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## Love song

Carolyn Murphy

I

It was mid-September / winter was coming / when you became ill

Throwing up

Not eating much

You lay on the couch watching TV

The doctor said it was a virus

It was the week before I started the new job / I was glad to have you home

I started work at CCI

And you were still sick

Going to work sometimes

Mostly at home and throwing up

Winnie visited / on her way to Europe

She took you to a doctor's appointment

She was worried about you

I didn't understand illness / didn't want you to be sick / just wanted you well  
again

But you kept throwing up / and you started to sway from side to side when you  
walked / and your eyes stared vaguely into space

The ear nose and throat doctor said it was vertigo  
He said do some exercises / go back to work / stop worrying  
Come back in three weeks

Somehow we went to Adrian's wedding  
In the country / three hours from Ottawa  
It was autumn and cold  
It started to snow while we were there  
Small white flakes against the red and gold of the trees

You became quieter and quieter  
Moving from bed to bathroom  
From sleeping and staring into space  
To shitting and throwing up

I tried to make you do the exercises  
How would you get better if you didn't?  
Sometimes you did them / to please me  
Then you lay down again and closed your eyes

I cooked and cleaned and shopped  
You rolled to one side of the bed and then the other / so I could change the  
sheets  
I went to work and came home to make your lunch  
You lay on the bed and I lay next to you / watching your eyes

You didn't see me anymore / your eyes were dull and empty  
I watched you recede a little more each day  
I cried and asked you over and over to stay with me

By the end of October I was exhausted / longed for a holiday from illness  
If only for a weekend  
We did go to Kingston. A conference for work

You lay in bed in the guesthouse while I attended lectures

At the doctor's again / you were worse not better / he booked you in to see a  
neurologist / there was nothing to worry about he said / just ruling out certain  
things

We left for the hospital early

The appointment was at seven

You lay on the floor in the waiting room. There was no one else around

When we saw the neurologist you threw up in his wastepaper basket

He straightened the papers on his desk / looked at you over the rim of his glasses

He said he needed to ask you some questions / were you done throwing up?

Your eyes were unfocused / shifting from side to side

Your skin soft and dull

You hadn't shaved for days

But you answered his questions / and did all the tests

Touched your finger to your nose

Tried to walk a straight line

Let him watch the way your eyes rattled when you looked at one thing

He said it wasn't vertigo / it was something more central

He would talk to Imaging

See if he could get you a scan today

In Emergency / you lay sleeping on a stretcher

I sat next to you

They did the scan and we waited some more

You stayed asleep mostly

I watched the nurses

Looking for news

When it came the nurses swarmed and buzzed with it

They looked at us and shook their heads  
And looked away again

No one said anything  
The doctor didn't come  
Eventually I asked the nurse  
She looked at me / knowing  
She said she'd call the doctor  
He didn't come / he spoke to me on the phone

Richard has a brain tumour he said  
I started to cry  
You must have known he said defensively  
He said arrangements had been made / he had to go

Something more central  
Now I saw this meant a brain tumour  
But when he said it I hadn't known  
I'd had no idea

The nurse took me away  
We left you sleeping / you still didn't know  
She gave me tissues and water  
She said call your family / have them come over  
They're in Australia I said  
I didn't know what to do  
I couldn't remember anyone's number

I called your work and couldn't find Judit or Philippe  
But found Jeff who came immediately

An ambulance took us to another hospital  
I watched you / quiet on the ambulance stretcher  
Wires and machines stuck to you

Being monitored by the paramedic  
The beginning of your new life as a patient

I held your hand / willed you to stay alive  
And as I watched unfamiliar roads snaking out behind us  
I realised no one had told me where we were going

||

Jeff followed us to the new hospital / brought your clothes and shoes  
I didn't want to take charge of your wallet  
Such a simple thing  
But I didn't know what to do with it / didn't want the responsibility  
Jeff said Nancy and he would be back later  
Someone would pick up our car

They lifted you from one stretcher to another and put a drip in your arm  
You put your life in their hands easily  
Grateful for the opportunity to let go  
We waited in a tiny examination room  
I curled up on a desk and tried to sleep  
My head pulsing and hot

