

Hard
a memoir
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Nancy-Gail Burns



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*To my mother, Leona Burns, who taught me the meaning
of working hard, and my father, Edward Burns,
who magnified the magic within dreams.*

Prologue

SATURDAY MORNING GROCERY shopping is for idiots, masochists, and bona fide cheapskates. Cars circle like sharks, as they hunt for a parking spot. A grey Mazda darts in front of me, seizing a spot designated for pregnant women. A tall, young man leaps from the vehicle. I suspect he is not pregnant. A blue Honda backs out. I pull in, as soon as I can clear its tail. I grab my bags, clench my teeth, and enter the store. People zoom by, snatching items off shelves. The gatherers, the hunters, are en force, even in the modern world. I am the ultimate bargain hunter. I fill my larder with reduced items. A stern looking woman jostles me as she reaches for peaches. I shove my cart in front of her, blocking her path. Butting in line is a faux pas. Pushiness does not deserve rewards.

Superstores are the rage. Aisles span for miles. I make my way down the gangway, as my eyes dart left and right. Countless grocery carts hit my heel, making it as fleshy as the rainbow trout that lured me in. People check their Blackberries, or are on their phones, or listen to music, or perhaps do all three. It's too taxing to notice the individuals around them. I observe the ... advancements. Saturday is not the day to venture out, because everyone has their head up their apps.

The rainbow trout baits me into coming because I'm a fish-eating cheapskate. I can't resist the weekend sale price. I save a monumental seven dollars. It's half price, but how much fish can one eat? As you can guess, I'm not a happy shopper. Hearing my name, okay not my name, but a nickname, I turn around and glare.

"Where are you off to in such a hurry, you little shithead?" the voice repeats.

I look up, way up, into the face of Darcy O'Grady. She's at least six foot one and built like a linebacker, but insists that she's five ten, and not even near the two hundred pound range. Right, and I have a body like a Barbie doll. Actually, I do, if you purchase the Asian model. You must have seen her. Flat chested and short. I'm getting off track. I'm

also not Asian. Just flat chested and short. Let's talk about Darcy. She looks healthy, which is a compliment if you were once ill. Her auburn hair is mid length and shiny, her face round and pretty. Thick lashes frame her blue eyes. Arched brows look at me inquisitively. Darcy has a strapping body, a razor sharp mind, and a penchant for ultra feminine clothing. Today she's wearing a baby blue blouse, with ruffles dripping down to form a soft cascading collar. Her right hand clutches a dainty purse. It's vintage bark cloth in a blue floral pattern. Somehow, she carries off this dichotomy. Instead of complimenting, I quip: "By the looks of you, I assume the neighbourhood children still fear for their lives."

"I'll have you know I'm on a diet, and it's only the neighbourhood dogs and cats that have anything to worry about."

Before I can think of an insulting comeback, my head is wedged between two enormous breasts. I wheeze through a small crevice: "Let go of me, before my ribs crack."

Luckily, she obliges before I pass out.

Fellow shoppers stop and gawk at our encounter. The air is at *attention* (readiness for direct communication on twitter). When they realize a murder is not about to take place in aisle five, they retract their phones. No *twama*, (drama on twitter) nothing *intwesting* to fire off, so they carry on with their business. Is it just me, or has technology created a world of broadcasters, rather than doers? Is the human race taking a giant step backwards? Does it sound as if everyone speaks with a lisp?

Darcy scrutinizes me, before saying: "You're not looking as bad as usual."

I have lost weight, resurrected my exercise regime, and cut my hair absurdly short. I take no credit for that fashion statement. In a moment of maniacal inspiration, my hairdresser decides my small features are better suited with a short do. Hair flies to the floor like a troop of kamikaze pilots. I can only stare in abject horror. When the butchery is complete, a self-satisfied smile appears on her face. "You look ten years younger."

If you're over thirty-five, and they reduce your hair to stubble, they always employ the age ruse. The bigger the blunder, the younger you look. A decade constitutes a major gaffe. If she had bothered to ask, I

would have told her: short hair is not an option, small features or not. Every morning after the haircut, I become the warden of an archaic insane asylum, forced to deal with an unrestrained uprising that demands hosing down the inmates, until they submit to normalcy. I pull at my hair, and hope the tugging will encourage it to grow.

