Making The Breast of Things - Cancer, *Calendar Girls* and Me

FRIDAY 6th NOVEMBER 2009

To misquote Bogey: “Of all the roles in all the plays in all the West End to be playing when you’ve just been told you’ve got breast cancer, I had to be baring my chest in *Calendar Girls*” - a play about a topless charity calendar, inspired by the death of a Women’s Institute member’s husband from leukaemia. And to quote Harry Hill: “What are the chances of that happening?”

It’s half past three on a Friday afternoon, and my partner Michael and I are sitting in a hospital office with a blank-faced consultant, having just heard the sentence “I’m afraid it’s not good news. The lump is cancerous.”

My first thought is “In approximately five hours, I am supposed to be flashing my cancerous boob in front of a theatre full of people. They’re not going to chop it off straightaway, are they, cos I’ve got a show to do?!”

Michael and I look at each other, shock oozing from every pore. We weren’t expecting that. We REALLY weren’t expecting that, as every step of the way since I first had a leaky nipple back in August, we have heard things like "It's nothing, it's just nipple trauma," (What traumatised it? Did it suddenly and belatedly realise that it would never point upwards again or something?) "It's benign, it's a cyst" (From a nice doctor who had just had a quick feel of the lump that I had suddenly found in October, on the first day of rehearsals for *Calendar Girls*) and "I don't think Miss Chazen has anything to worry about" (from the consultant's secretary to my producer, who was trying very kindly to bring the appointment with the consultant forward.)

I find myself bleating "Are you sure you haven't mixed my results up with somebody else's?" The consultant looks at me pityingly and shakes his head. Right. I see. The ticking time bomb I've been secretly waiting for ever since my mother died of ovarian cancer in 1995 and my father died of leukaemia in 2002 has just exploded. Rather earlier than expected, but there we go. I've got The Big C – can't quite bring myself to name it completely yet. In fact, since our parents died, my sister and I have avoided any references to the word "cancer" at all, in case merely mentioning it brings it on. Even that ad for Big C Research popping up on the telly results in me putting my fingers in my ears and singing "la la la la la" at the top of my voice until it's over.

It seems so ridiculous, though – I feel so healthy and well and happy. I am almost NEVER ill. When a certain male friend of mine sneezes once, he cancels all appointments in his diary for the next two weeks; I have been known to go to work on a temperature of 103. I haven't even lost any weight, for God's sake. (Of course I haven't. I have never once been so ill or so depressed that I couldn't eat.) I have always prided myself on being as strong as an ox and as fit as a flea. Now, it seems, I am as strong as a flea and fit for very little.

Ever since I was a child, in times of stress or high drama, I have always imagined myself as a character in a film or a book. Some kids have imaginary friends. I had an imaginary film set that followed me around. I still do. Try as I might, I can't help seeing one of those big old movie cameras out the corner of my eye, you know, the ones with the two cans of film on top that look like Mickey Mouse's ears? I can hear the whirring noise it makes, and sometimes an orchestra plays a sweeping soundtrack in the background. And Cecil B. de Mille is standing next to it, encouraging me to give the performance of my life.

The role I am seeing myself in now is that of Cousin Helen in *What Katy Did*. When Katy falls off a swing and is bedridden from a bruised spine, only her disabled Cousin Helen is able to bring her out of her pain and sulky bitterness, by teaching her that cheerfulness, patience, hopefulness and making the best of things are far more fulfilling and more endearing to those around her than wallowing in self-pity. My late mother, lovely and kind as she was, was not a good patient. During her year-and-a half long illness, if ever the 'phone rang and I made the mistake of answering the caller with a "Yes, Mum's fine, thank you," she would call out "No, I'm not, I've got cancer." My late father, on the other hand, did not tell my sister and me he was ill until he could hide it no longer. We only had three weeks with him after that until he died. In the movie of MY life, I am determined to strike a balance between the two – to be cheerful, honest, never complain, inspire others with my *joie de vivre* and good humour and, most of all, survive to tell the tale.

A nurse sets us up with appointments for more tests the following week. I could have had them done then and there, but for one, I'm not ready for that, and secondly, as both Ethel Merman and Freddie Mercury agreed, the show must go on.

We leave the hospital in a daze. Michael and I hold onto each other for dear life – literally – and say to each other "Everything's going to be fine." "Of course it is," we both reply.

It's raining, fittingly. (My imaginary film set only works with the best imaginary set designers.) We hail a cab to the Noel Coward Theatre in Leicester Square and I prepare to make the most difficult call of my life. Telling my sister. I would rather do it face to face, but I know I won't be able to do that for a couple of days, and Michael persuades me to do it sooner rather than later. Proof that taxi drivers don't listen to the conversations going on the back of their cab is provided when our driver slides the partition across and offers a cheery "Did you see that Nick Griffin on *Question Time* the other day? I think he was treated very poorly."

We arrive at the theatre, where the ladies of the cast are assembled on stage to rehearse a change to a scene that wasn't quite working. Arabella Weir, Julie Goodyear, Kelly Brook, Janie Dee, Helen Lederer, Rosalind Knight and Kathryn Rooney all look up at me expectantly. They all know I've been to get the results of my biopsy, and are waiting to hear me say that everything is fine. "Ladies of the W.I.," I begin, stealing a line out of the play – how I wish I had a script in front of me right now – "the results are in from the Finnish Jury, and they're not good. Nul points, I'm afraid." Kelly, who lost her father to lung cancer a couple of years ago, starts to cry. Julie, who was told she only had two years to live after being diagnosed with cervical cancer twenty years ago, shakes her head in disbelief. Their shocked reactions make me want to cry, but I can't, for fear the floodgates will open and never close again. We all come together in a group hug, and I am overwhelmed by the kindness of relative strangers. After all, we have only known each other for less than a month. I wonder whether the same sort of response would take place in an actuary's office, or on a building site?

We have an hour to go until "the half", when it's time to get into costume and make-up, so we all go off to a café nearby, where I am plied with both mineral water (as of 3.30pm that afternoon, I am on a self-imposed no caffeine, sugar or processed foods diet) and questions as to my treatment, none of which I can answer yet. Arabella holds up her glass to be clinked, and in a rare fit of Jewishness, I say "You know, in the Jewish religion, when we drink we say "L'chaim", which means "To Life." " "L'chaim!"

they repeat, with heavy significance. “Look,” I say, “My biggest fear is that I’ll have to start doing those bloody 5k runs. And I’m really beginning to regret spending £130 on having my hair straightened if it’s all going to fall out from the chemo.”

Back in my dressing room, I perform my nightly routine of applying make-up to the big hole and bruise on my breast from the biopsy of a week before. A tiny, unwelcome, thought flits across my head that soon I may not have a breast there at all, but I banish it crossly by singing *Don’t Worry, Be Happy* to myself. Various dressers and theatre workers pop in throughout the half to tell me how sorry they are, and each and every one tells me of a mother, or an aunt, or a sister, or, in one case, NINE friends who had breast cancer and survived it. I keep saying to everybody (and to myself), “I’m going to be absolutely fine, you know.” “Of course you are,” they all reply.

Standing backstage, waiting to go on for the beginning of the play, we share another group hug and vow to do the show of our lives. The curtain rises. I project myself into my character, Ruth, more fully than ever before. Everyone’s performance seems heightened, shining, determined not to let the bastards get us down.

At the end of Act One is the scene where the ladies of the W.I. remove their clothes and have their photos taken for the charity calendar. Now, I never thought in a million years that someone like me (a “character” actress, i.e. short and fat) would ever be called upon to remove her clothes for a part. I think I was so surprised that anyone had asked me to do so that I accepted the part without hesitation, not really thinking of the repercussions of actually having to take my clothes off. The first time we did the scene in rehearsals, in a drafty and neon-lit rehearsal space near Southwark with wall to wall mirrors, it was obviously somewhat nerve-wracking, but listening to the other ladies complain about their cellulite or their saggy bits - in my eyes, all tiny imperfections that just made them normal - made me realise that *all* women have body issues. Somehow, though, being a fat bird, there is so much wrong with my body that it's kind of pointless worrying about the way it looks. I don't *have* cellulite, I *am* cellulite. *My* saggy bits have their own postcode. Besides, when Kelly Brook is in the room naked, one will never win that particular beauty competition, no matter how good one looks.

It's a cliche, but it really is liberating to get one's kit off on stage. I don't think I would ever be able to wander around in a play for several minutes with no clothes on, and I would never want to do it on film so that the evidence would be around forever, but in *Calendar Girls* the actual moment of nudity lasts a split second. And each of us is tastefully hidden behind typical W.I. objects such a tea kettle or slightly too small buns or knitting, so really the audience can't see much at all.
My own calendar pose has me standing behind a gingham cloth-covered table laden with craftily placed bowls of oranges and marmalade jars, holding a wooden spoon over each breast (I noted with amusement that after that first rehearsal the kitchen spoons were quietly replaced by industrial-sized ones.) My character, Ruth, is the one person in the group who really does not want to take part in the calendar, so I decided that as she eventually changes her mind and turns up to the photo shoot after all she must be rip-roaring drunk. I have a line straight after my nude photograph has been snapped: "I DID IT!" As a joke in rehearsals I lifted my spoons at that moment in drunken victory before quickly replacing them as realisation dawns. I have now been hoisted on my own petard, however, as the director (during several telephone conversations during the course of a weekend) has somehow managed to persuade me to keep it in. So all those poor sods who bought a ticket thinking they were going to see Kelly Brook in the nuddy are in for one helluva surprise.

Tonight, as I reach the point where I am supposed to momentarily reveal all, the devil in me takes over, and I find myself lifting the spoons high in the air and then jumping up and down for several seconds, my good boob and my naughty boob bouncing in unison like the balls in a children's soft play area. The cast and the audience erupt, the latter little knowing the reason behind my Masai dance. “FUCK YOU, CANCER!” I shout as the curtain comes down, flicking V-signs in the air. “FUCK YOU, CANCER!” repeat the ladies of the W.I.

Michael is there waiting for me in my dressing room after the show – he would have been there all night, except he realised half way through that in a cruel twist of fate his house keys had fallen out of his pocket at the hospital, and he had had to go back to retrieve them. As we enter the tube to go home, we pass a homeless man sitting on the cold ground. “There’s always someone worse off than me,” I think to myself. At least I have a home, and a job that I love, and a boyfriend whom I adore and who adores me, and fantastic family and friends – with all that love and support, I WILL GET THROUGH THIS.

SATURDAY 7th NOVEMBER

Neither of us slept well last night. And we both wake up to the cold, grey dawn of reality. As we start to make breakfast, Michael says, “You’ve got to get better, I can’t look after myself.” This is true. I may not have children to worry about, but unless I force Michael to eat Oatiflakes with berries and organic natural yoghurt in the morning, he would happily fill his face with crisps and peanut butter. And suddenly, there in the kitchen, we’re both sobbing the tears that we haven’t been able to shed until now. It’s a very cathartic release for both of us.

Michael has long called me Pollyanna for my sometimes irritating ability to look on the bright side of everything, but I’m thinking I may need a little extra help at the moment. A couple of months ago, a friend introduced me to a book and a film of the book called *The Secret*. It’s terribly American, if you get my drift, but it’s all about the power of positive thinking. There is a chapter in the book entitled “The Secret to Health”, and Michael and I sit down and read it out loud. It’s full of good advice, and stories of miraculous healing from incurable disease, merely through the power of the mind. Okay, so it's Positive Mental Attitude a go-go.

Michael and I need to be together as much as possible today, so he takes the day off work and comes with me to the theatre. While I am on stage, he plans to go to a number of local esoteric shops; Michael is a gifted psychic, and he wants to buy me a talisman and some healing crystals.

We arrive at my dressing room to find a sweet card from Kelly, a bottle of bubbly and a note from Julie and some helpful information downloaded from the internet by Helen Lederer and her GP husband. Carl Prekopp, who plays the photographer Lawrence, knocks on the door and presents me with a hug and a stuffed bunny (one of my costumes in the show is a homemade rabbit outfit.) Janie, who's studying Reflexology, comes to say hello and offers to work on my feet any time I like. All these things are gratefully received – people are so kind.

After the hysteria and solidarity of yesterday's performance, the reality of my situation begins to hit me, and over the course of the matinee every reference to cancer and death in the play (and there are many of them) lands on me like a hammer blow. Although I present Pollyanna on the outside, my over-active imagination starts going into overdrive. By the end of the show, I have seen myself with a bald chemotherapy head like the character John's in the play, been wheeled around mentally in his wheelchair, made an incredibly moving dying speech like him to all my family and friends, and had a wing of a hospital named in my memory, just like he did.

In between shows, the Company Manager brings round a T-Shirt for the cast to sign, to be auctioned off for Children with Leukaemia. This puts things into perspective rather. Last week, I was dreading turning 40 in a couple of years time; now, I'd be grateful to get that old.

The truth is, I am not scared of dying. If there is a world beyond this one, then it's the start of a different adventure, one where I will see my beloved parents again. Maybe it's destination heaven, in which case, excellent – no more credit crunch, global warming, war, famine and reality T.V. I might be re-incarnated, and have the chance to do it all over again (as a tall thin person if there is any justice.) Or if the only thing that happens is we just drift into a dreamless sleep and never wake up, then I'll never know I'm gone. It's the people we leave behind who fear our death the most, as they have to go on living without us. No, the only thing I'm scared of is not having lived enough.

I have had a mostly great, lucky, blessed life so far. Incredibly happy childhood, a wonderful family, fantastic friends, excellent education, great career, gorgeous flat, amazing holidays, the best boyfriend in the world and a Skoda Fabia. Like most lives, it's been a rollercoaster of highs and lows, and apart from a six-month driving ban for speeding, non, je ne regrette rien. What right have I to rage against the dying of the light when there are children in the world starving to death every minute of every day?

Of course, I'm being terribly self-indulgent – breast cancer is apparently not necessarily a fatal disease these days. I need to give myself a stiff talking to. Drama queen.

SUNDAY 8th NOVEMBER

Today is Remembrance Day. Michael and I lie curled up in bed together listening to the two minute silence on the radio (if that's not an oxymoron) and once again, things are put into perspective.

My friend Helen-from-the-play's GP husband Chris calls at her behest to see how I'm doing and answer any questions I may have. (I don't have the heart to tell them that, being Jewish, I will never be stuck for help from doctors. Or lawyers.) He is terribly gentle and kind, and very re-assuring. He makes me realise something: to my sister and I, a hospital is the place where our parents went to die; Dr Chris reminds me that actually a hospital is supposed to be where people go to get better.

We spend Sunday afternoon with Michael's family, who have always treated me as one of their own, then have dinner with my sister and her Rabbi husband. This is the first time I've seen her since I told her the news. Luckily, the presence of my nephews, who are too young to be burdened with such information, ensures that the evening remains, superficially at least, upbeat. As we say goodbye at the end of the night, my brother-in-law (who gives great hug), tells me that he will have a word with God and tell Him to look after me. "Yeah, I'm a bit cross with God at the moment," I (half) joke, "He hasn't done that well by my family at all!"

MONDAY 9th NOVEMBER

As Michael has had to go to work today, I am left alone for the first time since Friday. My plan is to start writing this diary – writing about it really helps to focus my mind – and numb my brain with funny things on T.V.

I watch several episodes each of *Frasier, Seinfeld, Everybody Loves Raymond* and *Fawlty Towers* and force myself to laugh uproariously at every gag, even though there's a big black cloud hovering menacingly just within my peripheral vision. A friend said recently that the worst thing about having cancer is knowing you have it. I completely understand what she meant – it's all consuming, however hard you try to ignore it.

When Michael gets home that evening, he takes me through a Native-American ritual, which involves burning some herbs, wearing a charm round my neck and offering up an incantation to the North, South, East and West.

Oh, I know what you're thinking. NUTTER ALERT, SOMEONE SEND FOR HELP! If you knew Michael, you'd know he is far from being the woo-woo variety of psychic. He is very grounded and pragmatic, and has helped so many people with his sensible advice and caring attitude. I know that he needs to do this for me, and the whole ritual is actually very calming and comforting. He puts his perennially furnace-hot hands on my face and asks for strength and healing from the universe. Now, I am pretty atheistic when it comes to most things religious, but I do believe in the power of the mind and the energy of the universe and that with love and positivity anything can happen. Surely, in the circumstances, a bit of nuttiness can be forgiven?

TUESDAY 10th NOVEMBER

My sister Lynette and I meet at 12 to go for a swim. Ordinarily, we meet weekly for a long, lazy lunch, but those days are over. My body is forthwith my temple (one of those huge ones in the Far East, some might observe) and swimming will do it far better than the local Chinese all-you-can-eat buffet.

There's a large, heated pool at the Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital in Stanmore that has public swimming sessions. I know I'm using the phrase "puts things into perspective" rather a lot, but seeing a group of carers push waterproof wheelchairs down the ramp into the water, and people of all ages with varying degrees of mental and physical disabilities splashing around in delight – well, it really is a great leveller. I am reminded of a video I have seen on YouTube that shows the relative sizes of stars in the universe. The largest one known to astronomers is called VY Canis Majoris, the Red Hypergiant. Our Earth is the size of a pinprick by comparison. And VY Canis Majoris, the video says, is only a tiny dot amongst the several hundred billion stars forming our galaxy, which is one of a hundred billion galaxies out there. Note to self: YOU ARE NOT THE CENTRE OF THE UNIVERSE!

Despite my bravura, my over-active imagination starts playing up again today. I think it's because tomorrow I am having the MRI scan done, which will tell us if there's any other lumps in my breasts, and I'm not exactly looking forward to it. By the end of the show that night, every twinge and bodily function has become significant. A short bout of hiccups is obviously a sign of stomach cancer. A frog in my throat is probably emphysema (even though I don't smoke.) A slight and brief headache points to a possible brain tumour. My wee smells distinctly odd (I've forgotten about the asparagus I ate for lunch) and my tongue seems bigger in my mouth. Much to my annoyance, as I have never had time for hypochondria in myself or others, Pollyanna steadily gives way to Cassandra, and by the time I reach home I'm convinced I may not make it through the night. Michael opens the front door to me and the mere sight of him brings forth racking sobs. We have a cuddle and a chat about things, and, as always, he soon makes me feel better. I'm so lucky to have his love and support – how different things would be without it.

WEDNESDAY 11th NOVEMBER

I dreamt last night that I was going on a long journey that I wasn't packed and ready for. It doesn't take Mr Freud to work *that* one out. Come on subconscious, at least put some effort in.

My sister Lynette comes to pick us up in a taxi at 8 o'clock. As it's half term, the usual traffic is non-existent, and we make it to the hospital half an hour early.

We sit and wait in the MRI department. A nurse comes along and tells me to change into an unflattering open-backed gown, which, when standing, leaves nothing to the imagination. Sitting next to us along the endless corridor is an Israeli man and a lady who is clearly a translator hired by the hospital. "What have I seen you in?" the translator asks me, prodding me in the shoulder. "I don't know, what kind of stuff do you watch?" I ask politely. This sort of thing is an occupational hazard, but you'd think that sitting half naked in a hospital wouldn't be the time. She is not satisfied until I have given her my full CV, and, mystery eventually solved, she goes back to her client.

