

WILL POWER GIRL

A TEENAGER'S

TREK METTE DE FINE LICHT

THROUGH

»Beautifully written.
Open, sincere and
packed with insight.« **CANCER**

*Simon Davies, CEO
Teen Cancer America*

METTE DE FINE LICHT

**WILLPOWER
GIRL**

**A Teenager's Trek
Through Cancer**

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Foreword

“You don’t say. There’s no way. No one would ever be able to tell.”

That’s the response I usually get when I say I had cancer. Fortunately. Who would want to be gaunt, pale, and bald forever after?

Although the grim days of cancer are now past me, there’s nothing pleasant about uttering, “I had cancer.”

Why? Because it reminds you of the hell you lived through, and because it can make people’s eyes pop quizzically out of their sockets as they do a double-take about whether they heard “have” or “had.” To put an illness in the past tense requires both experience and awareness. I practice every day. I have to. Not because I want to declare it out loud to everyone I meet, but because cancer has left a big scar — a constant reminder of what I experienced — on both my body and soul.

My right leg is now made of metal. It comes with some physical limitations that often require me to ask for help or find an excuse if I don’t decline an activity outright. I can’t walk very far and can hardly carry my own suitcase or take the trash out. I’m certainly no longer able to ride horses or go skiing, the very activities that were once my favorite things in life.

My native thirst for speed has me enthusiastically driving a three-wheeled electric trike called Victoria instead. An unusual couple zipping along the bike lanes of Copenhagen, we turn heads and prompt all kinds of glances and queries at intersections and red lights.

What does my metal prosthesis actually look like?

It sits under my skin. My foot and thigh are my own, but the bone in between is made of metal.

If you're raising your brow, it's completely understandable — I've even met doctors who didn't believe it was possible. Were it not for my physical limitations and the long scar, people wouldn't be able to tell that anything had ever been awry.

When a very special person unexpectedly walked into my life for ten consequential minutes over ten years ago, I wasn't able to detect her prosthesis either. I lay in bed, chemo gray and nauseous, when a blond woman in her early twenties opened the door to my hospital room. She explained that only a few years prior she herself had lain in the very bed I was in now, and she lifted her pant leg to reveal a scar running from her thigh to her ankle.

I met Susanne only once, yet she has kept me company ever since. For me, she was my only real, living picture of a future without cancer, chemo, and nausea. When the pain was at its worst, when the fight seemed hopeless and I wanted to give up, I thought of her. She gave me the strength and courage to believe that my hair would be long and shiny again one day and that the physical and psychological wounds would heal.

In the decade that has passed, my leg has hardly become normal. It has, however, healed well. The limitations may not have gotten easier, but my hair is long and more-or-less shiny, and it's now time for me to move past the emotional scars too.

May this book be someone else's Susanne.

Mette de Fine Licht, 2016



Mette, 16 years old

**In every bright and sunny life, some water must fall.
This is my rainy season.**

An Abrupt Message

“They called from the hospital.”

My father stands at the threshold of my room. His forehead is creased with worry.

“They know what’s wrong with your leg, Mette,” he continues.

“Okay then,” I answer in an indifferent tone as I rifle through the clothes in my closet. “Where’d my raincoat go? Did I already put it in the duffel with the tent? Or is it stuffed in with the sleeping bag and my stockpile of granola bars?”

“Mette, hold on a second,” he says firmly.

I back out of the closet and shoot him an impatient look. I don’t have time for whatever he has to say. My friends are waiting for me at an annual music festival, and they’re saving a spot for my best friend, Rickie, and me to pitch our tent. She and I are inseparable, and it has been a week since our tearful separation from our classmates at the close of spring semester. We spent our first weekend of the summer at her house laughing and crying as we reminisced about the unforgettable school year. We also did a big shop for all the food we needed for the upcoming week. The provisions we have stowed away are far more than two sixteen-year-old girls could ever eat.

“We’ve got to have extra snacks to share with everyone at the campsite,” or so we had assured Rickie’s parents when they cast a worried glance at our overflowing cart.

My parents would have had the same reaction. But today is different. There are far more pressing subjects than an excess of food.

