Melanoma Mama

On Life, Death, and Tent Camping

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Dedication

In loving memory of my two primary caregivers
my beloved late mother
Elizabeth MacGregor Crooker Bates
1919 – 2011
and my caring, sweet stepfather
Dr. Frank Bates
who died of an undiagnosed chronic
lung disease in May of 2011

Chapter One

I almost died of cancer. But I didn't. Not yet, anyway. Melanoma, the most vicious of the skin cancers, is one sneaky customer. The doctors warn that it is doing its best to outsmart my immune system. Mine is late-stage melanoma, so I am not considered cured. Nasty cancer cells lurk, awaiting their chance to proliferate madly. But lately, the score has been immune system one, cancer zero. The prognosis went from, "Get your affairs in order," to, "You have maybe twenty more years." I did the math. Sixty-three, plus twenty. That makes eighty-three. Woo-hoo. I'll take that.

The day I heard that my cancer treatments were holding the beast at bay I rejoiced with abandon. The Grim Reaper had been sneaking in my door. He had tiptoed over the threshold with his chortle and his musty stench. We had stared each other down. For several years I'd been drooping from cancer-caused anemia. For six months I'd been bombarded by cancer treatments concocted by the Marquis de Sade. For several weeks I lay nearly lifeless on my couch while I drifted in shadowy numbness. So, as I left the doctor's office that day, dancing in the hallway and whooping it up, I thrust my middle finger skyward and shouted, "Fuck the Grim Reaper."

I've been given what few Stage IV melanoma patients have received. Another crack at life. People want to know what that's like. How does it feel to go from shutting down, writing your will, and giving away precious possessions, to shopping for new clothes because now you'll have time to wear them?

I certainly wallow in joy more than ever. But where do I store my lingering doubt while living from scan to scan in dread of sudden bad news? Can I thrive while death lurks? Can I learn to embrace uncertainty?

I once wrote a story of which I'm now ashamed, because in it, I lied. I was in high school then, hospitalized for minor surgery, and assigned to an open ward with rows of beds. One night, the nurses quietly hovered over an old woman in the bed across from mine. Under cloak of darkness, they surreptitiously wheeled her out. One lone woman had died in the night. Just that day I had been talking to her. That mystery–how life courses through you, then suddenly ends–gnawed at me, so I wrote about it.

I wrote for a church youth magazine, and I manufactured a tearful husband, a Bible, and a sweet smile on the woman's peaceful face. It was all a lie, and I apologize now for telling it. She was alone. No husband. No Bible. No sweet smile.

We should never lie about death. The stories we fabricate to comfort ourselves and others aren't fair to the dying, to the deceased, or to ourselves. We'll all take that last step, and we'll look desperately for guidance. Will terror overwhelm us? Will agony crush us? Will we be robbed of the quality of life long before physical death? Is there a correct way to die? Should we peacefully accept death or should we rage against the dying of the light? Somebody, please, please, tell us the rules.

One unbreakable rule should be that we speak honestly. Having come all too close to death, I've glimpsed a few new things. I'll tell them here, and I promise not to lie.

When I received the fatal diagnosis in 2008, I considered whether to write about my ordeal, and I chose not to. Writing takes time, and time was in short supply. I wanted to enjoy the spaces between treatments with as much enthusiasm as I could muster. The hard parts–major surgery, devastating interleukin-2 treatments, debilitating radiation treatments–did not merit being relived in prose. Living them once was plenty. I needed to squeeze as much living as I could in the spaces between my dying.

Then, after more than six months of medical torture, came my reprieve. A midnight pardon granted, and my death sentence commuted. A last ditch round of radiation, intended only to alleviate my suffering, unexpectedly triggered a full bore attack on my inoperable tumor. Even with the good news, I'm still on probation. But I'm recovering. It has been gradual and often disheartening as I struggle to regain the fitness that once gave me such pleasure.

