

## **Reflections**

My best friend, Catherine, was diagnosed with cancer in 1985, the same year as Marilyn Van Stone. The two women never knew each other but I suspect they would have been fast friends. From what Bruce Van Stone tells me of his mother, I know she and Catherine shared many character traits: a fierce devotion to their family and children, a love of life, a bubbling laugh, a selfless generosity (always thinking how to make others happy first) and an inner fortitude in even the darkest hours.

Catherine was diagnosed with breast cancer in the summer of 1985. Our families were vacationing together on the beach at East Hampton, New York. It was a carefree time. The children frolicked in the waves, the adults lolled under beach umbrellas reading the latest bestsellers, and every evening at sunset, we gathered for cocktails on the deck overlooking the ocean.

So idyllic was that sojourn; a glowing moment, so precious in hindsight; that Catherine, always heedful of the feelings of others, chose to keep her diagnosis a secret.

It was not until we returned to Toronto that she revealed the fact that she was deathly ill. But even then, she cast her breast cancer in the most positive light, “another of life’s little challenges.” She would beat it, she would try nutrition, alternative medicine, positive imaging, and, of course, chemotherapy and radiation. She didn’t want us to ponder the gaping emptiness of a life without her.

And for years, she did beat the disease. And rejoiced in living. She was there for the graduation of her daughter from Bryn Mawr University. She was there to encourage her son to travel the world in search of what he was looking for. She was there for the birth of my daughter, Jennifer, arriving in the hospital room with a big white bunny and an armload of flowers.

And when the dreaded disease did return, she tackled it again, with fierce optimism, undergoing endless bouts of radiation and chemotherapy. She took to wearing bright, silk scarves wrapped in turbans around her head.

In weaker moments, she worried about how her friends and family would survive when she was gone. We had scarcely any time to console her because she was so worried about us.

When times were particularly difficult and emotional, she wisely told me to find the part of myself that was “still, cool, green, and deep.” I still go there when I miss her.

Catherine died in Women’s College Hospital in May 1991, exactly ten years ago. As her loved ones gathered around her bed, she gave each one a smile and private expression of love. Then she turned to her husband and said: “Remember to buy a present for each of the nurses.”

So like Catherine! Right to the end, thinking of others.

We should all remember the generosity of formidable women like Catherine and Marilyn Van Stone when we give to cancer research so that their legacy will be honoured and countless others will be helped. They would have had it no other way.

Written by Gillian Cosgrove, a columnist with the National Post  
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