

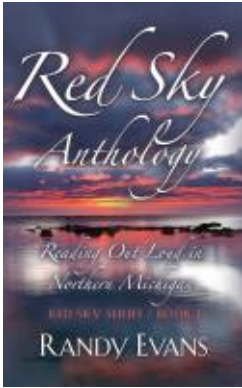


# *Red Sky Anthology*

*Reading Out Loud in  
Northern Michigan*

RED SKY SERIES / BOOK 1

RANDY EVANS



*Fresh, funny, and compassionate, Randy Evans's border-crossing collection (poetry, short story, fable, play, memoir and novel excerpts) never loses his voice or identity as he shifts from one genre to another. The death, grief, and bereavement of the loss of his wife to breast cancer serve as a central theme, along with hilarious forays into magical realism. "I laughed and wept, openly and honestly, dozens of times-beautiful storytelling!" - Wade Rouse, bestselling memoirist*

## Red Sky Anthology

Order the complete book from

**Booklocker.com**

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/8449.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood  
or online bookstore.**

**Enjoy your free excerpt below!**

# **Red Sky Anthology**

**Reading Out Loud in**

**Northern Michigan**

Red Sky Series/Book 1

**Randy Evans**

*Copyright © 2016 Little Traverse Press, Bay Harbor, Michigan*

*ISBN: 978-1-63491-121-4*

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Published by Little Traverse Press, Bay Harbor, Michigan

Printed on acid-free paper.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

Little Traverse Press  
2016

First Edition

*BLOG: randyevansauthor.com*

*FICTION/Literary<LITERARY  
COLLECTIONS/American/General<FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS/  
Death/Grief/Bereavement/Spirituality/Healing/Breast/  
Cancer/Patients*

*Selected pieces in this work were previously published in different form in the following: ProQuest LLC (2007), NPR This I Believe (2011), Bear River Review (2012), Petoskey News and Review (2014), Walloon Writers Review (2015).*

*Cover photograph by Mike Schlitt, Visions of Mike*

## **Out of the Inferno: A Husband's Passage Through Cancerland**

(an excerpt from Red Sky Series, Book 2)

1.

*Stopped mid-motion in the middle  
Of what we call our life...*

*Dante's Inferno, Canto I*

On a rainy November day in central Texas, Neil Schmitt, my father-in-law, trudged wearily down a country road along Pecan Bayou. A tall, lean man, he bent his head against the rain. He wore a floppy hunting cap, thread-bare coveralls, and worn-out boots that he knew he couldn't afford to replace. After walking out to the road from the old tool shed that he used as a blind, he decided that he was done with hunting for good, just like that. Once Neil made up his mind to do something or not to do something, that was it. He quit smoking that way. He quit playing poker that way. And this cold, drizzly day, he decided to stop hunting.

In his seventies, I guess he had become tired of getting up before dawn to sit on a folding chair for hours waiting for a deer to show up, and also his reasons might have had something to do with unpleasant memories of the land. The days alone in the blind might have given him too much time to think

about what had happened there during his boyhood—abandonment by his father, the long illness and death of his mother, and the struggles of subsistence living in a tin and tar paper shack with a dirt floor. He carried his rifle close to his body, cradled in his arms. The strap of an Army-green canvas bag hung over his wide sloping shoulders like a sack of memories.

As Neil made his way down the wet black road towards Irene Brown's house, he stopped mid-stride, and walked to the gate at Jordan Springs Cemetery where Laura, his mother, lay buried. She had died of breast cancer in the 1940s. As the sole caregiver for his mother, her long illness and death had flattened Neil's teenaged life like a bulldozer. He rested his gun on the cyclone fence, and stepped inside the grounds. He passed by the gravestones of long-dead, half-forgotten people that he had known during his life in Brown County, Texas. On the far side of a hundred-year-old oak tree, he removed his shapeless cap, and stood over his mother's grave. The face of the gravestone never changed. For him, it must have been like looking at a memory that couldn't be weathered away by rain or bleached out by the hot Texas sun.

Cold rain dripped on his thin gray hair, and ran down his forehead and neck. He fastened his top button, and pulled his bare hands into his coat sleeves. The air smelled of wood smoke. After about five minutes, he tapped the toe of his boot gently on his mother's flat gravestone, and returned to the road. Dogs barked from

the ranches. Windmills groaned. Jack rabbits stood by the side of the road like marbled statues. Stella, his wife, and Irene Brown, the widow of Dennis, his best friend, waited down the road at Irene's house with hot coffee, ham and eggs, biscuits and gravy. Irene had stoked the kitchen fireplace with bone-dry mesquite. Struggling down a rainy country road towards people you love, warm food, hot coffee, and a bright fire made what Neil called a life. A cure for gray thoughts on a gray day.

After I married Neil's daughter, he gave me his scoped hunting rifle. Even though the stock had been beat up with use, the gun looked well-maintained. I could tell Neil was proud of his rifle.

"I've killed a lot of deer with this pump," Neil said. "I want you to have it, because my hunting days are over." He didn't feel the need to explain.

Other than shooting a twenty-two at scout camp when I was a young boy, I had never fired a gun. It pleased Laurene to see her father give me one of his most prized possessions. She wanted us to love each other. After a while, we did.

I took the rifle home to Grand Rapids, and didn't give it another thought until a friend invited me to go hunting in Texas the following year. Laurene and I decided to fly down to Houston where she could stay with her parents while I hunted on a lease in the Texas

Hill Country. Neil and Stella were always happy to see their only daughter, and they seemed happy to see me, too. Stella had prepared chicken and dumplings for our evening meal. The steaming chicken broth smell made you want to gulp the thick air inside their tiny house. For dessert, Stella had baked a German Chocolate Cake, one of my favorites.

