

STRANDS OF LIFE

The digits on my bedside clock read 06:36. I was already wide-awake and had been for hours. This was the day I had been dreading since my diagnosis. The early morning sun filtered through a gap in the curtains, reflecting off the jewellery carousel that Jess bought for my fortieth. I stared at all the different earrings in my collection from over the years: the ruby droplets from my late mother, the peridot studs from my husband, and the sterling silver hoops I bought last week. Their colours were beautiful in the warm light, but all the while I tried to decide which pair, as of this evening, would most suit my new look.

I stretched across the bed, glad at having changed the sheets last night. The fresh smell was lovely to wake up to. I wriggled about and settled in a starfish position, feeling the cool material from Richie's absence. He left an hour ago for work and although I feel like this, the idea of consistent early mornings makes me in no way jealous of him.

Front doors closed and car engines started as my neighbours headed out to work or do the school run. I wondered if Allison, next door but one, would have the same daily argument with Chloe, her pop star wannabe daughter, about how she was wearing too much makeup. Lone behold I heard the clanging of their broken gate and Allison's high-pitched voice.

'Honestly Chlo, it looks stuck on!'

I giggled to myself, and then snapped back to reality. Nerves decided to set up camp in the pit of my stomach and anxiety came in waves with my heart beating ten to the dozen. I felt sick, a forthcoming regular occurrence, but didn't know if it was a side effect of the treatment or the worry about what was due to happen later today. It was probably both. I shifted to the end of the bed to sit upright; my body was heavy and lethargic, like a stubborn, dull weight. Over the past few weeks I had found myself with a large amount of new pyjamas, mostly from Jess. Last night's selection was a pink flannelette set with

sheep printed all over. The pun across the t-shirt made me laugh, 'What EWE looking at?' She could even make me smile with pyjamas.

On the bedside table, next to the clock, which now read 06:59, was where I kept my personal pharmacy. A doctor's dictionary of prevention methods: Amoxicillin, Arimidex, Adcal D3, Candestatin, Ibuprofen, and good old Paracetamol. First up though I took anti-sickness tablets, having never been able to cope with nausea. The sun's rays created a halo on the ceiling as the curtains prevented a full invasion of light, just until my eyes woke up and adjusted. The tablets all went down like stones; my gag reflex was annoyingly sharp this morning, not a good start to the day. Feeling the powdery film on my tongue, I craved a cup of hot tea. That was my personal medication.

I smoothed the bed sheets down and half-heartedly fluffed the pillows. My knees buckled at what I saw. This was the second morning in a row where my chestnut coloured hair casually lay on my pillow, after falling out through the night. Yesterday, the image taunted me, like the disease was mocking my body, laughing at my inability to control my own hair. This was the harsh reality.

I ran a bath and tried to forget the fact that I was going bald. The hot water and lavender bubbles tightened my ageing skin and soothed my nerves for a while. My shoulders relaxed to their normal position instead of hunched by my ears. I lay there and thought about hair. How it can define a person and become their identity. In my younger years it flowed down my back and the day it was cut short my mother kept the fallen locks as you would do with your baby's first haircut. Jess, now twenty-two, is the walking image of me so it's like my adolescent hair found her head. Seeing it lie on the pillow, come out in clumps in the hairbrush, and settle on the shoulders of my jumper were just some of the reasons why I decided to take it off before it all fell out in order to remain in control. My hairdresser, Amanda, is coming with her clippers and the deed will be done.

In the kitchen the kettle was already boiling. The steam funnelled along the underneath of the cupboards and beads of waters latched on to the unit, spreading across the surface like lily pads. Richie's cereal bowl was drying on the draining board and I smirked, he must

know I can't face the cleaning because his breakfast leftovers are normally strewn all over the kitchen. The clock in here is a shabby chic one from Richie's mum. She didn't understand that it was 'the style' and intended on returning it to complain it was scratched, so we took it off her hands. It was eight thirty now and I realised how much this disease was slowing me down. It never took me two hours to get washed and dressed. The poison flowing through my veins felt prominent today. Only in the twenty-first century could a treatment make you sick, stepping back in order to move forward.

Glad at still having the strength to do it, I made a cup of tea, my first of about six a day. There's beauty in small things and this is one for me. The lingering smell of last night's dinner turned my stomach so I made a quick dash, or as quick as my aching feet could move, for the living room. Jess bounded down the stairs ready for work. Her eyes looked red and puffy, I feared she'd been crying.

'OK Mum?' She said. 'How you feeling?'

'Not bad love, ready for this evening.'

'Well I'll be home for when Mandy gets here, I'm taking an hour off.'

'No don't be silly. I'll be fine. You're busy in there.'

She stopped buttoning up her coat as soon as I said 'I'll be fine'. She knew damn right I wouldn't be. Staring right into my eyes, I noticed how wise she had become in looking after me. I sensed the disbelief in her expression so clamped my lips together in surrender and sheepishly looked away. Jess tucked her hair into her scarf then placed her skinny hands on my shoulders.

'I'll be back at four. Don't argue with me Liz!' She pointed at me. 'Oh and phone if you need.'

I nodded and winked at my beautiful girl. The door closed and her expensive heels pounded the pavement.

