

Out Damned Spot

By

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“Melanoma: a form of cancer that begins in melanocytes (cells that make the pigment melanin). It may begin in a mole (skin melanoma), but can also begin in other pigmented tissues, such as in the eye or in the intestines.”

~ National Cancer Institute, USA

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“According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), the incidence of both non-melanoma and melanoma skin cancers has been increasing over the past decades, and WHO estimates that a 10% decrease in ozone levels will result in an additional 300,000 non-melanoma and 4,500 melanoma skin cancer cases globally.

South Africa has the 2nd highest incidence of skin cancer in the world after Australia and in particular one of the highest incidences of melanoma worldwide, as far as Caucasians are concerned. At least 20,000 South Africans are diagnosed annually with non-melanoma skin cancers, and approximately 1,500 are diagnosed with melanoma.”

~ CAN/SA (<https://www.cansa.org.za/be-sunsmart/>)

*This book is dedicated to
all my lovely friends
who left this earth way too early
because of bastardly cancer.*

You live on in my head and heart.

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Chapter One

“Oh my God! What happened to your arm?” the doctor grabbed the offending limb and peered at it, concern written all over her face.

Giselle shrugged. “Nothing. What’s wrong with it?” But a part of her also knew that it had grown a fair bit in the last few months.

Well, not exactly grown, but sort of spread.

Every now and then, whilst they were driving in the car, her mother had peered at her arm short-sightedly and said, “Oh Zelly, where did you get that bruise?”

She’d huffed and waved her off with an impatient, “It’s a *mole* mom.” But she realised that it now did look somewhat like a bruise.

The doctor examined her arm from various different angles.

“That does not look good,” she pronounced.

“So take it out,” Giselle replied, a lot more nonchalantly than she felt.

“I can’t. It’s too big now. You’ll have to go to a dermatologist. Or you could just let my husband cut it out.” Her GP was married to a surgeon.

Giselle sighed. *Really? Who needs this shit?* Life was already complicated enough since the kids boomeranged, and her mom had been uprooted from her home town and relocated across the country to live with them, she was getting older and needed a bit of help, whether she wanted it or not. Giselle loved them all, most of the time, but she missed her uncomplicated life with her husband before the three twenty-somethings came home and her mother moved in.

And now this. Having to get a mole biopsied. *Fuck it all.*

Unwilling to give an inch, Giselle stared steadily at her doctor. "So, will you organise it then?"

"Who?" replied her GP. "My husband or a dermatologist?"

Giselle pondered for a moment. It seemed silly to have the whole thing chopped out by a surgeon if she only needed a little bit gone. She decided to go with a dermatologist.

But it turned out that the local dermatologist had sadly passed away just a few weeks earlier. *How inconvenient*, thought Giselle, *for both him and me.*

She left the practice with a promise that the sister would find a new dermatologist and call her with the details.

Heart thumping, she climbed into her SUV. Fuck! Double fuck on toast. What does having a mole cut out entail?

She was more than irritated with the doctor too; she'd wanted to remove that mole a couple of years ago and Giselle had pitched up at the surgery wearing her big girl panties, only to be told, after scrutinising her arm again, that maybe it was not necessary after all. They'd watch it carefully. But somehow it had obviously not been watched carefully enough.

The call came a few days later. They'd found a dermatologist in Brooklyn and made her an appointment. "You're really lucky," the sister exclaimed. "Most of the other places could only take you in August."

The appointment was for the 24th of April, only a few weeks away.

Giselle muttered under her breath, "August would have been just fine with me."

"Pardon?" said the sister.

"Oh nothing," replied Giselle airily, "give me the details, please."

She jotted down the date, time, and instructions. It seemed like the dermatologists did not do medical aid. Cash or credit cards were the order of the day. You could claim it back, of course.

"I have a letter from the GP that you need to give the dermatologist. You should come and fetch it sometime." Giselle thanked her and promised the sister that she'd swing by before the end of the week to collect it.

