



Hailstorms Happen

Growing up on a small family farm meant having almost daily contact with disaster. At an early age I was introduced to birthing deaths, bloating deaths, infection, and disease. Cattle, horses, and pigs in my father's pastures and pens lived the Russian roulette life of the farmyard. More than a few of our dogs, cats, and chickens ended up under the wheels of passing milk trucks and farm equipment. Even the healthiest of sheep on the farm might not survive a southern Minnesota ice storm or blizzard. And, Minnesota summers were sometimes no more merciful.

The summer when I was ten years old, my mother, father, and I were seated at the old oak kitchen table when a wind came up so suddenly it rattled the kitchen chimney. Our forks were in midair when the room went dark. The sounds of the storm battering the house, barn, outbuildings, animals, and fields entered the room through the screen door. First came the heavy rain on the tin roofs of the sheds, and then came the beating at the kitchen windows. Hailstones the size of brass door knobs pressed down on the farm from all directions. And then, as quickly as it had arrived, the storm moved on, the darkness was pulled back from the sky, and the chimney left to its old ways.

For the first time in years, my father had a crop in the north fields that promised to cover the October farm mortgage payment. In the time it took us to say noonday grace and fill our plates with meat and potatoes, a mid-July storm stripped all of my father's 80 acres of ripening corn down to stubble.

The storm passed, but there was no air or speech left in the kitchen. After a long look out the window at what had once been, my father turned to the space between the three of us and said, “I’m going out to feed the heifers.”

Marjorie Williams, D.C. journalist and writer of the posthumously edited *The Woman at the Washington Zoo*, asked her doctor why she had gotten liver cancer. Her tests for cirrhosis and hepatitis had come back negative, and the doctor had told her, “It’s wild that you look so healthy.” Marjorie Williams died at age 47 from what her doctor could only explain as, “Lady, you got hit by lightning.”

When my friend pressed the oncology resident recently about what his theory might be of how I had gotten lung cancer, he replied, “She just got unlucky.” The major suspects had been ruled out. I had never smoked cigarettes, didn’t spend time with or around second-hand smoke, hadn’t lived or grown up playing near an asbestos site, and had never been employed by a coal mine or 19th century textile mill.

I just got unlucky. And Marjorie Williams and I are by no means the only ones hit by bad luck lately. Every day’s newspaper runs obituaries telling of women and men, girls and boys, babies of all ages, some who might even have looked wildly healthy, being struck down by some unexpected storm.

For over 40 years, I’ve taken care of my body. I am the right weight and have no other diagnosis of illness. I’ve eaten wisely, exercised regularly, and, aside from the occasional piece of high-end chocolate, have never developed a taste for caffeine, alcohol, or packaged food of any kind. It is not a surprise that I appear healthy. What is surprising is that I have lung cancer.

In fact, I am still in shock from hearing the diagnosis. On December 2nd, I went in for a routine physical to check out why I had suddenly begun to have some shortness of breath. The family practitioner took one look at the x-ray, and pointing to a large white mass in my left lung said, “You either have a blood clot, an infection, or a malignancy.” Because it was so

late on a Friday afternoon, she sent me for an overnight at the local hospital for testing. By 3 p.m. the next day, a resident doctor told me I had cancer. More tests were needed to determine whether I had breast cancer or lung cancer.

On December 8th at 8:30 a.m., I was told the results of the breast scan and bone scan. I have stage IV adenocarcinoma, or non-small cell lung cancer. The oncologist, never once losing eye contact with me, said there was no known cure and any treatment I chose, at best, would only be a means to live a little longer. When I asked for a more precise prognosis, he told me, “I’ve been an oncologist for 33 years, and I have never been right.” Then he laid out the national studies on this sort of cancer — survival time, on average, is one year after diagnosis. I have since learned that the five-year survival rate of non-small cell lung cancer patients is one percent, or as I wrote later in my journal, “They don’t have the guts to say zero.”

