

I am gently massaging cream on to my left breast. The cream is so pure, organic and sweet smelling, that I could very possibly eat it. I feel protective towards my breast; for the last four months it's been subjected to all kinds of scrutiny and abuse. The cream is helping to moisturize and protect it from the daily radio therapy sessions – 15 in all.

My left breast has been battered and violated, prodded, bashed and biopsied. It's been cut into and sewn up, squashed and flattened. It has a dent in it, and is numb on the right side, where there is swelling and bruising. One patch is puckered like cellulite and it's a sad brown colour, tinged sunburn-red from the radiotherapy. There are permanent pen marks on the skin and pinprick tattoos to guide the beam. There are small indented lines and a tiny sophisticated scar around the nipple which was cut through in order to extricate the cancerous tumour.

I never expected my left breast to have so much attention. It's always been the least dominant breast, not to my knowledge smaller, but somehow lesser. My right breast is perkier than the left; it even produced more milk for my babies when I was breastfeeding, the one I could rely on and turned to.

But after a routine mammogram last summer, I returned from holiday in France to find an ominous letter from the hospital, asking me to return for "further tests." There were four agonising days to wait until my appointment. I tried to visualise a positive outcome (I am not a naturally positive person, so that didn't come easily to me). Panic reverberated just below the surface of every waking moment, and one morning I telephoned the hospital and blurted out that the letter had alarmed me. A weary woman reassured me that only 1 in 10 women who returned for tests would have cancer. I googled and discovered that most outcomes of "further breast assessment," will show normal breast changes or a benign breast condition.

There were sleepless nights when I would curl on my side in the foetal position, hunched over my lap-top, so that I would not disturb my husband. Leaping from forum to fact, to a medical research paper, would make time pass at an alarming rate. I read it all in the toxic blue light, which was strident and unforgiving and prevented me from being lulled into a sweet meditative sleep-state. In the early hours I would ask what is the percentage of women that survive breast cancer? Or I would just type 'breast cancer' or 'survival statistics for breast cancer after one year/five years/ten years. I went onto forums facilitated by breast cancer charities and would finally close my computer feeling lonely and scared.

I was fairly sure that I'd be OK, but a nagging anxiety sat with me through the long days and nights. My grandmother had died of breast cancer. I knew of other women who had died of breast cancer too. I wondered whether smoking one a day had finally caught up with me. I had been smoking since the age of 14. I started at boarding school: packs of us girls would squeeze into the freezing toilets to smoke. We shared the cheapest cigarettes and after a few hurried puffs we would stub them out on the wall of the loos, graffitied with slogans such as (Addison is a Bitch. Tracey Loves Ian and so on,) and then return at the next break to re light the stubs and share a drag each. We were bored, extremely bored, and we thought we were cool.

Finally, the day "of further tests" arrived and my husband drove me to our local hospital. A gathering of gaunt, ghostly men attached to drips were sitting in wheelchairs, outside the entrance, vigorously smoking. The shallow dark pond was stagnant, strewn with rubbish. I imagined rats came out at night to hunt for scraps.

I was called in for my appointment. I lay down to be scanned. The doctor, who was looking at the ultrasound screen, said that she could possibly detect something small and vague on my left breast but she couldn't be sure. I told her that it must be my right breast. Surely, it had to be my right breast where I usually felt tinges of activity. She replied that everyone always thought it was the opposite breast to one that was being examined. I wondered why but kept quiet.

She made a swift decision to do a biopsy. The nurse numbed the breast with antibiotic cream and then the doctor inserted a hollow needle in order to retrieve some sample cells. There was an alarming sound like the pulling of a gun without the bang. When I asked how many women would actually have breast cancer after going through a biopsy, she replied that 80% would not have breast cancer. But she also revealed that she had seen 10 women that day and I was the only one who'd had a biopsy.

I later learned that one in two people born since 1960 will develop cancer and one in seven will develop breast cancer. But thankfully breast cancer survival has doubled in the last forty years, and 99% of people with stage 1 breast cancer survive the five-year mark.

A good friend went through breast cancer four years ago. She was 40 when she was diagnosed and the treatment she endured brought on early menopause. She lost all her hair through chemotherapy, including her eyebrows and wore a wool beanie all through the winter and summer. She was in tears much of the time, and felt sick and tired.

She persuaded another friend and me to join her on a marathon walk, raising money for breast cancer charities. We trained through the winter but the 26.2-mile night walk through London, was agony, because I had an infected toe after a medical pedicure. I had to remind myself that I was walking for my friend, and for my granny and in some weird, superstitious way, I was attempting to stave off cancer by doing good (we managed to raise over £10,000).

Eight days after the biopsy, my husband and I were sitting, waiting for the result. We weren't sure who was going to tell us the news. The waiting had been hell. I had swung from thinking that I would be clear, to imagining the cancer could have spread to the bones, or the liver, or the blood. After a long wait, a nurse called us in to see a consultant breast surgeon.

He looked up briefly from a computer as we sat down. I knew it wouldn't be good news if we were seeing a consultant for the result, but it was still shocking to hear him say that I had a small, cancerous tumour. I began to cry. My husband looked grave and took my hand. The doctor didn't offer me a tissue from the box on his desk, which disturbed me.

He gave us a lot of information that was impossible to digest, which is why it is always good to have someone with you at times like these. I focused on the idea that I would possibly have to have chemotherapy if a certain test proved positive and obsessed about that for the next six weeks until the result came through. Surgery, radiotherapy and hormone therapy seemed bearable, but chemotherapy literally terrified me. Braver women than me have endured it, but I was scared of feeling ill, nauseous and tired for weeks at a time, and of losing my hair. It was recommended that I have surgery but also that I could choose to have mastectomy and lose my left breast forever. This seemed untenable. I couldn't imagine life without my left breast.

