

## **The Crab at Our Door**

by Amber Lee

*The word* comes from Greek *karkinos* — crab. They say it's because of the way *it* clings: how its pincers reach beneath the skin, stubborn and relentless. *It* latches onto soft tissue and refuses to let go.<sup>1</sup> That's exactly what it did to my family.

It's been ten years since the crab appeared at our door. Ten years since the day my mother's world — my world — shifted forever with a single word. I was six. Too young to spell *it*, too young to understand *it*, but old enough to feel the change. I felt it in the hush that settled over the house. In the way my father avoided my eyes. In the soft sobs my mother tried to swallow back when she thought I wasn't listening.

### **The crab came crawling.**

The image is burnt into my memory: two blood bags swaying beside her at the dining table — the same place she used to cut fruit and remind me to eat my vegetables. Her chest was stitched and swollen beneath her shirt, but she sat there like nothing had changed, helping me with my homework. The red dripped slow, like time had thickened. She smiled at me — she always did. Still my mother. Still strong. Breakable.

### **The crab sank its claws in.**

At six, all I knew was that *it* meant death. I didn't scream. I didn't cry. I broke quietly. Hours spent in the shower became my escape. I told people butterflies landed on my arms. Ants crawled across my skin at night. Biting, biting. But there were no insects — only panic, gnawing beneath my skin.

### **The crab hid.**

Every Thursday, I was pulled from class. Therapy — a word I wouldn't know for years. Two counsellors over two long years, slowly unravelling the fear that had rooted itself deep beneath my ribs. I thought being chosen meant I was special. Now I know I was being pieced back together while pretending to be whole.

### **The crab circles.**

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<sup>1</sup> National Cancer Institute. (2019). Cancer Terms | SEER Training. Cancer.gov.  
<https://training.seer.cancer.gov/disease/cancer/terms.html>

Then, a month later, *it* returned — this time to my grandmother. Another diagnosis. *It* again. Two generations caught in the same grasp. I began to wonder if this clawed creature was coursing through our veins, marking our blood. Maybe the next strike would be mine.

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As you're reading this, nine women across Aotearoa will hear the words that changed my family forever. Each year, around 2,500 women develop breast cancer, and approximately 640 die from it. It's the most common cancer affecting Kiwi women — one in nine of us will face it in our lifetime. Imagine you and your eight closest friends. It's someone you know. Someone you love. Someone who might look just like you.

Most cases happen to women over 50, who make up around 70 to 75% of diagnoses and deaths. About 6% of cases occur in women under 40 — young women, just starting their journeys. Family history can increase the risk, but most women diagnosed have no close relatives with the disease at all. For those with a family history, most still never develop it.<sup>2 3 4</sup>

So I ask you — do you have someone close to you who has faced this? A mother, a sister, a friend, or maybe even yourself? Have you ever really thought about what those numbers mean when they reach into your own life, your own home? Because breast cancer isn't just statistics. It's people. It's family. It's love.

Every year at school, we hold Pink Day. We hear “breast cancer” and make awkward laughs, cringe because it feels far away — like something that only happens to older women or someone else. There's pink mufti, lunchtime stalls, baking competitions, and tables stacked with iced treats and handmade posters. From the outside, it's a cheerful event. And it is — it brings people together. It raises money. It raises awareness.

But sometimes I wonder...do people really understand what this day is for? Or has it become just another excuse to wear a pink hoodie and buy a cupcake? Because behind all the fairy bread and fundraising, there's something heavier that some of us carry. For me, it's the memory of my mother's stitched chest. It's the phantom ants that crawled across my skin and haunted my

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<sup>2</sup> Breast cancer foundation NZ. (2023). Breast cancer in NZ. [Breastcancerfoundation.org.nz. https://www.breastcancerfoundation.org.nz/breast-cancer/breast-cancer-facts/breast-cancer-in-nz](https://www.breastcancerfoundation.org.nz/breast-cancer/breast-cancer-facts/breast-cancer-in-nz)

<sup>3</sup> Key messages. (n.d.). Retrieved July 6, 2025, from <https://www.cancer.org.nz/assets/Position-statements/BreastAwarenessInfoSheet3-7Nov2013.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Cancer: New registrations and deaths 2013 | Ministry of Health NZ. (2016, November 9). Ministry of Health NZ. <https://www.health.govt.nz/publications/cancer-new-registrations-and-deaths-2013>

dreams at night. It's the sound of her breathing between words she tried not to let tremble. For some of us, it's personal. It's sacred. It's survival in disguise.

So when I see all that pink flooding the school grounds, I feel hope. Hope that one day, awareness won't need to be raised anymore. That no other six-year-old will have to learn what the word really means the hard way.

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While the number of people diagnosed with breast cancer in New Zealand has risen by 18% over the past decade, there's a quiet victory beneath the statistics: the mortality rate has dropped by more than 30% over the last 30 years. More people are living. Surviving. Hoping.<sup>5</sup>

Why? You may ask. There are many reasons. More women are attending breast screening programmes, which means cancers are being caught earlier. But there are other factors too — an ageing population, increased alcohol use, rising obesity rates, fewer children, later pregnancies, and a drop in breastfeeding. These are all part of a larger story — one that reflects the changing world we live in.

Knowing the signs — a new lump, an inverted or crusty nipple, nipple discharge, dimpling or puckering skin, orange-peel texture, unusual pain, or a change in shape — could be the difference between life and death. Awareness. It's paying attention. It's listening. It's caring enough to act.

Because crabs — stubborn and relentless, gripping tight beneath the skin — breast cancer clings fiercely. But the power to loosen its hold lies with us: in knowledge, early detection, and unyielding support. We might not be doctors, but we are daughters, sisters, and female leaders — people who can notice, who can speak up, and who can make a difference.

Just remember: The crab might be at our door — but we are not alone when we open it.

(1000 words)

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<sup>5</sup> IARC – INTERNATIONAL AGENCY FOR RESEARCH ON CANCER. (n.d.). [Www.iarc.who.int.](https://www.iarc.who.int/)  
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