

CHAPTER ONE



MAY 4

I hear snippets: “Biopsy ... mastectomy ... lumpectomy ... pathology ... radiation ... treatable ...” I sit flat-footed in a cushioned stackable chair as Dr. V, the radiologist at the breast center, explains to me my “call back” mammogram has revealed a “very worrisome” pattern of tiny stars splayed across the bottom portion of my right breast. She describes the scenario, but I don’t hear every word. “Are you here by yourself?”

“Yes,” I answer and she shakes her head.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes.”

She smiles weakly. “I’m very sorry.” She pauses to let her empathy sink in, and asks, “Do you have any questions?”

“Can I see it? Can I look at the film? I think it will help me a lot to see it.”

“Of course,” she answers and escorts me across the hall to a small darkened office. She holds the door and guides me in with a gentle hand placed on my shoulder. The room is lit only by a wall array of view boxes glowing white. I see she has not pulled down the bad-news film. I read my name carefully, as if I’ve never seen it written before, to assure myself that she has not mistaken me for someone else. She has not. Images of my breast are displayed, smashed into over-large shadowy negatives, on the brightly glowing boxes. Dr. V, a tiny Asian woman, takes a large rectangular magnifying glass from the desk and peers at the film. She steps back, gestures for me to have a look and hands me the magnifying glass.

“See these white spots?” she asks as her dainty finger points to the constellation on an image of my breast.

“The tiny spots?”

“Yes.” She takes an audible breath. “These are calcifications and the pattern they’re in is strongly associated with cancer. It looks quite worrisome.”

I feel the air conditioning blowing on the back of my neck. Studying the image, I try to digest that the spangle of dust is cancer. Cancer, in my body.

“Thank you.” I look her squarely in the face and see a sadness in her dark chocolate eyes. I’m sure she hates this part of her job, but she seems pleased I chose to look at what she knows is trouble. She pats my hand as I pass back the magnifying glass. “I appreciate your time,” I add, shaking her hand before I turn and leave. I walk briskly through the waiting room, careful not to run, taking care not to look at any of the waiting women.

It is a glorious day with a sky uninterrupted by even a wisp of a cloud, blue, warm, brilliant, crystal clear.

I drive home, listen to phone messages, check e-mail. Then I call my family doctor to set up a consultation with a surgeon, just as I’d been instructed. Her receptionist tells me she’ll call me back. I get a drink of water. Then I call Ed.

“I have breast cancer,” I say bluntly. There is silence.

“What?”

“I got another mammogram this morning and spoke to the radiologist. It does not sound good. I have cancer. Dr. A is setting me up with a surgeon.”

“Should I come home?” he asks softly.

“No, there is nothing you can do. We can talk when you get home. I gotta go.”

I hang up and pick up the other line to speak to Dr. A who has quickly called to set an appointment with a woman surgeon.

“If I had to have surgery, I would want her to do it,” she tells me.

I have an appointment with the surgeon for the day after tomorrow.

I hang up the phone and cry.

Like any other Tuesday I go to the pool for my regular swim workout. As I stand in the chest-deep water, Lorie, my lane mate, asks, “What’s wrong?”

“I have cancer. Fucking breast cancer,” I whisper. Quickly, I pull down my swim goggles. They well up with tears. I shake Lorie off as I plunge into the cool, shimmering pool. Once I’m immersed in the water, the world melts slowly away. I lose myself in the dancing reflections on the bottom of the pool. After a grueling workout, Lorie and I

talk, and I explain I will have a biopsy, but I'm sure the news will be cancer. I recall an ominous premonition.

"Before I got my annual mammogram I was dressing and caught my reflection in the mirror. I stopped and turned to face myself. 'You are so screwed,' I told my reflection. I just knew it wouldn't be good."

"Oh God," she whispers, and covers her mouth as if to hold any unsecured words inside. "You'll be okay. I'll pray for you."

Ed isn't home when I arrive. I begin dinner alone. When he finally arrives I greet him coolly. I'm angry he didn't care enough to be home before seven thirty.

"Are you going to tell me what's going on?" he asks.

