

## Foreword

Back in the days before children or sensible shoes, I was an avid Harley rider, taking my bike on tour, riding from show to show across the USA and beyond. While in Chicago, Illinois for U2's Zoo TV Tour, I had a couple of days off and only one thing on my mind – to make my way up to Milwaukee for a visit at the Harley-Davidson Motorcycle facility. I was lucky enough to meet with Bill Davidson and his father, Willie G., both of whom were very generous with their time. A highlight of that trip was having Willie G. show me how the company used his original drawings to create the finished product I had parked in my garage. Shortly after that visit, Bill invited me to join the Harley crew at the 1990 Daytona Bike Week. It was there that I met Ron and Kathy Bero who had been “assigned” by Bill, Ron's cousin, to keep me out of trouble. We became fast friends as we attempted to eat, sleep and drink all things Harley for the week. However, it was clear from the start that the beauty and efficiency of the new 'evolution engine' was not high on Kathy's list of topics to discuss. Instead, she opted to engage me in intense conversations ranging from the state of world politics to faith, and of course, the environment. It's fair to say that she approached each subject with polite determination, looking me straight in the eye, making sure every point was clearly understood. During one Daytona dinner, we became so engrossed in our own conversations that the rest of the party insisted we sit at opposite ends of the table, as if separating two bickering children. When I left Daytona Bike Week, I had realized a lifelong goal and made two new lifelong friends, and despite the geographical distance between us, we've managed to stay close.

In late 2005, Kathy called to break the impossible news that you never want to hear from a friend or family member. Kathy had been diagnosed with a rare and aggressive breast cancer, creating a benchmark in all our lives. I was terrified that Kathy's two young girls, EmmaGrace and Hannah, might lose her, and while I couldn't admit to it at the time, I felt entirely redundant, wanting to scream with frustration every time we hung up the phone. Then by coincidence, I came across the Angiogenesis Foundation (AF), a Massachusetts based non-profit organization promoting an anti-angiogenic treatment approach to chronic, inflammatory illnesses using specific foods, existing drugs and cutting-edge medications. I called Kathy and regurgitated everything I could remember from what I had learned, including how a new drug called Avastin was showing promising results with certain types of cancers. Not one to shun potential weapons in her fight, Kathy agreed to let me put her in touch with Dr. Will Li, president and medical director for the AF, who explained how adding anti-angiogenic compounds to her treatment regime could potentially help her beat cancer.

Having little time for self-pity, Kathy never revealed the full extent of the toll cancer treatment took on her, but ultimately due to her own self-advocacy, she received the best treatment available and is willing to tell her story for the benefit of all. As long as I've known Kathy, she has taken the focus off her own challenges by applying her skills to help others. Her battle with cancer was no different! During her recovery, Kathy founded NuGenesis, the first of its kind non-profit organization, which demonstrated another successful example of her tenacity to work for the greater good. She designed NuGenesis to teach patients and their families how to use food as medicine at every meal, and while her idea was simple, it took an enormous amount of time and energy. I know it was a labor of love, but it came at great personal cost for her.

Kathy Bero's story is a powerful one about stepping out in faith, embracing fears, and in a few clever Judo moves, turning the fear process on its head and into a force for good. Now, she's sharing her strategy with all of us.

--Larry Mullen, Jr., Founder U2



## Revelation

### **April 2005**

At 43, my husband, Ron, was tall and sinewy, carrying very little body fat on his ultra-marathon runs. In his first 100-mile race, Ron finished with a time of 19 hours and 35 minutes, placing him 95<sup>th</sup> of the nation's fastest ultra-runners. Meanwhile at 41, I struggled to recover from two pregnancies. Once fit, I was finding it hard to walk a couple of miles without collapsing from profound fatigue. I obsessed over my accelerated aging and was flummoxed by Ron's ability to defy his own. I wished he would scale back to accommodate my new physical state of motherhood, but he was literally leaving me in the dust, and its grit was thick in my mouth every day.

