

# one more river

Marianne Basson

*Griffel*

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One more River

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## FOREWORD

Marianne Basson's modesty about the miracle of her own life is humbling indeed. Confined for several years to a wheelchair by spinal paralysis, she was plummeted headlong into prolonged chemotherapy treatment for breast cancer just as she recovering from spinal surgery that would give her new hope. Sent home because her body could take no more of the ravages beset upon her by the cancer, many of us would have given up all hope. The fact that Marianne has since paddled the Orange River with her fiancé, Terry Gallagher, appear to be nothing less than divine intervention to many who have witnessed the brutal characteristic of a cancerous disease. Marianne, characteristically, takes this change of fortune in her stride – and perhaps that is what you do when you've overcome seemingly insurmountable odds. But her story, for the most part, is a poignant tribute to the strength of the human spirit, the gift of love and our capacity for hope.

When Marianne asked me to look at the manuscript of *One more River* I was, to say the least, perplexed that someone who had gained so much depth and wisdom through her own life experience, could entrust such a potentially empowering personal memoir to someone who knows so little about what it means to live with an illness such as cancer. After all, she barely knew me when I had arrived on her doorstep a few hours earlier, incumbend with the rather light matter of researching a travel-lifestyle feature on the new tourism developments on Lake !Gariiep. Five or so hours later, I agreed to read Marianne's book and help her reach the point where she was comfortable to offer it to a publisher.

I still don't understand what encouraged Marianne to entrust her manuscript to me, but I am truly honoured. For my part at least, I instinctively responded to Marianne's direct yet deeply considered and practical attitude to life. And the experience of editing the manuscript and keeping in touch with Marianne as we explored new areas of her story has developed my understanding of the despair, rage, tears and sometimes the triumphs of a woman who has faced the dread of breast cancer. And as I write, I realise that my education has simply been the start of Marianne's mission to share her story with other women so that they too might have the chance to change from being a victim of breast cancer to becoming a survivor.

Diagnosed with breast cancer in December 1994, Marianne now allows the journal she kept from the day following her diagnosis to tell her story. The physical and emotional journey which Marianne endured as she underwent treatment and battled the disease, is poignantly punctuated by the love and support of her Mom and Dad, the deep compassion of the medical staff who treated and nursed her, the close bond she formed with her dear friend Lorna, and Marianne's larger-than-life fighting spirit. The latter is a quality that has characterised Marianne's entire life and has lent her the courage in her darkest moments to cross where the waters were dark and deep.

Characteristic of Marianne's feisty spirit, the irresistible challenge issued from Terry, who was at the time a brand new acquaintance, was all the motivation she needed to embark on a courageous canoe trip down the Orange River. It simply was most fitting that the celebration of her healing should be dedicated to breast cancer patients around the world. The preparation for and subsequent journey down the Orange presented Marianne with emotional and physical challenges each step of the way. Many of them being deeply personal, meanwhile she shares others with countless other women who have fought breast cancer. Not least of these, the importance of learning to believe in herself, and the beauty and strength of her own womanhood. Marianne's journey unhesitatingly led her to a place where, no longer driven to fight for her life, she has learned to accept the love and support that Terry so gently offered.

Although a rather extreme method of coming to terms with how far she had come since her illness, despite moments of self doubt, it is not in Marianne's character to shrink from a challenge. And it is this adventure that allowed Marianne to acknowledge the depth and strength of her own character. Out on the water her physical and emotional journey became one as she learned to harness the power of positive thought to conquer her fears. *One more River* is a journey of self-discovery that all women need to undertake.

Kerry Theobald  
Grahamstown, 2005

One more River is Dedicated To:

Cancer sufferers world wide to help them think positively and live;  
not to remain victims but to become survivors.

AND

All the beautiful ladies who were unfortunate enough to have lost a breast because  
of breast cancer. You are still lovely.

AND

Specially to my nephew John Allen  
08:07:1985 - 25:03:2007

John, son of Minki and Stuart Allen

A beautiful boy,  
An exceptional young man,  
And then the angels came.  
Forever twenty-one you shall be.

-Marianne Basson-



**PART ONE**

*Come and see what the Lord has done.  
see what amazing things  
He has done on earth.  
- Psalm 46: 8 -*



I was born on the 29th of July 1955. My sister and I were twins and I fought my way into the world five minutes before my little sister followed. There was no drum roll for us because we were not the first children born to our parents. Our older sister was already nearly two years old. Another little sister followed seven years later and the twins became middle siblings. An uneventful but warm and loving growing-up period followed.

Thirty nine years after the birth of the two little twin girls something happened that shook one of them to the roots and it is there that my story starts.

It was the year of 1994 with only two weeks to go until Christmas day.

Notations in my diary will take you back ...

9 DECEMBER 1994

I woke up in hospital where the doctors had manipulated my spine under general anaesthesia. After ten days of total bed rest, I simply could not wait for my first 'sit-up' in a chair. I glanced over to where the wheelchair, my constant companion over the past four years of my life, awaited me as severe back-ache had rendered me a paraplegic.

It was four years ago that I had first sought medical help for a persistent but mild pain in my lower back. The specialist decided to operate without wasting time. His diagnosis was that I needed a laminectomy and a fusion on the five lumbar vertebrae. My condition was urgent enough for me not to be left with any choice in the matter and so within days I was in hospital and being prepared for surgery. As I suffer from epilepsy and was on very strong medication, I was quite apprehensive when the specialist stopped my drugs until after the surgery. Again I was not given any say in the matter and it proved to be a life-threatening decision.

Right after my surgery I lapsed into a fit called 'status epilepticus', a condition in which epileptic fits follow one another without recovery of consciousness between them. I was extremely lucky not to have suffered brain damage or a heart attack from that fit. But as the fit wracked my body, everything that had been to my back in surgery was ripped apart.

Ten days later I was to be sent home with the promise that the paralysis in my legs would disappear within time. I was just to have patience and give it enough time. I cannot even begin to describe the pain in my back and legs that I had to live with from that day on. I had seen many specialists since then but, given my epileptic history, not one of them was prepared to attempt surgery again.

I could not walk since the day that surgery was performed. The pain prevented me from moving too much and I were wheelchair bound. It greatly helped me to get around and to be less dependent on other people, but the muscles in my legs had fallen into total disuse. That was until I was given another chance by a surgeon who believed he might be able to help relieve the constant pain. Now, after ten days in bed with strict instructions not to move, but to stay as still as I could, I was quite ready for that promised 'sit-up'.

A nurse with a beautiful smile came to get me out of bed as I was allowed to sit up for thirty minutes while my bed was being made and breakfast served. I wheeled myself over to the window, eager to feel the sun on my face. Dawn was decked out in pinks and gold, the colours of my excitement. While sitting there watching the city wake up, I became aware of an uncomfortable swelling on the side of my left breast. I could not have envisaged then how drastically my life would change within the following few hours.

The nurse looked strangely concerned as she examined the lump, and I was soon rushed back to bed while the doctor on call was summoned.

"Is it painful?" he asked as his experienced fingers examined me.

"No," I said, feeling relieved. Certainly it could not be serious if there is no pain. I became aware of his eyes. The smile he put on for my benefit did not go all the way. He looked worried.

I managed to propel my vocal cords. "Can it be cancer, doctor?" I asked.

"Now let's not assume the worst. With lumps like this we can be ninety five percent sure it is not cancer, but I would like to do a needle-aspiration immediately."

As his footsteps disappeared down the hallway I wanted to call out for him to come back. I had so many questions spinning through my mind. I needed reassurance. I felt very lonely and scared.

The minutes felt like hours, as the bedside clock slowly marked the passage of time. I did not want to be alone but I could not allow myself to phone my Mom and Dad. They would be so worried, and it might be nothing serious. My children are grown and live far away. I did not want to worry them either.

There were footsteps coming down the passage again. Was it tea time or were they coming for me?

"Time for your needle-aspiration," a chirpy little nurse an-

nounced as she entered my room. Her crisp white uniform made swish-swish sounds as she busied herself fixing my bed. Her eyes did not meet mine.

More feet came down the hallway. The specialist arrived and introduced himself as Dr Evans. My eyes searched his face for signs of ... well anything that could give me an indication of an early diagnosis. But his eyes remained friendly and professional.

When Dr. Evans retrieved a syringe from the trolley, it looked huge and a look of alarm, that I could not hide, spread across my face. With a quick laugh he reassured me. "This procedure will not be painful at all." I closed my eyes and longed for my Mommy.

"This is a benign tumour or a cyst," he chatted reassuringly as he worked. At least he was right when he said the needle wouldn't hurt. It truly was only mildly uncomfortable.

Ten minutes later his smile had vanished. "Whatever this is, it's hard to penetrate. Sister, book the theatre for one o'clock!"

He looked serious when he spoke to me. "I don't like the look of it. We had best perform a biopsy so we can get to the bottom of this." He tried to sound reassuring, but his voice had a hollow ring to it - that of a doctor who hides what he really thinks from the patient.

I felt like I was on a wild seesaw ride. One minute up, the next minute down. One o'clock seemed so far away. When would I know?

