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Riding the Sea Word¹

So this was us, my cancer and me.

As it happened, I had breast cancer.

I loved my breast.

My breast, it appeared, was trying to save my life. My body was ill. It wanted to tell me something. I did not take good enough care of it. Not enough exercise. Too much sugar. Unhealthy meals. Regular glasses of wine with dinner ... My body had already warned me the previous year with a severe thrombosis attack affecting the length of my left leg. A valve was stuck in my body at the time and I had started taking daily medicines. And then scarcely one year afterwards ... my breast. Just trying to save my life. I'm Serious.

... because I got breast cancer, and I learned I should be operated on, and my breast, or a piece of it, would go. And thus my cancer, that fearful Sea Word, would go as well.

And after that I was going to be so careful, so extremely careful, that it would never pay a visit again. I talked to my body and it answered, and we came to such a friendly agreement.

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¹ An earlier version of this text was published in Spanish in *Raudem: Revista de Estudios de las Mujeres*, 5, 2017, pp. 262–276. That version was dedicated to my husband, Christian. This one is dedicated to the breast cancer medical staff at the Hospital Clinic in Barcelona, with heartfelt appreciation.

My body had helped me so much, since forever.

I would help it as well, this time. We were a team, weren't we?

Sometimes I felt that my body was foreign, a distant thing, like somebody outside of myself. Like a threat to my life, since it housed the Sea Word. Then I told myself, no, this is not the way. Let me put it bluntly, how I reasoned out that point. I told myself: I am my body, my body is me. We are two and one simultaneously. Right now it's not easy to explain or understand, but that's the way it was and is. It's like love as expressed by Emily Brontë through the mouth of Cathy: "I am Heathcliff". We are the same thing but it is for me to take care of it, since it takes care of me nonstop, twenty-four/seven; it cuddles me, houses me. It allows me to be worldly—not only in a Saidian sense. I felt Serious preoccupation that my body could stop existing, since that would mean I couldn't go on living in the world, because, without my body, where was I to go?

Nulle part ...

Within me was a Sea Word, and sometimes I would just forget. I would go about my routines as if nothing was happening, as if my life was not terribly compromised or under such a sombre threat.

Within me was a Sea Word and sometimes I got really, really scared. Then I'd feel that the possibility of dying was very present. Any thought or action would lead me to the thought of death; further, to the thought of imminent death. It was extremely depressing (even if this is such a dull sentence). I tried to avoid this line of thought and often succeeded, but often (too) I couldn't fight it. Then I would run away to the street and take a walk, buy some pieces of fruit or merely stare at the tree tops. This used to happen on cloudy days. I understood then why so many people choose to die in the Fall.

(Although Fall is a beautiful season, an early herald of the soon-to-come rebirth of the World.)

Here's why I didn't want to write about my illness: I was afraid of pulling closer the threshold, giving way to "thoughts about the possibility of dying"—yes, such a stream of subterfuges is necessary. Imminent death: that

grotesque black cloud which had suddenly appeared over my head, flying with me all day long, following every step of mine. My steps were indeed extremely frightened.

Later on, though, I would dare to write a little, but only when I hit the positive road. I progressively came around to the belief (convinced by medics, by treatment, by time) that I was on my way to recovery, and that I would get well within a few months. I would be healthy again, and then would have won so much! My new life would sport a new lustre, unknown to my life before the Sea Word. Hence, I must be thankful. Although, what a scare. As we say in Spanish: *Un susto de muerte*.

Every day I had to ride the Sea Word. But this too would pass, and I'd be back to being healthy.

A few snapshots to remember:

The one in which Dr. X told me the biopsy results were positive (or, inversely, negative, depending on how you look at it); that in effect there was something wrong in the tests I had taken and that for more information I should ask my oncologist. It meant, to begin with, that from then on I would "have" an oncologist.

I left the hospital with a sense of unreality.

As I arrived home, I found that a woman had been run over in front of my place. A police car and an ambulance were parked right there. The woman's body was still lying on the tarmac, covered with a blanket. I realised that any single minute that I'd live from then on would be a gift. I had always been careless when crossing that street.

When I told my husband that something bad had got inside my right breast (homage be paid to it).

When I told my sister and brother that I had something.

When I lied to one of my friends saying the tests were OK. I needed more time for the shock to sink in.

When I told my mum I had something.

When I told ...

When I told my teenage children.

My daughter, my soul and beauty, kept crying for hours. After some time she calmed down, very slowly. Little by little she understood that it wasn't the end, that there was a cure and that I was determined to be cured, although we had before us a long and complicated process.

