

GAME ON



Sailing Beyond Cancer with the Healing Power of Creativity & Imagination

Game On is a fictional tale based on the true story
of a young boy who won the fight against cancer
with the help of creativity and imagination.

ROBERT W.H. WILKINS, “WOODY”

Table of Contents

Foreword	ix
Acknowledgments	xi
Introduction	xiii
Prologue: I Did Not Want to Write This Book	1
1. From Home to Hospital.....	5
2. Aunt Sophie Visits	9
3. Child Life Visit–Checkers with Dad	13
4. Building a Race Car with Woody	15
5. Chemo Begins.....	21
6. Chemo-Pole Sails	25
7. Dr. Jones and Tests.....	31
8. Chemo–Vomit–Memory Box	35
9. Hair Loss–the Red Tractor	45
10. Dr. Loren–Pickup Truck	51
11. Test Results–Desertion.....	55
12. Pickup Truck Arrives	59
13. Game Over to Game On	63
14. The Very Special Project Appears.....	71
15. Pirate Ship–Sunshine Pen.....	79
16. Pirate Image	83
17. Ship Layout	89
18. Ship’s Planning Page Explanation	93
19. Ship’s Sails	99
20. Building the Field	103

21. Ship's Scenery	109
22. Coast Guard Inspection	113
23. The Treasure Chest	119
24. Travel the World	123
25. Feeding the Crew	127
26. Guided Imagery—the Crow's Nest.....	131
27. Drawing My Toy Pirate Pistol	137
28. Building My Pistol.....	141
29. Shooting Cancer	147
30. Shooting the Cancer Again and Again	151
31. The Cutlass Is Born	153
32. Building My Cutlass	155
33. The Day of the Cutlass.....	159
34. The Day of the Samurai.....	163
35. Standing Samurai	171
36. The Samurai Dream.....	177
37. Body Tracing Day	183
38. The Second Body Tracing	186
39. No Pistol or Sword, Then What?	189
40. Family Intention	193
41. Transitioning the Sword.....	197
42. Changing Bullets into Hearts	201
43. Healing Hearts of Love.....	205
44. Sharks on Duty	207
45. Music That Heals and Empowers	213
46. The Scent of Healing.....	217

47. Tests and More Tests	225
48. Preparing for the Party	233
49. Those Missing Years	237
Bibliography	241
Photographs of Captain Jack	245
The Programs That We Offer	264
How You Can Help	266
About the Author.....	268

Foreword

Game On is an important book because it communicates the power of the human spirit to rise above cancer and the emotional challenges of arduous medical treatments. This book's mission is to enlighten readers about the truly remarkable healing made possible by tapping into one's creative imagination, true spirit, capacity for love, and enduring sense of hope.

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PROLOGUE: I DID NOT WANT TO WRITE THIS BOOK

Dear Reader:

I did not want to write this book. I was asked to write this book. Twelve months ago, I received a letter from an attorney. His letter said the following:

Dear Jack,

I am handling the estate of the deceased Mr. R. W. H. Wilkins, otherwise known as "Woody." Among his journals and few personal effects was a letter addressed to you. In my role as executor of his estate, I am forwarding this letter to you for your attention.

Yours sincerely,

Mr. J. Higgins, Esq.

Before I opened the letter, I held it close to my heart and remembered twenty years ago when I was an eight-year-old boy with cancer. I remembered when Woody first walked into my hospital room carrying his magical bag of wood. We worked together for ten weeks. He used wood to heal my spirit and show me who I really was deep down inside. He showed me that I was not the cancer. I was a beautiful, creative, and wonderful child. This memory lives in my heart today.

After ten weeks together, as quietly as he had first walked into my hospital room, he walked away.

I am now twenty-eight years old, and I have often wondered where he was and what became of him. His program was called Dances With Wood, and I will always remember him as the man who danced with wood.

Here is his letter to me:

Dear Captain Jack, my very special friend,

For you to be reading this letter, it means that my time on Earth has run its course. Our time together was so very special for me. In the years that have passed since those ten weeks in the hospital, I have often held you in my thoughts and prayers. I am sending you this letter with one request.

I would like you to write your story from the perspective of that eight-year-old-boy with cancer. Please tell the story as you remember and experienced our work together.

I am asking you to write your story not for you, but for other children and adults who are facing what you so bravely faced and overcame: cancer. Your bravery and strength in prevailing over illness will be their inspiration.

Please know that I am with you in spirit, now and for always.

Woody

So here it is, the book written to honor my friend, Woody, and his magical dance with wood. May his light and his wisdom shine through these pages.

I dedicate this book to his spirit and to the healing power of love, hope, and creativity.

Jack Sarton



FROM HOME TO HOSPITAL

MY STORY BEGINS WHEN I was eight years old and the word “cancer” came into my life. It made people look at me differently; it stole my mother’s smile.

