

my cancer battleground is now a place of hope

A newborn baby helps *Bron Willis* find healing and joy in places that once held fear.

A tiny heart beats quietly, its precious owner snuggled safely against my chest as I walk the paths and lush green of this city park. I took an unspoken oath to protect this life, to nourish it, always – but in truth the tiny breaths, the heartbeat of this baby, are protecting me, changing the colour of this world as I tread familiar steps.

Here, on this corner, four years ago, my husband and I met friends who would look after our older son while we attended our first appointment with my breast cancer surgeon. Our son was little too then, just 14 months.

Here, on these steps near the fountain, we sat and cried after the next appointment, this one with our fertility doctor, wondering if our son would ever know the joy of a sibling – or a mother – as he grew up.

There, around that corner, is the IVF clinic where we waited in the car before dawn on the day of my egg collection – our one chance to save and freeze my eggs before chemotherapy began. We'd arrived two hours early, such was the worry of missing the exact moment that my ovaries would release their egg-laden follicles – a moment that had been rigorously crafted by needles, drugs, scans and a doctor who carried our dreams in his hands.

And here now, against my chest, is our baby boy. He has the tiniest of fingernails – and yawns. The sounds his lips make as they close are so small that their quietness amplifies their significance. He has chubby thighs and soft, silky cheeks.

He is the life that began here, amid all that chaos and pain and confusion. He waited, a kernel of life, a promise – silently, faithfully, giving us hope as we struggled, endured and emerged.

These streets seem softer now, safer. The pathology lab where I took my



“He is the life that began here, amid all that chaos and pain and confusion. He waited, a kernel of life, a promise...”

one-year scans is not as daunting. I think of friends who accompanied me, making sure I wasn't alone while I sat in white gowns, laughing about how many people had seen my bare breasts on this crazy breast cancer journey.

The cancer hospital has moved. In its place is an eye-and-ear hospital. I look through its windows and remember. We took such a bright approach to the challenge of waiting in there. I can look back now and admit how much it hurt, because the hurt is a memory. And now I have a new memory, a tiny one with silky skin, sleeping on my chest.

I pass the playground we visited so many times those years ago. Back then, it was our haven from the nearby medical quarter. There is the tree behind which my husband hid, playing hide-and-seek with our delighted, squealing son: “You found me!” There is the chair where I sat alone, closed my eyes and trained my breath to calm my body before yet another scan. There is the path I ran compulsively along before each chemo session, to prove to myself I was strong.

And there is the window of the birthing suite. You can look up at that

window from the street below and have no idea of the beauty that unfolds inside. And you can look down at the street from that incredible room and discover that while you are paving the way, contraction by contraction, for your unborn baby, people do normal things on that street. Friends chat, trams sound their bells and delivery vans double-park. The world turns and continues to turn, while your world is changed forever.

That room is the place where our dream became a tiny life, a perfect body that we held in our loving arms, that I now hold against my victorious, cancer-free chest. It is where my body heaved and released guttural moans with every contraction, where I felt the exquisite pain I'd wanted for so long. It is where our doctor told me to look between my legs as I heaved one last time, because I was about to meet my baby.

I simply didn't believe him. After four years of waiting, wondering – about the precariousness of my life and the preciousness of this tiny one – this moment was too overwhelmingly breathtaking to believe it real.

And yet there he was, looking at me, discovering me, loving me. And here he is, waking up against my chest as I walk. The joy of his life protects me from the hardest of memories. The streets are changed, bathed in new hope. My cancer battleground has become a monument to survival, hope and possibility.

My little boy is hungry. I will stop on this park bench and together we will feed – from the “good” breast, round with milk that will nourish this tiny life, this precious boy, our long-awaited son. •

October is Australia's Breast Cancer Awareness Month.