The nurse returns and tells me that there is some debate as to whether I will actually fit in the MRI machine. I laugh, but God, how humiliating. The staff have probably all taken bets. So we go down the corridor to test it out. I lie face down on the table, my boobs dangling below into pockets, and my arms pointing forwards past my head. Slowly, the nurse slides the table into the tube. All is well until we're up to my big fat bum, which scrapes along the roof. I hold my breath. My buttocks may well resemble a couple of space hoppers, but luckily they're very squashy, and the nurse decides we're good to go. She slides me out again and a canula is stuck into my wrist, through which the iodine dye will travel along my veins. I have never been good with needles - but I suppose I had better start getting used to them now.

Back onto the table I go. There is no hole for my face to poke through, like with some massage tables, so I move my head from side to side on the pillow, trying to find a channel of air for my nostrils to use for the next twenty minutes. The nurse lays a blanket over my lower half, and in a flurry of panic, I ask her not to cover my feet. Even in winter, I always keep my feet outside the duvet. No idea why. Maybe they're claustrophobic. Luckily, the rest of me isn't, as the MRI machine is tight and dark and narrow and I'm not allowed to move at all for the duration of the scan. I hope my poor sister never has to go through this, I think to myself – she's terribly claustrophobic after being trapped in a lift a few years ago.

I concentrate on regulating my breathing, each intake of breath forcing my voluminous bottom harder against the roof. I pretend that I am having a bottom massage and choose to find it relaxing instead of constricting. The nurse places headphones over my ears, then retires to the safety of the adjoining room beyond the glass wall, and speaks to me through a microphone. “Now, Miss Chazen, you are going to hear some very loud noises,” (hence the headphones) “Are you ready?”

I had planned to sing my way through the complete first half of *Les Miserables* to pass the time, but even with the headphones on, the noises are deafening. Instead, I force myself to allot a scenario to each series of clanks, buzzes, clatterings and gunshots: a man in a panama hat mows his lawn on a hot, lazy summer day; a group of cheeky workmen are pneumatic drilling a road and they wolf whistle my infamous bottom as I walk past; a roomful of secretaries are hard at work in a 1950’s typing pool – the boss winks at one of them, and I wonder if they’re having an affair; one minute I’m hiding behind saloon doors, listening to a shoot-out in the Wild West, the next I’m a fighter pilot, soaring through a cloudless sky. Another rhythm sends me to a beach in Ibiza, where I’m dancing to *Born Slippy* by Underworld. Then the noises change again, and I’m back on our working holiday in Zagreb last year, where during a filming break Michael and I went to see an exhibition on Nikola Tesla, and watched a display of electromagnetic experiments.

Just as I’m wondering how long I’ve been in for, I hear the nurse say “Just three minutes left now, you’re doing ever so well.” Of course, these last three minutes take hours. The sound becomes a loud drumming, and I find myself humming *Singin’ in the Rain* to myself. Just as I get to the end bit where Gene Kelly hands his umbrella to a passer-by, the noises stop and it’s all over. If this is the worst thing that happens to me throughout all of this, I say to myself, I’ll be O.K., a mantra I’ve repeated at every stage.

I feel so well that I go off to the theatre and do the two shows – I am determined not to give this cancer stuff the attention it craves.

THURSDAY 12th NOVEMBER

Our meeting with the Consultant is scheduled for 9am. Lynette phones us in a panic to say she's stuck in traffic and will meet us there, but we needn't have worried – we're not seen 'til gone midday. The Breast Clinic is only open on a Thursday, and on this one day a week the doctor has to see the many women who have been referred by their GP, or are waiting for a mammogram, or need an ultrasound, or are waiting for results like us. There are so many people in the not even small waiting room that there is overspill into the corridor outside and there aren't enough chairs for everybody. The NHS is a fine and commendable institution, but it is clearly massively understaffed and underfunded. Three anxious hours tick by, during which I become convinced once more that the end is nigh, until at very long last we are called in to see the consultant, Mr K.

It's a small room, and with us three, Mr K, another doctor and a nice, smiley nurse packed into it, it seems smaller still. "Hello darling, how is your show going?" asks Mr K, "I have been so worried about you!" This personal approach is instantly reassuring, and as Michael says later, makes us feel like we have made a real connection with this man, in whose hands my future lies. I had thought that at this meeting we would be told the results of the MRI scan and given a "treatment package" (like a "holiday package" but with less need for a bikini wax, I imagine), but it turns out that this is not so. It's actually a bit of a waste of time, as all that happens is that we are told to come back tomorrow for a biopsy on the second lump on the other side of the same breast and a lymph test, to check whether the cancer has spread to these locations.

As we leave the Breast Clinic, the nice, smiley nurse hands me a folder full of useful information about breast cancer. I know even as she is handing it over that I won't be opening it for a while. It's funny, usually I am the Queen of Google. I have diagnosed various friends and relatives merely by typing in their symptoms, but I have so far been unable to download any info on my own breast cancer. Perhaps I should rename myself

Queen of Ostriches, if I can get my head out of the sand for long enough.

The anxiety of this morning's long wait has left me exhausted, and Michael makes me call the theatre and tell them I can't come in for the matinee. I feel terrible – this is the first time ever that I've missed a performance of anything. But I know that they are prepared for this eventuality, with a lovely actress called Julia Hills, who played my part of Ruth in the original cast, standing by daily.

After a reviving sleep, I feel much better, so it's off to work I go. The cast assure me they've missed me, and it feels good to be back. One of the original Calendar Girls is in the audience tonight, and we all gather in Janie's dressing room after the show to meet her. She comes straight over to me, gives me a big hug and says, "I've heard all about you - I'm so sorry, sweetheart. I know you'll be just fine." It was the death of this lovely lady's first husband from leukaemia that inspired the Calendar Girls charity calendar in the first place, and I find her words very moving. The calendar has raised two million pounds for leukaemia research so far, and it is an honour and a privilege to meet such an extraordinary woman.

FRIDAY 13th NOVEMBER

If I hadn't asked the taxi driver for a receipt when we got to the hospital this morning, I'd never have known it was Friday 13th. Brilliant. Why not push me under a ladder and give me a mirror to smash while you're at it? My late mother had this odd superstition that you must touch your collar whenever you see an ambulance. As you can imagine, the hospital is a minefield, especially today.

There's no queue at the Breast Clinic today, thankfully, so I go straight in for my biopsies. A charming Irish doctor with a lovely lilt to his voice and a naughty twinkle to his eye tells me to undress to the waist and lie on the bed, while a pretty

Australian nurse sits next to me, hugging my knees and calling me Debb-o, which makes me smile. We chat about the weather, what we watched on telly last night, how hot the room is and suchlike, and I am almost (but not) distracted from the enormous needle that is approaching my left bosom. Thanks to a local anaesthetic, I can’t feel a thing, but it makes the most horrible stapling noise. The biopsy I had a couple of weeks ago was my first ever surgical procedure, and it felt rather weird knowing that something had been removed from my body, albeit a piece of cancerous lump that has no right to be there in the first place. This time, I am an old hand, and the whole thing is over in minutes without too much aggro.

This afternoon I have to tell my auntie and uncle and my two cousins, their daughters. I have put this off so far because as a family we have been through so much: my aunt has lost her beloved sister, my mother; one cousin had a stroke at the age of 36 and the other has survived breast cancer twice. But my sister is finding it hard not to tell them, so I force myself to pick up the phone.

My auntie and uncle take the news surprisingly well, considering – I suppose they’re used to bad news by now. I phone my older cousin, who had a double mastectomy and lymphectomy fifteen years ago and is completely fine today and she welcomes me into the club. Then I call my other cousin, the one whose stroke cut short a promising acting career. I feel humbled by the way they have both dealt with their own huge life-changing experiences, and am determined that like both of them – and Gloria Gaynor – I will survive.

After the heaviness of these three conversations, an email from my friend Liza comes as welcome light relief:

> Now look here. I'd like a quick but very firm word with your left bosom....
>
> Ok? Listening hard? Don't you think you're getting enough attention as it is without pulling a petty-minded stunt like this? Hmm? Sit up straight and look at me when I'm talking. For goodness' sake, you're the toast of the West End, you've made your partner and yourself into a pair of gay icons, and STILL you have to grab at more, more, more me,

me, me. Enough, ok? Pull yourself together, spit that thing out and learn to share. It's not fair.

SATURDAY 14th NOVEMBER

I have always felt too guilty about not doing my own cleaning to ever get a cleaner in, especially as it only takes a couple of hours a week, but recent events have led me to realise that life is too short for housework. Liyuba, our brand new Russian cleaning lady, is in the kitchen as I type. She is cleaning surfaces I never knew we had. Where has she been all our lives?!

I leave her to it and set off for the matinee on the tube. It’s packed, and there’s standing room only. I wonder idly if I could get a tee-shirt made, imprinted with “I have cancer. Give me your seat.” Oh God, I’m turning into my mother!

David Tennant, whom I met while filming *Doctor Who* and who is a mutual friend of Arabella from the cast is in to see the evening show with his girlfriend Georgia, and the plan is to go to Soho House afterwards. It’s been quite an exhausting week all told, and I am tempted to make my excuses and go straight home to bed, but then it occurs to me that in a couple of weeks time my social life may be forcibly curtailed for whatever reason and that I should live it up while I can. We laugh into the small hours, and it proves to be just the tonic I needed.

THURSDAY 19th NOVEMBER

The whole week has been leading up to this day, and our next appointment with the consultant, Mr K. Once again, we have a couple of hours wait, but this time we’ve come prepared and have magazines and newspapers to help the hours pass. Eventually, the nice, smiley nurse from last week calls us in to the consulting room. The MRI scan, lump and lymph biopsies show that the second lump IS cancerous and that the cancer HAS spread to the lymph glands. Somehow, although this is obviously not good news, it is what I expected to hear, so it does not worry me too much. However, it does mean that I now have to have a CT scan and a bone scan early next week, to determine whether the cancer has spread anywhere else. Mr K says there is no reason to believe that this is the case, and that these tests are purely routine, but until they have the results of both scans, they can't tell us what the treatment might be. So, another week of waiting. This is beginning to drive me mad.

Michael and I decide to treat ourselves to an afternoon at the movies to try to take our mind off things. We decide on the Pixar animation *Up*. BIG mistake. Huge. The film is all about an old man whose wife, the love of his life, dies of an illness that is almost definitely cartoon cancer. We spend an hour and a half sobbing into our 3D glasses, and, thanks to my new cancer bloody diet, I don't even have Ben and Jerry for comfort. Next time, we'll take a daytrip to a funeral parlour.

I have found it very difficult to tell friends the truth about what is going on. So far, I have only told our families, and those who have asked questions about a future about which I am unsure. For example, I have had to tell people who want to come and see me in *Calendar Girls*, as I don't want them booking tickets too far in advance in case I have to bow out of the play soon. I've also been unable to lie to those I've seen in person. I suppose I am really just waiting for the full picture to emerge next Thursday, so I can answer the inevitable questions there and then.

And even then, I'm not sure how to tell people. I suppose a change to my facebook status is out of the question? **Debbie...has cancer**. How about a text: **`Soz 2 tell u all, m8s, ive gt big C :-(`** Or perhaps I should just announce it on Twitter and let Re-tweets spread the word? I've realised I can't open conversations with "I've got some news," as that led more than one person to think Michael and I were finally getting hitched. We went round to a friend's house the other night and for a second I seriously considered saying "Hello! It's your cancerous friend here!" into the entry phone.

FRIDAY 20th NOVEMBER

Michael's sister has given me a book to read, *Love, Medicine and Miracles* by an American surgeon called Bernie Siegel. It's fascinating. Siegel maintains that cancer is a state of mind, something I have long believed myself. I'm only on Chapter One, but his advice so far is for patients to hug their doctor, to force him or her to recognise you as a person and not a statistic. Poor Mr K does not know what is about to hit him.

SUNDAY 21st NOVEMBER

I have been invited to attend a *Doctor Who* convention today at the Birmingham NEC, to sign autographs and have my photo taken with fans of the show (I appeared as Foon Van Hoff from the planet Sto in the Christmas Special 2007.) A few weeks ago, Michael would have taken advantage of my abscence to watch footie on the telly and pretend to blow up monsters on his playstation, but these days we can't bear to be apart.

So off we go up the M1 at 8 o'clock in the morning, choons banging out on the radio and a selection of silly car games at the ready. It's a long day, and my cheeks ache at the end of it from all the smiling for photos, but for a few short hours I manage to forget about the bad business in my left titty. One whole day of feeling normal. Until I get home that night and switch on my mobile, listen to the landline answerphone and check my emails and find several messages from concerned family and friends. Bang, I've got cancer again. Each message feels like another nail in my coffin. Words have so much power, you see. "Let's hope they've caught it early" leaves room for "They might not have caught it early". "You must be feeling very scared" *makes* me feel very scared. "Why didn't they know you had cancer when you had a leaky nipple?" reminds me how long this bloody disease has been hanging around, waiting to pounce. "You must get a second opinion" (even though I haven't had a first one yet) implies that I must start from a position of mistrust of the very man who might save my life. But I am being ungrateful and churlish. You're lucky to have so many people around you who care, young lady.

TUESDAY 24th NOVEMBER

We rise early, ready for a fun-packed day of scans back at the hospital. I start by having an injection of radioactive liquid into my right hand. For some reason, I find this the most upsetting procedure I've had so far, possibly because for the next six hours I am dangerous to children and animals and must use a special toilet in the Nuclear Medicine ward. Will I develop three eyes, like the fish in *The Simpsons*? Michael calls me Spiderman for the rest of the day, but as yet I have no discernable superpowers. Unless you count my uncanny ability to tell what snack Michael has eaten on the way home from work just by kissing him, but I've always been able to do that.

While the radioactive liquid starts its four-hour journey around my body, I'm off to have a CT scan. I have to drink a pint of water, then a canula is inserted into my left hand (I'm practically a pincushion.) The nurse asks my permission to tap my veins to make them stand out – apparently, if she doesn't ask, it could be construed as patient abuse. Seriously. Iodine is pumped into me, and the scan begins. It only takes a few minutes and is over before I've sung my way through the whole of *Bohemian Rhapsody*.

Then it's off for some food (we've never been able to eat breakfast on a hospital day) and a couple of hours to kill before I have to return for the second part of the radioactive bone scan. As I have to lie still, flat on my back, for twenty minutes, it is considerably more uncomfortable than the CT scan. My hands and feet are strapped into position, and I am told to turn my head to one side. Unthinkingly, I turn my head to the right, from where I have a perfect view of a large wall clock. And you know the saying: a watched large wall clock never boils. The bone scanner makes a loud whooshing noise throughout, so I transport myself to a beautiful beach, the whooshing becoming the sound of the waves lapping on the shore. My naughty boyfriend has buried me up to the neck in cool sand – that takes care of my bound hands and feet. After several weeks, the second hand reaches the twenty minute mark, and I am free to go. Again, as we head home, I repeat my mantra to myself: "If this is the worst thing I have to go through, I'll be OK."

That night, we make dinner together, and Michael accidentally spills a load of round black peppercorns into the mash. "Look!" I joke, as I pick them out with a spoon, "I'm giving this mash a lumpectomy." "Well," counters Michael, "You've got to see the tumerous side." "Yes," I reply, "We must make the breast of things, I'm lymphatic about that." Thank God we still have our sense of humour.

WEDNESDAY 25th NOVEMBER

Kathryn and Kelly from the cast ask to feel my lump today, so they know what to look out for in their own breasts. So during the matinee, in the quick change area backstage, as we're all stripping off ready for the calendar shoot scene, I let them feel me up. "Ooh, it's big, isn't it?" says Kelly, clearly impressed. "Come on, Kelly Brook, fair's fair," I tell her. "Let's have a go on yours then." I give her a cheeky tweak, in the full knowledge that for that brief moment in time I am the envy of men and lesbians everywhere. (They really are magnificent, by the way.)

THURSDAY 26th NOVEMBER

Patient to Doctor: So, Doctor? What's the prognosis?
Doctor to Patient: Well, the bad news is you've got 24 hours to live. The good news is Mr Cohen in the bed next to yours wants to buy your slippers.

So this is it, folks. After three weeks of proddings, pokings, injections and scans, the agonising wait for the outcome of all the tests is over. It's been even worse than waiting for A' Level results.

Following the advice of surgeon Bernie Siegel, author of *Love, Medicine and Miracles*, I ignore Mr K's outstretched hand as he welcomes Michael, Lynette and me into the consultation room and instead embrace him fondly round the neck. He almost flattens himsef against the wall in terror. Never mind, I'll work on him - til he's putty in my hands.

"We have had a look at all the tests and scans you've had," says Mr K, spinning it out like Davina McCall on eviction night, "and there is no evidence that the cancer has spread beyond the lymph on that side." The relief is overwhelming, the feeling euphoric. This was all of our greatest fear, and it feels like a reprieve. (I even found myself buying a small size contact lens solution last week, in case I didn't have any need for the larger bottle.) However, as I secretly expected, I need to have a full mastectomy and lymphectomy on the left side, followed by a course of chemo and/or radiotherapy, depending on what kind of tumour they've removed. "Fine," I joke, despite my sister's raised eyebrows, "I've never liked my left boobie anyway, it's always looking at me funny." The thing is, I've always felt terribly sorry for doctors, especially those dealing with cancer patients. It can't be a barrel of laughs. So if I can brighten their day in my own small way, I'm sure they'd appreciate it. We had heard that it is possible to have reconstructive surgery done at the same time as the mastectomy, but apparently in my case it's not advisable as it will prevent the radiotherapy from working properly. Once I am in remission, we can discuss breast reconstruction. I do hope they do BOGOF on boob jobs; it would be awful to have one brand new perky one and one old droopy one.

The operation is scheduled for ten days time, and we are sent off into another room (more a storage cupboard, really) with nurse

Trish, who takes us through all the fine details. According to Trish, breast surgery is usually relatively painless, as it's not an internal operation. She has mislaid the photos of mastectomy scars (thankfully), but she does show us the vacuum bottles that I will be hooked up to after the op which will drain all the gunk seeping from the wound (ew ew ew) and a natty drawstring bag to keep them in. She also lets us have a feel of a couple of prothseses (uncooked chicken fillets) and shows us the mastectomy bra I will have to wear (deeply unsexy).

In the car home, I ask Michael "Will you still love me when I only have one boobie?" "I'll just have to love the other one more," he replies. "Will you still love me if I have one boobie and no hair?" "Absolutely, darling." "Will you still love me if I have one boobie, no hair and no teeth?" "No problem." "Will you still love me if I have one boobie, no hair, no teeth and a hump?" "Of course, Quasimodo." "Will you still love me if I have one boobie, no hair, no teeth, a hump, halitosis, one eye and an extra leg?" "Now you're pushing it," he says, then he gets on his mobile and sets about changing his facebook status to **Michael...is feeling a right tit. Well, beggars can't be choosers.**

Cheeky sod.

FRIDAY 27th NOVEMBER

One of the worst things about all this cancer nonsense is that my days of flashing both boobies on the West End stage in *Calendar Girls* are numbered, with only another eleven performances left before I have the op. I feel so lucky to have been part of the show, and am glad that my left boobie especially got to know the thrill of an audience before it gets lopped off and sent to that mound of wobbly bosoms in the sky. The producers have been absolutely amazing, and have promised me a job on the touring production when I have recuperated, and the cast have provided endless support and laughs and shoulders to cry on when necessary.

