

Hello, my name's Lisa. I was forty-eight when I was diagnosed with terminal cancer and I was given twelve to eighteen months to live, possibly two years with treatment.

So in my right breast I had one, that was a whopper, um but that actually responded quite well to treatment. So I had so-, one type of um chemo for that and then on my left breast I had another one, and I've [laughs] I, I thought ohh so I christened them Hitler and Stalin.

Interviewer: If you've got a limited amount of time then what do you want to spend it doing?

Laughing, having a good time, having fun, admiring my wonderful breasts that are made out of my tummy. I'm fifty and when I take my bra off they don't move. That's quite nice isn't it?

Diagnosis

August 2012 and I was given the all clear about three months before I was rediagnosed. That, I was a bit cheesed off about that I must admit. But the per-, the brilliant thing about that was that we had a completely carefree Christmas. Actually however things panned out I would really be grateful for that wonderful carefree Christmas and I remember I was in the bath. It was the 3rd of January and I was washing my face and I found a lump in my neck, and I knew. I just knew. I thought my Lord it's back.

I remember going in to see my wonderful breast surgeon who saw me very quickly and she said oh let's see if it is anything. I think it's an enlarged lymph node. It wasn't. It was cancer, but she said I think we'll just do a little bit of no-, whip it out and do a little bit of radio around there, tidy it up and you'll be fine. So I'm thinking oh well that could have been worse.

But part of me was thinking actually I think that's more than that. I think this is a bit rubbish. I think this is a bit serious. And we went back and it was in my neck and my lung and my liver and [pause] I remember walking into the room to talk to her and Vic was with me, and there was another lady in there. There was my nurse who'd been my contact point, but there was another lady.

And I looked at her and I thought you're the shuffle me off the mortal call night nurse. You're the nurse that's going to see me out of this. And poor old Tracey, I remember her having to tell me, and I said

okay all I need is three years to get my girls into university and she just shook her head and said no.

Treatment

The first time I was ill that treatment I, [paused] I can't tell you how bad that was really. That was, that was so awful [laughs] and but you put your head down and you, and you crack on because they tell you to. And they tell you, you don't do this all in a day.

This time it's a lot easier, cos it, the treatment's different. I refused to have chemotherapy this time. I'm not having that again, because I couldn't cope with the pain, and the way it made me feel. It was really, excuse me. It was really awful. And one thing I was determined there is I, I almost banned the girls from my bedroom cos I didn't want them seeing me like that.

So I thought if I don't make it out the other side of this I don't want them to remember me like this, and it's another reason why I'm so dead against it. If I'm going to go I want them seeing me like this.

Telling the children

In the back of my mind it was I have two girls. I've got to finish raising those girls. They, I think at that time maybe sixteen and I thought I've got to finish raising them, and I can't leave Victor to do that on his own. So when we came back from the hospital they were waiting just up there. [Pause] And [sighs] Georgie said How bad is it? and I said It's as bad as it can get, love. And I said it's terminal and [pause] treatable to a certain extent, but probably eighteen months, two years max.

Be lucky to see you out of A levels, probably won't see you graduate, won't see you get married, won't see your grandchildren. We've got to get used to that. This disease will probably take your mother. It's up to you if you let it take your future. So this is not an excuse to go off the rails. It is not an excuse to fail at school. The way to fight this is to carry on, knuckle down, do well, get good results so that you have choices, and that you can move forward in your life without this thing ruining your life.

Interviewer: Do you fear for their future without you there?

No. [Pause] Cos that's a bit futile isn't it? I can't control that. All I can do is be here now doing the best I can like every mum.

Telling people

I sent an email out and told everybody cos I don't want anybody having half truths and nonsense.

Interviewer: What did you say?

I just said um I didn't really want to send you this email but a lot of people have asked so I'll do it in one go. Um it's come back and it's terminal and I haven't got very long. Um you know I'm slightly put out about that, but that's the way life is and we'd better crack on.

Coping mechanisms - being positive

I did have a bit of a sob and then I had a word with myself and I thought that's really not very good for you. That's a bit rubbish, sobbing. It's a complete waste of time, and if you haven't got a lot of time left why spend it crying?

The odds are you know that I'm not going to make old boats. So the time I do have I have to concentrate on the quality of my life, not the length of it. So if I have only a week or a month, or six months they've got to be the best six months I've, I've got, I've got to make that the most fabulous time.

What's the point in being miserable? So if I said to you you've got a weekend, one weekend what's your choice? Being miserable as sin because you won't have another one or enjoy that weekend and have a great time? It's a no brainer. Be happy. So for me it was being from a very organised project management background, it was okay, I cannot leave a mess behind me. I've got to leave everything tidy. I've got to have ev-, sure that everything I can do will lessen that impact on the people I love.

So I got onto my lovely man who organises all our life insurance. I have very, very, very good life insurance. I've had a heads up. So I can tell people that I love them, and say the things I want to say, and do the things I want to do, and put my house in order. I can live the life I want to live. I've been able to retire because that life insurance was there. It allows you to do things instead of talking about them.

So I, I do truly, truly believe when I say this has been a blessing, and my life is immeasurably richer and better for it. It really is.

Interviewer: Why?

