

## Wipe Out

*And now your breasts are the stars! Lean this way, please, a little more to the right, that's it, hand here, shoulder dropped, okay, beautiful, okay, don't breathe, got it! Just one more. . . .*

The technician's name was Penny. "Oh good," Rebecca said to the beaky older woman with sensibly cut hair, "you can be my lucky Penny!" Immediately she felt dumb. She'd made an agreement with herself: no luck. Luck was for the weak, the beggars, the people defeated even in advance of actual events. She was twenty-five years old, and the doctor had found a lump in her breast. So what? The two friends she'd told had responded with such panic that Rebecca had resolved to tell nobody else. Not even her father. She'd decided to bring her star quality to the occasion, greet everyone in the office as if she were untouched by fear, be a butterfly threading through a winter garden. She wouldn't let her eyes plead: please please let there be nothing wrong with me. She wouldn't think about her mother.

Fortunately, Penny had heard the penny joke so many times she didn't really hear it or feel obliged to respond. She gave Rebecca instructions to put on a paper gown, then she wisped from the room. Rebecca took off her shirt one button at a time, in a manner meant to please a hundred gawking men. As the fluorescent lights emitted a low ominous buzz, she tossed the shirt onto a chair, turned her back to the imaginary audience, unhooked her bra, and shimmied. "Wear the gown open in the front," Penny had said, "and crack open the door to show me when you're ready." In she sprang, like the spring-loaded blade of a knife.

Rebecca gasped.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you."

"You were closer to the door than I expected, that's all."

Rebecca stifled a sob and Penny handed her a tissue. Get a grip, she told herself. Of course some emotion is going to surface. But feelings can be managed. Who was that actress who laughed through her big scene until the frustrated director slapped her around in front of the

crew, and *right then and there* she gave the performance of a lifetime? “Darling!”—afterwards, holding her as she cried—“You were magnificent!” Didn’t she win an Oscar for that role?

“Did you put on any deodorant today?” Penny asked.

“No.”

“Any perfume? Any lotion?”

“It’s just me here, in the flesh.”

“Good.” Penny plucked a moist towelette from a box on the counter—Mammowipes, it said—and began to clean the machine. Rebecca thought longingly of the hot towels in the Japanese restaurant, scented with lemon, hanging gracefully from a pair of tongs.

“Ready?” Penny guided her up to the machine. It occurred to Rebecca there might be a pause here, a moment when she would stop and meet the technology—ah, so this is who I’ll be working with; Mr. Mammography, I’ve heard so much about you—but before she could take in anything but the leading player’s chilly contours, Penny asked her to unveil a breast.

“It should be a squeeze, so if it hurts at any time, stop me.”

“Okay. Like a pinch?”

“Like a squeeze.”

“Like my tit got caught in a car door? Like my neighbor’s Yorkshire terrier bearing down?”

Penny frowned. “Just relax—and tell me if anything feels wrong.”

What could feel wrong about putting your breast into a machine? Penny’s dry hands guided her breast onto the plate. Okay, this is like a high-fashion photo shoot; you always knew your breasts were stars! So give the fellas four good pictures. Penny coaxed, prodded, praised, wheedled, anything to get the work done right. *Lean this way, please, a little more to the right, that’s it, hand here, shoulder dropped, okay, beautiful. . . .* When the plexiglass paddle descended to squeeze her breast, Penny cried “Hold!” and scuttled over to a partitioned area, where she hit the X-ray button. The pain sharpened. Rebecca’s eyes went remote and glassy as she pretended she was Kate Moss, only with breasts. “Excellent!” Penny crowed. I could really get into this, Rebecca thought. Obviously, it’s been too long since my tits were appreciated. Her last date had handled her as if he were waxing his car. *I’m an ass man, actually.* Never mind. Turn, turn, just one more.

“All right,” Penny said. It’s a wrap!

Rebecca stepped away from the machine. Penny wrote on her chart. The exam had been all flutter and rustle and cheep, but now the birds had flown.

“Sit down,” Penny said. “I’ll be back in a minute. I just need to look at the pictures to make sure they came out.”

Rebecca hesitated. The chair was cold, the room quiet. This is the part where the caterer rolls in a table, heaped with cheese cubes and M&M’s and an assortment of diuretic vegetables. Previously invisible members of the crew creep up to whisper, “Sorry to bother you, miss, I just wanted to say: Nice pair!”

“Thank you—can you believe it? The doctor thinks there are—”

Penny came back in the room. Rebecca unclamped her legs and idly plucked a Mammowipe from the box. “Well?” she said jauntily.

“That’s all we need. You can get dressed now.”

“How strong are these things anyway?”

“They’re germicidal. They disinfect the plate.” She was still writing on her chart. “You can use them on your body too if you forgot and wore deodorant.”

“I know. But can they wipe everything clean?”

Penny gave Rebecca a long direct look, so frank with pity that Rebecca thought she might cry. “You’re very young for a mammogram,” she said. “But Dr. Wang knows what she’s doing. She doesn’t let any details slide. Why don’t you get dressed and I’ll be right back.” She closed the door behind her.

Rebecca tossed the unused towelette into the trash.

“Welp, it’s just you and me now,” she said to the mammography machine. Coyly, as if this were the off-the-record chat they’d both been waiting for. What a hunk of metal! Where was her gratitude for technological advances? Gone fishing, that’s where. Rebecca shrugged off the paper gown and stood naked in front of the machine. It had squeezed a million pairs of breasts, given good news, bad news, or no news. No news is good news. No news is a baseline reading, your résumé in a file, and Cancer is a Hollywood producer culling headshots and murmuring through a cigar: “What’s she been doing? Drinking, failing, getting fat, amping up her estrogen levels? She might be perfect—just perfect—for the part.”

Quickly she dressed, this time without any flair. Her throat ached. Penny peeked her head in.

“All ready?” she said. “Any questions?”

“There are red marks on my skin.”

“Yes, those go away in an hour. Don’t worry.”

“They look kind of like moons.” Rebecca glanced into her shirt. “Or like eyebrows.”

“They fade.” Clearly the interview was over; Penny needed to move on. “Let me give you my card. When you call—you’ll need to call tomorrow—call the number at the bottom. All right?”

“You’re not going to call me?”

“Any time after noon you can call.”

Why hadn’t it occurred to her that she would have to call and ask if she had cancer? Her mother must have done the same. Before the mastectomy, before the endless rounds of radiation and chemo, she too must have picked up the phone and *inquired*.

“Whatever the test results, Dr. Wang will follow up with you. Either way.” Penny checked the chart. “Because of family history, she wants to see you every six months.”

“My mother is dead.” The sentence came out like a burp, or a fart—and when she said it again, Penny looked alarmed, as if next she might hurl the Mammowipes against the wall, throw her shoe at the machine—a star behaving badly. “My mother is dead!” she repeated hoarsely.

“I know. I’m sorry.” There was a pause. “Would you like a tissue?”

She shook her head defiantly; her nose dripped and her vision blurred.

“I recommend you have someone with you when you call,” Penny said mechanically. “It was very nice to meet you.”

“I don’t feel as if we’ve really met,” Rebecca said, but as it happened, her lucky Penny had already left the room.