"You know as much as I do. The mammogram showed the classic sign of ductal carcinoma. I'm set to see a surgeon day after tomorrow."

"Well, they're not sure it's cancer?" he presses.

"No, until a biopsy's done they can't tell for sure. But I know. It's cancer."

"You just have to think the worst," he laments in an angry tone.

We don't discuss it more. We eat. I go into my office, google "breast cancer," and read until I can feel my heart pounding hard against my chest. I don't sleep. I lie awake that night. For the first time in my life my mortality seems real, tangible, imminent. Ed snores softly beside me.

MAY 5

As usual on Wednesday night I go upstairs to the gym after my swim to join Ed for his workout. The aerobics class is jumping around. Step, step, turn. The music, tribal in the beat, drives the exercisers into a sweaty frenzy. Ed's t-shirt is wet to the middle of his back. I walk past him and join in the final 20 minutes of the class: abs, weights and stretching. He glances at me assessing my mood. I smile at him, turn, and hunker down to work as hard as I can. It seems important to sweat at the moment.

MAY 6

Before I go to meet the surgeon, I stop by the breast center to pick up my mammogram film. I carefully avoid looking at any of the women in the busy waiting room. I don't want them to detect the terror I feel. In my car I pull the film out and look again to see if the tiny white spots are still present. They are. I stuff the x-ray back into the paper sheath and drive to the surgeon's office, turning up the music to drown out my internal voice—I don't want to listen. "Shut the fuck up!" I say threateningly as I turn up the volume.

I check in, show my insurance card, fill out several forms. Then I am informed Dr. B, the woman surgeon my doctor spoke so highly of, is on vacation.

“You’ll be seeing Dr. C,” the receptionist cheerily informs me.

I’m not happy but simply say, “All right,” and take my seat waiting for my name to be called.

Moments after signing a consent form for a biopsy, I find myself lying on my side with the unknown doctor prospecting my right breast with a sonogram wand. After he detects the suspect area he injects lidocaine. I crane my neck to look at the screen showing a computer generated image that looks like an ancient television with awful reception.

“That’s a rib,” he says as I feel the hard pressure of the wand almost rolling me onto my back. “I think this is it.”

He rolls the wand again over the area, then steps back while the nurse swabs my breast with a cool brown liquid that runs under my body. He puts a surgical knife to the side of my breast but I feel nothing even though I’m sure he has cut me. The nurse hands the surgeon a metal probe about the diameter of a pencil but much longer. He clicks it as if it were a ballpoint pen. I can see it has an interior core, a circular blade that pops out with almost imperceptible speed, like some hungry sea eel darting out of coral, then back lightning fast, lest it betray it’s hiding place. I look at the nurse instead of this tool nearing my body.

I feel the pressure of the probe being pushed in. The surgeon, or maybe it is the nurse, puts a hand on my shoulder to steady my body from rolling back with the pushing.

“Oooah, oooah!” I can’t help my outburst, caused not so much from pain but from surprise at the pop, and then the pushing I can feel deep inside my breast. A tiny fire-cracker. No, a gun.

“You’re doing fine,” the nurse says as the surgeon pulls the probe from my breast and drops a core into a small vial.

Four more times the gun inside me discharges deep in my breast. I feel sticky blood running into my arm pit.

“AHHHhh! Jesus! That hurt!” I curse as a red-hot, wet pain shoots through my nipple. I quickly imagine an electrode attached to a prisoner and the interrogator stepping back to repeat the question that has been asked without answer—so far.

“I think that should do it,” the surgeon says. “Sorry about the last one, but you did very well.”

I feel ashamed of my outcrys, not proud as his comment sounds I should. I look down at my breast where the nurse swabs the running blood with a sterile pad.

“Keep good pressure on that for a few minutes,” she instructs, then pats me on my shoulder.

I take a shuddering breath, still startled at the violence of the short ordeal. At least it is over. The nurse applies a small dressing and quickly leaves me alone to dress.

When I get home I call Ed and tell him I had a biopsy. It’s done.

“The surgeon offered to get it over with, I agreed, and I’ll get the results on Monday.”

