BAMBI SMYTH

Bad Hair Year

Beating a brain tumour, breast cancer, and healing a broken heart

Bambi Smyth has been going on journeys all her life – either physical, emotional or spiritual. Born in Scotland, but based most of her adult life in Melbourne, she now lives mainly in a rusty house on the Mornington Peninsula, where she takes long walks along the beach collecting stuff to make wild and wonderful sculptures, and rescuing the odd lost penguin. An illustrator and author of sixteen children's books, Bambi is also freelance designer of resort clothing, quirky toys and creative wildlife products.

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In memory of those who didn't make it,
even after long and valiant struggles.

My sister Bindy
My father Dacre
Tim
Charlie

Rest in peace

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ROUND #1

Out of the Blue

Thursday 28th October

Dad visited me last night. It was a wonderful surprise to see him again. In fact, it was the first time I'd seen him since he died two years ago.

At around midnight I heard a noise downstairs, and upon investigating I found him in my living room, although I'm not sure how he got in as I deadlock the doors. Still, there he was, standing tall and as straight-backed as ever, dressed in his favourite short-sleeved checked shirt and loose cotton trousers held up by his old brown cowhide belt, which I'm pretty sure predated WWI. He hadn't changed much – his silver-white hair was still neatly parted to the side, and his chin was freshly shaven, although I couldn't help but notice that his pale blue eyes were unusually bright.

There was something else about him too. He looked so strong and healthy – almost radiant – quite unlike his last months alive, when he was ravaged by the cancer that had cruelly invaded his entire body like a swarm of vicious flesh-eating army ants. It had been a hideous time for him – indeed for us all – so it was particularly heartwarming to think that he'd come down all this way to visit me, especially given that his new abode was surely far less full of painful memories.

When I entered the room he walked towards me silently and took my hands gently in his – his palms felt warm and dry against

mine. This surprised me for two reasons. Firstly because I had thought that a dead person would be much colder, and secondly, because him taking my hands in such a way was a rare gesture. I mean, Dad was a loving and attentive father, to be sure, but in life he'd not been a particularly tactile man – he had the stern demeanour of a naval officer, for whom overt displays of affection were seen to be unmanly. Indeed, hugs or hand-holding were given out with the same frequency of free lollipops to cadets during a passing out parade.

Like – never.

So, in the depths of a dark and lonely night, I found this act of uncommon intimacy very comforting. Very…well…validating, I suppose.

And besides, it's better late than never.

But the visit was also somewhat disturbing, because then Dad was suddenly gone without an explanation, and when I awoke I wasn't sure why he'd come at all, after being away for so long.

Wednesday 15th December

Dad visited me again last night.

He said nothing, but stood quietly in the living room beside two battered leather trunks he used to lug around the world on his travels, which I now use in place of a side table, their tattered *P&O* and *Cunard* stickers hanging on for dear life with a fifty-year-old lick and a prayer.

Dad observed me intently for a while, as if contemplating how to approach a tricky subject, before coming over and kissing me on my cheek, and then softly on my lips. He'd certainly never done the latter when he was alive, and I was so surprised I nearly burst into tears. I mean, if his hugs had been as rare as lollipops, then kisses were surely chocolate-dipped truffles. Rolled in gold leaf. Still, I found the gesture deeply reassuring, imagining it was

how a loving father might kiss his little girl as he tucked her into bed at night, to ward away the wicked bogey-men lurking in the shadows.

He didn't stay long, but I awoke feeling very much at peace, and filled with the knowledge that although sadly gone in flesh, Dad was still with me in spirit.

It's nice to have him watching out for me.

Saturday 18th December

It's my brother-in-law's sixtieth birthday party this morning – a breakfast soiree. Good grief! I mean – the week before Christmas? On a Saturday? At 8.30 a.m.? I don't know whether to laugh or cry. I can think of several other far more enjoyable things I could be doing right now – like sleeping.

Still, here I am, and I've brought my fiancé Greg along, who's in a cheerful frame of mind because, unlike me, he relishes early starts. In fact, sometimes I wonder how on earth we managed to get engaged given our differences: late riser – early riser. Animal welfare fanatic – football fanatic. A little bit right – a little bit left. Social butterfly – moth. But then again, we have heaps in common too – we're footloose and fancy free, somewhat eccentric, and see life as a journey, not a destination. And we both remember what Sunny Boys and Lolly Gobble Bliss Bombs were, so we don't stare at each other blankly when we're reminiscing about our childhoods.

Not that our three-year relationship is just about looking back; we've got lots of plans ahead as well – a Fabulous-after-Fifty-Future. We talk together for hours on end about how we'll help build schools for scruffy kids in remote African villages. Or how we'll design a fabulous tree house in an ancient Moreton Bay Fig up in Queensland, where we'll run a Bed and Breakfast for people who don't mind geckos in their beds. And then there are

our plans to rent a farmhouse in a different European country for three months every year, where we'll learn how to say 'Is your bull friendly?' in a multitude of languages.

We're going to do it all.

We walk up the garden path to the party and I brace myself for the usual barrage from well-meaning family and friends about when Greg and I will actually tie the knot. I'm now quite adept in the Art of Deflection, which tends to keep them quiet for another six months or so.

'One day, but don't hold your breath,' is my usual response.

And I'm quite happy to take my time, because when you meet someone on the internet – as I had with Greg – you need to give the relationship time to evolve from unbridled passion into feeling secure in the saddle, so as not to be bucked off when someone cuter and with a better internet by-line comes along.

So – three years? Five years? Ten until we wed? Who knows – we're in no rush. We've got plenty of time.

The party is in full swing when we arrive. A smart mobile coffee-van dispenses steaming cappuccinos and espressos to those who are still half-asleep – including me – whilst an apron-clad man enthusiastically flips apple and cinnamon pancakes on the back patio. The house is heaving with well over a hundred guests, and I wander around bumping into people whose names I suddenly can't recall, which is embarrassing, as they all seem to remember mine. Although, in my defence, 'Bambi' is not an easy moniker to forget, especially when attached to a six-foot-tall leggy brunette.

The one exception to the Forgetting Names Disease is my brother-in-law's brother, a hunky, handsome and very charming Ear, Nose and Throat surgeon, whose name – Doug – I always remember. We flirt outrageously whenever we meet at family events like funerals, weddings or birthday parties. Or should I

say, Doug charms, and I flirt back. Although may I stress, our interactions are always performed in a totally harmless, mutually respectful, allowably cheeky, co-in-law sort of way. Mostly because he's got a particularly attractive wife. Darn it.

