

# On processing your sickness through creative work



Filmmaker and writer Kailee McGee discusses how making a film about her stage 4 breast cancer diagnosis helped her get to the other side of it.

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As told to Claire L Evans, 2390 words.

Tags: [Film](#), [Identity](#), [Inspiration](#), [Beginnings](#), [Health](#).

**Your work is often about identity—the way we perform to the rest of the world and embody different characters throughout our lives. Where does that come from?**

Over the years, I've come to understand that my fascination with identity is rooted in being my mom's primary subject. My mom is an oil painter, and I grew up with her putting me in different costumes and setting me up in different scenarios, like baking a loaf of bread, playing a piano concert. She'd dress me up in a bonnet and clothes from the 1800s and have me walk on the beach with a bucket. Her paintings were all around her studio and our house, and in her gallery, where I started selling her paintings when I was eight years old. My mom would also paint herself, and she would also have her identical twin sister, who is also an impressionistic oil painter, be her subject. I didn't realize until I started looking backwards that I grew up thinking that's just what you did if you were an artist: you used yourself, or the people around you, as your subjects and as your muses.

**How did embodying all these different roles make you feel about your own identity?**

I felt like a subject, like a doll. Like criticism and tweaks were necessary to my existence as a human. Sometimes my mom would frankenstein two photos of me for one painting. There was a general sense of almost perfect but not quite. My mom would ask for my feedback on her work. There was a lot of talk about feminine beauty, and what picture was more beautiful, or what features were more beautiful. I think I always just felt the responsibility of wanting to be a beautiful female subject, in one still frame.

**Do you think your interest in auteur filmmaking comes from wanting to have control over how you're seen by others, rather than having someone else impose these different visions on you?**

Yes.

**Nailed it.**

Filmmaking has allowed me to process my childhood and my mom's way of being an artist—by adding another layer, another lens. Making films, I'm able to have maximum control and tell a more nuanced story. I get to step out of the painting and into a moving picture. There's a lot of darkness and heaviness, but there's also humor and levity there.

**What's more real to you—movies or life?**

As a kid, movies were my escape, my hope, and my fantasy. Like a lot of kids of the '90s, I bought VHS tapes and would rewatch them, rewatch them, rewatch them. There are certain movies that raised me, certain families that I wished could be my family—I wished I could jump into the screen and live in the movie instead of my own life. There really is a blurriness, and a longing to escape. I think that I wanted to take control and make my reality into a movie. Literally, to make myself the protagonist character in a film.

This might be a good time to add that I grew up in Laguna Beach, California. I had a graduating class of 150 kids, and I was in high school when MTV showed up on my quad one day and started casting for the soon-to-be hit reality TV show, Laguna Beach: The Real Orange County. So my peers on the show, who I've known since kindergarten, became the popular kids of the nation. Watching the way MTV blurred the lines between reality and fiction with people I knew, and watching my peers have their image altered—that affected me and the way I understand identity too.

**I want to talk about your film Can, which just came out online. It's about your experience navigating Stage 4 breast cancer—and the way serious illness dictates both how you're seen by others and your own sense of self. Was writing Can a way of protecting your identity from cancer?**

It wasn't about writing it, or even making it. It was about the end product. I had a vision of being on the other side of cancer, watching the finished film in a theater of people, and being like, "I did it." The only way I knew how to process being sick was to think about it in terms of a finished art project. It was a strange time, because I went underground, and I didn't really tell many people, except for my closest friends and family. I knew that I would eventually want to share, because generally, I tend to be a pretty open person, but I retreated to get through the hardest parts. I thought, okay, I'm gonna have to reemerge at some point. How do I do that?

**I was really worried about you when you were shooting. I was like, *she needs to rest*. But now I get how healing it was for you to be surrounded by people who shared that vision of you being on the other side of this with a film in hand.**

Obviously it felt different from other projects I'd done in the past. This starting point was me calling up friends and saying, "hey, I want to make a movie, I really want you to be involved, and I have cancer." I was outing myself in that way. The days themselves were shorter than a regular 14-hour indie film. So, that helped. Looking back now, it feels pretty insane that I did that, and that we did that. But, it ignited a deep purpose in me. My bliss point is being on set, especially on a set where it's a passion project and some of my favorite people are there, and we're bringing an idea to life together. There's no better feeling in the world. So to be in that ecstasy, surrounded by people I love and trust, that was the juice that got me through it.

**In all my experiences being on a set with you, everyone's really happy to be there—even if there's no money, and even if the hours are shitty, because you're good at making people feel like they're part of something bigger. Your day one pep talks are incredible. How did you learn to do that, and what advice would you give to other filmmakers about how to cultivate that feeling?**

What comes to mind is watching other people be leaders, but not necessarily in a filmmaking or creative space. My mom would teach aerobics classes to old ladies when I was a kid, and I would be dragged along. I'm using some of that experience and then adding a wink-smiley. Being self-aware about the Kumbaya of it all. I also worked as a 1st AD when I moved to LA, so I gave a lot of pep talks and safety meetings. At first I didn't know what I was doing, so I just made it up. So, it also comes from a place of "fake it till you make it" and hoping to start strong.