A hundred things rushed through my mind. Thoughts of my estranged husband came crowding in. Andre did not even know I was in hospital. I did not tell him because I came in for such a trivial little thing. Our marriage was not going well. Two weeks ago we decided to give each other some space so we could try and work things out. Should I let him know? I forced the temptation from my mind. He would probably think I was just looking for attention. I have never begged for sympathy in my life before. I felt utterly bewildered and alone. A strong current of emotion swept me down its path and took control of my life. The turmoil of my unstable marriage already had me spinning in a whirlpool of insecurity. What if I now had cancer as well? How could I swim against a current so strong that it was threatening to sweep my life away as if I was an insignificant obstacle in its path? I shut my mind tightly against the overwhelming fear. This was one river I was going to have to cross alone.

Finally one o'clock arrived and I was wheeled into theatre.

All was masked figures and blinding lights, as the anaesthetist slipped the needle into my arm. The last thing I remembered was Dr Evans waving me goodbye before I was out for the count.

I woke up in a lot of pain, too scared to look if I still had my breast. Suddenly I just could not handle the insecurity of not knowing what it was that they had found wrong with me in theatre. I rang the bell.

Squeaky rubber footsteps sounded in the hallway and a nurse stood next to my bed. "We are awake then are we not," she beamed, as she busied herself with the blood pressure instrument. "I brought you something for the pain," she said and I felt the needle prick my upper-arm.

"Nurse, did they ...?" I whispered.

She immediately understood my concern. "Your anatomy is all still in place, Love."

Relief washed over me as I drifted off again.

Dr Evans stood beside my bed when I next opened my eyes. He looked grave. "We removed the tumour and it does not look too healthy. We should have the results within a few days," he said hanging up the clipboard with my medical information at the foot of the bed.

"A few days!" I cried. "Why so long?"

"It is Friday and the hospital laboratory will only open again on Monday," he said softly. I saw a lot of compassion in his eyes just then.

Waiting for news was more unbearable than anything I can ever remember experiencing. Feelings of uncertainty and vulnerability screamed in my head. I knew I was not the first woman in the world to go through this kind of thing. How did they handle it? Suddenly the ripples on the waters of my life became a gusting storm wind that threatened my very existence. I was scared and I did not know how to cope. I was alone and I could not bring myself to phone my loved ones for help. The best I could do was to try and stay positive until I received my test results. I picked up my diary to read about some of the other rivers I had crossed in my life. Some were very deep and dark, but not one of them ever had the feel of death before. I fought their currents with real spirit. A fighter I was since birth. That was how I got to be born first when my little sister tried equally hard to be the first one to see the daylight. Once again, I knew, it was time to do battle with the forces of nature. We all get

stronger with every deep river we cross successfully. I drew a deep breath knowing that deep inside of everybody there is an inner strength. It was time to draw from my well of strength.

13 DECEMBER 1994

It felt as if the events of Friday had occurred months ago. Saturday ... Sunday ... Monday. The days dragged their feet like ancient people in a marathon.

With all the time in the world for thinking, as speculations and thoughts of 'what if ... what then ...?' crowd my mind. Was I ready to face this mountain at such an early age? Not yet, not now, not this. And definitely not at thirty-nine years old! I'll be forty next birthday. Throughout my life I have always been prepared to face anything that came my way, good or bad. But please God keep this away from me. I am just not ready. I feel lost at sea, as if adrift on a life raft in a raging storm.

Without needing anyone to express it in so many words, deep down I knew that this problem could have been far worse than I would have liked to expect. And the insecurity and uncertainty that came from this knowledge, was unbearable. I wanted to run. I wanted to run far and wild and be free - to where I did not know. But one thing I did know was that I did not want to wait to see Death beckoning his hand to me. I yearned to feel the wind in my hair, the sun on my skin.

Since Friday I had been pulling everything I experienced totally out of context. The friendly smile of a nurse became pity I did not want. Not yet! Every time the pain was especially bad, I could hear the messenger of death knocking at my door. I felt negative and over-sensitive to everything the people around me were saying. On the occasions when I tried to talk about my condition, the nurses were all too quick to set my mind at rest. I could not really expect them to understand what I were going through. It was just that they're not allowing me to deal with the reality of facing a possible mastectomy. Would I still be a complete woman if I lost my breast? I became very frustrated that nobody seemed to hear my silent cries for help. 'Strength, where are you!'

With my nerves as tight as a bowstring I lay in my hospital bed listening to the sounds of normality - laughter and joking and crying. The happy sounds offended me in an unreasonable way. Did they not know that my life might be hanging in the

balance? How could they sound so happy, I thought with rising irritation, when so much was at stake? So young and carefree, they just could not know what storm winds were battering my life.

Envy washed over me when fresh banter broke out. Feeling bitterly isolated, I wanted to share the companionship and laughter with them, just to be free of my raging storms for a little while. I needed respite before the gale, that I instinctively awaited, hit me. Suddenly I felt guilty. Those happy pink-faced children were living through their clear weather periods. They were not sharing my storms.

Tuesday morning. The breakfast on the hospital tray looked bleak. I could not swallow a morsel of it as I knew that this day was the day my results from the laboratory would arrive.

In the bathroom I undressed before the mirror. The face looking back was that of a stranger, shockingly pale. That face had the pallor of mortal sickness.

Huge brown eyes with tired, dark smears underneath looked back at me. God knows, I've had little enough sleep since Friday. The mouth had deep chiselled lines framing it. Was this a stranger or had I just not looked very closely lately, perhaps it was something new? The small, white plaster still covered the cut on the side of my left breast. The mounds of white flesh looked so young and proud. I realised that I had never looked at my body like this before, never taken the time to see how exquisitely beautiful God made the female form.

Would I ever see my womanhood like this again? The false cheer and wellbeing that had I forced upon myself during the past few days dropped like a veil. I felt naked and tired and scared. At that moment I knew deep inside that something deadly was growing in the body looking back at me from the mirror. I then cried tears of utter desperation, for I felt tired, afraid and out of control.

Back in my room Dr Evans was waiting. The truth was revealed in his eyes before he said, "It is cancer, Love. We will have to do a mastectomy."

Cancer! His words shocked me to the core. In me shook a bull. The enraged bull, maddened by the red cloth of the matador, rushed with thundering hooves at my chest. My heart pounded furiously in the confounded space of my rib cage. The storm wind had increased its velocity and Dr Evans's voice echoed oddly. I squeezed my eyes shut against the tears of rebellion. Disbe-

Lief mixed with horror and terror washed over me. The current of this God Almighty river was dragging me under. I fought to draw a breath.

Suddenly the game of life had changed. Life as I knew it. Only when death picks you as a partner for his next macabre game, do you realise how very precious life is. Death beckoned to me now and, however cheated I felt, it was time to play him at his game for my life. The fine string between life and death was so very fragile. Would mine be severed or spared?

In my thirty-nine years of life I had grown close to many people who, in their own special ways, have made living beautiful and significant. Now, with my life under threat, I realised how keenly aware I was of them all and how much I loved and needed them. It was time to let Andre know what was happening in and to my life. I was right down on my knees, feeling tired and battered to the depth of my soul. I needed someone to talk to. As my husband, he had the right to know. We have not always seen eye to eye but we had always been there for each other when life did not seem fair. I also had to phone Mom and Dad. Despite knowing that my news would shatter them, I needed them to help me cross this dark river. Dad had always claimed that I was a tough cookie, but right now I do not feel strong enough to do it on my own.

My fear had become a terror that washed over me in waves so strong that I did not have the strength to stay afloat. I felt empty, with no confidence and no resolve. I needed a life raft and realised it was time to make those calls.

18 DECEMBER 1994

What do you know? When I phoned home, Andre's new girlfriend answered the phone! He certainly had not let the grass grow under his feet. They could not have chosen a worse time to do this to me. I needed him now more than ever. He had no right to do this to me, I was his wife, for better or worse. I was being kicked out in the cruelest manner and at the most inappropriate time. Why did this have to happen now? Oh God, why now? Why when I was so vulnerable and alone?

As the house we were living in, was owned by the mines for which Andre worked, I would have had to move out. Andre said he could not allow my cancer to interfere with his new relationship but agreed to keep me on his medical aid until my treatment was over. Big deal!

Suddenly I was very angry at the unfairness of it all. Why did this have to happen to me? I was losing control over my destiny. The results of my surgery were another big concern to me. Would I be horribly scarred? Would I lose my femininity? Although I felt so incredibly alone, the knowledge that I was not alone, that I was not the first woman to suffer this disease and these concerns, gave my anger both form and direction. I would fight back.

I have now learned that the monster living in my breast goes by the name of 'mamma-carcinoma'. Funny, it sounds like the name of a beautiful woman. The next day the doctors would remove her clinging hold from my chest.

After my raging emotional storm earlier, a strange calm had settled over me. My terror took backstage to the concern I felt for my loved ones. Mom and Dad decided I should come and live with them as soon as I was released from hospital. They heard my plea and wanted to walk this rough patch hand in hand with me.

Taking stock of my surroundings earlier, I stole a sidelong glance at the woman sharing the semi-private ward with me. She was weeping softly without a sound. She looked bewildered and lost. During our introduction earlier, I learned that her name was Lorna. She too, was going to undergo a mastectomy the next day. Looking at her, I could see the naked fear in her big, dark eyes. A perfect mirror image of what I was feeling too. A despair so intense that it squeezed at my heart. The morass of which could sink us both. "God, give me enough strength to help us both."