Right now we're blazing through the house to pick up my things. There's no time to take off shoes or jackets, even though I know that tracking dirt across the carpet will not score me any points.

I look at my father in disbelief over his insistence on talking to me at this very moment. Why is he here at home in the first place? The wrinkles I see on his face are more a sign of sleeplessness than age. Surely he has been on call. He's a veterinarian who has worked around the clock since I can remember. Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve he is busy. On birthdays too, whether it is his child's, his wife's, or his own. Right now work is where he is supposed to be, just like he should be at most any hour.

So say something, I think. Don't waste precious time that I could otherwise be spending at the festival. In an instant his eyes turn cold and black. He opens his mouth to speak.

"It's cancer," he says. "Mette, you have cancer."

I stand straight up. All thoughts about rain gear, music, and snacks evaporate. My eyes fill with tears. I can sense my mother's eyes doing the same in another room not far away.

* * *

"Whhaat?" I choke...

We're sitting on the sofa. My mother, my father, Rickie, and I. Peter, my older brother by two years, is missing. He is camping with a bunch of friends. He'll be back next Saturday. It's Sunday afternoon now.

The coffee table is decked out with Coca-Cola in fancy glasses, each with a coaster underneath. Rickie sits with one leg bent and the other stretching out toward her glass. The carbonation has already left mine, and, for the first time ever, the thought of cola makes me sick.

“Well,” my father ekes out, “they called on Friday a few hours after you left for Rickie’s. The results from the scans came back faster than they thought.”

His tone turns cool and informational, and nearly as factual as if he were talking to one of his patients about a dog or cat. He has delivered this sort of news thousands of times in the course of his nearly thirty-year career. But today it’s his own daughter, rather than a dog owner, who sits across from him.

“We couldn’t imagine calling to tell you while you were at Rickie’s. There was just no way. This has been the longest weekend of our lives.” He sighs and looks toward my mother, who nods her head in full agreement.

I wonder if they had strategized about how to tell me: “You reply to her first remark. I’ll respond to the next. Then we’ll sit in the living room, give the girls a Coke, and just see how it goes.”

“Peter knows,” my mother begins, interrupting my cynical thoughts, which I nevertheless know are off the mark. “We told him Friday night. He was devastated and in doubt about whether he should go. But we urged him to. He wrote a letter to you. It’s in your room.”

I stammer... There was a letter? Was I too preoccupied by looking for my raincoat to see anything else?

A moment of silence falls over the room. All three of them stare at me. I don’t return their laser-like gaze. I’m completely frozen

and enormously confused. What does all this mean? What's happening? Aren't I supposed to be headed out the door?

"Is there something you want to say, Mette?" my mother asks after an awkward silence.

I manage to shake my head almost imperceptibly from side to side.

"What are you thinking?" she tries again, and gets a mere shrug of the shoulders.

Another flood of tears is about to pour from my eyes. Cancer? The tears stream in tandem with the thoughts. It can't be real. That's something only old people get. Something my grandfather got from smoking too much. Something he should have expected, or at least that's how my father describes it. He died before I was born. Will it kill me too, like it did him? Is that what my father just said?

Rickie grabs my hand. She's small in comparison to me, but she's incredibly strong. Am I strong too? Strong enough for this? Strong enough to cope with cancer?

One Year Earlier

It's Just a Sprain

The blood courses through every vein in my body. Oliver snorts below me. One, two, three...

Jump!

I keep count in my head and feel like I am soaring as the horse arcs over the hurdle with me on his back, before he lands exactly as intended.

When we hang midair in our gravity-defying dance, horse and rider suspended above the ground, my eyes dart to the next obstacle we'll undertake. I know there will be another one to clear within the split second after Oliver sets his hooves back on the ground. Surmounting these hurdles means always being ahead of the game. That's just the way it is. Oliver barely lands before he lunges into the next jump. The flow of my endorphins surges forward with him.

One, two, three...

Jump!

The sequence repeats itself over and again until we complete the ten-obstacle course. I let go of the reins and let him stretch his neck while I stroke his mane.

“What a good horse!”

