



The Colors I Saw

**A CANCER
MEMOIR**

Eliza C. Walton

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This book is a fusion of memoir and experimental fiction. It tells the story of my travels through cancer's terrain. Space and time have, on occasion, been rearranged to suit the telling. For instance, in reality, I whined more, but who wants to read about that? To maintain their anonymity, I have changed the names and identifying characteristics of some individuals and places.

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To my Bill

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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

I once heard about a mourning ritual in the South Sea Islands. When a villager dies, the body is laid out in the family hut. The closest relative stands outside the door and tells the death story, beginning to end, to each villager. The whole story. Hundreds of times. With each recounting, a little of the grief is thought to dissipate.

I haven't died, yet. But while writing this book, I found a little release from the terror of my ordeal with each telling.

Yes, cancer *is* as bad as they say. I have seen the whale. He is a big, sadistic, single-minded son of a bitch. He will drag you under, whether you've nailed him with your dinky harpoon or not.

If you meet cancer in your own body – not your mom's or dad's or spouse's; in your *own* body – nothing and no one can prepare you for what's ahead. Down, under, no air, the bends coming up.

The whale breached out of nowhere.

I clung to my harpoon, the one I never wanted to throw. I did not befriend him, and I did not drown. Those dives drove the air out of my lungs, then returned it. I learned to breathe through gills I didn't know existed. The colors I saw – it's not all black down there.

Eliza Walton
Newcastle, Maine
May 2018



PART 1

SUBMERSION

CHAPTER 1

Checking Out

May 15, 2009

Hello, Eliza Walton? It's Dr. Turst. I have the results from your biopsy."

Third in line at the checkout, I nod to the man ahead of me as he places a divider behind his groceries. Gripping the phone like a subway pole, I want to throw up, throw down the phone and heave out the worry in my gut.

"Pathology found no cancer in the biopsied tissue."

"Oh." Air exits my chest. "Oh. It's good to hear that. I am so glad. That's very good news."

A cart slams into my Achilles tendon from behind.

"Yes. I don't want to say for certain this isn't good news.

But I am afraid I still think you might have cancer. Sometimes we manage to get enough of the normal polyp material to think we're in the clear. The truth is, with a mass this size, we usually end up finding something later, when we take more of it."

"Oh."

"I'm sorry. I don't want to sound discouraging. Unfortunately, I have encountered this situation before. I'd like to schedule another colonoscopy as soon as possible. Not a full scope, just enough of one to do another, more aggressive biopsy."

"Oh. Okay."

Aggressive. Biopsy. Schedule.

I watch myself place spinach, strawberries, mocha chip ice cream on the conveyor, fingers tingling from the frozen brick. I wish I were home. With Bill.

I put the May 2009 issue of *Vanity Fair* face-up on the black rubber. I want to read Mark Bowden's piece about Arthur Sulzberger, Jr. I want to read it now. No more Dr. Turst.

I hear breathing from the phone.

"Okay...well...um...so if this is what you think it is, do you...God. Do you have any way to know what kind it is? This might sound stupid. Is this, could this be, very aggressive? Is there any way to know that now?"

The cashier holds up a leaking bag of flour. "Do you want a new one?" I stare at her blankly, her dangling red earrings calling to mind blood and intestines.

The surgeon continues. "Not really. What they'll do when they find the cancer, which I'm fairly sure they will find, is to stage it. You'll have a CT scan, and they'll see if it has spread to your liver, or your bladder, or your pancreas."

Stop. Oh God, please stop.

CHECKING OUT

“Okay. What if you’re wrong? If, um, if they don’t find anything really bad there.” I jam the phone between my neck and shoulder, juggling two large cans of diced tomatoes. “You can remove the polyp, right? I mean, during the procedure? You can take it out?”

“Ah, no. No, it’s too big. You’ll have to have a colostomy.”

“A what? You mean, with a bag? You mean even if it’s benign?”

The clerk seems to think I should close my goddamned cell.

