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17 May 1999: Breast Core Needle Biopsy

Monday morning, I call my dentist's office to ask the receptionist the name of the freezing Dr. Hupfau no longer uses on me.

"It's on the front of the folder," I say. "It says use something, and in red it says no to something else."

Dr. Hupfau comes on the line. "Tell them to use Isocaine," he says. "No epinephrine, say 'No adrenalin.'" He explains, "Most locals have adrenalin in them."

Penny Connell and I enter the Cancer Agency on the second floor and take the elevator to the third. This seems odd to us. We usually walk up three or four flights at the college where the elevators are slow and the stairs visible to encourage walking. The last time I was here, I looked at the emergency map, and was surprised that the staircases are hidden away from the central core. I don't see doors or signs anywhere indicating a stairwell.

After we check in at reception, we follow the blue lines to the sonogram and mammogram waiting area, and I put my card in the plexiglass container. We discuss how different this May journey is than our May journey to Greece years ago. We talk about where we'll go for lunch: Italian, Japanese, Lebanese, or a soup and sandwich spot called Beetnix. It's only 11:00, but I'm hungry.

The technician comes, shows me to the booth closest to her machine, and I change.

"Can my friend come in to watch?" I ask her.

"No," she says, "There isn't enough room. We have an extra doctor today."

I give Penny my purse, and the technician brings me into the same small room I was in for the organ scans where I climb onto the table. She quickly positions me and locates on the sonogram the same area in my left breast she found the other day. This time, I can look up at an angle and see the screen. That's me. That wiggly black area is cancer.

When I meet the doctors, I don't catch their names.

"Could you not use adrenalin?" I ask. "My dentist uses Isocaine."

"Why?"

"I've had extensive dental work. Something he called epinephrine took longer and longer to thaw each time. Four days the last time."

The doctor looks a little flustered.

"I don't mind taking the extra shots."

"Did you have a rapid heart beat?"

"No—I just couldn't get rid of the freezing. I couldn't think."

She accepts this and gets something else.

I close my eyes so I don't have to see the size of the hypodermic, but the injection is soon over and doesn't hurt at all.

Once she's certain the anaesthetic is sufficient, she makes a quick, small incision and sticks in a core biopsy needle. A white point with a thin tail floats onto the screen. Everything is moving—the depths shift, the horizon isn't fixed. The doctor starts to fish with the needle for the exact level, and the cancer bobs away from her. The point disappears from the screen.

"Dorsal," says the tech. She adjusts the image so the black appears again a little higher up on the screen.

"There it is," I say, referring to the white point of light, "below on the left—gone now."

Both the technician and I have a clearer view than the doctor does.

The white emerges further to the right.

She moves the needle in trying to get close to the floating black nest which is somewhat like a jelly fish, the edges undefined, the body not solid.

"There," says the doctor.

"Got a purchase?" I ask.

"You are going to hear a shot."

I wait. I can see the white arc—like a tiny harpoon. My eyes close as I feel and hear the shot. It's like a single bang from a nail gun. When I open my eyes, the black island has disappeared.

The doctor takes her instrument to a container and empties it into a tube of liquid. The two doctors mutter something about it.

The doctor tries again. The cancer moves, slips to the right, and the technician brings it back almost to the center of the screen.

"There it is—at nine o'clock."

The white point lowers to about eight.

She shoots again. This time I concentrate on keeping my eyes open, but again they shut. She removes the second core. I have the sense that the aim was too high.

She tries again. Closer. I feel this time she will hit it dead center.

"Good," says the technician while the doctor empties the core into a container.

"Fishtailed," says the other doctor when the sample floats the wrong way.

"Can I do another one?" she asks, "Just to make certain?"

"Yes," I say.

I can see the needle or light point as quickly as the tech.

"Bottom left."

"Over there. There. Forty-five degrees right."

The doctor can't. It's ridiculous that they don't have a second screen facing the doctor at the correct angle so she doesn't have to turn her body at the same time she explores and tries to locate the correct layer inside my breast.

"I'm going to try to center it. Just keep the needle steady."

The black blob slips down to the center of the screen as if the technician scrolled upwards and then brought it closer to the surface.

The doctor tries again. Again. Five needle core biopsies in all. By the time she is finished, almost two hours have passed.

"You were brilliant," says the tech.

"Yes," says the doctor as she bandages me, "Fast."

The tech gives me a bag of ice plus a white wash cloth to stuff into my bra to apply pressure. By the time I dress myself, I don't care where Penny and I eat: I just want something warm and comforting.

Weeks later, I read that the needle shoots at a speed of 78 miles per hour.

16 June 1999: Who's there?

3:00 a.m.

I get up to pee and for a second or so I don't recognize who's there in the mirror: ridged bald head, high cheekbones, distinct yet balanced face, neither male nor female, a little scar on the right side.

6:00 a.m.

