

NO SURRENDER

A former boxer's seven-month journey through the trauma of cancer treatment has been documented in poems and photographs as he invites people into a world most of us are afraid to see.

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Above: Goodfellow in hospital during his chemotherapy treatment.
Right: With staples in his neck after the operation to remove the tumour.

GEOFF GOODFELLOW'S FATHER taught his sons how to fight, but he regretted it before the end. The old man wished he'd shown the boys how to use reason instead of their fists. "I've done the wrong thing by you bastards," he told them. "You don't win any arguments fighting. You finish them, but you win by using your head."

Goodfellow's father John was a state boxing champion, and he was right about the likely problems ahead. "It got us all into trouble," Geoff says. "We've all had lots of fights, unnecessary fights." But some fights are not unnecessary, and some opponents can't be beaten by a good argument. In some fights you don't even know your enemy is there until he taps you on the shoulder, and then you'd better be ready to hit back with everything you've got.

For Goodfellow, that moment came one morning in January, 2008, before he went for his regular morning swim at Semaphore. A successful poet with nine anthologies behind him, for years he'd swum between the local jetty and Largs Pier, more than a kilometre away, to keep his body toned. He might have been 58, but he felt in good shape, powerful – and that was a good feeling. Getting old was not so bad when you were strong.

But he had a pain in his neck, and when he came back to his flat overlooking Semaphore Rd, he felt bloody awful. A huge headache engulfed him, so terrible he could barely get to the doctor. It was the flu, he was told. For several days he took painkillers, but got no better. Eventually, he drove to the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, barely functional because of the drugs, reeling like a drunk when he got to emergency.

They thought he was inebriated, and treated him accordingly. He told them to f... off, which probably didn't help. Staff were dismissive, he recalls, but soon they changed their tune. His neck contained a large cancer and he was in big trouble. He had five or 10 years at most. "I said, 'Get out of here, you don't know me. I've had more fights than there are floor tiles in this room and no one's going to tell me when I'm going to f...in' drop off'."

It was the cigarettes. He'd enjoyed them for years before giving up to guard his health, and ensure he could enjoy time with his daughter Grace. He recalls that when she was a little kid she'd watch him light up an Escort Red on the back deck, then have a hack and spit. Once she started toddling, she'd grab hold

of the railing and mimic him: spit, spit. "I thought, 'My God, what am I doing?'" He gave up, but a bad seed had been sown inside.

After Geoff got the diagnosis, he eventually, reluctantly, told Grace. The bad news found its way to Adelaide photographer Randy Larcombe, who had photographed Goodfellow for a magazine. Larcombe had seen his own mum confront cancer, and he was curious about what went on in the hospital treatment rooms. He wanted to record and document the process. Goodfellow was up for it.

Goodfellow is a mix of dark and sweet. His red hair has turned to close-cropped grey. He growls a bit, a gravelly tone little changed despite the fact he has an artificial voicebox, and he looks like the sort of bloke you wouldn't want to spill your beer on. His expansive use of language includes the full range of expletives. He knows he's been quick to anger, too quick at times, but he is sensitive too, a proudly working-class bloke with a strong sense of justice and injustice.

He's made a living catching the important moments in life and putting them down in poetry, which he has read in all sorts of places, from St Peter's College to Yatala prison. So through the treatment he wrote – often about 3am – of his experience, and the result is a manuscript, *Waltzing with Jack Dancer: a slow dance with cancer*. "What I'm doing is usually trying to capture other people's moments," he says. "In this book I was fighting cancer and catching my own moments."

Larcombe wanted to catch them too. The result is an exhibition of the photos and poems. A book is also planned, but they have yet to find a publisher. "What I tried to do was the opposite of what you try to do in the commercial world, where you cut out the ugly things," Larcombe says. "I just tried to photograph everything as it was. A lot is just me lurking around in the corners shooting what I am seeing."

