



#6 THERE IS NO ONE NEW AROUND YOU

MIA GAUDIN | BODY BOX
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This is a piece of writing about Sarah and Elsa. They're characters from my novel *There is No One New Around You* which I'm still in the process of writing. And since I seem to be constantly procrastinating finishing it, I'm using this one and a half hours, here at the Live Press desk, to get back acquainted with them. Plus, Elsa is a performance artist.

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When Sarah gets to the Performance Arcade she is already running late. She's there to see Elsa, her flatmate, her friend. Maybe her girlfriend. Elsa's meant to be doing a performance. The Arcade is just down from the house where they live together, perched up on Mount Victoria with a view over the harbour, over the corrugated roofs of houses that haven't been renovated yet.

On the concrete outside Te Papa there's a woman dancing in a jumpsuit that looks like she bought it from an instagram ad. Sarah had seen the ad herself and was tempted. Linen things with no tailoring. That's what she needed now she sat behind a desk all day and her workmates brought so many sweets it almost felt illegal. Every afternoon at three she could feel her butt expanding, pushing against her pencil skirt. One day, she thought, eating sugar in the workplace will be like smoking cigarettes. Our children will laugh about it and T.V. series will be made showing women in law offices scoffing back chocolate and everyone will be shocked.

Sarah can't understand where Elsa gets her confidence from. It seems so radical to just come up with an idea to do something and then show people. Elsa's ideas were questionable a lot of the time. She'd wanted to get a herd of cows to walk along the waterfront and dress them in tinsel and Sarah wondered, why. It seemed pointless. Who would care and why would you go to so much trouble to do something that was so fleeting. Something you couldn't buy. Elsa should, Sarah thought, just paint a painting, make something she could sell and earn some money. Sarah was sick of paying for her dinners whenever they went out and even more sick of Elsa saying she couldn't afford it, that they should stay home together for another Saturday night and make veggie stock from the scraps of things left in the fridge. And whenever Elsa made risotto she used brown rice.

"Cheaper," Elsa said.

"Gross," said Sarah. "It's not Italian."

Sarah doesn't know where Elsa is. She wasn't very clear with her instructions. There's a bunch of containers set up along the waterfront just near the market they go to every weekend to buy the veggies that end up as stock for the terrible brown rice risotto. Apparently there's art in all of them and Elsa could be in any of them. There's a woman coming out of a container filled with pictures of other women's breasts and she's crying. Sarah went in there the other day on her way home from work and looked at the breasts. She was trying to find the ones that looked like hers. The ones that looked more perfect. A man she'd slept with once told her she had the best tits in Australasia. He was a tour manager for a band, so, she'd figured, he would know.

Inside the container there are lots of breasts that weren't breasts any more. Or perhaps that's the whole problem. Sarah was part of the problem, looking out for the breasts that looked like imagined breasts and not thinking that when women had surgery and had their breasts removed that they weren't breasts anymore.

Sarah's mother Margot didn't have breasts anymore. She just had cancer. Or not "*just*," Sarah caught herself again. And not "*didn't have breasts*." She had scars for breasts and she had scars in other places too. There were the scars she'd had since Sarah had known her. The ones across her stomach made by Sarah herself, a settled little thing in Margot's uterus, growing too fast for Margot's skin and stretching it out in silvery lines, like the belly of a fish, a shining map of motherhood. And now, next week, Margot was heading into a bigger surgery to take out more of the cancer. She'd have her womb and her ovaries and part of her bowl taken out and would need a bag on the side of her body that she'd change like a nappy, she'd become her own mother.

Sarah hadn't told Elsa about Margot's surgery yet because it didn't seem real. Or at least, it didn't seem like a big deal because when you go to doctors they know best and surgery is a good thing. It gets rid of problems.

"A GP, an anaesthetist and a surgeon went duck shooting," her uncle had said at their family dinner last week. It was one of those stupid jokes and ended with the surgeon being the only one who shot a duck. "It looked like a duck, it quacked like a duck, it was probably a duck," Sarah's uncle said, putting on the arrogant voice of a surgeon.

