

A Tango with Cancer
My Perilous Dance with Healthcare & Healing

Apryl Allen

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for:

My husband
Kenneth Lewis Allen
You are my every breath

My mother
Ada Riddles Hettich
1922 - 2002
You taught me courage
You give me strength
I miss you dearly

My friend
Katherine Amalie Koppel
1966 – 2016
The circle of a bracelet is forever

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Prelude

A mirror doesn't lie. The hard cold truth in its reflection is *fear* when you hear the word *Cancer*. What follows is a terrifying reality that completely strips you of the life you currently know. Throughout this insidious period, you learn that fighting *Cancer* isn't necessarily limited to eradicating it from your body. Too often it continues with the healthcare system that's supposed to heal us.

The mere mention of *Breast Cancer* conjured what I had seen in the media and have experienced within our society: Bald women, scarves, pink, a "Spiritual Journey," the Susan G. Komen Foundation, Race for the Cure, pink ribbons, emotional women with their daughters at a finish line, and well (*big breath*) . . . PINK again!

Tragically, my mother passed away from breast cancer at the age of 79. However, I remained optimistic about my own health, primarily because my family does not have a history of *Cancer*. My mother began taking estrogen at age 76 to alleviate a throbbing pain in her shoulder—which it did. But shortly thereafter all sorts of health issues ensued, eventually leading to breast cancer. She was initially diagnosed in 1999, and after her surgery, was in remission until 2001. In September of that year, the cancer came back with a vengeance, this time throughout her entire body. Her doctor gave her six months to live. She passed away on April 20, 2002. My last conversation with her was on my 35th birthday.

April 20th was a Saturday in 2002. The following Monday I was diagnosed with melanoma. A year later I found myself in need of a hysterectomy, and a couple of weeks prior to that surgery had another melanoma removed. I remember thinking, *Okay, if this is the cancer I am to be labeled with I can deal with it*. Of course, we never know what our future holds . . .

My former self: Miss Arizona USA 1993, an actress, musician, singer, songwriter, Comanche storyteller and author, who has written and recorded two award-winning albums, currently authoring a Native American trilogy while simultaneously composing its musical. (Breath.) Falling madly in love, I married a high-profile architect and became not only his wife, but

his firm's CFO overseeing administrative, legal, financial and human resource issues (including negotiating our company health insurance).

That's who I was until my life came to a screeching halt in 2013—*Breast Cancer*. Now I consider myself well equipped to battle this disease: I'm in good health, my husband and I (to some extent) are well-connected with friends who are doctors, we know individuals who are highly respected within our medical community, we have good insurance and are financially sound.

Speaking of sound, I have named each chapter after various songs. I've indicated which version by the vocalists' rendition (in some instances I've included the names of instrumentalists that are showcased too). The reasons why I chose these songs vary: a couple played a role in my healing, some I sang to the cancerous nodule as if it were a person or illicit lover, others reflect how I felt at the time—the constant baring of my breasts and having them fondled by strangers left me feeling exposed and vulnerable.

As I refuse to give into this disease completely, I changed the titles of my doctors that had anything to do with, *ahem . . . Cancer*. I chose names I felt were more befitting due to the doctors' physical and personality traits, or what they represented to me. Okay, and yes, I renamed a few others who played a not so endearing role during this period of my life. Eventually the cancerous nodule and lymph node were renamed too. Throughout this book you will come to know them as the following:

Breast Cancer Nodule	Jorge
1 Cancerous Lymph Node	Lymph-Along-Kid
Family Physician	Dr. KnowItAll
Radiologist	Breast Investigator
Breast Surgeon	Medicine Woman
Oncologist #1	Mad Scientist
Nurse Navigator #2	Nightmare Navigator
Radiation Oncologist	Radiation Man
Reconstructive Surgeon	Shape Shifter
Life Coach & Therapist	High Priestess
Oncologist #2	The King
Oncologist #3	Dr. Cool
Health Insurance	ACME Insurance

Besides the renaming of my doctors, there are a few very special individuals I had to choose unique names for in the retelling of my *Tango*. They simply had to have meanings that would reflect the loving qualities they brought to me during this period of my life. Below are their names, meanings and pronunciations:

Adelaide – (A-də-layd)

In French the meaning of the name Adelaide is Nobility. French form of the Old German is a compound of ‘athal’ (noble) and ‘haida’ (hood).

Clíona – (KLEE-a-na)

According to Old Irish legends, Clíona is the name of one of the three beautiful daughters of the poet Manannán mac Lir. In other myths, she is a goddess of love and beauty. Yet others depict her as a fairy and the guardian spirit of the MacCarthy’s. Clíona is said to have three brightly colored magical birds who eat apples from an otherworldly tree and whose sweet song heals the sick.

Malaika – (muh-lī-kuh)

In Swahili the meaning of the name Malaika is Angel. As is the case with many Swahili words, it is ultimately derived from Arabic.

Pedro

The name Pedro is of Spanish and Portuguese origin and derived from the Latin word “Petra” meaning “rock” or “stone”.

Aliza

Means joy. In Kabbalah it signifies the joyful ability to rise above nature.

Lastly, as they say . . . all names in this book have been changed to protect the innocent, the not so innocent, and the downright mean and guilty!

1

In The Air Tonight

Phil Collins

In the back of my mind I knew I was past due for a couple of annual exams. The two I dread most are my mammograms and skin check-ups. Most women can relate to my fear of mammograms, but mine was a little more personal. First, I always think of my mother and find myself holding back tears and other emotions. Second, a couple of these appointments turned into biopsies—who needs that added stress! And third, a mishap caused by the Imaging Center itself.

Annually I check my credit reports and noticed a blemish on my otherwise perfect score. It reflected a medical bill for \$60 that had been sent to collections. To make a weeklong saga to correct this mistake short, the Imaging Center had entered the wrong mailing address—ergo I never received the invoice. No other attempts were made to contact me and the unpaid bill was sent to collections. As I pointed out to the collections agent, “You don’t get perfect credit by ignoring \$60 bills.” This only fueled my procrastination over scheduling my mammogram.

As for the skin check-ups, I attribute its postponement to travel and busy schedules. It seemed every time I made appointments for my husband and myself, they inevitably would be cancelled. Either our dermatologist would be out of town, or vice versa. Then we were told she decided to focus her practice in other areas and turned all of her patients over to a *younger* woman. It had taken me several years to find someone with whom I felt comfortable. Trust in healthcare is something rare and I really liked our dermatologist.