Today starts off being no exception to the rule, with me nimbly cornering Doug beside a towering pile of warm almond croissants that smell like they're fresh out of a French *boulangerie*. But his charm only lasts two minutes before he asks me what's wrong with my right eye.

'Nothing,' I reply, a little put out that things aren't going quite to plan. Flirting is almost a better stimulant than coffee, and boy do I need one or the other this morning. 'Why do you ask?' I continue, feeling somewhat deflated.

'It's very bloodshot,' Doug says, looking at me more intently than usual with his piercing grey-green eyes, which – despite his current earnestness – makes me go a bit weak at the knees.

'Well, I had a couple of champagnes last night, and stayed up late partying,' I answer blithely, even though it hadn't been that much champagne, or too late a night. Indeed, I'd been vaguely aware that the same eye had been bloodshot for quite some time – perhaps six months, or even longer – even when neither alcohol nor sleep deprivation could be blamed. But I respond insouciantly to Doug's observation because I simply don't want to spoil the fun.

'No, that would make both eyes bloodshot,' Doug answers – seriously now. 'And why is it bulging out a little bit?'

'What's bulging out? My eye?' I say, suddenly feeling very self-conscious, like a pug might feel having just caught sight of his poppy-out orbs in the mirror for the first time.

Doug spends the next five minutes gently turning my head from side to side, up and down, and occasionally tut-tutting thoughtfully, before dragging me across the room to seek the opinion of another guest, Donald, who just happens to be a

specialist eye surgeon. Not that this is a medical convention, but let's just say that if I were to have a heart attack here, I'd be in good hands.

After enough head spinning to make even Linda Blair wince, and doubtlessly providing a fair degree of amusement for the other guests, Donald also agrees that ordinarily I shouldn't have one bloodshot and slightly bulging eye. Two wonky eyes might be unfortunate genes or perhaps an indication of a thyroid problem – but just one is another worry altogether.

'If I were you, I'd head to an eye specialist to have that looked at,' Doug says, although so offhandedly that I'm not sure if he's serious, or whether this is some kind of new-age flirting, and that it's now my turn to think up some exotic affliction for him. Pathological cuteness would be a good fit.

But later, as he is leaving, Doug repeats his advice, ominously adding that 'sooner would be better than later', which prompts me to think perhaps I should be just a little concerned. After all, there had been a string of serious medical issues in my family, many of which could possibly have been circumvented if they'd been addressed in time. A sister with breast cancer, a father with prostate cancer, an aunt with bowel cancer, and a grandmother with uterine cancer – indeed, a family prone to biological unpleasantries on par with the bubonic plague.

Which gets me to wondering if there's any such thing as eye cancer. Because if there is, I don't want it.

'Don't be so melodramatic,' Greg snorts crossly when I update him on my impromptu mid-party ophthalmological check-up. Although I think he's actually just annoyed that I'd left him alone with my step-uncle, who's a great advocate of nuclear energy – a combination of views sure to have created some heat of its own, given Greg's a bit of a greenie. 'You're perfectly fine,' Greg continues lightly when he sees I'm still unhappy. 'Doug was probably just pulling your leg. You weren't worried about your eye before the party, so why should you be now?'

I know that Greg is probably right. Perhaps I'm being somewhat neurotic. But even so, by the time we're halfway home, I've decided to make an appointment for a quick check-up anyway. Just in case. Although I resolve not to worry about it until Monday, as after all, it's the weekend before Christmas, and I have some more partying to do.

Still, upon going to bed I'm unsettled. I'm starting to wonder whether this weird scenario has anything to do with Dad's visits, the last one just three days ago. Are they somehow connected? Rather than Dad just dropping in for a casual visit, had he actually been warning me of some mischief afoot?

Monday 20th December

Today I've got an appointment with an ophthalmologist. Trying to find anyone who'd see me right before Christmas was nigh on impossible – like Joseph trying to cajole the inn-keeper to give him a room on Census Night. But Roland* eventually squeezed me in on Doug's insistence.

Not that I normally call surgeons and doctors by their first names, mind you, but I once accidentally mixed up a Mr (as in a surgeon with at least nine years training) with a Dr (as in a physician, with as little as four). Which is apparently as unforgivable as calling a Canadian an American. So ever since that gaffe I've decided to avoid using titles altogether, to save myself from getting into a pickle again.

So here I am waiting for my appointment with Roland. Four days before Christmas. In a waiting room that's sorely in need of a fresh coat of paint, and most definitely some new carpet tiles beside the reception desk, where it appears someone has recently spilled their takeaway coffee. Or horrors – is it blood? And perhaps once they've fixed up those issues, a few less alarming posters might be a good idea too – specifically the one entitled 'Diseases

of the Eye', which shows such a range of weeping, puffy, bulbous, ulcerated and downright scary maladies that it can hardly be comforting anxious newcomers. Such as yours truly.

Before long, Roland is shining a bright light at me, and merrily puffing small bursts of air at my open eye with a little rubber squirty thing. Next is a somewhat more complicated Visual Field Test to check my peripheral vision, which requires me to rest my chin inside a large bowl-like instrument as random lights of different intensities are flashed at me, each of which I'm instructed to record by pressing a button. I pass with flying colours, although I think I was a bit trigger happy, and may have responded several more times than lights were actually generated. Perhaps that second coffee this morning wasn't such a good idea.

'Everything seems to be working okay,' Roland finally says, although I fancy a bit huffily. I've probably taken up one of his precious emergency slots, and with just two days before he goes on holidays he's most likely thinking that he really should have been seeing that old lady with a stye so big she could fit the whole nativity scene in. 'But I still don't like the look of your eye,' he continues sternly, 'so I'll refer you for a CT scan, and we can have a look at what's happening behind the scenes.'

I'm happy with that. I'm thinking it's probably just a burst blood vessel in my eye, or a similar inconsequential malady, and if it takes a trip to the local hospital to have it checked out and given the all clear, then that will be a load off my mind and I can get down and enjoy Christmas.

