

## *Wanting a Red Light*

It was a beautiful day to die.

Some of the leaves on the trees were beginning to turn their perennial orange, yellow and brown while others stubbornly remained green, mixing together in a bowl of cycling life. It was mid-morning and the sun had yet to fully warm up the day and there was a cool bite in the air that possibly required a sweatshirt or a long sleeve shirt if you hadn't fully adjusted to the changing seasons. On a normally similar day I might have braved the cooling air in shorts and a hooded sweatshirt, maybe a warm cup of coffee in one hand and the morning paper in the other. But, the cancer ripping through my body made me more susceptible to the changing seasons and I was bundled from head to toe in a jacket, sweatshirt and jeans with wool socks, while I sat on the front porch with my cup of coffee watching the leaves fall and straining to see if I could catch the changing of the green leaves to orange or brown or yellow. It was my favorite time of the year and an unusually beautiful day. Despite the beautiful changes all around me, I could only focus on the possible change in front of me, the ultimate change. Life turning to death, but for me no naturalistic circle back to life.

It was a beautiful day to die.

My wife loaded the back of our car with my bags and a pillow, while I watched from my seat on the porch. Part of me wanted to help her or even take over and load the car meticulously by myself and keep chivalry alive, at least in our household, but a larger part simply wanted to watch and reflect and contemplate all of the simple nuances of life, like the changing of the leaves on trees or the way the steam wafted out of my coffee cup and into the morning breeze.

The car was loaded and I shuffled slowly to the passenger seat wishing that I had more time to sit and reflect or debate what to do. Time, that precious overlooked commodity that steadily pulls away from us, was doing just that.

I could hear the fallen leaves crunching under the tires as my wife backed out of the driveway and onto our street. She put the car in drive and we pulled away slowly. I watched through my window as our house of twenty-two years slowly receded into the background and then disappeared. She turned the radio to ninety-five point one *The True Oldies Station* not because she liked it, but because I did.

We went through the first green light and I hardly noticed, the car never needing to slow down or speed up. Usually, we hit the red light and had to stop and impatiently wait for the cross street to have their turn or the women with strollers to cross in front of us. How silly it seemed to be so impatient, so in a hurry to get where we were going and then repeat the process in reverse to get back. That little four letter word that so effectively, yet subconsciously directed our lives. Time.

More leaves were falling around the city, but some still held out in their greens and purples waiting until the last moment to change and then fall to the ground, the dirt, the concrete and the grass. We went through another green light and then another and my wife verbally acknowledged our string of luck. I smiled and nodded, inwardly wishing we weren't so lucky. Time kept moving, seemingly faster and faster while all I wanted it to do was stop or at least slow down.

Of course I wasn't necessarily going to die today. My oncologist had told me that I had a nearly fifty percent chance of survival. Nearly fifty percent! That meant that fifty people out of

a hundred that were going to be cut open and have pounds of murderous black engulfing cancer removed from their body would survive. Nearly fifty percent! Of course that also meant that the other fifty people would die under the knife and depending on the strength of their faith would never know it. The blackness would encompass everything and the cancer would no longer be the issue. I couldn't help but wonder what my actual chance of survival was since I was nearly fifty percent, which meant not quite fifty. Was I at forty-nine or closer to forty-five? Was it a case of round up to the nearest number divisible by ten, which meant I could realistically have a forty-one percent chance of survival?

Since the diagnosis and then the decision to operate had been made, I'd bravely decided to think positively like my wife did and lean more toward the positive side of fifty percent. For no more than a few early moments did I focus on the negative side, the fact that I realistically had a better chance to die than I did to live. Until I'd stepped into the car and began watching my world change and quickly fade away with each green light we passed under, I had thought about the positive chances, that I was going to beat this thing and wake up with my wife and daughters standing over me in the hospital room and later at home with my grandson in my lap.

We went through another green light and I felt my heart quicken with each rotation of the rubber tires beneath us, bringing me closer and closer to what I knew could be the end. I found myself looking more to the rear than the front or the side, frantically trying to hold onto the lights and the leaves and the other cars lucky enough to catch a red light. I just wanted more time, time to be with my wife, time to suck in the clean cool air.

The last light was green and we passed under it unceremoniously, while my wife again pronounced our good fortune. I couldn't force myself to acknowledge her, I was too preoccupied with the blur around me. She turned into the hospital and we passed by the brightly

lit red EMERGENCY ROOM sign, a sign I'd passed under several times in the last year. Even those bright red lights proved elusive as we passed by on our way to the general admittance entrance on the other side. I watched the letters until we disappeared around the corner and then pulled into an empty parking space.

My wife turned the car off and then squeezed my hand, forcing me to remember that she was even there. She smiled and kissed me on the cheek, bravely fighting back the nervous tears that I knew were just beyond the surface and ready to overflow. It was hard to smile, hard to reassure her that things would be ok when I had no assurance to offer myself. My mind was on the nearly fifty percent and on all of the missed opportunities that had flown by with each bright green light. Why oh why couldn't there have been at least one red light, one short stoppage in time to let me soak in what was, what is and what could be. Time had indeed proved elusive, leaving me with only a fast forwarded version of what I wanted.

I stepped out of the car and slowly pushed my door shut, savoring even that ordinary and unglorified motion. The trunk was open and I could hear my wife pulling out my baggage. I looked around at the nearly full parking lot, seeing the trees beyond the concrete with their leaves going through their cycle of life, most of them succumbing quickly to the change but some of them holding out until the last possible moment, reluctant to let go.

I felt my wife's familiar touch on my elbow and then she asked if I was ready. I nodded. Before we passed through the sliding glass doors to the hospital I stopped. I closed my eyes and sucked in one last clean crisp breath of air. I no longer needed my eyes open to see the beautiful world around me.

I opened my eyes and stepped through without looking back. If I died today, it was indeed a beautiful day to die.