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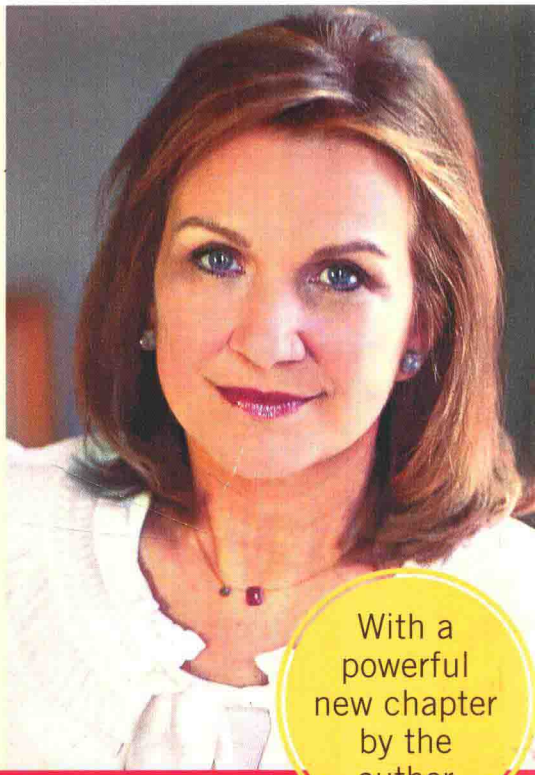
saving graces

FINDING SOLACE AND STRENGTH FROM FRIENDS AND STRANGERS



With a powerful new chapter by the author

elizabeth edwards

SAVING GRACES

Finding Solace and Strength from Friends and Strangers

ELIZABETH EDWARDS

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SAVING GRACES

For Wade, Cate, Emma Claire, and Jack

This is a small offering, for no mother
has ever been more blessed.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

KENOSHA

October 21, 2004

My face was tilted toward the stream of water from the showerhead. Water spilled from the corners of my closed eyes as my fingers outlined the unfamiliar lump in my right breast. Around and around again, I traced its edges. Try as I might, it wouldn't go away. How could I have missed something this size when I showered yesterday? Or the day before? Or . . . but it didn't matter. I'd found it today, this lump, firm and big on the side of my breast. I kept my eyes closed and finished rinsing my hair.

Until that moment—until the lump—October 21, 2004, was meant to be an ordinary day, if such a thing can exist on a campaign trail two weeks before a presidential election. An 11:00 A.M. town hall meeting at the Kenosha United Auto Workers hall. A rally later that day in Erie, Pennsylvania. Scranton in time for dinner, and Maine by sunrise the next morning. I would speak to at least two thousand people, prepare to tape a segment for *Good Morning America*, discuss Medicare premiums with senior citizens, talk

college tuition with parents, and, if it was a very good day, influence at least a few undecided voters. Just another ordinary day.

But I had learned long ago that it was typically the most ordinary days that the careful pieces of life can break away and shatter. As I climbed out of the shower, I heard the door to my hotel room click shut. I knew instantly who it was, and I was relieved. "Hargrave," I called out from the bathroom, wrapping myself in a towel, "come feel this." Hargrave McElroy was my dear friend of twenty-three years, my daughter Cate's godmother, a teacher at the high school my children had attended, and now my assistant and companion on the road. She had agreed to travel with me after John had been named the Democratic vice presidential nominee. I had previously chased away a couple of well-intentioned young assistants who aroused my desire to parent them instead of letting them take care of me, which was wearing me out. I needed a grown-up, and I asked Hargrave to join me. She had no experience on campaigns, but she was a teacher and what's more, the mother of three boys. That's enough experience to handle any job. Choosing Hargrave was one of the best decisions I would make. She instinctively knew when to buy more cough drops, when to hand me a fresh Diet Coke, and, I now hoped, what to do after one discovers a lump in her breast.

Hargrave pressed her fingers against the bulge on my right breast, which felt as smooth and firm as a plum. She pressed her lips together and looked at me directly and gently, just like she was listening to a student in one of her classes give the wrong answer. "Hmmm," she said, calmly meeting my eyes. "When was your last mammogram?"