In our life before children we defined ourselves as the "wilderness adventure couple." Our entire relationship was built around rock climbing, mountain biking, skiing, canoeing, hiking, spelunking, ice climbing and sea kayaking. Encounters with bears, whales and the occasional wolf were par for the course. When at home, our entertainment included scanning the catalogues for the latest, greatest camping, climbing or paddling gear we just couldn't live without. It was gear we even found a use for in our home. For example, we used our climbing equipment to renovate a 150-year-old home and stabilize a bouncy 2<sup>nd</sup> floor bedroom above the sagging living room ceiling. Ron procured a 400-pound support beam and rigged our climbing ropes up with carabiners to install it onto a set of vertical posts he had notched out and fastened on either end of the 25-foot room. We hoisted that massive beam horizontally against the ceiling, bracing ourselves to maintain control as it swung on its tenuous line, coming inches from knocking a hole through the outside of the house and aiming to kill us on its way. I joined Ron in swearing a blue streak, grunting with sweat dripping in our eyes, down our arms and into our hands, causing the rope to slide through our slippery grip. I squeezed my grip tighter, which had been strengthened from untold hours of rock climbing and managed to hold on as Ron delicately maneuvered the old timber, completing its placement. Heaving breaths, we stepped back to admire our work.

"It's fine," Ron said with a grin, admiring the strength of his partner and wife.

It always was. It seemed no matter what challenge we were confronted with, we always ended up just fine.

On one of my favorite expeditions, we kayaked the Kenai Fjords of Alaska. In August of 1996, we arrived in Seward as newly certified kayakers, having passed a simple test in the tepid waters of Waubesa Lake located in Madison, Wisconsin. Our footsteps clomped across the unevenly worn and weather-battered wooden dock at Port Seward as we approached the outfitter's raggedy shack to register. Inside the tiny crooked room, life jackets and paddles lined the walls. We showed our kayak certification, signed a waiver clearing them of any and all responsibility should we get injured or die, and paid for our rented kayaks and shuttle service to the drop off point. In the calm lake waters of Wisconsin, tipping over and pulling the spray skirt off while submerged underwater or rolling the boat back upright without exiting brought on fits of joy and

laughter. It never even occurred to us how those same tasks would become dreadfully dangerous in the hypothermic-inducing waters we were about to navigate. The man running the outfitter was well-seasoned in the fishing industry. He wore torn and tattered, dirty, navy blue trousers and a grease-stained zip-up Carhartt jacket. He cared little about who we were or what we were doing and expressed no responsibility for informing us of the impending dangers we were about to encounter in those frigid North Pacific seas. That's how it was in Alaska – live and let live.

The following morning without so much as a hello, the deck hands strapped our kayaks to the racks on the shuttle, and as if exuberant puppies we joyfully followed with our bright yellow waterproof bags wobbling at our sides. Moments later, the choreographed crew unleashed the boat from the dock, pushed it off, jumped on and took their positions for the three-and-a-half-hour ride to Aialik Bay. There, we would spend the entire week paddling in the shadow of four receding glaciers while we explored the foreboding landscape of the fjords.

As soon as the boat left the bay at Seward, a pod of killer whales porpoised, flanking the boat. I leaned over the bow smiling ear to ear and snapped picture after picture, bending my knees to absorb every bump while shielding my camera from the rhythmic spray of the ocean. My body worked hard to stay balanced as the shuttle raced through the choppy sea colliding with each wave like a wrecking ball against a cement wall.

The captain calmly called to me, “If you fall in, you’re not coming back.”

