

times2

'I am preparing for death and everyone else is on Instagram'

At 35, the academic Kate Bowler was told she had incurable cancer — now she is re-thinking life to live it three months at a time, she tells **Barbara McMahon**

Two and a half years ago Kate Bowler's life hummed with energy and possibility. The British-born academic had a baby son, a happy marriage and a successful career as a religious historian in the United States. Then at the age of 35 she was informed that the abdominal pains she had been experiencing were a sign of stage-four colon cancer. Her condition was incurable. "It never occurred to me that I would experience the kind of tragedy that would totally take my life apart," Bowler says.

She wrote her memoir, *Everything Happens For a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved*, in hospital waiting rooms while having chemotherapy and immunotherapy



Kate Bowler with her husband, Toban, and their son, Zach

treatments. "I am preparing for death and everyone else is on Instagram," she writes.

The words poured out, she says. "I was trying to understand some of the delusions I'd been under, like thinking that I was the architect of my own life. I wanted to take to grips with stuff I couldn't say out loud because it didn't seem polite or kind, like what it would mean for my family to lose me and that actually I'm afraid of death. I had a lot of questions about what I could hope for."

She realised she had wasted too much time looking at the horizon. "I was constantly forward-thinking: what's next for my career, what's next for our home renovations, what's next for our son, what trip

should we take?" says Bowler, who has a big, effervescent personality and a megawatt smile.

In her book she describes it as "arrogance, of becoming impervious to



book is an example of the platitudes that Bowler heard after her diagnosis.

Many people find it awkward to talk to a person with cancer, she says, because it's a reminder of how fragile our lives are. "We want to rush in and paper over the big chasm that lies in front of all of us, but there's really only so much you can do to fill the void.

"I've had hundreds of people tell me everything happens for a reason," she says. "The most common one is what I call 'death by free association'. I remind people of something terrible and all of a sudden I'm hearing about their aunt who died ten years ago."

She finds it particularly hard when people ask, "How are you really?" because it puts pressure on her. She knows they want her to be positive. "I think of it like cocker spaniel face — their heads tilt to the side a little bit and they go, 'Aww'. I'm grateful that they're trying to reach into my life, but what it does is it makes me have to respond to their sadness as opposed to me just being where I was at the minute before I met them.

"The thing is, I didn't choose cancer. I never wanted to be eclipsed by this stupid, terrible thing and so I miss the way people talked to me before. Let's talk about the weather! I'll take that!"

“It's a casserole illness — if I say 'cancer' people bring me food

In her book she lists phrases to avoid when talking to cancer sufferers and suggests better approaches.

Bowler is an assistant professor at Duke Divinity School in North Carolina and her first book was *Blessed*, about a doctrine called the prosperity gospel that claims that God offers the faithful the certainty that everything will work out for the best.

The randomness of her cancer diagnosis led Bowler to re-examine her faith. "I was sure I'd earned God's favour. I go to church, I'm pretty good at praying. I'm reasonably nice to people — I was on the good-girl Christian train, absolutely," she says. "I had to think, 'What does it mean to say I am a person of faith when faith doesn't mean certainty any more?'"

Christianity has been a comfort. "In the worst moments of my life I really felt that God loved me. It didn't mean protection and it didn't even mean everything would work out, but I do have the overwhelming sense that God is there somehow."

With immunotherapy treatment Bowler is managing her illness. Every three months she gets a scan and, depending on the result, is given another three months' breathing space. "Right now I'm not terminal, I'm incurable, and who knows what that means? I walk up to the edge of the cliff, find out if there is a bridge or not, and so far there's always been one, so I cross it and then I've got another 90 days," she says.

"I'm stuck in the present tense and everything is slightly terrifying, but it turns out that it has many advantages. I'm more grateful than I ever was for my gorgeous kid, for my marriage — but the language of ambition is gone. You're not working to try and get somewhere else, you're working to keep what you already have.

"I'm not trying to sugar-coat how genuinely horrible it feels. Yesterday my blood work went badly and I immediately started crying. But I do find that as a mother and a wife and a friend it is causing me to pay very close attention to the beauty in my life."

It must be difficult to have life parcelled out three months at a time. Bowler agrees. "How do I live beautifully within 90 days as if it were my last? It's a constant juggling act. Yesterday was all about scans and hospital time. At the same time I'm teaching and want to be there for my students, and then I have a four-year-old with an earache who wants to snuggle. Part of it is quarantining each part of my life, and the other is just learning that there is only so much I can do in a day and being alive also means starting to be more realistic about my limitations."

Bowler's voice catches when she talks about her husband, Toban, whom she has known since she was 14 and married when she was 22, and their four-year-old son, Zach. In her book she acknowledges that she will probably be her son's "first goodbye".

