

What's brave about having cancer?

→ Riazat Butt

On September 1st, exactly six years after being told she had only six months to live, Jane Tomlinson completed a gruelling 6,780-km bike trek across America. Before setting out, she talked about why she refuses to sit at home waiting to die.

Jane, 42, looks like a frazzled housewife. She doesn't look like someone who does Iron Man competitions – a 4-km (2-mile) swim followed by a 180-km (110-mile) bike ride and a full marathon. Some days, she can't take the laundry downstairs. Mike, 45, remarks how people always think Jane is bigger than she is. She's 5ft 3in (1.6 m).

In 1990, Jane was diagnosed with breast cancer. In the decade that followed she had a mastectomy and underwent two seemingly successful rounds of chemotherapy and radiotherapy. Then, in 2000, she learned the cancer had spread to her bones. It was incurable and the prognosis was that she had six months to live. In the past six years, Jane has had a total of five courses of chemotherapy and has just finished a course of the breast cancer drug Herceptin.

Perching on the edge of the sofa, Jane says that she hasn't been well. Her fatigue, just before departing for the US, is worrying. Today she begins a 4,214-mile [6,780-km] bike ride from San Francisco to New York. Even judged by her previous accomplishments – four marathons, three triathlons and a cycle ride from Rome to Leeds – it's a challenge.

"It's the scale that's making me nervous," she says. "It's what we're

doing for nine weeks. It's the sick feeling you get; it's about having said I'll do it. I feel I'm putting myself out there maybe for people to watch me fail."

The epic coast-to-coast journey has been 15 months in the planning and was dependent on Jane having a base level of fitness she could work from. "I'm not going into this thinking it will be a breeze. I'm quite frightened. I don't know the terrain. Some of the temperatures will be extreme – I mean, cycling in 45°C [113°F] is ludicrous. It's done on a wing and a prayer."

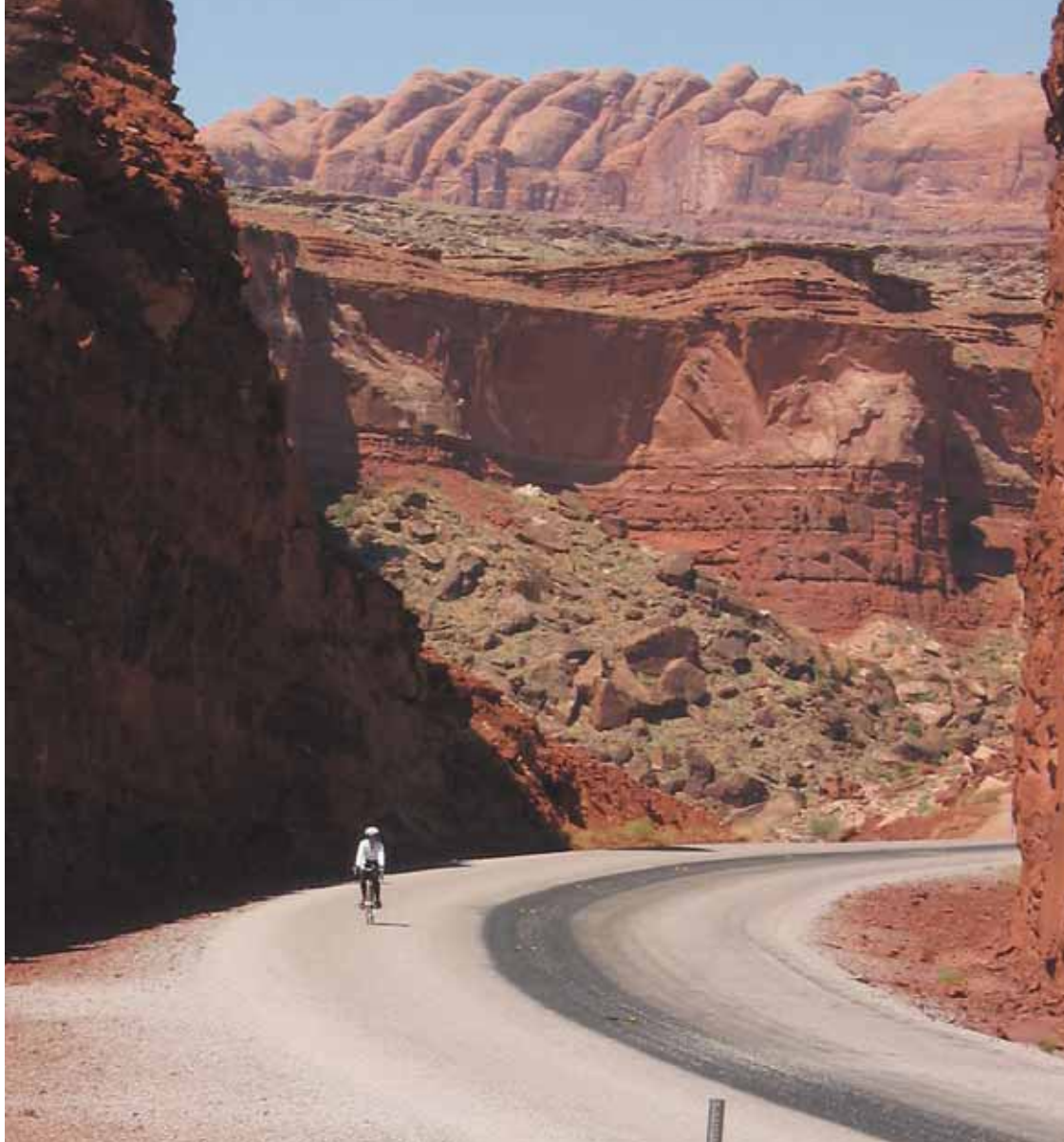
On this trip, she will be joined by Mike, Steven and daughter Rebecca, 18 – her eldest daughter, Suzanne, is at university. "It doesn't make it easier having Mike and Steven there, but I don't want to be away from them for that amount of time. We'll have collective memories and shared experiences – though I can imagine getting off my bike after a 70-mile day and Mike asking what we're having for tea."