“You mean a temporary one, right?” I ask.

“No, a permanent colostomy. You’ll need to have your rectum removed.”

A silence shrouds my head. I grip my left arm, dig my nails into the flesh so I can feel something other than the impact of my future.

Heading home on Route 1, I’m oblivious to the spring green of the swamp maples, the glint of the white pines.

I turn into the driveway, our white house sprawled to the right. Shivering through the warm breezeway, I leave forgotten ice cream to soften in the dark trunk all afternoon.

I want Bill’s arms around me, to feel 26 years of familiarity, the scent of Old Spice and his faint odor beneath. But he is gone, playing tennis with a friend.

I wander back outside to pace and wait for our son Jas to arrive from Brooklyn. He and his band-member friends will rumble into the house loaded with food from Trader Joe’s, all huge hugs and dirty laundry. I keep no secrets from our three children; they know my colonoscopy wasn’t clean. Stooping to pick up a clump of sod, I replace it in the nearby divot and

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ramp down the soil. My mind is in the recovery room, seven days ago.

Without my thick glasses, Dr. Turst and Bill are blurry outlines. The privacy curtain surrounds us in rubbery blue plaid, Dr. Turst on a stool to my left, Bill at the foot of the bed. My husband's face embodies struggle: capsized, not quite underwater.

Dr. Turst's dark eyes stand out against his red skin and white coat.

"I'm sorry. I found a large mass, very likely malignant." He pauses. "I hate to say this, but you probably have cancer."

Feeling Bill's stare, I turn from the doctor to my husband.

"I'll call with the biopsy results as soon as they come in."

Dr. Turst rises, shakes my hand and leaves us alone.

"We will get through this," Bill says. "Whatever it is, we'll get through it together." A lifeline, thrown from a man treading water.

My toe finds another brown hole in the green lawn. What can I say to my son, home from NYU for a gig at his old high school? "Guess what? They're pretty sure I have rectal cancer – so, Momma's gonna have a brand-new bag."

Adam's ancient van wobbles up the street, past the spent tulips. I hug myself and rock, wishing for Bill to appear.

Before the van rolls to a full stop, Jas bounces onto the driveway and wraps me in his skinny arms.

Sitting next to Bill in the high school auditorium after dinner, I forget the grocery-store conversation for several minutes at a time. Jas and his band play for a whole hour. They're having fun, and the audience is responding. Their music makes it

CHECKING OUT

impossible to stay scared the whole time, or focus on how to tell my story, or how much of it to tell, or when, or to whom. Through the wrong end of a telescope I nod at acquaintances for whom I can find no words. I grip Bill's arm and smile, smile, stuck inside a bubble that won't pop.

Rolling over in bed the next morning, I reach for Bill. He's not there. I squint at the clock and see it's already past nine. Saturday; another tennis day. It keeps him sane.

Last night he held me while I wept. "He doesn't know for sure. He could be wrong," he had murmured in the dark. "And if he's right, we *will* get through this. We will...we will." Confident, and quiet.

I run through my morning exercises on the purple yoga mat beside our bed, sticking with the program that helps my dressage riding. After showering, I wander down to the kitchen for coffee and toast. The Brooklyn crew sits around the bare pine table munching donuts. Jas stuffs a frosted cruller into his mouth, grinning. I smile back, rest my hands on my hips.

"Okay, here's the deal."

They are all attentive, and so young. Each wears a variation of the same outfit: jeans, ripped and tattered; t-shirts in muted colors; lace-up canvas shoes. Over his long blond hair, Spencer's Tyrolean hat contrasts with the brick hearth behind him.

"The surgeon called with my biopsy results. Jas knows – I had a colonoscopy a week ago. What he told me yesterday... it was horrible. He said even though the biopsy showed no cancer, he's sure it's there. He said I need another biopsy. More aggressive."

Jas looks like he might vomit. I flounder ahead, following a tenuous maternal instinct, a filament that could break at any moment.

