

In the Pink

By Charlotte Crowder

Years ago, I approached the mammography department of a suburban health center through a series of windowless, labyrinthian passages. At the end was a Dutch door. Behind the door, barely tall enough to lean on the ledge of the bottom half, stood Tirzah, a dumpling of a woman with a head of tight curls. In the small, airless room behind her were shelves of manila folders filled with mammograms. Tirzah oversaw the manila folders. Each one held a woman's fate. Tirzah served as a combination medical records administrator, sliding new images into the folders, and receptionist. She checked patients in and called their names when the technician was ready for them. She greeted each one with a clinical distance, never connecting. Her poker face did not betray what she must have known about the content of the individual folders. In two-and-a-half decades, she was there leaning on the ledge of the Dutch door when I arrived for my appointments: annual; too often semi-annual; and the most-feared, call-back appointments. We never exchanged a smile. She never acknowledged she knew me.

As I prepared to move out of state, it was Tirzah who retrieved my folder from a shelf and handed it to me. Fat with images of suspicious clusters and documentation of disfiguring biopsies, the folder held a history: the overdiagnosis and unnecessary treatment of a pair of healthy breasts. In the two-and-a-half decades it chronicled, I had lost my two closest friends and my mother to breast cancer. I stood by as they succumbed to the ravages of chemotherapy and radiation. I watched them die. It was hard not to believe that my numerous appointments and follow-up procedures were somehow protective against this dread disease.

In this tiny rural hospital in the community where I now live, the door to the waiting room of the mammography department closes off the hospital smells and sounds. This is an oasis: a small, hushed, cocooning space, painted in soft pastels. Gentle bird song is piped in. On the wall opposite two comfy chairs, upholstered in a tasteful floral design, is a mural of an open door leading to a flower garden. A few of the interior decorator's cards are scattered artfully on the table between the chairs.

At Tirzah's Dutch door there was no waiting room. We patients sat on straight-backed chairs in the passageway and waited for her to call our names. The johnnies were classic—white with a small blue repeating pattern.

Here, the johnnies are dusty rose. In the mammography room, the maw of the machine awaits. To soften its bite, a pink foam pad on the shelf forms the lower jaw. With advanced digital capabilities, the machine threatens to turn us all into survivors.

The johnny proves superfluous. As I slide my arm out of a sleeve, the technician and I ignore my nakedness. She fastens pink stickers on my scars to identify them on the mammogram: three straight ones in a row to mark the one that runs from my nipple to my sternum, a small dot to cover the divot from a wire-localized biopsy, a bigger circle where a lump was removed. We chat about the weather, both disregarding that she is handling one of my breasts like a raw hunk of meat, arranging it on the pink foam pad. I automatically set my feet at the required odd angle to the machine, reach up to grasp the built-in handle, and dig my

armpit into the corner of the shelf. It's muscle memory from years of practice.—Like riding a bike or doing a dance step.

A week later, the results arrive in a pink envelope—a membership card for a club to which I do not wish to belong. When my last mammogram results came from the hospital, they arrived in a plain white envelope. The letter, with a green happy-face sticker attached, came over my nurse practitioner's signature and read simply, "I am happy to report that your recent mammogram test was normal." This time, the message inside is in fact the same good news, but comes over the hospital name and appears to have been drafted by the marketing department, perhaps with some input from legal counsel. It begins:

"Your recent mammogram has been interpreted by a radiologist. Your health care provider has received an in-depth report of the results. However, we also send all our patients a summary of these results to encourage timely follow-up of any recommendations.

"Result: Your recent mammogram shows NO evidence of cancer."

Even preceded by a negative, the word itself conjures the spectre I have been fleeing all these years, reminds me how my hand shook long ago as I held the phone and listened to the radiologist report his findings, brings back the anxiety of the days waiting for biopsy results.

The letter continues to inform me: "...your breast tissue is dense...dense breast tissue may increase your breast cancer risk." This I know. I know my risk factors. Every woman knows her risk factors as she knows the dance steps before the mammography machine. Please, just let me revel in my normalcy.

Charlotte Crowder lives and writes on the coast of Maine. She is a medical writer and editor by day. Her short stories have been published in *Maine Boats, Homes and Harbors* magazine, *The Maine Review*, *Boston Literary Magazine*, *Brilliant Flash Fiction*, and *American Writers Review*. Forthcoming are short stories in *Dirigo Dreams Anthology* (City View Press, Fall 2019) and *Anthology 2, Dreamers Creative Writing* (Winter 2020). Her first picture book, *A Fine Orange Bucket*, was released by North Country Press in June 2019.

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