign in Canada.

A while back I wrote about a photoshoot with Totem Brand Stories (*a dynamic and talented group of people*) which was taking place to accompany an article that I had written for ***Lives Affected by Cancer*****.** Once again, I'm talking about sex – so if you feel squeamish you might just want to read the other articles, stories from bloggers and thrivers and patients alike about life during and after a cancer diagnosis – plus healthy meal ideas, amazing photographs and an exercise guide, and enjoy all the wonderful goodies the magazine has to offer. But if you DO want to read my article (*and you should, because this is an important topic, plus I love the photograph and want everyone to see it!*) check out page **36**, you can also catch a glimpse of me in an advertisement for FacingCancer.ca on page **41**.

Magazine link is HERE!

It's a beautiful magazine. Hard copies will soon be available in national women's magazines across Canada, but in the meanwhile, take a browse through their clever e-magazine format.

Wooohoo for sharing stories and making connections with incredible women! Wooohooo for another published article! Wooohooo for life in general!

3Aug2012

I am not Fearless.

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs

So blogging as Bumpyboobs, and being involved in Facing Cancer Together, and meeting the incredible women online, interacting through twitter and facebook and meeting ladies in person – it's all great. It's support, and like I've said before, I love the online world of cancer support because we can choose our interactions, the depth of our involvement, and even the people with whom we relate. There's choice. But even that doesn't protect you from the reality of cancer – that slap-in-the-face reality that people do die.

I follow a lot of blogs. You might not notice me, and my name isn't always listed under 'Bumpyboobs', but nevertheless, I'm often there reading. So many touching journeys are online (*I reckon each and every person has a story that is touching, even if they don't put it on the internet*) and it is my privilege to read and blog alongside these great writers.

Okay, so please get that I feel my work and my interactions in the BC and cancer community is a privilege. It's important to me in a very deep way.

But oh my goodness, it can be hard at times. Seems to me that people pass on too early, and final posts appear too often in my RSS reader. I don't want to turn away from others as they thank the world for the support. It's just hard to know that they've reached their last stop. Harder for them, of course, and just so aching for the family and friends left behind.

There's this great tag online about #fearlessfriends. Those are friends who stick by a person even after someone is diagnosed stage four or worse, beyond treatment. It takes a lot of character and strength to be a fearless friend. I'd like to give kudos to those who do it so very well. You ladies just keep giving, and it amazes me completely how generous you are with your emotions and support.

It's the fearless friends, alongside these incredible people who will blog their story to the very end, who give me strength to stay with them and not shrink away. But it's hard. It's nevertheless hard. And there are moments – just some moments, when I open facebook or twitter or the RSS reader and wilt as I read the headlines, as I have done this week for reasons many of you know.

Friendship is a wonderful and empowering thing. Support lets us know we're not alone. Conversation brings up important topics that need consideration. And daily triumphs shared are energy boosters for us all. It is a wonderful thing to work within the cancer community. But this is cancer we are talking about . . . so in today's post I just wanted to acknowledge that sometimes this is hard. It might be selfish to write – particularly with people passing and anniversaries being marked, but this blog has always been about getting the emotions 'out' so that I can move forward. It's a selfish blog, really, in this aspect.

So there is it. Out. Sometimes, I find it hard to be supportive. Sometimes, I'd rather just turn off my computer. Sometimes, I just need a little time away from cancer . . .

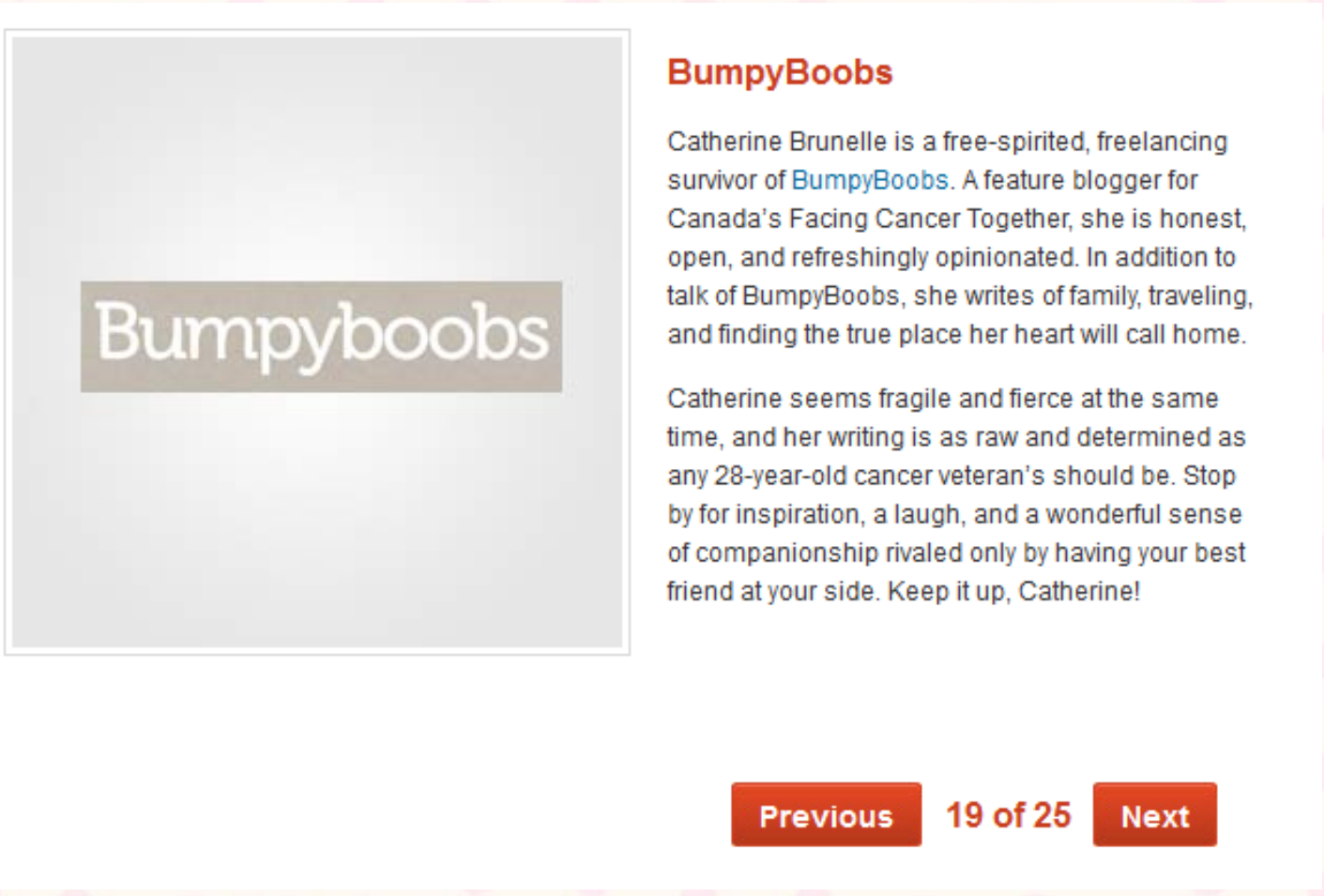
Then the next day I can come back and keep sharing, talking, laughing, reading and supporting. I am not fearless, and that is the truth, but nevertheless, I am doing my best. Probably we're all just doing our best.

7Aug2012

Healthline gives high fives

Posted in Uncategorized

Now the truth is – I can name *many* amazing cancer-ass-kicking breast cancer related blogs that are not on this list, but nevertheless, it's a great compliment to be added alongside these 23 BC blogs presented by Healthline. Thanks for this honour and your descriptive caption (even better than reading my horoscope!). How strange is it to read how others perceive your story? Rather strange . . . but also, kinda cool.



http://www.healthline.com/health-slideshow/best-breast-cancer-blogs#19

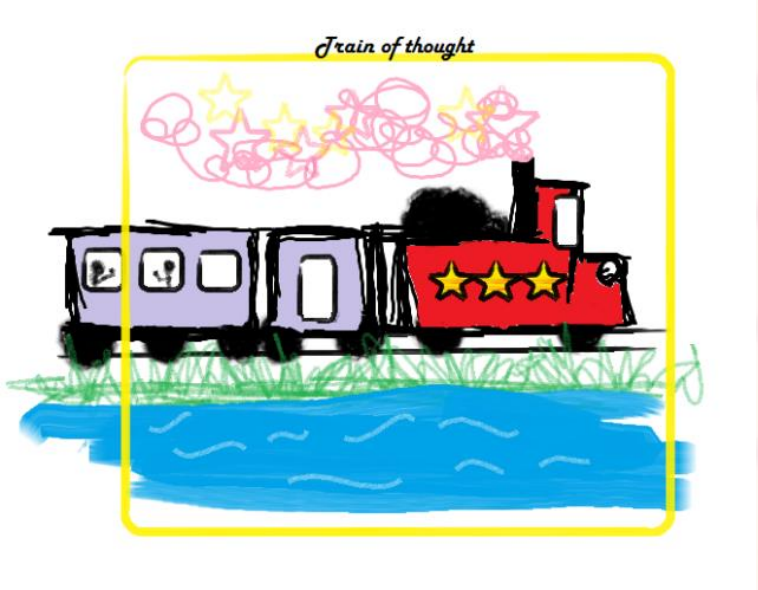
Well worth checking this article out to discover new stories. There are a few ladies here that I don't know, so I look forward to visiting their pages.

9Aug2012

An absentminded mess

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Fun, Life, Travel

We are on the train now, headed toward Pecs and leaving Balaton. For the past four days Zsolt and I have been enjoying a little lakeside R&R. Before that it was sweating in Budapest and late-night dance parties. I'll tell you what. If you want to take a break from the cancer world because sometimes it becomes too overwhelming, there's little better than going out to dance. One – you are in a state to not feel embarrassed since you know life is precious, and Two – it's just a freaking fabulous workout.



So that was Budapest. Hot-hot days and comfortable nights in outdoor clubs. And work, of course, which happily follows me wherever there's an internet connection.

But following this time away in Budapest, I have three little confessions to make . . . actually four – the last being less of a confession and more of a statement.

Number one: I burned the crap out of Zsolt's mother's pot here in Balaton. For the past couple weeks I have been in the mood to make tomato sauce with meatballs, particularly following this TED talk I watched about foods that kill cancer and – once again – was reminded that tomatoes warmed up are really great for an anti-cancer diet. Therefore I bought some liquid tomato and a can of chopped tomato while in Budapest and brought them down to Balaton. (*No one in Budapest seemed to really want my tomato sauce and meatballs. That's because it's just not part of a traditional Hungarian diet. However, Zsolt and I had some 'alone time' scheduled for the Balaton part of our travelling, so I deferred the cooking of the sauce until we arrived in Fonyod Ligit, which is a little village along the Balaton coast. And thank goodness I did.*) Anyhow, I had the sauce cooking for a nice long time, made the meatballs in the frying pan then later transferred those into the sauce, and cooked everything together with delicious results.

So we're eating this amazing sauce & meatball meal – and we're (*Zsolt and I*) are like, "*This is awesome. What's that flavour? I don't know what that flavour is? What did you put in it? I only put onions and basil and the meatballs. Maybe it's from the meatballs? I did sear them pretty good, maybe it's from the meatballs?*"

Wrong. That awesome flavour was from the blackened bottom of that sauce pot. It took me two days to discover the burn and by then it was so set into the freaking pot that I've been trying to scrub it clean for the past day and a night. Sugar scrubbed into the dark ring has helped (*using a newspaper*) but not totally cleared away the mess. We had to catch this train, so I've stashed the pot in a far corner beneath the sink hoping that when his mother *does* discover the burnt patch remaining – because she 100% *will* discover it, and then she will ask: '*Why did Catherine burn the pot*?' as though I had plotted to do this (*and with the real answer being that I burn essentially every pot that I encounter while cooking*) . . . hopefully, by this time this happens, I'll be well out of the country.

Not that she would get angry, but being asked 'why' I did something that I really couldn't help is a pet-peeve of mine, and tends to send me into a sarcastic fit of annoyance – replying with things like, "I burnt the pot because it was looking at me funny." Or "I burnt the pot to add to the flavour" (*apparently true in this case*) Or "I burnt the damn pot because I purposely wanted to damage it."

Truth is, I'm just absent minded. Which brings me to the second confession.

Number Two – I lost my glasses! Bah. Gone! Poof. Where are they? If I knew that, they wouldn't be lost. But one thing is for sure, they aren't in my luggage and that's all I'm taking away from Balaton right now as we head toward Pecs. Glasses equal gone. We're about to visit all these awesome places, and I'm stuck with my prescription shades. But at least I have those – even if it means walking around the house, mall, and movie theatre like a hung-over starlet with these dramatic black sunglasses.

Number Three – I broke my father-in-law's air mattress! Again, by the time he discovers this I am hoping to be out of the country.

Some people report chemo brain after having gone through chemotherapy – it's a very real problem that seems to creep up and then simply not go away; your ability to remember things is greatly affected. If you want to learn more about chemo brain you should check out AnneMarie's blog – aptly titled, "chemobrain" and just google search the term in general. I think this is one of the side effects they don't necessarily warn you about (*in addition to the one about chemo possibly killing your sex life*) before you sign that waver and agree to the treatment course.

However, in my case, I can only blame it on genetics. Absentmindedness has been my middle name (*a really long middle name*) since I can remember.

So if you ever want to ask me why I dropped that tissue and didn't pick it up, or why I left the light on, or why the front door is open a tiny bit . . . don't bother, because I won't tell you the real answer. Instead I'll say aliens forced me to discard the tissue as an experiment in entropy, or the light turned itself on and we may have a poltergeist problem, or the wind knocked at the door but no one answered and so it let itself in.

Number Four – I really did have a lovely time in Balaton. The allergies weren't horrible. The water was warm. I napped with my husband. We watched the Olympics. I did a little work. And the sunsets were beautiful. These little worries and expense-causing mistakes seem to follow me around everywhere . . . but nevertheless, I was quite absentmindedly happy to be on a mini-vacation, and forget, just for a little while, about the bigger worries of life.

P.S. I'm sipping on a pear-flavoured beer while riding this Hungarian train. Take that Canada! I'm drinking in public! Wooohooo! Life is just so crazy sometimes.

16Aug2012

A Home Blessing

Posted in Life, Love

Yesterday afternoon we paid a visit to Zsolt's grandmother. Her name is Anna, and she lives in a house all alone with a garden so large you could get lost amongst the apple trees, tomato bushes, strawberry plants, raspberries, grapes and climbing vines. Near the front of the garden (*close to her many potted cactuses*) are a few fruit trees – white peaches, yellow peaches, plums, and pears. My favourite are the peaches; they're nearly as large as your head. (*Well I exaggerate slightly, but they are huge*.)

So yesterday afternoon we visited Anna, Zsolt's grandmother, to eat some peaches and discuss the family tree. (*Zsolt is hard at work on his family tree, and occasionally he and his grandmother get together and conspire over names, dates and locations*.) The conversation rolled from one thing to another – all in Hungarian, so I kept myself busy eating a giant peach, peeling off the skin with a 70 year old paring knife Anna had saved, and dropping peach slices occasionally onto my dress, onto the floor, and onto the table cloth (*probably also ancient – Anna keeps everything, and in perfect condition too. I do not have this talent, as we've already established*.)

Well the conversation was rolling, and moved to the topic of needlework. Along with their paprika and lace, Hungarians are known for beautiful bright coloured needlework. Anna, back when her eyesight was better, was a master with the needle. She has numerous beautiful pillows that she made herself with the thread and needle. (*And in fact, she'd just picked up a pillow case from the market for me which she gave to me while I was eating my giant peach. Woohoo!*)

But even more special than the pillow case and flowers, has got to be the home blessing. This is a 'poem' or just a special thought that people keep in their home to bless it, and will pass along generation to generation. Zsolt mentioned to his grandmother how one day he'd like to put a home blessing in wherever we end up living – and guess what? Well, I am sure you can guess. She gave him a very special home blessing. This isn't one she sewed herself, it's from a generation prior – made by the second wife of Zsolt's Great Grandfather's. Unlike the pillow cases, this doesn't highlight any flowers. Instead it's very simple.

White cloth with blue thread. There are two angles stitched into the cloth, and between them they hold a banner. It reads as follows:

Házi áldas

Hol hit ott Szeretet

Hol szeretet ott béké

Hol Beke ott áldás

Hol áldás ott isten

Hol listen ott szükség nincsen.

Which translates into

Home Blessing

Where belief there is love,

Where love there is peace,

Where peace there is blessing,

Where blessing there is God,

Where God there is nothing else needed.

Is that wonderful, or what? I think so very much, and it's made even more special to realize this blessing has been in several generations of the Mucsi family homes, now to be in ours. We'll hang it in a place of honour for sure.

And I was thinking, now that we have a home blessing (good signs of soon finding a HOME), maybe I should write myself a health blessing as well. Something like,

Where Peace there is Health

Where Health there is Gratitude

Where Gratitude there is Love

Where Love there is God

Where God, nothing else is needed.

I'm not always 100% chatty about my feelings on God, but I do believe in the amazingness of life, of the remarkable miracle of our existence, of a big 'something' out there that holds us together (*it gives me comfort when I remember that earth is not much more than a speck of dust floating through space*),

And you know what else? I believe in staying healthy, happy and cancer-free. In fact, it's my personal motto.

Do you have a home blessing? What about a health blessing? What would you write in yours, if you decided to go ahead and bless yourself with a few simple words?

Anyhow. That's my story of Anna, the garden, her needle work and this beautiful home blessing.

(*By the by, I do think there is love in a home even when health is missing, and even peace too – peace within yourself, peace with the world, with others, etc. I have nothing but the fondest of memories from my own grandmother's final days – and look back at that time with thanks for being able to share those moments with her in the Tromblant forest. But nevertheless, I'm a great fan of Health and would very much like to stay healthy for a long life-time of peaceful, grateful, love-filled moments.*)

31Aug2012

Postcard from Southampton

Posted in Finding Home, Life, Love, Travel

(This post was meant to be up about a week ago – but instead of adding it as a post, I added it as a page. Here you go – now in the correct blog location! P.S. We are in New York now, having spent a week abroad and I'm about to meet with AnneMarie from Chemobrain! Good times and good travels.)

Excitement Alert!

I should be working – that's why I'm here at TRAGO (*WOOOOHOOO!!!*) this morning, but before diving into the job, I thought it'd be great to celebrate with you that I'm here in Southampton, Portswood, Trago Lounge (*best cafe ever*) enjoying my micro visit immensely.

It's so funny. Six years ago I can still remember arriving in Southampton (*my first time in England*) and getting off the bus, looking at the industrial town and thinking, "damn it." Ugly was *the* adjective on my mind. And yet here I am for a visit six years later, revelling in every bit of cafe, street sign, familiar litter, charity shop, tea house, that strikes my eye. Particularly this cafe. This is Trago, which if you've read earlier parts of my blog, you know is like a slice of paradise on earth.

After my mastectomy, my mother and I came here for a pot of dark tea. After nights out with friends, we came here to wind down the night. After a burst of inspiration, I came here to write it up and share. After making plans, my girlfriends and I would gather here for a long and quenching chat.

Plus, even though it's not yet 10 am, I'm also enjoying a chocolate gluten-free muffin.

It can be hard to spread oneself all over the place – leave bits of your life here and there. (*Saying good-bye to Zsolt's parents was a little heart-wrenching. Honestly, where's the teleportation devices? Shouldn't someone have invited a method for instant long-distance travel already?*) But on the bright side . . . it's good to have places that bring so much joy, even if we can be there – or with the people who live there – all the time. They are maintained in our hearts, and it's so very good to visit in person.

Tomorrow we take the boat from Southampton to New York. Zsolt is visiting the Titanic museum today – but I took a pass, despite it supposedly being totally awesome, since – you know . . . I don't need those associations at this moment.

Anyhow. Hello From Southampton!

That was one long postcard note. But who cares. It's good to have good moments. I hope you are having one yourself today.

Catherine

P.S. Babies are everyone! We leave this city, and upon returning everyone has given birth! It's quite amazing.

P.P.S. Going to meet a group of friends today – we had planned for a picnic, but this is England, so it may rain. Nevertheless, I could 100% mark this in my calendar as a very fantastic day. I'm totally stoked to see everyone again.

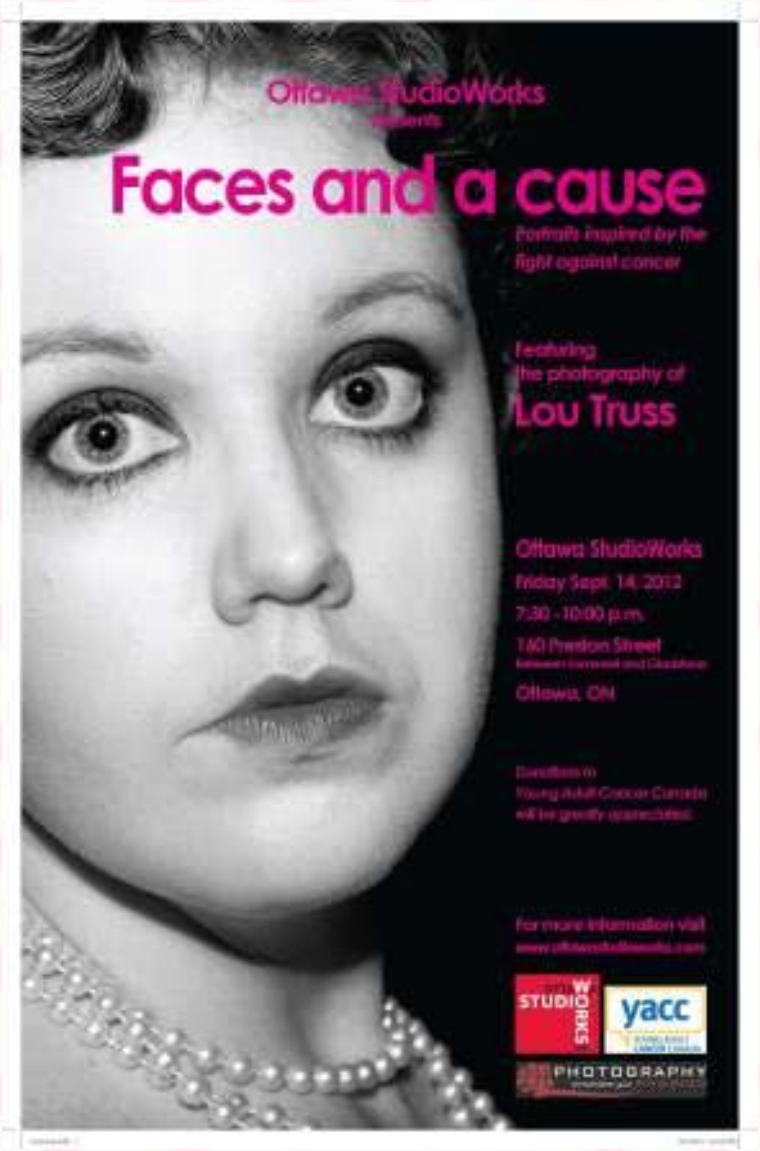
5Sep2012

Faces and a Cause: Sept. 14th in Ottawa, 7.30 – 10.00pm

Posted in Bumpboobs

You know what I love to do? Meet over a cup of tea. Meet friends, family, clients, colleagues . . . meet and drink a big steaming cup of tea. So can you guess what I just did?

This morning at the local Starbucks here in the west end of Ottawa, I was lucky enough to meet, chat and drink tea (*though I think she had a latte; for sure caramel was involved*) with photographer Lou Truss. Lou is a professional photographer who, along with travelling the world and raising a family, has captured a wide range of issues and conversations through her lens. She snaps documentary pics, weddings, campaigns, and causes.



Anyhow, a little while ago there was some buzz in the '**young women who've had breast cancer and live in Ottawa**' community, (*You might think that sounds ridiculous, but we're here and there are far too many of us.*) where Katie of Lovely Katie Lumps was telling us about this photography project that was going to raise awareness about breast cancer in young women. And it got me wondering, '*who is this woman who wants to show our story and raise awareness – and why should we pay attention to her exhibit amongst the plethora of cancer-awareness raising activities*?' Which sounds harsh, but I think is also fair to ask.

I wasn't sceptical about her intentions being genuine, but part of me was nevertheless uncertain in general. I put off joining the project – getting distracted by job stuff and travel stuff and other work stuff. Eventually the exhibit slipped my mind, until about a month ago when the first photographs were released on Facebook and Twitter.

TRUE: I know several of the ladies in these pictures. So yeah, I'm a little biased in my approval. But also TRUE is that in seeing the photographs released to the public to build attention for the exhibit, I was fixated by their beauty, by their approach, by how these women (my peers in the Y.W.W.H.B.C.A.L.I.O community*) were choosing to represent their stories of dealing with cancer.

Lou doesn't bother writing long captions and explanations. The photographs – stark in their black and whites – tell their own stories. These women whom I've known, talked to, found support from, suddenly seemed different. Even within the cancer community we so often wear our 'brave' faces for one another, you can forget that each person's experience is unique . . . and when we're asked to represent those stories, those unique experiences manifest very differently depending on the person.

Therefore, impressed by the sneak peek, I clicked the Facebook icon that said "attending" to the event.

And then I received an email from Lou – inviting me to meet for tea (*What? Did she know my weakness for coffee houses?*) and to model for this exhibit. So today, just a couple hours ago, we met and chatted for a while, swapping stories about cancer, about England, about health care, about immigration, etc.

Lou lost her father to cancer. It was very, very quick. She's had friends diagnosed with cancer too – she has friends right now (*yeah, that's plural*) who are going through chemotherapy. Cancer, once arriving on the scene, has reappeared far too frequently in her life. "We're fragile," she said to me at some point half-way through our drinks. But of course, when we're younger we don't realize that do we? Many young women don't check their breasts routinely – most people don't expect to get sick.

And nor should they. I'm not suggesting we live in fear. But to have an awareness that translates into a practical 'good health' routine, a proactive approach toward your body – *that* can save your life. It sure as heck saved mine.

So yes, raising awareness is a very good thing. And yes, not draping the stories in ribbons or colours or copywriting is a *very* good choice. Let each person tell their own journey – and Lou will capture their fragility and their strength through her camera.

Actually, it sounds pretty great; with the best thing being how genuinely she wants to make a difference. This Saturday my own story gets captured by Lou's camera, and then there's the exhibit on September 14th right here in Ottawa. If you're in the area, please come by and check it out – it's well worth seeing and meeting the women behind the images. It'll be a Friday night with **impact**.

See you there!

Catherine

Event Details:

Friday, September 14th, 2012 from 7:30-10pm at **Ottawa Studio Works** which is 160 Preston St. – between Gladstone and Somerset. Funds will be raised for "Young Adult Cancer Canada." It's FREE to get in, though donations to YACC are happily accepted. Also!! The Photographs will be for sale in raising funds.

**P.S. I'm just joking. We do NOT call ourselves by that name, or any name at all.*

11Sep2012

The tragedy and the miracle

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life, Travel, Uncategorized

Two weeks ago around this time Zsolt and I were in New York visiting the September 11th memorial site. It's an open-space with construction happening all around and tourists & New Yorkers dispersed between the two fountains where the towers once stood. It's surreal in a way; I remember my first year of university and getting ready to go to class when I heard something on the radio about a plane crashing into a building in New York City. It didn't sound right, it had to be a bad joke. I left the house. Rode the bus. Went to class. Sat in class. Found out it *was* real. Came home. Watched what happened over and over in replay.

Horrible. It's hard to be reminded that life serves tragedies just as equally as it serves miracles.

The fountains that pour down in the memorial park evoke sadness. There's such a sense of sadness. With the names of those who died rimming the fountain, the water slides away and tumbles downwards into the black pool, then again it falls into the ground, out of sight. It's about falling . . . falling and remembering, falling and weeping . . . it's about the lives that were pulled down into we-don't-know-where. I've never seen a memorial that was so effective in evoking a remembrance of loss. Yet at the same time it's beautiful to watch the water fall, to feel the spray lifted by the wind, to trace your fingers over the names.

I'm sorry for what happened on September 11th. I'm sorry for the people in Syria who are getting massacred. I'm sorry for people who are torn from their families. I'm sorry for people who get sick before they're ready. I'm really just sorry for all of these hardships that can make life seem unbearable.

And I'm thankful for the compassion people can show to one another; thankful for their courage to be resilient against a tyrant; thankful for the bonds we form with total strangers; thankful for a smile given on the street; thankful for the moment that is peaceful, even if the world feels like it's crumbling.

Anyhow. I meant to write about what's been going on since we've gotten back from Europe . . . but then I look at the calendar and it's September 11th, and this is a day that cannot be forgotten. I'm sure there are many days that cannot be forgotten for many people – both tragedies and miracles alike.

Today I'm thinking about those who know what it is to be helpless, and I'm hoping for as many as possible, they can find some peace despite the chaos.

12Sep2012

Breast Fest Travel Subsidy

Posted in Bumpboobs

Rethink Breast Cancer is this awesome Canadian organization that supports young women diagnosed with the disease, and stays very cool and fun while doing it. Okay, I know breast cancer isn't fun, but this is a fantastic organization – they help in big ways.

ANYHOW. This coming November is the Breast Fest Film Festival in Toronto. Rethink has asked us to spread the word about their travel subsidies for new 'young' breast cancer survivors (*if you don't like that word, feel free to mentally replace with whatever adjective you choose*). This is a really fantastic festival – it's *not* a downer whatsoever. Zsolt and I went last year and had a wonderful time; it's a great chance to connect with other women impacted by this crap called breast cancer, and find fun, strength and meaning from the films and discussions.

And guess what? They have a travel subsidy covered by Rethink and a portion by Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation. Here's the guidelines for who qualifies for free transportation, accommodation and entrance to the festival:

"To be eligible you must be between the ages of 20-45 and have received a breast cancer diagnosis within the last 2 years. You must have never attended Breast Fest or received a subsidy from the CBCF. In addition, you agree to share your contact information with the CBCF."

My two year window has thankfully passed (wooohooo!), but if you're reading this and think you're at a place where you'd like to connect with other young women and this amazing organization, don't hesitate to get in touch with them and **apply for the subsidy**. The deadline is **September 14th** – so move fast! Believe me, they do things with class and style. It's not a weekend to wallow in the misery of cancer, it's about celebrating life and being open about this problem.

Here's the link. http://www.breastfestfilmfest.com/index.shtm Happy viewing!

16Sep2012

Beyond the Sea: Our summer and our secrets

Posted in Canada, Finding Home, Life, Love, Travel, Uncategorized

A little over a year ago, Zsolt and I arrived in Canada. It was a big deal. He immigrated, and we transferred all our items over to Canadian soil. Part of me knew living here would be a challenge, but honestly I thought that we'd gotten through the hard stuff already – and this (*Canada, with my family*) was simply going to *work*.

So it did, in a way, and it didn't in others. Truth of the matter was it was an emotionally difficult year simply because we had a sense of failure – failure to make this grand home-coming as happy and life-changing as we'd hoped. We lived with my parents (*and are still here, thanks to the patience of my Mom and Dad, though will be moving out come October*) for just short of one year while Zsolt looked for work. When you're 30 and married, really, living at home feels less than cool. With Zsolt not getting hired anywhere and our not *progressing* as I'd hoped (*though my freelance writing started doing very well, and I'm so thankful for that! It was a bright spot*) . . . it felt more and more like we were trudging through thickening, sticky molasses and were never going to move forward.

Of course, optimism is built into my DNA. And I would tell Zsolt in the evenings as we lay in bed and held our nightly conference of concerns: "It's all going to work out. It always works out . . . eventually."

Then one day while at a friend's daughter's birthday party, it was suggested that Zsolt look into a different field than research or academia; maybe he'd be a good fit for patents?

Patents: the reserving of rights for intellectual property . . . highly complex and technical ideas that need someone who can dissect concepts, research prior art and understand a novel design before writing these ideas up in legalize to be submitted for patent approval.

Hmm.

Yeah, Zsolt would be good at that. He's a freaking Google wizard, and he's also a research science with an advanced degree. Maybe, just maybe, for once, having a PhD wouldn't be to his detriment.

OKAY! All this is leading somewhere. I just had to share it because this was happening for ages, and I could never directly write about it. It felt like crap holding back that struggle to find employment. But anyhow, I am going somewhere with all this. Hang with me . . .

He started applying to about 70 plus intellectual agency offices. AND – BAM – he caught a fish! Just one, but one is enough. He began acting as a consultant for an agency, and at one point they were even discussing hiring him on full time. An offer was about to be made for work to start in September.

So, back in June, we were so freaking excited about this that **we went crazy**. Literally, we went crazy. We booked a summer-long trip to Hungary, with a stop-over in Southampton to visit friends, followed by a boat cruise in the Queen Mary 2 to New York, where we'd hang with my cousin and then come up to Montreal by train to catch a bus that night back to Ottawa.

i.e. BIG TRIP.

Before you can say "maybeyoushouldsignacontractfirst" we had bought non-refundable boat tickets, train tickets, bus tickets and a one-way flight to Vienna (just beside Budapest). It was all 'happy happy joy joy' plus a bucket-load of relief.

And then one day Zsolt comes along and says to me: "I have bad news."

"How bad is it?"

"Bad."

"How bad?"

"Come read this email."

The job opportunity had fallen through. Oh my god, how freaking crushing.

"Oh shit. That's bad."

Now, *nothing* thus far, and hopefully *nothing* in the future will ever be as bad as hearing the words "It's cancerous." Okay? But nevertheless, after a year of hoping, thinking you can see the light, and then spending money on a grand trip, it was deeply disappointing. But we went on our trip anyhow.

And so we went to Hungary – saw Zsolt's wonderful family, ate amazing food (*including possibly unwise amounts of pistachio gelato*), visited with friends, laughed a lot . . . swam, sunbathed, rode trains. But all along that realization was in the back of our minds: "you're starting from scratch when you return back to Ottawa." We had developed a plan to move out *no matter what*, with my freelance stuff and some part-time jobs. I could work; the plan was a little bit comforting. A little bit.

And then we went to England: meet with friends for Mexican Food, had a picnic in a backyard, saw beautiful babies, slept in an attic, walked in the New Forest, chilled at Tragos . . . boarded the Queen Mary.

And then we sailed across the Atlantic. This was super cool. Okay, so I flew first class once between continents, and that was really nice. But *this* is a class unto itself. Beds made 2x a day with chocolates on the pillows (*none of which we ate – I don't know why*); formal dining every evening; buffet with 24/7 access to tea and strawberries; big band playing in the evening as couples swirl around on the dance floor (*we danced once to Beyond the Sea, which was our first dance at our wedding, but I'm such a garbage formal dancer that I couldn't bring myself to dance any more. It was fun to watch, too.*); a view of the ocean from our bedroom balcony that stretched out forever; dolphins in big groups swimming in from the distance then diving under the boat; whales flipping onto their backs; sunbathing on the upper deck and hot-tubbing at the back of the boat. Listen, if you've ever considered travelling between North America and England, and you've got at least a week to spare – *this is*

the way to go. Apart from one rough day, the weather was great and we had so much fun. It was totally restful, and I got loads of writing done too.

And then New York. Lord, that's one big city. I think the highlight was two-fold: hanging out with my cousin, and meeting Anne Marie (of Chemobrain) for a cup of tea and some conversation. You can keep all your big buildings, impressive architecture and bridges for someone else; I like meeting people and spending a little time connecting. People are the best. Meeting Anne Marie in person was like seeing her in full-spectrum colour all of a sudden. Online friendships are great, but nothing beats the real-world exchanges.

And then back to Canada on the 12 hour train ride. Back to Ottawa. Back to . . . .

Oh wait, I forgot to tell you*:* Half way through the summer, toward the end of our time in Hungary, Zsolt was offered a job full time. Full time! And in the patent field, too. AMAZINGNESS! MIRACLES! Somehow, through the astounded state of shock, Zsolt gave an immediate 'yes' to the offer.

SO! Back to Ottawa. Back to . . .

. . . first day of work**!** Writing patents! Looking for apartments**!** Recovering old sofas so they get a new life**!** Shopping the 'as is' Ikea section for furniture**!** Putting down a rental deposit on a beautiful apartment**!** Getting involved in an awesome photography project**!** Taking a French test for a library position! Getting honoured by the CCTFA Foundation**!** And much more to come.

We're doing things right this time around, and it only took a year to figure this out.

Whew. Big sigh of relief.

Stay tuned for coming adventures. (And in the meanwhile, I'm off to Pakenham for some more ice cream!!)

21Sep2012

Regulation Thermography Testing

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs

Let me tell you a story in the continuing adventures of my breasts. (*Yeah, one of them was removed, but nevertheless I still feel that somehow I have two boobs. Weird, or what?*) Okay, here it goes:

Last week I went off for some regulation thermography testing, which is screening based on body temperature – it essentially looks for areas of your body that are more hot or cold than would be expected, which could indicate an issue at play. Honestly there is debate on both sides of whether this is really effective screening. Some countries use it, others don't, and I think recently thermography was studied as an alternative screening method to mammography (who by, I don't remember, I read so many things) and wasn't found significant enough with the results.

But frack all that, and you want to know why?

Because I'm down to yearly breast screenings. On top of this, no one seems to want to give me anything more than a mammogram. Forget that dense breasts don't jive well with just mammogram screening – that's only one point that really gets me frustrated . . . the even bigger annoyance is that this is *radiation* being shot *repeatedly* into an area of my body I already **100% know** is vulnerable to cancer.

Boszky!

Sorry. I didn't mean to go crazy, it's just the lack of options – I mean good options that doctors are actually willing to prescribe without fear of it hurting the budget, are very limited.

Wow. I'm getting off track. Let's try again. Last week I went for regulation thermography testing, because I wanted to peek in on the ladies and surrounding areas for an update. There's a clinic in Carp that takes readings of your entire torso, and it's quite interesting to see how the varying temperatures are interpreted.

What happens for this type of thermography testing? You don't get light or heat shot through you, instead they take many, many, many temperature readings across many, many, many points on your body.

First, they get you cozy. I had a skirt on, so was given a blanket to wrap up in.

Then, they measure some points for temperature.

Next you take off your clothes and sit there in the cold. Well, you take off all your clothing minus some underwear. I borrowed Zsolt's loose boxers for this occasion – they did the trick and didn't cut off any circulation (*since no tight clothes were allowed*)

Once cooled, you temperature is taken again all over the place: point after point after point. I wonder if these correspond to acupuncture points? Anyhow, once the test has finished, there's a print out.

The technician said she needed to look at it in detail, but reviewing it quickly, she told me that my breast looks fine though it seems I'm having some kind of digestive reaction to something. Yeah, that just about sounds right, my GI has been messed up for a while and I'm still on the long road of fixing that up.

It was a good scan, and I'll likely get it done again. I like that it's non-invasive, not done in a hospital, and the lady was really compassionate. I like the results too – particularly that she noted my digestive issues. Now, of course, I'll have to consider mammography, ultra sounds, MRIs etc in the future . . . but for now, I'm just glad to have been reviewed in a way that doesn't leave a footprint on my body.

And that is the story of regulation thermography testing.

(*P.S. It's raining cats and dogs today, though my mom always points out that above the clouds the sun is shining, and we're going to start packing our stuff tomorrow for next week's move. We are getting outta my parent's house. Happy days and exciting prospects ahead!*)

(*P.P.S. This entire post (and entire blog) is just a recounting of my personal experiences, not a recommendation of any kind for any sort of treatment, screening, whatever. I just wanted to share, is all. If you have questions, take them to a professional.*)

(*P.P.P.S I have a sense my storytelling was rather flat this post. Can we please blame that on the weather? Thanks.*)

25Sep2012

IKEA Monster

Posted in Finding Home, Fun, Life, Uncategorized

Just wanted to write and say that Zsolt and I are moving soon. In preparation for this move, I've taken up a secondary residence in the IKEA fabric section. So far I've recovered the headboard for the bed, recovered the dining room chairs (*we don't have a dining room, these will be in the kitchen, but nevertheless I like to think classy*), recovered two sofas with slip covers, and made four pillow slip covers. BAM!

I was contemplating sewing some drapes, but have now reached the 'sick of sewing' point and think we'll just pick some up pre-made.

There are so many little things to think about: insurance, internet (*about 3x more expensive than England*), toilet brush, shower curtain, broom, coat hanger, packing, bubble wrap, lighting, truck rental, lease signing, bus routes, fridge stocking, **etc!**

And this week I'm off for two lovely days to Toronto for the **Facing Cancer Together Award of Honour** luncheon. Look Good Feel Better Canada is celebrating 20 years of making women feel normal (*and pretty!)* during treatments, and so have introduced this Award. I'm on the recipient list amongst some rather impressive people, so this should be good.

In the meanwhile, back to packing, sewing and spending of money. Yay! (*Boo for the money bit. Ikea should just give me all the pretty fabrics . . . yeah, that's a totally reasonable idea*.)

3Oct2012

Poetry and Orange Slices

Posted in Fun, Life, Writing

I have an urge to do two things. One: eat this plateful of sliced oranges. And Two: share with you a poem I wrote in my head while walking home from the grocery store today.

Here is the poem.

I am feeling rather shitty

But my shoes are yellow, and they're quite pretty.

Inspiration like this just hits me all time. Today I went to the grocery store for a little environmental change; I've been in this new flat of ours all day and just needed to see people. Plus, I'm full on knackered after the move and with all the boxes – not to forget the fellow downstairs smokes, and I believe it's getting to me a little bit. However, the apartment is lovely and eventually the boxes will unpack themselves. In the meanwhile I will take little excursions to the coffee shop, the grocery store and the library to break up my day. Really I need to get a part-time job that involves working with people in the real world. I love my online life, but sometimes it can be a little bit lonely. Maybe I ought to join one of those 'open' offices where freelancers come together and just work in a shared environment, despite all working for themselves. Or maybe, even better, I should open one of those spaces myself and then hang out there all day and distract people from their work.

These orange slices are a little sour

And yet they fill my brain with power.

Okay, one more.

Ikea boxes all around

And not a fixture to be found.

(because I lose them really easily . . . don't tell Zsolt.)

P.S. Having just finished the doodle, I'm done my oranges! Currently debating whether to slice a few more . . . and hmm, I seem to feel a little better. Maybe the walk and creative stupidity helped?

5Oct2012

FIVE AM insight

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life, Writing

It's an obscene time of the day, five in the morning – and maybe for some of you that's normal wake up time, but for me it's more like "wake up now and be punished later with exhaustion" sorta timing. But nevertheless here I am at my computer sitting in the front room of my new apartment (*in the dark with the street light outside giving me an orange glow*) and writing to you. Because I've woken myself up with all kinds of stupidity, and if I don't get this out then I'm never going to sleep.

Okay. Here is the thing. It's so incredibly stupid. I've woken myself up all because of this blog. Or maybe not exactly the blog. I love blogging, I love writing, I love having a place that's mine to share and tell stories. What I don't love is cancer.

Bumpyboobs started over two years ago and she has been a sanity-saver. (*Like Tupperware, the fresh saver – it kept my sanity from going stale.*) It began with my wondering what the bump in my boob was all about. It started because I was worried and frightened and couldn't talk with anyone about those feelings . . . and oh my god, I was in serious need of talking.

So that's how she began. And then the bump became F*ing cancer, and then this blog took on proper *meaning*. It's weird to say this, but because I was diagnosed with cancer – this blog had a purpose. It felt like my story suddenly became special.

Cancer, in its way, made me special. It set me apart. It made me a writer. It gave me an audience. And oh my god, I love the people I've met through Bumpyboobs and the stories we have shared, and I will most certainly continue to love those stories and read those blogs and follow people's lives as the keep moving forward. But what the fuck – *cancer* made me special?

So now it's 2.5 years later and I'm clear of any signs of this disease. My hair is so long it's past my chin. When I meet people for the first time, cancer *never* comes up – it's not even because I'm hiding that part of my story, it's simply because it doesn't come up. Thank GOD I moved past the urge to tell every single person about how I had cancer. There was a time when I needed to do that, because it was so fucking painful and so fucking scary. (*Actually, it's still entirely fucking scary. And I think about people who have said, 'I'm done with defining myself by cancer' and still had recurrence in the end . . . but is constantly wearing the 'cancer patient' badge any better? Does it protect me any more from the chances of recurrence? I'm kinda afraid that if I turn my back on cancer then it will come back, but I'm also kinda afraid that if I don't turn my back on cancer . . . that I'll never move forward.*)

Okay.

So that's where my head is, and I woke up in bed and thought to myself – I need to rename my blog, I need to rebrand this sucker so that I don't have to be about cancer all the time. The posts themselves are often not about the C-word. They have been about friends in England, navigating hard and good times with my husband, honouring my grandmother, immigrating to Canada, living with my parents and trying to find work, travelling and feeling so happy, drinking tea by the gallon, and enjoying the little things in life – also, the *best things* in life and just sharing those experiences with you.

You want to know who my current personal heroes are?

Margaret Atwood for all her generosity with her audience and her immense talent in her storytelling.

Felicia Day for making Geek Culture so damn cool, producing her own series, *NOT* being defined by what the world was willing to give her (*which were mostly mousy secretary roles rather than awesome-heroine-ass-kicking roles like she's created for herself*).

Lena Dunham for making her amazing series GIRLS, acting and writing a role that rings true across so many experiences, and for being so damn talented and capable.

Jane Austen for always giving her characters happiness and love, and for being damn witty and far more talented than many huge writers of her era.

Lucy Maud Montgomery for the stories she created that were always so hopeful, and the lessons on writing she shared – particularly in her Emily series.

And none of this has to do with cancer. Of course I admire the women who are battling the disease and pushing forward (and the men, and the children too) . . . but my **heroes** take on a different sorta theme.

Oh man. This post is getting long. It's 5.30 AM!

Here is my problem which I need to figure out: What is my story? What makes me special if it isn't cancer? Why would anyone read this blog if it's aimless and without a goal?

There are mommy bloggers, fashion bloggers, city bloggers, food bloggers . . . okay, I love moms, and food, and beautiful clothing – but I am not any of these categories, and as for lifestyle blogging – that's a vague term, isn't it? Should I be writing more about my IKEA decorating, putting flowers in vases and making my rooms look beautiful? (*Actually I can't do that anyhow, because truth be told is that the flowers die and I forget to throw them out, and after sewing all these sofa slipcovers, I'll be happy to never see another sewing machine in my life.*)

What's my story now? Please goodness, don't let it be all about cancer. But if it's not about that – then what? And maybe if I can't answer that in a nice packaged statement, then I need to really get my head on straight.

One thing I never say, but is true, is that while I am a writer, what **I really want to be is a novelist**. I want to write stories and share them in different mediums. I also want to work in a library and walk to work and help people enjoy their days. I want to indulge in simple pleasures. I want to figure out what my thirties are any good for. I want to talk about the lines on my face and how my expression seems more tired when I look in the mirror. I want to take one of my good ideas and actually turn it into something real. I want to have a message . . . and yet, I haven't got a clue what that might be.

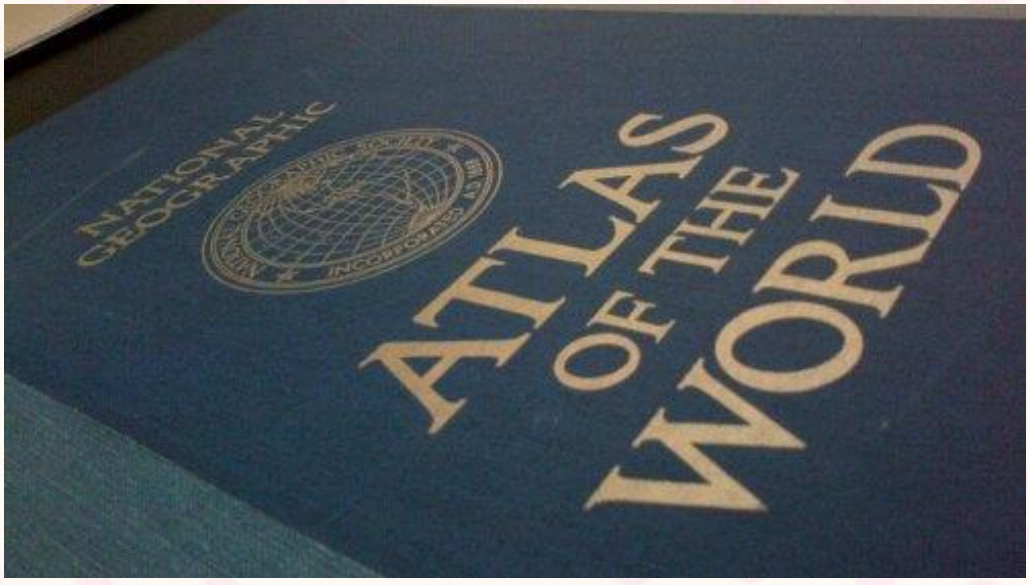
Anyhow, we'll see what comes from all of this. If you've read this far then I applaud you for making it past 1000 words – cause this is one long unresolved 'too-early-in-the-morning-and-I-am-going-back-to-bed' post.

Thank you for sharing your time with me.

Good night.

A few photos

Experimenting with the gallery setting!


NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC
ATLAS OF THE WORLD

10Oct2012

Our House (Flat)

Posted in Finding Home, Fun, Life

The flat is finally coming together. Last week we moved to our OWN PLACE! and with us came about 30 boxes and pieces of furniture. Since then, we've been wading through cardboard, bubble wrap, books, dishes and dust on the floors. But finally this place seems to be coming together. I'm going to describe it for you, just a little, cause I'm so very pleased to once again be living with my husband in a place we can make our own.

(*That gallery I put up the other day was courtesy of my Blackberry, which I don't use nearly enough and so decided to play with the Wordpress app. It's not user friendly, so writing posts and sharing photographs becomes tricky. However you saw a few bits and bobs – the basket and artwork made by the lovely Barbro of Sweden and Southampton, the slipcover I sewed for my grandmother's sofas* (plus the cushions I sewed with leftover headboard material), *the picture I drew ages ago and just discovered in a box, the chairs I recovered, and a rose pattern that was on the dress I happened to be wearing*.)

The Bedroom

Right. The bedroom is rather large. It's also rather sparse. There's something about bedrooms that I prefer to keep as simple as possible. This has everything to do with my sloppy habits . . . logic goes that if there's not much in the room to mess up, it doesn't become a crazy pit of discarded clothing and tissues. Oh my god, you should have seen my room only one year ago – I couldn't help myself! There'd be so many clothes on the floor that I'd eventually give up walking around the mess, and settle for walking over it. So the bedroom is space with very little decoration except for the drapes with their statement IKEA white-on-black tree pattern, the white & black checked headboard, the blue slip-covered sofa, my Cath Kidson bed sheets (pink roses and blue background) and a picture from Lulu's old home – this picture is in a beautiful golden frame, and the portrait itself is of a girl reading a book in some fancy Victorian clothing.

I can remember being very young at Lulu's old home in Montreal and looking at this picture. That was when Lulu had a giant record player in a wooden cabinet, and some silky sofas that would most certainly be called 'vintage' wherever they are today. I wondered who the girl in the painting (print) was, and what she happened to be reading. I wondered if she was really posing for this painting or was it the artist's imagination? I would look at it and wonder.

Now with it here in this room, I look at it and simply feel calm. Calm is very good.

The Kitchen

The kitchen is also large. Maybe a bit too large? Or maybe I just don't know how to use space effectively. We have a table (from Lulu's) accompanied by four colourful chairs that are pushed against the far wall. It is an intermediate room between the bedroom and the living room; it is a place of transition and a place of short-term pause. I like it very much, but amazingly it's my least favourite room since it receives the least light. Darkness isn't as soul-feeding as lightness. However, the soup created in this kitchen is totally delish that's a different sort of soul-feeding.

The Living Room.

My next favourite room after the bedroom-when-the-sun-shines. This room is where life goes down. There is a large desk that Zsolt is currently rearranging because he thinks I'm a crazy messy fool who couldn't organize a drawer if her life depended upon it. Well, *maybe* if my life depended on it . . . (*But the truth here is that we have different definitions of 'organization' and mine involves a bit more creativity while his involves a ton more order*.) In this living room, we have a computer and media area (one side of the room) and a life and leisure area (the other side of the room). There's a HUGE amount of space in the middle, and if I had more inclination I'd fill it with an area rug. But I don't, so it will stay huge and open and possibly available for spur-of-the-moment dance parties. The front windows are very large, and have a privacy curtain and drapes. This room is particularly fabulous because of the clustering of photographs and artwork on the walls.

And that is that.

Welcome to my new apartment. It's rather lovely, if I do say so myself.

P.S.

Happy Thanksgiving! This past weekend I was able to take the bus with Zsolt and go into Kanata for a family meal. This is **special**. I didn't have to board a plane, didn't have to fly for hours, and didn't have to suffer the ache of saying goodbye at the end of the visit because they are close, and I am here, and everyone is reachable. It's like a big hole in my heart has been filled in. This apartment and my life with Zsolt, that's another repair that has needed fixing and is now starting to heal. Things are coming together and it warms me up from the inside. Plus, I'm almost done the first draft of my love-child, the Generations story. Wowzers, so many good things – these are all very good things.

P.P.S. I am toying with a new name for this blog, or at least a new look to start. Once I have a list I'll put up some poll for a bit of fun, but in the meanwhile suggestions are always welcome!

14Oct2012

Compassion, Cabbage & Cramps

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Life, Love

Cramps suck! This morning as Zsolt and I were on a mission to buy organic free-range eggs from the local Loblaws, I began to feel a pressure inside my abdomen. At this point I distinctly remember passing a diner filled with Sunday-morning patrons, all of whom were enjoying the Sunday 3.95 breakfast. Zsolt was astonished that the restaurant was so crazy full, with more and more people coming down the sidewalk to go in, but I told him that in Canada breakfast is a big deal, and we honour this meal with a special Sunday observance and marked down menu prices. So we were off to get some eggs, and maybe a bag of rice because I bought a cabbage in the market yesterday for one dollar, so my mind is all, "you gotta make cabbage layer!" while my body is all: "you're not going to do anything productive today!" and it let me know this just as we were passing a diner.

Anyhow, that's when it started. I don't know about you, but I've got different sorts of periods aches . . . some are about a sore back, some are about the ovaries being tender, this one . . . I don't know *what* it's about, but I do know it's damn painful.

Starting slowly, this pressure built up and up till by the time we'd crossed the intersection toward Loblaws, it was sharp and radiating from my front to back. Lord.

So I say to Zsolt: "we need to turn around." And he offers no protests – instead we turned around, and he rubs my back as we walk back toward the flat.

Finally we reach the flat and I'm relieved. Sometimes this stuff becomes so intense I think I might pass out, but then I never actually *do* pass out – because I generally hit the bed in time. Actually, this threatening lack of consciousness is mostly about the anxiety, because when this radiating of pain starts to happen, I just think "What the frack is my body doing?!" And the worst starts to creep across my thoughts . . . so no matter how many deep breaths I'm trying to take, they all end up short and tense, thus the sensation of passing out. Basically, I have mini panic attacks because I don't want to get sick again, and it's hard to trust the body after the shit it put me through already.

On the other hand, if this is what it takes to have a baby and know the process is working – then okay, great. But who knows? I only hope.

Anyhow, we get back to the flat and here is the entire point to my post: We get back, and Zsolt is incredible. He puts on the kettle and gets out the hot water bottle as I crawl into bed. He makes me a cup of tea. He comes into the bedroom and rubs my back a little, then sits next to me as I clutch the water bottle and strokes my bare leg.

Then after maybe an hour passes, he tops up my tea and defrosts the chicken soup – bringing it to me in bed on a tray.

Ah. Today my man took good care of me. I guess over the past several years, he's learnt 'how best to comfort my wife' and when the pain was throwing me into panic, he was remaining calm and attentive. It was reassuring.

I really think that before medicine comes love. Love knows you're scared, it sits with you, and it wraps you in its warmth. Today Zsolt was so very good at taking care of me, and I'm so very thankful for that.

As for the cramps, I'm not in pain like before but am totally knackered and rather uncomfortable. However, while at the grocery store today (*A different grocery store, not Loblaws and no organic eggs. This was much later in the day after several hours in bed I went to a friend's place to watch people bake. Part of this experience involved going to the shop to get the missing ingredients*), my period cramps were thrown into perspective as the lady at the till was pregnant and suffering pregnancy pains. She was bending over and trying to breath, saying she felt like passing out. When I asked if the store couldn't at least get her a stool, she said that she'd asked and they said they didn't have one – so this women is checking out items and obviously suffering. Where was the love from her store? I don't know and I'm sorry it was lacking. It just seemed totally wrong.

After that I decided that I'm lucky regardless of cramps or whatever; I'm just lucky to have been given what I needed when I needed it most. A little compassion goes a long, long way.

17Oct2012

Cookie Comforts

Posted in Food, Fun, Life

Ah, sometimes when cruising through life we just need to stop and enjoy a cookie. That's my mantra: have a cookie and a cup of tea, things will seem better. So this morning I paused in my workday to whip up – literally, it took 10 minutes – some cookies. Gluten free chocolate-chip cookies, and *tresssss* delish! The only thing is, I didn't write down the recipe and put in way too much sugar (*could have done with about 1 cup less*).

Here are some guidelines if you want to try this yourself.

2 eggs, 1/2 cup ish melted butter, 1 cap vanilla extract, pinch of salt and some sugar (*A bit of white and a bit of brown, but not too much overall! Maybe coconut sugar would be a nice alternative?*). Mix and set aside.

Some gluten-free flour mix (*no clue what's in this, but it's from Bulk Barn ... it tastes quite beany raw, so I suspect lentil flour mixed with other stuff*) – maybe 3/4 a cup, ground almond – I don't know. 1 – 1.5 cups ish? (*I just shook it out of the mason jar*). pinch of tapioca starch. Bit of baking powder (*gluten free*), few table spoons icing sugar (*gluten free? – though maybe cut this entirely since these cookies are too sweet*), bit of coconut flour ... 1/2 cup? I have no idea. Chocolate chips to your preference ... I didn't put in many.

Mix it all together till it's wet but not too wet. (*Ha! This is such a poorly described recipe*!) and spoon out into balls on a parchment paper covered baking sheet. Bake at 350 about 8-10 minutes. Yummy! You can freeze any leftover dough for later cookie cravings.

17Oct2012

B*ch: Love it or hate it?

Posted in Blogging and Other Fun, Writing

I'm not a fan of this kinda language (except when I drop my baking on the floor, and the expletives explode . . .) But then again, it's also used as a term of empowerment amongst some women. So, what do you think?

https://www.slideshare.net/CBrunelle

20Oct2012

Shesconnected Toronto 2012

Posted in Blogging and Other Fun, Bumpboobs, Life, Writing

Okay I'm just a little bit giddy this evening. It may be due to having been awake since 4.30 AM, but that normally results in my being more 'zombie like' rather than 'totally stoked'.

This weekend I have the privilege of speaking on the Facing Cancer Together panel at the Shesconnected Toronto conference. This place is like my networking dream come true. Firstly it's full of interesting and smart women. Secondly everyone GETS IT: sometimes I go to local networking events in Ottawa, which are actually really excellent except that no one understands what social media is about. Blogs, twitter, facebook (*and a million others*) leave people stumped. So okay, that's fine as in there's no competition for social media in that group of successful women, but I do appreciate companies that appreciate what a blogger or social media person can do. (*I'm not going to go into what we can do right now, but it's largely about relationship building and sharing stories – bringing that all back to the brand*)

Anyhow. The train pulls in this morning around 10 AM after a four and a half hour ride from Ottawa. I attempted several sleeping poses on the train including the pretzel, the slouch, the sit back, the fist stack and your classic window lean. (*Maybe I slept 20 minutes*.) I boot it to the hotel with my luggage, drop my stuff, splash my face – and BAM! I'm down at the conference before you can say "YippiDoDah" six times backwards.

This conference is a mix of brands that love the social media or want to develop themselves in that line of marketing (blogging, tweeting, etc.ing) and bloggers who generally have an established, interactive and impressive audience.

[**Bumpyboobs' side note**: my audience may not be huge, but you are all so very impressive – which is why I love to follow your stories too; you get me laughing, thinking and enjoying the good company.]

There are also new bloggers, and companies only just getting started with the social media. Basically it's about learning and connecting with the women and the brands.

Right – five "HadOdIppiys" later and I'm at the FacingCancer.ca booth greeting the awesome ladies of the Fc.ca, Look Good Feel Better and the CCTFA community. Everyone is in a perfectly lovely and happy mood, and there is no stress whatsoever about completely lost signage that is somewhere in Toronto with the delivery guy who failed to deliver. None whatsoever. (*But it did show up eventually, and oh my goodness our booth looks beautiful!)*

I decide not to be super supportive, and instead drop my stuff and go walk around the conference. The conference was really cool; in the course of five minutes I'd hunted out a brand I was curious to meet – they are called Elephoto, and they are quite possibly going to feed into my photobooking / photocalendering / photomugging / and photokeychaining addiction in the future. They're a Canadian company, so I can skip the over-the-border charges, plus they seem quite good quality. Anyhow, we'll see how that goes. I have this weird love of printing – whether it be books (see my MA baby here), pictures, or business cards, and the sight and touch of high quality paper strikes me deeply with satisfaction.

Weird, or what? That's like having a G-rated fetish. If I can meet some Moo.com reps tomorrow, then my weekend will be complete.

But anyhow! Between the talks on social media, I did go back to the Facing Cancer Together booth to hang out, and cheer them on when the banners and goodies finally did arrive. And while standing there bloggers would come up and inevitably be ask if they had heard of the Look Good Feel Better program, and told about this new initiative of online support called FacingCancer.ca – some ladies just take a pamphlet and say thanks. Others stop for a moment – and if they stop, even for a moment, then you know they have story to share.

Every time I popped back to the booth, there was another woman letting us know how cancer has touched her life, or the lives of those she cares about. *Every single time*. Which only confirms how important it is to have these conversations, and share the message that support is out there – actually, it's right here . . . and it's available for everyone, even if 'supports groups' aren't your thing.

Anyhow. Tomorrow is the panel at 4 pm where we'll discuss online communities and finding support, plus why blogging is awesome for your well-being. It will be a day full of talks, and hopefully full of interactions and introductions.

It is such a good conference, and like I've said, I'm really so happy to be here.

25Oct2012

Vanier Snack Shack – Poutinized!

Posted in Finding Home, Food, Fun, Life

This evening, I ate a cheese-stringy, gravy covered, steaming hot bite of the neighbourhood at The *Casse-Croute* Vanier Snack-Shack. That's right, we poutinized our evening and discovered another charming go-to destination amongst the streets of our new home. (*And I watched a networking/marketing master at work – talk about having people invest in your business . . . oh my goodness, it was fantastic.*)

Here's the thing about Vanier that's awesome, and what I never really anticipated before moving here. This area of Ottawa has a whole lot of community sunk right down deep into its streets, venues, and parks. And bit by bit – through the neighbours Zsolt gets chummy with, the fellow who bikes around with his trailer and waves hello, the dad who plays with his daughter every morning outside, the house that's covered in ornaments, the park that hosts a spring-time sugar shack, and now our night excursion to the snack shack – we are learning more and more about this community.

I'm going to tell you about this Vanier Snack Shack right now, because I feel like it's only right. You'll see why in just a second.

Okay, this evening I had planned on baking salmon (*still marinating and raw in the fridge at this moment*) to eat along with the Naosap Harvest wild rice I was given at the Shesconnected conference this past weekend. Very healthy, no? *Yes.* But through a combination of feeling damn lazy, a wee bit discouraged from an unexpected bill (*can you say, "whoops, I spent how much?!")*, and being about a day away from my period – I was like, screw the salmon! I want to visit that remote snack house we noticed the other day by chance.

Zsolt wisely consented.

So we were off! Walking along the dark streets of the neighbourhood, we pass through an empty lot and approach the snack shack. Thankfully it's open (*we've tried to visit before and failed*), which I can tell because there's light coming from inside and there are little Christmas lights around the doorway and window.

In we go!

First impression: Inviting. There are little neon coloured poster boards all over and in different sizes advertising various food deals – two steamed hotdogs and small fries for 3 bucks, something called a bacon cheese hotdog, a variety of burger sizes, a poster for an American hotdog (?), an arrangement of styrofoam containers up on the

wall with different prices, situated above a chest-high wooden counter, behind which is the kitchen, a fellow in an apron, a young lady looking on, and the owner – Serge.

And here's why I think I *have* to write about this restaurant. (*Not including the fact that Zsolt has labelled this his favourite poutine so far in Canada, citing the "harmonious mix" between the cheese, gravy and fries*.) We were given such a warm welcome. Serge asked me firstly whether I was French, because I had a French sounding accent . . . I blame this on the word 'poutine', which I happen to say in a way that's rather French. If 'poutine' and 'croissant' were the only two words I ever needed to say in French, I could be mistaken for a native speaker . . . anyhow, he then asked if we were new to the neighbourhood, advised us to buy property as Vanier is about to boom, talked with Zsolt about his new patent job & the office move, let us know there's tons of art and music festivals in this area and we're welcome to contribute if we have any ideas, *and* gave us a tour of his entire menu. All the while the young lady was trying to get our order, but Serge wouldn't stop telling us all about the area and his snack shack.

We did eventually get a big poutine. Not the *biggest* poutine, but a fairly large one nevertheless. Before leaving he gave us his card, and said he was looking into the facebook thing but never had any time for it. I'm not surprised. This fellow strikes me as sunk into his community and his restaurant. He's organizing festivals, recruiting whoever walks through the door, and running what seems to me a successful small business. So no, he's not online as of yet, but you can find ratings for the Vanier Snack Shack at www.urbanspoon.com – which he asked me to visit and rate, if I was so inclined.

So, are we going to go back? Duh. He made us feel like part of the community – he welcomed us to Vanier, and his long-waiting-customer-behind-us (apparently they are old friends) welcomed us to Vanier too; from now on, going to the Snack Shack will never just be about a harmonious poutine, it is about being part of the neighbourhood. (But of course, the yummy food also matters!) Brilliant welcoming – brilliant marketing – and just plain brilliant poutine.

Bonne Appetite! And yes, I am glad we moved to Vanier.

P.S. I loved the huge helping of cheese curds. If you have poutine without the curds, you are missing out!

zomato

29Oct2012

Orange, Not Pink, and Halloween!

Posted in Fun, Life, Love

Quickie post just to say hello and wish you a very happy Halloween. I love Halloween, even though I basically do nothing on the day itself. But with pumpkin preparation, and building up to this time of year with all the fallen leaves of reds, brown and yellow . . . *sigh* . . . how could you not love Halloween? I know that October is meant to be painted with pink – and for sure it is in some places, but for me it's about the falling leaves and how they crunch underneath the foot. And honestly, I've been so wrapped up in how pretty it is this time of year, I hardly even noticed it was breast cancer awareness month. Really, it's October – which means, it's the month for HALLOWEEN.

Anyhow. Zsolt's been working like a nutter these past several weeks, so this weekend it was all about bonding. We had my brothers over for brunch, we went to the market, looked at costumes for Z's workplace, roasted a chicken, portioned chicken soup for later, watched a movie and carved this pumpkin. Sometimes I think you need these lazy and yet emotionally productive days.

I just want to say, I love October. And if you decide to focus on the things that warm your heart, I reckon the other stuff just fades into the background.

Happy Halloween, from Bumpybooooooooooos!

5Nov2012

Invasion of Las Cucarachas

Posted in Finding Home, Fun, Life

This is something I've gotta share, because it's so gross and so ridiculous I can't keep it in. (*Wow – that's a really tempting opening line, no? High five for gross and ridiculous!*)

Right: Last Thursday Zsolt and I finished our dinner, and were putting away the dishes when outta the blue Zsolt starts raising his voice: "There's something on the counter!"

Our counter is plastic, but pretends to be marble with a dark marble-like pattern. So at first I don't see it – but then, hello! Movement on the counter.

Oh. My. God.

For some reason, I'm holding Zsolt's favourite mug and I begin trying to both catch or smash this bug that's booting it across the counter. Zsolt stops worrying about the bug and starts freaking out over the mug, saying over and over it's his favourite mug and 'not with my favourite mug'.

The bug shoots off to the corner of the kitchen counter, then – with no escape in sight, turns around and starts running back at me. "Give me another cup!"

We somehow switch mugs and now I've got my English Stamp mug in my hand, which is nice quality china and a gift from my library friends when I left the UK. But at that moment it became a smashing tool.

This bug is hoofing it! I've never seen an insect run like this. And in the back of my mind, all I can think is "Oh shit."

But! The front of my mind is on the ball, and "BAM" I cup the sucker. No, I didn't crush it. I cupped it. My thing with insects is that I'm continually pulled between cupping them or killing them. So I have a rule: if it isn't a threat, I cup; if it *is* a threat, I KILL. At this point, the bug was unidentified.

After cupping this thing, we spend like 5 minutes figuring out how to flip the cup over and plastic wrap the top so we could examine the insect up close without losing it. Zsolt took care of the flipping and I handled the plastic wrapping. Then we headed to the computer and I google-searched the word, "Cockroach."

Mother Tucker. I won the prize.

The cockroach was only about ¾ an inch to an inch large, but it had all the google-listed items: the antennas, the wings, the little things that stick out the back and the Olympic-race-winning legs that run really damn fast.

So that was Thursday. Over the weekend I was at the Ultimate Wake Up, but still managed to amass an arsenal of roach-killing goodies in between sessions. Now here is the plan:

- Check with neighbours to see if they also have roaches. This is likely, whether or not they've spotted the f*kers.
- Set out traps of jars filled with water, which I've done, with the inside greased with vasoline. DROWN ROACHES, DROWN! And make some baking soda balls with which to poison them.
- Find a shop that sells cockroach traps and stock up, purchase extras to give to the neighbours & entice them to co-operate in the effort. (*Plus, this is a good excuse to maybe actually knock on a door and say hello; so maybe there's some good in this bad, eh? "Building community through cockroaches.")*
- Seal up cracks. I need to buy some steel wool, will be duct taping closed the access to the water pipes (*it's really big*), and will stuff cracks between wall & cupboard and by the door with steel wool.
- May spray areas with bug-killing poison . . . but we are trying for non-toxic methods before heading down that road.
- Email Landlord to have holes in walls patched (we're kinda mid-renovation here)
- Take out garbage every evening, as well as recycling.
- Wash, dry and put away dishes whenever necessary. Sweep for crumbs. Wipe dry wet surfaces.
- **DESTROY ALL ROACHES.**

So I'm not totally worried. I adore this apartment, and some stupid disease carrying bugs aren't going to stop that relationship. Screw them and their tiny antennas. Zsolt and I are becoming roach busters.

8Nov2012

Moving the Moving Boxes

Posted in Finding Home, Life

This evening Zsolt and I removed nearly all the boxes from our apartment. We've been holding onto these boxes ever since moving from England, if not longer.

Cockroach Update: The exterminator came round today and laid a paste in various/many locations of the apartment. That's right, you read correctly – *Exterminator*. Turns out the entire building has a cockroach problem, so the landlord is tackling each flat. I haven't at all built a 'community through cockroaches' (*excepting a 1 minute conversation in the corridor today that involved three opened doors with heads sticking out as we all exchanged with the exterminator about the problem*), but at least the issue is being handled throughout the building.

So this evening Zsolt and I packed up the boxes to be put out for recycling. Apparently cockroaches like the cardboard glue. It just felt so strange to let these pieces of corrugated cardboard go . . . like I totally didn't want to, like somehow I'd assigned emotions to these boxes and getting rid of them was cutting me off.

But what emotions could they be? Attachment to England? The feeling of not yet being home (since we've been storing boxes ever since moving to the UK, where they hid on top of closets, under the bed and behind the sofa)? The lack of moving ease?

I'll psychoanalyze myself a moment, and say that for nearly the past seven years Zsolt and I have become accustomed to being transient. The idea that we would stay put – in one flat, for a long period of time really does feel bizarre. Like, could this place be home? Are we home? Can a place you rent be home, aren't we not home until we buy our property? But there go the boxes – out into the street for the recycling truck to collect.

We're transient without anywhere to go, or any means to easily get there. So maybe we should just change mental modes and instead be 'settled' . . . settlers, who settle, and grow tomato plants and get to know their neighbours in a way that actually sticks.

Well . . . I don't know. The cockroaches have forced us to get rid of the moving boxes. We have to accept being here. I guess in a way that's one step closer toward community, eh?

The boxes are going. We are staying. The cockroaches must die.

12Nov2012

Rocking the Mirror Ball

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Fun

We are back in Ottawa after an awesome weekend in Toronto, celebrating Mirror Ball 2012 and Look Good Feel Better's 20th anniversary. I feel 100% lucky to be connected to Facing Cancer Together, not only because I've lived its benefits firsthand, but because the people who pour their efforts into making this website, support programs, emotional cheer leading, warm-hearted community, yearly magazine, bloggers' stories, and forum conversations all WORK (*take a deep breath now if you are reading this aloud for some reason*) are even more fabulous than this past weekend's ball.

So yes, it was my honour to attend the CCTFA's annual fundraiser gala for Look Good Feel Better and Facing Cancer Together.

I could write all about it, (*Like how Dionne Warner gave a moving speech about moving through 8 cancer diagnosis with the love and support of her husband, Graham; and how Don (Riding Shotgun) in his dapper bowtie stood up before the entire audience and shared his story of how the Fc.ca support has touched his life, and thanked the room for their amazing contributions; or how the beautiful lady who once presented me with a 20th anniversary LGFB Movado watch during the Facing Cancer Together Award of Honour presentation* (Take another deep breath!) *came by my table toward the evening's close and said she was a fan of Bumpyboobs! She even knew about the cockroaches! – Or how I stayed at a friend's place for the weekend, and was charmed by a Toronto area called 'Cabbagetown'*.)

Instead of all that, I'll direct you to the photo gallery on my Bumpyboobs Facebook page. The photographs speak for themselves, it was a wonderful event. **(Please feel free to 'like' the page while you are there!)**

Thank you again to everyone who contributes to making FacingCancer.ca and LGFB work, from the donors, the organizers, the volunteers, the women and those who love them gathering on the page to give and receive support, and the behind the scenes team – THANK YOU. You are all an important part of this community.

19Nov2012

Long-Distance Christmas Calenders ~ Elephoto

Posted in Finding Home, Life, Love

I don't know how it works in your relationships, but Zsolt and I once upon a time made a 'Christmas Deal' in terms of families. We were meant to alternate between families and countries, so one year in Canada with my clan, and the next year in Hungary with his. Very fair.

The first year after our marriage (*since we were married in Canada*) we spent Christmas in Hungary. And OH MY GOODNESS, I was miserable. That was my first Christmas away, and it was like ripping off a bandage that had adhere to my skin with super-duper glue. Ouch. Don't get me wrong – the situation was fantastic: amazing food, white fluffy snow, winter markets, his parents happy, family visiting, people drinking in abundance coupled with bread and paprika kolbasz . . . I was just sick through all of it with a high fever and a case of not-home-heart-break.

During the following year and a bit, I was diagnosed with cancer, Zsolt graduated his PhD, we immigrated our butts back to Canada, and have been here for the holidays since (*Two years in a row, 3 for me since Z and I parted the first X-mas after diagnosis*).

In theory were are due to travel to Hungary this year and spend Christmas with his family.

In reality, we're staying here. (*Work obligations*)

But that doesn't mean we won't miss his parents, sister and friends. We'll miss them like crazy.

Anyhow, this year at the shesconnected conference in Toronto, I was given a 20 dollar voucher from Elephoto after I assaulted their booth on the hunt for photo calendars and nearly cried all over a lovely representative of the company while telling her how, back when I was having chemotherapy and was filled with dread and desperation, photo books had this way of reminding me of better times. (*I've been making photo books for years, collecting our vacations together into these little booklets of memories. Ever since leaving England I've been seeking out another company from which to order, and so when I heard Elephoto is Canadian – I hunted them down to see what they offered, and check the quality of their prints*.)

Why does this tie into Christmas?

Because I reckon if we can't be there with Zsolt's family, we're going to send them some happy memories and let them know that more good times are going to come. (*Sometimes when I find a gift I know will make people cry in a good way, I quietly pat myself on the back for the awesome idea*.)

Therefore, I went to Elephoto the other day and uploaded several images for a Samson Family photo calendar. (*Don't worry, they don't read this blog since it's in English, so the present won't be ruined*.) After playing around with the interface for a while, making the photos do what I wanted rather than what the template wanted (*a little tricky, but doable*), I clicked through with the order. We received the calendar in the mail about 2 days ago, and I'm entirely pleased. The paper is a good, heavy quality without being a squeaky photo paper, and all our 'Samson Family Photos from Balaton, Pecs, Budapest and Hungary with his parents and sister and brother in law' are all there for 12 months of memories. It's going to be a hit.

So, thank you very much to Elephoto for letting me try your calendar, and for giving me this lovely gift that I can now pass on to others.

Now, in the meanwhile it's back to Christmas shopping and gathering more ideas for awesome presents. I doubt anything will be as touching or tear-jerking as the calendar, but I'm going to give it a shot!

(*And next week I go Holiday shopping with my little brother, which I'm totally stoked about . . . I'm even thinking of stopping with him for hot chocolate somewhere in the market to celebrate the festiveness, if he tolerates the idea*.)

Now to end this post, I'd like to know: how do you balance family obligations at Christmas? Anyone have some golden rule, magical transporter device, or no-fail formula they follow?

Please, share your wisdom and/or transporter designs in the comments.

19Nov2012

How to STAND OUT during chemo and beyond

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Fun

I don't know why I'm writing about this today, except that last week I met and chatted with a women who is going through chemotherapy. We met in a coffee shop, and while it's clear from our chatting that there is much going on with treatment and life, I couldn't stop thinking how lovely she was looking; she undoubtedly stood out from the coffee shop crowd, and it was largely because she choose to be striking with her clothes and makeup alongside with her bald head.

All of this made me think back in time, as I realised, "Geez, like this beautiful lady (*she has a name, I'm just not using it here*), I really stood out after chemo with the bald-to-short hair." Which led to other thoughts like, "Should I cut my hair short again?" (*NO!*) "Didn't I promise myself to be fabulous ever moment possible once my body had recovered?" (*YES!*) "Maybe I should write a post about standing out." (*Which I'm doing right now.)*

Here's the thing about chemotherapy – it knocks you on your ass. And frankly, if you decide to leave your home, which is rather inevitable during treatments, you *will* attract attention even if you'd rather be invisible to the world.

Let me say it again. You *will* attract attention.

And after treatment there's still months upon months of very short hair. Once again, *you will attract attention*.

But is that a bad thing? If you are going to stand out, then why not do it on your own terms? And hey, why not use the months following chemo as a practise trial for standing out for the rest of your life? Let it be a warm-up for becoming a spectacular presence in your everyday life – a unique energy people can't help noticing.

Personally, this is a big challenge for me since I grew up being the too-tall-for-the-boys constant wall flower. But the more I try with things like pink glasses, big blue rain boots, funky jackets, pretty clothes, blond highlights to come . . . the easier it becomes. No joke, practice makes this easier, and really satisfying too. Every wall flower wants to be noticed.

Therefore, I present to you, with an invitation to add your own ideas in the comments: Five ideas for standing out during chemo (i.e. whenever you can manage the energy) and beyond!

1. **Find some beautiful accessories**, e.g. scarves, bracelets, statement necklaces, earrings. Remember, scarves are not exclusively for your head – these can be worn around your neck as well. The lady in the coffee shop wore a beautiful combination of a pale pink scarf wound around a gold thread scarf. The result was so complimentary, I just kept looking at it and thinking how pretty she looked.

2. Smile at people. If they are going to be looking at you, look back at them. Smile, nod, say hello. I'm not saying you need to stop and converse with everyone about cancer or whatever else is on your mind that day, but smiling makes you instantly more relatable. It's the universal 'hello' and everyone is better looking with a smile on their face.

3. Invest in an interesting and impeccably flattering piece of clothing, make it different from the crowd . . . you could snap up something from a local designer, or search a vintage shop for some old-time charm. If you don't have the energy to shop, no worries – just keep a general eye out, and in the meanwhile look for daring pieces in your closet you've never had the guts to wear before this moment in life. (*But obviously wanted to, cause how did it end up there otherwise*?) Maybe it's a jacket that's tailored to your curves, maybe it's an asymmetrical dress or shirt – I don't know. All I know is it should be well made and different from anything else you've been seeing on the streets.

4. Embrace the short hair . . . at least for a while. I had mixed feelings about my short hair, but while it was there – I tried to style the blond curls (*throw-back to my baby hair*) sky high like Kramer from Seinfeld. Why not? Having pixie short hair is such a unique experience, and it instantly marks you from the crowd as a daring individual. Instead of hating the hair – love every second of your re-growth, from punk-rocker shaved to Natalie Portman sweet . . . you will stand out with that short hair, so make the most of the experience. (*Speaking of which, I really need to get some highlights put in. I'm aching to go BLOND again!*)

5.Embrace colour. Please resist the urge to hide behind black or grey on a daily basis. Okay, I agree that black and muted tones can be very flattering . . . but if you want to be striking, find *colour* that flatters your skin tones. Couple darker tones (*if that's your comfort zone*) with pops of coral, strong blue, light pink, oranges & reds with blueish tones, green or yellow. Combine those colours with your statement piece, and lady, you'll be smoking hot – and not because of the menopause!

I have this blue jacket that I wear whenever the weather allows . . . it's cut quite uniquely, has polka dots and is rather flattering. People say to me often enough, "oh, you're the girl in the polka dot jacket. I've seen you before!" You bet your ass they have. Chances are they've seen a lot of people before, but not everyone stands out.

You are fantastic, you are alive, you are YOU. So I reckon take the attention and twist it in your favour. Everyone deserves attention, why not use now to practise how to be present and seen? It'll get you off to a running start for all those lovely and healthy days to follow treatment.

And that's my two cents about that!

Catherine

23Nov2012

Five Little Thoughts on Random Life

Posted in Finding Home, Food, Life, Travel

Here is what I'm thinking about today:

I am thinking about Jasper, Alberta and a small bit of pathway that winds behind some of the homes of the tiny town. We're walk along this black path at night after the bars closed, (*we as in me and my friends, we were Tram Kids – working for the summer at the Jasper Tramway*) on the way back to the giant house where many of us lived. It was completely unlit, and I'd have to trust my memory of having walked that path a hundred times before during the day as we took the shortcut to our home.

Jasper, just so you know, is a town inside of a National Park. That means animals cannot be hunted here, and it's perfectly normal for elk to roam around the streets and chew on people's lawns. It's also not unheard of for other wild animals to find their way into the suburban streets, parks and pathways. A small part of me always wondered if there was a bear in the shadows as I walked back home, though a larger part of me just wanted to go to bed.

Anyhow one night as we were coming home, we stopped in this black pathway area and lay on the ground. All of us were tired, sweaty from dancing and high on being young. But, knowing there were meant to be shooting stars, we lay on the grass beside the path and looked up into space – big, black, never-ending space. One after another we spotted shooting stars, clusters of shooting stars, herds of shooting stars. If there was ever a night to make a wish, that had to be it. I cannot remember what I might have wanted, but I think on that evening with my friends on the damp grass along the path, I had pretty much everything I could ever wish for.

. . .

Except for Zsolt, but I didn't know to wish for him back then. And that's another story.

*

I am thinking about how difficult it must be for small businesses, particularly restaurants that can't afford to set up in the trendier parts of town. There are some really nice, cheap and cheerful venues around Vanier – unexpected compositions of flavour at reasonable prices. And yet the seats are empty. This afternoon I attempted to go to Golden India for their lunch buffet having heard their food is excellent but the restaurant is struggling, and somehow instead ended up at a place called El Tucan, which was also rather nice. The food was comforting, and the atmosphere had South American flare thanks to the 70s South American film playing over the speakers and on the television by the bar, and a lovely lady . . . possibly from El Salvador (*just a guess since the restaurant had Salvadorian food*), helping us with our meal choices. It wasn't as cheap as the Snack Shack, but she was most certainly cheerful.

These little places have so much heart poured into them. It must take heaps of courage to start a restaurant and say: “I don’t care about the failure rate for restaurants, I’m starting up (*insert restaurant name here*) and it’s going to be incredible!”

A highlight of this particular restaurant, apart from their really yummy spicy jalapeno sauce, were the drinks. I had a cashew nut fruit drink, which started off nutty and then switched to floral sweetness. Zsolt had a sweet and sour drink, which (*can you guess*?) started off sweet and then moved to sour. We were impressed.

After the meal we walked just a little bit along Montreal road and looked through the windows of all the small restaurants. So many small restaurants, so much competition, and so many empty seats. . .

*

I am thinking that grammar is one tricky b*ch. There are so many rules, and it changes depending upon location and organization . . . Zsolt and I keep getting into confusing disagreements whenever he asks me the random English language question. Like why are 'pants' considered plural? How do you shorten a quote? Is it that or which? And you know what – I hardly ever know the correct answer.

Forget the MLA handbook or Harvard guide to whatever. Lately I go to TheOatmeal.com or the Grammarist, or just plain GOOGLE the phrase to see the debate of its usage. And there's always debate. I know of only one woman in this entire world who may have a handle on all these rules, but she's particularly brilliant with this stuff and far above normal human capacity regarding theory around language. She's like the Super Woman of Grammar.

*

I am thinking we don't have enough candles. The lights just flickered here in Ottawa; we have a total of one Glade scented candle, and I'm guessing its little light wouldn't be enough to sustain us for an evening. Hmm. Isn't that doom day soon approaching? But then, what good would a few candles do if the whole world went kaput?

*

I am thinking that I need to make dinner, and yet have no clue what to serve. This is a daily occurrence.

P.S. TONIGHT is PRIDE AND PREJUDICE at the NAC. Awesomeness wrapped in petticoats!

3Dec2012

Christmas Shopping: A Cautionary Tale

Posted in Uncategorized

Okay, The middle of a hot flash may not be the ideal time to start this post, but I don't care! ***Happy holidays everyone!*** Your celebration of choice is fast approaching and I dare say there's a little cheer in the air.

Zsolt and I are big partakers of Christmas. We love our Christmas traditions. I've been holding off getting all festive for the past several weeks, just itching to pull out the miniature plastic tree we bought at Woolworths when the chain still existed, and the ornaments we've collected on our travels (*latest edition: Santa waving from a NYC yellow cab*), and the 50s Christmas records of hymns mixed with upbeat swanky party sounds, plus the Hungarian children's choir singing tunes like *Kis Karácsony, Nagy Karácsony*

**Reflective sigh.*

I won't even go into what it means to me to be HERE, to celebrate NOW, to have my HEALTH, and to be so full of LOVE. I won't go into it because you probably already know that it means everything to me. (*Though I'll likely go into it later, as the season progresses – I get so stupidly sentimental.*)

Instead I'll tell you why shopping online is pretty much just as challenging as shopping in the store.

Now look, I'm no advocate of Black Friday or Cyber Monday (*Though even at the thought of those words, my mind lights up with sales for Soia & Kyo or Karen Miller – my current favourite designers of beautiful clothing for beautiful woman, meaning every woman.*) but the plain fact is that Christmas is a time when along with celebrating rebirth, miracles, good will . . . we allow ourselves a little guilt-free indulgence. (*Which very easily turns into guilt-full overspending if not careful, as you are about to see.*)

Right: The man, otherwise known as Zsolt, wants a Nexus 4 for Christmas. Years ago I promised him a Sony hand-held play/toy thing if he graduated from his PhD. But then we were rather hit-up for an extended period of time, and that graduation present just kinda fell to the wayside. Now it's a dated device. BUT the Nexus 4 is apparently not dated. I don't why, maybe because it's brand new? Who cares, he really wants it and has been working so hard I'd love to give it to him. Therefore, it has become my mission to get him this phone/toy/mini-computer thing for Christmas.

So, plan of attack:

Follow twitter feeds of people who tweet about Nexus 4.

Change homepage to Nexus 4 sales page.

Sign up for newsletter.

Wait.

Which is exactly what we did until today. TODAY I get a call from Zsolt.

“Catherine, it’s going on sale in Canada at 3.00pm today!” (*By the by, how could I have missed that? I’m HOOKED UP for this kinda information*.)

His phone call was 10 minutes before 3.00pm.

So, what can you do, right? Drop everything and start hitting F5 on the Nexus 4 page . . . which, according to a blog post I read, refreshes a page very quickly and easily. So I’m all F5, F5, F5, F5 for like 10 minutes. And as I’m hitting this button, I’m thinking, GEEZ, so much for not engaging in commercial craziness. But, at least I can do it from the comfort of my home.

F5, F5, F5, F4! *Wrong!* F5, F5, F5, etc.

3.00pm arrives and *still,* I’m getting a sold out message from the Google people. But then my mobile phone rings. It’s Zsolt, he’s got the sucker in his shopping cart.

“Buy it!” I say. “Buy it right now before it expires!”

And we hang up. So much for Christmas magic and Santa surprises. I’m barking orders to the giftee to BUY BUY BUY the gift. And as he does this, I don’t stop – cause you know what it’s like with online shopping, things happen.

F5, F5, F5, F5!

Ah! I finally have the option to load it into my shopping cart. (*The shipping date at this point is 1-2 weeks.*)

The mobile phone rings again.

“It won’t take my card!” he says.

Ah ha! Zsolt has been struck by the cursed requirement to start a credit rating from scratch upon arrival in a new country. Really, why can’t we carry credit ratings country to country? And the same thing goes for car insurance. But anyhow. . .

“Here!” I throw him my card details and hang up after leaving instructions for him to call me back with an update.

(*FYI last time the Nexus 4 was available, it sold out almost immediately. Maybe I should have mentioned that earlier – we were panicked because we knew that out there in cyberspace was a flood of competition, unseen but fierce.)*

Then I return to *my* shopping cart and debated closing the screen. But his purchase hasn’t gone through yet ... and anyhow, it would take several more clicks to the actual purchase confirmation ... so instead I try to go forward just another step with the order. But no! Google isn’t letting me because their website is being swamped with requests.

F5, F5, F5!

The phone rings again.

“There’s an error in the order! I don’t know why, but it won’t go through!” he tells me.

He taps out of the fight, and now I'm in the ring.

"I'm on it," I tell him.

Again we hang up.

F5, F5, F5 – success! The shopping cart advances me to the next step. By now the shipping is 3-4 weeks, but that's still fine. So in go the details, and out comes the order confirmation. Wooohooo! I got the man a phone/toy/thing for Christmas.

Feeling pretty satisfied. I call up Zsolt. "I got the phone!"

And he's not quite as excited, for some reason.

"Hello? I got the phone?"

"I think I might have gotten it too."

Yeah, he did after amending the purchase details – though he didn't realize it initially. So, we both bought this crazy phone. And for some weird reason, neither of us trusts our order enough to cancel the purchase. So either I'll gift myself with a mobile device, or we'll return it this evening. Either way, please take this as a warning: Shopping madness can set in anywhere, anytime. Tread carefully through the amazing sales, the free shipping, the yummy samples, the discount card with your next purchase that you feel the need to redeem right away. (*Enjoy the shopping, but beware – don't lose your head, is all I'm saying. 'Cause it's easy to lose your head!)*

But on the bright side of all the madness – **We got the phone! Wooohooo!**

I hope you enjoyed this heart-warming story about the miracle that is Christmas shopping. Or at least, the miracle that is F5.

5Dec2012

RBC Bronwen Wallace Award for Emerging Writers

Posted in Writing

RBC BRONWEN WALLACE AWARD
FOR EMERGING WRITERS

Supported by

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

A prize of $5,000 will be awarded to the best work of poetry
Two honourable mentions will each receive $1,000 prizes

Candidates should submit 5 - 10 pages of previously unpublished poetry

To be eligible candidates must be:
* A Canadian citizen or permanent resident
* Under the age of 35 as of the deadline date
* Unpublished in book form and without a book contract
* Previously published in an independently edited magazine or anthology

Submissions must be accompanied by a cover letter with the candidate's name, address, email, telephone number, and details confirming their eligibility, including age and previous publishing credit(s).

Manuscript pages should not include identifying information, and should be unstapled and consecutively numbered. Entries will not be returned.

By submitting to this award, candidates grant the Writers' Trust of Canada permission to publish their work in print and digital formats. All rights reserved by the authors.

THE DEADLINE FOR SUBMISSIONS IS JANUARY 30, 2013

Send submissions to:
RBC Bronwen Wallace Award for Emerging Writers
c/o The Writers' Trust of Canada
90 Richmond Street East, Suite 200
Toronto, Ontario, M5C 1P1

For further information visit www.writerstrust.com or contact:
Amanda Hopkins, Program Coordinator
416-504-8222 ext 243 or ahopkins@writerstrust.com

Attention Canadian Writers-in-Progress:

The **RBC Bronwen Wallace Award for Emerging Writers** is happening again this year, only this time it's open for poetry. Once again you need to be under 35, unpublished in book form and without a book contract, but also have at least one previous publishing credit in a literary magazine or journal.

Personally, I feel as though this is somewhat ageist – because quite honestly, a person can come into writing at any age. In fact, if you're older, you may face more challenge in being accepted as a publishable writer than someone younger. (Plus, I'm thirty and in five years will be too OLD for this competition. What the heck?!)

This is a great competition because it would be HUGE to win, plus there's no entry fee. How many competitions do you know with NO ENTRY FEE?

Therefore if you are a poet, and you know it, Canadian, not over 35, without a book contract or published book and have been in a literary magazine or journal (*gasping for breath as I write these conditions*!), please do consider submitting your poetry. It's a great opportunity.

Take care! And click the image to read the PDF details for submission.

Catherine

10Dec2012

A great storyteller: Kate Matthews

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Fun, Novels and Stories, Treatment, Writing

I've been a big fan of author and cartoonist Kate Matthews for some time now, following her hilarious posts on facebook and sharing them with the online Bumpyboobs and Facing Cancer Together communities – so when I saw she was offering up a free ebook for whoever could guess what was in this picture, I jumped on the opportunity.

Like, I literally jumped. I was all, "OH! OH!" and somersaulted to my personal Bumpyboobs facebook account to give my response. And, high-five everyone, it was totally correct.

That's how I connected with Kate beyond just the Facebook fandom. She sent me a copy of her ebook, the **Little Pink Book of (mostly) Cancer Cartoons** and I had a hoot flipping through the e-pages and enjoying her witty take on breast cancer diagnosis, treatment, coping, relationships, LIFE, etc.

She gets it, you know? She really gets it. From booby heaven, hair loss replacement options (i.e. *silly string*), things people say, mastectomy, lymphedema, pink suffocation, and trying to feel normal. She gets it, and she made me laugh. What a beautiful combination.

But then Kate wrote me and offered to send along (*in hardcopy – woohoo!)* her other book, the **Little Green Book of (Mostly) Happy Household Cartoons**, with an ebook version to wet my appetite – and I realized she doesn't just get it, she *really* gets it.

It's a pleasure to flip through the normal-day-and-life cartoons Kate has created alongside and after the breast cancer diagnosis. Life goes on, and yes we can be haunted by the circumstances, by NED wire walking, by the worry . . . but life goes on, and the little things are so wonderful. My life with Zsolt has me laughing daily, and Kate's life reflected in her cartoons reminds me of those family moments, those lazy moments, those ridiculous moments (*I'm thinking cockroaches here, though she just has spiders*), that make each day so lovely.

And you know what the incredible thing is? Kate admits that before she started the cartoons, she couldn't draw. Okay, so the women and men of the Little Books aren't Disney-animation perfect, but they're almost better for that lack of perfection. Life isn't perfect, we are not perfect . . . but expressing your story despite all that is pretty darn awesome.

Anyhow, I just read her "Adam/Even and the apple full of antioxidants" comic and it got a burst of laughter. So, because I really believe in creativity and quality, and I love to support a fellow writer – if you are looking for a

charming book this Christmas, whether you're stocking a reader, tablet, find a book to hold, or just treating yourself, please do consider checking out Kate Matthews. She'll have you laughing through cancer (a freaking miracle suitable to the time of year), and she'll have you laughing through real & wonderfully normal life.

Now if you'll excuse me. I think I'll go back to my reading, and my giggling. Happy holidays everyone!

Little Pink Book of (mostly) Cancer Cartoons (Hard Copy) (Kindle)

Little Green Book of (Mostly) Happy Household Cartoons (Hard Copy) (Kindle)

P.S. I did get some free book bling, but I've been a fan of Kate for ages. And I'm not making anything from the Amazon links. She's just a great cartoonist! Oh, and she's on facebook if you'd like to follow.

17Dec2012

Babies & Bargains with my Oncologist

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Fertility

Last week was my six month follow-up with Dr. Canada. While I only get tested and scanned once a year, these cozy little chats are required every 6 months. This is how they often play out.

I arrive and take a survey where I mark all my ranging emotions and nausea conditions at 1 (*meaning not at all a problem & thank god that part is over*), except for anxiety which I always mark at 2 (*not bad but feeling a little nervous.*) You'd have to be a robot, I reckon, not to feel at least a 2 for anxiety during these check-ups.

Then I wait a while and the nurse eventually calls me over.

We go to the scale and I take off my shoes/boots. Weight is measured in kilograms, so I happily get off the scale not having a clue what that reading actually means. (*Thank you for the blissful ignorance, Imperial System*).

