Forever Today

Deborah Wearing

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GETTING ILL

It's hard to pinpoint exactly when exhaustion turned into the first stirrings of the illness. Sifting through the weeks and months before, I cannot know for sure. Maybe it was in the supermarket on our last Friday night shop. He looked black that March evening, hulked over the trolley in his overcoat. It was as if his feet were not quite taking his weight. There were broken pieces deep inside us that would sometimes catch and hurt or make a bad grinding noise. On this occasion, Clive seemed to be in a darkness we had not experienced before. We were by a chill cabinet. I had a tray of kidneys in my hand.

'You all right?' I asked.

'Yes,' he said, but he didn't look at me.

'What, love? Tell me, what is it?'

'Nothing,' he said, leaning lower over the trolley bar so that it moved off, wheels spinning.

We proceeded up the aisle towards canned goods. I sensed danger, but nothing you could put your finger on. My instinct was to stock up on comestibles.

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That Sunday, 10 March 1985, I proposed fresh air, a walk after lunch. Clive did not want to go.

'You'll feel better,' I said.

'I doubt it,' he said.

But I could not let the storm brew any blacker. We had to get outside, to move, to breathe.

'Look,' I said, 'let's drive to Hampstead Heath. If you don't perk up, we'll come straight home.'

He was too poorly to argue.

We parked in a red sandy car park full of potholes.

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'It's about to rain,' said Clive.

'Not yet,' I said.

My optimism was at odds with the gathering gloom above our heads.

'Come on, love,' I said, 'let's just walk to Jack Straw's Castle and back, stretch our legs.'

The heath at this north edge made a kind of low mound. I thought we could at least duck into the pub if the rain started. We held on to each other as we always did but the rough terrain was throwing us somehow out of step. Clive stomped, kicking up tufts. He said little. It was as if we had to press against invisible forces to cover any ground at all.

We had reached the middle of this expanse of stubbled green when a low rumble filled the sky. We stopped. A double crack split the air above our heads and a cold rain was upon us. We turned, heads bowed. Thunder rolled across the sky. The noise was everywhere, like a fury held in too long, unleashed. The sky pelted us with bullets of ice, stinging our faces. We ran, arms over our heads, all the way back to the muddy car park where the potholes had become puddles bubbling and splashing high into the air where the hail struck. I fumbled with the keys and we got into our car, slamming the doors. It was shelter, but it didn't feel safe. A curtain of white rain surrounded us and sheet lightning lit up the heath. We sat puffing and steaming up windows. The hail drummed so hard on the roof, I expected dents. Stones bounced high off the bonnet and off the ground. It was a good five minutes before we could see to drive home. The streets were awash with fast-running streams. Waters swelled around clogged drains and our wheels sent up a wave to left and right. It was raining like it would never stop.

The rain had washed our windows clean. I fetched the ironing. It towered above my head as I walked. I must have looked like a stack of laundry on legs. Clive sighed.

'So much?' he said. 'We mustn't let it get this bad.'

'We've not been here,' I said. 'Mind if I switch on the telly?'

'Has the lightning stopped?'

I watched the window for a moment. It was dark outside like twilight, though still only three.

'Uh . . . think so.'

'I can't cope with a film or anything with plot,' he said. 'My head aches.'

I fetched the aspirin and put the sport on low. At some point, Clive left the room and then came back.

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The iron bubbled and spat, burning the backs of my hands. Another bubbling sound. I looked behind me. Clive was perched awkwardly on top of the laundry, mouth open, eyes shut, head back. His feet barely touched the ground. He lay at an angle as if he'd fallen from a height.

'Darling!' I called out.

He opened his eyes and looked across at me.

'Why are you there?' I asked.

'I don't know,' he said. 'I must have been asleep.'

'Go to bed properly,' I said.

I took his hand and led him into the bedroom. He seemed lost and sleepy so I undid his buttons and found pyjamas. He was shivering.

'I'll make you a hot-water bottle,' I said.

In the kitchen I had the tap running to fill the kettle but there was a noise from the bedroom. I turned off the tap. A terrible kind of moan. I dropped the kettle in the sink and ran the length of the corridor. I thought heart attack.

