

The Wild Seed

By Irene Virag

THE PURPLE AND GREEN SPIKES of Moses-in-the-cradle hug the ground around the palm trees outside the hotel and yellow-breasted kiskadees look for handouts on my balcony. Bay grape trees sprawl along the crags above the beach, their saucer-sized leaves turning orange and yellow against a baby-blue sky. Hedges of red and white hibiscus border the road to the bus stop. Red powder-puff trees and trailing African daisies and bird-of-paradise bloom in a park in the middle of town. Bougainvillea scrambles along a wooden arbor, bright pink in the sunshine that warms my body and soul.

I'm in Bermuda on a long-delayed vacation – a vacation I thought might never come. Just a few days ago I was on Long Island – staring out the window at snow dusting the seed heads of Sedum Autumn Joy and clouds of seagulls lighting on a frozen pond.

In a few more days I will be there again with the sedum and the seagulls and the naked birches and the red berries of cotoneaster and the andromeda that had sprouted icicles when I last saw it. With palm trees swaying in my mind, I'll gaze again at the bare landscape of winter. And I'll look for warmth in the stark white plastic stakes that mark the underground wombs where the spring bulbs grow. I crave their vibrance. I long for their color.

I have been thinking about time and gardens - about the cycles of the seasons and about how quickly things can change. In just a few hours you can go from ice-covered branches to bougainvillea and back again. One minute you're thinking about what you're going to cook for supper tomorrow or whether you set the house alarm. Then time blinks. In an instant your whole universe shifts. You go from just living your life to wondering how long it will last.

In a split – second you touch your breast and go from being a healthy person to being a cancer patient. That's what happened to me. I have breast cancer. In December I had a lumpectomy. The day after I come home from Bermuda I'll start chemotherapy.

I hope I don't sound like I'm whining. I don't want you to say "Oh, poor Irene." I'm trying to work things out in my own head. And I want to bring you up to date. I'd like to think you've been wondering where I've been. Over the year and a half that I've been writing about gardens, I've come to realize I have a personal relationship with my readers. With all of you. There I was stretched out on the operating table with one of those silly paper shower caps on my head. Just before the anesthesiologist put me under, a nurse made me laugh. "I know you," she said, "I love your column."

It matters that you know where I've been and where I'll be coming from in the months ahead. Suddenly the world is a different place. Suddenly I am a different person. I felt time blink the morning I told my husband about the lump I had discovered the night before. "I have to tell you something," I said, "but I'm afraid because the minute I speak the words out loud, our lives will never be the same."

We were still in bed and we could see winter through the half-open blinds. I took his hand and guided it to the lump in my right breast. "I think I'm in trouble," I said.

I started to cry, and he held me. It was my 41st birthday.

I've stopped crying, but he still holds me. I have my moments - sorrow comes in the shadows of sleepless nights – and sometimes we think that we'll wake up one morning to find it was all a bad dream. Or that time will blink us back into our old lives. But breast cancer is our new reality. The lump was malignant – a wild seed growing in the garden of my life. A lousy, rampant weed.

My tumor was large and aggressive. I have stage 2 breast cancer. But I keep reminding myself that I'm luckier than a lot of women. I have the best of the worst. My surgeon was able to get what's known as a "clean margin" and the 25 lymph nodes she removed were all negative. My bone scan was normal.

Still, as I collect bay grape leaves in Bermuda and share a scone with the kiskadees, I know that chemotherapy is a plane ride away. And there'll be radiation after that. I'd be lying to you if I said I wasn't afraid. Before I became a garden columnist, I spent two years writing about breast cancer – how's that for fate – and I got a firsthand look at what it does to bodies and souls and families. I've been afraid ever since.

I guess I thought that writing about breast cancer was some kind of offering to the gods. Although I remember coming home one day and telling my husband about the surgeon I had just interviewed. "If I ever have a problem," I said – and I giggled nervously – "I'd go straight to Karen Kostroff." The gods must have been laughing. Two years later neither one of us could believe it as Dr. Kostroff examined the lump in my breast. "You can hope for a biopsy," she said, "but be prepared for a lumpectomy."