Grey west-coast morning. I go down to make my coffee and pick up *The Vancouver Sun* from my front porch. I come back to bed holding orange juice, coffee, thermos and paper. Then I snuggle under my floral duvet and read the first page. When I turn it, I see something move on top of Gordon Payne's painting of Ford Creek on Hornby Island. Totally startled, I shake my head and then see my black glass frames and my skull moving in the upper corner. The sandstone is so alive and has so many shapes. I love how simple yet intricate Gordon's landscapes are.

4:00 p.m.: Doctor Cancels

My GP, not his nurse, calls me. I am supposed to be seeing him for his last appointment today at 6:00 p.m. in order to talk. Then I'll go to my Healing Circle.

"I have shingles. I've had to have other doctors take over my births. It would be safer for you to rebook."

"Okay."

June 17: Want to Swim

I want to swim. I haven't for a whole month. My muscles miss their toning. My heart and lungs miss their workout. My bones and joints miss the utter ease of being surrounded by water. I especially love the stretches, the extensions of arms and legs that only come after thirty-five lengths when my reach seems to increase almost an inch. I usually swim a mile, sixty-four lengths: three lengths of crawl, one length of breast up until fifty, then crawl and breast lengths alternating. Today, I'll be happy if I can do half of that.

I call Rae Nickolichuk, a young Capilano College English instructor who used to be a lifeguard, because I want her to be with me in case anything should happen. Bad news for today—she has to mark English Placement Tests for someone else. We arrange to meet tomorrow at Ron Andrews Pool.

But ten minutes later, I want to go right now. Stop behaving like a six year old, I tell myself. Go to Templeton Pool. Tell the lifeguard. But take the car just in case you can't walk back.

When I get there, I hesitate about wearing my bathing cap. Certainly don't need one. I pull it on anyway, so I won't have to put up with stares.

"I'm in week one of a chemo cycle," I tell the young, blonde lifeguard. "Can you watch over me?"

"Certainly." He gives me a big smile, and I'm off.

I decide I'm going to do forty, a kilometer, no more. The first six are easy and feel good—just like they usually do. I love water. My arms stretch out; belly, back, and bottom float higher than almost all men's do. It's as if I plane just inches under the water's surface. After ten lengths, I wave over at the guard indicating I'm okay. After twenty, I'm into the faster swim. At thirty, I start alternating breast and crawl lengths—the cool down. Afterwards, I feel great, myself again.

18 June: Another Swim

Rae Nickolichuk and I swim at Ron Andrews. I don't wear a swim-cap this time because I've no hair to keep from the pool, and the cap's protecting nothing but my scalp. We each have a lane to ourselves: my idea of heaven. Every so often, I look over at Rae who glides along much faster than I do. I swim 64 lengths, no problem, feels good. My finger tips and toes vibrate.

20 June: Another Swim

Swim again with Rae. 64 lengths.

21 June : Damn Blister

"I have a blister from my nose to my lip," I say to Jennifer, Dr B's receptionist at the Cancer Agency.

"Dr B is on duty this afternoon," she says. "I'll speak with her and call you back."

An hour later, during my normal nap time, I am in a waiting room and almost falling asleep on the only hot day we've had all June. Opposite me, a Japanese-

Canadian in his early twenties falls asleep sitting up. Another patient and I get up and lift the young man's legs onto his bench so that he can be more comfortable.

When I see Dr B, she gives me a prescription. "Without nostril hairs, you can expect your nose to run."

June 23: My GP

When I do get to see Dr M, we're both uneasy. I don't say anything about the letter I wrote to him and all my doctors, but neither does he. We hesitate.

"How are the treatments going?" he asks.

"Fine, so far. I've lost my taste-buds this time, my sense of touch last time, my hair the first time—chemo is powerful. Look at this cordy vein." I stick my right arm out at him. "I also get lights inside my head from one of the drugs."

"You have to have surgery?"

"Yes—a total mastectomy."

Pause.

"Have you a surgeon?"

"Yes—but I haven't seen her yet."

"You never know," he says. "Nowadays with reconstruction and with doctors who want to conserve, you might not need a mastectomy."

Pause. This is awkward.

"Do you use the Internet?" he asks. "There's all sorts of information there that you might read—there are even cancer chatrooms."

"No, not yet—but I do have access through the college."

"Do you visualize?"

"I'm not tranquil enough."

"It works well for children."

"I just run around saying, 'Zap it, kill, kill, kill, kill!'" I'm startled by the power of my voice.

He laughs lightly. Is he scared?

"Why did it take you from Monday till Friday to give me my diagnosis?"

"My wife was mad at me about that too," he says.

"Why? You knew it wasn't going to go away by itself."

"I wanted to have an appointment for you at the Cancer Agency."

"So you could pass me on." Too bad he didn't do that in February.

"Little micro-cells," I say to myself on the way home, "I want to kill you. Go. Fly away. Drop away. Starve. Burn out. Disappear, you tiny shit-heads."

I also identify *with* the cancer: those cells want to live just as much as I do.