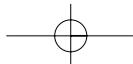
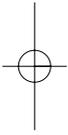


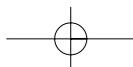


Katie Ward Originally from Devon, Katie moved to Dublin in 2004 with only €900 in her pocket, no job, high expectations and not a lot else . . . However, having made the city her home, she has worked hard and managed to attain many of the aspirations she set before leaving the UK.

Defying Gravity

Katie Ward





Defying Gravity

It's raining in my mind again, a little worse than before now that my fears have been confirmed, the autumn shower that has been hanging above me turned like lightning to biting winter rain, numbing my body from within.

On the contrary, to my mind it is sunny outside, not warm but sunny and if I had been able to have a day off work just for the hell of it, I would have spent it outside, maybe gone to the beach, but instead I am sat in a stuffy waiting room with the sun streaming into the window making pretty patterns on the carpeted floor. The warmth of storage heaters and the heat from the warm winter sun mix into a thick humidity that starts to make me feel sick, although nervousness could also be a cause.

“Miss Sanderson to Dr Finnegan’s office.”

I knock sheepishly on the door. Even though they are expecting me I always feel that I am intruding.

Do the Write Thing

“Come in!” calls a broad male voice

I open the door and see Dr Finnegan sitting behind his desk; he is wearing a suit, although it is a casual suit. He is a youngish man of around thirty and is new to the locality. He is tall with broad shoulders and big brown eyes, his hair is short with tight curls and he has a very infectious smile. All in all I find this doctor quite attractive.

“Miss Sanderson, is it? Please take a seat. So, Liberty – do you mind if I call you Liberty?”

“No, not at all.”

“Right, well, you’re here for your test results?”

“Yes, that’s right,” I shakily confirm in a breathless tone.

I feel the blood start to rush to my face and I feel the wetness of tears prick at the back of my eyes as I anticipate the results before he speaks them.

“I’ll get to the point.” There is a slight pause as he looks down at his desk. He could have been looking at his notes but I could see it was bad news. “Liberty, I’m sorry but you have Hodgkin’s Lymphoma. This is a cancer of the lymph glands and this is what has caused the swelling under your arm. Now we hope we have caught it in its early stages but this is an aggressive cancer and you will need to undergo a PET scan to determine how advanced it is and most likely chemotherapy.”

I sit there in silence; I heard what he said but the only words resounding through my head are “cancer, cancer, cancer” again and again but despite this my brain still finds it hard to comprehend what I am being told.

I thought that I would cry but I’m numb. I look

Defying Gravity

blankly at his face but do not see him. I am brought out of my reverie when he says, “Now, I know you are here on your own today but have you told your family about the lump?”

“Well, I didn’t want to needlessly worry them. I thought it would be nothing really.”

He looks at me for what feels like an eternity; I know he is trying to read my thoughts so I look down, suddenly finding a curious interest in the wood grain of his desk.

“Do you know what I find?” He pauses as if expecting me to enquire exactly what it is he finds. I don’t and so he moves on and answers his own question. “I find that sometimes people cope with news like this by pretending it’s not happening and they don’t tell their families because if they did it would mean they would have to face the truth. I cannot stress enough how important it is to have your family behind you in a time like this – you really do need their support.”

Again tears sting the back of my eyes and I feel the first one fall down my cheek and I know there is no way I can hold them back now.

He hands me a tissue and comes around the desk to comfort me. I don’t know exactly what he was saying but I look up through my tears and see his broad smile and before I know it I am promising to tell my family tonight.

I remember reading stories in magazines about women who had overcome cancer and some of them saying that they didn’t feel sorry for themselves. But I do and in truth I want everyone else to feel sorry for me too. You spend a whole lifetime being told that you have no

Do the Write Thing

reason to complain as there are people far worse off than you and then when you do have something to complain about you're told to be strong but I don't want to be. Yesterday I had a whole future ahead of me, but now it feels as if a fog has come and I can't see past today.