“I feel good,” I reply.

“I’m finished shopping. Once you’re done, we can grab a cup of coffee next door. It’ll be like old times.”

Next door is a pretentious coffee shop that insists you order a *cafe grande*, instead of a large coffee. If you don’t use their jargon, they pretend not to know what you want. They supposedly can’t comprehend the unconventional lingo of small, medium, and large. I like to jerk them around, and refuse to imitate their terminology. They look at me as if I’m dim-witted. Repeated failed efforts to get me to say *grande* conclude with an exasperated sigh and a large coffee in my hand. To make matters worse, the coffee shop is crowded and overpriced. I hate that sort of place, but I return Darcy’s smile, agree to meet her there, and hurry to the check out.

The lines are winding. The patrons sour faced, and surly. I head off to the self-serve.

“Take the last item out of the bag,” the machine advises me. I have yet to remove an item from the cart.

Darcy is leaving the store. She waves and says: “I’ll get us a table.”

To understand my relationship with Darcy, and the other women I was lucky to enough to meet, I must start at the beginning. My words and thoughts may blur because I want to be truthful, and our history is awash with tears. Some are born out of sorrow, others of anger, some are happy, or relieved, and the remainder are of sheer frustration. For each of us found a hard lump and it forever changed our lives.

DOCTORS ARE NOT my favourite people. They tell you what you don't want to hear, and make you wait hours to hear it. Considering my lousy attitude, it's not surprising that my annual check-up only occurs when my doctor insists she will not refill my Lipitor, unless I book an appointment for a complete physical. It's a practise I call prescription blackmail, and it's highly effective. Heart attack versus seeing the doctor: Fine, I'll make an appointment.

After the common tests, Doctor Fungus (not her real name) remarks that she's going to check my breasts for lumps, bumps and things that make you yell ouch, when squeezed. I mention how I sometimes feel a pea sized bump in my right breast, but it's gone by the time I begin my menstruation.

"Probably a little cyst," she says, not having felt anything unusual. Nonetheless, when my exam is over, I hold a requisition form for a mammogram. "You're at that age," she explains as she bestows an extra bonus. I examine the kit to collect stool samples and stop myself from yelling yuk.

I take the requisition form and agree it's time to have my first mammogram. I smile as I assure her that I grasp the mechanics behind the stick and accompanying cardboard envelope, with its daily slots. It is an Advent calendar for grownups! Getting older opens doors I would prefer stayed closed.

Fifty is the new forty. Nonetheless, it still whispers you're not young anymore and things can go wrong. I don't mind being fifty, except when I shop for a bathing suit, or they ask me to bag my crap.

I leave her office, get into my car, and throw the forms into my purse. Once home, I throw them on my desk and forget about them for six weeks. In a moment of compliance, I decide Doctor Fungus is right. I call the clinic to book an appointment for the mammogram. I'm lucky; a cancellation allows me to come in the following day.

Small breasted, I've heard stories about how the test hurts like hell, especially when your playing field is level. Psychologically I prepare for it. It'll be over with quickly. I can then say I'm a good patient who does what is asked of her. Well, almost everything. I promise myself I'll start collecting stool samples on Monday. Monday is always my start day, especially with diets. Luckily, I have a poor memory and tend to forget about the task until at least Wednesday. I then wait to begin the following Monday. Do you see where this is going? But really, you have to refrigerate it.

"Mom where are the eggs?"

"Next to the advent calendar."

"No!!! Don't open the slots."

Time flies when you dread doing something. I find myself sitting in the clinic's vapid waiting room. The walls, the carpet, the chairs: all a mind-numbing beige. I suspect its tediousness is purposely designed to elicit listlessness. Compliance goes hand in hand with boredom.

