

One

Before the Beginning

*Ask not what disease the person has,
but rather what person the disease has.*

Dr William Osler

This book tells the story of a person who happened to develop an illness that happened to be cancer, and of the people who helped her along the way. It is a book that tells of loss, unexpected gains and the surprise of discovering the capacity to adjust to both. So having put disease and cancer firmly in their place, and the individual person centre stage, I must give a brief biography of myself, the person to whom the cancer happened. Where to begin? The Zen *koan* asks, ‘What was your face before your parents were born?’ In the Highlands, where my father came from, they ask, ‘And who are your people?’

My father, Alastair Gunn, grew up speaking Gaelic in the far north of Scotland. He came from ecclesiastical stock. He was born in the manse in Durness, Sutherland in 1903. His father, Adam Gunn, came from a croft in Strathy, another

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north-coast township. On gaining a church scholarship, my grandfather went from Strathy village school to St Andrew's University to study divinity, returning north to be minister in Durness. There he married young Mary Mackenzie. Her father was a minister in Farr, Caithness. Before Mary's birth, her parents had emigrated to Nova Scotia in the mid nineteenth century, only to return to Caithness a few years later, overcome by the hardships of pioneer life in Canada and the death of their first baby. Years on, my great-grandmother would refer to 'the lonely grave in Nova Scotia'.

Although I never met them, Adam and Mary look a fine couple in the photos. They had four children, my father their third-born. In 1907, a few days after the birth of her fourth child, my grandmother died of childbed fever. She was only thirty-two. My father was then four years old. His only memory of his mother was the way her shoulders used to shake when she laughed – the eye-view of a toddler carried in his mother's arms. My father said the manse became a sombre place after her death. He grew up in the care of his father, a sequence of housekeepers and his Aunt Donella. At seventeen he went from Durness village school to study at Aberdeen University, again thanks to a church bursary. He became a teacher, and in 1929 went out in the (very) British Colonial Service to teach in Africa.

Prior to his London interview, Dad had never been south of Aberdeen. He was offered the post of maths teacher and sailed from Tilbury to Cape Town, where he boarded a train up to the Copperbelt in central Africa. There he became a happy colonial bachelor and continued his passion for climbing mountains. During his twenty-five years in Africa he taught many children, and also climbed Mounts Kenya

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and Kilimanjaro, and the Ruwenzori mountain range. His great love was for the Drakensberg Mountains of South Africa. He took my mother there for their honeymoon in 1948. She described having to be given a course of injections after her new husband walked her so hard and so high that her back seized up. They were fun together and had a very happy marriage.

My mother, Minnie Jane Potts, was born in Sheffield in 1911. She was descended from families of mill-workers in the north of England. Her father, Walter Potts, was born in Glossop, Derbyshire, where his father was a weaver. My mother said her father spoke of a tough childhood, with very little schooling and certainly no church bursaries for him. He moved to Sheffield, where he worked as a baker, and there he married my grandmother, Minerva Woolley. Grandma ran their small sweet shop while Grandad rose early every morning to bake the bread, ready the horse and cart and go out to sell his fresh penny loaves on the streets of Sheffield. We are most of us only a few generations away from poverty.

Mum described how hard her parents worked and saved. Eventually they were able to sell up and move to Morecambe where they ran a small seaside hotel. Lancashire coastal towns were just then becoming the holiday Mecca of the industrial north. My grandmother Minerva was great fun, full of life, and I like to imagine a certain Fawlty-esque style to her hotel. Like my grandfather, she too came from a large family. Her first job had been to sweep up under her brother Will's cotton loom at the mill. Ventilation in mills was poor and those were the girls who got 'grey lung' (byssinosis) from all the cotton fluff they inhaled. When

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Minerva told her mother she didn't much like the job, my great-grandmother replied, 'You were born into the wrong family, my girl.' Will emigrated to America as a young man, and though letters were many, his devoted sisters never saw him again. My grandmother left the mill and wisely moved south to be a lady's maid before meeting and marrying Walter. She and Walter worked well together in their shop and bakery, and were able to send my mother to a nearby private school. There my mother learned the meaning of 'But your father's in *trade* . . .' from other, presumably more landed, girls.

My mother trained as a teacher at Fishponds College, Bristol. She described regularly teaching classes of sixty or more in Sheffield schools she later worked in. She was adventurous, and when an aunt left her some money in 1938 she used it to travel to Australia to teach for a year – a sabbatical ahead of the trend. She sailed back across the Atlantic in 1939 in a blacked-out ship, World War Two having just broken out. She spent the war years looking after children evacuated from London.

