

Chapter 10

Cancer in Paradise

"There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle." —Albert Einstein

The flight to Freeport was like entering a time warp. It was almost science fiction-like as we moved from one world to the next. The United States disappeared over the horizon; before us, only turquoise blue ocean. This was our first trip to the Caribbean and we were thrilled to be on our way. Both Amber and I clung to the edge of the small plane window, straining to see what lay ahead. We were hypnotized. "Mom, look! You can see through the water! Is that a big fish there? Hey! There's a big boat over there!" In the distance, our last hope came into view: Grand Bahama Island. A cruise ship was just entering the harbor. "Oh... to be living *that* life," I thought. Every part of me ached to be on that ship with Amber and Gary and Todd, enjoying life without a care in the world.

Before we left the mainland, we'd booked two nights at the Atlantik Beach Hotel to give us a chance to get our bearings and find a home for our indefinite stay. It was quite a distance from the clinic but the price was right. Since we were on a limited budget, we needed to find a place to live and *fast*. Gary went down to the lobby and bought a couple of local newspapers. We scanned the ads; two looked promising. We called and set appointments to see the apartments, then went down to the pool for some much needed "R&R."

The cool ocean breeze greeted me as we stepped onto the beach. My toes sank into the soft sand. "Ahhh," I sighed with contentment. All I could see were pastel colors: Cream-colored

sand, light blue ocean that deepened as it neared the horizon and met the orange and blue sky, peach-colored buildings near the pool, tanned bodies laying around it. They were on vacation, I could tell. Their pace was slow and graceful. Most of them were laying on chairs that were scattered about haphazardly; drinks in hand or a book finally read. Many of them just lay there with their eyes closed—face to the sun—absorbing it all. A faint smile of pure pleasure would appear now and then. Our worlds were separated by a million miles, but I was in this one for now.

A few children played in the pool. Amber headed in that direction. "Mom, Gar, wanna go swimmin' with me?" She threw her towel on the chair, kicked off her flip-flops, and took her hat off. "Oh... No!" I thought. Nobody noticed. She scurried over to the edge of the pool. "Come on you guys!" In a splash, she disappeared beneath the water. I lay down to vegetate. Gary was delighted to oblige and quickly joined her. "Ahhh... now *this* is living!" I closed my eyes and snuggled into the chair. I could feel a faint smile on my face and gave in to the pleasure as well.

The next day, we set off on an expedition to explore our new world and learn our way around. We took a cab to downtown Freeport. The Immunology Researching Centre was located directly across the street from one of two shopping centers on the island. It was a simple, modern, yellow building trimmed in white. Adjacent to it stood Rand Hospital, undersized by our standards, but the only hospital on the island.

I reached into my pocket, found the piece of paper that Dr. Beatty had given me, and walked up to the receptionist. "Hi, I'm Patti Calistro. Dr. Beatty told me to ask for Arla Amara. Is she here?" "Sure. Have a seat. I'll get her for you." We found our seats in the Waiting Room and studied our surroundings. Tastefully decorated and although nearly empty now, it could seat about twenty people. It was clean, modern, pleasant, and accommodating. Magazines and books were on the tables between chairs that lined the walls. It gave me the confidence to continue.

Within moments, a young woman bounced in. She was all smiles and brimming with life. I was amazed at her beauty. She was tall and thin with dark hair that came to her shoulders and

brown eyes that took you into her soul. "Hi!" She shook my hand; her eyes were smiling. "I'm Arla." She looked down. "And *this* must be Amber!" Bending down to meet her, she shook Amber's hand. "Hi, Amber. I'm Arla. Welcome to the clinic. Want me to give you a tour?" Amber nodded and took Arla's outstretched hand. We finished introducing ourselves then followed right behind them.

"Well, this is the Waiting Room." We went on. "This is the Blood Pull Room." Off to the left was a small, white room with two large chairs at either end, both with wide extended arms. A refrigerator stood in the corner; cabinets and drawers ran the length of the room. A door, which led to the laboratory was closed, but the window next to it had its curtains slightly drawn. Curious, I glanced through the opening.

