

At times, the normal flow of life is interrupted by a crisis that challenges everything we believe in.

We are faced with a watershed—a crucial period that serves as a dividing line between what we were, and what we are becoming. Heather Eaton experienced such a time when told that she had a terminal illness—breast cancer.

This is a book that is hard to put down once started. Apart from offering informative insight into the treatment of cancer, *Watershed* is also the diary of a pastor's wife and a mother wrestling with her faith.

Rarely does one have the opportunity to read a spiritual journal of such penetrating insight. Women—and men—of all ages will find this book refreshingly honest, witty and rewarding.



Heather Eaton is a writer, speaker, horse lover, vegetarian, and mother to Stephen, Kate and Tessa. Her husband Dean is a Baptist minister. They currently reside in Adelaide, South Australia.

An excerpt from Watershed won the Patron's Award at the Daffodil Day Arts Awards, 1999, held by the Anti-Cancer Council of Victoria. The work was selected by John Clarke, Anti-Cancer Council Patron for 1999.



watershed

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To my wonderful family and all those friends
who have helped me in the journey

I wouldn't be here without you

In memory of
Lauren Kathleen McIntyre

preface

As God created order out of apparent chaos with the spoken word, I have attempted, through stringing thoughts together in written word, to create order in my own personal chaos.

This is a record of a journey. We are all pilgrims on a journey and like Christian in 'Pilgrim's Progress' we need helpful companions on the way. I hope this book can be that for you. Unlike their neighbours, the Jews were not seafaring people. For them the sea was seen as a primeval ocean, a place of judgment, a symbol of menacing chaos, a water desert. To contrast this, living water in the Bible is shown to be fresh, drinkable and life-giving. I have experienced the depths of the ocean of which they fear.

I cringe outwardly at some of the things written here; they are too honest. Yet I feel someone should be honest. Sharing my inner thoughts I hope can only encourage others who may be feeling the same. It is okay, it is normal to despair when your whole world has been turned upside down. God is bigger than my doubts. As T. S. Eliot wrote:

In the beginning God created the world. Waste and void. Waste and void . . . And when there was men, in their various ways, they struggled in torment towards God. Blindly and vainly, for man is a vain thing, and man without God is a seed upon the wind: driven this way and that, and finding no place of lodgement and germination . . . Men have left God not for other gods, they say, but for no god; and this has never happened before . . . In an age which advances progressively backwards?

The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot,
Faber & Faber, London, 1975, p. 160

For a time this verse described my state.

You may be reading this book to try and understand someone who is going through a life-threatening illness. They will at times feel as I have felt. If they can talk about how they are feeling without guilt or fear of recrimination for such thoughts, it will help them to get beyond this stage and on to a more positive one. My journey hasn't been all bad and the bad times have not been as black as for some others, and for that I am grateful. Yet I do have a story to tell and one which ultimately will bring hope.

Thank you to all those who gave me encouragement along the way. You have no idea what your words meant to me in the dark times.



My husband Dean and I met in 1979. Two years later we were married in a church in Adelaide. I suppose you could call us adventurous souls. While all our friends were buying houses and settling down, we decided it would be far more interesting to pursue, what I look back to now as, more of a nomadic lifestyle. As Dean followed his passion of being a minister we have had several moves, all of which have taken us away from our roots and family. This has given us many experiences we would not have had otherwise. We have always looked on life and changes as being an adventure and not as something to cringe about. I know too well that stability does not come from location, but from security in one another and in the author of all life.

I grew up in a family with two parents who were very unhappy being married to one another. We always lived in the same house, but it was far from happy. My older brother, Phil, had the thankless task of looking after me often. This gave us a close bond and I looked to him often for a sense of security.

The first real rift that came between my brother and I was in 1977. I had left home, had a job and was generally enjoying the freedom and irresponsibility of youth. My brother on the other hand had already done all this and had now given it all

away as a bad joke and become a Christian. I thought he was mad. Christians were little old ladies with grey buns and shawls, or nerdy pimply teenagers who sat at home with their stamp collections or science kits. For me a Christian's idea of a wild party was popcorn, 'Pictionary', or singing 'Kum-bye-ya' around the campfire. My brother had always lived a life that I wished to aspire to. He rode a motor bike, smoked, drank, went to all-night parties, surfed for weeks of the year and listened to heavy music. Now he had become an overnight nerd.

It wasn't many months before I discovered that all the fun I was having wasn't really much fun at all in the cold light of day. I began to experience great loneliness again and the sense that no-one really loved me. True friends were impossible to find and my life began to seem meaningless. It was then that I decided to seek out Phil. In my memory he had always been there for me and I was sure he would be again. He was only too happy to include me in his life. During this time my big brother gave me space to think for myself whilst showing me unconditional love. Phil's life was different now. Everything about this very human brother of mine seemed to resonate with a love beyond anything I had seen before. It wasn't long before I asked him to take me to church. I will never forget that night as I came weeping to the cross of Jesus. All the worries and guilt I had been carrying around like a cloak for so long were completely gone. Jesus forgave me and loved me unconditionally. I cried nonstop for the next week and I am sure God was healing me from all the emotional hurts I had bottled up inside.

Time passed and I began to grow in my relationship with God. Psalm 68:5-6 came to me and has held fast throughout my life:

*"A father of the fatherless and a judge for the widows
Is God in His holy habitation.
God makes a home for the lonely;
He leads out the prisoners into prosperity,
Only the rebellious dwell in a parched land."*

The words 'God makes a home for the lonely' held great meaning for me. What I remember most about my childhood was a deep sense of loneliness in the home. Soon after this I met my husband Dean and we were married in 1981, when we made our home together. We have three lovely children who are a great source of joy to us both. Having been in the ministry since 1981, life with its ups and downs has been interesting, to say the least, but through it all God has proved faithful.

waterfall

6th September 1997

As I sit and watch the screen it is the colour that affects me. The day is clear and bright, people stand and clap in a subdued kind of way. Perhaps they are not sure how to respond. Usually when a car comes by conveying this Lady they cheer, wave flags and generally feel patriotic. Today the car is a hearse and she will no more wave, or smile or touch those who have come to love her. There have always been flowers wherever she has gone but no more than today. A sea of petals and stems fading from their former glory in a way she never will. Goodbye English Rose, plucked before your time, never to grow old as those who love you will.

Disbelief is replaced with belief, but shock remains. Whenever we have seen her before it usually has been a happy occasion; a celebration of life. The crowd is still confused and is receiving mixed signals. A Princess, flowers, a cavalcade are supposed to pre-empt a festive occasion. Not today. She is gone and no more will we follow her glamorous and at times tragic story. She suffered much that is common to all and in a way had become an icon to many. She had wealth, a privileged birth, and position; aspects we all wish we had. These at times helped her to rise above her circumstances, yet none of these helped her in the end.

I was married the same year as Diana, about her age and I had my first child, a son, the same year her Wills was born. The same year Diana died I almost died too. There the similarity ends. As I watch her sons I feel the sad pull of my heart knowing that my three children could have been facing the same fate. Everyone feels their own mortality today. The veil between this life and the next is thin; thinner than we realise. If the fairy princess of our own creating doesn't fulfil our idea of a happy ending with all her privileges, what hope is there for any of us? I saw a similarly hunted and fearful look in the faces of those around me in my own situation.



7th August 1996

Armidale, NSW

Dear Philip and Gillian,

I haven't written all year to anyone so you will have to excuse the long silence. The fact is I haven't been all that well this year. Nothing too serious, just generally feeling off-colour and exhausted most of the time. We had a holiday in July and I think things have improved since then.

A lot has happened this year. I have been working as the manager of a book store that is part of an Australia-wide chain. In fact it is a great job, with less pressure than when I was studying, but for some reason I have felt less able to cope. This has frustrated me no end. Also Dean's father died in April which was quite depressing, as he had cancer in seven different parts of his body in the end, which basically caused him to die of suffocation. Needless to say we have both been a bit low.

We had planned a snow holiday in July, and during the early part of the year we thought it would never come. The time dragged on and eventually we were on our way. It was just what we all needed. Physically we thrashed ourselves each day, but mentally it was a complete rest. Honestly, I don't know how the kids have put up with us this year. Everything seems to be back on track now.

Another big change is about to happen to our family. No, I am not having another baby, although Kate would like me to. Last week we told the church that we would be leaving at the end of the year. It has been five years since we first came and a lot of things have gone right for us here. But we feel like our job is done and the church needs to have a change. We are currently looking at other positions, and the church here is looking for a new Pastor. Actually, this weekend we are driving down to Victoria to have a look at a church that needs a new Senior Pastor.

My dad has been living with us for nearly a year. We asked him to come and help us with the church and he has been

invaluable. I am not sure what he will decide to do next year. He is a lot of fun, but not so good in the role of childminder. The kids run rings around him, especially Tessa.

I will have two children in high school next year. They are all growing up nicely. I don't think any of them will become a brain surgeon but I really like them as people and feel proud to be their mum. They are all so different which can be quite exhausting.

Anyway, I would love to hear all your news.

Love from us all,

Dean, Heather, Stephen, Kate and Tessa.

27th August 1996

Lynton, SA

Dear Heather,

Thank you so much for your letter as I was hoping to hear from you. You sounded a bit low and I do hope you are okay. I was sorry to hear about Dean's dad; it sounds like a very sad time for you all. The trip to the snow sounded great though—just the thing. The kids sound lovely and I am sure they are all growing up beautifully. Are you still managing the book shop? . . .

Philip and I are on a wonderful diet which makes us feel on top of the world. We are also walking about an hour or two a day and are feeling very healthy.

Keep us posted on your moving.

Much love to you all,

Gillian.



20th August 1996

'Some irregular cells have shown up on the mammogram I've just had', said Kaye. Tears began to form in the corner of her eyes as she tried to keep her voice from wavering. 'I wouldn't even have had the mammogram except that I recently changed my doctor and she insisted on it.' Trish and I are having coffee with Kaye in her unit. She lives on the edge of the playing fields in our town; Armidale, NSW. She had come to Armidale, like many others, to study at the University.

Trish, Kaye and I have children in the same school and we all attend the same church, where my husband is the minister. I immediately switched into pastor's wife mode and began to encourage Kaye to look at the positive side, 'It's obvious God is with you in this. He must have led you to change doctors.'

We pray for Kaye and the surgeons as she is scheduled for a lumpectomy tomorrow. I don't mention to Kaye and Trish that I had been feeling physically low all year. Some days I lie in bed, not wanting to move, as my body aches all over. But I have to; I have to get the children to school and go to work. Depression and fatigue caused me to see a doctor in May. I had the usual pap smear and breast check and all seemed to be well. The thought of Kaye's surgery reminded me of the doctor's parting words, 'Come back in a week or two if you're still not feeling well'. I still wasn't well and it was now more than three months, and I hadn't been back.

Thursday, 5th September 1996

Sitting in the doctor's surgery I feel a fool. A nagging voice in my head mocks me over and over again, 'It will be nothing; why are you wasting the doctor's time? She will think you are a hypochondriac. You are just being neurotic because of Kaye.' I sit here waiting, while my own thoughts accuse me. Then questioning myself, 'What will you say to her anyway?'

Your so-called symptoms are so vague.' Trying to settle myself I pick up a 'Woman's Day'. Stunned I read the first page that falls open: an article on breast cancer. The woman who writes tells of her own radical mastectomy, within days of finding a lump. I feel light-headed with anxiety pains thumping through my brain.

'I'm leaving. The doctor will definitely think I'm neurotic if I go in there now.' Standing to my feet and attempting to bolt to the door and the car park, all of a sudden I stop. An inner voice, unlike the previous taunting one firmly says, 'You will go in and see the doctor and you will ask her to check your breasts'. I sit down, kind of dazed; almost feeling as if a force is willing me to stay, which overrides my previous anxiety about looking foolish. 'Yes I will go in', I hear my own inner voice say. 'And I will ask her to check my breasts.'

'Heather Eaton.' I hear my name and look up. Dr Astrid beckons me in. As I nervously sit and explain why I am here she asks me several questions about this lethargy I am always feeling. 'I would think that with a 25 hours a week job, three children and a busy husband you would be feeling tired.'

'No this is more than that. I feel like I need adrenalin just to function and for some reason I don't have any; to just get out of bed is a huge effort. I had a pap smear and a breast check a few months ago with another doctor, but could you check my breasts again?'

As I lie on the examination couch she probes and presses as doctors do. I sense her fingers check themselves and come into contact with something hard. A lump emerges to the surface. 'Have you noticed this before?'

I shake my head; my mouth is dry. I notice she doesn't look too worried.

'Well it must be a cyst. It's too big to be anything to worry about. Cancer lumps don't grow this big overnight', is her reassuring diagnosis. 'I will book you in for a mammogram and ultrasound just to be sure.' I think back to something I heard a woman say after a mammogram once. She said it was so bad that she would insist on a general anaesthetic next time.

'It will be okay. It's just a cyst. Nothing to worry about', I comfort myself as I drive home.

Saturday, 7th September

Today I went to a music practice and prayer time at church. Our church is one of those modern buildings that lacks the character and culture of many of the older buildings. Nevertheless it serves the purpose of keeping us warm and dry many times a week as we gather together for meetings.

While we were praying together Jo bounced over to me, 'I feel God is saying that there will be more daffodils in your life'. Jo is very bubbly and sweet by nature and I wasn't quite sure what to think.

'The daffodil is the cancer flower', I mused. 'No, I don't think God means that. I am sure He just means there will be more nice things in my life.'

I am not worried about the mammogram at all really. After all, the doctor said it was probably just a cyst. I've told my father and jokingly said to him, 'If there is anything seriously wrong with me dad, I will put myself in your hands'. He is such a health fanatic no doubt he will be able to give me some natural therapies. But I don't think it will come to that.

Sunday, 8th September

9.00 a.m.

I am so tired today. The tiredness I have been feeling all year has never been this bad. I have to go to church as I am teaching Sunday School. Lord, give me strength.

Dragging myself around the church I begin the repetitive task of setting up tables and chairs, putting out paper, pencils and craft items. 'I don't think I can go into church today. I

can't face anyone.' Church has started and I can hear the bright and cheery singing, and somehow I drag myself down to the front of the auditorium to sit next to Dean. I just sit, I can't stand, I can't sing.

'Are you alright?' asks Terry. I nod, but my head feels like it is stuck in a bucket of concrete. I listen to Sharon, the worship leader, as she tells a story:

'The children of Israel praised God on the wrong side of the Red Sea. They should have praised him as they entered the water, but they didn't through fear and unbelief.'

That is how I feel. All I can think about is the coming move to Victoria. Sharon went on, 'There was a minister who was visiting China so as to smuggle Bibles. At the customs point he began to fear as everyone's luggage was being searched. By a miracle he got through into China with all his Bibles. He then praised God. God gently reminded him, "You are praising me on the wrong side; after the fact, rather than before". That is exactly what the children of Israel did, and what we often do.'

I really took that to heart today. I will praise God now before the move to Victoria and in spite of how I feel. Miraculously the tiredness, the headache and the depression have lifted.

Monday, 9th September

Today is my day off from the bookstore. Lucky me, I get to clean the house, wash all the sheets and have my breasts X-rayed.

later

A lot of prodding, poking, stretching and squashing is going on. The nurse has a nice manner but I can see I wouldn't want her job. The machine they are manipulating me into is reminiscent of something from the Spanish Inquisition. Next is the ultrasound. Cold jelly and a probe kind of thing are

smearing themselves all over my chest. I am watching the doctor's face as he is looking at the screen. It's fine and he doesn't seem to be hiding a negative reaction. I will go home and ring my mother and tell her there is nothing to be worried about.

Tuesday, 10th September

'The mammogram and ultrasound indicate a benign lump.' Dr Astrid smiled at me with a reassuring and relieved expression. I feel good. Of course it was nothing to worry about. Everything is fine.

'What can we do about the lump, as it is rather sore now?' I ask.

'Not a lot really. Seeing as it is benign we don't like touching it too much. It should settle down in a few days.'

This doesn't thrill me particularly. My breast is so sore that my arm keeps knocking it, sending nerve-like shooting pains everywhere.

'I'll just take a needle biopsy to be safe, and then you can go home.'

later

It's a couple of hours later and I am at work. Customers are coming in and out in a steady stream. This is good as I don't want to think about things too much. I know it will be okay. I won't even hear from the doctor again. I will get on with my life and in a week or two I will have forgotten all about today. My general tiredness is still lingering but I won't think about that now.

'Mum can I ask you something?' Kate is talking to me while we do the dinner dishes. 'You know the test you had today, could it be breast cancer?' I freeze at the sink. How could she know that? All I have told them is that I had some blood tests to see why I was so tired.

'I know it won't be.' I hear determined steel in my voice. 'I just know.' She looks shocked. I am too. How did she guess?

'But could it be?'

Looking into her eyes I know I can't pretend anymore, or lie to her, 'Maybe, but I am not going to God yet. Everything in our lives has worked out so far and I know God wouldn't let me get sick now.' We continue on with the tasks at hand in silence, trying not to think anymore. After a few minutes she slips off to her room.

Wednesday, 11th September

I know where I am but everything looks different. The solid floor is moving and I think I am moving too. The cash register appears to fall but no, it is me that is falling.

'Heather, are you there Heather?' the phone which was in my hand but now is not calls to me. I grasp the desk, my mouth is dry, I am falling into a dry ocean.

Grasping the phone I hear my voice, 'Yes, I am here'. I sound strangely calm.

'Did you hear what I said? It doesn't look good and you had better get your husband and come in.' A whirlpool of books and faces float by.

I grip the desk to stop myself from falling, 'I'll be there as soon as I can'.

'Margaret, I have to go to the doctor's, can you come in?' I hear her worried voice and hang up. I am waiting now. The floor is a writhing, unstable sea. I am on a homemade raft, plunging into the current of the strongest whitewater. Can I keep afloat? Dean is not answering his phone. Anxiously I moan, 'Where is he?'

A customer asks if I am alright. 'I have just had some bad news', I mumble. 'But it will be okay.' God, will it be okay? I inwardly sob.

'Dad. Go and find Dean.' He has just walked into the shop to see me and I am sobbing at him.

He sees I am nearly hysterical. 'Now don't get upset, it won't be good for your immune system.'

'I'm in shock dad.' My voice echoes in my ears. He is hastily retreating.

I have to pull myself together. 'God, help me.' Thankfully, the shop is empty at the moment. Breathing deeply I begin to inwardly call out to God. 'Whatever is wrong He can heal me.' Calmness begins to override the panic. The floor is beginning to regain its stability. 'I will be okay.' Feeling more composed I pick up the phone to ring my boss in Brisbane. Deep breaths. 'Everything is going to be fine.' As he picks up the phone I find my mouth is moving but nothing is coming out. An eternity goes by before I croak down the phone. I think he understands what I am saying.

1.00 p.m.

Sitting in the waiting room calmly holding Dean's hand it occurs to me, as I look around at the other patients, that I have never been seriously ill. For goodness' sake, I haven't even had my tonsils or appendix out. The only times I have been to the doctor have been to do with pregnancy. And once I was depressed and I tried to get a doctor's certificate for a day off work. Ironically, the doctor didn't give it to me and just sent me home empty-handed. You can't tell by looking why these people are here. They all look so normal, as if they are just sitting here for a while, with nothing better to do. They will go home and resume normal, happy lives. Or will they? What are their faces not saying? Do seriously ill people look seriously ill? Do I look seriously ill?

How naive I am. I am rehearsing in my brain what she will say to me and what I will say. It will be malignant and I will have to have a lumpectomy. I can cope with that.

'Dean and Heather, please come in.' She looks worried. We sit. 'The needle biopsy, unfortunately, has come back positive.'

Silently I answer her, 'Yes, I gathered that'.

'There is no way around saying this.' She swallows and jumps right in, 'The lump is too large for a lumpectomy. You will have to have a full mastectomy and the removal of your lymph nodes.'

I am sure I have swallowed a rock. It is in my throat pushing its way down to my stomach where it will stay, dragging me to the bottom of a violent ocean. 'No, no', I moan, as I surface for great gulps of air. The sea is all around me and in me as hot tears burn my face. Dean is holding my hand, he hasn't let it go for the last hour. I grasp it firmly.

We are being directed into the surgeon's office. It is Dr Waters. All I know of him is that he is very good at his job, but he has a rather dry humour which is not always appealing to his patients. He is not joking now. This is a bad sign. I can't think. He is talking on and on and I can't think. I wish he would shut up. He is drawing diagrams. Dean is asking questions. I can't tell what they are saying. I think he is explaining why my whole breast must go. He is going on and on about burning the cancer out with radiation and using weedkiller to kill it. I hope this is his way of making a joke. Somehow it sinks into my brain that I have to come back this evening for another biopsy. The only question I manage to ask is, 'Do you think I have cancer because I use a microwave and an electric blanket?' Strangely enough he doesn't answer. Today is Wednesday and they want me to have my breast off on Friday. As we leave the surgery we run into Lyn and David. David has a blood clot in his leg and looks bad. Lyn smiles and asks what is up. I don't want to tell her. 'Heather has breast cancer', Dean answers. Dave's jaw drops, Lyn bursts into tears. She is an experienced nursing sister and she can't hold it together for me.

later

Dean is ringing people. I am in bed. The darkness of my room is comforting. I can't have it done on Friday. It's too soon.

Sitting in my room waiting for my children to come home I look around. If only I could stay in here forever. Everything is

familiar and comforting. The pile of books that always sits on my bedside table. They always change as I read them, but there is always a pile several high that I anticipate reading. My dressing table with the childrens' baby photos, my graduation photo, with Kaye, Trish and Anne who had all come to see me receive the BA I had worked so hard for. The photo with Dean on the same day. Without his support I couldn't have managed it while also being busy with the three children and working off and on. I still remember that day which was full of pomp and ceremony. I felt kind of silly in the black cape and hat. I had hired the smallest size robe and cap but it was all still too big. My parents on their wedding day smiling at me. They were happy then. Dad looking so much like my brother does now. Mum looking radiant and beautiful. The Japanese ornaments that Dean has brought home from his trips to that country, the basket of potpourri emanating a lovely jasmine smell. I love this room and it is nice being here.

The usual after-school eruption has just occurred. Dean is quietening the children down. We have to tell them now. I'm not telling them that I have to have a mastectomy; just a lump removed. They've seen Kaye and she is alright now. I don't want them to have to worry before they need to. They sit on my bed and look shocked as they see my tears.

We are all crying now. My mum is crying down the phone line. Dean's mum and sister are crying, my brother and his wife, all so far away, are crying. My children, Dean and I are crying. They all try to encourage, when they can talk, but their words are fearful.

Salty tears like the sea. Pure, light, bright, white; white-hot—whitewash, whitewater or watershed?

7.00 p.m.

I have just come home from having a core biopsy. This will tell us if the cancer is contained in a milk duct or aggressively

spreading. A needle the size of the inside of a pen was shot into me. The first needle bent inside my breast. I wonder what it hit. Although they gave me a local anaesthetic it still hurt like mad. The doctor took ten shots which felt like white hot rods being shot into me from a crossbow. I walked into the surgery feeling positive. I left swollen and sore. Overwhelmingly the realisation hits home that if God doesn't heal me soon that this is only the beginning. How many times will I leave from treatment feeling like hell? I am booked in for the surgery in eight days.

Dean has had a rotten year.

I don't want to look like a shark attack victim.

I always said I would never have chemo or radiation.

Now I am cowering, snivellingly accepting all the doctors offer. What has my life been up to now? Just a mishmash of untried theory.

Where is my faith? Is that only a theory too?

It is either there or not there at all.

The house is quiet apart from the distant noise of the television in the family room. Dean is coming in and out often to see what I need. I need him and God, but the children need him too. I don't want to see dad, as I know he will want to put me on a diet of garlic and orange juice. I can't put myself in his hands now. This is too big.

Dean is cooking tea. The pizza delivery guy just rang the doorbell.

*"Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil;
For You are with me;
Your rod and Your staff,
they comfort me."*

Psalm 23:4

Lying in the dimness this verse comforts me. Death is a shadow only; it has no substance. I will live, my children will have

their mother. Dean needs me although it is me that needs him now. He is calm, controlled and sensible. His words echo through my mind, reassuringly, 'It is something we will go through together. Don't see it as you alone having cancer. See it as something we both have to deal with. I won't feel differently about you.' Like him with his broken nose, I will have two profiles.

11th September

Adelaide

Dear Tessa,

I have had these photos of the snow that I took when I came to see you last. I haven't had a chance to send them before.

Today I heard the sad news that your mum has to have an operation. Just as well she is such a strong, healthy person and has her faith in God.

Grandma McIntyre rang me today and she said she is flying over to see you all.

I hope you like the photos.

Lots of love,

Granny.

12th September

In a state of panic I am aware that I am wakeful again. It has taken me hours to finally fall asleep and now the fear and urge to run overpower me, more than ever before. The unnatural chill in the room startles me, and I am immediately awake. Gasping for air, I try to breathe. Every breath brings no air, just a cold painfulness. Either real or imagined, I cannot tell, icy, slimy fingers grab at my throat, squeezing the air from me, taking the life out of my body. Foul and sinister seems

the darkness. Darker than normal, an inky tangible force is weighed down upon me. Grasping Dean I feel his warm flesh and know I will be alright. He is here with me. I am not in a coffin. I am in my own bed. The warmth of his breath defrosts me. His body envelops and comforts me. Reassuringly he talks to me until I fall asleep again, my mind clinging to the reality of his words, 'We shouldn't see you as sick, my love, but in recovery. Every day is another day closer towards your recovery. God loves you even more than I do, if that's possible.' Warm, comforting sleep washes over me again.

later

“. . . those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary. . . And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it.”

1 Corinthians 12:22, 26

During this year I have often felt like the weaker member of the body. Not more so than now. This is unusual for me. Normally Dean and I are propping up others. Our lives have never been this dramatic before. Maybe the church here in Armidale will grow stronger through supporting us.

Dean has rung the children's schools to tell them what is going on. Many people are phoning, calling in and dropping cards. They don't know what to say. They awkwardly misquote Scripture, trying to comfort but not knowing how. The whole church has really fallen in a heap over this, but they are praying like mad. The church in the Third World grows through persecution; maybe this is our equivalent.

I am in bed with a crowd around me, some standing, others sitting on the bed with me. It is interesting to watch their reactions. They are really scared for themselves as well as for me. If it can happen to someone like me (only 34 and apparently healthy) it can happen to anyone. I try to make them laugh so they won't look so terrified at me. They are trying to be positive, and are telling me about many miracles of healing.

'You know, Jo told me the other day that she thought there would be more daffodils in my life. Seeing as daffodils are the cancer flower I suppose you could call her a prophet now.' I laugh. They laugh too. It seems to break some of the tension. We chatter about all sorts of things, including the glories of Women's Lib. 'It's really a patriarchal plot!' I exclaim. 'Now women get to go to uni, while working, and still bring up kids and do all the housework.' It occurs to me that I have always wanted it all. Now the all is no longer that important.

