

PRECIPICE

By Kelly Garriott Waite

Four days before my dad dies, and about a week after the death of my great-aunt, my doctor finds a lump in my breast. "How does that feel to you?"

"It feels like I'm about to get my period."

"You have very dense breasts," my doctor says writing out a mammography order with the words 'malignancy' on it.

I feel ashamed. My breasts have failed some test. I want to apologize for their thick stupidity. Perhaps I ought to fashion paper dunce caps for them, stick them on top.

Thirteen days after the death of my father, I find I actually *can* adorn my boobs with dunce caps after they emerge pointy and indignant from the mammogram machine.

My yearly obligation done, I am free to concentrate on the rest of my life.

But the following morning, I get a callback.

My great-aunt has died. My father has died. My mother-in-law, who believes in horoscopes and signs, would say *things happen in threes*. Even though I don't believe in this, I begin to wonder if I'm number three. It's a way of hedging my bets. A prayer for astrological atheists. Sign scoffers.

Four days after my initial mammogram, twenty-seven days after my father's service, I return to the hospital.

"How are you?" the tech, a new one, asks. An unnecessary question. She knows I am standing at the edge of frightened. Peering into terrified.

"My father just died." Perhaps this will buy me some cred with the mammogram gods. *She can't be sick. It's too soon.* But I know this is an impossibility.

"Mine, too," the tech says. We speak of loss and caregiving and exhaustion and, yes, relief. We speak of writing—she's a poet, I'm an essayist. As we talk, I pull off my shirt, unbuckle my bra, don the horrid gown. It has flaps of fabric the size of St. Bernard's ears to cover each breast. But as the technician cradles my right breast in the palm of her hand, I realize this is all a ruse: There is no modesty in mammography.

My breast is compressed and rolled and compressed some more. "You have very dense breasts," she says, tightening the plates. I imagine what my boob must look like—a bug on the windshield, a too-thin pancake with a dobble on top when the cook got startled and jumped.

"I'll be right back," the tech says as she releases my breast after the fourth image is taken.

"Is it OK to get dressed?"

"The radiologist may want a sonogram."

I nod and sit in the chair and pick up my book. I arrange the dog-ear over my pancake boob. The other breast nods and clucks sympathetically at its poor partner. At any moment, the tech will come in and tell me I am free to get dressed. See you next year and all that.

The door opens. The tech enters. She is followed by a male doctor.

I don't try to remember his name. I'm focused on the fact that I am undressed and he is not; that he has just seen images of my breast and knows something about me that I do not. I try to pay attention to the words birthed from his mouth. *Cell growth.*

Calcification. Biopsy. Just in case.

The doctor leaves. A blink of an eye. Like my father, he is here. And now he is gone.

Now you see me. Now you don't.

The tech hugs me. We comfort each other for our father's deaths, for our own precious and fragile lives.

Exactly four weeks after the death of my father, I'm sitting in the Breast Health Center.

When will I stop marking time against Dad's illness and death? A woman wears a scarf on her bare head. I refuse to look at her. I don't want to upset her. I don't want to see my future reflected in her eyes. I know this is unfair. The woman's voice is full of optimism. Two men are here as well. I'm surprised when they're called to the back. I remember that men, too, can get breast cancer. I want to say *it's not fair*, but I remind myself that my mother always said *life's not fair*, and if I want proof of that I need only watch the evening news.

A nurse summons me to the back. I am weighed. I am measured. My blood pressure is taken. I just want to get this over with. Winter has been the season of waiting—for my dad's biopsy results, for his death after he decided to end treatment, and now...now

I'm whining. *Cut it out.*

The nurse says that the doctor is thinking of a biopsy.

"Just needles?"

"Just needles."

From what I'd been told, a needle with a hollow tube is inserted into the troubled area and cells are extracted. It sounds simple. Quick. Painless.

The doctor enters, accompanied by another doctor who wants to specialize in breasts. We shake hands. Nods all around. The doctor has me sit on the examination table.

"Could you," she gestures. "Open your gown? I like to start by looking at the symmetry of your breasts."

This gown has no St. Bernard ears. It has snaps, which once joined are reluctant to part. I fumble and sweat. I pull back my gown while the two doctors stare at my chest. I'm a piece of meat hanging in the window. I glance at the ceiling. Whistle between my teeth. Try for a joke. "My boobs have seen more action than they have in a long time."

The doctor has me lie down. She kneads my breasts while the other doctor leans over the table, looking on intently. The doctor thanks me for allowing the other doctor to be present. When she is finished, she tells me she's going to examine my films.

"Is it OK to get dressed?"

"I may need to do a sonogram."

I open my book. I pretend to read. I pray. I ask my father to look out for me, even though I'm angry with him.