Postponing these appointments became easier as my sole focus was placed on my husband’s business. Small business and the economy took all of our attention, and while I kept up with other health appointments, I let the two aforementioned slide. Stress took center stage as our business began

treading water. Our main focus became keeping our business alive and employees employed. This was how 2010 ended for us.

Fast forward to mid-May 2013 . . . my friend Adelaide and I booked ourselves a four-day spa retreat in Sedona, Arizona. From Thursday, June 27th through Sunday, June 30th we would be pampered nonstop with various spa treatments and elixirs. Throughout this glorious weekend we'd be oiled, rubbed, exfoliated, wrapped in hot linens, hot stoned and hot tubbed. We'd also embark upon various activities and adventures meant to stimulate our mind, body and soul—hiking, walks, workouts, water aerobics and yes . . . meditation.

During this same period, I ran into a friend at the gym, and for whatever reason we began discussing dermatologists. It ends up he goes to the same dermatologist we do. “I really like who she chose to take over her practice,” he informed me.

“Okay, I've got to schedule an appointment.” And for the next couple weeks every time I ran into our friend Seth, I was embarrassed to report, “No, I haven't scheduled the appointment.”

Eventually I succumbed and scheduled appointments with *all* of our doctors—our annual physicals, eye exams, dermatologist, you name it, I scheduled it. Earlier that year I had appointments with both my dentist and gynecologist, wherein Dr. Gyno reminded me I needed to go in for my annual mammogram. Promises were made, but quickly placed on the back burner.

During my routine physical with our internist Dr. KnowItAll, he too inquired, “Have you gone in for a mammogram lately?”

“*Argh*—no, but I'll get it scheduled soon.”

“I'm showing the last time you were in was June of 2010—two years ago.”

“Wow . . . has it been that long?” *Well, no worries, I'm healthy and am confident nothing will come of it.* “Okay, I'll get it scheduled,” thinking in the back of my mind I'd push it off until the fall—*who has time?*

My husband and I attempt to schedule our doctors' appointments together late in the afternoon. This way we can end our day with a martini. It's just something nice to look forward to—more so to take the edge off—allowing us to revel in our health and life!

In most cases we have the same doctors and I take the first appointment. Such was the case on June 21, 2013, with Dr. KnowItAll. Concluding my annual physical he invites me to join him in his office after

I realign my ensemble. Entering the small room, I take a seat across from him at his desk and we catch up on the various trips we've each taken over the past year. In the meantime, Ken enters the recently vacated exam room and readies himself for his physical. Concluding the details of his latest trip, Dr. KnowItAll excuses himself and disappears to greet Ken at his best. Looking around the room I spot a gossip magazine sitting on the chair next to me and start flipping through its pages to amuse myself. The hot topic with its scorching headline: "*Angelina Jolie opted for a double mastectomy.*" *Yikes . . . poor girl!!!*

Dr. KnowItAll finished with Ken and joined me in his office again. Soon Ken followed. "Ken I'm a bit concerned with the rhythm of your heart—notice here how this beat is different from the others? I'd like to get you back on the EKG. It could just be the anxiety of being here. Ruford, please get Ken back on the EKG and let's get another reading of his heart."

Again the same strange rhythm was seen on the tape. "You should make an appointment with your cardiologist. I don't think it's anything we should be too concerned about, but just to be on the safe side, get the appointment scheduled. Also, I'd like you to have a chest X-ray. They'll do that for you downstairs."

Over the years, Ken and I have had X-rays completed downstairs. If Dr. KnowItAll's office was open, they were too. However, on this day fate played its role—they were closed. Ken and I were a bit in disbelief and simultaneously looked at our watches. He soon uttered exactly what I was thinking, "*Humph . . . that's odd they're closed. In all the years we've been coming here I've never known them to be closed.*"

"Well, I guess it's for the best," I replied. "I need a mammogram and rather than putting it off until October I might as well get it over with. I'll call and schedule a chest X-ray for you and a mammogram for me." The next day we were set; I scheduled them both for Tuesday, June 25th. Unbeknownst to me my entire world was about to turn upside down!



It's going to be a typical mammogram, I keep telling myself, it has to be, Ken's here and nothing ever goes wrong at a doctor's appointment when he's with me—he's my lucky charm! And then my name's called.

I follow the technician through a maze of hallways to the changing room. I know the drill, change into the gown with the opening in the front. She'll be back shortly to get me. Piece of cake—this is definitely *not* going to end with a biopsy like the last one did in 2010. Deep inside I wish Ken could be by my side for this entire process—primarily because I can't seem to shake a looming feeling that a storm is coming.

After donning the lovely gown, I take a seat in the waiting room. *Hmmm . . . what to read—Angelina Jolie seems to be everywhere.* Well it doesn't matter, the tech's returned asking me to follow her to the infamous "Mammo Room." And here I stand, with my left breast in the machine all twisted and pressed, with one arm up and the other down.

"Okay, take a deep breath and hold it," the tech instructs. The soft whirring of the machine begins and I'm asked to do a couple more poses, then, "Okay, let's do the right side." And we repeat the same acrobatics on my right breast. "I love your skirt! Such beautiful tranquil blue colors. Where did you get it, in the Caribbean?" she asked while taking the last image.

"No, believe it or not, I found it at the mall."

"I wish I could find something like that," she mused. "We're finished here; I'll take you back to the waiting room while the Breast Investigator takes a look at your mammograms." *Okay and I'll get back to something other than Angelina Jolie and her "Double M."*

And there I sat, rummaging through the much handled magazines when the tech reappeared. "The Breast Investigator noticed a little something she'd like to get a better look at. Can you come back tomorrow for an ultrasound?"

Rats! "Yeah, sure."

"Okay, let's get you back up to the front to get it scheduled." Walking back seemed more confusing than the initial walk for the mammogram. Once at the front desk I scheduled my ultrasound for the next day, Wednesday, June 26th, at 1:30. Returning to the waiting area, I locked eyes with my husband's baby blues, now filled with trepidation. Without saying a word he asked, "*Another appointment?*"

"The doctor saw something she wants to get a better look at. I'm sure it's nothing, but they'd like me back tomorrow for an ultrasound." A bit disheartened, I left with high spirits. Surely it was nothing, just a little blip on the big screen of life.

