

Overnight, in 2007, Kerry Stott went from being a writer, student nurse, mother and wife to being a cancer patient. Kerry believes that there is more to life than a diagnosis. She expertly blends humour into her observations, which enable the reader to examine, without fear, the very serious subject of breast cancer. There is more laughter than tears in this compelling account of one woman's adventures with cancer.

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One woman's adventures with cancer

Kerry Stott

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Breasts

Breasts are those funny, wobbly, round things on the front of women's chests, the things that men lust after and females covet. For years I wished that my breasts were attached by Velcro so that I could remove them when I was doing sports or trying to squeeze through small gaps. I am 32 and it took until I was 25 or 26 for me to like my boobs. The reason was I am a 36D, so I am well endowed in the breast department. I was one of the first in my class to develop them and I went to numerous parties where boys would talk to my breasts. In all honesty, I spent many years hating and despising them. In hindsight, I wasted lots of energy and emotion because of what others thought and how they made me feel. It was a few years after I met my husband, Graeme, that I really fell in love with breasts. I realised that they were beautiful, soft round pieces of flesh that encapsulated my womanhood. When I was pregnant I wanted them to perform the function that they were created for: they did, in abundance. I could have fed three babies, and fortunately Vincent was so hungry that I didn't have too much excess milk. Then, like most mothers, I ended up with slightly saggy, stretch marked lady lumps. It took me a little while to get to like them again. I was fat before I got pregnant and knew I would not lose any of the weight without help, so I went to Weight Watchers and lost 5 stone. It was then that I really fell in love with my boobs. For the first time in years I had men staring and flirting with me. My breasts became an extension of how I was feeling: a balconette bra and a low cut top if I was feeling flirty, a tee shirt bra and a well cut blouse if I was wanting to be serious, a jumper if I wanted to be soft and approachable. They

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became as malleable as any other fashion item. They were beautiful.

When I found my lump, the only symptom I had was that my breast was slightly tender like they are when I have my period. I thought that I was being over dramatic and I got my husband to have a feel to make sure that I was not imagining things. Naturally he did not hesitate to perform this arduous task. It was quite amusing. He had his hands on both my breasts, so that he could compare them he said, and then he starts to hum and look over at the door frame. Puzzled, I asked why he was humming and looking at the door. 'It keeps my mind on the job in hand without getting distracted,' he said. I could only smile at his honesty. He concurred that there was a lump there and we both agreed that I should go to the doctor. I really, really thought I was wasting the GP's time. He was very kind and polite about examining me. There I was, flat on my back exposing my breasts to a strange man, well he wasn't that strange but I certainly would not be flashing my tits unless I had to. He was kind and asked if his examination was hurting. 'If you hurt me I will cry and make you feel really bad,' I replied. He said it was just a cyst, nothing to worry about but he would book me into the next breast clinic at the hospital just to be on the safe side.

I am lucky that I have a very good friend who had had a mastectomy. I went round to see her and said that I was concerned. She was so cool about normalising what I was going through. She said that in all probability it was a cyst, knowing my lifestyle, and that I shouldn't get too worried about it. Being like all good friends she knew that I was still uneasy and offered to come with me to my appointment.

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So one week later we trundled the hour long journey to the hospital. I started in the breast screening clinic where I was ushered to a private waiting room full of women only. I was asked to go into a cubical and strip to the waist and put on a wrap around tunic; it was so dated that it was back in fashion and would not look out of place on one of the media glitterati. I was delighted to find a wonderful camaraderie between the women. Some had been there many times before and for others, like me, it was their first time; the old hands helped soothe the new ones' fears; it was really quite relaxing. From the waiting room I was ushered into a darkened room for my ultra sound. It felt like it was moodily lit, the style that night club owners strive for. I took off my tunic and lay down on the bed when two rather mature gentlemen squirted some KY jelly on my left breast and scanned it whilst murmuring to themselves in the way that medical people do. Next it was on to have a mammogram. This should have raised my concerns as they normally do not do this for people under the age of 35 as their breast tissue is too dense to get an accurate picture. Anyway, there I was, half naked and about to have my breast pinched between two plates. It was not the 'garage door slamming on your tit' experience that others had described. It was uncomfortable but that was all. It was more startling that the radiographer's hands were ice cold on my nice, warm body, quite a shock to the system.