As happened with my blasé attitude to the original diagnosis, my cavalierness towards the mastectomy catches up with me during the show today. In the last scene, my costume is a particularly low-cut frock which shows off my ample and magnificent cleavage, if I may say so myself. I glance down, and there they both are: the twins, heaving in all their glory. Until such time as I have reconstructive surgery, I shall have to wear polo necks and scarves. Also, I have always been rather fond of the beauty spot on my left breast, and the thought of losing this tiny spot of pigmentation upsets me more than losing the entire appendage. Perhaps Mr K will let me have it after the op, then I can stick it onto the right boob with superglue?

MONDAY 30th NOVEMBER

If you ever want to feel really popular, either have a birthday on facebook, or develop a serious illness. After much debate, and a short survey of all the people we have told so far, I'm afraid I opted for a group email to tell those who don't yet know my situation. A few seconds later, the phone calls and email replies start flooding in. I am so touched, and so grateful for the love of my friends and family. Most offer sympathy and support and help in any way I might need it. Some console me by noting that I could now become an Amazonian archer – they used to cut off one of their breasts to make their aim better. One, the writer of *The Smoking Room*, is more irreverant: `On a slightly sick note - and hopefully just to make you laugh - we won't get any TittyGoneGone headlines will we?`

TUESDAY 1st DECEMBER

I have just returned from having my Pre-Assessment. I had various things including my blood pressure and heart fitness measured (all AOK) and was then tested for MRSA. By swabbing my perineum. No, that's not the bit between your nose and your top lip, as I found out when I presented my face. That's the bit between your front and back bottoms. Just so you know.

Today I must get on with making a will. Not to be morbid or anything, but it's a sensible sort of thing that all grown-ups should do. Apparently. My lawyer takes me through all the things I should take into consideration, and everything seems pretty straightforward. After all, my assets (which up until my op in a week's time used to mean my cleavage) don't amount to much more than the house and the car, both of which are also in Michael's name anyway. What proves harder to decide upon is what will happen to my body after death.

In the event that I *don't* regenerate like Doctor Who, what *is* to become of this short, round flesh suit I've been walking around in? The Jewish way (and that favoured by my family) is burial in a consecrated cemetry. Michael prefers the idea of cremation on ecological grounds. Personally, having been a cultural rather than religious Jew all my life, who only attends synagogue when there's absolutely no getting out of it, I would feel rather hypocritical suddenly being more Jewish in death than in life. On the other hand, cremation would upset my sister, who actually screamed and put the phone down on me when I suggested it. What I would *really* like, and this may just be something they made up for the Smirnoff Vodka ads, is to be made into a diamond! How cool would that be?! Michael says he would wear me in his ear, but I tell him I would rather be worn as a Prince Albert, so that if he were ever to think of having another partner, I would still be able to come between them.

SATURDAY 5th DECEMBER

This has been my last week on the show, as I am leaving four and a half months earlier than planned after tonight's performance, ready to go into hospital on Tuesday. Friends and family have been in the audience at every show, and I haven't really had a minute to think about anything.

I'd been fine all week, until yesterday, when, during a five-minute break backstage between scenes, I suddenly found myself thinking "I *don't* want to leave. I *don't* want to have an operation. I *don't* want to have my boobie cut off and I *don't* want to go bald. I'd much rather stay here and do two shows a day til after the New Year and then go somewhere nice on holiday, thank you very much." Helen makes the mistake of asking me if I'm all right, and her kindness tips me over the edge. I burst into horrible, breathless, gulping sobs all over the poor woman. I hate crying in front of people. She holds my hand and very calmly and gently talks me down from the ledge, telling me everything's going to be all right and assuring me that I will be just fine. I am soon quietened, just in time to hear my cue to go on stage for the calendar shoot scene. As always, the audience claps and cheers and there is uproar at the no doubt ridiculous sight of a half naked fat bird with massive bazongas jumping up and down in gay abandon, and my spirits soar. Laughter really is the best medicine.

So, it's now Saturday night and my last show, and, to avoid repetition of yesterday's bad behaviour, I have chosen not to get all maudlin and sad about leaving, but instead to enjoy every single minute. And I do. I have a veritable coach party of friends and family in tonight (literally – my Uncle Mel has come down from Liverpool to be here), scattered around the theatre in the few seats that were left at short notice. As I turn upstage amid gales of laughter to get my coat back on after I've bared my right and soon-to-be-historic left boobies for the last time ever, I whisper to Kathryn "I bet there are fourteen people out there in floods of tears right now!" I thought I would be too, but I choose instead to be grateful that I've had this opportunity to do something so unlikely at such a timely moment in my life. When I get back to my dressing room a few minutes later for the interval, there is already a text from my sister waiting for me. Brilliant! I love you xxx it says.

This week has been World Aids Week, and the Noel Coward theatre has joined all the theatres in the West End and on Broadway in asking for donations at each curtain call. Tonight, Janie steps forward to make the customary speech, but at the end of it she slips in "And also, we're losing Debbie tonight, so can we have a round of applause for her, please?” She’s so naughty. I bow my head and bite my tongue very hard so nine hundred and fifty people don’t see me well up. “If anyone asks where I’m going,” I say to Janie later, “ Tell them I’ve gone to Hollywood.”

It’s both Arabella’s and Rosalind’s birthday this weekend, so there is a dressing room party organized post show. But first, there are fourteen friends and relatives waiting at Stage Door to say hello. Each and every one of them has red, glassy eyes. “Have you all been crying?!” I tease them. “No, no, of course not!” they lie in chorus.

Michael and I deposit those without children to rush home to at a nearby restaurant, and head off to the party. I’ve got some themed leaving gifts for all the cast and crew, and we hand them round – “Boobie Sweets” in various flavours ordered off the internet, and a business card I’ve had made up with all my contact details on the back, and on the front a pair of cartoon breasts with an arrow pointing to the left one and the words *“And it’s goodbye from him....and it’s goodbye from me.”* I always have had terrible gallows humour. The champagne is flowing, the nibbles keep coming and it’s all terribly jolly. Until the moment I suspected might happen, when Bryan the Company Manager clinks his glass for silence and starts to make a farewell speech in my honour. Oh God, I was doing so well up til then. I am presented with the most gorgeous Liberty print scarf from the whole cast, and several bouquets, cards and other gifts. Like the Oscar-winners always say, I wish I’d prepared a speech, but I didn’t, and now I have to wing it. There is so much I *want* to say, but I’m already blubbing like Gwyneth Paltrow, so I stammer a quick and inarticulate thank you and start off singing “Happy Birthday to You” in order to get the party back on track. Phew, I think I just about got away with it.

A couple of Janie’s friends are in the audience tonight, one of whom is an anaesthetist, and the other of whom is researching and developing radiology at the very hospital where I might soon be receiving radiotherapy treatment myself. “Thank you very much for possibly saving my life in advance!” I tell him. He looks puzzled. Turns out I was talking to the wrong man. This one is in fact a quantity surveyor from Bridgend. Then I ask the anaesthetist whether she has ever lost anyone while they were under. “Yes, a couple,” she answers, cheerily. *Not* the answer I was looking for.

In true Jewish Goodbye style, it takes a good forty-five minutes from saying “Right, we have to go now,” to actually leave. I hate goodbyes. Especially when the road ahead is paved with surgical steel and not gold.

SUNDAY 6th DECEMBER

Michael and I spend the whole day doing our Christmas shopping and generally larking about together, determined to have a great time. On the way home in the car, I put my hand on his thigh and feel something small, hard, square and ring-box-like in his pocket. “What’s that?” I ask, without thinking. “It’s a...um...it’s a lump,” he jokes, “Now leave it.” Neither of us speaks for the next ten minutes, but he’s been rumbled and he knows it.

Having been together for four and a half years, we’ve often talked about marriage, but neither of us has been particularly fussed. The day I got my diagnosis, Michael said to me “Let’s get married,” but I told him that such timing smelled of reactionism and that I wasn’t dying and he should pull himself together. But when we get home this evening, he sits me down on the corner of the bed and tells me he’s had a month to think very seriously about his hasty proposal. He wants me to know that he loves me no matter what, he continues, and he doesn’t want another day to go by without everyone knowing that. “So, in the words of Beyonce Knowles,” he finishes, dropping to one knee at my feet, “ ‘*If you want it you gotta put a ring on it.*’ In conclusion: Debbie Chazen - will you marry me?”

"YES!" I sob. Honestly, I think I must have some faulty pipes somewhere, I've been leaking an awful lot lately.

And so the rollercoaster of my recent life suddenly takes an uphill direction. WE'RE ENGAGED!!! If a man still wants to marry me when I've only got one boob, then he's definitely the man for me.

MONDAY 7th DECEMBER

I've kidded my sister so many times that Michael and I were getting married, that she doesn't believe me when I tell her our news. I am the little boy who cried engagement. But eventually, it sinks in, and, delighted to have something to celebrate for once, she organizes an impromptu party this evening for a few close relatives of Michael's and ours. Everyone is delighted for us, and tactfully no one mentions the fact that my left boobie has less than 24 hours to live. It's a lovely party, and we spend the night in positive mood.

TUESDAY 8th DECEMBER

So this is it. Double D Day. It seems so strange that this is supposed to be the day I start to get better – even though I am yet to feel at all unwell. Michael, Lynette and I arrive at the hospital at the required time of 9am, and I check into my ward: 5 East B. "Miss Chazen, is it? Bed No 13, left hand side." Bed No 13?! No. Not going to happen. "All right," the nurse chuckles, clearly used to Bed No 13 being hard to sell, "Take Bed No 16 on the right." Much better. It's in a bright spot in the corner by the window, overlooking a spectacular view stretching as far as the mast at Alexandra Palace in one direction and St Paul's in the other. I am given a hospital gown and paper knickers to change into, and tight white stockings which will help prevent deep vein thrombosis from setting in during the operation. It's not the most flattering ensemble. More *haute suture* than *haute couture*. Lynette busies herself with unpacking my suitcase and arranging its contents in my bedside table: 3

pairs of pyjamas, ironed (I have not ironed anything since 1997 but I don't want the nurses to think I'm a sloven); iPod, recently loaded with the first series of *30 Rock* (perhaps I'll finally get round to watching it this week); several books (including many written and given to me by members of the cast of *Calendar Girls*); my Nintendo DS (to keep my brain trained); assorted toiletries and four different bridal magazines (!)

My operation is not scheduled until 2pm, but the hours pass quickly, what with various nurses popping up at regular intervals to check my blood pressure, temperature and blood sugar. A sweet-faced student nurse asks me to sign a Disclaimer absolving the hospital of responsibility in case of theft. (Did a patient once wake up after a mastectomy and shout "Help! Someone's stolen a boobie!"?) At midday, my consultant Mr K comes to visit. He draws the curtain around my bed and asks to look at my breast. "So," he says, "Just to check, it *is* the left one, isn't it?" "YES!", I reply, "Please don't cut off the wrong one." He laughs, generously, as if no one's ever made *that* joke before. He draws a big arrow on the offending boobie in blue pen, and marks all around the breast and up into my armpit. Then he asks me to sign a form giving him consent to operate. There's no going back now.

My next visitor is my anaesthetist, a young, pretty girl called Tanya. "Have you ever had an operation before, darling?" she asks me, kindly. "No," I say, my voice breaking a little. "You will look after me, won't you?" She is very reassuring. I tell her about the book I've read, *Love, Medicine and Miracles* by Bernie Siegel, in which he says that it is proven that people under anaesthetic can hear everything that goes on around them deep in their subconscious. "Will you please say nice things to me while I'm under?" I ask her, "Like telling me to get better and telling the cancer to fuck off and leave me alone?" "Of course I will, darling," she smiles. "Have *you* ever had anaesthetic?" I ask her, out of interest. "No, I haven't," she says dolefully. "But my friend has, and she said it was *brilliant*! I'd really like to try it out sometime." And with a cheery "See you later!" she's off.

I am Nil by Mouth, so while Michael and Lynette have their lunch, I set about composing the following:

Ode to My Left Breast

On Wednesday morning, nine am,
The surgeon comes to visit.
He brandishes a bright blue pen;
"Now, which of your breasts is it?"
"The left," I point, as he sits down
And gently cops a feel
Beneath my open hospital gown
That has zero sex appeal.
He takes his pen and draws some marks
Around my poor left titty,
"Well, I must say," the doc remarks,
"That's looking rather pretty!
These will help me in theater,"
He smilingly expounds
And with a cheery "See you later"
Continues on his rounds.

My sister and my fiance
Are gathered round the bed,
"I'd love a cup of tea," I say
"Or rum and coke instead."
They both depart; I close my eyes
In silent contemplation
Upon, of course, the theme of my
Impending operation
And how you're 'bout to be detached
My wobbly little friend
And though to you I'm quite attached
I guess this is the end.

Twas in my very early teens
My flat chest ‘gan to sprout
And from two undersized baked beans
You kept on growing out.
And suddenly two burgeoning spheres
Burst forth below my neck
And I began to wear brassieres
To keep you both in check.
Where now you’re saggy and diseased,
You once were firm and pert.
I passed the Pencil Test with ease
When lifting up my shirt.
(These days an entire pencil *case*
Could fit beneath my hooters,
Leaving more than ample space
For a couple of computers.)

And when my agent called to say
That I had an audition
For *Calendar Girls*, during which play
You’d be on exhibition,
I never thought I’d ever want
To put you both on show
And though it doubtless shocked my aunt
I’m glad I did, you know?
My bosom bold has always been
The envy of my best friend;
So chuffed am I that it’s been seen
On tour and in the West End.

For over thirty seven years
We’ve grown up side by side,
But soon the surgeon’s sharpened blade
Will to you be applied.
His scalpel keen, with great precision,
Will slice down from my shoulder
And with a circular incision
Will hack off my left boulder.

He'll pop you in a kidney tray
With neerie an apology
From whence without the least delay
They'll send you to pathology.
And when they've poked you all around
And found out what and why
You'll go to join that heaving mound
Of knockers in the sky.

The double act of Phil and Grant
Must go their separate ways
So thank you for the mammeries
Of many happy days.
I'll miss the fun and larks we've had,
The fondlings in the park,
The nuzzlings of some naughty lad,
The gropings in the dark.
No longer will some cheeky chap
Attempt to cop an eyeful
As now I'll only have *one* bap
To jiggle like a trifle.
Inseperable, without a doubt,
We started on life's journey
But they must take my tumours out
And I'm waiting for a gurney.

Your time with me will soon be ended
And I'm less than exuberant,
For now my cleavage, once quite splendid,
Won't be quite as protruberant.
So au revoir, old chum, your end's commenced,
You lumpy old left boob -
No longer to be pressed against
Whilst crammed in on the tube.
It's time for you to hit the road,
So farewell, sickly breast.
And so long, too, each cancerous node
From armpit down to chest.

Auf wiedersehen, you terrible teat!
I'm sorry for your plight,
But I will now be incomplete
And leaning to the right.
The time has come to say goodbye,
So, sis and husband-*to*-be,
Please join with me as, fondly, I
Say "Hasta La Vista, boobie."

At a few minutes past two, a porter arrives with a gurney to take me down. I keep a smile plastered on my face for the benefit of Michael and Lynette – I have to be strong for them – but my heart feels like ten lords a-leaping in my soon to be decimated chest. *What if I never wake up from the anaesthetic?* a daft little voice in my head keeps asking. These could be my last few minutes of consciousness on earth. I spend them telling Michael and Lynette how much I love them, all the way down in the lift and along the corridor to the Pre-Med room, where we must part company. "See you on the other side!" I tell them both, grinning like a loon, as though I was just about to watch a comedy show and not be operated on. And then they're gone, and I'm alone, and free to be scared.

The cheery anaesthetist appears by my side and rubs my arm soothingly. "I'm just going to pop a canula in," she breezes, "So we can get the anaesthetic in. I won't ask you to count backwards from ten - it's nothing like you see on *Casualty* or *Holby City*, you know!" I am in no mood to tell her that, actually, I've appeared in both shows and know from first hand experience that it's only acting.

I wish I could tell you what it's like to go under – but I remember nothing more after that! One minute, the canula is going in my hand, the next thing I know, I can hear Lynette saying "Oh, she's awake!" and then Michael's voice comes in with "She looks so beautiful!" The man is clearly insane, I remember thinking (but to be fair, in hindsight, I think he was probably just glad I was still alive.) I blow them both kisses into my oxygen mask, but, try as I might, I cannot open my eyes. They seem to be welded shut. There is a fuzzy buzz of activity all around me, of various nurses voices' coming in and out. It's like someone is constantly re-tuning an old wireless.

"Are you hungry?" I hear Lynette ask. "Chocolate!" I demand. Even semi-comatose, I refuse to take things seriously. She feeds me a spoonful of what I think must be mashed potato. And then another. One more. "Sick!" I proclaim. Michael holds a cardboard bowl under my chin, just in time for me to throw up all three spoonfuls. "Chocolate!" I joke. And then everything goes dark again.

I drift in and out of consciousness all night, coming to only when Mr K the consultant comes round to check up on me. I haven't the energy to hug him, but I stroke his hand fervently. "Thank you!" I whisper. A bit later the cheery anaesthetist comes to visit. "I did what you asked, darling. While you were under, I gave you subliminal messages about your successful future in Hollywood!" she twinkles.

WEDNESDAY 9th DECEMBER

At 6.17 the following morning, my eyes open easily and I am wide awake. All is dark and quiet on Ward 5 East B, the other occupants sleeping peacefully in their beds. I lift up the neck of my hospital gown, careful not to disturb the drainage bottle that is inserted into my armpit, and peer down at my chest. It's covered in bandages. The blue arrow Mr K drew on it is still visible, and there, just peeking over the top, is my beauty spot! It lives! Oh, frabjous day! Calloo! Callay!

I feel marvellous. I have survived the anaesthetic, my beauty spot is still there and all is well with the world. I am invicible. But then again, I am off my tit on painkillers, so I can't really be trusted.

Michael (or “Mr Lover Man” as the nurses tease me) calls at 7am , and I tell him the good news about my beauty spot. We are both delighted, and discuss the possibility of having it as a bridesmaid at the wedding.

The breakfast trolley comes round at 8. Apart from the mashed potato I threw up last night, I haven’t eaten for thirty-three hours (a personal record for me. My previous best was two hours seven minutes. I must surely be thin by now?) I ask for some porridge, toast and tea, but apparently I am not allowed honey as that is only available to private patients. Who knew bees were so classist?

There’s never a dull moment all morning. First, someone comes round with a survey asking questions such as: “How do you feel when the nurse looks at your drugs chart?” and “How do you feel when the nurse gives you your drugs?”, alongside multiple choice answers including: “Worried,” “Safe,” “Cared for” and “Comfortable.” I fill it in as best I can and hope I’ve passed. Then a couple of doctors arrive to see if I’m interested in taking part in a research project using computer software in breast cancer care. Yup, sign me up. A few minutes later, a nurse approaches and asks whether I mind if someone films the nurses all day, for training purposes. No, not at all. Just don’t tell my agent. My next visitor is the grandly-titled “Patient Pathway Co-Ordinator,” who asks if I will be alone at home. I tell her that, knowing my friends and family, I will never be alone again.

I am proved right by a steady stream of visitors from 11am onwards, and the rest of the day passes quickly in an entertaining conveyer belt of friendly faces. It’s almost a relief when it’s chucking out time, and I am at last left to my own vices. “You are always laughing!” exclaims the Spanish lady in the next bed. “All day long, laughing, laughing!” “I’m so sorry,” I apologise, feeling terribly guilty that I may have disturbed her rest. “No, no,” she assures me, “Is lovely. Make very happy.”