I remember the day when I heard this word for the first time. It was a Tuesday during a regular school week. The day began with Mom saying, “No school today!”

I get to sleep in...Yay! I did not need to know why; I just snuggled down inside my warm bed to make the most of a school day sleep-in. Later in the morning, Mom came to my room and gave me a hug, kissed me on the forehead, and then sat on my bed. In her usual, soft voice, she said, “Jack, we have to go to the hospital today. The doctor needs to see us.”

She said that Dad would be coming as well, so I figured I would be safe. I imagined getting ice cream on the way home, as we did after our last visit.

The hospital was a very big building with long corridors with loads of doors.

I liked the people, though; they were always friendly and nice to me.

I remember holding my mother’s warm hand as we navigated our way around people and through the long corridors to a small room. Dad was

with us, but he seemed distant and did not speak. I remember a woman showing us into a small room with chairs around a small table. Mom sat on my right side and held my hand firmly as she stared at a picture on the wall. Dad was on my other side with his eyes lowered to the floor.

After a few minutes, a doctor in a white coat came into the room. As he sat down in the big office chair behind his desk, I remember the sound of the air hissing from the cushion like a sigh. He reached his hand across the table, first to shake Dad's hand, and then Mom's. He gave me a smile and put his hand up for a high five. I felt a little nervous, but after Mom's prompting, I reached out and touched his hand. As my hand touched his, he gently closed his warm fingers around it.

He looked directly at me and said, "Welcome, Jack. We are going to take really good care of you."

I liked that he held my hand and looked at me.

Then the doctor lowered his eyes to his notes, cleared his throat, and spoke. His voice was soft, and he said the word "tests." It made me think of the tests we had at school. But he was talking about the medical tests that they carried out the last time I visited the hospital. Then he went quiet for a few seconds before he spoke the word that would forever change my life: "cancer."

My father locked his gaze on the doctor and reached out to grip my hand tightly.

My mother's eyes also were locked like a laser beam on the doctor, and that was when the smile that I had known and loved so well disappeared from her face.

I did not really know what cancer meant, but I knew it was not good. I wanted to go home. I wanted to play outside with my friends. The doctor spoke into a box on his desk, and a nurse dressed in a light-blue outfit entered. She did not say anything at first; she just reached out and touched my mother on the shoulder, leaving her hand there for a few seconds in a comforting way. She shook hands with Dad and said her name, Julie. Then she knelt down and looked me straight in the eyes. Her

eyes were big, brown, and warm. She cradled one of my cheeks in her warm hand and said, “Everything is going to be OK, honey.”

The word “honey” made me feel good all of a sudden, as if she was really seeing me. We headed to an elevator and went up inside the big hospital building. Then we walked down a long corridor to a room with my name on the door.

Mom’s hand was glued to mine. Dad left, and then he came back with a bag I recognized from home. He pulled out my favorite blanket from my bed at home and put it on my hospital bed.

Mom helped me change into my hospital gown. Then she lifted me up into the big hospital bed and pulled the sheets over me.

A nurse entered with a tray of juice and sleeping medication. Soon, the day that cancer entered my life would end. Soon, this dream would end, and I would wake up in my own bed, right?

Wrong!



AUNT SOPHIE VISITS

I WOKE UP FEELING DROWSY. Just some sips of milk for breakfast, and Mom told me that Aunt Sophie would be visiting soon. Aunt Sophie was Mom's younger sister and was something of a mystery to my mother and father. When my mother was in a playful mood, she used a nickname for Aunt Sophie that I did not really understand. She called her "stretchy girl."

Aunt Sophie taught something called boga, or toga, or yoga. She never said much, and she always talked slowly and softly. All I knew about Aunt Sophie was that she always seemed to see me on the inside, and she made my heart feel warm. She just sort of radiated warm energy. Whenever she touched me, I could feel a comforting warmth, as if she had just pulled her hands out of heated mittens. I liked the way she dressed in happy, colorful clothes. She always looked a little different from other people. It was midmorning when Aunt Sophie breezed into the room. My mother jumped up and fell into Sophie's long, embracing arms.

I looked straight at Sophie, who was looking at me over Mom's shoulder. Sophie lowered Mom back into her chair, and turned to me. She reached out and wrapped her arms around me.

Aunt Sophie released her hug and then held me at arm's length, gazing lovingly into my eyes. She knew I was nervous. I liked the way she looked into me in a loving, nonsearching way. I liked looking into her eyes. They made me feel safe and secure.

Could Aunt Sophie see the cancer? I wondered. What color is it? Where is it? How big is it? I stayed silent and kept my questions deep inside me.

Dad soon arrived and gave us all high fives.

