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Non Fiction | SPRING 2018

## Where Nobody Can Follow

By Gary Hunter

I'm lying on a gurney in the day procedure unit of Lagan Valley Hospital, Lisburn, Northern Ireland. I'm gowned, prepped and ready. The harsh theatre light gives my skin a waxy, yellow cast. I'm embarrassed by my flabby, skinny arms and the tattoos I got when I was seventeen.

My urology nurse specialist injects an anaesthetic gel into my urethra. It stings like a bastard. She waits a few minutes to let the gel work then inserts the cystoscope – a flexible tube about the thickness of a pencil with a light on the tip. I tense and try not to swear but it's painful. I curse and begin to recite a litany of apologies but a theatre nurse pats my shoulder and assures me they've heard much, much worse.

Once the scope has punched its way through my prostate, I relax and begin to breathe regularly. Patricia presses a foot pump and my bladder fills with sterile water. She invites me to observe the eerie, alien world of my urinary system on the monitor to my left. I glance at the screen. Old suture threads float like fronds of seaweed and human hair. I look away. I've seen enough.

The theatre staff discuss holidays, TV programmes and how long their kids spend on social media. I think about how incongruous it is – me lying there while a woman pokes around inside my bladder while talking about Spain.

The procedure takes about ten minutes but it seems much longer. Afterwards, I find a bathroom and piss needles. Hot and sore, I sit in the passenger seat of our car on the way home, clutching my crotch and moaning. My wife sighs as we sit in heavy traffic in Lisburn city centre. I need to pee again but don't want to ask her to stop the car. She wants to pull in to a garden centre and get coffee. I can't face it. We drive on.

When we get home, I take OxyContin for the pain, complain loudly and go to bed. I try to read but fall asleep instead. It is May, 2017.

I was diagnosed with chronic lymphocytic leukaemia in 2008. CLL is an incurable blood cancer for which I needed chemotherapy when it turned nasty in 2010. I'll require more chemo, which will gradually become less effective. The condition will almost certainly kill me. My immune system is compromised and doesn't work properly. Colds become pneumonia and cuts don't heal. Nodules swell up in my lungs and abdomen with annoying regularity. My spleen enlarges and pushes hard against the left side of my ribcage.

Later, in 2011, I began to piss blood; the toilet bowl looked like a slaughterhouse; thick red clots floated in the water. One day I collapsed with severe right-sided pain and my wife drove

me to the Emergency Department of the Ulster Hospital. I lay on a trolley and they shot me up with morphine. It did nothing. A junior doctor shoved a Voltarol suppository up my arse and that seemed to work. I was admitted. Later that night a nurse allowed me to insert my own suppository, thoughtfully sparing what remained of my dignity.

I was convinced I had kidney stones. Following a CT scan I was taken to see the urologist. A Macmillan nurse joined us in his office, sat down and smiled at me. I began to feel uneasy. If a Mac nurse was present, this wouldn't end well. The urology consultant stuck my scan up on the screen and, with a pencil, indicated areas of light and shade.

“Look. See that mass in your right kidney? Well that's a tumour, a big one, so I'm going to bring you in in a couple of days and remove the kidney, ureter and part of the bladder. Ok?”

“Uh, ok,” I answered, nodding like an idiot. “So what is it then? What've I got?”

He told me I had a urological tumour called transitional cell carcinoma – a rare and aggressive cancer of the renal pelvis, at the bottom of the kidney where the urine collects. I needed a nephroureterectomy or I would get weaker and die. My brain and mouth felt like they were in different gears so I kept quiet. The consultant drew me a picture on a piece of paper. He told me that TCC may recur, either in the remaining kidney or the bladder.

I thanked the consultant and walked out of the office, my head bursting. The nurse followed me, gave me a hug and explained what would happen during the surgery and how it would affect me afterwards. Her hair smelt like apples; she was soft and warm. Nurses are saints, Bodhisattvas of the earth. Lots of people manage perfectly well with a single kidney, she assured me. But the tumour could come back. It could come back. That's all I heard. It could come back and kill me. Two bloody cancers.

I phoned my wife and told her I had a solid mass tumour in addition to the leukaemia, and then I sat in the hospital lobby and drank tea from a plastic cup. A man with a limp came over and asked me where Outpatients was. I had to think about it but I remembered and told him.

Outside the hospital everything looked the same. The traffic was backed up at the lights; people waited at the bus stop while the driver stood beside his vehicle and smoked. An old man walked two arthritic greyhounds. The sun reflected off a car windscreen. It was just another day.

The world turned and for an instant I felt its cold indifference as a personal affront. I was briefly angry but decided that there was something reassuring in the fact that I didn't matter that much.