**How do you motivate people to join you? What's your advice for getting a potential collaborator to say yes? I mean, saying "I have cancer" probably helps.**

Saying "I have cancer" definitely opened up, let's just say, a free location. But I do best when I'm in person with people. I just try to be super real and honest, and get to the heart of whatever story I'm trying to tell. When I share that, I naturally get excited. And if someone's open to that kind of energy, usually they're just like, "wow, hell yeah." And if it's not a hell yeah, then it's a no, and that's okay.

**Something particularly challenging about the kind of filmmaking you do is the jump between the solitary and the collaborative. You start by sitting alone and writing a story about the most difficult time in your life—and then you have to get buy-in from a lot of other people. How do you switch gears?**

Well, writing for me is the hardest part of the process, because I'm an idea collector, and the ideas need to be organized, and brought together. Sometimes that feels difficult. I'm a perfectionist, and I really want things to be right. I have a hard time allowing for messiness in writing. So, it can feel lonely and painful and hard. Once there's a script, I feel really happy to move on to the next stage, and then once I start interacting with other humans, even in pre-production, the rest of it feels less lonely.

**Can is a unique case, because you were writing about something you were experiencing in real time. You were making this film in the middle of treatment, and you didn't know how it was going to work out. How did you balance the uncertainty of your own story with the actual, concrete demands of making a film with a beginning, middle and end?**

Well, the film is about me having an identity crisis, mid-health crisis, and those two things were still happening while I was making it. We ended up reshooting some scenes, which was a mindfuck, and then post was an evolving, unique process. My existential spiral was shifting. It felt like, how do I keep up with this? My health was changing too. There was a point where I had to accept that cancer, for me, isn't going to be black and white. It's not going to be like, "I did cancer, and it's over." It's going to bleed into the rest of my life. It's just a part of my life. I had to accept that the story goes on, which sounds corny. But, it's true, and it's a big acceptance.

**It's been really interesting, as your friend, watching you navigate the post-cancer experience. You're in this new category now of "survivor." Your cancer hospital just did a little news segment about you—you're good PR. It feels like it's become this other thing, where your illness is being instrumentalized by other people.**

I do kind of feel like a breast cancer spokesperson now, and it's a lot. Part of that is about celebrating the medical miracles that happened with me. Part of it is feeling unintentionally reduced down to being someone who was sick and got through it, which feels, in a way, like such a blip of my human experience. That's something I'm starting to navigate now that the film is out. Other humans who are going through cancer, or went through cancer, or have someone that they love who went through cancer, feel really willing to share with me. When I've shown the film, people come up to me afterwards, and in an instant, go so deep so fast about whatever their life experience is, and it's intimate and beautiful and amazing, but it's also new and a lot.

**There's this other layer of reality that you have access to now. You see into everyone's pain.**

Some people talk to me like, "Man, it's crazy you've been to the edge of life and back—that's priceless. You figured it all out." When it's your lived experience, it doesn't feel that way. I don't think about it like that. But through my cancer experience, I *am* able to look at some things differently. You usually don't know what's actually going on with other people, and they don't know what is going on with you. Holding that actually allows for there to be a lot more openness and compassion when interacting with people.

**Is there anything you know now that you wish you'd known when you first got your diagnosis?**

When I was first diagnosed, I knew nothing about cancer. Learning about how long and how intense the treatment was, I remember being like, *this is two fucking years of my life*. I can't put my life on hold for this! This is crazy. This is ridiculous, what these people want me to do. I remember my surgeon said, "This is the plan, but throughout this process, what you want, what your expectations are, and what you're going to ultimately feel good about as your end result might change." I didn't understand what he meant by that. Now I do. It's hard to articulate, but there is a feeling of acceptance for what currently is, even though it's so different than what used to be, and so different than what I could have ever imagined, or that I would ever write for myself as a character in a movie. There are so many feelings held up in that at once: sadness and grief and joy and beauty and ugliness. Somehow it can all coexist. At the beginning, I kept a little journal for my close friends, and I wrote, like, "At the end of this, I'm gonna be profoundly changed." I knew that. You go into something like this

knowing it's going to be big. Now on the other side, I'm like, yeah, dude: it was big.

#### **Kailee McGee Recommends:**

Watch *The Birdcage*, it's my favorite movie.

Indulge in a daily luxury or ritual. A few years ago I fell in love with [this bougie French incense](#). I've burned it every day since, and a small stick brings me a lot of joy. Initially, I felt guilty and stupid for loving it so much because it's expensive. Overtime, it's become a quiet affirmation to myself: hey, you're worth it.

Try [the Waking Up app](#) by Sam Harris. I enjoy listening to talks or poetry while I do neighborhood walks, especially David Whyte, Allan Watts, and Joseph Goldstein. His daily meditations are nice too. (The app is free for anyone who can't afford it, you just have to ask.)

Find a way to let go of resentments big and small. Whatever that looks like for you. In my experience, if you're not super intentional about addressing resentments, they are hiding inside of you, altering and cramping your mind, heart, and body.

Send the cold email. Wear the red lipstick. Break it off with the emotionally unavailable lover. Dance to Taylor Swift. Post the Instagram story. Set the boundary. Be accountable with yourself and push yourself and also, be gentle with yourself.

#### Name

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#### Vocation

filmmaker, writer

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