

Am I the Same Irene?

By Irene Virag

THE FORECAST called for rain and the day began with somber skies. But the cloud cover broke as I walked to the lectern. I look for omens these days and I took the change in the weather as a good one. I was speaking in Cutchogue at a garden tour. Hundreds of people sat in front of me on folding chairs beneath the brightening spring sky. I talked about the garden as a metaphor for life and death and about the wild seed called breast cancer that has changed my own life. The speech went well. I even got a few laughs. I love getting laughs nowadays.

Afterward, people came up to wish me well. Some of them told me I was brave, which was nice to hear even though I don't think it's true. I'm just doing what I have to do. Others said they were praying for me and still others who really knew how to flatter a writer said that they sat down to their coffee every Sunday morning with my garden column.

Then a young woman with dark hair stood in front of me. "I read your column all the time," she said. "I . . ." She stopped and stared at me. I could see she was struggling for words. She wanted to say the absolutely right thing. "I . . ." She grabbed my hand. "I hope you survive."

I hope so too, I thought to myself. I smiled and said, "Thank you."

People say the darndest things when they know you have breast cancer. Like the mother of my best friend from childhood who saw me recently at a funeral and didn't waste time saying hello. "Did they cut it off?" she asked.

I've learned to be ready for anything. For love or insensitivity. For humor or hand-wringing. For tea and sympathy or prying questions – or even cruelty.

For a flood of letters from readers that were so beautiful they made me cry and the flowers that turned my living room into a garden. For messages of pure caring from women I wrote about a few years ago when they were being treated for the disease I never thought would happen to me. For the adult stepchildren who called to say they love me.

There was the editor who sent a four-course meal to my house the day I came back from the hospital, and the friends who lifted my spirits by taking me to dinner three days later while I was still wearing a surgical drain. And the co-worker who gave me a marble rolling pin that was a gift to her from a friend who fought breast cancer with grace. It sits on my kitchen windowsill, a talisman for my journey through darkness. And there was a 12-year-old friend named Sabrina who prayed that the 25 lymph nodes removed from under my arm during my lumpectomy would test negative. They did. "She's good at praying," her mother told me. I'm not quite sure what I believe or don't believe. It's hard for me to accept that any God – He, She or It - would allow breast cancer to exist in the first place, but I'll take all the prayers I can get.

Like the special prayers from my Aunt Pearl, whose fatal struggle with pancreatic cancer and even her battle 25 years ago with ovarian cancer never shook her faith. I'm not sure whether I envy that or whether I'm mystified by it. I'm lucky she was still there for me when I was diagnosed - just like she was in my childhood when I needed to talk about the hurts I couldn't talk about at home. Even though I think support groups are helpful, I choose not to join one because I have friends - women I'd written about – who'd fought cancer and understood the fear and the fatigue. And because I had Aunt Pearl.

I was in the middle of chemo when Aunt Pearl came from Connecticut for a weekend visit. We talked a lot, my husband and I and Aunt Pearl and Uncle Bill. It was Sunday afternoon when she asked if she could see my scar. We went into the bathroom and stood in front of the mirror. I looked at Aunt Pearl and thought about the goulash suppers we ate beneath her grape arbor when I was a child and sipping tea out of her china cups and making grape jelly together. She was thin and pale, but she was still Pearl – a small woman with a personality as big as her heart. I don't think I've ever known anyone who loved life more. She looked at my mirror image and then at me – at the long red scar across a still-swollen breast. She touched the scar.

"My breast is actually looking more normal," I said. "It was so swollen right after the surgery that my nipple was inverted. It looked weird."

"My nipples have always been inverted," Aunt Pearl confided. "I was born that way. I couldn't breast feed my children." And she opened her blouse to show me. We both laughed.

"I wish this hadn't happened to you," Aunt Pearl said.

I touched her face. "You know I love you," she said.

"I love you, too," I said.

We buttoned our shirts and hugged each other.

Aunt Pearl died a few weeks ago. The funeral service was laced with music and laughter – people who knew my aunt knew she would have wanted it that way. Still, I thought about her cancer and mine. "Does anybody ever win this fight?" I asked my husband.

"You'll win it," he said. He always says that. But I know he's frightened, too.

I've been accentuating the positives. But I can't eliminate the negatives. I don't really want to hear about how someone's mother-in-law died of breast cancer or how someone else's friend found chemo a breeze and loaded up on lunch after every treatment. Or how, as someone who didn't say anything to me told my husband, "She just has to decide that she's going to ride a brahma bull for a year." If I wanted to ride a bull, I'd join the rodeo. And I can do without hearing that breast cancer isn't a death sentence anymore, not like it was "in the old days."