In the meantime, the results for Ken's chest X-ray were sent to his cardiologist and Dr. KnowItAll. His cardiologist told him he'd like to monitor his heart for a few days and equipped Ken with a heart monitor. It would be removed on Tuesday, *after* my return from Sedona.

In my heart I knew Ken was fine—his chest X-ray played its role as the instigator for me to get a mammogram. Now we were just following the needed steps to assure this indeed was the case.

"Honey, maybe I should cancel the Sedona trip and stay home with you," I offered, feeling a bit concerned. I don't know, there just seemed to be something in the air tonight . . . a feeling . . . a warning possibly . . . but I couldn't quite place it.

"Absolutely not! If you do we'll just sit here staring at each other, wringing our hands waiting for its removal. I'd rather you go and enjoy a wonderful weekend with Adelaide. Besides, you've always wanted to go away with a girlfriend for a spa retreat." And that's my husband, always looking out for others first.



Since an ultrasound is relatively simple, I insisted Ken spend his day at the office. Once again I find myself waiting for my name to be called. Although, I didn't have to worry about idle time—it appears the office lost the paperwork I completed yesterday—because I was asked to complete the forms again. Once finished I turned my attention to a movie that was playing on a flat screen.

Eventually, "Apyrl Allen?" rang through the waiting area. This time Penelope greeted me. Escorting me through the maze of halls, she took me to another changing room and handed me a folded sanitized gown with ties.

After changing I follow her into a 10 x 14-foot room where she instructs, "Please lay face-up on the bed. Are you warm enough? If not, I can get you a warm blanket?"

"No, I'm good. Thanks."

Feeling a bit apprehensive, we discussed how long she'd been doing this type of work while I watched her place clear gel on top of a magical wand. She then started the procedure. Thankfully, the gel was warm and I was saved from the shock of it being ice cold. We then scrutinized the monitor. "There's the little guy!" she exclaimed as she repeatedly moved the

sensor over the lower left portion of my underarm. “Hmmm, he does look a little angry,” she noted.

“Where exactly is he at?” I asked. After pointing him out to me on the black and white monitor I thought, *Yeah, he does look a little dark, and my underarm in that area has been feeling a bit sore. But that’s just due to the time of month—I think. I mean, didn’t he always get a little grumpy during this time?* Although I had a hysterectomy, they did leave my ovaries intact, as in I still have the monthly symptoms, just not my . . . *ahem, well, you know!*

“Let me get the Breast Investigator to take a look at him. She may want me to take a few more pictures.”

“Okay, I have nowhere else to go,” I said with an anxious smile.

When she returned, she relayed, “Yeah, she does want a few more.”

I watched as Penelope worked the red ball on her mouse—clicking on various sides of the angry little guy, attempting to capture his best attributes. “Okay, you can sit up now. We’re finished.” She grabbed a handful of tissues for me to wipe off the gel. “The Breast Investigator wants to take a look at these and may want to speak with you. Please wait here,” and she disappeared behind the door for the private screening.

Sitting on the table I looked around the room. *This is not my reality. This is not going to be my reality*, I silently assured myself. I then stood and walked to the end of the table and leaned with my back against the counter. *This is not what my future holds—I’m healthy!* I looked down at the bed I was just on and then around the room. I closed my eyes, taking a deep breath, and began releasing the air slowly between my lips.

That’s when the door opened. Penelope had returned with the Breast Investigator. “Hi, Apryl, I’d like to have you come back for a biopsy. This little guy doesn’t look too happy and I want to make sure everything’s okay,” were the first words the Breast Investigator uttered to me.

Double Rats! I felt my heart sink deep inside and my eyes immediately filled with tears. *Don’t lose it, Apryl, be strong like Mom—find her strength. This is nothing. I know it is, just like before—nothing. Oh why didn’t I have Ken, my lucky charm, come to this appointment?* “Do you think it’s anything serious?” My voice was barely audible.

“We don’t think so. We just want to rule out *any* possibilities.”

“Okay, when would you like me back?”

“How about Friday morning?” Penelope inquired.

“Sure. Oh wait . . . what am I thinking? My girlfriend and I are going to Sedona for a spa retreat. We return Sunday night. Can it wait until Monday morning?”

“Penelope, introduce Apryl to Iris and see what times we have available on Monday morning. Apryl, besides having a wonderful time in Sedona, we’ll need you to fast the morning of the biopsy. The procedure will take about two hours.” The Breast Investigator then excused herself to return to, well . . . more investigating.

“All right, let’s go see what we have available.” I quickly changed and followed Penelope back through the maze of halls to meet Iris.

After cordialities, “What time would you like the appointment?” Iris inquired.

“What’s the earliest you have?”

“Does 7:30 work?”

“Perfect! I’ll see you bright and early Monday morning.”

“Have a wonderful weekend in Sedona! And don’t worry . . . we just want to rule out any *uncertainties*,” Iris added.

Walking out the front door of the Imaging Center, I took a deep breath and let it out. Once in the car I slid my phone from my purse and dialed Ken’s private line.

“Hey, Baby, how did it go?”

Big breath. “Well, they want me to come back for a biopsy.”

“No! Oh, Apryl.”

“Ken, I’m sure it’s *nothing*, just like before. Besides, I really like the Breast Investigator. She makes me feel comfortable, and I know I’m in good hands. Plus, I remember my last biopsy being relatively easy—other than when she numbed me, but even that was reasonably painless. We’re doing it when I return from Sedona on Monday morning first thing.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“A little shaken, but fine.”

“Okay, I’ll see you at home shortly.”

After I hung up, I sat there thinking, *it really is nothing*. I felt a calmness come over me and the strength of my beautiful mother enveloped me. I then picked up the phone and called my friend Adelaide.

“Hey, how’d it go?” she asked, skipping cordialities.

“Well . . . they want me back for a biopsy.”

“No!”

“Yeah, but it’s going to be fine. I really like this doctor. They just want to make sure it’s nothing. She’s done a biopsy on me before and it wasn’t bad at all.”

“When are you having it done?”

“At 7:30 Monday morning after we return from Sedona.”

“Are you sure you still want to go?”

“Yes! It’ll help keep my mind off of it.”

“Okay then, we’re on!”

“I’m headed home now—I’ll talk to you later. Big hug and kiss!”

“You, too—bye.”

