

# Waiting

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**Second prize, Fiction: 2025 Marysville BookNest writing competition**

This day is long. Too long.

I've been awake and out of bed since 4.30am.

My head feels like it is about to explode.

The pain is strong and deep, and it crashes inside my skull like giant heaving ocean waves.

Relentless.

It's 2.00pm. I know that because I heard someone shouting angrily 'It's bloody 2.00pm!' I think they are sitting behind me, but it's hard to tell because I am in a haze. My eyes hurt. My vision is blurry. The waiting feels endless. The chair underneath me has hard edges. The air is cold. I'm so uncomfortable but can do nothing to change it.

Endless.

I smell eucalyptus in the air. Or something akin to it. Maybe tea tree. I like it. It's strangely comforting. My neighbour arrives and crouches in front of my chair. I know her voice so well. She sounds worn out. Her voice is croaky. She reaches to touch my hand which rests heavily on my lap. Her skin is cracked and rough. Her hair is wiry and unkept. Her brow is furrowed. Her eyes signal stress. I'm not sure what she is saying, but it sounds reassuring. I like that. She sits beside me now mumbling quietly for a bit. She goes quiet now and rests her hand on my chair beside my knee.

Comfort.

We sit side by side like we've sat over many years. Companions. Friends. Carers.

Neither of us would win a beauty contest. Not that we'd consider such frivolities. We're pragmatists. We get things done. Producers – not films, but food and yarn and flowers. We live next door to one another and have for over 40 years. A wide dusty dead end dirt road about a kilometre long with five houses on it. Great big blocks of land with a promise of productivity, if you're willing to do the hard yards. There's space between those houses except for my place and hers. Good fortune shone on us for many of those 40 years. When school finished, we both got jobs in the next town. We shared the driving, our lunches and dreams of the future. We gossiped about the townies we worked with and made acquaintances with local folk in the shops and restaurants. But they are long forgotten now. Only our friendship endured.

Endurance.

We grew up in our family homes as only children, only daughters, the two of us like sisters. Different houses, different parents but the hole in the fence between our homes gave us easy access to play every day of the week.

When we became mature adults, some called us spinsters. Or worse. Gossip is so cheap. I regret the hours I wasted on idle chatter and stupid qualms.

Worthless.

As we wait, I doze off and on. My heavy head nods forward and snaps back upright. It worsens the pain, and I'm beyond belief tired. So much pain. It's crashing and banging in my skull. So much waiting. So much is unclear. Unknown. Unfathomable.

Waiting.

A man approaches my neighbour and asks if I am okay. Why doesn't he ask me? My neighbour is tense now. Is she arguing with him? Through my hazy senses I hear raised voices. It can't be her. She never gets angry. I'm confused. She's speaking to the man. Her voice is low and strained and her hands gesticulate as if she's guiding traffic. I can't make out the words. She's here for me – I know that for sure. We have always been here for each other. I feel momentary comfort. But then the pain smashes into my senses.

Overwhelm.

A woman in blue comes up to me and gives me some tablets and a cup of water with a straw. I can't swallow them. Swallowing feels impossible. My mouth is like the desert. My tongue feels like bark. She leaves and comes back with another cup. I sip it and feel the grit of the crushed-up tablets. They taste like chalk. It takes some time, I'm not sure how long until the pain feels like it's behind a curtain. I know it's there, but I can be apart from it.

Relief.

From nowhere my memory takes me to past losses. And hers. Her mum died suddenly one early morning 18 years ago. Heart attack. She was here one minute and stone dead the next. Her funeral was a weeper. Not a dry eye in the church. My neighbour left her job in the town and helped her dad with the land. Then he died five years later. A long and slow demise. Some kind of lung disease. He suffered to the end.

Suffering.

My dogs Sheba and Billie were like me and my neighbour. They were like siblings but were not related by blood or breed. They grew up together. Played together. Roamed together. Ate together. Slept side by side. And were companions to the end. When Billie got cancer, she went fast. Sheba mourned as we mourned. And then Sheba died three years later.

Sadness.

My dad passed whilst he and Mum travelled to the land of their ancestors – the U.K. They postponed their dream of travelling until they had enough evidence that I had grown into a trustworthy adult. I was 21 and settled in my town job. They had saved for years and eventually flew off to the 'old country'. Mum's sister lived there. Dad had a few graves to visit of long past relatives. It was during their four-week holiday and on a tour visiting Cornwall, that they stopped at a tea shop for a pasty and a cup of tea. I have a photo of their last excursion on my fridge. They looked happy. Dad

has crumbs on his blue jumper. Mum's cheeks look rosy. On the way back to the bus, Dad slipped on a stone step, hit his head, and died two days later in a Cornwall hospital.

Shock.

Brain haemorrhage. I didn't make it time to say goodbye. Mum was beyond heartbroken. I travelled home soon after, but mum stayed with her sister for a month. She was never the same. Poor mum. She's had so much bad luck. She's been in a nursing home for eight years. I visit her once or twice a week. Frail. Demented. A shadow of herself, but I love her no less.

Unfairness.

My head feels hot. Like an electric bar heater is on high, right behind my brain. I need water and move my parched lips, but I can't find my voice. In my mind's eye I'm turning towards my neighbour, trying to speak, but my head is fixed straight ahead and slightly down. My neck won't turn. I give up on the need for water and shut my eyes.

Surrender.

Memories, strange and vivid fill my aching, constricted head. I register a moment of surprise as a lucid moment lights up in my mind like a motion picture. I see myself laughing at my neighbour dancing with my dog Sheba.

Lightness.

A fog comes over the memory and I open my eyes. The bright lights above me sear white light into my throbbing eyes. Someone, a woman, is crouching in front of me speaking to my neighbour. I can hear her but can only make out the odd word. Too late... Sorry.... Admission... Comfortable... Doom.

My whole head suddenly heats up, like a large hot stone is nestled inside my brain radiating to the edges of my skull. I feel a weight on my hand. My neighbour's warm hand is holding my hand. Squeezing. More people arrive in blue scrubs. Hands

reach under my arms and pull at me. I can't feel my feet. I don't want to let go of Libby, but I have no control. I feel scared. I feel stifled. It's too hot. I'm thirsty. My head hurts.

I close my eyes. I hear my name.

Something hot and liquid like circulates from my head to my chest.

My hands tingle.

I feel something heavy lift up inside me.

Peace.