



THE DREAM AT YEAR'S END

By Irene Virag

It's my wedding day. I'm dressed in a flowing white gown, waiting for my guests to arrive. But wait a minute. The chairs are facing the wrong direction. The guests are supposed to see the wildflower meadow waving beyond the sliding glass doors. Instead, we'll be staring at an empty gray wall. I look down at my feet and gasp. Where are my pretty white wedding shoes? I'm wearing a pair of beat-up black pumps. They frighten me. They're so ugly next to the hem of my dress. I want to kick them off but I'm afraid to move. "It's a shame Harvey can't be here," a familiar voice says. I turn around. I'm startled to see my Aunt Pearl sitting by the glass door. My Uncle Paul, her first husband, and my stepfather sit next to her. Their faces are blank, pale.

"It's OK," I tell Aunt Pearl. "Harvey and I are getting married – the same ceremony, the same time, the same vows. Everything's the same. We're just getting married in different places." I kiss my stepfather on the forehead and tell him I'm happy he could come. He was the drunken terror of my childhood but now he has tears in his eyes. Suddenly, I'm standing on a mat of rose petals. The toes of my shoes peek from beneath my gown. I panic. The rose petals make me realize I have no bouquet.

I run into the garden in search of a perfect rose to carry. But every rose I touch is dead or damaged. One is brown and withered, another teams with aphids, still another drops all its petals when I reach for it. I'm frantic, running from bush to bush. Suddenly, it's dark and cold. I'm never going to find a perfect rose. I sit on a stone stairway. I'm starting to shiver. I stare at my beat-up shoes and cry.

The dream hovers on the edge of reality as I explore it in therapy. "It's a cancer dream," says Suzanne, my psychologist. Together, we decipher the symbols. They're not hard to fathom. I'm at a crossroads. I want to be perfect like I was on my wedding day but I'm not. Like the chairs in the dream, my life has been turned around. I've been staring at an empty gray wall of breast cancer and I want so much to see the meadow.

The only people in the room are my three relatives who've died of cancer – my Aunt Pearl of pancreatic cancer, my Uncle Paul of stomach cancer, my stepfather of lung cancer. They qualify as witnesses to my struggle. Maybe Aunt Pearl is the speaker because she was always a talker and because her death was so recent. In the dream the groom cannot be with me but I'm not upset. I feel his presence and he will share the day – but only from a distance. My husband has been by my side all through the struggle – he uses "we" like a fight manager talking about his contender's next bout. But ultimately this is my fight. We're in it together but somehow we're separate. There are things only I can know.

Cancer mars my life like the ugly shoes that darken my dream. And the search for a perfect rose is a journey into the heart of darkness. I am searching for the perfect me – the me who was perfect only in that she never had breast cancer. The me who existed before that winter morning when a pair of swans glided by my bedroom window on the pond behind my house. That morning when I turned to my husband and asked him to feel the lump in my right breast and told him that our lives would never be the same again.

It's a year later and our lives are not the same. Swans fly past my window, beating their wings low against the sleet gray water and I am afraid.

At this moment as I write the last chapter of my first year with breast cancer, I wonder if I'll have to chronicle a second year. I am waiting for the results of two needle biopsies in my left breast. A year after my lumpectomy, cancer still defines my life. Fear is always lurking for those of us who live by mammograms and sonograms and blood counts and biopsies.

Fear hovered through the long months that followed my lumpectomy. It stalked the outskirts of chemotherapy. My world was dominated by cytoxin and methotrexate and flououracil - by nausea and low blood counts and exhaustion. And fear clouded the weeks of radiation that came next.

Not that I wasn't reassured when I arrived at the office of my radiation oncologist, Ezriel Diamond. I'm not Jewish but I felt good the minute I saw the mezuzah on the doorjamb. And I was impressed by all the meters and big switches outside the building. "What if somebody turns off the power?" I asked my husband. Nobody ever did. I was surrounded by technology - by laser beams and linear accelerators, by gantry angles and lateral and medial tangents. By an invisible force that can wipe out malignant cells.

Before treatment began, I had to go through a simulation in which the doctor used a special X-ray machine to define the precise area of my breast that would receive the radiation. He outlined the field on my skin with a green Sharpie pen. Then a technician marked the points that a laser would line up with. "She'll give you a rose tattoo," Ezriel joked. Actually, what I got were little black dots that are still vaguely visible.

After that, a new routine took over my life. Every weekday for six weeks, I'd lie down on an adjustable metal table with my upper body cradled in a customized cast – my head turned to the left and my right arm bent at the elbow over my head. I was alone in the beige treatment room, which is built of lead and concrete to absorb the radiation so that no one outside is exposed. A red laser beam came from a hole in the ceiling above me. There were other beams but I never noticed where they came from. The technicians - who operated the linear accelerator from outside the room - lined up the laser beams with the tattoos on my body. Sometimes they'd take an X-ray to make sure I was perfectly positioned.

When everything was just right, I'd hear a buzzing noise that meant I was receiving a dosage of deep photon radiation. The machine makes the noise - the radiation itself is silent as well as invisible. I had to lie absolutely still. The radiation was administered on a tangent to both the left and right sides of the breast to avoid hitting lung tissue and other organs and the other breast.

I was in the room for only 10 to 15 minutes, and most of the time was spent lining up the target – my right breast. The actual treatment took just under a minute on each side. Ezriel, who decided how much and

how often I received radiation, examined me regularly. And I saw my oncologist almost every week to have my blood counts monitored. I guess it was the sheer routine that got me – the daily visits that took precedence over my personal and professional schedules. And the tiredness. "The general effect of radiation is fatigue," Ezriel told me. I went about my life bone-weary – sometimes my blood counts dropped even lower than they had during chemotherapy. But I knew that if cancer cells were lurking anywhere, radiation was annihilating them.

