

The Beginning

Sometimes it is hard to know where the beginning begins even though the end is clear. I know where Julia started but there are only sketchy reports of his beginnings. Perhaps if we knew what possibilities might emerge from the shadows we would keep the lights on at all costs but it would be at the expense of living.

She was a beautiful baby, content with the world. Plagued by the pain of reoccurring ear infections, which left her with damaged hearing and all the loss of language and communication, she never complained. Smiled at her lot and wore the badge of second twin. Her twin sister was bossy and they learned to fight when they realized for the first time they could both reach for the same object. Forget all that warm and fuzzy talk about the wonder of twins. It's a hard road.

It was a childhood full of playgroup and play dough. I breast fed the two of them propped up on beanbags as recommended by The Nursing Mothers' Association. Their father was a seaman so he didn't spend too much time arranging the beanbags. He did build a beach house where the children were able to roam free and practise their independence. He was the sort of father who took his children to the top of the hill to learn to ride a bike and then launched them freewheeling downwards to the street at the bottom of the hill.

Emma my first-born was five years older than the twins, old enough to orchestrate concerts and older children into the house. A good, big sister. Not involved in their fights. A placid girl, who loved to dance and who enjoyed having little sisters.

Outside the protection of home, Julia lived in an isolated world, but she had her twin, Katrina, to fight for her inclusion in the playground. Katrina was king of the castle and Julia grappled with shyness. It allowed her to observe others. Katrina topped the class while Julia struggled to learn ten spelling words. She learned the humility required to live with learning difficulties. Katrina excelled in the gym; Julia painted ceramics with a circle of

middle-aged women with whom she chatted. Taught her to listen, to enjoy the simple pleasure of interaction with others.

We worked together on her speech and occupational therapy exercises each afternoon after school, which was time spent together, so she was always a willing pupil. Without any intellectual impairment, Julia was sensitive to her disabilities. Called herself Dah, unable to handle the J. Always clumsy, she would laugh at herself and a crash on the steps would be followed by her cheerful voice proclaiming “ It’s O.K. it’s just Dah taking a fall”.

The baby, Ella, was born when the twins were ten, a perfect age to practise motherhood without the distractions of sex. Ella was to say the least, an unexpected arrival but we were all delighted at what life had brought us and Julia showed the endless patience that was born of her love of children.

She had found her voice by the time puberty had extended its slippery fingers into our lives. She matured early so she was full of thoughts of fashion and boys while her sister was still busy pulling on the leotard. Katrina did catch up of course but by then Julia had established her own identity and a close circle of friends. She was a beautiful looking girl but it was her concern for others and her sense of humour that attracted them.

Their father built the children a large cage from recycled materials. It housed a collection of birds that I tended in the usual manner of mothers who always seem to end up feeding the pets. Good training for mothers I guess even if the intention is to instill a sense of responsibility into the offspring. Julia hankered after her own bird. One that would sit on her shoulder and respond personally. She arrived home from the markets with the first recruit who unfortunately took advantage of the open cage and bolted for freedom. Another trip to the markets produced another candidate whom she named Hope. What optimism! She looked so crushed when she returned from school to the empty cage. “Hope is dead,” she lamented, which made a resounding impression on Ella who as a three year old would accompany me

to mass on Sunday and actually listen to the sermon. Our parish priest chose that very week to deliver a homily on hope and the attentive Ella protested that in fact hope is dead, her distinctively childish voice ringing out loudly from the front pew. There were no more birds.

Her father is a difficult man. He taught the children to work hard, to exercise hard and live hard. He was not one for following the rules. My children accepted him with love and accommodated any injustices in his behaviour. Accepted the imperfections in human nature and forgave any of his trespasses. It tempered her resilience to male domination. But after a round table discussion with my four daughters it was agreed that we would be better off on our own. And so it was that we were free to do as we pleased and it pleased us to be able to give a home to homeless kids.

The lives of other children certainly broadened the girls' view of the world. They willingly made room on the couch and vacated their beds when necessary and learned how hard life is for so many. Gave them empathy and a real understanding that you do not choose poverty or privilege at birth. Introduced boys into our household, brothers to fill the void in a female household. The girls were of a good age to take in the hard grit of it. Julia learnt the lessons well. She always knew what to say to comfort a new arrival in our household. Made each feel valued in a gentle way.

We were by now a low-income family so at fourteen Julia was selling fish and chips after school and learning the thrill of a bargain. She was frugal with herself but was endlessly generous with her friends and family. She would happily eat a vegemite sandwich and forego the McDonalds. Each year when the girls were still in primary school, I would do the pilgrimage to the local show, an event that was designed to drain the pockets of adults and delight the children. Julia lined up at all the rides and show bag stands until the year she was given control of her own money. She didn't like to be ripped off. Took it as an affront to her intelligence and she could be amazingly forthright if the situation demanded it. She used to go in to bat for me sometimes, fiercely protective.

She did spend money on clothes and loved jewellery and always had some special piece on layby. Her collection grew over the years and she never lost track of the origin of each piece. Kept the clothes as well. Unable to part with all those bargains, she packed them into suitcases that lived under my spare bed and filled up the shed. When Ella was of an age to show an interest, Julia would arrive from life elsewhere and showed no mercy if she believed Ella had worn her clothes. Symbols I guess of her hard work.

The travel bug took hold when she headed off to America with a male school friend when she was fifteen. Saved the money selling fish and chips, not expecting a first class ticket. She never tired of meeting new people and immersing herself in new situations. She was not a promiscuous girl, which rather set her apart from her peers who were busy with their early experimentations with sex. It allowed her to cement her friendships and open the lines of communication with the opposite sex. Her male friends always remained fiercely loyal.

Her first boyfriend lived with us for quite some time. He had come from difficult circumstances and she understood his disadvantage. They shared a bed but not a sexual relationship. She said she wasn't ready for sex. He was a volatile character only twelve months older than her. She was full of teenage insecurities but they offered each other comfort. He moved on in the impulsive way in which he has seemed to conduct his life.

The week the twins finished year twelve I sold my house and moved them both into separate flats. They had to visit each other to fight! How they missed the daily battles over hairbrushes, borrowed clothes, household chores and all the other things they shared. Julia went off to work in a fruit shop, paid her rent, paid her bills, lived a full social life, never once asked for a loan and in twelve months had accumulated enough money to set sail with Emma for England. She thanked me for giving her that final shove into independence, recognizing the risk I'd taken.

She loved London - it was full of people. She worked in the canteen of a fashion house in Oxford Street. Not only access to cheap clothes, but also, the leftovers, which she would deliver to her collection of homeless people on her homeward journey. I went to London to work and Ella and I joined the girls complete with their English boyfriends. We lived in Streatham. Julia loved the rhythm of the streets, besotted by the black faces and the liquid eyes of the children. The Brixton Markets dripping with promises of a foreign world.

I watched her domestic affairs. She had an expectation that a man must pull his weight. Must be aware of his duties as a partner. The Englishman was ready to travel and they went to New Zealand for a year. Graded apples, which she said allowed her the freedom to meditate all day. Turned twenty-one. Katrina joined her for the occasion from Perth. They celebrated with a hangi cooked by the Maoris from upstairs.

Technology was still creeping in. Mobile phones were not in common use and I would have to wait for an update of the travels. Reports seemed to indicate that there were always unattended children in the cheap housing no matter where she lived. She attended them with care. Unable to bear the neglect.

It wasn't all so serious. She loved to party. Would never call it quits until the sun came creeping over the horizon. She came home single and cemented all her friendships. Had lunches with the girls. Knew the pubs and the clubs and all the characters. Danced until closing. The shy child banished by her enthusiasm for living. I was invited to join her on occasions. A privilege to be part of it.

Hospitality offered her a world in which she could shine. Always aware of her own clumsiness, she was however, anxious when starting a new job. Refused ever to write the blackboard menu, afraid to reveal her dyslexia. Enjoyed the daily interaction with her customers and they with her. A hard worker she was never one to call in sick even though she loved to sleep until after noon. Night shifts suited her better; she was vital at night.

There were other men and other places after that. She could not be home for long before she was busy working hard at putting the money together for another trip. Restless, pulled by the need to travel and to answer her own questions. She loved the challenge. Only ever lived in my house for very brief periods, determined to prove her independence.

Moved by the circumstances of the people she met. Julia enjoyed all people. Could never resist the opportunity to give. She never drove a car but claimed that humanity is far more interesting when viewed from the bus. She always carried little gifts just in case she should run into some needy soul. She once had all her hair shaved off while travelling in Laos because she was moved by the poverty of the barber. Paid him double and had to buy a wig for her arrival in Dublin where she was about to start a new adventure.

Raised as a Catholic, Julia searched for own spirituality. She was not a church attendee but would accompany me to mass at Christmas if she were home. She considered thoughtfully the religious views of others. Was aware of the face of God in the faces of the children she met, the people in the street and the friends she made. I remember her call one Christmas morning from Dublin. The city was alive with the ringing of bells, which echoed through the phone. Breathless, she explained that she was running to mass and sent her Christmas love down through the wires.

Dublin was just her sort of city. Big enough and small enough. Full of people from exotic places. She fell in love with a Nigerian man, a product of Nigerian streets. Complete with child in need of a mother. One foot still in the world of clubs and pubs. A taste of both worlds.

That was what I knew of her. What I knew of him was sketchy. Knowledge of just the bare bones of his life, of what he chose to tell us. Observations of his reactions.

He was from New Zealand, had been orphaned when his mother was found floating in a river with half her face removed and was then raised by his grandmother. His grandmother spoke only Samoan and ruled over Jimmy and his brother with a firm hand. Later he lived with an aunt and uncle who beat him daily. He did not like to be touched, and visibly flinched if an acquaintance got too close.

The Aunt and Uncle approached religion with zeal and a heavy hand and insisted on attendance at church. His religious beliefs were a blend of Christianity and Samoan lore. He was a problem at school. Refused to buckle down, bored by the process of structured learning. Ended up living on the streets for some time but later fathered a child. He told me this but he told Julia more. He admitted that he had treated the mother of the child very badly neglected them both and joined the army. Fought in East Timor, but there was no report of why he was discharged. His ambition was to join the Foreign Legion and he loved to inform any new audience of his intention. "He's a trained killer," Julia observed, perplexed by the notion.

The mystery of him was endorsed by his use of more than one surname. He always held off from people, stood firm at the back of the room, watching but not watched. Jimmy avoided eye contact not from shyness which was the first impression, but because he liked to have control. He drank very little alcohol and disapproved of any drug use. "He's really straight," Julia declared. He was certainly different to any one else in our lives. Little did we know that he was to be a complication in our journey.

Chapter 1

Julia moved to Dublin armed with a twelve-month working visa when she was twenty-five. She liked the idea of going alone. She knew nobody there and new places and faces called. Prospects for obtaining a working visa run dry for waitresses at thirty and she felt that time was running short. Her friends at home were starting to settle down, produce children, and make their commitments.

Emma was still living in Liverpool. She had married and her voice on the end of the phone was as Pommie as her husband. “I won’t fall in love,” Julia promised, “I don’t ever want to have to choose between there and here.” But she did. And the choice tormented her for a long time.

About the time Julia’s visa expired she met her Nigerian man and his little boy Charles. She allowed her working visa to lapse, captivated by both of them. Dublin was riding on high times, the streets were full of people and the recession had not yet emerged. There was plentiful work in the hospitality industry with good money attached. She was well aware however, that without a visa her movement in and out of Ireland was restricted and so she took on the status of an alien in order to stay and love them both.

Twelve months later she invited her twin, Katrina to come to Dublin. Julia had established a wide circle of friends some Irish but many like herself, travellers and immigrants. Adventurers, all able to take advantage of inner city life, the café and bars of Temple Bar. Emma came over from England regularly to visit her sisters. Julia phoned in June and offered to pay my fare in order that I could meet the boyfriend and the child. The arrangements were made for me to arrive for Christmas. However, in the interim the sad news broke. Apparently there was another woman, the mother of a second of his children who had been waiting in the wings and he had made a choice.

The choice left her as she said, unable to breathe as if all her life had been sucked from her very lungs. I posted Natalie wrapped up

with a Leunig prayer. Natalie was a somewhat tattered stuffed toy that she had loved since childhood. I had produced her in London when Ella and I went there with the intention at the time of staying on in England, but Julia had sent Natalie back to Australia for safe keeping when she moved on to New Zealand. She rang to say that it was the best parcel she had ever received.

I went for Christmas anyway. There was no prospective husband to meet but my girls were there and they had their lives and their friends to introduce me to. There was the further incentive of seeing Emma who showed no indication of leaving England for home. We would all celebrate together with just the baby Ella left to water the plants at home.

I didn't notice the melanomas when I stepped off the plane because we were all rugged up snugly in our winter clothes. I saw them the next day. I have spent my entire adult life keeping a watchful eye on my own and have become quite an expert on bits that require the surgeon's knife. Unmistakable, one had grown on top of a childhood scar created on her right hand by the ear and throat surgeon who had removed a black, gnarly growth at my request, while performing a tonsillectomy on Julia. My melanoma history had made me wary, but at that time the growth on Julia's hand was benign. She had been young enough at the time to mourn the loss of what she called her beauty spot. The other was on her left forearm. Stark, against her olive skin.

How long had they been there? Time is of the essence when dealing with melanoma. She was dismissive, but Emma knew. Emma had indicated their presence months before on a visit from Liverpool. Julia understood my concern but she was unconcerned. Doctors were expensive and she was an alien without the benefits of access to public health care. Her youth an invincible shield. She wasn't ready to come home knowing that she couldn't go back.

The recession had begun to make its mark on Dublin and her lack of visa left her unemployed. It became clear that she had no option but to come home. She and Katrina stayed on after I left

with Natalie tucked into my luggage for safe keeping, but they were making plans to visit India on their homeward journey. They were in no rush and would travel for as long as their money allowed. They arrived home at the end of March to a warm welcome from their friends. We celebrated with a party at my home but my attention was on the doctor's appointment that I had booked weeks before with our G.P.

Our G.P. removed the growths and we waited for the results to determine if they were indeed melanomas. Julia wasn't too concerned, I guess because she had grown up as a witness to my own melanomas and mine had always been removed successfully. I was concerned because I knew that a long time had elapsed since their appearance. The results revealed that both were melanomas and that a skin specialist would be required to remove the remaining cancerous cells as they had spread beyond the boundaries of the obvious growths.

The specialist cut her hand from the base of her finger to her wrist and removed more tissue from her arm leaving a crater about ten centimeters long. It was unpleasant and the surgery left her sore and uncomfortable, however the specialist was certain that he had been successful in removing all the cancer. I breathed a sigh of relief feeling lucky that the scars were the worst of what she had to show for what I felt was a close call.

By May the scars had healed and at the end of the month the twins celebrated their twenty-eighth birthday, full of promise for the future. On the day we received the news from Liverpool that Emma's marriage was over and she was coming home. We were all delighted to see the end of what had been a very unhappy union and rejoiced in the knowledge that for the first time in ten years we would all be together again.

Julia went back to work but she was plagued by doubts of the future, restless as always, her friends breast-feeding or pregnant. Torn between applying for a Canadian working visa and the lure of babies. Trapped by her learning difficulties she felt that a waitress had a limited time, that restaurants were the domain of

the youthful face. No tired faces to spoil the meal. She needed a second job because it became apparent that some expensive dental work was required and applied for work back at the city's airport where she had worked on a previous visit home. Her application was initially rejected because the employer complained to the co-worker who had recommended Julia, that he believed that she had psychological problems. Julia was bewildered. I pointed out that her scars did indeed look as if she was a victim of self-harm. She got the job: because cancer is O.K., self-harm is not.

When Emma came home in September she moved with the twins into their father's house. He is retired and spends months travelling overseas leaving his house vacant. Julia had been living there with him because she was anxious that he was advancing into old age and she wanted to spend twelve months with him. Wanted to say thank you to her dad. An unexplainable feeling that time was running out. But she got it wrong it wasn't his time that was running out.

The girls launched themselves into life but Julia laboured with depression. She complained of regular bouts of nausea but dismissed them, buried in her busy workload. The year disappeared and as Christmas approached Katrina took a job in a pub in western Queensland. I made trifle for Christmas lunch because Julia could not conceive of a Christmas without trifle. Her very close friend Ian was with us also but Ella speculated that she had an uneasy feeling we were missing the only opportunity to spend Christmas together and Julia announced that she had a lump under her arm.

Chapter 2.

Experience made her more willing to heed the need for haste and Julia booked a consultation with our G.P. while still arguing that a lump under the arm might simply be an indication of an infected gland. Thoughts of any real danger pushed aside with the thoughts of a new year. Her faith in the permanence of life unshaken.

I am a teacher and in the course of the year the girls had convinced me that attending a school trip to the USA with forty students would be a great opportunity to explore a country I had not previously experienced. I was committed. There would be insufficient teachers if I pulled out. Julia was insistent that all was well. Her appointment was to be the day after my departure. The new year barely broken.

I wasn't there. The news came in short bursts down the line. A specialist. Scans. Recommendation, that Julia goes ahead and attends a pre-organised music festival. A rough road ahead. Katrina, suitcase in hand, abandoning the west. Pet scans in Brisbane followed by dinner and a night out with her attending twin and cousin, cancelled due to vomiting. The specialist, sure of the results, but unable to help, because Julia was not a private patient. A suggestion of something untoward on the liver but no need for alarm. Back to the G.P. a man whom we trusted, who had been looking after the family since the twins were babies. He found a surgeon operating on public health in our local hospital!

Bulletins punctuating my mobile phone. The cold sharp air of the ski chalet in Seattle, her positivity fuelling my own hopes. Like any long distance call from a foreign place.

Julia and Katrina picked me up from the railway station. Me in the back seat and life seemingly so normal, the two of them in the front. An operation scheduled for the twenty-fifth. I was home in time. Hadn't missed too many important bits as Julia decreed. Not all the news was bad. She had met a man in the pub, clad in her new dress, a new love interest. He had gone away on business but was sure to return; Julia felt sure about that.

She was positive before the operation and expressed no anxiety about the outcome however she was nervous about the procedure. She had developed a deep dislike of injections which stemmed from her childhood operations. Her father delivered her to the prep room but retreated recognizing her need for her mother. She sat up in the narrow bed of the small room and asked me to record the moment on my mobile phone. Theatre gown and stockings, a game to pass the time.

The surgeon stripped the lymph nodes from under her arm and removed the offending lump. We could not at that time know how many lumps were to follow and our trust was with the surgeon. He also tidied up the scar on her arm, which had healed as a mass of proud flesh. A wonderful man devoted to his patients, a man who worked tirelessly. Julia admired him greatly.

Afterwards still high from the operation she demanded a cigarette and Emma assisted her, complete with drainage bags and drips, on the arduous journey out into the grounds of the hospital. We all tried to advise against such a foolish move but Julia was after all so determinedly independent. Not the moment to start making my own demands no matter how foolish the journey seemed. It was a public ward each of which seems to be equipped with a patient who is on the mend, the arbitrator of good advice. This ward contained an elderly woman who was on the mend and looking for distraction. "Don't smoke," she decreed, which Julia ignored. Julia returned, rattled and ashen white and as she dropped into her bed she appealed to the elderly woman "Don't tell Dad."

"I won't love," she replied.

When we came back in the morning they were the best of friends.

It was Australia Day and the rest of the country was celebrating. Cars decked out in the Australian flag and the smoke of barbeques. We could see it from the window of the hospital, which looked out over the mouth of the river. Separated by a pane of glass and no other thought but of Julia. She was happy to know that her friends were out there amongst it all. The new man rang her although I wasn't there for the call.

Of course there are the results. There is always the wait for the results. I had not yet visited the surgeon's office as Julia had been there with her father in my absence and she seemed positive that it was a simple matter of removing the lymph nodes and all would be well. The surgeon was disappointed however, he had done his best, but the cancer had more of a grip than the scans had indicated and radium would be required. Her friends supplied flowers and love; the start of a journey for each of them.

Mid week she went home to her father's as I was still working. On the Friday she came for the weekend, complete with a drainage bag, for some maternal love and nursing. Three weeks of healing was required before the radium treatment could begin. She was a little apprehensive about the radium with stories of nausea and diarrhoea that had plagued my sister, her Auntie Katrina, who had received radium treatment after removal of her uterus and the lymph nodes in her groin as a result of cancer.

