

## Contents

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1. It Appears to Be Malignant ..... 1
2. Confronting Cancer ..... 19
3. The Weather Forecast and  
    an Angel ..... 27
4. Living . . . and Dying..... 39
5. Meeting Jehoshaphat ..... 47
6. Prepping for Surgery . . .  
    Do I Need Gloves? ..... 61
7. The Operation . . . Was I There? ..... 75
8. File That Under "C" for Cancer ..... 97
9. Welcome to the Rad Club ..... 107
10. Facing the Enemy in the Dark ..... 135
11. The Pilgrimage ..... 149
12. You Drive, I'll Hold the Bucket ..... 167
13. Does This Journey Take  
    Many Pages? ..... 183
14. The Skirmishes ..... 195
15. The Blessings Came Down . . . ..... 223
16. No Other Foundation ..... 235
17. Berachah . . . the End  
    Is the Beginning..... 253

## Chapter 1

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### *It Appears to Be Malignant*

“Do I get a Corvette?” I asked as we drove home from the doctor’s office.

“What?” My husband took his eyes off the road and looked at me.

“Do I get a Corvette?”

“Why?”

“Because when Chuck Shirley found out he had cancer, he went out and bought a Corvette.”

Robert just sighed.

“So my question is again, now that I have cancer . . . well, if I do have cancer, do I get a Corvette?”

“I don’t think so.”

“I didn’t think so either.”

My yearly physical was put on my to-do list the first of every year. My only rule was that it had to be done before my birthday in April. Usually I procrastinated until March, but this year I called and made the appointment for January 31.

As I talked with the nurse scheduling my appointment, I realized she forgot to schedule my yearly mammogram. I was going to let it go, but just before I hung up I said, "Did you forget my mammogram?"

"Oh yes," she said, "I did." Then she made an appointment for the same day.



I am a procrastinator. I just overdrew my checking account—again. I had already declared that never, ever again would I ever make a mistake in my checkbook. I didn't have any trouble recording the checks I wrote in the checkbook. I faithfully recorded to whom the check was written and the amount.

I just didn't subtract the check amount from my balance. Not because I couldn't. I just planned on doing it later. Later. When I had more time.

We had Banquet Chicken and Tater Tots prepared potatoes for supper again last night. Meal preparation should be a breeze for me since I have a microwave oven capable of defrosting frozen meat quickly. But I popped the instant supper into the oven. *I'll cook a good roast beef and mashed potato dinner later. Later. When I have more time.*

My husband walked into the kitchen this morning, holding his blue pants in his hand.

The minute I saw them I remembered. They have a hole in the pocket. He had showed it to me when he took them off. I had said, "Put them on the night stand. I'll fix them this afternoon. No problem."

Two days later I moved them to the utility room so I could get right to them that morning. The next day I decided I would go ahead and put them in the wash. It would be better to patch that pocket when the pants were clean.

Now, a few days later, here is my husband standing before me with pants in hand. Drats! Somehow those pants got washed and dried. They jumped on a hanger and slid right back into his closet! I didn't patch the pocket. I was going to do it later. Later. When I had more time.

*I'm getting into trouble with my priorities again, I thought. I have no trouble writing, drinking coffee or visiting friends after my day at work. I love going to church meetings, Bible studies or traveling for speaking engagements. I love reading a good book. Shopping is always fun. Or a trip to see an art show or some historical landmark.*

There is time for all those things. I just don't have time for checkbooks and such. I was feeling really discouraged. *Lord, I prayed, I wish You would just make me better, more efficient. I get so tired of goofing up.*

Then I remembered the Bible chronicles lives of men and women who trusted God. Their successes and failures are recorded. God's grace and

mercy and love are not just for perfect people. I'm glad His Word says He is so willing to forgive us our shortcomings when we ask. I'm not going to wait until I have more time on that one.

*Lord, help me to establish my priorities according to Your Word. And please help me do with joy the things I don't want to do. And Lord, help me to be content with the way You made me. Amen.*

Don't call me to go have coffee. I am balancing my checkbook. I have a roast in the oven . . . then I have mending to do.



My life has always been busy. The adventure of every new day beckons me. A notebook keeps me on track. An office job the last seven years did not curtail all of my activities. I just learned creative new ways to squeeze more events in my days. My schedule in my notebook makes time for devotions, fun with the family and work.

I had not scheduled in cancer.

Cancer is not polite. It has no social graces or manners. It comes uninvited. It has no prejudices. It invades young and old, rich and poor, male and female.