"Nancy-Gail Burns," the receptionist calls out. She repeats herself, and gives everyone the stare down. On her third try, it dawns on me. I'm Nancy-Gail Burns. Stupefied, I follow the tall willowy blonde-haired woman into a room which holds a contraption that'll tell me if my breasts are normal.

The technician is a compact grey haired woman whose movements are sure and precise.

"Do you get tired of examining boobs all day?" I say.

Her face remains deadpan, as she says, chortling: "Could be worse. I could be examining assholes."

I enjoy her biting sense of humour. Especially when she says: "Mind you some days, I get my share of both."

"Not wearing deodorant, powder, or perfume, are you?" she asks.

"I read the brochure. I am au natural as ordered."

Handing me a gown, she says: "I can tell."

"Good, in view of what you are going to do to me, consider us even."

Laughing she says: "Remove all clothing from the waist up, and put on the gown."

She then leaves the room. A rather pointless nicety, considering I'll pull out what I'm hiding shortly.

She returns within seconds.

"Pull the gown off your left shoulder and place your left breast right here."

She points to the boob holder, which is a tray. Her request sounds easier than it is. Hello, I barely have breasts, how am I supposed to place nothing on a tray? It's absurdly difficult, but I manage to position my boob below the compression paddle, which lowers and applies pressure while taking low dose x-rays. Think of hands clapping in an up and down motion. Not displaying favouritism, she does the same to the right breast. Despite what I heard, it's painless. She says goodbye, instructs me to have a nice day, and hurries to meet her next boob. Left standing, I shed the gown, redress, and leave the office. Given I'm downtown, I decide to pick up my husband to save him a bus ride home.

I promised to call him when I'm done. Since I don't have a cell phone, I've borrowed my son's. Maybe, I'm odd. But I don't want to be reachable twenty-four seven. If you make yourself too available, people get mad when they can't contact you. I like a landline because I can decline to answer it, and excuses such as — "I guess I was outside" — are still plausible. The downside of my refusal to be a part of this century: Technology is advancing and I'm not. I take pictures of the lobby floor, call a few of my son's friends, and hope they don't see me as a crazy old lady who can't use a phone. With any luck, they'll think I'm the much more fashionable cougar. Grr ... Yeah right, barf. I take the elevator back to the clinic and ask to borrow their phone. The shame ...



Fred (not his real name, I would never marry a man named Fred) is waiting for me when I pull up. His silver hair shimmers in the sunshine. A bulging briefcase rests at his feet. He grabs the bag and hurries to the car.

"How was the test?"

"Alright."

"Did it hurt?"

I pull away from the curb. I pay more attention to the surrounding cars than to his question.

“Not at all,” I mutter.

He checks his watch. “We should pick up something to eat,” he says.

We settle on takeout since it’s getting late: ten to five. Oh my God, I’m getting old. I like to eat my last meal before six. Is sitting at Denny’s at four-thirty in the afternoon, with a coupon in hand, the next step?

“I gave you a coupon, young lady. You discounted it, didn’t you? Show me where you took it off the bill.”

Kill me now.

We decide on hamburgers, a real treat since I’m gluten intolerant and can only cheat a few times a week without paying for it. I will not explain what that means because it’s gross.

Twenty minutes later, we leave the drive through. I went to the bathroom so I lost my driving privileges. I don’t care since I see driving as nothing more than a mode of transportation. The sack warms my knees. The gold wrappers glitter, and the aroma from the fried food thrashes the doggy odour, which usually engulfs the car. As we turn into our driveway, my thoughts centre on my hamburger. The reward for sticking to my restrictive diet for most of the week. I like food. Especially the stuff I’m not supposed to eat. We hang our coats and set the table. We’re hungry, but we aren’t barbarians. We use plates, not wrappers. The answering machine’s red light blinks spastically. I try to ignore it, but as always, curiosity gets the best of me. I play the message. It’s the clinic.

“You have an appointment for an ultrasound at two o’clock tomorrow afternoon. Arrive fifteen minutes early. Do not wear talcum powder, deodorant, or perfume.”

