

❁ LIFE WISH ❁

JILL IRELAND



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LIFE WISH

To my family

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

WHEN I WAS TOLD I had cancer, I would have loved to talk to someone who had had the disease. I had watched several people close to me suffer from cancer, but unhappily none of them survived. It helped me through my initial terror that Happy Rockefeller and Betty Ford had overcome breast cancer; they were walking around now smiling and healthy, weren't they? I clung to this: if they could do it, so could I.

I am grateful to those two women for being publicly candid about their personal battles with cancer. It made a difference to me. With this in mind, I started this book as a companion for anyone unfortunate enough to be going through the isolation of catastrophic illness.

I intended the book to be helpful to others, but it soon became my companion, a means of self-discovery and personal growth. For seven months it seemed to write itself. Each day I awoke and was able to cast off the miasma of being a cancer victim with the knowledge that awaiting me downstairs along with my morning cup of tea was a brand-new yellow legal pad and a clear plastic Ziploc bag filled with a multitude of brightly colored felt-tipped pens.

There are many debts of gratitude that I would like to acknowledge, special people I am compelled to thank, starting with my doctors:

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Finally, thank you, Charlie, Suzanne, Paul, Tony, Jason, Valentine, Katrina and Zuleika. I love you.

Jill Ireland

LIFE WISH

1



Malignant!

Insidious, ugly, horrifying word. It slammed across the room at me, with almost physical force.

I had just undergone a biopsy. I was sick, giddy and disoriented; but as I was wheeled back into my room, I managed to ask my husband, "Did you see my doctor?"

"Yes."

"What did he say?"

The reply was spoken simply. "It's malignant. You are having a mastectomy tomorrow."

Cancer! I felt a flame of fear deep in my gut.

"Why didn't they operate while I was out? Why didn't they? No. I won't. I can't go through that again." I pushed away the plastic vomit dish. "I can't face the anesthetic. I can't go through the post-operating room again. Oh, why didn't they do it while I was out? Why?"

The outburst brought another attack of the awful nausea. God, this was a nightmare.

"Why didn't they take it while I was out?" Now I was angry. My right breast was burning with pain. All I could think was that I would have to face this again tomorrow. I managed to cry and vomit at the same time.

Charlie looked at me, shattered. I'd never seen an expression like it in his eyes before. "I tried to get them to do it, but they said they had to wake you and tell you. . . ."


In those first moments the impact of the consequences of cancer had not entered my mind. All I could handle was my immediate pain. It was a step down a road that would have no end. Now I know you don't get over cancer. Hopefully, you outlive it. But as I lay there recovering from a biopsy performed under general anesthetic that June 1, 1984, I had a great deal to learn, many battles to be fought.

Married to the man I loved, a mother to seven children, I was leading a full and happy life. With one slash of a surgeon's knife, everything was imperiled. My God, my daughter was only twelve years old. I was filled with horror. This couldn't be happening.

It wasn't until many months after Charlie spoke those terrifying words in the hospital that I determined to discover, if I could, why me?

This, then, is my moment of truth.

2

 I WAS THE FIRSTBORN of John and Dorothy Ireland. They named me Jill Dorothy. We lived on a pretty, tree-lined street in a suburb of London with my baby brother, John. Each house was red brick with a flower-filled front garden surrounded by a well-trimmed privet hedge. My parents' house had a blue front door on which the name *Chertsy* was inscribed. I didn't know then and I don't know to this day what the name meant. But to me it made our house special.

I thought my father was very handsome, dark-haired with golden skin, large brown eyes with long black lashes and perfect, even features. He had a ready wit, a good singing voice and a conversational flair. He was a popular man who liked to socialize. High on his priorities was his pint of beer with friends. He kept the front and back gardens immaculate; the roses and the lawn were his great pride.

My mother was blue-eyed, with fair skin and hair, a true Anglo-Saxon. As a young woman she had a very feminine figure, rounded and soft, not athletic. Her brain, however, was athletic. She had a sharp, often caustic wit and she was good at arithmetic, capable of working out large, complicated problems in her head in seconds. To my amazement, she also could juggle three oranges in one hand. My mother liked to laugh and knew how to enjoy the moment. She kept house impeccably, never allowing me or anyone else to help her, saying, "If you want something done properly, do it yourself."

My parents often went dancing and I loved to see them off for an evening, Mummy in a long, sparkling dress and Daddy so debonair in his suit or, on a big night, his dinner jacket. They were a passionate couple who lived, loved and fought with gusto.

My mother's father was a mounted policeman who came from three generations of horsemen and country landowners in Dorset. My mother's mother was reared on a large, successful dairy farm. My own father managed a chain of grocery stores. His father, my paternal grandfather, had been a coachman. And my father, as a boy, had worked in the livery stables. He loved horses. Can such traits be inherited? I suppose they can. In any event, I grew up with a great love of horses and riding.

