

Count Your Blessings

Be careful what you wish for, and read the small print.

I didn't want to go, but you know how persuasive the Bramleys are. They're 'experience' mad, always trying something new. Drake even did a Pirate Experience, taking pot shots at Somali pirates from a container ship in the Straits of Hormuz. This latest one though, is on an entirely new level. I remember the moment Carol slid the envelopes across the table during their dinner party. We all opened them at the same time, read the tickets and stared open-mouthed at each other.

"Read it! Read it aloud!" Shouted Drake, in his usual bullyboy fashion, so I did.

"What better way to appreciate life than to experience dying? Welcome to Count Your Blessings. Spend a weekend in a hospice with all the symptoms of a terminal illness, meet real patients and return to your normal lives grateful for every minute"

"Are you serious?" I said?

"Totally", said Carol. "Come on, look at how we waste our lives. We watch far too much television, eat bad food and go shopping just to kill time."

I knew she was talking about me.

"So, we're all going together next weekend, on us. I know you're free because I've checked your calendars. We get our implants on Friday after work and the minibus picks us up from here at seven to take us to the hospice."

So, being the weakling I am, I went along with it. That Friday, we sat in a row of chairs in the Count Your Blessings clinic; the Bramleys, the Robinsons, Misha and Brian, and myself, sleeves rolled up while they stuck us

with big needles. Drake was a complete dick, saying we had to guess what terminal illness they'd chosen for each of us as if we were being given chocolates from a box. Brian, thank goodness, demanded to know what we were getting so they told us. The implant contained the genetic coding that gave us the illness, in my case a bloody brain tumour, and the rubberised armbands they slipped up to the top our arms contained the biometric monitors and the 'restorer'.

'Don't, whatever you do, take it off', they said. I had to read the small print in the minibus to understand why. Drake didn't listen, he just laughed at how ironic it was that Carol was given bowel cancer because she was always farting like a horse.

The hospice was a converted Edwardian building that smelt of disinfectant and death. We arrived there late evening and were shown to our private rooms. A nurse came into mine, checked my temperature and wrote something down on my chart. She rolled up my sleeve, saw the armband and tutted in dissatisfaction before giving me some tablets and a glass of water to wash them down with. I slept terribly. It started with a pounding headache then developed into dizziness and finally nausea. I threw up the entire contents of my stomach including the tablets and eventually drifted off for a few hours.

The next morning I put on the dressing gown they supplied and wandered down the corridor into the communal social space. The Robinsons were sat next to each other on the sofa holding hands. Misha was attached to a saline drip and Brian was pulling clumps of hair from his scalp. Carol was nowhere to be seen but Drake was sat at a table with a painfully thin, jaundiced, bald man, playing cards.

I wandered over to see what was going on. Drake had a pile of banknotes in front of him.

"Good morning", he said jovially. "How's the brain tumour? My prostate cancer's a pain in the arse, but my poker is on fire, isn't it Bobby?"

The bald man nodded and looked at me with sunken, vacant eyes.

"Are you sure it's allowed? To gamble in a hospice?" I asked.

"Where's the harm?" said Drake. "In any case, what use is all this cash to Bobby, he's going to peg out soon?"

"That's a bit mean", I said, and wandered over to the Robinsons.

Misha was tearful. "This was a terrible idea", she said, playing with the sticking plaster on her wrist covering the end of the drip. "Brian's hair is falling out and he's already been sick twice this morning. I haven't even seen Carol yet."

"Maybe it's not such a bad idea", said Brian. "If it's all about appreciating your own good health then it's already succeeded in my book. I'm not sure Drake is entering into it in the right spirit though. Ripping off that sick guy is, well, sick."

I agreed. I was even less impressed later when I saw Drake wearing a Rolex that was previously on the wrist of an old gentleman sleeping in a big armchair.

"It was a gift", said Drake, "Just like this experience is for you, from us."

"It looks like you are getting more out of it than most", I said, crossly.

Later that evening that I went looking for Carol and found her sat up in her bed, reading a magazine. She had bloodshot eyes and had been crying. I sat on the bed next to her and gave her a hug. She wanted me to fetch her phone from Drake's room so she could call her children, so I knocked on his door and went in. He wasn't there, but on his bedside table were banknotes, the Rolex and some other bits of gold jewellery. I lifted the jumper on the bed to look for the phone and an armband fell on the floor. I stared at it for a moment then kicked it under the bed, before spotting Carol's phone and taking it to her.

A few weeks later we all went to the hospice to see how Drake was doing, which of course wasn't very well. As a former lawyer he should have read the small print. Don't take the armband off, otherwise the illness cannot be reversed. Now he can play cards all he likes.