Neil's eyes lit up when I told him I had brought his deer rifle with me. As soon as we could be excused from the dinner table, we cleaned the gun together in the garage. Neil moved his hands gently over the stock like he was touching the arm of an old friend. After we finished with the gun, he rubbed the back of his neck with a bandana, and gave me some hunting tips while he looked out the garage door to the street. He had a faraway look in his eyes. From his quick sideways glances in my direction, I think he might have been bashful about giving me advice. Giving advice was something he rarely did. He had never had a father around to give him advice. And he never had a son to give advice. But there were a few things he wanted me to know.

“First thing I want to say about hunting is empty or not, think your gun's loaded, and think everyone else's gun's loaded—safety off and ready to shoot. If someone makes a mistake and points a gun barrel at you, drop to the dirt as quick as you can. You're gonna be better off embarrassed than dead. Second thing, never use the scope to look at a human being—that's what binoculars



are for. Third, when you see a deer, the deer's gonna look much bigger through the scope than actual size. Make sure the antlers are outside the ears. Count the tines. People frown on shooting deer smaller than eight points.

"Another thing about scopes. Look behind your target to make sure there's nothing there. If you shoot a rancher's livestock, or worse than a cow, his favorite dog, he's gonna get real upset. You have no idea how upset. Why, you might see him dig two holes in the ground—one for the dead animal, and another one for you. I'm not foolin'. The last thing I want to say is to keep that scope away from your eyes. You've probably never heard of 'buck fever,' but 'buck fever' is when you get nervous after a big buck jumps out in front of you. You put the scope up against your eyeball and pull the trigger. You don't want to do that. That old Remington kicks like a rodeo horse. I know this, because it happened to me."

After a long pause, he added, "Now you needn't worry about getting a deer on your first hunt. Some people hunt their entire lives without getting a deer."

Laurene and I wanted to do something else while we were in Texas. For six months, Laurene had been concerned about a change in her left breast. Her gynecologist confirmed that she could also feel a textural difference close to the chest wall. In May 1991, Laurene met with a Grand Rapids oncologist who said

he could find no evidence of disease, but he told her that she could return in a few months if she had further concerns. Laurene asked me to see if I could feel anything, but I couldn't. Nothing had appeared on a mammogram, and there had been no indications on a routine test the year before. The oncologist told Laurene not to worry. He told her that a preventative measure might be to change her diet by eating more plant-based foods, and giving up unhealthy foods like chocolate. The only unhealthy food she mentioned that I remember was chocolate, because I knew what would follow.

That was it for chocolate. Laurene made decisions like her father. The whole family had to stop eating chocolate, and any other food that Laurene deemed to be unhealthy. She cooked broccoli stir fries, and other vegetarian dishes. Our favorite snack foods were replaced by organic carrots and celery. The bars of "real" butter disappeared from our refrigerator. She threw away the leftover candy from Halloween, a hoard that I had stashed in the back of the pantry where I thought it would be safe. New fruit bowls decorated the kitchen counter, inviting us to eat apples, bananas, pineapples, and grapes, rather than cookies and ice cream. She purchased a blender that roared like a jet engine while it ingested fruits and veggies, and pulverized them into "green" smoothies that glowed on the counter top like some magical potion from a Harry Potter novel.

New cookbooks stood like scolding health foodies shouting slogans at us from the kitchen book shelves—“eat kale and you can’t fail,” “salads and beets are healthy treats.” We stopped going out to dinner at restaurants heavy with fried-food menu items. I began to dream about hot juicy burgers and crisp onion rings loaded with salt and dripping with fat. I took advantage of lunch in the middle of the work day to satisfy my unhealthy food cravings. I packed emergency Snickers Bars in my briefcase. When alone in the kitchen, I stuffed the jet engine with scoops of ice cream, and squeezed heavy crisscrosses of chocolate syrup on top along with whole milk and powdered malt. Flipping the switch for a few seconds at 200 miles per hour produced a liquefied a shake with no more than a whisper of sound.

Our daughters concocted eating strategies of their own—for example, the Lucky Charms nutritional pitch:

“Mom, Lucky Charms are high in zinc.”

“That’s interesting, Meredith, how do you know?”

“It says so on the box! See, Mom.” “How much sugar?”

“14 grams.”

“Wow. That’s a lot of sugar, Meredith.”

"But Lucky Charms contains other healthy ingredients like *mayonnaise*."

"You mean *manganese*."

Laurene loved rules to order one's life, and when she made a new rule, we all had to get in line. Further, Laurene believed that if you followed the rules, life would be fair to everyone and all would be well. Her parents had raised her to follow rules covering every aspect of daily living. Rather than ten commandments, there were hundreds. Laurene told me that when she was a young girl, she would argue with Neil and Stella about changing the rules, but she would never break rules on her own. She loved to argue, and since she was the only child, she argued most of the time with her parents, her father more than her mother. Neil once told her when she was a teenager, "Laurene, if you argue with people like you argue with me, no one will ever like you."

Laurene made another appointment in August 1991, and again, the oncologist observed nothing. She returned in October, and finally, the doctor noted a difference in her left breast. He still said there was no cause for alarm. We wanted a second opinion, but at first, he first refused to write a letter. He looked up at us from the paperwork on his desk as if we were making a lot of trouble over nothing. When we pushed back, he reluctantly wrote a referral letter to MD Anderson in

Houston. The last line of the letter read: “I don’t feel this is a malignancy, but it should be biopsied to make sure.”