But it was not horseback riding that occupied my childhood. I can still recapture an early memory. I was four years old, holding my mother's hand as we walked through the tree-lined suburban streets. Dry autumn leaves crunched under my feet as I hurried to keep up with her determined stride. That was a special day. I was happy to be going somewhere alone with Mummy, without my baby brother, John. We weren't just on a stroll; my mother was excited and full of purpose.

"But where are we going, Mummy?"

"You'll see." She was puffed up with the secret.

"But where?" I was excited now.

"You'll see when we get there."

We crossed a hardtop road and found ourselves at a churchlike building. We entered the building. And life began.

I heard a piano. I know now it was classical music, Delibes to be precise. Then, it was magic music to me. With a hollow, haunting sound, it echoed through the long corridors. We entered a room occupied by rows of small children wearing pale pink silk tunics tied at the waist with satin ribbons, their hair pulled back in satin bands. On their feet, shiny pink slippers—I had never seen anything like it. A dark-haired

woman stopped the music with a wave of her hand and approached us. I no longer remember the conversation she held with my mother. I only recall dancing in my socks with the other children to the beautiful music.

My mother sat on a wooden chair along a wall with the other "Mummies." She looked happy as I made my first attempt at a balletic leap, a grand jeté. I was enrolled in the Stella Mainwaring School of Ballet, Tap and Elocution.

I remember the ballet, acrobatic and tap classes. I remember my first solo in one of many recitals. I danced to the music of *Coppélia*: *Da Da DAA-DA Da DAA-DA De Dudaly DA DA DA*. I can still dance the first steps. I remember my pink satin shoes and the cotton wrapped around my toes, sticking to the blisters as I peeled it off. I remember the many ballet exams and my copy of *First Steps* by William Franch, the small ballet dancer's bible. I remember the happy times. According to my inordinately proud mother, I danced with such talent and ability on my first visit that Miss Stella, as we called her, asked if I had taken lessons.

I remained happily with Miss Stella until she married and moved to a far-off land called America. Then I was taken to Gladys Harmer's dancing school, a more pressurized environment. I was ten, old enough to make the trip alone on a bus. I was not as happy as I had been at Miss Stella's. When, I wonder, did the happiness stop and a sense of responsibility, an obsession to succeed, take over? When did I lose my chance to choose? The other girls were competitive. They were good, extraordinarily good. One was expected to win medals at the prestigious all-England dance festivals. One was also required to receive honors in the endless ballet examinations given in French by licensed examiners. They were a source of constant worry and pressure. I developed a nervous sniffing, even when I slept. Sniff, sniff, sniff.

"Jill, stop sniffing," my mother would call through the wall.

Next step up the ladder was a professional child's dancing and acting school, the Corona Academy in Chiswick, London.

Now I rode the bus and a train to the high-powered school that provided children for movies and the theater. Several child stars attended the school. My father hardly seemed to figure in my life. My mother, energetic, vital and determined, prevailed. She urged, cajoled and encouraged me. She told me much later it had given her a social outlet, a means of self-expression. Once a week she bought a copy of the *Stage* and scoured it for child auditions. By the time I was twelve, I had appeared in pantomime, and danced in the children's ballet as one of the fairies in *Cinderella*. Once a week I was allowed to leave school early to play in Thursday matinees.

At fourteen, I joined the 3 J's — Jean, Jeanette and Jill. We danced, sang and performed acrobatics at balls, Masonic dinners and occasional church socials. Then at fifteen and a half I became a Tiller Girl, a sort of Rockette, at the London Palladium. This necessitated an hour-long journey with a forty-five-minute walk to and from the station. Frightened and alone well after midnight, I walked the center of the road. It was dark, silent and quite terrifying. At last I would see my house. Key in shaking hand, I would open the door and creep upstairs to bed to sniff myself to sleep. That was my routine every night for five months. When the Palladium job ended I danced in the musical *Wish You Were Here*, then another, *Wonderful Time*. I was sixteen when my parents gave me permission to share a London apartment with a girlfriend. I was happily relieved of my midnight runs.

At seventeen I spent springtime in Paris, dancing with the Anita Avila Ballet Company. Later that summer I danced in Monte Carlo's Sporting Club. The highlight of that season was an invitation to Prince Rainier's annual Red Cross Ball, a black-tie affair. None of the ballet dancers owned an evening gown, although some had cocktail dresses. All I had was the taffeta skirt I wore with a strapless bathing suit for a bodice. I clipped earrings to my shoes to make them look like evening slippers, and off I went. It was a wonderful experience, my first sight of real luxury, of wealthy men and stunning women.