Mum has just rung. She told me of a man who had cancer and he locked himself away with lots of comedy videos. He laughed nonstop for two days and was cured. I think I might try this.

'You are a fighter.' Our good friend Steve has rung from Newcastle. His wife Christine nearly died a few years ago from a brain haemorrhage. I don't feel like a fighter. 'You can fight this. Christine, as you know, has a hand that is partly paralysed due to the brain haemorrhage. We don't see that hand as something to be ashamed of, we see it as her medal of honour for the fight she has fought, and won.' Christine has put my name on the Australian Women's Prayer Chain.

'I know you don't want me to have the surgery or the cancer treatment.' Dad is sitting with me. This is the first time we have spoken alone for a while.

'No, that is yours and Dean's decision. Whatever you decide is up to you.'

He leaves me with a pile of health books and a list of things that inhibit the immune system. Bells go off in my brain when I read the words 'false sense of guilt' and 'low self-esteem'. I think about what goes on inside my head which no one else can see. A lot of negative chatter runs around and around like a runaway train, going nowhere and achieving nothing. Guilt is something I tend to carry around like a badge. I make a lifestyle out of feeling guilty. 'This must stop', I tell myself.

I don't ask God, 'Why me?' I ask, 'Why am I a white middle-class person living in a wonderful country like Australia and not a starving African mother dying on the side of the road?' It occurs to me that this is not exactly normal. In fact, it is morbid. Do I feel in some way that I deserve cancer, as I am so blessed in other ways?

The children are quiet. I think Dean must have sent them to school as they haven't been around until now. The girls are in bed with me and we are comforting each other, just loving each other. Kate doesn't want to tell the girls at school; Tessa does want to tell the girls. I haven't seen a lot of Stephen, he isn't talking at all. I will have to leave him to Dean.

Many people are offering help.

The fear is all around me again, I can smell it. The inky blackness cloaks me. I cry out. Dean's touch is a lifeline. He envelops me in his love, his warmth chasing the chills away. I fall asleep hearing his voice praying for me. I feel for Kaye. She had no one to talk her through the night. Of course the Lord is with me as He is with her, but I know I am not strong enough to go this alone without my life's partner.

Friday, 13th September

Jo has arrived with a pot of daffodils. 'They're not from me', she says, looking embarrassed. 'They were dropped in by someone for me to give you. I wanted to say could we swap them for tulips, but didn't know how.' Laughing I take the daffodils gladly knowing that they are coming from God. The psychology of making the daffodil the cancer flower is very powerful. Daffodils come at a time when the winter is over. They remind us there will be a spring and new life. I know my winter is just beginning but there will be a spring. Dean is sullen today. I am good so I am encouraging him.

I saw Jane later. She is really cut up because her mother died of cancer when she was eighteen. She feels strongly

that God will not allow this disease to go any further. I pray she is right.

later

‘Unfortunately the cancer is not contained in the milk duct. It is very aggressive.’ I don’t want to hear this. ‘We expect it will be in the lymph nodes and possibly elsewhere.’

‘Fine.’ I hang up on Dr Astrid. I won’t think about that now. I will just concentrate on getting over the surgery first.

My brother has foot-in-mouth disease at the best of times. He rang me and was trying to talk but only nonsense was coming out. He is upset over me, and also as a man he worked with died this week. ‘He found a lump on his neck and within three weeks he is dead.’ Realising what he is saying he begins to try and apologise for being insensitive. We both laugh. ‘Actually he didn’t die of cancer, he actually had a stroke.’

‘Well thank you for being so comforting’, I laugh. He decides to ring off before he says anything else he will regret later.

Tessa has been crying at school today. Stephen is still not really talking much.

I can’t read much at the moment. The words don’t make any sense. They swim and won’t stay still. The thoughts in my head are disjointed and fluid. Meals keep appearing at the door from those that want to help. Not sure how to help, they cook.

‘Do you have a hanky that I can take to the prayer meeting?’ my dad asks. He has just arrived and is sitting at the kitchen table with Dean and me. I knew why he wanted the handkerchief. In the Book of Acts people prayed over cloths and they were placed on sick people who were then healed. It is good to see him. He is quiet and serious. His eyes are a deep blue and I know he has been crying. I don’t want him to be sad. That sadness terrifies me. I am switching into my comic mode.

If I make people laugh I won’t have to see that sadness in their eyes.

‘Maybe you should take one of my bras’, I suggest. ‘Then they could pray, “Lord, fill this cup.”’ We all start laughing.

‘Somehow I don’t think the leader of the prayer meeting would cope with that’, cries dad.

“When she heard about Jesus, she came behind Him in the crowd and touched His garment. For she said, ‘If only I may touch His clothes, I shall be made well.’”

Mark 5:27-28

I will sleep with the cloth on my breast, Lord.

We watched a video tonight. It was a comedy; I think it was funny but I am not sure. I couldn’t concentrate.

‘Are you going to die?’ It is late and all the others are in bed, except for Kate and me.

‘No, of course I’m not.’ Hugging in the darkness I am glad she can’t see my face. She needs her mother. They all need me. I can’t die. ‘I promise you, I will be there to cry at your wedding.’

‘If you do cry’, she giggles through her tears, ‘I will step on your toe as I walk down the aisle’.

‘I really will cry then.’ I love these children. They are a part of me that I just can’t let go. We talk for a while until she feels she can go to sleep.

*“Because he has set his love upon Me,
therefore I will deliver him . . .
He shall call upon Me, and I will answer him;
I will be with him in trouble;
I will deliver him and honor him.
With long life I will satisfy him,
and show him My salvation.”*

Psalm 91:14-16

I believe these promises. I have to for the children.

Saturday, 14th September

'Do you know that it is alright to plan for the operation?' Dean has wrapped me in his arms. I have slept all night but am fearful this morning.

I have a dichotomy inside. If I believe for healing, I can't accept or even allow for the possibility of an operation. But then surely God will still heal me even if I waver. His grace is bigger than I. Yet I am confused. I don't want to miss a chance to be healed.

'I don't want to have it cut off.' Sobbing, I picture my deformed torso.

'They don't just get a buzz-saw out and chop it off you know.' The thing is I don't know. That is exactly how I imagine it to be.

'They will leave skin and it won't look so bad. It will be flat but neat, just like an appendix scar.' Relieved, I feel the terror waning. I don't want to leave this room. I want to stay here forever where it is dark and warm. My left arm keeps going numb but I won't think about that now.

*"Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed.
And in Your book they all were written,
The days fashioned for me,
when as yet there were none of them.
How precious also are Your thoughts to me, O God!
How great is the sum of them!
If I should count them, they would be more in number
than the sand;
When I awake, I am still with You."
Psalm 139:16-18*

Kaye is here. I am telling her about the prayer bra and the buzz-saw. We both giggle like school girls talking about something perhaps we shouldn't be.

All is familiar but not quite. The words and signs that appear around me are the same as they always have been, yet the

light seems to have changed. They are not the same as they were. Nothing is. Tessa's hand is warm and human in mine. Her skin on my skin beats with the same pulse as mine. We walk through the shops, trying to be normal again. But it doesn't quite work. We have been out for an hour and I feel the little strength I had beginning to fade fast. We turn for the car.

I am accosted. A thousand words are spoken to me yet I only catch one in ten. A customer from the bookshop who has heard about this thing is freaking out in front of me. I try to get away as she is disturbing Tessa. I hope she doesn't think I'm rude but we turn and go. She stands there looking after us, fear oozing from every pore of her body. Both my breasts have shooting pains in them. Please let it be okay, God. On arriving home dad is there to greet me. He looks thinner. I think he must be fasting. Flowers greet me, I don't know who from. They help me think nice thoughts.

I'm a Christian. Surely I can be healed totally? I believe miracles are for today.

More food has arrived. People have been ringing others and about 5,000 people will pray for me tomorrow in churches all over the world. I love all this attention but what a price to pay for it.

Mum is coming to move in with us while I am having the operation and treatment. Dad will have to move out. I can't worry about him. Is this an opportunity for mum to come to forgive my father for their marriage break-up????? She will have to see him often.

'There's a surprise for you on the doorstep.' Anne has arrived from Queensland. She is laughing and looks so pleased to see me. I see a shadow through the glass in the front door and immediately recognise the shape. She has brought my brother down with her to see me.

'How did Sue let you go?' I exclaim. They have only been apart when she has been in hospital having babies, and even

then he used to try and smuggle himself in for the night. I love my family and they love me. I couldn't ask for more. The evening is filled with laughing and joking, dad, Phil, Dean and Anne and I. We talk seriously at times but mostly we want to forget.

Sunday, 15th September

The oil on my brow is a symbol of you. Holy Spirit heal me now. Dean and the children stand with me. The whole church is crowding around us. Fervent, anguished prayers rise to the Father's throne. Tangible peace settles upon me.

Thousands of people are praying for me today. God can heal me. For goodness' sake, he even heals non-Christians. I have faith that he will heal me, and then I hope he will.

They all look at me with a hunted look in their eyes. I can't stand this so I say the most outrageous things to make them laugh and not look so devastated. 'Well it's one way to lose weight.' They look shocked but laugh too. I am laughing almost hysterically now. I can't stop. If I do I will sob.

*"Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by your name; You are Mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
And through the rivers, they shall not overflow you.
When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned.
Nor shall the flame scorch you."
Isaiah 43:1-2*

God's peace is with me but also a knowing. I am a bit down now after church because I think I know I will have to go through with the operation. I don't think this is doubt; I think it is just knowing. God heals miraculously but He also heals through medical science too. All good things come from Him.

Dave's voice hesitates on the phone. I try to reassure him. His mother died of breast cancer, and his wife Lyn nursed her through it.

'I know I'm not going to die yet.'

'You know that do you?' surprise emanating from his voice. 'Well you are very brave.'

'No, I am not brave. I am blessed. I have the best conditions in the world to get sick in. The best prayer support, the best medical attention and the best family and church family.'

Dean has taken me to the movies. I have no real idea of the film, but all I know is that I have fallen in love with him all over again. Yet this time it is an extremely painful experience because of the threat of loss. For the first time our love is both bitter and sweet.

Monday, 16th September

Dear Heather,

I've just been praying for you and it occurred to me to write and tell you we are upholding you in prayer; in fact, having asked and believed, we are rejoicing in God's healing for you. Imagine having to face all this without God. How wonderful to have Him so close, so able, so desiring to heal, so loving. He is the one who is our hope.

You are precious to God and to us. Know we are praying for you and giving thanks for the healing we know is yours. In His name and as friends who love,

Lynda.

*"For I am the Lord who heals you."
Exodus 15:26*

Trish, Kaye and Anne have all blossomed over the last year. As I watch them chat and laugh I can see Jesus in each one of

their faces. Anne has had to cope with a move interstate and to settle down into a new community and all that it entails: friends, schools, job, etc. Kaye has almost finished her degree despite her cancer scare. She is alive and vibrant. But Trish, who is always the quietest of all of us, I can see has changed the most. She never promotes herself or pushes herself forward but is always a strong yet peaceful force in the background, encouraging and loving all those she comes into contact with. She is great in a crisis, never falling apart but ever strong for those of us who need her to lean on. Over the years these girls have taught me to be a friend. I was never very good at that as I was always too busy with one thing or another that I can't even remember now (so it must not have been too important). Friendships are what counts.

Dr Waters looks awful. He grunts a greeting at me. He doesn't seem too pleased that I have brought Lyn with me. She is a nurse and I wanted her to help me ask the right questions and to understand his answers.

'Should I get another opinion. Maybe there is a way to save the breast?'

'I can't tell you what to do. I can only tell you that in my opinion there should be no delays for surgery. I am sorry I cannot see any way that your breast can be saved.'

I battle to form the right words in my head. Lyn and the doctor discuss things. Dean and I sit and listen. He says he thinks there is another tumour behind the nipple. I think he is right as I have noticed a hard spot there.

'If we only take out the lump and find that we didn't get it all, it is much harder to go in again and remove the rest of the breast when you are all bruised and wounded.' I can see his point.

Dean looks at me and we communicate in that look. He says, 'Perhaps we won't go ahead with the second opinion'.

'That's not your decision to make. It's her decision.' The ferociousness of Dr Waters's words shock me. He doesn't understand Dean and me. I wanted Dean to say that as I couldn't say it myself.

later

I am lying in bed pondering on what the doctor said. Dean is talking to Lyn, I don't know what about. I think what Dr Waters was saying without saying it is that he wants to save my life. There is no point in saving my breast if ultimately I will lose my life. The memory of his face, as black as thunder, scares me. He didn't even make one flippant remark and this is not good. I like it much better when doctors treat you like a necessary annoyance. When they can't do enough for you it is rather disconcerting.

'The results of the core biopsy show that the tumour is aggressive and invasive.' We are sitting in the kitchen, the kettle constantly on the boil, as we chain-drink cups of tea and coffee. My brother looks grey, dad just stares into space. I am surprised I can remember what the doctor told me. Calmly I fill them in on the latest. 'But one good thing is that the cancer is feeding on oestrogen so they can block this with medication and it will help to starve it. The cancer is like an octopus', I go on, talking clinically. 'It has a large body but then there are tentacles which spread out. This means I could have secondary tumours somewhere else in my body. In fact he is pretty sure I have got secondaries.' I feel numb about this; I feel nothing. 'The tumour is about 5cm across and lumpectomies stop at about 2.5 cm. So I will have to have the full mastectomy.' It is good to say it. Although they don't look too good. We join hands and do all we can. Pray.

I notice dad has written up a Bible verse and put it on the fridge:

"He will yet fill your mouth with laughter and your lips with shouts of joy."

Job 8:21

Well that would be nice.

Tuesday, 17th September

4.00 a.m.

I can't sleep. I am sitting in the family room with the TV on, hovering over the heater. It's early and the TV evangelists are playing one after another. Their world is unreal. They don't have any words of comfort. Dean's words echo through the black hole in my head. 'Lyn said that you will need at least one other person to help full-time with your needs and the kids' needs for the next six months.' No, No!! I don't want to be incapacitated. I don't want to be not in control. I am reminded that I was fearful for the kids when we knew we were moving, but God challenged me to trust Him with their lives. That was so hard. Now I will have to trust Him completely as I won't even be in the picture much at all for the next six months. I won't be fit to guide them. I can hardly write. I have a pile of tissues next to me.

I've calmed down now. No I haven't. They will lose their childhood forever now. They won't be able to enjoy what is left. They will think I am dying when I lose my hair and go thin; when I vomit and live in a state of perpetual seasickness. I've never had a strong stomach. I know I will be terrible on chemo. I know the girls will love me no matter what I look like but Stephen will be repulsed. I won't be me any more. I'll be someone else. A walking skeleton, a Chernobyl victim. Dean will wake up next to a metamorphosis. I will be a shrivelled-up old man, bald and with no breast. He just looks at me with wonderful eyes of love, more love than ever before. More love even than when he comes home from an overseas trip and cries because he is so happy to see me. I want to fall into an oblivion; into the sea of his love and never return. I don't think I will ever feel guilty again for not being a woman in Bosnia or a mother in Ethiopia.

I have this pain in my chest that won't go. An ache that feels at times like a cold frozen stone, and at others like the core of the earth burning within. I hope it is just stress and not that I am really dying.

When Jesus spoke of Lazarus he said:

"This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it."

John 11:4

Lord don't let me die; I will praise you on this side of the Red Sea.

*"But now, thus says the LORD,
who created you, O Jacob,
And He who formed you, O Israel:
'Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by your name;
You are Mine.*

*When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
And through the rivers, they shall not overflow you.
When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned.
Nor shall the flame scorch you.*

*For I am the LORD your God,
The Holy One of Israel, your Savior.'"*
Isaiah 43:1-2

God we pray to you for renewal but we don't want to suffer for it, thank you very much. We think you will answer our prayers by giving us wonderful euphoric experiences. We expect an epiphany on a mountain top like the Transfiguration. Maybe revelation can also come in a dark tunnel. Jonah was in a dark place, swimming in gastric juices, and finally came to the surface in a sea of vomit when he was renewed.

Some people are slain in the Spirit for hours; when they get up it is as if they are totally intoxicated with God. They laugh, they cry, they hug trees, spin around and have the shakes for hours. This never happens to me and at times I have wondered why. Why doesn't God arrest me so that I am totally unaware of myself? Maybe now He has. I am on the floor, out for the count. Now He has my full attention. The little day-to-day

worries that seemed all consuming are now totally irrelevant. I won't be getting up in a few hours but maybe in six months' time. Will I be changed then? I hope so. None of us will ever be the same. I must leave everyone else's journey with them and God.

7.00 a.m.

My brother is leaving. Dad appears from somewhere. I don't even know where he is staying at the moment. Anne is here to pick Phil up and to say goodbye. I wish they wouldn't look at me with such sadness. Blue eyes with steaming red tears make a purple fog.

'I will see you again soon.' Determinedly I get hold of myself. Hugging and choking back sobs is all we can do.

'I will be okay. You'll see. Dean will let you know how I am after the surgery.'

They think I am brave but I am not. Really I am a coward. It is easier to pretend to be strong so I won't have to see their faces in pain. I only pretend to be brave so the knife which wields each time I see their pain will be sheathed.

2.00 p.m.

'I'm glad it is only two more days.' The air is warm and fresh, tousling our hair. Ducks glide past, children play nearby, the occasional bike rider hurtles past on their way to somewhere. We have just stopped. We are not on the way to anywhere. We just sit and enjoy the moment as if the rest of the world doesn't exist. We are real but all else is not.

'That is the first time you have said that.' Dean looks pleased.

'I want it over with. I don't want it to be hanging over us.'

6.00 p.m.

Mum has arrived. Her feet have hardly touched the ground. She has swung into action, taking charge. The children are relieved that someone responsible has emerged. If she hadn't

retired two months ago she wouldn't have been able to come now. She can stay as long as we need her to.

The phone rings often and Dean is spending a lot of time filling people in. He hands me the phone and it is Karen ringing from Queensland. She always makes me laugh. Today she is crying. I think I have ruined her holiday.

'I wish I could be there with you now.'

'Just pray for me. Pray it all goes well.'

'I can't tell you what to do, but I think you should believe for a healing.'

'I know God can heal me if He wants to. But I am not going to presume on Him. I am not going to be pig-headed and say He has to heal me miraculously. He can use medicine too.'

She is silent on the end of the phone. I know what I have said to her cuts across all that she believes in. She believes all should be healed no matter what. There is no room in her theology for God to deal with us in suffering. I know that she feels like I am missing out because I am not rejecting surgery and believing God to heal me.

'My father-in-law died of stomach cancer', Karen continues. 'He believed he would be healed and had no treatment and then died.'

'God still healed him Karen. He healed him by taking him to heaven. God heals in many ways. He even heals us of things that we aren't even aware need healing—like relationships and attitudes. He is going to heal me of things I have no idea of yet.'

She is sad and silent on the end of the phone. 'Know that we are praying for you and look after yourself.'

This is all getting a bit too serious for me. The happiest person I know is falling to bits on the end of the line over me. I decide to lighten things a bit by impersonating a TV ad in a nasally voice which I know she will recognise, 'I am, I am looking after myself'. Her bubbly laugh that I need to hear more than anything erupts and I know she will be okay.

God please give Dr Waters the guidance and wisdom to save my human life.

Dear Heather,

This is a time for you to rest in God. You are surrounded by people who will love and pray for you. You have been a rich source of blessing for many. Rest and receive the love God has for you through His people.

Thank you for your support of me in the last months and know that anything you ask of me will not be too much. I love you sister and pray for a Divine Healing.

Jenny. xxxx

The kids are in bed and all is quiet. Mum and I are chatting as I fill her in on where we are all up to. She is sad and sombre but taking it all well. All her nursing training is helping her now, I can see that. She tells me of a book that she has on seven steps to getting well. One of the steps is to love unconditionally someone who you find it almost impossible to do this for. 'I think I should do this towards your father.' At this moment I am prouder of her than I ever have been. She has achieved a lot in her life professionally but nothing can come up to this. If she can let go of her bad attitude to dad and love him as a child of God I know she will have come a long way towards healing in her own life.

Wednesday, 18th September

On waking I realise that I have slept well and am not fearful. Only one more day to go before the surgery. My mind is freewheeling, thinking about my life, yet at peace. I remember the first time I saw Dean eighteen years ago in church. My jaw dropped to the floor and my heart began to race. 'Who is that guy?' I can remember thinking. He was with a group that I didn't know very well but felt compelled from that day onward to get to know them all better. Some months later we were at a prayer meeting together. He prayed for me that I would be healed from the hurts caused by my parents' marriage break-up. At the time I thought God would bring them back together.

Years later I realised that God had healed me even though they were not back together. I feel it is now God's time to heal my mother from her disappointments.

later

When will I see all these familiar things again? The supermarket, the bank, the chemist? Tomorrow I will go to jail, possibly for a six month's sentence, with no parole. Mum is with me as I show her where all the things are that she will need to know. It all feels so unreal. Maybe it will be like being in a time capsule. I will stay there for six months and when I come out I will pick my life up again. Will I recognise my life then? Will I see my things perhaps in the same place I left them, or moved and in a place I would never put them?

I'm on the mat, I'm down for the count, unable to get up until the referee blows the whistle.

later again

People are wonderful. Baskets of flowers and fruit, also pots of bulbs surround me. The most precious of all are the clover flowers Tessa picked for me on the way home from school.

I don't want to do this. The forms are in front of me and I have a pen in my hand ready to sign for the surgery. Dr Waters sits impatiently across the desk. I don't want to do this more than anything I haven't wanted to do in my whole life. More than not wanting to go through labour or facing someone who is terminally ill. Am I terminally ill? Am I not wanting to face myself? I just want to walk out the door and keep going and it will all stop. But I know it won't. That tumour will continue to grow.

'I will do it for you and the kids.'

Dean squeezes my hand. 'You need to do it for yourself too.'

'You should consider breast reconstruction later', the doctor adds casually. This was a comforting thought. I hadn't

considered that it was possible. Dr Waters is talking again. He is still not smiling. He is explaining some of the finer details of the surgery. 'I will have to cut a nerve out of your arm which will leave you with a numb spot. All your lymph nodes will have to go and we will send the whole lot over to pathology for a look.' His mood is matter-of-fact, like he does this talk every day. I suppose he hates this part of his job.

Kay, Trish and I are sitting in the mall having a coffee. We have just been to the movies to see a sad romance which they both had seen before. They said I could pick any movie and they didn't mind which one. It was great to have a good cry. Obviously they are trying to keep me distracted before the surgery tomorrow. The breeze is warm, as is the laughter we are sharing, while enjoying the afternoon sun. I feel so loved and supported. The whole church is praying for me today.

'How are you going now since your surgery?' I ask Kaye.

'Well my breast is all floppy now because of the fat that they removed in the lumpectomy. So I am a bit lopsided. Never mind, breasts are overrated anyway.'

later, later

Mum is in a flurry organising things. I think I have done all I can for Dean and the kids. I just have to pack for myself now. Writing is a great way to communicate with you, Lord. Words help to bring order in what seems chaos. 'In the beginning was the word . . .' God spoke and it was. When I have written something down I feel as if I can leave it on the page and no longer have it running around my head.

*"Because you have made the LORD, who is my refuge,
Even the Most High, your dwelling place,
No evil shall befall you,
Nor shall any plague come near your dwelling;
For He shall give His angels charge over you,
To keep you in all your ways."
Psalm 91:9-11*

And verse 16:

"With long life I will satisfy him, And show him My salvation."

'Lord you are my dwelling place, and Lord I am the person who you will satisfy with long life.'

I have lots of shooting pains in my breast and it seems to be swelling. Please Lord let the pathology results be good after the surgery and may the pain in my armpit go away.

'If you want to go back to Adelaide to live we can do that.' Dean seriously broaches the subject I have been avoiding.

'No, we should go to the church in Victoria.'

'Well I want you to know that if you want to go home we can.'

'We both know that God wants us to go, before I was sick we knew it, what has changed?'

'I love you.'

'I love you too. We'll go and leave it all up to God.' Clinging together I pray that all will be well.

6.00 p.m.

Someone has brought some food around. Tessa has been crying. She doesn't want other people's cooking. She wants my cooking. She is having yoghurt for dinner.

Tessa is fishing around in the kitchen. She appears at the dining table with a roll and a large cup of juice. 'Can we have communion together?' Dean and I catch each other's eye across the table. He looks exhausted. The strain shows on each of our faces. My children are facing the unknown just as I am. What better way to face it than together and by calling on the Lord. I reach for my Bible and read Psalm 91. They are all quiet and solemn as we join hands and pray. Dean's voice is strong and reassuring, soothing us in this turmoil. Mum is quietly crying. Dean breaks the bread and hands us all a piece.

'Lord we take this in remembrance of you.' We pass the one cup and as one in family we drink.

'Lord as your blood was spilt for me, heal me.' God's peace comes and floods the room in the quietness.

"Do not fear or be dismayed; tomorrow go out against them, for the LORD is with you."

2 Chronicles 20:17

Thursday, 19th September

Today is a big step towards my healing. I will praise God on this side of the sea. Lying in the bath I know that God's love is all around me just as the soothing warm water is now.

'Lord I give my body over to you. You who are the great surgeon. You are the potter and I am the clay. Cut the cancer out of my flesh. Cut the cancerous attitudes out of my soul. Heal me of my physical and my spiritual sickness.'

As I prepare for the day even the usual breakfast bickering of the children sounds sweet today. Maybe not. Someone is yelling now. I feel at ease knowing that so many people are praying for me today. 'Honestly if I am not levitating off the operating table into a full recovery I don't know what it will take.' It is almost like it is not really happening to me but to someone else. The kids are leaving for school. We thought it best to send them, hopefully to keep them distracted. I don't know if we are doing the right thing. I hope so.

'I love you.' Tessa's tears pull at my heart.

'I know you will be alright mum.' Kate is so brave.

Stephen just hugs me and turns to go.

12.00 noon

I had better write now as I may not be able to for a while. My heart is fluttering and I feel pain in my chest. I am all gowned up, waiting for the surgeon and anaesthetist to see

me. Apparently my GP Dr Astrid will be assisting. Lord, thank you for all the good things in my life.

I had a blood test this morning at the pathology clinic. The nurse asked me what operation I was having. I wished I had said varicose veins. The word mastectomy stuck in my throat and I began to sob.

I love reading over and over the cards people have sent me. This one is very soothing:

Dear Heather,

Thinking of you at this time and praying for God's healing upon you. The thought that comes to me constantly is that nothing can separate you from His love. So rest in that knowledge of His love for you and let God and others worry about the healing.

Much love,

Val.

