

## **Without an anchor**

The nurse struggled to find a vein. I closed my eyes tightly and curled my toes, waiting for the pain of the needle to be over. "Sorry sweetie, you don't have good veins, I'll get the hot water, that should help," nurse Kathy said as she went to find another nurse to take over my arm. She brought Joey, "He's the best!" Kathy said. Joey dipped my arm in a bucket of scolding hot water, where it sunk for a few long minutes. Then he assessed my arm before a quick jab - finding the vein right away to insert a canular – and the infusion began.

I looked out at the oversized dark grey chairs in a line against the white wall, in each one sat a person fighting a battle – an elderly woman without hair gently closing her eyes to rest, a young man furiously working on his laptop, a middle-aged lady whose husband lovingly held her hand. Each person, their own world. Each person receiving chemotherapy. I was alone.

Tears began to well in my eyes and then pour down my cheeks. "I know it's a lot," Kathy said as she searched her file for a form. "It is. But that's not why I'm crying," I replied. A few months earlier I had been in this very room supporting my mother who was receiving intravenous medication before she had passed away from cancer weeks earlier.

Kathy handed me a form to fill out, it was about mental health. "Do you feel depressed?" it asked, "Do you feel anxious?", "Yes" and "Yes", I wrote. Describe the

level of sadness you feel from 1 to 10, I circled 10. If there was an 11, I would have circled 11. Kathy took the form and examined it quickly, "Do you want me to organise an appointment with a therapist?" she asked. "No thanks, I have one" I said. Kathy nodded and returned diligently to her work. What could she or anyone really do for my sadness?

Kathy began attaching the bright red liquid into the drip. It is known as the 'Red Devil' for a reason - AC chemotherapy is the strongest chemotherapy one can have, and a person can only have it four times in their life. Based on the last time I had AC chemotherapy I knew I was about to feel extremely sick and would stay overnight in hospital.

The first time I had AC, that night I collapsed on my bathroom floor, half passed out with a severe migraine and crippling nausea. My husband pulled my body off the tiles and drove me to the hospital emergency room.

This time I knew how it would unfold - a headache would soon set in. Kathy walked me to the hospital room where I would stay the night for observation. The room was large with tall windows that looked out onto a busy suburban street dotted with cars and people. It would seem like a nice private room, but as I sat in the bed with its tight white sheets and stark white walls, my attention drifted to the large navy couch in the corner. It was a two-seater comfy couch, which would ordinarily be a welcome addition, but it made me wonder – how many people have died in this room? How many mourners sat and slept on this couch while watching their loved one leave this world? How many ghosts would visit me tonight?

As I lay on the bed, the migraine started to kick in – my temples ached, the light became piercing, my insides rolled with nausea that led me to curl into the fetal position on the bed. I shut my eyes waiting for the pain to subside, waiting and waiting in the dark room.

As the pain grew, I lifted my head from the pillow and said wearily to the air, “Mum, I need you, I can’t do this without you.”

I was heartbroken and filled with rage, life had felt unfair. My mum was the closest person to me in this life, my best friend, my anchor and she had died from cancer at 70, and two weeks later, still in the depths of grief I found a lump in my breast at 37.

Breast cancer I thought happened to older people, not when you have two young kids to look after and you are mourning your mother. I could not help but wonder, did grief make me sick?

But I would learn that breast cancer is the second leading cause of death by cancer for women under 40. In Australia women under 40 are not eligible to have mammograms because their breasts are considered too dense. So, for many young women they find breast cancer too late.

I was frustrated that I hadn’t received a mammogram or breast MRI despite having a family history of cancer, I was furious that too many young women are going through this. I felt grateful to be able afford medical care in Australia, and support from my

partner to help look after the kids when I felt sick, but what about women who don't have that? How did they cope? Who would help them? The more I thought about it the angrier I became.

"Mum, I need you, help me!" I called out to the white walls.

The sight of her death was still at the forefront of my mind. The trauma of seeing a once vivacious, kind and loving person, who had been selfless to her friends and family, lying still on a bed without her soul.

I had been the one to close her hazel eyes, I was the one to lift the sheet over her gaping mouth. I hugged her lifeless body and wailed for the mother that I had loved so deeply and who was forever gone from this world.