And enjoy summer too. I'm planning to spend all of January in my house by the beach – rather than schlepping up to town to work mid-week in my office-cum-studio – so I can slowly unwind from a busy year. Being a freelance illustrator and product designer of upmarket Australian wildlife souvenirs is creative, fun and enormously satisfying, but still, the market is so tough just now that selling my wares to a collapsing retail sector is like selling Vegemite to the Italians. I mean, who really needs a PVC

koala luggage tag anyway? Especially if people can't even afford to travel? It's been a hard slog these past two years. Very hard.

So a long uninterrupted break by the sea will be blissful. Four weeks of soaking up the sun, dozing in my hammock, beachcombing for weird and wonderful sea debris, entertaining friends, and seeing how long it takes them to fall off their stools after one too many gin and tonics. Which happens quite frequently with the sort of people I hang out with. And a month too for Greg and I to continue making plans for our Fabulous-after-Fifty-Future.

It's all ahead of us, so close that we can almost reach out and touch it.

Tuesday 21st December

9.30 a.m.

I'm waiting in the hospital's Imaging Department for my CT scan. CT is short for Computerised Topography, which is a type of three-dimensional X-ray. X-rays don't scare me, but hospitals do. I've never been treated in or admitted to hospital before. Ever. Not even to have my tonsils or appendix out, or to fix a broken limb. The latter of which is probably due less to good management and more to good luck, because when I was a child I would regularly fall off, or out, of things – bikes, horses, fences, trampolines, windows, trees. I once incurred such a huge and violently purple asphalt graze on my thigh after a particularly nasty fall that I charged the kids at school five cents each to take a look. Then in my later years I'd regularly fall in or out of love – which was nearly as painful.

But actually going to hospital is something that happens to other people. And sick people to boot. Which I'm not. So I feel a bit of a fraud being here, and almost wish my eye was spinning around uncontrollably in its socket, or something else that could actually be seen, or necessitated people ducking out of its way, so I could qualify as a 'real' patient.

I'm shown to a cubicle where I'm instructed to strip off to my underwear and to take off all my jewellery, including 'any tongue or body piercings', which I don't have, as quite apart from finding such accoutrements oddly barbaric, I also have a lifelong fear of anything sharp or pointy going anywhere near my body. And I mean *any*where. Thank goodness it's just a scan today, which is relatively non-invasive, so I can relax. I don an immensely unflattering white hospital gown – which has some of the ties missing, creating a fetching peek-a-boo show-me-your-knickers effect, and which also makes me look a bit like I'm about to be admitted to a lunatic asylum – and then I sit in a cold little waiting room contemplating what indignities I'll be forced to endure next.

A Russian woman with a thick accent enters the room with an equally thick hypodermic syringe, and looks at me in much the same way as a cobra does before it strikes. I'm about to bolt, because I suspect it's me she's after, not the other nurse now standing by my side in case I…well…bolt. But before I can escape she jabs the needle into a vein in the crook of my arm and leaves it there with a little plastic gadget attached to the other end. I stare at it in horror, quite unable to speak, wondering exactly when a harmless little X-ray turned into an excuse for torture.

'Zis is a cannula for ze dye zey pud een during ze scan,' she brightly informs me, before launching into a story about her family's daring escape from Russia during the Revolution with diamonds sewn into the hems of their jackets. At first I ponder the relevance of this to my own current predicament, but I soon realise it's a ploy to distract me, for which I'm grateful, as I really don't like the thought of a bit of stainless steel sticking out of me like a freaking piece of shrapnel. Indeed, despite the diversion, I can still feel a cold sweat beginning to envelop me, so I keep my eyes firmly averted from my arm until the Diamond Smuggler has taped the unwelcome contraption into place with some sticking plaster, and then sends me into the next room where I'm hoping

that David and Michelle – the radiographers – will go a bit easier on me.

The room is dimly lit and the CT machine broods in the middle like a futuristic robo-toad with mouth agape, waiting to be fed. It's a large white box-like machine with a short tunnel running through its centre, within which I presume I'll soon be sticking my head. It's not an overly threatening piece of equipment, but I still think it's all a bit of overkill for what will most likely turn out to be a false alarm. After all, pugs have poppy-out eyes too, and look how cheerful they are. Well, apart from when their eyes prolapse when they sneeze.

I'm laid down on a narrow table where Michelle straps my head firmly to a foam block to stop it from shifting out of position, while David oversees the set-up. Then they both literally flee into an adjoining room, making me wonder just how much radiation is about to be aimed at my poor defenceless noggin. Indeed, I'm not very happy right now. I've done my homework. A CT scan can emit as much radiation as one hundred chest X-rays, and I'm a bit worried this procedure will end up doing more harm than good. I mean, I run the risk of getting so irradiated that in four days time I could be used to light up the room instead of the Christmas tree. Or perhaps even cook the turkey.

Still, there's no doubt the scanner is a nifty device, as it will take multiple X-rays in thin cross sections along my head – much like a loaf of sliced bread, although perhaps in slightly more delicate segments than your standard Tip Top sandwich. These X-rays are then reconstructed into a three-dimensional image to produce a virtual picture of what's going on inside my head.

I shut my eyes as the table moves slowly backwards into the tunnel, whereupon I can feel the scanner start to rapidly rotate around me, like a 'Stargate' portal into another galaxy. The process itself is relatively quiet, with soft buzzing and whirring noises that I find oddly soothing. I take great care not to move my eyes, so as not to blur the scans, and discover that it's surprisingly

difficult to stare at a fixed spot, even with my eyes tightly closed. So I try some old meditation visualisation techniques to help me focus, and soon find myself staring at a delicate pink soap bubble shimmering and quivering inches from my face. It's really rather lovely, and I gradually forget that I'm in an unflattering hospital gown, laid out on a slab, with total strangers peering into my head. Indeed, this is the most relaxed I've felt in days, and soon the pink soap bubble takes on all the colours of the rainbow, and starts drifting away over a hazy purple horizon.

I must have fallen asleep, because suddenly the colours are gone, and I'm jolted back to awareness when David appears by my side. He warns me he's going to add dye to the cannula.

'It's iodinated contrast dye,' he says matter-of-factly, 'to enhance the images. It may feel quite warm.'

