

Best Friends

The news was never good. There were anxiety producing delays and nebulous results to be waited for and then to be analyzed. More samples required. New tests. The outcome was always grave. The reality was that she was 17 and she had leukemia. For him, the waiting room had become his second home. He knew the nurses and doctors by name. He knew how many chocolate bars had been bought from the vending machine since the last visit. He knew the other patients. He also knew that she was fighting for her life and that she needed him.

They had met in high school; grade eight English class with Mrs.Kaufman. She was an average teacher but she introduced her class to Shakespeare, specifically Romeo and Juliet. These were turbulent times for young teens both here and in Verona. Like Romeo and Juliet, their budding love was both accidental and innocent. When they read their lines for Mrs. Kaufman; Romeo : Juliet: a chemical reaction took place. There was the obligatory first date and the first kiss. Everyone had said it was "puppy love" and that it would never last. Yet, four years later they were still together.

At 14 they were healthy kids with a love for life. Both made the track team and both swam competitively on Saturdays. They were in the top third of their classes and were quite popular with their peers. It was only in grade 11 that she had the first feeling that something was wrong. She was always tired and her lap-time was getting slower. At first she thought that it was just part of growing up but when she could no longer concentrate on studying for her January exams she decided to see a doctor. One blood test and her world was turned upside down. What was the point in finishing school, developing a relationship, or competing aquatically? She was dying. She told him and he was stunned. The plans they had made, their hopes and desires, were suddenly eaten up by undiscerning, vengeful, cancerous cells. He did hesitate, momentarily, but once his mind was made up he never left her side. He felt like killing one of his friends for suggesting that he leave her and get on with his

life.

She would have appointments, treatments, tests and analysis and he would wait patiently with her for the results. Together they researched the disease and became quasi cancer experts. They knew all the lingo, the history, the various treatments, and most importantly the success rate for young patients. The more they learned the more hope they developed of winning the war. That hope gave her a psychological edge on the enemy within her. Of course she was not one to stay down long. Together they worked on their high school subjects and with the extra effort their grades even improved. By June's graduation ceremony she had lost most of her hair. He shaved his head, as did most of the guys in the graduating class, to show support.

The latest report wasn't good. There were a lot of grim faces, some shaking of heads, and even a few glassy eyes. The professionals were stumped by the erratic attacks of the disease. The enemy was winning and she was more aware of it than her doctors. Although she shared everything with him, she could not explain what it felt like to be eaten away from the inside, what it was like to try to sleep knowing that flowing through her veins was a monster who would not stop devouring her until it had consumed her.

He tried to be supportive. He held her when she retched out the results of another chemo treatment. He read to her when she could no longer focus. He fed her when she was too listless to lift a spoon to her mouth. And he listened to her when she described to him her dreams and fears.

She died at 10:15 on a rainy Monday morning in the middle of March. She had been a fighter but the foe had finally worn her down. Cornered by cancer there was nowhere to go except into the "Great Beyond".

He spoke at her funeral. When he had finished there was not a dry eye in the place. Her family wept openly. Her father would not be comforted. Her friends lamented the loss of such a promising peer. He was the last one to leave the graveside.

However, he had met a girl in the hallway at the funeral parlor. She had been there to pay her last respects to her grandfather. They went out to a movie the next evening and have been a couple ever since. I guess "that's life".