

## Chapter 1: A Warning from the Mammogram

*Laura's Journal: 2/14/2003, Valentine's Day: A funny day to be having a mammogram, but the first date I could get after my first mammogram in January showed some unusual tissue and they called me back. So today, on the day of love and hearts, the young, energetic doctor gave me the news after the procedure. This second mammogram has confirmed there are two irregularities close together on the left side of my left breast.*

*His advice was rapid-fire, concluding with his opinion that a surgical biopsy would be the best course. This could cause a large hole. It would be the safest way to find out if it is cancer. However, what if it's not? He seemed so sure; it was like handing me a death sentence within minutes of my mammogram.*

*It's funny how you live your life the best you can, thinking headway is still possible as long as your health exists. I've been so proactive about my health: exercise, diet, spiritual work to help with stress. All the while I thought I was buying myself time, and maybe I am.*

*My first thought as I was driving home was, it has been good so far. I feel I've made it further along than my mom got to go, dying as she did at forty-four from breast cancer. My second thought was that I didn't want to share Alex or the kids with another woman that he would marry if I die! No, no, no. It's an idea I can't easily give into.*

*The lines in my palm have been warning me that some big life changes might be coming up—I guess I thought it would be my heart, perhaps a heart attack, happening rapidly and decisively. As it was, a stranger was telling me within three minutes of my mammogram that I should get a big chunk cut out of my breast!*

*There is an axe in the ceiling, hanging over your head your whole life. Then one day, it drops.*

*At least reading my palm tells me that success comes about the time my life starts falling apart!*

*Sunset. It's so beautiful here. I've read that as you grow older, it only gets better, prettier, and less hard, less challenging. Or maybe more challenging. Nevertheless, many of my personal challenges are past me. I hope this one turns out to be insignificant.*

*What will I do if it turns out to be bad? That my time is limited? What will I do? Paint portraits of the family – some with me if they want, or create the watercolors for the acupuncture charts I've thought about doing for years, do them if I still can to pay back the alternative health community?*

*I used to worry, can I get ten more years? This was all I wanted during my thirties when I had another health scare. Then I reckoned I needed ten more years to accomplish a body of artistic work big enough and strong enough to leave a mark, a mark with my name on it. I have that now. I also have three great kids who would miss me, but don't need me anymore. Only in the way you always need your mom. I have to fight! I hated losing my mom.*

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The call from Laura came as I was visiting my mother, Emily Paul, at her apartment in the retirement home I had built ten years ago.

“I just got out of my second mammogram. The doctor says there's a suspicious area in my left breast. He thinks it's cancer and he wants me to see a surgeon and get a biopsy!”

“You're kidding!” The words refused to sink into my brain. Because Laura's mom had died of breast cancer at age forty-four, Laura had spent nearly ten years on and off breast-feeding our three children, which I always thought was the ultimate insurance policy against breast cancer. Yet here she was, harboring “something suspicious” in her left breast.

We both agreed that it was probably nothing and the biopsy would show that it was benign. Therefore, we decided not to tell the kids, our friends, not anyone at all, until we had more information. Telling anyone felt like we would somehow make it real, that our friends would regard us differently. Somehow, there would be a stigma, or a shame.

I had to tell my mom however, because she was right there with me and could see how upset I

was when I hung up.

“Laura might have breast cancer,” did not come out easily, considering my father died of prostate cancer in 1996. Seven years later, and now cancer had returned to our family.

My mother is a tall, handsome, Englishwoman in her eighties. She has survived a generous portion of misfortune during her life as many did who lived through World War II. Her fifteen-year-old brother died when she was just seven. The Japanese invaded Hong Kong, and she and my father managed to escape on the last ship leaving before the attack. The conquering Japanese imprisoned the rest of her family for the war’s duration, putting the women in concentration camps and the men into forced labor camps in China.

Their flight from Hong Kong ended in Canada where her husband fought for the Canadian army in Italy and then Holland during the D-Day invasion. My mother served as a lieutenant in the Canadian WAC for the war’s duration. After the war, her father, ill from mistreatment, died before she saw him. Her mother died in Canada a few years later. Now a survivor of the death of most of her contemporaries and her husband, she had great advice for me:

“Life can bring you challenges, but it does no good to panic. Just meet it head on and with God’s grace, you’ll survive.”