Driving home I felt a bit uneasy. But my mind was already fast at work consoling me. *Apryl, you’ve been here before—you’re going to be just fine! It really will be nothing!*

2

Wildfire

Michael Martin Murphy

Whether you believe in it or not, at some point *fate* will play a role in your life. Its guises are endless—mostly portraying the misconception that you’re in control. In some instances, its mystical spinning threads lure its prey with a subtle intoxicating proposition; other times it’s a euphoric feat or accomplishment. Of course there are those times when the deck’s stacked against you—with no warning at all it slams you up against a wall, knocking the very breath from you. That’s when you realize you’re but a puppet in its mindless game. The truth is *fate* has the ability to catapult you into another world, another realm, and sometimes a completely different life.

If you ever find yourself in need of a biopsy, I *highly* recommend a spa retreat prior to having it. It relaxes you completely, allowing you to revel in life and your health. And that’s exactly what Adelaide and I experienced—blissful, calming and tranquil. Honestly, it seemed there were no spare moments; there was always a treatment or activity we were scheduled for. Whenever the thought of my biopsy came to mind, I dismissed it knowing it would end as it did in June 2010 as *a non-event*. At the end of the weekend I actually forgot about my imminent appointment.

When I arrived home, after being greeted by our two sweet dogs, Princess Maddy and Loco Hugo, my loving and thoughtful husband reminded me of my notorious appointment. “Wow, I completely forgot about it!” and I really had!

That evening we went out for a quick dinner and then retired to bed early, to assure I had ample rest for my appointment. Thankfully, I felt refreshed and relaxed when I awoke the next morning. Although, what I didn’t fully comprehend is this biopsy was on a lymph node, not the breast.

Regardless, I was feeling confident because I had brought my lucky charm—Ken!

The routine was identical to that on my previous visits—completing the *same* paperwork I had submitted *twice* already! *Does anyone bother to enter my personal information into a computer?* I wondered after I turned it in. *Sigh.* And we waited . . .

Penelope eventually appeared and began speaking with the front desk. I knew it was only moments before my name was called. Then she turned in my direction. “Hi, Apryl!”

“Hi, Penelope!” After giving my husband a quick kiss, he assured me he wouldn’t move until I returned.

After slipping on the infamous frock, I followed Penelope into the procedure room. She then began to prep me for the biopsy—and this is where the spa retreat came into play. I felt as if I were having just another spa treatment. I put myself in the frame of mind that it was electrolysis *I had decided* to have done. It’s not any more painful than that type of procedure. (*I hope.*)

“The Breast Investigator will be taking two to three samples of the lymph node, and then you’ll be done.” No sooner did Penelope finish her sentence than the door opened and in walked the doctor.

While greeting me, Penelope handed the Breast Investigator a paper draping. Placing it over my chest, its opening revealed the offending portion of my underarm. Seating herself on a stool she informed me, “I’m going to start with the numbing shot,” and out came the needle. *It’s just electrolysis. It’s just electrolysis,* I silently chanted to myself as she gently poked me.

“Okay, let’s give that a few minutes to completely numb the area. In the meantime, Penelope will cue up the angry little guy via ultrasound.” The Breast Investigator then left while the anesthetic took effect. *Wasn’t so bad,* I thought to myself.

Soon the Breast Investigator returned. “You should be completely numb now. Can you feel this?”

“No,” I replied, knowing she truly wanted me to be completely relaxed and comfortable. Then she and Penelope began to speak another language. I know it was English, but I didn’t understand a word.

“Okay, I’m going to insert the needle. If you feel any pain at all let me know immediately. You may feel a bit of pressure, but there should be no pain.” I felt absolutely no pain whatsoever, but yes, oddly, I did feel the

pressure. To get my mind off of what was happening I turned my attention to the monitor.

WOW! *How cool!* On the black and white screen I could see the needle going into my underarm. I didn't allow myself the opportunity to consider that what I saw on the monitor was actually happening to *ME*. We all watched the angry little guy and the needle moving its way towards him.

The Breast Investigator then informed me, "You're going to hear a loud clicking sound as I take the samples." And just as she said—*Clap!* "Okay, there's one," and out came the needle. "Now for the second." The needle went painlessly in again—*Clap!* "Since I'm getting such good samples I'm going to take one more." *Clap!* It was over.

"We're all finished! Penelope will clean and dress the area. We'll send the results to your doctor once we receive them. Please, no strenuous exercises or lifting of heavy items for about one week. There might be some bruising but that's normal. Do you have any questions?"

Hmmm, bruising, I don't remember that from the last time, I thought. "No, I can't think of any." *Dang . . . how I wish it wasn't Dr. KnowItAll giving me the results.* He's so clinical and has a tendency, in a very rapid cadence, to prattle on in what I consider to be a different language. Forget about asking questions; they quickly dissipate as you're attempting to assimilate his next few sentences. No, I'd prefer to hear the results from my Gynecologist. *Oh well, it is what it is.*

"Tell your husband you're to be 'Queen for the Day'—absolutely no cooking. Now he can take you out for a much deserved breakfast!" And with that the Breast Investigator left the room. *This woman has no idea how much I trust her. She instills confidence which in turn keeps me calm.* I thought as Penelope took her vacated spot.

We again made idle chitchat as she dressed the biopsied area. And then came the tape. She must have considered me to be some sort of present minus the bow! "You're all finished—you can get dressed. Can I get you anything to drink? Apple juice, orange juice, water?"

"Mmm . . . apple juice sounds great!" I replied, following her out into the small hallway. As we walked through the door to the waiting room, I began removing my gown.

"No—not here!" Penelope chided. "The changing room is there," and she pointed to another small room. "This is just the waiting area."

“Oops! I’m so embarrassed!” and I silently chastised myself as I entered the changing room. *What am I thinking?!*

“I know, these rooms are so small—don’t worry, people do it all the time,” she said in an attempt to lessen my mortification.

Once inside the changing room, I hurriedly removed the gown and happily put on my own shirt. As I opened the door Penelope greeted me with a boxed apple juice. I followed her back through the hallways that made no sense whatsoever to the room where this all began. There, where the *real world* awaited with my loving husband. I looked into his eyes, which held many questions.

“Let’s go to the car,” I said saving the details for later. I was feeling a bit self-conscious and it felt as if all eyes in the waiting room were on me. Once outside I let out a breath I didn’t realize I’d been holding. It was over—another mammogram and biopsy completed and I *won’t* be returning until next year! At least that’s what I told myself.



On our way home I called Adelaide to let her know how the biopsy went. “Apryl, Clíona is not doing well.” Our friend had gone in for what was supposed to be a routine hysterectomy on Friday. However, due to complications, on Sunday evening she returned to the emergency room and was admitted for two days.