I tell myself I don't believe that things come in threes. I ask myself what I might have missed. Maybe that breast pain isn't just perimenopause. Maybe I shouldn't have invested in those expensive bras. Maybe if I hadn't quit my job...

Quit being stupid.

The doctors return. The specialist speaks of percentages. Assures me it's likely nothing. She hands me a laminated sheet. On it, there's a photograph of a woman. She is tanned and thin. Her hair is long and shiny. Her glowing smile reveals perfect white teeth. She's stretched out on a surgical table. It has a small cutout, through which one breast has been thrust. It reminds me of a cow's udder in a milking machine.

The doctor describes the procedure. My breast will be washed. Numbed. Mashed between mammography plates. Coordinates will be programmed into a machine. The doctor will press some buttons and a blade will make an incision in my breast.

Incision?

"You'll feel a strange tugging sensation. A bit of breast tissue will be sucked out and then sliced away by a blade."

Blade?

Where is the needle?

Where is the hollow tube?

"I'll end up with a short, thin tissue sample, about the width of a piece of spaghetti."

She holds up her hand, indicates the size with her thumb and index finger. "Then we'll re-position the needle and take more samples." She looks at me. "Do you have any questions?"

I point to the beautiful woman lying on the damn table waiting for a robot to slice open her breast. "Why is she smiling?" Because even when women are at their worst, even when they're worried about their health, their very lives, they have to look perfect and grin for the camera.

There is a moment of silence before we all laugh. "Perhaps she's smiling because she's taking care of herself," the doctor says, which sounds inane, but what else can she say? In a little better than a week, five weeks and a day after my father's death, I lie on that table. My makeup will be smeared. My two-inch hair will be standing straight up. I will wear a look of fear and resignation as my breast is positioned through that cutout. Will I be number three? I honestly don't know. But I hope and I pray and I tell myself that I don't believe in that stuff anyway.

* * *

Follow Michelle to the waiting room. Listen as she points to the changing room, the lockers, the toilets. Nod when she tells you to empty your bladder. Enter the changing room. Grab a gown. Notice how the shoulders fall to your wrists. How the gown can wrap around your body twice. How the hem skirts the floor. Don't read into the fact that you picked locker number thirteen. Stuff your clothes inside. Hand your oversized purse to Lisa. Tell her you still have to pee.

Pee.

Realize there are no hand towels. Dry your hands on the gown and realize that it reminds you of a shower curtain. Return to the waiting room. Ask Lisa if the gown was made for the Jolly Green Giant. Take small comfort in the laughter of the other women. You are all in this together.

Follow Lisa to the procedure room. See that Michelle is there, the doctor, too, a woman by the name of Heaven.

Step on the stool. Kneel on the table. Let your shower curtain flop open. Begin to lie down, aiming your right breast for the target - that square hole in the table. Turn your face toward the wall.

Lift your knees so that Lisa can put a pillow there. Move your left breast away from the cutout. Scoot. Scoot. Scoot. That's it.

Allow Michelle to remove the pillow from beneath your head. Understand that your breast is so tiny that even this small incline keeps it from fitting through the cutout. Someone presses on your shoulder.

Hold still.

Hold still.

Hold still.

Feel your breast being pulled and compressed between miniature mammography plates.

Try to breathe.

Listen to the hushed conversation between the three women. Wonder why they're tearing off a length of foil. Keep your head turned to the wall.

Feel the relief as your breast is released from the compression plates. Wonder why the women are helping you from the table. Wrap the shower curtain around your frame.

Follow the doctor to the image of your breast glowing on the wall. Try not to cringe when she points out your nipple.

Feel hope when she tells you it appears that the calcifications are near the skin's surface; that those are generally benign. Love your breast again. Follow Lisa and

Michelle to a mammography machine across the hall. Admire the sticker they affix to your nipple. Call it a nipple ring just to make them laugh.

Allow your body to be twisted and pushed. Bend your knees. Hold still. Don't breathe. Look at the painting hanging on the wall to your left. You know it's a reproduction of some famous painting, but you can't identify it. You're grateful for the black staring eyes of the people standing in the hayfield.

Stand back. Wrap the shower curtain around your shoulders. Wait.

Tug off the nipple ring. Put it back after Michelle tells you to. Watch as a second sticker is affixed to another spot on your breast. Step up to the machine. Make eye contact with the people in the hayfield. Hold your breath.

When the plate releases, do not move. Do not breathe.

Prepare for at least ten shots of your breast. Prepare for several stickers to be stuck to your breast. While you're trapped in the machine, study the different sized compression paddles. Your paddle is small, coaster-sized. Know that there are paddles the size of saucers and, good Lord, dinner plates.

Watch Michelle ink a circle on your breast.

Follow Michelle and Lisa back into the procedure room. Return to the table.

