PRAISE FOR BONE MARROW BOOGIE

"What makes Janie Starr's book so inspiring, finally, isn't her triumph over cancer, remarkable though that is. It's her belief -- no matter what -- in the ultimate goodness of people. Truthfully written, warmly intimate and personal, Bone Marrow Boogie is the best kind of book: a story that connects us, one human being to another."

- Judy Reeves,
author, A Writer's Book of Days and Writing Alone, Writing Together.

"Bone Marrow Boogie is so much more than a book about cancer: it's about love and family, courage and fear, joy and despair, and underneath it all a choice to maintain an indomitably positive spirit towards life. It is a book to be read by all who want to experience life at its fullest."

- Margo Chisholm
author, To The Summit: A Woman's Journey into the Mountains to Find Her Soul

"*Bone Marrow Boogie* is more than a beautifully written cancer memoir. It is a survivor's tale that charges us with the responsibility to hold onto our spiritual awakenings as we return to our ordinary lives. Witty, poignant, even funny at times, there is a message here for everyone who has been on or is planning to take a life-changing pilgrimage."

- Ann Linnea,
author Deep Water Passage, A Spiritual Journey at Midlife

“Janie shares with us her deepening conscious relationship with her body, mind and spirit, as she journeys through the chaos and perils of cancer recovery. Her odyssey provides a map for all of us on the road of life.”

- Roxanne Peterson, Ph.D., RN,
Body-Centered therapist and energy healer

“This book is about living well. That Janie did, while struggling with cancer, is remarkable. She uses her vitality to incorporate cancer into her world, and to not let the disease define or dominate her. Janie’s writing took me with her through fear, frustration, hope, love and joy.”

- Pam LaBorde, MD

“This is the story of the pilgrimage that Janie takes from diagnosis through treatment and recovery. She addresses the fears and the little triumphs of day to day life as she struggles against the disease. It is hard to imagine how cancer can be a gift but Janie's insights and reflections regarding her experiences are a gift to us.”

- Frank M, Senecal, M.D.

“Janie has written an intensely personal tale of her journey from health, through dealing with cancer and back to health again. Along the way she provides a roadmap of helpful tips and ideas useful to anyone dealing with a serious illness. This book should be recommended reading for all cancer patients and required reading for all health care providers."

- Paul Reilly, ND, L.Ac, naturopathic physician, SCTWC
co-author, How to Prevent and Treat Cancer with Natural Medicine

BONE MARROW Boogie

The dance of a lifetime

a memoir in bite-size pieces

Janie Starr

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To Kirk, Taylor, and Logan
who danced with me all the way

To Dale, Merrilee, and MaryBrooks
who made the journey sweet

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If we look at the path, we do not
see the sky. We are earth people
on a spiritual journey to the stars.
our quest, our earth walk, is to look
within, to know who we are, to see that
we are connected to all things,
that there is no separation,
only in the mind

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http://www.angelfire.com/ky2/moirai/letters.html

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To the agents, who praised my writing but cautioned that another cancer memoir would never sell, for giving me the impetus to go-for-it and the belief that I have more than one book in my soul. Watch out. You will be hearing from me in the future,

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And finally, because I believe in saving the best for last, To Kirk for loving me through each scary day, for believing in my work, and for finding me sexy after all these years,

To Logan for assuming that I would survive, for digging my bald head, and for including me in his high school journey more than any parent could possibly deserve,

And to Taylor, whose spirit uplifted me, whose commitment to my health was as strong as my own, and whose example continues to remind me of what's most important in life: love, compassion, and community with kindred spirits,

My eternal gratitude. May we all be happy and peaceful, may we all be healthy and strong, may we all be safe and free, and may we all care for ourselves with ease and with joy.

I am blessed beyond measure, and don't I know it.

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The dance of a lifetime

PROLOGUE

"I was slowly beginning to realize that the only thing that was worth writing about was living and dying and the trembling membrane in between."

Rick Bragg *All Over But The Shoutin*

My life was not perfect before cancer, but it was a good life, challenging without being overwhelming, satisfying without being mundane. I had not arrived, but I was on my way, on a path I liked, with folks who loved me back. At fifty, I had a pretty good sense of myself, my strong points as well as the places that still needed some work. My seemingly charmed life had held its share of tough times: an alcoholic mother and overbearing dad, a misplaced childhood in a racist South, and years spent trying to unravel the sense I had of not belonging - anywhere. So I felt I had paid my dues, but I also knew I was one of the lucky ones: good health, a solid marriage, financial security, and children that made me proud, not to mention being white in a society where race privilege is preeminent. I had pretty much made peace with my life circumstances by working in small ways to change things, hopefully for the better: coordinating environmental projects, facilitating diversity workshops, and generally speaking out against the injustices that riled me the most.

Lately I had been resting. I guess the Reagan-Bush years had worn me out, and things weren't looking much better with Clinton. Like many of my age cohort, I wanted to spend more time with my family and friends - reflecting on the meaning of life I suppose. You can only write so many letters-to-the-editor before you start to go around the bend. So, it was break time until a new passion came along to sweep me into its compelling current of activity.

As it turns out, what I took for world-weariness, with a touch of menopause on the side, turned out to be a tumor, tucked away and growing fast behind my chest wall. I was being eaten from the inside out, and the scariest thing of all is that I didn't know it. When I found out I had cancer, I figured my good luck had run its course. I was wrong, thank goodness. What happened instead was a harnessing of all I had learned before with a new-found conviction that I had what it took to get well. Cancer was not simply something I *had*. It defined my life from the moment of diagnosis. Even now it hovers around the edges, just outside my peripheral vision, waiting to reclaim the spotlight at the slightest provocation. From the outset, I chose to embrace my experience totally, and soon it became the context of my life. Cancer and I were one. At the same time, I believed - most days at any rate - that I would survive and that I would transform my cancer into something positive. I would do so in part by being present to everything that happened to me, as much as was humanly possible. I slowed down, I paid attention, I stopped sweating the small stuff.

Which brings me to the writing of this book. Like many survivors-turned-writers, it was not something I set out to do. I began with a journal - when you have cancer, you're *supposed* to keep a journal - but I quickly got bored and rapidly switched to e-mail. It was incredibly satisfying to sit down in front of the computer and anticipate the responses. They came from all over: England, Cuba, Maine, Minnesota, San Francisco, Seattle, and here at home. People ranging from my naturopath, my oncologist friend in Cuba, an aerobics buddy, my Mississippi writin' girlfriend, and finally my family, all thought I had something to say. I pretty much figured it had all been written before, so I thank them for convincing me that I have a voice worth hearing.

Writing about cancer is a tender thing, but then having the disease wasn't so easy either. I believe the telling is worth the risk of any unforeseeable repercussions that might emerge. In deference to those folks who may wish they had never made my acquaintance or who are on the shy side, I have changed a few names here and there. My desire is to be purposeful on behalf of other members of the cancer tribe and to tell my story as truthfully as I am able. Not because it is an important story, but because it may ease someone else's travels through the sharing. I wrote for over two years and watched my writing change as my relationship with cancer evolved. I was my most optimistic early on, then after treatment fear took over, and eventually I found some peace and perspective. Like Marion Woodman in *Bone - Dying into Life*, "Cancer has made me sadder and wiser, and therefore richer." Whether you are provider or patient, family member or friend, or a seeker working out your own journey, perhaps you will find a few jewels in reading my story. I make this small offering: Hold on to yourself and reach out for others. Expect and seek to be seen and heard and treated with respect and - dare I say - *love*. Remember on occasion to bow down and kiss the Earth and be glad. Then rise up, tune into your favorite music, and dance into your own lifetime.

BEFORE

"Faith usually means
that you can take a series of beliefs
and you can hold onto them
and that's your faith.

That's all about fear.

Real faith is
that this entity, this organism,
in the midst of intense feeling,
stays.

All our work is about that
not how to get away
but how to stay."

Richard Moss, *Words That Shine Both Ways*

WINTER GREETINGS

"Again did the earth shift, again did the nights grow short, and the days long. And the people of the earth were glad and celebrated each in their own ways."

This morning I came downstairs and discovered our Christmas tree sprawled out on the living room rug. Kirk, Logan, and I had just decorated it the night before to the tune of favorite carols and renewed memories evoked by special ornaments. Only a few of those ornaments actually broke, and despite a nearly impossible tangle of tree lights, an unsteady tree stand, and a general sense of dismay, we blessed our tree and decorated it once more – after wiring it to the wall for good measure.

The incident brought to mind both the sense of wonder and fragility I increasingly feel as I think about our lives. Both our Moms have moved into their 90's and are extremely frail, and a friend recently died of cancer; yet we are healthy, and our kids are moving self-confidently and gracefully into the world.

Taylor is a junior at UC-Berkeley where he has developed a passion for the study of permaculture and living lightly on the Earth. He worked on a sustainable agriculture project in Costa Rica last summer, then traveled with friends in South America. He will venture to Cuba after Christmas to study the island's commitment to organic gardening. I marvel at this young man who has become my friend, ally, and mentor in all the ways that are important to me. And I can only feel gratitude.

Logan, at fifteen, had his first major theatre performance, playing Arty in the Community Theatre's production of "Lost in Yonkers." Watching him take on this role, work long hours in school, followed by soccer practice in the afternoon and late night rehearsals leading up to opening night, convinced me that he can pretty much handle whatever he chooses to do. He was a joy to watch and no small inspiration to his parents. He may be our one Starr in lights.

We have definitely gotten the travel bug in recent years. During the summer of '97, I had the amazing opportunity to spend three weeks studying Spanish, culture, and politics in Havana, Cuba. I was struck by people's sense of humor, their kindness toward US citizens, and their openness in discussing the problems of their country. Cuba is a tropical paradise that has suffered greatly from isolation and yet has managed to feed, house, and educate its people. I have much to learn from their resilience and resourcefulness. I made good friends there and was so profoundly moved by the spirit of the people that I am returning in January for another adventure, this time touring the island by bicycle.

Last summer Kirk, Logan, and I spent three weeks in Ecuador, providing new opportunities for Logan and I to speak Spanish, and the chance for Kirk to demonstrate his amazing driving prowess on the wild and potholed roadways. We swam in the Pacific, off the Galapagos Islands, marveled at the cutter ants in the Amazon, visited small villages where even I felt like a giant among the indigenous people, hiked in the Andes, and hung out in the cafes of Quito. Logan loves to travel and, along with keeping us cultured, will surely motivate us to take more trips to more remote places in the near future.

In September, Kirk up and left the clinic he's been working with for most of his adult life. Managed care and poor management finally got to him, and while he had tremendous loyalty for his pediatric colleagues, he has gladly joined a much smaller single specialty Pediatric Association. He no longer entertains the possibility of early retirement; instead he's taking advantage of a more generous vacation policy to spend more days in the woods:

hiking, skiing, snow shoeing, whatever gets him out into the wild.

In addition to my ongoing commitment to "mastering" the Spanish language, I've been engaged in diversity and anti-bias training, and I worked hard (and unsuccessfully) to defeat the anti-affirmative action initiative that has recently shamed our state. I turned 50 last April and as a result, I've spent more time with friends, had more conversations with my kids, and have begun to seriously question what the hell it means to "age gracefully."

All in all, we are each well and happy and busy pursuing our separate and intertwined lives. We love hearing from those of you who take the time to share your life's adventures with us. As Solstice and Christmas draw near, I look forward to sitting in front of our steady Christmas tree and allowing a sense of peace to permeate the room … remembering seasons past, anticipating the future, and above all relishing this moment, right now....

December 1998

DISCOVERY

"The curse and charisma of cancer: the knowledge that from this point forward, all you have is the day at hand."

Terry Tempest Williams, *Refuge*

HEART SOUNDS

I had a heart murmur - which was news to me - and it was big enough to land me in a cardiologist's waiting room two days before Christmas. I was not particularly concerned - not about my heart anyway. I have a strong heart, one I count on, take for granted even. So although it had been pounding big enough for me to see it through my T-shirt, I was not worried about my heart. I sat patiently waiting my turn and feeling bad for all the obviously sick people around me. The room was comfortable and spacious with sweeping views of Puget Sound, and Mt. Rainier shimmering in the distance. Across from me sat a young child in a wheelchair, with raspy breath that made my chest ache. I tried to read my book. I always have one on hand and can usually lose myself in its pages, no matter where I am. But not this day; I re-read the first paragraph enough times to have it memorized - absorbing nothing. I looked up and spied someone I knew. He's an icon at my son's high school; nicknamed "Doc", he's one of the few Ph.D.'s, an elder revered as such. For years he has taught American History, and harbors a library larger than the University of Washington's on that particular subject. Students adore and fear him; he is a tough teacher, crusty and demanding. Here in cardiology, he looked old and tired, and obviously belonged in this room of pale and listless souls. I knew he had heart problems, but it was a shock to see him in this setting.

I breathed a sigh of regret for his illness and one of relief for myself. How little I knew. So I waited and instead of reading roamed around in my memory tracing the steps that brought me here. The summer had been glorious, three weeks in July, exploring Ecuador with Kirk and Logan. Taylor was on his own journey to Peru and Bolivia. Having just completed his sophomore year at Berkeley, he was profoundly independent, doing his own thing. We spent our first few days in Quito adjusting to the altitude. Eight thousand feet or so above sea level had us moving lethargically through the impoverished streets of the City's old town. The smell of urine comingled with seared meat and the cries of old women begging with as much dignity as possible. By early afternoon, Kirk and Logan had collapsed in a state of physical defeat on their beds. *I* felt fine. And this made my competitive self-smile. After all they were both distance runners and very fit. Leaving them sleeping soundly I set out on my own, looking for the nearest coffee shop where I could begin speaking Spanish and pretend I belonged.

The image faded abruptly as the woman next to me hacked unceremoniously into her dainty white hankie. Wondering why I was thinking of that day, I realized it had to do with how good I had felt, strong and ready to take on a new adventure while my "men" lay exhausted back at the hotel. I cherished the energy of that memory as I lurched mentally forward to a time one month later, when I woke up in the night with excruciating chest pain. We were back home, at our beach cabin about 45 minutes from town, and I thought I was either dying or having some sort of hysterical episode. I tried calming myself by breathing deeply, except that each breath exacerbated the pain terribly. Finally, I woke Kirk, and he was sufficiently impressed to suggest going to the emergency room. Now I was frightened. This man is a doctor and it takes a lot to get him excited. I balked. I didn't want to wake up Logan, maybe frighten him unnecessarily. Kirk acquiesced, pretty sure I was not having a heart attack, and not wanting to put me through three hours of lab tests at an overworked emergency room on a Saturday night. The episode passed with the help of some codeine he procured from a local pharmacy the next day. By the time I visited my nurse practitioner on Monday, I felt fine. Tests revealed probable pericarditis, a virus I likely picked up on one of the small planes we rode in Ecuador. I was supposed to rest for a week or so, but by the time I got the diagnosis, I was already back to aerobics classes, feeling like my old self again. I bounced back so fast that Kirk questioned the lab results. I, on the other hand, felt cocky at the resilience of my healthy body.

Now it was December, and I was on tap for a complete cardiac work-up. All because my osteopath had listened to my chest the day before. I had gone to her for cranial work, wanting relief from a stiff neck and a series of random aches and pains that had been coursing through my body of late. Back in October, I had begun to feel tired, and my afternoon lattes no longer did the trick. At 50, I was beginning to experience my first hot flashes. More like warm surges at that point. I also had occasional heart palpitations, which I had read were another menopausal symptom. So I chalked it all up to the change of life. I'll say. Also, as physically active as I was, it was not unusual for me to have a pulled muscle or tight hamstrings. But this was a roaming pain, sometimes in the center of my chest, occasionally in the middle of my back. I have never tolerated pain well - at least that is what my mother always told me - and I am impatient with anything that slows me down. I took up soccer at 40 and played year round for four years, bruised, battered, bloody, and exhilarated, until every bone in my body - not to mention my physical therapist and massage therapist - begged me to quit. This was different, so I went back to my nurse practitioner, wondering if my symptoms were related to pericarditis. After consulting with the internist, she informed me they had to be muscular-skeletal. I went off to physical therapy where I was brutalized for two weeks and, after a few minor adjustments, was assured there was nothing wrong.

That's when I made the appointment with Corrine Bell, the osteopath, three days before Christmas. I almost cancelled. Surely the stiff neck could wait, and I still had presents to wrap, cookies to bake, and a few last stocking presents to buy. Enter my friend Dale. One of the most intuitive women I have ever known, she was taking a two-year integrative healing course at the time. I had occasionally been a willing guinea pig as she perfected her craft, but I hadn't seen her in a while. She was over for a visit, and I happened to mention my fatigue and elusive pains. Gently she rested her hand in the middle of my back, only to snatch it away as if she had been burned. "You are on fire," she said in that Alabama twang I have grown to love, and then in that quiet way she has that lets me know I had better pay attention, she suggested I come for an session. I did, the next day, dragging a bit, driving instead of walking the short distance between our homes. An Indigo Girls song was playing, and I caught the words "...it's only life after all" as I pulled up in front of Dale's house. For some reason, they made me smile. That session may have saved my life. Usually energy pours off of me; that day there was none. I later learned that Dale had been really scared. What she felt draining out of my feet was something black and cold. She was adamant I needed to keep the appointment with Corrine. Which I did, the very next day.

"Where did you get this impressive heart murmur", Corinne asked calmly, as she moved the stethoscope smoothly across my chest. "I don't have a heart murmur", I responded, only slightly insulted. "Just some occasional palpitations, menopause you know."

She didn't argue as she took the most thorough medical history I would had in years. I liked her. This was my first visit, and I was struck by her gentleness as she began to work out the tension in my neck. Classical music played softly in the background, something I recognized and loved. I felt lulled and optimistic that this woman would fix what ailed me. After I got dressed, basking in an afterglow not unlike a really good massage, she mentioned casually that she had made an appointment for me to see a cardiologist the next day. "Oh, and you might get Kirk to listen to your heart tonight, just for fun", she added, as I was trying to figure what the hell was going on.

Pushing through my reverie, I heard my name being called. So I stirred myself in the waiting room and obediently followed the nurse back for my exam. On the way, we had to stop for the obligatory weights and measures. Stature wise I am small, just under 5'2", and about 108 pounds first thing in the morning, butt naked. But like most women I know, I hate getting weighed, and I am careful to wear as few clothes as possible, and no jewelry at all. So, as I approached the dreaded scales, I was shocked to register my heavy cords, dark turtleneck, and thick wool cardigan. I quickly threw off my shoes and reluctantly stepped up to be counted. Whew, light scales, I thought, as she recorded 106 pounds fully clothed, the first notation on my crisp new chart. Which didn't seem important at the time. And so the procedures began: a cursory exam by the nurse, blood pressure cup pulled a fraction too tight, stethoscope smashed against my skin, heart pounding noticeably. A question and answer period with the cardiologist, whose name I can no longer remember for the life of me. I noted with relief his brusque but not unfriendly manner. A chest x-ray, nothing remarkable about that, and then an echocardiogram, an elaborate piece of equipment that showed my dancing heart from every angle. A friendly tech pointed out the murmur, which was typical he assured me of mitral valve prolapse - a common, non-problematic heart activity. I already knew about that one; lots of folks have it, including Kirk, and our next door neighbor. It appears to be a thin man's condition.

The prognosis was looking good, so I called Kirk to see if he had time for lunch. He had freaked out the night before when he listened to my heart. I had laughed off his worries and made a joke about it to Logan and Taylor, home for the holidays. But the thoroughness with which he checked me out did not go unnoticed, by any of us. He had pulled out his old internal medicine textbook and was dutifully perusing the heart murmur section. "Knock it off," I told him. "My heart is fine."

Now, it seemed I was right, and we were both in the mood for a mini-celebration. We met at my favorite hole-in-the wall, Thai Garden. I ordered the tofu vegetable noodle soup, and he had his usual, phad thai. We drank tea and shared our relief over what looked to be nothing much. Then I went back to the waiting room to get the lab results, and he rushed back to squalling babies, awkward teenagers, and perhaps an emergency or two to make the day worthwhile.

I had gotten the hang of this waiting; I opened the book again, read the same paragraph, closed it, and checked out the afternoon crowd. I was surrounded by a tribe of people with papery thin, sallow skin and swollen extremities, who gasped when they spoke and wore a shared expression of resignation in their eyes. I checked out my thick olive skin and once again let out a guilty sigh of relief. I did not belong here. These were not my people. I just had an ordinary heart murmur, much ado about nothing. Never mind that hot spot in the middle of my back. Dale was only human. She had most likely imagined it.

I gazed out at the mountain, surprisingly clear for a winter's day, and slipped back into daydream. I was in Nashville, Tennessee, the place where I was raised, and I was there for my annual visit. It was just two weeks ago, and I was staying with my cousin Ann. She is younger than me by about 15 years, but she is a take-charge person who likes to lead. As usual she had planned a full schedule of activities, and I was exhausted. I spoke of the vague aches and pains and begged off; I suspect she thought I was wimping out. One afternoon getting dressed for a run, I noticed that my bra felt tight - too much southern fried food I guessed. After less than a few blocks at a slow jog, I had to stop. I was completely out of breath and felt nauseous. I rested and then set off again. The same thing kept happening, so after a while I gave up and walked home. Discouraged, but not concerned. Damn that menopause! That night Ann invited friends over for dinner, two women with whom she taught at Vanderbilt University. Like her, they were Ph.D's by day, but after hours, they had begun studying earth-based spirituality, so she thought I might want to meet them. I did not. They came anyway and talked animatedly into the night. All I wanted to do was sleep.

I jolted upright as I heard my name called once more, and, as I got somewhat unsteadily to my feet, that now-familiar waiting room started to spin and everything turned upside down. Only I didn't know it yet. I followed a different nurse, this time to the cardiologist's very own office. He ushered me to a seat - rich brown leather - and turned on one of those x-ray lights that showed somebody's skeleton in hazy relief. Mine, I guessed. Just as he was about to launch, the phone rang. "Yes", he answered abruptly. "She's here now and we're just going over the results. I'll get back to you."

Hanging up, he said that was my nurse practitioner checking in - having heard through the grapevine of my day in cardiology.

"Your heart is fine", he said as he began pointing to my exposed organs on the x-ray. I might mention that I hate x-rays. They are cold and impersonal and nothing looks like the inside I imagine. "Then what is causing…" I started to ask but was interrupted mid-sentence as he rushed on to point out a big black blur in the middle of my chest, where I thought my heart should be.

"I think it's lymphoma but I hope to God I'm wrong. That would be bad, really bad." He paused for breath and then blurted out. "That's what's causing the murmur. The tumor pressing against your heart."

I had stopped breathing and was struggling to understand the alien words that wouldn't stop spewing from his mouth. Lymphoma. What the hell is lymphoma? I thought we were discussing my heart murmur and now it's maybe lymphoma? I looked at him for a reprieve, but he just sat there, stone mute, having finished delivering his tentative verdict. The messenger. For an instant I wanted to kill him. Then I felt bad; he looked so miserable. Instead I asked for an explanation but have no idea what or whether he replied. Next thing I knew, I was in the bathroom, looking in the mirror at the person I thought I knew best in the world. Crying, crying hard, out loud. "Am I going to die?" I heard someone whimper. It was me, in a pitiful whiney voice I didn't recognize, as my mind raced and fear took over. Lymphoma, melanoma, sarcoma… words that meant cancer pouring out of me. Would it take me tomorrow, or next week, or did I have a few months to live? He said it was bad. What the hell did that mean? How bad? Oh sweet Jesus I do not want to die. Do I start bargaining now, or wait until I know what it means? Then I remembered. Shit, I don't believe in Jesus, God, or the Holy Ghost, so bargaining is out. What do I DO? I started picturing having to tell my kids, and thinking about the grandchildren I would never know, and I got myself out of that bathroom fast.

I called Kirk. I had to go through the clinic switchboard and then get his nurse to call him out of an exam room. I make it a policy not to call him at the office unless it's important, so she moved fast. Kirk was preoccupied and not paying attention to the cry for help that was screaming in his ears. "I have to get a CAT scan", I was telling him, "to confirm the tumor." Shit I was already using the word *tumor*. "Lymphoma," I said. 'He thinks it's lymphoma. Can you come get me? I can't do this alone. I don't even know what this is." At first he demurred, he was too busy, his waiting room was full, his patients needed him, and then, bless his heart, he got it. His fragile barricade crumbled right through the phone, and he was on his way.

I hung up, walked slowly, unsteadily to the scheduling desk and asked for an appointment. At Tacoma General, for a CAT scan. I watched the receptionist place the call. She couldn't get through, tried again, still busy. She became frustrated, and I thought she was going to take it out on me. "The line's busy," she said accusingly. "Look, lady. You think you've got problems. I've got cancer maybe, so don't give me your shit." I screamed at her internally but didn't emit a sound. There I sat, a small figure crumpled on a bench -- tears steaming -- waiting. Another receptionist actually *saw* me, asked if I was okay, offered me a kleenex, and got through to the hospital. It was Friday afternoon, two days before Christmas. She worked some magic and got me in. I had an appointment in 45 minutes. She was my first angel.

Kirk arrived, and things started happening fast. He met with the cardiologist, and they talked "medical." I might as well not have been there for all I was paying attention. The staff wished me luck as we rushed out of there. I took one last look at the waiting room and thought I recognized someone: a small woman, wearing a worn tan cardigan sweater. It belongs to her son and she wore it today for good luck. She is sitting with a book resting on her lap, opened, unread. Waiting. She is looking out the window, and she has no idea what lies ahead.

KEEPING IN TOUCH

To: My Friends
Subject: Situation Update
Date: January 1, 1999

Dear Friends,

I hate to use e-mail to update you on my situation, but it's the easiest way at the moment.

We got a diagnosis yesterday, and my oncologist, Frank Senecal, was quite pleased. I have B-cell lymphoma, which has the best cure rate of any of the likely possibilities, a high one indeed. Also, because of my relatively young age (ha!) and good health, I'm in the lowest risk group. All good news!

I start chemo on Monday after one last test and only have to go for treatment every 21 days, for 6-8 cycles. When that part is over, I do radiation, and then hopefully I can rejoin the human race. In the mean time, expect to see a balding version of my former self, and perhaps a more bloated one (ugh) as well. Logan says it will give me the opportunity to wear all my cool hats and show off my earrings.

The kids and Kirk have been amazing. We've done a lot of crying, laughing, and loving one another since I first got the news of a tumor on Dec. 23. Taylor immediately decided to give up his trip to Cuba, which was scheduled for December 27, and to stay here to take care of me until his semester starts, around January 18. Logan is the one I want everyone watching out for (subtly of course); for all his wisdom and maturity, he is after all only 15, and this is a hell of a deal for him to endure. He's been very open with friends and overtly quite positive. However, as he's the least emotive of the Starr bunch, it's always a little tricky to tell how he's really doing. Kirk went from devastated and freaked, to almost giddy with the prognosis. As for me, I've mostly been surprisingly peaceful and have concentrated on staying centered and healthy. My lack of energy has been the hardest adjustment; it's so unlike me.

Well, that's more than enough for now. Feel free to call, or write, or whatever. If people ask how they can help, any vegetarian food is always appreciated as are good "reads" (nothing too deep), but mostly lots of positive energy directed our way. Anyone who wants to plant a tree, recycle more, and use less will be contributing to my healing process as well. Happy New Year to each of you.

With love,
Janie

STARTING A JOURNAL

Journal Entry: 5 January 1999

I haven't kept a journal in years, but it's one of those things someone with cancer is supposed to do. So here goes:

On December 31, 1998, I received my official diagnosis of B-Cell Lymphoma. Since it was first picked up on chest x-ray, I have begun a remarkable healing journey that I'm quite sure will transform not only my life but the lives of those who love me.

Christmas was the most intense time I ever remember with Kirk, Taylor, and Logan. I could write pages about the affection, pain, and fear I've experienced from each of them.

Taylor has become my guardian angel, always touching my shoulder, bringing me water, crying and laughing with me, together working the daily crossword puzzle, turning something so simple into a comforting ritual. His Christmas gift was an altar of rocks and shells that he built by my bench overlooking Puget Sound.

I think this news of cancer broke Kirk wide open, exposing him to all the vulnerability that he has studiously avoided throughout his life until now. He wept and held me and said some incredibly loving things. He has since regrouped now that we have a definite diagnosis and a plan, but a softness remains that is lovely to see.

Logan, bless his heart, once he recovered from seeing me wheeled out on that that gurney post open-chest biopsy, and returned home, ready to get well, seems fine. He's back in school after the break, having aced his finals and has resumed *play rehearsal as well. Folks at school are being wonderful, checking on him without overdoing it, for which I'm grateful.*

As for me, I've been remarkably peaceful and centered so far, with the tremendous help of Dale and her energy work, and with my own willingness to live this experience. When friends ask me to describe what she does, I am without words. It's like deep relaxation, meditation, and guided imagery combined with a sense of charged particles racing through my body. I tell them to try it and see for themselves. During our session today she told me about a dream she had right after she felt that hot spot on my back. I take it as a good omen because Dale said she felt hopeful when she woke up, and because she's so damn prophetic. Here's how she told it, the best I can remember:

We're riding in a car together, a convertible I think. We're on the right side of the road but we're going backwards. I am driving. It's not hard to go in reverse, it's just not the usual way to do things, and that is worrisome, but I do know we are going in the right direction and that we are heading somewhere in particular. We get to a place in the road where we can either turn left or right. At this point I notice that we have switched to bicycles and that Janie and I are both in control of where we are going. We turn right and it takes us straight to Dr. Corrine Bell's. Which is exactly where we need to be.

I'm in a routine that includes meditation, rest, reading, eating well, and drinking lots of water. I've got friends and family watching over me. Chemo is going to be tough, though the people at Frank's office are humane and friendly, and Frank has an uncanny way of making me feel safe.

Images that have emerged so far include: seeing the tumor as a many faceted and hard bright diamond, which I chiseled away and transformed into tiny particles of pure energy that then burst from my chest sparkling like stardust, then settled into my Mom's diamond ring which was passed on to me at Christmas time.

And ...

Seeing the tumor as a spider arrangement of red yarn that simply needed to be unraveled and rewound on its skein, at first slowly and then spinning rapidly, turning into a golden ribbon and eventually melting away like a harmless garden snake in our own backyard.

So far I'm holding center, and I'm consciously grateful every minute for this life that feels suddenly so holy.

TREATMENT & HEALING

"I don't know how many of you have ever looked up a waterspout, but it's very dark and very dangerous-looking up there; scary, but there's light showing. And the song says disaster occurred and washed the spider out, and down came the rain. The song does not say… 'and the spider said to hell with *that*, and did something else.' Then, out came the sun --- circumstances changed, and the spider went up the spout again. This is the fight song of the human race."

Robert Fulghum, *1998 commencement address at Syracuse University*

TALKING TO MYSELF

Journal Entry: 7 January, 1999

Met my inner guides during my morning meditation: Amanda, a patient and enduring dolphin, and Frank, a spirited dark horse who just happened to have the same last name as my oncologist. Go figure. That seemed weird but who was I to argue?

This afternoon, during my session with Dale, I traveled to the stars and back and felt my heart burst wide open. In reality I was lying on a massage table in Logan's room with a blanket covering me for needed warmth. The weight I've lost has made me even more sensitive to cold than before.

As I was closing my eyes, Dale spoke about my high-spirited love for dancing, and how I've always invited others to join me, and now Kirk is part of the dance, and we are all dancing together...

I began by revisiting the work of the other morning as I continued to unravel the yarn that has come to represent my cancer. I became aware that it's no longer a hard diamond, but soft pliable yarn just needing to be released. I saw it as a web of death requiring me to gently unravel it. I watched as it metamorphosed into a wondrous web made of spun gold, and it was clear that it was the web of life, which would hold my heart gently and lovingly in place.

The next thing I knew, I was dancing in a meadow, and Kirk, and Dale, and others were there, and the dance was flowing and beautiful.

I felt as if I would been lying on this table for many years and many lifetimes past, and then I suddenly knew that I would live to hold my grandchildren, Logan's children, and that I would know how to hold them in a special way that I otherwise would not have known without this experience of cancer.

From there I flew into the universe and somersaulted among the stars, then plummeted like a rocket into the ocean, where for a moment it was dark and frightening and I thought I might drown. Amanda came and told me that I would be fine and that there was still work to do. It couldn't all be fixed in a day.

At some point I rode on Frank's back across the dancing meadow, and at some point I remembered the phrases "perspective and balance", and "life is a dance", and, of course, "it's only life after all..."

