

Beginnings: Jimmy's Gift

This book started life as a conversation between the writer, J G Ballard, and his doctor. I was his doctor. The conversations were to be about life and death.

Jimmy had prostate cancer, and the plan for the book had reached a point where an outline had been sketched and the content planned. I had put to Jimmy the concept of a project about cancer. I had suggested the idea of a jointly written book based around the relationship between a patient and his specialist. Jimmy and I were hugely excited about the idea of the book. We intended to spend time together talking about the impact of cancer on his life, what it really meant to be a patient, the interactions between doctors and patients, what the doctor and the patient really thought about, and what the doctor really meant when he spoke to patients. This exchange was to be bound by a thread that took in our journeys through life. It was to be a contemporaneous account of two lives intertwined and interlinked.

So, that's what had been planned, and the plan was bound to extend beyond its loosely set outlines and borders.

Jimmy set about writing a book proposal.

But before our project could be realized, darkness struck, and Jimmy became too poorly to think about writing. And so the book was never written, and the proposal languished in my filing cabinets until the moment of Jimmy's memorial service. This celebration of Jimmy's life was held on the top floor of the Tate, with great views over the Thames, exotic canapés, and a gathering of friends and family who had come to celebrate Jimmy's life. We sat together, listening to speeches that brought together all the parts of Jimmy's world, speeches

from Jimmy's wonderful daughters, writers, friends, film producers, and the marvellously self-effacing, baseball hat-wearing, Stephen Spielberg.

As Jimmy's treating doctor I had been invited to close with a tribute to Jimmy. At the end of my talk, as I stood in sunlight at the lectern, I was left with the feeling that somehow I'd let Jimmy down by not completing our project.

I'd had a history with Jimmy that antedated his illness. We had met many years before he was ill, when I had looked after one of his dear friends who had breast cancer. That was in the 1990s, and I had just completed work on my third and as yet unpublished novel, to write was my big dream.

I decided to impose upon Jimmy and exploit the contact that had been made with him. I asked him to read my book. I put the book in the post, and sent it to him on a Friday for comments, with apologies for imposing on him. He read my book over the weekend, and I received a blue biro letter from him on Tuesday morning, expressing interest, and suggesting that he might send the book to his agent Margaret Hanbury if I would allow him to do so. Well, of course I would allow him to do so, and the introduction led to the publication of my first novel, an event ranking a great deal below the arrival of children in consequence, but still of some enormous excitement to me.

Events in my own life took a poor turn, and creativity took second place to child care and earning a living. In the place where I earned a living I met Jimmy again. He had become ill and I was so pleased to be able to help him as he had helped me. He was transformed by treatment and from being dreadfully sick, and in considerable pain, he became remarkably well.

And Jimmy produced 'Miracles of Life'.

When in remission of his cancer, Jimmy would come to clinic every month and, on many occasions he would ask me about my writing. He would embarrass me by telling me that I really should get writing again. He'd say ...

"You really should you know."

And his right hand would give emphasis to his comment with a curving karate chop that cut the cold consulting room air and entirely seized up the conversation.

And my embarrassment would increase further.

These exchanges caused me great discomfort. Some of the discomfort was due to the fact that I was not being creative, and possibly could be, and the rest of the discomfort was due to the fact that I couldn't break the barrier of patient/doctor relationship to explain to him the reasons why I could not be creative. I wished somehow that I could break the barrier, and explain to him why it was that I had failed to come up to standard and produced another little effort.

I looked again at our outline after his memorial service, and felt that somehow and in some way this was his gift to me, the stimulus for a book on cancer. With his loss our collaboration could never be realised, what had been conversation was now a monologue. In its creation the book comes from my life as a cancer doctor, its errors and idiocies are mine, and my intentions and ambitions are to explain and guide.

I have written about the patient and his cancer and described what the doctor feels, described what the doctor really thinks as he talks to his patient. The faults and fractures in these stories are mine, but I have done my best for the love of a great man.

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