I hated to admit it, but it had been too long, much too long. For years, I had made all the excuses women make for not taking care of these things—the two young children I was raising, the house I was running. We had moved to Washington four years earlier, and I had never found a doctor there. Life just always seemed to get in the way. All lousy excuses, I knew, for not taking care of myself.

"We better get that checked out as soon as we can," Hargrave said.

I had a feeling she meant that very morning, but that was not going to be possible. We had less than two weeks before the election. Undoubtedly people had already gathered in the union hall to listen to the speakers scheduled before me, and there were young volunteers setting up for a town hall in Erie, and—as the King of Siam said in the musical—"et cetera, et cetera, et cetera." My lump would have to wait; the ordinary day would go on as scheduled. Except for one thing. Today, I planned to go shopping.

The previous evening, I had spotted an outlet mall on our way to the hotel. We had spent the night in a Radisson—a fact I discovered that morning when I read the soap in the bathroom. Since I started campaigning, it had been a different hotel in a different city each night. We would arrive late, traveling after it was too late to campaign, and we would enter and exit most hotels through the same back door used to take out the trash. Unless the trash dumpster bore the name of the hotel, I'd figure out where we were only if I remembered to look at the soap in the bathroom.

As soon as we spotted the outlets, Hargrave, Karen Finney—my press secretary—and I started calculating. The stores would open at ten, and it was a ten-minute drive to the UAW hall. That left about forty-five minutes to shop. It wasn't a lot of time, but for three women who hadn't been shopping in months, it was a gracious plenty. Despite the lump and everything it might mean, I had no intention of changing our plan. We had all been looking forward to the unprecedented time devoted to something as mindless, frivolous, and selfish as shopping. The clothes I had in my suitcase that day were basically the same ones I had packed when I left Washington in early July, and it was now nearing November in Wisconsin. It was cold, I was sick of my clothes, and, to be honest, I wasn't particularly concerned about the lump. This had happened before, about ten years earlier. I had found what turned out to be a harmless fibrous cyst. I had it removed, and there were no problems. Granted, this lump was clearly larger than the other, but as I felt its smooth contour, I was convinced this had to be another cyst. I wasn't going to allow myself to think it could be anything else.

In the backseat of the Suburban, I told Hargrave how to reach Wells Edmundson, my doctor in Raleigh. With the phone pressed to her ear, she asked me for the details. No, the skin on my breast wasn't puckered. Yes, I had found a small lump before.

At the Dana Buchman outlet, I looked through the blazers as Hargrave stood nearby, still on the phone to Wells. I spotted a terrific red jacket, and I waved to Hargrave for her opinion. "The lump was really pretty big," she said into the phone while giving me a thumbs-up on the blazer. There we were, two women, surrounded by men with earpieces, whispering about lumps and flipping through the sales rack. The saleswomen huddled, their eyes darting from the Secret Service agents to the few customers in the store. Then they huddled again. Neither of us looked like someone who warranted special protection—certainly not me, flipping through the racks at manic speed, watching the clock tick toward 10:30. Whatever worry I had felt earlier, Hargrave had taken on. She had made the phone calls; she had heard the urgent voices on the other end. She would worry, and she would let me be the naive optimist. And I was grateful for that.

She hung up the phone. "Are you sure you want to keep going?" she asked me, pointing out that our schedule during the remaining eleven days until the election entailed stops in thirty-five cities. "It could be exhausting." Stopping wasn't going to make the lump go away, and exhaustion was a word I had long ago banished from my vocabulary.

"I'm fine," I said. "And I'm getting this red blazer."

"You're braver than I am," she told me. "From now on, I will always think of that blazer as the Courage Jacket." Within minutes, she was back on the phone with Kathleen McGlynn, our scheduler in D.C., who could make even impossible schedules work, telling her only that we needed some free time the next Friday for a private appointment.