The nurse couldn't give me painkillers  
They could only dispense drugs to patients  
I left you for a few minutes and bought some Tylenol

When I knew it was morning in Sydney I found a phone and called your parents  
They were waiting to hear from us

Richard has a brain tumour I said  
Your mum gasped. She said she would fly over the next day

Your dad asked if it was in the brain stem  
I didn't know  
He said find out all you can and call back later

By evening they had a bed for you  
In the neurological observation ward  
There were nine other patients  
Eight with brain tumours  
And one man who'd fallen off his verandah and was now quadriplegic

Finally Dr Agbi came to talk to us  
He was calm / explaining everything  
Describing the parts of the brain  
Showing us where the tumours were located  
He wrote down words I could repeat to your father / his writing large and awkward

It was Wednesday. Still Wednesday  
He said you would have a biopsy on Monday  
Until then they would keep you under observation / stabilise your condition

That night Judit and Philippe came  
And Jeff and Nancy  
They were our family then

When I arrived home late that night the house was quiet and cool  
The familiar space the first real comfort I had had all day  
Philippe and Judit wanted me to go to their place  
But I knew when I walked in the door that I needed to stay at home

I had a shower and ate something  
Walked from room to room  
The wooden boards reassuring under my feet

I called mum and dad  
They had heard from your parents  
I had hardly spoken to mum since we'd arrived in Canada  
It was nice that night to hear in her voice that she loved me after all

Later I lay in bed in the darkness looking out the window  
The criss-cross of tree branches black against the paler blue black of the sky  
I cried myself to sleep  
It was a relief to cry / at home / in our bed that smelled of you  
I didn't change the sheets for days

In the morning Philippe and Judit came for breakfast  
They brought chocolate croissants. I made coffee  
Philippe had spoken to his mother who is a nurse  
She said some brain tumours were really not so bad  
We should be hopeful

Judit stayed with me all day  
She drove our car  
I was too skittery to drive

Along Main Street to the hospital / the landscape was stripped of colour  
The trees soft grey lace against the bleached sky

Nancy came to the hospital too  
She sat in the waiting room  
Knitting  
Her enormous handbag by her side

We sat all day / the four of us / waiting for news  
Worried they were sending you for so many tests  
Was there something they weren't telling us?  
No one had mentioned tests the night before

On Friday afternoon Judit and I went back to the apartment  
To prepare for the arrival of your mum and sister Rose  
We made up beds and swept the floor  
Nick and Eileen sent over a meal  
Nancy had been shopping and stocked our fridge with food  
There were six blocks of Lindt chocolate in the cupboard

That night Jeff took me to the airport  
We met Ronnie and Rose  
They both looked exhausted / but much calmer than I'd expected

At the hospital you were glad to see them  
By then you were stable and looked better than you'd been in weeks

At home that night we ate Eileen's vegetarian pasta  
We toasted Eileen and Nick and felt glad we were together  
The next night your father would arrive  
Before this I had only met your family a couple of times  
And now I would be living with them



## III

On Sunday night you signed a document / to give me power of attorney

We were all there

Ron and Ronnie and Rose

Philippe and Judit

Jeff and Nancy

You and me

Ron had talked to the head nurse

Now she turned a blind eye to the two visitors rule

Monday morning you had the biopsy

After you had gone in I saw Dr Agbi

Dressed in a surgical gown / his cap covered in bright yellow ducks

Skipping and jumping / his eyes laughing and excited

Getting into the lift

Ready to run a marathon. Ready to operate on you

He smiled at me as the lift doors closed between us

They cut into your head above the hairline / on the front left side

We spent the time at the shopping mall on Laurier

Your mum bought a white teddy bear

Rose and I looked at winter boots

You didn't open your eyes when we saw you afterward

Rose told you to squeeze my hand

So I would know you were conscious

They had shaved the front of your head

The remaining curls were matted with yellow disinfectant and dried blood

You didn't look good

But the doctor said it had gone well

By this time I knew it was cancer  
There were three tumours in your brain  
Your father said benign tumours wouldn't spread like that  
We were hoping for lymphoma  
The best of a bad lot  
A small chance of cure / versus no chance

