

Q&A with Marisa Acocella Marchetto

AUTHOR OF *CANCER VIXEN: A TRUE STORY*



Why is raising breast cancer awareness so important to you?

First, as a survivor, I became so aware of how precious life is and I wanted to do everything I could to spread the message out that early detection saves lives. How could I not do it?

Working with my dear friends, Evelyn Lauder and Elizabeth Hurley on The Estée Lauder Companies' Breast Cancer Awareness Campaign, has been such an exhilarating experience for me. Not only are we kicking cancer's butt but we're doing it in really great shoes! When I'm traveling the country with Evelyn, who I often refer to as 'the patron saint of breast cancer', and the wonderful Elizabeth Hurley, it is such an emotional time for me because we meet thousands of women who have breast cancer, or have had breast cancer or know of someone who has it. Listening to their stories also gives me the opportunity to share my story with them.

In your book, *CANCER VIXEN*, you depict yourself as a savvy New York fashionista, "caught up in the superficial stuff." Did this journey change that at all?

Yes. In the same way that 9/11 changed me and the rest of the country, at least for a while. I became acutely conscious of how finite my life is, and what I'd like to focus my energy on. I was completely consumed with clothes and shoes as a way to get attention and I definitely dressed competitively. I live in downtown New York City, the heart of the fashionista capital of the world. Everything is about getting the better bag, the better shoe, the better table, all the "important" things in life. Back then, fashion was a game of one-upmanship for me.

Back then I was a fashion victim – now I'm a Fashion VICTOR...

I dress as a way to make me feel better. While I was going through chemotherapy, I didn't want to focus on the IV in my hand, so I'd look down at my feet and give myself a little shoe therapy. My thought was, yeah, this needle sucks, but what a pretty pair of shoes.

So I invented my own universal law: THE LAW OF DISTRACTION. That's what I was practicing when I was focused on those shoes.

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You were 43 years old and 3 weeks away from marrying the man of your dreams when you were diagnosed with breast cancer. Did you worry that you might lose him?

After a lifetime of being single, I, a self-described terminal bachelorette was about to marry the man I've waited all my life for, Silvano Marchetto. My cartooning career was on track. I felt pretty good about myself. For once everything was looking up.

And then I was diagnosed with breast cancer.

Naturally, I was frightened. I've heard horror stories of men leaving their women when they have a serious illness. On top of that, Silvano is a celebrity chef and restaurateur. He owns Da Silvano, a star-studded restaurant in Greenwich Village. It's populated by A-listers and fabulistas, some of whom were hitting on him right in front of me, his fidanzata (that's "fiancé" in Italian). What would happen when the world's most beautiful women were making a play for Silvano while I was going down the unknown road of surgery, treatments, possibly losing my hair, gaining weight and maybe not looking or feeling so good? That really worried me. Would he still want to marry me?

In CANCER VIXEN, you write "Cartoonists don't just sit there and draw out of their heads. Some of us are reporters. I go out on assignments like a regular reporter, except I write and draw my stories in comic strip form, which is called 'reportage.'" How did you become a cartoonist/reporter?

It first started in November 1999, when *The New Yorker* asked me to go into the New York Knicks dressing room before and after the game and report about it in comic book form. Then I started getting calls from *The New York Times*. They hired me to create a recurring comic strip entitled "The Strip," which ran in the Sunday Styles section for almost a year.

I've always considered myself to be a cartoonist/anthropologist/documentarian anyway, so it came naturally to me. I love observing people, or maybe I'm just nosy.

You very openly and fearlessly say in this book, "Cancer, I am going to kick your butt! And I'm going to do it in killer five-inch heels!" How did you keep your spirits up? Were there any times throughout this experience when you did feel like a victim?

I felt like a victim when I was diagnosed with breast cancer three months after my insurance elapsed. That's right, I didn't have insurance. I'm a freelancer. I had insurance through the Writer's Guild of America. When it was about to expire, I called them and they referred me to another insurance carrier. I called and called the carrier, who didn't call me back. Then life just took over and I dropped the ball. It was my own fault, and I was a victim of my own stupidity. That was something I could point to and say, ok, that was an epic screw-up. Luckily, when I got married I was able to go on my husband's plan.

What if I weren't so lucky?

I did the math. The grand total from the first sonogram to the last radiation treatment and everything in between added up to a whopping \$192,720.04.