While I bought a suit and that red jacket, Hargrave set up an appointment with Dr. Edmundson for the next week, when we were scheduled to return to Raleigh. Through the phone calls and

despite her worry, she still found a pale pink jacket that suited her gentle nature perfectly. All the plans to deal with the lump were made, and the appointments were days away. I wanted to push it all aside, and thanks to Hargrave and the thirty-five cities in my near future, I could. We gathered Karen and headed out for that ordinary day.

The town hall meeting went well—except at one point I reversed the names of George Bush and John Kerry in a line I had delivered a hundred times, a mistake I had never made before and never made after. "While John Kerry protects the bank accounts of pharmaceutical companies by banning the safe reimportation of prescription drugs, George Bush wants to protect your bank account. . . ." I got no further, as the crowd groaned, and one old man in the front good-naturedly shouted out that I'd gotten it backwards. "Oops." I said it again, right this time, and we had a good laugh. I looked at Hargrave and rolled my eyes. Was this how it would be for the next week? Fortunately, it was not. We flew to an icy Pennsylvania, where the two town halls went well enough, or at least without event. I had my legs again. And then on to Maine for the following day.

I could tell by the look on the technician's face that it was bad news. Hargrave and I—and the Secret Service agents—had ridden to Dr. Edmundson's office as soon as we landed back in Raleigh the following week, just four days before the election. I had told Karen and Ryan Montoya, my trip director on the road, about the lump, and the Secret Service agents knew what was going on because they were always there, though they never mentioned a word about it to me or to anyone else. Ryan had quietly disappeared to my house in Raleigh, and the Secret Service agents respectfully kept a greater distance as Hargrave led me inside. I was lucky because Wells Edmundson was not only my doctor, he was our friend. His daughter Erin had played soccer with our daughter Cate on one of the teams that John coached over the years. His nurse, Cindy, met me at the back door and led me to Wells' office, dotted with pictures of his children.

"I don't have the equipment here to tell you anything for certain," Wells said after examining the lump. Ever the optimist, he agreed that the smooth contour I felt could be a cyst, and ever the cautious doctor, he ordered an immediate mammogram. His attitude seemed so very positive, I was more buoyed than worried. As Hargrave and I rode to a nearby radiology lab for the test, I felt fine. One thing I had learned over the years: hope is precious, and there's no reason to give it up until you absolutely have to.

This is where the story changes, of course. The ultrasound, which followed the mammogram that day, looked terrible. The bump may have felt smooth to my touch, but on the other side—on the inside—it had grown tentacles, now glowing a slippery green on the computer screen. The technician called in the radiologist. Time moved like molasses as I lay in the cold examining room. I grew more worried, and then came the words that by this point seemed inevitable: "This is very serious." The radiologist's face was a portrait of gloom.

I dressed and walked back out as I had walked in, through a darkened staff lounge toward a back door where the Secret Service car and Hargrave waited for me. I was alone in the dark, and I felt frightened and vulnerable. This was the darkest moment, the moment it really hit me. I had cancer. As the weight of it sank in, I slowed my step and the tears pushed against my eyes. I pushed back. Not now. Now I had to walk back into that sunlight, that beautiful Carolina day, to the Secret Service and to Hargrave, who would be watching my face for clues just as I had watched the image on the ultrasound monitor.

"It's bad," was all I could manage to Hargrave.

As the Secret Service backed out onto the road for home, Hargrave rubbed my shoulder and silent tears snuck across my cheeks. I had to call John, and I couldn't do that until I could speak without crying. The thing I wanted to do most was talk to him, and the thing I wanted to do least was tell him this news.

I had mentioned nothing to John earlier, although I spoke to him several times a day during the campaign, as we had for our

entire marriage. I couldn't let him worry when he was so far away. And I had hoped there would be nothing to tell him. Certainly not this. I had promised myself he would never have to hear bad news again. He—and Cate, our older daughter—had suffered too much already. Our son Wade had been killed in an auto accident eight years earlier, and we had all been through the worst life could deal us. I never wanted to see either of them experience one more moment of sadness. And, after almost thirty years of marriage, I knew exactly how John would respond. As soon as he heard, he would insist that we drop everything and take care of the problem.