I imagine it's going to hurt too, as quite frankly I don't think iodine and veins are the best of bedfellows. Mum used to apply orange iodine to my various playground grazes, and it stung like crazy, so I slowly exhale to prepare myself for the shock. However, the expected bite of the dye never eventuates, and contrary to David's suggestion, as the liquid inches its way towards my armpit it actually feels very cold, creating the decidedly unsettling impression that I have tiny chilled whitebait swimming about in my veins. Next I get a strong metallic taste in my mouth, like I've licked a lamp post, and then…horror! … it feels like I've wet my pants, as a warm flooding sensation washes over my nether regions. Heavens – how many more indignities must I endure? But all that soon passes, and it's back into the machine again for another ten minutes of radioactive hula-hooping, during which time I realise that my Bonds cotton knickers are still dry and perfectly respectable. Phew.

And then it's all over – the inside of my head to be forever immortalised in black and white. Which – now that the worst is behind me – I can't help but think is rather cool. Perhaps I could even get a copy of the scan, and put it through Photoshop

to make a kind of Warholesque technicolour self-portrait. Move over Marilyn Munroe.

David comes out of his hidey-hole in the next room where he's been watching the scans.

'All done,' he says with a smile. 'You can go home now.'

His face gives nothing away.

'Everything okay?' I ask, although I don't necessarily expect him to answer. He's really just the middleman, and will pass the scans on to Roland. So when I don't get a response apart from another broad smile, I slowly ease myself up, and off, the table.

'Happy Christmas,' says David brightly on my way out. 'See you later.'

'I hope not,' I say, equally cheerily, 'but don't take it personally.'

And then I head home, my mind already on the various pre-Christmas chores I need to complete, with just three more days to go until the big one. Thank goodness all this silly eye stuff is over, and now I can get on with my life.

Wednesday 22nd December

8.30 a.m.

The phone rings whilst I'm still in bed and half asleep. I'm a bit annoyed, as I'd decided to lie in for a change, given that the last few days have been strangely exhausting. It's Roland, the eye specialist from Monday.

'Oh hi,' I say, surprised to hear from him so early in the morning, let alone hear from him at all. 'I had the CT scan yesterday,' I add quickly, presuming he's checking up on me to see if I'd followed through with his referral. Which in all truth I nearly hadn't, given I had other things on my mind, like what Christmas presents to buy at the last minute for eleven nieces and nephews without completely breaking the bank.

Besides, I wasn't at all worried. It wasn't as if my eye felt like

it was about to explode. It hadn't really been bothering me at all.

Trying to jog myself completely awake, I cheerfully comment to Roland how much fun the radiographers must have looking at people's insides every day, never quite knowing what they'll find.

'Yes, that's why I'm calling,' he replies.

The tone of Roland's voice is calm and collected, so I'm not at all alarmed. Indeed, I've even started undoing the buttons on my pyjamas, ready to jump into the shower right after his call.

'The radiographer sent me through your scans,' Roland continues, 'and it looks like there might be a problem after all.'

'A problem?' I ask. I wasn't expecting this. Apart from my eye being a bit bloodshot and puffy, it feels perfectly fine. Still, perhaps the scan has shown up a slight anomaly that Roland simply wants to deal with sometime in the New Year, so I give up trying to undo the wretched buttons with only one hand, and decide to focus on what he has to say.

'A problem?' I repeat.

'Yes, the scans show there's a lesion in the bone behind your eye,' Roland says without any further ado.

My brain rapidly searches through my reasonably broad vocabulary to find the meaning of 'lesion', but I'm not sure I've nailed it. Does it mean a hole, or a lump? If it's a hole in the bone, then that might be unpleasant – suggesting something nasty is eating it away. But a lump in the bone sounds pretty harmless, and in my still-drowsy state I even fancy that deer horns or something equally interesting are taking root in my head. Which, with a name like Bambi, would be quite feasible. But there is a heavy silence on the other end of the phone, and it slowly dawns upon me that perhaps this isn't the time to be quite so flippant.

'What's a lesion?' I finally squeak.

The room is starting to spin around me in a strange blurring of colours and lights and shapes, like an old-fashioned merry-go-round seen through a kaleidoscope. I quickly sit back onto my bed to avoid falling over. 'Is it a hole or is it a lump?' I continue fitfully.

As I wait for Roland's reply, I find myself manically trying to do up my just-undone pyjamas again, as if I can somehow go back in time and start over. As my fingers struggle with the tiny mother-of-pearl buttons, I'm sending out panicked little messages into the universe, 'Please don't be a hole, please don't be a hole.'

'It's a lump,' Roland replies gently, although his voice is grave. 'A big lump in the bone. Where a lump shouldn't be.'

The tone of his voice is a dead giveaway. He is most definitively declaring that this lump is in fact not a good thing to have in my head. Perhaps just as bad as having a hole.

Maybe worse.

My mind is a total blur. I seem to step outside my body, and find myself looking down at myself, perched on the edge of my unmade bed, the telephone receiver clutched in my hand. The standing-up-invisible-me is oddly calm, and all I can think of is how normal the sitting-down-me appears to be – what with my pyjamas decorated with little pink poodles, and my just-out-of-bed hair making me look a bit like an alpaca that's been put through the tumble dryer. Indeed, I could simply be taking a call from a friend.

'That doesn't sound too good,' I reply, after joining my body again, and summoning up the most upbeat voice I can manage, as if being blithe might somehow blow the news away like chalk dust, and therefore deny it any real substance.

'No,' Roland says. 'It's not.'

I spend the next few hours in a mild state of shock, wondering what I'm supposed to do with such an open-ended diagnosis. Roland has referred me urgently to an ophthalmic surgeon, which clearly isn't a good sign. After going through the motions of showering and dressing, and numbly thinking about what to eat for breakfast, I start to feel even more disembodied, as if I'm watching someone else's life – someone else pouring out the macadamia muesli and slowly lifting the spoon to her lips,

someone else making the bed which had so recently been a safe haven. I'm not even sure who the real me is any more, as I keep jumping in and out of my body – subconsciously trying to find the least stressful location.

Finally, after pulling myself out of the fog that's swirling about me, I ring Greg to tell him what's going on. This is no mean feat, as I don't really *know* what's going on.

'What's a lesion?' Greg asks, although he is sufficiently suspicious of such a word to quickly offer to take the day off work, so he can take me to the new specialist.

'I don't know,' I howl, although I'm now frantically searching the internet for more information. The words swirl before my eyes.

'Bone + lesion = bone tumour.'

And then…

'Bone + tumour = abnormal growth in bone tissue, either benign or malignant.'

