



Lana Del Rey

"Ride"

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Lana Del Rey's "Ride," Cancer, and the Struggle to Be Free

Anya Silver

This is how metastatic breast cancer makes me feel: helpless, powerless, out of control, fated to die young of a death not of my choosing.

This is how Lana Del Rey's song "Ride" makes me feel: fucked up, and likely to die young, but in some control of my own life, and free even in the worst of circumstances.

Those of us with cancer have many anthems from which to choose. Most of them are not written about cancer, but they celebrate toughness and resilience. They rally us with the reassurance that we will beat the disease, that we are fierce warriors in a battle of life and death, and that our fighting attitude will help ensure our victory. See: Rachel Patton, "Fight Song"; Kelly Clarkson, "Stronger"; Katy Perry, "Roar"; Beyoncé, "Formation"; Tom Petty, "I Won't Back Down"; and, for those with more treacherous inclinations, Tim McGraw's cancer ballad "Live Like You Were Dying." Songs that take a more unsparing look at cancer, such as Jason Isbell's "Elephant" and Sufjan Stevens's "Casimir Pulaski Day," usually don't make the anthem list, because people in the song, you know, *die*.

I enjoy my fighting goddess songs. But Lana's "Ride" is, for me, the perfect anthem because it isn't about winning, overcoming adversity, or having a good attitude. It's about day to day survival. In its refusal to guarantee victory over one's problems, it speaks to me as someone with incurable, terminal cancer. It speaks to anyone who isn't able-bodied, or mentally "stable," or happy, without patronizing to its listener or preaching. There are remarkably few songs like that.

People undergoing cancer treatment are tired. When we're not in front of our families and friends, trying to comfort others, we often fall into an abyss of fear and despair. When Lana sings, "Don't break me down/I've been traveling too long/I've been trying too hard/With one pretty song," I empathize. Her voice is mine, singing to my disease, to my body, to life, to God. I can try and try, but chances are that I'll still break down. Smiling isn't a cure. A pretty song isn't a cure. "That open road" isn't just a place of possibility; it's also a place of deep loneliness. To the ire of some critics, who evidently lack an understanding of the mental state in which she's singing, Lana seeks the comfort of a man, anyone who will take care of her in her despair. Healthy people usually don't understand one simple fact about dealing with people with chronic illness: we don't need syrupy, clichéd advice about "fighting like a girl," etc. We need someone to listen to us, to care about us, to comb our hair and make us dinner, to hold us. Sometimes we need someone not to just to care about us, but to take care of us.

Then the song shifts. In the chorus of "Ride," Lana converts her loneliness to a feeling of freedom. Now, echoing Springsteen and the whole driving-all-night tradition of rock, the road becomes a place of redemption: "I drive fast, I am alone at midnight//I just ride." From her loneliness, Lana gathers up her inner resources. She finds independence. She fights "the war in my mind." She fights it alone.

A terminal disease can grant a person a tremendous sense of freedom. There's the freedom not to worry about small concerns, because death is so much greater a fear.

There's the freedom to ruthlessly and guiltlessly cut people out of your life who no longer serve your needs. I say whatever I want. I spend too much money. I call bullshit when I see it. I reject the fake theology of "Everything happens for a reason." I cuss if I want to. Do I make you uncomfortable? Well, bless your heart. I dare you to judge me when I'm dying.

Of course there's a war in my mind. How long will I live? What should I do with the rest of my life? Do I throw aside my responsibilities and go *carpe diem*? I don't want to make cancer sound like fun, because it's not. It's horrific. But it's my war, and as long as I can, I'll make the choices.

So, I forgive Lana the easy romance of an early death in the lines "Dying young and playing hard/That's the way my father made his life an art." We all know that live fast/die young is a rock and roll cliché with little reflection in the reality of being hooked up to oxygen and liquids, drugged unconscious on morphine, losing control over one's bowels, coughing up blood, and begging for higher pain killers. But it's an appealing fantasy, so I grant it to Lana. No, I'm not living fast. I have a kid and a mortgage. But I'm not taking the world's crap anymore, either. If I'm going to die young, then I want to be loud. I want to write poems that make people mad. I'm not drinking all day and riding around with bikers, but that's OK. It's kind of comforting to know that I could. And the freedom from old age, of dementia and decrepitude, brings an unexpected relief. Not much, but some. Whether or not M.I.A. is correct when she sings, "Live fast, die young/Bad girls do it well" is irrelevant. I pump my middle-aged fists to those lyrics. Some stories, even when we know they're not true, sustain us. I'm not a bad girl, but I like the idea that I could still be one if I really wanted to. And it's an appealing idea that dying young somehow makes me special and exciting, even though I know there's no truth to that idea. Mythology helps one get by.

And yet, Lana doesn't offer much comfort in "Ride," which I like. She's still "feeling crazy" at the end of the song. She's still out there, alone, driving, trying to find her place in the world. To have ended the song with some sort of arrival at self-awareness and safety would have ruined the song's appeal. When, in life, is there a clear and final point of "I did it. I'm done"? Never. Illness, in particular, doesn't have sign posts. There's no road map, no menu. No one has gone through the precise experience that you are going through before. I could have six months or six years left. Each one of us on the earth could have six months, six years. I'm riding, just riding. Most days, that's enough.

In the video for "Ride," Lana includes a Jack Kerouac-fueled monologue, little of which pertains to me. However, the last two lines have a motto-like quality that I can't deny: "I am fucking crazy/But I am free."

Freedom, for a cancer patient, is elusive. There are the appointments, the waiting, the scans, more waiting, the rigid treatment schedules that turn one into a walking embodiment of illness. Will the tumors grow? Will they shrink? What side effects will we suffer? So survival depends on an inner freedom, on a core of dignity and self-worth, and a knowledge that one still has choices and purpose in life. There's a little bit of the French existentialist in Lana. Can I admit that "Ride" reminds me of Camus? He writes, "The only way to deal with an unfree world is to become so absolutely free that your very existence is an act of rebellion." The existential hero recognizes that freedom and choice in an absurd world are possible, but that they must be *actively chosen*. One must make one's own meaning in the world, regardless of the world's expectations. One must become oneself consciously, and in doing so, a person earns the possibility of a life with meaning in a world that does not provide any inherent meaning.

What does this mean for me?

I can choose to take this medicine or not.

I can choose to struggle despite the side effects of treatments, because my life is worth living.

I can choose to die.

I am at the mercy of my dividing cells. I will leave my son motherless too soon. I will never be free of time and death slowly taking their inexorable snips out of me. But ultimately, nobody is free of time and death. I'm just more aware of that than able-bodied people are. As writer Anatole Broyard pointed out about sick people, I'm just smarter.

Like Lana, I claim my own freedom. Lana understands trauma. She has experienced loneliness. She doesn't offer me a cup of comfort, or an answer, or facile theology. But when I see her in the video, scrambling across the desert, screaming, that could be me screaming. My scream would say, "I exist. I am." I will love. I will create. I will sing in the car. Cancer will not destroy the beauty of my life, despite the suffering that it puts me through.

So I ride. I'll ride until I'm pulled out of that car. So would Lana. She gets it.