

Too Young to Be Old

25 Secrets
from TV's
Jean Queen

HOW TO STAY VIBRANT, VISIBLE,
AND FOREVER IN BLUE JEANS

DIANE GILMAN

WITH JAN TUCKWOOD

FOR MY FELLOW BLUE JEAN
BELIEVERS: My Sisterhood of the
Soul-Saving, Strength-Boosting,
Spirit-Lifting Jeans—or Why I
Wrote This Book

I was born to be a rocker chick, forever in blue jeans. Every chapter of my life has been edgy and raw, like denim—from my hippie days making jeans for Janis Joplin to my twenty-eight years selling my DG2 line on HSN.

The fact that my denim designs made me famous in my sixties, when I became known as HSN's "Jean Queen," is a gift I cherish. What I value even more is the love that flows between the women who wear my jeans and me. We are all connected, threads tied by heart.

We are beautiful today in ways we could not be when we were twenty, thirty, or forty—because we share the beauty of wisdom. We know ourselves. We're too vibrant to become invisible. We see with a clarity only real-life experience can reveal.

From the vantage point of now—my midseventies—I can see clearly: everything that happened in the first two acts of my life brought me to the exact right place, an Act 3

where I can bring my sisterhood of seven hundred thousand women even more than cool-girl DG2 jeans.

It's time to celebrate our wild blue spirits, the strength and edge our blue jeans represent. They're the uniform of our generation and a metaphor for our lives: tough even when frayed, beautiful when adorned, most authentic when worn over and over and over.

Jeans don't quit. That's me too. It's you.

I often say that life is like a stretch waistband: you can yank it over lumps, bumps, and muffin tops, but it's only good if it snaps back. In my DG2 jeans, this resilience is called "stretch and recovery." In real life, it's called my story—a story of guts, tenacity, and passion to succeed against all odds and snap back after life stretched me sideways.

My latest stretch and recovery challenged me in powerful ways.

I was diagnosed with breast cancer in December 2017, which seems like both long ago and only yesterday. As I began treatment, I videotaped a message to all of you, the women who made my DG2 line the number one fashion brand on HSN:

Hi, everyone. I want to share some personal news with you and let you know why you won't be seeing me on air for a while.

I am one in eight, one of the eight women who will be diagnosed with breast cancer in her lifetime. I have started my treatment, and I expect a full recovery. The great news is that I have the best care and the most amazing extended family supporting me, including you! Please keep in touch with me. I would love to hear from you. Our connection is from heart to heart, and I so value that.

All my love,
Diane

I was overwhelmed by what happened next. More than 130,000 of you wrote messages of encouragement and shared your own stories. I can't begin to describe what it felt like to have you in my corner—to know that so many women were rooting for me and taking the time to tell me how much you cared.

You became my secret weapon in my fight against cancer. Your love and caring bridged the miles between us and infused me with pure love on a scale I never could have imagined.

You helped heal me. You helped me see that cancer changed me—for the better. It cracked open my defensive shell and

opened my heart to accept the love I get from you, my Blue Jean Believers—the inspirational women who accept me, laugh with me, and stand by me.

I took a year out of my life to save my life, and in the process I hit the refresh button on my soul.

My cancer became a bridge to a new life, a life with real foundational purpose. It brought me to my Act 3, a time when I can deliver a much broader message of hope.

It is now time for me to give back—to share love and wisdom and encouragement with you. This book is a step in that direction.

First, I have to explain how I got here.

Prologue

MY WINGED HEART, PART I

“I don’t know if I can save it.”

The plastic surgeon pointed to the quarter-size tattoo above my left breast, the breast so wracked with cancer that my nipple had folded in.

“I don’t know. I don’t know,” he murmured, measuring the circumference of my tattoo with his fingers and gently pulling my flesh. “You may lose all this skin.”

I glanced down at my naked chest and took a deep breath.

My breasts had never been my currency. They weren’t what I flaunted in my wild youth, back when almost everything else about me was flaunt worthy. I was always more about my tight jeans, my distinctive style, my untamed auburn hair, and my rebel energy.