“My family and I are leaving first thing tomorrow morning for our vacation and Clíona needs someone to pick her up at 10. Can you do it?”

“Of course, no problem; is there anything else I can do?” *Anything to keep my mind off the relentlessly slow time clock ticking away to an arbitrary moment when the phone rings and I receive the results of the biopsy.*

“Yes, if you can check in on her during the week and maybe even spend the night with her—I don’t feel comfortable with her being alone. I’m going to the hospital tonight to take her some things. How did your biopsy go?”

“Great, just waiting for results now. Let me know if there’s anything I can do tonight.”

“Will do . . .” and we said our goodbyes.

After telling Ken about Clíona he reminded me, “Honey, that’s when my appointment is to have my heart monitor removed.”

“Oh, I completely forgot. Well, Clóna needs our help. Would it be too much of an imposition to help her? She doesn’t have anyone else,” I pleaded.

“I didn’t realize that, of course we can. As soon as my appointment’s over I’ll meet you there.” I knew I could count on *Mr. Wonderful!* That’s what my mom called him when she first met him. Actually, it was a nickname my friends gave him and, well, it just stuck!

Shortly after returning home, the tape from my biopsy started irritating my skin and I decided to remove it. When I took my shirt off we couldn’t believe the amount of tape that was used. You would have thought I had major surgery.

“Dang . . . I forgot about the tape and how much it loves my skin,” I said, lamenting the removal of it.

“I’ll help you take it off,” Ken offered and began doing so as gently as he could, but *Ouch . . . it HURT!* My stomach was in knots and nausea began to set in.

“Honey, I think I’m going to have to remove it myself. Can you get me a washcloth please?” After soaking it in hot water I wrung most of it out and placed the warm wet cloth on the bandage, drenching it. I then began peeling the tape off inch by inch. After doing so my skin was left with bright red welts. I placed some face cream on them, then dressed myself in comfy cozy attire and joined Ken in our media room for a much needed distraction.



At 10 o’clock the next morning, while parking, Ken phoned. “I’m here; it didn’t take any time to remove the monitor.” While gathering my things, he appeared opening my car door.

Together we walked towards the entrance of the hospital and its sliding glass doors. They opened swiftly and the all too familiar smell engulfed my senses as we walked through them. *Dang, I hate the smell of hospitals,* I thought as all of the memories of my mother came flooding back. I had to force myself to suppress them—now wasn’t the time.

After all she’d been through there was no diminishing Clóna’s beauty. Of course it took a couple of hours to get her discharged from the hospital. As the nurses were going through her exit procedures they handed

me her prescriptions. I looked at them, then handed them back to the nurse. “Can you please call this in to her pharmacy?” I inquired.

“No, sorry—we can’t,” the nurse replied.

“What do you mean you can’t? Of course you can. It will save us a lot of time and we’d be incredibly grateful.” I added the last words purely for effect.

You’d have thought I asked the nurse to cut off her left arm by the look she gave me. Realizing I wasn’t going to take no for an answer she took the scripts from me. “I’ll see what I can do.”

After providing her with both the phone and fax numbers to the pharmacy, it only took her *40 minutes* to get the prescription phoned in. At this point we were all starting to get hungry.

As we collected Clóna’s belongings Ken offered, “I’ll get the prescription from the pharmacy and lunch too, then I’ll meet you at her house.”

“Perfect!” I responded.

Once at her home I helped Clóna settle in and busied myself organizing while she showered. Afterwards, I assisted with the bandages as the nurses had dictated. While doing so I told her of my run in with the tape. Sliding a drawer open, she reached in and pulled out a roll of white medical tape. “I have the same problem; this is what I have doctors use. It’s hypoallergenic tape. Here, you can have this roll,” she offered.

Knowing she might require it again, “I won’t be needing it anytime soon, but I’ll take the packaging if you don’t mind?” I said as I ripped off the portion that indicated the brand and type of tape. I’d pick some up the next time I was at the pharmacy. *Only for future use of course—I won’t be needing it anytime soon!*

Ken arrived with lunch and her medication, then immediately left for home to shower and ready himself for the day; I’d meet him later at the office. Removing the bottles from the bag I handed them to Clóna as she sat down at the table. Once we were both settled, after serving lunch, I started babbling about lord only knows what, when I saw a look flash across her face. “Are you okay?” I asked with concern.

“Yes,” she replied, nodding at the same time, and immediately followed her response with a deep breath in through her nose. “I think I just need to sit quietly for a while,” she said, silently letting her breath out.

“No problem,” I said, understanding. And there we sat soundlessly together and began eating our lunch.

Rudely, our reverie was interrupted when my mobile phone began urgently ringing. Picking it up with the intention of silencing the ringer I looked at the incoming number. “Hmmm . . . I don’t recognize this number; I’ll just see who it is. Hello?”

“Hello, Apryl, this is Iris from the Breast Investigator’s office. We’ve faxed your results to Dr. KnowItAll and I always like to do a follow-up call to ensure it was received. However, it says his phone number is out of order. Is he still in business?” she inquired worriedly.

“Yes, we were just there a week or so ago. That’s odd . . . I know they put the phones on night ring from 12-1 for lunch. Was it maybe his answering service you got?”

“No, it definitely said it was out of order and I tried it three different times. What number do you have for him?” she asked.

I quickly looked up his number and read off each digit. “That’s exactly what I have,” she concluded. “Well, since we’re unable to reach him, the Breast Investigator would like to give you your results.” Without waiting for my response Iris placed me on hold.

Wow, *this is really nice of them to call with my results*, I thought—not noticing the flashing neon danger sign hovering overhead. No doctor calls with good news, and that’s when I was struck by lightning!

“Hello, Apryl, this is the Breast Investigator. We got your results back and, honey, I’m sorry to tell you this, but it came back as cancer.”

“What?!” *Obviously, I didn’t hear her correctly.*

“Yes, I’m sorry, honey.”

I felt myself crouch down towards the floor in efforts to steady myself. The room was not just spinning, but tumbling in all directions. Eventually I found my breath as words formed on my lips. “So, what do I do now?” I asked the Breast Investigator.

“We need to get you in for an MRI and find out where exactly the cancer is coming from.”

“Okay, I’ll call back to schedule it. Thank you for taking the time to call with the results,” and I ended a phone call that I never thought I’d receive during my lifetime. How ironic that I had told Ken I wished the Breast Investigator would be the one to call with my results. Be careful what you wish for—right?!