I headed home for our Valentine’s Day “Date Dinner,” a tradition from college, when Laura’s sorority, Pi Beta Phi, invited their boyfriends over for an elaborate dinner.

Laura and I met in the fall of 1969 and, by January of 1970, we married. So our first “Valentine’s date dinner” at her sorority was as husband and wife at the ages of twenty and twenty-two! So mature!

Even our kids don’t believe we married so young. It seemed old to us at the time, after all each new day makes you the oldest you’ve ever been. I was a tall, dark-haired senior in engineering and held a position as an anti-war engineering senator in student government at Oregon State University.

Laura was a cute, athletic, popular, blonde sorority girl with hidden connections to an anti-war,

underground newspaper, *The Scab Sheet*. As cover artist, she sold many of their papers with her provocative and powerful front page, political cartoons.

Our common interest in ending the Vietnam War gave us an immediate platform for long discussions about life and politics. Those earnest and idealistic late night talks quickly led to love.

Laura at fifty-four was as bright and vivacious as she was in college when I first eyed her: medium height, slim, blonde hair, blue eyes, and a mole on her left cheek that was a mark of beauty to me. An athlete, she had climbed 11,000 foot Mt. Hood at the age of fifteen, and was an outdoors person, a skier, Campfire Girl, even a camp bugler.

What more could a skier, surfer, hunter and angler have looked for in a wife? The way I had our lives planned out in college, she could ski with me all winter and then camp and fish our way through the Oregon spring. Camping and surfing all summer would lead right into camping and hunting in the fall. Around Thanksgiving and the end of hunting season, we'd be at the beginning of ski season again! All the big items—work, children, house, were just small details in the grand scheme of enjoying the Oregon outdoors.

What more than love of the outdoors could be important in finding a wife? Well, intelligence, a passion for life, careers, and raising a family. No wonder we married within four months of our first date.

Our thirteen-year-old-daughter Emma got home from school and dumped half a backpack's worth of valentines on the dining room table, interrupting our earnest conversation about Laura's possible cancer as we prepared dinner. Emma's interruption of our morbid topic was more than welcome.

Her dark brown eyes sparkled, and her ponytail bobbed around as she told us all the gossip about the romantic lives of her friends. Emma had one big potential heart throb, a tall, eighth-grade basketball player, from another school no less. She was moving forward with caution. Eighth-grade

romance! Passion and disaster greater than any soap opera. And a welcome breath of life into Laura's sad news.

After Emma disappeared to her room for homework Laura told me that she had scheduled the biopsy. Assuming it would reveal the worst, our conversation turned to her wish for nontraditional healing.

In the early 1980's my father had experienced a successful treatment of his prostate cancer by a Philippine "psychic surgeon." Despite my initial skepticism, a doctor had confirmed that his tumor had vanished and he had lived a healthy life for another sixteen years.

Then, in the early 1990's, Laura's doctors had found "something suspicious" in the same area now suffering from breast cancer, but it had disappeared after a visit to a woman faith healer living in Nevada. Unfortunately, she had passed away, but her son Carlos was carrying on her work and we decided over dishes to visit him.

That evening the thought that Laura might have cancer kept coming back into my mind, no matter how hard I tried not to worry about it. I would have the thought and I would feel a sense of panic, calm myself, tell myself to deal with things one at a time and then forget about it for awhile.

Then out of the blue my brain would shout, *Laura might have cancer*, and start the whole process over and over again. I couldn't imagine what she might be going through, it was making me panic and I didn't even have cancer!

As I sat and pretended to watch TV, I realized I felt like the engineer of a speeding train of life. This train had run straight on its happy tracks for years resulting in Laura's wonderful art career, a successful business, raising three children, and now, my budding writing career, something Laura had encouraged me to pursue.

I had written a novel, *Suicide Wall*, a story about Vietnam veterans and suicide, and it was the subject of numerous radio talk shows and years later was still selling on Amazon.com. I had turned to a second project, a young adult action adventure novel set in prehistory.

However, “something suspicious,” felt like the train tracks of our lives now had a switch ahead with evil gremlins manning the lever.

Without cancer, our ride in life would continue through a happy, broad valley of green meadows, smiling people, and red barns nestled among tall oak trees. With cancer the gremlins would switch us onto tracks leading up a narrow ravine cutting into dark mountains with thunderclouds, rain and lightning visible from far away.