THURSDAY 10th DECEMBER

My first visitor today is Mr K the consultant again, bearing the shocking news that my left boobie only weighed 3lbs. THREE POUNDS?! How disappointing. I had hoped for an instant weight loss of half a stone at least.

"How are you, darling?" he asks kindly, holding my hand of his own volition – clearly my fruiting him up over the past few weeks has had the desired effect! I tell him, honestly, that I am fine and having a lovely time. Mr K has a good look at my "area", as he calls it, and seems pleased with my progress. I feel like a teacher's pet, until he goes off to his next patient and I hear him call her "darling" too. I am shamefully jealous. He doesn't hold her hand, though. YAH BOO SUCKS TO YOU, FISHFACE!

This morning I have a long chat with Kate in the bed opposite. She has had a lumpectomy, and should have been discharged two weeks ago but she caught an infection so they kept her in. She says she is going out of her mind with boredom, so I lend her some books and magazines to read. I also get chatting to a couple of the nurses. They are both Nigerian, and show me photos of their husbands and families on their mobile phones, all wearing stunningly colourful traditional dress. Their blue and black nurses' uniform seems very drab by comparison.

I've come to realise over the past two days that I used to suffer from a degree of hospital phobia. As I've said before, in my mind a hospital was the place my parents came to die, and so every time I entered one in the past for whatever reason, it was always with an underlying feeling of dread. Now, I have come to appreciate the true purpose of a hospital. How on earth did they do it in ye olden times? In the days before penicillin and pain relief and *anaesthetic*, for God's sake?! I was never any good at the sciences, but as I lie in my comfortable bed, drinking my umpteenth cup of tea of the day while a kindly nurse doles out my medication, I daydream that instead of being a self-obsessed actress type who spends her life dressing up in costumes in silly wigs, I am actually a nurse. Or a doctor. No, a surgeon, saving lives as part of a day's work. Oh, who am I kidding? I can't even stand the sight of blood.

FRIDAY 11th DECEMBER

I *knew* Bed 13 was a bad lot. It's had three occupants since I arrived here: the first lady was completely unconscious throughout, the next spent two days being sick, poor soul, and the latest wailed loudly in her sleep throughout the whole of last night. Added to that the air con was broken, meaning the temperature veered between oven hot and freezer cold, so all in all I didn't get much sleep.

Kate from the bed opposite comes over to chat some more about my mastectomy. She chose not to have her whole breast taken off, despite the surgeon's recommendation, as she did not want to lose it completely. "How do you feel about it?" she asks. Perhaps it's because I never had a fantastic figure in the first place, but I honestly don't mind the fact that I am now lopsided. After all, if it means that I am now cancer-free, all well and good. And I can always have breast reconstruction in the future, and will end up with better boobs than I ever had to begin with. I tell her I will wear my scar with pride, as a symbol of everything that has happened to me and how strong my mind and body have been to get through it all, and urge her to listen to her doctor's advice. Better no boob than no life, that's what I say.

A lady comes round later to give me my NHS mastectomy bra. I am rather sore on my left hand side where the drainage tube goes in, but she is insistent that I try it on for her. My spongy falsie on the left looks ever so perky, but my heavy real right boob hangs lower by a good four inches. "Perfect!" the bra lady exclaims.

SATURDAY 12th DECEMBER

I have left it as long as humanly possible, but I am beginning to smell like a rotting fox, so today I am attempting my first shower since I got here. This involves a feat of Olympic gymnastics, as I cannot get my left side wet at all, nor do I have much movement in my left arm. I also have a drainage tube in a drawstring bag to negotiate. After ten minutes of Mr Bean-type slapstick comedy, I emerge clean, fragrant and feeling much more human.

On returning to my bed, I find that a beautiful bunch of flowers has been delivered from my Uncle Mel and various Liverpudlian rellys, along with a card saying “With love to Debbie, You are a one-off!” Oh, the Scouse sense of humour! Long may it live.

In between several rounds of friends and family coming by again today, I check the headlines on my iPhone and read about a 98 year-old woman who strangled her nursing home roommate to death because she had so many visitors. Clearly, I am going to have to sleep with one eye open from now on. This evening, I finally succumb to a television card and watch *X Factor* on the four inch telly above my bed, commenting on the acts with the nurses and other patients who are all watching too. Then Kate switches over during the commercials and suddenly shouts out “Debbie, you’re on the telly!” and there I am, as Kylie and Danny’s uglier, fatter sister Daggy in *The Impressions Show with Culshaw and Stephenson*. It’s a surreal moment for all of us!

SUNDAY 13th DECEMBER

Kate has been discharged today, much to her relief. We wish each other luck and off she goes into the sunset. Her bed isn’t empty for long – a pretty young girl arrives, all alone, looking a bit lost and scared. I smile at her, but she seems very shy. After an hour or so, the porter comes to collect her for her operation. “Good luck,” I call out to her as she is wheeled away, still by herself. I can't imagine how I would have felt going down for *my* op if Michael and Lynette hadn't been by my side, and the thought of that poor girl going through it all alone makes me cry my eyes out.

When the nurse comes round a few minutes later to do my obs, my blood pressure is unusually high because I've upset myself so much. The nurse writes *Patient upset* in her notes. "I'll come back later and redo it," she says. However, later it's the *X Factor* finals and, as always, I cry my way through the entire bloody programme. My blood pressure is even higher when the nurse returns to check it. *X Factor*, she writes in her notes.

MONDAY 14th DECEMBER

With veteran Kate having left yesterday, there is a new heirarchy in the ward today, and I am the Queen. If any of the other patients have any questions, they defer to me. The newbie, the pretty young girl from last night, is back in the bed opposite and is wide awake and smiling. "Are you ok?" I ask her, and she nods shyly.

At about eleven, a doctor who looks like an Asian Barry Manilow comes round to tell me they're sending me home. "But I've just ordered lunch!" I joke. The truth is, I'm a bit panicked by the thought of going home. I've had the most lovely week, in a comfortable bed that goes up down at the touch of button, reading, watching telly, making friends, being brought endless cups of tea, having fun with all my visitors and generally being lavished with care and attention. I can totally understand how people can develop Munchausen's Disease. I don't have an uppy downy bed at home, and when Michael's at work I shall have to do things *for myself.* Will I be able to cope? Dr Barry Manilow says that I have to keep my drain in until the level of fluid goes down, and the nurse shows me how to measure the output each night. It's not complicated, but it does involve subtraction, something at which I was never very good.

The pretty young girl opposite is also being sent home today. “Are you pleased to be leaving?” I ask her, and to my dismay she bursts into tears. “I’m in so much pain,” she sobs, “I can’t even sit down.” I go over to her and give her a hug and tell her to hold tight while I go and get the nurse. Two of them follow me back to her, and I can hear them soothing her very gently from behind the closed curtains. It’s heartbreaking.

Michael and Lynette arrive to take me home, and it feels like I’m moving house, I’ve got so much stuff – flowers and chocolates and fruit baskets and books and magazines. I dole out some of it to patients and nurses, and also give the nursing staff a big tin of Heroes - which, to me and all their patients, they all are - and a thank you card and hugs all round. They really have been marvellous, and I’m very grateful to them.

And so, clutching my drainage tube in it’s drawstring bag in one hand and a leaflet showing me how to do my physiotherapy excercises in the other, we all make our way to the car park. Although it’s only been a week, it seems like years since I was out of the ward. Ah, how good it is to breathe the slightly less than fresh air as we leave the building, the petrol fumes of ambulances mingling with the cigarette smoke exhaled by staff and patients alike as they huddle in the doorway.

Lynette drops us at our flat, and Michael and I pause on the doorstep, suddenly aware that my left boobie will never see home again. Despite my recent panic, it’s so nice to be home. I look around with new eyes, appreciating fully what I had come to take for granted.

As I am not supposed to do any lifting and carrying, poor Michael has to do everything for me. “I’m so sorry to keep ordering you around,” I apologise. “You’ve never minded before!” he retorts, cheekily.

I show Michael my scar for the first time this afternoon. I have not been left completely flat on one side, as I thought, but instead have a tiny little boob-shaped protrusion, divided in two horizontally by a zip of stitches. I have never been worried about Michael's reaction to the new, unimproved me, and his response now doesn't disappoint. "Aah," he says, tenderly kissing my chest just above the wound, "It's like Mini-Me. So sweet!"

TUESDAY 15th DECEMBER

I tried four different positions last night: on my back in bed, sprawled across the sofa, reclining on the chaise longue and sitting in the armchair with my feet on a dining chair. But I just couldn't get comfortable. Uppy downy hospital bed, I miss you.

My whole left side feels like a drawstring bag that has been pulled tightly shut and when I inspect it, there is a massive hard ridge leading from my armpit to the centre of my chest. It looks like something out of *Alien* and feels horrible. What the hell is it? Like a first time mother who has noticed something awry with her new baby, I panic. Michael asks if I want to go back to the hospital, but I don't want to waste anyone's time if it's nothing. Instead, I phone the Breast Clinic and leave a message for someone to get back to me, and a couple of agonizing hours later someone does. To my relief, I am assured it's just scar tissue and will eventually go away. I feel like a total hypochondriac, and the whole upsetting episode has not fit into my plans of being a model patient at all.

Michael eventually leaves for work, just as Lynette arrives, armed with a Balthazar of chicken soup, or Jewish penicillin as it is known. If this stuff has the healing properties it is said to have, I've no doubt my left boobie will grow back in no time.

WEDNESDAY 16th DECEMBER

I have received an email from an old friend from Manchester University, with whom I shared digs in our first year. We lost touch for years, but got re-acquainted recently when she came to see me in a show at The Young Vic. She writes that she has just been diagnosed with cancer of the thyroid, and she wants to thank me because she only went to the doctor to have the lump in her neck examined after she heard about *my* diagnosis, and realised that "bad things *do* happen to people our age." I am so upset for her, but relieved that she discovered it now and not months down the line.

This is why I am writing this diary. Love her or hate her, the best thing Jade Goody ever did was raise awareness of cervical cancer, and after her death the number of women going for smear tests has increased hugely. My hope is that, like my university friend, if there is anyone reading this who may have ignored a lump or an unusual symptom in their body, they will be inspired to get it checked out. I promise you, the *fear* of having cancer is so much worse than actually having it. Stop reading this now and go and make that appointment.

Coincidentally, the news today is that scientists have cracked the entire genetic code of skin and lung cancers, which could revolutionize cancer care. I have long held a theory that Mother Nature has a way of keeping numbers down on the planet, whether it be bubonic plague or scarlet fever or tuberculosis or cancer. I don't mean to be a party pooper, but when eventually a cure for cancer has been found, I believe some other disease will crop up and take it's place as the number one killer. Death is a part of life; the trick is to live each day as if death may come tomorrow.

THURSDAY 17th DECEBER

Still alive! Michael and I must brave the ice and snow to go back to the hospital today for a follow-up appointment with Mr K the consultant. Usually, I get very sore nipples in freezing temperatures; today, I only have one painful nipple. I know mastectomy is a bit extreme as far as pain relief goes, but it's very effective.

After submitting unconvincingly to another hug, Mr K examines my wound and tells me to go back to my ward to have my drain taken out. He will see me again in three weeks time to tell me my pathology results and discuss what further treatment is needed.

We go back to Ward 5 East B, where a newly installed Christmas tree is merrily twinkling away. Someone is sleeping in my bed, and unlike the three bears I feel instant kinship with her. My favourite nurse takes us into a side room and gently removes the drain from my armpit. I am relieved to see the back of it, quite frankly - it was like having to take the dog for a walk wherever you went, and if you forgot it was attached and went off without it, it would bite.

FRIDAY 25th DECEMBER

It's Chriiiiiistmas! We are going to spend the day with Michael's lovely family in St John's Wood. I haven't worn a bra since the op, largely because it's more comfortable without, but today I am determined to dress up for the occasion. I forsake the NHS bra in favour of a lacey mastectomy number I ordered online. Michael helps me put it on, and with a bit of adjusting here and there, you honestly couldn't tell which side is fake. Of course, I then realise that most of my wardrobe has been chosen with the express purpose of showing off my decolletage, not hiding it. Several changes of outfit and a polo neck later, I'm good to go.

This is the most active day I've had in quite a while (by active I mean eating, chatting, eating, chatting, eating and eating) and by the time we get home at about 6 ish I'm exhausted and can't wait to take my bra off. Mind you, that sort of behaviour is bound to tire anyone out, and I'm sure I'm not the only person this Christmas Day who was fast asleep on the sofa by half past six.

TUESDAY 29th DECEMBER

Don’t panic, Mr Mainwaring, but I’ve just discovered a little lump in my remaining right breast. Et tu, Boobie? Ordinarily, I might ignore it in the hope that it was just a pimple and would go of its own accord, but I know now that you can’t be too careful. I phone the Breast Clinic at the hospital and tell them what’s happened. As we are in that Black Hole between Christmas and New Year, they can’t see me until the day of my pathology appointment with Mr K in a week and a half’s time, so I have to wait until then.

I am not going to tell Michael and Lynette about it til nearer the time. There’s no point in *all* of us worrying. Besides, maybe it *is* just a pimple.

Just had a quick feel. It’s still there.

THURSDAY 31st DECEMBER

New Year’s Eve. We were due to go down to the South Bank with some pals, but instead opt for the peace and comfort of our own home with our friend Dan for company. As Big Ben chimes at midnight, we wish each other a happy, *healthy* New Year and hope that 2010 will be a damn sight better than 2009.

My resolutions:

1) To get better.
2) To not have cancer anymore.
3) To eat less chocolate.

I have already broken No. 3.

MONDAY 4th JANUARY 2010

My old university friend who has thyroid cancer is having her operation today to remove a tumour from her neck. I text her this evening to see how she's doing, and she texts back `So far so good. By the way, you were done. They took the MRSA swab from my` *`nose`*`.` That's private health care for you.

Actually, four out of eight of us who shared digs at Oak House while at uni have had cancer, and the other four we have all lost touch with, so who knows? This seems a very high statistic for under forty year olds. Perhaps there was something in the water at Oak House? As with the tobacco industry , I feel sure that someone somewhere is hiding something. I am not a big conspiracy theorist or anything, but do we really know what effect the digital age is having on us? Microwaves, mobiles, computers, iPods, plasma tv's – are they really as safe as we are led to believe? I may have to get all Erin Brokovich and do a bit of digging.

If you don't hear from me again, the FEDs have got me.

WEDNESDAY 6th JANUARY

The hospital has just called to cancel my pathology appointment tomorrow, due to adverse weather conditions – the snow is a foot deep outside and shows no signs of stopping. They will reschedule as soon as possible, but there are a lot of people to fit in.

I have resigned myself to needing chemo, radiotherapy, hormone treatment – the works, and if they say I need anything less it will be a bonus, so the cancellation doesn't bother me too much. Except the lump in my right boobie is still there and seems to have squatters' rights, and I would quite like to know whether it's suspicious or not. So, as has happened many times before, *more* waiting.

Hmmm. This joke is beginning to wear thin.

FRIDAY 8th JANUARY

Michael rumbled me this morning and I had to tell him about Lump no. 2. He was, understandably, a bit upset that I hadn't told him before, and gently reminded me that there's no "i" in team.

There is an "i" in hospital, however, and when I phoned them today to see if there was any news about a rescheduled appointment, the Breast Care nurse told me that I was a priority and should never have been cancelled. This is not such comforting news to hear. I don't want to be a priority. I want to be a...posteriority. (I confess I had to look up the opposite of "priority" just now, and although I'm not sure that word is right, it does seem strangely fitting, considering my *avoir du pois.)* She's given us a new appointment for 9am next Thursday, and come hell or deep snow, we shall be there.

SATURDAY 9th JANUARY

It's the last performance of the West End run of *Calendar Girls* tonight, and my goal over the last few weeks was to be well enough to attend – not as a member of the cast this time, but in the audience. The snow is plummeting outside, the roads are treacherous, and it would be so easy for Michael and me to stay home and close the curtains, but I am determined to round off this chapter of my life properly. So off we go into the white night, skating our way down to the tube and into town.

And how glad we are that we made the effort, because we're greeted at the box office by Bryan the Company Manager and escorted not to the seats we had reserved but to the Royal Box! Anton, one of the ushers, brings champagne and two programmes to us as we lounge about in the adjoining ante-room before curtain up, and even though I don't need to go, I make a point of using the private toilet. What a thrill, sitting on the Queen's own throne!

The show begins, and it's such a pleasure to watch all my friends doing their thing. It's especially nice to see my replacement in action – even though we have never met, we have swapped emails and texts and cards and presents, and it feels like we are already old friends. Julia is brilliant in the role she originated, and I feel so proud that I was once part of this fantastic show. Word must have got round that we are sitting in the Royal Box, as many of the cast play pertinent lines directly to us, or tweak a line or a gesture for our benefit, and I can just about make out some of the crew waving to us and poking their tongues out from the darkness backstage right.

Watching the play and its myriad references to cancer and chemo and dying and its overwhelming poignancy, I am stunned that I managed to do performance after performance, day after day for six weeks, all the while acting out a cancer-themed play of my own. I can actually feel the switch in my brain that I must have turned off before I went on stage remaining *on* for once, and, come the curtain call, Michael and I rise as one to our feet in an emotional standing ovation. The cast take their well-earned bow, and to our embarrassment wave and blow kisses in our direction. We wave and blow kisses back, and I can see the entire audience wondering just who are the fat couple in the Royal Box?

THURSDAY 14th JANUARY

After last week's appointment was cancelled due to bad weather, it's been a tense wait during the last couple of days' fresh snowfall to see if we would be postponed again. But we have heard nothing, so 9am finds Michael, Lynette and I once more in the office of Mr K the consultant. I told Lynette about Lump no. 2 last night, so it wouldn't come as a shock when Mr K asks to see it. We all hold our breath as he has a look and a feel, only exhaling when he assures me gently that it is in the skin of the breast and not in the tissue, and therefore nothing to worry about. It's funny, had Mr K told me that it *was* a cancerous lump, necessitating *another* mastectomy, I would have been stoical and unmoved, but now I can't help sniffing back tears of relief. Somehow, good news is so much more affecting to hear than bad.

There's more good news with the results of the pathology report – out of the twenty-six lymph nodes removed during the mastectomy, only one contained malignant cells, meaning that I am now cancer-free. However, to prevent a recurrence of the disease, I will need, as expected, four months of chemo, followed by four weeks of daily radiotherapy, alongside a year of regular Herceptin injections (given only to patients whose cancer is the hormone-receptive type) and for extra protection, five years of Tamoxifen tablets. I ask Mr K whether he thinks I will be well enough to take up the job offer of the tour of *Calendar Girls* from July, and he replies that he sees no reason why not. "But you must make sure you are up to it," he warns, "Touring can be very tiring." He pauses. "I know this from my years in burlesque, obviously," he adds with a twinkle.

This is the last time we shall see Mr K until I return for my breast reconstruction in about a year's time. I subject the poor man to one final hug, muttering an inadequate thank you into his ear. This man has saved my life, and all I can offer him in return is two free tickets to see *Calendar Girls*. He seems pleased, though he must have seen more naked breasts in his time than all the audience put together.