Where were the calm waters of my yesterdays? The storms in my earlier life now seemed like mere ripples on the water. Somehow I knew I was heading into the mother of them all this time. My skies darkened as a black wall of cloud swirled in on me, leaving me reeling under the blows of this storm called 'cancer'. There were no way out but to face the waves that were trying to engulf me. I had to sink or swim. What a terrible waste of a life, before I had had a chance to make something worth-while of it. The thought of it made make me sick. The anger within, which swept over me in uncontrollable waves, seemed the only rational outlet for venting my feelings right then. If nature had decided to put me to the test, then I would have to prove myself. A wind roared angrily in my mind as I tried to find some sunshine in this dark world. I had to concentrate on

being positive. The fight was on and life itself was the prize.

Looking over at Lorna again, the acute empathy I felt for her made me wonder how I could possibly help her. Suddenly I realised that in reaching out, I had found the inner strength that I was searching for. A great calm slowly settled over me as I fought the storm within myself. The roaring of the wind became a breeze and I could clearly see the path marked out for me. I wanted to help other women fight their storms and become survivors.

A bottle of ginger beer that a friend had brought me earlier sat on the bedside locker between us. My friend warned me at visiting time to be sure to drink it before it became too strong to be mixed with medicine. I had thought he was joking.

Thinking it might be a good icebreaker, I offered my fellow patient a glass. "Don't cry, it might not be as bad as you think," I said. "Let's have some ginger beer." She gladly accepted. As I took the bottle-top off, it exploded in my hands and hit the ceiling. My friend had forgotten to warn me that the bottle of ginger beer had been in his hot and sunny car most of the day. There were Lorna, my new cancer-friend, and I sitting on our beds amongst the ruins of the bottle with ginger beer dripping from our hair. We looked at each other and both burst out into uncontrollable laughter with tears streaming down our faces. For Lorna and I it was the first of many shared and healing tears to come. What an icebreaker that was.

The explosion was heard in the nurse's station and brought the sister flying through the door. I just hoped she had a sense of humour. Lucky for us she instantly summed up the situation and joined in the laughter as she changed our bedding and helped us to clean up. She was so obviously born to be a good nurse and the cancer ward certainly discovered a gem when they found her.

Blues dispelled, Lorna and I talked calmly in whispers through most of the night. She told me that she had discovered her 'lump' about 18 months ago while she was showering. Her fear of cancer made her wait until a week ago, when she saw her doctor for the first time about the swelling in her breast. She even hid it from her husband because she was too scared to worry him unnecessarily. She felt such a fool now because she realised full well that her stupid fears may have robbed her and her husband of growing old together. As we talked I was critically aware of the clock on my side table ticking out the

time left to each of us. Do we really have a choice as to how long we live?

I had met Lorna's husband earlier and remember thinking that a love, like the one they share, must be a gift straight from heaven. They were so much in love that I could not help feeling just a little bit envious. My husband could not even spare the time for one visit, not even to tell me that he did not want me as a wife anymore. At times it is very difficult to stay positive and I felt a well of self-pity pushing its way upward. God must have a very special plan for my life to allow this to happen.

While Lorna could not have done it without her loving husband, I realised that I would have to. I would survive.

x x x x

Lorna and I entered into an unforgettably beautiful and deep friendship during those days in hospital. After her mastectomy, Lorna did an incredibly brave thing. She decided not to go for chemotherapy, telling me how she would much rather spend the time she had left with her husband doing 'fun-things'. As she said, chemotherapy is no guarantee that you will live and a cure was far from certain. How could I ask her to rethink her decision and to do something that I was so very afraid to do myself? They went off to Egypt to cruise the Nile in luxury. Her postcards described the whole of a time they were having. When she came back to South Africa, it was clear to see that she was very weak. I did not know whether I wanted to slap her or just fold her into my arms and love her. I opted for the latter. It was her choice to go for quality time instead of quantity. I did not have to agree with her but I had to respect her decision.

Four months later she lost her battle with cancer and died quietly in her husband's arms. I felt a little something of myself dying with her. Lorna squeezed every drop of quality out of life and went to her end bravely and courageously.

When her husband phoned me to give me the sad news, he had one last message from Lorna. She said, "Be sure to thank Marianne for the ginger beer and the laughter. I love her."

Well Lorna, I hope you still enjoy the occasional bottle and laughter on the other side. I shall still share mine with you, girl!

25 DECEMBER 1994

The past week will always be a haze of pain and drugs. However, I cannot fail to mention something unforgettable that happened on the day my mastectomy was done. I met an angel in the form of a nursing sister.

After I was wheeled back from theatre and put into my bed, my body went into severe post anaesthetic shock. My shaking rattled the bed as if it was riding an earthquake. The attending sister's eyes widened and she asked me what was wrong. I tried to answer but my jaw was locked in a vice while the spasms shuddered through my body. I tried to scream but my voice was made ragged by the convulsions. As the next convulsion tore through my body the sister grasped what was happening. She kicked off her shoes and jumped into my bed, holding my body in a fierce embrace with her arms and legs. The shaking slowly subsided and she could let go of me. She smartly slipped out of my bed and straightened her crumpled uniform as she stepped back into her shoes without saying a word.

Now that went far beyond the call of duty. She had saved my life with her loving embrace for my blood pressure was still too low for me to be given any drugs. There are truly angels living mortal lives among us.

Dr Evans told me a few days previously that my cancer was then already about five years old and into stage three-four. He wanted to start with my chemotherapy early in the new year. I don't know if Lorna was braver or if I was more of a fighter, but I wanted to have that chemotherapy in order to stand the chance of a longer life.

1 JANUARY 1995

I was allowed to leave hospital with a suction pump still attached to my chest. I was very weak when I arrived home and went straight to bed. This New Year certainly had not started very well for me, I thought as I lay in bed and morbid self-pity tried to engulf me. The storm winds still occasionally rage in my mind but somehow I feel strong enough to deal with them.

In five day's time I had to go back to hospital for a check-up with Dr Evans. He would decide then when to start me on chemotherapy. I did not want to think any negative thoughts at

this stage and made up my mind to do the most positive thing of which I was capable. And that was to haul my butt right out of bed to spend some quality time with Mom and Dad.

I found them in the lounge, talking in whispers. The anxiety was in their fingers holding tightly onto each other. I was not crossing this river alone at all. They were going through very deep waters with me, every step of the way.

5 JANUARY 1995

I was back in hospital! When Dr Evans examined me the disappointment was written clearly all over his face when he discovered big lumps in my right breast. He asked me if I would like to go home to consider another mastectomy, or stay and let him proceed immediately. Despair cramped the muscles of my belly. I felt like crying out my protest against this further cruel twist of fate. I prevented the cry from escaping my lips and straightened my shoulders.

"Doctor, if I was your wife, what would you want me to do?" I asked, searching his face for clues.

"I'll book the theatre for tomorrow morning," he replied. Well, I could hardly have hoped for a more direct answer.

In the waiting room I found my Dad with a big, but oh so sweet, false smile. One look at my face set his bottom lip trembling. He knew the news was not good but did not want to ask before I was ready to tell him. I had to dig very deeply for the courage to tell him of this latest blow. We went to the hospital cafeteria and looked for a table that could accommodate my wheelchair.

Over coffee I shared my news with him as gently as I could. Dad was never one to carry his feelings on his sleeve, but that was beginning to change. He grunted like a boxer taking a blow in the face. His love and concern were naked in the well of tears in his green eyes as he left me to be booked into a ward. He went home to fetch an overnight bag for me and to tell Mom the disturbing news.

I were very worried about Dad. He was a miner and had been working murderous shifts on permanent night duty. He wanted to be available for me when I needed to go to hospital or for treatment. We lived an hour's drive away from the hospital and on the way in this morning he fell sound asleep behind the steering wheel. As the car left the road I cried out and he

jerked awake. That was a close call. I prayed in earnest for his safety.

19 JANUARY 1995

I was still recovering from my second mastectomy. It was a wise decision not to have wasted time. The cancer in my right breast was even further advanced than that on the left side. Well, at least I won't have to go lopsided for the rest of my life.

Chemotherapy was started yesterday and I was feeling very nauseous and brittle. It felt like the slightest jar to my body would cause me to break into countless pieces. I spent the day on my bed with a bucket close at hand. Nothing would stay down long enough to touch sides, not even water. All day long I fought back the waves of nausea that swept over me.

When I finally managed to drag myself out of bed to join the family, the look on Mom and Dad's faces tore at my heart. They were trying so hard to conceal their anxiety from me with too bright, too quick smiles and banal chatter. I wished with my whole heart that I did not have to lay this burden on them. If only I could put away their fears. They did not deserve this.

25 JANUARY 1995

When I got out of bed, half of my hair had stayed behind me on the pillow. My horrified screams brought Mom on the run. She tried to calm me down by finger combing the rest of my hair over the bald spots but big clumps of it came out in her hands.

