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Non-Fiction | SPRING 2015

## Cancer Diva

By Marcia Butler

Looking into the mirror, all I saw was yellow; or maybe it was orange. It certainly wasn't a normal flesh tone. The make-up arsenal was lined up in front of me like soldiers ready for battle: eyeliner, foundation, (thank goodness for foundation), rouge, eye shadow, and certainly eyebrow pencil... sadly, no mascara. Those little breezy lashes floated down like newborn chick's feathers and landed on my lap one day during an orchestra rehearsal. They were the first to go. My eyebrows gave up the next night, embedding their way into my pillowcase, poking into my cheeks the next morning as I awoke. Grease paint was never my thing, but if there ever was a time to gussy up, it was now. Slathering on more makeup than a lead singer on the Metropolitan Opera stage, I was made up like Carmen. Only the cigarette was missing.

The red chemo slipped into my veins with a mighty ten-second push and my hair fell out on day twenty-one of the second treatment during the intermission of a concert. My oncologist predicted this. Weeks before, we carefully counted up the days and I saw that day twenty-one inconveniently coincided with a scheduled performance.

"Should I get out of the concert?"

"Well, you may not actually *feel* that bad, and your hair *could* fall out the next day. Sometimes that happens. It's really up to you."

These doctors- they talked as if they knew how things would *feel* and when stuff would *happen*. That irked me no end. Take one dose of Adriamycin; *then* speak from real authority. One dose wouldn't kill you. But one dose certainly made you feel as if you *wanted* to die; it was that awful. Indescribable actually, dear doctor! I decided to chance it and play the concert.

Ever the chemo actuary, my doctor was spot on. Exactly twenty-one days after the second treatment, the poison wiped out all the follicles on my head. Downstairs in the women's dressing room during the intermission of the concert, I sat with my friend Maureen and pulled on my hair. It gave way easily. Four tugs and the clumps broke off from my skull without resistance.

"God, Marcia, *stop it*, you're making me sick."

Other women of the orchestra glanced at my emerging baldhead and quickly scooted by. It *was* a ghastly exhibition.

"What am I supposed to do? It's half gone...should I just keep pulling? Is no hair better than half a head of hair? Quick, Maureen, tell me what to do. We have to go back on stage!"

"Just stop now, no one will notice from the audience."

Maureen reached over, took the twice-dead hair from my hands and threw it in the wastebasket. Walking upstairs to the stage, I took out my oboe and finished the concert. The music was not memorable that evening.

Preparing for a bald life, I'd picked out a wig a few weeks before; the rite of passage for cancer patients. Get that wig before you lose your hair, they advise. Supposedly this advance wig purchase was for *my* benefit so that the world wouldn't register shock upon seeing the lovely hunk of bone encasing my brain—which was being fried, along with every disposable living thing in my body. Every three weeks.

The nice wig saleslady decided I looked glamorous in a blonde wig. My hair was graying dark brown. Well sure! Why not? Let's go. Blonde. What the hell, I'd go for it. So I bought the damned thing.

Blondie got her "reveal" only once. Wide-eyed gawking stares followed me around as I entered the stage area for a rehearsal, touting a head of blonde hair. Instead of the world going bug-eyed due to my hairless state, musicians were now rubbernecking because they didn't recognize the blonde oboist on the stage of Carnegie Hall.

"Who's *that*?"

"I'm not sure... Marcia was playing yesterday."

"Wait! That *is* Marcia."

"*Jesus*, what happened *there*?"

"Ohhhh, she has breast cancer, I heard. I guess she lost her hair."

"*Overnight*?"

"That's the way it happens. My aunt had it and it just all falls out at once."

"But a *blonde wig*?"

"I know. That *is* weird. She looks *bad*."

I heard those comments and slammed the expensive human hair wig in the trash as soon as I got home. That was it; the thing had to go. I'd perform bald, without a wig, and dare anyone to tell me I looked too sick and orange to sit on stage, scaring the patrons.

And suddenly I was quite the chatterbox, having more conversations with people than I'd ever had in my life. The steroid Decadron was my new drug of choice, prescribed by my considerate oncologist so I could perform in between the weeklong bouts of diaphragm-bending nausea. Made up like a harlot. Bald.

Now was the time to go for broke and get good and mad at somebody. Who the perfect victim but my oncologist? He could take it. He was getting paid lots of money, after all.

After my second chemo treatment, when my hair inconveniently fell out at the concert (prediction notwithstanding), I became convinced that he was overmedicating me. A menace to society, he was clearly incompetent. In fact, my refried brain concluded that I was the victim of a vast drug empire conspiracy. Merck, Squibb, Pfizer: all of them—*devils*. I marched into his office and demanded that this whole protocol stop *right now* and that he quit the profession immediately before he mistreated *other* women who had also gone *bald* and *orange* while high on steroids.

Poor, dear doctor... He patiently asked me to explain my reasoning. Sighing deeply with exasperation, I reiterated that without a doubt, an *egregious* error had been made. The chemo was not called for in my case and it *had to be stopped*. NOW.

“Marcia, you have invasive breast cancer.”

“No, I do *not*.”

“You had a large tumor.”

“No, I *did not!*”

“Yes. Look at your chart.”

I grabbed the folder and flipped through the dozens of pages that recorded my cancer history. I flipped and flapped, becoming increasingly impatient, as I was unable to find the necessary corroborating evidence to support my conspiracy theory.

“Look on page one.”

There it was: INVASIVE BREAST CANCER.

“Oh.”

“Marcia, do you have enough Kytril for next week’s performances?”

“I think so.”

That was another miss-prescribed drug intended to calm my heaving stomach. I gave up, hands in the air. Guilty. Not a grassy knoll in sight, just a lone gunman - my doctor. He’d heard this rant of “re-transition” before. The next week I sheepishly apologized and accepted the red chemo like a soldier suffering from battle fatigue but willing to follow orders for my greater good.

As these grenades exploded at my feet, I fought back with whapping arms like a blind, speechless child in a rage. The blasted dust settled, tamped down by recovery time, and one day I noticed flesh tone color had returned to my cheeks - the grease paint no longer necessary. That once used blonde wig rested in some ten-ton compost grave in Staten Island. My hair grew back—now a white skull cap. Angry bewilderment gradually titrated down, morphing into an evaporating wisp of Carmen’s cigarette smoke. My unwanted center stage Diva-life receded. I reclaimed my position in the world as just a woman on stage, standing out as one of the crowd.

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***Marcia Butler worked as a professional oboist for over 25 years in New York City. After retiring from music in 2008, she now has a successful interior design firm.***