



# The Sisterhood

By Irene Virag

*"Breast cancer was part of my life. It's not my life. It didn't and doesn't own me. If it ever comes back, I think I'll be able to handle it with grace and courage and dignity. But I can't waste today worrying about it." - Paula Leahy - June 5, 1994. 2) "I'd sit in a hut with a witch doctor if it kept my cancer away. I've looked at death down the barrel of a chemo tube. I'll never be the same again." - Cathy Langan - May 24, 1994*

THE FIRST TIME I met Paula Leahy, I was struck by her take-no-prisoners style. We sat in a diner surrounded by people going about their lives amid the scent of fresh coffee and the hubbub of business conversation and she told me how she stabbed her mammogram with a kitchen knife. She cut out the image of the three-centimeter tumor in her left breast and threw it in the garbage can. She told me that she wore bright pink lipstick and L'Air du Temps perfume and a gold ring and diamond ID bracelet to her lumpectomy, and brought along her favorite Michael Feinstein tape for the surgeon to play in the operating room.

She'd been cancer-free for six years when we talked that spring morning in 1994, but the memory of her anger was fresh. "I yelled and swore at the tumor, 'I hate you, you - - - thing. How dare you invade my body, you s-o-b? I'm not going to let you ruin my life.' " And she didn't. A year and a day after her surgery, she married her live-in boyfriend, Donald Pirone. "I'm living happily ever after," she told me. "Breast cancer isn't the worst thing that's ever happened to me. I like to think that the worst thing that's ever happened to me hasn't happened yet."

I felt the same way about Cathy Langan's I'll-do-it-my-way philosophy. Cathy is a breast cancer survivor who yearned for nothing so much as to be a mother. Three years ago, she showed me a white room with a wooden rocking chair and a toy chest, where she sat each day and dreamed of the afternoon sun streaming in through the windows as she cuddled a pink-cheeked baby.

She'd had a mastectomy 3 1/2 years before. The size of her three-centimeter tumor and the fact that the malignancy had spread to one lymph node made it a stage-three cancer. Through all that and the chemotherapy that followed, she never lost the dream of giving birth to a child that she and her husband, Tom, would treasure for the rest of their lives. Not even when an oncologist told her "No way."

We stood in the nursery-to-be in Cathy's Amityville home and I could see the Great South Bay out the window and I wished that dreams could come true. "I would have given up a long time ago if I didn't have this dream to hang on to," Cathy said. "I've wanted a baby so bad for so long. Ten years ago, if anyone would've told me you'll marry a man who loves you madly even though you have only one breast," I'd have laughed and said, 'No way, never, they don't exist.' So I've learned to never say never."

I wrote a newspaper series about Paula and Cathy and a dozen other women whose lives had been touched by breast cancer. The series was turned into a book called "We're All in This Together." And we are. Breast cancer has no boundaries. But there are degrees of separation. As much as I felt for the women I wrote about, I thought that I could never really know their tears. And I surely didn't want to. Theirs was not a sorority anyone would want to pledge.

It's three years since I met Cathy and Paula and our lives have changed in ways that make a mockery of the odds.

Cathy Langan is not only cancer-free but she's living her dream. She's the mother of a 1-year-old little boy named Thomas John - they call him T.J. - who is poised on the edge of taking his first steps.

Paula Leahy just finished treatment after undergoing her second lumpectomy in January. That was only a few weeks after I had a lumpectomy to remove a malignant mass in my own breast.

What does it prove? Nothing very much - except that life takes funny turns and breast cancer is a crap shoot. And we are all in this together.

PAULA LEAHY and Cathy Langan. My sisters under the skin. All of us veterans of the cancer wars. Soul mates on a search for hope. Paula and Cathy. They understand my furies, they know my dark places. "The longer you're away from your diagnosis, the more distance there is," Cathy tells me. "The dark looming figure fades."

"You know what I'd like them to put on my gravestone," Paula tells me. "She lived a long, long, long, long, long time. I don't care if people say she was brave, or an inspiration, or a pain in the butt. Just that I lived a long time. Period."

Amen. Both of them are giving me prayers to survive by. Cathy Langan, who defied medical convention by getting pregnant and who says she walked on water for nine months. Now she's walking on air. Paula Leahy, who fought the dark looming figure twice with her courage and her anger unsullied and who says she can hardly wait to dump a bottle of bleach on her head and be blonde again. I was lucky that way. I didn't get the chemo drug that causes hair loss. I'm still gray.

