

the long way home

As she revelled in the joys of new motherhood, **Bron Willis** was unaware that her dream summer was soon to shatter.

The sun was golden the afternoon I drove the back road home from Bendigo Hospital. The car knew the turns in the road and the paddocks looked gentle in the evening hues despite the harshness of the season. It struck me that perhaps the summer was over. My baby boy was at home waiting for me. But perhaps our summer, this summer of joy and discovery, was over.

He was 14 months old and I was in a bubble of early motherhood, where life was simple and just as it should be. I'd found a deep contentment despite the usual commotion of learning the motherhood ropes. And then cancer came and stole that away.

I didn't reveal what had happened when I arrived home. I embraced the "maybe" that I'd been given. I sat on the lounge-room floor with my husband, watching our son, as we had for endless hours since his birth, delighted and doting. We celebrated the almost-steps, which our little boy took for months, teetering on the edge of toddlerhood with a firm grasp still on the couch or coffee table. I was halfway between beauty and terror, but I denied the terror – for now.

The mammogram had been "just in case". My lump looked innocent, the GP said, but I went along on her advice, arriving late for what I presumed was an unnecessary interruption to the rolling along of life, sweet life. I barely registered the squeezing, the squashing, the prodding of a procedure that has since become familiar, a friend and a foe. And then I waited.

I flicked mindlessly through magazines in my white robe as the busyness of reception faded and the waiting room emptied. I went in, then out. The doctors changed their mind, looked again. A whisper made its unintended way through the partition.



Was there something to worry about? I asked. There was, said the doctors. But there might not be; we'll need to wait.

The weekend stretched between now and certainty. So while a tiny, worm-like biopsy of troublesome flesh made its way to a laboratory, the lights of the waiting room went out, the buzz of the mammogram machine was silenced and I took a deep breath – and returned to my bubble, holding terror at bay.

My son has an infectious smile and a playful spirit. His joy is something you can reach out and touch; it's right there between his little nose and the cheekiness of his blue, blue eyes. We were discovering so much together, our family of three. Newly settled into country life, we walked the orchards

and bush tracks with him bundled on my chest. We planted sweetcorn and watched ants march over the playmat while he scrambled to chase them.

He and I were intertwined in a different way, in those early days. Our skins touched often. I held him close as his eyes closed and his face took on the concentrated but contented look of our breastfeeding hours. From our nursery chair, I watched a swaying

eucalypt that stood, towering and ancient, in the distant paddock.

There was no place else I needed to be. From the kitchen, I watched firetails and silvereyes dive into our birdbath as we breastfed; and in the pre-dawn darkness, the sucking noises and the warmth soothed and lulled my bleary-eyed sleeplessness into calm. I long for them still – those tiny, sweet noises, three years later, though my boy is long past longing.

The following week, I took a photo as my baby nursed from my breast one last time. It was a sad, laboured photo, a tragic act – I knew it. But I needed a witness, to document the love, the pain, the heartbreak. By then, I'd been given certainty, of sorts. My breast, which had nurtured my boy, given him nourishment to grow and shine, was fighting. And a tumour was fighting us all.

The moments I cherished were ripped away, replaced by hospital wards, waiting rooms and ever-present worry. I farewelled innocence and opened the door, unsuspecting, to a barrage of fear, confusion, worry.

The next night, when our boy woke in our bed, crying for his feed, I sat helpless as my husband carried him out of the room, arms outstretched, his little face looking back at me in confusion, outrage and hurt. The shape of those lips, distorted in protest, and the tears on his tender cheeks are with me still. I sat, my quietly heaving body alone on the bed.

My little boy learnt, too early, it seemed, that a mother sometimes cries. And I learnt, too late, that a golden summer always ends.

I'm still searching for that summer – that year of contentment when my baby boy was my everything and everything seemed right. It was a summer so gentle and calm, against the storm that came after. •

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