To this day, the doctor’s letter rests at the bottom of Laurene’s permanent medical file at MD Anderson (*Patient #114148*). During the next ten years, I would often ferry her file from one appointment to the next to expedite an appointment. After ten years, I had to move the records around the clinic in a wheelchair. The file had grown to three feet high, held together with binder clips and rubber bands; filled with blood work reports, doctor’s clinic notes, radiologists’ reports, imaging results from CT and MRI scans, medications and dosages, weight, temperature, and blood pressure readings. Today scanners digitize more of the details, and keep the dog-eared, ragged paper trail neatly hidden in computer memory.

We made an appointment at MD Anderson for the Monday after my weekend hunt—November 6, 1991. On the sunny fall day before the appointment, Neil, Stella, and Laurene picked me up at a gas station where my hunting buddies had dropped me off near Johnson City.

Neil stuck his head out of the car window, and said, “Howdy...did you get your buck?”

His blue eyes brightened and he laughed with his entire body when I told him that I had taken two bucks

with his rifle. He kept saying, “*Two bucks, two bucks!*” I sat in the back seat of his blue Chevy Impala with Laurene, and apologized to everyone because I stunk. Laurene wanted to know about the red crescent wound beneath my purple right eye. Contrary to Neil’s warnings, when the first buck jumped out from behind a pile of brush, I placed the scope against my eye and pulled the trigger. Just like that! Blood spewed all over my clothes and onto the ground. I thought, *Did the deer in Texas shoot back?*

Neil talked freely in the car, something he rarely did. He jabbered about how he had been to Canada, and had hunted birds in South Dakota, but had never been to Michigan. With a twinkle in her eyes, Stella added that when the Canadian border guard asked Neil for his country of origin, he replied, “Texas.” Stella had been mortified. Neil questioned me about the weather in Michigan, and the hunting and fishing. He exhausted his knowledge of Michigan by telling about his general practitioner. “My doctor grew up in a town called Kalkaska, Michigan—*‘three ‘A’s’ and three ‘K’s,’*” he said slowly and repeated, “*three ‘A’s’ and three ‘K’s’—Kalkaska, Michigan. How ‘bout that?*”

I asked Neil why they had moved from Brownwood to Houston soon after Laurene’s birth.

“We wanted a better life. I didn’t want to stay somewhere that was going nowhere. After the war, there were plenty of good-paying jobs in Houston. With

Stella's teaching and my job with the city, we bought a house and paid for Laurene to go to college. I paid that house off in four years, because I couldn't stand the mortgage hanging over our heads. We could've been happy in Brownwood, but we did better for ourselves in Houston. Until a while ago, we kept a small apartment in Brownwood for spending weekends with our old friends. We hunted on Saturday mornings, danced on Saturday nights, and drove home after church on Sundays. Laurene went along. I expect we made the best of two worlds."

Neil entertained us with stories of Laurene's childhood, and about his friends in Brownwood. He talked about his only trip to Europe. Dennis and Irene had traveled with them, and Dennis had teased Neil for bringing canned goods to Paris. Neil justified himself by saying that he didn't know what the food would be like over there, so he had packed a few cans of red beans for an emergency. He also told us that after Stella and he were married, Dennis and Irene accompanied them on their honeymoon trip to "Old Mexico." Over the five-hour drive, Neil, Stella, and Laurene gave me an extensive history of their family and friends, and the stories behind each of them. I could tell how absorbed this small family was in the lives of the people they loved.

Halfway back to Houston, we stopped for barbecue in Brenham, Texas. The menu on the wall listed nearly all of Laurene's forbidden foods in one large display

behind the long counter. The menu described a range of combinations that excited me beyond description: *"BAR-B-Q BEEF, BAR-B-Q SPARE RIBS, CHOPPED BAR-B-Q BEEF, BAR-B-Q GERMAN SAUSAGE, BAR-B-Q CHICKEN, CHICKEN FRIED STEAK, FRIED SHRIMP, BQ SAUCE, HOT ROLLS, RED BEANS, POTATO SALAD, GREEN BEANS, MASHED POTATOES, COLESLAW, CORN, CARROTS, BLACKBERRY, CHERRY, PEACH COBBLER, BANANA PUDDING, SWEET TEA, AND DR PEPPER.*

At hunting camp, I had started each day two hours before first light with a long walk to a brush blind. In my backpack, I had two cans of Coke and two apples to last me until an hour after sundown. Now, I ordered sliced beef with pickles, onions and jalapeños on bread with extra barbecue sauce, beans, cole slaw, and sweetened ice tea. Behind the counter, a young man who held a long flat-nosed knife sliced a long slab of smoked beef ribboned with fat. (I'm not done telling you about this meal.) For dessert, I had blackberry cobbler topped with Bluebell Ice Cream. Laurene gave me a spoonful of her banana pudding. I remember how happy we all were. No one talked about the appointment the following morning.

When Laurene objected to my extensive food order, Neil defended me: "I've been eating like this my entire life, and I'm doing just fine. Besides, Randy killed his first deer. We need to celebrate!" Shooting your first deer in Texas is a big deal like in a lot of



places, but I suppose in Texas it's a bigger deal like everything else there.

After lunch, Laurene and I traded seats with Neil and Stella. I took the wheel, and drove the rest of the way back to Houston. We traversed three of Texas' geographic regions: the rolling plains of Central Texas, the Hill Country around Austin, and as we approached Houston, the Gulf Coastal Plain. From the 610 Loop we could see the skyline and the urban core of Houston, our next day's destination. I reached for Laurene's hand. I began to worry. *What tests will they do? How long before we see the results? What if Laurene has cancer? How will she react? I need to find a pen and notepad. I'll take notes. She looks so healthy. She's too young to have cancer. She follows all the rules of healthy living.*

It was half dark when we pulled into the driveway. Seed carriers from the neighbor's box elders helicoptered over the concrete. Neil's camper-topped red pickup rested at an odd angle outside the garage, sporting a flat tire.

"I need to sell that truck," he said. A week later, he sold his truck. Just like that.