She rang Auntie Katrina, as she had several times in the previous twelve months, to see if all was on track. The rest of us seemed to find ourselves so often in a random conversation about radium. Everyone had a story to tell. It became the topic at that time. But Julia had always been able to put pain into perspective. Had grown up with it. As a baby there were times when the only way I recognized that she was suffering from an ear infection was when I noticed the discharge from her ear oozing down her face. In Dublin she had been able to ignore the prolonged pain of a recalcitrant tooth abscess because the money she had saved for treatment was needed to pay the electricity bill for the Nigerian and his child. There were no complaints from her about the matter.

Discomfort was the verdict. That did not seem too high a price to pay. Julia always healed quickly and when the drainage bag was removed she launched herself positively into the future. Friends visited and they rang. So many, all genuinely concerned and looking for ways to assist, beyond the offering of a bunch of flowers. The mobile phone a solid connection to life. With some surprise I listened to her making arrangements for lunch with a

cancer survivor who was the mother of some distant friend. On the phone she sounded as if she was making arrangements for yet another of her many social engagements. At the time it didn't sound quite right as if perhaps a little caution should be practised. But I am her mother not her keeper and long ago I had recognized the damage of a nagging tongue.

Julia's main concern was weight gain; her inactivity was a contrast from her rigid exercise routine. As a teenager she had once spent an entire summer wrapped in an overcoat to hide what she viewed as grotesque weight. Her eating habits were odd. She would eat one food exclusively for a period and then focus on another. Sweets were another matter, they were always on the menu but always accompanied by guilt. She would limit her intake by day but by night the demon could take control and she would sleep walk to the fridge and demolish anything sweet. Sugar is to be avoided, it feeds cancer was the message from the dietician. A harsh penance.

There was the question of paying for treatment. It was expensive. Her father offered to lend her the money and so the problem seemed resolved. So many obstacles seemed to be resolved in the following months. As quickly as they appeared they disappeared. My mother like my sister had undergone radium treatment for cancer forty-five years earlier. Technology must have made resounding leaps since then and my mother lived on to see her children reach adulthood so I too felt that the cure was on the way.

Chapter 3

On his return she brought Jimmy to my house for dinner. Uncharacteristic of her as in the past she made very sure of her relationships before she made any introductions. No point in stirring up hope where none existed. He arrived in an elderly car. “Seven teaspoons,” was his response to the quantity of sugar required to sweeten his introductory cup of tea. He liked my library but his interest was taken by the bible that sits at my front door challenging a response. He recorded a piece of his writing in my notebook, a mixture of philosophical and religious responses to life, to ponder as I sipped on my red wine. I attributed his reference to “the slain” to his experiences as a soldier but later I looked them up and learned that it is a term also used to describe those who fall when healed by the power of a religious healer. I didn’t ask the intention of the author.

He was interested in drawing and I offered him my drawing tools and showed him how they worked. He was easy going, relaxed offering an explanation of who he was. He had been selling roof insulation and at that very moment the industry had collapsed under a burden of disgrace. He was adamant that his social responsibilities had dictated the way he conducted business. A victim of a government mistakes! Julia’s previous boyfriends had been an eclectic mix of tradies and labourers and she was impressed by his business shirt and his entrepreneurial view of his future. He certainly seemed to be in control.

He was obviously smitten with Julia and lamented the fact that he had given his greenstone to the wrong girl. Someone from his past. It was a stone that had been dipped into a sacred pond and apparently carried its own magic.

He was a big man a real physical presence in the room. Handsome enough but with a lisp, which sometimes as I later came to understand, hinted at a slight insecurity. Dark brows, which met in the middle and hid any intent in his eyes. Not the sort of man one would choose to challenge physically and he came with the reputation of a soldier. She dark haired and brown eyed was the

odd one out in our family. Her father's coloring, a contrast to my Irish heritage. Often mistaken as having an ethnic heritage, I could see her appeal.

It was a happy time and Julia and I were both intrigued. At the end of the evening he retired to bed, nose buried in the book of Revelations, which he read with glee to Julia. He'd certainly arrived in her life at a moment in which she needed the reassurance of a future and of love. He spoke of archangels with much authority and one could almost believe in that moment that Julia had found one.

There was the question of where he should live as his business had folded and he was unemployed. Julia's father was in the process of repairing a retaining wall at his home and so he offered a solution to both problems by providing Jimmy with a bed and employing him to fix the retaining wall.

Chapter 4

The radium treatment commenced. I took the morning off school to drive her to her first appointment where she also received a schedule of treatments. It wasn't too painful after all. We went for a hamburger at the roadside café in which her twin had worked while she was at school. Just another day, the two of us watching the traffic going about its business, but a sense of the surreal grinding away like the gears of the passing cars. She didn't want me to take any more time off school; there were ample offers for lifts to future appointments although she was reluctant to impose on anyone. I felt as if I should insist but I knew she did not want to disrupt my life. There was always the bus and the clinic was not very far from her father's house, she reasoned.

I had to be content with the telephone knowing that she was unlikely to complain. School kept me busy. Emma and Katrina were also busy with their work. Emma had started in a demanding job at TAFE in which she was both writing and delivering the course. Katrina immersed in the dramas of the kitchen of a big hotel. A blessing really. Immersion in another reality that helped to occupy our minds. Ella was at home with me and had just embarked on her first year of university so I was also occupied driving her to the railway station so that she could travel to uni and picking her up at night from her part time job. Reports of the visits from Julia's friends and many old family friends assuring me that she was in good hands.

Emma and Katrina had moved from their father's house into a rental property on the beach in early February. I drove them there for the initial inspection and sat parked in the car while they considered their verdict. It was perfect. Set into the hill, it had a balcony that overlooked the beach and it backed onto the bushy reserve of a headland. Best of all it had a cellar area that would be big enough for Julia so that she could live there also. She was to remain at her father's while she received her radium but was excited at the prospect of moving in. At the time our only visions were of the convenience of a residence that afforded them all

ample privacy and space. Little did I know as I waited, how that space would be used.

It was to be the first time that they had all lived together since they were teenagers. Three bachelor girls was the original plan but Emma picked up a partner on the way and so there were to be four in residence. It was fun decorating. All the girls had accumulated many works of art and souvenirs during their years of travel. Memories of past places and people. Julia's were stored at my place while she lived at her father's house.

And then the news. The doctors were surprised. The melanoma had grown back at the exact point of the application of the radium. She took it in her stride, convinced of a future because she now had Jimmy by her side.

There was a huge army beside her in fact. An army of friends all anxious to do anything they possibly could to provide support. What love and what joy they brought to Julia. Friends who shared desks from the first days of school. Friends who shared teenage adventures. Friends newly made. Parents of friends. Friends of parents who'd watched her grow and those she didn't know, wanting to support us all.

A fundraiser was proposed and accepted and the army went to work. It was a secret so Julia was not to know. They kept her busy. There was an important wedding to attend, a couple of old travelling companions from her 'round Australia' days. Lunches and countless visits from the girlfriends, children in tow.

The girlfriends and Katrina organized it all, for the sixth of March and spread the word. An afternoon event with fantastic prizes for each and for all, friends and their families and old folk, the cousins and aunt. Friends who had a lot of organizing to get themselves there, who drove some distances, with babies in the back seat. It was worth it all to see the joy on her face when Jimmy led her in on his arm, into a backyard transformed into a wonderful place. The pain forgotten, the last thought on her mind.

They turned on the lights and the music when it got dark so that she could dance with us all on the deck.

We were all astounded by how much was raised. By people's donations and the prizes By the tickets they bought. Their generosity, overwhelming. The goodness of them! Nobody went home empty handed. I didn't pay much attention at the time and was surprised the next day to learn that Aunty Katrina and I had won a three night stay at a beautiful bay five hours drive away; the resort owner connected by marriage to the neighbour who brought her children up as I brought up mine.

And a prize for Julia too! Two nights accommodation for she and Jimmy at the Marriott with some money to spend, given by the parents of a childhood friend. A romantic end to a wonderful day. A day to melt any negativity away. She bought me an elephant there. I had a small collection from places I've been and also a delft patterned one that Julia had given me six months before. They live in my lounge room. Little ones in a little herd with their trunks held high. My new one was made of green glass with silver inside and wild transparent ears. Something from somewhere she had been.

People showed their support in other ways as well. There were no shortages of prayers. I teach in a Catholic high school and the students and staff were quick to offer their prayers. Our journey became their journey and in the following months there were many school assemblies and pastoral meetings in which Julia and my family were the focus of their thoughts. There is no question about the power of collective prayer, that concentration of human energy that buoys the spirit. 2010 was the year that Mary MacKillop came to the attention of the Australian public. The year of her canonization, her name a buzzword on everyone's lips. I received a relic to pass on to Julia who was touched and kept it under her pillow. I gave her a card in which I reminded her to pray for what she really needed hoping that she would recall my words if things got tough.

For me it was the beginning of a constant mantra “Mary MacKillop, pray for us”. Not a prayer to pursue a miracle but prayer asking for the help to know when and what to say, to know when to deliver hope and when to console when there was no hope. A prayer to remind me that as Julia’s mother my job was to guide and support. A prayer for both of us so that we could recognize where our strengths lay. A prayer to accept the unknown and a prayer for any time. A prayer to accept what I must. A short, sharp jab of reality.

Chapter 5

The cancer specialist offered treatment with Interferon, a drug with unpleasant side effects and a terribly small success rate. It would involve nine months of treatment and Julia for the first time wrestled with the balance of the quality of life. She wasn't keen on the idea but to me small odds sounded infinitely better than no odds. It was the first time that she questioned the uncertainty of her future. My girls and I reeled with Julia under the blow and we were beginning to understand that the specialist's offer reflected the gravity of the situation. Beginning to understand the roller coaster in which we sat precariously perched on a giddy height and that we were unable to control the rapid descent into the troughs, that there was no break, no handle to pull. We were firmly harnessed in for the ride.

Barely had she started to wrestle with the decision to take Interferon, than the surgeon offered her further surgery. He felt it was worth removing the newly emerged lump. There was still the matter of the growth on her liver but somehow Julia had dismissed it as unimportant and the surgeon did not seem to be pressing the matter. I was still at work and so her sister Katrina attended the medical appointments. My knowledge was second hand but the surgery appeared to be all that was required to rid her of her burden.

It was such a concentrated time. I marvel when I look back at how little time had actually passed since the removal of her lymph nodes. Her wounds still fresh, hardly healed. Time seemed condensed and it was not yet mid March. Jimmy was still building the retaining wall for Julia's father. It seemed he wasn't terribly keen to get out of bed in the morning. He approached work without any sense of urgency and while Julia could understand her father's complaint about Jimmy's attitude, she was happy to have someone to keep her company and besides she was always one for stretching the boundaries between night and day herself. She did however comment on his reluctance to ever contribute to the household budget. "He could at least buy a loaf of bread," she complained. Julia never came to my house or anyone else's empty

handed, her sense of what was right and proper deeply ingrained. But, love has the ability to dissipate years of belief. It transpired that he was without a car; the one he had driven to my house was in fact only on loan. He owned a small grip with a minimum of clothes, a mobile phone and that was about it.

He was strong enough to build the retaining wall effortlessly, carrying the stones up through three floors to the top of the block as the house stood on a hill. However it was business that occupied his mind and with the demise of the insulation business he now had his sights set on installing solar panels. There was a business partner whom I never met but Julia did before the insulation went bust. He certainly seemed to be legitimately engaged in his future. His situation was understandable.

The girlfriends were all delighted to see Julia in love even though Jimmy didn't engage in conversation with them and remained aloof during visitations. My girls complained that they found it very hard to engage him in conversation, however I didn't experience the same problem. He appeared to be shy and I could well understand what an overwhelming force Julia's army of friends could be.

Julia worried about moving out of her father's house, concerned that he would be lonely. She often cooked for him and as a dutiful daughter attended functions at his club when he needed a partner. Welcomed in his friends and knew his neighbours. But she knew that she must make the break, that her own independence must be a priority and that Jimmy could not remain at her father's house forever. She had been given leave from work and was concerned that she could not keep work waiting indefinitely. It seems such a small concern now, however it was important at the time, one of the many issues that time dissipates.

She decided to wait until after the next round of surgery. She trusted her father to look after her during her recovery and her new residence would need a little love and paint before it would be truly habitable. Both her sisters were working and at the new address there were visitors from England with the attendant social

obligations. Her father would be on hand to cook, clean and change her dressings. Surgery was scheduled for the eleventh of March, five days after her fundraiser. There seemed no need for alarm just the dread and the weariness of the pain.

Chapter 6

She was ill after the surgery. Katrina, Ella and I stood beside her bed shaken by her pain. Emma was rushing from work but in her stress Julia asked us to halt her journey, unable to focus on anything but her own experiences. Not wanting to cause us pain. We soothed and washed her as we trembled and gradually she felt a little better. For her sisters it was to be the start of their nursing.

I had asked Jimmy before the operation if he would like a lift but he said he would find his own way. And he did, he had rented a car and stood at the door of her hospital room dressed up in his best long-sleeved white shirt. He asked my permission to enter the room and then presented the flowers that melted her pain away. We left them there, glad for what he could bring.

I went to school the next day feeling hopeful but troubled, that the world was travelling far too fast. I knew Julia had a lot of visitors to see. Her father and I don't see eye to eye so Julia made sure we didn't bump into each other too often. There was our old neighbour and Emma who had not seen her the night before and unlimited friends and of course the surgeon and cancer specialist with the results. I could have taken the day off but Julia did not want that, she would see me after school. I would pick Ella up at the station after university and continue to the hospital. She was due in early.

It was Thursday. I know that because my afterschool duty on a Thursday is to work with kids at our Homework Club. I took the call as the club began. I don't remember now who was on the other end of the line. If I was in my office, or on route to the club. Gone from my memory and yet all other details of the long journey remain. Three months to live. The shock on my colleagues' faces and emotion bursting my lungs.

I sat in my car in the car park to let it out and then rang my sister to deliver the news. I drove to the station and waited there in a world so suddenly altered but in which I must function. That feeling of detachment from worldly things. The ordinariness of

people coming and going unaware that the world had changed, transformed beyond the boundaries of the every day. Ella wasn't on the train I remember that because there was more time in the car park. Some delay at the university. I greeted a couple of arriving trains. Poor Ella on the train burdened with the news. In the end I don't remember how she got home. Or how she'd dealt with the news. I remember driving towards home with the next wave of intense grief building in its fury.

How much pain must she now be feeling and what should I say? The question I must face at last. I could hear her girlfriends as I walked into the ward. She had been upgraded to a private room so that they could deliver the news. All those people, but none of us had been there when the doctors came bearing their verdict. We had had no warning of it and she had been alone. Her father had arrived also, as scheduled by Julia who had planned the day's visitations, unaware of the news. He had known all the girls since childhood and was surprisingly composed. She was having a pedicure, the massage delivered and the McDonalds displacing the hospital food. It was then that I really realized the power her friends brought. The power to kiss and make it better, more powerful than any drug. She greeted me with an apologetic glance for the presence of her friends, no room for tears or private discussion, the room full of their attentions and their love.

The doctors discharged her in a couple of days knowing how precious her time was. Home to her father and Jimmy and friends. Her friends were unwilling to accept the diagnoses. "We'll fight!" they said with conviction. Every, Internet, testimonial, accredited, not accredited cure for cancer, was investigated by her army of friends. She ate crushed bitter almonds and read the testimonials of cancer survivors. Hard on her sugar habit and the guilt of smoking, but she gave it all a go.

So much attention that I felt a little superfluous but I know that was never their intention. I was sceptical about the Internet cures because we were dealing with melanoma and now it had travelled beyond the reach of the surgeon. Her surgeon was also shaken

knowing her trust in him, seeing her youth I suppose, although it was something unsaid, just the emotion on his face.

Their determination inspired her. She was not staying with me so I could not be privy to all she said and all she did. There were no tears from her, no expression of self-pity. No willingness to share her pain as if what she said out loud, could never be taken back again. Protection for her sisters as well, her love ingrained. A circular connection between the utterance of the sentence and the reality of it all.

I don't want it to be about me

Accept grief and all it brings
Taste the hard edge of pain
Without which there is no gain.

Pray that I can
Believe all that I say I can.
Live it, touch it, feel it.

Accept each wave
And all it brings.
The hard grit of it.

Each wave,
Each wave
That splays upon
The cool wet sand.

Chapter 7

Two Tawny Mouthed owls lived at Emma and Katrina's house. They were in residence when the girls moved in. At first there was only one, a male who slept by day in the protection afforded by the aluminum awning outside a bedroom window. He was joined by a female who was not always permitted to sit on the same perch but roosted behind him on the rail that supported the far side of the awning, depending on his mood. Visitors young and old marvelled at them, they became part of every visit but remained indifferent to all the attention. Charming, they became part of the identity of the house, the subject of photographs and children's delight.

While she was still in hospital her friends came to transform the room that was waiting for her at her sisters' house. It was dark and dingy with an offshoot, a little odd room dug into the hill on one side. The little room contained an old wardrobe smothered in graffiti and a foam mattress with the remains of a fire from some derelict past. The walls of the main room were constructed of artificial wood panels carelessly spaced, an afterthought of the rooms upstairs. But it was large with an alcove and had windows that let in the outside and its own shower and toilet and private access to the world outside. So they painted it white and I bought blinds to control the light.

She rang from her bed with instructions for what I must serve for lunch. All the details considered right down to the cake. The money from the fundraiser to help pay for it all and we all raised our glasses to Julia when she gave us a call and took a group photo so she could see us all. The perfect couches and coffee table appeared at a roadside sale and she had the money to buy them. From the same place I found a dresser to reflect her taste, a place for her jewellery box knotted with a tangle of precious jewellery. Treasures appeared as if by magic at the very right price. I bought cushions to tie all the colours in and her very dear friend Ian who renovated houses for a living, arrived with the pot plants complete with smart pots. And for the bed I was sent to the shop to buy the blue sheets that made her feel well. She said it was the colour that

made her feel right having practised in my spare room where I have my blue sheets. Two sets with a satin trim.

It took two days to complete the room and her friends brought gifts of new towels, crockery, and a TV set and waited for the moment when Jimmy led her into the room. Worth every moment of their hard work. The bed she had purchased, a symbol of the roots that she was at last willing to put down, screened from the sitting area by a bamboo blind. We didn't hang her paintings and art works, the pleasure was for her.

She debated about each piece and what should sit above her bed. I had brought her crucifix back from Dublin, a beautiful piece of royal blue porcelain decorated in the Moroccan style, which she had on her bedroom wall at her father's place. There was the painting from Madrid and the collection of photographs of London enlarged and framed and taken by a friend. A primitive mask that we had purchased together on one of her trips home. A painting of Dublin and Asian images on wooden wall- plates. My paintings of moments that established our past. Ornaments and vases each a memory of her travels and objects passed down from her father's family and mine all in harmony, a record of her life. Her grandmother's glass light shade that cast a blue light. A beautiful room filled with flowers from her aunt and orchids from my school. A room that reflected her and her creativity

Katrina was hurting and Emma too, they both needed a little boost, so I spent a night up until the small hours rearranging the furniture with her and Emma's partner. I bought cushions and little bits of furniture so upstairs could be included in the harmony of the house. I marvelled at how human our endeavours seemed in contrast to the gravity of the situation. The things we choose to busy ourselves with, with such intensity. Julia was pleased to see the happiness it brought knowing that her sisters needed my support.

A week after her surgery I went to her father's house and helped her and Jimmy pack her clothes ready to move into her new home. Her vast collection of bags and clothes scooped up and

bundled into the car. The reality was that her interest in her clothes, her presentation, had waned. Her surgery dictated what she wore, comfort her only concern. But we hung her clothes on the racks and filled her drawers.

Chapter 8

Her surgeon was not satisfied that they should just call it the end. He had connections with a professor who was conducting a trial on a new drug that had been developed for the treatment of Melanoma cancer. Australia is notorious for the number of victims who have fallen foul of its endless sunshine. The professor was world renowned for his pioneering work and the surgeon wanted the cancer specialist to perform a biopsy on Julia's liver, on that mysterious growth, to ascertain whether or not she would be a suitable candidate for the trial. Jimmy was to take her for her surgery but after the psychological build up to it all they arrived at the hospital to be told that the surgery was unnecessary, the specialist sure of what he was dealing with. I was shaken when I heard the news feeling that I should have been there with her.