Heartbroken, I started crying and her sobs joined mine as she held me and rocked me like a very young child. While a river of tears flowed between us I could not help but recall the cuts and bruises that were kissed better in exactly the same fashion when I was growing up. Once again I was that young child, standing on the threshold of a big and sometimes very scary life. I don't think she will ever realise how much I needed her arms around me at that moment.

Dad took me into the city for more chemotherapy and afterwards we went shopping for a scarf to cover my head. I could not afford any of the ones I liked. I never knew a scarf could be so expensive. He said he would foot the bill and not to worry about the cost. I tried to ease Dad out of the shop by pretend-

ing that I did not need the headgear for my eventual state of health. Dad was far too wise to fall for that stunt. He promptly dragged me back and said I should choose one or he would do so. Knowing his good taste, I was only too happy to leave the choice to him. At least this way I wouldn't accidentally break his budget. He chose a beautiful, white linen scarf with silver thread woven into the fabric. The saleslady helped us to wrap it turban-like around my head before we left the shop. My voice was hoarse with tears as I thanked him for his tender and perceptive attention to my needs. He could not really spare the money he had so generously paid to give me the self-confidence he knew I badly needed. 'Oh Dad, I love you. I desperately wish that I did not have to place this financial burden upon you and Mom.' His tears shone as brightly as the silver in my scarf.

The horror of losing my hair had been surprisingly far worse than the loss of my breasts. I was however promised by my oncologist that my hair would grow back better than ever in the not-too-distant future.

Outside the sun was shining brightly and glittering sparks flew from the silver in my new scarf. My smile reached from ear to ear and I felt very happy indeed. My self-confidence was right back.

With a sparkle in his eyes Dad said: "Let's go and try our luck at the Cancer Society. Someone told me they gave wigs to chemo-patients."

What a brilliant idea. We found the address with ease and were let into a room full of wigs. We were told to take our time to select the one I liked. I fancied a long blond one but Dad said it made me look like a dumb blonde. He selected a shoulder-length auburn style for me and it really suited me well. The lady from the cancer society agreed with Dad's choice and so I became a redhead.

6 APRIL 1995

I was very weak. I no longer felt as if I am crossing this river, but more as if the river was carrying me. Every time I went for chemotherapy it felt as if I was plunged into a whirlpool that was sucking the life from me. I walked in death's shadow daily, wondering how long I would be able to keep my head above the flow of this God Almighty river that was chosen for me. At this stage I realised how close to final exhaustion I was.

'I must be strong now. If I am not, I will be sucked into the quicksand, never to draw another breath.' The looks on Mom and Dad's faces were willing me to fight each day and to live. I dared not disappoint them. I have to try. It is time to draw from my inner strength and start swimming. With a gut-swooping rush I felt the fight in me return with strength.

29 JULY 1995

The last six months saw my weight dropping alarmingly. I used to weigh 65kg. The cancer has gnawed the flesh off my bones until I now drew the scale to only 32kg. This morning I saw Dr Evans for more chemotherapy, but after he weighed me he decided not to continue the treatment. He said my body could take no more. He looked very apologetic when he said that when all else failed, cancer could sometimes go into spontaneous remission.

I felt angry at the knowledge that all I had risked and suffered was now to be in vain. Nothing I have experienced in life prepared me for this moment. I was scared. I did not know how to die. But my friend Dr Evans had made a gut decision. I was sent off with armloads full of medication, as there was simply nothing more they could do for me except to monitor the growth of the cancer and to keep me as pain free as they possibly could.

The medical profession was now done with me and my safety raft was gone. It was time for me to tackle this river alone, in one last gigantic battle. Reaching deep down for purpose and strength within myself, I am surprised to find enough left to tide me through this war. Enough positive thinking might just see me through. It was the only weapon I had left.

10 AUGUST 1995

Mom and Dad secretly held a serious discussion about the future. The outcome was that he would take early retirement and they would look after me for as long as it took. They were going to buy a house in the country where the skies were open and the morning alarm was the singing of birds. Dad said that would be my best chance of survival.

x x x x

The months slipped by and a house was found and purchased in Oviston, a tiny village on the shores of Lake Gariep.

After the horror of chemotherapy, I could honestly say that I was starting to feel better every day. I had gained a little weight and my head had started sprouting a fluffy growth.

Moving-day had finally arrived. With Mom and Dad up front, I shared the back seat with the family dog, Lucy, as we took to the road and to our new future.

MARCH 1996

Oviston. To the outsider my expression must have appeared very solemn as I looked upon Oviston for the first time. I was almost silent and my face carried the scars of untold suffering. Deep furrows creased the corners of my mouth and purple smudges underlined my eyes. This was certainly the place to recuperate. As I looked upon the quiet village and its peaceful lake I instantly knew deep in my being that it would be here that I would find life again. With the excitement of old, revived, I could feel renewed strength rising within me.

The peace and quiet of the village and the lake had entered my soul and I wanted to live more than I have ever wanted to do anything in my life. I decided to live one precious day at a time. I dared to hope.

DECEMBER 1996

Today I celebrated the victory of my life. The suffering of cancer has taught me how to appreciate love to the fullest and how to live with joy. Life cannot be taken for granted for it is a privilege. To live deeply is to know love in its purest form. My celebration was one of life and love. The cancer unit in our nearest city called it 'spontaneous remission' and the three of us had reason to celebrate. We had weathered the previous two years with courage and laughter. The love and care was the best gift my parents could ever have given me.

15 JULY 1997

I went to the cancer unit this morning. It was time for my six-monthly check-up. I had suffered a lot from insomnia lately for fear that my remission might not hold. Now that my health was

back on track, I was terrified that it could all prove to be only temporary.

First, my blood was drawn for testing to see if any cancer cells were present. After that, it was time for a bone scan before my liver came under the eye of the camera as well.

It was lunch time before the oncologist could fit me into her busy schedule and I was shaking when I steered my wheelchair into her examination room. As she scanned through my test results it seemed like ages before she looked up and smiled. "Still in the clear, I see."

'Oh God,' I thought, I've never heard sweeter words in my life. It certainly looked like I might live. I said as much and her laughter joined mine. Life, the one thing that we all take so much for granted until it is suddenly threatened, was mine again to enjoy to the fullest for the next six months. Until the time would come for my next check up. I didn't suppose I would ever grow accustomed to this routine or that I would take life for granted again.

There was, however, something else. The doctor asked me if I would mind her calling a friend of hers, a man who had had wonderful success with spinal injuries, to have a look at my back. I could not refuse her offer and so came to meet a professor who would play a very important role in my story.

After a preliminary examination, I was promptly booked into a ward in the spinal unit for a battery of tests the next day. I was not holding my breath because I had seen so many doctors over the past few years and they had all agreed that I would never walk again. I had accepted my fate and life in a wheelchair did not bother me the way it did in the beginning.

Dad did not take me in to hospital this time because Trui van Antwerp, our neighbour, was the local ambulance driver. I had taken to catching a lift with her because we live two-and-a-half hours away from the hospital and I was afraid that my ongoing treatment had put much strain on my dear old Dad's bank balance. I phoned home to tell them not to expect me for a few days.

Dad answered the phone and was ecstatic to hear that I am still clear of cancer. When I told him of the new development, he wanted to know if he should take a quick drive in to bring me an overnight bag. I felt very loved as my one hand held the open back of my hospital attire together. "No Dad, I will be absolutely fine," I said near to tears. At that moment I wished

there could be a way for me to show him how very much I loved and appreciated him.

17 JULY 1997

Home again! Two gruelling days of tests were behind me and things were looking up. The professor had said that the prognosis were not good for me to ever walk again, but he was going to do an operation that would relieve me of a lot of the pain I suffer constantly. His words sounded like heaven to me because the pain was often far more disabling than being in a wheelchair.

He explained the frequently burning pain in my lower back that radiates into the buttocks as follows. "This was caused by your previous back operation and the injury afterwards. When you suffered epileptic seizures, because you were not wearing a back brace, and the flexion and extension of the spine could be the cause of this type of injury. You have evidence of progressing neurological deficit (muscle weakness and atrophy, loss of sensory and motor function, loss of sphincter control, continuing pain and sciatica. The objective of surgery is to relieve pressure on the nerve root in order to relieve the pain."

It all sounded very confusing to me but I must say that he tried very hard to explain exactly what was going on in my back. If anyone could do something for me, I was sure he was the right man for the job.

"Disc excision can leave adhesions and scarring around the spinal nerves and dura mater, which then produce inflammatory changes that can create chronic neuritis and neurofibrosis. Disk surgery may relieve pressure on the spinal nerves, but it does not reverse the effects of neural injury and scarring and the pain that ensues. There will always be pain, but maybe not as severe as now."

Prof explained that this would be a very lengthy operation and he would need the theatre for most of the day. I was sent home to wait for his phone call to let me know when he could operate.

Mom and Dad were as hopeful as I was and we were going to keep our fingers crossed that the outcome of the surgery would grant more quality of life for me.

29 JULY 1997

It is my birthday today and I could not have had a better present even if the queen came to dinner. Prof never called, but when I came home from church the ambulance was waiting at the door to take me to hospital. The theatre had been booked for the day after the next. Thank heavens my bags were packed and ready to go.

