

Sixtyfive Roses: A Sister's Memoir

Heather Summerhayes Cariou
McArthur & Company (2008)
ISBN 9781552786789

Reviewed by Olivera Baumgartner-Jackson for Reader Views (9/08)

Siblings – if you have one or more, you probably know how that goes... Can't live with them sometimes, and can't live without them for sure. So often they are our mirrors – in which we see ourselves the way others see us, and at times the way we wish we would truly be. I just cannot imagine losing any of mine, and I realize all too well that they have helped shape me into the human being that I became, in many ways even more than my parents have.

Reading "Sixtyfive Roses" was incredibly sobering. I cannot imagine the courage Heather Summerhayes Cariou had to have to actually write this unbelievable story and have it published. But then, she had a lifelong training in "above-and-beyond" courageous behavior. Imagine knowing since early childhood that your baby sister is ill – and that she will never get better. Imagine promising her not to leave, and not to let her die alone. Imagine being her lifelong protector. Imagine living with this impenetrable black cloud surrounding you and your family. And yet, you have to grow up. And you realize all too well that one day your sister will be gone. Imagine the rage, the despair, the jealousy for not being the center of attention, the desperate desire to make your sister's life easier... all those conflicting, oftentimes violent emotions. And one day the unthinkable happens... and your sister takes the last, labored breath. She is gone. And you are still here.

The story of how Pam, Heather's younger sister, was diagnosed with Cystic Fibrosis at the age of four, and how her family fought for her and other children with this debilitating disease is not a happy one, but definitely a positive and hopeful one. The strength and courage of everybody involved, from Pam herself to her family, her doctors and others with the same disease shows the world at least two perennial truths: that good does not necessarily win and that courage and fighting spirit can make an unbelievable difference. Back in those days children with CF tended to die very young, and Pammy's prognosis was no better, yet she kept fighting for over two decades and lived to the age of twenty-six. And she did not merely exist in this world, she lived her life as fully as possible and she made a difference in many other lives.

Heather Summerhayes Cariou's "Sixtyfive Roses" is a memoir, a tribute and a love poem, written in a clear, sometimes brutally honest and always sincere fashion. Her words are beautifully crafted, and her voice is distinct and unique. I have no doubt that Pammy is smiling at her big sister right now, and feeling mighty proud of her.

"Sixtyfive Roses" should be required reading for anybody dealing with a seriously ill person in their life, as well as anybody with any kind of a big or small problem. It certainly puts a lot of things in perspective, and it made me so very glad that I can go, pick up a phone and talk to my siblings right now, which is exactly what I am going to do tonight.