

FIRST PERSON

I had to fight cancer my way (please don't tell me it's a learning journey)

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CONTRIBUTED TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED 1 HOUR AGO

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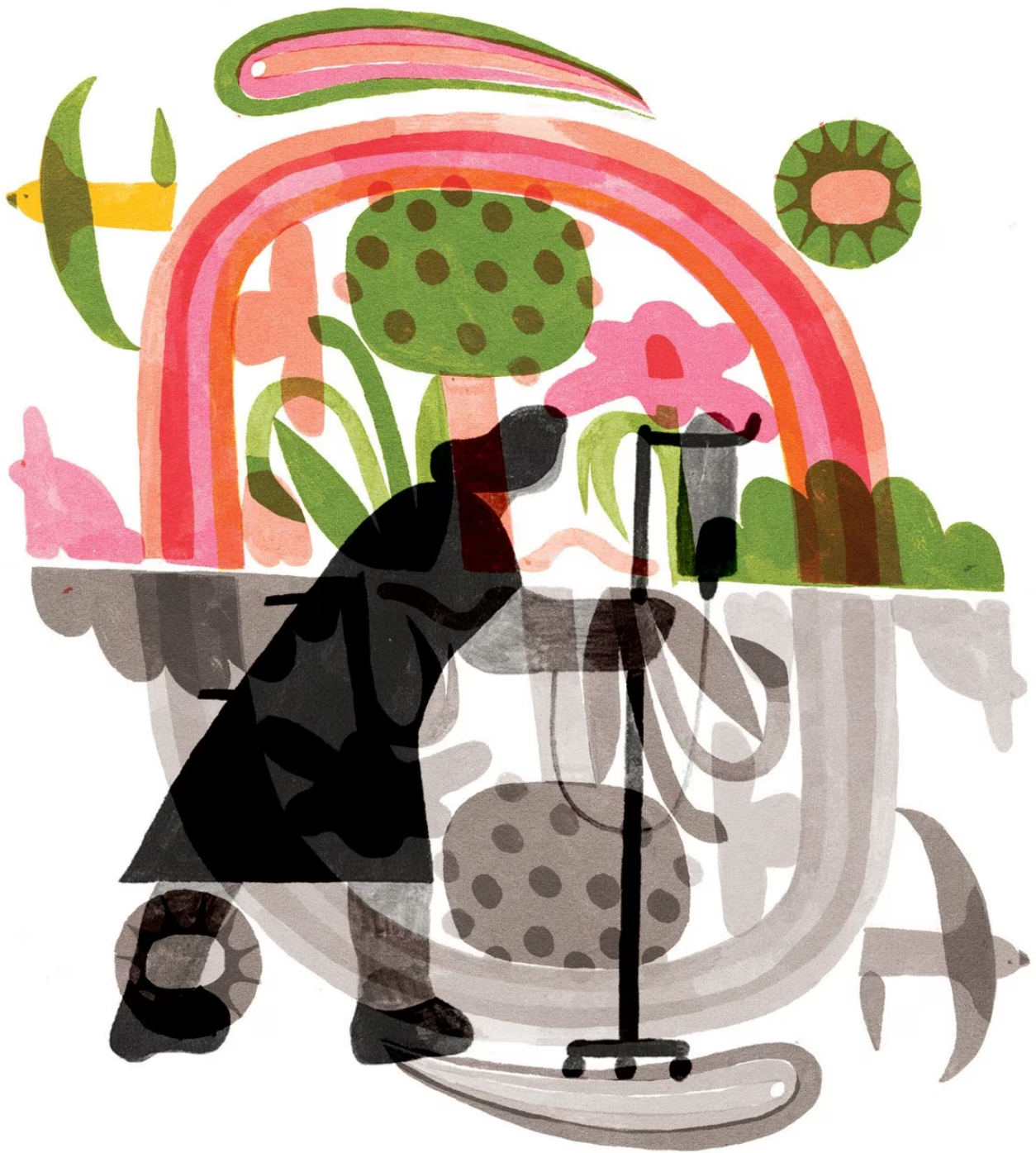


ILLUSTRATION BY MARY KIRKPATRICK

As my best friend drove me to my first oncologist appointment, I warned her what to expect in the coming months. I wouldn't be an inspirational, life-affirming breast cancer patient who carpes the diem and dances in fields among the butterflies. I'd be a dark figure pacing in the corner, muttering that people who hit me with their puppy dog eyes and bottom lip pouts when they hear my diagnosis need to back off.

My best friend wasn't surprised. She's met me.