"Daddy's getting older," Laurene said. "I can't believe he decided to give up hunting. I can't believe he's selling his truck."

## ***Lesson One***

***It doesn't matter how good you  
happen to be, or how well you  
follow the rules. Bad things can  
happen. There is no limit to how  
many bad things can happen.***

## 2.

*Not an uncommon occurrence. It makes even  
The well-intended scurry like an animal  
Who sees a monster in the margin of his nightmare.*

### *Dante's Inferno, Canto II*

We had been in the hospital for less than two hours on the following Monday morning. Technicians and nurses had administered an ultrasound and fine-needle aspiration of the breast. After they numbed her breast with local anesthetic, Laurene said that she only felt pressure. Twenty minutes later, a nurse told us to make another appointment for the same day. Since it had taken weeks to schedule the tests, the short interval until the next appointment frightened us. Why the urgency?

While Laurene was getting dressed, I chased the nurse down in the hallway. She wouldn't tell me what she knew, but I could tell from the way she turned her face away from me that this was not going to be a good day.

The hours before the afternoon appointment dragged. We drove back to Neil and Stella's house, and spread a blanket out in the backyard. I can't remember what we talked about, but it wasn't about cancer. We might have talked about fire ants when one stung me, or about Neil's prolific okra garden with stalks that grew

above the wood-slatted fence along the side of the house. At one point, Neil came into the backyard and trimmed some okra with his slender pocket knife. "For dinner," he said in a raspy voice. He walked back inside bent forward as though he was carrying an invisible bag on his back. I could tell he was worried. He looked like a walking question mark. When we came back inside the house, we found Stella attacking the kitchen floor with her broom, her arthritic hands wrapped around the broom handle like claws with the thumb of her left hand lower and pointed towards the floor.

Returning to MD Anderson in the afternoon, I dropped Laurene off at the entrance and drove off to park the car. I was driving Neil and Stella's car, so I looked for a wide space on the roof deck of the garage. When I approached the clinic building, I passed a dozen patients sitting outside smoking, hunched over men hooked up to IV stands like old chairs sitting next to floor lamps. A year later, the clinic would ban smoking on the premises, but I remember those emaciated men puffing away, and my thoughts at the time. *They had brought cancer on themselves. It was their fault. You'd think they'd have had enough sense to stop smoking. Laurene didn't smoke and she didn't drink. She had led a healthy life. She had always been a good person. She had followed the rules. She could not have cancer. It would not be fair.*

MD Anderson sprawls across 25 buildings covering 14 million square feet on more than seven

acres, including an inpatient pavilion with 507 beds, five research buildings, three outpatient clinic buildings, two faculty office buildings, a proton radiation clinic building, and a patient-family hotel. MD Anderson's 20,000-plus cancer fighters treat more than 100,000 patients per year. Inside the outpatient clinics, you have the feel of a busy international airport with people of all ages and nationalities—Arab women wearing burqas and tunics, Hasidic Jewish men with long beards and skull caps. You can pick up accents from faraway regions, like all the species of birds in the world are chirping at once, the song of each entering the songs of the others.

Even though it was November, Christmas cards created by children cancer patients through the Children's Art Project were for sale in the lobby, as well as sparkling Christopher Radko glass-blown tree ornaments. The clinic impressed me as an upbeat place of hope, a mix of disabled and able-bodied people moving around with purpose—fifteen thousand outpatient visits a day. I passed through the vast clinic lobby and found the correct elevator (Elevator B).

When I arrived at the radiation clinic waiting room, Laurene sat reading a book with great intensity. She always read when she wanted to get her mind off something. Her feet were tucked under the rest of her body like she always did when she was reading. The receptionist gave us a nod within fifteen minutes. At the time, I could not appreciate that fifteen minutes was a

lightning-fast wait time for a cancer appointment. On “clinic days,” oncologists would often meet with fifteen or more patients. Some visits took a few minutes; others lasted up to an hour. It depended on what was happening with the patient. Good news. Bad news. No news.

A young radiologist in a white lab coat didn’t hesitate to tell us what we had to hear. Laurene had cancer. The doctor told us what he knew so far. The biopsy had revealed a high grade tumor (high grade refers to the aggressiveness of the tumor). The diagnosis was breast cancer (later on a pathologist who looked at the biopsy gave us a more specific diagnosis: invasive ductal carcinoma). The doctor told us that the staging, although tentative, was not the worst news we could have received, but not good news. I felt blood flushing my face.

The TNM staging system (T=tumor, N=nodes, and M=metastasis), indicated stage 3 cancer (T3,N1, M0). At last, we knew more about what we were dealing with. T3 referred to the size of the tumor (1cm =.39 inches), and the doctor was guessing that the tumor in Laurene’s left breast was more than 5 centimeters. I did the math—about two inches. N1 meant that positive lymph nodes were most likely present. M0 indicated that further testing would be required to make sure that the cancer had not metastasized to other parts of the body, since the initial diagnosis had been based on a

microscopic view of the breast cells aspirated by the biopsy.

*Damn that doctor in Grand Rapids! What he had failed to identify over a six-month period, MD Anderson had identified in a few minutes, or at least, in a few hours.*

I held Laurene's hand. I was blown away by the news. I felt as though a monster had entered the room. I wanted to run away; scurry for cover. I didn't want to be there. This couldn't be happening. My eyes blurred. The objects in the room seemed out of scale. The room appeared overly small for such enormous news, a *roomette* rather than a room. We were sitting in this miniature-sized living room. The chairs and table seemed too small. The lamp looked too small for the table. The inspirational posters on the walls shouted messages that were out of place in this setting. Unlike the smallish furniture, the posters appeared as large as billboards on a highway: "CANCER IS A WORD NOT A SENTENCE," "CANCER CANNOT EAT AWAY PEACE," "LOVE IS BETTER THAN ANGER," "MAMMOGRAPHY SAVES LIVES."