This weekend is the Cinco de Mayo raft-up that our sailing club sponsors: the Lake Pleasant sailing social event of the year. Ed and I pack food for two days, board *Bliss* and motor to the distant, shallow Humbug Cove to join 24 other boats. Dinghies skim across the placid cove, setting anchors for the boats that become a part of the raft-up. We stand off for a while, waiting for our turn to join the growing circle of boats. I wave “hello” as we approach and act as if everything is perfectly normal.

“Where do you want us? Over.” I ask on the radio. I steer between the waiting boats as Ed goes about the business of dealing with the anchor and tying up the bow. I pass a stern line to our neighbors on the starboard, then on the port, and we secure fenders to keep our boats from banging. I don’t know either of our direct neighbors well but tell them hello and smile.

The entire bottom half of my breast has turned a deep plum purple; it throbs and aches. Over the weekend I spend a lot of time off the boat floating in the very cool water. It’s soothing to my aching boob. Saturday night I show Ed the bruising. “Jesus,” he says and screws his face into a sympathetic grimace. We don’t discuss cancer. We deny it for the weekend. Early Monday morning when I hear the news will be soon enough to talk. I’m sure Ed believes it is nothing more than a false alarm. I know better. I just know.

Any competent sailor has, by nature, a proud sense of self-reliance nurtured by the knowledge that smooth sailing is a fleeting gift. Winds quicken, seas rise, and weather has no regard for any boat or its crew. It’s incumbent upon a sailor to steer her boat through the chaos of a storm. This cancer is looming on my horizon like a monstrous low pressure system. The wind has picked up, the glassy waters of my life have darkened, and as I look forward I wonder if this storm will take down my tiny boat.

I’ve been in fierce storms while sailing. A few have brought a sickening fright that fell over me like a thick fog, leaving my hands trembling and my heart banging for an escape. While I was scared many times, I only crossed the bar of panic when I realized

I was caught unprepared. I lost courage when I lacked seamanship. Fear took over when the task at hand was unclear. Inaction was my undoing. Now, I'm teetering on the edge of unfettered emotional collapse with visions of my body sinking beneath me like a floundering craft. I'm unprepared.

During the night a storm begins to build—sailors pray for the light of day so they'll see what they're facing. As the sun rises they curse the light as the sight is too much to bear. Waiting for a diagnosis is like that. I'm most anxious to know the facts but only if the news is better than I expect. Perhaps I have let my fear paint a picture darker than reality—but I'm trying to steel myself for any news, hoping the facts are better than I've imagined.

Ed—my husband, my partner, and my friend—is so at peace that I feel he's ashore, not straining his eyes to see if the storm will envelop me but rather preparing for my landfall with grace and confidence. I know that is good. But I long for him to be with me. He can't protect me from this. He can't shield me, but he can touch my hand, soothe me and assure me I will not be alone, even if he isn't on my boat. I'll listen for his voice above the howling winds.

MONDAY, MAY 10

Beyond here dragons be ... at this point, having had a biopsy but waiting, I can relate to the fear and loathing sailors must have felt when they continued past the charted waters into God-only-knows-what peril. Will this tack take me into danger? I should find out soon. I hope today. Then perhaps I'll again take control of my voyage. Choose a route. Set the sails and batten down the hatches. God help me.

"Ductal carcinoma in situ," Dr. C's nurse tells me as if she's used the clever line before. "If I could pick a breast cancer to have, that would be the one I would want." I smile at her but think she isn't all there. *Pick a cancer to have ... My aunt died of breast cancer. Women die of breast cancer every day. Why would anyone pick a cancer? This isn't an ice cream flavor.* The surgeon suggests I have the surgery the next day. Dr. C calls it a partial mastectomy, and my stomach curls in rejection of the idea.

"If you can get the EKG done today, there's no reason to wait," he advises after asking if I have medical pre-directives, a will, and a medical power of attorney. He looks at Ed when he suggests surgery tomorrow, as if it's Ed's body we're discussing pulling apart. Ed and I retreat to a tiny office and sign release papers. The whole thing is dream-like. As I sign the papers, I'm still reeling from the fact I do indeed have cancer.

