

Courageous Daughter of Zion

by Suzanne Shakespeare

I was nine years old before I realized there was hurt and unhappiness in the world because of one word – cancer. My family loved, we had good friends, a warm, loving home and a strong conviction that the Lord would take care of us, so how was I to know that in February 1973 a new dimension of life was about to open before me?

Earlier that winter my lower left leg had been bruised while ice skating, but every ten-year old has bruises. A month or so later, a friend and I were roller skating, and I was accidentally kicked in the same spot. It hurt. It swelled. When the pain became constant, my parents took me to the doctor. An X-ray sent me to the local hospital and further diagnosis found me in the Primary Children's Hospital in Salt Lake City, Utah, with things ahead of me I still can hardly understand.

Ewing Sarcoma is the name for a type of bone cancer, a type so rare and with so little research available that one hardly knew where to begin. I hated the needles, the doctors, the nurses that came with the needles, the pain in my leg, the wanting to go home when I couldn't. How was I to understand that my parents had been given only a liver of hope.

Of all the ugly words conceived, chemotherapy must be the very worst. How I hated to see the IV person coming, knowing that after he was finished with his part mine would begin. Nausea so violent I couldn't keep anything in my stomach. Lips so cracked and raw it was like I'd been beaten every morning. My hair began falling out, and to any girl nine or ninety, that is a blow to pride only we can understand. How I hated to be thin and pale and have people look at me like I was going to disappear before their very eyes.

My parents prayed for a miracle; I prayed that it must be a bad dream and it wasn't really happening to me. I knew prayers were answered, but I wanted mine answered right now!

Five long, painful, learning (I can see that now) years later, the miracle had happened. I was alive, I was fourteen, and life was beginning all over again. I still remember the day the doctors told me I wouldn't have any more medicine and I was free of the disease. It's true I had a lump and one leg was several times smaller than the other, but I had a beautiful head of my OWN hair and life. Could anything stand in my way now?

Life was wonderful! School was a challenge I loved. I joined clubs, took part in the plays, swam, and rode my bicycle. I had my first "real" job. Surely if God had spared me once, I was invincible. At sixteen, some things are absolutely necessary. Boys, for instance. The Junior Prom, going on school trips, wearing your hair a la Farrah Fawcett Majors, being just like everybody else, driving a car. I was going to do all of those things.

Then the hurt came again -- the very same leg, the very same place. The swelling began. I had walked too much; my job kept me on my feet too long at a stretch; I had inflammation of the knee. Surely it was just one of these? I was advised to use crutches and stay off my leg for a month and it would improve. It had to. My junior year in high school was just beginning. I had things to do. Dumb old leg, anyway! But it was all I had.

The pain didn't go away, and a quick trip to Salt Lake City just to check turned out to be the beginning of a long road to another me.

Another type of cancer? Ridiculous! I was cured -- another ugly word to the unsuspecting. I was sixteen and nothing could happen to me. It had already happened five years ago. I was the miracle girl who was only supposed to live for a year, and here I was. Impossible, impossible, impossible!

Amputation? It had never entered my mind, had never been spoken aloud, and now to suddenly find myself faced with being different, with being limited. It was something I couldn't even begin to comprehend. Whatever the Lord had saved me for, it couldn't possibly be this.

September 13, 1978, I lost my left leg about four inches above the knee and with it, many of the dreams only a sixteen-year old has. I couldn't decide whether to pray for recovery or for complete oblivion. My world had shattered, and I wanted it to stop -- right now! Stop because my leg was gone. Stop because I was facing chemotherapy again. Stop because I was once again going to lose my crowning glory. What was left?

The Lord blessed me with two very special parents. How hard they must have prayed for me and pleaded that I would have the strength to forge ahead and learn to accept this happening as an opportunity and challenge. I didn't want to get out of bed, my parents made me. I didn't want to face my friends, my parents invited them in. I didn't want to go to school – can you imagine how I felt going to school that first time with my pant leg leg flapping – but my parents left me at the door knowing I could do it.

And I did! Me, Suzanne Shakespeare, who thought my friends wouldn't like me now and that I wouldn't be able to do anything. I learned something those first few days that is more precious than all my material possessions. I wasn't really different at all. I was still the same me -- the girl who joined the clubs, had lots of friends, and loved to study. The only thing that had really changed was my capacity to understand and appreciate. What wonderful things to have learned.

And guess what? I've had one date, am learning to drive, going to try out for the school musical. I'm getting my new leg soon, and I know there will be many hard adjustments ahead. I still have chemotherapy when I'm so sick I can hardly understand what's going on around me and my crowning glory comes from a store, but I'm alive. And the Lord must have something wonderful ahead just for me, and you know what? I'm going to find it!

-- *Suzanne Shakespeare, Age 16*

Epilogue

Suzanne continued having chemotherapy until January, 1979. On a routine visit to the Primary Children's Medical Center in Salt Lake City, a chest X-ray revealed widespread cancer cells in the lungs. There was nothing more medical science could do.

How do you tell a sixteen-year old girl she is going to die? Straight-forwardly with tears, love, and a determination to continue on as normally as possible. Time? Two months --

Soon after she returned home, Suzanne went on a family trip to Disneyland, her favorite place. She attended a four-day forensics meet in Salt Lake City. She auditioned and received a part in the high school musical. She asked a young man to the Sweethearts Ball and danced all evening -- without crutches on a newly acquired artificial leg. She carried a full load at school, and despite a record winter for snow and ice, rarely missed a day.

There began to be shoulder pains, shortness of breath, loss of appetite, but Suzanne would take nothing but aspirin because pain pills might interfere with her school activities.

On March 15 she began a three-week tour of the South with her grandmother. The pace of the tour and her increasing loss of strength made her extremely tired. Her breathing became so difficult it was impossible for her to lie down. But still it was only aspirin and a determination to stay on the tour until she had been to Disneyworld.

On March 27 her father flew to Miami Beach to bring Suzanne home. Her condition was very critical. They arrived home early the morning of March 28. She had her first pain pill that afternoon and quietly passed away in her sleep that same evening. On March 29 the tour reached Disneyworld.

(From *Voices From The Past: Diaries, Journals, and Autobiographies*, p. 151-154)

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