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*"Congratulations," interrupts the Cancer Recruiter. "You have been specially se-*

*lected to receive our amazing free offer—no acting experience necessary. We're running some specials you'll love. We have a real deal on a small malignancy with minimum spread available through the end of the month. Which credit card will you use to purchase our free script?"*

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The first hint that whispered of uninvited company came during my yearly checkup.

My physician did all the routine tests. He checked my paper-gown-clad body from ears to toes. "Is your life slowing down any? How is the stress level now?"

I was ready for that question. He asked me that every year. When I first went to see him, I was dealing with one teenage son in crisis and one son in expensive technical training in an Arizona college. A full speaking itinerary and numerous community service obligations kept me busy, besides teaching the adult Sunday school class at church.

This year in answer to his question I said, "I have to tell you, Dr. Fina, that I'm feeling wonderful. My job has been a fascinating experience. I feel closer to my husband than ever before. This has been the best time in our over thirty years of marriage."

Never one to be brief, I went on. "Our three boys are all grown and married. Our daughters-in-law are each a gift from God. We have

one grandson, who is perfect, of course. I'm so blessed."

"Well, you certainly look healthy. Menopause may be around the corner, but we'll talk about that after I get the results from the rest of the tests. You can go down to X-ray for your mammogram. I'll see you at three this afternoon."

The elevator door opened to the first floor. I turned left to the X-ray department. I wasn't nervous. It would be the same routine as every other year.

"Yes, I do monthly breast exams" and "Yes, I watched the video last year," I told the technician doing the exam.

I was behind the white curtain putting my blouse back on.

"Mrs. Olmstead?" The pretty and confident tech-nurse was outside my dressing room. "We need to get more films. Can you come back with me?"

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*"Hello. Are you thinking about our offer?"*

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*No, I'll pass this time, sorry, no thanks, uh-huh . . . no, call me again next year,* I told that nasty little voice.

But to the nurse outside my dressing room I said, "Yes, of course. Do I put the lovely aqua-blue gown on again?"

"Yes, I'll meet you at the end of the hall."

My breasts have always been full of lumps. Fibrocystic disease is a misnomer and possibly a “phantom disease” according to some studies. But it had been alluded to by some of the doctors who had examined me. On occasion throughout the years there had been this or that “suspicious” lump or “let’s-keep-an-eye-on-this” lump. But nothing had ever come of them.

So this switch in the routine did not bring immediate panic. I followed her down the hall. She took two more X-rays using the same procedure as before. She felt my left breast. “Now you can go. We will send these up to your doctor. You are seeing him at three, right?”

Naturally when I got back in the dressing room I felt my left breast. I couldn’t feel anything other than all the usual lumps and bumps.

Getting a tape deck put in our car was on our list of things to do as well as some shopping for the hours between appointments. When we get to the city of Billings, which is two hours from our home in rural Montana, we always have a list.

“How’d it go?” Robert asked as I came out of X-ray.

“Same as usual,” I answered. “Except I had to go back for a couple more shots. Let’s go eat. I am starved. The fasting phase is now over!”

Our marriage relationship is full of love, companionship and good communication. It is



a product of learning to give and take. It did not happen overnight.

God took a country girl and a city boy with totally different heritages and melted them into one. The crucible was typical, everyday family life: starving through college, forming career paths, raising three boys, volunteering in community service and learning to walk faithfully with our Lord. We trusted God continually to perfect the work He had begun in each of us.

We always felt a good relationship was worth fighting for. Many times the “fighting for” took hours. Behind our closed bedroom door. Accusations, hurt feelings, disparity over child rearing or remorse over the budget. We fought, emptying our gunnysacks of grievances, with each other periodically over thirty-four years. God brought us through.

Now our relationship is worn comfortably—like old tennis shoes. We have learned to nourish and care for “us” as we would a priceless heirloom. We consider spending time together a blessing from God.

When our last child left home, I wrote about the experience in my weekly newspaper column:

We have entered a new era in our home. We are alone. ALONE TOGETHER. Just him and me and the two cats and twenty-six ducks.

Our sons are officially raised. I think. At least they are no longer here for meals.

The youngest started college this fall. He now has his own pad.

The middle son graduated from college in June. He spent two months at home while seeking a job. That two months endangered our mother-son relationship at many times, but we did survive. Now he has a job and a pad too.

This first night of ALONE TOGETHER should have been a special occasion. We had looked forward to this for twenty-six years. No, that is not true.

We didn't start looking forward to being alone until we had teenagers. But with each progressing year, ALONE TOGETHER kept looking better.

Right now, let me state that we dearly love our children—and almost all of the time. But I think the idea is to raise them up and then they leave. Then the father and mother can spend some time together with the love they share that started this whole thing to begin with!