Then I go in a room . . . generally the first room, and wait. Just wait. I can look out into the hallway through to the waiting area; I can look at the poster that says I should have brought my medical records *(then think, "oh well," because I never bring my medical records*); and I look at the table that I never sit on where there is a gown I never wear.

Eventually Dr. Canada arrives. He's a lovely fellow who was so incredibly patient and helpful when I was going through chemotherapy, so I try not to hold it against him when he now plays the "how fast can I get out of this room?" game. I'm not an emergency or a priority. I'm just a check-up.

But this time I wanted to hook him for just a minute longer.

The nurse, after taking my weight and showing me to the room asks: "Is there anything you'd like to focus on in today?" (*I guess this is a test for how much time I'll be taking up.*)

I answer: "Babies."

And she smiles and says, "Okay, I'm sure you can talk about babies." Then leaves me to look at stuff and wait.

Suddenly, I was becoming more and more nervous. There was all that baby drama when I was first diagnosed (*The guilt inducing should I/shouldn't I get fertility treatment),* and then the baby drama after I finished chemotherapy with an AMH test that was never properly explained and left me thinking I couldn't get pregnant

EVER. That is devastating news, and not something that should be shared over the phone without an immediate explanation of the AMH meaning except for the nurse saying "IVF isn't going to work for you."

And THEN there was the baby clarification, when I regained my menstrual cycle with a steady 30 day interval, which suggested that ovulation was in fact happening. After insisting on being referred to the fertility clinic, I had my eggs checked and yes, a few remained. "But you better get on it," advised the nurse who scanned my ovaries.

"You better get on it." Those words have rung in my ears ever since.

So I'm sitting there waiting for Dr. Canada to tell him that I'm nearly done my 2 years of Tamoxifen, and don't try to stop me! I'm going off the medication to get pregnant.

My palms are sweaty. My anxiety had grown to a 4. *And* I left my tablet in the waiting room with my dad, so I couldn't even tweet my way through the anticipation!

Finally, Dr. Canada arrives. He immediately launches in – asking about family history, then saying he'll try to order an MRI though isn't sure it will be approved, and a mammogram, and an ultra sounds . . . and . . . and . . . and he wants me to stay on Tamoxifen for at least another year.

Bollocks!

I tell him there is no way that is happening. I've been on for 2 years, and there's just no way I'll wait for three.

He changes course, and says something along these lines but not exactly: "Well, I'm torn in this situation. On one side," (*and he holds up one hand*) "I've seen far too many things to advise you to go off Tamoxifen early. But then on the other side," (*he holds up the other side*) "pregnancy in young women hasn't been shown to put them at any higher risk of recurrence, and can actually have a protective aspect toward breast cancer."

So he is in two minds.

I am not. I have made my decision. So I say to him,

"I know you don't think I should go off early, but this is important to me. It is very important. And I've already been told that I need to get going if I'm going to have a baby."

At this point, I am guessing he regretted referring me to the fertility clinic. But that's only a guess.

And so he came back with a compromise so reasonable I couldn't really say no. He suggested I stay on for another 6 months till June when my scans are all set to be done. If that's all clear, he will step back with the Tamoxifen pressure and let me get on with having a baby.

"And in six months, you won't tell me I should stay on longer?"

"No."

Okay. I can pretty much assume that in six months he *will* tell me to stay on longer, but that's because it's his obligation. With clean scans, I'll move forward and just get on with my baby craving adventures.

Anyhow, It's weird negotiating with an oncologist. He said that many doctors in his position wouldn't support me whatsoever, which is very possibly true. However, that doesn't mean in any way that I would continue working with an oncologist who didn't support me. Sometimes I can be a little bit stubborn about what I want. And in this case, I **know** what I want.

And so there is it. Fertility after cancer is a juggling of tests, opinions, drugs and opportunities. But I can hang in there, because obviously it's worth it – and then, once the kid arrives, that will be a whole new kinda challenge.

24Dec2012

A Very Merry Christmas!

Posted in Uncategorized

Happy Christmas, and Happy New Year, may 2013 bring health, success, and so much Love into you life. WOOOHOO for another year! And for Christmas. I love Christmas.

Thank you to everyone who has been reading this Bumpy Blog with all its random posts, changes, and deviations. I don't know where we're heading, but it's wonderful to have such good company for the journey. Thanks you for your comments, your visits, just being here and for accepting me as part of your online world.

Merry Christmas! Happy Holidays! And enjoy yourselves. God I love this time of year. And I love being healthy. And I love being with family. Don't you?

Catherine

P.S. Yesterday I made an amazing cake for my annual family St.Hubert's chicken dinner. We go to this restaurant called St. Hubert, and this year, for the first time ever – everyone came back to our place afterward for dessert. I pulled out the very fine china, (*so fine, it rarely sees the light of day*) and served up this lovely maple syrup floating cake. It's not difficult to make, it's IS gluten free (*but the kind you would never suspect to be gluten free*), and I was so darn proud of it! Add some vanilla ice cream on the side, and I think I should have been crowned hostess with the mostess for the evening. We put on some Bing Crosby that Zsolt & I had bought from a thrift shop, and played it on Lulu's old record player. That record player is sentimental magic. I think my dad particularly loved the cracks and pops as Bing sang White Christmas and the music got stuck on one particular line that was repeated over and over till Zsolt moved the needle.

I miss Lulu at this time of year. She was the best for Christmas and cookies and sucre a la creme. I miss old family gatherings where she's be in the middle (*she'd insist on being in the middle*) watching over everything and speaking very loudly. There are things that I miss and things I can't control. But this Christmas has been lovely despite all of that, and I am looking forward to our families growing – so maybe one day I can see my own mother as the matriarch where the grandkids gather round, and she makes them whatever little Christmas touch

she decides to adopt. And then, even later, when my kids have kids, I'll get to know that pleasure too. For sure I'm making them ginger bread cookies with icing. That's what Lulu did for me, and I love it.

What a long P.S.

Ok, that's all for now. Again, thank you so much for being here. Catherine x

28Dec2012

Holidays in Review

Posted in Uncategorized

Some Holiday Highlights before I decide to clean up the flat and get ready for New Years. I guess the season is passing by – as it does. Bring on 2013 and hopefully a whole lotta goodness.

Adventures to look forward to:

- Finishing the first draft of my story for the second time. Sending out the work and saying "hello" to agents.
- Travelling to Hungary for Easter.
- New projects and wonderful work adventures.
- Clear scans.
- The baby project.
- And enjoying every single day of feeling good, living in love, and just being HERE.

2012 Christmas Highlights:

- Mom and Dad making gingerbread cookies, just as I posted on this blog about missing Lulu's cookies. Mom made a gluten & grain-free cookie, and dad cut them into all kinds of shapes and iced the people. He even made a gingerbread Zsolt.
- Mimosas. Mom and I snuck several of these drinks over the holidays with raspberries bobbing in the juice & champagne. I'm thinking I might sample some more come New Years. YUM. It totally satisfied my recent orange juice craving.
- Being together. I'll never stop being thankful for being with my family on Christmas. Now if only we could be in two places at once and share with Zsolt's family too. Well, hopefully next year.
- December 24th. Zsolt and I have a little Christmas celebration to ourselves every year. Typically that preceded our parting ways to visit our families . . . but now we're a family ourselves, so we stick together. I won't go into details, but should at least say that the night involved dancing.
- Balaton from the 80s. We received a lovely book from a lovely lady all about Lake Balaton. This book must have been published in the 80s, and it's all in English. Zsolt's mind was BLOWN when we opened this gift. He read the entire thing cover to cover.
- Bing Crosby. We've been listening to good old Bing on the record player. I've already talked about the skipping and the nostalgia in the cracks and bumps . . . but it's so lovely, I thought it's worth mentioning again.
- Telestrations. A FUN game where you pass around a word as you would in the game 'telephone', except instead of whispering you draw the word. This game works best if you are bad at drawing. Otherwise it could become boring.

- SNOW. Ottawa is a giant snowball. It's been snowing and snowing and snowing. Not on Christmas, but ever since. Now, where are the snow shoes and cross country skies? Oh wait . . . I'm right in the middle of the city without a car. Brutal! I'll just stick to shovelling my stairs.

I hope your holidays were just as lovely. And you know what? They're not over! Isn't that fantastic?

Happy New Year 2013

Cheers to feeling good, to feeling happy, to emotional moments, to supportive communities, to friendships, to creativity, to exploration, to writing, to LOVE, to family, to growth, to change (eep), to tea with conversation, to success, to experience, to books, to opportunity, to travel, and to welcomed ADVENTURE. May it all be of the very best kind, and may we all find huge enjoyment in our everyday moments.

Happy 2013.

~Catherine

4Jan2013

A Letter to My Fourteen Year Old Self

Posted in Blogging and Other Fun, Bumpboobs, Life, Love, Writing

(*Starting Note: I'm listening to an Abba Album on repeat, swaying to Fernando!*)

A while back – before the holiday spin overtook my brain with turkey, mashed potatoes and bottles of champagne, I received an interesting email from Kristi Harrison, founder of the "Life Changes Foundation" which is raising awareness after the diagnosis of Kristi's friend, Katie Morris Kyser, who was diagnosed with breast cancer.

Krisiti's concept of Life Changes is really interesting, particularly since 'new normal' and losing the person we were before diagnosis is often discussed online. The fact is, life changes – we cannot go back and for me, before engaging in Kristi's project, 'back there' was a place of innocence lost and reality biting very hard. Okay, yes, I have SO MANY wonderful memories before being diagnosed that I cherish (*for instance, the 'how we met' story with my husband that is excessively romantic and entirely over-shared*). But if I cling to who I was before diagnosis, it makes me sad about who I became immediately after. I guess that's because the experience held was more physically and emotionally painful than anything I'd ever dealt with in my life. And once felt you can't go back, so I prefer to look forward and punch things out occasionally.

But then Kristi challenged me with the project she's leading that focuses on writing letters to your 14-year-old self. She asked if I would get involved by writing a letter. (*Hello, write about myself? Challenge accepted!*)

The adventure of high school. I'm bottom right.

What surprised me in writing the letter is that I still love the girl who was once 14. She doesn't make me sad, even though her style choices are **ahem** regrettable. In fact, she makes me look forward to having a daughter. Isn't that weird? She doesn't fill me with loss or a mourning sensation . . . I'm simply proud of her and know she'll be okay despite anything and everything. And if *she'll* be okay, then maybe *I'll* be okay too.

Perhaps 'new normal' is really just a point (a point that happens and again and again and again) on the continuum of life? And we'll all be okay, despite whatever crap we encounter – even death. I have to have faith that whatever happens after is just what is meant to be, we'll go back where we came from, and be whatever we were before. AH! I'm going too deep. No excessive philosophizing will be tolerated on a blog entitled "Bumpy*BOOBS*"

(*Okay, I turned off the Abba because those previous 2 paragraphs were deep, and I can't do deep with Abba. However, I'm now turning it back on.*)

So, if you are interesting in joining Kristi's project, you can find her Facebook page right here: https://www.facebook.com/LifeChangesFoundation

Get in touch. See what happens.

And now the moment you've totally been waiting for (*righhhht*), the letter to my 14 year old self. Enjoy!

Click to read the letter at the Life Changes Foundation page! I laughed like an idiot while writing this.

12Jan2013

Poll: Your Objective Opinion

Posted in Uncategorized

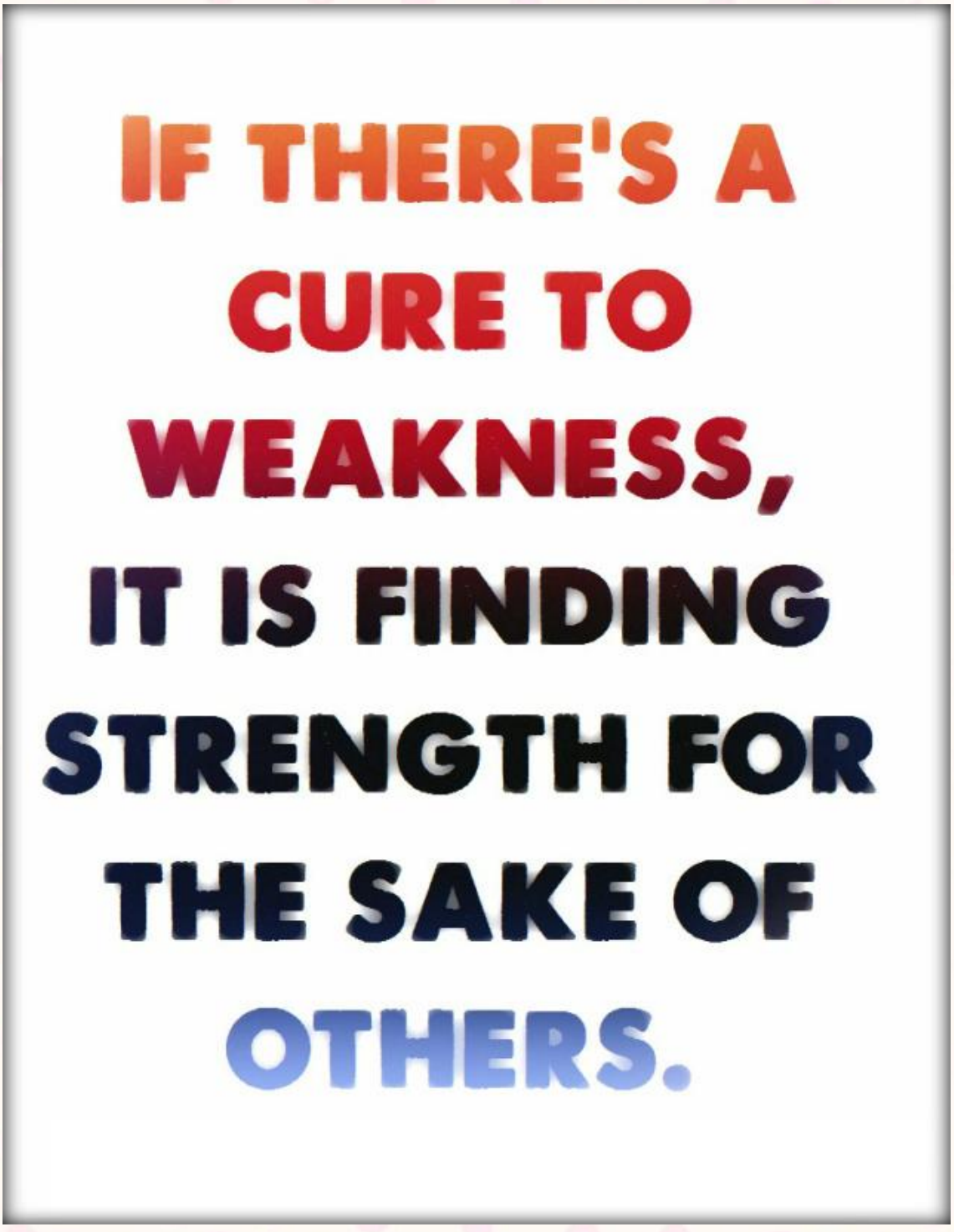
Okay, I'm in need of some outside opinion.

Specifically I need *your* opinions because, when it comes to writing titles for my stories, I'm just total garbage. So, I'm not going to tell you *anything* about this book – I'm just going to list three possible ideas, and it'd be great if you could vote on one of the options. Honestly, I think agents, editors, publishers & marketers tend to change titles, but I nevertheless need to attract their attention before that stage.

So here are the options. Please choose your gut-impulse choice.

What title would make you pick up this book?

Finding Strength for Others



And somehow this helps me to feel better.
~Catherine

23Jan2013

Catherine Goes Boob Shopping

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Life

Today, we're going to talk about boob shopping. Boob as in a single breast (*i.e. a prosthesis*). Last week, Zsolt and I decided to finally act upon my long-desired craving for a breast that properly fit my body. Therefore, after waiting and waiting for an opportunity (*i.e. insurance*) we decided to go for it.

I call this picture: "Chronically Awkward." You can see the nerves.

SO! I called up my local mastectomy boutique, aptly named Kelly's Boutique, and arranged an appointment with Diane Hayes who owns the shop. It's easy to tell that Diane has her heart in this business. The shop itself is named after her sister-in-law and youngest brother's wife, Kelly, who lost both breasts to inflammatory breast cancer and later passed away from the disease. Diane herself seems to genuinely thrilled when she can help a woman feel better about her body.

The appointment was made.

Fast forward to the next day, Zsolt and I get on the bus and head to the St. Laurent area. We hop off near the St. Hubert Chicken Restaurant (*drool*) and cross the road to Kelly's Boutique.

Now I'll be honest. I almost cancelled this appointment about six times before actually walking through that door. Zsolt had to talk me down . . . he told me it was okay. Everything would be fine.

Why was I so nervous? I don't know. I was worried about filling out the insurance since I've never done that before in my life, worried about whether I should get a properly-fitting breast form at this point, stressed over something else that had just happened in our lives that I'll mention another time (*sorry that's so cryptic*), and just worried in general. It is my natural tendency to worry.

So we arrive at the boutique, and step into the store.

Sensory overload! Suddenly I went from anxiety to full on "shopping!" mode: There were scarves, hats, BRAS, bikinis, and bathing suits everywhere. The place is PACKED with colourful and varying product. And while I totally avoided the hats . . . because they kinda make me shiver with memories of chemotherapy, I gravitated to the bras.

Bras. Bras. Bras! Pretty bras that you wouldn't have seen three years ago when I was first diagnosed. There was one particularly black and purple number I really loved. The price tag was beyond my range, since my insurance doesn't cover clothing for mastectomy, but I am nevertheless so glad to see that designers are finally catching on. Women want to feel attractive, even after their breasts are taken away.

Okay, so I was playing in the land of bras and bikinis, when Diane's assistant let me know that Diane was done with her previous client and I could come along now.

Come along where, exactly? (*My nerves were rising again*.)

We were led to a backroom with a fainting couch (*apparently, I'm not the only person who gets nervous*) and a full length mirror, and possibly a feather boa – but that could just be from my imagination. Zsolt and I went into the room and waited.

Soon, Diane came in. After a few questions about what I was looking for, ("a boob?") she said, "okay, let's see." So that's how I found myself, once again, exposing my chest to a stranger. Oh my goodness, if I had a dollar for every person who has seen my chest – I could at least buy 3 pints of Hagendaz ice cream.

Again, I was nervous. But Diane was so professional and *so* certain in what I needed that the nerves lightened. While she disappeared to pull options, I waited on the sofa wrapped in a slippery bathrobe and took pictures of the place with Zsolt's phone for this blog post. Then she came back and we looked at her pick.

The BOOB of CHOICE: An Amonea breast form that *sticks to my chest!!!* We played with the sizes till we found the perfect match, and then she showed me how to stick on the breast. It's fascinating stuff – and it's not

itchy at all. I was so freaking thrilled with my new boob, I was pushing out my chest for Diane and Zsolt to judge the shape. The two of them (my breasts, not Diane and Zsolt) just looked so very pretty inside that black and purple bra.

Sold! I took the breast.

Do you want to know the very best aspect of this stick-on breast? Well, because it sticks to me and doesn't sit inside a pocket within the bra that means –

Hold on.

Drum roll.

That means . . .

I CAN BUY ANY BRA I WANT! WooooHooooo! Bring on the pretty zebra stripes, satins, COLOURS and cheap frills that LaSenza and LaVieEnRose can offer. It has been over three years since I could walk into a lingerie shop and not despise the rows upon rows of unattainable bras representing a part of me that couldn't be reclaimed. Not without reconstruction, and I long-ago choose never to reconstruct.

But now, with my stick on & not-itchy & not too heavy breast – I can be pretty, and it can done in a way that I can afford.

So that's the lovely news.

It was a good experience, and I'm so glad I didn't cancel that appointment.

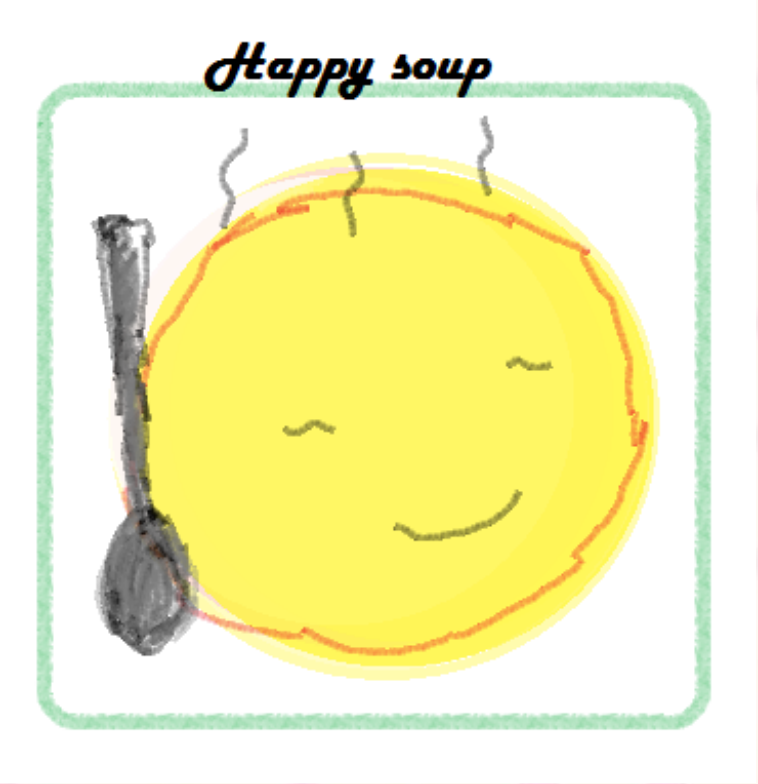
If you are in Ottawa, and want to visit Kelly's Boutique, here's her website with all the needed information: http://kellysboutique.ca/

5Feb2013

Zsolt and the Beanstalk

Posted in Uncategorized

It's hard to start this story. I don't exactly know where to begin. I guess I can start with a fabricated fairytale, since that's like stepping into tepid bathwater before turning on the HOT.



You know the story of Jack and the Beanstalk? Jack is this good-hearted fellow who in desperation trades the family cow for some magical beans. Well, let's pretend that my husband, Zsolt, is like Jack: a good-hearted fellow who goes after a year of searching for work finally found some magical beans. And when planted, a sturdy bean stalk began growing that stretched all the way up to the sky.

What could Jack/Zsolt do but climb that bean stalk? So up goes Zsolt. As he's climbing, he rips off beans and throws them down to me (Catherine), so I can make bean soup. We are practical like that.

But you know who lives at the top of the beanstalk? A giant holding a golden chicken that lays golden eggs. When the giant sees Zsolt, he's all, "You could be a giant too, if you wanted. But first, you need to prove yourself!"

And so Zsolt, hoping to one day become a giant so that he could also have a gold-laying hen of his own, starts his trials to become a giant. (*He's pretty tall already. Not giant tall, but a very respectable height*.) The giant yells, and shouts, and swings his club. Zsolt ducks, side-steps, and rolls out of the way. This goes on for hours and hours.

But soon the giant starts losing his patience at this little man who never quits. So the giant starts saying: "You are a terrible person! I think you are too small for this business! You call yourself a giant? Think giant-wannabe, think!" And each time he shouts, he becomes smaller and smaller and smaller.

This goes on for quite some time. Until . . .

Until the smell of bean soup begins to waft up into the clouds. Zsolt, who has been fighting like crazy to become a giant, suddenly realizes he's starving. That bean soup Catherine has made smells incredible. Suddenly, he snaps out of his 'must succeed' trance: Golden chickens are nice, but you can't eat them. And the furious giant who wanted to test Zsolt on his competencies . . . he's shrunk down to half a foot tall.

And that's when Zsolt says, "Cluck it."

He turns around and climbs down the beanstalk, and he eats a bowl of bean soup with his wife.

All that to say things have changed, once again, in our household.

But on the bright side, I have my husband back on weekends and weeknights. I'm doing some fabulous work and Zsolt has gained some excellent skills. Things will work out. Things always work out. I guess we're at a point where we need to write our own stories and set our own rules. I don't know what comes next . . . but as long as it involves *health* and *love*. We'll be okay.

We've got our bean soup. We'll be okay.

*All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

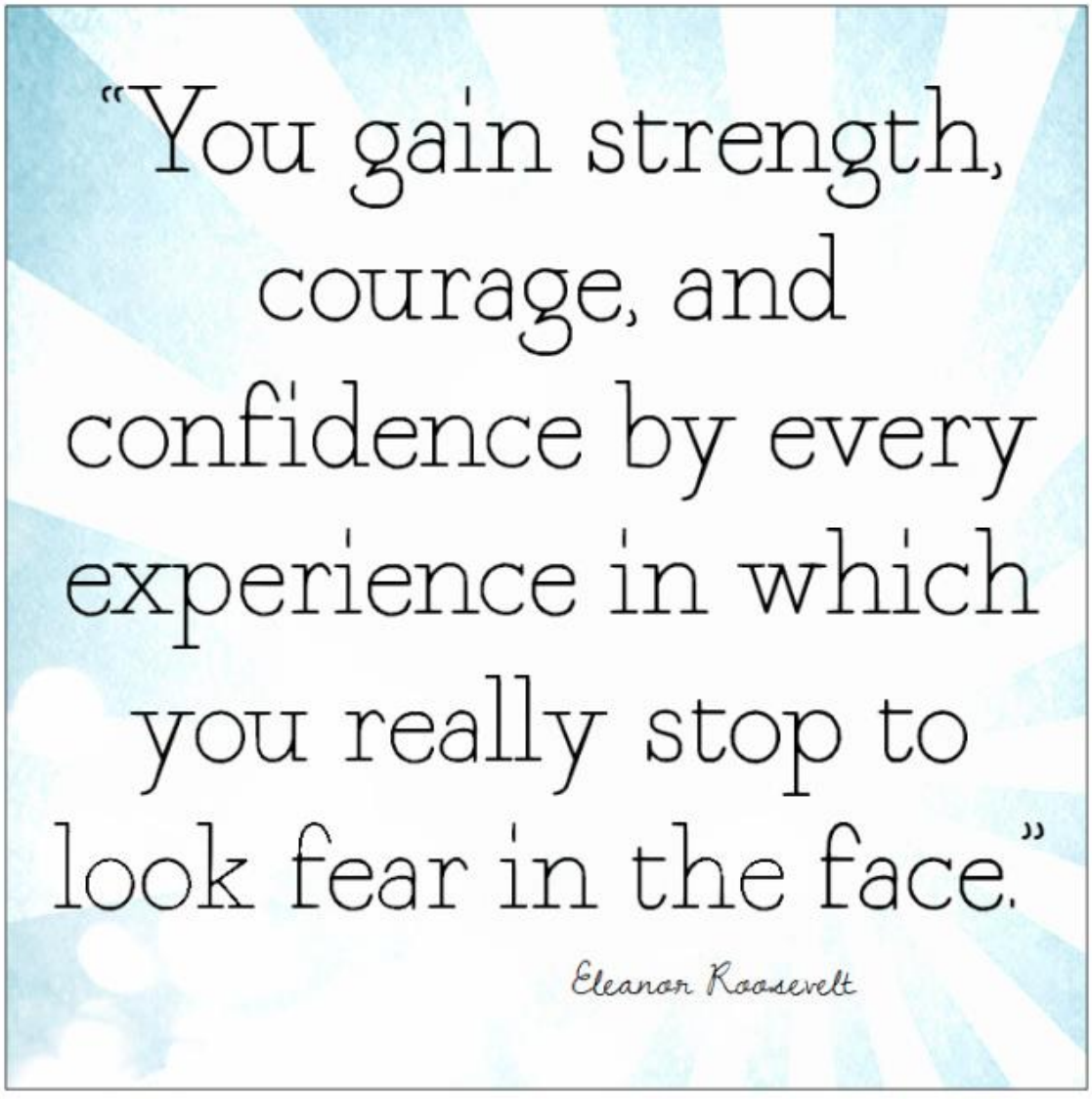
28Feb2013

Posted in Uncategorized

This is my first reblog ever – so here's a test! Hope it works.

ShaSharables

Quotes are wonderful things. They make us feel warm & fuzzy, which therefore makes them perfect for content creation. Why not use brilliant ideas that align with your brand *and* engage your audience? Here's one I made for FacingCancer.ca's Facebook Page.



View original post

3Mar2013

Asking for Help & Feeling Ashamed

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Life, Treatment

I saw this video after Neil Gaimon tweeted it out to his followers. It's a TED Talk featuring Amanda Palmer. Okay, maybe like you, I'd never heard of her before. But Neil Gaimon is a very cool author and I trust his suggestions, so I clicked through.

At first I wasn't sure what to make of her talk, but by the end I was thinking to myself, *"I've got to share this with the awesome people who read my blog."* (Skip to bottom of this post if you're really excited to view it!)

Her message is just SO powerful. The idea that "it's okay to ask." Sure, she's speaking from the point-of-view of an entertainer trying to make a living . . . but going beyond that, to the concept of asking, to the concept of supporting. It's amazing. It's powerful.

I've said it before, and I'll say it again right now. It was damn hard to ask for help during chemotherapy – hard to the point of shaming. And yes, when I finally *did* break down far enough to say I wasn't okay, people were incredible in giving their support. I think of my family, I think of my friends, I think of my cousins, my aunts, my boss, my colleagues, my husband. They were all incredible.

So why – *WHY* – so much shame in asking?

There is power in asking for help. Maybe Amanda is right. Maybe this is the future – and not just for music, but for dreams and lives and ambitions. I know of one women in the US who is struggling to pay her medical bills (*Okay, I know of several women in the US who are struggling – universal healthcare is a GOOD thing, not a communist thing*) and her friends are crowd-sourcing to help her buy a new car (*replacing her ancient clunker*) to get between treatments. I know of another young woman who has started an amazing charity called A Fresh Chapter, and she's been raising funds to help twelve other people discover life after cancer.

Whether it's thinking big or just thinking about the next meal – what is wrong with asking for help?

So here is the video. Don't get weirded out by the 'live statue' intro. It's worth watching through – this may well be the future of creative work. And asking for help, that's something we should all be able to do without shame.

https://www.ted.com/talks/amanda_palmer_the_art_of_asking?language=en

8Mar2013

The Coolness & Tragic End of Antoine Legros

Posted in Canada, Life, Novels and Stories

There are some amazing stories that slip away into the past. But ever since Zsolt's started digging into our family tree – they just keep popping back up! Today I want to share one of them with you.

This fellow with the beard is my great-great-great-great grandfather on my father's side of the family, Antoine Legros dit Lecount (*which means, his nick name was 'Lecount' – i.e. The Count, a nickname often given to people who were being said to behave in an aristocrat fashion – i.e. overly proud*). Antoine was a voyager – he was the man you'd imagine trekking through the pre-Canadian wilderness leading traders, exchanging with first nations, delivering mail between forts, and living off the land. He was contracted by the Hudson Bay Company in exchange for some cash, cotton shirts, shoes, one silk handkerchief and a necklace.

In short, he was really cool.

Unfortunately, his life was cut short with a double barrel shot gun. It sounds horrible – it *is* horrible. But one thing that nevertheless remains touching is that in the last moments of his life, he saved his son from a paranoia-crazed English man. Here is that story, taken from the original account of witness, James Bruce in 1840, later to be transcribed into *Artic Expeditions* (1877) by David Murry Smith.

The Murder of Antoine Legros

"James Bruce and Thomas Simpson were hired by Hudson's Bay Co. to explore and survey along the north coastline of America between the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. They were traveling with a large group of Indians and Metis (mixed-blood). The following incident happened in 1840, the third year of the expedition on the Pembina Trail, Dakota Territory.

In early June Bruce and Simpson left the main camp along with Antoine Legros, Sr., Antoine Legros, Jr. and John Bird; the last three were Metis. The party of five intended to travel ahead of the main body, arriving at St. Peters quickly.

After a few days of travel, Simpson began complaining of feeling unwell and wanted to return to the Red River Colony. On June 14, Simpson and the other four men turned back. Simpson was restless and uneasy and commented that he would never recover from his ailment. The party traveled until an hour and a half past sundown, arriving within a mile of the Turtle River.

The men then began arranging their camp for the night. All the accessories of prairie travel surrounded them. Their horses were grazing nearby, and a cart for the outfit occupied the center of the camp. All were armed with guns and pistols, for the Sioux were on the warpath. But within themselves were elements more dangerous than the tomahawks of the savages; only two of the five would ever leave that spot again; for three it was their last camping ground.

Bruce, Bird, and the elder Legros began raising the tent. With his back to Simpson, Bruce heard a gunshot and turning he saw that Simpson had shot Bird, who groaned and fell to dead. He then saw Simpson turn and shoot Legros who staggered and fell against the camp cart then fell to the ground.

Immediately Bruce and the younger Legros ran a short distance away to where the horses were tied. Simpson called out to Bruce asking if he was aware of any intention to kill him (Simpson). Bruce replied he knew of no such intentions. Then Simpson said he shot Bird and Legros because they intended to murder him in the night for his papers.

The elder Legros, who was still alive, asked Simpson to allow his son to leave unharmed to which Simpson complied.

Simpson then offered Bruce five hundred pounds to go back with him to Red River Colony and "keep the affair secret". He then asked Bruce if he knew the way back to Red River. When Bruce said he did, Simpson gave the order to harness the horses.

The elder Legros now called to his son to come and embrace him one last time. It was then that Simpson asked Legros if it was true that he and Bird meant to kill him to which the dying man replied, "No".

All this time the explorer was standing in the middle of the camp with his gun in his hand. At this time Bruce and Legros Jr. went to the horses, mounted and rode away to the main camp. Immediately after arriving they gave the alarm, and joined by five men, returned to the scene of the murders.

Bruce found Simpson dead in the cart, shot in the head with his own gun. In his report, Bruce stated that Simpson did not display symptoms of insanity. There were no papers found in Simpson's belongings indicating a reason for the murders. Another report suggests Simpson had become a 'madman'.

The three men were moved to the churchyard in Red River Colony where they were interred in the same grave.

The younger Lecount was never asked to give a statement."

21Mar2013

Sick at the Same Time – Adventures in Hungary

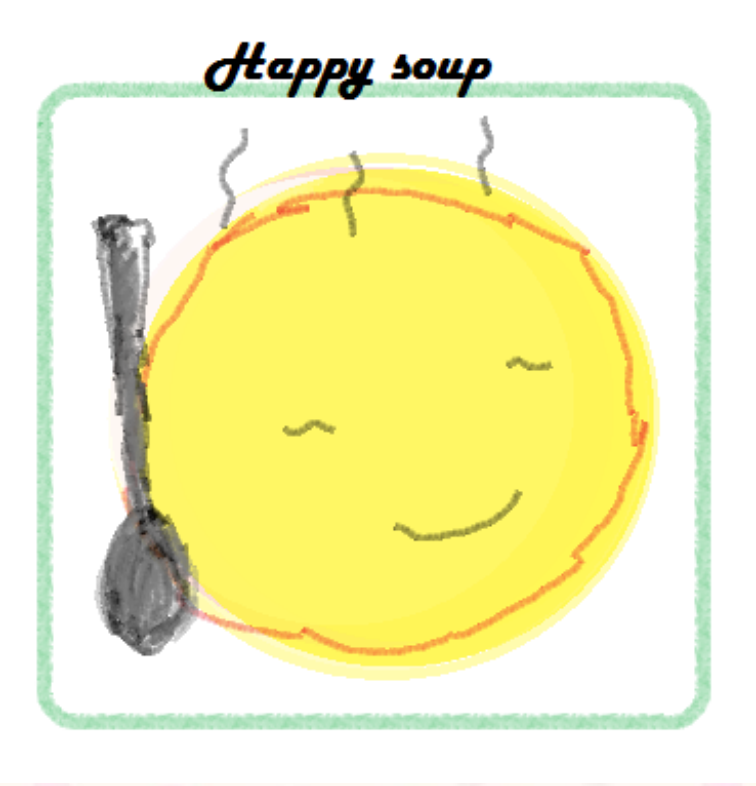
Posted in Finding Home, Food, Life, Love

Well, we're in Hungary!

After 10 hours of flying, 12 hours of train-riding and a few days spent in Budapest, Zsolt and I have finally arrived in the beautiful Pecs. So be prepared, because the next little while on Bumpyboobs is basically guaranteed to be adventures in Hungary-land (*i.e. Magyorszag if you want to say that in Hungarian*).

Our first adventure in this country of fruit, paprika, barking dogs, salami, red roofs and a language that continues to baffles me:

Catherine and Zsolt's totally awesome adventures of getting SICK!!



We've never been sick at the same time before, and I have to admit, we handled it rather differently. Zsolt was cheery as anything. I was full of WTF!! anger, at least on the first day when I felt like a heavily congested achy grumpy zombie lady.

I ought not to go into specifics . . . but I will just a little. Ever since chemotherapy (*I don't like how often that line reappears in my stories*), I've been avoiding getting sick. My mantra is "Happy, Healthy and Cancer-Free." Though lately I try and remove cancer from the equation entirely, and just say, "Healthy & Happy." Therefore, this means keeping a minimum two or three meter distance from sick people – and running away as soon as possible, not touching anyone who is sick, not using the same cutlery or food, and just NOT getting sick. Because sick reminds me of being *sick*. And I never want to be that sick again.

So I was rather pissed when I caught this cold. But it's only a cold, and I was being stupid. However, no matter how logical my brain was in saying that, my emotions were throwing me all over the place and were desperate to lay blame, and simply not-feel-this-way-anymore.

Zsolt, meanwhile, was sipping his tea and wearing his comfortable clothes, and enjoying this little reprieve from the business of life. He says to me, "We're sick at the same time!" like it's cause for celebration.

So I decided to try and lighten up. These stupid colds are going to happen in life. And when I'm a mother, I reckon it may become inevitable. Holding so much deep rooted anger toward illness isn't going to do me or my body any favours. It's my personal take-away: I need to address this source of anger.

But in the meanwhile, we've been eating meat soup, which is really chicken soup. Oh my God it is delicious. Zsolt's mom puts all kinds of vegetables into the broth (e.g. carrots, radishes, broccoli, potato, brussels sprouts, turnips, garlic, onions, etc.) along with the chicken, and then she strains everything out so what's left is this golden tasty broth that might of well have descended from heaven.

This has been our medicine for the past three days, and it's basically all I've eaten (chicken and veg bits thrown in).

I'll tell you what, when the body is feeling down, there's nothing better than chicken soup. Actually, yes there is! Chicken soup that I didn't need to make for myself. Add some paprika potato chips to that arrangement and you've achieved perfection.

Anyhow, this is really just the first adventure. And while it might not be a typical travel-log experience, it was actually quite revealing for me. I still have no interest in voluntarily getting sick, or ever getting *sick*, but it would be good not to get so angry about life's small & inconsequential bumps.

Interesting Magyar (Hungarian) Fact:

It is chive season in Hungary at the moment. People are allowed to pick the chives (*cut the chives?*) from the forest since it grows there all over. However, each citizen is restricted to 2kg of chives.

Now, isn't that interesting?

One of my favourite things about Hungary (*yeah, I might be saying that often*), is that the year revolves around a calendar of food and/or occasions that honour that food. Some day I'd like to make a calendar of all these lovely seasons, just for my own pleasure. Forget the months and the days – live by the seasons.

And that's all I got for today! See you later

This Is Not A Post: #Feminism & Family

Here is a link to an article that I read, which made a lot of sense. My parents have been doing this 'make it work for you & your family' sort of approach every since I can remember. While I don't consider the only definition of success as being at the top of an organization (*because there's many different ways to be strong, and important, and influential, and passionate*) – I *do* think things are changing, and this balance between work and life is for the better. Sure this is about Feminism, but more so I think it's about family . . .

Anyhow. This isn't a quirky post from a bumpy life, instead it's a well constructed article on women in the workplace. Click through if you dare!

Catherine

"Why Women Still Can't Have It All"

25Mar2013

Searching for David and Hajni

Posted in Fun, Life, Travel

(*Just a point of information for readers who may be like, what the heck? David & Hajni are a lovely couple we meet while in Portugual just after I had finished radiation treatment. We stayed at the same guest house and played MANY rounds of Zsir (meaning grease), a Hungarian card game*.)

This is a far-off, long-shot of a chance (like BIG TIME). But if David or Hajni happen to read this post, please do know that we'll be in Budapest around the 4th-8th ish, and would be glad to meet up. I tried your old email address, but it's not working. There's only a micro slim chance you'll see this, but nevertheless – here's to giving it a shot!

And to everyone else who was notified of a post, and instead read this strangely targeted and personalized message. I have instead for you the worst joke you'll ever read, which I used to share with people when I was younger thinking it was totally awesome (*because I made it up myself*).

What do you get when you stuff a house full of cheese?

. . .

Cottage cheese!

And that's why I've never gone into comedy.

28Mar2013

Making Circles and Plans and Circles and Plans

Posted in Canada, Fertility, Finding Home, Life, Love

It's hard to be caught between two long-distance families. It's hard not only for us, but also for the people we leave behind with each plane ride back to that slippery concept of "home."

Yesterday evening Zsolt, his mother and I were at the kitchen table looking at some stitching she had done. Anna is very creative, and she's been working on a beautiful pillow case of red flowers. It's taken her several months to stitch, on and off as she watches television in the evening.

Anyhow, there we were yesterday evening. The dinner had been put away, and we were sitting at the table just talking, which is a bit of a rarity since normally it's a choice between playing cards, watching a movie, or me escaping to our upstairs bedroom where I can watch some English webseries and chill out. Frankly, I'm not a fan of the movies, and while the games are fun I get tired of them easily, but talking . . . talking is very, very interesting. Even if it's all in Hungarian.

Anna was telling us about all kinds of things. One was that she had wanted to be an architect, but ended up in banking instead because her parents thought she was too skinny to do the co-op necessary for architecture that took place on a construction site. (*She says she could have done it, but her parents worried she could not.*) And so she studied accounting instead and ended up working at a bank.

Interesting no? I'm accustom to seeing my mother-in-law as a *mother*. Cooking, caring, and fussing all the time – that's what I see. I've never met the young woman who had aspired to design buildings and dared to get married in a miniskirt. But I bet we would have gotten along, had we been able to understand one another.

And then she said what somewhat struck an even deeper chord within me. Anna related that back when she had children, (*back when she was working 12 hour days at the bank, coming home late at night and only seeing her kids on the weekend – it was communism in Hungary back then, very work-focused rather than family-centric . . . had she been given the choice, I suspect she would have stayed at home more often*) – back when she had children, she had wished they'd hurry along and grow up already. And now that she is older with far more time, she kinda wishes the reverse, that they could go back to being kids again.

I guess it's empty nest and missed opportunities. And it made me feel a little bit frustrated with our own lack of children. We *never* talk about the baby stuff with Zsolt's parents. They understand we need to wait before trying. But part of me would love to scoop up all those grandmotherly vibes and pour them over my own kids. I feel as though there's a circle of life here, and we're missing an essential loop.

Because really, Zsolt is never going to be four years old again. And, I reckon, instead of wishing him back to childhood, it should be wished that he become one heck of an amazing man, which he is – supportive, loving, caring, and growing; I think that her loneliness is more a result of family being far away, then her children no longer being children. At least, that is my guess.

Of course, I've known for a very long time that Anna sees Zsolt as her little boy. It makes all the sense in the world. She's so full of love, and it's the sort of thing that needs to be passed forward. But at the same time, I shouldn't worry about her empty nesting, should I? That's her journey to navigate. Though it is still a little heartbreaking.

Children grow up, parents step back, and families continue in a way that spreads outward rather than closing back inwards. It's a theme I've written about in this blog, and loads in my fiction – and to be honest, since leaving Canada those many, many years ago for England and therefore taking my first steps 'outward', I have been just a little bit heart-broken. Once you step 'out' you can't step back 'in'.

Kids won't solve long distance. But that's not why I want to have children. I simply feel like we're ready. It's time. Let's continue the circle. And not for the grandparents, though they are in my heart too, but because it's right, and Zsolt & I want it. And frankly, we've got a whole lot of love to pass forward as well.

So, I'm counting down. April in Hungary. Then May in Canada. Scans at the hospital in June. If all goes well, then I need to wait three more months before trying. And then we try. And then we see.

And I have no idea what will happen next.

15Apr2013

Bob and the Beanstalk

Posted in Fun, Novels and Stories

Hi, okay it has been some time since I've posted and that because I've been having adventures, which I'll make a point to share soon

Lately I've been submitting to agents navigating a dead computer screen (so this is being shared from my husband's smart phone) and traveling. But also I took a pinch of time to adapt Zsolt's employment story into a fun fable, now shared on Wattpad. So if you feel in the mood for a quick and easy read, please do check it out. Hopefully more will come!

See link below for "Bob and the Beanstalk", and read you later!! ~Catherine

http://www.wattpad.com/story/4951643?utm_source=android – on the Wattpad app
http://www.wattpad.com/download

17Apr2013

Inspiration at the Kitchen Table

Posted in Life, Travel

Jimminy Crickets, it's been a while since I've written. But I've got a story for you, sort of . . . a spur of the moment decision story of going to Italy. Here's how it happened:

Later in the month, Zsolt and I will be taking a train ride (*a damn long train ride*) to Prague to meet with friends and have fun. But we had the idea that Zsolt's parents, Anna and Laszlo, could come along with us a couple days earlier and explore the city. Zsolt's parents don't speak English, so it limits their ability to travel. (*Also, Anna gets really nervous when going to new places. She reads every single bit of travel information available, memorizes words from the dictionary, makes lists of translations . . . and then still gets completely lost whenever we arrive in town.*)

Anyhow, while they wanted to go on a trip with us, they really didn't want to go to Prague. This is so weird. My cousin told me it's one of his favourite cities in Europe. He said, "You have to go to Prague." I've heard nothing but rave reviews for this city. But Zsolt's parents don't want to go. And actually, Zsolt's not so bothered either. Apparently it's less charming because it's Eastern European . . . less exotic for them, less alluring . . . also, Zsolt says it is a tiny city and there's not much to do.

But it's PRAGUE! It's beautiful. What else does one need?

Anyhow, they suggested we go somewhere else. So there we are at the kitchen table, sitting around the plates of cheese, kolbasz (salami-like but better), peppers and bread, wondering were we could go. I suggested we just go up to Budapest and enjoy the baths and very inexpensive opera. But then somehow the conversation wound it's way to other places . . . places that would take hours and hours by car, which *then* led to "Why don't we fly somewhere?" But where? "Italy!" Which is when Zsolt's dad become very, very excited – saying he'd do anything to go to Italy. I might not understand everything they say, but I know Laszlo is excited when he starts speaking really, really fast and then jumps up from his chair – runs out the room – and calls back to us that he'd "do anything to go to Italy!" (*I can't remember why he left the room. Let's just leave that hanging*.)

So, of course we look up flights and Ryan Air is having a sale. Maybe people in North America don't know about Ryan Air. I've always been a bit suspicious of them, since their prices are so stupidly low . . . they are the lowest of low cost airlines in Europe. I think the owner once proposed to have people standing up on flights . . . it didn't pass of course, but that just gives you an idea of how cheap they are.

Right. Anyhow, Ryan Air had a stupidly low price on flights to Pisa. And wham, bam, thank you ma'am, we are booked and flying to Florence! One second we're at the kitchen table eating kobasz, the next we're on the plane flying to Italy. Crazy!

It was an extremely fast trip. We arrived in Pisa, took a train to Florence, spent a day and a half in Florence, took the train back to Pisa, went up the leaning tower (*where I had vertigo . . . it felt like there wasn't enough room, and I was going to fall over, and nothing was safe. Mind you, every other person up there seemed just fine. That's me in the picture trying not to have a breakdown, and displaying my conditioning to 'always smile for the camera'*), walked through a very exciting market where I bought a tiny (*and wonderfully cheap*) piece of art that I think will look fantastic alongside my other bits of art, grabbed the return plane and flew home.

Knackering! But also, a real privilege. It is such a privilege to see the world, to enjoy other cultures, to hear stories from Italian women about the sons who married English girls and now live in Scotland, to walk these ancient roads, to see masterpieces first-hand, to eat gelato non-stop, to explore . . . it was lovely, and it was a privilege.

So that's the story of that. And there will be more travelling to come. I've been trying to fit in my work between flights, trains and car rides, and I have to say it's great to be flexible in online engagement and ghost-blogging, and assistance giving. I love that I can live anywhere and still have a working life. That's quite the privilege too. The hard part is that my computer screen totally died. This is the third time ACER COMPUTERS (*if you are reading this post*), and while I love the speed and convenience of my laptop . . . staring at a black screen makes it rather difficult to work. But it's all being managed. Once back in Canada I'll replace the screen.

On a side note, my drawing pad also died. I'm not sure if it just needs a new battery . . . but time will tell.

So all of this wonderfulness was experienced this past weekend, and I'm very grateful. Then last Monday in the night I read about Boston and the bombings. And I have to ask, how does any of it make sense? How? This world is a gift. I've seen people be saints and savours to one another. Working in the online community of support, I've seen strangers comfort strangers, and compassion shared freely. Walking through the amazing streets of Europe, I think of all the beauty that's been poured in here . . . and then at the same time, the wars, the holocaust, the massacres . . . I think of the goodness and the evil. And I don't know what to say.

All I know – right down deep inside me – is that people want to be good, and people can always be better. The bombings were heartbreaking, and my thoughts are going out to the city of Boston. I know within that madness people were proving just how good they could be. But it still breaks my heart to hear of the hateful things. I just don't know what to say.

I'm glad for what I've been given in life. And I hope that kindness, art, exploration, openness and compassion win-out over that dirty and destructive word, 'hate'.

And that is the end of this post!

19Apr2013

Riding the train in Hungary

Posted in Finding Home, Life

I sometimes wonder if Hungarians realise how lucky they are to be riding the train. It may be one of the slowest services in Europe but on a bright day when the cabin windows are down and the green and yellow fields seem to roll along endlessly, I can't imagine a better way to travel. Zsolt and I have started our week of train traveling. First to Erd, later through Budapest, and then onto Prague. We read and look out the window. We travel through long tunnels in total darkness as the wheels scream. We listen and watch as old men hit on groups of teenage girls. We sweat in the sunshine and breath the enveloping warmth.

And in between it all my mind thinks about stories and my fingers get to writing.

So here is what is on my mind:

Yesterday we meet one of Zsolt's high school friends for some ice cream downtown. Let's call him The Big Man, because he's tall and wide like a superhero. The Big Man is a guy who always looks like he is on the go, cruising for ladies and making important deals. Yesterday when we met, he showed up in a dark leather jacket and wore mirrored sunglasses even though it was about twenty-five degrees outside.

Anyhow, we meet with TBM and after some chatting I did not understand (whenever Zsolt and TBM meet, there is a lot of Hungarian spoken. I think they talk about women and life – but who knows?), we went off for some ice cream.

Here is something you'd never expect: Zsolt's highschool buddy, TBM had a stroke three years ago this Sunday. That stroke took away his ability to speak and walk – everything had to relearned. But you wouldn't know it to look at him today. And I guess since that happened (right around the time I was diagnosed with cancer) I've seen him as a different person – not as anyone less impressive, but certainly as someone more relatable.

And yesterday TBM said something that made him seem even more normal.

Even though he comes off looking successful and confident . . . not all is well. He's looking for work, as are so many these days. When I asked him (since his English is excellent), "If you could do anything or be anything, what what you do or be?"

He replied, "That's the problem, I don't know. I could lie and make something up, but the truth is that I don't know. I feel purposeless."

It's hard to get anywhere when you don't know where you are going. But on the other hand, not all who wander are lost. I don't know when the window of finding yourself closes in society, but I reckon it ought to stay open as long as needed, and then reopened again and again to air out our lives and take in fresh perspectives.

But to feel purposeless is a heavy thing. I wouldn't have suspected it since TBM really does come off as a 'big man' in more than just the physical sense – he's just somehow impressive.

So there you have it. Everyone has their struggles, from physical challenges like strokes, growth spurts, back pains, losing breasts, etc., and everyone has personal challenges too. So the next time I look upon someone with defensive judgement (because I have an instinctual distrust toward people who seem too cool), I will try to remember TBM and the vulnerability he so honestly shared.

And that's all I have to say about that.

30Apr2013

Tirano

Posted in Travel

We woke up this morning at 3 am to catch the plane for Milan. Guess who wasn't a happy camper? After saying goodbye to Hungary and family at the airport (I might have more to say about that in another post) we flew into Milan, grabbed a train to the city centre, grabbed another train after that and were on our way to Tirano, a small (tiny) 'city' in the valley of the Italian Alps.

And since arriving, also since taking a nap, I've between smiling like crazy. This is the place for me. You can keep you large and striking cities; give me flows of streams and waterfalls tumbling down mountain sides; give me vineyards that layer themselves one after the other up and up into the clouds; give me a cool rainy day with a complete lack of tourists (except us); give me a riverside hotel room and mountain view; give me baskets of strawberries for only 60 cents. That is all I ask to make me happy.

Gosh, I've missed the mountains. One summer over ten years ago, I had the joy of working on top of a mountain for the Jasper Tramway in Alberta. That was a very special time. Looking up into the mountains, particularly when the air was damp and cloud hung low in random wisps – it felt like being wrapped up in God.

So, you can understand why Tirano makes me smile.

Zsolt and I spent a few happy hours walking around this compact place and snapping pictures like crazy. We must have looked ridiculous. It was raining all day here – so whenever Zsolt pulled out the phone to snap a picture, I'd hold the umbrella way, way high up above his head, and somehow we kept walking around like that! Did I mention this umbrella is BROKEN and half flops down into us? Well, there you go.

The smile didn't leave my face for the entire afternoon. Maybe it is because we had time together, just the two of us. Maybe it was because I was delirious for lack of sleep. But most likely it was because I felt so blessed and so happy to enjoy this beautiful place.

And tomorrow gets even better!! We will be going through the Alps on the Bernina express. It will be spectacular.

9May2013

A Post for Karen

Posted in Life, Love

I can't imagine what it is to lose the most important person in the whole world. I just can't. Maybe one day that will change, but I pray it's no time soon.

A friend lost her husband this past week. Her name is Karen, and she's full of love and enthusiasm and support for the ladies online who have been through cancer. I don't know of any way to help, or any way to alleviate what she's going through – and I'm certain she's not checking her RSS feed – but just on the off chance that Karen reads this, I would like to make her (*make **you**, Karen*) smile just a little.

So here's my contribution to your day today. I hope you enjoy the video. It seemed special to me in its simplicity. (*And thanks to CoffeeJitters for sharing this initially*)

Dedicated to Karen, here's a video on finding what you're looking for – and so often, I think we're looking for love in all its forms.

https://vimeo.com/65097808

10May2013

Trying to Date a Literary Agent

Posted in Novels and Stories, Writing

I'm going to tell you a very short conundrum about falling in love. It's not a mushy story, and there will be no tears or chocolates. It's really just that if you're a novelist, or even better – an aspiring novelist, you've most likely read article after article that says the same thing when it comes to agents and their choices: Understandably, they need to fall in love.

Which means that finding an agent isn't like finding a job at your local bank, or local clinic, or local book store. Finding an agent is way more like finding the love of your life.

Easy as pie! Right? Right . . .

But since finishing *Postcards from Claire*, it's become my job to get it noticed. And traditionally speaking, that first step for any book that's come of age, is to find an agent who is ready to take its hand.

And that is a-okay with me. I adore working with passionate people, and how much more passionate does it get than *love*? So yes, I'd love to find an agent who loves *Postcards*. That, of course, means querying and writing letters and waiting for responses – 99% of which will be (*have been*) 'no, thank you'. You can really see that the literary field is full of lovely people, because their rejection letters are always so encouraging (*even if generally cut-in from a pre-written form*), and I always think, *shame, you seem like a nice person*.

So, my book and I are out dating, cruising the scene, trying to pick up chi. . . ***wait a second!***

I just realized this today. In looking for a literary agent to represent my book, to fall in love with the Claires, to feel passion over the story lines and plot developments . . . **I've basically become a man**.

How do men do this all the time? How do they chase after girls, hoping to snag a good one, wining and dining them, only to have the ladies always hold the upper hand in the decision making? And if you think I'm being sexist – well maybe I am, but I've always thought that girls in North American society had it easier than guys when it came to 'hooking up'. For instance, take a girl who is a nerd and a guy who is a nerd. Okay, and take them back in time before it was cool to be geeky. Throw them both into that awkward stage of puberty. The girl, despite being different, is still lovely. The guy, while also lovely, is not a girl, and therefore gets thrown into lockers.

So anyhow, when it comes to romance men chase. Okay not always, but often. I've been a woman my whole life, so it's a new experience to court someone as the underdog.

(*This makes me sound like Malibu Barbie of the dating scene, which isn't true. I was and am still that geeky girl who somehow avoids the lockers and managed to find a beautiful nerdy man who loves her like crazy*.)

Anyhow, I think it's kinda hilarious. All I can do is flash my epistolary skills in wooing these agents, so I guess this whole love-affair in the making is very Pride and Prejudice like. One day, some day, someone will love my book. Whether it will be an agent, or readers through self-publishing (*i.e. plan b*), we'll see what happens.

The truth is, I really believe in *Postcards from Claire*. ***I'm*** **in love with story** and that is a very good starting point. And in the meanwhile, I'll keep searching, keep wooing, keep writing. If that all fails, maybe I'll try e-harmony.

14May2013

It's not cool to patent our genes

Posted in Bumpboobs, Treatment

Tying into the news circulating about Angelina Jolie's decision to have a preventative double mastectomy, I thought I might share this video that was sent to me by Robyn Shepard from the American Civil Liberties Union. Now normally I don't go into this stuff – but the video is light and easy and kinda fun to watch. Also, it is on a subject that needs to be noticed: creating patents on our genes.

Angelina urged women today in her article, "My Medical Choice" to get tested for a BRCA mutation if possible – except many women won't get tested because it is NOT possible. Why? Because it's really damn expensive. One company has the patent, and so the research cannot extend beyond *and* it will remain damn expensive to test. Unless . . . unless that patent gets kicked out, and we'll see what happens in the coming weeks.

But why go on explaining when You Tube can do it so much better? Here's the video!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ywj_a0Mulvk

21May2013

A Game of Association

Posted in Blogging and Other Fun, Fun, Life, Novels and Stories, Writing

So what's new? What's what? What's up?

Life has been comprised of little events over these past couple weeks. Little things and little events. The other night before falling asleep I was laying in bed with my husband, Zsolt, and I think we were right on the cusp of dreamland. Something happened, and I cannot remember what it was. Maybe we turned over at the same time, or sighed at the same time, or patted one another's back or belly. All I *can* remember is thinking, 'I have to write about this, it would make a lovely post.'

So lovely, and apparently, so forgettable. Taken away by sleep.

Little things have been happening. There was a wasp nest on the back porch; Zsolt an I constructed a plan to knock the thing down with an Ikea curtain rod. We were going to wait until dusk, when the bees were also sleepy, then he was going to poke the nest, drops the curtain rod, and run into the apartment (not a far run, it's about 1 foot to the screen door). To be honest, I was looking forward to the adventure, but then the handyman who is working on the apartment came by and did it before we could tackle the situation. That's probably for the best, but I feel just a little like the story has been stolen away. So again, a lost opportunity for narrative fun.

But speaking of the back porch, since you've now read to the fifth paragraph in this blog post, I've got myself a little herb garden growing out there. Two basil plants, two mint plants, one lavender plant, one Thai basil plant, one Italian parsley and one clump of chives cut from the garden at my parent's house. They are all planted in a box (*which is very important for non-dying reasons you'll read below*) that I've arranged, and received daylight on and off as the sun arches across the sky.

So the other day, speaking of gardening, we received a letter in the mail from the city of Ottawa. This letter advised us *not* to grow carrots, or really anything edible in the ground. Why? Because the land on which we are now living used to be a garbage dump and the food could poison us! And down the street, on this very same road, there is a house that was put up for sale at an ambitious price tag of $400,000. Can you imagine anyone paying $400,000 to live on an old garbage dump where you can't even grow carrots? But the house, much like my apartment, is beautiful.

In continuation of my publishing quest, I attended an event put on by the local Ottawa Romance Writers' Association. These ladies know their stuff. The most interesting aspect of the talk revolved around self-publishing. It seems to me that with all the stuff I've already written, why the heck *not* find it some professionally designed covers and list them on Amazon as ebooks? They'll be sitting there doing the exact same thing they are doing now on my hard drive . . . and I actually really like the stories. My mom always says I ought to write my stories like I write my blog, which is an opinion that makes sense – though nevertheless I do love my third person woman-in-flux narratives. :)

Last night I was at a good friend's house for dinner. We ate BBQ beer-can chicken and spicy pork with grilled veggies (*and wine, but I don't really drink wine*). It was entirely delicious. Anyhow, as the evening went on and no one left the table – which Zsolt calls, "preserving the harmony of the table" – the conversation somehow rolled around to water, or more specifically ponds and lakes.

Did you know that people (*myself included*) are entirely weird about water? Now you'd think that ducks, and fish, and otters, and turtles would be the ones who are freaked out by bodies of water – because statistically I think they have a wayyyyyy higher chance of being eaten while swimming than humans. But nevertheless, as we (*the dinner party*) chatted about water, it was soon revealed that we all have strange hydrophobic thought patterns.

I blame my father. That's you, Tony. When I was a kid, he had me watch the movie JAWS because it was apparently the best movie of all time and everyone – even children – should check it out. :) To this day, I have to fight back the image of a shark being in the pool with me every time I go swimming. And then extend that to lakes and oceans. It hasn't stopped me from swimming in the Mediterranean, and canoeing in the lake, and doing laps in a pool . . . but it's there in my mind nevertheless, and it makes me uncomfortable.

Another fellow said that he associates lady ghosts hanging above the water. And then another fellow said he always wonders how many dead bodies are in cement boots at the bottom. Eugh!

Zsolt, as usual, was not weird. He doesn't have any qualms with water, lakes, oceans or ponds.

And since I'm now at the end of this post, several paragraphs later, I will ask you: does water freak you out? And if so, what exactly about water freaks you out? I'm guessing at least a few people have stories to share. It cannot be a coincidence that three out of four people at that dinner table have weird associations.

What's your weird association?

P.S.

OH! Another bizarre association concept. One fellow asked the table, what do you think about when I say "best of both worlds?" Here are the answers:

The Star Trek Episode where Picard becomes Borg

Being a King and eating loads of cake

Having the best from a variety of options

Pulling from Europe and the United States

Fascinating or FASCINATING? What do you think of with the expression?

29May2013

Fourth Year Anniversary :)

Posted in After treatment, Life, Love, Writing

Today is May 29th, 2013. I'm in a coffee shop looking out toward the busy street. There are scooters and shops and buses and dogs. It's raining, but I guess that's okay; it means I get to wear my giant rain boots that are this gorgeous royal blue. There is only one piece missing from this scene, and that is my husband. He's considered missing because: 1) He *detests* going to coffee shops and 2) He's at an Invest Ottawa Seminar till after lunch and 3) **It's our wedding anniversary today!**

Four years married Oh my goodness.

Technically, I'd say we've been together for just about 8 years this coming July 25th, but we were *married* in an old church in Pakenham four years ago. The ceremony was led by a young Hungarian priest and given in both languages. I had pink tulips, which are Zsolt's favourite flower, and Zsolt was forced to wear a pink tie to match.

One of my favourite memories from that wedding (*okay, there are many favourite memories, this one just happens to fit into my current mood*) is waiting to walk down the aisle. The family had all walked down to take their seats, Zsolt was waiting at the front with his sister, my bridesmaid was just about to take off, and I was on the verge of panic behind the entrance doors, holding onto my dad's arm. There was this little old lady floating around us and fixing my dress. And just as all this was happening, she gives me a nudge and points up at the ceiling.

High above us on the ceiling is a painting (*a fresco, a mural?*) and amongst the painted clouds is this big eye right in the middle. This little old lady says to me, "I've been coming to this church my entire life, and whenever we'd walk through the entrance, my father always had me look up at that eye. He said it was the eye of God watching over us."

So together we looked up at the eye. At God. At the idea.

That made me feel better. And after that moment, at least in my memory, I got married to the man of my life.

Four years later, I'm here in a coffee shop and my husband is out trying to meet with other entrepreneurs for his business. Never in my life did I ever imagine I'd be a writer & social media 'er' professionally. *Never*. I didn't dare dream those sort of things in high school or university. It was only after having had cancer that the life changed so much and somehow left me following the words: "I am a writer."

And never in my life, in my whole entire span of knowing the man, did I imagine my husband would be starting his own business. Yeah – that's right. When the world won't give you space, you need to make it for yourself, and that's exactly what he's doing. I couldn't be more proud. The Zsoltster is getting into patent analysis (focusing on prior art searches) with online work and consulting, helping inventors and businesses be confident

of their idea before investing in their patents or prototypes. That's why on our anniversary we're prioritizing him going out and learning more, interacting, meeting people. It's important. And we'll celebrate our amazing marriage on the weekend.

Zsolt as an entrepreneur. Wow.

So is God still watching from up there on that ceiling? Four years later, have we arrived exactly where we should be? Cancer was the biggest test for both of us (*and still is, frankly*), but being unemployed, dealing with crazy people, and learning to stop comparing ourselves to others who have followed a *completely* different path has been hard too. (*And we are still learning how to do that last bit.*)

It's so funny. I always said that it was heartbreaking to live between two families and be so far away from both of them. Every time at the airport when we say goodbye to Zsolt's parents and his dad basically RUNS for the airport exit so we don't see him crying – heartbreaking!

But wouldn't it be something if we found a way to work from anywhere? This might be an answer.

We were in this little Italian mountain village not long ago, and the wifi was excellent. I said to Zsolt: "This is where we should come for a month and live. Just because we can."

And you know what else is funny? Zsolt used to say when he was looking for work (*the first time we arrived in Canada, which feels like ages ago now*), "I wish someone would pay me just to search the internet!" (*because he's really good at database searching*) – and now he's starting a business that basically involves in-depth database searches and analysis.

Life is WEIRD.

Life is challenging.

Life keeps surprising me.

Thank GOD for certainties. I knew four years ago that without a doubt I wanted to marry Zsolt. I know for certain that he and I will be together for our lives. And you know what, I knew eight years ago when I first met him that this was the man for me, and *nothing was going to stand in my way*. Certainties are a blessing, and most of mine reside in the fact that 1) I love my husband and 2) I love writing.

And that is why, on my four year anniversary, I'm in here in this coffee shop writing a post to you. Bumpyboobs has been with me for three years. And through this blog we've been growing up and testing ourselves in ways that school never prepared us for. I am grateful for this space and the people who are kind enough to read it. Thank you for being part of this crazy, challenging, and weird adventure through life.

Cheers to finding your voice and vocation, and cheers to being flexible. Cheers to giving support. Cheers to finding friends. Cheers to getting older. Cheers to everything that makes this world so sweet (*including the cup of tea beside me that has now gone cold*.)

And most of all, cheers to my husband – who I love from a place that can't exactly be described, except to say it's deeply rooted. Happy anniversary, Babe. I love you.

~Catherine

P.S. My husband is now on twitter. If you can, please do follow him at @easypatent. Also, check out his website at www.easy-patent.com, and if you know of anyone needing some research and analysis (*and may be considering a patent*) on their great inventive ideas, send them our way

P.P.S. Oh my goodness, for the first time in 3 years, I'm not associating my wedding anniversary with discovering cancer. I mean – FRACK – that did happen, and now I've thought about it. But I didn't really think about that connection for most of this post. Yay for progress. (*And for a good scan at the end of JUNE*)

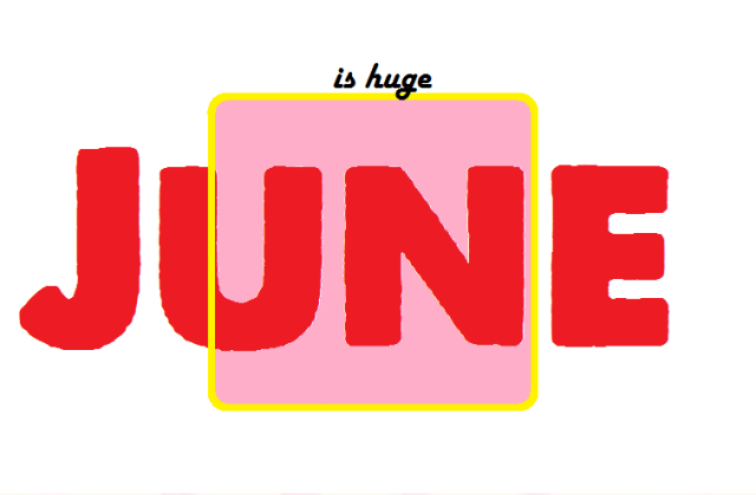
7Jun2013

Tamoxifen, MRI, and Fertility FUN

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Fertility, Life

Okay, here we go. It's June, baby. And I mean ***baby.***

This morning I spoke with a young lady who works in the local imaging clinic. She was booking me in for a MRI this upcoming Tuesday morning. All I could think of as we talked over my 'pre-screening' on the phone was: "I hope I don't cry again. Oh, and I hope I don't pass out. *Annnd* I hope I don't throw up. *AND* there better not be cancer." Not crying would be a glorious first.



(*The other stuff all happened the very first time I had an MRI. The situation was simply too overwhelming, but no wonder given the circumstances of diagnosis.*)

But it's a wonderful thing that I'm even having an MRI. The fact is, a woman in my situation – without any family history or any faulty BRCA genes – isn't generally welcomed to MRI breast screening. But Dr Canada sent in a request, and apparently the requisition went through. It might be because I told them I was kaput with the tamoxifen.

As I said before, it's June, **baby**.

What has been an emotional month for the past couple years now has an additional mark of importance. I'm not just getting screened this month, I'm stopping my tamoxifen. I've now been on Tamoxifen for 2 years and five months. So, basically 2.5 years. The oncologists recommend 5 years, and that might even be going up to 10 years with some new study recently released.

But I'm not waiting 10 years to try and have a baby. You can just forget that.

It's so funny. I was saying to my husband, Zsolt, the other day that there are times in my life when I don't want to be stopped. You know? Like when I want something so much, so badly, and feel that it is *so right* that it takes on a certain sort of power. I really only ever regret the moments where I didn't follow my gut. For choices this big, this important – I need to go with what resonates through my being. And it's saying TRY, DAMN IT, TRY.

I WANT to do this with every single part of my being, and therefore, we are going to do it. We are going to go for a baby.

My oncologist, as I've said before, is of two minds in the matter. In one aspect he thinks I should stay on the Tamoxifen. But on the other side of things, he reckons young women actually benefit from getting pregnant in terms of protection from cancer. He is in two minds. I am in one mind. My single mindedness helps this decision feel a little less scary.

The Tamoxifen stops as of June 15th. We then wait three months. And then, we try. That's all I can do. Try. And I guess give up all dairy products and other food that encourages too much estrogen, since I will be without the Tamoxifen – it's like the least I can do. And make sure I sweat every day since that also burns off extra estrogens.

So Monday is the MRI. June 27th is the mammogram. I'm stopping Tamoxifen on the 15th. And if the scans come back clean, then onward and upward. Today I also swallowed my nerves and called the fertility clinic for a check-up. More on that some other time.

June is a big month.

Everything will be okay.

I'll try not to cry.

10Jun2013

Why I ALWAYS dance at weddings

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Fun, Life

The suitcase has been half unpacked and my purple cocktail dress is draped across the growing pile of clothes on the sofa in our bedroom (*I've got some beige heels somewhere, but I couldn't' tell you where they've gone*). I have a popped blister on my left foot, and my hair is an unwashed bird's nest from all that hairspray I tried to use that ultimately did nothing.

This is going to be a very quick post because of all the things that need doing, including lunch being made.

Here is what I want to say.

This past weekend we attended a wedding of a friend and his beautiful wife. These weddings amongst my friends are fantastic. They are first class celebrations of love, connections and reuniting. I'm so glad to be part of that happiness.

Anyhow, you know how it goes at weddings. The bride and groom have their first dance, and not long after the dance floor becomes deserted as people attend to the bar in order to work up 'courage'. And that's all fair enough.

But I have an MRI on Tuesday.

It's weird to say that. And maybe you don't see the connection? I have a MRI on Tuesday to make sure there's no cancer in my body.

And this past Saturday evening, there was an empty dance floor. Do you see the connection yet?

When it comes to weddings, along with all the lovely conversation, dresses, and food – I choose to DANCE. I need to DANCE. Zsolt and I must DANCE.

It's a strange thing to say, and quite possibly in my head, but I feel like there's this very thin veil between me and my old high-school friends. It has a whole lot to do with having had cancer, fighting cancer, worrying over cancer. You know?

When I dance with my husband at weddings, I'm doing it (*despite the quality of the music*) because I'm alive and capable of moving, because I'm here now and tomorrow holds no promises, and because it makes me so happy to dance and be goofy.

Actually, thinking about this – I'm underestimating the experiences of many of my friends. I know some of them have faced things I'm yet to encounter, and felt things that are just as deeply impacting. Love, loss, life, distance, heart-break, illness, fatigue, divorce, birth, death . . . Jesus! I just realized that as a group, we've seen a lot.

So maybe everyone *does* get it – and that's why, by the end of the night, everyone *is* dancing.

Anyhow, I've got to go and make this soup. But all that to say that when it comes to wedding, I've got to dance. One the light side it makes me laugh, and looking deeper, it makes me feel alive.

Okay, time for lunch. And maybe a shower to follow!

12Jun2013

Well shit, that scared me

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Life

Oh my goodness, what a day . . . this morning I signed into the Facing Cancer Together twitter account (@cancer2gether) and wrote out a morning tweet. Ultimately it went like this:

Okay Wednesday, be awesome!

But it started out like this:

Okay Wednesday, surprise me!

And then I thought, "*well, I just had an MRI so no surprises are necessary.*"

So I switched it to:

Okay Wednesday, delight me!

And then I thought, *"but this isn't really about me."*

Which is how it ended up at general awesomeness. But I feel somewhat convinced that I beckoned the universe to give me a surprise, and therefore shouldn't have been at all shocked when the hospital called to arrange a CT scan.

Okay, I had an MRI *yesterday*. Then *today*, unexpectedly (*without my realizing I'd be sent for one*) I was called in for a CT scan. In fact, they called my parents house, so my mom called me, and then I called the hospital. I would have asked the lady at the CT booking when this requisition had been sent in, but she was SO grumpy that I didn't dare. Instead, I followed up that booking (*for tomorrow by the way*) with a call to my oncologist's nurse.

Of course, their first point of contact is always the answering machine. Therefore I left a message along the lines of this:

"Hi, yeah, Catherine here. I'm just wondering whether the CT scan was requested *before* my MRI or as a *result* of my MRI. CALL ME BACK, PLEASE."

Then I tried to work.

Ha!

Tried.

Failed.

Then Zsolt and I went for a walk. We basically said nothing to one another the entire time. I asked Zsolt at one point what he was thinking, and he said, "Nothing really, I'm in a blank space." So that shows you that he was worried too. Personally, I was thinking: "oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck." And then I started thinking: "If I were to die what would I want to have accomplished?" Which lead me to figure I would want to have a child, if possible, and I would want to publish my fiction novel. That led me to some far-fetched day dreams of crowd-funding to raise money for printing the novel and distribution (*apparently I have some traces of business woman inside of me, since even in panic mode I was making this ridiculous plan*), and people would probably give because they felt sorry for me and the book would sit on their shelf unread as a memorial to that awesome chick who once was, and maybe is somewhere else beyond whatever we know, but it'd never win a GG, and what the fuck is going on, and oh my God I hope it's nothing, and holy shit I hope it's nowhere else in my body . . . etc.

Of course, that reality is always a risk. It's a risk having had breast cancer. It's a risk resulting from stopping tamoxifen. IT'S a real life risk. And today I had just the smallest taste of how it would feel to hear more bad news.

The good news: I've been living my dream, and don't hold many regrets. I still WANT to have kids, and WANT to publish my writing, and felt that even when in panic mode. So I'm glad it's all congruent.

The bad news: This shit can be scary. And it can be real.

Then we came home and I decided to try and be productive. That involved working on a slide show for the local community organization. Somewhere between deciding on transitions between pictures (*fade in, pop up, vortex, flip, conveyor belt, and so on*!) the mobile phone rang. It was my doctor's nurse.

Essentially, she has no idea about this CT scan. No clue! But as for the MRI, here is what she said:

"Your MRI has come back indicating no signs of cancer."

YES. FUCK YES. HIGH FIVE. WOOOHOO. Oh shit. That was stressful. I need a nap . . .

None of which I said to the nurse. Anyhow, I can therefore assume that this CT scan is just to get a full body impression *before* I move forward to try and get pregnant, and is not at this moment (*and hopefully in no future moment*) connected to any sort of recurrence or cancer.

Zsolt and I hugged. I called my mom. But damn it, it was scary. Today brought some awesomeness, but not before delivering a big dose of surprise and panic.

Now I'm on my back porch, and typing this out to you. Hello, how are you doing? The sun is shining after many days of rain, and I have a CT scan tomorrow. Later this month we are going to a cottage . . . and in the meanwhile, my apartment is a compete mess since this is a month were I'm a little out of control, and have therefore lost my ability to tidy.

Life goes on. But geez, does it need to be so dramatic?

16Jun2013

Happy Father's Day, Dad

Posted in Life, Love

Today is father's day. For all those moments of soap opera watching, star trek exploring, shampoo rinsing, sweet potato chip making, second cup drinking and general good mood moments: Thanks, Dad

27Jun2013

Watching the cookie crumble

Posted in Uncategorized

So it's time to write this post. The truth is, it's a post in limbo . . . and I know I should remain the constant optimist and punch back my fears and continue to hope for a miracle, which I *am* doing, kinda, but I'm also crying about every hour on the hour.

Unfortunately it's not my style to hold things back. It's not good for me. Not healthy. Which is why it's time for this post.

This past week I had the joy of being at a cottage for several days. It's this amazing place up north a little from Ottawa into Quebec, on a lake called Lac Blue Sea. (*I think that's the name, at least*). The cottage we stayed at with my family was amazing. It was clean and mould-free and there were kayaks that my husband and I took out every day, and my mother and I took out together as well. We would paddle into this big lake and then just sit there, floating only a little above the water in what was a beautiful stillness. Loons dipping into and out of the water, fish flipping through the surface, trees guarding the shore . . . it was a slice of heaven.

Then on Thursday my husband and I jumped into the car and headed back to town for what was meant to be a routine oncology appointment. We were shown into the room, and given a seat – and there was this poster on the wall opposite of two dogs running down the beach. And I said to Zsolt, "Geez, if he gives us bad news all I'm going to associate with this moment is that dog's butt."

I'm a damn idiot.

In walked Dr. Canada, and he began talking in second person, say 'we decided at your last visit that you should get pregnant, and we thought you should get scans first.' Then he sat down opposite me. He passed out our MRI results (since I always request copies of my results) and said they were fine.

Then he says something like, "now I don't want you to get very upset, but there's an abnormality in your CT scan on your lungs."

Which basically amounts to tiny spots on my right lung, where my breast once sat as it filled up with cancer.

So la, la, la, several minutes later I'm crying and Dr. Canada is writing me an anti-anxiety prescription while my husband, Zsolt, is trying to absorb the conversation. To put it in Dr. Canada's words: "It's not a slam dunk," and there's a chance it's not cancer. But also as he said, cancer would be the "highest probability."

You ever heard of that molecules of emotion book, about reprogramming our RDNA, and therefore changing our situation? Well, thinking of that I want to say this isn't cancer in my right lung. It's just scar tissue left over from pneumonia and not caught in an earlier x-ray. That's what I want it to be. I want to NOT have cancer in my chest. FUCK OFF cancer drama.

But I've been crying ever since that meeting. And we've been basically devastated. **It's Zsolt's birthday today**. He is the love of my life, and his being born is the greatest gift I could have ever received. I love him, I love him, I love him. So, you can understand, that the concept of leaving him absolutely terrifies me. We decided we need to learn more before we panic further. And also, I should probably stop thinking about death.

And I'm avoiding Dr Google best as possible. But there's something in my lungs, and that something is located awfully close to another something that had to be surgically removed via mastectomy.

This is a weird feeling. I'm not taking that anti-anxiety med, I'd rather cry my way through. And Zsolt, my wonderful Zsolt, he is doing so well. Whether we are emotional, or smiling for each other's sakes, or smiling for real in a moment of distraction, he is doing so well.

Zsolt: Happy birthday. I love you and that is one thing that will never, ever change. Sorry for the crappiness of today's celebration, but being together really is the tops, no matter what else is happening.

P.S.

Prayers, crossed fingers, and good thoughts for a glorious miracle are very much welcome. A miracle would be awesome. Also, a cure for cancer would be awesome as well.

3Jul2013

Random Footprints

Posted in Uncategorized

I don't want to be overly sentimental or cosmic or something like that, but at this moment I am most certainly leaning on faith and relearning what that means.

Anyhow, today I was feeling rather crummy, my belly was all 'blah' and stuff, so I picked up a random book from my shelf for distraction. Distraction is a rare thing these past few days. I can't get my mind off all that big scary stuff I don't want to think about and yet can't stop considering.

Anyhow, the book was Homar Price, and it's a very old copy that my Dad passed along to me and I totally adore. So, sitting down, I opened the book thinking I'd glance at a couple pages. And there where I opened it was a bookmark. A book mark that I'd cut and written out years ago on a piece of sketch paper, and at some point shoved into my books while packing between moves and never thought about again. And on that book mark was my very favourite poem.

You probably know it, it's that footprints poem. So I sat there and read the poem, and in a way, it was just a nice reminder. It held no promises, but I reckon it held some hope and the idea of a lighter load, and right now, I could really use a lighter load.

Anyhow, for that poem to end up in that book and be opened by me at that time . . . it was so beautifully random that I'll take it for a miracle. And if one miracle can happen, maybe more can too

Here's a copy of the poem. It's the footprints poem.

One night a man had a dream. He dreamed
he was walking along the beach with the Lord.
Across the sky flashed scenes from his life.
For each scene he noticed two sets of
footprints in the sand: one belonging
to him, and the other to the Lord.
When the last scene of his life flashed before him,
he looked back at the footprints in the sand.
He noticed that many times along the path of
his life there was only **one** set of footprints.
He also noticed that it happened at the very
lowest and saddest times in his life.
This really bothered him and he
questioned the Lord about it,
"Lord, you said that once I decided to follow
you, you'd walk with me all the way.
But I have noticed that during the most
troublesome times in my life,
there is only one set of footprints.

I don’t understand why when
I needed you most you would leave me.”
The Lord replied,
“My son, my precious child,
I love you and I would never leave you.
During your times of trial and suffering,
when you see only one set of footprints,
it was then that I carried you.”

5Jul2013

It's my Birthday!

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Life, Love

Guess what? Today I'm officially 31 – a word to my thirties: I'm here, I'm in you, and I'm not letting go!

Yesterday was something. Zsolt and I had a follow up appointment with Dr Canada at the hospital, so that pretty much consumed my thoughts. We were going to learn about tumour markers and hear what could be seen on the lung x-ray.

So, we get to the hospital and are pretty much immediately taken into a consultation room. The nurse says she'll pass me a slip after the talk with Dr Canada so I can book my follow up appointment. And I was like, "Follow up appointment?" in my head. Not aloud. Follow up appointments are never quite the words you want to hear in a consultation room, particularly after the life-shaking news I received last time.

Anyhow, she left and Zsolt and I waited. And waited. And waited. Part of me had been calm going in there, but as the waiting continued another part of me started kicking up and wanted to just leave.

"Let's leave," I said to Zsolt, pretending to be joking.

He pretended to laugh.

For some reason I decided to dress nicely for this appointment. Yesterday I was in my high-waist blue skirt, stripped blue t-shirt, and blue canvas shoes. Zsolt was in his red t-shirt, blue jeans and white shoes. Together we looked like the American flag, which I guess was appropriate considering it was July 4th.

Anyhow, just as I'm sliding down in my chair onto the consultation room floor with all the nerves, in walks Dr Canada.

He's smiling, he says hello, he gives me a hug. (After I sit back up.)

And all along in the back of my mind, as we exchange words and he tells me a little bit about the anxiety he realizes I must be feeling, I just want to know about the tumour markers. Finally he lets us know that the markers looked 'normal', and the markers specific to my situation looks rather 'normal'. And that was great to hear.

The X-ray didn't show the spots, which probably means they are too small. This, he said, was a bit of a disappointment because now I'll need to be bounced around in my referrals before we can find someone to actually biopsy the little things. Therefore, that means I need to keep waiting.

Fucking torturous.

And then we talked about possibilities and options and treatments and scary stuff. They may be benign spots that resulted from a lung infection some people in this area can get, so there's that as a bit of hope. The biopsy will really reveal all.

Some scary things were also said yesterday. Things I already knew, but I guess you never want to hear coming out of a doctor's mouth. Stuff like breast metastatic cancer isn't curable (garbage!). Stuff like woman do die from this. Stuff like some women live one or two years while others live many more.

Stuff I don't want to battle, take on, challenge, fight, deal with, or acknowledge. Stuff I'd rather *not* have to consider. (*And I think it's total crap that we are slapped in the face with this 'no cure' crap! Science – GET ON THIS ALREADY. Oh, yes, you are. Okay – GO FASTER.*)

He also said that if it is metastatic I can basically forget about carrying a child. And if it's estrogen receptive, I should consider removing my ovaries.

However, we have a bit more hope after that appointment, and small in good *no matter what*. Small is good. Not being cancer is the best. **Let's shoot for the best!!!**

On another note, a happier note, last night I attended a bachelorette party. This is my first every bachelorette party – I didn't even have a bachelorette party when marrying the Zsoltster.

Dress code said black dresses. Hmm. I paired a black skirt with a black tank top, and said, "good enough!" Can you believe I own no little black 'going to a club' dress? I guess I can believe it – black isn't my best shade.

The party was for an old friend I've known since almost always. (She was an excitable, imaginative and trouble-making kid, who I got to see grow up into a *beautiful*, hilarious, and compassionate woman. You would like her very much.) She and I grew up on the same street, and while we weren't tied at the hip or anything, it's been good to have her there to talk to when it's needed, and I'm sure its visa versa. I'm so entirely happy for her to be marrying such a lovely guy, and think there's a lifetime of laughter and fun ahead for that couple.

Now, I'm not a natural party girl – I'm kinda the anti-party girl, particularly as of late – so I showed up with my bottle off fizzy water and was quiet in my corner as stories were passed around about the bride-to-be, and quizzes were taken, beads won, salads and Mexican food eaten. I met new people and caught up with friends from high school.

It was one of those nights when I could forget about the hard stuff for just a little while, just long enough to laugh and think of how wonderful the world can be for us. So I'm very glad to have gone, very glad to have been there for that moment, and kinda sorry I wasn't in the mood to dance on any tables – though that really rarely (if ever?) happens anyhow.

Now here is a small miracle I'd love to see happen: Dr Canada wants to look at my previous post-original-diagnosis CT scan from three years ago. If he sees spots on that scan, then I'm okay because this is probably just a result of that stupid infection people can get. If he doesn't, then I need to have a biopsy to see what is going on – and that has a long wait time attached to it, plus scary possible implications. I wasn't sure whether or

not to talk about this, but I've decided to do so since your good vibes worked last time, so I'm hoping they work again. Please do send some my way, if that's okay. And in the meanwhile I'm hoping, praying and writing for good results in all areas.

Next week I drop off that CT scan.

Week after I have a bone scan.

We *want* spots on the original CT scan, and a *clear* bone scan. That two things would be good. **Good** would be **GOOD**.

And, it'd be an awesome birthday present too.

12Jul2013

The Parade of Appointments

Posted in Bumpboobs, Treatment

Good afternoon from Montreal, Quebec! The Zsoltster and I have been here the past couple days while he attends the International Startup Festival down at the port of the city. I've been at my cousin's house hanging out with his lovely family. It's really nice to be around kids – they pull you out of yourself, and I don't think about my worries when we play together or make lunch or just plain hang out. It's really nice to not think about things, sometimes.

That being said, I'm still thinking about things at all other times in the day. It's this weird morbidity that I'm having trouble shaking off. The other day we watched the Disney movie where a Navy dad with eight kids marries an artistic mom with ten kids. Both the man and the woman 'lost their partners, who died a few years before' and that's all that is said about it. I nearly started crying right there during the Disney movie. But maybe that's a post for another day.

In terms of what is actually happening (rather than what seems to be happening in my head, and I'm really trying to rewire even if it keeps creeping back in), the next several weeks will be a parade of appointments.

In this parade, we'll see that familiar float, the bone scan – glowing skeletons will march down the parade route and be scanned for cancer by doctors with giant magnifying glasses and white lab coats, and then for some new exciting additions;

there will be a pulmonary test thing – which is, of course, the love float, with a lace-rimmed giant heart made of papier-mâché and filling the air full of soap bubbles from the bubble machine that's hidden on the stage behind a heart-shaped topiary;

and a lung capacity thing – imagine massive yellow air balloons hovering over the crowd, breathing in the air as the flame fills them up bigger and bigger, with the lovely and daring Amelia (from that book I was/am writing…) inside and waving down to the crowd;

plus a stage one fitness test – I don't know what that is, but I imagine it's all the mom joggers out there converging in the parade and representing mommy chic, pushing their children in bright-coloured carriages with one hand and holding up gymnastic streamers with the other as the space above them fills with mingling ribbons;

a PET scan – which is all about sugar, as you might know, or radioactive glucose, so that float has got to be a giant honey pot oozing out onto the street and making things sticky for all other parade-walkers, and the honey crawls across the float searching out cancer to soak it up, except the organizer forgot to pack the 'cancer' sponges and so there's absolutely no cancer there to soak up the honey, and it just runs over and eventually disappears into the sewers after the cleaners wash it away;

plus I have two meetings at cancer centres in Ottawa that offer integrative care. I have *two* meetings at *two* places because if this is something then I want to go somewhere that feels right, and work with doctors who have both compassion and expertise. So imagine two football teams charging down the road on the parade route, pushing away any semblance of a threat. Hut-huting and competing to be the very best cancer-killing football team between the two of them;

next we have the ‘Santa Claus’ finish with what equates to the lung surgeon and my oncologist. I have appointments with these experts, and I guess they’ll be giving me the bottom line on everything.

And then at the end of that parade are Zsolt and me, walking hand in hand and full-on knackered from all this walking and participating. We’re waving, but really all we want to do is stop and rest on the sidelines. Maybe get a sausage and a cold lemonade? It would be much, much nicer to just watch and not participate. There is no float I want to wave from, no marching band I want to try for, no streamer I want to twirl.

And there you have it. It’s emotional and difficult. But I’m holding onto that bit of hope that feels so small compared to the mountain of tests and biopsies and crap I’m about to endure. Even when the morbidity sneaks in, even when my resilience fails . . . hope and love (cause we can’t forget love) bring me back eventually. Today we are here, and today we don’t have cancer. Not officially, and hopefully, not physically either.

Parades happen and they can be quite the spectacle, but I’d much rather go to the beach instead.

18Jul2013

The Sherlock of Speculation

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life, Treatment

The bone scan was today. I won't go into too much since I already wrote a detail-rich post on bone scanning about 3 years ago. Except here in Canada they put an elastic around your feet and wrap you up in a cocoon-thing. No wonder some people get claustrophobic. But mostly it's like being put to bed for a nap.

Though one odd thing happened, and now I feel compelled to over-analyze it. Before the scan the technician was asking all kinds of questions.

"Do you know why you're here?"

"Yeah," I replied. "Oh, do *you* not know why I'm here?"

"I just need to make sure you know."

Okay. So I tell her. I'm there because of breast cancer.

"Where?" she asks.

"Right side," I say.

Then she says something along the lines of "you have breast cancer on you right side."

And I say, "No, I don't know if I have breast cancer."

"You don't know?"

"I had it three years ago."

Then she asks if I've had follow ups, operations, dental work, etc. And *then* says, "So why do you need this scan?"

To which I reply, "I wanted to get pregnant, and so they did a CT and found some spots on my lungs. I don't know what they are, but we're checking for cancer."

That conversation went back and forth like a game of ping pong. She wasn't rude or anything, but I got the feeling she was trying to determine whether I "knew what was happening". But I swear I didn't show up the scan looking like a hot mess, or falling over drunk, and wouldn't it be so much more sane to completely forget the shit storm that has caused this anxiety than be able to remember every freaking detail?

ANYHOW.

The scan happens. It's easy. If you are going to get a scan, I say, "Make it a bone scan!"

And afterwards, as I hop off the table and grab my shoes to go, she says the weirdest thing: "Good luck with your pregnancy and all that other stuff."

Okay, thanks?

Do technicians know the power of their words? Do they realize we patients of paranoia analyze *every sound* that comes out of their mouths? "Good luck with your pregnancy and all that other stuff." What does that mean, oh great Sherlock of speculation? Has she peered into my future and saw that there's no cancer? Does she think my oncologist is totally overreacting? Did she get distracted by the end-of-day procedures and just say the first thing that came to her mind, possibly relating to the concept of pregnancy because she too is trying to get pregnant?

I just don't know, and I guess I'll never know.

In other news, today Zsolt and I underwent the serious process of making pickles. It involved cleaning jars, pouring water into a pot then pouring it back into measuring cups since we didn't know the quantity (*or rather, I didn't believe Zsolt's guess of 5 litres that turned out to be correct*), adding salt to the water, slicing the cucumbers after they were cleaned, adding dill, garlic and bay leaves to the jars, sticking the cucumbers into the jars, and topping them with toasted sour dough bread. Then, everything was placed into the sun.

It's been HOT these past few days. The apartment is above thirty degrees (*Canadian for 'damn hot'*), we have been stinking and sweating and sweating and stinking – so what do you do in a heat wave? Make pickles.

In other news, we've discovered an amazing pond that isn't too far away from the apartment. It's really an old quarry that's been filled with water, and the locals go swimming in the 'pond' – the whole thing feels like camp, and it's the sort of exercise that I'm actually really happy to do. There's magic in water, particularly nature and water, and I'm really thankful that in this time of crap and coping, there's a place so full of laughter.

And that was today. Next week is going to be nuts: scans and meetings every day. But maybe, if miracles can happen, they'll bring me some good news too. We'll see. Even when I feel like I've lost my hope, little bits of it float back up and I think, "maybe, just maybe it will be okay."

So here's hoping. Pregnancy, pickles and ponds. That's what I want. Oh, and that trip to the beach I mentioned before!

25Jul2013

Reality Bites

Posted in Bumpboobs

I feel so lost. Reality is that my PET scan didn't bring back favourable results. What shows up there aligns with the CT findings, and there are definite signs of metastasis in my lungs. My oncologist is now on the move to see whether I can somehow get Zolodex covered (which costs just under my monthly take of income) so that I don't have to have my ovaries removed. Having the ovaries removed when you've been dreaming of having a family – that is one big step.

Having metastatic breast cancer is one big *leap*.

I feel lost in the jump.

And pretty fucking pissed off too.

I'm lost, and angry, and ANGRY, and sad, and so extremely concerned about leaving my wonderful husband behind, and nervous for what comes next – whatever it may be. I know the golden phrase now becomes No Evidence of Disease, a.k.a., remission. And so that is what I need to work toward, and maintain for as long as life allows me.

There's this sliver of hope with the biopsy and something about 'young people having different things'. But my doctor was not enthusiastic, and perhaps a bit of realism is starting to set in. One way or another, I really do enjoy being here and would quite like to stay at this party (with my husband and friends and writing and dreams, and maybe even hair, and a baby? Well…a family one way or another) for a whole load of time longer.

But today, today, today . . . I am lost. Biopsy is August 2nd, so we'll see what they find.

2Aug2013

No Matter What

Posted in Bumpboobs

Tomorrow is the biopsy, and that is okay. I'm nervous, but that is okay too. No matter what, we will work toward two very, very important things in our lives: To be happy and healthy – no matter what results come from the biopsy.

Thank you so much for all the kind thoughts and wishes. It has been a lift, and I most certainly know there are many people and more importantly, *friends (whether or not we've ever met!)* out there cheering us onward. To Zsolt, thank you. To my parents, thank you. To my brothers and their beautiful partners, thank you. To my friend down the street, thank you. To my friends online, thank you. To my friends around the world, thank you. Part of Happy & Healthy is that key component of Love. And I feel a whole lot of love in my life. So, THANK YOU.

4Aug2013

The Big Project

Posted in Uncategorized

I guess it's one thing to dream about becoming a writer. For a while, that's exactly what I did: I'd write my stories, take my creative writing classes, and think that *one day* I would claim the title of 'writer'. Well, that time has come and gone – today I am a writer, title owned. In all honestly, it was the diagnosis that pushed me to live by what I love. Since then I've recommitted to my fiction, poured out emotions into this blog and picked up ghost-writing and social media gigs with amazing organizations. It's not all glam – actually, it's definitely not glamorous – but I love it. That's what matters.

And as this all happened one assignment and post and story at a time . . . Catherine the writer (*that's me!*) soon began to dream about being Catherine the ***novelist***, Catherine the ***author***. And once again, I waited on that dream, nervous about taking the steps to make it happen.

However, now it seems a possible recurrence is pushing me forward yet again (*&%$!!!) to live what I dream, and stop waiting for permission from anyone outside of myself.

