Daring to hope

After a grim diagnosis, a young rectal cancer survivor learns to trust in the future again.

By Cherie Henderson

A leap of faith
For survivors, small choices, like whether to splurge on a coat, can be fraught.

A Salvation Army bell danced above the grinding of bus brakes on Madison Avenue, and inside my head, I danced, too. Nearly 21 months after a surgeon sliced a metastatic chunk from my liver, my latest CAT scan showed no cancer. Warm with relief, I unbuttoned my trusty wool coat to let in December's clear chill. I'd gotten the coat, red with squared-off shoulders, in high school. Back then, it had felt like a toehold on adulthood, so I'd kept it through college, then relegated it to the back of my closet when a newspaper job sent me to subtropical Miami. After my husband and I moved to New York City, I'd put the coat back into service, but several East Coast winters had rubbed bald spots into the cuffs. I checked my reflection in the window of an upscale boutique and decided they didn't really show, then noticed the sweaters and dresses on display behind the glass. Usually, I sailed by stores like this one; I'm not much of a shopper. But today's clean scan demanded celebration, and the mannequins called to me with their spendy song. I decided I deserved a splurge.

LESS THAN TWO YEARS EARLIER, at age 33, I learned that I had rectal cancer—the same thing as colon cancer but located at the bottom of the large intestine instead of higher up. My husband, David, and I and our 2-year-old toddler, Doug, were about to move to a new apartment, one with more room for the second baby we were planning. I was ready for another child, as long as I ignored how overwhelmed I still felt taking care of Doug on top of my part-time job as a reporter for a wire service. Many nights, when my husband got home from work, I immediately put him in charge of Doug, slapped down dinner and headed for bed. I know David suspected I was avoiding sex—I could see it in his eyes when I ignored his romantic overtures. But I was exhausted and starting to doubt myself. My other mom friends were coping, so why couldn't I?

The first time I saw a pink tint in the toilet bowl, I ignored it. I knew it was probably blood, but there wasn't much, and I figured it was a result of hemorrhoids left from the pregnancy. I didn't want to waste valuable babysitter time at the doctor. If I had a free hour, I'd rather go for a run. It was only the prospect of becoming pregnant again that pushed me to see a gastroenterologist, who didn't seem worried when I described my symptoms. What could be wrong with a young woman like me? Still, he wanted to do a sigmoidoscopy to be safe, and as I lay on my side in the dim exam room, we chatted about the weather as he spread a bit of gel around my bottom. I tried not to flinch when he slid a finger into my rectum.

Suddenly, the conversation stopped. He flicked a switch and told me distractedly, "Here's the scope. You're going to feel pressure." I kept still, the only sound the whir of the machines. Then the scope moved, sending images of my insides onto a monitor I couldn't see. The nurse said, "Did you notice...."

"Yes," he said sharply and left the room. I dressed quickly and went to his office. He said the tumor was the size of a baby carrot, and to him there was no mistaking it, though tests wouldn't make the cancer diagnosis official for another two days. He outlined how the treatment would probably go, and I put on my red coat and left in a fog. On the way home, I called David. "You know I was going to the doctor today?" I reminded him. "Well... he thinks I have *cancer*." The words seemed absurd. As I walked, I watched other people on the sidewalk going about their day, all unaware that the ground had just shifted beneath me.

At home I shakily paid the sitter; David arrived a half hour later. We left Doug entranced in front of the TV, then retreated to our bedroom, holding each other, crying quietly as we tried to rearrange our world around this new demon.

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THAYER ALLYSON GOWDY; STYLING, DANE HOLWEGER. SEE GET-IT GUIDE.

For more information on colon cancer, log on to ColonCancerFoundation.org.

I put off telling my parents until I knew the results for sure. How do you start a phone call like that? I couldn't imagine getting that news about my own child. I dialed slowly, and when my mom answered, I asked her to put Dad on. Before they could guess—"You're pregnant!"—I recited the facts: the symptoms, the tests. I paused and made myself say it: I have cancer.

There were no gasps, no cries. Dad was too flabbergasted to say anything. Mom, a former farm girl (when we used to pick raspberries, if she bit into a bug, she'd call it protein and grab another handful), gathered herself quickly. "So, what does this mean?" she asked. There was good news—the tests hadn't found any metastasis, I said. I outlined the doctors' 10-month plan: chemotherapy and radiation to shrink the tumor, surgery to remove it, then more chemo to kill off any lurking cells. The radiation would throw me into menopause, ending my hopes of bearing a second child, though with so many things coming at us at once, it was hard to focus on that bit of devastation.