She logged the appointment into her cell phone and pushed the whole inconvenient matter to the back of her mind.

Life went on.

Chapter Two

The 24th of April dawned far too quickly.

“I’ll make supper tonight,” Giselle’s mum announced when Giselle took her a cup of early morning tea. She was propped up against the pillows, reading a book.

“Ah, Mum. That’s not necessary.” The words were out of her mouth before her brain had processed the offer.

“Zelly,” her mother pulled herself up and took a swig of her tea, “you’re always so ruddy ungrateful. You don’t know how you’ll be feeling today. Your arm might be sore. You might be incapacitated. In fact, maybe I should come with you to the dermatologist—you might not be able to drive home.”

Giselle sighed ungraciously. “Fine, Mum, you can make supper, but I’m going to the doctor alone. I’m sure I’ll be perfectly fine to drive home. But I don’t want to have to go to the shops later, so do you have everything that you need to make supper?”

“Of course I do,” retorted her mother. “I’ll make a chicken.”

The only person she would not have minded tagging along was her lovely husband, but he was busy lecturing, so that was a non-event.

The appointment was for 12:00 p.m. and she'd worked out that if she left at 11:15 a.m. she'd be able to get there with time to spare. She knew the way; they'd made a dummy run over the weekend specifically to find the place. It was tucked away on a back road and had taken a few circles around the block to pinpoint.

Unable to concentrate on anything, Giselle wandered around the back garden, discovered a couple of granadilla's nestled near the compost heap and was delighted to see that the pecan nuts were starting to fall. She gathered up a few and went back to the house.

Her mother continued to fuss right up until she pulled out of the driveway. Alone. Giselle took a deep breath and counted to ten. She was fully aware that her mum cared, and was worried, but it was so irritating. She'd left five minutes later than planned, but reckoned there was still plenty of time. Except she hadn't bargained on it being a busy workday instead of a deserted Sunday, and the journey took even longer than expected.

She turned left at the traffic lights and immediately realised she'd turned too soon and had taken the wrong road when she didn't recognise a single landmark. The tyres screeched as she did an illegal U-turn and went back the way she'd just come,

frantically eyeing out the digital clock on the dashboard.

Who the hell stole the last five minutes? Holy shit. How had she succeeded in messing this one up?

She managed to take yet another wrong turn and realising that she didn't have a clue where the bloody place was, haphazardly parked in a vacant spot. Giselle hauled out her cellular phone and shakily punched in the dermatologist's address, cursing herself for being so dense when she realised that she'd turned left instead of right. *Seriously, how idiotic.* A car guard peered suspiciously into the car window. She eyed him balefully. *Really? Do I look like a dodgy person?*

He backed off and indicated that she should park in a proper spot. She shook her head and smiled at him. He started to approach again, but she smacked her car into reverse and headed back the way she'd just come.

By the time she'd found parking, the clock in the car gave her exactly two minutes to dash inside. *Hardly time to spare,* she thought wryly as she reported at the reception. The ultra-efficient, yet very friendly receptionist briskly dispensed forms for the new patient to fill in.

Armed with a clipboard, Giselle eyed out the mixed bunch in the waiting room. She wondered if they all had dodgy moles, but then quickly realised from the adverts on the wall that dermatologists covered a multitude of sins. Clearly being almost late wasn't a problem either. *Will I even be home in time for*

dinner? She laughed to herself. The person sitting next to her glanced up and eyed her out. Evidently laughing in the waiting room for no apparent reason was frowned upon. She handed the completed form back to the receptionist and sank down on her seat.

It was one of those end-of-summer days, not that warm but not exactly cold yet. She pulled up her sleeve and eyed out the mark on her arm.

Fucker. Squelching down angry feelings, she retrieved her Kindle from the depths of her bag and started reading. But it's hard to read with shaky hands and a pounding heart. If only she knew what to expect.