I read these definitions out slowly and carefully to Greg, but then hesitate as I get to the last post.

'Tumour + malignant = cancer.'

I don't bother reading on, and quietly put the phone down.

Diagnosis

Thursday 23rd December

4 p.m.

Gulliver*, an ophthalmic surgeon, looks at my scans and rather matter-of-factly tells me I have a 42-millimetre lump behind my right eyeball. He explains that the lump is at the rear of the orbital cavity, in the thin sheet of bone that normally cups the eye, although in my case the bone is now so grossly swollen that it's pushing my eye forward – hence the budding pug impersonation.

Gulliver appears to be quite relaxed about my predicament, which confuses me. I can't imagine that any uninvited four-centimetre lump in one's head is particularly good news – like a gatecrasher at a party, who for all you know has a hand grenade in his pocket.

'What made it grow?' I ask limply, wondering what all this ultimately means for my eyesight. I'm an artist, after all, and I generally require two eyes to make that side of things work out.

And then Gulliver hits me with it.

'I'd bet it's a meningioma,' I hear him saying through the fog now starting to rapidly re-envelop me with every word he utters. 'A tumour on the surface of your brain,' he continues. 'The swelling of the bone may have occurred as a result of the tumour butting up against it, much like a sponge.'

My mind has slowed to the pace of an ancient mantle clock – not quite keeping time, with the wheels and mainspring clumsily grinding against each other, and impeding my thoughts from forming properly. But I slowly – jarringly – comprehend what

Gulliver is saying. It's not just a big lumpy bone I have inside my head, but possibly a brain tumour as well.

It's certainly not what I was expecting to hear, and I suddenly feel dizzy. Out of control. The clock's pendulum has just come away from its support and I'm falling through time, and space. I press Greg's hand tightly.

'A brain tumour?' I whisper in the vague direction of the light-box with my CT scans on it, although I don't actually want to look at them. Because that would mean I couldn't so easily deny it. 'A brain tumour?'

'A meningioma is a tumour of the membrane covering the brain – the meninges,' Gulliver continues. 'Such tumours are quite often benign, but some can be malignant. I'm guessing yours is benign, given the bone is so swollen. It may have been there for years.'

Now there are two ways I can deal with this information. Option one – I can focus on the words *tumour,* and *malignant*, which have extremely negative connotations, and I could therefore start falling apart immediately, and merrily hurtle towards total self-destruction. Or else just hide beneath the bedcovers for the next year or two. If I have that much time. Or option two – I can filter out such words and instead focus exclusively on *benign*, which is a sleepy kind of word, and sounds pretty harmless. And then I might live forever.

So, being a generally positive kind of girl, my choice is clear.

'Benign is good. Isn't it?' I squeak, hoping that will be that, and now we can all go home and enjoy our pre-Christmas frivolities.

Gulliver patiently raises one eyebrow. 'Well, benign is certainly better than malignant, but even a benign tumour can grow, either slowly or quickly. Which either way isn't good in finite spaces like your eye or brain cavities.'

Gulliver pauses a while as I try to digest this new information which has done little to dilute my fears. I was trying to focus on the less scary option, but even if my meningioma is benign and

therefore not technically defined as cancerous, I still have a brain tumour, plus a huge lump in the bone behind my eye to boot. Two for the price of one. I should be so lucky.

Not.

Yet Gulliver still doesn't seem overly concerned. In fact, I get the impression he's either being dismissive, unsympathetic or both, and frankly I'm beginning to feel a little pissed off. But then I get a grip of myself, and reason that he must see dozens of patients a day. To him my condition is probably as harmless as discovering a nest of mice in one's pantry: unpleasant yes, and requiring attention, certainly – but not life-threatening.

Gulliver tells me he's leaving right after my appointment to go on holidays, so he can't see me until the New Year. 'But if you're worried about it,' he says, 'then I'll refer you in the interim to another ophthalmic specialist for a second opinion.'

Well, of course I'm bloody well worried. Mice in the pantry are one thing, but what if they start breeding uncontrollably? Two weeks might be the difference between a nuclear family or a nuclear holocaust.

'No way am I waiting,' I blurt out, perhaps a little rudely. But it *is* my head after all. I've already lost my sister to breast cancer due to a late diagnosis, and my father to what may have been an incomplete prostatectomy, so I'm not about to put myself in the same situation of something being half-done or done too late. I tearfully insist on a second appointment as soon as possible, although I get the feeling that Gulliver is a little put out with having to ring around at the last minute to see who else might be available. After all, it *is* just two days before Christmas, and most people are already in summer holiday mode. Indeed, I suspect Gulliver already has his board shorts on under his work trousers so he can head right from his office to the beach-house. And I swear I can smell sunscreen lotion wafting up from his briefcase. Either that or he has a coconut and banana cocktail in there.

Greg and I don't talk much on the way home, but through osmosis we manage to convince each other that there's been a mistake, and that this whole ridiculous business is going to turn out to be something quite harmless. Funny even. Besides, this wasn't in our plans – our plans are for a Fabulous-after-Fifty-Future together, sailing the world, backpacking through Borneo, and building schools for those scruffy kids in Africa. We have other schemes, other schedules, other stars to grab hold of – so all this nonsense can't really be happening.

Can it?

I go to bed with a tight knot in my stomach, as if I've just eaten a poisonous fugu fish, and I'm waiting to find out if it's going to be a mere irritant, or kill me stone dead.

Saturday 25th December

Christmas Day

7.30 a.m.

The only appointment Gulliver could get for me was for today – presenting a logistical dilemma that will necessitate some fancy footwork. My entire family – twenty-one people in all – will be gathering at my brother's place for Christmas lunch, with me in charge of the roast potatoes, as well as a super fancy dessert, the latter of which has been my signature dish in recent years. So why the dilemma? Well…besides Greg, I haven't told a soul what's going on. The last thing I want – apart from a brain tumour – is for Christmas Day to be spoiled for anyone else. We're all still mourning the fact that my father is no longer with us on this most special of family occasions, not to mention my sister, even a decade after her passing. No – my nearest and dearest can do without any more upsets, so I'll leave my bad news a few more days, when everyone is feeling more resilient.