*This must be the bad news room. Are we supposed to read the posters, and think that everything is okay? They have staged this room to look like someone's living room. Living room. Ha! I don't like this room, and I don't like this doctor. His lab coat with his name*

*embroidered on the front makes him look like a garage mechanic.*

Other than my grandfather, cancer had never raised its ugly head in my immediate family. Cancer happened to acquaintances or strangers, but not to someone close. Not to my parents or my children or my wife. Our second marriage had just begun four years earlier. What would happen to us? Our children? I slouched down in the tiny chair. *Look at Laurene! She's doing better than me. I'm leaning back and she's leaning forward. She's leaning into the news. She's clear-eyed. She's not zoning out like me. She wants to know the new set of rules so she can challenge them. She's making the doctor sweat under his white lab coat. She's asking so many questions! I was thinking what Neil had said to Laurene when she was a teenager. If you ask the doctor too many questions, he won't like you.*

Laurene acted like she was in GE business meeting. She didn't care to charm the doctor. She didn't care about how much he liked her. She wanted to know as much as she could about the pathology report. How invasive was the cancer? What other tests would be performed? What did the blood work show? How would we know if the cancer had spread beyond her chest? Where might it travel—to the other breast or somewhere else? Her mind operated in “think” mode—no time for emotions. She wanted facts. The oncologist could only tell us that the cancer was “locally advanced.” He said, “It's bad, but not as bad as it could



be.” Laurene asked about staging. The doctor said that the pathologist had graded the cancer Stage IIB (the tumor was less than 5 centimeters with no evidence that the cancer had spread to auxiliary lymph nodes).

When the doctor started to leave, Laurene blocked the door. I wanted to laugh, because the doctor had no idea who he was dealing with. He had lost control of the meeting. Laurene had more questions. The doctor sat back down. The doctor stopped sweating. His face muscles relaxed. I think he had realized that he would be unable to leave until Laurene was through with him, so he might as well relax. We discussed treatment options and next steps. When Laurene asked what we could do now, we were not expecting his answer. We thought that he might tell us about how we could be better informed, or outline alternative approaches to control the cancer in addition to medical treatment. Instead, he said to pay attention to our marriage relationship. Based on his experience, he said that dealing with cancer strains marriages. We assured him that we could handle cancer like we had dealt with other life challenges— like raising a blended family, balancing our work schedules, and caring for our parents.

I resented his comments. *Are you a psychologist? So one doctor tells us not to eat chocolate, and this one wants us to go to marriage counseling.*

Rather than discounting what she had heard from the doctor like I had, Laurene looked for ways to benefit from his advice. She got it immediately—cancer involved more than medical issues. Living with cancer involved substantial quality of life issues. As we headed back to the lobby, she began to form mental action plans. Her first thoughts focused on me and the family. She didn't want the disease to affect my work or the girls' school performance. She could quit her job and stay with her parents for treatments, if I could manage work and take care of the girls while she was away. She said that she was out of shape spiritually, and needed to do some work on her faith. She needed access to the latest new developments in breast oncology. She needed to join a support group, and maybe find a counselor. She wanted a new oncologist in Grand Rapids to backup her new doctors in Houston. We needed to revise our family budget without her income, and cut our expenses, and review our health care plans. Laurene knew that cancer was a big deal, before I did.

As we walked down the hallway towards Elevator B, I could see her change. Her blue almond-shaped eyes turned a shade darker. Her face muscles tensed with resolve. She was going to beat the cancer. "We can do this," she said. "You get the car. I'm going to buy Christmas ornaments for the girls." As I exited the building, I looked back at her. Her tall body bent over the display tables of ornaments. Her light brown hair hung over her face. She was a good-looking woman.

The lost souls still sat on the concrete wall as I walked out of the clinic to the parking garage. They resembled paper-thin zombies appearing and disappearing in smoke clouds. One man tapped a cigarette from his pack of Camels. When he wrapped his thin fingers around the cigarette and lit up, the pulsing embers looked as if they measured out the residual life still inside his frail body.

The man reminded me of my grandfather who had smoked unfiltered Camels. He had started his smoking career at age 14 as a Pennsylvania coal miner. At some time in his life, he had had his forearm tattooed with the tobacco company's iconic one-humped camel. (The smoky clouds from the cancer patients smelled like my grandfather.) Then one day soon after I was born, he stopped smoking and swearing—just like Neil had stopped smoking and playing poker. But my grandfather quit too late. He developed lung cancer in his seventies when I was in my thirties. We sat on his screened-in patio eating my grandmother's pickled relish on a slice of white bread while he talked to me about how the brakes in cars had improved during his lifetime. He referred to the moon landing. He gave me advice to live by. The advice I remember—bend your knees when you lift, don't shovel snow with the shovel handle pointed at your privates, keep your shoes shined, and never join a church with a building campaign.

That my loving grandfather was dying of a strange disease was about all I knew at the time. Other than a

great aunt who had died of breast cancer, there was no history of cancer in my family. I could only observe my grandfather's labored breathing as he lay in bed propped up by pillows. I was spared seeing his pain, and knew nothing of his fear and anxiety over the disease, but I first used the word "cancer" as the name for the disease that had killed my grandfather. *Would I lose Laurene like I had lost him, or could we beat this? How long would we need to deal with this unwanted intrusion into our busy lives? How could I take care of the kids and work while Laurene went through radiation and chemotherapy?*

I didn't know much more about cancer at age forty-five than I had known from taking high school biology. I had no idea what caused cancer, how it spread from one site in the body to another, or how it could crowd out healthy cells, and, too often, kill people. For weeks after Laurene's diagnosis, I listened to how people used the word "cancer" in everyday life. A newscaster on the TV said, "Extreme groups are spreading like cancer." Another day, I heard "Radical ideologies are metastasizing." "Evil predator," "ruthless," "invasive," "intractable," and "mysterious" were the words used to portray cancer as an agent of death invested with magical powers. A life-threatening disease had inflated into a monster in my mind, one who was about to carry my wife away.