Then the waiting began; outpatient appointments never run on time. When I got to see the consultant I was greeted by a small Asian man who smiled a lot and had a wicked sense of humour. I asked when the cyst would be drained; it was then that he told me that I had a solid mass and that he would need to take a biopsy of it. This

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involved having a local anaesthetic in my breast and a biopsy needle the size of a scaffolding pole injected into the breast and a piece of the mass removed. With some glee the consultant showed me the piece of flesh he had extracted from me, it was quite interesting but I just about freaked when he told me that he needed to take two more samples. I was patched up and sent out into the waiting room and told that I would need to come back in three quarters of an hour. So off we trundled for a coffee, discussing the 'fact' that it must be a benign lump.

When we were called back in to the consulting room he told me straight out, very matter of fact but with compassion in his eyes, that I had cancer. My heart started racing and I went into emergency mode. I did not panic. I never do, which is why I am a good nurse, but I focused on small details: his tie, my note book that I had got out to write things down in case I couldn't remember them. This time was different from other emergency situations I had been in. It was like someone turned the sound down; I got the gist of most things that he was saying but I missed a few. He said I was very brave. I must have looked confused. I certainly didn't understand how I could be brave because it was just matter of fact. In these situations I deal with facts first and then deal with the emotional fallout later.

When I left the room I suddenly felt very hot; I was either going to be sick, faint or cry. My body opted for the latter. I just stood there crying and shaking uncontrollably. One of the breast care nurses and my friend led me away to a consulting room somewhere and I just sobbed inconsolably. How could I have cancer? There was no history of cancer in my family; I do not drink heavily; I don't smoke; I am not overweight and I exercise regularly.

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So how the hell did I have cancer?! Did they get it wrong, was there a mistake? Somehow in my heart I knew that there was no mistake.

My first thought was about my nursing course. I was so close to finishing, to no longer being a *student* nurse but having the title of *nurse*. The day before it did not seem so important but now it did. I had two weeks to get my head around the fact that I had cancer, that I was going to lose one of my beautiful breasts. In two weeks I had to comprehend that I would no longer be a student, a scholar, a freelance journalist, a mother, a wife, a nurse: all this would be wiped away and I would be a cancer patient.

I will not bore you with the tsunami of emotion that followed in those two weeks. I spent every night drunk and most days crying. It was so hard to comprehend that one of my beautiful breasts would be hacked off. It looked and felt healthy; in my mind I questioned if I was actually about to engage in some form of self mutilation, to cut off a piece of flesh that intrinsically felt normal and healthy. By performing this act of self harm, would I receive some form of attention that I subconsciously required? It really did seem fantastic that I had cancer.

I did not feel as though I was being brave. In fact, there are very few times during the course of this illness that I have continued with an action when I was afraid; this is my definition of bravery. Most of the time I just continue with what needs doing because it is better to get on with it. I do what I need to survive. The night before my surgery I phoned my husband. I told him that I needed his help to get my head in 'the zone', otherwise I was packing my things up and leaving the hospital. I felt real fear, the sort that pours ice cold terror into your bones; it was

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taking every fibre in my body not to run away. Graeme told me that he loved me and he wanted to have arthritis and curvature of the spine with me; he wanted to grow old with me and that this could only happen if I had the surgery. I just couldn't let this gentle man, with such a big heart, down. Strangely I did not draw any motivation from my child. I knew that whatever happened he would be well loved and looked after. I had to find something that would motivate me and only me. I could not be altruistic. I had to find some selfish motivation. The fact that this good man wanted me, warts and all, gave me the strength to get through it.

