

Cindy Kunzendorf

A vibrant rainbow arches across a cloudy sky above a calm lake. The lake's surface reflects the rainbow and the surrounding green trees. The scene is peaceful and scenic, with the rainbow being the central focus of the image.

*Finding
Rainbows*

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my dearest friends Diana Marks and Kandi Kaliher.

Foreword

I find myself looking back at my life and realizing that all of what my parents had told me was true, insightful, painfully accurate, and provided me with the type of faith, courage, and hope to live each day to the best of my ability. To be happy with what I have instead of wanting what I don't have. They knew that things could get worse, but they always prayed that things could get better, and in most cases it is about how you look at things that makes all the difference in the world.

You can look at your reflection in the mirror and on a rare occasion realize that who you see is a compilation of life experiences that family, friends, and just people you meet have influenced. Everything you do and everything you are has been formed along life's journey.

I need to thank my sister, Vicky, for always pushing me to find this moment where I complete the writing that has always been in me. She and my mother love my stories and poems, and always felt that I have helped others when I shared them. I also owe Vicky for the title of this book. Writers I am sure will understand

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that not having this type of key to the locks inside your brain can stall all your creativity.

Finding Rainbows was a defining moment for both of us, because we were together doing what sisters do, complaining about things we couldn't control and shopping, and there it was—a beautiful double bannered rainbow with the sun peaking out on one side of the horizon and the dark casts from the days on again off again storms on the other side that made me stop everything and appreciate that moment for all its radiance. I was like a kid describing it, mesmerized with all the brilliant colors. I'm chattering away about the brilliant blues and reds and then the softer hue from the second banner, and how amazing it was for us to be together and get to see it together. My sister looked at me like she always does, and realized that whatever we were complaining about had no value anymore and could no longer keep my attention anyway, and knew that was my gift: In a storm of any kind I can find the rainbows.

I had to change the names of many of the characters in the book so that their identities are protected. But this is a personal journey that has touched many lives, and those lives have touched me.

My thanks also go to Diana for all the things she taught me while she was alive. She had the most beautiful soul of anyone I have ever met. She also defied medical science by surviving countless medical conditions and life and death experiences over and over

again. She was my ultimate companion, and she always grounded herself by saying she knew that she was still alive because God must still have some purpose for her to fulfill. She also savored life and really went out of her way to cherish those precious few perfect moments. So she kept going; she was the Energizer Bunny or more appropriately, the Energizer penguin. Trust me you will get the penguin reference later.

I also have to acknowledge Kandi whom I met over thirty years ago at the University of Illinois. My sister Vicky recently showed me an article I had written so long ago in college that actually led to me meeting Kandi in the first place. She touched me and connected me to people that I would never have known and personifies that theory that all of us are really only six degrees of separation from each other. She had the most beautiful giggle, a perfect smile, and the type of kindness that is so rare. She would look for the perfect gift for months, and write a personal note with it, so that you would treasure it forever. I still have some of her gifts from college. Kandi also lost her battle to cancer first and that was the beginning of the poems that I would write along the way as I searched for words to describe how I felt.

Having someone believe in me and my vision has been instrumental in helping me make the time to write this story. Thank you, Debbie, for continuing to see what the future may hold and not letting me give up something that means so much to me. Having a psychic

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share what she sees as my possibilities prevented me from making excuses and pushing away something I knew I had to do.

Thank you, Vicky, for always being there for me and making me believe I have enough time and energy to keep doing anything I really want to do. You are my best friend forever. I know that we live in different spaces and are apart on a physical level, but know that we are together. I wrote “Same Sky” to demonstrate how I think we are linked in heart and spirit.

Same Sky

Outside I stroll along
Enjoying the crisp night air
As I gaze at the stars above
I know we share
The same sky.

I miss being with you everyday
Treasured memories of stories
That are retold in the constellations
Days of love and glory
Held in the same sky.

The moon shines onto the earth
And I realize how little time has passed
Since the very beginnings of our birth
The infinity of life reflected
In the same sky.

I wish we could be together now
And know you are always in my heart
Because as I look at the night sky
I know we really are not far apart.

Our dreams are held in the same sky.

My Personal Journey

Poetry for the Soul

I have listened to suggestions for several decades to write a book and to share my experiences with people relating to my life. This is in part because my family is extremely supportive and partly because I have survived cancer not once, but three times so far.