Laurene didn't seem to feel the same way about cancer. If she harbored exaggerated fears similar to

mine about the disease, she didn't share them with me. That we were beginning a long and difficult journey did not occur to me at the time. I had no clue that I was entering a stage of my life comparable to an all-consuming inferno. More than a bump in the road. A big deal.

## ***Lesson Two***

***People form crazy abstractions  
about cancer that we would never  
ascribe to the common cold or to the  
flu.***

### 3.

*At that, the pitch-dark plain shook.  
Every aspect of that moment is burned in my brain:  
The cold sweat inside my clothes.*

#### *Dante's Inferno, Canto III*

On the way back to Neil and Stella's house, we watched people speed by on their way home from work. High billboards and neon signs shouted advertising messages at us like *Gallery Furniture Saves You Money!*—the slogan of a local businessman who held a fistful of cash over his larger-than-life head. The whole world seemed out-of-scale, from the miniature conference room at MD Anderson where we had received the bad news, to the furniture magnate on the billboard with his yard-wide fake smile. *Too small or too big. Out of the ordinary. No text for what we needed to do. Just large letters on large billboards.*

We turned off the 610 Loop, and took the familiar turns to Neil and Stella's. Laurene remarked about how the neighborhood had both changed and remained the same since her girlhood. All the homes on the street were about the same size, one-story brick ranch houses built in the 50s. Neil and Stella's first home had been their last home. Laurene pointed out a Korean Methodist Church, a new community center, a strip mall with a video store, the favorite swing swaying on rusty chains in a rundown park, and a Texas-style

French restaurant that Laurene said displayed exotic game mounts on the inside walls. We pulled into the driveway of the tiny bungalow behind Neil's red pickup. I looked over at Laurene to see dried-up tear tracks on her face. She rubbed her eyes and pulled back her hair as she opened the screen door. I could tell that she was steeling herself to face her parents with the news. The wind was beginning to blow, and the screen door slammed behind her. I opened the door, and the door slammed again.

Laurene and I found Neil and Stella in the family room watching an old episode of Lawrence Welk. When Laurene informed them of her diagnosis, they both cried while an accordion player squeezed out a tune from the TV. The news upset Neil beyond anything I had ever seen from him. Perhaps life-long anxiety about Laurene's inherited risk surfaced. I'm sure he remembered the pain and suffering that his mother had endured. He may have thought about how hard it had been to care for his mother with no help. Until she died, Neil had raised turkeys on the small farm. He had to chase them down in order to sell them in Brownwood. He would drive the turkeys to town in an old jalopy. At the time, there was no road access, so he had to drive over fields and through gates to get to the road. He had also worked in town at a bakery while going to school. Taking care of his mother had not been easy. For perhaps all of these reasons, and the fact that he loved his daughter more than anything, his hard face softened in a sorrowful way. He fell into silence.



The big band played on the TV: *“Good night sweetheart, till we meet tomorrow, Good night sweetheart, sleep will banish sorrow...”*

After we watched the evening news with Neil and Stella, they retired to bed with hugs and kisses for both of us. They still looked stunned. Laurene and I were too hyped to sleep, so we laid together in her bed. Her room had not changed since high school. The pink, frilly bedspread and hot pink cushions remained, the same drapes, lamps, nightstands, and a double bed with springs that creaked every time you made the slightest movement. In the small house the two bedrooms were separated by a tiny bathroom. We were literally less than ten feet from Neil and Stella. We could hear them snore.

It was useless to try to sleep. As we had done in the afternoon of this long day, we decided to take a blanket to the backyard. We placed it near the high stalks of Neil’s okra garden where the tall plants hung over us like tassels. I could smell the moist evening air and a faint scent of Laurene’s perfume. We rested on our backs and watched the stars in silence. The face of the night sky dwarfed the little house in the little yard. It made me think of the lyrics, *the stars at night are big and bright, deep in the heart of Texas*. What was deep in my heart at this moment? Like the night sky, my heart contained boundless details with no specificity. All the thoughts were bumping against each other. Laurene leaned into my side, and splayed her left leg

over my right leg. A soft wind blew her hair in my face. Laying on the blanket beside my wife, her face splashed by moonlight, I forgot for a moment about the cancer cells hidden under her skin.

We lay still next to each other for a longtime until I heard tapping sounds moving from place to place on the other side of the high wooden fence that enclosed the yard. What I first thought were dead leaves stirred by the wind, sounded nervous and hostile. **“RATS!”** Laurene said. I didn’t bother to wait for her. I grabbed the blanket, and leapt towards the house. Laurene laughed at my quick exit.

“You run like a damn Yankee!” she said. She knew I was skittish about all the creepy, crawly creatures in Texas.

Once inside, Laurene removed two old jelly jars from a shelf in the kitchen, and handed me one. I was in a cold sweat.

“Momma and Daddy never throw anything away,” she said.

On my jar, I could see the nearly washed out music bars of “My Old Kentucky Home” etched on the glass: “eep no more, m lady...weep no more today” Laurene poured stiff shots of Maker’s Mark into the jelly jars. The whiskey warmed me. We sat down in the family room that Neil had built in the sixties so Laurene could

have parties with her friends. Around the room you could see a gun cabinet, a large deer mount, a window air conditioner, and a “Dad of the Year” plaque that Neil had received from Laurene’s sorority at Sam Houston State. After a few sips, Laurene wanted to talk.

