

Mayday, Mayday

Category: Coming Undone

written by Sarah Liu | June 1, 2023

T.S. Eliot was slightly off: I consider May, not April, the cruelest month.

May 8: A birthday, Maril's. She died of pancreatic cancer—too soon after her brother, my step-father, died of the same disease.

May 10: A diagnosis—the date I learned I had pediatric acute lymphoblastic leukemia, two days before my 14th birthday.

May 14: Another birthday, my step-father, Bob's.

May 19: A date of death, for my biological father, due to esophageal cancer.

May 5, 2023: An MRI and another diagnosis—my third brain tumor.

May 9, 2023: A voicemail message from my neuro-oncologist. "Tumor board plan: PET/MRI, possibly two other growths."

May 10, 2023: An insurance denial for the PET scan. I also learn my neuro-oncologist is leaving UCSF.

May 11, 2023: A nightmare about my screeching mother, though I haven't consciously thought of her recently, after decades of therapy. I wake with memories of how she literally tried to kill me, yanking out IVs. Of how, after my bone marrow harvest, she slammed the phone down 2,000 miles away saying, "There are kinder ways to treat the body."

I got up and started brushing my teeth when something happened. Seizure? Hemorrhage?

I'm not sure if I've recovered or ever will.

I feel permanent exhaustion. I can't watch TV. I must limit my screen time. I haven't written anything decent for weeks. I can read only mysteries, no "serious" books. Every day, I force myself to do tasks for "brain health." I have no energy for fun, pure enjoyment, simply numb release.

I'm unmarried, childless, have no close relatives. My friends would miss me, but my death would have no major impact. Only my cat's life would be seriously disrupted.

I've asked all my doctors about the pace of my decline and received the same answer: "We don't know." Does destruction happen at an even rate, a constant variable, or in bursts, brought on by sudden events?

That May morning was my contribution to science, a moment indicating acceleration.

I attend a cancer writing group, and someone else said the same things. I responded instinctually: "No, no, your life is priceless; keep fighting." Why did these words come so easily for her, when only brainless bits of dross appeared on self-reflection?

To her I said: "I think of my biologist step-father, who devoted his career to studying life. A protein chain with a membrane, developing into a multicellular organism, a corporeal envelope ... our very existence is miraculous, a gift—whatever your religion, atheism included. You are unique, a singularity: No other DNA has been or ever will be you."

I think rather than dream of Bob: Life matters because it's damn hard to *be*. Beyond all doubt.

Sarah Liu
Berkeley, California