

the mouth that roars

SHE MAY BE KNOWN FOR HER UNFORGETTABLE VOICE, BUT FRAN DRESCHER HAD TO LEARN TO SPEAK UP WHEN IT CAME TO A TERRIFYING BRUSH WITH CANCER
BY KAREN MOLINE



For two years, she had pain after sex, unpleasant periods, inexplicable mood changes, embarrassing acne that wouldn't go away, changes in her bowels and an ache in her leg. "Sometimes," she says, "when I was filming my television show, I'd stand on that hard floor of the soundstage and feel like my insides were dropping out."

Yet even as Fran Drescher—best-known for her starmaking role on television's *The Nanny*—described these symptoms to eight different doctors, a cancer was growing inside her womb. "When I had an ultrasound, my ovaries looked normal and my uterus looked normal," she explains. "Doctor number

eight told me with great authority: 'Fran, you do *not* have cancer.'"

But it turned out that the actress (whose Noo Yawk accent was voted Most Distinctive, Most Annoying and Worst Overall in a 2001 Wake Forest University poll) was gravely ill. This month, she spills the beans in *Cancer Schmancer* (Warner Books), a surprisingly candid autobiography filled with both medical and marital *misbegas* that is the follow-up to her best-selling 1996 memoir, *Enter Whining* (Harper-Collins). Writing in the brash style that has become her trademark, Drescher reveals that if her doctor hadn't performed a routine biopsy—which, she says, given her symptoms, should have

been done two years earlier—the disease could have killed her.

But the woman who meets me for breakfast at a quiet Manhattan hotel is so patently full of life that it's hard to imagine she's recently stared down death. Drescher, 44, barely resembles the kvetchy caricature she's created over the past 20 years. Soft-spoken and sunny, she's a tiny little thing wearing skintight lilac trousers and a chunky beige sweater. When I ask about her much-younger boyfriend of three years (ensconced in their room upstairs) she blushes prettily, then beams. When I don't order enough to eat, she's quick to dole out some homespun advice ("Get the broiled grapefruit," she urges. ►

"It's excellent!"). And believe it or not, That Laugh doesn't even come close to the abrasive, exaggerated honk that made her famous. When I express surprise at the contrast between Drescher's on- and offscreen personas, she smiles. "I always try to make other people feel comfortable," she says sweetly.

All the same, Drescher's battle with uterine cancer has caused her to shift her lifelong focus from pleasing others to taking care of herself. In 2000, she underwent a radical hysterectomy; though she feels fine, she won't be officially "cured" until the five-year mark in 2005. She admits that her own ambivalence about confronting the eight physicians who brushed aside her ongoing symptoms may have played a role in her faulty diagnosis. "I've always tried to turn negatives into positives," she says. "But this experience . . ." She rolls her eyes and laughs. "This one was a challenge."

As she navigated her path from doctor to doctor, Drescher became increasingly



Dresched for success: Fran hits the stores in *The Nanny*, 1994.

the disco classic *Saturday Night Fever*. She was 18. Her most memorable line—when she brazenly asks John Travolta if he's as good in bed as he is on the dance floor—launched her Hollywood career. (The unscripted pinch she planted on her costar's soon-to-be-famous rear end didn't hurt, either.)

Drescher and Jacobson moved to Los Angeles in 1977 and were married the following year. They settled down, and four years later adopted Chester, a yapping Pomeranian who, until his death in 2000, would accompany the actress wherever she went (Robin Williams once described the dog as "Edward G. Robinson or Liberace reincarnated. One of them is back—and pissed!"). Drescher found work in such forgettable films as *American Hot Wax*, *Ragtime* (her part performed almost entirely in Yiddish) and *Dr. Detroit*; she also did frequent guest spots on such television series as *Night Court*, *9 to 5* and *Fame*. One film was memorable—1984's *This Is Spinal Tap*—and so was her performance as Bobbi Flekman, the press agent from hell.

Still, throughout the Eighties, Drescher's professional accomplishments remained decidedly smaller than her ambitions and talent. In voice and demeanor, she was Queens personified, and the association limited the kinds of roles she was offered. In 1986, her struggle for stardom was derailed when two armed men broke into her home; one tied up Jacobson, the other raped her and a visiting friend. Although the assailants were later apprehended, the scars were devastating and permanent.

"Before this cancer happened, I'd had some tragedies in my life of gothic proportions," Drescher says quietly, toying with her granola. "I always dealt with it, but the problem was that I never allowed myself to feel it. I never allowed myself to let other people in to support me and carry me. Somewhere along the line, you become emotionally bankrupt because you're not taking—you're only giving."

Her solution was to throw herself into work. In 1991, she costarred with Twiggy and Julie Hagerty in *Princesses*, a

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suspicious when none was able to find anything wrong with her. "I kept slipping through the cracks," she says. "More than once, I'm sure it was because I didn't look sick." More surprising, the actress' fame would turn out to be a liability. "My doctors loved meeting me," she says, askance. (One, in an egregious breach of professionalism, brought his 12-year-old daughter to the office for an autograph.)

"How many women go for second opinions?" Drescher asks, her voice cracking. "Once we wake up and smell the coffee, it will be hard to go back to sleep. Women aren't going to recite their symptoms and passively let their doctors decide what we get and what we don't get."

Drescher is the kind of person who has always known what she wanted—at least professionally. Once described by a Hollywood producer as having the comic timing of Rosalind Russell, the curves of Jane Russell and the tenacity of a Jack Russell, she sought the limelight

even as a child. (Her mother once remarked that "she was such a knockout at age twelve, people came up to me saying, 'My God! Put a ball and chain on this one!' She is so pretty.") "I do love show business," says Drescher. "I like being center stage."