We must all have these sorts of stories.

My story – my *novel* – started back when I wanted to get pregnant. Pregnancy is intimidating, and so to work through I began to write a semi-ridiculous story about a line of women who were coping with the emotional and personal changes of becoming a mother.

Then, bam (*and sigh*), I got breast cancer.

No babies. The writing stopped. Surgery and chemo happened. Life changed in so many ways. I began to recover. (**ahem! and there is the micro story of* that)

And then . . . eventually . . . the writing started again, with the same family of women, the same nine months of pregnancy, the same whimsical and ridiculous stories. Except this time there was something deeper.

My dad gave me a very precious gift when I was around thirteen. He gave me an old tin container, and in that container are a pile of postcards from his grandmother and her friends. So that makes her my great, great, grandmother. Of course, I've never met her, don't know her story – but as I began to write about my Claires, and their journeys, I (*in a sense*) began to create a history of the possible women in my past, and the battles they

may have fought, the adventures they may have had, and how we all tie together and pull strength from those stories (*of course, this required NO research since as a writer, I pull everything from a fictional world called My Imagination*).

And that's the personal side of this story. **I am becoming novelist right now, and this book is going to get published – hopefully with your help!**

Here's the book blurb, the one I was sending out to agents:

"Constructed in stand-alone chapters, the story of the middle-name Claires is intrinsically connected. These ladies are nine generations of the same female line, taking us from one life-defining moment to the next.

Each middle-named Claire has a unique ambition: from Amelia Earl being the first solo woman to circle the world in an air balloon; Elizabeth fighting off an angry ghost while deciding what's next career-wise; Dotty rebelling against an abusive husband after chasing down a snowy owl; Ruby craving escape from her small town life; The twins stowing away on a TransCanada train; Anna fighting her urge to create magic; Aliza blackmailing her way into circus life; Marianne convincing her mother-in-law to end a hunger strike; and Amelia Stives sailing to the new world after burning down the family barn. Yet in this novel, the middle-named Claires' greatest overarching challenge is to face their own insecurities and find strength despite the uncertainty of their futures. Their stories lace together as the reader learns more about where each woman came from, and what her mother, and her mother's mother (etc.) has experienced."

But what you really need to know is this story pours out from the heart, and will have you laughing, crying and thinking. It's good. So go read it. It's really good. You of the future is reading it at this very moment, thinking, "hey, this book *is* awesome." And it's my baby – so obviously I'm presenting you with an extremely biased opinion.

Soon I'll be starting a crowd funding campaign. You'll be hearing more on this as it goes. Watch this space for developments. And thanks for reading this far. I know it's not the biopsy drama, or "what comes next" kinda stuff, (a*ll the fun stuff is saved for August the 13th, I'm having dreams of everything changing, seeing some freaking line in the sand that I can't cross back over – but that's for another post, eh.*) this project is my mental lifesaver without doubt, along with Zsolt, family, friends and everyone online. So, why not grab our dreams while we can? That's what I'm sure as heck gonna do. And you are so very much invited to read along, and read the book too.

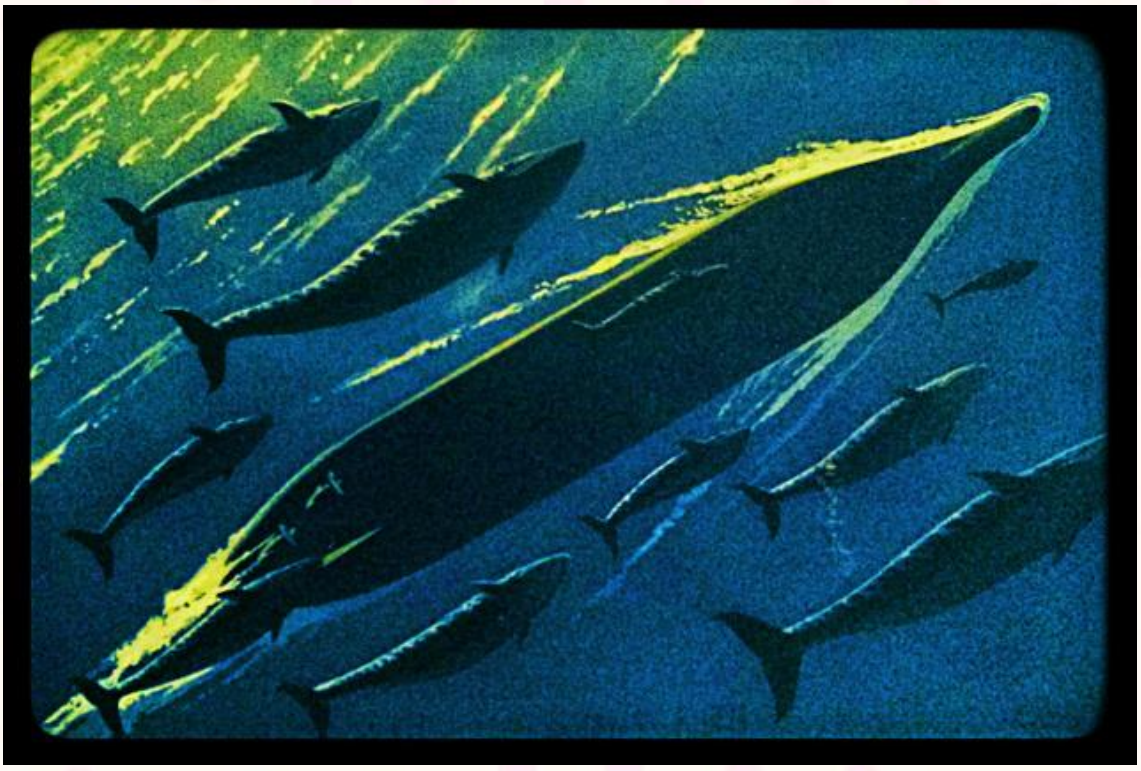
More to come. Along with all that other stuff . . .

12Aug2013

The Cream in Life's Chocolate Truffle

Posted in Uncategorized

This morning I woke up thinking about bucket lists and how much I despise them. Okay, I understand it's a great thing for many people, but personally I've never liked bucket lists. Back when I worked in a bookstore named Chapters there was a title along the lines of *1000 Places You Need to Visit Before You Die*. And who is really going to visit all 1000 places, and does that make their life more fulfilling for having constantly been on a plane to follow a list of things to do before dying? So while many see the buck list as a beautiful and supportive thing, I guess I've just held this grudge for quite some time.



And in rebellion to the bucket list, (*while laying there in my bed*) I thought I'd make myself a fuck-it list, to show myself and 'the world' (*i.e. my imagination of who might be watching in judgement, which in reality is likely no one*) that instead of planning the things to do before I die, I'd rather focus on the stuff of LIFE. So I was thinking my fuck-it list would contain riding a Sea-Doo at least once cause they look very cool, building my family, going on the Queen Mary again, spending summers in Balaton, buying a cottage, eating amazing organic cheese, etc.

So as I thought over my fuck-it list, it soon became (*I realize now as I write this*) a bucket list!

Now* it is midday and I am in downtown Ottawa, sitting on a bench in the shade alongside the start of the Rideau Canal. It's a world heritage site and kinda wedged between Parliament Hill and the Fairmont Hotel, where the canal spills out into the Ottawa River.

Somewhere out of sight, bagpipes are begging played.

The canal workers are filling and draining locks in front of me.

The sun is bright, the sky is clear, and the shade is cool.

Bicycles are whizzing by . . .

and while I know Tuesday has a *very* high chance of being a total shit day – *because many signs are pointing to 'yes' and my oncologist didn't call last week with any miracle 'look at these amazing biopsy results' kinda news* – I also know that today is beautiful, and feeling this sort of pleasure is the cream of life itself.

To be part of the moment, part of friendship, part of love, part of beauty, and away from the sadness that has lately settled into the pit of my stomach . . . it is a wonderful feeling to be a participant in this life. I love the fun and exploration, I love the connections and the laughter, I love the joy of something different

. . . these are things that Tuesday will not take away. I will not lose my ability to be part of the moment, even if some of those moments are terrible ones. And that being part of the moment, to me, *is* the list. It's the beginning and the end of the page, and so long as we can find that intangible, hard-to-describe freedom in the cream of life, then I will be satisfied.

Well, that and finally publishing at least one of my novels.

Ha! Okay, slippery slope – I could go on, but I don't dare in fear of creating yet another version of the bucket/fuck-it list.

So, in honour of those yummy 'cream in the truffle' moments, I'm going to share a postcard Zsolt and I have sent to ourselves from the Queen Mary 2, which was such an amazing experience. We have many of these sort of postcards – every time we go to a new place, we mail ourselves a postcard. Our collection has become a treasure box of memories, and I pulled inspiration for this idea from my great-grandmother's tin.

[It's a very inspiring tin (It's even inspired my BIG book publishing make-the-dream happen project!)]

* *Now*, as in 'then' when I was waiting for my husband and our friend to explore the locks and analyze how they work. They are scientists, those two, so it's in their nature to care about mechanics. Personally, I prefer to care about the breeze and the sunshine. In any case, this past weekend has been so absolutely lovely. We had a vacation from sadness and heavy thoughts. This weekend was just about laughing, eating well, and sharing our time with a good friend.

** *Psst! Want to sign up to be notified when the crowdfunding campaign starts? [You can leave your details here and I'll email you at GO time].*

13Aug2013

Not awesome news

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life

I don't have too much to say today. The news is as expected – the breast cancer has come back, and it is in my lungs. Dr. Canada was very kind and caring as always, but his message was a difficult one to hear. Essentially, he told me to get on it if I have any 'big wishes'.

The cells appear to be weakly estrogen positive, which isn't great news (*it would be much better if they were strongly estrogen positive like the first time, but I guess it changed*). But nevertheless, we will try turning off my ovaries for a couple months and see what effect that has. If the cancer is held at bay – then great! If not, then chemotherapy will happen.

But man, he paints a bleak picture. Basically saying how (*which I already know*) cancer can keep coming back approach after approach. He also said we're going to have to depend upon *future* treatments that are being developed. So FUCK in a FUCK BUCKET because while that's nice and all, "future" isn't today, and today is when I could really use a cure to this disease. And then he was saying that when people have a 'limited amount of time' they don't want to spend it being sick with chemotherapy. I hate to say this, but he doesn't really sound hopeful, does he?

Don't worry, I'll get my positivity back. I have a disposition toward optimism.

I guess the good news is that today I'm not dying. Today I just have cancer. Right now I can breathe, and walk, and function – which means I can try every damn thing available (*and affordable*) to beat the fucker back. I'm going to see what happens with alternative approaches alongside the medical ones. Dr. Canada gave me two months before checking in on the cancer again, so I'm going to be doing my very, very best in that time. It's literally the least I can do.

And today I guess we'll lay in bed and cry a little bit. Then tomorrow we'll get up, get going and keep pushing back. That's about all I can promise for now.

I wish this could have been a post for miracles, but maybe they're still working their way over? Who knows? Each day is a freaking miracle, that much I know for sure.

18Aug2013

Happy Bunny vs. Angry Bunny

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life, Novels and Stories, Writing

Today is Sunday, and it's a really beautiful day outside. We have lovely Sunday plans: farmer's market in the morning, brunch with the family and then a friend is getting married – I'm entirely honoured to be invited to attend her incredible event. (*While also thinking of another friend out west who was recently married, and wishing I could have been there.*)

The past week has been hectic, with appointments flying out of the unicorn's butt in magical rainbow bursts. Sorry, that's weird, I saw a picture the other day and it made me laugh. But really, that's just weird.

It's been busy. I'm trying to implement some kind of push-back routine into my life, that involves things like mistletoe injections, coffee colonics, juicing, fresh garlic, Vitamin C IV treatments (*more on that later*), visiting naturopaths, going to acupuncture clinics, trying to connect with a social worker, and maybe even moving from my most loved apartment since the neighbour downstairs is a chain-smoker who won't be stopping anytime soon.

So, we're pushing.

One thing is different in me, so I'm going to talk about it now. I have been getting very angry. First I was (*still kinda am*) a little angry with Dr. Canada for his bleak perspective of this situation. Then I became very angry with my downstairs neighbour who won't take his smoking outside. And then, I became angry with my upstairs neighbour who kept us up all night with moving and other loud activities. And then, I became angry on a friend's behalf over something someone said, which I think no one else even noticed or would have cared about.

It's not like I'm taking my anger out on these people. But Zsolt gets an earful.

And it's not like I'm walking around angry every second, because there are awesome things happening too. It's just that I get ANGRY quickly. My fuse has been cut very short. I suppose my ability to recover still remains, but it's hard to shake off this deep bubbling anger – it's like a lava that wants to explode and keeps looking for avenues of eruption. I'm not really sure where to direct the energy. Can I tell-off an innocent stranger, neighbour or doctor just because I'm a walking time-bomb of emotion? No.

So where does it go? I literally have no idea. Ideas are welcome.

But in the meanwhile some good things are happening too. The other day I wore an awesome outfit that included a green shirt, black skirt and a bright orange belt. I felt so very pretty, and that was a good help because it was also the day I went for the diagnosis. But even amongst that crap, I am pleased with that lovely outfit. (*So you can see now how often I dress up: not enough!)*

Last night was a lantern festival here. It's amazing to walk through the darkness and let your eyes settle onto these randomly glowing lanterns and light sculptures. I felt outside of myself and lost in that night-feeling. It's a wonderful thing.

Blogging will be taking another step forward in this beloved neighbourhood, Vanier, where I live, and I'm so excited to be involved! More on that later.

And then just this morning my friend Ian Kirkpatrick said he'll work on my book cover! I'm absolutely thrilled. We met Ian and his gorgeous/brilliant wife back when we first moved to England. Since then his art has seemed to explode in all kinds of cool directions. It's wonderful to see your friends succeed.

Oh, and tomorrow I'll be meeting with a very well established erotic romance author and friend to talk ebooks. Exciting!!!

I've started an email list for anyone who wants to be notified when my crowd funding goes live in September. Seeing the names pile up on that list makes me realize that this is real, and that is awesome. I want this to be REAL. If you want to read about the book, you can do so here (*I'll soon be posting excerpts*). If you want to sign up for an email once we get rolling with the campaign, you can do that here too!

And now: Time for a farmer's market!!

25Aug2013

Adventures of JUICING and BRUNCH

Posted in Uncategorized

Today I'm going to share with you an adventure in Brunch and Juicing. Okay, so that's a bit less thrilling sounding than my Adventures of Claire Never-Ending, but this is real life baby, and real life only gets really dramatic once in a while. And thank goodness today wasn't a dramatic sort-of day.

This morning I walked from my lovely apartment in Vanier to my brother and his girlfriend's home. It was only about a 30 minute walk, but oh-my-god I was so knackered you wouldn't believe it. For some reason, I'd had a pounding headache that started yesterday evening and lasted all the way through to today. But, there was no thoughts of cancelling the pre-arranged brunch. This was *brunch*, after all. No one in their right mind (or good bodily condition) cancels lunch.

So, I threw on my dress that Zsolt describes as a giant "Greek flag", dark prescription sunglasses, too-big-but-I-LOVE-it fedora hat and turquoise scarf. Basically, I must have looked incredibly hung-over. But you know how headaches are, sunlight starts to hurt.

45 minutes later and I'm at their apartment. Don't ask me where those extra 15 minutes of walking came from. I blame the exhaustion.

Knock on the door. Go in the apartment. Say hi to Bro and his lovely lady. Next thing that happens, I ask my brother to needle me.

"Needle *what*?!" You might be asking.

Needle *ME*. He is an acupuncturist practicing Traditional Chinese Medicine (and personal trainer too, as well as a Qi Gong teacher). Lately he's been treating me to help with relaxation, because Lord, it's stressful lately (*duh*). So he has me sit on the sofa and then starts sticking the needles into my foot. I'm one giant pain-baby, but it's mostly okay. Not even needle pinches, but the ones that do fade away pretty quick. After it fades, you're left with a strange feeling. I guess that's the Qi working it's magic.

Anyhow, we do that. And he needles between my feet, hands, and face. Then we breathe together. Meanwhile, his very lovely partner is in the kitchen preparing BRUNCH. In and out, he's got me breathing through my belly. It's good. I'm relaxing despite the headache. It's very good . . .

Fast-forward thirty minutes: the needles are out and I'm downstairs in his garden cutting out pieces of organic kale and char for the BRUNCH and JUICING. We're out there working, and suddenly I realized that my headache has dropped from a 8 to a 2 . . . it's barely there and getting better and better. So today is a special day, because today I'm admitting my older brother is right – there may be something behind his acupuncture work, and frankly, I'm amazed it dispelled a headache that was pounding all-night-long. (*Much like some neighbours were doing as well at 3am with techno music blaring. But that's another story. Zing*!)

Anyhow: to my bro JP, thank you for the help.

After we gather the veg, (*which my brother insisted we harvest with the intention of getting good mojo from the leaves*) we headed up into the kitchen to join his girlfriend in the BRUNCH making.

I just freaking love BRUNCH.

JP gets out the juicer while his girlfriend (*who I should ask, I guess, if I can use her actual name sometime)* starts making this amazing omelet thing with garlic shoots, goat cheese, fresh garden-grown tomatoes (*I'm hungry again just writing this. Seriously. Food, please!*) makes the food and checks the potatoes.

My brother is a juicing wizard. In goes the carrots, the ginger, the kale in bunches and the apples – out comes this glorious green juice. We drink it immediately and it's so freaking delish. Maybe it's a mental thing, but how can you *not* feel more healthy while downing that green JUICE?

And next thing the food is ready, we at the table eating, and Catherine is very, very happy.

Having started the day feeling exhausted, hung-over (*without having drank or done anything fun the night before*), and aching in the brain . . . it was just such a lovely time. It was *such* a lovely time, and I thought today I might share something entirely lovely with you.

So to JP and You-Know-Who, thank you so much for having me over for BRUNCH and JUICE!

Now in other news . . .

The Adventures of Claire Never-Ending

by Catherine Brunelle

(A taster excerpt from Amelia Claire Earl's story, 2011. Amelia is the first Claire we meet in the novel . . .)

I've made the first excerpt PDF for you to read from my novel. The Kickstarter campaign doesn't start yet, but I am collecting emails if you want to sign up to be notified. But in the meanwhile, give this a read and see what you think of the first Claire. Her name is Amelia Claire Earl. Enjoy!

31Aug2013

Am I not paying enough attention to cancer?

Posted in advanced cancer, Bumpboobs, Canada, Finding Home, letting go, Life, Love, Novels and Stories, Writing

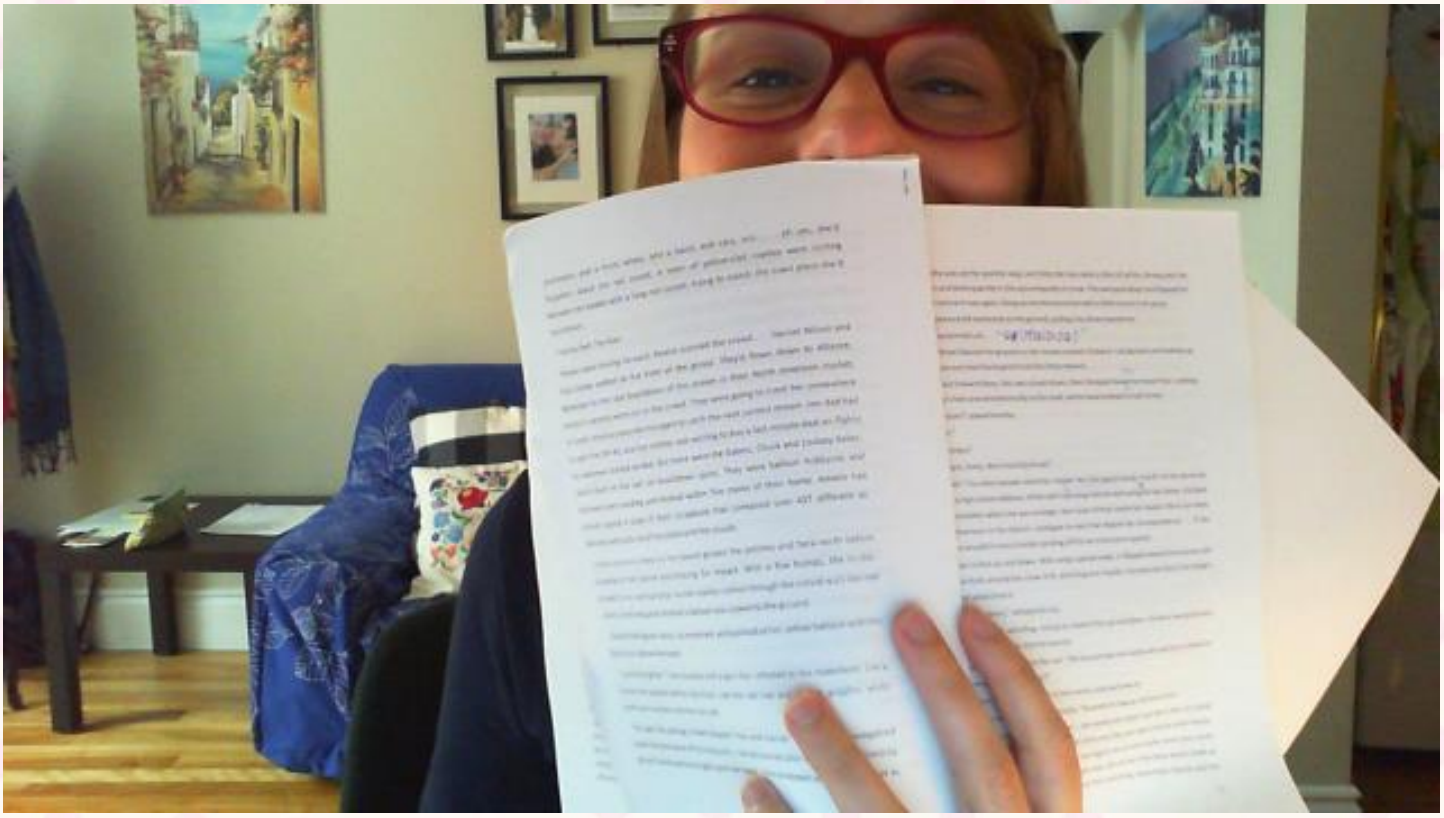
Okay, so yesterday I spent my entire Friday in front of the computer webcam making a video. It was a heck of a lot of work for something that is totally basic – but there was the editing, the lack of a script (*my dad taught me in elementary school to never public speak using a written script . . . so instead we'd write points and I'd talk around those ideas . . . and then in high school during my debating club days, it was the same situation. So yesterday, I figured I'd 'go natural' and just talk. Four hours later . . .*), and then of course the editing of my rambles. But it was SO worth it. The final result is open and honest, even if not fancy. I reckon open and honest come first when asking people to fund your project.

Okay, so the reality is that in preparing for this kickstarter campaign, even though I'm a wee bit overwhelmed with its growing requirement of commitments and work, it's freaking FUN.

I'm having fun.

And it was realizing that last week that scared the crap outta me.

During an interview with a fabulous local blog, Apt613, on the kickstarter book project, I was asked about how I could jump into such a big project with the news I'd just received? You know, where do I find the energy? And my only answer for that was that this is my energy because it's my joy. I'm also kinda worried about what happens next once this goal is realized (*with your help!*). Where does that energy go?



And then the other day a neighbour said to my mom that she'd "heard your daughter isn't doing well." Which is fine, and so understandable. Except that I am doing well. For someone in my situation, I'm able to walk, there's been no chemo as of yet, I have my hair, my energy is good, I can breathe . . . I am doing very well.

But having had these questions, they must have lingered in the back of my mind or something, because the other day I had a big pause moment where a feeling of panic suddenly overcame me:

- Am I in denial?
- Am I not thinking about the cancer often enough?
- Is it going to blindside me again, because I'm not paying enough attention?
- How often should this be on my mind, should I be scared? Like, right now and today, should I have fear?

Because when I work on my book publishing goal, those feelings . . . that fear . . . it kinda just turns off. Is it a good thing? Or am I being naive?

Last week I had a coaching session with this lovely lady named Camille Boivin. She's from Ottawa and I work with her for her company Sister Leadership. Anyhow, Cam is full of generosity and a desire to help people connect with their emotions and ambitions. And when the cancer came back, we started working together not as client and writer, but as coach and person-who-needs-some-emotional-work-done. (That's me.)

So last week in our session I was talking about this anger I'd been feeling. And somehow that discussion of anger turned toward a discussion of sadness. Because along with that anger, I was feeling deeply sad (*and still do sometimes, like when I realized last week I wasn't feeling shitty enough*). So we honed in on that sadness. Cam asked me to look back over my life when I've felt similar feelings of sadness.

* In this case of metastatic cancer, I'd say the sadness isn't just about the disease, but more so about potentially leaving my husband behind and hurting my family and friends. The idea is completely crushing.

So I began thinking back in time when I'd felt feelings of loss and sadness. School graduations. Ends of summers working abroad. Moving to a new country. Saying goodbye at airport. Leaving a beloved workplace. Losing my golden retriever . . .

And then Cam asked me this: "If you could go back with what you know now, what would you tell yourself in those moments of sadness?"

And I said to her, "that even though it hurt, good things were coming . . . and love doesn't stop just because you are separated. The love keeps on going."

Because from school graduations came new schools, clubs and friends (*and I just attended the wedding of my first friend ever – we may not be together always, but the love stays*); end of the summer working abroad brought me back home where I found a bookstore job and made more friends there (*though I'll always love the Jasper Kids from 2002*); In moving to a new country I left my family and best friend, but learned oh so much about being independent and made such incredible friendships with people who I still carry in my heart even after returning to Canada; saying goodbye at the airport always means I get to say hello to someone on the other end; leaving my work gave time and space for me to become a writer; and losing my dog – well, that still hurts but the love doesn't fade. Not one bit.

So I guess if I could go back to those moments when I felt that sadness, I would just tell myself that I'm not leaving the love and by moving forward more good things are going to happen.

Since that conversation I've felt a lot less angry, a lot less sad. I've been to doctor appointments, blood draws, chemo wards, searching for clinical studies, urine samples, meds from the pharmacy, acupuncture . . . but I'm not grieving the Catherine of four months ago who was almost certain she was cancer-free.

Today I am here, and I'd rather run forward toward whatever good can be created. This kickstarter is part of that. Being proactive in my health is part of that. Not being sad has been a result of those reflections.

Is it normal? Will it stay forever? Is it denial? Is it really because I haven't met with Dr. Canada? I just don't know.

How often should I think of the cancer, and will it do me any good? Again, I just don't know.

It's so strange to wonder if I'm not fearful enough. I also realize I'm new to metastatic cancer, and therefore incredibly naive to its realities. Is there a right way to cope? I would actually really appreciate hearing other people's experiences with this fear vs. life thing – is there any use in holding fear close? I've been happier this past week than I've been for a while, and that is quite precious in these times.

Anyhow. That's all I have to say about that. Now, back to work!

~Catherine

P.S.

To not overwhelm you with blog posts, I'm going to slip in the second excerpt from *The Adventures of Claire Never-Ending.* Meet Elizabeth (Amelia's mother) and read her story here! If you want to sign up for an email notification when the project launches, you can do so here.

The Adventures of Claire Never-Ending

by Catherine Brunelle

(A taster excerpt from Chapter 2: Elizabeth Claire Earl-Grey's story, 1980. Liz is the second Claire we meet in the novel, and Amelia's mother . . .)

8Sep2013

Ready, Get Set . . .

Posted in Uncategorized

All the beautiful cities in Europe seem to have carousels. At night, as you wander through the streets, stopping at the night markets and looking in store windows, there will always be that open square with the familiar crank-organ music and orange glow of the carousel: fairy lights, mirrors, swans, rabbits, ponies and golden poles upon which the animals slowly rise and fall as they parade in a circle.

Mechanical magic

That's one of my stories: the watching of carousels at night. It's not the only story, it's just one of them. A small moment from my travelling that has stayed in my mind with a touch of nostalgia.

Everyone has these sorts of stories. Small stories, big stories, long stories, epic stories. Stories of hard choices, stories of change, stories of love, stories of loss . . . we simply all have them. And so I think when we read novels and dip into someone else's narrative (*even a fictional narrative and a fictional, fantasy world*), we're able to get lost in those moments because there's that deep familiarity. Who hasn't had a moment of wonder, or sorrow, or laughter? Who hasn't experienced a miracle? Who hasn't slain a dragon?

Anyhow, I just love stories and could probably share forever these little snap-shots of sentiment and adventure.

On Monday, my novel, the *Adventures of Claire Never-Ending,* will launch its Kickstarter campaign. I'm excited and I'm nervous and I'm hopeful. Also, oddly, I'm wondering what will come next? This project has been such a sanity-saver; it's given me a purpose that hasn't included illness (*and will continue to do so as this project succeeds and I self-publish the boo*k!). I am a writer, and I love to write. What comes next will be the sharing of more stories. Not my own (*that's what this blog is for*), but rather the ones that belong to my imagination. Our imagination. Everyone's imagination.

So tonight I am nervous, and excited, and nervous, and excited.

It's coming. The start of this #BigProject is coming.

Stay tuned for Monday, September 9th when I announce the kick off of the Claires. Eep!

Get ready, get set, and . . .

(And if you're afraid you won't notice the Kickstarter launch, click here for an email notification. Also, fresh from the oven is my third except from the Adventures of Claire, read it while it's hot!)

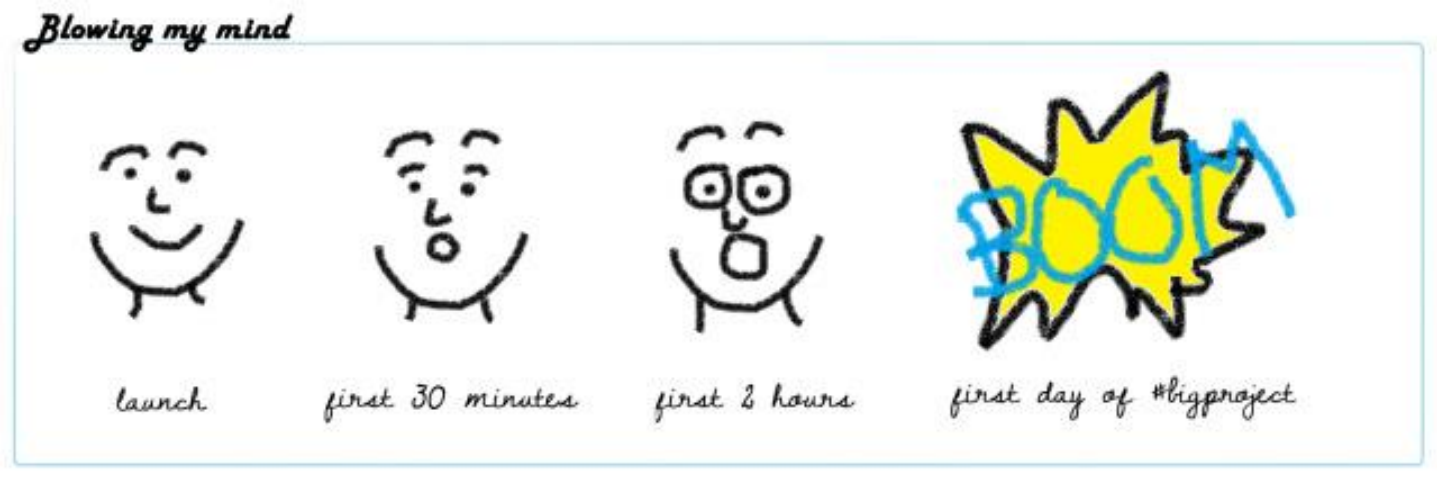
EAST
06

9Sep2013

And . . . Go! The Big Project is live!

Posted in Fun, Life, Novels and Stories, Reading, Writing

I can't express how exciting this is. My big dream: To become a novelist. How is it happening? With your help and this kickstarter campaign. I'll tell you what, I'm so freaking excited and giddy. So, I've drawn a cartoon to illustrate how much all of your support has been knocking me off my feet, and blowing my mind.



Today is day one of reaching that goal for publishing my novel, *The Adventures of Claire Never-Ending*. I won't say again how much this means to me, because it's said in the video on the kickstarter page, and I've written about it before in this blog.

What I will say is that there are two huge goals in this campaign:

1) Raise enough money to create this book.

2) Get this book into people's hands. To imagine people sitting down with their cups of tea and reading my novel . . . to picture people meeting the Claires, having their favourites, resonating with the stories . . . it's magical. And I can't help but wonder in what ways will people connect with the ladies and gentlemen of this novel? There's a ripple image used in one of the stories, and I'd like to apply it here. If one person reads the book, and passes it onto their friend, who passes it onto their friend – I just wonder how far the story of the Claires could go? It's a dream and in this next month we'll see what happens.

So yes – the campaign is live, please do pledge, pick up a copy and share.

Also, not to distract you but I've got to share this too: Apt613 has written a piece on my writing/project, and I'm so totally thrilled with it. If you'd like to read it, click here and check it out.

12Sep2013

CBC radio, IV Vitamin C, and DR CANADA

Posted in Uncategorized

It has been *quite* the week. If you've been following the Kickstarter for *Adventures of Claire Never-Ending*, than you know we might our goal for producing the novel. !!!!!!!! WOOHOO!

If I wasn't so knackered at this very moment, I'd kiss you all.

It was such an incredible experience, and I want to thank everyone who pushed in and gave, and ordered, and shared, and supported. The campaign is still going, so I really hope to sell more copies over the next month. Are

you part of a book club? Maybe you and your friends would be interested in the Claires

Between the tweeting and sharing and thanking, and getting blown-over by YOUR awesome support, I've been going to a place called the OICC in Ottawa. This is the Ottawa Integrative Cancer Centre. Twice a week I am receiving intravenous vitamin C treatments. This is meant to help control the cancer. It also works well when coupled with chemotherapy, but let's not go there in this chat today. Basically the IVC is meant to encourage the cancer cells to breakdown. That's putting it very simply. It's not a cure, it's a treatment. Heck, there is no cure for metastatic breast cancer, they are *all* treatments. But I want that shining golden prize of No Evidence of Disease (NED) to become mine. If you've read some of the comments in this blog, you'll see it is possible. And even without NED – to keep things under control means good quality of life and no pain. Those are two beautiful concepts.

NOW. **Two adventures I have to share with you in this post. First is the interview on CBC radio for All in a Day. (WOOOHOOO!) Second is my visit just this morning with Dr. Canada.**

Just yesterday I was at the CBC building in downtown Ottawa. CBC is a national broadcaster and the standard of quality in Canadian media. So it's huge to be there and was an honour. Hopping off the bus, I rock up to the big CBC location on Queen street. There's a security guard and I check in. *Then,* after a little while, a lady comes out to meet me. She has on a great red shirt, awesome sparkly shoes and such a cute hair cut. Unfortunately I cannot remember her name, but I do remember her excellent style.

Anyhow – we go into the 'news area'. Surreal!! Think of any news show you've watched on television – that is what this place is like, except for unexpected sensations like the softness of the carpet beneath my feet, the glow of florescent lights and that quiet hum of chatter. On one long wall there is a photo of the earth from space. In the centre of the room – hanging above all the low cubicles – is this massive, circular structure. It's both a light fixture, art installation, and screen for all the stations. It's a huge circle, and all around the outside are screens with different channels being played without any volume. Oh, and people look good. Everyone is dressed for success.

The show went really well. I'll link in an audio clip to the picture below if you want to listen in. You should listen, it was a great experience. My parents and Zsolt both say it was great. Thumbs up for a encouraging family.

Yay!

And then today was the oncology appointment. Dr. Canada was in a much better mood today. That was great. He also said this should be a time for joy. I'd rather focus on joy than dread – so yes, that was good. He also talked about sex, and he spoke quite frankly. Zoladex can lower the libido and dry up the lady parts. I've had problems with this before. So he was so great – even though Zsolt was squirming next to me with discomfort – basically saying something like, "this should be a time to focus on what you can do, not on what has been lost. So if you have trouble having an orgasm, try and focus on how much pleasure there comes from extra foreplay." And he's right. And I'm glad he opened the door for conversation. (*Of course, he was referring in the bigger sense as well . . . such as having children, a certainty of a long life, etc. I think sharing this concept via intimacy was smart and frankly less emotional, cause you can laugh over sex, no? We did.*) Also, one last thing: he wants me to go on a clinical trial that will start early 2014. In his words, he thinks the drug will be a "homerun!" So I'm all in favour of homeruns, even if I'm a terrible baseball player – I'm quite glad to hit a grandslam out of the park in the name of crushing cancer. I'll just keep swinging till the job gets done, in my game there is no such thing as striking out!

So the language was much better today.

There is so much to say and write, but I won't go into it all today. Sooner than later, I'll write you a post about vitamin C. One very definite side effect: I get HYER right after treatment. It wears off. Too bad all treatments can't work the same way – putting us in good moods.

OKAY That's it.

Kickstarter is KICKING BUTT. With every single book sold, and more people who are going to read the Claires, it just gets fuzzier and fuzzier with warmth inside my heart. Thank you for your support. In return, I hope you like the novel.

Be well and have a lovely weekend

Catherine

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZU6xztnFvhI

2Oct2013

Blog Silence Broken

Posted in Uncategorized

Ah, radio silence . . . or rather, blog silence. For the past little while I've taken a break from the blog. Not because the blog was overwhelming, but because *I* was overwhelmed. However, we've just returned from a pause out west. This fishing trip had been planned ages ago, and so I decided not to cancel – in fact, it's probably for the best that I didn't since one thing after another was beginning to grind me down. We needed the break.

Here's the real, real, real truth: I am not good at this. I'm just plain terrible at it. And of course it will all work out somehow, but I don't know how people do it – and I'm not just talking about the cancer stuff, though it's the biggest challenge, but the life stuff too. The highs and lows and curve balls and backtracks and ambitions and workloads. I'm just feeling kinda garbage with all of it. I guess that's why spas were invented, and tea with friends, and duvets, and hugs.

So that's all I'll say about it. It was quite surprising and knocked me off guard as it happened. I'd quite like to stop that from happening again, if I can see the signs ahead of time.

For the past several days Zsolt and I have been on a bear hunt. It started in Calgary and a drive with my friend out to this beautiful lake Kanananananananasksis. Or something like that. We'd packed our inflatable canoe with us, and were ready to sail except the winds and rain stopped us from heading out. So instead my lovely friend took us on a very slow drive through the back-country where we hoped to spot wildlife. It didn't happen, however. Though apparently the next day they had to close that park because a grizzly was spotted eating a carcass.

From Calgary we took our rental car up to Banff. Banff is a National Park in Alberta, and it's lovely J There's a very touristy village with help wanted signs in all the windows – so if you are looking for a rocky mountain adventure, they have vacancies. However, no bears were spotted.

From Banff, we drove up to Jasper – a town embedded in my heart from trips as a child and a summer spent working for their tramway back in 2001. This is a far less commercial village, except for the souvenir shops all selling the exact same crap. We stayed here a couple days and drove from one waterfall to another, all the while going 30km/hour and looking for bears. Still nothing. But, we did find elk, thank goodness for that.

Here in Jasper I finally was able to canoe on Pyramid Lake, which had a been a day dream of mine way back in the chemoland days. Except instead of feeling that freedom and lightness I'd so craved, we were wrapped up in layers of warm clothing, praying it wouldn't rain on us. There's a strange niggle with this new diagnosis that I can't shake off even in the best of moments. It's just there looking at me. And whenever I look back at it, it sticks out its damn tongue.

To be honest, I'm a little exhausted lately – even on the trip I was exhausted – and it can largely be attributed to that tongue sticking-out, shoulder sitting, moment-spoiling little mental reminder I can't seem to shake off. The way I see it, I've already lived 2 years with this bull shit cancer, and they were 2 of the sweetest years I could have asked for. Now that I know it's there . . . why can I not get back to that sweet spot?

After Jasper – which involved a ridiculous canoe packing episode where we folded, jumped on, climbed over, sat upon and crushed our canoe into the suitcase – we went to Vancouver. In Vancouver we had one day of sunshine where Zsolt and I rode a two person bicycle. Now THAT was fun. There's no being distracted or getting teary when you're trying to balance a bike between two people while watching the stunning scenery and taking in that ocean air. It still makes me smile.

Following Vancouver, we met up with my parents and little brother (the real purpose of this trip) to go fishing. Okay, I didn't fish. I went to cafes and had cups of green teas. But the guys went fishing with HUGE results. So even if we never saw a bear, at least he did witness a dinosaur fish.

And now we are back and the real world continues. We'll see how this goes, and how I manage. One day at a time, eh. Plus, now that I'm back, I get to enjoy piecing together the prizes and construction for the book. Tomorrow I'll meet with Ian to talk covers, and I've already got an ISBN sorted. When I think of my book – like really think of it and imagine it – it fills me up so much with that splash of goodness and lightness . . . kinda like biking around Stanley Park on a bicycle built for two.

So here we go – moving forward into autumn and the upcoming new year. We will see what happens next.

P.S. Wendy Nielson has featured me on her blog this month as she shares stories of those faced with breast cancer. Check it out, she's done a lovely job with our interview. Also, It's now breast cancer awareness month, and that is fine if not also kinda exhausting. There are places where awareness is hugely needed, and there are places where we could move beyond awareness. Cancer is a tricky little bugger whether it's impacting children, women, men, pets or anything. It's heartbreaking as any other life-threatening illness is heartbreaking. And breast cancer is not what you think it is . . . it's not six months of treatment and life moving forward. Okay, life moves forward, but for 1 in 3 women like myself, it's also cancer moving away from the breast area and into other vital organs of the body. There is no cure, and treatment options are shit. So if you want to support a cause this month for BC, that's wonderful. Please check before you buy pink, so that the money you give (whether you decide to fund research, emotional support, awareness of 'ahem' metastic breast cancer, or even better **finding cures**) actually goes toward those goals and not just people's piggy banks. That's all I say here today. Thanks!

6Oct2013

Sexism Surprise!

Posted in Food, Fun, Life

Today I went with my best friend to the Ottawa Cookie Jam. This is a local event, and I think this was its very first year. Overall I'd say there were pros and cons, but the idea and the vibe have so much potential. I look forward to seeing this cookie party growing bigger and richer as each year passes.

Anyhow, so we went to look at cookies. Of course, the only problem was that most cookies were already gone by the time we arrived – which was 25 minutes after the doors opened. So no pretty cookie pictures for you, because I was too busy running around trying to *get* the cookies before they all disappeared!

(Maybe next year they should stage the servings, or have more cookies. There's so much cookie potential!)

Mind you, I'm not meant to be eating cookies in the first place. Since the diagnosis of stage IV, I'm really trying to cut all the sugar. My latest vacation wasn't too helpful in this area, but I guess God was looking down upon my friend and I today, and said: No MORE SUGAR! So that I restricted my cookie temptation.

However, we did get our 8 cookies worth, and we brought them back to her brand new home in Vanier for a tasting. I mostly just ate one cookie – maple walnut, which was gluten free, lovely, and not too sweet at all . . . but overall it was lovely. We met some more friends and had dark tea with cookies.

Lovely!

But to backtrack slightly, as we left the cookie event we decided to walk home from downtown. This meant we had to walk pass one of the best shawarma places in Ottawa. [*Shawarmas are like gyros, pitas, kabobs, donairs etc.*] So I thought, "Hey, I'm gonna get dinner and lunch for me and Zsolt." Their chicken platter is so big, it can stretch two meals for two people eating 'not too big' portions.

Right, so my friend and I go into the take-out place on the way back home. And we go in, there's no line-up. We go up to the counter where two men are standing . . .

. . .

. . .

. . .

And eventually one of them says, “Hi.”

So I said, “Hi,” and then—

THEN he turns back to the other guy, both of their backs to us, and keeps talking to his buddy.

So my awesome friend says very loudly, “Can we get a chicken platter?”

And this dude behind the counter turns back and says something like, “Okay.”

He makes the food. I go and pay.

. . .

. . .

. . .

After I pay, I am waiting for my food to be passed over. But he’s helping the next people, a couple. Finally, he gets the chicken ready for my order . . .

. . .

. . .

. . .

Then eventually passes it to me.

And as this is all happening, at some point during this exchange since it’s taking SO much time, the less naive side of myself wakes up from her nap and thinks: *he is doing this because we are women*.

It’s true. I mean, he didn’t say anything like “You Are Women, Therefore You Wait” . . . but he was quick enough in serving the couple behind me and both my friend and I came to the exact same conclusion.

So where does that leave me? In one of the best shawarma places in town, I encountered something I’d never expected to encounter here in Ottawa . . . sexism from a guy who isn’t even yet my age. And it wasn’t even your expected body-objectification type sexism . . . it was, ‘you aren’t good enough for me to notice you’ type sexism.

WTF?

Of course, since he didn’t hold up a sign saying “I’m one heck of a sexist jackass” I can’t prove the situation was 100% sexism, but it did feel 100% like sexism.

So it makes me wonder, are we being naive to think sexism isn’t happening all the time around us? Well of course it is! And maybe we’re sexist to men, maybe men are being sexist to us, maybe it’s a cultural thing, or an age thing, or a class thing, or a media thing, or a one-individual-who-can’t-get-his-head-out-of-his-ass thing . . . maybe it’s a lot of things. But it really leaves me extra unimpressed when it’s an *intentional* thing.

Anyhow, that shawarma shop isn't quite so attractive to me anymore. That's okay though, we've got many of these shops in Ottawa from which I've received excellent customer service when with girl friends. I love shawarma shops for the relationships you can make with the people behind the counter. Today was just ridiculous – so ridiculous it surprised the heck out of me.

And so there's a little story about my sexism surprise. Plus, of course, the cookie jam. It was a wonderful Saturday, absolutely perfect in every way despite the dude whose head was too far up his ass. I loved today because it had nothing to do with the drama that has otherwise cast a shadow over my life. I loved the freedom of being with friends, going to events, walking through town and now writing it all down here.

So that's all there is to that. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going to go dance with my husband.

~Catherine

13Oct2013

Happy Canadian Thanksgiving!

Posted in Bumpboobs, Canada, Food, Love, Novels and Stories, Writing

This weekend is thanksgiving in Canada, and I'm writing this post today because I'm so incredibly glad for the occasion. It's a little bit ridiculous to be so glad for thanksgiving, particularly since my family long-ago gave up on the turkey and cranberries and mashed potatoes in exchange for Indian food . . . but the weather is just so lovely, and it's always a pleasure to get all together. I can't help feeling good about giving thanks.

A friend of mine recently said to me that it's great to be a big dreamer, but even better to be a big DOER. And she's so totally right. I love to imagine sunshiny weather when it's raining, but it's even *better* to actually get outside when the sun does shine (*I say while looking at the window and typing on computer from inside the bedroom – okay, from between my bed covers.*)

So I dreamed about self-publishing my book, and now it's really going to happen. (*I wonder if I dream of it getting accepted by some huge publisher, if that would happen as well – I guess the lesson here is to actively make these things happen.*) I dared to ask people to help, which is actually rather intimidating – so I don't know how Terri of A Fresh Chapter manages it time and again.

BUT you know what? Last year at the Mirror Ball in Toronto that raises funds for Look Good Feel Better and Facing Cancer, the hostess said something about asking for money that was so insightful and so valid, I still remember it. Tracy Moore stood up there on the stage and said that people suggest it must be hard for her and Sherry to go about asking for money during the night. But no, she asserted, it wasn't hard to ask for money because it was going to a worthwhile cause – helping women navigate the emotional hurdles of cancer. It's not hard to ask because the intention is good.

So that's something I've kept in mind. Now, with the kickstarter I feel much less entitled to ask because while the intention is *good*, it's impact is also small. There's just me and my book. Though I really hope it resonates with those who read it, and that is how the impact can become larger – hopefully!

But anyhow, all that aside, today I'm thankful for being a DOER. It's not easy, but it's happening.

I'm also thankful to feel so much love and support. It is amazing. And I really mean it, too. It was **amazing** (*Causing great surprise or wonder; astonishing*) to receive such an outpour of support. Now we're putting the book together bit-by-bit. I ordered more material for the tea towels yesterday, and am receiving edits, and have the cover with Ian, and am trying to learn more about ebooks (*with some advice from Opal Carew*). It's overwhelming, it takes all kinds of time, and it's fantastic. I'm grateful so many people gave their support to this happening.

* I am grateful for my breath. Air comes in and out of my lungs, and I love that sensation. Ever since the doctor said "there are spots" I have had trouble in my chest. Trouble like pain, wheezing, etc. Whether it is psychosomatic or cancer-related, I don't know exactly. All I know is that it is uncomfortable, and comes on and off. The past week or so I've had some strong wheezing, and living with that sensation is truly challenging. Today the wheezing has backed off, and I am grateful for the ability to breathe in and out without that internal crinkling sensation. My mom gave me some drops, and I did some steaming stuff – honestly, I don't know what helps, but so long as something helps, I am so incredibly grateful.

I am grateful for the tears, because they are easier than the stress.

I am grateful for butter chicken, which I'll be licking of my plate in a few hours.

I am grateful for family and friends and love.

I am grateful for an apartment that has been repaired. The handyman came by yesterday (*and is here again today*) and pulled out all our cupboards. Oh my goodness! You should have SEEN the MASSIVE holes behind our cupboards. So of course the neighbours' smoke was pouring into our apartment. I am *not* grateful of an inconsiderate neighbour who won't take his smoking outside. But if I talk too much about that my wheeze will return. Let's just say that the holes are fixed and I am glad.

And last but not least, I'm grateful for this blog, for the leaves falling from trees, for my husband's beautiful smile, for the tea we drink each morning, for the sunshine through the window, for hot showers, for friends and family, for the cottage we'll escape to later this upcoming week, for the support I've received in all kinds of ways, for chocolate chip cookies made without much sugar (little bit of coconut sugar) and no grains or gluten . . .

You know what else, I'm grateful for feeling happy right now. It doesn't always happen, but right now I am – Thank God – feeling good.

So Happy Thanksgiving! I hope you have a wonderful day whether or not you are celebrating the occasion.

~Catherine

P.S. My "Catherine Brunelle Writes" facebook page has a very small number of likes. It was pointed out that maybe I should give it more attention, so if you are in the mood for a little "liking" (and want to follow writing adventures with pictures, thoughts, etc), please do click here and like the page. Thanks!

24Oct2013

Strange and Stupid

Posted in Bumpboobs

It's been such a while since I've last posted. To rev up my blogging juices, I'm writing directly into the text box on wordpress. This is quite literally going to be a post that's hot off the keyboard.

Life has been busy. Sometimes that is good, sometimes that is bad. Basically the goodness or badness all depends upon my anxiety levels. Menopause + dealing with cancer = CRAZY Catherine. In high school some friends used to call me 'crazy brunelle' because I would do rather random things (which weren't at all random, though I guess it might have appeared that way). Anyhow, that was one of the nicknames I had, and it was funny. Now I feel like at times I might actually be losing my sense of control, and that's way less funny. Even if I tell myself: "these feelings are from the Zoladex," I still have waves of anguish over not being able to have children, facing a life-threatening stage of cancer, deadlines, messy apartments, fashion choices, making meals, whether Zsolt is mad at me (he never is, I just get these momentary anxious moments where I'm like, "you have got to be mad at me!" and then he says he isn't, and all is well again).

Anyhow. Sometimes it's no big deal. But for some of the stuff, well, yes it is a big deal.

One of these big deals is baby making.

It's rather frowned upon to have a child while in my situation. And the problem here is that most women in my situation stay in this situation. That's their life. So having a child? Is it wrong to give up hope? Am I betraying that little baby I've been imagining since falling in love with Zsolt? Maybe. I don't know. All I know is wrong or right, I find myself grieving the idea of that baby. I grieve the bedtime stories I wanted to tell them, the heirlooms I wanted to pass onward, the trips we would have taken, the tiny shoes I would have slipped onto their feet. I grieve the daughter I'll never have tea with, and I grieve the son who won't get a chance to compare, back-to-back with my husband to see who is taller.

There's this whole world in my imagination that part of me is saying goodbye to, and it's beyond the control of my determination. It's hard, because I'm supposed to be a fierce mother – and that, I reckon, starts even before the babies arrive. Yet here I am feeling a deep loss – and I wonder if feeling loss equates to giving up.

Life has always been unexpected. So many good things have happened that I never expected. And, maybe I'll go on to have children, or adopt children, or love other people's children, or sponsor children, or mentor children . . . I'm quite certain, actually, that at least some of those things are going to happen.

There is this idea that embracing uncertainly is a good thing. It is. But I like to be certain, it gives me power. I like to be certain about my priorities, my loves… even if I can't see the future, I want to feel certain I *will* see the future.

Would it be really stupid for me to say I want to live? I'm in the mood to live, and I'm not in the mood yet to die. Maybe when I'm 92, or something like that. This might be denial. But if this is denial, it's sure as hell filled with a lot lot of fear and sadness, and I don't reckon those things go hand in hand. If I could switch off that by pushing a button for some fearless, happy denial, I'd truly consider doing so.

So, will I live through stage four cancer? Well, I'm here today. And I'm quite sure I'll be here tomorrow. And two days ago I bought a sweater as an 'investment piece', explaining to Zsolt that it was worth $60 because I'll be wearing it a decade from now . . .

There are many things going on in my head. I guess that is why it's good to blog and just let it all go. I'm letting it go into this space. It is moving out of me and onto this page. Out of me. Out of my head. More will come to fill it back up, but it's helpful for now. Thanks for tolerating this little blurb about nothing that is also filled with heavy emotions.

(You know what is funny? When I was first dx and had treatment, I was embarrassed to admit I was afraid it would come back … as if doing so would take away from my determination to beat the cancer. Now that it's come back, I'm embarrassed to admit that I could be okay, because it takes away from the really shitty realities of cancer at this stage. Strange and stupid in both aspects. I want to hope, and I'm allowed to be afraid. The two aren't exclusive to one another.)

28Oct2013

If you happen to be in Ottawa

Posted in Uncategorized

If you happen to be in Ottawa next Monday, I'm speaking with Women in Leadership at the HUB on Bank Street. During the conversation, I'll be talking to Tina (President of WIL) about creating a Kickstarter event, learning how to ask for what you want, navigating around pretty big (emotional) challenges, etc. It should be a good conversation.

They've started a Eventbrite page, so I'm linking it here should anyone like to join us and register. Of course, I'd be glad to see some friendly and familiar faces there. I'm going to put on my investment sweater and hope it works some magical powers. Really, me as an "Fascinating Woman"? I don't know. But what the heck? There's a first time for everything! Besides, as I have found with my blogging – everyone has a fascinating story, all you need to do is listen, ask and dig just a little.

So, see you there, or not. Either way, have a lovely week

(P.S. Oh my GOODNESS, I'm thick in the middle of editing. It's totally thrilling and totally consuming. My eyes are going cross from all this screen staring. Happy days.)

10Nov2013

How things are going, and a story about worms

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life, Novels and Stories

I'm waiting for the chicken to defrost just a little before I slice it up. In the meanwhile, it's time for a blog post! While I often update on Facebook and occasionally through the Kickstarter campaign, I thought maybe here in the land of blogging, it was quite a good idea to share on how the book is doing.

So, how *is* the book doing?

Very well, thank you for asking. There were starts and stops with a few things, but in reality none of that even matters because it is all very good. This reminds me of why it's good to do what you really believe in – like, from the gut and heart and whatever part of you taps that inside strength.

My point: When it is good, the hitches don't matter.

The book is now off to the printers with the editing done (*well, we did our very best for the time being*), and cover designed. I have a proof copy, and it's gorgeous.

Check out that investment sweater! Me being interviewed by Tina of Women In Leadership, Ottawa.

Internal debate: When to reveal the cover? Zsolt thinks we should ship out the book first, then show everyone the cover. He thinks it would be a lovely surprise in the mail. The man has a point. But on the other hand, I LOVE IT, and it's sooo hard not to show the world when I'm going bonkers over something. Though maybe opening a book in the mail and seeing the picture would be very exciting… I imagine it could be fun. Your opinion?

Also, I'm planning on having a launch party. Now I've typed it out loud, I'm obligated! You heard it here – LAUNCH PARTY IS HAPPENING. Most of me wants to have it at the apartment. I'm wondering just how many people can fit into this space. Because really, all the *best* parties are house parties, no? Yes. It's good to launch in a book store with wine and conversation… but perhaps it's better to launch this book in my kitchen with pot luck, music and laughter? While the book is literary, it's by no means stuffy. The party should reflect that, wherever it may happen.

Finally, in the very smallest cracks of the day, i.e. midnight-ish, I've started working on my writer's website. This is all on me, I'm not outsourcing the business of websites. It's mostly just a bit of fun, but also something quite practical. Below is a picture from the website, featuring an image from one of my oldest postcards:

And just to give a little update, kind of imagining that Lulu was still reading this blog, and I know she'd be curious: How are we doing? Zsolt and I are doing really well, thanks for asking.

In terms of life, it's been beautifully normal lately. There's an oncologist appointment coming up this week, and I am praying Dr. Canada isn't going to ruin my buzz. Onco appointments give me anxiety hot flashes.

The IV Vitamin C is going well. I go to the OICC in Ottawa, and I'm very grateful for their services. It's *not cheap*, but like one of my doctors said: can you really put a price tag on your life? Well, yes, you can . . . but nevertheless, this is my shot, my time to try my damn best with what I've got, and I'm going to take it. I'm lucky to be able to do this. Part of what I make from the kickstarter campaign – like whatever I get to take away after making the book, etc., will hopefully go to this sort of thing.

I'm also doing something called mistletoe. It's an injection 3x a week that is meant to stimulate the immune system. Truth be told, this isn't fun. But I've heard some good results from others, so that is very encouraging.

Also, Zsolt's parents are bringing us to Hungary for the holidays! I guess you can call that a gift for the soul. I had tried suggesting they come over here, but it's not easy for them with the language barrier and the world being big, fast, and a little intimidating. So we go there! I've found a place that will administer vitamin C while I'm in Hungary. There will also be Christmas markets, and puppies and goulash (I'm hoping). I reckon it is better to go now than wait, wait, wait for the right moment. Forget waiting for the right moment—I don't know what that even means anymore, except that body allowing, *now* is the right moment for everything.

And we are happy. I haven't been crying every day, Zsolt and I laugh and play, and I am glad. I'm glad to be happy. Not much has changed one way or another, I guess . . . well, we've just been allowed to step-back from the drama (*or get used to the drama*) and a bit of happiness has been finding its way back in.

Also, I went to my parents' workshop this past weekend, which was a HUGE help emotionally. There were a few really solid realizations during that workshop. Mostly, I realized I've been quite hooked on this idea of 'home' and maybe that's not working out for me anymore. Maybe it's time to let go of that allusive dream, or redefine it. I like that, it's less pressure.

Other news? Oh, let's see. The man is cooking me eggs. I've been so busy that Zsolt has been making lunch several times a week. He has mastered the art of eggs with yolk that isn't too hard or too soft. He fries the bacon so it's cooked but not chewy. And, he's insisting upon frying up broccoli every time since it's so healthy.

* MAN. Speaking of broccoli. A while ago, we bought broccoli from the local organic farmer who sells on the nearby street corner. So, fresh broccoli – *la, la, la,* happy days. Zsolt does his thing and cooks it all up while I'm at the computer working away. We eat dinner, and then, toward the end I notice a dead worm! Grossed out, I push away the last bit of broccoli and refuse to eat more (*due to a traumatic broccoli freezing incident as a teenager that also involved worms*). So Zsolt tosses the insect, then goes to eat the remainder of my broccoli—again finding another worm, then another, and another! THE ENTIRE LOT OF BROCCOLI IS FULL OF DEAD WORMS, and we'd eaten it all, minus that clump on my plate.

BAH!

But, at least they were organic worms.

The END. (of this blog post)

12Nov2013

A Little Healing Harp

Posted in Uncategorized

Today I listened to a harp. Right up close – ear to the wood. Very slowly the strings were plucked, and I listened with eyes closed to the vibration. The sound would start very deep, and made me think of the colour brown for some reason, then it would stretch out far and just continue and continue and continue until finally, eventually it faded away.

There is a lovely lady in Ottawa who invited me to her home this Monday morning. I won't say her name only because, I forgot to ask if I could mention it here. She is an actress and musician and writer and counsellor and traveller and the perfect example of a renaissance woman. Through a small series of coincidences, I found myself in her living room today, ear on her harp as she plucked different notes.

Two weeks ago I was at the Ottawa Women's Business Network Courageous Women's Event, which was organized by the lovely Camille Boivin, for whom I support in writing the blog "Sister Leadership." This women's event was held at the Bytown, and part of the evening involved storytelling and meeting notable women of Ottawa's past. One lady there was Mother McGuinty. Mind you, she's not the *real* Mother McGuinty – that lady being from the canal building times in Ottawa, which was long, long, long ago. The women at the event was an actress, and she often plays this role. Anyhow, she was by far the most popular person at this party as she played the role – and she wasn't even there to network! Mother McGinty kept asking us to show her our ankles, and invited us to work at her 'bar' over the way where men would go crazy over the flash of a lovely ankle.

She was totally charming.

Then the other day, I was at the OICC, and there she was on the cover of a music CD – Mother McGuinty. She was on the cover of this CD, playing the harp.

And then, I was asked to find and interview her (for a series of Ottawa women we are doing over at SL). Which I did, because that's what I do – and during our conversation it came out that she had had stage four lymphoma many years ago. To help herself feel better during treatments, she found a favourite note on her harp, and she would play it, listening as it stretched out and vibrate into her, until it finally faded away – then, she'd strum it again, and again, and again, resonating with the notes.

During my interview with her, which will sooner than later be on Cam's blog, I had mentioned seeing her CD at the OICC, which is when she learned about the stage 4 breast cancer, and invited me over for a cuppa and some harp-listening.

It was a lovely part of today. It's lovely how the notes flow right into me.

Never in my life did I imagine holding a harp and resting myself against it to listen and vibrate and heal. But that is exactly what happened today. It was lovely, she was lovely, and now I know my notes. J B and C – deep and strong.

So there is a little story about that.

18Nov2013

The Pill, LuluLemon, and My Soap Box

Posted in Bumpboobs

Not so long ago (*like last week*), Lulu lemon went and threw a grenade into their enterprise. You probably know what happened so I won't go into it. I'll only say it *sucks* that my damn expensive set of yoga pants are now embarrassing to wear. Comfortable, but embarrassing. What a huge fail on their part. I loved their brand and didn't give a damn about some stupid see-through trousers that were recalled. Now, they as a company have become embarrassing.

But this isn't about Lululemon. It's about the birth control pill. In this post on the Lululemon website, they link the pill—through social changes, promiscuity, Super Girls, shoulder pads, and whatever—to breast cancer. Because of the rambling leaps in logic, the conclusion is really stupid. However…

I link the pill to breast cancer because at 28 years old (okay, 27 turning 28), I was diagnosed with stage three breast cancer in my right breast. I had no risk factors. Cancer isn't a common theme in my family tree. It was seemingly random.

Eight years (*give or take*) I was on the pill. I started around the age of eighteen, before I even began having sex. As soon as the concept of sexual relations (*whooohoo!)* came into play, it was off to the family doctor for a prescription. Forget carrying condoms with me and insisting the guy wore it – I was a teenager, and therefore, I was assumed to not be responsible enough for that kind of foresight. It's no one's fault. Teenagers are horney and like to have fun. Foresight *can* wane. There was fear around teenage pregnancy and throwing you life away.

The pill was the answer.

At first I wasn't sure, but after visiting the doctor it seemed okay. She prescribed me with some medication, explained how to take it, and off I went into the world of Sexual Good Times. (*Except I wasn't actually having sex, that came later. I was just glad to be on the pill in case I decided to hit that homerun.*)

And then, as I started to look around, I realized all the girls were on the pill. Everyone popped their pill and got bigger boobs, or stabilized their periods, or had a change in libido, or cleared their acne, and in general us young women had peace of mind that we were safe from throwing our lives away.

Do you know what? When I went to visit the doctor, we didn't even talk about alternative contraception. I mean, okay, there were condoms (*I'm pro condom since it doesn't change our physiology*), but I mean contraception that a woman could actively control with her own body like diaphragms, sponges, spermicide gel, etc. (*Back then that metal T thing didn't seem to exist*). It was just assumed that this change to my hormones, tricking my eighteen-year-old body into thinking that it was already pregnant all the time, was the way to go.

I was on the pill with various breaks for eight years. I didn't even consider it to be a real drug. When nurses, or doctors, or insurance people asked if I was on medication, I'd reply, "No. Oh, well, only the pill." As if it was nothing.

For eight years, taking a pill that made my body think it was pregnant. Taking pills that made me flat-out nauseous and sometimes vomit if they were swallowed less than 12 hours apart.

I'd never even seen a diaphragm before – didn't even know how to get one. But that was okay, because the pill was okay. It wasn't a *real* drug.

I guess that's what really ticks me off: my failure to appreciate that birth control is a real drug, with REAL impact on the body's system. And it's not just me. I have friends who've also been on the pill for eight plus years and spoke about migraines, fatigue, nausea . . . then, they went off the pill and the symptoms got considerably better (*not all the way better, but consider if the body has been altered for so many years, would the impact clear up immediately, if ever? I don't think so*). I feel mad at myself for being so flippant about something so real. Just because everyone did it, I thought it was nothing.

And I suspect birth control is still being sold as *the* way to prevent pregnancy. It's not a drug, it's a lifestyle.

Obviously not everyone on the pill (*actually, hardly any my age*) has gotten breast cancer. But women do seem to be getting cancer at younger ages. What are the real risks? Was it something other than birth control that caused the disease threatening me today? I don't know.

I do know that the pill is now listed by the Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation as a risk factor for breast cancer, so that is good. And what about young women who might be put on an eight year, ten year, or even longer path with this drug . . . is it still a lifestyle thing – a pill that you pop – or are the implications being explained, along with the alternatives?

Recently, I filled out the HOW study, which is a massive survey of women with and without breast cancer, comparing factors so that we can really learn about risks and differences and why people get breast cancer. Men *and* women are welcome to fill it out. You are welcome to do so, if you like.

I don't know why I got breast cancer. A culmination of factors, I reckon. But do I think the pill is linked to this disease. It's not a packet of candy, it's a packet of drugs that alters our bodies. (*And maybe guys don't like condoms, but they'll get used to it if that's what women insist upon*.)

So that is what the LuluLemon stuff kicked up inside of me. The pill makes me angry. I know it liberated women to take control of their bodies, *but why should women have to* ***alter their bodies*** *to take control*? Particularly in a relationship with mutual respect, where one doesn't have to hide not wanting to get pregnant…

Anyhoo, that was a strong-opinion post. For birth control, I'm generally anti pill. Sure, there are cases when it is needed, but maybe as a whole we can be too quick to underestimate and overprescribe.

And that is all I'll say about that.

24Nov2013

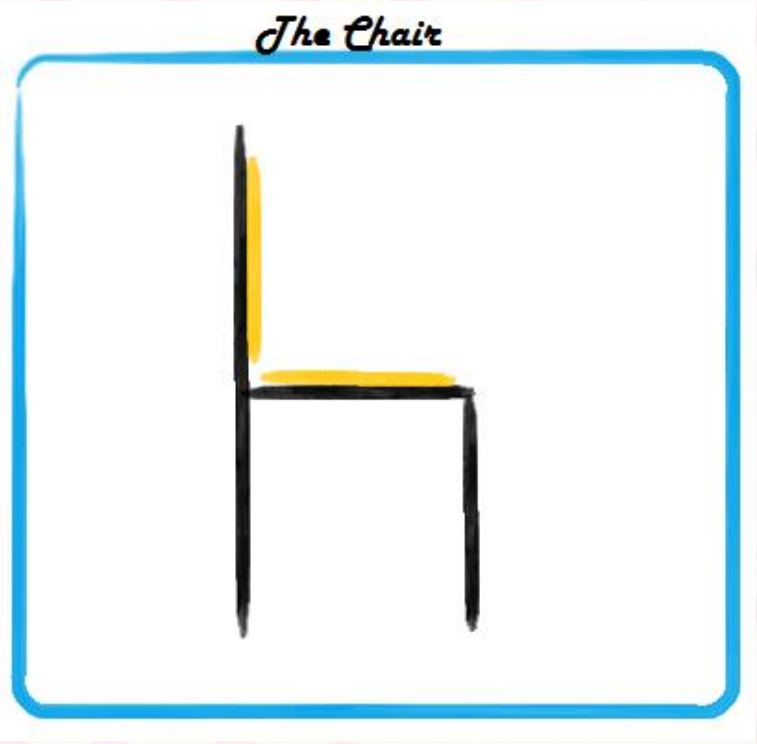
The CHAIR

Posted in Fun, Life

Let me tell you about the chair. But to do that, I need to tell you a little bit about last night, and why we had to run out of our hotel room here in Toronto this morning.

Last night was the Mirror Ball for Look Good Feel Better and FacingCancer.ca. As I've mentioned (and if you know me online, you've probably noticed), I both blog and work with FacingCancer.ca. So, we were fortunate enough to receive an invitation to the Mirror Ball this year. It's a really big gala that raises funds for the programs. This is the stuff that helps ladies receive complimentary cosmetics when they are going through so much, and gives them a place to share stories and feelings online.

Anyhow.



We were at the Mirror Ball and it was gooooooddddd fun. After catching up with the other awesome FC.ca bloggers and behind-the-scenes lovelies, my favourite aspect of this ball (along with the appetizers, ambiance, buzz, fancy clothes, drinks, and delish food) is the silent auction. Silent my backside! That auction room is *busy* with people looking over the products on auction.

Let me dip into my memory and share some of these things:

Luggage – starting bids were around 20-100 dollars. Those are tempting numbers, particularly since our luggage is on its last days!

Loads of kids stuff. No thank you.

Kitchen goods and home wear from the Bay. Including a lovely scarf Zsolt and I were tempted to get into a bidding war over, but since it' only worth 20 dollars in the first place, we didn't bother.

Cosmetics galore!

Trips to here and there (*not needed, through the train trip across Canada sounds cool*).

Random stuff: There were puppies, a lawn mower, some giant plush mushroom…

Anyhow, I've been anticipating this auction from the moment we were invited. However, while it was time to browse, we started talking to friends and just skipped the entire showcase. Suddenly the lights are flicking on and off, signalling everyone to go out to the dining room.

No way! Zsolt and I are rushing around looking at stuff and mostly dismissing everything. Then somehow, we bid on a random sweater (*which was cosy as a cloud in heaven*) and the luggage. *Then* we go to the amazing dining room and begin the meal. Except this year, everyone seemed auction obsession (*which is a good thing, since it all goes toward the charity),* and so the whole table is flipping through the little book of auction stuff. Zsolt and I decide to flip as well. That's when we see a listing for an orange and cream chair for 20$. BAM! Before you can say, "Actually, we shouldn't" the Zsoltster had bid on it! We're in for 20 bucks on a chair we have no way to transport back to Ottawa.

And the auction goes on, and on, and on… and no one bids against us to take it away.

End of the night comes – and we've won the chair!

WTF!

We hadn't even *seen* the chair. And I can't even tell you why we bid. It just kinda happened. We were struck with silent auction fever . . . maybe they put something in the food . . . maybe we should just take this as a warning to *never* go to Vegas—our self control is not up to the challenge.

Anyhow, we go and pick the chair, and it actually turns out to be quite nice. (We didn't win the luggage, but we, again, didn't want to go into a bidding war over the pieces)

So we take this chair up to the hotel room, and figure we'll sort it out tomorrow morning. Everything will be a okay.

Skip to 12.30 pm the next day, and we're waking up – thirty minutes late for checkout. I have never seen my husband jump up from the bed so fast. He is part zombie, part productive-robot. We are literally throwing things into our various bags, hoping we don't get charged extra as we sneak out the door.

You know, I am going to divert the blame and say this was the fault of the Royal York for having such temptingly **thick** curtains in their rooms. It was dark as night when we looked at the time, and I was half buried in a pile of feather pillows.

We get our stuff together, and just as we are about to make a quick exit we remember, we bought a freaking chair last night, and there it is in our room! So here is the dilemma: we took the train to Toronto, and as I learnt about half an hour later, VIA rail won't let you take furniture onto the train. Soooooooo…… after walking around Toronto for a while with this random chair, we have this conversation:

I say to Zsolt, "Let's ditch the chair."

He says to me, "But we can't ditch the chair. I'll feel bad since it's such a *good* chair."

I give in, cause I know it *would* make him feel badly, and it *is* a good chair.

So, one taxi ride later – going deeper into Toronto – (*the taxi driver fleeced us as he could smell the desperation off of me. It was hard to find a driver who would accept a chair in his car*) we rock up to a friend's house in Toronto and are asking him to please accept the chair into his home until he next drives down to Ottawa, which he very kindly does.

Therefore, in a month or two, the chair will come make its way to our apartment.

We made it back to the train on time, and now we are rocking and rolling toward Ottawa. The Mirror Ball was such a good time, and it was a pleasure to stop working for the night and just have fun. There was good company, good food, awesome fashion, and late-night dancing. There was also a chair.

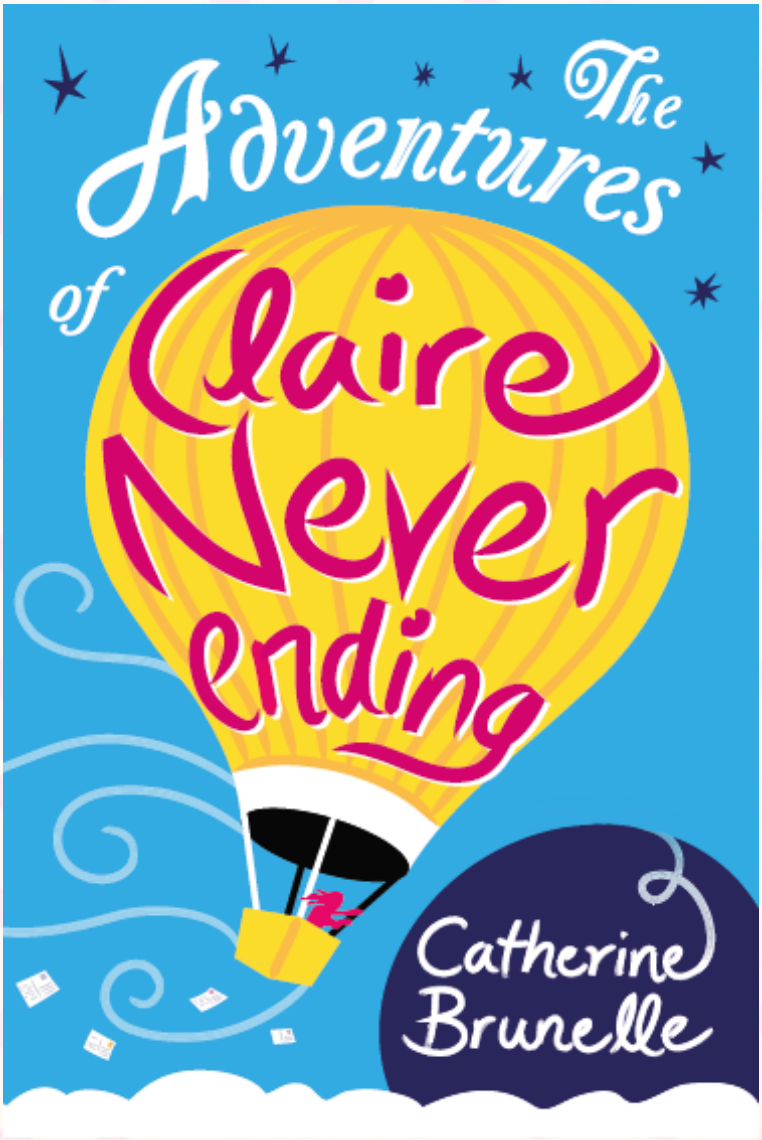
And that is the story of that

The end.

27Nov2013

Ta Da! Meet the Book :)

Posted in Novels and Stories, Writing



It's here and it is beautiful!

The past couple days have been about signing books, packaging books, and sending books. So I hope you receive yours soon. When you do, I'd LOVE to see a picture of you and your book (or just your book) that I could share online. Many of the Claires have a lust for travel and adventure in this novel, so it'd be great to see where the actual novel travels to. You send in pics through ClaireNeverEnding@gmail.com, or share on my facebook page, or tweet it at @Bumpyboobs. If you missed the Kickstarter campaign, the book is now available online (and at my parent's office in Kanata).

Where can you buy the book? Soft cover novels are being sold through Amazon: http://amzn.to/1a60ypI You can also buy ebooks through Amazon for kindle AND Smashwords. Smashwords carries every ebook format, so it's very good for any kind of device.

Reviews are a really helpful thing for an author. So, if you read the book and like it, please do give it a review on Amazon.com (book or ebook), and/or Goodreads. That would be amazing.

Lastly, my website is up! After a little trouble getting it connected, it's finally flying. Check it out at http://www.CatherineBrunelle.com

I feel like I've asked so much from everyone with the Kickstarter campaign and this novel. Just so you know, I have been so touched by people pouring forth with their enthusiasm. In return here are my hopes for you:

- I hope you find the story to be good, especially for all of you who have been reading alongside me with this blog.
- I hope it carries you in that big yellow balloon and whisks you away for your own adventure.
- I hope you have a favourite Claire.
- I hope it helps you to smile, laugh and nod (and tear-up just occasionally) often as you read the stories.
- I hope you recognize bits and pieces of yourself in these women. (Despite their being 100% fictional)
- I hope when you chase after your own Big Dreams, you let me know so I can cheer you forward as you did for me.

It isn't a perfect novel, but it's one of the heart – as I am sure they all are. And for me, the pay off has been interacting with everyone on the Kickstarter campaign *and* allowing a new definition of myself to develop that is so, so good. The Catherine who made this book is a very happy Catherine, indeed.

Here's a picture of my dad after I dropped the book off at his house. It made me smile, so I'll share it with you too.

Have yourself a beautiful week.

Catherine

11Dec2013

Budapest and Vitmain C Infusion

Posted in Bumpboobs, Travel, Treatment

[A 'to be fair' addition. The following friday after this post (i.e. today, when I'm writing this update), the infusion went far better. I think having my translator with me – Zsolt the human Hungarian-English dictionary – was really helpful. Plus, I was more prepared in the vein department. I looked like that kid in the Robert Munch story, Thomas' Snowsuit. So, it has improved!]

Hey there, how you doing?

The man (Zsolt) and I are finally in Hungary for Christmas with his family. It was a pretty awesome to be invited over by his folks, but also an adventure that has presented itself with challenges. The biggest question being, how can we travel for long periods when I'm getting treatment? Mind you, it's not "**treatment**" if you know what I mean – as in, it's not the treatment-that-shall-not-be-named. There is no nausea as a result, or hair loss, or illness of any kind. Actually, infusions of vitmain c (IVC) kinda rock in that there are no heavy-handed side effects.

Anyhow, I had spoken with the naturopath in Ottawa about taking a month long break from IVC, and she said, "I've seen it be done before, but the results weren't very good…"

Gulp.

So, how to travel and still get my infusions?

We were scrambling over this for a while, trying to find clinics that might offer the IVC service. I'd found many in Austria who offer IVC. Zsolt came up rather thin in Hungary, *however* he did find a clinic in Budapest that offers vitmain infusions. From there, he found a doctor who was willing to allow me to get my Vitamin C infusions, providing I bring along the vitamin C myself, which I have done. So, what follows is an email to my mother describing yesterday's experience. I'd like to say *before* diving into that little adventure, that I pray this won't be the normal course of events. And it really is incredibly good of the doctor to allow me to have these treatments in her clinic. (*It's a fertility clinic by the way, the irony of that doesn't allude me. Except of course, if there is no irony and I've just pulled an Alanis Morissette in making the suggestion. Whatever*.) So despite all my winging, looking back I am of course grateful for this accommodation.

Here's a little taste of what happens when travel and treatment meet. Plus, throw in a fever and a language barrier, just for some extra fun.

"*Hi Mom,*

*The doctor's was a mess. I mean, in the end we got there – but it was a crap day as a whole. The night before the doctor appointment, Zsolt got a fever. Then, the day of the appointment, his fever was waning but he had terrible heart burn. So in the end it was decided that he should not come along. Therefore, I took a taxi into Budapest and met his sis & bro-in-law [*I have cut out their names for this post*] at the doctor's.*

No one at the clinic spoke English.

We wait and wait, then go into for the appointment. So the doctor spoke to Zsolt's sis & bro-in-law and hardly to me at all. I think I scare people with my total lack of Hungarian. Meanwhile, I'm just so knackered from Zsolt having been sick and all this travelling – I look like a total mess.

Anyhow. Finally that meeting is over, and it's time for my vitamin C. This is where it gets really ridiculous. The doctor insists I drink water, go to the bathroom, and rinse my arm in warm water. And she keeps saying this over and over, so Bro-in-law translates it to me over and over. And I'm like, "yeah, I've done this a million times already – okay, 15 times".

So Zsolt' sis & bro-in-law leave because this is all on their lunch break and they need to get back to work. It's just me and the nurses who come along to give me the infusion. There are two nurses, who seem like lovely people but are utterly incapable at this infusion thing. They have me sit in a lounge chair with no arms on which I can rest my arm. And they try to get me to let them use my elbow vein. But i'm like, "no way, you need to use my hand" and that freaks them out even more. There are two of them, and they are doing everything together – checking my veins, going over to the heater and turning it on because it's damn cold in the room, coming back, going off together to microwave my gel pack (which I bought the day before), coming back.

Eventually they try a vein in my hand. Unfortunately, they didn't get it. But they don't even try again. Instead they say, "We need to go and get the doctor." They say it in Hungarian, but 'doktor' is easy to understand.

So – one poke, and they go get the doctor. Except the doctor is busy (not that they tell me that, they tell me nothing), and I'm sitting in that room alone for about 45 minutes. FINALLY the doctor comes in, but she doesn't want to use my hand veins. She wants to use my elbow. I am SO fed up, that I say fine, use the elbow.

So she does. It eventually goes in, because it's a really hard vein, and they start the drip.

Okay, so there are two bags. The nurse tells me about one hour, so I reckon I'll be done in one hour. I call up Zsolt (his Dad drove back up from Pecs to drive us down to Pecs after the appointment since Zsolt was sick earlier) and tell him to get over to the place (since he is feeling better) because I'm alone in a room with no way of calling for help if it were needed.

About an hour later, the bag appears to be done, and Zsolt and his Dad arrive. I sit up, thinking this is all over and am ready to go. Except the nurse comes in and says there's another bag. My sitting up has shifted the needle without my realization that it was out of the vein. The nurse hooks up the second bag, leaves, and I say to Zsolt, "This doesn't feel right."

And it wasn't right, because the needle wasn't in my vein at all, and the drip is just going into my arm. Soon I notice the damn bubble under my skin – tell Zsolt to turn off the drop and go get the nurse, which he does. The nurse comes in and removes the needed. Then, we collectively agree that this is enough for today, and I'm getting the hell out of there.

So, I did about 25 grams of Vitmain C. I guess that's better than nothing. On Friday I hope to God it goes better. Zsolt says that this is a women's clinic, and they hardly ever do infusions, which is why they are so nervous. Maybe it would have been better to get this done in Vienna. It was miserable, no joking. I am hoping that next Friday I can help them more with how to do the infusion with Zsolt's translation.

Zsolt is much better now. He says his illness was much like what happened several years ago when we were living in England and he had a fever out of nowhere. We're back in Pecs now, I slept in till 10 and had breakfast in bed. It has restored my sanity, though I am not looking forward to Friday when we drive back up

for another infusion. BUT my life is important and I guess that means tolerating some nervous nurses and a whole lot of Hungarian I don't understand.

;p So, I am doing my best over here. Though I do miss home

And there is a very long answer to your question

Love,
Catherine"

12Dec2013

Happy News Bulletin

Posted in Novels and Stories, Writing

Just a short post for a little happy dancing news. Yesterday I was pleased as punch (*like cranberry juice mixed with champagne and sparkling water, served with frozen raspberries*) to be mentioned in the Apartment 613 article on local books to read in Ottawa.

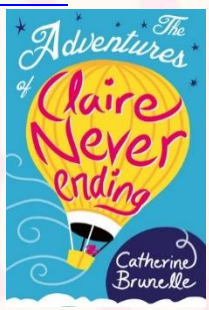
BUT not only was I in the article, which is wonderful in itself, I was also at the *top* of that article in the 'personal favourites' section. **Katy-Perry-Bra-Fireworks-Explosion-of-Excitment!** If you live in Ottawa, or even if you don't (since many books are online), do check out the round-up of novels, poetry, and graphic novels. Read here: http://apt613.ca/apartment613-holiday-book-gift-list-for-2013/

So, that basically made my night. Hopefully that feel-good momentum can carry through to this weekend, after the next Vitamin C infusion. It's really wonderful to be part of the Ottawa writing scene. I hope soon I can say I'm part of the Canadian writing scene – would that not be amazing?

Okay, happy news bulletin officially over!

Except for this little widget! I've got a book give away on goodreads

Goodreads Book Giveaway



The Adventures of Claire Never-Ending
by Catherine Brunelle

Giveaway ends January 01, 2014.

See the giveaway details
at Goodreads.

Enter to win

And now for the fireworks: (This video is actually filmed in Budapest, so that's a nice coincidence)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QGJuMBdaqIw

18Dec2013

Proud, Excited and Thankful List: 2013

Posted in Bumpboobs, Canada, Fun, Life, Love, Novels and Stories, Travel, Writing

It's evening here in Hungary, and we've just come from a lovely day at the Vienna Christmas markets. There's nothing like a whole load of Christmas lights in the dark to make you think of the holidays and year-end magic. So that's what I did today, and now I'd like to think about what I did this year. This post is for a reflection of gratitude before moving forward to 2014.

What I'm proud of:

1) The novel. There are *so many aspects* of this that challenged me, and I'm hugely proud to have faced that adventure at full-tilt, along with incredible support from you all. Seriously, I feel like I won an Olympic medal for 'putting yourself out there, then creating something awesome from the experience'. Can I award myself a medal, or would the Olympic committee protest that? Maybe a gold-foil chocolate one instead.

2) My husband. Zsolt shines in many, many ways. I'm proud of his looking forward despite a year where he was laid off, felt displaced, and learnt his wife has stage four. This guy is pushing forward *and* acts as cheerleader supreme. I'm so incredibly proud of him.

3) Becoming involved with VanierNow and writing people's stories. One story that really shines that I wrote is about Erika, the not-an-artist.

4) Getting up in the morning, getting dressed, and living my life. I'm very proud of this. I do it for myself, for my husband, for my family, for my health – I do it because life is better this way.

5) Recovering my grandmother's furniture to give it new life. I sewed those slipcovers myself, baby! Lulu would not be impressed with the quality of my sewing, but I think she'd like the sentiment.

6) My work with Facing Cancer Together and Sister Leadership. As I said, it's an honour to share people's stories.

What I got excited for:

1) My husband, this blog, my friends, and my family who always make me smile and have great times when we are together. (We've drank about a swimming pool's worth of tea during our chats, eh?)

2) Water. Last year we bought ourselves our dream canoe. This year we used it. We also found a nearby swimming hole that – despite one nibbling fish – makes me feel so happy inside.

3) This article in Apt613, and then *this* article in Apt613. It's such an honour.

4) Travel. This year, we travelled through the Alps, wandered around Zurich, saw Christmas lights in Vienna, took a train across a mountain top in Italy, went up the leaning tower of Pisa, spent time in the beautiful city of Pecs, looked for bears in the Rockies, rode a 2-person bike in Stanley park, and spend much time downtown Ottawa doing our groceries.

What I'm thankful for:

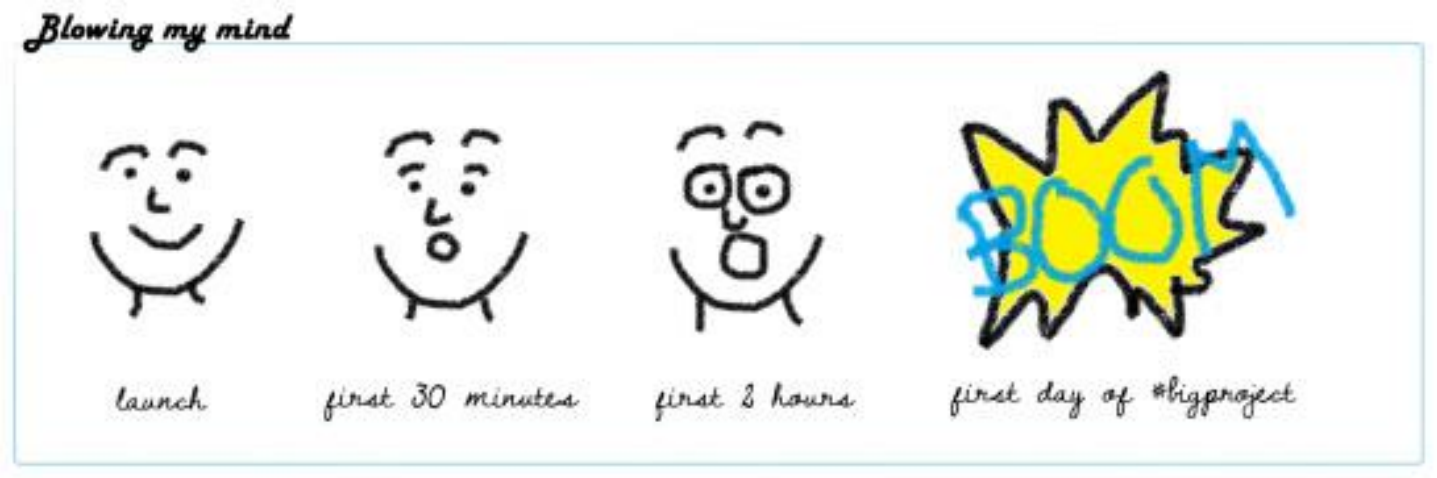
1) My husband, because he sees me breakdown about every day, and he somehow finds it in himself to put me back together. So, I'm thankful for him and the magic we have together.

2) My Mom and Dad, who have been taking on the world on top of pushing me forward to push back against cancer.

3) The hug my best friend gave me on the day I was told about those spots in the lungs.

4) You and You and You! I love to see people do well and live well, and luckily enough I get to mix with people online who seem to feel just the same towards others. The amount of talent you have, creativity, compassion, humour . . . it's such an honour to mix with the mixers online. And thank you for your enthusiasm around my own big dreaming, too!

4.5) For the huge generosity that was shown during the Kickstarter campaign. It has been a great support in our life, and a good help with my health costs too.



5) Camille of Sister Leadership has been coaching me through some very big emotions, so for that I cannot express enough how thankful I am.

6) I am thankful for writing. My writing gives me a sense of purpose like nothing else. When I wrote that story about Erika and featured her art – that is what it's about. When I write little stories that makes my husband smile, that is what it's about. When I imagine worlds that are seemingly impossible and yet happen in my imagination then fall onto the page – this is what it's about!

7) The beautiful photo shoot my friend Lou of Lou Truss Photography did for me and Zsolt just after I had been diagnosed again.

8) Each deep, beautiful breath of air. And for my lungs easing up on the pain, thank you so very much lungs and body.

And that is me for 2013. I hope there's much more to come for 2014. Like, say, Claire Never-Ending becoming a Canadian bestseller? How can I make *that* happen? What about the dream cottage in Balaton? Plus, more sharing of stories, more writing of fiction, more supporting of others, and loads of health heaped over that happiness.

**** I'd love to hear some of your most proud/excited/thankful moments from 2013. Want to share a moment, or even a blog post? Feel free to link them in.** :)**

~P.S. I have been trying to learn about making cool newsletters (as opposed to boring ones), so signed up with MailChimp & added a sign up app on my facebook. I've heard that newsletters are good for sending out little excerpts/nuggets people wouldn't normally get elsewhere from your work. So if you'd like to sign up for my writing newsletter, I'll do my best to throw in some 'fresh for you' fiction in the mailer! Maybe a Little Zsolti story, or some short spin-offs from Claire Never-Ending. Let me know what you'd like to see

25Dec2013

Little Zsolti Christmas Story

Posted in Novels and Stories, Writing

Merry Christmas to you!!!

This is only a quick post to wish you a very happy holiday, and share with you this little gift. It's a story I wrote for the Z Man for Christmas following all of the markets we've been visiting. He really enjoyed the story and thought I should share it. So here it is!

https://bumpyboobs.files.wordpress.com/2013/12/little-zsolti-goes-to-the-christmas-market.pdf

That's the PDF link, where you can read and download to your heart's content.

Have a lovely holiday time and rest up! Merry Christmas!

Catherine

27Dec2013

The FLASH

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life, Life despite cancer, Love, self growth

I just thought to myself, "I should follow the Pollyanna Plan's example and write one blog post every day for an entire year." Then I had this flash where I imagined not being able to finish it because I'd died… So it scares me of course that this is the first reaction. The reaction of death. Man, it scares me.

But now, writing that first line of this post onto my wordpress document and thinking about it for a minute… now I've just thought to myself, "where did that original thought – that *positive thought* – come from in the first place? Where did that idea to live for a year spring up from?" And I've never really asked that question before. But, thinking about it now, it feels like there are two parts of me, except the only part I've been noticing and taking seriously is the one offering flashes of fear.

Weird confession: Whenever I see a knife in someone's hand, I have a flash of them stabbing me. And whenever I have a knife in *my* hand, and someone passes by, I get this flash of myself stabbing them. That's mostly why I'm a little scared of knives. It's the same things for guns. I get these flashes of people shooting me. Weird.

My point is, these are the flashes that get my attention. The ones based on fear.

But there are other flashes, and I am realizing right now as I write this post that they need to be nurtured more. I have flashes where I can see myself teaching my own child a 'life lesson'. I have flashes of living in a cottage in Balaton. I have flashes (dreams) that my book becomes a bestseller.

Just a moment ago, I had a flash to write 365 blog posts in a row, across one whole year. That suggests that some part of me – a strong part of me, since it comes to my mind FIRST – feels the capability of living at least 365 days more.

Each day I live with the fear flashes. They tell me I am going to die too soon. They make me afraid that I'll be leaving my husband and family far too early. Part of me has been afraid to admit this in the blog, because what if this is me knowing what will actually happen? What if this is me knowing my fate, and not yet accepting it?

But then, if *one* part of me has that fear, another part of me does in fact have hope – otherwise I'd never be capable of dreaming.

So now I have this challenge, and it is to nurture the ideas that comes **first,** my ability to hope and to imagine. I want to feed that part of my mind, and help it learn to follow through. Fear will get me nowhere, hope can take me anywhere.

And I've literally just realized that that hopeful side of me exists. Like, right here as I wrote down the experience to simply get it out of my head… and it's turned into this realization. There are many parts of me, not only the part who is afraid all of the time. I want to learn about Catherine Who Hopes. She has some good ideas. I reckon she should be introduced to Catherine Who Acts. And we don't need to invite that other fearful Catherine along to the party.

Anyhow, this is what I'm thinking about, and I think it makes sense. Why haven't I noticed my positive side before when it comes to life, and when it comes to cancer? Well, because I was scared of all this fear that has been running through me. But at least I am noticing it now. At least I realize it is there. That is power in itself. And it's also a really good starting point for change.

P.S. I will not be writing 365 posts, because I think it's better to just not. This isn't about fear, this is about me not wanting to blog that much! Better to be focusing on that bestseller goal.

1Jan2014

Big Kiss For You

Posted in Uncategorized

MMUH! Happy New Year!!!

I think I get this from Seinfeld's soup nazi, but my brain mixes in 'kiss' instead of soup, and 'Big' instead of no.

Welcome to 2014! Last night the idea made me emotional. This morning it made me grumpy. Now I am wearing a new dress (Christmas present) and feeling a bit better. These are the days of emotional roller coasters. So what to do? Focus on something that makes me happy, along with putting on a dress. Therefore, I did this picture. It's makes me happy. And I made the first chapter of my novel (Amelia's story) free on smashwords for the New Year – to bring in a big balloon of hope that anything is possible. If you haven't read the book, **you can start with this fun starter**.

Also, three people won my Goodreads giveaway, so that is pretty exciting too. And while I pledged to not do book stuff till the new year and I returned to Canada… geez, I cannot help myself sometimes. Know what I mean?

May you dip into what makes you smile today, and for much of your time in 2014. Cheers to getting up and getting dressed, to silly internet memes, to the sight of fireworks exploding across a city (i.e. Pecs, where we watched from the balcony and shivered in the cold, and I thought – "well this is one way to start things rolling,"), to emotional journeys, to big realizations, to the advancement of science, to the loving of ourselves, to GOOD SCANS and to GOOD BOOKS.

MUH! BIG KISS FOR YOU! Happy new years.

[Oh and to newsletters, mine can be found here. Yes, I plugged it. *I told you,* I can't help myself. This is what brings me joy ;)]

11Jan2014

The Ghost of Baranvárga

Posted in Novels and Stories, Travel, Writing

There is a highway that runs between Budapest and the city of Pecs, weaving through the Hungarian countryside. This road was built recently, and will, one day, continue down into Croatia.

