

What If

Category: Afraid

written by Catherine Pipas | August 2, 2017

I undo the front of the cloth gown and step closer to the menacing machine. The female technician gently lifts one of my breasts—usually she begins with the left—onto a cold, flat surface. I shiver as my warm skin reacts to the chilly metal. Then, the top of the machine slowly descends, pushing into the top of my breast, flattening it, and squeezing it until tears form in my eyes.

“Hold your breath,” the technician states.

Without the noise of my breathing, the whirring of the machine sounds louder. After a few seconds that seem like endless minutes, the machine lifts as if it has heard my prayers; it frees my breast from its unwelcome grasp. The process is repeated as my right breast undergoes the same procedure.

I fear mammograms—not because the pain is intolerable, but because I have had four biopsies based on mammogram findings. The first occurred when I was twenty-seven years old, the mother of a one-year-old. The last took place sixteen years ago, when I was fifty-four. Each biopsy involved an outpatient visit to the hospital, the dreaded intravenous needle, and the angst-filled days of waiting until the final lab tests arrived: benign.

What a lovely word benign is! Yet, as I prepare for my annual mammogram, I cannot ignore the fear that spreads throughout my mind and body: What if? What if this year’s results are the ones I dread?

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