

*Cancer Medicine*¹ © Pat Irwin Lycett (wk.pi.lycett@sympatico.ca)

Winter Ice 1994 Chapter 1

“So, the frog’s building a house and goes into the bank for a mortgage. Mrs. Black, the loans manager, mentions collateral and the frog digs into his pocket for a small family heirloom. She heads to her manager for advice and he says, “‘It’s a knick-knack, Patti Black, give the frog a loan’.”

“Leigh, that’s hilarious,” I giggle, “laughter really *is* the best medicine. Where would I be without you and Kent?”²

My main focus, while I recover from this mastectomy, is on learning enough to keep myself alive. How many times have we heard the story ‘they say they got it all, now she’s having chemo,’ and the next thing you know – she’s dead.

Today is the Ides of March – might have been bad news for Caesar, but, despite the odd crying jag, my Irish luck seems to be carrying me through.

Crystal Pages, my book store, is temporarily closed; my husband, Kay, is at his office and I need to do laundry. Instead, I light a fire, lower the needle on a Sinatra record, and curl up in our lazy-boy. High on the hill, gazing down at still-snowy tree tops, I muse about our family Christmas/Solstice, 1993 – the morning I saw, but refused to see, something different about my breast.

Standing before our full-length mirror doing a monthly check – a twenty-year habit – my startled eyes gaze back at me. There’s ice in my gut. Is that a slight change in the shape of my right breast – something not quite right? I palpate – nothing there. “Not possible,” I say out loud to my nude reflection – can’t have a problem with my boobs – they’re my best assets.

All seven of our kids make it to our Irwin/Lycett family party. Our four grandchildren³ look so adorable; the girls decked out in flowered dresses, lace collars, velvet sashes and black patent leather shoes; Alex in a white shirt, Jordie wearing a red bow tie. We’re trying to keep our wide-eyed darlings entertained. Soon enough they’ll be scattering paper, ribbons and bows.

The adults are gathered around the island, snacking and carving. Our two pregnant daughters-in-law discuss their intention to breast-feed their babies due in March. ‘*Breast-feeding is a hedge against cancer,*’ craters through my mind. With an apologetic

1- Interactive Medicine, healing therapies, and Hippocratic science; “I swear... to abstain from whatever is deleterious (first -do no harm).” Taber’s Cyclopedic Medical Dictionary, p.902.

² - Special joke-callers – great guys – Leigh Parker and Kent McDonell

³ - Alex Irwin aged 8, Cassie Irwin 21 months, Emma Irwin 16 months, Jordie Kay Westbrook 9 months.

smile, I offer, “You guys were bottle-fed, and I’ve always felt guilty about that. I tried in the hospital with you, Ben, but it just didn’t work out.”

“My mother bottle-fed all of us. Didn’t your nursing schools teach that you could be more sure of the nutrients with formula?” asks daughter Kathie.⁴

“That’s true,” I say, “and the U.of T. Home Ec. course was the same. When I was about fourteen,” I continue, “my doctor discovered my inverted right nipple, and said I wouldn’t be able to breast-feed.” Plowing on, “And when I turned ten, my cousin Jane was born. Aunt Evelyn had breast abscesses, and they lived with us for a whole month. Great for my sister and me, playing with Janie, but Ev ended up with terrible scars, and we were scared to death.” There are murmurs of commiseration; I still think my baby boys were short-changed; and that cancer connection keeps ratcheting through my head.

We toss salads, lay the table, set angel chimes dingling, chairs are brought from around the house, crackers are cracked, toasts proclaimed with silly hats in place and everyone digs in. Desserts eventually find their way to the table, with coffee and tea. I’ve eliminated wheat and sugar to deal with colitis (first diagnosed in 1981), and tuck into bread made of ground almonds and honey.⁵ The kids rollick through the presents, and Alex and all of our sons are pleased with the shirts I made for the occasion.