There was just enough time for a hasty goodbye before the wheelchair and I were bundled aboard. The waiting was over, I thought as I settled back to catch some 'shut eye'. I had the whole of the back of the ambulance to myself as we sped through the night on this journey.

8 AUGUST 1997

The surgery was a major success. Prof and his team spent nine hours in theatre rebuilding the damage to my spine. It was late night when I woke up after the surgery and Prof was sitting next to my bed with a grin that threatened to split his face in half.

"You are going to walk again," were his first words to me. I honestly cannot recall anything else of the conversation that followed. My heart was too full. I can only remember the joy of the moment.

Prof had a special hard corset made for me and I was fitted with it today. It reached over my shoulders and all the way down to my hips. It would be my second skin for at least the next six months and I was only allowed to take it off to be bathed while lying on my back.

The physiotherapist also came to see me, to plan my exercising programme. We were to start the following day. All my fingers and my toes were moving and I felt a growing impatience to be let out of bed. The next day could not come quick enough.

30 OCTOBER 1997

Once again it was time to celebrate. Mom, Dad and I stood in a tight circle raising our glasses and toasting the wheelchair that could now go into storage. According to the doctors it was another miracle that had brought us to this celebration.

After nine hours of spinal surgery in July, by a professor

who believed he could help me, the wheels of my total recovery were set into motion.

It took three very difficult months in hospital to teach me to use forgotten muscles. I first had to learn how to crawl before I could be taught to walk again. But it was not all bad. We had our laughs as well.

One evening, during visiting hours, a fellow patient's little son non-chalantly angled over to my bed. He pointed a finger at my brace and whispered, "And what is that?" I crooked my finger to signal him to come closer and said in a stage whisper, "I can only tell you if you promise never to tell anybody else. It is a very big secret." His eyes widened saucer-like and with rapid head motions he made the oath. I looked at him warningly and said, "I am a real Ninja turtle and nobody else knows." His eyes flew open even wider as he clasped his grubby little hand over his mouth to prevent the squeal from breaking loose.

It came as no surprise to me that for the rest of his mother's stay in hospital, my little friend appeared next to my bed every night as soon as the bell announced visiting hour. I will never forget the delightful glitter in his eyes to have befriended a real life Ninja turtle.

I would still be in the brace for at least the next three months but it felt incredibly good to be standing on my own two feet. I had a vision of only calm stretches of water waiting for me in the future.

Times ahead looked rosy and we were very positive as we drained our glasses.

**PART TWO**

*Have you been to the place  
where the sun comes up,  
or to the place  
from which the east wind blows?*

**- Job 38: 24 -**



1 JANUARY 1998

It's the start of a brand new year and it was time to take stock. I was still jobless and without any money of my own. This year I would have had to change that. Now, after my mammoth battle against the cancer that knocked me off my feet for nearly four years, it was time to start thinking of joining the workforce again. Oviston is basically a retirement village and there was simply no work to be had. I had been a journalist and a photographer for the previous seventeen years of my working life but I simply lacked the strength to return to such a demanding job.

During the previous few months I had strengthened my body with long walks in the nature reserve that surrounds the village. It was soul healing to get up early and be out in the veld when the sun came up. The fish eagles rented the sky with their first cries and the game animals headed down to the water for their first drink of the day. The lake stretched out before me, endless and blue, to meet purple mountains on the horizon. Fish were jumping in lazy arcs flashing their silver bodies in the morning sun.

Fishing had also become one of the delights of my life in Oviston. I did it to strengthen the muscles in my back, but was soon totally hooked. After joining the local fishing club, I have walked off with the first prize on occasion.

While recovering I also took up painting and have loved it. It was towards the end of 1996 that Dad, who was always very good at drawing, kindled my interest. I caught him sitting in the garage drawing umbrella-thorn trees and baboons. They looked so realistic that I asked him if he had the patience to teach me to draw as well. It seemed a wonderful way to express your inner feelings without words. Dad handed me a pencil and paper and drew up a chair for me. We spent many happy hours drawing pencil sketches before I was ready to add some colour to my creations. I had no paints, so I raided Mom's kitchen cupboards for all the bottles of cake colouring I could find. Dad's art box had an extra paintbrush that I did not think he would miss, and I was ready to start painting. The utter mess I made of those first pieces of 'art' was an embarrassing secret I kept to myself and I disposed of them very carefully. No one ever knew what I was up to before the cake colourant and paintbrush were discovered to be missing. By then my first 'paintings'

did not look half so bad, so I admitted my guilt and showed them my flower paintings. Mom got her cake colourant back and Dad gave me some half-used tubes of oil paints to try out.

I made miniature paintings and glued them onto stiff folded paper ... my first greeting cards were ready for sale. Those sales led to a few local commissions for small paintings. Soon I had made enough money to purchase acrylic paints and a variety of paintbrushes. I also received a few ostrich eggs from one of the local farmers who said I should try and paint on them. I tried and was quite surprised when they sold almost immediately. The next delightful surprise came in the form of a letter from a Bloemfontein businessman. He ordered five of my painted eggs as Christmas presents for his family in England. I soon decided it was time to test the bigger competitive market and made up my mind to give the Grahamstown National Arts Festival a try. Perhaps ... I hoped ... I could make a living from art.

x x x x

Blood, sweat and tears followed my decision. I worked long, hard days for six months until it was time for the Grahamstown Arts Festival. The town was filled to capacity but I found a room to rent at one of the school hostels.

I will never forget my first sales. Sunflowers were the craze and, as luck would have it, most of my eggs had sunflowers painted on them. Sales on the first day alone paid for all my expenses in Grahamstown. I started feeling like an artist and began looking around at the other festival stalls. One stand in particular had me mesmerised. It was decked out in Bushman art on eggs, on paper, on wood and on stone. As I chatted to the creator of the art I fell in love with the life and past existence of the little yellow men, whose history was so beautifully told in the paintings. I was so enthralled that I knew from that moment on that I wanted to do Bushman art and nothing else.

Ten days later, I returned to Oviston with enough money to buy paint, brushes and art paper. I set to work in earnest. Mom wondered whether I was not wasting my time because she was not convinced that she liked my new style. Bushman art! Dad, on the other hand, thought it was very good and even put some shelves up in the laundry, which doubled up as my studio, for my paints and brushes.

Six months later I had my first 'exhibition' of my Bushman

art in the Dias Museum in Mossel Bay. There I gained exposure to a number of foreign tourists. One German gentleman bought the egg I had been painting at the exhibition while the paint was still wet. He simply stuck his finger in the hole at the bottom and started blowing on the paint to dry it, so that his purchase could be packed. An American gift shop owner bought all my hand-painted bushman cards for resale in his country. On the last day of the exhibition, the owner of the Feathers Gallery in Den Haag bought out all the stock I had left for distribution in Europe. Her husband, who is a book publisher in Den Haag, asked if I would like to write and illustrate a book on Bushman art and culture as he was greatly interested in publishing such a book. It was tempting but I had to pass by the offer because I did not have a car to do the necessary research for such a book. I would have needed to visit all the sites of the original paintings to have the authority to write honestly about them. It was a pity, but maybe one day I would be equal to the task.

By the end of 1998 I was living on my own again. I was lucky enough to obtain the house across the road from Mom and Dad rent free. I only had to pay the rates and taxes and my municipal bill. Its huge workshop was fantastic I was now working very hard. Mostly I painted ostrich eggs that I got from farmers in the area. You can just imagine how many got broken because my epilepsy was still a daily fact of life. But the most important thing was that I was on my own feet again and loving it.

I began to specialise in Bushman Art and started to receive recognition from outside the borders of South Africa. Buyers from gift shops in America, Australia, Spain, France, Holland and England came on board ordering small paintings, cards and painted ostrich eggs.

Only one thing was needed to make me happier. And that was someone with whom to share my joys and my tears. God did not create woman or man to walk their lives alone. He made them to share in His beautiful creation, hand in hand. I could not help asking myself if I was ready for that special someone to share my life. I had a firm belief that one day love would come into my life again. And perhaps then I would be ready to receive it.

It seemed that life had returned to normal at last. There was not a ripple to stir the calm waters of my life and I remembered a promise I had made myself years earlier. One thing that I wanted with all my heart was to do something in order

to help breast cancer-victims world wide and help them to realise that they still had the strength to think positively and live. I wanted them to be aware of the healing power of positive thinking. That they need not remain victims but that a positive mind could help them become survivors. I needed to tell my story and reach out to as many ears as I could.

8 SEPTEMBER 2001

Again there were purple storm clouds on the horizon. Dad collapsed this morning. After Mom's frenzied phone call to me I wasted no time getting to their house.

There he was sitting on a chair completely paralysed on his left side. He said that he must have suffered a stroke. I looked at his dear face and knew instinctively that something far worse was wrong. I asked Mom to make us a cup of coffee to get her out of the room.

"Dad, I think this might possibly be a brain tumour," I said.

"Don't talk rubbish. Just now your mother hears that. It's only a stroke," he replied

I was insistent. "Daddy, your face is not affected by the paralysis. That rules out a stroke. I am taking you to hospital right now."

I saw in his eyes that he knew I was right. Mom was still in the kitchen when I told her to leave the coffee and pack a bag for Dad. I ran across the road to ask a neighbour to help us to get Dad into the car and to lock my house.