And I felt blessed and loved and full of the Universe, and I opened my eyes to Dale in her rainbow clothes, and I knew I was home.

Journal Entry: 8 January, 1999

After my session with Corrine this afternoon, I feel wonderful, an incredible sense of clarity and renewed energy. Her work is so subtle and elegant, like a soft whisper blowing softly across a tranquil lake, barely causing a ripple, yet leaving its indelible mark. Taylor went with me, so he witnessed the slight movements with which she realigns my body and awakens my spirit. More good magic surrounding my life. My aura must be singing!

I woke up pretty tired and draggy this morning, without interest in a walk, felt nauseous before lunchtime, even vomited some, and then had this miraculous recovery. I also had good (separate) visits from Merrilee and Sandy before my appointment, which helped revitalize me. I continue to be struck by which interactions energize me and which ones drag me down. Mostly, I'm being pretty choosy   I only invite in folks who energize rather than deplete. E-mail correspondence has been overwhelming, all loving and heart opening, and I relish the anticipation as I check my in-box, savoring the connections that await me.

When Taylor and I got home from Corrine's, we started reading The Fifth Sacred Thing by Starhawk. I should say he is reading it to me, and it is a joy to revisit this book that I loved so much the first time. Having Taylor read aloud makes my heart sing. I sit on the sofa, look out at the Sound, occasionally let my mind wander, and then bring it back to Taylor's voice and his gentle, beautiful face.

He read a blessing for the departed which Madrone whispered to a patient and dear friend as she lay dying. It struck me as beautiful in its simplicity, so I quote it below:

> "May the air carry your spirit gently. May the fire release your soul. May the water wash you clean of pain and suffering and sorrow. May the earth receive you. May the wheel turn again and bring you to rebirth. Blessed be."
> (Fifth Sacred Thing, p. 5)

I believe I would like those words read for me, some day, a very long time in the future. For now, I turn to life!!

Journal Entry: 12 January, 1999

My days feel surprisingly full even though my life has slowed down to a world of rest and recovery.

I had a down day on Sunday, felt ashy and grouchy, snapping at people without provocation. It was the first time I really felt I would lost my grounding, but I'm wanting to be really easy on myself, so rather than worry that this feeling bad was a trend, I just let it be. As I told Dale, I am wary of having expectations of perfection, as if I need or am capable of going through this process without bad times.

Yesterday was a total contrast. I woke up energized and wanted to move. I drove to the Foundation For Global Community office, where I've spent too little time of late, and picked up Sallie for lunch (just like the old days, BC). It was good to get out and to see people at work, to reassure both them and me that I still exist in the world and am actually doing fine.

Afterwards I went for an incredible massage with Cheri and then came home for an session with Dale. What a life! I intended to write about the session immediately, and I wish I had because now I've forgotten so much. I began by just allowing my spirit to follow the music, an ethereal flute that took me up into the clouds. I just flowed with the sounds and watched the experience unfurl. It didn't have the ecstatic quality of the previous session; it was mellow and subdued, yet equally powerful.

I remember a moment when I saw myself completely recovered from cancer and realized with almost a sense of awe that from then on the term survivor referred to me. I felt proud and also conscious that I could claim responsibility for my wellness and well being, that it was no longer a matter of suerte, but of consciousness and will.

When I shared this part of the energy work with Dale, I cried, overcome by the relief I suddenly felt from a sense of undeserved good fortune. I am truly creating my good fortune with the love and support of many.

I also remember during the meditation a strong connection with my friends, Helen and Maren, and then, Taylor. Their faces passed before me as a reminder of the importance of staying involved with people and not isolating myself, and of actually reaching out and communicating with friends who have called and written. Taylor's face I held before me and simply drank in his beauty and serenity. Our time together is brief before he returns to school, and I am mindful of the joy and peace his presence provides.

This morning Taylor and I drove to Seattle for my appointment with the Seattle Cancer Treatment and Wellness Center. We spent over an hour with Paul Reilly, a naturopath who has worked with Frank over the years seeking to amplify and complement what conventional medicine has to offer. He is designing a personal protocol for my wellness response to cancer, which includes nutrition, vitamin supplements, and an approach to cancer treatment that is proactive and positive. He's quite formal and maintains a professional distance that contrasts dramatically with Frank's emotional warmth. Among other things, he said my diet was low in protein and that I needed to add eggs to my diet on a daily basis. I didn't argue though I would been off eggs for years. As we checked out, I heard him say, "now remember a hug a day", which I thought seemed most out of character with this somewhat aloof man. I assured him I got plenty of those, and it wasn't until I spoke of the interchange with Taylor that I realized Paul had been reminding to me to consume an egg a day. Oh well, so much for touchy-feely. He offered exactly what we were seeking, and we left with renewed energy and hope for my successful recovery.

So, now I have a million pills to take, power shakes and green tea to drink, and eggs and tofu to consume. Other than giving up wine, there is very little adjustment, and perhaps now is the time in my life to abandon the grape or at least significantly diminish its consumption.

After leaving Paul's office, I had such a hit of the psychological nature of energy – I woke up this morning tired, draggy, and snappy (particularly at Kirk, who definitely doesn't deserve my barbed tongue), and by the time I got home, I was feeling energized and refreshed.

Journal Entry: 17 January, 1999

Today I felt deeply afraid for the first time, I think, since my diagnosis. Taylor left, and my heart broke open, and I wondered if I had the courage to keep moving forward. For a moment, I wondered if what I thought was my own strength and grounding was really a deep dependence on him. I wondered if I could go it alone without him. I think my fear was a way of expressing my grief over his departure. We have become so close these last few weeks, having shared every meal, every trip to the oncologist's office, the naturopath's, the hospital. We laughed, and hugged, and cried, and talked, and talked, and read together, and sat quietly together, and healed one another's fears. He's fixed my shakes, organized my pills, prepared our meals, and through it all he's been steadfast and loving, offering little touches, smiles, and gentle nudges to get me to eat or drink.

We had an appointment with Frank on Friday. Usually those visits lift our spirits because Frank is always so positive, in a real sort of way that we can trust. This time it was different. He had some bad news about my LDH blood count. It seems it rose just before I started chemo, and that is a negative prognosticator, because it indicates increased tumor activity and thus moves me statistically from a 70–80% recovery potential to 50–60%. Taylor took it really hard. Kirk and I had not talked statistics with the boys, and Taylor was blown away by these numbers and even more by the realization that I would not simply be handed a clean bill of health when treatment ends, that the threat of cancer will remain with me always. That night he and I discussed Frank's news with Kirk, who gave us an optimistic scenario that helped put the numbers in perspective. For some reason, numbers don't threaten me too much; they don't say anything about me as an individual with great nutrition, lifestyle, and attitude prognosticators, those factors that can't be quantified but that count for so much in recovery. Taylor later told me that upon leaving Frank's office, he had decided not to return to school, but that after talking with his dad, he felt he could go. I responded that I needed him to go in order to heal. I need to know he's at school, living his life, learning important things, and having fabulous experiences that he can share with me. It's bad enough having cancer without adding the burden of interrupting my child's precious time in college.

Yesterday, while Kirk and Logan ran, Taylor and I talked about his leaving, and he cried in my arms. For the first time since the night I told the boys that I had cancer, I was the comforter, the one who holds and gives strength. This afternoon when we dropped Taylor at the airport, I felt once again for a moment the ability to be strong and to send him on his journey. Only after he left did I break down and doubt my inner tenacity.

When we got home, it was clear that Logan had taken up Taylor's mantle. He was cooking dinner, fully in charge, with a smile on his face. Tonight he and I sat in the living room together, he studying and I reading The Fifth Sacred Thing, which I will now finish alone. I thought Logan would be glad to have Taylor leave so that he could reclaim his number one spot, but he said that this was the first time he was truly sad to see Taylor go. It must have helped him more than I realized to have an older brother so clearly in charge at such a vulnerable time. When we left for the airport, Taylor hugged Logan good-bye, and Logan returned the hug full force. They had never been into hugging before, and I felt a bond had been forged -- through adversity, true -- but still a bond that will serve them henceforth.

The gift of that hug brought tears to my eyes, and I registered it as one more remarkable moment in so many remarkable moments that have occurred since my diagnosis. There has been so much beauty, such intensity of experience, and I have been filled with a greater sense of peace and joy than I have ever known. So, yes I am strong, and I am grounded, and I will continue to move from illness to wellness, to follow my own path that includes the love and support of family and friends but at the core depends on my own conviction and courage. I am not so egotistical as to think that my will alone can assure me a cure, but I am clear enough to know that it plays a crucial role.

Journal Entry: 22 January, 1999

I have developed a comfortable routine, and the days flow sweetly by. Last night Dale and I did energy work, so today I feel particularly good. We had gone five days without a session, and I can really tell the difference.

Wednesday I was tired and irritable, and I was struggling with so much attention from Kirk. He wants to be available and meet my every need, but it's so different from the way our relationship has been that it doesn't feel natural. He's much better when he's out working in the yard than when he's hovering over me. By afternoon I perked up, and we made love, unbelievably the first time since I was diagnosed. It was very sweet, and also sexy, and it felt good to both of us to reconnect in bed. I think we were both afraid that we'd cry and never stop; instead, it was, as Kirk said, "life affirming" and then very peaceful.

Yesterday I went to my first Qigong class, and I think I'm going to like it. It's a very slow movement process that is intended among other things to channel healing energy. Normally, I would have been totally frustrated by the slow pace, but in my present condition I found it soothing. I took Linn Jacobs, and it was wonderful to reconnect with her. She has been living with constant pain for the past eight years, yet she has an incredibly positive and matter-of-fact attitude. I think she is going to be an important teacher in my life right now. Sandy is planning to come to the class also, a good time for us to be together. I feel her support daily.

During my session last night, I worked on love, imagining it expanding outward to all the people in my life, including those that do not love me. It felt right and possible at the time, but in the light of day it resurfaces as a sometimes-insurmountable challenge. I also focused some on my tumor, which I haven't done much lately. I've felt as if it were almost gone and that my work somehow transcended cancer. Despite the fact that Frank called just before our session and provided a strong reminder that I'm dealing with a very aggressive tumor and that I'm a long way from cured. In my heart I feel only a sense of well being and healing. I imagine the tumor turning into a beautiful red flower; I imagine it transformed into love, and I imagine myself whole and healthy. I adore my work with Dale; it feels sacred, and at the same time so grounded and down to earth.

This morning I did a meditation using Bernie Siegel's healing tape for the "exceptional cancer patient". Of course, I loved the concept, and I also loved the meditation. Afterwards, I felt refreshed and ready for the day. I rode my exercise bike and watched Spanish language TV; then I showered and watched more of my hair fall out. Merrilee came over for lunch; she is so easy to talk to and just being with her makes me feel stronger. Likewise with Joyce who arrived later to teach me to crochet. After she left, I ran some very ordinary errands, which felt wonderful, and then I dropped by to see Diane. The visit reassured her that I am doing fine. Sometimes I think one of my main tasks is reassuring others, but in the process I reassure myself, and that feels like a good thing.

Logan seems totally immersed in school and not unduly traumatized by the fact that his mother has cancer. He regales me with stories about rehearsal, the cap n' gown controversy, and his various classes. He just called to ask if he could go to a movie with his theatre buddies, and I am both delighted, and relieved to see him going about his life in such a "normal" fashion.

Taylor has called a couple of times, and he too seems to have reintegrated back into his school life at Berkeley. He always sounds a bit subdued, but he's enthusiastic about his classes, and this morning he was jazzed about a possible summer job on a farm in an isolated beach community north of San Francisco. So, I'm relieved on that front as well.

It's raining, yet again, and while it doesn't match my mood, it makes me quite content to be at home reading, crocheting, e-mailing friends, and keeping up with my journal. It's a very good time for me in all ways except for the undercurrent awareness that I have cancer. It's there all the time in small ways, such as when I need to remember to take vitamins, make my shake, and drink my green tea. These too have become normal parts of my day and part of the ritual of becoming well. So, I am largely content and at peace, and always I feel grateful.

Journal Entry: January, 1999

Tomorrow's a big day: chemo 2. I keep getting e-mails from people saying they will be thinking about me, which is nice but also makes this treatment feel like a bigger deal than I would like. I prefer to think of it as one more step toward recovery, so that while it may make me feel worse for a few days, it's to be welcomed and not feared.

Yesterday we went to see Life is Beautiful a very poignant Italian film about a family shipped to a concentration camp, the enduring love they had for one another, and ultimately the survival of a little boy's spirit due to his father's love and creativity. When the movie ended, I just sat there and cried, mostly for the insane cruelty of human beings, and to be honest, probably a little bit for myself as well. I've done so little crying since the first days of learning I had cancer, and I think that tears, like laughter, are a piece of the healing process.

I spoke with Taylor yesterday morning and wished him a happy birthday. He was subdued but looking forward to camping out at the beach with friends, despite the rain. He's never been one to make a big deal about birthdays, especially the "significant" ones. Still and all, he's 21, and to me that's worthy of celebration. He'd had a promising job interview, and I was encouraged that he is seriously looking to work on a farm this summer in northern California rather than here in Washington. He was also excited about a possible job for this semester with an industrial composting cooperative; I sure hope he gets it, as he needs lots to do to keep his mind in California. This morning when I talked to him, he was crying and really missing me. I felt so bad for him, because I understand the pull, and there's so little I can offer except the reassurance that I'm fine and doing everything I'm supposed to do: taking my vitamins, staying away from sugar, etc. I miss him too and the incredible calming energy and strength he brought me, but I would give anything if he could go back to being consumed with school and farming issues and not feel pulled in two directions.

I had an invigorating (for me) walk with Laura this morning, managing to do the whole waterfront. I've been exhausted the rest of the day, but I decided it didn't matter since there's nothing I had to do all day. I think it's important to do one long walk each week to keep my lung and heart capacity strong; and besides, being outside and walking along the water brings its own healing benefits.

Logan had a tech rehearsal today; he is deeply involved both with the play and with the other actor/students. I can detect no sadness in his life and so believe that he has put my cancer in perspective, perhaps better than the rest of us. Thank goodness!!

Journal Entry: 28 January, 1999

It's been a few days since I've written. I think I just forget, plus my fingers are so numb from the vincristine that it's actually somewhat difficult to type.

My chemo on Monday went really well and was not followed by any nausea or vomiting. Hopefully, due to the pharmacist's careful juggling of my nausea meds, we've got that challenge taken care of. It was great having Dale there with me, and afterwards we came home and watched an insipid yet wonderfully escapist romantic comedy, Dance With Me. It took my mind off any potential problems and allowed us to pass the afternoon laughing instead of worrying.

I was really drowsy on Tuesday from the meds and a bit bummed by the amount of hair loss when I washed it this morning. I decided once again to take a proactive approach, so

I made an appointment to have my head shaved, and when Diane came over for a visit, I asked her to take me. It's quite shocking in a way to be bald; on the other hand it's funny and practical and sure beats the alternative. Kirk says I look like an athlete; I think I look like a Star Wars character; either way, I look at it as one more step toward getting well and as just part of the journey. Logan has handled my baldness with the same degree of acceptance and humor that has served him throughout this experience. He says I look hip. What a guy!

Yesterday was a lovely day. I spent the morning alone, meditating, reading, talking on the phone, and having lunch. Kirk worked half day because he'd taken Tuesday morning off to be with me post-chemo. He got home around 1:00, had lunch, and then we ran some errands together. Just normal people stuff. We came back and made love, and it felt warm, and tender, and passionate, and not nearly so scary as it did last week. I think we both felt relaxed and much less fragile, particularly emotionally. Then Kirk went to the store and Dale came by for an session.

It was a very powerful session with lots of frenetic energy and amazing visualizations. I'm in the prednazone phase of my chemo cycle, which really hypes me up and produces some great energy work. At first I was flying up to the stars and then swooping down into the ocean, and I had to remind myself to ground with the Earth. After that, I was able to settle down and focus loving attention one at a time on Taylor, then Logan, and then Kirk. I spoke with each of them of my love and connectedness, and I felt their presence in return. At one point I became aware of focusing an opalescent white light into my chest and heart area, and I realized all I needed to do was allow the light to wash through and cleanse any negative or tumor energy and create space for healthy growth. I imagined a garden of rich composted soil where roses, pansies, lilacs and ferns were growing. Finally, I found myself back on my beach, where

I sensed Amanda, my dolphin guide, in the water but somewhat remote and distant. She made it clear that she is always present for me but that it's difficult to connect when my energy is so frenetic. Our connection needs to be around quiet and calm energy, and my task is to learn how to be in that calm place. I believe Amanda represents the deeper parts of love and wisdom, and that I am moving toward greater access to those parts of myself as I continue this work.

Through out the session I felt suffused in love, and I was aware of the god/goddess qualities of love, acceptance, and forgiveness that reside inside of me. I kept hearing the words "love" and "being peace" as I made my journeys in the cosmos and within my heart. These moments are so powerful, and I awake incredibly refreshed.

Journal Entry: 3 February, 1999

The days flow fairly effortlessly one into another. They are marked by certain rituals that I have come to greatly appreciate: greeting the day at my altar, a time to reconnect with the Earth's energy and mystery, to ground and center myself for the day, and to remember that life emanates from love and an open heart; doing my morning meditation on the sofa, Wendal sleeping at my feet, his dog-snores creating a comforting drone in the background, a time to focus on healing and restoration, to allow my creative energies to flow, and to awaken to the possibilities of the day; and even drinking my shakes, taking my vitamins, and checking e-mail, all of which connect me to health. Otherwise, I am busier most days than I anticipated, with visitors, exercise, phone calls, appointments, and ordinary errands. As I continue to explore and expand who I am during this healing time in my life, I find myself reading The Spiral Dance, a rebirth of the ancient religion of the great goddess, by Starhawk, Love, Medicine, and Miracles by Bernie Siegel, and Being Peace by Thich Nhat Hanh. In many ways I am enjoying this time, and although there is always, always the reminder that I have cancer and am undergoing chemotherapy, I feel so well most of the time that there's a sense of unreality to the diagnosis.

Yesterday Kirk and I went to Seattle for our appointment with Paul Reilly. As with the last visit, I left feeling refreshed and hopeful, and unlike last time, Paul was relaxed and easy to connect with. I particularly appreciated his and Kirk's collegial interaction, Kirk's willingness to express any doubts about Paul's treatments, and the non-defensive way Paul responded. I felt, for the first time, that Kirk had at least one foot on the team, and that he'd opened up considerably in his acceptance of naturopathy's role in my healing. It was a very good day.

Taylor checked in last night as he has been doing on a regular basis. He continues to worry about me and to remember all the details of my treatment schedule; on the other hand he's definitely involved with school and focused on the really important issues of his life in Berkeley. I am incredibly proud of him and the commitments he has made. His work to save the student garden and to make it a community garden simply makes my Mama heart proud. And while I would give anything not to have "dumped" cancer into his life, I have to believe that, long term; we will uncover great gifts through our handling of this experience.

Today I spent the morning with my usual routine, which I've come to greatly appreciate. Then Sallie dropped by for a visit, and afterwards I had lunch with Stan at Thai Garden. There we were, him tall and black, me short and mostly white (not knowing what all my genetic pieces are), and both of us with our shiny shaved heads. We high-fived and laughed about being twins. I am grateful for his willingness to ask me questions about my illness, such as "can you expect to totally get over it?", and then to talk about his life, his girls' basketball team, his kids, *wife Sarah, all the regular stuff. If anything, now that we aren't doing diversity training, we spend more time just talking about our lives. I miss the high energy of those work conversations, but at the same time I crave any non-cancer regular interactions. After lunch I went by the office, cleared out the backlog of mail, visited with folks and came home.*

I'm a bit tired now, but not overly so, and am looking forward to my second qigong class this evening. So that's it for now.

REACHING OUT

To: My Friends
Subject: Surviving Lymphoma: an almost half-time report!
Date: March 4, 1999

Hi all,

During the first few weeks after I found out I had cancer, I began keeping a journal, and then as is typical of my writing history, I soon lost interest. I also found that it demanded more energy than I often had. Recently, I have been thinking once again about the need to document this journey, and so I decided to write to you, my friends, rather than to myself.

The involvement and presence of family and friends has made this experience a remarkable one. I have felt loved and supported in ways that I believe are critical to healing - from cards and e-mails to wonderful meals, to flowers, books, and healing rituals sent by folks from various parts of the country. I have also shared the very good news that after my second chemo treatment, the tumor had dissolved about 80%, a remarkable and very affirming accomplishment, as I have been visualizing dissolving and transforming the cancer from the beginning. I believe that I will be cured of cancer, and I believe that the combination of medical treatment and the pursuit of wellness are the reasons.

What I haven't talked or written much about is what it's like for me to have cancer and to be undergoing chemo. I have been told by reasoned and well-intended folks that I am lucky, also that this is the worst thing that could happen to someone, and that I gave myself cancer for a reason - none of which helped very much. I have also been told that I am loved, that my positive attitude will see me through, that cancer doesn't stand a chance in my body, and that I am an inspiration to others - all words which have helped tremendously.

When I found out I had cancer, I thought I was going to die, and soon. I didn't know anything about B-cell lymphoma, and I couldn't remember if it was a really bad one or just a pretty awful one. Turns out it depends on a lot of factors: age, tumor size, extent of symptoms, certain blood levels, as well as nutrition, meditation, energy work, love, and other intangibles that modern medicine hasn't or doesn't know how to research. Now I believe I will live, but it's not always easy living with the uncertainty...

Just for fun and brevity's sake, here's a list of what's been good and what's been hard about this experience so far.

Good stuff:
Family, especially Kirk, Taylor, and Logan
Sharing that 1st month with Taylor
Watching Logan live life to the fullest
Seeing Kirk's reaction to the "80%" CT scan
Friends, near and far, new and old
E-mails, cards, letters, flowers and plants
Knowing lots of people are meditating, praying, and sending good energy my way
Knowing some folks are planting trees
Great meals lovingly prepared
Meeting a challenge in a positive way
Quiet time to read and reflect
Meditation and sessions
Deciding to shave my head and doing it
Discovering my courage
My oncologist, chemo nurses, naturopath, massage therapist, energy healer
Gratitude
Laughter
Believing in my survival

Hard Stuff:
Having to tell my kids
Being really afraid
Watching Kirk and Taylor be really sad
Telling and thus bringing sadness to others
Going for chemo treatments
Throwing up
Feeling hyper, drugged, nauseous, constipated due to chemo drugs
Having a surgical biopsy

Having a port-a-cath surgically inserted into the chest wall
Adjusting to the port and experiencing limited mobility in my right arm
CT scans, blood work, getting weighed again and again
Having numb hands and feet, due to chemo side effects
Fatigue!!!! Fatigue!!! Fatigue!!!
Having my hair fall out
Anticipation
Knowing that the possibility of cancer looms into my future

I wouldn't wish this experience on anyone, but I also believe there are lots worse situations. I don't believe I caused my cancer, nor do I believe I could have prevented it. At the same time, I've never thought 'why me?″ Or felt particularly angry. I'm a fan of Stephen Levine, who says we're not responsible for our cancer, we're responsible to it. It's what we do with the shit when it happens that matters. I believe that this time is special because of its intensity. It makes love more intense and makes it clearer that life is too short to waste. Anyone who thinks I'm lucky because I have this time out without any responsibilities except to get well (and of course "be there" for Logan, do the laundry, and manage life's other daily challenges), may be right in a way. It might also signify the importance of taking a time-out when it's needed, of being a little bit selfish, of asking for help, and of re-evaluating your life from time to time. The funny thing is that I already did those things, so living "right" is no guarantee. It's just more fun. To a point! My life is a bit too healthy these days, and when I arrive at that day when all the treatments are past, and only the future lies ahead, I intend to celebrate BIG TIME. A glass of wine, a chocolate chip cookie, family, and friends.

Stay tuned...
Love,
Janie

P.S. To those of you who are providing food for us: I believe that the gift of good healthy food is a gift of love. Not only have you freed us from cooking three nights a week, but you've given us a sense of connection to a broader community and helped us avoid the sense of isolation so many cancer families experience. Thank you with all our hearts.

To: My Women's Group
Subject: Beach Reflections ≈ Naples, FLA
Date: April 5, 1999

I look down at my tan lean legs as I stroll comfortably on the beach. My arms swing rhythmically by my side. I feel strong, energized by the warmth, the breeze, the gulf. I can almost pretend I don't have cancer that chemo poison isn't coursing through my bloodstream. Except that my hands and feet are numb and tingling; my bald head is covered by a biking hat to protect it from the sun; and also, I am simply always aware, every waking moment, even when I feel great, that I am vulnerable in a way I never imagined. Walking, I look at people differently than I used to; I imagine their stories, their own hard times. I no longer assume that smiling people are carefree; who knows what stories they have to tell. I pass an aged decrepit woman hobbling painstakingly with a cane. Before, I would have thought, if I had noticed her at all, "gee, I hope I'm not like that at her age." Now, I admire her tenacity and hope I get to *live* to be her age. I pass a large stalwart woman who stands fiercely with fishing poles in each arm, waiting for her husband and son who are hopelessly attempting to fish in the shallow, tame waters. She asks, laughingly, after my second passing, how many times I'm going to walk this beach. I smile, feeling a connection, grateful that she's spoken and somehow let me know I am not invisible. I keep moving, rhythmically, flowing, loving my stride. I pass an older man helping his grandson build a sandcastle. Something is wrong with this man's arms; they are thin and withered, perhaps a stroke, so he uses his feet to push the sand in place. I pass young beautiful women, with dark tans and taut bellies, who stride purposefully down the beach, animated, engaged in beach talk. I feel nostalgic for health, youth, and long flowing hair. Then I remember the young me, who was filled with doubt and self-deprecation, too fat, too short, too whatever. And while I would bargain big time for one of those bodies, I would only go back with the knowledge and self-love I now have.

The water is so blue, green, clear, opalescent. I'm sure it is bluer than in past years. Kirk and Logan assure me it has always looked this way. Has cancer improved my eyesight or am I simply paying attention in a new way? Everything sparkles, and shimmers, and when I swim, I am of the water, transparent and clear. My bald head keeps me afloat; going deep is out of the question right now. And when I shake my head to clear the hair from my eyes, there is nothing to clear.

I sit under my K-Mart beach umbrella and claim it as my new home. It is green, meant to look like palm fronds, and its "petals" blow gracefully in the breeze. The day is mine, to read, daydream, talk movies with Logan, or life's mysteries with Kirk. I am peaceful and content, most of the time. Yet the undercurrent is there, restlessness, fear, self-doubt. Am I really recovering? Is the cancer gone? Could it come back in the night without my knowing? What about that pain in my shoulder, the ache across my biopsy scar, do they portend something? And how am I ever to know? Relax, breathe in patience, trust, presence; breathe out fear, doubt, agitation. Trust! But how do I know if it is an illusion? Is trust dangerous, a false sense of well being? Or is it letting go, releasing into the moment, connecting with all life? Both options seem likely, both have risks. My mind takes me in so many directions, and I have decided simply to notice, to pay attention, and not to judge too harshly. At least for the moment...

Thank you for listening, for being there… always.

Love,
Janie

THIS BODY IS MY HOME

I never once left my body. From the moment I got the news, I moved in, unpacked the dishes, and made the bed. I hung up a picture of me, taken on my 50th birthday, that best depicted my lively fighting spirit. It captures me sitting outside in the sunshine, clapping my hands and laughing out loud. My long curly hair is flowing free, and my right foot is raised as if I am about to leap off the step and do an Irish jig. In overalls and purple work-shirt, and sporting my new hip sunglasses, I look sassy and ready for most anything. That was before, when I still believed that my outspoken ways somehow made me immune to cancer. I wanted to remember the magic of that day as I tumbled into an uncertain future. This move inward just happened. I was there hugging myself tight and promising to hang in for the duration. No matter what. It wasn't so hard. Un-cool as it is to admit, I am quite fond of this body of mine. She has served me well, taken me on some great adventures, and until now - never let me down. So I figured the least I could do was love her through this illness and do my part to see that she survived.

With Dale as my guide, I embraced all of me. I found myself unwilling to do battle with the mass that had invaded my chest; I wanted to transform it instead. I remember during one of our first sessions, just days after my diagnosis, I saw the tumor pass through my body, like so many twinkling fire flies dancing on the wind, and settle - cleansed - into the diamond ring my mom had recently passed on to me. I have never worn fine jewelry, always preferring silver to gold, feathers to pearls. But in that moment I understood that my mom's ring was a talisman, to be worn always, its incandescent sparkle both a reminder and a promise. When friends asked about it, I shrugged and said simply that it held some healing mystery that I didn't really understand. When people asked about my personal war on cancer and wanted to know what I was doing to kill the tumor, I chose my words carefully. I left the killing up to Frank and his crew of war-ready nurses while I infused my body with white light - dissolving tumor cells and replacing them with holy compost, rich in nutrients, tilled and ready for planting. Purple lilacs mostly and an occasional white rose.

Chemo was a challenge. It was hard to stay present while retching violently into the toilet bowl. Somehow I managed it, even during those rare moments of terror when I questioned whether I would make it through. The night of my first chemo nearly brought down the roof, flooding me with fear and wonder. How could such awful medicine save my life when I was spewing my insides out? Here's the thing: I knew I needed help. And Kirk's toilet-side reassurance wasn't enough. Frank had given instructions to call if I threw up, and I was puking food I hadn't even eaten. Once when I was a kid, after a particularly heinous roller coaster ride, I barfed all over my best friend's new cardigan sweater, the pink one, spattered suddenly with chunks of cotton candy and other remnants of undigested fair food. This was worse. "Call Frank," I whimpered. Kirk was sitting on the cold tile floor beside me, ever the stalwart non-phased-by-human-byproducts but-nevertheless-frightened doctor-husband. "Don't think it's necessary," he uttered, voice steady, and firm. We had our first cancer fight right there on the bathroom floor. I knew what was going on. Kirk's need to protect a fellow physician from a late night phone call was huge. My need for reassurance that I wasn't going to die from dehydration was bigger. I wore him down. He called Frank, who told me, in that calm way I had come to trust early, that I was not in danger. When he added that I had done the right thing by calling, I glared at Kirk a little unkindly and then collapsed, purely defeated by the events of the evening.

That first morning in chemo would have been the ideal moment for an out-of-body experience if ever there was one. Such a surreal place, a center where dying, maybe-dying, and determined-to-live folks were drawn into a makeshift community, held together by the necessity to poison themselves in order to prolong life. Seeing those emaciated bodies and scraggly heads sunk into their lazy boy recliners, IV's strung into their veins like so many worms pursuing their next meal, made me look around for the nearest exit. Then I noticed the devastation on Taylor's face, and I knew I had to stay for his sake, if not for my own. He and Kirk were hovering together in the chairs thoughtfully provided for guests. They were my support team that first day, but it's not clear who was having the harder time staying put. Then a nurse named Lisa introduced herself and began to set me up for my first infusion. She was a tall woman, in her thirties I guessed, with a soft body that looked like it knew how to hold a frightened child, or in my case a 50 year-old woman scared out of her wits. I felt my muscles relax some as she moved in close to explain the procedure that one day would seem like an almost normal way to pass the time. She was so relaxed and friendly that she pretty much melted me on the spot. Also, she did not act afraid of me or of the drugs she was lining up for my first cocktail. She knew them well and spoke matter-of-factly about their potency. And yet the way she sat so near, and gently massaged my arm before administering that first stick made me want to remain right there in her presence.

What followed was to become the defining rhythm of my days for the next five months. My life ran in 21-day cycles, beginning with those three-to-five hour sessions where I was injected with a formulaic array of poisons designed to destroy my cancer without wreaking too much havoc on the rest of me. Having survived round one with the reassurance from Kevin, my pharmacist, that he would up my anti-nausea meds, I became a model - if somewhat unorthodox - patient. With Dale's steady presence (she became my chemo buddy most days), I made this place a home. We decorated my cubby with a bouquet of flowers and a candle, which we lit on days no one was around to mind. Chemo makes some folks incredibly sensitive to fragrance of any kind, so we were careful not to inflict our ritual on others. I need to say right here that not everyone is cut out for chemo duty. The job is meant for those calm types not taken to fainting or crying spells, capable of sitting quietly for long hours, preferably with a sense of humor, and the wisdom to know when to remain silent. Southerners are perfect; they've been trained since childhood to visit. Visiting requires the ability to sit, chat about nothing, and drink copious amounts of sweet tea.