Looking to Clíona I felt my world begin to crumble. “Clíona . . . Oh Clíona . . . what do I do? I don’t understand . . .” tears began tumbling down my cheeks.

I didn’t quite fathom how Clíona kept herself so calm. She sat for a moment, then placed her hands on either side of her plate. Spreading her fingers wide she closed her eyes and inhaled. As she slowly let out her breath she brought her fingers back together and I watched as she slipped her hands from the table. It was as if I were watching life in slow motion. She slowly stood, walked over to me and gave me a *ginormous* hug.

Standing with our arms wrapped around one another, time came to a standstill. Finally, one by one my senses came back and I pulled myself together. As the world around me started to come back into focus it dawned on me, *Apryl, get a hold of yourself; Clíona has just been through a horrible experience herself.*

When we finally released one another, Clíona took both my hands in hers. “Apryl, I’ve been here twice with my mom. One thing I know for sure is that you will be just fine.”

“Yes, I will . . .”

“You need to call Ken now,” and she tenderly squeezed my hands.

With tearful eyes and shaky hands I pick up my phone. *How could I have forgotten about Ken?* After a big breath I pressed the few buttons it took to dial our home phone. “Hi Honey, the Breast Investigator called with my results. It came back as cancer!” I heard myself repeat the ill-fated words.

“Oh, Apryl—NO!” I could feel his heart literally burst over the phone. Thank God he had the heart monitor removed; otherwise it surely would have imploded at that very moment. “I’ll be right there.”

Ending the call, I decided to get the MRI scheduled *immediately* and rang Iris back. She had an opening the next day, July 3rd, at 10 o’clock. I figured I was under the gun and needed to get things going—*I mean, why wait?!*

“Are you claustrophobic?” she inquired.

“No, I don’t believe so.”

“Okay, then nothing to eat or drink tomorrow morning until after the appointment. Now that we have the MRI scheduled we should probably schedule the biopsy of the nodule in your breast.” Wow, *is this really happening?* “The earliest we can get you in is on July 9th due to the Fourth of July holiday and everyone taking long weekends. Does that work for you?”

“Yes, what times do you have available?” Because I had to fast, I wanted to make sure the biopsy was scheduled first thing that morning.

“Does 7:30 work?”

“It’s exactly what I was hoping for.” And there it was, everything was set for the MRI and the biopsy of my—*gulp*—cancerous nodule.

At some point Clíona had slipped away into another room. When she came back she was carrying her phone and said Adelaide was on it. “Hi, Adelaide, can you believe it?”

“NO! Oh, Apryl.”

“I know, I really thought it was going to be nothing.”

“So did I—I was so sure of it.”

“I know . . .” What else is there to say at this point?

“What are you going to do now?” she asked.

“Well, I just scheduled an MRI for tomorrow and I guess now I need to find some good doctors. I’ll call you later, okay?” Reality was starting to sink in as I handed the phone back to Clíona. She again disappeared with it into another room.

Not knowing what else to do, I picked up my phone and started dialing. The first call was to our friend the Shape Shifter. His assistant Brianna informed me he was in surgery. “Okay, well, I have some news . . .” How exactly do you tell people about “*your news*”? But the words spewed from my lips like lava from an erupting volcano. I felt as if I were someone else witnessing this abominable event taking place. *This wasn’t really happening, I’m healthy!* It was like watching someone picking through carnage left over from a disaster and now calling the authorities for help.

“Oh, my gosh. Apryl, I’m so sorry. When did you say you were diagnosed?”

“Now . . . just within this last hour.” My mind was reeling—*cancer*.

“What?!” She was completely flabbergasted. “I can’t believe you’re this calm.”

“I guess I must be in shock.” *Reality*—exactly what is *reality* and where is it at this *very* moment? It eluded me.

“The minute the Shape Shifter is out of surgery I’ll let him know. He’ll be heartbroken to hear this.”

“Thanks, Brianna,” and we ended the call.

Clíona had been coming and going in her kitchen but at the moment she was nowhere to be found. I sat back in my chair and took

another deep breath. *Okay—now what?* Numb—absolutely *nothing*. I had been shaken to my very core, riveted with an insidious vice-like grip from a single word—*Cancer. Get a hold of yourself Apryl. Who else can you call? What’s the next step? Doctors—who else knows doctors?* Then a light went off—*our friend Samantha!*

Samantha was always talking about her doctor friends. Maybe she knows someone who could help point me in the right direction. I picked up my phone and dialed her number. After two rings, one of her sons answered it. “Hi, may I speak with your mom? This is her friend Apryl.”

“Yeah, hold on a minute,” and I listened as he set the phone down. I could hear voices talking in the background but no acknowledgement of my call. *Nothing*. Like the sickening void I had deep down in my belly—*absolutely nothing*. I sat for I don’t know how long until it occurred to me whoever answered didn’t mention to Samantha I was on the phone. So I hung up, thinking, *okay, I’ll give it a few minutes until her phone disconnects and call back*. Still Clóna was nowhere to be seen.

Once again I pressed the buttons for Samantha’s mobile phone—*one ring, two . . .* “Hi, Apryl.” This time it was the melodic voice of Samantha greeting me. I heard myself reiterating the ill-fated diagnosis I was given.

“Let me make some calls and I’ll get back to you. Apryl, I am so sorry to hear this.”

“Yeah, me too.” Ending the call, I felt empty inside.

Clóna was now seated next to me at the table again. Lunch was forgotten. I think I had taken three bites prior to the call.

Heartbroken I implored, “Oh, Cliona, I don’t understand . . .”

Calmly she looked into my eyes. “We don’t always understand why something happens—what’s important now is that you focus on healing.”

Her words brought an amazing calmness to me. “Thank you, Clóna—I’m so sorry I got this news when you’re in the middle of needing to heal yourself.”

“Everything happens for a reason,” she replied.

And there it was, even though the word hadn’t been spoken. *Fate* silently imposed itself on my world and was spreading like wildfire.

After clearing the table, I offered, “Since I don’t think I’d be good company for tonight, is there anything more I can do before I leave?”

“No, don’t worry about me, I’ll be fine.” I felt horrible leaving her like this.

