



# You're 21, dating, and then you get cancer. (Oh shit.)

**SOPHIE VAN DER STAP** on the one thing no woman wants to explain on a first date...

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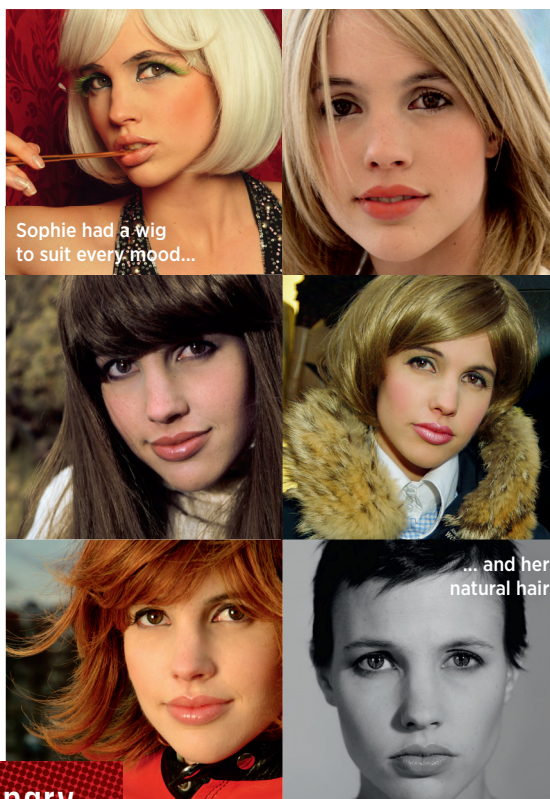
he dimness of the bar gave me the anonymity I craved. Scanning the room, my eyes settled on a smart, grinning man in a tie, standing alone. Inside I was terrified, but I threw myself into battle, edging away from my friends and closer towards him.

Shouting over the music, I told him my name was Sue, and that I was on a gap year. We talked about where we lived, our hobbies – nothing serious. And then, after he'd bought me my fourth mojito, we kissed. That kind of drunken, reckless kiss that only happens at 1am in a bar. His hand brushed my hair as he pulled me in for a second time, and I remember wanting to laugh.

We shared a cab home, his head resting drowsily on my lap as I stared out of the window. We exchanged numbers, but I told him I was going on holiday – catching a plane to Marrakech the next day.

Closing my front door behind me, I pulled off my red wig and stared at my bald head in the mirror. Sue, the girl on the dance floor, was the fiction. This was my reality. I didn't feel like I'd lied to him; just that I'd been escaping my own life for a few hours. Because I wasn't going to Marrakech in the morning, I was going to hospital for more chemotherapy.

Cancer is a lonely disease, especially when you're 21. My parents and



Sophie had a wig to suit every mood...

... and her natural hair

**"I was angry... I kept thinking that I might die without meeting the love of my life"**

elder sister were really supportive – and my friends were too – but the truth was, everybody else was getting on with their lives.

Six months earlier, I'd thought I was invincible;

my life was full of choices and possibilities. But then I went to the doctor complaining of shortness of breath, weight loss and a few strange aches. After a flurry of tests, I was diagnosed with rhabdomyosarcoma, a rare cancer of the connective tissues. It was advanced, but at first the doctors weren't sure whether they could help me. All they could do was blast me with chemo to shrink the tumours around my lungs and liver.

Instantly, all control I'd had over my life was gone. All those choices I'd had to make – where to study, who to date – disappeared. I was just a frightened, helpless body being pushed through the healthcare system. I tried to go

back to university, where I was studying political science, but I couldn't focus. And as for dating – that was out of the question. I felt disgusting. The treatment made my face puffy and my arms swell. 'Chemo sweat' drenched my clothes so often that I had to change my T-shirt several times a day. By the time all that wore off, my dark-blonde, shoulder-length hair had started to fall out. Cancer was threatening to take my life, but first it took my identity. I barely recognised myself.

It was hard not to be angry. It sounds stupid, but – besides leaving my friends and family

behind – all I kept thinking was that I might die without meeting the love of my life. I'd never really wanted the conventional things in life – marriage, a mortgage, children. But I *did* believe in dating, and love. And you don't get many men asking you out on the chemo ward.