Before my decline, I could easily dance, ski, and hike. I could readily touch my toes. An exuberant zest for life came automatically packaged in a fit body. I had danced the Can-Can complete with cartwheels on my sixtieth birthday. (I danced a hip-grinding, Gypsy Rose Lee strip-tease too, but that's another story.) When I could no longer grab a full breath of air—when my joints all ached, and it became a chore to stand up straight–when I walked with a granny shuffle, the waves of discouragement were difficult to conquer. They sometimes still are, but I fight like a pit bull for my health.

I gradually discovered that I could begin to enjoy my former activities, even if in limited form, so I have been adding them back into my life. One thing I have loved is marathon, cross-country tent-camping trips; just me and my over-packed car, my AAA maps, and my wanderlust. So, six months after my last radiation treatment, when I had mustered enough energy to conceive of it, that's what I decided to do. I decided to see America up close and personal, getting sand between my toes and mud under my fingernails, because to know a place intimately, I believe you must get sweaty and roll in its dirt. You must let rain soak your socks and insects suck your blood. Smoke from campfires must sting your eyes. You must feel sticky hot and quivering cold. (But *don't* under *any circumstances* get sunburned.)

After radiation treatments, when I lay on my couch during what I call The Dreary Days, I thought I might never again see sunlit badlands or smell desert sage or hear the roar of waterfalls. Waking up to the songs of birds on the branches near my tent was a treasured memory, but I assumed I would never hear them sing again.

During my ordeal, I had purchased, for a mere ten dollars, my lifetime America the Beautiful National Parks Senior Pass. After age sixty-two, the pass allows free entry into national parks, monuments, and historic sites. That pass burned a hole in my pocket and in my psyche. From the moment I got it, I thought, "What if I die before summer, and my family finds it in my wallet, unused?" That little rectangle of plastic with a photo of a blooming cactus nagged and nudged me to get packing.

I improved through the summer of 2009, but not enough to take on the rigors of a long-distance camping trip. By early fall, I still had my doubts, but I thought I might have enough pep to enjoy it. Driving across the country by myself would be difficult, but with no time constraints, I knew I could manage. But camping in a tent? I've established a routine that seems, to me, like no big deal. But there's effort in all the bending and stooping to pitch a tent and bed down on an air mattress in a mini-dome in which you can't stand up. I also considered cold, rain, lightning, and all things that go bump in the night, not to mention the nighttime ups and downs that come with a 63-year-old bladder. But I recalled how I'd loved other long-distance camping trips, including the challenges, so why not try? In a pinch my credit card would buy the luxury of a real bed in a motel.

I yearned to see this land again, and to see it with the fresh eyes of recovery. It's a familiar cliché that a close brush with death can be a gift. They say it makes you live each day fully awake and aware. I can vouch for the fact that, after looking into the bleakness of the tunnel of no return, ice cream tastes sweeter, music sounds brighter, and the touch of a human hand thrills me with its pulsing warmth. I had already discovered the truth of this commonplace notion. So I longed to see the grand landscapes of this vast country with newly opened eyes.

I once attended a writing workshop with a marvelous teacher named Martha Gies. She taught us to approach our writing with the "traveler's mind." When you travel, you are more likely to notice details that you would miss in your daily life. You are looking for novelty and you open yourself to it, whereas in daily life, the familiar is what comforts us. She taught us to write always as if we were on vacation, seeking the new and the interesting. I have learned that I am happiest when I live the same way, as if on permanent vacation, always on the prowl for the fresh and surprising detail. Otherwise, life's a rut. And, as the saying goes, the only difference between a rut and a grave is the depth of the hole.

Thinking back on the worst weeks of my illness–the time after surgery, after interleukin-2 treatments, and just following radiation–the time when a nine-centimeter inoperable tumor in my chest fouled my lungs and blocked my esophagus so that I could swallow only mashed-up food–when I had yet to learn whether the harsh cancer treatments would benefit me–when I knew only that I did not want to push myself up off my couch to get a needed drink of water, I discovered one of the dreariest aspects of dying of cancer. It is really, really boring.