Then Ken walked in the door. From the moment he entered the room our eyes locked. With no hesitation he walked directly to me and protectively embraced my entire being. We held to one another for several moments then, looking into each other's eyes, stood completely frozen in time. Our eyes never veered from one another while unspoken words filled the space between us and the entire room. Words of love, compassion and heartfelt sorrow. After all, it wasn't only me this was happening to, it was *us!* The moment was surreal—one of us was broken and we both shared in the devastation.

Finally, I tore my eyes from Ken and turned my attention to Clíona. “Are you sure you're going to be okay?”

“Yes. Are *you* okay to drive home?” she asked, clearly having more concern for me than her own well-being. I was so embarrassed that I learned about my cancer while she was dealing with her own traumatic health issues. “You can leave your car here if you need to,” she offered thoughtfully.

God, this was the last thing she needs. “No, I'm fine—I can drive home.” After gathering my things I gave her another big hug. “If you need *anything* at all, Ken and I are just a phone call away. Please don't hesitate to pick up the phone no matter what time it is.”

“Thank you, I will.”

Dazedly, Ken and I climbed into our separate vehicles and headed for home. In retrospect, I probably shouldn't have been driving because after making the first left turn out of the cul-de-sac, I made an incorrect turn.

Immediately my phone rang. “Honey, are you okay?”

“Yeah, sorry, I'll turn the car around. I just got a little confused.” Eventually we made it home, although I don't remember much about the drive. My world had literally been turned upside down and inside out.

Later that afternoon I received a phone call from the scheduling department at the Imaging Center. The voice on the other end informed me, “Your insurance, ACME, has a five-day waiting period for approval on MRIs.”

“What? Are you serious?”

“Yes, so five days from today will be next Wednesday, July 12th.”

“That seems so far away. How about if I pay for the procedure and then submit it to ACME for reimbursement? I'd really rather keep the appointment I have tomorrow,” the CFO in me said taking over.

“Oh . . . okay, we can do that. I’ll put you in here as ‘Self-Pay’ then. You’re all set for tomorrow.” As I hung up the phone I thought to myself, *I’ll run this like I do our business!*

3

Rumor Has It

Adele

I woke myself breathing. I know it sounds odd but I was taking deep breaths in through my nose and slowly releasing the air through my mouth. Instinctively my body was attempting to release the stress from my recent cataclysmic diagnosis while I was sleeping! Or was it that my body was beginning the healing process while in a dreamlike state?

And now . . . how exactly do you start your day after receiving news such as this? Eventually Ken and I found our rhythm and as *he* was having coffee, the phone rang. It was Dr. KnowItAll. He was calling with the news of my recent diagnosis, but we informed him I had already been told.

“How are you holding up?” he asked over the speaker phone.

“I’m doing well but still in a bit of shock, I guess.” We then told him I’d scheduled the MRI for later that day.

“I assume *they* will be calling you with your results?” he inquired with what seemed to be a not so thrilled tone.

“No—I don’t believe so. When they attempted to contact you yesterday they received a message saying your number had been disconnected. That’s why they contacted me directly.”

Of course he completely dismissed the fact his phone was having problems. “I’ll phone you when I receive the results from your MRI.”

After we hung up I said to Ken, “So he waits to call until the next morning with catastrophic news such as this? I know he received the fax yesterday. You’d think after a life-threatening diagnosis *our doctor* would have the decency to contact us the first moment he had!”

Ken agreed wholeheartedly. But it was water under the bridge at this point. I found out from whom I wanted and *almost* exactly the way I’d envisioned it, only my version had a better ending.

Shortly after Dr. KnowItAll's call, Iris phoned. "Apryl, I notice you're down as 'self-pay.' I thought you had insurance?"

"I do, but your scheduler called and said our insurance has a waiting period. To avoid delaying the procedure, I figured I'd go ahead and pay for it and then submit the bill for reimbursement later."

"Who's your Doctor?" I could hear the wheels spinning in her head.

"Dr. KnowItAll."

"Let me make a phone call to his office. He should be able to authorize this and get the approval pushed through immediately." With a mission, she hung up the phone.

How fortunate am I to have someone willing to take the initiative? I thought. About 20 minutes later she phoned back, saying the approval was in place and returned my status back to "Insurance Paid."

Sometime later my friend Samantha called regarding doctors. "I checked with all my doctor friends and two out of three gave me the same name for an oncologist. I'm not sure what other types of doctors you'll need but this sounds like a good start."

Not knowing what an oncologist was, after we hung up, I immediately googled the meaning and, spelling it correctly the first time, this is what I found:

Oncology (from the Ancient Greek *onkos* (ὄγκος), meaning bulk, mass, or tumor, and the suffix *-logy* (-λογία), meaning "study of") is a branch of medicine that deals with cancer. A medical professional who practices oncology is an *oncologist*.

Oncologist a doctor who specializes in diagnosing and treating cancer using chemotherapy, hormonal therapy, biological therapy, and targeted therapy. A medical oncologist often is the main health care provider for someone who has cancer. A medical oncologist also gives supportive care and may coordinate treatment given by other specialists.

Lovely—just the type of doctor I want in my address book. I then googled the oncologist's name and was thrilled to see his office was 10

minutes from our home. Dialing his number I was transferred by the operator to his assistant's extension. Receiving her voicemail, I left a message to schedule an appointment.

Ringin' back a couple of hours later, the voice on the other end of the phone was expressionless. Regardless, I now had an appointment for July 19th at 10:45. I felt rather numb when I hung up the phone.



Ken cleared his schedule for the morning of my MRI. In retrospect I'm glad it was scheduled so quickly. There wasn't time for me to think about the procedure. Arriving at the Imaging Center, attempting to sound upbeat, I exclaim, "Okay, let's get this bad boy over with!"

After being greeted I was asked to sign in and "Please complete the following paperwork." That's right, they were requesting the same information they had received from me *three times prior*. Why can't they have the paperwork prefilled with my information and ask me to make changes only if it's required?

While scribbling monotonous information on the page, I paused. "Ken, I wish you could come with me," knowing full well they wouldn't let him.

"I know honey, me too. Just know I'll be waiting right here."

Unexpectedly Iris walked into the waiting room. "Hi, Apryl!"

What is that pink thing she has in her hands? I thought to myself. *Oh dear God—don't let that be for me. Not here. Not now. Not in front of all these strangers!*

With a huge smile on her face, Iris thrust into my hands a Pink Beany Baby Bear! Tied around its neck was a white ribbon with the Imaging Center's name printed on it, and embroidered in white thread over its heart was the breast cancer ribbon logo.

"This is a gift from all of us here at the Imaging Center!" she said kindheartedly.