Pretty good preparation I'd say. If you've got rowdy or nervous friends who want to help, let them run errands, buy you some new underwear, or cook a meal. On the other hand, I may be selling folks short and projecting like hell. I know I would have been lousy at it, wanting to organize patients, change their eating habits, and convince them to throw away their head scarves. Since I had joined the ranks, all I wanted was Dale's sweet touch and a fairy godmother to make it all go away. I sure didn't want anyone messing with me. I would settle into my flat-gray lazy-boy as if it were my favorite reading chair and get myself ready. Even as I began to doze, I paid attention to my breath, to the light streaming in through the window, and to those around me. My nurses mostly, but also the patients nearby.

Like Maude. She was old and frail, ancient really, yet she looked like she'd enjoyed some high old times, fast cars, and bourbon on hot summer nights. She was a talker, mostly telling tales about her grown-up son who was sitting at her side and getting the biggest kick out of the way she blurted out their most intimate life details. Apparently her only heir had not been able to produce off-spring, so she had offered him a gift certificate at Christmas for the local sperm bank. "He turned me down,' she cackled. He laughed too, relishing this retelling that exposed his mom's outrageous side. They had history, and they'd had their share of fun along the way. This day was her last chemo, and she was feeling frisky. "I am so drunk," she hooted, ""'almost as good as a jigger of Wild Turkey." Whatever she had, I wanted. All I ever felt was tired and dopey, and this lady was having a blast. As the last drops squeezed into her tired old blue vein, the nurses went into their farewell act. Lisa was in charge, pulling out streamers of toilet paper, which she draped around the I.V. Pole. Dan, the weights and measures guy, popped in with a kazoo and some of those shrill party favors. When you blow them, they leap out like snakes out of a cage and then curl back demurely, hibernating until the next command performance. Jodi, the gorgeous nurse whose cornflower blue eyes had snared Kirk from the get-go, placed a clown's nose on Maude's face and one on her son as well. Someone took a polaroid shot, and everyone cheered. Maude ate it up and left that day drunk and happy. I felt happy too. She had touched me with her bodacious humor and toughness, nuzzling easily into my heart and memory.

Chemo was like that. In the midst of much horror and fear, where tender souls barely hung on to the sides of their lazy-boys, were moments of pure delight amid people of character and strength. Joking was part of survival, and we all engaged in it together, staff and patients alike. We were protective of one another as well, like so much Chihuly glass waiting for an earthquake to shatter us into pieces. There was tenderness in the way Dale rubbed my feet that mended the worst breaks. Others watched and began to imitate her moves. When she couldn't come, Kirk took off from work, and he too cradled my numb toes in his lap and massaged them awake. It was as intimate a time as any we've ever had, outside of sex. I imagine to an outsider we probably looked pathetic. Not hardly. We were learning what it meant to hang together during tough times, and I was frankly amazed by our newfound ability to do so. We, the proud independents, had learned to lean. Some folks sat through the long hours of chemo alone. My heart ached for them, and I felt fortunate indeed.

While I was sick, I learned to love me slow. Which was no small feat. I, who would rather skip than walk, became a plodder, a dreamer, a still life watercolor. Frank had warned me that chemo would make me tired, but the tumor had already dragged me down, so I figured I was used to it. Once I realized that cancer, not menopause, was wiping me out, I stopped fighting the fatigue and let myself be. The dance that was my life shifted from a high-speed twist to one of those slow dances we used to do in college - bodies draped around each other and feet shuffling softly. I went from being the show-off in the center of the dance floor to a contented voyeur, taking pleasure from watching the actions of others. I was as purposeful as ever, but my attention was focused on healing, and that required me to get quiet for perhaps the first time in my life.

My mornings began with a methodical foot-slapping walk out to my altar to greet the day. Taylor had created this ring of stones and glass - an unanticipated Christmas gift - for me right after my diagnosis. Located on a bluff over Puget Sound, this place became as sacred as any holy site I know. I went there to connect with the Earth, to be wholly in my body, and to simply be. I go there still as it gives me the grounding I need from which to live my life. When I greet the four directions, I participate in an age old ritual which I do not fully understand that grounds me to place and connects me with others. I light my candle, acknowledge my guides, and invite earth, fire, water, wind, spirit and mystery into the center of my circle. I feel fresh and new each day, and painfully aware of my vulnerability. As the weather unfolds, so too my prognosis bends and turns. And yet I am able to remain still, with my fears momentarily at rest, as I gaze out upon the water and revel in the dissonant cawing of seagulls. I come to breathe birdsong and register the seasons' migrations while standing tall and opening my heart to all Earth's blessings. During my illness I made my pilgrimage daily through the wettest winter in Washington state history - 92 rainy days, nonstop. Bundling up like an old crone, I carried my candle and sage with me. And no matter the weather, I lifted my face to the sky and rejoiced in the miracle of a new day. I never felt more alive than I did then and never in less need of complaint. While the living railed on about the weather, those of us hanging on the edge celebrated another day of rain.

Most days, once Kirk left for work and Logan headed off to school, I lay on the living room sofa and meditated to the tune of Bernie Siegel's somnolent voice. Together we traveled to my special place, a deserted beach somewhere in the South Seas, where I reconnoitered with my imaginary spirit guides and cavorted in the warm blue-green water. Following his lead, I allowed myself to relax deeply and to journey through a land of peril and mastery. I would frolic through a field of daisies, feel my way through a dark dank tunnel - moving always toward the light - and eventually emerge triumphantly on the other side. Awaiting me, wreathed in smiles, and dressed in their party best, were all my friends, family, allies, and guides - animal and human alike - raising their glasses, filled with a non-alcoholic bubbly, to toast my success. Even my fantasies were politically correct. Coming to, grinning sheepishly, pleased with myself, I stretched, rewound the tape, and planted a kiss on my own sweet head.

In April, I got a reprieve. My white blood cell counts were holding strong, so Frank gave me permission to travel. Logan, Kirk, and I made our annual spring break pilgrimage to Florida, where we would spend a week of R&R away from sickness and the color gray. I have had a love affair with the sun my entire life. It turns my skin a deep olive tan. It makes me feel sexy and warm, and it melts away the tensions accrued during the months of hunkering down. This year was no different except for the purple baseball cap affixed to my bald head, and the slathering of #30 sunscreen all over my skinny self. "Chemo patients burn to a crisp when exposed to sunlight," my ever-vigilant nurse Petra had assured me. So I was being uncharacteristically well behaved, holding court under the petals of my palm tree-shaped beach umbrella. I sighed deeply as I wiggled my numb old toes into the warm white sand. Feeling almost buff in comparison to the retired jet setters who frequented Naples beaches, I took daily strolls, waded in the aquamarine water, and marveled at the stroke victims, cardiac cripples, and other veterans of bodily wars, who like me had come to the sun to be healed. I felt strong away from home. Besides, I knew the end of chemo was in sight, and that someday soon I would begin to reclaim the gleeful woman in the picture over my bed.

I loved plodding down the beach. The tropical breeze blowing across my head enlivened my spirit. I wanted to keep walking, forget about chemo and then radiation down the road. Instead, we came home, and I had to face my last two infusions. Until now, chemo had a rhythm and I was in step. But this was something altogether different: back-to-back hits of cytoxin, designed specifically to destroy my resistance to any little virus or bacterial infection that happened into the neighborhood. And for what? In order to produce stem cells, baby blood cells that regenerate when their numbers are low - the ones that are collected and stored for transfusions. At this point all signs of the tumor were long gone. Dale and I had vanished it into thin air, and I'm sure chemo had done its part as well. I was close to cured. So why all this talk of blood transfusions? Frank is nothing if not thorough, and he was leaving no stone, or stem cell, unturned. He wanted my blood on ice, just in case… Well, I could do this I thought, still glowing from my days on the beach. There were times when I thought I could handle anything. Until he began to explain the process…

I never once left my body, not even that day when Frank made me question him for the first and only time. Kirk and I always went to appointments together, just in case an unexpected decision had to be made. Once Frank found a lump in my neck, and we were rushed off to the hospital to have it analyzed. A normal nodule in the thyroid as it turned out, but for an hour I considered how I would survive a new tumor sighting. Without Kirk's steady presence, I might have caved. For some reason on the day Frank explained stem cell collection, I was there alone. I listened, I took notes, and I hated him a little bit, this man who was pulling out all the stops to save my life, who was thinking about my long-term survival should lymphoma reappear and require a last-resort transfusion. I was tempted to leave, to call it quits, but my body wouldn't let me. "We're seeing this through," she reminded me, as I asked Frank if this procedure was really necessary. He gave me an apologetic yet determined smile, and said, "You're damn right it is."

I sniffled some, but only after he left the room, and then I went to find Petra. "So, here's the drill," she explained in that take-no prisoners tone I had come to know and trust. "Stay home. Don't touch anyone, especially don't touch the dog. And insist that anyone who enters the house washes their hands." I got that germs were a big deal, and eventually it sunk in that people died from this procedure. Not often, but enough that she felt the need to scare me into hibernation. I asked her if she thought I really needed to go through with it, and she looked at me like I was foolish. "Okay so quit your whining," I thought, "Get a grip, and deal with this thing." I did. And it was okay. Actually it was awful, but I made it okay. The cytoxin wiped me out, so that mostly I lay on the sofa bed in the den, pillows piled high, in a state of near or total oblivion. The movies I watched became a backdrop for my own hallucinations, and except for an occasional trip to the bathroom, I pretty much stayed put. It was the quietest week of my life, also the slowest. I wondered dreamily if I had attained some Zen state; I had certainly achieved mindlessness. My only respite from house arrest was a daily trip to the infusion center for injections of neupogen, a designer drug to encourage stem cell fertility. Kirk and I managed to take pleasure in our new morning ritual. Talk about adapting. Some couples meet for tea; we got shots. Afterwards, he would deposit me at home, tuck me in, and head off to the office to see his own patients.

I made it through with flying colors, but that's a story for another time. Suffice it to say that millions of baby Janie stem cells are chilling in our local blood bank, where they will hopefully never see the light of day. I bounced back pretty quickly from time in quarantine, and soon enough it was my turn to graduate.

As I watched the needle penetrate my vein for the last time, I was awash with emotion. On the one hand feeling absolutely celebratory and on the other, reluctant to leave the sanctity of this place. The infusion center had been my treatment home for five months, and I was ambivalent about saying good-bye.

I never once left my body, choosing to allow a sense of loss to wash over me like crows wings. I had given plenty of thought to this day, having witnessed a number of chemo graduations. This was an important milestone, and there would be no toilet paper streamers or clown noses for me. I had been off the cocktail for a month and had been coming in for weekly injections of retuxan. The great thing about this drug is that it has no (known) side effects, and rather than attacking the entire human organism - me - it directed its venom straight at the tumor. My hair was growing in - alfalfa sprouts on bare earth - my energy was making a come-back, the tumor was gone, and my head and heart were clear. The entire cast was there that day - Petra, Lisa, Jodi, Mary, and Dan. They said it was my day, I could do anything I wanted. Kirk was with me and warned them, too late, not to egg me on. I laughed a lot that day, in part to cover my own fear of what next. I had brought gifts, and like Santa Claus in summer time, I proceeded to hand them out. Everyone liked Dan's bubble set the best, and we giggled like school children as he began showering us with those transparent shimmering bubbles of our youth. I gave Jodi two small candles to honor her up-coming wedding. Hidden within her gorgeous exterior, she has such a sweet soul. When she strides into a room, heads turn, and hearts murmur in unison. And she doesn't even know it. Lisa got a soft quilted heart because she is all that. Loyal to her chemo patients beyond measure, she is intolerant of whiners, which would be anyone not afflicted with cancer who dares mention an ache or pain. And for Petra, my sentry, a strong upright candle in a metal holder. Mary, part time chemo nurse extraordinaire, a.k.a. mother of five, a.k.a. Frank's wife, would get her gift later with him. Hugs followed, and I smiled appreciatively as Jodi made a point of including Kirk in our circle of hard-won friendship. We said our good-byes, gooey eyed and tender, and as we walked out the door, I promised to return, as a visitor.

Radiation turned out to be more difficult than I had anticipated, and in some ways I blame the chemo crew. They had lifted my expectations, and after five months in their care, I was unprepared for the false cheerfulness that was to follow. There is an intimacy about chemo that is hard to tell. From the moment I walked in for my first hit - with all my trembling fear - I felt it. Dan looked me in the eye. Lisa touched me. Jodi smiled gently. And Mary told me I was brave. No false promises, no guarantees of success. Diligent effort by all. And Petra, who I first thought was the resident Nurse Ratchett, turned out to be the glue that held the place together. Still and all I wouldn't wish chemo on anyone. I would have preferred to have met these remarkable folks someplace - anyplace - else. But since I chose to go through it, I'm glad I stayed for the final act. The curtain call was something to behold.

THE STEM CELL QUEEN

To: My Friends
Subject: Quarantine
Date: April 27, 1999

Dear Friends,

There is a strong sense of peace and rhythm to this time of "quarantine." I feel content to be home resting reading listening to tapes checking e-mail eating sitting being ... and so forth. Except for Dale who comes to do energy work, I am not seeking visitors. Even my dinner angels are greeted with a napping note on the door. What a new side of me to explore!

Preparing for stem cell harvesting is going well, and driving to the clinic each morning has become its own gift of time and ritual. Kirk and I go for an 8:30 am appointment, to avoid a germy crowded waiting room, and it provides a space for us to be together and reflect on our experience with cancer. The chemo staff is incredible. Each person has opened her heart to me and taught me something new about life and love. My primary nurse, Petra, is a strong German woman who really frightened me last week when preparing me for the stem cell harvest. So, I wanted to discount her, to stereotype her, and to separate myself from her energy. And then I realized that her fear tactics came from a loving place and a deep desire that I pay attention and stay well. Since opening to her, I've learned that she has a pond in her backyard which she tends daily and covers nightly to protect her fish from marauding raccoons, that she loves rocks and when she and her husband backpack, he carries huge special ones home for her, because "he loves me very much", that she has been meditating for 30 years, and that on Sunday she attended a Buddhist healing ceremony at the Unitarian Church. Dale visualizes Petra as a sentry guarding my body and only allowing healthy cells to enter. It's a perfect image....

This morning as we were leaving, other nurses greeted me warmly, laughing with us as we joked about our morning shot-date and wishing us well as they sent us on our way. It's hard to describe how a sterile and cold chemo (infusion) ward can be a sacred space, and yet it is.

Today I shared with Kirk how fortunate I feel, that if I had to get cancer, I got it now. Fifty is a time of reflecting, of centering around relationships, of reaching deep down to the core of life. I've been preparing for this time always. It doesn't mean I think I got cancer for a reason; it means I'm open to transforming the experience because of who I am now. My twenty-year-old self, thirty-year- old self, or forty-year-old self would have made a mess of it, through no fault of her own. Also, I've gone from thinking 50 sounded old, to knowing how young it truly is. So I celebrate having just turned 51 in a way I'm quite sure I've never celebrated before.

Enough said for now. Bless you, my friends. Be patient with my absence. I will re-emerge soon, strong and healthy, and obnoxiously full of myself :)

Love and light,
Janie

PS: This morning I envisioned stem cell collection as a gathering of daisies that I would bestow at the clinic with my name on them.

The Stem Cell Queen, part 2

Subject: Out of jail
Date: May 5, 1999 11:19 AM

Dear Friends

It has been quite a week and one that I am grateful to say has ended well. I don't think our family had any idea how stressful this stem cell generation and collection process was going to be until it was over. Having to stay soooo clean, not to be able to hug anyone, not even Wendal, to worry about something as insignificant as the possibility of a pimple getting infected, not to mention having no energy and for the first time ever, very little interest in food, and on top of it all being more tired than ever before...made it a challenging time. I think it was like most crises in that we did fine and stayed positive as long as we needed to, and then once it was over, went through a bit of post-traumatic stress, and are now back on the path of recovery.

So, here's what happened. Wednesday my white blood count was down to .2 (10 being good and higher being better). Thursday, it was up to .4 and looked like I might be ready for harvesting on Saturday. Thursday afternoon I started having really "good" bone pain in my hips (an indicator of stem cell rejuvenation). All that action takes place in the marrow, for some reason making me think of angels dancing on a pin. These stem cells are my ace in the hole, making them angels of sorts, I suppose. Friday morning I felt LOUSY, and when we went to the clinic, we found, to the wonderment and amazement of all, that my count had gone up to 8 - a record high. So, Petra got on the phone to St. Joe's and convinced the staff that they had to harvest my cells *now*, not Saturday. And so they did, and then sent us home to await the results, with the assurance that I'd likely have to come back at least one more day in order to obtain enough cells. I went to bed, dragged out and with the beginnings of a really bad headache, only to be awakened mid-afternoon by Petra with striking news. The minimum number required for a satisfactory collection was "5" (representing millions), and the number I produced was "116." I've apparently broken all local (and according to Frank, national) records. So, I've got some awesome cells frozen away in my behalf, and now I can proceed with treatment. It also means I've got great bone marrow in there working for my long-term well-being. Dale says that the marrow is the juicy part, where our energy is stored - our essence - as well as the birth place of our blood cells. For a moment I tingled and felt my bone marrow dancing, but then I crashed and didn't start feeling human again until late yesterday.

This morning I woke up feeling refreshed and went for a 2 mile walk. Hopefully tomorrow I can get the port removed and reclaim my body as my own. Then the next stage begins ... I do believe the worst is over, and I'm OH SO GLAD.

My love to each of you and continued gratitude for your support.

Janie

THE CULT OF THE ZAPPED ONES

Chemo was such a sociable place, but radiation was something else entirely. At least for me. At chemo treatments, I felt, in a weird way, part of a new family. As if I'd been chosen and initiated and now could call myself a member of the cancer club. Not that it was a family I really wanted to join, but there I was in one of those lazy-boy chairs next to other bald headed people in their chairs, all of us hooked up to IV's, and receiving our various cocktails that, with all their poison, were meant to save our lives. I used to sit and wonder who of us would live and who would die, and sometimes even now, I wonder who made it... and who didn't. And will I end up being one of the ones who makes it, who gets to call herself survivor?

Anyway, I was going to talk about radiation. It's a lonely place, cold and sterile, and you have to go through it by yourself. Most of us drive ourselves for this brief, daily procedure, but it means that for the first time I'm on my own, without Kirk or Dale's steady presence to lean on. After you check-in, you sit in a waiting room with a bunch of strangers, all wearing standard issue gowns and robes. At least they're not paper. It's a small room reserved for those of us there to get our daily zap. That's what they call it, the lab techs, I guess to put us at ease or something. It made me feel creepy the first time someone said it, and then like everything else, I got used to it. Because radiation is a daily activity, you see the same patients in the waiting room everyday, just a handful of folks in various stages of cancer treatment trying to act cheerful.

As if it's the most normal thing to be sitting around in our bathrobes waiting to be zapped. Some people worked the jigsaw puzzles, lots of them I'm guessing from the fact that there was a new one almost everyday. Other folks liked to talk. Some just sat really still, waiting their turn. And me, I read, or tried to, mostly pretending that's what I was doing. Two people I remember best: Sonia, who was addicted to puzzles, in for breast cancer, and Mr. Anders, who talked a lot, and had some sort of abdominal cancer. Sonia knew everyone's name; she was outgoing and eager to greet. She used to get there early for appointments, as if this place provided some kind of shelter from the rest of her life. Mr. Anders, in his early eighties, refused to wear a robe, claiming it embarrassed him to take his pants off. He talked all the time about "the wife" who also had cancer and was in worse shape than him, also about his kids, and about growing up dirt poor in North Dakota. He got on my nerves, so mostly I ignored him, and read my book. It didn't seem to bother him particularly; he just kept on talking.

The radiation techs were a hard bunch to crack. They would act cheerful, but distant, their friendliness seeming studied, phony, and, therefore, frightening. I cried after the second day. I felt so alone in that place, and it was so different from chemo. There I could have family or friends with me, and the chemo nurses were real people who laughed, and made mistakes, and took their jobs totally seriously, all at the same time. I think they were called to do that work, and they did it out of love, for us the patients, and probably because they were truly pissed off at cancer. I felt strong in chemo, even though the treatment was much worse than what I was getting at radiation. At least I felt supported and visible. There were no needles or nausea with radiation, just a deep sense of isolation. The first few times I got zapped, I felt like a number, not quite invisible, but definitely not real. I had made it through five months of treatment by finding a way to be in relationship with everyone who worked on me: nurses, doctors, naturopath, everyone. And then I hit the wall: radiation.

After I cried, I pulled myself together and decided it was up to me to crack these people open. I'm not sure why, but it seemed really important at the time. I just started engaging the techs, making them hear me, see me, and even put lotion on my back after each treatment to decrease the likelihood of skin burns. I began to feel a little more real, to keep myself company while being zapped, because no one was in that cold, sterile room but me. It's too dangerous for normal people, so they leave the room and watch from afar. That's part of the isolation thing, being abandoned in such a barren place with my chest exposed and covered with purple markings - alone, except when the tech comes in to change the film or realign the equipment. Other than a soft whirring noise, there’s little indication that anything is happening. Just thousands of invisible rads invading my chest wall. And then it's over, just a few minutes really. I change back into my own clothes, retrieving my self-identity like it was someone’s lost sock, wave good-bye to the waiting room, and head out into the daylight where I can breathe. Counting the days, twenty altogether. It seemed like forever, but nothing compared to what both Sonia and Mr. Anders had to endure.

Days pass and the routine becomes familiar, almost ordinary. We greet each other like old friends, settling in for a visit. I now wear my own bathrobe, holding onto my identity for dear life. I joke with the techs about my purple tattoos, telling them my son says I look like I've joined a cult. The cult of the zapped ones, I think. I tell them I have two sons, and give them their names. I make them see and hear and touch me. I want them to acknowledge that I'm a living breathing person and not just a number. I've gotten to know one of the nurses, Sandy, who’s warm and friendly and hates the coldness of some of the techs. It's the nature of the job I think, the alienation of the place, the separation of the patient behind the glass partition. I'm glad *she* understands how I feel; it makes me less crazy somehow.

Somewhere along the way, in the waiting room, I put my book down. I listen to Mr. Anders talk about his wife and family and the hard times in North Dakota. I realize I can read anytime and that this man needs to talk and deserves an audience. I look forward to seeing Sonia and discussing her latest puzzle. I develop a favorite tech, the one who talks to me in a normal voice and tells me about her kids and life outside the zapping room. My time is running short, and I know I'm going to make it. And finally it's almost done, just one last day, one last zap, and I'm going to be set free, released, no longer identified as a cancer patient, except for the bald head.

The last day I come bearing gifts: a cozy hat for Sonia, who still has chemo to look forward to, flowering plants for my two regular techs, a book on relationships for Sandy, and a small plant for Mr. Anders. I tell him it's for his wife. Sonia brings me a card she made herself on the computer. She writes, "it means a lot that you took an interest in others at a time when you have your own struggles to deal with." I feel embarrassed and a little guilty but also good inside. I take my last treatment, remembering to breathe, focus, center, and ground. I hug the techs, and Sandy gives an impromptu speech in front of the waiting room about how much my energy and positive attitude have meant to everyone. Mr. Anders seems shocked by the whole thing. I'm crying, so is Sandy, and then I just walk out the door, and into the sunlight, and I am no longer invisible, and neither is anyone else.

PARTY TIME - CELEBRATING FRIENDSHIP

I had finally completed treatment and wanted to count our blessings - out loud and in public. Kirk, the medicine man, was reluctant, fearful, I think, of calling attention in our direction. After all, Frank had admonished us to save the champagne for the two- year mark. When had Kirk become superstitious I wondered. He needn't worry; I was not so foolish as to tempt the fates with a victory dance this soon. No, what I wanted was to bring together the folks who had come to our rescue in countless ways - to say thank-you in person. I had fantasized about this gathering for months, imagining a large circle of friends and strangers brought into community by our need and their generosity. When I put it that way, Kirk agreed. We would send out invitations clearly marked *In Celebration of Friendship,* so no one would think we were pushing our luck. We had hopes for a sunny day.

August in the Northwest can mean cool mornings, sunny afternoons, and long pink evenings. Some days begin shrouded in fog, and instead of Puget Sound and Vashon Island, a sea of white flows mysteriously past our bedroom window. On a good day, the sun begins to burn through around noon, and landmasses reappear as if dropped into a jigsaw puzzle from above. People began arriving for our party just as the Olympic Mountains emerged from the last wisps of fog. The weather fit my mood: this was my own coming-out party of sorts, and I was torn between a sudden shyness and the desire to shine. I wanted people to see me as healthy and strong, normal even. I was pushing too fast too soon, but I felt I owed it to them to be well. After all, they had played an integral part in getting me here.

* * *

Immediately after my last radiation zap, Logan, Kirk, and I had flown to California to spend some time with Taylor. He was working on an organic farm in Bolinas, near the coast, living in an old

Airstream trailer, and he wanted to show off his burgeoning crop of salad greens and miscellaneous squashes. I had my own agenda: to take refuge in the summer sun and the sweet vibrations of my family, to get my strength back, and to reassure Taylor that I was indeed fine. We took leisurely hikes along the coast, picnicked on the beach, and picked vegetables for both the Saturday market and our own dinner, which we grilled over a smoldering fire. Watching Taylor strip down and race into the surf, long hair flowing behind him and exuding the freedom of youth, gave me just the image I needed to keep moving forward. I felt his strength and exuberance flow through me like a current, and I began to pick up my pace. By the time we came back home, I felt reinvigorated, and while nowhere near my old-self, I was beginning to recognize the possibilities.

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By the time the sun made an appearance on this day of celebration, most everyone had arrived, well over the sixty or so we had anticipated. I invited them out to the back patio which overlooked the water and was sheltered somewhat by our quirky Madrona tree. She had endured her own share of surgeries and tough times, and I took comfort from her presence. The new growth on her lower branches belied all the dire predictions of her impending demise. She too is a survivor, one who has thrived on beating the odds.

As folks gathered, I began to shake a little inside, wondering if I would find the words, the right balance of levity and depth, if I could convey what it meant to me to have been held in all these loving arms. I called upon that picture of Taylor whooping it up in the roaring waves, and I felt my energy grow.

“Gratitude is the heart's memory,” I began, not remembering who to credit for the quote.

Kirk was worried about having this party, testing the fates and all. At the same time, we didn’t want to wait the requisite two years before saying thank-

you. Which is why we invited you: simply to share our gratitude. You gave us a sense of connection when we could have felt alone and isolated. You made us laugh, you shared our fears, and our hopes. You put up with all my peculiar demands. You looked out for Kirk and Logan. You drove me to appointments, bought me underwear, sent me ginger tea and paperback novels. What a creative bunch you are.

I spoke at length - I like to think eloquently - about the many blessings bestowed. I named the giver and I named the gift, and I believe that as my words floated out over the Sound, we were all healed some. This small community brought together by illness had worked some powerful magic, and it was up to me to acknowledge and honor what had transpired. I like to imagine that there are healing communities forming all over the Earth in response to cancer and other deadly diseases, but I know too often it isn't so. I watched enough chemo patients go it alone to realize just how fortunate I was. And I hoped that by calling attention to the goodness of these folks, I would set in motion a pattern that could be applied the next time - for someone else.

To those of you who prepared and brought meals. Your culinary talents were matched only by your flexibility as you not only provided generously but were also willing to accept significant restrictions - low fat, sugar-free, vegetarian food served on non-disposable dishes - with such a positive attitude. My goodness, what you put up with!

There was a ripple of appreciative laughter. My rigid adherence to correctness, as defined by me, was widely known and tolerated. I was looking to make converts of any remaining skeptics and was not above using my cancer as a major heal-yourself heal-the Earth born-again opportunity.

Three days a week for six months you fed us stuffed shells, lentil soup, stir-fried vegetables with tofu and an occasional fish treat for Kirk. Not just meals but also so many personal touches: fresh flowers, notes of encouragement, candles. Desserts for Kirk and Logan, so they wouldn't fade away. Whenever I had *appointments with Frank, he would ask, with such sweet concern in his voice, if I was able to eat much. I just laughed. I've never eaten so well in my life.*

To Debbie, I know you wanted me back in aerobics as soon as possible. What else could have made you take on the task of organizing this most amazing meal-on-wheels? Plus, you kept my spirits up by telling me how great I looked after my butt had quite simply disappeared along with every ounce of body fat. Only you would find beauty in such scrawniness.

To my chemo nurses Petra, Mary, Lisa, and Jodi, you had me laughing out loud right there in the infusion center. And from day one, you saw Janie and not a lymphoma patient, you welcomed my family and friends into the treatment room, and you taught me so much about love and courage in an absolutely terrifying situation.

To Dan the chemo man, you checked my weight so fastidiously, fretting over any lost pounds, and you made me feel like a princess as you led me to my lazy-boy recliner. And to Kevin my pharmacist, you worked so diligently and successfully to fix my nausea, always a smile on your face as you rolled along on your funny stool from one patient to the next.

To my women's group, Dale Golden, Heather Halabisky, Chris Parent, Merrilee Runyan, and Karol Swenson, you cried and worried and laughed with me, listened to my fears, created rituals for healing, and celebrated each small victory, and you didn't always make me the center of attention but kept our group going in a normal sort of way. You supported Dale while she cared for me. You faced my illness head on with hearts open, which helped me do so as well.

To the friends who dropped by for visits, sent cards, and flowers, and other gifts in the mail, or left them on our doorstep, you brought in the outside world and reminded me that I was not home alone.

To my e-mail buddies, you surprised, delighted, and touched me with words of encouragement on a daily basis: poems, stories, personal sharing. Every day I booted up with a sense of expectation. I was never disappointed. There you were making me feel connected and encouraging me to write.

To each of you our gratitude beyond measure.

I paused for breath, and because the next part would be the most difficult for me to get through, without tears.

And of course, above all, to my family, who accepted, respected, and supported my way of approaching cancer: to Kirk, you moved through skepticism to full endorsement of Paul's nutrients, Dale's healing sessions, and my own insistence on an alcohol-coffee-and sugar-free diet. In short, no fun! You missed more work than you could have imagined, went to more appointments, ran interference with the medical world when necessary, tried awfully hard to develop a Zen attitude in the kitchen, and at my request let your hair grow long, even though it often drove you crazy. One hairless person in the family was enough, and I needed you to experience a bit of my own strangeness. You endured it all with amazing grace.

To Logan, you kept me grounded. You lauded my bald head and never seemed embarrassed or irritated by me. You organized and continue to organize my millions of herbs and vitamins, you brought home your world of school, theatre, and track and were always available to share your life and thereby give me a sense of normalcy. And, best of all, you never seemed to doubt that once this treatment hell was over, I would be just fine. You made a believer out of me.

To Taylor (down there in California) your decision to forgo your trip to Cuba and stay home to take care of me during that first, really scary month was a literal lifesaver. You went to MD, ND, OD appointments, spent hours on the sofa with me, crying, laughing, and reading The Fifth Sacred Thing to me. You shopped and cooked incredible organic meals, and basically did everything in your power to make sure I would get well. You are the one who totally shares my philosophy of healing and being in this life. I loved that before heading back to college, you gave your dad a lecture on the importance of feeding me only organic food. I know you worried that he would sneak in some pesticide-drenched food now and then for convenience sake. And in truth, Taylor, you were a damn tough act to follow. You are my teacher in so many ways.

And to Dale, whom we've adopted as our own: sister, healer, friend. You were with us every step of the way, paying attention to my family's fears as well as to *my own, holding such strong conviction that I would recover. Without you, this cancer would have been a nightmare, instead of the journey that brought us here today.*

By elaborating in such detail, I hoped my friends would see how together they completed the puzzle. I figured by now folks would be getting restless, but when I looked up from my notes, I saw mesmerized faces gazing back at me in silence. So I dared to continue a little longer…

Okay, so now I have just a few little gifts to hand out - inspired by experience together.

Petra, I spent a long time looking for this rock to add to your collection. It had to be strong because that's how you've been for me, a solid rock to lean against during the toughest of times. Also, unyielding.

For Paul, my favorite green tea because you taught me to drink it, and because you inspired such confidence in our ability together to heal this tumor, and because through your left-brain, research-minded approach, you won Kirk over almost instantly.

To Debbie, a gift certificate to organize your data base of dedicated aerobics groupies, because you so beautifully organized others on my behalf.

For Frank, a bottle of red wine because you said it was alright for me to drink it on occasion. That was before I met Paul and he said "no way". You're meant to share it with Mary and to toast each other's commitment to this very hard work. Also a book about complementary medicine because you are the most open-minded and open-hearted doc I've ever met.

Cheri, a heart stone because you collect them and because you lovingly held me each week during massage, never shrinking from my diseased body, always offering your encouragement, through touch.