Whitewater

Parched and dry yet I dare not try to keep anything down. If only, like my wife, I could go to sleep and wake up when it is all over. Three hours have passed. How much longer? Oh God, what if Heather dies today? Steadily my head throbs in my hands.

'Will you trust me with her life and yours?'

'Yes Lord, what else can I do?'

'When the doctor comes out will you trust me if he says she only has a 50/50 chance?'

'Yes Lord, I will.'

'Even if he says she only has a 10% chance?'

'Yes Lord, what else can I do?'

'I have called you to be together. I will give you the faith to believe; you will be together.'

With fear and hope mixed together I look up and see the doctor coming toward me.



The grandchildren are home from school and yet I have heard nothing. Several times I have rung the hospital but there is nothing to tell me about Heather. How long is it going to be?

They are fretting and anxious. What can I tell them? We must all wait together, oh but how long? My daughter could be dead and I don't even know it. The stress is getting to us all. We wait. I can't do anything. Help me Lord. Tessa thinks I am trying to take her mother's place. I won't take it to heart. She is anxious and thinks she will lose her mother. Oh thank God the door is opening and Dean is here.



Conscious or dreaming, one by one I see my children's faces float by in the blackness. I sense Dean is near but cannot see him.

I am conscious that I am connected to tubes and machines which are tying me to the bed. It is hard to move. Every few seconds it seems lights flash in my face, ice is put in

my mouth and a nurse hovers over me checking I don't know what. The buzzer is replaced in my hand. I am conscious that mum is near by, just sitting and waiting. I am waiting, waiting to feel better, waiting to get up again.

Saturday, 21st September

My life at this point consists of three things: drips, drains and commodes. Drips going in, drains connected filling up with bile go out, desperate dashes to the commode. Yet nothing happens. Not until I see the rubber gloves and the catheter does my own natural plumbing work. The hand pump I pump like mad for the pethidine to come so I can sleep again. I don't want to wake up but inevitably the pain takes care of that.

Briny waters are drowning me. Dean and mum have been in and out today. He told the children today that I had my whole breast removed. They are shocked and numb. So am I. Jane has come in. She is crying. 'It's gone now', I mumble. 'My breast is gone.'

She sits by my bed sobbing and praying.



Why won't they answer my questions? Grandma has just gone for a walk. I sit here in my room alone. No one is speaking. I don't know where dad is. Why won't they take me to see mum? Kate is the only one who listens to me and talks with me. We cry together often. Stephen just plays on the computer. I have seen dad crying. I didn't like to see that. What is going on?



Sunday, 22nd September

Today I can focus and think a bit clearer. I insisted they take me off the drips as all I could dream about was the joy of going

to the toilet on my own. It was not an easy task but I managed to stumble to the loo, feeling my sea legs and getting used to the unevenness of my upper body weight. But it was pure bliss to just be on my own without the army of nurses and their disciples trailing with me.

later

I've managed to have a shower while sitting in a chair. A nurse has come to wash my hair. Nurses are great really; they do try to make you feel good. The Doctor is here and I think he is pleased, although he doesn't show it much.

'Well I spent a long time on you, in the hope that I wouldn't repeat the bad job I did on Sister Mary. Poor thing she looks like she has New England Dieback. At least she is a nun and not married I suppose.' It is good to hear him make a dry joke. He must be feeling better about me. I managed to look at my wound while he was examining me. I can't see much as it is taped up, but it is very flat.

Yesterday was very black. I can see how people get to the point where they want to end it all. Absolute bleakness fought a battle in my mind. Only remembering, and almost chanting, some positive Scriptures won the day in the end. Apparently I cried so much I upset mum. It was like the three day baby blues, but thank God there was no baby. Actually I would prefer a baby to this any day. Dean has just been in after church and read me the sermon he preached this morning. I can't remember much but I think it was about perseverance and Jeremiah.

The operation took a lot longer than they thought it would. This caused everyone to get rather beside themselves. By the time mum and the children came to see me apparently I looked so awful that they all left really upset. They thought I looked nearly dead. Stephen tried to comfort my mother by saying, 'Never mind, Grandma. You're a nurse. You should be used to seeing people who are dying.' Needless to say this did not

improve things. I think he has inherited my brother's genetics for being insensitive.

later, later

I had a lovely afternoon today. Many of my friends have been in. I tried not to look at the sadness reflecting in their eyes so I spent the afternoon saying outrageous things so they would all laugh and in turn make me laugh. Karen is back from her holiday and she was just what I needed. A good dose of her is better than any medicine.

8.00 p.m.

'Hi. Mrs Eaton?' A middle-aged man with a kind voice rouses me from my sleep.

'Hi. I'm Dr Nevin. I've come in for a bit of a chat about your treatment.'

Sitting up, I swallow hard. He sits by my bed with a file in his hand. His voice soothes me. I like him.

'With a tumour the size of yours and with several lymph nodes involved we should give you what is called "the works burger."'

'How big exactly was the tumour?'

'It was 5cm, plus there was a second smaller tumour behind it.'

'We don't know if any lymph nodes were involved though?' I ask.

'With a tumour that size it's highly likely. Hopefully it will be only one or two. You have a much better survival rate then. Even so, you also may have secondary cancers elsewhere.'

I don't want to hear this. I had thought I was feeling much better today.

'You will need four sessions of an extremely strong chemo which we only give to those who we think are young and strong enough to live through it, and then eight sessions of CMF, all of them three weeks apart.' I listen, quietly accepting. It will be okay, it will be okay.

'Also we can put you on a drug called Tamoxifen which will stop your body producing oestrogen, which at the moment has been feeding the cancer. And then at some stage a course of radiation.'

'Why have I developed this cancer?'

'There are no hard and fast rules that can pinpoint why anyone develops cancer.'

This annoys me. I want to know why and no one can tell me why.

'Statistically, what is the percentage rate for my recovery?'

Kaye had a 95% chance of recovery. I know mine will be less than that. I'm hoping it will be about 80-85%.

His soothing voice crooned on. He must have had to give this speech many times before but he didn't make me feel like he was bored, just very concerned that I understood what he was saying.

'If you have no further treatment you only have a 40% chance of recovery. If you have all of the treatment, chemo, radiation and Tamoxifen you will have a 60% chance of survival.'

My face is contorting and I can't speak. Why did I ask that question? He didn't give me the answer I wanted. Why did I ask? He is sitting with me while I sob. After a while he leaves.

I reach for my Bible, my head is racing as I try to find the Scriptures that have meant so much to me lately. I read them over and over. Finally I know I can't do this on my own. I ring the bell and the nurse comes.

'Can you please ring my husband and tell him to come in.'

"I have called upon You, for You will hear me, O God;

Incline Your ear to me, and hear my speech.

Show Your marvelous lovingkindness by Your right hand,

O You who save those who trust in You

From those who rise up against them.

Keep me as the apple of Your eye;

Hide me under the shadow of Your wings."

Psalms 17:6-8

I am falling asleep saying over and over again, 'You save those who trust in You'. I do trust you Jesus. I will live.

Monday, 23rd September

It is not only death I fear but living through the treatment. Dean stayed with me last night until I fell asleep. Poor guy. He had only just got home when the nurse called. He had just made some eggs for himself. The first food he would have had all day. I suppose when he went home he would have thrown them out, cold and greasy.

This has been such a trying year. The church in Victoria still wants us to come and have said that Dean can go on light duties until I am better. God knew that this would happen. He planned our days before there was one of them.

I am going home today. I am surrounded by flowers from friends. The nicest of all was the single carnation with this card attached:

Dear Mum,

I hope you get well.

From your son,

Stephen.

I love John Donne's 'Holy Sonnet':

Batter my heart, three person'd God; for, you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise, and stand, o'ethrow mee, and bend
Your force, to break, blowe, burn and make me new.
I, like an usurpt towne, to another due,
Labour to admit you, But Oh, to no end,
Reason you viceroy in mee, mee should defen,
But is captiv'd, and proves weak or untrue,
Yet dearly I love you, And would be lov'd faine,
But am betroth'e unto your enemy,

Divorce mee, untie, or break that know againe,
Take me to you, imprison mee, for I
Except you enthrall mee, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish mee.

The Penguin Book of Renaissance Verse 1509-1659,
Penguin Books, St Ives, 1993, pp. 543-4

That is how I feel. I want God to capture my heart and take it away to heaven.

I think this was John Donne's Romans 7. Thank you Lord for Romans 8.

"Fear not, for I am with you;

Be not dismayed, for I am your God.

I will strengthen you, Yes, I will help you,

I will uphold you with My righteous right hand . . .

For I, the LORD your God,

will hold your right hand,

Saying to you, 'Fear not,

I will help you.'"

Isaiah 41:10, 13

later

Dear Heather,

Just writing to let you know that we love you very much and want you to know that you are a very special person in both our lives. Our thoughts and prayers are constantly for you all. We are looking forward to hearing good news and catching up real soon.

Natalie and Jason.

PS Jason is not too sure about the chemo soup. How about chicken?

I am home. My second drain comes out tomorrow. Physiotherapy begins on Wednesday and the stitches come out on Friday. After the stitches come out I am going to fly to

Brisbane. Dean, mum and the children will meet me there. We will spend a few days at my brother's house.

Dr Waters was more dry and offhand today in his comments. I think he is one of those people who can't handle tears so he says the most bizarre things to shock you, so you won't get weepy in front of him. My appetite is still not good. My parents saw each other today and they both behaved themselves. Dad gave me this letter:

Dear Heather,

The link between our attitude and our health is called Psycho-neuro-immunology. In other words, the effect of the thoughts of our brain on the immune system:

The idea that states of mind affect health was observed by Galen in the 2nd century BC in his finding that depressed women were more prone to breast cancer than their cheerful sisters.

[O. C. Simonton & S. Matthews-Simonton, Getting Well Again, Bantam Books, Reading, 1978]

This leads us to recall Proverbs 17:22:

*"A merry heart doeth good like a medicine:
but a broken spirit drieth the bones. "*

I have read that 'crying' tears have a different chemistry than 'laughing' tears.

Dr F. A. Cook, a physician attending the crew of a ship imprisoned in the ice in the Antarctic in 1898, saw the healing effect of laughter. One man had died during the long winter and others were sick. He says:

But surely one of the most important things was to raise the patient's hopes and instil a spirit of good humour . . . to combat the spirit of abject hopelessness was my most difficult task . . . as soon as one of our number was down,

everybody made it his business to create an air of good cheer about him.

[Dr F. A. Cook, Through the First Antarctic Night, 1898]

If you were a Queen centuries ago, you could command your jesters to make you laugh, or off with their heads. Well, if your family can't make you laugh, how about this:

Gough Whitlam was asked if Paris, where he had been posted as ambassador to UNESCO, was as much fun as Australia. He looked down at the journalist and said, 'The fun is where I am'.

[Greg Flynn, 'The Australian', 20/7/96]

I hope the fun will be where you are.

Love,

Dad.

later

I lie here trying to rest. The noise of the kids ricochets around the house, rumbling towards me down the walls. At least that makes me feel like some things are still normal.

As I lie here I can hear Stephen performing his nightly aquatic sports. He is actually singing in the shower. How could he be singing now? Yet I am glad he is. Now he is happily spouting water from one end of the bathroom to the other as he scours his braces, completely oblivious of his noise and mess. Oh well, as long as he is happy. Something a few days ago I would have told him off for is now music to my ears. At least he is his usual self, even if I am not.

Tuesday, 24th September

3.00 a.m.

I am awake. I am sleeping in the spare room which is at the back of our house, away from the front door. I will stay here

until I feel up to moving back to my room. I am on some heavy painkillers but the pain is still keeping me awake. The drain that I still have is a pain in the arm pit. Thankfully it comes out today. Lord I am going to praise you in the sea. I'm in the depths, being tossed by the current. I can't fight anymore.

later

I can't stop crying today. Emotionally exhausted. I've tried my best to be positive for people, but I can't do it anymore. I am sad that I have upset them; I feel guilty for being sick. I feel like every time I see someone I have to convince them that I am not going to keel over. I can't face anyone today. I'm going underground.

When Dave sees me, I know he sees his mother who died of breast cancer. One thing she apparently said to Lyn (Dave's wife, who nursed her) when she was so ill was that she wouldn't have missed this for the world. Wow. Now that is faith through adversity. This is where Christianity becomes real. It is no longer a theory. Your word is truth Lord, absolute truth. And I am going to believe it absolutely.

later

'What are you eating?' Dad is here sitting with me. He is too serious. I want the old man back who is always joking.

'Nothing. I am too scared to eat. I can't get organic vegetables and I worry about all the chemicals used on the vegetables I can get.'

'Well you have to eat something.'

'It's amazing that our bodies cope as well as they do really. If I think too much about it I may never eat again.'

'You're going to have to eat something soon, without worrying about it.' He is sounding like a father telling his young child off.

*"Create in me a clean heart, O God,
And renew a steadfast spirit within me."*

*Do not cast me away from Your presence,
And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of Your salvation,
And uphold me by Your generous Spirit."
Psalm 51:10-12*

God I feel like you are doing heart surgery on me.

later

Dad has brought around some health books and a book about a man who was miraculously healed of cancer.

Mum has been great. She has just taken over wonderfully. I don't have to worry about anything to do with the kids.

later, later

Dean is sitting on my bed with the phone in hand. He is waiting to speak to Dr Waters.

'Hi, Doctor, it's Dean Eaton calling. You were to get the pathology results today?'

He listens, and I listen to him listening. His face gives nothing away.

'Right, we will be in later, so you can remove Heather's drain.'

He hangs up and looks at me. 'One large 5cm tumour, one smaller tumour behind the nipple and 26 out of 28 lymph nodes were cancerous.'

*"Arise, O LORD, Confront him, cast him down;
Deliver my life from the wicked with Your sword . . .
As for me, I will see Your face in righteousness;
I shall be satisfied when I awake in Your likeness."
Psalm 17:13,15*

Worry, fear and anxieties are luxuries I can no longer afford. As I fight this battle in my mind it amazes me what pops into my head and what I have to push out. I realise I must have

been an obsessive worrier before. It's a battle in my mind which I must win. I can hardly read or watch TV, but I must be really careful what I allow into my mind. Only positive stuff from now on.

later, later

I am lying on the examination bed in the surgery while the doctor prepares to remove my drain. He has an interesting crayon sketch on his wall in a frame. It could be mistaken for a children's drawing but the signature gives it away. The Picasso symbolism is striking. A dove hovering over a battle ship, almost as if it is a fighter plane. Instead of dropping bombs it brings peace.

I arrived in the waiting room with the drain hidden in a shopping bag as it looks pretty gross and I didn't want to make the general public feel sick. The first drain was removed by a nurse in hospital and was no big drama. I soon realised that there must be an art to removing drains as the doctor obviously didn't have the same skill. He is pulling it out without cutting the tubing first. My scream echoes throughout the room, into the waiting room and out onto the street. 'The nurse didn't hurt me like that, she cut the tube first so there was no suction. What is the matter with you?' I vent my hurt on him and immediately regret it. Dr Waters's face looks ashen. I know he didn't mean to hurt me. Dean is looking slightly embarrassed.

As we leave I notice the waiting room is much emptier than when we arrived. Carol the receptionist, who I know, smiles. 'The place has emptied out a bit now; you have just cut our workload down a bit. It was amazing after that scream how everyone suddenly remembered a previous appointment and fled.'

'Sorry about that.' I leave feeling sheepish. In fact while I was lying there before the drain was removed I felt a bit like a sheep placidly being shorn. That was until the pain. Then I turned into an angry tiger. I feel much better now the drain is out. I instantly have more energy.

Some of my customers have sent me cards:

Dear Heather,

I just wanted to say that we are praying for you and I want to encourage you the way I have been encouraged in my illness. I pray that you will have the peace of the Lord so close to you and I know He will lift you up each day. I can honestly say that I had such a peace and even joy during the first months while my church family have supported me through my cancer trial. I know that you will be surrounded by family and friends but later on if I can help you I would love to do so.

God Bless you and may He give you a speedy recovery.

Louisa.

To sweet Heather,

Our love and prayers are with you and yours. Our precious Lord feels the pain you are suffering. He is always so faithful and he will bring you through with a strength and vibrancy you didn't know you had. May His presence help you to meet each new day with a hopeful, cheerful and trusting heart. God bless you with His healing love and power.

*“... for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”
Nehemiah 8:10*

Keith and Carolyn.

Wednesday, 25th September

My energy is returning slowly. Bouts of nausea come and go but I am managing to eat something by dinner time. I showed Dean today my flat chest. It is still taped up but its very flat. He was loving and reassuring. He didn't react negatively and

so neither did I. We both thought it would be much worse. Thank you Lord that I am not too vain. Stitches out on Friday and then off to my brother's in Queensland. Jenny and Jo came today. It was great. They don't make me feel sad.

later

Forgive me Lord for the resentment and unforgiveness I have had against some people. You know who they are. Create in me a clean heart O God.

*"Hear a just cause, O LORD,
Attend to my cry;
Give ear to my prayer which is not from deceitful lips . . .
You have tested my heart; You have visited me in the night;
You have tried me and found nothing;
I have purposed that my mouth shall not transgress . . .
Uphold my steps in Your paths,
That my footsteps may not slip . . .
Show Your marvelous lovingkindness by Your right hand,
O You who save those who trust in You . . ."*

Psalm 17:1, 3, 5, 7

Thursday, 26th September

"And the prayer of faith will save the sick and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven."

James 5:15

I have sinned. I have not always respected my parents and I have held things against them. Lord forgive me.

Darling Heather,

*I am thinking of you every moment. I know everything will be fine.
We love you heaps. I hope you received the flowers. No*

news is good news, so if we don't hear we will know everything is progressing well.

Love,

Aunty Barb.

Thursday, 26th September

Dearest Heather,

I have been feeling so sad after hearing the news of your illness. I have been thinking of you all the time. What a dreadful shock it must all be for you and the family. Life often seems so cruel and unfair. I've given up trying to understand. You must be feeling rather daunted at the coming battle, but if anyone has the courage and will win, it is you. You have always been so full of life and energy and so brave. Is there anything I can do for you? Do phone at any time if you want to talk.

Our love to Dean and the kids,

Gillian.

Dean is tired, depressed and stressed. He can't work because of me. Work would at least take his mind off me. He needs a good rest too. Yet I can't worry about him. I give him to you Lord and trust that you will give to your beloved in their sleep.

Friday, 27th September

People call me brave. Sitting here waiting for my stitches to be taken out, I know I am not. Dad is with me and he is impressed with the surgeon, once I told him that he is into the Pritikin diet. I know this redeems him in his eyes slightly (although he sees all doctors as charlatans). I am not brave. I live in a great country with good medical facilities. I have a God who responds to the prayers of His people. I must be the most prayed for person in Australia at the moment. I am sustained by the prayers of the saints and the response of God.

Saturday 28th September**4.00 a.m.**

It is pitch black and I am stumbling in the dark looking for the painkillers. Although it is so dark there is the most wondrous orchestra of nature playing a symphony outside. Birds of all kinds are singing the glory of the coming morning, along with the bass line of frogs and the tenor line of crickets. I can hear at least four different roosters trumpeting to each other and to the sun. My brother lives in the middle of a rainforest and they have the typical menagerie. There is no traffic here yet it is as noisy as a freeway. This huge ecosystem surrounds the house making the humans seem insignificant. I could shout out the window and no-one would hear. God's creation is all powerful and I feel joy and healing in just lying here listening to it in the blackness. No fear is near me. It is like the promise of love and light in the morning.

later

'What were you dreaming?' he asks as I am coming out of subconsciousness, being woken by his voice and his beautiful smile.

'I dreamt that you and I were lovers again.'

'So did I.'

'Did I have one breast or two?'

'One.'

I am beginning to weep with happiness.

'I am glad that you weren't dreaming of something that can never be.' I answer hearing his heartbeat. I don't think I am vain. It would probably have upset me more if it had been my right hand. Yet I did need to know that Dean is not repulsed physically by me.

'I love you more than ever. You are more precious to me than I ever could have imagined', he reassures.

'There is a door in my mind which I have slammed shut.'

He listens as I talk in the quietness. 'Behind it I have put any

thoughts of death. It is a cast iron door a metre thick and I will not open that door.'

'We must leave death with God. We must never open that door.'

An older Christian that we both know, who is in his eighties, was telling Dean some time ago about the time he had a coronary bypass. He was lying on the hospital bed feeling extremely ill and pondering whether he would die or not. The Lord clearly spoke to him at that point. 'When you die is none of your business.' This shocked him at first but now he is fit and well and smiles when he thinks back on it. I suppose that it is true that when we die is none of our business. It is God's business.

A friend of mine who is a great one for positive confession and praying in faith is breaking her heart over me. She has no room in her theology for suffering. To her all suffering is from the devil and not allowed by God, and trials are to be fought rather than to learn from. Yet I know God is more interested in my character than my comfort. He really has my attention at the moment.

later, later

Life is the pits. I need the painkillers more than ever, but not for my breast, for my legs. As I have virtually been in bed for over a week, my muscles have died. Today I walked a lot just because I wanted to be with the family and not stuck in a bed. Now I am suffering for it.

Dean and I are lying in bed. He is quiet now. I have just witnessed a terrifying sight. My husband, who is always sensible and great in a crisis, has just lost it. He cried for over half an hour. He needed to release some emotion and I am grateful that he has.

Sunday, 29th September

Dean and I have just woken up from a sleep on the beach. More than anything I have been looking forward to experiencing the sea again. It is full of the rhythms of life and extremely soothing to look at and to listen to. My favourite thing in the whole world is to fall asleep to its sound and again to wake, knowing its consistency and that no matter what happens in life it is always there, pounding shoreward. We are having a day to ourselves, leaving the children with mum and Phil. It is just what we have needed to fill up our emotional tanks afresh. Just being alone together, loving each other and having fun. Forgetting. There was a time last year when I felt like we knew each other so well that we almost had nothing left to say to one another. Each other's thoughts and changing moods were so familiar. I realise now we must have become stagnant in our relationship, perhaps due to overwork. We were in a rut. Now we have so much to say to one another. This makes me realise that stagnancy in marriage is an area that needs work. Yet it was fifteen years before this need surfaced. Perhaps that is significant in itself.

Monday, 30th September

Looking in the mirror my face creases up. I was fine when I walked into the shop. All kinds of wigs look down at me from their stands. A girl with cropped blonde hair is trying on a gorgeous long red wig. She looks stunning. I look ridiculous. A cross between Farrah Fawcett and a poodle with a bad hair day. The shop assistant notices I am crying.

Dean reaches for my hand and asks her to give us a minute. She walks away.

'I don't want to buy a stupid wig', I sob, ripping it off my head. It is the fourth one I have tried on and they all look awful.

later

We settled on a short warm brown bob style for the wig. I think I will get my hair cut short before the chemo so in some

small way I can retain control over losing my hair. Maybe it is just the appearance of retaining some control.

I have been reading some alternative literature on cancer. Basically it is saying that I must get rid of all chemicals in the house, especially petrochemicals. I should use only natural products for shampoo, conditioner, soap and washing powder. Buy and eat organic food as much as possible. Some precursors for breast cancer are:

The pill before age 25, dairy foods, and exposure to organochlorins, cat collars, farm sprays etc.

They talk about boiling pawpaw leaves for hours and drinking the liquid as an alternative to chemo. Apparently it is a thousand times stronger and doesn't kill off the good cells as well. The disadvantage is that it tastes foul. Isn't that the way? Anything that is good for you tastes revolting. Tomorrow we go home.

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God."

2 Corinthians 1:3-4

Wednesday, 2nd October

It's three weeks since I received that phone call from Dr Astrid. Dean and I are sitting across the desk from the Oncologist who has come up from Sydney. He is annoying me. Why does he have to be so nice? Often doctors seem to just tolerate you as an unnecessary annoyance. When they are nice and can't do enough for you it is a bit of a worry. I would rather they were horrible to me and telling me good things than being nice to me and telling me horrible things.

'You have a small lump on your scar which may just be scar tissue. But you also have two pea-size lumps in the lymph nodes on your neck.'

Have I been in denial? I was feeling so positive before I came.

The doctors are all referring me to one another. This one is referring me back to Dr Waters. I don't know why I bothered coming. He just asks what Dr Waters says and then agrees. None of them ultimately want to call the shots, they are leaving that for me.

The Oncologist is lining up more tests for me to have: bone scans, stomach scans, barium meals. Chemo starts next week. Oh joy! My head feels like it is full of cotton wool. I have to really concentrate just to speak coherently. I feel claustrophobic. I am fine if I only think of the next step. When I think of all the steps that are ahead my head spins, the floor seems unstable, and a seasickness washes over me. I haven't even bitten my nails or had any junk food cravings for the last three weeks. All my fetishes are gone. This is real stress.

Dear Heather,

We love you heaps. We rejoice in the Lord for we know He will continue to watch over and keep you. Our prayers for your continued recovery are ever with you.

Graham and Barbie.

Graham has virtually had the church thrown in his lap. He is the head elder and, as Dean can't possibly work at all, Graham has had to come in and take over. But I can't worry about that. It's amazing how many worries creep inside my head. I can't take them on. I have to leave them with you God. Worry is a luxury I can't afford.

Thursday, 3rd October

Drinking it through a straw is the only way I can get it down. Dye injections and now drinking a radioactive milkshake. What

is all this stuff doing to my immune system, which is already depressed? I am supposed to be doing good things for my body but instead I worry that all these so-called medical treatments will make me sicker.

'Will the stomach scan be bad for me?'

'It is like having twelve X-rays', the radiologist answers. 'The only bad thing is that when I inject the dye some people have the sensation that they are wetting their pants.'

'Oh, nice one.'

The metal bed I am lying on is pushed forward and I am surrounded by a large round machine. I am not allowed to move for forty minutes. Only allowed to breathe slowly, in and out. I am concentrating on my breathing. It is like the pulse of the ocean. In and out, in and out. 'Lord I am in the sea, being dragged along by the current of your love. I have no control over my circumstances, just as I have no control over the elements. Only you can control the elements and also my life. This makes me want to praise you.' A great sense of relief envelopes me. 'This is not a raging storm throwing me all over the place, but a strong clear current which comes from you and cyclically returns me to you. Just as you have set the seasons and days in motion, so you have set the tides of my life. Your peace and joy flood me now.'

Off to pathology for a CA 15-3 cancer biochemical marker test which will tell if there is a large amount of cancer cells floating around, indicating a tumour elsewhere.

"... Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing? Then He arose and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace, be still!' And the wind ceased and there was a great calm."

Mark 4:38-39

later

Dean is reading a book and he read me this part today:

Murphy's Law: Nothing is as easy as it looks, everything takes longer than you expect and if anything can go wrong, it will and at the worst possible moment.

Maxwell's Law: Nothing is as hard as it looks, everything is more rewarding than you expect and if anything can go right it will and at the best possible moment.