The photographer was fascinated by the impersonal nature of it. "You give your body over to the doctors. Everything is in their control. They push all the buttons from there on in. With the radiation there's that sense you almost become dehumanised a little bit. The boxes get ticked off, you get this much radiation, chemotherapy ... but there's not much talk about what goes through your head in all this. And I think that's what the poems do."

The first photo was taken just before Easter, and the project would go on for seven months. A big tumour was removed early on, but that was just the start. The



Time Bomb

On my first day of chemo
i didn't know what to expect

Lisa my appointed nurse
put a drip into my right hand
& told me there was about
four & a half litres to go in

the machine pumped in
a saline solution hanging in a clear
plastic bag on a chrome stand

the Baxter pump ticked
with monotonous regularity

when Lisa hung the black bag
marked

Caution: Cytotoxic
Handle with gloves
i knew i had the real deal

six patients all sat patiently
taking in their chemo

apart from the ticking —
the room was filled with
our combined silences

after some minutes a woman spoke —
it sounds like a time bomb
going off

it is i whispered it is.

**I'D SAY, 'YOU'LL NEVER BEAT ME, YOU'LL NEVER BEAT ME. I'M
HERE FOR YOU NOW, I'M F...ING HERE FOR YOU NOW.'**

Right: An operation to insert a voice box following the removal of Goodfellow's tumour.
Left: Goodfellow at Semaphore beach after being given the all-clear of cancer in December. His weight had dropped from 84kg to 66kg.



body then had to be purged of any remaining cancers with chemical and radiation therapy.

The earliest photo is of Goodfellow from side on, bare-chested, shaping up for the fight. His chin juts forward in aggressive challenge. He's on the front foot. His fists, encased in boxing gloves, are poised for a sharp jab. He's probably 80-odd kilos. But there's something else: a scar, fresh, that starts at the ear and scythes down and around the front of the neck. Leaving aside the scar, this is his ideal image of himself. The world is a physical place, where challenges can be met – must be met – with physical strength. Boxing is a controlled aggression. "I was never a great champion," he says. "My dad was featherweight champion of SA and my brother was featherweight and lightweight champion of SA." It got him into trouble? "Yeah," he says, "in and out of trouble."

"I'm very persistent," he continues. "I take the fight up to people. I won't run away from a battle. And I think that's what the training had given me: the way through to step up and fight it. And I used to speak to the cancer, and even before the operation I'd still go to the beach every morning. I was too scared to swim so I used to wade in neck-high water and try to cool my throat down. My throat had been infected. I thought I'd pump all this cancer through my body if I started swimming. I'd say, 'you'll never beat me, you'll never beat me. I'm here for you now, I'm f...ing here for you now.' I'd walk through the water at Semaphore, telling it to f...k off and go away."

Larcombe thought the boxer picture worked well. "We knew he was going to lose condition because of the chemo and everything," he says. "I wanted to take a shot, and capture the scar, and also show he's fighting." It was bravado from Goodfellow though. He didn't really know his opponent. "I knew it was going to be bad but I didn't know how tough it would be."

Goodfellow's surgeon, Guy Rees, encouraged him to write about his experience. When he heard about the photo project, Rees readily agreed to help with access. On Good Friday, 2008, the day after he'd removed the tumour, he sat by Goodfellow's bed and told him the easy bit was over. "Go home, eat as much chocolate as you can and full cream milk, anything that's fattening," Goodfellow recalls being told. "Build up your body as much as you can because in six weeks' time, when that wound heals, you're going to have the weight stripped off you. The radiation and chemotherapy are going to be difficult and even tough people fall down at that."