My smile dropped, and my heart sank. Without pause I quickly moved in against the saltwater corroded cabin of the boat. I tucked my camera away and watched the whales through my God-given lenses. When we arrived at the ice-lined fjords, the captain unloaded our boats on a non-descript shore before backing up and out and giving us a farewell salute. There was no one there to greet us and no information kiosk or wooden map to point us in the right direction. Once the shuttle boat disappeared, we were on our own with no way back until he returned seven days later. It was absolutely exhilarating. We organized our gear into the hull of our small, narrow kayaks and paddled smoothly through the silty grey, ice-filled waters of the bay. Instantly, I felt tiny. The landscape rose sharply around us, and I found myself mesmerized as I stared down through the layers of gelatinous jellyfish drifting under and around our boats, popping and floating through the abyss of their liquid universe. We propelled ourselves past small icebergs as we struggled to approach Aialik Glacier, whose arctic winds kicked up powerful waves repelling our tiny boats.

My biceps burned as I skillfully dug deep into the paddler's strokes, swiftly steering clear of the enormous blocks of buoyant blue ice that had calved from the glacier's edge. When they crashed into the water, huge surface waves teetered my boat closer to flipping than I cared to experience, and while the orcas from the open sea were not visible in the fjord, with each and every wave, the thought of turning face down into an infestation of jellyfish sent a jolt of adrenaline through my body. With every stroke I worked to brace my boat against the surface of the water and slowly picked my way across the bay, singing out to calm my nerves. “Slow and steady wins the race.”

Adventures like those renewed my spirit but were put on hold with the pregnancy of my first

daughter, EmmaGrace. I was not good at being pregnant. I could climb a mountain with an 80-pound pack on my back while scanning the landscape for bears but struggled with another life growing inside my womb. For me, birth was in a whole different league of endurance activities. By the time my second daughter was born, I moved through each day bedraggled, barely remembering my adventures let alone considering taking part in one.

Exhaustion dogged me each day. Something wasn't right. Something was happening in my body, but I didn't have a name for it. I was generally a "go with the flow" kind of person but became frustrated and wanted out of that flow. I felt like a tethered dog spying a bunny across the yard. Every time I tried to race forward and reclaim some part of my previous existence, an invisible chain jerked me back so hard my bones hit against my organ-filled cavity with a thud. I so badly wanted to get back out into life, but my lack of energy left me shackled in a heap on the living room couch.

Then came the day Ron noticed my hair in the shower drain.

### **Spring 2005**

My second daughter, Hannah, was 18 months old when I decided to ignore my weakening state and forge ahead by grabbing a dream 23 years in the making. I wanted to herd sheep with my border collies. The time had come. We had our farm. We had a fenced five-acre pasture where a small flock of sheep would live with our two rescued cows and two horses. The sheep would be delivered at the end of the summer after my dog and I had completed our first round of training.

I joined the Wisconsin Working Stock Dog Association (WWSDA) and enrolled in three sheep herding clinics run by some of the top herders in the world. My pup, Albert, was a star. At just 10 months old, his furry, black-and-white spotted frame was very muscular. He had a keen eye and a strong work ethic. He was a playful family dog who loved to chase balls and wrestle with his favorite chew toy – a ring of primary-colored plastic keys. But when Albert saw the chickens at the edge of our yard, a switch was thrown. His head lowered as his front legs dropped to a crouch position, and his eyes darted from the chickens to me as if to beg, "Can I move them? Can I? Can I? Can I?"

In my mind, there was nothing more impressive than sending a dog out into a lush green valley towards a small flock of white sheep speckling the turf a half of a mile away. In herding competitions, the good shepherd directed her dog with a few short whistles to move the flock towards a small pen waiting at the other end of the field. Just like at a golf tournament, the audience at those trials spoke in hushed tones as the tension built with every deliberate step the determined dog took. Its eyes locked on each sheep, stalking the edges of the flock and watching for one to break. The sheep crowded nervously together gingerly prancing as they moved closer to the gate. There was no way for them to escape the intense eye of the border collie. So, resigned to their fate, they shoved past each other into the pen. The shepherd, who always stood calmly at the ready, waited with the gate in hand for that exact moment when all of the sheep were in and then slammed the gate shut. Time! The crowd cheered, and the shepherd praised her dog who continued to pace in a crouched position around the pen with its primal predatory instincts fully engaged and ready to complete the kill. While maneuvering a herd of sheep, the border collie's riveting display of extreme self-control demonstrated an impressive exhibition of

a mock hunt.