For Terry, a smudge stick in honor of the meditation garden you created for me along with this entire magical landscape, and because we share a love of ritual and have chosen to honor the Earth.

Dale, a candle because you have provided so much light at the darkest moment, you have opened a window into a healing world I never knew existed, and you have helped me access my own healing powers.

Kirk, a hair tie for obvious reasons, and because you steadfastly held me in your arms and heart.

Logan, a bumper sticker to acknowledge our hours together behind the wheel as you learned to drive and gain your new found freedom of the road. It says, "Plan to Improvise" and I believe that describes the careful yet joyful way you are traveling through life.

I was about ready to wrap up. So I said I had two closing quotes to read and then I would release everyone to enjoy a meal none of them had prepared.

Marc Janes, my e-mail pal extraordinaire sent me this Robert Fulghum quote right after I was diagnosed. I stuck it on the fridge and it's still there:

> *I don't know how many of you have ever looked up a waterspout, but it's very dark and very dangerous-looking up there; scary, but there's light showing. And the song says disaster occurred and washed the spider out, and down came the rain. The song does not say... "and the spider said to hell with THAT, and did something else." Then, out came the sun --- circumstances changed, and the spider went up the spout again. This is the fight song of the human race.*

and a card that Dale sent me early on:

> **I believe in friends**
> and in the healing that comes
> from laughter, and tears,
> and stories shared.

I believe in wisdom
that can be found in having fun,
and in truths that are born
out of trust and honesty.

I believe in the strength
of one hand holding another
through the dark nights of the soul,
and in the miracles
of hugs and smiles
and perfectly-timed
words of reassurance.

I believe in the down-to-earth,
here-and-now kind of heaven
that reveals itself
every time we see ourselves
through the kind and caring eyes
of those who know us so well
and love us just the way we are.

In this often-far-from-fairy-tale world,
we live in, **I believe in wonderful friends**
that somehow make it all worthwhile.

I guess that pretty much says it all. You are quite simply an amazing bunch of folks. Come back in two years and we'll break out the champagne. Meanwhile let's eat.

And then I was done. I smiled widely knowing I had said it the best I could. People started clapping furiously, and I felt their applause like a strong heartbeat that would stay with me for a long time to come. Logan was wiping tears from his eyes as he got up from the porch step where he had been sitting nearby. Folks began to mingle with one another and to tell each other their stories - to make their own connections. I felt such peace and a sense of completion. I had a long way to go, but I didn't know it yet. I just knew that in that moment, I was standing on sacred ground.

LIVING WITH FEAR

"For years and years I struggled
just to love my life. And then

the butterfly
rose, weightless, in the wind.
'Don't love your life
too much,' it said,

and vanished
into the world."

Mary Oliver, "*One or Two Things*",
New and Selected Poems

ON THE MEANING OF HAIR

"Great head, Mom!" That's what Logan, then fifteen, had said when I came home with my newly shaved head. A pre-emptive strike of sorts. That was in January when I had just started chemo, and my hair was falling out in clumps like small animal pelts, and it was getting me down. So the day after my second dose, I called the guy who cuts my hair and asked if he would shave my head. He fit me in that afternoon. It took a long time, which was okay because it helped me get used to it. Turns out I was the first woman he had shaved and he was being careful. It felt like I was taking my life back in a way. I couldn't prevent cancer or the realities of treatment, but I sure as hell could decide what to do about my hair. We even laughed some while he was doing it, and in the end he wouldn't charge me. Now you have to know him to appreciate the generosity of the moment, because he never does anything for free. At least he didn't use to, because making money was the thing, the only thing. So, of course, I got all teary and gave him a hug, and then drove my bald self home.

Now in the great scheme of things, having a shaved head is no big deal, especially compared to having a life-threatening illness. Which I did. But I have to say it was strange and took some getting used to. Which never really happened, come to think of it. Logan adjusted right away, or at least that's how he seemed. And my friends all said how great I looked. And Kirk was the best, giving me kisses and lots of reassurance, when he wasn't busy trying not to cry because he was so scared about what was really going on. My baldness became quite the focal point. I've read about other people with cancer, and it was the same for them. Even nowadays, it's hard for some people to talk about cancer, to ask the questions they really want to ask, like “Are you going to die?” for instance. So they ask about your hair. Because it's a safe thing to talk about and a safe way for people to show they care. The problem for a woman is that being bald makes it pretty obvious that you're sick. Unless you live in California or maybe New York. Where I live, no healthy woman my age has a bald head on purpose. It just hasn't caught on. So that means when you go out in public, people stare, and usually they give you what I call the sympathy look. They kind of hang their head and look sad and act sorry. And I think they really are, but even so, it gets tiresome. Sometimes I wanted to be able to just go to the grocery store and not have anyone notice me, because when they did, it reminded me all over again that I was sick, that I had cancer, that I was on chemo, and that I was really tired. Not that I ever forgot those things for very long anyway, but I didn't need any help remembering.

It reminded me of being pregnant when strangers thought nothing of coming up and patting my belly. That used to really piss me off. Now I see how basically harmless it was, but still I think people should have to ask permission. A private thing all of a sudden becomes a public event, and sometimes you just wish people would mind their own business. At least when I was pregnant, people assumed I was happy about it, which I was, so it was a celebratory kind of interference. A bald head on the other hand mostly inspires fear, and as I said, sympathy. I could have worn a wig I suppose, but that's just not me. And besides, it’s not like I was ashamed, or felt like a freak, or wanted to be in camouflage. I did wear hats some, but that was because I was freezing all the time. I never appreciated how much my hair was keeping me warm until I didn't have it anymore. So, I even wore a hat to bed most nights. It was Kirk's dark blue running cap, and he said it was like sleeping with a cat burglar. I knew he was kidding, so we laughed about it. We laughed whenever we could.

As soon as the weather got warm, which was about six months after diagnosis, I ditched the hats. Friends remarked that I looked like an Olympic swimmer, GI Jane, even Buddha. I didn't care; I was so glad to feel warm and expose my head to the sunlight. Also about that time, I finished treatment and my hair started growing back, slowly, very slowly, a bit like the promise of spring, and I felt alive. Like watching the earliest buds come out on the trees, and it's hard to believe that soon the whole tree will be covered, but having faith that it will happen and the world will turn green. Sure enough it does. Once I felt reasonably sure I was going to be okay, and I got some sun on my face, and I stopped feeling tired all the time, I wore that bald head with pride. I had survived something really awful, and I was going to make it. I wanted the world to know it. So I probably strutted a little.

Now it's September and my hair is coming in, curly. I mean really curly, so guess what's become the new topic of conversation? Mostly, I don't mind, because I know people are glad for me and relieved for themselves, but sometimes I just wish they'd talk about something else. Logan has figured it out; he's moved on. His Mom has hair, and she is going be fine, and he doesn't want to talk about it, now or ever, I imagine. He wants a normal life back, he wants his biggest worry to be homework, the cross country team, and whether or not he's going to get the lead in the school play. He doesn't want to think about cancer. He is done.

Me too.

FIRST ANNIVERSARY REFLECTIONS

Journal Entry: December 1, 1999

The holidays are upon us, and I just want to run away. It's not that I mind the rain, or the gray, or the fact that it gets dark so early. No, for me it is about anniversaries. This is my first one, the anniversary of getting cancer. Of feeling lousy and not knowing why, of wandering from nurse practitioner to physical therapist, naturopath, osteopath, and finally cardiologist. Nothing wrong with my strong heart, nothing that couldn't be cured by the absence of one very large tumor pressing on my chest wall. Then moving fast, and the unreality of my first CAT scan: lying on table, being instructed by a mechanical male voice to take in a breath and hold, breathe, do it again, and I'm doing it, hoping that if I do it right and remain calm, it will turn out fine. Be a good girl, say your prayers, do unto others – none of it worked. "Yes indeed, a very big tumor, growing fast," said Dr. Mark, the radiologist, reassuringly. "The fast growing ones are the easiest to kill," he said kindly. The first positive words I had heard since my chest x-ray three hours earlier. And I grabbed those words and held on tight, and I never let go and I began to live again.

Words matter, and so I chose mine carefully. Instead of killing my tumor, I set out to transform it, turning darkness into light, killer cells into rich compost. The healing began with the radiologist's optimism, and it continued through seven months of chemo, radiation, meditation, energy work, and vitamin therapy. Not to mention the unfailing kindness of friends, my own brand of determination and will to live, and above all the constancy and love of my family.

And so here I am feeling healthy and strong, with only a few residual effects of treatment. My feet still get numb most nights, and my lungs are not as efficient as they used to be. My hair is so uncharacteristically curly as it grows back that friends feel compelled to exclaim over it frequently. Kirk pets me and hovers in a way that reminds me of my own persistent fears, and I have to stop myself from pushing him away (my problem, not his). I resent the reminders that come unbidden in the form of pats on the head and sweet sighs by those who love me. I think about cancer often enough as it is, like every time I take a really deep breath or happen to catch a glimpse of myself in a mirror. It is there most of the time, in the shadows, waiting for me around the corner, threatening to overturn my flimsy boat, to upset my apple cart, to send me spiraling back down into darkness.

And that is why I want to run away, preferably to someplace foreign and warm. I don't want to put Taylor and Logan through Christmas, with all its memories of Christmas past. I don't want to stand around sipping red wine, which I now allow myself sparingly, with friends chatting about my curly hair, or even to engage in deep conversations about race, religion, or the environment. It is not that I am in denial, no way. I wish I were. Wish we all could be. Wish I could wish it away, especially for Kirk and the boys, but also for me. Even while I know there have been some incredible gifts that came my way on cancer's back. I am grateful most every waking moment, and I never take life for granted, and I mostly live consciously, and I even do unto others a fair amount of the time. And I don't wish the holidays were over, because that would mean more time spent. Come to think of it, there is very little I wish for. Whatever it is, I have yet to figure it out. Maybe it is not to run away after all; maybe it's just to be here fully alive as I am for as long as possible not worrying too much about how long I get, just loving the time I have.

To: My Friends
Subject: Anniversary Reflections
Date: December 9, 1999

Dear Friends,

When I first began writing the above, I was intending it to be a journal entry, not for public consumption. I had planned to mail out something positive and totally upbeat. In rereading it, however, I have decided it makes more sense to be real and share it all. As I have said often, writing to others has been a significant part of my journey; it has made me feel connected rather than isolated, and it has given me the perhaps misguided hope that someone someplace else might benefit in some small way from my experiences.

As for the upcoming anniversary, December 23, my good and wise Mississippi friend Mary Brooks, asked me “Do you have a plan yet? Will you ask for support? Will I be dancing in support of you? Or just saying your name out loud, slowly and with strange rhythms? You will let me know.” And then I knew that, yes, I wanted everyone’s support, in whatever way you might give it, whether dancing, praying, meditating, sending positive vibes, planting a tree, having a tofu Christmas, and on and on, in all the creative ways that you know how to be present. Ultimately I ask that you hold me in your hearts, and I will do the rest: a walk in the woods with my three men, time to reflect on where we have been, and to celebrate where we are now, and then with as much grace as possible, to simply move forward. And then good conversation with friends, time to drink red wine, laugh, comment on my curly hair, and have deep philosophical discussions about race, religion, and the environment, and to truly revel in the mystery of it all.

So cheers, happy solstice, and as always, a very hearty thank you.

All my love,

Janie

HOLIDAY LETTER

Let the Mystery Be

This year, imbued with a deep connection to life, we adorned our home with a living Christmas tree, a six-foot tall noble fir with a 150-pound root ball. What was intended to be a move toward simplicity became the season's greatest challenge. However, once standing and decorated in the corner of our living room, our tree was indeed a marvel to behold, and certainly worth the effort.

December 23, a year ago, I was diagnosed with lymphoma. It was a horrendous day that grew into seven months of life slowed down, and dedicated to healing and recovery. Now, one year later I am better than fine, and having survived something terribly difficult, I am extremely grateful; not only for my health, but also for the incredible love that carried our family. In last year's holiday letter, written before my diagnosis, I wrote of "the sense of wonder and fragility I increasingly feel as I think about our lives." Perhaps I had an inkling. These days, I am often overcome with the desire to kick up my heels, romp in the woods, and celebrate big time. Every day is such a day, whether spent quietly writing at the computer, vigorously jumping up and down at aerobics, or leading a workshop, serving on a board, and otherwise making my passions known and heard. I am, simply, very glad to be here.

Cancer has affected each of us in ways that we are still trying to understand, and while we are immensely relieved and grateful and ready to return to normal, we hold tightly to the connection we feel for one another. Kirk smiles a lot more now that I'm through treatment. He goes to work happily and returns home full of hugs and glad tidings. We appreciate each other a lot more. And we say so. He took a long, solo five-day hike this summer in the Cascades and plans to do a lot more in the future. He loves doctoring, gardening, and running, but he's happiest of all in the woods.

Taylor just returned from Cuba, the trip he had planned to take last year. In May he went to work on an organic farm in northern California, and then in October, took off for two months of Spanish study and adventuring in Guatemala. He'll graduate from Berkeley in the spring, his legacy a successful campaign with others to save the student organic garden and to maintain the ethnic studies department. With his influence, we've converted our grass yard into a small fruit orchard, herb, and native plant garden, and he's even inspired me to dig in the dirt a little bit.

Logan, now sixteen, drives! I survived cancer to be his driving buddy all summer. We had a great time, and he was an astute learner. Now, every morning when he heads off to school in his brother's trusty old Volvo, I feel a small lurch in my stomach, missing him, knowing he's taken one more step out the door and down the road. He works hard, yet it rarely seems like work. He runs cross-country and track, stars in school drama productions, volunteers at the local non-profit movie theatre, and is a leading authority on most things related to the performing arts.

Yesterday was the loveliest Christmas I remember. We had agreed that all gifts would be handmade or homemade this year, and so we had "creation" stories to share as we opened each one. We took time to savor each other's creativity and originality and to appreciate the love that surrounded this most precious time together.

Today we dismantled our tree. Although equally challenging, this time we had a sense of what we were doing, and when in doubt we improvised. We planted her at our beach place where at least for me she will serve as a reminder of the Christmas we celebrated life and mystery and one another with a little more awareness and gratitude than usual.

As we look once again toward the promise of longer days and the return of light, we send you our love and best wishes for the New Year.

December 1999

A Mixed Bag

Journal Entry: March 21, 2000

Check-ups are a mixed bag. I like that I feel healthy as I enter Frank's office. I like seeing my chemo nurses and having them exclaim over my wonderful, newly curly crop. I even like seeing Frank, who in addition to being my oncologist has become my friend, and whom I trust to find any bumps or lumps that do not belong. So I walk in with a smile on my face, and I visit with the folks that helped save my life. And I truthfully answer that I am feeling well, have lots of energy, and that the chemo and radiation effects have diminished. I breathe deeply as Frank listens to the noises in my back. When he says words like "great" and "good", I feel relieved without having a clue what he is hearing that is great and good. His exams are gentle and thorough. He listens to my heart, feels under my slightly sweaty armpits, and palpates my abdomen and groin. Each procedure yields a "good" or "great", and each time I am relieved. I watch his face carefully as he concentrates on the findings of his fingers; I try to read a message in his eyes. All is concentration giving away nothing. And then he looks at me and says that everything seems to be fine. And I breathe very deeply, smile, and give him a hug.

This is our routine every three months. Kirk is always there with me, and he and Frank visit easily about their medical practices. We are three friends, casual and comfortable with one another, as long as those fingers of Frank's reveal only goods and greats. So far, so great. Today was my third such routine follow-up, and I expected it to go as well as the others. It did, yet part of me was on alert, is always on alert. My chest ached some yesterday, and I burped more than usual with meals. Why? Exercise, esophageal tightening left-over from radiation, the return of my lymphoma? Frank says it's only natural to worry and that it is an unavoidable sidebar to the disease. I know that and I accept it, and still, the fear curls up in my throat, begging to be dismissed. As it was today.

For some reason I come home subdued and tired. Which starts a whole new round of inquiry. Why am I tired? Left over from the intense weekend, post traumatic stress from the check-up, the return of the tumor? And away I go into the scared place, familiar now – small, dark, and mildly claustrophobic. It is different from the terror place that is reserved for fears confirmed. The scared place is mine alone. I re-center there and speak to myself kindly, with reassurance until I can emerge once again and take up my life.

The usual mix was messier today. I went early for my appointment in order to visit with a friend who was recently diagnosed with a slow-growing lymphoma, in the stomach and fairly advanced. She was in for her first chemo, terrified, putting a good face on it. Here it goes again, I think, someone else whose family has been shaken up and dumped out on the sidewalk for passersby to witness. We talked about hair and movies and the general shittyness of it all. And I felt sad for her and sadder still when I looked into the blank glazed-over eyes of her husband. I crossed my fingers and hoped to hell I would never have to go through that experience again.

With all that I do to stay healthy, I know my chances of survival are good, even great. Except when my chest aches, a pill catches in my throat, or I feel the slightest bit tired. And then I think the whole thing is a crap shoot, and that maybe I have nothing to say about how the dice are thrown, or where they land. Meanwhile, my next CT scan is in six weeks, and my next appointment with Frank is in a month. I like being reassured, so in a way it seems like a long time to wait, but the reassurance isn't guaranteed, so the wait also offers a respite. Definitely a mixed bag.

THE DOLPHIN TUBE

CAT Scans! I have had many these past 16 months. The price I pay for survival. Every four months to see if the tumor has returned. Here is the drill.

The night before and then the morning of, I have to swig 16 ounces of the most god- awful concoction, a viscous white liquid, piña colada flavored, that makes my intestines show up on the scan. It is a serious challenge to keep it down, so I have learned some tricks. Keep stirring, so that none of the blobby stuff has a chance to coagulate in the bottom. Find something distracting to do, such as talk on the phone, read e-mails, write a letter. Have a glass of water or maybe a cup of peppermint tea on hand to dilute the impact. And then hope for the best. It actually gets worse each time; I think my system has developed a memory of the taste and texture. Or maybe I have less tolerance for tiresome experiences now that I am healthy. You learn to put up with things when you are sick that seem totally unacceptable otherwise.

Hospitals are notoriously impersonal places, filled with well-intended, usually overworked, staff. I remember to be friendly, make contact with each person that passes me through the system. Kirk and I always go together; even though it's supposed to be routine, it is not. Nothing is ever routine when cancer is involved. Nothing! So we check in, and I fill out the exact same forms every time, swearing that I have never had a bad reaction to the dye they are about to inject into my veins and that I have no conditions that would contraindicate the procedure. I absolve the clinic of all responsibility while under their roof, and we sit down to wait. Sometimes we hold hands, sometimes we laugh a little and talk, always we are brave and a little bit scared. When my name is called, we head down the now familiar corridors to the prep room. There I have an I.V. administered and, if I'm lucky, I get a nurse who knows how and where to stick.

Today is such a day. Susie is Filipina, small like me. Her English is careful and imperfect, her smile lights up the room. She asks if I am right or left-handed, the only one who ever asked, as she looks for the hand with the most prominent vein. I say left, and her stick is perfect. I of course tell her so, thanking her profusely. I am not squeamish about needles, but I have learned to recognize the nurses who care enough to do the job well. Once I have been prepped, I get to drink one more beverage, a large styrofoam cup filled with a Tang-like substance. I ask if I may bring my own glass next time, unable to resist the opportunity to do a little environmental education. Fortunately, this aide has a sense of humor and nods in the affirmative. We talk about the nastiness of these drinks, and she is both sympathetic and matter-of-fact, qualities I greatly appreciate. She shares my incredulity over the selection of piña colada as the flavor of choice. We imagine someone in a lab somewhere who would rather be in Mexico or has an overwhelming craving for rum.

Finally I am ready to be escorted across the hall to the scanning chamber. A new person takes over, someone I do not know. But it's okay because I see Diane working in the control room with all the computers, and she is my good luck charm. She has been here every time, and she has always been real and funny and totally positive. She is the tech who told me the day the tumor showed up that I would be fine. She is one of the bright spots, and I am always glad to see her. I know that she likes to fish with her husband and doesn't care if she catches anything. She just likes being in the boat. Her children are grown, and she loves her work; she went through menopause at 42, and she looks too young to have grown-up children. She exclaims over my curly hair and says convincingly that I look well.

I breathe a little more easily as the new person positions me on the table. Her name is Katherine, and she is all business. I remember to engage her in conversation, instantly picking up on her southern accent. She is defensive until I mention that I grew up in Tennessee. The connection is made, and suddenly we are fast friends. She is here on loan for a month, misses air conditioning but not the Texas heat. She also misses her three teenage sons and is glad to be going home on Friday. She makes sure I am comfortable, warm enough, and reminds me of what to expect. Then she leaves the room, and the surreal part begins. My table moves into the open-ended tube where flashing lights are rotating rapidly in a neon arc and brightly colored animal stickers have been pasted, to put kid patients at ease. I am rather partial to the silver dolphin, evoking Amanda, and I smile in spite of myself. My amusement is interrupted by that canned male voice that tells me intermittently to hold my breath and then breathe. I always worry that I will blow it out too soon, but somehow I hold on. I wonder how heavy smokers and people with lung disease manage. I tell myself to relax, to center and ground. Katherine comes back in to inject the contrast dye, which will light up my liver and other organs that are fed by my blood vessels. The weirdest thing happens: first, I get a strange metallic taste in my mouth, and then seconds later, my crotch is on fire. I am surprised every time. Diane once told me that some people like the sensation - it calls forth old flames and sexual yearnings from years past. To me it's a jolt of reality, an invasion into my private regions, one more indignity to be endured with humor - never longing. A few seconds later as the crotch fires extinguish, the "man" tells me to hold my breath one last time. And then, it is over. A total body scan in a matter of minutes. Katherine takes out the I.V.; I pull up my jeans, sigh inaudibly, and go find Kirk.

Now we wait. We hang out with Diane and Katherine, joking about Katherine's southern accent. Diane fills her in about the "nice" big tumor I had in my chest wall. *Nice* is not a word I would use, but I let it pass. We are getting special treatment. At this point, normal people have to go home to wait, usually for days, for the test results. Since Kirk is a pediatrician, the radiologist reads my pictures as soon as they come up. We have someone unfamiliar today; she and Kirk know each other from phone consults but have never met. I like her quiet, confident manner. She says how hard this testing must be, how she reads scans all day long but doesn't much think about the people whose insides she is perusing. I am struck by how easy it is to disassociate, and I feel our presence may be a gift, a reminder of the lives she holds in her hands. I do not blame her for this distance; it only saddens me some. Besides I have got my own problems to worry about. First, for comparison purposes, she flashes up an old scan, one that shows the tumor in its heyday, smirking with power. I gasp and grab for Kirk's hand. Then I refocus, gazing at indeterminable shapes while the two of them exclaim over my appendix glowing sweetly, thanks to the piña colada/tang infusion. The radiologist takes her time, intently studying the shapes on her screen. I stop breathing until she pronounces me healthy, not a tumor in sight. Another reprieve. We shake hands, thank her profusely, as if she has the power to grant immunity, and say good-bye.

And then we are back in the corridor, holding one another for dear life. Holding and crying some as well. We weren't always this way together. We were a sunshine couple that became cranky whenever storm clouds appeared. I used to believe that we would fold completely or pull apart in disgust if anything truly dark threatened us. And then I got cancer, and instead of falling apart, we fell together. We became vulnerable, weak-kneed, leaning. We hold each other up. Who knows what lies ahead? Already, we have gotten busy and preoccupied with peripheral matters. Except on CAT scan days. They bring us back to who we are, they offer focus, evoke memory.

I wonder out loud that it does not get easier over time. I repeat, it is *never* routine. Kirk believes the scan pulls us back to the beginning; after all it started here, the discovery. We are breathing again, beginning to allow a sense of relief to sink in. We laugh a little as we walk into the sunlight, arm in arm. We are free for now; the fear recedes into the shadows, and off we go to have lunch and celebrate.

Together.

BREAST CANCER/NOT

It was February 1999, and I was sitting in my recliner, receiving my chemo drip and minding my own business. I was feeling woozy and disconnected as I often did, drifting in and out of conscious awareness. My eyes fluttered open as an indecently cheerful woman sat down for a visit. I can be a very friendly and charming person when I want to be, but at this moment I longed to escape. No such luck. She was here to offer me support, to validate my experience with breast cancer, and to offer her personal wisdom - a survivor full of missionary zeal. There was only one problem with this picture; I did not have breast cancer. So before she had a chance to launch, I apprised her of that fact. "Oh," she said, undaunted, "well, have a nice day anyway." In that instant I felt I have failed somehow. My lymphoma did not easily lend itself to support groups or uninvited visitors.

I sighed, relieved, as she went looking for another candidate, almost any woman would do. If you are a woman and you have cancer, it is reasonable to assume you have breast cancer, unless, as in my case, you don't. That stubborn individualist that lives inside of me demanded that people know what I had. I wonder why. Do I care that people, strangers even, know I have two intact (if slightly saggy) breasts? More likely it reflects my fear of more cancer in my future. Today lymphoma, tomorrow…? "Stop!" I commanded, "and breathe. One step at a time." I still had three more chemos, stem cell collection, and radiation to go through; I had enough to worry about without thinking about what might await me down the road.

* * *

It's a warm September afternoon, and the Tahoma Food System Board meeting is just breaking up when one of the trustees tells us his sister has breast cancer. He has only recently learned of this diagnosis and is understandably shaken. Afterwards, he asks what cancer I had. "Lymphoma," I say and observe the blank look on his face. It is clear I won't be much help. *Fortunately* another trustee did have breast cancer, and so she immediately moves into the inner circle of advisors. She states, rather authoritatively I think, that breast cancer carries with it a special loss unlike other cancers. I don't disagree, how can I? What do I know, and besides isn't it near the top of every woman's worst fear list? And yet I find myself feeling left out and competitive, wanting to offer my own pearls, my own gems, my own fools' gold. Instead, I slink off mumbling something about being available to talk anytime. I feel somehow less than. At the same time I am clear, clear, clear that I do not want the diagnosis required to become a member of that specially afflicted club. Several friends have had breast cancer. It almost feels inevitable.

A few days later, I go into Paul's neighborhood office and am greeted by the receptionist who has known me for almost two years. I come in regularly to purchase vitamin refills and a host of unpronounceable nutrients. Today she wants to know if I am going to be in the breast cancer survivors' fashion show. I am stunned on two accounts. I cannot imagine me in a fashion show of any kind, no matter how great the cause, and ***I did not have breast cancer.*** Which I tell her politely. There it is again, that feeling that I can't quite name.

I am left wondering what it is I want from people. Certainly not sympathy. I did not want it when I was in the middle of treatment, and I do not want it now that I feel myself recovered. I simply want my story to matter, my experience to have counted, and most of all I want people to get the facts right. Not because there is something special about me, or lymphoma, but because I need to be seen and part of seeing me includes the fact that I had cancer, not breast cancer, but nevertheless a serious life-threatening disease. And I survived. At least so far.

I recognize that my reaction to all these breast cancer references (there have been many more) is mostly about terror. I attempt to brush it off like dandruff, white and persistent, nearly impossible to remove. I cup my breasts tenderly in my hands; they are small and fit easily. They are old friends who have served me well, fed my children, brought joy to my mate. I would miss them, but I would survive their loss as many women have before me. I admire these women, the way they literally take life into their hands, saying yes to the knife that will cut away diseased flesh and hopefully give them a future in return. Their scars are proud testimony to their courage. I am, nevertheless, disheartened by the almost nonchalant way they are expected to sacrifice their breasts. Surely a life cannot be measured in handfuls of flesh, yet somewhere there needs to be space to grieve, and later to celebrate.

My path was different, no less treacherous, but with few visible reminders. Except for a biopsy incision and a port-a-cath scar blazoned across my chest, my wounds are mostly internal. I am, however, familiar with matter-of-factness as part of survival. "This is the way it is, this is what we have to do, alright fine, we'll do it. Cut them off, hit us with rads, inject our veins with poison. *WE* can take it … Just give us the promise of life. And then let us shed our tears wrapped in the arms of someone who loves us and honors our wounds, both seen and buried deep."

Today breast cancer lurks in the shadows of our minds, in the air that we breathe, in our genes, and our water. I am glad I did not have breast cancer; I have been told that I have a slightly higher risk than before of getting it as a result of the radiation that helped save me once. The treatment causes the disease, requires the treatment. What a merry-go-round, what a curse. I would like to believe that I am through with cancer, and on most days, when I look at my healthy, vigorous 52 year-old self in the mirror, I do believe. And then someone innocently asks about my breast cancer. And I can only mutter "not". And hope fervently that it is true.

* * * * * *

Since writing what I thought was my last word on the subject of breast cancer, I have been deluged with more reminders of this ubiquitous disease. I am trying to pay attention instead of running away. National Public Radio does an hour long special on "Talk of the Nation"; my friend Heather informs me of a gallery showing of paintings, writings, and photographs by breast cancer survivors; the newspaper has full-page breast cancer awareness ads; and Kirk tells me of a colleague who has just been diagnosed. She would like to talk to me, to learn from my experience with cancer, never mind that it was lymphoma. I mentally review my treatment history before picking up the phone, and then we are talking for long minutes, this woman I do not know, about chemo, hair loss, body image, energy work, naturopathy, and support systems. I have much to offer, and she is eager to learn, a strong woman, a cardiac care nurse accustomed to taking charge of other people's lives, not forced to save her own. There are some tears on both sides of the conversation, but more importantly a connection has been made. I do not fear for my breasts or my life as I listen to her story. I am strong and ready to give what I can, and I am grateful to her for asking.

And so, just now, as I sip my green tea and spill these words onto the page, I feel some measure of peace. I am energized by the possibility that on occasion my story will help ease the way for another. I hold my breasts and then place my hand over my heart. I touch the scar that marks the tumor site, and I wonder who will be next. Selfishly, I hope to God it's not me. And I hope to God it's no one I know. And I hope to God "they" find a cure … soon.

ON THE MEANING OF HAIR REVISITED

It turns out I was wrong about being done. It's December, almost a year since my diagnosis, and this obsession with hair has continued. I feel compelled to search for its metaphoric significance. To answer the questions I haven't yet asked. And to understand … simply understand the meaning of hair.

During chemo, I became bald everywhere. I developed a new empathy for skinned chickens. Not only my head hair, but eyebrows, lashes, and even chin hairs abandoned me. Armpits became silken, and my arms and legs were smooth and bare. And yes, even my pubic hair fell out, leaving me feeling vulnerable and cold. More like a young child than a woman-grown. It took me back.

I came into the world bald, and my parents feared I would remain that way. It would have brought further shame upon their house. Not only was I their second adopted baby, but a hairless girl. Clear evidence of failure on their part. Being a compliant child, anxious to please and hold my place, my hair eventually grew in thick and full. Later when it became unruly, I begged to have it thinned, but they were horror struck by the idea, and I capitulated without much protest. Thin hair was almost as bad as none at all and indicated something lacking. I just wanted to fit in, so I did what I was told. I was a horseback-riding, tree-climbing girl, and that was fine with my folks as long as I had a good head of hair.

In college, hair took on entirely new meaning. Hanging long and straight, it called up Joan Baez and songs of power and protest, swaying hips and warm southern nights. My dad said it looked stringy and flat, but by then I wasn't listening. I smelled the changes in the wind, like a whiff of sweet marijuana, and though I couldn't carry the tune, I wanted to sing along. My long hair gave way to a chemically-induced afro, women's consciousness raising groups, and power to the people. History recorded itself in beauty shops across the land.

All those years, I played with that thick head of hair without giving it a lot of thought. It meant power and femininity and choices and freedom. Also resilience and the ability to change on a whim. I took it for granted, never dreaming that one day it would be gone. And on that day that I took my life in my hands and had my head shaved, I had no idea what a profound act that would be. How for me it would signify true power, separate from an attachment to hair. When I got home, after receiving Logan's proud words, "great head, Mom!" I went upstairs to the bathroom mirror. And I laughed. There stood a woman I did not know, a brave, bald-headed woman with tiredness and determination in her eyes. She looked back as if to say, "Hey, I have no idea where this ride is going to take me, but I am ready, and so are you."

I had felt beautiful and sexy and lively with long (artificially) curly hair. Kirk loved that look, and suddenly he was compelled to extol my beauty when I had no hair at all. And despite those moments when I wished to be anonymous, I loved it when people said that I was courageous, a role model, a stepping into the world sort of person, even as I took time out to heal. I learned that my strength went beyond the color or texture or length of my hair. I learned to shed the fears and shame of my parents, to radiate my own beauty from within. To go with the flow even when the road took some mighty tight turns.

