

Confessions of a Realist

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86 days, 10 operations and plenty of easily manageable prayers.

This is how long my teenage sister has been an inpatient at the Children's Hospital, Level 2: Neurology Ward.

The diagnosis? A slow-growing but large brain tumour.

The solution? Cut it out.

Simple.

Except nothing ever is. Hello, surgical complications.

Hello, Desperation.

Perhaps somewhere in this sprawling continent there lives an Exceptionally Insightful Individual who is able to look beneath my shaved scalp and swinging gypsy skirts and label me a 'realist'.

If there is, and if they did, they would be correct. Smack bang on the money. That is, if 'realist' means too afraid to pray big, impossible prayers. If 'realist' means too afraid to hope.

The problem is, I'm tired of being a 'realist' and sick of playing life safe. 89 days and 10 operations too tired. It's time to live up to my radical hairstyle... or maybe just my recently-tested faith.

I've never been a maths whizz, but the numbers are crunchable. If my sister is going to be healed before Christmas, I'm running out of time.

It's eleven days until the 25th, yet as a family we exchange gifts on Christmas Eve... so that only leaves ten days. The transition from institution to home is not an easy one, so she would need to be discharged at least two days before the 24th in order to settle in. This leeway would also give my parents and me time to construct some form of 'Christmas'.

My calculations clunk to a conclusion. The 22nd of December.

Eight days away.

I look down at the comatose body on the hospital bed, swathed in white blankets, held together by an invisible tincture of drugs, will and Spirit, and a much more visible array of drooping tubes and blinking monitors.

How long does a miracle take? Is eight days enough? The 'realist' in me thinks not. I open my mouth anyway.

Please Lord.

It hurts to pray. Hurts like it does when you throw a comment into a conversation and have no clue whether you'll be met with agreement or confused silence. Hurts like it does when you offer companionship but wonder if you'll find yourself alone after the party.

Bring her home on the 22nd of December.

I ache with the sheer impossibility of the words. Now I've spit them into being, what will I do if the morning of the 23rd dawns and my sister's bedroom remains empty?

This is not the prayer of a realist. What would the Exceptionally Insightful Individual say if they saw me now?

99 days, 11 operations and one impossible prayer.

I wake on the 22nd to the sound of a million coins falling onto pavement. A glance out the window shows the rain is accompanied by wind strong enough to throw the branches of our huge white gumtree into disarray.

In a film this would be a carefully placed premonition, complete with threatening piano notes. Real life is rarely so obliging, but I still feel giddy. My body shakes with that peculiar type of trembling ecstasy which follows an all-nighter and a bad knock-knock joke. Yet it's not a punchline I'm waiting for. It's a lifeline.

As I pull on my blue-and-white skirt and smooth down an already smooth waistband, a little-used voice whispers that perhaps today will be The Day. Perhaps God will give me my miracle.

Don't be ridiculous, a far more well-oiled voice replies. God doesn't work that way. Not for you, not today. You're wasting your time, your energy, your hope.

Can hope be wasted? Is it a single use item like a sticky band-aid or a disposable face-mask? Or is it something multi-purpose, like washable bandages and air-purifiers? Better yet, is there a hope which comes with a life-time guarantee? If so, I'll get six, thanks. I'll even sign up to the 'we promise no spam' promotional email!

I walk downstairs.

'What did they say?'

Mum presses the 'end-call' button and rests the phone in her lap. These past 99 days have given our landline a workout. No longer is it the final frontier: 'Beware. Out there be marketers!' Instead if you asked, it could babble about tearful ten pm calls and sober six am consents for surgery. It would probably complain over the endless monotony of conversations beginning, 'How are you?' and concluding with litanic variations of, 'We love you.'

'She had raisin toast for breakfast and woke early when the nurse—'

'Good,' I derail Mum's response and set about changing direction. 'Did they say whether she can come home today?'

It's not the question of a realist.

Mum frowns. 'Home? Of course not. Perhaps by Christmas Eve, but even then...'

My prayer had been a secret. Realists do not have the liberty of molding hope into sentences.

Outside in the storm the gumtree screams with primal fury. Inside near the phone my faith stutters through silent syllables.

What are you doing, God? I thought – I hoped –

It's okay. The realist in me re-asserts herself. Your faith doesn't require miracles. God still cares. Not everyone gets a showy display of heavenly love.

The words may be reasonable, but they bring no comfort.

99 days, 11 operations and one far too impossible prayer.

The nurse looks from my sister to me and flicks her short blonde hair behind an ear. 'Once the Endocrine team signs off, are you happy to take her home this afternoon?'

Happy. Am I *happy*?

Oh Lord. The nurse's casual question reverberates against the walls in my soul and they begin to crumple. In fear I try to hold them upright. I am a realist. I have to be certain.

'Are you sure?'

The nurse nods. 'We'll call to check on you and she'll have to have follow up appointments with the various teams within two to six weeks of discharge...' She continues through prescriptions and descriptions and medical-predictions, and we've heard it all before... or at least I hope we have, because neither of us are listening.

I let the walls dissolve to dust. My sister's eyes shine.

99 days, eleven operations and one answered prayer.

It's the 22nd of December and my sister is coming home.

Three years, seven months and one miracle.

Perhaps somewhere in this sprawling continent there lives an Exceptionally Insightful Individual who is able to look beneath my shoulder length curls and professional black slacks and label me a 'realist'.

If there is, and if they did, they'd be right. Smack bang on the money. That is, if 'realist' means no longer afraid to pray impossible prayers. If 'realist' means one who has witnessed a miracle and lives to tell the tale.

Three years, seven months and one miracle.

That's how long it's been since my sister came home from the Children's Hospital, Level 2: Neurology Ward, healed of a brain tumour.

Hello, unexplainable cure.

Hello, Hope.