



Stories  
of  
Courage

## The Beat Goes On Surviving Breast Cancer to the Oldies

By Donna Yates-Adelman

*(Reprinted with permission; originally published in the Globe & Mail, October 25<sup>th</sup>, 2001.)*

GREAT Article

M. Z

**“I’m so glad you called back. We found cancer cells in your breast biopsy.”  
“It must be a mistake,” I breathed. “I had a mammogram recently. It was okay.”  
Silence.**

**My heart sank. I had it. My mouth was dry; I just couldn’t speak.**

“Look,” the doctor’s voice came through the phone like an alien who was trying to convince me to stay on Mars and he’d return one day to pick me up. “Your lump is very small. All you will need, I think, is a simple lumpectomy and radiation. I’m going away for two weeks. Call me anytime after the 27<sup>th</sup>. We’ll book you for surgery then.”



St. Mary’s hospital and up to Dr. Z’s office, my husband’s nephew. He phones the doctor at the Montreal General Hospital who confirms the diagnosis. Dr. Z then assures me the lump is small, probably not in my lymph nodes and different—most assuredly very different—from that of my husband’s first wife. Her cancer had spread everywhere by the time they found it. “You’re not going to die,” the doctor reassures me.

“But I’m worried about Hy. I won’t have the strength to support him,” I say.

“He’s a big boy,” Dr. Z says, walking me to the door. “I’ll tell him, if you want me to.”

“No. I’ll tell him myself.”

I’m so weak I can hardly get through the hospital and out to my car. I make it through the city to the highway. The windshield wipers bump, bump, bump. I think of my nephews; I will never see them grow up; never see them graduate from high school let alone college or university; never see them married or have children. I wonder how long I’ve got left—probably more than a year if my lymph glands are free of it ... five years if I’m lucky. God, five measly years! I’ll be only 58 when I die ... Robert 17, and Brian just 16. We had such a good time, the three of us, and now it’s going to end.

I feel like I’m going mad. I have to pull out of this. I click on the radio and push the search button to find the Oldies station, the one I listened to with my nephews. We always went wild after supper, dancing ’round the house to my long-playing record album from the ’50’s. We called it Loony Tunes Night; dressed up in the coats and hats and sweaters in the front hall closet;

Robert, an Air Force ace from the First World War; Brian, a floozy in my sweater, oranges for boobs, bright lipstick and a wacky peasant skirt. We would then parade upstairs around Uncle Hy’s bed in single file—Robert, Brian and me. Hy would grin and shake his head behind the Gazette.

I want to feel that way again now— young and free. I have to.

“Sweet little sixteen...” I begin to sing, gyrating behind the wheel. “I found my thrill, on Blueberry Hill ...” I think of high school ... “Rock, rock, rock around the clock ...” I’m a teenybopper again and I start to feel better.

I begin to realize I’m not as important as I think I am. I am, in fact, quite insignificant in this grand world of ours. Life does go on. I make a vow to do whatever I have to do to beat this thing. After all, it is only some little cell that’s gone askew.

I park under a huge pine in front of our house and slide down from the 4Runner, still agonizing over what I will tell my unsuspecting husband. The front door is open; Hy stands in the soft glow of the lamp in the front hall behind him, the Gazette dangles from his hand. I walk up the steps and into his open arms.

“The doctor called,” he says, “You’re going to be okay. I know you’re going to be okay.”

He presses me to him; I feel the comfort of his warm body against mine. “I know,” I say. “I know.”

It’s almost nine years since I discovered that lump in my breast. I’ve had surgery, chemotherapy, (my choice), radiation and Tamoxifen. For five more years, Robert, Brian and I played Loony Tunes. My nephews are now both in college.

Each January, before my annual check-up, I always develop a severe case of the jitters. I haul out the Loony Tunes LP and dance around the living room, all by myself. The check-up and mammogram are always okay, thank God, and the beat goes on and on and on.

A buzzing noise droned from the receiver I clutched in my hand. I was sitting in my gynecologist’s office waiting to tell her that the young resident who took my breast biopsy had strongly recommended that I come off the estrogen patches which I faithfully stuck to my backside every month. I also wanted to show her the little lump in my left breast. The lump that felt like a tiny pea. The lump that a pathologist had already analyzed, and that was about to change my life forever.

“It’s hard for me to tell,” my gynecologist and friend was telling me. “It certainly feels suspicious. But I’m biased now, of course, after knowing the results of the biopsy.”

I hear her, but it’s not sinking in. I have to find someone to tell me this isn’t happening. I stumble out of her office waving off offers for a ride home.

Outside it’s snowing; the storm they had been predicting has arrived. My heart’s pounding, the 5 o’clock news clacks on, then the traffic report; I’m aware, but I’m not listening. I’m wondering how I will break the news to my husband. His first wife died of breast cancer five years before I met him. Now I believe I’m going to die and all I can think of is poor Hy.

My Toyota 4Runner claws through the drifts of snow. I somehow make my way to