A couple of days later she rang very early in the morning. She was at the hospital with Jimmy who had driven himself there with palpitations that the doctors were investigating. He would be there for some time and she was tired. I picked her up and she came to my home to rest. There was a knock on the door and I opened it to a man who said he had been sent to heal Julia.

It was amazing that he should appear from out of nowhere, for at the time we were unaware that he had been sent by the indigenous community with whom Julia had many connections. Amazing that we should be alone together at my house at a receptive moment in time. She was unsure of what her response should be.

He sat Julia down and asked for half a glass of water and demonstrated his beliefs in his own powers. He offered the opportunity for her to accept his help but insisted that the decision was hers. He had been raised as a Catholic but now lived with Buddhist nuns, claimed to have seen the face of Jesus and to have cast out devils, a potpourri of beliefs and convictions. It didn't really matter what he believed it was the opportunity for the spirituality he offered. I certainly wasn't convinced that he could cure cancer but I knew she was looking for something on which

to focus. She had been to mass with me on a couple of occasions but on the last she had to depart early, overcome by nausea. She had always been sensitive to the needs of her soul and if nothing else he offered the time for deep reflection. When he left she asked my advice and I replied that there could be no harm in taking what she needed; and she could always drop out if it didn't suit.

He asked for no payment but Julia could not entertain the thought that he had been out of his way for her, without a show of gratitude. She gave him a bowl filled with fruit and block of chocolate that had only survived on the naturopath's orders. He left his number and she called him up and then he came each day to her new house to deliver his healing.

She said it helped. Gave her a new focus. He came each day and we were all sent on missions to buy cheese and biscuits and pieces of cake for the healer and food for the Buddhist nuns with whom he lived. Sometimes he brought other healers because he had a forthcoming commitment and was going to be away and he wanted Julia to connect with someone who could take over his work. He did bring her a sense of calm. I didn't attend the healing sessions but there was always someone from the house as support.

There were still visiting girl friends and new and old friends who came daily and had to be scheduled in between visits from the healer. Jimmy didn't like him very much especially when there was a complaint from the healer because Jimmy was keeping Julia up all night. He had an endless capacity to watch videos and preferred to sleep by day in the cocoon of their room.

He was still trying to organize his solar panel business, which he did over the phone, but he was there to drive Julia to appointments and to visit friends. It was at this point I learnt that in fact Julia was paying the car rental as well as their rent. But, he distracted her pain.

Late one afternoon I picked her up to drive her down to the mouth of the creek. It was still summer, hot, but she didn't want to risk a

swim in the pool She wanted to bathe her wounds in still, salty water. It is a beautiful place; the wooded reserve runs down the headland that guards the mouth of the creek on one side and on the other, a stretch of pure, white sand. Very few people were there to watch the last light of the day, and Julia waist deep in the stillness, to all appearances was just a young woman taking a dip, the wounds hidden deep under her arm. I watched from the shore moved by her beauty. It did not seem possible at that moment that she could die. She was so alive, her long hair untied, a calm mermaid in the blue water. We were waiting to hear from the surgeon who was doing his best to advocate for her acceptance on to the trial. At that time there had been a lot of publicity about the trial and the testimony of a patient who had been successfully treated, snapped from the jaws of death at the very last moment.

Chapter 9

The school term was drawing to a close and I found it difficult to make a decision on when to take sick leave. I knew that Julia was happy with the support she was getting and I didn't want to start leave too early in case I would need the time further down the track. On the twenty ninth of March the decision was made for me. Julia, Katrina and I visited the surgeon.

He was elated, a moment of joy in his job. Julia was in, and the success rate for the trial was eighty percent. It would involve living in Sydney for at least six months.

She wasn't very responsive, slightly stunned, and the surgeon pointed out that it would be hard but it was a rare opportunity. She agreed but I did not understand her reluctance at the time. Maybe a full realization of her position?

There was some further testing to be done so that Sydney would be armed with the information they needed. I organized my sick leave and would have enough to see me through for three months.

Easter was drawing near and I did my final week at work. My sister Jane came to visit from Alice Springs. Julia was pleased to see her, there had been many connections over the years. I was concerned about the accommodation we would need in Sydney and Jane made inquiries and rang a friend from our school days who lived in Sydney. A connection with someone, who had lived through the cancer of her son. A wonderful colleague bought me a TomTom Satellite navigation system for my car knowing how much I dreaded the idea of driving in Sydney. But things were still unresolved. Easter arrived and brought with it my sister, Aunty Katrina, and her children all close to my daughters in age and connection and my brother Liam as well.

I cooked a dinner at my house and true to tradition gave Julia the shank from the Lebanese lamb. She said it was the best ever yet. And we had a grand night and her sisters entertained us with a song or two and plenty of dancing. The sort of night she always

enjoyed. Jimmy came at the end to drive her home having declined the invitation to join the family. My family was a little disappointed at the loss of an opportunity to meet him, to welcome him in. We all went to her house the next day but Jimmy remained well in the background unwilling to step forth and make himself known.

We were waiting for a date for her first appointment in Sydney and were frustrated by the time it took. I had imagined myself packing the car and heading off. I had planned exactly what we would take. Enough bedding to survive on a bare floor if necessary, linen to accommodate any visitors, cooking equipment and crockery, a sewing kit, my sharp knives and cooking herbs and my paints and brushes all to be packed into my small car. The plan was to look for an unfurnished flat and I started making enquiries on line. Finally the date came through and we were surprised to learn that we had to wait until the nineteenth of April, which was a week off. We were anxious that the clock was ticking, five weeks already used up since her death sentence.

Two new melanomas had appeared on her back and they were causing her a lot of discomfort, making it difficult to sleep and there was pain below the knee on her right leg. Her father was impatient and heard of a trial in Brisbane and made inquiries only to learn that they were trialling a different drug and that there was a long queue of patients all equally desperate to find a cure.

My brother Liam suggested I join him and his family in a lighthouse keeper's house, where they were staying for a week as part of their volunteer work preserving the vegetation of a national park. Julia was invited also, but in the end she decided she wanted the time with her friends and there were the healers' visits. It was good time to gather my thoughts surrounded by nature and the rhythm of the sea. My brother and I sat one night in the little, window lined, hut underneath the lighthouse beam and watched it scan the clear night sky, full of the awe of it and hope.

Julia had her week booked with social engagements and I felt that it would have been a good time for her to slow down a little and

spend some time alone. But she wasn't ready for that yet. The healers were taking up a large part of her waking hours, which Jimmy resented because he liked to keep her to himself. We were all a little reluctant to visit her in her basement room, aware that we might be intruding on her privacy. In fact her sisters complained that they found it hard to get an audience with her. The time in Sydney would allow her some time for reflection. Jimmy was not joining Julia and I, he was to remain behind, with the assumption that he would have some time to organize himself to Sydney.

The girls all came for dinner one evening, time together as a family before departure. I had dug Natalie out of the security of my wardrobe and tucked her into the blue sheets on the spare bed, anticipating that she would be needed. "Where's Natalie" was her first statement as she came through the door, her first enquiry of her comforter since her journey had begun. A stuffed toy, grubby and worn, providing the security that was needed, as it always had.

Ella packed her bags in preparation for moving into her sisters' house that afforded much better access to the train station and work. She would have the inconvenience of leaving her study desk behind but she would have the company of the household during my absence. I had considered renting out my home in the hopes of boosting the finances but there was far too much organization and not enough time to secure a home for rental. I would pay for Ella's board instead, as well as my mortgage.

Julia would have to continue paying rent and her share of the household bills, as Jimmy had no income at all. He was still driving the rental car that needed fuel, had to be fed and of course there was the expense of his mobile phone. He smoked cigarettes and had an occasional bottle of red wine all supplied by Julia. There was his entertainment and the continuous supply of videos. The household included him in any meals they prepared but he was never moved to respond with the assistance of some housework, accepting it all as his due. But Julia was able to

justify his actions because he was still trying to start the business, only a matter of time until he could pull his own weight.

My girls were concerned that I would find the drive too arduous, but I needed the car in Sydney and it was packed to the gunnels. Driving in unfamiliar city traffic is not a chore I face with confidence. Emma is a confident and competent driver having handled vehicles in all parts of the world and so it was decided that Emma would share the drive, we would break the journey over night. Julia was not well, the melanomas on her back causing real discomfort and her right leg was beginning to hurt, enough to cause her to limp. I booked her on a flight that we would be able to meet in Sydney in time for Emma to make a return flight, ready for work the following day.

There was a phone call from a member of my parish, a woman I had known since my children were babies, not closely connected except by our faith. She had started a prayer chain that stretched out into a network of unknown faces and places, but they needed guidance on what they should pray for. I had been given the address of the charity house near the hospital, run by the church for anyone in need of a bed while attending the hospital. They were busy but we had a couple of nights there intermittently combined with a couple of nights at a cheap motel, but after that, it was all unknown. “A roof over our heads,” was my reply.

Chapter 10

It was a good journey despite the fact that my over packed car forced our knees up under our chins. It was a good opportunity to spend time with Emma. We went to the pub for dinner and I caught up with her life. She drove all the way and the only hiccup was the unintentional tour through Pitt Street, our control over the TomTom not yet complete. But it was a journey full of hope nevertheless; surely the odds were too good for failure at eighty percent.

Julia survived her journey alone. She had been anxious about travelling by herself. How little we knew at the time, how many things would be for the last time. She was never again able to fly alone. But she was smiling as she hobbled along and waved good-bye to Emma. I breathed a sigh of relief when the TomTom delivered us to the charity house door and thanked my colleague for her wonderful gift as my mantra relaxed on my lips.

There was time before check in to explore the local shops and we soon discovered that we had arrived in a suburb populated by immigrants mainly Indians, complete with Indian stores. Clean and tidy, a place full of people creating a new life, with unreadable titles in the video store and our favourite cuisine served at the curry shop. Julia's signature dish was an African curry but we both loved Indian food.

So many positives and a comfortable bed but she was nervous when we settled into our room with the thought of her first appointment. So many questions still unanswered. How did the trial all work? How sick will you feel? Will we have a bed next week?

The bed was our priority and there wasn't a lot of money. What remained of Julia's fund raising money I wanted her to keep for the long road ahead. We had surprisingly good luck and found a place just near the Indian spice shop. Near the rail line, so she could travel in some distant future that we imagined. How long to

take a lease for when you don't know what lies at the end? The real estate agent put it on hold; we had until the afternoon.

We waited forever in the bowels of the building where the cancer clinic is situated. An attractive room but filled with cancer patients. And it took a very long time to measure and poke and fill in the forms and then we were told there was no room on the trial. But they made amends and made phone calls and delivered an appointment time for the day after tomorrow, back, from where we had come.

There is nothing to do but respond to the steps needed to take you there. Cancel the flat and the rest of the charity house accommodation and find the motel that had been booked for our second night and tuck her in for the night. The TomTom set for our exit from the city, the alarm for four thirty in the hopes that I could clear the city before it woke. It was a small sealed room without a breath of fresh air. I had the most terrible nightmare, a dream in which I lay paralyzed in my bed as an intruder stood in the bathroom metres from our shared bed. I could never again consider using up our credit there for a night's accommodation.

We set off into a dense fog for our eleven-hour drive with no time to make the appointment in Brisbane if we broke our journey with an overnight stay. She didn't feel able to fly on her own. There was not a complaint from her on the entire journey and sitting hurt, the melanomas on her back causing pain. Along the way she was disturbed by the discovery of a melanoma that had appeared on her right thigh. I felt as if she was disintegrating before my very eyes, but it was too early to abandon hope and the road lay stretched before me endlessly. She found the sweets that I had in the glove box, left over from my journey down and queried why I had left them untouched. I hadn't eaten any because I didn't like the thought of eating them in front of her when she was avoiding sugar. She unwrapped one and handed it to me with a gracious smile. By chance we pulled up for petrol at a dilapidated service station that sold hand blown glass and there was a piece that was just right for her house. A rollercoaster of a ride, that journey but there was the thought of getting home.

We were only an hour and half from home and making good time when a young driver decided to ignore all the road works warnings and ran right up the back of the car behind me as we waited at the stop sign held by the traffic controller. “Just keep going mum” she said as we inspected the damage and I am glad I did because when we got home and opened the boot it would not shut again. Her father called in the aid of a panel-beating friend and we were ready for Brisbane the following day.

Chapter 11.

My life seemed to be reduced to car journeys I didn't want to make. A traffic jam and I got lost. The clock, ticking at a terrible speed as the appointment time loomed, but in the end we made it on the dot. Our understanding of Brisbane was that it was trialling a drug that had not enjoyed the success rate of the Sydney drug. Second prize and a disappointment to everyone, but we were grateful that there was a trial at all.

She was accepted after their investigations of the pile of scans and reports and time with the doctor who explained that the trial was rather like a lottery in the method that they used. A computer would decide who received the drug and who would receive the placebo. That certainly reduced the odds! Amongst the rules on the contract was a clause that said pregnancy is not allowed. The same rule applied in Sydney but she had not really thought about it then. Could treatment continue for years and years? What if one lot of melanoma was simply replaced by a new invasion? Was this a cure or simply control?

Downstairs in the hospital we waited in pathology for her to give the blood they needed to complete her admission. Her mobile rang and it was Sydney and they wanted her back again because there was room on the trial. Saved from a needle, but on the way home, she cried for the children she would never have. It was hard not to cry, to give hope away; I consoled her with thoughts that there would be gaps in between times of medication. Times for babies if that was the thought that she needed to hold it together, to make it make sense.

We would not have to leave home until the twenty fifth of April. Four days for family and friends and Jimmy. I started a carving using a piece of Heeble, a material that I like to use because one can achieve a result very quickly due to the soft nature of the material. Something concrete to show for my time while I waited. It was to be a Madonna and Child and it was still in a rudimentary form when Jimmy, who had been directed by Julia to come to fix my burst water main, expressed an interest in it. He was intrigued

enough to take a piece of Heeble and my father's carving tools with him in order give it a go. Something to keep him entertained while we were away. I didn't see a lot of them in that four days knowing how busy she was with Jimmy and her friends.

Uncle Paul came, from overseas, hurting and angry at the injustice of it all. He is my brother, an addict, from another place, not part of my world except by our sibling connection. I remember when he first met Julia. He babysat the infant twins, two of them, a brave move from a bachelor, but a statement from an uncle and an uncle who even then struggled with the protocols of life. Buried himself in the world of drugs, a disconnection from ordinary life. He spent the night walking the floor with her. When they woke in the morning she looked at him and smiled, an infant making a connection that never died.

He rang before he came to establish what he should expect, afraid of the confrontation of an emaciated body. However she still looked surprisingly well, her melanomas not visible under her clothing, just her arm without mobility, only the scar on her forearm was really visible. She was charming and put him at ease, knowing her uncle for exactly who he was. Always understanding of his lifestyle but loving him nevertheless, bringing out the best in him. He cried as I delivered him back to the railway station but I was unable to carry his burden as well as mine.

Her father rang to say that he wanted the funeral arrangements made, fussing over the question of cremation or burial. Wanted an answer to what he felt were his obligations, but I protested. There would be a more appropriate time to ask her about her intentions and the requirements for the funeral arrangements; we were going to Sydney on a positive note. Julia knew how hard it was for her father to cope with the situation. He was unable to just suck it in and so she suggested that he take a month stay in The Philippines where he had friends. He was amazed that she should consider him to such an extent, however I saw nothing surprising in her sacrifice, she had always put others before herself and besides it was easier than carrying the burden of his pain.

On Anzac Day we set off once again. The passenger seat filled with pillows, Natalie and a carton of bottled water to slate Julia's endless thirst. She was in pain but didn't want to take her Panadol Forte preferring to weather the pain. But the family convinced her to take the pills and waved us off. We broke the journey with an overnight stay at a beachside place that was new to us both. We drove to the headland to see the view before the night fell and you could almost mistake that moment as being part of some road trip taken for pleasure, but she was sick at dinner, unable to eat on her last road trip. Food became more difficult for her after that. She had become more sensitive to spices and strong flavors and I determined that I would be using the steamer that was packed into the boot.

Chapter 12

At what point do you imagine that the details don't matter and at what point do you realize that indeed they do? How much do they paint the landscape in your head, how you choose to read them is entirely up to you. It was a beautiful room. Provided by the love and charity of people who never feature in the landscape of a modern world. Not the people who appear on the six o'clock news, but people who care enough that we could be delivered into the security and support that they had provided.

A very small room, modest in fact, the two single beds sat toe to toe clad in a floral print that invited you in to thoughts of some construct of home. Prints on the wall and a hook behind the door. There was a little bedside table where we charged the phones and I kept my reading book. She had a chair beside her bed on which to keep her medication. Under my bed sat the lead that fed my electrical toothbrush. What possessed me to take it? But it was charged to the very end. The bathroom across the hall just inches away and a kitchen whose only fault was the rules, designed only to keep it clean. No fault in that, but not a space one could call one's own. No glass of red wine with which to unwind, the rules clearly stated and of course the ashtray was outside. It was O.K. we had both been there before.

Our new home had been able to offer two weeks of accommodation and we were feeling very positive the next day when we headed off to the hospital. We were anxious to know exactly what was involved in participation of the trial. The doctors made it very clear the way it all worked. They were justifiably proud of the results they had achieved to date. The melanomas in eighty percent of patients, would shrink within a week and in the odd case would disappear within a fortnight. A period of ten hours was required after the first ingestion of the drug so that Julia could be monitored. Thereafter the monitoring would take place in a ten day cycle which was when they dispensed the drug and recorded anything that may have occurred in the interim. Julia, dependent upon me to read the fine print, so she could make her decisions.

Sounded within our reach but there was a proviso. More testing, more scans, more proof of where her cancer was. It made her nervous, afraid that she would not pass their test. The scans and tests were outsourced in a series of appointments that we must meet armed only with our TomTom. She was calm in the car, able to deal with my anxieties and to read the directions that were passed through that little wee screen. It became a rhythm of tests and my trips as she slept, to fill up the larder.

I had been hoping that she might feel well enough to take the train into the city. A distraction from our medical visits. Our little room did not offer a lot in the way of entertainment. But she was unable to go in that first week and we determined that as soon as she felt able we would make the trip. I went to visit my old school chum whom I hadn't seen in years. She had been down a similar road with her son, not a melanoma victim, but a victim of cancer nether the less. She understood the frustrations of the process of treatment. Her son was alive and well and this strengthened my belief that the trial was worth all our efforts.

We made it to the city. She loved it, her face alive with the memories of all those other cities, as we stepped out of Central Station into the crowds. "I love the city!" she declared as she slowly limped to Paddy's Market. She bought me more elephants there, moving from stall to stall, creating a little herd. The healer was fond of elephants so she deliberated carefully about which one to choose for him. She insisted that I have a shoulder massage from the Asian practitioners and bargained with them with the skills learnt on her overseas travels. She bought a black dress after I had talked her into ignoring the expense and a pair of boots. A little retail therapy. There was the allure of a duck dinner up the escalator in the Asian food court and we made it, but after that she apologized because she had no more energy to use, afraid that she might be spoiling my fun. I assured her that there would be another day and she limped home.

Both of us toe to toe through nausea and pain and I asked about Jimmy, thinking that she would be finding the separation hard and she said she was glad that we were together, feeling unable to deal

with the weight of him. She sat bolt upright in her bed the night that the pain attacked her upper leg. Moved to cry out in pain, to disturb my sleep, to trust that I would be there. She had been experiencing stomach pain but this was new. It was the thigh on her right leg where the new melanoma had appeared.

It was Friday the next morning and Julia was scheduled to have a Pap smear that was part of the screening process. It was the last appointment before the trial would begin and there was a level of anxiety in the journey, both of us wanting only to get to the trial which was due to start on the fifth of May. We rang the hospital to report the pain and they advised that we ask while at the doctors, for pain relief. Off on another TomTom journey to learn that the doctor found the Pap smear too difficult to perform claiming that she was dealing with lesions, a shock to us both. Julia, who had grown two more melanomas on her back, found it a painful ordeal, stressed by the unfounded complication as much as lying on her back. Julia's request for pain relief refused, because, apparently it is something the doctor did not prescribe.

There was a nurse who was Julia's case manager for the trial. She had impressed both of us with her compassion. She found a doctor at the hospital to deal with the pain and assured Julia that no time had been lost because she had found another doctor to do the Pap smear on Monday, the day before the trial. Julia was soothed, her distress appeased. However it was the first time she had been prescribed morphine and she was disturbed by the need for it. Worried about addiction and any control that the drug may have over her thinking.