“I asked him, ‘Well, what if you’re wrong and it’s benign. Can you remove the polyp when you’re in there?’ The surgeon said, ‘No, it’s too big.’ He told me I’ll need a colostomy. He *said* that. On the *phone*.”

Spencer’s hand darts up to his mouth. Ian stares at his lap, Jas at the table. Ross and Adam look straight at me. Jas begins to shake. His lips go fuzzy, blurring as they tremble. I focus on his pale brown hair, cropped in a goofy, left-leaning wedge. I need to finish, now, with his friends around him as padding, straw or sawdust to soak up this toxic overspill.

“I asked what kind of cancer it was likely to be, because I didn’t know if all rectal cancer is the same. He told me, once it’s confirmed in the lab, I will be staged. They’ll try to see if it has jumped to my liver or my stomach or my pancreas....”

Jas is in shock. I have destroyed my son.

Ian grabs his stomach and cries, “Whoa, wait. I mean I think I have cancer in *my* pancreas, and I don’t even know where my pancreas *is*.”

I start to laugh. The news has been surreal. The scary possibilities float up and away with each paroxysm. We all bend forward, whooping or gasping. I believe I will be alright; we’ll all be fine. Jas will cope. My family will survive, with or without me.

Before the band piles into the van on Sunday, Ross presses a post-it into my hand on which is scribbled “Marta Terlecki” and a phone number.

“Call my mom, today, please? Really. I mean, she’ll

CHECKING OUT

want to be in on this. You know. So will dad. They're both endocrinologists."

I google "area code 505." Albuquerque. "Endocrinologists in Albuquerque." What a great title for a short story.

"Yes?"

"Hi...is this Marta? This is Eliza. Eliza Walton. Jas's mom."

"Jas's mom. Eliza. How lovely to hear your voice. Ross has told me all about you."

"Ross is so great. He told me about you, too, how much he thinks we'd like each other. Yesterday I received some news...."

Three days later, I sit in front of my computer in the empty kitchen. Maybe Dr. Turst is a quack. Maybe nothing he said will happen. But what if he is right? If I do have cancer? I'll need a way to make sense of it, to scope out the horror in all its detail.

I have flotation. My MFA studies can be my lifesaver. With two semesters and three residencies still to go, maybe I won't finish. But I will cling.

How would this play out if I were a famous writer? Forget famous. If I had even published a book or two. Or if I lived alone. In Manhattan. No husband, no children, no horse. The stakes might feel different. I might feel more confident, using this new material about rectal cancer. Or if it were any other cancer. Even breast cancer. Breasts are sexy. They hide a heart. What butts hide....

I begin fleshing out sketches from the store, the phone call. I linger on my own reactions. "Jas's friends will help him," I type. I shouldn't be doing this now. I need to work on *Scuttled*,

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the novel I've started as my MFA thesis. But my imagination is too much in thrall to cancer to care about any made-up characters. It's hopeless now to try to write about anyone but myself.

I begin by describing Bill's irritated face as we drove down to Scarsdale to celebrate Jill's 50th birthday two weeks ago. Jill, my oldest, best friend. I type whatever rises up until I can't stand it anymore and grab my horse's dirty fly sheet from the garage to wash. Outside in the sun, I spread it on the grass to dry.

CHAPTER 2

Canaries

April 30, 2009

Bill thumps on the hood of his red Saab. He and Grace have been waiting half an hour for me to finish my final checks: oven, thermostats, toilets, timers. Bill starts the engine as I slide into the car.

At 16, torso sunk into the back seat, Grace will not raise her hazel eyes to meet mine. Within minutes, she is nodding her head, earbuds in place, iPod mini tucked in her jacket pocket. Her dark auburn hair falls forward in loose loops over her wide cheekbones and small nose. I know this must irritate her skin, as sensitive as mine. But cool trumps comfort.

Bill stares straight ahead, piqued, silent, an older version of his daughter. I sigh. We know each other so well. It's

ridiculous we can't leave the house for a weekend without a major sulk.