Many years ago – back when cars looked like carriages and double-lane highways didn't exist, there was a tiny village named Baranvárga in this Hungarian countryside. The village was a place of farming, because of course that's what you do in the countryside, *but* it was also the birthplace of a talented musical family.

They were the Szeszards, headed by Szeszard Tomas. Tomas had fourteen children (almost all boys), thirteen of whom moved to the newly merged city of Budapest to play in the orchestra. The remaining child was a girl named Zsuzsanna, who married the local Baranvárga butcher, Edes Ivan.

Tomas' sons were renowned throughout the Austro-Hungarian Empire for being masters of the classical composition. While they were never *quite* good enough to become a Brahms or a Liszt, Tomas himself certainly might have become one of the greats if only he had left the village and moved to Budapest.

But he loved his village life, almost as much as he loved his music.

In the morning he'd wake with the violin tucked beneath his chin. He'd eat his boiled egg with one hand with plucking strings with the other. He'd sit amongst the chickens in the yard tuning his instrument, waiting for his daughter to bring lunch. And in the evening, he would rest on the edge of the small Baranvárga fountain in the centre of the village, and play his heart out to the moonlight (*and to the barking dogs, who were always mysteriously quiet during the best parts of his songs*).

Tomas' sons encouraged their father to move to Budapest, but the old man refused. This was his home (*and the burial ground of his wife. While he didn't mention this reason aloud, Tomas was very sentimental*).

"Give me the morning light and fields of grapes," he would say between the breaks in his playing as he reached for more pálinka and a slice of goose fat toast. "This is where I play and this is where I stay."

They offered him an apartment overlooking the Danube. They offered him an audience of thousands at the Hungarian State Opera House. They even offered him indoor plumbing.

“Here I play, and here I stay,” he replied.

And so Tomas played his ingenious compositions to those who passed by the village, and his music, even if not witnessed by crowds of thousands in the concert halls of Budapest, trickled its way into Hungarian folk culture.

“This is my home. This is where I play, and this is where I’ll stay,” he would whisper, over and over as the years went by.

Then one day Tomas died right there in the centre of the town with his fingers still clasped around the violin neck. They buried him next to the fountain. And time went on. The Austro-Hungarian empire collapsed. The world had two wars. Hungary was sliced into pieces. The Russians arrived. Revolutions happened. The Russians left. Democracy took over. A highway was built.

There was some controversy in the building of this highway, and if you drive from Budapest to Pecs, it’s quite clear why. There in the very shallow hills not far from the wine region of Pecs are three absolutely unnecessary tunnels. Instead of blasting away these tiny lumps in the landscape, someone made a lot of money with construction. (*These tunnels are shallow, by the way, that they had to make one of the hills larger before they could dig through.*)

What no one remembers, because it hardly seems important now, is that the middle tunnel is built right over the original village of Baranvárga, just below the grave of Tomas Szeszard (*now completely untraceable since the village was destroyed during the first world war*).

There he rests between the rubble and the tunnel.

“This is where I stay,” he had said. And that’s where he plays even today.

Floating through the tunnel is the ghost of Tomas Szeszard himself, playing with the strings of his violin. (Occasionally accompanied by Zsuszi’s high pitched singing voice. She wasn’t buried too far away either. It was a *very* small village.)

You can listen to him if you like. All you need to do is drive through the tunnel with your radio on. Zsolt and I are generally blasting Katy Perry on the national pop station. But there are no rules, just be sure to have your radio on. He’ll float into your music with his glimpses of his bouncing violin, and he’ll float out again just as you drive back into the daylight.

And that is the entirely made-up reason for why the tunnels in Hungary are haunted with folk music. It’s Tomas, head of the Szeszard family. He’s still playing, even in his grave.

14Jan2014

The most charming thing you'll watch today

Posted in Bumpboobs, Fun, Life, Life despite cancer, Love, Novels and Stories, Travel, Writing

(i.e. a random and wandering post)

Hello

Life back in Canada has been one hop to the next. I'll be perfectly honest, coming home was not easy. It was H-A-R-D. Coming home doesn't just mean seeing family, getting on with the book promotion and cups of tea with friends. It means hospital appointments, Zoladex shots, test results, CT scans, etc.

So while I got on the plane, it was not without great trepidation. To be honest, I'd sometimes prefer to run away from this mess. It's such a challenge to face my health again. But unless I really do decide to run away, this is the time for one foot before the other. No joke, I cry and cry to let it all go. (*Just before leaving we had lunch at Zsolt's parent's house. I couldn't take it, my mind was flashing with hospitals and dread, so I went upstairs to cry myself satisfied in the bathroom. Little did I know they were crying downstairs as well about us leaving Hungary. So, everyone was crying. But I think that's a good thing, because these are our* emotions *and they deserve to be honoured. Saying goodbye at the airport was easier because of this experience*.)

Anyhow, I cry and then I stop crying. Instead I tidy the apartment, get rolling with my book and other writing (*seriously, writing and creative projects are my JOY*), and will eventually unpack the suitcase. Just now I wrote my newsletter, which was interesting. It was like a blog post, almost – except with more links. Hmm, I still need to finish a short story for that. . .

Oh my goodness, another good thing: I've made a schedule for myself. With the freelancing work, the book, a new part-time job, cooking, cleaning, grocery shopping, *plus* vitmain C treatments and hospital appointments … there is a lot to juggle. Strict scheduling is my tool for sanity. I'm sure this juggling act is much easier than many other people's busy lives.

But I disgress from the purpose of this post!

A friend was kind enough to send me some beautiful music. I mean, *this is beautiful*. It's candy for the ears, as she put it. And it is – except there's no actual sugar and I'm certain it'll fill your body up with happy hormones.

Listen, smile, and listen again.

Talk to you later,

Catherine

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mFeBgNma7cU

21Jan2014

YouTube with my Mom: we're making whipped body butter

Posted in Food, Fun, Life, Love

When I showed this to my husband he said, "I don't know where to place this." I assume he means he doesn't know what to make of it. Fair enough, Mr. Scientist Husband. But I'll tell you what *I* make of it: This video is awesome! And it is awesome for two reasons: 1) The body butter is a beautiful thing. And 2) It's a little time capsule of my Mom and I having fun together.

So here is our first attempt at a video. It's a little all over, a little quiet, a little rambling . . . but it was fun. So watch and enjoy! Around 2:11 Zsolt, while watching, groaned from total embarrassment. He said, "I was thinking I had the most beautiful wife, and then you go and do *that!*"

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q0g0RdAcZaY

(And speaking of all-natural body butter, I have a far more serious and racy post in the mix for Bumpyboobs. This week, I actually interviewed AnneMarie of Chemo Brain Fog on her project regarding sexuality post/during cancer. Okay, it was just an email interview – I sent about four questions, but it's going to be a good post for opening conversation, so stay tuned for later this week. We are talking about S-E-X, etc.

P.S. In the spare wisps of my days, I'm trying to work on this newsletter. About a month ago, I had this great idea of making a choose-your-own-adventure style short-story using Aliza from my novel, and some ridiculous character she encounters. My idea is to write the story, then create it as a trail you click through online, page to page as you make your choices in the narrative. (And maybe with an Easter Egg here or there.) So this little idea is actually a lot of work. But it's coming, so if you want to see it, sign up here and get on the mailing list. Considering the time it's taking me to write the first newsletter, you won't become a nuisance to your inbox.

24Jan2014

Sex, Cancer, and the Things We Don't Say

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Life despite cancer

Okay, this is it. I'm talking about sex again. It was ages ago that I spilled the beans on contracting vaginas, so now I'm back to give you a refresher and talk about an important project. Essentially, AnneMarie over at Chemo Brain Fog is once again going into lightly treaded territory and has decided to take on sexuality. I know—you know—we know this is a hot topic with the lid on tight. Beneath that cover there is serious bubbling happening.

I can see the discussion on the rise. There are articles in Huffpost once in a while, bloggers have pulled back the curtain occasionally, and Facing Cancer Together has got stuff in the mix too. So there is a bubbling. Geez, even Dr. Canada once mentioned the usefulness in cuddling. That is all good stuff. Let's get that pot exploding with conversation.

I admire AnneMarie for tackling this conversation with a large-scale project. Her book idea isn't just about sharing one experience, it's about collecting many. So this post has two things: 1) A little bit from me, since that feels fair, and 2) A little bit from her too with more to come on her own blog, later. After reading this, hopefully you move on to 3) A little bit from yourself as you anonymously fill out the survey. There's one for you and, if they are open, one for your partner too.

(*Chances are if you've read this far but never had cancer, you're thinking 'time to click outta here' but hey, we are talking sex and that's engaging. Plus, stress around intimacy can impact you whether or not you have had cancer. Okay, I'm being cancer specific – but it would be so naive to imagine other women and men don't struggle with their bodies as life happens and things change. So while the survey is for women who have had cancer and their partners,* **this post** *is also for you. Thanks for being with us.*)

Now for a little bit from me (but only the really embarrassing stuff).

You might know my story of intimacy during and after chemotherapy. Sex drive evaporated, lady parts tightened to the point of impossibility. Or at least, so I thought. After a load of work, and with the return of my estrogen, things improved loads. However, my lower area was never 100% healed. (Mind you, I was the only one who noticed. Zsolt had no complaints!)

A distraction for those who want to skip the 'details'. Look here! Then go down a couple paragraphs.

BUT then I was diagnosed stage four. The depression itself was a buzz kill, and then I went on Zolodex. This is a drug that essentially stops ovulation. The lack of lady hormones has again broken my vagina. It takes a lot of work for me to feel anything except pain down there. Thankfully I've learned to power through the experience (*This is S&M in action, people. 50 shades of 'fuck off cancer'*) so that it can also incorporate pleasure, but sex will never be easy again. Thank God for whipped body butter!

Zsolt and I talk about this, I cry as required, and we then have very intimate experiences together. But it's hard and I often have a sense of dread toward what was once so awesome.

That is *my story* and those are *my issues*. For others it is surgery, chemotherapy, lack of bodily control, cramps from sliced muscles, exhaustion, missing body parts, etc. The point is, this is just my story. Many of you have your own stories. Now, here is a little of AnneMarie's. I put on my 'blogger' hat and interviewed her. Before we go further, if you want, you can fill her survey right here. The survey is anonymous.

Now here we go, AnneMarie and her project! WOOOHOO for you AnneMarie!

Catherine (i.e. me, asking her, AnneMarie): Why do you want to write a book about sex and cancer? And how do you know other women/men are struggling with this as well?

AnneMarie: First, I wanted to see if there was any interest, would others be willing to share their stories. I attended a support group about body image issues many months ago and the conversation immediately turned to sex. It was all women and we ranged in age from early 20's up to age 70. The room was packed; the conversation was lively and eye-opening. I realized others are struggling with so many aspects of their sexuality.

It seems the topic is barely discussed. I don't want to write a self-help book based solely upon my own experiences. Compiling stories from many different women is what I believe will make the book helpful to the widest audience. Women who are single and dating obviously have different concerns than women who married or in committed relationships.

Catherine: Who are you working with for the book (there's a doctor, right?)

AnneMarie: I'm working with a medical oncologist whose practice includes addressing sexual issues. The doctor has chosen to remain in the background for now since the collection of the stories and having a true picture of what patients are feeling is crucial. Interestingly, when the first narratives where shared, I discussed some of what I was reading with the doctor. Some of the issues being shared were things that were never brought up by patients during their visits with the doctor. Knowing that made me more determined. This book may provide insight to our doctors and help them to ask the questions we may be too embarrassed to mention. The doctors aren't mind readers. If we aren't telling them everything, how can they even attempt to offer us solutions.

Catherine: Can you share what's in this survey, and why it matters?

AnneMarie: The survey is short. All questions are optional. I ask for age, relationship status, type(s) of surgery, ongoing treatment with tamoxifen or any other "maintenance" medications, disease stage, geographical location. Those responses help put the remainder of the information into perspective. For example, if someone lives in a very rural area, I would expect they may not have access to a large number of doctors so they may not have an opportunity to speak to a doctor who is well versed in issues surrounding intimacy or sex. The most important part of the survey is a personal narrative. I didn't want to ask specific questions about sex. I hope people will share their fears, their feelings or even specific stories that may be helpful for others to hear.

Catherine: There's a survey specifically for caregivers. What are you hoping to learn from them?

AnneMarie: I am seeking information from caregivers or partners of patients because I think some of our hang-ups are insignificant to our partners. What I mean is that we may be overwhelmed at the thought of someone seeing our altered bodies and for our partners, they aren't looking at the scars. I hope hearing from some of them may help us past our insecurities. Hearing from partners is a means of breaking down a communication barrier that may exist in many relationships.

Catherine: Is there any personal story you'd feel comfortable sharing around this area?

AnneMarie: I am very insecure about my appearance since my breasts were removed. Clothed, I'm fine. I still change with my back to my husband. My surgery was never an issue to him. He did everything to assure me I was more than my breasts.

Many months ago, we had serious marital issues that resulted in a separation. Shortly after the separation, I had to undergo a complete hysterectomy. The combination of losing all of the rest of my female parts and being separated was one of the lowest points of my life. This is not something I've ever really discussed on my own blog. We are trying to work things out but it's been difficult. The thought of dating and possibly becoming intimate with a man terrified me. How would I tell a potential partner that I have missing body parts? Would I expose my chest to anyone or would I insist on remaining partially clothed? Is there appropriate lingerie?

Having been married for so many years and then, being thrust into the world of dating, it was easier to avoid all of it. The fact that I was in that situation and instead, just spent time with my female friends, made me realize I sex was becoming an insurmountable problem. I have an excellent therapist and we discussed this issue so many times. Intellectually, I know it wouldn't matter with the right person, but I never got past that fear. My marriage is still very much in the earliest stages of repair so this is an issue that I may have to face one day and frankly, it terrifies me.

*

Interview over, Thanks AnneMarie!

Now it's your turn: If you've read this far, I reckon you care. So, share your experiences and let's help one another. Again, you can find the survey, "Share Those Moments" here, and if you are a partner, you can go over here to fill out your version.

It's emotional, but it's also so good to let these things go. There are way more stories that I've heard from others that could be shared here, but wouldn't it be better to tell your story for yourself?

Good luck. And thank you.

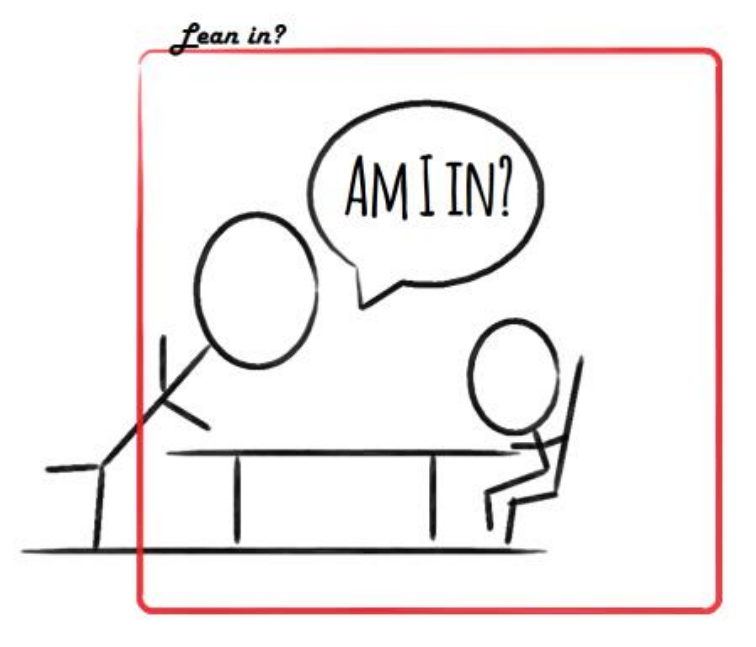
Catherine

2Feb2014

Lean In? Sometimes I'd rather Lean Away.

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Life, Life despite cancer, Writing

So, I have an on-again, off-again book club, and one of the books we recently discussed was *Lean In* by Sheryl Sandberg. She is the woman in that popular TED talk, which exploded into a book/movement to 'lean in'.



The book is for women in the workplace. Or rather, it's for women who want to excel/climb the ranks in the workplace. She is essentially looking at why we don't have more women leaders, and a LOT of that reason, according to Sandberg's discussion, is about children/family.

That is to say, women anticipate having children, and so they back away from work. There are other aspects, but this point is one that interests me the most. Essentially, she suggests that even before meeting the loves of their lives, women are already planning their exit strategy for motherhood. And therefore, they are less ambitious in their jobs.

Okay, I can get that. In fact, I've seen that actually happen.

Now why am I talking about this today? Because I'm curious about leaning in from the perspective of cancer.

Sandberg argues women should lean in so that if they do have kids, when they return from their mat leave they will be in a good position. Focusing on advancing your career is worth it for the places it will take you, and because when you come back to work you'll be at a higher level. So, say instead of babies you have a possibly shorter life span on your mind. Are there similarities here? Should we 'lean in' and create a legacy of some kind? Does that kind of stuff even matter? Why bother leaning in if the clock is officially ticking? Is the assumption of illness, change, or even death reason enough to not go for a promotion or try to rise up in a company? Better yet, those diagnosed with stage four cancer – are we more likely to lean away?

Maybe it's a matter of time. But that's the one massive question that cannot be answered. It could be a year, it could be twenty years, it could be . . . well, who the heck knows?

I've met one woman who choose to lean away. She was counting down the days till retirement and was diagnosed with stage four breast cancer. Instead of retiring, she went on disability as she slid into depression. Somehow, to her, being on disability rather than being retired seems to equate to missing the golden ring. But then, I reckon the depression contributes to that perspective. She is emotionally disconnected from joy, and that is really crap.

There are other women – younger ladies in the thick of motherhood, diagnosed with stage four and choosing to stay home. They'd rather spend time with their kids, and who is going to argue against that? That makes all kinds of sense to me. They are leaning into what matters most to them.

And then there is me. To lean in or lean away? This past autumn had me leaning in to get the book done and out. It was a very good decision, and what an experience. Also, I worked during that time too, even right after diagnosis when life was nothing but brick walls. Though to be honest, while we build Zsolt's business I don't have a choice whether or not to work. I must work. We need to eat and pay rent. Retirement isn't an option. Heck, I'm only 31! There is nothing to retire.

But even if I'm working, should I be leaning in? Should I try to grow my career or be content as it is? Is it fair to my employers if I apply & get accepted for a higher position? What if I get sick again, and their investment comes to nothing? Is it selfish to lean in? Do I even want to lean in?

With my book it is different. I like to lean in because it's just me. Either I sell or I don't sell. Either I create or I don't create. No one else is impacted. But even with writing . . . well, there are these scans every few months . . . there is that constant limbo. Life itself is an emotional stop and go.

There's a point in here somewhere. Actually, no, there isn't a point. There is a question: **Do you lean in, and what does that even mean to you after being diagnosed (or someone you love being diagnosed) with cancer?** And if someone told you time was limited, would your career even remain a focus?

What do you think? Leaning in post-cancer, leaning in at stage four . . .

I lean into what I love, that's for sure. But as for the other stuff, I don't know. I found myself not committing and using "I had cancer, so I don't' want to waste my time on crap that doesn't matter" as an explanation for that – whether or not it is a good explanation. Honestly, I'd rather write short stories that make people smile. I'd rather capture someone's story and help them feel special. I'd rather tweet and talk and doodle and create. I'd rather feel my heart get filled up with a job very well done. And most of all, I'd rather weave stories, even if it's not catapulting me to the top of an organization, or even a bestseller list, it's what I prefer to do. Now with the stage four, I feel that way even more.

Though as I said, I still need to pay my bills. And really, my dreams are much bigger than just paying bills. I want to buy property and travel and live well and realize some huge ideas that must involve success. So, despite stage four, and not knowing what the next scan will bring, I actually do want to lean in. I want to lean in on my terms and with what I love.

So that's a little from me. Now it's your turn:

Lean in . . . what does that mean after fighting for your life? I'd love to know.

5Feb2014

Finally some good news

Posted in advanced cancer, Bumpboobs, Life despite cancer, Treatment

Every few months I get an x-ray of my lungs. This is done to check on the spots. You see, last summer when the spots were discovered by the CT, I'd also had an x-ray which *didn't* show any cancer. The spots were too small to appear on that less precise form of x-ray imagining.

Therefore, I've had an x-ray since then with the idea being, if no spots show up than the cancer is stable. Truth be told, I am having a hard time handling these little hurdles in the metastatic way of life, and so I didn't blog about their coming or their going. There was nothing to say, I was stable – i.e. nothing showed up.

Last week I went for a CT scan. My oncologist, Dr. Canada, has had hopes of adding me to the latest promising phase three study, where I may have (it is randomized) been given that drug in testing Palbociclib, which seems very promising for 'extending life' – which is very good and yet not good enough, if you ask me. If there was any change in the scan, I would be eligible.

I didn't write about this scan last week. I couldn't. It felt like my world was about to crash. Mixed between normality were cracks of panic. And what is very hard in all of this, is that these scans and checks are now a way of life. One scan or x-ray will *always* be followed be another in a few/several months. Metastatic breast cancer, unlike stage three and below, has no end of treatment. It's living scan to scan, and I wonder if anyone can become hardened against this.

But I don't really want to talk about that today. So I will stop there. Today I'd rather look at the encouraging things.

I had my results yesterday. They were good. We went out in the evening to celebrate with my parents, because even if I do need to go through this every few months – good news is GOOD. It means something is being done right. The cancer tumors were not just stable, but had somewhat shrunk across the board. Shrinking is a good thing.

Lord, I'm doing so much right now. There's the vitamin C, the Zoladex, the supplements, the emotional work. So it is hard to say what is working. Maybe it's my body's immune system? Maybe it was publishing my novel? Maybe it is just everything all combined? All I know is this is good news, and I need to keep on with the routine. News like yesterday's is my motivation.

So there is the update. I've had so much support from everyone visiting Bumpyboobs and beyond with the diagnosis, the book, living well . . . so when there is good news like this, we need to celebrate. Never mind what comes next.

Happy faces for everyone. Even if mine is still a bit tentative!

By the by, one of my friends is a doctor at the hospital where I had my results. While waiting for Dr Canada to arrive (after the nurse ushered us into a small treatment room), my friend knocked on the door and came in to chat. This was a very good thing. Everyone should have surprise visits from their friends while waiting for potentially life-altering news. It takes the edge off. So a very big THANK YOU for doing that. And I loved your outfit too, by the way. Polka dots are awesome.

P.S. I might be going to something called Sex-a-palooza via some free tickets. So, there could be a post in that!

P.P.S. This song is sooo good! You are invited to dance in your chair while listening to it.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WZ8vp7D1hrI

14Feb2014

A Love Between Two Aliens

Posted in Fun, Life, Love, Travel, Uncategorized

Last night Zsolt and I were laying in bed and talking. This is what we do, and I reckon it's what many couples do. I was asking him if he thought we've always known one another and could sense each other out across the world before we even met.

He figured that was unlikely. Though he did think it was a miracle we met at all, and quite a remarkable thing if you consider the infinite number of aspects that had to line up for us to meet in that hostel in Nice, and at that time in our lives. The odds are basically even higher than winning the lottery.

I said true enough. It was a miracle that we met, and that we're together. And I also said that I reckon we did know each other in some sense, even if it wasn't a past life. Right from the start our energies synced up and I knew he was for me.

He said that maybe we were synced somehow.

And then I came up with the idea that maybe we're just aliens passing through, and we're travelling together across the universe – since we enjoy travelling so much – and living a variety of lives and existences as we get to know a place.

He said if that was the case, then we better enjoy our time on earth since we'll not be stopping here again.

I agreed. I love earth, but if the universe is on offer, how can a alien/person/soul not want to go out there and explore it?

I asked him where he wants to visit next.

He said he didn't know, but it will be good.

It will be good, I agreed.

Then we talked about Earth, because we're here now and enjoying ourselves. The people are nice and the scenery is beautiful. Except, of course, not everyone is nice and not everything is beautiful. Certainly not everything is easy. But we like it anyhow. It's a miracle that it exists, just like it's a miracle that we are together. And I kinda enjoyed thinking of myself as an alien who is living in a body and passing through.

So, even if he might not believe in past lives, and I might not believe in coincidences, we both certainly believe in miracles. And aliens.

Every day with my husband is a miracle. I couldn't get more lucky than having him as a companion for travelling the universe, and for talking in bed late at night. So, that is that and I'm very glad for it.

To Zsolt on Valentine's Day: I love you. :) Obviously!

21Feb2014

A Brilliant Review of Claire Never-Ending (I'm happy dancing)

Posted in Uncategorized

I saw this today while riding through grey, grey Ottawa on the bus and shaking the rain off my toque. Full disclosure, I know Kevin from the Ottawa Writing scene and as two newly self-published authors, it's good to encourage one another. So, with that in mind, after I get through with this post, I urge you to visit his page and writing beyond just this gorgeous review.

There are three exciting things about this review.

THE PAGE TURNERS

ABOUT THE BOOK RE

Young Adult Paranormal Horror Fiction

Book Review: The Adventures of Claire Never-Ending by Catherine Brunelle

Kevin Johns February 21, 2014

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Despite having a master's degree in English literature, I'm forced to admit I spent most of University doing everything I could to avoid reading Canadian literature. I grew up a punk rock kid, highly suspicious of anything remotely patriotic; it all smacked of mindless jingoism to my adolescent mind. Besides, why read Stephen Leacock when you could read William Shakespeare? Why read Susanne Moodie when you could read Virginia Woolf?

It was only as I grew older, bought a home in the nation's capital, settled down, and had children, that I began reassessing concepts like "patriotism" and "nationhood". The older you get, the smaller your world becomes, and the value of things like fraternity and community suddenly become much clearer, not to mention more nuanced.

I now see reading Canadian literature as a valuable opportunity to investigate who I am, what it means to be a Canadian citizen, and where the customs and traditions of the community I live in came from in the first place.

Which brings us to The Adventures of Claire Never-Ending by Catherine Brunelle. While the book's cover suggests whimsical and light chick-lit, the novel is, in fact, a startling complex work of pure Canadiana. Yes, there are moments of whimsy, and its narrative certainly focuses on women's issues, but it is with a depth of complexity and breadth of scope that pushes the novel far beyond a "light read", allowing Brunelle to follow in the tradition of Canada's best and most respected literary authors.

From a formal perspective, *Clair Never-Ending* is shockingly ambitious for a debut novel. Eschewing a traditional chronological unravelling of story, Brunelle chronicles nine generations of women, all with the middle name Claire, in largely self-contained short-stories that move backwards in time, one generation for

Don’t hurt yourself with squinting. Read this post, then click the picture and go to the actual review.

1) It’s so well done! He is seeing things in this novel that I hadn’t realized. Actually, that’s the thrill of putting a novel into the world, other people have a chance to make it their own by interpretation. This is a fantastic example of just that.

2) He’s a guy! I’m totally pleased that *Claire Never-Ending*, even if “boxed” as women’s fiction, can have appeal to everyone.

3) More buzz around the book! I’ve been chatting with Marie of @JBBC about bringing together my many hats/brand, blog touring, and learning how to promote a novel. It’s honestly rather challenging to tackle promotion on one’s own without a publisher without getting burnt out. The novel was a very healing experience for me to both write and produce. I think it became a saving grace in difficult times. But what is it now? Is it still my journey? Reading a review like Kevin’s helps me realize that *The Adventures of Claire Never-Ending* needs to be about your stories and connections now. I want to pass it forward, and champion more of these individual experiences with the story – whether it’s the reader, the reviewer, or you folks reading this silly little blog post.

Anyhow, there are challenges and changes. All good things. This review is a great way to kick-off that evolution. So, please do enjoy! I felt like I was reading my book again through fresh eyes in his review.

So, thank you so much Kevin! (Author of The Page Turners)

2Mar2014

Welcome to the new blog!

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life

Maybe you feel this sometimes, that the internet is real and yet not totally real? The people are real, our issues and experiences are real . . . but we set up hashtag tribes, have our circle of friends, build our website homes and play in environments like Facebook, Instagram, the news pages, twitter, and it all kinda reminds me of a RPG game. There is a sense of constructed control here online, even when life keeps throwing curve balls, and yet, there is a sense of helplessness as I read the highs and lows of others sharing on the internet. Like the real world, life changes here too.

All of this to say, it's time for another redesign on the blog, as you might have noticed.

For one thing, most of the links are related to my writing rather than cancer. That doesn't mean Bumpyboobs is all about the business. If it was, it sure wouldn't feel real, and wouldn't still be called Bumpyboobs. This blog has been a dear friend of mine during rather hard times, and those of you who read the posts have become part

of that friendship. The truth is, I still need Bumpyboobs. She is there for me to talk about the highs and lows, and all the bizarre in-betweens. I prayed never to be a blogger who writes about stage four cancer from experience, but here I am.

Here I am – and yet, Bumpyboobs is so much more than that. This blog has chronicled my longing for that allusive sense of home. It's traveled with Zsolt and I country to country. It was there for my wedding anniversaries. Together this blog and I have grown to reflect all the changes – good, bad, hard, fun . . . It was here for Zsolt's PhD, the arrival of his residence visa, for my random story writing, the loss of my grandmother, the moving into our own place, and for the launch of my novel along with the Kickstarter campaign.

This blog is an ever-changing reflection of life, *and* I can dress it up however I please, which feels really good when life is a constant limbo game.

If you read this blog, than you know I love to write. The truth is, writing saved me when I was diagnosed, and taking that writing even further has saved me again when I learned about stage four. Instead of retracting away from obligations – I was compelled to run head first into them. It is totally exhausting, sometimes overwhelming, highly emotional, and occasionally plain stupid. However, there is a strong part of me that wants to live hard by writing more stories, raising funds, publishing books, loving design, getting creative, thinking of promotion, cheering on others, honouring amazing women, meeting more people, and continually reaching for the golden ring on the never-ending merry-go-round of life.

I've grabbed it before; I want to grab it again, and again, and again.

Cancer is on my mind every day. But it doesn't own my passions or ambitions. It throws me toward the edge of depression. And in response I retreat into this creative space – telling more stories, writing silly nothings, thinking up plans that are bigger than I can tackle all at once. Sometimes I panic that I've done nothing with my life. Other times I remember that the ability to create and to care are valuable things.

I want Bumpyboobs to be part of "Catherine the Writer/Novelist" because these are real and present identities. It has been healing for me to be ambitious, even if it's also terrifying along with exhausting. But this is a magical place (*as I'm sure you know if you have your own blog, diary, journal, etc.*) When I want something, I bring it to the blog (*like The Adventures of Claire Never-Ending*) to help it become real.

So what if this space is virtual – a home I've programmed that cannot be shown-off in the real world? So what? (*I ask to myself, challenging my own insecurities*). This is a fertile ground for ideas to grow. It's a special thing, at least to me.

(*By the by, what do you think about our lives here online? Do you see any difference between this and the more tangible world? Is this more or less powerful, or just different?)*

Therefore, all that emotional preamble to say this: **Welcome to the redesign of Bumpyboobs!** It's an accompaniment page to my website www.CatherineBrunelle.com, which is currently in redevelopment as well, to pull together the different hats I wear in my work and online. I'll let you know when that is done.

Also to come, a change in my twitter name. Eep!! That's a really hard one, but it needs to be done. I love Bumpyboobs, but this lady is much more than Bumpyboobs. Mind you, it's damn hard to find a handle involving @Catherine___ that hasn't already been taken!

Anyhow, it's Saturday night! Enjoy yourselves! See you online.

5Mar2014

A little Hungarian lesson for you

Posted in Fun, Life, Travel

This evening I was riding home on the bus, and thought that I'd like to share with you some of my favourite Hungarian expressions, and what they mean in English. Some of these are general expressions, while others are pretty much Catherine-Zsolt made-up and used.

(*Oh yes! Now I remember why I wanted to do this. I had just finished a long day of work, and all I could think to myself was "I'm so farkaséhes right now." Then I thought, "I wish everyone knew what farkaséhes means, so that I could say it aloud and people would be like, "oh yeah, I hear that!"*)

Here we go. A little Hungarian fun

First off:

Farkaséhes means . . .

Wolf hungry! (I'm so farkaséhes right now. I'm so Wolf HUNGRY!!)

Next up:

Itt a kezem nem disznóláb means . . .

This is my hand, not a pig's foot! (i.e. shake my hand already, it's not a weapon . . . a friend told us pig's feet used to be used as weapons. So go figure.)

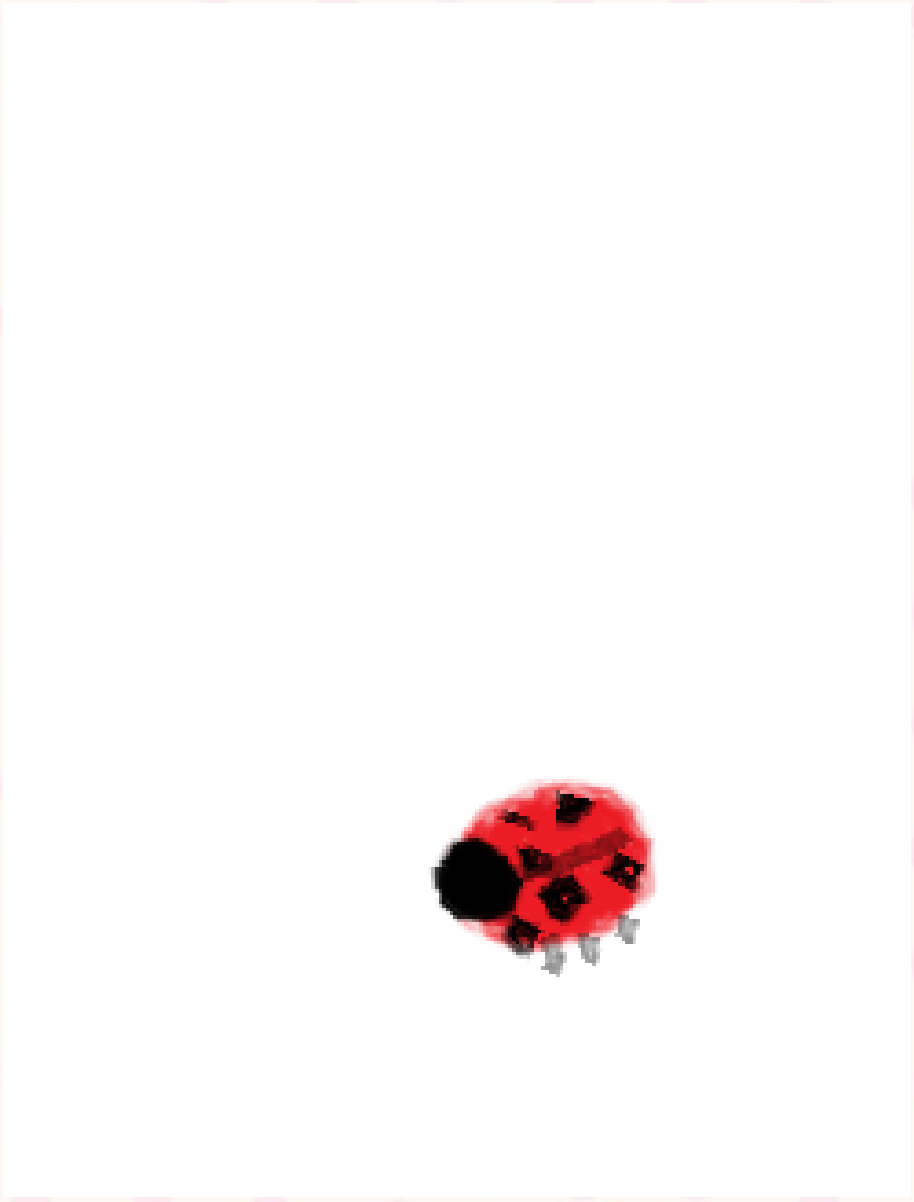
And then:

Sasnak Sas A Fia means. . .

Eagle's son is Eagle!!! Zsolt and a friend (same one as before) had a bit too much palinka one evening, and then found a book of Hungarian expressions. Eagle's son is Eagle figuratively blew their minds. Many years later, he told me this story – as thought this was the apex of all realizations, and I just thought it was hilarious. It *is* a good expression, but I still like to tease him.

And then there is:

kicsi bogaram, which means



Little Bug! This is the endearing and loving term that Zsolt's parents call Zsolt – and me, and his sister, and their puppy . . . so, I like it very much. "My sweet little bug," Anna often says before expressing concern that maybe we're too cold, or tired, or overworked. I love it.

Next comes:

Mint a Bunda, meaning

Like a fur. As in, “I slept like fur.” That is to say you slept totally beautifully and it was a gorgeous evening of Zzzzzzs.

And last but not least:

Záp tojas, meaning

Rotten egg! This is what Zsolt might say as a tease, so then I'll say "Ross Uborka" and that is a Hungarian expression I made up all by myself meaning 'Bad Cucumber'. So, that's fun. And, I hope this post was fun for you too. I was so moved by the comments on my previous post, that I thought I'd do something nice and light to say THANK YOU.

You mean a lot to me too.

13Mar2014

25 Reasons I Love the Internet

Posted in Articles, Fun, Life, Writing

The internet has just turned twenty five years old! That's a good year, isn't it? A year to be noticed and applauded, and so as a birthday gift, I've made the internet a list of twenty five ways it has impacted my life. **If you have a ideas to add, leave them in the comments blow – *also* you can hop over to your own blog and link back here for sharing**. Here we go:

Why I Love the Internet: A 25th Birthday Tribute

1. **Blogging:** Damn, blogging is good. Thanks internet.

2. **Social Media:** I work in social media. If social media didn't exist, I'd just be standing by the side of the road saying "Reheat if you like pizza!" and stuff like that. Thanks internet for giving me work.

3. **Storytelling:** Thanks for giving people a means to tell their story, one that doesn't have a gatekeeper. There are reasons the internet needs to remain a free space and this is a HUGE one.

4. **My Grandmother:** Lulu was 90+ years & living in Montreal while I was in England. We used to have Skype conversations. Thanks internet for letting us visit. I got to spend time with my grandma before she left us, and I treasure those conversations.

5. **Netflix:** THANK YOU, internet!

6. **Online Support:** When I was dx with breast cancer, there wasn't even a local support group where someone my age (*or perhaps just my state of mind*) would fit in. Thank you internet for helping find connections to others who understood (*and thanks #BCSM, FacingCancer.ca, and Journeying Beyond Breast Cancer*).

7. **The Teenage Years:** An email archive going back to when I was about sixteen and BOY CRAZY. Thank you, internet?

8. **Everything you need in your pocket:** Because of the internet – I can have my phone, my television, my work, my calendar, my pictures, my past, my projects, my banking, and just about everything else in my pocket, using the phone as an interface for that world. We are *living* Star Trek. Bring on warp speed!

9. **Access:** Thank you internet for making people accessible – whether they are company owners, organizations, actors, news rooms, etc. The barriers to conversation are knocked away by your powers (and everyone agreeing to take part).

10. **Websites:** Before these things happened, the internet was a lotta black or green screens with trickles of text. Thank you internet for these 'houses' online where we can build our dreams.

11. **Opportunity Hunter:** The internet made it easy to find my dream summer job in Alberta while I was living in Ottawa. I found a company in Jasper, emailed my application, had a phone conversation, and landed myself a summer position in one of Canada's national parks. Thanks so much for that summer of fun, internet.

12. **Collaboration made easy**: Thanks internet for providing a platform where sharing and engaging and collaboration are embraced. Because of this ability, I was able to not only crowdfund online to self-publish *Claire Never-Ending*, but then was able to work with people in England and the USA to get that book put together.

13. **Traffic Navigation:** I can check highway conditions online and see how crowded it looks. Back when I had a car to use, this was really helpful.

14. **Street View:** Did you know you can walk the streets of Rome without ever having been there. You can also see my husband and I waving to you if you click here.

15. **Access to Steam**: This is an online gamers paradise, offering games from *wayyy* back when the internet had nothing but peach fuzz on its cheeks. Thanks internet.

16. **Selfies.** There's a reason we're obsessed with taking these photos, and it's to share it with everyone who cares online.

17. **Spam:** No, I'm just joking. Spam sucks, but that's the price you pay for a forum where everyone can do what they darn well please. Spam might be a drawback, but the ability to get creative, to talk, and to challenge—those are huge benefits.

18. **Online shopping:** Booking trips, buying shoes, selling art, *plus* those handy "discreet product name on the visa bill" venues. Thanks, internet!

19. **Collective problem solving**: "What should I wear today?" You ask the world via your favourite social network…within minutes you'll have an entire outfit planned by other people. Miraculous! Thank you, internet.

20. **The empowered consumer:** This is an interesting one. We can shop online and compare, compare, compare. The empowered consumer may be sticking it to the brick & motor business, but it's still rather incredible stuff.

21. **Hilarious cat & dog photos.** I needn't say more. Thank you, internet!

22. **Education**: What, I can get a university degree online? What? Most of those lectures are available on YouTube for free? *What!?* Thanks, internet.

23. **You Tube:** Oh my goodness, I almost forgot YouTube. It's my answer for every "how do I…" question.

24. **The Biggest Brain in the World**: I mean, mother earth certainly trumps it, as do the secrets of the universe, but the internet is growing everyday as people have the opportunity to add their knowledge. That's cool. So thanks for being cool.

25. **LOVE:** Because of the internet, I was able to correspond to my Hungarian sweetheart from across the world via Gmail, then MSN messenger, then Skype – and with each advance, it felt as though we were closer together. So, for all the love fostered and grown online, thank you internet!

So, what's the trend here? Connection, I think. Thank you internet for all these connections. World Wide Web makes a lot of sense from the perspective of connection. And now I'm going to go and disconnect in favour of some real life enjoyment. One thing you can't do online is hug, eat, sleep, or breathe, swim, suntan, drink tea, dance all night, or taste chocolate; but give it time, just give it time…

16Mar2014

This is what happens at 2:00 AM

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life

It's about two am.

I just read an article online that says that "if you can't fall asleep in 15-20 minutes, get out of bed and stay up until you feel sleepy. Not just tired, but sleepy."

So, I got out of bed around 12:45 thinking maybe it was the morning, because the neighbour upstairs is always getting up so early and making noise. But no. It was just past midnight. It's Saturday night, so I can't hold it against the neighbor for making a little bit of noise. Besides, this has been happening for the past week.

Is it the time change? Is it the rolling hot flashes? Is it the Arimidex? I don't know. It's probably the lack of cookies.

I went on twitter and tweeted quite randomly. Realized a local artist/blogger is this fellow I had met years ago while working at Old Navy. I remember working at Old Navy when it first launched in our town, and this fellow was there . . . then one day he says to us (teenagers and uni kids) "I'm actually undercover here, researching for a cartoon show about animals who work in a mall" . . . or something like that. And then he said, "I've got what I need, so I'm quitting."

Of course you don't believe a crazy story like that – not when this is your second job *ever* and this guy seemed younger than you, and he was quitting without one spec of remorse. (*Now* that *was a new concept for me – the ever-trying eager beaver*.) So, no one believed him till he whipped out his driver's license and proved that he was many, many years older than us. **Back then, I thought any age differences meant older. Now that stuff is all just stupid. But at the time, it was mind blowing how much "older" he was.* So apparently, when you cannot sleep and it is 1:45 in the morning, you make weird connections based on people's twitter profiles, and have strange flashbacks to days long gone.

I didn't like that job. The floor was made from concrete and my shins shot through with pain at the end of every shift. Plus, I was mostly invisible there – and after feeling invisible through high school (okay, I felt more translucent than invisible, and far more opaque toward the end), you get to have enough of it.

Writing is a really good help for not being able to sleep. Just talking through the words and letting these thoughts unravel. I'll put this on my blog, and possibly regret it later. But the mystery of my sleeplessness must be resolved. I would prefer to resume normal sleeping patterns.

Spring forward. Hot flash. Work anxiety. New drugs. Old drugs. Zoladex. Radiators. Upstairs Neighbors (he's also new). What is it? I just do not know. I *would* like to eat a bunch of cookies, except there aren't any. So, I'll settle for this bag of frozen pecans.

Okay. Bedtime part two.

Goodnight.

24Mar2014

Growing Up Online via Websites

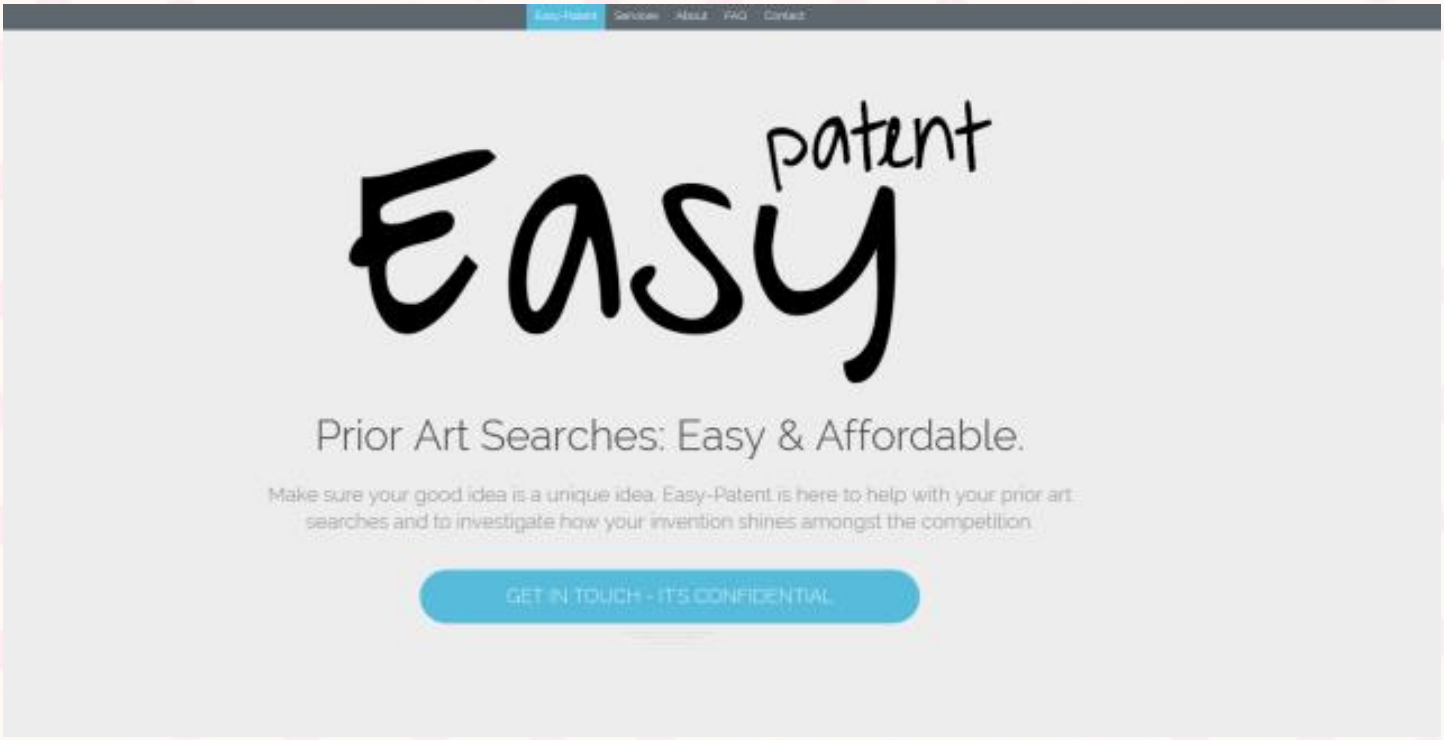
Posted in Articles, Blogging and Other Fun, Life, Writing

There's been loads of work happening behind the scenes at *Chez BS*. That's the name I just made up for our apartment. We're not working on the apartment…well, we did just paint one wall yellow recently thanks to my awesome friend who gave me a "wall of paint" for Christmas… but what I mean is, we've been working on our businesses.

Zsolt is still piecing together Easy-Patent. There's a lot to be done as a start-up business. One very important thing is to get clients. He's working on that. Another very important thing is to have a professional online brand. I've been working on my identity online, too. There's me as a writer, blogger, bumpyboobser, self-publisher, book lover, Ottawa liver, traveller lover, crowd funder… so that's all a little bit scattered. My challenge is to unify those identities online. *(Since in 'real life' they are already unified, as in – all of it comes in one package: me, Catherine)*

In both cases, a very good starting point is to have a very good website. So that brings me to the point of today's post. A little while back, the Zsoltster discovered a website builder called **Strikingly*. We'd been using Wix and Weebly before this, and they were nice – but Strikingly truly does appear striking on the screen in a way that others haven't yet managed. You know how all the cool websites have these beautiful scrolling features? Strikengly's like that.

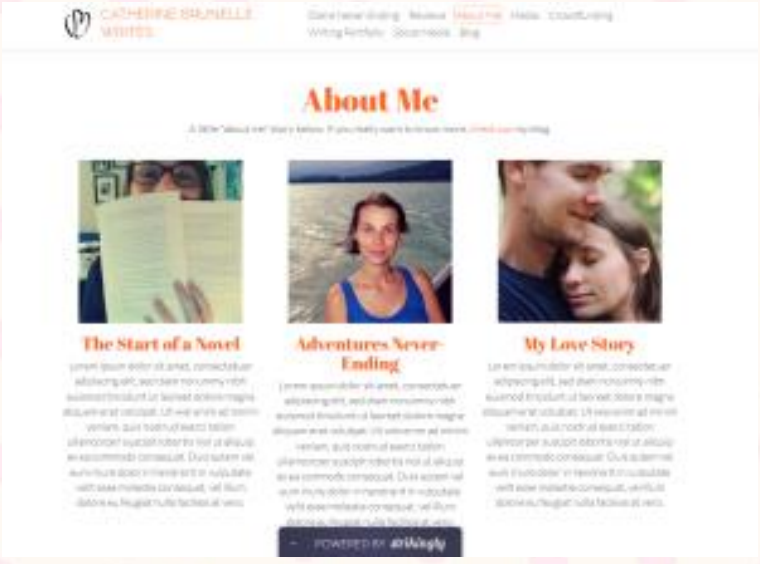
Anyhow, Zsolt went ahead and began building his Easy-Patent website there one day while I was away. When I got home later on, he showed it off and was really, really proud. One, it is always adorable when a loved one is really, really proud. And Two, it looks great. *(Kinda hard to believe he could do something so lovely online without me there to guide him. But there you have it. The man did good.)*



So, he has this gorgeous website ready to go, and because of that he is feeling a lot more confident in his brand. By the by, check out this awesome infographic I designed for him to send to clients. That's another post for another day about the awesome infographic building program I used.

CatherineBrunelle.com is getting a makeover as well. As Marie recently told me, I need to bring together my different stories in one place. That place is going to be my touchstone online. So, like Dr. Z *(i.e. the Zsoltster)*, I started building my website on Strikingly. It's not done yet, but if you want a sneak peek – check it out here.

It's so easy to start creating all these different projects and stories online. And because it's so easy ... *blog idea – poof! It exists! Ebook – poof! It exists! Globe circling book tour – poof! No, just kidding on that one* ... because it's so easy, it's also easy to end up with fragments of one's self all over the place.



In making these touchstones for our businesses, I feel like we're growing up online. My only qualm, which is a big point to note, is not being able to bring the blog Bumpyboobs into the new website. But maybe one day. Until then, it remains where it is, since it's doing such a fine job.

* Anyhow, we enjoy using Strikingly so much, that we decided to go pro plan. That's a big deal for us. I *never* go pro plan. But just before doing that, I found myself an opportunity to exchange a year's worth of free pro plan service for one little blog post on this business that I already loved. So, here it is!

Now how is that for growing up in the blogosphere? Someone wants me to write about them? Okay, I've gotten that before with random mailers, but in this case – I'm super excited!

So, new websites and stories coming together 2014, I am hopeful.

* I should say that Wix is useful in that it has some nice layering options and flexibility, though the text sizing ticks me off to no end! Weebly is good for multiple pages and a blog (super useful) but the templates are starting to get dated. Strikingly's basic plan has good options (though limited in how much can be changed), while the pro lets you play with html, which will be empowering – but even at the basic level, the interface is clean and doesn't spasm with the text input – sparing us some arguments as I write copy for Zsolt – plus the design is really fresh. What it needs is a way to bring in one's blog, and then it would be like the super hero of web builders. I was asked to give a review of my experience in exchange for the pro plan, so there it is pros and cons! Obviously I find it very much pro overall. It's fraking beautiful.

29Mar2014

Running Nowhere Fast

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life

Have you ever had that dream where the bad guy is chasing you, so you want to run away – but you're getting absolutely nowhere? That's how I feel sometimes. Mostly when I have a hot flash, but sometimes it simply happens without any hot flashes at all.

Like today. Today I feel like I'm trying to run somewhere and not actually moving. Admittedly, in the literal world you'd never catch me running. I'm allergic to running . . . well, if a person could be allergic to exercise, I'd be allergic to running and baseball. But in the metaphorical sense I want to run as in move forward with life. I love those moments of success and celebration, I also love those moments of rest and reflection, and give me a bit of time to write to make it all totally lovely – but to get to those moment, I apparently require these moments of taking the metaphorical lego pieces and building a life one tiny block after another tiny block, and my face is so close to the construction that I can't even see what I'm building.

Oops. I jumped metaphors.

Running really hard but going absolutely nowhere.

Today that is how I feel.

Tomorrow may be different.

Probably I just need more chocolate. I will now test that hypothesis and go make myself some low-sugar cookies. Cause a girl needs her cookies.

Memories of Chat Rooms

Hi, I just saw my blog now has different format options for posts. This is apparently “Chat Mode!” Do you remember those chat rooms from back in the day? It was one of the first things I ever did on the internet. There was this website that looked like a house, and you could move room to room chatting with people. I was way too innocent to realize that when people asked “what colour is your hair” it wasn’t just out of curiosity. For me, back then, “chat rooms” and “chatting” was just about saying hello to this new world at my finger tips. Actually, that applies to today as well.

Hello!

Now, how does the actual CHAT work here? No questions about hair, etc, please.

Hmm, the post preview doesn’t actually look any different from a normal post. I’m going to hit publish anyhow and see what happens.

7Apr2014

The "Blog" Blog Tour

Posted in Blogging and Other Fun, Novels and Stories, Writing

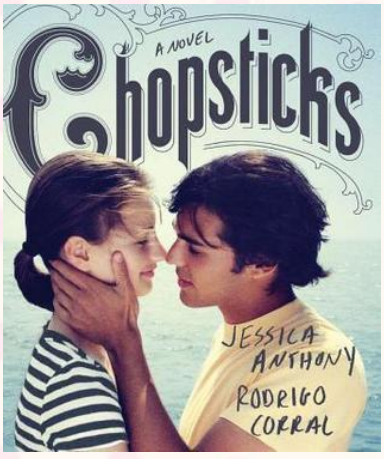
Hello and happy Monday! I'm actually writing this on the previous Friday, but am imagining it's Monday for the sake of timing. Let's visualize Monday together: start of the week, five days till another mini two-day vacation, hung over from all that grocery shopping and cleaning you did on the weekend. I can see it now in my mind's eye. To be honest, I work all day Saturday, so my conception of the weekend is blown to bits. However, for those working normal weeks, hopefully this Monday post provides a little distraction from that load of post-weekend emails you're working through one-by-one. Take a long sip on your hot-pick-me-up-drink, and tuck into the reading!

This week I get the privilege of receiving the baton from Philippa over at A Feisty Blue Gecko. I've been a fan of her blog for quite some time. She takes such wonderful pictures and shares such touching stories. I think she and I have a similarity in our writing, in that we wear our hearts on our sleeves. It's so much better that way.

Anyhow, I get this email from Philippa asking if I want to be part of a blog tour. Not a book tour (*which I'm very slowly trying to arrange*) but a "blog" *blog tour*, where a set of questions develop a life of their own, and jump blog to blog for writers to answer. It's basically a chain letter except I get to talk about myself before passing it on to two other talented writers. (*more on them to come!)* So, here is a small interview between me and this travelling blog. It's about writing, so we should get along very well.

Hey Catherine, I'm the Blog Blog Tour. Here's my first question for you: What are you working on?

Nice to meet you, Blog Tour. What am I working on? Honestly, I'm mostly working on my book launch party at the moment. That's a funny thing since *The Adventures of Claire Never-Ending* has been out since last December in 2013, BUT, back then I'd promised myself not to back out of having a party. Therefore, even thought it feels like it's coming outta nowhere, I'm throwing myself a book launch. Working on that means arranging the event. I truly detest readings at book launches, and am figuring out alternative ways to introduce people to the book. We'll have a slide show, fortune teller (my mom), book launch bingo, and a silent auction of very Canadiana artwork by Lise Landry to raise money for **A Fresh Chapter**.



But I have other projects that I play with on Mondays (*truth!*) between appointments, and would like to develop more over the summer. My big ambition is to write a book for my husband. That would have some Little Zsolti stories, photographs mixed together, the story of how we first met, plus random stories and memories. Back when we first got together I would make him scrapbooks. Over the years I feel out of that kind of storytelling. But recently I picked up a book called "Chopsticks" and it brought on big-time inspiration on how to piece our story together. So I'd love to do that for him and for us.

Also, I have an unlisted writing blog where I post the first few threads of my fiction writing. It's a space to just play with ideas, and keep them accessible while also seeing what random likes they attract. So far I'm playing with three stories on that website – one about this world where the heroine ends up challenging the author (i.e. me the writer), another that is the Wizard of Oz meets Red Dwarf, and another that is my take on Dr Jeckyll & Mr Hyde but with vampires and witches.

I used to write extremely serious stuff, and still do sometime. But in terms of long-term projects, it has to make me laugh and smile and love all the way through. Otherwise what's the point?

2) Woah, that answer was way too long, Catherine. Let's trim it back a bit, eh? Now, next question: How does your work differ from others of its genre?

Ahh. Hmm. ? (*I'm thinking it over*)

My women's fiction writing certainly differs in that I don't play upon romance. But that's not totally true, actually, because many of my characters are in love, or are finding love, or are running away from love. But for me it's always more about their growth as individuals rather than chasing after a date. And then I just forget to have that make-out scene, or sex scene, or whatever. Mind you, I would certainly write it if the story went that way . . . but so many of life's pivitol moments (*after the teenage years*) aren't all about whether a guy will call back, and so at least with *The Adventures of Claire Never-Ending*, that stuff all happens off of the page. I enjoy reading romantic chick lit and women's fiction, yet my writing just don't gravitate that way. *At least not yet;* If I actually go through with that Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde story, that will change.

3) Why do you write what you do?

I blog what I do because it needs to get out, and because I feel like having a conversation. You see, Blog Blog Tour, you are not the first blog I'm spoken with before. I talk to Bumpyboobs all the time, and she's a good listener

As for creative writing, it makes me happy and can be a good challenge. There's something so brilliant in creating a text that is beautiful. I step back and think, "I did that?" When you are writing, you create a world – and it's a powerful experience. I love creating those worlds, meeting those people, following their stories. They become reality as they are written. It's a big deal to me – there's something freeing in that creation, and it's such a good feeling to play in that space.

4) How does my writing process work?

The less thought I give it the better, at least to begin with. Ideas percolate in my mind during monotonous activities (like cleaning the bathroom, for instance) and then I'm rewarded for completing those activities by sitting at the computer and letting my fingers tell a story. (*Or by eating cookies*.) One word after another, that's how it works.

So far so good. Not efficient, not planned, but it works.

*

End of Blog Blog Tour!

NOW! I get to introduce to you two writers who will be picking up the blogging baton from me next week.

Meet Kevin T Johns:

Kevin is an Ottawa-based writer of YA paranormal fiction. His debut novel is *The Page Turners*, and as I've said before, it's Freaks and Geeks meets Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Kevin has published an excellent book, and I'd love to see it explode across the YA scene. I really enjoyed reading it because along with the monster side of things there's a *KICK-ASS* young woman who is totally super cool and capable of saving the day, *and* the actual core issues in his writing canter upon bullying, loss, divorce and just the hard bits of being a teenager.

Check out Kevin's blog on writing here – it's full of great tips and ideas.

His book is here, too, and not to be missed.

Another wonderful writer picking up the Baton is AnneMarie Ciccarella of Chemobrain: In the Fog. To know AnneMarie is to be impressed by AnneMarie. This lady GETS IT DONE, and is another blogger wearing her heart on her sleeve. Plus, she's taking on the conversation of sexuality and cancer with her project, Share Those Moments. Here's her bio:

Diagnosed with invasive breast cancer in 2006, AnneMarie Ciccarella embarked on a path of patient advocacy in 2011. She is passionate about the importance of evidence-based care and seeks to share her knowledge with others. AnneMarie's greatest passion is providing support to others. She recently extended her advocacy into the area of mental illness. She is currently working on a project about the effects of cancer on sexuality where she will bring the voices of many to the conversation. She is the author of the blog, Chemobrain: In The Fog.

Check out her blog here.

This blog tour has now been across North America, Asia, Europe, Australia and back again!

And that's it from me up in Canada. May the blog be with you.

P.S. When Philippa passed me this challenge, she also passed it to Marie over at Journeying Beyond Breast Cancer. Go and see what Marie is up to by clicking here.

9Apr2014

Dreaming of blog posts . . . and leg hair

Posted in Bumpboobs, Fun, Life, Life despite cancer

Before falling into sleep I sometimes compose blog posts in my head. Last night I was thinking to myself about leg hair, and how I should write about it here. My post idea was basically this:

"This winter I shaved my legs ***once***. Zsolt is the only man I've ever encountered (intimately) who is cool with hair on my legs – heck, I go out in the summer with week-long unshaven legs ever since finding this blessing of a man. I suspect it's because he's from Europe . . . or that he just a guy who doesn't care.

He was also one of the first guys I'd met who would throw down the dance gauntlet before anyone else had hit the dance floor. This wasn't even contingent on pre-drinking. It was only contingent on there being cheesy eighties pop music playing. The first time we ever went dancing was in Nice, France. That time he definitely wasn't sober. Zsolt had this signature dance move he does that involves him pointing at you with both hands stretch out, then letting that "point" circle around the room. It was noticeable and hilarious. Now I pull that point-finger move far more often than he does, but it will always remind of me of when we first met.

I have this memory of being about 13 years old and attending a pool party. My legs had stubble. And being a typical teenage girl, I of course chased boys around the pool all night threatening to scratch them with my semi-hairy legs.

"Touch my leg!" I'd say.

And they'd run.

This is a case of being high on hormones. That's also how I met my husband. Hormone high = mighty courage.

My next scan/x-ray/whatever is scheduled for May, and I'm thinking of pushing it two months back. Part of me fears everything, and is scared the cancer will gets frustrated with being ignored if I push it back. A larger part of me doesn't want to allow cancer to once again ruin an important time of the year. From May till the second week of July we have important stuff happening.

Last year our birthdays were heartbreaking occasions.

So this year, I'd like to wait on whatever news – good, bad, or unchanged – may be coming. I just want to wait. That means I need to call the oncologist. Dr Canada seems to get that I want to live well. But still, asking for anything other than protocol is scary business for me. Maybe I'll grow my leg hair for courage, and hit up some hummus & olives for a temporary hormone high."

And that is the post I was thinking of writing. Not actually word-for-word, but something along those lines. Surprisingly this isn't the stuff that keeps me awake at night. What keeps me awake is the building bunch of projects I have going on – including my book launch!

Now, here we are at the end of this rambling post.

Good morning!

20Apr2014

Happy Easter!

Posted in Fun, Life, Love

Today we are having a lovely, lovely time. It has mostly revolved around food – and that's is a good thing. Following a very successful, and very late brunch, my man and I snapped this photograph. Have yourself a lovely long weekend, a happy Easter if you celebrate, and a very nice day in general!

21Apr2014

Giveaway alert!

Posted in Fun, Novels and Stories, Writing

How did I neglect to not mention this?! Lisa at Pink Kitchen is having a give away of my novel, *The Adventures of Claire Never-Ending*. If you want to get in on that sweet, sweet action – check out her post here:

http://pinkkitchen.info/win-a-copy-of-the-adventures-of-claire-never-ending-by-catherine-brunelle/

Yay! So, click on the post if you'd like to win a copy. Lisa has so many good recipes on her blog. She does loads of gluten free cooking, and some of her stuff is grain free too – or can be adapted to be grain free. Mom, you'd enjoy that! I'd like to thank Lisa for being so good to sponsor this give away, and for all the yummy inspirations she shares every week.

Also, did you notice Zsolt's hair in the previous post? I cut that myself, thank you very much! It's the first time *ever* he's allowed me to do anything even near to styling his hairdo. Normally I am instructed to shave it all off. But for my birthday . . . which is in July . . . he's let me pretend to be a stylist. You might be checking your calendar and saying, "but it's not July" … to which I'd reply, "shhhh, don't spoil it for me." I don't always understand the way men work or their inner clocks, but I enjoy it when I can style this man's hair.

Now, if you haven't clicked over to Lisa's yet, here's the giveaway link again. Woohoo!

Contest ends April 30th.

27Apr2014

Book Launch Baby

Posted in Uncategorized

Whew, what a week ahead. There's still so much to do!

My book launch is coming up this week. I know, I know, the book came out ages ago technically, but I never had a launch. With all the work and emotion poured in, it feels like there should be a party of some sort, no?

So it's coming up. If you haven't checked out http://www.strikingly.com/booklaunch for the deets – go on and have a browse. A little thrill for me this week was having my story shared in the metro. Since this exposure was for Ottawa, I'll link you a pdf if you want to check it out.

SCENE

16 SCENE

Nine generations of adventure get kickstart

Catherine Brunelle.
Local blogger and author pens first piece of fiction while experiencing a real-life twist

BACKSTAGE PASS

Hoping to start a family but unsure how to do so, Catherine Brunelle started writing a book a few years ago as a way to explore and understand the emotions that come along with being pregnant and having kids.

The process, she says, did help add the result is her first novel, The Adventures of Claire Neverending.

"The book is about nine generations of women who share the same middle name — Claire — and it made me think about, if my mother and her mother and her mother all got through that experience of birth and having a family, then I could do it. It gave me strength in that way," Brunelle says.

Halfway through writing the book, though, everything changed when she was diagnosed with breast cancer.

"My family plans had been put on hold indefinitely, but I kept writing because, by the time it happened, I felt a real connection with the women in my story. It was more than just about pregnancy, it was about the afterlife and making a life for yourself and maybe that's why it's so important to me."

Brunelle published The Adventures of Claire Neverending herself with the help of an extremely successful Kickstarter campaign.

Her goal was to raise $3,000. In just 24 hours, she met that goal and, in the month that followed, that number more than doubled. To date, she has received more than $7,500.

Initially, the majority of the contributions came from people she knows but, as the campaign went on, Brunelle's blossoming online and social media presence (the blog and tweets under the name bumpytoobs) attracted even more interest and contributions.

"It was amazing — one of those moments that you don't forget," she says. "It was a show of support for the book, it was a show of support for me and I guess the idea of having big dreams beyond the diagnosis. It was empowering and it's been such a learning experience."

To learn more about Catherine Brunelle, visit catherinebrunelle.com and read her blog at bumpytoobs.wordpress.com.

When and where

The book launch for The Adventures of Claire Neverending will be on May 1 from 7 to 9 p.m. at the Kanatanugh Showroom (84-86 Beechwood Ave.). RSVP claireneverending@gmail.com.

Catherine Brunelle's first novel, The Adventures of Claire Neverending, was made possible through a successful Kickstarter campaign.

So yes, creating a book launch. There's a load to do considering it's on Friday. I have a definite threshold on what I'm capable of managing, and my mood cycles between wonder woman and emotional mess on the couch with a load of just "normal day" in between. Normal days are my favourite, but the wonder woman moments are extra memorable.

Things to do:

Create Book Launch Bingo: This is for people to have a reason to chat, and something to *do* at this launch. Events can be awkward or boring without these little bits of fun. Since I am not hot for readings at these occasions, I'd rather have people meet the book through their own exploration. The bingo works really well there.

Choose pictures for slides: I've got that slide show to set up (people can click through on their own). I *love* the photographs from my mom's childhood, plus I turned some book pics into slides too.

Fortune telling: my mom is doing this. On Wednesday I'll be teaching her the exact technique used in *Claire Never-Ending*, so folks can have their fortune told

Hashtag: This thing needs a hashtag. Maybe #ClaireNeverEnding – but isn't that too long?

Food: My mom and my friend have kindly stepped in here to help. One is making all kinds of lovely cookies. The other is sorting out cups, drinks (other than the wine, which I have), nibbles. If life was perfect, I'd have food that ties into the book's themes – but that's not going to happen this time. Folks will be getting standard nibbles. Zsolt will be pouring drinks for people.

Flow: My friend will also be playing hostess for the evening. So I need to meet with her and explain what she should be saying to people when they arrive (which I plan to figure out today). I'm going to throw music in here because I'm not in the mood to give it its own bullet point. Need to do music too. I'm thinking cafe style music.

Silent Auction: I need to set that up. We need clip boards for the bidding sheets, and I need to create the bidding sheets. I need to work out payment methods. While A Fresh Chapter is a registered charity in the US, it is not a registered one in Canada – as in, you can't get tax receipts. But you can get lovely items like Lise's paintings, a photo session, or some watches Anyhow, must do this.

Details: And the details, I need to do the details. What will I say when I finally say something to the group? How will I announce the winners of the bingo and auction? Where should I put the book for sale, and who will carry receipts if someone wants one?

Mind you, if all of this fall through it should still be a good time. The book is made, and that's the best bit!

OH

AND

TUESDAY

it's Blog Out Loud. This is a big deal to me. I'll be reading a Bumpyboobs post from 2013 at the event. Honestly, I have trouble believing my post was accepted for the event. But personal insecurities aside, it's going to be a wonderful occasion. *AND* I get to hang out with Laurie from Not Just About Cancer because she was selected too! Amazing or Amazing?

Zsolt will be on hand to take pictures during the event, so I'll let you know how it goes. If you live in Ottawa, this is an event to not miss – I have a feeling it'll be attracting many, many great people from the area. It's one of the only blogging events that I know of, apart from conferences.

No more procrastinating! Time to get to work.

P.S. I'll leave you with this picture. Another paper had considered sharing my story and was like, "get me a picture of you and the book within the next 30 minutes, if you can!" I was sick and in bed when this happened, so jumped out of bed, took a shower, put on the makeup, and had my man snap this picture. Then I rushed to the computer and sent them along, only to receive a notice 24 hours later that I'd written the incorrect email address and she'd never received the images . . . and for sure not within that 30 minute window. Bah. Well, waste not want not – I'm putting the picture here at least. And on the bright side, I have a picture of myself and the book finally.

Oh, my friend Lou will be snapping pictures at the book launch. How lucky am I?! She's a wonderful photographer.

Now I'm really done. Happy Sunday.

1May2014

Blog Out Loud 2014! (And breath out)

Posted in Blogging and Other Fun, Bumpboobs, Fun, Life, Writing

No one is home. That normally means this is the time for me to eat junk food en mass, but for two reasons I won't be doing that: One . . . Ha! Junk food . . . in my sweet, sweet dreams of the past. And two, I'd rather write about **BLOG OUT LOUD!**

Yesterday Zsolt and I went to Ottawa's very special event, Blog Out Loud. This is organized by a lovely lady named Lynn of Turtlehead, along with a group of volunteers and other bloggers to help her out, and has become a regular blogging tradition in the local area since 2009.

In past years, I'd see talk of this event pretty much always *after* it had happened. But this year, thanks to way more time spent on twitter than I should be spending, I caught the news! Not only did I catch the news, but I caught it in time to submit a post to the reading.

Amazingly the post was chosen (along with 10 other blogger's posts) from over 60 entries.

Gosh, it's challenging to choose a reading from 2013. Many of my blog posts don't stand alone, and others touch on stuff that I just didn't want to represent at an event like this. The part of me who is a "writer" needs space from the part of me that just . . . gets too much attention, I mean the cancer stuff.

Writer me is like, "no, cancer drama, you cannot play with Catherine today." So I submitted a little post I wrote while on a train in Hungary about Zsolt's friend. And it was picked.

Therefore . . .

Yesterday evening Zsolt and I rocked up to this beautiful church on Elgin Street, where the Writers Festival is being held. This year, BOLO has hooked up with the Ottawa International Writers Festival.

(A little side story about this festival. I used blog for the writing festival. Back in 2011 (?) when we first came to Canada, I really wanted to find the writing scene in Ottawa since we'd left my writing peeps in the UK. So, I volunteered to cover events and blog for the Ottawa International Writers Festival. That was cool. Because of that experience I was able to attend several great events… I even sat right in front of Michael Smith while he

went on about food porn, and grocery vs farms, and test kitchens. It was an accomplishment, in my mind, to be a part of this writing festival. Fast forward to yesterday night, and I was actually reading at that very festival. High Five!)

So, we get to the event and I'm stupid nervous. You'd think after attending about a million networking events with Sister Leadership, networking wouldn't be scary. But it was. Maybe because I cared so damn much. You know, it's easy to play it cool when there's little to risk . . . but when you care, care, care about mixing and connecting and making actual connections with people you only see online, but really admire, casual cool just runs outta the room and leaves you there going, "ahhhugh?"

Therefore, we busied ourselves by looking at the books for sale. Zsolt was great. He is always great. We took pictures of covers that I liked, because it's always good to notice eye-catching designs.

Then back to the mixing . . .

"Ahhhugh" was about all I said for the majority of the evening.

There were two rows of seats near the front, so I planted my butt down on the one with my name on it (AHH!) and relished that safe space.

BUT, I should say that I did meet a few people like Lynn herself (*as warm and kind as I had anticipated*), Tanya of Spydergrrl, (*Tanya is doing a series on live tweeting at events, which I reckon is very useful and will be paying attention towards*) and Laurie of Not Just About Cancer. (*Along with many more talented and warm ladies after the event ended, and it was so much easier to mix. I don't know why . . . maybe the live tweets helped? Thank you for the twitter hellos! They were really, really nice to read. Ottawa is awesome not just for its pockets of culture, but for the nice people living here too.)*

I should also say that I was so happy to see Laurie – having followed her online through #bcsm and her blog for so long and admiring her and recently chatting with her via skype, to see her in person was such a pleasure. She was wearing this gorgeous red dress, and looked absolutely beautiful.

Anyhow . . . we settled in for the readings, and Lynn introduced us bloggers to a large room full of people one by one.

I was third. It went well. At some point a choir (this being a church) began singing in another room as I read. Maybe that's a good omen? Anyhow, I didn't pass out. That's all that really matters.

(One time I was working at the library in England and this tour group comes in. My manager is away, so I need to describe the library services at the Avenue. As I begin to talk, I find that I cannot breathe in. I talk and talk, the breathe is going out and out, my voice goes up and up. I literally had to choke out the words: "Can't talk anymore." The tour guide took over and I hid in the office until they left.)

There is video footage of all readings, and as soon as it becomes available I'll link it here for you to watch. The event itself wasn't too long, so if you settle down with some tea and cookies, it's really nice viewing to enjoy.

One thing I realized while listening to the bloggers read was that we're good at being darn tootin' vulnerable. Whether we are joking about parenthood, or discussing anxiety attacks, reflecting on loss or fear, talking mental illness, looking at judgement, or glorifying that moment of joy in a delicious beverage . . .

. . . the best of blogging contains stories of real life, and real, raw feelings.

Heck, listening to these blogs being read, I realized many of the bloggers I am awed by were probably struggling with the same nerves and social jitters. After all, blogging is a levelling field between extroversion and introversion, between shy and outgoing, between familiar and new. Sometimes that is hard to translate into personal encounters . . . or at least the *first* encounters.

That's what I tell myself, this was the *first time* meeting so many of these ladies. Next time I'll know them just that bit more, and will be just that bit more relaxed.

It was a good event. I look forward to the next one, and I look forward to meeting more of the fantastic talent this city offers. Geez, I just love blogging.

BOLO 2014!!! WOOOHOO! (Check out all the wonderful readers/bloggers and the BOLO event here)

Next up: Friday. eep.

6May2014

Book Launch Recap and Pictures for #ClaireNE

Posted in Life, Love, Novels and Stories, Writing

While I try sorting out having my CT scan moved till *after* my B-Day (Onco appointment moved, but the scan needs to utbe fixed. I just got my two weeks letter yesterday), *you* can enjoy these pictures from the book launch!

My facebook page has the whole album, so I'll leave most there and just share a few here while I describe the party.

Thank you to everyone who made it such a great success.

My mom did fortune telling.

My **brother JP** who practises traditional Chinese medicine and acupuncture donated two sessions to the bingo draw.

My friend Catherine made three batches of homemade cookies – some were even gluten free.

Domicile allowed us to use their space, and were so great about helping set up. The ladies there for Domicile were totally charming.

FacingCancer.ca & Look Good Feel Better donated two stunning watches.

Lou Truss donated a photo session *and* took photos of the event (which you can see on the facebook page)

AND Lise Boivin provided gorgeous paintings of local nature scenes on which people could bid. (*She's also the only lady without a web presence, but if you want to get in touch with her just shoot me an email.)*

All together, we drank many massive bottles of wine (Zsolt was the bartender, and a wine-enthusiast for the night), had well over 50 people come along across the evening, got the book into more people's hands, had folks dropping in from off the street, raised over $800 for A Fresh Chapter, flipped through 140 slides, had at least ½ a dozen fortunes read, ate many beautiful and yummy homemade cookies, snacked on a spread designed by Costco, mom and my dad, had three bingo winners, and enjoyed many, many happy conversations.

It was great.

And whew, now it's done.

Facebook page with pictures, once more.

Oh! And if you want to grab a book for Mother's Day and you are in Ottawa – Chapters in Kanata has several copies available.

Thank you so much to everyone who took the time to come. I so very much appreciate you being there. And for those who missed it, thank you for all the good wishes and thoughts. It was a great success, I reckon!

8May2014

Life between the scans

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life, Life despite cancer, Love, Travel, Writing

So, upon my request, my oncology and CT appointments are being moved.

It's funny, a lot of this business with cancer really does take place in the mind. I happen to be in the very fortunate circumstance where there isn't any pain. Many others don't have that luxury, but I do and I am thankful for this moment. The pain in my chest has quieted down, and I only get that wheeze when my anxiety kicks in. Actually, as I've said before, different moods seem to trigger different reactions in my chest.

Anyhow, all that to say, the appointments are being moved. Some may say it's risky to move the scan back five weeks. But there are always risks in this "game" of health. There's the risk of over-treating, the risk of under-treating, the risk of too much radiation, the risk of not knowing what is happening, the risk of knowing too much, the risk of knowing too little.

Or I guess you could say, they are the choices. There are a lot of choices, and yet sometime it also feels like I have no choice at all. This shit is happening and I am dealing.

I have chosen to move my CT scan by five weeks so that for just a little window of time, it can feel like life isn't all about cancer. This isn't a cowardly decision, it's a brave one. That's how I see it. What is life all about anyhow? Is it about the terror of scans and the waiting for results? Fuck no. Those are not the benchmarks I want to live by. I get the need to be aware and be strategic and yet I need my dose of "normal" too.

Anyhow. Don't get me started.

The scans are postponed and I'm happy about it (and apparently defensive). They aren't gone, but they will keep. And then, once they arrive, life will reboot and we'll start again from scratch. That's what it feels like after each of these tests, it feels like starting again from scratch – for better or for worse and no matter what the news, I need to recover and rebuild.

In the meanwhile, I'm dreaming again. It's a possibly bad habit that I am associating my happiness with my busy project creation, but ever since last year I've been compelled to go-go-go.

There is the book, my Literary Love, which I will leave alone for a little while apart from a book signing in June.

And I'm also working on a project to help local writers find one another more easily within Ottawa. Kevin and I are creating a podcast to go with the #OttawaWrites venture, and that is rather exciting. More news to come.

Zsolt and I maintain our big dream of living in both countries, though I'm honestly scared sometimes we won't get to realize those moments if we keep putting them off. Next year is our ten year anniversary and Zsolt wants us to go back to Nice where we met. He is awfully romantic. And I just want to make it there. I want to make it

there, and then I want to make it much, much further for years upon years of growing businesses, travelling to Hungary and back, visiting new places, writing in this blog and so much more. Maybe we'll get a dog?

I'd love to start planning writing retreats for writers, bloggers, authors, etc. Can you imagine going somewhere beautiful and being encouraged to write, write, write while also having a group of like-minded folks to bounce off ideas? A special time made just for you and your passion? That's what I'd like to do, and I have absolutely no idea how to start that rolling!

I'd like to also maybe one day set up a writer's house – which would work just like those shared office hubs – where people could book time to come and work/write and have resources for editing, designing, printing etc. *And* this place would be in a gorgeous location that feels like a retreat even though it's really connected to town. I don't know. I just feel like creating and entrepreneuring.

Plus, I want to give myself time for my own personal creativity – whatever that may be. My next project may not be a book, or maybe it will be . . . I don't know until I find the quiet space in which to experiment. I have this mental image of throwing spaghetti against the wall till something sticks. That's kinda the way it goes with me and my mind.

So many ideas.

So many ambitions.

There is so much life to live in between the scans. Putting them off five weeks is a good compromise, I guess. Ideally I'd run away from everything and go live on a beach with Zsolt somewhere. But since isn't an option . . . five extra weeks, and then we'll start again.

P.S.

Holy Moly, look what just landed in my inbox today (1 day after the post). Did some sophisticated cookies or internet spiders do this? I swear I didn't google Nice, France, I only wrote it in the blog. I'm quietly freaking out now as I read way too much into this as a sign . . .when it could simply be very strategic marketing. How is a girl meant to distinguish a sign from the universe from google ninja internet crawlers?! Now I'm all "maybe we should jump on a plane now while we can!" vs "be practical, you are saving for big dreams!" Air Canada, you done confused me. Probably best to ignore the coincidence since it's most likely google ninja crawlers. . . I hope, hope, hope.

11May2014

I'm lucky to have my mom

Posted in Life, Love

My mom and I go for tea and talk about all kind of things. It's nice. I guess maybe it's a relationship everyone has with their mother, but then again, maybe not. This morning "us kids" went over to my parents house to help work on the garden – me, Zsolt and my little brother. The day was spent pulling up weeds and making the flower beds look tidy. I'm still not sure if this was actually a good Mother's Day gift, since my mom was right there in the yard fixing things up alongside us and that cannot have been relaxing, even if it was helpful. I kept trying to get her to stop, but I guess the job really did need to get done – and get done properly.

But anyhow, on the way home I somehow got to thinking about sisters. My little brother – who isn't actually so little, and was driving us home in his car – asked me if I feel like I missed out on something by never having a sister. So I thought that over, and thought about my friends who have sisters. Well, maybe I missed out on a closeness that seems to happen between sisters, but then I think about my mom. We get along very well. We're both stubborn, and both quite sensitive, and both like having time together. So, I therefore concluded in my brother's car that maybe I didn't miss out on anything too much since I have my mom to be friends with.

We go for tea and talk all about everything. But I especially love that we can talk about our work and we so get it. We get one another's habits, and can talk about one another's projects, and know one another's challenges. We take turns reflecting, and then turns in observing. We drink out tea and we are easy in one another's company.

Plus we made this video, which I'll share here again because it is Mother's Day. I'm very lucky to have my mom.

Once again, Happy Mother's Day, Mom.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q0g0RdAcZaY

15May2014

Human vs Squirrel

Posted in Canada, Finding Home, Fun, Life

This started late last week, but if I really think about it – it's been going on for quite some time. I'd look out the back porch door window at the fire escape stairs and see them hopping up and down the steps. It was fun to watch. Squirrels going up and down during the winter. It's a glimpse of urban wildlife, like spotting a raccoon or getting to know the neighbourhood cats.

Then about two weeks ago the gutter came crashing down in the middle of the night. The BANG woke us up for about two minutes before we fell back asleep. (Thank God it wasn't a burglar, geez.) Apparently – according to my landlord – the gutter had simply rotted away, and it needs to be replaced by a professional.

Anyhow, that's all back story.

Early last week I was outside on my back apartment-building-porch, enjoying this amazing weather. With weather this good, I take the mobile phone outside and do my social media'ing' from there in my $10 Sobeys grocery store chair. It works really well.

Anyhoo, I'm on the back porch when a squirrel makes its way down the stairs above me. So I did what you do – I stood up and stomped my foot, thinking the squirrel would bolt. *Except it didn't*. The little bugger came at me! Or not at me, but it came toward me, so I'm up and jumping around, and it's up and jumping around, and I'm like "OH Sh8T this squirrel must have rabies to be this crazy!" and basically hug the wall, when it – thank God again – ran past me and somehow disappeared.

At this point I began calling out for Zsolt, since for some reason that's my gut reaction in a situation of panic.

Eventually I settled back into my $10 chair, and then promptly left again when I heard more little noises I couldn't place. I had crazy squirrel fear.

THEN just the other day, Zsolt informs me that we have a family of black squirrels living under my spice planter that has been sitting around since last summer. Apparently, according to Big Z, they just moved in and he has been watching them run in and out. The potter has a gap in the bottom so it could, in theory, sit on a railing.

Four teenage squirrels, who were obviously birthed in the apartment roof, had moved onto our porch. And for some reason, none of these squirrels have learned *fear*. They are freaking fearless. The cats don't even chase them!

But you can't keep squirrels on your porch, can you? One second they are all cute looking, and the next they are reminding me of black rats with long tails. Normally I'm cool with squirrels because they show respectful fear and avoidance. But not this little pack, oh no, they have no fear.

So, we decided to bust up their little nest. Putting on his tall green rain boots and carrying the broom, Zsolt carefully snuck around *behind* the planter on the porch, and tipped the thing over. They ran outta there.

But here is the problem. They still have the family home in the roof. I don't want to be responsible for a bunch of dead squirrels if the pest control is called in. *But* I also really want to be able to go outside and not freak out with every little noise or ambush of black bushy tail.

Therefore, we are keeping the broom on hand at all moments, and Zsolt has been repeatedly running outside with it chasing them down the porch stairs and out of the yard.

I'm not actually convinced this is working, but we will see.

And that is yet another adventure from the land of apartment rentals.

Anyone know of some non-killing squirrel deterrents? Maybe we need to adopt an owl?

18May2014

A Petition for #FairCancerCare

Posted in Bumpboobs, Treatment

This is just one of the many reasons, and many stories lived and/or heard, that make me want to support #FairCancerCare:

When I was told it was definitely breast cancer in my lungs, I was also told it was slightly estrogen receptive. That means it kinda likes to eat estrogen. (A change from the first time, when it *really* liked to eat estrogen.) My options in this case involved hormone therapy.

Except I'd already been on Tamoxifen, the only breast cancer hormone therapy I know of for women before menopause, and it had stopped working.

That meant I needed to but put into menopause.

I would be put (back) on Zoladex, I was told, which is a drug that puts your ovaries to sleep. Zoladex is *not* covered by OHIP. The oncologist wasn't sure if it would help, but he figured we should try that first and foremost before doing anything else. Except . . . except that monthly shot costs about 500 bucks a pop. Or I could pay 1500 a go and get the three month shot.

But insurance would pay for it.

Right?

…

Oh wait, you don't have insurance? Well then, you need to have your ovaries removed via surgery.

!!

That is seriously what I was told. And if this post seems a bit fragmented in pace, it's because to this day I'm stupefied by the solution to my struggling to afford medication – cut out perfectly healthy pieces of my body, *despite* there being an effective pill that could do the same thing minus the traumatic surgery.

Ultimately I was able to get onto Trillium because we're a lower income family. Though even that has had its challenges – and of course I am grateful to have that. But for many others they end up paying loads out of pocket (not on the table here, but also worth mentioning is the cost of alternative treatments. Wouldn't it be lovely if the cost of complimentary health care was built into our treatment plans?)

Anyhow, for many, many reasons, I want to direct you to #FairCancerCare, an online petition for Ontario healthcare that moves for more treatment coverage. They want to gather signatures before the provincial election to bring urgency to these needs.

"As Canadians, many of us are understandably proud of our health care system. In Ontario, most of us believe that, should we ever be unfortunate enough to get cancer, OHIP will cover us. Unfortunately, in far too many cases this doesn't happen.

Sometimes, the very best treatment that your doctor prescribes for your cancer is not covered by provincial insurance. Patients have to choose between a fully-covered treatment plan that may be less effective, or following the recommendation of their doctor and paying the high cost for chemotherapy out of pocket.

This is two-tiered health care. Wealthy patients and those with good private insurance have access to the best care. Those who are not so lucky either go deeply in debt or take their chances with what OHIP will cover.

In 2014, no Ontario cancer patient should be accumulating thousands of dollars of debt. And yet it's happening more often than most of us would think."

If agree with their mission, then do sign the petition and please share their campaign.

29May2014

The Moment I Knew For Sure

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life, Love

So I have this memory burned into my mind.

This memory is me at a train station in Amsterdam. My younger brother is standing behind me on the train platform and we're waiting for this train to pull away. The train station is perfectly European as in the ceilings stretch up high and pigeons fly amongst the raftors. The announcements in this far-off echo and bounce around the massive place as we stand there waiting.

And then I see him. I see Zsolt find his seat inside of the train. Only seconds ago he was with me in my arms, and now he's there inside of this train about to pull out of the station. It's funny how one second you can be wrapped up in this world of love and excitement, and then – almost inevitably – the next second you are sobbing on a train platform as your heart breaks and you wonder, "will I ever see him again?"

Zsolt is inside of this train waiting to pull out of the Amsterdam train station. He's sitting by the window next to the platform. I slow down the tears as much as possible and go up to that window, and wait till he notices me.

He notices me.

He smiles.

I smile.

I put my hand against the window; it's cold and it's dirty, but he's right there on the other side and only moments before he was next to me kissing me goodbye. Zsolt puts his hand upon the window against mine so that all there is between us is this cold pane of glass – that and a train that is now about to leave the station.

But just there in that ten second window before I need to step back, I make the decision that will change my life. I decide that no matter what happens, I will see him again. No matter what, we will be together again.

At that point, I'd known Zsolt for about three weeks, and had spent about nine of those days together with him. It was enough to know I wouldn't give up on us. It was enough to change my life.

So, when I start to think about the things I'd rather not think about, I try and remember that moment on the platform – grimy glass and all – and focus on my hand against his hand. It is the moment that I carry with me through all of this, and keep safe with a sense of certainty. It's the bright side when I go to the hard places. It is my power. It is our love.

P.S. It's our five year wedding anniversary today, hence this sentimental post!

1Jun2014

Wisdom Tooth Countdown

Posted in Life

I can't run away from this any longer. Or I could, but it would only get worse. Five years ago I was told I'd need to remove my wisdom teeth. Ha! That was Catherine-ese for "You need to stop going to the dentist," and so I did.

The infections come and they go, but my wisdom teeth have remained in place.

Except for now. For some reason I've suddenly pooled courage and decided to get the suckers pulled one at a time. *(I'm only getting 2 removed since the others seem fine. We'll see how it goes.)* Why now? Why not five years ago? Actually I don't know. Circumstances have lined up this way, and I'm actually a great believer in circumstances. So it's on, baby. *(Unless I run away.)*

There are many, many YouTube videos online explaining how an impacted tooth is removed from the jaw. I can see them in the list of results, but haven't actually clicked upon them as of yet. One lady told me they need to unhinge your jaw. HOLY S. What kind of crazy is that?

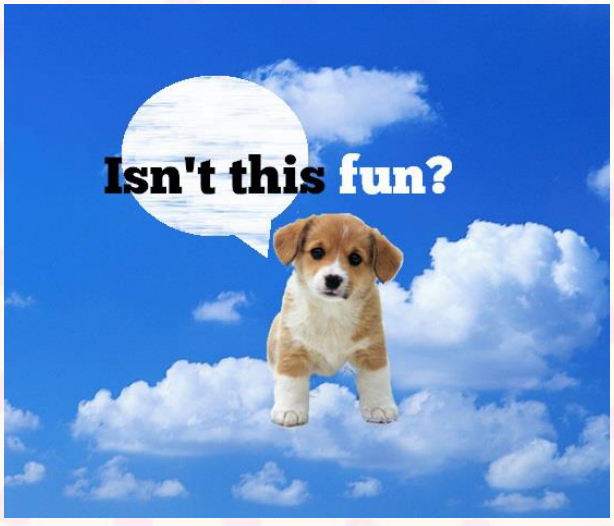
Okay. Status has changed:

I just watched 49 seconds of a 1:11 min video. That was enough. It was a very straightforward cartoon. I hope this is a straightforward procedure, because Catherine won't be taking a nap during the event. Bring on the numbing agents!

Maybe this is just the distraction I need from the scans that follow my upcoming birthday. Got scanxiety? Get your wisdom tooth removed!

Bah!

T-minus 10 days and counting till tooth removal. This is now the part where you say it's no big deal, and far more like playing with a puppy while floating on a cloud. That sounds about right. Right?



9Jun2014

A little retreat – The Studio Cafe

Posted in Life, Writing

Well, I'm *meant* to be writing up an article at this moment. But all parts of my being are calling out "capture this moment!" so instead I'll write you this post.

Are you an artist, writer, creator, reader, day dreamer in Ottawa? Well, I've got a beautiful little nook for you to go and craft your beautiful moments. For some time now I've been playing with organizing beautiful retreats for writers in Ottawa. **BUT** till that plan takes shape (check this out if you are interested), this cafe seems like the next best thing.

The Studio Cafe on 1089 Somerset Street West in Hintonburg (*where Somerset turns into Wellington*). How can I describe this place? It's coffee shop meets your dream office space. The area is open, there's a fellow strumming his guitar and singing amazing grace, sunshine is pouring through the massive windows, tea & coffee are on tap. (Okay, not 'on tap' but I happen to like that phrase.)

Coincidentally, Ottawa is currently full of fluffy white clouds of fluff – and that translates into fuzzy snow-like landscapes outside the window, so I kind feel like I'm in a movie with the beauty and the music and the relaxation.

The Studio Cafe is a great place for creation. Designed to host artists, there are rooms to rent, a classroom in the back, and art classes/seminars are taking place often. There's this one water colour class coming up on June 14th from 10AM-12:30PM that looks lovely, and I think involves painting doughnuts.

But if you aren't an artist – I think this is also the perfect nook for a laptop and some street gazing as you hunker down for your next chapter, article, blog post, or story structure. If they start offering

lunchables then I might just start camping out all day for some writing-only time (as opposed to I-need-to-clean-out-the-fridge-and-wash-the-laundry time).

So, writers in Ottawa – you have a new retreat. It's called The Studio Cafe, and it's really freaking gorgeous. (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram)

~Catherine #OttawaWrites

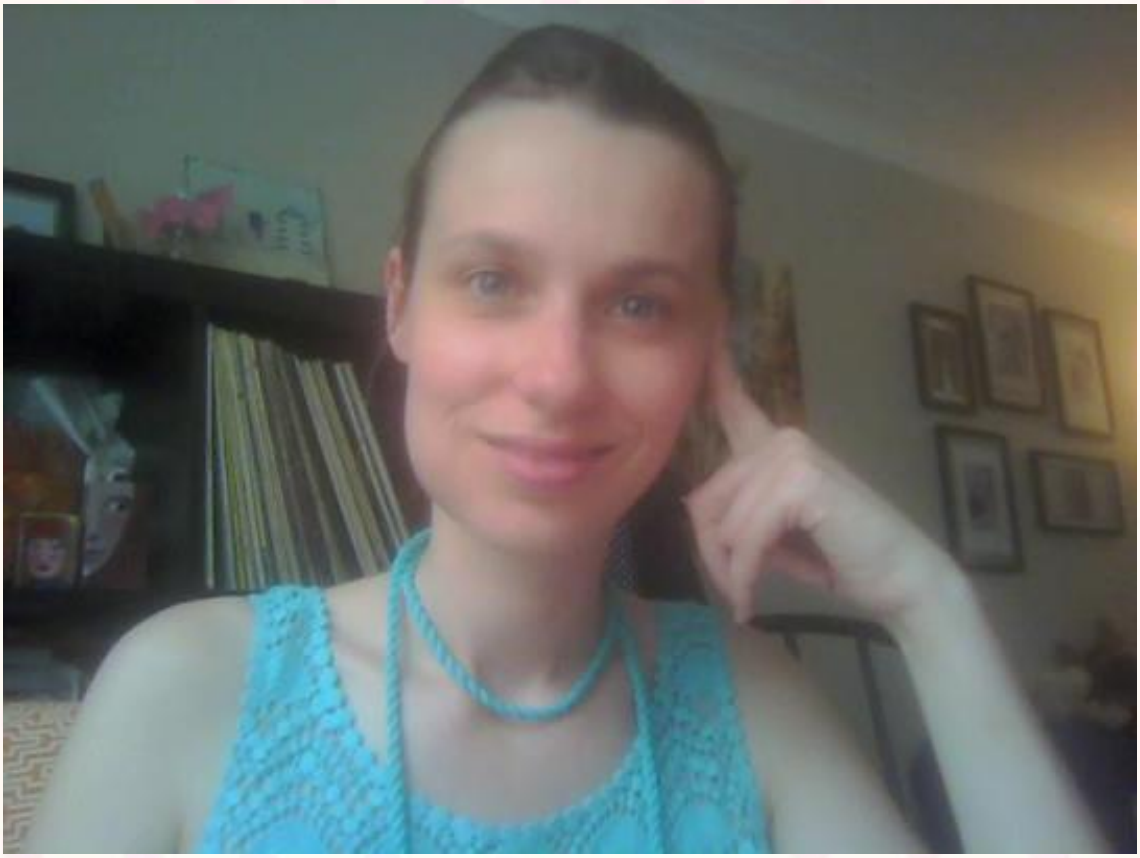
13Jun2014

First wisdom tooth is gone!