"I don't get to promise him that I will always be there, but I'm hoping to give him a way of looking at the world where he can see both the pain and the beauty at the same time and know that they don't cancel each other out. I want to guarantee that his life will be rich and beautiful and mostly easy, and I know already that it's not possible. But if I can offer him what I'm learning — that even in the worst moments there's something really gorgeous there — and if he can learn to see that and live with that, then he's going to be a pretty lovely human being."

Everything Happens For a Reason is roaring up the bestseller lists in the United States and Bowler says she has been taken aback by the reaction. She has a blog and a podcast in which she interviews other people about dark moments in their lives and how they got through them.

"In writing the book I didn't feel, 'Wow, I have a lot of unique feelings about cancer that I want to share with everyone,'" Bowler says. "I was imagining that there is a whole world of people who are struggling under the weight of positivity and other people's expectations and not being sure how to hope for their lives when they can't keep it together any more.

"And that's a world way beyond cancer — that's divorce and parents dying and not being able to pay the bills. Cancer is a casserole illness. If I say it out loud people will bring me food and other comforts, but there are so many other tragedies people experience where no one helps and that breaks my heart."

Bowler says cancer makes her see life in full colour. "It's weird: the worse things get, the more things seem bright and clear," she says. "The sense of tragedy and joy really are side by side. We've bought a 3ft silver Airstream trailer and we're rehabbing it and we're going to take a giant, stupid trip and go and see the Spam Museum and the world's largest ball of twine [in Cawker City, Kansas].

"I am trying to pursue whimsy because it's for no reason. When you start to slow down you realise that almost all the good things are for no reason. I plan on doing more of that in my next three months."

Everything Happens For a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved by Kate Bowler is published by SPCK (£12.99)

Drunk shopping: my late-night pleasure

My Hermes delivery driver, Spencer, knows when I've been drinking. It's that blank, then surprised look I have on my face that tells him that I've completely forgotten that I bought whatever is in that bag he's holding. "At the chardonnay, were we?" he cackles before disappearing to deliver something else from Asos to another crapulent housewife down the road.

Come on, we all do it. A recent survey published by marketwatch.com reports that last year Americans spent an average of \$448 a person in drunk purchases. Generation X spent the most while sloshed, averaging \$738 a person, while millennials spent \$206.

Alison Loehnis, the president of the online luxury clothing giant Net A Porter, has confirmed that one of their busiest times is when people are two drinks down. "It's that kick-back moment at 9pm when we notice a big surge in sales," she says. And I think we all know what "kick-back" means.

I reckon I make my most confident online shopping decisions about half an hour after drinking exactly 200ml of white wine. Like those Hummel high-top trainers or these £60 Astrid & Miyu gold hoop earrings that I am wearing right now. Let's just forget about that time I bought 500 extra plastic syringes for a Calpol bottle. Or those cutwork stripper heels from Topshop, or the boiled wool dress from Isabel Marant.

Clearly to make themselves feel better, people share their weird tipsy purchases on Instagram with the hashtag #drunkpurchase or #drunkshopping. For example, @drinkbev from California who bought a pair of yellow roller skates.

That is playtime compared with some of the things that my followers on Instagram buy: Alice Hillis from Clapham in south London bought 10,000 "nail gems" from China; Claire Shell from Gloucestershire won a piano on eBay for £10 even though no one in her family plays it. Izzy and Ben Ansell from Peckham

Rye bought a Jeep Cherokee when drunk at Christmas.

"It's definitely his best ever drunk purchase," says Izzy.

Then there's Lulu Johnston from Barnes who woke up one morning to an email from Christie's auction house and discovered she had bought a print. "No idea why I had gone online to Christie's," she says.

Perhaps my favourite story is that of Kate Bennis, a video producer in New York, who told Market Watch that she bought her cat a mini police officer costume one night after having some drinks. She said it's one of the best things she has bought.

The saving grace of drunk shopping is, of course, that most purchases can be returned. The stripper shoes and the dress went straight back. I've still got the syringes if anyone wants one? Or ten?

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life itself. I failed to love what was present. Looking back, I was horrified by how easily I'd treated my life like a series of consumables, believing that there would always be more."

In the midst of grief was the absurd. A harpist played in the foyer of one of her cancer clinics, background music that was uncomfortably celestial for her. In another clinic she saw a poster that read: "Laughter is the best medicine." She described the tone that doctors take with cancer patients as "hostage-negotiator neutral", with the doctors trying to manage the sufferer's emotions and evading the truth.

She took to swearing because the lives of everyone around her seemed to be marching on while hers had ground to a halt. "I was losing my cool. I really was," she says, laughing. "I used the f-word, the likes of which my family has never seen. I think it was because of the absurdity [of what was happening] and I couldn't believe that I could feel so lonely."

Family, friends and colleagues have weaved a "human web" of love and concern around her — but people don't always get it right. The title of the