

Intimate moments: dispelling the cancer myth with real life - Summer Rain by Nanna Hauge Kristensen.

By Sophie Townsend

“SUMMER RAIN” by Nanna Hauge Kristensen. Mixed by Ole Fugl Hørkilde.

Duration: 3mins. Danish Radio P1, 2017.

Winner of the Third Coast/Richard H Drieheis Foundation 2018 Best Documentary: Foreign Language Award.

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summer-rain/

Nanna Hauge Kristensen’s Summer Rain is a small piece in length and in scope. It is intimate, almost fragmentary. Its power lies in the size of its canvas, its observational mood, and its rawness. It was produced for Danish Radio in 2017 and was the winner of the first prize at the P1 Shortdox competition that same year.

It starts with the sound of running water, circling through its scenes back to the same elemental sound.

Water is often a sound that acts as a symbol - water is used as a sort of code for purification. Water washes away pain, bringing potential to begin anew.

And yet, at the beginning of the piece, only 10 seconds in, we are brought back from all that is metaphoric in that sound of water, back to the quotidian. This is not baptismal, or a cleansing of the soul. It is a bathroom, nothing more. The shower ends, we hear the suck of water down the drain.

This is real life.

A young boy calls out ‘Mum, come and see.’ But she can’t – she tells him she has to get ready.

Then to herself, she says ‘I’m going to try brushing it, and see if more comes off.’

This is *really* real life.

Cancer narratives have become, over the last several decades, less and less interested in real-life experiences of the illness. They are much more more focused on a sort of mythic, communal, story of glorious survival or brave defeat. We are encouraged to vanquish our cancers; to be brave and strong in the midst of a sort of David and Goliath battle. Those living with the disease are often portrayed in popular

narratives as patient and wise. People learn things from this disease, and those of us who support them become their disciples of this new-found way of experiencing the world.

I have always found this way of cancer storytelling difficult, untruthful. Yes, people who are sick are sometimes patient and wise. Sometimes they are difficult and tired. Sometimes they behave badly and are deeply pessimistic. And yet, to raise funds, and, I suspect, to make us all feel a little better, cancer sufferers are so often portrayed in popular narratives as warriors locked in battle. There is something of the character of war propaganda in media and fundraising portrayals of the disease, something reminiscent of the cheering war cries of WWI and II, sung to ignite the spirit of those on the battle front and those at home.

In many ways, a rallying, almost mythic narrative of cancer makes perfect sense. As medical technology gives us greater insights into the disease, and never-ending breakthroughs give us the belief that we can rid ourselves of it, we have become more determined to see cancer as a baddie, as separate to ourselves. And competition for the fundraising dollar allows for little nuance. Good and evil is useful in the marketing paradigm. Humans have been locked in a battle with cancer for decades now, so why not use propaganda slogans similar to those used in war? Why not mythologise the both the brave survivors and the fallen victims? Why not, for a moment, pretend that cancer is not simply human cells out of control, but a more dangerous, darker foe that we innocents must fight?

Because it's not true, that's why not. Because it forces us into making the illness something mythic. And while myths can go some way to explaining things about ourselves, they don't allow for the truth of the lived experience.

Kristensen offers something else entirely. She seeks neither sympathy nor celebration. An anthropologist by training, her observational, almost distanced approach style, allows us to glimpse her life, but also to feel it. There is something very empirical about what she's doing in this piece, and she allows us no room to pretend that her cancer is anything more than an illness with its repercussions, its difficulties and its pain.

Summer Rain makes no claim as a "Cancer Story." It is simply a story of a woman - a woman who is a mother, and a daughter, and who has cancer; a woman undergoing treatment, and raising her child, and dealing with the ramifications of what cancer treatment means. At just over three minutes, the work has a fragmentary quality, reflected within the nature of the piece itself. This is not the whole story, but rather, an observation of part of that story. It is fragmentary, and in its resolutely quotidian nature, doesn't allow for the sort of war story that has become so much a part of the cancer narrative. It's not a hero's journey, a struggle of good and evil. It is, quite simply, an examination of life and how we live it.

After her shower, there's the sound of morning preparations. The sound of the bathroom, her hair brush through her hair, is counter-balanced by the sound of her child calling to her from another room. As listeners, we overhear a morning's preparation, nothing more.

And then her child calls out again.

'Mum, now come and see.'

She calls out to him 'Yes.' And then, to herself, says 'I just have to throw my hair in the trash.'