My twin sister Callie is the first of my family to return home. I want to wait until everyone's home to I tell them; I only want to say it once.

"Hi, Libby, good day today?"

"Yep."

"Are you OK, Lib?"

"Yeah, I'm fine, why?"

"You sound a bit distracted, like you have something on your mind."

"No, I'm just really tired, not feeling a hundred per cent."

"You do look very pale, Lib. Sit down and I'll make you a cup of tea. Just rest up."

Callie has always been the protective one. She is older than me by a few minutes and ever since I remember she has been the one I turned to for everything, even more than my mother.

I remember when we were about six, we went for a bike ride, and I didn't want to ride mine as I always got too tired so I rode on the back of Callie's. We were down near a farm, most likely where we shouldn't be, and were surrounded by a swarm of geese; I was scared and ended up falling off the bike in the middle of them. Callie was so brave, she came back, got rid of the geese and took me home to patch up my knee. I remember it was at that

Defying Gravity

point that I knew she would always be my protector, but I have always wondered what I am to her, if I have a role in her life like she has in mine.

“Here you go, Lib, that’ll make you feel better. I think you’ve been working too hard – you should take some time out and look after yourself.”

“You’re probably right. I’ll make sure I look after myself before it’s too late.”

“It’s never too late, Lib – you taught me that, remember?”

“I thought it seemed a bit too much sense for you.”

“Exactly, I have never been sensible, Lib – that’s you.”

“Callie, do you believe in destiny?”

“To a certain extent. I mean, I think it is also down to the individual because it doesn’t matter how many chances life gives you – if you don’t take them what will change?”

“Do you think everything happens for a reason?”

“Absolutely, even when you don’t see it, everything has a reason for happening.”

I always thought I was in charge of my own destiny but now I feel as if I am part of some grotesque human lottery, just waiting for my number to be called. My thoughts, usually a haven in times of trouble, have now become a dungeon where I relive the day’s events over and over as the rain continues to fall all around.

My parents are the next to arrive home. I thought I could wait till after dinner to tell them but I can’t. I have to tell them now or I never will.

“Right, well, I have some news for you. Firstly, I don’t

Do the Write Thing

want you to get upset and please let me finish before you ask any questions.”

Everyone agrees but the mood changes and I see my parents look at each other with a worried expression.

“I can’t remember when it was, but I noticed a lump under my arm and went to the doctor about it because you never can be too sure. I went back today for the –”

“You’ve got cancer!” said Callie.

“Er, well, yes, I have Hodgkin’s Lymphoma, which is cancer of the lymph nodes. We have hopefully caught it in the early stages and that’s half the battle apparently.”

I try to sound optimistic but I see the devastation on everyone’s face; I see the realisation sink in that this won’t just go away and there is nothing any of them can do to change it. I feel like I am to blame, like I am the biggest burden in the world, and for the first time wish I had never been born. At least then my family would never have had to feel this pain.

“So what happens now?” my mum ventures, trying to stop herself from crying but unable to stop her voice cracking halfway through.

My heart bleeds to know that this is all my fault. Why don’t I have the answers that they need?

“Now I have to undergo intensive treatment starting with a PET scan to ascertain how far developed the cancer is and whether it has spread to any of the other lymph nodes – which will determine what course of treatment I need.”

I am surprised at how robotic I sound, like the doctor has programmed me. My body goes numb with each tear

Defying Gravity

my mother cries, as if I am leaving my body to watch this scene from a safe place, away from the pain.

“Please don’t cry. I’m going to fight this. I’m too young to die.”

I feel the lump start in the back of my throat as I say this. I am too young to die and I can’t accept that my life will end here.

“The doctor is scheduling an appointment for my scan on Friday. Callie, will you come with me?”

“Absolutely.”

I see the tears well up in her eyes and know her pain. I wouldn’t know what to do without her. They say you’re born alone and you die alone in this life. I may die alone but until that day comes I have never been alone. Callie has always been right by my side.

