

How Connie Got Her Rack Back

Chapter 1: The News

It's funny how you can be bee-bopping along in your life like a frenzied hamster on a wheel, when all of the sudden, your stupid foot catches on the wheel and you fly off smacking face first into the side of the damn hamster cage. The day I hit the cage face first (and subsequently had bar marks on my face for months) started out like any other day. Seriously, I should have known.

I wake up late (of course) screaming "Get up, get up!" to my kids so they can eat their breakfasts and I won't have to do the dreaded "mom in pajamas signing me into school" bit. They will get on that bus if it KILLS me. I hear the bus coming around the corner, my son the lolly-gagger, taking his sweet time putting on his sneakers. Good grief! Do these kids have a "slow-mo" button? On the bus they go. Some days, the best sight in the world is the tail lights of a yellow school bus-with your kids on it, of course. I know I must sound like a horrible mother for saying so, but hey, it's reality. That and a cosmopolitan can cure almost anything!

So I head to my doctor's office for the much dreaded follow-up mammogram- the one where they find one thousand ways to squeeze your tit like a pancake. I'm an old hat at this. I mean, how many times have I done it? A bunch. You put the ugly gown on with the tie in the FRONT, the x-ray tech holds your breast like a lump of clay and places it on the cold, hard x-ray machine. So pleasant.

Most people need a Xanax to relax. Me, I need a good cup of coffee. I sit on the chair sipping my coffee in my fabulous gown, reading all of the breast cancer statistics posters on the wall. Nothing like some thought-provoking literature to make you even more stressed out while you wait! I sit there thinking of my mother, as I do so often. Here in spirit, I say to her, "Mom, it's not my time for this yet." She knows what I'm talking about, wherever she is. This was her battle too. A valiant effort in her fight, but lost nonetheless.

After I receive a few "pancake shots," the x-ray tech comes back and informs me that the doctor wants more images and she needs to get more film. God, why does this always have to take so long? I have so much to do...the hamster wheel is beckoning. Finally, my photo-op is over. No glamour shots, just malleable films of flecks on a lighted board. The radiologist comes in and tells me she would like to perform an ultrasound on a couple of shots. No biggie, I've had this done before too.

The ultrasound tech is the human version of Cindy Brady's Chatty Cathy doll. All I'm thinking is get this damn thing over with so I can get back to work and get on with my day! It's amazing to me how we as women have (almost) no modesty after we have birthed children. Gown goes off, boobs exposed, on with the ultrasound.

The goop goes on. Don't they ever warm this stuff up? Chatty Cathy is quiet, so I look up and see that her face is set into a stern expression. What is this about, I wonder. Chatty Cathy is quiet. Chatty Cathy's are not supposed to be quiet. She excuses herself and comes back in with her grim-looking posse.

The radiologist introduces herself, takes the magic wand from Chatty Cathy and runs the lube all over my chest looking for something. The concentration on her face is exhausting me as I watch her. She finally looks up after what seemed like an eight-hour shift, points to a spot and says, "I'm sorry to tell you this, but I believe this is malignant. You will have to have a biopsy to confirm, but I am 99 percent sure this is malignant.

SHUT UP! Why is Chatty Cathy saying "I'm so sorry" with tears in her eyes? Tell me this is some sick joke and Alan Funt is hiding in the corner after I've had my chest exposed to all of American television! Well, Alan's dead, so this is pretty much happening.

Apparently, doctors don't have a great response to, "You're shitting me!" other than to say "I'm sorry" over and over. My first thought is, THIS is my moment? No fanfare, just a room they usher me into akin to a smelly high school classroom with a table, a chair, a box of Kleenex and a phone.

"Can we call anyone for you?"

OH MY GOD! What now? And to think, I was stressed about my kids getting on the bus this morning.

I'd had thoughts of this moment just over a year ago, when I was miserable in my marriage to Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. I was reaching for a glass out of my cabinet and had an epiphany. I was about to turn 38. I said to myself, "If I live to be the same age as my mother, I have 15 more years left. Do I want to live them like this? HELL NO!" So I got my ducks in a row and got out of Crazyville.