As a reporter, I watched women I came to love die. I sat by their bedsides and hoped their hopes and cried over their pain. I compared breast cancer to a phantom that stalked the lives of the women it touched. Now it's shadowing me. I can feel myself trying to build a wall around my fear – I've been working at it since the night I discovered the lump in my own breast.

Or maybe I'm building a wall around me – the inner me. In describing my former assignment I once wrote that "I was being asked to look beyond the diagnosis to the tears and terrors of women who could be me. I was being asked to give a voice to my own fear, to give a face to breast cancer." Now it's my face. I'm not the Irene Virag I used to be. I'm Irene Virag, who has a six-inch scar that runs along the upper portion of her right breast to her armpit and two wounds from a surgical drain that look like they were left by a vampire with bad aim.

I'm Irene Virag, who has breast cancer.

And so I take comfort in the warmth of another latitude – in knowing that when snow dusts the evergreens of Long Island, bird-of-paradise blooms in Bermuda. I wake up in this place where winter as we know it never comes and look out the sliding glass door of our room at palm trees with whispering fronds and ice plant with spiky pink flowers and the endless blue-green sea beyond them.

My husband and I take long walks on the white-pink shore where sandpipers play tag with the ocean. We hold hands and leave sneaker prints that will vanish with the incoming tide. We talk about relieving the stresses of work and family and losing weight and getting through the chemotherapy and radiation treatments that will take place over the next nine months.

We speak of women I've written about who fought breast cancer. Some of them didn't make it. We talk about the ones who gardened. Liz LoRusso, who planted daffodils in her shady front yard in Huntington, and Sue Rosenbaum, who nurtured a flower garden on an esplanade in Long Beach. We take heart from Lois

Woodhull, who celebrated her survival by planting an alpine garden she can see from the kitchen of her home in Cutchogue. And from Cathy Langan of Amityville, who had a baby last year and planted lilies beneath his window.

We walk on the white-pink sand and let the sun warm our bodies – don't worry, I've covered myself with SPF 30 – and melt away some of the fear. We talk about the garden that 1 in 9: The Long Island Breast Cancer Action Coalition planted in Eisenhower Park to honor all the brave women who fight this disease. It's called the Garden of Hope. I spoke at its dedication and offered analogies between gardens and breast cancer. "As a garden columnist," I said, "I write about life and death. I write about rebirth and survival. I write about beauty. And most important, I write about hope."

I wonder now if the wild seed had already taken root inside me that sunny spring day. My husband and I ponder the irony of my sojourn on the breast cancer beat and the book that grew out of it. The book's title was "We're All in This Together." I didn't know how much of a personal prophecy that would turn out to be. When I get home from my week-long escape on this pastel island, my battle will resume. There will be chemotherapy to annihilate any undetected cancer cells lurking in the corners and conduits of my body. There will be radiation to zap the site where the evil germinated. And for years to come, there will be checkups to make sure the wild seed doesn't take root again.

For now, I worry about nausea, about losing my hair, about premature menopause. It's nice that my oncologist, Paula Schwartz, is a gardener. She understands the therapeutic nature of gardening and talks about the medicinal properties of plants. "My favorite perennial on Earth is foxglove," she says of the plant that shares its botanical name with a heart medication called digitalis.

The amaryllis that was budding when we left – the bulbs are planted in a teak-root pot my husband gave me for my birthday – should be in flower. My seed catalogs and my potting bench will be waiting for me, too. From now on, I'll have to wear gloves when I garden. The depletion of lymph nodes makes me prone to infection and swelling – I can't even have my blood pressure taken on my right arm. But once in a while I'll pull off my gloves and touch the earth.

Our re-landscaping project also beckons. We started renovating our gardens last spring and we're discussing plans for this year. There are empty beds to plant and a white pine to move. We want to relocate our vegetable garden. We're putting it in the front yard.

And we've promised ourselves a rose garden. I know roses have prickles. I'll just have to be careful.