ELIN HILDERBRAND ADDRESS
“OVERCOMING LIFE’S CHALLENGES”

People ask me all the time when I knew I wanted to be a writer. The answer is that I knew as a child, seven years old. My second grade teacher gave every child in my class an award at the end of the year, and my award was the “Top Author” award. As soon as I accepted it, I thought, “Yes, I am an author.” From that moment on, writing was my life’s sole purpose and publishing a book my only goal.

When I was fifteen, I attended the Young Writer’s Camp at UVA in Charlottesville. A few years later, I majored in Writing Seminars at the Johns Hopkins University, where I studied with John Barth and Madison Smartt Bell. Upon graduation, I asked Professor Bell what I should do. Go to graduate school? Get a job? He suggested I ‘get out in the world and live,’ so that I might have something to write about. I moved to New York City and initially worked in publishing, but I quickly learned that working for a publisher was a far cry from being a novelist. I quit.

I then decided the best course of action was to get a job that left me time to write. I taught English – the first year at IS 227 in Queens and the second year at Dobbs Ferry Middle School in Westchester County. I had the summer between these two school years off and, not waning to sweat out the summer in Manhattan, I sublet my apartment and decided to go to Nantucket Island for the summer. I had grown up summers with my family on Cape Cod, spending the month of July every year in Brewster, and I had been to the Vineyard in college. Nantucket was the logical third point on the triangle.

Back in 1993, when one wanted to spend the summer on Nantucket, one called the island’s newspaper, the Inquirer & Mirror. I called from my landline in my Manhattan apartment and asked for the classified ads to be mailed to me via USPS. Six days later, I had
the ads in my hand and I proceeded to find a room for rent in a house, which I then called from my landline.

I like to quote John Denver and say that when my ferry pulled into Nantucket Harbor it was like “coming home to a place I’d never been before.” I fell in love with the island instantly and after spending the entire summer, I knew it was where I wanted to live. I moved back to Manhattan in September to teach, but at the end of the school year, I sold my furniture, packed up my belongings and moved to Nantucket permanently. That was in the spring of 1994.

The first few winters I did a fair amount of traveling – I backpacked through Southeast Asia, Australia and New Zealand one winter and through South and Central America including the Galapagos Islands the next. Then, deciding I had sufficiently “gone out and lived,” I applied to graduate school. I was thrilled to be admitted to the prestigious University of Iowa Writers workshop.

However once in Iowa, I was miserable. I was used to living close to the ocean; in Iowa, I found myself surrounded by cornfields and pig farms. I lived in Iowa City, a Big Ten college town, which had no cuisine to speak of, and very little sophistication. The University offered free therapy and I availed myself of it every week. I cried all the time. Eventually, I decided that the best way to make myself feel better was to start writing about the place I missed so much: Nantucket. It was in my second year that I began writing my novel, The Beach Club.

In my very last workshop, my professor, a fine novelist named John Casey, had his agent visit our class. The agent said, “Which one of you lives on Nantucket.” I raised my hand. He said, “I’d love to chat with you after class.”

It turned out the agent, Michael Carlisle, had grown up summering on Nantucket in a very fancy house on Main Street. I told him I was writing a novel about Nantucket. He said,
“When you are finished with it, please send it to me.” That was in May of 1998. In January of 1999, I delivered the manuscript – meaning, I printed it out, boxed it up and sent it off. He read it and called me. He said he would like to represent me, then he said, “I’m going to make you lots and lots of money.”

I was thrilled! However, the first 11 publishers Michael sent The Beach Club to turned it down. Only the very last publisher, St. Martin’s Press, made an offer – of five thousand dollars. I said, “Is five thousand dollars a lot of money? Because I can’t quit my job.” He suggested we take the offer and in June 2000, The Beach Club was published.

It’s one thing to have a book published (my life’s goal: achieved!) and yet another to sell copies. However, The Beach Club was picked, almost immediately, as People Magazine’s “Beach Book of the Week.” I was thrilled again! The problem was that St. Martin’s had only published 2500 copies, which immediately sold out. This was the year 2000, long before the advent of e-books, so in order to buy books they had to be on the shelves. My book was out of stock for three long weeks over the Fourth of July, a frustrating scenario indeed, and my introduction to how challenging the world of publishing could be.

However, overall, The Beach Club did well for a first novel and I was offered a two-book deal for Nantucket Nights and Summer People. But Nantucket Nights didn’t get the kind of platinum publicity that The Beach Club had and it sold far fewer copies. Summer People did even worse. Despite this, St. Martin’s offered me another two-book deal, for The Blue Bistro and The Love Season. The Blue Bistro was, by far, my favorite novel that I’d written (it’s still my favorite, all these many years later) and it sold abysmally – 4000 copies in hardcover. I was so distraught that for the publication of The Love Season, I hired a private publicist and she did a phenomenal job. Again, I got a 4-star review in People Magazine with a big picture of my bad self. And again, St. Martin’s ran out of books and
again, it was before the advent of e-books so there were no books to be had for three weeks of the summer.

