

The Four Stages of Grief

By Kate Steger

Stage IV

Stage IV, metastasized breast cancer. Aggressive.

Aggressive, Stage IV, metastasized breast cancer.

Breast cancer, Stage IV. Aggressive, metastasized.

Metastasized breast cancer. Stage IV, aggressive.

Bad news repeats itself *ad nauseum*, never settling into

The Way It's Meant to Be.

“Put my arms around you. Kiss both eyes.”

A disembodied voice already in my head,

Or are we still talking on the phone?

What dreams are these of dead that speak?

What rooms writhing with copperheads?

Or was it a shady porch where healing black snakes perched?

Is this room even real?

Stage III

This is the stage where blonde teenagers,

oblivious to their lease on life,

interrupt their chatter with flirtatious boys and turn

to answer your tedious questions about ingredients.

Mystified by your rejection of “flavor enhancers” and “milk powder,”

they stare at your bald, blotchy mother

once so movie-star gorgeous

now reduced to purple hats

and department store mirrors that don’t lie,

even while you do:

“That matches,

that looks pretty,

that’ll make a nice Sunday outfit.”

(Only another size smaller, if you please, since she’s wasting away ...)

They are appalled at your jaw-dropping behavior

when you catch the old lady sneaking a hotdog

all yellow and green and red with condiments.

You cause a public scene, tantrum, drama:

“I can’t watch you eat that!

Do you have a death wish?”

And they think, “Jeez, what’s the big deal? It’s just a hotdog.”

“When I am old, I shall wear purple...”

and eat hotdogs

and drink mocha lattes all day long.

Who am I to say that the prudent way

is the way to face death?

I—who risked my life more than once

to dance and laugh on the brink of the abyss?

What difference does a hotdog make

when the date is fixed in the stars?

when, in cosmic time, a decade here or there is still not enough?

when aging is perpetual humiliation and paradise is forever?

Who am I to ask her to prolong her stay?

Stage II

bing! is the Chinese word for ‘sickness’

like a bell that rings somewhere in the body

an alarm that goes off

a blinking lighthouse message

a guide

a forest shower they say

cures the *wenming bing!*

wenming here being

the relentless soot and grime of human

thought and civilization

washed away in the gentle battering
the constantly tender and irresistible dripping
of a day-long outpouring

cry, cry, baby

all morning with the rain
thunder crashing and rumbling
lightning ripping open the cloud of your heart
sackloads of tears splashing on thirsty trees

the bird of joy, mr. hummingbird
who takes our prayers to god
is not deterred sitting under a leaf
his ruby necklace asparkle in the raindrops

Stage I

Now bereft, what's left
Is an empty pair of life-is-good pajamas
Soft with the smell of her hug
“Put my arms around you. Kiss both eyes.”

Prayers for a happy death answered
She danced away on butterfly wings
Fluttering out the window on a gentle August breeze

A day choreographed for her glory.

Condolences all miss the mark

Because the hole in your heart

Is not yet holy, nor ever will be filled.

Most especially not by sympathy in couplets

Cloying with autumnal leaves or spring's blossoms

Invoking God or angels.

Better show me a picture of an ax

And a tree stump. "She's gone.

Get used to it" might help.

And remind me that sequoias

Birth daughters posthumously

The trauma of death shocking them

To grow into the sunlight

Only absence can reveal.

Kate Steger works in global health and development. She also lends camera, communications and cooking support to her brother's documentary film productions, the most recent of which, *Stage Four: A Love Story*, chronicles the blossoming of their parents' relationship while their mother was dying of breast cancer. The trailer can be seen at stagefourlovestory.com.