Dad said he was taking Mom to get coffee and they would be back shortly. Dad walked out first with Mom following, leaving Aunt Sophie. I still did not know what cancer was. I think I wanted to know. But perhaps it was better not to know.

Aunt Sophie slid onto the bed next to me and did what I so loved her to do. She made the form of a spider with her hand and walked it toward my feet. I pretended to squirm as the spider hand crept over to my toes. Then a lunge, and she grabbed my foot, and I squealed in delight. Still no words, just her soft gaze that held me in a safe place.

Slowly her hands began their gentle rubbing strokes on my feet, and I could feel love and energy from her hands flowing into my feet and up my legs into my body. It felt warm and safe.

I was feeling homesick, and a few tears formed. I turned my head away from Aunt Sophie, putting my hands up in front of my face, hoping she would not see that I was crying. She came around to the other side of the bed. She gently pulled my hands away from my face, cradled my teary cheek in one of her warm hands, and placed her other hand on my heart. Then she lowered her head close to mine and whispered the words my heart so longed to hear. Her words are alive in me now. She whispered, "Jack, sweet, dear Jack, I love you, I love you, I love you. I love your tears, I love all of you."

I turned my head to look into her eyes. She reached for the tissue box and pulled out two large, white tissues. She said, "Oh look, you have angels living in your tissue box." Then she pretended the tissues were

angels with white wings and made them fly above me, swooping and soaring before landing on my wet cheek. She would dab my tears and then take off again in flight. The sight of her with these two little white angels made me start to giggle. She started to giggle as well, and next thing I knew, we were both laughing away.

At that point, Mom and Dad came back into the room. Both were carrying large cups of coffee. Mom found delight in seeing the two of us laughing and giggling, and she wanted to be let in on the joke.

Aunt Sophie pulled two more tissues from the box and gave them to Mom, urging her to see them as angels with white wings. Mom caught on really quickly, and the two of them shared a sort of angel-wing dance over my bed. My tears from homesickness were gone, and now the tears were happy, giggle-induced tears. We were all having fun, in a hospital no less. All it took were some tissues and the imagination.

The angels flew into the waste bin, and Aunt Sophie resumed her place at the foot of my bed, holding and rubbing my feet. Aunt Sophie only told Mom about the angel wings, and not about my tears. She was someone I could trust, and trust was so very important to me.

The trust I felt for Aunt Sophie made me feel safe. Aunt Sophie stood and said that she had to teach a yoga class that afternoon and would be leaving soon. She gave big hugs to Mom and me and a high five to Dad. After Aunt Sophie left, Mom relaxed in her bedside chair, and I settled in to watch some TV. Dad popped open his laptop and disappeared into cyberspace. I dozed as I pondered the memory of the foot rub. About half an hour later, there was a knock on the door and the nurse manager walked in. She wanted to know Mom's plans for visiting, and if she wanted to stay through the night.

"Absolutely," Mom replied.

The nurse manager nodded and eased from the room. Ten minutes later, one of the nurses pushed an armchair on wheels into the room.

"This is a combination recliner and bed," she said to Mom. "I will bring you some sheets and a pillow later."

Mom gave her a bow and mimed the word, “Thank you.” The nurse nodded and quietly left.

Now I had a room buddy. The hospital room seemed a friendlier place. Mom was here. She was my hero.

The day was busy with a variety of hospital visitors. I thought of my younger sister, Shana, and my older brother, Joe, and wished I could go home to see them. With a sleeping pill, my first day in the hospital came to an end.



CHILD LIFE VISIT-CHECKERS WITH DAD

JUST AFTER BREAKFAST THERE WAS a knock on the door, and in walked a lady named Gaby, who said that she was a Child Life specialist. She was fun and smiled a lot. She was really interested in me and asked me a lot of questions about my hobbies and interests. Then she asked about movies. I looked at Mom first, and then I said that I liked the *Rocky* movies.

“Oh,” she said. “Rocky is that courageous boxer who won against all odds, right?”

I nodded yes.

She said, “Let me pop out for a few minutes; there is something I’d like to get for you.” She slipped from the room, and in ten minutes came back with *Rocky*, *Rocky II*, and a big box.

“Wow,” I said. Gaby was really cool, and I liked her warm, friendly way. She also brought me a package of arts and crafts supplies that I could use to make gifts and cards for my family and friends.

The words “child life” were happy words for me. In the days ahead, I needed all of the happy words I could find. Gaby got ready to leave,

raising her hand for a slow high five. I could tell that she liked me. She did not look at me as though I was a sick kid, and this was important to me. I was pleased to have a new friend.

Just before she left, she asked if I liked woodworking. Mom answered for me, saying that I had never had the opportunity. Gaby asked if I would like to build something with wood. I nodded yes, and then Mom asked, “How can you do woodworking in a hospital?”