

A Different Winter.

BY JONN KARSSEBOOM

It's sometimes interesting how changes in the garden runs strangely parallel to changes in real life.

Last summer, it all began with a constant cough that wouldn't go away. When I first heard it from her, it was while she was planting a few garden projects near the beginning of July. It was just a small cough: just one small degree rougher than clearing her throat. I didn't think anything of it and nor did she.

Yet it was a couple of weeks later that KT, (Pronounced Kay Tee... Its been her nickname for some years now) decided to go in and see a real doctor. It was a big decision for her because raising two young girls on her own, working full time at The Garden Corner and tending to two horses, three goats, a rabbit, a few adopted cats, a flock of chickens and a loyal dog left her very little down time.

When she returned, it was exactly as we expected. A bit of bronchitis with a bottle of antibiotics and she would be back planting and creating unique planters in a week. It was good too, I remember, because orders were going to back up quickly.

Though after KT's third visit to the doctor she was beginning to become uncharacteristically impatient. Not only because her cough remained, but also

her voice was so hoarse we had trouble understanding her. More importantly without her voice, we were absent her wonderfully wry sense of humor. In a last minute, second thought effort her doctor ordered an x-ray.

And with that simple act, a frightening fury of a medical storm was unleashed upon KT. Over the next several weeks dark spots on x-rays led to CAT scans that led to PET scans that led to biopsies.

"It was the worst part of the whole thing," KT later told me. "Not knowing."

It was on a beautiful autumn day in September on a bench outside of the clinic that I found myself sitting with her. The fall grasses in all of their glory swayed gently with the soft breeze and the summer perennials were just beginning to show signs of wear and tear. KT, we had learned, had cancer in several lymph nodes just outside one of her lungs. Later we would learn it had a name: Lymphoma of the mediastinum. She was young though and experience had made her strong yet in many ways we were there just at the moment the season changed.

Once the doctors zeroed in on exactly which type of cancer she was confronting, her chemo treatments were scheduled immediately. We saw her almost every week just before her dose and being naturally curious gardeners, we asked all of the inappropriate questions as well.

Her chemo treatment, after a long day at the hospital consisted of a plastic bag filled with the cancer killing chemicals that was strapped with a belt around her waist. The chemicals were literally pumped into her for stretches of 24 hours via a small pump not unlike those we use for fountains in the garden.

And as the fall décor in the nursery changed to Halloween and then changed to Christmas we watched KT change too. Her shoulder length brown hair thinned and fell out. Though with her abundant creativity and a few well-suited hats it was hard to notice.

No longer could she stand in the rain or cold to chat either. And because her white blood cell count was low, she was specifically forbidden to plant or even touch the soil. Because of our own winter sniffles, we had to keep our distance too.

Privately and quite stoically we found that during each of the six rounds she also developed and endured numerous sores in her mouth and tongue and found it hard to even swallow. On the sixth round of chemo she found sores inside of her ears.



KT and her kids.

Quite miraculously though, the tumors began to wither away. After the last round we held our collective breath when the tests results came in. Battled and worn thin, KT called me with the excellent news. The doctors couldn't find a trace of the cancer.

The crew gathered at the coffee bar when she came back from her appointment. We toasted over lattes and mochas and hot cocoas to celebrate as we shared hugs and high fives. The dark bleak winter with cancer seemed near over. And, I suppose, just like the plants in our garden, we looked forward to spring again.



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