*J. C. Maxwell, The Winning Attitude,
Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, 1993, p. 109*

An example of how a pessimist and an optimist look at life. I know I look at things through the eyes of a pessimist, rationalising this by saying that I am realistic. If you never have high expectations then you won't be disappointed. Dean is the optimist. It must be hard for him to live with me sometimes.

Dad tells me that prayer meetings all over town are continuing for me. I really am the weaker member of the body now (1 Corinthians 12).

Friday, 4th October

Having my hair cut short was supposed to make me feel more in control of losing my hair. It doesn't. I hate it. The chemo is only a week away. I want it, but then I don't. Sometimes I am coasting along nicely, coping with everything too well, and then I worry if I am in denial. I am not in denial at the moment. I am outside the hairdresser's in the mall, crying. I must get home before I make a spectacle of myself.

later

"Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you."

John 14:27

"For with God, nothing will be impossible."

Luke 1:37

"And whatever things you ask for in prayer, believing, you will receive."

Matthew 21:22

Lord heal me and hear my prayer.

Fear, worry and guilt are luxuries I can no longer afford. I have to let them go and not be afraid.

later, later

As I sit in the spare room in my bed re-reading some of the cards, and enjoying the flowers that have been sent, I do feel loved and prayed for. Dean is with me reading Hebrews to me:

"But, beloved, we are confident of better things concerning you, yes, things that accompany salvation, though we speak in this manner. For God is not unjust to forget your work and labor of love which you have shown toward His name, in that you have ministered to the saints, and do minister."

Hebrews 6:9-10

These are my favourite cards today:

To Mum,

I love you. I am glad you are getting better and you are the best.

Love,

Tessa. xxx

Dear Heather,

Just letting you know we are thinking of you and praying for you and your family. Be encouraged that many people are praying for you here in Newcastle. If there is anything else we can do, anything you need, please let us know. This card comes with one huge hug from us, just add water, I mean imagination.

Love you heaps,

Nigel and Steph. xoxoxo

Dear Dean and Heather,

We were both shocked and numbed when we first heard your bad news. Then we were extremely saddened and angered that people so nice and full of life, so giving and faithful as you are, should have to suffer such pain and loss. What an awful ordeal this must be. As I am spending much time feeding our new son I want you to know that I have sent plenty of prayers heavenward while doing so.

I suspect there must be times when you have wondered if prayer really does change things. We are praying that your path will be strengthened and that there will be many opportunities and experiences to enjoy as well as endure. We both remember the times when you encouraged and motivated us when you lived here in Newcastle, and how much we enjoyed and appreciated your friendship. We pray that there will be special people around you now who will support and encourage you.

May Jesus be very real to you at this time,

Noel and Jenny.

later, later

'Like a bucket of sewerage has been thrown over me, that is how I feel. I am trying to not let depression swamp me, but what can I do?'

Dean just hugs me and lets me talk.

'I feel greedy for life. Is it wrong not to long for heaven? I don't want to be without you and the children, and I don't want you to be without me.'

His face is calm, not showing the torment that I know must be behind it.

'Sometimes I know that I will survive, and then a moment later I worry (luxury) that I won't. I want it all. I want all of life.'

Once again my partner picks up the pieces of my life and soothes the ache within. In time I feel better and not so distressed. He is so good; I recommend him to anyone who is sick.

As he says, 'You just need someone to blow the clouds away.'

Saturday, 5th October

I have just had a phone call this morning from a friend in New South Wales. A Pastor from Gosford has just lost his wife. She was eight months pregnant. They were just sitting at their kitchen table having a cup of tea when she collapsed. Her husband ran to ring an ambulance and he felt distinctly to turn back. He spent the next two minutes talking with his wife, telling her he loved her, before she slipped into a coma. If he had gone to the phone first he would never have got to say goodbye. She died on her way to hospital. There was nothing they could do; she had an aneurism. I have just told Dean what I have heard.

'You know, as bad as your dad's cancer was, at least everyone had time to say goodbye, and to leave nothing unsaid.' Dean is not speaking. He is not coping with what I have just said. He grabs me and hugs me tight, crying. We both just stand in our kitchen so grateful that neither one of us has been snatched away. As painful as all this is, it is not as painful as instant loss. Neither of us has to speak, we just know that our marriage bond is so strong. We are two halves making a whole. Surely God wouldn't take me away now. I think about all the feminism I have read. I really don't care for all this individualism, where women have to find themselves, and do this by leaving husband and children. I think you find yourself in loving relationships more than in isolation. The bond of marriage is greater than the bond with parents or children. Sometimes it is even greater than with God, as God seems so distant. Yet I know He isn't. It is just that we live in the shadow of the eternal reality.

later

Dean is feeling the tension in his throat. It is the same horrible feeling he had when his dad was dying.

I am going on the Pritikin diet: fresh fruit and vegetables. No salt, tea, coffee, sugar or dairy products. These are all the things I love, yet this is not so hard for me at the moment as I am terrified to eat anything that may be harmful for my body.

Sunday, 6th October

Sitting in church I let Your words wash over me Lord; it is just you and me Lord, I am totally unconscious of those around. Dean is preaching; doing what he was called to do. I listen to the words knowing they are coming from a heart full of pain, knowing they also come from Your heart Lord. Yes Lord, I agree, you never created evil, but you walk through it with us. You are not a theorist. You proved that through the Incarnation. You came, rolled up Your sleeves and were willing to get involved in our own personal pile of mud.

‘On the Titanic were a group of Salvationists. They willingly gave up any chance to climb into a lifeboat, instead offering it to those who were not Christians. They did this because they saw heaven as a promotion. Heaven is a promotion, it is our eternal hope.’

In theory I say yes, death is a promotion, but I still don't know if I can do it.

later

We are home from church. I have been having a nice chat to the kids. They are so brave. They are trying hard to be good for me. Although they usually end up having a scrap every now and then, just like naughty puppies.

Dad has left a book for me to read. It is on the Gerson and Pritikin diets. Gerson was a man who cured incurable cancers in people by putting them on a fresh food only diet. He says that basically if you want to live you can't eat anything cooked again. I can't do that. This is too much. All I crave at the moment is steamed vegetables. The book talks about

cancer as being a metabolic disease; a failure in the body's detoxifying process. Obviously my body hasn't been coping with the amount of toxins in it. This surprises me as I am a vegetarian, yet salt, dairy and caffeine were high in my diet. Maybe the fact that I have been so depressed this year has lowered my immune system and therefore my body's ability to cope with detoxifying. I am a choleric/melancholy by nature and therefore over the years depression is something I have had to deal with at various times.

An article I am reading tells me that in the 1970s the Israeli government decided to clean up their dairy industry. They banned most chemicals that were used in dairy production—from the grass the cows ate to the milk factories. A decade later they had a 30% reduction in premenopausal breast cancer.

My wound is getting better. I still have a numb spot in my upper arm. It's weird. I feel an itch there, but when I scratch it I can't feel the scratching. The physio exercises are going well. I can do a little more each day. Some women apparently get a frozen shoulder which is very painful. I pray I don't. I find myself saying the strangest things because I can't concentrate properly. Words often escape me, and it is frustrating trying to get out what I want to say. I always took thinking, talking and spelling for granted. Language was an unconscious act that just happened mostly. Now I have to concentrate on every word.

I have changed my soap, shampoo and washing powder to natural products. I am on antioxidants as well as vitamin C, zinc, iron, pain killers and Tamoxifen. When I start the chemo I will be on anti-nausea drugs also. I am consuming more tablets than food at the moment. I am convinced that chemo will help. Even the natural therapists use a kind of chemo (pawpaw leaf tea). But I am not so sure about radiation. I am too scared to use the microwave so how can I submit to radiation? I've

even got rid of the electric blanket as I fear that it is interfering with my body's electrical forces.

I have been reading a book called *My Breast*. It is the story of a woman who had a lumpectomy. Joyce is an American of Jewish background. It shocks me to read that one in nine women in the USA will develop breast cancer. Elsewhere I have read that seven women a day die of breast cancer in Australia. One thing that makes me sad about this book is that there is no spiritual element to her story. She says an old Jewish prayer twice but she admits she is agnostic. Her world has no hope in a higher power.

I have the same psychological profile as her: low self-esteem, melancholy and I have in the past had a problem with anger. Her doctor told her she had caffeine breasts: lumpy and cystic. This book also says that a low-fat diet and no caffeine are advisable. One nurse said to her:

Our approach to illness is to attack everything . . . If you feel less stressed you will be able to deal with your treatments better . . . to enjoy life. We are not helping you reduce stress because we feel it can cure cancer. This idea, that reducing stress will protect you from further illness, is like carrying a rabbit's foot. It may make you feel better, because you think you have a solution, but at the same time you may be setting yourself a goal that is impossible and will only add to your stress. There is a tendency to feel that you have more control than in fact you do—that you can prevent a recurrence with your mental attitude. The problem with that is that it leads to blaming the victim. If something happens, you think it is your fault. The trick to dealing with cancer is to be comfortable with the notion that there are some things we cannot control.

*J. Wadler, My Breast, Women's Press Ltd,
London, 1994, pp. 124-5*

Therefore, reducing stress won't necessarily stop a recurrence but will help me cope with the whole thing better. I can't control it, but ultimately I can just do what I can and no

more. Although there is no evidence linking stress to cancer it may affect an already existing cancer by suppressing the immune system's ability to deal with cancer cells.

The problem is that most cancers have been there a long time by the time we find them. The average cancer has a doubling time of one hundred days; it takes one hundred days for one cell to double to become two. You need one hundred billion cancer cells to have one centimetre of cancer. If you do the math you'll see that most cancers have been present for eight to ten years by the time you can feel the smallest of lumps.

ibid. p. 173

Joyce had a stage two cancer. I had a stage three to four unless the tests I have had say otherwise. Lord I am trusting you that it will be a good result.

Tuesday, 8th October

'Do you still find me attractive?' I am back in our own bed enjoying again the intimacy that means so much. I have just been remembering the reality check I had yesterday. I was in the change room of a shop, trying to be normal and do normal things and glad to be out of the house. As I looked in the mirror I panicked with terror, praying that no one would accidentally walk in. I really do feel like I look like a shark attack victim.

'Honestly I have never had a moment when I have cringed at the thought that your breast is gone.'

He is so reassuring and I answer with all my heart, 'You are my wildest fantasy, my strongest dream and my most comforting thought'.

I know we are blessed. How can you have a great love affair if you don't spend time on it? How can a great artist create unless years are spent learning and polishing the craft? Marriage is like that. It needs love and attention.

later

The words 'Radio Nuclide Bone Scan' send a shudder through me as I wonder what else they are going to do to me.

'What is in the injection?' I ask the elderly doctor who is lunging for me, needle first.

'A radioactive substance', is his terse reply.

'Will my body cope with that?'

'It is the only known diagnostic procedure. If you want the test you must have the injection.' He throws down the needle on the sterile tray and storms out.

I am shocked. Why shouldn't I be able to ask questions? They want you to own the treatment and then don't like you questioning them.

A younger student doctor appears. He is Asian, and his manner is pleasant. Immediately I feel reassured. He looks at my chart.

'You're only thirty-four. That is young to be dealing with breast cancer.' He looks genuinely shocked and saddened.

'Can you tell me what this procedure can be compared with? I am worried about what it is doing to me.'

'The bone scan is equivalent to two X-rays.'

That was all I wanted, to know that I wasn't doing any major harm to my body by having the scan. Doctors need to have more compassion and not to feel threatened when we ask questions. We have brains, we need to know what is happening to us.

I remember some time ago watching a movie called 'The Doctor', with William Hurt playing the lead role. His story was about being on the other side of his own profession when he was diagnosed with throat cancer. One scene comes to mind. He was in recovery after surgery, still groggy from the anaesthetic. Accidentally he was given an enema. He knew what was happening but couldn't manage to call out and tell the nurse to stop and that she was ministering to the wrong patient. When he did come right out of the anaesthetic he had a few very colourful things to say about the indignity of his treatment.

The conclusion of his story was very powerful. Before he had been quite uncaring toward the sufferings of his patients. Now, having experienced both sides of the medical profession first hand, he was able to train young doctors to have a more compassionate approach. The older doctor and the younger doctor here in the Nuclear Medicine Department remind me of the contrast.

later

'Why? Why?' This question keeps popping into my head as I look around me. The day is sunny, but my mood is black. So many people are abusing their bodies with smoking, drinking and bad diet, and they don't have cancer. Well they don't look like they have cancer anyway. How can they eat all that fattening food and laugh while they are doing it? Don't they know what it is doing to their bodies? I know a lady who smokes sixty cigarettes a day and drinks heavily and she is still chugging along at sixty-five. In fact she has only just retired from a very responsible management position. I have been a vegetarian for years. We are not supposed to get cancer. It must be my bad attitudes then. You can eat what you like as long as you don't worry about it or anything else. Maybe that's the answer. Worry, guilt, fear and, at times, anger, have been long term problems for me. Yet what about the cancer ward at the Children's Hospital? Surely they haven't had time yet to see the consequences of bad life-long attitudes. I want to know why. Maybe there is no real answer.

later, later

'So you have had all the tests. We now just have to wait for the results and start the chemo. I think we should start on Thursday.'

Only one more day before I go to the guillotine and lose my hair. Sitting in the doctor's office with Dean all I can think of is that I had better get a photo of my shorter hairstyle before there is nothing left.

'The stomach scan came back good. There are no tumours that we can see anywhere, in your liver or stomach. That's really good. But the two lumps in your neck are still there. Frankly, they are a worry.'

I wish the floor would open up and swallow me whole. Jane believes this disease will go no further. Why have these wretched lumps appeared and why haven't they gone away?

I leave praying that the bone scan and blood test will come back clear.

Judy is sitting here with me in the lounge. She lost her husband over fifteen years ago to stomach cancer. Her grey hair reflects the wisdom of age. Her voice reflects the knowledge of knowing. 'Before Bruce became ill, I believed. But after we had gone through all the treatment and he went to God, I could no longer just say that I believed. I could now say, now I know. I know that God is real and heaven waits for us. It was more tangible than anything else I have ever experienced on this earth. Her words are so comforting. She exudes the knowledge that she is trying to articulate, that words are too limited to express. Lord I pray that I will not just believe, but that I will know, too.'

Yet while she is talking it dawns on me that God is not preparing me to die. In fact He has promised me that I will live. I just doubt His promises. I fear death, but more than that I fear leaving those I love. The bonds with my family are stronger than ever. They are in me and part of me. God has not begun to sever those ties, in fact He is making them stronger. Whenever I think of leaving my husband and children a physical ache, a heart pain permeates me all over. If I was going to die, surely I would begin to be able to let go. God please make the test results okay.

later, later

'Why haven't the pea-sized tumours in my neck gone away? I am being good with my food, why haven't they disappeared?'

My mother thinks for a minute, nodding her gentle and wise head. 'You know, if an ocean liner wants to turn around and

go the other way, it has to travel two miles in the wrong direction before it achieves the turn. You have to give it some time before your body accomplishes the turn.' I know she is right. I am too impatient.

later

Mum has heard that twenty seven women this year in Armidale have had a breast removed. I'm getting out of here while I still have one left.

Thursday, 10th October

Great. I can now go out in public with a T-shirt on. I am now the proud owner of a synthetic wonder mastectomy bra with matching lifelike prosthesis. I imagined the prosthesis to be a hard plastic lump. Instead it is a soft silicon lump. It is heavier than my real one.

'I can go out in public and wear a T-shirt now.' I am talking to Karen on the phone.

'What's the fake one like? Is it firm, or saggy and baggy like the other one?'

'How rude.' We both laugh like school girls. Her laugh is so infectious. It is a real antidote for depression and feeling sorry for yourself.

'Kate used to call me floppy when I went around the house without a bra on. Now she will have to call me lippy.'

'Oh, that is so sick.'

later

I had a screaming fit and a good cry last night. It felt good. Today is yummy, chemical cocktail day. I don't want chemicals going through my body. That stuff will kill off all the good cells as well. What is wrong with me? Why am I going to allow them to do this to me? I don't want to end up looking like Ghandi. Why can't it all just go away?

How did this thing grow so quickly? Am I like Job? Did God allow Satan to inflict this on me to test me? I just don't know.

9.00 a.m.

Dean has been up since 5.00 a.m. praying for me. We are sitting around the table. The breakfast things are scattered all over it. The kitchen looks like the remains of a refugee camp.

The children are all praying for me that all will go well today. Stephen's prayer makes me think, 'Please Lord help mum to be in a better mood and not so depressed for the rest of the holidays'. He sounds bitter. I hadn't even realised it was school holidays.

9.30 a.m.

I am strangely calm as I enter the hospital. I check in, walk upstairs, tell the nurses at the station I am here. They usher me into a room which must double as a storage room. There is a bed but I choose to sit in a chair. Dean sits on the bed. We wait. I notice the medical supplies stacked up against the wall and on top of some cupboards. There are catheters perched on top of one another with their product name in bold letters, 'The Gripper.' It's nice to know that even people who manufacture hospital supplies can have a sense of humour.

'Doctor will be with you shortly.' She gowns up. She is wearing a rubber apron, extra thick gloves, a mask. There are special bins labelled 'Toxic Chemo Waste'. What are they going to do to me? I feel sick.

'Hello, how are we today?' Why is he so cheerful?

Terror fills me. My mouth is dry. I want it all to go away. I want to bolt. I am sure that if I just get up now and walk out of the hospital, walk out of Armidale, head up the highway it will all just go away. Dean talks to him, I can't. He is filling three large syringes full of bright red chemical substance.

I could do it, I tell myself. I could just walk out that door and keep going. What is stopping me? If I go, I know it will all just go away. The cancer will disappear.

I am starting to cry. Dean is soothing me. I want to go, but he is making me stay. I don't want to stay. I don't want to do this. I am killing myself if I do this.

'I am just giving you an anti-nausea injection.' He has a good voice for a doctor. He makes you feel calm. 'I have to put it in very slowly or it has an unfortunate side effect.'

'Oh great', I manage to say, 'What would that be?'

'It can make your crotch itch.' We laugh and the tension is broken.

Looking at the red syringes, they appear menacing and evil. I am trying not to think of what they are. You are supposed to see chemo as a positive thing. I can't do that. I loathe it. The Doctor is slowly injecting them into a saline drip which is also running into my arm. Dean and the Doctor are talking. How can they speak so casually about things. What subjects? Politics, a new private hospital that is being built, football and of all things the weather. It annoys me. I am trying not to look at the injection but my own perverseness wants me to.

It's okay. The Lord is my Shepherd. I sit there mumbling inside my head, repeating phrases of Scripture, closing my eyes. The Lord is my shepherd; death is only a shadow; nothing can separate me from the love of God; when I face the waters you will be with me. Their chatter goes on around me and in me.

'There. That wasn't so bad was it?'

I leave with Dean, armed with anti-nausea pills. They haven't warned me against getting too close to a naked flame so I mustn't be flammable. Now I just wait for the side effects to hit me. The side effects that everyone is praying against.

3.00 p.m.

My urine is red. I am back in the spare room at the back of the house, close to the bathroom. So far not too bad. I have a burning sensation going through me like a bad fever.

Dean has just come home from the shops. He has just spent \$67 on a huge box of oranges and 20kg of carrots, as well as some other fruit and vegetables. He wants me to have plenty of orange juice and carrot juice.

Friday, 11th October

A restless night. Thank God for modern medicine. Without the Zofran tablets I am sure I would be more like a seasick seal than I already am.

Saturday, 12th October

Metal mouth. Everything tastes wrong. Water tastes like a bad chemical concoction from a science lab. I want to hurl. I don't want anyone to come near me. I just want to sit and stare at the spot on the wall. Inward I go, not ever wanting to come back.

later

All sorts of women. Old, young, hair, no hair, sick, well. All of them have or still are going through what I am. It is so unfair. I made myself get up and go to the hospital where they are having a Breast Cancer forum via satellite, with Westmead Hospital. Different doctors are speaking about their field of expertise. I feel so sad looking around the room. I'm on my own with you Lord and I am trying to praise you in the Red Sea. But it stinks.

later, later

Weepy and miserable, all I can see before me is the black hole of months of treatment. I don't want to do it. I want it to all stop NOW!

Will Dean get sick of it all and stop loving me? I am fed up and sick of myself, surely he must be sick of me too. The girls have told me today that they love me. I don't feel very lovable. In fact I feel like running under a truck. It's amazing how selfish you get about your own pain. I know I am being utterly selfish, but it is all too big for me.

8.00 p.m.

Jenny is here. She is just what I need. I am holding a spruce wood cross that she has just made me. It is a holding cross about 10cm in length. She has threaded a leather thong through it so I can wear it and hold it when I pray. As she was making it she prayed for me the whole time. She has been away for a few days at a nunnery for a retreat. Part of her retreat was to stay for twenty-four hours in a tree-house, with no communication with anyone, only God and the silence. She is telling John tonight that she is leaving him to go and become a nun. No not really.

I am crying on her shoulder and she is telling me it is okay. 'This thing is huge and you are so brave.' I don't feel brave. I had thought I was in the current, swimming. I am not. Until Thursday I had only reached the water's edge with my feet wet. Now I am only up to my ankles. There is a lot further to go. I don't want to do it. Lord hear my prayer. Cast me out of this pit. My life has stopped. I want my job back. I want to be well. I want my life back.

Sunday, 13th October

'It's the treatment that has really upset me. I feel like ending it all.' Dean is sitting with me quietly listening. He will take the children to church while Jenny comes to stay with me. 'I've fought depression before but nothing compares to this. I don't want to be in limbo, I don't want to be on the shelf. I have no sense of God. I know ending it all is selfish but to me at the moment it seems the most logical thing to do.' There, I have said it.

'You remember Geoff Bingham.' Dean reminds me of his favourite writer. 'He was a prisoner of war and later a missionary. Well he says that suicide is man's ultimate act of independence from God.'

I know he is right. 'I suppose he would know, having been through a Japanese POW camp. No-one could argue with that. Pray with me.' I haven't been able to pray on my own.

'Lord we pray against the temptation to despair . . .' His words go on soothing me. One thing I can rely on is that Dean will be there.

later

One sentence prayers are all I can manage.

Spurgeon wrote, ' . . . if God has not cut you off from mercy, there is no room for despair'.

" . . . For You, LORD, have not forsaken those who seek You."

Psalm 9:10

later, later

What is wrong with me? Why do I want to end it all?

Jenny is sitting with me. The others have gone to church.

'You know why I went to the nunnery. It was to see what it was about me that had allowed the cervical cancer last year, and the breakdown this year, to occur.' She continues to talk. 'I realised that I am really a task-oriented person. A high achiever. My whole self-worth is tied up with what I do.' Bells seem to be going off in my brain. I can relate to this. 'During my time away God really showed me that my sense of self-worth has to come from being His child, not from myself.' Wow, this is making sense to me.

'Jen, when I have felt exhausted all this year, I put it down to the fact that I was probably an adrenalin junkie. I thought maybe I had overdosed on adrenalin and now my body just wasn't making any more. This still didn't make me twig that something was wrong. I am the kind of person that always

gets sick on holidays when my body has a chance to stop. Or I will get sick but not realise it. I just get crankier and crankier and several days later it dawns on me. Oh, you're sick. That's why you are so cranky.' I pause. 'There must be something wrong with me that I don't stop when my body is telling me to. I just go and go.' I am amazed at my own stupidity. Sure I am a high achiever, but maybe my strengths in this area can also be a great weakness.

'It's all about God's grace', she adds. 'He loves us, not for what we achieve. He just loves us.'

Monday, 14th October

I'm better today. I found myself praying spontaneously in the shower this morning.

later

'You know mum, I have this amazing capacity just to lie here and stare at the wall.' Mum is fussing around me, making the bed. The rest of the house is quiet. I think the children must be back at school. 'I would be just happy to stare at the wall for ever.'

'Sounds like you're turning into your father', she replies. We both laugh. I think its the first time I have laughed for a while.

later, later

My bone scan and blood test have come back with good results. No further cancer is evident.

Sunday, 20th October

'I want to thank you all for your prayers during this time.' It is our farewell day at church. I am standing on the platform with Jenny. We are going to sing one more time together at

church, but I hope it won't be our last. She is my favourite person in the world to sing with. 'I know that this has been a hard time for all of you. We will miss you dearly. In the next little while we won't see much of each other but I am sure that when we are in heaven we will have an Armidale reunion. We will be able to catch up on each others' lives then.' They are all looking up at me, some smiling, some crying. 'Through this time Dean and I have had to lean on the Lord more than ever. God is doing heart surgery on me. When this time ends I know He will have pruned the tree and made me more into the image of Christ. I pray that He does that in your life too.'

Siobhan begins to strum her old acoustic guitar. Jenny's lovely alto voice rises from the ground up. As I join in, my soprano voice weaves its way with hers, joining, then soaring higher, weaving in and out. Together we make a lovely harmonic melody that rises heavenward as incense to the throne. I am no longer self-conscious. I shut my eyes and let the music lift me higher, unaware of all but you and me Lord. This is our prayer Lord, written by Jenny, based on the scriptures you have quickened to me:

Keep me as the apple of your eye
And hide me in the shadow of your wings

Keep me as the apple of your eye
And hide me in the shadow of your wings

O Saviour of those who seek refuge
Show thy steadfast love
O Saviour of those who seek refuge
Show thy steadfast love

I call upon Thee and you will answer me, Oh God
Incline your ear to me, hear my words, Oh Lord

Keep me as the apple of your eye
And hide me in the shadow of your wings

Keep me as the apple of your eye
And hide me in the shadow of your wings

Because I have made the Lord my refuge
And the most High God my habitation
He will give his angels charge over me
To guard all my ways

With long life he will satisfy me
With salvation he will adorn me, Oh God

Keep me as the apple of your eye
And hide me in the shadow of your wings

Keep me as the apple of your eye
And hide me in the shadow of your wings

Jenny Fitzpatrick, 'Hide Me', 16/10/96

Monday, 22nd October

Tessa's excited face screams with laughter through the bus window. She is going on her first school camp. It is the first time I have been to the school since that Wednesday. She is so excited and I think it will be good for her to go. Dean and I will take this opportunity to go away for a couple of days as well, leaving only the other two for mum to care for.

'Your lovely hair, where has it all gone?' One of the mothers in the class approaches me.

'I've had it cut, as I am going to lose it anyway.' She looks confused and horrified. I realise she doesn't know. 'Breast cancer.' She is shocked, mumbles something and then quickly walks away. Trish and Kaye stand with me as their children too are going on the camp. The bus starts up and the kids begin to shout. We wave. The last thing I see is Tessa's excited face crumpling into tears and mouthing the word 'mum'.

Tuesday, 23rd October

Dean and I are staying in Coffs Harbour for two days without the children. He really needs to relax as he is having chest

pains and a sore jaw from all the tension and stress. I think I can face the chemo one more time. I can't look too far ahead; just one more time.