The purpose of the trip is to raise money. Her gruelling endeavours have so far made £1.25m (1.86m euro) for cancer charities, and she is hoping the cycle ride will take this to £2m. "We don't seek publicity," she says. "Some glossy magazines want to do an 'at home with' feature. But have

you seen the state of this place?" Her dry self-deprecation is tempered with flashes of steel. While her endurance achievements have earned her the affection and respect of strangers, she has also been criticised for the amount of time she spends away from home. But, as she explains in her matter-of-fact way, the challenges give her goals to plan for that are not too painful to contemplate falling short of. She would like, she says, to see Rebecca through university, and would like to see Steven into secondary school – but that's an emotional investment. She never thought she would live to see Suzanne reach her 21st birthday. "If I had been really poorly and died, it wouldn't have mattered to me because I'd be dead, but it would have brought extra disappointment [to the family]."

Concerns have also been raised about the danger of setting standards by which other people with cancer will be judged. She is, she says bluntly, the most reluctant of role models: "Cancer sufferer – those two words narrow my life. As if there's nothing else to my life. Cancer is a bit of my life.

"I'm here six years after I expected to be here. People tell me I'm selfish, that I should sit at home. It's like your



Pedal power. Tomlinson is not going to let her life be defined by the words 'cancer sufferer'

The challenges give her goals to plan for that are not too painful to contemplate falling short of

life has no validity unless it's for someone else's memory. It's insulting. When you're poorly, you can't do the housework, you can't do the cooking, you can't do your job. To say that you should sit in the corner so people can visit you – it's like living your own wake. It makes me a bit angry."

She laughs at the suggestion that she's stopy, but she also seems pleased by the notion. If she has become a mascot for triumph in the

face of adversity through her charity work, proving that chemotherapy and radiotherapy needn't entirely ruin someone's quality of life, that, she says, is a by-product, not something she set out to achieve.

"I am a mother, a sister, a daughter, a wife. And I happen to be a cancer sufferer. Why do I even have to be a sufferer? And what's brave about having cancer? Living with cancer isn't courageous. You make the choic-

es you can in difficult circumstances. It's just having a shitty life. It's shit having cancer."

And the treatment that has helped to keep her alive is a double-edged sword: "I've had two rounds of chemotherapy in two years and it's bloody horrible. Nobody tells you that. Nobody writes about how awful you feel after chemo. People see your hair fall out, but that's not the worst of it. I can't feel the fingers in one



The last leg.
Passing the White House
en route to New York

“Living with cancer isn’t courageous. You make the choices you can in difficult circumstances”

hand. I can’t feel the balls of my foot, which makes cycling difficult. My mouth is sore. Your diarrhoea is so bad you’re pooing blood.”

Listening to Jane, you begin to see how the rigours of cycling up to 90 miles a day in blistering heat might almost be a welcome distraction; something else to worry about, a different sort of pain. “You go through the treatment and, six months later, you go through it again. You do it because you know that’s the only way you’re going to be around for your family.”

And then it’s time for her to get to hospital. The needles are waiting

This article was first published in the *Guardian* newspaper on 29 June 2006, and is reproduced with permission

THE CHALLENGE

Jane’s Ride Across America would have been an extraordinary feat of endurance even if she were perfectly healthy. It started at the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco on the 30th June and ended in New York 62 days and 6,780 kilometres later, on 1st September. Her route took her across the Sierra Nevada, the Rocky Mountains and the Appalachians and included a 200-km stretch that never dipped below 2,100 metres, rising to almost 3,500 metres as she crossed Monarch Pass. The Tour de France never rises above 2,000 metres.

With minimal back-up and two companion cyclists, Jane travelled some of the most deserted stretches of road in America, relying on maps that sometimes let her down, and having on several occasions to fend off attacks by packs of wild dogs. You can read a blog of her journey at www.Janesappeal.com or www.thesun.co.uk/blogs.

To donate to Jane’s Appeal log on to <http://Janesappeal.com> or call +44 (0)845 1200829