"Oh, how nice. Thank you so much Iris." Taking it, I try to keep an appreciative smile on my face, knowing she has the best of intentions. I then stood, as it became obvious there was more to this gift. She then wrapped her arms around me, enveloping me in a HUGE hug! After she left the waiting area, and with everyone's now sad eyes on me, I didn't quite know

what to do with the bear. I had my smaller purse that day and couldn't easily hide it away.

I fumbled with it a few moments until Ken lovingly offered, "Here, give it to me, I'll put it in my briefcase." *Whatever would I do without him?* I thought as I attempted to gather my senses and realign myself from the "smack me dead in the face" announcement that *I have Breast Cancer!!!*

Of course my name was called at that very moment. "Apryl Allen?" just in case anyone wanted to know who I am.

As I attempt to stand on shaky knees I can no longer feel, I hear myself utter the words, "That's me." *Yep me! The one who was just handed the PINK BEAR! The one who has Breast Cancer!!! And now that I have all of your attention, wait for it . . . wait for it . . .*

"So this is the Apryl everyone's been talking about with the beautiful smile!" the tech announced enthusiastically.

A little of the stress, along with my heart, melted at that moment. "Oh . . . how nice of you." Truly, I was appreciative. Reluctantly I followed her through the myriad of halls to yet another changing room and into the ill-famed gown.

Once in the treatment room, I felt as if I had stepped into the futuristic sci-fi feature of the week. The room was entirely white. "This is the MRI machine. I'll need you to lay face down first and place your breasts through the holes in the bed. Once there I'll use my hands to correctly position them for the procedure."

Is she serious? Holes?! Position me?! "Okay," I replied meekly.

"I'll then roll you in for the first portion of the procedure. When I bring you out I'll be placing the IV in your arm and position you again for the second half of the MRI."

"What?! I'm going to have an IV? But I'm terrified of needles . . . I'm not sure if I can do this."

Heartfelt empathy reflected within her eyes. "Apryl, we'll go real slow and take our time. If for any reason you feel uncomfortable we can have you come back at a later time. Honestly, the IV is a non-event, plus I'm *really* good with needles. I promise it will be relatively painless."

Maybe it was because of her compassionate demeanor that I started to calm down. "I'm still a little nervous. If I knew about the IV, I would've asked to take something."

“Let’s just take our time and see how it goes. Lay down and we’ll make sure you’re completely relaxed before we start.” Once I was in place, with my breasts hanging through the holes, she began manipulating them until they were *hanging* exactly where she wanted them.

“Okay, don’t move. I need you to stay exactly as I’ve positioned you. Now look straight ahead, do you see the opening at the end?”

“Yes,” I replied halfheartedly with a touch of terror in my voice.

“I’m going to push this button and it will take you into the machine. While the bed is moving, I’m going to run to the other side to meet you. I’ll be holding your hand before you know it.”

“Okay, let’s give it a try,” and I shut my eyes as tightly as I can. While this was happening I envisioned her at the other end. Just as she said, before I knew it she was holding my hand.

“Oh, what a lovely wedding ring you have.”

“Thanks!”

“What are they—sapphires and diamonds?”

“Yes.”

“It’s quite lovely and so unusual. I wish I’d have thought of something like this.”

“Actually my husband thought of it. I agree it is lovely and I get tons of compliments on it,” I replied, knowing full well she was attempting to divert my attention. *Okay, I’ll play the game.*

“All right, I’m going to leave you now and go into my little room over there. If you need anything at all just let me know. I can hear everything you say. You’re going to hear some loud sounds but try to relax. It will be over before you know it.” I believed her.

Once again, fate inserted itself. While in Sedona I had brought my Jambox so Adelaide and I could listen to music.

Suddenly I was thrust back into time . . . Adelaide took my phone. “*Let me see what songs you have on there—I feel like dancing!*” After scrolling through the list of albums, Adelaide picked *21* by Adele. Second song on the playlist, “*Rumor Has It.*” It starts with a fantastic drum beat and that’s when Adelaide began dancing! There she was with her beautiful dimples that are insanely contagious! I couldn’t help but join in the dance.

Now, fast forward to the MRI machine. Believe it or not, the pounding sounds the machine made immediately took me back in time. Closing my eyes, I saw Adelaide and her beautiful dimples dancing to the beat of the drums. That’s what got me through the 20 minutes of, well, quite

frankly, the first part of hell! Then the voice of the tech interrupted my reverie. “I’m going to bring you out and get you set up for the second portion of this MRI.”

I closed my eyes as she brought me out of the machine. *Why do they have you go in headfirst? What’s wrong with feet first?!* I thought to myself. I sat up as she prepped me for the IV. While putting the needle in, she told me the solution they were injecting me with would be eaten by any cancerous nodes. “They’ll light up like Christmas lights for me on the screen.” She was incredibly gentle and, as I mentioned before, *compassionate*.

The needle went in easily. “When you lie down, don’t bend your arm. You’ll need to keep it straight for the entire time, so try to get comfortable. If you’d like, I can give you this pillow for your head to help with the positioning. Once you’re in place, I’ll be positioning your breasts again.”

Soon I was gliding back into the MRI machine. As before she met me on the other side and immediately grabbed my hand. She helped with positioning me on the pillow so I could comfortably lay with my eyes in the direction of the opening. She then retreated to her protected room.

This time, with my right arm extended straight, my hand dangled out at the end of the machine. I envisioned my mother standing there holding it. Her beautiful comforting demeanor shrouded me completely and I could feel a glimmer of her strength. Once again the beat started and Adelaide and I danced our way to the end of the procedure.

The music stopped when the voice of the tech came over the speaker. “I’ll be with you shortly to help you off the bed.” As the table came to a stop from within the tunnel of terror, it felt as if I was breathing fresh air again. The tech then helped me sit up and removed the dreaded IV. With her assistance, I carefully stood. Once vertical, and knowing I had my balance, I flung my arms around her and cried tears of relief that the MRI was over.

“Thank you! You made this unexpected and terrifying experience somewhat palatable. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate what you’ve done for me.” I believe she was taken aback and at a loss for words and, quite frankly, I think shocked I was hugging her. I will *always* remember her kindness.

After I changed out of the gown, I returned to my beautiful husband awaiting me. Once again he took me to a late breakfast—or was it an early lunch—at our favorite Mexican restaurant. Yet again fate dealt another card—one I will not soon forget . . .