

CASEY QUINLAN

Cancer
For
CHRISTMAS

MAKING THE MOST
OF A
DAUNTING GIFT



Sarasota, Florida

First Edition
Copyright © Casey Quinlan
All rights reserved. Published by the Peppertree Press, LLC.

the Peppertree Press and associated logos are trademarks of
the Peppertree Press, LLC.

No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, transmitted in any form or by any means,
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise,
without prior written permission of the author.

Cover Illustration by: Martha Gradisher
Book Design by: Elizabeth K. Peters

For information regarding permission,
Call 941-922-2662 or contact us at our website:
www.peppertreepublishing.com or write to:
the Peppertree Press, LLC.
Attention: Publisher
1269 First Street, Suite 7
Sarasota, Florida 34236

ISBN: 978-1-936051-41-0
Library of Congress Number: 2009933849
Printed in the U.S.A.
Printed August 2009

"Whether or not you know someone battling a "really big disease", this book has a gift for everyone: courage to dance with a life-threatening disease; laughter when least expected; and a gentle-but-firm kick in the pants toward taking the driver's seat of your own health and treatment options."

- Mary Foley,
author of *Live Like Your Nail Color*
Even If You Have Naked Nails

"Cancer for Christmas is a gift to anyone faced with the medical machine. Casey Quinlan's humor, irreverence, insight, and take-no-prisoners approach is an inspiration to anyone dealing with illness—or, for that matter, any major life challenge. You'll cry a little. You'll laugh a lot. And you won't be able to put this book down."

- Shela Dean,
Frequent Foreplay Miles,
Your Ticket to Total Intimacy

"Casey tells it like it is, which is exactly how she lives her life: full on, no holds barred! And now, thankfully, her honest words, wit, and wisdom will help women the world over realize that they can not only survive, but thrive! Thank you Casey for your inspiring story! You are truly a gift. XOXO!!"

- Susie Galvez,
international image consultant, speaker,
author, beauty industry expert and radio co-host of
"Girlfriend We Gotta Talk!"

*For anyone
who has ever heard a doctor
say something that
changed their life forever.*

CaSeY QUINLAN

FOREWORD	6
CHAPTER 1 – I Want My Mammo, Momma	12
CHAPTER 2 - Cancer for Christmas.	24
CHAPTER 3 – Surgeon Surgery.	32
CHAPTER 4 - Let Me Outta Here	40
CHAPTER 5 – First They Cut You (The First Cut Is the Deepest).	46
CHAPTER 6 – Then They Poison You (Pass the Pickles, Please).	54
CHAPTER 7 – Then They Burn You (Hiroshima, Mon Amour).	79
CHAPTER 8 – The Doctor Is In	85
CHAPTER 9 - Balls Don't Make You Brave, But Tits Sure Can	89
CHAPTER 10 – What I've Learned @ the Medical Care Car Wash	98
RESOURCES & REFERENCES	117

CANCER FOR CHRISTMAS

ForeWord

I'm writing this book because somebody has to – there are eleventy-million-and-three books out there telling you that you can survive cancer. You certainly can, and I'm literal living proof. I don't need to add to that ever-growing pile.

I'd like to tell you the story about my cancer's detection and treatment, with the hope that you'll learn from my experience that yes, indeed, you can manage – survive? - cancer treatment.

Cancer treatment turns you into a patch of kudzu: first they cut you, then they poison you, then they burn you. Sometimes they poison you, burn you, cut you, and then poison you again. In some cases, they leave the poison on the shelf and just cut and burn you. Whatever horticultural-horror version of this metaphor you experience...you're kudzu.

The first time you hear "cancer" and your name used in a sentence you get a roaring sound in your ears. This prevents you from hearing much of what comes afterward, at least for a while. You sit there looking like a surprised cartoon character – at least that's what I felt like - every facial feature frozen in a rictus of "say WHAT?"

CASEY QUINLAN

That roaring sound dopplers in and out for a while, making it hard to hear what doctors are saying to you – and trust me, in today's drive-thru medical care, they don't say all that much, making hearing what they say critical. This makes it imperative for you to walk in either self-informed, or with a list of crisp interview questions that will get you up to speed on your situation, reveal actions to be taken, give you some idea if there's a Plan B, what to expect from any given decision, and so forth.