By its absence, I learned that hair meant warmth on cold nights and a sweaty neck on hot days. It could be gathered around for protection or flung back as an act of defiance. Baldness meant freedom from tangles and entanglements, car windows rolled down and nothing to blow in my face as I took curves at high speed. Freedom! To some it meant illness, to me part of a mysterious turn in the road - the river-run-through-me. Hair meant something to swing and strut and feel sassy about. Baldness brought forth a dignity I did not know I had, along with those fantasies of Buddha, GI Jane, Gandhi, and fast swimmers surging through turgid water. In its starkness, my bald head shone.

My hair has grown, been cut back, and grown again, as reliably as the black berry bushes that creep up our bank. It has been bone straight, curly like Shirley Temple's, and Afroed like Angela Davis. Most of my life it has been reddish brown, though I did turn it black once, and just the other week, in honor of Halloween, I sprayed it purple. After chemo, new hair sprouting signified a promise, buds surviving the winter, and curls that were chemically fertilized. Hair tightly sprung, like the pubic hair that was making its own come-back, causing my head to ache at times. New growth can be painful. It rapidly metamorphosed from small tight curls to a full-fledged 'fro. Memories of protest days come full circle. Then about the time I acclimated to my new hip look, the curls began to loosen and lengthen, and the new crop came in straight.

Occasionally, I run into old friends who missed my Buddha days, and I hear myself talking to them about hair. Me, who got so sick of folks focusing on my head, wishing they would just come out and ask their hard questions instead. But perhaps I was being unfair, because now that I am well, it is something I want to talk about. That baldness was my red badge of courage, which I no longer wear. It alerted everyone, myself included, to the challenge I was facing, and it reminded me every time I looked in the mirror or felt a cold wind blowing across my head to stay present in this life while I had it. There were people who thought I was brave for refusing the wig or turban, and a few fellow travelers who threw theirs off as a result of my stance. I was empowered by their faith in me. And while I knew my bravery had nothing to do with hair, and that surviving was the tough part, I now appreciate the confidence those remarks gave me. Confidence to face the chemo needle, the cold slab of radiation, and the crotch-burning sensation in the CAT scan tube. As well as the on-going uncertainty that is the survivor's cross to bear. My strength comes, in part, from taking each step with the knowledge that people who love me stand nearby.

Nowadays when I look in the mirror, a sprightly middle-aged woman looks back. My hair has reasserted its straight self and become dappled with grey as if to herald more changes ahead. I have decided to keep it short for now, but just long enough so that no one asks if it's a cancer "do". Sometimes I miss that shorn me who was clearer of purpose than I have ever been before or since. I miss her absolute calm and her almost unwavering conviction that she would prevail. It frightens me to give voice to that longing; "watch out what you wish for" screams softly in my brain. I do not miss the fatigue, the fear, or the pain. I am clear that I am not calling back my illness. What I am doing is calling forth that woman of quiet determination and inviting her to dance with me. Together we can make some mighty fine music.

As for the meaning of hair, I think it is simply to grow.

SOLSTICE GREETINGS

In the Spirit of **Not** *Christmas*

In lieu of the usual holiday cheer, historically genuine and heartfelt, we have decided not to celebrate Christmas. We have been moving in this direction rather deliberately for several years, slowly decreasing the number of presents bought, wrapped, and placed under our tree. We have steadily increased our focus on Winter Solstice, that day when sunlight begins once again to edge out the night. We have gathered for over ten years on December 21, at the home of friends, bringing food to share, and winter tales, poems, or essays to read aloud. We have stood in a circle, at the water's edge, around a blazing fire and re-committed ourselves to remain connected to the natural world and to one another. For a night our focus has been dedicated to our chosen community of family and friends, and we have set aside the stress of the holiday season. Then we have moved back into the frenetic pace of cooking, cleaning, entertaining, and last minute wrapping. For a long while it worked.

It no longer does. Taylor, now 22, has been gently prodding us for several years to reduce our consumption, and we have complied, although initially with some reluctance. Instead of a pile of gifts that threatened to take over the living room, we reduced our number to a tasteful few that mostly fit under the tree. Still, it was too much. Finally, two years ago, the tree we had decorated so painstakingly fell over. I swept up the shards and fir needles, trying not to take it for an omen. Kirk and I accomplished a resurrection the following night by ourselves. Logan, then 15, said once was enough and refused to participate, and Taylor was not yet home from college. A week later, and only a day after I had written our '98 holiday letter, I was diagnosed with cancer. I wondered some about the significance of that fallen tree and the mess it created, but like the tumor growing inside me, it was a mystery. We celebrated Christmas anyway and probably felt more appreciation for one another than we ever had. That Christmas had such a surreal quality: friends calling to express their sympathy and offer help, others exhibiting total denial, asking what our plans were for the holidays, and still others too numb to respond at all.

As many of you know, I survived and thrived, and now I am facing a second anniversary. But I am jumping ahead. Last December, Taylor suggested we put an end to our usual gift exchange and thus eliminate the clutter altogether. I wasn't ready, being by far the major offender in the family, so I suggested we limit ourselves to two presents apiece and that they be either handmade or homemade. Everyone agreed, and what followed was the most personal Christmas I have ever experienced. We gave each other our time, and stories, and handmade crafts. We also had our first living Christmas tree, which was rooted in soil and could not fall over. It was much smaller than previous trees, but huge nevertheless. I celebrated the fact that we had not killed a tree in order to satisfy our need for tradition. We chose the ornaments carefully, selecting our favorites to adorn this tree. The day after Christmas, leaving the usual trail of tree droppings, we lugged it out to our beach place where we planted it with much fanfare and spontaneous tree blessings.

Over the winter it died. We had obviously done something wrong, kept it inside too long, not loved it enough, who knows. So much for that idea. This year we made a clean sweep, deciding to forgo the holiday altogether. As Logan said, "If you're not into the Christian thing and you're not into consumption, what is the point?" That made sense to me, and caused Taylor to send up a cheer. Even Kirk got into the spirit of not-Christmas. We celebrated Solstice on a calm clear night at the time of a new moon. Because it was no longer the warm-up act, it took on greater significance, at least for me. We gave a few simple gifts, locally-produced honey and organic tea mostly, and received one or two in return.

On this day, December 22, we have escaped to our beach cabin, having chosen to leave the chaos behind. December is a fragile time for me and to pretend otherwise would be a lie. Watching others make merry – often with grim determination – I believe we have made the right choice. And I suspect that in this quiet retreat tucked away in the woods we will each take stock, remembering Christmas pasts and feeling grateful for my renewed health and for the simple presence of one another. We are profoundly blessed to be surrounded by tall majestic evergreens, the loveliest Christmas trees one could imagine.

December 2000

WAITING FOR RELAPSE

Like drowning, my fears of relapse are often seductive. Sometimes I find myself half-way through a waking nightmare before I even realize it …I'm crying, breaking the news to my kids yet again, like a broken record, wondering if I've got it in me to attempt another survival … I am swept away by a current so intense that it takes all my willpower to pull me back. I shake myself hard and repeat a mantra to ward off evil spirits.

I have come to realize that, along with other post-cancer hangovers, fear is an unavoidable part of the package. I wonder if that is true for everyone or is it due to my vivid imagination, my obsession with body parts, or the fact that I am a writer. I ask around, and other survivors report a similar absorption, complaining about the way fear lurks in the tight corners of their minds, only to leap out at the slightest provocation. For me, it's usually related to an unexplained physical malfunction that I instantly assume - without missing a heartbeat - to be an indication that the tumor is back. Or else it's a metastasis cropping up in a previously unaffected lymph node. Or maybe it's not even lymphoma; I am a target for other cancers now as a result of my month in radiation. A slightly above-average possibility, but it's enough for me.

The debate gets underway, starting off with the voice of reason. "Look how good you feel; you haven't lost weight; this chest tightening and that thickening feeling in your throat, is just post-radiation gunk. No worries." And moves on to fear of denial. "Yeah right," I shoot back, "just like the last time when we thought all those vague symptoms were muscle aches and pre-menopause." And then paranoia, "What if it is a tumor and I'm being fooled by my body, by everything that's been done to me, what if residual stuff from treatment is masking the real thing? What if I wait, and it's grown too far, too fast?" My parental-self pipes up, admonishing me not to overreact, upset myself, upset others, for nothing. "Just be patient. See what's happening. Look at yourself; you're fine. And besides you don't want your new doc to think you're a hypochondriac." "Okay, you win," I say, capitulating reluctantly. I want to be wrong, I want to be overreacting, I don't want to be a fool. I also don't want to miss the god-damn tumor if it's back. "Okay, breathe, Janie. Wait a few days. See what happens."

I do and the aches move on, the swallowing gets easier, the tightening loosens. This pattern has played itself out a million times over the last year and a half. No exaggeration. And the reassuring grown-up me has always been right. But how do I know she isn't just a pleaser, avoid-conflict-at-all-costs, don't-rock-the-boat, part, that's been lucky so far and guessed right? So, instead of experiencing some resolution, it's more like a reprieve until the next time when the pattern reasserts itself with even greater intensity. Like it did on Christmas Eve. Kirk, Logan, and I were having a candle-lit dinner at our beach cabin: Tofu bourguignon, mashed potatoes with shitake mushroom gravy, seasonal greens salad, crusty bread, and organic red wine. We were enjoying ourselves in the semi-darkness, feeling pleased that we had escaped the madness of Christmas celebrations for the peace and quiet of the woods. And that's when I threw up, unceremoniously and without fanfare. I managed to leave the table without alarming anyone and made it to the back deck before I blew out that last helping of potatoes. Not a cause for alarm. Ever since treatment, this happens occasionally, randomly without provocation. I've learned to go outside so I don't have to clean up afterwards, very practical I think. In the spirit of the holidays, I had probably eaten more than usual. I rejoined the guys and drank a cup of ginger tea while they had dessert.

I didn't give it any more thought until the next time, after we'd eaten at a local Vietnamese restaurant, exactly one week later, and then again one week later after a very simple dinner at home. A definite pattern had emerged, and I began to worry. Fear slithered across the floor, laid itself smack dab on my chest and glinted at me - not unlike the Cheshire cat after a long toke on the hookah pipe. Kirk was worried too, but in a more cautious, professional trying-to-be-responsible sort of way. We agreed on a plan, and I called my radiation oncologist the next day. She doesn't live here anymore, but I was able to track her down in Portland for a brief phone consult. "So I was thinking it might be related to radiation, " I offered cautiously. " Kirk thought it might be scar tissue tightening, and neither of us could see how it could be a relapse." I said this last part in a rush, not wanting to waste her time and not leaving space for any bad news to sneak in. "No I don't think so either," she answered reassuringly, and then after a pause, "unless of course some big ol' tumor is lying across your esophagus." That did it. Who knows what else she said, but I'm pretty sure it was not intended to alarm me. Too late!

That is how I ended up in radiology at Allenmore Hospital, on a Tuesday morning so early it looked more like night than the promise of a new day. I was there for an upper G-I, a barium swallow, to make sure there were no blockages in my digestive system. It was of course a fasting test, meaning I hadn't had a thing to eat since midnight, so I was cranky anyway and full of flashbacks. Waiting rooms had become a theme in my life, and they rarely resulted in good news. I made my usual effort to connect with the folks who tended me, but my heart wasn't in it. I'm worn out with the effort and wonder why it's my job to make the first move. I did like the woman who checked me in. She had class, and her fuchsia sweater with the purple paisley scarf made her dark skin shine. She looked to me like she belonged some place a lot more exotic than this colorless hospital lounge, and I told her so. Smiling, she gave me the waiver to sign - No, I don't hold this hospital responsible for anything. Yes, I understand the procedure I am about to endure, never mind that to this point no one official has told me a thing about it - and when we finished, she actually escorted me down the hall and pointed out the radiology suite. I thanked her, wanting to do more, offer flowers, take her picture, something, to register gratitude over such a simple act. Instead I walked down the hall, took a seat, and waited some more. It was a small room, only three of us there in the pre-dawn hours to get our gullets looked at. After listening to the desk clerks complain good-naturedly about their work, I was called back, told to undress, put on the gown so it opened in the back, and wait. I'm in the midst of a great read, *Playing the Bones*, and I was able to lose myself in it, which told me that I wasn't too stressed by this latest development. After all, Cynthia, my new family practice doc said it was just a routine precaution and nothing to worry about. I really like her and appreciate her thoroughness, so I don't fault her for not knowing that routine no longer exists where my body is concerned. Still, I had reasoned that most likely these vomiting episodes were related to anniversary trauma and not to a big ol' tumor lying across my esophagus.

Even so, I was in need of a kind word, a friendly face. Which I pretty much got with the radiology tech. She was perky, but not obnoxiously so, and she was thorough in her explanation of the barium swallow. She had all these drinks lined up on a sterile metal tray, reminding me a little bit of a hawker at the state fair as she explained their use. It would be up to the doctor whether I would be treated to the thin or the thick drink, or whether I'd have to toss back a cupful of radioactive-looking crystals. Followed by water. They would make me want to burp. I was to refrain. As she left to get the doctor, I asked his name. She said she was going to find out. "Dr. Blorke, or some such thing," she said on return. "What's his first name?" I asked, feeling a little feisty. "I have no idea" she laughed, as another tech who had stuck his head in the room said he thought it was Aaron but wasn't sure. It didn't strike either of them as strange that they didn't know this man's name. I pursued the matter, asking my tech her name. She responded with her first name, Julie, and a smile. She had clearly dealt with patients like me before. "I bet he calls *you* by your first name," I observed as lightly as I could. "Oh I don't think so. He doesn't really call me anything." "Oh great," I muttered under my breath.

I thought customer service had found its way into the nation's hospitals and medical clinics. Part of their marketing strategy - not to mention mal-practice paranoia - if not because someone figured out that it makes patients feel better. Up until this episode with the mystery doc, henceforth referred to as Dr. Aaron, I've had some pretty great experiences with the medical profession. But then, I almost always have my doctor husband with me, so my observations are not exactly scientific. One of my heroes will always be Dr. Mark, the radiologist who read my first tell-tale CT scan and told me I could beat the tumor that was growing rapidly inside me. I wonder if he knows Dr. Aaron; possibly they play golf together when it's not raining, but most likely customer service is not a topic of conversation. Mark has it inside him to reach out and touch someone. As I soon learned, Aaron apparently does not. Hell, even the servers at restaurants tell you their names, and the most intimate thing they will ever do is bring your food and fill your water glass. Which compared to my upper G-I experience sounds like a sacred act.

When Dr. Aaron walked in, he did not greet me, did not tell me his name, did not ask me a single question, diagnostic or otherwise. The procedure began with him telling me what to do, not unkindly, just perfunctorily, and me obeying. Now, I have learned over the years - especially from my days of hospital work in the seventies - not to anticipate a lot of warmth from medical people. But this was different; this guy just wasn't there; my big toe nail has more life in it. He performed his duties; I performed mine, which involved contorting my body into various pretzel shapes and swallowing the thin stuff (thank God) on command, so he could watch its pathway on the monitor. I could not see a thing, and my mouth was too full of white chalky barium to ask any questions anyway. The instant he finished, he bolted out of the room. I figured he would be back, fool that I am, always looking for closure. It didn't happen; he had done his bit and never mind that I was left in the dark.

This story ended well. Cynthia called the next day to say the test was negative, which means they didn't find anything abnormal. So we just wait and see and hope it was an episodic thing that won't reoccur. She spent 15 minutes on the phone with me; boy, does she get points. That may be a record of sorts in my life experience. She also had results from my lab work. Everything was great there also. I won't be dying of a heart attack anytime soon given my cholesterol scores. The only red flag was a low white blood count. She faxed the results to Frank and suggested he follow up when I see him in February. The beat goes on …

Meanwhile I penned a letter to Dr. Aaron and boldly enclosed a copy of *The Dolphin Tube*. Kirk thought it might improve his bedside manner to know that any given patient could turn out to be a writer. I just wanted to give him the chance to get inside a patient's words, if he will take the time, in the hope that they might touch him somewhere. More than likely he'll just toss it in the can, but it is worth my small effort, and besides I need the closure.

Dear Dr. Blorke,
You do not know me. I was your 8:00 a.m. upper-GI, a 52- year- old-woman, with three episodes of precipitous vomiting, and some throat thickening. I have a name, but we were never introduced, and so I had to learn your name from someone else. You arrived, performed your task, and left abruptly, before I could ask any questions that might detain you.

I have worked in medical settings, am married to a physician, and consider myself to be a strong individual. I tend to handle medical exams well. I am also a cancer survivor and, therefore, find all diagnostic procedures to be somewhat disquieting. Fear of relapse is big. Human contact is important; it helps demystify the process; it takes very little time.

I am sure you are a busy and important man. I respect that. Nevertheless, I hope you will take the time to read the enclosed essay which I wrote for Applied Radiology. The feedback has been positive; one radiologist thought it should be required reading. I wouldn't go that far, but I think that perhaps if you saw your work through the eyes of others, you might consider slowing down, just a bit.

I wish you well.

Sincerely,
Janie Starr

P.S. If you were just having a bad or unduly hectic day, I know how that can be. Most patients are surprisingly understanding if you let them know what's going on.

* * *

It has been weeks since I wrote that letter, and it comes as no surprise that Dr. Blorke did not respond. Just too dang busy I imagine and decide to let it go. I am pleased with myself for bothering to write in the first place and have since encouraged another friend, whose treatment at the hands of a physician bordered on abuse, to pen her own letter of outrage. She has a kinder nature and finds the idea of confrontation hard to consider. Which gets me to thinking about my need to vent and my fears of relapse.

No one has suggested a psychogenic cause for lymphoma, for which I am grateful. With all my soul searching I cannot attach one myself. A friend with breast cancer was accused of having intimacy issues by a male naturopath more interested in her astrological sign than her family history. Left breast over-dependency, right breast fear of relationship! Bernie Siegel has suggested that cancer patients have somehow brought about their own illness by a lack of self-assertion or an extreme need to care for others. I am oversimplifying in part due to my own defensiveness over this most volatile issue. I - with my masters degree in psychology - do not deny the role of stress as a contributor to physical infirmities; in fact I have long been a proponent of such a relationship and in my own naiveté have placed blame where it did not belong. *That* person is too self-effacing. *This* person is in denial, or works too hard, or takes on the weight of the world, or forgets to smell the roses. In my own case, I have perused the depths of my psyche, wondering what ancient childhood traumas made me a willing host for this damn disease, because for the life of me I cannot produce a current cause. Frank and Paul agree that the start-up for this tumor happened long ago, so I feel an historical absolution. If the seeds were planted long ago, surely I've uprooted them all by now. But what about current events? Am I living in such a way as to set me up for new strains? Perhaps my anger, which surfaces so readily, lodges itself in my unsuspecting organs where it may fester and eventually grow into a malignancy. I don't think so. Certainly, I am not a study in self-denial or repression of feelings, and I've worked through my family-of-origin issues to the best of my ability. No more ghosts in *my* closet!

So then I turn to lifestyle questions. Maybe all those bread-butter-and-sugar sandwiches our next-door neighbor, Mrs. Greenly, fed me as a child got the ball rolling. Or the rat-haired hot dogs we lavished with so much sweet ketchup and egg-intense mayo? More likely the fat-dripping Oscar-Meyer bacon I consumed in such vast quantities until I learned about cholesterol and began my conversion to vegetarianism. Or the years of gin-and-tonics on hot summers nights and chardonnay to take off the winter chill. And the last of my culinary vices: chocolate and coffee, dark rich sins that coursed through my veins right up to the time of my diagnosis. Then I look at all the overweight, meat-eating, and beer-guzzling folks around me, and I shake my head, more in wonder than a desire to criticize. We've all known people who never broke a sweat and smoked until their teeth and finger tips turned yellow, who lived well into their nineties. In the final analysis who gets cancer remains a mystery and why I got it may never be answered. One thing I know for sure: self-recrimination never cured anyone, and it's not really my shtick anyway. Prevention is! And as far as I know I'm doing just about everything in my power - while still leading a relatively normal existence - to keep cancer at bay. Not a day goes by that I don't ask myself if what I'm doing is enough. An answer has not been forthcoming. So I wait and worry, and some days I feel like I'm drowning.

FALLING ON MY FACE - LANDING ON MY FEET

If dying is anything like fainting, then perhaps I should develop a more positive attitude toward the last act. I am becoming somewhat of a fainting aficionado, having gone there a number of times over the years. I had not given it much thought until recently when I found myself flat on my face in the hallway just outside our downstairs bathroom. I was irritated to be awakened by a distraught husband asking in a loud voice riddled with panic if I was okay. I just wanted to return to that peaceful place I had so briefly occupied.

As a young girl, I was a member of a fainting club. We used to get together at our rich friend's house and make ourselves faint on her trampoline. We would usually take turns, but sometimes we all went out at once. It was so easy, just hyperventilate, stick your thumb in your mouth and blow, and pretty soon you were falling to the ground like a leaf released by a spring breeze. It was painless and free, and it guaranteed a trip to someplace full of light and sweetness. Coming to brought disappointment, a moment of disorientation and then the reality of an ordinary life crashing down like an old headache hiding behind my eyes. One time it took a girl an inordinately long time to come back, and we got scared. Also, we were moving into puberty and had other things on our minds, so the club disbanded of natural causes and left only a faint memory of a land beyond my eyelids that held the promise of a sunshiny day.

The sensation is difficult to capture in words because it dissipates immediately upon waking. This night there was no trampoline to caress my fall, so I suffered a small scratch on the left side of my head, and my glasses twisted like a contortionist tripped in the middle of a new pose. Kirk sat me up gently and leaned me against the door jam. "I'm calling 911," he said. "Don't move!" I felt such pity for this dear man who had endured more than his share of disturbance due to the quixotic failings of my small body. What a disappointment I must have become. He married me, in part, for my physical strength and resilience. I had the legs of a mountain climber and the spit of a tiger when I was mad. I still do, but my inner workings have become increasingly unreliable, and it makes me think I've let him down. Last time it was cancer, this time a routine colonoscopy with post-procedural hemorrhage.

At 52, I was about two years overdue for the dreaded scope. You tell anyone that's been there that you're going to have a colonoscopy, they groan, grimace, and proceed to give advice. The procedure wasn't the problem - there would be enough Demerol and Verced to make it unmemorable - the prep was what everyone hated. I would have to swallow a full gallon of foul-tasting liquid - the cherry flavor was to be avoided at all costs - and would then be treated to four hours of raging diarrhea. "Don't even think about leaving the bathroom," was the sage admonishment I received consistently.

My rebellious streak took over as I plotted out my evening on the toilet. Adhering to the words of those-who-had-gone-before, I ordered my swill in lemon-lime and bought a gallon of bottled water to mix with it. Petra said tap water was so chlorinated that the taste would eventually make me gag. She also advised me to add the flavor in small increments just in case I couldn't stand it. Good thinking. Next it was time to decorate the throne room. I brought in candles and incense, for mood enhancement and to cut the smell. I borrowed the portable video monitor from the office and, at Logan's recommendation, rented *Chicken Run* for my viewing pleasure. It was a short movie, so I also had a pile of magazines, journals, and a mediocre murder mystery to keep me entertained. To ward off the chill that was predicted to ensue, I had a stack of blankets, my poly-fleece jacket, and the dusty space heater from the basement. I was set. As an afterthought, I added my laptop computer in case I was struck with a creative impulse - which was admittedly unlikely. And finally my large chair-like pillow, which I leaned against while sitting on the floor, reading, drinking, and waiting for the fun to begin.

After an hour of guzzling a glass of briny water every 7-10 minutes, with no action, I was beginning to wonder if I was immune to the stuff. Hah! With almost no warning, I just managed to pop in the video and to take my seat when my bowels announced that the party had begun. "Keep drinking," I reminded myself, as I eventually neared the end. I sent up a cheer when I took the final swallow. About that time, Kirk arrived home from work, tentatively knocking on the bathroom door, and at my invitation, peering in with a practiced look of sympathy on his face. He burst out laughing at the scene: candles lit against the darkening evening, me wrapped up in my favorite blanket, and piles of reading materials scattered across the floor. "Later," I said, "You're interrupting my movie." I smiled to let him know I was fine. He left, shaking his head, chuckling, and relieved. At 55, he had managed to avoid this rite of passage, but he knew time was running out, and I think he was taking notes.

At 10:00 PM, I was finished - right on schedule. The time had passed - along with all of my insides - uneventfully, and I felt smug. I don't know what the fussin' was all about; this was no big deal. Other than some serious hunger pangs, I felt fine, slept well, and woke up ready for the *easy* part.

It was still dark when we arrived at Allenmore's Medical Center and joined the sorriest bunch of folks I have ever seen hovering in the "Digestive Health Specialists" waiting room. Patients were pretty much drained from the previous evening's activities, and the coffee shop had yet to open to stoke up the designated drivers who would wait out the procedure together in this artificially cheerful room. I managed to engage a few people in conversation, and soon the mood lightened. I refrained from any scatological humor as I was sure we had all had enough from our well-meaning friends and family. When my turn came, I gave Kirk a cheerful kiss and followed the nurse down the hall. It would be less than two hours before we would be reunited. After the usual question and answer period and the signing of papers, which released God Himself from responsibility for any highly-unlikely-but-remotely possible unforeseeable complications, I was escorted into the procedure room. I met my doctor - the man I was to trust with reaming out my colon - while lying flat on my back. I'll never understand why these medical people can't find a way to show some of the common courtesies they surely learned at their Mama's knees - and this man a southerner to boot. He was nice enough, and I was already feeling groggy from the anesthetic, so I decided not to lecture him on ill manners.

When I came to, with only a lingering hint of the pain I may have endured, Kirk was at my side, and Doctor Reece was reviewing his findings. He had discovered and removed a large polyp in the lower regions of my colon. "It looked fine," he said, sounding almost bored. "Possibly the tip was pre-cancerous," he mentioned as an afterthought, but he had gotten it all and subsequently cauterized the site. There was nothing to worry about. I would just need to come back in a year for a repeat performance, he added indifferently. "Do what?" I said. "I thought this was an every five-year happening at most." He brushed off my concern, and I hadn't even reacted to the loaded "cancer" word mentioned in connection with my precious, once-afflicted body. I wondered if he had ever undergone a colonoscopy and indulged myself in an image of this somewhat sanctimonious man lying on his side while his insides were being sucked out. "Immature," I chided myself. Nevertheless, it was momentarily satisfying. I tuned back in as he told Kirk we would receive the path report in the mail in about ten days. End of story, case closed, on to the next anus. Mine no longer held interest, or anything else for that matter.

I was advised not to drive for twenty-four hours and to avoid eating nuts and raw fruits and vegetables for a week. Nothing said about exercise, sex, or travel to foreign lands. Which I did not expect, this being routine and all. So imagine my surprise when I began expelling bright red blood from my rectum at 6:00 that evening! At first I thought it might be a pink-tinted residue, but after I had been called to the toilet a third time, I decided to confer with the on-call doc. He agreed it could be left-over flow but allowed as how I could also be hemorrhaging from the polyp site. He did not seem overly concerned, however, and when he gave me the option of coming into the ER and waiting for several hours before being seen, or doing a wait-and-see at home, I inferred that it wasn't serious. I voted for the latter, not wanting to seem over-reactive and being unenthralled by the prospect of a fruitless evening hanging out in the ER with the usual gunshot wounds and sore throats. I'm not a snob exactly. I just have no patience for waiting. When Dr. Donnerly realized he was speaking to a medical wife, his tone changed noticeably as he expressed genuine concern for my discomfort. I chided him briefly, suggesting that he should be equally solicitous of all his patients, and then I hung up and headed back to the toilet. By that time Kirk had gotten home and endorsed the wait-and-see approach whole-heartedly.

Three episodes, and less than an hour later, we changed our minds. Wait or no wait, I needed to go to the ER. That's when I fainted. Pretty soon after I came to the bathroom was filled with seven strange men in uniform, taking vital signs, inserting a large needle into my left arm, administering fluid. My charioteers had arrived, complete with ambulance and oversized fire truck. I muttered that seven guys seemed a bit much for my 105 pound self, but they assured me this was routine. So, I got my first ambulance ride, and I swear I remember thinking that this was some great raw material, and boy would I have something to write about later. The EMTs were considerate, with the right balance of humor and medical efficiency. I felt taken care of and a wee bit embarrassed. I had stopped bleeding by then and suggested we head back to the house. Stanley, who seemed to be the lead guy, smiled at my foolishness and went back to work. Pete, a student, took my blood pressure so gently that I am certain he didn't get a read, but I told him "good job" anyway. This crew was from the Hilltop, the low-income part of town where I work. Like old friends, we chatted casually about its renaissance and the dangers of gentrification, and then we arrived and I was unloaded.

As they rushed me down the hall, past the skinned knees and hacking coughs, I allowed as how I would do anything to avoid that two hour wait, even if it entailed banging my head on the hardwood floor. Stanley said lots of folks had figured out the system and called 911 unnecessarily to by-pass the waiting room, but that I did not qualify as a faker. I guess my vitals still weren't so good. Later I found out that the bleeding had stopped because my BP was so low. Once it crept back up, the bleeding resumed. Buckets full. Meanwhile the on-call doc showed up, while the ER crew was busy trying to find a decent vein. No luck, not enough blood. I was shaking cold, shocky I suppose, so Dr. Donnerly, who by then had become Charles, went off to find blankets. Bless his heart, he was a human being, and because his nurse hadn't arrived, he was looking for work. He got big points for that small act of kindness, no prima donna here thank goodness. Meanwhile, Kirk was talking to Logan on the phone, and I got on to reassure him. "I'm fine sweetie," I said. "Sorry you missed all the excitement. My first ambulance ride, pretty cool." I even remembered to ask if he had found the resources he needed from the University Library. "You sound fine, Mom" he sighed in relief. "Oh I am, just a little bleeding that's all." I believed myself despite all the attention I was getting and the look of worry that had become a permanent fixture on Kirk's face.

A thoughtful nurse had placed a toilet-on-wheels by my bed, and for a while I was able, with assistance, to use it when I felt a hemorrhage coming on. Then I fainted again, and my potty privileges were revoked. That time I didn't make it to la-la land before I was yanked back. Fluffy cumulous clouds descending only to be brushed away by those in charge. From then on I had to remain flat on my back, which meant I felt every mountainous clot that oozed out my behind. Only then did I begin to appreciate the seriousness of the situation. In my own defense, I was not so much in denial as a victim of a vampire bleed. Finally Donnerly's nurse arrived, and the crew had stabilized me sufficiently to proceed. The plan was to do a second colonoscopy, this time without all that lovely Demerol, find the polyp site and re-cauterize. I negotiated for at least a small dose of something to take the edge off and thus became a drunk in excruciating pain. I'm pretty sure I yelled for the thirty or forty-five minutes it took to locate the source, but at least I held still. Kirk later told me that he could see nothing on the screen but a dark tunnel, so full of blood that Charles was swimming underwater, blind. How he found the site I'll never know, but it reminds me that he deserves a note of thanks when I feel up to it. He administered Epinephrine and branded the wall of my colon with his own personal "C" until the bleeding stopped. I remember him saying that this was as bad as it gets for someone in his line of work. Nice and neat this wasn't. Anyone who has seen ***ER*** knows they are messy places, a long way from today's sterile, and orderly, doctors' office.