Thirty years have passed and the desire to share the story of how cancer has affected my life has grown each day. Poetry has found me during the journey and my poems vary from deeply moving to whimsical verses dedicated to the people I have known and love.

This book celebrates their part in the revelation that this book is totally about life and how fighting cancer along the way helped me live life to the fullest and see it for all its beauty. You will find that I firmly believe that my life would not have been as beautiful and I would not have experienced happiness to the levels I have if not for cancer.

I will be forever grateful for the destiny that has lead me through life and brought me to you to share this story. I hope you find inspiration, shed tears, laugh, and look at life in a new way.

The Beginning

Something wasn't right about me and I just couldn't figure out what it was. I wasn't really sick, but I was having all sorts of little things going on that were just annoying and exhausting. I was an athletic nineteen-year-old college student going into the second year of college and this did not make sense. I had been sick a couple of times when I was a kid but nothing that dragged out like this.

I had gone to the campus physician that fall in 1976 right after I began attending the College of Pharmacy at University of Illinois in Chicago, and he really treated me like I was some sort of nut. "My symptoms" could be representative of "stress, or some underlying psychological issues. [He] couldn't be certain of the cause of my symptoms." I'm thinking, what the heck? Stress can cause all of my symptoms? I wonder, with this type of logic, why the clinic wasn't full with my classmates. Aren't we all stressed out?

His solution was to suggest antidepressants or mood elevators. He wanted me to consider antidepressants, and I was struggling not to scream at him. *What I am feeling is not in my head, you total monkey!* I thought that, I didn't say that out loud; I was still a very meek nineteen-year-old who still had no clue about how things work, going to one of many doctors for the first time on my own. It was the in the late seventies and pharmacy was exploding with medications that could

fix just about everything. My response to the doctor was “no, I won’t take those pills for something that I don’t believe is wrong with me. I’ll suffer with all the symptoms before I will do that.”

Of course, in the back of my head I’m thinking taking that kind of pills would be the next step to the insane asylum and straight jackets. You will find that I have a vivid imagination heavily influenced by the movies that were playing during that time. *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest* had been an Oscar winner in 1975. Jack Nicholson’s character was wild and didn’t follow the rules, but he wasn’t crazy. There was no way I was going to subject myself to any Nurse Cratchet types or have the wild side I hadn’t even discovered yet be squelched.

I was starting to itch so bad now that my skin felt like something was crawling around under the surface, I literally had nights that my feet and hands itched so much that I used a fork to scratch them. I had this stupid tickle of a cough, and the diarrhea would come and go. Is this what people get when they are stressed out? I’m thinking I didn’t have these problems in the junior college when I went for my undergrad classes. All I kept thinking was that it didn’t make sense.

I could rationalize my symptoms like the doctor did and minimize it. I kind of felt guilty complaining about it, because complaining about things accomplishes nothing.

I had moved away from my family to attend college and had lost my grandmother in the same year. Grandma died in the spring of 1976 and I moved to Chicago in September 1976. In class, the psychology professor at the College of Pharmacy would have ranked those events as major stress points in life. He would lecture that many patients break down with medical and psychological problems at those points in their lives.

I'm thinking this might explain everything, but it almost might not . . . right? I was starting to believe that could be why this was all happening, but something just didn't fit. Something inside told me they weren't right. In my gut I knew there was something else going on.

So the doctor's plan was to run some tests. Lots of tests it would turn out. We were at a major teaching hospital in Chicago, so why not teach all the residents about the tests you can run to rule out all sorts of suspected diseases?

Time was pushing through the winter months in 1976, so the residents did the basics to treat my "issues." There was a chest x-ray and they said that it was apparent I had bronchitis from all the irritation, so they needed to suppress my coughing. They didn't see anything else on the x-ray so that was the plan. Apparently, I had actually coughed so much I had caused something else, so now we need to fix the bronchitis and that would fix the cough. It all seemed to loop around itself.

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I actually had a doctor tell me that my coughing was causing my coughing and that I had to suppress my urges to cough at all costs. Do whatever I can not to cough, got it. The doctor prescribed Robitussin AC cough syrup (it has codeine in it) and I would find that this was pretty good stuff. It didn't taste really good but it stopped the coughing so I could sleep. I was frequently getting new prescriptions for more cough syrup. I would occasionally just drink right out of the bottle to get relief from what was becoming my little reminder that my cough was not going anywhere.