Her trip to Australia gave her a love of travel and she was on the first troop ship out to Africa after the war. There she worked as a teacher in central Africa, nearly marrying a tea planter in Nyasaland (now Malawi). However, she broke off that engagement and returned to the Copperbelt, where she married my Dad. My sister Donella was born in 1950 in the mining town of Broken Hill (now called Kabwe) in Zambia. My mother, now aged thirty-nine, had a lengthy first labour before delivering 'a gift from heaven of ten pounds seven', as one telegram read. Two years later I was born, as my mother liked to boast, in Clement Attlee's

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London drawing room. The Prime Minister wasn't home at the time, having sold the house, which had then been turned into a private nursing home. Mum had lost the baby boy she was carrying the year before, so my parents arranged to return to London for my – as it turned out, uncomplicated – birth. My father would later tease me that my birth cost him a small fortune. This surprised me, as I had grown up hearing Mum tell friends 'Mary was born on leave' – in those days of Empire, the Colonial Office paid for teachers in Africa to return home on leave by boat every four years. Being born 'on leave' had always sounded to me somewhat careless.

Mum loved it when Dad's promotion to Inspector of Schools upgraded them to first-class cabins. However, I was born before such heady times, and at the grand age of three months set sail for Africa in economy class. Mum said the array of bare ship's pipes filling one wall of our steerage cabin was great for drying nappies on, adding, 'And we used to bath you in the ship's bread bin!' Apparently, at one point I also rolled from top bunk to cabin floor. I wonder that I survived my first sea voyage.

We lived in Africa until 1954 when my father, always wise, sensed the winds of change early. With their shared love of travel my parents chose New Zealand as the next country to live and work in. After three years there, Vancouver was next on their hit list, but after packing up the last crate of family belongings for the move, my weary Dad decided to book passages home to Britain instead. Thus are children's futures decided for them. Donella and I returned to Britain aged seven and five with a grand pair of Kiwi accents.

I grew up happily in southwest England, deciding at

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around the age of twelve to be a doctor when I grew up. I made the mistake of announcing this passing idea to my mother, after which no future career change was admissible. I'm glad of it. I've loved being a doctor, although my ride through medical school was bumpy. I was thrilled to leave school and start at Edinburgh Medical School in 1970. With science A-levels I went straight into second-year medicine. Eight weeks later I came straight out again. The florid juvenile arthritis that had first troubled me aged fourteen flared up badly at university. I ended up back home by Christmas, ill and miserable with swollen joints, and missed the rest of the academic year.

Aged eighteen, I made a heartfelt plea to the universe as I hobbled aimlessly around my parents' house: *Just let me qualify. Just let me finish university and become independent.* Fortunately the symptoms eased in time for my heroine big sister to swoop me off that summer to Switzerland and Italy, a time of shared travel and fun. A summer gift of brightness after a pain-filled year. That September I returned to Edinburgh and this time stayed the course. Painful joints bothered me throughout my student years, but then gradually settled. My body seems to have a knack of allowing alarming pathology to develop and flourish, then over time fall quiet again.

John and I met in fourth-year medicine. John was a fairly bohemian medical student, known more for frequenting Highland bars than attending ward rounds. I was more studious but after graduating I developed doubts about hospital work. Back in the 1970s it seemed – and often was – such a harsh, didactic environment for both patients and staff. I took a break, first sunbathing on Greek beaches then

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working in a Camphill Community (a school for children in need of special care, run according to the insights of Rudolf Steiner) near Aberdeen, which I loved. While there I realised I wanted to work with children, and I returned to Edinburgh to take up hospital posts in obstetrics and paediatrics. John had in the meantime morphed inexplicably into an enthusiastic, hardworking, exam-sitting hospital doctor. We wended our ways through a variety of posts in Bristol, Dublin, London and Liverpool before deciding to go and work in Africa together.

Ours was a meandering, rather than whirlwind, romance. It took us six happily independent years before deciding to get married. When I phoned home with news of our engagement there was a stunned pause on the line before my delighted dad said, 'But Mary, this is so unsudden!' After marrying in 1980, we headed for Malawi. I was returning to the Africa I'd grown up hearing my parents speak of with such fondness.

For two years John and I worked in Ntcheu, a small town close to the Mozambique-Malawi border. As the only doctors in the 200-bed government hospital, our combined medical expertise was expected to cover all paediatric, obstetric, medical and surgical emergencies. Of course, it didn't – we were only four-years qualified. But before we arrived, there had been no doctor at all at that hospital so we simply did our best. Patients were remarkably resilient and the universe was kind to us as the hospital was staffed with excellent Malawian clinical officers and nurses (both locally trained) who gave us great support. We often operated with a helpful theatre nurse standing beside us holding up a copy of Bailey and Love, the surgical bible of the time, for us to

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read as we nervously opened an abdomen. We also had to accommodate the many sick people who made their way over the border from war-torn Mozambique. Then, as now, civil war pushed a country's people across neighbouring borders. I remember one dignified elderly Mozambican lady with a broken femur, carried many miles to our hospital on a makeshift stretcher. She healed well in hospital on traction, but on discharge our ambulance could take her only as far as the Mozambican border. Any further and the warring parties in Mozambique would have commandeered the vehicle. We had to watch her hobble homewards with her stick, waving her thanks to us as she went.

