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## **CHAPTER 4: THE ART OF PEACE – PART 1**

Natalie is due back in a few days. She sends me a postcard with her flight details on the back of a postcard of Horst's famous corsetted woman from 1939. It was the last photograph he took before he fled Paris just a few months before the German occupation; taken, apparently, just after midnight, with everyone crying. The pearly whiteness of the fabric and the delicate curve of the corsetting down her spine; and behind and around, the darkening shadows.

I tuck it into a band on the corkboard in my kitchen, next to some old bra ads, a note about Meg's stays in *Seven Little Australians* (I must remember to look that up), and some other bits and pieces torn from magazines.

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I smooth the corner of a copy of Nick Ut's famous photo of a group of children and soldiers running down the road in Vietnam in the early 1970s, fleeing a napalm attack; the children with their mouths open in a silent painful scream; the little girl in the centre of the frame with her clothing completely burned off, her arms held out from her sides in a gesture of acute agony and bewilderment.

I can remember coming home from school at the end of first form and on the kitchen table was the *Sun* newspaper, with the front page taken up with this photograph: a naked girl, just a few years younger than me, running, with her hands lifted out, away from her body; her face contorted.

To have all your clothes burnt off, and for your skin still to keep burning. And then to have someone photograph this and display it to the world.

Somewhere deep beyond thinking and knowing was my fear or recognition or questioning (my unknowing) that if something like that happened to me, here: if my house burnt down and I had to run out into the street naked, a twelve year old girl... Would it be considered okay to show that photograph on the front page of newspapers for everyone to see; or would my white skin, my nationality, my belonging to the same group as the readers, protect me?

\*

I remember when Cyclone Tracy hit Darwin on Christmas Eve 1974, my Gran, unmoved, as far as I could tell, by disasters many times greater in other parts of the world (where the human face of tragedy was too black for her to identify with) was deeply horrified and wanted to send parcels and money to help.

‘Imagine,’ she said, ‘having nothing,’ (and then in a lower voice) ‘*not even a change of underwear.*’

\*

Back in the kitchen in June 1972 I saw all the things I was meant to see in Ut’s photo — how could I not, even in my enormous ignorance? But I also just saw a little girl, close to my own age, completely vulnerable, who was photographed without clothes on and this photograph displayed around the world, and I’d never seen that before either. There were layers to the photo that kept on burning, sensations that were beyond words, impressions that didn’t stop even when you tore your eyes away.

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My brother Bruce keeps ringing me up, wanting to talk about how Maddie should be having the full treatment regime. I get off the phone feeling shaken by all his predictions if she doesn’t submit to ‘best medical practice’.

Surgery, radiotherapy, chemotherapy, the modern day weapons in the war on cancer. Maddie calls it slash, burn and poison. She’s asked Bruce to stop ringing her about it, so now he rings me instead.

Somewhere in all this Maddie’s breasts have lost their private, sexual nature, and have become a public matter. A place of contamination and contest. Everyone has an opinion. She should be doing this. She should be doing that. Has she tried this? What is she *doing* about it?

I pick my way through this minefield, keeping the lines of communication open.

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At the Library I try to erase it from my mind as I clean up some of my files and download my Dr B research onto discs. There’s a computer guy coming today about this Y2K thing. All the computers here have to be checked and the whole system overhauled.

Apparently back in the days when they first starting programming computers, storage space was incredibly expensive, so they saved some by just using the last two digits of the year whenever they put in a date. When you’re in the thick of the twentieth century – the greatest, longest, most amazing century of them all – you forget that eventually it too will end. And then 99 becomes 00.

Which means to a computer programmed to put an invisible 19 in front of those two digits it becomes 1900 again, and instead of moving forward with us into the new millenium, the computer (bound only to logic and free of any consciousness of time or space) sends every new record, file or notice back in time, downriver, into the logjam of history.

