

Repeat Mammogram

by Cindy Stepaneck



My mom died from breast cancer when I was thirty-four and I have had a lump removed from one of my breasts which left me with 1.75 breasts. In simple terms, I do not look forward to my yearly mutilation and smashing session the doctors call mammograms. Even more than the yearly mammogram, I hate when they call me back for extra views saying, “the doctor didn’t like what he saw.” Let me just say, I don’t like what I see when I look at them either.

Mammograms

It is not normal to have you breasts rolled out to look like a fruit roll up before it is rolled, pie crusts or anything else that is flat. It is not only a painful experience, but it is usually a very stressful time for a woman, especially if they have a family member or friend with breast cancer. We will immediately begin to worry about what will happen when they do the tests, what they will find, what will I do if I have cancer, etc.

My Yearly Mammogram

I went for my yearly mammogram, but I wasn’t surprised when they called and told me my breast didn’t look right. I could have told them that. Ever since my lumpectomy, my breasts haven’t looked right. When the radiologist office called and left a message to call back, I felt the fear rise in my throat. By the time I had played phone tag for half the day, panic was knocking at my heart. By the time I scheduled my follow up appointment I was trembling, my mind raced and I prayed, “God we have been through this before, what is the purpose of this? I cannot have cancer. I already lost ¼ of a breast. How much more can I give? I don’t have time for this.” That’s when God showed up.

He said, “This isn’t about you, this is about touching someone else. I want you to make them laugh.”

I thought, well I can see how someone who holds a woman’s breast all day, rearranging them so they fit perfectly in between two hard, cold plastic plates, applying pressure so tight your eyes water, smiling and saying “tell me if this hurts” needs to laugh. “Really God, you have to be joking. They don’t know how to laugh?”

He repeated, “I want you to make them laugh.”

“Lord, are you crazy, how am I supposed to make them laugh?”

I remembered my lumpectomy and how I wrote on a rainbow band aide: Limited edition, handle with care. Unfortunately it was scrubbed off before the surgeon got to see it. I was very disappointed because I wanted my surgeon to laugh too.

I started to think of all the crazy things I could do. God just started pouring funny thoughts into my head. It started with: Caution explosive under pressure, I don’t roll that way, this side up, Fragile Do Not Bend and on and on. I even decided if I had to have another biopsy I would write: Dig carefully, hidden treasure. I then started thinking of what I shouldn’t say to the mammo tech and all I could think about was: I wish I were an Oscar Meyer Wiener.

The day came for my repeat mammogram. I made sure I got home from work in time to decorate my breast. I had enough time to plan, plot and be creative. I was going to write on my breast in permanent, red marker: CAUTION EXPLODES UNDER PRESSURE.

I have been blessed with a great talent; I can write upside down, backwards, sideways, you name it I can write it. I found a permanent red marker, went in the bathroom, held my left breast up, (thank God I’m right handed), and started printing in bold, capital letters from the bottom to the top so it wouldn’t smear. Just above my nipple, perfectly centered, in a straight line I wrote PRESSURE, above that in the same fashion UNDER, above that, EXPLODES and above that CAUTION. So from the top down it read:

CAUTION
EXPLODES
UNDER
PRESSURE

It was a perfect plan. I checked my handy work in the mirror, it was perfect. All the letters went the correct direction, they were the same size and you could read them. I waited until the letters were dry before I let go of my breast. Sir Isaac Newton was correct, there is gravity and it always wins. The perfect words were now in a nice semi circle around and above my nipple. The bright red letters stretched. Oh well, I thought, I can’t change it now, it gives it character. I wanted to make sure my breast looked ok, so I proudly displayed my handy work to my husband who burst out laughing. If he laughed, the mammogram tech should surely laugh.

I had my daughter drive me to the base so she could get her hours for her driver's license. I signed in, the young airman or whatever his rank was (I think he just got out of diapers last month and shaved for the first time yesterday) asked what I was there for. I bit my tongue and resisted saying I had an invitation to model my breast. Instead I told him I was there for a mammogram. He called some department, I thought I heard orthopedics. They told him I wasn't scheduled. He realized he called the wrong department. He sent me back to the waiting area with my purple folder (the folders are color coded to help keep your services private but everyone knows purple is for a mammogram.)

So there we went down the hall, my husband for support, my daughter so she could learn to drive and me carrying my secret purple folder, a bunch of wise cracks in my head humming "I wish I were an Oscar Meyer Weiner." We waited less than 5 minutes before this older woman called me to come back with her. She put me in a closet with instructions to take off everything from the waist up and had me dress in this hospital gown opened to the front.

I followed her instructions, took one last look at my handy work and froze in horror. There was my perfect letters in not so permanent red marker, stretched and bleeding red letters down my breast. It looked like an advertisement for a horror film.

The mammogram tech came back, knocked on the door and asked if I was ready. Too late now, there was no turning back. I wrapped the hospital gown tightly around my secret weapon, opened the door and followed her, hiding a smirk on my face. She instructed me to put this little metal sticky thing on my nipple so it could be identified in the picture. She said, "When you are done, we will put your breast on the plate." I wanted to ask if they were dinner plates but I didn't. I turned around looking very innocent and laid my breast on the plate. I saw her look at my breast; try not to laugh as she read it. After several minutes of an uneasy silence she politely said, "Is that for me?" I looked at my breast like I had never seen it before and sweetly replied, "Why, yes it is."

She burst out laughing. We laughed so hard and so loud until someone knocked on the door to see if we were okay. She said, "I have been doing mammograms for 18 years and no one has ever written me a note." Expressing my amazement, I innocently said, "WOW that is a lot of bare breasts" and we howled until we cried.

And God laughed.