According to Jewish tradition, a body cannot be left alone, so together with my siblings we waited hours for the Chevra Kaddisha (Jewish burial society) to arrive. As per custom her funeral was days later, followed by the Shiva - seven days of mourning. Seven days? I was still in the depths of grief. I thought I had grieved for her while she was still alive knowing the end was near, but the finality of saying goodbye to someone so deeply loved, would pierce a wound in my soul that no one could heal.

"Mum, please, I need you!" I yelled into the darkness.

"Darling, I'm so sorry you are going through this," her voice said tenderly.

When I opened my eyes, I could see her. She did not look sick anymore – her eyes were no longer dull, they sparkled. Her skin no longer grey, now golden.

“Mum, I miss you too much, my heart is broken. I’m scared my children won’t have a mother, they are so young, I’m afraid they won’t know me. I need to be here for them. It is too much! I can’t cope!”

“Sweetie, you must cope. You need to be strong for your children,” I heard.

“Mum, you were so strong, you fought so hard to live, you wanted to be here so badly, and yet you were taken.”

“I so want to be here for my children! Please ask God to protect me. Please send me strength,” I called out.

“Darling I am with you. I am always in your heart.”

Then the voice was gone. In the darkness I began to cry, not just tears, howling raw sounds of anger and pain. “Ahhhhhhhhhhhh!” I screamed at the white walls, “Ahhhhhhhhhhhh!” I yelled viscerally into my pillow as if I was trying to release the torment trapped in my soul.

Hours that felt like days passed and soon the light of dawn shun through the thin grey curtains and it was morning. The agony of the migraine had subsided, but my

vision remained fuzzy. The light hurt my eyes, and nausea still rumbled deep inside me, but I was relieved the migraine had passed.

I thought about my mother's words – was it a dream, was it a hallucination, was it a ghost? I didn't care, I was just grateful that she was with me.

With my feet unsteady, I walked slowly towards the bathroom to dress. It was difficult to look in the mirror. Where once I had long flowing chestnut hair, now my hair had left from chemotherapy. So too my eyelashes and eyebrows had vanished. Losing my hair felt like a punishment.

As I painted on my eyebrows with eyeshadow and placed a short brown wig on top of my scalp, I wondered who I was doing this for. Was it for me to hide my bald head as though it was a source of shame? Or was it for others, so that when I order a coffee, barristas don't have to mean it when they say, "How are you?", and so that acquaintances don't really need to think about what I'm going through when they stop me in the street to say "Hello". Or perhaps it is for my daughter so that she is not embarrassed that her mother does not have hair at school pick up? The wig had never felt right. It was heavy and itchy and sat awkwardly on my head. It felt like a lie.

My husband Adam drove up to the hospital entrance to pick me up. I opened the car door to find Elijah crying furiously in the car seat. "Why is he screaming?" I asked before closing the door. "Because he wants you and he's hungry!" Since starting

chemotherapy, I could no longer breastfeed, and Elijah who was only one years-old, had to switch to regular milk, which he was not fond of.

“Mummy, why do you have to stay in hospital? I’m scared when you go to hospital,” my five-year-old daughter Lia said as she twirled her golden ringlets sitting in her car seat.

“They are helping me at hospital. Why are you scared?” I asked.

“Because of Nana. Nana went to hospital and she died,” Lia said.

“Nana was very sick. The doctors are trying to help me get better,” I told her gently.

Adam interrupted the conversation, “I have so much work to do. You need to look after the kids when we come home.”

“Adam, I’m still feeling really unwell, I need to go to bed,” I said.

“Well, you can’t,” he replied firmly.

Around ten minutes later we arrived at the house – a small Victorian in Caulfield. I took Elijah out of his car seat and carried him in my arms toward the front door. Lia followed close behind.

We walked along the corridor and entered my bedroom crawling into bed together.

I lay my head on the soft pillow, with Elijah resting on one arm and Lia wrapped in the other and held onto them tight. Seconds later Elijah started kicking the blanket into the air. His little fingers grabbed my cheeks and turned my face towards his deep blue eyes. “I love you” I said, as I kissed him softly on the forehead. Then I looked towards my bedside table to the photograph of my mother who was staring back at me.

I put my faith in God and placed my hands on my children’s heads and said the Hebrew prayer that parents have said for their children for thousands of years:

*“Y’varekh’khah Adonai V’yishm’rekha.*

*Ya’eir Adonai panav eilekha vihuneka.*

*Yisa Adonai panav eilekha v’yaseim l’kha shalom.”*

“May God bless you and safeguard you.

May God illuminate His countenance to you; and

Grant you peace.”



