

## Good for Another Year

By Cherie Ann Vick

It's 6:30 a.m. and I am in my bathroom getting dressed for the day. I select a crisp pair of jeans and a button down shirt—no pullovers today. I grab a bra from the lingerie holder on the back of the closet door. I move automatically to the shower where I keep the deodorant. No, wait, no deodorant today. No talcum powder and no perfume. Today is picture day.

I eat breakfast and try to work. I am fighting a cold, so I don't get much done at the computer. But work is a useful distraction. At 12:30 I eat a quick lunch and check my phone to be sure I have the physical address of the Cancer Center—101 Manning Drive, Chapel Hill. In the car I program the GPS—even though I probably don't need to any longer—and back out of the garage.

In the 27-mile trip to Chapel Hill, my mind journeys back over the terrain of the last 21 years. I was 44 and living in South Florida. For the first time since I turned 35, I skipped getting my picture taken. Newly married and starting a consulting practice, I had no health insurance for the very first time since college. In following year, the State of Florida offered group policies to individuals and small businesses—a forerunner to the Health Insurance Marketplace. I joined a PPO with reasonable rates. In May I went to South Miami hospital radiology.

Four years earlier, a mammogram suggested an irregularity of the left breast. A general surgeon removed two small benign masses. This day I completed my test and waited for the radiologist. When he came in the room, he handed me a red rose. He said they were giving roses that day to every woman who came in for her test. Then he said,

"You need to see a surgeon."

Not entirely satisfied with the previous general surgeon, I asked him who he would recommend.

"I hear good things about DerHagopian."

I thanked him and left. I told my husband the news. Naturally, the one year I skipped my picture session there would be something suspicious in the next picture. Still, I had been through this before. I called the surgeon's office and got an appointment. I was more annoyed than panicked. Dr. D., as he was called, did a lot of breast surgery. He practiced in three major hospitals.

I don't remember now if I took the film with me from South Miami to his office or if he ordered it. After meeting me briefly in his office, he hung my film on a long light box outside his door. With a pen he pointed at a dot on my pictures.

"See that? That's cancer."

He continued to talk about it. I know because I saw his mouth moving. I couldn't tell my husband much about what he said. Something about a needle biopsy, but don't bother, because he won't trust it

anyway—too many false negatives. Need to get on his surgical calendar. I was alone so I know I drove home the short distance from South Miami to Coral Gables.

Over the next nine months, my body and my doctors fought an invisible, insidious disease in a way that made me sick, tired, and unable to work very successfully. My husband was there for two surgeries, six rounds of chemotherapy. Someone had to drive me to chemo—I got nauseas as soon as we got in the car. I drove myself to nine weeks of radiation.

By Easter I had finished with the treatment. One inch of straight brown hair had replaced the shoulder-length curly brown hair I had when we married. My prognosis was good. Even though it was Stage 2 Invasive Ductal Carcinoma, I had completed all the treatment protocols. Now I just needed to be vigilant. Labs for the next couple of years showed no spread, no return of my cancer.

I have reached at the Dogwood Parking Deck at UNC Medical Center. I find a space on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor and turn to take a picture of my car underneath the location banner. I begin the short walk across the esplanade to reach the Cancer Center. I check in, reassure UNC that I have health insurance and someone will pay for this, and take the elevator one flight to the special mammography unit. It's October, so there is a table of pink giveaways—pens, post-it pads, mints, and small pink bag clips. I give the friendly receptionist my name, which she easily finds on her roster. Though I am 20 minutes early, a volunteer immediately takes me to the waiting room.

I grab a hospital gown and enter one of the changing rooms. Snapped and tied up I emerge and lock my shirt, bra, jacket, and purse in locker 11. I put the key around my wrist. Another woman emerges from a changing room. She has not been able to master the tie-down in the back, and looks a little like a Halloween ghost with arms outstretched. We laugh and joke about these "gowns." It breaks the tension we both feel at being here. The television overhead shows stories of couples shopping for new homes. Is 1400 square feet enough for him? Does the kitchen space accommodate an island for her? Have any of these people ever had cancer? I wonder.

"Ms. Vick," the radiology technician calls as she opens the door to find me. Her name is Jane, she tells me. She is the senior tech here. The tech who took my pictures last year is on a break. We enter the room with the very large camera and her computer station. I feel the chill of the air as the hairs of my unclothed arms respond. She pulls up my history on her computer and asks me about it briefly. She tells me she is very inventive about getting just the right pictures from all angles. This is meant to be reassuring I am sure, but it has the opposite effect on my body, which stiffens. I remind myself to breathe. She asks me about my treatment and I tell her. I also tell her my mother died from post-menopausal breast cancer, but that was after, not before, my own.

From talking about my cancer she segues to discussing her mother's diagnosis and eventual death from ovarian cancer—how little time they had, how treatment was brutal and avoided, how she and her sister took time off work to spend with mom, the photo recordings mom made before she died. I am standing in front the picture machine. I don't speak to her but I force a small smile of recognition that what she is saying is important. Suddenly she realizes that I am tense and need to get this over with. She says as much and we begin.

Jane marks my scars on the left with little stickers to be sure the radiologist won't mistake them for a tumor. She takes three views of the right breast, positioning me with face against metal, and breast beneath a plate of clear plastic. The machine groans as it compresses my breast. Hold it, she tells me each time, don't breathe. The shutter snaps and we have it. Ok, breathe, and she releases the machine's vice-like grip. She has me turn sideways and raise my arm overhead, hugging the machine. Then she takes six views of the left, each with a different pose, and a searing pain where the scar tissue still lives as a reminder of my cancer surgery. Finally, we are finished. She shows me the black and white film with pride. I thank her and she escorts me to the waiting room.

There is a new woman—maybe in her 30's—in the waiting room when I sit down to wait for the radiologist. I don't remember which of us speaks first. She tells me she is back for another test because six months earlier her pictures had shown something. Did you have a sonogram? I ask. She said she had and now she needed new pictures. I decide to tell her I am a 20-year breast cancer survivor. Her face brightens. Yes, I beat it and I come back every year. I want her to have courage just in case she hears, 'You need to see a surgeon.'

"Ms. Vick," the radiologist calls my name from the half-opened door. She is smiling. She doesn't even wait until we reach the private office the center has set aside for bad news.

"Your results look great."

We sit at the table anyway. She hands me the paperwork that says I am all clear.

"You are good for another year."

I thank her and return to the locker to get my clothes. As put them on, I climb back into my own present-day skin. I smile at the checkout person and tell her I will be back. When I reach the esplanade, I say a prayer of thanksgiving for the gift of another year.