Sitting in the car, I dialed John's number. Lexi Bar, who had been with us for years and was like family, answered. I skipped our usual banter and asked to speak to John. He had just landed in Raleigh—we had both come home to vote and to attend a large rally where the rock star Jon Bon Jovi was scheduled to perform.

He got on the phone, and I started slowly. "Sweetie," I began. It's how I always began. And then came the difference: I couldn't speak. Tears were there, panic was there, need was there, but not words. He knew, of course, when I couldn't speak that something was wrong.

"Just tell me what's wrong," he insisted.

I explained that I had found the lump, had it checked out by Wells, and now needed to have a needle biopsy. "I'm sure it's nothing," I assured him and told him that I wanted to wait until after the election to have the biopsy. He said he'd come right home, and I went there to wait for him.

Hargrave and I got there first. I opened my back door to the smell of clean laundry. As much as I truly enjoyed traveling the country campaigning, there's nothing like walking into your own house warm with fresh laundry. Ryan appeared in the kitchen, clean socks in his hands. It was often impossible to do laundry on the road, and everyone knew that our house in Raleigh was there for their use whenever they needed it. When he saw Hargrave's face, Ryan simply gave me a hug. I sent them all home—Ryan to his hotel, Hargrave to her house around the corner—and I sat in the

study looking out at the basketball goal where I had watched Wade play so often, and in my perfectly still house I waited for John.

I have always loved my house. John and I had bought the lot more than twenty years earlier, when Wade was a baby and I was pregnant with Cate. It had taken every penny we had at the time to build it, but it had always been worth it. We designed it to be built in stages. It started as a simple house for a young couple with two infants and had since grown to be so much more. It had been a home brimming with teenage enthusiasm, a cradle for a family in grief, and a playroom for babies nearly twenty years apart.

It was where we had raised our two oldest children, watching them grow to young adults. There was the big kitchen, its barstools accustomed to the weight of teenage boys. There was the playroom above it that the children had decorated as a fifties diner, with old metal advertising signs on the walls. What was once the garage had been transformed into a small bedroom for our youngest children, Emma Claire, then six, and Jack, who was four. Upstairs was Cate's room, for her visits home from college, and Wade's room, unchanged, his book bag beside his bureau, still filled with his papers and eleventh-grade textbooks.

I heard John's Secret Service caravan pull into the driveway, and I went to the door. He got out alone. He walked through the gate as I came through the door. His eyes, narrow and focused, filled with tears when he looked up at me, and his face, which had been set with purpose, softened. We didn't say anything. We just held each other. The Secret Service didn't exist; the neighbors, the house, the beautiful day all melted away. We held on and made the pact we wish we could have made to save Wade. "Nothing can happen to you," he whispered in my ear. "Nothing is going to happen to you."

"It will be fine. I will be fine."

John had called Wells on the way to the house, and he didn't think it would be fine. Wells had told him what he hadn't told me, that it was likely breast cancer. When John asked if we should stop campaigning and take care of this right away, Wells had responded,

"I don't think that will help." John was stricken. His good friend had just told him that nothing could help, that the cancer was too advanced to save me. Though John didn't know it at the time, it wasn't what Wells had meant at all. He simply meant that a few more days didn't matter. John had to talk to another doctor—Cliff Hudis, a specialist at Memorial Sloan-Kettering in New York who had been recommended by Peter Scher, his chief of staff—before he could be convinced that he had misunderstood. As he waited to speak to the specialist, he told me that he wanted to stop campaigning and immediately do whatever was needed to make me well. "I'll cancel my schedule," he said to me.

We couldn't let that happen. Without talking to a doctor, I believed it would do no harm if I chose to wait the four days until the election to do the biopsy and begin treatment—whatever that was going to mean. I had already waited more than a week.

But there was another reason.