Ed and I ride home in relative silence.

“I’ll tell Steven,” he offers. I nod in agreement, still too stunned to speak.

All I can think is soon part of my body will be cut away. I find this thought horrifying and confusing. I imagine my chest breastless, scarred and disfigured. I’m scared shitless.

“I want to see another doctor. I don’t know. I just need to hear it from someone else. Will you call him and tell him I don’t want surgery tomorrow? Tell him I need to wait.” Tears begin to roll down my face.

“Okay,” Ed says without discussion.

Like the name of an approaching hurricane, my cancer has an identity. Perhaps now I can tack away from danger. Much of my anxiety is gone. Not that I’m not afraid. I am. I’m very afraid. Soon, I’ll have to choose what course I will take to deal with this ugly storm. Knowledge will empower me.

Now my family: husband, mother, brothers, sisters-in-law, and lastly my son, know. My sweet son, Steven, chose earlier to hear no speculation but instead to wait for the science. I’m sure in short order he’ll learn as much as anyone can. Ed, too, reminds me “knowledge is power.” So I read, just a page or two, choking with morbid curiosity. I find photos of mastectomies online. The amputations are deforming and the reconstruction sounds awful. What I read scares me more, and I don’t know if I’m lucky or not.

Luck is such a big part of sailing lore. Superstitions swirl around the act of taking to sea. Never leave on a Friday; never rename a boat; never bring a banana aboard. A woman aboard will doom a ship. Cancer, I’ve already found, is like that too: full of mystery and superstitions.

The clock reads 2:22, 3:54, 4:29. I lay awake. One more night-watch in stormy seas. I yearn for peace but the storm within me won’t subside. I’ve read of soldiers so weary they lie in an exposed roadside ditch in order to get the sleep they desperately need, oblivious to the fact they can so easily be detected. I should be so lucky. “To sleep, perchance to dream.” In that dream I yearn for, will the seamonster with sticky tentacles seek me out as I go about my humdrum business? Will its arms wind around my breast, grip me in a ghastly hold and drag me overboard? I won’t see it lurking in the deep—following me—hungry, waiting. Will adhering to the superstitions send it away? Cut it all away, shoot it with x-ray guns, douse me with chemicals, set me afire to get the beast off my bow!

Setting an anchor is a way of gaining control when you're without power—it holds the boat fast, apart from disaster. A vigilant watch is kept to assure the anchor continues to hold and to safeguard against any floating dangers bearing down on the boat's position.

I decide on treatment: a lumpectomy/partial mastectomy followed by radiation and Tamoxifen, if appropriate. I feel a sense of relief—of regaining control—and sleep with only a few interruptions caused by the discomfort of the biopsy. I set an anchor and finally stop progress toward doom on a rocky shore. I sleep. I laugh. I swim. I work and see my regular doctor to do a pre-op EKG. Dr. A is like a cook who brings the crew hot milk—soothing, concerned and optimistic. But I can see in her eyes a glint of worry for me—or perhaps a fear of what storms she herself might face. She orders an x-ray of my chest when I tell her I am experiencing bouts of breathlessness from my intense anxiety. Please Lord let it be clear—I stupidly smoked cigarettes, quitting 14 years ago. A mistake I can't erase. My anchor drags as a new fear replaces an old. Not only do I not sleep well, I argue with Ed, throwing the blame on his snoring. I push him away when I need him so desperately. I'm adrift again.

My mother arrives to be with me after the scheduled surgery. She smiles weakly when she greets me in front of my house, but I can clearly see she's as scared as I am. Her show of distress makes me angry and upset. I simmer as she spends the day pacing the house, sighing and standing in the middle of rooms, literally not knowing which way to turn. Her inaction stirs me emotionally. I want her to fix this. She cannot.

Karen calls. She had a double mastectomy a year-and-a-half earlier. "Oh. Shit. Oh, God," she says as I explain I'm scared to let the first surgeon do as he wants to with me. She tells me, "Call Dr. Z. He's the best ..." Distracted, I listen to her recommendation and get his phone number as my mother stands behind me as if she were expecting me to hand her the phone. "Call me back and let me know when you're going to see him."