"Nothing solves a problem like the ice cold precision of a knife," Margot's sister had said, backing up her husband and Margot had nodded. Maybe it didn't seem real to her either.

Eleven days ago Sarah had had her own surgery. A freckle cut out from the base of her big toe on her left foot. Her GP had asked her if she had health insurance and she had said yes. Margot had been paying for Sarah's private health insurance since she was 15, and at university when Sarah told Margot she was depressed Margot said, "never tell that to a doctor, it will affect your premium." Sarah had hung up the phone, hating her mother for not understanding.

The GP referred her straight to the plastic surgeon on Molesworth Street and Sarah took the earliest morning appointment she could so her boss at the law firm wouldn't get mad at her for taking time off during the day. In the waiting room she picked up a pamphlet for botox and posted an instagram story of it saying: "*Friday morning visit to the doctor ☺*".

One of her ex-boyfriends replied with a thumbs up.

The surgeon was dressed in such a nice suit he looked like a lawyer and he lay her down in the chair in the centre of the room and looked at her toe.

"How long have you had this?" he asked her and she said she didn't know, couldn't be sure. "In that case," he said, "it's probably new."

He took out a magnifying glass with a light attached to it, the same as the one Sarah's GP had used, and told her that there was something unusual about the freckle. Its surface was uneven with different colours. "Imagine looking at an oil spill," he said, smiling up at her from the end of the reclining chair. "I can't guarantee it's nothing. Especially if it's new."

So right then and there he injected her foot with anaesthetic and took out the freckle with a knife while Sarah closed her eyes and started talking, to take her mind off it all, off the idea that this person she had just met was slicing into her body and removing a part of her.

"My mum has cancer," Sarah told the surgeon. "They think it started in her breasts. Or her uterus. They can't be sure."

"Unrelated," the surgeon said. "I'm almost finished. If you feel anything later in the day, just take two panadol. I'll send this away to the lab."

Sarah opened her eyes and saw the freckle at the end of his tweezers. It looked like an eye that had been cut off a potato. But more fleshy. And Sarah wanted to vomit, the idea that this part of her was in a bag on the way to a lab.

"I'm glad you got that taken off," Elsa told her later that day when Sarah was lying on the couch at the flat with her foot elevated, the stiches covered with some tape. "Every time I looked at your foot I thought that was a piece of dirt. It annoyed me."

Sarah had gone back to the surgeon yesterday to have the stiches removed and he had told her the freckle was totally benign. "You must have had it for a long time," he said. "There's nothing to indicate it's new."

So now Sarah has a scar where she used to have a freckle and she feels ill every time she looks at it. She almost can't look at it because it freaks her out to think that this thing she'd never really noticed about her own body before was gone and she hadn't had time to love it. All she had now was the instagram story she'd posted of her foot at the end of the reclining chair with the caption "*bye, bye.*"

There are lots of people walking around now and Sarah still can't find Elsa. It's a clear-blue-sky Sunday at the end of summer and there are three markets on along the waterfront. A cruise ship has come into the harbour called the Island Princess and more people will be coming towards the Arcade along the side of the sea. All of Elsa's ideas will be going out into the world soon to all these people and Sarah feels scared for her. She doesn't know what the performance will be. "It's a surprise," Elsa had told her earlier that morning, taking a used tea bag from the day before and pouring boiling water over it. "You like surprises."

Near where the woman was dancing in the linen jumpsuit, there's a different woman sitting on a piece of concrete, breast-feeding her baby. She's wearing a singlet with no back on it and Sarah can see the sun and the wind licking her, all the way underneath the straps, and she wants to reach out and tell the woman that there's such a short burn time here and offer her some sunblock. But she doesn't. She turns away when the woman looks up at her, and she pretends to keep looking for Elsa, because Sarah is that kind of person. The kind of person who doesn't Wdo things in public.