THE WEEKEND ESSAY

A BATTLE WITH MY BLOOD

When I was diagnosed with leukemia, my first thought was that this couldn't be happening to me, to my family.

By Tatiana Schlossberg

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Photograph by Thea Traff for The New Yorker

Saved

When you are dying, at least in my limited experience, you start remembering everything. Images come in flashes—people and places and stray conversations—and refuse to stop. I see my best friend from elementary school as we make a mud pie in her back yard, top it with candles and a tiny American flag, and watch, in panic, as the flag catches fire. I see my college boyfriend, wearing boat shoes a few days after a record-breaking snowstorm, slipping and falling into a slush puddle. I want to break up with him, so I laugh until I can't breathe.

Maybe my brain is replaying my life now because I have a terminal diagnosis, and all these memories will be lost. Maybe it's because I don't have much time to make new ones, and some part of me is sifting through the sands.

On May 25, 2024, my daughter was born at 7:05 in the morning, ten minutes after I arrived at Columbia-Presbyterian hospital, in New York. My husband, George, and I held her and stared at her and admired her newness. A few hours later, my doctor noticed that my blood count looked strange. A normal white-blood-cell count is around four thousand to eleven thousand cells per microlitre. Mine was a hundred and thirty-one thousand cells per microlitre. It could just be something related to pregnancy and delivery, the doctor said, or it could be leukemia. "It's not leukemia," I told George. "What are they talking about?"

George, who was then a urology resident at the hospital, began calling friends who were primary-care doctors and ob-gyns. Everyone thought it was something to do with the pregnancy or the delivery. After a few hours, my doctors thought it was leukemia. My parents, Caroline Kennedy and Edwin

Schlossberg, had brought my two-year-old son to the hospital to meet his sister, but suddenly I was being moved to another floor. My daughter was carried off to the nursery. My son didn't want to leave; he wanted to drive my hospital bed like a bus. I said goodbye to him and my parents and was wheeled away.

The diagnosis was acute myeloid leukemia, with a rare mutation called Inversion 3. It was mostly seen in older patients. Every doctor I saw asked me if I had spent a lot of time at Ground Zero, given how common blood cancers are among first responders. I was in New York on 9/11, in the sixth grade, but I didn't visit the site until years later. I am not elderly—I had just turned thirty-four.

I could not be cured by a standard course of treatment. I would need a few months, at least, of chemotherapy, which would aim to reduce the number of blast cells in my bone marrow. (Blast cells are immature blood cells; a high count can be a sign of leukemia.) Then I would need a bone-marrow transplant, which could cure me. After the transplant, I would probably need more chemotherapy, on a regular basis, to try to prevent the cancer from returning.

I did not—could not—believe that they were talking about me. I had swum a mile in the pool the day before, nine months pregnant. I wasn't sick. I didn't feel sick. I was actually one of the healthiest people I knew. I regularly ran five to ten miles in Central Park. I once swam three miles across the Hudson River

—eerily, to raise money for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society. I work as an environmental journalist, and for one article I skied the Birkebeiner, a fifty-kilometre cross-country race in Wisconsin, which took me seven and a half hours. I loved to have people over for dinner and to make cakes for my friends' birthdays. I went to museums and plays and got to jump in a cranberry bog for my job. I had a son whom I loved more than anything and a newborn I needed to take care of. This could not possibly be my life.

Schlossberg reporting off the coast of Santa Barbara in 2022. Photograph by Lauren Justice

I ended up spending five weeks at Columbia-Presbyterian, and the strangeness and sadness of what I was being told about myself made me hunt for the humor in it. I didn't know what else to do. I decided that everyone in the hospital had Munchausen syndrome by proxy, and I was their target. It was a joke that I found funnier than everyone else did. Later, when I was bald and had a scrape on my face from a fall, my joke was that I was a busted-up

Voldemort.

