

W. A. Austen

The Seven Times I Didn't Tell Anyone About My Breast Cancer

The first time I didn't tell anyone about my breast cancer was the night our son told us he was gay. It was his night. Curt was seventeen, and so careful with the way he broke the news, very much like the time he warned us about the only C he ever got in elementary school. He organized us around the table and began with an overview of his generation's changing culture and then began to localize his focus, referring in general terms to the senior prom of the previous year's graduating class, which everyone in our Seattle suburb remembered as the first one with gay couples.

Curt hesitated then, as if he'd lost his place, and so I took it as a cue. "If you are gay," I said, "it's not a disappointment. It is who you are, and we have always been very proud of you." The truth was, I had not up until that moment thought one way or the other about Curt's sexual orientation, but he was my son and I knew what he wanted to say.

"Thanks, Mom," he breathed.

"This calls for champagne," I continued right away, and I shot a glance at my husband and my daughter, Pete and Bettina. Both of them were hovering on the edge of looking dumbfounded and that wouldn't be fair to Curt. I kept talking as I got out the glasses and a bottle of the pretty-good stuff we usually had on hand. Maybe Bettina was learning something in college, because before long she got the drift.

"Well, I knew it all along," she said as if she had. "It was the *American Idol* trading cards. I mean, come on, Curt," and he grinned back at her.

After a quick glass or two his father was able to join in. "If you think this is going to get you out of pouring the cement Saturday, well forget it," Pete said, and we all laughed. I don't know if anyone else winced a little inside at the implication that being gay might mean being above manual labor, but in the end, it was a pretty good remark. A serviceable remark under the circumstances, and it broke another layer of the ice. After that, the champagne took over.

Later on in our bedroom, with the tv covering our voices, Pete and I cried of course. It's a thing you do. You think about every song that he sang on the way to nursery school, every costume he wore for Halloween, the way he liked to organize his toy cars in neat long rows; and then you think about grandchildren, and the unkindness of people, the great stretches of the world in which he will not be able to live as himself—oh,

you just cry, that's all. And if you have an appointment the next day because you know deep down that the lump in your breast really is what you worried it might be, well, it doesn't seem like something you want to bring up to your crying, serviceable husband.

What would I have said—"Guess what else, Pete?"

The second time I didn't tell anyone about my breast cancer was because my sister got it first. I saw Dr. Ng, and she scheduled me for a lumpectomy. She was calm about it. When I got home, there was Susie calling from Chicago. She had ignored her own symptoms, or she hadn't had time because of her company's acquisition, and now she had a stage two tumor. Her cancer was advanced, and I was crying with her and yet I was awful at the same time because I resented being in her shadow again. In school she had always taken advanced classes, too, while half of mine were remedial. I was jealous of my own sister's cancer.

Naturally, Susie couldn't keep on the subject long before slipping onto business matters. I have to bite my lip when she does it. I just don't like what she has done. The Pink Wigs idea seemed sort of harmless when she started it, high-quality hair pieces and extensions for little schoolgirls in a pale, streaked pink so distinctive she was able to trademark it, but when it turned out that there was a broader, troubling demand for the things, it made me a little queasy. Who would have predicted how many affluent mothers felt their *infants* weren't obviously feminine enough? Who would have anticipated *preteens* would start snatching the things off their sisters' heads for grade school dances? Who would have thought that a short white tee shirt with teeny-tiny lettering saying "I Have Pink Hair" would wend its way up the age ladder onto college campuses and beyond? Who would have thought it fair that her idea was going to be bought for eight million dollars?

Susie felt so much better talking about her incoming money that she asked what was new with me. She raised the subject without much real interest, but I was so proud of Curt that I told my sister of his announcement. I immediately regretted it. She started on with her "You poor thing" reaction, the reaction she had to everything in my life. It made me so mad, for her condescension, for her subtle disparagement of my son's sexuality, that I almost, almost yelled at her. But I didn't. I knew that at the bottom of it all she was scared. I was scared, and my cancer was just in there with the slow learners.

The third time I didn't tell anyone about my breast cancer was because I didn't have to. I scheduled the lumpectomy for a day Pete was out of town surveying a development site a hundred miles south of here, in Oregon. He'd be staying overnight, indulging one of the idiosyncrasies I had no interest in sharing with him, a love of the most decrepit, inexpensive accommodations he could find. I'd worry about it, but if a man tells you he likes to visit the sort of place he'd stay if he had a sleazy secret life, he probably doesn't have one. Bettina was back at college, and Curt hadn't been off the phone since he'd come out. Oh, to be young and interesting.

When a pamphlet pledges to debunk common myths about anything, I'm inclined to believe it, and Dr. Ng's had assured me that the lumpectomy would be quick, relatively uneventful, and possibly all I'd need in the way of surgery, contrary to common fears. I only worried when I read that the last promise depended on the surgery resulting in the removal of the entire tumor, and, if it were cancerous, all surrounding precancerous cells, an outcome referred to as clean margins. My uneven margins in penmanship started me down the road to my undistinguished educational experiences. I brought up this point when my extremely young surgeon introduced himself, but all I got was a confused expression from him. Still, his surgical skills delivered on all of the brochure's assurances, and he was in fact the first person to talk to me after I arose from anesthesia.

"We got it all, Ms. Rouse," he said. "I'm quite confident."

I tried to correct his reading of my name, but my jaw wasn't quite up to the task.

He continued as if I hadn't spoken, telling me that the tumor was small and that there would be swelling which would actually make the right breast seem larger for a couple of days, but in the end the lumpectomy probably wouldn't noticeably affect the contour of my breast.

"When we get the full results in, your doctor will set you up with your followup."

"I meant to say my name is Rauseo," I said, clearly now.