We are sent down to the Oncology Department, which conjures up not so nice memories of our late mother. When our poor mum had chemo fifteen years ago, she was horrendously sick from the side effects of the treatment. We were sharing a bedroom at my aunt and uncle's house at the time, as our new flat was still being decorated. I had just started at drama school, and was having the best time of my life during the daytime, then going home and holding my mother's forehead as she threw up for hours and hours each night, watching her get weaker and thinner daily. I'm ashamed to admit I resented her illness at the time; over the past few months I have been only too aware of what she must have gone through.

The Oncology Registrar talks us through all the treatments I will be having, and shows us a graph stating that 90% of women on the same course are still alive ten years later. I suppose this is meant to be comforting and positive, and I silence the silly voice in my ear whispering *"What about the other 10%?"* by asking her about side effects. She assures me that chemotherapy drugs have improved so much since my late mother's treatment that it is possible I may not be sick at all. Just my luck. I had hoped that weight-loss would be the only up-side to the whole sorry saga.

The main side effect of chemo is hair loss. From *every* part of one's body. When I was filming *We Are Klang*, I had to wear a bald cap in one episode, and I was surprised to find that I didn't look too bad. A bit Churchill-y (the Prime Minister, not the dog), but bearable. One of the writers apologised at the time for making me look so un-glamorous, and I remember joking with my typical gallows humour that honestly I didn't mind because if I ever got cancer I would know what I would look like after chemo. Well. Didn't *that* come round and bite me on the posteriority?! The Registrar explains that there is something called a Cold Cap that patients can try, which freezes your scalp so the chemo can't get to your hair follicles, but it's not guaranteed to work. I'm more upset at the thought of losing my eyebrows and eyelashes. A natty hat can hide a multitude of baldness, but one can't exactly go around in one of those sleep masks all day.

Our morning appointment turns into a day-trip, as I am sent around the hospital on various errands: to have an ECG to check my heart (no problem); to get a blood test to check chemo compatibility (no problem) and to get my veins checked for ease of entry (problem.) Apparently, I have what is called "shy veins", which will explain why every injection I have ever had has been preceded by several minutes of tapping and squeezing and tutting while the tourniquet is tightened more and more around my bulging forearm. Great. So my boobies will expose themselves at the drop of a bra, but my veins won't come out for love nor chemo. The nurse decides that it would be better for all concerned if I were to have a portacath fitted. This is a small port inserted under the skin of the chest or arm under general anaesthetic, which remains there for the duration of treatment (in my case, a year) via which chemo can be given and blood can be taken. I am such an old hand at operations by now that it doesn't phase me in the least, especially as it's only a short op and I will be in and out of hospital on the same day. Surgery is set for next Tuesday. Uppy downy bed, I'm coming!

TUESDAY 19th JANUARY

I'm having my portacath fitted today (or my 'portcullis', as Michael's mother Queen Shirley of Malaprop, says.) Lynette and I arrive at the Day Surgery Unit at 9am as instructed but instead of being led to an uppy downy bed in a peaceful and friendly ward like last time, the receptionist waves us grumpily towards a long, soulless corridor with hard plastic chairs lining the walls. And there we sit for SIX hours. We brought several magazines with us, but they remain unopened, as throughout the day we are kept entertained by the fascinating goings-on a little way down the corridor.

It seems a young man has been stabbed, and over the next few hours a steady stream of his relatives and friends turn up, each one starting a fresh and very voluble argument with the others on arrival. "Shall we go and sit somewhere else?" my sister asks. "Are you kidding?" I whisper, "This is better than *Casualty*! If only we had popcorn." One man punches another, two of the ladies start a cat fight, and a nurse trips over one of the women's babies who has been left to crawl around the floor, and has to be taken to A & E. (The baby seemed oblivious, by the way.) It's a huge wrench when my name is called at 3pm and I have to leave this thrilling spectacle and head towards an anteroom where I must change into my hospital gown. After that it's only another hour and a half before it's time for my op. "I'm afraid Spielberg still hasn't called," I tell the same cheery anaesthetist who whispered job opportunities into my ear during my mastectomy. "Oh, he will," she replies, nodding her head in certainty. And that's the last thing I remember until I wake up half an hour later, only slightly groggy and with a piece of metal inserted under my chest that feels disconcertingly like an enormous tumour. Ooh, will I set off airport security gates from now on and have to be frisked extra thoroughly? There's got to be *some* perks.

Lynette fills me in on what happened with *Families at War* during my absence – apparently, a policeman arrived to sort them out but before long one of the men punched *him* and was promptly handcuffed and led away. Damn, I missed it. At about 9pm I'm deemed sufficiently *compos mentis* to be allowed to go home, although not before we have another surreal encounter with a couple of belligerent drunks who are lying across the exit door. All in all, it's been a very sitcom day.

WEDNESDAY 20th JANUARY

Just as the pain in my armpit is beginning to wear off, I now have a sore neck where the portacath line is. I can't remember what it's like to feel normal, and suspect I won't for quite some time to come.

It's my first chemo day. This is the one I've been dreading, the memory of my poor mum's suffering still fresh in my mind.

Michael and I go to Oncology first, where I am assessed by a glamorous female doctor who happens to be wearing an incredibly revealing low-cut top. Show-off, I think to myself. After a brief chat, Dr Cleavage sends us up to the Chemo Ward. No sooner have we sat down slightly nervously in the waiting area, when a woman of around thirty-five or so makes a beeline for me. "I know you, you're off the telly! Are you ill, then?" she asks. "Er, yes," I reply, "Today's my first chemo." "Oh it's awful. You’re going to be so sick. And it’s dreadful when your hair starts falling out. I tried the Cold Cap but it was so painful I couldn’t bear it. This is my second time, I had cancer six years ago but it’s come back again and it’s spread and the chemo doesn’t seem to be working.” She rattles all this off in a hopeless sort of monotone. “We could be friends, if you like, what’s your mobile number?” I am saved by a nurse who comes to collect the woman and take her for treatment, and as soon as she is gone I burst into tears. This is not what I wanted to hear at all. Her negativity washes over me like a tidal wave, completely engulfing my usual jollity. “Hey, hey, hey,” soothes Michael, “Don’t let her upset you. You’re going to be just fine, come on, positive thinking!” He gives me a much-needed cuddle and I claw my way back up.

After a short while a male nurse called Tom comes to collect us. I thought the Chemo Ward was just a small ward but we turn a corner and it stretches into the distance, filled to the suspended ceiling with patients and their plus ones. “Chair or bed?” asks Tom. “Ooh, uppy downy bed, please!” I say. I get comfortable as Tom prepares the Cold Cap for me to wear. This is a highly unflattering bright blue helmet attached to a refrigeration unit by a long tube. It reminds me of the time I was in panto and a lovely group of children with special needs came backstage afterwards to meet us. Trying to be friendly, I patted one little girl on what I thought was her cycling helmet and announced cheerfully “I like your hat!” Then it suddenly dawned on me that they had all come by coach and her cycling helmet was actually one of those caps to keep your brain safe when you have a head injury. I probably killed the poor kid. Tom stretches the Cold Cap over my newly shortened hair (I had it chopped last week from below my shoulders into the obligatory Chemo Bob, so that if and when my hair starts falling out – the Cold Cap is not 100% guaranteed to work - it will be less of a shock) and fastens it under my chin. “I like your hat!” teases Michael.

Wowzers. That *is* cold. But then, I guess the clue was in the title. Whilst highly unpleasant, it’s not totally unbearable, and I force myself to stick with it. It's a bit like the brain freeze you get when you drink a milk shake too quickly, only longer lasting and without the benefit of the milk shake. After ten minutes or so, the chill gives way to numbness and I can barely feel it anymore. I have to wear the Cold Cap for an hour before chemo, all during treatment and then for an hour and half after for maximum effect. Tom uses the time to tell me about the kind of chemo I'll be having and its possible side effects. The list is endless, and ranges from nausea, constipation and/or diarrhoea, breathlessness, fatigue, risk of infection, rash, lack of appetite (yay!), red urine (ew!) and brittle nails to heart and lung problems, and much more besides. By the time he's finished taking me through it, I feel as though I have every symptom. And this is a treatment that is supposed to be making me better!

At around quarter to two a slight ripple of noise goes around the ward, and it seems to be concerning me. Ironically, today my first episode of *Doctors* is being broadcast, and I have just appeared on the telly in the ward as psycho kidnapper Sissy Juggins. A chorus of "Is that you?!"s greets me from patients and nurses alike, and I try my best to exude stardom and glamour from beneath my Cold Cap.

The surgeon left a canula in my portacath during the operation yesterday, so Tom is able to fit the drip for my chemo straight into it. "You must tell me immediately if you feel any burning in your chest," warns Tom, "And I'll stop treatment." Oh God, the pressure of self-diagnosis! Is that potentially fatal burning or merely wind? Thankfully, it all seems fine. As the chemo goes in, Michael holds my hand and whispers positive healing messages in my ear, with a few dirty words thrown in to make sure I'm concentrating. After 45 minutes or so it's done, and while I keep the Cold Cap on for a further hour and half, Tom explains to us the contents of a huge bag of drugs I have to take home and ingest over the next few months. There are various steroids, anti-sickness tablets, drugs to counteract this and drugs to prevent that and injections to boost bone marrow which the District Nurse Nerys Hughes will come and administer in our home. He's very thorough, is Tom, going over every detail several times to make sure I know exactly what I'm doing. I suppose we live in such a litigious society, where people sue faster than you can say "No win, no fee", that he can't be too careful.

At 6.30pm we are the last to leave, everyone else having gone home long ago. We are both exhausted, and Michael suggests we have Chinese takeaway for dinner. Ordinarily, I would never say no to noodles, but having spent all day trying to get healthy, I persuade him that perhaps something homemade involving broccoli would be a better idea.

SUNDAY 24th JANUARY

I am due to receive my first of five daily injections of bone marrow today (the chemo I am receiving depletes my stores, which could lead to infection) and I am currently waiting for the District Nurse Nerys Hughes to arrive. I have felt fine over the last few days, with none of the side effects that Tom warned me about. Apart from red urine, which is more surprising than painful. Thanks to all the pills I've been popping, I have not felt at all nauseous, nor felt any lack of appetite (damn you, anti-sickness drugs!) and I still have all my own hair and teeth.

The District Nurse arrives and it's not Nerys Hughes at all but a very nice lady called Narinder. I'm not even sure she came on a bicycle. Narinder pinches a roll of fat on my stomach and sticks the needle into me and, actually, I can't feel a thing. "You may feel a bit of pain in your shoulders and legs over the next few days," she warns. No, not me, I think smugly to myself, I'm invincible.

MONDAY 25th JANUARY

My shoulders and legs are absolute agony. The top of my back feels as though it's made out of concrete, and my calves throb with a constant dull ache. Poor Michael is enlisted to massage duty and after a lot of pounding here and there, eventually I feel some relief.

On the plus side, now the steroids are kicking in I am able to complete a difficult Sudoku in double quick time. It's quite extraordinary. My biro moves so quickly it's blurred. I have not yet tried my hand at shot putting, but I feel pretty sure that I would be Olympic standard. Perhaps I should put my name down now for 2012?

THURSDAY 28th JANUARY

People keep sending me articles that they've cut out of the newspaper or found on the internet about how eating camel dung and tree bark cures cancer, or how we must rid our houses of all electric equipment for optimum health, or how to grow a breast back by standing in a vat of donkey milk for twenty minutes a day, etc etc.* Whilst of course very kindly meant, these articles all contain completely conflicting advice. The truth is, nobody really knows what causes cancer, nor do we have a definitive cure just yet. And everybody is individual; the diet undertaken by the lady who allegedly cured her own cancer by eating nothing but fruit for a year would have killed someone who was diabetic, for instance. I'm a great believer in alternative medicine, but, please, a bit of common sense is vital.

* Please do not try these at home. I made them up.

MONDAY 1st FEBRUARY

I have never been a big fan of insurance, as I believe it to be the biggest legal con ever. You pay into an insurance scheme for years, then you make a claim and ever after are penalised with higher premiums for using the very service for which you've been paying. However, today I have to eat my words humbly. My Critical Illness Cover, which I was forced begrudgingly to take out when I got a mortgage, has paid up. Being an actress, I have been no stranger to varying lengths of unemployment over the years, but I can't pretend not to have been rather worried about what's going to happen over the next few months. Now, I have a bit of money to put by, so even if I don't work for a long time we shall be able to afford the mortgage at least. Thank you, cancer!

WEDNESDAY 10th FEBRUARY

We have a 9.30 Oncology appointment this morning before my second chemo treatment. I recognise a few people in the waiting room from my last appointment three weeks ago, and we exchange comradely hellos. I am shocked to see that several of the patients are noticeably more bald than last time, some now sporting that unmistakeable Chemo Pallor skin tone, and I am all too aware that I am looking at my own future.

After the obligatory couple of hours wait, I am weighed by a nurse so that the correct dose of chemo can be measured out by the pharmacist ("Hey! This nurse has sent us two patients' combined weights by accident!"), then I'm sent in to see Dr Cleavage. After a brief consultation to check how I've been since my last visit, she signs me off as good to go and we're off to the Chemo Ward.

The first thing we hear when we arrive at the waiting area today is a lady saying "Chemo ruined my liver and Herceptin messed up my intestines." Brilliant. I wonder what uplifting, heart warming titbit we'll hear next time?

I have Nurse Tom again, and he is surprised when, without his never-ending list of side effects from last week to listen to, I go straight to sleep while the Cold Cap does its thing. Apparently, I'm a phenomenon – he's never known anyone else to be able to sleep whilst wearing one. Maybe I have a freakishly thick skull like The Elephant Man? The canula that was fitted into my portacath during surgery was removed after my last chemo, and when Tom comes to fit the needle directly into the port today, there is a problem. The saline flush is going in, but he is unable to draw blood back into the tube, without which procedure chemo cannot happen. Tom summons his boss to have a look, and she decides that they need a longer needle as my portacath is quite deep. As they don't have any in stock today, Tom will have to go through a vein in my hand. This takes several attempts because of the uncharacteristically shy veins which necessitated the portacath in the first place, and I end up with more holes than an Emmental cheese. All this hooha means that once again we are the last to leave, and poor Tom didn't even get a lunch break! They all work so hard, these NHS nurses – pay them what they deserve, I say!

SUNDAY 14th FEBRUARY

Valentine's Day. We start the day with my fiancé proving yet again what an amazing and loving man he is by giving me my bone marrow injection. (We decided that rather than wait in indefinitely for the District Nurse to come - they are so busy, it could be any time from 10am til 3pm - we could just do it ourselves. After all, there's no vein to find or anything – it should be easy peasy.) Having watched it being done the last couple of times, Michael confidently takes the enormous syringe out of the box, and expertly pushes the plunger slightly to release any air bubbles. Sitting on the sofa, with me standing in front of him, he gently pinches a bit of my stomach and boldly sticks the needle in. "How was that?" he asks. "Didn't feel a thing," I lie slightly. "Phew!" says Michael, and then promptly bursts into tears. I have to say, I don't think I could have done it to him had the roles been reversed. He's my hero.

Medical procedure over with, Michael and I debate whether we should go to an art gallery, see a movie or go out for dinner to celebrate this day for lovers, but we decide instead on a more active and life affirming guided walk around Dickens' London. It's a crisp, cold February day, and with every step that I take on our two and a half hour ramble, I breathe the fresh, cool air deep into my lungs and exhale all the bad cells to join the Dickensian fog we are hearing about. I'm not going to let you get me, cancer, I think to myself, there's too much life to be lived.

TUESDAY 16th FEBRUARY

You know when you're in love, or you're in the depths of despair, and suddenly every song you hear seems to have been written just for you? Well, lately, every television show I watch has someone being diagnosed with breast cancer. *Brothers and Sisters*, *90210*, *Nurse Jackie*, *Gossip Girl, Hollyoaks* (please don't judge me for my choice of viewing) have all had similar storylines recently. And, of course, having cancer is always portrayed as being absolutely horrific and almost always terminal. Not one of these telly cancer 'victims' just gets on with it, as I and many of the patients I have met seem to be doing. No wonder people are terrified of getting cancer, if this is how it is portrayed in the media. Abandon hope, all ye who watch TV.

FRIDAY 26th FEBRUARY

I got an email a couple of days ago from my friend Emma Kennedy, with whom I appeared in *The Smoking Room*, asking me if I would like to be involved in raising money for the MoonWalk Breast Cancer charity. Unfortunately (!) I will be unable to take part in the actual 26 mile walk in May as I will be still undergoing treatment, but of course I will do everything I can to help our team, the Booby Dazzlers, to raise cash. I promptly sent out a request for sponsorship to everyone I know, and am most gratified to see today that my amazing friends and family have already donated nearly £2,000 to the cause. It feels great to be doing something proactive towards beating this bloody thing.

Tonight there is a memorial evening for my movement teacher from LAMDA, the drama school I attended for three years, who sadly died recently from….yes, you guessed it, breast cancer.

She was a lovely lady and an inspirational teacher, but I can't bring myself to go. I need to stay completely positive right now, and hearing about someone who died from the very disease I am currently fighting will, I'm afraid, be too difficult to bear.

One of the boys in my year died from a form of leukaemia four years ago and we had a memorial service for him where we all shed a lot of tears and shared a lot of laughs and memories. Drama Queen that I am, I can't help but imagine how people would take news of *my* death. How would reports of my demise be put, I wonder? "Oh, did you hear that Debbie…" Like that scene in *Roxanne* when Steve Martin as a modern Cyrano de Bergerac thinks of twenty ways to insult his own nose, the various options buzz around my head:

1) *Ethereal:* … has passed away. 2) *Paranormal:* …has passed over. 3) *Poetic:* …is at peace. 4) *Cheeky:* …has kicked the bucket. 5) *Shakespearean:* …has shuffled off her mortal coil. 6) *Wistful:* …has gone to that great chess game in the sky. 7) *Familial:* …is with her parents. 8) *Religious:* …is with God. 9) *Musical, Version 1:* has joined the Choir of Angels. 10) *Musical, Version 2:* is knock knock knocking on Heaven's door. 11) *Abandoned:* ...is no longer with us. 12) *Optimistic:* …is starting on the next big adventure. 13) *Physiological:* …has breathed her last breath. 14) *Biblical:* …has gone to meet her Maker. 15) *Sporting:* … has fallen at the final furlong. 16) *Terminal:* …has expired. 17*) Spooky:* …has given up the ghost. 18) *Pythonesque:* ...is an ex-person. 19) *Agricultural:* …has gone to permanent pastures new. Or, simply, 20) *Matter of Fact:* …is dead.

Perhaps my family will start a drama school scholarship in my name: The Debbie Chazen Award For Most Promising Short Fat Actress.

Yes, my legacy will live on.

WEDNESDAY 3rd MARCH

When we arrive at the hospital for my chemo today, we cause a bit of a stir; the first part of this diary was published over the last couple of weekends in *The Independent on Saturday* magazine, and it seems that EVERYBODY has read it! Thankfully, we don't see Mr K, especially since I received a letter from a breast cancer patient who thought she recognised Mr K as her own surgeon, and was resolved to hug him on my advice the next time she saw him. Poor Mr K. I hope he doesn't sue me for harassment.

By now, our third visit to the Chemo Ward, we've learnt all the names of the staff and had a brief chat *en passant* with most of them. It's a veritable United Nations of Nurses in here: Tom is Tasmanian, Vera is from Barbados, Seline is a Swiss Miss, Eric is from China, Elena was born in Bulgaria, Chiwitel and Mopelola are Nigerian, Claire's from New Zealand and Artemio is Filipino. They are all incredible, and it already feels like we are one big melting pot family.