I knew I should cook something special and have candles and a tablecloth and all . . . but I was just exhausted. The summer had not been easy. I reheated some leftover hot dogs. Robert said he didn't mind. He was exhausted too. After supper he stretched out on the couch. I curled up on the love seat.

Our first night ALONE TOGETHER af-

ter all these years. He slept. I slept. Finally we got up and went to bed and slept. You have heard of jet-lag? We must have had parenting-lag.

*"Time Out with Lois,"* reprinted from the *Rosebud Press* and the *Forsyth Independent*, September 29, 1988.

The restaurant we chose for lunch was both sophisticated and charming. One of the delights of a day off together in Billings was picking a new place to dine. Between courses our chatter was mostly about the new tape deck for our car.

"You'd think we were teenagers," I said. "Paying that much just so we could listen to all our tapes."

"Nope," Robert said. "A teenager would have spent twice that much!"

"You know another thing we should talk about," I said between bites of savory crab salad. "We could be facing cancer, you know."

"I don't think we should think that. Let's just wait and see what Dr. Fina has to say."

"Well, I just feel like we should pray. Let's ask God to have His perfect will in whatever happens with the tests."

So we prayed a simple prayer, like so many we had prayed together over the years. "Lord, here we are. You know our future. Take care of Lois. Give the doctors wisdom as they look at the tests. In Your name, amen."

We picked up our car with our teenage tape deck and drove to the Billings clinic. When we walked into Dr. Fina's office, he had films up on the white screen in the exam room. His expression and manner immediately told us he didn't like what he was seeing. I thought he was upset.

"First, I want to take another look at you." He didn't look at my ears or my toes. He began another breast exam at once. The left breast. "Did you feel anything here?" he asked.

"No."

"Can you feel this?" He directed my hand to the top of my breast.

"Yes, I feel that. It feels like a mint. It's not round. It's flat and movable."

He went to the screen, again staring at the black and white film. His manner was entirely different from our usual comfortable bantering back and forth.

"I didn't feel it either this morning. But we obviously have a lump."

"We" *must include me*. I glanced at Robert. He looked pale green. "Are you OK?" I asked.

He just gave me a weak smile with, "Are you OK?" A little question with thirty years of togetherness in three words. Love. Concern. Grief. His "Are you OK?" was trembling.

"I have to tell you that some other doctors have looked at this," Dr. Fina said, "and we agree that it appears to be a malignant tumor."

"Can you see it on last year's film?" I questioned. "How old is this thing?"

"Tumors can grow for years before we can detect them," he said. He looked as pale as Robert. "There is not a sign of this on your mammogram which was in March last year. I checked." Dr. Fina put his hand on my shoulder. "Are you OK?"

"Yes," I said. "Yes, I'm fine. Well, I mean, I thought I was fine."

I tried to feel what I was feeling. (Can you understand that?) I didn't feel afraid. I didn't feel panic. I didn't feel doom hanging over my head. I just felt . . . I just felt . . . I just felt fine.

Dr. Fina was decidedly uncomfortable. I wanted to pat his shoulder and tell him it was OK. Did he feel bad because he had not felt the lump in the morning? Did he feel bad because he had told me how "healthy" I was just a few hours earlier? We didn't have time to talk.

He said, "I'll get the nurse. I have already called a surgeon. I want you to talk to him today."

The nurse had a sadder face than the doctor. She walked us down the hall and around the corner. Robert reached for my hand as we followed the nurse. We walked through the doorway that read Oncology Surgery Hematology.

*Isn't this interesting* (and that is the exact word that came to my mind), I thought as I followed the nurse, *I wonder what God has in mind now?* Inside there was a feeling of His presence surrounding me. It gave me such peace and a sense of security.

The nurse showed us to chairs in the waiting room. "Dr. Brown will be with you shortly," she said apologetically. She did not look reassuring as she walked away.

"Are you OK?" Robert asked, holding my hand tightly.

"I'm OK. Are you OK?"

"I am just worried about you," he said.

There was that "OK" question again. Multitudes of unanswerable questions in one.

"Well, if you want to know what I'm feeling right now, the truth is . . . I'm just thinking that God has opened a door into another room in my life." My eyes locked with his. "And I'm glad it's my door. Not your door. Or the door of one of our kids or their wives. Or my folks. It is me."

It will always be my belief that when serious illness attacks one in a couple, it is harder to be the spouse than the ill one. I knew what I was feeling. He had to wonder and imagine.

"Let's pray," I said.