We planned to go out for dinner Friday night  
With Philippe and Judit and Jeff and Nancy  
To La Gazelle, your favourite restaurant  
We had booked late so we could stay with you until the end of visiting

Though in the end we didn't go  
We saw Dr Agbi who had news  
Medulloblastoma  
No cure  
He would operate on Monday  
A craniotomy  
He called it debulking the tumour  
There would be a five percent risk of quadriplegia or death

It was late November  
He said you might not make Christmas without the operation

## **IV**

The surgery took six hours  
I didn't see you Monday morning  
You went in early

I slept in / drew out the morning at home as long as possible  
We arrived at the hospital in the afternoon

Hoping to see Dr Agbi

He came out to talk with us / said it had gone well

You would be in post op for a few hours

We should come back later

So we went shopping again / Bayshore mall this time

We wandered around

I bought new slippers for you / guessed your size

Rose and I still didn't have winter boots / everyone said it would start to snow soon

When we got back to the hospital you were in your room / going up in the lift  
your dad tried to tell me how you would be / but nothing could have prepared  
me for your drowned and bloated face

They had over-hydrated you before surgery / and you had been lying face down  
for six hours while they cut a hole through your skull and pulled and poked and  
prodded Removing tumour

Now all the fluid seemed to have collected in your face

I didn't recognise you

You looked dead / fished from the ocean after many days

You squeezed my hand

I watched Rose stroke your arm / talk to you / her voice soothing

I felt nauseous / needed to sit down

I moved to the chair near the door

Then I was lying on the ground by your bed

Wet and cold and empty

I couldn't stand up I felt so weak

Someone brought me a drink

My hand wouldn't grip the cup

Rose and one of the nurses took me to the bathroom and gave me a shower

I sat still and blank while they dressed me in hospital pyjamas, my shoes and coat

It was such a relief to give in / to let go

We stayed with you a little longer

Then the nurse said we should leave you to rest

Rose went to get the car

I sat in a wheelchair while your dad took me to the entrance

Back at the apartment Mum called

I told her you'd come through the operation well

I tried to tell her how I felt

People were chatting in the background

I couldn't explain how terrible you looked

How somehow I knew we'd lost something / that everything would be different now

I didn't know the words

## V

When the nurse weighed you after three weeks in hospital you had lost 25 kilograms

I asked her to check your weight again

I thought it was a mistake

But when you got out of bed to go to the shower

I could see how thin you were

Your knees bulged out / your skin hung loose and limp on your bones

Holding onto a walking frame / a person either side

You lurched and jolted your way to the shower

You kept your eyes closed

And when you did open them your eyes wandered off in different directions  
Your left side was weak and didn't work properly anymore  
Your left hand shuddered and danced  
You couldn't hold cutlery or a glass  
Ataxia they said / a side effect of the surgery

At the end of August we had gone white water rafting  
You had seemed well and we were happy  
By the end of November you were barely able to walk or see or use your hands

## VI

At home each night  
Your sister Jenny staying now  
Five people in a two-bedroom apartment  
I felt selfish keeping our room to myself

But I needed the space  
A corner of the apartment that was mine  
The other bedroom had become your parents' room  
Your sisters slept in the lounge room  
Your dad and Jenny took over the kitchen

They only wanted to help  
But I was too shy to say I wanted to cook / wanted to do the dishes / wanted to  
shop  
I was too slow for Ron who had everything organised before I got up each  
morning

I longed for silence  
And time to think  
And for another TV so I could escape / alone in our room at night

## VII

Waiting in the Imaging Department / you were having more tests  
The attendant asked me to hold your file  
Already you had a long history / a ring binder full of pages

There was a results section  
Results of the biopsy  
Probably medulloblastoma  
And then the results of the craniotomy  
My heart fluttered  
We were still waiting for these results  
The doctor had said nothing / but here they were in the file  
I scanned through the words  
Looking for hope  
And there it was, the last line  
Lymphoma  
Send for more tests to confirm