People came and went in the charity house, each with a sad story, but each glad of the interaction that was offered in the kitchen and the T.V. room. Julia responded to them all with the natural way she had of making people feel at ease. One couple, who had a young baby in the children's hospital, mistook me for the patient assuming that Julia's smile was an indication of good health. We created names for the people who came and went, created a little world for ourselves in which we often laughed at the anomalies of human nature as if all the residents were characters in our new

world. A bond between she and I, from which the outside world was excluded.

We thought we had the house to ourselves on the Saturday night, an opportunity to take over the couch and the remote control in the T.V. lounge, so we went up to the shops to buy some treats, pleased with our good luck. A positive outcome of Brisbane, that sugar had been given the all clear. Disappointed by the return of a resident, a student from the country who was staying while doing a medical practicum, we laughed nether the less as she changed our channel and we retired to bed.

There was a grotto with a statue of the Virgin Mary in the garden, a perfect place for a prayer and my mantra. A little oasis in my life. And a church just walking distance away that serviced a parish rich with immigrants and their choir fired by their enthusiasm. And a little green park just one block away with swings full of children and the comings and goings of people, just enough to make the journey down the little lane worth while.

The woman that managed the house with its team of volunteers who came each day to clean and man the phone, knew of our situation having followed our journey to Brisbane and back. She offered us a third week of accommodation, which was against the policy of the house that endeavored to support as many people as was possible. We would have two more weeks after the trial began but the uncertainty of what arrangements we should make for accommodation were a nagging problem. The manageress encouraged me to hold off in my pursuit for a flat suggesting that maybe a granny flat might just become available. There was something in her advice that reassured me that it was indeed too early to make any commitments.

Chapter 13

The administration of the drug and the monitoring of her responses took place in the room in which chemotherapy patients received their treatment. A mixture of people some sadly young, some bearing the loss of hair, wound up in their scarves, some supported by friend or a relative, but all joined by the patience with which they sat in their chairs hooked up to their drips. There was a change of faces half way through the day as the first wave of patients completed their treatment and a new wave appeared for the afternoon. We were there for the day and I brought along a book to read to Julia but she was unable to concentrate, tired out by the effort to make it there. But she had received her first dose of the drug and there was a comfort in that.

Julia's melanomas were measured and recorded on camera so that their progress could be monitored over the coming weeks. The very fact that they were external allowed the researchers to make direct observations of the drug's effect and we learned that her cancer was a mutation of particular interest to the researchers. She had been asked if she would volunteer the surgical removal of a couple of her external tumours as any evidence gathered from the growths would provide valuable ammunition for the research. She hated the thought of surgery but took very little time to consider her response, understanding how many lives may some day be influenced by her decisions. One could only admire the dedication of those conducting the trial and their determination to fight what they viewed as a disease that is peculiar to Australia.

Use of the drug would involve fasting for two hours before ingestion and for one hour afterwards. A routine would have to be developed for our day but it was possible to inch the clock slowly forward so that she would be able to function socially, join others at a meal table. By this time we seemed to be armed already with an arsenal of medications to deal with the nausea, the constipation and the pain. The exact number of doses until the next day of monitoring were dispensed so that the researchers would be able record any missed doses. There would be a continuation of the scans as the researchers recorded internal changes.

She slept for most of the day only waking for the hourly monitoring and for a couple of brief sojourns into the outside world for a quick puff on her cigarette. She looked at peace as she slept and I felt that if this was the worst that we could expect then all was possible. We had only to wait for the tumours to shrink.

In all her years of travelling Julia had never been to the Opera House so we went to the city again on the train and got off at Circular Quay. We sat on the bottom step in the sunshine daunted by the climb, but content to be there, watching the crowds. I bought a journal in which to write a children's story as I had a concept that was rattling around in my head. It would fill in my time while she was sleeping. And with all the pleasure she always received from her love of giving, she insisted that we stop at the Oyster Bar on the Quay so that she could buy me a plate of oysters and a glass of wine. I ate as she sipped on her water, content with my pleasure.

A week and a half had passed since the initial administration of the drug, but Julia was unable to observe the results as her melanomas were on her back. She invited one of the residents to join us for dinner one night, a lovely man who apparently had been coming to the cottage annually for a post operative check up on his heart. We watched television together after the meal and she asked us both to look at her tumours. They had not shrunk at all but there had been a change; the largest one had developed two dark eyes and spidery veins that spread out from its centre. I could only hope that the change was an indication for the better but we declared a new name for them and from that moment we referred to them as The Beasts.

Chapter 14

A flat mate from her hometown past came out from the city on the train on the Thursday night and we were both pleased because by then her drug schedule would not interfere with their visit to the pub opposite the station. Lemonade planned as the refreshment, a far cry from their party days. I drove her there, it was quite a short distance but beyond her capacity. She had dressed for the occasion and had done her hair as if it was just any night out and when I went back to pick her up I was struck by how happy she looked as she waved off her friend, the dingy station transformed under the night light.

My girls, my siblings, my friends and of course hers, were all desperate for news on the other end of the line. I ran up the most outrageous telephone bills while we were in Sydney but I could only be glad that we live in the age of the mobile phone. Jimmy phoned many times but she was reluctant to take his calls, complaining if he rang when she was asleep, terse with him. Later she confessed that there had been perverse accusations of infidelity, accusations about the good time she would be having without him. There was no explaining his thinking, it was inconceivable. He wanted to join us but she wanted him to find a job. She had lost patience with his pursuit of the business, wanting him to take a labourer's job, any honest job in fact that would bring in an income as she was still paying all his bills. She declared that she would hear no more of the business.

The stress of their concern for Julia impacted on the daily interactions of my girls and there were complaints that domestic matters were not always going well. The three of them, Emma's partner Brad and Jimmy as well, all living under the one roof, tension building. But there was a new project to take up their energy. Julia had many connections in the surfing world as we had come from a town well known for its connections with the surf. A huge fund-raiser had been organized for Saturday the eighth of May. Surf boards had been donated by some of the biggest names in surfing and there were prizes galore. My school had joined the bandwagon and a colleague arranged for the sale of

many of the tickets at school. Tickets were sent to relatives far away who sold them to workmates, anxious to be involved.

Julia was overwhelmed by the attention and such a powerful display of support but she was glad we would be in Sydney for the event feeling shy about receiving such blatant expressions of love. We listened to reports of the fundraiser on our mobile phones and she was as excited as if she had been there in person. Julia insisted that Jimmy attend, felt despite his protests, that it was only right that he should be present. He neglected to take his mobile phone so there were no reports from him. Everyone agreed that apart from the money raised there was a wonderful sense of community, an experience that touched the hearts of all those who attended the benefit. Tracks Surfing Magazine reported the event touched also with the unity of the community. We were up until all hours, no thought of tiredness just the joy. In the morning Jimmy rang to say he wanted four and a half thousand dollars for a car and a new hoodie. He bought the hoodie himself with the money she had sent for the rent but she refused him the car, disappointed at the very request.

It was to be some time before she actually received any money with tickets still to be accounted for, but in the morning she was delighted to be able to give some money to a couple who had an adolescent daughter who had been hospitalized with mental problems. They were such a sincere couple, struggling financially to pay their accommodation and it gave Julia such pleasure to offer them a little help. Julia was receiving the invalid pension but the fundraiser would assure that she had money to pay for the bond on accommodation. She had sent Jimmy eight hundred dollars from her pension so that he could pay for their rent at home and the hire car and an airfare to Sydney.

Chapter 15

Her twin Katrina and Jimmy flew down together enjoying a sense of comradeship and giggling about the state of Jimmy's overnight bag which had disturbed a flight full of people because at the last moment he had discovered it contained rotting food stuffs from months before. For someone who claimed to have been in the army he certainly was not ever concerned with keeping his kit or anything else tidy. Apparently it was hard to get him into the taxi on time because of his usual lack of concern for the time, but they were both in good spirits when they arrived.

Katrina was entitled to a night of cheap accommodation at The Crown Plaza hotel, as she was working for the company at the time. Julia would join them and they would spend one night at the Plaza and then move on to a cheaper motel room for the following two nights as the girls were sharing the expense between them. There was not sufficient accommodation for me in the one room so I would remain at the charity house but they would be able to use my car and I could catch the train home.

The previous day a surgeon had removed one of Julia's tumours, a small one from high up her side towards the shoulder blade. She had really hoped that the doctors might take one of The Beasts so that she could lie comfortably on her back, however their removal would require a general anaesthetic, which was not permitted on the trial. The surgeon allowed me to join Julia for the procedure and we chattered about the value of white noise as a tool for aiding study while Julia struggled with it all. At one point she cried, so rare for her, and then hurriedly apologized for her tears.

We drove to the Plaza to meet them, any thoughts of yesterday's surgery dissipated by their arrival. Jimmy was pleased to see her. He had brought two greenstones, one for him and one for her, a pendant to be worn at the throat, a stone to bind them together.

That evening we planned to eat dinner at a local restaurant. Katrina and I left them alone for a couple of hours and then we all met for a drink at the pub and Jimmy detailed his ideas for a book

he would one day write. It would explore the theme of archangels and their integration with we mortals here on earth. By now we had worked out the time for fasting and the time for eating and it was a small opportunity in time. The western suburbs of Sydney were new to Katrina, and there was a sense of adventure in our outing, but mainly Katrina was just glad to be with her sister. We sat eating our al fresco meal, the first of the diners in order to fit in with Julia's routine, but the moment was spoiled by Julia's irritation, complaining because Jimmy would not eat all the meal she was paying for, knowing that afterwards he would demand to fill his stomach with junk food. She found it so ungracious his lack of gratefulness.

I met them again the next day when a trip to the city of Sydney had been planned. Julia had not had a good night and in fact complained that Jimmy had taken over their shared bed without any regard for her wounds or her pain. Katrina confirmed that she had spent the night listening to Julia's complaints, but Jimmy didn't seem to be perturbed in any way. Julia was not up for the trip and Katrina and I decided to make the journey together leaving the two of them alone. Katrina was disappointed, she would gladly have forfeited the city trip to spend the time with Julia, but I consoled her with the notion that neither of us could ever give Julia what she needed from Jimmy.

They came in on the train in the evening to meet us at China Town. Katrina had also arranged to catch up with a friend that she had worked and travelled with in The Middle East and Julia wanted to shout us all dinner. Once again the timing had to be right to fit in with the medication. We selected a meal and ordered but time was running short and Julia ate a little and felt unwell enough to continue so she paid the bill and with all her charm wished us good night. Jimmy took her off into the night to catch the train back to the motel room. I was glad of his size and his strength, comforted by the notion that he would be able to look after her. I wasn't there in that motel room, not there to make my observations. But she complained the next day that he had no notion of how to sit at a meal and share, no notion or idea of ordering and sharing each dish with the others at the table. I don't

know why she was so displeased with him I would have attributed his behaviour to a lack of exposure to the protocols in a Chinese restaurant, but she certainly viewed it as a deficit. “He doesn’t know how to share,” she said, her face screwed up with the distaste of it.

We had another attempt at a meal the following evening in one of the curry restaurants that abound in the district. I spent the day with Katrina and her travelling mate and once again joined Jimmy and Julia at the restaurant. She was unable to eat the meal but determined that our evening should not be spoiled, retired to sit in the car. We finished our meals knowing that is what she wanted but each of us were so aware of the reality of the situation. Each, playing the part of the invited guest, unwilling to disturb our host. The only relief from the evening was the waiter who had set out to impress us but instead amused us when he dropped a tray full of plates. Katrina’s tension evaporated in laughter. I was to have many more meals with Julia in which she dismissed the fact of her illness, determined that life was unaltered. Her favourite cuisine, but the very last time she would ever attempt all those spices.

Katrina and Jimmy had one more day and were to fly out mid afternoon after their ten o’clock check out from the motel, so we decided on a picnic so that Julia could rest as we passed the time together. Before Katrina and Jimmy’s arrival in Sydney I had emptied the back seat of the car into our little room so that the car would accommodate us all. I walked up to the shops and bought the food from the Lebanese shop where the young man behind the counter had made his attraction to Julia so clear on a previous visit for breakfast.

Jimmy was driving and it was a relief to have someone else to take control of the car. He set the TomTom for the park and we set off into the heavy traffic. I don’t know what induced him to stop on a corner in the midst of the stream of traffic in the middle of the city, but he spent so much time fiddling with the TomTom that the driver behind lost his temper. It was an ugly response from Jimmy, total lack of control, road rage in fact and I thought

for one moment that he was going to ram my car into the other driver. Yelling abuse, hard language and no thought of anything but his own anger. It was only Julia who pulled him up, a voice of reason pointing out that her mother and sister were in the back and it was her mother's car.

The entrance to the park was only around the corner and it was such a relief to get out of that vehicle. She pointed out that in fact he was in the wrong, he had stopped in city traffic, so he dumped us all and disappeared for the entire duration of the picnic. Went off with his mobile phone glued to his ear, a long distance call to his brother in New Zealand. It was then that I learned the reason for her irritation with him. He had not paid the rent or any other bills with the eight hundred that she had sent instead she was now bound by a greenstone around her neck paid for by her and the phone that was glued to his ear was another of her burdens. When he returned he refused to eat so we had to dump his meal, Julia appalled by his manners. We had all done it tough too often to throw food in the bin. He had apparently had a haircut and paid the barber twice the price advertised enjoying his own benevolence, but Julia pointed out who was paying and he didn't like that, complaining that she had tipped the waiter at the curry shop. He just did not see it the way that we did, did not see that it was not his money to spend. A different view to ours.

We had to go to the bank before he went home so that Julia could give him more money because the rent had to be paid. She hobbled in as Jimmy waited on the footpath. And then an argument. Katrina and I sat in the car immobilized by the moment. He abused her, yelled out loud, not a brief moment but prolonged, a war zone on the footpath as she handed him the money. He couldn't accept her reluctance to just hand over the money without her disapproval of the situation. Katrina white faced and frozen by shock. "We don't deserve this," is all she could mutter and it was indeed one of those defining moments that make one question how much is enough. Katrina had to travel home with him on the long journey by train and then plane. He said not a word to her throughout the journey but used some of Julia's money to purchase a book at the airport.

Chapter 16

Each day presented new faces amongst the volunteers at the charity cottage. They were older people who had retired but wanted to give their time to help those in need. They were all connected in that they belonged to the local catholic parishes and one kind woman knowing of our plight offered us accommodation in her home, but it didn't seem right, despite her warmth. One morning a couple walked in to fulfill their shift, it was the first time a couple had arrived to work together. He had come to tidy the garden as his wife changed the linen in the rooms that were vacated and took the telephone inquiries. Julia was still asleep, as we had no urgent appointment that morning.

They established that I was the mother of the young woman with cancer, obviously aware of our situation and then offered us the use of their home. Just like that! They were going on a holiday and their home would be empty. They lived within an accessible driving distance from the hospital and they would be gone for three weeks. They were due to leave as our time expired at the cottage. There was something about them, a calmness that made their offer so genuine. I had no hesitation in accepting and then we settled into a conversation about their forthcoming trip.

They were going to Queensland and I asked where and inquired if they ever visited my home town. And indeed they had on a past trip. Jim was custodian of the family tree and had spent years in fact tracing all the branches that spread from his mother's side. He had gone in search of her family, one of whom was married to the owner of a picture theatre. The theatre, owned and built by my father's father, in which I had lived as a baby! It was then that he and I learned that, his grandmother and my grandmother, were sisters.

Our time at the charity house was due to expire on the Sunday after Jimmy and Katrina left, so I rang Jim and his wife Bernadette and made arrangements to visit their house so that they could become acquainted with Julia before they left. Julia was apprehensive about the decision I'd made to accept the

charity of strangers but you couldn't meet them without understanding that they were indeed the result of all those prayers.

She loved Jim at once; he was a blend of her grandfather Grumps and his brother all rolled into one. Bernadette, with the quiet strength of a woman who has raised a large family and seen it all. The house full of clocks, clocks on every wall, a collection born of Jim's patience with fixing things and their travels. We arranged to come back on the Sunday evening so we could spend the night with them before they departed the following morning.

Ten o'clock was departure time from the security of our little room. I was out of bed early to repack the car which was somewhat like a jigsaw puzzle. We had been shopping the day before and Julia had bought a bundle of new clothes at a store, which was a goldmine of bargains, and had not been able to resist buying a very large canvas of New York in the stationery store. It had been easy to put the canvas in the car when it was empty but a different matter when we had our full load on board. I secretly loathed the thing realizing the difficulties of ever getting it on to the wall of her cellar room but she was so delighted with it that I dare not reveal my feelings.

We had arranged to arrive at Jim and Bernadette's at five in the afternoon because Julia felt unable to face a day of social interaction. I suggested the movies to fill in the time but even that sounded too strenuous, so we spent the day in the little park down the lane, our bedding spread out under a tree. She slept most of the day and I read my book until it was time to cart all our goods and chattels to our new home where Jim and Bernadette were waiting with the cookie jar filled to the brim with the slices that Bernadette had baked to make us feel welcome.

After dinner Julia retired to her very own room. The seasons had changed and winter had crept up on us although Julia did not seem to respond to the cold when up and about. The bed had an electric blanket and she had discovered that heat helped to alleviate the pain. And there on the bed, blue sheets, the best color of all, and Natalie tucked in, looking quite at home too.

They were gone before we awoke in the morning and she reported a good night's sleep. It was then she discovered the relief of the bath. There had only been a shower at the cottage but now she was able to immerse herself whenever the pain took over. It took the pressure off her leg, which by now was a real problem. We kept the bathtub full and topped it up with hot water as required. We were no longer sharing with other residents and the privacy was a welcome change.

She was still reluctant to reach for the Morphine and I had to encourage her when it was really needed. I took responsibility for keeping track of the time, producing meals and her medications at the appointed time but we worked in partnership as she was determined that there would be no slip ups with the drug.

With our own rooms, I was no longer aware of how her nights passed because she did not want to burden me. I felt it was an opportunity for her to truly reflect on her situation as up until this time she had always been supported by someone else. I was only metres away but we agreed that if I was needed she would use the mobile phone. She only ever called me once but she made many calls in the middle of the night especially to friends overseas so the reality was that she was never alone and she would hobble into the bath unaided when the pain took control.

She would sleep until late when I would have her daily juice ready. A different cocktail every morning for her amusement as much as mine. Small pleasures in a world that was becoming more restrictive each day, although the pain in her stomach had settled down. But Julia did not want to admit to the reality, afraid that if they knew on the trial how sick she was then they would cancel her medication. I realized how illogical her thinking was, we were dealing with experts who knew what they were observing and they would make their decisions based on their own observations, but it didn't seem right to remove her faith in her own will power.

Chapter 17

Katrina came down a couple of days later and joined us. Julia wanted her to sleep on the floor beside her bed and they had a night reminiscing about their childhood and their times together. We went off together for the administration of the new cycle of the drug but Julia did not want us to spend those endless hours beside her chair in the chemotherapy room, still worried that she might be imposing in some way. The only thing that satisfied her was that Katrina and I took the train to the shops and came back with new clothes for Emma and Ella and as well as some for ourselves. We were also under instructions to buy presents for Jim and Bernadette and there had been a lot of discussion about the most suitable gifts.

Katrina was torn between having to get back on that plane and her love for her sister. I'm glad I was there, the thought of leaving her would be unbearable but she was still making plans for a flat for the future and there was even some talk for a while of a granny flat in the street in which we were staying. But that was all it was and for the moment we were safe where we were.

Frustrations lay in the lack of any explanation from the people conducting the trial. They looked at The Beasts and conducted their monitoring and sent her for scans but there was never any comment on progress. There was no gauge for us and clearly the tumours were not shrinking. Our favourite nurse had taken leave and her replacement seemed unconcerned with the mental welfare of her patient. The only nurse in our entire journey who seemed unable to give the love that so many of them brought into our lives. Just one sour note. One visit she upset Julia deeply because Julia looked away as a blood sample was being taken, there was no comment from Julia about her aversion to needles, but the nurse viewed it as a negative response. It had become apparent that there were times in between monitoring in which we were idle. We had been given a schedule that stretched through into the New Year and it occurred to us that it might be possible to live at home and fly down to Sydney for treatment, aware that other patients had done the same thing. Julia was reprimanded by our

new nurse, reminded that she was privileged to be on the trial at all, and that home, would not be possible. Later Julia confessed how close to tears she had felt, like some naughty child.