Back in the stall, it is the same routine that we've had for years. Off with the saddle and harness. Water into the bucket. Several pats.

A few carrots. Hooves cleaned before a light brush of the coat, and then out to pasture with the other horses.

I watch in awe of the phenomenon of horsepower as he gallops toward his playmates. I, on the other hand, am completely exhausted. The thought of the two-mile bike ride home has me feeling like it is going to be the final leg of a triathlon, even though it is downhill most of the way. If I hurry, maybe I can get there in time for dinner.

I turn to go back into the barn and finish up.

“Ouch!” I cry out, even though there’s no one other than me in the barn today. It’s summer vacation, and it’s beach weather. You really have to be smitten with a horse to allow dust and riding boots to triumph over the summer heat. Or, you’ve had to put your horse up for sale. That is why I’m not wasting a single day, because I know Oliver and I will soon have to part. School starts in a week, and I have agreed with my parents’ wishes that he’ll be sold since I won’t have the time to ride him.

Ouch. There it is again. How odd. My right leg hurts when I put weight on it. The pain shoots up through my knee. What could it be? There wasn’t any hint of discomfort when I was in the saddle, was there? Maybe I twisted something without noticing, I think, as I stomp into the basement with the tack. I switch out the hot, black boots for something smaller and more seasonal and go to get my bike where I left it a few hours before. It’s a little less painful to pedal, but the strange, uncomfortable sensation is still shooting up my leg.

* * *

“Does this hurt?”

“Yes.”

“How about here?”

“Yep.”

A dark-haired doctor presses his hands on my leg. The pain has gotten worse, and, in just a few days, the area below my right knee has swollen into the size of a tennis ball. My bare legs dangle from the examination table. I am expecting the simple diagnosis of a sprain. Surely I'll be sent out the door in a flash, with a prescription in hand for a few pills to conjure the symptoms away just as quickly as they appeared. School starts in four days. The first week is all about getting to know one another, and we'll be out on a bike trip. I can't wait to go.

“OOOOW!”

The doctor looks at me in surprise. I stare back at him in disbelief. Can it really come as a startling revelation that it's precisely there that it hurts? He has been pressing the exact same spot for the last two minutes, and all the while I've been frank in my protestations.

Finally, he backs away from my leg and takes off his glasses as doctors often do before saying something.

“It looks like a simple sprain. But you say that you haven't been doing anything you normally don't do?”

He gives himself a proverbial scratch on the chin before adding:

“Mette, when you're fifteen years old and run, ride, and bike every day the way you do, it's not out of the ordinary to end up with a sore knee. You could also just be having growing pains.”

That's not quite it, I think. My five-foot-three frame hasn't changed in a while. This leg thing isn't a big deal — I am in

complete agreement with that — but I haven't had a growth spurt since I was thirteen.

“Okay. So what do I do now?” I say, feeling a bit annoyed not to be taken quite as seriously as I think the pain warrants. Growing pains? Come on. “School is about to start and all, you know. We're taking a bike trip as part of orientation.”

“A sprain requires rest. I know that's not what you want to hear, but I can't recommend that you participate. See if you can drive with the teachers instead of biking, and *no* climbing, or doing anything even remotely strenuous. Do you hear?”

Damn it. No miracle pills and no magic wand. Only aspirin, restriction, and rest. Even though I am not in agreement with the doctor's orders, the good girl in me nods obediently, knowing that she doesn't have a choice.

My leg really, really hurts.

Pursued by Pain

The morning run in gym class is getting harder each day, even though one and a half miles isn't exactly a long distance. We're only a few days into the term, and we're exercising outside while we can, before the season turns things dark and cold. If Rickie weren't always ready and on the mark, I'd never be on time and would get written up for skipping the mandatory morning sprint. Getting the blood flowing at such an early hour is itself a major victory, to be followed by the relief of a shower alongside the other girls in the locker room. This is where we rant and gossip about the newest couple and the latest ones to have broken up. It is where we complain about the teachers and our parents and all the things that they don't understand. On Mondays, we recap the weekend.