Determined to save Laura and keep our happiness on track, I turned to the Internet that night to learn more about breast cancer.

It strikes one out of eight women. Depending on the severity or the stage of the cancer before treatment, the chances of surviving five years from detection and treatment are nearly 98 percent with early discovery, but only 16 percent if discovered after it has spread to other parts of the body.

Cancer is like being forced to play Russian roulette. You try everything you can think of to avoid getting involved, no smoking, exercise, diet. But once you have it, there’s a gun at your head and it might go off no matter what you do. You’re forced to play and your only friend is the odds.

Depression set in as I sunk into my brain that breast cancer has no guaranteed cure. It’s not like the flu that you deal with and it goes away. No, with breast cancer, you pick your treatment, and hope.

A miracle healing by Carlos was an appealing option; better for the cancer to just vanish.

I woke at 4:30 and the adrenaline from “something suspicious” propelled me to my computer. Fear drove my fingers. Somewhere there had to be a cure. How could Laura have cancer? She is a skier, a jogger, and at fifty-four, she has many more years to enjoy her successful career as a celebrated Oregon artist. With three children and everything to live for, if she has cancer, I want faith healing! Yet a chilling bumper sticker I had seen once crossed my mind. It had read, “Even non-smokers die.”

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*Laura’s Journal: 2/15/2003, Saturday: Interesting news. I called my older sister today and she’s*

*had three operations to remove lumps. She has "fibrocystic disease of the breasts," which causes the breast to make cysts. So far, they have all been benign. She says bad mammogram results don't even worry her anymore. She says a simple day- surgery procedure removes the cysts. It really hurts afterward, and you need at least a day to recover. I'm not so worried now.*

At first, I rejoiced at Laura's news from her older sister, of course it must just be a cyst. But we soon turned back to visiting a faith healer, just in case.

I had reservations with the concept of visiting a faith healer, though I didn't voice any objection. The idea of miracle healings made me angry in a way, because if they worked sometimes but not others, and the patient had no idea why, it made God seem unfair. Surely, a miracle healing could not be a matter of luck. But I sure hoped it would work for Laura.

I put those skeptical feelings aside as I arranged Laura's visit. Miraculously, already a good omen, he would be visiting the West Coast in days. I soon had flights, car rentals and a motel in Napa where he would be working.

Only one problem; Laura's surgeon had scheduled her biopsy for the very afternoon we were to fly down. This bothered me. It seemed far better to have the psychic surgery first followed by Laura's surgeon finding nothing to biopsy.

By having the biopsy before the cure, well, it seemed to me to be asking for failure. In the end, Laura decided she wanted to keep her appointment with her surgeon, thinking it was better to know for sure that she had a malignant tumor before visiting Carlos. Then if he said he has removed it, we'd definitely have proof a miracle healing occurred if it was confirmed by a second biopsy the cancer was gone.

I admitted that was a good idea if you wanted proof of miracles but at this point I'd settle for an unproved miracle that just concluded she was fine. Given the press of time to get something done if it was cancer, we stuck with the schedule.

The day of the biopsy I drove Laura to her appointment and joined her visiting the doctor. I have always liked the people and the excellent care we have received from our local hospital. But today, I did not want this hospital to become part of my life, or the words “breast cancer” to be part of our reality. Even though I just wanted us to run away, I had to be supportive of Laura. All the time I was thinking, this hospital has nothing to do with us. We’re young and active; why only a few weeks ago we went skiing! Skiers only need hospitals when they break a leg. This is all a mistake!

Everything about the hospital was imposing and threatening. The lobby looked more like a NASA research facility than a hospital, despite the beautiful artwork.

After Laura checked in, we took our seats in the waiting room. A patient came out of the exam room, spied a friend, and took a seat next to her. As they chatted, it was impossible not to hear their conversation about her next operation, a “rebuild.”

She’d had a mastectomy and now it was time for the rebuild. The doctor would then tattoo nipples on the skin to make them look real. The only rebuilds I’ve ever known were new engines in hot rods, and my friends had sounded as excited about putting a big block Chevy into their ’65 Malibu as this woman was about her new breast.