At that point, I was sitting on a novel called *Barefoot*. My agent, same agent Michael Carlisle, suggested we shop this novel around. But I had Stockholm Syndrome where I had fallen in love with my captor and I didn’t want to leave. Michael wisely persuaded me to meet with other publishers. What followed was what I now refer to as my “Cinderella day” – I went to New York and met with eight publishers all of whom wanted to buy my book. An auction followed and I took a pre-emptive deal with Little, Brown.

As of today, Little Brown and I have published 11 novels, all of them New York Times best sellers. This past summer’s novel, *The Rumor*, debuted on the hardcover list at #3.

A happy coda to this story is that in the summer of 2011, I was in Cooperstown, New York with my oldest son who was playing baseball there. My agent, same agent Michael Carlisle, called to tell me that *The Blue Bistro* had hit the NYTBSL six years after it was published. Justice had been achieved!

My challenges in the publishing world turned out to be far easier than the medical challenges I faced just a short while ago. In May of 2014, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. I found the lump myself – I was, at that time, very small-breasted, about half an A-cup – and I had two mammograms followed by an ultrasound and finally, a biopsy. Ten days later the doctor called to say I had cancer. Nobody is ever ready for that phone call and especially not me. I was healthy: I ran 8 miles a day and ate a lot of blueberries, didn’t smoke, breastfed all three of my children for a year, and I had no family history.

I went two days later to meet with my oncological surgeon at Mass General. She was a wonderful woman, blond like me and about my age, with four children and great taste in
shoes. She explained the nature of my tumor and said we would treat it with a lumpectomy and radiation. However, she wanted me to have an MRI to make sure there was “nothing else hiding.” I was relaxed in the MRI machine because I knew there was nothing else hiding – I’d already had two mammograms and again, I was only half an A-cup!

When my surgeon called the next day it was with the unbelievable news that the MRI had turned up four tumors in my right breast and one in my left. I was now looking at a double mastectomy with possible chemo and radiation.

“And I have more bad news,” my doctor said. “They don’t make implants as small as you were so you’ll have to go bigger.”

OKAY!

The date for my surgery was set at June 13. My novel The Matchmaker was coming out June 10. I had to cancel tour dates, and it was then I decided – since I was to be on the road most of the summer promoting my book to large audiences of women – that I should publically announce my diagnosis. Life was imitating art – in my novel, The Matchmaker, one of my forty-something characters is diagnosed with cancer out of the blue. I had just spent a year trying to imagine what that would be like...and then, suddenly, it was happening to me. I wrote a piece for the Huffington Post, which caught the eye of the producers of CBS This Morning. The day before my double mastectomy found me flying to New York City to appear on the show with Charlie Rose, Gayle King and Norah O’Donnell.

My surgery was a success, although painful. (Gayle King checked in the day after the surgery via email and I responded, “I feel like I have concrete breasts stitched on with barbed wire.”) My surgeon told me that her high-powered attorneys and investment bankers gave her four weeks of rest and she asked if I could give her four weeks of rest. I said no; I had a book to promote. I told her I would give her two weeks, which ended up only being twelve days. After twelve days, I flew to Chicago to do two events. I still had two
drains in and I was on drugs but I told my publicist not to cancel Chicago because to cancel would mean I was too sick to go and I was determined not to be too sick to go.

One of the watershed moments of my illness came during the second event in Chicago. It was a brown bag lunch for 100 women at a library in Cook County. In the front row were two women, one with very short hair and one with no hair at all. My eye kept drawing back to them. When they came through the line to get their books signed, the woman with very short hair said, “We’ve both had double mastectomies; collectively, we’ve gone through 36 rounds of chemo and 64 rounds of radiation. We came today, Elin, to show you that you are going to be fine.”

It was at that moment that I realized that there were women far sicker than I was who were fighting the disease with strength and with grace. They took the pain and difficulty of their illness and turned it into something positive that they could share with me.

I spent most of the summer of 2014 being “reconstructed” into my new C-cup self and at the end of September, I had the tissue expanders taken out and implants put in. About a week later, I developed a life-threatening infection in my left breast that had me Med-flighted on a helicopter from Nantucket Cottage Hospital to the roof of Mass General. I was operated on and my left implant removed – which probably makes me the only person you know who lost three breasts last year.

I spent last winter being reconstructed on the left and I am happy to say I am now healthy and whole.

I will leave you with one thought that was shared with me during my battle. I received a text message from a woman who works in my independent bookstore. Suzanne is a 7-year survivor and the mother of two grown sons. She said to me, “Elin, if I had it to do over, I would take the cancer again because of what it has taught me.” And I thought, Whoa.
But now, I agree with her. I would take the cancer again – and why? Because it is only in facing that which threatens your very being that you learn *what it means to be alive.*

Thank you.