I boil it down to this: when you take your car to a car wash, do you want to go through inside the car, or strapped to the hood? Not being informed, not taking a proactive approach to your medical care, is like going through the car wash strapped to the hood. You'll wind up beaten to smithereens by the whirly-towel things, and get buckets of soap and wax up your nose, if you choose to go through the medical car-wash as an uninformed participant.

What follows is my story of getting cancer for Christmas in December 2007. At the time, it felt like the weirdest Christmas gift imaginable. Since then, I've come to truly see it as a gift.

It's a gift to me because it boiled down how I approach life to an essence - one that I savor daily. Hearing the word cancer and my name used in a sentence repeatedly both

CANCER FOR CHRISTMAS

*scared the **** out of me, and made me deeply grateful for every experience I had. Nothing like the specter of death to make you feel fully alive, as long as you manage to beat the Reaper. Eventually the Reaper wins, for all of us, but there's no reason to hurry up that process, is there? Life's too much fun, even in dark days, for me to want to shuffle off stage early.*

And I hope it's a gift to you, one that will help you navigate the rapids of cancer treatment, or that you will use to help someone you love make decisions about their treatment. There can be dark days, as you navigate those rapids. Please feel free to laugh loud, to find the funny in those ridiculous situations (and positions!) you find yourself in – it'll keep you sane, and grounded, and in charge. It did that for me.

I'm not a doctor. I don't play one on TV. I haven't stayed in a Holiday Inn Express in ages. This book is not meant as a diagnostic tool, or any prediction of exactly what will happen to anyone post-diagnosis.

This is the story of my journey, the choices offered to me, and the research I did to learn the possible impact of each of those choices.

I'll share my research, my philosophical approach, and the reasons behind my decisions. I will not name the doctors in this story, since it's less important that I send you to specific

CASEY QUINLAN

doctors than that I show you how to figure out if the doctor you're seeing is the right doctor for you.

I've included blog posts and journal entries made during my trip through the cancer treatment car-wash, to give you an idea of what was going through my mind as I weighed treatment options. What I decided should not be adopted as a decision by anyone else – the decision-making process is what I'm trying to reveal, with the goal of helping anyone facing cancer, or an equally scary diagnosis, find a path to successful treatment that meets their needs.

And as a coda to each chapter, I've shared the gift I found in that part of the process – some of them surprising, some of them enlightening, all of them welcome.

Cancer For Christmas

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & THANKS:

Dr. DB, who diagnosed me early, and put me on the path to what I'm certain will be full recovery.

Dr. Randy B., whose input was critical, timely, and just right.

Dr. Sure Hands, whose delicate hands have treated me with the utmost care, and left very little trace of their work.

Dr. Cocktail, who continues to heal me, and in whose hands my long-term survival rests.

Dr. Glow Worm, who took good care of me in spite of the fact that she doesn't handle an angry patient well.

Dr. ESDP, who gave me the best Christmas gift I've ever gotten.

Crystal and Faith, who prove every day that oncology nurses are at the heart of healing cancer.

The Lymphedema Service at St. Mary's Hospital in Richmond, VA, for helping me manage my breast cancer souvenir.

Dr. Surgeon Ego & Dr. Drive-by, who gave me the low-bar measure for what I'll tolerate from a doctor who's treating me.

Mary, the original bodacious woman, who has been a rock throughout this journey. I'm livin' like my nail color, baby – Mammo Mango all the way!

Linda and Lyn, survivors who took me under their wing and helped ease my journey by sharing the story of theirs.

Donna, Dorothy, and Patricia, whose journeys were more terrifying than mine, and who kept me fearless.

CASEY QUINLAN

Paula and Mort, who showed me what a cancer-fighting team looks like.

The women of ABWA's River City Express Network, whose concern and support have sustained me for years, including my most challenging one.

Terry, Susan, Mel, Kim, and all the women of Curves Short Pump, Curves Cross Ridge, and Curves Virginia Beach, who continue to throw me life-lines, and whose support is too deep and wide to measure.