Despite the fact that she was obviously limping and had reported the pain in her leg on her first monitoring, scans were limited to her body and her leg was not scrutinized. We did understand that it was a trial and that the agreement was that she was there for observation, however we only dealt with the nurse who reported her findings back to the doctors.

Back at our house I photographed The Beasts on my mobile phone so that Julia could see what was going on. She sent the photos to Jimmy for comment but he could not judge their size without a scale to measure them by and suggested I take another photo beside a fifty-cent coin. She balked at the idea, deciding to leave The Beasts out of her own view.

There were no more trips to the city and in fact Julia became reluctant to leave the house unless on a medical appointment. We would sit on the verandah that faced the back courtyard smoking our cigarettes, but she had no interest in world outside. The leaves of the street trees were ablaze with the colors of autumn but she was untouched by their beauty. Colleagues from school had sent a whole collection of videos and sometimes she felt well enough to watch them. I watched a couple with her but only to keep her company.

But a phone call from a friend would dissipate the world in which we living. Her voice strong and confident, as she underplayed her situation, taking just another call in her busy social life. Only her family was really privy to any anxiety or tiredness in her voice. She spoke to her father who was still in The Philippines just as she had at the charity house. He wept on the other end of the line but she shielded him from any of her concerns, carrying him as she always did. I complained that he should have to face the situation like the rest of us but she said no “Not all people are strong enough,” a plain statement of what she viewed as fact.

I spent the weekend after Katrina left painting the illustrations for my children's book. There had been no room to work at the charity house and now I had a space that could have been custom made. She was happy with that knowing how absorbed I was in the art. She slept most of the time but appeared intermittently to show her approval and to float in the bath. But most of all she wanted to go home and so we decided that indeed we would. We would go for just a few days between treatments, despite the thought of that car journey and so on Monday I spent the day repacking the car and cleaning the house and restocking the fridge which had been left generously full by Jim and Bernadette. We went to bed on a positive note with the alarm set for the early rise.

Chapter 18

We didn't go. She came in before the alarm went off to deliver the news. She was in intense pain with her leg, but apologized because she knew that there was no possibility of a car journey. As if it was my disappointment that she must appease. A night of pain and she had left me to sleep without a word hoping the new day would change it all. We rang the hospital and some unknown doctor on the end of the line suggested that it was a melanoma playing up and advised increasing the morphine. She was alarmed at the loss of her mobility. I consoled her so easily with the promise of a wheelchair and that appeased her, believing that the drug would kick in and her circumstances would be temporary. We could only marvel that we had not been in some motel room when that pain hit and resigned ourselves to staying on. Julia's concern was the morphine, which hit like a sledgehammer leaving her with the worry that she would not have control of her thoughts

There was a decline in her stomach pain, which The Trial doctor viewed as a positive sign, as an indication that the drug was having an effect. However the melanoma on her leg had never been visible before, just a pain that only she was aware of and now I could see it although nobody on The Trial had looked at it before. The Beasts grew more menacing in appearance and I reported on them daily to Julia but she wanted no more photos of them. It was hard to judge any shrinkage as I saw them too often to make that judgment.

Sunday the thirtieth of May was the twins twenty-ninth birthday and as the date grew closer Julia pined for home. On the Thursday she asked me to ring Emma to see if she could come to Sydney for the weekend. Ella had really wanted to come as well but there was not enough warning to organize a trip for her. Emma took a flight on the Friday and did the bus journey out from the city to arrive for Julia waiting in her new black dress, radiant at her sister's arrival.

I bought her a walking stick for her birthday and she adopted it immediately as her own, pleased by its smart flora pattern. New

pyjamas from Emma and Ella and a Lamington cake to follow the roast that she was able to eat without the consequence of pain. A beautiful day and she asked no more than that but when Emma had gone she declared, "I need Jimmy." Just a stark statement that needed no qualification.

He was still unemployed and she was still paying all the expenses but she paid his airfare and he arrived to transport her from reality. We had to go to the shops to prepare for his arrival, which was the first time she had found the energy for anything but medical appointments. She was exhausted filling the trolley with the things he liked but I could not convince her to give me the list and wait while I shopped. A purpose to it all, preparing for a visitor with plans to cook him pancakes with maple syrup.

Their connection was immediate and for that moment it was as if there was no cancer at all. She showed him *The Beasts* and it was the first time that there was really someone else to gauge their growth. His reaction was clear and I knew from that moment there was no going back.

Jimmy had arrived with a birthday present for her, an archangel carved from the heeble I had given him. He excitedly produced a brochure advertising a Martial Arts course that would eventually offer the opportunity for employment as an instructor. Julia questioned him about the details and of course the prospective income reasoning that it would suit his interests from his army training. He had considered joining the Commandos, which had an entrance admission that expired at thirty and he was drawing nearer that age. However Julia could not conceive of life as an army wife thinking of a future together which could only involve babies and she had grown up with a father who was always at sea. It was at least an attempt to find employment and she wanted him to be content, understanding the commitment of a partnership.

Chapter 19

It rained incessantly over the next few days, which didn't trouble Julia and Jimmy at all but I sat alone in the house as they disappeared into their own world only appearing for meals. Jimmy drove her to her appointments for scans including one on her leg, which was the trial's first response to complaints of the pain in her leg. She had been given an appointment for the following Friday to see an orthopedic specialist in the city who would view the scans and provide a prognosis. They went off in fine spirits both of them seemingly detached from the purpose of their journey and completed their outing with a trip to the movies.

The rain and my inactivity compounded my increasing sense of isolation. The only escape was the smoking area on the little back verandah, sodden and cold, the ashtray full of water and my phone. The Trial had at last given her permission for one trip home and we had planned to make our move in the following week but it depended on the outcome at the surgeon. I asked Julia if Jimmy could drive my car home and the two of us could fly together but she was adamant that he was to fly with us and that he couldn't be expected to drive alone. I wasn't happy and reminded her that I had undertaken the drive more than once. My brother rang; he understood my frustrations and advised me to go home alone for the weekend. I felt selfish considering my own needs but there was no doubt that Julia had what she needed at that time. Jimmy could look after her; earn his keep for a little while.

The rain got heavier, record breaking according to the newscast, with the Eastern Suburbs afloat in the deluge, but on the Friday I set off on the bus and then the train to catch my flight only to discover some error in the booking arrangement. I had no money as I had given my credit card and spare cash to Julia who was somewhere at a hospital in the city attending her appointment. There was no point in returning to Jim and Bernadette's as Julia had the key and there was no covering on their front porch.

Locked out and with no way of going forward I decided that at least the airport offered protection from the weather and that I should wait until Julia's appointment was over and find my way across the city so I could link up with the two of them.

Circumstances had taken control. I was settled in for a long wait when a colleague from school appeared. She had just attended her mother's funeral, which was apparently in the suburb where Jim and Bernadette lived, and she had time to kill. Another colleague at home was also nursing her husband who had been diagnosed with cancer six weeks after Julia and we spoke to her on the phone. I caught up with all the news at school. A brief break from my world after all!

"She's back," was Julia's only comment as I waded into the car. Her report from the surgeon was brief. There was nothing he could do. The melanoma was exerting such intense pressure on the bones in her leg that there would remain the constant possibility of the bones shattering. He suggested a splint or wheelchair. There was no need to wait for the following week to go home, no treatment forthcoming. She was dismissive of the significance of the surgeon's conclusions, reporting only Jimmy's clowning in the surgery. The two of them on an outing, me in the back.

I spent the evening booking airline tickets and arranging the use of a wheelchair only to learn that the airlines would require a doctor's certificate in order to transport Julia. I notified Emma to hire a wheelchair for arrival and finally got us on to a flight without a certificate and went off to bed prepared for an early rise so that I could repack the car whose contents were spread through the house. The happy couple appeared for a late breakfast and the remnants of the cleaning. I asked Jimmy if he would mind parking the car in the street as Jim and Bernadette were due to return and would need their car space back. He asked if it was safe to leave my car and all my possessions in the street, a surprising question given that I had no other option.

I did understand her reluctance to take the car home. Clearly she was not yet ready to accept the fact that there was not going to be

a flat, the contents of the car not needed for a future she was not going to have. No real acceptance of what the surgeon's verdict implied.

The cancellation of the flight was announced after Julia was installed in her wheel chair but the consolation was the opportunity of another flight with another company. My credit card was empty having spent the last of it on the cancelled flights and I only had enough cash for two fares. A stressful moment, but by some chance Jimmy had enough money in his pocket for his flight and we would only have to weather the extra time at the airport. He was undisturbed by any of the proceedings. Julia however was anxious about arriving home in a wheelchair at the airport in which she had worked. It seemed such a strange concern but I suppose it would be an admission of her condition.

Chapter 20.

The owls were still there when we got home, sitting unblinkingly on their perch, still delighting the visitors who returned in their hordes to see Julia. I returned to my own home to give Julia time with her sisters. It was to be their first nursing experience without my guidance and they were anxious to welcome her. They fussed over the meals that they cooked for her, tempting her with her favourite foods however she needed to adhere to a rigid routine or nausea would take control.

Jimmy was to have an interview for the martial arts job and demanded a new suit for the interview. He had attended one interview and returned with the story that he was required to wear a suit for a follow up interview. Julia was very annoyed by the request, arguing that nobody wore a suit where we lived, not even to a funeral. She said that she felt embarrassed at his ignorance of the social conventions of applying for such a position but also feeling that there was something untoward about the whole story. He also required a martial arts uniform, which was an expensive item. She let him know of her suspicions about his honesty but she paid for the clothing anyway stipulating that she expected him to produce an income for her investment. He showed me his martial arts uniform with great pride and asked if I would sew on the badges.

I visited daily with soup, which I made at home knowing it would be easier for her to digest, and attended some of the evening meals. On the Tuesday evening there was a crisis while I was at home. The melanoma in her leg was causing extreme pain. Julia was moved up to Katrina's bedroom, which was adjacent to the bathroom and the relief of the bath. Jimmy and Katrina spent the night getting her in and out of the bath and I received a desperate phone call from Julia asking for me to come. She looked so relieved when I arrived. Jimmy was concerned by the amount of morphine she had taken, all to no avail. We needed something to help her to relax, to go with her pain. I rang the Trial to ask if Julia would be permitted to take Valium as many drugs were outlawed on the trial and Julia had decided she didn't want the

trial to know that she was at home. She hoped to keep the visit home quiet as she had been given permission for one trip home and she imagined, by keeping this visit quiet, she could come home again in the future. I could understand the Trial's rationale as patients who entered a crisis could be spread all over the country, admitted to hospitals with whom they would have no communication and valuable data could be lost. However Julia's situation seemed so futile knowing that it was only a matter of time before the Trial admitted that treatment had been unsuccessful, but she was still living in hope.

A lifelong friend who was a nurse obtained the Valium and the crisis was resolved but Julia was still unwilling to accept that the only concern should be controlling the pain, addiction only a problem for the living. I was able to resolve the problem of the pain, but I felt an increasing sense of helplessness in the situation and booked our flights back to Sydney knowing full well that we would be going back for the delivery of the bad news.

Julia had been looking forward to seeing the healer, who brought her an opportunity to centre herself and a sense of peace. He felt that her cancer had not disappeared because she was blocking his work in some way, but he was unable to see the reality that the benefit he brought was not a cure but the opportunity to release all the tension from her body and her mind. She asked me to attend his visit as she felt awkward alone in his presence. I had not spent anytime with him except at his initial introduction and I was struck by his lack of concentration on what he perceived as his work. He took a long phone call and chattered endlessly during the proceedings.

He came to visit with his wife and some other off siders one afternoon. They waited until Julia appeared in her wheelchair and then he started to berate western medicine. Julia was firm in her response pointing out that vaccinations would not exist without western medicine. I added my support. Julia had made personal sacrifices for the Trial and I didn't believe that he should negate her efforts. He was affronted by my attack but furthermore I explained, in fact I had read *The Tibetan Book of Death and*

Dying from cover to cover. He responded to that information with an acknowledgement of the role that preparation for death played in his own culture.

I visited the doctors hoping to catch up with our G.P. whom I had not seen since our journey began. We needed more morphine and a cover letter for the wheelchair on the return journey but he was away and I saw another doctor at his surgery. And there was now the problem of where we would stay when we returned to Sydney as Jim and Bernadette had returned to occupy their home. The charity home did not have a bath and Julia was becoming reliant on the relief it offered. I let the manageress know that we would not be coming back as we were entitled to another two weeks of accommodation. She was sorry to hear of Julia's decline having had the opportunity to become acquainted with her. I rang Jim and Bernadette and without hesitation they said they would be happy to have us. Julia was reluctant to intrude on their life but there was really no other option.

My car was still parked outside their house. I had spent the week musing on the fact that any essential item I needed was still in the car. On the Friday morning I went to visit Julia and check to see if anyone had produced her morning glass of fresh juice. The juicer was in Sydney and I had been buying the juice from a shop near her house. Jimmy was there as usual; the new job not yet active. I asked if he could obtain the juice but he refused. Julia was scathing in her response to him declaring that now her mother would have to do the fetching. He was unmoved and I set off to buy the juice, but I was disturbed, not just by him, but also by her presumption that I should make up for his inadequate behaviour. It was for me the last straw in their dismissal of my feelings. I went home afterwards to spend the weekend alone before our dreaded return to Sydney, a great wave of grief building a momentum that drowned my weekend. Alone in a sea of tears I felt angry at her betrayal but knew that I could never express my disappointment, not wanting to cause any rift between us. Angry, that she was going to die.

I couldn't bring myself to go back to visit them that weekend but I really don't feel she noticed. An Internet bill I received had added further hurt. My USB stick was with the household so that Ella would have access to the Internet while studying and I now owed the Internet provider \$1000. Apparently Jimmy had spent endless hours playing Internet games. Ella was fascinated by his behaviour observing that he could remain engrossed in a game beyond the time that seemed humanly possible. Julia dismissed it as my problem, reasoning that Jimmy was under the impression that there was unlimited usage.

He went off to work on the Saturday. Unpaid. A recruitment drive for the Martial Arts academy at a local fair! Julia was angry and declared it was time for a real job.

Chapter 21

There was very little conversation between us on the flight to Sydney, Julia lost in her own thoughts and I felt that I should not interrupt. Repeated my mantra silently and knew for sure that I could not reveal the pain of my own weekend. Bernadette picked us up at the airport and as we packed the wheelchair into her boot she lightened our mood with her gentle chatter.

There was an appointment at the Trial for the following day, which was Tuesday. We attended and spent the day undergoing the process of observation and the reissuing of drugs. The nurse who attended Julia on our initial introduction to the trial had returned from leave and we were both pleased to see her. There was no comment on the report from the orthopedic surgeon but there was to be a review of her case that week and the board would provide a verdict. The sour nurse insisted that we return on Thursday for any news but Julia asked that any news be delivered over the phone. A great deal of effort was required to attend the hospital. It was the gentle nurse who intervened and assured Julia that she could see no reason why any news could not be transmitted by phone. I was glad knowing what the news would be, glad of the sanctuary of Jim and Bernadette's home.

Both Jim and Bernadette were experienced in palliative care having worked in nursing homes. Julia had been apprehensive about intruding into their lives but they were both wonderful, dissipating her fears. We enjoyed our evening meals together with bottle of wine and lively conversation. Julia put in an order for a meal she would like me to cook for us all, not that she would be able to eat much of it, but because she loved the opportunity to share. We went off to the shops and she insisted on controlling the wheelchair herself so that she could select the ingredients. Strawberries for Bernadette who had admitted her love of them and seafood for Jim. A new world from the perspective of the wheelchair. We were both intrigued by the responses of people to Julia in her chair, fascinating enough to dismiss temporarily the reason for it.

We struck up a conversation with a gentleman in the fruit shop. He had prayed for and claimed to have received a miracle delivered through Mary MacKillop. But it wasn't his miracle that intrigued Julia but rather the idea that he would make a very good boy friend for me. She had previously suggested that the gentleman at the charity house would be a suitable candidate. I asked her why she was so keen to find me a partner and she replied that she didn't want me to be lonely. I reassured her that I was perfectly satisfied with my life the way it was but she was too young to understand that there can be any other life but life with a partner. I already had all my girls and my work, but she was still driven by that drive to reproduce.

We had time to fill in before Thursday, Jim's clocks slowly ticking though out the house. We went to the movies and traded our world for a couple of hours but she was still in that chair when the credits rolled on to the screen and we both knew that the time for the in coming call was drawing nearer.

She took it with such dignity and thanked the doctor for the opportunity she had been given. Graciously wished them all the best for all their work in the future and said good bye and then she turned to us contorted by the pain of it. "I don't want to die, I don't want to die," she sobbed dragging me with her into that crescendo of bitter tears.

The practicalities of still being alive means that while the memory of it will remain, the moment, cannot last forever. Bernadette produced the evening meal and booked flights with suitable seating and a hoist for disembarkation from the plane the following day, while Jim sat with us in the bitter cold of the back verandah as we smoked, marvelling at our determination to persist with the cigarettes. He produced the sherry bottle and Julia had a couple which relaxed her although her stomach played a heavy penalty when she retired to bed. Their presence, invaluable to both of us, both of them consoling us with their strength.

Bernadette went to early mass the next morning to pray for us and then drove us to the airport. Julia said goodbye to Jim. "You're

cool,” were her parting words. I was emotional and teary as we said goodbye to Bernadette at the airport and I wheeled Julia off into the crowds.

It Is What You Want To Give

What if you could take someone else's
pain from them
And channel it out through
yourself?

Grief comes in waves
And waves
And waves

But people surf!

Chapter 22

The light shone through the clouds, her face an ethereal silhouette against the aircraft window as we ascended for our homeward journey. I indicated the clouds and remarked that we were indeed getting nearer the end of the journey. She responded understanding my meaning. I suggested that when we arrived home it would be time to make the preparations necessary for that end. I would purchase a will kit and she could set about listing to whom her precious things should be given.

“The healer can’t cure my cancer,” she observed, a question implied by the intonation in her voice. I replied that indeed he could not. “What I don’t understand is why if he is such a spiritual person he isn’t preparing me for my next life,” she continued. An understanding at last! An understanding of that journey, which we were on together. What more could I give her? I suggested that she needed someone else to do the healing, someone to guide and support her through the time ahead. I knew how much comfort the healing afforded her and we needed all the help we could get. She knew who to ask, it would be Annie, a protégé of the healers who had attended her previously in his company. Annie had worked with Julia at the airport and was connected also through Julia’s association with the local indigenous people. Apparently it had been Annie who had sent the healer in the first instance. I asked if she would like to see our parish priest but she declined claiming that she had nothing to say to him.

It was a solemn journey accompanied by intense physical pain and the strain on her face was clearly visible. I put her straight to bed the moment we arrived at her house expecting that she would dissolve into sleep but I could not have been more wrong. The girlfriends arrived complete with children and her agony was transformed by their presence.

Emma and her partner Brad, were to return on the afternoon flight to Sydney to collect the car and drive it home but they discovered at the airport that there was the usual complication of a booking

that had gone wrong and the airline computers had apparently stalled and they were forced to pay another fare for the following day. An unplanned evening together instead. It was still raining when they arrived in Sydney to a train strike but they found the right wine for Jim in the unfamiliar city and had at least the opportunity to meet Jim and Bernadette who afforded them the same hospitality that Julia and I had received. Jim with the car serviced and warmed ready for their early morning departure.

Ella returned to my home with me to take up residence in the comfort of her own bedroom. It was good to be home but there was still that unsettling feeling that life could not return to what it had been. Her sisters were glad to have Julia home at last and Emma and Brad had moved out of their room near the bathroom and moved down to the cellar, a swap, so that it was possible to care for Julia. Jimmy protested at the move but our minds were made up.

He was still unemployed and had made no effort to contribute to the household in any way. Julia was very short with him, no hesitation in demanding that he did as she bid. Such a big man but he had come to hanging his head in a subordinate manner whenever she admonished him, like a child being reprimanded by an adult. He told Katrina that her feistiness was one of the things that he found attractive about her, her spirit, her willingness to fight however he never acknowledged that the reality was that he was the only person with whom there was ever any dispute. Katrina reported an awful evening, which involved his shouting at her. The household had listened in horror but had come to the conclusion that Julia accepted the behaviour because it made her feel alive, a part of life.