There were four other people in our end of the waiting room. Three were engrossed in magazines. One man was sleeping. His head was slipping closer toward his chest as we sat there.

"Lord, we pray You will give us strength for what is ahead. We thank You that You are with us right now. We know You will walk with us in all that is in the future. In Jesus' name, amen."

The nurse came out. "It will be awhile yet before we can work you in," she apologized.

"That's OK, we're not going anywhere,"  
Robert replied.

So we sat in the waiting room.

Waiting.

My mind was envisioning the future . . .

*With cancer.*

*My job.*

*Robert.*

*His job.*

*Speaking engagements already booked—  
two of them in less than ten days.*

*The kids.*

*My folks.*

*Carol.*

*Phyllis.*

*Robert.*

*Mary.*

*Broom.*

*Marilyn.*

*Sharon.*

*My church family.*

*My boss.*

*Robert.*

*Oh Lord, this is going to affect a lot of people.  
Please help them walk this path also. Oh, please com-  
fort Robert. Give him strength right now.*

One by one the people were beckoned by the nurse to go around the corner and down the hall to the little rooms. I recalled the last time I was in this area of the clinic. I had

brought my friend Kitty Berube for one of her chemotherapy treatments. She had later died from cancer. . . . That recollection started my mind down a path . . .

*There is John Williams. . . .*

*He had bone cancer. He is doing great. . . .*

*But there was my friend Pat Hofeldt. . . .*

*She died from breast cancer. . . .*

*Connie Bailey had breast cancer. . . .*

*She is doing good. Debbie is doing good . . . and so is Fay . . .*

*and so was Kitty . . . and so was Pat .*

*Bruce is hanging in there, and so is Cheryl Booth.*

I looked over at Robert beside me. I wondered if his mind was reciting a cancer roll call too.

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*R-r-in-g-g, R-i-i-ng. "Hello, this is the Cancer Recruiter. I'm just calling to tell you that your number has been selected. . . ."*

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"Do you want to just go home tonight?" Robert asked, breaking the silence.

We had made reservations to stay two nights



in Billings. It was all written down in my notebook with two hearts drawn on the weekend.

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"Excuse me, did you get cancer penciled in there?"

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"No. I want to stay," I told Robert. I don't give my schedules up easily. "Besides I think I'll need the ladies retreat tomorrow more than ever. God will uplift me there."

"Mrs. Olmstead?"

We hopped up. We were the last ones in the waiting room. It was nearly 5 o'clock. We had sat there an hour and fifteen minutes. Thinking. Grasping each other's hand from time to time. Waiting. There was a smile on my face, I am sure, as I followed the nurse. I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that God was in control. My Aunt Ruth had penned in her Bible, "The will of God does not take us where the grace of God cannot keep us."

So God was in control.

Right under God was this Dr. Brown.

We went into the little room to practice waiting some more. Waiting now for *the surgeon*. I had never had surgery in my life. I had never even had stitches. I wondered what this surgeon would be like. Images floated through my mind . . . with face masks, sterile doctor-suits, scalpels, (no, cancel that picture) . . . and the face of Winchester from *M\*A\*S\*H*. . . .

This definitely was going to be a new chapter in my life.

"I just do not understand it." Under the nurse's directive, I was taking my blouse off for the seventh time of the day.

"Do not understand what?" Robert was still looking serious.

"I cannot understand why, if they want to look at your front, they tell you to tie the gown in the back. Why can't you just put it on with the opening in the front?"

Finally there was the sound of paper rustling outside the door. A young man, with a smile and friendly eyes, wearing a white coat said, "I am Dr. Brown. I have one more patient to see. Then I can spend as long as we need, talking, OK?"

He shut the door. He didn't have a face mask on. No scalpel in his hand either.

"Yup. That's OK. I think *my* schedule is going down the drain," I said to the closed door.

We sat, staring at the wall, the cotton swabs, the packets of antiseptic cleanser, the sink, the wallpaper . . . and each other. Robert was starting to look normal again.

I shivered. The paper gown didn't provide much warmth. It was tied in the back too. I always follow directions when I'm intimidated. *Lord, this certainly is interesting. . . . I just have to smile, thinking about how You are going to use this for Your glory. Dear Father, You know how I am. You are going to have to do a mighty miracle within me. Let me be found faithful. . . .*

“Well, I think I’m about ready,” I said to Robert. “I think I’ve about waited to the end of my capabilities. How about you?”

He picked a *Popular Science* magazine out of the rack. He had already gone through the three magazines in the rack a dozen times. His hands were shaking. “I think, let’s get this show on the road.”

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“See, we told you tickets were available.  
Just look. You got front row seats!”

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