There *was* one thing I could do which gave me enjoyment, and that was to watch movies. So I stayed on my couch and watched three, four, and five movies a day. The concentration needed for reading was beyond me. Movies, on the other hand, would go on with or without my attention, and a snippet of dialogue would intrigue me even when I had napped through most of the movie– "Fasten your seat belts, it's going to be a bumpy night." (Thank you, Bette Davis.) I watched so many movies during that time on the couch that I felt guilty. I'd become a movie junkie. I thought, I get to lie around and watch back-to-back movies while other poor slobs have to go to work. Lucky me. But I suppose that stretches the concept of looking on the bright side.

So, in the winter of 2009, when I got the good news that my expiration date had been extended and that I had won the Melanoma Treatment Lottery, where the odds are about as unfavorable as the

Publishers Clearing House Sweepstakes, I was determined to end the boredom of dying. I vowed to suck the juicy joy out of life.

I recognized the miraculous gift of a second chance. I hesitate to mention gifts and miracles, because it might seem like I'm dipping my toe in the baptismal font of religiosity. Trust me, that's not where this is heading. I'm not steeped in anyone's doctrine. But I do think about grace: when a person, through no personal merit, having done nothing more than any other terminal cancer patient, gets a second chance. There is a calm, a balm, a peaceful sigh of relief in feeling saved from certain doom. But call me skeptical–my best guess is that no misty, ghosty thingy sprinkles grace like Tinkerbell's fairy dust. I would never be rude enough to claim that God was protecting me above the many who have died of cancer. That's just wrong.

I'm not about to confirm any theology. I won't arbitrate the dispute over whether heaven consists of harps and haloes, phalanxes of virgins, or a tedious eternity with your dysfunctional family. I haven't a clue. I can only talk about life, and on that subject, I advocate living passionately and abundantly. Period. My purpose in writing this book is to show how much living can be done in the valley of the shadow of death.

So if you'd like to join me in a cross-country adventure, to see how a late-stage cancer patient seizes each day and packs it with geological marvels, wildlife adventures, and campsite calamities, then climb in and we'll take a freewheeling ride across this grand continent where we'll stand awestruck before the grandeur of life itself.

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Chapter Two

My basic purpose in driving across the country was to get from my home in urban Portland, Oregon, to our family farmhouse in rural New Hampshire where I am now writing this account. My more important purpose was to pour myself into America and to wrap America around me like a blanket. I needed to grow larger than myself and larger than my cancer.

I planned on taking almost three weeks because I wanted to avoid miserably long driving days and to sightsee at will along the way. Uncharacteristically, I drove partly on multi-lane, interstate highways. I normally choose only back roads through small towns so I can look around while driving. But I decided to travel in spurts, whizzing by some lovely countryside in order to pause at the great landscapes of the national parks. I'm sorry that some states got short shrift. I have learned that all states, including Oklahoma and Iowa have their scenic merits, although I have, on occasion, resorted to munching Cheetos to ease the boredom of vast stretches of not-much-to-see.

Everyone has a different style of traveling, so I won't pontificate on travel tips, but I started off with piles of predictable stuff: tent, sleeping bag, air mattress, cooler, dishes, camp stove, camera and binoculars, plus my trusty box of AAA maps, tour books and campground guides. And, needless to say, a big hat and lots of sunblock.

I will give only one travel tip right now. Listen up, ladies. Men, block your ears. Don't want to leave your cozy tent at night to go to the bathroom or the nearest bush? The best port-a-pee-pot in the world is a Folger's red plastic coffee can. No kidding. Do remove the coffee first. Inside your tent, you hold the handy handle and squat right over that puppy and then click the lid back on in case you kick it over in the night. This one piece of advice should be worth the cost of this book.