To my surprise, Dr. Z's assistant sets me up for an appointment for the next business day and schedules me for surgery next Tuesday. "He does surgery on Tuesdays," she explains. I'm in the same boat as I was with the other surgeon. I can't get out of this. Part of my body will be gone in just a few days. I call Karen back to give her the news and begin to sob.

"I'm on my way over," she says, ignoring my insistence that I'm okay. She shows up at my door with a beautiful blue hydrangea and a tart, and hugs me tightly. Patting my back, she whispers, "It's okay," as I drip snot on her shoulder.

“Crap,” I snivel, and wipe her wet blouse with the back of my hand. “I’m sorry.” We both break out in laughter, and I feel as if a truck has rolled off my heart. We sit at the kitchen table and begin to talk about breast surgery. My mother goes to her room to lie down.

Karen asks, “Is she all right?”

“She’s worse than me.”

“It’s really not that bad, even if they take all of your breast,” Karen says.

I tell her I saw photos on the internet and it looked bad to me. “You should see my breast now,” I tell her. “It looks awful.”

“From what?”

I explain the biopsy left my breast black from the nipple down. “I’ll show you, if you’ll show me,” she offers. “I’m proud of my new boobs.” She laughs.

I strip off my T-shirt and turn to show my bruising. Karen sucks air between her teeth. “That’s from the biopsy?” she asks in disbelief. “I wouldn’t let that guy touch me again. How sore is it?”

“It looks worse than it feels,” I assure her.

She opens her blouse and undoes her bra. Her round breasts escape. They look, well, great but I can’t help noticing there isn’t an areola. “I haven’t gotten my tattoos. I just haven’t had time to have them done, but other than that they look better than what I started with ... don’t you think?”

“Well, Karen, I don’t remember seeing your boobs before, but they look pretty good. Are they hard?” She lifts and squeezes them together as she shakes her head no. Then she pushes her finger pads against her nipple-less breast as if she were checking a loaf of bread for freshness. “I’m very happy with the way they came out.”

“Thanks,” I tell her the truth. “I’m not so scared now.”

“Good,” she says.

I’m so happy she insisted on coming over.

The anchor is set. In a well-protected harbor, I’ve let out more rode. I’ve told friends and they’ve buoyed me, pointed my bow into the wind and assured me I will weather the storm. My fears are still very real, but I can hear the voices of reason now above the mournful wail—that incessant, screeching wind tearing at everything. I can hear, “bare poles, batten down the hatches.” Comfort comes. I can ready myself, my soul, and my body for the fight. I’m physically strong. For my age, I can think of only one person who is stronger. Ironman Lorie has me beat, hands down. She’s a phenomenon. But I do have elite endurance. If I must stand a second watch, I can do

that. I'm strong. I do pushups in the middle of the night, and I feel the stress in my shoulders melt away. If I must, I can swim to shore. By God, I can do that! Finally, I feel confident I'm not too weak. I won't curl in my berth and listen to the wind unless I need sleep. I need sleep. I'm exhausted.

MAY 13

All the sails were stripped. The hatches were dogged down. Food was prepped. I was ready for the oncoming blow and the churning seas. From my conversation with the doctor's office I thought I would be signing consent papers and be on my way. But I am again surprised when I find myself sitting in an exam room. Dr. Z enters and warmly greets me. He's a dapper guy with an ease and confidence. He arranges my mammograms on the light boxes along the wall and marks them with a black grease pencil, then pulls out a magnifying glass to take a closer look. He does a breast exam on my left breast. "That's the good one, I think." He begins to examine the badly bruised right breast.

"Was there a lump there before the biopsy?" he asks.

"No."

He explains what he feels is a hematoma. "Have you had a breast MRI?"

I shake my head "no."

"You should have one."

"Before tomorrow morning?" I ask, stunned by his suggestion.

"You should wait for surgery. The MRI will show if there is more disease and we should have a better look at the left breast. We won't see much on the right breast, with all of the bruising. But I think it'll be a good idea."

