

# The crab

Ondine Sherwood 1959-2025



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MAR 19, 2025

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My mother bought me a gift the day she told me, as if to apologise for the bad news. It was called a Sam on Toast. A slab of solid Belgian milk chocolate with blob of butterscotch in the shape of a fried egg. She'd got it for me, because I'm Sam. She said that it was already at stage four. The targeted treatment she would

shortly be taking works for an average of three years, and then it stops, and the cancer grows again. I thought I'd have more time, she said. She told me that when she was five years old she'd realised, while lying in bed one night, that she wouldn't always be a little girl, and one day she'd be a crooked old woman with a cane. The babysitter heard her screaming in terror. Now, suddenly, getting to be a crooked old woman with a cane didn't seem so terrible any more.

She didn't want people to know. She didn't want to be pitied. She didn't want to go on a year-long round-the-world eat-pray-love adventure. Mostly she wanted to keep working: to be useful. She'd always been practical, stoical, good at fixing things, problem-solving, puzzles. That wasn't the whole story, obviously; she'd always been active and creative and incredibly, effortlessly *cool* in a way I could never really approach, but since I'm her child it was the problem-solving I kept finding myself calling on. When I was a kid she'd patiently walked me through long division; a few years later she was the one who showed me how to fill out a tax return. She was still the first person I called whenever things went wrong. It hadn't been passed down, her particular brilliance; when it comes to this sort of arena I've always been very, very stupid. I don't solve problems; I discover entirely new problems that no one had even thought of before. Recently, I'd bought a big wide wardrobe online and then discovered it was actually very, very slightly too wide to fit around the corner into my bedroom. It banged into the skirting board. So I'd done what any self-respecting adult would do, and phoned my mum for advice. Should I maybe *rip out* the skirting board? Seemed like the best option. I was just about to get going with a chisel when she suggested that before I started tearing up the walls I could maybe try *lifting* the wardrobe a few centimetres above the skirting board instead. I tried. It worked.

The Sam on Toast had a smiley face; the happy, friendly smile of a well-contented egg. I tried to be as positive as I could. I told her that there would be good things in the time she had left. Three years ago her treatment hadn't even existed; may

in another few years there'd be something else. But even barring a major medic breakthrough, all she needed to do was hang in there and there was a very good chance she'd get to meet her grandkids.



That was just under a year ago. It was strange to be in that small parcel of deferred time. One day, I knew, I would be outside, looking back on it all; it would all vanish into the thinness of the past, where nothing lasts longer than an instant. But while it was happening it stretched on and on. A succession of nearly normal days.



There's a language people use when talking about cancer. The cancer is an *it*, an enemy, a foreign thing, invading the body. You *fight it*, or *battle it*, you are in a struggle with it and sometimes you win. Hippocrates named it *karkinos*: the crab. We're not sure why. Later classical writers suggested it might be because the blood vessels around a tumour look like a crab's splayed legs, or because of the pinching pain it causes, or because cancer, like the crab, is obstinate. But there's a layer in the human unconscious that seems to be plagued with crabs. After Sartre took mescaline in 1935, he spent months seeing crabs everywhere, teeming just at the edge of his field of vision. As it happens, I've seen them too. When I was very young I was terrified of crabs; I was afraid a crab might pinch my toe. So crabs invaded my daydreams. Whenever I pictured myself opening a cupboard or unzipping my schoolbag, thousands of crabs would come pouring out. Once I'd seen the crabs it was impossible to stop imagining them. *Don't think about crabs, don't think about crabs*, until that frantic thought starts to veer sideways on spindly legs. A crab is foreign, but it won't stay out. Maybe this is how it became the name for the *it*. This hard-shelled, alien, invertebrate thing scuttling around your bones.

But as everyone knows, there is no *it*. The cancer is just you, your own body, doing what it's always done. Cells grow and divide, and form masses of healthy tissue exploding with fresh new life. Springtime in the body. Everything blooms. Anywhere your organs can start flowering, and like all growing things the exuberance wants to spread, through the blood vessels and the lymph nodes until it's everywhere. Cancer is innocent. It's everything best about human life. Our ability to become different, to contradict ourselves, to transform ourselves and the world without any particular plan or direction, just expanding out into the unknown. The body does more and more, it grows into new and fantastic forms, while you do less and less, until your own freedom kills you.





On New Year's Eve, 2025, my mother was drinking and dancing and singing karaoke with my dad. Robert Palmer, *Addicted to Love*. In January she was cycling to her qigong classes. But then one night a fox got in the henhouse and killed a few of her gentle clucking pekin bantams. She loved those hens, but it's what foxes do. Foxes are also innocent. A few days later she couldn't get out of bed. She wouldn't eat. I thought it might be depression. Even once she was in hospital I kept pretending. One day we'd have to face the big problem, the one with no answers, but not yet. You just need to drink your fortisips, I said. Do the leg lift your physio taught you. In a week or two you'll get over this, you'll be up and about, living your life. The doctors boosted her steroid prescription and she spent a few days dragging herself around the ward on unsteady legs. See, you're getting

better. After the operation she could sit up in bed again, open her eyes and talk. There's hope yet. But every time she improved there was only a moment to catch my breath before her condition collapsed again. It all moved so fast, from one moment and worsening reality to the next. I stopped working out. I stopped writing. I stopped replying to emails. I ghosted all my friends. My dreams all took place in the oncology ward at UCLH, dark and beeping, while outside the window London twisted into predatory shapes.

