

*An Unexpected Journey by Mairi Neil*

This room is too small. A tiny desk jammed in the left corner as we enter through the door. A four-shelf bookcase laden with pamphlets melts into the right wall and four grey cloth office chairs cluster beside the desk, silent when moved against the carpet, which is another nondescript grey. I think how crowded the room will be when filled to capacity - patient with partner or friend, the doctor and a nurse/counsellor. Or, maybe cosy - it depends on what news is delivered.

Now, there is only Deb, the nurse who has been looking after me. We are waiting for the doctor to return and already I feel claustrophobic. The Venetian blinds are semi-closed on the pencil thin window but I can feel the chill from the stormy sky threatening hail.

I don't gasp for air, or take reassuring gulps. Instead, holding my breath, I almost stop breathing. Perhaps a subconscious plea for time to stop, even be rewound, will be answered. This morning has become surreal.

I can sense rather than see Deb behind me, her chair close enough to be reassuring, or grab me if I lose control. I think she expected me to sit in the chair parallel to the desk, face the doctor and her, but I sit once removed, where a husband or partner should be. Where John should be.

I suppress a mixture of emotions: anger, pain, sadness, self-pity, and fear. The empty chair reminds me I am widowed eight years.

A silent voice in my head acknowledges reality - I'm fifty-seven, alone, and no man is going to find me attractive now. I tremble for a moment, an almost imperceptible jerk. Deb leans closer; I can feel the heat from her body and grit my teeth, willing the tears to stay behind burning eyeballs. The ache for John's strength beside me is making me emotional. I must stop thinking the impossible.

Dr Sarah returns, hunched as if warding off an arctic wind. She clutches several files to her chest. It has been less than a week and already I'm a paperwork headache for the system. She sees my raised eyebrows, smiles weakly and spreads the manilla folders, obliterating the smooth green surface of the desk.

'Your GP will get copies of all reports and so will your surgeon.' She sniffs and apologises, 'I'm not feeling well - must be coming down with a cold.'

I murmur sympathies. So does Deb. Later I'll laugh at the irony. Three of us commiserating over her cold after she has told me I have breast cancer - Invasive Ductal Carcinoma Grade 2 breast cancer, early stages. '... should only be a lumpectomy ... probably some lymph glands. No results yet if it is hormone receptive, won't really know if it has spread anywhere else until the operation and more biopsy results ... definitely radiation treatment, maybe chemotherapy to follow. Any questions?'

I don't know what to say so babble my thanks, grateful for her expertise, her kindness, a health system that I hope will make me well, or at let do its best to make the route to oblivion as easy as possible.

I can see in her grey eyes that she is already preparing herself for the next patient. Three hundred women a day diagnosed with breast cancer in Australia - an epidemic Dr Sarah coped with by keeping women like me at a distance.

She leave the rooms quietly as she came in, a mouse-like figure, all fawns and browns, pale-skinned, fair hair lacking lustre because of her sniffles. I recall her cold, cold hands - petite, slender, surgeon's hands. She operates at the The Alfred when she is not delivering bad news at BreastScreen Victoria.

I won't forget her part in my journey, her soft voice and her cold, cold hands. She'll remember me as Patient 061.52.72.

Nurse Deb is different. Although we have only shared a few hours, they have been intense and earth-shattering hours for me. We bonded over our love for elephants when she admired the pendant around my neck, a gift from John. I heard her sigh of relief when I did not break into hysterical sobbing or react angrily to Dr Sarah's news.

Those stages of grief will come but my Scots Presbyterian childhood kicks in when I face trauma. I have learned to hide my grief, contain my anger.

'I'll visit the local swimming pool and give a primal scream underwater,' I say with a nervous laugh. Deb nods her approval.

'There's some more admin stuff.' Deb is apologetic and begins to usher me into another room I struggle and stumble over the crammed chairs, I feel a stunned mullet expression has taken residence on my face.

Training kicks in; Deb pauses. From her face, I can see her go through a checklist from her counselling course. She advises I stay in the room for a few moments, let the news sink in.

'It is a bit of a shock,' I murmur. 'I had almost convinced myself the biopsy would be okay - it would be a cyst, or fatty tissue.'

Another silent, practised smile and nod from Deb. I'm glad she has learnt sympathetic silence. I picture the days ahead when everyone will have a breast cancer story, unsolicited advice about what to eat, what to do, speculation about how I got it.

Emotion lumps in my throat. John was such a good listener; I ache for his comforting arms, the squeeze of his hand, the loving smile only for me that twinkled in his Paul Newman eyes.

I shrug off my torpor. 'I'm fine, Deb. What's the next step?'