I tell him, "I'm ready now. My mother is here. I've told my clients I'll be out. I don't want to wait. Just hack them both off. I don't care."

He smiles and says, "I won't do that."

As I walk out of the outer office, my mother trailing behind me, I go wild with a mix of terror, anger, aggression—an awful blend of pent-up emotion. I want this to be over. I've had enough already! We walk to the car where I call Kelley, whom I've arranged to meet for lunch just down the street.

"I can't meet you," I tell her without offering any explanation, then burst into tears.

"Debbie. Debbie. Are you okay?" she asks softly.

"Yes. I'm fine, but I'm so pissed. They postponed surgery. I'll just talk to you later. I need to call Ed and tell him."

I call Ed and angrily tell him, “He cancelled my fucking surgery. He wants an MRI done first, it’ll take a couple of days to get it approved by the insurance, then a few days to get it scheduled, then a few days to get the results. Fuck!”

“Is your mother with you?” Ed asks.

“Yes.”

“Have her drive.”

“She can’t drive this stick shift,” I say as if she were not next to me. “I can drive!” I rant and curse some more before hanging up and starting the car. I begin by over-revving the red rocket’s engine, then I drive recklessly. As I push the car past 100 mph in midday traffic, my mother begins to cry. “You’re scaring me,” she pleads.

“Afraid of this?” I taunt her. “This is fucking nothing. I have death inside me and I have no control! At least I can press on the fucking gas. This is nothing!” I scream at my mother.

Shame, shame on me—I deserve this. I deserve whatever comes my way. I’m shameful. I slow the car and drive through tears the rest of the way home.

Ed comes home for lunch. We bicker a bit. I want sympathy, but instead, he offers a terse, “Get a grip.” I feel better. I feel worse.

Emily calls and passes the phone to her new husband Mark, a sweet guy who happens to be an anesthesiologist. When I lament to him about the frustrating delay, he tells me a story in a measured baritone voice:

Last weekend he and Em took some friends out on Lake Pleasant on their boat *Frequent Flyer*. They were having a pretty good sail, moving along nicely. Their friends own a small plane and are used to zipping from town to town. Well, as usual on Lake Pleasant around noon, the nice breeze petered out, and the four found themselves sitting in the middle of the lake with no prospect of going anywhere.

“It was a great morning, but after a few minutes of sitting with no wind, our friends quickly complained, ‘This sucks!’” Mark pauses and waits for me to say something.

“Thanks, Mark,” I offer to his silence on the other end of the line. “I guess I’m waiting for the wind. I know how to do that,” I laugh. “I sail on Lake Pleasant.”

When I first started sailing I was sure I hadn’t trimmed the sails right, hadn’t turned the boat as I should or the wind was deceiving me. I would push the boat around, forcing a tack, look at the swinging sails, and try something else. It didn’t occur to me sometimes I simply didn’t have wind in my sails. No matter how I trimmed, no matter which way I pointed, no matter what I thought, I positively couldn’t sail without a breeze. This was a fact. A good sailor will take a break, eat, read, sand, varnish—do anything but try to sail when there simply is no wind.

MAY 18

I should be recovering from the surgery Dr. Z first scheduled for today, and waiting again for the pathology report. Instead, I spend the day as routinely, as regularly, as I can. Now it's the evening and I find myself at the sailing club meeting with many people who know I have cancer, thanks to Ed's e-mail announcement. It's both depressing and uplifting. Survivors are coming out of the woodwork. They're like ghosts on a haunted ship patting me on the back and welcoming me to a ghoulish sorority. Brenda, who I had only met once before, approaches me to show me how she's surviving. Her bones clatter under her cute sailing outfit. Her eyes bulge from her sunken face. Her scrawny arm reaches for me, welcoming me into the cancer ward. I lean hard on the chair in front of me. *Steady. Control your expressions*, I order myself. *She is not me*, I repeat to myself as she explains (as everyone else has) her team of doctors are the best and I should be seeing them.

"Sentinel node, radiation, chemotherapy, vomit, fatigue, lumpectomy, oncologist," her words pepper me like icy rain in a spring squall. Hard bruising stabs.