I am pretty sure he did a good job. It's ten days later, and I have not re-bled. Days 7-10 are the highest risk, so tomorrow I will bless his work and reclaim my body as my own. I have been pretty much under house arrest, which has been fine with me. By the time I was allowed to leave the hospital I had received four units of other people's blood, and it seems to be taking a while for the new cells to feel welcome. I didn't want anyone else's blood, but Charles said I didn't have a choice. He seemed regretful, but he was firm. I suppose I might have bled out otherwise. Post-second colonoscopy I was hauled up to the PCU (Progressive Care Unit) with new blood still pouring in through an I.V. By then it was around 2:00 AM, and I sent Kirk home to check on Logan. They had kept in touch over the hours; Logan was handling his anxiety with a case of his own diarrhea, and I was sure this little emergency had brought back all kinds of bad memories for him. So Kirk, who had ridden shotgun in the ambulance, reluctantly hailed a cab back to the scene, while I was left to face the night shift. I had two nurses: Miss Perky, who insisted on calling me "hon" despite *my* insistence that my name was Janie. To her credit, she finally got it; and Miss Death, so pale and affect-free that I looked good by comparison. If she enjoyed her work, it was her own well-kept secret. I tried to muster some kindness, but I was just too worn out. Besides a bad case of self-pity and guilt was settling in my bones, and I was ready for a good cry. Once left alone - after a monotone lecture on hospital protocol by Death and a cheerful fluffing of my pillow by Perky - I let loose. Kirk and I were supposed to be heading to Baja in three days. The long-awaited adventure of a lifetime. Six nights camping on a deserted mangrove beach, sunny days kayaking and whale watching, evenings in circle around a campfire spilling forth the wonders we had shared. No ordinary trip, a pilgrimage of sorts, full of personal and physical challenge, fresh vegetarian and daily catch meals, and the bliss of time away. Now the trip was off. What was I thinking? Never mind that no one had intimated the likelihood of danger, this was the most routine procedure imaginable, everyone over 50 does it… bla, bla, bla. Somehow I should have known better, after what I've been through with the chest x-ray that exposed my lethal tumor. Nothing is routine. That has been my mantra for the past two years, but somehow I forgot. I believed the medical and lay mythology, and I was wrong. Sure I had signed the forms, but disclaimers are made for nearly everything nowadays. Also, no one advised us that the danger of hemorrhage post-polypectomy escalated over time. I could have started bleeding in the middle of the ocean miles from medical care, and I would have died. So I suppose I should have felt fortunate. Instead I felt angry and shifted rapidly from guilt to blame. Who the hell were these doctors to treat thousands of patients and never apprise them of the risks, much less suggest that they weren't to travel, exercise, or be more than an hour away from an emergency room for ten days? Or that this being an elective procedure, one might make it at a dull time in one's life. Polyps show up in 5 % of colonoscopies. One out of two hundred bleed. Which doesn't seem like much until you doctor reveals how many hundreds he does routinely. So I festered through the night, and by the next day all I wanted was to go home.

Dr. Knoffler, the Hospitalist (a peculiar title for someone who specializes in the care of hospitalized patients), made rounds about 10a.m. and revealed his intention to keep me for observation for another 24 hours. I pulled out all the stops: I wept, I told him of the missed trip, I promised to get my vital signs up. We cut a deal. If my vitals were normal by late afternoon, he would release me. I got busy envisioning a welcome committee for those new blood cells, picturing the calisthenics they were surely performing in unison, and committing myself to going home. The immediate challenge, once I graduated from clear liquids, was what-to-eat in this denizen of white bread, gray meat, potatoes, and jell-o. The phone rang, and I was drawn into a discussion with the hospital dietician who was making a diligent attempt to figure out what to feed someone on a "strict" vegetarian diet. Why are there never "strict" meat eaters I wondered to myself? We settled on a garden burger and cooked vegetables. Like a fool, I got my hopes up. At 12:30 - almost 30 hours since my last meal - I was treated to a mushy burger, mashed potatoes from a box, and carrots from a can. Aside from cardboard fiber, there was not an ounce of nutritive value on that tray. I reluctantly replaced the gray metal lid, to keep the food warm for the garbage disposal I suppose, and waited for Kirk to deliver my protein shake and mozzarella cheese sandwich. Later I (jokingly?) informed my day nurse that I would go on a hunger strike if the doctor didn't let me leave. Later still, Dale arrived to administer a well-needed dose of energy medicine to ensure a good blood draw.

About that time, I got a roommate - who was really sick! Which, come to think of it, appeared to be the criteria for this ward. From the mucous hawking that assailed me through the curtain, I gathered she was in congestive failure. I felt sorry for her, I really did. But the sound of mucous makes me want to do a sympathy retch, and on top of that, she snored while sleeping through her loudly cranked up TV show. My resolve hardened. I had to escape, and Dale was my ticket - out. "Come on," I said, "I can't begin to relax in here." No one seemed to care as we took off down the hall, finally stopping in front of a door marked "Solarium." I took it as a good omen. We entered what turned out to be the coke machine room. But, hey, it was empty, and there was a sofa big enough for a Lilliputian to lie upon. I would manage. Sure enough, as Dale began to work her magic, I sank instantly into a state of deep relaxation. Not unlike the dreamland of my fainting episodes. I reveled in the sweetness of the images that unfolded, mythical creatures surrounding me with their aura of love and blessed healing. Swirling light, deep purple and bright green mostly, danced behind my eyelids, as I allowed my body to regroup and recover from this latest assault. I awakened, refreshed, and without the searing headache of years gone by, to a nurse calling me back for my check-out check-up. I felt confident that I would impress the powers-that-be with high numbers, and sure enough my hematocrit and hemoglobin were well within the normal limits needed to get me out of there. I was proud that Kirk had promised to check me out AMA (against medical advice) and relieved that it proved unnecessary.

After the requisite wheelchair ride to the hospital entrance where Kirk was waiting, I was back in our own car and we were heading home. I called Logan to alert him and smiled big at his obvious pleasure. "It got pretty lonely here," he admitted later when we hugged good-night. Coming from Logan, that spoke volumes of the fear he must have experienced when he arrived home the night before to an empty house and a hastily written note on the kitchen counter. After cancer, I had vowed "never again", and here we were once more, recovering from a medical crisis. Needless to say, my confidence was shaken, and now I knew what it was like to feel let down by the medical system, big time. Two days later I finally heard from Doctor Reece. "I meant to call you yesterday," he said brusquely, "but I forgot." If I hadn't been so pissed, I would have laughed out loud. Who trains these guys? I gave him points for honesty and then immediately revoked them on grounds of either stupidity or callousness. The conversation did not improve much. He said there was no reason for the hemorrhage. "No *known* reason," was my retort. As it turned out, the polyp was at the upper limit size-wise for removal without surgery. Reading between the lines, I'm guessing I got nicked and he missed it. Just one of those things. Accidents happen. I understand that. Anyone can make a mistake. Just own it! That's all I ask. Oh yeah, and at least pretend to be sorry. Take acting lessons if necessary. Patients like to think doctors care. Besides, they're less likely to sue a human being than an ass-hole, so it might be worth the effort. "Sorry about that," Doctor Reece muttered unconvincingly as he signed off. As if he'd inadvertently pulled in front of me in the grocery line, when he'd actually crash-landed, sending my cart reeling and smashing my produce all over the floor. "Bye," I said. He would always be Dr. Reece, never Jack.

As my energy slowly flows back into what feels like a scratched-up shell, my natural state of optimism is making its own resurgence as well. I am tired of feeling tired, depressed, and sad. I am ready to be released, to take a walk longer than the 3 block limit I am currently allowed, dare I say, to return to my place in the front row of my aerobics class. I am ready for unconscious bowel movements that don't evoke fear. And yes, I am ready to forgive, myself as well as the doctor who (mis)treated me.

One good thing happened. Two people got to go to Baja in our stead - for free - people who had wanted to go and couldn't afford it. We gave them our spaces, and they were made glad. While I don't believe the universe gave me a four-unit hemorrhage so that Dave and Marsha could get their adventure, I am grateful that something good came out of all that inopportune blood loss. I learned through our small grapevine that Marsha declared it a miracle. Two people she loved had died this year, and she had been struggling to make ends meet with her carpentry business. Maybe she needed that trip more than I did.

One other thing - while I was sitting on the bathroom floor, waiting for the medics to come to my rescue, a small bird flew in the open front door and settled on the floor nearby. No kidding. She just sat there peering at me and ruffling her feathers. All I could think about was the bird poop I would come home to if we didn't invite her out. The next day Kirk mentioned that he had asked two of the EMTs to move her, and being used to all emergencies, they obliged, flapping their wings sympathetically until she left. We haven't seen her since. Looking back on it, I think perhaps that bird came to deliver a message. To tell me I would make it. I would fly out of there, and I would return. Replenished and ready to begin anew. I sure hope that bird knew what she was chirping about.

ONE LUMP AT A TIME

I have spent very little time completely on my own. So when the opportunity came along to spend a week in France by myself, I grabbed it. A friend offered me her small green-shuttered cottage on the Ile de Ré, in the heart of a one street town where I could hang out "toute seule." It was summertime, hot blue skies, open-air markets, and the scent of fresh baked bread right outside my front door. It was a good place to be, to play around with French words I hadn't spoken in decades, and as it turned out, to write.

It amazes me how easily we humans establish routine and ritual in a strange place. I began my day with a brief meditation and journal writing - more of a travelogue actually. I was saving my real story for later. I prepared my daily egg in the rustic but well-equipped kitchen - leisurely. Later I would go for a long bike ride, braving the French traffic, explore the quaint island villages, or take a long walk along the coast. For now, I was simply getting ready. Taking it slow, tasting my breakfast, exulting in the stillness of being alone.

Each day I spent time with my laptop, practicing flow writing, dancing on the page, directionless and free. And then I found myself in the middle of a story I had never intended to write about a woman in relapse. As the story unfolded, flowing out of my fingers faster than I could type, I became terrified. Poorly disguised as fiction, my worst fear was taking shape in front of me. My breathing became ragged and then stopped altogether. I froze in mid-sentence and had to go for a walk. When I got back, I shifted from the first to third person and felt freed up enough to continue.

I was elated when I finished. And not because it was great writing. I was pretty sure it wasn't. I don't know a thing about fiction. I had finally let out my demons and flung them where they could roar to their hearts' content and hopefully leave me alone from now on. Meanwhile, off I went to gather in local color, and when I got back, I returned to non-fiction, pouring it out prolifically during that brief sojourn away from real time and real place. I came home to the Northwest, renewed. Pretty sure I had laid my fears to rest. As it turns out I was wrong, but that comes later. Meanwhile, here's what I wrote:

Discovery

She was standing there, gazing vacantly out the window, when she felt the lump. Not looking for it, just rubbing her neck in an absent minded way and thinking about what she wanted for breakfast. She was alone, purposefully so, having taken off for two months to find her muse. Instead she rediscovered cancer, or at least so it appeared. It seemed so unlikely and at the same time hardly a surprise. She had been sick once before, and while pretty sure she was in the clear, no one who has been through it before ever truly lets her guard down. Except that she had. On this small island a hair's breath off the coast of France, cancer simply did not belong. She had felt safe here, living in a fairy tale world of fishing villages, baguettes, and locally- grown vin ordinaire.

Yet there she was, worrying the new-found lump, and ravenously hungry - which struck her as strange under the circumstances. Since there was no telephone in this rustic seaside home, and she wasn't at all prepared to tell anyone anyway, she made breakfast. The works: eggs and brioche, fresh strawberries, and thick black coffee. She had not drunk coffee in almost two years, one of several bad habits she had relinquished in the name of good health. She figured what the hell, a lot of good that green tea had done, so she added cream for good measure. Breakfast was plentiful, the French coffee excellent. She threw it all up and went to find the pay phone.

It was August, and the village was full of Parisians who had fled their mythical city and in particular the foreign invasion that occurred this time every year. Which made for a long line at the phone booth - which was fine. Maybe she would figure out what to say by the time her turn came. Otherwise, she could just step out and go to the back of the line. One of the things she appreciated about the French is how they don't give a damn what you do as long as you don't butcher their language too much. And in this remote hamlet they were fairly tolerant in that regard as well. She considered telling the sweet looking lady ahead of her about the lump, but she didn't know the right words, and besides why ruin someone else's perfectly nice holiday.

So she waited, patiently and occasionally found her hand fluttering around the side of her neck, like swallowing with a bad sore throat, just to see if it was still there. It was. Encapsulated, painless, resting in the lymph node on the right side. Probably not resting actually, probably taking off in all directions at this very moment, spreading throughout the lymphatic system, collecting in the marrow, attaching itself to unsuspecting organs along the way. She could feel herself starting to panic for the first time and had to bend over to catch her breath. She could not do this. Slowly, she took herself out of the phone line and walked unsteadily back to her blue-shuttered but otherwise stark, white cottage. She was made nauseous by the stench of garbage, which was long overdue for pick-up, but she waived it off, unlocked the door with her oversized key, and collapsed in the one comfortable chair by the window.

Now what? She would go about these remaining two weeks as planned, exploring the island on bicycle, doing her writing exercises, and spending afternoons on the beach collecting characters for her novel. After all, she felt fine, except for the nagging lump, so she figured she had caught it early and that she had ample time to seek treatment. She knew her husband and children wouldn't agree, but then they weren't here, and part of why she had come was to learn how to make her own decisions without their (loving) interference. She had in mind simpler things: which beach to hike, where to eat lunch, which village to explore during an afternoon bike ride. Still, one couldn't always choose the sorts of dilemmas that would come along, and surely, after what she'd been through, she was equipped to handle this one. Anyway, she might be wrong. How many times had she been sure the tumor was back only to realize that, like an amputated limb, the sensations were there even after the offending member was gone.

She was beginning to feel some sense of resolve when her gaze landed on the makeshift altar she had created on the coffee table. Recent pictures of the family lay scattered haphazardly: her husband standing in his garden grinning sweatily as he held up a tomato for inspection; her older son who hated having his picture taken caught in a moment of reflection as he peered at a distant mountain peak; her sixteen year- old posing dramatically in the fedora she had given him for Christmas; and of course Mollie, their Portuguese water dog, eyes hidden behind curly black fur, conveying an evident air of silent reproach. Trinkets and symbols of good fortune, courage, and strength were strewn among the photos, reminders all of what she had been through, and portents of what lay ahead.

Who was she kidding? This was not her life alone to play with so recklessly and possibly to give away. People she loved more than sunshine counted on her and would never forgive her self-indulgence. She sighed tragically. Then once again she picked up her phone card and trudged out to the booth, which was beginning to look ominously like a coffin standing on end. She had to get a grip; it was unlike her to be so dramatic. Too much time living inside her own head with no one to talk to, she supposed. This time the line was down to a few locals. The sun was shining after an unexpected morning of rain, and the tourists had all taken off for the beach. She was unaware of the tears that were beginning to stream down her splotchy cheeks, until a little girl standing behind her nudged her gently and handed over one of those soft linen hankies that only grandmothers are supposed to carry. She took it gratefully, relinquishing all hope of stoicism as she unabashedly blew her nose. Apologizing in her halting French, she realized her turn had come. She pushed in the card, placed the call, and waited, half hoping that no one would answer. It wouldn't be real until … and just then an all too- familiar voice said, "hello."

Definitely not the making of the great American novel, it, nevertheless, felt like a major accomplishment, a weight-relinquishing catharsis. I shared it via e-mail with MaryBrooks, and, of course, with Dale. MaryBrooks said not to change a word, and Dale said it read true. They both said it scared them mightily, and they had to remind themselves it wasn't happening to me. I was emboldened and foolish enough to send it off to a magazine, Rosebud, for publication. The rejection slip was handwritten and to the point, "An overworked theme, needs a sharper angle, show- don't tell." Sometime later I shared it with Christina, my writing guru - teacher - friend. She advised me to stay away from fiction for now, warning that the genre was too complicated. That sounded so ominous and mysterious that I didn't even think to ask why. I wasn't attached to it any more anyway, as it had already served its purpose. Like the retelling of a bad dream at first light, the writing dispelled the fear some and that was worth a rejection slip any old day.

Just last night my fingers happened upon a small bump tucked below my left shoulder muscle. I gasped inwardly, "knowing" instantly it had to be melanoma. Never mind that Logan, Kirk, and I were in the midst of watching the video, Magnolia, which is riddled with mean men dying of cancer. Or that a friend's husband was diagnosed with stage 4 melanoma last week. The obvious connection was irrelevant, and I wasn't reassured until Kirk took a hard look, under a harsh light - with his glasses on - at what turned out to be a harmless wart. It's that quick, that close to the surface all the time.

Each time the bump or lump turns out to be benign, I learn something. This time it was about simply paying attention. Ignoring it won't make it go away, tumors thrive on ignorance. The trick for me is to face it head on, the lump, the bump, the fear. And then to let it go. Breathe it away on my out breath and go on about living. Some days are harder than others. Last week Logan's Spanish teacher was diagnosed with ovarian cancer, the mother of a school friend had a mastectomy, and I already mentioned the melanoma. At such times I find myself thinking about the woman I left stranded in a phone booth in a little village off the west coast of France. And, I worry about how she's going to find her way home.

CANCER IN THE GARDEN

Pesticides - fertilizers - herbicides - arsenic in our drinking water - airborne - waterborne - seeping up through the topsoil - these are my obsessions.

It's springtime, and the brick stoop I'm sitting on feels warm to my butt. Shorts weather as long as I stay put in the sheltered area of our sun-baked patio. Life is pushing through everywhere. Jonquils stage a take-over, bending against the breeze, bursting out from the rhodie bush, spreading like butter across the backyard, and even sneaking up the bank from the gulch. I grew up with these flowers all the way back in Tennessee, where they signaled the same promise I'm feeling here and now. No matter how dreary the winters. Life goes on, even in the face of cancer.

So there is that fear again again, popping up like the maple sprouts that overtake our gardens and walkways this time of year. Unstoppable. Instead of breathing in the pungent fragrance of the *daphne odora*, I'm imagining the spread of cancer cells spurred on by the toxins that have come to rule the land. I didn't always perseverate so. I grew up in a time and place when DDT doubled as a highly effective mosquito repellent. We never considered that anything potent enough to wipe out mosquitoes might not be healthy for Homo-Sapiens either. We were too busy celebrating our weed-free lawns and manicured golf courses to be bothered with consequences. Besides, back then cancer wasn't knocking on so many doors. Now just about everyone I know knows someone who's got it. And we're starting to know some of the reasons why. Yet President Bush has decided to rescind the executive order that would decrease the amount of arsenic in drinking water and to lower the standards for carbon emissions. Golf courses remain herbicide green in the midst of extreme drought, despite concern that golfers have a higher incidence of tongue cancer than the normal population. I've read that they like to lick those little tees they screw into the ground to position the ball. For good luck I suppose. My friend

Terry, the organic landscape designer, is addicted to golf. He assures me that he wears gloves at all times and never puts anything into his mouth. There's something wrong with that picture, at least for me. He laughs at his own foolishness and then tees up for another 9 holes. My dad played golf like a fanatic. Saturdays were scary at our house, breaths held against a bad score. He died of cancer at 83, otherwise a perfect specimen in the peak of health. Do we even know what causes prostate cancer, or is it like lymphoma, where the doctor shrugs a "beats me" kind of shrug and says it's probably genetic or maybe the environment? Well, *that* narrows it down some.

It is so easy for me to go off, sitting here with that watery March sun tickling my face. As hard as I try to be in the moment, cherishing each breath, all I have to do is look across at the neighbors' Lego lawn - everything in its place, matching rows of plants perfectly spaced on either side of the front entrance, and green as plastic - and away I float on a cloud of Dursban.

It was springtime 1999, and I was sitting in this very spot, bald head greeting a warm breeze, when the Orkin truck drove up. It wasn't really an Orkin truck; that's what we had when I was a kid. Nowadays they have fancy names like "Ever-so-Green" and "Ecolawn" to confuse people. A harmless looking young man - meaning that he didn't wear a face mask, carry a gun, or in any other way resemble a mass murderer - assembled his gear and began sending a fine spray of something invisible but mighty stinky into the air. I remember giving those anti-nuclear presentations right after Chernobyl and making a big deal about how the air belongs to all of us. We were paying attention back then as we imagined that nuclear cloud wafting its way laconically around the planet, giving each of us a small taste of the devastation suffered by the Russian folks who lived next door to the reactor. Well, minuscule amounts of stuff spewing my way hardly compared, but it sent me flying indoors, with Wendal in tow, just in case. I put in a call to the neighbors and left an intentionally non-confrontive message, asking please would they let me know the contents of whatever was being sprayed on their trees. I said nothing about the air belonging to all of us, being way more concerned about my personal health than a political debate. They never answered my call, which shouldn't have been a big surprise, communication not being their strong suit. They were nice enough. They simply seemed uninterested in discussing matters of consequence, and our relationship had pretty much topped out at "nice weather, eh" and "how's it going?", with the understanding that an answer was not required. Next I called the offending company - having gotten the number off the side of the truck - and was met by a slightly irritated, bored sounding woman who assured me that *their* spray was completely safe. "That EPA made us cut back our chemicals, so now we have to spray more often," she allowed conspiratorially. "Dang" I said, "raw deal," and hung up. Oh well, I thought, resigned, it's only four times a year. Surely that's not enough to kill anyone except the aphids that are dumb enough to go after those trees. Then Wendal eyeballed me through all that thick curly black fur of his, and I burst into tears. "It's not fair," I wailed, and then glanced around as I heard my grown-up voice chiding me for my persistent attachment to fairness after what I had been going through. I threw a seat cushion at my imaginary self and went to lie down on the sofa. I hated lectures no matter where they came from.

Soon I had better things to think about. In April, Terry started ripping up our lawn. Back in September for Kirk's birthday, Taylor had given him a crayon rendering of our yard, transformed from a sea of mown grass into a wonderland of native plants, meandering stone paths, and a small orchard. Kirk loved it in the abstract but wasn't sure he wanted to tackle something that big. He already had his small vegetable plot and cutting garden and that kept him plenty busy. Taylor was a sophomore at Berkeley, taking his first baby steps toward what would become his life's passion - organic farming. The yard that had served him well for soccer practice for nearly a decade now looked like so much wasted space. Grass - that cultivated weed requiring so much sweat and toil, never mind water and fertilizer - signifying nothing. He was gentle and instead of pressure, he painted a picture. And planted a seed. Kirk is not one to be rushed, certainly not by me who wanted to start tearing out sod with my teeth the moment I saw the drawing. He needed to weigh the options, which he might still be doing if Terry hadn't dropped into our lives. He came to us across the water at the recommendation of my friend Merrilee. A Vashon Island man, accustomed to long delays at the ferry terminal, he made his first visit in October. He took a leisurely stroll with us to get the lay of the land, and more than likely to check us out as well. Soon, he was engaging Kirk in a discussion about drought-tolerant natives while tantalizing me with the promise of a meditation garden, tucked away in a corner of the yard and imbued with mystery. He had us snared, and soon we were pouring over his sketches, picking and choosing and slowly piecing together a plan - not unlike Taylor's original.

I was still healthy when we first met Terry. By the time he returned to begin work in the spring, I was well into the stark realities of disease and treatment. Turns out his dad had lymphoma also; one day he brought him by so I could view a success story. From then on my transformation seemed to parallel the garden's. Everything had to be stripped bare and dug out before new growth could take hold. Tired old caterpillars, we were getting ready to burst forth, newly outfitted butterflies. During weekly sessions, my images were of compost spreading through my chest - the tumor now gone - and making a bed for healthy new cells to grow. We both had setbacks - like the day Frank found what turned out to be a benign nodule in my thyroid - and the morning the deer, in their eagerness to munch the tiny new leaves, broke off a limb on our newly planted cherry tree. Our progress was more circuitous than linear. We were both so vulnerable in our nakedness, yet we persevered the way new growth must - despite the odds and sometimes dire predictions.

Daniel, Terry's assistant, began showing up early mornings to haul dirt. I healed some just watching him. Sweat glistening off his dark-skinned back, he made endless trips to and from the stinky rich mushroom compost pile, easily pushing his overflowing and rusted-out, yellow wheelbarrow. More like a Zen Buddhist immersed in walking meditation, he moved slow and steady, clear of purpose. Over tall glasses of ice water, he said he'd known some tough years and had found that taking his time and paying attention worked best for him. We had some things in common, aside from being in our early fifties and having both run away from the South. We knew the value of friendship, and we were each in our own recovery program, hoping we'd get upgraded and could call ourselves survivors. One day he didn't come, and I missed his steady progress. A week went by, and it appeared he was gone for good. Terry said his misery had come back to haunt him, and the bottle's call was just too strong to resist. I didn't get involved with the day laborers who replaced him; their stories looked too sad to imagine. Dutifully I left out pitchers of water, but I couldn't bear to watch someone else pushing Daniel's wheelbarrow. I was such easy prey to even the hint of a bad omen.

Summer came early and warm after the endless days of Northwest rain. Treatment ended July 7, and soon both the garden and I were ready to reveal ourselves to others. Kirk and I wanted all the neighbors to feel welcome; after all, they had put up with mud and muck for months, and we figured they were bound to be curious. And, as often is the case, there was an underlying agenda. Perhaps if people visited our yard, they would think twice before spraying their own. Terry gave me an organic gardening newsletter, which included an article on community building. I made copies and hand-delivered them along with an inviting cover letter that both Kirk and I signed. I listed all 12 neighbors at the top, so that no one would feel singled out. Clever me!

While many folks weren't home, a few were. And the comments about the new growth that was sprouting on my bald head provided an easy segue into garden talk. Some folks thought we were crazy to be creating work for ourselves. "Grass is so easy," they said. We knew better. We no longer believed in easy. I spoke of our commitment to a pesticide-free, drought-tolerant yard, about the anticipated pleasure of eating a crisp apple pulled off our very own tree, and about my newly found obsession with breathing uncontaminated air. I learned that we weren't the only concerned ones and was encouraged by the interest expressed in visiting our new landscape. Until I got to the Kellys - the Lego folks. I was in a charitable mood but also feeling cowardly, so when their son answered the door, I gave him the papers and asked that he share them with his parents. A missed opportunity and one I have since regretted.

The materials must have made a big impression! Less than two weeks later, we spotted a man - wearing no protective covering - dribbling an odorless, colorless liquid onto the Kellys' lawn. Kirk went to check him out. "Dursban," he reported upon return. "It's supposed to kill a bug that's nibbling their grass." I called Terry, who once labeled their place the nazi yard. He was livid. "That stuff's lethal," he said and directed me to a website that claimed a relationship between Dursban and childhood leukemia, asthma, and, of course, lymphoma. A few months later we heard that the EPA had banned it from future use, unfortunately with a grace period of several years. I felt simultaneously vindicated and dismayed.

I still do. Which is why I'm sitting here on the front porch, obsessing instead of appreciating. Then I spy some little white and purple daisy-like flowers dancing in the breeze. I later learn they are called anemones, which strikes me as odd. Aren't those sea creatures? In that moment I know them only as wind flowers, and I allow myself to dance with them. We catch each other's eyes and laugh out loud, mellifluously. In that instant I hear the Indigo Girls singing "… It's only life after all," and I flash back over the past two years of earnest effort on my part to stay in this life as long as possible. What's the point I wonder, if I'm spending it afraid to breathe the air, drink the water, and raging against the neighbors. I can only do so much. Besides sometimes my anger really scares me. With so much talk about folks causing their cancer, I walk a shaky tight rope. I can do my bit and then for my own sake do my best to let it go.

I grab my sage, light a candle, and head out to my meditation garden. Tucked away at the end of a stone path where baby white tulip bulbs are just pushing up from the dirt, it looks out toward Vashon and provides the mystery Terry promised. I breathe in gratitude and humility. I breathe out righteousness and meanness. After some resistance, I send a blessing toward the Kellys. "God forgive them for they know not what they do," I intone, surprised by the enduring nature of my protestant upbringing. I tilt toward the Madrona and bow in deference to her majesty. A crow cackles back at me from her summit chiding me for taking myself so damn seriously. I sprinkle some sage on the ground and repeat my mantra "for the privilege of this day and my time on the Earth, I am grateful." I think about Daniel and hope he's having a good day. I send blessings to Martha, who just had a mastectomy, and to Greg, who has melanoma. I walk back toward the house, taking in the rosemary that's sprouting purple flowers and the Oregon grape that's covered in yellow blossoms. I'm chanting "may you walk in beauty every day, may you walk in beauty each and every way." I know I am not through worrying about pesticides. The Kellys will most likely continue to spray, greens-keepers will risk their own health for the sake of their fairways, friends will continue to be diagnosed with cancers that may have environmental etiologies. And it will make me feel sick, angry, and scared. Maybe the next time, I will catch myself a little sooner, especially if the wind flowers are blooming, and before leaping back into the fray, I can be glad for this moment, and for this day.

LOOKING BACK - MOVING FORWARD

It's Only Life After All

"The paddler, the mountain climber, the cancer survivor - each comes back into the framework of our lives charged with the responsibility to hold on to our spiritual awakenings. As life returns to its ordinary patterns, we are faced with countless decisions about how to sustain connection and change."

Ann Linnea, author, *Deep Water Passage, quoted from Calling the Circle - The First and Future Culture, by Christina Baldwin*

LAURA - MOVING FRIENDS FOREVER

Walking in the crisp morning air, I know once again that I am in love. It's Sunday morning, our time, my friend-for-life and me. We have both been out of town, so it's been weeks since we've walked. We are religious about this time, we count on it, like breathing and afternoon naps. We have lots to talk about, stories to tell, adventures to share. But it's not really the words that matter, it's just being together, and moving. We know what we have is precious, and we are demonstrative, as always in our greeting. We cling to one another and then off we go.

We have been traveling together for over twenty years through all kinds of weather and family turmoil. Laura discovered me one day, coming home from a run and anointed me her new running partner. I confessed straight out to being a fair- weather short-distance runner, never mind my well-developed calves that attracted her in the first place. She was nonplussed and said she would have my distance up in no time. Who was this woman so determined to get me out on the road? As it turns out, she was right. Pretty soon, in spite of myself, we were doing 5 miles three times a week. I had always hated to run and only did it so I could eat what I wanted and stay fit. With Laura I forgot I was running. We talked the whole time, holding nothing back. We laughed out loud. And we became friends. I doubt that we gave it a lot of thought in those early years. We were too busy worrying over our young children, wondering if they would be toilet-trained by kindergarten, and complaining about our husbands, those insensitive men too caught up in their own lives to notice ours very much. We took for granted our youth and good health. We were old first-time parents, in our early thirties with our caesarian born baby boys.

Years passed. Laura had a second baby boy, and shortly thereafter I did as well. We were mothers of sons; we had a lot in common. We kept running - talking - trusting each other with our deepest secrets. Fueled by adrenaline, we held nothing back and opened ourselves to each other's advice. There was plenty, and it always helped, at least for my part. We ran through an almost-affair or two, serious marital discord, work changes, and childhood traumas. We ran through damp dark evenings and hot sunny afternoons, changing clothes to fit the seasons, adjusting days and times to fit our schedules, but always always running.

Laura is my moving friend. We tried biking for a while when she had an injury that prevented running. We came close to dying a few times as we misjudged oncoming traffic and slick rainy roads. Biking impeded our conversation some, but it was only a temporary adjustment. We were nothing if not adaptable, and soon we were back to our old running pattern. Once we were so engrossed in conversation that we didn't hear the man coming up from behind. It was dark and windy, and we were leaning close together, oblivious to the world around us. Then we heard heavy breathing right next to us, and we screamed, and grabbed one another, and scared the shit of that poor runner who had the temerity to blurt out "runner on the left" and pull us out of our reverie. After he passed, trembling in his own fear, we laughed uproariously at the power of our screams. We were invincible. We could handle anything.

Then I took up soccer and began an exhilarating four-year process of wrecking my body. Eventually, I had to quit running distances. We tried having tea together, but it didn't work. Laura could not/would not sit still. I thought that was the end of us. Instead, we decided to walk and so began our Sunday dates. We found a route that satisfied us both, with enough hills to challenge and very little traffic to cause distraction. We continued to move and talk fast, rushing down hill toward the waterfront, cruising along the flats, and puffing back up the other side. We continued to share the trials, tribulations, and intermittent joys of parenthood in our hurried breathy fashion. We sandwiched in those walks, just like the runs before them, between the real tasks of life: our jobs and families mostly. We had our small adventures, including the time we saw a naked man doing his own brand of yoga overlooking Puget Sound. And the day we passed a man running toward us who was so gorgeous that we had to turn around and stare at his retreating butt. Only to find out that his butt was bare under his long running shirt. We were thrilled, searching him out for weeks afterwards, hoping to catch another glimpse and eventually wondering if we had made him up.

Then I got sick and everything changed. At first I refused to see Laura because I didn't think I could handle her reaction. She is a woman of intense emotion - we are alike in that way - and I knew this turn of events had slammed her hard. Years before she had been more upset than I was by my early miscarriage. Also, her mother had died of cancer, and she had her own personal scars from this disease. So I kept her at a distance until she promised to keep it together. She came over to see me, which was so weird, the two of us just sitting in my living room trying to act casual about the tumor that had grown between us. When I couldn't stand her pained smile any longer, I relented in exasperation, "oh, hell, let it go!." She did, and we cried, and laughed, and then cried some more, all that pent-up emotion demanding release.

