

SAMPLE CHAPTER

Cancer Gifts

Lessons In Gratitude
Acceptance and Perseverance

by
Linda Kopec



EMERALD LAKE
BOOKS
Sherman, Connecticut

SAMPLE CHAPTER

Cancer Gifts

Lessons in Gratitude, Acceptance and Perseverance

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DEDICATION

*In loving memory of my mother Alice
and all those who have lost their fight
with this disease called “cancer.”*

*And in honor of my loving husband Dennis,
our two amazing daughters Jen and Emily,
and our son-in-law Ed, who has a heart of gold.*

FOREWORD

This book is an inspiring memoir written by my mother, Linda Kopec, about surviving cancer, not once, but twice. It is a story of hope, determination, perseverance and faith. If cancer has touched your life in any way, I believe you will find yourself engaged from the very first paragraph.

Mom's determination through her cancer treatments repeated itself in her determination to write this book, which has been a collaboration in the works for eleven years. It's not just her perspective, though. It includes contributions written by her doctors, my father Dennis, and my sister Emily.

My mom's heartfelt down-to-earth stories also include important medical information and reflections on choices that had to be made.

This book is purposely written as short helpful chapters and is presented in chronological order. There are also captions with food for thought on every few pages called "Ringing the Bell" to help you explore the lessons that my mom learned on her own journey with cancer. The chapter titles are clever and witty, leaving you wanting to know more. For example, one chapter is called "The Lap Lady." What is that about, and who is the lap lady!?

Writing this book was a labor of love. My mom felt led to tell her story so that it might help someone else. Early readers have already expressed how it has helped them, and if you are holding this book, we hope it encourages you too.

My mom is always willing to talk with anyone who has questions or just to listen. When you have been through something like cancer, you become an asset and advocate for others as well. You never know when your life experiences may help someone else.

Chances are, you either know someone who has had cancer or have had it yourself. I don't know anyone who has not been changed by this disease. It doesn't even have to be cancer. It can be any medical situation. The principles and feelings are similar. You're overwhelmed with uncertainty and confusion, wanting answers, feeling scared, and just downright upset. It takes over your life and needs attention. These moments touch places in you and impact your life in ways you would never realize or think of. It is a journey. It really is. Just show up the best you can. Ask questions and take someone with you to be your support.

It is with deep love, gratitude and honor that I write this foreword for my mom Linda. She has been changed by cancer. We all are changed by cancer, and we are continually learning from this. Yet, she has shown such courage, strength and faith as she faced her cancer journey that she touched the lives of those around her. You would never know how hard it was for her. She carries herself with such a positive attitude, always moving forward, moving on to the next thing. She has taught me that life is meant to be lived. So, keep learning from experiences and moving forward.

To all the caregivers out there, make sure to be good to yourself. Eat well, drink water, get rest, and consider joining a support group. Whatever you do, make sure you have support. Cancer is too much for someone to go through on their own. One thing this book gets across is it takes a team effort on every level. Stuff you would never even think of. Be open to the experience. You never know what's next...

—*Jen Kopec*



Jen, Linda, Dennis and Emily

INTRODUCTION

If you're picking up this book, you have probably been touched by cancer in some way. Perhaps a diagnosis was recently received by a friend, a family member, or even yourself. No one wants to hear the dreaded C-word. But when you do, it's natural to want to know what you are in for. More importantly, you are looking for hope. You want someone to tell you it's going to be alright, that there's a way through this diagnosis that leads to peace and happiness, if not full restoration to health.

I've been in your shoes, not once, but twice! So I can guess what you're feeling.

I was quietly living my life, working full-time and contentedly married to my husband, having raised two wonderful daughters together.

Then everything changed. Suddenly, I received my first cancer diagnosis, Stage 4 colon cancer, and my world was turned upside down.

I was scared. Not knowing what to expect. Not knowing if I would survive. Worrying how this would affect my husband and my children.

While I would find my way to being cancer-free again a year later, it wasn't without its challenges. That feeling of being afraid never quite left me as I navigated my way through the treatment process.

When I was diagnosed with Stage 3a breast cancer ten years later, I couldn't help but wonder, "Why me? I've already been through this before."

Being a completely different cancer, my treatment regimen was completely different too. While I had chemotherapy and surgery the first time, this time, I had chemo, surgery and radiation.

