

A Letter to my other half:

Dear David,

You are lying in St Vincents Hospital Emergency Department propped up on a stretcher that is too short for you. There is a large bottle suspended above you slowly dripping a vital drug into your right arm and I am willing it to bring you back to normal. You can't speak properly and your whole right side is floppy including your face. You've had a stroke. It's an awful shock.

We had been to a concert - Barry Humphries and Meow Meow performing songs from the Weimar Republic with the Australian Chamber Orchestra. Excellent. We had crossed Martin Place to have a late dinner at an Italian restaurant. After we'd ordered you went downstairs to the toilet and it happened. You collapsed, flailed about on the floor, crashing into things. No one was there to help. Somehow you hauled yourself up the stairs with one arm and staggered back to the table. Other diners thought you were drunk. You tried to pick up a glass of water and sent it flying. The maitre D came to our table and asked if there was a problem. You couldn't speak. You slumped, looking frightened. 'Please call an ambulance', I said.

Racing through the city on the wrong side of the road with the siren screaming, the driver was giving instructions to the hospital staff. 'How far to go?' I asked urgently. 'A few minutes'. He grinned 'You wanna drive?'. At least he made me smile.

At Emergency a team was waiting for us. So efficient. Three of them wheeled you away while I gave your details to another.

The neurosurgeon looks as if he has rushed from a dinner party to come in and attend to you. He's wearing a pink shirt. He says he thinks you could be a candidate for a new drug. It only works in 30 percent of cases he warns and there is a small chance of death. Just a small chance. Do we want to risk it? I look into your eyes. You've been crying. Without a word we agree that we do want to risk it.

Now I'm beside you holding your left hand while the dripping goes on and on. The drug will take two hours to work. IF it works. You lie there watching it drip into you. The neurosurgeon has left, gone back to his party. A young woman doctor is in charge now but she has her hands full with other problems.

Its a typical Saturday night about 11 pm. Phones ring constantly. Trolleys trundle by with newly arrived patients, inert and bloody or moaning and flailing about. Doctors and orderlies in unflattering grey and blue hospital smocks attend to them quietly and competently. Violent drunks and drug addicts are causing chaos all around you. I am standing guard over you with my umbrella as one of them breaks away from the two policemen who are trying to hold him and hurls himself at a tray of metal instruments that crash in all directions. He's yelling at the police, the doctors, everyone to 'Fuck off!' and then starts running the length of the casualty department. The police give chase, catch him and drag him back to the desk

where a social worker tells them loudly “There’s no point being violent with him.” I disagree. They wrestle him into a padded room where we can see him on the TV screen throwing himself against the walls. At least we can’t hear his screams any more. If you hadn’t had a stroke you’d be riveted by the drama. It’s a nightmare version of your play ‘The Removalists’, except that this Kenny Carter isn’t just naturally aggressive; he’s on Ice.

It’s probably my fault you had a stroke. I’ve always stressed you out, encouraged you to be more active than you wanted to be. You were content to be at home, lying on a sofa learning French or reading whenever you weren’t at work on your computer. But I wanted to be out and about, meeting people, going places. For decades you’ve put up with it and now it’s too late.

I shouldn’t have dragged you to places you hated, paddling down the Amazon being chased by a giant spider that ran along the surface of the water. Or tramping through the jungle in the wilds of Iquitos, sharing a hut with monkeys or swimming in a river full of Piranha fish. I thought it was an adventure but you hated it. I’m sorry.

I shouldn’t have insisted we go and live in Denmark in the coldest winter for a hundred years. But Whitlam had just been thrown out and I wanted to see what it would be like living under a socialist government. You reluctantly agreed to accept a job at the University of Aarhus in Jutland where the ships were frozen in the harbour. You hated the climate and the university. You called it a Marxist feminist seminary. One of your fellow lecturers described Shakespeare as a ‘Tudor hierarchical apologist’ You laughed out loud. He was furious. People had no sense of humour, you said. But our children went to the local schools and learned to speak Danish. We made friends and they remember Aarhus fondly. But you hated it. I’m sorry.

But what a life we’ve had together. You won’t die. You won’t!

But if you don’t recover fully, if you’re confined to a wheelchair and have to re-learn to speak or write I’ll be patient and caring and never, never encourage you to go the Third World countries like India or Burma again, where you got violent stomach upsets, or to Tibet or Macchu Picchu where you got altitude sickness or to Egypt or Libya where there were dangerous political upheavals that we barely escaped. I’m sorry.

We can have a holiday in a nice hotel where there are palm trees and swimming pools and massages and cocktails like you’ve always wanted to. I won’t be bored. I promise. If we ever go to Vanuatu or Fiji again I won’t go off in a local bus to interview the leader of the coup who is languishing in jail. I won’t go chasing interviews for newspaper articles again. I’ll just sit by the swimming pool keeping you company.

And if you recover fully I won’t ever drag you off to Central Australia so you fall on slippery rocks and break your ankle looking at rock art. And if you do break your ankle I’ll never just buy you a walking stick and some pain killers and drive on through flooded creeks to the next rock art site. I’ve been heartless.

What's the matter with this miracle drug ? Its been almost two hours and I see no change in you. What if you never speak again? We won't be able to argue about films and books any more or discuss the different things we are writing at the end of each day and reassure each other. Or talk about our funny grandchildren. How will we wake up together and tell each other our dreams and make up outrageous interpretations and then laugh about them? Will I still be the first person to read the first draft of every new play you write and give tactful feed back? Will you even write another one?

So many things I should have thanked you for before this happened. We didn't meet till we were nearly thirty. But what an amazing forty years. We've had a large family. We haven't alienated any of the children.(Well, not badly.) They all seem to quite like us, as well as each other. All our lives we've done work we enjoy. We have good friends. We've been so fortunate. Our marriage has been adventurous. Not all plain sailing. Not at all. A challenging voyage with storms on the way. As one close friend put it " You two have had a love story with hiccups." You're still the love of my life. I'll look after you no matter what happens. I think you know that.

As I watch the slow dripping I can gradually see that a strange thing is happening. Colour is coming back into your face. And you are moving the fingers of your right hand. You are trying to speak and I can just understand what you say. "It's starting to work. The miracle drug. It's working."

And it did. We were so lucky. And feel so deeply grateful. I meant all that – about not dragging you off on adventures you hate any more. And leaving you alone in peace to just read, write and think all day.

But an odd thing has happened in this year since you recovered from the stroke. It's you who has suggested we travel to challenging new places, and you who arranges to go out and about and invite people to join us. Its you who has taken on new work, written more plays than ever before and even decided to direct one yourself. You're the one who is buzzing with energy and although I am proud of you I hold back and watch, monitoring you, keeping you calm. I'm not the initiator of risky action any more. Our roles have changed.

Selfishly I want to keep you safe so that we can have another decade or two of stimulation and laughter and loving together. I think you do too.

Kristin x