Thank goodness my mom had already been planning to fly up in a few days and help with our move. When I opened the door, we hugged, neither one of us mentioning the cancer. Instead, we fussed with her luggage and she fussed over Doug, each of us knowing without saying how much better it felt to be together. Pretty soon we were side by side in the kitchen, packing up dishes, then unloading them in the new place. The tasks gave me something to focus on while I mulled over my cancer and how it had thrown so many of my hopes and expectations into doubt.

AFTER DOING RESEARCH, I learned that, after lung cancer, colorectal cancer is the nation's second deadliest, killing more than 50,000 Americans a year—nearly as many as breast cancer and AIDS combined. I was young for the disease; more than 90 percent of the 150,000-plus people diagnosed each year are at least 50. But I had only one tumor, and while it was big, every doctor said how lucky I was that it didn't seem to have spread; my surgeon thought he could cut it out entirely. That was key; one doctor told me flat out, "If the cancer comes back, the likelihood of curing you is negligible."

About six weeks later, I began chemo and radiation. The effect was like having the flu, and I let David and my parents take over the chores and napped with Doug when I was home. But I kept up my three-day-a-week work schedule as much as I could; I needed those hours when I wasn't a cancer patient.

By the end of the six-week treatment, the pain of moving my bowels brought me to tears. But the tumor disappeared almost completely, and the surgeon removed it along with my rectum. At the same time, they checked my nodes and found they were clear, though because I'd had radiation before the surgery, there was no way to tell for sure. I had a temporary ileostomy while the site healed, meaning the end of my small intestine was rerouted so it came out through my abdomen, where an external pouch was attached to collect the waste. Emptying the contents into the toilet took practice, and the stench was fierce, but I was a farm girl's daughter, never one to be squeamish. I told myself it was better than dying.

I continued working through the follow-up round of chemo, nervously joking to friends that I'd missed out on the full cancer experience because I never lost my hair. Still, much as I tried to pretend things were normal, listening to my parents debate about where to retire reminded me that I might never get to make that decision. Even choosing between one-year and two-year cell phone contracts felt laden with implications. And then there was our son. I hated that I often lacked the energy to do simple things like take him to the playground; the idea that I might die before he was old enough to remember me twisted my insides with fear. But I tried to focus on grinding my way through until the last step: surgery to reconnect my plumbing.

More than nervous, I was positively giddy the day before the operation. My mom was back, and she watched my son while I packed an overnight bag and folded my red coat on top. I was ready. But by the time I put Doug down for his afternoon nap, I still hadn't heard from the hospital about what time to come in the morning, so I dialed the doctor's office myself.

"I'm sorry," the nurse practitioner told me. "The doctor has left for the day." Then, she said it: One of my tests had turned up bad news. "It looks like the cancer has come back. On the liver," she said. I froze. I asked her about the surgery. "It's tomorrow, isn't it?" She said she didn't know. I hung up and looked at my mom. "The cancer," I said. "It's come back." And then, before the tears could start, I called David with the horrific news.

> "I hung up the phone and looked at my mom. 'The cancer,' I said. 'It's come back.'"

"I'm coming home," he said. Neither of us could say more. I turned to my mom. "I think I want to watch TV." She nodded, and I flipped on a movie about ballet students learning corny life lessons, as if this were any ordinary Monday. My eyes focused on the screen while my brain convulsed. How much time do I have left? Should I write Doug a letter telling him how we'd spent hours throwing rocks into a Central Park pond, how I'd loved the Beatles' song "Here, There and Everywhere," as if that might give him insight into my soul? But that was all I'd be for him: a stranger he couldn't touch.

I heard David's keys, and without speaking I walked with him to our bedroom. He put his arms around me, and together we cried, as we had nine months earlier. Finally, when we came out, my mother looked up, waiting for me to speak, but all I could manage was to ask how the movie was going. We sat until it ended, and then Doug woke up. I made myself race Hot Wheels cars with him while my husband walked the dog and Mom fried up burgers for David and herself. We all hoped that somehow the surgery was still on, that I still needed to fast. Their plates were nearly empty when the doctor finally called.

He sounded distracted—we spoke for less than five minutes. I'm on a train, he told me. Yes, the cancer had come back. No,

no surgery tomorrow. Sorry, losing the signal. I pictured the doctor in his seat and wondered who was next to him, hearing my death sentence. Later, my cheeks flushed in anger as I recalled how I'd gotten the worst news of my life. But at the time, I was overwhelmed, so I filled a bowl with black cherry ice cream, then spooned the dessert into my mouth without tasting it. How had I let myself believe I was safe?