I know this is in some ways harder for her than it is for me, as she is the one that would be left behind.

The tears and questions eventually stop. Nobody talks about the cancer any more after that unless they have to. Every cough, sneeze or headache I have brings a concerned look from my family. They try to hide it but each is petrified that the sickness will start to show itself in me in a way that is undeniable.

I lie in bed the night before the scan and play out every scenario in my head and I mean every scenario. I think about if I die and if I don’t, if I am ill for years and if it goes as quick as it came. I am determined to stay completely positive about my chances but I decide to cover all angles and make a will. Then I begin to find it hilarious that I’m making a will. I mean, I have nothing

Do the Write Thing

of any real value; I have about two hundred quid left in my bank until payday and the usual electrical suspects but nothing to give that is worthy of remembering me by. I decide to think about it all later but again the thought of making a will makes me chuckle. I always thought making a will was synonymous with being old, something that you knew you would do but not anytime soon.

The day of the PET scan arrives and I'm not as nervous as I thought I would be. Maybe it is because Callie is with me and she always makes me feel safe.

I'm finally called to the doctor's room with Callie in tow. The doctor greets us both but a confused expression stretches across his features as he timidly asks, "Er, which one of you is Liberty?"

"That would be me." I smile warmly at him. I forget that we are identical and always wonder why people give us strange looks.

"Please take a seat." He ushers us both to a seat opposite him in a very cheery manner. I wonder how he can be so cheery when he deals with so many sick people every day.

"Right, today we are going to be conducting a PET scan. Now this is a procedure we do to try and find the malignant tumour cells in the body. What we'll do is inject you with a solution called 'radionuclide glucose'." He looks up at me with a smile before saying, "That's sugar to you and me. So we do that to show where glucose is being used in the body. You see, malignant tumours show up brighter on the scan because they are active and therefore use more glucose. This then in turn

Defying Gravity

allows us to see where the tumours are and if they have spread to other parts of your body. Do you have any questions about the procedure at all?"

I nod that I don't and am taken to the scan area and given my sugar injection. I soon find myself wishing I could have eaten them instead; I always loved sugar cubes as a child and would have eaten them all day if I could.

The whole thing didn't take as long as I thought it would and before I know it I am sitting with the doctor again talking about the scans.

"Well, it's actually good news: it's as we thought. We have caught it in the early stages and as yet the tumour has not spread. So it's really important that we act quickly and aggressively to stop it having the chance to take hold. We are going to put you on combination chemotherapy with radiation therapy to kill the existing cancer and stop it spreading further. Do you have any questions at all?"

"Does that mean I'm going to lose my hair?"

"Yes, I am afraid you will and the treatment will make you very poorly. We will also have to put you on a course of tablets that will help your immune system because that will be severely affected by the treatment and you will be prone to a lot more illnesses and a cold could easily develop into pneumonia, which would be an extremely bad situation for you. You have to be as good to your body as possible now."

After the consultation I feel as though I have been given a second chance. I see a look of relief on Callie's face. However, I can't get complacent: the battle has just begun. But to know that the cancer hasn't spread to other

Do the Write Thing

parts of my body makes me feel as good as if he had given me the all clear. This surely is the best news I could expect under the circumstances.

So tomorrow is the start of my treatment. I have to go home, pack up my things and go back to the hospital as an inpatient. It's all happening so quickly I feel as though I am lost in a dream that I cannot wake up from, but then I feel the lump and I know that this is not a dream; it's a living nightmare.

I remember as a child always wanting to be in hospital, to have all the lovely flowers and chocolates. To have everyone come and visit you while you lie in bed. I suppose at that age I wouldn't have realised exactly why people are in hospital and how sick they are.

"So how do you feel?" asks Callie.

"A little relieved, to be honest."

"I know my heart skipped a beat when he told you. I swear I could not hear better news in my whole life other than that you'll make a full recovery."

"And I will, we just have to believe it."