So there I sit, diagnosed with the very illness that prompted me to move on with my life. The irony! I cry, not out of sadness, but more out of disbelief. I call my boyfriend, who is off in a tropical locale "finding himself" for a month. Yeah, that's another version of Crazyville I'll have to fill you in on. I hardly remember the conversation. All I remember thinking was, "Please come home and help me through this."

I don't really want to, but I call my Dad to tell him. I know he will be heartbroken and the floodgates to the past will open up and be unbearably painful. And so I do. While dialing the phone, I think of the car ride during my mother's funeral procession, when the driver said to my father, "Well, it's over now," and my father responded, "No, I have my daughter to worry about." So that dreaded day had come to fruition. I remember the heaviness in my father's voice as he said, "I'm sorry."

"I'm so sorry." I know, what else can you say to someone who's just been diagnosed with cancer? "Well, you've made it this far, so I'm sure you'll live." I know that saying "I'm sorry" is a heartfelt sentiment, but it feels empty nonetheless.

No one knows the right thing to say. There is no right thing to say. It just is. It SUCKS, but it is. It's the culmination of every shitty moment you've ever endured in your life all rolled into one.

I walk out to my car in a trance with a feeling of heaviness, yet hollowness at the same time. Like all of the oxygen in my lungs is being squeezed out of me like a python. The same terrifying feeling I had in college when my boyfriend asked to hold his snake (no, not THAT one) and it wrapped around me in a vice grip that took two of his friends to help unravel. There was nothing to unravel with this news. Only me.

The whole ride home, I blindly stared ahead. I have no idea how I even got home. I kept saying to myself, "Hi, I'm Connie and I have cancer." Like I was at an AA meeting (not that I've been although I am probably a few beverages away from a meeting). Cancer, cancer. What the hell? I feel fine. I look fine. OK, I could look better, but couldn't we all? What woman doesn't want to look a little like Cindy Crawford? As I grapple with all of these thoughts running through my mind, I wonder, "Will I get NEW boobs? New and IMPROVED?" Maybe even a bionic rack.

Then I think of my kids. Oh my god, I can't die! They need me! They can't spend the rest of their lives with Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde as their only parent! I HAVE to live through this because dying and leaving my kids to be raised in Crazyville is NOT an option! My adrenaline kicks in and I think. I'm back on the hamster wheel. What is the game plan? There must be a game plan. I think back to what the doctor said. Something about having a biopsy. It's scheduled for Friday, two days away. I can live with a little uncertainty for two days, right? She said she's only 99 percent sure it's cancer.

Maybe I can rewind the clock an hour. Just an hour. In that hour's time, my life had turned upside down. If ONLY I could undo the last hour. I am in desperate need of a do-over. I think back to my early 20's when I worked as a staff supervisor in a home for the developmentally disabled. There was a very sweet man with Down's syndrome there by the name of Ronny. Every night it was Ronny's job to set the table for dinner. He would set the table at 5:00, not 4:59 and definitely not 5:01. One night when we had an outing planned, the staff and I turned all of the clocks in the house back an hour, so 5:00 would come a little sooner. All was well until we asked Ronny to set the table. He responded with, "It's not 5:00 ['5 oh oh' he would say] yet." Shit! We forgot to change his watch! Ronny had a good point. You can't move time ahead, and you certainly can't take it back.

How different it was to go to bed that night than it was to wake up that very morning. It is so true that you have nothing unless you have your health. How stupid I feel for having complained about the small stuff. Who gives a shit if the kids miss the bus or there are clothes all over my daughter's floor? I have CANCER. Nothing else matters. Now the planner in me needs to come out and I need to make a plan to get through this.

I get a call the next day from Debra, a nurse at the health center. Little did I know during that first conversation, but she would turn out to be one of my Rocks of Gibraltar. She calls me to ask if I have chosen a surgeon and an oncologist yet. WHAT? Jesus, aren't we only 99 percent sure it's cancer? I sat in my basement office holding the phone to my ear in a complete daze. Every ounce of stress permeated my toes all the way through my entire body, leaving me with a pulsing in my head that was hard to ignore. How do you even pick a surgeon? Or better yet, an oncologist? Who the hell would I know? No one. She recommends a surgery group to me and tells me we can talk about it when I go in tomorrow for my biopsy. Thank god I have someone to do the thinking, because it certainly isn't me.