On the morning of the surgery I felt fuzzy, like I had taken some Valium. I was in a world that was not really real, in any sense. However, I hate not knowing what is going on and I tried very hard to get out of this fuzzy bubble, but then I thought, do I really want to be completely aware of the horror of my situation? No thank you, so I just tried to accept this feeling of being disjointed.

When I awoke I cried and cried. The recovery nurse was there to hold my hand and gave me a huge hug. On the ward the nursing staff stayed with me until my husband arrived. I was so distressed. Graeme stayed until I was calmer and I had fallen asleep. I could not have given better care myself. The nurses were fantastic. The following day I looked at my wounds for the first time. It was like looking at a foreign landscape, flat where it should not be and giving me direct access to a view of my stomach which was flatter than I remembered. It was not frightening, just unusual. That was it, the end of my breast.

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Now we enter the amazing world of prosthetics. It is hard for me to get my head around how many different prosthetics there are for women who have had a mastectomy. My post surgical prosthesis was about the size of a pair of rolled up socks. It was made of material and stuffed with the sort of stuffing that you find in cuddly toys. It fitted nicely inside my bra but, like a naughty doggy, it would not stay. It roamed around my chest, normally at the most inopportune time. However, it did serve its purpose: to make me look normal and give me back some self confidence. After six weeks I received my permanent prosthesis, which is much more complex than the post op variety. Imagine, if you will, all the different shaped breasts that there are in the world, not just small or large, but wide, narrow, pointy, saggy, scooped and pert; all of these different styles are catered for. Plus, if after surgery the chest wall is either concave or convex, this is catered for too. The backing of these prosthetics can be gel, material or even stick on which is perfect for strapless dresses. Should the surgery require a lumpectomy, where only the tumour is removed and a dimple is left in the breast, well, there are inserts of all shapes and sizes to cover all possibilities. All this and I have not talked about nipples yet! There are bras that have fake nipples built into them. There are fake nipples in a wide range of sizes to be inserted into a bra, or there are nipple covers to obscure your real nipple should it be erect and you do not want it to show. The prosthetics come in different weights too: half, three quarters and full weight so, not only can you choose what is more comfortable for you, but a patient need never feel lopsided again, as I did with my post surgical breast. Phew! All this

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effort that has been put into making women feel whole again.

People around me were very curious about what I looked like after my breast was removed. I would much prefer people to ask questions than to look at me strangely; so they did; they asked all sorts of questions. Initially they wanted to know what my chest looked like after surgery. I was quite willing for people to look; it was no longer a sexual area of my body because there was no breast there so I felt no qualms about letting people look. The same happened with my prosthesis, both my post surgical one and my permanent one. All anyone had to do was ask and I would whip it out. My permanent one was the funniest because if you held it at an angle it would go wrinkly; I always said that that's what my breast would look like when I am older.

Here this chapter ends. There is not much more that can be said on the subject that binds all women together. It is not the end of the story for me as I will get a reconstruction but it is the end for that period of my life that was the interim between being whole and being built again.

Interesting people

One thing that I need is mental stimulation. Fortunately I am, by happy surprise, surrounded by interesting people. People who make me think about the world and challenge my perceptions. I have never sought interesting people because I find, when you look for them, all you find are idiots and charlatans attempting to pose as intellectuals, and these are the most boring, irritating individuals on the planet.