“I am so sorry you have to deal with this. We just got married a few years ago.”

“I’m glad you decided to marry me.”

“I hope your girls know how much I love them.”

“We all love each other.”

“I’m not used to being sick. I might get ornery.”

“I doubt that will happen...but you can be ornery. I won’t mind.”

“Don’t leave me.”

“I won’t leave you.”

We had dated for three years before our marriage; a long time from my perspective. Laurene had wanted a guarantee that our marriage would work. She didn’t want to make a mistake about us. We had both been divorced after fifteen-year first marriages. One morning, I ran across a woman from church in the supermarket who told me that Laurene had called her to

do a reference check on me. I thought, *how many women do reference checks on prospective husbands?* The woman wanted me to know that she had given me a thumbs up. She examined a cantaloupe in the produce aisle—pressing the skin, smelling the stem. She lifted the melon up and down as she spoke with an accent that reminded me of Laurene’s.

“Don’t worry, Laurene will get off the fence sooner or later. My husband says she’s too intense, but I don’t see her that way. She’s a hard-working woman raising those two girls, holding down a job, and going back to school. I remember when John and she broke up. She jogged through the neighborhood every day crying her eyes out. She looked thin as a scarecrow. Did you know I grew up in Texas, too? I brought her a bottle of Jack Daniels after John left. She invited me in for a drink, which I expected she would. She drinks whiskey and coke...Texans do that. By the way, if you plan on marrying a Texan, you better learn to dance the two-step. I think it’s a good sign when a woman drinks whiskey, don’t you? You’re a strong man. You need a strong woman. Texas produces strong women like Laurene and me. My husband asked me why Texan women are so strong, and I told him *because of asshole Texas men*...but in all fairness, there are asshole men everywhere...not *you* of course.” She pointed the stem end of the cantaloupe in my direction like it was her prop for an asshole.

Laurene would say, “I want you to know the *real* me. I want you to know about all my faults. I want you to know every rotten part of me.” She absolutely refused for me to idealize her. Maybe she knew me better than I knew myself—how I idealized women. Of course, the flip side of this conversation was that she wanted to know every “rotten part of *me*” as well. I told her that I lived in an introverted bubble, that I spent most of my time unaware of my surroundings, that I had difficulty doing more than one thing at a time. I told her that I was impatient, and often made decisions impulsively, that my feelings were easily hurt, and that I was too ambitious about my career to live a balanced life. (I didn’t tell her the really bad stuff.)

I had no idea how to close the deal with her. After three years, I had begun to think about moving on. I began to think that I could find someone else who would be less difficult to win over, maybe someone a bit more easygoing. Then one evening I said, “Laurene, I can’t give you the kind of guarantee you want. There are no guarantees. You need to make a decision.” I could almost hear her thinking, *I want a guarantee that our marriage will work and we’ll be together forever. He won’t give me a guarantee, but I know he loves me. Can I live with that? Yes. I guess we should get married before he gets tired of waiting and dumps me.*

She had the practical mind of her father.

A month later we were engaged in the dining room of a Tudor mansion that had been turned into a supper club. We met after work. That day, Laurene had given a product planning presentation on a new GE lighting product. She wanted to talk about work for a while to clear her mind. She knew what I was about to do, but she wanted to get everything else off her chest. I proposed, and she said yes. I slipped a sapphire and diamond wedding ring on her finger. After several visits to a local jeweler, he had designed the ring to Laurene's specifications. She had wanted a sapphire ring that looked like Princess Diana's. She knew what she wanted, and did not like surprises. That night she brought her Polaroid camera along. Pictures preceded kisses.

During our engagement, Laurene signed us up for pre-marital counseling. We enrolled in a workshop titled "Stepping into Step Parenting." A psychologist administered batteries of inventories. We discovered that our two personality types couldn't have been more different; we were what Carl Jung had named "Dionysian opposites." Laurene was an extrovert. I was an introvert. Laurene made decisions based on facts. I made gut-based decisions. Laurene used her mind to solve problems. I solved problems based on feelings and values. Laurene liked to plan the future in detail. I preferred to let things happen.

Wedding planning proved to be the first test of our significant style differences. We met every night after

work to go over the invitation list, the wedding attendants, the photographer, the food and entertainment. She wanted a preacher friend to perform the service, but she wanted to write out what he would say and limit his time. We listened to tapes from local musicians, and settled on a harpist. She wanted the girls to wear identical outfits with matching white and pink hats, dresses, stockings, and shoes. We ordered both a white cake and a dark “groom’s cake,” a Southern tradition: I wanted German chocolate. What if our outdoor wedding was rained out? We needed a backup plan. The details seemed to be endless, and I would often cut off our weeknight meetings by eleven.

During the months before the wedding, I also had to pass muster with Laurene’s entire family: Jennifer and Meredith, my future stepchildren; her parents, Neil and Stella; Laurene’s aunts and uncles and cousins from Texas, including her Uncle William Rice who had spent his life bull riding on the rodeo circuit.

When I first met Uncle Rice and Laurene’s cousins, Bo and Billy Don, we sat in the family room with Neil while Laurene, Stella, and the other women removed dove filets from milk cartons, dipped them in milk, egg, and flour, and began to batter fry them on the stove in a cast iron skillet. No one said a word for a long time. I noticed that I was the only one sitting there without a big belt buckle and Western boots. There was no TV playing, or anything else to distract us from sizing each other up. Everyone held a tumbler of iced tea. Nothing

to nibble on other than some unshelled pecans. Finally, after what seemed years, Billy Don half-turned to me, careful not to make eye contact.

“Shoot birds?”

“No, I’ve never shot a bird.”

(Long Pause)

“We do.”

