

LA

In late July 2021, Gen and I flew to Los Angeles so she could undergo open-heart surgery. Seven or eight years earlier, her oncologist at Cedars-Sinai told her the cancerous neuro-endocrine tumors in her body would eventually infect the valves on the right-side of her heart, requiring replacement. Otherwise, the valves would stiffen over time, causing fluid to enter body, leading to cardiac arrest. We didn't want that to happen! Open-heart surgery is a serious operation, but right-side valves are especially difficult, the doctor told us. He recommended doing the surgery while she was still in relatively robust health. Despite having cancer for fifteen years, Gen felt good physically. We had settled into a routine long ago that enabled her to have a high quality of life. Her doctor understood that and told us the surgery could wait if we wanted. Gen decided to go for it.



Gen at the airport



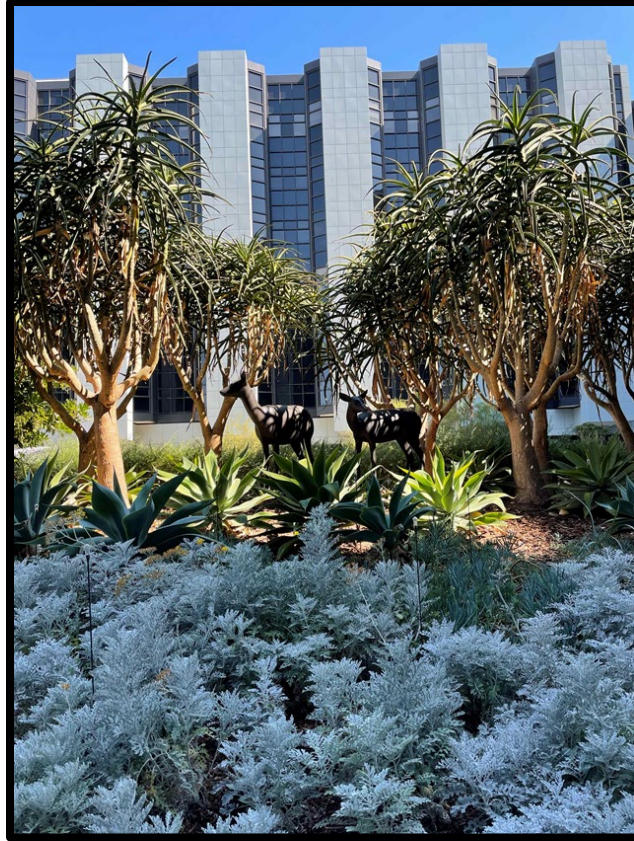
Eating out the night before

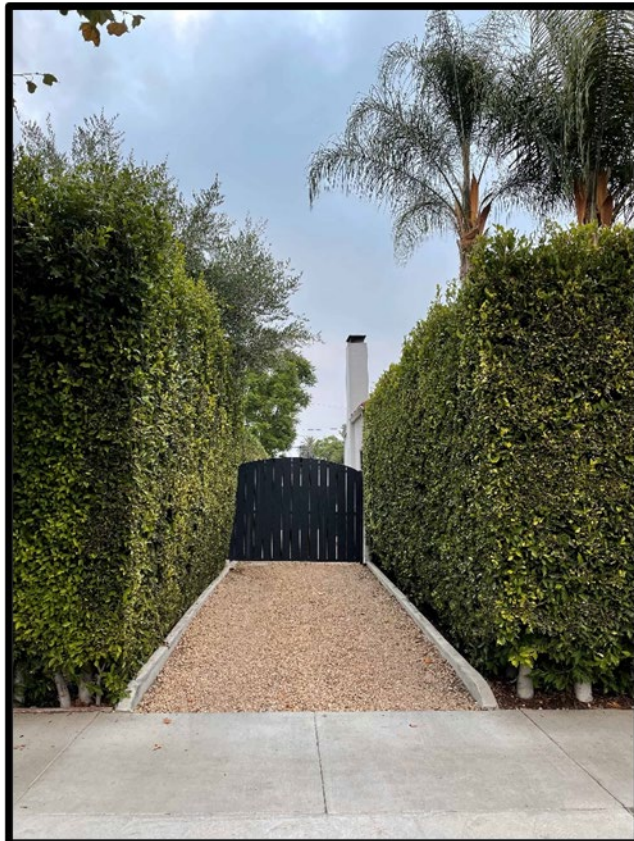


In the hospital after the surgery

We took a taxi from the airport to an Airbnb close to the hospital in a leafy, upscale neighborhood full of charming older houses. It was like coming home. From 1985 to 1991, we lived on Hilddale Ave., a dead-end street between Sunset and Santa Monica Boulevard not far away in West Hollywood. We loved living there. Above us was the Sunset Strip; to west was Beverly Hills where we walked our dog Sutro; to the south was a row of raucous gay bars that energized the neighborhood; to the west were eateries, including Barney's Beanery and our favorite bookstore. Not yet gentrified, West Hollywood was a vibrant, eclectic community at the time. You never knew who you would meet on the street.

Gen and I took a walk to our old stomping grounds the night before her surgery. We strolled up Hilddale and then had supper at a restaurant filled with busy young people. I felt like crying. In 1985, we were at the front end of our adventure together. Now, we were on the other side of the bell-shaped curve that is life. How much more time did we have? The doctor said the surgery could add five years to Gen's life. It could also set her back, he told us. The surgery itself had risks. Gen took all this news stoically, as she had throughout the cancer journey. She was a Midwesterner and prided herself on being tough and not getting emotional about things. Not like me. I agreed with her decision, but I was anxious the surgery would upset the apple cart that had been our quiet lives together these past years. So, when not with Gen in her hospital room, I went walking, around the hospital and through the neighborhood. I took photos as I walked – something I hadn't done very much recently. It felt good to be creative, if even just a small way. Here is what I shot:















Gen was in the hospital for ten days. Although the surgery was a success she required a pacemaker, which was something we didn't expect. We stayed in the Airbnb for another six days before tackling the daunting task of going home. Gen had lost twenty pounds or so and looked as thin and frail as a wraith. Her spirits were good and with a bit of luck and a couple of wheelchairs we completed the journey without much difficulty. It was an unsettling feeling to push Gen in the wheelchair and see her so thin and weak. Except for some intermittent severe back pain, Gen had been robust all our lives together. She wasn't now.

Gen entered cardiac rehab and successfully completed the program in early December. Her cardiologist said things were looking good on the heart front. A detailed medical scan in November indicated her tumor situation was largely unchanged. She even made it to the gym twice during the Christmas holidays. However, she had not been able to bring her weight up at all despite my energetic efforts at meal-making and calorie-shopping at the grocery store. It worried me. Then in January, the cancer tumors began to grow and spread. It was a surprise. In February, her oncologist put her on chemo pills. It was a last line of defense, she told us in her usual matter-of-fact manner. Gen took the news stoically and took the pills dutifully. She didn't return to the gym again.

My anxiety in LA came true. The apple cart tipped. I didn't want to think about it. Instead, I focused on helping Gen in any way I could. When my emotional guard fell down, as happened frequently, I steered my thoughts to memories of a different time in LA, before the surgery. Back when we were still on the bell-shaped curve together, looking ahead.



At Barney's Beanery in LA after a hospital visit in 2008

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All photos by Courtney White.

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