"Oh, *what* is the matter?" I ask. "It's a beautiful morning. Rain's gone. Sky's blue. We're on our way to New York City. I can't wait to see everyone. We allowed an extra hour and a half. What's the problem?"

"Nothing. It's fine. Everything's fine."

"That is not true. You're upset. Come on."

Bill's fingers tense on the steering wheel, his mouth set in a straight line as he turns out the driveway. Watching the red-winged blackbirds cling to the cattails in the marsh bordering Route 1, I am back 35 years, traveling from college in Vermont to work in Manhattan, to Jill's parents in Scarsdale. It will be good to be back.

But goddamn Bill if he can't say what's wrong. Of course I know, but I can't let it go. Someone has to check and recheck the house. Ten years ago, if I hadn't noticed the scorched night-light and stuffed bear with a blackened belly that slipped off Jas's bed.... And I almost forgot my dress for Jill's birthday party tonight. Details. They take time.

Passing the Topsham exit, emerging from beneath the Main Street bridge, Brunswick pulls up alongside our car. Fort Andross Mill looms to the right, housing the Antique Emporium, purveyors of cowbells, political posters from the twentieth century, and bowls, lots of bowls.

At the red light at Pleasant Street, Bill asks, "Dunkin', or wait until Coffee Roasters in Yarmouth?"

I motion to Grace to take out her headphones.

"Dunkin'?"

Grace grins. "Like, always."

"And you? What do you want?" Bill asks, staring ahead.

“Oh, I guess I’m fine with anything.”

“Ha.” Bill raises his eyebrows.

“Really. Dunkin’ is fine. I’ll get green tea with honey. If they have it.”

“And what else do we want?”

“A chocolate frosted and, like, a glazed. And, you know, a milk,” from behind.

Bill pulls on his left blinker and scoots in front of an oncoming pickup into a parking slot.

“You’re not going to use the drive-in?” I ask.

“No. I would rather eat ground glass than use the drive-in with you in the car.”

“That’s nice.”

Inside, we are second in line. When it’s our turn, Grace places her order. Bill asks for a medium coffee with cream and sugar, and two plain donuts. I hesitate, then ask, “Do you have green tea?”

The woman behind the counter nods her gray-flocked head at the basket of tea choices.

I choose green with mint. “Medium, with honey, please.”

The woman shakes her head. There is no honey.

“Oh. Well, sugar, then, I guess. Just a very little, please.”

Several more customers walk in behind us. Grace begins to fidget. She stares at me.

I ask, “May I have a chocolate frosted, too, please. And a cinnamon jelly cruller?”

The server asks, “You want what?”

“A cinnamon cruller. You know. A donut, only not round. Straight.”

“A jelly stick, you mean. We don’t have any today,” she says, pointing to the empty bin.

“Oh, then, a plain glazed cruller is fine.”

The server reaches to put a small sheet of waxed paper over a glazed stick.

I whisper, “If it’s not too much trouble, actually...”

The glass door opens to admit two more families. The small store is getting crowded, and Grace aims a longer, cooler stare in my direction.

I continue, still whispering, “Those coffee-cake muffins look good. Could I have one of those instead of the cruller?” Bill sighs to my side.

“Huh?” the server mutters. She glances past me toward her other impatient customers.

“Oh, I,”—a little louder—“I’d like a coffee cake muffin, please, instead of the cruller. Sorry. Thank you.”

Bill presses a twenty into my hand. He and Grace walk out the door to the car, carrying their drinks and my tea.

I pay for our order and receive the bag of pastries, walk past the line, smiling, wondering why I always end up whispering in restaurants and take-out places, as if, midway through my order, the eatery becomes a church or a library, and my regular voice might disturb or offend someone.

In the car, I blow on my tea through the little hole in the top and close my eyes. I have just sent my April packet in to Stonecoast: a critique of three flash fiction writers, a very short story in Chekhov’s style, 30 pages of new fiction. I have no idea what academic papers to write for May. Maybe Woolf? In *The Waves*, Bernard embodies many people. He worries, writing fiction, that he’s never himself.