I settled on the sofa, my safe haven, and pulled an old photograph album from under the coffee table. The edges of the brown cover were scuffed and worn but it had stood the test of time. It begins with Richie's parents and mine then chronologically works

its way to Jess's graduation last year, where it ends. She always spoke about travelling after university but my diagnosis came six months after her last exam. A pang of guilt shot through my heart. I didn't want her to stay because of all this. Another thing that was no longer in my control. Looking through the album was escapism. I revisited lovely memories captured in a moment. My mother combing my hair on the morning of my first day at school, even at five it was unusually long. I remembered the yellow ribbon she cut from the reel in her sewing room, and how there was a different colour for each day. Another photo of our first camping trip showed a big sack of potatoes sat next to my father, who was rolling his eyes at his wife's bizarreness. Their argument echoed in my head.

'Margie, please tell me why we need all these bloody spuds?'

'Because...my dear, your boys eat like they have hollow legs and I didn't know if they'd have them here.'

'We're in France not the Artic Circle!'

I laughed aloud to myself, submerged in these memories.

The noise from the television woke me up mid-afternoon. The half-eaten sandwich and left over apple core lay plated on the carpet. My appetite was non-existent. I pressed the display button on the TV remote to check the time, 15:58. It had clouded over and the wind was howling at the window, reflecting my mood. I sat up, straightened my shirt, rubbed my eyes, and propped the cushions against the couch. Jess was due back any minute and the 'mummy mode' in me didn't like her to see me flat out and nauseated. A car pulled up outside and I could tell it wasn't Jess. It was Amanda. My body started to shake.

When I opened the front door I could tell she was just as nervous as me. Amanda had cut my hair for years and had grown to become part of the family. No other person would have done this for me. We set everything up in the kitchen, mostly so it would be easier to sweep afterwards. I sat down while Amanda fiddled with the clippers. My knees were knocking together. Just as I started to wonder whether she'd make it, Jess charged into the house. Flustered and panicky, she apologised for being late and without taking her

coat off, knelt at my knees and gripped my trembling hands. My mouth began to water profusely, the saliva irritating the growing ulcers, another side effect of the medicine.

Amanda plugged in the clippers and wrapped a grey hand towel around my shoulders. She gently combed my hair, knowing how sensitive my scalp had become. I saw her face in the mirror's reflection and this usually confident, outspoken girl was petrified. Her hands shook as she tried to grip the comb. She'd never done *this* before. I reached out and held her beautifully manicured fingers.

'Mandy, come round here to me.'

The words came out like I hoped, soft and forgiving. She slid the comb in to her back pocket and knelt down next to Jess. I had to be brave and strong. I was the mum here.

'Thank you from the bottom of my heart for doing this Mand, you're helping me beat this thing.'

Her eyes began to water but she stopped herself and transformed into the professional we all know.

'Right, let's do this.' My voice quivered and a lump the size of a golf ball surged to the back of my throat, and suddenly it became very cold. I heard the flick of a switch and the dreaded buzzing noise, and then time seemed to stop.

I closed my eyes as the jagged blades cut through my hair. The vibration pounded against my head like a stampede, each motion coming quicker than the last. Jess whispered how it was going to be all right and how she thought it looked good. I finally opened my eyes, prepared to see my new self. Strands of my life covered the floor like a shaggy rug, each piece falling like rain around me. Every bone in my body trembled as I saw my time as a daughter, a wife, and a mother as though each bit of hair contained its own memory. Anger swelled inside me that this vile disease had infiltrated my body and how life can change in a single moment.

Rain started to fall lightly, tapping against the windowpane as the daylight faded. I looked out into the back garden, still feeling the hair graze my neck as it fell from my head.

The weather seemed to be getting worse as though it was fighting to get inside and join the mood. Eventually, the buzzing stop. Amanda smoothed her hands over the crown of my head and Jess, swallowing hard, exclaimed how it actually suited me. The deed was done. I turned to face the mirror, like I was a competition winner on *This Morning*, unveiling a makeover, without all the glitz and glamour of course. Silence filled the room. It was not I looking back. I didn't recognise this person. The girls held their breath, waiting for my reaction.

I took a moment to really look at this person, trying to find my soul behind the half-sunken eyes and wrinkly skin. Tears were brewing as I reached up to feel what remained. It was strange, like the bristles on a nailbrush and it looked so much darker now it had been stripped to the roots.

The front door opened then closed in a hurry and Richie appeared flush-faced, in the kitchen doorway. He stopped in his tracks and stared across the room to me. No words were needed because he knew, inside I was devastated. I suddenly remembered our very first date and how he was mesmerised by the length of my hair. It was flicked out at the sides that night, Farah Fawcett style. He wore the same goofy smile back then too, just as he did right now, and like every time he saw me, he winked. I let out a sigh of relief and the floodgates opened. The pressure of the past four months was released through every teardrop that streamed down my face.

Although I was angry and scared that it had come to this, I strangely felt liberated, as though my hair had ironically been the chain locking in this disease, forbidding an escape. I breathed deeply and Jess appeared at my side.

'Looking as fabulous as ever Liz,' she whispered.

That was it. There was my fighting talk. She stood behind me, rested her chin on my shoulder and we both faced the mirror. Her hair was loose; a few strands fell across her face but touched my cheek. I took a mental photograph of the moment and smiled at the resemblance between us. She squeezed me tight and turned to help Amanda pack

away. I looked hard at the reflection staring back. I knew in my heart Liz was in there somewhere and I wasn't giving up any time soon.

Word Count - 2396