All road rules were broken as I drove to our nearest casualty unit. Fear and apprehension rendered Mom quiet as she held on tightly on to his hand.

By nightfall Dad was diagnosed with advanced lung cancer. There were metastases in the brain that had caused the paralysis.

Suddenly the storm was raging and we were reeling under the blows. Nature had decided to test us again. This time, I realised, the storm could rip Dad away from us.

25 SEPTEMBER 2001

We brought Dad home today. There was nothing more they could do for him. Now it was our turn to give him all the caring and loving, we were able to give. He would not go back to hospital.

Dad put up a very brave face. On the way home, he even insisted that we stop at the store so he could buy us a drink. Maybe he knew it was the last time he'd be able to do that.

We would cross this river with him, holding his hand all the way.

20 NOVEMBER 2001

It was with mixed feelings that I wrote in my diary today, sadness and joy. Two weeks ago my dear old Dad lost his battle against cancer. My heart still sobbed with the terrible sadness of losing him.

While America came under terrorist attacks, with planes crashing into the twin towers and bombs exploding, the same thing was happening in our lives. Our existence was ripped apart with Dad dying right before our eyes. We felt so helpless not to be able to save him from the pain and distress that came with dying from cancer.

Over the weeks as Dad grew steadily weaker, I was surprised at my ability to be so strong, for Mom, for my sisters and for the rest of the family. They all sensed the strength in me and that comforted and helped them through this difficult time. It was my own experience of what it was like to live with cancer that gave me the compassion to be a pillar for Dad and the ones I loved. Mom leaned heavily in her time of greatest need and I felt so very privileged to have been there to offer loving arms to comfort and protect her. I was proud to be in a position to return the love she had lavished on me when I crossed my darkest, deepest river.

I was thankful that Mom and I could nurse him at home until the end. We smothered him with all the love and caring that came so easy to him in his nearly seventy years on earth. He silently slipped away to better pastures in the early morning of 6 November.

I hope I repaid just a little bit of my debt to my wonderful father. I will always love you and hold you dearly in my heart Daddy. Here's to you, Hermias Basson, you were a great man!

7 DECEMBER 2001

Today I did something that I never thought I would ever do again. I went on a date. I met a man two weeks ago at the local bowling club. After the game, there was always a small gathering for a drink, and there he was. Terry Gallagher is a big man, with eyes blue enough to make you think of mountains on distant horizons. There was a sense of excitement about him. His movements were those of a powerful predator who was aware that my voice became husky with extreme shyness as my stomach made a quick flip when he spoke to me. Feeling self-conscious, I crossed my arm over my chest and lifted my chin. It was time to put my theory to the test, that breasts did not make a woman!

After the initial how-are-yous and who-are-yous, Terry began to tell me about his canoeing trips on the Lake. He spoke with so much enthusiasm that I was mesmerised. It sounded fascinating and free and wild. It seemed totally naturally for him to invite me on a trip across the water. I accepted the invitation as my heart beat wildly. As I used his given name for the first time we were both acutely aware of each other. I dared not tell him that I have never canoed in my entire life before.

When Terry picked me up, early that morning, there were two canoes on the trailer. Pandam is a handsome little Canadian single canoe, and Langberg, a bigger double Canadian.

At the water's edge, he helped me into Pandam and pushed me off before following in Langberg with his dog, Tazz, sitting on the bow like the captain of the ship. Crossing the lake Terry kept up a steady line of conversation while I battled with the paddle and Pandam zigzagged under me. I thanked my lucky stars that the lake was as smooth as a fishpond with not a breath of wind in the air. I simply had no idea how to steer a canoe, but thought I would look stupid if I asked. I watched Terry's motions closely in an attempt to learn as much as I could about handling a canoe, but became no wiser.

Reaching the far shore, I was too tired to get out of the canoe. Terry noticed. "You should not pull yourself across the water using your paddle. Whilst one arm must pull, the other arm must push," he said, while he demonstrated the motion to me. Huffing and puffing like a puff adder, I thought he had left it a little late to offer me that advice!

We shared our picnic breakfast as ducks paddled around,

occasionally diving for fish. Lake Gariop stretched out like a giant mirror and the distant mountains disappeared into a haze of purple. It looked like a finely painted watercolour. The tranquil beauty of the scenery was a perfect mirror image of the quiet content I felt inside. I hoped this was a vision of things to come. I've had so many stormy waters in my life up to now, I wanted to grasp the utter peace and tranquility with both hands and apply it to my own life. I dared to hope that the storms were behind me. Life seemed very precious just then.

By mid-morning, we headed back to Ovis-ton. I was delighted to see how much easier it was to paddle with just a little know-how. As Terry helped me out of the canoe, his hand brushed mine. The shock of it spread through my body like ripples on a pond. Perhaps I've been on my own for far too long. When I was alone again, that familiar and aching loneliness returned to me stronger than ever.

25 DECEMBER 2001

Terry's enthusiasm for canoeing was infectious. In only three short weeks, Terry, Tazz, Pandam and Langberg had become a fixture in my life. I keep thinking of Terry during those most unlikely moments. By now, Tazz was completely comfortable with me on the water and he often joined me in Pandam, with his bushy, white tail curved high.

Hardly a day went by that the three of us did not take to the water, paddling to new discoveries. My newfound strength and energy has kindled a fire deep inside me. Not only could I now match Terry's strokes on the water for many kilometres, but our hearts have begun to beat as one. This was something I should not have chanced just yet but I was acutely aware that we were falling in love. But I was also very aware of his reserve.

A few days previously, I had entrusted Terry with my darkest secret. I knew that the longer I waited, the more difficult it would become to tell Terry about my cancer and the fact that I do not have breasts. He listened silently, without a word while I talked. He certainly knew how to respect achievement. The darling man did not even look shocked. He just said, "If it does not bother you, why should it affect me?"

I felt such a strange mixture of utter relief and happiness, I wanted to cry. Why did I ever think that my mastectomies could prevent me from loving a man again? I was still a woman,

with all my womanly desires and femininity intact. My breasts did not alone comprise my womanhood. My experience with cancer had made me a stronger woman. With that revelation and newfound sense of wellbeing I were beginning to believe enough in my own strength and confidence to start looking out for new challenges. A feeling of celebration had begun to bubble up from deep inside of me: a celebration for my physical strength, for new companionship, and for the strength of mind and body I had acquired while crossing my rivers. Life itself was a celebration!

During a conversation this afternoon, Terry came up with a very bright idea. "Why don't we go on a canoeing trip on the Orange River?" he asked. "We could find someone to put us into the river at Aliwal North, and then we can paddle to the Van der Kloof dam."

I laughed, "You must be pulling my leg. I have never been on a river in a canoe before. Rivers are dangerous places to go and they play with small boats!"

He grinned wickedly and took me to his garage, where he had maps of the area pinned on the wall. "This is where we will start," he said as his finger traced the paper river.

"Are you serious?" I asked, the smile disappearing from my face.

He was still smiling when he turned around, his eyes twinkling. "Do you think you could handle a challenge like that?"

I wanted to think about it first, but I felt the familiar old excitement at any new challenge rising within. I had always loved a challenge. "Are you daring me?"

"I think I am," he said, returning to the map. It required all my concentration to follow the plan he had laid out. Terry's enthusiasm fascinated me and I found myself wishing that the magic of the moment would never end.

It would be a real challenge for me, because there was white water on those rivers and I were a complete novice. The closest I had ever come to white-water rafting, was seeing it done on TV. The proposed trip challenged us to plus minus 400 kilometres of river canoeing and two big dams between the starting and finishing points.

The river would push us most of the way, while the flat water on the dams would be harder going. This was the kind of challenge that was tailor made for me and I felt my excitement rising to great heights.

1 JANUARY 2002

We had decided to do it! Since Christmas day we had talked about nothing else but our proposed canoe trip down the Orange and I was carried on a happy tide of events that simply seemed to make the decisions for me. There was a strong feeling of camaraderie between us as we planned the venture. It was just so lovely to have someone by my side to help make decisions that might affect my life. I listened to him talking about the trip and his visions for the future, and loved every second of it. Our friendship was growing fast into the kind of love that could have had a future. I so wanted these moments to last forever that I nearly made a fool of myself by proposing a longer trip. Being so close to Terry, had recaptured emotions in me that I believed long gone. I wanted to share this trip with him as fiercely as I ever wanted anything in my life before. If nothing else, I wanted at least this. Consumed by my own curiosity, everything I did was informed by an urge to experience more and to know more about this man.

We spoke through most of the previous night, bringing us closer in spirit, but each keeping a reserved distance from the other. Terry had warned me that the Orange River had a reputation of being one of the most fearsome rivers in South Africa. That did not scare me too much, with this guy at my side I trusted implicitly in a good outcome.

There would be much preparation before we left. Our first consideration was for a back-up person, someone who would put us in the water at Aliwal North and with whom we could stay in cell phone contact along the way.

After some serious discussion, we came to the decision that Oviston based Ollie Botha would be our best choice. He agreed instantly. Ollie is not usually one for participating in ventures of this magnitude, but he would love to be part of it from the sideline.