Giselle heard her name being called, looked up and saw a lady standing in the doorway. She hastily stuffed the Kindle back into her bag and followed the white coat down a passage, into a room.

The lady sat down behind the desk and invited her to take a seat too. She was the dermatologist.

"What can I do for you?" she enquired with a sunny smile.

Giselle handed over the letter from her GP and eyed out the office nervously whilst the doctor skimmed the letter. Giselle knew that it did not say very much. The envelope had not been sealed, so she'd read it herself.

"Where is it?"

Giselle dutifully handed over her manky appendage. It needed no explaining.

The dermatologist bent over her arm and looked at the brown patch from all different angles. Then she took out what looked like a magnifying glass and examined it some more. Giselle wondered if it was some fancy piece of equipment that could see through layers of skin or if it was really only a measly magnifying glass. She desperately wanted to ask but managed to refrain.

“It’s too big to remove the entire section in my surgery,” the doctor straightened up, “So I suggest we just remove that dark spot in the centre and send it away to be analysed.”

“Fine with me,” Giselle replied, feeling relieved, and even more worried, all at the same time.

She ushered Giselle into a little room off her office and indicated that she should hop up onto the bed and make herself comfortable.

“The pathologists usually take two or three days. If you don’t hear from me, you’ll know all is well. Just come back in two weeks’ time to have your stitches out,” she said.

Heart thumping, Giselle slipped out of her shoes and made herself comfortable on the table. While the doctor readied her instruments to chop up her arm, she scrutinized the artwork on the wall, unable to make out exactly what it was because she’d left her glasses in her bag. It looked like a forest with a fairy house or something similar. *How cool is that?* she thought. *My dermatologist likes fairies.*

“I’m going to numb your arm first. You’ll just feel a small prick,” the doctor said as she arranged Giselle’s arm on her stomach. She then decided to put a towel under it to protect her clothes, and had to rearrange it. Giselle had visions of a fountain of blood spouting out her arm and hitting the ceiling. She rolled her eyes and her lip twitched as she bit back a smile, imagining how horrified the doctor would be if she could read her mind. She felt the prick and decided not to look.

She closed her eyes and could feel the doctor fiddling with her arm, marvelling that the whole process was going so smoothly and, after that initial prick, there was no sensation at all. The doctor worked efficiently next to her and explained what she was doing. In no time, the offending mole had been excised and popped into a little plastic jar.

There were only a couple of stitches and the wound site was really neat, covered with a neat plaster. It did not hurt in the least, yet. But, Giselle reminded herself, she’d had an injection to numb the whole caboodle. Pain was sure to come flooding in at some stage.

Giselle felt somewhat foolish. She’d built up this colossal picture of some nasty, excruciating event, and instead it had all be very civilized, almost pleasant, if you could call having parts of your body removed pleasant. *Body parts*, she scoffed to herself, *that’s a tad over the top. It was more like a teensy strip of skin.*

She hopped off the bed and thanked the doctor profusely for such a painless procedure. Then took a closer look at the picture and realised it had nothing to do with fairies. It was a lovely illustration of hair follicles. The doctor pointed out some similar ones along the same theme in her outer office. Giselle sighed, dodgy eyesight to go with her dodgy arm.

“Remember, it will take a few days to get the results. I’ll call you. If you don’t hear from me, come back in two weeks’ time to have the stitches removed. In fact, you should make an appointment for that now, before you leave.”

She accompanied Giselle down the passage towards the accounts office. Heart thumping, Giselle stood waiting whilst the doctor quietly explained all the procedures that needed to be invoiced and went off to call her next patient. The clerk’s fingers blurred over the keyboard and soon the printer whirred. She handed over a piece of paper. Giselle glanced at the bottom line, gulped, and handed over her credit card.

She stopped at the front desk on the way out and made an appointment to have the stitches removed in two weeks. Her eyes were drawn to the neat little bandage on her arm.

It’s gone. It’s really gone.

Climbing back into her SUV, she shakily texted her lovely husband, Nick.