It was, Goodfellow says, as bad as Rees predicted. He was terribly nauseous, weak, writhing in pain, and the radiation burned and left him unable to swallow properly or taste anything. "There were nights when I lay there, often in wards of six men – and he told me I



Maybe

In the Head & Neck ward
most of us blokes are fifty plus
old Marlboro men
on Alpine white beds
now that's Kool

& i'll give you the Drum
it could well be Winfield
Reds on the right
& Blues on the left
(geez that looks like Blue
in bed seven
hasn't he lost some weight)
& where is Paul Hogan
when we really need a laugh

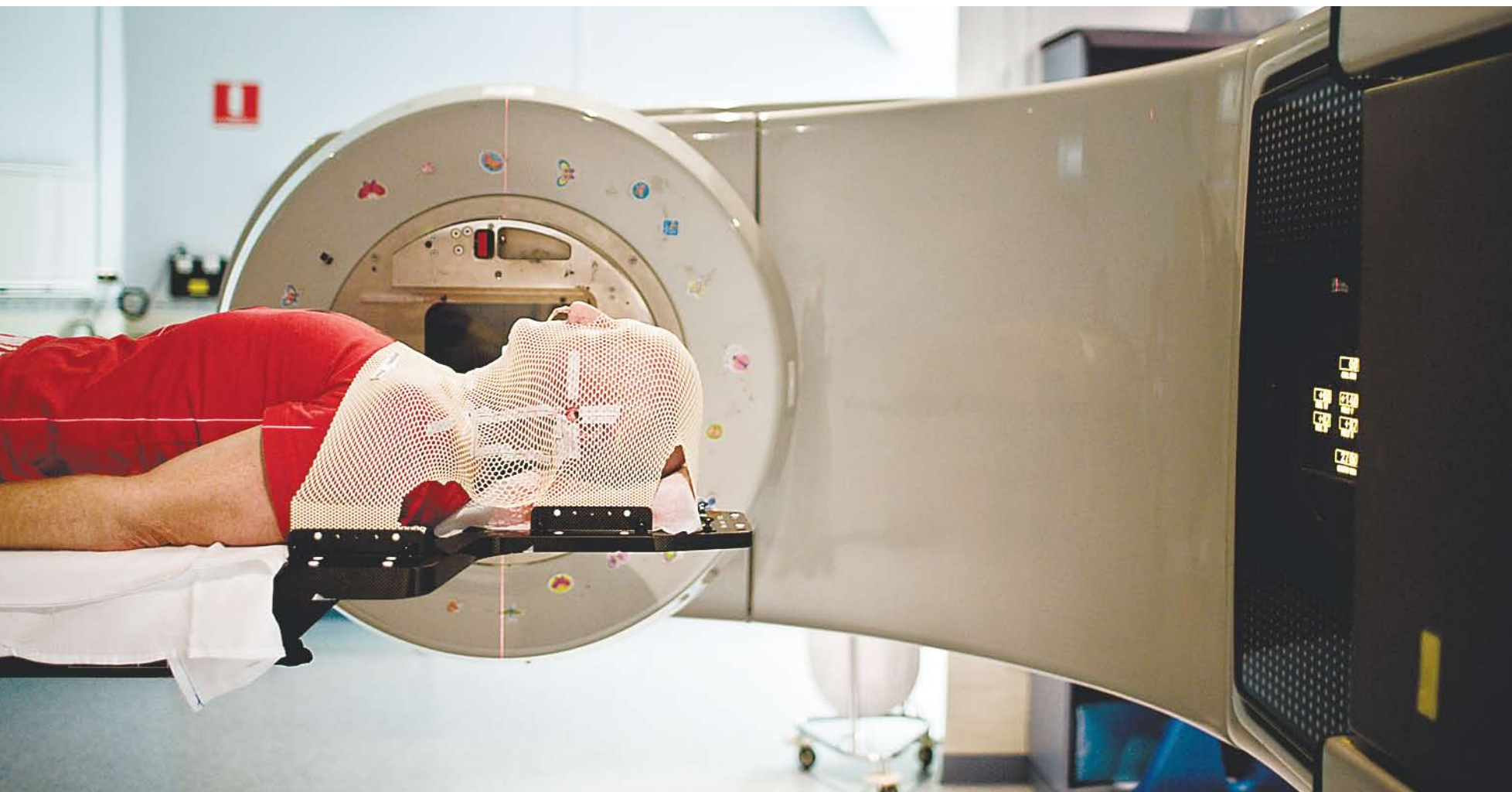
post op now with stapled
throats after our neck dissections

maybe it'll hurt too much

maybe there's nothing much
to laugh at anymore

maybe now the laugh's on us.