Posted in Life

I do not know what has happened to my attention span lately. Maybe someone threw it out with the good weather. Maybe it'll come back in a couple days? I was just in the middle of some social media work when there was this lady with a picture of brilliant white teeth and an article about dental hygiene and whole-body health. That made me think of two things: 1) Man my teeth are yellow, but geez it's the last thing on my mind (generally) and 2) Oh yeah. Wisdom tooth!

I am grateful for everyone who wrote to tell me getting a wisdom tooth is no big deal. Now, the majority of folks who told me that had their tooth removed while asleep or on happy drugs – but I think they were essentially right. Getting the tooth removed is no big deal. It's just damn uncomfortable.



Oh, I'll be in Kanata Chapters on Sunday (father's day) signing books from 12-3pm. Do feel free to come by and say hello. You can get an upclose look at this swollen face! Could be far worse, I reckon.

So, following a networking breakfast, I walked my butt over to the dentist and met Zsolt. Big Z's job was to keep my older brother notified so he could come by and pick me up. It's was quite kind of JP to do that in the middle of his day. So kind, that I'm going to link you to his website right now and say he's a really great acupuncturist in Ottawa, if you happen to be looking

Anyhow, Zsolt stayed in the lobby and I went into the dentist procedure room place. Here's what I recall quite clearly.

Freezing. First she applied a gel to freeze my cheek. Then, injection by injection, she froze the whole thing up. I lay there looking at the ceiling for about five minutes have a flash back to the only time the dentist filled a cavity in my mouth. It was a baby tooth, and I cried like crazy when the freezing set it. There's something so wholly uncomfortable about the freezing . . . at least until it settles down.

So, the dentist & her assistant come back in, they give me one more freezing shot, wait, and then away we go!

Holy crap. Everything was numb. No pain. But a lot of psychological WTF was going on nevertheless. For some reason, as she began to scrape away the gum, I started singing the ABCs in my head over and over. That worked quite well – that and gripping the arm rests for dear life.

Then a discovery was made. I had a MASSIVE wisdom tooth. It was all they could talk about! "Oh that tooth is so big. I hadn't expected such a big tooth. For such a small woman that is a huge tooth." They needed to drill it. And drill it. And drill it. And drill it.

Again, no pain. Just some messed up visuals. Basically there was tooth and jaw dust flying into the air. Every time they brought down that little circular drill I moved my tongue away for dear life. Surely they must have safe guards on those things, right? So – high-pitched drilling noises, no pain, dust, and time.

Oh, and I was actually mentally filming this in my head. I was literally thinking it was a shame my eyes weren't also a camera, but it was a really incredible shot.

Eventually the tooth was removed and I was stitched up. The remainder of the day was spent with Netflix acting as a mental dampener to the discomfort – the unfreezing was really crap, but after about 7 hours it was mostly okay. So overall I'd say it sucks to get an impacted, deeply buried and massive wisdom tooth removed. Sucks but is doable. Hey yes it's doable. It's just not what I'd choose to be doing with my time, generally. The bit that hurt the most was the bill. But as my friend Kevin says, it's not exactly an area where you look to go cheap.

But as that article reminded me – it's better to take care of your mouth, since you are therefore taking care of your whole body.

One tooth down, one more to go. I think the next one will involve far less drilling.

Weird Stuff!

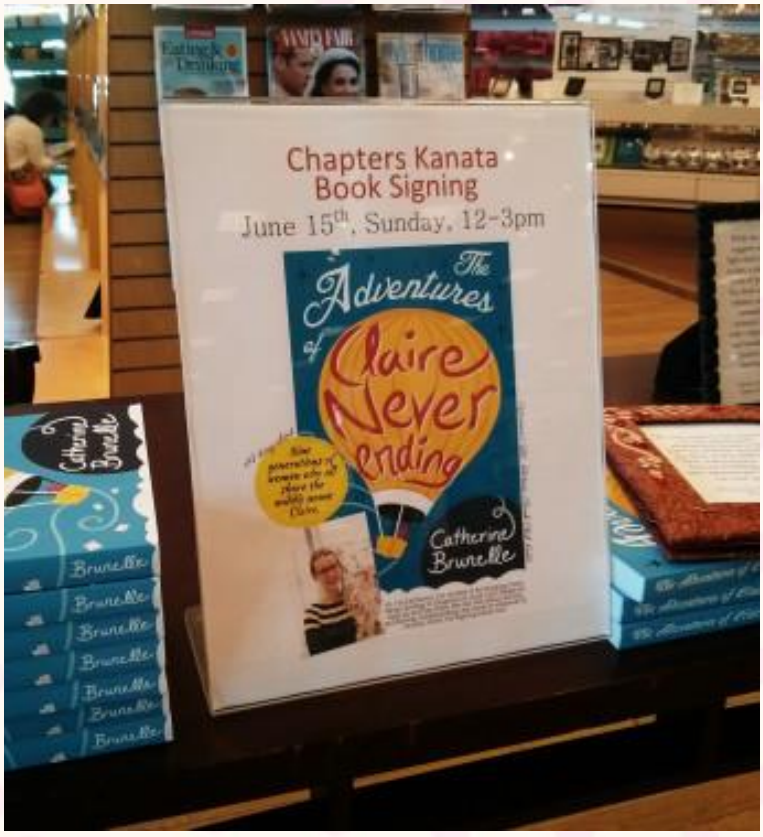
17Jun2014

First Book Signing EVER Recap post!

Posted in Fun, Life, Novels and Stories, Writing

Well – that was interesting!

This past Sunday took me over to Kanata (part of Ottawa) for a book signing event. Though when I say event, I really mean a wooden table, my books and a sign. But since this was my first book signing ever, I suppose that could merit 'event' status. Why not?



As I said, it was interesting. I feel like the occasion took part in three stages. Here they are:

Stage One: A throwback to preschool.

I arrived at the bookstore with my laundry basket full of book signing stuff – big sign, extra books if necessary, stand for the big sign, some quotes, some business cards and . . . no pen. I forgot the pen for the book signing. My mom dropped me off, and we decided she ought to stay for a cup of tea for a little while. So while she hooked us up with the teas, I set up my table.

Chapters was really good and put the signing table *right* at the front of the store. You really couldn't ask for a better spot. So that was lovely.

We sat at the table and drank our tea. A few folks came up and one women actually recognized the book from the newspaper! She bought a copy for her daughter who had just given birth. I think that is awesome. Eventually my mom was like, "time for me to go…" And I was like, "NOOOOOOOO" because it feels soooooooooooooooooooooo awkward to be at the front of the store looking at people pass by just hoping someone might toss you a smile. It's really uncomfortable stuff.

Ten more minutes tick by, and finally I said okay, she could go. Not that I was literally keeping here there – but I mean like she could go as in, I realized it was time to grow up and harness some courage.

So, mom left.

Stage Two: Alone.

After mom left, I was at the table sitting down and sipping on my tea. It continued to be weird. People walk into the shop and will either 1) make eye contact, smile and immediately move away, or 2) make no eye contact and keep a wide distance.

One lady asked if Claire Never-Ending was a kid's book, which is totally understandable since it's a fun cover. I'm going to try changing it – even if I *do* love the cover. She's my first, and will always be remembered. I'm debating between three possible options for the next cover: random woman absorbing the world type image, random woman looking pregnant type image, or random connection to ancestry type image. I say random because it'll most likely be stock photo – though I'll carefully pick it.

Anyhow, it was a really painful hour. Weird-o-rama. However, I did sell a copy of the book to two ladies – a mother and daughter (the mom was 92) who were both named Olive. Apparently the name doesn't go very far back in the family, but it does extend to cousins across the world. Cool.

While waiting for the agony of a book signing to end, Kevin and his daughter popped over to say hello. Kevin dropped off the copy of his book I'd asked for, *The Novel Writer's Blueprint*, since I'm hoping it will help me kick some butt with my writing. And Lori popped over too with her two girls. Lori and I were in the photo collection *Faces and a Cause* shot by Lou Truss. She'd come all the way across town to buy two of the books! So, how is that for awesome? It was a delight to see everyone.

But then they left, and I was alone again.

Stage Three: Stand UP.

This is when a lady named Karen took her shift at the book store. She was working at the front of the shop greeting customers as they browsed the aisles. Karen came over to my table as I sat there feeling uncomfortable.

"You'll never sell anything that way. You have to stand up."

"Oh?!"

I stood up.

"Yeah," she tells me. "You have to stand up and say hello to people. Have you got anything to give them?"

"I've got these?" I showed her my business cards that look like book.

"Bookmarks! Great, ask if they want a bookmark," she suggested.

"Ok."

(Of course this wasn't our *exact* conversation – but it's the gist. Karen also introduced me to another fellow who worked at the shop, who was, apparently "as shy as you are!")

So, I stood up and handed out 'bookmarks'. The first person I offered a bookmark to rejected the offer with a decisive "no."

“That’s okay, you asked her and that’s what matters,” encouraged Karen.

I did. I did ask her. She said no, and it didn’t physically hurt me. Besides, honestly, if someone doesn’t want the bookmark, it saves me one bookmark for someone who *does* want it!

For the rest of the time I was there, I was literally springing bookmarks on people. They would be whizzing by, and I was like “HEY YOU! TAKE A BOOK MARK!!”

(Well, okay, I was more like “Would you like a bookmark!!!!?!!!!”)

Some people said no. *But,* several people said, “okay,” and of those a handful of them stopped to actually ask what the book was about, and of those I actually sold about three copies. And all of that happened in about 30 minutes of standing and throwing bookmarks at people. Imagine how it would have gone if I’d been doing that the entire time?

. . .

THEREFORE, it was a very worthwhile event. And standing up to launch bookmark assaults on customers felt far better than sitting down and hiding behind the pile of unsold books. It was still awkward, but it was good awkward. It felt kinda . . .*adventurous*.

So, good first signing! It was scary, and I reckon they’ll keep being scary but at least I know I can (at least) stand up and say hello. Maybe one of these days I’ll wander into the aisle and chase potential readers through the book stacks. Maybe…

And that is the story of my very first book signing event. Thumbs up for learning.

P.S. I used to work at that Chapters for about three years. Back when I met Zsolt and kept flying between Canada and Hungary, they essentially funded the plane fare by allowing me to pick up work whenever I was back in Canada.

2Jul2014

A Nice Little Life

Posted in Bumpboobs, Canada, Fun, Life, Life despite cancer, Love

Life has been nice these past 2 weeks. When I think back to this time last year . . . well, let's not do that right now. Instead, let me tell you just a little about how awesome it is to take a holiday for *real*.

First some friends got married. Oh my goodness, that was lovely. Funny, I can remember going to a wedding last year and feeling a strange moment of . . . something. But this time it was far more about laughing with friends, and hearing touching speeches, and seeing a very happy couple united. So that was the start of the good times. Right after the wedding, we took off for a cottage.

My parents rented a beautiful cottage not long ago up at Lac Blue Sea for about 6 days. They invited all of us to go up and stay with them at the cottage for some R&R. There's zero internet at the place, and that's really good since the only time I seem to stop working is when I literally cannot access my work. So, we went to the cottage and unplugged.

It was fantastic. From kayaking to beautiful food to swimming at dusk, to pretend cottage shopping, to multiple cups of tea, to laying on the sofa reading books, to playing board games, to laughing, to napping . . . it was

heavenly. Last year we went to the very same place, and Zsolt and I spend some time at this place last autumn as well. It's a good place – a very good place.

But it doesn't stop there. As you may know, I pushed my scan back this year. It took some juggling, but we got there in the end. So, for Zsolt's birthday – he turned 33! – we celebrated his birthday. He received many video games that I hope he one day plays. . .

(We are playing *The Walking Dead* together at the moment, a game produced by Telltale Games and based on the comics *The Walking Dead*. It is seriously intense and emotional stuff – but also fun since we're really playing together. He kills the zombies while I hide in the other room, and I help him solve the not very difficult puzzles. Also I choose the responses in the dialogues, and Zsolt kills more zombies and shoots stuff in general. Good teamwork.)

Zsolt had some special birthday waffles, and then we just hung out the entire day. It was honestly a bit of a knackering day since we also left the cottage that afternoon, but it was a happy day nevertheless.

Then yesterday was Canada Day. It was so, so, so good. Last year had the weight of a hundred bricks on my chest. This year we were so busy going downtown and snapping silly photos, meeting friends, eating awesome food and watching fireworks, that I hardly had time for heavy emotions.

And then on Saturday it will be my turn to have a birthday. Thirty two years old J I'm so freaking happy about it that I could just cry all over this keyboard.

The week following will be, very likely, a challenging week. I'll have a CT scan, and then wait another week for results, and then . . . I don't know. I could cry all over my keyboard thinking about *that* too – but would much rather not at the moment. For the time being, it is far better to enjoy the summer weather and summer mode of life.

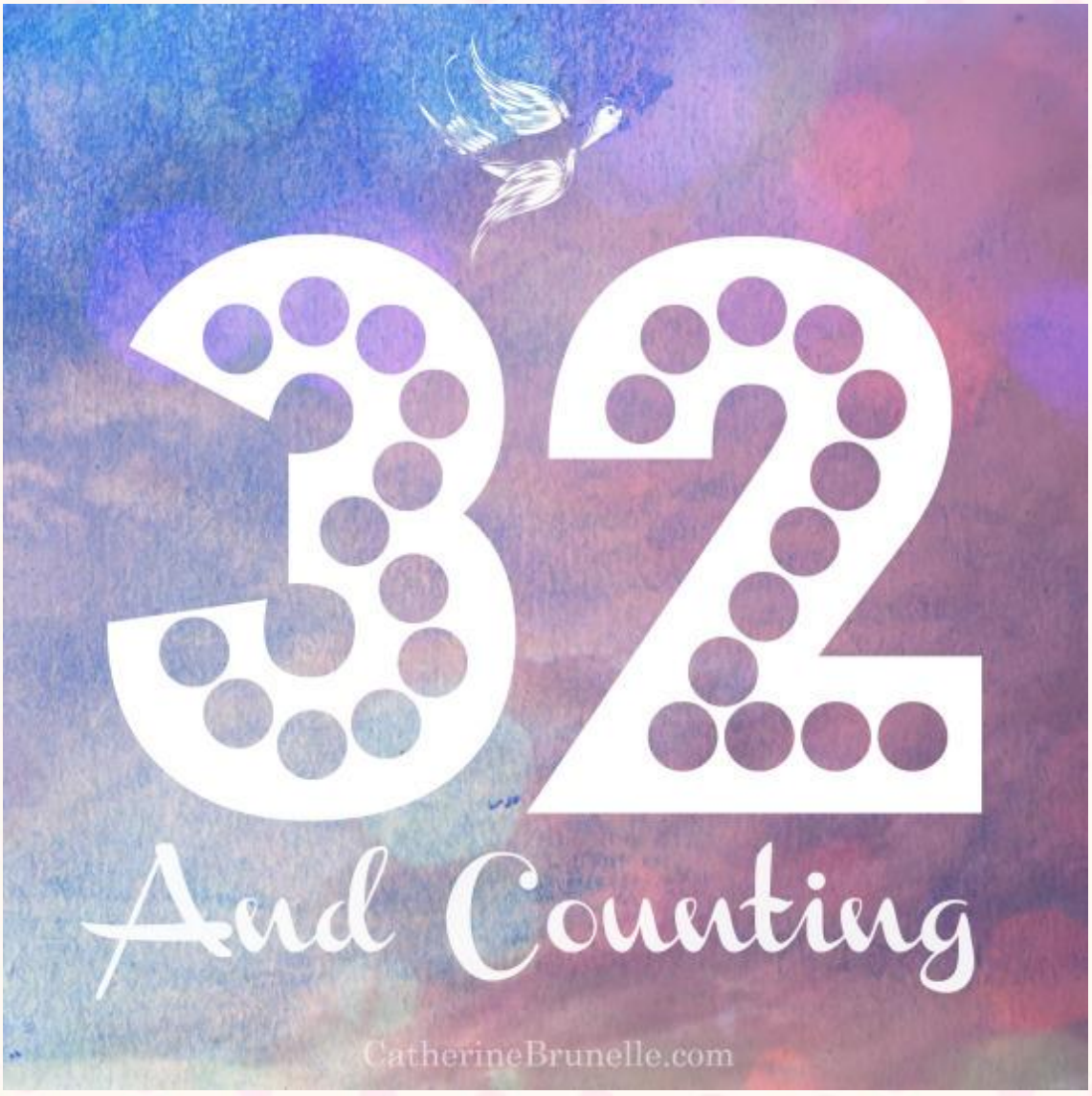
It was a good decision to push back the scans. This has been a beautiful time.

5Jul2014

And Counting! 32 Life Lessons on my 32nd Birthday

Posted in Bumpboobs, Fun, Life, Love

Today I turn thirty two. That sounds pretty darn tooting good, doesn't it? I want to make this occasion with a short blog post. Here I am at thirty two. Just past evening last night (or today, I guess), Zsolt asked me about my sixteenth birthday. What was it like? he asked. For the life of me, I can't exactly distinguish it from my seventeenth birthday. All I know for sure was that I had watched *The Sound of Music* too many times and had this picture of sweet sixteen involving dancing around a gazebo on a moonlit night singing *"I am sixteen going on seventeen."*



One thing for sure, I feel more sure of my self sixteen years later after having turned sixteen. My self-confidence isn't perfect, but somehow, through some miracle of life, I've managed to connect myself with the

very best of people who are fantastic and supportive and such good friends (which includes my family). When I walk down the street in my bright red trousers, thick pink glasses, rainbow hat and polka dot jacket, I feel beautiful. (Sixteen year old Catherine would have never left the bedroom, let alone the house, in that outfit.) And I have a more secure sense of myself. Okay, I'm still a bit of a drifter, but at least I know what I like and don't like in a very clear way.

Okay, it's 6 AM when I am writing this, but here goes nothing. For my 32nd birthday, here's a list of 32 things I've learned over the years. Damn, this is going to be a long list!

1. Good people are worth investing in, and they'll invest in you too.

2. Walking down the street in red trousers with pink glasses, a rainbow hat and a polka jacket is *the best* way to dress.

3. When it comes to Love, don't settle. Love is far too important to settle.

4. The best way to become anything is to start by admitting it aloud. For example: I am a writer. I am also an entrepreneur.

5. Birthday are always better with cake and a loud round of Happy Birthday.

6. The outside often reflects the inside. To feel better, clean something.

7. If you expect to work with amazing people, you will end up working with amazing people. Like love, this is an area where it's not worth settling.

8. 6 AM is not a good time to wake up and make a list.

9. School is great, but travel and adventures are better.

10. Hollandaise sauce is really easy to make – use a double boiler, but don't leave the top pot directly on the steam. I hold with a mitt and lift to control the temperature.

11. Everyone is normal in their unique way.

12. Successful people are great people. There's no use in being intimidated or thinking they see themselves as better. They are hard working and have tapped their talent. Better to learn from them than be insecure.

13. Assholes aren't worth more time than it takes to read this sentence.

14. Holy hotdog, am I seriously only on number 14? Okay, I have learned not to make a list at 6:15 Am.

15. The best way to travel is by boat – big, luxury boats. It's beyond first class.

16. Everything is easier the fifth time you do it. Keep going.

17. Say hello and smile.

18. Even hot guys can be nice guys. I'm thinking of my husband here, who was a jock and who I would have *never* gone near when I was sixteen because he is far too good looking.

19. Being invisible can have its advantages, but damn, it feels good to be seen.

20. Life won't unfold as expected, but fuck that – chase after your dreams. Even if the road to realization doesn't go as planned, you *can* make it there nevertheless.

21. Sometimes it is useful to know that we are a tiny spec of life in this infinite expanse of space, and when you zoom away from Earth we literally disappear into the nothing because there is so much out there. I'm not saying we are not important, I'm just saying that when life feels unfair, it is good to remember the vastness of what is out there – and how "unfair" probably isn't a concept in space.

22. Everything you experience will leave an impression.

23. I should really be in bed right now.

24. Things can and will get hard. But not always. And often times they get better. It's a bit of a cycle.

25. Once that really big thing happens to you in life, you can never go back to the way you were before. It's like #22, but a thousands times that. It's okay to cry for the loss.

26. Some people will find you intimidating. That is both reasonable and bizarre, but maybe it means you are doing something right? I don't know. Check back with me when I am forty and making another damn long list.

27. Hope is important.

28. Paprika – it's an under appreciated spice, but so totally worth your while.

29. If a guy ever wants to "save you," run in the other direction. (Unless you are hanging on the ledge of a cliff or something similar. I am more talking about that desire to fix what is not broken)

30. Feminism is good. There are many things that are good – Feminism is one of them. (I realized I was a feminist around the age 16 or 17, and it surprised me.)

31. When you wear glasses, people assume you are smart. If you stand straight, people will assume you are confident. If you smile, people will assume that you are kind. There is a trend here.

32. Every birthday matters.

Bonus Lesson:

You can always go back to bed. I will see you later.

Pretty Postcards

Hi there. I'm currently in distraction mode, so thought I'd share with you this Etsy store with adorable postcards. If you are going to send a postcard, make it an adorable one . . . or a really weird one. In this case, it's all about adorable. When I saw her page, it made me think of the Claires, and how they'd for sure be sending a postcard like this to one another.

Droomkleuren's Etsy Shop

(Okay, I read her blog too. The women who makes these cards makes a lot of lovely things.)

Enjoy the distraction!

~Catherine

13Jul2014

The Locked Door – another story for distraction

Posted in Bumpboobs, Finding Home, Life, Life despite cancer

As usual I should be busy working on something else at this very moment – but I think this is a little story that is very blog worthy. It involves one conversation, a shower, various small straight objects and one locked bedroom door. (*Hmm, that sounds bizarrely racy. But don't get your hopes up for* ***that*** *kind of story)*

So, this morning Zsolt asked me to stop locking the bedroom door at nights. I should preface this by quickly mentioning that we sleep with the door *closed*. It took a considerable amount of time before my man agreed to the closed door – but with the troubles we've had downstairs coupled with a humming deep freeze not far from our room (because we live in an apartment, so everything is close to our room), he eventually agreed that we could close the door connecting the room to the apartment.

Anyhow, this is an old and smelly apartment. Sometimes we leave the living room windows open to allow for fresh air circulation at night. Except lately I've become rather paranoid about this – what if someone breaks in through the window in the middle of the night? Right? Okay. So, we are now closing the windows. *EXCEPT*, this remains a smelly old building, and come morning it's worse since there has been no air circulation.

Anyhow – my solution to this was to leave the windows open, but close and lock the bedroom door so that if someone *did* break in, we would be separated from that drama.

However, this morning my man asked me to stop. He said, "It makes me feel trapped." And how can I argue against that? You just can't. So I said, "okay, I will no longer lock the bedroom door."

End of conversation?

Well, no, not quite.

Later in the day, I decide to take a shower. Because that will later involve me running around in a towel, I therefore close the backdoor leading to the balcony in our bedroom so that I can run around without clothes later on and not be seen since we normally have it open with the screen door for more fresh air (*to be clear, this is a different door that leads directly outside – which we always have closed and locked at night. What Z and I were talking about is the door connected to the rest of the apartment*).

Anyhow, back door locked. I hop into the shower and get clean – because today I met with this wonderful author Stacey Atkinson and wanted to be clean, as one does, when meeting.

After the shower, I wrap up with my towel and head for the bedroom, except the door is closed.

I try to open it.

The bedroom door is locked.

Is this a joke?

I made the mistake of asking Zsolt if he locked the door.

No, he didn't.

For about five minutes, I entertained the idea that someone had busted through the back porch door and was now in our bedroom robbing us of our bedsheets, and locking us out as they did a search. (Paranoid, much?)

But no, that wasn't the case either. In my day dreams and reflections while heading for the shower, I simply did what I said I would not – and locked us both out of the bedroom.

!!

Zsolt was really unimpressed. Though to be fair, I seriously can't even remember doing this – obviously I did it, but in no way do I recall the action.

Bah!

I try to unlock the door with a coat hanger.

I try to unlock the door with a meat holder stick thing.

Zsolt tries to unlock the door with a drill bit.

We unscrew the door handle and try to unlock the door magically.

We nearly break the door handle.

Zsolt attacked the door handle device vigouraly, essentially stabbing it with his screw driver.

We watch Youtube and think we've got it.

We nearly break the handle, *again.*

I am ready to take out the entire thing, but then worry: if we knock off the handle on both sides, how do we twist the actual lock device to allow the door to open?

So we do nothing.

At this point, I am supposed to be at the coffee shop to meet Stacey.

Also at this point, Zsolt (normally so wonderfully calm) has flipped his lid, and is ready to ram against the door till it breaks open. He is literally ready to run it down – and I am assuming part of this crazy was connected to that whole sense of being trapped. He really wanted to break the door.

But then I remember: the screen door! It would be better to break a screen than to break a door.

So, I slip on my PJ dress and rainboots, grab the house keys, and go around to the back yard. Here I very carefully pushed out the screen from the lining, (and then fixed, 'cause I'm freaking lady McGuiver), and unlocked the back door to enter the bedroom!!

Holy hot dog, did that feel good. Stepping into the bedroom, I went over to the other door and unlocked it. Simple stuff.

In my head I was like, “WHO IS AWESOME? CATHERINE IS AWESOME!” and then I mentally punched the air and moonwalked into the living room to announce my awesomeness to my husband. In *reality*, I walked into the living room (where Zsolt was cooling off), took off my rain boots, and then put away the key.

What is the lesson in all of this? Why bother reading all the way to the end of this post? Why bother writing it? I guess I find it hilarious that one little lock can cause so much chaos in our lives. We’d be terrible on *The Amazing Race Canada* if they somehow randomly choose us to be on the show and tackle challenges. One door, one little basic lock, had us arguing and ready to destroy something.

So, apart from some concern over 100% subconscious behaviour that I cannot remember, I guess the real lesson is . . . hmmm . . . I’m awesome?

Yeah, that sounds about right.

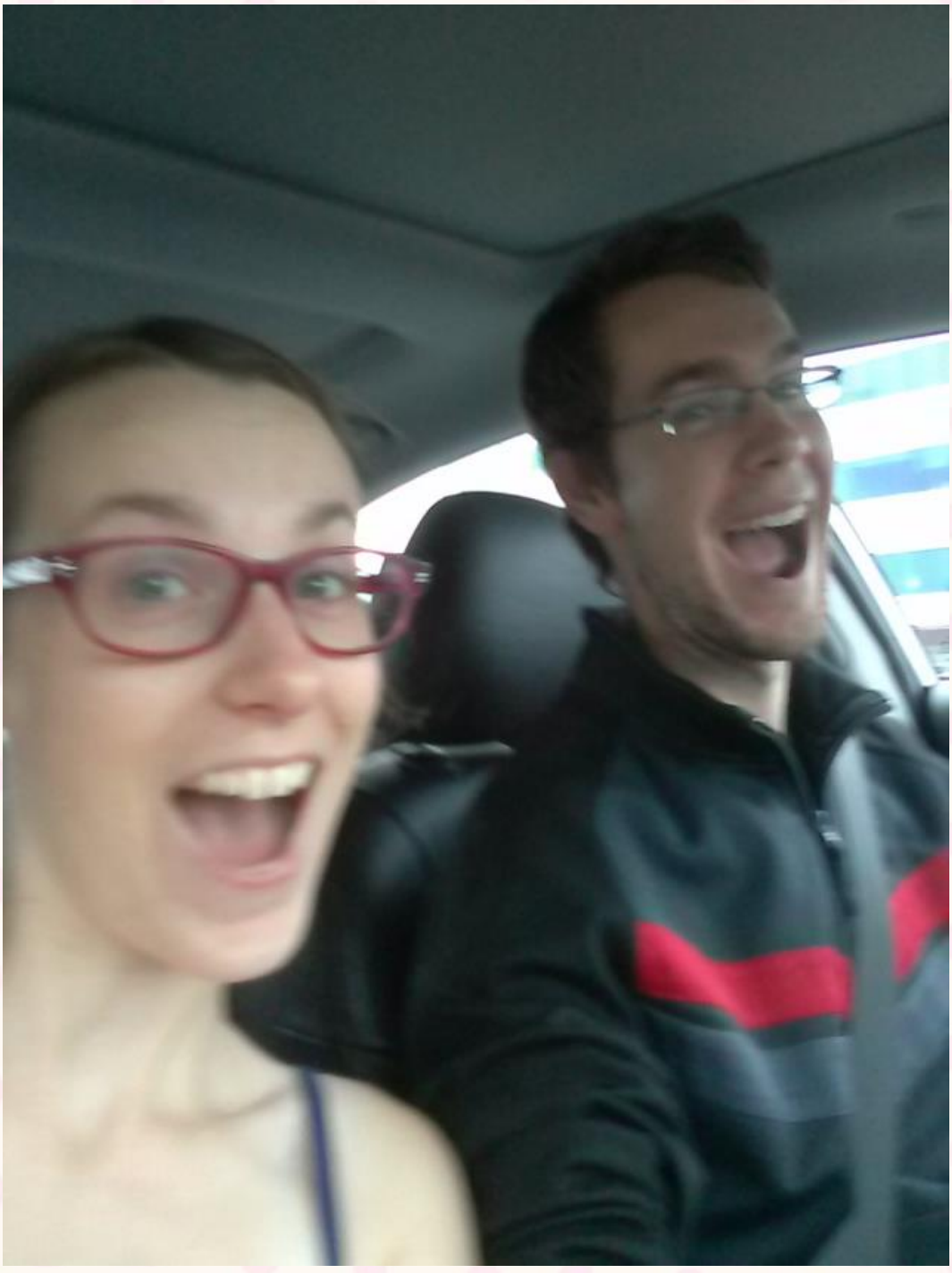
;)

Distraction done!

15Jul2014

Nodes are shrinking

Posted in Uncategorized



The nodes continue to shrink. No new spots appearing. Bring on the hot flashes if they keep the good results flowing! Holy crap that was far too nerve wracking. Next CT is in four months, how much living can we squeeze in between now and then, I wonder? ~Catherine

3Aug2014

Penny Palooza 2014 in Ottawa, Aug. 23rd

Posted in Life despite cancer

Last year I "E-Met" Penny when she and I connected on Twitter. We live in the same town, and Penny was dealing with the treatment of breast cancer. Since then, she's been a great supporter of my novel (even walking nearly an hour to the book launch!) and a supporter of the city where I live. As we all are, she's way more than the trauma of breast cancer – and so she's pulling together her many skills to help raise funds for the Ottawa Hospital Breast Health Centre.

So, how is she doing that? Wiiiitttthhhh

PENNY PALOOZA!

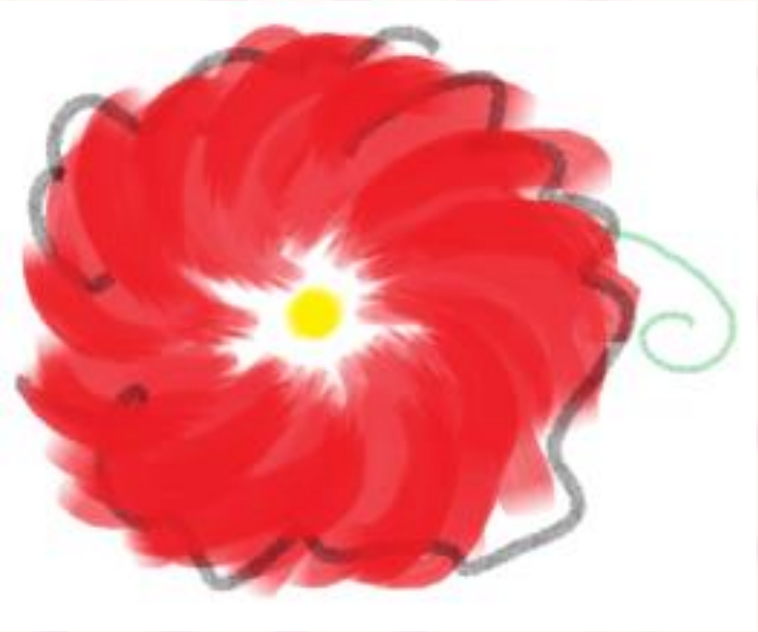
Basically, it's a music festival in a park in the summer. So, that's perfection. It is in Ottawa on Saturday August 23rd (*Why is the best stuff on a Saturday, when I'm working? Let's start having all the cool stuff happen on Tuesdays, eh?)* from 4-9PM. Admission is a suggested donation of 10$/person, or 20$ for a family of four. If you want to indicate you'll be going, here's the facebook event page!

She's got a lot of heart, and a lot of drive to be bringing this out another year. For that, I tip my hat to you, Penny.

4Aug2014

An Explosion of Gas from my Brain*

Posted in Life



You know what I've never really understood? I have never quite understood that phrase, "You can learn from my mistakes." Some part of that has never settled well within my mind. Do you know what I mean?

In life I want to learn. For instance, I want to create three columns in a wordpress post. So I google it, find the CSS code, and create those columns – all because some lovely person took the time to share that resource online. But then I want to have two columns rather than three, and try to edit it, and ruin everything. I've made a mistake. To fix it, I'll really, really need to start paying attention to what the heck is in that CSS code, and what all these little labels mean, and why everything did a back flip with I erased that little "/"

What am I talking about in this post? Hang on, I'm trying to form a complete thought, and it's probably (based on past blog posts) going to form at some point.

During Women Executive Network breakfasts (which I get to enjoy thanks to SisterLeadership.com), they often have a question for the speakers that goes like this: If you could give your younger self a piece of advice, what would it be? And then inevitably sometime wise and full of insight gets shared. Which is lovely. Except. . .

Except those insights have derived from the highs and the lows of previous experiences. That knowledge was made from all the mistakes and successes in that person's life.

Basically what I am saying is looking to save people from their mistakes just doesn't make sense. (Not to me, at least) Mistakes are good. They are necessary. They can be terrible. They certainly are difficult. They force change. They are surprising. They create deep knowledge.

Mistakes are intrinsic to life, and life is worth living.

You know what I really like? I like when people share their knowledge/stories as a resource – not as an ultimate cure-all answer. We can still make the mistakes, but knowing someone else has made them too is reassuring (*even knowing they are making them at the same time as you is reassuring. I'm thinking of chats with my girlfriends, where we compare life notes over tea*). Knowing there are other people facing similar challenges gives me a sense of connection and understanding. I also like when I make mistakes, and someone can help me look at what I've just lived through and understand how to pivot. I really appreciate coaches, mentors, friends, google articles, etc., that hold up a mirror.

Don't deny me the mistakes . . . guide me through them . . . laugh with me . . . live them with me.

Anyhow. I just wanted to write that down. It's awesome to have teachers, but there aren't shortcuts in life. Maybe we get easy answers with the online sharing of knowledge – but that doesn't mean no burdens or efforts. Mistakes are going to happen.

This is as far as I feel like writing. My thoughts have not come together particularly well, but at least I got this off my mind. Oh my goodness there is so much to do today! You ever make one of those lists for the day . . . and it's already past noon, and you've only done about 2 out of 10?!

That's is me right now.

BAH!

*Brain Fart

8Aug2014

Hot Thrashing, a 3:00 AM Story

Posted in Finding Home, Fun, Life

These are one of those posts concocted in my head at 3:00AM. It feels like a good idea at the time . . . so I start writing it (*in my head*) and then say, "No you don't, brain! We are going to sleep now, not write blog posts." So it gets grump and tries to keep writing. And I need to make a promise that tomorrow (*if we go to sleep now*) I'll write a real post all about the idea, and share it here.

Therefore, here we are with another blog post.

This past week I had one major angry fit. It was like hot flash amplified. There I was lying in bed reading a YA novel about magic and realms and pettiness amongst 'friends' when in walks the Zsoltster. He says to me,

"Can you clean the apartment tomorrow, because it's *really* messy."

And I erupted into a dragon, blowing a stream of burning fire, filling our bedroom with my rage, and then stormed out of bed into the other part of the apartment. Anxiety began pulsing all over and I was just-so-angry. SO-ANGRY.

This is the bit that kept me up last night. "It wasn't a hot flash" says my brain, "it was a hot THRASH! High-five!" So at least a part of me finds that hilarious. Probably the part of me that also loves reading YA magic books.

I guess I should make it clear that my husband has been working his butt off these past few weeks. Like morning till midnight. We help each other out, right? So when he is crazy busy, I try to take over things and vice-versa.

Anyhow, I was doing my best, and it just ticked me off that it was pointed out that my best wasn't good enough. Of course Zsolt would never actually feel that way – but I'm a hormone flashing woman, plus a writer, and therefore will, without doubt, read into all statements made about my housekeeping.

While my husband hid in the bedroom, I began throwing everything in the apartment into this large bin. In went my purse on the ground, in went the papers on the kitchen table, in went my new camera, in went the clothes on the sofa – everything went in. Even stuff I needed. It just all went in.

So that felt good. The apartment seem a bit more tidy, all the crap was now isolated in one place.

Then I went over to where the floor was sticky. Apparently my soup leaked on the floor. Not that the observer of this leak cleaned it up. So, continuing my anger, I got down on my knees and scrubbed that damn floor! Scrub, scrub, scrub!

All the while, I'm sweating like crazy having one hot flash after another. (*or working out, this may also be the case.*) It became quite late, and there was still that damn box of stuff. But first, I could no longer stand the site of all those stupid dishes piling up. Still pretty furious, I began washing those dishes – one after another, after another, till I'd washed about 1,000,000 utensils and maybe 20 different plates.

That felt pretty good.

And then there was the bin of crap.

Sitting down at the now clean kitchen table, I sorted that crap (*much of it not actually being crap, but very useful things*) into different piles according to their 'home' within our apartment. Then, one pile after the other, I put it away. Finally, I filled out a survey for the OICC where I get my vitamin C, because it had been in that pile of crap, and had quietly weighing on my mind all week. *e.g. "when am I going to do that survey, already? Later. Later, later, later.*"

By this point, exhaustion had really hit me. I was KNACKERED. It's hard to be furious when you are knackered. And by this point the fury had left me. Instead I felt really damn satisfied.

And since that point, I've stayed pretty darn-tootin' satisfied. The apartment is tidy. I like that. Life is better this way. And we are eating better. And I'm not as overwhelmed, for some reason.

Sometimes you just need to get incredibly angry. Or at least, I do.

Hot THRASH. Change of mind, that is hilarious. High-five, Catherine who wakes up at 3:00 AM and dictates blog posts. See? I kept my promise.

The End.

21Aug2014

You might like this, and, “SPIDER CRISIS!” Another post written late at night.

Posted in Blogging and Other Fun, Bumpboobs, Fun, Life, Writing

Oh my goodness, it’s getting late! You know what that means? Time for another rambling middle of the night blog post!

Except this week I’m keeping it very short, and possibly sweet if you enjoy this sort of thing. So, obviously Bumpyboobs is my little home on the internet. Many people reading this blog have their own little homes on the internet. We know how important these spaces are – these are the spaces in which we can say what needs to be said, find support, bring our own take on hot topics, begin conversations and much, much more.

Sacred spaces.

Oh blogging, I do love you.

Anyhow, this week I want to share another project that I think we can really relate to. Over at my new second home online . . . or would that be my third home after facingcancer.ca and fourth after SisterLeadership and fifth after twitter . . .

Hmm...

Anyhow, my new thing is OttawaWrites, which isn’t truly focused just on Ottawa. It’s a podcast for writers, simple as that. And this week I had the loveliest interview about creating social change through writing. And what better community to share that conversation with than BLOGGERS?! OR, those who read blogs and quietly think “I’d like to share my story too.”

The nice thing here, is this interview is about an Alternative Media Assembly workshop – writing for social change, and that is going to be live streamed on Saturday. You can catch the streaming here from anywhere in the world: http://psfaltmedia.tumblr.com/livestream

(In the meanwhile, here’s the podcast chat about writing for social change)

In this interview, the lovely Alexis Shotwell explains how she wants to make writing accessible for everyone. She also talks about writing for change – and so importantly, how an advocacy piece of writing isn't simply a rant, but will leave the reader with takeaways to consider, be it questions, or suggestions, or guidance, etc.

So I think this might be perfect for many of you writers (and to-be-writer) who have a message to share. Therefore, **I'll link in the podcast**, and if you like go giver 'er a listen.

Enjoy!

(P.S. I am in the forest this week at a retreat. We're reworking a client's website/blog and focus, so went away from the world to really slow down and focus. Zsolt is alone at home fending for himself in terms of food. Thank goodness for takeout, otherwise I think the man would starve! MMUH to my man, if you are reading this post!)

Oh lord, now it's 11 pm and the room may….be spinning…just a little. So, this post is over. I'm tired.

Back to bed!

P.P.S. I'm staying in the basement of this cottage, and there is a really big spider on the wall right by the bed. OH MY GOD, it just flew through the air toward me! OPERATE ELIMINATE SPIDER IS ON!

P.P.P.S. It was a fly. I wasn't wearing my glasses. In any case, it's been taken care of. eep.

Good night! (Don't forget to listen to that podcast if advocacy in writing is your kinda thing. Even if you aren't in Ottawa, they will be live streaming the talk this coming Saturday – so everyone can catch it.)

29Aug2014

The Slow Movement & Small Thinking

Posted in Fun, Life, Writing

My girlfriend and I were chatting at the Bridgehead this evening around expectations set for writers, and how we feel about those expectations. I reckon this is a story we have all experienced before, many times with references to J.K. Rowling, since that's most people's point of reference in the world of book publication. Anyhow she described a story that went along the lines of this:

She'd been chatting her novel with a co-worker, and the colleague was quite excited for her. So excited, that he was throwing out ideas about how she could hit the mark and sell thousands of copies of books. He showed her an article in the newspaper that that very day reported on a self-published author who had hit it big, and was now being sold nation-wide and had a strong following.

This caused some anxiety in my friend. She loves to write. She is totally a writer. But . . . she really isn't into marketing, promoting, and all the stuff todays aspiring authors often need to be.

In that moment, as the newspaper was displayed as an example of where she could be a year from now – it wasn't inspiring, or encouraging, or invigorating . . . for her, it was anxiety causing. She worried about it quietly in the back of her mind. She thought about it on her way back home. She talked with her partner about it.

And he reminded her that it was never about the selling of books. Her love was in the writing of books. To write, to print, to share and then to write again. Simple as that.

And I related.

Oh, how I related.

Let's be clear, I'd be *thrilled* if Claire Never Ending was picked up and launched far and wide into the world of readers. But holy hot dog, do I not enjoy the expectations that often come with a dream. There are the expectations of blowing it up huge, or selling tons of copies, of creating a business.

It's truly knackering. And while I do see all kinds of merit in building that career as a writer – I like what my friend brought up next, which was this idea of "slow marketing"

"**Slow Marketing** is a term that emerged from the expansion of the Slow Movement into the arena of marketing and advertising." ~Wikipedia

Basically, slow marketing is about taking your time, doing something well, and not worrying too much about that very big, big, big picture. It's about the long journey rather than the rocket ship ride.

Maybe that is too abstract. I guess it's mostly about doing what you love, devoid of expectations that don't fit your real desires.

Personally, I feel a little torn. It makes me quietly ache when folks with excellent intentions ask if I am writing another book. No, I'm not. I'm not writing too much these days. And the other day I had a realization: that is okay. It is okay for me not to be writing at this moment. It is all okay. I am doing just fine putting my creative energies in other places.

When I realized that – that I didn't really feel like writing another book right now – the pressure suddenly lifted. It felt okay to focus on writing-related project that actually don't involve creative writing. My mind is curious and engaged. My book is alive and well, which was always a deep drive inside of me. And I will continue to market it in small but persistent waves of effort . . . when I can, as I can, and with pleasure.

Soon I'll go back to developing the new cover. Isn't that exciting? I think so. I look forward to it. And once done (if they'll have me), I look forward to throwing more bookmarks at innocent bookstore shoppers.

And I love social media. Of course, it is a world of "marketing, conversation and sales (a side of things I also like very much. Seriously, if I went back in time, I would have taken a degree in marketing – it is fascinating and so fun). So yes, it has that element, but even more importantly, it is a world of conversation and community. I find out the weather from this Ottawa fellow named Kyle who is *soooo* fast to report atmospheric changes, and advise whether you should cancel or continue the BBQ. I see what my fellow authors have been up to, and where they are in their writing and accomplishing their big dreams. I listen in on the local Vanier conversations – and who has spotted what in the last few days. I following along the #BCSM conversations, and click through to read the latest news in cancer research.

That's my form of slow – it's real & genuine engagement with my community.

This evening I said to my friend, "I always think small, and that can be to my detriment."

But then I corrected myself.

"Or maybe . . . maybe it's to my benefit? Maybe the detriment is judging the way I operate as being wrong. Who am I comparing myself to anyhow? And why bother comparing at all?"

And she said to me, “Some people think big, and they do it really well. Some people think small, and they do that really well too.”

So we sipped our tea and felt quite satisfied with our resolution to this conversation.

What do you think? Big, small, slow, fast? What pace of ambition suits you best?

Does anyone relate to this, or are we crazy?

~Catherine

(And this is where I had planned on ending the post. But a second look & quick revision has caused it to keep going on . . .)

P.S. Did you notice I’ve inserted some seemingly random pictures from Star Trek in this blog post? That’s right! I did it cause I felt like it, and because it was fun. Wasn’t that fun? My goodness, watching Star Trek again from an adult perspective has made it even *better* in my mind.

P.P.S. I’m cooking up a series for writers on crowdfunding. It will involve 1) a long & pretty infographic. 2) TWO podcast episodes – one where I chat with another author who crowdfunded, and one where I chat with Kevin about why it’s hard to ask for help from others. and 3) A FIVE part youtube series called “Crowdfunding for Writers” where I break down things to consider if you are launching & want to crowdfund your project.

If you want to get all of this delivered to your inbox in a handy, summarized and easy-to-reference manner, just click the picture below to find your way to my mailing list sign up page.

P.P.P.S. I'm burying this because I don't want it to be a big deal. It's been just about 1 year since I was diagnosed with metastatic fucking cancer. So there's that. But *also*, it's been *over* a year since I've given up wearing a bra. Maybe for the rarest of rare occasions I will put one on . . . but otherwise – NO BRA. It stared when my chest had intense pain and I really couldn't wear one . . . and now . . . meh, it's not really on my mind.

1 year, no bra.

and yes, I'm still here, still creating, still living, still loving . . . and still very much alive. Thank God.

31Aug2014

Zsolt's Heroic Pepper Plant

Posted in Bumpboobs, Fun, Life, Life despite cancer, Love

This is a short story about Zsolt's heroic pepper plant.

We have been waiting and waiting to grow peppers. We have a very special variety of yellow peppers that are quite sweet and refreshing, and remind us of Hungary. So, it all started back in March. After so much delay, we finally found some little seedling planters and the big man planted the seeds. Except he didn't quite plant them . . . he more or less flooded them. The instructions read "sprinkle with water," and instead he "poured a jug of water" over the whole thing.

For weeks we waited. I kept saying, "throw 'em out and replant the seeds. We've drown them."

But Zsolt had faith.

Then one day they began to sprout. One after the other, after the other! This was a miracle unto itself. And so Zsolt tended the plants, very *carefully* watering them, leaving them on the radiator, moving them into the sun.

One particular shoot was doing really well. It was the one you'd point to and think, "yep, it's coming along."

Except one day, after having left the plants outside to toughen up (Z is always trying to make them really tough, for some reason), our prize pepper plant somehow broke right in half.

Disappointment was felt. No way would a plant recover from such a bad break.

The next day, Z put the seedlings back outside, including the broken plant since they were all in one big seedling plastic thing. (I should win a prize for that amazing bit of description, eh?) They stayed out all day long, and then in the evening we brought them inside.

Lo and behold! The little broken pepper plant had fixed itself! Right where the bit had broken, there was a sort of swollen area, and the plant was fixed far more upward than it had been earlier.

The next day, it stood even taller.

And the next day, even taller.

Now that really felt like a miracle. Just when we had counted it out – the little guy proved its resilience and stood back up!

And now, way over in August, it has the biggest pepper of them all. Okay, sure, the peppers are all little and have a ways to grow – but it's our resilient plant that is leading the charge!

Zsolt calls that plant his little hero. I think the meaning of this scenario goes way, way further than simply growing a plant. Obviously. Do I need to explain it? Probably not, I think.

That little paprika pepper means a lot to us. And when the day comes that we get to actually eat the pepper, I plan to make an entire meal around it – potato layer with sour cabbage on the side, maybe even a little wine, and some wonderful Liszt in the background while we eat.

Sometimes the little stories make the biggest different. This is one of those times.

~Catherine

9Sep2014

Internet Advocacy

Posted in Uncategorized

The internet is a darn-tooting special place. Maybe not stumbled-upon-mini-meadow-in-the-woods-with-sun-beams-and-babbling-stream special, but a place where anything can happen, and more importantly ***anyone*** can be the cause of the happening.

So, this idea of dividing it up into fast and slow and privileged and poor and pay more or save more options pisses me off. The one lovely thing about this situation and the internet is that it's our space. We can have a say, and an impact. It's happened before that big bad plans were stopped via the advocacy of voices coming together, with leadership from organizations. It's happened in Canada, it has happened in the US before.

But of course that's never the end, is it? So, until there's some sort of charter of rights of the internet adding one's name to a petition can be required. That's what I did, and if you like, you can do so as well. OpenMedia.ca is, from all I've seen, a good organization that keeps users interest at heart. For years they've fought for better service in Canada, for privacy, for rights online.

Here's an article explaining what's going on now in the US, and how it may impact you regardless of where you live. So, check it out if you like

https://openmedia.ca/blog/do-you-remember-dial-we-do

In other news: I'm off to the Canadian Authors Association this evening to give a talk with my OttawaWrites.com Podcast co-host, Kevin. BAH! Nerves are inevitable. After I make lunch today, I'll go back to practising that talk. The theme: *Why Talk About Writing?*

And just to reinforce how useful this topic is, I ran into a fellow writer yesterday evening while at a networking wine thing *(Cranberry juice & water for me. Wine is wasted on my palette)*, and we talked and talked and talked about writing.

Therefore, it gives me confidence today. Writing is seen as a lonely profession. Maybe that's because so many writers are shy, or introverted, or don't feel like admitting what they do? But I've noticed that the more I say, "I'm a writer" the more writers I meet. And it actually doesn't feel at all like a lonely profession.

Anyhow! Onward to make lunch!

Article once more: https://openmedia.ca/blog/do-you-remember-dial-we-do

Have a lovely day,

Catherine

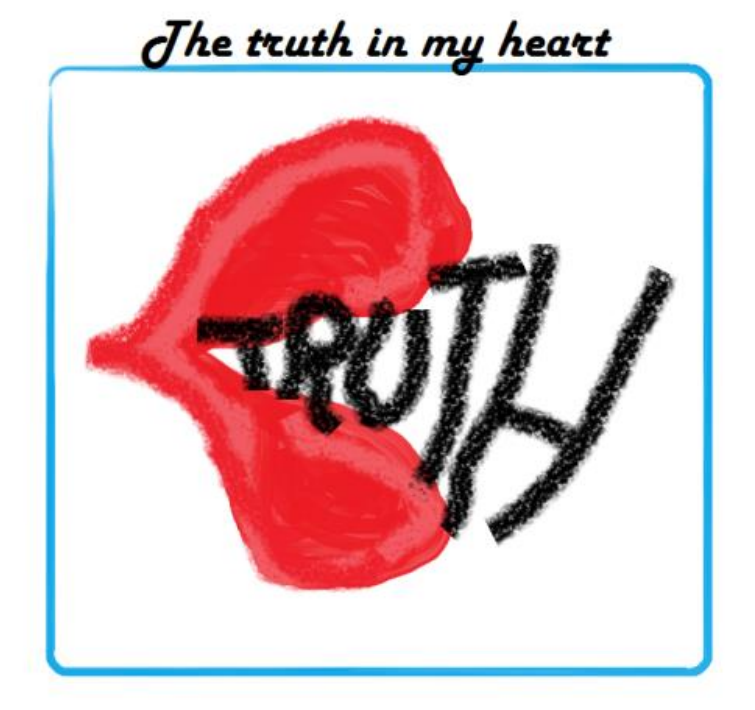
P.S. I'M SO FREAKING NERVOUS!!!

16Sep2014

In Which I Write About Dying

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life, Life despite cancer, Love

I watched a very good movie the other day, *Seeking a Friend for the End of the World*, and it has been hanging in my mind. I've had an emotional reaction to the film. Like, a real deep big tear-inducing emotional reaction.



The film starts off with the news reporter announcing that all attempts to stop this meteor have fail. The Earth will be destroyed in X number of days, and there is nothing anyone can do about it. Everyone on Earth is going to die. That is the end. Over. Dead.

And I guess, everyone on Earth *is* going to die. Over. Dead. One day . . . when their time comes.

Part of me wanted to turn off the film immediately. It would be too emotional, I told myself. But another part of me was so intrigued. This film would be one big conversation around death and life, and everyone in that story was on the same playing field. Terminal illness no longer mattered. Accidents no longer mattered. Health no longer mattered. Obligations no longer mattered. Fighting for your life no longer mattered. Everyone was in the same boat.

And it is from here in the film that the protagonist finds the love of his life, days before the meteor hits, and they end up in bed having a conversation along these lines right before the film ends.

She says, "I wish we had met earlier. Like when we were kids."

And he says, "It wouldn't have been enough time. There would never be enough time. We had to meet each other now. It had to be this way."

As the meteor begins to hit the earth (chunks of it, I imagine), with crashing noises in the far off distance. he calms her fears by asking about her childhood, and how many siblings she has, and what her favourite colour is. And that is the end of the movie. They die. They were never *not* going to die.

Why can't it be that easy to accept death? And why can't I just admit aloud, "I think about dying all the time. Like every day. I'm afraid to push things off too long, because everything could change any moment. I know I'm going to die. There will never be enough time, no matter how much time I am given. It scares me. It breaks my heart that I might leave the people I love. It wakes me up. It follows me in the good times, and it confronts me in the bad times."

And then **not** *have someone respond: "You have to think positive. You will beat this. You are going to live a long time."*

Because that may all be true, but sometimes I really just need to talk about dying. A gentle conversation where I don't need to feel guilty for my fears or emotions.

Zsolt says he is here if I want to talk about dying. I reckon it must scare him a little, but he's here. He also said, that maybe he just doesn't completely understand, because he *doesn't* think about dying much at all.

And the thing is, I don't want to dread death. I just don't. I would rather live with it. Make it a friend. Know it will be a good thing whenever it comes, because a part of me will be going back to whatever I was before I got here.

Matching the theme of death, I've been reading Philip Pullman's His Dark Materials series. There is a quote that one ghost girl says, as she dreams about really, truly dying properly.

"We'll be alive again in a thousand blades of grass, and a million leaves; we'll be glittering in the dew under the stars and the moon out there in the physical world, which is our home and always was."

Isn't that so beautiful? How is there sadness in that image? How is there any failure or lost battles in that?

I'd like to see death as going home, I would like the idea to not haunt me, but walk alongside me – and I reckon that will only happen if I admit it is there in the first place.

My name is Catherine, and I think about death. I think about it quietly, because I worry how others might feel if they knew this secret side of myself. And I don't want to be told to keep fighting, unless, of course, it comforts someone to say it. Otherwise this is my life, and I decide when and how I live. I know how to keep living (*forget fighting, that isn't my style – it's more about living and loving wholeheartedly, passionately*), and I think one day I'll know when I am done. These choices are mine alone, and I'm pretty stubborn about those kinds of things.

I love living, and I plan on basking in life. Yes, I have fears. I worry over death. I worry over hurting others, particularly my husband. I am scared of what might come. But in the "now" I do my very best – you know? I just do my very best. I love my very best. There will never be enough time, but right "now" feels quite enough.

So all of this to say, dying happens. And I need to be able to talk about it sometimes. Maybe just here on the blog, where I talk about things that are otherwise too uncomfortable to share. And once in a while, I need to write a post that doesn't ultimately strive to comfort those reading it, either.

This post is for me. I've said it. It's done. And I'm still here despite all of that.

Sigh of contentment. I sure do love being alive.

P.S. Zsoltster, szeretlek. Ne aggódj, mert én nem megyek sehova. Te vagy az én horgonyt.

25Sep2014

More than this “battle”

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life despite cancer

It’s so easy to say something with the best of intentions, and having it come out all wrong. I get that. I’ve done it myself actually more than once. But this whole “lost their battle” thing irks me so much, that I feel compelled to write about it in my post. Just gotta do it. So I’ll say this now while the pain of loss isn’t radiating, and it hopefully it won’t be seen as an attack on those who mean well, but rather as a constructive thought:

No one “loses their battle” and no one should be reduced to having lived only that part of their lives in the paragraphs, headlines, and memorials that mark their passing. That is how I feel, very strongly. It might be an easy expression, but it is a wrong one. It neglects all the possible ways a person might have lived a beautiful, full, impacting life. And if they only get that little paragraph of remembrance, should we not be celebrating their triumphs, rather than marking them as losers?

When it comes to illness, no one loses. A person may simply get dealt a shitty hand, and despite best efforts, life will take its course. I am tired of reading about all these lost battles.

And when it comes to being remembered in the media, we are not “Cancer Bloggers, Cancer Kids, Cancer Patients, Cancer Truckers, Cancer Waitresses, Cancer Artists, Cancer Models . . .” Just because it’s an easy headline doesn’t mean it isn’t totally degrading to the beautiful legacy that person left behind.

But how do you correct people? Can I tap someone on the shoulder while they post a memorial and say, “um, excuse me, I’m about to be an annoying pain to your already heartbroken self?” No, it’s just bad timing and disrespectful.

So it’s to be said now, at least here, and by one voice to add to others who have written about this: While those left behind may feel that deep, throbbing loss of a loved one, the life lived is far more valuable than a familiar but unconsidered add-on sentiment.

And that is all I have to say about that. For now.

29Sep2014

Space Opera in SPACE

Posted in Novels and Stories, Writing

I woke up in the middle of this night feeling like something was missing. “What is it,” I wondered. And my brain floated over to the world of writing. I have all this writing that still hasn’t seen the light of day. Little trailing pieces floating in the air; worlds without endings. And while I’ve decided not to put pressure on myself to get overly down about not writing enough, because I’m up to other fun things instead . . . I still do love writing.

So, here’s something I wrote a while back. It’s not serious. It’s really just fun. But here it is. And if you like it, there might be more. It’s a space opera story. Science Fiction, baby. But it’s also tied into a classic story. Can you guess which one? It’s actually rather obvious.

Here we go:

“The thing you have to remember is what?”

“Customers first.”

“Customers always first. Okay, pop quiz: Image the dinner rush has just ended—”

“The dinner rush ended two hours ago.”

“I know that. This is hypothetical. Now, the dinner rush just ended—*No! Let me finish before you argue about the dinner time again. We’re pretending here, Newbie*—Dinner is over and the restaurant is a mess. There’s no tomatoes left to put on the burgers, and a customer has just come in. What do you do?”

This is the question I always ask newbies. I may only be the night manager at Wurgers, but I know a thing or two about leadership. Our chain is as strong as its weakest link. James “The Day Manager” Marshall might do the hiring, but *I’m* the one the floor scooping fries, taking orders, and pacifying the drunks that come in from the bar. And where is James at two in the morning when some guy named Alf has just projectile vomited his Wurger milkshake to the cheer of his buddies? At home asleep in his king-sized bed, that’s where!

“Chop, chop, newbie! What do you do?”

“Serve the customer?”

“Then?”

“Tidy the restaurant?”

“And then?”

“Cut more tomatoes, I guess.”

“Exactly right. But next time, give it to me with certainty.”

“Yes sir.”

“Okay. Go count your cash.”

There’s some kind of storm brewing outside. Our Wurger’s is in the middle of a massive parking lot with a Mallmart on the other side. There’s about an acre between us, and all throughout the giant lamps are shaking like twigs and sparking with light. The wind is kicking up with a kind of strong Whoosh, Whoosh sound against the building. Looks like there could be hail any second, which means my phone is crap, because it was predicting a clear night.

In these cases, some people might let their team go home early. But we have a contract with the plaza stating Wurgers stays open till four AM on Saturday nights, no exceptions. I’m not the kind of man who makes exceptions. We stay open. The storm can bugger off.

“Dorothy?”

“Yeah?”

“Quit sitting on the counter, and can you help Newbie with his cashing out?”

“Yeah.”

“Dorothy?”

“Yes?”

“Quit sitting on the counter.”

“Sorry.”

She’s a good girl, just a little bit spacey. Sometimes I think she’s not quite with us, but then she snaps right to it when a customer pulls up to the microphone. I’ve never seen a worker take an order so fast and have it turned around with cash in hand and the car pulling away. She’s set the record for most burgers sold in one hour, and that was at the drive through where people drop their money and stop four feet from the window.

“Dorothy?”

“Yeah?”

“I need someone to cover an extra shift next Wedn—‘”

“Oh my God!” yells the Newbie. “My car! It’s just been lifted and flung off the ground! There must be a tornado out there.”

We all move to the drive-through window to look at the Newbie’s car flying in circles through the air, except for Mike who hasn’t noticed a thing yet. The Newbie is whimpering.

“There go the lamp posts,” says Dorothy.

Lamp posts are now shooting from the ground up into the air, disappearing from view.

“What’s going on?” asks Mike, taking off his ear buds. Finally he notices us. That kid smokes so much weed, it’s a wonder he can focus on flipping burgers at all.

“What the hell is going on out there?” I ask.

“Everything is flying,” replied Dorothy, as though this happens every night shift.

Suddenly the lights go out. We’re in the darkness for a moment, and then there’s flashing. It’s strobe lights and disco dancing, except we haven’t got a clue where it’s coming from. “What the hell is going on?” I ask again. “Is this candid camera? Are we on candid camera?” I fix my hair.

“That show hasn’t run in years!” shouts the Newbie.

The Whoosh Whoosh is now a ***WHOOSH WHOOSH*** as the wind just starts to rips everywhere—it sounds like it’s banging against the windows and pounding on our ceiling.

“Do something Tim, man!” yells Mike.

“What do you want me to do?” I yell back. Emergency Wurger protocol stipulates first and foremost the evacuation of customers in a dangerous situation. But they’re not here, so, “EVERYONE GET OUT!”

“I’m not going out there,” replies Dorothy. She doesn’t yell.

“EVERYONE STAY HERE!” I correct.

Suddenly the whole restaurant is shaking, take out containers are falling everywhere and the fries are jumping out of their fryer. The cash registers all burst open and there’s money floating into the air. Packets of salt and pepper are bursting open like confetti bombs. The secret sauce and plastic utensils are flying across the room.

“EVERYONE GET ON THE GROUND!” is the last thing I remember saying as we all duck down into the drive-through alcove and the chip boxes keep falling on top of us like cardboard rain as the wind begins blowing inside the restaurant and the shaking of the building becomes faster and faster till the place is vibrating, and those mystery strobe light goes faster and faster.

At some point, I must have had a seizure, because the next thing I remember is waking up with everything quiet and all of us strewn across the restaurant – which is a disaster by the way, and is going to take a hell of a long time to clean. What the hell just happened? I can’t even tell you. All I can really say, is that looking out the windows of our restaurant … we are not in the parking lot of East Central Talkapa anymore. I don’t know where we are. All I know is that it is glowing neon pink outside, and I need to unwrap a pair of sunglasses from the kiddie meal box to see anything.

*

We’ve locked the doors. I know that the customer is always meant to come first, but in this case I have two reasons for keeping them out.

One, the restaurant is a disaster. Dorothy is mopping the streaks of special sauce that were flung all over the chairs and tables. Mike is in the kitchen doing much of the same, only its worse in there – hamburger patties,

limp lettuce, buns, fries and grease everywhere. I've been filling the trash bags. There are sixteen bags and counting waiting to go to the dump … wherever the dump may have gone.

And two. Two I can't really explain. Like I said, the customer comes first—but what the hell am I supposed to do when the customer is a gang of cuddly teddies? Yeah, maybe that sounds adorable, but you've never seen a living teddy bear screaming at the top of its fluffy lungs.

"Just keep ignoring them," I repeat. It's pretty much all I've been saying for the past hour.

"Tim, let's see what they want," says Dorothy. She's been pushing that mop around for the last twenty minutes, but her heart isn't in it. She wants to go outside, that's all she's wanted to do since we woke up. "They might have the newbie with them."

"Oh right, and we're supposed to do something about that?" I ask. "Be logical, Dorothy. If they have the newbie, they'll grab us the second we unlock those doors."

"I think they're cute," she replies. Walking up the window, she pulls out her phone and takes a picture of the watching teddy bears.

"We're not opening the doors."

"Hello!" says Dorothy as she waves to the dolls. "They were only screaming for like, ten minutes, Tim. They've been perfectly quiet since then. Hello you!"

The teddy bears are waving back, more of them are crowding closer to window where Dorothy is standing. Is this what it feels like to be famous in Japan? It's like we've gone from being their biggest nightmares to their greatest idols. Dorothy is fiddling with her phone, which, by the way, she's not even meant to have on her person during a shift.

"Who could you possibly be texting?" I ask.

"I'm not texting anyone. I'm Instagraming their picture," she replies.

I pull my phone out from my pocket. "We're in the middle of a neon pink world with teddy bears. How can you "Insta" anything?" There's no internet or mobile connection. The battery is down to five percent. Crap.

"I have really good reception," replies Dorothy.

"Dorothy is right," says Mike, who suddenly has an opinion on something. "There's no point in cleaning this mess. We don't know where we are, Wurgers is surrounded by freaky dolls, and Leon's gone missing."

"Teddy bears," corrects Dorothy, still typing into her phone and smiling at something.

"Who's Leon?" I ask.

"The new guy," replies Mike.

"The newbie."

"I think they want to eat us," says a voice over the intercom.

“Hello?” I ask. “Who’s using the intercom without my permission?”

No one answers. Mike, Dorothy and I stop what we’re doing. Suddenly it occurs to me that one of the teddy bears might have gotten in. “Do you think one of them got in here?” I whisper to my team.

“I sure hope not,” whispers the voice over the intercom.

“New guy, is that you?” asks Dorothy.

“Of course it’s me.”

“Where are you?” asks Mike.

“I’m right here.”

“Where’s that?” I ask.

“Here.”

“New guy—” starts Dorothy.

“Actually, it *is* Leon. I mean, it says Leon on my name tag which none of you ever read.”

“In tape and marker!” I say aloud to wherever the hell he is hiding. “You’re Newbie till I say different … or till you get a proper badge.”

“Yes, sir,” replies Leon, the newbie.

“New guy,” continues Dorothy, “We can’t actually see you. Are you hiding or something, cause we’re just hearing you over the intercom right now.”

“I’m right here, right where I was just before all that crazy stuff happened.”

This is weird. He’s nowhere that I can see.

“Leon?” I ask.

“I can use my name now?”

“Just this time. Leon, what do you see right now?”

“I see you three standing there looking up toward the ceiling.”

“Okay,” I reply.

“And I see the back door with a what looks like a big crowd of teddy bears.”

The back doors is at the very back of the restaurant, behind the kitchen and the office … can’t see it from where I’m standing.

“And, then I can see the basement too with the boxes. And the eating area. And the cash registers. And the entrance doors.”

“Anything else?”

“I can see what used to be the parking lot, but that’s just more bears and bright pink sunshine.”

Taking off my seal-shaped kiddie sunglasses (Dorothy is wearing the red parrot ones, and Mike went for the green alligator glasses, which goes to show you never know people till you see them in action), I head through the kitchen, stepping over the piles of patties and fries and fat, and into the back office. There’s the tiny CCTV screen switching between the different camera views of the restaurant: front of shop, back of shop, outside, exits, basement. But Leon isn’t here.

“He’s not back here!” I shout to the others, returning to the counter. “Leon, where the hell are you?”

“I’m right here.”

Dorothy looks at her phone. “My friend Millie thinks the teddy bears are adorable too.”

Leon laughs. “Starburst, that’s a good filter – works for everything.”

“How do you know what filter I used, Leon?” asks Dorothy.

Leon doesn’t answer. For a moment, all we can hear is the soft compression of teddy bear flesh against the windows and doors.

“Leon?” she asks again.

“I don’t know,” replies the newbie.

“I think he’s *in* the restaurant,” says Mike.

“We’re all in the restaurant,” I reply.

“Leon?” asks Dorothy.

“Yes?”

“Are your nails dirty?”

Another long pause. More compression of teddy bears. They are piling up on top of one another now, piling higher and higher against the door and blocking out the bright neon light. Every single one of them is smiling at us, which is better than the screaming, I guess. Leon hasn’t said anything yet.

“Newbie, tell her if your nails are dirty!” I shout.

“I can’t see my nails,” replies the Newbie.

“Are your shoelaces tied?” asks Dorothy.

“I can’t see my shoes.”

“Pinch the tip of your nose,” she instructs.

“Can’t find my nose.”

“Dude, you are not in Wurgers, you *are Wurgers,”* says Mike. “You’re the restaurant!”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” I reply.

“None of this makes sense,” replies Mike.

And that’s when the lock flips on the entrance and in floods a wave of fluffy, plush teddy bears. Suddenly, we’re neck deep in the cuddly creatures, and then we’re crowd surfing, tiny fuzzy arm by tiny fuzzy arm, out of the Wurgers and into their bright pink world.

*

It looks like a story book, wherever the hell we are. The trees are swirly, and the hills are like pencil colour landscapes. Everything is pink, pink, pink, except for the teddy bears, which are more like every single bear that was every made and ever discarded collected in one place. This place. Wherever that is.

The bears are everywhere you look. They’re surrounding us and piling on top of one another. And, to add to the horror, they are giggling. It’s a tingle-inducing succession of tittering.

“I think we’re about to die,” I whisper to Mike.

Mike takes the ear plugs from his head, “What’s that?”

“I think they’re gonna kill us now.”

He shrugs and puts his ear buds back on.

“Hey,” I say to him.

He takes one out. “Yeah?”

“Here I am here sharing my last moments with you, and all you’ve got is a shrug?”

“Mike feels things deeply,” says Dorothy. “His music helps him.”

“*I* feel things deeply,” I reply, “well, sometimes I feel things deeply. Like, you know, when we miss our month-end sales target, or a customer complains, or I’m *about to die*.”

Dorothy gives me a look. It’s *knowing*. Since when did she become the psychoanalyst of the group? “Watch this,” she says to me. “Hello little fellow,” she says to the nearest, largest teddy bear. “You want a hug?” As the large teddy bear raises its arms, she scoops it up and gives it a massive hug.

Suddenly the whole group of them are cheering and clapping their stuffed paws together. The teddy begins to speak in teddy-bear jibberish, waving it’s arms into the air.

Dorothy nods along, as if she's actually understanding everything.

"Ask the bear if it wants to eat us," says a voice that emanates from Dorothy's phone.

"Newbie?"

"Yeah?"

"You're in her phone too?"

"I'm everywhere, I think."

"Where are we?" asks Dorothy to the Teddy Bear in her arms.

What a stupid question. Where are we? Who cares where we are? We're in the middle of some strange bright pink world that nearly burns my retinas, and all I can manage to see are teddy bears. We're in someone else's acid trip, that's where we are!

The teddy bear continues with its jibberish, but now something is happening. The crowd is moving aside and making a trail back to the Wurgers. . .

And that is it for now. I have a second part, but nothing beyond that. Maybe openly sharing a chapter will motivate me to write more. Or not . . . or maybe? It's an experiment!

3Oct2014

Crowdfunding Youtube Series LAUNCHED

Posted in Uncategorized

Hi! Just a quickie to let you know I've now managed to wrestle Zsolt away from the computer long enough to edit the first of my **Crowdfunding for Writers** Youtube videos. Wooohoo! (It wasn't easy, that man is glued to his computer)

So, click through.! I'll let you know when more are out, but if you want to be notified on your own, you can click through to YouTube and actually subscribe to my channel. I hope to develop more short vlogs (video blogs), films, etc over the year.

Exciting or exciting? Hmm. I think it's exciting.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?list=UUP9Qelnzb-jLE5VLre9rTfA&v=jKJh9z29jPU

11Oct2014

Co-Survivor Award: My Mom and My MAN

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Life, Life despite cancer, Love, Radiotherapy Treatment, Treatment

Way back when I was first diagnosed and wrote a profile for myself for Bumpyboobs and FacingCancer.ca, I identified myself as a survivor. Forget dictionary definitions, *I* defined a survivor as someone getting up every day, facing what needed to be done, learning how to thrive through uncertain realities, and living life on their terms.

My life, my definition.

So when FacingCancer.ca recently announced their Co-Survivor Award, it made me really happy to see *their* definition of survivorship:

We believe survivorship begins at the time of diagnosis.

And it made me even happier to see that they've decided to honour those who have supported us, honouring the support they've given.

And surrounding every cancer survivor, there are people who care: we call them Co-Survivors. Whether it's a friend, a family member, a medical professional or an online supporter, use the form below to tell us who has made your cancer experience a little better with their selfless support.

There have been many people in my life who have helped. From friends in England, family in Canada, letters & emails from my friends during treatments, support during my crowdfunding, and the awesomeness and insight of those who get it online. But for the Co-Survivor award, if I could nominate someone (*and I can't because I work for FacingCancer.ca*), it would be two someones: My husband and my mother.

Zsolt is Zsolt. You know him via this blog. He is softness and love and unconditional support. We've been through so much together and still we dance in the middle of the day. There's so much to say, I really cannot begin to capture it all.

My mom, well, she's my guide, point of reference and my friend. When I hear one thing regarding healthcare, I'll take it to her for her opinion. And I'll never forget how she left Canada and my dad for over a month (to sleep in our small one bedroom apartment on an air mattress in England) to help me recovering from the mastectomy – and then to help Zsolt and I weather that first terrible round of chemotherapy.

So here is the question: *Who is your co-survivor, or co-thrivor, or co-awesomnesser?*

If you live in Canada and can think of someone you'd nominate as co-survivor – then I invite you to pitch in your story over at FacingCancer.ca. Ten from the many will be chosen, and then we'll agonize over them to land upon the first Co-Survivor recipient (*but the ten will also receive goodies, too*). Can you think of someone? Nominate here.

If you don't live in Canada, and I know many don't, but still want to share who has supported you, that's what the comments are for ;) People *do* read the comments, and they *do* pull inspiration from them – even folks supporting others, and needing to hear the positive impact their actions may have. Or even better – write about it on your own blog, and then link it back here.

And you know what? Even if you haven't had cancer (I hope), you may still have a co-survivor in your life, or co-supporter. I love stories about love, and about generosity, so I welcome you to leave your own reflections.

Now, that is all I have to say about that.

Except this P.S.!

P.S. I wasn't asked or prompted to write this post for the award. I just like the idea. Everyone who does something kind for another person deserves to know their impact. This is just one really great way of saying thanks.

12Oct2014

Indie Sex Goddess – don't miss Sylvie's book!

Posted in Novels and Stories, Writing

Hey, you like erotic & real-to-life poetry? No, I'm not trying something new with the blog. (*So, you can relax, Zsolt.*) My friend Sylvie is in the middle of her crowdfunding campaign for Russel Square Station. Sylvie really holds back no punches, and no details, in her style of storytelling. I truly admire her for taking a chance & crowdfunding her collection of poems from a really crazy experience of meeting her muse in England.

Sylvie's collection will be printed in juxtaposition to a variety of art pieces from Juan Carlos Noria. And I personally think these two complement one another perfectly in tone and style.

So, if you want to check it out, I'm definitely plugging it

Have some fun and click through. She's giving it her best, and if you want to support her with means other than purchasing copies, etc, do consider giving her a share within your own network.

AND.

HAPPY THANKSGIVING!! (Canada)

Monday the family will gather to play Settlers of Katan. Man, we have become obsessed with this game – and when I say "we" I mean my whole family including parents and siblings. It's great

13Oct2014

Happy Thanksgiving!

Posted in Finding Home, Food, Life, Love

They said we couldn't do it. They said it would be too difficult to grow. They said, these plants are far too fragile.

BUT WE DID IT, BABY!

And this evening, we feasted on those little peppers (paprikas), along with a potatoe layer meal. Proper Hungarian. Proper gardening. Zsolt's heroic pepper plant grew the largest pepper. It was delicious. The others were a bit too 'green', but hey, we're learning. So, Sunday evening the two of us had our own tiny thanksgiving for being together, growing together, and overcoming incredible odds.

Happy thanksgiving to you as well. Even if this isn't your official holiday, may you have a reason, or many reasons, to be grateful.

Be well.

Catherine

26Oct2014

Champagne Explosion of Brain Bubbles!

Posted in Canada, Finding Home, Life, Novels and Stories, Writing

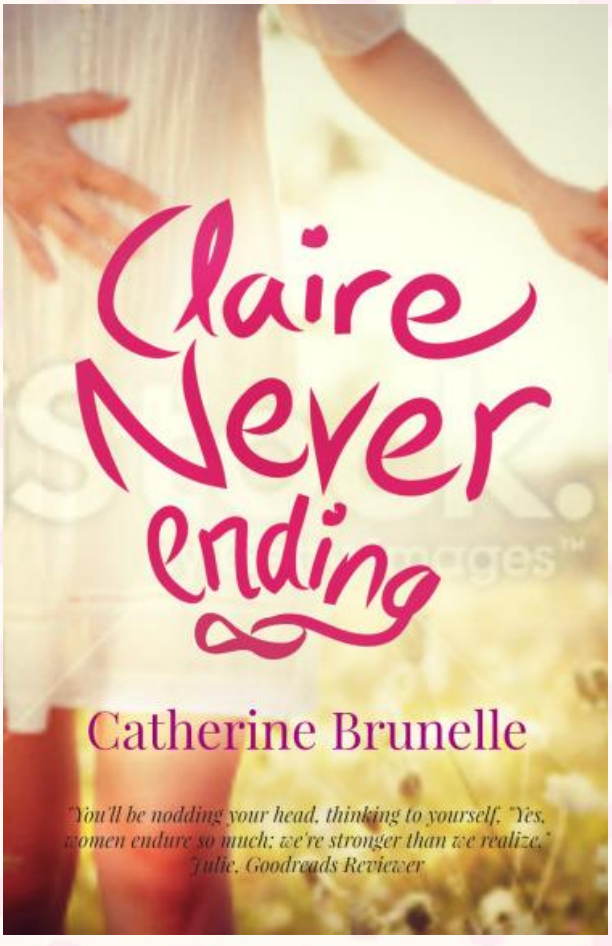
(i.e. a rambling post about everything. Except anything useful. Though that does depend how you define useful.)

So, me and Photoshop have been getting to know one another. It's a multilayered being, and I've been playing with Youtube to help me learn. As my friend was saying the other day – it's a really powerful platform, but with power comes complication. Man, it's **so** complicated.

Being the Lady McGuiver I am, and never *ever* investing more than twenty minutes into learning anything, I've been bouncing between photoshop, picmonkey, paint and occasionally powerpoint to design the elements for my new *Claire Never Ending* cover.

Geez, I love designing stuff. I love, love, love learning stuff and getting hands-on. But I just hate, hate, hate, studying. This contrast is a real flaw in my system of creativity.

Anyhow, all this internal jabbering to sayyyyyyy: The Cover is Coming Along!



Preview – I am going with this image, and have now bought it from istock.

Out there amongst the papers on my desk is a list of TO Dos before 2014 ends. One of them is to finishing the Claire's redesign. Another is to apply for Zsolt's citizenship, although I really haven't gotten that far yet in my productivity.

There are a couple other points, but I've completely forgotten them. Hmm. I'm trying to remember now. Nope. Oh, crowdfunding videos! I remembered one more! I want to finished my crowdfunding series. That's nearly done to be honest, and just requires a few more late, late nights or early, early mornings for editing.

YouTube is fun. This is another area where I don't really want to study too much, but do really want to create content.

Where is all this content creation going? No idea where yet. J Zsolt says I need to make a business plan. "Make a business plan?" I asked him, like he was speaking a different language – is "Makeabusinessplan" Hungarian for "You are the best wife and I love you like crazy?"

Probably not.

He is right, actually, plans are good. Structure is good. Strategy is even better. And then, action. That should come along too at some point: Structure, Strategy, Action. Not my strong points, but probably useful.

And that is that.

Now for a story:

Last night I was lying in bed with the Zsolt Man, and he was relating the story of a business meeting he recently had – where he saw the fellows walking down the street, and it reminded him of being with the fellows at the ORC when they would go for lunch.

That got me thinking. Those lunches not too many years ago were a lovely daily tradition. So I began telling Zsolt why they were so lovely. Zsolt would come down to the staff club cafeteria for their lunch. Since I lived & worked on campus, I would very often join them. And after about 5 years of this, it was a comfortable, happy routine. We'd all get together, I'd get to kiss my husband, and then they'd talk about this and that – often around the stresses of being a PhD student, but not always. The conversation *always* ended on a very similar note, around the lines of: Let's search it on Wikipedia. And they'd go back to their lab to look up whatever the heck they'd been discussing that day.

And through that group at the lunch table, I not only got to enjoy their company, but also the company of their partners who would arrive occasionally for the meal – girlfriends, children and wives. So we would pull two tables together, and have a great big lunch meal.

It was really nice. Friends, support and food wrapped up into one nice hour.

After I'd finished relating those memories, Zsolt asked me if I missed it.

So I thought about it. And you know what? I don't miss it. I'm just very glad to have had it. I'm very glad to have been there then. I'm very glad to be here now.

And that had me thinking – several years ago, I missed everything. It was this deep homesick pit inside of myself. Something has changed. Maybe realizing you can't ever have things as they were before. Or maybe it's realizing that there are always wonderful people there somewhere to connect with. I don't know. Maybe it was coming back to Canada – but I'll tell you, this hasn't been an easy transition either.

Whatever the reason. I didn't miss anything in the sense of longing for those day. It was simply nice to have had them.

And that is when I realized, between Zsolt and I, we have friends all over the world. Amazing individuals who we've connected with at one point in the moving and travelling and life-living. None of them are congregated in a single spot, and we'll never have again what we had before in those moments of laughter and friendship.

Even if all those people and all those moment are scattered across our past, and across the world – that is okay. It is better than okay – it's awesome. Knowing each of them, doing all of that life stuff, has been a pleasure. We have this beautiful gift, and I'm grateful for it.

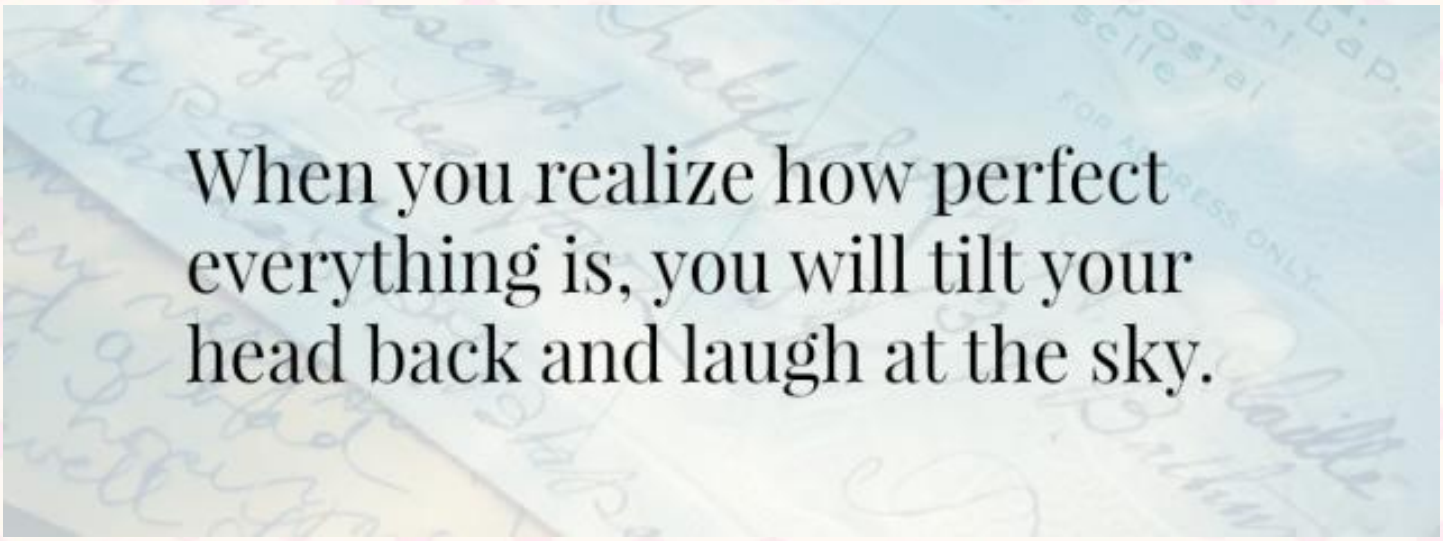
And I don't miss them, because to me, they are still there somehow. Whether it's in my memory, or on my Facebook page. They are there, doing well, and that makes me happy.

P.S. Over on Ottawa Writes this week (in the process of being rebranded) we have an episode about quotes you stick on the front cover of books. There's also a nice interview around writing and community. Listen here. This sideshow passion project is one of those things that could probably use a business plan . . .

7Nov2014

Still trying, but it sounds nice.

Posted in Uncategorized



9Nov2014

My Reading from Blog Out Loud

Posted in Blogging and Other Fun, Life, Travel, Writing

Not so long ago, the Ottawa International Writers Festival had welcomed Lynn's Blog Out Loud event to their venue. I was lucky enough to be chosen to read at the event. Well, now you can see the reading – if you like. There are some great blog posts read during this evening, so I encourage you to watch the whole video and do feel free to watch the other segments. If you want to skip ahead, I come onto the screen around 16:45 and read an old blog post "Riding the train in Hungary"

The video has been acting a bit wonky, so I'll add the click-to-link here as well: http://vimeo.com/111226494

Got Grit?

A friend shared this over on Twitter, and I'm glad she did. It's the kind of message I need to hear over and over – whether I'm waiting for results, starting a new project, or continuing on with long-standing dream. According to this lady with the good ideas and lovely boots (*making me think I should update my 10 year old standby squaretoed boots*), long term success doesn't have much to do with background, looks, health or intelligence. It really, overarchingly, connects to grit-determination-resilience-and coming back again and again.

And while much of me acts like a big crying mess (*which is also healthy at times*), another part of me is most certainly gritty – stubborn, passionate, hopeful. When I want something, I *really, really* want it and that doesn't go away easily. As Angela Lee Duckworth says in her video – it doesn't mean you won't fail, it just means that failure isn't seen as the end point. We can get up, brush off, and keep going. This is the sort of thing I need to be reminded of indirectly over and over again. Maybe you too? If you'd like a little inspiration to help along with the day, here's the video I'm talking about.

18Nov2014

The Bizzaroness of Not Being Liked

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life

Ever piss someone off so badly that they completely stop making eye contact with you and pull a passive aggressive routine when you attempt to interact with them? Yeah? Me too!

I'm not sure how many people in this world hold an official grudge against me, but I reckon it isn't ***too*** many. For sure that security guy at that airport in Toronto definitely had a beef with me. That was a strange one. One second I'm going through the security check-in worrying mostly about whether my prosthesis would set off any alarms if I had to have a pat down – *and debating whether it would be more worthwhile to tuck it into my carryon bag where a different security guard would see it via an x-ray and be like "she has a boob in her bag!"* – when all of a sudden, I'm in front of this guard, and he says something that feels weird to me, and I say something feels rude to him, and suddenly it becomes extremely tense.

But in general, I prefer someone to feel respected and appreciate. And for sure I hate to feel like garbage in response (*which means I hate getting into trouble of any kind*). Okay, maybe there has been a couple times like the above, etc, when what I did was definitely not taken as I meant it to be taken – and then as a response to that, I reacted in a way that wasn't so productive because some part of me automatically flips into 'smart ass' mode. (*Smart-Ass Catherine has such a good time. Seriously, I kinda love that part of me, but hate the bad feelings that always follow.*)

Anyhow, in today's case, I've upset someone. The trouble here is that I am not exactly sure what I did that was so deep-grudge worthy. And upon my approaching this person to discuss the bizzaro tension between us today, I was quickly shut down by some hard-core denial on their side about our obvious situation.

While not being liked definitely makes me uncomfortable and is currently taking up some head space, particularly since I interact with this person quite often lately . . . it also makes me feel kind of . . . well . . . *not terrible*.

For instance, I don't feel terrible for thinking they are acting like a passive-aggressive idiot.

And I don't feel terrible for standing up for myself and not accepting their garbage.

And I definitely don't feel terrible for what might have pissed them off originally, if that is indeed the thing that pissed them off.

AND I don't feel terrible for now not trying to be nice, anymore.

Okay, I know that everyone has their own stories that result in the way they see and react to the world. And I know that the way a person acts toward me, or I toward them, often only minimally has to do with that actual interaction and has far more to do with deeper issues. I know all of that.

But sometimes it is really tempting to say: "fuck off and stay out of my way." You know? I'm not saying this should be the answer to world peace. I'm just saying, it feels good – at least in my head.

I tried to open up a conversation to address the tension - but that crashed and burned. If they aren't ready to not be angry, than I really can't do anything about it. So here are the options: I'd rather 1) not have to be around this person as they stew in whatever they are stewing . . . however, it cannot be helped, so, therefore, I am looking forward to the day that I 2) get over their anger – so much so that it doesn't faze me when they refuse to talk, look or work directly with me. That is called a 'thick skin' right? Right. It's a skill to be learned, and I know this is really a "no big deal" situation so maybe it's a good way to train my skin for thickness.

Anyhow, I am not used to being so openly disliked. This will need processing on my side, too. In some ways, I might as well be grateful for the weekly distraction of tension since tomorrow morning I get scan results, which is definitely one case where I have no trouble asserting my honest reaction to a situation:

Dear cancer,

Fuck off and die.

Sincerely, the body that doesn't need you any more. i.e. Catherine

19Nov2014

Stable-ish

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life despite cancer, Treatment

The results are in and they say ‘kinda stable’ which is as good as I am getting for this round. I guess I will have to be kinda okay with it, and do what I can before the next scan.

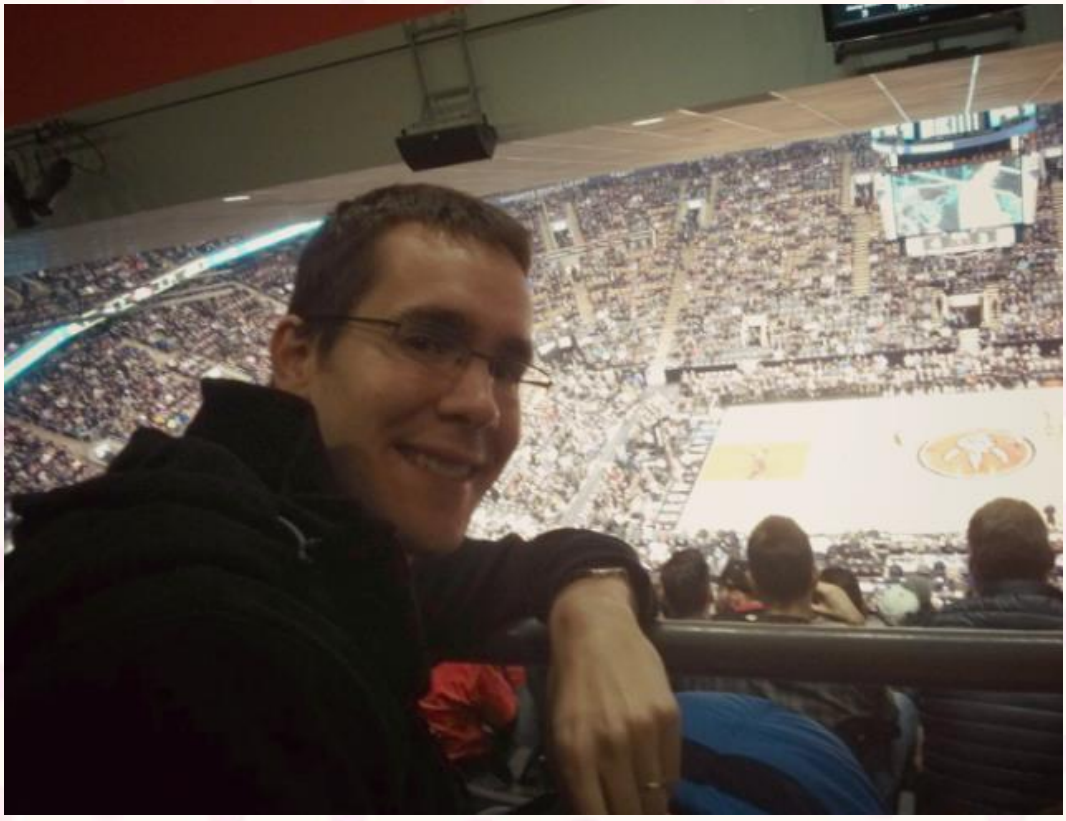
P.S. oh my god it is freezing in Ottawa!!!

22Nov2014

Happy Fun Times in Toronto

Posted in Bumpboobs, Canada, Fun, Life

Zsolt and I have run away to eploe! Actually no, we've been married for five years. But that's a fun sentence to write. Zsolt and I have actually run away for mini vacation – or 'mini break' as they say in England. This weekend we are in Toronto for the Mirror Ball, but also, we decided that while we're down here, we would catch us a NBA Basketball game with the Toronto Raptors.



And that's exactly what we did last night. Oh my goodness, I don't think my husband's smile can get any larger than it was yesterday evening.

So, we left Ottawa thinking it might be tight, but there's at least be time for me to tap a post-drive nap in the hotel room before hustling to the game. Wrong. We left way too late, and arrived way too late. There's wasn't even time for me to grab dinner from Chipolte, which I'd been craving on the drive down.

"We can get hotdogs at the game. It'll be the full game experience," says Zsolt in the hotel room as we realize there is no time for a proper dinner.

Anyhow, it was late and we were late so we busted a move out of the hotel room and set off on the subway toward the Air Canada Center. (Personal beef moment: What is up with Air Canada now charging for the first piece of checked luggage? They do it because they can do it. But that's a grade-A discount airline move, and not at all impressive).

Right so, we're in the subway riding along to the game. There's a connection at Bloor or something. Connection caught.

"It's too bad we didn't bring the camera," I say. Because these are the moments you want a camera for, right?

"Augh!" says Zsolt. He is upset we didn't bring the camera.

And then the next moment, he goes, "Hey, did we bring the printed tickets with us?"

And I go. "AUgh!"

No, we didn't.

We *did* however bring the mobile phone which is steadily heading toward zero charge. BUT, if we can just download the Ticketmaster app and bring up our account the online tickets will be there. So we get off the metro, and begin downloading the app. It's about 15 minutes till the game starts. Meanwhile the phone is having it's own countdown of battery life 20 percent, 18 percent, 16 percent…

Eventually the app uploads, (after we gave it access to *everything* on the phone in a desperate attempt to hurry things along) and we have the tickets.

Then we bust a move to who knows where. All I know is one minute there are a lot of people, then a lady giving directions, following by me charging through the crowd, across the street, up an escalator over a bridge and then, finally, when we hit about 12 percent charge on the phone and our tickets, security to get in.

Whew.

Zsolt buys is six dollar hotdog. It's a Nate hotdog, so I ask him if it tastes like New York. He tells me it tastes like Hungary, and believe you me that is *not* a compliment.

One last flash of the ticket to the usher, an we're in our seats!! (And lucky for that, I didn't realize we had to show the ticket again!)

What followed was basketball bliss. Zsolt was 'Woohoo'ing and explaining the more complex rules, and whenever there was a chance of winning a t-shirt he stood up and waved his arms while I held the jackets and pretended we weren't so, so, so high up. The guy had an amazing time. I haven't seen him have such a good time in a while. It really made me happy to see him so happy.

Sometimes I forget that Zsolt is going through a lot of stuff. With work and CT scans, he goes through so much. If I could give him a Raptor's game every weekend, I would. But maybe it's even more special for being a first-time treat.

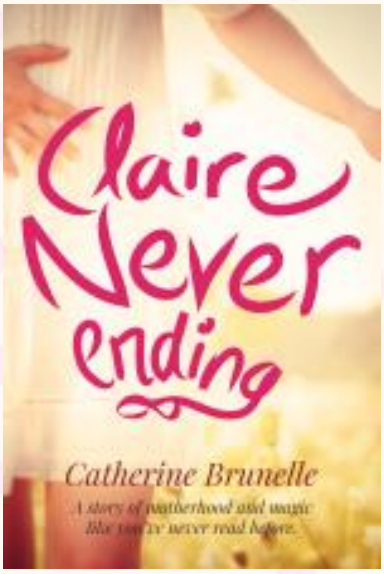
We are happy with the scan results. I am not quite so happy, okay, to be honest – because the cancer stopped it's shrinking and a couple spots *may* have *possibly* grown, with the appearance of what *may* be a new tiny spot. The oncologist says that it might have been there all along, and results on such small scales depends on how the CT scan cuts when taking a picture. And so we wait till the next scan to know more, and see if stable really is stable.