"Radiation is a strong X-ray that can destroy tumor cells," Ezriel explained. "When radiation is given over a period of time, normal cells recover while tumor cells can't repair themselves." Good, I thought. Zap 'em. Run silent, run deep. Kill the sneaky microscopic bastards.

For my final treatments, I received another kind of radiation called an electron boost. For five weeks, the photon beams I had been getting had blanketed my whole breast. Now the electron beams would pinpoint the place where the trouble began.

Radiation leaves its marks. They stare at me in the mirror for weeks - dark burned patches peel below the pink lumpectomy scar that curves from my armpit to the center of my swollen breast. Even now, almost two months later, there are small traces of my moments in the room reinforced with lead and concrete. My husband touches my breast. "You're beautiful," he says. "I love you," he says. Doctors examine it. "It looks good," they say. Well, it's not their breast. It's my breast. I don't like looking at it. I don't touch it.

To tell the truth, I'm nervous now that my treatment is over. I've lost my safety nets and I feel as if I'm still on a tightrope. I wake in the middle of the night listening to my heart beat, wondering if a furtive wild seed is dividing somewhere inside me. Waves of fear come at unexpected moments. And the thought wells up. "Is it really over?"

In October my husband and I go to California and drive up the coast from Santa Monica to the Napa Valley. It's our first real vacation in a year of hell and I luxuriate in it. My white blood count is still low and sometimes fatigue catches me unawares. I have stabs of pain in my breast – part of the healing process, I'm told. In Calistoga, we take mud baths and I am self-conscious when I appear naked in front of an attendant. But she says nothing and the mud bath is wonderful. "I told you so," my oncologist, Paula Schwartz, tells me when I come home. Paula had advised me about mud baths and inns and restaurants up and down the coast – her expertise goes far beyond the treatment room.

But a frown creases her face when she examines me. There is a lumpiness across the top of my breast that concerned her weeks before. "You have a paranoid oncologist," she said that time and she laughed. "I'm glad," I answered. She sent me to my surgeon, Karen Kostroff. I don't believe in angels, but I believe in Paula and Karen.

Karen seemed pretty certain that the lumpy ridge was scar tissue. Now Paula sends me to her again. Karen still thinks it's scar tissue – or possibly a predictable reaction to radiation. There are no magic bullets for cancer – just treatments that take their own tolls.

I'm due for my first post-operative mammogram and sonogram in the middle of December, but Karen calls the radiologist while I'm in her office. Why not push the appointment up a few weeks to be sure everything's OK?

The Monday before Thanksgiving, I meet another doctor – Robin Ehrenpreis. Once again, I'm sitting in

a dark office looking at films of my breasts. As usual the mammogram shows nothing because I have – allow me my vanities, I hate saying this – dense breasts. The sonogram is more revealing.

Karen was right about the lumpiness in my right breast. Souvenirs of cancer. Scar tissue from surgery and fat necrosis from treatment. But hold on, here comes fear popping up out of the shadows. There are two small nodules in my left breast. My healthy breast. Damn it, I think, not again. We can see them on the film.

"Because of your history . . ." my new radiologist begins. My mind stumbles. That's who I am, Irene Virag with a history of breast cancer. Robin is informative as well as thorough. She says the nodules have benign characteristics, but unless she does a biopsy, she can't know for sure. And there's a possibility that they're "proliferative" – they could be producing too many cells. They might have to be removed. We make an appointment for a needle biopsy.

My husband and I try not to worry. We talk about "ifs," but we avoid the word "recurrence." My birthday is Dec. 1 and my husband gives me a Limoges watering can and a new nutcracker for my Christmas collection – a wizard in a blue outfit holding a beaded crescent with moons and stars attached to it. "We can use some magic," he says.

The biopsy is on a Thursday. It should be nothing. I've survived a lumpectomy and chemotherapy and radiation. A biopsy, even a double biopsy, should be a piece of cake. But now someone is putting needles in my other breast. Give me a break.

Cancer patients learn a lot about waiting. The lab results aren't in on Friday and it's the weekend. My stepson calls every day. Friends take us to brunch. My husband and I clean up the garden and hang wreaths. We buy little poinsettias to place around our Christmas tree and cyclamens to brighten the garden room. We're preparing for a holiday party.

The party is an anniversary of sorts. We had one around the same time last year. When I found the lump, we considered canceling it. But it turned out to be a good distraction. I couldn't sleep so I stayed up nights washing punch bowls and decorating the house. It was a great party and I didn't want it to end – I was scheduled for surgery in two days.

This year, we want our party to be a victory celebration. Now, we're worrying about a tainted victory. We go about the weekend with a sense of *deja vu*.

The results are ready on Monday. The nodules are benign. No malignancy, no proliferative characteristics. I guess I'd been bracing for bad news. "What does that mean?" I ask the nurse on the other end of the speaker phone.

"It's benign," she says. "That's good."

My husband breaks into tears. We hug each other. It's party time.

But I'm not taking anything for granted. I have to have another mammogram and sonogram in three months. By then it will be a new year. I'll greet it with some of the lessons I've learned over the past 12 months. Lessons about how vulnerable we all are and how random the cosmos can be. I've learned how important true friends are. I know how good my life is. I'm learning to say no. I'm trying to stay on top of the wave. I want to believe in the future.

Maybe the clues were all in my dream. Even if I can't find a perfect rose, I don't have to be afraid to kick off my beat-up black shoes and run barefoot through the meadow that waves in the distance. I don't have to be afraid of who I am. I'm a breast cancer survivor.

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