"I know but it's hard when you just don't know."

"It's more exciting that way."

"I'd rather not have that excitement if your life is at risk."

"I know it's hard but a positive attitude is half the battle. I can't spend every day thinking I could die because I would just waste what time I have left."

I go home and have the last family meal I'll have in a while. Again we hardly talk about the cancer, we just talk about what's on the TV, but I don't mind because in a

Defying Gravity

way I feel closer to them now than I ever did before. Not since we were children have I really appreciated what my family means to me.

We all go together to the hospital and all the way in the car I am freezing cold; my toes feel like ice and I can't distinguish if this is caused by the weather or my own fear.

As we arrive and make our way to the correct department it kind of feels like I am starting school all over again. The feeling is surreal and I don't fully realise how isolated and alone I will feel when my family leave. There I am in a cold and clinical room, bordered by sick people and the faint din of muffled talking caused by the various bodies watching television with headphones on.

I lie on my bed and read a book, hoping that I can beat this and that my positive attitude will remain in even the most trying time of my treatment.

"Miss Sanderson, it's time for breakfast."

I awake and for a second I forget where I am and for a moment it is like nothing is wrong. Then I remember and the dread is like a lead balloon stuck in the pit of my stomach weighing down my soul to the ground.

I try to eat but I can't; I find it hard to swallow and after a few feeble attempts I give up completely.

The first treatment makes me so sick I feel like I have been stuck in a very warm room too long. My head feels thick and my body starts to tingle painfully all over. I just want to sleep but I can't because I feel so sick.

"Hi, darling, how are you feeling?"

I open my heavy eyelids and see my mum, dad and Callie by my bedside.

Do the Write Thing

“I don’t feel so good at the moment but that may just be because I’m not used to the treatment.” My voice feels very shaky and comes out almost as a whisper.

“Oh love, I don’t think you will get used to it but it will probably get better.”

I smile weakly and feel the familiar urging in my stomach and before I know it I am being sick as a dog. I know I was told that the treatment would make me poorly but you could never realise to what extent.

The rest of the treatment makes me feel worse and after a month of therapy I am convinced that I am about to die at any moment.

My hair has started to fall out; even my eyebrows and eyelashes succumb to the chemotherapy. I have tried to stay strong but now after all this I am beginning to break and in my pain I take it out on the people closest to me.

The more I see myself deteriorating the more I cannot bear to look at Callie; all I see when I look at her is how I used to be. We are identical and when I look at her I am reminded how awful I look now and how ill I am. I just can’t take it any more.

“Mum, hi, it’s Libby.”

“Hi, love, we’re just about to come see you. How are you feeling?”

“I’m not too bad today. The rest of my hair has fallen out now so I’m wearing a head scarf.”

“Oh love, I’m sorry.”

“I was just calling because . . . well . . . do you mind if I just see you and Dad tonight?”

I feel awful but I just can’t bear to see my sister; I

Defying Gravity

can't bear to see how I was before and how I might never look again. I know it's selfish and I hate myself for it but I just can't bear it, I can't bear to see her, not when I am like this and she is like that, how I used to be.

"Well, if that's what you want, dear, but . . ." She moves into a place where she can't be heard and lowers her voice. "Callie will be devastated. She would be there all day every day if you let her. Can't you reconsider?"

"No, I can't." I start to get angry because I know how much I will hurt her, but she doesn't know how much it hurts me every time I see her. If she had any idea how much it hurts me I'm sure she wouldn't want to come anyway.

"OK, dear, it's your decision but I want you to tell her. She would never believe it from me."

Before I know it I am on the phone to my sister telling her the awful truth.

"Hi, Callie."

"Hi, how are you feeling? We were just leaving to come and see you."

"I know – that's what I was calling about."

"Why? Are you trying to hurry us along? We'll be there really soon, so don't worry, but you know how Mum and Dad fuff around."

I smile at this because I do know – whenever we went on holiday we were always still at home two hours after we were supposed to leave because Mum had to check something again "just in case".