Last December, I had invited Paula to a holiday party I held the weekend before my lumpectomy. She never answered and I wondered why. She would tell me later on - after both of us had been through surgery. "I already knew I had cancer. I didn't call anyone. I couldn't ruin Christmas for the people I loved. When your columns disappeared from the paper, I had a sixth sense about you, Irene." I called her again in February. I had a column coming out explaining why I had been out of print and I didn't want her to read about it in the paper.

"Paula, I have something to tell you," I said.

"Irene, I know why you're calling me. I have something to tell you, too."

She told me that she went for her yearly mammogram in December. The technician told her to call her doctor. When I wrote about Paula the first time, I said her middle name should be Indomitable because even when it comes to breast cancer she does things her way. Paula demanded to see the radiologist immediately. "Is it cancer?" she wanted to know. "Yes," the radiologist said.

She went home to Hauppauge and told her husband. Then she called her surgeon and an oncologist. Later that same day, she and Donald went to see "Evita." Paula started the new year with a lumpectomy. This time she had the surgeon play the sound track of "Phantom of the Opera." Paula and Donald had danced to "All I Ask of You" on their wedding day - when she was a blonde bride in a white tea-length dress with lilacs in her hair and he was a silver-haired groom in a white tuxedo jacket.

The tumor in her right breast was a new cancer, she learned. It was a new primary site. It wasn't a metastasis that had spread from her previous cancer.

A few days later 56-year-old Paula Indomitable went to Disneyland.

When we gave each other our news in February, she was just out of the hospital after having a separate surgery to remove lymph nodes. Her 85-year-old mother in Boston died while Paula was on the operating table. Three days after her operation the surgical drain was removed and Paula delivered the eulogy at her mother's funeral. "Bucket of Blood," she'd nicknamed the plastic drain her first time around. I didn't really know what she meant when I'd interviewed her years before. Now we could compare notes.

We were both facing chemo. "Let's try to get together between treatments," I suggested. As it turned out, we weren't able to. But every now and then, I'd check my voicemail and I'd hear Paula's Boston accent. Her messages made me laugh and they made me cry. Tears are no stranger when you're in chemotherapy.

"Your column on pruning your lilac was beautiful, and more important it shows how brave you are," the phone voice said. "I couldn't have cut down that lilac bush for all the money in the world because I wouldn't have thought I'd be around in three years to see it bloom again. You're a braver man than I, Gunga Din." I smiled because I could never be braver than Paula Leahy. "No," I said to the empty room. "You're my hero, Paula."

Mostly we kept each other updated by phone messages. Paula understood. "Isn't cancer time-consuming?" she said.

"I finished my last - - - chemo," one of her messages announced. "I can say nothing good about it. Chemo taught me what eyelashes are really for. I always thought they were for Lancome. When you don't have eyelashes, your eyes get so irritated. Let's hope chemo kills cancer, because we're lucky it doesn't kill us. If they can put a man on the moon and a camera on Mars they should be able to come up with something better than this. But I'm coming back to the world of the living. It's over. And I just know it's going to be done for you too and we'll both live long lives and die of heart attacks when we're 90." Or 100, I thought. With no recurrences and no new cancers. There are no secret handshakes in our sisterhood, just secrets of the heart and mind.

We finally got together in the office of our radiation-oncologist. Usually I was leaving the office when Paula was coming in. We talked in sound bites and we shared a lot more than the linear accelerator that shot electron beams through our scarred breasts.

Paula's long blond hair was now short and dark. "You look beautiful," I told her. I meant it. In our sorority, we don't tell each other white lies.

"I love feeling the wind in my hair again," she said. She told me about a woman who stared at her in the supermarket. " `No I'm not Demi Moore,' I told her. `I'm not GI Jane. I've been through a real war - I'm a chemo head.' "

We've both been to war but she's seen more combat than I have. I think Paula is preaching to me in the best sense of the word. She's figured out the answers to questions I'm just starting to formulate in my mind. "I've learned that I have only enough energy to take care of me," she explains. "You have to let go of the people who take your energy. You have to protect yourself. I've learned to tell people, I don't, I won't, I can't." Other words to live by: "I choose to be positive - I'm living my life today. I won't be one of these old women who dies and they find 10,000 unused nightgowns in her drawer."