Albert was ready. Me? Well, let's just say Albert carried me. He did everything he could to make me look good. I imagined it was frustrating for him, but he wanted to herd in the worst way and remained the consummate professional. He would subtly swipe a look at me and then in mid-crouch focused his eyes in the direction he wanted to take the sheep. Finally, putting two and two together, I realized that when he took my lead, the sheep scattered. So, I got better at taking his. Without any help from me, Albert moved the flock in fluid unison as I waved my stick around periodically saying, "There" or "Lie down" just to make it look as if I wasn't a deadbeat shepherd. Who was I kidding?

I had planned to enter our first novice trial later that spring at a beautiful farm in the Baraboo Hills of Wisconsin. The site was reminiscent of inland Scotland where the shepherds sent their dogs out for miles to collect the sheep and safely return them to their shepherd's barn yard. In Baraboo, the fields were much smaller, but it was still the quintessential border collie haven. The hues of green on the landscape provided a stunning backdrop for the black and white dogs moving waves of white, woolly sheep over the hills and valleys speckled with apple trees. During the trials, some truly exceptional shepherds casually steered their dogs with short whistles to signal them to make direction changes, and then leaned on their crooks to chat with the course minders or admiring audience lining the hillside opposite the penning gate. In preparation for the competition, Albert and I attended a three-day clinic. The instructor, Julie Simpson, came all the way from Scotland. The only woman to ever win the Supreme International Championship had somehow found her way to Spooner, Wisconsin, to coach our little herding club in the art of natural dog handling. She was, as they say, the supreme alpha dog. Everyone wanted to please her, including me.

It was an incredible opportunity, but the nagging fatigue plagued me all weekend as I struggled to engage. The shadow of something sinister lurking in my body followed me everywhere I went. After every shower, I picked out the tangled clumps of my long, curly blonde hair clogging the hotel drain. I urgently guzzled cranberry juice whenever I could get it even though its tart dryness was never a favorite in my mouth. Without realizing it, I was witnessing the proverbial tip of the iceberg as it surfaced.

A few weeks later, I found a small red spot on my thigh and dismissed it as a bug bite, but its persistence drove me to visit a dermatologist who diagnosed me with Lyme disease and immediately started me on a five-day course of antibiotics. Each day, I studied the spot looking for any signs of change, but there were none.

### **June 2005**

Too busy, too stubborn and in a state of unconscious denial, I ignored the aching spot on my leg and went to another herding clinic with my friend Ann. When I bent over to pick up a box out of the car trunk, she immediately noted the red streak moving up my thigh and disappearing under my shorts. Alarmed, she pleaded with me to leave the clinic and go straight to the hospital, which forced me to say that I would even though I knew I wouldn't. Throughout the day, the itchy, hot, prickly pain tracked up my leg firing a static charge just under the skin. I tried to brush it away, but relief was elusive. At the end of the day, instead of honoring my word, I went straight home

to celebrate my first-born's graduation from first grade.

EmmaGrace had a passion for camping and wanted to hold her graduation party in our black walnut grove where we could roast hot dogs and marshmallows over the fire, tell stories and sing songs. The celebratory night faded as our energy waned. We sat in the swing chairs Ron had suspended under the canopy of towering trees and listened to the droning croaks of frogs in the adjacent marsh. Our silence gave way to the crickets who took over the darkened stage as our domed red tent beckoned us to bed. So, with droopy eyes, we tucked ourselves in, and everyone drifted off to sleep...except me.