'What's the matter?' I called out as I ran. My voice was on the way to a scream. 'What is it? What's wrong?'

His teeth were chattering. He did not look at me but lay with eyes half closed beneath the trembling bedclothes.

'It's OK,' he said. 'I think I've got a chill.'

'Why did you make that noise?' I asked.

'It's only m-m-my teeth chattering,' he said through a new wave. 'Bb bw I'm mb fr-fr-freezing.' He sucked in breath through his trembling jaw.

Clive's pale face floated on the dark-brown bedlinen against a dark-brown carpet. I took his temperature. It was above normal.

'I'm calling the doctor.'

'No need,' he said. 'I'm probably fighting something off.'

He was the husband. I was used to taking his word for it.

I believe that shuddering was the first slight jar to Clive's brain, perhaps a momentary seizure.

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Our cousin Lawrence felt only a slight jar one night on a voyage to America. He went on deck and spoke with people playing cards. They'd felt it too but went on shuffling. Our cousin never saw them again. They were on the Titanic. Lawrence got out alive in a half-full lifeboat as so many women refused to leave their husbands, preferring to drown with them than to survive widowed. 'In some cases,' said our cousin, 'they were torn from their husbands and pushed into the boats, but in many instances they were allowed to remain, since there was no one to insist.'

Clive stayed home from the office on the Monday. 'I'm just a bit under the weather,' he said. He met his friend John for lunch at a Turkish restaurant but had no appetite. They put his kebab in a box. I found it in the fridge a week later. John's mother had just died and he was bereft. He still lived in his parents' house though he'd turned forty.

'When two people are very close,' Clive had said to him, 'like you and your ma, you are always together even when you're apart. That's how it is with me and Deborah.'

The last thing Clive had said of his friend's mother as they parted that afternoon was, 'I'll never forget her.'

On the evening of Sunday 17 March Clive had a headache and he slept heavily that night. He took the Monday and Tuesday off work because of the headache. On the Monday his temperature was a little high and he was drowsy but his temperature returned to normal the next day. For the rest of the week Clive attended a conference in St Albans. He came home each night bubbling with excitement. He was among friends, talented historians, doing what he loved to do. They were considering the music, history and liturgy associated with St Alban and his shrine. The Europa Singers, his amateur choir that we ran together, had started rehearsing the Missa Santa Albanis by Fayrfax. I was in the kitchen when Clive came home early from the conference that Friday afternoon flushed, tired and with a headache. He called his secretary at the BBC, where he worked as an early music producer for Radio 3, to say that he would not be returning to the office that day.

The next morning, Saturday 23 March, I was on press cuttings duty in my office, the PR department at John Lewis. Afterwards I went on to try to sell my violin. We were hard up and there was a tax bill hanging over us. The shop didn't want to pay much so I put it back in the case, reprieved. I had carried it under my arm most of my life and had often forgotten it on trains. The guard used to find my violin case on the overhead luggage rack at the end of the line and put it on the next train back home to Teddington. Everyone knew it was mine, I forgot it so often. Though I never played awfully well, I was always happy to be reunited with the instrument and now once again I was glad I hadn't needed to sell it this day. When I got up the stairs, violin in one hand and briefcase in the other, Clive's son Anthony held the door open for me. Clive was on his knees in the hall, bowed over piles of books.

'My goodness!' I said, lifting bags in the air. I edged around the books to the bedroom door where I could put things down. 'What're you doing?'

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'We're sorting them into alphabetical order,' said Anthony.

'Hello, love.' I bent over Clive and kissed his cheek.

'Mm, hello. Where've you been?'

'Didn't you get my message?' I took off my coat and threw it on to the bed.

'When we got back the answerphone said ''error''. There wasn't any message.'

'I thought it made a funny noise. I was trying to sell my fiddle. I've been to Guivier's.'

I turned to greet my stepson. At twenty-two, he was only five years younger than I was and I had to stand on tiptoe to kiss him.

'We're going to watch the match,' he said. 'Dad, it's nearly kick-off.'