Chapter 23

Julia was still hoping that The Beasts could be removed, not just because of the discomfort, but she found them psychologically disturbing. On the following Monday, the 21st of June we set off on a visit to her surgeon. Julia was in high spirits; happy to see the man in whom she had so much trust. She dressed for the occasion and Katrina and I wheeled her into his surgery, where he greeted her with his usual respect and evident concern. By this time new melanomas had appeared on the breast, on the thigh and the unyielding tumour under her arm had reappeared.

He explained that her cancer was growing expediently and took the time to draw an analogy between her cancer and an old Chinese tale. The story was of a Chinese peasant who played his musical instrument for the emperor and was to be rewarded with anything he desired. The peasant asked that he be given a grain of rice and that each day thereafter, that quantity would be doubled. Very soon the peasant owned all the rice in China. It was the first time since before the Trial that she had been given an expectation of how long she had left to live. The Surgeon promised to remove The Beasts and explained that cancer consumes all the energy that would otherwise be used to support the body; their removal would slow down that drain on her energy.

She wanted to keep The Beasts after removal, determined to burn them in some fanciful ceremony but he asked if they could be sent back to the Trial who could use them for their research. “Just one last thing for science,” I encouraged her. She was disappointed but she agreed and asked if he would remove all her other tumours including his old enemy lurking in her armpit. He couldn’t promise to take on that foe knowing how much surgery he had already performed on the area but booked her into the hospital for surgery the following day.

Chapter 24

I had never seen her so nervous before an operation before, scared that she would die on the table, her business with the world incomplete. She was actually shaking with fear and feverish as Katrina and I showered her in preparation for the operation. Consoling her with the thought that her nerves could also be attributed to the heat of her body. She insisted that the theatre staff let me know the instant that she was in the recovery room and they wheeled her off leaving Katrina and I feeling deeply disturbed by her distress.

The surgery seemed to take forever, part of that time frame that exists whenever there is an apprehensive wait, but she had recovered sufficiently from her surgery by the time they let me know, for her to have regained her composure. No jolly photos of the cap and gown this time around, just the hard hit from the surgery, her face pale under the blue cap.

She seemed to be a mass of staples from head to toe. Ugly wounds on the back but The Beasts were gone. An open hole in the flesh on one side where the staples were stretched to the limit. She had pleaded once again with the surgeon before surgery to remove the lump under her arm and he had admitted that he had been awake for hours the night before planning how best to perform the removal. There had been very little flesh to pull together and she now had a hole there, which was never to close again. But just a few stiches needed for the breast and the two on her thigh.

Jimmy came up later in the evening to see her and Katrina and I left her in his hands. He stayed the night and apparently spent the time getting her to and from the bathroom and back to bed again. He was a good nurse when he put his mind to the job. Not afraid of getting his hands dirty and patient with Julia's demands. She was more demanding of him than she was of her family but underlying it all was her frustration that he now felt he had a legitimate excuse for not working. She insisted that she was able to cope by herself as after all she was in a fully staffed hospital

and ordered him to buy the paper and start a job search. He spent the subsequent night in his nursing role but after that she would have no more of it.

The Surgeon appeared the following day clad in his theatre garments, direct from an intense day of operating. She was delighted as always to see him. He produced his mobile phone and showed us the images he had taken the time to record while she was in the theatre. The two Beasts lay spread upon a table, a scale beside them to record their surprising size. Black with the melanin, which he explained clung to his fingers as he cut them from her back. Apparently tumours drain that dark pigmentation from the body and store them giving rise to their unearthly color. He asked for my email address so that he could send me the images to print out. “Now you can burn them” he said as she scrutinized his phone. The email was in my inbox when I got home and I sent them on to Aunty Katrina who blew the images up giving them the status that Julia felt they deserved.

We worked out our visits in shifts until late in the evenings and took over the nursing. The staff remarked that they were very glad of the extra hands. She issued orders for chocolate bars and treats for the staff and soon had them all charmed. I was surprised, to learn from one of the nurses, that Kevin Rudd had just been deposed by Julia Gillard, as the leader of the Labor party. I have a healthy interest in politics and was intrigued to learn that the outside world existed and that such a significant moment could have simply passed me by.

There were other visitors as well. The girlfriends and her friends all came and gave her their love. She gave as much time to them as they asked, sometimes to the detriment of herself, trying to balance her medication so that the timing would be right. She reserved “The Horse Pills” a large green dose of morphine, as a last resort for killing the pain, in order to be alert for her visitors. The doctors had suggested that the drug be administered intravenously and an attempt was made to insert a shunt, but Julia was extremely disturbed by the attempt. It was the only time that I was a witness to such a loss of control by her, more than just

tears. She apologized immediately to the physician and nurses, shaken by her own response.

Ella had hoped to see her big sister alone as she had not spent time alone with her in months. Afraid that she might miss her opportunity to express her love and admiration. I discussed it with Julia and Ella and organized that Ella would come. We didn't burden Julia with the details but Ella would come from a university exam, take the two hours travelling time and arrive at the appointed hour. I had been there since early morning when a visitor arrived who was a friend from work, someone very lately part of Julia's life. Julia spent hours with her and then retired to sleep. Ella and I sat patiently and silently beside her bed for a couple of hours, not moving a muscle, until she was finally awoken when the next visitor burst into the room. We left, Ella's business incomplete. Julia rang a couple of hours later to say she was sorry and I explained that she must remember that for some of us she will always matter in our lives and as for others, they will have moved on

The mobile phone was always the first consideration when setting that restrictive side table beside her hospital bed, but always with that consideration for Natalie's space. We found Natalie on the floor on one occasion and the neglect of that grubby little stuffed toy appalled Julia. A temporary slip but we understood her meaning. She rang Aunty Jane who lives in the centre of Australia and asked if she would be coming but Aunty Jane said regrettably no, so Julia fondly wished her goodbye. She rang many people and they rang her. The sign on the door may have occasionally said no visitors but you could never stop them coming in down those wireless waves.

There was some talk of surgery on the leg where the melanomas were exerting their force on her bones, but it was deemed unfeasible. I was glad of that and it passed her by without too much concern She was O.K. with it all until they moved her down into palliative care.

Chapter 24

There is no argument with the label on the door. Cleary stated for all to see. A day and a half taking it in. But she did! The strength that comes from knowing that the path is laid. It was the taking control that laid her bare. The strength of her and what she gave.

We were waiting for the final scans that had been taken on Jimmy's last visit to Sydney, taken as I had fretted in the rain. But my mantra was still upon my lips and I pointed out that we would have a time frame, know at last how each organ would impact upon the time in which to act.

On the twenty-eighth of June she called us all in at seven a.m. the beginning of the doctor's rounds. We were there to hear the facts. Her father, unable to do anything but weep, was invited along with her oldest friend, her twin, her lover and her mother, all of us there to digest the news. I had no need of any explanations and she understood that but she wanted the others that she loved to hear of her fate from the doctor's mouth, to accept what they must hear. The entire palliative care team was lined up squeezed into the hospital room, her bed central stage when she asked the intern to read the details of the scan report.

She referred to the experience of the doctor, explained that she understood that nobody could provide a date but understood that an experienced team must have an understanding of a time frame and she was entitled to that. She was magnificent as that nervous intern read the report. As he mentioned each area discovered, uncovered and revealed on a page of paper, reordered, undeniable, she touched each violated body part. The cancer now in her stomach, her liver and creeping up into her lungs. Holding the attention of all who attended except for Jimmy who was mysteriously engaged in a telephone conversation. "I'm Fucked" she said at the end of his report and the head nurse was so struck by the situation that she giggled and was moved to ask for a repetition of that resounding phrase. The rest of the team remained locked into their view of their roles. I questioned the nurse about whether she really required a repetition of the

moment and she looked upon the solemn faces and saw at once the situation.

They were with us then, not that I think that amazing group of people would ever have offered anything less of themselves but now they understood our journey. The sentence was weeks not months as she had hoped but now she could plan out her time. The social worker came to explain Julia's rights. She had the opportunity to make her decision about her medical care, an empowerment to her. There was to be no prolonged life support and no resuscitation if the situation required.

We were given brochures on the indications of when death was imminent, time to digest the information that so many people either avoid through choice or because death comes suddenly. Julia had been too young to observe the process of her grandmother's death and she had been in London when her grandfather died. Her sisters also were unfamiliar with the process. The social worker suggested a family meeting at home, an opportunity for us all to discuss any concerns or worries.

The doctor explained that she had an option. She was still in constant pain and it seemed that no amount of morphine was going to get it under control so they could offer her the choice of an induced coma, which would allow her to die peacefully. The advantage would be that she could say her goodbyes and end the pain. The idea disturbed Julia immensely, went against the grain. "But can I still go to heaven" she asked and the doctor replied that she must seek the opinion of her priest on that matter.

Annie had been coming daily to administer her healing and I started to stay for the visits. She was beyond diligent, having to schedule her visits between her own work schedules. She wasn't a driver and it was some distance from the airport where she worked to the hospital, but Annie insisted on getting herself to Julia's bedside independently, intent on her healing. Her presence brought an immediate sense of calm into the room. A gentle woman, she would set about the healing, remaining often in the most uncomfortable of positions absorbed in prayer having

administered the ritual of healing. She believed that it was possible to cure the cancer and was determined to prove her point. Julia without realizing it had learned to meditate, to remove herself from her situation and she would easily fall into the deep sleep she so desperately needed. I prayed also, but my prayer was that Julia would have the strength to face her own death.

Chapter 25

The ground floor location of the palliative care ward had the advantage of being more accessible to the hospital grounds. The volunteers from palliative care had supplied Julia with a brand new wheel chair and she took control of the opportunity to use it to maximum capacity. Restless in her clinical world, Julia would ask to be pushed out to the grounds. It had been a real mission upstairs in surgical, but it was easily accomplished from the ground floor. She would ask to be parked on top of the no smoking sign, which was clearly painted on the pavement knowing full well that I was not one to disobey such a directive. Lighting up a cigarette for us both, making me choose between right and wrong and laughing at my discomfort.

It was a busy space full of the comings and goings of visitors to the hospital and to the emergency ward. Full of life and all the characters it brought. She would strike up a conversation with anyone who had the time but mostly she sought the company of those whose body language indicated a need for a cheery word. We listened one day to a tale of woe from a dissipated character recovering from a bender and in need of a cigarette, which she supplied. She turned to Katrina and I as he departed for the bus stop and with sadness said “I will miss the people in the street.”

It was a new world that pavement. On one occasion we were sheltering from the sun in the bus shelter when we had the pleasure of an encounter with a man who was the uncle of a close friend. The twins had known him since childhood. He was a well-known character in the town, distinctive because his only mode of transport was his motorized scooter. A lifetime of confinement to a chair and medical emergencies that had not slowed him down in the least. She greeted him with a laid back smile and asked if he had heard the news and he confirmed that he had. “How much for one of those?” she inquired indicating his scooter. It was indeed the Rolls Royce of medical transport and came priced accordingly. “You could get a second hand one,” he suggested but she dismissed the idea because there would not be enough time to make full use of it. They laughed together and she pointed out that

the morphine was difficult to manage but he encouraged her to take whatever was needed and rode off smiling with the delight of her.

The trip back from the pavement to palliative care took us past the hospital gift shop, a treasure trove that Julia could not resist. There were always more presents that she needed to buy for visitors. "Every one likes a present," she reasoned storing them up to present to the appropriate receiver. She bought a green glass elephant with silver inside and presented it to me but I pointed out that she had already given me one way back when the journey began. She was undisturbed by her mistake and rectified the matter by promising to pass it on to Annie, but Katrina was distraught believing that her sister was losing her mind. I argued that it was not the case at all just a momentary lapse of her memory. I photographed my collection of elephants at home and took them in for Julia to view and she remembered immediately where they had all been purchased and approved their new setting. An interest still, in all the worldly things, with which we fill our minds.

However not all trips to the outside world were full of distractions. We always offered her the choice and sometimes as we wheeled her chair towards the entrance of the hospital she chose to take the entrance that led through the back car park to the river. She was remote from its beauty, the river unscarred by buildings, nature rooting us into this earthly life. Scarcely populated with the comings and goings of the everyday world. Emma and I took her there one day. She was stony faced lost in her own reflections. She directed a statement at me "There is only one good thing about it all, I don't have to bury you," she said little realizing the pain for me in that thought. As we wheeled her back in she continued, "I feel that all I have to do is get out of here. Just make it home. But in my head I know that is not true."

Chapter 26

Jimmy had made no attempt to look for work and he had become a focus of many conversations, speculations on his intentions. The workings of his mind could only ever be conjecture. I had suggested very early in their relationship that maybe we were witnessing the responses of a culture foreign to us, but that time had long passed. I had witnessed him moved to tears by the thought of Julia's death but he remained unmoved by the need to give her what she wanted – a man who could prove his self worth. He slept by day buried in his bed. Was he some sort of conman living off the charity of others who had donated to Julia's benefits or was he simply some dysfunctional soul, too self absorbed to look beyond himself? He certainly had become a complication, the archangel no longer visible.

Emma's birthday was on Wednesday the thirtieth of June and the girls were planning a party. A meal for all their friends, and a welcome home to Julia who was to be discharged that day. I arrived early in the morning to wait for the doctors and the lists of instructions for her arsenal of medications. I was apprehensive about going home to a party when she was so clearly exhausted but the girls insisted. As the day wore on into early evening she became wearier waiting for her discharge and it was not until the sun had set that I wheeled her to the car. I asked if she would like Jimmy to come and drive her home, but she refused, adamant that if she was going home she was going with her mother.

The house had been decorated and was alive with people when we arrived but she was unable to make more than a brief appearance driven off by her pain to the privacy of her bedroom. She reappeared for short periods throughout the evening but she was chained to the regime of her pain and the medication. She cried in her bedroom reminded by the buzz of the party that she could no longer be part of it all.

I had been suggesting that my granny flat should be utilized for Julia and Jimmy. It would allow for the nursing and Katrina could move into my spare room but Julia would have none of it. She

decreed that they would all remain together to the end. Too many independent adults to have to accommodate the adjustment to communal living with a terminal patient who was beyond their experience! The tension under which the household had laboured for so long broke out that evening.

Jimmy and Emma's partner Brad had a long running dispute over the guitar that dominated the living area. Both of them keen to outplay each other, an animosity in their battle. Brad had removed the guitar to the cellar and towards the end of the party, when most of the guests had delivered their farewells, Ella and her boyfriend along with Jimmy went down to the sitting room in the cellar. Apparently there was an explosion of anger when Jimmy picked up the guitar and sang the song he had shared previously with Julia; we could hear the aggression upstairs. It was only Julia's commanding voice that pulled Jimmy up, made him rein in his natural inclination to attack. Ella's boyfriend took Jimmy out to walk off his anger in the cool night air.

Brad appeared upstairs and Julia commanded him to sit and listen. He sat at her feet as she explained her expectations. "We share in this household," she said "Everything we have here we have shared with you and I expect that you would understand that." She promised to give Jimmy a guitar of his own to resolve the problem, a woman dealing with miscreant children. "You have unleashed a killer," she warned him and asked him to remain downstairs in the cellar. I asked him as well but he ignored us both and left by the downstairs exit to follow Jimmy out into the street, where he leapt from behind a bush to continue his taunts. I caught up with Jimmy who had managed to ignore Brad's presence in the street but was, while still seething, pleased that he had managed to control his own anger.

Brad could not let it go at that. On Jimmy's return he came back upstairs to further provoke him and Jimmy responded in the only way he knew pushing Brad down the stairs. Julia leapt from her wheelchair, all pain forgotten just the vision of Jimmy in jail and her beloved sister Emma brokenhearted forever. There was no doubt that she saved Brad, her command holding Jimmy by the

only leash to which he would respond. The bones in her legs shattered as she ran down that hall.

It took hours for me to settle her down, overwrought and without sleep she wept as she asked why we had been subjected to the evening's events. Why had there been a party at all? I had no answer, suggesting that maybe the reason might be made clear at some future date, at some unforeseen circumstances. As if dying isn't hard enough without others impeding the journey. Emma appeared swollen eyed in the morning and Julia was up calmly advising her that she must face the reality of the party night and speak to Brad. They were going on a trip to visit Aunty Katrina and would be away until the weekend when they were to return with Aunty Katrina and their cousins.

Her strength in dealing with them all was remarkable, empowered by the knowledge that there was not forever to set the world straight. When Emma left Julia wept again asking why Emma had abandoned her but I assured she would never be abandoned by Emma and a little pressure off the household for a few days would be of benefit to everybody. Katrina had taken up a new relationship with a man who seemed to have arrived in her life at a fortuitous moment and Julia was delighted that for Katrina, there was some escape from the reality of her twin's death. Julia could have some time alone with Jimmy and there were things to be done.

Chapter 27

The palliative care nurse came to set us on our nursing course. It was an intense business with the times of administration, dosages and the names of the drugs all catalogued on the wall of Julia's room. A tray to contain all the medications and dressings and Julia knew them all. She prided herself on her being still in control, knowing exactly how many dosages remained in each packet. The palliative care team had tried to convince her that injections would deliver quicker relief but she remained adamant that she was adverse to needles. A fear I suspected that was compounded by her experience of all those junkies she had known in all those distant places.

There was a couch in her room for the visitors and compacted into that small space was the television because Jimmy wanted to watch videos. Julia had no interest in them at all, her mind on more serious matters. Jimmy was still not convinced that Julia was going to die. He asked the nurse if she had ever witnessed any miracles and she replied that she had not seen one in thirty years of nursing. I asked him if he had ever been through this process before and he said no. The owls were visible on their perch right outside her window, keeping guard.

Julia was struggling with nausea and had arrived at the point of constantly attempting to make herself vomit, her fingers down her throat. I pointed out that it provided no relief and that the practice was only causing further stress and she took my advice and ceased. Sleep never lasted for long. Her trips to the toilet and the bath seemed to roll into one everlasting event of getting her from the bed to the wheelchair. The house, providing only an awkward space with little room for mobility compounding the pain of movement.

The following evening we moved all her treasures up from the cellar and under her directions the room was transformed into her own space. The blue crucifix above her bed and the blue curtains I had made her earlier in the year to match the blue sheets upon the bed. She was happy, distracted by the task. Her friend Ian the

builder was a little reluctant to pick up a hammer but they were old friends used to sparring. "I'm dying!" she reminded him and he hung the last of the paintings on the wall.

Jimmy was still sleeping in her bed so he had the night duty but I received a call in the early hours of that night. I felt as if my head had just hit the pillow but she was distressed and needed me to come and do the healing, to put her to sleep. I arrived and we burnt the candle that an uncle had sent and with the touch of my hand she dissolved into sleep. It was a pattern that would remain but it was hard to control my own grief as I willed my strength into her.

That week was the only period in which she was teary, digesting the inevitability of it all. There was a guitar at my home that Julia had picked up on her travels around Australia, left behind by a hitchhiker and it was delivered to Jimmy who took it up with great delight. He would serenade her as she laid in the bath, swept away by the romance of it all, a refuge from the tears.

I called from home on the Friday evening and spoke to Jimmy but I was disturbed by the distinctive sound of her crying in the background. He wasn't too perturbed and explained that she was upset because her friends were all gathering for a drink at the home of an old chum and she was unable to go. "I just want to go and have a sip of Tia Maria and milk with my friends and now I can never do that again," she sobbed as I arrived. It was time for some action so I produced the will kit and we set about listing all her possessions. She already had a very clear idea of who should have what and now everything was laid out before her in her room. She debated the reason for bequeathing each object, the meaning that it would have to each person she loved.

There were all the friends in Dublin, her girlfriends, cousins and aunts, close family friends, past boyfriends, and her sisters. A very long list, which surprised me because I knew the history of them all and some of them I would have imagined had lost their original significance in her life. But she listed them all as if they were some sort of tally representing her life.

There was only one person that caused her concern – the child in Dublin. She reasoned that he had a new mother now and it had been a couple of years since they had contact and she didn't want to cause the child any stress. Finally we agreed that the carved box that she had kept from her own childhood should be filled with Australian sweets and some shells collected from her trip around Australia. There had to be Rocky Road because it contained marshmallow and the child loved it. I was to buy a card and write a letter to be sent after her death. Her eyesight was failing and writing, which she had always found challenging, had become impossible. She only just managed to sign the framed print designated for Annie after I had written the inscription. The process took hours and hours and we were able to forget the ticking of the clock for that time. She faulted only once declaring that she didn't want to give away all her beautiful things. "You must." I said and we continued the work until she was free of it.

