

## THE WAITING ROOM

The Christmas tree lights twinkle merrily as Susan Boyle's voice wafts from the speakers in the waiting room. The receptionist sings along as she types. Minutes later, we learn that Dad's cancer has returned.

Not content with taking most of his bowel, microscopic traces have survived the aggressive chemotherapy. It's now entrenched in 70% of Dad's liver. It hits me with sickening clarity. One day we will lose him to cancer. Once it's in your system, it never really leaves. Dad's age is against us. The oncologist informs us that this will be the last time we can wage war against cancer.

In the car on the way home, I break the news to my siblings. My composure amazes me. Dad does what he always does in a crisis: he goes to work. The task of telling my mother fills me with dread. As expected, she falls apart and I spend the better part of two hours trying to calm her down. By the time I leave, I have a migraine.

While we struggle with the news, all around us Christmas preparations continue. Christmas carols, overly bright sales assistants and the concept of happiness grates on my nerves. They don't understand. Christmas is a time for celebrating family, for giving, for receiving. Not this year.

We're referred to the best liver specialist in Victoria and after our first meeting I finally understand the meaning of *God Complex*. He'll remove the cancerous portion of liver, a procedure called a liver resection. Here is a surgeon who's at the top of his field and he knows it. He uses the word cure.

The benefit of working with a top surgeon is that things move very quickly. Despite the Christmas period shutdown, Dad is classified Category 1, putting him at the very top of

an incredibly long list of patients. At a pre-op appointment, the details of the complex procedure are explained. The risk is enormous.

The surgeon tries to arrange a team for the following Monday, but can't confirm a definite date until later in the week. I get the call hours later. It's all confirmed. I take this as a good sign.

Over pizza a few days before the operation, Dad informs us that if he doesn't make it out of surgery, he wants a small funeral.

Monday arrives and Dad's in his gown. A nurse shaves his body, teasing him about his hairy chest and nether regions. We laugh at the tight stockings he needs to wear to prevent the possible effects of deep vein thrombosis.

The surgeon arrives. He's all business in his scrubs but takes a moment to tell us that if, once he's in, the cancer has spread more than the scans show, Dad will be sewn up and returned to recovery.

The ward is eerily empty. Most surgical rounds are still a week away. Fair enough too: hospital staff are entitled to time off with their families. The nurses at the station are laughing and swapping Christmas Day stories and the conversation moves onto what lunch will be. Pasta wins.

We kiss Dad goodbye and tell him we'll see him soon. He waves at his girls: my mum, my sister, my niece and me.

We wander out to the empty waiting room at ICU. We retreat to the café downstairs for coffee. A pile of magazines helps while away a few hours. We gossip about friends and comment on the articles until we run out of things to say.

I watch people come and go in the busy lobby. Flowers and balloons need to be delivered, phones need to be answered, parcels need to be signed for and food needs to be eaten. Life cannot be stopped.

A delivery van pulls up. The driver jumps out. He pulls out large boxes, stacking them on a trolley. I'm fascinated by his quest to stack everything on the trolley. He wants to make only one trip inside. Clearly that is not going to happen. I watch him make slow, unsteady progress. He's almost made it to the sliding doors when a box shifts and falls. He reaches down, giving me a bird's eye view of glorious plumpers crack. I burst out laughing.

My sister's phone rings. It's good news. The resection will proceed.

Back in the waiting room, a large group of Indigenous people have gathered. An elder is dying. As more family arrives there are tears but they're composed. Perhaps they're better prepared for the spirit life.

A young mother arrives with her newborn, providing a welcome distraction for the indigenous family. Death is the last thing you think about in the presence of new life, pure and innocent. Even in the face of their grief, women coo over the baby, congratulations are offered from arriving family members.

News arrives for the clan. The elder has passed. The women weep and the men pat each other on the back as they take turns to go in to say their final goodbyes.

The multi faith chaplain arrives to offer support. I watch her as she holds their hands and speaks softly to them. The stroke of an arm, a hug, a kind word: the tears falling down cheeks don't seem to be of regret. Instead, she helps them reflect on a life well lived. What must that be like, helping people through a time of loss when you've never met them before?

The chaplain wanders over to our group. I avert my eyes. I don't want her anywhere near me. Too late, she sits beside me and asks me if I want to pray.

No thank you.

The phone rings; more good news. Though the cancer was more widespread than at first thought, the surgeon believes he got it all. Dad is being closed and it's over.

In recovery, he's connected to so many tubes. He's being assisted with his breathing. My heart aches for the man who is my hero. He moans. He did great we are told. Yet he's in so much pain. I try to offer some comfort but I want to cry. A nurse shakes him aggressively and I bite my tongue. She knows what she's doing. This is her domain, not mine.

Outside, it's a perfect summer night. The streets are filled with people walking, enjoying the warmth of January in Melbourne. Laughter fills the air. Somewhere nearby, a family plans a funeral: they end the day less one family member. For us, anxiety is replaced with hope. After a marathon operation we've been given another chance with our father, husband and grandfather.