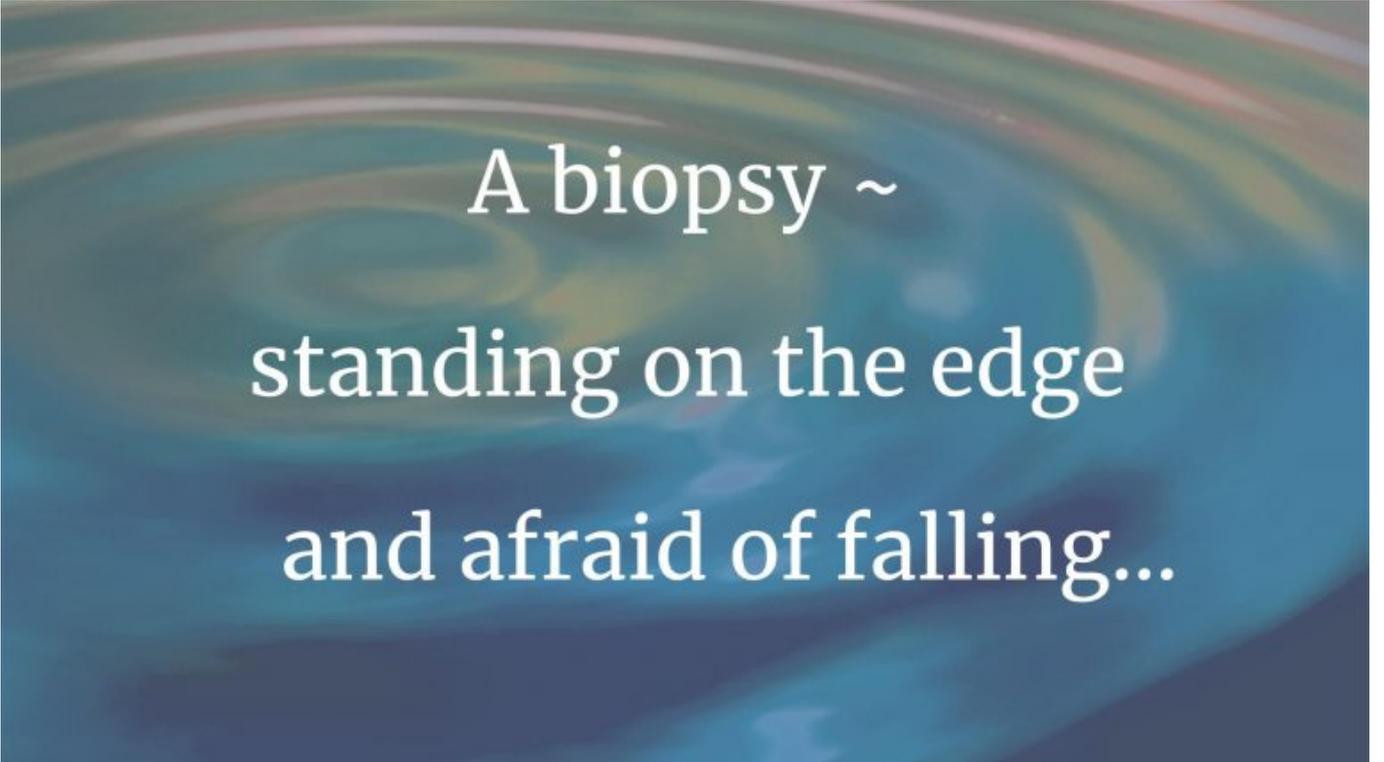


At Three O'Clock

Category: Stories

written by Adriana Añon | July 2, 2021



A biopsy ~
standing on the edge
and afraid of falling...

Running to make my Tuesday biopsy appointment, I tripped, landing viciously on my hands and knees at the corner of Madison Avenue and 79th. Embarrassed, I was helped up by a gray-haired lady in her eighties. For an instant, I wondered if I'd get to be her age.

Walking into the clinic, I saw my husband, who'd insisted on meeting me there. My beige pants were slightly ripped and bloodstained, my knees tingling and smarting.

I waited for my name to be called, recounting my mishap as he held my hand.

A young nurse technician led me to the procedure room and instructed me to lie on the exam table, one arm over my head, my left breast exposed, awaiting the surgeon. With its metallic machines and radiological equipment, the space felt at once crowded and cold; somehow there seemed no room for me to say anything.

My pose made me feel both contorted and agitated—and, I soon discovered, it also made it challenging to meet the surgeon's eyes when she arrived. I glimpsed only part of her face and short, dark bob as she sat down to start. It felt awful meeting her like this, my dignity and confidence stripped away by my nakedness and fear.