"Bald." God's finger poking me in the chest.

"Sick." I feel myself clinging harder to the chair in front of me.

"Exhausted." I want to run.

This is not helpful, I tell myself, trying not to feel the sting of the "what to expect" words. I expect nothing but survival. My survival, not anyone else's.

MAY 19

Putting treatment off to gain discovery has not been so bad after all. I've had three days to go about my business pretty much uninterrupted by the bad weather ahead. I know it is coming, I can't avoid it, but I have enjoyed the smooth rippled waters of daily life. I spent the last two weekends doing chores, attending to stuff that clutters our lives. In case I die I don't want to leave a mess.

I will have the MRI tonight. I don't expect to hear anything until Monday. So, what should I do to occupy myself?

I may go sailing. It will be a nice diversion. I always feel better, even if I already feel happy and upbeat, after a good romp on the lake.

Finishing late in the day, we put the boat up as the sun slips into her berth below the horizon, the cacti haloed with an optimistic glow. The routine is comforting. Everything is off that came aboard.

Check the electrical panel. Flick the switches, off, off, off. Replace the covers. Clear the deck. Remove the gas tank. Stow the burgees. Lower the dagger board. Secure the

lazerettes. Put the rudder below. Hang the sheets and dock lines below to dry. Lower the trailer tongue. Stow the foresail. Dog the hatches. Bring up the wash boards and close the companionway. Some days when we're alone, Ed and I drive together to Spinnaker Point to fold the sails. Folding sails is a ritual dance. Easy with two, doable with one. Pull, fold, pull, fold. Zigzag, then loosely roll. Take a huge amount of sailcloth and organize it to fit neatly into a bag with the head, the clew, and tack ready to use the next time. All of this gives me a sense of control. I want so much for my life to be like that. Take disorder, a rumpled heap of sail, tame it to a bag, stow it neat and tidy.

MAY 20

Dry rot. It should simply be cut away. If it's left unattended it'll ruin everything, turning a strong, sturdy wooden craft into a floating shell of decay. Like cancer.

Oddly enough, I feel physically stronger than I ever have. I can swim nearly two miles in an hour. I can do ten men's pushups. I can scamper across a deck like a monkey. I can easily lift three-quarters of my body weight at the gym. I can haul up a mainsail smartly. Yet in this fatty spot on my body a rot has taken hold. I have no choice but to cut it away. No matter the loss of any gentle curves. Yes, I can rebuild but I have grown so accustomed to my shape, my size, that the thought of altering it, even in the slightest, saddens me. Change must come to spare my hull from being eaten away by insidious rot.

Will I still cause Ed's heart to quicken when he catches my silhouette in his gaze? Or will he recall only what I once was, beautiful and whole, and long for the gentle pillow of my breast? If I were an island, I would not reconstruct, but I'm not. My well-kept body would be that of a young boy with a vagina if I lose both breasts, if only one—the lovely symmetry I took for granted would be eradicated. If a large lumpectomy, a lopsided oddity. No longer a sleek powerful craft.

Predictions are for low pressure. The seas are again rising beneath me.

Yesterday, when checking in for the MRI, I noticed the first surgeon's report from the biopsy had *Debby Huntsman* along with a date in March, not May as it should have been. The hope ran through my mind that all of this was only an awful case of mistaken identity. This was not really happening to me but to Debby. My God, how could I ever have had confidence in them when they couldn't even get my name or the date right? I'm happy I won't be seeing the first surgeon again.

MAY 21

After waiting until one o'clock with no word, I reluctantly pick up the phone and call Dr. Z only to hear a recorded message.

Once while helping Ed bring a small sloop to the dock, I suddenly found my head under water, my hand still gripping the forestay as I was busy pulling down the jib. An undetected whirlwind, dust devil sans dust, swooped down from the dam and hit the little boat. Hearing the message that Dr. Z's office closed at noon on Fridays was like that gust.