Paula says she's writing a book. "It's just for me," she says. "You want to hear the names of some chapters: Putting On The Wig, Chemo Head, God Dropped Me Like A Hot Potato, The Balance Sheet, Who Cares About Mars?"

That's my Paula. Funny and tender, too. "I've always had the ability to find the sweetness in life. I make lists of the things that make me happy: Red wine and Broadway shows, sunshine on my face, nature, writing, Donald, Shelley the Shrink - she's had breast cancer twice and she's alive. Drinking coffee is a joy. Putting on mascara again is total happiness. And the smell of gardenias. When I was on chemo, they made me nauseous. Now the smell of gardenias in bloom is heaven."

I can relate to most of that. I have my own list. My husband, Harvey. Suzanne the Shrink. Writing. Reading mysteries. My garden. Women with breast cancer thirst so for sweetness. It's as literal as chemo. I tried hot chocolate again the other morning - chemo is over and the taste is back. My perfume smells good again.

For Cathy Langan sweetness is a little boy. Cathy is my hero, too. Heroes do things we wish we could do. I'm not about to get pregnant. I won't take the chance. But I'm glad for her that she did. She sent me a picture of her baby and jotted a note. "Never say never. T.J. is our miracle." She wrote me letters through the hard days of my treatment and I've saved them all.

"Always remember to plant your garden and plan for next year," she wrote in June. And then a month

later: "I cried when I read your recent segment on the rigors of chemotherapy. I wanted you to know that it is exactly 6 years ago today that I abandoned my collection of scarves and hats for the Sinead look. That's somewhat hard to believe today as I brush my shoulder-length crop of summer-bleached hair and move effortlessly through my days without the 'phantom.' "

A few weeks ago, I went from radiation to see Cathy and the little boy she once dreamed about in a room waiting to become a nursery. The blond-haired, blue-eyed child that a 40-year-old mother nurtured with her one breast and with a love that knows no limits. She and Tom had decided to have a child despite warnings that a pregnancy might cause a recurrence of cancer, but Cathy had trouble conceiving and they put an overseas adoption in motion. They were two weeks shy of putting down a non-refundable \$15,000 payment and flying to Beijing to adopt a Chinese baby girl when Cathy became pregnant. They had already painted the nursery pink - they even had a velvet and satin pink dress in the closet for the baby's first Christmas. As it turned out, they didn't need the dress and they repainted the nursery lemon yellow with a border of blue ducks.

"I believe Jesus saw that we were crazy enough to go to China for a baby and he said, 'Let's give these kids a break.' I loved being pregnant. I loved getting huge. I was at peace. I felt that my body was in a state of grace, that nothing bad could happen."

In her fifth month, she had a biopsy of her cervix and was told she would not be able to carry a baby to full term. Later, she learned from medical tests conducted because of her age that she had a high probability of having a Down's Syndrome child. "I'm having it anyway," she told the doctors. "If it's Down's Syndrome, we'll deal with it."

T.J. was perfect. "My cervix opened beautifully for him," Cathy says. "I was thrilled to pieces to be in labor. I'd do it again in an instant."

Not long after the birth, Cathy felt a strain in her stomach that she thought was a pulled muscle. Her oncologist insisted on a CAT-scan. Cathy was right about the pulled muscle but the fear returned. For all of us who know breast cancer, the fear hovers on the edge of our universe. "It's like I was right back there," she says. "The threat was still real."

It was there a few weeks ago when she felt two lumps in her left breast. She didn't rest easy until a sonogram and her surgeon assured her that it was normal breast tissue. It was just before T.J.'s first birthday party.

We drank tea while T.J. crumbled a cookie in his high chair and banged a wooden toy on the table. Later, we played with him on the floor of the den. He was trying to walk and it was clear that it would happen soon. "My life revolves around him and I love it," his mother said. I held the baby and laughed as he put the blue stuffed elephant I'd brought him in his mouth. And I thought about the child I would never have and loved Cathy for having hers.

Cathy Langan and Paula Leahy. My sisters under the skin. All of us rolling the dice and hoping for luck. All of us survivors reaching for the sweetness in life.



Newsday photos by Erica Berger