In the meanwhile, we are here in Toronto, and we got to see our first NBA game. How awesome is that? It is awesome. And now onto *my* kind of fun – the Mirror Ball!! WOoohOO!!!

30Nov2014

Help with a long, long shot: Deadline Midnight Tonight

Posted in Novels and Stories, Writing



Okay, it's a long, long, long, long, long shot. One of those million in one chances. BUT, Canada Reads 2015 is looking for book suggestions for next year around the theme of breaking barriers. So, if you are in the mood, I'd love your help to get *Claire Never Ending* seen just that much more **by tweeting (tweet #CanadaReads to @CBCBooks), emailing, instagramming or facebooking using #CanadaReads with my title**. Oh, and the deadline is midnight today!

"We're looking for books that will help us understand and overcome the things that divide us, in families and between communities, and at large." *~CanadaReads2015*

I really feel like my book breaks some barriers – it literally **brakes the barrier of time within one family**, and by doing so showcases the reasoning and actions between hard decision and their lingering impacts. I think that allowed me to paint the Claires with compassion, even if they were making sad choices at times.

Also, I reckon it **breaks some stereotypical gender barriers with storytelling** in that this is a book written about women, celebrating their strength, and it doesn't hinge upon chasing a man or being caught between two men. Essentially it doesn't need that love-challenge to make the story work. I'm rather proud of that, actually.

Plus of course, obviously, it's self-published. I think it's yet another example of how good books are finding new ways to be seen – **breaking the publishing house barrier**.

Plus, with all this breaking barriers, this season of Canada Reads is in store for some seriously heavy reading. So, the Claires could lighten things up, too. At least a bit.

Anyhow, as I said, this is an impossibly lonnnnnnnnnnnnnnng shot. Without a publisher rallying behind a title, it really is damn difficult to get seen at that kind of level. But life is full of million to one shots. I got Zsolt to email them with my book today. By the by, I think anyone can nominate a book – they don't go checking nationality.

And that's all I have to say about that. Now I'm off to clean the kitchen . . . again. Dear Kitchen, please grow up and learn to wash yourself.

Thanks for reading this self-promoting post, and if you *do* contact the CBC to suggest Claire Never Ending, thank you so much!

Catherine

8Dec2014

A Useless Guide to Sewing Stockings

Posted in Blogging and Other Fun, Fun, Life, Novels and Stories, Writing

I grew up with one giant red stocking. My grandmother made it for me It's red felt, and has some remnants of glitter glue on it. Back when we were little and Santa was as real as real could be, it felt like a darn tooin' miracle to walk into the living room Christmas morning and see those stocking filled with goodies.

Actually, it still does. My parents have been pretty awesome with that tradition. Though they've always said how the stocking my grandmother made were far too large. It's been in my head for a while. The thing is, we could go out and buy new stockings – but Lulu made these all by herself. How can you replace homemade memories?

Well you cannot replace them. But I was thinking to myself, and decided that Zsolt and I need little stockings that we can take with us wherever we may be for the Holidays, be it Canada, Hungary or the moon. So, I decided to sew us Christmas stockings.

Here's my how-to-list for making Christmas stockings, from someone who really cannot sew.

1) pick out pretty material. I picked mine up from a shop called Fabrications in Hintonburg.

2) Pick out some soft stuff to add to the material. Only do this is if you want to make your life more complicated. Sewer Beware, this is a time-adder to the project. Though I do think it is worthwhile. I picked up some raw felt from the knitting shop Wabi Sabi in Hintonburg.

2.5) Watch a Youtube video on how to use a sewing machine . . . after you find yourself one. You can also handstich, but be prepared to take *forever*.

3) Figure it out!

Forget patterns, I Lady McGuivered it by just piling the materials on top of one another, did some pinning and cutting out a vague, large sock-like shape. This resulted in several errors and a **lot** of repining. Each sock is unique, because I'm terrible at planning. So one is really wide, and the other is really tall.

4) Sew it all together somehow. First I almost sewed it backwards. Then I ripped that out and started again. Except the edges were raw. So I cut a strip to cover that up. Eventually I resorted to hand-stitching certain sections that somehow escaped the chomp of the sewing machine.

5) The details matter. Seconds before I was about to cut into my felt for the Z and the C lettering, once again about to freestyle the letters – I thought, hey, why not print out a letter and just trace it?

I did, and it turned out beautifully. Because these stockings are meant to be life-long stockings, I didn't just glue on the letters, but instead stitched them on.

And voila! Lovely Christmas stockings.

No matter how meandering and ridiculous the process, they got there in the end. I'm quite pleased.

And speaking of being pleased. I'm focusing on enjoying life a bit more this month. After the puddles of misery throughout November with waiting for & receiving scan results, I wanted to stop being sad all the damn time. That is my big goal for 2015 that I made during my parents workshop.

So, that means a few big changes that I'll talk about later, but also one pretty important one I'll talk about now.

I signed up for National Novel Writing Month, and finished the 50,000 in one month! It felt incredible and bizarre. At the start of the month it really seemed impossible, but by the end I was rolling. If I could give myself time to write 2000 words a day, do you realize how much I could write? TONS.

So, what I'd really like to give myself this year to help make life more liveable is the gift of TIME.

TIME to do what I love. TIME to clean my apartment. TIME to write 2000 words. TIME to get together with friends. TIME for my writing podcast. TIME to exercise. TIME to play.

That means shaving off time from other things. It means a bit of change and letting things go that I have wanted to do, and still want to do. But at this point, I think what really matters is just finding a way to not cry so often. Silly things like Christmas stockings are part of that.

So there you go, a useless guide for sewing stockings, and the gift of time. That's me. That's all I have to say about that. Happy holidays.

Speaking of fun, we had a really good time recording our latest podcast over at our writing show. Here is a link if you feel like having a listen as you wash dishes or something.

19Jan2015

Proud, Excited and Thankful list 2014

Posted in Fun, Life, Love, Travel, Writing

Hello 2015,

How have you been doing? It has been a lovely one month since I disappeared. Where have I been? Mostly in the kitchen doing dishes. (again) We also had family get-togethers, I sewed stockings for everyone, there was some crazy Settlers of Katan playing, Zsolt and travelled to CUBA . . . and then played more board games by the beach.

It was a holiday. A beautiful freaking holiday. Now we're well into 2015 and there are projects ahead. But first and foremost, I think this is a good moment to stop and reflect. While on the beach in Varadero, I took out my notebook and scribbled out my Proud, Excited and Thankful list for 2014.

(I also scribbled down a few observations of Cuba. Here they are: *A boy runs down the beach not checking for jelly fish – scanning the crowd of sun thirty Canadians crowding along the shore; Girls in cargo mini skirts and black fish net stockings who scan luggage as you pass through customs. Black hair, no smiles and thick black eyeliner; How do you recognize a Canadian in Cuba? They have a whooping cough; don't trust friendly Cubans in Havana who want to take you to a 'free salsa festival' . . . you'll end up in a cafe paying for all the drinks; Late night tango with couples on the Paseo del Prado, not a show – just life; bright old cars and explosions of diesel dark exhaust; casas from an age where the remote is still in the wrapping; Coconut taxis; turquoise water and shallow waves; laughter, kisses, and sun burns.*)

So, 2014 was a really lucky year for me, and this is a list definitely work making

What I'm proud of:

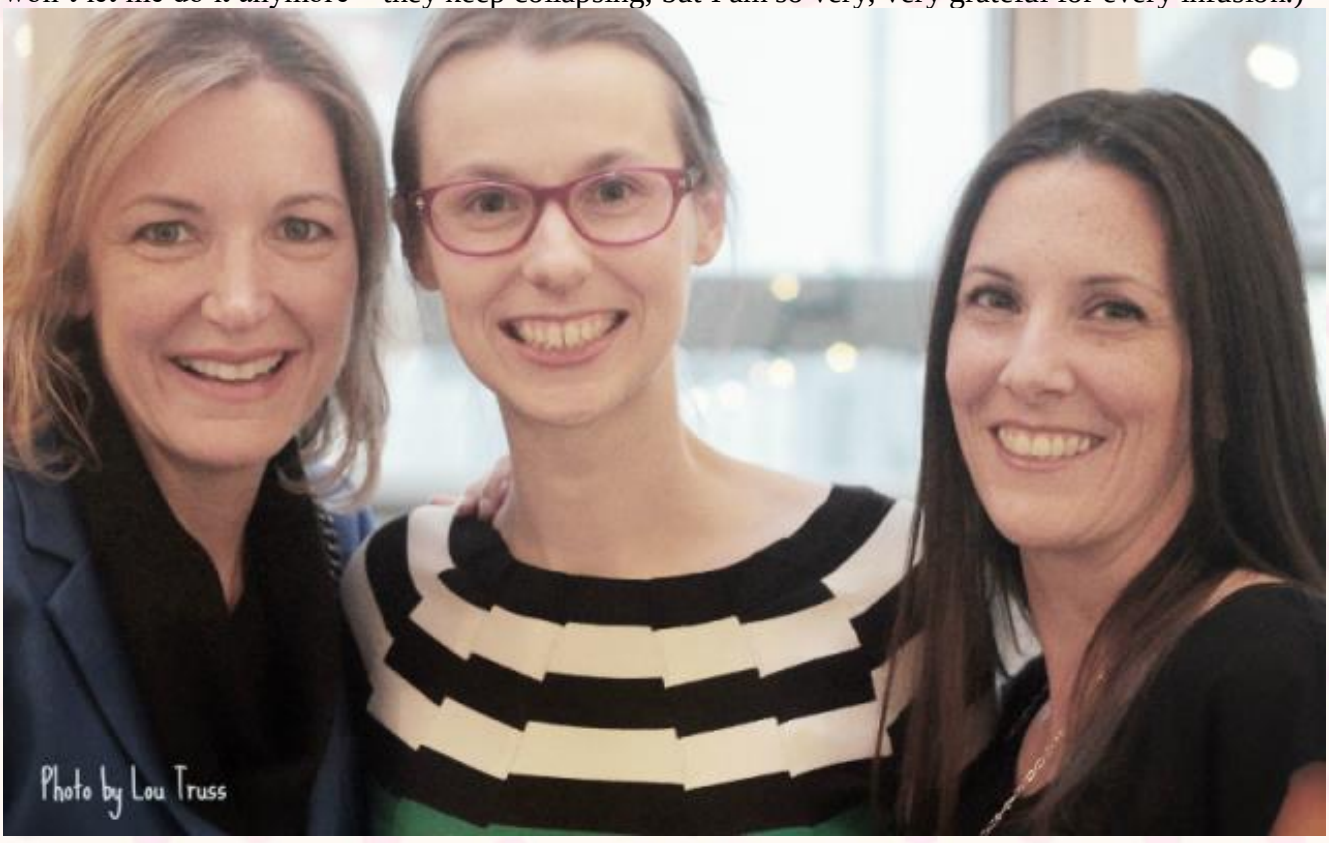
1. First and foremost I'm proud of my husband, Zsolt. He put a lot of work into his company this past year and pushed far, far past his comfort zone. It's not easy for a Hungarian physicist with zero business training to go into the world and advocate for his business. It's just not. But he did it. He is doing it. I am so damn proud of him. (Of YOU Zsoltster!)
2. Ottawa Writes. It's a podcast about writing that my friend and I started for fun. I think we've been producing great content, and I think it's only getting better in 2014 as we rebrand and reshape the show. Weird. I'm on a podcast? Weird. But cool. Frankly, I'm also proud of myself for saying "yes" to something so totally new.
3. NaNoWriMo! That's write. I did it. Now . . . to keep on doing it. BAH!
4. Getting up and getting on. It's not easy. To be honest, despite really awesome scans this past year, I haven't made it easy on us with plenty of emotional breakdowns. But hey – we get up, and we get on. That's something to be proud of.
5. Magazine Article Writing – Hey yeah! I got to share some Vanier loving in *Ottawa Magazine*, plus I wrote one of my best articles ever in LIVES affected by Cancer.

What I am/was Excited for:

1. Little trips. Since Big Z and I decided *not* to travel this past year, we've instead taken little weekend trips here and there. So, we have gone here and there and I love that. 2014 has been a year for little adventures – so that 2015 can be the year for AWESOME BIG adventures. Look out Hungary, we are coming for you again!
2. Hair! I've got a lot of it now
3. Ottawa Writes again! We are rebranding in 2015 as Write Along Radio – and that is a big new challenge. Every Tuesday evening Kevin and I record an episode. It's such good fun. It's exciting good fun.
4. Cottaging. **See more in 'Thankful'*
5. Christmas Stockings! I sewed amazing stockings for my whole family (not including the Samsons) and they are freaking darling. Seriously beautiful. It's really wonderful to create with your own hands, and know it's something that not only looks good but is clearly filled with love.

6. *Annnd* Pic Monkey. Seriously, I love that program.

What I was Thankful for in 2014:

1. *Board games: What? Well, you see, last year my family and I began playing board games while renting a lovely cottage in Quebec. We played Settlers of Katan, to be specific, and I think it's giving us a thread of connection. Since that cottaging time, we've gotten together over and over to play more. It's so fun and to be honest, I'm so grateful for this time with them. So, that tops my list of gratitude.
2. Health. 2014 was the year of good scans. I don't need to say more, do I? This is a blessing. Now listen up 2015, I want you to learn from 2014 and keep on trend. Man, it's nerve wracking business, but I am very thankful for this year of health. (Which included the Vitamin C infusions, by the way. My veins won't let me do it anymore – they keep collapsing, but I am so very, very grateful for every infusion.)
3. 

4. FacingCancer.ca. I have worked with them for over two years. They made me community manager and took a chance on my social media skills. It's been such an honour to work for them. My gratitude just pours out for all they have done by letting me do what I've so enjoyed – chatting online with friends, reading stories, being there for others. In 2015 I've officially stepped back from that role, and will now just be a happy blogger over on their site. That's a big change, but of course they were so wonderful about it. They're wonderful plain and simple.
5. Hair. I've been growing it, it's long now. I love it. LOVE IT.
6. An AMAZING book launch!
7. Cups of tea! With my mom, my dad, and my amazing friends who are always happy to trek out to Bridgehead.
8. ZSOLT!!!! He's my most wonderful of wonderful.

So there it is, my 2014 Proud, Excited and Thankful list, as crafted on a beach in Cuba. My wish and prayer for 2015 is more good scans, and also to bike along the shore of Lake Balaton, sail in the Queen Mary, be at home in Pecs, find a beautiful new apartment in Ottawa, grow my podcast, build Zsolt's business, write more stories and have fun, fun, fun. Bottom line: to enjoy life.

Wishing you a wonderful year to come.

Till the next post!

Catherine

P.S. I'm also grateful for *The Mixed–Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler.* Thank you so much, S.C.!

22Jan2015

A Normal Day: Random Post

Posted in Finding Home, Life, Writing

This is what a typical day looks like. I mean the days that don't take me out of the apartment. Those days 'out' are fairly typical too (*since I do work outside the home as well*). But not my favourite kinds of days. So here is what a typical favourite kind of day looks like:

(Why am I writing about this? I don't know. I feel like it. Do we always need a reason for what we write? Antidisestablishmentarianism is the longest word in the English language, so a friend named Curtis once told me. Why did I tell you that? For no reason whatsoever.)

Zsolt and I wake up at some point. I wake up before him almost always without fail. That wasn't always the case, but for some reason it flipped around. I guess that might be due to the days when I need to get up and leave – life outside the apartment happens early. But on days at home we don't wake up early, that's for sure. Typically we're still up at midnight taking about business in the darkness of our bedroom, trying to figure out plans and the 'what comes next' – it's not really good bedtime chatter, but we do it anyhow!

Right, we wake up. At this point there is a pretty big decision that needs to be made: do I wear pyjamas or not? Because you know, it's a nice kind of day when you get to wear PJs, but it's a far more productive day when I wear real pants. Ultimately I choose yoga pants because I'm busy but also lazy, and there's no denying that.

Then – if this is a *very* good day – I do the morning routine: Wake, put on the kettle, blend frozen veggies and fruit and drink with my vitamins, make matcha tea, read the news.

After that, if it is a *very, very* good day, I clean something. Maybe it is the kitchen, or the bedroom, or maybe it's the laundry that has likely grown to be about 5 feet tall. (Seriously)

Once that is all over, I hop on my computer to get to work. Ever since leaving one community management job, my morning has changed and I'm still trying to figure out how best to fill in this time. Do I build that website I need to build? Do I proof that story? Do I write an article? Do I get on with Easy-Patent admin? What about Sister Leadership? Do I go and wash more dishes?

Having written that paragraph, I realize what I *should* do with that morning window of time. I should write – just write. Maybe I write a random and unimportant blog post. Zsolt in the meanwhile is wrapping up the news, and just launching into his day of earning concrete bucks doing what he really enjoys: searching the internet.

Then at some point, lunch is made. Dishes pile up. We eat. Zsolt looks at the window in case something interesting might happen. Then, back to work.

We work throughout the afternoon. On the *very, very, very* good days I get to push along projects that make my heart buzz and face smile. And then, if I'm lucky, I eventually finish something. Often I *don't* finish anything. That happens wayyyy too often, actually.

Then I go and make dinner. More dishes. We eat. We watch something on the computer. Back to work.

By the time 9 pm arrive, I generally stop working and jump over to cleaning more dishes, or doing projects that aren't ever going to earn me a buck, or reading an excellent book (which only happens on the *very*, *very*, *very*, *very* good days) or maybe writing if I'm feeling ambitious. I might also be recording my podcast if it is a Tuesday. Zsolt keep working for Easy-Patent.

By about 10:30 I'm in bed. Zsolt will keep working, and he'll stop around 11 ish. At some point during this day, we may have taken showers, and we will have brushed our teeth. These aren't important details, but I thought I would mention it in case you are curious. Sometimes we play Super Mario, because it's awesome, but that's not a regular thing.

Zsolt comes to bed.

We talk about our day, and about the business, and eventually about stupid little things.

We go to sleep. I have hot flashes. I go to sleep again.

And that is that.

30Jan2015

It’s Offical: We are outta here

Posted in Uncategorized

We have given notice on our apartment. Our beautiful and messed up apartment in Vanier. From giant bedrooms and a gorgeous kitchen to sprinting cockroaches and a neighbour who never stops smoking in the apartment below . . .

In March I’ll be getting my scans, and then I’ll be getting results. I’ll also be packing up the entire apartment and moving everything into a storage facility. *Because* we want to go to Hungary in April. Big Z hasn’t seen his family for a year, and Lake Balaton has been lacking my good company. So whatever the news, we are going. For how long – I don’t know.

Chugga, chugga Train of Life, there you are going forward again – and as usual, I’m not sure what will come next!

Nothing Butt Net

So this just happened. Zsolt made a joke and thought it was great – very witty. Therefore, for some reason – remembering he played basketball for a long time, I say, "That joke was nothing but net!"

And then he stops, and gets that look he gets. "But net?"

"But net," I reply.

"*But* net?"

I almost choke on my paleo pizza now, realizing he is actually saying, over and over with that look of trying to understand "*Butt net?*"

Finally I manage: "Nothing. But. Net."

"Nothing butt net!?"

And then I can't eat anymore because I'm laughing too hard.

Finally I explain the expression to him, and make the basketball connection. He gets it. I keep laughing.

Apparently, in Hungarian they say "without bone" for that same kind of experience. Also weird. Yet nothing will ever be beat The Butt Net, whatever that may be. You use your imagination, as Zsolt had to do when he got that look he gets.

Ah, good times.

The end.

10Feb2015

Catherine's Story: The Children of my Daydreams

Posted in Uncategorized

About two weeks ago, I was kindly asked by Marie to submit a piece for her week-long series on fertility issues – cancer and it's treatment impact being a darn big one of those challenges. So I wrote her a little story about one Saturday morning long, long ago, when Zsolt and I lay in bed dreaming up baby names. Here is a reblog of my full guest post on Journeying Beyond Breast Cancer. You are welcome to click through and read, and then do explore more of what JBBC has to offer.

Catherine (P.S. It's an emotional piece, but I happen to be having a very good day today. So just keep in mind, it's not all sad moments)

Journeying Beyond Breast Cancer

Years ago, and I mean nearly ten years ago, my husband – then boyfriend – and I would lay in bed on a Saturday morning and not get out till about noon. We'd just hang out there and talk the way a couple talks when they are new and crazy in love. Somehow on one Saturday morning, the subject came up of baby names.

(So that was thrilling for me, because nothing says 'long term' like baby names.)

That discussion sparked several other 'lay-in and day-dream' Saturdays, and we finally settled on two names: Claire for a girl, and Joseph for a boy. Zsolt thought Claire was a beautiful name (*also my middle name*), and I quite liked the Hungarian nickname for Joseph, Joszo, plus it's my dad's name.

Since that time I've always seen the two of them, Claire & Joszo, in my head. It has felt…

View original post 592 more words

16Feb2015

POOF – I'm a Plugin!

Posted in Blogging and Other Fun, Fun, Writing

I've fallen into the computer and I can't get out!

Why have I turned into a plugin? As I was commenting to my co-host Kevin, it felt as if these past couple weeks in prepping Write Along Radio, my new podcast for writers, has been sucking me into this computer screen/fan noise vortex. From figuring out themes, wordpress.org, hosting, backing up, pluggin in, headers, images, streaming and more . . . When Kevin cracked a joke that we ourselves were turning into just another WordPress plugin, which made total sense.

Anyone out there ever program/host their own site? It's intimidating and bizarre and thrilling, no?

But sweet relief! The website is ready, the podcasts have been edited and uploaded, the whole production is rolling! I'm so very proud of our revised and refreshed writing podcast. The sound quality has been knocked up a few levels, and we've got actual formats: writing challenges, book discussions, and industry interviews!

So, if you are a writer/blogger/enjoying of writing, and you like online radio shows (i.e. podcasts) here is what you can do next:

1) Visit the website and say hello. I'd love a comment for the Write Along Radio comment fields.

2) Subscribe the radio RSS feed at iTunes, Stitcher, or whatever podcast RSS feeder you prefer.

3) Do a happy dance with me!

Also we'll be having giveaways all week, including a cute "Happy Writer" t-shirt that I painted with my own two hands. Okay well, we aren't giving that specific t-shirt in the picture below because . . . well, I *may* have melted plastic to the back of it while using a binder as a flat surface while ironing the material with my frying pan. BUT, I'll make you your own t-shirt, so that's even better. Keep your eye on the site and it's social pages for news.

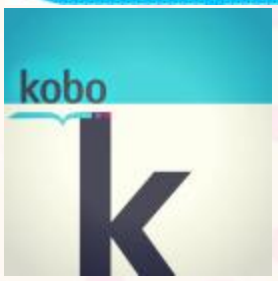
p.s. We have a fun blooper reel for Newsletter Subscribers to Write Along Radio.

Celebratory post over and out!

Write
Along
Radio

Episode
Zero!

Writing
Challenge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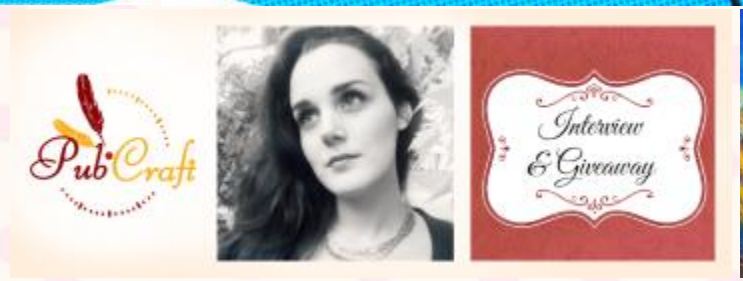

PubCraft
Interview
& Giveaway

Write
Along
Radio

20Feb2015

Win a “Happy Writer” t-shirt. I’ll make it for you! :)

Posted in Fun, Life, Writing

Hey there! I’m literally running out the door right now (in my snowpants and winterboots) but want to let everyone know this giveaway is happening right now over on my writing podcast, Write Along Radio. I’ve made a cute “Happy Writer” t-shirt, and know *many* folks reading this blog are writers/bloggers themselves.

P.S. as I mentioned in the other post, this won’t be your t-shirt. I’ll paint one special for you.

So, please do go and enter. It would make me so happy if one of the bumpyboobs crew won. I can’t actually help you win, but there are loads of entry options. So do enjoy! And please, don’t forget to check out the rest of the site/podcast episodes. We’ve been working like crazy over it & feel super proud.

http://writealongradio.com/2015/02/awesome-writing-t-shirt-giveaway/

22Feb2015

If I'm not a writer, then what am I?

Posted in Life, Life despite cancer, Writing

Sometimes I ask myself a really tricky question, which goes like this: Who am I to ____? Fill in the blank with just about whatever you like.

Who am I to have a blog? Who am I to host a podcast? Who am I to ask for crowdfunding support? Who am I to start a business? Who am I to make a video?

[Fair warning, my keyboard has several sticky buttons including the period, so please excuse any missing '.' 'd' or 'k']

Well basically that could just go on and on. It's something I struggle with repeatedly. And I guess in those moments, I find some comfort in the label I've given myself: "Writer."

Just yesterday Zsolt said something to me that has gotten me thinking. He revealed he's been considering this for some time . . . trying to understand what I do, or what I am? And not too long ago, he finally found the answer

"You are not a writer," he tells me.

And that's confusing. Because if I'm not a writer, then how did I write this blog these past four years, or those articles, or those posts across the internet, or my beloved novel *Claire Never Ending*?

"What do you mean I'm not a writer?"

Calling myself a writer has been really good for me. It's given me courage to answer that question: "Who am I to?" with the answer of "I'm a writer, damn it!"

"You're not a writer," Zsolt says to me again. And then he explains how when people ask him, *when is her next book coming out* – and he sees I'm not actually working on a next book — he's never sure what to say.

(This actually gives me very clear flashbacks to family gatherings around various holidays when people ask: *So what are you doing?* And for years upon years I'd reply, "Ahhh. Punch bowl." Then disappear to get another drink.

So you see, when I found the title of writer and tried it on, it became a 'job' description that I really quite enjoy. It fits me well. I don't make any money from it – or rather, the money I make from writing stems from clients ideas, or website design, or social management, all very nice, too. *But* when I say I'm a writer, I'm not actually thinking of my work. I'm thinking of the blog posts, guest posts, articles, chapters, challenges, stories . . .

Anyhow, all that to say, the label gives me courage and congruency at those awkward family gatherings.

So, the big Z really threw me with his conclusion that I'm not a writer.

“Why am I not a writer?” I ask him.

“You’re a creator,” he replies. “You are a media person, and content maker, a person who has to make things”

Hmm. I actually rather like that. I’m a writer, for sure, and don’t you forget it, but I’m also . . . a creator. I create things. Sometimes it’s art. Sometimes it’s a t-shirt. Other times it’s a video. And this is all okay, I guess, because I have a label to give me courage: I’m a creator and I like to tell stories. I guess I’m a creative multi-media storyteller. It’s not going to go on my business card, but I think perhaps at my core & behind it all, I really am this.

I’m also a business woman, entrepreneur, endurance lifer, wife, traveller, house keeper, company manager, book shelver, co-host, WRITER, advocate, community lover, storyteller, doodler, learner . . . with all these hats, it’s no wonder my love is feeling confused as to what exactly I do.

But like I say, that’s not something to put on a resume. And definitely not something to tell the customs agent when they ask what I do for a living.

However, he has gotten me thinking. And so maybe next time I’m feeling uncertain, I can reference his broad and generous conclusion. Who am I to _____? I’m Catherine Brunelle, damn it!

And that is all I have to say about that.

For now.

The end.

24Feb2015

doodling

Posted in Fun, Life

Did a quick doodle on Zsolt's new touchscreen. I'm rather impressed with the "play" factor of drawing right onto a screen. It's like a sketch book, only I can do more after the sketch is done. I haven't done anything to this, but it gets me excited around possibilities for some doodles. ~Catherine

8Mar2015

Here's To The Ladies

Posted in Life

Happy International Women's Day you wonderful, brilliant, creative, sassy, caring, sharp, beautiful, gracious, stubborn, inspiring, loving, deciding, growing, striving bunch of people. **We don't always turn to the one another and say, "You are a role model to me." So please let me say it today.**

In many different ways, I have learned from the women in my life, and the women beyond my life. Whether it was a friend's compassion, a writer inspiring me with her story, learning business sense, another's search to be free, strength despite loss, telling hard stories, bull-headed stubbornness, nursing through the night, creativity in the face of violation, personal sacrifice, authentic leadership, gentleness with humour, confessions over tea, big aspirations, building communities, long ago lessons . . . whether it's any of these moments that have taught me so much, or many others I can't even begin to list – I find inspiration from you all.

You are my role models. Just so you know.

Here's to the ladies.

~Catherine

11Mar2015

Zsolt's First Knock Knock Joke

Posted in Uncategorized

Me: Knock Knock

Zsolt: Knock Knock?

Me: No, you are supposed to say who's there? It's a knock knock joke. Don't you know about those?

Zsolt: [silence]

Me: It's a type of joke. You know, 'Knock Knock?'"

Zsolt: I don't get it.

Me: Just say 'who is there?' Okay? Knock Knock.

Zsolt: Who is there?

Me: Banana.

Zsolt: [gives a look]

Me: So now you say, Banana Who? And then I hit you with the punch line.

Zsolt: Banana who?

Me: Knock Knock?

Zsolt: Who is there?

Me: Banana.

Zsolt: Banana *who*?

Me: Knock Knock.

Zsolt: *Who is there*?

Me: Orange.

Zsolt: Orange who . . .

Me: Orange you glad I didn't say banana?

Zsolt: That’s stupid.

Me: I know.

18Mar2015

Cue the Curse Words

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life despite cancer, Treatment

When the Dr Canada walks into the room and begins to summarize things, I know it's bad news. My question becomes, how bad is it? And I struggle to let him have his own process of summarizing before blurting out "What are the results?"

So no summarizing for you guys.

The spots in my lungs are growing again. There has been a 2mm-7mm change in size since the last scan. I suppose in the bigger picture, this can be characterized as a slower growth. But also, in the big picture it's incredibly shitty news.

Not surprising news, though. If you look at my past four scans, you see first, a slowing down in the shrinkage, then a 'stable state' with suggestion of possible growth, and now clear evidence that the treatment is finally starting to wear off. That damn cancer is tricky. It changes, it pushes, it won't fucking stop. It makes a fair argument that striving to live forever is really not a good idea for the environment in which we inhabit. (Obviously I've thought about this a little). Their lifespans should be up, and yet … they just keep on going.

Marcelle, my mom, says we need to push back harder. We need to be more stubborn than the cancer.

What happens next?

I am not really sure. Firstly, we wait to see if I can get onto an extended trial via the hospital for a new approach to inhibiting the cancer. That would be good. It throws a definite wrench in the Visit Hungary and Love Summer plan. But I think we can nevertheless be stubborn about that idea. Even if we don't go the whole summer, there's a nice plane travelling between Montreal and Budapest now, and I have hopes of using this as my personal shuttle to the continent.

And then the boxes are piling up in my kitchen, because we're moving. Oy! Not sure what is going to happen now, but as we agreed upon earlier, there is no sticking around in that flat anymore. I can't keep breathing that shitty smoky air.

Apart from this – I don't know. We're sad, and frustrated, and a little stunned to be honest.

We'll get through all of this. But what is going to happen next? I have not got a clue. In my novel I have a line at the end of a few different chapters about what is going to happen next, and everything is going to be okay. It's a nice deep inner faith that things will be okay, even when what that means is impossible to understand. What is okay?

Anyhow, for now that is all I have the energy to say.

FUCK.

Okay, I had energy for that extra bit. BOZMEG KORVA BAD SPELLING HUNGARIAN CURSE WORDS.

Okay, now I am done.

P.S. There is good news here too, actually. There’s no evidence of spread. It’s very good to hear.

23Mar2015

2:00 AM Pixel Style

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life, Life despite cancer

I'm taking a video game class this week. It's exciting. I thought maybe I could make a video game around coping/treating/attacking cancer. It's just an idea. **I'm not actually sure where the 'game' aspect would come in, but if anyone has any personal coping techniques they love, please do let me know.** Maybe it's a morning drink, or a meditation, a phrase they repeat over and over, an act of advocacy, or even an act of escape. a treatment you believe in, a For me it's often just finding a way to let the steam release.

So, yesterday at 2:00 am when I woke up with a tight chest and fear, I got up and drew this picture. It's my first bit of pixel art. Reminds me of playing adventure games, so it seems fitting for this upcoming video game class.

29Mar2015

Cottage Night

Posted in Uncategorized

We are celebrating as a family this weekend, and while here I did this doodle. That is all.

~Catherine

Experimenting with Audio & Storytelling

I've been recording some of my blog posts via a voice program lately, and this evening I just wanted to do something lovely. So, I spend the night working on this. It's kinda a capture of this blog here at bumpyboobs/catherinebrunelle and yet another way of sharing stories. This is one episode and I'm calling the show "Hey, It's Me" cause that's how I roll.

I like it. You like it?

The music gives it a nice added layer and emotion and meaning. If I make more, they'll be a mixture of blog reading, random stuff saying, etc. But here's a first taste to see how well she can be digested.

In the meanwhile, enjoy! ~Catherine

https://soundcloud.com/catherinebrunelle/hey-its-me-what-am-i

5Apr2015

Easter and Expectations

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life despite cancer, Uncategorized

Happy Easter! For awhile there I thought spring had finally arrived, but nope, not quite yet! The Easter bunny had to wear snow boots this morning.

So the apartment is crazy. Yeah, we are still here. At least, our stuff is still here. The official get-out-already date is April 12th. That's when we have muscle lined up to come in and help carry boxes down the street to my friend's basement. Muscle = my two brothers and my dad's truck.

The funny thing about this move is that we don't know what will happen next. Will we leave the country for vacation soon? Will we need to get an apartment before the fall? Will I be on a plane defying logic and jetlag as I fly back and forth between Montreal and Budapest (and can that be managed? Zsolt thinks it is crazy, I think it is brilliant. Except for the actual flying… flying is *not* fun.)

Many things are up in the air. We've both decide we will be hitting up Hungary this summer, it's really the when and the 'how long' that are in question. My parents reckon we should simply take off and let lake Balaton feed my soul. I want to get onto this study Dr Canada had mentioned.

Speaking of which, I'll need to call him this week to chase it up.

Day have been passing by. I breathe in and out and think 'hey, no trouble there' and try to image the cancer cells melting away into nothingness. It's a blessing to be able to mostly ignore the situation… I mean, I don't ignore it, but I try to ignore it as much as possible when I'm not doing something about it. I try to focus on other things.

Other things… yeah… my attention has been jumping between projects. One second I'm packing. Next I'm editing audio (my latest thing). Then I'm researching this article. Now I'm going out to meet a friend. Then, finally, I settle down and do actual work.

The other day I was listening to This American Life, and there was this episode about Batman. Except it was more bat man… and they guy wasn't a bat at all. The show shared a story of a fellow who lost his sight as a young boy. But now, as a grown man… well, he says he can see. He says, he grew up seeing the world through clicks – like bats use sound to see. And he has done this for so long, that now he can actually see things, shapes of sorts, even thought he literally has no eyes. When in an MRI, he mind lights up just like yours or mine would when being told to watch a passing object.

INCREDIBLE. Listen here.

The point being: He has defied general expectation simply because he never agreed with it in the first place. He's taught himself to see again. This to me is remarkable. His beliefs and consequent actions made something happen that was never thought possible.

No time to finish that thought! It's off for a family meal in Kanata.

Happy Easter!!!

6Apr2015

Suitcase Time Machine

Posted in Finding Home, Life, Travel

I'm packing my suitcase for Hungary. We don't have a ticket, and I'm still totally unsure when we are leaving – or how long we're going for, but nevertheless, I'm packing my suitcase.

Easter Monday in the Brunelle Samson household is really all about packing. Actually, we're finishing with the packing of this apartment. Today involved Zsolt pulling apart the living room with his old PHD papers, contracts from England, left over visa applications, books and video games and more video games.

I've been in the bedroom, emptying the closet and dresser of every single bit of clothing I own. One piece after another, I folded the shirts and tank tops and socks and sweater and trousers and scarves, and stacked them on my grandmother's old sofa (for which I'd made a dark blue slip cover, and now feel sentimental about giving away).

Onto the bed I opened our burnt orange suitcase. This will be my case for the entire summer of displacement and –hopefully– escape.

Hanging from the curtain rod in my bedroom are a thick collection of dresses. Summer dresses, autumn dresses, cocktail dresses, gala dresses. I take the coral baby-dress from the rod and lay it in my burnt orange suitcase. The strap is broken, and I'm hoping Zsolt's mother won't mind sewing it since my kit is packed away. I can picture myself by the lake Balaton, wearing this little bit of coral nothingness, and feeling just like I felt almost a decade ago when I first found that slice of Hungarian paradise. I will pack this dress, Anna will sew the strap, and it can be like old times again.

There is the wine purple Karan Millen dress that I wear to nearly ever formal occasion ever. This is not a dress anyone would need at Lake Balaton in Hungary. But I slide it into the suitcase nevertheless, in hopes that somehow we'll be able to take the boat between England and Halifax. I wore this exact same dress on the Queen Mary while we sailed to Canada (via New York) about two years ago. We were excited for Zsolt's new job, and thrilled with the glamour of the cruise ship. It was a highlight in a life full of wonderful moments. So maybe, if I pack the dress, we can live it again.

There is this raggedy dark blue tube top folded and resting on top of the pile of clothes for consideration (do I put it in the suitcase, or put it into the cardboard box for storage in my friend' basement?). I concoct some possible outfit in my head, and slip it into the suitcase. Maybe if I pair it with my high-waist black skirt… *maybe* I can get away with wearing it again. And even better, maybe my husband will notice. This is tube top I wore one fantastic night in Nice while out at a nightclub with a group of Hungarians. I'd had some light mesh shirt over it for most of the evening, but when we ended up in a club's crowded basement sweating and dancing

like crazy, I'd headed to the ladies to cool down. Off came the mesh top, up went my hair into a high ponytail, and on went the vibrant blue headband that matched the sleeveless top. Walking out of the ladies, I passed that cute Hun I liked. He did a double take and said, 'woah.' . . . he *liked me*.

So, I'm here packing my suitcase for a trip that isn't planned, and reliving memories imprinted into my clothing. And I stopped just now to write this blog post, because I didn't even realize what I was doing until about 10 minutes ago. I'm taking action. I'm doing *something* to make this all real, and to have another summer, hopefully with a few new piece thrown into the wardrobe, to make all kinds of new memories.

The suitcase is now nearly full. It's packed for Hungary. And whenever we get there, it's going to be a damn good time.

10Apr2015

Move it behind the wall

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Life, Life despite cancer, Novels and Stories, Treatment, Writing

I would

like to

build a

wall,

between

myself and

the ideas

of

expectations, trials, doubts, bleak realities, statistics,

or more.

On my side of the wall, the active and living side

would be

hope

and life

and wants

and the

words:

Change

and

Cure

and

Heal

and

Stable

and

Fun

and

Clear

and

Health.

No doubts

there

to cloud

my view

of

what

I want.

I would

live on

my sunny

side of

the wall.

Take walks. Make plans. Drink tea. Heal well. Love. Create.

Live in possibility.

And the

stuff

behind

the wall

would go

quiet

from

neglect,

and settle

over

time.

Like

Forgotten

Objects

in the attic.

White sheets draped over top,

covering and muting,

into quietness.

No longer

needed.

And I would face the sun.

and Be Alive in the sun.

Peacefully Happy and

healed.

15Apr2015

Limbo Land

Posted in Finding Home, Life, Travel

I have that limbo song in my head just thinking about this post. *Every limbo boy and girl, all around the limbo world, gonna do the limbo rock all around the limbo clock!* You can thank Chubby Checkers for those awesome lyrics.

We have moved out of our Vanier apartment. Good bye massive kitchen, good bye clouds of smoke and screaming neighbours. Good bye Snack Shack, good bye walking to Bridgehead, Good bye lovely neighbourhood! While I will miss the neighbourhood – we really came to love it (with spring here, folks are beginning to venture outside again. It's gossip on the street all spring & summer long!).

We are out.

I did like it there to be honest. It was our home, and it was HUGE.

Anyhow, limbo land. I called DR Canada about whether I'm able to get onto this big important study, and have not heard back. Not really surprised. We have an appointment with him on April 20th to find out more. So, I'm okay not hearing back. I keep waiting to buy that ticket to Hungary, but may as well embrace the stillness for the brief moment that it lasts.

The move this past Sunday went very well. There were some moments of panic. Firstly, we couldn't get the queen box spring mattress into the truck bed. So, my little brother strapped it *on top of the truck* and we drove at 20 km/hour to my friend's house in the neighbourhood where we are storing our furniture for the summer. But then, the darn tootin' box spring wouldn't fit into their basement! My little bro gave me a jolt of panic when he said: Do you have any backup storage? Can you arrange that right now?

To which I replied: Augh!

That was pretty much his prediction over and over throughout the entire day: You will need more storage.

Actually, we did need more storage. But thankfully my friend's lovely neighbour popped up outta *nowhere* (okay, from next door) and offered to house our mattresses IN HER BASEMENT! This is what I mean about Vanier having some truly lovely people. We don't even know this lady, and she lent us space in her home. I guess the world in general is full of lovely people.

With my Dad's truck not getting the job done fast enough, (and my entire family present, slowly losing their patience with job of moving boxes one vehicle at a time) little bro had another idea: he'd rent us a MOVING vehicle/truck! While we all thought he was away picking up some tools, he was actually out renting a moving truck. Smart guy. Once he arrived the boxes were loaded in, and off they went. It was a good idea, I'll admit it. I'm also quite glad I didn't need to arrange it.

Days prior to the big move, we were dealing with the big PACK. Honestly it was driving Zsolt and I crazy sorting through so many things, packing boxes, sorting closets, cleaning spaces, sorting charity . . . packing just takes forever and it turns everything upside down. We were losing our minds in the mess, and our apartment turned into a strange maze where you navigated between stacks of cardboard boxes.

Now we are in my parents basement again, soaking up the calm spring rays of sunshine, and clean smoke-free air. I feel as if we've come full circle from the time we first arrive in Canada. Except, you know, it's not at all the same, and we won't be here for long. I'm still itching to buy that ticket to Hungary. I suppose I'll just have to wait till April 20th to learn what type of schedule will be happening. Fingers crossed for the study. I like that option & I want that option.

And that is all. Excuse me while I go listen, again, to that limbo land song.

20Apr2015

House Hunters R Us

Posted in Finding Home, Life

You know how I was packing that suitcase to travel, without even having a plane ticket? Well, Zsolt and I spent last Sunday doing something pretty similar to packing. We went and looked at houses.

Not that we have a mortgage. Nope. If you look at the standard list of what two entrepreneurs need to be approved for a loan, we barely squeak by. Chances are, if we were to wait one more year, we'd have more savings and a great chance of approval.

But logic has no place in the search for home. And while I'm feeling quite okay with renting, my husband has had his heart set on property for a very, very long time. Plus what the hell are we waiting for, except pre-approval?

The other day, we had to call the bank for something to do with taxes and accessing accounts or whatever. BORING! From that conversation, the customer service fellow suggested Zsolt's business might be interested in acquiring a 'pre-approved' credit card. Would we like to apply?

We do our banking by speaker phone, so that we can both listen in. Now we were miming our responses to one another, him doing the maybe face, me doing the no way head shake. I hate these slide-it-in promotions. My first and strongest instinct is always to say NO. But not my husband, and since we had considered a credit card for his business in the past . . . somehow, between his 'why not' hand raising, and my 'ahhh, well' eye brow raise . . . we ended up being transferred to the credit card department.

And spoke to another customer service guy. Long story short, we got the credit card. But the real point to that story, is the credit card guy was like 'oh, maybe you'd be interest in talking to our mortgage people?'

And I was like NO WAY and Zsolt was like, why not? (All silently mimed, once again), then I was like, oh yeah, okay … and so a meeting was set up so we could chat with someone from the bank. We had that meeting, realized it was 'maybe yes, maybe no' in terms of possibilities… and decided to wait a little longer before applying.

BUT. I have to say . . . somehow, even while not being pre-approved, we ended up checking out open houses last weekend.

You know how shopping feels so good? Well house shopping feels fantastic. It's a date, day trip and adrenaline rush rolled into one! We drove around Mississippi mills and the sticks looking for places. We found an area we rather like with water to canoe in and a forest to explore. Now I guess we need to find the money.

But every good thing needs a starting place. Whether we buy this year or next, it's good to start.

That is all.

23Apr2015

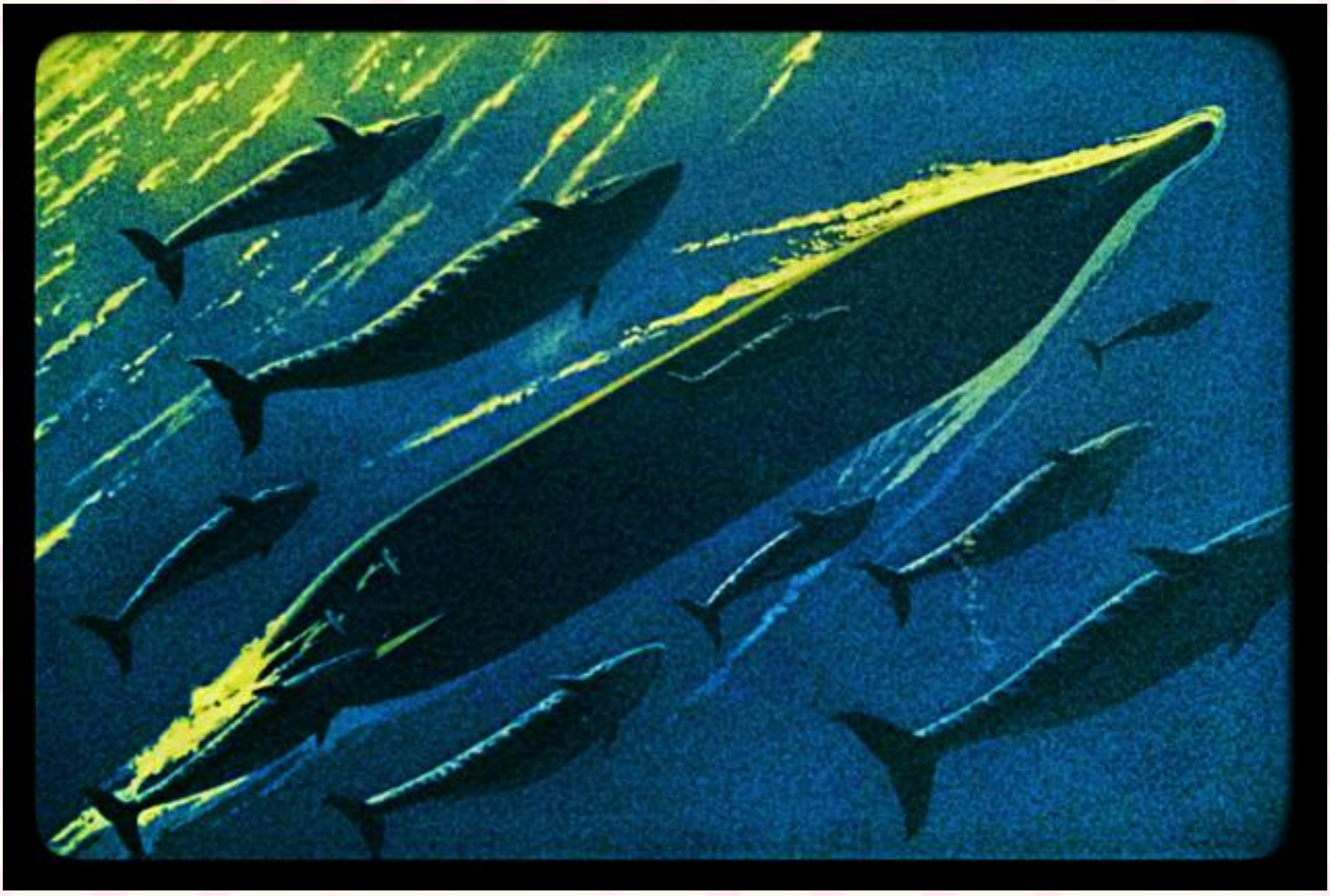
Cruising to Hungary!

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life, Life despite cancer, Travel

So, we just bought ourselves two tickets to Europe on the Queen Mary. Yep. That happened. June 3rd.

Yay for Hungary! Yay for Sailing! Yay for Balaton!

(boo not getting onto studies. I'm officially on some other hormone blocker instead. Hmm. But hopefully the drug I wanted will soon be commercially available, so it won't need a study. Soon. Hopefully. In the meanwhile, I'll try the healing water of my favourite lake & work with my mom!)



27Apr2015

Random midnight rant

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life, Life despite cancer, Love, Travel, Treatment

It's late and I have a wheeze in my left lung. I never know what to think about these things. Is it the humidity in the air? Maybe I'm just feeling anxious from a weekend of booking travel and staying up too late? Perhaps it's because my team is out of the playoffs . . . I've had wheezes on and off for the past two years, often anxiety related, but who knows. Each time I hear/feel the wheeze, it plain scares me. Everything stops and I take a few deep breaths, asking myself: is it really there? Did that really happen?

Yeah, it did. It happened. It happens too often.

Is it the nerves, or it is – you know – that cancer thing the previous scans showed was growing?

Here's a little dose of honesty. I'm really truly disappointed to not have made that study. There is this drug out there that's not within my reach. Not for the time being, at least. It's now on sale in the US while they finish up trials. I had some very high hopes for that drug, because this hormone therapy stuff just doesn't seem to be cutting the mustard anymore. And frankly, I don't want to have the chemo conversation like, ever. As in *never*.

My mom has been doing a lot of research. Thank goodness for that. I just can't do it, not like she's able to. So we will be working on my body and its ability to heal. Because of her, I don't have to be passive as I wait for the next set of scans. I'm grateful for this. Also, there's this yoga place with a first-time special of 35$/month for unlimited classes. We are going to go together. Another thing that inspired gratitude.

Topic jump:

Last week. I left my oncologist appointment with a new prescription, by the by. After some bizzaro conversation with the resident doctor who is learning to be an oncologists about an abnormal pituitary gland inside of my brain, followed by many reassurances by her and Dr Canada that is very likely not cancer – or at least, not breast cancer – anyhow, following that, I receive a prescription for another estrogen blocking drug given that the previous wasn't working. Honestly, while I am going to take it this summer just to see what can happen, this new drug doesn't give me high hopes. We are buying time. Not time as in 'stopping the cancer from growing' but more like 'delaying any hard conversations about treatment options in hopes that something better pops up'.

So, I'm going to take this summer for what it is: an escape. Maybe I can write. Maybe we can rest. Maybe we can enjoy a beautiful few months together away from the word 'cancer'.

Topic jump:

Here's one other thing I just want to say. It's really late at night, and I'm writing this in the dark. I'm certain Zsolt would love it if I stopped writing, but he's a good sport too. Anyhow, here is what I wanted to say: treatment blows for young women with bc. Like, it sucks. I'm blocked from all the good studies because I'm not 1) over 65 and 2) without a uterus.

Where are the drug studies for young women with this damn disease? Why can I be eligible for the drug with great potential? Why do I need to wrestle with my oncologist and pharmacist to be covered for a certain prescription, and have to argue how I'm most certainly post-menopausal – not having had my period for *over a year*, enjoying the never-ending flux of hot flashes and anxiety, watching certain body parts shrink from lack of estrogen, definitely not ovulating with a diminished sex drive, and also not-so-much enjoying the constant pain when doing adult activities due to a crazy weird tightening of the lady parts. Seriously, it's like being revirginized after every go!

So, don't tell me I'm not postmenopausal! BAH! The nerve of some people. I could go on, but had better not.

Topic Jump:

Soon it'll be the 10 year anniversary of when Zsolt and I got together. We met in Nice, France, and plan to go back there for a couple days during our trip. Pretty damn romantic, eh? I expect it to be too-quick, very emotional, and deeply important to us both to return. The number of times we've recounted the story of 'how we met' to one other – well, it's a lot – so to actually be returning to the scene of that miracle feels good. It's important to us both.

Topic Jump:

It's almost midnight. I'm getting tired. No wheeze for the time being. I guess it went away.

Topic Jump:

Bedtime.

Good night.

Random rant over.

Maybe now I can sleep.

P.S. (Apparently my right leg is ahead of me. I've been sitting a weird way while writing this, and now it's totally numb!)

28Apr2015

Happy Writer T-Shirt – Woohoo!

Posted in Fun, Life, Writing

Well, today I took some time to get this rolling! It's the Happy-Writer Tee from my podcast, Write Along Radio. I took the original design, scanned it, 'vectored it' and now it's on a t-shirt. I've tried to keep the price low at 19.99 US (plus shipping). If any of you bloggers/writers out there want to grab one, now is a darn good time. The fellow who won the giveaway has said that it helps him write. This made me smile to read.

Enjoy and Happy Writing! ~Catherine

Will be a bit different. Click the picture to check out the new version.

P.S. We are aiming for 50 as in, it would be nice. But regardless of whether that number is met, any orders placed will be fulfilled. Ta!

2May2015

How to start a podcast

Posted in Uncategorized

Here's a touch of happy news. My article "8 Simple Tips for Starting a Podcast (from a total amateur)" was picked up as a featured post over on BlogHer. Love it! Please let me brag for just one moment with some pride, when I say this is my 3rd featured post! This makes me feel pretty darn good.

Read **8 Simple Tips for Starting a Podcast**

Image: Patrick Breitenbach via Flickr

Other past featured posts include:

25 Reason Why I Love the Internet

and

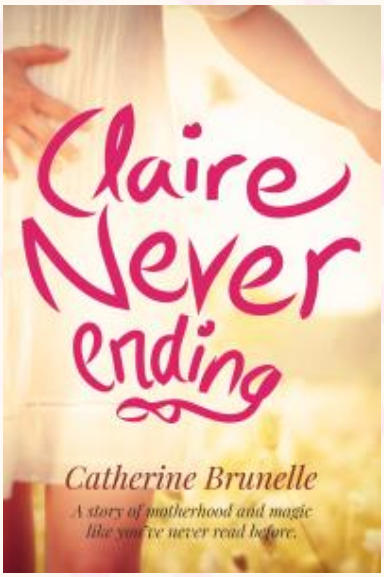
10 Thinks To Do While Waiting For Test Results

(Apparently, lists are a good thing)

12May2015

A Claire Who Lived for 1514 Words

Posted in Novels and Stories, Writing



A Cut Character from Claire Never Ending: I was looking through my files today, trying to find the revised short-story I'd written not far back as a spin from Claire Never Ending. What I found instead was this chapter. Well, it's not a chapter. It's a character I was building for the novel, but didn't write beyond 2000 words. For each new Claire, I had to find out who she was – so would write these scenes that felt out a character. I think LaLa would have fit into Ruby's story slot. Maybe she's Ruby in a different dimension, if Ruby had never jumped off that train with James.

Anyhow, here is it. It's never been edited, so please excuse the errors. If you ever want to check out Claire Never Ending, It's over on Amazon.

La La Bliss

"Make room, Fellas – clear space, you Dames.

We've just gotta announce who's stepping on the dance floor. Drums! Somebody get me a drum roll! Come on, louder, bigger! Now keep it rolling men, make me scream over top of ya!

Ladies and Gentlemen slap those hands together, cause the hottest Betty in this roaring waterfall city has deemed to grace us with her delicious form. With all the curves of the Mississippi, and legs longer than a cedar giant. Let's give a hand for the hottest gal this side of the border! Our very own hotsy, totsy, taxi dancing queen – La La Bliss!"

And from the shadows steps La La Bliss, already shaking her hips and flapping those arms – side dancing, knees twisting, breasts waving, beads bouncing. Catch those big charcoal eyes, and short, copper hair – mind the flash of her gold sequined headband wrapped round her pretty brow. The limbs are flying and her smile's got snap – she's a crazy, whacked out, sexy mess.

A quarter slips into the announcer's palm with a big red kiss smeared along his perky, happy cheek, and a wink is delivered through her dark native eyes – a wink and a promise for a piece of the take.

"This one's a quarter boys. She's fine goods, Fellas. Line 'em up and knock 'em out. Quarter tickets only!"

Little Bliss knows how to sparkle. That's plain as Jane's face. Sparkle La La, La La Bliss. Not her maiden name, not her married name either. Because that was back then, back before La La was born. She's a new woman now, and sailing above the rest of the desperate dames in this town. The lost women, she calls them. She doesn't drop to her knees for her keep, not lucky little La La Bliss.

“Line up boys!” she laughs into the mic. Her eyes scan the crowd and she winks at them all. Make it look fun, make it look wild. And she holds out her hand as the men race to claim her – bumping and pushing and falling at her feet.

The pink and yellow lights of Freddy’s Bourgeois Dance hall shine and slip and catch her in the spotlight, blind her in the eyes – and if you weren’t desperate, and if you weren’t fighting, if you had a seat at the back and were apart from the crowd, nursing a whiskey and worn out from the world, if you weren’t a drunken mad man frothing at the mouth and piling your tickets into her pale little hand, then maybe, for just a moment, you’d spot something smouldering behind her dark stare. As she hits the polished floor with that good sorta jazz music flying in the background, and swings into the Charleston with her too short, too ugly partner whose staring at her with glassy moon eyes and a look of utter awe slapped across his face, maybe you could see a little of the hurt, glancing at you before it melts back into her smile, and she laughs and shakes her hair.

She’s a naturally injured woman, little light La La Bliss. But so are most women who end up dancing, who end up here, alone, where the water plummets between two countries.

…

With the stab of her fountain pen, Lala finished inking out her words slowly but surely. Every holiday she’d go out to the pharmacy and buy the prettiest postcard she could afford, and since coming to Niagara, she could afford the real fancy ones, printed in colour and everything. Now she turned the small card round between her fingers, watching the fat New Years baby stare at her with a sash across its basket reading 1927 in red glitter. It cost a dime, tourist prices, but she didn’t mind.

Finishing her note, she tucked it into her carpet bag; she’d never given up her carpet bag, or her worn out beaver jacket. They were items for life, her mother had told her as she’d passed them along, they’ll last far beyond your generation, her mother had said. And Gil had wanted to burn them. He’d wanted to burn every bit of who she was before arriving. Every last bit. She was never really his, and he knew that all along, knew it from the tan line on her ring finger that they never spoke about aloud. Anyhow, she wasn’t his girl, she was only his favourite.

The band was cooling off out there, playing a smooth jive that strummed and hummed through her dressing room walls. The crowd was thinning, everyone was going home. A knock on the door, it was one of the other girls, Rouge, dripping in sweat and patting her armpits with a towel, “Good pull tonight, Bliss Baby?” asked Rouge, and she stepped into Lala’s dressing room and fixed her eyelashes in the bright, bulb lined mirror.

Lala reapplied her lipstick. “Not bad.”

“You going out? Find a fella or something?”

“Or something,” replied La La with a wink. Her voice had gone thick with the smoky halls and late night shouting. She put down the lipstick and lifted the iron, getting a few of those last curls, then flipped her head and shook it all out into a disheveled mess, straightening back up and fixing the strands in the mirror, getting it to look just right. Lala didn’t know too much about politics, or the world, or anything really. What *she* knew about were men. The other girls primped and puffed, but not La La; she oozed, she spread herself open and let it all hang out. Gil had always said a women looked most beautiful after making love. And Lala had the eyes of a woman left in the bed, so Gil had said. She knew that much about the men with the tickets: they all craved a smoky, hazy, loved up girl like her, even if only for one dance.

Rouge stopped her own primping and looked over Bliss. “I’m gettin’ out of this place Lala, you oughta do the same. You see these,” she bent in close and bore her small blue eyes into Lala’s large dark stare. “You see those lines? Didn’t have those before, eh, and I’ll bet you get them too. I’m getting outta here, Baby Bliss.”

“Where you going?” asked Lala.

“Hollywood.”

That got her attention. The whole reason La La had run away from home was to become a star. But somehow she’d been distracted, caught up by the Falls. She hadn’t even made it to the border, and it was only over the river.

“You gonna be a film star?” asked La La. She lit up a cigarette and took a long pull.

“I’m gonna have a laugh,” answered Rouge. That wasn’t her real name either. Round Freddy’s Bourgeoisie Dance hall, none of the girls had real names.

The clangs and the bangs and the *boom boom booms* raised up in a crescendo of razz-a-tazz music, with the bar tender calling last round, and the clock ticking down to three AM. It was Lala’s cue, the club was closing. She had a different show to attend next.

“Good luck,” said Lala, standing from her chair, picking up her fox fur cape and throwing it over her shoulders. She looked in the mirror a moment, at the lush woman who stared back all dressed up and ready to go, then she slid out of the fox and hurried to the closet, pulling out her old jacket – the beaver fur, and slid her arms into the familiar sleeves. With a sigh she turned back to the mirror. Rouge had slid into LaLa’s chair and pulled a flask from her garter.

“Want some?” asked Rouge.

La La buttoned her jacket and accepted the flask, taking a swig. “I’ll see you on the big screen,” she whispered, still staring at Rouge’s reflection.

“Here’s hoping,” answered Rouge. La La handed Rouge the flask.

Lala wasn’t jealous. She wasn’t anything, because a girl like Rouge wouldn’t make it down there, no more than she’d made it up here, up in Niagara. She was yesterday’s news, expired goods – and it came off her like a cheap perfume. No one would touch Rouge Deliquesce; Lala didn’t know much, but she knew that for sure.

Lala wasn’t jealous that Rouge was leaving. She was the star of this dance hall. Still the star. And nothing, *nothing and no one,* was gonna ruin that. Taking the postcard from her desk, La La tucked it into her pocket, picking up her burning cigarette and closing the door behind her as she left the dressing room, left the dance hall, and slipped out into the night. The dark buildings echoed with the click of her heels as she walked with sure steps along the frozen, deserted main street of Niagara falls.

She flicked the burning cigarette down into the gutter. She was the star of this little down. And now, it was time for her late night show. Gil was a man who didn’t like to wait.

19May2015

More Audio & Storytelling :)

Posted in Life, Travel

Here's a little bit more of blog turned podcast. In this batch of Hey It's Me I have two posts, and one collection of postcards read aloud. If you dig it do let me know. We'll be traveling soon, and I also want to capture that somehow. I want to capture all of these moments and chronicle them. I just do. It's never the same when you go back to read the old stories, but even if it's not the same, it is still *something*.

Clips from https://soundcloud.com/catherinebrunelle

Check out the latest three episodes. I think the music is just lovely.

Music featured in these episodes were found on Free Music Archive:
"That Kid in Fourth Grade Who Really Liked the Denver Broncos" (by Chris Zabriskie)
"Deep Blue Sea (with Jean Ritchie)" (by Howie Mitchell)
"I Do Like To Be Beside The Seaside" (1907, piano roll) (by John H. Glover-Kind) and "Maple Leaf Rag" (1899, Z. Brewster-Geisz version) (by Scott Joplin)

28May2015

Five years and counting

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life despite cancer

My groovy little brother turned 28 years old today. He was over at my parents for dinner, where Zsolt and I are staying. At one point, he asked me if I remember my 28th birthday. Oh yes, I remember. I'd just had surgery to remove my right breast, and was trying to scrape together some reason to want to celebrate. My friend had thrown me a party in her backyard. Mom was visiting for the month to help in me recover and prepare for chemotherapy. Zsolt had had a birthday the week before – he was literally in the hospital waiting for me to get out of surgery.

So yeah, it was *quite* the birthday. It was also five years ago.

Five years is quite a significant number if you are diagnosed with breast cancer. I guess it's the window in which, if you survive, you are deemed 'cured' in some measure. Lately I'm not sure how much it does or doesn't mean to folks. But it's still a big number. For instance, if you remain cancer-clear after five years you can apply for life insurance again. I was actually looking forward to applying for life insurance.

I remember planning to have a damn big party when I got to five years and was still cancer clear. It was going to be my line in the sand.

But this evening, right to the moment before I was asked that question, I'd actually forgotten the anniversary entirely. That's not easy to do – many folks can tell you. But I'd forgotten because since five years ago, I've have a number of different moments to mark different test results. I'm obviously no longer cancer-clear. Now I fall into the stage 4 level of breast cancer where it spreads and they don't have any amazing options or cures to offer. There are no more 'all clear' timelines. Instead, there's average life expectancy.

But, dwelling there won't help anyone, least of all me.

All I really wanted to say was *five years.* It's good to be here. Great to be there. I just wish I could have said 'Five years no cancer!' you know? Instead, in that moment, I thought . . . five years . . . and then had this weird feeling deep inside of me.

Here are some good things that have happened over the past five years:

Zsolt got his PhD

We traveled a lot, and did it well

I published *Claire Never Ending* and in a way, it makes me feel like I will live forever through the ripples

We moved to Canada

We created jobs when there were no jobs

We had our own apartment, and we made friends with our neighbours

I wrote and wrote and wrote, and became a freelancing writer

My friend and I started a podcast

I had three years of remission, and one year of shrinking

Every morning I woke up beside my best friend and husband

We traveled some more

I turned 28, then 29, then 30, then 31, then 32, and soon I'll be 33

We came home

We made home

I sang in the shower

There was much drinking of tea with friends and family

Board games happened

And many other things, many big and small moments.

Life has been beautiful, just as much if not more than it has been hard. So, I am very, very grateful for these five years. They do mean a great deal to me, even if this anniversary isn't what I had hoped it would be. Illness sure as heck changes your life, but I hope I am a better person for it. If I can't have my life insurance policy, I can at least claim a damn good life.

So that is all I have to say about that.

~Catherine

29May2015

Wedding anniversary :)

Posted in Life, Love

This is the summer of moments, my friends. Today is Z's and my six year wedding anniversary. We went to the Little India lunchtime buffet to celebrate. Now we are back home being not-so-romantic by getting back to work.

BUT you know what is romantic? Visiting the place we met ten years ago. And that is exactly what we're going to be doing this summer. So get yourself ready for some sappy storytelling love-infused posts.

In the meanwhile, to my dearest husband, happy anniversary. You are everything, and I think we've done a fantastic job of never forgetting how much we mean. Nagyon Szeretlek!

8Jun2015

Nighttime Waves in the Middle of the Atlantic on the Queen Mary 2

Posted in Bumpboobs, Fun, Life, Life despite cancer, Travel

We've had smooth sailing on the Queen Mary 2, except for the waves that kicked up last night. In the evening prior to dinner, Zsolt and I were down in the games alley near the bottom of the ship, staring out the windows with other guests and saying along the lines of: "Look at that! Woah! Here's another!" as the waves coming off the ship collides with waves approaching from the oceans for robust claps of water that shot spray high into the air. It was powerful and wonderful.

But then, later in the evening, as we lay in bed and rocked back and forth – suddenly, I no longer found it so wonderful. There was some point where we suddenly seems to tilt a little too much in the other direction unexpectedly (to me at least), and this was startling. So I opened my eyes and began to worry.

And that is what I did for quite a while. I worried. I lay in the darkness and thought about how we were literally in the middle of the Atlantic all alone. How this massive ship looked like a toy boat against the spread of Atlantic all around us. How one employee had been saying that in the winter, they'd once sailed through 12 meter waves, which was quite scary (yesterday waves were about 4 meters high). How if the ship flipped, we'd be stuck. How if we went into the water, we'd freeze and drown. How many things could go wrong? And part of me waited just in case the alarm signal went off, and we'd need to jump out of bed and grab the life jackets.

Zsolt was sound asleep throughout all of this, totally minta bunda – which is Hungarian for 'like a fur' as in, like a bear hibernating in the winter. As in, it really wasn't a big deal and I was most certainly over exaggerating.

And the logical side of my mind realized this over exaggeration. Only *hours* earlier, I had been thrilled with the sight of those waves, and was loving watching them slam and crash together. It was beautiful.

The logical side of my mind also said: Hey, you are in a warm and comfortable bed, next to the person you always want to be next to, and you are on a gorgeous holiday – enjoy it, lady.

To which I replied: WE MIGHT TIP OVER!

To which the logical side said: then deal with it as it comes, and go to sleep in the meanwhile.

And then I had to agree with myself. It reminded me very much of the later-coming September scans. This time I'll have my chest scanned and my head. I am, of course, very nervous about with may be seen – particularly since the news wasn't happy last time. So you know, I dread September and that is the truth.

But at the moment, I'm on the way to Hungary with my husband. It is our 10 year anniversary since having met, and we will be stopping by Nice – the place we met – to be sentimental and romantic and possibly get a tan on the beach.

Perhaps I should extend my experience on the boat to that in life: deal with it as it comes, and just enjoy in the meanwhile.

It's a challenge to let the logical and the emotional meet in one place. I am still scared of the scan. I am still nervous of nighttime waves . . . but then, so many wonderful things are happening all around today. And sometimes, I have to make my body and mind realize that worrying won't do anything. It won't make the ship sail better, and it won't help the scans to come.

After trying a couple restoration yoga poses, I finally settled into sleep mode and began to think about Romeo and Juliet. The actor troop here on the boat will be performing it today, and Zsolt would like to catch the show – never having seen it done live. I began thinking how way back in high school, grade 10, I was lucky enough to play Juliette in a classroom dramatization. It was the death scene. I worth a skirt and dress shoes, which looked clunky under the white sheet they draped over me as I lay there 'fake dead' while Romeo threw his life away over a miscommunication. Then I got to shot myself in the head with a foam Nerf gun, and fall to the ground – trying to hide my fit of giggles.

The teacher said I, and my friend Derrick who played the priest, had done particularly good jobs in acting the parts. Based on this single compliment back when I was 15 years old, I have always quietly held the belief that I'm a damn good actor. Of course, I have not tested that hypothesis ever since.

And then, I realized, I'd forgotten all about the waves, and was finally ready to fall asleep.

One thing about the past, it is certainly useful when distractions are needed.

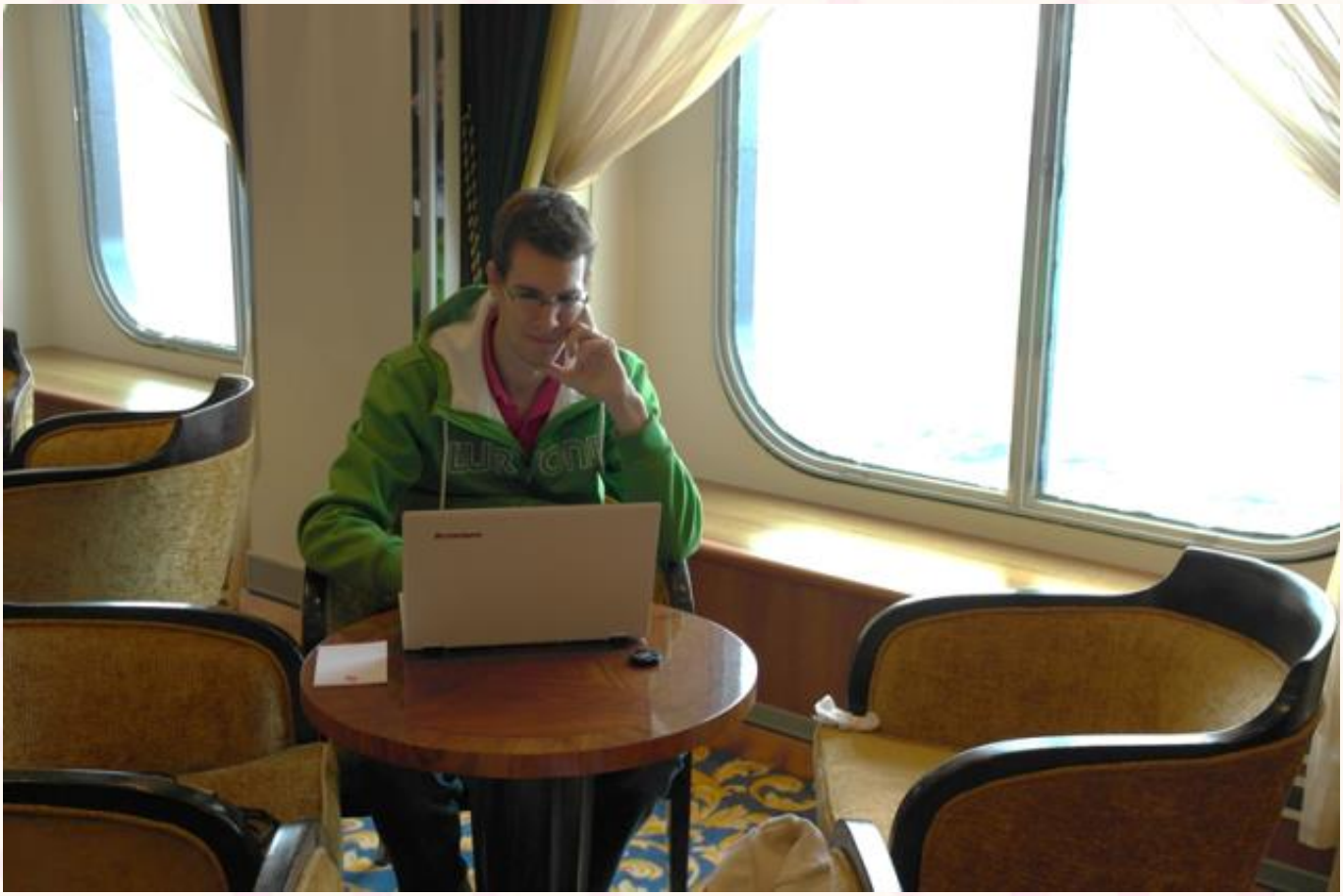
So that is the story of big wave-like metaphors, and trying to fall asleep.

P.S. We are having a lovely time.

P.P.S. This post brought to you by my man Zsolt, who has been working much of the trip and I'm literally snagging some of his precious internet minutes. Thanks babe!

P.P.S Picture time!

bench



18Jun2015

Yummy Europe

Posted in Finding Home, Food, Life, Life despite cancer, Love, Travel

We are here, we have arrived. As I type this, I'm looking out the bedroom/office window and can see the peaks of neighbouring homes (red tiles) and green gardens. There are electrical cords too, but let's skip over that feature. Hungary: Home. We are here.

The past two weeks has been such a lovely disconnect. Big Z couldn't say the same, I am guessing, considering he worked for *quite* a bit of the trip. However, we still crossed Europe quite happily and still managed to see the sights.

[warning, I'm feeling lazier than usual and will not be checking for typos. Read on at your own risk. Editing may come later as a result of post-posting shame]

Nice was *happy sigh* so nice. Between the thunder storms and work deadlines, we managed to stroll along the promenade and soak up quite a bit of ambiance. Essentially, we were able to – ten years later – revisit the site of our first meeting. There was Villefrance-sur-mer that I tend to never stop talking about. Stepping off the train, I immediately recognized the roads and turns taken on our original visit. Ten years later, and it's still deeply impressed in my mind.

This is a small, old fishing village where the buildings are ancient and painted in the Mediterranean colours of pinks oranges, greens and browns, and they are lined up very closely together to help block that beating sunshine.

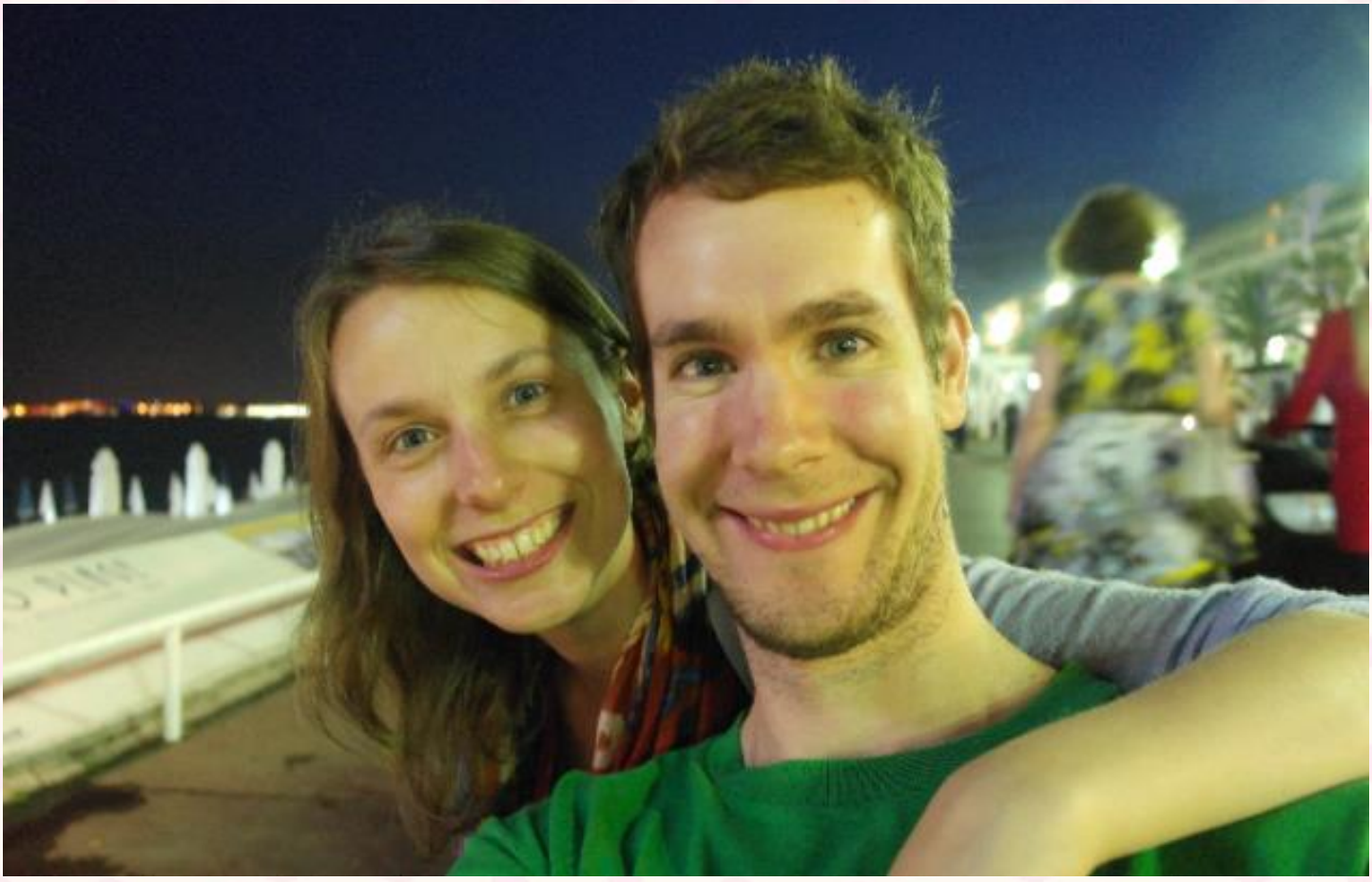
Hot damn, look at us! Why can't my hair do this more often?

We wound through the streets and made our way towards the beach. Ten years ago, Zsolt had not brought a towel along with him for the day – so, even though I didn't actually know him – I let him share mine. Hormones and adventure mixed together created quite a different Catherine than the world had ever seen before, back then. So, during our recent trip we shared a towel again.

Then later in the day, we visited an old Nice ice cream parlour where the waiters have been, both times, not so lovely. Hot milk for me, ice cream for Zsolt. It was pretty special, actually. Pinocchio is really the spot that was our first 'date' in that it is very date-like. A guy and a gal can't share a strawberry ice cream dessert (eaten ten years ago, before I broke it off with sugar) and *still* decree it wasn't a date.

Later that evening, while walking down the beach promenade and listening to the various buskers serenade us – saxophones and cellos – with their karaoke backups, we debated the spot of our first kiss. Thank goodness for facebook – we were able to look it up and then revisit the exact location the following evening.

So talk about your nostalgia!



Following this was another flight to Milan. (We had flown from England to Nice and had mucho, mucho turbulence. On the flight to Milan, our seat was at the very front of the plane. Turbulence happened again and my hands started tingling then going numb – I was going into shock, I think. Or just having a panic attack. However, I didn't tell anyone this…at least, I didn't tell anyone official. The airline steward was kind enough to let me know it was perfectly normal and would be over in 5 minutes. See, they should always do this. I'm far better when someone official explains what is happening, rather than 20 minutes later come over the speaker and say 'oh, we had some turbulence but it is done now.')

Anyhow, Milan. Mostly, we saw the train station. And in the train station, we met some very rude people. Ugh. This made me grumpy. But again, deadlines had to be met! On the day of our flight, we woke early to walk around the city, and I think the visit was salvaged. Zsolt had some soft, flurry lemon flavoured pastry that the clerk said was the best in Milan and had a wonderful reputation. My sugar-free self was just a bit envious, but I admit: I licked it, and it was good.

(Props to Z for allowing me to lick your food before you eat it)

And now we are here. Back in the real world, but not the real world. Anna, my mother-in-law is struggling with my eating habits: no flour & no sugar flying the face of all common Hungarian sense. She doesn't use the internet, so I'll have to give her some ideas. It's a very strange dynamic, her kitchen, and I try not to get involved as much as possible. however, the other night she asked if I want to eat pizza for dinner, so I think we'll need to work on the challenge together.

And speaking of food! I just learned that Zsolt's sister Anita has a lovely blog sharing her spin on recipes – creating food for those living with diabetes. The food is all diabetic friendly, often gluten free and certainly low sugar. Go and see for yourself. She's the Dessert Room (Desszert Szoba).

You'll need to select the English translation via the google widget. It's in the right hand column. AND she takes all the photos by herself. She's a damn food artist, and I never knew it!

Okay, that's all from me. I know I promised sentimental posts – and I reckon this didn't deliver. Remarkably, I was quite composed during the entire visit – except for this part:

We're walking hand-in-hand down the beach side promenade, having just left Pinocchio's ice shop. Just as we're nearing the Negresco, Zsolt stops and begins telling me that he's so incredibly happy, and that I'm the love of his life, and everything is so much better when we are together. And he just says all this stuff, and it's almost better than a wedding proposal how it tumbles out and his stopping makes it such a *moment*. So of course, I want to cry, but rather just throw my arms around him and bury my face in his shoulder and hug, and hug, and hug.

It's funny, in the movies I guess they'd have us making out like crazy as the camera spins around us, but in realty all I really, really wanted was to be as snuggled into him as possible. And then of course, share a kiss. But it was his stopping and our hug that I'll remember. What a romantic man.

P.S. Oh my god, Anna is frying bacon and I can smell it from up here. Whatever she's making, I want to eat it.

22Jun2015

The Power of a Pause – stories from Zsolt's grandmother

Posted in Fun, Life, Love, Travel

This past Saturday we piled into the car and drove across town to visit with Zsolt's grandmother, Anna for a chat and to pick some fruit. She's his grandmother on his mother's side. I met her about 9.5 years ago, when, while visiting Hungary, the 'grandmothers' would come by for a meal. By grandmothers, I'm referring to Zsolt's grandmothers and aunt Zsuzsi – who I may write about one of these days, because she's quite the character.

Anyhow, back then and for much of the time since, I didn't really get to chat with Anna. Fact is, we speak different languages, and Zsolt's *dad's* side off the family are very much gregarious show stealers. Hilarious people! His gran, Gyongyi, was always fretting about being old and Zsuzsi was always telling her latest story from wandering around town and having no sense of personal space.

Anna was far more quiet. She would sit across the table from me, on the very far side and only occasionally – and calmly – ask a question that Zsolt might translate.

Then a few years ago she moved to a new home, and we suddenly began to pay her visits there. Her house once belong to her grandson, who has quite the green thumb. The yard is a literal orchard of white peaches, sour cherries, apples, berries and more. It's not even that big – it's just incredibly well designed. So we go and sit in the garden, and she makes lovely food that I don't eat – but think looks really, really delicious.

Inside of Anna's house, where we migrate whenever it begins to rain, is a real treasure of stories. Her walls are covered with carefully preserved photographs from her days as a school girl, and her wedding, and her children (including Zsolt's mom), and more. And, her sofas are covered with finely embroidered pillow cases – with or without the pillows inside. That was her profession, she grew up doing embroidery and had an incredible talent with the needle.

Everyone sits around the large table in the center of the room – the old family table – and politely chit chats about the weather, the amount of snow in Canada, their sore joints, some family gossip . . . and then, if we stay there long enough, someone like Zsolt's uncle or aunt may show up, and the chit chat happens again – *until eventually, it doesn't*. People go out to pick fruit, or turn to one another for more quiet chatting.

Zsolt and I are left there sitting beside his grandmother, Anna. And now, the real conversation can begin.

Anna has a very special talent beyond caring for her home, sewing and the garden. She's an excellent multilingual conversationalist. Nope, she doesn't speak a bit of English. But what she's very good at is knowing when to **pause**.

Zsolt will look at me, then ask in english: What should I ask her? So I say, ask her about her garden. And then he does. Anna will reply, and then she will pause so that Zsolt can translate to me. Then, the stories somehow unfurl from there, and as she tells each piece of the story, she'll pause and Zsolt can translate.

Normally folks go on for 5 minutes, and then I get the 5 word translation because big Z can't remember what they were saying. With Anna it is so wonderfully different.

During our last visit, I asked Anna whether she makes palinka (a kind of very strong fruit alcohol) from the abundance of fruit in her garden. She explained that her children gather the fruit to make palinka, but she personally has no use for it.

Oh really? I ask – as Zsolt translates everything – Why is that?

She really just has no use for drinking alcohol. She's never cared.

Oh, I reply. Me neither! I just don't care about it. I've always thought this was a genetic thing I got from my mother.

Now Zsolt explains his stance on alcohol, that he doesn't ever drink it at home because I never do, but when out with friend he'll definitely have some drinks.

Then, Anna explains that her father loved his drink. They had so many grapes and wine all around them, there was an abundance of it. Her family always had alcohol on the family dining table, and when folks visited, they were always sent away with a bottle of wine from the vineyard. It was as plentiful as the bottled water we have today.

And Anna, when she was little, used to go to that dining table and pour herself little sips of the palinka and the wine – just quick tastes. She'd do it whenever it pleased her, and no one ever noticed, because there was so much of it!

And as she tells this, we can picture her as a little girl sneaking into the room and pouring herself a quick shot of drink. And suddenly we know her a little bit deeper. We know her beyond her age and status as a grandmother, beyond the eye surgery she just had, or how she becomes tired very easily these day. We know her story, just a little bit more.

All of this because she pauses, and in turn, I can ask questions.

It's a lovely think to chat with Anna. In those moment, I don't feel the language divide. I just feel like family.

29Jun2015

The First (and the only) Mindful Monday

Posted in Uncategorized

I don't ever do a mindful Monday, but a friend sent this quote to me the other day around blood, vibration and motherhood. She was at an event, and this passage was read, and it made her think of my novel, *Claire Never Ending*. (I'm quite honoured that she made such a wonderful connection). I read the passage and it made me think: DAMN THAT'S POWERFUL. Now it's your turn to read it and feel your own response. I'll link to the origin of the post below.

It is often said that the first sound we hear in the womb is our mother's heartbeat. Actually, the first sound to vibrate our newly developed hearing apparatus is the pulse of our mother's blood through her veins and arteries. We vibrate to that primordial rhythm even before we have ears to hear. Before we were conceived, we existed in part as an egg in our mother's ovary. All the eggs a woman will ever carry form in her ovaries while she is a four-month-old fetus in the womb of her mother. This means our cellular life as an egg begins in the womb of our grandmother. Each of us spent five months in our grandmother's womb and she in turn formed within the womb of her grandmother. We vibrate to the rhythms of our mother's blood before she herself is born. And this pulse is the thread of blood that runs all the way back through the grandmothers to the first mother. We all share the blood of the first mother – we are truly children of one blood.

Layne Redmond

From *When the Women were Drummers*, found on Gaiman Life

P.S. Did you ever consider how *you* originated in your grandmother? This is some literal linkage here! And the vibrating! I'll say it's the ripples of Claire, but you can call it whatever you like.

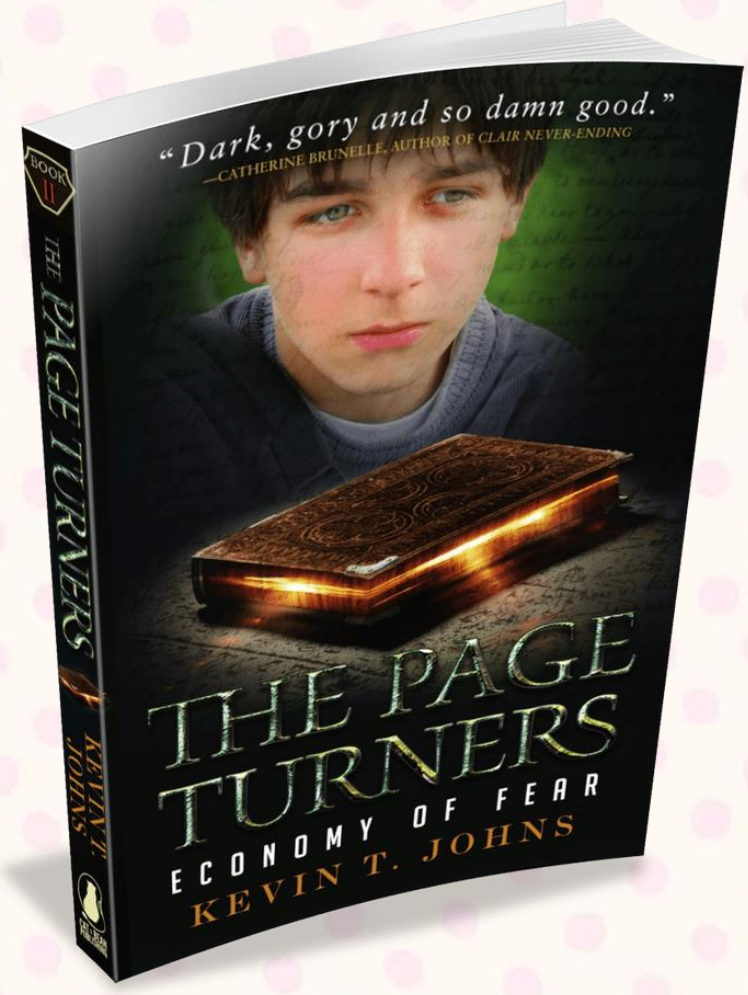
30Jun2015

Economy of Fear

Posted in Fun, Life, Reading, Writing

Hello you lovelies,

My good friend and podcasting partner Kevin is doing a pretty big thing. I mean, he's been doing a *lot* of big things this summer, including adding a new tiny daughter to family of ladies, and now he gets to add 'squeal book' to that list. Kevin and I met over a year ago, when we got together to discuss writing. I'd just finished his book *The Page Turners*, and he had just finished reading *Claire Never Ending*. I'll never forget how he showed up at the coffee shop with a list of questions to ask and a book to be signed. I showed up with . . . ahh, well . . . nothing, actually, except nerves and a mindset to make a new friend. But that moment is a good snapshot of Kevin, if you don't already know him. He pours himself into his projects. He exceeds expectations.



Anyhow, right now at this moment he has a pre-order party happening for the follow up novel to the Page Turners, called *Economy of Fear*. But Kevin being Kevin didn't stop with, "hey I have a new book, guys," He's gone and created this bundle – because he has this funny deep love for bundles. Normally I'm all anti-bundle. Even in the grocery store when Zsolt wants to buy 2 cans of tuna for the price of one, I full on reject the idea because *hey, we don't need two cans of tuna!* (Except that we do, in reality) however, I actually think Kevin has knocked this one out of the park. Again, exceeding expectations.

But because you guys probably haven't read Kevin's work – I'll give you the skinny on it now. To celebrate the sequel in the series, he is giving away an entire audio book of the Page Turners: Blood (the first book), plus he's giving away audio commentary, a prequel chapter *and* a 40 minute video where I get to interview him about writing! It's like the coffee shop all over again, except I'M IN CONTROL!

Ha. Ah. That got awkward.

Kevin books are, I think, a cross of Buffy the Vampire Slayer with the kids from Freaks and Geeks. It's dark, deep and dives into the world of small towns, friends, depression and how books can both save and change you.

If you want a good and gory read, check it it. Pre-ordering stars now!

24Jul2015

10,000 Kisses

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life, Life despite cancer, Love

Today is July 24th, 2015. That means it's the 10 year anniversary of my first kiss with Zsolt. It's also the 10 year anniversary of when I thought to myself, "I could marry this guy." AND it's my 10 year anniversary since having that absolutely perfect moment I'd always wanted with another person—it wasn't just the perfect setting or situation as we lay on the beach side by side, sharing earbuds and listening to Iron & Wine's *Such Great Heights*; it was perfect for reasons that can't be put into worlds. It was my first totally perfect moment. I remember realizing this as I lay there beside him, and then feeling amazed.

The blog has been largely quiet this summer. The reason for this is because I'm here with him, and we're by the Balaton shore, and everything feels so much in the present moment. Being with my husband, especially in a place like this where we are relaxed, and easy, and free, is simply put, curative for the soul.

I know what it is to feel fully alive and totally happy. I know what it is to be totally well and healed in the most essential of ways. It is because of this tall, hansome Hungarian I kissed ten years ago today. It is because I am totally with him and am totally for him, as he is with and for me.

So today I am healthy, and happy, and free. It's all longed for, and I am grateful.

Happy anniversary, Zsolt.

Love always

Catherine

P.S. 10,000 kisses? Well, at three kisses a day for 10 years, we're about there. But in fact, we suspect it's really about 20,000.

30Jul2015

This morning in the kitchen. . .

Posted in Finding Home, Fun, Life, Love

This morning Laszlo came into the kitchen still wearing his striped pyjamas. In he hops to grab something from the counter, then out he goes right back into the living room. If I didn't know that today was special, this would have been a clear sign that something was up. It's nearly 9 AM.

"Did your dad just get up?" I ask my husband.

"Did Dad just get up?" he asks his mother, Anna.

"He's been up since 5 AM running around the house," she replies, "fixing the garage, taking a shower, shaving and getting tidy. He's just too excited to change his clothes."

I made my banana mixed with nut butter breakfast and sat down at the table with Anna and Zsolt. The topic of Zsolt's cousin's recent engagement comes up. We all heard about it through Facebook, with pictures off the 'will you marry me' spelled out in candles included. It looks like it was a very sweet proposal. I guess they're now engaged! It's wonderful, but also bizarre to think she's at the age of marriage. In my mind, everyone stays much, much younger than me. But apparently I'm getting older, and a new generation is getting married.

Laszlo appears in the doorway, but this time he doesn't come into the kitchen. I wonder if he noticed that I noticed he's still in his pyjamas. He begins talking to Zsolt, and I watch him through the yellow glass-panel kitchen door. His hands are moving quickly, but not widely.

"He's won five dollars in the lottery," explains Zsolt.

"So that's a good sign for a good day," I reply. But of course that's not why he's so excited. His pyjama-wearing, running about excited because today is the day he will pick up his new car. This is a car that's been discussed for many years now, and they've finally been able to go forward with the purchase. After two weeks of delays in the car being delivered – today is THE DAY.

AND he's just won five dollars in the lottery. Never mind that he also spends five dollars a week on lottery tickets.

Laszlo keeps talking.

"He needs to go into our bedroom to get some paperwork," explains Zsolt.

The room is a mess. I've literally only started tidying it that very morning, but then abandoned the effort for some breakfast. The mess I'm most concerned about is my pile of underwear where the laundry hamper should be, which also happens to be right by the paperwork.

"Okay," I say. Because you know, the man needs his paperwork.

Laszlo disappears.

Anna and Zsolt begin to stretch and yawn at the same time. It's absolutely adorable. They're slowly raising their arms about their heads and yawning it out. I like how much Zsolt and his parents enjoy each others company. Subconscious imitation is a strong form of flattery and interest. So, this is darn tooting cute, and I reckon a showcase of love.

"Should we give them an engagement card?" I ask Zsolt.

"Should we give them an engagement card?" he asks his mother.

"It's not needed," replies Anna. "Engagements are for the close family. When I was a girl, people would gather each side of the family for the engagement – but just the closest family – and there would be a dinner between the two group. Then, at that dinner the guy would give the girl a ring, and they would be officially engaged."

(*She says something to this measure. Zsolt is our translator between Hungarian and English. These "" are approximate, but close enough.)*

Zsolt and I definitely didn't do this. We were engaged on the Isle of Wright in England, and our families were on different sides of the world. But still, it was memorable.

Suddenly our conversation around proposals stops as we hear Zsolt's father on the phone in the other room.

Oh no.

No.

Ohhhh.

Anna is ready to jump out of her chair, but Zsolt manages to keep her still.

We listen.

Yep.

The car is delayed.

And so ends the morning of excitement, romance, and pyjamas. Next time I see Laszlo, as he comes into the kitchen to explain the phone call, he's wearing his normal clothes. We will have to wait once again, it seems. But hey, the car *is* coming. And it *might* be here this afternoon. Here's hoping the lottery ticket really was a sign of a lucky day. If nothing else, we are all together here as a family in Pecs, Hungary. While I can't actually bring that up in the middle of the 'car isn't here' disappointment – it is nevertheless true, and it is also a very lovely thing.

The end. For now.

P.S.