And then we did what we knew how to do best. We moved. We kept walking, through months of chemo and radiation. I couldn't manage the hills anymore, so every Sunday, I drove us down to the waterfront where we could walk the flats. I might have been sick but that didn't mean I was going to let the woman who's afraid to drive across the Narrows Bridge put me in harm's way. We struck out, arm and arm, resolute, and scared. She always made sure my bald head was bundled against the winter cold. I teased her about that, but I liked the way she looked out for me. She told me that someday we'd look back on this time as a mere blip in the greater scheme of things. I said no; this thing was big and we would never be the same. She nodded reluctantly and withdrew her naïve words of reassurance. Sometimes we passed friends who said how good I looked, sometimes strangers who said they were praying for me. It had its surreal moments.

Those walks became sacred - our Sunday school in a way - and something I was determined to do pretty much no matter what. We walked more slowly because my feet had gone flat and lifeless due to the vincristine in my chemo cocktail. Also because my energy was as low as a tadpole in wintertime. We laughed more, and cried some, we held hands and hugged when we needed to, and we didn't give a rat's ass what anybody thought about any of it. All those years of worry about our kids, complaining about our husbands, grieving the deaths of parents, and adjusting to Laura's new step-mom - none of it had prepared us for almost losing each other.

Now that I am healthy again we have picked up the pace. We cruise up and down those long hills, rain or shine. We take nothing for granted. We have come to know in a way that is as intense as a rainbow over the Sound that we are blessed. I amble over to her house, and we discuss how cold or hot it is outside. We adjust our clothes accordingly, adding gloves, or discarding jackets. We hug and giggle and head down the hill, blowing off steam about the events of the week. I stop to yell at a couple of crows, and we laugh at my outlandishness. As we hit the flats along the waterfront, at about mile two, we move into full swing. Today we see a seal cavorting in the waves, and we actually pause for a moment to appreciate the sight. We *ooh* and *ahh* at the light reflecting off the seal's back, and we hold onto one another in gay abandon. We are each other's best audience, and we know it. We are in church, and it is a holy place, and we are paying attention. We realize how fragile it all is in a way we could not have fathomed in those other days. And maybe because of that, we are sassier than ever, walking through the seasons, worrying about our kids, complaining about our husbands, and celebrating our ability to do so. We are more philosophical these days about most things, perhaps because we went to the brink and we saw what it looked like over the edge.

Laura and I love each other in a way that only best girlfriends can, unconditionally and with an honesty rarely shared in other relationships. I know that she will be there for me always, and I trust that she feels the same way about me. She is my moving friend, and we are at our best when we're charging up a hill, deeply engaged in matters of great importance - at least to us. We walk now instead of run, but it doesn't matter. We are steady and true to our path, and most especially, to one another.

SACRED GARMENTS

Mormon women wear sacred underwear. Only they are called "garments", and they're a well-kept Mormon secret. At least they were to me until this afternoon when Meg let it slip in my writers' group. My mind went to something black and lacy from Victoria's Secret, but she said it wasn't so. Apparently they protect the wearer and identify her to other members of the clan. Like a secret handshake I suppose. I am left wondering about the meaning of undergarments with mystic powers - to those women of course - but also in my own life. I who wear jockey underwear and feel down right fancy on the days I bypass white for the purple striped ones. I have three piles of underpants in my drawer - just about the only compulsive thing about me - whites, colors, and stripes, and I pick them to fit my mood. All that is to say that underwear does matter, but *sacred*, now that's another thing altogether.

"Garments" make me think about my mother in an entirely new way. In fact, they almost make me want to go looking for her - something I have not done in all those 52 years since I was given up for adoption. Like most adopted kids of my generation, I was handed the news when I was too little to understand what it meant. "We chose you out of a room full of beautiful babies," I remember my mother telling me, even though I was only five at the time. "We picked you because you were the best of all." Visions of K-mart baby dolls, testing for the one with the most desirable features. She wets, she cries, she is well-behaved in public and not overly demanding at home.

After that, I was pretty much discouraged from ever mentioning the "A" word again. My parents had their own shame to deal with about not being able to make babies like normal people. It showed up in my mother's alcoholism and my father's angry disappointment in a son not truly his. So we didn't talk about it, and I was pretty ashamed myself for being a cast-off. Kind of like used clothes, nearly new and a pretty good bargain but somehow tainted for having been discarded. It was harder on my older, not-related-to-me brother, because they got him first. He bore the brunt of my mother's self-doubt and my father's blame. He was a difficult child and did not measure up. I fared better, coming second, a girl, and eager to please. I pretty much got over that hand-me-down feeling, but it took some years and the help of a capable therapist. Somewhere in my twenties I came to appreciate the courage of that good woman, whoever she was, for knowing better than to keep a kid she couldn't care for. Whatever her reasons. The parents who raised me were loving, if flawed, and I figured they were enough for one lifetime.

It wasn't until I had my own kids to worry about that I gave *her* much thought. And then only as the potential carrier of pestilence and disease. I've thought about him some too, my elusive birth-father, but that's another story. When I was twenty-five and had been married a few years, I attempted to break the silence on the subject of my birth. The sudden hit-and-run death of our wedding gift puppy-dog threw me into an intensely - though short lived - maternal state. I was in graduate school at the time and taking genetics. Those two events conspired to make me consider my origins. With great trepidation and careful word-crafting, I wrote my parents and asked their help. It was a painful attempt, and it netted very little. My dad sent a letter of inquiry to the Cradle Society, the upscale adoption agency in Chicago, Illinois, where I was housed for the first six weeks of life. He received an oblique response that revealed little of interest and only served to return me to silence.

We got over that poor mutt's death and put off having children for a while. Eventually we went on faith and hormones and started our family. The relevance of my genetic make-up faded into the background until I was diagnosed with cancer, 25 years later. Although no one knows for sure what causes lymphoma, genetics has been implicated. So I became concerned for my kids. This time I was looking for something specific and hoping desperately that I wouldn't find it. Connecting with the Cradle was so easy! I simply fired up my computer, found the website, and shot off an e-mail, chuckling over the disappearance of "Society" from the agency's name. Most likely part of a new, more inclusive, image. I received an immediate response. In keeping with the times, a new tenor of openness has developed in the adoption business. I was treated with respect and consideration and felt legitimate for one of the few times in my life. I didn't find what I was looking for; no one was tracking cancer in those days when polio was all the rage. What I found, however, was something I had not bargained for.

It turns out that my birth-mama was Mormon, and there is nothing about that fact that sat right with me. In all my fantasies, I never came up Mormon. I have imagined myself Jewish and Native American mostly. I am dark and carry strong energy. My features, especially my nose, are well defined. As a young teenager I visited a synagogue once with a friend and even went so far as to dye my hair black and wear it in braids for a while. It was not a very sophisticated approach to searching for one's roots, but it was the best I could do at the time. In the 70's, I boycotted Safeway and other known-to-be Mormon establishments. I am pro-choice, and they most definitely were not. About that same time I attended a statewide women's conference in Yakima, Washington, and watched a large group of Mormons take it over. I was struck by the way a few men, carrying walkie talkies, herded their women into isolated groups and informed them how to vote on issues related to women's rights. I remember trying to engage a young woman about my age in some form of conversation, only to be rebuked by the fear in her eyes. We were the enemy, the bra-burners, the baby-haters, or so she had been taught by the men in charge. I was 29 years old, two months pregnant with my first-born and was sporting a fairly obvious bra. I am 5'2" on a tall day and not generally a scary person - except to her and the other Mormon women in her entourage.

Now I come to find out that *she* was one. And I'm searching for the good news in that discovery. And some way to know her beyond my own solidified stereotypes. Maybe it has something to do with the underwear. I wonder what she was wearing that day in

April when her water broke. Did pregnant Mormon girls get to wear sacred garments or were they shamed into wearing something plain and ordinary? Maybe even scratchy and homespun? She was 29 when I was born - a fact I noted with interest, as I sought common ground. Most likely she had already been initiated into the secret society of the sacred garments, only to have them snatched away when she came up pregnant. An out-of-wedlock Mormon woman living somewhere out west in 1948; it probably didn't get a whole lot worse.

Mormons don't give up their babies, at least that is what I have been told. And yet *she* did. That must have been some story. All I know is that she worked in her dad's café from high school on, that she met my birth-father somewhere in the Southwest, and that she came back pregnant. An aunt in Chicago provided her some kind of refuge, and after a long, hard labor, she gave birth to me. She did not see me after I was born. Apparently she went home to the café and never looked back. As far as I am concerned, she did the right thing. It would not have worked out, her and me. While I never quite fit in that southern landscape of Nashville, Tennessee, where I was raised, I sure as hell wouldn't have made it as a good Mormon girl-child. I am simply too outspoken and strong-willed. But then so is Terry Tempest Williams, and she's a Mormon. I read her books, trying further to unravel the mysteries of my Mormon heritage. She has written boldly about her divergence from the Mormon patriarchy, and she has demonstrated publicly against the nuclear testing that most likely gave so many of her clan breast cancer. Her identification with the Earth is authentic and true. I bet she doesn't wear that secret underwear. I grew up in a racist south knowing I would have to leave. I demonstrated against a war I believed was a lie. I have spent a lot of my life fighting discrimination of all kinds. I too have taken my stand.

Maybe my mother did as well. I think giving away a baby is about the strongest, hardest thing a woman could be called upon to do. I am sorry I never told her so, but I believe that opportunity, if it ever existed, passed us by a long time ago. I reflect on what I've gone through these past two years and wonder what it is about cancer that has turned my thoughts her way. Something about the shock of discovery and my subsequent vulnerability. Facing something this big has made me appreciate in a new way what she was up against in that small dusty town so long ago. What I wonder is did she ever get to tell her story? Did her own mama support her? Did she ever find true love? What were the colors and flavors of her life and did she know the joy of a baby in arms? What happened to such a woman tainted by the consequences of unholy love? Did she ever wonder what happened to my life, and does she know I admire her for letting me go? I think maybe she has something to do with my stubbornness and penchant for survival, and I thank her for that as well. I hope her life held some joy. I hope she got a second chance, and I hope they gave her back those sacred garments. That is, if she even wanted them anymore.

BARBIE GETS CANCER

My friend Clara has a friend named Helen who has breast cancer. It is one of the really bad kinds. I say that knowing that there are no good ones; however, this one is more virulent than others. This one has the dubious honor of being the fastest growing on record. Helen would prefer second runner up but no such luck.

Helen and I are different in many ways. We have never met, but Clara has spoken of her often, so I feel as though I know her, at least superficially. She is fiercely independent and rarely asks others for help. She does not have nor seem to desire a huge support system, a significant- other or family close by. Until now she has not had much experience with the medical system. She has a rather traditional vision of what constitutes good looks. Tall, blonde, and thin, she is conventionally pretty, without giving much thought to exercise, and on top of that she is also a nice person. She is single by choice and does not have children.

Clara walked every step of my journey with me, and she knows how I rely on my rather extensive support system, friends, and family. I pretty much abandoned make-up in the seventies; I think beauty transcends lipstick and face paint, and besides, it's a whole lot of trouble. I am destined to remain short, dark, and *cute.* More like a terrier than a Barbie Doll. Having worked in and around hospitals much of my professional life, and after 30 years of marriage to a pediatrician, doctors hold very little power over me. They must earn my respect like everyone else. As I told Kirk once, "you may be God at the office, but at home you're a mere mortal like the rest of us."

What Helen and I have in common is cancer. Also we are both in our early 50's. And we share Clara. Because of my experience with lymphoma, I am now a resource person, someone who "knows", who has "been there". Near-strangers ask me for advice, and sometimes it gets tiresome. Clara is a friend for life, so when she tells me about Helen, I listen hard.

Last week I learned that Helen's oncologist *forbade* her from working with a naturopath while going through chemo. He said the nutrients would interfere with its effectiveness. I believe he is wrong. The first thing I recommend to anyone new to cancer is to find a really good naturopath, preferably with oncology expertise, specifically to build up her immune system, facilitate the efficacy of treatment, and mitigate against treatment's deleterious effects. It worked for me! Helen did call to make an appointment with my very own Paul Reilly, but she could not get in right away, so for now she has given up. Sometimes getting past a receptionist is just too hard. Also, she decided to stay with her cancer doc even though she does not like him. He has a good reputation. Never mind that he is confusing her and taking away much of her power. She is too tired and overwhelmed to track down a second opinion. I understand. Having cancer is about the most overwhelming thing I have had to face. Every move feels like wading through mud. Every step carries the possibility of defeat. Still, I wish she would muster that independence of hers and go see someone else.

Today I learned that Helen's doctor (whose name I fortunately do not know) referred her to a Ladies' Cancer Beauty Expert. Helen has now ordered a wig and has bought some new make-up. She already uses make-up, and from what I hear, she looks good. I suppose she learned some secrets about disguising fatigue and other tell-tale signs of chemo. When I heard about the Beauty expert, I blew up!

Barbie gets cancer! Now I have nothing against women choosing to wear wigs, scarves, perfectly applied make-up, or whatever else the hell they want to do to make themselves feel better and in control of *something*. Cancer can totally undermine any sense of control or self-confidence, and for some women breast cancer destroys their sense of femininity. Never mind the ever-present fear of dying, which almost no one will talk about. So my sympathies and empathies are strong.

What makes me crazy is a culture, ours, that resists naturopathic medicine and endorses face paint. The message is clear: Listen to your doctor, do what *he* says, do not take your health care in your own hands, and for God's sake, look good.

I am lucky. At least according to Logan, I have a great head. I do not make that claim with arrogance; it is just a fact, and it made being bald a bit easier. I am even luckier that I have family and friends who endorsed the choices I made about my health care. For about a minute after diagnosis, I contemplated the shame of cancer, the notion that it was somehow my fault and that I should do what I could to disguise it. I got over it, and I wanted others to know I was not ashamed. Just sick. There were plenty of times when I wished I could go to the grocery store or a Board meeting incognito. On those days I could imagine the value of a disguise or a move to San Francisco. And yet, while I was not particularly motivated by an in- your-face, deal-with-it-people sort of attitude, I suppose I did want to model a sense of pride and courage.

Now that I am in survivor mode, I am a crusader for women to stay away from the Barbie track. Wear a wig, sport a baseball cap, bare your head to the breeze. Whatever you decide, do it because it is what you want to do. Be true to you.

As far as Helen goes, I hope she loves her wig and has fun with the make-up. I hope she looks in the mirror and sees a survivor. I hope she swells with pride at the obstacles she is facing with tremendous courage. And I hope that she carries no shame. I hope she loves herself bald, and sick, and tired. I hope she occasionally reaches out to her friends and allows them to hold her hand. There is nothing to like about cancer. There are, however, moments to cherish, and for me they included the loving kindness of others and an emerging sense of my own power. I bless her journey and wish her well. I hope she reconsiders and gets herself a different doctor. And I hope she tells him why.

FIVE POUND WEIGHTS

Lorraine moves like a belly dancer, all swaying hips and sexual invitation. She is a relative newcomer to the aerobics class where I have danced three days a week for almost twelve years. She fits right in, as we are a motley group spanning decades and displaying an array of body types. I love this class. When I am in my zone, I am the center of the universe, kicking and whirling, and as Lorraine says, "I achieve lift-off."

When I was a kid, I took the requisite years of ballet dancing, making my parents proud in my starchly stiff tutu as I pliéd and jetéd across the hard wood floor. My mother never forgave me for quitting just as I was about to graduate to toe shoes, turning the blame on my friend Viola Hall for leading me astray. The truth is I felt confined. Ballet is so precise, so perfect - no room for mistakes and certainly not for improvisation. I wince as I remember my stern, rail thin, tight-lipped teacher lurking at our backs with her ruler ready to strike out the instant a *faux pas* was committed. We were children, expected to conform. It was not in my nature. I longed to climb trees and fight with boys; instead I found myself lacing up a pair of pale pink satiny slippers that pinched my toes and squelched my urge to run. One day I hung them up and never looked back.

That's why I love aerobics. I perform for me. And occasionally when I get a wild hair, I like to show off. Breaking into an impromptu twist or bump-and- grind as dictated by the music and my inner impulses of the moment. Debbie, who's taught the class from the beginning, encourages me. We motivate one another, especially on the days when much of the class seems more interested in high level gossip than lifting their heart rates. Debbie has tried getting tough, announcing a no-talking rule during the aerobic part of the workout. It stuck for a while, but the desire for conversation won out in the end. I am no paragon. I like to visit as much as the next person, but I crave movement even more, so I usually confine my chats to warm-ups and cool-downs, and of course when Debbie makes us go outside to run stairs and hills. It takes my mind off the agony. I love to move and to dance, fancying myself a whirling dervish in spandex. I cannot abide regimented repetitive exercise of any sort. Remnants of ballet class, I am sure.

Which brings me to my least favorite part of the class: weight lifting. It has become the rage of late, championed by doctors and exercise freaks alike. Many of us have entered the menopause years, signaling the outflow of calcium and subsequent dissolution of our bones. Weight-bearing exercise has been heralded as the antidote. There are women in aerobics who have yet to break a sweat who faithfully shuffle off to weight training at the local Y. Debbie has included hand weights in our routine for years, and for years I have declined, claiming chronic neck problems. During that 15 minutes of torture, I pantomimed the moves, simultaneously tightening my arm muscles while relaxing my neck - no small feat. The thing is I have great biceps, so Debbie was content to let me go my own way. We had an understanding that she would let me know if she noticed any decrease in bone density, and I would in that instant pick up my first weight. She is psychic about bodies, able to guess a person's body fat within points, so I felt confident she would know when my time came. She did. During my 49th year, after a three-week trip to Cuba, where I had contracted a rather virulent local flu, she told me I looked weak. She handed over a pair of pink hand weights, 2 pounds apiece. A pretty puny start! I hated them but dutifully complied, suffering the anguish for the sake of my bones, while complaining vociferously. In her wisdom Debbie ignored me, except to laugh occasionally at my whining. As I completed each methodical repetition, I pictured my little-girl-self struggling to align her uncooperative feet in fourth position, and I wanted to hang up the weights right there. Except that I couldn't let Debbie down. She is a worrier, and my bones were under her special care.

As it turned out my weight-lifting career was short-lived. I began complaining of fatigue, and non-specific chest and back pain. Debbie was concerned. She was used to me giving her a hard time when she had gone overboard with stomach crunches, but I was her front row, high-energy, stellar student. If I was tired, something was wrong. Over the months as I continued to slow down, she hounded me to see a doctor. “I did,” I snarled. “It’s just menopause and muscular skeletal strain.” I was in physical therapy and had sought medical advice on more than one occasion. They had found nothing. And I was still the most active member of the class. One day when I’d had enough of her mothering, I snapped at her to lay off. A week later I was sitting in that cardiologist’s office, getting the results of my chest x-ray. Debbie was one of the people I dreaded calling. I expected her to freak because that’s her nature. She surprised me. Instead she was subdued - and eerily calm - as she whispered almost inaudibly, “ I know.” It turns out she’d had a premonition that I had a tumor in my chest, and she didn’t know what to do about it other than to beseech me to seek care.

Nowadays, I’m lifting five-pound weights, which I know isn’t much. I still hate them, but I no longer object. I have learned to endure small discomforts. And I have become a believer in strong bones.

Years ago after my father died, I attended a grief workshop in Seattle. It was my first encounter with Stephen Levine, death and dying, life and living guru - the man who first taught me about five pound weights. They were his metaphor for the daily hassles that cause many of us such stress: traffic jams, long lines at the post office, a stubbed toe, or a broken fingernail. Life’s little curved balls, they provide us an opportunity to practice. If, instead of letting them drive us to road rage, we saw them for the mild annoyances they are, we would be better able to handle the big stuff down the road. As he spoke, and I looked around at the sea of rapt faces, I wondered to whom he was speaking. Over 500 people were packed into that room, the majority sitting in rows on cold, metal folding chairs. About 100 of us had arrived early enough to get the coveted front row floor space, and we were sprawled comfortably on our own pillows and seat cushions. It was these fellow floor-sitters that held my attention, for they were mostly young men afflicted with AIDS, leaning against their equally young male partners. It was my first up close and personal experience with actual infected human beings, during those early years when AIDS belonged to the gay community and was always fatal. I was blown away by the tenderness and love that I witnessed on the floor that day, and I felt like just about the luckiest person in the world, to be healthy, and to be doing something that felt really normal, and right on schedule, mourning the passing of my 83 year-old-dad. I could almost luxuriate in the simplicity of my grief.

Stephen must be speaking to me, I reasoned. While I did not feel compelled to minimize the loss of my father, I was able to put it in perspective. The weights these folks carried could be measured in tons. And yet as I watched lovers care for one another, offering sips of water, gently draping a shawl over shrunken shoulders, I witnessed a kind of acceptance and gratitude that I could not yet begin to understand. I felt terribly inadequate. How could I ever cope so graciously with life's biggest wallops when I was still stuck back in traffic, yelling self-righteously at the ass-hole who had just cut me off.

Hefting these bright yellow five-pounders in Debbie's aerobics class, I have come inches closer to understanding Stephen's message. I am struck by our different tolerance levels as I watch my classmates bend at the waist and begin an endless repetition of arm curls. Lorraine delicately holds the little pink weights I started with over two years ago. Mary easily hoists the green ten-pounders, and Debbie demonstrates with a pair in each hand because she's outgrown the singles. We each carry what we can and what we will, and who's to say whose experience is the hardest to endure? Even now, looking back, I tend to minimize my cancer. What if I had been given a death sentence, instead of being told that most likely I would live? What then? I remember the ravaged faces of those men with AIDS. I picture the homeless woman, standing inconveniently at the freeway exit, with her handwritten sign, "Sober mom, please help!" I look over at my friend Cheri, whose weights are raspberry colored and weigh just four pounds, and I wonder how she does it. She nursed her son for seven years before he died of a brain tumor at age ten. She is one of the most joyful and celebratory people I know. And then I think about my friend Clare, who endured two bouts of breast cancer and the loss of her precious right breast. After reading one of my essays, she wrote in response,

"I'm sobered by the fierceness of your treatment. We each walked rugged trails in our treatments, Janie. As you describe yours, I wonder if I could have managed your trek".

Those words shook me. Had I exaggerated my experience for effect? How could she imagine that my trek was worse than hers? Wasn't I the one who had gotten off easy? Whose body remained intact? Now, as I reminisce, while coming as close as I ever intend to pumping iron, I am struck by the absurdity of such comparisons. As Clare said, "We each walked rugged trails," and I would add that we did so with amazing grace. Perhaps I had been practicing after all and just didn't realize it. Or maybe the big ones teach us to handle the day-to-day. Nowadays, traffic doesn't much faze me. I laugh as I trip over the dog's annoying squeaky toy. I am virtually unflappable in the face of burned toast.

As Debbie signals at last that it is time to put away the weights and to move on to other endeavors, I am flooded with both relief and gratitude. It is almost time to stretch, our reward for hard work. First we manage a few push-ups, which for some strange reason I enjoy immensely, and then endure way too many stomach crunches. Then Debbie leaps up - she has more energy than anyone I know, myself included - dims the lights, and switches to classical music. "Ahh," the room breathes a collective sigh, as we lie on our mats, extend our tired muscles, and breathe into a nice slow stretch. I cannot say how heavy a load I have carried thus far. I know that I have learned to heft far more than I believed possible. I hope it has prepared me some for whatever lies ahead.

THE MOON WAS FULL WHEN MY MAMA DIED

"The moon was full when my Mama died. She slipped away in the early hours of a new morning, as she lived -- quietly. Dying when the moon was full may have been one of the wildest things she ever did. If I have a regret, it's that she didn't do more.

Living to be 92 is an accomplishment in itself I suppose. And Mom was mighty lucky that she got to remain in her home surrounded by the love and care of her friend and companion, Ida Jones. Still and all, it could not have been easy to see the passing of so many before and to slowly fade away from this vigorous life that many of us love so well."

Those were the opening words I spoke to the small gathering of folks who had come to bid my Mom farewell. I got the call early on a Wednesday morning, just days after my ambulance ride to the ER. I was barely awake, blowing steam across my first cup of tea and wondering if perhaps my life was finally going to return to normal. I was still exhausted from all the blood loss but starting to feel a glimmer of energy swirl through my body again, my first ray of hope emerging out of deep fatigue. Rrrring. It actually took a moment for me to return from my reverie and to pick up the phone. "Janie?" It was Ida on the phone, and her raspy voice told me she had been crying. "It's your Mama. She passed on sometime during the night. In her sleep. I checked on her close to midnight, and she seemed fine, though her breathing had become so shallow, I had to put my head right down on her chest to be sure." She paused for breath and courage and then we made plans. "Not now," I thought selfishly. "Not when I'm just beginning to get my strength back." I brushed the thought away like cobwebs and soon was on the phone making reservations on Southwest Airlines, grateful there was finally a direct flight to Nashville. Six hours of flying gave me plenty of time to think about my mom and to reckon with her death.

I know so little about her life really. I grew up in a time when parents were not meant to be friends, and our age difference of forty years created an even greater chasm between us. I loved her though and admired her kind and patient nature, so different from my own. At the same time, the way she put up with my dad's endless stream of criticism made me mad. She did not stand up for me as a child, but then I realized later she never stood up for herself either. Some folks say he spoiled her, gave her too many things, even back when they were young and poor. Maybe so. But to me she did not appear spoiled as much as overwhelmed by a fast life and an ambitious husband. I believe she might have been happier had she remained on the bluff overlooking the railroad tracks, in Ripley, Tennessee. A small town where expectations were of an ordinary nature, where the brother she adored took over the family pharmacy and where her sister grew up to be a crotchety old maid. Instead she went off to Vanderbilt University where she met my dad the football hero. While she did not graduate, she did manage to snare this handsome big man who wanted so much out of life and would not be satisfied until he got it. I hear she was beautiful, a real head turner. Her pictures say it was so, and even as an old woman she held her looks. My parents must have seemed perfect together, and perhaps they were for a time.

The fact that they were unable to make babies was assumed to be her fault. I always wondered but never asked what that must have been like. Next to catching the right man, having children was what women were supposed to do. I cannot imagine the guilt she must have endured, and I feel sure it was exacerbated by my dad's need to exact blame. The possibility of his own inadequacy would not be considered, so she bore the brunt of that failure all alone and eventually convinced him to adopt my brother and me. We were four years apart and as different as could be. Jim was never meant to be part of this family and would surely have grown into a healthier happier man had he been raised by simpler folk. When life got tough, he used to escape to the Ripley relatives who welcomed him into their fold. Off-the-chart expectations killed his spirit at an early age. Not of my father's loins, he was, nevertheless, expected to be my father's son: extrovert, athletic, sensibly smart, and above all ambitious. He was none of these things. He was a sweet, blond-headed boy who turned taciturn and inward, escaping into his room, and later inside his own tormented self. Thank goodness for those kind country cousins who took him in and gave meaning to his life.

Jim and I were never close. My daddy's little girl, I easily became the favorite. I was dark and wiry, athletic like him, cute and petite like my mom. I looked like I belonged, and I'm quite sure that made it easier for them to welcome me into the fold. I excelled at school and was a jock as well. My desire to please was big, and while I too disappointed my dad from time to time, my achievements outweighed my failures. I knew I was loved and that saved me in the long run. Somewhere along the way, Jim pissed off my parents so much that he likely wondered if he had killed whatever affection they must have felt when he was young. From my perspective, he didn't stand a chance. If I lacked the drive my father demanded, at least there was a chance I would find a man who fit the bill. I used to feel bad about my brother's life and the part I must have played in making it worse. But he became a distant and mean adolescent, he smelled bad - a combination of poor hygiene and pores clogged from years of pent-up rage - and I was both frightened and embarrassed in his presence. As a young teenager I pretty much pretended he didn't exist. Which wasn't hard to do. By that time, the folks were shipping him off to whatever boarding school or military academy would take him. No one knew about learning disabilities in those days, so kids who did not fit in were disciplined. No wonder he was mean.

As a grown man, he has remained distant, but he has become kind in his own way. I believe his self-absorption derives from years of self-protection, and he simply does not know how to be in relationship, at least not with me and mine. Some of that is my fault. There is not even blood between us, not a single gene to tie us together. We have nothing in common, and by habit, I am comfortable with our distance. I sometimes wonder where I learned to be so cold. I do not think it is my general nature, but with this strange brother, I feel only a remote curiosity, and I would not grieve if our paths were not to cross again. Which is a distinct possibility. My mom's recent death pretty much severed the last tie-that-binds. From now on, it will require conscious will for us to get together. I think I make him uncomfortable. My life looks so good on paper, a husband and two young-adult sons who love me, work that makes me glad, a strong cadre of friends that I count on, and until cancer, excellent health to boot. Throw in financial security, and it's enough to make him resent the hell out of me. And yet, that does not appear to be the case.

The rift between my brother and my dad was an obvious one; the chasm between him and mom has remained a mystery. As the mother of sons, I cannot fathom pushing them away. Something big must have happened. As my mama got older and her mind began to break off into bits and pieces, she lost that sweetness that had characterized her for so long. I have seen her face turn to stone when my brother walked into the room. No longer inhibited by southern convention, she would glare at him with a look of withering hate and often as not ask him, with teeth bared, "What are you doing here?" He would laugh awkwardly and pretend that she wasn't dripping venom, never knowing how to answer her. I felt a mix of relief and guilt that I held favorite child status and was thus exempt from her contempt. I always wanted to know what upset her so, but I never thought it my business to ask. Now she is dead, and I cannot imagine digging around in that bag of worms at my brother's expense. Plus, I'm not sure he knows either. Of course I have speculated. Perhaps she blamed him for my dad's anger, often turned toward her. Or for the fact that she took to drink as a means of escaping what she could not mend. Or for his failing to love her the way sons often do. I doubt she was particularly embarrassed by his peculiar ways or his lack of financial success. But maybe she blamed herself for his outcome, resented him for not being hers by birth. He does not look like the rest of us, so it is easy to evoke his checkered past.

From the beginning I did my best to fit in. When my dad asked me to perform, I danced. On weekdays after my school and his work, we threw a baseball in the back yard. I was allowed to wear pants when most girls still had to parade around in below-the-knee skirts and blouses. On Sunday, I threw away my gum, put on a pink frilly dress and obediently accompanied my parents to church. Sitting between them swinging my legs, singing those Presbyterian hymns, off-key, I held on for all I was worth. I don't know where Jim was. I can't say I cared. I was too busy securing my own place. Being adopted means someone chose you, most likely because they really really wanted a baby to love and it was your lucky day, so there you were, heading home to Nashville, Tennessee, from Chicago on an airplane, bald and pink, smiling pretty, hopes high as the sky. It also means someone threw you away, most likely because they were too young or too poor, and certainly out-of-wedlock, but maybe it was something you did, or the way you looked. And that meant you could never be too careful, because if it happened once, surely it could happen again. Who knows when I figured that out? It seems I have known it all my life.

Even so, inside this mostly sweet ball-throwing, little girl skipping self, a rebel was lurking. Buried deep, she kept still for years, showing up only when she hurt too bad to keep quiet. I was admonished often for being overly emotional, for "wearing my feelings on my sleeve." Whenever my dad felt compelled to yell at me "for my own good," I was a goner. "Stop that crying, young lady, right now, or I'll give you something to cry about." I swear he said that, though it embarrasses me to admit to his cliché. I could not take criticism from anyone, constructive or otherwise, for my own good, or not. I tried not to cry, I really did, but anything short of praise terrified me. If they were so unhappy, dissatisfied, disappointed in me, what was to keep them from sending me back? That was the current that flowed through my skin and let me know I never would truly fit in. I would always be the kid with the big sad eyes, standing on the outside, and peering through the fogged up window into the Donna Reed kitchen where children belonged automatically and were fed chocolate chip cookies fresh out of the oven. No wonder I loved Annie and Oliver. Orphans together, and who knew how long before my luck would run out.

We were not a sit-around-the-table-talk-about-your-day sort of family. Mostly my dad talked and we listened. It was usually tense, in case one of us had done something wrong. Most likely my brother, but anyone was fair game. We were discouraged from complaining about life's small or large insults, from showing our feelings, from giving excuses. And yet, I'm pretty sure my abandonment fears came with me on the airplane and were not a product of my rearing. My mama and my daddy loved me true and never once used my adopted status against me. My dad's love especially bore an intensity that spoke volumes about his own upbringing, had I known how to listen. The "A" word was simply not mentioned - except that one time when mom explained how I had been chosen from a room full of beautiful babies because I was the most beautiful of all. At five, that played pretty well. By 12, the height of ugly awkwardness, I was sure they had made a mistake. I kept those thoughts, along with most others, to myself. Perhaps that is why the tears continued to fall: they were a replacement for the words that went unsaid. To speak of my origins was to advertise my parents' - correction, my mama's - inability to conceive. Best to keep it quiet and save my pennies for the therapy I would surely need someday. Only then we didn't know about therapy, so best keep fears and doubts under the pillow, and get on with fitting in.