"Oh, and there may be some discomfort later today. A lot of women report soreness in the arm."

"Someone will have to take my place in the WNBA playoffs," I said.

He looked confused again and then patted my hand. "You did very well, Ms. Rouse," he said and moved on.

I rested as long as they'd let me in the recovery room. I was allowed discharge into a cab. Curt had a late band rehearsal; I left him dinner and a note that I'd gone to bed early. It was another twenty-four hours before I had to see anyone at all.

The fourth time I didn't tell anyone about my breast cancer was that next evening, because Pete wanted to have sex when he got home from his trip. I'd had some intention of breaking the news to him then, but I liked the look in his eye when he came in. I knew he had been thinking about his son. I saw both acceptance and a need for reassurance in his face, and I heard the complicated mix of hurt and mischief in what he said. "I'd like to do some things with you that our son will never understand" was how he put it.

"Only if the lights are out so you can pretend you're in your Motel 6," I came back, and his eyes glowed. As I have said, Pete is one of those serviceable husbands that they've just about stopped making. He changes lightbulbs, barbecues in the backyard, and doesn't do anything about the premature gray hair. He knows when to laugh at my jokes, though he is completely incapable of telling one himself. Sometimes he can go up to considerate on the kindness meter, but never over the line to sensitive. So

when he wants to roll around, I owe him considerate, too. Besides, I'd taken some of the Percocet the hospital sent home with me, and I was not about to object to anything as long as I could stay awake.

It was nice. It was easy enough to maneuver him away from the small surgical dressing, since he'd always favored my left one anyway and was eager enough to take me with half a negligee still on. The best part of sex with Pete is the talking. I know he does it to slow himself down, but it's the only time he tells me about his work. This time I learned the Oregon site is a mixture of ledge and clay, except in one corner where the toy store is expected to go, which is soft earth and may be problematical. He went on about the difficulties, but it was all sweet talk to me.

Would he have lost interest if I'd told him about the cancer? Would I want to know?

The fifth time I didn't tell anyone about my breast cancer was because all hell broke loose. Curt got in a fight; my sister lost her breast, her hair, and two million dollars in final adjustments at the moment of her company's sale; Pete's backhoe capsized in the bad dirt, breaking his arm and scraping off an acre of skin; and even Bettina got in trouble, discovering a weakness for gambling on a junket with her friends and taking \$4,000 in cash advances on the credit card we'd given her. All of this was bad, very bad, and my heart hurt for weeks but I was not about to let any of it stand. I let Curt fight his own battles, though I did make a quiet visit to the school principal's office to inform him our lawyer would tag along if there were a second occasion. I practically chained Pete to the bed for the ten days his doctor recommended, and I made it interesting for him. Bettina will be scraping and painting our porch through the spring term and summer, while living on half her allowance and acknowledging the phone calls her mother made to every one of her friends explaining the Gamblers Recovery program.

And then there was my sister. Unlike Susie's, my early-detected, clean-margined cancer did not need chemotherapy, only eight weeks of daily radiation. I was already tired all of the time and the affected skin felt like the Caribbean sun, but I arranged a weekend with her. The first day she blazed with anger and vomited lunch, though she did have a really good wig. Not pink, though. The next morning she was still furious, mostly about being swindled in the sale process of her company.

Finally I said, "I have something for you." I found a piece of scrap paper, wrote TWO MILLION DOLLARS on it, and handed it to her.

At first she studied it as if it were written in hieroglyphics, and then looked up thoughtfully. "You know, I don't feel one bit better," she said, a smile spreading across her face, "I don't feel better at all!"

"That's great!" I laughed and we hugged harder than we had in twenty years. Before long we were laughing so much I thought she might throw up again, but she relaxed.

"You were always the smart one," she said.

"Yeah, I faked those D's."

"Thanks for coming."

"You have always been a winner," I said, not caring how clichéd I sounded, "and you'll win this one too." For the first time in our adult relationship, I found the next day that I wished I could stay longer.

The sixth time I didn't tell anyone about my breast cancer was because I was afraid. I did not fear telling anyone, the telling was never the thing. I was in the last week of my radiation and all of the crises had settled down. I was tasting a free cup of grapefruit soda in the grocery store, as it happened, one hundred percent juice with carbonation only added. The taste was new, not startlingly so, but absolutely delicious, and I wept fat tears right in front of the sample lady.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"It's so good," I bawled.

"Well, I've never had quite this kind of reaction," she said.

"I think I'll go sit by Customer Service," I answered. Next to the newspaper racks, the coin changer, and the bag recycler, I thought about my last conversation with Dr. Ng. I was in a category with a 10-year survival rate of over 95%, she'd told me. I'd really dodged a bullet.

A man came in with a big load of coins, and the sorter chugged rhythmically like an old-fashioned train. The overhead aisle signs shone in the bright store lighting, and I could barely detect some of them waving lazily in the air conditioning. I took a deep breath and stood. I bought a case of the grapefruit soda.

The last time I didn't tell anyone about my breast cancer was when I finished my treatment, signed a million forms, and went home to my family, my serviceable, gay, addicted family. It was a Friday night. Bettina had paint spatters on her face, Pete was styling a sporty blue half-sling, and Curt, well, Curt was beginning to look like one of those handsome guys who make a lot of heterosexual women miserable. I did want a nap, but I wanted a glass of wine with my family more.

I went in to change clothes and looked at the redness of the skin around my breast. It would be gone in a few days, like the whole experience, and I sprayed myself with a cool lotion the hospital had given me. I grabbed one of Pete's shirts, one of the ironed ones he never wears. I headed back to the kitchen, and I knew I would never tell anyone about the cancer now because it was over, and because it was mine.