A minor problem (like middle age) that's been on the 'must do something about' list for a long time. But one minute it's 1982 and we're all dancing and singing along to Prince, and the next, here it is. The eve of it all. The global countdown. And in every office around the country, a mad rush for 'compliance', that lovely neutral word for obedience, yielding to command, submission to the established order. In the vast information cataloguing, storage and retrieval system that is the State Library, compliance is what keeps us all running.

And it's not just here, but everywhere: in every computer, all over the world, in every office, bank, corporation, government department, security system, database, transport system, airport, supermarket, warehouse, every high rise elevator and traffic light, every service delivery system, our water, electricity, gas, our salary and social security payments, our medical records... Everything, we are told, could be ticking towards meltdown.

We could wake up in the year 2000 and find that during the night our world has lost it's footing, and we're sliding, diving over that edge.

\*

*two thousand: zero zero...*

*don't you want to know?*

\*

Like the maybe time-bomb ticking in Maddie's breast.

Bruce insists we send in the experts. (A simple matter of compliance.)

Maddie has other plans.

She says she wants to explore alternatives. She doesn't see her body as the site of an invasion that needs quelling. She doesn't want a macho oncologist, seeing himself as a commander in a war operation.

\*

In the envelope with the Horst card, Natalie has also sent an old postcard of the famous Atlantic City boardwalk.

On the other side I write:

2<sup>nd</sup> November 1968

Dear Sisters,

Guess what? I've joined an organisation called WITCH. On Halloween we hexed a whole batch of brokerage firms and major banks and trusts and afterwards the stock market slumped five points! And on September 7th I joined the protest outside the Miss America pageant, where I threw my old mascara and lipstick and – dig this! –

my *bra* into a giant Freedom Rubbish Bin (called a 'Trash Can' over here). We women are sick of being beasts of buying, sick of our high-heeled low status roles! Sisterhood is powerful!

And then I did a line of xxxx's and signed it 'Wanda'.

\*

Natalie's oldest sister, Wanda, did end up over there around that time. And she did send a postcard that began 'Dear Sisters'. I remember because I felt disappointed to have been left out (she usually included me too) until Natalie explained that this meant 'fellow females'.

I put the postcard in the envelope with the Horst card, wrote 'DR B, Colbinabin' on the front and popped it in my desk drawer.

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**February 1969:** 'Well, here we go girls,' says Maggie Tabberer, 'into a great big, more beautiful Hickory New Year, and this time it's colour crazy! Not bonkers-in-the-head crazy, mind you, but beautiful, gorgeous, luscious, super-duper, sensational colour-crazy... with bras, slips, half-slips, panties, girdles, all in Happy New Year Hickory-colours.' (The Melbourne *Sun*.)

\*

Wanda also used to send us updates on the anti-war demonstrations in the US. Back here in Australia the big Moratoriums — with a hundred thousand people lining the streets and filling the Melbourne City Square — didn't begin until May 1971. But looking through old newspapers, I can see how many protests, for years, there were before this. Small groups of slightly scruffy students; pictures of them hauled off by the police with their heels dragging on the ground. Sometimes only a dozen or so.

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### **Last night I dreamed I held up the traffic in my Maidenform bra...**

In those days, apart from Wanda, probably my greatest source of information about anything counter-culture was reading *Lil Abner* cartoons in the *Sun*.

Once I cut out one of the strips with SWINE — 'Students Wildly Indignant About Nearly Everything' — marching along with their banners and placards and long hair and beads, and sent it to Wanda, thinking she'd be pleased. She wrote back really angry, saying Al Capp was a fascist patriarchal pig.

I blushed with shame, even though I didn't know what 'fascist patriarchal' was, and I didn't know much about pigs either (we only had cows and dogs).

\*

Actually, I only really read *Lil Abner* for the stuff about the Sadie Hawkins Day races. I used to find the thought of them very exciting, although in my fantasies I used to do it the other way around: instead of the women chasing the men to catch and carry them over the finishing line so

they could marry them, I had a long continuing saga running at night about racing madly through swamps and jungles and bush, my clothes getting ragged and ripped, wearing a shirt tied under my bust like Daisy Mae's, pursued by handsome sexy men...