They don’t ask. They command. In hindsight, I should have ignored the red light and enjoyed my hamburger first. Another test is definitely not a good sign. I turn to Fred, forget it, I cannot even pretend to be married to Fred. His name is Luke, and clever that I am, I say: “They weren’t supposed to call back.”

I understand the ropes. You go for a test. Once you leave the premises, you cease to exist. Follow-up calls are inconvenient, and a faux pas. Annoying your doctor by requesting the results of the examination is

rude. Protocol insists you forget about it. Months later, during a scheduled appointment, your doctor may, or may not, mention that you went for the examination, and the results are negative. Why did they call me? I didn't expect a call back, nor did I want one.

Like most men, Luke is not good at reading body language. When my face pales, and my knuckles turn white as I clutch the counter, he suspects I'm having worrisome thoughts.

"Don't read too much into it," he says, as he bites into his burger.

Right, given the state of our healthcare system, you don't get an appointment for a test the following day, unless they saw something, and it was not good. Expedience has become frightening.

I'm incapable of speech. Shocked doesn't explain how I feel. I sit down and tell myself it's a fatty tumour, or a cyst. My hamburger tastes like sawdust. Its odour, which made my mouth water moments before, causes my stomach to lurch. I take a bite. I can barely swallow. When my husband isn't looking, I give the burger to Cane, our black lab. He finishes it before it touches the floor.

I pick at my fries. Luke tries to be entertaining and I pretend to be entertained. As soon as the meal is over, the dog belches, and I rush to the computer and begin googling. The literature instantly emphasizes that an abnormal mammogram does not mean you have cancer. The abnormality could be a denser breast tissue, a cyst, or a harmless lump such as fibroadenoma. It repeatedly highlights how benign conditions comprise the majority of abnormal mammograms. Ultrasounds are routinely advised when the mammogram detects a suspicious area. For every 1,000 U.S. women screened about 7% (70) will be called back. Ten will be referred for a biopsy; the remaining sixty will be diagnosed with a benign condition. Of the ten referred for biopsy, 3.5 will have cancer and 6.5 will not. Of the 3.5 who have cancer, two will have a low stage cancer that will be effectively cured after treatment. Reassuring statistics in the light of day, but as night descends, and I try to sleep, I can only think of malignancy, and the fact that the lab called back within two hours of my mammogram. I silently repeat encouraging statistics, but it's pointless.

In the dark, colour appears in the form of a mint green coat. I'm thirteen when my mother buys me the most amazing coat a mother

ever purchased for her child. Stylish, it looks plucked from a fashion magazine. It's a maxi, which is the opposite of a mini, so it covers from neck to toes. The buttons are large and shiny. The cuffs have clips that tighten to form ruffles. It's also non-refundable since the store is going out of business. My mother takes a chance, which is uncharacteristic of her. Since money is tight, we never risk wasting it.

When she holds it up, my eyes grow wide. I grab it from her hands and hurriedly try it on.

During the seventies women wear cone bras, and coats have darts. The coat fits, with the exception of the chest. If I bump into something, or hold an object tightly, the material will invert. It is rather problematic, and definitely not a good look. *Hey, here comes the kid with the inverted boobs.* Not the sort of attention one seeks.

Mom laughs. "It'll fit next year," she assures me.

I believe her. My body type is similar to my mother's. She is well endowed. I have the curvy hips and an ample bottom. Within a year, I'll surely blossom. She takes the coat and hangs it in the dark recesses of our hall closet.

The following spring, Mom takes the coat out of the closet. We lay it on the bed. Its buttons gleam gloriously. I touch the soft material and my pulse quickens. Mom holds it up. I rush over to try it on. My smile plummets as I tie the buttons. My mother's smile vanishes before I can tie the belt.

It still doesn't fit. Mom's reassuring words are not as encouraging. Back in the closet it goes.

By the third year, the coat has become a harbinger of spring. As soon as winter's hold loosens, the closet door opens, and voila, the coat emerges. I see it, and grimace. It's a test. I fail repeatedly.

We no longer smile. Nor do we comment on the coat's beauty. I try it on because I have to. It's now shorter — and tight across the shoulders. However the risk of implosion remains. Without uttering a word, Mom takes the coat, and hangs it back into the closet.