Inside the laboratory, people were working the rows of modern machines and equipment. Beyond the lab and through another door, a kindly, somewhat middle-aged gentleman sat at his desk. He was sporting a pipe; glasses were perched at the end of his nose. "He looks like Santa Claus," I thought. He looked up from his computer screen to meet my gaze. "Is that Dr. Burton?" I asked Arla. "Yes, it is," she smiled. The tour continued. "Bathroom... Examining Room... Dr. Clement's office... Conference Room... Mrs. Burton's office." I wasn't sure what to expect when I'd decided to bring Amber to the Bahamas for immunotherapy. I was pleasantly surprised and somewhat relieved when I saw the clinic's modern facilities.

Arla told us that she lived at the Sea Sun Apartments with her family: Gary, her husband, and their three kids, Macey, Paul, and G.P. Her father was on Burton's therapy for a brain tumor he had. "He nearly died, but since we've been down here, he's doing a lot better. C'mon over and meet the kids. They'll be thrilled to have someone else to play with." She told us about the orientation at the clinic on Monday. "You need to be there. The therapy will be explained in detail and any questions you have will be answered." I was pleasantly overwhelmed, but confident that we were where we should be.

After arranging to store our possessions on the front lawn of the clinic until we found an apartment, we walked across the street

to the Town Centre. This was the "happenin' " place; all the local Bahamians shopped here; the tourists shopped at The International Bazaar. It had a few miscellaneous stores, a post office, a couple of banks, and a Winn Dixie supermarket that served as the hub of the complex. It was a bustling place where conch was sold fresh from the back of a pickup truck, school children would meet for a soda, and local business people met for the latest gossip. Anyone who was anyone came here to meet, talk, and be noticed.

Freeport was much more sparse than my image of a tropical island. It was completely flat, with scrub-brush here and there, palm trees, and man-made landscaping. The island seemed to be neatly laid out, with some sort of master plan in mind. Lush flowers and trees lined the highways. The houses were modern and well kept. There was an intricate system of public transportation: Small, privately owned vans that cruised the roads at regular intervals. If you wanted a ride, you stood on the side of the road and waved them down. For fifty cents, you could travel anywhere.

We went back to our hotel room for one more night. I relished this time to forget. The rest of the world just dropped away as we played "tourist" not "cancer victim." The three of us went for a long walk on the beach, played in the waves, and buried Gary in the sand. Then, we returned for a swim, a shower, a nap, and a nice, long, tasty dinner. We went to bed early and slept right through 'til morning. No worries, no nightmares, no dreams disturbed my sleep. I gave myself up to the Bahamas and to Dr. Burton's therapy.

The next morning, we checked out of the hotel and hailed a cab. With only faith and no home, we loaded all of the luggage, rebounder, and thirteen boxes, in and on it. "Thank God it's a Cadillac." We headed into town, stopping at the clinic to unload our stuff on the lawn. We were sure we'd find a place to live that day. We had a couple of prospects.

After lunch at Winn Dixie, we took the bus to Kwan Yin Apartments to meet Sandy Kaiser. She had placed one of the ads that caught our eye: "Studio apartment, fully furnished, \$300 a month." It was located across the street from the Princess Hotel

and Casino and down the road from The International Bazaar. It was an impressive building, four stories high, yellow with white trim, and shaped in a "U" with a large pool in the center. We took the stairs to the second floor. Sandy stopped at the third door down the hall and opened it.

The apartment was bright and cheerful with yellow and white decor. As you walked in, there was a small kitchen on the right, a full bath with tub and shower on the left, and beyond, a large room with two studio couches at one end and a dining room table at the other. A sliding glass door opened onto the balcony that overlooked the pool area. We loved it! "Sandy, when can we move in?" "As soon as you'd like." We finally found a home; one that would be our refuge as we navigated this life-threatening storm.

With new energy and joy, we went back to the clinic to collect our things. One of the patients had rented a compact car and offered to help us move in. It took several trips, but by evening we were home. We spent the weekend unpacking, food shopping, swimming, and enjoying "the good life." Sunday afternoon, we picked up our bikes at the airport and rode straight to the ocean. It felt so good to be independently mobile again... so good to be free from cancer and enjoying life to the fullest.

As we rode along the back streets, we marveled at the sights and sounds of the Bahamas. Strange new plants and animals were a feast for our eyes. Amber sat on the back of my bike—the same \$13 bike I bought in Whittier two years earlier—babbling on and on. "Mom, let's take that road there. No, not *that one*, *that one*. Can we stop and explore those ruins? How far away is the beach? Can we go swimmin' in that canal? Oh, Mom, isn't this fun? Hey, Gar, I'll race ya! Come on, Mom, go faster!" I'd strain to peddle as fast as I could; Amber just laughing with delight; Gary pretending to lose the race; all of us surrendering to the wind, the sun, and the feeling that we had escaped from the world. We were happy, truly happy.