(Look out for Bottomless Canyon!)

Not that I had a bust like Daisy Mae's, but it was, after all, a dream.

I decided not to mention this to Wanda. Some things it's best just to hold to your chest.

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### **Diana Chose Gaol**

(The Melbourne *Sun*, 20<sup>th</sup> January 1969)

A 20 year old Melbourne University student went to gaol for 48 hours over a protest against the chemical company that makes napalm. She said 'I'm worried about what the people at the Centre For Democratic Action will eat tonight — you see I'm the only one who can cook'...

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On the other side of the page is an ad for Exacto skimps -- 'Invigorating support for active men and boys' -- with an illustration of two boys in y-fronts and singlets flexing their muscles at each other while Dad (also in his undies) looks on indulgently. I make a copy for my collection.

\*

The unnamed chemical company that Diana chose to miss cooking dinner for was probably Dow Chemicals, a major supplier of napalm during the Vietnam war. Also a major supplier of Agent Orange, DDT and a producer of dioxin. These days it's one of the corporations at the heart of the silicone implants litigation.

Who knows, maybe it (or one of its subsidiaries) makes the chemicals that Bruce says Maddie needs to start pumping into her veins.

But Maddie has joined the conscientious objectors, the shell-shocked, those disillusioned with the techniques of waging war on disease. An old peace activist from way back; and a student of Aikido, a martial art practice also known as 'the art of peace'. She stakes her life on there being alternatives to both aggression and passivity. She is prepared to demonstrate with her own body.

\*

In 1968, according to the Herald fashion writer, transparent chiffon blouses caused 'a storm of controversy'. A year later and it's heavy lace see-through blouses. But this time the lingerie industry is ready. These can be worn, she tells her readers, with a vest-like body stocking over your bra, 'so you can be sexy *and* modest.'

\*

In the library I direct a man wearing walk socks and shorts, carrying a neat brown briefcase, to the newspaper holdings, and look up some facts about Australian marsupials for a woman sporting a

kookaburra brooch on her cardigan. In a quiet moment between requests I write on a clean white card:

**Cairns, August 1971: Girls Hold 'Funeral' For Midis**

Fashion chain head, Mrs Pat Washington, lined up her models and salesgirls and had them take off their midis and drop them one by one into a flaming six gallon drum set up in the entrance to the main store. And underneath they had... hot pants!

\*

On another card I write:

**Bra Makers Fight Back:  
Halter Tops Deal a Body Blow to Manufacturers**

By Pat Von Wolff  
*The Age*, 2 October 1972

'It is the most exciting year in bras I have ever seen,' says Mrs Lillian Booth, of Myers. 'We have *halter* bras which are well equipped for all bust sizes, even soft body bras which will support up to a D cup.'

An executive from Hickory says his company became aware of the halter, and the threat, about 5 months ago...But he admits that some women won't take advantage of the new bras and will wear their halters over bare skin.

Miss Val Tresize, buyer at Georges, gives support to this bra-less trend. 'The majority of my customers won't wear a bra,' she says. 'It is such a nice, natural look under the soft knits and jersey. Even the big girls don't have hang-ups, or should I say a hang-down, about going without a bra.'

\*

Recently I was having breakfast at Gail's, and she and I were talking about the early days of women's lib. Suddenly Victor, who was getting ready for school, started to mime dangling a bra by the fastenings and lighting the end. He jumped about as it whooshed into imaginary flames and then began frantically patting up his arm and onto his shoulder and chest, flicking his fingers from the pretend burns.

'Victor—' I was stunned (he's ten years old), 'Where...where did you see that? Where did you learn that?'

He ignored me and ran out of the room, slamming the door and doing his usual thumping about noises.

Gail said, 'He probably saw it on *The Simpsons*.'

