

A Pink Skirt  
*by Suzanne Osborne*

The memory is as vivid to me today as when it took place 34 years ago. My not-so-newly divorced mother had decided I was in need of a father's discipline. I was being packed off to Ohio with every one of my 13-year-old bones full of rebellion. I carried with me a small jar of Texas dirt and the determination that come hell or high water I would someday return.

Time passes and, as life happens, circumstances reroute our intentions. Twelve years later found me single with two small daughters driving cross-country on our first real vacation. Finally, my girls were going to see the place only familiar to them as a map on mama's bedroom wall. We were spending ten days in Texas for the Fourth of July. I went speeding through wide-open spaces with a sky so close I could touch it and more stars than I remembered existing. We swam in a lake where a sign warned us not to feed the alligators. We ate chicken fried steak and watched fireworks while the delicious heat of the July night penetrated bone deep. I hadn't felt so warm in years. We left Texas, tanned, carefree and happy although I was frustrated to be leaving at all.

My younger brother, Joe, had been house sitting for me and greeted my return with a solemn face. He insisted I listen to the messages on my answering machine. There was only one. My doctor's office regretted to inform me that "it" had shown up again and I needed to come in immediately. It had reared its ugly head once before, blindsiding me with a routine pap smear presenting abnormal results. I had told no one fearing that speaking of it would make it real, as words have the power to do. At the time, I was 22 years old with a 3-year-old whose father died

before she was born and a 1-year-old whose father might as well have been dead for all the use he was to us. I remember sitting in that sterile room, staring at the floor, trying to process how cells just suddenly decided to mutate in my own cervix and destroy me. This would make my babies orphans. Dear God, I thought, who would raise them for me? My mother would be the logical choice, but she was almost 60 and had heart trouble.

Reality penetrated my dazed confusion in the form of a glossy tri-fold brochure. There were rows of stick figure women like those you see on bathroom doors except these all had little pink skirts. Each stick figure stood for ten women, and each row represented the stage you were caught at, as if you were going over a precipice and had suddenly been arrested in your fall. Stage 1 had nine stick women pictured with the tenth grayed out. Those nine, so pink and vital, seemed hopeful, but all I could focus on was the last one. Ten women had just faded away with the color leached from their skirts by an invisible, silent thief. I belatedly realized that was not even my row. My eyes moved down to stage 3 where only six of the ten figures were pink. Better than half seemed like a good shot, and I grasped at it, until the extenuating factors were explained to me. Through a fog I heard my doctor say that they could remove it with a laser . . . if we get it all . . . if you make it three years without a recurrence . . . you're so young to have this happen.

My doctor performed the operation himself and, after confirmation came that he had been able to remove it all, he remained fanatical in his vigilance. I was tested every six weeks repeatedly, and then he was able to move it out to every three months. What a noteworthy day for us both when he said, "I'll see you in six months!" There were smiles and sighs of relief all

around his office. The staff had become personally vested in my care over the years. They remembered the young, engaged couple deciding to hold off on the wedding until after their unplanned baby was born. They had kept the secret of our child's gender from her father and me so it would be a surprise to us. They had perhaps regretted that secret, as I had, when he never showed up at a family cookout after work and, late that night, I had learned he would never show up again. They were rooting for me throughout my second pregnancy, an afterthought of an ill-fated attempt at proving I was ready for a new relationship. My fortitude gave them a chance to believe that destiny could be diverted and life was sometimes just.

I was certain no one in that office had wanted to make the most recent phone call and were undoubtedly relieved to have gotten the answering machine. I found myself fresh from our vacation, wilting, while explaining the implications to my family. The facts were that nine pap smears later, and ten weeks short of the all-important three year threshold, I had just become a young mother with a 30% chance of living another ten years. Three perky little pink skirts had been effectively bleached to oblivion while I was performing some mundane task, perhaps folding laundry or mowing the yard. It frightened me to think that my life was slipping away and I didn't even hear a whisper as it went.

This time around I had support, but I found it cumbersome which in turn made me feel guilty for my ingratitude. The truth is, the worry of others is a heavy burden when you are carrying all the weight you can bear. I was fortunate to have been tested at stage 1 the second time. I found myself, in an attempt at humor, questioning if that meant I could get a skirt back. Two weeks later I received a call giving me the all clear, but by then I had determined a woman

waiting for the ringing of a phone to change her life was not who I wanted to be. I had decided that, for however long I had left, I was going to do what made me happy regardless of how ridiculous it sounded to others.

After putting the phone down, I walked into my bedroom and closed my eyes. I spun around twice before sticking a thumbtack in the Texas map on my wall. I acted swiftly, before logic had a chance to deter me, and within a month my plans were complete. I handed my house over to Joe after I bought a lowboy trailer and the most pitiful excuse for a \$300 van imaginable. The van didn't even go in reverse, but that was all right because forward was the only direction I was looking. I headed south on the interstate in a car carrying two kids, two cats and two hedgehogs; van, trailer, and brother with my pared down worldly possessions were following behind. Wretched as it sounds, those were actually the items on the plus side of my new beginning. On the negative side were the immutable facts of knowing no one where I was going, having no job or home and only having a paltry \$1,500 to my name. Even though this took place 22 years ago, that much cash back then didn't buy you a whole lot more than it will now.

When we arrived in my thumbtack town two days later, I drove Joe to the airport for his return flight. I then checked us in to a Motel 6 that would be our home for the next couple of weeks. As soon as the girls were enrolled in school, I went to work for a temporary agency and fast-talked my way into a trailer for rent. I am sure none of my family believed I would stay, but almost 20 years passed before I next drove north to visit my mom in the hospital.

There have been plenty of ups and downs through the years; against all the odds, I have lived them. Some might call my decision to strike out as I did foolhardy or something far less

charitable, but I know it was the best and bravest thing I have ever done. My girls are grown and married now with children of their own. I have finally picked up the dream of going to college, believing I will have time to finish. I have a little farm with a garden where I can sit in the sun, warmed to my marrow and full of gratitude. Just last week, driving down a red dirt road, I rolled my window down and shouted to the heavens, "I'm a Texan. Thank you God!" Deep in my heart, I wear a pink skirt and a smile as big as Texas.

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