I later read in a letter to my GP that I had a 10mm in diameter tumour. The tumour was stage 1 but grade 2, which meant it was small but mid-range in terms of how fast it would grow. A sweet breast nurse explained that the

tumour had moved out of the milk ducts into the actual breast, and that I needed ‘breast conserving surgery,’ also known as a lumpectomy. The tumour would be removed and I would also have a sentinel lymph node operation, when lymph nodes are removed from under the arm to check whether the cancer has spread to the lymph glands). There would also be a course of radiotherapy and hormone treatment.

There was a huge amount of information to take in, far more than I have regaled here and after the appointment, I was wiped out with exhaustion. My 14-year-old daughter was away for the weekend, thankfully, because it would have been hard to function normally in front of her. I was like a sack of jelly, a lump on my sofa.

My husband took charge. He called a seaside hotel and booked a dog friendly room for the following night. It was a relief to know that we could temporarily get away. When my 17-year-old son arrived home, I told him that the test result was not good. He said how sorry he was in a very formal voice and left the room. I had to understand that it was his way of dealing with the news. He wanted to stay in London with his friends.

The hotel in Camber Sands was perfect, and we spent hours on the huge sandy beach with our dog. It happened to be one of the last sunny September weekends and it was a wonderful spoiling thing to do. After some thought, I decided to change hospitals and ask for the same female breast surgeon as a friend had been with. It was actually possible to do this, which seems remarkable considering that I am an NHS patient. Asking to be referred to a particular surgeon, brought back some control, to the otherwise out of control situation I had found myself in. I wanted a woman to deal with my left breast, or as it turned out a team of women.

My son revealed that he had been far more upset than he had let on, and I was very unsure about whether to tell my 14-year-old daughter, as I knew she would be desperately anxious. It was only when I received a wise email from a new friend in America, that I decided to. She said: *telling her is such an opportunity for her and for both of you to go through the tough news together. As hard and scary as it is, you will get to be there with her when she gets the scary news. And in witnessing you go through such a challenging time she will get to see what strength and dignity look like--that it's messy--but that you take care of yourself anyway, that you do the next right thing. Such a power of example.*

She was upset and tearful when I told her I had cancer in my left breast and wanted to be assured that I would be OK in the end. I told her I would be in my most confident voice, although I was still unsure whether the cancer had spread. It was a relief to be truthful with her, although I was so nervous that I weirdly giggled, which felt deeply inappropriate.

I began to tell my very best girlfriends, the ones I knew who would listen intelligently to me and be gentle. A few very good friends began checking in nearly every day. Two best girlfriends who are alternative therapists gave me complimentary treatments and I really felt blessed, nurtured and loved.

I was very held by my friends; they all came forward in their different ways. One friend gave me an "amulet" a small, silver key from the Vatican which I wore around my neck when I went to discover whether I needed chemotherapy. It brought luck, I am convinced of it and was the perfect gift.

The experience has also reminded me of how supportive and rock-like my husband is, which is an odd thing to say, but it was reassuring to know that he is always by my side, "for better and for worse, in sickness and in health"

My left breast is tender and bruised and it still has massive swelling from where a metal 'seed' was inserted just before the surgery (the seed is magnetic and used to find the tumour during the operation) but it caused a huge hematoma and my breast was black for about two months.

I had no idea that my left breast was smaller than my right until the lead surgeon told me when she was looking at me a week before surgery. She warned me that after surgery and radiotherapy the breast would be even smaller and a different shape. She added that there would be the opportunity to even out the breasts with further surgery or liposuction at some stage - however I don't think the left breast can take any more and nor can I.

When I look in the mirror my left breast is certainly diminished. My breasts are no longer symmetrical, but I prefer the size of the left now. A cup smaller, I guess, than the right one. It is still bruised and numb and puckered and it began to itch madly and peel after radiotherapy and would only be soothed by Aloe Vera gel. It is hard to think that it will one day be smooth and sexy and normal again. Perhaps it never will be?

The last four months have been a journey, with some strange twists and turns, the lowest points have been the interminable periods waiting for test results. There were frightening moments, particularly during the first few weeks, when I would call the “breast nurses” at the Marsden Hospital, because I was so fearful of chemotherapy and of finding out that perhaps the cancer had spread, that I could hardly breathe. I have been tearful, overwhelmed, and scared, but I have also been loved and supported.

The day surgery left me drugged up, sore and stunned, but I still managed to go to a friends’ opening night at an art gallery two nights later. I was fatigued after surgery, but three weeks later, when it was finally confirmed that chemotherapy was not needed, the world seemed light again.

There is so much help out there for women with breast cancer; however, I found the endless leaflets and books and forums scared me rather than comforted. Instead I chose to meditate, talk to friends, breathe and walk the dog. I was lucky as I had a deadline for a book, which kept me distracted when waiting for some results.

I have been told that breast cancer is not a “lifestyle” cancer, so I felt momentarily better about the smoking, but going forward, I feel I need to calm down generally, not sweat the small stuff and look after myself.

During my life, I have subjected my body to drugs, late nights, smoking, car crashes, broken limbs, two post-partum haemorrhages, and my mind to worry, stress and petty grievances. None, or all of these things could have caused cancer. In my new life, I want to meditate every day – not that I’ve managed that so far. I intend to do much more trusting and letting go and imagining things will turn out right in the end. I am so grateful to my friends and husband and kids and of course to the extraordinary NHS – how lucky we are that it exists. This is the up side, if there is going to be one.