\*

Maddie has been on a retreat for the past few days, at a place run by a man who cured himself of incurable cancer about thirty years ago.

Bruce talks of the risks of not acting straight away but Maddie says there are also dangers and risks associated with acting too quickly, rushing in with aggressive measures when her body and mind is in shock, and she is feeling so deeply depleted and vulnerable.

She wants to act, but her first action must be to regain her balance.

Maddie says that contrary to popular opinion, breast cancer is rarely a medical emergency. If the tumor is just in her breast then it's not affecting a vital organ; and with someone her age, for it to be large enough to feel, it must have been growing there for many years, so it's unlikely to change a huge amount if she waits for a few more weeks. And if it is a rare 'aggressive' cancer, and spreading at such a rate that every minute counts, then in that case surgery may not be able to help much anyway, and she would need her immune system and mental state to be as strong as possible.

Doing things a bit more slowly and carefully, in a way that feels right for her, is a risk, she says, but one she's prepared to take.

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Bruce says this is preposterous. 'Well I know what I'd be doing, he says, if it was me staring down the barrel of that gun.'

(Shoot first, ask questions later.)

Bruce says, Better safe than sorry.

Maddie says, When did having your breast cut off, your lymphatic system reduced, your skin and tissue near your heart irradiated, and your body poisoned become someone's idea of being safe?

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But perhaps the biggest danger in waiting a bit (the unspoken one) is that if she asks too many questions, reads too many books, she may never become compliant.

(Maddie is dangerous: a loose cannon.)

\*

I don't know what to think. There are days when everything Maddie says makes sense, and then there are days when I see a woman in the library wearing a scarf to cover her baldness, who looks well and *safe*, or I meet someone who had cancer, and had all the recommended treatments, and it *worked*. Or I hear something on the news (*Breakthrough: New Cancer Treatment!*) and I get a chill in my stomach at Maddie placing herself so outside of all this.

Maddie is stepping off into a limbo land where there is no-one in a white coat with a multi-million dollar institution behind them telling her that she is doing the right thing.

She says, Well, yes, they have might on their side. Which makes it hard.

Then adds, And have you noticed how they never have newspaper headlines that say 'Cancer Breakthrough, Not So Great After All'?

\*

Other times, when Bruce booms at me down the telephone, I am reminded of our father. If we didn't bomb Vietnam, Dad used to say, contain the red menace, then it would spread right through South East Asia and down in to Australia. 'You'll have slanty eyed teachers! How would you like that?'

\*

Fear and Cheer. The staple ingredients of every campaign.

The fear: well, that's obvious.

The cheer?: 'If we send in the troops straight away, we'll be home before Christmas.'

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Gail says, Surely it's Maddie's business what she does.

Maddie says, Unfortunately, cancer's big business these days.

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### **Global Chemotherapy (Or: the war just before the war on cancer)**

In Australia we know it as 'the Vietnam War', but in Vietnam, they call it 'the American War' – those years approximately between 1962 and 1975.

For a long time the US felt they were invincible; all that was needed was to keep the government committed to throwing large amounts of money at the war effort and they would inevitably win. How could they not? The task itself seemed fairly straight-forward: find the enemy and destroy it. To the US military thinking, communism was an alien invasive force within South Vietnam, something to be rooted out and eradicated so as to restore a natural, healthy pro-American capitalism.

But the enemy proved to be hard to clearly identify, and wasn't always foreign.

In the early years, the media reported a steady stream of optimistic breakthroughs and celebrated each small victory. In those days there was little reporting of the side effects, the failures, the recurrences of outbreaks, the downside and costs of each assault. But as the years dragged on this became harder to ignore.

The guns got bigger. And the 'mopping-up exercises' – unable to distinguish between friend and foe — defoliated ancient and intricate jungles, destroying the wildlife habitats of tigers, water buffalo and a range other animals and birdlife in a relentless quest to disarm a mysterious and recalcitrant force that kept spreading along invisible supply lines.

