

Mole

LESLIE MALCHY

L'auteure raconte son expérience face à un naevus retiré de son cou et de son bras. Elle a été attérée quand la biopsie a révélé la présence d'un mélanome, (cancer de la peau).

One of the last memories I have about being at work is the scissors.

I was sitting at my desk.

Staring blankly at my bulletin board.

The divider that separates my cubicle from the one before me.

I heard a sound.

Snip, snip.

I settle back into my body, my mind instantly alert.

Snip, snip.

Someone is cutting something, with scissors.

Snip, snip.

Probably making labels for organizing some data files.

Snip, snip.

The sound of scissors,

Cutting open my skin.

Snip, snip.

It takes me there instantly.

My heart rises in my throat, tears threatening.

Snip, snip.

My arm throbs.

I live here in Vancouver. It rains a lot here.

But I don't believe in umbrellas.

I haven't owned one in years.

In fact, I am scared of them a little.

Walking down the street

It often seems that the streets are filled with them.

The eye-poking potential is maximum in this city.

Umbrellas have become my existence. Now.

Umbrellas in the middle of summer.

The awkwardness of it.

It is the middle of summer.

It is bloody hot.

And I don't go anywhere without my new umbrella.

I have to protect myself from the sun these days.

Today I rolled 10\$ and 50¢ in pennies. A good day.

Only intermittently blankly staring up at the ceiling from my rocking chair.

A couple of weeks before everything happened I rented a movie called *My Life Without 'Me*.

It starred Sarah Polley and was about a woman with two kids who found out that she had cancer.

She had a very short time to live and wrote out a list of all of the things she would do before she died.

I don't exactly regret watching the movie now.

But it was probably not the greatest timing.

Sometimes I sit in my rocking chair and stare at the wall.

Look out the window.

Time passes and I 'hadn't noticed.

Sometimes people are talking and I don't hear them.

Sometimes now, when things happen, I don't hear anything.

Life gets really loud all around me and the thoughts in my head are deafening but I can't identify clearly what they are.

I know they are there though, because there is no room for anything else.

I convinced myself to go to a party last week. A stagette for an old friend.

People are making Small Talk.

I remember vaguely that I work at UBC and I study counseling. Oh, and I play in a band.

“What do you do?” a woman asks me.
“I have skin cancer” I want to say.

It’s not like I am thinking about it all the time or anything.

It’s just that I can’t think about anything else.

Riding home on my bike a few weeks ago, when it first happened,

July still.

Lifting my sore arm from the handlebars when I passed over a bumpy lane.

Gotta let it heal properly, I had thought.

Blankly whipping along 10th avenue, looking down at the brown and black tar spots on the road.

Malignant melanomas, all of them.

Abnormal borders,
discoloration.

I remember the first time I went there. The BC Cancer Agency.

I walked up to the counter.

The receptionist gave me some information and a pamphlet:

“Your first patient visit!” booklet

As if it is Disneyland.

I understand why they do that, I really do.

But I don’t really want this to be a recurring episode, an ongoing experience.

What I now know is that truly it is very upsetting, even to walk *into* the BC Cancer Agency.

As a patient.

What is true is that it is traumatic to hear the word Cancer and have it relate to you.

It is a harsh word, both literally and symbolic.

It is a diagnosis.

They are good people here.

The volunteer who walks me the five steps from the reception desk to the waiting room, to fill out my medical history. She also walks me to the elevator. “Oh, yeah, it always takes this long for the elevator. I’ve been volunteering here a long time.”

Comfort talk.

I glance over at her, short curly graying hair, sensible beige walking shorts and runners. A blue volunteer smock

over her red t-shirt. I notice her uneven chest, a dent where a breast looks like it used to be. I swallow deeply and look away.

Early summer, riding home on my bike,

For the last time, exposed.

That day my life came to a screeching halt.

I remember riding home that day, from UBC to commercial drive, my heart beating. Almost knowing.

Rushing home to meet my dad, I tried to time myself perfectly.

I’m meeting him at 5:35 p.m., at the medical clinic.

It’s a hot day. I’m glad because I’m wearing shorts today.

Bronze skin gleaming out from under my white tank top.

My mom had said, “Dad is going to meet you there.” *He doesn’t need to come*, I had protested, *it will be just fine*. “He wants to come with you. Just let him come.” She had insisted.