During the months I spent campaigning, I had gotten to know so many people around the country, and I don't mean "know" them like I spent twenty minutes talking to them from a stage. I mean that they shared their deepest fears with me. A day didn't pass that someone didn't cry in my arms: their son was getting ready to leave for Iraq and they were trying to buy him body armor from the Internet, their company was moving to Korea and the place they had worked for thirty years was closing, their health insurance company had increased their premiums so much that insurance was now out of reach, Medicare premiums, gas prices, college costs, all going up when their wages were going down, and the list went on and on. I couldn't even think about stopping or letting John stop. Those faces—the parents in Manchester, the wife in Sandusky, the father in Detroit—were with me, and they were why John and I got up each morning, week after week, month after month. We couldn't stop. Lump or no lump, cancer or not, I had to continue to talk to as many people as possible, debate whatever issue needed debating, and do what I could for those people, and more importantly, John had to do the same. The rest we'd take care of after the election.

We could do it. It was only four more days. We had to do it. We only had four more days.

But first, there were people to tell. Cate was coming home for the concert, but before she got there, John called John Kerry, who, like my husband, was terrific. Whatever you need to do, he said. He said it to John, then he said it to me. We told him that we'd decided to keep going. John Kerry can be a great cheerleader, arm around your shoulder, flattering you and urging you on, and that is what he was that day, a sincere and compassionate cheerleader. We won't ever forget it.

Cate was the hard one. I had called my parents and told my mother—my father had a stroke in 1990 and doesn't talk on the phone much—that I had found a lump but that I wasn't worried and neither should she be. I tried the same nonchalance on Cate, but—unbeknownst to me—John later told her that it was more serious than I was letting on, which was as hard for her to hear as I had feared. I didn't know he'd done that or I wouldn't have let her leave my side for the rest of the campaign. But she did leave. By the next morning we were in West Virginia, about to scatter across the country for the last push.

A day or two later, I was in Cleveland Heights. We ate a terrific breakfast at a restaurant called the Inn on Coventry. It was a wonderful local favorite, crafted of oak and chrome and vinyl and filled with customers who knew the waitresses by name. We ate and shook hands, spoke to the crew in the kitchen, and worked our way to the bright outdoors. The Secret Service detail always attracted a crowd long before people knew whom to expect, and there was the usual crowd outside the Inn. Most stood back and waved or shouted good luck, but two women came over to say hello. One had short, sparse hair growing in patches on her head; the other wore a wide scarf. They handed me a pink ribbon pin, symbolizing the fight against breast cancer. "Are you a survivor?" one of them asked me. I was caught off guard. I had done a good job of pushing thoughts of my ultrasound aside for the last few days, and now I found I didn't know how to respond. So I just hugged each of them tightly and thanked them. For exactly what, I wasn't yet sure.

I held it together until Election Day. That morning—November 2, 2004—I woke up alone in my hotel room in Des Moines, Iowa, and discovered blood in my urine. Nothing like that had ever happened before, and with that discovery came all of the thoughts that I had been pushing aside the four days since seeing the technician's face. I was pretty certain I had cancer, but there was still so much I didn't know. Like how long the lump had been there—it could have been years—or what it was doing to me on the inside. Had it metastasized? Did the blood mean it had spread? I hadn't allowed myself to visit that possibility before, but I knew that my chances of survival were much less if the cancer had spread. *Stop thinking about this,* I told myself. *Get through this day. John and Cate and the children are at the end of this day. But what if . . .* My mind played out the debate back and forth as I dressed.

The knock on the door and Hargrave's happy "Ready?" interrupted the debate. We hurried to meet Christie Vilsack, the Governor's wife. We stopped at a local bakery and bought dozens of bagels to deliver to volunteers working get-out-the-vote drives. There was a slow cold rain as we stood on a downtown street corner thanking voters and handing out bagels. Then it was Des Moines and the Governor and a few dozen people who were once important supporters but were now even more—we had become friends during the two years I had been visiting Iowa. It seemed like the perfect way to close the campaigning—in the company of friends. By the time we got back in the car, my hair had gotten wet in the rain. I looked rough.

Of course, I was headed to a television studio to do remote television interviews. I would sit in a room with an earpiece hidden in my ear and talk to the voice in the earpiece while looking at the camera in front of me in the darkened room, and I would be on television in Reno and Las Cruces and St. Louis, wherever. It was like talking on the telephone with a camera on you, so you couldn't scratch your nose or fool with your hair or squirm because you were tired of the same chair.