For men, it's been suggested to try a Gatorade bottle, but I have not had the privilege to observe how well that works.

Back to my pile of camping gear. On day one, I recruited my cheerful neighbor, Chris, to help me load my mounds of boxes and duffel bags into my aging Honda Passport. Chris is a worldly fellow, and is not easily taken aback, but I noticed the most peculiar expression on his face as he surveyed my possessions. I suspect the foolhardiness of what I was about to embark on was just dawning on him. His stunned look might have carried a touch of envy, but more likely he thought I was bonkers.

The first day was a breezy love affair with Oregon. As soon as I left Portland I was in the famous Columbia Gorge. This is a world-class destination for travelers who flock to see precipitous cliffs with cascading waterfalls galore. The gorge was carved out about 12,000 years ago during an ice age in which Lake Missoula (a modern name for a prehistoric lake the size of Lakes Erie and Ontario combined) burst its 2,500-foot-high ice dam. The entire lake roared westward over Idaho, Washington, and Oregon and got funneled through the gorge. Roiling with car-sized boulders imbedded in ice, the raging water smashed against the hillsides, gouging out the steep cliffs of the gorge in one sudden calamity. Or actually, a series of them. The ice age was in full swing, so the ice dam would form again, and within a hundred years would burst again and repeat the destruction. The geologists are still counting up how often this happened, but the series of floods carved out the gorge and dumped thick layers of soil into Oregon's Willamette Valley, which now boasts a rich, agricultural plain.

In the gorge, I drove past the Bonneville Dam. It spreads across the vast Columbia River in a phenomenal feat of engineering accomplished way back in the 1930's. Every time I drive through it I sing, out loud, Woody Guthrie's song, "Roll on, Columbia, roll on. Roll on, Columbia, roll on. Your power is turning our darkness to dawn, so roll on, Columbia, roll on." This giant dam still provides much of the power for the entire West Coast.

Of course, dams are controversial. The lakes that form behind them displace everything. Human communities, fragile ecosystems, and Native American petroglyphs all disappear as the water rises. Dams are good examples of both human ingenuity and human hubris.

There is talk now of removing the dams. Even with salmon ladders, dams impact fish migrations and threaten the salmon's survival. It seems that hatchery-bred salmon lose some of their genetic hardiness, and are not a true substitute for the native salmon.

The salmon fisheries are themselves controversial. Everybody vies for a piece of the salmon action, including sea lions. During the salmon runs, you can stand near the Bonneville Dam and watch sea lions cavort in the current below the dam. They have something to cavort about, since they can easily snag their fill of migrating salmon. The fishermen hate the sea lions. Sea lions are big and fat. It's no secret how they got that way. The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife is perpetually trying to relocate the sea lions, but sometimes resorts to killing them.

Then there are the conflicts between the Native Americans and the rest of the fishermen. The tribes exercise their treaty rights to take salmon at their usual and accustomed fishing grounds "for as long as the rivers shall flow" and thus piss off the white guys who are subject to quotas. So it's the commercial fishermen versus the sports fishermen versus the Native Americans versus the sea lions. And it's the salmon versus the dams. It would take somebody much smarter than I am to referee that melee.

The gorge is wooded and, on the day I traveled through it, shared the rainy weather of Portland. As I drove east, the sun came out and the gorge flattened, first into the lush fruit orchards of Hood River, and then into the dry, treeless country where golden wheat fields spread across gently rolling hills.

On the car radio, I lost Portland's jazz and classical stations, and picked up Central Oregon's country and Mexican music stations. Stations that play authentic Mexican *ranchera* music, including *narcocorridos*, thrive in Central Oregon, where many Mexicans find agricultural work. The music has the classic sound of accordions with a polka-like beat and lyrics in Spanish laced with yipping aye, aye, ayes.

