

**Touched***Mali Farnell*

Just hearing her name, she felt complete. Whole. Not halved by her disengaged husband or quartered by the demands of parenting teenagers. She was acknowledged as the individual she used to feel like before she was a wife and mother.

“This way, please”.

She placed the well fingered dog eared copy of *The Woman's Weekly* on the empty chair next to her, her vinyl seat exhaling as she stood up. She caught a glimpse of her full figure in the reflection of the rain speckled window, and pulled her pale pink knit top down over her thickening middle. It had been a long time since she had felt as glamorous as the women in the back of the magazine pages. The plunging necklines, heels and stockings when accompanying her husband to work functions were a scant memory since the new young account manager had joined his team at work. His renewed interest in his job seemed to require additional ‘team building’ activities after work.

Making her way across the room through a faint cloud of perfume, she walked down the carpet tiled hall to his room. He was waiting in the doorway. As she entered his small enclosed space, he shut the door behind her. He ushered her to a nearby seat and sank into his padded executive style swivel chair, the type that depicted a certain level of comfort and authority. Perched on the edge of her chair, which offered a mere gesture of comfort; the woman felt soothed by the gentle hum of the air-conditioning unit affixed to the wall.

“What can I do for you today?”

It was an open-ended question that expected a closed-ended answer. The woman drew a long, deep, heavy breath. How sad it was, she thought, that it was only ever someone she was paying that would ask her that question. She could not remember the last time anyone proffered such an interest in her who wasn't a public sector or retail employee.

It went without saying that she naturally gave to others. After all, she was a mother. There was shopping to be done, meals to prepare, shirts to iron, the house to clean, and children to attempt to connect with.

“Could you have a look at my breasts?” she said, twisting her mouth up at one corner.

He was a tall, athletic, greying, middle aged man with an angular face. He looked like someone who would cycle up and down mountains on weekends to stay fit.

He gestured to the nearby bed. Pale blue curtains fell on either side of it. She sat nervously on the edge of the white sheeted bed, it felt firm and starched beneath her. She removed her soft knit top and gently placed it beside her. Moving towards her, he asked her to remove her bra. She lay back on the bed, her lower back arching slightly from the crisp cool sheets. "Are you cold?" he enquired, with a caring tone, covering the lower part of her body with the sheet.

"No, just a little nervous" she said. "You should be used to this by now", he smiled.

Standing over her, she looked up at his face. He was strangely handsome. She looked at his crotch and wondered how it was that he could grope a woman's breasts and stay focused on the task at hand. His hands moved all the way around her breasts, paying particular attention to each one. For a fleeting moment, the act felt perversely intimate. The amount of care and attention he paid her in that moment in time, made her feel valued. Like he cared for her. Feeling his cool, soft touch on her skin felt good. Not sexual, but caring. She could see the concern and concentration on his face. She mattered to him. How ironic, she thought, that when the two things that seemed to define her as a woman were being massaged, she felt like a woman.

How long had she felt invisible, she wondered? At what point did she begin to feel like she didn't matter. When had the bone aching loneliness set in?

Was it before or after the cancer?

"All right, you can put your top on now" said the Doctor.

He washed his hands and returned to his desk.

"You can relax. Everything is fine. You're free to go"

Relax. What did this mean? Did it mean not thinking about where her husband was after midnight three evenings a week, or trusting that her eldest son was safe as he jumped into his friend's V8 car packed with mates screeching out of the driveway. Was it trying to forget the phone call from her mother in the Nursing Home, when she'd begged her to visit more often. Did it mean ignoring the possum that kept peeing in the roof cavity, and the leaking shower head that dripped loudly like Chinese torture for hours and hours on end? Should she take the phone off the hook so her abusive brother couldn't get through in the night during one of his drunken rages? But what if something happened to one of her children? What if they needed to get in touch with her?

The painful reality crept in. Everything was not fine. It was far from fine. Free. What did that mean?