

# *Beyond the Big C*

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Beyond the  
Big C

*Hope in the face of death*

*Jeremy Marshall*

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## **Beyond the Big C**

This is the story of my journey with cancer – but, as you’ll discover if you read on, it is not just about me. I am 56 years old and have had cancer for the last seven years. I want to share my experience in the hope that it helps you. As it’s my story, some parts of it may be relevant to your experience, other parts may not. You can be the judge.

I am not a cancer specialist, nor am I an expert on living with cancer. This is not a book about how to cope with cancer, nor how to beat it. I don’t want you to think that I am some amazing person – because I am not. Although I am a Christian, I am not an inherently ‘religious’ person who sails effortlessly from one high point to another. I have doubts and I am often afraid. There is nothing exceptional about me and I am very far from being a model for others. So why am I writing this short book?

I would like to introduce you to someone else – someone who has utterly transformed my life and someone without whom I couldn’t survive a single day in this messed-up world.

Having incurable cancer seems a dead end. But I believe there is hope beyond the Big C.

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### **Finding a lump**

My journey began one day in early September 2012, in the shower. I felt a very small lump on my ribs. It was about the size of a couple of very small peas, buried just below the skin. I didn't think it was cancer – although, inevitably, the thought did flash through my mind. I said firmly to myself, 'Don't be ridiculous Jeremy. It's just a lump.' In fact, being a typical man, I didn't really do anything much about it for a couple of weeks until my wife Jeanette finally told me firmly, 'Go and see the GP.' So eventually, I did. The GP examined it and, to my relief, said, 'It's nothing to worry about. It's almost certainly just a fatty lump which is typical at your age (I was 49 at the time) but we will get it checked out, just to put your mind at rest.'

From there, I was referred to specialist after specialist, who all ran tests and looked puzzled. One said, 'I don't know what that is, but it is not a fatty lump.' Eventually, the doctors decided to take it out to enable a biopsy and better analysis, so I had an operation just before Christmas 2012 to remove it.

### **Waiting for the results**

It was quite difficult to get the results back from

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the local hospital after Christmas as everything was closed and then the surgeon was on holiday. Finally, after various phone calls, I started impatiently pushing the surgeon's medical secretary for an answer.

She demurred but eventually said, 'OK, well, we've referred you to the Marsden.' Everyone knows that the Royal Marsden only treats one disease – cancer. A couple of weeks later (and further multiple telephone calls from me), I got a call from the medical secretary telling me that the diagnosis was confirmed. It was a type of sarcoma and I was to see the specialist sarcoma oncologist at the Marsden the following week. That's when I first felt real terror. I felt my knees go weak and a cold hand gripping my heart.

I can still remember exactly where I was when I got the call (just north of Oxford Street on my way to a charity dinner). And how I felt – which was as if I had been punched in the face. It was hard not to let my legs buckle. I went ahead with the dinner as I thought it was too late to pull out – but, of course, my mind was fixed on the diagnosis not the dinner. On my way home, I made the terrible mistake of googling the exact type of cancer. Again, I can remember exactly where I was standing in

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Waterloo station (Platform C, since you ask) and my feelings of terror when I read on my phone the very gloomy prognosis. (That is why the first thing the doctor tells you when you meet them is, 'Don't research the prognosis on the Internet!')

### **Meeting the specialist**

When I eventually met a specialist at the Royal Marsden, he told me that I had a rare type of sarcoma which is a cancer of the muscle tissue. To be exact, a pleomorphic liposarcoma. But, good news, they had caught it early and the prognosis was fairly good: only about 20% of people had a recurrence – although, if it did recur, the prognosis was very poor. '1 in 5 – that's pretty good odds,' I thought. Being an optimistic person, I was sure I would be in the 80%. To make sure they had got all the cancerous tissue ('clearing the margins', I think it's called), I had another operation and then a course of radiotherapy which, while tiring, was tolerable. I went every day for about six weeks and lay still without moving while the machine read the tattoo marks they had placed on my body. At its worse, it felt like a mild sunburn. Apart from a few weeks to recover from the operation, I carried on working



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as normal, just coming in late and leaving early. Life gradually returned to normal.

### **Back to normal?**

Everything seemed to go back to as it was. I went every three months for a check-up at the Marsden. Everything seemed fine. In fact, at the last check-up in April 2015, the specialist congratulated me on having gone two years cancer-free and that the next check-up could be in six months' time. I can remember how happy and relaxed I felt leaving the hospital. Each time after the tests, I eagerly phoned and messaged family and friends and told them: 'all good'.

Then one hot Saturday at the end of May 2015, my wife Jeanette and I were invited to dinner with some friends in Sevenoaks where we live. My whole life was about to change irretrievably. As we started dinner, I adjusted the collar on my polo shirt, which was slightly rucked. As I did that I felt a really large lump on my left collar bone. It was much larger than the pea before, more like a golf ball. I knew immediately what it was. The cancer was back. I made an excuse, went to the bathroom and examined it carefully. I felt sick to my stomach. In inner turmoil.

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Not wanting to upset anyone, I went back and told my hosts, 'I'm sorry – I feel ill, I need to go home.' On the way home, I told Jeanette and, on the Monday, I arranged to go in for a scan at the Marsden on the following Friday. I would get the results in a week, on a day which is seared into my memory: Friday 13 June 2015.

### **Back at the Marsden**

That Friday, I sat with Jeanette in the waiting room of the Marsden. As normal, the nurse came to collect us and take us through to see the oncologist. On the way, she said simply, 'I'm really sorry.' That was enough warning. My worst fears were confirmed when I entered the room. Normally, I would meet with the oncologist and a nurse. But, instead, at least half a dozen people were waiting for us.

Straightaway, they told me, 'We're really sorry: you've got five large tumours in various places throughout your body and we can't operate on them. In fact, your cancer is incurable.' The next question from me was obvious: 'What's the prognosis?' After the usual qualifications about 'difficult to say', the answer was quite bald: 18 months.

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I am not ashamed to say that I burst into tears. Life changed forever.

### **Four years on**

Now, as I write this – getting on for four years later, the situation is pretty much the same. I still have five fairly large tumours and my outlook is still as uncertain – but I’m alive! I’m incredibly grateful for the expertise of the oncologists and staff at the Marsden, plus the research on mine and other rare conditions next door at the Institute of Cancer Research. In the meantime, we’ve tried various experiments which haven’t worked and therefore, I have basically stuck to chemotherapy.

After a while, the oncologists decided that it was not the same cancer as before but a completely different type: extrapulmonary small cell carcinoma. Quite how I got from a sarcoma to non-pulmonary small cell lung cancer and how the growths were missed after the first one, I don’t know. I quite enjoy baffling the medical establishment. A specialist who saw me told me, ‘You have some of the strangest symptoms I’ve ever seen’, which I secretly enjoyed hearing.

In the meantime, I have been through four complete chemotherapy cycles, lasting about five