Chicago was really cold all through winter break that year, and I would later read that the longest stretch of below freezing weather would hit the city between December 28, 1976, and February 7, 1977.

The diarrhea was still there even though the residents thought the codeine in the Robitussin would stop it. So the attending doctor would ask all the residents what could cause diarrhea and fatigue and they all guessed a parasite could do that. I'm thinking couldn't the coughing all the time make you tired?

Nope I guess not, we were going to have to run some tests to rule out the parasites first. The problem with this strategy is that I had to supply stool samples, fresh samples, and run them to the lab within thirty minutes of producing them. They also need one "stool sample" for each test. So literally every time I had a movement, I was running across campus through the snow with a steaming pile of it, hiding the sample cup in a brown

paper bag, as I brought the samples to the lower levels of the hospital.

I found that ironically the parasitology labs were in the bowels of the hospital, “pun intended.” Sorry couldn’t help myself.

But what the heck, we were testing for stuff, we had to find something. Knowing what I had would be better than not knowing. I still had a problem believing that I could have a big tape worm in my gut anyway. I’m figuring I would be a lot skinnier, but that wasn’t the case. All of it was pretty gross but I did what I was asked to do. It was like being on a quest.

I guess it would have made sense to me if I had been to Africa, India, Brazil, or Mexico doing missionary work or something recently. The only places I really had been to included Rock Falls, Chicago, and Iowa, nowhere else in the last year.

I thought I would call my parents and go home for a visit and try to relax with my family away from the stress of school only to find out that my timing wasn’t that great.

My Parents Move Away

My parents deciding to move away surprised me. It seemed to have happened so soon after I had moved to Chicago for pharmacy school. I kind of liked knowing that my home and my family were only two hours from school. Our home had been in a twin city

that bordered the Rock River between Rock Falls and Sterling. I had lived there for only three years while I attended high school and the junior college getting my credits for pharmacy school. Things had really started to go faster and faster once I moved away.

My parents would decide to move back to Iowa not long after I had moved to Chicago, after Grandma died, and my sister graduated from high school. I guess I didn't take into consideration that I hadn't called them in awhile. I was surprised when I called my parents to arrange to come home for a weekend visit and was told I couldn't come home. They were moving to Ottumwa, Iowa, that very weekend. I asked them when they were going to tell me, and my mom said after they finished moving.

Her response was I didn't live at home anymore, so they shouldn't have to tell me their every move. I was initially disappointed that I had not known of their decision and was not part of the decision but it wouldn't have changed anything. Mom was planning on telling me, I just called her before she had a chance to call me. Mom could be funny sarcastic sometimes, but she had been busy with my grandmother's illness for months before Grandma died and then deciding to move back to Iowa seemed to be her next step. I didn't realize that she had always longed to live in Iowa. Both Mom and Dad had sacrificed so much to make the best plan for their children, including staying in our house.

I understood that this was the beginning of what it meant to be on my own. I was the one that had moved away to go to college so it was selfish to think that their lives would be on hold while I was beginning a new life.

It probably made sense for Mom and Dad to go back to where all their family lived. Grandma had just lost a battle to tongue and throat cancer a few months earlier in May of 1976. Just going through the process of driving back and forth every week, to be with her mother as she was slowly dying, probably solidified for my mom that what she wanted was to be closer to her home and family.

I wasn't excited about it at first because I had wanted to finish school in Chicago where I had a four-year scholarship. I had just assumed they would be where I left them in our home like they had always been when I graduated. That had been the plan when I had headed off for college, and I had not seen their desire to move back to their childhood home coming up so quickly.

Now it was going to take a long time to go home, it was over a six-hour drive if I had a car. In fact, there is no way I will be able to go home very often at all now. It kind of pushed me into sticking out everything I would be exposed to in Chicago on my own because I wasn't going to be able to run home.

I had really hated that Grandma had to die from cancer, but I hated more that she had to suffer and agonize while my mom had to spend so much time

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with her struggling to help her. There was nothing Mom could do but watch her slowly die. She really had to go through the hardest thing ever. To see someone you love waste away and not be able to stop any of it from happening. That has to be the worst thing I could imagine.

I found myself daydreaming about Iowa and all my memories of summers long ago, of simpler childhood adventures, surrounded by good old fashioned family times.

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