

Cancer Scars

by **Danusha Goska**

Now, see, if I were a true and deep artist, I would look at my cancer scar and write a poem or sculpt something uplifting. I'd create art like that famous black-and-white poster by poet Deena Metzger, the one where she is naked, arms stretched against the sky. You see her breast cancer scar, now a tattoo. One of the most stunning, generous, and brave images I have ever seen.

As it is, I look at my scar and think, "Duct tape." I am a spinster with no man of my own. I'm related to lots of men—brothers, uncles, cousins, nephews—who would, in accord with my family's tradition, not pee on me if I were on fire. As a man-less spinster I use a lot of duct tape. It really does fix everything, and anything duct tape can't fix is not worth salvaging. So, yes. I look at this mess of a scar and think, not poem or essay, but, rather, "Duct tape."

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I went to the hospital this morning. I waited in the waiting room. I paged through copies of *Cancer Today*.

A lovely woman came in with a dog so elegant this dog would put to shame Joan Crawford in an evening gown designed by Adrian.

"Would you like a visit?" the woman asked.

I reached out to the dog. It was a black Pomeranian. I've never seen a dog with such perfect fur: lush, thick, sleek, shiny. The Pomeranian's name was Neena. She was wearing a little vest that identified her as a service dog. Her owner told me Neena's story.

"My boyfriend is a long-distance truck driver and he had Sophie, a black Pomeranian who traveled with him on the road. He had her for eighteen years. After she died, he couldn't stand the idea of a new dog. 'No one can replace Sophie!'

'Well,' I said to him. 'No one can replace Sophie, but there are so many dogs out there who are lonely and uncared for. We can give a dog a home and some love.'

I worked on him for six months. Finally, he said he'd let me get a dog, but it had to be a black Pomeranian just like Sophie. I went on petfinder.com. I found a black Pomeranian but he rejected that one. Didn't look enough like Sophie.

I found another. She was a survivor of Hurricane Katrina. They sent me a photo. She looked awful in the photo. I showed the photo to my boyfriend. In spite of how bad she looked, he said, 'Her!' So we flew to New Orleans and picked her up and here she is."

Neena had to go. I went back to waiting. Thank God for Neena. Thank God for that nice lady.

I am afraid of medical settings and medical people. I've had some really bad medical experiences. I was chronically ill for six years in the 1990s. The illness I had is rare and little understood. I was subjected to three experimental surgeries. Before every surgery, I was reminded that the surgery might kill me, make me sicker, or it might restore me to a full life after years of crippling poverty. A photo of my innards appears in a medical journal. One test alone was worse than all three surgeries. They clamped me into a chair in a light-proof chamber the size of a phone booth. They placed electrodes on my head. They then sealed the chamber and I was in complete darkness, except for one pinprick of red light. Then someone spun the chair around, in alternating directions, at varying speeds, with no warning. I begged to be let out. They wouldn't. "Just a few more minutes. You can do it."

You'd think that this information would be on my chart: "This patient fears medical settings and medical people. She's clocked a lot of dicey history. Go easy on her." And you'd think that medical personnel, interested in healing, would heed it. You'd think.

They called my name and I went into the room and undressed. I assumed the position on the cold table. Yet another person I'd never met before and would never see again who would touch my body in intimate ways entered the room. I shook a little; some tears fell. The woman, who had an unnaturally tan face, loomed over me with a

large pair of tweezers. "YOU ARE TENSING UP. THAT WILL MAKE IT WORSE. IT WILL HURT. STOP IT."

She quickly glanced at my chart, discovered my name and spoke it. "DA NOO SHA! Relax! RELAX RELAX RELAX! You are going to make it hurt!"

Now, you might think that having a strange woman with an unnaturally tanned face looming over me, yelling in an overtly angry way the word "RELAX" over and over, might tense me up. But I'm from New Jersey, and it worked for me better than any wind-chime-accompanied mantra.

I obeyed. I imagined walking off through the fields of bruise-blue rye in Slovakia, my Uncle John up ahead. We were walking toward the hills, toward the thickly forested hills, where Uncle John's beehives were. We'd tend to the bees and then hike over the mountain and hear the clear call of the cuckoo high up in the leafy treetops and the heavy panting of wild boar scuttling over the forest floor. He'd give me juniper berries and instruct me to bite them with my front teeth while inhaling their released, cleansing aroma over my tongue. We'd fill a basket with mushrooms he unearthed, where I saw only moldering oak leaves, to bring home to Aunt Jolana to put in the soup we'd have for dinner.

"Your scar looks good," the woman who never told me her name or her title said. I knew more about Neena, the therapy dog, than I knew about this—part-time nurse? World class surgeon? Jersey Shore tanning addict? Imposter?

If my scar looks good, I don't want to see the scars that look bad.

I heard the staples hit a metal tray. She was careful to remove the staples from different parts of the scar so that no one part became irritated. It really didn't hurt. It is so often the case that people who are good at the technical aspects of medicine lack bedside manner. Those with the smooth bedside manner might not know the right end of a stethoscope.

I was about to venture my duct tape joke when she said, "I'm going to glue you up." And then, "Now I'm applying the tape."

So, yeah, tape. And glue. My latest accessories. But no spit or carpet tacks.



Danusha Goska is a recipient of a New Jersey State Council on the Arts Grant, and a Stephen King Haven Grant. Her book *Bieganski: The Brute Polak Stereotype* won the Polish American Historical Association Halecki Award. Her book *Save Send Delete* was inspired by her relationship with prominent atheist Michael Shermer. Her new book *God through Binoculars: A Hitchhiker at a*

Monastery will appear in 2018.