was a young man to have this cancer and most people will be 10 or 15 years older – so I was surrounded by older men, some of them back for a second bout. When I was so debilitated, thinking about a second bout six years later for me, I thought, ‘No, I won’t be lining up for this again. I’ll just roll over and die.’ And I know now that I wouldn’t. I think I’d be back for this fight another half a dozen times if I had to.”

There were plenty of others worse off, and that helped push back the self-pity. Goodfellow recalls sitting in the waiting room for radiation therapy, feeling like he was on his last legs, and looking over to see a 32-year-old woman with a toddler waiting her turn. “Oh f...!” he thought. “I’ve got to stop feeling sorry for myself. I’m an old man; she should have a life!”

There were other times when it all seemed too difficult. “There were nights very much like that. Just thinking, ‘I don’t want to be there any more. It’s too hard’. And one night hearing the bloke in the next room to me die, and me thinking ‘I’m gonna be the next cab off the rank; I’m gone.’ And then still being there in the morning, and thinking, ‘I’ve got to just keep my strength up. I’ll come good again’.”

He is coming good – “I eat like a horse” – but it’s taking a while. We’re sitting around the dining table in the sunlit back room of his home. Larcombe has the photographs scattered around: Goodfellow encased in a mask for radiation therapy that burns the side of his neck; lying in a scanning machine; on the operating table as the surgeon inserts a voice box.

There’s a striking picture of Goodfellow standing on the beach, in red budgie-smugglers, looking out to sea, his first time back since his operation. He looks at the picture of himself momentarily and turns away from it, choked with emotion. It was taken in December, a few months after he’d been given the all-clear of further cancers. But he was still debilitated by the treatment. He’d started at 84kg, and got down to around 66kg. He goes silent for a while. “I don’t really


want to remember when I was that skinny,” he says in a thick, strangled voice. “I see myself as a lot more solid than that, and I like the idea of being solid and strong, and I think of myself as a fairly capable physical person. But I’m quite vulnerable there. And I don’t like being vulnerable.” Now he’s only 71kg, so not much heavier. But he feels strong. He’s been running, swimming, doing sit-ups and push-ups.

Goodfellow wants those who see the exhibition and read the poems to get a sense of what cancer means to the patient. Many people wouldn’t visit him in hospital, or at home, because they didn’t want to see him in a debilitated state. “They’re scared of it,” he says. “What I want to do is break down that barrier. I think that I want people to see what happens to a human body, and that the human body is resilient.”

The cancer has changed him, and not just physically. “I’m vulnerable. Previously I might have thought I was quite invincible. I wrote a poem about reversing out of my driveway and there was a bloke parked at the end of it, in the street, and I told him to ‘move your f...ing car, you idiot!’ And he says to me, ‘Chill out, dude.’ Six months before I would probably have got out and back-handed him. I drove around the corner and I started laughing. And I was laughing at myself. I thought he was f...ing right. I just needed to chill out.

“So it’s been a lesson in humility for me and I think that I want people to know about cancer and not to be so fearful. You can come through. You just have to have a certain amount of mental toughness, to tough it through.”

The month-long exhibition begins on May 29 at the Grenfell Centre, 25 Grenfell St, city. Any profits from the sale of work will be donated to Cancer Voices SA. Today is World No Tobacco Day. ☒

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Above: Goodfellow encased in plastic mesh which was clipped to the bed to hold him rigid during the radiation treatment.

Right: Medication during his chemotherapy.

Below: The mesh mask and his boxing gloves.