They were too small to get me a gig as a dancer in one of those cages at the Whisky a Go Go, but they were shapely enough to get noticed when I sat out naked by a friend’s

pool on Fire Island. They looked good in clothes and good out of clothes, and I honestly thought my breasts and my tattoo would be there forever.

Now they'd become the lead villains in my own personal horror movie: a stage 2 demon in the right breast and a stage 3 ogre in the left. *True to form, Diane*, I thought to myself. *One kind of cancer wasn't enough for you. You had to have two.*

Everything about me has always been extra, including my flirtations with death. The stage 2 tumor on the right side was hard but small and not going to kill me. It was the stage 3 mass in my left breast that was threatening to do me in. It had infiltrated my tissue so completely—"tethered" was the word my surgeon used—that it had pulled my nipple further and further inward until it creased my breast like an accordion.

It's not that I didn't notice it was happening. I'd watched that pleat grow and deepen for years. It was as if my breast was being devoured from within, but I remained in denial. I came up with all kinds of explanations. It had to be calcium deposits. Or tissue shifting because of age. Nothing to be concerned about, right?

Wrong. My surgeon had scolded me for sticking my head in the sand. How could I have ignored this for so many years? She also berated me for the role I'd played in helping it grow.

How could I have deliberately subjected myself to cancer-boosting substances for so many years—all in the name

of vanity? How could I have taken hormones? How could I have injected myself with HGH—human growth hormone—to feel and appear more youthful? Didn't I know that stuff could kill me? Taking estrogen when you've got a cancer fueled by estrogen—"That's like throwing gas onto a fire!" she exclaimed.

My excuse had always been my warp-speed life. No time, no time, no time. No time to take care of my body, except the parts that mattered on TV—face, hair, teeth. No time to take my eye off designing my DG2 line or selling it on HSN. No time to be pulled into the morass of the medical system.

I told myself I didn't have time for cancer. But the truth is, I was terrified—and my terror had paralyzed me. Now I had to face my fear.

On July 31, 2018, there we were—my breasts, my tattoo, and me—in our last moments together.

My beautiful tattoo. My red heart with the green dragon wings and the tiny red drop falling from the heart. *My winged heart.*

My mind flashed back to that dingy tattoo parlor above the bus station in San Francisco's Tenderloin, the grimmest, scariest neighborhood in the city. I dodged hookers and pimps to find the stairs.

I'd been sent there by Janis Joplin. Women didn't get tattoos back then, back in 1969—except women like Janis, who I adored. She sang the blues with a raspy, soul-rattling wail, and it was a sound the world had never heard before. Me? I was a twenty-four-year-old who'd run away from home to

start a new life as a fashion designer, and I embroidered the jeans Janis wore as she strutted onstage.

The man who had inked the small heart above Janis's breast and also the bracelet tattoo around her left wrist—a scroll design that looked like the fusion of a heart, a tulip, and a uterus—also gave me mine. His name was Lyle Tuttle, and he was a pioneer of tattoo art who became famous as the Illustrated Man.

Lyle had tattoos over 95 percent of his body—everywhere except his face, hands, and feet, because, he'd say, "I like to look civilized in my clothes." Tattoos are like luggage tags, he said. They show where you've been.

For me, who would've rather died than go back to where I'd been, my winged heart meant flight. It was a permanent mark of my emancipation. Each sting of the needle felt like a deep gulp of freedom—liberation from the terror of my childhood. My parents would have been appalled by it, which only intensified its appeal.

It was delicate but tough, pretty but edgy. And it was unique—that tattoo was proof that I was one of a kind, an original, and that I was as certain of my talent as Janis was of hers. Women like us, we were free from the rule books our mothers had been forced to follow, the rule books that told women they were nothing without a husband.

That tattoo was proof I was fearless! That nothing could stop me.

Now, as I prepared to enter an operating room to have my breasts chopped off and maybe my tattoo too, I felt my

bottom lip quiver. Soon my body would be altered forever. How fearless was I, really?

Maybe Janis was right. Maybe *freedom* is just another word for nothing left to lose.

"I've had that tattoo for almost half a century," I told the plastic surgeon as I tightened the hospital gown around my naked body.

"I'll try to save it," he said. "I can't promise anything, but I'll try."