I read it again and again  
Lymphoma  
Not medulloblastoma  
Suddenly you had a future after all

Back upstairs I told your family what I'd read  
Rose laughed at my spying  
We weren't supposed to read the hospital file  
We started to hope again

That night Dr Agbi confirmed what I had read  
They'd been waiting for more tests / didn't want to get our hopes up

But it was true  
You might be cured  
A one to two percent chance Ron said  
We held onto that hope

## VIII

You came home for one night before you were transferred to Oncology  
The doctor was not sure it was worth the effort  
Getting you home and back for just one night  
But when I asked you, you didn't hesitate  
You wanted to come home

You sat on the edge of the bed  
Your body slumped to one side  
While I dressed you in your winter clothes

I wheeled you to the entrance  
Jenny was waiting with the car  
We drove home and parked behind the building  
The back entrance was at ground level  
Inside was a small flight of stairs  
The physiotherapist had spent days teaching you how to walk up stairs  
One step at a time / your father behind you while I was in front

Inside you wanted to go straight to bed  
We tried to keep you up / wanted to see you enjoying yourself  
But you were too tired  
The exertion of travelling home the most active you'd been in weeks

For dinner Ron made a special meal  
Your place at the table set from that day forward

You found it hard to eat / food spilled everywhere / you hadn't sat at a table for weeks

But you enjoyed the meal / at home / in our apartment

It was a relief that night to curl up together

To remember how it felt to be alone with you

To remember it was our apartment / our home

The next day we had to take you back

The holiday over too quickly

At the hospital we sat in the waiting room

A bed in Oncology not available for another hour

You lay sleeping on one of the couches / in pain / only wanting to get into bed

One of the priests came to talk to you

Told you to cheer up

Christ's ordeal was worse than yours he said

Your silence proof to him you were indulging yourself

Jenny and I angry / glaring at him / wanting him to go away

## **IX**

There were days and days of preparation before chemotherapy started

Tense jittery days / full of fear

Was the tumour growing again?

No reassurance from the doctors who stood with their backs to you

Shifting from one foot to the other as they explained each new delay

The thought of you in hospital, alone, pushing me out of bed each day

Keeping me by your side till late



Back and forth day after day  
Running on adrenalin  
Longing for a day off but unable to bear the thought of not seeing you  
Not being by your side  
Even though it slowly became clear you did not remember me  
Your face blank when I walked into the room

I watched you slip into the ease of childhood relationships  
You turned to your parents and little sister when you needed something  
Rose gone home again by now  
I hoped you would ask for me sometimes  
Ask me to help you eat your meal  
Ask me to get you a drink of water

The only reassurance / the way you clutched the Carolyn bear  
A present from Philippe and Judit before they left for France

You lay dull and listless in the bed / hardly speaking / eyes closed  
I waited anxiously / getting more nervous with each day's delay

The only relief came when the snow finally started to fall  
At first it was just a few inches  
And then one night it snowed and snowed and snowed  
Soft white flakes that drifted slowly down  
Making everything white and cold and quiet  
A heavy beautiful silence

It was still snowing in the morning  
When Jenny and I raced outside  
To run and laugh and fall into the thigh deep snow where our driveway used to  
be  
Our happy faces smiling and red with cold

At the end of that week / late in the afternoon / it was an awful relief when the  
bright yellow fluid finally started to flow into your veins  
The beginning of ten weeks of chemotherapy

## X

You came home for five days at Christmas  
I asked Clau and Marcio to come for Christmas lunch  
I went shopping and bought presents for your family  
And for you and me to give each other  
Jenny said she would prepare the meal

Winnie was visiting again  
She and I went out to a place on Laurier to buy a Christmas tree  
The trees were stacked up against the fence in the yard of an empty gas station  
Inside a man and woman and three children sat watching TV  
The tree we wanted was ten dollars and covered in snow  
Its shape perfectly regular / like all the television Christmas trees I'd ever seen