Myra, who managed all the generosity that came my way.

The Greater Richmond Technology Council and The Venture Forum, whose leaders and membership kept my ship afloat, and continue to do so.

Linda, Kim, and Alicia, who love-bomb me constantly, and who gave me an iPod!

Carroll, who rode in on a white horse and swept me out of despair at exactly the right moment.

All my friends, each and every one of whom has lifted me up whenever my spirits sank.

All my clients, whose stories I tell with joy in my heart.

Hank, my very own Terminator, who is always there with just the right amount of whatever it is I need: bullets, Bordeaux, brandy, or just a willing ear.

And, as the last shall be first: my family, particularly Cece, without whom none of this would have been possible.

CANCER FOR CHRISTMAS

Chapter 1

I WANT MY MAMMO, MOMMA

I've always been a good little soldier about getting my mammograms. Started at 40 with my baseline, which is protocol for women who have no family history of breast cancer. I've made, and kept, my appointment every year, submitting to the tit-crusher without too much in the way of whining.

I even got a good comedy bit out of it, stating that you go in a 38C and come out a 44-Long, and when I get my hands on the sadistic bastard who invented this machine, I know just how I'll screen him for testicular cancer. The procedure does sort of beg for comic relief, and I was a stand-up comic in the '90s – low-hanging fruit like this is gold for a comedian, trust me.

This carried on for years. Make the appointment, get your boobs mashed flat, the doc says, "see you next year!" Fourteen years, to be exact.

I'd gotten cocky. Complacent, even. I'd rescheduled my 2007 mammogram twice, when what seemed to be more important appointments created a conflict.

CaSeY QUINLAN

I presented myself for my fifteenth mammogram on the morning of Monday, December 10, 2007, at the offices of Dr. DB, where I'd been going for mammograms since 2000. They were busy, things took a bit longer than usual, and I had a meeting later that morning to pick up a payment from a client.

Important stuff. Let's hurry this up, huh?

I finally got myself mashed, then got dressed to talk to Dr. DB in what had become our annual "no change, see you next year" 60-second conversation.

Here is the first piece of practical advice I have for you: when mammograms are a part of your life, find an imaging center where you look at your films with the doctor. There are two imaging centers where I live (in Richmond, Virginia) that do this. After my first seven years of boob-mashing, when I still lived in New York, which were followed up weeks later with a "you're OK" letter, discovering that it was possible to know before you walked out that all was well was a welcome change.

So, I went into Dr. DB's office, the Kingdom of the Light Box, with my films – and after 15 years of mammograms, that's a lot of films – up all around the light box walls. There they were, "the girls", lit up from all sides, each view looking essentially the same, year after year.

Cancer For Christmas

This year's models were on the box next to his desk. I walked in, we walked over to the films, and at the same moment, we both leaned over and said, "What's THAT?"

"That", in this instance, being a tiny spot in the lower midline of my left breast. A spot that had never been there before.

Dr. DB said he wanted to do a magnification mammogram, and maybe an ultrasound. I said I had a busy morning, and would come back later in the week.

As I dashed out of the office, I stopped at the desk and made said appointment for Thursday, Dec. 13. When I left, I took with me a nagging little voice saying, "What IS that?"

The next few days were busy. I work with the Technology Council in Richmond, and that Wednesday they held a summit conference on IT in healthcare – irony is one of my very favorite things – and I spent several minutes talking to a doctor, Randy B., one of the experts in healthcare IT presenting at the summit.

Remember him, he'll show up again soon.

Thursday morning, one of my presentation-coaching clients was speaking at an accounting & finance forum breakfast. During our work together over the previous ten days, I'd learned that she was a breast cancer survivor. I didn't mention my funky mammogram, but

CaSeY QUINLAN

thought that if I needed some advice, I'd ask her for recommendations.

After watching her nail her presentation, and get mobbed afterward by CFOs (chief financial officers) and CEOs who wanted to talk about doing business - I love it when a plan comes together - I headed back to the imaging center. Telling myself all the way there that this nagging little voice, the "what IS that?" voice, should just shut the **** up.