In a matter of minutes, I began tossing and turning with the itching pain burning out of control and moving into my torso. Exhausted and frenzied, I quietly crawled over the bodies of my sleeping family and bolted from the tent to hide in the comfort of my own bed where I slept fitfully throughout the night. By morning, I lay in agony on our antique, pea green couch, shifting uncomfortably around the lumps of matted cotton stuffing when Ron and the girls wandered in from outside. I looked up from the couch and weakly met Ron's dark blue eyes, which instantly filled with alarm. Dripping wet, it was obvious I had spiked a very high fever. He forcefully pronounced that it was time to go to the hospital, and even if I had had the energy, how could I have argued?

I was dismayed that I hadn't listened to Ann. Ron packed up food and toys for the girls and schlepped their stuff and their mother to the ER. I lamented my stupidity, having waited until Sunday to see a doctor, which most likely meant we'd have a long wait in the triage area. When we arrived, I dragged myself through the sliding doors of the admittance area and found a happy surprise. There was only one other person waiting. He was dressed in ripped up jeans and a torn, mud-smearred, red tartan flannel shirt. His arms and face were bloody, and he held an ice pack to his head. The man, in his 50s, had been putting a new roof on his house when he slipped on a loose shingle and slid off, falling hard to the planting below. I felt bad for him as he sat slouched in his wheel chair looking pretty demoralized. To me, it seemed obvious that he would be called before me, but when the ER nurse appeared at the swinging doors, she called my name instead.

The highly skilled ER team at our little Oconomowoc Memorial Hospital was consistently ranked at the top of emergency rooms in the country. Their quick diagnosis of a lymphatic staph infection set in motion a flurry of activity during which they inserted a catheter into my arm and pumped high doses of intravenous antibiotics through my veins. As I passively lay there watching them prep my arm, the kids squirmed, and Ron turned away.

I told them, "It's no biggy. Needles don't worry me. This is nothing – piece of cake." Then, I sang a section from little Hannah's favorite Disney Halloween song, "They Can't Scare Me!"

I smiled a sincere and convincing smile at my girls unaware that it would be only a few short months before I would become extremely needle-phobic and not able to honestly muster that song ever again.

While the infection resolved fairly quickly, I continued to battle fatigue and hair loss. One problem after another provided clues to my failing health, but doctors of all disciplines struggled



to pinpoint the problem.

In an effort to lift my spirits, Ron pronounced, “You’re fine. Let’s start up date night again.”

He was good at that – pronouncing. It was how he dealt with stress. It was nice in theory, but I had trouble mustering up the energy to even sit upright let alone go out on a date. My motivation was in the crapper, and all I wanted to do was sleep, but like every other mother with small children, I brushed it off.

### **August 2005**

Each day, I looked out the kitchen window to spy my two horses who always seemed to be staring back from the fence. They were used to regular attention from me, and my guilt over neglecting them weighed heavy. They spent their days grazing in the pasture, whether they were bored or thrilled was hard to say. Horses truly are naturally lazy, but ours seemed to like interacting with us; otherwise, I don’t think they would have run to the fence whenever we approached. I consoled myself by focusing on the five-acre pasture, two cows and flock of chickens keeping them company and allowed myself to relax.

Simon was my favorite. He was a Government Morgan bred to work. I thought of him as the border collie of the horse world. We met at the boarding facility where I was riding and learning equine husbandry before EmmaGrace and Hannah were even a glimmer of a thought. When I first saw Simon, who was brought there to be sold, he was just a terrified three-year-old pacing in his temporary stall. Although he was so young, Simon had already endured physical abuse delivered at the hand of his breeder, and with larger-than-life eyes, he drew me in. Even though I knew very little about taking care of horses, I purchased him in the spirit of sparing him from any future hardships.