I don’t know how it happened, but they all decided they liked me. At least they didn’t take as long as Laurene had. Billy Don and his family ended up supporting Laurene and me in many different ways over the next ten years.

We married on September 5, 1987. Amy and Laura, my two daughters, along with Jennifer and Meredith, wore frilly pink bridesmaid dresses along with white hats, white stockings, and white shoes. They each carried a bouquet of pink flowers while the harpist played the Pachelbel Canon in D. The preacher read his scripted sermon with only a few additional anecdotes. At the time, Amy and Laura were 13 and 11; Jennifer and Meredith, were 10 and 6. Meredith had to be pried from her mother’s arms, as we left the reception. She sobbed uncontrollably. She had never been away from Laurene before.



Laurene had left the details of the honeymoon to me. I was thrilled that she would delegate our honeymoon trip to me. How uncharacteristic of her. “Surprise me!,” she said. Boy, would she regret it.

When we arrived in Zurich the day after the wedding, Laurene asked me for the itinerary. I told her that I had made reservations for the first night, and rented a Fiat for two weeks. There was no itinerary. She looked surprised, but not pleased.

I thought that we might cross the Alps like Hannibal, and roam around Italy for a few weeks. Unfortunately, I had rented a car in Switzerland that required unleaded fuel. When we crossed the border into Italy, we were provided with a map showing six Agip Stations with unleaded fuel in the entire country. When we arrived at the first station with its yellow, black, and red dragon logo, Laurene jumped out of the car with her dictionary, and towered over a short Italian gas attendant. He looked up at her with horror like this tall American woman was about to attack him.

“*Senza piombo?*” Laurene shouted with her head pointed at the phrase section of the tiny dictionary.

“*No, no, senza piombo.*” The man raised his arms skyward, as though he was searching for divine protection.

They were out of unleaded gas. We did find gas later in the day, and stopped at a bank for *lire*. Gas, cash, and a place to sleep were Laurene's priorities until she settled down, and we started to have fun. Over the next two weeks, we stayed in all manner of lodging, from an estate home in Lucca with satin wallpaper, chandeliers and marble-walled showers, to a room in Padua with unpainted walls, peeling plaster, a bare light bulb hanging from the ceiling, and a shared bathroom down the hall.

Our honeymoon ended in an odd way. We received a call from Laurene's boss at GE. He wanted her to attend a product marketing meeting in Paris on the day she had been scheduled to return to work. He said that the company would pay for her return air fare, rescheduling penalties, and expenses, if she could rearrange her return trip. So on the final day of a romantic two-week romp through Europe, Laurene flew from Milan to Paris, and I flew from Milan to Cleveland. No one was more surprised than our girls when I arrived home without their mother.

A week later, Laurene returned home, probably the only GE employee to ever be reimbursed for a honeymoon trip. Neil and Stella had been our babysitters, and they stayed on to help me out until Laurene returned.

"That was an awful lot to ask," Neil said, referring to Laurene's boss. "How in the heck did he find you?"

Laurene planned our future trips. Over the following years, we would load the kids in the car or book flights for what Laurene called their “educational vacations.” Laurene wanted “the girls” to see the country: Boston, Chicago, Hawaii, Houston, New York City, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Washington, DC, and Williamsburg, Virginia, among others, whether they wanted to or not.

Laurene would read about what we were to see while I drove the car. The girls wanted to buy trinkets in souvenir shops, and a constant stream of complaints issued from the back seat, the most common one—“Jennifer's knees are sticking to my knees!” Once, Meredith passed her mother a note predicting that she would soon have a fit. Laurene responded by writing her a brief inquiry about when and where she intended to have her fit. Meredith replied that she would wait until we had arrived home, because the backseat was too crowded for a proper fit. Later, Meredith changed her mind, and informed Laurene that she was going to jump out of the car window, but she never did. Instead, she turned herself upside down, and through the rear view mirror, I could see her walking off the ceiling of the car with her pink Roger Rabbit high tops.

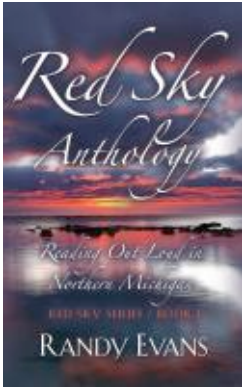
No matter what the complaints, Laurene dragged us from one museum and historical marker to another from North to South and from one Coast to the other. Determined that the girls would grow up well-educated and well-traveled, Laurene never gave up wanting to

see the world along with her family. Staying around home was her father's idea of a good life, and my father would agree. They had seen enough of the world during WWII. Wars do that to people. But for Laurene, new places were like wrapped gifts to be opened with curiosity and delight, something she could do for the people she loved.

The guarantee that our life together would work was something I couldn't give Laurene before our marriage, but when she asked me not to leave her after the cancer diagnosis, I gave her a promise that I could keep and wanted to keep.

### ***Lesson Three***

***When you see a clear sky, a smooth  
ribbon of highway ahead, and think  
you will keep going on and on past  
the horizon, all of a sudden there is  
no sky, no road, and no horizon.  
You are lost without a map.***



*Fresh, funny, and compassionate, Randy Evans's border-crossing collection (poetry, short story, fable, play, memoir and novel excerpts) never loses his voice or identity as he shifts from one genre to another. The death, grief, and bereavement of the loss of his wife to breast cancer serve as a central theme, along with hilarious forays into magical realism. "I laughed and wept, openly and honestly, dozens of times-beautiful storytelling!" - Wade Rouse, bestselling memoirist*

## **Red Sky Anthology**

**Order the complete book from**

**[Booklocker.com](http://www.booklocker.com)**

**<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/8449.html?s=pdf>**

**or from your favorite neighborhood  
or online bookstore.**