As a sophomore at Hillcrest High School in Queens, Drescher used money earmarked for a driver's ed course to pay for professional headshots; at 16, she placed second in the Miss Teen New York contest. She also began dating her future husband, Peter Marc Jacobson, whom she met in a school production of *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*. After graduation, with visions of becoming the next Lucy and Desi, the couple tried to enroll in acting classes at Queens College; upon discovering that their desired courses were booked to capacity, they decided to attend the Ultissima Beauty Institute as a stopgap.

Just a few months later, Drescher managed to land herself a tiny role in

sitcom for which she had high hopes. When the show only lasted two months, she was devastated. "We were living in a fool's paradise," she's said. "The money in TV is great, but I'm a control freak, and I just needed to be in control."

Cashing in some frequent-flier miles, Drescher flew herself first class on a much-needed vacation to Paris, and found herself seated beside Jeff Sagansky, then the president of CBS Entertainment. On the ten-hour flight, she sold herself as a viable television star, accent and all. On the trip, she developed the concept of herself as the New York Jewish version of Julie Andrews: a sort of Mary Poppins crossed with Maria von Trapp. Sagansky was charmed, and two years later *The Nanny*, perfectly fine-tuned to its star's vocal inflections and middle-class Jewish background, became a worldwide hit. The series,

help change legislation in a way that will foster early detection of gynecological cancers." Soon after she was finally diagnosed in 2000, tests revealed that the disease had not yet spread, sparing her the trauma of chemotherapy and radiation treatments.

That was scant consolation after a hysterectomy that June, followed by a slow, debilitating recovery. Compounding her grief was the loss of her 18-year-old beloved dog and fears that she might never have the children she's recently realized that she might want after all. (In 2000, Drescher had her ovaries frozen, a procedure that is still experimental.) "I have this fantasy," she says, toying with her hair and staring off into space. "But maybe it's not a fantasy." She pauses. "Maybe it can happen."

Drescher is also dealing with the fact that she won't be assured she is out of

including an MTV pilot and a screenplay, currently titled *Waiting for Dick*, which she hopes to direct. She's also developing a one-woman show based on *Cancer Schmancer*. As she explains, "It's a woman's story about, you know, separation, divorce, career triumph, finding one's self psychologically, finding a new love, going through hell. About really being tested."

Although Drescher long ago stopped worrying that she might be viewed as a one-dimensional talent, she's still hoping to play something more than a pushy broad with a broad, pushy voice. "I know what I am," she explains. "I'm not trying to be someone else. But I think that as I mature, I'll be able to do more and more serious roles—or at least temper the comedy with something serious."

The actress is endearingly blunt about her image. "The greatest misconception the public has about me is that I like to shop," she proclaims. "And I really don't!" She's equally frank about her sexuality. "I always encourage women to get laid," she says, laughing so hard that our waitress scurries over to get in on the joke. "Sex is really important. Before I met my boyfriend, I knew I needed a man—not someone to spend the rest of my life with, but someone I could sleep with when I wanted to and be comfortable with. Someone who I could talk about my other dates with!" She laughs, again infectiously. "I hadn't found that person. But I was open to it because I see what happens when you go too long without some kind of sexual encounter. Those urges and feelings definitely keep you healthy."

Ah, yes—but would Drescher ever consider marrying again? The actress pushes her barely eaten granola away and waves expansively. "I'm not opposed to it, but I'd probably be nervous," she says. Then she flashes me her famous Fran Fine smile and laughs once more. "Probably a prenup will make me less nervous. I want to be able to afford a very good nursing home if I ever need one." ■

Karen Moline, an entertainment journalist, is the author of *Belladonna* (Warner Books, 1999)

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created and coproduced by Drescher and Jacobson, ended in 1999 with protagonist Fran Fine happily married to her boss and pregnant with twins.

Real life was a different story. Drescher's inexplicable physical symptoms worsened; she and Jacobson, her husband of 20 years, separated and underwent a very public and humiliating divorce. "We never stopped loving each other, but we had to grow out of each other and find who we are as people," the actress confesses, taking a sip of green tea. "When I first started in therapy, the shrink would say, 'What do you want?' And I would say, 'Well, I'm sure that Peter would rather . . .' And she would say, 'Wait a minute, I didn't ask about Peter. What do *you* want?' It was like I couldn't put my mind around that concept; I'd spent the last forty years never being able to admit my needs."

Ironically, it was Drescher's cancer diagnosis that allowed her to find her voice. "Maybe I was 'chosen' because I am the everywoman with high visibility," she says. "Now, I'm determined to

the woods until 2005. Currently, she undergoes rigorous checkups every six months. "It's never pleasant," she says dryly. "I always get anxious, and my usual coping mechanisms get a little fried. I just have to stay as low-key as possible all the way down the elevator, through the hallway, or the car ride in. I'm always so happy and relieved when it's over."

Another avenue of happiness stems from her relationship with Michael Angelo, her 28-year-old boyfriend who stood by her during her long ordeal. "He's my hero," she coos. The couple enjoys time with Esther, Drescher's new Pomeranian, in a house overlooking the Pacific Ocean. She keeps to a healthy diet, and spends as much time as she can hiking in the mountains near her home. "I have a new life," she says happily. "No one leaves this planet unscathed. We're all capable of living many lifetimes within our one life."

That philosophy extends to her career. "I really feel like this is round two for me," Drescher says. These days, she has her hand in many different projects,