I used up all of my accumulated vacation time and spent five hours a day, six days a week getting to know my new horse. I brushed him, sang to him and played with him. We learned to trail ride together, and by the end of 1997, Simon seemed to know me better than I knew myself. When he began to nuzzle my belly with gentle pushes that made me giggle, the trainer at the barn cautioned me that he was being rude, but it didn’t feel that way. Then one day, it occurred to me that I had missed my period. Simon wasn’t shy with his love for babies no matter what the species, dividing his compassion equally between the youngest horses and puppies, moving gently around human children and even watching over a zebra in his pasture that had been rescued from the circus. So, one Saturday when Ron and I were on our way to shop for upgraded camping gear, I just had to find out if Simon knew something I didn’t.

“I need to stop at Walgreens,” I told Ron.

“Why?” he asked.

“I’ll tell you after I get what I need,” I responded evasively.

Ron pulled into the parking lot, and I launched out of the car and scurried in through the doors laughing out loud at myself. I found the aisle with the pregnancy tests, bought one and ducked

into the bagel shop next store. In their bathroom, I read the instructions carefully then followed them closely. As I counted the seconds, two lines materialized in the oval window at the end of the plastic stick. I read the directions again, which clearly stated that one line was negative, two lines were positive. The lines were fairly faint, and I wondered if my eyes were playing tricks on me. Did I really see two lines, or was the color bleeding through from the moisture? Uncertainty morphed into certainty. A huge smile filled my face as joy welled up from my heart. I was pregnant and in a split second I was overflowing with love for that little baby. I laughed all the way back to the car.

“It’s positive!” I said through hearty laughter.

I waved the pregnancy test in the air and said it again, “It’s positive! I’m pregnant!”

I watched as Ron’s dumbfounded expression changed to understanding followed by happiness and then elation.

“We’re having a baby?” he asked rhetorically.

#### **Thursday, October 27, 2005**

Simon did it again in 2003 with my second pregnancy. He was two for two, but when he started pushing at my right breast less than two years later, I didn’t make the connection. I thought he was getting pushy because I felt so weak. I knew I wasn’t pregnant again because Ron’s tubes were tied. So, the only logical conclusion was that I must’ve entered menopause. I had always developed faster than my peers, and it would seem that I was entering mid-life faster as well. I was an old lady, and Simon mostly only liked babies.

So, the evening of October 27, 2005 was a watershed moment when Simon’s true motive was revealed. While drying off after a shower, I noticed a small, dime-sized red spot on my chest. As if I was standing in a powerful ocean surf, a wave of fear knocked me back. My first thought was to run outside and hug Simon. He wasn’t being pushy at all he was telling me I was sick. He had done what the doctors couldn’t. It was another “Lassie” moment similar to the time when I woke up one Sunday morning in 1998 to a voicemail informing me that Simon had been taken to a large horse show by the trainer who boarded him. EmmaGrace was just six months old, and my visits to Simon were unpredictable, so the trainer assumed I wouldn’t be there and had “taken” him to a show without my permission. That was the word she used on the message. She just took – kidnapped – my horse. She thought she could earn a little commission by finding a buyer at the show and then convince me to sell Simon, “what with the baby and all.”

On that Sunday morning, my head was so hot I could feel the steam pouring out of my eyes and ears as I ran out of the door yelling to Ron, “You’re in charge!”

Then I raced to rescue Simon. The show was at the Jefferson County Fairgrounds in a huge outbuilding filled with portable stalls holding hundreds of horses. I stood at the open end of the building scanning the crowds of people impeccably clad in jodhpurs, English-styled shirts and leather riding boots. I didn’t recognize anyone and clearly did not fit, looking disheveled in my sweats and helplessly enraged. I didn’t know what else to do but call out.

“SIMON!” I hollered as loudly as I could.

It only took a second for his ear-piercing whinny to carry through the cavernous building buzzing with activity. He whinnied again, and I followed his call, picking my way through the narrow aisles careful not to trip on the farrier tools, tack trunks, coolers and grain buckets scattered around each stall. At the far end, I found Simon sweaty and scared, pacing on a small piece of concrete surrounded by moveable stall walls. The trainer, who stole my boy, was nowhere in sight. As I led him through the crowds and out of the building, walking seemed to calm his nerves. I loaded him onto the trailer and drove him to a friend’s farm just down the road from mine., and that’s where he stayed until our barn was ready for my “Lassie” to come home.

