

Please Hold My Hand

BY LOIS HJELMSTAD

The young man looked down at me, reached for my cold and shaking fingers, and simply said, "I will hold your hand until you are asleep."

It had been a long and difficult 17 days since the Friday morning in April when my husband, Les, and I had nonchalantly driven to the hospital for a breast biopsy that we were both convinced would be negative. I had discovered two lumps in my left breast in February. But I had always had lumpy breasts and I had had a clean mammogram in November, so I did not feel any urgency. In fact, I only casually mentioned them to my internist when I was treated for bronchitis in March. He wasn't particularly concerned either, but he ordered a new mammogram (also negative) and asked me to return in three weeks.

When I went back, the lumps were still there, so he sent me to a surgeon. Trying not to alarm me, the surgeon explained why he wanted to remove and examine the lumps. His voice was gentle, but I felt no reassurance and a small shiver fingered my spine. Even so, I convinced myself there was no problem. I am a church organist and it was only two weeks until Easter, so I delayed the biopsy until I had played for Palm Sunday and Easter services.

Les and I were dumbfounded to learn that the lumps were malignant. The diagnosis threw me into a chaos of tests, doctor appointments, disbelief, and denial. The logistics were overwhelming. The spring recital for my piano students was coming up. There was so much information I needed to gather.

Ms. Hjelmstad is an author who teaches piano and music theory and composition. She lives in Engelwood, CO, and was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1990.

Major decisions loomed.

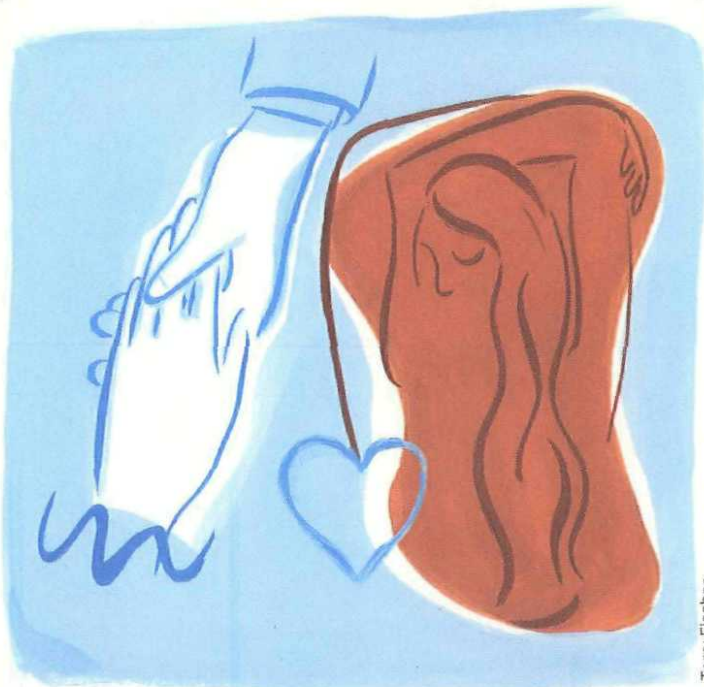
But finally the flurry of phone calls was over; the students were settled; the decisions were made; the modified radical mastectomy was scheduled. I had tried to prepare. The night before the surgery, I had written a poem titled "Good-bye, Beloved Breast." Somehow I had thought that if I could properly say good-bye, the grieving could begin. And now here I was in the hospital.

They had wheeled me from the holding area into the bright, light blue room. What I had been resisting with every fiber of my being was about to happen. No matter how I had tried to prepare myself, I had an absolute horror of losing that breast. I desperately wanted to be brave, but my bravery was in meltdown. Somehow I kept myself from jumping off the cart and running screaming down the hall.

And the young man, the kind young man with the same name as my youngest son, was grasping my hand firmly in his. There is no way he could have known how difficult it is to be diagnosed with a life-threatening illness. There is no way he could have known what it means to a woman to lose her breast. There was no way I could have known at that moment what it means to lose a breast.

I didn't realize then how much my bosom *was* a connection to the remembrance of my life as a mother, a wife, a nurturer. The breast was a connection to my children's infancy and childhood. It was a source of their earliest nourishment—the pillow upon which I rocked them to

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Terry Fischer

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sleep. It was also a haven for my husband—a place to rest his head when a day had been too long or a night too sleepless—as well as a source of intimacy.


But the warmth and strength of the young man's hand lent me security as I drifted into the small death that is anesthesia.

Afterward, I told my surgeon how much that security had meant to me and asked him to relay my appreciation.

When new symptoms developed in less than nine months, I was horrified. Again, the chaos of cancer whirled around me. Many tests, many consultations, much deep pondering in the wee hours of night followed. Nothing was conclusive. They could not tell me I had cancer in that breast. They certainly could not tell me that I didn't.

Finally I decided to gamble no longer. It was not quite as difficult to go into surgery the second time. The remaining breast was not much of pillow or a haven. It symbolized cancer and threatened my happiness. But I was terrified nevertheless.

As they wheeled me once again into the bright, light blue room, my surgeon sat down beside me, reached for my cold and shaking fingers, and simply said, "I will hold your hand until you are asleep." □

 Lois Hjelmstad further describes her experiences in *Fine Black Lines: Reflections on Facing Cancer, Fear and Loneliness*. For more information call 800-294-4714.

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