Supplies of petrol for our two ambulances, and paraffin for the vaccine fridges in the twenty rural health centres, were erratic since all fuel tankers to land-locked Malawi had to drive through embattled Mozambique. There was no electricity supply outside Ntcheu, so a national paraffin shortage resulted in no refrigeration for life-saving vaccines in the rural centres. Mothers would faithfully bring their children to be vaccinated at local centres, often to find no vaccines available. The walk to Ntcheu hospital, where the vaccine was available, would have taken them days. So, as a result of a war in a neighbouring country, our ward was often full of children suffering from measles, and measles is a killer in Africa. It was heartbreaking to see.

There were few cars in our rural area. Whenever a rare fuel tanker (sometimes bearing bullet marks) showed up at the only petrol station, the long queue that formed was of people, not cars. Armed with all manner of plastic containers, local people would wait patiently in line for hours simply to buy a litre of paraffin with which to light their lamps and

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stoves. This graceful human line would heave a collective sigh of despair when we drove to the front of the queue in our hospital ambulances to refuel. They knew how much we'd drain the scant supplies available, given that we had to fill our containers too. It was terrible to get a phone call from one of the rural health workers thirty miles away for a mother in severe obstructed labour and have no functioning ambulance to send out for her.

Yet despite the constant hardships and frequent grief, Malawian people were also full of joy and vibrancy. I admired them so much. Malawian people laugh often – frequently, and with good reason, at irate *mzungus* (white people) getting exercised about Things Not Working (as white people expect them to). I didn't realise what an uptight, entitled young person I was until I went and worked in Africa. There I learned to drop my Western expectations and simply work flexibly with whatever happened each moment, and with whatever resources came to hand. The day becomes fun when you're working in a team who respond spontaneously and generously, despite limited resources, and together do their best. Our time in Malawi was such a tumble of work, fun, chaos, tragedy and happiness that it is hard to represent life there fully.

When our three-year contract ended in 1984 we left with sadness, but elderly parents and commitments at home made us feel it was time to return to Scotland. I travelled home from Africa pregnant, just as my mother had thirty years earlier. On arriving home I wrote from Edinburgh to tell friends in Ntcheu I was expecting. One Malawian friend, Peter, was over the moon at such news, writing back with the wonderful statement, 'But Madam, we thought that

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you were *unproduce!*' (So very much more descriptive than 'infertile'.) He had viewed my childless state aged thirty-one with deep concern, and in true Malawian fashion had decided the problem lay with the woman, not with the man.

Our son, Adam, was born in 1985, our daughter, Rebecca, arriving three years later. Together with John, my husband, my children are the best things that have ever happened in my life. I could never have anticipated the joy (or the sleepless nights!) they have brought.

Our family had eleven happy years in rural Scotland, John working hard as village GP while I worked hard at keeping sane. Neither baby slept well. John worked days and nights, as did all rural GPs in those distant days before any separate 'out of hours' service existed. The nearest district hospital was over an hour away, paramedics had not yet been invented, and single-manned ambulances were the norm. The local GPs therefore covered all home visits and all emergency care by day, by night, and over all weekends. Every third night nocturnal phone calls would pull John out of bed to attend to anything from road accidents to obstetric emergencies. Back then, the GP's wife (female GPs in rural Scotland were then few and far between) covered the on-call phone evenings, nights and weekends when the doctor was already out seeing to patients. I can remember many a bleary night as I held and comforted my own sleepless baby while answering a busy night-time phone, wondering why the whole world seemed to have forgotten the precious art of sleeping. Knowing that John worked full days even after such busy nights meant that complaining about my lot, even to myself, simply wasn't an

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option. I look back and pay homage to all the village GPs of the past, and their wives, who together rendered such a comprehensive service to their communities. In the pre-dinosaur age before mobile phones, both wife and young children were housebound whenever the doctor was on call. As the years went by, I found this exhausting.

As a GP in southern Scotland I worked only part-time, so I was surprised to find this period in my life more tiring than working full-time as a bush doctor in Malawi. The rewards of such meaningful work were great, however, and I will always be glad that we had the privilege of living and working together so closely in a warm, rural community when our children were young. The decision to leave was hard, but in 1996 we moved to a larger practice nearer Edinburgh with a much lighter night-time and weekend commitment. The kids settled into their new schools and a springer spaniel rampant by the name of Tess joined our family. We all breathed a joyful sigh of relief.

And then I developed breast cancer.