My son, my soul and beauty, who is younger, didn't really grasp the news. I told him in such a gentle manner, that he didn't really ... I had to explain it to him again a few days later, less euphemistically, but to this day I'm not sure whether he grasped the dimension of the whole thing, or not. It is probably better if he didn't.

Some people try to help but they don't really help you. These are some sentences which did NOT help:

Good luck.

Everything'll be all right ... You'll see.

It's not like it was in the past.

I'm sure it'll be ok.

Don't worry, many people come out of it.

By way of contrast, other sentences DID help. What's more, they helped a lot:

Two of my cousins went through this and they are perfectly well.

My friend Kathy had one breast and a piece of her stomach removed last year and she is completely fine.

My sister-in-law went through the same illness, all her lymph nodes were removed and then she relapsed, and now she's in perfect health.

An Iraqi friend of mine had it last year and she's good now.

I know of five women who have gone through the same thing and they're all fine.

This and nothing else was what my body yearned to hear: that they were all perfectly fine.

A new giant scare leaped at me in the shape of the word "survivor". I came across it early in the process. As I read the webpage of the Spanish Association of Oncologists, I learned that, once everything was over, I would be a survivor. It had a strong impact on me. Another Sea Word was reassuring me of the certainty that my life was in terrible jeopardy. Right when I had finally managed, with much effort, to somewhat appease my anxiety, another word, also containing a Sea, managed to put me back on the road to fear.

Then, what a productive topic, that of nutrition-and-the-Sea-Word. Hundreds of thousands of websites are devoted to instructing us, beguiled by the Sea Word, on the bounties of healthy nourishment. Immediately after the bad news, you start not wanting/being able to eat virtually everything. And. Your body immediately resents such an abrupt change of habits and begins losing weight scandalously. And. It starts broadcasting all kinds of weird sounds, farting freely around and hurting in places hitherto unknown. Now you eat a lot less than you used to, but there's a good side to everything: you're never really hungry, because you're prepared to do whatever, go wherever, to heal. Even starving yourself.

I would wake up in the middle of the night with severe tachycardia. I was sure that my Sea Word was taking over by the hour. After some weeks I came to understand that it was the radical change in my diet that was making my body complain, not the Sea Word (not yet, at least). It was not used to watery vegetable soup alone for dinner. Nonetheless, fear that my body should be hosting something still worse than my breast alien remained.

Before meeting my oncologist, I was to meet my (new) gynaecologist. Man he was handsome! Smart, elegant, he reminded me of a sinister character from Caribbean mythology whose name I won't write here out of superstition, a comparison surely influenced by the fear of dying to which I was prey at the moment (guess who I'm talking about?). The sexy gynaecologist told me my breast would be reconstructed. To my surprise and certain delight, he sort of said that I had a sort of a beautiful breast, or that's what I understood—mind you, I just mention this because in the midst of such oncological gravity it was unexpected, it's not to boast or anything. He also explained in great detail to my husband and me what type of Sea my Sea Word was exactly. After a couple of minutes I had forgotten literally everything.

I would sometimes be asked, "At what stage of development is your Sea Word?" I had no idea at what stage it was. I was too cowardly to learn what my body ... what I ... was really going through.

A mean thing used to happen at the beginning: I would look at the anonymous people around me, on the street for instance, and felt it was so unfair, that I should be ill and the rest of them wholesome. Oh my, I would even have eugenic-type thoughts, I have a better right to live than that crippled old lady, who surely does not have children to raise or any other important mission in the world anymore. Unforgivable. Shame on me.

To be honest.

Or I would look around myself, in the metro for instance, and think, "Look at them, so fucking healthy, and they don't even notice; they don't realise how fucking lucky they are" (forgive my language but that's how it went; I was really fucked up, myself). And I would despise them with a vengeance. Or I would envy them. I don't know to this day.

In fact, we are all constantly dying, one way or another, while we live. But we're simply not aware. Kazuo Ishiguro wrote somewhere that we all know we are going to die one day, but we just DON'T believe it.

The day you learn that you are indeed going to die, and that the day of your death might not be too distant, believe me, is a tough one.

For a number of weeks I was dead worried about my liver, my stomach, my lungs. Then, again, I gradually pushed myself into the belief that they were OK. And since I came to be firmly convinced that my Tit had sacrificed itself for my sake, daily I commanded myself to talk to it, to thank it, to say thank you, thank you, thank you for saving my life. I love you. I love you. I shall always be thankful, also when you are no more.

