

Thirty days to live

An encounter with mortality

PAULO COELHO

Death is a beautiful woman, always by my side. She'll kiss me one day, I know. She's a companion who reminds me not to postpone anything — 'Do it now, do it now, do it now.' Her voice is not threatening, just constant. It tells me what matters is not how long I live, but how I live. I was once stranded in the Mojave Desert, running out of water, and without having read any of the manuals that tell you how to survive in the arid lands. And once, I got lost while climbing in the Pyrenees. Both times, I thought I would be leaving this life, but I didn't.

Five months ago, I went to the doctor for a medical check-up. I would never have done it on my own accord; my best friend forced me to. Her father had just died, and she insisted that all her friends should do a stress test for the heart. I told her, 'I'm not a hypochondriac.' She ordered me to do it anyway. So I went to the doctor's and did the stress test, which involved riding a stationary bicycle.

'Mr Coelho,' the doctor said, 'you have 30 days to live as two of your arteries are blocked.' I said, 'What?' And then, 'Are you sure? I'm not feeling anything.' 'It's a silent heart stroke,' said the doctor. 'Those two arteries are 90 per cent blocked.' I told him I'd quickly email other doctors to get second, third, fourth opinions. All turned out the same as the first — I would die in a month at the rate my arteries were clogging. I was scheduled for an urgent procedure two days after. It all depended on what they would find once they opened my heart, a process known as catheterisation. The surgeon would then ascertain if I required angioplasty or a bypass — or indeed, if I was beyond help.

For one day, 29 November, I sat with death. Being a Christian, I believe the question the Lamb of God will ask me isn't 'How much have you sinned?' but 'How much have you loved?' I felt immensely grateful that I've been able to share the last 33 years with Christina, my wife. Not many people find the love of their life; I did. (It did, though, take me four marriages to find her.) Christina and I have had the fullest experience of love, that sense of complicity and surrendering. So I feel I have loved fully.

Had I lived? I belong to the baby boom generation, and I've done it all — sex, drugs, rock 'n' roll. I was a hippie, a dropout, my parents' big headache. In 1974 I was arrest-

ed by the Brazilian military government for 'subversive' activities. I survived those crazy years and finally decided to do what I really wanted — become a writer. I'd had many years of doubt, with people telling me: 'Nobody makes a living out of writing.' But I felt it was not about making a living; it was about living.

There are two types of writers: those with a dense inner life, such as Proust and Joyce, and those who have to experience things to write about them, such as Hemingway and Baudelaire. I need to experience what I write. I wrote my first book when I was 40 — when others were thinking about retiring. I started a new life. The book was called *The Pilgrimage*.

I'm still writing. If it had all been just for money, I would have stopped 15 years ago, with *The Alchemist*. Writing is my calling,

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something I do with all my energy and love. On 29 November this is what I was thinking: I've had love, I've done everything I wanted to do, and I have fulfilled my mission, my personal bliss. If I died tomorrow, I would be leaving this world full of joy. In the end, it has nothing to do with whether you believe in an afterlife. Everyone wants to face death with honour and dignity.

Obviously — since I am writing this — I didn't die. The catheterisation revealed that I had three arteries that were totally blocked. The doctor opened them by angioplasty, using a balloon. He inserted three stents, metallic tubes that would keep my arteries open. When I came to, he said, 'You can play golf in two days.' I told him I was more of an archery man myself.

Since then, I have continued with life as normal. Now, though, I follow a diet of sorts. I also bring a GPS with me when I'm out in the mountains, just in case. My wife and I spend a lot of time walking in the highlands. Sometimes I find myself wondering: what if my friend hadn't forced me to go to the doctor — where would I be now?

Christina and I scale the slopes as we have always done, but now I keep an eye on the co-ordinates, in case we lose our way.

BAROMETER

Imperial diamond

This week's diamond jubilee celebrations will be hard-pressed to outdo those of Queen Victoria's in 1897.

— A diamond jubilee was supposed to be a 75th anniversary, but it was brought forward by the government as an excuse for a mass celebration aimed at promoting British trade.

— On 22 June, the Queen was conveyed in a carriage along a six-mile route ending at St Paul's, where an open air service was held so she did not have to disembark.

— Six million were estimated to have watched the procession. For 400,000 of them, however, it was not necessarily just patriotism that spurred them to attend: they were plied with free ale and pipe tobacco supplied by grocer Sir Thomas Lipton.

Royally satisfied

An Ipsos-Mori opinion poll suggested that 80 per cent of Britons want to keep the monarchy. How does that compare with other constitutional monarchies?

Denmark (Jylands Posten 2010)	82%
Netherlands (Maurice de Hond 2008)	70%
Norway (Dagbladet 2010)	67%
Spain (Instituto Opina/Cadena Ser)	65%
Sweden (FSI 2010; question was whether monarchy was 'good')	46%

Opening gambit

Some things opened by the Queen which have struggled to survive her reign:

1955 The Queen's Building, Heathrow. It became Terminal 2, but closed in 2009 for redevelopment

1956 Calder Hall nuclear power station. Renamed Windscale and then Sellafield. Original power station closed 2003

1969 QE2, the cruise liner. Withdrawn from service in 2008

1972 Runcorn City Shopping Centre. Went into receivership in 2009. Now in the process of redevelopment and known as Halton Lea Shopping Centre

1974 Queen Elizabeth II Park Recreation Centre, Christchurch, New Zealand. Closed after earthquake damage, 2011

Silver memories

The Silver Jubilee, 1977, in numbers:

TV viewers (worldwide) who watched the procession down the Mall **500 million**

Miles travelled by the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh on their jubilee tours.....

56,000

Street parties in London.....

4,000

Congratulation cards received by the Queen.....

100,000

Sales of the Sex Pistols' 'God Save the Queen' in the week of the Jubilee celebrations.....

200,000