At first, when I kept wondering why I was going through this again, there was no answer. But over time, I became convinced that this was to serve as an inspiration of sorts.

I had a close-knit family and supportive healthcare team. But what about those cancer patients who don't have that or who don't know how to ask for what they need? Or who don't even know what they might want? And what about those caregivers who wish they knew how to be more helpful and supportive of a loved one facing cancer?

That is what inspired me to write this book. By sharing my story, my goal is that, as you take a ride on my emotional rollercoaster, you will see that there is hope among the fear and beauty among the ashes.

There are people who care about you and who want to see you healthy and well again. With their encouragement and care, you will become a stronger person. This experience will teach you more about yourself than you've ever known before. No matter what your particular journey entails, as time passes, there will be beauty in it.

May my story bring you hope as you make your journey and remind you that you are not alone.

A VERY UNUSUAL DAY

It was a cold winter day in February 2005. The alarm clock went off, and it was time to get up for work. I showered, dressed, had a quick bite to eat, and was off to work. Traffic on the highway that day was moving along without any tie-ups or accidents. I was always glad to arrive at work safely and on time.

As I entered the building, I said “Good morning” to Kathy, our receptionist.

She replied, “Payroll checks have been delivered and are on your desk.”

At that time, I worked as a payroll bookkeeper in a nursing home. As I was getting the checks in order for each department, I started having severe pain in my lower abdomen. *What was the matter with me?* My head was hot with fever. Maybe I was coming down with the flu. There was no way I could stay at work. I needed to go home.

Since I was feeling so poorly, I didn’t feel up to driving myself home. My boss agreed to drive me. Then a friend offered to follow us in my car. It was so good to get home, but the pain was still severe. My husband Dennis was at

work, and our daughters were grown and lived out of state. I was all alone and not sure what to do.

As I sat quietly, I began feeling worse. This was not good. I couldn't just sit there. What if I passed out? No one would know.

I had such an uneasy feeling that I decided the best thing for me to do was to call the doctor. I explained my pain to him, and he told me to come in right away. Since his office wasn't far from home, I felt confident I could drive myself there. I sure was glad my friend had driven my car home for me.

Still in pain, I arrived at his office. He greeted me as I opened the door. "Linda, come right into the examining room."

I was so glad I didn't need to wait. I explained my pain and told him where it hurt.

After the examination was over, he said it was not the flu. "Sounds like an attack of diverticulitis: here is a prescription for you. I want you to go home and rest for a few days, then come back next week to see me again."

The next week, I went back for my follow-up visit. I was feeling much better. It was such a relief to not have that pain anymore, but unexpectedly he strongly urged me to have a colonoscopy. He gave me the name of a doctor across the hall from his office. I felt better and was putting it off, but then I thought maybe there is something more going on and I just didn't know. I sure didn't want the pain to come back.

Finally, I got the courage to call and make the appointment. Because of my attack, I was given an appointment right away. I was considered an emergency case... "What?"

I wondered. “Why am I an emergency case? What is going on with me? What is wrong?”

Then I thought about my job. *How can I work if I have something seriously wrong?* There were so many thoughts going through my mind, and it seemed like my world was turning upside down.

It was February 23, 2005, when I first met Dr. Nkemakonam Ikekpeazu. I explained the pain I had had two weeks earlier.

After we talked a while he said, “We need to know for sure what caused the pain.” He recommended I have a CT scan.

Now I was really scared. I didn’t even know what a CT scan was.

On Friday, March 3, 2005, I had the CT scan. It was explained to me this is a computerized scan that combines a series of x-ray images taken from different angles around the body. It uses computer processing to create cross-sectional images of the bones, blood vessels and soft tissues inside the body.

The next day, Dr. Ikekpeazu called me and told me the results of the scan. He said, “You have an abscess on the outside of your colon, and it is quite serious. You need to have a drain put in very soon. I want you to go to the hospital on Monday, and we will do this right away.”

I said okay, but really didn’t understand what was going to be done. I was so surprised by the call that I didn’t know what questions to ask and wasn’t thinking clearly. Different thoughts were running through my mind. *Am I going to be all right? How serious is this?*

My husband is an accountant and, being the middle of tax season, Dennis was very busy. Since the doctor had made the

procedure sound fairly routine, I took my friend Debbie up on her offer to take me so Dennis could go to work. So, on the following Monday, Debbie and I went to St. Raphael's Hospital. The procedure to attach the drain took about an hour.