This time I have Nurse Eric to administer my treatment. He squeezes the Cold Cap down over my scalp, hooks me up to the refrigeration unit and leaves my follicles to freeze for an hour. I feel a bit like one of those Make Your Own Ice Lolly kits you can buy at Lakeland. Head flavour. Yum.

An hour later, Eric returns to administer my chemo, but despite using a newly restocked longer needle, my portacath is still not working. After manfully struggling to flush it with saline for a while, Eric gives it up as a lost cause, and books me an appointment with the X-ray department next week to try to find out what's wrong. He then tries desperately to find the elusive vein in my right hand (he can't use my left because I've had a lymphectomy on that side), which as usual takes several attempts. For someone who has a fear of needles, I think I'm being very brave - over the past couple of weeks I've had more pricks than a prostitute.

The appearance of Kevin at the foot of the bed helps take my mind off things. Kevin, by his own admission, is an old hippy who, for the past seventeen years, has been giving massages to over four hundred patients and staff per week at this hospital.

If I won the lottery, my first purchase would not be a Porsche or a mansion in the country but a live-in masseuse, who would pummel, knead and soothe me whenever I chose. She wouldn't have much free time, I can tell you. Unfortunately, thanks to this bloody disease of mine, I'm not allowed to have body massages for the next five years as it might disturb the lymph and stir up a whole hornet's nest of troubles, but I gratefully accept a gentle and relaxing foot massage from him while we chat about his love of the States (he's travelled around fifty of them) and the fact that the Canadian NHS is fifteen years behind our own (he taught massage there.) Kevin radiates goodness and healing vibes, and after he leaves me Michael and I watch him work his magic on other patients around the ward. The female ones in particular blossom like flowers in his presence, and he flirts shamelessly back.

At 12.00 a nurse comes round with the lunch trolley, offering sandwiches, orange juice, yoghurts, fruit and Fudges. This is beginning to feel like one of those all-inclusive spa holidays – I lounge around in bed having a lovely sleep, disturbed only to be massaged and brought free food. I could get used to this.

MONDAY 8th MARCH

I've had an overwhelming response to the first part of my diary, and the letters and emails have been flooding in. One of the main reasons I'm writing it is to show people who are terrified of 'The Big C', as my sister and I were, that actually having cancer is not as bad as the fear of getting it. It never occurred to me that other cancer patients would want to read it, as I myself have been largely unable to read, watch or listen to anything cancer-related since my diagnosis, finding the information misleading at best and irritating at worst. Apart from all the wonderful and overwhelming messages of support I have received, I seem to have become something of a Cancer Agony Aunt – my facebook inbox has been flooded with messages from women who have just been diagnosed, or who are about to have their op, or are about to start treatment, all desperate for some reassurance that everything will be all right. I feel a huge responsibility towards these women, and to each one I write back words of comfort and support, and tell them that positivity is key.

I find it shocking that a lot of these women seem to be relatively young. In the UK, women are not routinely invited to have a mammogram until the age of 50, yet, according to the Cancer Research UK website, over 1,300 cases of breast cancer are diagnosed among women aged 35-39 each year. Surely this is evidence that mammograms should be offered to women from the age of 35? But I suppose it all comes down to funding – or, rather, the lack of.

TUESDAY 9th MARCH

My Scouse Uncle Mel, my late father's youngest brother, whose lovely wife Shila tragically died from breast cancer a couple of years ago, sent me the most brilliant and moving email today: a response to my own poem.

How wonderful to read your *Independent* story,
Surely to fill your life with much glory.
It's not often that I read from cover to cover
But your spirit and strength will help you recover

Your long since bad boobie will be sorely missed
And I'm sure that Michael goodbye to it kissed!
A sight to be missed by family and friends
And a few thousand others down the West End

Your last night's performance was professional and brave
So much of your humour to others you gave.
It's a long time since I've had such belly ache
And your talent shone through like icing on cake

Your boob said goodbye to the stalls and the gallery
And they all sang back to it, Thanks for the mammary

I'm so sorry your boobie's been taken away;
I believe they've got new ones quite cheap on eBay
I'll give them a ring and tell them your comin'
But even without it, take my word – you're all woman!

Your 3lb boob of the mark it fell short,
But you wouldn't want it on your nose as a wart!
So be thankful forever and make cancer pay
As they could've kept the boob and thrown YOU away!

So look to the future and universal fame -
Everyone will know you by face and by name.
Your Michael's a bigger diamond than he put on your finger
And with him always behind you, you'll be even bigger.

WEDNESDAY 10th MARCH

The results from my X-ray have come back. It seems that the line from my portacath is kinky (no sniggering, please) which means that the nurses will never be able to draw blood back from it, which means they won't be able to use it at all for my chemo, which means endless attempts at injecting it into the crappy veins in my right hand. It's a bit of a blow for my fantasy of breezing through chemo without any difficulty, but it can't be helped.

So, I'm now three down and three to go with chemo and, in the interests of medical science, here are the results of my self-administered Halfway MOT:

1) Hair on scalp still attached but looking a little thin. Noticeably more hair than usual gets washed down the plughole after shampooing and most mornings I wake up to find myself sharing my bed with a were-pillow.

2) Eyelashes, previously long and thick, have become short and stumpy, like the bristles on old toothbrush you keep to clean the

grouting. No amount of L'Oreal Volume Million Lashes mascara can make them look any better. Where are styling with lash inserts and post-production enhancement when you need them? Because I'm worth it.

3) Mouth full of sores and ulcers, but even this hasn't ruined my appetite, dammit.

4) Numbness all around left side and down left arm, at the same time as terrible itchiness in the area, which cannot be relieved as I cannot feel me scratching myself. Then again, my nails have become so flaky that I am having to keep them cut bitten-short, so I have nothing to scratch with anyway.

5) Almost constant rigid shoulders and painful calves due to our DIY injections, which Michael administers every day for five days starting on the fourth day after each chemo. I feel like The Thing out of *The Fantastic Four* – a creature hewn from rock.

6) Constant mild torpor and a general feeling of things being not quite right.

On the plus side, my legs, armpits, chin, upper lip and downstairs beard are all completely devoid of hair without any need for waxing. Plus, the patches of psoriasis that have been my constant companion since puberty have totally disappeared. Result!

Yes, there are definitely some positive things to have come out of having cancer. Becoming engaged. Having a cleaner. Discovering the joys of online grocery shopping. (They bring *food*! To your *door*!) Not feeling guilty if the only thing I feel like doing in the day is laying on the sofa watching shmaltzfest romcoms. Having a *bona fide* cast iron undeniable excuse not to attend things without having to make something up (there's only so many times one can use the "I've been captured by aliens" defence.) Not having to go down to the polling station in person because I've applied for postal voting. Having one's days filled with a steady stream of entertaining visitors. Being sent lovely care packages of magazines and chocolates by faraway friends. I've even been sent a homemade knitted bosom called Booberella by an old university friend to replace the one I've lost. It's not all bad.

Thank you, cancer.

WEDNESDAY 24th MARCH

To mark the midway point of my chemo sessions (these days, we find any excuse to celebrate), Michael and I just went away for a long weekend to York. We walked for miles (albeit slowly and taking pit stops along the way – much as I try to ignore it, chemo *is* tiring), ate lovely food (of course) and generally had a fantastic weekend getting away from it all and feeling *normal*. The change of scenery did wonders for us, but now it's back to the familiar friendly faces of the Chemo Ward.

Today I start a new chemo drug, one called taxotere. This has just as many possible side effects as the one I was on previously but in for a penny, in for a pound. Perhaps I'll finally start experiencing the nausea they keep promising? Honestly, I must be the only chemo patient in history not to have lost any bloody weight.

About an hour into the treatment, I suddenly start experiencing palpitations and Michael runs to fetch Nurse Tom. He assures me that they won't last long, and I try to ride it out. It's a fairly unpleasant session, but I try to imagine that I'm on a rollercoaster ride at the fairground and eventually it passes. From now on, Tom tells me, I will have to have premeds before chemo to prevent this from happening again. Good thing; I hate rollercoasters.

FRIDAY 26th MARCH

As I am going back into *Calendar Girls* in July, this morning I am due to take part in a nude publicity photo shoot with the new cast - Lynda Bellingham, Jan Harvey, June Watson, Ruth Madoc, Bernie Nolan and Brenda Gilhooley. I've already done this once before last year, and after that first nervous shucking off of our dressing gowns in front of the photographer it got easier as the day went on, until by the end we were all wandering around in the nuddy without a care in the world. This time round, however, I've only got one boobie to flash, and a whopping great dark red scar across my left side. I console myself with the knowledge that every single cast member will be feeling insecure about some part of her body, and at least my disfigured chest will distract from the size of my bum.

I've asked the producers to tell everyone involved in the shoot my situation beforehand, so it won't come as a shock to anyone. And, of course, everybody is incredibly kind and relaxed. We do our group shots first, hiding our tits 'n' bits behind various carefully placed props such as umbrellas and Christmas presents, then it's on to the individual photos. I am given two large saucepans to cover myself with. "You're ever so brave," says the make up lady as she powders my face. "I don't *feel* brave," I reply. "Mostly, I feel cold." And I do. It's bloody freezing in that studio with no clothes on.

At the end of the shoot we all crowd round the photographer's laptop to check out the digital results, and I am shocked to realise how I really look at the moment. One can never see the change in oneself just from looking in the mirror every day, but I'm afraid the camera never lies. My hair lies thin, flat and listless around my unmistakeably steroid-puffy face and my eyes, despite the false eyelashes, have a sort of haunted look.

Thank God for Photoshop.

FRIDAY 2nd APRIL

Whilst absent-mindedly trying to set free a bit of chicken from our Good Friday lunch from between my teeth, my heart descends to the soles of my feet as my fingers stumble across a huge hard lump on my gum. Oh my God. It's a tumour. It must be.

Whistling nonchalantly so as not to worry Michael, I move towards the computer and type "lump on gum" into Google. The first result on the list is a medical forum and as I enter the website and read the various answers to the question "Help! I have a hard lump on my gum – any ideas?!" from Snappy Sue in Norfolk, I am relieved to see that most of the replies seem to suggest it's only an abscess and that Snappy should visit her dentist to get it sorted. Phew. And then I read a bit further and discover that Lamplighter from Worthing thought that *he* had an abscess but it turned out to be Oral Cancer and he lost half his jaw.

"I'm just going to phone my sister!" I lie to Michael, as I take the phone down to the bedroom and shut the door. I dial the number for the Breast Clinic at the hospital and it rings and rings until the ansaphone kicks in. "I'm afraid there is no one here til Tuesday…" Of course there isn't, it's bloody Easter Weekend. I remember back to Christmas time, when I felt a lump in my right boobie and everyone had left for their Christmas break. Am I destined to spend every national holiday convinced that I have a tumour?

One of the worst things about having cancer is that it has turned me into a raving hypochondriac, which I never was before. Indeed, in the past I had no truck with illness at all, in myself or in others (although I might have professed sympathy for someone with a cold, underneath I would think "Get over it, you wimp!") Now, every slight symptom is significant. I had a terribly bad back the other day, and was convinced that I had a massive tumour growing down my entire left side – until Michael's auntie pointed out that I am now lopsided and my back was probably just re-aligning itself to cope with my new physique. And it’s not just tumours, oh no! One of the nicest men in the world, Gareth Carrivick, who directed me in *The Smoking Room*, had a bone marrow transplant from his sister to treat his leukaemia, and recovered nicely, only to die recently from pneumonia. So, of course, I can’t so much as clear my throat nowadays without having ominous thoughts about the state of my lungs.

I think the quickest and best course of action will be to make an emergency appointment with the dentist on Tuesday. It’s going to be a long wait til then….

TUESDAY 6th APRIL

It’s okay, it’s only an abscess. Of course it is. Probably caused, the dentist said, by my immune system being down at the moment and not being able to fight infection as well as usual. I feel like such a fool that I spent all weekend worrying over (relatively) nothing. Michael is cross with me for only telling him everything after the event, like I did last time, but I honestly would rather risk his wrath than have him worrying unnecessarily, especially as I’m sure this won’t be the last of my hypochondriac episodes. It’s better this way – one of us has to remain sane throughout, and judging from past form, it’s unlikely to be me. Michael’s malapropping mother Shirley has advised me that to boost my immune system I should start taking enchilladas. I presume she means echinacea, but you never know.

WEDNESDAY 7th APRIL

Martina Navratilova has breast cancer. This, surely, is proof, if ever it were needed, that cancer has no rhyme nor reason. I mean, compare the two of us – you couldn’t find two people more unalike. Martina: incredibly fit, healthy eater, probably doesn’t have to worry too much about paying the mortgage. Me: incredibly fat, healthy overeater, often unsure where the next pay check is coming from. Which just goes to show that, however much doctors say you can stave off breast cancer by eating well and taking lots of exercise, that's just not true. Tell that to poor Martina.

SATURDAY 10th APRIL

I seem to be spending most of my time these days altering my tops. I've become a bit paranoid about them gaping open and revealing my falsie to all and sundry, so I've taken to threading elastic through all the necklines and it seems to be working a treat. Perhaps this is an idea for a new enterprise? I could put an ad on Gumtree: PUT AN END TO OVEREXPOSURE PARANOIA WITH THE NEW PATENTED DEBBIE CHAZEN ELASTIC INSERTION METHOD©! SAY GOODBYE TO GAPING FOREVER! RESULTS NOT GUARANTEED. NO REFUNDS.

WEDNESDAY 14th APRIL

"Is this seat taken?" I ask a couple I haven't seen before as Michael and I settle down in the waiting area of the Chemo Ward. The lady shakes her head, and I can't help but notice that she looks absolutely terrified. I offer her a reassuring smile, but to my distress this only makes her burst into tears, which in turn makes me well up, and before I know it I am hugging a complete stranger.

It turns out that this is Roma's first chemo session, and she is understandably nervous. I think back to my first chemo session, and the Prophet of Doom who greeted me on my arrival. Weirdly, I realise, that very same woman is lying in a nearby bed, attached to a drip. It's been three months since I last saw her, and I am shocked by how terrible she looks. In that instant, it feels like fate that I am the first patient Roma and her husband Pete have talked to today, and I know that it is within my power to make the road ahead less petrifying for them.

I put on my brightest smile, and breezily talk them through what's in store, making it sound as much like a jolly tea party as possible. I’m cracking jokes left, right and centre and I swear if I was selling chemo door to door like the Encyclopaedia Britannica I would have had an empty suitcase in under a minute. My patter does the trick, and before long Roma and Pete (who has been chatting football – the universal male conversation starter – with Michael) are both relaxed and ready.

Every breast cancer patient is different: some, like me, have the op first, then chemo, then radio; some have chemo first followed by the op; others only have chemo or an op or radio – it’s all individual. In Roma’s case, she is having chemo first, then, depending on the outcome of that, the doctors will decide what’s next. So, for her, this is the first part of her treatment and she hasn’t had that long to get used to the whole idea.

Roma and I settle down in neighbouring beds, and for once I find that I cannot go to sleep during my treatment as I usually do; instead, I find myself listening to one of the nurses tell Roma the same endless litany of possible side effects that I was given on my first time. After today, I only have one more chemo session left; it’s hard to think that Roma has all of hers still to come.

SUNDAY 25th APRIL

It’s all over the Sunday papers that Bernie Nolan, who was about to take on the role of Cora alongside myself in the tour of *Calendar Girls*, has been diagnosed with breast cancer. Should other cast members start to worry? I mean, is there a *Calendar Girls* curse or something?! Obviously, she’s going to have to pull out, and while we’re on the subject, so am I, sadly. I have come to realise that I was a bit previous in thinking that I would be fit and able enough to go back into a full-on theatre job like that so soon after the end of treatment, but, as always, the producers David Pugh and Dafydd Rogers show endless kindness and patience and tell me that I can start rehearsals in September instead of July. It’s a relief to know I’ve got those couple of extra months to get my strength back.

WEDNESDAY 5th MAY

It's my last chemo today! We nearly didn't make it back, because we've just spent the last few days in a blissfully sunny Jerusalem with my family for my step-nephew's bar mitzvah, and that pesky Icelandic volcano Eyjafjallajökull (if ever a word needed a mnemonic, that one's it!) threatened to hold us all hostage, but it held off and here we are.

Roma and Pete are already there when we arrive at the Chemo Ward, and we rush over and greet each other like old friends. They've been busy over the past three weeks, our new Cancer Buddies. They've already read every book we recommended to them, they've Googled the first part of this diary in the online edition of *The Independent on Saturday Magazine*, and their children have downloaded sketches from *Tittybangbang* on YouTube; they tell us that they are both in a very positive mood because of meeting us. I'm impressed, and secretly flattered. I've never been anyone's inspiration before! No pressure, then.

Roma has been doing well over the past three weeks, but her hair is falling out in clumps, despite wearing the Cold Cap. I've been so lucky; although my hair is definitely much thinner on top, I haven't lost it, and I think that makes a huge difference to one's morale. I don't *look* like I have cancer, so I'm not reminded of it every time I look in the mirror. Roma's booked an appointment with the hospital's wig specialist, and she models a few for us – the blonde bob is a unanimous hit.

At half past five in the afternoon, the chemo drip is taken out of my hand for the last time. No more Cold Cap. No more trying in "vein" to find one. No more DIY injections after this next lot. My eyelashes, previously my best feature, will be able to grow back. The relief that we have got through the last four and a bit months is so great that Michael and I both have a little cry in the corridor outside as we leave. And then we remember that we're back again tomorrow for my first Herceptin treatment, so our feeling of freedom is somewhat short-lived. Oh well, it was nice while it lasted.

Of course, there is still that ever present little voice inside my head that keeps reminding me of all the patients I've met who are back in the chemo ward a few years down the line, going through the whole nightmare process for a second or even a third time, but every time it starts to speak I put my fingers in my ears mentally and sing "tra la la la la" until it goes away. As Lady Macbeth says, "These deeds must not be thought after these ways; so, it will make us mad." I have enough ill health to worry about without adding insanity to the mix.

THURSDAY 6th MAY

We have come to the Chemo Ward armed with books, iPods and game consoles today, because, as it is the first time I am being given Herceptin, we have to stay on the ward for six hours after the two hour treatment so they can monitor me for any allergic reactions.

Though it couldn't be used for my chemo, my portacath (or "porthole" as Michael's mother now calls it, having been corrected from using her previous name for it, "portcullis") is back in business, and my poor sieve of a right hand can have a well earned rest.

Michael sits beside my bed playing FIFA on his Playstation and I try to read my book, but I just can't concentrate. There are several different types of machines in the Chemo Ward, and each makes a variety of bleeping noises. There's one that sounds like the first three notes of Mungo Jerry's *In the Summertime*; another is the start of the theme tune to *The Magic Roundabout* and a third seems to be singing "Figaro! Figaro! Figaro! Figaro!" They all go off at random and frequent intervals, like the mating calls of rare electronic birds, and I find myself picking up where each bleep leaves off and humming the rest of each song in my head, until the call of another machine supplants it and I have to start humming *that* song. It's quite exhausting, and not a moment too soon I realise that I can stop the madness by listening to my iPod instead.