Bombing villages in order to save them from the communist cancer, they often only created a deeper and more entrenched resistance, weakening their support base and leaving a toxic devastation for generations to come.

Defence documents show that over an eight year period the US sprayed more than 65 million litres of chemicals over Vietnam – including Agent Orange, Agent Blue, and Dioxin. It has been estimated that even if the US agreed to pay the estimated costs of 500 US dollars per hectare, it would still probably take between 100 and 150 years to successfully regenerate the three million hectares that were devastated in this process.

\*

I dreamt I was running through a jungle, with my polkadot shirt tied under my bust like Daisy Mae. I could feel the mud squelching up between my toes. I jumped onto a fallen branch and climbed up into a tree, and there were vines that I could swing from. I knew I had to hurry, they weren't far behind. I held on and gave myself a push off into the air and I swung suspended for a long time, and then I was on the ground again. And then I was in the backyard, at Auntie Denise's in Ringwood, and right in front of me a white tiger came out from under the foliage of a flowering bush. We looked at each other, its tail gently swaying, testing the air. Then someone came out of the house with a gun (or was it a broomstick?) and said, I'll take care of this...

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### **The new medical-industrial complex**

In 1971 — the waning years of the US-Vietnam war, which had become not only unpopular but also seemingly unwinnable – President Nixon confidently declared a new war. This one, though, was a motherhood and apple pie war, a war no-one could complain about. Although it too in the end would prove to be long and expensive, with few clear gains.

And it too was a war in which the chemical corporations, buoyed by increased government funding, would again be kept busy.

\*

1974 : three years after Nixon declared war on cancer and increased government funding for cancer research, Adriamycin, a highly toxic chemotherapy drug nicknamed 'the Red Killer' hits the market and sells ten million dollars worth in its first year.

In the years between 1983 and 1987, sales of chemotherapy agents nearly double, from 270 million US dollars to 564 million. This is also a period in which directors of several major pharmaceutical companies began to sit on the boards of anti-cancer organisations and of prestigious cancer research institutions such as the Memorial Sloan-Kettering.

By 1997, global sales of chemotherapy drugs are estimated at 30.9 billion dollars annually.

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This time, I went to school in my pyjamas (how on earth did I come to forget my clothes?). I ran through the playground and Stephen Riddley from third grade came out of the principal's office and pointed his finger at me, ratta-tat-tat... There was a flash of light. I looked through a window and saw Maddie spread out on a desk. She wore a white hippie gown and there was a red patch that blossomed over her heart and dripped down onto the floor, amongst the chalk dust and banana peels. I got on the floor and cupped my hands underneath and caught the blood, but it was dark blue like the ink in the ceramic inkwells. The teacher came and dipped his pen into my cupped hands and he began to write on Maddie's body... I saw the way it cut her flesh, I saw the

way it made her writhe in pain, but she couldn't get up off the table. There were nylon stockings and suspender belts tying her arms to the table-legs. I pulled at them, but it was no good.

I woke up, and I must have jerked or called out because Leo woke up too. He was still half asleep, but he held me. And I told him the dream, and we talked.

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He said if it's not a medical emergency, then why do they rush women into surgery the minute they find out?

Bruce says they have to, early detection saves lives.

\*

I tell Leo about the MBA Insurance advertisement that Maddie sent me last week. The one where they have the picture of Rembrandt's painting of 'Bathsheba' and then a close up showing the dimpling of her breast tissue.

Bathsheba, already married, but asked by King David in a letter to meet him secretly, has a dilemma, the ad tells us. 'But *the model* has an even more tragic problem. She could not possibly have known about it, nor could Rembrandt, or anyone else on earth at the time. Medical opinion now is that she was in the advanced stages of breast cancer. The classic "*orange peel dimpling*" in her left breast is what happens when the disease is left untreated.'