"No, that's not why, Callie. I hope you understand but I don't want you to come tonight."

Do the Write Thing

There is silence on the phone and I feel the tears start to prick my eyes. I know this is the right thing to do but it is just so hard.

“What! Lib, why would you say that?”

“I just want to spend time alone with Mum and Dad, that’s all.”

“Stop lying! Don’t think I haven’t noticed how you have been acting lately!”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, the last few times I’ve been there you have hardly spoken to me and wouldn’t even look at me. I know it must be hard for you but it’s hard for me too, you know.”

“Hard for you? Why? You’re not the one dying here.”

“Neither are you – positive thinking, remember?”

“Yeah, well, it’s hard to be positive when you look in the mirror and don’t recognise your own face any more.”

“I know it’s hard but it’ll be better and you’ll be back to your gorgeous self soon enough.”

“Callie, just leave it. Just leave me alone. I don’t want to speak to you and I don’t want to see you again, is that clear?”

“Perfectly.”

As I put down the phone and make my way back to my bed, I know for the first time what it feels like to be alone in this life. They say blood is thicker than water but I don’t know – sometimes family blood can get very diluted.

My parents arrive to see me but they are quiet, I am quiet and we hardly say a word. I think that they must

Defying Gravity

hate me and wish I were dead. I mean, if I were dead it wouldn't be like losing a daughter, would it, because they would still have the other healthy one who looks exactly like me. No, I am convinced I would soon be forgotten and nobody would even care.

Days and days pass and I lose track of them. I continue to go through my therapy but I just feel lost, like I am just going through the motions. My will to live is waning.

The nurses start to lose patience with me. My parents come to see me everyday but I refuse to let them talk about Callie. I know she is hurting but so am I. Why can't they understand how hard it is for me?

"Liberty, it's time for your walk." The nurse motions for me to stand up.

"I don't want to walk."

"You have to walk or you won't be able to eat much and you need your strength."

"I don't want to eat, I want to die."

"No, you don't, I know you don't."

"You don't know me so don't suppose you know I don't."

"Look, just a small walk so that you can eat more. You have more treatment tomorrow and if you don't eat properly then the sickness will be even worse than now."

I think about it for a second and cannot justify making the sickness worse so I give in and take the small walk around the ward and back to my bed.

My parents arrive as usual and I see them talking to the nurse. They have brought a visitor that I do not

Do the Write Thing

recognise. I am curious now as the person has either very short hair or very blonde hair.

They finish talking to the nurses and walk towards me. I look at the stranger, totally intrigued, trying to figure out who it could be. As they get closer I see that she is oddly familiar. It is only when she reaches my bed that I see who it is.

“Callie, what have you done to your hair?”

“I shaved it off.”

“Why did you do that?” I am completely astounded, as I cannot believe that she would ever choose to shave all her hair off voluntarily.

“To be like you. We were born identical therefore we should stay identical.”

“Are you mad? You look dreadful!”

“No, I’m not mad. I’m the same as you. You wouldn’t see me because I reminded you of how you used to look, so now I’m the same as you there’s no reason for you not to see me.”

I burst into hysterical tears and cannot stop. I see how much my sister loves me and what sacrifices she is willing to make to be with me in my toughest hour.

“I’m so sorry for being so mean but I just got so upset to see how I used to look, it was just so hard.”

“I know and once I realised your reasons it didn’t hurt so much. I just wish I had thought of it before.”

In the year that has passed since I was first diagnosed I am on the way to making a full recovery, our hair has grown back and we look the same again, the rain inside

Defying Gravity

my mind has stopped and spring is here again. I never thought that I could be so happy. The fog that clouded my future has lifted and as I sit here on a sunny winter's day my eye is caught by the endless blue skies above me. There was a time I never thought I would feel this free and alive again but I defied gravity. I fought against my disease because in the end medicine can only do so much, then the rest lies with you.