The magnification mammogram of the left boobular area took less than five minutes. I'd been told that an ultrasound would be next, but after the technician took the films to the doctor, she came back in and said there'd be no ultrasound. The doctor wanted to see me.

Somehow, this was not reassuring.

I went into the Kingdom of the Light Box, where the doctor and I stood before the magnification films. He wanted to do a biopsy on whatever-it-was, which through magnification looked – duh – much bigger.

He kept saying that there was no reason to worry, that most of the biopsies he did turned out to be benign, that only 30% came back as cancer, blah, blah, blah.

I didn't really hear what he was saying. I was too busy staring at the image, remembering all the medical stories I'd been a part of in my days in network news.

CANCER FOR CHRISTMAS

“Irregular star pattern. And those sure look like spicules to me.”

I didn't say it out loud, but I was now starting to have that feeling you get when you're watching a suspense movie, and some poor fool is about to get done in by the bad guy.

Cue the scary music.

The biopsy was scheduled for Wednesday, Dec. 19.

I spent the next 18 hours in a quiet mental riot. What if it WAS cancer? I had medical insurance through my almost-ex-husband's company, but the financial agreement we'd forged when separating in early 2006 was about to end, meaning that a significant portion of my income was about to dry up. If I wound up with cancer, how would I be able to work on business development for Mighty Casey Media?

Dammit, I didn't have TIME for cancer – my schedule was full!

I had just, for the first time, drawn up a soup-to-nuts annual plan, with the help of my Mastermind group. The ink was drying on what looked to be a meaningful step toward getting back on my feet financially, with some audacious-yet-achievable goals for 2008.

Cancer was most definitely not in that plan.

CaSeY QUINLAN

The morning of Friday, Dec. 14, I had a meeting with that Mastermind group. I had trouble sleeping the night before – gee, I wonder why? – and was still in something of a swivet as I drove to the meeting.

Suddenly, I was hit with a moment of clarity.

Luckily, it wasn't accompanied by the sound of a car crash, because to say I was distracted would be putting it (very) mildly.

That clarity – a small, clear voice that was my own – said this: whatever “it” was, cancer, a cyst, or nothing at all, “it” represented all the anger, all the resentment, all the crap I'd collected in my 55 years on the planet.

“It” was going to be removed, and I would move on, completely free.

BLOG POST 12/14/2007

I'll Kick Its Ass, Baby!

Found out yesterday that I might have breast cancer. Will know next Thursday, after a biopsy on Wednesday. The best part of this whole thing is that, after struggling yesterday to figure out what the message was from this, the message became clear: the tissue that will be removed, whatever it is, will be a complete encapsulation all the anger, resentment, self-doubt, self-abnegation...in fact, all the **** collected over 55 years on planet Earth.

That's the definition of a win, at least in my book.

CANCER FOR CHRISTMAS

Cancer? If it is, I'll kick it's A**, baby.

Arriving at that conclusion was a turning point for me, and not just in how I was going to deal with the immediate future of biopsy-and-whatever-came-after. I really did feel as though I was getting the chance to move past all the "stuff" I'd collected in a lifetime that included two failed marriages, more disappointments than I could shake any kind of stick at, and a lingering sense that I still hadn't figured out what I wanted to be when I grew up.

I've joked for years about the emotional baggage we all collect over a lifetime – what I refer to as "my full set of Samsonite." I felt, with this epiphany, as though I was being presented with an opportunity to strip down all the crap, to jettison what wasn't serving me, to move into a freer, happier way of being.

That full set of Samsonite was reduced to the size of a small shadow in my left breast. Whatever else it was, it was my chance to reassess my baggage, and leave anything unnecessary at the side of the road.

It was outta here. All of it.

I spent the six days between magnification mammogram and biopsy searching with my fingers in the area shown on the film, and all the other parts of my breasts, for any sort of lump. There wasn't one. The only thing I found was the bruising that showed up due to my relentless searching.

CaSeY QUINLAN

Take that as a warning: no palpable lump does not mean you don't have to go for a mammogram. On the other hand, if you DO feel a lump, get thee to a mammogram as fast as you possibly can. The key here is early detection – cancer found in the early stages, Stage I or Stage II, is much more survivable than it is if it gets to Stage III. At Stage IV, you're literally in a fight for your life.