Here's an update

7Aug2015

Night train to Balaton Lake

Posted in Finding Home, Life, Travel

It's evening here in Balaton. After a sweaty day of sunshine and heat, we are clustered on the screened outdoor terrace trying to enjoy the hint of nighttime coolness. I have been reading Jane Eyre on my e-reader, and I think it's effecting my writing. I'm feeling somewhat reflective.

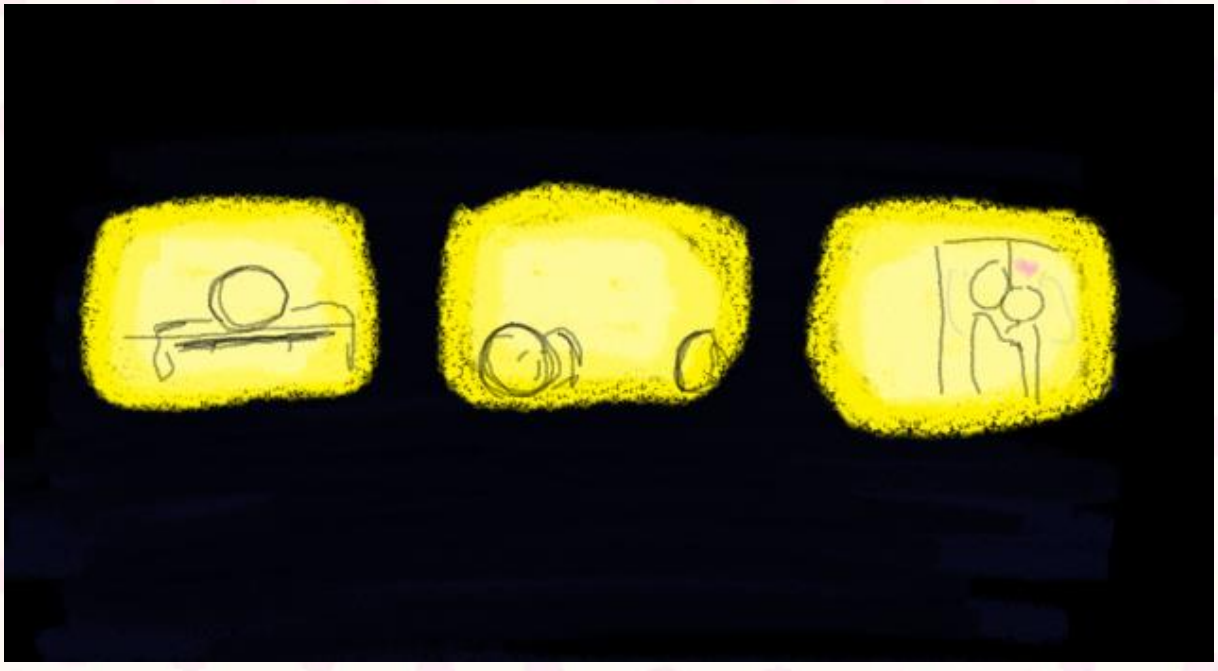
Here is what is happening: there are massive spiders in the corner of this terrace – massive, as in, huge, as in, several centimeters wide. The terrace feels like a lit-up stage, with the rest of the world, including the nearby train line all in the darkness outside – almost as if they don't even exist. *Almost*. Mosquitoes hum but can't reach us. The standing fan whirs as it gently blows the air. My skin is sticky with sweat. Everyone is on their laptops, phones or tablets.

And, to boot, I'm enjoying a glass of wine. I think tonight will be quiet. The heat has done us all in. We couldn't even bring ourselves to make dinner as planned. It was leftovers from the fridge instead.

Zsolt's family's cottage in Balaton is very, very close to the train line. In fact, the train tracks are just across the street from the cottage itself. So we are neighbours with the rumbling engines and their screaming carts.

And when I say screaming, I mean ***screaming***. For minutes before their arrival, we can hear the rumble of approaching freight trains. The air carries a growling noise and by the time the trains are finally blasting by and shaking the little stone cottage, the sound of their wheels and carts and chains and power are erupting into my ears and skull and mind. I used to describe it as a waking nightmare where for a few seconds, the world sounds like chaos. Now I just cover my ears instead.

But not all trains are the same. Some sound aggressive, and that is all I can make of them from the bright terrace as I look out into the night beyond the screened wall. Others though, other trains are a slice of magic…



The train is coming, rumbling but not screaming. It's not a freight this time; it's a passenger train carrying the holiday crowd from Budapest to the local Lake Balaton stations for this hot weekend. It's a slower train, but not slow. It's a smaller train, but not small. What I love about the passenger trains of Budapest, particularly at night, is that while they can see us perfectly in our glowing terrace while they are driving by, I can also see them – the passengers – perfectly in their lit up cabins.

Many are standing with elbows resting on the window ledge and their heads out into the fresh air. They are watching the windows of the cottages, like I am watching the windows of their train. Others are sitting in their seats, some are walking through the aisle. I spot one couple kissing by the doors. And as the train passes, with only the windows glowing, it's as though I'm witnessing many separate moments – separate cabins, different people, and because of the windows they are like flickers of channels on the television, glimpses of stories and lives.

I love watching trains for their passenger windows. The long and screaming freights are not to my taste; I'm still negotiating a fear that they will jump off the tracks and come roaring into this little Balaton village of Fonyod by the lake. But the passenger trains don't scare me at all. Instead, they absorb me.

Sometimes I wave, and sometimes I feel too grown up to wave. But in any case, I always watch. I always smile. I'm always glad for those glimpse of stories as the train hurries by.

And that is Balaton at the night, as we are here on the terrace, feeling rested and warm and waiting to cool.

The end.

17Aug2015

Going back to Canada

Posted in Finding Home, Fun, Life, Love, Travel, Uncategorized

We are on our way back. After two amazing months here in Hungary, the working-holiday has come to its end. I'm both sad to be leaving Zsolt's incredible family, anxious for the next set of scans, and massively excited for an upcoming opportunity I'll tell you more about in September. So, let's just say, I'm a big jumble of emotions. This is resulting in many naps today and a total lack of appetite. The packing needs to be finished, the room needs to be cleaned, and all I really want to do is sleep . . .

Sleep and share some pictures with you. This are from my instagram account.

As Zsolt says, it's like we are starting all over again from scratch – for the third time. I would actually count it at four, considering England, but there you go. This time I have some wonderful things to look forward towards, as does Big Z, but it's still hard. Leaving is always hard.

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23Aug2015

Night Train to Germany

Posted in Life, Travel

It felt like a romantic idea, taking a night train between Budapest and Dresden. I'd seen these sleeper cars in the movies, *Murder on the Orient Express* and such. What it really became was an eye opener to the story of migrants moving into and travelling across Europe.

For weeks before we left Hungary via the Budapest Central Train Station (Keleti), we had been listening to conversations in Hungary about the migrants. Some call them economic immigrants: people moving to another country to gain a better quality of life; others call them refugees: people seeking asylum from the atrocities within their home countries; and many, many, many in Hungary ultimately called them a problem.

Well over a thousand migrants *a day* are appearing in the country. Around dinner tables and along street cafes, everyone is discussing what they read in the papers or have seen on TV. Many of the comments are the same:

How are these migrants to be processed, supported, housed and moved? Hungary is not a rich country, and even if it was – in this a country by country crisis, or does it need EU wide policy and support?

Some migrants arrive looking, according to the newspaper which in turn becomes people's opinions, too clean and polished for trust (*though this documentary from Vice has a few words shared on that, plus having a nice shirt doesn't mean you still don't stink from weeks upon months of sleeping rough*).

There are fear mongering campaigns from the government about how these migrants will take all jobs, steal all chickens, and bring disease; (unfortunately most of this is typical political crap to buy votes at the cost of a group's core humanity).

And of course the words 'religion' and 'culture' are upon many, many lips. More fear, more uncertainty.

But still, I didn't actually *see* any migrants as I swam in Lake Balaton. I didn't pass any groups of displaced individuals as we walked through Pecs's downtown square. So, it really wasn't until the night train to Dresden that I finally caught my first glimpse of those searching for something better…

After an emotional goodbye to Anna and Laszlo, which is always so heartbreaking, Zsolt's sister and brother in law took us to the train station, Keleti. They helped us carry our luggage to the sleeper train. In doing so, we entered this massive hall within the station – it looked like a huge old church, except without any seating. I

looked around, checking for the migrants. But at first, I couldn't see them. There were people of all colours, all traveling, all looking plain knackered as they waited for their trains to arrive.

I asked Zsolt, Nitti and Berci – do you see any migrants? They shook their heads, uncertain too. But then, while waiting for the train to arrive, we began to see them. Or rather, we began to notice them. Many of the women wear headscarves. Many of the younger men seem single, and rest together in groups. Many of the children cling to their parents. And the teenagers seem to do exactly what teenagers will do – float to the side, a bit away from their families . . . but not so far that you think they're all alone. Like us, they were waiting. No one was begging, which actually surprised me.

Finally our train arrived, and Berci and Nitti help us take the luggage into our cabin. Yes we splurged on a two bed cabin. I figure, if you're doing a sleeper train – do it right. The cabin was this incredibly narrow bit of a room, with bunk beds. After much puzzle-like arrangement of bodies and suitcases, we settled into the room. Zsolt's sister and brother-in-law waited on the platform for us to leave. We waited in the doorway of the car. Everything was delayed.

Walking up and down the platform were the migrants. This train that we were on was going to Germany. They wanted to go to Germany. According to a friend of ours who works for immigration, Germany is their Shangri-La – the migrants hear the benefits are great. This actually reminds me of how many Hungarian Romas were arriving to Canada after hearing Canada had some excellent benefits. The Canadian government literally took out billboard ads and placed them in Roma populated cities in Hungary that basically said: We have changed our immigration laws. You will be immediately sent back if you come. Don't bother trying.

Anyhow, these folks wanted to get to Germany, that's where their hopes lay. The means, our train, was right in front of them, and yet it wasn't possible to reach. What struck me most were the groups of families. Big groups, milling about on the platform together . . . walking here and then there, scanning the train together with children held in their arms, children held by the hands, and those teenagers finally paying attention and hovering closer to the herd. But how can an entire family stow away upon a train? They can't.

Finally we began to move. We waved goodbye to Nitti and Berci, and returned to our cabin. Even as the train left the station, one off the conductors came walking through the corridor with a migrant in front of him. "This way" the fellow was asking the conductor, "that way," the conductor – more or less – instructed. And so they walked together through our train car, towards the back of the train.

Half an hour later, we are in our cabin. I'm sitting on the only available floor space, eating from a bag of chips. There's a very hard knock on the cabin door. "Immigration!"

I'm like, "one second," and try to push myself up to open the door – it's tiny and crowded, so this takes a couple tries.

"Immigration!" Rap, rap, rap!

"Coming!"

I try to open the door, but one of the bottom locks confuses me – so it opens, but then jams. The men on the other side try to open the door too. Obviously it's still locked, it opens and jams again.

"Hold on," I call again. They try the door again.

Finally Zsolt manages to lean around me and untwist the bottom lock.

The door is swung open.

“Immigration! Passports!” There is a security guy and a police guy. I lean against the doorway eating my chips as Zsolt fishes out the passports. For some reason, I laugh to myself. Probably become immigration guy number two looks a bit like a cartoon character, and I can’t help finding this situation both disturbing and ridiculous. The guy who kept calling ‘immigration’ passes back our documents one after the other, take a quick peek into our cabin, and then, they move on – pounding on the next cabin door.

Eventually the train arrives to its next stop in Hungary, and we see through the window a group of migrant men being herded down the platform. They got onto the train, but they didn’t get much further.

One, then two security officers pass by – large muscular men with tiny flashlights, shining here and there.

“You know, in many ways we are very lucky,” I say to Zsolt.

“I know,” he replies.

I can’t even begin to imagine what will happen to these thousand plus people a day who are crossing into Hungary and beyond. Where will they go, who will take them, what will happen next? It’s all beyond me. The only thing I know is what I saw on that train platform in Budapest. I saw a mother feeding her child baby formula from a big can with a kitten on it. I saw awkward teenagers with faded jeans. I saw groups rushing down the platforms. I saw young men sitting together and waiting for who knows what. I saw weathered old men holding the hands of toddlers.

I saw them watching us, and certainly they saw us watching them.

Eventually Zsolt and I give up looking from the sleeping cabin window and lower the blind. As the train rocks, creeks and charges forward, we tuck into bed. I can’t help but wonder whether anyone has managed to make it out of the country, and whether they’ll actually reach Germany. It feels unlikely.

This is the night train to Dresden. It is not so romantic.

9Sep2015

Blogging Personality

Posted in Bumpboobs, Fun, Life, Life despite cancer

So I saw this personality test on the Vlog, and thought I'd like to give it a try. But rather than writing 3500 random phrases, I just pulled from my blog posts and inputted it. Then it analyzed the text and gave me my personality results. Not bad, I think! I'll take that. Here's a link if you want to try it yourself.

This is what IBM had to say about my blogging personality. If you write or blog, maybe give it a try as well? It could be a fun little game to see what you are expression through your words. (as a computer program would interpret)

You are social.

You are empathetic: you feel what others feel and are compassionate towards them. You are confident: you are hard to embarrass and are self-confident most of the time. And you are outgoing: you make friends easily and feel comfortable around other people.

You are motivated to seek out experiences that provide a strong feeling of efficiency.

You are relatively unconcerned with achieving success: you make decisions with little regard for how they show off your talents. You consider helping others to guide a large part of what you do: you think it is important to take care of the people around you.

Also, I had some news the other day. One step at a time and all of that. It could be worse, of course. Though knowing that doesn't always make life super fun to manage, does it?

2Oct2015

In which I lose my mind, slightly

Posted in Bumpboobs, letting go, Life, Life despite cancer

Hello hello hello

and

hello!

Okay, enough of that. I think I'll do that thing where I blog and pretend no one is watching. Dance like no one's watching – except, I'll write. And this isn't on some big stage. *And* most importantly, I'm not wearing any leotard, ballet shoes, *or* waving any jazz hands.

Man, work has been interesting. Like, 9-5 and beyond interesting. It really hasn't stopped since I began. Today I made a list of all the things I'd like to do – for only one part of my job, not even the other part – and there were 80 things on that list! EIGHTY. And they're not like 'sharpen all the pencils in my pencil holder' they are complex-to-organize pieces of business.

But hey, I've made a list. Next comes the question: which of these are going to help me reach my goals best, and also fastest? From there, I'll prioritize. Along with: what am I am actually capable of doing at this moment?! And what needs to be done first, so that other things can be done afterwards?

You know what full time employment feels like? (She asks herself, because she's *meant* to be writing as if no one is reading. Damn.) It feels like an adventure game. Monkey Island, with fewer monkeys, or pirates, or insult sword fights. If I want to accomplish goal A, I need to have resource B and C in my inventory – but I can only get those resources by solving puzzle Q. etc. So yes, apparently my love of adventure gaming has prepared me for being a grown up. Who would have known?

Anyhow, I love my new job. I love, love, love it. You know what I do? I do this! And I love it!

But you know what I haven't' loved? I haven't loved the surging pressure headache I've been getting. And I haven't loved the wheezing in my chest – caused by elements that I *really* don't love. And I haven't loved that the boxes in my apartment STILL haven't been unpacked despite my having moved in a month ago. AND, since I'm writing to myself and am allowed to complain like no one is listening, I DON'T love the FUCKING cancer that is trying to FUCK UP my life.

Ahem.

Excuse me.

But it's true. I am both happy and frustrated at once. When I'm at work, it all goes away. When I'm at home, and not watching the Amazing Race with my husband, I focus far too carefully upon the wheeze that has developed in my chest. Along with the cancer cells, I think stress has simply gotten to me. And while I fully realize there are means to relieve these pressures, I can't seem to . . . get there. You know?

Like, I should meditate. I should exercise. I should do yoga. I should go for a swim. I should eat well. I should take vitamins. I should call the hospital. I should call my health care insurance. I should brush my teeth more often. I should clean the kitchen counter. I should unpack those boxes. I should maybe start chemo. I should finish writing my next book. I should edit that podcast. I should write this article. I should finish a blog post. And oh yes, I should do the things that really, truly make me happy.

Or I could just go to bed.

Often, at this point, bed feels like the best option. Except I don't even really love my bedroom, because we moved into a really weird, though also clean, apartment, and I'm not sure if I like it yet.

As I said, complain like no one is watching. Sorry.

Now, it's not always like this. I do all those things on the list above quite happily (except for anything hospital related, because that does *not* make me happy). But I haven't written a blog post in a long time. Partly because I've been tired. But also largely because I've started a new job, and I still don't' know how to navigate between my voice, my job, and my private but also public health and life story. When it comes to work, I never want to drag in the heath realities. So I don't update my blog, because I don't want folks noticing what's going on when I'm not at my desk hustling to make an awesome book club.

What I probably really need to realize is that no one is watching. Like really, they're not. And if they are, they're not really because we all have lives that demand attention. But still, it's been a weird challenge for me. I've never felt the need to censor myself before, except when I worked for the library. And frankly, that was hard even then. I feel it even more so now.

But I like writing these things out. If I'm ever going to move away from these stress-pressure reactions, it's definitely at least in part going to be through writing them out.

So there it is. My complaining blog post. I'm a little happy, a little sad, and a little tired. I'm also really excited, totally in love, and scared out of my mind – but hey, why can't we be many things at once?

And now I will revert to my default coping method.

Time for bed.

Goodnight.

12Oct2015

Almost Canadian

Posted in Canada, Finding Home, Life

When I pictured the location of Zsolt's citizenship test, I liked to imagine some place like the Museum of Canadian History – with its massive atrium and totem poles, and a view of the Parliament building that really says, "oh, Canada!"

And perhaps for the citizenship test, Canadian olympic champ Jon Montgomery from the Amazing Race (Canadian Edition) would be standing in the middle of the atrium as Zsolt descended down the escalators into the main hall, and in his hands would be the applicants' first clue cards. Grabbing the yellow paper package, Zsolt would rip open the clue:

Who is the Canadian hero known around the world for his cross country marathon to beat cancer?

"Terry Fox!" Zsolt would say to himself, and then he'd be off to the Terry Fox statue opposite Parliament Hill for the next clue, racing against others would-be-Canadians of all colours, cultures and religions. In this race, there are no rules, and Zsolt steals a cab from another contestant, apologizing as he does so in the proper Canadian manner, and then zooms across the bridge into Ottawa – bribing the taxi driver with a twoonie and a loonie (so, 3$ all together) to put pedal to the metal. Finally, after a series of clues that has him and thirty other contestants racing from historical landmark to government structure to Canadian heritage site around the city, they finally all find themselves vying to get up the Peace Tower elevator, where at the top all the family members are waiting to cheer on Canada's winner of the Amazing Race Canadian Citizenship Challenge!

As we all wait and hold our breath in anticipation, the elevator digs – and out steps . . . Zsolt for the win!

Because that would be awesome.

However, it was still very exciting when my husband received a letter from immigration in the mail inviting him to participate in a multiple choice test at an unremarkable government building. It was recommended Z study the guide, *Discover Canada* – and so that's what he did. We read through it together in the evenings, and he studied during the days. The afternoon before his test, he answered ~400 multiple choice questions online.

Of course, were he to fail he could just take the test again – but sometimes it's just easier to get things done the first time around.

Then, on a lovely Thursday afternoon, we went to the very unremarkable government building next to a very loud highway, and he entered a room with a test and a pencil, then came out twenty minutes later – answer a few questions in an interview – and voila! Test done!

He scored 20/20, and I'm totally proud of him. I then forced him to pose with his Canada scarf wrapped around his neck. But we were both into it, because it was VERY exciting!

And now we simply wait for the ceremony invitation to arrive in the mail. I'm glad it is all moving along. Sooner than later, Canada won't just be Zsolt's home – it will be his country.

And if you're wondering, Hungary and Canada allow for dual citizenship. This is a good thing. Maybe one day I'll get to be as much Magyar as Zsolt will be Canadian.

14Oct2015

It’s Cancerous: A Love Story

Posted in advanced cancer, Blogging and Other Fun, Bumpboobs, Life, Life despite cancer, Love, Writing

I wrote this ‘game’ in the summer, and intended it for #metastatic breast cancer day (i.e. stage 4) during this month for #breastcancer awareness. It’s still in its rough form, but I’ll share it because that was why I wrote it, and believe me it wasn’t so easy to write. This isn’t everyone’s experience, and to be honest I have purposefully given it a vague ending – to be interpreted as you like. But it springs from very real frustrations. The options are not easy, and not enough.

So, play if you dare.

Click here: It’s Cancerous: A Love Story

24Oct2015

What comes next? I don't know.

Posted in advanced cancer, Bumpboobs, Treatment

Yesterday was one I'd like to forget forever. At about 6 AM, I woke up Zsolt with a hard cough. I woke up myself too! The cough, unfortunately, was very, *very* unhealthy. Like, get to the ER unhealthy. It was followed up by a kind of gurgling in my lungs.

Pretty fucking scary, I have to say. After a day in the ER at the General in Ottawa, with a few tests and a lot of waiting, plus a visit from various doctors, the reality was confirmed – one of my lung lobes had collapsed. The treatment I'm on isn't working. Hasn't been working for a while, and so the problems have been growing – most recently blocking one of the airways into a lung area, hence the collapse. And it's time to jump ship to different options. This a point in the road I really didn't want to reach. I didn't want to get here. I don't know how it will go down.

But I do love my life, and I love my work, and I hope this new treatment option – the scary C word, but considerably more light in dosing, plus possible radiation to the trouble making lung lobe blocker – will have the effect of pushing back the damn progression, because then I can carry on as I'd like. Apparently a range of doctors will be meeting to discuss my situation, and come up with a plan on how best to tackle this. In the meanwhile, I am breathing fine. The lung doc says I'm compensating remarkably well for the loss of the lobe.

Anyhow, it was a scary day. Perhaps even scarier for my husband, who was left alone after I'd passed out from panic at 6 AM and managed to get me the needed help – he laid me out safely and called 911.

My parents and he stayed with me all day in that small, quiet, and thankfully uneventful ER room. They were with me when I received the news of the progression and its ramifications, and they are with me in what needs to be done moving forward. Together I am certain we will make the best of this. I'm lucky for all of this love and support.

One day at a time, one challenge at a time.

But holy shit, life is fragile.

3Nov2015

Saying “No” is Boring

Posted in Bumpboobs, Fun, Life, Life despite cancer, Writing

So let’s cut back to regular normal life. Because that all still happens, even when I do crack and write my little crisis moments here on the blog. In my normal life, I have come to realize I’m really doing far too much. It’s coming to the point where I need to wrap up obligations and say no to taking-on any more.

Boo! That’s so boring. However, for the time being, I believe it is becoming more and more necessary. I love, love, love collaboration and new ideas and trying new things – but I’m genuinely becoming tired. My husband can attest. There are very good days, but there are just as many days where it’s hard to do anything but strap an ice pack to my head. Of course, we all face this kind of up and down, and I know this situation is not unique. However, I do feel like I should take my opportunities to slow down.

Slowly things are wrapping up. *Very slowly*.

Towards the end of the summer, I finished the literary blog review that I’d been writing for Apartment 613. Dusted and done. I decided to stop trying to finish up that It’s Cancerous game and just leave it be as it was. Now, as we move into November, I am finishing up the production and promotion of a special radio episode that I’ve been able to produce. It’s really freaking beautiful, and I’m quite proud. Storytelling is a power medium – even, for me, somehow more powerful when you couple good writing with good audio.

Can I share it with you? This is a project I did for the World Wildlife Fund and Hub Ottawa. I think it was done very well. There are several things I’ve been proud of lately – my contribution to Foment Magazine and the literary festival episodes, my husband or everything he does, and this project now completed with the help of a small grant.

So give it a listen. Various Ottawa-based writers submitted their writing, and I picked a handful, organized readings and hosted the episode. This stuff is wonderful. No matter what happens, this episode will have been produced. It’s a time capsule of creativity. Just like my Claires.

I do get tired. Oh – so – tired. For days on end, I get home from work and my head is knackered. I push too hard, and don’t stop when my body suggests it might be time. Instead I say, ‘one more thing.’ – and while this really truly cannot go on – at least not at this weird transition phase in my life, I do so *love* the results of a project well done.

Anyhow, as I slowly ease myself out of saying “yes” so often, I will leave you with this. It’s a wonderful 45 minutes of storytelling. I really freaking love it, and think everyone did wonderfully.

9Nov2015

Wanted: Bloggers

Posted in Uncategorized

Imagine you wrote a blog post one day, then the next day you were dragged from your home and taken away. No fair trial, just gone. Maybe worse. Probably worse. That happens; it happens way too often. I figure, bloggers should look out for other bloggers. And so, I'm looking for folks interested in helping share a post about Amnesty's Write-a-thon. You can pick a case you care about from **this website**, and I'll send you some material to help showcase why writing letters matters so much.

Amnesty International is hosting a world wide letter writing event on December 10th. This is a day where thousands upon thousands upon thousand of people write letters on behalf of others who have sufferings that make my little stories look easy. I'm talking about being imprisoned for blogging, for tweeting an opinion, for daring to defend another's right to express, and so much more.

'cause seriously, imagine if you could be jailed and flogged from writing your thoughts in a blog post? Imagine that. Except that it's almost impossible to truly imagine because it's simply horrible, and thankfully many reading this post won't live in that kind of world. If you'd like to help create change for those who do, let em know and I'll give you the 411 on a post. Leave a comment, and I'll message you to follow up.

Don't have a blog? **You can still sign up** and write some letters. You can still tweet out about the event. You can still draw pictures for Zunar the cartoonist for Instagram. You can still do quite a bit – and as a group, we can help create change.

That's it from me. Thanks for reading my post. Have a lovely day.

20Nov2015

Broken glass

Posted in Life despite cancer, Love

Of course I miss my grandmother. It's been years since she passed away, but I miss her still. I'm sure we all do, when we stop and realize it. Though it's not often I stop to realize too many things. Not stopping is a bit of a coping mechanism, you might say. Or maybe you'd say defense mechanism. I guess I'll just call it 'my mechanism.'

Anyhow, so, it wasn't long after we finally moved to Canada for keeps that Lulu passed. She was staying at my aunt's cottage, and I had the good fortune to spend many days with her and my aunt. Zsolt and I would go up to keep them company, because it can become lonely in the middle of the forest. Then one day, she was in pain, and there was an ambulance, and then suddenly she was gone.

But that was then.

As I said, we had finally moved to Canada, and Zsolt and I were setting up our home. So, much of Lulu's things came to us. We had her two sofas that were straight from the 90s, we got the stack of lovely plates with the sunflower pattern, we received her old record player and some lovely music, and, among other things, we received some lovely glasses with a light etching of a flower.

Back when I was a kid, we'd visit Lulu at her apartment in Montreal where all these things once lived. And while visiting, she'd offer us a Pepsi. Since our household in Ottawa *never* had such an abundance of pop – of course it was nice to have a Pepsi at Lulu's apartment. But she didn't serve the Pepsi in its can. Instead, she'd pour it into a glass.

And that's what I think about when I look at those glasses. Or maybe, rather, that's what I feel. I feel her and her Pepsi, and how it was to visit. I was a kid, keep in mind, so the visits were mostly totally boring – at least until I grew up. But still, it was a good feeling to be there in those moments.

Anyhow, the thing about glass is that – you know – it breaks.

Fact: my cupboard is filled with MUGS because I don't buy glasses. They drop and shatter and it's a catastrophe. But when there was a chance to take Lulu's glasses, I went for it. We've been enjoying them for the past few years. And somehow, they keep her in my mind.

Unfortunately, as I said, glass breaks. One by one Lulu's glasses broke. There were only a few, and then there were fewer. After tonight there are now officially none.

The last glass broke this evening.

I had no idea, apparently, how much they mattered to me. As soon as I realized the last glass was gone, I just blubbered like you wouldn't believe. Like, ridiculous. Zsolt thought I had gone crazy. But you know, somehow she was suddenly more gone than she had been only moments before. Or maybe it just reminded me that we had lost her. Or maybe . . . I don't know, maybe too many things have been held inside and pushed away through my mechanisms.

So I cried for the glass, and I cried for my grandmother – and I cried because sometimes it's just better to let everything out. It's not that the world is terrible, or life is crazy, or I'm uncomfortable. None of those apply. It's just that the tears started and would not stop.

I think we've had many reasons to cry lately. From internal struggles, body issues, to real world horrors. There have been reasons to cry. And yet the tears have been held back…… but emotions don't dissipate simply because I prefer to ignore them. They apparently wait. They wait, and then, when the last glass shatters, they finally unleash.

There's no moral here, this is just a story. Just one story. And I have other cups – I have mugs made by family, and champagne flutes given by friends, and tea cups from my mother-in-law, and cups from England, and many wonderful things all around. It's nice to look upon an object and remember that love lays behind it. If nothing else, I was reminded of that tonight, and reminded of my grandmother. Even if I cried, I cried for her – and it was very much a needed physical relief.

Lulu, wherever and whatever you are, I hope it's good. I hope it's very, very, very good.

Love,

Catherine

28Nov2015

Zsolt becomes Canadian

Posted in Uncategorized

Guess who became Canadian? Zsolt!

It's been a ridiculous week, but one wonderful silver lining was my husband gaining his Canadian citizenship. It's surreal. I was half outta my head with fever this week, but still went to the ceremony because you *cannot* miss your husband becoming CANADIAN.

Please help me welcome him to Canada. Congratulations, Zsolt!

And thanks to mom, dad and David who were at the ceremony, too.

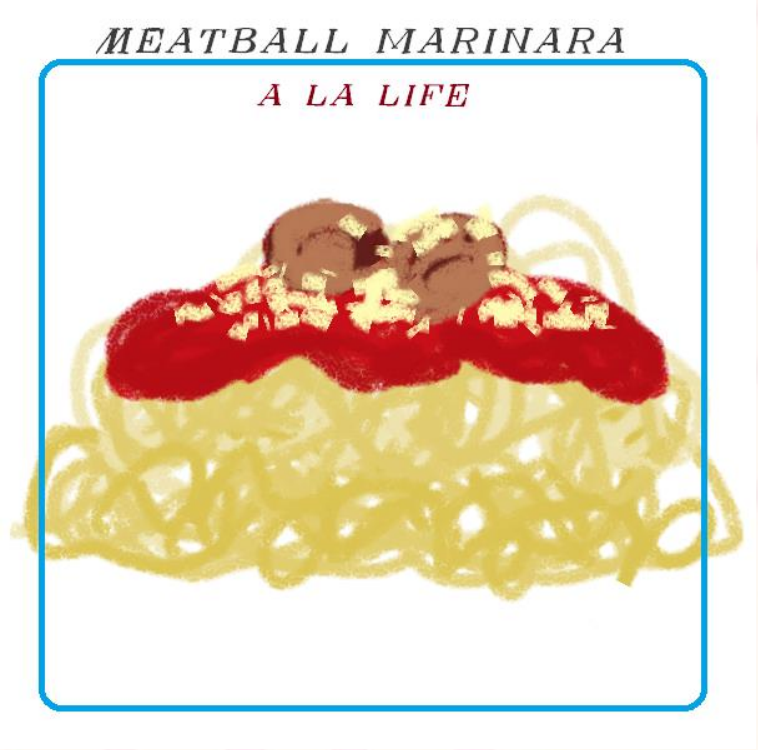
xoxox! Catherine

19Dec2015

May it be worthwhile

Posted in Blogging and Other Fun, Bumpboobs, Life, Life despite cancer, Radiotherapy Treatment, Treatment

After a while of simply *not* writing things down, I guess it just becomes easier to stop altogether. That's what I've been doing lately – stopping all together. It started just after that post I posted (oh man, ugly wording) about the blood and the hospital and the lung and yada yada yada.



I just stopped with the posts. This will happen sometimes. Often it's because I'm out having an awesome time in the world. But sometimes it's because I just don't want to share.

All this being said, it's been a trip.

Life has gone all pin ball machine lately, and I'm that metal ball pinging from paddle to paddle. Sometimes I shoot up in a happy moment, other times I roll down towards that game-over pit and not a paddle can save me . . .

That's really dramatic language. When I started with that pinball metaphor, I actually thought it would be more fun.

Life has been like a plate of spaghetti. I'm the meat ball on top, sinking into the marinara sauce and wet, warm noodles . . . and the Parmesan cheese, with that pinch of salt and sprinkle of pepper . . . and the fork going in there with the spoon, wrapping all the goodness together . . .

Actually no. Life hasn't been like a meatball on a plate of spaghetti. I'm just seriously hungry. Like SERIOUSLY hungry.

Life has been like this: it's has been busy. After that trip to the hospital, a few different things happen:

- My oncologist, Dr Canada, ordered a biopsy – meaning a tube-down-the-throat-into-the-lungs biopsy.
- Then, following that, radiation was ordered – meaning shoot radiation at your lungs for two weeks every evening after work.
- Then, following that the side effects kicked in – meaning don't eat because you can't and lose 10 pounds for swim suit season…except it's winter and we all just want to indulge in cookies and chocolate. At least, I do. Stuffing too. And meat pie. And pretty much everything right about now. Just today I had my first solid food in a week. I chewed that olive about 40 times before swallowing.
- I missed work, and worried.
- Biopsy results came back. Interesting stuff. More another day.

Other things happened too!

- Zsolt became CANADIAN.

I was going to throw him a party like this: Everyone would come over wearing red & white. We'd be decked out in Canadiana. He, being the guest of honour, would name the best Canadian outfit. We'd have a map of Canada and people would be blind folded, and would need to 'pin the capital on the country'. There would be a table filled with Canadian themed food from Beaver tales to maple syrup to a veggie platter (because you need something healthy) to maple cake to Canadian beer, etc. And we'd all give Zsolt our best advice on how to be Canadian.

None of that happened, except in my head. Maybe it will, probably it won't. Unfortunately the radiation side effects were stronger than anticipated, and we cancelled the party. Party or not, the man is still CANADIAN. And it's still really surreal.

More things!

- Refugees began to arrive in Canada! This makes me really happy to watch in the news. They've been going through a nightmare. Even though the memories will of course follow them, they are here. They are in a new home, and we want them to feel as safe as possible.
- We decorated our apartment. Finally, after months of the pictures hanging around and the freezer being in the middle of the floor, we have put everything away and made this new place feel more like home.
- Work! It went well.
- I went and bought some clothes. Somehow, in between the physical phases of treatment, my mother and I went to the shop and I picked up some clothes for work. The sale rack was good to me. I no longer need to shop for another 1.5 years.
- My family has been awesome-incredible-amazing-loving-supporting and more. Zsolt and I have been so touched.

This is what I need to remember going into 2016. It is probably not going to be a bed of roses, but if I'm lucky the lows will seriously be balanced, if not totally knocked aside by the highs. I need to remember what I'm fighting for. These good things need to be the center of me. It may not always been easy, but I pray it is always worthwhile.

That is all.

Goodnight.

31Dec2015

2015 in the blink of the screen

Posted in Blogging and Other Fun, Bumpboobs, fear, Fun, Life, Life despite cancer

Here we go, it's the end of 2015. No joking, I can remember the year it turned 2000 like it was literally (almost not quite) yesterday. The New Year's Eve party was held in my neighbor's dance studio – and it felt as though half our grade showed up. Maybe it was really just a quarter, but it was a big party nevertheless.

My dad bought me 'baby duck' champagne because he figured the millennial shouldn't be rung in without some fizzy baby booze, even if I was underage for drinking. (Which is reasonable, I think, considering there was no shortage of booze at the party. Though I seem to recall my mom wasn't so very thrilled that he went out to get me *ze drink* a la baby duck.)

This was back when I didn't touch alcohol. I had my reasons, but mostly it was because I really didn't care about it. This I get from my mother. However, I was nevertheless all set to have some champagne, except that I barley got a sip in due to some very concerned friends who weren't too pleased. So, I caved into peer pressure – but in the reverse direction than would be expected.

Whatever! It was a great night. There was a balloon drop that took forever to set up beforehand because we had to blow up all the damn balloons. There were weird make out scenes at midnight – as in, throw up and then kiss! For me no kiss, but I watched a guy I had a crush on kiss someone else, and somehow I was still into him after that. Typical wonderful teenage stuff. And I think I was wearing trousers made out of this khacki coloured mesh. Weird.

At midnight we checked the phones, and for about 2 minutes they didn't work. Y2K Strikes!

Then came the inevitable freak out, when the host is both hammered yet beginning to sober up, and realizes: "My parents are going to kill me!" which is when we pull out the garbage bags and begin cleaning – around about 1 am. I've been at many a party where this has happened, and always get my clean on. Once, at a different New Year's party, the host's mother actually called during the party, then asked to speak with me knowing I'd be sober. I'm not bragging, except that I AM BRAGGING because somehow it made 'being responsible' feel cool for a few minutes.

Anyhow, after the party, at about 2 or 3 am, we went back to my friend's home. When I say 'we' I mean *all* my group of friends – the guys and the girls, and I reckon we totaled over 15 people. Boys slept in the basement and girls slept upstairs. Except that my friend's mother were completely shocked that everyone was hammered. Hammmmmmered. One friend who shall remain unnamed tried to go through the door and walked into the wall, repeatedly. So, we got quite a talking to the next morning. In fact, my friend's mother thought I was also completely drunk – and this truly bothered me, since I'd been talked out of drinking that bottle of champagne, and therefore missed the boozy fun and instead got pinned for the trouble. Honestly, I was just exhausted by the time she saw me. Tired Catherine is actually nothing like champagne & sugar Catherine … but, why would she know that?

However, it was still really nice of her mother to let us all stay there. Her mom didn't know what she were getting into. She handled it quite well considering.

Mostly I remember having a damn good time. And that it feels like just yesterday. And I was about 18.

Flash forward, and I'm almost 34. Okay, I'm 33 but with 34 on the horizon.

2015 went by in the blink of an eye. We were in Hungary for the summer. I got a real job – like, a serious and challenging and REAL job. I wrote many articles and won a grant. I was with my husband. We saw the cancer grow, and yet it didn't own our life.

2016 will start off with a serious bunch of challenges. They will be worthwhile, but they will also be hard. One step at a time. It makes me wonder, will I write more this year or will I write less? Much less? Not at all? Or maybe a whole lot? I'm not sure. Each time I write a post about cancer, I feel truly weary of becoming 'the girl who has cancer' all over again. Not that I was ever that girl entirely, but you get known for something and it sticks. I guess I hesitate to blog it all out because it makes me address a piece of myself that – *just – doesn't – fit.*

And yet, writing it out fits me quite perfectly.

Oh well, who cares? Each year is a surprise, and sometimes you have moments that stick in your mind in the best possible ways, and will always feel like only yesterday. May 2016 have many of these moments for you, for us, for everyone. Even when it gets hard, and damn it – it will get hard, even when that happens, may we think back to 'only yesterday' and use those moments to fuel us towards the future.

One day at a time. Sooner than later, it will be the end of 2016, and we will have yet another new year to look forward to.

Happy New Year everyone. May you have a Baby Duck good time.

P.S. WordPress year in review!

23Jan2016

Going to Bed

Posted in Life, Life despite cancer, Love, Treatment

10:00 PM.

C: Zsolt, when are you coming to bed?

Z: It's only 10:00 PM!

10:30 PM

C: Zsolt when are you coming to bed?

Z: Soon.

C: Come soon, I'm sleepy.

11:00 PM.

C: Night.

Z: Night.

click goes the light

11:10 PM

C: I'm having a hot flash.

Z: …

11:15 PM

C: Zsolt?

Z: Yes.

C: Is everything okay?

Z: Everything is okay.

C: What about [enter nearest problem on my mind]?

Z: That is okay too. We're both okay.

C: Alright.

11:20 PM.

C: What do you think about ice cream? I haven't had ice cream in a long time. It's been years already – I think about 2 years, except that one time with that xylitol stuff. Which was good, but I still felt guilty eating it – it was too sweet. I think I miss Balaton. Sometimes when I think of it, I picture out our on that surf board in the morning, looking at the water.

Z: That was nice.

C: Yep.

Z: The fish were big.

11:30 PM

C: Zsolt?

Z: Hmm?

C: Wouldn't it be awesome if the chemo and treatment knock the cancer back into remission?

Z: Yes.

C: Mission remission.

Z: Mission remission.

11:40 PM

C: Ow!

Z: What is it?!

C: Back spasm. I'm getting an ice pack.

**sound of shuffling bare feet on a too-cold floor. Flash of light from the freezer. Footsteps return.*

C: Damn.

Z: What?

C: I forgot the tea towel.

**again, sound of shuffling footsteps.*

11:50 PM

Catherine kicks at her blankets, then flips to the other end of the bed. She then does a half-asleep yoga-like stretching pose.

Z: You okay?

C: I'm not going to sleep tonight.

Z: You say that every night, and then you sleep.

C: True.

12:00 AM.

C: Zsolt?

Z: Yeah?

C: Nothing.

Z: Are you sure?

C: I guess so. I just can't stop worrying.

Z: Tell me what you're worrying about.

Catherine proceeds to list everything she is worrying about. Zsolt then talks her through them one by one.

12:10

Z: Babe?

C: Yes?

Z: Good night.

C: Good night.

Z: I love you.

C: I love you too.

And how can you not love a man who never, ever complains – no matter how many times you wake him up?

30Jan2016

Advocacy Avoidance

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Treatment

Sitting here on a train that is somewhere between Ottawa and Toronto, quietly cursing myself for putting off this so long. After a couple trips to different eye doctors – one at a private clinic, the other within the hospital, and having been sent home both times with the sentiment, 'we don't see anything' I have become a self-doubter. Also after a couple calls to the hospital about when my MRI will be, and why is it being put off till April – with one not-so-happy response, and then another with simply no response at all . . . my inhibitions kicked in, and I just plain shut up about it.

I thought it would be okay to wait till next week during my doctor visit to bring things up. I thought my eye would be okay.

Except now the *left* eye is blurred and shadowy and flashing. Not a good thing. I'm really such a jackass for not doing something about this earlier in the week. Somehow I figured it would be okay.

Anyhow, so here I am on the train from Toronto to Ottawa, following a week of conference and meetings and work stuff . . . and kinda falling apart emotionally. Just kinda, because I'm not breaking down. So – that's simply 'kinda'.

We'll arrive in Ottawa and meet my parents at the train station. They'll give us a ride to the emergency room. I'll ask them to take a look of my left eye and help fix this problem, if it can still be fixed. And meanwhile my nose has been bleeding for most of the train ride – and there are freight cars ahead of us making this train delayed by an hour – therefore I won't get to Ottawa till 9:30 pm.

Next week I'm supposed to be setting up for chemotherapy. They found a marker in the cancer that is HER2+, which is good only because there are targeted therapies for this kind of cancer. The plan is to blast away the cancer by coupling the HER2+ treatment with chemotherapy.

yay.

No, it's actually: YAY!

But still. Chemo. Ugh. Terrible stuff.

A part of me is scared it's too little too late. Life feels normal despite the cancer, until you can't sleep from back pain, or until the spot in your eye starts growing rapidly, or until your nose won't quit bleeding, or until your damn lung decides to collapse in the middle of the night. (Until you throw a hissy fit on a VIA rail train.)

I'm a jackass because I didn't push when I knew things needed to be pushed. I just stepped back after a couple attempts and said, 'Okay I'll wait' – except waiting when I know there is a problem is doing me zero favours.

Part of this whole 'dealing with cancer' business is being an advocate. And sometime, I guess that means not caring that you are potentially bothering others.

All my life I've felt I was bothering others! I'd literally not call my friends in fear that I would be taking up their time unnecessarily. So when it comes to taking up a doctor's time with repeated requests for a speedier MRI or hospital appointment arranging . . . auuuuuggggghhh.

And then there's just plain denial. That is my responsibility, and my comfort blanket (until it's really not so comfortable anymore). I have put off getting this eye thing checked AGAIN because it's actually easier to do nothing. Every time I do *something* is takes a whopping load of effort and determination. The idea of having to repeat advocacy moments over and over and over until answers are found is just so . . .

It is just so very necessary.

I don't like it. But it is necessary.

Anyhow, this train is late. My nose is still bleeding. My eye sight is like looking through a glass of beer. The seat is pretty cozy. And it's quiet in the car. Out the window there is darkness, with the occasional pockets of streetlights and cities. I am okay. I'm not in pain. This will be dealt with.

I *will* go to the emergency room, and I will advocate for myself again.

And then, probably sometime tomorrow or Sunday, I'll crawl into bed and turn on the Netflix, and hide from the world like I so love to do.

31Jan2016

Back to Bed

Posted in After treatment, Bumpboobs, Canada, Fun, Life, Life despite cancer, Love

So now it's Sunday, and as predicted I am in bed resting. There has been some glorious napping today, as reward for all that ridiculous advocating yesterday and Friday evening.

As it turns out, my eye is fine. There is more to do, but at least my eye is fine. (vision not so much). My MRI has been hurried up, as I think it should have always been, so that is a win too. And the nose bleed has calmed down. Next week I visit with my oncologist, and we start to get the treatment going.

Time to take care of this cancer bull shit and reclaim my body.

In the meanwhile, I went to Winterlude today with some excellent people – being my two brothers and their partners. We walked/skated the canal, sipped hot drinks, then went over to the ice sculptures. It was freaking ZERO degrees in the city, which is bizarrely warm. So, by the fate of a few texts send by my bros, we caught the beautiful ice sculptures before they began to melt away.

And now I'm home in bed and have been napping like crazy. NAP-attacked. My brain needed it. This evening I think we'll order some Butter chicken and onion bahji from Havali's because it's yummy and my new form of comfort food. Then I'll go to sleep, and start a fresh page on life tomorrow.

The eye continues to bug me – my left has some very hazy vision issues so it's truly odd to look at things up close, particularly books or computer screens. But at least I know that as we move forward and treat the issue this can be, in time, resolved.

Not such an easy road ahead, but finally we're starting in the right direction. There were a few moments this weekend when I remembered my need to advocate even though I truly hate it, and so I kept asking questions – but even more importantly, kept going back I until I had the answers I needed.

No wonder I'm napping all day today – minus the Winterlude good times.

And that is all. Everything is okay. And now I'm going to have some hot chocolate, and then SLEEP MORE.

10Feb2016

Chemo Eve Eve

Posted in Bumpboobs, Canada, Chemotherapy, Finding Home, Life, Love, Radiotherapy Treatment, Treatment

My friends do this thing each year called Christmas Eve Eve – when everyone gathers at a bar/pub to have some drinks and just pause for a good time. It's nice and I've loved going.

Well, tonight is my 'chemo eve eve'. It's far less jolly and eventful than Christmas celebrations – however, I did paint my nails this evening, which was an adventure. With my eyes being so messed up, trying to focus upon the thickness of the polish upon my nails was rather different. Things a few feet away aren't so hard, but those *very close up* details do challenge me. The entire time I was working that paint brush with my cuticles, I was narrating to Zsolt: "Can't clearly see what I'm doing, but it's going on. Oh! All over the finger. Okay, now for the other hand!"

It may have helped if it the room hadn't been so dim. My Dad always says "don't curse the darkness, turn on a light." But as I was only cursing the nail polish, I forgot all about the lights.

But hey, this was the best part of my evening, and I was revelling in the ridiculousness. My nails are now a very dark blue/green, and they look like someone painted them with a translucent blindfold on. Which is somewhat true, at least in the case of my left eye.

So chemo starts very soon. Chemo and the magic key to remission: HER2+ targeted drugs. I am both dreading the chemo side effects, and looking forward to getting the cancer under control. It has truly had its way with me these past few months. Unfortunately I now have spots alongside both eyes, and – ugh – in that layer between the skull and the brain. So pretty much skirting the brain, though perhaps technically in the brain. But at least it's not in the essential tissue … and I would like to avoid any 'yet' with that statement, and just say we'll radiate the heck out of them and blast them away. Or so I pray. Brain is bad bad bad news.

But eye on the prize – we'll do chemo, and then at the same time, radiation. I don't know if it will be a targeted radiation treatment or full brain. The lovely doctor I spoke with today said he needs to consult with a few other doctors first. Either way, it will make painting my nails in dim lighting with one wonky eye look like a total cakewalk. (Karen, next time I'll give you a call!)

Here is a nice story, and it's also why I think I will do much better this time around than 5 years ago when first diagnosis. Everyone I love is here. My husband is beside me, and my family are here for me, and my friends are never too far away either, even when I'm too tired to do anything but think of them. Just this past weekend, my

mom broke out the flip chart board, and my entire family brainstormed ways to help support me in beating back the cancer – getting to that golden word ‘remission’ (officially my new favourite word. I like it even more than ‘butter’ and ‘delicious’). This family gathering was the most touching thing you could see. And then, after all that brainstorming, we made a picture board together.

Mission remission. Get this damn cancer under control! I’m going big, because there’s no choice for going home – except if you are speaking literally, but let’s not muddy that up. I want the cancer gone. gone, gone, gone. May this Chemo eve eve mark the moment when everything starts going right. It needn’t be a shitty day – but instead a day that tips the scales, and gives my body the chance needed to regain control. Let’s pray on that, if you dig prayer. Otherwise maybe you can just nod your head and think: *go for it*.

Cheers to getting better. And to family. And to dark nail polish. And – oh! To a cute new pixie cut. It may only last a week, but at least that’s one week when I can rock this new look. (I may look a bit grumpy in this picture, but really I’m just exhausted. Cancer is exhausting.)

And now, it’s time for bed.

15Feb2016

ZZZzzzz

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy

Here I am back in bed, and doing okay. It is two days post chemo, and that is not enough time to recover my sense of self or independence. As in, I need to keep taking it easy. Thank goodness tomorrow is Family Day in Ontario, and I can avoid that tinge of work-guilt that tugs ever so slightly when calling in sick.

Truth be told, I'm not sure how the heck I'm going to cope with the upcoming head radiation. But there you go, one step at a time. This week I get the markers, next week we get started, the week after it continues – and then right at the end, time for more chemo.

My mother suggests I just focus on today. So I will. But I'm also having a hot flash as I write this down, and you know what that does to a lady's mind.

I wonder if I'll need to get new glasses, or if my eyes will go back to their normal vision?

The port is in, and so far so good. I've had warnings of not moving too much so that the stitches don't burst, and other warnings that come when you are thin and getting a port embedded under your skin (as in, not as much padding as they would like, but I won't go into why that isn't a great thing. This port is going to work out.)

But whatever.

Today I am sleeping. Tomorrow may be easier. But still, no working allow yet.

Goooooooood night.

P.S. It has really been a decent few days. Family has made this possible. As has having some big bursts of love, and great back-discomfort coping techniques. Plus, I've been watching Once Upon a Time like crazy, and pretending I'm the noble hero out there, leading my t-cells into battle and slaying all those cancer cells.

21Feb2016

Make Mine Pretty: Car Shopping

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Fun, Life, Life despite cancer

The Big Z said that if I do super awesome at blasting away cancer cells, as in – if I get to that moment of remission, I could do/have anything I wanted. Truth is, I don't do/want too much more in life – except perhaps a cottage on some water … and a dog … and piece of warm rhubarb & strawberry pie with vanilla ice cream on the side.

BUT after a lot of thinking I did come up with an idea. It would be nice to have A CAR.

A car of my choosing, where I decided upon the type, and the accessories, and *the colour*. So Zsolt agreed. Get better, pick your car, he said.

Not too long ago I really wanted to buy a new sofa. But the Big Z was like, "no way those thing are too expensive." So I said to him, if I one day get a full-time job I'll buy a sofa. And he said, fine. Except we both knew that was a really long shot from ever happening. The sofa was a pie in the sky daydream. (a rhubarb strawberry flavoured pie in the sky daydream)

But then I went and landed the sweetest full time job you could ever ask for, and it came outta no where. BAM! At this very moment, I'm lounging on my lovely sofa. *(which was going to be purchased new from the shop, but then we saw the exact model and colour on Kijiji for 200$ less. It had been sitting in a lady's office unused, and she was moving offices – so we snapped it up! Sweet!)*

Therefore, based on the sofa story, this car thing might actually happen.

To help with that possibility, I'm stimulating my mind by looking at cars. And here is what I've discovered so far:

I really care about the colour.

And while I also care about safety, handling and fuel economy, colour is a HUGE part of my decision. I want a really cool colour, or a cute colour, or a pastel, or pattern, or something that makes me smile every time I see the car. Fushia maybe. Baby blue. Lemonade pink!

Yes, this is extremely stereotypical, and I'm sure it does very little for the portrait of a progressive, independent and smart women shopping for her first new car. However, forget all that because I want something pretty!

I'm trolling Instagram just hoping there's a instragrammer who loves lattes, organic markets, bright nail polish and good books who also happens to test drive many different cars and snap great photographs for their feed, and at least make the cars look cute if not colourful. But nothing! I can find it for books, food, clothes, coffee . . . but not for cars. (I love with book instagrammers do those color-coordinated collages of items and books. I also love a good latte shot.)

Where are the cute car instragrammers? The hipster car reviewers? The mani/pedi drivers? Where are the colour options?!

I look at car marketing, and I just do not jive. Yes, I like that a car is safe and drives well and gets great gas mileage – YES, I know those aspects matter – but I really don't care about the look of the engine, or a piece by piece reconstruction of the interior, or the specs – SPECS? They are not my first stop in car shopping, they are for *after* my heart has been stolen by a beautiful design and colour.

Car shopping reminds me of when I first needed to switch to mastectomy bras, and suddenly realized everything comes in white, black and beige. (and, in the case of cars, red)

Dear 'Car Marketers', I am disillusioned. I need some serious whimsy and lifestyle imaginations in my car shopping experience – not a 360 rotating view on your website.

If you would like me to test-drive your vehicles and take cute Instagram pictures as I stop for my tea with girlfriends, give me a call. How about my husband and I take your car for a drive to the (to-be) cottage, and snap pictures along the way? Maybe we borrow a cute puppy and add it to the mix? If I'm too busy being chemo-drunk then get someone else to do it. Make car shopping instragram, pinterest, and tumbler friendly. Grab my imagination so I can push back these cancer cells! And also, while you are at it, more colour!! I reckon book bloggers, fashion ladies, bike fashionista and foodies, etc., are a valuable point of inspiration for the world of online car shopping. Take notes & leave us charmed.

The end.

Shedding!

For quite a long time Zsolt and I have wanted to get a dog. And while I'm still so hooked on my very first and deep-in-the-heart retriever, there's room in our lives for another happy pooch. A hypo-allergic pooch.

But in the meanwhile, as we wait to live somewhere that could happily accommodate a dog, I feel we're getting a taste of doggy life. My hair is shedding all over the darn place! Here's a hair, there's a hair, every where's a hair hair.

Everyone says it's fine, and that's greatly appreciated. But yes, we have a shedding animal in the house, and it's me!

;P

18Mar2016

Age vs Beauty, and Sally Field …

Posted in Blogging and Other Fun, Bumpboobs, Life, Writing

The other day I was watching the View. I'm on leave from work, and I guess when you are on leave watching ladies chat about pop culture and American politics is a thing that just happens naturally. Honestly, they kind of drive me crazy (because I'd like to argue with them, but end up arguing with the TV screen. Then my mother, working in the other room, says 'who are you talking to? And I have to admit that it's no one.), but if I don't watch something I have trouble remembering to eat my banana for breakfast.

Anyhow, Sally Field appeared on the show to promote her film Hello My Name is Doris. Apparently it's good, according to her and the ladies at the table. I believe them. From this chat, Sally Field was asked about gender and age in Hollywood. She shared some insightful remarks about trends and actions and ideas without follow through. I was impressed with her experienced perspective. But one little thing really caught me, and it continues to make me think.

While discussing age and Hollywood, the ladies of the view were letting Sally know how darn good she looked – 'You look 35!' says Joyce Beher, a View host. I know that is meant as a compliment, but it immediately strikes me as a sad juxtaposition against the words that Sally had literally just spoken. Sally Field is smart and productive and beautiful.

"What the heck was that?" I say to the TV screen.

Does she look 35? No.

Should she look 35? No.

Does Joyce's comment inadvertently imply that whatever age Sally is at this moment isn't an age to be honoured?

Yep.

And what's sad is that is really how our culture has been trained to think, not just Joyce Beher. We attach beauty to age – with an emphasis on 'anti-aging', when the two things needn't have a damn thing to do with one another.

People who are beautiful in my life:

My mother; my father; My mother-in-law, my father-in-law, my brother's partners, my brothers, my best friend and her husband, my sister and brother in law, the inspiring library ladies who I worked with in both Southampton and Rosemount, the women of my old book club and writing group, the children of my cousins

(and my lovely cousins too!), all the babies I adore to see on Facebook, my husband, my grandmother, my husband's grandmother….

There are so many beautiful people in the world, and the more I come to meet and know them, the more incredible they are in my mind.

How old are all the people I just listed? It doesn't matter one bit. They are a range of ages and experiences. They are a rainbow of eye colours, hair types, tan lines, wrinkles, scars, and smiles.

Beauty is not age. And the moment we say 'you look half your age' I think we discount the value of perspective, wisdom and credit earned within a lifetime, as well as how wrinkles add kindness to a face, and grey hair is lovely, and stretch marks are accomplishments. (etc)

Age before beauty? Beauty before age?

In my mind the two do not compete.

Beauty is as beauty does.

31Mar2016

Anticipation

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life, Life despite cancer, Radiotherapy Treatment, Treatment

All I really want to do is look at beautiful things (like spring) and talk with wonderful people. I'd also love to go to Lake Balaton and have a wine spritzer by the water, while the sun sets across the water. And I'd like if there was a 'forget this all' pill that I could take for a few days.

Truth is, it would be easier if I could leave my emotions and thoughts behind, and just do what I really want to do. With all that is going on, the emotions don't make this easy, so instead as I feel frustrated and sad, I daydream of things I'd like to do.

So let's see…

I'd like to smile more for my husband, so he feels like everything is alright.

I'd like to sleep really, really well. Sleep like someone who is on vacation and feeling so safe.

I'd like to look in the mirror and see myself clearly.

I'd like to dance all night, outside, with friends and some great candle light. No mosquitoes!

I'd like to listen to Cat Stevens and Eric Clapton, which I'm actually doing – so there's one realized!

I'd like to go shopping for summer dresses.

I'd like to have energy! That will come. Not for a while, yet.

I'd like to eat something deeply delicious.

I'd like a gluten-free grilled cheese sandwich from The Red Door (in Ottawa). To be done.

I'd like a non-dramatic, yet highly fun kids book to read.

I'd like to make something cool.

I'd like to pet a dog to which I'm not allergic. And give it a big hug. And then it can take a nap with me

I'd like to go to the Farmer's Market and pick out beautiful food – and I'd like to bike there and back, too!

I'd like to do very little, and yet still accomplish something wonderful.

I'd like to learn how to paint with oil. (And I guess, l learn how to paint at all!)

I'd like to play the piano. Christmas music, specifically.

I'd like to sail on the Queen Mary.

I'd like to go for a picnic in the common.

I'd like to sing. (Which I do, but you know, it should be done more)

I'd like to sit in a kayak and marvel at the water.

I'd like to realize that I feel 100% myself again. I love those vivid moments of self that sneak up on you; when suddenly you are at your shining best, doing what you love, feeling in that 'impossible to perfectly arrange but wonderful to realize' way.

Ever feel that way – when you're just living life and suddenly everything is so very right? Maybe it's in the garden . . . or walking to the shop . . . or the touch of a warm breeze on a gorgeous day . . . or the way a dress brushes against your legs . . . or the first taste of a cool drink . . . or the sight of someone special walking towards you . . . and you know you are 100% yourself, 100% your most, in that moment.

I'd like that.

While life shouldn't depend upon anticipation, sometimes it is a very important sustaining factor.

P.S. Things I get to do everyday:

See my amazing husband. Enjoy the company of my family. Think about friends and those far away. Be taken care of – and right now that is a BIG deal. Nap. So you know, it's not all horrible stuff – it's just . . . I can't help daydreaming of the better days, which include these things, and so much more.

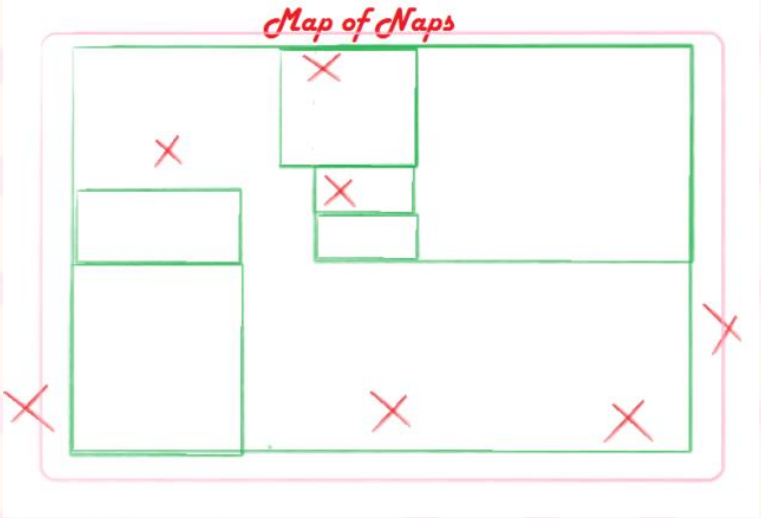
4Apr2016

Map of Naps

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Radiotherapy Treatment, Treatment

I'm going to try going to work this week. Not *going* but working. 'go' in a virtual sense. Also going to find out the new plan on tackling the distortion in my eyes, and get results on other things. Bah! I handle none of this with grace. Rather, I handle it through pajama pants and hooded sweatshirts.

It *will* be quite nice to start working! There are a few things on my mind about how my job is ticking along, and I'd really like to follow them up. Now I can finally quench that curiosity. This makes me feel pretty stellar.



The only thing is, my energy has a way of tanking quite rapidly. The body requires several small naps a day, otherwise I hit the ground like a . . . rock. Yes, like a rock.

We've been on and off staying with my parents (largely on) and they have been incredible in helping us get through the treatments. Incredible. My whole family has been so supportive, and it touches me quite a bit. While we had great support in England, there's no one like family when it comes to actually asking for help. I'm far less embarrassed. And when it comes to my mom, she is a great advocate in helping me spell out exactly what is needed.

Part of the results will be to see how my skull and brain are doing. Of course I'm nervous. There is good reason to be nervous. But this is treatment time, so whatever is happening will hopefully be treated. Treated so we can move forward.

One really nice thing I've literally noticed only while typing the blog post is my use of double letters. There was a tumour developing between my skull and brain, and I think my typing was giving away a sign of this. Essentially it became quite difficult for me to type without using double letters. Every other sentence I'd use an incorrect double letter. Like this:

Actually Actually Acctually acctually acctually actually actually acctually actually

Like that.

That is me typing the word actually several times in a row without correcting myself. I cannot stop doing the double 'c'.

However, despite the word 'actually' remaining a challenge. I *did* just type about 200 words in a row without any doubles. Not bad. Believe me, this is serious progress. Maybe it means things are improving in my head. I hope so.

With results upcoming, I like to take the little signs of progress to heart. It's important because it's alsso (Damn!) quite terrifying. This is not a small deal.

However, in the meanwhile as I go to work and appointments and results and such, there are always the naps. Sweet, wonderful naps.

The End.

4May2016

Distortion

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Radiotherapy Treatment, Treatment

As I am nearing this 5th cycle of chemotherapy, things are definitely becoming more challenging. And one really striking oddity is my general perception of stuff. Stuff like the way the world feels. If that isn't vague enough, I mean my brain space. I'm spacey.

Maybe it's from the full head radiation (very likely), but also from the cancer in my eyes, things are so very spacey lately. Just last week I had a temperature, and during that time it was quite hard to figure out depth – things were further or nearer or just plain incomprehensible. I found myself clinging to the wall as I walked, willing myself to figure out how to walk straight again. How to make my head stop spinning. It *did* stop spinning as my temperature went slowly back to normal, but that lasted several days and I still get the wobbles when I walk.

So I was well confused *this* week when I woke up in the middle of the night whacked out of my head. Like so gone. For the very first time in my life.

You see it's been hard to eat. I just don't really want to eat anything. And so I lose weight. Plus I was becoming rather nauseous with a bit of upchucking, so losing more weight. Anyhow, in an attempt to deal with this, I am – or was – trying a little bit of a special 'medical herbal' oil, if you know what I mean. I'm not down with this typically; like my entire life I'm all noooooo thanks. But somehow when you have cancer that could kill you if you don't beat it back, you become willing to try a bit more.

So I was taking the tiniest bit of this stuff, just to see if it would help me eat and not get sick. I didn't feel anything, to be honest. That was fine. But then I was told – take more, you should feel something. So I was like, fine. And I took more. Still, I felt nothing . . .

Until about 11:30 at night, when I woke up after rolling over, and was like

WHAT THE FUDGE?!

I thought my head was a giant gingerbread man – big, flat, circular, and ginger, I guess. (with icing eyes) And I wasn't sure if I was stuck in a dream, except I was pretty sure it was real as I was talking with Zsolt. AND I wasn't sure if my distortion had returned in full hurricane force, and that's why everything felt crazy.

It was a bit of a tip off that just the sight of my husband was tripping me out. I literally could not bring myself to look straight at him. It was too crazy.

It was not fun. But, I was interesting. And it became hilarious when I turned on my phone.

Ever heard of Snapchat? I do this sometimes and send videos or pictures to others during the day. Or night, in the case of my 11:30 surprise.

So I opened Snapchat to give some people hell. Except I can't! I can't do it – My angry words dissipate into the air and are replaced by random thoughts about flowers, and then bursts of laughter. I try again! "You did this to……HAHAHA!" And that is all I've got before the snap timer runs out.

Then I get my husband to take my temperature, because maybe I'm having a fever again – so in goes the electronic thermometer – and I watch the numbers crawl upward and whip it out at 36.2 saying that is a great temperature. Not my temperature, because it wasn't done calculating, but a great one nevertheless.

And I just laugh more. And feel terrible. I felt both terrible and hilarious at once, it that makes any sense. Mostly terrible, to be honest.

And I remember that I could not get enough water. I drank about 3 cups in a row . . . and then felt really, really full – except the fullness was in competition with thirst. And that full feeling seemed very far away. As did the washroom . . .

Eventually we decided it might just be best to sleep. So we turned off the lights, and I sang "I can show you the world" from Aladin to myself in an attempt to fly.

Wow, so I'll not be doing that again. Seriously, if I want the world to go sideways I'll just run a temperature and get more radiation.

But I can see the laughter appeal. Laughing is such a special thing. Lately I'm quite stuck between neither laughing nor crying, though wishing I could just let it go and cry like a baby or laugh like an idiot. There are so many feelings I am having, from hope to desperation to fatigue to relief to trepidation . . . so many, and not enough opportunities where my body actually finds the outlet to release things.

So the good thing is that I laughed.

And hopefully in time this distortion will settle down. I don't mean the herbs, I mean my brain. I hope it calms down soon so I can feel normal. Normal is a really nice feeling. I like normal.

The end.

16May2016

Venting

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Radiotherapy Treatment, Treatment

This is a venting post – so be warned. I'm just grumpy and want to wha-wha-wah it all out of myself. Maybe that will help me feel more in control again.

So last week I went for a head MRI – brain and eyes to be specific. I get to the hospital to get my port accessed, which took way longer than I wish it did, then ran over to the MRI scan place – where they said I was on the cusp of lateness, and they may not be able to fit me in.

I say: I'm ready now! Port accessed and ready!

And I run into the change room and change, and am by the MRI room in about a minute in the scrubs they give you. I wait for someone to come over, see I'm all set and bring me in.

But I just keep sitting there. And then I hear this technician lady talking into the phone . . . "so she doesn't need it?" (and yada yada yada, I didn't memorize each word – but she was inquiring after someone.)

About five minutes later, maybe ten, she comes out to me and tells me the MRI has been cancelled.

"But I have an consultation next week with two radiation specialists to discuss the results of *this* MRI."

"The report says it should be in June. I can't do anything."

"But I'm here now. My appointment is for now."

"It should be in June," she replies.

"But I'm meeting the doctors next week to discuss the cancer in my head – the results of this scan. What are we going to talk about if there's no test done?!" I'm getting pissed off now.

"There's nothing I can do. That's what the chart says. You'll have to come back in June. Or go speak to the doctor now and get them to call me."

"And I might get in today?"

"I don't know."

AUGHGHGHGHGHGH. AUUUGH!

Okay. We go to the cancer center at the hospital and they are very helpful. Within minutes the receptionist has cooled my lava-like fury and is investigating the situation. A nurse is looking into it for me, I just need to wait.

The nurse comes out and explains the scan really should be in June. It was booked too early, and therefore moving it to June is okay. It's normal procedure is to wait 3 months post head radiation before doing the follow up MRI. Everything is okay. The doctor did this purposefully.

"But I'm meeting with the doctors next week, supposedly to discuss the scan."

"It's mute now, I'll cancel the appointment and request they reschedule for after the MRI," assures the nurse.

I calm down, think 'fuck it', and go to Bridgehead (coffee shop) for an almond milk decaf latte. It was a very stressful morning.

This week I get a notification phone call about my appointment with the radiation doctors on Wednesday. I call them back (responding to the message) and say:

"Can you rebook this for after June 10th? The scan was postponed"

To which they say

"There's a note here for this specific date."

"To review a scan that didn't happen yet."

"You'll need to call the doctor's nurse and have them sort it out."

OR, BOOKING OFFICE, YOU COULD JUST REBOOK! I say in my head. But not out loud.

Then I call the nurse. She hasn't called me back yet. Tomorrow is Tuesday, then its Wednesday. I'll call again tomorrow. I know my stupid appointment stuff isn't her top priority – but my continual sense of displacement, of misinformation, or missed connections between departments . . .

. . . it's getting to me, man.

Who has the holistic picture in all of this? Me, just me, only me – because I'm at every appointment, I'm at every scan, I'm at every cancellation, I get every phone call, I meet every doctor, I hear their ruminations.

Who is at the center of the fucking tornado? ME.

Who should be held as an expert in her care? ME.

Who is given the very least amount of credit when it comes to rebooking, decision making for the logistical details, having results sent between departments, getting copies of the reports – me.

lower case me.

I know everyone is covering their own butts. I know. And I know it's a huge monster of a system, and the fragmentations are a necessary part of so many working arms (wonderful arms, caring arms, capable arms) trying to help in different ways. I know it's all so hard to manage.

But I also know I AM one of the experts in all of this – yet far too often I'm made to feel helpless and victim-like in my lack of control.

One other thing. . .

The doctors have nurses who are assigned to them. That's great. But I remember in England, I had a nurse assigned to me. Someone who didn't actually work for the doctor, but instead worked with the patient, her whole job was to advocate on my behalf – and whenever I had a question, I could pick up the phone and they would be all over making things easier. If I was in the hospital, I could drop by their office and ask a question.

There are times in health care when I know my story best. And in those moments above all others, I'd like to be given the credit I deserve.

There are times in health care when I *am* the weaker one, the 'victim' of a hard round of chemo, barely able to advocate for myself … and in those moments, I wish I had my breast cancer nurse in England again, someone who I know puts my schedule, my stress, my issues first.

Lately I feel lost in a big system of notifications, notes and dis-empowerment.

This is a time when I'm frustrated with my health care system. It's not an everyday experience, and it doesn't mean I'm ungrateful . . . but there is something very important that is lacking. And having to jump these ropes of permissions and contradictions leave me just plain mad.

I'm mad.

Not upset or sad: mad. I guess, ultimately, it is that feeling that makes me want to get things done. To make more phone calls. Leave more messages. Become more annoying.

So look at this. . .

After all that venting, I'm feeling empowered.

Huh, maybe the system does work. . .

BAH!

26May2016

Nope

Posted in advanced cancer, Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, fear, Treatment

Well the treatment I was on didn't have the desired impact. The cancer has kept growing. I'm now onto a new chemo treatment and in 2 months it will be time for another CT scan. After that I don't know. The problem, I reckon, is that the cancer isn't just one thing – it is different types, even if they are all breast.

I feel helpless at the moment. Only got the news yesterday. It's like … this stuff just doesn't want to slow down. In a sense, I'm at the top of the CN Tower, and standing on that glass floor – suddenly realizing the ground beneath me is very, very far below….

Dr Canada says it is not time to give up. He says there's still a fight to go. So, onto the next treatment and see what happens. See what drugs are coming out. Right now I can't really digest all this – except the disappointment. We're chewing on plenty of that. Truly, I thought it was going to work.

I know the empowered and active patient lives longer. But there are moments where I think we need (or at least I need) to lick the wounds. This is one of those moments. And then we'll need to just keep going. Try new things. Push. But damn it, I could use good news!

30May2016

Skinny Dipping vs Depression

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life, Life despite cancer, Love

I went skinny dipping. It's great. It's like when I first discovered *not* wearing a bra was far more comfortable than wearing a bra – and hence ditched my bras almost all together. (Resulting in my true form 'flat as a pancake' being rocked daily. The mastectomy certainly helps with this look.)

My parents have a pool, and for a long time I've though how lovely it would be to skip the uncomfortable bathing suit and just jump in – but never went for it. Well, as I was in one of those 'f-k it' moods lately, and since no one was home at my parents except Zsolt and I, and because the weather has been so crazy warm . . . I just went for a swim a la nude. It was beautiful.

You know that cold dread of getting out of the pool, as you towel off while the suit you are wearing clings and chills your skin? That sticky resistance as you try to pull it off, after having stepping into the air conditioned house where the cold air hits hard against the cloth of your damp suit? Well there's none of that when you're butt naked in the backyard, drying off with your towel.

And when you swim through the water, there's really no resistance. It's just slip and dip.

So from now on, whenever possible, I'm gonna swim a la natural. It's just better this way.

This too, is one off my reminders that life isn't all cancer. It's hard, because my mind and body seem to be trying to convince me otherwise. I wake up in the morning thinking about scans and appointments and whether anything will every work. I think about slipping through the cracks of a system. I think about mortality and final days and fighting and sleeping. I think about my eyes and their warped sight . . . and such. I wake up every morning and some nights stuck with these thoughts, and they sink deep into me, making everything heavy. And I have to pull myself out somehow – it's not always so easy – pull myself out to be here in the moment, here today, living now.

Things like skinny dipping help with that. So does going to the river in Packenham (where Z and I were married seven years ago in the church there) this past weekend, and putting our feet into the flowing water – watching as schools of tiny fish swim up to investigate our toes. (eep!) That helps pull me out too.

Last night we watched our wedding video. The ceremony was lovely, and vows reminded me that not everything has gone wrong. Yes, life is threatened, yes we are frustrated, and yes, I deeply regret not having had children – but in listening to the *vows*, I remember we made promises that have been kept and held as precious. We have and hold though good and bad, through sickness and health, through rick and poor – we have been an amazing married couple. And though I sometimes feel as though I'm failing, particularly as the cancer spreads, I must remember that we are in fact blessed.

Every day when we get to find our 'in the moment' joys, we really truly succeed. But also, when we hold each other and cry, and when the doctor gives bad news, we still shine through. He's my husband and my life is a slice of satisfaction thanks to our relationship.

Anyhow, there's a wandering post where I am sorting out my emotions. Depression vs skinny dipping, love vs expectation, good times and deep pits of sad.

Today we are outside in the backyard, and the pool is waiting. There are no scans this week, or tests, or results. And I will try my best to be Catherine the normal, with her husband Zsolt the loving – and later this day, will jump in that pool buck naked once again.

10Jun2016

Just a little nothing

Posted in Bumpboobs, Canada, Finding Home, Life

My honey has a new job! YES – congratulations, Zsolt! You do good work, and this is a good thing! The job is kind of an extension of his previous work – only now he gets to work with a great team and learn even more. I'm super proud of him.

And with this new job, he received an iPad, which is fancy. And with that iPad, we found a doodle app.

And with that doodle app, I was doodling.

This, along with a nice few days spent in Montreal, was a lovely distraction for tomorrow head MRI.

15Jun2016

The green journal

Posted in Bumpboobs, Finding Home, Life despite cancer, Writing

It's rush hour here in Ottawa. Early rush hour, but now with flexible work schedules it seems from 3 pm onwards everyone is hitting the road. I'm on the porch of my downtown apartment, which has steps leading down to the sidewalk. I guess you might call it a walk-up. A very busy road it to my right and it's clogged up with cars. I can't hear them too much, however, because my right ear is not hearing very well lately. It may be a side effect of the radiation. It may be that my ear is full of wax. Probably it is both. My father took a look in there and said it was very waxy. He then tried putting in drops while I told him not to poke my ear drum, and gave him an all-around hard time.

Radiation or not, I probably need to get these ears cleaned. That and stop watching Youtube videos about people getting their ears cleaned, because it's gross. (but cool too, because I find that weird stuff fascinating)

This is one of those days when I cannot stand being told to rest. Zsolt is head-deep in his new job, so cannot play with me. I'm locked out of my work email so cannot take a peek at the accumulating correspondence that need to be sorted. And project wise I'm a bit dried up at the moment.

Lost in a land of chemo and recovery and destructive anticipation.

I've come across videos and blog posts that made a very important point around chronic illness: stop feeling sorry for yourself and do something. Do something for your *life* because you are here to live it. Don't hide behind pity (self or otherwise). Create pathways in the mind that don't focus on the fear or pain, but rather reinforce the constructive, the creative, and the happy. And to do all this, you must do something. Because you start feeling very sorry for myself when all you do is lay on the couch.

Some days it's okay to lay on the couch. Sometimes I MUST lay on the couch. But when I can get up and move and not feel zombified, it's really wrong to just stay there letting the sadness sink deeper.

Thing is – I don't know what to do! So I have come out onto the porch to write a blog post.

There is a green journal in my place, tucked in amongst my other writing (stories, drafts, thesis, etc). This journal was written upon meeting Zsolt. It's about my going to Hungary, him coming to Canada and our moving to England. It's full of wondering about the future and love and commitment. It's really a trip to re-read these many years later. I can see how circumstances have changed, but even more important, how much I've changed too.

I was happy but lost at 23. And actually felt like a failure – I had expected great things, and clear directions from myself. I thought I would know where life was headed. But after four years of psychology, and having dropped out of Photography to go to Hungary, I was literally floundering and without purpose.

There's this list where I write out what I'm good at: taking instructions, helping being, listening,

AND

There's this list where I wrote out what I'm okay at: drawing, photography, psychology, speaking

Isn't it funny I never wrote 'writing' on those lists? Or storytelling? (Or project creation/management, or networking or designing or community building . . . but of course I couldn't back then, because I'd never *tried to do those* things) There I was in Hungary – feeling like I didn't fit in, couldn't understand anyone and had no purpose – filling up my green journal with observations of life. Writing in the park about the church across the yard, and the school children, and how the tourists were watching me as much as I was watching them. It was such a natural way for me to be – the writing – and a talent too, right in front of my eyes on the page, and I didn't even see it. Instead I felt disappointed for my lack of purpose, and my lack of money making potential.

It makes me wonder what I cannot see in front of me right now. What am I missing? What important element is there to notice and embrace? And is it only time and life that will reveal things, or is there a way to force it to my attention now?

(Can I pop this pimple of potential? Yeah, I'm fascinated with popping pimples too, as well as looking into ears)

This is SUCH a self-absorbed blog post. Very self-ruminating. Bumpyboobs has become my green journal.

In a way, I feel lost as I did those 10 years ago. Cancer has changed everything once again. All the projects have stopped. Even my job had to be put on hold. Heck, I've even published my novel. So what now? What is my purpose now? Can I get back there, do I need to reposition – and how?!

Are there new pathways I can carve into my mind that will take me away from the cancer pity? Do I need to make it a productive part of my life? And if so, how? I'm not going to become an advocate, so what is this illness forcing me to experience? How I supposed to learn from this – what can I create with this? What can I do **despite this**? Who am I now?

I am back there, like ten years ago, floating and uncertain. But I'm much, much further too. Far more confident in myself – and I know no matter what, I am not a failure and there is no loss. Just life. Just living. Just a lot of learning and experiments.

We'll see what happens next.

3Jul2016

Happy Canada Day Plus One!

Posted in Bumpboobs, Finding Home, Life, Life despite cancer, moving to canada

Happy Canada Day + 1! As in the day after our country's 149th birthday. I'm writing this post late because on the day itself there really was not time for blogging.

As a country, we are officially 149 years old (if you care to ignore the generations and generations of First Nation people who lived on this continent long before the Europeans arrived – but as a united & politically connected Canada, we are 149), which pretty much makes us a baby when comparing ourselves to other countries.

After witnessing the UK vote themselves out of the European Union last week (!!!! Aruggggghh!!!!) I truly felt gutted. Zsolt and I had rich lives in England while there. We met the best darn people you'd hope to meet. Some of my fondest friendships were formed while doing my MA and working in the library. Lifelong friendship were made as Zsolt studied his PhD. And while I missed Canada and family in a way that ached, it was becoming more and more my country. If I hadn't gotten sick we would have made it our permanent home, I'm certain. I'd be English today. Instead, as it is, Zsolt is Canadian.

But it's also the first place I ever felt like I *didn't* belong. While working in England, I was referred to as a foreigner. That was weird. Me, foreign? Maybe, but not by much I reckoned. It's the first place I witnessed an open argument between groups of people on the street – specifically Polish and English, which certainly I'd never seen in my suburban home of Kanata, Canada. It was the first time I realized that not everything was totally okay in the world, and that tensions were creeping in – seeping into some minds. Not into all people, but enough that 2nd generation polish kids felt compelled to explain their Englishness to me on more than one occasion. (at work, and once in a restaurant with the waiter). Something was certainly going on then, and it has clearly continued.

Though by living and working for an international university, you get into a lovely liberal bubble of acceptance – and most of this passed by me without noticing. So when it came to the Brexit voting, I never suspected it was possible for the Leave vote to win. Except that it did. Leaving me to worry about my international friends in England, and how they will be treated.

Remember when Quebec held the referendum here in Canada to remain or leave? Remember that? That was the damn worst. To think a 149 year partnership (okay, it was like 129 back then or something) could break apart with a simple vote – it was scary to me even as a child. Even as a kid, I knew Quebec leaving would break something very special. I'm not saying it is something perfect, but guys – we have a very special country. The more I see of this wonderful world, the more I know there's a strong reason to love this place so much.

We are not perfect. But we are special. For one thing, we're proof that a country can evolve its identity while maintaining important values, even as it welcomes the identities of others. (Just crash a citizenship ceremony to see what I mean, it's totally inspiring. They do them in Ottawa.)

You know, the EU is very special too. I hope it remains an ever strengthening and evolving entity – where countries within work well together, support each other, realize each other's worth (as if they didn't already), and don't leave when things are hard, or because some parties promised a vote that was really just some political tool rather than a smart way to govern.

And I cannot forget the United Kingdom, because it's a very special place, particularly in my heart (along with Hungary). I know that it is bursting with good people – even those who voted to leave, in their minds, felt they were doing the right thing (though my frustration with them remains very high because it was a damn bad decision. In hard times, we look to blame – and they were given an easy and massive target to kick, with extremely serious consequences.) But I know there's so much goodness in the UK – and goodness knows the more we attempt to understand and support each other, the better off we are all around.

Anyhow, Happy Canada Day. I love this country, and as my life grows I come to realize in how many ways I'm blessed to call it home.

P.S. I had a lemonade moment yesterday (term inspired by Mandi) when it was 9:30 and we decided to race to from our apartment to Major Hill's Park to see the fireworks. I was exhausted, but Canada Day is only once a year. So on when the rain boots, out came the umbrella, and we went to see those big BOOMS happen in person. It was so nice, and even if I was knackered to the bone by the time we return, it was worth every ounce of energy.

4Jul2016

One down, one more to go

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life despite cancer, Radiotherapy Treatment, Treatment

Finally something good happens in the doctor's office! Today I received the results for my eye and brain MRI. We waited about 1.5 hours to see the radiologist, who is such a lovely man that you really cannot mind the wait too much, and it had the effect of pumping up my paranoia. After all, why else do they keep you waiting that long unless they are scrambling to process the news and develop a plan before visiting your room? That was my logic at least.

While I'll probably never get 'no evidence of disease' due to the cancer having infiltrated the skull of my bone (in effect growing the bone, which won't typically shrink again even if it dies) . . . the legions have slightly decreased. Even the eye lesions have had a slight decrease once again.

Also, the MRI techs didn't find any new lesions.

Plus my actual brain tissue still remains clear.

SO, today I received good news. Nothing ends here in terms of the threat, but in terms of improvement – it is happening. The radiation has been worth it. May it continue to help my body push back.

Even as I write this, I can feel an uncomfortable stitch beneath my left rib cage. Just this morning I had another CT scan, and I'll be receiving those results this Wednesday with my oncologist. (Day after my 34th birthday). If there is any growth (which I reckon is likely) we'll have to pivot strategies – and that will start with a liver biopsy of a cancer lesion.

But even if that happens, I will try not to panic. Do not panic – just proceed. The HER2+ therapy, in my opinion, has had an impact on my bone mets – even if my lungs and liver are not responding as expected. And since bone mets can become painful if they grow, I'm grateful for any form of control. I'll just need to see if my oncologist agrees in that it is worthwhile to continue the therapy. Sometimes I think I'm in a game of negotiations as to what can and cannot continue.

Anyhow, at least for today there is a WIN. And with my birthday being tomorrow, I'll take it gladly.

Finally, some good news.

6Jul2016

Buffalo Cheese and CT Scan Results

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Food, Life, Life despite cancer, Treatment

Yesterday I was craving fresh (in water) buffalo mozzarella balls. So, I get Zsolt to drive me to the grocery store – where they have big buffalo mozzarella balls in water. I also picked up some chips. We get to the cash and neither Zsolt or I have our wallets! Not a penny on us! BAH!

I threw a little hissy fit of frustration, and then we hop back into the car and go back to the house – pick up the wallets – and head to a closer grocery shop (Sobeys).

So we go to Sobeys, except they don't have buffalo mozzarella balls. They have cow milk, but that is not what I was craving. I love that sweet flavour with the buffalo. However, the chips here were on sale, so I pick them up and saved us a few bucks.

THEN we decide to go to Farmboy. Into the car we hop and cruise down the strip to the shop. In the shop I go. OH, one last package of fresh buffalo mozzarella cheese balls. We grab 'em and check out.

I get home, ready to dive in, when I see the seal isn't sealed. The damn package was already opened! Not cool. (And I'm really starting to lose it – getting really pissed off.)

Back into the car, and back out – this time to a different Farmboy, since the last one only had one product left, which I bought and now wanted to exchange. So we go to the different Farmboy, and I grab their last package of buffalo mozzarella balls (checking the seal), and exchange the cheese.

FINALLY we get home, I take out some balls, and collapse in front of my computer to watch a show. Sweet, cheesy, salty bliss.

"What can I learn from this?" I asked myself

If at first you don't succeed, try-try again.

I think the same can be applied to cancer. No matter how frustrating, it is worth pushing for what you want. In my case, to try, try again.

And I can say this so easily, because today I received good news. Today I have NOT been crushed at the doctor's office. The CT shows good results, considering I've only received 2 doses of a new chemo treatment. Good results considering the last treatment didn't have great impact.

I'm very happy, with a tinge of bittersweet – I can go back to work, but will still get this chemo every three weeks. Upside is that it is easier to recover from compared to the previous approach, even if it is tiring (so I can live my life a bit more as I also destroy cancer).

The MEGA upside is that it may be having a GOOD effect on KILLING the cancer. That blows any bittersweet feelings out of the water. Die cancer, die! MUHAHAAHAHA!

I said to Dr. Canada, “I didn’t expected good results. I was feeling defensively pessimistic.”

He nodded his head. “I think that’s a reasonable approach. But I’m going to be optimistic for you.”

So I said “Okay, you stay optimistic for me.” And I very much appreciate it, indeed.

Today has brought a couple pieces of happy news – from a surprise with my novel, to a surprise with my results. Steady onward, and we’ll see what happens next.

Considering I thought this would be a most horrible week, it has turned out pretty well.

The end.

P.S. I love this picture made by my friend James. Check it out

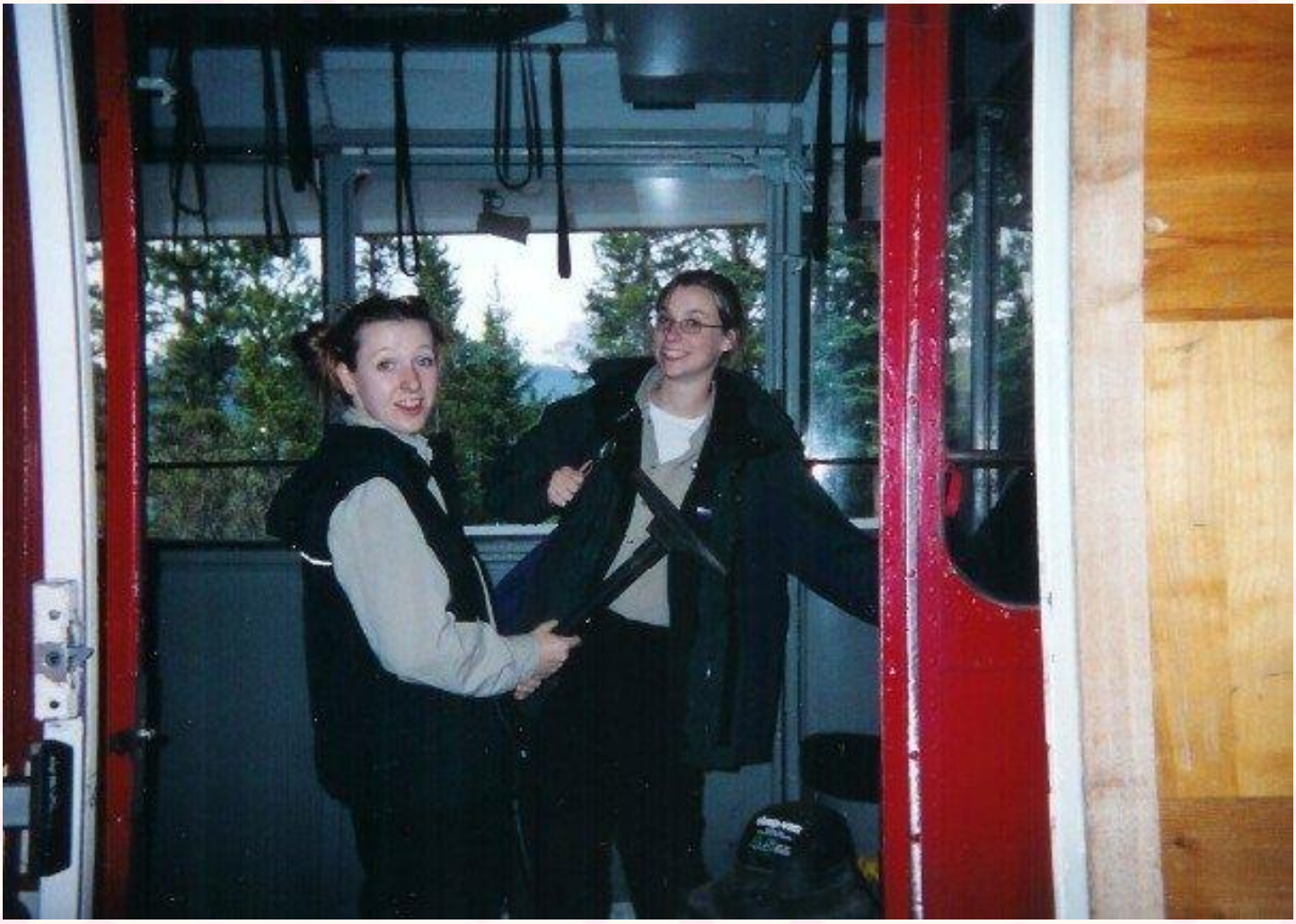
Who doesn’t want to be compared to Kathryn Janeway?!

7Aug2016

My First 11 Jobs

Posted in Canada, Fun, Life

Last night I was cruising around on Twitter and came across the hashtag #myfirstsevenjobs. It was really interesting to see how people's careers progressed (or not) over each job transition.



Anyhoo, I thought it might be fun to consider in my depth than a tweet my first MANY jobs. Seven won't cut it for me, and I'm in the mood to paint a path from beginning to present day me.

1. BABY SITTER

Since it seems more a right-of-passage than job, I'm not sure whether to count this. But babysitting IS work – particularly when you are babysitting three brothers who love to get into fights, go on the roof, and do the opposite of what their parents put down as rules … not to forget force you to play non-stop driveway hockey. Ah, but I enjoyed it. Five bucks an hour back then, and I felt I was asking too much.

I've actually known people who have paid the bills with babysitting. Man that is smart. I'd never considered it back when Z and I were flat broke.

2. SUBWAY SANDWICH ARTIST

Ah, my first 'real job' on the books with tax deductions. I walked into the restaurant and answered this question correctly: The lunch rush just finished. The tables are messy, the tomatoes need to be cut and a customer just walked in the door. What do you do first?

Serve the customer? Then fix the floor? Then cut tomatoes? CORRECT!

I got the job. It paid for my week-long grad trip to Mexico. A summer well spent during a time when I really was in a bubble about the value of a buck.

3. OLD NAVY

Never-ending-folding-opportunity!! I walked into a group interview for this simply because some friends of mine and I were wandering around the mall and there was a sign. I was wearing this ridiculous pink tank top and my hair was sloppily piled on top off my head in a bun. Apparently this made me hip enough to land the job. They played non-stop 80s pop music and the floor was concrete … i.e., it was literally painful to work there.

4. CONCESSION STAND

Truly my worst job. In writing this, I realize I am lucky *this* was the worst job I ever worked. Really it was just gross – limp lettuce, drug deals in the walk-in-freezer, concession stand food, and a bunch of flirting-with-each-other fifteen year old kids working their first jobs. Did one season to save money and then ditched it.

5. TRAMWAY

Oh man, the job wasn't great but the summer was AMAZING. Since I was a kid I had wanted to work a summer in Jasper National Park. So during my first summer of university, I got myself a job at the Jasper Tramway working in their retail shop on top of the mountain. We'd do 12 hour shifts, but we ALSO all lived together in a big house, and rode bikes up mountains, and ate ice cream in the park and went dancing all night long. It was incredible. Everyone should work a shitty job in a beautiful national park at least once.

6. BOOK SELLER AT CHAPTERS

I have very mixed feelings about this time in my life, but my most vivid memories from then do come from this store. Here I met a boyfriend, and also my best friend Catherine – she worked in the kids department and it took about 6 months before we ever really spoke to one another, because we were shy. Twelve odd years later and she's still a rock in my life. This job also helped pay for the back and forth trips to Hungary during my time courting Zsolt.

I just have a bit of a pinch with it, however. When I finally left for good, after three years of working there and showing up keen for each shift, the management were a bunch of assholes minus one fellow. Not a card wishing me luck (I was moving to England to be with Zsolt), barely a thanks, and the head manager (who so clearly hated his job) didn't even want to let me use my discount one last time on buying books. I know that sounds petty, but in retail that's like saying 'go frack yourself'.

However, it did connect me to good people, and was a place about which I cared.

7. PRICEWATERHOUSECOOPER INTERNAL DEBT COLLECTOR

How the HECK I ended up doing this, I don't know. In England you go to a job agency, and they place you in a position. Somehow I ended up here and accepted it because, you know, money. It was my first financial office experience. It was my last financial office experience. I worked about 9 months here, observed the bitterness of both management and long-term employees, saved cash for my MA in Creative Writing, and then took off on a trip to Iceland, never to return there again. I also met some great people, all recent university grads like myself.

8. ASSISTANCE SERVICES UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

This was a FUN job. I got to go to other students' lectures and take notes for them. Sometimes I'd go hang out with them on job placements. Other times I would just take them around campus so they were familiar with the space. It was all about helping these young people feel capable in their studies.

9. LIBRARY ASSISTANT & DIGITIZATION

Again with the University, but at a tiny library in the Humanities campus that looked out onto a courtyard. *happy sigh*

If we had stayed in England, I most certainly would have remained here for ages. Not only was it a lovely place in general, but the people – oh my goodness, such good people. This was the first job where I really felt valued as an employee, and in turn it made me value the job so much more. I wasn't some expendable part-time employee . . . I mattered to them. It's also where I was diagnosed with breast cancer and my manager truly helped me navigate that nightmare.

10 – ish. MORE LIBRARY

I truly love libraries, and this was no exception, but WOW … working for the city is a ridiculous jungle of protocol, ridged rules, and hierarchy. However, I did work at a very special branch in our city.

11. FREELANCE WRITER & SOCIAL MEDIA'ER'

Ohhh yeah. I don't know how this happened, except that I had a MA in creative writing, moved back to Canada, did some blogging for local sites, and then one day went to a networking meeting where I randomly told people I was a writer. From here Camille Boivin came into my life. She hired me as a blogger, and it was a great relationship. I had two main clients in my work, and they helped Zsolt and I float along just enough to get out of my parent's house and into the apartment in Vanier. It was lean times, but times where I was really building what I wanted to do with myself.

12. AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

A series of fortunate events, and projects, and job board emails, led me here. I am happy and grateful. So grateful. My project for the organization is the book club. It basically wraps much of what I have loved into a big ball, and then lets me play with it. I am inspired daily by the people with whom I work and am in awe they have welcomed me into their circle.