MAY 22

My mother, who has been hovering now for a week, Ed, Emily and I board *Bliss* and take her for a morning romp. There's a fresh breeze and unseasonably cool temperatures. No hot decks, no sweating while the sun blazes in the blue skies. A gift of a day—so nearly perfect it makes my heart race at the thought that time will not stand still to capture the glory of the clear emerald lake, the cool refreshing breeze, the optimistic wink of the sun upon the ripples, and train it all to heel at my side. Water gurgles against the hull as *Bliss* cuts quickly through the water. Her progress is accompanied by an occasional splash as the bow drums into an oncoming wave.

All of this, so sublime, is lost on my mother, who sits sullenly with her broad-brimmed sun hat pulled down tightly. She fusses periodically with the Explorer Relief Band which Em had loaned her to ward off seasickness. Em kindly attends to her. Ed and I occasionally advise her that if she would make an effort to look out onto the horizon, the disconnected sense of motion would reconnect in her brain. She mumbles at our advice, frowns, and insists on having the hat pulled down so low all she can possibly see is the straw lattice inches away from her eyes along with the sole of the cockpit.

In disgust, I realize how much I am my mother's daughter. I've only been seeing the brim inches from my own eyes. I've been absorbed in self-pity—unable to see the nature of all the good things which have yet to come my way. I've been focusing too intently on what is immediately before me. So much glory has gone unappreciated.

I need to practice getting my head out of my ... hat. Practice mindfulness as opposed to self-absorption. Watching my mother, I wonder if my total lack of optimism is congenital or of my own making. Do I paint a scene with great drama beneath the brim of my hat?

Rick, a good friend of ours, calls on the VHF for us to pick him up at the dock. We drop the foresail and quickly fake the main so we can beeline across the lake to the dock where he awaits us. Soon we see his jolly silhouette, arms overhead, like an excited child beckoning to the ice cream truck.

Ed and I have known Rick and his wife Kelley for almost a decade. We've shared charter boats together. Anyone knows they must really like someone to have them as successful shipmates. Sharing a boat can ruin a friendship. If the friendship is sound, sharing a boat can strengthen the bond. Rick happened to call me the day I got my diagnosis. I was compelled to share the news with him and asked him to watch out for Ed. Thoughts of Ed's becoming an overburdened caregiver knocked me down.

After all the years of knowing Rick, that day he shared with me that Kelley is his third wife. Both his first and his second wives are dead. Rick assured me he would be a good friend to Ed, helping him anyway he could. I felt a load lift. Rick, self-described as rail meat or ballast, lightened my load.

Bliss is a light, fast racer and in the breezy conditions she bounds along. As we tack, Rick shifts to *Bliss's* high side to flatten her heel. We opt to reduce the headsail to a blade and the main to a double reef. A passing power boater taunts us to pull the sail all the way up to the top. Within a few minutes, after sloshing along, we comply with his tease. Off we go at a good click, happily skimming along.

My mother continues to complain of seasickness. A heavy gust heels *Bliss* over hard. Rick reaches out to hold my mother, who on the aft high side sits startled, arms out-spread like a falling infant. I yell, "Round up! Round up!" Which Ed does.

Now, again on a comfortable heel, we begin to chat. So often, Ed and I are alone for the day. With so many people aboard, there is more distraction than usual. Chatting away. Laughing and poking fun, we are thoroughly enjoying the ride, the weather, the conversation when Rick yells, "Oh shit! Reef! Reef!"

Just a few feet ahead is a reef marker—warning of a submerged hilltop looming green just below the surface. In the middle of the lake, surrounded by 138 feet of deep blue water, an underwater spire juts. With no time to change course, we all watch in horror as the buoy passes, almost touching the starboard side. It's undoubtedly a good thing the boat heels at respectable angle as we pass, reducing our five foot six inch draft considerably. I imagine the daggerboard passing mere inches from the crest of the most assuredly rocky hill, the hill which will reemerge in late fall when the high water levels drop. We are very, very lucky we didn't make the news as a reminder to keep a vigilant lookout while on a boat.

Just under our placid surface, a life-threatening danger looms. We are lucky, and we know it.

I'm having a hard time realizing I'm lucky. Lucky to have found the cancer with a mammogram. Lucky to have seen the marker, tiny dusty stars, to warn me. I fail to feel lucky.