Chapter 28

The house was still full of daily visitors and Julia liked to see them all made welcomed with a drink and something to eat. She was never too indisposed for them, especially the children. She arranged for an older group of ladies from the airport to come for lunch on Saturday. I was under instructions to produce the meal. One vegetarian and one gluten free please. So I arrived from home with the meal and the crystal and the silverware and the linen serviettes and greeted her guests while we waited for that moment when the drugs had her pain sufficiently under control and I wheeled her out in her chair. She was always such a gracious host but she charmed them all knowing that in fact it was a farewell. It was the first of her formal farewells and I was to witness many more. Annie was there and I spoke to her, pointing out that indeed Julia was dying and that what she needed was the spiritual guidance for the rough road ahead.

When they left she had an arranged visit from the boyfriend with whom she had travelled around Australia. Julia asked me to stay explaining that Jimmy would be jealous of an old boyfriend. He stayed for hours and hours and they both enjoyed their time together. Julia, including us both, charming. They recounted their entire journey together, laid the past to rest and she closed the page.

It was clear that the family would need to make a roster in order to cope with the nursing and it was a matter of working out where each individual's energy could best be utilized. Her father came early in the mornings and I was there during the days but she complained that Jimmy who was on the night shift would only last until one or two and then he would go to sleep leaving her stranded in her bed. So I was rostered on for the night shift and moved a grip with my essentials up to their house. Annie complained that if Jimmy attended her visits he would sleep throughout the healing.

Any medication that was dispensed was recorded so the nurse, who visited daily to attend to her wounds, could be certain of how

Julia and we were handling the situation. There was no pressure from the hospital concerning where Julia choose to die. In many ways she had become used to the security of the hospital but she did want to die at home and had a faith that we would all support her in that.

The consolation for Julia was that she would be reunited with her grandparents in her next life. I explained that I didn't believe that the hereafter was as simple as that, arguing that she would have moved on to a new level of understanding, an evolution of the thinking that is confined by our earthly experiences. She found that a disturbing notion and asked to see our parish priest. As I left her room, the conversation fresh in both our minds, the phone rang and it was the priest. He arranged to visit her on the following Tuesday.

Katrina was really struggling with the prospective loss of her twin, not that the other girls were finding it easy but Katrina found it particularly difficult to cope. She had quit her job to be able to put in the time with Julia, and Emma and Ella were lucky enough to have school holidays. My sick leave had run its course and the new term of school was to commence. I briefly contemplated returning at the end of the school holidays, which were to finish on the eighteenth of July. I could do my night shift and go to school but Julia was alarmed by the idea that I would be absent during the days. In retrospect it does seem a little ambitious, but the girls were at home and in some ways I felt superfluous during the day and I needed the distraction of something else to focus on. I applied for Long Service Leave on the proviso that I could return to work as soon as I was ready.

Aunty Katrina and my niece Zillah were due to arrive the following day, which was Sunday and Julia was anxious to see her aunt. My sister has had nursing experience and is the family font of knowledge on many medical matters. She had always given her time to Julia and that power that maternal figures have to kiss and make it better was needed, along with the reassurance of her aunt, that indeed it was time to say goodbye. Julia wanted her to spend the night sleeping in her bed with her, a comfort she

was looking forward to. Aunty Katrina was a little anxious about the responsibility of it all, anxious that she would dissolve into dysfunctional tears, but we assured her that there was very little sleeping involved and that the nursing was organized and we had all succumbed to tears.

Chapter 29

I didn't go to mass in that period after we came back from Sydney, the days were compressed into a blur, the girls off work and nothing to mark the time. My thoughts were focused on the time ahead, the uncertainty of when death should call, the uncertainty of what pain still lay ahead. It was an insular space and intrusions and inquiries from the outside world seemed foreign to the importance of our business. God and Mary MacKillop stuck with me, nevertheless.

Aunty Katrina and Zillah's arrival brought us one step closer to those final farewells. As with any visitor, Julia responded with what she could give them, rather than what she could take. There were the possessions to be passed on but she was excited at the prospect of being able to give Aunty Katrina a sum of cash. My sister has always struggled financially, even her visit meant a loss of essential income from her job, but it was the last thing she would ever complain of and Julia understood her sacrifice well. But it was more than that; Julia was looking forward to seeing the surprise and delight on her aunt's face.

When the visitors arrived Julia was asleep on the couch, head on her father's lap waiting to receive them and we all crept around not wishing to wake her from a rare moment of sleep. Aunty Katrina had no need to be apprehensive about their meeting. Julia had control of the situation, empowering her aunt and cousin with her own strength. I was to see many repetitions of the situation, Julia turning the focus from herself and her situation into a moment of real connection.

There was an inspection of the wounds, quite shocking to the uninitiated viewer, and the question that Julia wanted to ask. She wanted confirmation of the time frame that we had constructed and her aunt confirmed that while there could be no definite answer, three weeks until death sounded feasible. Satisfied with the response, Julia asked her aunt to change her dressings, check that all was in order and then she set about creating a wonderful evening for us all. A remarkable evening, a display of her

determination to make it easier for all of us. There was the constant submersion in the bath, and the dreaded horse pills, but in between she would join us in the lounge, picking up the threads of all the conversations, inquiring about the details of her aunt and cousins lives, adding her humour to a social evening which moved us all. We were up until late which was so characteristic of all our adult years together. The accommodation dictated that we had to double up on the beds and Julia, who was content with having us all under the one roof, directed the sleeping arrangements.

The social worker was scheduled for the following day and Julia's father arrived for the early morning shift, completing the family circle. Neither my sister nor I paid any close attention to the nursing that morning as it was not our shift. I was distracted by Ella, who was in a very emotional condition, one of those moments, which seemed to strike us at unforeseen moments. She was anxious about the forthcoming meeting with the social worker and didn't feel she would be able to cope. Jimmy remained asleep, distant from us all.

We sat with the social worker in a rather formal semicircle around the couch waiting for Julia to be wheeled out. She insisted on leaving the chair for the dignity of the couch. She mentioned briefly that she wasn't feeling very well and indeed she was very flushed but she dismissed it, intent on the moment. I went to rouse Jimmy who kept us all waiting as he set about cleaning his teeth, Julia demanding a little more haste. He finally joined us and sat on the peripheral edge of that group, cap firmly pulled down over his eyes.

None of us had been able to anticipate the social worker's intentions in calling the gathering and she seemed at a loss as to where to begin, so I posed the first question. Given the grief we had all experienced I wondered if we would experience less when Julia died, was there a measure of grief for each of us a sort of bankable quantity with our deposits taken into account for the final balance? The answer was no. I contemplated her response later. A sudden death would avoid all the anguish we had

experienced, but the trade off for our grief, was the opportunity for Julia to come to terms with her own life and her own death.

Julia had obviously given the gathering some thought. She asked “What happens when I die?” but the social worker mistook her question for an inquiry about the physiology of the process and Julia was momentarily put off track as she had intended it as an opportunity to offer comfort to us all. She corrected the misunderstanding and then proceeded to address us in a formal valediction in which she made it clear that she had come to terms with dying and thanked us all for all that we had given her. She was steadfast in her delivery, stronger than those weeping before her.

It became clear how ill she was when Aunty Katrina and I took her back to her bed. We had not seen her wounds or bathed her that morning and now the angry red tell tale signs of infection had spread down from her armpit engulfing her arm, her body hot to our touch from a raging temperature. We had her in the bath trying to reduce the temperature when the palliative care nurse arrived and ordered an ambulance. As they wheeled her out she said her final goodbye to her cousin and aunt, but Aunty Katrina was adamant that they would see her the next day at the hospital. “I’m not taking Natalie,” she declared leaving us all with an understanding that she had found a new source of strength.

Chapter 30

“I nearly died” she said, the anger quite clear in her voice the following day, the path of the infection marked out on her skin with a permanent marker. I understood her anger, she would have been cheated of the opportunity to say her goodbyes to that long list of all-important friends and she deserved that. At least she was comfortable in the familiarity of the hospital and there was less stress on her body moving her from the bed to the bathroom. There was no bath but she resolved the problem by immersing her leg in a bucket of water, which did the job. And there was never a complaint from her about that.

The palliative care team in that hospital was wonderful. Selflessness in a world where too few choose to venture. Julia loved them all and they loved her back. There was more than one tear from them when she said goodbye. They called her Frank because of the Sinatra song. She was calling the shots but always with appreciation of all they did for her. She was brave in her acceptance of her circumstance but it was her concern for them that they understood. She had developed a bond with the doctor, trusted him, looked forward to his delivered opinion each morning. He regretted that he had to announce that he was going overseas, he was concerned that she would be upset. She was for about thirty seconds after his announcement and then asked “Why?” to which he replied that he was going to see his son, and without any hesitation she smiled and said with love “I hope you have a wonderful time with your family.”

The infection had shaken her up but it had also cemented the drive that she needed to complete her journey. On the Monday night my nephew Elliott arrived to join his mother Katrina and Zillah for their goodbyes, nerves on both sides, but I left them with the privacy they needed and waited outside the hospital room. They reappeared, Elliott with a gift in hand and reported her stoicism, not a tear from her, just her love. They went home knowing that there could only ever be one goodbye. She was exhausted when I went in to see her. “It’s so hard,” she sobbed, but I reassured her that she had done a magnificent job.

The priest came but she wanted me to stay for his visit, afraid that she would have nothing to say. But she did of course. She asked him to excuse any inattentive behaviour because she had just swallowed a horse pill but she wanted him to understand that he had her undivided attention. He did not really know her; I was the churchgoer. Firstly, she defined the differences between her and myself, and then pointed out that some things were the same, and that we both liked to be open to the differences in life. But she could only make sense of it all if her grandparents would be there in Heaven waiting for her and she told him of my explanation. He allayed her fears with his explanation that she would recognize the love of this life in the next. She presented him with a gift, a glass teapot, an ornament without practical use, a remembrance of a moment because as she explained anyone that spent their lives working for the welfare of others deserved a present. He was quite overwhelmed. "I don't need to see him again." she said, satisfied by his responses.

One of us needed to be there twenty-four hours a day. She slept so very little and for the rest of the time it was one endless journey from the bed to the bathroom to the bed, outside for a cigarette, to bed, outside with the visitors back to the bed repeated time and again. And each movement was difficult and we hated her pain. We organized a new roster so that we could take turns on the night shift. A diminishing opportunity to show her how much we loved her.

My brother Liam and family arrived as my sister left, my brother to stay with me and to support his family as they said good-bye. My brother's sons are much younger than my children, and the cousins didn't know each other well. Julia summed up the situation, the confrontation of a hospital room, and invited them all to join her outside. "We'll share a cigarette." she offered, inviting them in. Their beloved dog was in the car and Julia got wind of it and invited the dog to. She was right, they were complete with their pet. She was amazing in her ability to recall all the little snippets of information about so many people that she was connected to. She knew of their latest achievements and praised them for that. And with a twinkle in her eye, promised

that she would be at the next party looking down upon them.
After they had gone she wept in her room.

Chapter 31

The journey had brought us to the bottom of a very steep mountain, one she had to climb. Julia was to repeat her farewells day after day to so many dear friends and relations. Each of them with only one goodbye to say, she torn by so many. But she did it bravely and thanked each person for what they had brought in to her life. But, we both knew there could only ever be one goodbye, two would hurt too much. The cigarette excuse became the tool she used to ask her visitor to wheel her out for some time in the outside world before departure. I would often wait on the lounge she passed on her way to the no smoking sign, her visitor pushing the chair and she would invite me to join them and afterwards I would push the chair back to her room.

Our wellbeing was always on Julia's mind. She understood we needed breaks, time out from the intensity of it all, but she didn't have that option herself. She observed sadly that she couldn't have a holiday from dying. She supported us as much through it all as we supported her. But she was struggling still, death pulling her where she didn't want to go. Emma and I took her down to the riverbank one morning, she bleak with the strain of her existence, but we turned it around with the suggestion of funeral plans. She had given the matter some thought and as we live in a parish that services two churches, chosen the church where her grandparents' were married. The tune to end the service would not be a love song but an ode to life and friendship she explained as she sang Louis Armstrong's "What a wonderful World".

I was glad I wasn't there when she said goodbye to her girlfriends. A long list of them, but she did not see them as one group, they were too precious for that, Julia made sure that each had that moment for intimacy. Each with a piece of jewellery and their memory of her. Friends, who had been able to transport her from reality just by their presence. I had known them since they were children and I was spared their sadness. Scheduling visitors became a serious issue. No sleep, the stress for her, people ringing me and pleading their case for a visit while she was in fact the one in charge with her mobile phone, people who felt they may never

have the chance to say goodbye. But she wanted to see them all and worked to ensure she did

Annie came each day and brought with her a retreat from the giddy whirl of that ride. Sleep, and the energy of prayer. A resting place on that mountainside! I was often there and prayed with Annie and I asked her one day if she realized the peace that she brought with her healing, because I knew she was still hoping for a cure. I ran into Annie and Julia as I was delivering the sushi for their lunch one day. They were in the bus shelter, Julia in her chair and I overheard the end of their conversation, Julia assuring Annie she had faith in her. She asked me to wheel her to the bathroom to give an explanation. “What will happen to Annie when you die, I don’t want her to feel as if she has failed”, I gently inquired. But Julia was sure she could look after Annie.

Annie brought a lot of strength to the rest of us too. She had calmness about her, which she delivered with a smile, and we all knew what she brought to Julia, all glad whenever she entered the room. Julia organized for Annie to give a massage to all the family including Liam who had stayed on without his family to lend me a hand. Annie was happy to be of service but Julia insisted that she would pay, a gift to us all. Jimmy on the other hand brought with him nothing, but disillusionment in the existence of an archangel.

Chapter 32

Initially she would not allow Jimmy to have a night shift because he had a cold and she didn't want a cold to add to her woes, but she was adamant that he should get a job and he needed sleep for that. Worried that she would live longer than the little bit of money she still had left. "He's expensive!" she lamented and asked repeatedly if he would just pick up a tool and go to work. But he didn't, he went one day then he threw it in and lay in his bed until he walked into her hospital room and lied, right there in front of us, and put out his hand for his daily money. She knew exactly how much of her money he had used from the time they had both moved into the house together. She complained that he could at least buy his cigarettes at the discount shop since she was still paying the bills, but most of all she complained because he could not share a cigarette with her. He cancelled his opportunity for the night shift for some sudden engagement and I was called in, but she had come to depend on him less and less. There was talk from her that he should not carry her coffin but much later when we had made it home again and she lay in the bath for the last time, he brought out the guitar and I knew that he was with us for the rest of the ride.

The priest came again to pay her a call and she had him wheel her out to her no smoking sign. Jimmy was there and she asked him to draw closer. She laughed as she pointed out my discomfort and asked the priest if he thought it was terrible that as a child she was allowed only limited T.V. and had to eat at the family table with her own serviette, had rules to follow. She paused and continued. I had maintained my control until she was fifteen and then I had set her free. It was a tribute that I shall always value and she delivered it with a smile on her face blowing a kiss into the air, setting it free.

She didn't forget Natalie. She had said goodbye but she couldn't decide where she belonged. There was a lot of discussion on the matter. Natalie had been a source of comfort since she was a child. An old friend. Julia decided to be cremated with her but I suggested that she could live on my spare bed in case there were

nieces and nephews in the future, who might be in need of a friend. The idea appealed to her.

Julia swung between acceptance and disbelief that she was dying but she consoled herself with the resignation that a future life would have been harder in her world in which her learning difficulties curtailed a career change. But there was her biggest loss. The thing hardest for her to bear. Spoken of more than once, and spoken of for the last time as we mourned together at her words, delivered slowly, her face a mask, “If only I could have had a baby- no one could ever imagine, how much I would love it.” But she was wrong – I could.

So many people sent their love and their support to the family. So many acts of kindness. The parish decided to have a fundraiser and Julia was greatly comforted by the thought of all those prayers. “It must be hard to be the mother” people would state offering me their sympathy. So many people made that statement that it became a question. I had thought about it often and was surprised by my own response. As my child was dying, an event I would never have envisaged, the thought abhorrent, an event I would wish on no one else, I had the privilege of seeing exactly who she had become. A child replaced by a magnificent woman. A life, which evolved into the Julia, whom we had come to admire. Proud to know that all my endeavors as a mother had come to fruition, the time, the love, all well spent. But I wouldn’t mind if I had ever missed that opportunity.

Chapter 33

Night shifts were an intense time, no interruption from visitors just the challenge of trying to sleep. The hospital supplied a fold out bed for our overnight visits, but we only ever grabbed what seemed like a fleeting moment in that bed. Long after the last of the visitors had departed there would be that final trip to the pavement before attempting sleep. Interruption for medication and the constant trips from the bed to the toilet. And the trip, back out to the pavement in the middle of the night, a refugee from the hospital room. It was cold out there but she never seemed to notice, a rug draped over her legs, but for us, as we braced ourselves against that chill, we were reminded of why we there. She commented one night that I didn't seem too keen on venturing out at that hour, but I assured her my concern was the wear and tear on her body, the sleep lost, the stress of reality and she slept through that night.

My girls all took their turns at the night nursing. There were concerns that Ella, our baby, might find the going tough but I knew all would be well and she was after all with Julia. It was the night Julia dreamed that her twin was at the altar and woke in a flurry, anxious to get dressed for the occasion. Afterwards Julia said wistfully "Ella is grown up," and Ella had at last, the opportunity to tell her sister how much she loved her. She took care of us as much as we took care of her. Katrina's nights were overrun with a grief, which gripped her in a constant struggle to avoid tears, but Julia provided her with comfort. Emma, practical and yet emotional, a good big sister. Julia knew us all, remembered the details of our lives, what was going on in the background at that time and what mattered to us most. Painful as it was, it was a privilege that we all shared.

Annie did a night shift. She was very concerned that she might be taking special time from us but I reassured her that Julia needed her support, and that was our concern. They had a wonderful night together, a massage for Julia and Annie played the song that she had chosen to sing at the funeral. A request from Julia that challenged Annie, who was determined not to let her down. Then

Annie did her healing and Julia slept through the night -time pavement run. Energized by Annie's love. One of her dear girlfriends stayed another night, under instructions to bring her beer and reminisce just like old times. She brought a painting she had produced in response to Julia and a poem to express it all and Julia had a wonderful time despite the wheelchair beside her bed.

She was determined that there could still be good times. Emma and Brad, Ella and I were invited to lunch at her favourite sushi restaurant. Julia frail in her chair, our fellow diners moved by her appearance. We sat there immobilized by the situation, but we ate the food she ordered, determined to give her back what she wanted to give us. "Wheel me out outside please Mum." she said apologetically, her food untouched, her face pale, shaking with the determination that we should have a pleasant meal, share ourselves at the table. Uncle Paul was waiting on the other end of the mobile as I wheeled her outside. And she was lost in her pleasure of chatting to him, making light of reality, arranging the time for his visit. He was coming back from The Philippines with great haste. I pushed her back to the car proud of her in her chair.

My girls and I had a night off together when Annie stayed the night with Julia and we took the opportunity to weep together. Stunned by the thought that our lives would be forever changed. How could we conceive of a life without her? We had all traveled, but for years had shared a dream of experiencing a new destination together, the five of us. We would go together, after her death, as soon as circumstances permitted, and raise our cups to her so she could be with us, and she was delighted when we revealed our plan and saw at once a purpose to the proposal. She determined that she must leave enough money to help with the fares, her contribution to our shared journey.

Chapter 34

The mail bearing her precious possessions, transporting them to her friends in Dublin, arrived in remarkably short time and the recipients rang her up and said their final goodbyes, a chapter closed. She had lost a lot of weight and as we passed the mirror in her bathroom one day, she commented that her face had changed. I replied that she had her Dublin face on and she was pleased by that. Remarkably, her face was never disfigured by her disease, our Julia still visible. I was busy getting her into the toilet when she casually mentioned that there had been a letter from Dublin, a letter from the child. I thought she had been dreaming or was confused it seemed so unlikely. But there it was, a single piece of paper, written in his childish hand, declaring his love for her.

The Palliative Care team routinely asked her for a report on her pain level, but she was dismissive of reporting her pain to us. Almost as if it was a secondary concern, her mind occupied by higher things. She was however distressed by the constant discomfort of her bowels, a continuous pressure that drove the trips to the toilet. We could not reassure her that it was just the cancer, that it would be better to do one less move from the security of the bed. Each night she insisted that the dressings on her wounds were changed despite the medical advice, afraid of another infection, insisting that we take note of the healing process, the wounds packed up with gauze where the flesh didn't meet. The staff, patient, familiar with their ward.