Unable to hold off reality, we arrived at the clinic at 8 am sharp. We were back... back to the reason we were here... back to the CancerWorld again. I tried not to show my disappointment but a sinking feeling clouded my thoughts, if not my words and

actions. "I need to stay strong... to stay upbeat and optimistic for Amber."

Before the orientation meeting, Amber needed to have her blood pulled. It was a new term to replace the old one: Blood drawn. We were led through the Waiting Room and into the Blood Pull Room. Because of what she'd already been through, she was terrified. But as she looked around the room and saw the other patients treating the needles so "matter-of-factly," her fear began to subside. Hand in hand, we stood in the doorway watching, just letting her fears float away and finally disappear.

The scene was unusual: People simply sat down in the chair, chatting all the while as if they were visiting with their best friend. Lee, the technician, put the tourniquet on their arm, swabbed the injection site, put the needle in, drew blood out, released the tourniquet, removed the needle, and put pressure in the area to stop any bleeding. All of this was done in a couple of minutes with no crying and no screaming; they didn't even flinch. Amber studied their faces. The patients continued to talk and laugh through the whole process.

From this scene, she collected her courage. "Okay. You can take my blood now... but it better not hurt too much." She hopped up into the chair as I stood by her side. "Here, Amber, squeeze my hand if it hurts." At the beginning she did, and then I felt her hand relax. She felt proud as she held the cotton swab on her arm to keep it from bleeding. Now she was a "pro" like the rest of them.

Dr. John Clement was the medical doctor who did the actual examination. Since Burton was ostracized in the States and could not practice his immunotherapy there, he came to the Bahamas to continue his practice and research. According to his agreement with the Bahamian government, Burton was allowed to practice his therapy as long as he didn't treat any Bahamians (they didn't want them to be used as "guinea pigs") so he had a MD on staff. Since Burton was a Ph.D., he couldn't work directly with the patients.

Dr. Clement was a tall, lean, very good looking man with an English accent. I could've fallen in love with him instantly, had the circumstances been different. I buried my thoughts. "Well, hello Amber. I'm Dr. Clement and I'll be taking care of you. Now, tell me

about this." He pointed to her scar and the small metastasis underneath. "Well, I used to have a *big* bump there and then the doctor cut it off, and I got a lot of pin pricks and needles and..." He looked at me and then at her. "I don't wanna get any more needles or 'cocktails' okay?" He smiled. I had to explain. "I was taking her to Dr. Cole in Long Island, New York, for an intravenous combination of small amounts of chemotherapy, DMSO, laetrile, and vitamin C. He calls them 'cocktails'." "Oh... I see. Let's just take a look at this." I could tell he was enchanted by her as he studied and probed the tumor site. "Does this hurt?" He moved the tiny lump that grew under the scar. "Nope." He weighed her, measured her, and took her temperature. With the examination over, I thanked him, took Amber's hand, and walked to the Conference Room.

The meeting for new patients was just getting started. Gary took Amber across the street for pancakes, while I attended. As I looked around the conference table at the other potential patients I realized, "For most of us, this is the opportunity to save our loved ones' life. I can see my own desperation in their faces," I silently rambled, "I wonder what kind of cancer *she* has. I don't see any evidence... any tumors. And *him*, I can't see his cancer either. How did all these people find out about Burton?" It was as if we were all thrown together in this room for our last hope for a cure... for our last chance at life.

The door opened and Mrs. Esther Burton, almost comical with her "beehive" hairdo, walked to the head of the table and sat down. She seemed stern and serious; a stark contrast to my clinic experience so far. As she looked up from the pile of papers before her and cleared her throat, the expression on her face told me she was not amused at our attempts at light conversation. The whole mood of the room changed. Like a soldier to her troops, she explained the therapy to us. "First thing in the morning, 3cc's of blood is drawn. Then you leave and return at 10:00 to pick up the patient's syringes, usually four of them. They must be kept cold and injected one hour apart. You have to eat plenty of protein, especially chicken." She went on to explain a few facts about island living and where we could go food shopping, send a telex, make phone calls, etc. I stayed to fill out some forms, then slowly