A day after the coat's annual outing, I'm walking to school. I see my cousin, four years my junior, walking ahead. Her gait is lively. She's wearing a new coat, and looks proud. It is mint green and has very large shiny buttons, and cuffs that create ruffles above her wrists. She

spins around and the coat forms a magnificent arc. Sandy sees me; smiles, and waves excitedly. I pretend not to see her, turn the corner, and slow my step.

I hate mint green to this very day. It reminds me of breasts that obstinately refused to grow. If one of them grew a tumour, I swear I'll rip it off myself.

Stupid breasts, stupid mammograms.

MY FAMILIARITY WITH ultrasounds involves seeing my unborn children. I smile and nod, feigning understanding whenever the technician points at an appendage, and believe *I'm having a well-endowed boy, instead of a girl with a set of arms and legs.* I'm confused, but the experience is decidedly more joyous than looking for a tumour. How does the scenario go when it's a tumour? Do they point out their observations?

Oh look it's round and self-contained—fatty, fatty, two by four, guess you don't go to the oncology ward.

See all those spikes and the irregular shape—Spiky, spiky, oh that is bad. You have cancer, oh so sad.

The technician performing the ultrasound is polite and professional, and has the demeanour of an undertaker. This test is no joking matter. But let's pretend I have a chance of living long enough to leave the room.

My memory of the thousands of dollars spent on research—proving how laughter decreases pain, boosts immunity, lowers stress hormones, eases fear, and anxiety—must be faulty. For whenever you face a medical emergency, those around you often look as if they lost their best friend. Do you not want to save us? Admit it: you spent the money figuring out ways of ridding the system of the sick. It's a Machiavellian budget scheme, isn't it?

Or is your long face an attempt to appear sensitive? *This woman is having a test done to look for a cancerous tumour. Show her grief, show her sombreness, and look as if you're dying too.* Do they honestly think that makes things better? You might as well hire a hole-digger to sit in the waiting room. Ravens at the front desk would be a nice touch. I admit I sometimes look at things differently, but comedians should be at the front line of our health care system. That way, even if the treatment is unsuccessful, you'll leave this world laughing, and one minute of laughter is worth more than an hour of anxiety.

Recumbent on the table, I can't muster a complaint as she applies the cold sticky gel to my right breast. It's the obvious troublemaker.

Gel makes the breast slippery so a small transducer, a device that picks up sound waves, can slide along the skin, sending waves through it. The principle is the same as the sonar used by bats. When a sound wave strikes an object, it bounces back. By measuring echo waves it's possible to ascertain how far away the object is, and its shape, size and consistency (whether the mass is solid or filled with fluid).

"What made you have a mammogram?" the woman asks, without taking her eyes off the screen in front of her.

The image has become so important she can't take a second to glance in my direction. Does she not know niceties go a long way? A smile, a nod, a quick peek, any of those things, would make me feel like an individual, instead of a potentially cancerous boob. I swallow bitter feelings.

"I thought I felt something a few months ago, but it went away. I assumed it was a cyst. When I went to my doctor, she didn't feel anything, but she suggested I have the test since I am fifty. Since I've had the mammogram, I can now feel a tiny lump."

"Show me," she says.

I place my finger just above my nipple. She informs me it is at the twelve o'clock position. I never knew that breasts are read like clocks. My lump is sitting on the stroke of midnight. She begins to slide the transducer over my right breast. She focuses on where I told her I could feel the lump.

"That's odd," she mutters, and I feel my first pang of apprehension. "So you didn't feel an unvarying lump?" she asks. I don't like the incredulity ringing in her voice. I also don't appreciate how she refuses to look me in the eyes.

"On occasion but usually not," I explain. Apprehension turns to dread. She doesn't read me as well as I can read her. She shakes her head, and I shiver.

Dammit, she should know most people can read head shakes! They are never complimentary. They usually signify disappointment, and sometimes, especially if eye rolling is involved, they denote exasperation. I didn't see her roll her eyes, but I suspect she did.