“DONE!”

Her overall feeling was one of immense relief. The whole process was over, and it had not been half as terrifying as she'd imagined. Who knew having a mole cut out was such a doddle? Giselle felt rather silly for agonising over it for the last few weeks and losing all that sleep.

Okay, she always lost sleep. But maybe she'd lost a few more hours anticipating this whole thing. She turned the key and blindly headed out of the parking lot. Turning the wrong way, she smiled and shook her head. Never mind, there was no hurry to get home. Then she realised that maybe the numbing meds would wear off and the pain would kick in. She'd be plunged into soul destroying, brain-boggling agony. So she pressed down on the accelerator and took more careful note of where she was driving.

Once again she glanced at the neat bandage on her arm. So. Bloody. Small. All that worrying for such a tiny little dressing. True, it was a fancy plaster, but still, it was insignificant.

Giselle decided to take the shorter route home, just in case the numbness really did turn to raging pain. She turned up the radio and hummed along to something that she didn't recognise. The traffic slowed. Then stopped.

Strange, she thought, *this is supposed to be the quickest way*. She looked around, trying to see if there were any blue flashing lights indicating an accident, then realised that there was a power outage, the traffic lights weren't working and there were pile-ups all over the place.

She tapped her nails impatiently on the steering wheel. How long was this going to take? Then she looked at her “nails”. Little jagged stumps. Mosaicking was not healthy for fancy nails. How soon would the injection wear off and her arm start throbbing? She remembered how she’d once had a needle cut out of her foot and the pain had been almost unbearable.

Come on, hurry up, she urged the stalled snake of cars ahead of her.

She twiddled the dials on the radio, trying to figure out how far the outage went. No information was forthcoming. She wondered how her mum was doing with dinner. The car inched forward. She gritted her teeth as a car cut in front of her. The music had given way to a boring talk show. She pressed the buttons impatiently as she tried to find some music that she could relate to. Nothing. Static. Religious music. More static. More talking. In the end, she gave up and stared blindly at the mess in front of her. With nothing else to distract her, she couldn't help but let her imagination wander, and wonder what they might find.

Eventually, the traffic thinned and the road emptied out. She gunned the engine and headed for home.

Roughly an hour and a half after her rogue mole had been biopsied, Giselle drove up to the gate of their home and pushed the grey button. It creaked open. Gratefully, she drove in and parked in her usual spot.

“Let’s see, let’s see.” Her mum started fussing immediately. Her daughter, Jade, sauntered up and

stared at her mother inquisitively. She was squeamish but she wanted to know what the story was too.

Giselle displayed the little patch on her arm and explained what the situation was. Disappointment reflected in two pairs of eyes, they'd expected more somehow.

"Can I give you a hand with dinner Mom?" was Giselle's way of politely enquiring if everything was under control. Her mother flew off to her section of the house to check on the potatoes.

Jade eyed her mom and giggled, knowing that her Gran's cooking habits were a little bizarre. She sometimes took most of the day to make supper, cooking things in batches as she felt like it.

Chapter Three

To her utter amazement, there was no pain. Giselle sat down at her desk and stared at the screen. What should she do first?

She was busy with a couple of projects, one of which was a little anthology of stories from unknown writers. She smiled, reflecting on how well that project was turning out.

A friend had tagged her on Facebook because somebody wanted a story written for some or other magazine. Giselle had scrolled through literally hundreds of comments, amazed by the fact that people just put their email addresses on Facebook for anybody to see. Flabbergasted at the way people, who had seemingly never written a thing before, all the wannabes, were tagging each other and saying, “Hey so-and-so, do you want to have a bash at this? You’ve always wanted to write a story.”

Holy crap! Writing was a craft, not something you had a bash at for a magazine.

But then it seemed that there were loads of hopeful people who really wanted a chance to write something that everybody could read. That would be published.

Giselle had dashed off a private message to the people who were looking for somebody to write. No