I remember going home and staring out the window, wondering if it was ok to get drunk. I decided it probably wasn't a good idea. I shoved the Stones' *Exile on Main Street* album into the CD player and cranked up the volume on *All Down the Line*. Keith's dirty, swampy riffs made me feel better about things. When the Stones finished, I listened to AC/DC, the Beatles and Warren Zevon's *Life'll Kill Ya*.

*‘Life’ll kill ya. That’s what I said. / Life’ll kill ya and then you’ll be dead. / Life’ll find ya, wherever you go. / Requiescat in pace, that’s all she wrote.’*

Later that evening, my wife and I sat our three children down and broke the news. I laughed and told them I was hard to kill – just like a bad weed, as my ol’ Granny Hunter used to say. The next day I phoned work to let them know I wouldn’t be back for a while. I wanted the surgery quickly. I wanted the bastard cancer out of me. I imagined it wrapped around my guts like a black parasite, like the creature in *Alien*.

My GP asked me if I’d given my tumour a name but I never did. I discovered playwright Dennis Potter called his Rupert, after Murdoch. Potter did a TV interview with Melvin Bragg shortly before he died. Bragg got all emotional and choked up. Potter swigged liquid morphine from a silver hip flask and grimaced as each wave of pain washed over him.

The following week, with a large X marking the spot on my right side, I was wheeled into theatre. The surgeon and the anaesthetist talked to me about football. Apparently there’s a five-a-side football team comprising of surgeons from various specialities. I made a lame joke that I felt like a condemned prisoner awaiting lethal injection. “Funny you should say that,” the anaesthetist murmured, “one or two of these drugs are the same ones used in executions.” I think I managed to laugh just before drifting off. The meds kicked in and I didn’t care anymore.

The evening after the surgery an old man in the bed next to me went crazy, yanked out his catheter and rampaged around the ward as blood spritzed everywhere and red flowers blossomed on his pyjama trousers. He shouted and screamed about pursuing the remnants of the German Army through Europe and into the smoking ruins of Berlin. I was terrified. I jabbed the button to summon help, thinking he might try to pull my catheter out too. Nurses rushed in, soothed and restrained him. He was taken away and I didn’t see him again.

Later that night, in the grip of a morphine high, I hallucinated about thousands of bats spewing out of a huge dark cave, into a red sky. Silent, leathery wings, black on red. Every bat had the face of Joseph Stalin. I was nudged awake when it was still dark. A young duty doctor wanted to check my catheter and Frankenstein-stapled torso. I said I was thirsty so she went away and came back with an ice-cold can of coke.

My life is measured out by hospital appointments, CT, MRI scans and uncomfortable, invasive procedures. I accepted medical retirement when I knew I needed chemotherapy. It was alright for a while – no work and sympathy - but sometimes I feel like I’m defined by illness, a professional cancer patient.

Some people assure me I’m brave but I’m not. Bravery implies a choice. I’m not brave when I wake up in the early hours, sweating, pulse thudding in my head like a drum tap on a parade ground, wondering what part of me will pack in next; dreading the arrival of another long hospital envelope in the morning post. I know the cancer is incurable. I envisage a shadowy

figure walking close behind me, smacking cracked lips, large black flies buzzing around its head.

I go on because there's nothing else I can do. Fatigue's an issue and coping with uncertainty is difficult. My veins are sclerosed, useless. When I have blood tests they dig into veins in the back of my hand. Cognitive dissonance hovers, waiting to pin me down and stuff my head with sawdust and nails. Moreover, nobody tells you how tedious it is to live like this. But I go on. What else can I do? I have the time now to reflect and to try and make sense of my life thus far. That's something. I'm writing again; I can do that.

I think about my mother. I look back and see images from my past with startling clarity. I dig out old black and white photographs and I see them in colour. I hear the voices of friends and family; I smell sea, rain, petrol, cities, wet leaves in gutters, pencil shavings. I hear clanging metal machinery, rock music from pirate stations coming through static on transistor radios. I see religious iconography, decayed buildings, iron, steel, a red sun setting on foreign lands, explosions and soldiers, faces in windows, and yawning holes in dark earth.

Sometimes my parents come back to me in dreams. I urge them to tell me what it's like to be dead but they don't speak. My father stares at me with dull yellow, uncomprehending eyes. He's dressed in his navy blazer with silver buttons, light grey slacks and shiny brown shoes. We're in a room full of ash and dust. *Tell me daddy, tell me. I need to know I need to...* I wake up crying, struck by a sense of loss so profound it's like a hard punch in the gut. And I remember...I remember.

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**Gary Hunter is 61 years old and lives in Northern Ireland. He worked in print and broadcast media until accepting medical retirement. He has chronic lymphocytic leukaemia for which he's had chemotherapy and he's undergone a nephroureterectomy for transitional cell carcinoma. He's recently completed a Master of Arts in Creative Writing and gained a distinction. He volunteers for several cancer charities and he listens to The Fall.**

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