

## **Jerri Harrell**

### **My Diagnosis Seen and Unseen**

This time I wasn't set free. I was held like a prisoner. It would only take a few minutes. As a grown woman, I couldn't stand getting my titties squeezed, squashed, and pressed in that damn machine. I knew the drill; remove all clothes above waist, put on patient gown, or gowns if I wanted my ass covered in the back, sit and sit and sit in waiting room until name called. Waiting meant I was exposed. The people in the waiting room would see me and see through me. Then arms up, down, side, squeeze, hold breath and wait for doc to review results, then I could go free. I sat next to a young pale woman. She looked scared. Her face shared what my mind held. The technician called her name, and as she stood, I noticed her gown was uneven in the front, flatness where her right breast once resided. I hadn't eaten lunch; I lost my appetite. Nothing else existed in that moment, but what was happening to me. I didn't care if I returned to work or let the next person catch a break. I just wanted to be still, to take charge, and be in control of what I needed in that moment. I wanted to be still to know that God was present to help me.

"Miss? the radiologist wants to speak with you in this other Room," said the technician. She stared blankly and avoided eye contact. The uncertainty of anything made me anxious. I sat in the leather chair, tissue boxes on either side of me framed the end of the tables. The white screen glowed on my face. It showed me when I was that little eight-year-old girl who tried to disappear while the moonlight streamed into the motel room at Niagara Falls, where my father and sister groaned and moved in the covers next to me. The white screen exposed me as the cancer in my bloodline, born of my father and my sister. I stared at the white screen and imagined the scans that would reveal the truth. The doctor knocked and entered the room. She wanted me to have a biopsy immediately. I wanted to disappear, so I did, like when

my father's heavy hand pushed on the back of my neck into the floorboard of the car, to hush, get down, and be quiet. I felt like somebody was coming after me or for me. I closed my eyes. I didn't want to see what would happen. I waited. My father succeeded. I was not seen by my grandmother's co-workers as the bastard child no one knew about.

The biopsy was scheduled for 9 am the next day. The waiting room was filled with people. Bloody cuticles singed my mouth as I bit down. Head tilted backward; I closed my eyes. The light blue cushioned couch swallowed my behind into its comfort. An old woman shuffled towards me. Her walker navigated the tiled hospital floors to the empty seat beside me. My grandmother's favorite perfume, Elizabeth Taylor's "Passion," nipped my nostrils as she sat down. I wished my grandmother were here with me, the way I wished she had been with me when she vanished on the narrow street, as we drove the old station wagon to Niagara Falls. She didn't wave goodbye on the day I found out I was born of incest, the cancer in my family that nobody wanted.

The nurse yelled my name. I gave the old woman a quick smile of respect. "Bless you sweetheart, whatever you're going through, God's got it," the woman said as I stood up. But I didn't know if God had it. My father told me that God would let me suffer until I obeyed. I smiled back at the woman. "Yes, God's got it," I said as I walked into the procedure room. Coldness held my upper body as I laid face down on the elevated table. Left breast dangled through an opening. Interns in the room proudly wore their white coats, laughing about their day. White cloth sterilized the table beneath me; silver instruments, syringes lined up at attention until time for battle. The doctor performed the procedure. She turned and twisted my left breast,

extracted pieces of flesh. The interns stared and looked away repeatedly. I laid naked, exposed for all to see whatever it was that my father said I had done wrong. The same thing the crossing guard saw. She wore a blue uniform, just like the police. “I know exactly who you are and where you came from. I see you and it’s disgusting!” she spat at me. I felt dirty like something was wrong with me. I didn’t understand why she only picked on me and none of the other kids. I tried my best to avoid her corner on the way to school, scared that she would send the police to my house to get me. I didn’t know what I’d done to her. I was eight years old; she was a grown woman. She knew whatever my father knew about my birth. I wished I could have been invisible when I needed to.

It had been 3 days since my biopsy. My cubicle sat in the middle of the office. The computer screen stared at me. It was lunchtime, but I was more hungry for my results than food. I typed my name into the medical records screen. I wanted to know the truth, but my father’s hand pushed my head to the floorboards. “Get down! Now I said!” I couldn’t hold my breath much longer. My father would not succeed this time. I clicked the lab results screen.

*“Stereotactic Breast Biopsy results- Ductal Carcinoma In- Situ Stage  
2-3 –cribriform type, milk ducts”*,

It’s okay now. Stand up. You don’t have to feel less than, unworthy, or not good enough. Cancer is not who you are. It doesn’t define you. You can fight it and remove it from your being.

## Jerri Harrell

In *My Diagnosis Seen and Unseen* I tell how my breast cancer diagnosis and childhood trauma are intertwined. Although I worked as a nurse for many years helping other people heal, I had not healed from feeling like I was a cancer in my family. I want people to know that it is possible to reconcile your past and still have a future despite your experiences. I use writing as a form of therapy, along with counseling and being active in a 12 Step Recovery Program. I have learned how to genuinely love and accept who I am as a human being. The cycle of generational trauma and dysfunction in my family is being broken so my children and their grandchildren do not have to go through the same struggles. *Diagnosis Seen and Unseen* is from my soon to be published memoir titled, *Hiding in Plain Sight: A Black Woman's Struggle to Claim Identity as a Child of God Born of Incest*, in which I tell about growing up the product of my father's incest with my sister. On the one hand, my father, a Black rabbi, put his little girl at the top of a ladder on the street corners of Manhattan to draw a crowd so he could preach the Word, yet he hid me from my grandmother's co-workers so no one would know about me. This led to addictions, promiscuity and unhealthy relationships until I received a cancer diagnosis and almost died from a drug overdose. I searched for the God that my father preached about and prayed that He was not a punitive God who would take my life, but a loving and kind God who would help me change my life.