I take a bite of muffin and fish out my notebook. This woman who whispers in Dunkin’ Donuts could be Mildred.

Or Judy. Maybe Florence. She has considered dyeing her gray-brown hair auburn but worries about the roots showing between hair appointments. She's the mother of three. She's not meticulous. Her mother grew up in Maine, and she whispered, too. No, the mother of this woman didn't whisper. My hand jiggles as the car pulls back onto Pleasant Street. I print in clumsy capitals the short story title: "A Woman of More Than Two Minds."

Bill drives five straight hours to the Scarsdale train station, where we'll wait to meet Jill and Jas, who are traveling in from Manhattan together. Then we'll all head to Jill's parents' house, where Jill's husband, David, will meet us after work. We'll spend two nights with them, then all drive into the city on Saturday morning.

In the late April sunshine, Bill and Grace sit on a bench outside the nearby flower shop where I am selecting a present for Jill's mother, Joy. Father and daughter rest for over 45 minutes, eyes closed, faces lifted skyward, until I emerge carrying a deep-brown stoneware vase and a wrapped bundle of white lilies.

"I found these, plus something else. Well, they aren't things. I can't pick them up until we leave on Sunday. So we'll have to swing back through here on our way home. They're beautiful. They sing. The male does."

I smile.

"They're a beautiful pale red, not yellow. The best part is, they're free. The guy has canaries and lovebirds and finches living all together in this huge aviary in the middle of the store. Two of his canaries had babies."

Silence.

“He said he was overwhelmed. I just wanted to help. He asked if I knew anyone who might want a pair of canaries. I said yes.”

Bill and Grace walk to the Saab. Settling herself on the back seat, Grace closes the door emphatically. Lifting her chin at me, she raises her eyebrows at her father in the rear-view mirror and leans forward to take a deep sniff of the sweet, heavy lilies while we watch for Jill and Jas’s train to pull in.

On Saturday morning, we leave for the city. By noon, Jill has already spent a few hours painting in her studio and calls to tell me where Grace and I should meet her for a late lunch. Maybe we can also take Grace shopping. Jas is wandering around with Bill and David, heading toward a bar with good pizza and baseball.

An hour later, Jill calls again.

“Where are you?”

“We’re, um, we’re on 8th, like you said.”

“8th and what?”

“Let’s see. 8th. I mean 8th and Astor.”

“*Astor*. Eliza, come *on*, pal. That’s ten blocks from where I told you this morning. Right? Ten long blocks. East-west.”

There is a pause, then Jill’s voice again.

“Oh, no matter. We’ll meet at Timothy’s, on Charles and Seventh, right? Charles and Seventh. Got it? Wait, no, let me talk to Grace.”

I hand over my cell. The sights of spring in Manhattan surround us: neon-orange shorts, a turquoise tank top, bare legs and bare arms. Small dogs growl from enormous purses, some of them wearing goggles to protect their eyes from the sudden sun. Grace shuts the flip phone, threads her arm through

CANARIES

mine, and we begin to walk west, toward our classy friend who will be waiting with one eyebrow raised, smiling beneath thick jet-auburn hair held back from her sculpted face with a black barrette.

Headed back to Maine the next morning, we stop to collect the young birds. I carry a travel cage and some canary seed I picked up at a pet store. They are a shy pair, frightened by the transfer to a cage. Their feathers shine a soft, pale shade of rosy peach. They have tiny black eyes; ecru beaks, legs and feet. Neither attempts to peck at my hands as I thank the flower shop owner and walk to the car. I ask Grace if she wants to keep them next to her. She nods at me, settles the small cage on the seat to her right. Picking it up again, she rests it in her lap with a grudging smile.

“They’re so, like, delicate. They’re so not parakeets. You know. They seem shy. Oh my God, Mom, they’re pretty.”