And I started to relive again that mid-July day on the farm. I saw how my father’s best crop in years had been destroyed while the three of us sat helpless in our kitchen chairs. I remember my mother and I walking out to the edge of the fields and seeing close up what had become of the fall farm payment. And I remember at age ten being absolutely certain that this event was not because a superpower from above or a cursed force from below was trying to pull my parents under. Growing up on the farm had taught me at an early age that even the hardest work isn’t enough to guarantee a crop or keep a calf healthy or save a flock of chickens from disease. My parents’ daily lives were about putting their wits and backbreaking labor up against the uncontrollable. Nature didn’t offer them much help, let alone any guarantees.

Remembering my father’s sparse words that day has helped me cope with my own unexpected loss of a harvest. I find myself comforting family and friends with the corn crop story as a means of reminding us all of what we already know — that none of us have any guarantees about how long we live or how we die. I don’t remember being handed a card

saying, “you will live to be 85 or 72 or even 59.” And if I ever had such a card, I add, I must have lost it somewhere along the way!

I had illusions of longevity, but now I know that all along those illusions were paper kites without wind. Because my grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, and even cousins grew old, I was lured into thinking I too would become a well-ripened, old member of the Sauber Devine clan. In fact, when I turned 44, I was so confident of a long life that I said to a friend, “I’ve now lived half of my life.” My grandfather Patrick Devine was 94 when he was diagnosed with cancer, and those of us gathered around his hospice bed agreed Pat had had a good life and time had been rightly generous to him.

When Pat was my current age, he had 36 more years left to live. A Friday afternoon trip to the doctor and a few CT scans later, I’m left wondering if I’ll survive long enough to see my soon-to-be born grandchild. I catch myself hoping I’ll live one year so I can hold this new child in my lap and read aloud *Maple Hill Farm*. Three more years sounds very appealing. Five more years would be even better. Ten years might qualify me for the *Guinness Book of World Records*.

We all know we must die sometime. It is just that some of us would like to live a bit longer than we get to.

I can’t help but think about all I’ll miss by dying sooner rather than later. I had always imagined myself taking my grandchildren, once they were old enough, on trips to places like Budapest, Harare, Dublin, Topeka, Kansas, or wherever might fuel their love of the larger world. My sons are just beginning their careers, and I’d hoped to see them settle into houses and middle age. And I had plenty of plans for the years after retirement from my own career as a college teacher. If lists of ideas for research and writing and other projects make for good wallpaper, I have enough to redecorate my own house and the next door neighbor’s yellow bungalow.

My father looked long and hard at his ruined crop before he came to accept what he could not change. I know I can’t change my diagnosis of terminal cancer any more than the three of us could have stopped the

hailstones that summer day so long ago. But my father did go out to feed the heifers, and I too, like my father, am moving on, doing what I can to match my wits against what I can't control.

Religious people in the same situation as mine might find comfort in thinking, "Thy will be done." I grabbed a pitchfork and said, "I've got to get my will done!" For the first few weeks after my diagnosis, I shoveled through jobs that await anyone suddenly faced with a shortened life. I wrote my last will and testament, completed my living will directive, organized my financial accounts where my sons can find them, and researched cremation plans. On the farm where I grew up, work came first, no matter if it was a Sunday or a Wednesday, a sunny day or a stormy one.

And along with sorting out my business affairs, I began the process of telling family and friends about my diagnosis. Like a child first practicing the alphabet, the sounds of cancer and terminal were not sounds I was familiar with within the context of my own life. But by repeating my cancer story over and over again, I began to make the necessary connections. And I began to better grasp why the word cancer evokes fear and terminal brings such grief.

"We understand death for the first time when he puts his hand upon one whom we love," wrote Madame de Stael. But when death puts its hand on our own beloved self, then that is another place altogether. Fear and grief become a suit of clothes the terminally ill can't ever take off and put away in the closet.

I can't say for certain where my father found the fall mortgage money the year of the hailstorm, but most likely he'd been forced to sell off some or all of the young heifers he'd gone to feed that July day. My father thought he was going to have the best corn harvest in years. But he got unlucky. I too have gotten unlucky, but perhaps it is luck enough to have learned at an early age that hailstorms do happen.