AND THAT IS IT.

?: What were your first seven, or eleven jobs? Share in the comments or write your own post and link back here

My takeaways from all this:

1) You gotta carve your own path, and it probably won't be a straight or expected one. If it were not for my taking on independent projects like blogging for Apartment 613, writing my novel, or creating Write Along Radio with my co-host, or randomly telling strangers I'm a writer, I would never have had the better doors opening for me. Also, I did an MA in creative writing . . . which people may tell you leads nowhere – except for me, it lead everywhere I pushed it to go.

2) Being valued is important. Once I stopped accepting shitty management, or devaluation on my services, or being treated as expendable, I found positions where my work was honoured. I want to work with people who care, and so that is where I end up. Put it out there and, if you can, don't accept less.

3) A monkey wrench does not need to stop you. During all these years I felt, at different times, totally aimless in life, totally broke and worried about payments (plotting out our groceries dollar by dollar then feeling sick when we went over our small budget), totally sick with chemo, and totally worried about dying any second. But I'm still doing what I love to do, because I am far more than my fears AND (point 2) work with incredible people who help me keep going.

Okay, I can't believe I have written so much in this post. Blame it on the lack of children in my life. If I had had a kid, then I would just bore THEM with all this recollection and take-away insight . . . heck, if I had had a dog I'd aim it their way too. But it's just me and you, honey, blogging around together.

And so I will now stop writing.

The end.

13Aug2016

The ‘Me’ in the Mirror

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Life, Life despite cancer

Over the past six months, or so, with the treatments, my weight has dropped considerably. The first chemo had its impact with occasional bouts of nausea. The second chemo has not caused any nausea, but I’m still losing weight. Probably so far, I’ve lost about 18 pounds. I’m the lightest I’ve ever been; so light, I will float away any moment and dissipate in the breeze. Gone.

I’m writing this because yesterday I visited my brother’s gym. He is a personal trainer along with also being a Traditional Chinese Medicine Acupuncturist here in Ottawa. Very kindly, he will be helping me train. We need to build my body back up. We need to get the muscle regenerating (or whatever the word is). We need to fix the woman who looks like she’s missing 20 pounds.

It was weird looking in the mirror of that gym yesterday. All around me were people training themselves. They were sweating and pounding the bags – they had strong arms and strong strikes. They didn’t seem to worry about shattering a bone when hitting something. I’m scared to even lift a grocery bag, for fear of crushing a vertebrae. And in the mirror I watched myself amongst them, so noticeably different.

Beauty – is it in the eye of the beholder? Even more so, is health in the eye of the beholder? Does it count that I feel well for someone in my situation? Is this frail projection reflecting back at me a reality that my sensibilities won’t accept?

I’m at battle with the me in the mirror, because I’m a bit afraid she’s the me who is dying very slowly.

I guess that is really the truth of it. It scares me a little, you know? To wither away, it’s not cool. So I need to remember: the me in the mirror is doing her best. She is at the gym despite feeling totally awkward about it. She is eating the meat and fat, despite having no real desire for either. And she is trying her best. There is a ‘me’ in there who is healthy, beautiful, and striving to survive.

I just need to remember this. And keep trying. One pound at a time and one treatment at a time, I want to get my body back.

14Sep2016

If I must choose, I choose OIL

Posted in Bumpboobs, Canada, Fun, Life, Life despite cancer, Reading, Uncategorized

Zsolt said to me the other day, I'm haven't checked your blog in a while – which made me go, eep… I haven't written in a while. The last post wasn't exactly uplifting, so what I am going to write here is a very brief summary of things. Stories may come from these, but at the moment they are all just things.

September is the month of scans. As the chemo continues every three weeks, it is now time to see if it is actually working. Fingers crossed. After a summer of blissful ignorance, it will soon be back into the consultation to receive results. Oh do I hate these moments.

The Ottawa International Writers Festival is kicking back up. This is great news because of the great conversations that take place. This year I'm hoping to catch Margaret Atwoood on The Tempest, Madeline Thein and other panel members on The Ever Present Past, and perhaps I'll go to Charlotte Gray's The Promise of Canada. And of course, I'll be bringing along my microphone to see what others think of the show. These event fit somewhat well around my chemo schedule – those Atwood and Thein are only shortly after treatment, and I'm quietly slightly a bit worried that I'll have to skip them.

OH I started an art class. We have a choice in the class: paint with acrylics or paint with oils. There is no switching mid-course. My brother and I visited the art store together, and noticed that oil paint is WAY more expensive than acrylic paint. Therefore, at the class I decided to paint with acrylics. UNTIL I went down into the gallery at the school. All my favourite pieces were painted in Oil. AND I have always wanted to paint with oils. The medium intimidates the HECK out of me, for some reason. But you know what? It's time to stop being afraid of failure. And it's time to see past the price difference and decide what will bring joy. My gut says oil.

By the by, our art teacher is charming. However, she has this need for things to be captured properly proportion-wise. In terms of details, I am not meticulous. Details are so boring. If I draw a terrible milk jug, it is highly like that I don't care two bits about that milk jug and would rather focus on the tea cup. Like writing, when drawing, I edit out all the boring bits and prefer to just focus on my focus. It's the portraits of Manet that struck me long ago with this approach – focus on the focus, and give little detail elsewhere. Art school rebel = ME! Let's see how that turns out, eh? (Though I do agree that contrast and tone are essential)

One more thing about that. The class is in the middle of the day, middle of the week and it's all younger women. What the what? Seriously, I anticipated being the youngest in the room. Rather, I'm one of the oldest. This makes me feel wise with my years.

Um.

Work – I am working part-time. YES. It is going very well. And speaking of work – disability. What the heck is it? How does it work? Am I eligible? My oncologist wrote me a letter explaining to Service Canada why I am not able to work full time anymore, and how I will likely never be able to do so again. It was one GRIM letter. No sugar coating the impact of stage four cancer in that letter. I should never have read it, but he did the right thing in writing so openly about everything. But seriously, I never, ever, ever should have read it.

Heck yes, I'm using oil paints. Life is to be lived.

Books! Well, apart from the Amnesty International Book Club (facebook link!) which sparks some pretty fascinating conversations, I am just about to finish *All the Light We Cannot See*, which I picked up upon recommendation from a friend. It is fantastic. Gripping, beautiful, immersive, and so excellent story telling. It takes you through some hard things, but keeps you flying as you pass. This novel is worth reading. Go to your bookstores or libraries, read, savor . . .

And speaking of books to read, my friend Don Kerr who I met through facingcancer.ca, is in the process of kickstarting his account what it's like to support someone diagnosed with cancer. About five years ago, his wife Kate was diagnosed with breast cancer. Don began to blog at facing cancer about his feelings, and how he found his way in supporting his wife. He is open and honest – and maybe, probably, other care-sharers/givers would benefit from such a book. Or for those trying to understand their partners as they support them, to read someone's perspective.

Here is the link. Visit and consider buying a copy to support Don's great initiative.

And seriously that is all. Life is thankfully busy at the moment, and alternates between good days and harder days. I do not feel like being specific, because I am so tired at the moment, and therefore, this blog post is done.

Like a pancake.

Hmm, I miss eating pancakes.

2Oct2016

A twist on mansplaining

Posted in Fun, Life

The other day my dad and I were having a 'conversation' in the car. This happens a lot. I think, to most people (including my father) these conversations could also be called arguments. I would say they are debates.

Anyhow, I can't help it – my father has a very special kind of logic. Often there is sound reasoning buried inside the kernel of the idea, but he begins his broad concept and not with clear reasoning. Maybe a car on the highway reminds him of back when he used to drive a Chevrolet 76 with his buddies, which would tear up the street with clouds of popping black exhaust.

But when he's talking about that car, he's actually talking about climate change, and how that one car company had that emissions scandal, and how many other eco cars are just a lot of fluff and nonsense, and how e-cars have batteries that will never break down.

And somewhere in between this stream of backward consciousness, he'll make a ridiculous statement that totally gets my goat. Something like 'only intelligent turnips should drive cars!" which makes no sense – but probably, in some way, it really does. I just need to suss out the train of thought, if I had the patience to do so...

But of course, instead, I lose it and argue against intelligent turnips driving cars. Because he gets me every time – and it's really quite good fun.

(By the way, He never said turnips should drive cars. This is just a fictional example of how these things get started.)

Anyhow, the other day I mention that the Clinton/Trump debate was a perfect example of mansplaining.

"Do you mean man spreading?" he asks me.

"Man spread!? Man Spread?!"

"Man spread," he says.

"It's not man spread," I reply.

"So what is man spread?" he asks.

"It's when a man sits with his legs wide apart, and everyone can see his balls pressed against his pants."

And we laugh like crazy.

"So what is mansplaining?"

"Mansplaining is when a man talks over a women, cutting her off, explaining what she really means, or giving background on the subject in which she's already an expert."

We agree that the term isn't really fair. As in, not every man does this and labeling it so isn't fair. Really, it's being damn overbearing, is what it is. Unfortunately, I do believe (based on my experiences) that in many, many, many cases, when it happens, it has often been a dude. A man. A boy. And yeah, it happens a lot.

But you know what, women need to keep their knees together all the time, and men are allowed to let it all hang out without one touch of shame – in fact, there's almost this machismo associated to man spread. More than once a male has noted that I sometimes sit with my legs too far apart. *Mmmhmm.* Which is, in a sense, putting me in my place.

Maybe, metaphorically speaking man spread and mansplain aren't too far apart.

So I'll give this one to my Dad in our never-ending debates. In this case, you have made a great deal of sense.

4Oct2016

It just wasn't right

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life, Radiotherapy Treatment, Treatment

It's so strange what can trigger a person. For me, it's tattoos. Not beautiful tattoos of self-expression, but rather tiny black mole-like tattoos a person gets when they go in for radiation treatment.

As life with metastatic cancer continues, thankfully, so does the need for treatment. While my bones are *mostly* stable, there is a trouble spot that is creating some dull pain in my hip. Dr Canada thinks we should get on top of it with a single shot of radiation. That means I'll go in next week, get it radiated, and then be done, minus the after-effects which are not promised to be fun.

Somehow I can handle this idea of radiation, but the tattoos that come with it . . . the visible, always there, never fading tattoos . . . I hate them so much. I hate how much my body is being marked by cancer, and these tiny black spots represent the permanence of so many things.

So, that's already a loaded emotional trigger. Then add onto that my experience getting the markings.

Today I went in to get my tattoos and have the CT scan of my hips. It was just fucking horrible. The admin assistant shows me to the change room and tells me I need to remove my trousers, though I can keep everything else on. So I do – and then I realize, there are no hospital gown trouser available. So I leave the change room instead draped in gowns back and front like a dress, and walk around trying to find trousers. But there are no damn hospital trousers! The lady is busy with other patients, and I'm just stuck without any pants.

Then a technician come out. He's tall and later middle aged. 'Catherine Brunelle' he calls. So I go and see him. He's the guy who will be doing my markings.

Fuck. It's a man. Fine.

I begin to tell him I was looking for trousers but can't find any. I fail to say: I require hospital-gown pants before going another step . . . instead I listen as he rattles on about next time I can just keep my own pants on, and follow him into the CT room.

We take a seat in the room. I feel pissed off. I know I'm radiating annoyance. I cannot help it. I also feel helpless.

"I'll give you the tattoos here, here and here." (he points with each here: hip, belly, hip)

"Where? On my front, or on my back." I had assumed this tattoo was going to be placed on my back, as it's my backside that is sore.

"Here, here and here," he points.

"On my belly?"

"On your front."

Catherine is not happy about this. She is really not happy.

But, the spot needs to be radiated, and I climb onto the CT scan table – sans trouser.

“Okay, I’ll lift up your gown,” he says.

“No,” I respond. Because the idea of baring my legs and belly with nothing but my knickers on is just too much. Instead I remove the front covering gown and slid it down to cover my thighs and hips. This leaves me mostly covered. Good.

Except then he gently folds down the gown to access my pelvis.

I just swallow the emotions. Get it done, Catherine.

“If you can pull your underwear down a little.”

I pull them down *just* a little. Still thinking he is going to tattoo my fucking belly. But oh no, it’s not my stomach that is getting the tattoo.

“Okay, a bit more here.”

And he reaches over me and very gently pulls down the underwear so my pubic hairs are all there to see, and the back of the underwear is down off my butt.

And I’m just lying there looking upwards, exposed, and thinking ‘just get through this’.

FYI, he isn’t being grabby, or rude, or anything inappropriate. He is professional. But he is doing things I wasn’t warned to expect by doctors, admin assistants, or the technician himself. And so, no matter how professionally he behaves, I essentially hate him.

He puts tiny metal BBs on me, covers me up, and runs the CT scan. Then he comes back out, uncovers me again, takes off the BBs and gives me the tattoos – one on each hip, and one on the upper crest of my – I don’t know what to call it… above the pubic bone. Pubic hair. Pubic all over the place.

The he steps away, and lets me know I can pull my underwear back up. And I looked down and just saw too much. Started crying right there. Still kind of crying now, for some reason. I was lowered on the table, and shown out of the room – but didn’t take more than two steps before swooping into the open bathroom in the hall, shutting the door, and crying my eyes out.

I’ve had my chest tattooed and I’ve had a rubber mesh pulled over my face to create a mask that would pin me to the radiation table. And that was all upsetting. But this felt violating. I wasn’t ready – and if I had known, I would have asked for a female technician. I should have asked for one when I saw him, but I just didn’t – I didn’t know what was about to happen.

And that fucking sucks.

I have gratitude for what people do, and for their expertise. I have gratitude for the support given without asking anything in return. And I know I complain a lot here, it’s true. But on this blog I can say the feelings that I often fail to express in those critical moments.

I just wish I had known. I could have gotten ready. I could have asked for a women.

But that is done now.

He did nothing wrong, but whatever happened to me emotionally really wasn't right.

P.S. While writing this post, I realized how uncomfortable I had been. So this morning I called the radiation department and requested a woman work with me when I go in for the actual scan. They were super nice about it – and it's no problem at all. Thank goodness. Now, if only I could have made that request in the first place…

** this conversation is an approximate of the wording. I didn't record everything, but it's the gist.*

16Oct2016

Here is something fun :)

Posted in Bumpboobs, Fun, Life, Life despite cancer

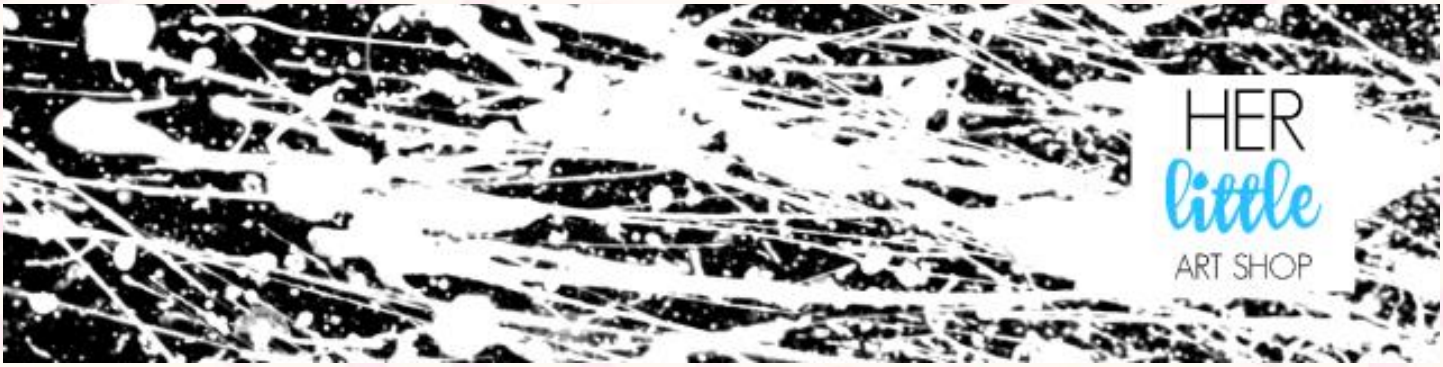
So, to jump off from that last post – here is something FUN.

I have been body-deep in the painting lately. I say that, because the stuff is splattered all over me. Zsolt keeps finding more paint on my neck and face . . . on our living room furniture . . . sink . . . back splash . . .

Anyhow, it's good fun and a wonderful distraction from other aspects of life. There's an element of disconnection, follow by some moments of emotional processing, and then back to disconnection and process. Every time I sit down to paint, I never know what will happen. Every time I find myself surprised. Sometimes frustrated. But often quite satisfied. It's a learning process to say the least.

And let's face it – I wouldn't be me if I didn't set up a website for my better bits of art. So I have taken my love of website building and am experimenting with Etsy. After suggesting a friend give it a go with her artwork, I decided to try it myself. After all – there is literally nothing to lose.

Here it is – and maybe I'll continue, and maybe I'll abandon it entirely. Either way, it has been great fun. Fun, fun, fun. And healing, and fun.



(Here's a mental picture. Zsolt builds his Lego models while I paint in my sunny corner. This, to me, is a form of everyday bliss.)

30Oct2016

A week of things

Posted in advanced cancer, Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Finding Home, Fun, Life, Life despite cancer, Radiotherapy Treatment, self growth, Travel, Treatment

This week was a good week. It's nice to have them occasionally. I honestly didn't expect it would be all that wonderful. But it was pretty chill, and productive, and somehow visiting with my radiation doctor made me feel less dismal and more . . . just . . . steady.

Boo!

Here is what happened. It's almost so unremarkable that you really needn't read another word in this post. But I feel like writing it out, so there you go.

This week I saw Margaret Atwood for the second time in my life. I'm editing/recording a mini podcast feature for the Ottawa International Writers Festival and Foment Literary Magazine. It's a nice thing that gets me out of the house on the rare evening, and lets me talk about events with other literary loving minds. Margaret Atwood wore skeleton gloves for the event, which she picked up at a gas station. Throughout the evening I know everyone in the audience was wondering why she wore those gloves. And I know this because during the Q&A at the end, someone ask her why and everyone clapped. Then when she explained it was a spooky season and she bought them at a gas station, everyone clapped again. Two rounds of applause for the skeleton gloves. And Margaret Atwood. And her new book *Hag-Seed*, which sounds really entertaining.

Also this week, we have had a bunch of pumpkins populating our home. Tomorrow I'm hosting a small gathering of family and a few friends, and we are carving these pumpkins up. This is really an overly elaborate plan to make other people carve pumpkins so I can enjoy the benefits of roasting pumpkin seeds later. Mmmm, I adore salted roasted pumpkin seeds.

Furthermore, I made a rather excellent cheesecake.

As well! It's always a satisfying week when I'm able to make progress at work. It seems to me there is always another big project that needs attention. In general, it feels like having this massive piece of ice I'm meant to turn into some lovely sculpture. But the only way to accomplish this gleaming sculpture is to slowly scrape and scrape at the ice till it finally takes forms. The scraping is emails, phone calls, writing texts, experimenting with ideas, sending newsletters and such. And in the in, you get something wonderful. This week, I could move that sculpture along. But next week, of course, there will always be more to do. This is okay. It helps me. By the by, the Amnesty International Book Club is having a Readers Choice vote – go vote! It closes on the 31st.

Counter that above point: this week I worked mostly from home. I just could not handle it otherwise. Firstly, it's a post-chemo week. Secondly, I received shitty news about my treatment last week, which got me down down down – and so incubating myself, in a way, helped me cope with all the ice chips I needed to scrape off not only my work sculpture, but my life-in-general sculpture too. And I could cry whenever I wanted. Plus stop to take naps. And watch the end of Star Trek Voyager.

Next: My art class was attended by only two people this past Wednesday. While that sucks for our lovely instructor, it wasn't at all bad for me. It was useful to have a little extra input into my impossible-flower-painting-that-is-driving-me-crazy. Oil paint is an interesting medium, but my goodness does it require patience. Patience is not my strongest point. And so, I am reminded to slow down in life.

We cleaned. This is why you invite people over, in additional to harvesting their pumpkin seeds. It forces one to finally clean one's apartment.

We had sushi. That was fun – it's this roll-it-yourself sushi that Zsolt and I really enjoy. After finally finding sushi rice at Bulk Barn, we ate our hand-rolled sandwich style sushi. It made us both quite happy.

So you can see, it was an unremarkable week that was nevertheless good.

Last week was terrible. Apparently while other areas in my body are stable'ish' in regards to the cancer, my liver spots just keep on growing. Fuck buckets. This terrible disease is terrible. However, there are areas in my body that seem mostly stable, and that is good. Dr Canada is working to see what alternative treatments he can find me. I hate cancer. And this is a shitty way to end this happy blog post.

Therefore I will add this! I booked a ticket to go on a trip. I'm excited. Extra excited because I'll be traveling with my Dad, and we haven't done anything like this together *ever*. Not that I can remember, anyhow. It's gonna be one long plane ride of him saying crazy things, and me taking the bait every time. FUN!

Last thing, it snowed!! Holy moly.

Happy Halloween

Catherine

10Nov2016

Just a letter

Posted in Life

Dear Hillary,

Thank you for trying. Thank you for pushing so hard, against so many obstacles. Thank you.

In your concession speech, you said many important things – but one of them just didn't sit right in my chest. You apologized. You said sorry. Please don't be sorry, and do not apologize for having tried so damn hard and presenting an option that spoke of compassion, understanding and togetherness.

I can only imagine how the results of this election must have shattered you. They shattered me, and I'm not even American. They knocked me over sideways and made me think about helplessness, and despair, and how the happy ending I seek both personally, physically and globally just do not seem to be coming true. I am sure you wept, and may still weep. I wept too. I weep still.

Amazingly, I have found myself needing to mourn. Never did I expect that feeling. But then, never did I expect you to lose, or England to want to leave the EU, or such septic leadership in Hungary, or fear mongering to have such success, or – personally – to face possibly dying from cancer so damn young. Life is full of these little surprises.

But you also prove that life is full of inspirations. And fight. And strength to try – no matter the outcome. And people who want to care about others. You have become one of my heroes. And I will never be sorry that you gave that glass ceiling a damn hard punch.

Because you fought, you made me stronger. You make many people stronger.

That is all.

30Nov2016

The Big Trip

Posted in advanced cancer, Bumpboobs, Finding Home, Life, Life despite cancer, Love

It is Tuesday afternoon. Zsolt and I are knocked out and still in bed. He is working between his sniffles (the man has a cold) and I am blogging between my aches. The timer is set so every 45 minutes we get up and do some movements together. It helps a lot and the pain I felt all weekend is loosening its grip. It's a pretty nice day together, despite our utter exhaustion. He is sick, and I should probably be 10 meters away from the man at all times, but damn I missed him so much. I cannot bring myself to leave his side.

This past weekend was the Big Trip for my father and I (I wonder how my Dad is doing today? He's back at work while Zsolt and I get to hang out in bed!). Dad and I headed out west for the weekend to visit with family. It was a very good visit, but a challenging one too. I may as well tell it like a story rather than recounting just takeaways. After all, life in reflection is really about the stories – takeaways have little impact without them.

Thursday evening Dad picked me up 3 hours before our flight was due to leave. Normally I'd oppose this, but he felt it was important and I figured it was easier to not argue. So! We got there early and settled in. The plane left on time, we jammed ourselves like a bunch of sardines onto the flight, and then *whoosh!* we were off to Edmonton.

Fact: I was worried about flying. Reality: I had reason to be worried about flying. My body is not a fan!

After we arrived in Edmonton all seemed well, but I woke up in the middle of the night with throbbing shoulder pain. It got so bad I had to wake up my father in the other room around 2 AM. Poor guy gave me a treatment in the middle of the night. Thank goodness for being born into a family of health care practitioners. Not everyone can call upon their chiropractor and energy guy at two in the morning. After the treatment, I eventually got back to sleep. And the next morning, we went out and got me a very flat pillow (best for my neck and shoulder), a cute little heater, a hot water bottle and a kettle in which I could boil water for the bottle.

Take Away: My Dad was so kind. And, I'm high maintenance!

The weekend itself was all about getting to know family. I liked the little moments – things like car-ride conversations, getting tea, comparing book lists, doing some painting. The big event was the family reunion on Sunday. My aunt held it at hers, and so many people came. It was quite something. A few I had known in my adulthood years, but many not. It was very meaningful to establish these connections again. There's just such a difference in perspective in this phase of life. As a kid and teen you want to slip away during family events, but now I want to know who these people are – what makes them *them?*

And I found the questions arising again and again: how are we the same? What makes us family? What in you do I also see in me? What is being passed on to the next generation of kiddos (there are many kiddos!) that I know is in myself too?

For me this weekend was about friendship, family and legacy. Growing up without sisters, it's good to connect with my cousins – particularly the ladies. And now not having any kids, I wonder what of myself will ever ripple forward? It's so self-focused, I know. Don't get me wrong – I see these people and they are their own bright excited adorable ambitious surprising sparks. They are their own. But to recognize a little this or that of something I also hold is a comfort. It's a weird comfort.

Dad caught up with his family – saying both significant hellos and goodbyes. (He had his own important journey this past weekend.)

I loved this. Everyone we met with was a keeper of a story. Everyone would recall a 'remember that time?' story about everyone else. One bit of history after the other, I think the older generation rebuilt their connections, and the youngsters learned a little something.

Here's an example. My one uncle (the youngest of many brothers) once shot a pistol bullet through my Dad's window where they lived (back when they were kids) as retribution after my Dad (one of the middle brothers) got that uncle's baseball bat chopped into pieces. Why was it chopped into pieces? Because the oldest brother initiated a machete-vs-bat fight with my father. The wooden bat, used by my father, lost the battle.

CRAZY.

That's the tone of many stories.

Take away: way too many things for this blog post.

Hmm. And now we are back in Ottawa. Walking off the plane, through the airport, was a struggle. An emotional struggle considering what was to be faced upon our return, and all the emotions and connections we knew we were leaving behind for a very long time.

Today was a day for being in bed. It's now much later in the day, and I'm finishing this blog post. The doctor called today, Dr Canada. Not only am I not eligible for that study I thought I'd go on, but it turns out there are spots of cancer in my brain tissue now. Before it was just in the skull … not anymore. Turns out the game is changing once again. Turns out life can be pretty hard sometimes.

But you never know. The underdog keeps fighting – and a story much expected to go badly can something surprise you. Hey, if the Ottawa Red Blacks can shock the CFL with their AMAZING win the other night – who knows what other awesome moments are in store?

The most awesome of moments from this past weekend was actually *not* a moment. It was my Dad. He was awesome. Being with him was lovely, loving and fun. I'll cherish this weekend not only because I reconnected with far-away family, but even more so because I got to be with my father.

He's definitely the best takeaway I could ask for.

23Dec2016

It’s hard

Posted in Uncategorized

I really don’t want to repeat the words Dr Canada said to Zsolt today. I don’t want to repeat them because I truly don’t know how to deal with all this. Life shouldn’t be measured in years- it should be measured in experiences, and contributions and love. Each day is a gift. And quite frankly, I’ve been one of the luckiest people I know. So many things worked out when most needed. Life has been filled with friendship and love, with beauty and exploration, with laughter and family. Most fortune, I found the love of my life and knew right away. Zsolt and I have wasted no time in this life. I hold no regrets.

Except, of course, for the reality of leaving him. This is something I truly struggle to face. Dr Verma said some rather blunt words to us today. Words that are much less about hope and far more about facing the current situation. And we are going to face the current situation. And it is scary. I worry about the process of dying. It’s terrifying. And I worry about leaving my husband behind. There would never have been enough time between us – but time isn’t what matters – just living as best as can be lived and loving as hard as possible.

It’s hard. It’s Christmas, and it is hard. But you know, we’re still so blessed. So very, very blessed.

24Dec2016

Merry Christmas!!! (But not a Christmas post)

Posted in Life despite cancer, Treatment, Uncategorized

2 AM post

Today was a very good day. Really it was lovely. Dr Canada prescribed me some pills, and after two days of being unable to eat – finally I have both appetite and some strength.

Plus my family visited today. Zsolt and I are staying at my parents house for Christmas, and stayed all of last week for not eating, etc, and my brother, his lady and my brother came over.

In addition, I had just enough energy to go to my friends' annual Christmas Eve Eve party, which is in a bar and relaxed.

So compared to yesterday this was a Christmas miracle.

Another interesting thing about having mets to the brain, is (apart from being unable to eat or feel my face) truly bizarre side effect of lucid visions. Not when I'm 'awake' but the minute I close my eyes and try to sleep I see things. Weird and beautiful and distracting things. Mostly I see what looks like cross stitch patterns you might see in a tapestry. Except it is a very clean tapestry and if the vision allows me, I can go in incredibly close to examine the details.

I tried to envision an apple – simple right? What I got instead was this pattern of colour-apple green-stitched in small bundles ultimately forming small squared stitched upon a basic bed of cold grey wove together. And as I watched, more apple green stitches appeared, and I realized they were right up to my face, essentially touching everything I saw.

So, pretty fudge buckets weird or what. Because this wasn't a dream. I was trying to entire an apple to form from the ether and never expect. By the by, when I open my eyes – I STILL see these objects.

Another vision was of Marie Antoinette with her courtesans in some French garden yard. Except I could see the incredibly fine details of her dress. And I stared more intently at this, the texture began to pour down the back of the dress like black sand emeralds, till all the courtesan and Antoinette morphed into sand and stepped into a wall.

Then I blinked and was back with my husband, the wall lost in the whiteness of his t-shirt.

In time I hope to either get ride of this or get used to it.

In the meanwhile …. weird-oh-rama.

It's reasons like this I'm not keen to try weed again. Life is already enough of a trip.

MERRY CHRISTMAS YOU BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE!!! There are many ways to be kind to one another. And in the wake of yesterday, many of you have founds way to express that to me and Zsolt. Thank you.

PS as I wrote this at 2 AM, I am amazed any one ‘reading this’ was about to understand the incoherent blurb of text that it is! Well done you folks. I’ve tried to fix it a bit today.

11Jan2017

Can you tell me a story?

Posted in Uncategorized

For the past several years around my birthday I've had a thought. It goes something like, what impact have I made in this world? And with that thought, I almost had the courage to ask people if I left any impression upon their life, or just had a nice moment where we laughed together, or helped them without realizing it (or remembering it) or just did good in some way for them, or maybe just share a moment that sticks out in one's mind for no good reason.

And then I chicken out. Maybe because we're not supposed to ask those kinds of questions? I don't know.

But why do I have to wait until I'm a ghost at my funeral haunting the egg sandwiches to hear a story people remember about me? Why? No reason!

So even though it isn't my birthday. And even though I am NOT dying tomorrow … I would like to ask:

Can you please tell me a story?

Was there a moment between us you remember – big or little? Did I ever help you when you needed it? Did I make any kind of impact on your life? Or say something that stuck? Did I ever make you laugh? Or did I do something wonderfully stupid? I'd like to know. I'd like to know what the day was like, and how you were feeling, and what we looked like back then, and why we were there together, and what happened. I'd like to hear a tiny story.

And yes, I realize that there are plenty of stories where I fucked up and hurt people too. The ones I know of, I think about still. The ones I don't, well I guess I don't. And if you feel the need to tell that story, I get it. But don't, please. Yes, this is a very selfish post, I agree.

If you have a story, you can leave it here in the comments or on my facebook page. If you don't, that is a-okay too. I don't know what to expect. Crickets? Nothing? A little, maybe. I know many of you are not commenters. But if you feel like trying, I feel like reading.

Thank you so much. Please consider your story an awesome gift to me.

17Jan2017

MALL walking!

Posted in Bumpboobs, Fun, Life, Life despite cancer, Love, Radiotherapy Treatment, Treatment

It's eleven PM and I'm starting this blog post. Too late for spelling or grammar concerns. Too late, really, to be blogging. But what the heck? Let's go for it.

Lately I've taken up an interesting sport. It is called "mall walking" and it's quite the event. You see in Canada winter is cold. In Ottawa, where I live, it's also snowy and icy and creates chaos for a person who lives downtown, doesn't own a car, and needs to walk on the icy, uneven, potholed sidewalks of the city.

But the weather is beautiful on a crisp winter day, and the mall isn't too far from my downtown location. So while downtown and not at my parents place, it's a bit tempting to risk the short outdoor walk (even though my oncologist scared the heck outta me around breakages in bones, etc.) and go to the mall for a little bit of movement.

Yeah, I'm basically behaving like an elderly citizen. But I get it more, you know? Things like chemo and the change in body really make you get it. Mall walking – it just makes sense.

So the other day my brother took me walking in the mall.

First, it was absolutely adorable. He and I walked the precarious sidewalk towards the Rideau Center Mall arm in arm. I mean, come on – when do you walk arm in arm with your brother? NEVER, in my experience. But we did! I was quite excited about the whole trolling the mall thing, and he was happy to humour me.

So we take a walk outside. But by the time we actually reach the mall I'm wheezing like a … well … a person who cannot catch their breath. Unfortunately, my lungs have been giving me trouble. But that's why it's good to get outside and push them a little. Push, as my bro says, so that the body knows where to aim and grow towards.

Right, I'm wheezing on the street corner, catching my breath. But we made it – because the entrance is JUST RIGHT THERE. Screw the wheeze! Let's keep going! I proclaim to him and a few random people passing by.

We continue up an incline. Screw the wheeze, screw the wheeze, screw the wheeze I say as we chug along. Because goodness knows I can't just shut up and conserve my breath. No, I cope through chatter.

And finally we reach the entrance to the mall food court. Basically, we're hitting up the most exciting part of the tour first, because there is plenty to see and do in a food court.

Including getting a massage!

We go in, take a seat on some comfy stools and my traditional-Chinese-medicine trained brother gives me an awesome chest and shoulder massage.

So we go from holding arms, to massaging.

Not weird at all.

Ha!

But screw it, I was in 7-heaven. Every walk should pause mid-way for a massage. Plus, it really helped to reinvigorate me for the remainder of the mall walk.

Then we take off (but not before deciding that as a reward for this very productive walking excursion, we'd buy some BUCHIPOP, sold in the food court and made by my brother's girlfriend – it's her drink company – on the way out!)

And off we walked into the mall.

I guess the key to a good mall walk is not to actually go into many shops. It's more walk-by browsing. Otherwise things become rather stagnant. However, of course, if something catches the eye than by all means stop. Of course, I'm doing it wrong, technically. WAYYYYY back when I was 20 and worked for Old Navy, I'd see proper mall walkers in the morning before anyone actually began shopping in the mall. They were a serious bunch. They didn't stop to shop because the stores were not even open yet! They would just charge around the mall over and over – really proper and serious mall walkers.

I'm more like … a contemplative walker. I enjoy the sights and sounds. I enjoy the conversation.

JP, my brother, carried my coat. Very gentlemen like. So first there was arm-in-arm strolls, a massage, and then gentlemanly behaviour. WEIRD! But to tell you the truth, his carrying my coat is a great relief, and I can use that energy for explore and gab for a longer period of time.

Eventually the walking felt complete. I bought my rewards BUCHIPOP and we headed back to the apartment.

While I do spend most of my time at my parents, it has been very nice to be downtown too. If for no other reason than the chance to spend more time with my brothers – they both live downtown – and of course, for the occasional visit to the mall.

Arm in arm we walked home together. And it was it such a good time. I've decided that I will take the memory of that mall walk with me into my radiation appointment this week.

Targeted radiation – cyber knife. For all the spots in my brain. I have three days worth of sessions. First day 1 hour with the face mask on, locking me to the table. Second two sessions – 1.5 hours and 1 hour back-to-back with the face mask on, locked down. Third session, on the Monday – 1.5 hours and 1 hour back to back with the face mask on, locked down. (VERY good, but psychologically challenging)

The only way I figure I'll cope with this, is to take in all the stories and moments I've been enjoying – from you – to think about as my brain receives laser radioactive surgery.

I will think about the mall walk with my brother. Think about going to the tea house with my oldest friend and the hot chocolate we used to order. Think about Pink Floyd and Christmas lights. Think about dancing with my husband. Think about PWC and eating a gooey pizza with my also-wants-to-be-a-writer-and-we-also-love-to-gossip co-worker. Think about shelving books at Chapters and escaping to the back room. Think about going out west with my Dad. Think about Pride and Prejudice with my mom. Think about car rides with my cousins. Think about kicking some ass in the gym class self-defense module and earning a reputation for being crazy. Think about BOLO. Think about riding bikes in Balaton. Think about brunch with friends. Think about my writing, how you react to it, and what I want to do with it going forward.

Think think think.

Thank you so much for all of your messages. I was nervous to put that post out. SO nervous. But it was good, and I'm glad to have done it.

I'll take all of you in with me to those radiation sessions. And we'll get these spots under control.

And that's all I have to say about that.

PS NO SPELL CHECK TONIGHT> Maybe tomorrow. Maybe. I'm always embarrassed by the errors. But better out then never published. And things can be reviewed later. Gooood night!

20Jan2017

A Manifestation of Love

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life, Life despite cancer, Love

During the day I get sweeping, gushing feelings of exhaustion, which essentially force me into the bed for a rest. But while I rest, I also think. And it's quite nice to do.

This past holiday season – between Christmas and New Years, I did something very important: I re-watched for the umpteenth time Pride and Prejudice with my mother. The BBC version. The best of versions. She and I have watched it so many times. Countless times. There's no one else I'd rather watch it with, and frankly it's not half as good if I watch it without her.

So, we make our cups of tea and sometimes there's a small plate of cookies. Then, we climb onto what is the most enormous bed ever, being a king-sized bed, with a gorgeously thick duvet cover, and settle in for a little bit of viewing. It's not all watched at once, because it is quite long, so when we embark on watching Pride and Prejudice, I have the additional pleasure of knowing that there will be several sessions of tea, cookies, bed and viewings.

She may have her knitting, and I may have my phone. But mostly I think we have each other and the company of the Bennet Family. Because inevitably as we watching the show, we will end up holding hands and laughing at whatever witty thing just happened on the screen.

I love Pride and Prejudice, but even more I love holding hands with my mom. I love that space and time of being together. This is probably literally the first time I've mentioned the action 'aloud' but there you have it. It's unspoken, and feels perfectly natural. It didn't always happen, since growing up I wasn't so into 'touching other people' – but living in a different country for a while from one's family can make one more sentimental …. and it carries on from there.

Anyhow, I really value my relationship with my mother. And I value those little moments. And I value that we get each other in a way that never needs exploration.

So I'm lying in bed 'napping' but really thinking about all of this, which makes me think a little further. My mom and I are close, in an unspoken way. It's very hard to describe beyond Mom and Daughter – close friendship doesn't capture it enough. But I think that scene in the bed does. So what about my other extremely important relationships? How are they best captured?

Well Zsolt and I … I mean … it's captured every day in every moment. He is my husband, I am his wife, and we are for one other. So I'll just leave it there because I think that is saying enough and frankly it's all too big to hold in words on this blog. It's like the intangible relationship with my mom, but so unique to itself.

My Dad and I – that is such an easy one. Our moment, I feel comes in two ways. One is simply the way we exchange. I've blogged about this before. The 'he gets me every time' and the 'I get him right back with a zing'. I'm not sure he loves this arrangement, but it's a dynamic that is more about love and habit than it is about anything else. And then the other way, the smaller moment of a hug or a smile. This is new for me because, like I mentioned, I don't much love being touched. But in some moments, some important moments, a hug is okay.

And then that unique relationship with my brothers. It's so different than my parents or husband or best of friends. It's not so sentimental, but … but maybe it is?

Big brother little sister – What moment or gesture marks its meaning? I think, of late, it has been his kindness and support. He loves to push – all his life he has pushed, and in his adulthood he's harnessed that into the power of pushing people to live well. I, however, don't love to be pushed. Ha! Not at all. So we find our medium ground. But more than that – beyond how he makes me juice and reminds me I should exercise … the real bottom line is we've learned how to support one another. Supporter and supported in turn, as needed, in different ways that life poses challenges.

At least, I think so. It's kind of a new one for me to consider.

And then big sister little brother. I really am not sure the marker for love here – except that I care for that guy like crazy. Like nutso. Like bonkers. Growing up he was literally at times my closest friend, but probably too young to understand that, I think. In adulthood we have our own lives, but still these occasional wonderful moments. The other day he surprised me as he and his girlfriend took me out to see The Gift of Lights here in Ottawa. It's a camp ground that was covered in Christmas light displays, and you drive through slowly and it's quite surreal. Well we put on Pink Floyd and it was fantastic. How can you not love an evening like that? We even hit up my parents' hot tub in Kanata afterwards. It felt like being a teenager again.

And then there are my closest friends. What moments make those relationships? The conversations, I think, more than the individual actions. The chance to exchange on ideas that are either about life, or culture, or just picking things to pieces and better understanding the world. God I love doing that over a cup off tea. Maybe they can best be represented by cups of tea.

Anyhow, when I stop and think about it, there are so many kinds of very important relationships in my life. It's quite fascinating how they are all so different in function and form, but bottom line all so very much filled with love.

Next, I hope to watch Anne of Green Gables with my mother. It's a much longer series, produced by TVO (I think?) and a great classic. I have not watched it 1000 times before, but maybe 500 times. So, this is something to look forward to once again. And those cookies. Geez, my parents make amazing cookies.

26Jan2017

Cyber Knife in Ottawa

Posted in Uncategorized

Lately I don't write much about treatment experiences. This is because the blog has simply evolved beyond that. Back when I was first diagnosed, I was all over chronicling what it is like to have a mastectomy or chemotherapy or radiotherapy or IV C or alternative therapies.

But now, well – chemo is chemo; radiation is radiation; and complementary therapies are very complimentary. My daily life involves dealing with these things. And a million phone calls to the hospital and other services. None of this feels remarkable anymore.

However, cyberknife is pretty cool, I gotta say. And the fact that we have it here in Ottawa is excellent. We're a very lucky city.

One of the first questions the cyber knife technician asked me in passing conversation was, "So did you come from out of town?" because this is a service not available everywhere. I think cyberknife didn't arrive in Ottawa until about 2010 or something. The Ottawa Hospital Foundation fundraised 3.5 million from awesome donors to bring this to Canada's capital.

While I cannot tell you everything about it, I can try to relate what I've experienced here, because I want to express my gratitude for being able to access this service. And for once, I don't want to complain about the hospital. J (Because really I am grateful for everything. It just gets to be too much at times and I need to vent.)

Cyber knife does feel to different from radiation in general: there is a table you lay in. You go in for X amount of sessions (fewer in general, I think) and then you leave to deal with the side effects later. But it is different – significantly so. Rather than targeting a whole wide area of your body, the cyber knife – or stereotactic my radiation doctor has called it – is more like a precise surgery, using hundreds of radiation beams.

So I rock up to the appointment last week ready to roll. Nervous as heck, but ready to roll. I have my water bottle, slippers, butt pad, DVD selection (Fantasia mostly, for last week) and sweater. While normal radiation takes minutes, cyber knife takes longer. It's so very precise, they need to line things up quite carefully.

I give them my DVD and ask if I can have a blanket put over me.

(Now, I'm not sure whether all cyberknife places have giant flat screens on the ceiling above the treatment table. But they should! In my opinion, television is better distraction than the Ambien they offered me. Watching Fantasia chilled me right out.)

Shout out to Laurie at Not Just About Cancer for letting me know there was a DVD player in the room!

The folks are quite efficient. I barely have a chance to even look at the machine before my face mask is clamped over my head. It makes me wonder if everyone getting this treatment has a different kind off mask – body mask, leg mask, etc… because the 'surgery' is so precise, they really do need to ensure things are lined up properly.

Anyhow, then the interesting stuff starts to happen. Frankly, I try not to focus upon it. It's interesting in a freaky way. There is this big white arm with a laser on it that reminds me a bit of HAL of A Space Odyssey, in that it

reminds me of an eye, and a robot. So HAL the radiation robot moves around me here and there and there and here. It does this for quite some time. Sometimes I hear it shooting out the bursts of radiation, sometimes not. But on and on it goes.

Meanwhile I lay on the table and watch the movie. I'm allowed to take breaks if needed, and I do. It's no big deal. Every time HAL moves into my view I close my eyes, because I don't want to look at him. And then peek my eyes open to see if he has left my field of view.

This goes on, and then it is done.

It is okay. Long. Not comfortable due to my worsening hip … but okay.

Until the DVD stops …. and then I get very jumpy. But thankfully with a wave of my hand the techs come in and quickly change up the entertainment, and I can disappear again into another film or show.

Like other radiation, it can apparently cause burning and itching and hair loss (and they hair may or may not grow back). Short terms side effects apparently last a week. Long term side effects … well, we will see.

Overall the goal here is to get my brain a bit under control. This is no cure – the cancer is now in the brain tissue, and that is a big problem. But it is a method of controlling the impact of the cancer. It's really having an impact on my cognitive abilities. I simply cannot process quickly, and my left side of many things feel a bit behind my right side.

And then there is the rest of my body … but I won't digress into a pool of pity. Not for the moment. Maybe later. I am doing what I can.

We'll see how this goes.

One step at a time.

And that is just a little bit about cyber knife. It is doable. And better if you can bring in something to distract you during treatment. If no DVD, then music is a must.

THE END!

1Feb2017

Special Things

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Fun, Life, Life despite cancer

Today is a special day.

It's the day I went into the office for a small gathering of friends to celebrate my time having worked together at Amnesty International. It's also the day I get to finally start my new treatment approach.

And it's very bright outside today, which makes it all the better.

Let me start with Amnesty. I do not write about work on this blog too often. I feel it's something beyond the personal – and would be unprofessional to write about it in this space. But I can write about how lovely it is to belong somewhere, and I have really felt like I belonged in my role this past 1.5 years, and with this amazing organization. Truly it has changed who I am, how I see the world, and my knowledge in what kind of change people working together – grassroots upwards – can make.

But today was about the cheese and tea. Having finished work last week (I made the decision to leave my role as book club coordinator after Dr Canada gave Zsolt that 'expect the worst' talk, and things wrapped up last week.) … having finished work last week, some friends at the organization threw me a little tea party this week. I just had to show up and enjoy! There was tea (we tried some plum, some cinnamon, and a hibiscus) and variety of cheeses, as well as crackers and gluten free baked goods from the market, plus most importantly: Good Company.

Sitting around chatting reminds me that it's just essential to connect. Social media and such is fine and well, but a nice table with some china and chatter – it's the essential stuff. It's where the calm and laughter really live. It's where you realize how much you have in common, and how much you have to learn. I hope as time moves forward, I can continue to seek out meaningful moments like the ladies gave me today.

Today is also a special day because of the new treatment. Oh, stage four and treatments – one comes after the other until the doctor says 'that's it!' and it's a very hard situation. But sometimes moments of hope appear, and whatever kind of opportunity they offer – another month, another year, another study, another approach – they are meaningful.

With the cancer all over my lungs, liver, bones and in my brain, the picture is not pretty. But at least today I've been able to start a new treatment course. The radiation has zapped the spots in my brain, and maybe this

medication will help kill any bits remaining in there. If so, maybe then I can get onto a clinical trial and attempt a different approach for battling back the disease. Fingers crossed for a virus study.

But we've had to wait about 3 months before I could get this medicine. It's called Tykerb, and it's a HER2 drug that apparently can cross the blood brain barrier, whereas other approaches cannot. It's also about 5000$/month if you are not covered by the province or insurance. Guess who isn't covered?

However, through a series of fortunate events, persistence and compassion it has become accessible to me. I won't give details because it's not my place to do so. But we get to try it, and that is so very good. Like I say, who knows whether it will work, and even if it does, who knows how long it will last – with me, things seem to move on quickly from working to not working, but it's nevertheless a gift of hope. I get to try.

I get to try. And that matters very much.

I'm also back on chemo. This time it is a pill. This is fine, it's part of the treatment. Though it's also a bit hard to swallow in that … I already weigh nothing. My energy is so depleted. My appetite was never great. Ahhhh.

But who knows? Maybe it will help push back the cancer in my lungs, so I can breath better. And maybe it will reduce the discomfort of the bones. And maybe I'll be able to rebuild some muscle mass? All these things would be lovely.

In the meanwhile, I had a fun conversation today with the ladies at work about movies that impacted our lives. Some that came up: Garden State (my movie choice), Amelie, Reality Bites, Bridget Jones, Dirty Dancing and more. And in that vein, here is one more: Beauty and the Beast. One of the first characters that I really, really wanted to identify with. Headstrong, smart, beautiful, adventurous, and a reader! Disney is redoing the film with Emma Watson. Here is the trailer. Tingles!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OvW_L8sTu5E

P.S. I am writing a lot lately. It's a coping mechanism. I hope I am not overwhelming your news feed or email.

Feel most welcome to ignore me.

P.P.S. Did anyone catch that emergency debate on the USA's decision regarding refugee travel and how Canada should respond? Very insightful, I thought …. very interesting how each MP approached the issue. Much of it disappointing (self-congratulations of a country, avoidance of issue through excessive storytelling, platform pushing), but some of it quite good (acknowledging Canada has failed to support refugees in the past, pushing for some form of commitment on how we can help now, direct language and direct responses, etc.)

P.P.P.S I've got nothing to add here – just didn't want to end on politics.

THE END

9Feb2017

Purposefully Posting

Posted in Uncategorized

This body of mine is keeping me awake again. But that's not news. That's every night around 3:30AM-5AM or 4:30AM-6AM or 1:30AM-3AM. As far as insomnia goes, it is very reasonable and probably not insomnia at all.

But still, it helps if I write.

Therefore, I am writing.

Today I received a lovely bouquet from work. A thank you for everything kind of bouquet. It's with white hydrangeas and pink roses and white lilies that are all cast against these large, wide folds of dark green leaves. Very pretty. It arrived via the delivery person and was a great surprise. Notably it was not a bouquet about my health, but instead about my contribution.

And yet still slightly bittersweet to receive, of course.

The past few days have been strange for me. Listless. With the impact of radiation being felt, I'm tired. Justttttt so tired. And yet not tired. Jusssssst so not tired. There are things I'd like to do, but have no drive to get done. My mind says yes, the body screams no.

Patience is a virtue in these situations, I suppose. But at the same time, I feel like I'm missing my window.

There are these windows when living despite cancer. Windows of opportunity that are between treatment and scans. When I do not need to visit the hospital 3 x in a week, and do a follow up the week after, and get treatments. There are these golden windows when life should be seized BY THE BALLS. Yeah, I just typed that – for realz.

Right now is that window of time. Except I literally just abandoned one of my life-balls-grabbing outlets, being my job. My amazing dream-come-true job. It's bobbing away from me in the stream of life. The purposeful side of me is like, "WHAT IS NEXT?" and the reality side of me is like "YOUR NAP!"

But life despite cancer means pushing beyond the nap (or between them). I've been inspired by many an amazing lady in the metastatic cancer world to know it's essential. And it's always just been a core value of how I'd like to define myself. Please, as I have said before, never say I lost a battle against a disease – should it come to my passing one day – instead, say I live the fuck outta life. Because if life isn't about more than this body, then what's the point of anything?

What is next then?

More writing? More art? More social media exploration? More travel? More 'I haven't discovered it yet, but will let you know when I do'? Probably all the above in small, manageable doses.

I suppose at now 6:00 AM in the morning, it means more sleep. For now.

And then ultimately a search for purpose. A new purpose. The last 1.5 years has been for Amnesty. Before that, for my writing. And now … we will see. Once again, it's time to redefine what I am through what I do. I see everyone around me working with intensity … and my instinct is to join in with a passion. Therefore, I must find a spark – however long or short it is to last (spark may be short lived, but if it catches, it burns!)

And I must be more forgiving to my body. We are one unit, even if I would rather pretend that isn't the case when the pain flares or sleep calls . . . but we are one unit, for now, and care needs to be given there too. Compassion, perhaps is an even better word.

So long as boredom doesn't creep in too deeply.

Anyhow, so the journey of who I am begins again.

With the receiving of flowers, it is time to start a new path.

.

.

.

And go back to bed.

20Feb2017

Adventure is Worthwhile

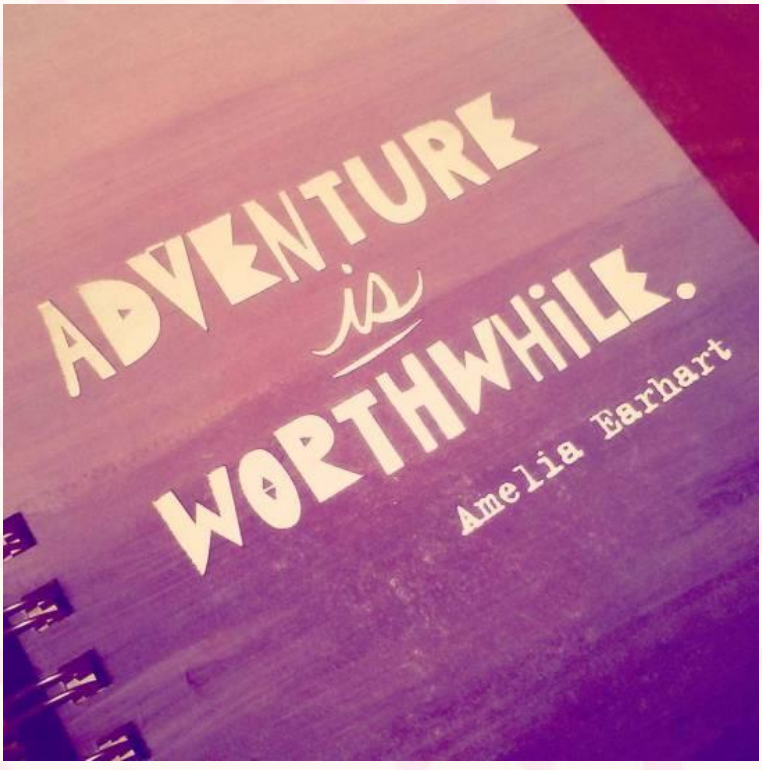
Posted in Bumpboobs, Finding Home, Life, Life despite cancer, Love

Years ago my parents attended a psychic fair. There's one in Ottawa, held each year, I think. Anyhow, they were there and my dad got to talking with one of the psychics. I suppose she must have given him a reading. And surprisingly part of that reading related to me.

"Your daughter is going to travel the world, and there's nothing you can do to stop her," said the psychic.

"Catherine?" he asked with a fair amount of disbelief. I mean, not disbelief that I'm his daughter – but that I would have ever considered traveling. As a child I hated not being home. When I went to camp my parents had to fax me every day, just so I could cope with being away. One day the fax came through with only the cover sheet – I balled my eyes out.

So, he doubted her prediction very much.



And then, one day, I went off to travel the world, and there was quite literally nothing they could do to stop me. (Even though before leaving for Europe Dad *did* in fact warn me, "don't go falling in love with anyone while you are away." Ha! Well, we know how that ended up.)

All that to say, I have been adventurous. From going to camp, then moving to Jasper for the summer and working at a Tramway, to moving to Quebec City for a month of solitude and French, to backpacking with my brother in Europe, to *almost* becoming an Au Pair in Sicily, to living in Hungary, to studying in England, to crossing the Atlantic by ship, to eating the best pizza of my life in New York, to Iceland and Portugal and Malta and Greece and Havana, and all the incredible places I've been gifted enough to visit.

Life has been an adventure. And it has been, as the great Amelia Earhart stated, worthwhile.

As you may appreciate, adventure can be big and it can be small. It can be choosing to raise a family, it can be buying a home, it may be travel, or diving into a passion project, it can be trying something new, it can be saying "I want this for my life" and then chasing that down, it can be a new recipe in the kitchen.

Anyhow!! One of the dearest gifts I've received from my adventures have been the relationships – the friendships. My goodness, what incredible relationships life has brought. It's a theme I've explored in Bumpyboobs before – how living here and there can create heartache, because the fact is you always need to say goodbye. But you know what? The good friendships, the *REALLY* good ones – they keep. They just keep.

My best relationships came from taking chances. Even if that chance was simply reaching out and saying hello to someone new.

Examples/Stories!!

Zsolt: Went back packing with little brother. Experienced fear like crazy. It was my first time in Europe and so far away from home. Each new city terrified me for the first day or two, (and then it was technicolour brilliance of adventures.) Met a man I thought I could marry. MARRIED HIM.

The creative writers: I won't name them. But here's the jot-note story. Moved to England with boyfriend. Eeeep. Arrived with nothing. Worked in a miserable job for 6 months. (still made friends!) Decided job was miserable. Applied for Creative Writing program, despite being sure I wasn't good enough and was pretty sure a career post-MA would be hard to pin down. Was accepted. Spent every last penny on International Student fees. Met people who LOVE writing. Met people who would help shape my passion for writing. Met people who had such compassion and fascinating stories, and who dared to share their writing over many cups of tea. Met people who would be incredible FRIENDS FOR LIFE.

Zsolt's PHD: This was Zsolt's adventure, but I stuck my nose in. Zsolt applies for a PhD in England and GETS ACCEPTED. (Even though one teacher at his school in Hungary told him he'd never make it through a PhD degree in England). Leaves everything in Hungary and moves to England with girlfriend (me). Struggles like hell with the pressures of a PhD in a new country, all in English, with big expectations. Bonds with those who are doing the same, and facing their own big challenges, and they all persevere together. Kindly, he invites his girlfriend to join him and his colleagues for lunch every day at the Staff Club on the uni campus. They welcome her as if she belonged among this group of incredible scientists. Those same colleagues begin to invite their partners to join us for lunch too. Friendships and families form. We are blessed.

The Tramway: Again, no names. But here is the story. Am inspired when 15 years old after visiting the park to move to Jasper for a summer after high school and work. Do as planned. Work on a mountain. Live in a shit hole. Meet the BEST DAMN PEOPLE you could ask for. Go to the club every other night and we sweat through our clothes with the dancing. The next day, everyone gets on their bikes and heads to the glacier lake. Or the veranda at the Fairmount. Or the grocery store. Or that tree in the park with the perfect kind of shade. At work, we savor what it feels like to look across the world everyday from the peak of a mountain. And we wear very ugly uniforms of green vests and mesh pants. Those people matter to me, and I still value the important friendships that have lasted from that time.

Working for Amnesty: Accepted a job in August, found out the cancer had become worse in September. Still began job in October – took the risk that it might wear me out (It did at first! But then it lifted me up.) in exchange for doing what mattered to me in life. Met people who inspired me to strive for better things, and helped me realize my potential. Worked 1.5 years before I had to stop. CONQUERED MY DOUBTS and grew a better relationship with myself.

Adventure is worthwhile.

These are big examples, but there are so many smaller ones I could list here too. Podcasting, publishing, applying to work in a book store (was I good enough to recommend books?!), inviting people to attend pumpkin carving parties (because I am terrified of social rejection), and many other things. Small things matter very much.

Adventure is worthwhile. But in every day life, so is risk. So is commitment and just a tiny bit of passion.

Hesitation is reasonable, but ultimately, it's for suckers. Do plan and learn. Me? I worked boring jobs to save, applied for visas, entered contests I'd never win and took opportunities never knowing what might and might not work, what might or might not fail, or where it all was going. (I also took many naps, cried too many times, ate a lot of cheese, and watched a lot of Netflix, 'cause I ain't superwoman.) Somethings worked, others didn't. Try, try and try again!

But, despite feeling rather aimless occasionally (**ahem**, okay, often), I strive to remember that my big personal regrets are all from times I let my fear and insecurities me. Not having a baby. Not chasing after a boy. Not running for class president. Delaying what I want because I didn't know how to do it well (learn how if it matters so much, and ditch perfection) … and from those moments I have taken much too.

Regrets happen, and so does fear, and frankly this is real life – opportunities will at times be missed.

But…

Adventure is worthwhile. Risk is worthwhile.

You are worthwhile.

Now, give the world a chance to realize that. Stop hesitating and dive into life. (You know who you are!) I promise, I will keep doing the same. Together we'll see what happens next.

(High five!)

Considering the time, that is all I want to say about that. Sorry for being SO very didactic towards the end. This blog post has somewhat carried me away on a sentimental TEDTalk-esque wave of PREACH, LADY, PREACH!

P.S. Thank you to you-know-who for inspiring this blog post. YOU are so very worthwhile, in every way. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

P.P.S. I'd like to dedicate this post to Jasmin. She truly challenged me to face my fears when I attended her retreat Stretch Heal Grow through Rethink Breast Cancer. She had metastatic breast cancer and passed away recently. If you'd like to learn more about her adventures, check out her story and considering supporting her incredible project as a legacy to this women.

26Feb2017

IT'S 1 AM. Let's talk about high school debate clubs!

Posted in Bumpboobs, Fun, Life, Life despite cancer

Well, I guess Zsolt was right. He said I'd be awake all night if I had a treatment so late, and here I am 1 AM not yet to sleep a wink. Oh well!

There is a motion sensor in this particular room where I am writing, and it controls the light in here. We are in my parents basement, and have decided to switch mattresses. So the old mattress, still being a valuable item, is tucked behind the sofa, which in turn blocks the light switch with the motion sensor. Every time the lights begin to dim I need to reach back and shake the mattress.

Just sipping on watery milk and shaking mattresses at 1 AM.

Before this I was in bed thinking to myself. Enjoying thinking to myself, actually. It was all enjoyable memory stuff – but then I looked at the clock and saw it was *past* 1 am. Normally I'm on my first middle-of-the-night wake up by now . . . and this evening yet I haven't even fallen asleep yet! THEREFORE, I decided to get up and write.

It's working already, I can feel my third eye getting tired. Literally. The space between my eyebrows feel heavier than the rest of my face.

Oh yeah. This is going to be a gooood blog post. I can tell already. Things are really shaking up Catherine in this one. There is such a clear train of thought, I could sell tickets to this one.

(Apparently 1 AM me is a bit sarcastic. Once upon a time, a favourite high school teacher said: Sarcasm is the lowest form of wit, and I'm sure he was quoting someone but I haven't a clue who and don't care to google search at this time of the night. In any case, his words stuck with me.)

So there I am in bed thinking of stuff. And one thought leads to another – such as how in grade 6 elementary school I really thought James' public speaking speech was much better than Angelina's and he should have been sent to the board finals rather than her. SEE? HOW CAN I SLEEP WITH THIS STUFF IN MY HEAD? Which led to how I came to enjoy public speaking and debating in grade nine with Mr Dickinson as my teacher, which led to how I came to love being part of the debate club in high school.

The debate club is where the coolest kids are – and I'm *not* being sarcastic. It's where people go when they want to talk about interesting things. That is great kind of thing. It's almost better than still being awake at 1:20 AM.

I loved my debate club. It was scary and fun and like a secret club that few knew existed, but where we got to talk about fascinating things and travel in the trains to old universities (for debating tournaments) and go out to bars that didn't ID and have motel room pillow fights and learn how to present an argument and laugh like crazy because everyone around you is witty as anything. It was the only thing I did in high school that had me interacting with students across various grades. Smart people who today are off in the world doing smart things.

Mrs Podgorski ran the debate club, and thank goodness for her. She was this lovely women who was gentle and kind, and had the most blindingly brilliant children who were older than me in our high school. Part of me wonders if she started the club so that they'd have an outlet for their genius. Quite likely. But she treated us all like family in that class room where we met in week after week.

Be it resolved that thinking about these kinds of things makes me happy.

BE it resolved that I AM still a little buzzed, and therefore must be careful of blogging like an idiot.

BE IT RESOLVED that that resolution has come and gone.

Oh well.

Debating was so nerve wracking. We'd go to these tournaments only occasionally knowing what the resolutions would be. The organizers hardly ever threw us soft balls (E.G. BIRT women are smarter than men = soft ball = easy and stupid and fun to debate), but rather had us start from some big abstract idea related to politics or the world or culture, and then we had to define it down and begin to argue (E.G. BIRT Canada should adopt a safe third party policy). SO going in you'd often only hear the resolution 30 minutes in advance of the debate. That means, you had 30 minutes to plan an argument AND if you were the defending team rather than the presenting team, you didn't even get that because you had no clue how the presenting team would interpret the resolution. (keep in mind, we didn't google back then – one time, this team actually came to the debate with a MASSIVE dictionary. I thought it was overkill. Why not just bring your whole encyclopedia collection along?!)

Half the time we'd walk in those rooms blind, hear a short introductory speech, and be expected to give a seven minute speech in return. AUGH!

Occasionally I shined, often I bombed. Once at McGil university I bombed in front of about 200 people, but thank goodness my partner was a semi-genius at public speaking and picked up the ball after I threw it way, way, way off the court. It was because of him, and a score tallying error, that we were in the finals. (Although I had done very well prior to that final debate, don't get me wrong. But he definitely carried the team)

ANYHOW. (1:36 AM.) There were highs and lows like that. It might sound intimidating, but not every moment was so intense. We'd have goofy and fun debates during the actual club meetings, and sometimes not even that – I'd just get to see the older kids be cool, and enjoy sitting there in their smart as anything company.

Did I ever mention how much I dig smart guys? So this club was paradise. There was this one guy at the rich-person private school in Ottawa who I saw debate in a bilingual tournament, and while I didn't understand a single word he said in French, he was beautiful while saying it.

I can accredit much to that debate club, including a great friendship. I can't remember if we joined together or separately, because he was also my first boyfriend for 5 months of high school (life is supersaturated intense when you are a teenager, so that is a relationship for sure), but in debate club we debated. I remember we won or came second during an inter-school debate tournament when working as a team (yay!), and in our final year of high school when deciding upon who would be debate club president, he insisted I be co-president of the debate club (because we'd been there the same amount of time) even though he was clearly the strongest debater on the team. Classy stuff.

So all of this was running through my head this evening, and it was nice to consider for a little while. Nowadays my debate partner would have to be my father – poor man. And really, I'm not inclined to debate anyone these days. Truth is, I would rather understand how and why your perspective is your perspective than simply argue

back and forth as to who is correct. (except for my dad, of course, because he gets me every time, and perhaps Zsolt too, and maybe my brother too…) But straight debate doesn't take anyone anywhere. Though I also like to present my perspective in a way that is logical, and in a sense can answer to the other person's experience. This, I believe, comes from living life and studying psychology. Though certain people can really get me rolling in the good 'old debate style mode.

AHHHHHHHHHH 1:48 AM CATHERINE IS WRITING TOO MUCH.

And now you know how long it takes me to write a blog post. That was the *real* plan all along. Ha ha ha. I got you. You thought you were gonna read another reflective and insightful post about life. NO WAY. I just wanted to illustrate how long it takes to write these things.

And, that I'm still buzzed as heck from the treatment.

Zsolt was right. The man was right.

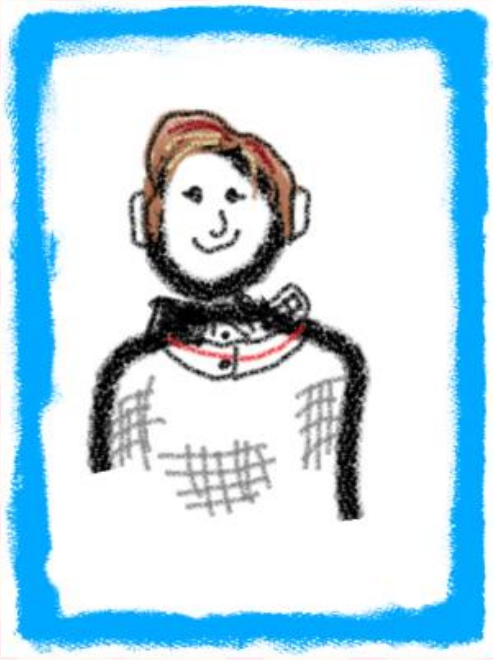
He's gonna love that.

13Mar2017

Hair Care

Posted in Bumpboobs, Chemotherapy, Fun, Life, Life despite cancer, Radiotherapy Treatment, Writing

Sometimes I take a shower, shampoo my head and style my hair. It looks something like this…



Then I go out into the Canadian Winter with my hat on, OR I take a nap OR I do anything except sit still as a mannequin, and it becomes something like this…

The next day, Mom and I go for a cup of tea. I'm too tired for a shower and assume my appearance is fine. But my hair is sneaky and does something like this…

The next day, I'm off to another tea shop (because that's basically all I can manage lately) and forget to look in the mirror at all, having just woken from yet another nap and needing to rush myself back to the land of the awake. But then I go to the ladies room at the cafe.

Upon looking in the mirror I realize I look something like this:

Then this

Then, after a while, this…

Because what can you do? At least it is hair. And hey, at least I'm out of the house.

That's the end of my story.

Time for a nap.

P.S. That sweater is wool, you would wear it every day too if you felt as cold as I get!

22Mar2017

Static

Posted in Uncategorized

Productivity must be a mental muscle, one that I am failing to exercise … because it's becoming more difficult to get going lately. Unless I have a firm appointment or commitment, I just lay here in the bed and stare at the ceiling. It's really very ridiculous. There are things that could be done. Heck, this very second I see a pile of clothes that could be sorted, dishes that could be put away, a book I might find interesting, and a package that must be sent.

But that's all I'm doing. Watching it all. There is an expression about boredom. Something about it being a luxury of those who are spoiled. Well I don't know about that. Feels more like a curse in some sense. Sometimes it's a luxury after a hard day. Right now it's like a heavy blanket I can't push off. And it's not the same as rest.

Mind you, it might have more to do with mood, apathy, or something, rather than boredom. Maybe it's not about being purposeless … just instead … stuck in myself. I keep thinking "you are wasting the days when you feel well! How many will you get, and how many will you regret?" But even that gets me no where.

Just writing this is probably enough; a tiny little flex in that mental muscle.

5Apr2017

Posted in Life, Life despite cancer

Well it's the middle of the week and all is well. Quite happily my eye appointment was moved into May, and apart from an MRI of my brain next week, I can comfortably continue getting on with smaller things. Just this morning I decided to lay late in bed and indulge in more sleep. And it was just so lovely because my hips were not sore, my lungs were not thick, my guts didn't hurt and my head was screwed on. All is well.

The fatigue continues to be a problem. But when things come up, I try to push past that heavy body feeling. For instance, the other day we celebrated a birthday in the family. I prepared all kinds of appetizers, as well as a painting craft. It knocked the stuffing out of me, but the food was great.

And then I had visits from friends and family. This of course is very special. If I had the mojo, I'd write a lovely post about how much it meant to me – but I don't really have it in me right now. Except that my aunt and cousin flew in from the USA for literally 1.5 days worth of visiting me. Once upon a time, they had a cottage in Quebec, and we would all gather there as a family during the holidays. I still like to remember going to the village coffee shop, or walking around the Tremblant village, or enjoying movies in the basement. It was also where Lulu spent her final days. I think her being able to live in such a beautiful setting was such a gift, and such a sacrifice on the part of my aunt, who took care of her each day.

When then came to visit me the other day, it was a bit like the cottage again, in that we just hung out and ate and chatted. It made me wish they all lived closer. But life takes us in many separate directions, and there isn't much to be done about it.

And finally, Zsolt and I bought ourselves a car. It's a little 2011 Fiesta. We bought it because when I looked at my list of goals for 'mission remission' last year – literally none of them had come true. We even tried to get a puppy, only to find I'm crazy allergic to poodles. So for the past month we have been browsing autotrader.ca. Because of being too easily overwhelmed, we often saw interesting/affordable options but then I couldn't bring myself to follow through on the steps for purchasing. But eventually we found the little Fiesta, and it was easier to manage the purchase. SO for the sake of ticking a box and having something that is ours, and for going to appointments and, most importantly, having adventures, we bought the car.

I should feel a lot more excited about it than I currently am. Maybe once the nerves wear off excitement will follow? Maybe once spring truly arrives, and we can road trip around Ottawa and enjoy the sunshine … hopefully then I'll be all smiles. Maybe it needs a name?. That might be the key.

And there you go. This isn't much of a post, but it is an update. Sooner or later I'll write a proper story about something interesting. In the meanwhile, you can imagine us in this tiny car driving around the city. Or me sleeping in bed. Whatever floats your boat, you weirdos!

6Apr2017

The rain

Posted in Uncategorized

It's pouring cold rain here in Ottawa. That's the forecast for the entire week, however next week on the Tuesday is going to hit 20 degrees, and I couldn't be more pleased. I'll have to plan something nice on Tuesday (along with the scheduled brain MRI).

But today is grey and rainy. Cold too. However, that didn't stop me from bundling up, grabbing my hot water bottle, and going to go sit in my new used car. Zsolt didn't get that – why just sit in the car? It's hard to explain. Essentially, I'm trying to get used to it. I want the car to feel like a friend, and we haven't quite reached that level yet.

Resting in the passenger side of the car, I reclined the chair and tucked the hot water bottle into my coat – zipping it snug against me. Then I relaxed.

Everything was grey, and everything was wet, with streams of water running down the windshield. I found myself staring at my neighbour's shutters, contemplating their paint choices, until my eyes gave that up and closed. Then it really became interesting.

When it rains in my mind, it's a uniform dumping of water. But listening as the drops hit the body of the small car, I realized that the rain was performing a sweeping symphony. Not as we're used to it with an orchestra of violins and drums and horns . . . but with gentle tappings, metallic tings, charging waves, and constant droplets. It didn't remain the same for more than ten or fifteen seconds before merging into some new, wet texture of noise and pressure against the car.

I lay inside, wrapped in this cold wetness yet untouched by the water, and was grateful for my hot water bottle. (Then again, when am I ever not grateful for that bottle?)

A few more degrees warmer, and maybe the car will become my new place for naps. I find it soothing to rest and listen to the rain. It really has so much to say.

13Apr2017

The First Road Trip

Posted in Life, Life despite cancer, Travel

I'm sitting here with my hot water bottle, contemplating. It's like those pauses in the day you used to take when looking up at the clouds. Or those big think-ins on a Sunday morning when it was just you, your bed and a slow morning. I do this thing with a caster oil pack and my hot water bottle that requires me to be still for a while. And today I'm in no mood to watch Netflix as this happens – I'd rather just think.

Anyhow, while thinking I began to consider road trips – particularly since I'm still making friends with the little blue car we bought – and my mind drifted back in time to my and Zsolt's very first road trip.

Fade from hot water bottle scene to a bright sunny day in Hungary. We are in a car. I am eating a pastry that looks like a short and wide cinnamon bun while Zsolt is driving.

We were going to Austria, which is snug against the Hungarian boarder. The trip started off with the limp 'bang' as the car lost all power just outside of Pecs. It cut out as we began to drive down a hill, and Zsolt pulled it over to the side. We both got out of the car to stand by the side of the road while Zsolt called his father for help. I opened up my brown paper bag and pulled out a second pastry to enjoy.

As it turned out, the wire connected to the battery came off and that is why the car died. Sweet relief, we could still go on our trip to Vienna. One very memorable thing about waiting on the side of the road was this woman who pulled over. . .

Zsolt and Laszlo are hunched over the engine, not having a clue what went wrong but trying to magically fix the car nevertheless, when a car pulls over and out steps this woman. She's wearing leather. A lot of leather. And it's yellow. Fixing her driving gloves, she strides over to the group of us by the car engine, and wades in – looking the motor, pointing at things, saying stuff. It's all in Hungarian – I don't understand a thing. But she seems confident!

Then Laszlo (Zsolt's dad) gets a map from the glove compartment, and opens it on the trunk. They all gather around the map, and I am wonder *how* in the world does a map relate to fixing a car?

It doesn't! The Yellow leather lady is just lost and needs directions. She had no clue what might be wrong with the car.

So weird!

Anyhow, eventually a mechanic showed up and everything is fixed up. Zsolt and I head towards Austria, and Laszlo heads back to Pecs for lunch.

Now here is the thing about road trips – they can be stretches of very boring moments, punctuated by wonderful discoveries. Vienna was beautiful without doubt, (parks everywhere) but it wasn't my favourite part of the experience.

The best part of my first road trip with Zsolt, was the Széchenyi Palace. This is a mansion/mini palace (more mansion than palace) where Zsolt booked us to stay for two nights. It's right by the border of Hungary and Austria, and very useful for catching the train to Vienna.

When we checked into the palace, the fellow working the front desk said it was his ancestor who used to own the place. And he whipped out a 5000 forint bill and show us a picture of his great great great (I don't know how many greats) grandfather. The guy on the bill and this dude really did look alike!

How utterly bizarre to know your family once owned all this beautiful property, and had enough status to be featured on national money – and now – after it was stripped away – he remained there to check in passing travellers. It makes me a bit sad, honestly. But in any case, this fellow was very proud of his history.

The Széchenyi Palace was a wonderful discovery. The place was quiet and overlooked by tourists. So it felt like we had the place to ourselves. The hallways absorbed all sound as your walked along them, with thick carpeting and old furniture gobbling up our voices. And the room we stayed in – the room wrapped around you – huge windows – but all dark wood panelling, and a tall bed in dark wood with thick blankets. There was a small hallway with doors on either side that separated the washroom from the bedroom. At night, to use the loo, you'd find yourself in between rooms, lost in pure pitch black while groping for an ancient light switch. It was the perfect place for ghosts to hang out.

And during the day, after crossing the manicured garden out front, there was this gorgeous walk – it stretched straight out from the palace and far, far, back into what was now a farmer's field (though I imagine once, before the land was seized by 'the people' it was all wooded), a corridor of field lined with tall trees – all the way down to a memorial. This was where the original Széchenyi honoured his wife.

It struck me as fascinating that a grave should be placed *so* far from the palace, but also very understandable. In walking between the home and the memorial, there is nothing to do except contemplate – to look at the clouds and trees, to look at the stone marker far away, to think and reflect.

What better way to remember someone than to create a passage where all a person can do is remember and reflect?

So that was my first road trip with Zsolt. We made it to Vienna and had a lovely visit. But what I really remember are the unexpected moments, the women in yellow, my cinnamon pastry and this palace where the history seeped from the floors, walls and rooms.

Now we have this little blue car here in Canada. Canada doesn't hold the mysteries that Europe does, and yet . . . we will see. I hope to be surprised by unexpected discoveries. If nothing else, I'd like another pastry.

17Apr2017

Missing Mandi

Posted in advanced cancer, Bumpboobs

Today I learned that Mandi Hudson has passed away. She wrote a wonderful blog called Darn Good Lemonade, and she was an advocate for raising awareness about stage four breast cancer. That women was relentless – she just kept advocating and advocating. But also she kept living and living – traveling, and RVing and being with her husband Mike. Despite all the crazy medical stuff she had to endure, Mandi pushed life right to the end. And I cannot believe she is gone.

Way back when I was first diagnosed, her voice was one of my first discoveries of online support. She was about my age, and determined, and going through much of the same. Our cancers came back around the same time. We would sometimes compare notes, or suggest ways for coping.

What do you do when an online friend dies? How can I sufficiently mourn her? I know there are many, many in the #BCSM community who were made to smile by Mandi. Where do we gather to share our stories and give one another a hug?

You don't of course. It's simply a question of sharing a bit of love on Facebook and crying in your room for the loss. Mandi, I believe, would have just pushed harder. She and many other women were not going to take the pain of loss lying down. While I often choose to hide, I know she would have been lining up her next conference or speaking opportunity and raising more awareness.

Well, I'm going to remember Mandi not only as a strong voice, but as a friend. I never got the chance to hug her in real life, but I feel we were there for each other as often as we could be online.

I will miss you Mandi. Keep shining wherever you are now.

30Apr2017

Rambles

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life, Life despite cancer

Hello, it has been awhile.

But here I am again writing to you, and to me, and to . . . I don't know. Just writing.

Modest Mouse's *Float On* is playing on the speakers. It's Spotify playing through. I first heard this song in 2005, while staying at a hostel in Marseilles and encountering a group of very rowdy Brits. They kept playing it as we went to the beach, trolled the late night downtown streets and just had a good old time in general. One of them could open a bottle of beer with his teeth. They were all life guards, which was reassuring because we all swam to a cave only accessible by water – and it was a long swim. No one drown, thank goodness. We hitchhiked back from the tiny beach that lead to the cave, but my brother and I were the only ones who could get a car because of my French. Everyone else walked the long, long walk back to the hostel.

The song is long over now. I'm not a fast typer.

This past week has been quite fine. Not bad. Not fireworks. Should every moment be fireworks? That is basically impossible. It would certainly be exhausting. But then, I'm exhausted all the time anyhow. I can't even bring myself to go out for tea, which is MADNESS.

It's getting more difficult to 'be'. My energy is so low that the stairs at home are a challenge and leave me winded (with a splash of low blood pressure dizziness). I suspect I need a blood transfusion. While chemo these days are pills I pop from home, they are nevertheless chemotherapy. It's fucking exhausting. However, I am hoping a transfusion, if deemed necessary, will pick me up. But then there's the issue of *the bulge*. The bulge is in the lower part of my solar plexus and it is hard. It presses into my stomach giving me nausea. Not sure what can be done about it, but I'll see a doctor next week to discuss.

Now that song about funked up kicks is playing. It's both very disturbing, and very catchy. Leaves me conflicted.

The other day, the women who cleans my parents home said to me, "I didn't know you are an artist" and I was like, "whaaa?" because I am no artist. But she enjoyed the tiny series I painted that features my feet, Zsolt's feet, and our hands. And truth be told, it was really nice to hear her words. But I'm not an artist and have no desire to be. Not officially. If I'm anything, I'm a professional napper. Nap this! Nap that! Nap here! Nap there!

Went to a local spa in the woods the other day with my mother. It's called the Nordic. Lovely place, a very nice location to relax in Ottawa. But if you have brain fog and are weak as a noodle, and on top of that, scary skinny, it's *not* such an easy place to navigate. Their handicapped parking was blocked when I arrived, and all the padded chairs in the cabanas were removed so my bony butt had to rest upon the hard planks of their wooden seats. And then, having trouble focusing as I do, navigating the stone steps in the place was really challenging too. My poor mother had to haul our bags around the resort because I can't carry heavy things. BUT we had a lovely lunch, and the infinity pool was lovely and, had I been able to handle them, the saunas are always a treat. My inability to navigate their premise is really a reflection on how much I've changed rather than any comment on the resort – except for their lack of chairs in the entrance and that parking situation – not cool at all. But I

still think it is wonderful there. I just also think I shouldn't go again without gaining more strength. And bringing a cushion for my skinny butt.

How entitled am I, using a spa to benchmark my state of health?! … Ah well, I'm lucky in that aspect and will accept that luck wherever it comes from.

We finally found a name for the car: Little Zoomer! And guess what the little zoomer did this week, turned on it's *check engine* light. Curse words! *&^%$^! We are taking it in on Thursday for an exam. We shall see. I'm also taking myself in this week to get this hard mass looked at by a doctor. We'll see about that one too.

And now, my water bottle calls.

GOOD NIGHT.

P.S. What a game last night. Go sens GO!

13May2017

Medical marijuana and ear wax

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life despite cancer, Treatment

Okay, I'm gonna do it. I'm gonna write this blog post. And I'm going to keep it short!

With my total lack of appetite, and nausea to boot, I'm exploring the world of medical marijuana. There is a clinic in Ottawa called the Canadian Cannabis Clinic, or something along those lines. My care coordinator recommended it to me, and my family doctor referred me over there after I kindly asked her to do so.

(by the way, I also had my ears cleaned out at my family doctor's. After a lifetime of not flushing my ears, I got a satisfying plug of wax released from each ear. It was wonderfully gross. As my lovely audience in the room can attest to.)

Anyhow, eventually I ended up at the CCC for an appointment. It went very well! Apparently, there are different properties of weed and different strengths that can be purchased. The CCC took my history, and then I spoke with a doctor via Skype. She helped to explain and explore the dosing and strains that might best suit me. And after that, I was passed to a care coordinator – who hooked me up with a legal supplier, and helped me find a product to try. Overall, very helpful! I look forward to trying the goods and see if it can help.

Best part was, the consultation was covered by OHIP, so I didn't need to pay anything for the visit. That was a surprise.

When so many other things are going a little crazy, it was nice that this could be fairly easy. Many steps, but fairly easy.

Zsolt is SO busy at work. Every time I see the guy he has a lap top in his hands. I can barely get him to leave the house! It's great that he is so fulfilled at his work. Next I hope they can find a balance so I get my man on the weekends.

And finally I'm painting a painting for my mother, and am VERY intimidated. I really don't want to mess this up or make it look boring. But I keep telling myself, if you don't have fun there is no point – so relax. My mom doesn't mind if it is terrible, but I'm sure she would like it even more if it weren't! We went to the shop together and picked out the colours she likes, and a massive canvas. Honestly it is the canvas that intimidates me. Plus all that pain I'll needs. Oh well – on wards!

That is it. There is a mass in my chest pushing on my abdomen and stomach – so I had a CT for that, and will ultrasound it later. I hope something can be done. I hope.

Okay that is really it. I could write more, but I'm not inclined to do so.

Therefore, done.

P.S. I had a blood transfusion. The best thing about a blood transfusion (apart from the life giving fresh healthy cells and the amazing anonymous donor who helped me so much) is the four hours I get to sleep in a bed during the day, and not feel at all guilty about the time ‘wasted’. Guilt free blood transfusions, a great way to rest.

25May2017

Ball of nerves

Posted in Uncategorized

Today I feel quite wound up. A ball of nerves. Emotional.

Today I go visit the oncologist, and I'm already feeling nervous. It will be little surprise, whatever the latest tests say. The ball in my abdomen is hard and growing. Clearly it's more cancer, or inflammation from more cancer. I can feel it growing all over my body in little balls.

Last night I had a dream. In this dream, I was laying downstairs in my bed, as ever, thinking about getting up. And Zsolt was calling me from away to rise and shine. So I did – rose and put on my clothes, including the bathrobe I find myself in too often. And I drag myself up the stairs, and as I finally reach the kitchen, there is my whole family with a birthday cake just for me. Dad, as per his goofy self, starts trying to sing his own unique version of Happy Birthday, but I put both hands on the counter and insist upon the classic version. The cake is strawberry short cake. Now, all of a sudden, my golden retriever shows up in the kitchen too! She's so happy to see me. I bend down to give her a good petting behind her lovely ears, and she's still just giddy with excitement that I'm there – as if I had been away for a long time. Then I wake up and remember she died many years ago, and it is way too early for my birthday.

To see her and stroke her was wonderful. I wish I could see her again. Maybe I will one day? Depends on what happens after it happens. Could be anything.

Anyhow, now I'm here in bed writing this post. It's been a long time since I've had a good cry. Feels like I'm due for one soon. Then again, as Zsolt says, today isn't the end of the world. But still, crying is allowed.

1Jun2017

This and That

Posted in Uncategorized

Chances are that if i spend much time editing or worrying over this post it will never get written. We went to see the doc last week. Turns out the hard mass is the result of the cancer, but is fluid, not a mass. At least now I imagine the stuff being drained, drained away.

The more challenging news is he doesn't want to put me back on treatment until I am stronger. Right now I am desperately weak. So, it could mean I will try again, and it could mean there is no more trying. I feel conflict between these realities. I want to be strong, treatment could do that, but also treatment makes me weak. I really want to feel good and healed, but i am really tired of swallowing pills on which I choke

However, very good things happened this weekend. It was my wedding anniversary! 8 years married. 12 years together. I like those numbers.

To celebrate, we stayed at a resort called The Opinicon. It was wonderful! The cabins are all so beautifully redone. It has a classic vibe mixed into modern taste and highly clean rooms. There is a fresh feeling in staying there – fresh air, fresh paint, fresh sheets, fresh mind. Our cabin, Juniper, faced the lake. And even though it was close to the golf cart maintenance road the cabin was perfect in all ways. Because it is close, the cabin is accessible via wheelchair. The grounds held an ice cream parlour, there was a beautiful main lodge, a kitchen garden and in time there will be a pool, hot tub, and very long dock. It is located somewhere between Kingston and Ottawa, next to Chavey's Locke.

Unfortunately, I find myself knocked out and unable to write more.

nap NAP nap nap nap.

That is all.

PS. I'm test driving a wheelchair – weird

9Jun2017

try to keep living until you feel alive again

Posted in advanced cancer, After treatment, Bumpboobs

Which is what I will try to do.

It's official, I'm being moved to palliative care. Zsolt and I visited with Dr Canada who, and he officially bowed out. There is nothing more that he can offer in the form of treatment. Now I move into a different circle of support that involves home visits, wheel chairs, IV for hydration and more. It is very hard to accept. But I will do as the saying goes – try to keep living until I feel alive again.

In the meanwhile, I've just today discovered that I enjoy filtered apple juice.

This is all I can manage to type. It's a sad day for us.

15Jun2017

Stay Hydrated

Posted in Uncategorized

I am typing here to you with some burnt fingers and a 3:00 AM knowledge that I should be sleeping. But When the doctor prescribed at big steroid boost, it is hard to stay asleep, unless that sleep gets read weird.

Therefore after attempting to follow one of the first commandments of palliative – get rest – I am attempting another: stay hydrated. Apparently I am not so good at it because I just dropped and cracked a glass tea travel mug. Burnt some fingers too. The even would have happened regardless of the time of day. I poured myself a second cup. The idea here is that I stay hydrated BUT don't over water myself, as I has been done a lot tonight. Loads of ice chips and cold drinks. Mostly water, also some clever juice and fizz combos. Attempting to slow this down, i am trying to tea and type. So far the tea is working – I have not touched it – but the type is keeping me awake.

Yesterday, or rather Tuesday now, came two separate visits from a nurse and a chemo home doctor later. While I am gracious for both, they are way more harsh than Dr Canada ever was. Though maybe all this will change as we get to know one another. Anyhow, it was tooooo much and truly draining. Hopefully this set up bit goes steadily, and I don't fully lose my mind.

There are good, smile moments too … floating in the pool, dancing again with Zsolt, and even eating eggs. Just here is a challenge. We will work through it all … even the broken tea travel glass mug current sitting in my sink.

Good morning.

P.S.

Good evening. Following this rough night where only a hot shower was the cure, we had a lovely day. Friends took us for ice cream, Z&I picked up medications, I bought a cane, we rolled in my rental chair around the grocery store, and went to get pizza. Tonight upcoming be what it may, today was actually fun.

Catherine

21Jun2017

Under my tree

Posted in advanced cancer, Bumpboobs, Finding Home, Fun, Life, Life despite cancer, Love, self growth, Travel

I had a particularly good day yesterday for a number of reasons, one big one being the boost of steroids and food. But this experience I feel is worth turning on the computer to capture at 2:40 AM.

Zsolt and I were relaxing on the front porch last evening, enjoying the massive sway of maple leaves mixing with a breeze and the gold evening light. Zsolt was mentioning how his friend enjoys recording short videos to remember the feeling of a place, rather than what it looked like alone with a photo.

This made me think a little.

I think, I replied, that I like to actually be in a place that has captured a piece of who I am, rather than a picture or a video …. being there, in that spot, whether it be an evening by the lake in Balaton or sitting under the tree I have literally grown along with all my life . . . that is what is really is to remember who, and what I am. That is when a piece of what makes me, me, shines. It reminds me that life is far more than a picture, or film, or a place to sit, a thing to let happen, a bed. These experiences are pieces of what I am. They make me, and they remind me of what I am.

So, I like them best. Far better than any form of art or screen.

Places that make me:

Under my tree

Balaton in the evening

The pond in Rockliff

The lake in Jasper called Horseshoe

The pool with family on a hot day

A drive with the window down and the music blaring

Eating into an orange that drips with sweet tangy juice

Sticking my face into a watermelon on a hot day

Warm cookies that are home made, not too sweet, and mine

A cup of tea and milk

Ice water

Little mountain villages with water down the middle

Home

Travel

Love

Zsolt

Dusk

I am all of these things

6Jul2017

BIRTHDAY!

Posted in Bumpboobs, Life despite cancer

I am now 35 years old. Here are some pictures of life in at the cottage and my utterly perfect birthday and Canada day.

15Jul2017

Thank you!

Posted in advanced cancer, Bumpboobs, Life, Life despite cancer, Novels and Stories, Writing

Hi everyone,

Thank you for the b-day wishes. It was lovely. Perfect basically.

Okay, I really don't know what to say except not much at all. I have been making an effort these days. An effort to stay out of bed. It's a lot easier for me to do this in the afternoon. I sleep in till about 10:30 lately, and then mentally put my shoes on very slowly, and then I'm up – visiting with folks (who come over), writing, painting… OH

I just painted THE largest canvas ever. Once it is on the wall Maybe a picture will be possible. It took the stuffing out of me to paint. The stuffing. It may be the last thing I paint for sometime simply because I'm knackered.

Things to look forward to:

That cottage part two. We don't own in my family, we rent. It is easier. Less responsibility. But we have rented the same place, so it feels homey. I sleep not so well, but the view of the water is lovely. Last time we were there I borrowed a game from my best friend. It is called "marrying MR Darcey" and is a role playing game. Good fun! Each year a couple at the cottage will take an evening meal to make. It is soooo good. I must be quite hungry now because I'm in the mood for that food.

My 12th year anniversary with Zsolt.

A warm sunny day. While BC is suffocating with flame and smoke, Ottawa has gotten so much rain. Every day it rains. It is a gloomy thing and I keep thinking there may be sunshine. I am thinking of the folks out west and the terror of what is happening. We are lucky over here in Ottawa – if only we could blow our storms your way.

Another visit from my bestie. She has made time for me in a big way. It has been very meaningful. Her birthday gift was a summary of happy emails we've exchanged over the years. Crazy hilarious and sweet.

My writing group.

Everyone I've seen lately and who has allowed me to spill my guts to them, and endured me saying some very direct things on how I have loved them in my life.

The steroids I'm on have had a useful impact. Sure, my skin is tissue, my nails want to fall off, I have mood swings and there are dots spreading … none of it matters compared to the fact that the drugs are keeping me upright. Sometimes it feels like upright in a very puppeted fashion – but I'm pushing to stay and do what I can do.

Apparently my right eye as an astigmatism (or whatever) that has slightly changed it shaped. This means new glasses – an outdoor sort of thing. Also my phone is experiencing spasms and is to be replaced as soon as I get the energy to do so.

This isn't a health update but rather one in the list of things to look forward to. I finished the first draft of my book!! It is called Space Opera in Space. The wizard of Oz meets zany cross universe adventurers who work the night shift at a Wurgers fast food restaurant. YeAAAAAAHHHH! It's fun and very light and rather quick. Once I clean this up slightly, and format, I will be sticking the draft (keep in mind that word) on Bumpyboobs for anyone to download and print for themselves.

And that is all I have to say about allllll of that.

P.S. Totally knackered having written this!

17Jul2017

Truth of it

Posted in advanced cancer, After treatment, Blogging and Other Fun, Bumpboobs, Life, Life despite cancer, Writing

Well today I slept till noon. In the middle of the night I allowed myself a tylenol, which helps alleviate the pain that I can sometimes feel in my chest and back and ribs. I know my doctors would say to take morpheme … but I know pain, and this is just a shadow pain … muted, mostly, and tylenol can do the trick.

So I sleep in and savor it like a warm bath. But there is life out there! In my mind I have made myself low sugar peanut butter cookies, and I am have made myself goulash and more kaposta. And in my mind I have finished my manuscript and posted it on this website for access.

In my mind I'm already wearing the incontinence diapers we bought for the cottage, which means I can finally chill out about mistakes.

In my mind I have found the energy to go buy that acrylic painting paper I need so not every painting is on thick canvas.

And in my mind, I can basically tap dance – and walk up the stairs on my own.

But the only parts of that that are true rests with the incontinence and the weakness when it comes to the stairs. And then there is my husband who I worry about all the time. Worry about his work, but also his emotional state of being, and how it is such a struggle to do this for us both …… though downstairs in bed or upstairs in zero energy but pushing any how land he is always fun to be with.

No energy for proofing. I am sure it is getting worse and worse. Oh well, at least words hit the page.

Done

PS I am getting new glasses and that is exciting.

29Jul2017

Last Post – 144 months and 1 week

Posted in Uncategorized

I am writing this to thank all of you. Thank you so much for following along this journey. I've been lucky, not many diagnosed with breast cancer and reoccurrence live as long as I did. Some only get months. For me, it was years.

It was trips to Europe. It was a writing career. It was becoming a podcaster. It was buying a car. It was watching my husband thrive in his work. It was paddling the waters early morning in Balaton. It was cottaging with my family, and playing games like Telestration. It was meeting all your babies! It was working at the library and seeing how they support so many. It was landing a dream job with Amnesty International, which justified how following your joys can actually lead to concrete 'grown up' good things. It was family reunions and cousins and aunts and uncles. It was buying a couch! It was facing fears. It was Claire Never Ending.

It was time with my Dad (wow we are so alike). It was time with my Mom (and shows we watched, the comfort we shared, the support you gave). It was time with Daniel (the car rides!). It was time with JP (the kindness and love). It was time with Catherine (the tea we drank!). It was my fellow writers, Ulrike, James and Kate (and how we believe in each other). It was meeting Kevin. It was time with my long-time friends, seeing how they've grown, and Christmas' Eve Eve.

It was Zsolt. It has always been Zsolt. Everything, every second, instant, thought, laugh, cry, comfort. The way he smiles when he walks into the room. How his face changes when he thinks. His wonderful height, and how I can cuddle up into his arms. How much we have in common. How much we love each other. How you are my very very very best friend.

And it was all of you too, who wrote to me in the comment sections or read along quietly. You made the hard days easier, and my random thought experiments acceptable. It was fun to write with you. I'm grateful to know you were all out there, and in some ways my words left an impact. That was your gift to me.

Thank you.

I've been lucky. I got to have so much. I got to have you.

This life has truly been a win.