I HADN'T RESEARCHED METASTASIS because I thought I'd escaped it. Besides, that initial dire assessment—"If the cancer comes back, the likelihood of curing you is negligible"—seemed to sum things up. The first websites I looked at agreed. At the American Cancer Society site, the same section that told about metastasis had information on hospice care. Another section read: "Most people who die from cancer have metastatic tumors." But I kept reading. I found out that if there were only a few liver spots, they could sometimes be cut out, burned off or frozen. I had only one spot! About 30 percent of people who had successful surgery would be disease-free five years later. That was better than the zero percent chance I'd thought I had. I wasn't down yet.

I joined a clinical trial to test a pump implant that would deliver medicine straight to my liver, allowing a stronger dose. The protocol put me in the hands of a man who smiled warmly as he pronounced himself "a great liver surgeon," in a way that made us believe him. My parents moved in, and I repacked my overnight bag. Doug was asleep in a sea of stuffed animals when I put on my red coat and kissed his cheek. My dad was staying behind, and I muttered a quick good-bye; if I had said more, I might have started crying and never stopped. I just wanted to get to the hospital. Once the gas mask dropped onto my face, I could let someone else take over.

When I woke from the anesthesia, the news was good: They'd cut out the liver spot. I was on to six more months of chemo. Along with the pump medication, I got a new brew in my IV, one that made it tougher to be glib about the "full cancer experience." Instead of feeling tired for a day, I was foggy for three. I lost enough hair that I needed a wig, which I kept hidden from Doug. Now 3, he was still wrapped up in his nirvana of Hot Wheels and dinosaurs, and I wanted to keep it that way.

My marriage, though, was showing signs of wear. David and I hadn't made love for months. A lot of the time, I wasn't up to it physically or was simply too depressed. The odds had tipped against me: For patients in my liver-pump trial, the median survival rate was five years. I wanted to see my son grow up and marry, wanted to sip coffee with David on the patio of our retirement home. There were moments of joy, like Doug's graduation from preschool, but the specter of death hung over us; privately, we'd each gone into mourning.

Finally, the time came to get the results of my first CAT scan since the liver surgery. That morning, I brushed my teeth, staring in the mirror at my gaunt face and wisps of hair. Whatever inner core I'd drawn on to get this far was gone; I felt used up. I wondered what I'd do if the cancer had reappeared.

David and I arrived at the doctor's office early, shuffling sections of the newspaper between us without remembering anything we read. My name was called, and we waited for another half hour. Then the nurse came in to take my blood pressure. David and I studied her face. She seemed cheerful, but maybe it was only for show. Or maybe she didn't know that we were waiting to hear whether my husband would have a wife in a few years. Whether our son would have a mother.

When the doctor appeared, we leaned forward. She flipped through her papers before looking up. Without a greeting, she made the announcement: The scan was clean. My shoulders relaxed, my body sank back. She dictated a schedule of scans every three months for the first two years, quizzed me on my symptoms, then left. David and I hugged each other.

Retail therapy
Comfort can come from unexpected sources.

Afterward, he headed to work and I slipped on my red coat and walked toward home. I turned in at Bloomingdale's. There was a handbag sale, and before I knew it, I was at the register with a purplish-gray tote, nothing like my usual basic black or brown. That day, a shopping ritual was born.

AND SO, A YEAR LATER and the latest scan over and done with, I found myself in a Madison Avenue boutique, eyeing a white swing coat. I pulled it off the rack. Gorgeous, fun, but white? In the city? I swapped it for a black felt number, but the cut was all wrong for me. Then I slipped on a black, alpaca A-line with a stand-up collar. Sophisticated, timeless and it fit me like a dream. I reached for the price tag. Even on sale, it was $795. I tried on a few more, then picked up the alpaca again. Another customer nodded her approval, but I froze. This was a coat you kept for 20 years. I wasn't even two years past cancer. Did I dare think I was safe now?

"What's your return policy?" I asked the clerk. No easy out there. Sale merchandise was not returnable. I imagined myself ailing in bed, telling my sister-in-law that I wanted her to have the coat when I died. Then I looked back in the mirror. I was feeling better, napping less—I'd had five clean scans in a row. The doctor had said that if the cancer was going to recur, it would probably be in the first two years. I was one scan away.

"Sold," I said buoyantly, and wore the coat home. ■

THAYER ALLYSON GOWDY: STYLING. ROBIN PAGE: HAIR. CHAD STRAHAN USING KUSCO MURPHY: MAKEUP. CHERI KEATING FOR BENEFIT COSMETICS: PROP STYLING. DANE HOLWEGER. SEE GET-IT GUIDE.