The *narcocorridos* are a fascinating sub-genre of traditional Mexican ballads. They tell of the daring exploits of drug runners outwitting the authorities. Occasionally they express repentance, but more often they glorify the drug dealers. This stems from a long Mexican tradition of romanticizing bandits who flaunt authority, as in the famous nineteenth century novel, *El Zarco* by Ignacio Manuel Altamirano.

As I drove along, one of the Spanish songs that caught my attention was a ballad with a twist. The singer describes the alluring pulchritude of his lover, and we expect the usual theme: "I can't help it. Passion is stronger than morality." But the sultry lover turns out to be the man's own wife.

I love to drive along the blue-green Columbia River with its tugboats and barges, its windsurfers and kiteboarders. Windsurfers stand on boards to which sails are attached. It takes great strength to hang on and scoot over the water, and even more strength to pull the sail up out of the drink when the windsurfer ditches. Kiteboarders get tugged along at breakneck speed by parachute-like kites, and the boarder sometimes goes airborne. I was driving where the bluff blocked the river from view, and was surprised to see this fellow flying through the air beside me. I hope his mother doesn't know what he's up to.

Forests of windmills adorn the bluffs at the river's edge. The windmills have proliferated in recent years in response to our need for alternate forms of energy. They look slim and graceful. A monumental, tapering pole supports three aerodynamically sleek blades that turn with slow ease. The insertion of these manmade giants into the landscape does not offend my eye. There is charm to their gentle dance above the wheat fields.

In places, there are tracks left by the wagon wheels of the pioneers who drove across the prairies to settle in Oregon. The desert is slow to regenerate, and those tracks are still visible.

Past Pendleton, Oregon, home of a famous rodeo called the Pendleton Round-Up, the road climbs into wooded hills. Emigrant Springs State Park on Blue Mountain provides lovely campsites conveniently close to the highway–a bit too close for sensitive ears. The light was dimming and it was time for me to stop. I had forgotten that by mid-September the days would be noticeably shorter than in summer. During this trip I soon turned expert at making camp in darkness. I also imagined a balmy Indian summer, but, of course, at high elevations, even on warm days, the temperature can plummet at night.

I decided a campfire would be cozy, and I purchased a huge bundle of dry, pitchy pine by placing several dollar bills in a metal box nailed to a tree, and wheeling the wood to my site in a conveniently provided cart. The pitch helps keep the fire burning and its scent evokes memories of childhood campfires, rich and pungent.

The first evening by my campfire was idyllic. I sank into the lap of nature with no resistance. The pines rustled, the stars blinked, the friendly, muted voices of other campers floated my way, and the fire was just enough to take the chill off the mountain night. I had no guitar with me, but I felt like singing, so I sang *a capella*, at first timidly–more humming than singing–and then, without reserve. "Summertime, and the livin' is easy. Fish are jumpin'...," first sticking to the melody and then jazzing it up. I progressed to, "No one to talk with. All by myself. No one to walk with, but I'm happy on the shelf. Ain't misbehavin', I'm savin' my love for you, for you, savin' it for yoo-oo." Yeah, I really got into it.

Regarding my worries about sleeping on an air mattress in a tent, I wrote in my log, "I did well–minimum of aches and pains in lower back." That, of course means I had aches and pains, but ignored them. Cancer-caused anemia had fatigued me for several years, and repeated cancer treatments had clobbered me over and over. A few aches and pains were child's play.

* * *

My ordeal began nineteen years earlier, in 1990, when I went to my doctor for a routine check-up. He looked at a mole on my back and said, "That's coming off." I had been suspicious of that mole and had pointed it out to two prior doctors. They were unconcerned. Their lack of perspicacity delayed my diagnosis. This third doctor carved it off and shipped it to a lab. Uh oh. Trouble. It was "level three" melanoma, meaning it had grown deeper than the surface of my skin. It was described by the pathologist as “an ominous looking tumor.” It had “some capillary involvement,” meaning it might have begun to ship nasty cancer cells throughout my body. The doc used the word “metastasize,” meaning spread. Who knows why doctors eschew the perfectly clear word, “spread” for the meaty mouthful, “metastasize.” But then, I was a lawyer until my retirement, so who am I to squawk about opaque language?