She remembered, for instance, when I forced my way out of a stuck elevator. It opened its doors four inches and froze. That was the cherry on top of my poop-sundae week. With a lung-clearing sigh, I squished my backpack through the gap, wedged my shoulder against the elevator frame, and pushed with both arms and one knee until I could squeeze myself out. I was going to make it to my apartment or get cut in half trying.

Yet, at my appointment, knowing nothing more about me than the attempted murderer in my right breast, the surgical oncologist explained how important positive thinking would be in my cancer journey.

And with that explanation, I knew cancer treatment was going to be worse than I thought.

A month earlier, when I rode Via Rail from Toronto to Edmonton, was a *journey*. Taking the bus from Vancouver's airport to its ferry terminal, because public transit is an under-appreciated way to see new places, was a *journey*.

Cancer is a *challenge*. It's an expletive-inducing unfairness. It's the weight dumped on you when your body becomes a playground for abnormal, uncontrollable dividing cells. Call your own cancer experience what you want, you'll hear not a peep from me. But leave out the fluffy, non-threatening, sugar-coated euphemisms for destructive processes in my tissues when talking to me about mine. Thank you.

And was a cookie-cutter mindset of blind optimism my only chance? I had optimism when I found the lump in my breast. I was so positive it was nothing that I didn't tell anyone but my family doctor. Even after the mammogram, the ultrasound, the biopsy and when the biopsy results came back in three days when I was told to expect them in seven to 10, I held fast. Women find benign lumps all the time, right? My mother's side of the family had no history of cancer, breast or otherwise. That's the side that counted, right? Turns out: no. So, optimism couldn't keep me out of an oncologist's office, but I was supposed to bet my survival on it now.

Ironically, I learned that one of the mainstays in cancer treatment is to not let it change who you are. If you love singing, sing. Love jogging, jog. Love your hair and your eyebrows? Take a class on makeup after chemotherapy to help you feel like yourself again. Cancer takes enough; don't give it anything.

Except, it turns out if you are a little bit belligerent and a whole lot pragmatic. Then you do have to change. You have to hand over the core of yourself to cancer because somebody somewhere decided that people like you don't make it out of this place alive. Literally.

I get the intent behind the advice to be Suzy Sunshine; I was never sold on its value. It was delusional to be happy in the face of horrors. It was exhausting to minimize my experience out of concern for others. Pretending for other people stole precious chunks of energy I needed for myself. Saying everything was fine didn't make a single thing fine for me. It only made me want to shut myself off from anyone whose support I needed. Alone, I could be as upset or mad or sad as I felt without worrying I had worried loved ones. How could that be preferable to being openly infuriated at my situation and actively using that as motivation to fight through it?

Dr. Gabor Maté explores the consequences of glossing over life's stressors in his book, *When the Body Says No*. Dr. Maté cites research that found breast cancer patients had worse prognoses if they reported handling the cancer well as opposed to considering it an adversary to fight. He claims we create a state of chaos within our bodies when we ignore or downplay anxieties and stressors, which results in poorer health. In other words, encouraging patients to react in any way other than by being fully aware, present and understanding of cancer's realities could have the unintended consequence of making cancer less survivable.

This was *my* cancer. I had to fight it *my* way – even though that meant fighting to fight it my way, when my energies would've been better spent fighting only cancer.

Months after my treatment ended, when I started to rock Mia Farrow's hairdo in *Rosemary's Baby*, my psychosocial oncology therapist asked me what I thought my cancer was meant to teach me. (Because, again, oncology prides itself on suggesting

that when we're hit with a load of bull cookies, we need to pretend it's fertilizer for the garden of our lives.) I replied that, even as a cancer patient, I had it in me to do it my way.

No, I didn't do as I was told. I didn't look on the bright side or banish all but the pretty thoughts. I didn't live for little things that brought me joy until I was strong enough to do the big things of joy. I didn't keep my chin up and count my blessings while I embarked on a *cancer journey*. Still, I *was* positive. Positive this breast cancer would not end me. Positive I'd endure the treatment and come out the other side to rail against cancer in thought, word and deed.

For anyone faced with their own stuck elevator of a cancer diagnosis, let me be the (maybe) first to say: Don't let anyone dictate that feeling fortunate and feeling furious must be mutually exclusive. I was lucky my cancer was small, and I found it early. I was angry I had it and was forced to face it for a single minute. Because treatment can take a while, you'll have time to feel all the feelings.

Don't believe anyone who says you have to frolic with the field butterflies – not if you'd rather dig in and force your way through cancer's door.

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