There were indignities and humiliations. I had a postpartum hemorrhage and almost bled to death, before being saved by my obstetrician. (She had already saved my life once, by noticing my blood count and giving me the chance to be cured. This time felt like overkill.) Little things made it easier, or somehow made it feel like everything was going to be fine. My son came to visit almost every day. When friends heard that I liked Spindrift seltzer, they sent cases of it; they also sent pajamas and watercolor kits and good gossip. People made paintings and drawings to decorate my walls. They dropped off food at my parents' apartment, where George and the kids had moved. The nurses brought me warm blankets and let me sit on the floor of the skyway with my son, even though I wasn't supposed to leave my room. They ate up the gossip that I gathered; they looked the other way when they saw that I had a contraband teakettle and toaster. They told me about their kids and their dating lives and their first trips to Europe. I have never encountered a group of people who are more competent, more full of grace and empathy, more willing to serve others than nurses. Nurses should take over.

Eventually, my blast-cell count went down and I was allowed to do a round of treatment at home, with my family. My care was transferred to Memorial Sloan Kettering, one of the largest centers for bone-marrow transplants in the country. Whenever I needed to be back in the hospital, my oncologist visited me almost daily, talking about my disease, of course, but also about foxhunting, who was annoying me that week, his new cat. He's Orthodox Jewish and observes the Sabbath, but he would still answer texts that I rudely sent on Saturdays. He has scoured every inch of the earth for more treatments for me; he knows I don't want to die and he is trying to stop it. My transplant doctor, always in a bow tie, always shouting a big hello, is a mad scientist in disguise as one of the country's foremost experts on bone-marrow transplants, who safely got me through a lung infection and didn't bat an eye when I pulled out a rosary and a bottle of holy water, blessed by Pope Francis and sent from Rome. He looked at me and said, "*Vaya con Dios*. Go with God."

After the at-home chemo, I was admitted to M.S.K. for an even stronger dose of poison. Then I was ready for a transplant. My sister had turned out to be a match and would donate her stem cells. (My brother was a half-match, but he still asked every doctor if maybe a half-match was better, just in case.) My sister held her arms straight for hours as the doctors drained blood from one, scooped out and froze her stem cells, and pumped the blood back in the other.

The cells smelled like canned tomato soup. When the transfusion began, I sneezed twelve times and threw up. Then I waited—for my blood counts to recover, for my sister's cells to heal and change my body. We wondered if I would get her banana allergy or her personality. My hair started to fall out and I wore scarves to cover my head, remembering, vainly, each time I tied one on, how great my hair used to be; when my son came to visit, he wore them, too. After a few days, I couldn't speak or swallow because of sores in my mouth; food turned to dust on my tongue.

George did everything for me that he possibly could. He talked to all the doctors and insurance people that I didn't want to talk to; he slept on the floor of the hospital; he didn't get mad when I was raging on steroids and yelled at him that I did not like Schweppes ginger ale, only Canada Dry. He would go home to put our kids to bed and come back to bring me dinner. I know that not everyone can be married to a doctor, but, if you can, it's a very good idea. He is perfect, and I feel so cheated and so sad that I don't get to keep living the wonderful life I had with this kind, funny, handsome genius I managed to find.

My parents and my brother and sister, too, have been raising my children and sitting in my various hospital rooms almost every day for the last year and a half. They have held my hand unflinchingly while I have suffered, trying not to show their pain and sadness in order to protect me from it. This has been a great gift, even though I feel their pain every day. For my whole life, I have tried to be good, to be a good student and a good sister and a good daughter, and to protect my mother and never make her upset or angry. Now I have added a new tragedy to her life, to our family's life, and there's nothing I can do to stop it.

I went home after fifty days at Memorial Sloan Kettering. The transplant had put me in remission, but I had no immune system, and would have to get all my childhood vaccines again. I started a new round of chemotherapy to keep the cancer at bay. I relapsed. My transplant doctor said that leukemia with my mutation "liked to come back."