Three months after my treatment began, I got a text from Harry\*, a guy I'd met at a party pre-diagnosis. I texted back immediately, feeling a pang of excitement. Before I had a chance to wonder whether it was the right thing to do, I had a date. The thought of it half killed me with nerves, but I couldn't cancel. Maybe this was what I needed – normal interaction with a nice, genuine guy? I wanted to feel like part of the human race.

I tried to keep a lid on my terror, spending ages perfecting my makeup and preening my long, blonde wig, hoping he wouldn't clock it looked different. I taped it firmly in place.

He'd invited me to his place for dinner. My friends cooed over >

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that, saying it was thoughtful. I wasn't convinced – what if it was more of a 'booty call' situation? Either way, I showed up, sweaty and nervous. My worst fears were confirmed. "Did you get a haircut?" he asked, as he opened the front door. And then – before I could answer – "It's just, your hair looks kind of... wiggish..."

I felt naked. No, worse – transparent. I didn't say anything, his words eating away at me until my eyes began to sting. He dressed the salad and chatted away, totally oblivious.

I felt so vulnerable as we sat there picking at our Quorn sausages on his sofa, plates awkwardly balanced on our laps, that I ended up blurting out the whole story to him.

"I still want to kiss you," he said afterwards. "You're still Sophie."

And so, lame as that line was, I did. It was clunky – his hands stayed awkwardly still throughout – but that night, I went home feeling a weird rush of excitement and relief. It was like I was still in the game – that somebody, thank *god* – still fancied me.

I didn't date Harry again after that (frozen sausages on a first date? *Really?*), but that was the day I felt like I got my mojo back.

As the months passed, I began to get into the rhythm of my new life, having chemo every three weeks. On days one to 10 I would feel like shit, but then my energy slowly returned. During that small window, I'd force myself to go out and meet friends for dinner, or join them at the pub. Wearing my wigs (I built up a collection of nine), I convinced myself nobody was staring, or even noticed that I looked different. But I was careful – I didn't

drink much, or stay out late often. My blonde wigs got the most male attention. I even managed to pull in a coffee shop once, wearing a super-fake platinum number. A guy bought me a drink, made terrible jokes and tried (unsuccessfully) to get my number. I pretended to cringe, although I can't lie, I enjoyed it.

But I slowly realised getting a date wasn't the problem. It was what

I said nothing. Partly because he had a girlfriend, but also because I couldn't bear the thought of losing his friendship. John came with me for my scan results, 10 months after my diagnosis. He was sitting next to me when the doctor said the words, "You're clear", and he watched me sob with relief.

The following night, he joined me and my friends on a night out to celebrate. Bubbling up with relief and excitement (and maybe a few beers), I finally told him how I felt. His reply? "I think we're better as friends." *Friends.*

I felt winded at first; mortified second. But a few days later – after the initial sting of rejection had worn off – I actually felt relieved; like I could move on. And isn't that what life is all about? Getting yourself out there; telling people how you feel; trashing your heart and then heading out to do it all again the next day? That's living. Well, it is to me. And suddenly, I felt like I had plenty more of that left to do.

John died a year later – his cancer returned. I was devastated – it felt like part of me died with him. My days with him – and with all the guys I dated, actually – were a means of escape from a world

of sickness and tumours; the flipside of reality that kept me full of hope. So thank you John, my wonderful friend. And thank you, mojito pusher, Harry of the Quorn sausages fame, café guy and all the other men I raised a glass with along the way. We may not have gone the distance – and I'm happily single now – but you all played a big part in saving my life.

\* *The Girl With Nine Wigs: A Memoir* by Sophie van der Stap (£8.99, Vie Books) ♦



Sophie with her own hair, after beating cancer

**"I felt a rush of excitement that somebody still fancied me... I had my mojo back"**

happened *next*. Because it's one thing to flirt and kiss, and another to really let someone into your life. As soon as you do, the parallel world you've built disappears.

The only person I really let get close to me during this time was John\*.

John was cute. Messy hair, gorgeous face, incredible arms, but also a really decent guy. And he'd just come through cancer himself. I met him through a friend of my mum's, and he soon became my 'cancer-coach'. Only he could truly understand what I was going through.

Every time we met, I fell a bit more in love with him. And every time,

AS TOLD TO ANDREINA CORDANI. PHOTOGRAPHS ISTOCKPHOTO.COM. \*NAMES HAVE BEEN CHANGED