Dimwit, why didn't you come for testing earlier? Don't you recognize cancer, you stupid twit?

Oh my god, I have cancer and, as an added bonus, I'm a tad stupid.

It's over. She moves away from the screen, and stands up, without saying a word. She begins to retreat.

"Get dressed. Your doctor will have the results in a week."

I whisper goodbye, but she has already left the room. I'm alone with air that feels heavy and dark. I tell myself I'm being paranoid. The only problem is I'm not prone to paranoia. I failed the damn test. I know I did.

The experience leaves me vulnerable. I deserve a treat. I stop off at the grocery store and buy a loaf of French bread. I indulge in two crispy toasts before I put the bread away. I now have a stomach-ache and most likely a cancerous breast. All in all, not a good day.

IT TURNS OUT I'm not the only one having an ultrasound. My niece, Caitlin, finds out she's pregnant. The youngest family member is thirteen, so the prospect of fresh blood elicits excitement.

As a child, Caitlin had the longest, skinniest legs and arms of anyone I knew. When angered, limbs flew in every direction. Would her child be the same? Would his or her tantrums encompass a whole room? Considering Caitlin is five-seven, and her husband is six-foot-five, I envision the child having the capacity to touch all four nursery walls at once.

9-1-1 please help us. We cannot reach the baby; his foot is jamming the door.

You mean he's in front of the door and you're afraid to open it.

No the baby is in the crib, but he's stretching, and we're worried we'll break his leg if we force the door open.

I love babies. I'll carry him or her, even if his or her legs touch my knees.

When I visit my husband's family, everyone speaks of the new mother and the progress of her pregnancy. Something is growing within her, and it's beautiful and revitalizing. Something is growing inside of me, but it's hideous and deadly. Caitlin shares her experience. She talks of ultrasounds, and weight gains. Her tone denotes excitement and anticipation. She revels in her body's ability to produce new life.

I hide my experience. I hope it'll dissipate into groundless fear. Caitlin's situation is so different from mine it counterbalances my despair and brings hope. Not everything in this world is bad. A point I recently often remind myself of, because the big C is about chaos, confusion, and catastrophe.

Textbooks describe cancer as a malignant tumour or growth, caused when cells multiply uncontrollably, destroying healthy tissue. Researchers give no mention to the consumption of healthy thoughts, and the birth of destructive, negative feelings. Even the very threat of

cancer will not allow you to disregard it. Bursting into your consciousness, like its concrete form, thoughts multiply uncontrollably.

Everything is going to change. You're not normal. You're sick. Malignancy. Have you noticed it has your name in it? Do you know what malign means? It denotes evil and wrongdoing. It's hurtful. Something bad is out to hurt you.

Say goodbye to your breast. Maybe even your life. Your plans for the future? Kaput. You don't have a future. Unless you think dying of an agonizing disease is a future. The strength you imagine you possess will buckle, as will you, as you fall to the floor and beg death to take you.

Fuck off eh!

"I'm cancelling the trip," my husband says as we tidy the kitchen after dinner.

I clean the counter mechanically.

"Don't be silly. You'll be back in three days. You planned the conference months ago. Just go. I'm sure it's nothing. I'm fine."

When he gives me a worried look, I ramble on about statistics. As his forehead relaxes, I know he's feeling reassured.

I'm lying. Nonetheless, I convince him to go. I thrust the dread deep inside of me, until it is a tinny voice, off in the distance.

My children say I hate to be wrong about anything. They're mistaken. I want my perceptions to be false. I want to be reading things that are not there. My little bump is a cyst. I'm blowing everything out of proportion. I'm guilty of the classic mistake: Making a mountain out of a molehill. I can live with being foolish. I want my life to revert to normal. I don't want to be the woman with cancer.

When Luke leaves for the conference, I feel triumphant. The hard lump does not have the power to change how I live. Sometimes you must make a molehill out of a mountain. It's the only way to get beyond it.

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About The Author



Nancy-Gail Burns, author of *Insidious and Jolted*, lives in Gloucester with her husband, daughter, son, two cats and a dog. She is currently at work on her next novel.