Heart pounding, I raced down and around the Granville Island seawall, gazing over at the countless bodies, sunning themselves on the beach. Bodies placed just so. Facing the latest direction of the sun. Sucking out the last of the high UV index rays. Optimal tanning exposure. Getting a base tan, as the woman lying next to me last Saturday had mentioned to her friend. *I’m just getting a base tan*.

She had been lying on a blanket next to me at Kit’s beach that day. The Saturday that I got the phone call from the clinic where they told me that I needed to come in for my results but refused to tell me what they were over the phone. I remember that moment. I was lying in the sun. I quickly moved into the shade to make the call. “You can’t tell me anything until next Wednesday?”

Upset, I remember riding home, along the seawall.

Breathing deeply.

Just try not to cry.

Wait till you get home.

Suddenly, the seawall is flooded with people. All of them. In various states of undress. Some of them in plain briefs. Others in elaborate costumes. Breasts oozing out over fantastic bustiers. Mirth bubbling out from around these big groups of friends, brothers, moms, coworkers, neighbors. Handwritten signs on square pieces of paper pinned to their chests.

“I’m running for my wife.”

The Underwear Affair.

Of course.

I remembered reading about it.
Seeing the sign up pamphlets all over town.

The Walk/Run for Cancers under the waist. The forgotten Cancers, the ones that don't get funding like breast cancer. The less common ones. I had cycled past, held my breath with effort.

"I'm walking for Bob."

God, I thought, when did they ever decide to have one of these Cancer walks at nighttime? And on the seawall no less. When does that ever happen? I had cycled upstream. They were all walking in the opposite direction as me, moving towards the beach, towards the water.

"I'm walking for Judy, she is still with us, five years later."

It was just me, pedaling my little legs as fast as I could, trying not to burst, scream.

"I'm sorry but we don't give out results over the phone."

Breathe, breathe, you are going to be okay.

I had ridden past the last of the parading folk, a few stragglers with boxer shorts and beer cans over their genitals. I spied a gazebo up ahead, music playing. I'm going to be okay, I remember thinking. I'm going to be okay. *You can cry as soon as you get home. You can go have a good cry.* I had slowed down as I headed up to science world, people milling about, time to catch my breath.

I did make it home that day. I even had a conversation that made me feel better about my situation. "It's really common," said the guy from the seawall. "I've had tons of moles removed. I get checked once a year at the clinic. I'm sure you are going to be fine."

I made it home that day and forgot all about the phone call.

Until now, right in this moment when I spy my dad at the clinic, sitting in the waiting room, reading a magazine. I park my bike. I'm a little late and he is a little early. We sit and talk for a few seconds, maybe minutes, I can't remember now. And then all of the sudden we are in the little room, waiting for the doctor. I am filling up the space with small talk, telling my dad about the mundane details of my day so far. I'm engaging. Witty.

Dr. Irving comes into the room. Not really looking up. "What are you here for today?"

My voice has a clear confident tone. "You removed a mole from my arm and my neck and I'm here so that you

can remove my stitches on my arm and give me the test results from the biopsy." I'm matter of fact, giving him all of the info. I know he is busy and sees a lot of different people in a lot of different clinics. You have to help jog his memory.

He looks up, sees me, remembers me. "Of course, how are you?"

"I brought my dad here with me today" I tell him. I am standing up, by the examining table.

"Hello Dr. Malchy."

"Hello," says my dad. I think they exchange a few words. I'm not sure.

I'm standing over by the counter now. Leaning up against it. Absentmindedly fiddling with the prescription pads, noticing the rubber gloves. Dr. Irving is standing near me to the right. My dad is sitting down in the left-hand corner chair, near the door, leaning forward. He asks in Dr. language about the results of the test. I'm paying attention now. I'm curious too. In an off-hand kind of way.

"Well the test results came back, it was a malignant melanoma." I look over at my father and he looks up at me and blinks.

I am crying now, not aware of the pain, like the last times. I was so worried about the pain. Last time I was so focused on the pain and on letting go of the pain of the surgery. Sinking into the feeling of the pain and letting go. Wait and you will notice that the pain is just another sensation, I had thought.

There is no letting go of this. There is no pain. No pain. I barely notice the grief of my arm being cut open for the second time. I am looking at the wall. I am crying. Faintly aware, as I was last time of the time speckle of blood on the wall, right near my head.

Malignant melanoma. What is that? I don't know. All I know is that my dad is not smiling. He is not breathing a sigh of relief. No, he is asking more questions. "Will you send a report to the BC Cancer agency?" he is saying.