I was in the prime of my law career and the news of the nasty mole felt like a punch to the gut. I was only forty-four years old, and I mentally played out my untimely demise over and over.

A friend gave me a tape that taught meditation and positive imaging techniques, and I grabbed onto it to calm myself. “Imagine yourself in a beautiful, peaceful place,” the tape advised. It had a certain musical background that, to this day, brings up a memory of me sitting on a sunny rock by a gurgling stream, desperately trying to forget that I might soon die of cancer.

Although only marginally successful at calming my agitation, the tape helped me to focus on the fact that I was living. Such a simple concept. I’m still sucking air. Must mean I’m alive. So far, so good. That concept has served me well, like when I convinced myself that I was lucky to be watching so many movies during my hideous radiation. Focusing on life’s pleasures has saved me from total despair. During the most grim moments, I’ve learned to grab whatever feeds my spirit. I cling to simple things like a friendly voice on the hospital phone, even though I warn the friend I probably won’t remember the call because they’ve doped me to the gills.

So, after my original diagnosis, I had a surgical procedure called a “wide excision.” They removed a big patch of skin around the original tumor site and checked for more ugly cells. I got my first good news. No more cancer cells. Then we had a tough decision. Do we watch and wait or do we clobber my system with chemo or whatever they were using in those days? The well-considered opinion at that time was to watch and wait. For years it seemed to have been the right decision. My quality of life was just ducky, I had regular blood checks and lung x-rays and skin checks, and ... nothing. One year, two years, three, four, and five. Zero, zip, nada. Boy, am I lucky. I beat that bad boy. I even outlived my first oncologist who died tragically in an airplane accident. (Now I warn my oncologists to watch out. I plan to outlive them all.)

So, unbeknownst to me, I had already won the Melanoma Lottery once before this. The cancer cells had, of course, secretly spread beyond the original site, and when that happens, they predict you'll take the dirt nap within about five years of diagnosis. The fact that I was not noticeably affected by my cancer for sixteen years is miracle number one. All that time, my immune system must have been tap dancing on those nasty cells. I've become a big-time cheerleader for my own immune system. "Push 'em to the left. Push 'em to the right. Come on system, fight, fight, fight."

Chapter Three

In eastern Oregon, in the town of Wallowa, tucked at the base of the towering Wallowa mountain range, are real, working ranches. A college pal of mine owns one, and her daughters, all three Smith College graduates, have each put in time running it. They combine the wisdom of their forebears with modern ideas of sustainability to create the next generation in the all-important process of producing the food we eat. I called ahead and asked if I could visit on my way through. Daughter *du jour,* Nora said, "I'll be slaughtering a goat this morning, but you're free to drop by."

Slaughtering a goat? Uh oh. Ding, ding, ding. Mortality rings its death knell. Here one minute. Gone the next. Life. Death. Can I deal with watching a warm-blooded mammal meet its maker? I avoid killing insects. (Mosquitos, hear this–you are one big exception). Who am I to callously make life and death choices for some creature who has beat impossible odds in the evolutionary sweepstakes and is happily enjoying its moment in the sun? But I do eat meat. So that means I nurture my own squeamishness while somebody else plays hatchet man. Maybe it was time I faced up to where my food comes from.

It was a warm, sunny day and the road to Wallowa wound through Hells Canyon Scenic Byway along a clear, sparkling river and up a ravine that opens out to the high ranchlands that snug up to the dramatic Wallowa mountains. On the AAA map, that road shows little dot, dot, dots along it, meaning that it is an exceptionally scenic route. This route certainly earned its dot, dot, dots.

