

# Walking To Gibraltar, Chapter 3: In Which Everyone Was Wrong

by Frank Indiana

What's the protocol for telling people your spouse has cancer? How do you tell your son, your friends, your co-workers? How do you tell your mother? How do you tell *her* mother?

"I can't talk to her," Astrid said. "Will you call her, please?"

Astrid had spoken to her mother once in the previous two years. That once had been eight days earlier, when she called to tell her mother it was possible she had cancer.

"It's probably nothing to worry about, Mom," Astrid had said. "Everyone says it's probably nothing."

Astrid did not lie. Everyone said the grain-of-sand lump she'd felt on the front-outside corner of her left breast was nothing. Yes, the nurse could feel it, and the doctor could feel it, but it didn't show up on the mammogram. It did show up on ultrasound—but it was so tiny that it was probably a benign cyst. But its shape was a little irregular, so it was best just to do a biopsy. The surgeon, Dr. Dresser, didn't think it was anything, and Dr. Dresser had done thousands of breast surgeries over the course of his career. He still didn't think it was anything after he removed it and sent it off to the lab.

Everyone was wrong.

And now it was time for Astrid's mom to be informed of the mistaken opinions of at least two physicians, two radiology technicians, four nurses, one husband, a son, three girlfriends, and, so far as Frank knew, the boyfriend.

The boy she'd been seeing. Not boyfriend. He hated the sound of that. He refused to consider it except in the quietest, most constricted voice in the tiniest, blackest corner of his mind.

No matter. The not-boyfriend would not be phoning her mother.

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"Hi, Mom," Frank said. "Astrid asked me to call you."

"Frank. How are you, honey?" asked Astrid's mother. Glenda. But he'd always called her "Mom."

"Fine, fine. Listen, Mom. Astrid talked to the doctor. It was—the news wasn't really good. He told her it was cancer."

He could almost hear her knees collapse. "No!" she cried. "How can that be possible? I prayed."

"I know, Mom. I know. I'm really sorry. It's really small and they caught it really early, and they think she's going to be just fine. But—I'm sorry."

Frank told her what he knew, embarrassed to be the one to have to do it. He'd never known how to talk with Glenda, who treated even the most mundane developments—a trip to Pizza Hut, a new clock radio—as high drama. What place did her daughter's—her estranged daughter's—cancer have in her soap-opera universe? Glenda hyperventilated. He did his best to sound strong and calm, assured her he would call.

"How can that be possible?" she asked. "I prayed." Those were the words that would haunt him for the next year. Because he realized that Glenda really wanted to know the answer. How was it that the awesome power of her prayer had not moved the Lord Jesus to heal her daughter? What was the flaw in Glenda's faith that allowed the Maker of Heaven and Earth to reject her plea?

Frank felt sorry for her in spite of himself. Nobody should have to carry that sort of burden. Astrid's cancer was about environment, genetics, luck, some combination thereof—who knew? The doctors didn't know. If Almighty God was responsible, then Almighty God was an asshole.