Quickly I set up my stand in the bedroom, rosined the bow and tuned up. In the next room the crowd was calling 'CI-TY, CI-TY, CI-TY,' and my boys talked eagerly. They didn't see each other nearly often enough. The violin had a good rich tone. I started to play earthy notes on the low strings. I swooped around, dipping my knees, playing as if the violin were me speaking, laughing. I wished I were a better player, to play the music I loved the way I wanted it to sound - Bartók, strong and bright on open strings, Stravinsky's Soldier's Tale. 'Walking down the road one day - daa, di di di di di dee - A soldier had a tune to play - diddle diddle diddle diddle diddle . . . di!' I stumbled over the double stopping, guessing at the notes without any music, pressing my fingers where I thought the sounds were. The soldier sets out with the jaunty walk of a young man, a violin about his person; the devil meets him on the road and promises him everything if he'll sell his violin, symbol of his soul. He sells, and is consigned to hell. He thought he could resist temptation, get back on the road, but he's lost. The same cock-a-hoop tune repeats over and over through the piece as the soldier walks blindly on towards his own destruction, and strikes up one last time after the soldier's demise as the devil waits on the same road to catch the next sucker.

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I could hear Clive calling out to me from under the music. I went into the front room, fiddle in hand.

'I'm sorry, darling,' he said. 'Do you mind not playing? It's my head, it's bad again.'

'Sweetheart!' I said. 'My poor love - another headache?' I bent over the back of the sofa to kiss him gently on the temple.

'Or the same one . . .'

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'What can I get you? Have you taken any aspirin?'

He looked at his watch. 'It'll be four hours at a quarter to five.'

'Why don't you go to bed? Tell him, Anthony!'

'She's right, Dad. Have a lie-down.'

'No.' He leaned back and looked into his son's face. 'I want to make the most of you here!' A football roar came from the television and both of them turned to watch, faces entranced.

'Hold it . . . Hold it . . . Now pass! Move! OHHH!' The boys groaned and the crowd groaned with them.

'Tss! They left him totally exposed! What a waste!' said Clive. 'No point running like a madman if there's no one with you, no back-up!'

'You look flushed, love.' I put my hand on Clive's forehead. 'Shall I take your temperature?'

'I'm all right,' he said, his eyes on the action replay, one arm outstretched to the heroic runner, sighing at his slow-motion fall. 'I'll live!'

Clive had had so many headaches that past year, from working hard and being exhausted, that the aspirin bottle stayed out on the bedside table instead of in the bathroom cabinet. There was nothing unusual about his head aching, although he did perhaps seem under the weather, as though he might still be fighting something off.

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The next morning was Sunday 24 March 1985. We woke late. Anthony was sleeping in the back room. We were expecting his sister Alison to arrive, plus some friends for lunch. We lay in the last of sleep, wrapped up as one under the bedclothes. Clive was the first to move, while I lay lazy and warm and watched him get out of bed through half-closed eyes. He staggered forward a couple of steps, his head falling into his hands.

'Aaach!' he gasped.

I leaped up and was beside him, my arm around his shoulders.

'My head!' he said. 'It's like something hit me with a hammer.'

'Where?' I said. 'Where does it hurt?'

'All over . . . awful . . .' He stood bowed over, naked, his skin bluey-white.

'You're coming back to bed,' I said.

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He let me lead him slowly back and help him in. I pulled the duvet close around him.

'Why is it so bad?' I said.

'I don't know,' he said.

'Shall I call the doctor?'

'No, it'll pass.'

'Well, I'll call Peter and Christina and put them off.'

'No, don't,' he objected.

'Well, you can't see them in this state.'

There was a pause while he registered the truth of it.

'. . . I s'pose not,' he said.

I stuck a thermometer under his tongue and phoned our lunch guests. His temperature was 101°.

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Later Alison arrived and sat with her brother in the front room. In the afternoon Clive was vomiting, feverish. We wanted to call a doctor. Clive said not to.

'They'll only say it's a virus,' he said. 'Nothing they can do.'

I awoke the next morning, Monday, to find the headache had kept Clive awake all night. The bed was drenched with sweat and his pyjamas were sopping. I turned the mattress. The grey line in the thermometer crept past 101° and towards 102°. Clive was still feverish, still vomiting. He let me ring the surgery. I asked for a home visit. At lunchtime I slipped home from work in a black cab. The doctor had not been but had telephoned, telling Clive she thought it was flu.

