

EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

By Tamaso Lonsdale

'God! Man! It's beautiful! Fantastic! Is that your work?'

The younger man smiled proudly. 'Yes. It's not bad, is it?' he admitted modestly.

'Not bad? It's amazing!' said the older man clapping his young friend on the shoulder. 'You can be proud of that, old son.'

I listened to them in shocked disbelief. How could they possibly think this piece of work was beautiful? I could not reconcile their enthusiasm with my own opinion. I had looked at it long and hard and been horrified at its ugliness. A single red line, criss-crossed with black spikes, like a railway marked on a crudely drawn map, stood out sharply against a background of red, pink, yellow and purple blotches. This was beautiful? But then didn't Shakespeare say that beauty was in the eye of the beholder?

In this case it also depended your point of view.

They were professionals, doctors viewing it from beside my hospital bed whereas I had been staring at it in horror in the mirror after an agonizing time trying to pluck up the courage to lift the dressing and look at this wound, which was all that remained of my left breast.

Breast cancer! Two words that strike fear into the heart of any woman game enough to believe that maybe it could to happen to her. But that wasn't me. In fact, I had always been certain that it was one disease that would not touch me. I did not have a family history of breast cancer. I had breast-fed my five babies, I had a sensible diet and I was not on estrogen. On my doctor's

advice, I had regular mammograms but I never really expected to find any cancer. I felt completely safe.

When my nipple began itching I thought I must have been bitten by something, probably a tick as it was the season and the little creatures constantly attack me. Also, the tiny lump looked like a tick bite. I took little notice but was puzzled when the lump did not go away after a couple of months.

Just before Christmas I had two falls, landing on my arm each time. Movement was painful and I went to the doctor. While there, I mentioned the lump on my nipple. The doctor examined it carefully and looked serious.

'I think we'd better send you for a mammogram,' he said. 'And an ultrasound, too.'

This was the Thursday before Christmas. My doctor was about to go on holidays so he arranged the tests for the next day and asked me to wait for the report and bring it to him.

Of course I read it. Two words jumped out at me: 'malignant' and 'excision'.

From then on it was a roller coaster ride. I saw a specialist on the Monday and he arranged for me to go into hospital for a frozen section histology under general anaesthetic. This confirmed his diagnosis of breast cancer.

I had two alternatives. He could cut away the cancer and leave a portion of breast which would then require radio therapy for six weeks or he could do a complete mastectomy.

I opted for the latter. I just wanted it to be gone! Out damned spot! Out!

There was no time to agonise over it. This was the festive season, wasn't it? I put on my happy face and when people said: 'G'day! Happy Christmas! How are you!' I beamed back: 'Fine, thanks.'

This was true. I did not feel sick in any way but in the back of my mind the words 'breast cancer' were repeating over and over like the wheels of an express train. I still could not believe it! It was as if it was happening to somebody else and I was merely a spectator.

I waited till after Christmas to tell my family.

My daughter immediately made arrangements to have her children looked after and came from interstate to be with me, a very loving gesture for which I was extremely thankful. I also had the support of my very dear friend although he was devastated at the news and it was a matter of supporting each other at times.

The operation took place on New Year's Day. I still could not believe it was happening. Even going into the operating theatre, in a drowsy pre-anaesthetic state, I was still telling myself this was not really happening to me. I woke up briefly on my way back to the ward and my first thought was: 'It IS true! It has really happened! Your breast has gone!'

After that, it was drips and drains and an oxygen mask, blood pressure and temperature checks, injections, pain killers, constant queries of 'how are you feeling?' and much support from loved ones.

Messages of love poured in. The phone rang constantly, visitors brought gifts, flowers arrived, and cards came in the mail from friends I had not seen for years. How could I not get better?

And I did! Apart from the discomfort of the wound I felt amazingly well. Everyone was surprised at how well I looked. And why not? I hadn't been sick at all in the first place. To me, this is the greatest puzzle. How could I have had cancer and not feel sick?

On coming home from hospital I felt embarrassed at appearing in public thinking that I must look lopsided. I certainly felt that way! Luckily, though, I'd never been very big and so, when I was fully dressed, nobody could notice anything wrong. I soon went about my daily life as if nothing had happened just a couple of weeks before.

This is the big lesson I learned from the experience. The inner me didn't change in any way. I was still the same person, except perhaps for a deeper awareness of the love surrounding me.

This has been a strong reinforcement of the teaching that 'we are not the body'.

And as for the beauty or otherwise of the wound, those two guys were absolutely right. The scar healed beautifully.

Bio

Tamaso has been writing most of her life. She was first published at the age of nine in the Sunbeams children's section of the Sydney Sun and also read her stories on 2GB and 2SM radio stations' children's programs.

She is the author of nine teenage novelettes for 'reluctant readers', four books on Australian birds, several published short stories and poems and has self-published one book *Skye's the Limit*, a story about a young girl's fight to save a rainforest.

Tamaso has lived in Nimbin northern NSW for twenty years, during which time she has been a volunteer worker at Nimbin News Magazine and presented a Writers' Program on NIM-FM. Community radio. She now edits the literary magazine *Beyond the Rainbow*.

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