When it was over, there was a tube about three feet long lying on my stomach that connected to a bag. The tube protruded from my groin to drain the abscess. The whole thing was very uncomfortable, and I was completely overwhelmed. I had no idea how I was going to manage getting up and moving around with all this paraphernalia to work around. I felt mortified and ready to cry, wondering how I was supposed to put my pants on with this tube hanging out of me.

The nurse saw how upset I was and offered to assist me. She secured the tube to my leg and helped me get dressed.

This was not what I expected when the doctor said he would put a drain in for the abscess. I hadn't been prepared for what it would be like

RINGING THE BELL



and only knew that there was another CT scan taken during the procedure that was used for guiding the doctor's work.

Have you ever been surprised by a lack of information? If so, how did it make you feel? During this cancer journey, be sure to ask questions. The more information you have, the better you'll be able to make important decisions about your treatment and care. And if you're feeling overwhelmed or aren't comfortable asking questions, appoint a trusted family member or friend to advocate for you.

I just wanted to go home and cry. Finally, we could leave the hospital, and I was glad to be home and in bed. What an exhausting day!

It wasn't until a few days later that I found the information online that I needed to understand the drain procedure. It explained that the

surgeon uses a CT scan to locate the abscess. Then, it is drained using a needle. A small incision is made in the skin over the abscess and a thin plastic tube called a “drainage catheter” is attached. The catheter allows the abscess to drain into a bag and is usually left in place for a week.

At the time of my procedure, our house was undergoing construction. We were building a new kitchen and garage. The whole side of the house was open with just a plastic tarp covering it. It was the second week of March, and it was so cold.

When I got home from the hospital, our house felt like a wind tunnel. We called our daughter Emily to tell her how things went with the drain. I was in bed at the time, resting and trying to keep warm. As soon as we told her how cold the house was, she said right away, “Mom, you can’t stay there in the cold. Come stay with me, so you will be warm.”

Emily lives in upstate New York, a five-hour drive from where we live in Connecticut. It was decided Dennis would drive halfway, and Emily would drive the other half. So, Dennis got me settled in the car with a pillow and blanket and off we went to meet her.

By the time Emily and I arrived at her house, we were both so... so... tired. She put sheets and blankets on the couch in the TV room so I wouldn’t need to climb the stairs to the bedrooms. It was hard to settle down from the long day.

I tried to process the day’s events. The morning had started with going to the hospital with Debbie, having the CT scan, and getting the drain put in. After the procedure, I had the shock of seeing the long tube on my belly, the nurse helping me get dressed, and returning home with my instructions.

Finally, there was the five-hour car ride to Emily's house. I was so exhausted, I just wanted to cry.

The next day, Emily went to work. After she left, I called my boss and told him I was in New York dealing with this drain and couldn't come to work. My boss had no choice but to learn my payroll job since it was Tuesday, the payroll transmission day. Checks needed to be processed for the next week's payroll for 206 employees. After we made many phone calls back and forth from New York to Connecticut, the payroll was finally done. Another exhausting day!

While Emily was at work, I rested as best I could. I hated the drain and wanted it out. A foreign body could cause infection, which I sure didn't want to have happen. I also feared, if I moved the wrong way, it might come out on its own. Then I would be in big trouble. I definitely didn't want to go back to the hospital to have it put in again—let alone needing to go to a New York hospital. I needed a lot of patience.

On Wednesday and Thursday, it snowed all day. Upstate New York gets lots of lake-effect snow. It was lonesome while Emily was at work, but when she came home in the evening, I felt a little better.

Friday arrived, and it was time to go back home to Connecticut. I had an appointment with Dr. Ikekpeazu in the afternoon. I thought this would be the day the drain would come out. Emily helped me into the car, and we headed for Connecticut.

When we arrived at the doctor's office, the waiting room was filled with people. I was very weak and not feeling well at all. The drain was more than I could handle and was making

me very emotional. I tried to hold back my tears, but sitting in the waiting room seemed to last forever.

When it was finally my turn to see the doctor, I thought, *Now he will take it out.* Instead, he explained to Emily and me how serious the abscess was and that I needed to keep the drain in another week. Not what I wanted to hear...

This can't be happening. I left the doctor's office ready to cry. There was nothing I could do.

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