One morning, out of the blue, the pain returns. It is has been several months since I last felt it. Did I stress it again? Or could I have a case of shin splints, which has been going around as the temperatures have chilled outside? Maybe I've got another growth spurt coming on, I speculate.

Later, in the cafeteria, the teacher on duty notices me. She is a former nurse and very kind.

"What's wrong, Mette?" she pauses to ask in the hallway.

"I don't know. My leg is hurting the way it did during orientation. I've probably sprained it again."

Mrs. Carlsen looks quizzically at me.

"Are you sure?"

“Oh, yeah. I told Coach Johansen that I can’t make basketball practice,” I say.

I love basketball, but I don’t really know what got into me when I decided to sign up for the team. My height gives me the kind of view that my fellow players had as toddlers. Nevertheless, I persevere in the futile attempt to compete.

Coach Johansen also happens to be my geometry teacher. Everyone thinks he’s cool. I think I’m lucky that he feels that way about me too. When I just barely made it to the board to chalk up some theorems and triangles during his class this morning, he had the sense to tell me that I shouldn’t be dribbling a basketball at practice this afternoon. I ought to be going to the doctor instead, he said.

“I can’t say exactly what’s causing your pain, but it’s most likely a sprain or water on the knee. Rest and come back in a week if it’s still hurting,” sounds the assessment of a new doctor.

I do as advised. I keep my leg elevated and straight, hobble around as little as possible, with my knee again resembling a tennis ball. Rickie is often nearby to support me when I need to get my clothes on and off. Nothing helps. The pain holds steady. A week later, I’m back on the examination block. This time there are two doctors dressed in white instead of one, plus an intern is now involved. He peers over his teacher’s shoulder.

“It’s definitely not water on the knee,” concludes the one who had otherwise said just the opposite only a week ago. “Continue taking it easy, and come back if it still hurts in two weeks.”

I shake my head and hobble out. What a waste of time. Again I'll do as I'm told, because surely a belief in authority will make me well.

A couple of weeks later, the swelling is almost gone. By November I'm ready and in good enough shape for a school ski trip.

On the slopes, I ski like an ace. The fresh, crisp mountain air cools my cheeks and the skis feel like bolts of lightning under me. They make my heart gallop faster than Oliver does when he races across a field. I have seen many a mogul starting with my days as a pigtailed toddler in a race-car-red snowsuit. My early Alpine debut earned me a ticket to race among the forerunners at all sorts of skiing events. When it comes to skiing, I'm on par with the guys who can do a slam dunk.

We are six teenagers to a cabin, and each one of us is free to spend the day as she wishes and go to bed when she wants. During the day I fly down the slopes and by night, my roommates and I hold the boys next door under siege with a barrage of snowballs. We regale each other with stories of the latest battle with our neighbors. Our exploits have us giggling so hard that we spray hot chocolate onto our pillows and over the rug. We're in heaven.

But the all the activity has its price. By December 24th, it's unbearable to dance at a Christmas party. I pop ibuprofen and nevertheless writhe in pain as everyone else is breaking into a sweat from "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree." I shouldn't have come.

My leg continues to issue complaints, and, as the next ski trip, slated for February with Peter, my parents, and a bunch of family friends, draws near, I am in horrible pain despite doing my best

to rest. I'm not running. I'm not bouncing basketballs. I'm also decked out in a leg warmer that goes from my ankle to my thigh and my puffed-up limb looks like it belongs to the Michelin Man. The intensity of the pain is what a hard tackle or bike accident might inflict. I can't make any sense of it because I haven't had contact with anything that would cause that kind of injury. I am still operating under the misconception that pain is more or less normal for an athletic fifteen-year-old. In my head, I hear the echo of the doctor's voice saying so.

Luckily, no fewer than three doctors are among my parents' friends who are joining us on the February ski trip. They keep the medicine cabinet stocked. Three pink pills and I'm as ready as ever for the slopes, and just as eager as the others to suit up in the mornings with a feeling of having been primed by my last Alpine adventure. In the evenings, though, the pain breaks through.