We would need a lot of supplies that we did not have. A tent, sleeping bags and special clothing were only a few of the items on our long list of needs. Once into our discussion, I offered to try and find some sponsors. Our venture had become so important to me that I would go about begging, with my hat in my hand if need be.

Terry said that we should leave by the middle of April, otherwise the night temperatures would drop too low for us to be

sleeping in a tent on the river banks. He also suggested that I should get a lot fitter for a journey as long as the one we had planned.

This trip was finally starting to feel real to me. Terry's suggestion that we combined canoeing with hiking and camping in all weather conditions as part of our training sounded good to me. We left on a three-day camping trip the day after the next.

7 JANUARY 2002

We were back, and our first 'training-session' was a rather overwhelming experience for me. We left Oviston just after dawn on our camping-come-canoeing trip. The sky was awash with colour as we paddled hard.

After canoeing for about six hours we decided to set up camp in a protected little bay. As it was still early, Terry suggested a short hike and we set off to climb the koppie behind our campsite.

The grass brushed my bare legs as I strode out to keep on Terry's heels. I suddenly heard a muffled hissing at my feet and looked down. My right foot was about one centimetre away from the head of a fully-grown and very angry puff adder. I froze. As she recoiled to strike, I came out of my stupor and kicked. She sunk her fangs into the steel toe of my walking boot. This saved my life!

I have never jumped so far or so high in my entire life, but the next moment I was airborne with the blood-curling scream of 'PUFF-ADDER' on my lips.

Terry still swears that I landed on his shoulders and tried to ride him like a wild horse through the long grass.

Hogwash! I was quite composed again after about ten minutes and insisted that he escort me back to camp. There I found the sherry bottle and gave it some serious attention. The hiking could wait for another day.

I cannot help feeling that this was one of those rare instances where mortal danger got a definite kick in the backside because a higher power was looking out for me!

10 JANUARY 2002

Tom Dean, Terry's cousin from England, had arrived a few days previously. I was quite nervous to meet the first of Terry's relatives, but what a delight Tom turned out to be. They had not

seen each other since childhood, so they had a lot of catching-up to do. So that has given me time to start looking for sponsors.

Every company I called listened to my plea and then asked me to send a fax to tell them why I thought they should sponsor us. Of course they all wanted to know what was in it for them. At times I felt like a beggar but I pushed through the long list of possible sponsors. I was definitely not going to be put off by my own embarrassment.

I now began to wonder if it was my shyness or Terry's reserved nature that stopped us from crossing the bridge of friendship to declaration of love. Now that he knew all about the turmoil in my recent past, perhaps he was waiting for me to show him that I was ready to take the next step. I sensed that he was the kind of man who would do nothing before his feelings had naturally matured enough to move to the next level. We are both old enough to know that love was not something that you can switch on and off at will. I knew and appreciate that he respects the fact that I was still very vulnerable. I, on the other hand, had no idea how I would cope with the intimacy that was such a natural part of loving someone.

12 JANUARY 2002

Today the penny dropped. There were so many angry rivers in my past, so many dark waters, that I had no choice but to cross them. It was my destiny and my test to prepare me for what I was going to do from now on.

It was on 18 December 1994 that I first knew there was a path to walk marked out for. Memories whisked me back over the years to that night. The pain and fear in Lorna's dark eyes, as real as if it were yesterday, removed the barrier of seven years in that moment. I had felt acute empathy with her, my fellow breast cancer-victim. I remember having an all-consuming need to reach out and help her cope with her fears. That was the night I knew I wanted to do something to help other women fight their storms.

Over the years that followed, I had often reached out to women who suffered the same fate as I did. It was deeply satisfying to see a spark of hope in eyes that only a short time before held nothing but naked fear and despair. I wanted to share my experience with more women, to help them to think positively and live, not to remain victims but to become survivors.

My mind was made up. I was wilfully going to take on the battle with this river of rivers, 'the mighty Orange', for every woman in the world who suffered from breast cancer. Once I had conquered the Orange, I would write my story about both the mighty rivers and take it to the media. I would dedicate this trip to all those beautiful, feminine ladies out there who had been unfortunate enough to have lost a breast. Lorna, I would take with me in my heart, every step of the way.

To the companies, who were prepared to sponsor us, I would promise free advertising in the media. With that decision made, I started phoning magazines, newspapers and radio stations. Most newspapers wanted us to talk to only them and no one else. After explaining why we needed as much media coverage of our venture as possible, they came around and promised their support.

13 JANUARY 2002

I faxed mountains of 'beg-letters' to companies today. Many of the people I spoke to thought we were absolutely crazy to take on such a dangerous venture. Some even told me straight to my face that they would not help us kill ourselves by sponsoring us. Well, there was nothing to do now but wait for some positive replies. We have our fingers crossed.

14 JANUARY 2002

Cousin Tom accompanied Terry and me for a hike near Bethulie Bridge today. We could not let up on the training, so Tom simply had to tag along.

Tom and Terry were walking some ten metres in front of me when they must have frightened a reed buck that had been feeding behind a low tree. Thinking that the danger has passed, she jumped out of hiding and missed my nose by millimetres.

Terry, with his dry English humour, said the terror on my face as the buck brushed my nose would have made 'National Geographic' magazine if anybody had bothered to raise their cameras, and fixed it on Tom with a stiff stare. Tom and I thought it was hilarious and had the giggles for the rest of the afternoon.

Observing the close companionship that Tom and Terry shared, my single state was brought home to me again. It had never really disturbed me too much to be on my own, but I had begun

to feel a desperate need to have someone to share the ups and downs of life with me. Perhaps I was finally ready to take the next step.

30 JANUARY 2002

The 'Rapport' Sunday newspaper now called me 'The Cancer Woman who bares the Orange'. They picked up the story of me dedicating the trip to breast cancer-victims all over the world. When the story was published, I tasted my first minor success.

Other newspapers soon came aboard and our story was told and re-told all over the media. Just the publicity we needed to make a few recipients of my 'beg-letters' take notice and respond. Hurrah!

Helpful members of the media fraternity now included 'Radio Orange', 'Radio Algoa', 'The Barkley East Reporter', 'Volksblad', 'Sunday Times', 'Alival Weekblad' and 'Rapport'. We could not thank them enough.

20 FEBRUARY 2002

We recently completed a six-day training trip around the islands in the lake, combining rock-climbing, camping and 'all-weather-canoeing'. I had always wondered how I would fare in really rough weather on the lake. I soon found out.

The morning we left Oviston, there was not a ripple on the water and the islands were all perfect upside down reflections. Looking around me, I thought how God could not have made this world more perfectly beautiful. An intoxicating joy for life settled in my heart. Life was good.

After some hard work with the paddles, we decided to stop for tea. As we pulled in we saw baboons lining the rocky horizon of the kopie behind us. Then one enormous member of the pack gave an alarmingly loud bark. The others joined in as we poured our tea from the flasks. We drank with binoculars glued to our faces. They never let us out of their sight while we watched them with equal interest. With tea break over, we nosed the canoes into the water and the baboons barked us a last farewell. They were so wild and free that I thought briefly of their unlucky counterparts, spending their lives in the confinement of cages and zoos. Why can't all creatures be as free as those baboons? Free to breathe and move and live as they wish. Those unlucky cous-

ins were simply denied the freedom of choice.

I felt incredibly glad that I had taken the chance with chemotherapy all those years ago. How I wished my friend Lorna could have shared my happiness with me, but she had made her choice and I had to respect it. Her path was not mine and my path was not hers. She was not able to take the chance that I had. She wanted to live her life with all the quality she could grasp, knowing full well that it might be a short life. Here is to you Lorna. I will always remember you!

We spent six glorious days working and playing. I even saw an island filled with spoonbill-nests. It was filled to capacity with little fledglings hanging over the sides of their stick-homes. Their bodies were still very small, but their beaks were nearly full-grown. They looked so funny swinging their heads from side to side, Terry had to drag me away from them.

Yesterday, on our return path to Oviston, the water was once again like a gigantic mirror. The sun painted the sky in crazy colours to greet the day. Up ahead stretched the vast open waters of the lake, reflecting my own peace of mind and an awareness of the endless possibilities our adventure promised. Above my head, the cry of a lonely fish eagle, broke the silence in agreement.

After an hour of easy paddling, a light head-on wind started to ruffle the water. The persistent wind echoed my constant awareness of the obstacles yet to be faced and overcome on our river venture. My inner battle with the big C had taught me to tackle any forces of nature head-on; any obstacles that life presented to me were nothing more than challenges not yet overcome. A nagging thirst settled in and thoughts of a mug of tea seemed very attractive. But the tea break was to wait because the wind had now swung around and our hands were full trying to keep the canoes heading straight into the oncoming waves. Undulating hills of water came rolling in. Driven by the wind at their backs, their soft growls were threatening and the wind sang a piercingly lonely song. I was frightened. Nature was reminding me of a time, long ago, when I was as lonely as the wind, and was growling in fear like the waves. The comparison was ominously close to home.

Terry looked concerned as he pointed at the dark, boiling clouds towering over the horizon. Around us there were endless stretches of open water, with nowhere to beach Pandam and Langberg while we waited out the storm.

