

# Lessons from Adele

My best friend Adele taught me that it's possible to face the worst of life – even cancer – without relying on a spouse or children to support you. The story of a single woman, a time of need, and a neighbourhood that became a family.

BY CYNTHIA BROUSE ILLUSTRATIONS BY JULIETTE BORDA



**I**t's about nine o'clock on a warm September evening. You're out for a stroll, maybe walking your dog, in the dusky light on a friendly looking street in Toronto's east end, a front-porch kind of street with narrow houses fronting close to the sidewalk. As you pass number 87, you can see into the softly lit living room, just a few feet away. The curtains are open wide enough to reveal a frail, middle-aged woman lying on a hospital bed. She has closely shaven, jet-black hair; her dark-rimmed eyes seem hollow, and her olive skin is stretched tightly over a skeletal frame. If you stopped for a moment, you'd notice that on her left cheek someone has painted a bright blue butterfly. If you stopped for longer, you might see a man and a little boy exit the house opposite. The man is carrying a dish covered with foil. They enter number 87, and the man carries the dish to the kitchen while the little boy stands in the sick room, quietly watching the sleeping woman. The man returns, and plants a gentle kiss on the woman's forehead, and the two leave.

A little girl who's not supposed to be riding her bike at night, but is anyway, pulls up on the sidewalk.

"How's Adele?" she asks her neighbours.

Adele Jacobson was my closest friend in Toronto, where I live. She died of lung cancer at the age of 52 on Sept. 26, 2003, in that little living room on that friendly street. Precisely two weeks after she died, I found myself in a breast clinic, staring at a chickpea-sized blob on a mammogram as the doctor said, "I wish I had good news for you." One of my first thoughts was directed angrily toward my dead friend: "How could you leave me? Who's going to help me through this?"

Because, like Adele, I am unmarried and childless. Adele had been divorced after a brief marriage, and lived alone, as I do, in a house she had struggled to buy on her own. I'm a freelance writer and editor and part-time teacher staring down 50.

Who else do women like us turn to?

**WHEN I WAS A GIRL IN THE EARLY 1970s**, I read an article in a magazine, possibly *Chatelaine*, that profiled a single woman in her 40s, who, the writer told us, was dying of breast cancer, alone, in an apartment in a big city, with no one to care for her. "Alone in an apartment she'd dwell," ran the lyrics of a Paul McCartney song that was popular at the time. "Sometimes she feels so sad." If that song depressed me, the magazine story was a shock. My narrow, teenaged focus made

such a lifestyle seem unthinkable. In the small town where I grew up, there was almost no such thing as an unmarried or childless adult. It was beyond my powers of imagination to summon up a day when I, too, would be a single, childless woman in her 40s, living alone in Toronto with breast cancer. But childhood fears are just that: I was also once terrified of German shepherds, penises and singing in public, all of which became some of my favourite things. I now see singlehood as more like the monster in the closet than a terminal disease; when I open the door and take a look, it's a pretty wussy creature.

For one thing, I'm not alone in my aloneness. Last spring a front-page, above-the-fold *Toronto Star* story exclaimed, "A Woman's World Is Increasingly Alone." "Women are marrying less," it read, "divorcing more and outliving the men they do stay with." According to a 2001 Statistics Canada study, 14 per cent of Canadian women live alone, more than double the 1971 figure. Almost a third of unattached women in Canada qualified as "low-income."

In other words, as boomer women enter late middle age, more of us are going to be fending for ourselves when the roof caves in, without sons and daughters to nurse us when we're ill, or spousal life insurance and pensions to support us, or grandkids to drive us to the grocery store. Of course, some parents find out their kids have no time for them (and sometimes the feeling is mutual). Still, those of us with neither offspring nor partners are heading into territory that up until now has been only sparsely charted.

But this demographic detail means there will be more of us to help each other out as our knees, memories and bank accounts head south, to experiment with inventive living arrangements and to lobby for social supports. Furthermore, the never-marrieds – or as one academic article puts it cutely, the "ever-singles" – are often pretty good at being alone. As a married male friend once responded to my "what's wrong with me" whine, "The only difference between you and married people is that you actually like your own company."