"Good morning, ma'am, I'm Dr. Icen," she said matter-of-factly, her strong voice resonating against the walls. "How are you today?"

How am I? I thought. Well, let's see. For four months, I've been living with a couple of suspicious-looking lumps on my left breast "at the three o'clock position," as my family doctor says—lumps that, depending on the day, I imagine might mean a disfigured body, pain, cancer, death, all of the above...Now I'm lying here feeling utterly exposed, at the mercy of two people I've only just met, who hold my fate in their hands.

"I'm fine," I said. I'm a grown woman, after all, and nobody likes a crybaby.

"Okay, we're going to do a guided core biopsy. Have they explained the procedure?"

"Kind of..." After my doctor described it as "just a little pinch," I'd looked it up on the internet.

"All right, we're going to numb your breast. First, you'll feel the needle a little, a prick, then a burning sensation under the skin."

She began, and I squinted and kept it together, feeling everything she'd described. The monitor, three feet from my face, depicted the procedure all too vividly.

"I'm going to insert the guider, then I'll extract three or four samples from each lump. Each time, you'll hear a big clank sound, but don't jump. Stay still. It's going to sound like this"—(a loud *clank*). "All right there?"

"Yes, I'm fine," I said, wanting to cry.

On the monitor, I watched the guider being inserted into my breast and reaching the first lump. I willed myself to hold still during the loud, unsettling clanks, fearing that any movement would hurt. I closed my eyes, and my experience was reduced to the clanks, Dr. Icen's voice asking her colleague to adjust the monitor, and my scraped knees' tingling, for which I felt grateful; it made me feel alive.

"I think you should give me candy or something for staying still so well," I joked. They laughed politely.

"That's right, it's Halloween," the nurse technician said. "I didn't buy any candy yet."

"There's always so much candy, anyway," the doctor replied. "I don't know why people give out so much."

"That's true, and then we eat it for weeks," the nurse said.

Serves me right for wanting to be cute and funny, I thought. The truth is, I never eat candy, and I didn't care how these women viewed sugar consumption. But I wanted them—I *needed* them—to see me as more than lumps in a breast.

I'd hoped that they would understand how I'd feel, going through this. But to tell the truth, even *I* hadn't known how I'd feel, until now.

I'm not finished with living! I wanted to say. I'm only thirty-three. I'm not finished loving my husband. I'm not done raising my children. I've always wanted to write, but I haven't yet. For every experience I've had, there's another one waiting to be had. Please stop talking about candy!

"Okay, last one." *Clank!*

I started to relax, but the doctor warned, "You still have something inside you. I need to get it out. Just a moment."

She pressed down on my breast as if trying to squeeze the last bit of juice from an orange. Suddenly I realized that my breast wasn't completely numb. It hurt so much that I couldn't pay attention to her words: something about how it might bleed or get infected, and what to do. It all sounded like *blah-blah-blah* to me.

Bandaging the incision, she said, "Your doctor will call with the results in a few days—probably Monday. All right?"

"Thank you," I said, relieved it was done. In the dressing room I put myself back together again. Part of me wished I could return to the procedure room fully clothed, just to say, "Look at me. I'm a strong woman, too." But most of me wanted to run—to keep this place forever unfamiliar and foreign. I walked out to the waiting room and into my husband's comforting hug. It was a huge relief to bask in his warmth, his smile, the way he made me feel human again after that numbing experience; the way he made me feel pretty.

The following Monday morning felt like the longest of my life; I kept calling the doctor's office, but only got the answering machine. Fear made me selfish, unable to accept that I was just one of many people waiting to hear their verdict.

It was when I stopped waiting that it happened.

"Mami, will you come dance with me?" my five-year-old daughter asked. For the first time that day, I wasn't thinking—just going at it in the living room with ABBA blasting in the background.

Then the phone rang.

"Mrs. Añon, I'm calling from Dr. Bernon's office."

My breath caught in my throat.

"Yes."

"We got your biopsy results, and both lumps are benign, okay? We'll see you at your next appointment."

"Okay. Thank you so much."

I held my daughter tightly, my tears finally gushing out, mixed with laughter. It was an exquisite, utter joy—like the first bite of a juicy sweet

mango, multiplied by a thousand.

The taste of future.

I called my husband. "I'm okay. They just called, and I'm fine." As I spoke, I felt the fear vanish, like a magic trick.

Once in a while, my lumps hurt, forcing me to acknowledge that they're still there.

I'm grateful to them for reminding me that life gives us no guarantees. But for now, when they speak to me, I can answer:

"Not yet. I'm not finished yet."