I couldn't really see why Maddie sent it to me. She rang me the next day and was amazed that I hadn't noticed what to her was a massive contradiction right there in plain sight. I tried to guess what it could be but each time I got it wrong. Finally she told me where to look.

'The model,' the ad continues, 'is Hendrickje Stoffels, Rembrandt's common-law wife. Within a year of the painting, she would give birth to his daughter... and just nine years later, she would die. Then, they thought it was tuberculosis.'

Can't you see? Maddie says. But I still can't. It does sound tragic. (Does she think it's too maudlin?)

The ad, Maddie says, is to encourage women to take out health insurance so as to get regular screening mammograms, so they can have their cancers detected early, unlike poor Hendrickje, and have all the best treatment that modern medicine can provide.

—Right.

—But look at what it says: she lived for another *nine years* – with *advanced* breast cancer! And even then she may well have died of TB and not cancer. Even with modern medical treatment, nine years is pretty good going for advanced breast cancer. And then within a year of sitting for the painting she gave birth to a daughter — that wouldn't have happened if she'd had chemotherapy, in fact she may never have been able to have children at all if she'd had all the advantages of modern medicine, because it can push you into early menopause. So, really I don't think she did too badly for someone with cancer advanced to the stage of breast dimpling (which means she must have had it growing there for a long while already), and without any treatment. And also without all the terror and agonising that goes with early diagnosis.

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Leo says, but the ad is saying that if it *was* detected early she might have been able live much longer than nine years. That she might have been cured.

I tell him that Maddie says that we can never really know for sure that early detection results in people living longer, or if it just results in people living longer with the knowledge that they have cancer.

For instance, if Maddie's cancer was detected when she was 50 instead of 54, and she lived five years after detection instead of one year, the survival statistics would show a dramatic benefit, but there's no real benefit to her if either way she still dies at age 55.

—So does Maddie think that we shouldn't be trying to detect cancer early? (Leo sounds shocked.)

—She says it could be helping, but it's not proven. We may never really know for sure. Some people say that if you look at the mortality rates – the number of people dying of cancer each year – then things haven't changed much. Not for breast cancer anyway. The ones where the mortality statistics have really changed over the years are things like lung cancer, and that's more to do with prevention – more people giving up smoking, and better work conditions – than it is about screening and early detection.

Leo doesn't say anything. But I can feel in his body wrapped around mine that he is tense and disapproving of this heresy, but doesn't want to criticise Maddie to me. But even to *say* something like this out loud. The words are like little pricks of ice, falling around us, while we shelter in the bed, safe under the covers.

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*Mortality statistics.* The statistics that Maddie says are the only ones that really matter. But such a brutal phrase. It's understandable that doctors might be uncomfortable mentioning these to people with cancer. So much more cheery and positive to talk about 'response rates', 'recurrence rates', or 'survival rates'.

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*A glossary of terms, according to Maddie*

The 'response rate', Maddie says, refers to the chances of the chemotherapy causing the tumor to shrink a particular percentage. So a '60% response rate' means that in sixty out of a hundred people given that form of chemotherapy the tumor shrank a certain amount.

However this initial shrinkage means little if afterwards it just grows back even more rampantly, which can often happen. And the figures also don't tell you what happened to the other 40%: did the chemotherapy have no effect, or did it perhaps make their cancer worse by overloading their immune system?

The 'recurrence rate', on the other hand, means the percentage of people who developed a new tumor in the same body site or organ over the specified period (over five years, for example). But the figures don't tell you things like how bad the new tumor was. Fewer recurrences, but more virulent ones (because your immune system has taken a beating from the chemo), could actually mean a higher overall death rate.

‘Survival rates’ refer to the percentage of people still alive x number of years after diagnosis.

The improvement in long-term survival rates that has been directly attributed to the use of chemotherapy (in the very few random controlled trials done on this) ranges from about five to ten percent (over say, twelve years), depending on the type of cancer and which study you refer to.

Leo: *five to ten percent?* Is that all?