I amuse myself for a while searching for suitable songs to make into a Cancer Playlist: *Lump* by Presidents Of The USA; Duran Duran's *Undergoing Treatment*; *Chemo Limo* by Regina Spektor; *I Love Breast* by Leftside (ironic, really, since he only mentions the one and my own Leftside is now as flat as a pancake – well, as flat as a small speed bump); anything by Czech band Malignant Tumour; *Hospital* by The Used; Weezer's *We're All On Drugs* and, of course, Gloria Gaynor's *I Will Survive*. Any more suggestions, put them on a postcard please. Perhaps I'll make a CD and the hospital can sell it at the gift shop: *Now That's What I Call Cancer!*

The hours fly by like a penguin (think about it), and just when it seems that we're out of the woods, I start experiencing shortness of breath. It's not terrible and it doesn't last long, but Nurse Eric says that the next time I'm given Herceptin I'll have to have premeds. Hurrah! More drugs!

At last, long after everyone else has left, Eric tells us we can go home. It's been a very long day.

Our wonderful friend and taxi service Daniel is waiting for us in the car park as usual after treatment – I don't think either of us could face the bus home right now.

SATURDAY 8th MAY

I've been nominated as Best Villain by the British Soap Awards for my role as psychotic kidnapper Sissy Juggins in *Doctors*! Also in the frame is Larry Lamb as *Eastenders'* über evil Archie Mitchell so there's more chance of the Pope turning Jewish than me winning, but, best loser's smile polished to perfection, here I am with my on-screen brother and fellow psychotic Ivor Juggins about to go up the red carpet and into Television Studios.

The whole event starts with drinks and nibbles at 4pm (I don't know why they bothered with nibbles, none of the glamorous soap stars around us seem to be eating a thing; oh well, more for us!) and by the time the actual awards ceremony starts at eight I'm already exhausted from all the standing around chatting. After all, this is the most partying I've done since I started treatment. I've had to escape to the loo at least three times, just for the chance to sit down for a bit – oh, and overhear some *very* tasty gossip courtesy of the *Hollyoaks* girls who have all squeezed into the ladies' to touch up their lippy.

The ceremony lasts a couple of hours. Larry Lamb wins of course, and, even though it probably makes me look like a sore loser, I shun the after party, which promises to go on into the wee small hours, opting instead to take my goodie bag and be taken home to my fiancé and my bed by one of the waiting fleet of cars. There really is no place like home.

TUESDAY 11th MAY

I bumped into an old friend today whom I haven't seen in a while. Of course, there came the inevitable "How are you?", a question I have come to dread. How do I reply to that? Is he aware of my situation and genuinely asking after my health, in which case a relatively detailed yet positive response is appropriate? Or has he no idea, in which case there are two options: fill him in so that he doesn't hear from someone else and get upset that I never told him myself or mumble "Fine, thanks," and change the subject? I'm afraid I went for the simpler latter choice today, but I should really start practising some alternatives for future such occasions.

SATURDAY 16th MAY

Having spent months raising money via any means necessary, the London MoonWalk is now upon us. I say "us" – I have been unable to take part in my team's rigorous training schedule because I was undergoing chemo at the time (thank you, cancer!), so I am leaving it up to the rest of team Booby Dazzlers – which consists of two actresses, four journalists, a novelist and a TV presenter - to walk the 26.2 miles without me. But Michael and I have vowed to be there at the start line at midnight to see them off and then (after a good but guilty night's sleep) cheer them on at the finish tomorrow morning at around seven.

At 11pm, Michael and I make our way to the VIP area at Hyde Park, where the Booby Dazzlers are all getting hyped up for the walk ahead. This is the first time I've met some of the girls in person, although we have chatted a lot online, and I thank them all profusely for undertaking such a daunting task. Then one of the organizers ushers us through into an enormous tent, bursting at the guy ropes with women (and quite a few men) sporting customised bras and merrily stretching their hamstrings. It's incredibly moving to see all these amazing individuals and the atmosphere exuded by the sea of pink is electric.

We pick our way through the lunging legs towards the stage so we can hear the Welcome and Thank You speech that is being made by Nina Barough, the founder of the charity, then the large screen behind her flickers into life with a video about the MoonWalk and how the money that has been raised is being spent.

I have been on the verge of tears ever since we got here, but now, confronted with this emotionally charged VT, and its many images of breast cancer patients at varying stages of the disease, it suddenly overwhelms me that I am one of them, and that everybody here is doing something incredible for *me*. I can't stop sobbing, which, of course, sets Michael off, and before long we are engulfed by a Booby Dazzlers group hug.

Midnight approaches, and we all make our way to the start line, Michael and I on the outside of the rope that contains the walkers, and the Booby Dazzlers inside, where they are soon swallowed up into the surging tide of walkers. "Break a leg!"

we shout into the seething mass, “But not literally!” Suddenly a woman with “Mum” written on her top reaches over the rope and squeezes my arm. “I loved your article,” she shouts as she is swept away from us. In my fragile state, knowing that she knows I’ve got the same thing that killed her mother sets me off again .

We drive home in silence.

SUNDAY 17th MAY

Two trays full of steaming cups of tea and coffee in hand, at quarter to seven this morning we make our way to the finish line. A few exhausted bodies already litter the grass, recovering from their ordeal. We don’t have to wait too long until we spot the first cluster of Booby Dazzlers, followed soon after by the rest of them. They all look surprisingly perky, considering what they’ve been through.

Over a celebratory champagne breakfast at Claridges, we find out that the Booby Dazzlers have raised £26,000 in total, which is the most of any team this year! More champagne, please Waiter!

TUESDAY 18th MAY

I now have three tattoos.

Am I going through a mid-life crisis, or rebelling against a strict upbringing, or trying to express my innermost soul on the canvas of my skin? Have I been imprinted with a butterfly on my hip, or a swallow just above my buttocks, or maybe a Celtic band around my bingo wing? Do I now have Japanese symbols written on my personage which I think mean “love” and “success” but actually mean “Half price all week at Yo Sushi”?

No. I have three blue dots, one under each arm and the third in the centre of my chest, and this is what happens to you when you are about to start radiotherapy. Their purpose is to help the radiotherapist line the patient up properly under the machine so the treatment reaches the right spot.

But do they have to be blue? I look like I've been raped by a Sharpie.

In Morse code, three dots denote the letter "S". Perhaps when this is all over I can pretend I'm cool and that "S" stands for the name of my gang or ting.

WEDNESDAY 26th MAY

There is a charity based at the hospital where I am being treated which offers free alternative therapies to breast cancer patients such as acupuncture, reflexology, pilates, reiki, counselling, yoga and more, and over the next few weeks I have booked myself several sessions, planning to take full advantage of such a wonderful service.

This morning, before I go upstairs for my Herceptin treatment, I am doing something called Soul Therapy, which apparently "combines hands on healing with therapeutic talk and other useful techniques to support the client at every level: mind, body and soul." Sounds great.

And it is. One hour and a cathartic cry later, I feel on top of the world.

I'm going to be having Herceptin every three weeks for the next year, so I feel it's imperative that it simply becomes part of the routine of life. To this end, I have forbidden a protesting Michael from taking more time off work and coming with me today. I need to go it alone from now on.

Nurse Elena administers my premeds of panadol and piriton and tells me that the latter will most likely make me drowsy. “Not me,” I tell her, “I need a horse tranquiliser to send me to sleep.” She reminds me of this when she comes to wake me up a couple of hours later.

We see on the news tonight that they have developed a possible breast cancer vaccine, which in tests has worked in mice and which will now be tested on humans. Although there is the usual addendum that women should try to eat healthily and take plenty of exercise to ward off the disease. Hmmm. Tell that to Martina Navratilova.

FRIDAY 28th MAY

I’ve finally felt up to having my first audition since I became ill today. It was for a new three part TV show, and I’d come fully prepared: I’d learnt the lines, practised my Irish accent and put on clothes and make up suitable for the character so that I looked the part.

(Not every actor dresses up for auditions, by the way, but I find it helps. Usually it’s something like a shawl to suggest a Bohemian type, or a bright red lipstick to show someone who’s outgoing and fun loving, or bunches and drawn on freckles if I want to look younger. (Yes, I did that once. No, I didn’t fool anyone.) I remember when I went up for the role of Fanny Squeers in ITV’s *Nicholas Nickleby*; in the original Dickens novel, I noted that Miss Squeers wore her hair in five curls on top of her head and had “…a remarkable expression of the right eye, something akin to having none at all.” So, I duly piled my 80hair into five topknots and plastered my left eye with makeup, leaving the other one bare. I looked ridiculous. I met the director and the production team, had a little chat about the character and did my audition. *And nobody said a word about* *how I looked*. Perhaps they thought it was a fashion statement? Anyway, I got the part.)

But I digress.

“So, what have you been up to lately?” the director asks me, a showbiz version of the dreaded “How are you?”

Now, normally, at this point in an interview an actor would reel off a list of all the jobs he or she has done in the past six months or so - or make some up if necessary – in order to appear so very in demand that the director should count themselves lucky that the actor managed to squeeze this audition into his or her very busy schedule.

But this time the question lies hanging in the air as flashbacks of my diagnosis, operation and chemo run through my mind.

What should I say? “Oh, I’ve just finished filming a new soap called *Breastenders*.” ? Or perhaps “I’ve just done a six month stint as Patient No 1 in *Cancer: The Musical!*” ?

“Erm…not much,” I reply, completely thrown.

I didn’t get the part.

TUESDAY 1st JUNE

Like most hospitals, I’m sure, the parking situation is horrendous. There are very few spaces and the hourly rate is extortionate, which means that in the past we have either come by bus or taxi, or relied on the kindness of family and been driven in by my sister or my Uncle.

But starting today – Oh, joy of joys! Oh, dream of dreams! - I have a golden ticket: a pass for free parking, issued to all radiotherapy patients. I drive straight past the line of cars that stretches from the car park far down the road.

“Oy!” shouts the man in the front car, angrily winding down his window, “There’s a queue, you know!” I smile sweetly at him. “I’m having radiotherapy,” I beam, edging my way into one of the specially marked bays, and the man looks suitably mortified that he dared to challenge someone with (whisper its name) *cancer*.

It’s a good thing it’s quite chilly today (thank you, global warming), because for the duration of radiotherapy I am not allowed to wear deodorant. *Note to self: do not raise arms in air for the next three weeks. I’ve also been advised to wear loose fitting cotton and invest in some aqueous cream. Unlike most other departments of the hospital, appointments in the Radiotherapy Suite run more or less to schedule, so I barely have time to book a fantasy holiday from one of the stack of tantalising *Traveller* magazines in the waiting room before I am called and told to change into a hospital gown.

There’s a beautiful backlit photo of my favourite kind of tree - cherry blossom – on the ceiling of the treatment room, and I pretend that I’m lying on the grass underneath it as the nurses grapple me into position, lining my tattoos up with the markers on the radiotherapy table. Then they leave the room, and accompanied by a loud buzzing noise the Dalek plunger-like arm of the machine slowly moves over my body like the sun travelling across the sky. I can’t feel a thing. And it’s all over in a matter of minutes.

I don’t know what all the fuss is about. Piece. Of. Cake.

TUESDAY 15th JUNE

I’ve been very smug for about a week or so about how easy radiotherapy was proving to be. Then the huge blisters started to appear. And the soreness set in. And the fatigue overwhelmed me. Serves me right.

I can’t wear my bra because it’s too painful over the blisters so I can’t go out anywhere (apart from the hospital), but then again I’m so tired all the time that I don’t really want to go out anywhere. The highlight of the past three weeks really has been the free parking.

It’s my last session today, I’m relieved to say. I asked Michael to buy a couple of tins of posh biscuits and a thank you card, and I get quite emotional when I hand them over to the nurses after the Dalek has done his thing for the last time. “I hope I never see any of you again!” I say to them all, “In a good way!”

So that’s another hurdle crossed off the list. Get thee behind me, radiotherapy, Debbie has left the building.

TUESDAY 29th JUNE

After a couple of weeks rest, and several tubs of aqueous cream, my burns are healing nicely and I’m feeling much more lively, so Michael and I decided to celebrate the end of radiotherapy with a long weekend in Lille.

We’ve been away three times already this year (York, Jerusalem and now Lille) which does seem rather decadent (thank you, health insurance!) but each trip has been a timely celebration, a much needed change of scene, and an opportunity to recharge our batteries for the next step.

A very odd thing happened on Saturday afternoon. I nipped into the loo during a long and leisurely lunch, and as I was washing my hands the lady in the next cubicle asked if I could pass her some loo roll, which I did. When she came out, having noticed my distinctly non-Lilloise accent, she asked where I was from. We got to chatting and one thing led to another. It turns out she is a breast care nurse in a nearby hospital, and she herself had breast cancer last year.

And that’s how I found myself comparing mastectomy scars with a total stranger in a loo in Lille. Small world, eh?

We got back home last night to find the following email in my inbox:

Madam Rita Osborne
42 Dryden Street
Leicester, L15

As you read this, I don't want you to feel sorry for me because I believe everyone will die someday.Please do not be surprise the way I got your contact, its obvious that this proposal will come to you as a big surprise.This is because we have not met you before but I am inspired to send you this email,my Name is Rita Osborne suffering from cancerous ailment. I am married to Sir Williams Osborne an Englishman who is dead.My husband was into private practice all his life before his death.we live together as husband and wife which lasted for three decades without a child. My husband died after a protracted illness,My husband and I made a vow to uplift the down- trodden and the less-privileged individuals as he had passion for persons who can not help themselves due to physical disability or financial predicament.

I can adduce this to the fact that he needed a Child from this relationship,which never came,when my late husband was alive he deposited the sum of Ten Million Pounds(10,000,000.00 Million Great Britain Pound Sterlings)which were derived from his vast estates and investment in capital market with his bank here in UK. Presently, this money is still with the Bank. Recently, my Doctor told me that I have limited days to live due to the cancerous problems I am suffering from.

Though what bothers me most is the stroke that I have in addition to the cancer. With this hard reality that has befallen my family, and me I have decided to donate this fund to you and want you to use this gift which comes from my husbands effort to fund the upkeep of widows, widowers,orphans, destitute, the down-trodden, physically challenged children,barren-women and persons who prove to be genuinely handicapped financially.

I took this decision because I do not have any child that will inherit this money and my husband relatives are bourgeois and very wealthy persons and I do not want my husband hard earned money to be misused or invested into ill perceived ventures. I do not want this money to be misused hence the reason for taking this bold decision. I am not afraid of death hence I know where I am going. I do not need any telephone communication in this regard due to my deteriorating health and because of the presence of my husband relatives around me,I do not want them to know about this development.

How do people get away with this nonsense? I mean, she's detracting from the admirable charitable work performed by all those nice people who contact me regularly from the bank of Nigeria…

FRIDAY 2nd JULY

I've been feeling uncharacteristically low these past couple of days. I'm feeling a bit helpless and vulnerable and I keep bursting into tears for no reason and the fact that I've got the most excruciating pain in my unmentionable whenever I pee and keep sweating like a frying onion even when sedentary is not helping much.

And then it hits me; I've been taking Tamoxifen tablets for a few weeks now, a hormonal therapy "wonder drug" prescribed to many patients with oestrogen sensitive type breast cancer, and when I Google "Tamoxifen side effects" a myriad of symptoms appears on the screen. Depression – check. Thrush – check. Hot flushes – check. Now all I have to left to look forward to are "…blood clots, insomnia, strokes, and deepening of the voice." Brilliant. I can handle listening to Joni Mitchell endlessly, I can just about bear going around with natural yoghurt in my knickers and I'm not averse to carrying a fan around with me at all times, but if I suddenly turn into Barry White I'm going to have to sue.

MONDAY 12th JULY

Back in May, my sister Lynette and I went and had a Genetics Test to determine whether we have the BRCA1/BRCA2 genes associated with breast and ovarian cancer. Considering our mother died of ovarian cancer, and both our cousin and I have had breast cancer, Lynette and I have been resigned to the fact that it must simply run in the family. But today we got the results and much to our surprise and relief we are both negative. So, it really is just down to bad luck then?

In other news, the side effects from the Tamoxifen seem to come and go, and although thankfully my voice is yet to descend to *basso profundo*, I am now however experiencing terrible insomnia. I'm up to four thousand sheep by now but they're really not helping. So I go to bed each night armed with books, Sudoku puzzles and podcasts and somehow I manage to get through the wakeful hours. I console myself with the thought that I'm probably getting no less sleep than all my friends who have small children and *I* don't have to change nappies or think about catchment areas.

MONDAY 26th JULY

Well, here's a slightly worrying development: last week I had a routine CT scan to check on my progress, my first since treatment began, and I have just received a phone call from one of the Breast Care nurses, someone called Miriam. When I was first diagnosed, the scan showed a lump on my spleen as well as the two in my breast. The doctors said that if *that* was a tumour, it would be a secondary from the primary breast cancer, so they proposed to treat the primary first and hoped that the chemo would also destroy the secondary. But according to this latest scan, it seems that the lump on my spleen has not only stayed put, it has grown by two millimetres and Miriam wants me to come in first thing tomorrow for a blood test. She will be there to answer any questions we might have.

This is not hypochondria. This is real.

TUESDAY 27th JULY

Miriam is there to meet Michael and me in the Haematology Department and I'm sorry to say that we both take an instant dislike to her. She obviously means well, but she has this downbeat nasal sing-song whine to her voice and a hangdog face to match. It's the sort of face that says "Oh dear. Poor you. You've got *cancer*." Everything about her manner suggests that she knows you are a hopeless case who shouldn't bother buying any long playing records as you almost certainly don't have long enough left to listen to them. "Let's find somewhere private to chat, shall we?" she bleats, head on one side and bottom lip thrust out to denote compassion. "I think the Bereavement Room is free." Oh, good choice.

She re-iterates mournfully the results of the CT scan and with great melancholy confirms that one of the Oncologists will see us tomorrow to give us the results of today's blood test. And then with almost comic timing, she pats my arm and pronounces in funereal tones "Try not to worry too much."

I want to punch her stupid puppy-eyed head in.

On the way out, we bump into Roma and Pete. Roma's also had a spot of bad news; she has a confirmed secondary on her liver, so she will need Herceptin for the rest of her life. When she asked how long that might be, the Breast Care nurse replied "Well, put it this way – you'll never be an old lady." They are understandably angry about this patronising answer, and from the way they talk about her, it soon becomes clear that the nurse was none other than Miriam, who clearly wins the award for

Most Annoying Person on the Planet. I really hope we never see her again.

WEDNESDAY 28th JULY

"Hiiiii," intones Miriam dolefully as she shows us into the office of one of the Oncologists before sitting down on a spare chair. Clearly, she is here to stay.

We've not met this Oncologist before. She's very nice, very matter of fact and instantly much more comforting than Nurse Cancer Face over there in the corner. The results of my blood test are inconclusive, so they are sending me to a private clinic in Harley Street for a PET scan, as the hospital doesn't have that kind of equipment. "Have you any questions?" she asks.

"Erm, yes," I reply, squeezing Michael's hand like a stress ball, "How likely is it that this lump on my spleen is cancer? And if it is - what then?"

The Oncologist considers her words carefully. "Well, if it *is* cancer, and under the circumstances it is more than likely to be so, we could try a different kind of chemo," she suggests.

"Can't you just remove the lump? Or the spleen? I mean, who needs a spleen these days? Isn't it like a vestigial tail or something?" I ask.