I've never been fascinated by the site of a needle: knitting, hypodermic or otherwise. You'll never catch me in a rocking chair slamming out an itchy wool sweater with a couple of knitting needles, nor will I be the first in line for a flu shot. But the tides are turning, with the surf about to deliver me on a bed of needles.

All I can think about on my way to my biopsy is that I am having a "bibopsy" today. I picture the woman in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* telling the story of her bibopsy. "They found teeth and a spinal cord. Yes, it twas...my twin." Gotta find

some humor here or I'm going to freak. I have an array of amazing friends in my life, many of whom take on the task of being my partner in crime for the many doctor visits I have to endure, the "bibopsy" being the first. My dear friend Jill comes into the office with me as Debra goes over the procedure.

The gist of it is they stick this long-ass needle through your breast and then this vacuum cleaner-type machine sucks the tissue out through the needle. Fun stuff, huh? Of course, I'm asking a million questions, far in advance of what I am having done at that moment. Such as, "What happens next? Will I have my breasts removed? If so, do I lose everything?" God bless Debra because she answers every one of my questions. When I ask her about mastectomies, she tells me that sometimes they try to save your nipples and of course, I ask how? Well, how can I put this...she informs me that sometimes they are removed and attached to your stomach area so they "stay alive," then they are re-attached to the breast at a later date.

Again with the "You're shitting me!" That's attractive. With my belly button, it will look like a smiley face! I could pierce my nipples and have a chain going from each nipple to my navel! We laughed so hard – just the thought of it!

The "bibopsy" is like having a needle stuck up your nose and pulled out your ass. It is not pleasant. I count the ceiling tiles in order to keep my wits about me. I think if I had the choice, I would give birth again instead of having this needle pressed through my breast. At least I would have something at the end. Another go at a poopy, crying, colicky baby might beat the outcome of this.

Oh, who am I kidding?

I remember leaving the hospital after the birth of my daughter. Derek, my now ex-husband, brought the car seat in, and the nurse made sure my daughter was secure in the seat before we left. I can close my eyes and visualize the little pink outfit, her head to one side looking as if she is being choked by the belt, and the nurse saying, "Looks like you're all set. Let's wheel you out front. Dad, bring the car around." What? No oral or written exam? We can just TAKE her? Well, I'm still figuring this one out, so I'm guessing there's no guide to having cancer either.

While I lay there waiting for the vacuum action to ensue, I chuckle (inside, of course) at an incident from my childhood where my mother tried to invent this very thing. Only, it wasn't cancer cells she was trying to extract, but ear wax. I was about 10 years old and I couldn't hear very well out of my right ear. My mother, being the die-hard nurse that she was, had peered in my ear to discover a blockage of ear wax. I know – gross. But the real comedy of the situation was that my mother had read in one of her "mom magazines," that if you rip up a sheet,

wrap a piece around a knitting needle (you can understand my loathing of the needle now), and dip it in wax to harden, you will create an ear wax extracting contraption. Oh, did I mention that the narrow end went into the ear and the other was lit on fire – yes FIRE – to draw out the wax?

To accurately paint the scene, my mother had me lay my head down on the kitchen table, then inserted her contraption, lit the other end and proceeded to leave me there while she went down to the basement to throw in a load of wash. And just as I was thinking, “If anyone could see this – “ the flame drew closer and closer to my head and my mom was nowhere to be found. “Oh my god, my hair is going to catch on fire!” I remember thinking. I screamed for my mother and she got there just before the flame hit my hair. Kudos to Mom for thinking outside the box – but yeah, not the best move.

I’m thinking that my current extraction procedure isn’t the best move either, but what choice do I have? I need to know where I stand with this cancer business. I try not to think of where it is or how far along I am in stages. I will deal with that later. Right now, I need to focus on getting an answer to my question. Do I REALLY have breast cancer? I’m a rational person. I like to see things in black and white. I’m just hoping that this mess isn’t going to lead to a pink slip from my life.

