

What do you picture when you hear the theme music to [Desert Island Discs](#)? For years, I did as the title suggests: I'd imagine a remote beach of bone-white sand, with the requisite lone palm tree, surrounded by azure blue waters. But now I have only to hear that melody to be taken somewhere else entirely. The instant that gentle tune plays out from the radio on a Sunday morning, I am back in the living room of my older sister, Fiona, having a conversation that was absorbing, funny, revealing – and the last such talk we would ever share.

How My Sister Said Goodbye - extract

Jonathan Freedland in conversation with his sister Fiona, whose final wish was to record her own Desert Island Discs

Listen

She had been diagnosed with bowel cancer in 2009, when she was 45. She had been through extraordinarily intensive medical treatment: 18 or 19 operations (she had lost count), and between 70 and 80 rounds of chemotherapy (she had lost count of that number, too). Her doctors told her she had set some kind of record.

But by the early spring of 2014 it was becoming clear that the disease could not be resisted much longer. She knew she was going to die. As so often, we took a walk together in our local park: for 10 years, she and I had lived on the same street, my front door a 40-second walk from hers. This time, though, she wanted to talk about the future, after she was gone. In the past, when she had attempted this conversation, I had tried to divert her, insisting that we weren't at the end of the road just yet, that we'd cross that bridge when we came to it. But now I just listened.

We spoke about arrangements. We talked about her funeral. She gave me instructions as to how I and the rest of the family were to treat her husband, Robin, and her two daughters, Beth and Ellie, then aged 20 and 18, when she was no longer there to watch over them. I nodded and made careful mental notes. I was used to taking instructions from my older sister. Ever since we were little, she had been in charge: she would set me and my middle sister, Dani, art projects to keep us busy during the school holidays. She was the font of wisdom in our family, the one we all turned to for advice. Career move, colour of wallpaper, choice of holiday destination: you'd always run it past Fiona. But then she surprised me with a request.

She mentioned the answering machine message that she had kept, carefully stored and saved, from our mother, who had died two years earlier. She cherished it because it was the only recording she had of her voice. She sometimes played it back, just to feel near her. She didn't want Beth and Ellie, or Robin, to be in that position. She wanted to give them more than a scrap to hold on to.

Fiona told me she wanted to record her own [Desert Island Discs](#) – and she wanted to do it properly, just like the radio programme: a long interview, punctuated with musical choices. She asked if I would play Kirsty Young and if my wife, Sarah, who is a radio producer, would edit and mix it.

Now that I think about it, Desert Island Discs was the obvious choice. Fiona loved that programme, regularly asking me if I'd heard this or that edition. She used to refer to "Kirsty" as if she and the presenter were on first-name terms. Like plenty of others, and long before she became ill, Fiona would often draw up her hypothetical list of musical choices. And, of course, the format demands the interviewee look back over a life in full, which is what she wanted.

We met a few weeks later, on a Sunday afternoon at her house, and sat together for nearly three hours. I decided the only way I could begin to handle this encounter was professionally, to approach it as a radio interview. Fiona had told me what pieces she had chosen and I came with them lined up, ready to play. I worked out what areas to cover and when. I suppose I knew I was distancing myself from what was really happening.

We sat in her living room. Or, rather, I sat. She lay on a couch, legs outstretched, her head supported by cushions, a microphone clipped to her top. At intervals we would stop. She would sip a glass of water, I would go off to microwave the small thermal beanbags she would put by her neck to ease the pain. It was constant and severe by then, but she was not to be deterred. An accomplished lawyer, specialising, as it happened, in medical issues, she revealed herself that day as a natural broadcaster: she was fluent, funny and completely engaging. Nothing was written down, but she knew exactly what she wanted to say.

She began with [Doris Day singing Que Sera Sera](#). It wasn't there for its musical value so much as a reminder of our own mother, who loved the song and would sometimes sing it to Fiona when she was a little girl. As the song played out, the two of us were transported back to our childhoods, the room filling with memories of those years we had shared: Fiona the oldest, me the youngest, with Dani in between. Like smell, music seems to have a hard-wired connection to memory, evoking the past instantly and powerfully.