But the team did at last convince her to take her drugs intravenously. She surrendered to the shunt and she discovered that her pain was relieved more quickly. Their concern was controlling the pain, making her comfortable. Julia's father usually arrived early in the mornings to spend the time with her and was there for the team's visits. I was frustrated by his inability to take in any vital information because he was always overwhelmed by his own grief. He had an early appointment one morning so I was there for the team's visit. The doctor welcomed me in, glad of the opportunity for which he had been waiting.

The aim was to get her home to die. Julia had spent enough time in hospital and enough time at home to make a decision. A hospital bed and nursing equipment could be delivered to her home, but the doctor's concern was that we would be able to cope. Julia did not hesitate in her response to his questions about our ability to take care of her, assuring the doctor, that there wasn't any need for worry. "My mother is experienced. She nursed her own mother and father and a partner as well. She nursed her mother as she died at home in my mother's bed." Julia explained. Her trust in me complete.

We had discussed those deaths. I explained that my mother had chosen to say goodbye as death pulled her from my bed, encouraged by us to let go, but my father, who had lain motionless for days, had been unable to make that transition until the room was clear of the people he loved. Each death is different I explained, no two the same.

Chapter 35

The healing still brought sleep and refuge and it was with some consternation that Annie announced that she would be going on a trip, off to the island that was her ancestral home, part of a long term plan for which she had been saving for a very long time. There was no thought from Julia of her own loss, instead, Katrina was sent to the shops to purchase a camera for Annie. Julia delighted at the opportunity to give, her only regret that she could not go to The Mall and choose it herself.

A solicitor who had given much of her time organizing the very first fund-raiser, volunteered to write up Julia's will and power of attorney. Paper work for the dying, an opportunity for Julia to put her worldly affairs in order. A chance she saw, to leave her money for our trip. Not that there was much of it, which added a plaintiff touch to the occasion. I was to make sure that Jimmy had enough to catch a bus to where ever he might choose to go. She had always been so careless with her paper work and now she could set things straight. "Please do my tax!" she implored us as I mentally envisaged the state of her non-existent filing system. But it was a comfort to us as well, to know that solicitor's kindness brought her a sense of control over her own destiny.

My brother Paul flew in for his visit and said goodbye, reluctant to leave, hoping that he could spend just a little more time with her, but there could only ever be one good bye. "I can do it by myself." she decided one morning when I had completed a night shift and had stayed on because of some hiccup, which meant that everyone else was unavailable. I wanted to stay for the day but she was insistent that she had organized her visitors and would catch up on sleep until they arrived. Sometimes that mobile phone seemed like a curse, she was occasionally confused, but would make her own arrangements. The visitors didn't arrive in time and she got herself out of bed, a toilet run, and broke her leg again.

Aunty Jane came the next day, prompted by Aunty Katrina and myself. I had heard very little news from Julia, information of the leg passed on second hand. Julia had arranged that we visit in the

afternoon. Her room was full when I guided Jane to her door and I mistook the pleading look on Julia's face for a moment of confusion. But it was more than that. Aunty Jane had not seen Julia since the week before Easter and was not in a position to judge the situation.

My sister and I were at the hospital early the next morning when the reason for Julia's distress became apparent. In an effort to control that new wave of pain, the Palliative Care team had administered a new drug. A drug, that left her unable to communicate, the words unable to form properly in her mouth. Isolated as she was in her childhood. "It's O.K." I assured her. "I can understand you." However, the effect diminished because they removed the drug. "It's used as a street drug in Europe," she informed the team who were appalled by the very idea.

I have on my wall a clock that my sister Jane made me. It is much admired, pasted and painted and Jane had created one for Julia. A very odd gift for someone who is battling time, but Julia accepted it graciously, accustomed to her aunt. And Aunty Jane said her goodbyes.

Annie's birthday was coming up and Julia was determined to attend the lunch at the Mexican restaurant with Annie's family and the healers. The mobile running hot, arrangements to meet everyone there. Katina dressed her twin and took her to last social engagement. The only other outing was in an ambulance to see the radiologist in a hope that he could offer some relief for her leg. But she knew it was hopeless before she even left the hospital and the effort to attend the appointment left her agitated, insisting that only I should move her from the hospital trolley to her wheelchair. The ambulance driver redundant, she trusting in the expertise I had developed on our journey together.

There were a few more scans on her leg, taken in the hospital, and she wanted me to attend, but the doctors knew that there was nothing else they could offer her, just the comfort of their attention. A brace was fitted to her leg in an effort to immobilize it but it offered no relief. Jimmy approached the doctor with a

suggestion that they could cut the nerves in her leg to eliminate the pain, but they explained that, there was no possibility of such a procedure. He had found a wonder drug on the Internet, used by the U.S. army no less and despite the enormous expense and with no consultation with the rest of us, had placed an order. He had taken to visiting Julia's father and apparently they had become good friends. He picked me up in his car one evening and I was shocked at his disclosure that he was hoping that Julia would live for another three months. How could he live with her pain? "We will still have that white picket fence Babe," he promised. But she recognized her reality; concerned only, that he would be homeless when she was no longer paying the rent. "I just want him to have a job so that he can sit on my father's couch and say I worked hard today," she said, not realizing that she was imposing her values on someone who did not share them.

Finally he announced that he had a job. One hundred thousand dollars a year for driving a forklift at a factory just up the road. He could ride a bike she reasoned. A night job, so he could justify spending his days in bed. The construction of the lie so flimsy that only Julia could believe it. Apparently he had made some progress with the solar business, and Julia had made her feelings clear on that matter. But we were torn by our love for her and the truth.

Chapter 36

It was an endless time. The familiarity of the hospital, insular from the rest of the world. The hand sanitizer at each entrance, imploring us to leave our germs outside. Flowers filling her room. Meals unplanned, rest snatched when we could, a distortion of time. Visits from people I knew only by name. An old friend out of jail, just in time to say goodbye. But in fact she was only there for fifteen days.

Katrina did her last night shift at the hospital on the Sunday night. She couldn't take Jimmy's dishonesty any longer, forced to share a house with him, knowing that he wasn't working in a warehouse. Protective of her sister. "He wouldn't be here if Julia wasn't sick," she said revealing what we all knew and then revealed his deceit to Julia. "Why did he have to wait until I was too weak to fight?" Julia responded, but then she empowered her twin to take action on her behalf saying, "If he doesn't have any rent to contribute by Wednesday, you can be my vocal cords". She asked me the next morning for my version of the truth and I asked if she really expected that a forklift driver would earn one hundred thousand dollars a year.

Monday the nineteenth brought the news that the hospital bed would be installed at her home the following day. There was to be one last scan, not because it could inform the doctors in any way, but because she wanted reassurance that the cancer had in fact spread expediently, that time was nearly up. She lay on the table as the radiologist read the scans, waiting for the confirmation. I cannot pretend to be able to interpret a scan, but the solemnity on the face of the young woman, reading that telltale film illuminated before her, said it all. "Hopefully not too long," I reported as I wheeled her back to her room and she sighed with the relief of it.

The girls made up the hospital bed at her home with her blue sheets. The room stripped bare of everything but what was required for the nursing; a commode, a cabinet for the medication tray, a bedside table for her ashtray, a mattress and bedding on the floor and the blue crucifix on the wall. We had no real idea of

how long it would take, but at least we were equipped to take care of her physical needs. The nursing staff at the hospital instructed Emma, Katrina and myself on how to prepare a vial for insertion into her shunt. Katrina a little apprehensive at first, but relaxing enough to gain her confidence. We would still have the support of the nurse who would come daily.

There were no friends to greet her when we got home. She had said goodbye to them. She had her last bath that evening, the night Jimmy produced his guitar and I knew that she had forgiven him. She called me in to her room to announce that Jimmy would carry her coffin, but I was not surprised.

Chapter 37

A salesman for the Internet product arrived the next morning to fulfill the appointment that Jimmy had organized. In fairness, he only claimed to be selling a product, that in essence was a vitamin supplement. Julia attended in her wheelchair. She insisted that I also attend, listen to the details, decipher it for her. She was so frail, not her astute self. It was very expensive but I could see no gain in pointing out the obvious. She sent Jimmy off to buy the salesman a bottle of wine, her innate generosity not tempered by her condition. There was a desperation in her voice, grasping at the last straw, not for a reprieve, but for some relief from the weight that was dragging her down, beyond her control. I sensed the sympathy of the nurse who was working in the background, who must have seen it all before, but I didn't have the heart to say no. When the money was paid and the bottles of solution secured in the fridge she said sadly, feeling duped, "He was only a salesman, wasn't he mum? And I even bought him a bottle of red." The bottles remained forever after, untouched, the household reluctant to pour all that money down the sink.

I slept at my own home that evening but when I returned in the morning her deterioration was evident. "I can't hang on any longer," she apologized in desperation.

"You mustn't hang on for us," I replied, perplexed by her misconception. That evening as Emma and I put her on to the commode we watched silently as she passed blood, a flood, which was unnoticed by her. We removed the commode without comment, joined in the unspoken agreement of our silence.

I put her to sleep with the touch of the healing that night, fearful that my grief would disturb her, shaking with the emotion of it. For the first time that evening, as I slept beside her bed, I failed to hear her when she called out. She had to call a second time, but she was not stressed by the incident. I pointed out that perhaps it was time for her to spend some time alone, as there had been no opportunity for her to prepare for the journey she must face independently. I would settle her and leave. She agreed and the next morning we purchased a baby monitor and set it up in her

room so that all she had to do was speak and we would be able to respond.

I was moved by the fact that she would express such gratitude for our ministrations. Thanking us for each little thing we did, while we felt so helpless. Her leg propped up by pillows, the melanomas that had been removed by the surgeon on her thigh, returned, to break through the scars. She wanted to use the commode but we insisted on the bedpan knowing that she was incapable of sitting up. She was upset by her total loss of independence but the girls and I cajoled her explaining how proud we were of her bravery, of how she had conducted herself and the intelligence she had displayed in dealing with so many medical decisions, the impression she had made on her doctors and everyone with whom she had dealt. “Do you really think the doctors thought I was intelligent?” she responded wistfully and we were glad of the joy on her face.

Julia didn't want me to administer her morphine reasoning that my eyesight was poor and the needle had to be inserted into the tiny opening in the shunt. She had always trusted me with her drugs before, but I suspect she was concerned, protecting me from the responsibility of it. Her own sight had been reduced to shadows and she explained that it was uncomfortable for her if we got too close, moved by the urge to comfort her with a kiss.

We reported the incident on the commode to the nurse who explained that the dosages of morphine needed to be increased. “You don't want her to witness the disintegration of her own body,” she cautioned and advised us to administer the dosages as soon as there was the slightest indication that the morphine was wearing off. Julia had until then insisted on waiting until the last possible moment before taking more. Emma cleared the kitchen table and established a work- station that allowed us to maintain a diligent control.

Chapter 38

In the dying process hearing is the last sense lost. Julia felt compelled to answer the mobile phone still beside her bed. Kind wishes from people who didn't understand that interruptions from the outside world had become an intrusion. On the Wednesday, Katrina took positive action and removed her phone and Julia was too exhausted to offer any objection. The tool that had served her so well, laid to rest.

There were still a couple of visitors who had not seen her at the hospital. A few more chapters to close. Julia didn't have the strength for it. Felt that she had achieved what she needed to achieve, but I must confess to taking control of the last few visitors. Chapters that must be closed, not just for Julia, but for those who would be left when she was dead, left to struggle with the untied loose ends, There was Ella's godmother and our old neighbour who had known Julia since she was a small child. They came and afterwards I asked her if I had been right in allowing their visits and she said that I was. A flat mate from London came on the Wednesday evening and we listened through the baby monitor as Julia laid the last of her journeys to rest. There was just Ian, Annie and the family left.

As the morphine took over she became more distant from it all. Her duties almost complete. I wasn't there, but the family reported that the following day she surprised the nurse who arrived to find her sitting up in her chair surrounded by her sisters and her father, two bites out of the Cheese Burger on her plate. The nurse saw it as a sign that death was further off than we had all imagined but it was just a brief moment, and when she retired to her bed it would be the last time she was capable of struggling with the effort to sit up in her chair.

Ian had been upset a week before when Julia put a halt to his visit at the hospital. He was on his way in the car when I was instructed to ring. But she couldn't face him then, wanting to say her goodbye when she was sure that it would be their last opportunity. He came as instructed by Julia on Thursday night.

We left them in peace, offering only our support to Ian when he emerged from her room.

Jimmy didn't leave his bed much either. Like the owls, he slept by day adjacent to her room and from time to time she would ask where he was and was satisfied to know that he was in the next room. But she didn't ask to see him as if she had no real need for him at the time. The rest of us were disturbed by his presence in the house. He remained an anathema. The palliative care nurse commented on his effect upon the household and suggested that it was time to ask him to take his leave, however I didn't feel that we had the right to make that decision. Katrina had been brooding over her promise to be her sister's voice and Jimmy had made no effort to add to the rent, though where he would find the money, was a mystery. I didn't communicate my feelings about Jimmy's position to Katrina and on the Thursday, much to my surprise she took action and quietly but firmly explained to Jimmy that it was time to leave.

The house was full of her sisters and their partners, all sitting very quietly in the lounge. He rushed straight off to Julia in her room to complain of the injustice of it and then returned to confront me as he obviously imagined that I had orchestrated Katrina's decisions. He puffed himself up, a rather threatening figure and faced me full on. "What is it with you Sue?" he said, sure that I was responsible for any negativity towards him. "I'll tell you what it is." I responded, glad to be able to indeed tell him what the trouble was. "You only had to lay bricks for three weeks for her and you couldn't do that. And worst than that you made us implicit in your lies." He seemed genuinely indignant at the suggestion of lies, but I continued, "Every time you spend the day laying in your bed and then tell Julia that you have been at work – it is a lie." He continued to protest but cut I him short and turned my back on him to respond to Julia

Julia insisted that Katrina should apologize to Jimmy, which left Katrina feeling that out of duty to her twin she must wholeheartedly embrace him. A duty she struggled with for some time after Julia died believing in her promise to her dying sister.

Katrina left feeling wretched, believing that she had simply followed the plan laid down earlier in the week. Julia had heard Jimmy and I in the lounge and I was admonished for picking on her boyfriend. “He’s my boyfriend,” she declared and I calmed her down with my agreement. He disappeared after that leaving us intent on the nursing. He didn’t reappear until the following evening when he arrived in her doorway dressed up in his best shirt and trousers. “Where are you going Babe?” she asked pleased to see him as she struggled to sit up on her bed. “Out” was his curt reply. So she made the inquiry again and he raised his voice so that there could be no mistake that his response was final and delivered it to her, a frail ghost of who she was. Without pity he responded “I said out,” his words hard with his disdain as he turned and disappeared from the house.

Jaime–Lee a neighbour who had grown up with the twins stayed on the Friday night and she too remained haunted by that scene. Like me, his callous demeanor shocked her but Julia had made up her mind to concentrate on dying and she was now so weak that her focus was narrowing.

Saturday seemed to be interminable and Julia asked repeatedly when the day was going to end. She wanted to get out of her bed, restlessly demanding that we help her attempt to get into her wheelchair, disturbed that in the end Emma had to be firm and say “No.” Her good, big sister. Emma upset by the resignation in her little sister’s sad acceptance. However the day was broken up by news of the fund-raiser that had been organized by the parish for that day. Julia buoyed by the thought of their prayer. The parish later reporting the wonderful sense of community that they had all enjoyed as they worked together.

Her father brought his overnight bag as we prepared for whatever lay ahead. Annie was to leave on her trip the following day and she arrived with a meal she had prepared for the household and to say goodbye to Julia. She stayed with Julia for the afternoon and into the early evening and when she emerged to leave she said goodbye to the rest of us as well. I noticed that she was not in possession of the print that Julia had planned as her parting gift so

I asked her to wait while I checked with Julia. Emma was administering the drugs as I entered the room and asked Julia if she had simply forgotten the print or had some other intention and she smiled as she said “No mum, there can only ever be one good bye.”

The End

The after hours doctor came after Annie left and doubled the morphine. Emma and I took the night shift together, the morphine being administered every half an hour. We sat up together as the rest of the household slept and I talked to Emma to keep her awake. She didn't miss a beat, the dining room table spread before us, the rhythm of the night dictated by the preparation and delivery that left what seemed like brief moments in between. When the sun came up Katrina and her father took over for a couple of hours while Emma and I slept, but Katrina was disturbed by the emotion of it all and was happy to pass the job back to us.

The doctor came back to check that she was no longer in pain and for the first time she was able to confirm that she was without it. There was a danger that we would run out of morphine but the doctor was diligent in locating a chemist that would fill a script on a Sunday and Jimmy was sent off in the car to pick up the medication. Julia was driven by the need to sit up, to take control, but her body was so frail that we hardly dared to touch her. Her father and later Jimmy helped as we levered her into an upright position using the pillows to buffer the impact of movement, but once she was upright she would be overcome with exhaustion and we would lay her down again. The last of her struggles to maintain life.

By mid afternoon the household was feeling the pressure and Katrina with Jimmy and her father went off to her father's club to have a drink with his mates. Julia slept peacefully through the rest of the afternoon as Emma continued her work. And then as the sun was setting Julia woke as Emma and Ella and I entered her room.

“What's happening to me Mum?” she asked and I replied, “You're dying.” So she decided it was time to say goodbye.

She said goodbye to her baby sister first, comforting her with the knowledge that indeed she had been there to see who her little

Ella had become. And of course all her love for her good big sister, who wept and wept, part of her soft nature. I was agitated, worrying that things would not go smoothly for her as the others were still at the club and I stepped forward to say my goodbye, but she said, “No Mum, you’re last!” And with that Katrina and Jimmy walked in the door returned from the club and she took her time to carefully say goodbye to her twin who wept by her side.

Then Jimmy stepped forward to her blue bed and she laughed as she reached for his hand and said, “Who’s that black man holding my hand? Why it must be Jimmy!” And it occurred to me how little he really knew her, that he was even unaware that many of her boyfriends had been black. But she told him she loved him. There was no more she could do for him than that and so he walked out into the blackness of the night and stood on the verandah overlooking the sea and from some deep place within himself came a howl. A noise that pierced the night. Like some beast mortally wounded. And back in her bed Julia said “Sorry Jimmy.”

Her father had still not returned and I could feel my anger rising at the notion that he should keep her waiting, but the girls reminded me of why we were there. So I explained that her father was running a little late because he was having a drink with his mates and she was happy with that. He arrived quite soon after and said his goodbye, giving her the little pat on the face that he reserved as his expression of love. He prolonged his goodbye unaware that I was waiting my turn but I pointed it out and he accepted it graciously.

“I can see them all waiting for me,” she said as I took her hand. “You’re off on your journey now,” I explained and she smiled at that and said joyfully “New friends and new adventures!” It was time for us to leave her as she and I understood, so I guided the others out of the room and asked if she was sure that we should go and she said, “Yes mum, there is only one goodbye.”

We all sat in the lounge and listened to her through the baby monitor. Katrina and her father were disturbed, feeling that they

should be in the room with her, but I insisted that Julia had said goodbye and needed her time alone. We were there together for a couple of hours but Jimmy, Katrina and her father went off to bed at about ten o'clock, unable to listen any longer. I suggested that Julia's father sleep on the floor next to Julia's bed but I asked him not to interfere with Julia, explained that she was no longer troubled by thirst or pain. Emma, Ella and I listened as Julia took account of her life, we were struck by her politeness. A childlike quality to her voice. "Let's share," she repeated, her convictions clearly stated. No torment of any kind. Emma continued administering the morphine but Ella and I would attend to give her support. Julia was unaware of us, busy with her own affairs

Ella dozed off at about midnight and Emma and I continued until just after 1a.m. when we entered her room and saw her face contorted by her final struggle. I called Jimmy and the others and Jimmy was there in half a second. "See her face," I said and with that she was gone.

The men stripped her and washed her and laid her out in her blue sheets and when it was done I went home to my bed to watch the sun rise through my window. The next morning it was discovered that the owls had gone, gone forever.

I saw my daughter's

Death mask
Hard upon her face.

But! I heard the
Hard last breath of her

And saw the peace
In its place.