Perhaps unlike the sudden widow, we know how to find the resources we need – not just to survive, but to be happy. Our social networks tend to be strong and wide and flexible. And if they're not, it's never too late to make them that way. In the book *Flying Solo: Single Women in Midlife*, Carol Anderson and Susan Stewart describe single women who are "not unhappy but think they ought to be." I now think I ought to be >

happy, and mostly I am. Sure, sometimes being single sucks, and not just when you can't reach the roast pan on the top shelf or your grandmother dies.

Adele and I did our share of feeling lonely and sorry for ourselves, both before and after cancer. But at a certain point those feelings got boring – and life got surprisingly full. After I turned 40 and acquired a niece and three nephews, I became horrified by the notion that they would grow up pitying me, and I set out to be somebody whose life they might consider emulating, or at least, in the words of my oldest nephew, “the wacky aunt.”

Besides, the divorce rate tells us that Bridget Jones's “smug marrieds” don't necessarily have all that much to be smug about. For many, marriage is a lonely place. I can't count the number of times I've felt blessed not to have to deal with the financial squabbles or infidelities or troubled children that some married people must face. In any case, I defer to the words of Judy Plum, a “spinster” character in a lesser-known novel by L.M. Montgomery (for the author, wedded bliss turned out to be a serious contradiction in terms): “Marrying's a trouble and not marrying's a trouble and I sticks to the trouble I knows.”

If I sound a tad like Pollyanna, let me hasten to add that having cancer is no laugh riot, single or not. An ambivalent member of the pink-ribbon brigade at best, I did not find my life automatically transformed by cancer into an inspiring movie-of-the-week. Like the late Miriam Engelberg, in her darkly hilarious and brilliant cartoon memoir *Cancer Made Me a Shallower Person*, neither Adele nor I could see ourselves as particularly heroic.

“I'm not dying of lung cancer,” Adele snorted the day she received the terrible diagnosis, invoking Dr. Kevorkian and speculating about suicide. “And nobody at my funeral's going to say I died bravely and with dignity after a battle with cancer.” I won't deny that among the items that got both Adele and me through the experience was a supply of mood-improving pharmaceuticals. So, this is intended as neither a “poor-us” story nor a bowl of chicken soup for the soul. It's simply the trouble I knows.

Adele was a lively Jewish transplant from Connecticut, who reminded me a little of Judge Judy. She worked for many years as an interpreter for the deaf and a teacher of adult basic skills at George Brown College in Toronto. Ten months passed between her diagnosis and the day she was taken away from us for

good. She didn't commit suicide, and, though she'd cringe to hear me say it, “heroic” is not far off the mark. In fact, in that 10 months, I believe she found courage and a kind of peace she didn't know she was capable of feeling. And in the time that followed my own cancer diagnosis, I realized that Adele had not abandoned me. The last months of her life had been a lesson in how to live with cancer as a single, childless woman, her final gift to me. Let me share with you some lessons from Adele, a well-loved teacher who was teaching till her last breath.

When she first heard the words “lung cancer,” only her coworkers knew Adele had gone to the hospital by herself. Sent home with some painkillers, she had a strange, stroke-like attack as she sat alone in her house trying to absorb the news. Fortunately, a close friend at work called to check on her, and when Adele picked up the phone but was unable to speak coherently, her friend summoned an ambulance. Here's the complicated thing about single, urban life. Often the people we're close to aren't close to each other. While paramedics loaded an uncommunicative Adele into the >

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# Lesson One: Distribute a list of essential numbers to anyone who can get the word out if you need help.



ambulance, her neighbours rushed into her house, only to realize they didn't know how to alert her family. They'd all become friends when Adele had instigated regular street potlucks, and they knew she had a sister and mother in Connecticut, but didn't have their phone numbers. Most of them had met me, but didn't know my last name.

By happenstance, a young Chinese student named Lulu who had lived with both me and Adele telephoned as the neighbours stood helplessly in Adele's living room (at least they had keys), and she provided them with my number. I happened to have Adele's sister's number, only because for some reason she'd given it to me before one of her visits home. That was Lesson One. The next day, I gave my boss and my neighbours a list of the phone numbers of my closest friends, my siblings and my parents.