I could see this upset Laura. Life had thrust us into an unpleasant world where she might need a rebuild. After a long wait, distressing because our flight left in the early evening, a nurse showed us into an examination room, asked Laura questions, and then said the surgeon would arrive in half an hour.

“We have a flight at 6:00. Do you think we’ll be able to make it and keep this appointment?” Laura asked the nurse.

I prayed she would say no and reschedule. Then Carlos could remove the lump, and a biopsy would never find anything.

“She’ll be in soon,” the nurse replied. But the half hour came and went, and by 3:30, we were ready to leave, since check-in for the flight cut off at 5.

In walked Laura's surgeon. She filled the room with her energy, presence, and authority. I felt dwarfed, hopeless and stupid to hope Laura was healthy and "something suspicious" was benign or, if malignant, that a faith healer I didn't have much faith in could miraculously remove it.

Who was I with my hope for a miracle healing compared with this woman of power who battled cancer daily and knew it was real?

She entered the room the way I imagined a knight entering a castle a thousand years ago. Unheard heralds brayed their trumpets. We stiffened to attention, the drowsiness of waiting cut off by the adrenaline of our fear. The surgeon, the killer of cancer! For her to exist, cancer had to be a reality, a deadly disease.

Laura's surgeon was pleasant, but serious, as she should be. Here was a person who did battle with one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Her very presence confirmed Laura had breast cancer, despite our wishes or hope for a miracle cure.

She quickly placed her hands on Laura's breast and poked around as Laura winced in pain. The surgeon found the lump and gave it a hard squeeze.

"Okay, here it is, you can tell it's there," she said. "I'll get it prepped."

She swabbed a portion of Laura's breast with red liquid antiseptic, put on latex gloves, then reached for an instrument, a long needle.

The needle, the lance, the knight's weapon, lay in a sterile plastic bag on a clean, white cloth draped over a stainless steel table. It reminded me of the presentation of the sacrament on communion day.

The surgeon gave Laura a local anesthetic shot and I looked away. I could not stand watching Laura suffer. After tearing the plastic from the needle, the surgeon spoke to Laura.

"Okay, I'm, ready."

"All right," Laura replied softly.

The surgeon blocked my view, jabbed with her arm, and a snipping noise, like vegetables cut on

a granite countertop, filled the room. She whisked the lance away into its bag again. A bandage, a promise of analysis, and a good-bye left us minutes later outside once again on the top, open floor of the parking structure.

A February southwest wind pushed clouds above our hunched, hurried figures. The cold and coming dark crowded out all sense of hope as we drove in defeated silence.

“Do you think Carlos is going to work?” Laura finally asked near the airport. The cross town ride had passed with no conversation.

“Yes, I do,” I lied against my doubt. Despite my father’s miracle, I felt little hope. Laura’s cancer now seemed bigger, more certain, more real.

“But what do we do if the tissue report shows I have a malignant tumor, and Carlos removed something and says I’m healed?” Laura asked. Her question jarred me out of my thoughts about my father’s cancer.

“You’ll just have to get another biopsy,” I reassured her while masking my apprehension.

We did not leave the San Francisco airport car rental until after nine. I had asked for the “Hertz Never Lost” GPS unit. Crossing the Bay Bridge, it told me to make a turn, not the right one, and we landed in a rough neighborhood, somewhere in Oakland. I pulled over and tried to figure out how the “Never Lost?” unit worked, when a car rushed up to us and stopped with a screech.

Though startled, I rolled down the window and saw it was a police officer in an undercover car.

“Are you folks lost?”

“Totally!” A guardian angel could not have flown to our side faster or given better directions as he led us back to the freeway.

The drive dragged on leaving us at The Chateau Inn after eleven.

The Chateau Inn—read motel—had the air of a ski area in summer. A huge, abandoned parking lot said, “You’re not here at the right time!” The night clerk admitted tourists overflowed during wine-tasting season, but since this was not the season, we could have our pick of spacious rooms at a low

price. We collapsed in bed to Leno and hopes of Carlos in the morning.

Napa is an odd blend of upscale wine and low-rent rural. The morning sun revealed we were not far from the house where we would meet Carlos.

The stairs of the old, alternative, hippie house creaked. A warm ex-hippie woman our age let us into her combination home and spiritual shop. Shelves in her living room and displays in her kitchen offered for sale everything from books on massage to books on healing, teas and soap to gems.

