

Bonnie Jean

Maureen McKenna

“Look at the beautiful album that Sarah made for me.”

Jean’s softly spoken words float across her bright yellow and blue dining room. Provence in the spring comes to my mind. CHUM-FM radio plays softly on her stereo. I strain my ears to hear Rod McKuen sing “Jean” from the movie “The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie.”

“Jean, Jean, you’re young and alive.”

The words of the song hang in the air. They transport me back to when I first met Jean, to when a waif waltzed into my new office on the fifth floor of the Xerox Tower, as I unpacked boxes on a sunny Sunday afternoon in August 1993.

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Scattered on the floor are photos of friends and family, seashells from around the world, framed “Cathy” cartoons. Cathy is my heroine. She portrays with great humour and insight the lifestyle and challenges of the professional single woman.

Brilliant white light shines into my office from the western-facing window across the hall. I squint as I look up and see a young woman with bright-blond hair, bound in a ponytail with an orange scarf. She looks all of fifteen. A halo of sunlight dances on her head. Her blue eyes sparkle, and I find myself smiling.

“What is our problem?” She smiles back. “We obviously don’t have a life! Hi, my name is Jean and you must be Mo McKenna. I heard that Chris had hired you away from the Product Planning Group.

Welcome to the crazy world of marketing! Let me buy you a coffee downstairs at Starbucks and I can give you the inside scoop on the department.”

As if in a dream, I follow the waif down the hall, like the children must have felt as they followed the Pied Piper. I have no choice. I must follow the bright turquoise, cropped pants, hot-pink golf shirt and sequenced flip-flops into the stairwell.

Along the way Jean chatters. “Hey, you are so lucky to be right next door to Joe. He is the brains behind our latest marketing strategy. You will love working with him. Warning: he loves playing practical jokes. This is a great group. We work hard and we take time to play. We have a running group. Do you want to join us? I am participating in my first marathon in Stockholm next month. It’s my first trip to Europe.”

“Jean, the longest I have run is to the store and back.”

So began my friendship with Jean, my yearning for a younger sister fulfilled. We worked, jogged, played, drank wine and laughed together. Within a year, I had two plaques from our 10K runs decorating my office wall. Jean teased me when I completed my first race. “The oldest runner in the race is 85, and he just crossed the finish line before you did.”

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A year later I stand with Jean on the sixth floor of Mount Sinai Hospital in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. Incubators and monitors fill the space. Green gowns cover our bodies and ugly clear plastic hats hide our hair. We stand together with our hands tightly clutched, watching Jeffrey, Jean’s newborn son’s tiny chest rise and fall.

“Jean, the facecloth is longer than his whole body!” I gasp as I look into the incubator.

At birth he weighed one pound, eleven ounces and he is now one pound, nine ounces. The tubes in his nose and chest are as fine as a needle and yet look so big taped to his tiny body. A bright, blue doll’s hat covers his head right down to his eyebrows. His eyes are closed and his perfectly-shaped mouth opens as he yawns. Jean reaches into the incubator and he closes his hand around her pinkie.

Jean chews at the cuticle on her left thumb. Her eyes focus on her day-old infant. “Randy and I wanted this baby so much,” she sobs. “It took us three years of IVF procedures and now he may not live.”

I take a deep breath and firmly declare with conviction greater than I feel: “Hey, Jeffrey has your genes and look at that tiny fist clenching your finger. He is here to stay. I say he’ll be a marathon runner by the time he is fifteen.”

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That was twelve years ago. Today, wearing a colourful bandana, Jean smiles up at me as I walk into her room, my high heels tapping loudly on the bamboo floor. I sit down on a yellow chair by her bed. Jean weighs less than 80 pounds now. The cancer that began in her breast is now in her brain and in all her bones.

The room seems small with the hospital bed and the monitor that brightly flashes her vital signs. Attached to her bed is the intravenous fluid supply that feeds her and provides her with morphine.

I avert my eyes from the IV and look at the colourful quilt on the bed. Sarah, our crafty friend who made the photo album, designed it. Twelve of Jean’s friends each contributed a square to create a tribute to Jean. Sarah hand-sewed all twelve squares together. I look at my

contribution—a picture of Jean after my first race. She smiles as she holds an ice pack to my knee. Boy, we sure drank a lot of wine that night.

I look down at the open album on the bed. “Jean, what a great photo of Jeffrey. He has grown another foot, I swear! Boy, just like his mom – he is quite the athlete – hockey, soccer and now cross country running!” Looking down at Jeffrey’s blonde hair and blue eyes, I can see Jean in all his features.

Mary, Jean’s mother, walks into the room. She has moved from Kingston to help care for her beautiful daughter. Randy needs help to take care of Jean and Jeffrey.

“Mo, tell mom about the kids you are working with,” Jean encourages me “Tell her all about Alex...”

I bite my lip, take a deep breath and remind myself that I can cry when I get home. This is my friend Jean, so in the present moment, genuinely interested in those around her. I smile and begin to tell a funny story about one of the students I mentor. The three of us laugh and for a moment cancer has left the room and we are friends sharing a funny story.

When I was twenty, someone told me that we live for these fleeting moments and today I know this to be true.

Mary looks away from Jean. She swallows hard and takes a deep breath. Pain and sorrow deeply etch her face. “I need to go and pick up Jeffrey from school,” she says. “I’ll leave you two to talk.”

My eyes move to the sunlight as it plays on the bamboo floor. I find myself wondering, how do you straighten bamboo? I recall the conversation with Jean when she was renovating the house. “Mo, I’ve found a way to have a wood floor and save trees. I’m going to use

bamboo.” Jean makes all her decisions with a long-term view of the impact it will have on others and on the world. She is my teacher. How will I continue to learn when she is gone?

Looking out the window I notice that snow is falling softly onto the cedar deck, each flake unique and perfect. I stare as the snowflakes land on the brown-and-yellow bird feeder. Last week Randy placed the feeder on the deck so Jean could see the birds from her bed. A red-winged black bird hovers over the feeder.

I pull my eyes away and look back at my friend. My heart physically aches as I reach out for her tiny, bruised hand. So many needles have invaded her veins. I softly trace a pattern of purple, black and pink.

She takes my hand. “Mo, thank you for being you. These last two years have taught me about the gift of just being present with those you love. I can’t handle people who are afraid to be with me. Their fear of my death makes it hard for me to breathe. I feel the energy being sucked out of my body. I only want to be with people who can be present with me right now, those who give me nurturing, positive energy. I am so blessed.”

Jean gasps as the pain shoots through her, tries, and fails to take a deep breath. With a quiet dignity she announces, “I’m not afraid of dying nor of the pain that I experience in my body. But the pain I feel when I think about Jeffrey and leaving him consumes me. It’s just not fair!”

I reach out to gently hold her. She cries until there are no more tears left in her dehydrated body. I gently wipe her face, and look into her eyes. A faint smile forms on her lips. A giggle erupts from her mouth and she quietly laughs. “Remember the story of Job in the Bible when he was experiencing all those awful blights? He looked up

to the sky and said, 'Why me Lord, why me?' And the Lord looked down and said, 'Job, some days you just piss me off.'"

I smile at the old, tired joke we share when one of us is feeling pissed off at what is happening in our lives

I silently pray, "Thank you God for this gift of joyful sorrow."

I pick up the photo album and hold it so that Jean can see the pictures, and I slowly turn the page.