The man came outside to help us load it in the boot  
At home we stood it in the lounge room  
The snow on the tree quickly melting / making puddles on the wooden floor

Your work had sent a box of Christmas decorations  
Each person adding an item to the gift box  
I decorated the tree while you sat blankly on the couch  
Waiting for permission to go back to bed

Christmas morning it was minus twenty / the sky a deep blue  
Out the window of the apartment it looked like summer  
Except for the snow

Ronnie and I went for a walk by the river

I pulled my scarf up over my nose to stay warm  
The river was frozen and thick with snow

We walked through the park  
The snow up to our knees  
Our steps criss-crossing with all the other steps already imprinted in the white

## **XI**

Each night at home I looked after you / looked forward to being alone with you  
But you hardly slept at all  
Constantly awake / agitated and tense  
You asked over and over  
Where am I?  
What's happening?

What should I do?

All night and all day

You needed to urinate every five or ten minutes  
And wet the bed two or three times every night  
Nancy and I went shopping on Laurier / to buy more sheets  
Pure cotton  
White and pale green  
And five pairs of boxer shorts  
We washed load after load of sheets every day

Each morning I longed for the sound of your father getting up  
Knowing that he would take you to have breakfast  
Leaving me to sleep

## XII

When you went back to hospital  
We took turns visiting you  
Your dad and Jenny there each morning  
I arrived at two and stayed until eleven  
Your mum came late and spent the nights with you

You needed someone all the time now and there were not enough nurses  
Ronnie somehow able to stay up all night / sleep during the day  
Always able to go on / tireless  
Driven to save her eldest son

Looking after you had become our job  
We were shift workers  
Clocking on and off  
Familiar with the staff / the hospital routine / where the supplies were kept

The next week when you were home again  
Mick and Glenda were visiting  
They had booked into the guesthouse around the corner  
But each night your parents stayed at the guesthouse  
And your brother stayed with you

The first night in your parents' room I woke every ten minutes  
Sharp and alert. Expecting to help you  
But after that I slept  
Forever grateful to your brother and Glenda for arriving when they did  
Fresh and eager to help  
Letting us rest

After they left I did nights again

But after only a few days I was exhausted  
Not sleeping at night / unable to sleep during the day  
I found myself at four in the morning  
Angry / pleading  
Telling you not to go to the toilet / you'd just been

I didn't take you and minutes later you wet yourself  
When I realised the incontinence pants had not been enough  
That the sheets were wet too  
I cried at the thought of changing the sheets for the third time that night  
I just wanted to sleep  
I'm sorry you said  
Over and over

But I was too tired to care for you properly  
So I woke Jenny / asked her to stay with you / so I could sleep

She stayed with you until morning  
The next night we did the same / half the night each  
In the morning  
Both exhausted  
We went out to buy the paper / left you with Ron and Ronnie  
We had to get out of the apartment

We sat in the café around the corner  
Drinking coffee  
Eating toast  
Slumped in the armchairs  
Enjoying the bland piped music

You had told both of us you couldn't do this anymore / couldn't keep going  
We tried to convince you that you could / you had to  
But we were both fearful you wouldn't survive

## XIII

At the hospital that week  
We told the doctor how ill you were  
He reduced the dose of chemotherapy that went into your brain  
And prescribed codeine

The codeine was our saviour  
You slept  
Sometimes for a few hours at a time  
And half way through the night you could have more codeine  
So we could sleep some more

By late January we were used to the routine  
Jenny and I did the night shifts at home  
Your mum did the nights in hospital  
Your dad kept the house running  
We were coping and there were only two more weeks of chemotherapy

But then you became ill  
It was a Saturday afternoon  
You were due to come home the next morning  
Walking into your hospital room / ready to start my shift  
Your dad and Jenny there / ready to go home  
Your dad telling me how you'd been that morning  
You suddenly became distressed  
Your face red and bloated

The Oncologist walked in / doing his afternoon rounds  
Ron and Dr Gertler seemed to know immediately  
You had an infection  
Septicaemia or meningitis

Dr Gertler took blood samples and fluid samples from your brain  
He put you on antibiotics