On New Year’s eve Kay and I entertain friends for pre-drinks; then we all swoop off to our beautifully decorated Victorian-era Town Hall where we dance ourselves silly. *There can’t possibly be anything wrong. I haven’t lost weight. I can’t feel any lump. I’m imagining it. I’m O.K.*

I continue to swim laps, practice tai chi, sell books, attend our book club, and pack for our trip. In my deepest heart I feel that there *can’t* be anything wrong; my breasts are different sizes – that *must* be what I’m looking at.

In mid-January we land in Barbados, my husband’s favourite place in the world. The following morning, with Kay asleep, I jump into my new red bikini and head for the beach, thirsting for the sea, so salty and clean. I emerge after a delicious swim, as long shadowy tendrils of January light scatter across the beach. One distant walker catches my eye, sloshing along the water’s edge, and we both wave. I breathe in the vibrant pinks and reds of the bougainvillea leading to our condo. I flop on my back onto the warming sand, stretching my arms over my head. Then I roll onto my stomach and choke down a scream – *jesus*, there *is* something there – my right breast is on fire!

Keeping this atrocity to myself, we drive around in our rented moke-jeep, visit friends, cheer Barbados in the polo match, hug the thousand-year-old Baobab and solve crosswords.

“I think I might have a little lump,” I tell Kay on our return flight. “Guess I’ll have to get it checked.” His big blue eyes are pensive as he takes hold of my hand. My mind is reeling. It can’t be malignant – must be benign – there’s no breast cancer in *my* family. Then I gasp, my eyes widen with horror as I remember that I know little of my

⁴ - Kathie Lycett Westbrook.

⁵ -Elaine Gottschall, *Food and the gut Reaction*, 1986, p. 91.

father's family – only that his mother died very young. Jeez! What a predicament! I steel my spine to deal with this insane development.

Then, I breathe a little easier as I remember that I'm well-acquainted with many healing modalities – Reiki, Tai Chi and Naturopathy have played a large part in keeping me well. I try to visualize *all* therapies as gifts from god or the universe; then my heart skips a beat remembering the side-effects of radiation and chemotherapy. I determine right then and there to take charge, make my own decisions, fast-track every bit of info I can lay my hands on and refuse, absolutely, to let this thing bring me down. If the worst comes to the worst, I'll agree to the slash, but definitely no burn⁶ or poison.⁷

The following morning I arrive at my naturopath's⁸ office and bone-up on anti-cancer homeopathic remedies, the enhanced nutrients in organically-grown foods, and the importance of reducing chemicals in our household. I rush home to look for my copy of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, the book that succeeded in banning DDT – *should have paid more attention – will re-read right now*.

We call our kids, friends and family and within days all of Orono has heard the news. Friends⁹ shower me with Reiki and Therapeutic Touch¹⁰ in our book club sessions, and at Mary's¹¹ Thursday night spiritual group.

I'm a little wary of taking the next step, a visit to my M.D. My sister¹², a traditional R.N., gives me a dose of her reality. "You know I'm not interested in all that off-the-wall stuff – get to your doctor today, you idiot, and call me when you get home."

⁶- Richard Walters, *Options, The Alternative Cancer Therapy Book*, 1993, p. 12. "Side effects of radiation: Severe prolonged immune deficiency and chromosomal damage resulting in later cancer." & "Radiation appears to be of limited value in treating cancers and often does more harm than good."

⁷- Ibid. Virtually all of the anticancer drugs approved by the FDA are toxic at the applied dosages and markedly immunosuppressive, destroying a patient's natural resistance to many diseases, including cancer. p.9

⁸- John Hawrylak, N.D.

⁹- Kellie McDonell, Sylvi Parker, Barbara Walker, Wendy Pratt, Phyllis Bandola and Rosemary Tuma.

¹⁰ - Reiki – universal, spiritual, hands-on, vital force energy. The practitioner becomes a clear vessel through which energy flows, allowing the higher purpose of the healee to be the outcome of the healing. Therapeutic Touch, in a similar manner, works with subtle energies.

¹¹- Mary Rutherford

¹²- Shirley Janes.