I have learned not to judge people by their circumstances. If healers were “proper,” they would have huge clinics, insurance billing and busy schedules. They would not wear stethoscopes. No need. Carlos’s mother used to “scan” our bodies by holding a towel in front of us. How she could “see” through the towel, or through our bodies, I have no idea. I only cared about results.

Laura spent an hour alone with Carlos. He doesn’t allow cameras or guests in the healing room. I slumbered in a rocking chair, the morning sun creeping slowly toward me across a black cat sleeping on a throw rug. Lulling soft music and incense smoke washed the room most like a museum of 1968.

Finally, Laura came out and Carlos asked me to come in. He said he had found a growth, though it was not a tumor. He had managed to remove part of it, but Laura needed to come see him tomorrow to get the rest out. He assured me that she was cancer free. This statement relieved, yet worried me. While the scene reminded me of my father’s miracle healing years earlier, I still felt anxious. The engineer in me said only a new mammogram and biopsy would prove Laura cancer free.

Later that day we sat around the pool and Laura worked on her journal. It was sunny but cool so we didn’t swim, just sunned. Despite the chance to ski and snowboard in the mountains, Oregonians endure their winter rains more than enjoy them. We emerge each spring with heads turned down out of the habit of avoiding rain so long. When the sun comes out it’s a surprise, an afterthought of nature we have to grow familiar with again, like an old friend returning home after a long absence.

The white concrete reflected the sun and the warmth felt good. The walls reminded me of Greek villages I had visited one winter. I resolved then that once free of cancer, whether by miracle or

medicine, we would celebrate in Greece or somewhere Mediterranean.

*Laura's Journal: 2/20/2003, Napa Valley, California. Sitting by the pool at the Chateau Inn. This morning the spiritual healer, Carlos, worked on me.*

*Yesterday, before we left Portland to come see Carlos, we went to see the surgeon Dr. Fancher recommended for my biopsy. Dr. Fancher, my regular doctor, is convinced I have breast cancer based on the radiologist's description of my second mammogram. I wonder if my mom's cancer history has influenced their thinking.*

*I related my sister's fibroid cyst condition to Dr. Fancher on the phone, but he seemed doubtful this is what I have. He recommended I have the tumors surgically removed. The surgeon surprised me yesterday when she said she could feel them (I could not), and since she could feel them, she decided to biopsy them on the spot. It was over in three clicks of a long needle.*

*"Dazzle," my nickname for my camp and high school buddy, went down this road during Christmas, only a month ago. She told me the steps of her treatment. It began with an irregular mammogram showing displacement of calcifications. Her second step was an office biopsy, which indicated a malignant tumor. An operation, a lumpectomy, followed, where they took out her tumors and some lymph nodes. Yikes! I'm now at step number two, the office biopsy. The idea of an office biopsy relieved me in a way. I thought I would need a biopsy using surgery.*

*Not needing a surgical biopsy gave me hope, as it was the least invasive way to find out if I have a malignancy. So afterwards, we were on to Napa and Carlos, and now here I am journaling at the Chateau!*

*Last night, the three-quarter-full moon rose over the bay as we crossed the Bay Bridge. The silhouette of lacy dark trees against the moon, and the moonlight reflecting off the water, were so beautiful, especially when countered by the filthy interior of the Bay Bridge.*

*The all-consuming flashes of beauty throughout the trip kept surprising me. As we drove to the*

*Portland airport earlier, I glimpsed a huge plane landing with its landing lights on. Dramatic rain clouds coming in from the Pacific and the silver blue of the just-rained-upon city in the background silhouetted the plane, with the elongated triangle of shimmering landing strip in front.*

*Alex was accommodating and did not object to our going to the seventh floor. I snapped photos from the roof of the parking structure while he stood with our luggage in the last of a rain shower. He arranged this whole trip and has been such a dear to be with. He makes me laugh so much, tells me interesting news, and gives me hope in general. This state of fear and anxiety has a firm grip on me and I appreciate the breaks he gives me.*

*Carlos says I don't have cancer. We'll see on Friday when I get back. I'll find out the result of the biopsy. Carlos says to ask for a second opinion if they do find a tumor after the first biopsy, and not to let them operate on me until I have that second opinion.*