

For the whole year we had studied together I never realised that Ian's wife was ill. He had never said anything. As I watched him walk out of the church that day, carrying one of his nieces, I remember thinking how sad I felt for Liz's parents. They'd lost a daughter forever, but Ian at least was young. He'd probably get married again. Have a second chance at sharing his life with someone. I didn't guess then that his second chance would be with me.

And now it seems as though history is repeating itself. How can I tell him?

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In the park opposite the medical clinic I slump onto one of the benches and call Ian.

'Hi, Ali, how did you go with the surgeon? I've been thinking of you all morning.' His voice is optimistic, cheery, like usual.

I struggle to get any sound out of my throat. In the end I can only whisper. 'I have cancer.'

Silence.

My fingers are slippery on the phone.

'Ali. I'm coming. Now. Where are you?'

Ten minutes later Ian sits beside me. Around us, people are walking their dogs, resting on the grass, relaxing in the sunny weather.

'I can't believe it,' I gasp. Ian hugs me, burying my face in his chest. His hands run through my hair and massage my neck and shoulders. I pull away and our eyes meet. The lines on his face seem deeper. 'Ian, tell me this is a bad dream and that I'll wake up in my bed. Please tell me I don't have cancer.'

He takes my hands. 'Ali, we're both sitting in the park and you've seen your surgeon. He's just explained that you have cancer.'

But we'll get through this together. You know I'll be right beside you every step of the way.' He gives my hands a squeeze, but his shoulders sag. 'What sort of cancer?'

'Something to do with blood. I have an appointment at Peter Mac tomorrow morning.'

A woman pushes a toddler in a stroller. The child slurps an ice-cream and it dribbles over his face and down his arm.

'What about the kids?'

I got myself fit and healthy so I'd always be able to look after them. I'd give my children the organs in my body if they needed them. Now, because of me, they're going to be hurt in the most terrible way. 'I don't want to tell them yet. Let's wait until we have more information. We need to understand what's happening before we talk to them.'

'Yes. We'll explain it to them when we can answer their questions truthfully.' Ian breathes deeply and pulls me closer. 'What else did the surgeon say?' I notice his fingers shake.

'They need to run more tests to find out if it's spread and what's going on.' As I look up at Ian the sun catches his moustache and turns it golden-bronze. 'Why is this happening to me? It's not fair. I don't smoke. I've never done drugs. I've barely ever been sick before. How can I have cancer?'

'I don't know, Ali. It's not about fair. But I promise you, we'll manage.'

A group of schoolboys dawdle in front of us, kicking stones to each other. 'I almost forgot about work tomorrow. Ian, can you ring my principal and tell her what's happened? I can't come in to school and don't know when I'll be back, but it may be a few weeks. We'll let her know how things go at Peter Mac.'

Driving home from the park, everything's surreal. I'm watching someone else from above. Someone else who's just been diagnosed. At home, organising dinner, I'm a robot. I almost don't

hear the kids. It's as if I'm enclosed by a thick layer of glass and their words simply bounce off. It takes all my energy to get a meal onto the table.

That night after dinner, Ian and I leave the kids watching television and go to my dad's place to tell him. Ian has agreed to do the explaining. I know I'll just cry.

Dad's pleased to see us but seems vaguely puzzled; he was at our place for dinner only last night. We settle into the leather chairs in his living room. Ian takes a deep breath.

'Unfortunately, we have some bad news. Ali has been diagnosed with cancer.'

'Oh Lord,' Dad says, frowning. The wrinkles on his forehead look as furrowed as a ploughed field. 'When did you find out?'

'Today,' Ian says. 'The reason her arm broke in Tasmania was because of a malignancy.'

Dad looks confused. He's eighty-one, works full-time, and I've never known him to be unwell. His face softens, and it's the look he gets when he thinks about my mum. 'Valda also had a tumour,' he says quietly. 'What happens now?'

'The first thing Ali needs is to have tests at Peter Mac. To find out if it's spread. Then they'll make a diagnosis and decide on treatment.'

'Yes, Valda was at Peter Mac,' he murmurs.

Don't remind me, I think. Can this be real? This time yesterday, I was a normal person. Today I've crossed a line and can never go back.

Dad heaves himself out of the leather chair and comes towards me.

'Why is this happening? To you?' He takes my hand, his arm trembling.

'I – can't – believe – it.' I whisper. I daren't say anything more, there'll be a torrent.

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Dad shakes his head. 'Sometimes, I just don't understand things.'
We don't stay long. We've dumped all this stuff on him. And I'm brain-dead. I hug Dad, then turn to leave as if in a trance, and trip over the front step. As Ian steadies me, I glance around and notice Dad just inside the front door, his face distorted.