I presented myself at the imaging center on Wednesday morning, Dec. 19, for my biopsy.

BLOG POST 12/19/2007

OK, That Was Fairly Weird

...my biopsy, I mean.

On the weirdness scale, it ranks somewhere between sedation dentistry and getting hit in the head with a two-pound sledgehammer..

I really could have done without the show & tell after the procedure. Somehow, seeing the size of that freakin' needle - needle? More like a rocket launcher! - did NOT make me feel better. That, and the fact that the tissue-remover deal sounded just like my electric toothbrush. Oh, GREAT - now I'll have flash-backs while brushing my teeth.

My dentist will be so very pleased. I mean, to me all dentists wind up looking like Laurence Olivier

Cancer For Christmas

in "Marathon Man" anyway, so this is NOT a good thing.

Results tomorrow. Stay tuned...

I recommend that, should you find yourself in the same time-for-your-biopsy-Mrs.-Johnson boat, you take an iPod loaded with Soundgarden, the Ramones, Pearl Jam, Nine Inch Nails, and Wagner's Götterdämmerung, the better to drown out the sound of projectiles being fired into your boob, repeatedly, in service of grabbing and grinding up shreds of tissue to ship off to the pathology lab. I did not have said iPod, and deeply regretted its absence.

Lashings of lidocaine meant that this procedure wasn't particularly painful – other than the vise that twisted my breast around to the point that I felt like saying, "Hey, it's not a faucet, guys!" Definitely tit-in-the-wringer time.

There's also the highly amusing position one finds oneself in – lying facedown on a table with your boob dangling down through a hole.

Twisting, banging, and grinding complete, I was asked to return the following afternoon for the results.

I, of course, spent a very restful night (not), thinking not at all about the following day (ha!), and sleeping the sleep of babies.

CASEY QUINLAN

Fat chance.

BLOG POST 12/19/2007

In the Spirit of the Season, as a Celt

...which season I identify as Yule, I offered the following toast at a gathering here in RVA last night.

There were stares. And then there were cheers, even from the avowed Baptists:

In the northern latitudes, my ancestral place, the winter solstice marked the end of the reign of darkness and the promise of the rebirth of the sun. As Christianity spread to Scandinavia and the British Isles, Christmas celebrations supplanted Solstice Night. However, I choose to celebrate as my ancestors did, to celebrate the end of darkness - death - and the birth of new light - life.

Tomorrow, I will learn if I have breast cancer.

Under the mistletoe, allheal, the plant of peace, I celebrate the end of personal darkness. The release and removal of all old anger, past resentment, lingering self-doubt, all the crap collected on a 55-year journey. Tonight, I acknowledge the darkness. And I turn toward the light.

I honor the rebirth of me.

CANCER FOR CHRISTMAS

Whatever comes to pass in the current dances-with-my-left-boob, I will emerge stronger, better, and unbowed.

I wish ME joy. And I wish joy for all of you. Raise your glasses to the end of darkness, and the coming of the light. Whatever happens, this feels like the best Yule ever. Or Christmas. Whatever.

I was terrified, but I was determined not to let terror get the best, or even the better, of me. I don't consider myself particularly brave, but one of my core philosophies is that when you face a big problem, you can either scream about it, or start dealing with it.

If you scream, you waste time and breath. Screaming does nothing for you, and it sure doesn't do much for anyone within ear-shot, either. Plus, you just wasted all that time on screaming that could have been better spent looking for ways to solve the problem.

Denial doesn't work very well either, particularly in situations like this. Worst-case scenario was: I have cancer. However, if I did have cancer, it looked like it had been detected early, making my long-term survival probability pretty good. Denial – also known as running away – wouldn't do anything positive for my survival percentage. In fact, running away would likely kill me.

CaSeY QUINLAN

Even with all the struggles I had been through in the last few years, I enjoyed my life much too much to be willing to give it up.

So, I cowgirl'd up and kept moving forward.

The Gift



Discovering the capacity for meaningful change with an epiphany about the “stuff” we all haul around – you can only really fly when you let go.