

## Welcome to the Amazon Club

- Jane Bissell

Sunday 14 October 2001

Mom has gone off to church. To pray for me, I reckon.

I have breast cancer. Found out yesterday. Blast it and bloody hell is all I can think of to say about that.

Yesterday, Saturday, Katherine and I went to lunch first. To my favourite café, Peppers, for panini and coffee. It was sunny and warm so we sat outside. I said to her, 'Life may be about to change', and she told me again, 'You don't know that for sure, try not to get worked up until you have all the facts'. We walked over to the CD shop and I ran into an old work mate. When she asked how I was, I told her I was off to the States on Monday for a few months, but inside a voice was chanting, no you're not, over and over and I felt like such a liar. She told me how well I was looking. Then Katherine and I drove to the clinic.

The place was empty on a Saturday afternoon with only a couple of nurses at the emergency desk. Katherine and I sat down and soon Belinda (*Belinda Scott, Breast Surgeon*) arrived, looking as if she had just come from surgery with her scrubs in a plastic bucket. She smiled and told us to come on through and we did. There's a photo of her husband and children on the wall of her office. She said she was going home afterwards to organise a birthday party for one of her kids.

We sat down, she opened up my file, looked at me for a moment and smiled again but this time it was different — one of those 'I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but...' smiles.

Belinda told me I have breast cancer.

The three of us just sat there.

Belinda laid her hand over mine and said, 'Would you like some water?' I nodded. Then she said, 'It's okay to cry if you want to,' and I did. Katherine looked stunned too. She was sitting beside me and she rubbed my back with her hand and said nothing. Belinda brought me a cup of cold water. She spoke to me calmly and began to outline what we need to do next. She suggested I buy an exercise book and start writing in it — questions,

information, or just thoughts and feelings that I want to write down.

Belinda said I can't go away. If I'd been planning to go for only a week that would be all right, but all those months away? No. She told me we need to book in for surgery and remove the tumour right away. Not 'a lump' any more. It's 'a tumour' now. She gave me a folder of information from the Cancer Society. I am to come back on Monday to meet with Janice, Belinda's breast nurse, to set up my surgery and other appointments. Find out what I need to do. When I got up to leave, I said thank you. Thank you? Whatever for?

Katherine and I were going downstairs to the car. I felt some outburst of emotion welling up — anger or fear or sadness, I don't know which — so I said, 'Bugger!' and hit the folder against the wall. All the papers fell out. Katherine picked them up.

We got into the car and were silent. What was there to say? She negotiated the traffic and I sat with tears sliding down my cheeks. It couldn't be me, sitting there, it had to be somebody else. Jane was busy getting on with her Saturday afternoon — seeing a movie, having dinner with friends afterwards. I didn't know who that person was sitting in the car with Katherine, but it sure wasn't me, I thought indignantly. Breast cancer? No way. Rubbish.

For a brief moment, it seemed like life was over. The thought was profound, not really that frightening, but so startling it stopped the tears. Then, Jane the Manager stepped in and began making plans for the funeral.

Katherine took me back to her house and asked what she could do for me. I said could I have a shot of whiskey. She poured one, hesitated and said, 'Think I'll have one too.' I asked her to tell me what Belinda had said — tell me again — and she did. 'What do we need to do now?' I asked.

Appointment Monday, surgery in about a week, no going away to the US.

Mom and Dad were waiting to know what had gone down. The moment I heard Mom's voice on the other end of the phone, I couldn't talk, so Katherine took over and told them the news. Then I wanted to see my friends, Louise and Libby, so Katherine called them for me and we went over there for dinner.

Libby's breast cancer was three years ago. She had a mastectomy. She's been okay ever since. She is now a Breast Cancer Support Services volunteer visitor.

When we got to their house, they were both waiting on the doorstep and each gave me such a strong hug. Once inside, Libby gave me a book to take home and read — Dr Susan Love's Breast Book. She said I'm to call her whenever I need her — doesn't matter what time of day or night. She said to me right then that I will get through it and I will come out the other end okay. I'm in the best hands with Belinda Scott and her team. She held my shoulders at arm's length, looked at me, then she smiled and said,

'Welcome to the Amazon Club.'

I thought, what a great title for a book, realised I didn't really know what she meant, then wondered why she was smiling.

After dinner when she and I were in the kitchen, I said to her I don't know if I can do this. I've never been much of a fighter, really, whereas she's always been a very sporty, competitive, confident person, fearless and capable. Not like me. I told her I'm afraid I might just give up.

Wrong thing to say to Miss Libby. She looked me in the eye and said, 'Yes, you can do this, and you will. We'll help you. Choose life, always.'

I talked some things through with her. Belinda said the tumour has been there 'a long time'. Years. I've been having mammograms and ultrasound at the same radiology clinic since I turned 41. That's four years ago. Why didn't they find it earlier?

We talked about my lifestyle — the one I've been struggling with for over five years and had to take a break from to recover my health. I had major stress that just went on and on. Could that be the reason I now have cancer? I've worked with airplanes and trucks for many years and maybe I inhaled too much exhaust or came into contact with something toxic in our freight one day. I was almost in a panic, thinking, searching for some reason why it had happened and then I came back to, why in the hell didn't they find it when I've been doing everything right?

Libby said they really don't know what triggers the cancer to start developing but they feel sure certain

lifestyle factors contribute to it. Libby's was caught early while it was still in a pre-cancerous condition called ductal carcinoma in situ, or DCIS. She explained what that was but I only recall her saying something about 'calcifications' being 'abnormal,' indicating the pre-cancer and that's how they found it. When she mentioned calcifications, I remembered the radiologist telling me at my first mammogram that I had a lot of these microscopic things. She told me at every subsequent mammogram that they looked all right. She showed them to me on the films and I can recall the tiny white flecks in the breast tissue.

Anne H. called this evening to wish me bon voyage for tomorrow. Of course I had to tell her I'm not going.

'Why?' she asked, incredulous.

'You'll never guess in a million years,' I told her. 'I have breast cancer.'

There was this deep silence on the other end. I've never known Anne to be at a loss for words. She's been a secondary school teacher for years and has a response for just about everything. But I sure got her this time.

'Oh no,' she said.

I say, 'I have breast cancer'. I say the words but I don't really understand what's going on. Not really. I took Belinda's advice and bought an exercise book today. I've started a list of questions and have been jotting down thoughts. I'll take the book with me to appointments and maybe I'll take it other places too so I can write in it when I want to.

© Jane Bissell

Welcome to the Amazon Club

Longacre Press, 2004