It's still rearing its head a week later, when I return to school with freckles from the high-altitude sun and a leg even more swollen. It's no longer just the knee, but also my lower leg in its entirety. I keep my motion restricted. Ibuprofen is no longer enough to squelch the pain, so I continue with the pills I was given on the trip, the ones indicated for folks who are crippled and lame. No biggie, I think, totally unconcerned. As long as they do the trick.

By the time snowdrops peek out from the ground and spring is on the way, I'm back running with my gym class in the early mornings. Basketball competes with volleyball, and one weekend I'm thrilled to go hiking on a trail overlooking the ocean. Midway, the path turns into my greatest nemesis. I end up icing my leg and pleading for relief through a sea of tears. My parents tell me to calm down as they schedule another trip to the doctor. The torture

has gone on long enough. The excruciating, tear-triggering pain prevents me from seeing the fear in their eyes and the worry on their faces.

Real Pain, Real Fear

“Yes, there’s no doubt that you’re experiencing significant pain.”

A new and previously unknown doctor surveys the X-rays of my leg.

“But we don’t have a diagnosis.”

It’s May 2nd, and this is where my mother has taken me after school. I’ve never had to have X-rays. Nor have I been to a hospital for treatment before. It’s kind of exciting. I was more than a little jealous of Peter when got to have X-rays after breaking his arm a few years ago.

“We’d like to do an MRI,” the doctor says as he looks back and forth, first at me and then at my mother.

“Okay,” I say neutrally, without any idea about what an MRI is. “Now?”

“No, no. We don’t have the equipment here. You need a referral from us, and we’ll call you when the appointment gets scheduled.”

I nod and draw the curtain to get dressed again, unconcerned and without any idea of the worry that had been growing inside my mother over the last several months. The X-rays had validated them for her, at long last. She’s an occupational therapist and knows how bones should and shouldn’t look. She leaves the room to call my father, so I can’t hear their conversation.

* * *

Back at school everyone wants to know how the X-rays came out.

“Fine,” I answer, because I think it’s a good sign that the doctors at least spotted something worthy of investigating with the scan. “I’ll get put in an M-or-something-other machine,” I say.

Nina looks at me in all seriousness. The two of us have been good friends the entire school year.

“Why? When?”

“Oh, soon,” I think. I don’t really know why...

“I don’t like the sound of this,” she says.

I stare back at her with a look that conveys my confusion. She has an analytical mind and the gift of psychological insight, even though we are hardly more than kids. As a rule, we’re in agreement about everything. At this particular moment, though, I share neither the worry I hear in her voice nor the fear I see in her eyes. But all the other people in the room do.

* * *

The last seven weeks of classes fly by as the school year comes to an end.

On a warm June day, I’m standing with a hundred other students, singing our school song. A gazillion hugs follow, along with dozens of “Oh, I’m so glad you’re in my life.” I head home with two boxes of keepsakes and the driving pain in my leg.

It’s empty and quiet throughout the house, and it couldn’t be more boring. My thoughts go to the last thing Mrs. Carlsen said to me:

“Call me when you get the scan, Mette.”

It's been seven weeks since the X-rays were taken, and there's nothing to say other than that the pain is worse and I still have the scan ahead. I cry, but the tears are triggered by the fear that all the other teenagers in my class share. Our terrifying question: How are we going to survive the summer without each other near?

A week later, I'm crying on the sofa. The Coke in my glass is going flat. My parents are lined up in front of me and Rickie is at my side. That's when I first begin to have serious doubts about my survival.

Knocked Down at the Festival

Cancer? I don't get it, and that is the only thing I can say when my father unleashes the bad news, right before my mother appears in the living room bearing Coke.

"I don't understand," I whisper, and stare into the space in front of me. I don't want to make eye contact with anyone. Not even Rickie. She's holding my hand.

"No, Mette," my mother answers. "I know you don't. We don't either. It's not fair. It's really *not* fair."

The conversation settles into silence again. I open my mouth to speak. I want to say that I need to call Mrs. Carlsen, because I promised her I would. Instead tears run down my cheeks and into my mouth, and I have to cough. I can't get a word out.

I forget about making the call.