Dragging myself back from happy memories, I looked at myself in the mirror and gingerly touched the red spot on top of a 25-year-old scar where a benign cyst had been removed. I felt a small something, but not really anything. The area was warm, but then again, I had just gotten out of the shower. A flash of electricity ran through my body. Even though I couldn’t feel anything defined, it was there. The soft, elusive mass seemed to dissipate under my touch. I was overwhelmed by a tsunami of fear before wave after wave of clarity rolled over my mind, leaving me with no doubt as to what it was. What else could it be? I had been poked, prodded and examined for everything else. My head was on fire, and my body flushed with panic and felt anchored by lead as my heartbeat clobbered at my temples. I was overwhelmed with the adrenaline of dread, and a chorus of every cell in my body screamed the unthinkable, “YOU HAVE CANCER!”

Standing alone in the bathroom with everyone else asleep, I took a deep breath in and stared at myself in the mirror. The black and white subway tiles on the walls faded from view, and all I could see was that red spot reflected back at me through the steam. My body knew what was growing inside and had been sending me messages all along, but I had been too busy to hear the alarm bells signaling cancer. Thank God Simon hadn’t been.

As my brain re-engaged, the adrenaline dissipated. I thought about waking Ron and telling him I had cancer, but I knew he would just dismiss me with, “You’re fine. There’s no way you could have cancer. What would the odds of that be?” I didn’t know what the odds were then, but I do now. One in seven women would be diagnosed with breast cancer that year, and those weren’t very good odds for me. Instead, I phoned Suzannah, Ron’s sister and a physician’s assistant (PA) at Memorial Sloan-Kettering. After I described what I had found, the dismay in her silent pause was palpable.

“Oh, Kath,” she blurted out.

Then, as if a switch had been thrown, she became compassionately professional and described the possibilities. It was clear from Suzannah’s voice that it was not good, but I had no idea just how “not good” it really was. She asked me to get paper and pen to write down the very specific instructions she was about to give me. At the top of the list for the next morning was to go directly to my OBGYN and not leave until I had undergone each test she named. Suzannah, my own personal PA, presented me with the dialogue that would unfold and gave me the words I had

to use to get where I needed to go.

“Those symptoms are typical of an infection,” she said in a deep deadpan tone. “That’s most likely what it is, but don’t leave until you’ve had a physical exam, a mammogram and an ultrasound. Have them fax all the results to me right away. If anything shows up, I’ll have you schedule the appropriate biopsy.”

Suzannah knew they would want to give me antibiotics and send me home, assuming I had mastitis, an infection in my mammary ducts. She was certain this was not the case and sternly instructed me to stay until I had completed all the tests. Not generally a pessimist, I assumed she thought I “only” had the regular curable breast cancer. I had no idea there were 30 different types, and without naming it out loud, Suzannah had diagnosed me with the rare and difficult to diagnose, inflammatory breast cancer. I hung up the phone and began rifling through my memory bank trying to find what I had recently read or heard about breast cancer and its rates of survival. I thought it was 98% of all breast cancers were curable. After all my grandmother had been diagnosed with breast cancer when she was in her early 70’s. She had a successful mastectomy with no other treatment and died 20 years later happy and fulfilled. I took her memory to bed with me and lay in the darkness persuading myself I would be fine too.

The minutes ticked by, but sleep was elusive. Controlling my destiny was my preferred state of being, but a diagnosis of cancer left me completely out of control. There would be no plucking the tumor from my chest, tossing it in the trash and going along my merry way. In the darkness, my thoughts turned to Suzannah and how dependent I had just become on my “little sister.”