God has been speaking to me about 'being'. My whole Christian life has always been about doing; about what I can do in the church. Now I can't do anything am I still a Christian? Of course I am, but my thinking has to change about this. God just wants me to 'be'. To be His child and to find value in that.

Friday, 25th October

I used to tease Dean about his hair being all over the bathroom. This time it's me. It is a death experience, but I know that I will be resurrected.

Dear Gillian,

Thanks so much for your last letter. I am finally feeling up to writing back and letting you know how we are all going. I had a mastectomy over a month ago now; I am healing up well and all in all going quite well. Yes, it was a huge shock. I never expected to get sick, and I still try and work out what it is within me that has made me susceptible to this disease. I've finally come to the conclusion that no one thing was the cause, even though there are some classic things about my personality that seem to be prominent in cancer patients. There are also things about me which are not. For example, I have been a vegetarian now for several years. We are not supposed to get cancer. Yet I have read about Linda McCartney who is also a vegetarian. She is fighting for her life right now, even going to have experimental and dangerous treatment as she has secondary cancer. I breastfed my children, had them when young and not a long-term pill user (only used it for two months, it didn't agree with me), haven't worked with toxic substances. These things should be in my favour but they haven't stopped me getting cancer. It doesn't make sense.

I know my stress levels must have been a big factor. I don't seem to have normal cut-off points to stress. I always strive to do more and am frustrated when I can't keep up my own high standards. It all looks very silly now in retrospect.

I am sticking to a fairly rigid Pritikin diet and enjoying it. It is not so different than my diet before, except now almost no dairy or fat, and I am consuming a lot more fruit. So many people have been praying for me all over Australia that I can't help feeling that prayer and being encouraged by it.

It has been interesting to look at a major crisis from this side of the fence, especially seeing what has helped me and what hasn't. Emotionally the most draining thing was the pressure to convince people that I wasn't going to keel over and die in the immediate future. I have an inner peace that I will be around for a long time and yes, I will beat this thing. I don't think this is denial. God has really reassured me of that. He is not asking me to prepare for heaven. And the bonds with Dean and the children are growing stronger rather than beginning to be released. I know God doesn't cause evil but He walks us through it and I feel His guidance and love more than ever.

The doctors have told me that if I have all the treatment I have a 60% chance of survival. Well I am just determined to be one of those 3 out of 5. Although all of my lymph nodes were affected there doesn't seem to be any secondary cancer in my body, apart from two micro metastatic lumps in my neck. I am hoping and praying that they will disappear with the chemo. As the tumour was oestrogen-receptive I am on an oestrogen blocker which will help as well, and essentially put me through an early menopause.

I have had one lot of chemo and have recovered well. I will have it every three weeks; sick for a week and good for two. So that is not so bad. I became very depressed about allowing the doctors to put all those chemicals into my body, which was

very hard on my mental state. You have to die to live really, and that is not easy to come to terms with.

Early in December we will be moving to Victoria which will be closer to family. The new church have said that if Dean needs to he can go on light duties for as long as I am unwell. Everything has worked out well and I feel very blessed. Mum is still here. She will stay with us until we move. She has been spectacular, really keeping the family going.

Dean has hardly left my side through all of this. He is so wonderful and keeps reassuring me that he still loves me. The children seem to be fine, although this must be the hardest thing they probably will ever have to face.

I think of you often, and miss you. I want to reassure you that I am alright.

Love,

Heather. xxxxx

Saturday, 26th October

'Have you been sick?' The little old Italian man at the greengrocer looks shocked. He hasn't seen me for a few weeks.

'Yes, I have cancer.' He looks really disturbed and upset. I am surprised. I must look sick now; different to how I used to look. My hair is moth-eaten. He is pressing upon me extra fruit and vegies to help my vitamin intake.

later

I had a fight with dad today. I know the fight wasn't over what we actually argued about. It was over the fact that he is upset that I am having chemo. He wants me to go the natural way. He doesn't understand that I can't risk it, for my family's

sake. I can't presume on God. God hasn't told me not to have the chemo. I won't take silly risks. Just one step at a time.

Monday, 29th October

I feel ugly. My hair is all over the house. I tried the wig on today. It didn't look right. Neither did the turban. No wonder I am depressed. I have cancer; I've just had surgery; I'm going through menopause complete with hot flushes 24 hours a day, depriving me of sleep; and my next chemo is in two days. Great. I feel like a coward.

later

Kate is upset that I am losing my hair. She just wants it all to stop. Me to. Stephen says nothing. Tessa is quite wild at the moment and hard to live with. How are we all going to handle this? All the changes that are, and are still coming. Will we be alright moving to Victoria? I will just have to trust God for friends and emotional stability when we move.

*"Hear a just cause, O LORD,
Attend to my cry;
Give ear to my prayer . . .
You have tested my heart; You have visited me in the night;
Uphold my steps in Your paths,
That my footsteps may not slip . . .
Show Your marvelous lovingkindness by Your right hand,
O You who save those who trust in You . . ."
As for me, I will see Your face in righteousness;
I shall be satisfied when I awake in Your likeness."
Psalm 17:1, 3, 5, 15*

To Mummy

I love you.

Where is a hug when it is needed?

With Tessa.

Wednesday, 30th October

Naked and ugly. My hair is coming out in clumps. Karen rang and asked if I would like her to make me a raffia wig (blue to match my eyes) with dread locks. She suggested I could glue a velcro patch to my bald head so I could affix the wig easily. Oh Plleeease!!

*"May He grant you according to your heart's desire,
And fulfill all your purpose.*

We will rejoice in your salvation . . .

Now I know that the LORD saves His anointed;

He will answer him from His holy heaven

With the saving strength of his right hand. "

Psalm 20:4-6

later

'Here I am.' Trish has just arrived with clippers in hand. I asked her to come over and give me a number three cut, as it is very depressing seeing hair all over the place.

'How is Jonathon?'

'Okay, but I left him at preschool. He has been so upset about you getting sick that I didn't think I should bring him while I do this.' Trish plugs in the clippers and begins the big snip.

'Yeh. The sight of me getting my head shaved would give him nightmares for years.'

'He is so clingy at the moment. He keeps asking me if I could get sick.'

'Poor little chap.' It feels weird. Hair is falling like leaves off a deciduous tree. *"But if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her"* (1 Corinthians 11:15). Oh well, not any more.

'It looks cute', she says handing me a mirror.

I look. Well they are definitely my eyes looking at me, but everything else is not right. There are great holes in my hairline where patches of hair have already come out from the roots.

'Rubbish. I look like someone from Chernobyl.'

'Don't be silly. It looks cute.'

'Cute compared to what?'

later

I am wearing my wig. It looks like a Beatle's hairstyle. A very bad one. Dean says I have to start going out with my wig on and getting used to it. Oh joy!

Thursday, 31st October

I am extremely excited. The two lumps in my neck have gone down. The chemo is working. The chemo went well today and I am feeling positive.

Saturday, 2nd November

'Well not many men can say they have done that to their wives.' I am completely bald now. I am sitting on a chair in the bathroom and Dean has just shaved off the 2mm left of my hair. It feels better than it falling out bit by bit. 'I always thought you would go bald before me. At least I don't look like I have the mange anymore.' I try to cheer myself up but it looks hideous. How can he stand to look at me?

I feel naked, humiliated, ugly and depressed. I am not so despairing as the last time I had chemo but I feel pretty bad. It's hard going from a very highly motivated person to a lump who can't even get out of bed. My mouth feels like the Sahara. No matter how much water I drink it is never enough. I can't do this again. Can't I just pretend that it will all go away?

Dearest Heather,

I just want you to know you are very much in our thoughts and prayers. We love you very much and know this trial won't last forever. Sis, I love you heaps.

Lots of love and hugs,

Phil, Sue, Jonathon and Nathan.

To Heather,

I hope you get better soon. I guess you are feeling pretty lousy at the moment, so we are sending you this card to try and cheer you up. You will get through.

Love from Jonathon.

PS Nathan has drawn a picture of the new foal.

Dearest Heather,

I pray God will 'Hide you in the shelter of His love'. Our love and prayers are with you.

Jo.

Sunday, 3rd November

'I think you had better get rid of the painkillers. I feel like taking all of them.' I talk and Dean listens. He doesn't disapprove of me when I say such things. Nor does he try to solve my problems. He just listens. I don't think I could even swallow a handful of pills at the moment as I am so nauseous. What is wrong with me? Why am I thinking such thoughts? I was always told that everybody who tries to commit suicide is totally selfish and trying to manipulate others in that act. That is not how I feel. I just want to escape. No fight left. Somehow I have to grab life by the throat and get on with it. But how? God hasn't miraculously healed me. I feel very alone. The Bible says I'm not alone but I feel alone. This is my prayer.

"O LORD my God, I cried out to You, And You healed me."

Psalm 30:2

I'm saved. Why aren't I healed?

Monday, 4th November

'You're bald. You just have to accept it.' A stranger's face talks to me in the mirror. It is an old face; one that I thought I wouldn't see for many years to come. It's not me. Where have I gone? I look away from the mirror deciding that if it doesn't help don't look. 'Pretend you are who you were and don't look anymore.' I don't feel comfortable in the wig so I will turban myself until further notice.

'I won't do the chemo anymore.' Lying in the darkness I can't tell if he is wearing an upset look or his patient look.

'It will be alright. Just don't think about it now.' He soothes.

'I mean it. I am not putting any more poison in my body. I can't face it again.' I am determined and angry. This is the first time in an age that I feel any kind of spark of life. I am a flat, plain, white nothing, but I won't have any more chemo. Dean tries to reason with me but I am fighting him now. 'No, no, no.' He can't make me have it. And then I stop. Quieting my inner fury I hear in the darkness a strange sound. It is the sound of pain. Through sobs and wrenching he clings to me. He manages to speak through gulps of tears.

'Fight, fight the cancer for me.' Encircling him in my arms it is now me who is soothing him like a distressed child. More distressed than I ever care to know again. It dawns on me that I have to hate the cancer more than the chemo. Images float through my mind of how empty the future must seem to him if I am not there.

In the darkness I listen to his steady breathing and feel at ease that for the next few hours at least he can be free from the torment I am putting him through. I think of the women from *The Hiding Place*. They looked like me because of an external enemy; they were victims of an evil war. Mine is an internal enemy, just as real. I think of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. How bitter and painful was His night of anguish. In all His humanity He faced death. I think I understand the human aspect of what He suffered, yet He said, *"Father, if it is*

Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done" (Luke 22:42). How hard it must have been to pray that prayer. How could He have not only prayed it, but acted on it? 'Father, I echo that prayer. Yes, take this cup from me, yet not my will but yours be done.' All this pain mustn't go to waste. God change me and use this time.

Wednesday, 6th November

Everybody else is in bed. I can't sleep so I am watching a late night movie. The opening scene shows a man with his wife on her deathbed. She looks to be in about her forties and is obviously dying of something like cancer. I am appalled at the rest of the movie. He actually gets on with his life and finds someone else. I don't want to be that first wife. I don't want to be a sad memory that grows dim in the minds of my husband and children. I want to be warm, living and breathing, here with them. I don't want them to have another life that I am no longer part of. I want to live.

Saturday, 9th November

As I wake this morning it is with great joy and I realise I am no longer feeling sick. I can hear the surf pounding the nearby beach. We are staying at a friend's holiday house near Coffs Harbour as we decided the children needed a change of scenery too. It has been ten days since the chemo. I also feel more positive. When I have the chemo I have no sense of God being with me. I become numb to normal, warm, human feelings and only feel very alone. Today feeling is creeping back into my self.

I am disappointed that God has not healed me. Yet a hundred years ago the most I could have hoped for (apart from a miracle) would have been a quick death. Chemotherapy must seem like a miracle to people of the last century. I can't dictate to

God how He must heal me. I just have to accept that every breath we take comes from Him. Thus every scientific breakthrough is because of that breath of God and therefore from Him.

later

It is nice to be out and about looking at the shops like a normal family. I am self-conscious about the headscarf but try hard not to think about it or notice people looking at me. After all, this is a kind of hippy beach area. People wear headscarves even when they have hair. I remember seeing a lady once when we were on holidays. She wore a big floppy hat but you could tell she had no hair underneath. No eyebrows or eyelashes either. Now it is me. I won't think of that. Just enjoy the moment.

later, later

'Mummy, everyone is looking at us.' We are in a large family restaurant and Tessa's big brown eyes look sadly at me. I can feel eyes on me but have wanted to ignore it. I have this overwhelming urge to rip off my head scarf and really give them something to look at. But I won't. Calm down and just enjoy the sun and the day.

later

Dean has been sad all day. Earlier we talked about the miscarriage I had years ago, but I think it is more than that. Dean and I thought we loved each other before, and we did. But I know we love each other far more deeply now even though I am bald and disfigured. This is both bitter and sweet.

'I am absolutely terrified of the next chemo.'

'I know. It's getting tough on all of us, making you go.' Dean grins. The sand is warm and comforting between my toes. I love the beach. The power of the ocean set in place by God's hand with all its tides; it is like the heartbeat of the earth.

'I have no resources within myself left to cope.'

'In other words you have nowhere left to go but to God.'

'Yeah, and that's scary. He may let me down.'

'Because people fail us we quite often see God through the image of other people.'

'I know, I know, but I don't want to do it, I have no fight left in me.'

'He will never leave you, nor forsake you.'

'Even though I forsake him constantly.'

We sit quietly on the beach and I ponder. My thoughts wash back and forth in rhythm with the tide. I know my own independence is a weakness as well as a strength. I try to battle on my own. Now I have no choice but to lean totally on God. Lord, thy will be done. I have no false crutches anymore; it is just me and God and I have to trust Him.

'Life will get better, you know, and like Job we will have a double portion. Our life will be the richer because of the things we have learnt through all this pain.'

'I hope so. God will definitely have beaten out of me my workaholic tendencies and I will take time to enjoy life along the way.'

The children come thundering up the beach, wet and happy. We gather our things and go back to the house, trailing our wet towels through the bush.

Tuesday, 12th November

The rhythm of the train meets my mood. I am on a journey and I know where the end will be. Life is bliss. I haven't felt this well for ages. Yesterday I felt like jumping out of my skin. We are on our way to Newcastle for a few days to stay with Steve and Christine. I finally feel like I have come to the end of all my own resources; and guess what? God has met me there. There is nothing of me left to fight with. All I end up doing is fighting Him in my circumstances. As we were leaving, mum said I had a great attitude. Well today I might have a good attitude. Mostly I don't. Today I just expect to live, that's all.

later

The lake meets the ocean in Swansea (part of Newcastle). It is good to see it all again. It has been five years since we left and we were only here for two and a half years. We arrived earlier and have just had dinner. Steve is his usual, placid self, and great fun. Christine is busy with the four children. It has been over five years since they had a trial similar to ours. I know I can talk to them about anything. They have been there before. Christine had to have brain surgery due to an haemangioma in her brain. Her fear wasn't that she would die, but that she would live with brain damage after the surgery.

'You know, during the weeks before the surgery I realised that for once in my life I could say anything I liked to anybody and they would excuse it as they would put it down to stress, because of the brain surgery.'

'You say anything you like anyway, Christine.' Steve banters back at her. We are in the dining room of their lovely beach house. They have an enormous family room out the back where all the children and various friends are congregating. Surf boards, surf skis, wetsuits, bicycles and skate boards offer a barrier and obstacle course to any adults that want to enter the kid zone. We quite happily stay in this part of the house, leaving them to it. We talk on and on. It is good to hear Dean talking to Steve. Steve is able to shed some wisdom and insight and just fellow understanding to what Dean has been through.

'You know, through it all', Christine adds, 'I have realised that God is into relationships. He is always wanting to have a deeper relationship with us. We get so busy with our lives yet He is always waiting in the wings. Sometimes He uses bad situations to get our attention, so that we will allow Him to enter our lives in a deeper way.'

'I can relate to this. I was like the pet white mouse running around its cage and jumping on its wheel. Around and around I went. I would have kept going too and never stopped. Now I have been flung off that wheel and I am lying in a heap in the corner of the cage. God is trying to show me a way out of the

cage I have built for myself. There is another life to live than the one I have been living.'

Wednesday, 13th November

"... O My Father, if this cup cannot pass away from Me unless I drink it, Your will be done."

Matthew 26:42

"... My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death... Take this cup away from Me; nevertheless, not what I will, but what You will."

Mark 14:34, 36

As I ponder these verses I remember that the cup is an Old Testament symbol of suffering and wrath. Jesus is mortified at the prospect of experiencing His Father's wrath and judgment. He is sorrowful unto death at the thought of it. His Father would no longer be supporting Him, but against Him.

I have to swallow a cup too. Yet it is not a cup of wrath, but a cup of suffering. God is not judging me or inflicting punishment on me. He is walking through the fire with me. My own suffering is minuscule compared to what Jesus suffered in his humanity. Yet somehow he said, *"... not what I will, but what you will"*. How did he say that? God help me to say that every day.

Thursday, 14th November

Dean is buying me clothes. I feel uncomfortable about this but it seems to make him happy. We are sitting in a shoe shop and he is enjoying getting the sales assistant to bring out all the cream shoes in the shop. It's a bit too festive for my mood. I don't want to try these expensive shoes on. It hits me that I don't want to spend all that money on shoes, as who will wear them when I am gone? Sometimes I forget I am sick and then it

all comes back to me, knocking me over like a water wall; briny waters sweeping me under.

later

Sitting on a bus I watch the world. They are all living in their happy little homes enjoying their happy little lives. Or are they? What pain lies behind anyone of these doors? I am so ignorant and naive of life.

It occurs to me that I must start looking at the chemo in a more positive way. Dean sees it as a miracle drug but I still see it as poison that will slowly kill me. Petrea King, in her book *Quest For Life*, states:

If you experience the treatment as a toxic, poisonous substance going into your body it is very likely to cause you more side effects than if you believe, you can see, this substance as liquid gold pouring its healing power into your body. We do have the power to choose what we hold in our minds.

P. King, Random House, Milsons Point, p. 125

'You have changed, you know.'

No, I didn't know.

'What do you mean?'

'You're more humble, more dependent on God, I suppose. I don't know. You just seem less prickly about things and not so feisty.'

I know he is right. My whole life up until this time has been one of proving myself. I always was motivated by guilt and low self-esteem. I know that if God healed me instantly I would be like the children of Israel after the Red Sea. I would rejoice but soon forget from whom my rescue came. Hopefully this way God will do a lasting work in me. As any artisan knows, anything of great worth takes time to create.

Sunday, 17th November

Why should something so glorious upset me so deeply? Dean and I are watching a video about a man who died and went to heaven but then came back miraculously. His description of heaven draws me in, but I don't want to be drawn in. The fight inside is great. An overwhelming desire comes to me to go and see what he has seen. To go and be with Jesus. But if I want to do that does that mean I am giving up on my family?

Noticing my tears Dean holds my hand and squeezes.

'I am in turmoil, wanting to go and wanting to stay.' I blurt it out. 'What is God asking me to do?'

'You are just going to have to leave that to the Lord. When any of us die, is none of our business.'

I know he is right.

later

We are on the train back to Armidale. It has been a good break. I hope mum has survived with the children. I have been writing letters and Christmas cards to everyone I know. I don't want them to worry. I want them to know I will be alright. It is only two weeks until we move. I am glad as it will mean I will have had my third dose of chemo.

"He asked life from You, and You gave it to him—

Length of days forever and ever."

Psalm 21:4

There are times when I think, 'I have faced death, I could face anything now'.

Other times I know this is not quite true. The will to live is a strong force to be reckoned with.

Monday, 18th November

Dear Heather,

The class asked a while ago if they could have a party for Tessa on her last day. They would like her to think it is a surprise so we won't advertise it too much.

Tessa seems to be overreacting to a few things at school lately. Often when we get to the bottom of social matters we discover that she sets herself up in particular situations or makes mountains out of molehills. She seems to think she is the victim when often she isn't. I talked to the class after she left on Friday afternoon and asked them to be tolerant of her behaviour because she has got a lot on her mind at the moment. They seemed to understand and I hope they put it into practice to make Tessa's last week a happy one.

Love,

Robyn.

Wednesday, 20th November

Mum is crying. She just heard that a friend of hers with bone cancer has died today. She desperately wanted to see her one last time. Instead she was here with me a thousand miles away. That chance is lost now. I want to be there when my children are the age of this woman's children (they are at university). Mum is so upset. I can't die before she does. There must be nothing worse than burying a child, whether they be infant or adult.

I don't want to be the dead first wife that is all too quickly a dimmer memory than before. I want to live. I don't want them to suffer because of me and then to get over me.

Thursday, 21st November

*". . . The Mighty One, will save;
He will rejoice over you with gladness,
He will quiet you with His love,
He will rejoice over you with singing."
Zephaniah 3:17*

Today you are here holding my hand, Lord. As the nurse gowns and gloves up. As the IV is inserted under my skin, as the saline drip begins, as the anti-nausea medicine is slowly seeping into my body, as the bright red chemo begins to flow. I don't think I will ever look at raspberry cordial or red creaming soda the same way again. Yet I sense your peace. I have remained prayerful; not wanting that horrible depression to conquer me again.

watershed

Monday, 25th November

Dear Heather,

A quick note to say thank you very much for your letter. I thought you sounded very brave and together (just what I would have expected of course). It was very reassuring to know all the details of your illness and treatment. The worst thing has been not knowing how you are. I do hope you are coping with the chemo. A friend of mine here, Caroline, is undergoing it at the moment for a lung tumour. She is on a similar diet to you. Phil and I are on the same sort of thing. Giving up dairy foods made us both feel marvellous. The kids are studying for exams and I am flat out with various projects. We have bought a little cottage by the sea and take possession on the 28th. I'll have to work a bit harder so we can afford furniture.

Love,

Gillian.

'Well, I've come through this chemo pretty well and without the depression I usually have.' Allan has come for a visit. It is great to see him—working, living and breathing—even though he has faced what I am facing.

'Did you suffer depression?' I ask. He looks into space purposefully.

'Did I suffer depression?' I realise it was a stupid question and regret asking it. 'The greatest revelation of my Christian walk came to me when I was at my lowest.' He talks on, even though it exposes him to the feelings I know he would rather not remember. I see in his own human weakness, a strength I wish for.

He goes on, 'I was out on my own, walking around a field. Devastated. Thinking of my wife, my four children and the child Janelle was carrying. I was thinking of their life without me. "Who would look after them if I died?" was all I could think about. God spoke to me in that moment and I will never forget it. It is something that has changed me forever. He asked me

whether I trusted Him to care for my family.’ He pauses thoughtfully.

‘Of course that was the bottom line. I wrestled with it.’ A peaceful look comes upon him as he goes on. ‘Then God showed me a glimpse of His nature as the Father, the archetypal Father of all humanity, of which all fathers that come after are only a dim reflection. I realised that, ultimately, He is their Father and whether I am here or not, He will father them.’ I sat pondering what he had just said. I am not ready to hear or consider it. No-one likes to feel redundant. He presses home the point, ‘God is father and mother to your children. Do you trust Him that He will look after them if you die?’

His challenge rings in my ears. I know my answer is ‘no’; I am ashamed to admit that. I glibly add, ‘Oh, I know they will be alright, but I don’t want them to go through the pain of losing me’. Pushing these challenges away, I find myself changing the subject away from me and this thing with its ramifications.

later

I am hurt by what she has just said. Sitting here in her lounge room drinking her tea, I can’t storm out and leave like I would wish. She is a good friend, but insensitive. The school has just rung her to pick up one of her children as they are vomiting. Her response is all I would have expected, but wished it wasn’t: ‘Well we don’t have sickness in this house; I’ll just command it to go’.

She is so hyper-faith. She believes we don’t get healed because we don’t have a revelation of healing. That is so unbiblical and makes God seem unfair. ‘Whoops, sorry, you just missed your healing because you didn’t get the revelation.’ Who is the one who gives revelation anyway? It’s not something we can do without God first giving it to us. We are leaving now, as she has to go. She drops me off and I trudge inside my own house, smouldering all the while.

Dean is home and I dump on him. ‘These hyper-faith preachers are so dishonest. They don’t have any unhealed people appearing on their shows as that would be bad for

publicity. When in fact it is dishonest.’ Dean agrees. I continue to pontificate. ‘Every minister knows that statistically there is a huge amount of people who go out for prayer and are not healed.’

He adds, ‘But that doesn’t stop us praying in hope and faith, as the Bible tells us to.’

‘She thinks I have no faith and that is why I am not healed. For goodness’ sake, people who aren’t even saved get healed. It is God’s way of grabbing their attention. Where is their so-called faith?’ I tirade on, ‘She sees no credence in anything I say or experience because to her I have missed it’.

I sit and fume. I don’t like feeling as if my whole life is of no value because, in some vague way of which I have no way of knowing, I have blown it. The insinuation that is always there; maybe you have sinned and God is judging you. Haven’t we all sinned? Don’t we all deserve death? That’s the whole point of why Jesus came, so we wouldn’t have to face judgment.

This letter was waiting for me when I got home:

Dear Heather,

I trust this card finds you well on the way to recovery. I have not rung as I consider you would have more than enough in phone calls. However, know that you are very much in my thoughts and prayers.

As I was lifting you before the Lord recently, I had a picture of a mother with her young baby. I believe it represented God and you. The picture relayed to me a complete contentment and peace in the baby because the mother had such love and devotion towards her baby. She nursed it with such tenderness and gazed upon it continually. It seemed that all else faded in comparison to what the mother felt and did for the baby and what the baby received from the mother because of it. In other words, their relationship to one another. I also sensed that this was only the beginning of an ongoing relationship; like the first fruits and the best is yet to come. Just as a mother yourself, you know that your relationship with

your children is far deeper now (and will continue to deepen) than it was when they were babies.

It is one of those pictures that, although simple, speaks volumes. So I pray that the Holy Spirit conveys that message to you and the days ahead will bring a new depth of relationship with your Lord that will far surpass all else. I have heard that you are off to Victoria and I hope this gets to you before you leave.

Much love and blessings upon you,

Val.

God is interested in relationships, and He is using this situation to get my attention. I am all ears, Lord.

“ . . . I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.”

John 10:10

later

‘I don’t know what I would do if this cancer appeared somewhere else. I can’t go through this treatment again.’ Mum and I are in the kitchen. She is doing what she has done ever since she arrived, cleaning and packing up the house for the move.

‘Don’t even think about it’, she says strongly.

I know I have to be more positive about the future, yet I have no motivation for anything. This bothers me. My mind freewheels. I think about my life. I have always been motivated by negative things: to be a good mum, because I think I am not; to be a good Christian, because I think I am never good enough. Well that’s just it. I am not good enough and never can be. That is why Jesus died for me. I have to find a way to be motivated by positives, rather than negatives.

later, later

‘I would understand that if I died, you remarried.’