There's an even higher cost: Women who are without health insurance have a 49% greater risk of dying from breast cancer.

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That fact comes straight from The National Breast Cancer Foundation.

Having insurance can mean the difference between life and death. That's why I'm giving a percentage of the proceeds from *CANCER VIXEN* to provide breast care for unprivileged women at the Comprehensive Cancer Center affiliated with St. Vincent's Hospital in Manhattan. *CANCER VIXEN* also supports The Breast Cancer Research Foundation, founded by Evelyn Lauder in 1993.

You reached out to some pretty unorthodox sources for support after your diagnosis: the Kaballah Centre, a psychic hotline, a holistic doctor. What ultimately helped you the most and what recommendations would you make to others who are staring down this disease?

Cancer is war. I knew I needed to arm myself to fight this disease. My strategy was to attack it from four different angles:

1. The attack from a physical angle: I wanted to get rid of the toxic cancer in my body. How would I do that? It was a search to find the right doctors. I tried to be open to whatever information came my way and actually went to a holistic Oncologist. There are a lot of charlatans out there, and he was one of them. I didn't enlist him in my personal army.

2. The attack from a spiritual angle: I wanted to get rid of the toxic thoughts in my head. I went to The Kaballah Centre (after a little arm twisting from my friend Lisa and my very Catholic mother) and began to take responsibility for my thoughts and actions.

Also, there is the law of cause and effect. If you think that taking hormones may result in a problem or tumors 20 years later, don't take them. Or if you're concerned about the hormones in dairy, drink organic milk. I want to keep whatever's toxic out of my body as much as possible.

I also leaned on my psychic, I admit it. I found Dr. Nikki on a hotline. She was a drill sergeant who has two doctorates, so she's tough and brilliant at the same time.

3. The attack from an emotional angle: I wanted to get rid of my toxic relationships. I weeded out the people who weren't good for me, and seeded the relationships that were. My family and friends were there for me 24/7. It was important for me to have a support group.

4. The attack from a mental angle: I wanted to stay active and not give into a toxic "woe is me" depression. How I did that was I always tried to have something to look forward to. Before the lumpectomy, I looked forward to getting married. Before chemo, I looked forward to having a honeymoon. During chemo and radiation, I focused on my *Glamour* deadline for *CANCER VIXEN*. Having a goal always propelled me forward. The busier I was, the more my mind was off me.

I also forced myself to not let it slow me down. Which is easier for me to say, because I didn't have the heavier chemo. Many women—many patients—have an even tougher road than the one I was on.

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Lastly, I realized something interesting—that a little bit of denial can be a good thing. The more I focused on my upcoming marriage and my *Glamour* deadline, the less I worried about my health. The less I worried about my health, the healthier I became. I'm convinced that's one of the reasons I did OK.

Today I've kept my spirits up by staying on top of my health situation. It eliminates guessing and worrying and all that fear about whether you're ok or not. Part of staying alive means getting the necessary check-ups. Include vigilance on the list of artillery.

Do you think you were an optimist before and would you call yourself one now? Do you feel that optimism played a role in your recovery?

Right now my negativity is in remission, and it's a constant battle to remain a healthy optimist.

When I first saw the tumor on the print out from the sonogram, I thought it looked like a black hole. When breast specialist Dr. Christopher Mills took a look at it, he thought it resembled the size of a large pearl. That struck me as something very revealing about the way I had seen the world up to that point—I would always go to that negative space.

The Kaballists look at the worst situations as one's biggest opportunity for growth. So, from the very beginning I was determined to plant the seed of health and positivity. That attitude has taken root, and so far, it's worked. Today, I'm cancer-free.

In many ways, believe it or not, I look at the whole experience as something positive. It made me a better person, a better wife, a better daughter, a better stepmother, a better sister, a better friend, and ultimately led me to a better life.

You wore different shoes to every chemo appointment. I have to ask: What's your favorite pair?

Whenever I walk by a shoe store like Christian Louboutin or Giuseppe Zanotti and spot a pair, that will be my favorite pair—the shoes I don't have! Some things never change.

What do you want your readers to get out of *CANCER VIXEN*?

I wrote *CANCER VIXEN* with an objective: to help me and help people who were touched by this disease. We've got to keep fighting. My biggest lesson was that life is worth fighting for, and the worst thing that can happen to you can be your biggest opportunity. And don't be a victim – BE A VIXEN!

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