I sometimes had (still do) this overwhelming wish to install a huge Tit somewhere, I don't know, a gigantic mural of some gaudy material featuring a Superb, All-Mighty Tit. On Big Ben, or the Eiffel Tower. The Tit Saviour. The Tit which gave her life to save mine. My precious.

One of my best friends is a Mad-Wonder-Woman with a variety of areas of expertise which she juggles in different periods of her mostly frantic life. For my good luck, she also specialises in hypnosis. Like my Tit, my friend also saved my life, hypnotising me and helping me talk to my body every Friday. Helping me tell my body "how much I love you, how much I need you, how much I want to encourage you to keep on sustaining my substance".

For this reason, I shall be forever thankful to my dear Mad-Wonder-Woman, too.

When I was young and fresh like a daisy, I left my hometown to, can you believe this, create the consciousness of my race—I was influenced by no other than Stephen Daedalus, note my delusions! As a regrettable consequence, I live away from my extended family, only surrounded by my nuclear family.

After I entered the world of Sea Words, a regular stream of visitors started pouring from my hometown to see me. Every week somebody came along to take care of us, me and my Sea Word: my sister, my brother, my niece ... They're incredible. Definitely, the best family ever.

When I told my mum, both of us sitting on a bench in a park near her place, she went on discussing petty stuff, literally as if she hadn't heard me. Only after a few days, very slowly, did she start asking timid questions about my breast. To my siblings, not me. She was so afraid. And she got ill, I mean, she got more ill: my mum has been ill for the last thirty years. After my news she grew more ill than ever. For one, she's old now. And then, having to grapple with the idea that your daughter is grappling with the Sea Word. It took her more time than expected to make a decision and come to pay a visit. For one, the house was always busy with volunteer caregivers. And then, I'd also have got more ill in her situation.

When she finally came, she would take such good care of me. Such good care of me.

Even my childhood best friend came to see me. We had hardly met up in recent years, would just send a Whatsapp now and then after it came into existence. It was pure chance that she sent one just a few days after I had met my oncologist (I guess I should talk about him as well, but I won't, though he's splendid). I answered that Whatsapp with a brief "Call me". I couldn't not tell her, could I? She popped in soon afterwards. Lovely weekend together. She's very dexterous, so I took the opportunity for her to help me upholster some old chairs I'd bought last year on Wallapop, for next-to-nothing.

Cheering up messages.

From work. From relatives.

Other friends of old got back in touch, friends who came to know about my Sea Word one way or another. And they would text me all the time. How are you feeling? Feeling ok? How's treatment going? How many sessions left, darling? Cheering up, cheering up, cheering up, cheering up ...

Others said nothing.

In the same way as every ill person reacts differently to the devastating news of the Sea Word, every non-ill person reacts differently to the news that somebody close to them has to ride it. And the mantra: Do not judge. Do not judge.

Somebody lent me Deepah Chopra's *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success*.

I could only turn more spiritual, right?

I started (sort of) grasping the notion of God (OMG). I realised it is a (sort of) Source of Infinite Possibilities, as Chopra puts it. My ex just calls it physics, more specifically cosmic rays. You're bitten by a cosmic ray and you enter the world of Sea Words, as easy as that.

I also realised Our Lady of El Pilar is a mandala. I would lose myself in her soothing silhouette.

I like thinking that Pilar, Oshun and Lakshmi are just one and the same: incarnations of Shakti, universal female energy.

What could I do, but become more spiritual.

I also got back in touch with my ex. He walked me to one of the CMT sessions, and on that occasion gave me a graphic novel on the life of Miguel Hernández, the great poet and shepherd. Later on, he also paid me a visit with his current girlfriend, a lovely woman who had ridden the Sea Word nine years before. A survivor. And she was perfectly fine. Meeting her: one of those things which helped. A lot.

My ex-brother-in-law is also a survivor. He called me, cheered me up. Texted me often.

My ex-mother in law. I had not seen her in sixteen years. She called me. Isn't that great.

To them and the all others: THANK YOU.