We kept it loosely chronological. [Green Onions by Booker T and the MGs](#) reminded her of her teenage self, the friends, the parties, the "liberation" she felt in that first flush of youth. She recalled bouncing around so hard to [Blondie's Heart Of Glass](#) in the house she shared soon after graduation that she and her mates brought down a chandelier from the ceiling – one made, as luck would have it, of glass. [Tracy Chapman's Subcity](#) brought back her evening pottery classes, and the alternative career path – as a ceramicist – she might have taken.

She played Al Jolson, whose voice would instantly remind her of our father, a Jolson devotee; songs for ever associated with meeting her husband at Manchester University; and laughed as she listened again to the [Shirley Bassey classic Kiss Me, Honey Honey, Kiss Me](#), which she used to sing to her girls at bath time. Slowly, song by song, we evoked a life.

Inevitably, we drew closer to her illness and to the reason she was playing the castaway. She spoke of the previous five years, of the ordeal of her treatment and the pain she had endured. Yet she also described the joy she had felt in that period, her appreciation of the family she loved and of life itself, every day of which she had learned to savour.

"We have had the worst of times and the best of times," she said, adding that she was unendingly grateful to the doctors who had given her what she regarded as an extra five years of life. "My life has almost been consumed by medical appointments, and yet I've tried to put
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it aside and think, ‘You know, I’m back at chemotherapy again, that’s a good thing.’ I say to myself, ‘It means I’m still here.’”

Tentatively, I asked if that meant she had had some good moments among the gloom. “More than moments,” she fired back, still my firm, insistent, even stubborn older sister. “Really fantastic times.” And she recalled a family holiday in Italy, by a lake where almost every day she would swim in the water while Robin and her daughters drifted by on a pedalo. She was then recovering from a recent round of surgery but as she swam, she would think to herself, “This is just heaven. Heaven.” The song that brought all that back, the song the four of them had belted out as they packed up their towels for each daily trip, was [Edith Piaf’s La Vie En Rose](#).

She had messages for those she knew would be listening in the future. She told the girls how proud she was of them, how nothing they could ever do, no choice they could ever make, would disappoint her. Knowing that she would not be there to offer her approval, she gave her daughters her blessing in advance.

What I didn’t appreciate as we spoke was that Fiona had not told Beth and Ellie of her plan. I think she saw the recording as a gift and, on some level, imagined it might be a nice surprise. But when Beth came across Fiona’s musical choices scribbled on the back of an envelope, she became distressed: she thought she had seen the pieces her mother wanted played at her own funeral. When Ellie found out about the recording, she, too, became unhappy. “I remember feeling really angry,” she told me later. “I don’t think I’d accepted that Mum was going to die at that point. And I was annoyed that she was doing something to leave behind already. I was like, ‘Why are you doing that? Why do you need to do that?’”

I gave Fiona her Desert Island Discs on a CD. It stretched to two hours: I confess I lacked Kirsty’s discipline and I had allowed Fiona 12 (it might even have been 13) musical choices, rather than the statutory eight. We also let the conversation run in full.

By then, my sister was pretty much confined to bed. I think she listened through once on her own and then, when she felt ready, invited Robin to hear it with her. It happened to be 30 years to the day since they had become a couple. “We knew it was our last anniversary together,” he told me. “We both lay on our bed, I turned it on and we listened, holding hands, lying next to each other.”

Afterwards, the girls did the same. They lay in bed next to Fiona, the three of them listening. They did it in two sessions. By the time they got to the second half, a couple of days later, Fiona’s condition had deteriorated to such an extent that she could no longer speak.

The function of the recording, imagined by Fiona as a posthumous gift, began to change. When close friends came to visit, Fiona would ask, or motion to, Robin to put on the CD, and they would listen with her. Sometimes, when she could, she would nod or smile at the relevant moments. Sometimes she might squeeze their hand. But, in what she knew were her last times with those she loved, she let her special edition of Desert Island Discs do the talking. It became the way she said goodbye.