I know of people who have just dropped dead, and or got run over. You know they've gone out to work, and they've never come home. And when you are given a terminal diagnosis you have time to get

your house in order, and you have time to do the things you want to do and see the people you want to see, make gentle, subtle decisions about who you really don't want to spend your precious time with. You work out what's important. [Pause]

You build bridges that perhaps you didn't have the character to, to build before, and you say the sorry's that need to be said and just sort your life out really.

I, I hope that by being happy and being positive and using and approaching it the way I've done it uh I hope that it will make my life longer obviously. I believe it will work for me, because it has so far. I'm, the proof is for the way I'm dealing with this that is working for me is that I'm sat here talking to you cos I shouldn't be. I should either be really, really seriously ill or dead by now.

Intensity

Interviewer: There's an intensity to life now isn't there for you?

It is in a different way now. It's a gentler intensity. It's like you know this sounds I don't know, it but peop-, but the colours are brighter, the trees are greener, the sky is bluer, the sky is, you know the stars do twinkle more than they used to, because you notice things you know. You notice things. I notice the colour of my girls' hair. I try to drink my husband's face in. I try to remember every feature um [pause] and his hands. He's got the most beautiful hands and I look at them all these days, mm. [Pause] Yeah.

You can live with anyone by and large but finding the person in your life you can't live without, that's it, that's the one, and [pause] [sighs] oh it sounds terribly selfish, but if I go first I won't have to live without him. He's going to have to live without me. And that's, that sounds uh so selfish doesn't it, but part of me is quite happy about that. I wouldn't want my life without him. [Pause] I really wouldn't.

Support and relationship - husband

Now when you are lying in bed for months on end virtually unconscious with no hair, and covered in sores and you can barely talk [pause] and you cease to look like a human being [pause], and your husband tells you that he still, you still look like the girl he fell in love with [pause] you know that takes a special man.

I'm not a woman with cancer. I'm not a fifty year old woman with cancer who's immeasurably fatter and older looking, and looks like she's been in a shark attack when she takes her clothes off

[laughter]. I'm not that woman. He has never once flinched. He's never once looked away from me. He has treasured me.

Well we've been together over twenty years now.

Interviewer: Bloody hell, that's going some then.

Yeah and, and I still feel like that. I still think God you are gorgeous. Poldark, as much as I like my Mr Poldark he doesn't hold a candle to you.

You sometimes have to say goodbye to that physical type side of your life for a long time with this disease, [pause] but [pause] you know I go to, uh I go to bed at night and I hold his hand, and I go to sleep holding his hand, and that's, that's enough.

I remember saying two things to Vic and one was if I go within a year or two years you'll still be fifty and you don't get any medals for being on your own in this life. So you go and find someone and you're happy. You put our children first, and you don't do anything daft, but you find someone to be happy with, because you've got probably this amount of life to live again. So you're not to sit in this house being all sad and looking at pictures. Get out there and live your life and find someone to love you and have a good time.

Support - family and friends

I would love to tell you about my village. Oh and when it really got bad and it was really quite awful actually, but you know there'd be someone out in the garden. I'm just tidying up the garden, chopping it down, doing a bit of weeding. Oh I've just come to get the ironing, I've brought your washing in, it was going to rain. Uh oh there's a dinner. There was a dinner virtually every night on our step. There was taxi services for the kids to netball matches and picking them up from school and taking them to piano and ...

Interviewer: So in a sense the whole community just pulled...

The whole community, anything we needed doing, and some of the things we didn't realise we needed doing. They were there, just quietly supportive, and taking Vic out to the pub. I have a friend up the road she'd just come and sit with me and lay on the bed next to me and hold my hand, [pause] you know and she was there when I said I don't want to wake up in the morning. I've had enough. I want to die now. This is so awful, I want to die now, and she's the one that sat there and listened to that and held my hand.

And then the next week the laptop came up and we looked at silly pictures on the internet and laughed our heads off.

Interviewer: See I see you now and you just seem like the epitome of you know positivity and all that. It wasn't always like that, you.

Oh God no. [Laughs] No it wasn't.

Sadness

If I allow myself to think [sighs] or imagine my girls getting married without me there or [becomes emotional] [pause] my parents at Christmas time [pause], or my husband waking up every day on his own [pause] or never being able to watch Poldark again [laughter]. If I allow myself to do that this happens.

Interviewer: You get sad

That's not good. Am I doing myself any good doing this right now?
No I'm not.

Death and Dying

Sometimes you do get you know, you do, you wake up, if you've started to feel a bit poorly some days you think is this the beginning of the end. How long have I got? I hope I still manage it in exactly the same way you know. You can be in pain and winge or you can be in pain and get on, or you can be ill and think well I'll watch my favourite film or I'll watch Poldark, cos Poldark just makes everything better. [Laughter] That should be on the NHS, watching Poldark daily, should be on the NHS.

Dying is the easy bit... you know. Dying's not hard. You just stop breathing. So yeah it is, it's, it's a strangely wonderful liberating blessing and I didn't think I'd ever say that if I was told that at fifty I'd be told that I'd be lucky to make fifty-one, but it, that's the way it is.

When I die, I'll have gone. There's no more pain. There's no more anguish. There's nothing. My parents and my husband and my children [pause] and all my friends and everybody I love are left picking up the pieces. I'm scared of dying badly. I'm not scared of leaving this world. I don't want the people I love to see me slowly dissolve, and I certainly don't want that for myself.

No, that's, that's not, that's what I'm scared of, not dying, once you're gone you're gone. Death is nothing really.