

The past year for me had cut deeply. Because in the past year I had been pulled away from the leukemia research and studies I had been dutifully doing for over twenty years to become someone else's experiment in the same cancer hospital. And in the past year, my life had changed in ways that I never expected, and knew would never reverse.

My husband and I waited in an office for my primary care physician to give us the results of my biopsy. I had found more often than not over the years that a dollop of pessimism, sprinkled with a pinch of hysteria, for some reason helped ward off bad things. It's almost as though this kind of thinking strips the Powers That Be of the ability to shock and rattle and they just give up since there's no fun in it anymore. My whole life, I'd been semi-jokingly referred to by friends as a complete neurotic, but what they didn't realize was how being a neurotic was my *modus operandi* for survival.

This time, though, I made the mistake of being too calm, too optimistic. I foolishly assumed that the marble-sized lump in my right breast was one of those hormonally-induced, benign fibroadenomas I'd read about, which could range anywhere between the size of a pea and a golf ball. A golf ball! I couldn't even imagine having something that huge inside of me that's just a big lump of nothing that isn't going to go anywhere. To fuel my wishful thinking even more was the fact that I was premenopausal at the time of the mammography and ultrasound. Bang! Obviously there were oodles of up to no good hormones flying devilishly around inside of me, giving me these weird feverish sensations in the chest area every month and making weird things happen and strange growths pop up out of nowhere. *Of course* I was destined to experience this

plethora of oddities, and I was convinced that what I had was just this goofy, harmless mass of misplaced flesh that arose from my body's biological clock having ticked as much as it was ever going to.

The primary care physician walked in and shook my hand and my husband's. She didn't look particularly happy, which my husband pointed out later as having been the moment that he "knew". The words "Your biopsy came back positive for invasive ductal carcinoma" were uttered from her taut lips, and there was no pause or breath taken before she followed up with, "Would you like for me to write you a prescription for Ativan?" If I had been raised in a rainforest by monkeys and had known absolutely nothing about cancer, her offer of a lorazepam script would have told me in no uncertain terms that what I had was something really, really bad.

I was told my tumor was large enough to make a simple lumpectomy challenging, and I was encouraged to enroll in a clinical trial involving six months of pre-op drug treatment to shrink the tumor. Two mandatory biopsies were included in the trial, and with them came a realization as I looked at the "MRN" patient code that was typed on my paper bracelet: I was on the other side of where I'd been for years. I had always acknowledged that there were real people behind the countless "MRN" patient codes that I'd seen typed on the labels on heparin-coated tubes of blood from leukemia patients. I'd read the names and genders and ages and I'd often form an image in my mind of what they might look like. But there was a kind of detached indifference when I did this, as

though my science-oriented brain, just to be able to get the job done, had insulated and protected itself from the distraction of feeling any kind of emotion.

Now, I was an "MRN" number, my name, age and gender typed on the labels of heparin-coated tubes of blood passed along to hospital staff members performing analyses as part of the clinical trial. I wondered what was going through their own science-oriented minds as they read the labels and went about doing their jobs.

The next six months of daily pill popping and monthly shots in the rear end while knowingly carting around a malignant mass and at least one contaminated lymph node went by surprisingly fast. I palpated the mass every so often and generally didn't feel much change until several months into the treatment. To my delight and surprise and utter relief, I found myself having to go searching for the same lump that had been prominent enough to send me into a frenzied, hysterical panic when I first stumbled upon it while adjusting a shirt I was wearing. Rough measurements were taken by several of the medical staff, and the tumor mass was believed to have shrunk to approximately one-eighth of its original size.

"This bodes well for the clinical trial," I excitedly said to one of the clinical trial nurses, unable to suppress the quaver in my voice.

"This bodes well for your *life*," she said, pointedly.

I underwent two consecutive surgeries and six weeks of radiation therapy. Before I knew it, it was graduation day, and I crumpled my worn johnny gowns and tossed them into a laundry bin outside the hospital dressing room for the very last time.

"You should write about your experiences as a breast cancer patient," one of the technicians said to me as I was leaving. "I mean, you ladies go through so much."

I nodded.

I agreed it was a journey worth writing about. And in a way I believe it was a journey that may have taken me to a better place in life. A place where there's more appreciation of who I've been, who I am, and who I still may have the chance to be.