Ron and Jenny didn't go home  
We sat with you all afternoon / watched you get worse and worse  
The nurse checked your blood pressure every ten minutes  
By six when your mum arrived there were three nurses  
In and out of the room / watching your blood pressure drop lower and lower

Finally they moved you to intensive care  
They said we couldn't go with you / perhaps we could visit later  
Your white blood count was low because of the chemotherapy  
Your dad said you might not make it to morning  
Months of stress and fear and love suddenly compressed into this one night  
By morning the fight might be over / lost  
We sat in your room in the Oncology ward / waiting

After an hour Ronnie and I went to find you  
You were in a dark room full of equipment and beeps  
A nurse to watch over you  
Annoyed by every sound / you were angry and wakeful  
Delirious  
Constantly pulling at the monitoring devices

We sat on either side of your bed  
Trying to help you rest / unable to be anywhere but by your side  
Holding your hands so you wouldn't remove the tubes that ran all over your  
body  
I sang to you / song after song / and convinced you to sing too  
Bob Marley tunes / the only thing that kept you calm

## XIV

You stayed four nights in intensive care

Four long days and nights

In a dark room with no windows

On the second night your brother arrived

Jenny had been in Ottawa for two months / but needed to go home

Bob had arrived to replace her

When you moved back to Oncology

It was like going home. Back to your private room

With chairs and a bathroom

And a view of trees and snow

Dr Gertler said you would stay in hospital now / until the end of treatment

Two weeks of antibiotics and then one more round of chemotherapy

We fell into the shift work routine we had already established

Your dad with you each morning / Bob and I each afternoon / your mum  
overnight

Bob brought your guitar to the hospital and each day he played songs for you

The two of you singing while I knitted

The same songs over and over every day

You pressed the call button whenever you got the chance

We tried to stop you bothering the nurses since we were there to help you

But you liked to call them / wanted to talk / wanted to know what they were  
doing

Lorna the only nurse that seemed to understand

She came into your room laughing / making you laugh

What the hell do you want now she would say?



One afternoon we took you down to the hospital cafeteria  
For afternoon tea  
You wanted to go  
But the minute we had your wheelchair pulled up to the table / your IMED  
machine plugged into the wall / you wanted to go back  
The unfamiliar space / humming with people and noise / too much for you  
We ordered coffee and biscuits and ate them quickly  
Then took you back to your room

Each day of that last month we walked to the hospital  
When I stepped out the front door and felt the crunch of the snow beneath my  
feet  
The cold air grabbing at my skin  
I was glad that it was winter while you were sick  
Glad that the weather provided so much surprise / so much to wonder at / so  
much fun  
I loved the snow and the cold  
And I needed the distraction  
Needed to enjoy myself despite everything / because of everything

It was an hour's walk  
Along Main Street  
Past the Green Door / sometimes we stopped there for lunch  
Across the Rideau River / still frozen  
Everything white and grey / a monochromatic landscape  
I had never known there were so many shades of grey  
Or that they could be so beautiful

I started to knit you a sweater the week you went into hospital  
Something to do during the long hours of waiting  
Annita and Steve visited the night I started knitting  
When I held up the two rows I had done and said it was a sweater for you  
Annita laughed  
But I kept knitting every day  
To take my mind off things  
To lose myself in the feeling of the wool between my fingers  
And the sight of the rows and rows of accumulating stitches

I knitted when we waited for results  
I knitted when the catheter in your shoulder started bleeding and the blood  
soaked cloths were piling up on the bed despite the doctors efforts to stop the  
flow  
'It isn't really a lot of blood' your dad kept saying as the nurse went back and  
forth with new supplies

My knitting was a lifeline  
If I kept knitting and finished the sweater / then you would have to survive to  
wear it

I finished it the week you were discharged  
Three months of knitting  
It was too big for you and a little lopsided  
But I had finished it  
And you were out of hospital

When we went up to Montebello a few days later  
You sat in the back of the car wearing the sweater  
Singing along with Louis Armstrong on the radio  
'What a wonderful world'

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