'How's your head?' I asked.

'Ghastly,' he said.

'What sort of pain is it?'

'Like a band all round. Last night it was the sides more, now it's moved behind my eyes, the top, here . . .' He put his hands around his temples and at the back.

'Is it thumping?'

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'Not exactly, it's constant, terrible.'

I rang the surgery again and repeated my request for a home visit before I went back to work. It was the intensity of the headache that worried me. In the afternoon a doctor came and prescribed something for the vomiting, and a painkiller for the headache. Clive was still sweating a lot. He ate nothing all day and took hardly any fluid.

On Tuesday morning, 26 March, I woke to find the headache had kept Clive awake a second night. The pills obviously weren't working. His temperature was 102°. I had to cajole him to drink the occasional sip of water. He was still vomiting but the sweating had stopped.

'You'll get dehydrated,' I told him. 'Shall I ring the doctor again?'

'No, give the pills time to take effect.'

At lunchtime I bolted home. He was much the same. I rang the surgery. Late afternoon I phoned from the office. He said the doctor had rung him. 'Real flu can be quite bad; there's nothing they can do.'

'Phone if you need me,' I said.

'All right,' he said in a hollowed-out voice. 'I . . . I . . .' He seemed to be straining for some thought that was vanishing. 'I can't remember your number.'

How odd, I thought. 'Don't worry, love. Write it down. Have you got a pen?' I could hear him fumbling for the pad.

'Ah yes,' he said when I told him. 'I forgot it for a moment.'

I felt alarm in my stomach. 'I'm coming home now,' I said.

'OK,' he said.

I told my boss I needed to go, ran downstairs, jumping the last two steps, and out of the building. I flagged down a taxi in Wimpole Street.

Back home, Clive looked washed out. I couldn't understand why he was not sweating despite his temperature hovering at 101°. The pills had allayed the vomiting but he still felt nauseous.

He sat on the sofa that evening in his white towelling dressing gown and watched a little TV. That was a good sign. He asked me to fix the blinds, which were not evenly drawn. Clive never could bear them crooked.

We discussed Thursday's choir rehearsal and made plans for someone else to conduct it.

'You better phone, er . . . er . . .' Clive's face clouded over. 'I can't remember her name.'

'Janet,' I said.

'Janet, yes, of course . . . How peculiar,' he said.

'Do you want to go back to bed, love? You've been two nights without sleep. It's no wonder you're not with it. Do you think you could sleep now?'

'I don't know, maybe.'

I helped him back to bed and caught sight of the pad where Clive had written my office phone number. Next to it he had written my whole name, Deborah Wearing, and the words 'in the office'. On the yellow cover was printed Devon and Cornwall - Reporters' Notebook.

'When you're better,' I said, 'we'll go to Cornwall.' Cornwall was where his family had gone every summer when he was a kid. We had always said we would go there but had never made time. In six years we'd had only one holiday, in Spain, five days in France and a few long weekends. Other than that, Clive typically worked seven days a week.

'You need to slow down, take a holiday,' I said.

'Yes,' he said.

'You and me in Cornwall.'

'Yes,' he said. His eyes were shut. I kissed him on his hot forehead and tiptoed out.

I woke on Wednesday morning at a little before 6.30 a.m. and turned to see how Clive was.

'Darling?'

'Yes . . .' he said in a faraway voice through half-closed eyes.

'Did you sleep?'

He lay there breathing.

'Darling?'

'Yes?'

'How are you? Did you sleep?'

'No, I didn't,' he said.

'Did you sleep at all, love?'

He breathed some more, and in that pause I grew afraid.

'No, not at all,' he said.

The pain in his head had kept him awake now for three days and nights.

'How's your head?' I asked.

'Terrible,' he said. 'Sleep . . .' he said. 'I must have sleep . . . I want to go . . .'

'To the loo?' I asked.

'Yes,' he said.

I put him into his dressing gown and led him to the bathroom.

'Is this it?' he asked.

What did he mean?

'Do you want to go, love?'

He had a short pee, nothing much, and grinned at himself in the mirror.

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