Cancer.

I start to cry.

Leaning harder now against the counter.

I am crying.

It is sinking in.

Malignant melanoma

Cancer.

"I need to excise a wider section to try to get all of the edges."

"You could make an appointment with the plastic surgeon"

“How long will that take?”
“You know as well as I do the wait lists for some of these places.”
“Or we could do it now.”
I hear a voice saying, “Do it now.”
I’m not sure if it is my voice or my dad’s voice or both.
“Do it now.”

My dad picks up whatever he is carrying in his lap and stands up. A magazine. An umbrella. His jacket. I’m not sure. No I think he is wearing his jacket. I think he never took it off. He didn’t make himself comfortable. He is going to wait outside now, until it is over.

I’m looking at the wall.

He is putting on his gloves now. Cancer. He is preparing the tray. This is familiar now. Third time this month. *BC Cancer Agency? What does that have to do with me?* He is filling up the needle and sticking it into my arm. Cancer. I am crying. This is no time to be brave. I hear the clicking of the knives, the scalpel. Cancer. He is cutting my arm open, again. Thoughts going through my mind. Danielle needs to quit smoking, I think. Snip, snip, snip. Why do people get tattoos? I think. Cut, snip. He is cutting me open. I will never get a tattoo, I think, never purposefully mutilate my body. Scrape, scrape, he is carving me up now, saving my life.

This is saving my life.
I cry harder.

Outside, I see my dad. He is closing up his cell phone and turning towards me. I am sniffing, somewhere in a remote area of my brain I register that he is talking to my mom and I feel sad for her. I feel badly that she has to go through this. I know this is worse for her than it is for me. Dad asks, “Do you want to come over?” I nod sniffing. “I will just go collect my bike. Meet you there.”

I marvel now, what a wonder it is that I didn’t get hit by a car that day. Unwittingly walk into traffic.
I made it home. Barely.

Dodging the cigarette smoke of all of the people on the street.
All of the people smoking on Commercial drive.

Carcinogen.
I hear the word for the first time.
It is the first time I get its meaning.
The sun.
Beating down still. Yes, it has not been that long since we went inside.

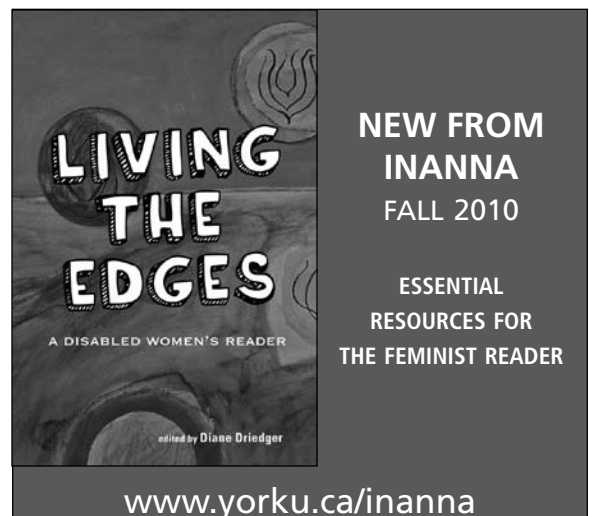
The sun, beating down.

It is the first time I feel the panic of the sun.
Why is it so bright?
I try to walk under cover, in the shade, under the awnings.
Holding my bike up.
Trying to cover my bandage.
The hole in my arm.
Time has completely slowed down now.
Lost all of its meaning.
There is no shade...
I never want to go outside again, I think.

Cancer, he says.
The sun is beating down on my forearms.
Where is the goddamn shade?
Panic rising.
I feel the suns rays burning into my skin like poison.
Skin Cancer.
My heart beating hard now from the fear
Feel the tears rising, just there under the surface
Must find cover, must find shade.
The sun is poison
The sun is beating down onto my skin
Cancer

How far away is it until I am home?
It is only a few blocks.
The longest walk home.
The hardest walk of my life.
I never want to go outside again.

Leslie Malchy has an M.Sc in Psychiatry from McGill University and is currently finishing an M.A. in Counseling Psychology with a specialization in Marriage and Family Therapy from Antioch University. Her writing has previously been published in academic journals such as Art and Health and the Canadian Journal of Public Health. This is her first publication of creative literature, an excerpt from her upcoming novel: Mole.



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