

*I'm going to tell this story as I know it. Even now, it is strange to me. I have no idea why I am telling it. I have never been sentimental. Perhaps just to say that it happened.*

Kathy Acker, "The gift of disease" (1997)

The morning of the 24th of December 2021. I am in my mother's bathroom, inside my mother's shower, watching the water run down my body. Remembering that scene today, more than a year later, it's as if I'm standing there watching myself through the glass shower door, staring at my still undiagnosed self. With pity, and more so, bewildered. Still.

That moment in the shower, was the first I realized something was wrong. The body, the belly I was looking at, was not mine. It was not the body I had been familiar with until that moment. Down there, my belly bulged, round, clearly visible, in a way I had never seen anything on myself before. I got out of the shower, dried myself off and tried to put on the trousers I had chosen for the day. A pair of navy-blue trousers, very beautiful trousers with a belt of the same softly falling fabric, trousers that I had bought precisely because they fitted me so well, so well as if they had been made for me. It would have been the first time I had worn them outside my bedroom. Would have been. On that day, I couldn't zip them up. My belly, my new bulging belly didn't fit in.

All stories, even those where you have no idea why you are telling them, have a beginning. This is the beginning of mine. That moment in the shower.

When something happens, something extraordinary, something life-changing, there are details which burn into your memory and stay there, like scars that fade with time but never completely disappear. Details that serve as references for the story. Details like my mother's fluffy bath mats. Details like the fingernail of the pinky of the gynecologist I went to as soon as I got back from my Christmas visit. A neatly cleaned and filed fingernail, a bit longer than all the others. Details like the calm voice of that same doctor when he told me: „There is something big inside you that doesn't belong there“. The movement of his hand as he flipped out his

mobile phone to call the head of gynecology at the hospital where I was supposed to go straight afterwards.

I didn't stay long in gynecology, my disease also affected my reproductive organs, but it had originated elsewhere, in my intestines.

In Germany, colonoscopies for colorectal cancer prevention are provided for women from the age of 55. Men are a little earlier in line, their health insurance pays for the procedure from the age of 50. I was 39 years old when I was diagnosed with stage IVc bowel cancer.

Bowel cancer is a slow-growing type of cancer. If the tumor is in the part of the intestine called the sigmoid colon, as it was in my case, it can be there for a long time without causing any symptoms. I had no idea of being ill while the cancer had already eaten its way into other parts of my body.

Among the different details that get stuck in mind are colors. The aforementioned navy-blue of the trousers on Christmas Eve. The concrete grey of the hospital building which is positioned at the Landwehrkanal like a fortress and where I had to go every other week to get my chemotherapy, first as an inpatient, later as an outpatient. The beige of the tray on which they serve food in the hospital, three times a day, food that is often the same color, the same beige as the tray, but that doesn't matter anyway when the medication takes away your appetite. The light pink of the drinkable food, Fortimel Yoghurt Style flavor raspberry, prescribed for my underweight. The muted red of the leatherette chairs in the day clinic, where I sat for hours and hours, watching the chemo fluids drip into my veins. Other shades of red. The red of my blood, of course, pumped over and over again into countless cannulas, trickling in dusty clots from my parched nose, inflamed from the treatment. The red of the drops of blood on the toilet paper, which I still look out for every single time, even though they are no longer there, should no longer be there. But also, more pleasant shades of red: the Chanel-Red of my surgeon's fingernails as they clicked gently across her computer keyboard. The red of the bromeliad a friend brought

me to the hospital after my surgery. Against the rules. I had to keep the plant outside my room during my stay. Potted plants are not allowed in hospital rooms because there could be germs in their soil. I didn't know this, neither did my friend. Neither of us had been inside a hospital as a patient before 2022.

There are a lot of stupid things you get to hear when you're sick. Nice things too, of course, but unfortunately these are drowned out by the stupid ones. A lot of them have to do with strength, they are compliments on the strength of the sick person. As if this person had a choice. Even if they are well-intentioned - these compliments always remind me of the stupidest phrase of all, which says that something that doesn't kill you makes you stronger. One thing I can assure you of: What doesn't kill you, but very well could have, doesn't make you stronger at all. Much more likely, the opposite is true. One of the reasons for this is that diseases like the big C do not tend to come alone. The big C comes in the company of the big F. F for fear. And the F is setting itself up to stay forever. I have no idea whether I am stronger or weaker after this year of being haunted and shaken to the core by my illness and its treatment and all the fears that come with both. It doesn't matter. There is absolutely no need to grow while fearing, while suffering. What matters, the only thing that matters, is that I am. That the cancer hasn't killed me. At least not yet. Maybe, if I'm very lucky, it never will.

The quote from Kathy Acker that I used as a preface for this text is from the essay „The gift of disease“ that she wrote in 1996 and published in the Guardian Weekend magazine in 1997. The essay is about the cancer that was found in her breast. When she wrote the text, she thought she was cured and apparently, she was looking for something like meaning in what she had experienced. Unfortunately, she was not cured. Kathy Acker died on the 30 November 1997 at the age of 50.

I can understand what she was longing for, but I must disagree. This disease is not a gift. There is nothing good about cancer.

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