Understand that the calcifications are not near the skin. This is really going to happen.

Hate your boob just a little.

Listen to more quiet conversation. Wonder what's going on. Notice how hard the table is beneath you. You can feel your pelvic bones. Your hip bones. The bones in your cheek.

Listen as Lisa (or is it Michelle?) tells you it's going to go quickly now. When they ask if you are ready, say "yes" as bravely as possible. Feel the cool alcohol on your breast.

Hope the smell will make you pass out.

Realize the smell of rubbing alcohol will not make you pass out.

Listen as the doctor tells you *in one two three* you'll feel a slight pinch and some burning.

Don't move.

Know that the worst is over.

Listen as the doctor tells you that now they're going to do a deep tissue numbing and it will burn a little bit more *in one two three*. Wonder why Lisa (or is it Michelle?) is rubbing your leg.

As the shot enters your breast, feel your eyes rolling into the back of your head.

Apologize to the women for swearing repeatedly. Condemn Dr. Heaven to hell.

Listen as the doctor tells you *in one two three* you'll hear a click but not to move. Do. Not. Move.

Be glad you didn't move. You will later learn that this is a spring-loaded needle. A harpoon chasing a whale.

Listen as the doctor tells you you'll hear a lot of whirring noises but not to be alarmed.

Compare the whirring sound to a chainsaw, followed by lots of beeping, like your children's old Simon game. Wonder if there are lights flashing somewhere in the distance. If the women have uploaded an arcade game on their Smartphones.

Don't move.

Try not to panic when LisaMichelle says, "I've never heard that noise before."

Realize that your right arm is tucked beneath your leg. Breathe as the machine goes quiet and LisaMichelle tells you that Dr. Heaven is going to check the samples. Ask if you can move. Try not to get angry when you are told no. When Michelle asks what hurts, tell her your arm is asleep. As she pulls your hand from beneath your leg, feel the life flow back into it.

Relax as the doctor inserts a titanium clip into your breast. Listen as she tells you you'll have results within 5 working days. Thank her now; you will not see her again. Take a deep breath as the harpoon is withdrawn.

Say hello to the wall as Michelle introduces the nurse who will bandage your breast and hold compression for twenty minutes. Realize you have no idea what *hold compression* means.

Ask the nurse—you were too frazzled to catch her name—if she'll stitch the breast. "Steri-strips. You have a hole the size of a coffee stirrer". You picture a coffee stirrer sticking from your breast and this reminds you of a straw in an orange.

When the nurse tells you, try to get up. Realize you cannot. Your body is frozen to the table. Your neck hurts. Your back hurts. Your breast hurts.

Watch the nurse, whose face you see for the first time, pull the shower curtain across your shoulders as she helps you to sit. Lie on your back. Understand that *holding compression* means the nurse has to place pressure on your throbbing breast for twenty minutes. Try to think of things to talk about as she cups her hand over your

boob. Talk about walks and books and work. Ask what to do if your breast bleeds. Be reassured when she says that it won't.

Grab your purse and cross the hall for two more mammograms. Joke with a woman waiting for her mammogram about the hideous gowns. Remove the contents from your locker. Slip into your clothes. Wait for Lisa to tell you that Dr. Heaven is happy with the final mammograms. Accept a hug and wishes for good results. Slip a circular ice pack into your bra. Know that this jittery feeling is from the numbing medication. The drug contains Epinephrine (Adrenaline).

At bedtime, notice the bloom of red across the gauze. Try to be patient when the doctor on call says she can't do anything from where she is. Try not to panic when she suggests the ER. Feel relief when she says try holding pressure first. When she asks if you have someone at home with you, tell her yes. Try not to laugh when she suggests that person hold pressure.

Ask your husband to grab your boob. Realize he is lying down and putting all his weight on you. Worse, your son could come into the room at any moment and what would that look like? Hold your own compression. Try to read, holding your book in one hand, your boob in the other. Hope the book doesn't fall on your face.

Take a second call from the doctor. Reassure her that the bleeding has stopped. Try to sleep on your back, your boob cupped in your hand. Realize your earplugs have fallen down your shirt, your ice pack has slipped out of your bra, your husband is snoring. Stare at the ceiling, wide-eyed. Know that this is the adrenalin.

Stare at the ceiling.

When your husband wakes in the morning, gingerly roll to your left. Feel a pull on your incision site.

Wake an hour later. Check the gauze. Realize you're bleeding. Hold compression. Hope that the neighbors can't see you walking around the kitchen groping at your boob with your left hand, clutching a mug of coffee in your right.

Wonder about the biopsy results.

Worry.

Panic.

Think about your dead father.

Stop.

Hold still.

Stand at the window. Notice the birds gathered at the feeder.

Hope.

Pray.

Breathe.

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