Greg has stayed the night at my place, and we quietly open our presents in bed, where we take great care not to talk about lumps or lesions or grubby gremlins lurking in dark corners. We tear off the glittery paper wrapping and curly gold ribbons, and each pretend to be delighted with our booty of CDs and Bunnings vouchers, and a very smart power drill that Greg pointedly gives me – 'pointedly' because he's as much of a handyman as Barbie, so I have a sneaking suspicion that broken chair he's been promising to fix forever will be up to *me* to tackle. Then again, I *did* give him an omelette pan last year – a not-so-subtle hint that he could do more 'real' cooking rather than his usual chicken schnitzel sandwiches – so I suppose now we're square. Still, as much as we're both trying to be chirpy, there's a tension in the air between us, deflating what should be a buoyant morning.

Greg leaves early in the morning, heading off to spend the day with his mother who's all alone in the country. His big blue eyes are intense and filled with concern for me, but he hugs me tight to his chest, assuring me everything will be fine.

Somehow.

I calmly peel thirty potatoes and sit them in cold water for cooking when I get back from the hospital. I check that the fifteen layers of red and green fruits – whole raspberries, sliced kiwi-fruit, diced strawberries, green grapes, blackberries, and then 'repeat as above' – have set in their conical mould for the most impressive Christmas Tree dessert ever. I check that all my presents have their correct name-tags, ready for distribution later in the day. I check in the mirror that my face isn't too red and puffy from crying, nor my pug eye too obvious, brushing my fringe over it as if a curtain pulled across the window of a macabre peep show.

And then I drive myself to the Eye and Ear Hospital. The streets are totally deserted, with neither a laggardly Christmas reindeer nor a drunk rolling home from the previous evening's festivities in sight.

I feel utterly, completely alone, as if I'm the last person on earth.

I sit in the waiting room with my fat grey envelope of CT scans clutched to my increasingly tightening chest, and feel very odd, as if I've been plunged deep underwater and it's just a matter of time before I run out of air, or my lungs explode. I'm not sure if I'm frightened, or anxious, or sad. Or just in emotionless limbo – waiting for that air to run out.

I still haven't looked at the CT scans. I figure that what I don't know can't hurt me. Besides, I don't really know what to look for. Does a brain tumour look different to everything else in your head? Or – like a terrorist – does it camouflage itself in an attempt to trick the body into believing that it's a friend? Before pulling the machine gun out from under its cloak and going on a murderous rampage?

The waiting room is eerily silent, and I can't quite believe I'm sitting here when nearly everyone else in Australia is either still asleep, unwrapping Christmas presents, or wrestling a five-kilo turkey into the oven. I have to wait a while for my appointment as a shrieking child is rushed in ahead of me with a toy plane wedged firmly in his eye-socket. Then a dishevelled young man smelling of beer arrives with what appears to be a small plastic snowman stuck fast in his ear.

Still, given all the wild Christmas parties around town last night, it could have been stuck somewhere a lot worse.

Finally I'm shown into a room to present my scans to the attending eye specialist – a charming Swiss-French doctor called Amin. He's so handsome that I wonder why he's not at home with his family doing Christmassy things, like drinking eggnog or going to church, or hiding the new toy plane Santa gave his six-year-old because he – of all people – knows that Christmas, small pointy flying objects and eye-sockets don't mix. But I'm glad he's not at home doing all those things, because right now I need a kindly soul to get me through this potential ordeal. And

I'm hoping it's not going to be Pandora's Box that Santa has left for me beneath the tree.

Amin puts my scans up on the light box to see what's going on, and there I see it for the first time.

I think I stop breathing.

A golf-ball-sized swelling shows up clearly in the bone behind my right eye, quite alarmingly upsetting the symmetrical balance of my skull. It's very strange to see the inside of my head revealed like a Leonardo da Vinci study on anatomy. The bony lump is bright white, and I can make out that my eyeball – a pale grey – has been squished into less than two-thirds of its normal space. Indeed, there's no room to swing a cataract in there. Seeing it all in such dramatic black and white astounds me. After all, I've not really felt anything all that amiss, and certainly had no pain or problems with my vision, which is more what you'd expect from having one's eyeball clutched in as good as a medieval vice.

Amin studies the scan carefully, taking several measurements with a remarkably unremarkable wooden school ruler, the bizarre juxtaposition of which does not escape me. He shakes his head as if he's uncertain.

'Well, it could be a meningioma,' he finally declares, 'but I can't be sure if it's benign or malignant.'

My eyes flood with tears. Again. With my catastrophic family history – not to mention the countless hours I've spent on the internet these last two days – I know only too well what malignant means, and that's not what I want in my body, let alone in my head. I'm suddenly filled with unspeakable dread – like I'm peering into a pitch-black cave knowing it's inhabited by a vile faceless being, just waiting to reach out with its crooked, bony fingers and snatch me inside. I'm paralysed for a moment, and then I back away from the cave's entrance to stand in the sunshine, where it's safe, and inhale deeply.

Amin must have read the upset on my face. 'But if you're going to get a brain tumour,' he quickly adds in a comforting tone, 'then

this is the best sort you can get. These ones are usually operable.'

I carefully ignore the word 'usually'. By now I've figured that the only way I'm going to get through all this is by concentrating solely on the positives. And indeed, I don't know whether to laugh or cry at his summation of my tumour – 'the best sort you can get' no less. Heck, maybe I should buy a lottery ticket, given this is my lucky day. 'Roll up, roll up, your chance of winning in tonight's draw is as likely as getting a brain tumour.'

Great.

After peering at the scan a while longer, Amin eventually says he'll book me in for an MRI in the first available slot next week. He explains that the CT scan clearly shows the deformed bony structure in my head, but an MRI will show the soft tissue around it, and whether a meningioma is the culprit after all.

'Then,' Amin says with a delicious Swiss-French lilt which I find so sexy I nearly forget to be afraid of what the words are actually saying, 'when those results are back in, I'll most likely handball you to a neurosurgeon. I'm guessing the problem may well be too big for just an eye man to handle.'

A neurosurgeon? This is getting serious.

Ho bloody ho. Happy Christmas.

I'm not going to let this interrupt the day's festivities. I've always been a pretty optimistic woman, and not one given to helplessness or despair. Well, not that I've ever been tested quite so dramatically, but I'm still not going to suddenly collapse in a heap and let the vultures pick at my remains before I'm even dead. After all, it's not over till it's over. So I drive home, put the potatoes in the oven, check the fruit pyramid hasn't collapsed into a fruit slushie, and pack all my presents into a box for distribution after lunch.