The "Hospital de día", the Day Hospital. The nurses. The plastic bags full of chemicals. Transparent, red, juicy, tasty. What's your name? María Isabel Alonso Breto. And only after hearing this they stick the drugs onto your catheter. They need to make sure that your dose is your dose, and your substance your substance. In the early sessions I used to start the recitation with my surnames (in Spain we have two, the father's and mother's), like at school: Alonso Breto María Isabel, but that seemed to confuse them. I therefore changed tactics and recited names-first-and-then-surnames, with discipline. Anyway, after more than a dozen sessions they had learned both my names and my surnames by heart. One day I brought them a present: a huge plastic bag full of sweets, tasty and juicy. For them to sweeten the time, those sweet and patient young nurses, between the doses.

I was obsessed with bodily defences. I didn't want to lose my defences. I was so afraid it could happen. I went to the Hospital Emergency Department twice because my toes would swell and redden, and I feared an infection. I spent hours on end in the waiting room, until it was my turn. Both times I was prescribed antibiotics, and then I felt closer to safe.

I was so thankful to receive, via e-mail or mobile, lively and beautiful messages: songs, videos, jokes ... Jokes were my favourite. I just wanted to laugh my heart out ... I just wanted to die laughing. I just wanted ... to forget I was riding the Sea Word!!!

They installed a catheter in my arm. It travelled with me for months. It saved me a few punctures: for blood tests, for the massive insertion of chemicals. My arm (my body again) behaved so nicely: it didn't complain, didn't hurt, didn't get infected ...

When they installed it, the catheter I mean, I was damned afraid, let me tell you. But I put on a brave face, as if I were a strong person. All the time I'd do that.

That's what you need to do, when you're riding the Sea Word. To put on a brave face. And then you feel strong. And, though you're going through hell, you feel better.

At the beginning of it all, after one of those early biopsies—that is, before I knew about the Sea Word at all—while on a medical visit, suddenly more and more members of staff in white gowns started coming close to the stretcher trolley where I had been made to lie. They all looked deeply worried. Mind you, this deeply worried ME, but I kept silent. They were all looking at the computer screen like they were dazzled.

Then I was told I'd receive an appointment, and that was all. They left one by one without so much as a word, not even of farewell.

As I was leaving the place, one of the younger women, a nurse or some kind of medic, suddenly hugged me, a hug so strong, so long and so emotional that it gave me the certainty not only that I was ill, but that I was close to imminent collapse. I lived in a state of uneasiness until the announced appointment arrived, not long afterwards. Dr. X confirmed what I already knew, after the hugging, but refused to admit. Those days in-between had been extremely difficult. The gesture of that young woman, nurse or medic, was full of empathy, no question about that ... But I don't think it helped me at all.

Because of the sacred matter of my defences, and so as to avoid untimely contagion, our family cat Bruno became Bruno The Rover. The poor thing was forced to spend stints in custody at several friends'. They would all fall

in love with the creature, I must say. As a putative but essential member of the family, we missed Bruno dearly. On his part, the new adventurer made the most of his changing venues: He became a worldly cat, a cat-cosmopolitan ...

We became a truly German family: we invited (meaning forced) all our visitors to take off their shoes at the entrance, providing them with slippers, like I tell you, Northern style. I amorously envisaged this routine as barring the way into my home of any kind of undesirable bacteria. Call me a maniac, but Barcelona's sidewalks are full of dog-shit and a full range of non-descript fluids, a detail not often mentioned in tourist brochures.

They say that cruciferous vegetables are the best against the Sea Word. The problem is: when you cook cabbage, the whole house smells like fart. THPPTPHTPHPHHPH, cauliflower, THPPTPHTPHPHHPH, steamed kale, THPPTPHTPHPHHPH, Brussels sprouts, THPPTPHTPHPHHPH, boiled broccoli day in day out, meaning, rather: day in, day in, day in, day in ...

I tried growing kalanchoe without success. Anyway, I was afraid to mix kalanchoe with the heparin cocktail I injected myself with every morning to ease blood circulation. And in turn, I got worried again, this time because perhaps not eating kalanchoe was a serious sin of omission, meaning (and three), I wasn't doing enough to get healed ... Was I irresponsible? Dear God, Sea Words are Serious stuff. I was livid when I gave it a second thought. I tried to do this as little as possible.

More or less this is all. Although it is nothing, in comparison to what it really was. But to slowly approach a conclusion: Throughout, I did eat a couple of biscuits, although I'd read on numerous websites that sugar is just the worst thing when it comes to the Sea Word.

It was only a couple of biscuits, I promise.

Just a couple of really-good-quality, quasi-ecological ones.

And thus. The great protagonist of this staccato story was my body, this I shall never forget. Since then we have entered a whole new type of relationship.

It was, on the whole ... what can I say. It was a lovely reunion.

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