In January, I joined a clinical trial of CAR-T-cell therapy, a type of immunotherapy that has proved effective against certain blood cancers. Scientists would engineer my sister's T cells, directing them to attack my cancer cells. It was dark all the time outside my hospital window. I was given more chemotherapy; after the CAR-T treatment, I had cytokine-release syndrome, in which a storm of inflammation left me unable to breathe without high-flow oxygen. My lungs filled with fluid and my liver was unhappy and I was constantly on the brink of going to the I.C.U. A few weeks later, I was in remission again, though I had lost about twenty pounds. The doctors were happy with the results: I had done better than several other patients in the trial, which beggared belief, but I went home.

It didn't really feel as if I was home: I had to go to the outpatient clinic most days, to treat infections or receive transfusions, sitting in a recliner for hours on end, waiting to know when I would need to go back to the hospital. In early April, I did go back, on just a few days' notice, for my second transplant. I hoped that this would work. Actually, I decided that it *would* work. I dutifully copied Seamus Heaney poems into my notebook: "The Cure at Troy" ("Believe that a further shore / Is reachable from here. / Believe in miracles / And cures and healing wells.") and "The Gravel Walks" ("So walk on air against your better judgement"). I tried to be the perfect patient: if I did everything right, if I was nice to everyone all the time, if I didn't need any help or have any problems, then it would work.

This time, I had an unrelated donor, the logic being that the cells would be distinct from those of my sister and me, and thus better suited to take on the cancer. All I know about the donor is that he is a man in his twenties from the Pacific Northwest. I imagined a Portland woodcutter or a Seattle tech bro. Either way, I wished I could thank him. I went into remission again; I relapsed again. I joined another clinical trial. I was hospitalized twice more—weeks I don't remember, during which I lost another ten pounds. First, I had graft-versus-host disease, in which new cells attack old ones, and then, in late September, I was downed by a form of Epstein-Barr virus that blasted my kidneys. When I got home a few weeks later, I had to learn how to walk again and couldn't pick up my children. My leg muscles wasted and my arms seemed whittled into bone.

During the latest clinical trial, my doctor told me that he could keep me alive for a year, maybe. My first thought was that my kids, whose faces live permanently on the inside of my eyelids, wouldn't remember me. My son might have a few memories, but he'll probably start confusing them with pictures he sees or stories he hears. I didn't ever really get to take care of my daughter—I couldn't change her diaper or give her a bath or feed her, all because of the risk of infection after my transplants. I was gone for almost half of her first year of life. I don't know who, really, she thinks I am, and whether she will feel or remember, when I am gone, that I am her mother.

Schlossberg and George Moran at their wedding-rehearsal dinner, in 2017. Photograph by Elizabeth Cecil

Meanwhile, during the CAR-T treatment, a method developed over many decades with millions of dollars of government funding, my cousin Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., was in the process of being nominated and confirmed as the Secretary of Health and Human Services. Throughout my treatment, he had been on the national stage: previously a Democrat, he was running for President as an Independent, but mostly as an embarrassment to me and the rest of my immediate family.

In August, 2024, he suspended his campaign and endorsed Donald Trump, who said that he was going to "let Bobby go wild" on health. My mother wrote a letter to the Senate, to try and stop his confirmation; my brother had been speaking out against his lies for months. I watched from my hospital bed as Bobby, in the face of logic and common sense, was confirmed for the position, despite never having worked in medicine, public health, or the government.

Suddenly, the health-care system on which I relied felt strained, shaky. Doctors and scientists at Columbia, including George, didn't know if they would be able to continue their research, or even have jobs. (Columbia was one of the Trump Administration's first targets in its crusade against alleged antisemitism on campuses; in May, the university laid off a hundred and eighty researchers after federal-funding cuts.) If George changed jobs, we didn't know if we'd be able to get insurance, now that I had a preëxisting condition. Bobby is a known skeptic of vaccines, and I was especially concerned that I wouldn't be able to get mine again, leaving me to spend the rest of my life immunocompromised, along with millions of cancer survivors, small children, and the elderly. Bobby has said, "There's no vaccine that is safe and effective." Bobby probably doesn't remember the millions of people who were paralyzed or killed by polio before the vaccine was available. My dad, who grew up in New York City in the nineteen-forties and fifties, does remember. Recently, I asked him what it was like when he got the vaccine. He said that it felt like freedom.