‘We are married for life and that means eternal life. If, and I’m saying if, you died first there wouldn’t be another wife in heaven.’ Tears are coming again. They come so often along with the pain in my chest.

‘If you died first, I would keep true to you. But people do remarry and get on with their lives. I will understand if you do.’

‘Wigglesworth never remarried and General Booth covenanted with his wife on her deathbed that there would never be another. I feel the same way too.’

11.00 p.m.

I can’t sleep. The night is cool, and I lie with my eyes open in the darkness, seeing nothing. I am glad to hear Dean’s snores as it is a lot more pleasant than the noise he was making earlier. For an hour I witnessed the most horrific sight of my life. He really lost it. His sobbing was more painful to hear than even my own has ever been. There was nothing I could do to make it stop. It just had to spend itself. Now it has and he is silent apart from the heavy breathing of a deep sleep. He told me that two weeks ago he had a sense that I would go before he did. He doesn’t know if it is from God or not, but it was such a real thing to him that he has been bottling it up ever since. He has had the harder job. He has had to keep strong for me and the children. He hasn’t lost hope, just his nerve.

It is something that we both have to come to terms with together. One day we will be parted by death, as our wedding vows state. In the meantime we have to live, to really live. Not live to die, or live around my sickness, but really live. Neither of us expected to face these things at our age.

“With long life I will satisfy him, And show him my salvation.”

Psalms 91:16

"This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God . . ."

John 11:4

Thursday, 28th November

*"Turn Yourself to me, and have mercy on me,
For I am desolate and afflicted.
The troubles of my heart have enlarged;
Bring me out of my distresses!"
Psalm 25:16-17*

Today is Stephen's fourteenth birthday. Dean is taking him out with some of his friends tomorrow. I will try and make an effort for him today. None of us feels like being festive but maybe that is what we all need.

later

I have been reading *Quest for Life* by Petrea King. It is very helpful. She talks about psycho-immunology and states that the fear of the disease is what we must get rid of. Dean and I have faced our fear and must now get on with living. Losing each other, for us, is the worst that could happen. Now we must go on and really live and take hold of what we have.

She goes on to talk about stress and the fight-or-flight reflex. This quote means a lot to me:

All these examples [of stress] make us grit our teeth, tense our muscles or make our heart beat a little faster. If this is compounded with a poor self-image, depression, or feelings of failure or entrapment, then it's a very likely possibility our fight-or-flight response is permanently left on. In fact, we can become so accustomed to the stimulating effects of these stress hormones that, should they ever decrease, we might deliberately go out of our way to re-establish what to us has become the 'normal' equilibrium.

Many of us only 'feel alive' when our stress chemicals are flowing. In this way we educate our bodies to believe being stressed is 'normal'. It's rather like having a stimulating drug circulating in our bloodstream all the time . . . I realised that I 'thrived' in the midst of a crisis. If there wasn't one around, then sure enough I'd create one. One of the long-term effects of these chemicals and hormones circulating in our bloodstreams is the depression of our immune system's response.

Quest For Life, p. 125

This makes so much sense to me. I thought I was an adrenalin junkie, and I was. When there was no more adrenalin I couldn't even function. I was always motivated by a crisis. Even the simplest of things had to become a crisis for me to complete them.

I have always wondered why I have lacked peace in my life, after all, Christians are supposed to be peaceful. All this crises motivation does not lead to a peaceful existence. I have to retrain myself; I need new ways and strategies to function. Positive ways.

I have never been one to live for the moment. I either anticipate and plan for the future or regurgitate the past. Neither are very healthy and are fraught with anxiety and/or fear. I must learn to 'be' right now and live each day as it is.

My left arm is numb today and I feel unwell. I will just have good and bad days; that's just the way it is.

Friday, 29th November

The children have left school today. The girls both had class parties and Stephen is having a night out tonight with friends. All things here are coming to a close. I am excited for the future.

Sunday, 1st December

We are at church for the last time, saying our goodbyes. It was a great service. Jo led the singing again and it was a wonderful time of worship. We have only been gone a matter of weeks but I can see things have changed, and will continue to change without our influence here. That is just the nature of it. I am crying; some of my friends are crying. We have known and loved them for the last five years and it is painful to go. I have given up wondering why I can do this; why I can just leave? We are on loan to a congregation, on assignment, and then we leave. It amazes me how some people can live their whole lives in the one place. We don't have that privilege. Yet we do have the privilege of serving a group of people for a time, seeing their lives change by God's grace, and then it becomes someone else's turn to serve them. That is just the way it is. As we leave the car park I am glad the goodbyes are over as I am sad for the children. I am not going to let their sadness overwhelm me; there are a lot of positives to look forward to.

later

Everything I love in the world has just walked to the car, got in, said goodbye and driven down the road. Dean and the children will take three days to arrive in Victoria. Mum and I will follow by plane.

Monday, 2nd December

Our furniture has gone on the truck and the house is all empty. I have enjoyed living in this house but I won't miss it that much. Life goes on.

later

'I have had to re-evaluate everything about my life', Jenny speaks calmly. We are overlooking the lake on her property.

What a peaceful setting. Wild ducks, gorgeous parrots, beautiful flowering native plants everywhere, a lake with its own little island. How could anyone be stressed, coming home to this view everyday, I wonder.

'I mean how could one person be a housewife and go under, and another be Prime Minister and fly through life. It must be not what you do but how you do things.' She is right. Pondering what she is saying, I know that I have come to the same conclusions myself.

'Attitude has to have an effect', I concur. 'I have had time over the last few weeks to listen to my own head. A lot of rubbish has been circulating there and it really has shocked me. I have had a totally undisciplined thought-life. Left to itself my mind is morbid and pessimistic, fraught with worry and anxiety. It is really hard to turn it around but it is essential that I do it. The Bible talks about renewing your mind and I knew all that, or so I thought. Tell you what, it is amazing how almost dying makes you get your act together.'

She laughs. I won't see her again. She is one of my favourite people and I will miss her dearly. I take a last look around me while the sun sets and I walk away, remembering the words of Psalm 32:8-9:

*"I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go;
I will guide you with My eye.
Do not be like the horse or like the mule,
Which have no understanding,
Which must be harnessed with bit and bridle,
Else they will not come near you."*

Lord was I really like that? Was I really like a stubborn mule that you could not get to come near? Lord I am sorry. Guide me with your eye.

*"When you said, 'Seek My face,'
My heart said to You,
'Your face, LORD, I will seek.'"*
Psalm 27:8

Tuesday, 3rd December

'Thanks for coming.' Trish and Kaye and another friend Sue are seeing me off at the airport. Goodbyes take so long. I will miss them badly, but they are only a phone call away. I am crying now as the plane leaves. I can see them waving. My life here has gone. I hope to put behind me all the badness of the last few months.

"My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience."

James 1:2-3

"And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope."

Romans 5:3-4

Friday, 7th December

All the unpacking is done. I have done none of it really. The children are meeting new friends and settling in well. The church manse is comfortable and I think we will be happy here. Mum will stay until after my next cycle of chemo. Kate has borrowed the movie 'Beaches' from the video store. She keeps watching it over and over.

Saturday, 8th December

I feel like a freak. Tomorrow I have to face this new church, with no hair. I remember what Kaye told me a few weeks ago, 'You don't have to have hair to be beautiful. There are a lot of ugly people walking around with hair.' I try to comfort myself with this. I hope the head scarf doesn't slip.

Sunday, 9th December

Church went well. They are all very friendly and want to help. Yet, all my friends aren't here and that is something I will have to get used to. God encouraged me today not to be independent from Him, but to draw closer than ever as I have hardly any of my human props in this new situation. I have Dean, mum and the children, but not intimate girlfriends. I will just have to draw on Him more. His presence is refreshing.

Monday, 10th December

'Mrs Eaton.' My name is called and I go in.

'Just sit there will you.' He reads my file. I sit. It is taking a long time.

After ten minutes have passed and he has said no more to me, I get up and walk around. Finally he puts all the papers down and looks at me for the first time. Again I sit.

'Well you know that you have a very advanced disease.' Charming chap, this new doctor, I don't think.

'It is highly unlikely that you will be cured.' I hate him on sight now. This guy is a real sweetheart. Why did I decide to come here on my own? I should have asked Dean to come but I didn't.

'But the two small lumps in my neck have gone down', I manage to croak at him.

He looks surprised and decides he had better check out what I am saying. He lunges for my throat and has a good prod. He can't find anything and is surprised. 'Well after three cycles of chemo, that is a good response', he gruffly retorts.

'They went down after the first one', I say.

'Hmmm!' I have this feeling he doesn't believe me.

'How old are your children?'

'14, 12 and 9.'

'Well it is highly unlikely that you will see them grow up.' Oh, what a prince. No chance here of engendering false hope in a patient. He is giving me a death wish, pointing the

bone, treating me like a piece of meat. I am crying now and he is ignoring me. Here he is telling me I am a hopeless case and he has nothing more to say. I know these doctors don't take a course called 'Bedside Manner' at medical school, but surely they don't have to act totally inhuman. Are they too frightened of giving false hope? I get up to leave, determining never to see him again.

'By the way I think the treatment plan they have you on is too severe. We will be cutting back the cycles. We don't want to kill you with the chemo.' This worries me. Of course I want to get out of any chemo I can but they only say this to patients when they really are in a bad way. I leave, determined to go to Melbourne for the treatment. This country hick hospital only has him to offer and I won't subject myself to him again.

The receptionist calls me back. She is older and immediately I see a compassionate face. 'Before you go dear, why don't you just go down to the oncology department and meet Sally. She's the nurse there. She's lovely. She will look after you.' What is there to lose? I follow her directions to the oncology department.

As I walk the halls I am incensed by that man. Why should he change my reality? He is just guessing. He doesn't really know what is ahead for me. Only God knows that and he is not God. I will see my children married. I won't leave any of them before I know they can manage.

later

Well if I hadn't met Sally I would have opted to go to Melbourne for chemo. She was wonderful. Her job must be twice as hard after that doctor has seen a patient; combating the emotional torture he puts them through. She sat me down and very compassionately listened to me. Then she said, 'He may be right, but really we don't know. Even if he is right it doesn't mean that we can't manage the disease for a long time.' A long time. I like the sound of this.

'I know they must have to cut themselves off from people otherwise they would probably collapse under the stress of

their job, but do they have to put such a strong death suggestion into us when we are not strong enough to cope with it?' She diplomatically listened without commenting on the doctor. I suppose she must hear my speech many times from his patients.

I leave the hospital. It occurs to me that there is a fine line between denial and being positive. Maybe denial is easier. I had forgotten how sick I am until I saw the doctor. I am drowning.

Tuesday, 11th December

If I just stand here long enough surely something will come along and end it all. No more treatment, no more depression, no more pain, no more fighting. The road is quiet. No one comes along. I think of Dean and my lovely children. Walking off the road, I go home.

later

'I know it is totally selfish of me, but I don't think I can go on.' I have just told Dean that for a minute I wanted to be run over by a truck. But no truck came.

'Don't give into despair', he urges. 'Things have to get better. You're almost half way through the chemo now they have cut it back.' I know he is right. I head for the bedroom, wanting only to sleep and never wake up.

Dear Heather,

Hopefully I will be coming to see you soon as I am planning a trip to Adelaide. Barbara, Max and I are planning a trip back to Pt Lincoln to see the house we all grew up in. If we don't do it now one of us may drop dead, so we have promised to do it in the new year. The others are thinking of doing it by boat.

If I step overboard by accident the caravan is yours. I pity who ever has to fumble through all this junk.

Love,

Your Dad.

PS Do you miss grandad Tess? I miss you.

Friday, 14th December

Today my next chemo cycle is due. Dean and I are seeing an oncologist from Melbourne. The hospital here has visiting specialists come every week. As a public patient you just get whoever is sent. Today it is a woman. She is nice, but is reiterating to me much the same as the doctor did the other day.

‘What is your understanding of the disease?’ she asks.

‘I know I am high risk, but I always thought I could be cured.’

‘That is highly unlikely.’ It begins to sink in. Oh well, I say to myself, I just have to trust you Lord. There is nowhere else to go.

I am being shuffled into a room that had also doubled as a waiting room for the doctor. There are about ten others in here. Some are waiting for the doctor, and others like myself are being connected up to IV poles. Sally is here, hooking up a patient.

‘Heather, how did you go?’ Her smile and friendly demeanour instantly make me feel at ease.

‘Oh fine, you know’, I answer. ‘By the way, this is my husband Dean.’

‘Jump on the scales and we’ll weigh you first.’ I have lost five kilos since this all began. I don’t mind this so much. Really, I think I am vain after all.

We all sit here with our poles and our different coloured IV drips. The other patients are mostly older. They seem to placidly accept their treatment as if it is really a day out for

them. One woman seems younger, but it is hard to tell. She is wearing a head scarf similar to mine, but she has no eyebrows or eyelashes. Realisation hits me that I must look fairly similar. I have been ignoring the fact that my eyelashes and eyebrows are becoming increasingly thinner.

They are giving the chemo to me differently than in Armidale. No saline drip or anti-nausea medication first. They also give me different tablets and a mouth ulcer wash. Sally walks around chatting to different ones, helping the time to go by quickly.

‘Sally’, I call her over, ‘there is a kind of burning smell in this hospital, which makes me feel sick.’

‘I can’t smell it’, she says. ‘Never mind, it could just be a reaction to all this.’ She gestures around her. ‘It’s funny, you know. People like to see me in here, but after their treatment, I’m not so popular anymore. If I see one of them down the street, they never want to talk. Just the sight of me makes them want to be sick. It’s all association.’ We both laugh. ‘I suppose we can put it down to another unfortunate side-effect from the chemo.’

later

I ponder as I lie alone in my room. The children are watching TV and it rattles down the walls toward me. The question, who am I? occurs to me. Am I just like all those others I saw today, just a patient, a sick person? Surely that is not all God has intended for me; just to fade away and die. Have I achieved all I am going to? Is my life so far all that there is and will be? It can’t be. There must be more. I have to throw myself on your mercy, Lord. The desires of my heart are to mother my children, to love my husband, to serve God, to see my children married, to be a grandmother, to retire with Dean and live to a ripe old age with him. I am greedy for life.

*“Delight yourself also in the LORD,
And He shall give you the desires of your heart.”*

*Commit your way to the LORD,
Trust also in Him,
And He shall bring it to pass.”
Psalm 37:4-5*

Sunday, 16th December

Lord, I sense your presence as she is praying over me. A woman I have never seen before, from the church, has come to pray for me. I am lying in a bed of sweat as my body tries to deal with the poison that is in it. I am past caring what anyone thinks. She is mentioning the river of your peace, Lord. It makes me remember the story of the Red Sea. Yes Lord I will praise you in the sea. Although what the doctors tell me is not good I feel more positive than ever. You are not preparing me to die, but to live. I believe you will heal me. You wouldn't have allowed the doctor to find this thing when she did if you had it in mind to take me Lord.

Wednesday, 19th December

The chemo has gone well and mum has left for home. Dean's mum is coming before Christmas to stay until the end of the school holidays. I am filling up on all the vitamins and fresh food I can keep down. I only have six more weeks of chemo left. I am trying to read a book on Christian meditation, although my concentration is not very good. It talks about waiting on God, not just calling on God.

I have no doubt that I will be clear of this cancer and be healed.

“He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform.”

Romans 4:20-21

Sunday, 23rd December

Who am I? The person I was has gone, who is left? Everything about who I am that was Christian has gone. I am filled with anxiety. I visualise the inside of my black brain. All I can see of the future is a black hole and me diving headfirst into it. Into oblivion. What is the point in anything? Why are any of us here? We are born, we breed and we die. What is the point of that? Like laboratory mice we run around bumping into things. Is this the point of our existence? A cruel joke.

Monday, 24th December

I am me again. Today when I woke I knew I was back. I don't know where I have been but today I am back. Perhaps now it will seem like Christmas. At least ten times yesterday I wanted to burst into tears at church. I shouldn't have gone as I was not fit to be seen in public. Dean tells me I have to allow for the fact that I am also going through menopause. Is menopause a pause, or a dead end?

Dear Heather, Dean and family,

Your Christmas card was the first one for the season, along with your good news that you are coping well with all the treatment. Well, in light of all that has happened, I suppose this means you really were always meant to be a Princess. Dean would never be so heartless now as to ever have you wash a dish or sweep the floors again (would you Dean?). And the kids? Well, that's easy. Every time they go to drop something on the floor or fight (I'm sure yours must do it too) just give them that 'I'm going to faint' look, to keep them on their toes. In your letter you said you hadn't felt well and were exhausted but the holiday in July improved things. Well, the answer's there. Life should always feel like a holiday. Do only the things that make you feel happy and relaxed. This is your turn and your time to be the receiver. You have done your bit and now

Jesus wants you to be happy and in a holiday state of mind. A change was in order and a change of address is a good start. You are probably unpacking boxes as I write. No let me rephrase that. You are instructing the family to unpack, merely pointing your finger in the direction where the contents are to be placed.

Take it easy and have a great Christmas. We are praying for you.

Love ya heaps, and hope to see you soon.

Your cousin,

Ruth.

Christmas Day

'When I am in the midst of all this doubt and depression, when I doubt that even God exists, why don't I doubt our relationship?' The children woke us up early and we have had the usual present opening ritual. Now they are playing quietly, with Dean's mum looking after them. We are spending some time alone talking in our bedroom. 'I mean, it would make sense for me to no longer believe that God led us together, but I don't doubt our relationship. It is like it is the last bastion of reality. All else has gone. It is the only thing left that I can believe in at those times.' Without condemnation he listens, not trying to solve my problems, but just hearing me out. 'Do you think we love each other too much?' I ask.

'No I don't think that.' He smiles. 'God made us to love each other, we are an expression of God's love toward each other. You just want another thing to feel guilty about.' This man, who knows me better than anyone else, can say this to me and I won't take offence. I know he is right. 'It's your independent nature', he goes on. 'You are trying too hard to believe. That in itself is your search for God.' I listen as he continues to talk. I love to hear him talk. He is so together and stable and that is what I need right now more than

anything. To hear sane speech when my own head can only speak the ramblings of a mad women. 'Many of the desert fathers expressed the same doubt, you know. You're not the first one to express disbelief and an angst within.'

'Why don't people talk about it then? I don't think I have even read much about it. Maybe I haven't really looked for something to read on it, as before it wouldn't have been relevant to my world.'

As Christians, do we only show in public our positive happy sides, never our lost and lonely souls which have given over to despair? Today I know who I am. I am me again. Who knows what I will be tomorrow when I wake up? Today I know that all the insanity in my brain is hormone-related and due to the chemicals that are in my body. But when I am in the middle of it, it is all so real, more real than the logic I see today.

I am getting used to it here in Victoria. At first I hated it.

8.00 p.m.

Christmas lunch was a disaster. We had booked into a restaurant so we wouldn't have to cook. We left after three hours without any lunch. The poor kids were very disappointed.

Friday, 27th December

Everyone in Australia must know I am breast-less. I will be able to give show-and-tell seminars soon. I have pain in my armpit and numbness on my left side. I hope it is alright. Only two more doses of chemo. At times I can't think, read or even watch TV. Yet I managed to read this today:

"And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us."

Sunday, 29th December

“. . . even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body.”

Romans 8:23

It is all foreign to me here. I feel displaced. The faces are all different. I recognise nothing. Lord, just as I long for heaven to escape this hell on earth, I realise that you also long for me to come to heaven. You long for your creation to be redeemed. Yet I don't want to leave my husband and children. Help me come to a point where I can accept that you will look after them if I go. I think I have a small lump on my right side.

I need an answer to the whole radiotherapy problem. Things I have read tell me that it is not beneficial for pre-menopausal women. How will Dean cope with the children while I am away for six weeks? I can come home on weekends. Will we be alright? Will our family be alright after all this?

*“I waited patiently for the LORD;
And He inclined to me,
And heard my cry.*

*He also brought me up out of a horrible pit,
Out of the miry clay,
And set my feet upon a rock,
And established my steps.”*

Psalm 40:1-2

Dear Heather,

Let us know when the chemo is over so we can rejoice with you. It's been an ordeal and we will be very glad when you start getting fit again. Like all of us who have had to face that we do have a body, from now on begins a learning process. You can't take health for granted anymore, so you study and become body conscious. Like Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:27 you make your body your slave. It begins a revelation about

yourself. If you have to become health conscious then get excited about it. Set a goal to become the prettiest, most vivacious thirty-four year old girl in Australia. Why not? Go for it.

Love,

Dad.

PS Love to little brown eyes (Tessa), and to Kate who is becoming a lady, and to Steve the Karate Kid, and to Dean the big-time Pastor who dreams visions. Make it big.

How long have I been here? Do I really care? Can someone drown themselves in the bath? That spot on the tiles hasn't moved since we have been here. Can't I be like Alice and just shrink, be sucked down the plughole, down the drain. My life is down the drain and out to sea. Looking at the spot helps me not to think. No thoughts are better than the torturous thoughts that plague me day and night. Thoughts of death, thoughts of annihilation. Thoughts of loss and displacement. How can there be a God? If He is there, He is not interested in me. Therefore when we die there is nothing. Just black. Look at the spot. Don't think. The sponge has sunk to the bottom. I have sunk to the depths of the darkest, coldest ocean, living with weird sea creatures. I am saturated with grief, and I can't hold any more. Let me sink, and let me die.

Do the good die young?
If so, I wish I was bad.
Am I bad or am I good?
Is evil good or good evil?
Pain is just pain.
In it there is no virtue.

*“For you cast me into the deep,
Into the heart of the seas,
And the floods surrounded me;
All Your billows and Your waves passed over me . . .
The waters surrounded me, to my soul;*

*The deep closed around me;
Weeds were wrapped around my head.”
Jonah 2:3-5*

Wednesday, 15th January

I am sick of writing in this journal. Day by day it is all the same. An emotional roller-coaster. I swing from despair to total disbelief, with a glimpse of God in between. I can't sleep, for as soon as I drop off, I have an enormous hot flush. Dean doesn't know whether to fry an egg on my head or to stand clear as I may spontaneously combust.

later

Someone convinced me to come to a cancer support group today. Apparently you live longer if you attend one. I wish I hadn't. They are showing us a video of a cancer support group in which the members all have metastasised breast cancer. According to the definition given, that is me. They were all given 18 months to 2 years to live. It took one of the group dying for the others to really open up to each other about their own lives and deaths. One member is saying that she sees the whole exercise as negative. She doesn't come back. I agree with her. I feel flat. All these women are just talking about death and I hate it. I am going home to bed. To my favourite spot on the wall.

'Mum, could you die?'

Kate is chewing her bottom lip and I am not sure what to say. They tell us that it is better to be honest with children even if you think you are trying to save them from pain.

'Yes, I could die. But I have a two out of three chance of living. Therefore I am going to live.' She cries in my arms. I whisper words of comfort to her. Words that come from the Bible. God, I hope you are real, I hope what I am saying is true.

later

It would be easier to die for a cause. The converse is that we live now for a cause. Yet is it enough to keep me going? Some days I have no sense of God. The part of me that knows God and that I am His child, has gone. We see God through the filter of our lives. My vision of God is being clouded by externals. Doesn't it say somewhere, we see through a glass darkly? My dark glass is keeping me from God's love. My emotions are affecting my theology. Suffering is part of theology. I cannot divorce the two. What must I do? Should I just confess and choose to believe? Then will my emotions fall into line?

later

Alone in my room I think. I don't want to go and interact with the family. They are just noise and I am intolerant of them. All I think of is death and dying, death and dying. Death is like skydiving. I certainly wouldn't choose to do either. Would my parachute work? If I jump will He catch me or will He let me fall into oblivion? Is heaven real? Is it really like the children in the Narnian Chronicles, going through the wardrobe door? I always believed before, or did I? It is easy to believe in heaven when you are not going there just yet.

Sunday, 19th January

Instead of running home straight after the service, I stay. Claustrophobic is one sensation but also I need to escape from myself. Her demeanour impresses me. She radiates something. Dawn is just one of the new people I am meeting here in this church. She is telling me that she has died many times and been revived since she was a little girl, due to her bad asthma.

'How do you cope with that?' I ask.

'I stay ready for heaven. I know I could go anytime, so I stay prepared.' I am shocked. I am not like her; I fear going. I know I shouldn't but I fear God; I fear He will let me down. Is He really there?

25th January

Lord when will your people breathe?

Lord let it come

We're waiting on you Lord

Make a way out of no way.

We know you will come through.

Song from 'Riverdance', Tyrone Productions

Oh tortured head of mine. Obsessively I think and think. What is the point to anyone's existence? Why do I constantly feel like I am sinking in an ocean with only a plank to hang on to. My whole world has disintegrated and I am dying, drowning in a bitter sea of tears.

If this was ever granted, I would rest

My head beneath thine, while thy healing hands

Close-covered both my eyes beside thy breast,

Pressing the brain, which too much thought expands

Back to its proper size again, and smoothing

Distortion down till every nerve had soothing,

And all lay quiet, happy and suppressed.

*'The Guardian Angel', Selections from the Works of Robert Browning,
John Murray, London, 1923, p. 189*

This is me. To think is to be tortured. My head is a torture chamber. I am going mad.

I belong nowhere. I am a nomad. Where is my home? It is not here. There is nothing familiar here. Why did we come? To keep sane I just repeat one-sentence prayers, like a chanting mantra. 'Lord heal me; Give me peace; Save me from this pit;

let me sleep.' Obsessively I ramble on, hoping there is a God who hears.

In the midst of this torture, moments of sanity break in. Seeming to override my own maze of thoughts the knowledge comes that God, the Creator of the universe, is in charge of my small life. I pray that this knowledge will stay with me and overcome the blackness.

'I want to walk out that door and never come back.' Steve Sharp has rung. I tell him what I am too afraid to tell anyone else, 'I want to just leave home and go away and hide. Or go and see my brother and my father. If I just leave here it will go away.'

'You sound just like my wife when she is hormonal', he answers. I realise the menopause is making me crazy. Lord keep me sane.

I am sick of hearing people say that, when they have faced a near-death experience or a life-threatening illness, how much they appreciate life. For me it is just one long day after another. When will these days end?

The morning dew glistens in the grass;

A white moth floats above and drinks

From a leaf star drop.

Spring approaches.

The world begins to awaken from deep cold.

I am not ready for winter to pass.

My soul yearns for the short days,

The dark cold of winter

Where I can wrap myself in layers of clothing,
stay indoors, keep out the cold.

The brightness and cheerfulness of spring
comes too suddenly upon me.

My soul looks for a cave

in which to hibernate for summer.

Deep inside myself I find such a place
And dwell lonely and confused.

