

Third Degree

Category: Stories

written by Susan S. Turner | September 23, 2016

Susan S. Turner

When I find a lump in my left breast I am stunned. I probably shouldn't be surprised, but I'm immobilized. It takes me several days before I tell my partner, who has to push me into action. I get the referral from my doctor and schedule a mammogram. The radiology practice fits me into their schedule that same week, but I still have several days to sit with the unknown.

Finally the day of the appointment comes. I wait in the reception area for an hour before the X-ray technician calls my name. As we walk to the exam room, me in my usual long leg braces and aluminum forearm crutches, she is chatty and asks, "How did you get here today?"

"I took the Thruway to Exit 133," I respond. "The office was easy to find."

"You mean you drove yourself here?" she exclaims, wide-eyed. "How can you drive?"

Used to these questions, I answer politely about cars with hand controls.

Now she has me strip to the waist and begins to squish my breast onto the mammogram "torture machine," as I call it.

"Do you live alone?" she asks.

Ignoring her question, I start to point to my breast and say, "I felt a lump right here—"

"Do you work?"

These are the questions that strangers often ask people with physical disabilities. I always wonder if they're just trying to satisfy their curiosity; or whether they're trying to assuage their anxiety that it could happen to them. Or are they simply glad that it is I who have the disability, and not they?

Finally the technician comes to the big question: "What happened to you?"

At least it's not what I sometimes get: "What's wrong with you?" Then I always want to say, "Nothing is wrong with me. What's wrong with YOU that you have no manners?"

"I had polio when I was a child," I answer curtly. "Now may I get dressed?"

She tells me not to get dressed but to sit in the dressing-room waiting area while the radiologist looks at the mammogram and decides on the next step.

Again I wait. I shiver in my paper gown, sitting near the waiting-room table with its glossy magazines.

I am remembering how my mother lived with breast cancer for fourteen years, through two mastectomies and repeated chemotherapy and radiation. She continued to work throughout her chemotherapy.

"I can be nauseous at work as easily as I can be nauseous at home," she explained.

But she was a bookkeeper and had an office to herself. I am a clinical social worker in private practice and deal with a different client every hour. I'm self-employed and need to work.

Still, my mother did it. I can do it. And maybe there's a lesson to be learned here—to move outside myself, to move beyond nausea; to focus on the other, not on self.

I remember her short, wavy salt-and-pepper hair. She was more upset when it grew back in pure white than she was when it first began falling out. She did wear a wig while she was waiting for her hair to grow back in; I promise myself that if my very short, mousy brown hair falls out and I need a wig, I will buy a long, luxurious blond one.

Then I chastise myself for thinking the worst. *It's probably only a cyst, and there's nothing to worry about.* I take a deep breath and try to relax, leafing through a *People* magazine.

In what is only fifteen minutes but feels like an hour, I hear the waiting-room door squeak open. I look up. In walk the X-ray technician, the doctor (his name on his white coat) and a nurse.

Why a nurse? I ask myself. *It must be bad news, and they think I might fall apart.* Wrapping the paper gown around me more tightly, I hear it rip in the back.

The three of them stride over and look down at me. The young doctor is tall and pale and wears a white lab coat that's too tight on his bodybuilder shoulders. He holds a file folder; the room is totally quiet except for the *tap-tap-tap* of his forefinger on the folder. The nurse and technician hover right behind him, almost knocking into the waiting-room table.

"The tech tells me that you had polio," he says, his tone professorial. "I never met anyone with polio."

I am speechless. The nurse and technician move in closer.

"Didn't you get the vaccine?" he continues.

"What? *What?*" I say. I start to shake, and my breathing grows rapid.

"Didn't you get the vaccine?" he repeats, more loudly.

Suddenly I realize that I'm not cold anymore. The bright fluorescent ceiling lights seem to burn into me. With an effort, I hold back an angry retort.

"I got it in 1952," I respond in a staccato voice. "The vaccine came out in 1954."

Inwardly, as so often before, I feel again like the little girl who was always afraid of the doctor. The little girl who always answered people's questions, so that they could learn. Once more, I am the child who wanted to please. Now, as then, I want to scream.

I sit up tall, pulling back my shoulders and not caring what happens to the paper gown, and suddenly feel a gust of cool air against my back.

Looking straight into the doctor's eyes, I speak loudly and firmly.

"Stop with the unnecessary questions. What about my breast?"

"Oh, that," he responds dismissively. "It looks like nothing to worry about. See you back in six months."

About the author:

A clinical social worker for thirty-five years, Susan Turner has spent her career working with disenfranchised groups, including people with physical disabilities and those infected and affected by HIV/AIDS. Her current practice, in Albuquerque, NM, includes gay, lesbian and transgender clients; she also works with deaf and hard-of-hearing clients and is a consultant to the NM Commission for Deaf and Hard of Hearing. "In my late twenties, I finished college at Sarah Lawrence, where I discovered that I loved writing. An article of mine appeared in the *New York Times*, and I contributed a chapter to [*Lesbians at Midlife: The Creative Transition*](#). Recently I've begun to focus on memoir writing, hoping to share my story as a woman with a disability who has enjoyed a full life as a social worker, a teacher, a feminist activist, a lover, a mother and a grandmother."

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