Which leads me to Lesson Two: If you're not acquainted with them yet, get to know your neighbours. And if possible, live in a place where that's possible. Adele and I both became homeowners in our early forties. We could afford only tiny, modest places, and that led us both to a working-class district that features the kind of density and openness that helps you

get to know your neighbours whether you want to or not. The women on my street, many of them single, met monthly for a potluck dinner for years, and a broader group still meets from time to time even though some have moved away. Adele had organized similar gatherings on her street; residents there have said it was she who drew them into a community with her gregariousness, her love of entertaining and her genuine interest in the lives of others, regardless of age or background. I can only hope the boom in senior singles living in apartments and condos will generate more neighbourliness among those little boxes and lofty towers than I ever experienced as an apartment-dweller.

Adele's neighbours came to her aid when she needed them. Lesson Three is about asking for, and accepting, help. Like me, Adele had almost never been the centre of anyone's world. When she saw that her friends, family and neighbours were willing to help her, she in turn discovered the other side of loving people: the ability to let others love her back. She let us into her new, scary life, allowed us to share her illness and her dying. She simply accepted our sometimes fumbling attempts to care for her as though she felt she deserved them, not in a selfish way, but generously and with grace. >

# Lesson Two: Get to know your neighbours socially – whether you want to or not.



With the help of an organization now called Hospice Toronto, whose goal is to support people who wish to die at home, we formed a care team to look after Adele and to assist her primary caregivers – her sister, also single and childless, and their mother – who came to stay with her for long stretches. The first meeting of our team had an almost jolly atmosphere; a photo taken of the group that night, with a beaming Adele in the middle, attests to her ability to plan for the inevitable while living in the moment.

Following a schedule prepared by Hospice Toronto, her neighbours and a handful of close friends cooked meals, shopped, fielded phone calls, and spent hours holding her hand, watching her sleep, sneaking Schezuan lobster into the hospital when she had to be there, and periodically protecting her from the medical staff. We cried, too, but we laughed even more.

A year later, when I chose to have both radiation and chemotherapy after my lumpectomy, I was frightened, more by the unpredictability of what was to come than anything. The last thing I wanted was a dozen people calling me on Monday and being left completely alone on Tuesday when I could really use help or company – and I didn't want to be a burden to just one or two people. I took a deep breath and sent out a mass e-mail to about 50 friends, neighbours, co-workers and acquaintances who I thought might be willing to give me a hand. Because I wasn't sure what I needed them to do, if anything at all, I got out a calendar and asked each one to commit to a day or two in the coming months when they could call me. I would tell them what I needed that day. I also booked a buddy for each day I had to be at the hospital for treatment. As is so often the case, I ended up needing few of the things I thought I would, and many things I hadn't thought of at all. But I accomplished roughly what I'd set out to do and I almost never had to attend a treatment alone, which helped my morale considerably.

Both Adele and I discovered that sometimes the people who can help you are not the people you're closest to – and that that may be just as well. My family members, for various good reasons, were not available very often (and my most intimate friends didn't live in Toronto), but freelance co-workers ferried me to my interminable appointments on weekdays, brought me groceries and listened to my macabre clowning about the intravenous catheter hanging out of my arm or the *Star Trek*-like atmosphere of the radiation chamber with its green beams of light poking at my breast.

## Lesson Three :

Ask for  
help and  
schedule



your  
friends  
in a rotation of  
support duties.

My neighbours fetched prescriptions, hunted up a nurse who lives on my street to check my incision for infection and drove me to emergency. I soon discovered that people like helping out, and were even insulted when not asked. I made some new friendships and renewed old ones in the process. Almost nobody actually turned away, and I respected those whose reasons for not being able to deal with my situation were too private to discuss.

A teenager on my street shovelled my snow while I was sick, which brings me to Lesson Four: Make children a part of your life. (In fact, if you're single, make sure you have friends of every age; a couple of stalwarts on my cancer-care team were retired people who had time to spare.) Adele's love for the kids on her street (including a darling infant named Niamh, who brightened up some truly disheartening care-team meetings) was returned with childish honesty, and those same kids danced to Aretha Franklin with the grownups at her memorial party.

I can't predict how I'll feel 20 years from now, but living in an adults-only community seems a dreary choice to me. Being around younger people prevents me from fearing them (a common ailment of the elderly) and keeps me young. Well, younger. Visits with my siblings' children, or just watching the neighbourhood >

Lesson Four:  
Feeling  
young is a  
jolt in the  
arm, so  
make children  
a part of your life.



kids act like idiots in front of my house, makes me feel like I'm smack in the middle of life, tied to something bigger and more important than my own problems, maybe even a positive influence. And while it's true that I see some of my friends with kids less often than I'd like, I've accepted that I have to make an effort if I don't want to lose touch completely – and my honorary nieces and nephews are better than TV.