"You just have to do chemo," people say, "and then you'll be fine." Pardon me? Getting chemo isn't like getting a manicure, and I'll never be the way I was before I felt a lump in my breast. Before cancer pushed me into the deep end of an icy pool and I had to gasp and struggle and find my way back to the surface. It's a confusing time for me. I can't say with absolute certainty what it is I want from people. Maybe I want what Aunt Pearl gave me. For people to say they wish this hadn't happened to me, to tell me – and show me – that they care. To reach out, no matter how inarticulate the attempt.

If I'm not sure what I want, I know what I don't want. I don't want phony good cheer. I don't want to be ignored. I don't want hostility.

I surely didn't want the message on my answering machine from someone I hadn't thought about in years who bears a grudge against me. "I'm sorry to hear about your breast cancer, Irene," the remembered voice said, "but I want to say, 'Vengeance is mine,' sayeth the Lord.' "

And I didn't need the encounter with a colleague who, in a disagreement over office space days after I returned to work, asked why couldn't I put my tabletop bookshelf above a metal cabinet bracketed high on the wall. "Because I just had breast cancer surgery," I snapped. "I can't reach that high."

In the past I would have wimped out. This time, I stood my ground. Maybe breast cancer has made me tougher.

I'm learning to deal with hurt. Most of my colleagues have been wonderful but a few walk by me as if I don't exist. "I'm not good in situations like this," one of them told my husband, who also works at this newspaper. "I don't know what to say to her."

"Just say, 'hi,' " he said.

I wish she could simply have told me what she told him. I would have understood.

I tell myself that the people who walk by me are exorcising their own terrors or working out their own issues, that it's not really me they're refusing to acknowledge – it's their own fears about disease and death. Grow up, I want to scream at them. Look at me, I want to shout. See me. I'm still Irene.

But am I? I'm Irene Virag with breast cancer now and I'm trying figure out who she is. I'm putting myself back together. We spend our lives assembling and reassembling pictures of ourselves as if we're giant jigsaw puzzles. Breast cancer happened to me and scattered the pieces of who I am in one cruel sweep. I have to pick up my pieces and fit in a new and terrifying one called cancer. I have to incorporate it into my new picture – I don't want to be in denial. But even as I struggle to redefine myself, the people around me are redefining me, too.

And if I try to see myself through their eyes, it's like looking in a funhouse mirror. They expect to see alternately a brave heroine or a bedridden invalid. Well, I'm not Joan of Arc but I'm not at death's door either. And I don't know whether to laugh or cry at what people say and do, or don't say and don't do. I guess it's always better to laugh but it's not always easy.

I've had it up to the neck with being told that cancer is a gift, that it will make me a better person, a stronger person, that it will help me prioritize my life. I was a good person before I got breast cancer. I was a strong person, I understood what was important in my life. If breast cancer is a gift, where's the return counter? I can do without inquisitions into the gory details of every procedure. Like the relative who asks me the same questions over and over again. "How swollen is your breast?" "Where do they give you the injection?" "How long before you feel nauseous?" "Does it make you constipated?"

And I don't need cigarette smoke in my face. I hold my breath whenever I walk into a building where smokers congregate outside the front door. It's like going through a gauntlet. At a party, a cousin with a lit cigarette dangling from his mouth sat down next to me to ask how I was doing. He was surprised when I moved away. "Is it the cigarette?" he wondered. "For crying out loud, she's got breast cancer," my husband said.

I don't need remarks like the one from a relative who greeted me at another party. "You look pretty good," she said, "considering." That's another thing. Having cancer doesn't always mean you look sick. I was lucky – my stage two cancer was aggressive but it was caught early. I had a lumpectomy instead of a mastectomy. I didn't lose my hair from chemo. Unless I bare my chest, I don't look any different. It's hard to reconcile the inner turmoil, the abject fear, with an outwardly unchanged image. You look good, people say, you must be feeling OK. I smile and change the subject.

"You look good," an acquaintance said. "So you're all better now, right?"

"I start radiation next week," I said.

"Oh. Well, you look good. That's all that really matters."

My oncologist, Dr. Paula Schwartz, understands. "I'm the only one who can tell you that you look good," Paula told me.

Like I said, I've learned to be ready for anything. I was just starting to put myself back together last spring when I went to the Long Island Flower Show. Mostly, it was great for my morale. I had just written a column explaining why I'd been absent from the paper. People I had never met came up to me and embraced me and wished me well.

Then I visited the exhibit booths. The first one was staffed by a man I'd met a few times. "I was really sorry to hear about you, Irene," he said. "Really sorry." He tried to cheer me up. "But you know, we all gotta go sometime."

He's right, of course.

But not yet, I hope.