Sometime later — maybe an hour, maybe three — Rickie and I are in the backseat of the Passat and my mother is at the wheel. The tent is in the trunk along with two duffel bags stuffed full of gear, food for the week, and the raincoat that had been packed after all. Partway through the sad situation, someone had declared that we should go to the music festival anyway. Fine. Had they told me to go to the North Pole, I would've agreed and taken off with exactly what was in the duffel now.

"Call if you're sad or you want to come home," my mother says as she drops us at the gate.

I nod and wave a few times. She sees me bravely wrangle the baggage and embark into the maelstrom of people and colorful tents along a circuitous path.

The others are already at the campsite, just as we'd expected.

"Hey, Licht! Rickie! We're over here," a friend calls and waves.

But the feelings inside me are nothing close to what I've anticipated. The reunion with the others, the beat of the music and the atmospheric effects of all kinds of smoke — it all seems meaningless and hollow, and it makes me dizzy even though I am tamely sipping on a soda. Rickie's repeated glances, her steady hugs, our battle with the tent all help, a little. The whole time I am nearly tripping over stakes and molehills because my eyes are brimming with tears to the point that I can barely see. I don't dare look in anyone's direction. I don't want them to notice me, and eye contact will surely cause my tears to flash flood. Any attempt to feign a smile causes a full stream. They surge every time I hear someone laugh. I can't venture any kind of communication, and I barely manage to help raise the tent because of the pain. The sting, the ache, runs up and down my leg. Maybe it was a bad idea to come. Even though I'm surrounded by thousands of other people and camping with my own fifty closest friends, I feel alone. Only one of them knows that life has just punched me in the gut and that I'm gasping for air. She is sitting here and someone just popped a can of Coke into her hands.

I hobble a few steps away, flip open my cell phone, and speed-dial the number. It rings once before my father answers.

"Veterinarian Hans de Fine Licht," he says the same way he always does.

I don't know why I stumble over it. Maybe he should have said, "Hans de Fine Licht, veterinarian and father to a daughter newly diagnosed with cancer."

"Hi. I-i-it's me," I choke. Instinctively, I bite into my coat-covered forearm to keep myself from collapsing into a sob.

"Mette, how about I come and get you?" he instantly asks.

"Would you please?" I sniffle.

An hour later, I'm in the passenger seat of his Toyota. There goes the festival. All my stuff is still there, but I don't have it in me to look back.

A beep from my telephone breaks the silence. It's a text from Benjamin, a friend since kindergarten.

— Licht! Where are you? :)

— Forgot something at home. I'll be there tomorrow.

— Bummer. See you.

I actually believe what I write. Even though the pain in my leg causes an unending stream of tears, I am still certain that if I can manage to get home and get my limb elevated, I'll be in tiptop shape by morning. Of course, I am horribly mistaken.

Thank you for reading my story.
I hope to see you on the social media:

Instagram: @will_power_girl

Facebook: @Willpower Girl

You can also follow my blog at **www.willpowergirl.com**.

Please leave a comment anytime, I would love to
hear your thoughts.



»If you really want to understand why the field of adolescent and young adult cancer needs to be a specialty in its own right, then this beautifully written account of a young girl's fight for life is the book for you.«

Simon Davies, CEO Teen Cancer America

From one day to the next, sixteen-year-old Mette goes from being a cheerful, active teenager to having Ewing's sarcoma, the same rare type of cancer that took Ted Kennedy, Jr.'s leg. Mette struggles with chemo, nausea, and the most terrible thing she can imagine, being bald. To avoid looking like someone who is ill, she does everything possible: buys a wig, attends class, tries with all her might to live a normal teenage life.

WILLPOWER GIRL — A TEENAGER'S TREK THROUGH CANCER

is a moving story about a young girl with an incomprehensible disease and a big portion of willpower. Mette learns how to turn adversity into strength, and daring to believe in the future once again, she comes out the other side to rediscover fulfillment and a rich life.

Born in 1985, Mette is a successful author and teacher based in Copenhagen, Denmark. She lives with a prosthesis in her leg and continues to go for regular checkups.

**Follow Mette's blog about teen cancer
and life after cancer on
WWW.WILLPOWERGIRL.COM**