"I'm afraid it would be inoperable," she replies gently.

Michael and I deflate like a couple of balloons.

"Let's get the PET scan done first, then we can take it from there, okay?" she reassures us. "Is there anything else?"

Suddenly I remember that on Friday we have a long-standing appointment with my surgeon Mr K to discuss the possibility of a breast reconstruction. There doesn't seem much point now. I ask Nurse Cancer Face to cancel it for us.

"Of *course*," she croons, nodding her intensely irritating head.

When I was diagnosed last November, I faced the possibility of dying stoically. I knew I had lived a great life and done pretty much everything I wanted to do (apart from snog Jonny Depp – don't worry, Michael understands.) But somehow now, having gone through all the chemo and the radiotherapy and endless injections and side effects and come out smiling, it all feels very unfair. Was it all in vain? Is there an unavoidable cancer-shaped bullet out there with my name on it after all?

I remember when I was about eighteen I was walking home alone late one night, and I stopped to tie up my shoelace. Suddenly, a lorry veered off the road and onto the pavement in front of me, crashing into the window of an optician's. If I hadn't stopped when I had, I would have been killed without a doubt.

I've cheated death twice now – perhaps it's third time unlucky.

THURSDAY 29th AUGUST

I think my late mother might have been Colonel Sanders, inventor of Kentucky Fried Chicken's 11 secret herbs and spices. No, don't call the men in white coats, let me explain: every time I see the KFC sign, with its red and white cartoon of the Colonel, it reminds me of a certain photograph I have of Mum. It was taken in the 80's, so it has faded with time, and although she never had a beard (thankfully) there's something similar about their smiles and spectacles which has led me to the admittedly unlikely conclusion that my late mother has somehow been reincarnated as a fast food icon. So whenever I see the Colonel, I always offer up a quick “Hello Mummy!” This is not a new phenomenon for me; shortly after she died, I felt myself obliged to obey the Law of Any Single Girl Living Alone Must Have A Cat by adopting a black and white kitten called Oscar. He was an adorable little thing, and the minute he arrived in my flat he made a beeline (or catline) towards the crochet blanket Mum had made years ago, eschewing the basket I had bought for him, and snuggling into the blanket which I had folded up over the sofa. With the complete rationality of a recently bereaved daughter, I took this as a sure sign that my mother had clearly been reborn in this little bundle of fur. Which gave his habit of constantly widdling on my bed the most uncomfortable connotations, I can tell you! At least Colonel Sanders has never urinated on my duvet, to my knowledge. We have a KFC down our local high street, and today as I run some local errands I find myself lingering outside the restaurant on the opposite side of the road, looking up at the cheery face on the sign and mouthing the words “Please look after me, Mum. Don’t let it be another tumour. Please?”

I’m quite sure you already think I should be sectioned for asking for help from a fried chicken conglomerate, but I could swear I saw Colonel Chazen wink.

TUESDAY 3rd AUGUST

It’s not been the best week. Time has limped along like a snail on crutches, every day an endless wait until the next one. What’s made it even worse is that suddenly we’ve been flooded with invitations to all sorts of parties and weddings, plus I’ve been asked to do a few episodes of *Coronation Street* (as a rather annoying social worker called, ironically enough, Miriam) plus *Calendar Girls* is looming over the horizon once more. We can’t reply to any of these offers, as we simply do not know what the future holds at the moment. Our lives are currently being held in a state of suspended animation like a Damien Hirst cow in formaldehyde.

In the letter I received from the Harley St private clinic, I am warned that a PET scan is extremely expensive so I must give them plenty of warning if I need to cancel. How amazing that the NHS is spending all this money on me! I have absolutely no complaints about the NHS (except, perhaps, for the waiting times) but my goodness, here's posh! The clinic waiting room is all very tastefully decorated with original oil paintings on the elegant grey walls and a pot of fresh filter coffee brewing away next to a tray of china mugs and a tin of superior biscuits. There's none of your hotel room-type watercolour prints of gardens or paper cups or packets of custard creams here - oh no.

Nor is there any waiting. Bang on time, a friendly Australian nurse comes to fetch me. Michael stays in the waiting room while I am taken to a small room with a bed and a chair in it. I change into a hospital gown (noticeably softer than your NHS type) and then the nurse has a go at injecting the radiotracer into my hand. It takes several attempts, of course – some things don't change, even in the private sector. I am then told to lie down and rest for an hour, to allow the liquid to travel round my body. I hope it's wearing comfortable shoes, it's got a long way to go.

I manage to fall asleep, probably due to not having slept much over the past few days thanks to a mixture of Tamoxifen and worry, and have to be gently woken up in order to go through to the scanning room, where I promptly fall asleep again during the thirty minute scan. Laying still has never been so easy! Before I know it, it's all over and the nurse is telling me we can go home. How we've enjoyed seeing how the other half live.

Now all we need to do is wait 16,520 minutes til we get the results next Wednesday. And counting.

FRIDAY 6th AUGUST

I’ve been re-reading *The Secret*, a book that encourages positive mental attitude and one that helped us when I was first diagnosed, and on its advice I have been doing some visualisation of our meeting with the Oncologist next week. Whenever I start to feel scared (*quite* often), I imagine the following:

Nurse Cancer Face (sadly, I seem unable to exclude her from the picture, but I’m damned if I’ll give her any lines) *shows us into the office. I am wearing the “Abracadabra” lucky charm necklace Michael bought me last year, he is wearing his lucky pants* (don’t ask.) *The Oncologist looks up, and before we’ve even sat down, she says “Well, the good news is, it’s not cancer!” Fireworks, joy all round* (even Nurse Cancer Face breaks into what could be a small smile), *tumultuous applause and end of scene.*

Over and over again, I go through this scenario in my head, sometimes out loud. Look, I know it sounds daft, but it’s the only thing I *can* do right now. We are otherwise helpless.

WEDNESDAY 11th AUGUST

Our 16,520 minutes of waiting time are almost up. Michael and I sit hand in hand in the waiting room, staring at but not really watching *Cash in the Attic* (or, as Michael’s malapropping mother calls it, *Cash in the Oven*) on the plasma screen TV in front of us. I am wearing the “Abracadabra” lucky charm necklace Michael bought me last year, he is indeed wearing his lucky pants. Just as it becomes clear that the attic owner’s dream of a new carpet for the lounge may well become a reality, Nurse Cancer Face materializes before us like Dracula (I *knew* she’d be around.) “Hiiiii, follow me,” she beckons lugubriously (and I *knew* she’d give herself lines, the cheeky mare.)

Taking deep breaths all the way, we walk the plank after her down the seemingly ever-lengthening corridor. The scene I've practised over and over swims into my head: *The Oncologist looks up, and before we've even sat down, she says "Well, the good news is, it's not cancer!" The Oncologist looks up, and before we've even sat down, she says "Well, the good news is, it's not cancer!" The Oncologist looks up, and before we've even sat down, she says "Well, the good news is, it's not cancer!"*

Nurse Cancer Face knocks on the door of the office and in we all go. The Oncologist looks up, and before we've even sat down, she says "Well, the good news is, it's not cancer!" And then, departing from the text a little, she adds, "In fact, the scan came back stonkingly negative!"

I am so stunned that my visualisation has been made almost picture perfect flesh before me (well, apart from the fireworks and the applause) that for a long moment the significance of her words doesn't sink in. And then I look at Michael and he is grinning from ear to ear. And yes, Nurse Cancer Face is grinning too, from – well, one side of her chin to the other. Like the time last year when we were told the cancer had not spread, we have been given a death row pardon once more.

One of the few things I remember from my Russian studies at university is the story of how the author Dostoevsky was arrested for being a radical and sentenced to death. On the day of his execution, he and his fellow prisoners were led through all the initial steps of execution, some of them already tied to posts and awaiting death, when news came that the Tsar had issued a reprieve. For some reason, this account made quite an impression on me – how must it have felt to think he was about to die, then be acquitted at the last minute? All right, so I haven't exactly been tied to a post to await the firing squad, but in that one instant the clouds have lifted and all is well with the world once more. Now we can look forward to the future without fear. Now we can write in pen over all the pencilled-in invitations and job offers in the calendar. I'm going to be in *Corrie*! I shall play my character like Nurse Cancer Face! Life resumes normal service at last.

"So if it isn't cancer, what the hell is it?" I ask the Oncologist.

"Well, we don't know," she admits. "It might be something you've had inside you for many years, and if it hadn't been for your breast cancer we may never have known about it. We propose to leave it well alone, but keep monitoring its progress to see if it gets any bigger or starts causing you pain."

Sounds good to me.

Michael and I practically skip out of the room. We can't stop smiling and hugging each other and we keep repeating what the Oncologist said: *"In fact, the scan came back stonkingly negative!"* Every time I have a hypochondriac thought, I'm going to say that to myself.

To celebrate the good news, we decide to spend the afternoon at one of our favourite places, the cinema, where we watch the new version of *The Karate Kid.* It is, of course, the best film we have ever seen. It's as if we have both taken LSD; the world and everything in it seems brighter, more sharply focused and entirely wonderful.

All in all, it's been a perfect day. I'm glad I spent it with you.

FRIDAY 27th September

In my naiveté, I assumed having breast reconstruction would be as simple as cutting my flesh open along the mastectomy scar, stuffing in a wibbly wobbly silicone bag and sewing me up again, after all of which I would have two perfect bazongas once more. But the photos the plastic surgeon shows me at my appointment today show a very different picture. For a start, radiotherapy means I am not a suitable candidate for an implant, as the skin in that area is now too thin to stretch over it. So what the plastic surgeon proposes to do is take some of the fat off my back and move it round to the front. Whilst the thought of having a backfatectomy is very tempting (after all, there's enough podge there to turn me into Artemis, the many-breasted fertility goddess), the images of the women who have had this procedure do not sell it to me. They all have massive scars across their backs, and none of them sport even a vaguely matching set of boobs. One up, one down, one hanging straight while its neighbour veers off to the left - it's a disappointing reality. I leave the hospital slightly depressed. Do I really want to put myself through another operation and several months off work again just so my necklaces will hang straight, like the opening sequence of *Thoroughly Modern Millie*? I swallow my vanity and my pride and, with Michael's assurance that he loves me no matter how many boobies I have (although I suspect he might actually be quite aroused if I *was* Artemis), I make the tough decision to put my dreams of reconstruction to rest. Never again will I drop peas accidentally down my cleavage. Never again will I be able to use the crevice as a handy holder for a spare hankie or a biro or some loose change. Never again will I be able to perform Molly Ringwald's party trick from *The Breakfast Club*, when she secures a lipstick between her breasts and applies it to her mouth by bending her head. (Although to be honest I've never been able to do that - too many chins.)

SUNDAY 5th SEPTEMBER

This week was both our fifth anniversary and my birthday, two events we thought at one stage might never happen. So we decided to make use of the gap between my filming *Coronation Street* last week (it was legendary!) and the soon forthcoming rehearsals for *Calendar Girls* by booking an impromptu week in

Venice (our last holiday for a while, I promise!) to mark both occasions.

Venice is the most romantic city on earth, of course, and we take full advantage of that fact; our anniversary finds us gliding down the *Canale Grande* in a gondola, whilst my birthday is spent taking in the sumptuousness of the Doge's Palace and the Basilica of St. Mark before we get a motorboat down to the Venice Film Festival, which happens to be on at the time.

It's an amazing, restorative, life-affirming week, all the stress of the past month vanishing under the jewel green waters that surround us.

MONDAY 13th SEPTEMBER

And so we're back we're this all started – *Calendar Girls.* It's an almost entirely different cast this time, which includes Lynda Bellingham, Jan Harvey, Ruth Madoc and Michelle Collins, who has replaced Bernie Nolan. Although I've done a few days here and there on various, this is my first time back in full time work since I had to leave the same show last December, and it feels great.

The director pulls me aside to discuss what I am going to do for the calendar pose this time; obviously, I'm not going to be able to flash both boobies like last time. We decide that instead of standing behind the gingham table, I'm shall be laying on top of it amongst all the marmalade-making paraphernalia, the left side of me hidden behind a giant bag of sugar and my one remaining boobie covered by a wooden spoon like last time. Of course, the devil in me can't resist adding a moment of naughtiness: instead of lifting my spoons in the air like last time, I am now cocking my leg in the air in triumph after the photo has been taken! Despite the fact that I will be wearing two pairs of knickers and 20 denier flesh-coloured tights, I pity anyone who has bought seats in the boxes on the left and hope to God they won't have brought binoculars.

MONDAY 4th OCTOBER

We open tonight in Stoke-on-Trent, a friendly town in Staffordshire. There's the usual flurry of going round the dressing rooms dispensing first night cards and gifts, and before we know it the Stage Manager's voice comes over the tannoy to announce "the half": it's time to get into costume and make up, the show is about to begin.

The packed audience laps it up as they always have, screaming with laughter especially at the calendar scene. I am pleased to note that my cocked leg brings forth gales of hilarity rather than waves of disgust as I feared, nor does anyone in the left side boxes faint over the side. All well and good.

At the curtain call, we all take our bows and, in an unstoppable Pavlovian response, I find myself bursting into tears as we walk off stage. The last time I took a bow after performing in this play, I was about to go off and have a mastectomy and a year of treatment. Now I'm back, 3lbs lighter on the left hand side, eyelashes not quite up to full strength as yet, but I'm here.

I don't want anyone to see me emoting all over the place, so I go to find a quiet corner I can sob in, completely forgetting that half the cast are going to come past any second on their way to the dressing rooms. I'm rumbled, but I don't mind, as we all share a group hug and a moment of cast solidarity.

Now that that inevitable moment is out the way, I know I can relax and enjoy the rest of the run.

SUNDAY 12th DECEMBER

Well, it's all over bar the shouting. We did our final show of the tour last night, ending in a particularly nice theatre in Brighton, where we've been for the last two weeks. Roma and Pete and Roma's sister came to see the show here, and she is in fine form. It turns out that the lump on her liver has responded well to chemo and it is no longer considered "life-threatening", although she will still have to have Herceptin long-term as a precaution. So sod off, Nurse Cancer Face with your "You'll never be an old lady"! The truth is that although huge strides are being made every day with cancer treatment, doctors still don't know much about it really. And I've also realised that every patient is entirely individual - what's effective treatment for one does not work for another and vice versa.

Beginning and (hopefully) ending my Time of Cancer with *Calendar Girls* has had the effect of truncating the bit in between, so it almost (but not quite) feels as though it never happened. When I think back over the last year, it seems so surreal. Sometimes I turn to Michael and ask him "Can you believe I've had cancer?!" To which he responds with a shake of his head and a great big hug. Which, believe me, is even more effective than chemo.

I went to a talk given by author and former breast cancer patient Stella Duffy the other day (I hate to use the word "survivor" – in my family, that word has connotations with the Holocaust, and although what I've been through recently hasn't exactly been a walk in the park, I can't really compare the two) and with her kind permission I would like to end with her words:

"*I didn't 'win a battle' or 'fight successfully' or any of those other awful military metaphors people use to talk about disease. My dear sister-in-law who's just died after living splendidly with* *bowel cancer, then liver cancer, for three and a half years isn't a loser because she died in the end. She didn't 'lose her battle'. She was just unlucky. I am very lucky to be alive. But I get tired of people saying I'm lucky.*

Because aren't we all?"

See you on the other side.

EPILOGUE - March 2014

So, what happened next?

After finishing writing my diary, I had another five months of Herceptin to go and it all became fairly routine. I would go in to the hospital once every three weeks, where I fell into a deep sleep for a couple of hours whilst the drugs went to work, then I went home. I was asked by the Research Department if I wanted to take part in clinical trials to see if six months treatment works just as well as twelve, but I'm afraid I wasn't brave enough to do it. Even though only having to go into hospital regularly for half the time would undoubtedly have been a bonus, in my head I had figured with treatment lasting a whole year, and I chickened out.

The lump on my spleen, according to my latest scan, has shrunk by two millimetres, so it's looking unlikely that it will ever burst out of my stomach like the alien did out of John Hurt as I once feared. My eyelashes came back after a few months, but my post-chemo cold cap thinning hair is only just returning to full thickness and health.

I finished my last Herceptin treatment on June 1st 2011, just over a year and a half after receiving my diagnosis. I'm still taking Tamoxifen daily, and will do for the next year or so. My calves continue to be incredibly sore as a side effect, and now I wake up daily with numb and painful fingers which need to be shaken out for several minutes before the feeling comes back, but all in all it's a small price to pay for the protection this wonder drug is supposedly offering. Latest news reports suggest that it may be of optimum benefit to continue taking Tamoxifen for ten years rather than five, or even for life, so we shall see what happens when my five years are up. In November of this year, if I remain cancer-free up til then, I will officially be in remission.

Two years ago, on January 19th 2012, Michael and I...no, don't get excited, we didn't tie the knot, and as of the time of writing we still haven't got round to it, much to the chagrin of all our friends and family - patience, little ones!....well, we went on a diet! There's nothing like a little bout of cancer to make one realise that one should probably start taking better care of oneself. We did Lighter Life, a diet where you don't eat any actual food at all, but instead add water to powdered shakes and soups etc. Michael took eight months to lose eight stone, and I took eleven months to the day to lose my target ten stone. Yes, TEN stone. That's a whole nother person I lost in weight. How that person got inside me in the first place, I don't know. I probably ate him. We sold all our fat clothes on eBay and bought a whole new wardrobe each. We now do at least half an hour of aerobic exercise every day, and think nothing of leaving home early and walking an hour and a half into town instead of getting public transport. Our life has completely changed, and all due to - or, at least, exacerbated by - Tommy the Tumour. Thank you, cancer!

I was worried that if I ever lost weight my career would suffer, but, fingers crossed, so far that doesn't seem to have happened. I keep busy as ever, thankfully. At time of writing, I am just about to finish a six month run in the West End - the first time I've been back there since I was diagnosed during the run of *Calendar Girls* - playing a Russian housekeeper to Ben Miller's MP in *The Duck House*, a farce about the MP's expenses scandal. In it I perform feats of physical comedy that I would never have been able to do ten stone ago! My cancer sister and dear friend Roma and her husband Pete came to see the show last week. Her thick and glossy hair is now back down to her waist and she is progressing nicely.

It's been two and a half years since I toured Britain for the third and final time with *Calendar Girls*. We were in Glasgow for my fortieth birthday - Michael came up for a few days (as did my sister and my brother-in-law as a surprise!) - and we celebrated in style; I may now be middle aged, but frankly I'm delighted to have made it so far.

When we took the final curtain call in Richmond on a cold December night, I couldn't help but look back on the past three years of being in *Calendar Girls* and wonder how different things might have been if I had not had that experience to distract and support me whilst I was going through all that cancer nonsense. I hope I never have to find out. The thought that dear Lynda Bellingham is now having to go through it herself makes me very sad indeed, and I hope she comes out the other side soon.

I shall always be looking over my shoulder, I suppose. A family friend who is twenty five years clear of breast cancer told me that she still gets edgy around mammogram time - and I'm going to be having scans every six months for several years. Funnily enough, many of my hypochondriac moments happen when I'm washing up. I am just the right height (i.e. very short) that when I am standing at the kitchen sink my boobie rests on the surface, and if I inadvertently splash myself with water (as I often do) I get a horrible flashback to when I had a leaky nipple - the symptom that started the whole cancer ball rolling. Perhaps I just shouldn't wash up. Or at least, wear an apron.

34, 862 words