One day I decided to speak out. I don't remember when that was or what I said, but I'm pretty sure it had to do with race. The rebel was set free! The next thing I knew I had turned in my pearls for hippie beads and my Villager dresses for bell- bottom jeans. I grew my hair long and stopped rolling it up, and worst of all, I quit shaving my armpits and legs. That particular act of defiance shamed my mom no end, but although she pointed out that only poor Mexican women went hairy, she never turned against me. Occasionally offering me her razor as if I had simply forgotten this basic form of female hygiene, she loved me still. Of course by then, I was safely married to the medical student of their dreams, and she observed that Kirk accepted this aberration without complaint. Looking back, I wonder how she saw me then. No longer afraid of speaking my mind - at least no longer paralyzed - I must have seemed so unlike her. Did she look into the mirror and face the difference in our gene pools? Or did she simply shake her head and wonder as most parents do at the strange ways of children? I am pretty sure she did not feel responsible for who I had become. She was fond of reminding me that "you're just like your father," whenever I did or said something unbecoming. She was right; I had developed his razor edge and could cut people to the quick with my righteous tongue. Except him of course. It would be years before I could take on my dad. And years more before his temperament would begin to gentle some and the makings of a lasting peace begin to emerge between us. By the time cancer took him at 83 we had become friends in a way my younger self never dreamed possible.

I am not sure whose story I am telling at this point. A death in the family wakes up many ghosts. The relatives gather to tell old tales. Friends come in sorrow and celebration, for a life lived, a death that was long overdue. My brother stands off to the side, doing his best to stay in the room. I am once again the family princess, dressed tastefully in black, poised in my role. I greet people of all ages, some brittle as seasoned kindling, who have come to pay their respects and to remind me of my mother's long-ago sweet self. A few cry, but most are dry-eyed, as I am. Only my brother breaks down at the graveside, as I somehow knew he would. I reach up to give comfort to this remote man of 56, who stands 6'3" and weighs well over 200 pounds. I, who have gained my voice, am no longer prone to easy tears. And I imagine that his grief runs deeper, fed as it must be by so much unresolved pain.

The organ is silenced, the last notes of Amazing Grace float into the air. Kirk squeezes my hand, and I stand up to bless my mother's journey.

"The moon was full when my Mama died…"

SUN DOG OMENS

I saw my first sun dog the other day, and I took it for an omen. I am having my first desert experience at my first writers' workshop, a place called C.O.D. Ranch near Oracle, Arizona. It's a good place for me to contemplate "what next" in my life. It provides just the right balance between safety and wildness that I need. As I understand it, a sun dog is caused by some kind of weather convergence, and it is a predictor of rain. Although sun dogs usually show up near sunset, on this day it was winking down on me as I hiked along the Arizona trail in the middle of an arid afternoon. Which I was doing instead of writing because I needed to be outside in a fierce way. To me, it looked like a small square rainbow up in the sky, and I saw it as a window into some other world. Which surprised me since it is not customary for me to make such an observation. In my usual blurting sort of way, I spoke about it at breakfast this morning, and my friend Clare remarked that it made perfect sense to her that I would be seeing omens in the sky given the way that I had survived cancer and all. Which got me to thinking.

There are as many ways to survive cancer as there are tumors waiting to be set free. I remember Mr. Anders from the radiation waiting room. He was the one with abdominal cancer who got his gut zapped every day. He wore an old farmers cap perched on his head - a bright orange one that had *Dakota* emblazoned across the front. I recalled how he passed the time talking incessantly, mostly telling stories of rough winters in North Dakota and going into grim detail about his wife's throat cancer. As far as he was concerned, he was just going through a rough patch that needed fixing so that he could get back to taking care of her. He would have little patience for people who saw windows instead of cloud formations that signal rain. He was a practical man, down-to-earth, and brave. I didn't like him much at first. I wanted him to stay quiet; so that I could pay attention to my own heartbeat and to the book I was pretending to read. But Mr. Anders needed to talk, and pretty soon I realized that I needed to listen. He taught me something about facing things square on, at a point when I was moving perilously into a wallow of self-pity. I am grateful for that.

Someone else who comes to mind is my friend Stephanie. She wasn't actually a friend yet, just someone I knew once a long time ago when we were on a Planned Parenthood Board together. She was the ultimate professional, dressed to the nines in a dark gray business suit, with a maroon and black paisley tie knotted tightly through her crisp white shirt. She was a smart, ambitious woman hefting a briefcase that matched her practical yet classy leather pumps. She intimidated me some, but then I left the Board and didn't give her any more thought. Until she called me one day - I was about three months into treatment - to say she heard I had cancer and that she had just been diagnosed with breast cancer and could we talk. "Of course", I said feeling kind but reluctant. I told her to ask me anything, and soon I was telling her that yes, for a while, I too had no sex drive. I was so afraid of dying I couldn't imagine having sex, and then the desire to feel alive took over once more. I told her how tenderly Kirk made love to me that first time, and how we both cried, and then I was crying again as I replayed this story out loud. And then we were crying together, over the telephone.

Pretty soon we started taking walks together. I told her where she could get her head shaved and gave her the name of my naturopath, and she told me about her plans to cut back from 80 to only 50 hours a week at her job, so that she could take it easy during chemo. Stephanie was a Boeing exec on the V.P. fast track; with a straight face she told me her job was to broker deals for weapons of mass destruction. I - the peace activist - kept my mouth shut and just let her talk. Where would this lead I wondered; how could I be a friend to woman who was so different from me? I had pretty much dropped out of normal life to heal my cancer, having taken up energy work and green tea as a lifestyle. Meanwhile she was working out the most efficient path possible through this monster disease that refused to be managed on a coffee break. Her odds were better than mine, and when I heard that, I actually felt competitive and wondered what I was doing wrong. Then she had her mastectomy and reconstructive surgery, and she thought she was done - back on the fast track. Except that the severed breast turned out to be riddled with tumors. She called me, sobbing incoherently about not wanting to die, so I rushed over and just held her a while and tried not to let my own fear seep into her scary upside down world. I was fresh out of treatment and pretty darn shaky even though my prospects at that point had gone from average to near excellent. I felt her terror sear right through me, and I knew I would need reinforcements because I was still too vulnerable to be present for her.

She got well eventually. I saw her recently and she looks good. She has finally gained some weight and is back up to her 80 hours. Personally I think she is crazy, but what do I know? Maybe that ruthless business drive saved her life. She isn't likely to see windows either; I doubt if she has the time. I feel bad that I couldn't have been there for her during the worst of it. Her down-turn scared me so much that I had to run away.

The other day Kirk asked if I would talk to one of *his* Moms. Her name is Paula, and she has 16-year-old twins, who are his patients. She was just diagnosed with breast cancer and wanted to find out about Dale's energy work. Kirk said I would probably like her but that we were very different. She is a nursing specialist, left-brain, pragmatic. I am starting to sound like a flake, which I am not, but I admit that I did not approach my cancer with any part of my left-brain, so I got his drift. I've come a ways since Stephanie. Also, Kirk wouldn't ask unless he felt it was important; he knows better than to take advantage of my medical history. So I gave her a call, and I'm glad I did. I liked her right away. She had spunk, and she seemed open to pretty much everything. We talked for a long time, first about resources, then how her kids were doing, and how she was going to cope. I gave her the names of every resource person I could imagine, told her how Dale had helped with the diagnosis, gotten me through chemo and stem cell collection, also, how she had pumped up my immune system and kept me believing I would live. I talked about Paul's vitamins and how they helped diminish some of the side effects of chemo such as hand and foot numbing, how they helped build my immune system, and how I was still taking them by the handfuls to keep myself strong. Frank is her oncologist also, so I told her how open he was to complementary medicine and how much I trusted him right from the beginning. I listened a bunch too and encouraged her to unload as much as she needed. Reliving treatment is still a tender trip for me, but it is getting easier, and I only cried a little, mostly in empathy with what Paula would be facing. She indicated that I had helped and that made me feel good. She promised to call Dale right away.

The small world story here is that I am on a Board with her brother. He mentioned once that his sister had breast cancer, but they have different last names, so I didn't make the connection. Until the other day. He and Paula had figured it out, so he sent me an e-mail giving an update. It wasn't good. Her first two chemo treatments were disasters. She threw up for days and had to be hospitalized both times for dehydration. Would I call her? She was feeling better by the time I reached her but said she was terrified of facing the next chemo. In answer to my question, she admitted that he had not called either Paul or Dale. I was stunned and just a little miffed. After all, she had asked me for that information. What was she thinking? I took a deep breath, releasing judgment, remembering the thousand ways there are to approaching any kind of situation. And then I encouraged her - strongly - to call Dale. She said she would, and so she did. I figured I would check on her when I got home from Arizona. I would try not to be pushy. And I would most surely not tell her about any sun dogs.

Which brings me back to Clare's comment. Which come to think of it I wasn't sure I understood. So at dinner I asked her to say more. "Well", she said, "it just seems to me that you've been on one hell of a journey. From what I hear you pretty much stayed awake through the whole thing. So it doesn't surprise me that you're seeing windows where some folks just see rainbows."

That helped some, but it didn't settle anything.

So what did I imagine was in that other world anyway? A place where cancer cannot go? Where babies don't die young? And where children are never left behind? Unlikely. I like to think it is populated with creatures wiser than us, who have figured out how to be compassionate and kind. Where there is no shame and only occasional heartbreak. And where people in need have friends to help them.

Then it dawned on me, that what I had seen was not a window after all, but a mirror reflecting the best of this very world we live in. A whole parade of folks began to walk across my video screen: Fiercely protective Petra, who made sure I kept myself uncontaminated during those times of high risk. She was the one who called to say I had beaten the world's record - by millions - for stem cells collected. It was nice to know I was "number one" at something. Taylor, who stayed home with me during that awful first month, cooking my meals with only organic ingredients, reading *The Fifth Sacred Thing* aloud each evening, and guarding me against whatever he perceived to be a threat. Who cried when he had to go back to college and threatened to stay home until I told him how much I needed his stories to make me strong. Debbie, who organized meals-on-wheels for our family, and all the folks who brought us those beautiful-to-look-at healthy and delicious dinners. The parade was endless, made up of grocery store checkers, weekly lunch buddies, people who were meditating, praying, howling at the moon on my behalf, my hairdresser, e-mail pals, a friend who sent little packages of assorted teas and paperback novels, strangers who looked me in the eye… And so it went, and the omen came clear.

It is my turn now. I am meant to give back. I haven't exactly figured out what or how, but I'm sure I will think of something. And so it will be, and so I will continue to receive. The sun dog is my witness.

STAY TUNED

To: My Friends
Subject: Stay Tuned
Date: May 4, 2001

It has been two years since “Surviving Lymphoma: an almost half-time report!” I didn’t realize it at the time, but it set me off on a writing path that has escalated and moved into center stage. Without knowing where I was headed or why, I found myself spending more and more time in front of the computer, finding ways to tell my story. As it was intended back then, the process has contributed significantly to my healing.

Frank told me early on that lymphoma comes back fast if it’s going to come back at all. “Two years,” he said, “and then you can break out the champagne.” In January of this year, he let me know I had passed the mark. I was surprised. We had been counting from the end of treatment; he was counting from the date of diagnosis. That meant I could stop worrying six months early. I felt pounds lighter that day as I fairly skipped out of his office. Definitely not a skipper, Kirk, nevertheless, wore skipping all over his smiling face.

Life of course is never simple, never linear, and always unpredictable. Shortly after that celebratory appointment, I had the now-infamous colonoscopy which revealed a large pre-cancerous polyp. So in addition to nearly bleeding to death, I was left with a new fear: Colon Cancer! I have decided not to attach myself to that one. I will be a good girl and return for another look-see in a year, but meanwhile I feel too damn good, too damn healthy to fixate on what my Digestive Specialist (who comes up with those titles?) assures me is a highly unlikely repeat performance, on all accounts.

There’s something I’ve been thinking about as I look back over my shoulder in preparation for moving forward. No one needs cancer to learn about second chances and the preciousness of life. Have you ever almost run over a little kid who was darting thoughtlessly across the street at the very moment you were making a left-turn? Or nearly been rammed head-on in what would surely have been a fatality accident - yours? Second chances. Or had your son call to tell you about his new organic gardening class for preschoolers, about their 30-second attention spans, and about their wonder over the thousand frenetic bees swarming the hives - and you feel the warmth of his suntanned smile through the telephone wires? Or your friend from Mississippi comes for a visit and hugs you so tight you’re reminded of your old teddy bear with the stuffing oozing out, and she tells you - crying - how happy she is to be here? Or you wake up early, before the alarm, and steal a few illicit moments to read another chapter in Elizabeth Berg’s new novel about a man with a brain tumor - which has you totally enthralled, scared, and grateful? And then you put the book down and gaze out at the foggy morning and you know with certainty born on faith that it’s going to be a sunny day? And you have the good sense to recognize life’s preciousness and to wrap it around you like your favorite old purple bathrobe and simply breathe in its familiar yet extraordinary fragrance before you leap into a brand new day? Well, that’s what I’m talking about. No one *needs* cancer to love life.

Yesterday, I had a session with Dale. We meet every three weeks, so that she can go over me with her psychic fine-tooth comb. She knows my body better than anyone - after all she was the one who sensed the hot-spot in the middle of my back before it showed up on x-ray - and I always feel reassured when she pronounces me healthy. As I lay on her massage table, pillow beneath my head, purple blanket keeping me warm, I felt myself sinking into that place of deep relaxation and vibrant presence. “Your energy is poppin’ today,” she laughed as she placed her hands gently yet firmly on my feet. Warm currents of energy, glowing red, surged into my belly and chest, and I smiled at the sensation’s familiarity. In that instant, I was alive from head to foot, I was as healthy as any 53-year-old woman has a right to be, and come what may, I had enough sense to allow a breezy thank-you to waft over me. My insides were singing a hallelujah chorus while my body sank deeper and deeper into that realm of no-thingness, no place, no time. I was gone…

Afterwards, sitting together companionably over tall glasses of water, Dale said she had been dreaming about me. Dale dreams in Technicolor, and she remembers them in minute detail. My own dreams remain elusive. I am lucky if I catch a lingering glimpse in that early morning time between sleep and wakefulness. So I feel particularly pleased and honored to have appeared on her radar screen. "We were sittin' together on a back porch, some place warm," she told me. "I was looking at you and you looked different. Even the colors you were wearing. They were bright yellows and oranges. As we talked, you said that you *felt* different and you weren't sure everyone realized it yet. You were transformed - in all ways - body, mind and spirit."

After my colonoscopy, Dale had done an excellent job reframing it as a time of cleansing and renewal. Shortly thereafter, Paul's blood work revealed that my pesticide levels had gone from alarmingly above to slightly below average. My hematocrit was strong, and my white blood count was on the rise. Just the other day at aerobics, three different women told me how great I looked. Cheri said I was hopping around like Tigger. "I really appreciated your bounciness this a.m.," she wrote later in the day. "What a joy to watch, and you have to know how infectious you are!"

Now Dale's dream seemed to confirm that the transformation was real. She continued to recall her night vision, "you looked very *avante-guarde*-like, with short hair, kind of combed up." I interrupted to tell her about aerobics, but she had more to say. "The dream was about your writin'. By accepting yourself as a writer, it changed everything inside and outside of you." I felt somewhat sheepish, my secret revealed. At the same time, I allowed her words to sink in, and I knew they were true.

What I am experiencing above all is a release - a letting-go - and a willingness to move forward. It doesn't mean there won't be any more fear times. I know better than that. It's just that I am ready at

last to dance my song into the wind. I’ll still be wearing purple.
Stay tuned…

Love,
Janie

PS: To those of you who’ve been generous enough to let me read to you aloud, I say love comes in many forms. Listening lives very high on my list.

EPILOGUE

Let the Mystery Be

“Within the circles of our lives
we dance the circles of the years …

Again, again we come and go,
changed, changing. Hands
join, unjoin in love and fear,
grief and joy. The circles turn,
each giving into each, into all.
Only the music keeps us here … “

Wendell Berry, “*Song*”, *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry*

The sun is shining, brightly, undeservedly. After all, it is December 29th in the Pacific Northwest. Rain was predicted, as usual, but predictions rarely come true in this part of the world, and certainty is an illusion at best. I'll take the surprise of a sun-drenched morning over certainty any day.

I feel remarkably glad despite this morning's loss: Taylor has left. After a glorious two-week visit, he has gone to spend New Year's in the desert with friends. They will wake to air so cold it steals the breath away, and by noon they will cavort amid cactus and desert palm in tee shirts and ripped jeans. At twenty-three, he knows who he is and what he wants. He asks for little and gives much. I am a better person when he is around, more mindful of conserving life's precious resources, walking rather than driving the short distance to a neighbor's house, eating seasonal greens rather than the flown-in delicacies I crave, and feeling quietly satisfied rather than long-suffering or self-righteous in these small choices.

Yesterday we took the ferry to Vashon to visit our friend, Merrilee. Taylor and his partner, Stacey, are creating a non-profit organic farm and educational center in southern Oregon, and Taylor wanted to pick M's brain. Not only does she have her own lavender business, but she serves on a land trust board and farms organically with her daughter. She loves Taylor's plan and wants to be a part. Wants him to want to live on Vashon. Don't we all? But that's not to be. He's meant to pursue this dream in a warmer clime where the growing season extends through autumn and tomatoes grow big and fat in early August. Late afternoon, we scooted back across the water in Rainier's shadow, Taylor full of good ideas and me simply grateful to be on this boat at this moment with this passionate young man, miraculously my son.

He left early. At 4:30 a.m., I woke to his good-bye hug, warm whiskers grazing my cheek, and smiling I rolled back into sleep. The visit was good and the loss a familiar ache in my chest. Kirk drove him to the airport, where he joined the check-in line that already snaked out the door and wrapped around the sidewalk. Part of our new reality since the September 11th terrorist attacks.

We managed to get through this holiday season unscathed. No tree to topple over or die from a winter storm. No bad news to mar the season of joy and renewal. My third anniversary (December 23rd) passed uneventfully and almost without notice. A need to protect myself from life seems to have eased some, and I allowed myself to celebrate, almost, without fear. Our winter solstice gathering was the most meaningful ever -- friends hanging out around a roaring fire, on a clear calm night -- our laughter like a prayer offered to the heavens. Lyn and her son Grayden created a mandala in the sand, and we each placed objects of personal significance into the center and told stories about our chosen treasures -- seeds from Taylor, a crow's feather from me, from Logan an obsidian rock, and from Kirk a small shell. Wrapped around the fire, we read winter poems and stories of creation. We listened to George Harrison's song, "Here Comes the Sun." A promise and a sorrow. Loss and recovery. Recovery and loss. A cycle like the seasons. The longest night offers the promise of longer days, George's death re-releases his music into our consciousness, and together we sing, "it's alright, it's alright," and in that moment everything is.

We closed our ceremony by calling out what we were grateful for. Each expression of gratitude was endorsed by a hearty group chorus of "Blessed Be." I said I was thankful for these two young men, who are my sons and my teachers. Kirk said he was grateful for all our health. He looked like he was going to cry, and I knew he was thinking about me. This anniversary has been harder for him than for me in some ways. I love that he never takes my health for granted, and yet I wish I could reassure him that from now on I'll be fine. None of us believes in long-term fine any more; we settle for right now and know we are luckier than most.

After September 11th, I found myself unable to grieve for the folks who died, or worse yet lived to suffer all those losses. I was walled off. And I knew it was left over from cancer. No more sentimentality from this woman. No more weeping for the children starving in Africa and Iraq, or for the hungry homeless in Seattle. For all the work I've done opening my heart to life, I had successfully shut down my capacity for empathy. It wasn't that I ignored the pain around me, but that I was incapable of truly *feeling* it. I was angry about the attacks and worried sick about the path our government was sure to take. I witnessed for peace and held up my sign "Justice Not Vengeance" on Pacific Avenue for all to see. But I did not cry. I marveled at those who did and wondered what had become of the tender-hearted woman I used to know.

Cheri Rae collects hearts. I noticed the pile of rocks right away the first time I walked up her steps for a massage. They were of myriad colors and sizes and seemingly of different shapes. Until I looked closer and realized each one resembled a human heart. Some were plump and shiny, others chipped and ragged, each with a unique story of origin and significance for the woman I was about to meet. I found them curious but was more concerned about relieving my back pain. That was "before" when I still took the stairs two at a time and took for granted my own heart sounds. Later, when walking up steps felt like an accomplishment, and Cheri's massages became a way for me to lay claim to my new fragile self, I began paying more attention. During that time of moving slow, I found a few hearts of my own and gave my favorite one to Cheri. Heart rocks abound - on beaches, by the side of the road, in the garden. Like four leaf clovers they require patience and a willingness to receive.

Before cancer, I wore my heart on my sleeve. Despite my Dad's valiant efforts to toughen me up, I wept over sappy commercials, stray dogs, and homeless souls. My mother said I was too sensitive and that someday I would get hurt. She was right but for the wrong reasons. During cancer, my heart fell wide open. I was a kinder gentler person, at least for a while. I was present to other people's stories and grateful for the interest they took in mine. After cancer, as fear of relapse became my steady diet, unbeknownst to me, I began to build the barricades. That's when the hurt began. Cherie noticed how tight I was as she pulled at my ribcage and attempted to loosen my chest. Because my tumor had lodged behind my heart, beating on it unmercifully, I think I had become afraid that it might break. "She died of a broken heart," is how I imagined my epitaph in my more morbid self-indulgent moments. So even as I worked with both Cheri and Dale on opening my heart and healing into love, I was putting up signs: "private," "no trespassing," and "keep out", for good measure. In my need to be strong, I packed up my vulnerability and put it on a shelf to gather dust. I am allergic to dust.

I am drawn to hearts, but until recently I hadn't understood why. Last summer I bought a heart-woman sculpture at our local farmers market. She's made of rusted iron, her hair stands up on end like a surprise, and her heart is bright blue. Every morning she welcomes me when I walk down the path to greet the day. I often smile back, pleased that she has taken her place in my meditation garden. Every day my mantra has been the same, "I come to cleanse my spirit, to open my heart, and to heal mind, body, spirit." I actually believed it was working. I was saying the right words and filling my space with hearts. I just didn't have much access to my own.

Then one day in October, I met a woman who gave me a purple heart. She is a healer and she was pretty clear that I needed a reminder. She said my own heart had been boarded up for too long and the time had come to set it free. Given my reaction to September 11, I was inclined to agree with her. I wanted to care about other people's suffering again. I started carrying around that little glass heart and squeezing it ever so gently. I wondered if it would bleed. I decided to take the risk. I was tired of sneezing.

Reclaiming my heart has not been a headline event, but there *have* been signs of progress. Right after I was given the purple heart, I joined a *LovingKindness* meditation class. Unlike practices I had attempted before, this one is simple and undemanding, does not require the usual leg numbing pretzel position, and can be done regularly or only occasionally as needed. It consists of four phrases that

I can call upon anywhere anytime to soothe my soul, calm my agitation, and open my heart: may I be happy and peaceful; may I be healthy and strong; may I be safe and free; may I be able to care for myself with ease and joy. The first night, our teacher, Jude, explained that the heart muscle needs to be exercised like any other, and she compared our work to lifting weights. "You have to start with the small weights and work your way up," she said, using a metaphor I well understood. I began sending loving kindness to family members, friends, the folks I admire. As my heart opened wider, I sent these words to strangers and even people I don't like very much. I sent loving kindness to the neighbors across the street, to the guy who cut in front of me on the freeway, to the innocents who died in New York and Afghanistan, and ultimately to the perpetrators. An odd thing happened: I actually wished them well. It occurred to me that if all beings experienced health, happiness, peace, safety, and freedom, there would be no place for cruelty, terrorism, or retaliation. The more I practiced the easier it got. Until one day I heard myself say, "may my heart be happy and peaceful, may my heart be healthy and strong, may my heart be safe and free, and may my heart care for itself with ease and joy." I was on the road to recovery.

The last time I climbed Cheri's steps for a massage, I stopped to check out her heart rocks. I picked one up, and it shimmered in my hand. I held it against my chest and felt a slight murmur in response. Melt-down I thought. That day Cheri told me a story. It had to do with her son and the recent anniversary of his death. In past years, she had spent that day alone, allowing grief to take its place in her heart as she re-experienced the loss. This year was different. She decided to work, and as it happened, she massaged the son of a friend - a teenage boy with a soccer injury. He was the age Trevor would be if he had lived. It gave her a sense of connection - and helped her heal some more. I felt tears edging their way out the corners of my eyes, and I blinked in recognition. My heart was opening and it hurt. I relaxed and let the ache fill my chest like a warm bath. The death of a child was unthinkable; recovery unfathomable. Yet here sat this woman, collector of hearts, who had become my friend and whose touch had brought life into my tired bones, smiling as she talked about Trevor. She was ready to release him even as she would always hold him close. She had journeyed so much farther than I down the path of grief and loss, and rather than break, her heart expanded and reached out to my own. We hugged long and hard, and I felt almost whole.

I look out the window and am surprised to see the Cascades bathed in sunlight. These mountains are perennially shrouded in fog, so it is a wonder that they chose this day to shine. I love this moment, still groggy from dream sleep, sipping my first cup of tea, and holding the memory of Taylor's sweet good-bye. I squeeze my purple heart and release him to his next adventure. I celebrate his life and my own as well. The ache over his departure is a reminder of all the leave-takings past and a promise of those to come. How lucky I am to be alive, to know life's blessings, and yes, its sorrows as well. If life is a dance, then I am ready to learn the next steps. Watch out, it's bound to be a tango.

December 2002

APPENDIX

ONE WOMAN'S APPROACH TO TREATMENT

On December 23, 1998 I was diagnosed with B-Cell lymphoma, evidenced by a large, fast-growing tumor hidden behind my chest wall. The hardest moment of my life was having to tell my two sons that I had cancer. We cried and grieved and tried to deny the reality of the time bomb in my chest. And then slowly we rallied, called friends and family, and made a treatment plan. I began to call myself a cancer survivor almost from the moment my oncologist said this tumor could be cured.

Words matter, and so I chose mine carefully. Instead of killing my tumor, I set out to transform it, turning darkness into light, killer cells into healing compost. This process continued through seven months of chemo, radiation, meditation, energy work, massage, and vitamin therapy. The unfailing kindness of friends and strangers, my own brand of determination and will to live, and above all the constancy and love of my family were critical components as well.

It is now almost two years since that dreadful December, and I feel great! I never take a day, or a breath, for granted, and yet as each day passes, I think less about cancer and more about the days that lie ahead. I believe that everyone’s journey with cancer is unique, and so it would be presumptuous for me to prescribe a treatment approach for anyone else. Instead, I offer a bit of my own experience in the hope that it may be of some help to others.

Being proactive was incredibly important for me, and so as soon as I had a diagnosis and a prognosis, I set about building my team. I have a fabulous oncologist, Frank Senecal, a man unafraid to tell the truth and also to speak from the heart. From the start, I felt I had an ally as well as a physician, and someone who was open to the complementary medicine I intended to use in conjunction with chemo and radiation.

I found Paul Reilly at the Seattle Cancer Treatment and Wellness Center. He designed a personal protocol for my wellness response to cancer, which included nutritional advice, vitamin supplements, and an approach to cancer treatment that was proactive and positive. He offered exactly what I was seeking, and I left with renewed energy and hope for my full recovery. It meant I had a million pills to swallow, power shakes and green tea to drink, and eggs and tofu to consume. I was already into an organic, vegetarian, and relatively low-fat diet, which made the adjustment easier for me than for some. Except that I had to give up chocolate, coffee, and wine, my three favorite vices! However, when Paul said that sugar feeds tumors and wine and coffee can affect the immune system, it suddenly seemed like a no-brainer.

In addition to Paul, I began to work steadily with an energy therapist, Dale Golden. She helped me focus on the spiritual side of my experience as well as on harnessing my own energetic healing resources. I am not a religious person, and yet I do believe in the power of connecting deeply with my experiences. So I began to keep a journal, to meditate each morning, and to share my feelings with my family and friends through conversation, e-mails, and phone calls. I made sure not to become isolated even as I spent more time at home resting and taking care of myself. I, who had been a runner and rather avid exercise freak, made a commitment to take a long (slow) walk at least once a week and to ride my (borrowed) exercise bike at least twice. There were weeks when I did neither because I was simply too tired, but mostly I kept it up because I wanted to work my heart and lungs as much as possible.

At times I felt weak and vulnerable. I threw up horribly after my first chemo, so I notified my pharmacist and he made sure that never happened again. By the second chemo, my hair was falling out in clumps, so I made an appointment and had my head shaved. It was quite shocking in a way to be bald; on the other hand, it made me laugh and it felt good to take charge of my life whenever I could. Most of the time I felt empowered to make it through treatment and to stay in touch with the experience along the way. I made friends with my chemo nurses, real people unafraid of my cancer and willing to both laugh and cry with me. I felt supported and visible. During radiation, which was a lonelier experience for me, I was terrified until I remembered to breathe deeply and focus on shrinking the tumor. Whether isolated for stem cell collecting or recovering from a port implant, I began to discover that I was much stronger than I realized and that I would do whatever it took to increase the chance of my survival. I also learned to take in the love and assistance of others, letting go of any need to do it all by myself. A group of friends organized their own Meals-on-Wheels to bring our family healthy dinners three nights a week. Others took me to appointments and stayed with me while I was poked, prodded, had blood drawn, sat through chemo, whatever it took.

I feel intense gratitude for my recovery, and even though I complain from time to time, I am committed to continuing the work recommended by my teammates. So, I am still taking a million pills prescribed by Paul Reilly. I eat organically and stay away from sugar. As a treat, I have a little red wine on the weekends. I do energy work every three weeks and remember to meditate most days. I no longer spend long hours in quiet reflection, but I also don't rush around in a state of frenzy the way I used to and see so many people doing. I pay attention and I relish both the sunshine and the rain. Sometimes my feet still go numb (residual from vincristine), and I have trouble swallowing (effect of radiation on my esophagus), and I take these as reminders of how very precious and tenuous this life is. I still get really scared sometimes. I hated having cancer. As my husband said, "It took away our innocence." I do not believe I caused my cancer, nor can I guarantee that it won't return. I can, however, play my part. I agree with the "shit happens" bumper. I believe that it is what we do with it that matters. So I make compost and, I laugh whenever I can.

Each trip through cancer is different. Some of us will survive it, some will not. Regardless of outcome, we each have decisions to make about treatment. I wish for each of us the courage to make the journey sweet.

Patient Information Manual
Written by request for Paul Reilly, N.D.

BOOGIE MUSIC

The author gratefully acknowledges the following excerpts quoted as chapter headings in *Bone Marrow Boogie*:

Octoroon, "Amazing Grace" by Laura Love, Mercury Records, 1997

Backstage, Reilly & Maloney, "Dancing in the Dark" by Ginny Reilly, Freckle Records,1986

Holly Near, Musical Highlights, "Change of Heart" by Holly Near, Calico Records, 2000

When I was a Boy, "Calling All Angels" by Jane Siberry, Reprise Records, 1993

Tapestry, "Chills my soul right to the marrow" lyrics from "Home Again" by Carole King, A&M Records, 1971

1200 Curfew, "It's only life after all" lyrics from "Closer to Fine" by Indigo Girls, Epic Records. 1995

Infamous Angel, "Let the Mystery Be" by Iris DeMent, Warner Bros. Records, 1992

BOOGIE QUOTES

The author gratefully acknowledges the following:

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All Over But The Shoutin, Rick Bragg, Publisher: Pantheon Books ISBN 0-679-44258-8 (1997)

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The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry, Wendell Berry, "Song", Publisher: Counterpoint Press; ISBN: 1582430373; (October 1, 1999)

BOOGIE PROFITS

All profits to the author will be donated to the Collective for Education, Agroecology, and Diversity, a not-for-profit organization based in southwest Oregon. CEAD is dedicated to cultivating connections between people and their local ecosystems by pursuing community food security, fostering ecological and agricultural diversity, and teaching the arts of sustainable living. This work is carried out through a farm and education center that seeks to promote healthy food, healthy people, and healthy landscapes.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Janie Starr holds master's degrees in public health and clinical psychology. In the mid '80's she left her private practice to work for issues related to peace, justice, and community building. She has been a passionate speaker and writer on topics ranging from adolescent development and human sexuality to the nuclear threat, environmental sustainability, diversity, and more recently, cancer. She lives on an island in the Pacific Northwest with her family and dog, Wendal.