As I spent more and more of my life under the care of doctors, nurses, and researchers striving to improve the lives of others, I watched as Bobby cut nearly half a billion dollars for research into mRNA vaccines, technology that could be used against certain cancers; slashed billions in funding from the National Institutes of Health, the world's largest sponsor of medical research; and threatened to oust the panel of medical experts charged with recommending preventive cancer screenings. Hundreds of N.I.H. grants and clinical trials were cancelled, affecting thousands of patients. I worried about funding for leukemia and bone-marrow research at Memorial Sloan Kettering. I worried about the trials that were my only shot at remission. Early in my illness, when I had the postpartum hemorrhage, I was given a dose of misoprostol to help stop the bleeding. This drug is part of medication abortion, which, at Bobby's urging, is currently "under review" by the Food and Drug Administration. I freeze when I think about what would have happened if it had not been immediately available to me and to millions of other women who need it to save their lives or to get the care they deserve.

My plan, had I not gotten sick, was to write a book about the oceans—their destruction, but also the possibilities they offer. During treatment, I learned that one of my chemotherapy drugs, cytarabine, owes its existence to an ocean animal: a sponge that lives in the Caribbean Sea, *Tectitethya crypta*. This discovery was made by scientists at the University of California, Berkeley, who first synthesized the drug in 1959, and who almost certainly relied on government funding, the very thing that Bobby has already cut.

I won't write about cytarabine. I won't find out if we were able to harness the power of the oceans, or if we let them boil and turn into a garbage dump. My son knows that I am a writer and that I write about our planet. Since I've been sick, I remind him a lot, so that he will know that I was not just a sick person.

When I look at him, I try to fill my brain with memories. How many more times can I watch the video of him trying to say "Anna Karenina"? What about when I told him I didn't want ice cream from the ice-cream truck, and he hugged me, patted me on the back, and said, "I hear you, buddy, I hear you"? I think about the first time I came home from the hospital. He walked into my bathroom, looked at me, and said, "It's so nice to meet you in here."

Then there's my daughter, her curly red hair like a flame, squinting her eyes and grinning a gap-toothed grin after taking a sip of seltzer. She stomps around the house in bright-yellow rain boots, pretending to talk on my mother's phone, a string of fake pearls around her neck, no pants, giggling and running away from anyone who tries to catch her. She asks us to play James Brown's "I Got the Feelin' " by picking up a portable speaker and saying, "Baby, baby."

Mostly, I try to live and be with them now. But being in the present is harder than it sounds, so I let the memories come and go. So many of them are from my childhood that I feel as if I'm watching myself and my kids grow up at the same time. Sometimes I trick myself into thinking I'll remember this forever, I'll remember this when I'm dead. Obviously, I won't. But since I don't know what death is like and there's no one to tell me what comes after it, I'll keep pretending. I will keep trying to remember. ♦

Tatiana Schlossberg at her parents’ home in New York City. Photograph by Thea Traff for The New Yorker

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Tatiana Schlossberg is a journalist and the author of "Inconspicuous Consumption: The Environmental Impact You Don't Know You Have." She previously worked for the New York Times.

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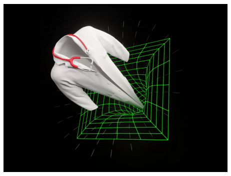

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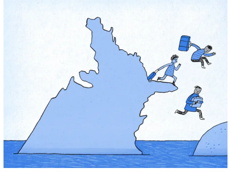

JOURNALS

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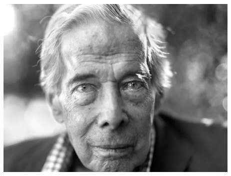
By Calvin Tomkins



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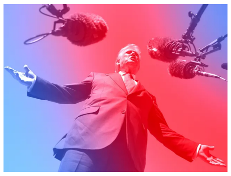

PERSONAL HISTORY

And Your Little Dog, Too

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By David Sedaris

2025 IN REVIEW

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