

Two

Andrea Levy

“I have something/someone for you.”

“Good. Male or female?”

“Female.”

“Childbirth?”

“Don’t be silly, we haven’t done childbirth in ages. It’s a bit rare you know.”

“Around here maybe but not in other parts.”

“Well maybe so. But childbirth . . . no. Cancer.”

“Breast?”

“Of course.”

“I’m not going to have to hang about for ages am I? Only the last one took years. It’s on. It’s off. Tries my patience.”

“You have patience then.”

“Funny. You need it now in this game.”

“Well only round here. Some places we’re rushed off our feet.”

“True. Anyway get on with it.”

“Right, so, female, breast cancer . . .”

“How long’s she had it . . .?”

“Umm let’s see. Oh yeah. Nine years now.”

“Not bad. Hospital?”

“Royal Marsden.”

“Oh bloody hell not there. That could take forever. They find this and that and then something else . . .”

“Well this one’s a bit of a cantankerous bugger. She won’t take everything they’ve got. Keeps talking about quality of life. Says she’s come to terms with death.”

They look at each other and laugh for a good five minutes wiping their eyes from the watery tears of laughter. Good God their stomachs hurt.

"Right, right, come on enough. My stomach hurts. Right so this one has come to terms with death."

"So she says."

"How exactly?"

"Everyone dies, blah blah. All the old chestnuts."

"Is that it?"

"Well there's slightly more."

"Oh yeah like what?"

"She says she's had a good life and is ready to go."

"How old is she?"

"Um er right yeah, um . . . sixty."

They both start laughing again.

"No don't start me off. Stop it."

"I suppose there was a time when that would be considered a good innings."

"Some places it still is."

"Yes I suppose so. Not around here though."

"Not really, but for breast cancer . . ."

"True, true. There's been an edict that they should get younger."

"I know but I don't think that's fair. Forty with young kids. I don't think that's right. This one got kids?"

"Not of her own. Two stepdaughters."

"Young?"

"No, in their early forties. Kids of their own."

"Oh well that's okay. You may not think I have a heart . . ."

"True. I don't."

"Yeah well you may not think it but something stirs when they're very young. With kids."

"Actually I've been told to caution you about that. You've spared a few recently."

"Not spared. It's just they worked like mad to stop it. No dairy. No cooked food. All the usual tosh. Just thought I'd give them a break."

"Well don't next time. It doesn't look good. They're going no matter what they eat . . ."

"Sometimes you're more heartless than me."

"It's not heartless, it's just that reality must be kept in check. Can't have people believing they have some sort of control."

"Why not? Just once in a while."

"No no no. Quite apart from all the God-awful books that get written it makes people really think some idiotic things."

"Why not once in a while?"

"Because it's tedious! I had one the other day who gave herself coffee enemas daily. Said it did her the world of good."

They look at each other and laugh.

"Bloody hell I see what you mean."

"Now. Wait for this. Now there are lots of people doing it."

"Nescafé."

They laugh.

"Flat white."

"Some will be doing decaf soon."

"With soya milk."

They laugh again. The phone rings. One picks it up. Nods. "Yes, yes. Sorry." Puts down the phone.

"They say to get on with it."

"Are they listening on this one?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"They listen on most now . . . When they have the time."

"But . . ."

"Better not. Let's just get on."