Then I sit down and take a very deep, long breath.

I spend the next hour and a half, as the potatoes cook, wondering what on earth I ever did in my past life to deserve this crap. Is it some kind of karmic justice finally punishing me for mercilessly

teasing Androula Doukas in junior school? For cheating in that ninth-grade German test? For stealing those toe-socks from Sportsgirl when I was a teenager? There must be a damned good reason that I've been given such an unwanted head-mate.

It's not that I'm complaining. It's more that I'm taken aback at how my life has turned suddenly from a carefree existence with a fiancé and an exciting future, to a decidedly nightmarish scenario where I have no idea what's ahead. A sense of certainty has been replaced by the unknown. The ordinary with the extraordinary. Weightlessness with something heavy and sodden.

A sunny blue sky with a black cave.

But although I'm scared witless, I make a concerted decision not to let this thing in my head know it. That would just empower it, like a wild dog gorging on a helpless kitten. Best to ignore it, starve it, and hopefully it will eventually slink away into nothingness.

When the potatoes are browned and crisped to perfection, I head off to my brother's house for lunch, where I enthusiastically knock back a Brandy Crusta or two, just like my dear father used to make – although today I make sure they're double strength. Then I spend the next six hours in the bosom of my beloved family, wearing a silly orange paper hat, reading out excruciatingly bad Christmas cracker jokes, and eating far too much plum pudding.

And I'm pleased to say that by the end of the day, no one is any the wiser to the fact that my world has just started to fall apart in the most spectacular fashion.

Sunday 26th December

At the tail end of a Boxing Day celebration in the country with cousins, I choose my timing carefully to tell my family what's going on. They're pretty much struck dumb with disbelief. They certainly didn't think our family was due for yet another

potentially life-threatening diagnosis for a good decade or two. And besides, I'm supposed to be 'the lucky one'. Breezing through life effortlessly, and without all the burdens that come with having a family. (Not that I'm actually at all convinced that makes me lucky, but perhaps more *un*lucky – at least in love.) Still, I work hard at keeping my usually positive demeanour cranked up to high, as I feel a certain sense of responsibility to protect them. Especially Mum, who really doesn't need any more dramas in her life. So I gulp down the last of the mulled wine punch, have another cold pork sausage, and hug my family tight, encouragingly declaring that everything's going to be just fine.

Although I'm not sure who I'm trying to convince the most – them, or me.

Wednesday 29th December

Well – so much for that. Today I was supposed to be going down to the beach for an uninterrupted month-long stay. It's here in my diary in big capital letters – BEACH – with three exclamation marks to show how excited I'd been at the prospect. But Amin has just rung to tell me he's organised the MRI scan for me in two days time, so I'll have to delay my departure.

Oh well, I suppose it gives me the opportunity to go to the post-Christmas sales and buy things I don't really need, with money I don't really have. Nothing like a bit of retail therapy to distract me. Although it might be best to avoid Myer's appliance clearance sale this year. Why on earth did I think I needed a heated eyelash curler anyway? Two years later and my lashes still haven't grown back.

Friday 31st December

11.15 a.m.

'You again?' says David, the same technologist who did my CT scan just ten days ago. Although he doesn't really seem all that surprised to see me.

'Yes,' I answer, somewhat more subdued than at our last meeting. 'I forgot to wish you happy Christmas last time, so I'm back to at least wish you a happy new year.'

An MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) scan works by using a powerful magnetic field and radio waves to construct a minutely detailed three-dimensional view of the area. This means it's even more critical to declare any metal I might have in – not just on – my body. I should be right though, as to my knowledge I've not had any body piercings in the last week, and my mouthful of amalgam fillings – from an indulgent, sweet-toothed childhood – doesn't seem to concern anyone. However, as I undress, I recall a rather unfortunate incident in third grade when I sat on one of Mum's huge darning needles, only half of which was ever recovered from my posterior. I can't help but imagine the second half finally dislodging – thanks to the MRI machine's magnet, which is many thousands of times stronger than the Earth's natural magnetic field – and hurtling at a terminal velocity of 65 kilometres per hour through my body from back to front. Good grief, if this brain tumour doesn't kill me, the anxiety caused by my overactive imagination certainly will.

Once again the Russian Diamond Smuggler jabs a cannula into my arm to receive the contrast dye during the procedure. I'm rather proud of myself that this time around I don't flinch, for as much as I've always been terrified of needles, I decide that maybe it's a case of mind over matter. So I distract myself – not with soap bubbles, which tend to pop midway through – by imagining I'm floating down a silver-gilded river edged with weeping willow trees, and the needle prick in the crook of my arm is simply a little nibble from a curious fish.

Well – it works for me.

The MRI machine looks like an overweight version of the robo-toad CT scanner of last week. However, its tunnel entrance is much narrower – not much wider than shoulder width – and much deeper, which makes a journey inside its maws a great deal more daunting. I gingerly lie myself down on the table.

'Are you claustrophobic?' David enquires, which immediately makes me think that I probably am.

Not that I'd had any issues with enclosed spaces when I was a child, given that I would hide from my sisters for hours at a time in various household cupboards. The pantry was certainly the most enjoyable, owing to the easy access to tasty snacks. Perhaps I'd been acclimatised to such conditions when I was a baby, when my crib was located in a walk-in linen closet because my three sisters had filled all the bedrooms. And even before that – at three months old – I'd spent a week when we were on holidays sleeping in the caravan's kitchen sink, although fortunately Mum had thought to line it with thick woollen blankets. And leave the plug in. Perhaps such minor deprivations had created certain long-term psychological issues for me, but claustrophobia was not one of them. However, I'd never been tested with something quite so challenging as an MRI. That hole is very, very narrow, and I'll be in there for nearly an hour, like a lab rat shoved up a test tube.

'Claustrophobic? Nah,' I say, as if the thought hadn't even occurred to me. Indeed, denial has suddenly become my best friend.

I'm fitted with heavy-duty earplugs and headphones, and then my head is placed in a heavy plastic cage, which looks like an open-topped Darth Vadar helmet, but in white. This attractive fashion statement is then strapped down tightly so it's impossible to move my head out of position, and I can't help but think that if Hannibal Lecter were around I'd be in real trouble, given that he had a propensity to devour human brains when still encased in their – live – owner's skulls.