When I was eighteen I appeared in the movie *Oh, Rosalinda*, dancing a solo role. My performance attracted the J. Arthur Rank Organization, which signed me to a film contract. By the time I was twenty I had starred in several movies. A year later I married a handsome young actor, David McCallum, and thirteen months later I became the mother of a son, Paul. I don't remember making conscious decisions to do all this. It just happened.

While I was pregnant, the Rank Organization suspended my contract. Suspecting they would, I had concealed my condition until I couldn't fit into a champagne silk evening gown "the Organization" had especially designed for me to wear to premieres and balls. David and I were to attend a premiere at the Odeon Theatre in Leicester Square as one of our contractual obligations. The limousine arrived promptly, early enough to give me time to get into my finery. There were the evening gown and fur waiting on the backseat of the limo. The Rank Organization, never philanthropic, kept my dress-up clothes in the studio wardrobe department, delivering them just for the occasion. When I returned home after the ball or other events, I removed my fancy clothes and the driver put them back in the limousine; then like a rather large pumpkin, it drove off, leaving me clad in an old terry-cloth robe. This time, horrors, the dress refused to zip up. David tried. I tried. No good. What now? I couldn't *not* turn up. I'd played truant too often. There was no choice; I had to wear a dress of my own. It would surely cause trouble and end in harsh comments from Rank's higher echelons. But it seemed the best solution under the circumstances. I didn't own many clothes. I tended to look like a beatnik in my civvies: black slacks, black shirt and leather thong sandals. Standing before my closet in my underwear, I frantically slid my few things along the rod. I had recently bought a plain gray silk dress from Fenwicks in Bond Street, attracted by its modest price. It was simple and suitable to my age, not at all glamorous and sexy like the creation I had failed to zip. The Organization insisted on a certain image for its contract players. We were


members of what they called the Rank Charm School. We were supposed to be well-bred, society-type girls who acted for fun. We wore elegant gowns provided by the studio. My gray dress didn't fit the portrait, but I wore it. David, who was desperate because his own contract was threatened by this whole affair, said I looked nice. I draped the rented fur over my shoulders and off we went. I encountered a sea of raised eyebrows. The following day I was questioned. I confessed, and my movie contract was suspended.

If Mr. Rank did not want his swelling actress, many other studios and theater productions did. During my pregnancy I appeared on stage at night and worked at movie studios in the day. In *The Diary of Anne Frank* I mastered the art of walking sideways while still facing the audience. I looked pregnant only from the side view, so I moved, sat and spoke with my body facing out front. I played Margot, Anne Frank's sickly sister. The script required the cast to remain onstage throughout the play. Margot spent much of the time resting on a couch. I'm afraid Margot, and Jill, fell asleep more than once.

After Paul's birth, the Organization measured my waist to certify I had returned to my pre-pregnant eighteen inches. I had. My contract was renewed for another year. Looking back, I remember working, going to class and keeping in shape. I was ready for any job that might come up. I took care of my clothes; actresses need to dress well. I took care of my shoes; actresses need good shoes. I saved my money — you never knew when you would be out of work. I took care of my figure, hair and skin. And finally I controlled my sniff. David was much in demand as an actor. Both of us worked regularly; we were considered a successful young couple. Sophisticates, we thought ourselves, juggling our work, marriage and parenthood. I loved acting in spite of never feeling I was good enough, never feeling satisfied with my performances.

Then still in my twenties, as Miss Stella had done eighteen years earlier, we moved to the far-off land, America.

3

 I WAS AT HOME, lying naked under a towel on the massage table in my dressing room, divorced, remarried — many movies, countries and children later. My masseuse, a small, dark-haired Russian named Jana, worked on my body as we talked and gossiped about things women discuss when they're alone in their private world, concerned only for that moment with the preservation of beauty. Jana massaged my thighs with strong, kneading fingers. Her purpose was to make sure not one bubble of cellulite would mar the line of my legs.

Massages were new for me. I'd started them four weeks earlier in a desperate attempt to get back into shape after the most recent of a series of leg injuries. My right leg had atrophied; the muscle tone was weak. I'd been exercising, but that wasn't enough. I had been advised that massage was good for the circulation. Jana was a cosmetic masseuse, dedicated to keeping women's bodies flawless. Wonderful! I was getting therapeutic massage and my thighs were looking swell. I wanted my legs to look good again for myself and for my husband, Charlie.

Charlie . . . I thought of him while Jana worked away. I fell in love with Charles Bronson in Bavaria during the filming of *The Great Escape* in 1962, shortly after I'd suffered a miscarriage. I'd just come out of the hospital and was on my first outing when I was introduced to Charlie, along with other