Cancer Survivor Tig Notaro Turns Her Humor to the Coronavirus Pandemic

The comedian, who stood up to cancer, isn't about to let a little global health crisis get her down.

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Stand-up comedian and cancer survivor Tig Notaro can find the humor in any situation. In an interview with Slate, she recounted a darkly funny moment from a recent FaceTime call with her stepfather.

"I was talking to him and then I noticed he stopped talking," she said. "And I immediately thought, 'Oh my God, my stepfather died on FaceTime with me.' And then my very next thought was, 'Oh my gosh, I have the greatest story to tell now. Whenever the pandemic is over I cannot wait to talk about how my stepfather died on his first FaceTime attempt.'"

Though that particular story will never see the spotlight (Notaro's stepfather, it turned out, had simply encountered issues angling his screen), it demonstrated the Mississippi-born comic's innate knack for turning even the most traumatic experiences into material worthy of a standing ovation. Now an industry mainstay with four albums under her belt—Good One, Live, Boyish Girl Interrupted and Happy to Be Here—Notaro indirectly owes her fame to a series of tragic events that unfolded within four months in 2012.

In March of that year, she was diagnosed with a potentially deadly bacterial infection. The week after she was discharged from the hospital, her mother tripped, hit her head, fell into a coma and died. Shortly after her mother's funeral, Notaro was diagnosed with Stage II breast cancer in both breasts. What's more, she was weathering a recent breakup at the time.

It was, Notaro told The Guardian, in what may be a contender for understatement of the decade, a "pretty crazy time."

Her first instinct was to keep her cancer diagnosis private. But in a flash of inspiration, she incorporated it into her routine rather than swept it under the rug. That August, she walked onstage at the LA club Largo and delivered an instant classic of an opener: "Good evening. Hello. I have cancer. How are you?"

The line, immortalized in countless news articles, blog posts and YouTube clips, Notaro told Slate, had come to her in the shower about a month after her initial diagnosis and made her laugh

“maniacally.”

“I thought, ‘I love stand-up so much, maybe I’ll never get to do it again, and I don’t feel like I can make the typical jokes I’ve always made,’” she said. “‘So I’m going to take a chance.’”

The risk paid off personally and professionally. In the eight years since, Notaro penned a memoir, I’m Just a Person; cowrote, produced and starred in One Mississippi, a show based on her own experiences as an androgynous lesbian who spent her childhood in the heart of the Bible Belt; met and married the actress Stephanie Allynne; and became a mother to twin boys.

Though Notaro has fully recovered from cancer, her diagnosis and treatment have remained a focal point of her comedy; she pokes fun at the disease, mocking the horrified reverence with which people often think and speak about it.

In 2014, she performed topless in New York City, shrugging off her pink button-down and baring her mastectomy scars. In another show, she joked that her breast cancer was karma for making one too many cracks about how flat-chested she was.

“My boobs overheard me, and were just like, ‘We’re sick of this,’” she deadpanned as the audience roared. “‘Let’s kill her.’”

In a normal year, Notaro would probably be fielding interview requests from journalists and meeting with film and TV executives. Now, like most of us, she is limiting her contact with people outside of her immediate family, hence, presumably, the FaceTime call with her stepfather.

But she is doing so in a way that, once again, makes her feel as though she exerts a measure of control over her life.

“I am kind of pretending that I chose this for myself,” that “I chose to stay home and spend more time with my wife, Stephanie, and our kids,” she told Slate of her pandemic coping mechanisms. “And it’s actually all of the long hours of work that I’ve done and traveling around the world and surgeries and hospitalizations that I’ve reflected on those times I’ve thought, ‘Oh my gosh, if I could have anything in the world, it would be to spend time with my children and Stephanie.’ So I’m pretending like this is me saying, ‘You know what? I’m just going to spend more time at home.’”

To read more about celebrities—including an actor, a chef and a quiz show host—who have survived cancer, click here, here and here. To learn about a 2015 Showtime documentary about Notaro, which chronicled her life before and after her breast cancer diagnosis, click here. Check out Notaro’s interview on the Slate podcast How To—and find her own podcast Don’t Ask Tig, here.

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