As soon as I arrived at the ranch I was greeted by Nora who is lovely, lanky, and lean, with the shoulders of a linebacker from farm work, firefighting, and leading pack trains of elk hunters into the mountains. Her helper that day was a retired airline pilot from Alaska who globe trots in his private plane to hunt with his buddies, of whom Nora is apparently one. Bird hunting was on their afternoon agenda.

We immediately jumped into a field jeep to ride up through the pasture to mend a fence. While Nora and her friend stooped and propped fence poles and tugged and stapled barbed wire, the nearby llamas, cattle, and horses came clustering from curiosity, while a good old farm dog napped in the shade of the jeep. I stood photographing and pulling clean air into my radiation-damaged lungs. Waves of contentment swept over me. I was keenly aware of the privilege of living to see that lovely day.

We bounced through the fields back to the barn for the goat slaughter. Nora had agreed to provide a goat for a barbeque to be held by a group of forest-fire fighters. I took photographs–before and after pictures–throughout the process. But I was careful not to bond too much with Billy before the deed was done. He was a pretty, all-brown fellow, chosen because of the even color of his coat, which Nora planned to tan. He ran freely with the other goats in their comical joltings and bumpings as they wandered, unfenced about the ranch.

The process turned out to be intriguing, and I did, indeed, learn about where food comes from. The slaughter was swift, neat, and ethical. Here's how to properly slaughter a goat:

Separate Billy from the others and give him a bowl of grain. While his head is down, and he is happily munching his last meal, administer a quick bullet to the brain with a .22 rifle. (There was discussion over whether a pistol might have been better, but it was over in the other house.) Lights out occurs simultaneously with the gunshot cracking, and the goat feels nothing. There is subsequent muscle twitching in the legs, but the goat is already dead by then. The twitching is a result of muscles going limp and releasing tension.

Hang the goat upside-down by its hind legs and let it bleed out.

(Yes, there is blood. It is red. It drips on the green grass where the dog licks it up.) Then slit the hide up the belly, and, starting from the hind hooves, peel it off in one piece with the help of a sharpened knife. Spread the hide slimy side up in the sun and thoroughly salt it for later freezing, then tanning. Slit the goat's belly, and let all the innards slide out into a waiting bucket, leaving a clean cavity that doesn't need washing. Save the heart in a bowl of cold water and promptly refrigerate. Wipe off visible blood with a damp cloth, but don't wash thoroughly, because a skein will form to protect the meat.

Not all of these procedures went without mild controversy between Nora and the older, slightly imperious airline pilot, who exercised a self-imposed duty to instruct the young lady who had already, herself, dressed out countless elk, deer, and farm animals. Nora was appropriately civil, and only occasionally mentioned her prior experience as they decided such things as whether you should gut the goat while it is still lying down, as you would an elk in the woods, or whether you should hang it up first, then gut it. And should you use a nearby barn bucket instead of a thoroughly cleaned house bowl to hold the heart? Should you wash off the blood with water, or should you just let the skein form? The discussions were businesslike and never descended to squabbling. They do teach those Smith College girls tact.

A death occurred that day. The goat was playing and romping, and then, in an instant, it was meat for the table. As businesslike as the process was, people did notice death. Several workers drove by the barn and saw the pearly flesh of the skinned goat and teased, "What terrible things you're doing to that goat." Then they drove off, laughing. It was like, see death, oh-my-god, crack a joke, drive on.

And when Nora was up to her wrists in blood as she knelt on the grass spreading heaps of salt on the hide, she reached out and patted the severed head of the goat, with its closed eyes and stubby horns. She said, “Hi, cutey. You look like you’re just sleeping.”

I told Nora that I was impressed with how humanely it was done. I said, “When my time comes, I’m going to tell the doctor to give me a bowl of Ben and Jerry’s, and when my head is down, to let me have it.”