Jenny Fitzpatrick, 'Lonely & Confused', 1996

Monday, 3rd February

Dear Heather,

I will be back with you soon. This has been a terrible shock to you and to us all. I want to tell you how proud I am of you and how wonderfully you have coped with everything. It has been no small pill to swallow (no pun intended). I know there are better days ahead for you and this nightmare will pass. As always I am praying for you.

All my love,

Mum.

To Mum,

I love you and I just want you to know that you are the best mum anyone could ever have.

Love,

Kate.

When people are observing a tragedy they often don't know what to do or say. So they do what they can; bring food. Food, the great panacea of all ills. This is the case here. Since we arrived nearly two months ago, lasagnes, casseroles and quiches have knocked on the door and frog-marched themselves to the freezer. Somehow they seem to have bred in there as there always seems to be a never-ending supply. It's a bit like the loaves and fishes really.

February

What I am seeing now is something that I have been waiting for. My wife and I have made the trip to Melbourne to see about the radiotherapy treatment. Sitting in the waiting room of the Peter MacCallum Hospital, Heather seethes. This is the first real glimpse of the anger that I had so long expected. She, who I have loved for eighteen years, has at times a propensity for bouts of anger. Yet through all the last months her anger has been quietly dormant as she almost insipidly has taken the punishment of treatment in her body. Now I see something different. She is silent, yet every pore in her body seems ready to spring into an angry tirade that would stretch forth and release an avalanche of lava, that has somehow been dammed-up until now. The Doctor comes in. Heather gives terse answers and I know that she is holding it all in with everything she has. 'Please don't explode here', I mentally say to her, hoping she will hold it together. We are shuffled off to another floor to see yet more specialists. I am thankful that she didn't unleash on the poor, unsuspecting doctor. It is quite a terrifying sight to see her in full flight.

I don't want to leave my family for six weeks. I don't want to have high-powered rays zapping my body. They are drawing all over my torso in blue texta as I lie on a metal bed. Now they are photographing my bare top. Oh, when will all this humiliation end? I am just a lump of disfigured meat. Now they are tattooing markers on my torso so they can line up the radiation machine. I always said I would never get a tattoo. At least it doesn't say 'Mother'. Do these rays they're giving me, in themselves, cause cancer? Some say they do. I still don't know if it is the right thing to do. I am angry that I haven't been healed; angry that I didn't die, and now I have to live and fight. He hasn't killed me or made me well. He has left me in limbo making me trust. It is so unfair. Why can't all this suffering end? It would be much easier to die but He makes me stay. I could die well if I had the chance. Instead I have to live.

some days later

Having just read what I last wrote I am amazed at the change that now has come. Yes, I have been angry with God. I am better now, having admitted it. Because I was angry I refused for a time to admit that He even existed. But you can't be angry forever with someone that, in your mind, doesn't exist. Sooner or later, that anger has to come out. Have I been giving supreme devotion to my illness? Have I made it an idol?

"Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the Lord drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided . . ."

Exodus 14:21

later

I used to constantly worry about what others thought of me. It is interesting to analyse this. When I worry about such things, who is the centre of my own attention? It is not God, but myself. I am putting myself at the centre of my universe. One thing I no longer care about is what people think of me. If they don't like it, so what? They need to get a life.

later

'Are you with the Camp Quality group?'

Confused, I look at her, wondering what she is yelling at me for. I am looking in a shop in a nearby town. She sees my confusion and raises her voice even more.

'Are you with the Camp Quality group?' Everyone is looking at me but trying not to. I leave, not answering her loud cries. I must look like a freak. I wonder if she asks everyone who wears a hat or a scarf on their head that question.

later

Why did we come here? Should we have stayed in Armidale, or gone back to Adelaide where we were all born? I feel like a

nomad that belongs nowhere. God, help me belong. I have heard it said that patients with Alzheimer's are always packing their bags, and disappearing. Their family finds them, later, trying to return home to where they were born. Maybe I have lost my mind and, like them, want to go back home. I want some roots.

*"I am worn out with groaning;
all night long I flood my bed with weeping
and drench my couch with tears."*

Psalm 6:6

*"I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint.
My heart has turned to wax;
it has melted away within me."*

Psalm 22:14

later, later

I spend a lot of time just staring. Can't concentrate to read or watch TV. Just lie in the bath for hours thinking of nothing. This is better than thinking of something. In a way, it is most comforting to become a blank, a blob of emptiness. Lately I have taken a little time to notice my surroundings. There is no-one I can really talk to here. No-one who could cope with what I have to say. No-one that I could safely bare all to. Except for Dean. But I think I am slowly driving him to insanity, telling him all of it. I don't know how much more he can take. A few friends from Armidale have rung. That has helped.

later

Helen has dropped in. She is a young lady in her twenties who is now in remission from lymphoma. Carrying an envelope of photos with her she sits down. 'I wanted to show you these.' Before me, she spreads out an array of photos. They are all of her in various stages of treatment; with hair, thinning

hair, no hair and hair regrowing. I am amazed that she has shared this with me. We talk on and she encourages me to keep going. I learn that she is in remission and has been for three years. Yet the 'why?' question still plagues me.

7th February

Dear Heather,

Thinking of you always. Here is a small gift to remind you there is always hope. God is in control, that never changes. We miss you guys heaps and continue to hold you up in prayer. Dean, I want to say thank you for your ministry and friendship. You are a very genuine person and are greatly missed.

With much love,

Trish.

20th February

The door bell has just rung. I am home alone as I have been throughout the day since the children started school. Getting up from bed I shuffle to the door. A lovely kind face greets me. It is Bertha, an American lady in her seventies. She is handing me a cake she has made. She doesn't stay as she is walking home from the town. I think about how far it is. It must be a two or three kilometre round trip. I can't even walk to the door without almost keeling over, and she can walk kilometres.

27th February

Today is my birthday. I have no hair and I am all alone in this hostel with a bunch of sick old people. Dean came and stayed with me for the first two days but he had to go back last night to the children and my mum. He wanted to stay but I made him

go. I wish I hadn't now. But I will be home with them on Friday evening. Never mind, it is only just another day.

later

'Heather, come on down.'

She is so nice and kind that it makes me almost pleased to come in and see her. Jenny is the radiologist that has been treating me so far this week. When she chats away I no longer think about what the harmful rays could be doing to me. She makes me feel like I am going for a trip to the solarium rather than having some lifesaving medical treatment. I walk down the corridor in my very attractive-looking hospital gown. She looks at my chart and exclaims, 'It's your birthday today. Oh it must be tough being in here on your birthday.' I was feeling alright until she said this.

'Yes, it is tough. I miss them all and I am here and they are there.'

'Oh, it's alright.' I am trying to be brave but the tears are coming now. I hadn't missed them until she spoke, sounding so sympathetic and sorry for me. She chats on, and I try not to cry. Before I know it the treatment is over and I begin to leave.

'Just hang on a minute.' Jenny makes me wait. She soon returns laughing with a helium clown-faced balloon. I think it is ridiculous but it does make me laugh. 'Happy Birthday.'

I leave with a smile on my face, grateful that I won't have to go home by train.

later

I have just arrived back to my room. There are several cards and a present from my brother.

Dear Heather,

Happy Birthday. We love you heaps and wish we could be with you. Please be happy and strong and hold to the truth that this won't last forever. We love you and are thinking of you

and praying constantly. I can't wait until all your treatment is over. Then you can start again, regaining your health and vitality. Be happy and value your life as we value you. You are a wonderful person and we miss you very much.

All my love,

Phil.

PS If wishes could make you well you would be jumping out of your skin with energy and wellbeing. Keep your chin up.

Lots of love,

Sue.

Dear Gillian,

I am in Melbourne staying in a hostel run by some nuns. This is my first week of radiation treatment. There are probably fifty other cancer patients staying here, but I seem to be the youngest by about forty years. I will be here for several weeks, going home on the weekends, and travelling to and from Melbourne by bus (takes about three and a half hours each way). Each day the patients without their own transport are picked up by a Red Cross car and taken to and from the hospital. Amazingly the cars are driven by volunteers, and I am very grateful that they give up their time for us. The hostel was built after the Second World War to house war widows. I can't imagine living here then, especially if you had any children, as it would have been a tight squeeze. We have one room bedsitters and communal bathrooms. It is alright for me as I will only be here for such a short time but I imagine how it would have been for those women back then. The rooms are comfortable but getting a bit old. Even so, I am grateful for it as it means I don't have to find a hotel, which would be a lot more expensive.

So far I have had two radiation treatments. The staff at the hospital are wonderful. They greet you with a smile and chat

to help the time pass as you are getting zapped. Firstly they lie you on a sliding bed and then they put heavy lead shields in place on the machine that radiates you. They draw all over you with blue texta, which they prefer you not to wash off, and then spend some time lining up the machine with the six small tattoos which they gave me at an earlier visit. They have to check and recheck as there is a risk that they will accidentally cook a part of me that they shouldn't; like my heart for instance. This procedure is repeated three times on three different parts of my left side. All the time they are chatting and making me feel at ease. It really isn't so bad.

I am starting to feel much better physically, so I hope to master the public transport system from here and see a bit of Melbourne. You know the kind of thing: shops, churches, old buildings, gardens and, of course, the cinema. Physically I am getting better. The only drawback is that I am going through menopause. Hot flushes, dizziness and irrational mood swings can make life interesting. I am coming to Adelaide in May so I hope to see you then. There is a great need inside me to make a trip to Adelaide. I just need to see some familiar places and familiar people, family etc. I feel quite rootless at the moment, nomadic. You never know, I might even have some hair by then.

Love, Heather.

PS How is Caroline doing with her treatment?

2.00 a.m.

I can't sleep. My head is making plans for the future. I keep thinking of things I want to do in life. It's wonderful.

3rd March

'When do you think you will do more tests?' The doctor I am seeing today seems young. He looks to be in his early thirties.

'There really is no need, at this stage. You yourself have said that you are feeling well.'

'Is that the gauge?' This surprises me. 'Some women with breast cancer have never felt unwell.'

'Further tests have their risks too.'

'What risks?' I ask myself. I don't like hearing that word. 'When will I be in remission?'

'We can't say. Not until we concur that there is no active disease.'

I want a tick of approval but it looks like I am not going to get it. He has asked me to take my file down to radiotherapy for him. Silly man.

I am now sitting in the hospital cafeteria with a cup of decaf, reading the file. It's quite thick but I have a half an hour before my radiation treatment.

The first letter was from the Sydney specialist that I saw on October the 2nd to the surgeon Dr Waters:

. . . As you say she is a lovely lady and unfortunately one in a rather dire situation with this wretched breast cancer . . . she has developed some palpable glands . . . and I suspect that her disease is fairly aggressively developing and that unfortunately I think whatever one does the medium to long term outlook is going to be pretty hopeless, although I have obviously not expressed that to the Eaton's today as I think we need to support them through this difficult period. Some people, as we have all seen, do better than others . . . I think if she does settle down . . . assuming no metastasis . . . and using the glands . . . as a marker. I fear however, that things are going to go downhill. I do hope I am wrong for this lovely lady and her young family. The other complicating feature . . . is that they are planning to move to Victoria . . . it is not ideal in the sense of switching in midstream . . . They've promised to keep in touch and if there is anything we can do . . . I would be delighted to move heaven and earth to do so . . . I thank you for asking me to see Mrs Eaton and hope that things go a little better

than one might think, although I guess we all have a certain feeling of negativity regarding this poor young lady's outlook.

(signed.)

I am amazed at the humanity of this letter. This is not the way doctors tend to come across. They often sound harsh and mechanical, and appear that they never get emotionally involved. He sounds very sad for me.

Dr Nevin wrote:

. . . she has two marble size supra clavicular nodes . . . indicating metastatic disease.

and later:

On examination the marble sized nodes . . . have now become impalpable, indicating that they seem to be responding . . .

and later:

. . . her previously enlarged . . . lymph nodes remain impalpable.

After we moved, the new doctor wrote this:

. . . there was a very small palpable abnormality in the left supraclavicular fossa, which measures around 0.5cm . . . In view of this . . . Mrs Eaton has metastatic and incurable disease. This is not surprising after reviewing the original pathology . . . I think it reasonable to continue to treat her aggressively and to try and prolong her disease-free interval.

I am not upset; I realise how limited the medical profession is. They are just guessing, feeling their way in the dark. Basically, I have to trust in God. Where else can I go?

Dearest Heather,

Thank you so much for your letter. I had been hoping I would hear from you with your new address as I have been thinking of you so much and wondering how you were getting on with the chemo and so on. It sounds as if you are coping well, although it must be a bit lonely being in Melbourne on your own. We have a little cottage by the sea, so why don't you come and stay; anytime? We could go down there for a few days and walk on the beach, etc. We would love to have you if you would come.

It must have been very hard moving while you were having treatment and I can understand you feeling so uprooted. And having to go through menopause too. That really is a bit much.

My friend Caroline was diagnosed as having lung cancer last July. She has been through chemo and is now going through radiotherapy. The tumour has almost disappeared so everyone is very optimistic. Luckily she hasn't lost her hair. I am sending you this card with the mermaids to inspire your hair to grow back. They look so beautiful, I hope you like it. Keep cheerful and keep in touch.

Love,

Gillian.

4th March

Dearest Heather,

I have been thinking about you a lot lately and praying. I felt prompted to send you this card. How are you, and what stage is the treatment up to? I can't begin to comprehend the battle, nor the effect it must have on your soul as much as your body. But I do pray that you would know the Father's love as He carries you, my dear friend.

Life is much the same here in Armidale, though settling down to a gentle blur, not a mad rush. My love and prayers are with you.

Jo.

6th March

I have opted for the train today. That way I can come and go as I please, rather than wait for the Red Cross car. It feels so good to be walking everywhere. I love the feel of my legs, which for so long were scarcely able to carry me around the house. Everything is alive here. It is early autumn in Melbourne and very pleasant weather. Nothing like I expected. You know the adage; four seasons in one day. I love looking at people. People who are off to work, going shopping, doing their thing. They have a life. The suburbs zoom past as we head for the city. It is a bit of a shock seeing so many people and so many houses when I have been isolated for so long. But I love it. It makes me feel alive.

Walking to the hospital from the train is pleasant. More people, cars, trams, the smell of exhaust, all remind me of where I grew up. Melbourne has a lot of similarities to Adelaide. Beautiful gardens and majestic buildings.

As I enter through the doors to the Peter MacCallum Hospital and head for the lift to the basement, I feel good. Jenny is waiting for me to go into the treatment room. We have talked a lot over the last few days. Amazingly, I have discovered that she is a Christian. I think God definitely arranged for her to be here for me. I am astounded by this. Maybe He is interested in me personally after all.

My treatment is over and I leave. For a second I am checked by the sight of two children who are here waiting, one who is only a toddler. Both are bald and sit playing quietly while

their mothers watch on. Quickly I leave, not wanting to think about that. How do the staff cope, working here; seeing so many people sick all the time?

The warm day greets me. I head for the tram. Today I will take a walk on the beach at St Kilda.

7th March

To My True Love Heather,

I love you more than words can express. As the years go by our love grows stronger, deeper, with more understanding and larger than life itself. Thank you darling for all the years of devoted, loving friendship. Thank you for the many wonderful memories we have of being bound together by a love which has exceeded all of my expectations. Thank you for sharing your joys, sorrows, dreams, desires and most inner thoughts with me. It is a rare thing in this world to experience a sense that love transcends all our yearnings. You give to me that kind of love. I truly love you.

Forever in your love on our 16th Wedding Anniversary,

Dean.

To my darling husband,

I want you to know how much I love you, and appreciate your love for me. Over the last six months our love has been tested and stretched further than ever before. When I have needed you most you have been there. There hasn't been one moment when I have not received from you the love that I have needed. You fulfil me completely, love me totally and never give up on me. I love you and want to be all that and more, to you. Today I remember the vows we made to each other sixteen years ago:

*For better, for worse,
For richer, for poorer,
In sickness and in health,
Until we are parted by death,
Before God, I pledge you my faithfulness.*

I will love you and be faithful to you forever.

*Your wife and love,
Heather.*

Lord have mercy on us. We don't want to lose each other.

*Home is where the heart is
And my heart is with you.*

*Fidelity does not with time fade
Nor from the object jade,
But embraces tempest, never shaken,
Held firm and braced by love,
Constancy daily proved.*

*The marriage of souls does not come easily,
But when two knit in mind, heart and body
With the pulse of life and blood,
As the grafting of a limb to another,
It cannot be torn asunder.*

*Love alters not through tempest
Nor fades with age past,
But remains set and steadfast,
To the target ever fixed,
Fire and life intermixed.*

*Death's shadow palls and bears
And tempts us to fall and despair,
Yet love transcends all fear, and grasps life
With four hands and runs on
To the dawn in the east where the new day begins.*

*Even in death the throng holds strong,
Cords of gentleness bind ever long,*

For betwixt the two comes one
Of greater than the single unit alone.
Two souls, two minds, one heart abode.

Home is where my heart is,
And my heart is your heart.
Beating together in unison,
From dawn past to eternity and on,
For you I long, I long.

H. Eaton, 'Heart', 1997

10th March

I am back with the family. Here in my faithful bed I have escaped. Whenever the news is on I turn the TV over. I no longer want to know about the sufferings of others. I used to get really cut up over others, but now I just don't want to know. Before all this I believed that yes, Christians do suffer. That was before I actually had to do some suffering myself. Now I no longer have it all sorted out. I am still angry with God and find myself rationalising Him away. I have 'what ifs' going through my head all the time. The chaos of our lives. It is all in flux, no rhyme or reason. All I see before me is a black hole. No future, just a black hole.

later

I have just read about a pastor's family in Sydney. They had a car accident and two of their youngest daughters were killed while another sustained serious neck injuries. Also I read about an aid worker in Zaire. One daughter shot dead, one daughter died of a brain tumour, another daughter in hospital fighting for her life due to a brain tumour. I feel I have nothing to say about my pathetic suffering in light of this.

11th March

Armed with a list of questions I tackle the doctor.

'Last week I read my file.' He looks bemused. 'I know they

have told me I am considered incurable, and now I have read it, but is this really the case?'

It dawns on me that even though they have spelled it out so clearly I am still fighting against the prognosis. How clear do they have to be for me to get it?

In a clinical fashion he replies, 'Statistically your chances of being here in five years are 50-60%. If you can get through the first five years you will have more chance of getting to ten years.' He continues his speech as if it is well rehearsed. 'Unfortunately, you had all the worst risk factors: large tumour, lymph nodes all positive, pre-menopausal.' I nod.

'If I had a recurrence, in your view, how long would I live?'

'Twelve months.'

'Well, what are the most likely places that a secondary cancer will pop up?' I am alright. I am talking about this logically, no tears, my breathing is steady.

'For breast cancer patients, statistically they are most likely to develop a secondary in the brain, bones, liver or lung. Symptoms you should look for are any persistent pain, coughing or breathlessness, or headaches with vomiting.' He goes on, 'But most women who are going to have a recurrence usually do so in the first two years. Getting through the first two years is a good goal to aim for.'

'So you're not going to give me some kind of approval rating. What do I do, go home and sit around like a bomb waiting to go off?'

'Put it this way. Make sure you get on with your life. Go and do all those things you have always wanted to do. Don't leave it too late.'

I head back for the street. The hustle and bustle of the city is soothing. It helps me to feel alive, and part of the human race who are getting on with their lives. I don't know if I can settle back down in the small town we now live in. Dean and the children like it and are settled, but it all seems foreign to me. I don't want it to be the last place where I live. I want to run away.

later

I have come to the conclusion that it is okay to want to live. Life is a gift from God and I should desire it. On the weekend Dean and I went to see some old friends, Ian and Jan, who are now living in a nearby town. Ian was telling me of two women, both with cancer. The one with the worst prognosis (six months) was fighting to live and be healed. Alternatively, the other woman had a very good prognosis, but she promptly rolled over and died. It struck me then that I have been rolling over and dying for weeks. I have had a death wish. Most of the time I am still thinking about death and dying, rather than fighting to live. Somehow, I have opened the door in my brain which I swore I would leave shut. I must fight on. I have the best incentive program to keep fighting: Dean and the children. Surely this must motivate me. Yet at times it's not enough. I must resist the morbidity of my own brain. I mustn't roll over and die. So many people have prayed for me, surely there is one righteous among them whom God will hear.

Dear Dean,

Thank you for your letter telling us of your new church and address. I was sorry to hear of Heather's condition. It must have come as a shock to you both. It takes time to adjust, accept and yet continue to have faith in His purposes, but I sense this is the way it has happened. Do give her our special love in Christ and she will be in our prayers, quietly. . . My sister Eileen, 83 and a very godly woman (she was a missionary in PNG), has myeloma, which is cancer of the bones. She has had some distressing experiences, yet is facing it all quietly, being at peace, though under heavy treatment. She is a fine witness. Cancer in its various forms seems to be prevalent today amongst so many we know. I am sure you both have received much through your fellowship together. We don't have to justify God or ourselves over the matters of illness.

In His great love,

Geoff.

20th March

Goat Face. Menopause is making my face hairy. Apparently this is unusual for my age. Great.

26th March

Stop thinking and analysing, and just accept. I know my mind is working against me—it is a torture chamber—but I fear putting it on the shelf, in case I become a totally mindless Christian. Yet I know I have to have the faith of a child. All my mind does is give me questions. No answers, just infinite questions.

Dear Heather,

Hi. Well, everytime I write I forget to post it and the news is all outdated. Mum has kept me in touch with how you are all going. It is nearly the end of March and Easter will soon be here. Almost a year since dad left us all.

Bruce and I pray for you, Heather; for Him to hold you, strengthen you and encourage you during your treatment in Melbourne. It is great to hear that your hair is growing back. You have been an incredibly brave person in many ways. Yet I realise that, like all of us, you probably don't feel that way. Often we feel no-one understands how we really feel. The greatest thing which you know is that God knows exactly what amount of pain we feel (in all areas). When I understood that, it made me feel so much better about what I experienced and am experiencing.

One week later. Another week gone with good intentions to post. I keep missing you on the phone, Heather, every time mum rings. She says you are resting. I guess one day you will feel like talking. Not a day goes by that we don't pray for you, Heather, and the family. I can't wait to see you in May.

Love, Alynn.

I am not so depressed today. It is alright to want to live. I want to live for Dean and the children and not roll over and die. God must have something significant for me to do. Surely life so far is not all I will achieve. I need a purpose and a point.

Today I am swimming in the river. Just today.

31st March

Dear Heather,

I have been thinking of you so much lately and wondering how you are going. I have decided that before I go back to work at the shop I would write . . . Lots of people enquire about you at the shop. We all continue to think and pray for you. I hope that things are going fairly well for you at present.

My special love to you, my old friend and workmate. I still miss you heaps.

Love, Margie.

I have been reading a book dad gave me on how our attitudes affect our health. I have to stop reading it as every time I have a negative thought I worry about how it is affecting my health. I can't renew my mind myself.

7th April

'God is in control, I know things are going to work out.'

Mum is trying to encourage me. The problem is that most of the time I don't believe He is in control. Why is my life such a mess? I am becoming a deist, as I see Him as only distant and impersonal. I suppose this is an improvement on not believing at all.

later

'Thank you for all you've done for me.' I am lying on the bed, while Jenny is lining me up with the machine, and checking

measurements. She has been so comforting and I have really looked forward to seeing her each day.

'You know, according to my roster, I was supposed to have been moved to another machine two weeks ago.' She continues checking and rechecking. 'I wasn't happy about this as I really felt I needed to be here for you. I prayed about it and they haven't moved me yet.' She smiles.

'Thank you', I whisper. Tears reach the corners of my eyes and run down my temples. I can't move to wipe them. I lie still as the machine does its work, pondering on why I ever doubt. Isaiah 43:2 comes to mind:

*“. . . When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned.
Nor shall the flame scorch you.”*

later

That was my last treatment. I think I am ready now to settle down and start a life. I will just have to find things to fill my life; all those things I wanted to do when working and studying but didn't have the time.

later

'How did you cope being the carer for your husband?' I am having lunch with Kaye's sister Bev, who lives in Melbourne.

'Well, you just do. Of course, it's hard watching them suffer. But you have to be strong for them to keep them going.'

'I am a little worried about Dean. When I go home on weekends he is a bit distant from me. He seems a little too wrapped up in his work. He has always been a workaholic but, I don't know. He's just distant that's all. I am afraid he is burning out on me.'

'I think you need to be telling him this.'

'I know, I have been totally self-absorbed and depressed. I rely on his good nature too much. He just seems withdrawn.'

We talk on and on. She is a great help. As I articulate the way I see things, I am finding that my connection with God improves and, in part, my faith is being restored.

10.00 p.m.

He is still distant. The house is quiet and all are asleep except for us.

'Do you feel like you need some space from me?'

He looks absolutely shocked, 'What a thing to say'.

'Well, you seem distant, like you want to be on your own.'

'What I want is for you to stop disappearing all the time. I don't know whether you are coming or going.'

'So you are not burning out on me?'

'No, of course not. You obviously don't know how hard it has been. I just get used to you being home and then you are off again. I suppose to cope I have just shut down a bit.'

'Makes a change. You're the one that's always left me waiting at home for you as you have gallivanted all over the place.' I am glad we are sorting this out. He is not burning out on me.

10th April

Dear Jenny,

How are you all going?

I have just come back from Melbourne after finishing seven weeks of radiotherapy. I am quite tired and sore at the moment, as I have what feels like a severe case of sunburnt chest and armpit. I am glad it is over, although I really did enjoy playing tourist in Melbourne. I went to the Art Gallery, many cathedrals, shops, the State Library, historical sights, botanic gardens and the cinemas. Dean and the children have had enough of me gallivanting around and are glad I am home. Home. That's a funny thought. It doesn't feel like home yet. The people are very nice and supportive, but real friendships take time to develop. I have really missed all of you back in Armidale terribly.

I still have hardly any hair (looks like a number three cut) and so I still wear the scarfs. I am finished with the doctors for

now, but will have check-ups every three months. They haven't run more tests and don't appear to want to as they consider I have an incurable disease. Yet they are happy with my progress. Sometimes I think they are just as much in the dark as I am. They say I will be in remission when I have no symptoms. Due to the fact that I didn't really have symptoms in the first place, I have no comfort in their words. All I can do is trust in the Lord that this insidious disease will not resurface.

I want to see my children grow up. Facing the prospect of separation from my family all the time does nothing for my frame of mind. It is easier to live in denial, as then I can make short and mid term plans for my life which gives me a reason to get up in the morning. I suppose you are not dying until you are really dying, and I just have to somehow get on with it and rebuild a life for myself. I may go overseas this year with Dean, to Japan.

Dean is very happy in the church here and enjoying the ministry immensely. They are very genuine people who are easy to please and have accepted us very well.