This is extraordinary restraint - the sentence simply hangs in the air, without the ornamentation of sound, music or written text. And its bareness gives her words a quiet, brooding brutality that we can't help engage in. We are brought into this world completely, so that when her little boy shouts again 'Mum, come!' we feel at once his growing need and her own needs as a woman living with a disease. When she calls to him 'I'm coming' we feel both the relief of the child and the burden of the mother in a life with cancer.

I produced my documentary *Cancer as a Battleground* in 2010 as a response to my growing unease in watching friends and family with cancer be forced into a war-like paradigm in the treatment of their disease. It felt to me that cancer was treated not so much as a disease, but as an enemy, as the enemy. I watched, horrified, as people I knew and loved became soldiers in this battle against some sort of dark foe. *Cancer as a Battleground* laid out the history of where this battle imagery had come from, and where it was leading us to. I detailed what it meant to see a disease in this way, through the lens of 'us and it'. The theatricality of the 'fight against cancer' seemed to do damage to those patients who did not vanquish the adversary. It seemed to me to put people in the categories of winners and losers, and give those who suffered bravely a sort of halo of wisdom and fortitude which seemed to deny, their ordinariness, their humanity.

Forgoing the grandiosity of mythic battle, *Summer Rain's* insistently observational quality doesn't seek to romanticise suffering or demonise the disease. At its heart, the piece is about love, motherhood and care.

'My mother went and got the red Margrethe mixing bowl'.

The second scene, or idea of the piece, moves away from Kristensen as a mother and carer, and focuses instead on the relationship she has with her mother.

'She always did that when I was little, and about to throw up. Now she's taking care of me again.'

There is a moment of silence, and then her mother whispers 'Oh sweetheart.'

'Oh sweetheart.' It tells us everything. The bravery, as a maker, of this level of minimalism is, I think, profound. Kristensen has the assured skill of a documentarian who knows the meaning of words, and understands that there is no need to embellish the mother-child relationship because we, as listeners, feel everything there is to feel in those words alone.

This is Kristensen's real skill – her ability to relay the information she needs us to have in as simple and straightforward a way as possible gives her listeners just enough to feel, deeply, for her subjects – herself, her child, her mother. There is no leading, no manipulation. It is an honest portrait of a life with cancer that I think I've encountered.

The sound of the razor buzzing brings us from the unseen emotion of the piece to the very real and visceral. We are brought back to the corporeality of cancer. It buzzes without sentiment, without feeling.

'It's coming off now, are you ready?'

'Yes'

There is nothing but the sound of the razor for many seconds, until the voices of Kristensen's mother and child are finally heard.

'Oh cookiebear,' says her mother. It is an echo of sorts of 'Oh Sweetheart' and tells us everything we need to know about caring for a cancer sufferer.

'Why are you crying mum?' asks her child.

'I'm crying because I look so strange.'

'It's super ugly isn't it mum?'

For me, this line brings back the painful memories of watching my children, and particularly the youngest, deal with their father's cancer and death. (When I produced *Cancer as a Battleground*, I had no clue that my husband would be diagnosed with the disease a little under a year later.) In *The Updates*, my feature about his cancer, I wrote about my youngest hanging the dress she planned to wear to his funeral near the front door of the house, so it would be ready at a moment's notice. She had explained this to him quite happily, in the days he was only just coming to terms with the fact that he'd die from his disease.

Kids say the darnedest things, and all that.

The piece ends with the sound of rushing water. Summer Rain on her bald head. She tells her listener that she quite likes it, and this scene is near as we get to anything symbolic or metaphoric. There is a strong sense of healing, of something akin to rebirth, or optimism, at the very least. But the piece remains grounded, quiet and real. There isn't a definitively happy ending, or a sense that through this experience she has somehow become reborn.

As her child says to her when her hair is shaved off,

"I think mum, she... You can still tell it's mum

Yeah, you can still tell it's mum."

This is the realest of life, after all.

SOPHIE TOWNSEND

Sophie Townsend is a senior producer and editor at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's Radio National, and her feature-making work is internationally recognised. In 2015 she won the HearSay International Audio competition with her piece ['Mr Fix-it'](#). Her works ['Stories and Driving'](#) and ['The Updates'](#) were featured at Third Coast in 2015, and she was a Australian Walkley Award nominee for her documentary ['Cancer as a Battleground'](#). She regularly makes work for the BBC's Short Cuts podcast, and her work has also featured in CBC's Love Me.

Sophie has taught at the Australian Film, Television and Radio School in Sydney and at PRX's Podcast Garage in Boston. She has presented regularly at Australia's Audiocraft conference and events. This year she spoke at the 2018 Third Coast Festival on writing visually for audio. She also presented her body of work about grief and widowhood at UnionDocs in New York.



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