A good friend of mine has a son who has diabetes. His child was diagnosed years ago, around Christmas time - an excellent time of year to be told that you have to be careful what you eat or you could die. He asked if I had wished cancer on others. Why does that old person not have cancer? Why doesn't she have cancer because she's an unpleasant individual? And so on. He said that he had thought like this for six months after his son was diagnosed with diabetes and then spent the following six months feeling guilty about it. My friend was astonished to find that I had never had thoughts like this. He said that I must be an angel or a saint. As it happened, we had had this discussion over lunch, and in the evening, after he had gone, my hair started to fall out. I had already shaved it to a grade one, so there was not much to fall out but each tuft I pulled came away in my hands. It is degrading and undignified, stripping you of choice and identity, and forcing you to take on the role of cancer patient, something that I have been unable to do willingly. That night I sat there and cried and cried, mourning the loss of my stubble. That is why I have never wished this disease on anyone else, not even the people who have wronged me over the years. I would never like anyone to feel so

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disempowered, insulted, fearful, to be robbed of role, money, freedom and choice. With my eloquent grasp of the wonderful English language, I cannot imprison or capture the feelings of fear and anger that this illness has brought me. I could not and will not wish it on another human being regardless of how foul an individual they may be.

A paediatric nurse has been helping me try to explain cancer to my four year old. With great wisdom and foresight she said that people 'revert to type' when their bodies are under sustained attack like they are when receiving chemotherapy. People who know me understand that I would never wish cancer on another. They think of me as kind, generous, gobby, outspoken, blunt, challenging and funny. They do not think of me as having a foul and fiery temper. As this nurse has said I have reverted to type; I did not think that one body could hold so much rage. It must not be good for me, physiologically speaking. I have never suffered fools gladly, but now I find myself frequently telling people to 'f*%k off'. Please note that I do this to their faces, not behind their backs or under my breath. I am enraged by idiots and fuckwits who say things like: 'I know', 'I can imagine'. How can they know or imagine how I feel or think? How dare they assume that they can imagine themselves in my position, that they can grasp the complexities of cancer, of everything that it has taken away? To know that in all probability, I, at aged 32, will eventually die of cancer or of a heart problem caused by the chemotherapy drugs that are, at this moment, saving my life - a sobering thought! How can they know how I feel when, on returning home from having been suddenly admitted to hospital with a suspected infection my son

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says to me, 'I looked and looked for you, but you weren't there, I couldn't find you, I was worried'? Are they really able to acknowledge the sensation that I have when I am so fatigued that I can barely get up the stairs, or concentrate on reading a book? Do they really know what it is like to look like a stereo-typical cancer patient, and have people stare, and children point, saying 'Mummy, why has she got no hair', and for the mother, then, to look embarrassed? 'At least you're not being sick' they say. What do they know of the nausea that stops me eating, drinking, sleeping, even lying down; it wears me down like a pumice stone rubbing away at skin until it is red and raw.

On the whole, however, I am able to focus my anger on the cancer, where it should be, to keep it in check, not lashing out at innocent people who are trying to make me feel better. However, sycophantic idiots get it with both barrels. Unfortunately, I am a grumpy old cow but now I am a grumpy old cow with a fierce temper.

On the bright side, I am surrounded by people who know me and love me dearly. They know when to say 'at least you won't have to worry about grey hairs' and when to hold me and, importantly, when to give me a wide berth. I am delighted to have surrounded myself with caring, instinctive, loyal and interesting people. It is through this collection of interesting individuals I am able to explore what I am feeling and where it has stemmed from. They take me out of myself. Recently I have been suffering from vertigo and my friends have been able to laugh along with me at my feeble attempts to walk in a straight line. Currently I have a tendency to meander down the street in a manner akin to a drunken sailor. They have shared with me their experiences of the menopause,

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with mood swings and hot flushes galore. They give me puzzles to exercise and bend my mind, to prevent me from festering and withering. They help me get through the tough times and help me live life as it should be, to the full, when I am well enough. So, interesting people, I salute you.

Overnight, in 2007, Kerry Stott went from being a writer, student nurse, mother and wife to being a cancer patient. Kerry believes that there is more to life than a diagnosis. She expertly blends humour into her observations, which enable the reader to examine, without fear, the very serious subject of breast cancer. There is more laughter than tears in this compelling account of one woman's adventures with cancer.

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