OK, you say, but how can I be part of a community when communities seem to be made up of families? One single friend said that when she bought a house in a suburb outside Toronto, her neighbours treated her as though she were a circus freak. When we're not being pitied, single women are seen by some as a threat to family stability, not to be invited in for coffee lest we lure your unsuspecting spouse or child into our debauched lairs.

Well, Lesson Five is doing your part by considering yourself a family of one. Waiting for your life to "start" is seriously stupid. For example, Adele lived in a home, not a house, which she delighted in dec- >

Faster than the speed of facial.



orating and maintaining, despite not being handy. Like Adele, I created a home for me, filled with my tchotchkes and my family photos and as much or as little dirt and clutter as I want, and I welcome people into it often, even as I enjoy the solitariness to which I am evidently best suited. And my close friends see me as a family, not as half of something that needs completing before becoming eligible for social inclusion.

Part of creating a family of one is cooking. I was often taken aback when Adele would literally smack her lips and say, "Oh, I made myself a terrific poached salmon last night!" I could cook, but it had never seemed worth it to cook just for me. Through Adele, I learned to enjoy sitting down alone to a good meal I'd made myself, as well as to share my meal with others.

Because a family of one can expand in surprising ways. Like many single-woman homeowners, we rented out spare bedrooms to students, a choice that's occasionally a crashing drag, but mostly a source of fascinating connection and even comfort. >

## Lesson Five:

Don't be  
down on  
singledom



– do your  
part by considering  
yourself a family  
of one.

Let him think that glow is  
because of something he did.



Adele and I cheered and stomped from the balcony at the college graduation of Lulu, our student from China; Lulu called Adele her Canadian mom in an e-mail that was read at her memorial. Adele's and my young tenants were also adopted by our neighbours.

And while I never aspired to being Dorothy, Blanche or Rose on *The Golden Girls*, it's starting to look like they had the right idea. Non-traditional family arrangements and pooling resources will become more common as the number of unattached women rises.

Lesson Six is actually one I taught Adele. When one of my closest high-school chums died in a car accident at 30, my heart ached for her parents, who would have had to journey to the city from her home town to make some sense out of her belongings and finances. I resolved to make sure I had all my papers in a safe but

who don't really like kids, or who, either bored by SpongeBob SquarePants or simply envious, don't care to hang out with their friends who are parents. Some single people are more private than Adele and I, and wouldn't feel comfortable sharing such an intensely personal journey with a wider circle. Others wish to spare loved ones grief and inconvenience for as long as possible and prefer to keep their crises to themselves, or to rely on professional help. One single friend says she'd rather be dead than have a bunch of neighbours hovering over her in the hospital, or even setting foot in her house, which she considers a private haven. For her, it's about control, and control over one's life is certainly the greatest thing about being single.

But there may come a time when life is out of your control, and you need somebody, even if it's just some-

## Lesson Six: Get your paperwork in order – and keep your will and financial details close at hand.



locatable spot, including an up-to-date will and a list of where my bank accounts, insurance policies and investments reside. Adele had done little of this when she got sick, and it was excruciatingly difficult to suggest it to her without seeming ghoulish. Eventually, with help, she was able to sort out most things before she died. Luckily, her sister, mother and cousins were with her at the end. If you have no family at all (or you're not crazy about the family you do have), and you end up in hospital, the medical staff are not permitted even to tell your friends how you're doing, which is why you need to assign a power of attorney for health as well as property.

All of these lessons are about building intentional connections, which, in some ways, is not all that different from getting married or having children. The type, number, and closeness of those connections will not be the same for everybody. There are lots of single people

body to keep all the other somebodies away. Whatever combination of support and connection suits you, they are what you deserve, regardless of your marital status. Most important, single women (and men) need to feel part of the larger community, with different but important roles to play. And an inclusive community doesn't happen without some effort and design, on all our parts. A few days before Adele died, her neighbours held a street fair. A couple of the men tenderly folded her into a wheelchair and brought her outside, where she was able to chat on the sidewalk with people who had become her family. Joining the kids, she had a blue butterfly painted on her cheek – a reminder of the last day the sun shone on her face, and of how she had touched so many people as she made her way through life, on her own, but not alone.

Thanks for the lessons, my hero, my teacher, my friend. •