Stephen and Kate are doing well at high school, with a pleasing report for their first term. They are thoroughly enjoying the youth group in the church here, which has about fifty kids attending. Spiritually they have had a renewing time which pleases me as the last year has been hard on all of us. They have been to several large youth rallies and a camp which have all been special times of growth for them. Tessa is still finding life a little hard. She went to a friend's house the other day (they live on a farm) and her dad took her for a ride on a motorbike. When she came home the first thing she said to me was, 'He went so fast that my face was left behind. I told him he was the motorbike rider from Hell.' I was slightly embarrassed but he just thought she was her mother's daughter.

Dean and I will go to Adelaide in May for a Pastors' conference. This will be a good time to catch up with old friends and

family. In fact, I have a new brother-in-law who I have never met.

Take care,

Heather.

May

Armidale

Dear Heather,

Amidst the storm of life you are bobbing on the waves as unsinkable as a lifebuoy. Going up and down but never under for more than a flash. I praise God for your courage and faith in the Lord who has redeemed us and promises that all things work together for good . . .

John and I really believe God has pulled us out of ministry here for now. He has told us to relax and not to panic and to wait and see what He will do . . . He very clearly gave me a vision of a harvest field which John and I will harvest together, clearly saying, 'come and work for me'. Haven't got a clue what it is all about, like where, when, etc. It's a very unsettling place to be, but on the other hand exciting. Who knows what the Lord will bring? Personally, I am a real, 'like to keep everything just the way it is', kind of person. John is a 'drop it all and head for Africa' kind of guy. So, understandably, for us to move together on this is requiring huge volumes of negotiation, self-control and reliance on God.

I miss you heaps. I haven't written any songs, but I have written this letter. The last letter I wrote was back in 1988 to my mum, telling her I was having a baby. Hoping to see you soon and don't worry about anything, just feel it.

Love,

Jenny.

1st May

'Is the Bible the index of all truth or not?'

I am pondering what Dean has just said. He is challenging the congregation about the Bible. There was a time when this would never have even been a question for me. Now I don't know what to think. For months it hasn't been that for me. If the Bible isn't the index of all truth what is? Our own minds?

Am I creating God in the image I want, as the Greeks did? Are the characteristics I attribute to God real (whatever that is), or a figment of my own imagination? If my mind is the index of all truth then I am lost. My own subjectivity changes daily and thus fails me. If there are no absolutes in the world we are lost. If there are absolutes I no longer have to worry about the big questions of life. I just have to line things up with the Bible and be secure in that. Alternatively, relying on my own subjectivity, feelings and emotions can be a one-way trip down a sewer drain.

2nd May

Calvinist or Postmodernist? Which one am I today?

My mind is very confusing to live with. Today the questions are washing over me, yet no real answers come.

How can we really know God while on this earth? We can know about Him, but we can't really know Him until we are in heaven, as we see Him through our own finite minds. Does He really speak to us today? Is the Bible the index of all truth? For the answers to these questions I know I can't rely on my own subjectivity. We think we can know who God is, but does this change for all of us by what baggage we bring with us to God; and also according to our emotions and moods? Therefore I have a huge question mark dangling before me. I hesitate to go to Him, as aspects of His nature may be just figments of my imagination. If this is true and I can't trust the Bible then there is no hope. The Bible is either true in its entirety or not at all. He either has complete control over my

life or not. Now I am vacillating into Calvinism. God becomes sovereign and I become fatalistic.

later

‘Your skin is remarkable.’ I am having a check up with the Oncology Specialist from Melbourne. He is pleased, but not showing it too much. ‘I would have thought your skin would be a lot sorer and redder than it is. Usually by this stage it looks quite awful.’

‘I am worried about being so tired. Honestly I could go to sleep right this minute.’ He scribbles down some notes on my chart.

‘Look, that’s fine,’ he says. ‘If you’re still this tired in three months time, we’ll worry about it then.’ He leads me out of his office. ‘Sally, will you organise for Mrs Eaton to have the usual tests before she sees me next time.’

‘Things are looking good,’ she smiles at me reassuringly as I leave to go.

“And suddenly a great tempest arose on the sea, so that the boat was covered with the waves . . . But He said to them, ‘Why are you fearful, O you of little faith?’ Then He arose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm.”

Matthew 8:24–26

later

I haven’t been depressed for two whole weeks. Two days was my record before. This is a huge breakthrough. I remember Lyn in Armidale saying that during the treatment was the worst time, and after that I would be better mentally. She was right. I have been thinking about my choleric/melancholy personality. When I was younger I always felt like I was two different people in one. In a way this is true. But through this time I have been letting my melancholy side take over. I have to let the choleric side rise up and help me fight to live.

5th May

The drive up the hill takes me to the past. A day I regret badly. I knew that when we left Adelaide eight or nine years ago I would never see her again, only her monument. The flowers are always blooming here, perhaps it is the great fertiliser the gardener secretly puts on the garden. The circle of life. It is not easy to find where she is now, among the rows and rows, and rows of similar homes for the dead. Tombstones all with carefully thought out words and remembrances from those still with a future. I never came to her funeral. A sense of responsibility stopped me. Thinking that Dean and the children couldn’t manage if I came. I should have been here when she died, not just for the funeral but for the time leading up to her death. She was my last living grandparent; and many good gifts she has given to all her grandchildren genetically. Mother of five, grandmother of twenty, and great grandmother to at least twenty more. Finally, I see it. McIntyre, Laurel Kathleen (nee Wright). Quite alone here, I place the daffodils alongside some other tributes from one of the many that remember her dearly. I used to see graveyards as a sentimental but peaceful place. Reading the various headstones used to make me feel melancholy but not sad. Now it is too much. The sadness is overwhelming. All these people, a huge acreage of graves, have gone from their families. How many tears do these headstones represent? I hate this place.

I think of the last time I saw her. She was still fit and well then, before the strokes. My father and my cousins have told me of her last days and how it was with her. She died peacefully at the end. It is not her death that I want to think about but her kind, unassuming ways. Her quiet influence on all of us who were part of her clan. Her undemonstrative love, care and concern that we all knew and felt. We are not used to death. Generations ago we would be more used to it. Everything about our society encourages us to avoid all thought of it and prolong life. Here in the shadow of the tall trees that have witnessed many burials, I can no longer avoid it. It is part of life and comes to us all. When I die, I want to

be placed here, near to where my grandmother's remains are laid.

later

Old bluestone buildings like fossilised giants. Trees, old as the buildings, protecting, housing and nurturing the vast amount of possums and bird life. The smell of earth and eucalyptus, wind and warmth. My first school, and the small row of shops that I would have walked past or visited every day. The old post office which is now a night time restaurant called 'Stamps'. The Baptist church where I first attended Sunday school. My street, my childhood home. The old people I knew in this street have gone and been replaced with younger, newer families. The old people next door, and next to that the doctor's house still looking magnificent and resplendent with its huge hedge frontage. The plum trees, still lining the nearby roads, of which I used to pick and eat. The memorial park with all its magnificent Morton Bay fig trees, big enough for a child to make into a mansion treehouse. The creek, winding, babbling through this original village until much later it passes on to become part of other drains and creeks meeting the ocean. It is still flowing from the brown hill, endlessly flanked by rows of willows keeping guard like palm trees over an oasis. Sometimes deep enough to swim in if you snuck into the private school grounds, without the boarders or the caretaker finding you. My heart delights that it is all still here. The ground firm and hard beneath me. No waves or dizziness, just firm, stable ground. Memories flood of happier times, carefree times, times of eternal promise.

May 7th

Dean and I have just come back from a week in Adelaide, where we attended a Ministers' conference. It was really good medicine. I just needed to see that it was all still there. For a whole week I had a familiar landscape surrounding me; places

I know so well from my earlier life. Seeing old friends and relatives was like a healing tonic, with no bitter aftertaste. The street I grew up in, containing my childhood home, which looked better than ever with recent restorations completed. The park I would have played in nearly every day of my childhood, still there, with all the familiar trees that supplied me with ample places for hiding and playing. Everything was green and beautiful just as I have dreamed many times over the last months. I can cope here now, in Victoria, knowing that Adelaide is still there and not so far away.

12th May

Dear Pastor Ian,

I am writing to you because I heard at the conference about your illness. I know at this time you are probably feeling quite numb and overwhelmed by the immensity of your situation. Eight months ago I had a similar prognosis as yourself. Leaving my three children motherless and my husband a widower was something I had never before contemplated.

I began this journey with a positive attitude, thinking that God obviously wants to get my attention and that I will make the best of it. Unfortunately, this didn't last long. I have suffered all the characteristic stages of grief. By far the worst was depression, which was heightened by the chemotherapy and a hidden anger at God. I had no idea I was angry at God until one day it all came out. This surprised me as I have never been hyper-faith in my beliefs and have always agreed that yes, Christians do suffer, because we live in a fallen world. This was all fine in theory, but when I actually had to suffer, my true colours seem to show. I didn't feel that any of us had deserved this. In my anger and depression I found myself denying God's existence, which ultimately led me to even greater despair.

Also, I had to come to terms with my own mortality, realising that deep down I feared death. This is perhaps shameful for a Christian to admit. Yet, unless we are faced with imminent departure from this world, I believe we think that we will always be here; secure in the world we know. I know now that if it came to it I could die with peace. Death is still the unknown and therefore fearful, but God gave me a picture that has helped me. Death is like skydiving. It is the last thing I would choose to do. Yet, unlike the skydiver, I don't even have to jump. I just have to lean in the general direction of the door (Jesus is the door) and he will suck me up in an almighty updraught, not only catching me, but sending me upward and onward to God. I know that I could do that now, and trust Him with those I love. But until that time, I know it is important for me to have a purpose and a point to my life. Something like this makes you re-evaluate your life, seeing what is important and cutting off the rest.

I can't say when the change happened in me and I came out of the deep depression I had been wallowing in for months, but I do know that I couldn't do it of myself. There was nothing left of my own coping resources. Only God could drag me out of the pit I had found myself in. I was afraid that I had to live through all the treatment but also too scared to die. As Jesus said in the garden, "Not my will but yours be done". We don't have the strength to pray that prayer, but abandoning ourselves to His will is all we can do.

With whatever is before you, Ian, you can do it in Him. I am the biggest coward in Australia and somehow I have faced it and come through to the other side. I know God will be there for you, even when you don't sense Him, even when all your senses are completely numb. He will do a deep work in your heart that you won't see now but will in time. He is not distant, even though for most of it I have felt so far from Him. I have come through the other side, not necessarily feeling closer to Him, but stronger in faith in Him.

A great comfort for me has been the prayers of the church on my behalf. It is wonderful to belong to the body of Christ, who will be there in times of great need. This was hard at first to accept, as in the ministry it is you who are usually being a strength for someone else.

With much compassion and prayers,

Heather.

June

Dear Gillian,

It was a pity that we missed you when we were in Adelaide, but thanks so much for your card of the Tower Bridge. I'll be seeing it for myself next year. Life has started to settle down for me now, here in Victoria. It is a small town, surrounded by dairy farms and fruit orchards. The children have settled into school and made friends, a process which is only beginning for me.

My treatment is over for now and all seems to be going well. I will have more tests in July to see how I am really going. Since I finished the radiotherapy I haven't been as depressed as I was. Occasionally I have a bad day when I just want to run away from home. I don't know where I would go. (It's a bit like when I was in labour. I thought if I could just leave the hospital and go home the pain would stop. If I run away then I imagine the cancer will just disappear.) Most of the time I feel confident that I will beat this thing and see my children grow up. The doctors have told me that if I get another secondary they will only give me a year to live. But then they are not always right and they don't allow for the God factor. I know I can't manipulate God to do what I want but I will trust Him regardless, as I know that one day I will be in a better place and will understand more fully all that has gone on here on

earth. A friend of mine who has had cancer put it like this. He said that in a way we are the lucky ones. We have been made to face the reality of our own mortality. To many of us it is just a theory until it is too late and thus we do not have the chance to prepare for death; to live the life we have fully, knowing that it is limited. I am endeavouring to leave nothing undone and most importantly nothing unsaid. Why does it take almost dying for us to do this? We should always live this way. At times I am still quite frustrated, feeling cut-off in my prime. I imagine it is how one feels when they retire, but I am too young to retire; feeling as if there is no purpose for living. I think part of it is an over-romantic view of my own worth as far as what I want to achieve in my life. On the other hand I have had so many things I wanted to do but couldn't as I was sidetracked by study and work. Now I can begin to tackle them. Anyway, enough of my diatribe.

The church here is very supportive and Dean is enjoying himself immensely.

By the way, thank you for the beautiful mermaid card. It must have been inspiring my hair to grow back as it is now about 2cm long.

I love you heaps,

Heather.

25th June

Dear Sue,

I have written to you at your parents' address in the hope that they still live there and can forward this letter on to you. Last time I heard from you was when I was living in Newcastle and you sent me a lovely picture of your son Henry. He must be about eight by now. Since then we have lived in Armidale NSW for five years, and now we are living in Victoria. Dean

is pastoring a church in a town about two hours north of Melbourne.

I woke up this morning with a strong urge to write to you. In September last year I was diagnosed with breast cancer . . . I don't know if I have ever really told you what you and your family meant to me. I think it takes something like what I have gone through lately to say things we probably should have said a long time ago. I know I was an awkward kind of kid . . . Your friendship and the stability of your parents' home was like an oasis to me for those years that we knew each other at school.

When I was about seventeen I became a Christian. I finally found what I had been searching for in my life; that ultimate security that is not just found here on earth but for eternity. I even remembered some of those awful Religious Instruction lessons that a certain teacher used to give us at school. For the first time I understood them . . . What I am trying to say is that I want to thank you and your mother for the kindness you showed to me when I was very mixed up. With some of the things I did I am amazed that your parents didn't ban you from seeing me altogether. They really did show me the love of Christ and were a true example of a stable Christian home. Obviously this was part of the reason I was drawn to you.

Time marches on . . . my strongest desire is to see my children grow up and establish their own families. Dean has been wonderful throughout this whole trial. He is everything a person could ever need in a crisis. I pray daily that God will spare our family any more grief. I am ready to go into eternity if that is the case but I don't want those I love to suffer any more.

I suppose when one is faced with their own mortality, parts of their life that they feel were left incomplete seem to pop up. You were a friend to me when I wasn't the easiest person to be

friends with. For that I thank you. I do hope this letter reaches you somehow.

Your old school pal,

Heather Eaton (McIntyre).

July

Dear Heather,

I am so glad you wrote to me. I read your letter with a mixture of shock and happiness. I had to read it three times before it actually sunk in. It is hard to believe the way our health can turn. Hearing about your tumour is another reminder that we can't take anything here on earth for granted.

Mum was here when I got your letter, so I gave it to her to read too. We were both deeply moved by your words and want you to know that you will be in our prayers and our thoughts constantly. It was lovely to hear that your friendship with me and my family meant so much to you. You were a really great friend. I remember lots of fun times that we had together, so please don't feel it was hard going for me. Our lives follow a pattern that seems very strange sometimes, but God has a plan that is eventually revealed and then things start to make sense . . . It was very hard to lose dad last year. He was 81, and had been very ill for months. We know we will see him again one day and he gave us lots of courage over the days he was dying. He was quite at peace and ready to go and meet the Lord . . . We were very proud of him.

Would you believe my children are now going to the same school we went to . . . I have made some very good friends through church and school, including an old friend of yours, Yvonne . . . I will let her know I have heard from you. Please let me know how you go with tests in August.

Love,

Sue.

PS Your letter arrived at mum's old address on one of the last days that her mail was being redirected.

Sunday, 19th July

I met a lady today who told me of her mother's fight with cancer. She had been diagnosed with lung cancer and given three to six months to live. Yet she told her family that she would not die until all of her children were married. Sure enough, ten years later, after her last daughter had become engaged, she passed on.

I need to determine that I will be around to see my grandchildren; I need to stop fearing death and believe in God that I will live. My children need me and so does Dean. If I died he would have to quit the ministry, he couldn't cope with raising the children and a stressful job. So my goals are to see the children through high school. Then to see them married. To pursue all the things I have ever wanted to do but haven't been able to. To support Dean and to travel. And finally I want five years with Dean to live by the sea when he retires. That is a lot of stuff to live for.

later

The temptation is always there to give in and die. But life is good and I am enjoying it. I want no regrets. Do it today. A few months ago I thought I would never be happy again, that joy would ever elude me. Each day seemed long, horrible and endless. Lately I feel happier than I have in years.

Friday, 25th June

I have been in bed for two days this week. Whenever I get tired I think I am dying. Then I get homesick for Adelaide. I just have to hope that one day we will live there again.

Thursday, 31st July

“From that time many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more. Then Jesus said to the twelve, ‘Do you also want to go away?’ But Simon Peter answered Him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.’”

John 6:66-68

later

‘It’s funny. I thought by now I would be changed. That God would have changed me into a better person. More mature, I suppose.’ Dean and I are driving back from the hospital in a nearby town. The well-worn road stretches straight ahead. There is certainly a big sky in this part of Australia. It’s as flat as the Hay Plain, but not quite as desolate, thanks to the irrigation channels.

He looks at me and exclaims, ‘You are different. Completely different. You have far more depth than before and conviction in everything you say.’ I am surprised. I still have so much that is in flux in my mind yet he doesn’t see that. I suppose I just see the bad.

‘I thought maturity would be mountain top experiences but it’s not, is it?’

‘No, it’s not.’ He smiles and reaches for my hand.

‘You know, seeing Andy just then was so much harder than I thought it would be. I thought because I had been on the inside of cancer just as he is now that I could say something that would help him. But I felt as useless as I used to before I got sick. I still didn’t know what to do or say.’

‘I don’t think it is ever easy, no matter what you know of someone else’s suffering. In fact, knowing what they suffer can be harder because you do know, rather than being blissfully ignorant.’

‘Poor guy. He was trying to be so brave. I tried to be comforting but was awkward. He was trying to be positive and cheer me up. As if it wasn’t that bad. I can remember doing that with people. Anything was better than seeing them in pain

over what you were going through. I hope he will be alright.’ Feeling as if I have failed Andy I sit in silence. We turn the corner of the main highway and head towards our little town. Cows and channels as far as the eye can see.

1st August

Dear Heather,

I was so glad to receive your letter and to know that you are feeling more cheerful . . . I have just had the sad task of writing Caroline’s obituary. She died last week, having been sick for about a year with lung cancer. The funeral was on Saturday and there were some wonderful tributes from her friends and colleagues. I feel very low today. I shall miss her terribly. She was fantastically brave, and her concern was always for her friends and family, to try and spare them. It’s a mystery why these things happen to the best people. Maybe they have learned the lessons they are supposed to learn in life, and so are allowed to go home . . .

Love,

Gillian.

Dear Gillian,

I am so sorry for the loss of your good friend Caroline. I have just re-read some of your previous letters where you mentioned her, and I was shocked. You seemed to think that she was going so well and improving. None of us can take this insidious disease for granted. I feel for you deeply with your loss. From the way you wrote of her she must have been a wonderful person; one who made your life richer as you knew her.

I had some good news the other day. The specialist has told me that I am officially in remission. They consider my disease incurable, but as of now there is no sign of active disease

in my body. The volcano is dormant. They have done all they can for me and it seems the rest is up to my body (and God). Anyway, I feel great. And while everyone in the house has come down with the flu I seem to have only a mild head cold. All that vitamin C, and the antioxidants, tonics and juices, with prayer, is doing me good.

I have gone back to my favourite sport, all under the pretence of getting fit. A lady I have met here is allowing me to ride one of her horses several times a week. It is agony at times and I am amazed at how inflexible my body has become. I suppose losing all that muscle tone while I was mostly in bed is the cause of it. It is a lot of fun and I hope to go in a few horse shows later this year . . .

Love, Heather.

The air is warmer this morning than it has been. Praying in the quietness I see myself no longer as the helpless, unaware baby, but as a toddler beginning to walk. Yet it is to my Father's lap I run. With joy I am scooped up into that warm, secure place of dependence. The winter has not been so severe. It now passes and spring is coming. As I lie in the peaceful darkness the words of a song swirl around my mind:

*In the quiet between the stillness
When peace is the sound
I remember not believing
When no-one was around.*

*In the peace between life's stillness
He'll engulf and gently surround
With the tide of His love, when no one is around
He is teaching me how to drown.*

Travis Job, 'Tide of Love', 1997

31st August

Today Princess Diana died.

epilogue

In 1990 I was living in Newcastle at the time that the earthquake hit. The children and I were sitting on the lawn at the local swimming pool, eating our lunch. Suddenly I saw the ground ahead begin to roll towards us in a series of waves. As the rolling motion reached us we were carried along with the force, feeling as if we had been tossed upward and shaken to our very core. This was accompanied by a growling noise, nothing like I had ever heard before. Right before my eyes the earth which had always been stable appeared to metamorphose into something which was the complete antithesis to it. Of course, after a few seconds it was all over and everything appeared to have returned to normal. The reality was that nothing was the same again for many people. Many lost their lives and thousands of homes were substantially damaged. It has taken years for that damage to be repaired. When I was told I had cancer my world became like the ground on the day of the earthquake. My belief systems, which until that time had appeared to be solid bedrock, were catapulted into the air. When they again resettled themselves they were never the same. At first they appeared to be completely destroyed. As time went on and the damage was surveyed, what came out of the carnage was a stronger set of belief systems, which now are prepared and can cope with the worst that life can throw at me personally.

Many times I said to Dean that there must be something wrong with my foundations as a Christian or I would be coping better with this situation. Something deep inside of me knew that there was something wrong. It took time for me to find out what it was. I heard Dr James Dobson say on a radio program that many of us believe, even if we don't say it, that if we go to church, serve God and love the Lord, then we deserve to

be happy and not to suffer. If you asked any of us we would say in theory that yes, Christians suffer; look at Christ and Paul and also many today. Yet deep down we don't want to accept that this is true. This was me. When it came my turn to suffer I wanted to opt out, to no longer be on this boat ride, it's too hard. The most honest prayer in the Bible is in Mark 9:24, "*Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!*" What was Jesus reaction to this prayer? He did not condemn this man but healed his son in spite of him. God is bigger than our doubts.

We all have ideals about how our lives should go. It is when our ideals don't match reality that we become frustrated and depressed. We have to let those ideals go. In fact, believing that we will have happy little lives with no hardship is a lie from the devil. Just ask a Third World Christian what he thinks of that theory. If we have a wrong foundation in our Christian walk we flounder in times of trouble. If we believe that we live in an ideal world and should have ideal lives then we won't cope when trouble comes. If we accept the words of Christ then we will persevere and hear God whisper to us in our pain.

"... In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

John 16:33

And also:

"My strength is made perfect in weakness."

2 Corinthians 12:9

Sickness is a workaholic's nightmare. We think it is all a big waste of time. Yet God brings renewal through trials, not always through signs and wonders.

What can be more weak than a baby? Christ came in the weakest form of all humanity. God's strength was made perfect in the weakness of a child. We are all infants in the Father's

hand. He nurtures us, feeds, burps, changes, washes, loves and keeps us warm. A baby does not fully understand all that is being done for it and often fusses and fights the parent who is caring for them, making the job harder. The parent thinks nothing of the sacrifice of tending the infant, who can show no real gratitude. In some ways the most endearing quality of the infant is its utter helplessness. This is grace. As the baby can do nothing to earn or repay the parent, neither can we with God. It is in the dark times that we can come to know afresh how dependent we are on God for all things.

Faith like Job's cannot be shaken because it is the result of being shaken.

anon.

In our society today we are all much keener on short cuts and instant gratification—guilty of only wanting to linger and partake of the high points in our lives. No one enjoys going through trials. You never hear any one say, 'Wow, that was a great divorce I had last week. I really enjoyed that.' Yet if we are honest we can see that it is not in the high points, but in the valleys that we grow in character. We all want a deeper faith but not through pain, thank you very much. Our greatest strengths can also be our greatest weaknesses. Those of us who are fairly independent, which is a strength, can find ourselves fighting against God, by being independent from Him, which becomes a weakness.

On the threat of suffering, C. S. Lewis wrote:

... At first I am overwhelmed, and all my little happiness's look like broken toys ... I remind myself that all these toys were never intended to possess my heart ... and my only real treasure is Christ ... the moment that threat is withdrawn, my whole nature leaps back to the toys ... Thus the terrible necessity of tribulation is only too clear. God has had me ... only by dint of taking everything else away from me. Let Him but sheathe that sword for a moment and I behave like a puppy when the hated bath is over—I shake

myself as dry as I can and race off to reacquire my comfortable dirtiness . . . And that is why tribulations cannot cease until God sees us remade . . .

C. S. Lewis, The Problem of Pain, Collins, Glasgow, 1963, pp. 94–95.

On this journey I have faced sailing through the rapids, looking into the whirlpool's face, and have finally been thrown back onto the shore; sodden, half drowned but still kicking. In the last two years my life has completely changed. I am enjoying life and all that I am doing. In many ways I am grateful. I just wish God could have got my attention another way. I wish I wasn't so stubborn.

“. . . and he brought me through the waters; the water came up to my ankles . . . the water came up to my knees . . . the water came up to my waist . . . and it was a river I could not cross . . . water in which one must swim . . . Then he brought me back and returned me to the bank of the river . . . Then he said to me: ‘This water flows towards the eastern region, goes down into the valley, and enters the sea. When it reaches the sea, its waters are healed. And it shall be that every living thing that moves, wherever the rivers go, will live . . . for they will be healed . . .’”

Ezekiel 47:3–9

“Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea . . .

And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.

. . . I will give of the fountain of the water of life freely to him who thirsts.”

Revelation 21:1, 4, 6

Death Sting

Oh Death, where is your sting?
Your sting is not within me.
Go from me, away from me,
I am more than a memory,
To those I love dear
and who hold me near.
Cast your shadow upon yourself.
Never again come by stealth.

O Death, where is your sting?
Your sting is deep within me.
Your shadow creeps into my bones;
Insistently, irresistibly, I sink like a stone.
Let me sleep and never wake;
In fear's cocoon I gestate,
As a slug I inch toward a watery grave;
In earth's cavernous entrails, I suffocate.

O Death, where is your sting?
To where will this tunnel lead?
Spare me the eternal birth,
Bitter cup be removed,
Hold back the day of my dawning,
Don't take me while my sun is still rising.
Death or life, which is the dream?
Eternal light, eternal night, which is calling me?

Oh Death, remove your sting from me.
Begone and leave, you be the memory.
I will claw out to the black holed abyss.
Take away your deathwish.
God, help my purpose to remain clear,
To stay with all I hold dear;
I will not join the rows of the dead,
Like teeth gaping from an evil head.

Oh Death, where is your sting?
Your sting has gone from me;
The birth has come with pains a many;

Stillborn is not the heraldry;
Shouts of joy again rebound,
Ocean engulfs and gently surrounds,
In the tide of His love I eagerly drown,
In the tide of His love we eagerly drown.

H. Eaton, 1997