Bruce says, alright, but the alternative therapies, they can’t cure it either, they don’t get any better results than this.

Yes, but that’s Maddie’s point, they get similar results (and sometimes better), but without the toxicity.

Maddie says that even with that five to ten percent statistical gain there are often problems with skewed samples. Sometimes people have to drop out of a treatment group because they can’t handle the toxicity, and there are others who die in the middle of treatment (from pneumonia, for instance, due to the lowering of their immune system). If these people get omitted from the results, that means the final ‘test’ group that persists with the treatment and makes it through was probably healthier overall to begin with, so maybe this is why they have better long term survival rates than the control group. She also says that some have argued that the small gains observed for women with breast cancer are bunched in the pre-menopausal age group, and maybe the effect occurs because the chemotherapy stops their ovaries producing estrogen, rather than from any direct effect on the cancer. (And that’s a lot of toxicity just to lower your estrogen levels, and would mean little benefit for older women or women whose cancers weren’t estrogen-positive.)

And then there’s the placebo effect. This is always the argument levelled at the non-conventional treatments, that they’re just the placebo effect, not a ‘real’ cure. But then why don’t they ever factor in the placebo effect for the toxic treatments?

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Maddie says the exception to all this is a very small number of rare adult cancers, and childhood cancers, where chemotherapy seems to have a dramatic impact on survival and to be the closest thing to a cure we have. The bad news, though, is that the incidence of childhood cancer (the rate of new cases occurring within the population) has been steadily increasing at about one percent per year.

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In the morning I make breakfast in bed for Leo, but the man next door is spraying his weeds, so we have to keep the windows shut.

When I moved here we had heaps of blackberries cropping up in the backyard and in the garden bed along the fence. So we had a working bee and cut them down and pulled out what we could, but they just grew back. So I called someone at the local council (this was before Gail moved in) and he put us onto a guy who for a price came and poisoned them for us. It seemed sensible. Who wants to live with blackberries lurking in the bushes and ripping your fingers when you try to pick a flower, spreading their little tentacles everywhere.

But then they grew back again, even after a thorough poisoning. Not all of them, but a lot. And this time they looked even tougher and meaner. So I called the guy to complain and he sent out a young bloke armed with a can of petrol. ‘This will do it,’ he said. And in my extraordinary naivety I guided him around the garden, pointing to the regrowth, making sure he didn’t miss any, while he aimed the nozzle and tipped straight petrol onto the little clusters of dark new leaves and down into the soil.

The petrol worked. The blackberries curled up and died. But so did half the garden plants. Gail was horrified when she moved in and took over the gardening. ‘Petrol? You paid someone to put petrol into your garden *soil*?’ She poked the dry bones of a once beautiful magnolia. As soon as she pointed it out, it did seem absurd. (But it had seemed so rational at the time, and the guy was so confident that this was the go.)

Gail’s approach to blackberries and vicious weeds is to cut them close to the ground and then immediately (within seconds, before they seal over) paint them with a small dab of the least toxic form of weedkiller. She never sprays willy-nilly over a whole batch. And then she concentrates on rebuilding the soil, finding out what is deficient, replanting with a variety of dense groundcovers, and feeding and mulching them to keep them healthy and strong. She spends time in her garden, getting to know all its seasons and quirks and vulnerable spots. (Rather than ignoring it for most of the year like I did and then sending in the hit-man.) She picks the optimum time to deal with each weed – the stage in their growth where their roots are loosening and they are easiest to pull out, or when they have exhausted themselves producing a seedpod and are less likely to survive a slashing on a hot day. And she only uses poison as a last resort, on the very worst of them, and then sparingly. Tiny amounts.

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Leo kisses my breasts. Licks the stale tears off my cheek. A plate falls onto the mat with a muffled crash. We hold hands and in the slow early morning hours, while the man next door nukes his weeds, and Gail rattles some pots and pans in the flat below, we make love, and then sticky and replete, drift back to sleep.