Of course the old adage “two is better than one” applies here, as the doctor found not one, but two suspicious spots to biopsy. The second spot is farther in. JOYOUS! The needle probes yet even further through my breast. Damn, I think I have counted these ceiling tiles twice! Hey, is that a spider in the corner? I focus so hard on that spot that I think there must be a family of spiders up there. Only later do I find out that it was, in fact, just a spot. Well, the spider imagery made the time pass a bit more tolerably. Did I mention that I DON’T live in Crazyville? Yet...

Waiting for test results is always a harrowing experience. Almost like waiting for your SAT score so you can compare with your friends and see who’s got the best chance to make something of themselves. Only to find out twenty-five years later that no one gives a rat’s ass what you got on your SAT’s, just that you did your best and actually became something. Unfortunately, the rating of a cancer test has a purely different outcome. Not “Which college will I attend?”, but “Will I have a lumpectomy” or “Will I have my breast removed?” Not “Will I study biology?” but “Will I become the latest cancer biology experiment?”

I endure the longest weekend of my life...waiting. Your mind can become your worst enemy when battling with an unknown. The endless cycle of thoughts

becomes even more exhausting than the hamster wheel you may continuously run on. The cage walls, whether plastic or metal grating, come closer and closer to you until, at some point, you realize the only access you have to the outside is your nose and maybe an arm that reaches out, but touches nothing. No answers, only questions.

How do I shut my mind off? I try to imagine a beautiful beach with the surf lapping at my feet as I walk. Then an image of my boyfriend lying on the beach “finding himself” pops into my head, and then I just get pissed. Men are the most selfish creatures on the planet. “Me, me, me.” I don’t mean to speak for all women, but I do believe we have a tendency to think of others more than we think of ourselves. Finding a man who shares this mindset is proving to be quite elusive. My mind goes to Chuck Woolery and the *Love Connection*. God, if only it was that easy. Here are your three choices. One of them is your dream guy. Where is Chuck when I need some guidance.

The fact that he does not fly home immediately to be with me is a huge red flag. Just one that I didn’t want to deal with at the time. Worse yet, I couldn’t face it. We had dated years ago, before I was ever married to Derek. We met up again after all those years, so I have this stupid fairy tale imagery clouding my normally sane thought processes. God, I am such an idiot! Who am I to think that there can be a fairy tale ending in my future?

I remember years earlier walking down the aisle to marry Derek thinking, “What am I doing?” I was 28, almost 29, successful in my career in the family business, always coined the “cute” girl. What was I doing? I wanted a family. I wanted to be somebody’s mother. To pass on all of the wonderful things my mother had given me: love, acceptance, belief in myself. It’s amazing how the choices we make form us into the individuals we become. Should I have married Dr. Jekyll? In the all-knowing hindsight? Probably not. But I have two incredibly wonderful children that I would not have the privilege to mother had it not been for their father.

An early clue that my marriage was not a match made in heaven came early on with a trip Derek took to the grocery store. It was before we were married on a night I thought I was channeling Betty Crocker and was going to cook up this extraordinary meal that would be showcased on the cover of *Women’s Day* magazine. Needless to say, the meal was terrible but the story would live on as something that should have been a short story in *Reader’s Digest*.

He was taking FOREVER, and I remember thinking, where the hell IS he? After what seemed an interminable amount of time waiting, I decided to call. "I'm trying to find a line to check out," he said.

"What do you mean TRYING to find a line?"

To which he responded, "Well, I can't go in the ten items or less line because I have eleven items and I can't go in the 'candy free' aisle."

So, my thinking maybe he had some crazy candy obsession I hadn't yet discovered asked, "Why can't you go in the 'candy free' aisle?"

"Because I have a bag of Starburst." I don't think I stopped laughing for hours. Years later, as my frustration with my marriage mounted, I often reflected on the Starburst incident, knowing that must have been my "sign," but laughed about it anyway.

Only now, I wasn't laughing and I wasn't crying either. My emotions as flat as my chest was about to become. Thanksgiving quickly approaches, and even though I am paralyzed with fear of my future, I take time to reflect on what I am thankful for. My children, of course. My mother died of breast cancer when I was 26. The pain of that, so raw. I am forever thankful for the time I did have with her. Her life, so impactful on mine and so many others. She had no idea the legacy she would leave. I wonder what legacy will I leave my children. They are seven and eight years old. If I can't beat this, will they even remember me?