* * *

The truth is, I have considered assisted suicide. Oregon law allows for it, but not, of course, with a bullet to the brain. A doctor must declare that you are within six months of dying. Two doctors must say you are mentally competent and are not depressed. (The law doesn’t explain how you avoid depression when you know you have less than six months to live.) Then the doctors can authorize a lethal overdose of something or other. This is one option for avoiding suffering when the end is inevitable.

An alternative option is called hospice. Once you choose hospice, all treatments are intended to be “palliative” which means their purpose is to ease your suffering. With your consent, or the consent of your pre-authorized caregiver, all curative treatments are stopped, but you can have pain killers and tranquilizers–whatever you need to feel better, and you can keep taking medications for any other chronic diseases you might have. You simply stop taking curative treatments for your life-threatening illness.

I had not officially reached the stage of hospice, but my radiation treatments were intended to be palliative only. The idea was to shrink my inoperable tumor just enough to let me continue eating on my own, before the tumor would grow back again and completely block my esophagus. Instead, much to everyone’s surprise, the tumor started shrinking and kept on shrinking and is still shrinking.

If my good luck doesn’t hold, and I must choose between assisted suicide and hospice, I don’t know which way I’ll lean.

Patient With Incurable Cancer Tosses Champagne in the Face of the Grim Reaper
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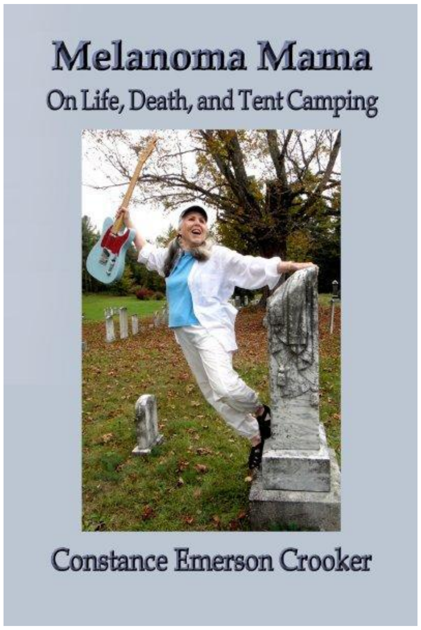

Retired trial attorney and professional writer, Constance Emerson Crooker takes an unflinching look at mortality in *Melanoma Mama: On Life, Death, and Tent Camping.* One reviewer, Rebecca Pepper Sinkler, former editor in chief of the N.Y. Times Book Review has said, "Melanoma Mama transcends the usual cancer journal, offering instead a true celebration of life and a glass of champagne tossed in the face of the Grim Reaper."

In *Melanoma Mama,* Constance Crooker shows the power of the human spirit to soar above the grim realities that come with a diagnosis of Stage IV cancer. She refuses to lie about death, so she relates both her fears and her sassy challenge to the Grim Reaper. In this true narrative, she deftly weaves two stories in contrapuntal harmony. The journeys into the darkness of her treatments are lightened as they intermingle with the sparkling tales of her solo, cross-country tent camping trip--a trip she had not expected to live long enough to enjoy. There is nothing typical about this book. It is a cornucopia of keen and funny observations about America's wild places told by an insatiably curious woman who is gregarious company on this road trip through life. You will meet a person who can find joy while entangled in a tango with death--a person who has learned that when life and death no longer matter, true joy is possible. The author's honesty will impact you forever, opening the door for you to bravely face life's deepest mysteries.

Constance Crooker's twenty two year struggle against this fatal disease has not ended. Just as the book was going to press a large melanoma tumor was spotted in her brain. After successful brain surgery she returned to the business of informing others how much living there is to be done in the valley of the shadow of death. She chronicles her ongoing saga at caringbridge.org under the site name, melanomamama. She is optimistically working on two more books: *Avoiding the Tuscan Sun: Melanoma Mama in Italy* and *Life in the Slow Lane: Melanoma Mama as Caregiver.* Her web page is melanomamama.com.

Melanoma Mama: On Life, Death, and Tent Camping by Constance Emerson Crooker

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