

Thankfully, the story continues

By Mary Billiter

I turned the corner in the waiting room and stopped. Dressed in a black suit, a crisp, white shirt and the tie I gave him at Christmas, my heart skipped a beat. He calls it his Flintstones tie because of the silver and blue square pattern. But the skinny width of the black tie with its classic geometric design reminded me of eras past. If this tie had a television character reference, it was Don Draper from “Mad Men,” not Fred Flintstone.

Still, he complemented the gray leather armchair he found to occupy while I was in the ladies’ room. My red purse was beside his black polished shoes. His straw hat lay on the coffee table. If I didn’t know him, I’d want to.

I glanced at the periodical rack, picked up two Time magazines and walked toward him.

“So would you rather read about my hometown hero from Louisville, Kentucky, ‘Muhammad Ali’ or,” I held out the other cover. “‘How To Stay Married (and why)?’”

The couple adjacent to him watched with rapt interest.

“Well, the marriage issue has a heart-shaped lock on it, so that looks a bit...” He paused, carefully considering his response. When words seemed to fail him, his blue eyes didn’t. They never do. He looked up at me as a smile played upon his lips. “They both look great, but I think I’ll go with The Greatest.”

I laughed and so did the other couple in the waiting room. My husband, Ron, simply grinned and accepted the magazine with Ali gracing the cover.

It was our third trip in the same week to meet with one of my team of doctors. The week earlier, I had my first mammogram since being diagnosed six months before with lobular carcinoma in situ. Two new calcifications in my right breast were discovered. I was three weeks post-operative from an abdominal hysterectomy that was part of my breast cancer treatment plan when two stereotactic core needle biopsies were scheduled.

The breast biopsies would remove sample tissue from the areas of concern to determine if my LCIS had moved from the lobules to the ducts. In short: Had my cancer spread?

Ron drove and waited three hours for me during my breast biopsies. A day later, when one of the steel markers at the biopsy site stuck out of my breast and I couldn’t remove it, Ron called the after-hours number while I panicked. They advised us to leave it alone and return to the breast center in the morning. He drove carefully so I wasn’t bumped and jostled. The radiologist removed the marker, sharing the good news that pathology had



determined that the lower site of calcifications were benign. But the upper site was being retested.

My husband witnessed my measured reaction – moments of elation, followed by quiet withdrawn periods riddled with doubt. Maybe it’s due to losing his mom to leukemia, but Ron doesn’t push me to “get over it” or “snap out of it.” He understands that with my diagnosis comes with a bevy of emotions and supported my decision to work with a mental health counselor to sort through them.

Still, when the oncology nurse called later in the week, notifying me that they had the final pathology results but that they wouldn’t release them over the telephone, it wasn’t my counselor I called.

At every juncture, I’ve turned to my husband for direction, I’ve leaned on him for support, and I’ve cried and cursed when things like biopsy markers that aren’t supposed to come out did. It meant another needle, more pain and time lost in a doctor’s office.

I never finished reading the “Time” article, but in a feature on “How To Stay Married” there was probably a sidebar story on mistakes to avoid. I’m sure I’ve hit them all. Even if there wasn’t a list, leaning too heavily on your partner sure wouldn’t be a deal maker toward longevity, any more than having a wife diagnosed with breast cancer. There are times I forget all that my husband shoulders or that any of this has affected him.

Until we sat together in an exam room, waiting for my oncologist, wondering what pathology would yield, and I realized my husband was quieter than usual. I knew my fears – the cancer spreading, dying, and my husband and children’s future. But what were his fears?

When the door opened, I think we both held our breaths. The oncologist walked in, smiled and announced, “Good news.”

But I still didn’t exhale. She waved a paper, sat down beside us and began reading. “Right breast at eight and nine o’clock no evidence of atypia or malignancy. Breast, right at one o’clock, multiple additional levels reviewed.” She skimmed the report, citing things like apical snouts and secretions, which made no sense, but then she said something that did. “The findings are benign.”

Stunned, I turned to Ron. His blue eyes that have always guided me and shown me compassion, and the depth of a husband’s unwavering love for his wife, brimmed with tears.

And I knew we shared the same fear.

“Benign,” I said and finally exhaled.

He nodded, reached for my hand and held it.

The prognosis was good, and our story continues.

*Mary Billiter can be reached at
marybilliter@ymail.com.*