

REMARKABLE
JOURNEY

THE YEAR
THE BURLY BROADS
DID THE
CANCER DANCE

CINDY SMALLWOOD

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To the doctors and nurses
who danced with us
and

To our family and friends
who formed a circle around us
in case we lost our step

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ONE

“I think you have a breast cancer.”

REMARKABLE JOURNEY 1/8/09

I'm sending this out to my extended Norris family to ask for your help.

Sue has a lump in her breast. We saw a surgeon yesterday. He did a core biopsy. He thinks it's cancer. We get the results Monday morning. If it's bad, then we have work to do. And we will. And she will be fine.

So could you guys hit your knees and send up a few prayers for my girl?

I sure would appreciate it.

I'll keep you posted.

Thanks.

Love, Cindy

So it began.

And so I begin to tell you the tale. Another cancer story. And why would my long slumbering muse finally be aroused to deliver a cliché? Why, after we've worked so hard to avoid the Cancer Club, would I sit down to write about it?

Clichés are born from abundance. It's clear there's way too much cancer going around. It's also clear that with a touch of the cancer comes an abundance. An abundance of fear. An abundance of waiting rooms. An abundance of invasive procedures and invasive thoughts. Abundance abounds! Because we found an abundance of love. An abundance of luck. And laughter. An abundance of opportunities to experience a gratitude and appreciation that is still growing and deepening.

It's not like I'm recommending cancer. I just want you to know it doesn't always end up with the theme from *Brian's Song* as your life's soundtrack. (Although I did hear it a couple times.) It can bring a clarity about this gift of life that we tend to miss after too much day in, day out numbs our senses.

They always say show, don't tell so I'm going to show you my email. I'll show you how I saw things as they happened. But I'll also fill in the gaps since I didn't concern myself with providing context back then, being up to my eyeballs in context already.

The email that started this turned out to be the very first in a series of reports to family and friends that we decided to call Remarkable Journey when we named the mailing list. This first one only went out to "my extended Norris family." If you're going to know me, you're going to know them so we'd better get the introductions going.

In 1968 the country was filled with upwardly mobile families moving their little baby boomers from place to place as they climbed the ladder. We Smallwoods moved into a roomy house in a Schaumburg subdivision with glee, after a couple of years spent in an apartment while it was determined whether Chicagoland was going to be a good landing place. The apartment had been bigger than the suite in the hotel in Iowa, and maybe even the little rental house downstate in Rock Island, but we were all ready to settle down in a nice house in a nice subdivision in a nice suburb. We could, however, have been excused if we'd wondered if we'd moved to an amusement park and right into the House of Mirrors: Next door lived the Norris family, whose ladder had started in Utah and went through California on the way to Schaumburg. The similarities were incredible. Two couples named Jay and Virginia, although Mrs. N. goes by Ginger. Each family had two daughters —Jan Norris and I were born in 1954 and my sister, Lisa, and Jill Norris were born in 1957. We each had a black and white cat. The fathers worked in the travel industry—Dad managed hotels and Mr. N. worked for United. Both of them worked such long, crazy hours that we were lucky to get everyone together for a meal. Both families were far away from our extended families. Until we became an extended family.

We have shared holidays and heartache, weddings and funerals. We've watched each other grow up and grow old. They are my family. A friend of mine introduced me to the perfect word for Mr. and Mrs. N.—they are my sparents. It was Mrs. N. who I called to meet me in their garage after my father died and I was weary of being strong and brave and just needed a quiet place to be sad. And Mr. N. has been a rock solid presence in my crazy life, always there with a smile and a knowing look and a good hug. I think if I were really their daughter, they might have torn their hair out, but as it is, we benefited from the perfect distance and closeness between us. Jan, Jill, Lisa, and I are sisters. We share an incredible amount of history and have known each other for so long. We are so familiar with the unshared part of our history that we can

almost forget we weren't there for that part. We will always be a part of each other's lives.

So, of course, the Norrises were going to get the heads up when the doctor pulled that big old biopsy needle out of Sue's boob, noted that it had bent, and said, “I think you have a breast cancer.”

Sue is my partner. Going on 32 years now. We're gay. When we got together, that was kind of a BFD. Not so much anymore. We're fortunate that neither one of us ever really qualified as the typical all-American girl who grew up expecting to fit in and do all the things that all-American girls do so we didn't have expectations for, or a reliance on, society's stamp of approval. We were always “out.” Sue's mom ended up doing some great work in Chicagoland, in regards to AIDS and gay rights. She's even in the Chicago Gay and Lesbian Hall of Fame as a friend of the community! She used to get frustrated with us when we wouldn't come up and join in the gay rights parade. But it just isn't us to ask someone else to tell us we're ok. It isn't us to be in your face. And Chicago wasn't our community.

We live in central Illinois, near Champaign. The presence of the University of Illinois has always made Champaign kind of the farthest south suburb of Chicago, without the suburban crowds and hassle, and with a more urban sensibility and openness, and cornfields. It's a great place to live. Sue went to U of I from her Chicagoland suburb and ended up staying down here. I ended up here because a friend had a house and I needed a place to live. We met when Sue came to work at the warehouse where I was assistant manager. We got together and we've stayed together, through thick and thicker, thin, and damn near bare. It would be nice if we could get married and have all the rights and protection, and maybe get a few presents. But it would be redundant.

We live on a river—we have 10 acres, 5 on each side of the river. We've lived here for more than 20 years and our roots are strong and deep. We have 3 wonderful dogs—Sally, Harry, and Luigi—who provide us with the opportunity to experience and try to live up to the kind of love that is direct and pure and immediately reflective. We've often giggled at the thought that most of the folks up and down our road would probably describe us in those oft-heard words uttered after another wacko unleashes: “I never actually spoke with them. Seemed nice enough. They just kept to themselves.”

We do. Sue came to our relationship as the most asocial person I'd ever come across. She has always preferred solitude, and in our good times, that solitude included me. I've been blessed with a life peopled with really good people, but I also seemed to always be moving through, on my way somewhere. And when we moved here, I found my somewhere. We have built a good life here. And, by choice, it has been a pretty isolated life. At least, we thought it was.

Christmas of 2008 had a tiny little cloud hanging over it.

On December 23rd, I wrote—

Getting a little deep. Oney called last night, wanting to know if I thought it would be ok if she didn't tell Mom that she's been called back for a second look on a mammogram. I told her I thought it would make her visit easier if she held on to that news. Sue has an appt for a mammogram the morning after Christmas to take a look at a lump. They're both probably fine but it's possible the traditional visions of sugar plums dancing in our heads will be visions of boobs instead. Should make a gay woman happy, but it doesn't.

Oney is my sister Lisa's nickname. (It's a long story but when a little kid with her kind of authority announces that she is to be called Oney, her sister responds. For life.) The thing is, both Sue and Oney had previously had surgery for those fibrocystic things that scare you to death and end up being nothing, so we were concerned, but not terribly.

Then the day after Christmas, when Sue had her mammogram, the technician was very solicitous and asked if Sue wanted to go back to her gynecologist for the report or if she would prefer to go straight to the surgeon. Sue picked the surgeon who had plucked a couple of sebaceous cysts off my chest. She knew I liked him and felt good about him. It was the first of many right decisions she made. We went in, knowing he would be straight with us.

"I think you have a breast cancer."

That's pretty straight.

The day before we saw the surgeon, I wrote in my journal.

let me be grateful whatever comes my way.
my judgement is limited by the smallness of my view.
life is big.
whatever it brings let me say
yes!
thank you.
whatever comes my way.

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