Nothing is as scary as looking your own mortality in the face –staring it down and trying to figure out how you can conquer it as quickly as possible. My mother always told me: "You are the master of your own destiny." What now? I'm no longer in control. Something else is. Not someone, but something. It's not as though I can bitch someone out for my failure to live or be well. It's not like I can walk up to Lucy Brown's "The Doctor Is In" and say what the hell is going on here, Lucy? Even Linus and his stupid blanket can't help me out of this mess. I'm feeling more and more like Pigpen – the stinky kid in the sandbox that no one wants to play with – because they don't know what's wrong with me. And so the wait continues through the weekend. Will I play alone in the sandbox?

My father and his wife Gail are on their way up from Florida to experience my wonderful Thanksgiving cooking. I'm not a TERRIBLE cook. Hell, I can READ! If you can read, you can follow a recipe, right? I am so excited for them to come up, for the holiday. Not for my cancer mess.

They arrive at my house, and my father is visibly tormented by what lies ahead for me, for all of us. The years of my mother's struggle to survive is written all over his face. I feel as though he can't even look at me. Like the pain of the

past has catapulted to the present and the pain is just too hard to bear. I feel sorry for him. Not in a pitiful way, but so sorry that I am the one to bring this pain back. And then I think wait – I'M THE ONE WITH CANCER! This is MY struggle! Everyone will be watching it from the outside and I will be the one living it. Living the day to day struggle, whatever it will be, will be mine alone.

Monday finally comes after many hours of tormenting mental time. I'm still on a mission to find my own off switch. It would make this whole mess seem more bearable if only to shut it off for a few hours a day. The news comes. Debra calls and tells me that the two spots biopsied are both malignant. One invasive, one non-invasive. I don't even hear the rest. I just hear malignant. And in those poignant moments you only see in made-for-TV movies, I hold the phone away for a moment and take the longest breath of my life. Breathe, Connie. Breathe.

My dad and Gail are downstairs. I have to tell them. I remember the moment my foot hit the top of the stairs. The weight of my legs reminds me of when my kids were little and each held on as I walked. Only no giggles come from down below as I walk. Just a heaviness I have never experienced. Something deadly is running through my body and I want it out. I almost feel dirty. As if a "cleansing" or a colonic will alleviate the weightiness I feel. My foot finally hits the last step and the outcome is written all over my face. But the piss and vinegar side of me that always seems to prevail says, "I cannot fucking believe that this is my life!" Oh my God. Was that my out-loud voice? Did I just say the f-word in front of my father? I look at his face, and yup, it was my out-loud voice. I wait a moment and then realize, I am thirty-nine years old. If I want to say the f-word, I CAN. And really, WHO CARES? I have cancer. CANCER! If ever the f-word is ever warranted, it is now.

My indoor voice chants fuck, FUCK, FUCK as I walk back upstairs to call my boyfriend with the news as he lies on a beach in St. Thomas. I know I sound totally bitter about it, and I don't mean to be. But I do know this. If the person I loved was a dealt a terrible blow, I would be on a plane no matter my original plan. I know at that moment and many more to come where I stand in the love triangle of Mark, me and Mark. Mark and Mark would eventually prevail and I will at some point, months later, come to grips with it.

I call Derek to inform him of my short-term impending doom. I realize (god help me) that I am going to need his help in the coming months with the kids. More importantly, I need to discuss with him how we as parents will break this news to our children. I should know by now, after many years of being married and dealing with flat affect from my ex, that, "Yeah, you'll be OK," in response to

my news, is exactly what I should have expected. Nothing more, nothing less. The nothing more grew to include a call back a few minutes later requesting that I “make sure” my life insurance policy names him as the executor to distribute money to our children. As always, Derek doesn’t disappoint. He is probably thinking a payout from my untimely death will be more likely than him ever winning the lottery. I am so far beyond disgusted that there are no words. None. Just a feeling of relief that I don’t have to look at his face across the kitchen table day in and day out for the rest of my life. However long or short that life might be. We do, however, decide that I will tell the kids the news when the time is right. I hope that my heart and head can come together to form the words for that conversation.