CHAPTER 3

Caution Horses

May 4, 2009

Waiting for my morning coffee, I check the calendar. On Friday I'll get to experience a colonoscopy. At 53, I've put it off for three years, as have all our friends. Bill waited four. He says it wasn't so bad, but about medical procedures, he's prone to minimizing. I've had a little bleeding, a few inner twinges, no more blood than from an ordinary hemorrhoid. The nice physician assistant at my doctor's office told me it was likely nothing, and since I was due for a scope anyway, she'd just go ahead and order one.

After breakfast, I pull on rubber boots, knowing it will be muddy at the barn since it rained most of April. It's Monday, and Polo hasn't been ridden since before we went to the city last

Thursday. My flighty young Thoroughbred will arch his neck and be ready for a few bucks before I mount, and maybe for a few more after. A chestnut gelding, he seems like an unsettling horse to most people, but for me, he's perfect. I attribute his spooks and unpredictable darts to his age, his sensitivity, and a sense of humor.

"Ooof, these boots are hard to get on. I'm already sweating. Jesus, Bill, it's almost eighty degrees. It was in the *forties* until last week. Maine. Spring."

Bill flips the page of the Saturday *Portland Press Herald*, shakes it out. He raises graying brows. "Where's Grace?"

"Upstairs, still snoozing, taking a day off. She drove over to the barn by herself yesterday after school. I think this afternoon she has a Model United Nations fundraiser. It's not as though she rides Dreamy that much, really. At this point, we're not talking exercise here, for either of them."

"Tell me again why we have her horse?"

"She'd be a good horse, if we lived closer to the barn. It's harder for Grace than for me. I can make time for the barn around my writing most days. Grace can't. Not with AP Bio."

Anger squeezes my ribs. Bill will not ruin my morning with his fretting. "Look, Bill, Grace is fine," I continue, my voice raised. "Give it a rest, can't you? She's fine. The world isn't perfect. It's pretty good, though. I know we have to sell Dreamy. It will take time to find the right home. For now, let her be. Please. Let Grace be."

Bill nods, turns the page, shakes out the paper again.

Gunning my van's engine, I speed down the driveway. At the street I stop, flex my hands, take a few deep breaths. My heart has broken out of its cradle, ricocheting off the curving walls of my chest. It's always Bill's smallest comments that get

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to me, his niggling worries about money, or Grace or Jas or Mac, when I am grateful that all three kids seem to be thriving.

I shake myself and turn left toward Whitefield where Polo waits in his paddock, sharp hooves worrying the softened ground, felting hay into soil and muck.

“It’s not all black down there.”

Baker, knitter, animal lover, wife, mother – but most of all, a writer. That’s how **Eliza Walton** sees herself. Until, halfway through her MFA studies, a diagnosis of rectal cancer lands on her head. Fear, shame, and dread threaten to pull her under.

How to face an anxiety-laden year of radiation, chemo, and a permanent colostomy?

Family, friends, caregivers, even her animals, all help. But Eliza’s pen becomes her best weapon. Chronicling each assault on her body with startling honesty, Eliza uses the act of writing to make sense of her powerlessness in the face of this unspeakable illness. When her vitriolic alter-ego appears, she and Eliza navigate the terror, absurdity, and even the humor, of an uncertain future together.

Neither superficial nor overly sentimental, *The Colors I Saw* is a riveting metafictional memoir filled with references to the literature that fueled Eliza’s imagination and sustained her. It’s the story of her deep shame and loss, accepting an unacceptable reality, and the friends and family who helped her survive. In the messy journey from “*You have rectal cancer*” to living a full, if somewhat altered, life, this endearing page-turner is not about whether the author survives, but how.

Eliza Walton worked at *Rolling Stone Magazine* after college, kicking around Manhattan in a state of nervous unrest until meeting her husband and moving to a small farm on the coast of Maine. Before receiving her MFA in fiction, Eliza took time out from writing to raise three children among sheep, chickens, ponies and donkeys.



Photo © Nina Fuller

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