

The Melvyn Files

In October 2017 I was diagnosed with a cancer in my right shin bone. It had been hurting for a while, after I'd been out running, but I didn't suspect that Melvyn the Melanoma was making an unexpected return.

Melvyn had first appeared twenty years ago. He hadn't even tried to disguise himself. Classic black spot on the back, itchy, rough surface, jagged edges, a textbook melanoma. At the risk of being misunderstood, I can report that I immediately had it off. Diagnosed and removed on the same day. "I think I got it all", said the surgeon, "but you never know". Indeed! We were moving to a new house at the time, and my related life insurance went from £15 per month to £90 per month. Someone knew something that at that point I didn't.

Ten years later, Melvyn returned, this time disguised as a lump in the right armpit. Fortunately, the experienced consultant saw through the ruse straight away and booked me in for immediate surgery. He scooped out the contents of my right armpit, lymph nodes and all, and found malignant Melvyn crouching amongst them. "I think I got it all", he said, "but you never know". "It's OK, I said, I've heard that one before". Looking on the bright side, at least I wasn't buying a house this time and didn't need to upgrade my life insurance.

This all happened two years before my scheduled retirement from Ofsted, and, for the first time in my life I was off work. I discovered I rather liked it. After nearly forty unbroken years of work I especially enjoyed Sunday evenings, when I didn't have to read through 400 emails or plan for the next day's inspection or meetings. I tolerated this inconvenience so well that I decided to take retirement a year early. I had stared into the ugly face of the Grim Reaper and didn't like what I saw. If, as seemed possible I only had a bit to live, it was time to live a bit.

As before, Melvyn's Comet came around again on his scheduled orbit ten years later. He was heavily disguised this time as an ache in the leg. I suspected an old football injury, but it was Melvyn, yet again, who had returned to haunt me. I had a whole series of scans and went for the results. The young consultant had an experienced older nurse with him to back him up. "It's definitely a malignant melanoma in the bone", he said, "and we've found some bits in your liver as well. This means you are Stage 4". "How many stages are there?", I asked. "Four", he replied. It sounded as if the news could have been better, particularly as I still had eighteen months to run on my Norwich City season ticket.

My wife and I were sent off with the lugubrious nurse for some supposed TLC. Her glass was, I fear, permanently more than half empty. No, I shouldn't run. No, I shouldn't cycle. No, I shouldn't swim. "How about reading?" I tentatively asked. She frowned. She might as well have added: "and if you do curl up to die make sure it's on a soft surface". Following a definition of Puritanism I had just encountered, I decided it was, undeniably, the description that best fitted her: 'a person who lives in fear that someone, somewhere, is having a good time'.

I decided to take no notice whatsoever of what she'd said, and was delighted when I met Gill, my very special oncologist, to find that she agreed with me. "Do whatever you feel capable of doing", she said. She sent me to see an orthopaedic specialist I predictably called Ben the Bones. He gave me some options, one of which was, and I quote, to "open the leg, scrape the crap out of the bone, fill it with cement and sew it up again". That sounded good to me, and within three weeks the deed was done. I was delighted to find that the cement didn't drag me down to the bottom of the swimming pool. I hope the cancer nurse hadn't had a bet on that.

I was prescribed some cancer tablets with very long names that I shortened to Dab and Tram. Taken night and morning they certainly attacked the tumours very well at first. Then they got bored and began to attack my liver as well. What followed was my yellow period, when I could easily have blended in with the crowd at Carrow Road without a shirt. This was because a new character appeared called Billy Rubin. He was responsible for all the yellow, the itching, the shakes and the sickness that anyone who's had 'liver trouble' will recognise. His reading on blood tests was meant to be between zero and 20. Mine was 257, so he'd obviously singled me out for some very special treatment.

It took three months for my liver to get back to normal. After that, I was able to start another treatment with a drug called pembrolizumab. Every three weeks, you're connected to a drip and the wonder drug is pumped in. 'Liz', as I call her, is a very clever and newly discovered operator who stops the immune system from shutting down when it's not meant to. Melvyn, cunning little devil that he is, can change his shape and his appearance to make the body's attack force, the T-cells, think he is a good friend. Then, just like the little kids in the eponymous story, the T-cells slam the brakes on their attack, invite the wolf in and start to dance with him. Liz stops that happening, by metaphorically jamming a brick under the brake pedal. So clever a trick it was worth a Nobel Prize for the scientists who discovered it.

In fact, Liz turns out to be very smart indeed, because she teaches the T-cells to recognise the tumours and do the job themselves. This is called immunotherapy. I have to hope that my T-cells are not as slow-witted as the rest of me, and cotton on quickly. We'll soon find out, because I've been selected for something called the Dante Project. I was hoping to postpone the visit to the Underworld, so the infernal name was a bit off-putting. In the event, the project involves people who've been 'Lizzed' for a year. Half will keep taking the treatment and the other half will stop. I'm stopping. Every three months scans will show if my immune system has cottoned on. If not, it's back to the treatment, or the drawing board.

I've discovered through reading up about it (some would say a dangerously energetic activity!), that I'm extremely lucky. As little as five years ago a diagnosis of Stage 4 melanoma would have entailed a sharp exit. Around 18 months was the figure quoted for life expectancy, which means I would now be writing this account posthumously. With the new drugs the prognosis is much better, but no-one knows yet how much better. Mutant Melvyn can change his tactics and Tommy T-cell needs to adjust his as well. When Melvyn brings on an extra striker Tommy has to quickly put five at the back. But, as in football, the striker often scores anyway, so it's best not to take anything for granted.

At the time of writing, I'm hoping for extra time and penalties!

Harmer Parr
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With a bit of luck, to be continued....