Eventually it became clear that she would not be getting better. We all sat around her hospital bed. Husband, three huge tall sons. When they visited, the doctors kept cheerfully commenting on the impressive biomass of her sons. We told her we loved her. She could barely speak. We talked about things we remembered. Various obnoxious things I'd done when I was just old enough to know better. I'd tried to identify some small detail and she rolled her eyes. Totally wrong, she croaked, as always. If you knew her you'll know why that was funny.

We thought that would be the last day, but it wasn't. Long, still, sedated hours. Nothing changed. One of the last things she'd said to us was that she didn't want to be left alone, so she wasn't. We stayed with her in rotating shifts, twenty-four hours a day. I'd take a thirty-minute lunch break and walk around Fitzrovia, amazed at the way people carried on, going to work, putting up buildings, operating businesses, starting wars, as if anything we do in the brief daylight of our lives has any real meaning in the long run. We divvied up the nights. My dad would sleep at the hospital every other night, with the sons taking turns. I went third. Tried to get some rest on a hard and squeaking fold-out chair. I thought about another night, one I couldn't remember. The two of us in another hospital back when I was the one who couldn't walk or speak, on the very edge of life. She had held me to her chest and nourished me; I couldn't do that for her. The board above her bed said *Nil by mouth*. In the morning I was woken up by the nurses, who told me that after nearly a week of stasis, her condition had worsened

overnight. Her breathing was shallower, her skin was discoloured. Final stages, they said. There wasn't time to get the rest of the family together. I held her hand while the gaps between gasps grew longer and longer, ten seconds, twenty seconds, until the silence never stopped.

Some people might find it a deeply moving experience to share the last moments of someone they love. Beautiful, in its own way. I am not one of them. It was the most brutal thing I've ever been through. My mother died just past eight in the morning on Tuesday, the 11th of March. She was sixty-five years old.





Losing a parent is normal; more than that, it's the absolute best case scenario, the least cruel thing we can hope to get out of this world. There are rituals to guide you through it. I have suffered in a small chair while strangers told me exactly which great-uncle we're related through. I will be reciting an Aramaic tongue-twister for the next eleven months. But it doesn't *feel* normal. You go through the stages of life, growing up, leaving home, starting to think about having some kid of your own, and all of it feels good, like becoming more of yourself, but all of it leading you to this point, where the person that carried you into the world is suddenly torn out of it, and you're left in the wind, helpless and untethered, and with the strange certainty that it's all your fault.

I don't dream about hospitals any more. I don't dream about my mother either, every time I go to sleep I discover that I've done something horribly wrong. I've cheated on my girlfriend, or committed a string of murders, or unknowingly smuggled chemical weapons into the country. Every morning I wake up full of black sloshing guilt.

The guilt is normal too; every child feels some guilt for the death of a parent. I think it's because we really are guilty. I'm guilty for all the obvious, small things: For my dumb positivity and false hope. For being a selfish little shit as a child, and occasionally as an adult too. For every one of precious seconds with her I wasted on pointless bickering. When I was younger she would give me advice, and she was usually right, but I hated it. God, Mummy, leave me *alone*! Don't you understand that I'm *less* likely to do it now? Even by the end we still hadn't quit stopped, even if we did switch sides. I would nag her to put down her phone, forget the emails, and look at a tree instead; she told me to get off her case. But the guilt is there for huger, hazier reasons too. I sent the vivacious young woman in the photos to her deathbed. By growing up; by not noticing the time.

Not everything dies. Bacteria don't. You might kill billions of them every time you clean your kitchen, but death is not necessary for them. They reproduce by splitting themselves in two: the 'parent' cell doesn't stop existing, it just starts existing twice. Which means that every bacterium in your gut right now is impossibly ancient. They've all been alive for three and a half billion years, and when you're done they will disperse into the soil and continue to live, indifferently, forever. The price of immortality is being a bacterium. Living in asexual equilibrium, forever. The price of not being a bacterium is death. Sexual reproduction has given the world an incredible richness of new and changing forms, but it means our time here is brief. As psychoanalysts, slasher films, and the French have always known, sex is a metaphor for the void. My girlfriend and I have started planning to have our own children; part of why is because we're increasingly aware of our own mortality. Life takes some of the sting out of death but it works both ways. The birth of the child implies the death of the parent. I am also a living lump of cells that grew inside my mother's body. Of her, but not her. A hard-shelled thing; a crab.

I've tried to dredge up my first memory of her. Impossible; there's no such thing. You can't have a first memory of someone who's been there longer than you can remember. But I know my first memory without her. First day of nursery school the teachers tried to smile and cajole me in towards all the nice educational toys but I just stood in the hallway in front of the door through which she'd disappeared and cried and cried.







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