A purple-black wall of clouds was closing in fast and we put some extra effort into our paddling. The next moment a gust of wind hit us broadside and the canoes reeled under the blow. There was no turning back. Nature had decided to test me once again. I was to prove myself worthy and meet this challenge head on.

The wind and waves were playing alarming games with our canoes as the storm worsened. It was at that moment I realised, with a sickening sinking feeling, that I was not wearing my life jacket! My eyes spotted the life-saving piece of equipment lying innocently in the nose of my canoe. The waves were so high it felt as if I was riding a bucking horse. I knew I needed help, but my emergency whistle was fixed to the life jacket. My cries for help were whipped from my lips by the wind. Pandam and Langberg were too distantly separated by the waves for easy communication with Terry. On a lake this size, the waves could rise to three metres high in a storm wind. The ferocity of the wind continued unchecked by any land that would have reduced its force.

This was not the first time in my life that I needed life-saving help. The life jacket on that previous occasion had been the knowledge that I needed to deal with the cancer within me. And help had come after I had learned to deal with the storm within myself first. Every time I feel threatened I am able to draw strength from that experience. Out in that storm I had to believe in myself. Terry certainly did.

I have been privileged to have had so many people over the years believing in me and to have had so many second chances when things looked bad. Dr Evans believed that I stood a chance and he operated with gut-swooping speed and later instinctively knew when to stop the chemotherapy. Then there was the angel nearby when I went into post-anaesthetic shock. Her quick thinking saved my life. The steel toe of my walking boot also saved my life when the puff adder sunk its teeth into it. It could have been any part of my body, but she chose that small piece of steel instead. I also took great comfort in the love, support, care and laughter my parents gave me when nothing else could have saved my life.

The waves towered over Pandam as white horses raced past me. I was scared and fought like a demon to paddle within hearing distance. Finally Terry heard my desperate cries and acted quickly. Hugging my canoe to his, he gave me the time

to inch forward on my knees to retrieve my life jacket. I was truly privileged. This daredevil act in the storm was yet another shot at life, or am I just a cat with nine lives?

That was a close call and I made a solemn promise never to be stupid enough to be caught on open water without being zipped into a life jacket.

Once again we headed directly into the jaws of the wind while lightning crackled impressively around us. The water roared angrily as we ploughed, for what seemed like hours, through the storm. We were in the worst weather I had ever experienced on water.

My thoughts returned to my fight for life over the previous years and I knew I had to stay positive. If I have learned one thing, it's that a positive attitude goes a long way. There's a lot to be said for mind over matter, and I had to believe in my abilities. In the darkest hours of my fight for life, I learned to allow God to calm my stormy waters for me. One only needs to ask and then trust in the outcome like a child.

As a great calm came over me, the wind abated. I had beaten the turmoil within as the other storm passed overhead. Within minutes of the sun breaking through those storm clouds, the water regained its glassy-calm surface. The wind died down completely and I knew the storm was over. I had passed the test, I had survived and beaten the odds once again.

It was about then that the idea of this book was born. I wanted to reach cancer-victims world wide, and realised that newspaper write-ups alone were not going to do it. I had never written a book before, but I have already learned to trust in my abilities.

10 MARCH 2002

We had decided to extend our Orange River venture. Starting in Lesotho, we would now follow the river to Prieska in the Northern Cape. Our path on the water would now be approximately 800 kilometres. We feel fit and the water was waiting.

Our first sponsored parcel arrived today. We could hardly wait to get home before ripping the wrappers off, like two children under the Christmas tree. It contained two lovely red, all-weather sleeping bags. They were just what we needed for our venture.

20 MARCH 2002

I was filled with soul-consuming wonder and joy - he loved me too! We went canoeing late the previous afternoon and stopped on a little island to watch the sunset. The sun was a ball of fire, dropping into the lake and the hills were awash with the colour of blood. I told Terry that it was not the day that was dying but the night being born. He pointed at the geese homing in on one of the small islands and we spoke in hushed whispers about the wonder of creation, lying so naked before us. The timbre of his voice was as tender and caressing as fingers stroking my very being. Our mutual delight in each other was growing stronger by the moment. He asked me if I felt ready for the challenges that awaited us on the river and the future. My voice sounded breathless in my own ears when I told him to lead the way because I am ready. I didn't even feel his arms encircling me but his first kiss was as soft as the wings of a butterfly on my lips. He was holding me very close as he whispered the words of love I so wanted to hear. I remember the warmth and softness of his mouth, as our kisses grew more urgent. I burrowed myself deeper into his embrace as all the emotions I have denied myself for so long flooded through me with the force of a hurricane. I knew then, beyond a doubt, that I had loved him from the very first moment that I met him. It was love at first sight.

With only one month to go before our trip, we were busting our butts, training as hard as we could. It was going well and I felt super fit. When we saw rough weather coming, we made a point of getting on the water. Because I had never canoed on a river before, it was the best training I could have been exposed to. I loved every minute of it.

We had told the media that we would be leaving from the Tele River in Lesotho on 20 April. We had been promised media coverage from 'The Sunday Times' for the whole trip and our sponsors were very pleased about that.

I could help believing in the good of people when I looked at the growing pile of sponsored articles. By now countless parcels had arrived from sponsors that believed in the good cause of our venture. Certainly the media coverage was a very good drawcard too. With the arrival of every new parcel we grew as excited as with the first one. Our sponsors had been generous indeed and we were very thankful. We now had a tent, water sandals,

first-aid kit, sleeping bags, backpacks, and even folding chairs.

Our sponsors included the Strops Company, Vic-clothing, The River Lodge, Max Butchery, Three Spears, Cape Union Mart, Bokomo Sasko, Eldre Pharmacy, Dorans Pharmacy, Bags Direct, Uitspan Butchery and Saltz Adventure wear, Robby Sport, Augrabies Waterfall National Park, Van der Kloof Holiday Resort, Kanon Eiland Erdekom Guesthouse and Prieska Waterwerke Guesthouse.

A call from a Johannesburg-based company came today. Their business was in canoe-design, and they were very concerned that we were attempting to paddle the Orange River in Canadian canoes. They would like us to use their kayaks for the venture. Their company had perfected a strong, lightweight design for river racing in rapids. As we were worried that Pandam and Langberg might not be the best canoes for the ferocious rapids, we expected to encounter in the river, we were considering their offer.

21 MARCH 2002

Today I began to face some very realistic fears. Could I do it? What about the grade five rapids that existed in the upper Orange? Those are monstrous, boiling, masses of water that have the power to drown any man or beast unfortunate enough to be caught up in them. Then there are the massive whirlpools we had read about. Herdsmen had told many stories of how cattle, trying to cross the river, had been sucked in, never to be seen again. One might wonder if those cattle really disappeared to a watery grave. Perhaps the animals landed up on dinner plates into the herdsmen's houses.

Another concern to me was the legend of the Grootslang, or Great Snake of the Orange River. It is believed to be a 40-foot long serpent with enormous gems in its eye sockets. Now this monster, according to legend, lives in the part of the Orange River that flows through the Richtersveld - an area of scrubland in the middle of South Africa. There, where he made his home, the legend tells of a cavern crammed with diamonds. The Grootslang guards the treasure with its life. This cavern, known as the 'Wonder Hole' or 'Bottomless Pit', is mostly avoided and even guides are reluctant to take expeditions there.

Only one man has been said to have tried to explore this hole, which locals say is connected to the Atlantic Ocean, over 40 miles away. He was a toughened old prospector who used winches

and cables to reach a ledge far below and near the 'Pit'. There was a very strong smell of sulphur and cavernous tunnels led off the ledge. Bats flew into his face causing him to lose his grip on his electric torch and his mates had to haul him back to the surface. He was badly shaken and swore he would never attempt to go there again.

Some travellers claimed to have seen the serpent, and newspapers had occasionally reported sightings. Many witnesses estimate the length of the Grootslang to be at least 40 feet. Stories of three-foot wide tracks in the mud on the river bank related how a party of prospectors followed the tracks for many miles before they finally disappeared into the waters of the Orange River. Natives to the area said that the Grootslang is a spirit snake, and an encounter with it fills you with a sense of evil. Sightings had been reported over the length of the Orange River.

Most rivers and lakes in Africa have their legends of mythological monsters. Our local legend might be nothing on the scale of Nyami-Nyami of the Zambezi River, but the tales told still increased concerns about what we might encounter on this river.

Deep down, I did not really want to believe in the monstrous river-snake of the legends, but it did make one wonder. We had, after all, spent a lot of time on the Lake and seen unusual creatures lurking in the deep.

25 MARCH 2002

After heavy consideration, we had decided to stick to using Pandam and Langberg. We rejected the offer of longer, slimmer, faster canoes with no baggage hold, because we needed all the space that our Canadian canoes could offer. Our back-up would not meet us too often on the voyage, so we need to carry a lot of supplies, such as tinned food, and our water would be very heavy. Our first restocking point would be Aliwal North.

Our biggest concern, however, was that Pandam has no ballast tanks. She could sink if turned over in a rapid. Despite our concern we knew our canoes best and feel more confident taking on the battle, with the mighty Orange, in them.

To solve Pandam's floatation problems, we had decided to tie empty two-litre plastic bottles in her nose and tail end. To test her, we'll turn her over in a shallow bay to see if she floated.