The table starts to slide backwards into the machine. It seems to take forever to get me deep inside its bowels, during which time I steadfastly keep my eyes tightly shut, just in case I freak out as I watch myself slowly getting entombed. It's feeling more and more like a coffin by the second.

But then I'm too fascinated to be scared, as the next thirty minutes are filled with curious noises that reverberate throughout my entire body. Even with earplugs I can tell the sound is extraordinarily loud – sometimes getting up to the level of a jet engine. It's clear this is an experience I'm unable to deny, so I resolve to embrace it, listening to it as I would an Industrial Orchestra, with its multiple 'instruments' – jackhammers, foghorns, dentist drills, and peculiar sci-fi beeps and clicks. Indeed, I find myself rather enjoying the whole experience, and the thought of being buried alive vanishes entirely.

When I'm eventually extracted from the machine, I cautiously open my eyes to find David looming over me. 'Contrast dye,' he smiles. 'You know the drill.'

And indeed I do, so I turn my head away as he injects the solution into my cannula. Once again I get that same weird sensation of tiny frozen whitebait heading for my armpit, before they seem to defrost and become one with my own bodily fluids. Another ten minutes of scans sees me through to the end, and David waves me off for the second time in ten days.

'I hope I never see you again,' I say to him cheerfully, 'but please don't take it personally. And do have a happy new year.'

And with that I dash from the hospital as fast as I can, and vow not to give all this nonsense a second thought until next year. I've got a life to lead, a summer to embrace, a man to love, and nothing's going to stop me.

Saturday 1st January

It's twenty minutes past midnight on New Year's Day, and I'm tucked into bed at the beach with Greg snoring loudly beside me. We celebrated New Year's Eve with my two next-door neighbours, dining on fresh prawns and barbecued snapper, accompanied by a bottle or two of good champagne. A relatively simple affair, but that's the way I like it these days – no more wild parties in suburban backyards drunkenly kissing strangers under gaudy plastic mistletoe, and wondering how the heck I'm going to catch a taxi home ahead of another 550,000 car-less revellers. I've matured enough these last few years – and most certainly the last few days – to find far more joy spending time with close friends on my own balcony overlooking a vast stretch of mysterious black ocean, and kissing one's betrothed under a billion twinkling stars.

But as happy as the night was, it had been tainted by a deep sense of foreboding. I still don't know exactly what I'm up against, and whether it's seriously serious, or simply inconveniently serious. Indeed, the word *serious* has become extremely elastic these last few days, and my life could well depend on which end of the spectrum my eventual diagnosis sits. But I mustn't be gloomy. It's still technically New Year's Eve after all, so I locate the Southern Cross sitting a handspan or two above the inky-black horizon, and imagine it to be my 'holy' cross, praying to the universe that all those exciting plans Greg and I have been making will eventuate.

One day.

Monday 3rd January

I'm all blissed out. Soporific even. I've just returned from a glorious day at my favourite beach – with blindingly white sand and turquoise shallows at the base of the limestone cliffs, colourfully painted beach boxes, and a scattering of elegant yachts

and cabin cruisers bobbing about on their bright yellow moorings. I'd allowed myself to be completely in the Now, without a care in the world, and the whole experience was about as summery and sensual and life-affirming as it gets.

For a while I'd even thought that my life was perfect.

But then, back home on the front porch, as I'm rubbing the sand out from between my toes, I get a call from Amin, the specialist who saw me on Christmas Day. He's got the results of the MRI, and is going to make an appointment for me to see a neurosurgeon as soon as possible.

'A neurosurgeon?' I ask, the world suddenly stopping, even the sand falling from my feet suspended motionless in the air. 'So does that mean it's serious?'

I don't actually know why I'd bothered asking such an inane question, as it's quite clear that if I need to see a neurosurgeon as soon as possible, then things are serious. And by the sound of Amin's voice – now more leaden than lilting – things are more seriously serious than simply inconveniently serious.

I sit down on the front door step and listen carefully as Amin gently starts to unravel the security blanket that's been my life for the last fifty-odd years. Stitch by stitch.

The MRI shows there's a large mass on the surface of my brain. It's five or six centimetres in diameter – a lot bigger than what he'd been expecting. He says that although he still thinks it could be benign, it's not the sort of thing he's prepared to ignore, so seeing a neurosurgeon is the next logical step.

'Who was that?' asks Greg when I get off the phone, and trudge upstairs.

'Just a new boyfriend,' I say, somehow finding the strength to be cheeky.

And although Greg looks at me with concern furrowing his brow, we both decide to leave it at that for the time being.

Wednesday 5th January

9 a.m.

Jeffrey*, the neurosurgeon, is a rather round chap whose blue and silver striped tie doesn't fit all that neatly around his somewhat solid neck. But despite the fact he looks like he enjoys the odd twelve-course yum cha, he also has the air of someone who knows what he's talking about, and in this case, it's heads. His tiny office is filled with shelves of fist-width medical books, a light-box and a life-size plastic model of a skull, which looks as if it can be pulled apart like a three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle.

Jeffrey is friendly and chatty as he looks at my various scans on the computer screen. But then he spooks me a bit.

'I'm going to get another two radiologists to have a look at these,' he says. 'I'm worried you might actually have an atypical meningioma.'

Atypical? Yep – that would be right. I've always been regarded as a little eccentric, so being labelled with something medically atypical doesn't come as a surprise. Besides, what fun is there in being typical? If I was typical I wouldn't have gone to parties half-dressed in plastic clingwrap, or thrown a soiree at the City Baths with a Roman Orgy theme, or spent three months overseas dating seventy-five men from twenty-two nationalities for a book I was writing. In my mind, atypical behaviour means doing something a little bit different, and a little bit fun.

But the way Jeffrey says 'atypical' sounds decidedly ominous. Like it's something that's not behaving normally. Which in a person is fine – perhaps even cute – but in a tumour may not be quite so desirable. Like the nuclear waste dump next door starting to glow orange, and spewing out hordes of six-legged rats. I'm pleased, then, that Jeffrey is going to get an extra opinion or two, although frustratingly it means even more waiting.

Indeed, I'm in intolerable limbo. Jeffrey is the fourth specialist I've seen in less than three tumultuous weeks, and I'm still not sure what's wrong with me. I feel like my head is on a platter