Fiona died on 28 May 2014. Following Jewish tradition, for the next week we sat “shiva” together, friends and family gathering each evening for prayers, for tea and cake, and to swap

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memories. One night, the house packed, I spoke about Fiona and decided that I ought to let her speak for herself. We played the short passage in our conversation where Fiona talked about her relationship to Judaism. "I'm not a religious person, I've not been through this illness and felt I need God," she said. "Sometimes I wish I did – it would make things probably a lot easier. I don't get comfort from that, but I get huge comfort from the rituals."

There is one passage I will always cherish. For a sentence or two, Fiona says goodbye to me

She said this as she introduced her final disc, the central prayer of the Yom Kippur liturgy, Avinu Malkeinu – a plea offered on the day of atonement, when Jews, after a full day of fasting, plead with God to grant us another year of life. Fiona had held back tears as she spoke. She knew that her own plea for another year had not been granted; but Avinu Malkeinu always moved her. And so there, packed into the kitchen of my house two or three days after she had died, more than 100 of us listened to her speak of its singular meaning – and then we sang it for her.

Later, for a much smaller group of family and close friends, we played the entire recording. One of those there said it was somehow typical of Fiona. She had always been so good with advice, always armed with shrewd recommendations for plays to see, galleries to visit, books to read. Here she was now, coming up with one last, brilliant idea. "This has been such a comfort to us," one friend said. "I wonder if others in this situation might benefit from it."

From there grew the idea of making it public, of somehow putting Fiona's Desert Island Discs on the radio. Though I now realise that, too, was Fiona's idea. Not long after we'd done the recording, she told me that if there were a chance it could be broadcast, she would like that. It's quite clear to me now that she conducted the interview with that in mind. She would explain who people were, even though both of us knew; she referred to "my mother" rather than "Mum". She was speaking to a wider audience.

And so, sometime last year, I contacted a former colleague at [Radio 4](#), now in charge of Desert Island Discs. We talked, and the result is a half-hour programme that will be broadcast on 30 December. It features Beth, Ellie and Robin. But the heart of it is Fiona and the recording we made together that day.

I think Fiona's instinct was right. She understood that this could be an extremely helpful way to approach a terminal illness: helpful for the person facing the end, helpful for those left behind. She had told the story of her life, addressed those she wanted to speak to, made sure those who loved her would still be able to hear her voice when they needed to. People leave wills and letters, of course. But sometimes it's the voice you long for.

Already the recording has left its mark. Beth and Ellie now have something to play to their own children one day, to introduce them to the grandmother they never knew. And it's there in tangible form on her gravestone. Engraved are the words Fiona said to me in that interview, and which I know she meant: "Better to have had a really, really rich life, as I've had, than a long, bleak one."

As for me, there is one passage I will always cherish, even if I find it hard to listen to. For a sentence or two, Fiona says goodbye to me. She picks up a subject we had talked about often. "We've had discussions, haven't we, about the sibling relationship," she says. "Often it's the
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one that gets left out. People talk about mother/daughter, father/son. But people just don't talk about the love and special relationship of siblings. And basically, throughout my life, that has been an extraordinary relationship." You can hear her fighting back tears. "And I'm sorry to leave you. As much as the girls and Robin, and of course Dad and Dani. Because I know it'll hurt."

It still hurts. But what I'm left with is the knowledge that in her 50 years my brave, clever, funny and strong, strong sister did not only teach me about life. She also taught me how to approach death. How to face it, and how to give something beautiful to those who are left behind.

- [How My Sister Said Goodbye](#) is on BBC Radio 4 on 30 December at 11am. You can donate to Marie Curie at justgiving.com/FionaFreedland.

http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/dec/19/for-record-jonathan-freedland-sisters-desert-island-discs?CMP=share_btn_link